Salt is an invisible object for research in archaeology. However, ancient writings, ethnographic studies and the evidence of archaeological exploitation highlight it as an essential reference for humanity. Both an edible product and a crucial element for food preservation, it has been used by the first human settlements as soon as food storage appeared (Neolithic).

As far as the history of food habits (both nutrition and preservation) is concerned, the identification and the use of that resource certainly proves a revolution as meaningful as the domestication of plants and wild animals. On a global scale, the development of new economic forms based on the management of food surplus went along an increased use of saline resources through a specific technical knowledge, aimed at the extraction of salt from its natural supports.

Considering the variety of former practices observed until now, a pluralist approach based on human as well as environmental sciences is required. It allows a better knowledge of the historical interactions between our societies and this “white gold”, which are well-known from the Middle-Ages, but more hypothetical for earlier times.

This publication intends to present the most recent progresses in the field of salt archaeology in Europe and beyond; it also exposes various approaches allowing a thorough understanding of this complex and many-faceted subject. The complementary themes dealt with in this book, the broad chronological and geographical focus, as well as the relevance of the results presented, make this contribution a key synthesis of the most recent research on this universal topic.
ARCHAEOLOGY OF SALT
APPROACHING AN INVISIBLE PAST

EDITED BY ROBIN BRIGAND AND OLIVIER WELLER
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Common salt (sodium chloride) is an invisible object for archaeological research, but the ancient texts, the history, the ethnography and our everyday life confirm that both Man and Animal can not live without it. Salt is a primordial reference for humanity. This “fifth element” is universal in a double sense, diachronically and diatopically. How can archaeology and related disciplines or sciences approximate this soluble good, this “white gold”, this invisible past? Giving visibility to more or less ancient activities such as rock salt extraction or concentration and crystallisation of natural brine is still a difficult task. It requires crossed perspectives, on different levels: systematic archaeological survey and excavation around the salt sources to identify exploitation techniques, chronological and production dynamics; paleoenvironmental analysis (e.g. pollen, charcoal and remains of soil combustion) to evaluate the relations and the impact of salt production on the environment; spatial analysis to correlate archaeological and salt resource data bases; ethnographic investigations to build different ethnoarchaeological models and enlarge the referential of techniques…

Within a brief enumeration, the salt related archaeological research theme are intriguingly various: explorations (hunting for salt), exploitation techniques, exploitation and used tools, transport and storage containers, human and animal feeding, conservation, manufacture related uses, barter, commerce, human and animal mobility, salt resources control, conflicts, strategic value, professions related to salt exploitation and uses, etc. All these themes already make a study object for an impressive amount of interdisciplinary archaeological approaches. This amount is continuously increasing, as the study of a universal element that only has indirect archaeological visibility requires a holistic approach.

Some forty years after the Report on the salt weekend held at the University of Essex (De Brisay and Evans 1975), this book brings out the most recent results in salt archaeology and displays the variety of approaches that are required to understand the whole complexity of this many-faceted object. The two international sessions which took place during the 7th World Archaeological Congress (Dead Sea, Jordan, January 2013) and the 19th European Association of Archaeologist (Pilsen, Czech Republic, September 2013) proved the need for a global review of recent orientations on the universal topic that salt is. This work follows on from previous European conferences about salt Archaeology, organised in 1998 and 2001 (Weller 2002), 2003 (Figuls and Weller 2007), 2004 (Monah et al. 2007), 2006 (Weller et al. 2008), 2008 (Alexianu et al. 2011), 2010 (Nikolov and Bacvarov 2012) and 2012 (Alexianu et al. 2015).

If Europe is the host to some important archaeological research projects on the role of salt in the prehistory or the history as in Romania, Bulgaria, Germany, Spain, Great Britain or France, important research is also going on in Asia, South America and Africa. These new approaches, either historical, archaeological or
ethnographical, prove that research on salt is becoming a topic in itself within humanities on a global scale. The twelve papers of this book cover a broad surface, both on a chronological level (from prehistory to nowadays), on a geographical level (South America, Japan and Europe) and on a thematic one (production and transport techniques, spatial analyses, traditional uses, environmental interactions, etc.).

This book is structured around four themes.

The first theme is ethnography and salt exploitation. Following research in West Africa (Niger), China (Sichuan area) and Oceania (West New Guinea), Pierre Gouletquer and Olivier Weller shape an overview of various technical processes of salt production. The diversity of production systems, all strictly adapted to the local climate and possibilities, their complexity and their level of technicality are linked to the social and economical aspects of this resource for human societies. Marianne Cardale Schrimpff’s research in Colombia compares archaeological findings with the descriptions given in numerous historical documents, thus improving the understanding of pre-Columbian production techniques. Finally, Marius Alexianu and his team reflect on supply choices and strategies around the Romanian Carpathians, depending on the nature and the availability of the resource.

Part two focuses on salt production techniques. Olivier Weller’s paper is a synoptic synthesis of the salt exploitation during the Neolithic in Europe. The various types of salt resources, the diversity of archaeological evidence as well as of exploitation forms are discussed. Following a different perspective, Maria Cristina Grossi and her team of archaeologists review the recent searches on the location of a former lagoon west to Rome, where sea salt production evidence was found for the Roman time. On the broader scale of Poland, Józef Bednarczyk and his colleagues review pre-medieval salt exploitation. Their focus on a region that had hardly been studied up to now (the Polish plain) is a heuristic study of a production site from the first centuries of our era.

Papers of the third part of this book address the issue of interactions between the first agro-pastoral societies and salt, either from the sea-salt in Japan or from salt spring in Rumania. Takamune Kawashima studies the origin and the development of salt production in Japan and questions its social and economical challenges during the last three millennia of the current era. A fundamental issue is addressed in the papers of Gheorghe and Cornelia-Magda Lazarovici on the one hand, Robin Brigand and Olivier Weller on the other hand, in the region of the Rumanian Carpathians: the structuring role of attraction played by salt resources on Neolithic habitat and trade networks. Using cartographical tools and geographical information systems, the authors were able to improve the understanding of various processes, including both circulation and controls of goods with a high social value.

The fourth and last part of the book is homogeneously focused on one chronological era – the Roman time – in a historical point of view. Thomas Saile studied the rhythms of salt production in Central Europe alongside the expansion of the Roman Empire north of the Alps. His point meets Ulrich Stochinger’s
approach: focusing on the Rhenodanubian regions, he confirms the existence of noticeable changes and moves of production systems along the extension of the Empire. He questions the salt demand as well as the trade routes and the economical importance of this mineral resource during the imperial period. Finally, Isabella Tsigarida’s paper explains how the increasing salt demand during the expansion of the Empire in Great-Britain could be met by the authorities. Using archaeological data, she contributes to document the methods and infrastructures linked to salt exploitation.

The structure of this book as well as the variety of approaches and grounds which it displays remind that a better understanding of social, economical and territorial challenges surrounding salt can only be reached by gathering our knowledge and experiences in the peculiar domain of salt archaeology.

R.B. & O.W.

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References


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