

Salt: A World History

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The following passage has been transcribed for academic purposes only, and is aimed at teaching reading comprehension skills necessary to perform well on the FCAT.

Please read the following passages, and answer the questions that follow in the packet. Please take as much time as is necessary to read, understand, and adequately answer the accompanying questions. Questions will be graded on the basis of correctness, response quality, and appropriateness to the required reading material. The questions from this packet are due at the end of class.

Introduction

I **bought** the rock in Spanish Catalonia, in the rundown hillside mining town of Cardona. An irregular pink trapezoid with elongated, curved indentations etched on its surface by raindrops, it had an odd translucence and appeared to be a cross between rose quartz and soap. The resemblance to soap came from the fact that it dissolved in water and its edges were worn smooth like a used soap bar.

I paid too much for it – nearly fifteen dollars. But it was, after all, despite a rosy blush of magnesium, almost pure salt, a piece of the famous salt mountain of Cardona. The various families that had occupied the castle atop the next mountain had garnered centuries of wealth from such rock.

I took it home and kept it on a windowsill. One day it got rained on, and white salt crystals started appearing on the pink. My rock was starting to look like salt, which would ruin its mystique. So I rinsed off the crystals with water. Then I spent fifteen minutes carefully patting the rock dry. By the next day it was sitting in a puddle of brine that had leached out of the rock. The sun hit the puddle of clear water. After a few hours, square white crystals began to appear in the puddle. Solar evaporation was turning the brine into salt crystals.

For a while it seemed I had a magical stone that would perpetually produce brine puddles. Yet the rock never seemed to get smaller. Sometimes in dry weather it would appear to completely dry out, but on a humid day, a puddle would again appear under it. I decided I could dry out the rock by baking it in a small toaster oven. Within a half hour white stalactites were drooping from the toaster grill. I left the rock on a steel radiator cover, but the brine threatened to corrode the metal. So I transferred it to a

small copper tray. A green crust formed on the bottom, and when I rubbed off the discoloration, I found the copper had been polished.

My rock lived by its own rules. When friends stopped by, I told them the rock was salt, and they would delicately lick a corner and verify that it tasted *just* like salt.

Those who think a fascination with salt is a bizarre obsession have simple never owned a rock like this.

Salt is so common, so easy to obtain, and so inexpensive that we have forgotten that from the beginning of civilization until about 100 years ago, salt was one of the most sought-after commodities in human history.

Salt preserves. Until modern times they provided the principal way to preserve food. Egyptians used salt to make mummies. This ability to preserve, to protect against decay, as well as to sustain life, has given salt a broad metaphorical importance.

Salt was to the ancient Hebrews, and still is to modern Jews, the symbol of the eternal nature of God's covenant with Israel. In the Torah, the Book of Numbers, is written, "It is a covenant of salt forever, before the Lord," and later in Chronicles, "The Lord God of Israel gave the kingdom over Israel to David forever, even to him, and his sons, by a covenant of salt."

On Friday nights Jews dip the Sabbath bread in salt. In Judaism, bread is a symbol of food, which is a gift from God, and dipping the bread in salt preserves it – keeps the agreement between God and his people.

Loyalty and friendship are sealed with salt because its essence does not change. Even dissolved in liquid, salt can be evaporated back into square crystals. In both Islam and Judaism, salt seals a bargain because it is immutable. Indian troops pledged their loyalty to the British with salt. Ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans included salt in sacrifices and offerings, and they invoked gods with salt and water, which is thought to be the origin of Christian holy water.

In Christianity, salt is associated not only with longevity and permanence but, by extension, with truth and wisdom. The Catholic Church dispenses not only holy water but holy salt, *Sal Sapientia*, the Salt of Wisdom.

Bread and salt, a blessing and its preservation, are often associated. Bringing bread and salt to a new home is a Jewish tradition dating back to the Middle Ages. The British dispensed with the bread but for centuries carried salt to a new home. In 1789, when Robert Burns moved to a new house in Ellisland, he was escorted there by a procession of relatives carrying a bowl of salt. The city of Hamburg, Germany, symbolically renews its blessings once a year by carrying through the streets chocolate-covered bread and a marzipan saltcellar filled with sugar. In Welsh tradition, a plate was put on the coffin with bread and salt, and a local professional sin eater arrived to eat the salt.

Because salt prevents decay, it protects from harm. In the early Middle Ages, farmers in northern Europe learned to save their grain harvested from a devastating fungal infection called ergot, poisonous to humans and livestock, by soaking the grain in salt brine. So it is not surprising that Anglo-Saxon farmers included salt in the magic ingredients placed in a hole in the plow as they invoked the name of the earth goddess and chanted for “bright crops, broad barley, white wheat, shining millet...”

Evil spirits detest salt. In traditional Japanese theater, salt was sprinkled on the stage before each performance to protect the actors from evil spirits. In Haiti, the only way to break the spell and bring a zombie back to life is with salt. In parts of Africa and the Caribbean, it is believed that evil spirits are disguised as women who shed their skin at night and travel in the dark s balls of fire. To destroy these spirits their skin must be found and salted so that they cannot return to it in the morning. In Afro-Caribbean culture, salt’s ability to break spells is not limited to evil spirits. Salt is not eaten at ritual meals because it will keep *all* of the spirits away.

Both Jews and Muslims believe that salt protects against the evil eye. The Book of Ezekiel mentions rubbing newborn infants with salt to protect them from evil. The practice in Europe of protecting newborns either by putting salt on their tongues or by submerging them in saltwater is thought to predate Christian baptism. In France, until the practice was abolished in 1408, children were salted until they were baptized. In parts of Europe, especially Holland, the practice was modified to placing salt in the cradle with the child.

Salt is a potent and sometimes dangerous substance that has to be handled with care. Medieval European etiquette paid a great deal of attention to how salt was touched at the table – with the tip of a knife and never by hand. In the most authoritative book of Jewish law, the *Schulchan Arukh*, The Prepared Table, written in the sixteenth century, it is explained that salt can only safely be handled with the middle two fingers. If a man uses his thumb in serving salt, his children will die, his little finger will cause poverty, and use of the index finger will cause him to become a murderer.

Modern scientists argue about how much salt an adult needs to be healthy. Estimates range from two-thirds of a pound to more than sixteen pounds per year. People who live in hot weather, especially if they do physical labor, need more salt because they must replace the salt that is lost in sweating. This is why West Indian slaves were fed salted food. But if they do not sweat excessively, people who eat red meat appear to derive from it all the salt they need. The Masai, nomadic cattle herders in East Africa, meet their salt needs by bleeding livestock and drinking the blood. But vegetable diets, rich in potassium, offer little sodium chloride. Wherever records exist of humans in different stages of development, as in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century North America, it is generally found that hunter tribes neither made nor traded salt but agricultural tribes did.

On every continent, once human beings began cultivating crops, they began looking for salt to add to their diet. How they learned of this need is a mystery. A victim of starvation experiences hunger, and so the need for food is apparent. Salt deficiency causes headaches and weakness, then light-headedness, then nausea. If deprived for long enough, the victim will die. By at no time in this process is a craving for salt experienced. However, most people choose to eat far more salt than they need, and perhaps this urge – the simple fact that we like the taste of salt – is a natural defense.

Where people ate a diet consisting largely of grains and vegetables, supplemented by the meat of slaughtered domestic farm animals, procuring salt became a necessity of life, giving it great symbolic importance and economic value. Salt became one of the first international commodities of trade; its production was one of the first industries and, inevitable, the first state monopoly.

The search for salt has challenged engineers for millennia and created some of the most bizarre, along with some of the most ingenious, machines. A number of the greatest public works ever conceived were motivated by the need to move salt. Salt has been in the forefront of the development of both chemistry and geology. Trade routes that have remained major thoroughfares were established, alliances built, empires secured, and revolutions provoked – all for something that fills the ocean, bubbles up from springs, forms crusts in lake beds, and thickly veins a large part of the earth's rock fairly close to the surface.

Almost no place on earth is without salt. But this was not clear until revealed by modern geology, and so for all of history until the twentieth century, salt was desperately searched for, traded for, and fought over. For millennia, salt represented wealth. Caribbean salt merchants stockpiled it in

the basements of their homes. The Chinese, the Romans, the French, the Venetians, the Hapsburgs, and numerous other governments taxed it to raise money for wars. Soldiers and sometimes workers were paid in salt. It was often used as money.

Today, thousands of years of coveting, fighting over, hoarding, taxing, and searching for salt appear picturesque and slightly foolish. The seventeenth-century British leaders who spoke with urgency about the dangerous national dependence on French sea salt seem somehow more comic than contemporary leaders concerned with a dependence on foreign oil. In every age, people are certain that only the things they have deemed valuable have true value.

The search for love and the search for wealth are always the two best stories. But while a love story is timeless, the story of a quest for wealth, given enough time, will always seem like the vain pursuit of a mirage.

Directions

Each of the following questions is a sample short response question. You should aim to provide a minimum of three to five sentences answering each question. Simple, one sentences responses will not count towards the completion of this activity. The difficulty level of the question is listed following each response prompt. Observe the following tips when formulating a response:

- Using a quote from the reading to support your answer will always help your score!
- Spelling does *NOT* count; try to use advanced vocabulary, even if you cannot spell the word properly!
- Do *NOT* rephrase the question in your response.

Response Prompts

1. Why was the rock, which was described at the beginning of the introduction, unique? Provide and explain at least three examples. (Low difficulty)
2. Why might someone find the author's obsession with his rock bizarre? (Medium difficulty)
3. What are some of the ways salt could be used as a preservative? Use examples from the reading to support your answer. (Low difficulty)
4. What are some of the ways that salt is *symbolic* to different cultures? (Medium difficulty)
5. How does the human reaction to lack of salt differ from lack of food? (Medium difficulty)
6. What are some of the ways that different cultures get the salt that their bodies need? (Medium difficulty)
7. Why, looking back, does it seem "comic" that humans cultivated such an obsession with salt? How does the modern desire for oil compare to the ancient desire for salt? (High difficulty)