

**THE RITUAL SIGNIFICANCE  
OF YELLOW AMONG THE  
ROMANS, A THESIS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649191024

The ritual significance of yellow among the Romans, a thesis by Francis Marion Dana

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UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

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YELLOW AMONG THE ROMANS**

BY  
**FRANCIS MARION DANA**

A THESIS  
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, IN  
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PHILADELPHIA, PA.  
1919

The writer takes this opportunity to express her gratitude to those members of the department of Latin in the University of Pennsylvania under whom she has studied and to whose helpful encouragement throughout the preparation of this thesis she is deeply indebted: to Professors J. C. Rolfe, W. B. McDaniel, R. G. Kent, G. D. Hadzsits, H. B. Van Deventer and E. H. Hefner; and also to Dr. M. E. Armstrong, of Goucher College, for valuable suggestions in connection with this dissertation.



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## INTRODUCTION

The conventional significance of color occupies an important and little-understood position in the human thought of all ages, but it is only within recent years that any detailed study has been made of individual colors as being religiously symbolic. Among the ancient Romans, religion was almost entirely a matter of convention, and we should therefore expect to find that their religious rites were, in a large degree, fettered by a formalism which tended to produce an intricate system of symbolism. Such being the case, it has been for centuries the task of scholars to attempt to discover the meaning of certain religious rites, a meaning which the Romans themselves were far from understanding. In all these researches, however, there is but little mention of the significance of color, and it is the aim of this study to examine a part of this phase of Roman religion.

A recent study by Dr. M. E. Armstrong, of Goucher College, has accounted most satisfactorily for the use of scarlet, purple, black and white, and gold in Roman ritual, but no study has been made of the use of yellow, which is important particularly in the marriage ceremony. Of what natural phenomena was yellow the visible sign or representation, and what was the underlying idea which the Romans wished to express by its use? These are the questions which must be confronted in an investigation of this kind. In this connection the words found to be of the greatest importance are *luteus* and *croceus*. First of all, therefore, we have tried to collect, as nearly as possible, all the passages in which they occur, in order to decide the difference, if any, in their color denotation. Though it has been impossible to make separate mention of all the references collected for this purpose, those have been quoted which seem to bear especially upon the final decision.

A brief study of the word *flavus* revealed the fact that, with perhaps one exception, it has apparently no symbolical significance; therefore references to its use are few, and the discussion is confined for the most part to passages in which *luteus* or *croceus* occurs.

In an effort to discover the fundamental idea which the Romans wished to express by their use of yellow, it has been found necessary to introduce discussions of some length explanatory of several of the most important conceptions associated with Roman religion and private life.

Greek literature has been drawn upon only so far as it bears directly upon our discussion, and no exhaustive collection of material has been attempted in that field.