

Bernard Moinier & Olivier Weller, *Le sel dans l'Antiquité ou les cristaux d'Aphrodite*, Les Belles Lettres — Collection Realia, 2015, Paris, 356 pages, ISBN 978-2-251-33842-2

The volume, issued recently (2015) by Les Belles Lettres, known for the quality and variety of works published, which have influenced for the better cultural progress across the world, is a work that meets the exigencies demanded by the prestigious French publisher, particularly on account of the expertise of the two co-authors.

Bernard Moinier is a specialist with an experience of more than twenty-five years in the field of salt research, and a former intendant of the *Comité des Salines de France*, a professional association that actively monitors for the salt producers of France the technical and scientific regulations. An admirable combination by this man-of-letters of a training in exact sciences with a full grasp of classical languages, allows him to have an advised understanding of the ancient texts, concurrently with the technical competence required by a specialist in the salt industry. This aptitude is visible from the countless participations at international scientific gatherings, and the appreciable number of studies and volumes on salt, one of which is *Sel et société*, published in 1997 by the prestigious Nathan publishing house.

The second co-author, Olivier Weller, is a French researcher with a vast experience in the archaeology of salt from multiple focal points across the globe (France, Spain, Germany, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, New Guinea). The double specialisation, as an archaeologist and ethnologist, allowed him to tackle the problematics of the salt from a multi-faceted standpoint, focusing on the techniques of salt exploitation, the uses and the socio-economic dimensions during the Neolithic.

Relying on a vast and varied ancient bibliography, meticulously covered, the authors divide the information into coherent parts, from the technical aspect, represented by the salt exploitation methods, to the spiritual one, in a multi-faceted approach.

For the first section of the work, the authors structure the information in a very clear manner, highlighting the entire variety of saline manifestations revealed by the works of ancient Greek and Roman authors. Besides the origin of the salt and the present-day geographical correspondence of the places where this resource was exploited, emphasis is put on a number of details concerning the salinity, chemical composition, quantity of salt obtained, or the exploitation techniques used, with some stages accompanied by graphical representations. This approach is completed with the archaeological discoveries, which complete the overall image of the procedures to exploit salt not only in Antiquity, but since Prehistory. The world revealed by the ancient writings is presented by regions, with the characteristics of each being highlighted.

The solid expertise of one of the authors (B.M.) in the classical languages came to the fore with the analysis of a number of indicators for certain saline references, for which

contentious translations have been made throughout time have, in order to reason out the accurate meaning.

Even though the uses of the salt during various periods by human communities have arguably witnessed an increased attention in works of a scientific-academic and other nature, on account of representing the finality of salt exploitation, the chapter dedicated to this topic manages nevertheless to stir the interest of the reader by stressing the complexity and the variety of salt's domains of use. Emphasis is put on its use in human alimentation, making a full analysis of the presence of salt on the tables of the ancients, ranging from types to quantity and, by means of comparisons with other victuals and through inferences, to the price of this special mineral during certain historical periods. Particularly detailed are the descriptions of the salt-curing workshops and of the techniques for preparing fish- and meat-based products produced with the help of salt, with each category being presented separately. Medical remedies based on salt abound in ancient writings, while the procedures for processing hides being presented at large, accompanied by detailed calculations. Mummification, the uses of salt in metallurgy, in textile manufacturing for fixating colours, and illumination, are strikingly interesting aspects, adding to the existing body of knowledge.

The second part of the work, entitled *Les cristaux d'Aphrodite*, is fully justified by the last section, developed around the issue of behaviours and mentalities concerning salt among ancient peoples, with an emphasis on the myth of Aphrodite, the goddess born from the foam of the sea, a real of salt by excellence. The term *sales* was used as a metaphor by multiple ancient Latin authors to designate the psychological and temperamental traits of an individual, by reference to the qualities of salt. Salt, as a "gift of the gods", is upheld in the entire ancient literature, from the Homeric expression "divine salt", to the universal myth of Aphrodite, grown around a physiological effect observed by the ancients, namely the *aphrodisiac* effect of salt, its beneficial role during pregnancy, parturition and breastfeeding, both in humans and animals. The complex symbolism of salt during the Antiquity is analysed in detail by the authors, also by recourse to Biblical references, in order to complete the picture and inciting the reader to compare them with the more obvious aspects of the present-day collective or individual mindset.

For an exhaustive presentation, the authors supplemented the ancient sources, which were presented in footnotes, with opinions of specialists from the respective fields, which they adopted or only presented for information purposes, listed in the substantial bibliography at the end of the book. Similarly, a set of annexes presenting the totality of saline manifestations mentioned by the consulted writings, as well as several maps with certain types of salt from various regions of the Roman Empire, help to construct an overall image of the saline universe, at least from the geographical standpoint. Of real use for understanding the historical period addressed by the authors is the chronological table. In

the same vein, the indexes of personal, people and place names point the reader to their topic of interest.

The importance of *Le sel dans l'Antiquité ou les cristaux d'Aphrodite* can be demonstrated foremost by the accessibility it reveals, both at the level of language, appropriate for both the specialised and wider public, and of the scientific information contained by it, establishing it into a seminal work of the novel field of anthropology of salt. Benefiting, as already stated, from the expertise of the specialist in salt from the technical and classical-studies point of view (B. Moinier), successfully completed by the training in the humanities of ethno-archaeologist (O. Weller), the volume could emerge in the scholarly world as a valuable monograph, probably the first of such a scale in the field that analyses the entire problematics of salt in Antiquity. This is, I believe, contingent on the appearance of an English-language edition, which would ensure international visibility, facilitating access, in an analytical and all-encompassing manner, to the entire ancient body of writings referring to salt, which is not accessible to all readers.

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