

The preparation and use of cosmetics dates back far into prehistory. We cannot tell how many thousands of years ago men first began to smear coloured pigments on their faces and bodies or to decorate themselves with tattooed designs, although we believe that these practices originated in magical and religious beliefs. By the time of the earliest near-eastern civilizations in Mesopotamia and in Egypt, we can see that medicine and social customs were both helping to expand the use of cosmetic substances from merely religious origins. For the rest of antiquity we find a close relationship between the salves and ointments in the physician's medicine-chest, the incenses and oils used by priests, and the eyeshadow, rouge, powder, lip- and nail-colouring and perfume so liberally applied by the elegant ladies (and even by the dandies too) of Imperial Rome, as Ovid or Martial reveal.

Most of the substances used in the production of all these expensive items were intended for one or more of these purposes: to give colour or scent, to give protection, or to act as the vehicle for the active ingredients. In this issue of Labyrinth we shall look at the pigments used to provide coloured cosmetics in the ancient world. These were occasionally of animal origin: the 'purple snail' provided rouge, while egg-yolks, milk or dried leeches were ingredients in hair-dyes and bleaches. More commonly, various minerals were ground to powder with little pestles and mortars, mixed with some liquid to form a paste or a solution, and painted on. Many of these were harmless or even helpful to blemished skins: face-packs of fine clay are still recommended by cosmeticians and skin-specialists today. Much more

harmful was the use of white lead to make white face-powder by countless Greek and Roman ladies, some of whom were undoubtedly poisoned by steady use of it, as we now know how readily lead is absorbed through the skin. Still, the safer use of white crocodile-droppings, dried and ground for face-powder, hardly makes an appealing alternative!

Soot from burning various substances was an important ingredient in eyeshadows and eyebrow and eyelash darkeners (it is still used in mascara production), while the green copper compound, malachite, was used from very early days in Egypt as an eyeshadow for the lower lid, galena (a dark grey lead compound) being used on the upper

lid. Occasionally red or yellow ochre or yellow orpiment (an earth and a mercury compound respectively) were used as eye-paints or powders, particularly in Mesopotamia. Apparently all these minerals were originally thickly applied as a deterrent to the flies and a defence, not overly effective, against the eye diseases the flies helped to spread. Soon, however, social ideas of elegance and beauty rather than doctors' recommendations seem to have encouraged the use of eye make-up, and subtler- and safer- effects were produced with burnt almond shells, greenish resins obtained from coniferous trees, or soot from charred date-pits or burnt rose-leaves.

The vegetable kingdom provided many sources of pigment for cosmetic use (though far more of scents for perfumes), and almost all of the oils, gums and resins used as vehicles and fixatives for the cosmetics. (Even wigs, if not entirely made of human hair, were often built up or underpinned with vegetable fibres such as linen and cotton). The commonest colouring plant was probably the henna, which was used not only to make the hair treatment we are familiar with, but to make rouge and nail colours as well as a red paste applied by Egyptian women to the palms of their hands and the soles of their feet. The juice of such varied plants as seaweed, lichen, or asa foetida (a strong-smelling herb) was also used to produce pigments for rouges.

All of these pigments were occasionally used in water-soluble mixtures of such ingredients as honey, asses' milk, or egg-whites, especially if, as with henna, conditioning of hair or skin was intended as well as bleaching, tinting or dyeing. More often the finely ground pigments were mixed on a special palette or in little mortars with fats or oils to produce a smoothly-spreading paste, or were simply used as we might use tinted face-powders, being applied with small sponges, balls of wool, or feathers.

The elegant Roman aristocrat of the Empire was quite willing to own not one, but a dozen slaves who would specialise in preparing their mistress for social or for intimate encounters. Masseuses, manicurists, hairdressers, eyebrow painters, perfumers, even special slave-girls to hold her fans, to hold her mirrors, to select her jewels or her dresses were able to turn her out as a miracle of perfection -- quite unrecognisable as the woman who went to bed at night so thickly smeared with a greasy face-mask that her husband couldn't get near her! Only if she had a lover would she retire for the night in all her glories, as Ovid and later Juvenal both realised.

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