Mirrors of Salt

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Cover: Cucuteni typical ladles, Romania (photo: C. Preoteasa).
The production phases of salt crystallization in Cacica, the Cucuteni culture (Mugur Andronic).

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Foreword

Three main factors contributed to the development of the concept of the anthropology of salt which I proposed in 2012. Firstly, the numerous ethnological surveys carried out as part of two Romanian exploratory research projects on the ethnoarchaeology of salt, Ethnosal and EthnosalRo, led me to notice with surprise that from a young age the inhabitants of Romanian villages located in the vicinity of salty springs acquired an integrated knowledge of the interconnecting facets of the topic of salt. Secondly, I was influenced by an amazing holistic book on salt dating back to the Spanish Renaissance (Gomez Miedes 1579, 2003), and thirdly, I was aware that not many contemporary books examined all the diverse aspects of salt. I gradually realized that in order to understand the true complexity of the role played by salt in the evolution of human societies everywhere it would be necessary to revisit the Renaissance model while adapting it to current studies and methodologies. This goal could only be achieved, in my opinion, by studying the anthropology of salt.

That idea led us to organize a symposium in 2012 to test the validity of my new conceptual approach to the anthropology of salt by studying a salt-rich country, focusing on the example of Romania. Although the specialists in different areas who participated were unable to cover all the aspects they would have liked, they did find, with mutual surprise, how different approaches could be applied to the same subject of research: common salt. It is important to note that the intention was to test the anthropology at a national level, in this case examining salt in Romania. The surprise was that some Romanian researchers had also studied salt world-wide as well as at the national level. This outlook was also demonstrated by several studies submitted for publication by researchers outside of Romania who showed interest in the innovative theme of the Iași symposium. We realized that our initial intention to study the anthropology of salt at a national level could productively be extended to cover its study on the international plane. That is why the published works were divided into two primary sections: the anthropology of salt in the world and the anthropology of salt in Romania (Alexianu et al. 2015).

These developments led to the organization of another scientific gathering, this time at an international level. The main organizers of this event hesitated for a while when it came to selecting a name, deliberating over whether to define it as a symposium, a colloquium, a conference or a congress. Considering the enormous potential of the anthropology of salt we chose the last option, which was obviously very ambitious but suitable for covering the many topics generated by salt and the numerous disciplines which are involved in the research of this mineral.

This First International Congress on the Anthropology of Salt was organized within the EthnosalRo project. For financial reasons the date for this congress could not finally be set until six months before it actually took place on 20-25 August 2015. Obviously, this time frame was insufficient to ensure widespread promotion; however, contributions from 29 countries across four continents (Europe, America, Asia, Australia) were submitted. The many presentations were organized according to five major themes: anthropology and archaeology (47 presentations), history (14), halotherapy (8), heritage (22), and literary and linguistic approaches (7). Contributions on the archaeology and anthropology of salt attracted the most submissions, with 12 key presentations from the USA, China, France, Japan, Mexico, UK, Mongolia, India and Romania (Caliniuc et al. 2015). Contributing to the success of this congress were the energetic and pertinent activities of the event coordinator, Dr Roxana-Gabriela Curcă, who was assisted by then PhD candidate Mihaela Asândulesei, and by Masters student Ștefan Caliniuc. Also worthy of mention are the other members of the organizing team, including Prof. Dr Gheorghe Romanescu [†], Dr Andrei Asândulesei, Dr Vasile Cotiugă and Dr Felix-Adrian Tencariu. Amongst foreign participants, we appreciate the very welcome financial support given by Dr Olivier Weller (CNRS – Paris). A special mention is due to the co-editor of this volume, Dr Ashley Dumas (University of West Alabama), who has undertaken the complex and difficult task of ensuring the necessary standard of language for submissions from authors who are not native speakers of English. Our special thanks for the contribution made to the editing of this volume go to Dr Felix-Adrian Tencariu and PhD candidate Radu-Alexandru Brunchi.

As usual, not all attendees submitted their articles or studies. In place of these the editors were happy to publish other authors who found out too late about the organization of this congress, but showed great interest in the new challenge of the anthropology of salt. The number of papers submitted by Romanians was almost equal to that of foreign authors. This fact should not be considered a deficiency. The guiding principle of this type of congress consists precisely in spreading the knowledge of research on salt from different areas of the globe.
International participation at the First International Congress on the Anthropology of Salt, organized under the above-mentioned conditions, was encouraging but obviously did not exhaust the huge potential of this emerging discipline. This is why we believed that the next congress which took place between 12 and 16 October 2017 in the famous resort of Los Cabos, Mexico, in the homeland of the salt goddess Huixtocihuatl and of one of the world’s largest salt-producing centres, Guerrero Negro, would mark an important step forward in the evolution of research into the role of common salt in the development of human societies everywhere and in all times.

Marius Alexianu

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