

THE PEOPLE OF SALT

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Since ancient times salt was considered a very precious natural resource. Today we take advantage of its varied properties, regardless where we find it: on the surface or deep under the earth, in brines (salt water brooks). We use salt to prepare our meals, to preserve food, in therapies, in research etc. But if today we know how to exploit salt and how to benefit of its properties we cannot avoid wondering about the way people exploited and used it thousands of years ago. How was it exploited, how was it used in prehistoric ages?

The National Museum of Eastern Carpathians tried to find an answer for this question by resorting to experimental archaeology conducted at Băile Figa, Bistrița-Năsăud County archaeological site. During several archaeological researches the Museum revealed here one of the most important Romanian archaeological findings – one of Europe's oldest rock salt exploitation sites, dated between 3600 – 1500 B.C.

Why experimental archaeology? Because, on the one hand, it facilitates a better knowledge and understanding of the past through experiments that reproduce aspects of ancient life and test the interpretations of the researchers, and, on the other hand, it represents a highly efficient way to attract the younger public towards archaeology and towards getting to know *salt* in a much different way than reading about it in school books.

Thus, between the 10th and 20th of August 2010, the National Museum of Eastern Carpathians (MNCR), organised, with the support of its partners: the “Cucuteni for the 3rd Millenium” Foundation from Bucharest (FCMIII), the “Carpații Răsăriteni” Cultural and Scientific Association (ACSCR) and Exeter University, Great Britain, “**The Experimental Archaeology Camp from Beclean - Băile Figa, Bistrița-Năsăud County – 2010**” as part of the “People of Salt” Project, financed by the Administration of the National Cultural Fund (AFCN).

The activities of the camp were conceived in an interactive mode. The schedule of the camp included workshops, as for example clay modelling, archaeological diggings, and experiments such as firing the clay vessels in ovens, obtaining salt with the help of *briquetages*, methods of rock salt exploitation etc.

In the beginning all the participants visited the Băile Figa archaeological site where they could observe the archaeologists at work and they got precious information regarding modern archaeological research methods. The students had the opportunity to observe the 3000 year old findings *in situ* – the wooden instalments used by prehistoric people to exploit rock salt and brine.



**Fig.1. Visiting the Băile Figa archaeological diggings, 2010(left);
Fig.2. - Visiting the Băile Figa archaeological site (right)**

During the *Clay modelling workshop*, which was the most appreciated workshop, the students could manually create objects and *briquetages* (specially shaped vessels used in prehistory to obtain small pieces of salt out of brine, by boiling it). They used different types of clay with varied mixtures, following the shapes and modelling techniques used in prehistory. At the same time our partner, the Centre for Drug Abuse Prevention Evaluation and Counselling of Covasna County (The National Drug Enforcement Administration - ANA), organised the contest “The Mascot against Drugs”. This contest was part of the “Holiday without drugs” Project, and there were two winners – Anca Rus and Daniela Roman, both of them students at the “Liviu Rebreanu” Secondary School from Beclean.



Fig.3 and 4. Manual modelling of the clay briquetages

One of the most captivating activities was the experiment of firing the *briquetages* in the oven-pit and in the unicellular surface oven. Through firing at high temperatures (the oven-pit firing reached an 800° C temperature) the clay vessels became ceramic vessels, a part of them being used afterwards for another experiment – in obtaining solid salt by boiling brine in *briquetage*.



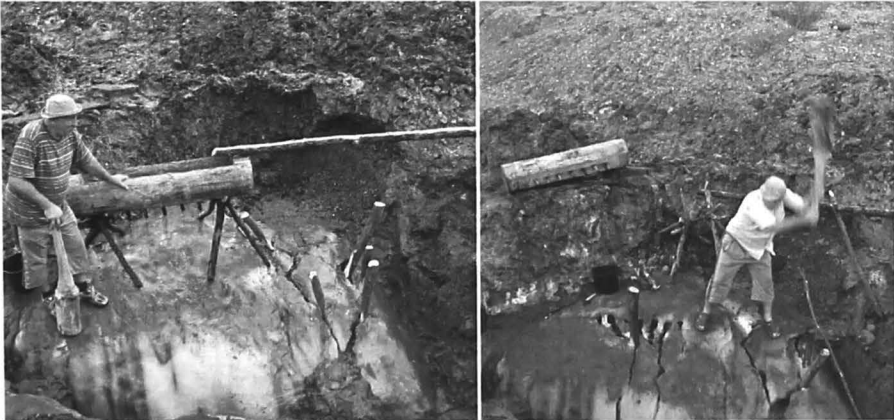
Fig.5. Firing the briquetages in the oven-pit (left);
Fig.6. Briquetages (detail)(right).

During the experiment called “Trough” we tried to reproduce a wooden instalment found at Băile Figa, which was used in prehistoric times to exploit rock salt. Thus, to be able to exploit rock salt, a wooden “trough”



**Fig.7. The oven, general view(left);
Fig.8. Firing the vessels and the briquetages in the oven(right).**

was craved; on its bottom it had several holes, in which wooden pegs were placed; these pegs had hemp strings inside them. The trough was set upon the rock salt and filled with water, first with brine, then with fresh water. The hemp strings directed the fresh water flow towards the rock salt and thus the flow made deep perforations in the salt bed. Using a wooden sledge hammer and wooden wedges we were able to detach big pieces of rock salt.



**Fig.9. Installing the „Trough” on the rock salt bed;
Fig. 10. Obtaining pieces of rock salt using the „Trough” and fresh water**



The varied activities of the project and the choice of using experimental archaeology attracted a number of 42 students from „Mihai Viteazul” National College – Sf. Gheorghe, Covasna County, „Liviu Rebreanu” Secondary School and „Petru Rareș” National College – Beclean, Bistrița – Năsăud County. In addition, the *Clay Modelling Workshop* was organised as well at the Community Social Services for Children Complex from Beclean (General Office of Social Assistance and Child Protection of Bistrița Năsăud County), where 60 children, primary, secondary, high-school and university students took part at this activity.

Based on the questionnaires given to the students before and after taking part at the activities of the camp we could observe that during the camp they have learned a lot of new information, they got to know the *prehistoric, pre-industrial and traditional* salt exploitation methods and uses (rock salt, brine springs, brine wells etc.).

The “People of salt” project took place at Băile Figa, where the “Băile Figa Spa” was recently opened (a balneary resort financed by the European Union), and thus the organisers of this project could also “profit” by having the opportunity to promote the archaeological findings of the area, since the resort attracted thousands of tourists this year.

The artefacts of the salt exploitation are not as spectacular as other ancient findings, and this fact explains the lack of scientific studies, presentations and exhibitions in museums related to this very important economic activity. But regarding the success of this archaeological camp and the results of the experiments conducted in 2010 by the Museum at the Băile Figa site the Romanian museology slowly rallies to the European current of presenting ancient civilisations through the reconstruction of settlements with all their aspects, based on archaeological findings.

Translation: Andrea Deák