

Project Review**A ROMANIAN CNCS PROJECT (2011–2014):
*THE ETHNOARCHAEOLOGY OF THE SALT SPRINGS
AND SALT MOUNTAINS FROM THE EXTRA-CARPATHIAN
AREAS OF ROMANIA***

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The multidisciplinary studies related to salt (either in a solid or liquid state of aggregation) have underlined its overwhelming role for alimentation, human and animal health state, food conservation during unproductive seasons (before the era of refrigeration), the stability and development of human habitat. This function subsequently determined the tendency to control (inclusively in a military way) this natural resource, irreplaceable to human life. The sub-Carpathian area of the Eastern Romania, characterized by a high density of the salt springs (over 200 that we know so far), holds the record for the most ancient traces of salt exploitation all around the European area, beginning with the Starčevo-Criș culture. To this essential aspect for the whole European prehistory we should also add that the most distinctive aspect which clearly set apart and distinguished the sub-Carpathian Moldavian area from similar European ones (or maybe worldwide), where diachronic methods of salt spring exploitation were attested, is the continuity of these methods to an intensity difficult to imagine up to the present, regardless of any sort of mechanization, economic organization or legal regulation, hence in similar conditions to those of pre-industrial societies. This unique situation in Europe represents the ideal framework for the development of complex ethnoarchaeological researches even within the European Union. Nowadays, researchers resort to the ethnographic analogies regarding remote areas unrelated to salt springs, in order to understand the archaeological phenomena related to salt springs, which drastically reduces the adequacy degree and the credibility of the ethnographic analogy.

The approach of the Romanian-French team so far, which completely observed the exigencies specific to the ethnoarchaeology, underlined the huge cognitive potential of this area on a global level. The idea to compare a Neolithic (and of other historical eras) situation, despite the succession of different archaeological cultures around salt springs, to the present day situation gains a solid ground in the fact that traditional brine supply methods and their intensity, the distribution and use networks of salt springs are practically identical. This is proven by the mediaeval and modern documents that cover a period of half of a millennium. Thus, the methodological novelty consists in the substantiation of applying current models to prehistoric archaeological contexts, beginning with the ascertained fact of the continuity—during the second half of the millennium—of the economic patterns and social contexts generated by the existence of salt springs. This occurred despite the major changes in the social, political, and administrative organization of the communities within the sub-Carpathian Moldavian area, inclusively the fact that Romania joined the European Union. An essential impediment in the setting of ethnoarchaeological researches was the lack of ethnographic studies related to the phenomenon of exploiting brine from salt springs. As we already know, ethnographers do not deal with the same issues as archaeologists; as consequence, most of the situations that could be interesting for the archaeology are never recorded. Due to this fact, an original ethnographic questionnaire related to the subject of salt springs exploitation from an archaeological perspective was elaborated. By successfully testing this useful instrument on the whole Eastern sub-Carpathian Romanian space, we elaborated a complex database that has already enabled the first modelling processes. The results of spatial analyses provide solid arguments to accept/reject several working hypotheses related to the role of salt springs in prehistory, especially in the Cucuteni-Tripolye cultural complex. Given the fact that the salt spring exploitation in Mexico, America, etc., even though it presents very interesting aspects, it does not have enough amplitude for complex modelling. Our 1992 study caught the attention of O. Weller (CNRS France) who obtained several successive series of financing since 2003 in order to carry on ethnoarchaeological investigations in the salt springs area, whose importance we have apprehended. Since 2007-2010 the researches have intensified within the CNCSIS Idei no. 167/2007 project, entitled *The salt springs of Moldavia: the ethnoarchaeology of a polyvalent natural resource* (Alexianu, M., Weller, O. 'The Ethnosol project. Ethnoarchaeological investigation at the Moldavian salt springs', *Antiquity*, vol. 83, Issue 321, September 2009, antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/weller321).

Because each campaign provided new and often unexpected aspects concerning the exploitation, uses, distribution networks, social contexts related to salt springs, we need to extend the ethnoarchaeological research framework to the entire Romanian extra-Carpathian area in order to build a saturated model (cf. G. E. Sacks, *Saturated model theory2*, World Scientific Publishing Co., Singapore, 2010). We need to continue this type of research, taking into account also the imminent disappearance of the older generations, who have first-hand information regarding the non-industrial salt exploitation during the last century. We underline the fact that, for the first time in the field of ethnoarchaeology, the correlations between the exploitation of salt springs and that of salt mountains/cliffs will be systematically analyzed. We thus create the premises to fully substantiate interpretative models impossible to achieve anywhere else in Europe. It is obvious that the modeling based on such a consistent database maximizes the credibility of using the ethnographical analogy to understand the various contexts on the archaeological time. Therefore, the different sub-models provided by this project will undoubtedly be used as reference for the areas—anywhere in the world—with evidences of salt exploitation in the archaeological, but not in the ethnographic time. We also mention that the tendency to build potentially universal models will not exclude the emphasis on the idiographic aspects illustrating the intelligence of human behaviours in particular situations. On the other side, the complexity and diversity of ethnographic data of such a large area is the ideal information support to theoretically substantiate the concept of anthropology of salt, that we have recently put into circulation (*Archaeology and Anthropology of Salt: a diachronic approach*, (eds. M. Alexianu, O. Weller, R.-G. Curcă), BAR 2198, Archaeopress, 2011, Oxford).

The project proposed aims to apply the spatial method in the field of ethnoarchaeological researches on salt springs. This top, innovating orientation in the field of ethnoarchaeological researches will be extended to the whole extra-Carpathian region, and, in the future, to the intra-Carpathian area. It is obvious that the Romanian-French ethnoarchaeological researches on salt springs will impose a pattern of scientific behaviour for all future European and international researches on the ethnoarchaeology of salt springs and salt mountains/cliffs and on ethnoarchaeology in general.

The saturated model of non-industrial salt exploitation, developed as a result of the project's implementation, will undoubtedly represent an inevitable referential for the ethnoarchaeological researches on salt worldwide. The theoretical substantiation behind the concept of anthropology of salt will definitely inspire and potentiate the interest of specialists from other fields of knowledge (especially, medicine, biochemistry, linguistics, philology, hermeneutics). It is our firm believe that the original features of this Romanian project will entice the interest of both students and young researchers, specialized in exploring the past of Romania, Europe and other continents. The proceeding stages of the project will also feature a highly important cultural significance through the safeguarding intangible heritage regarding the universe of salt. A few important involvements must be underlined concerning the public health care within the investigated areas (detecting the toxic elements of brine from salt springs), the sustainability of rural economy, through supporting this parallel non-quantifiable economy, medicine (traditional halotherapy). The future results of this project developed in the extra-Carpathian area of Romania can be used successfully used within the archaeological and ethnographical tourism programs.

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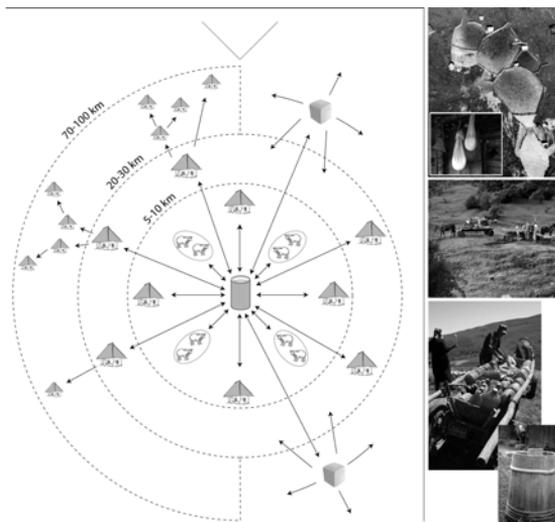


Illustration by Olivier WELLER and Robin BRIGAND

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