



NEO-BABYLONIAN RECIPES FOR DYEING WOOL

The cuneiform text is in the British Museum, and dates to about the seventh century BC. The number is WA 62788+82978.

Approximately 15 lines are still lost at the beginning. This missing material perhaps included:

1. A recipe for washing the wool.
2. A section on preparing the woad/indigo vat.
3. Introductions to sections I and II (corresponding to section III a-d below, which introduce sections IV-VII).

The translation is as direct as possible and is not over-interpretive. Uncertainties are indicated. Words added in parentheses are for clarity, since the text is very terse.

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SECTION I: to produce *uqnātu* ["lapis coloured" i.e. dark blue wool]

[...] [...] [...] you [...] [...]. You repeat this, and [...] [...] when you [...] until it becomes very hot you [...] [...], and it has bubbles(?). You put the wool into (it); [...] You remove (the wool), "winnow" (it), wring the fluid out (of it), and squeeze(?) (it); (then) you set it in the wind, and cool (it) down. You repeat (this procedure), putting (the wool) back (into the solution), wringing out the fluid and squeezing(?) (it) [...] You set it in the wind and cool (it) down. (You do this) once, twice (and) three times until the dyestuff is used up(?). When you have done this [...] [...] into the [...] vessel. You put that water and dyestuff [...] and(?) the wool into it, and as before you do it once, twice (and) three times [...] until the dyestuff is used up(?). When you take it out (you will have) *uqnātu* wool.

SECTION II: to produce *urriqu* [i.e. light blue wool]¹

You put that water and dyestuff (and) the remainder of the wool in it, and you do this once, twice (and) three times [...], until the dyestuff is used up(?).> When you take it out (you will have) *urriqu* wool.

¹Note: this translation is based on colour logic. Etymologically the word should mean either "yellow-green", or at best "pale yellow-green."

SECTION VI: to dye *urriqu* to *argamannu* [i.e. pale blue wool to red-purple wool]

You put *kasû* in water, and boil it up on the fire. You strain it, and put the *urriqu* wool in it. You boil it up on the fire. When you take it out (you will have) *argamannu* wool.

¹Note: *kasû* has so far been interpreted as: rose, mustard, liquorice and beet!

SECTION VII: to dye *urriqu* to *argamannu* [i.e. pale blue wool to red-purple wool]

You weigh out *urriqu* wool and alum in equal proportions, and boil (them) up in water on the fire until the water is all gone. You boil up crushed ...-madder (*ḥat-ḥuritu*) and those flocks of *urriqu* wool in equal proportions in water and "clay water" on the fire. When you take it out (you will have) *argamannu* wool.

SECTION VIII: to dye plain wool to *tabarru* [i.e. red wool]

You comb out the wool. You boil (it) up (with) alum in equal proportions in water on the fire until the water is all gone. You boil up either ... madder (*ḥat-ḥuritu*), ... madder (*inza-ḥuritu*) or madder (*ḥūratu*) and those (flocks of) wool in equal proportions in water and "water of groats" on the fire. When you take it out (you will have) *tabarru* wool.

Approximately 15 lines missing to the bottom of the tablet

SUMMARY OF COLOUR PROCESSES IN SECTION IV-VIII:

IV: *uqnātu* (dark blue) + [(a crushed dye)] = *ḥašmānu* (blue-green)

V: *uqnātu* (dark blue) + ...-madder (*ḥat-ḥuritu*) = *takiltu* (blue-purple)

VI: *urriqu* (pale blue) + *kasû* [unidentified] = *argamannu* (red-purple)

VII: *urriqu* (pale blue) + ...-madder (*ḥat-ḥuritu*) = *argamannu* (red-purple)

VIII: ...-madder (*ḥat-ḥuritu*), or ...-madder (*inza-ḥuritu*) or *ḥūratu*
(madder) = *tabarru* (red)

The meaning "madder" is well established for plain *ḥūratu*.

Perhaps *ḥat-ḥuritu*, and *inza-ḥuritu* (an imported dye) are both varieties of madder.

SECTION IIIa (referring to Section IV below)

[*Uqnātu* wool], which is the same as [...] wool (i.e. another word for dark blue?), can be used for *ḥašmānu* wool. [The (flowers/stems of the plant/plants used) for *ḥašmānu* wool are red.]

SECTION IIIb (referring to Section V below)

[*Uqnātu* wool] can be used for *takiltu* wool.

SECTION IIIc (referring to Section VI below)

[..... wool], which is the same as *uqnātu* wool, [.....]s

SECTION IIId (referring to Section VII below)

[..... wool], which is the same [as wool], can be used [for wool].

SECTION IV: to dye *uqnātu* wool to *ḥašmānu* wool [i.e. dark blue to blue-green]

You weigh out *uqnātu* wool and alum in equal proportions, and boil (them) up in water [until the water is all gone]. You boil up crushed [(dye plant)] and the *uqnātu* wool [in equal proportions in] water <and> ... on the fire. [(...)]. When you take it out (you will have) *ḥašmānu* wool.

SECTION V: to dye *uqnātu* to *takiltu* [i.e. dark blue wool to blue-purple wool]

You weigh out *uqnātu* wool and alum in equal proportions, (and) boil them up in water on the fire until the water is all gone. You boil up crushed ...-madder (*ḥat-ḥuritu*) and the *uqnātu* wool in equal proportions in water on the fire. When you take it out (you will have) *takiltu* wool.
