

Book Reviews

**Archaeology and Anthropology of Salt: A Diachronic
Approach – Proceedings of the International Colloquium,
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Not all the published proceedings following an academic event are events themselves, but this book might as well be considered one, since it manages to bring forth an interdisciplinary yet unified view on the complex phenomenon of salt, especially in its relation with the evolution of humanity over time.

Significantly, the 2008 colloquium that made the reviewed book possible took place in Romania, the country with “the oldest evidence for salt production in Europe, and probably worldwide” (*Foreword*, vii). As it is apparent in the editors' *Foreword* and in Nicolae Ursulescu's welcoming speech, the conference did not appear from nowhere. Supported by the framework of the project *Salt springs in Moldavia: the ethnoarchaeology of a polyvalent natural resource, (2007-2010)*, it continues pioneering research in the history of salt exploitation, of which a significant outset was made in Romania by Ursulescu himself as far back as the 70s. There was a number of archaeologically-focused conferences (Paris 1998, Liège 2001, Cardona 2003, Arc-et-Senans 2006), as well as several others, historically oriented (Halle/Saale 1992, Granada 1995, Cagliari 1998, Weimar 2001, Nantes 2004, Sigüenza 2006); but the true precursor of the *Archaeology and Anthropology of Salt* was the 2004 international conference on the archaeology of salt (organized in Romania, by the History Museum in Piatra Neamț), taking into account that the papers delivered there were likewise ranging from field

research to ethno-archaeology, ethnography and linguistics, instead of keeping within the limitations of the historical-archaeological domain. That is to speak only about Europe, although, as the editors mention, important research on salt, from different standpoints, is under way in Asia, South America, Western Africa and Oceania.

Through their affiliation to the “narrow group of specialists” in salt, the editors, who also author papers in the volume, profess (in the *Foreword*) their intention to courageously spill the salt in front of the contemporary world and thus to restore some essential truths. And they fulfill their promise through this collection of articles that construct a broadened perspective on this essential mineral, by using anthropological, ethnological and linguistic or philological approaches, which makes one reconsider not only the role salt has played in the evolution of humanity, but also the value of the research concerned with it.

The structure of the book supports an interdisciplinary approach inside humanities, as it was announced in the *Foreword*. The division into five sections partly gives tribute to the history of the domain (especially parts II and IV), and this is manifest in the titles: I. Ethnographic Approaches of Salt, II. Archaeological Salt Exploitation, III. Ancient Texts and Salt, IV. Historical Approaches and V. Linguistic and Philological Approaches. The papers are grouped according to interest, but together they create a balance between traditional and novel approaches and render a diachronic picture - from the Chalcolithic until the present times - of topics such as salt exploitation and its political, social and economic implications, household uses of salt, the language of salt, etymology or geographical names referring to salt.

The opening section is concerned with ethnography and comprises five articles, of which the first two - “Salt springs in today's rural world. An ethnoarchaeological approach in Moldavia (Romania)” (Marius Alexianu, Olivier Weller, Robin Brigand, Roxana-Gabriela Curcă, Vasile Cotiugă, Iulian Moga) and “New ethnoarchaeological investigations upon the salt springs in Valea Muntelui, Romania” (Dan Monah, Gheorghe Dumitroaia, Dorin Nicola) - deal with the

ethnoarchaeology of salt springs in Romania. The authors of the former argue, using archaeological evidence corroborated with chemistry, population and road-network data that the existence of salt sources used to be crucial for settlers and that the salt springs in many places in Moldavia continue to be exploited nowadays by the members of the rural and urban communities, sometimes with traditional practices that have hardly changed over the millenniums. Such peculiarities make the study of the traditional salt economy in Romania crucial for a better understanding of the history of salt spring exploitation which is almost extinct in the rest of Europe today.

Nevertheless, as stated in the following article, such heritage is endangered by the rapid modernization of the Romanian society, and this makes research even more valuable. For instance, the fact that the brine of some salt springs in Valea Muntelui can coagulate milk into a delicious light cheese has been used in the households in the region for thousands of years. Because the whole area is wealthy in sources of salty water and in archaeological sites related to them, the authors claim that, as there were several easily exploitable springs in the area to provide enough salt for people and livestock, this is the possible explanation for the atypical existence of an isolated Chalcolithic settlement in a mountain depression, at Hangu, in the Cucuteni A phase.

“Traditional methods of salt mining in Buzău county, Romania in the 21st century” (Doina Ciobanu) describes the oldest form of salt mining still practiced today in the mountain areas of Buzău and Vrancea where salt can be found very close to the surface.

Jorge A. Ceja Acosta's article, “El Salado-Ixtahuehue and Benito Juárez-Soconusco: An Ethno-archaeological study of salt pre-industries of Southeast Veracruz, Mexico”, deals with the complex relation between salt production and social identity, at the same time intending to determine whether the current traditional methods of boiling salt in Ohuilapan and Soconusco resemble those in the pre-Hispanic time. In “The saltmakers of Soconusco and Benito Juárez: An interpretation of ethnoarchaeological data from the

perspective of gender and identity”, by María Luisa Martell Contreras, the investigation interpretations some data in the previous paper, with a focus on the evolution of the women's role in the salt-obtaining process from the pre-Hispanic time to present day. She suggests that this ethnoarchaeological model might be tested in the future on archaeological sites of salt-exploitation.

The two papers that open Part II. Archaeological Salt Exploitation - “Provadia-Solnitsata (NE Bulgaria): A salt-producing center of the 6th and 5th millennia BC” (Vassil Nikolov) and “Tell Provadia-Solnitsata(Bulgaria): Data on Chalcolithic salt-extraction” (Victoria Petrova) - are concerned with the same complex located upon a rock salt in the eastern Balkan peninsula. In his article, Nikolov describes in detail the process of salt production during the late Neolithic and argues that the fortification system discovered there – in a unique combination of defense wall and ditch - served the need of the community to defend their valuable product. Starting from a completely preserved vessel and from several sherds coated with an additional layer of clay, Petrova hypothesizes that such special purpose bowls are most probably related to salt extraction in the middle Chalcolithic.

As a matter of fact, the whole section deals with prehistory and exploits data from an archaeological point of view. The four succeeding studies - “Spatial Analysis of Prehistoric Salt Exploitation in Eastern Carpathians (Romania)” (Olivier Weller, Robin Brigand, Laure Nuninger, Gheorghe Dumitroaia), “The Cucuteni C pottery near the Moldavian salt springs” (Roxana Munteanu, Daniel Garvăn), “Some salt sources in Transylvania and their connections with the archaeological sites in the area” (Gheorghe Lazarovici, Cornelia-Magda Lazarovici) and “New archaeological researches concerning salt-working in Transylvania. Preliminary report” (Valeriu Cavruc, Anthony F. Harding) - return to the Romanian territory.

The first investigates the relevance of salt springs in settlement patterns from the Neolithic to Chalcolithic, by building a Geographic Information System (GSI) able to

provide a diachronic overview of the population dynamics at micro-regional scale that emphasizes the complexity of the prehistoric territorial organization and settlement hierarchy.

Against existing opinions in literature, the second article reasons that, especially because of its abounding presence in the seasonal camps near the salt springs, the C type ceramics of the Cucuteni culture cannot be a variety 'imported' from eastern populations nor an indicator of the existence of individuals of eastern origin within the Cucuteni tribes, but more likely a local product that served a specific purpose, that is salt water evaporation.

In the third paper, the authors suggest that the need for salt shifted the Neolithization process - which started with animal breeding and gardening - from Anatolia to Thessaly, Macedonia, the Danube area and then to Transylvanian salt areas. They also present several sites in the intra and extra-Carpathian area and advance the necessity of ampler archaeological research in order to attribute them to the correct cultures.

In their preliminary report on recent archaeological results, Valeriu Cavruc and Anthony F. Harding conclude that, at the moment, the Băile Figa, Săsarm - Valea Slatină and Caila - Sărătură sites directly evidence for ancient saltworking in Transylvania and that the archaeological results, especially the wooden objects and timbers, may add to the realization of a close dating of the sites in the Carpathian region.

Jesús Jiménez Guijarro's "The beginning of the salt exploitation in Spain: Thinking about the salt exploitation in the Iberian Peninsula during prehistoric times" remains settled in the prehistory but shifts the investigated area. It is concerned with the use and of salt in the Iberian Peninsula and discusses the hypothesis of a direct relation between the 'revolution of secondary products', the Bell-beaker culture and salt-exploitation during prehistory.

The following section, entitled *Ancient Texts and Salt*, moves to Antiquity and its three cultural landmarks: Greece, Rome and Egypt. Though admittedly aware of the possible dangers of such arithmetic, in "Salt in the Antiquity: A

quantification essay”, Bernard Moinier attempts a quantification of salt demand in the economy of the late Roman republic and the early Empire by combining ancient population figures with salt major uses and by using literary, archaeological and epigraphic sources. As clear from the title, Cristina Carusi's “Hypotheses, considerations – and unknown factors – regarding the domestic demand for salt in ancient Greece” also deals with salt consumption, but in Greece this time. In her opinion, the possible objectives and implications of such an investigation, as well as the unknown factors involved, must be present in a wider discussion on the salt consumption dynamics.

“Historical development of the 'salinae' in ancient Rome: from technical aspects to political and socio-economic interpretations”, by Nuria Morère Molinero, analyses the earliest appearances in the Latin literature of the term 'salinae' that, in the author's opinion, in certain cases referred to more than mere production sites, as salt trade turned some of these into wealthy economic centers.

In approaching the uses of salt, natron and alum in the activities of tanning, dyeing and cleaning in ancient Egypt, Virginie Delrue claims that the choice of the substances was made in accordance not with availability or price but with the best efficiency for the best product. Her paper – “Salt in tanning, dyeing and cleaning in ancient Egypt” – draws on literary and papyri sources from the Pharaonic times to the Roman period.

The four articles in Part IV (Historical Approaches) come closer to present day by making the transition from Antiquity towards mediaeval times - “Salt production in Mediterranean Andalusia in the transition from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages” (Antonio Malpica Cuello) and “Land organization and salt production in Region of the Salado River (Sigüenza, Province of Guadalajara, Spain): Ancient and medieval times. Results of the first campaign 2008” (Antonio Malpica Cuello, Nuria Morère Molinero, Adela Fábregas García, Jesús Jiménez Guijarro) or settle themselves in the Modern Period - “Sea salt and land salt. The language of salt and technology

transfer (Portugal since the second half of the 18th century)” (Inês Amorim) and “A short overview on the main salt production in Italy from the end of the Middle Ages up to the Modern period” (Valdo D'Arienzo).

Thus, the first expose introduces a history of the salt production in the Mediterranean Andalusia based on the abundant archaeological remains suggestive for fishing and preparing salted fish and highlights the necessity for an archaeological analysis before traditional landscape and vestiges are completely lost. The same period and country but a different region is the concern of the following article. It presents the preliminary results of the first year a research project (the 2008 campaign), of which worth mentioning is the observation that in the Roman period production and rural life were centered around the salt storehouses and that resulted in the emergence of specialized workers. Remaining in the Iberian Peninsula, the following paper deals with the issues of salt language and technology transfer between sea and land salt exploitation from the second half of the 18th century onwards in Portugal. The last article in the section is a diachronic overview of the evolution of the salt-exploitation in Italy with its ups and downs caused over time by factors such as the people's migration from one region to another, the uncertainty of property, the disappearance of old commercial routes, the establishment of state monopoly on salt, the appearance of economic policies etc

As the editors claim in the *Foreword*, they intended to also attract contributions from the literary and linguistic domains whose members have been “unassertive, unsystematic and rather peripheral” (Foreword, vii), in order to round up a more comprehensive perspective on salt. Consequently, the closing part brings together two articles concerned with salt toponymy – “‘Salty’ geographical names: A fresh look” (Alexander Falileyev) and “Etymological and historical implications of Romanian place-names referring to salt” (Adrian Poruciuc) - and a third one interested in the Greek and Latin aphoristic phrase about salt, by Mihaela Paraschiv.

The first article analyses the etymology of two categories of geographical names: those which at some point were

thought to reflect the PIE word for 'salt' but in fact do not and others, considered to have nothing to do with it, but which may actually be related to it. Falileyev supports his presentation with detailed examples and explanations and concludes that such misrelated associations are sometimes produced by false analysis or by folk etymology.

Adrian Poruciu approaches several Romanian salt toponyms in regard to their etymological and historical implications. In his view, both the geographical names based on Romanian terms of Latin origin and those of diverse descent provide crucial data about the interethnic contacts that occurred within the territory of today's Romania. Starting from Iordan's list of so-called Slavic 'synonyms' of the Latin-based halotoponyms and from the seven Transylvanian villages called *Șieu*, he convincingly builds a case based on the concept of coterritorial languages where toponyms are indicative of bilingualism and can store not only linguistic information, but also historical, social or political content.

In "Salt in the Greek and Latin aphoristic" the focus falls upon the identification of the salt-related aphoristic phrases in the Greek and Latin literature that could have produced the semantic shift from the concrete to the abstract. In the quotations she provides, Mihaela Paraschiv distinguishes several noetic-axiological and symbolic attributes of salt, as mineral that tastes good and is indispensable for life, but also as element of civilization that denotes hospitality and trust, and which is related to spirituality and moral value.

Auspiciously, all the papers are in English and that enables them to reach a diverse audience more directly. The graphical conditions of the book are excellent, with numerous colored illustrations that support the scaffold of explanations and argumentations. But, above all, this multifaceted approach, somehow like the crystal of salt itself, manages to throw more light on the closely interwoven relationship between salt exploitation and humanity.

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