

Blas Román Castellón Huerta, *Cuando la sal era una joya. Antropología, arqueología y tecnología de la sal durante el Posclásico en Zapotitlán Salinas, Puebla.*

Con un prólogo de Marius Alexianu. Secretaría de Cultura. Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, México, D.F., 2016, 294 pp.

The role of salt in the development of communities in Pre-hispanic Mexico, one of the major areas of human civilization, began to be studied relatively late compared to the archaeological research carried out in other areas, primarily Europe. Although a historiographical assessment indicates, after periods of absence or feeble concerns, a relative increase in specialized studies in the last two to three decades, such works are still insufficient for the huge potential of Mexico. That is why a work like this one arouses *ab initio* the largest interest in the international community, where, likewise, in recent decades, a notable revival of archaeological and anthropological research focused on salt has been observed.

First of all, I want to underline the title of this book. Along with the metaphor contained in the main title which draws attention to the value of salt in traditional communities (*joya - 'jewel'*), the subtitle (*anthropology, archaeology and technology of salt...*) marks by itself the aspiration towards a more comprehensive analysis able to overcome the strictly disciplinary approaches, which are obviously very useful but insufficient for understanding the complexity of the subject at hand.

This position illustrates, of course, the university education, research activity and position of the author within the Mexican academic life. That is why I consider it necessary to present some bio-bibliographical references. Blas Román Castellón Huerta obtained a Bachelor Degree in Archaeology from the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia in 1985 (with honours), a Master Degree in Arts (Archaeology) from the Arizona State University (1992) and a PhD in Anthropology (Archaeology) from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (with honours). Since 1985 he has been Associate Professor at the National School of Anthropology and History (ENAH), Mexico, and since 1996 a Senior Researcher at the Direction of Archaeological Studies in the National Institute of Anthropology and History. Since 1987 he has carried out archaeological research in nine areas of Mexico and one in Salvador. He is the author of three specialized books, has edited two studies volumes and published several reference studies.

The introduction (pp. 19–30) presents the general framework of research carried out mainly between 2002 and 2008 in the surroundings of the present-day municipality of Zapotitlán Salinas, situated in southern centre of the Central Plateau of Mexico: “This work studies ancient salt production, technology, social, cultural and symbolic implications and its place within a wider political system of trade relations, trade interchange and taxation in the

post-classical period”. The main objective of the paper is to “define and explain the existence in this place and during this period of a sudden change in salt production scale” in order to obtain the so-called salt cakes, for barter and tax purposes. The introduction has the merit of raising a strong interest in many aspects of research, from the first contact of the author with an important archaeological salt production site, to the epistemic dilemmas that preceded the archaeological excavations and which continued afterwards. The reading is passionate and it is not by chance/accident that the most numerous pages of the introduction (pp. 22–29) are incorporated into a perfectly justified subtitle: *A fascination for the unknown* (in Esp. *Una fascinación por lo desconocido*).

Given the high complexity of the work, the author had the propitious idea, in the *Introduction*, to present the *The general scheme of this book* (*Esquema general de este libro*) (pp. 22–30). Thus, given the limited information on salt production in Pre-hispanic periods, the author points out that he sought to define as accurately as possible the historical and archaeological context of saltworks, the physical and geographic environment of salt and artefacts in relation to the technological processes. Starting from this basis, the most important social aspects generated by technology have been interpreted, as well as the consequences of salt production here for neighbouring regions. All of these great research milestones are structured into the eight chapters of the book, the essence of which is presented below.

The first chapter, *Production and specialization in the Postclassical*, deals with the issue of artisanal specialization in salt production, as it results from archaeological research, through critical recourse to the conceptual problems specific to the economics of ancient societies. The following chapter, *Ancient history and salt production in Zapotitlán*, presents the historical and archaeological context of the Zapotitlán region. The third chapter, *Salt production sites*, provides a detailed description of the salt production areas, archaeological research and their results. The reconstruction of each stage of technical operations necessary for the production of salt is done in the *Production process* chapter, in which the author adopts a less known theoretical perspective that considers technology as a communication system with important symbolic implications. The historical implications, internal and external consequences of the sudden increase in salt production are analysed in the *Production scale* chapter. The next chapter, *The social organization of production* presents the social consequences of salt production, but also the implications at the level of social representations, including social imagery. The chapter *Destinations of salt* presents the distribution of salt and its social mechanisms, the context of political forces involved, perceptions of different receivers who participated in the interchange system. The last chapter, *Technological change in the 16<sup>th</sup> century*, analyses the historical circumstances that put an end to this technology, namely the appearance of mining and cattle breeding, specific features of the new Hispanic society.

The *Conclusions* synthesize, at a high level of generality the personal research outcomes, as they appear in each chapter of this book, also being experienced or incorporated into the previous researches. Following are some of the most important conclusions. Thus, it is highlighted that the water control systems and the salt production are the two decisive elements for understanding the origin of the domestication of plants and all the cultural manifestations generated by it, as reflected in the archaeological finds. The author considers that both the quantitative aspect of salt consumption and the symbolic dimensions should be taken into account, arguing that the agricultural populations identified salt with the state of being human, in contrast to the non-human (p. 257). The author shares the idea that technology is a historical-cultural expression with symbolic dimensions, while distancing himself from the simplistic vision that salt production is simply an economic or functional activity that responds to a material (biological or agricultural) need. In support of this come ethnographic arguments, namely that among the current populations “the Zapotitlán salt has a special role to play in eating food and in other medical, social and religious uses” (p. 258). The techniques of producing consumer goods are “a true religious experience” because “the masters of these waters and lands are not human, but divine beings, with a different essence to which they must be offered” (p. 259). It is also emphasized that “crystallized salt cakes or blocks must be literally designed as parts of the body of the (salt *n.n.*) goddess” (p. 261). Techniques and associated beliefs should not be conceived as two distinct elements, but as a unitary whole (p. 261). Regarding the intensification of production in post-classic period, the author concludes that it is “generated by an increased demand for the diversification and prestige of saline products (salt cakes) and not only food, nutritional or economic demands” (p. 263). The use and exchange strategies with other products were not based on a common appraisal (*tasación común*), but “depending on the social value, but also on the magical and ritual of this salt” (p. 264).

Special mention must justly be made with respect to the illustration (drawings, some redesigned, and photographs, made, with some exceptions, by the author) accompanying the text of the volume.

In the light of the above, I believe that this publication is unquestionably a valuable reference book for anyone interested in salt in general, and Mexican salt production in particular. This work decidedly demonstrates that on the issue of the role of salt in the archaeological past, the strictly archaeological approach is insufficient and must be replaced by a broad anthropological one. Considering that research is disseminated with important details and, in an accessible and pleasant language, simultaneously rigorous and very lean, the work is of interest to both the academics specialised in this field, as well as the general public, but especially for the young generation of researchers from the field. Through a multi-faceted discourse that is markedly clear, logical, penetrating and (self-)critical, the work provides the reader with a comprehensive, complex and complete overview of Zapotitlán

Salinas, Puebla in the post-classical period. This is why I fully agree with the main conclusion of the *Foreword* (*Prologo*, p. 17), namely that the qualities of this book, representative of the high level of humanities in Mexico, place it in the highest position among the world reference books on the anthropology and archaeology of salt. Furthermore, I am sure that the systematic archaeological and anthropological research featured in this work will be an inspiration for other scholars, especially if the book will also benefit from an English version, which will enable reaching a diverse audience more directly.

One more remark: after reading the entire book, I realised that the main title is not simply a metaphor, since to produce salt in grain is not the same as producing a salt cake. Both processes are related but the production of a salt cake is much more complex and the result is certainly a prestigious good, and this outcome makes the waste of broken ceramics (millions of ceramic fragments; p. 25) a futile issue since what they get finally is a very valuable product: a real jewel.

In the end, I am very pleased to mention that the conclusions of this review have been confirmed by the honouring of the author with the prestigious award *Premios Nacionales INAH. Premio “Alfonso Caso” a la mejor investigación en Arqueología 2017* (INAH National Awards, “Alfonso Caso” Award to the Best Research in Archaeology 2017). This very prestigious award, conferred since 1985, recognises the major works concerning Mexico, including those by foreign scholars, published in the fields of Anthropology, Archaeology, History, Museology, and Restoration.

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Mihaela ASĂNDULESEI,  
Interdisciplinary Research Department – Field Science,  
“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University Iași, Romania  
mihaela.asandulesei@yahoo.com