

XII.—*Molochina* and a Fragment of Caecilius

ERNESTINE F. LEON

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS

The line *carbasina molochina ampelina* is quoted by the fourth century grammarian Nonius Marcellus from the *Pausimachus* of Caecilius in the book entitled "De Colore Vestimentorum" (17.879. 18 Lindsay). Although depending on earlier grammarians, Nonius usually followed a valid tradition based on the texts of the authors quoted.¹ The line with which we are concerned was quoted in order to illustrate the meaning of the word *molochinum*, which is defined as "a Graeco, color flori similis malvae." Varro (*L.L.* 5.103) cites *malva* as a derivative of the Greek *malachê*, which is the mallow. The blossoms of the various members of the genus *malva* range from white to red. The majority have so characteristic a purplish tone that the first aniline dye to be discovered,² a pinkish violet, was called mauve from the French word for *malva sylvestris*, the color of which it reproduced. A derivative from *molochinum*, *molocinarius*, is used by Plautus (*Aul.* 514) in a passage which lists the dealers in feminine finery who will call at the end of the month to demand payment of their bills from the wealthy husband of an extravagant wife. The *molocinarius* of Plautus is the seller of mallow-colored dye.³ The single inscription quoted by earlier scholars for the word *molochinarius* (*sic*) is now regarded as a forgery by Ligorio and placed among the "falsae."⁴

Isidore of Seville, writing nearly three centuries after Nonius, when the texts of many of the literary works of the Republic and the earlier commentaries were no longer extant, defined *molochinia*

¹ Teuffel-Kroll, *Gesch. d. röm. Lit.*⁶ 3.222.

² The first aniline dye was obtained accidentally by Sir William Henry Perkin and a patent was taken out for the process in 1856. Dye works for the commercial production of mauve were set up the following year and its use for the dyeing of silk was established by 1858. See *Enc. Brit.*¹⁴ s.vv. "Perkin" and "Dyes, Synthetic, Industrial Production."

³ Nixon in the Loeb translation of the *Aulularia* renders the word "dealers in mallow dyes." Since, however, no dye is derived from the mallow plant itself, the word must be taken to refer to mallow-colored dyes. This interpretation is given in the Latin dictionaries, s.v.: e.g. Lewis and Short, "A mallow-dyer, one who dyes with the color of mallows"; Ainsworth, "A dyer of a kind of purple"; Forcellini-Corradini, "Molochini coloris infector."

⁴ *CIL* VI.690*.

as a cloth made of mallow fibers and called *molocina* by some, *malvella* by others (19.22.12). A single European member of the mallow family, *malva cannabina*, yields from its stem a tensile fiber which is capable of being made into rope,⁵ but is far too coarse for cloth. Two varieties from the Far East, unknown to the ancients, are employed for rope making today.⁶ Instead of writing from personal familiarity with a luxurious mallow cloth, Isidore appears to have confused Nonius' definition of *molochina* with that of *molucina*. While the former is defined in the book on colors of clothing, the latter is cited under kinds of cloth, "De Genere Vestimentorum," as occurring in a line from the *Paedium* of Novius (14.867.24 Lindsay):

molucinam, crocotam, ciridotam, ricam, ricinum

Here Nonius defines *molucina* as "vestis a mollitie dicta." The word *mollitia* (*mollities* is a variant spelling) is specifically applied by Pliny (*H.N.* 19.48) to the softness of wool resulting from a particular process in its preparation. We can hardly assume that Nonius himself confused *molucina* with *molochina*, for whatever Nonius' faults he could surely differentiate between words denoting kinds of cloth and colors of garments.

Isidore's incorrect definition of *molochinia* as a cloth made of mallow fibers was adopted by James Yates in his comprehensive and still authoritative work, *Textrinum Antiquorum* (London 1843). Chapter Two of this book is devoted to a study of cloth made of mallow fibers; Chapter Three to a fabric called *amorgina*, which Yates considered a finer variety of mallow cloth. In her article "Silk in Greece" (*AJA* 33 [1929] 27-33) Miss Gisela Richter has shown that the cloth of Amorgos was a tussah or wild silk.

In his series of references to the mallow in ancient writers Yates (301) quotes a statement from Dioscorides, Lib. 3, to the effect that the stem of *malva cannabina* was used for ropes. Then he argues that since the *malva sylvestris* was a source of food and medicine to the ancients, the stem fiber of this more common garden plant was made into thread for weaving. As a matter of fact, we have no statement that it was ever so used. No example from grave wrappings has been so identified. Moreover, with the limited ancient chemical processes it would have been impossible to reduce

⁵ *Enc. Ital.* s.v. "Altea."

⁶ *Enc. Brit.*¹⁴ s.v. "Fibres."

mallow fiber to raw material for the weaving of fine cloth. The Greek word *molochinos* is given in a list of imports from India in Pseudo-Arrian, *Periplus Maris Rubri* 6. There is, however, nothing here to identify it as a kind of cloth. It may have been either a color of cloth or a red dye. The related *malachion* in a fragment of Aristophanes (320.10 Hall-Geldart) is generally taken to mean robes of a purplish color. Another definition of *molochina*, quoted by Yates as from a vocabulary of Papias of the eleventh century, obviously goes back to Isidore. Yates assumes that the mallow cloth was of gleaming whiteness (303), basing his view on this definition of Papias and on a line from a poem on Charlemagne attributed to Alcuin:

Tecta melocineo fulgescit femina amictu.⁷

He ignored the use of *fulgere* to refer to the glow of bright purple or red as used, for example, by Cicero (*Cat.* 2.5), "qui fulgent purpura."

Yates furthermore suggests the possibility of a greenish cast to his white mallow cloth, since Pliny (*H.N.* 37.114) derives the name of the green mineral *molochites*, English malachite, from the mallow. Pliny is the only source for this definition. The name malachite is commonly so explained in works on geology and mineralogy. Thus Webster's *New International Dictionary* suggests that the name is derived "from its resembling the green color of the leaf of the mallow." Possibly the definition of Pliny is his own invention for a word which probably had its origin in the Semitic languages, in which *moloch* (Hebrew *melech*) has the significance of royal. Malachite is an oxide of copper, copper carbonate, $\text{CuCO}_3 \cdot \text{Cu}(\text{OH})_2$, found wherever copper is exposed to air in mines or even on the green crust of copper roofs. It was used for wall decorations as inlay or as the basis for green pigment from early times in Egypt, its source being the copper mines of the Near East.

Other scattered references to fine oriental cloth are identified by Yates with his hypothetical mallow textile. He reasons (304) that

⁷ Yates took these data directly from the Du Cange *Glossarium*, s.v. "melocineus." After citing the line from Alcuin, Du Cange gives the definition of Isidore, using the spellings *melocinia* and *melocinam*; he then quotes Papias: "molocina vestis quae albo stamine fit, quam alii malbellam vocant. Idem: Malbella quae ex malvarum stamine conficitur quam alii molocinam vocant." Du Cange was sceptical of these definitions and so adds: "Alii ex colore vestem hanc dictam volunt," giving Nonius' discussion of the passages in Caecilius and Novius. Papias' definition is taken from Isidore and the word *albo* is probably a corruption of *malveo* or *malbeo* that had crept into the text of his *Lexicum* in the five hundred years before the first printed edition (1476).

since *malva sylvestris* does not grow in India, this country must have used the *malva hibiscus* or possibly the *malva cannabina* for weaving. The statement of Strabo (693) quoting Nearchus, which Yates interprets as evidence of the weaving of mallow cloth in India, actually refers to cotton, the wool which grows on trees. Here it is said to have been used both for fine cloth and as stuffing for saddles. The *xylina himatia* cited in a fragment of Ctesias⁸ is evidently bark cloth or tapa. This fabric is not woven from the stem fibers of a plant, but is the bark of the *malva hibiscus*, a small tree. This bark is steeped, pounded, and made into pliable cloth, which was used for clothing by the primitive Indi even before their comparatively early use of woven cotton cloth. It is prescribed as the only variant for the skins of animals in the dress of those devoted to the religious life by the laws of Manu.⁹

Tapa is much more familiar to Europe and North America today than it was a century ago, when Yates wrote. It was used exclusively by the natives of some Pacific islands before the coming of the Europeans. The official ceremonial robe worn by the Queen of Tonga at the coronation of Elizabeth II was made of tapa cloth, according to press reports. Tapa cloth takes dye readily and is usually ornamented with brilliant printed patterns. Blümner¹⁰ follows Yates in accepting the existence of a rare and beautiful cloth presumably woven from the mallow fiber of India. He does, however,¹¹ identify the colored cloth of the Indian ambassadors in Herodotus (7.65) as being of tapa cloth. Granted that specimens of tapa cloth had come to the attention of the ancient Greeks, it was not a frequent importation, but rather a rare curiosity.

Consequently, the woven oriental mallow cloth of Isidore and Yates has no basis in fact. Indeed, until late antiquity outer garments were, except in Egypt, where linen was used to a great extent, quite generally of wool. Ulpian, quoted in the *Digest* (47.2.19.4) on the theft of garments, says that the owner must substantiate his claim by naming the color of the garment, but gives no indication that the claimant must state the kind of cloth also as a further means of identification.

⁸ Ctesias *De Rebus Indicis* frag. 22 in supplement to C. Müller's Didot edition of Herodotus (Paris 1877) 100.

⁹ *Enc. Brit.*¹⁴ s.v. "Bark Cloth."

¹⁰ Hugo Blümner, *Die römischen Privataltertümer* (Munich 1911) 247.

¹¹ *Technologie und Terminologie der Gewerbe und Künste bei Griechen und Römern*, 1² (Berlin and Leipzig 1912) 199, note 2.

Of the other two words in the line of Caecilius cited at the beginning of this paper, *carbasinus* means "of or relating to flax" and appears also in the form *carbaseus* referring to all kinds of linen cloth, from fine linen luxury material to sail cloth. The Greek original, *karbasinos*, is the word found in the Septuagint (Hebrew *karbas*) for linen garments and is generally rendered "fine linen." The third word, *ampelina*, is a *hapax legomenon*, an adjective from *ampelos*, grape vine. No cloth could have been produced from any part of this plant in antiquity, and no attempt has been made to assign an exact meaning to the word in this quotation.

Accepting the statement of Nonius that *molochina* refers to a color and pursuing the idea of color further, we may assume that *carbasinus* suggests the pale yellow of unbleached linen and *ampelina* the dark green of vine leaves. This combination of colors became popular in Rome at the time of Caecilius, the first half of the second century B.C., for at that time the decor of painted walls came into fashion from Greece and Asia Minor, superseding bare tufa or monochrome stucco. The earlier republican houses on the Palatine, as, for example, the House of the Sphinxes, show in the decoration of the walls dark green, pale yellow, and purplish tones, as well as the more familiar Pompeian red. We may therefore conclude that this combination was so admired by the Romans of the second century B.C. or by their arbiters of fashion that their clothing as well as their homes showed the colors pale yellow, purplish red, and dark green, i.e. *carbasina*, *molochina*, *ampelina*.