

The Salt Trade on the East Coast of Dalmatia and Istria (XVII - XVIII centuries)

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For centuries the natural richness, configuration and composition of the soil and the contents of sea water have been used for various purposes. Salt had long been collected on the islands and along the coast. Traces of salt-works have been discovered; most of them became gradually exhausted, while some of them have remained in use up to the present day with their structure and form radically changed. The technology of obtaining salt from sea-water has evolved from being a primitive and very simple process to a much more complicated and modernized one.

The eastern Adriatic coast was an abundant and convenient source of salt exploitation and its favourable geographic position made possible the exchange of salt between the inhabitants of various places and countries. It was a kind of mediator between the Mediterranean, the Apennine Peninsula and the Adriatic on one hand and the continental part of the Balkans and the Danube basin on the other. There have been no important changes in its position up to the present day.

The advantage of possessing salt is considerable. Independently of various circumstances the owner could fix the price. He could get any other commodity or money for his salt. He was in a better position than the person who did not possess it because it was very important for both men and cattle. With progress, the uses of salt became more varied in every day life. It became less and less just a commodity to meet the elementary needs of the immediate producers and their surroundings and entered the sphere of exchange, becoming a first-rate object of trade from which income was obtained. Therefore various parties developed an interest in the trade — small

and large producers, owners and lease-holders, town communities, large estate owners, dealers and carriers, home and foreign rulers, all wanted to control the production and trade in salt, without sparing the means to achieve their objectives. The root of the problem should be sought in the economic policy which accompanied and directed the salt trade. Each of the interested parties, both native and foreign, tended to reserve the trade for themselves, because it was not only lucrative — yielding considerable income — but also conferred various privileges which were important in a society that measured reputation and a good name by holding property and a a lucrative job.

Such was the social environment in which salt was exploited and trade carried out on the eastern Adriatic coast.

Periodisation and Sources.

If the salt trade of the eastern Adriatic coast is observed as a whole over a timespan of several centuries, three periods in the organisation of production and trade can be differentiated:

The first period began in the early middle ages at the time of home rule and the existence of the South Slav states.

The second period began with the destruction of the South Slav states and incorporation of their territory as well as the eastern coast by foreign states (the Venetian Republic, the Osmanli Empire and the Austrian Monarchy).

The third period began with the repelling of the Turks from the Danube basin and the Balkans (only one part of the South Slav States) and with the decline of Venetian domination in the Adriatic and the Mediterranean, and with the contemporary expansion and strengthening of Austrian influence in the area until its decline in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which will be the subject of our study.

These social and political events brought with them corrections in the organisation of production and trade, specific to each period. Naturally, they disturbed the production process and the intensity of trade temporarily. The obtaining of salt from sea water and the trade

in salt were predominantly adjusted to the needs of the new principal state rulers.

The scant and contradictory sources reveal only this much. Unfortunately, for a number of town communities and whole provinces sources have not been found (or they do not exist at all) for whole centuries. The only exception is the Republic of Dubrovnik which succeeded in preserving her individuality and state autonomy for several centuries (up to 1808) in the southern Adriatic.

Salt-works and Obtaining the Salt.

Along the entire eastern coast from Trieste and the Yugoslav-Italian border down to the Yugoslav-Albanian border (the west-east axis) salt was exploited in numerous smaller and larger salt works. As time passed their number varied — some were opened, others were closed. But the total quantity of salt increased on trend. A considerable number of salt-works (Piran, Pag, Ston and others) maintained production and improved their technology. They acquired new elements and took on the characteristics of modern factories.

The expense of constructing salt-works was not usually large; the most important thing was to find and adapt a suitable area (a field) so that water could be supplied and drained. Up to the seventeenth century most of them had no machinery. Only the extension of salt-works and the introduction of machinery caused larger expenses which were soon regained.

The output of salt varied not only between salt-works but within each one. The quantity and quality depended upon the site of the salt-work, its technical equipment and skilled handling, and the composition of sea water (salinity grade) and atmospheric conditions. Some of the salt-works could meet the needs of a large feudal family, village or the nearest town and some of them produced several thousands of buckets or tons of salt.

The founders and owners (joint owners) of the salt-works were of various professions and belonged to various social classes: small and

large estate owners, traders, town patricians, communities, provincial governors, rulers and government institutions (parliaments, chambers, salt offices etc.) Those who developed and organized production were mostly natives.

Production was organized at the owner's expenses, or it was leased. Mostly local people worked there under various conditions and were variously paid. Only the introduction of machinery brought foreign skilled workers into the salt-works. Some of the workers worked in order to meet their commitments towards landlords, town community or ruler, the others for partial wages or as agreed by contract. The payment was either in commodities, money or both, covering the agreed percentage of total salt production. The workers were in a position of inferiority or semi-inferiority in relation to the owners of the salt works.

The conditions of work were not easy — the worker was exposed to bad weather, and the supervisor was not always benevolent. But the employees had certain privileges — they were exempted from military service and long hard labour, especially at the time of salt gathering.

The Transport of Foreign Salt by Ships.

Although there were many salt-works along the coast and the quantity of their salt constantly increased, they could not meet the growing needs of the population and market. Therefore very early salt had to be imported from other countries. It was transported from the ports and landing places of the Mediterranean (the Apennine Peninsula, Sicily, Malta, Levant, Cyprus, Albania and other places).

The transport of this salt, the quantity of which sometimes exceeded the quantity of home-produced salt, was an incentive to shipowners and united them in the wish to undertake the transport by their own ships. Several ports and larger towns had a long tradition as ports. Organizing the transporting of salt had a firm technical and juridical basis in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The town and state authorities issued regulations and published books of rules («Rollar-Ordnung», «Rolo») stipulating conditions and classifying

shipowners for transporting salt. It seems that the frequent transport of salt dictated the construction of a special type of ship to carry it. Later, such ships were separated from the then standard types. Out of all the types then navigating in the Mediterranean and in the Adriatic one third transported salt. Specially designating ships for the transport of salt brought rationality and economy and certain security from possible losses. Salt is very sensitive to atmospheric conditions and changes; it had to be kept in its natural state so that losses and damage were avoided since repacking was inconvenient at that time. Although such transport was accompanied by risks and uncertainty, the shipowners competed to have the opportunity to transport salt. Obviously, it was a lucrative business giving a satisfactory income. However, it was not accessible to everybody; only the very rich could procure a ship and enter the business. Such a ship, navigating in the Adriatic and the Mediterranean with special designation, cost a large sum of money (as much as an average shop in a town on the coast in Rijeka or Trieste). The number and status of salt transporters in Senj prove this statement. In 1763 Senj was in the immediate vicinity of the Austrian, Turkish and Venetian border; various interests and jobs converged and were settled in this maritime trade centre.

The Croatian and Bosnian mainland was for centuries supplied with salt from Senj. The Viennese and Graz Chamber built large storehouses and employed workers who controlled and settled the purchase of salt there. The following number of ships, shipowners and their status was noted at the height of operations:

Carrying capacity	number	«carra»	number		
			patricians	citizens	commoners
up to 50 «carra»	12	408	4	4	10
over 50 «carra»	13	1,184	13	3	2
Total	25	1,592	17	7	12

It can be deduced that 17 patricians owned most of the ships with carrying capacity of more than 50 «carra», while citizens and commoners owned the ships under 50 «carra». Consequently, only rich citizens could take part. Previously the situation had been even more unfavourable for commoners and citizens, not only in the salt trade but in other public transactions: the Austrian Monarchy and the Republic of Dubrovnik encouraged and gave preference to native shipowners, but the Venetian Republic had favoured Venetians. Shipowners were allowed certain privileges: they were exempted from military service, transporting armies and some town taxes and duties.

If there had been no imports of foreign salt, there would have been no active market in salt in the Adriatic and the Balkans.

Organisation of Transport and Purchase Holders.

The long tradition of organized salt purchase has its origin in the town communities of the middle ages. Since then it has been improved and adjusted to the needs of economy and trade and social organisation. With economic progress the organization of salt purchasing markedly improved. It has always been conditioned by various interests and long-term objectives which were reflected in an economic policy favouring the production of domestic salt, the import of foreign salt and the export of salt into the mainland of the South Slav countries. The Republic of Dubrovnik is a fine example of this during its entire existence (up to 1808).

In the general framework of organisation various institutions were formed: local, regional, provincial and central-government, whose task was to improve the salt trade and to collect the income from it. Storehouses were built in the ports (towns) and salt-trade centres.

The transport of salt by sea and its export to the mainland were regulated. Customs and tolls were established, old practices adjusted or new ones created for new needs. Efficiency, precision and legal security were improved. Salt was receiving special treatment compared to other commodities.

Commoners, rulers, government authorities (chambers, salt

offices) feudal masters, towns, town patricians, home and foreign dealers, shipowners and sailors, carriers, officers and soldiers took part in the salt business directly or indirectly, and their influence varied according to each stage. They belonged to various social strata. To some of them salt was the only commodity they traded while others traded with other commodities as well. All of them had their own interest in the business and a particular point of view. Considering the objective circumstances which divided them, their mutual competition and discordance are quite understandable. Each of them wanted to derive profit, and in this wish their interests conflicted and diverged. It is interesting to note that, according to the data we have, salt dealers were never scarce: people took part and invested their money gladly so that there was never a lack of businessmen or money.

Purchase and sale of salt.

Purchase and sale are at the centre of the complex organisation of salt production and trade. Domestic salt, it seems, was sold in smaller quantities to the immediate producers and dealers in the salt-works. It was purchased there to be transported and stored in the storehouses in towns and ports. Salt registers were not always accurately kept so sometimes it is hard to tell whether it was home or foreign salt.

The quantity of salt was very often not registered. Only the name of ships and shipowners were noted and that makes the study of the salt trade very difficult. Public storehouses existed along the entire eastern coast of the Adriatic. Some of them were there in the Middle Ages and became widely known (those belonging to the Republic of Dubrovnik and those along the western coast of Istria) attracting businessmen from Mediterranean countries and the Balkans.

The retail trade in salt began very early in town communities. It satisfied the needs of local inhabitants and of surrounding areas. However, wholesale trade prevailed and it formed the basis of the trade in salt. This is proved by the example of Rijeka/Fiume:

Year	Purchased buckets	Sold buckets
1635	9,848	3,559
1636	5,378	3,865
1637	51,632	11,865
1638	560	5,045
Total	67,418	24,334
(out of which salt was sold and shared out among towns)		2,000
		26,334

From the total quantity of purchased salt 39.06% was sold: 36.09% out of town — most probably to Carniola, Croatia and the Military Borderland — and only 2.97% in the town at retail shops. The quantity of purchased and sold salt fluctuated during the four-year period but tended to grow.

Transport of Salt into the Hinterland of the Adriatic.

According to some authors almost every large port on the Adriatic coast had a road connecting it with a vast hinterland. These had been used in Roman times. In more recent times modern roads were built for new and diverse purposes. For centuries salt has been transported from ports and storehouses into the mainland. Larger quantities of salt coming to the ports' storehouses were exported to the mainland by these roads.

The example of Rijeka could be applied more or less to other ports on the coast. Exports amounted to several thousand buckets of salt annually from various ports. Here are some data on the quantity:

Selling place	from 1763 to 1772 sold buckets of salt
Devin	190,886
Trieste	784,572

Rijeka	79,478
Bakar	471,636
Bakarac	175,924
Senj	1,213,814
Karlobag	135,662
Total	<u>3,051,972</u>

Together these places totalled had less than 25,000 inhabitants at that time, and such a large quantity of salt was not, understandably, sold only to them, but it was transported to the mainland at a considerable profit.

The transport of salt from the maritime ports to the mainland was, in the Middle Ages, subjected to special agreements and regulations. The historian Konstantin Jireček confirmed that Bosnia and Serbia purchased and imported salt from particular storehouses. «The main imported commodities were salt and homespun. According to old contracts salt could be imported only via 4 maritime places: the mouth of the Neretva, Dubrovnik, Kotor and Saint George on the Bojana river, the nearest salt works in the south being near Drač. The citizens of Dubrovnik, who made considerable profit from the sale of salt up to the fall of the Republic in 1808, were keen to make sure that the contracts were respected. Violent disputes would break out when the Slavs tried to organize salt-works near Sutorina or Budva. At the beginning salt was obtained from the salt-works near the town itself but later the salt-works at Ston were opened. The Ston salt-works have been supplying the mainland with this commodity for centuries and still do today.

The transport of large quantities of salt into the vast hinterland was not easy and simple at that time although there was a long-standing tradition: it was hard and expensive, risky and uncertain. Caravans of 10 to 1,000 horses and mules had carried salt from ports into the mainland for centuries. Only with the construction of several modern roads which connected the coast to the mainland, was transport improved and carts introduced.

Several thousands of draught-horses were needed to carry annually several millions of buckets (each horse carrying 2, 2½ or 3 buckets — 100-105 kg.). The Emperor Joseph II (1780-1790) saw this for himself during his journey in Croatia and Littorale in 1775 when he wrote in his diary: «Diesen Weeg übersteigen jährlich mit grösster Beschwerniss viele tausend und tausend Pferde, welche den Stichhandel mit Zengg treiben, und Salz abholen, das sie gegen Weitzen und Taback vertauschen».

This kind of transport was undertaken by individuals, groups or a kind of «company» — some of them stayed in the business permanently, others only temporarily. It was subjected to special regulations, and the operation lasted for several weeks or even several months. Peasants (villeins) took part in it in order to fulfill their commitments towards their feudal masters or the state for either partial payment or payment as contracted. The transporters would usually carry various commodities from the mainland to sell or exchange them for salt in adequate quantities in the ports. This kind of transaction was continued up to most recent times in some ports where wheat was exchanged for salt.

Income and Importance of Purchase and Sale.

People belonging to various social strata were happy to take part in the production and trade in salt because both its exploitation and its purchase and sale were useful and profitable. In the income structure of the owners, lease tenants, contractors, dealers, carriers, town communities, chambers and even in the Government's budget the income from salt was considerable. A high level of income was collected although expences for production and purchase were very low. The difference between the money invested and collected varied from place to place and over time, but income was always high. The richest Croatian landowner, the nobleman Zrinski, collected 84% profit on the money invested for the purchase of salt in his port on the

Croatian littoral, and the profit of the State Salt Office in Rijeka was 140%. The Graz Chamber, and later the Austrian-Hungarian Chamber collected 40,000 to 50,000 *gulden* from sales in Senj. In the same period the Republic of Dubrovnik received on average over 41,000 *perper* annually from the salt business — 100% or even more than expenditure. The Venetian Republic was able to cover the expenses of its rule in Istria and Dalmatia out of the income collected from the Istrian salt-works. The income collected from salt was considerable in the budget of the Austrian Monarchy, especially after the fall of the Venetian Republic (1797) when it occupied the entire eastern coast from Venice to the Albanian border. The numerous salt-works and active, well-organized transport and marketing, and the monopoly on salt all formed inexhaustible and rich source out of which the Viennese Court collected large sums of money.

Although there were many problems and negative factors in the transport of salt the quantity always increased. Over the span of two centuries, the seventeenth and the eighteenth, considerable progress was made throughout the territory under study. The quantity of salt rose, financial resources increased and circulation quickened.

The effects of the salt trade were beneficial — it stimulated and developed the market and the exchange of goods, connected different towns and regions, made contrasts among states (Austrian Monarchy, Venetian Republic and Osmanli Empire) less obvious and introduced various social strata into the process. The first contacts of the rural population and their masters with the market were made when they needed salt. Salt was the first article they could not produce at home and had to buy on the market.

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