Earliest Samples of Royal Purple Found

Evidence points to the work of Bronze Age people.

By JOHN NOBLE WILFORD

Purple has long been the color of royalty and high ecclesiastics, and through time the most regal of the purples came from a dye made from a gland of certain Mediterranean mollusks. The poet Robert Browning spoke of it as "the dye of dyers." In the Roman Empire, the dye's rich hue and colorfast properties were so valued, and its production so time-consuming, that the extract was literally worth its weight in gold.

The Phoenicians became proficient in the production of royal purple and in the first millennium B.C. engaged in a brisk trade in dyed fabrics. Moreover the seafaring Phoenicians went they set up dye factories, leaving mounds of mollusk shells to fascinate and inform future archeologists. Their name may even derive from a root meaning "purple."

Use in Bronze Age

Scientists have now come up with chemical evidence that people in the late Bronze Age, several hundred years before the Phoenicians, were also busy making the dye out of such mollusks as Murex brandaris and Murex trunculus. These marine snails are often called whelks.

In an analysis of a purple-colored accumulation in an earthen jar found in Lebanon, chemists at the University of Pennsylvania and E. I. du Pont de Nemours & Company identified what they said were the earliest known samples of the famous dye. Pottery at the site, at Sarepta midway between Tyre and Sidon on the Mediterranean coast, was dated between 1300 and 1200 B.C. The Phoeni-