



Hilltop Cloud

## Time Travellers Club

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September-15

Dear Club Member,

[www.hilltopcloud.co.uk](http://www.hilltopcloud.co.uk)

Earlier in the year we celebrated the discovery of aniline, chemically synthesized dyes. This discovery revolutionized the colours of our clothing and our houses, as until then colours could only be derived from plants and pigments from the earth. This led to a somewhat muted palette, with bright rich colours being much prized, and very expensive.

The most famous expensive, exclusive dye has to be Tyrian Purple, also called Imperial Purple. During Roman times it was variously only allowed to be worn by Emperors, then freely worn by women (but only high ranking men), and then was heavily taxed but could be worn by anyone. Either way, it was a clear indication of social status, that's purely because purple was only obtainable from one source.

The town of Tyre in modern day Lebanon was the source of purple dye, it came from the *Murex* sea snails found in the seas surrounding the town. The snails were harvested, and fermented in giant, stinking vats. Twelve Thousand snails were needed to get 1.2g of dye, enough for the trim on just one toga.

Over in Mexico they use snails of a similar species but unlike the destructive habits of the Romans, the snails are only milked for their dye. The snails are collected, and when placed on fabric they excrete the dye containing enzyme, and are then placed back in the sea. In one small village the women wore only purple skirts.

The exact colour of Tyrian Purple bizarrely isn't necessarily purple. By use of different mordants you can get rose, crimson, burgundy, black or even pale blue if you dye under the midday sun. Until recently we had no idea how they processed the snails to get the dye in Roman times, but the recipe has now been re-discovered allowing historians to explore the full range of colours these snails can give us. One thing that does seem pretty certain, purple in this case is far more red-pink toned than the colour we now associate with imperial purple. There's a scrap of wool in the National Museum of Beirut that's bright pink!

Just as a side note about the fibre this month, it's a Merino/Bamboo blend, please don't leave it in your stash for too long, the high merino content will cause it to compact.

Happy Spinning,  
Katie