

Reviews

Marius Alexianu, Olivier Weller and Roxana-Gabriela Curcă, eds. *Archaeology and Anthropology of Salt: A Diachronic Approach. Proceedings of the International Colloquium*, 1–5 October 2008, Al. I. Cuza University (Iași, Romania). (British Archaeological Reports International Series 2198, Oxford: Archaeopress, 2011, 226pp., several illustrations (in colour & b/w) and maps, pbk, ISBN 978-1-4073-0754-1)

Salt has played an essential role throughout human history, but it is only in the last decade that it has emerged as an important issue in European prehistory. An increasing number of sites confirm that salt was intensively exploited in prehistoric Europe from the Neolithic onwards. The archaeological evidence provides a broad picture of the different methods employed for its collection and processing. As a result, research has primarily focused on the technological aspects of its production. In recent years, however, other topics such as its uses in the past, the development of exchange networks, or the symbolism of this mineral are attracting much attention (Di Fraia, 2011). It is here that anthropology, a field where research into salt has a long tradition, may offer a valuable contribution to better comprehend the significance of this substance in prehistoric times.

This book collects the papers delivered at the International Colloquium held at the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania, in October 2008, on the archaeology and anthropology of salt. It has been co-edited by three specialists on the issue who have been conducting research together on salt springs in eastern Romania for almost ten years. While M. Alexianu and R.G. Curcă (University of Iași) have centred their interests on this particular area, O. Weller (CNRS, France) has also carried out archaeological and ethnoarchaeological work in different

European countries (France, Romania, Bulgaria, Spain), as well as New Guinea, which has made him one of the most reputed scholars in this line of research. The production of salt in past times was the focus of his PhD project, defended at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne in 2000, and he has further pursued this matter as illustrated by the number of international meetings he has organized since then (Liège, 2001; Cardona, 2003; Piatra Neamț, 2004; Saline Royale d'Arc-et-Senans, 2006). Consequently, his contribution to this book, both as editor and co-author of two of the papers, is a sign of its quality.

The aim of the colloquium, also pursued in the publication of the proceedings, was 'to capture as many perspectives on the complex phenomenon of salt, against the background of the elements which determined the prehistory and history of human communities' (p. vii). In order to do so, the volume has been divided into five parts, which cover, respectively, ethnographic and archaeological approaches (Parts I and II), ancient texts (Part III), historical approaches (Part IV), and linguistic and philological approaches (Part V). While these approaches may seem at first sight very disconnected from each other, as the editors themselves recognize, they in fact complement each other, since 'they have in common the complex relationship of humanity during its whole evolution to

the *sine qua non* element of reference which is salt' (p. viii).

Therefore, the reader is provided with a multidisciplinary insight into salt. In contrast to the first meetings examining the production of salt in the past that were organized in Europe, which focused either on particular chronological periods (Weller, 2002; Figuls & Weller, 2005), or on specific types of salt works (Morère, 2007), Weller has favoured this diachronic and comprehensive perspective in the latest books he has edited (Monah et al., 2008; Weller et al., 2008). In my opinion, this perspective is particularly helpful, since historical and ethnological analogies facilitate the interpretation of the archaeological evidence at prehistoric salt works, and allow placing data in context. Certainly, this cross-cultural analysis is one of the strongest points of the book, since it clarifies not only the technological processes involved in the production of salt, derived either from sea or inland sources, but also many other interesting aspects that provide a clear understanding of its role in different societies. Social aspects have been given preference in recent publications (Abarquero & Guerra, 2010; Guerra et al., 2011) and they have been the main topic of the programme of the latest colloquium on salt in prehistoric Europe that took place in Bulgaria in 2010, where salt was considered to be the key factor behind the social differentiation of Chalcolithic societies, as observed in the Varna cemetery (Nikolov & Bacvarov, 2012).

Among the papers delivered at Iași and included in this volume, different procurement methods were examined, such as the processing of brine obtained from inland saline sources, the extraction of rock salt through mining activity, and the evaporation of seawater. This provides a deep insight into the diverse technological processes related to salt production. Likewise, in order to assess properly the social

impact of salt, the book covers a wide chronological range, from the Neolithic (mid-sixth millennium cal BC) to the present day. In view of the body of evidence for Romania, where the oldest documents illustrating the exploitation of salt date back to the Neolithic, and traditional practices are still in use among rural communities today, it would have been very interesting to examine evidence of historical periods, considering the importance of halotponymy (contribution by A. Poruciu, Part V, Chapter 2).

Another strength of the book lies in the scholarship of the contributors (including C. Carusi, J. A. Ceja Acosta, A. Harding, A. Malpica, D. Monah, N. Morère, V. Nikolov, among others). Despite the fact that most of them come from different European countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Italy, United Kingdom, France, Spain, and Portugal), it should be noted that all the papers have been written in English in order to reach the largest possible international audience.

Taking into account the origin of the participants, it is not surprising that topics are mainly Europe-centred. Therefore, as a prehistorian, I cannot help but miss some contributions about the renowned salt works of La Seille, in France (Olivier & Kovacic, 2006), Central Europe (Saile, 2000), or the Italian region of Lazio (Attema, 2006). Only three papers deal with non-European regions: two of them examine the production of salt in Southeast Veracruz, Mexico, from an ethnoarchaeological perspective, and the remaining one looks at documentary evidence from ancient Egypt. Consequently, if the editors sought to broaden the geographical scope of the book, personally I would have appreciated papers on work in areas such as China, Vietnam, or Nigeria (or even a paper by Weller on his work in New Guinea), as important research projects on salt production were in progress at these places at the time of the colloquium

in Iași (Flad et al., 2005; Reinecke & Nguyen, 2008; Tijani & Loehnert, 2004). Indeed, the editors refer to this circumstance in the Foreword (p. vii). However, this comment should be read as an observation rather than a criticism, and one should not overlook the extremely detailed analysis of the regions selected.

Last but not least, the volume greatly benefits from an excellent visual record. The editors have made a great effort to include a large number of colour photographs, black and white images, and maps and drawings, which allow the reader to appreciate even the smallest details of the archaeological materials, as well as understanding some of the traditional methods for producing salt that are described throughout the book. I find particularly impressive the Bronze Age wooden features and objects (troughs, shovels, ladders) recovered by Cavruc and Harding in Transylvania (Part II, Chapter 6). Not only are they evidence of the preservative properties of salt, but, most interestingly, they also present a method of brine processing different from briquetage (i.e. the remains of fired clay artefacts and ceramic vessels used for boiling brine) that, probably, was the most widespread salt-related technology in prehistoric Europe.

In the light of the above, I believe that this publication is unquestionably a valuable reference book for anyone interested in salt – both academics and the general public – from the perspective of the humanities. It provides the reader with a comprehensive overview of salt-related research ranging from prehistory to the present, and represents a source of inspiration for further research.

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Kent Flannery and Joyce Marcus, eds. *The Creation of Inequality. How Our Prehistoric Ancestors Set the Stage for Monarchy, Slavery and Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, Harvard University Press, 2012, 631pp., 73 figs., hbk. ISBN 978-0-674-06469-0)

This is a substantial and impressively ambitious book that aims to trace the development of inequality in human societies from our earliest ancestors through hunter-gatherers and early agriculturalists to the world's first states and empires. This is a big topic tackled on a large scale. But nowhere in over six hundred pages of text do the authors mention the archaeological record of Europe, either for hunter-gatherer or agricultural societies, and Rome receives only one mention. As a consequence, the readers of *EJA* might reasonably ask why this book should be of interest to them.

Let me begin to try and answer this question by summarizing the authors' approach and argument. Flannery and Marcus take their stimulus from

Rousseau's (1755) famous work, *A Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men*, in which the author traced the emergence of culture from nature. This work was written before the foundation of both archaeology and anthropology, and yet it took a social evolutionary perspective (in common with other Enlightenment scholars fascinated by what unites and divides human beings) to trace man's journey from being 'born free' (in 'primitive society') to being 'everywhere in chains' (in a competitive and exploitative modern society).

Flannery and Marcus aim to show the general reader how the cumulative mass of archaeological data traces the details of this long-term evolution from freedom to gross inequality. To achieve this aim they