

Peatland proverbs from the past: buying the marsh with the salt (Aristotle, 384–322 BCE)

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SUMMARY

Texts from Antiquity include much valuable information on how ancient cultures perceived and utilised peatlands and other wetlands. The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) mentions in his work ‘Rhetoric’ a proverb “buying the marsh with the salt.” He explains that it refers to situations that have both good and bad sides. Within the context of salt production in coastal marshes - where ashes of burned plants were boiled in water until salt remained - it relates to “good” salt, and “bad” incompletely combusted plant remains. When the one was mixed with the other, there was a substance with both good and bad aspects.

KEY WORDS: ancient societies, Greek/Latin writings, Greek/Roman salt production, past landscapes, wetland appreciation, wetland exploitation

INTRODUCTION

A proverb - from the Latin word “*proverbium*” (the Greek word is “*παροιμία*”, “*paromia*”) - “... is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorisable form and which is handed down from generation to generation” (Mieder 1993, page 5). In Antiquity, authors already published works with collections of proverbs (Edwards *et al.* 1996). One of these authors was Aristotle (384–322 BCE; Figure 1), who was a student of Plato in Athens and one of the most important scientists of ancient Greece. His works cover numerous antique philosophical disciplines including logic and metaphysics, epistemology, physics, optics, astronomy, the natural world, biology (including an early form of taxonomy), psychology, ethics, politics, economics, linguistics, rhetorics and art (Nussbaum 1996). Although his collections of proverbs have not been preserved, he writes frequently about sayings in many of his other works, of which the ‘Rhetoric’ contains a proverb on salt and marshes. This article presents the proverb to an audience of present-day peatland/wetland scientists within the context of the perception of these landscapes by ancient cultures (de Klerk & Joosten 2019).

SALT IN ANTIQUITY

Methods of salt production in Europe dating back to the Neolithic have been studied archaeologically (Weller 2015). Salt was considered a precious substance in ancient Greek and Roman times, and Pliny the Elder writes:

“... a life of even the slightest sophisticated standard cannot exist without salt, and it is such a necessary substance that the word has also passed on to the higher joys of the spirit.” [another meaning of the Latin word “*sal*” is “*spirit*”] (“... *vita humanior sine sale non quit degree, adeoque necessarium elementum est, uti transierit intellectus ad voluptates animi quoque eximias.*”) (‘Natural history’ XXXI:41,88).

Salt was obtained in numerous ways (see Harding 2013, Brigand & Weller 2022, Grisonic 2022, Marzano 2024). First of all, there was mining of large salt deposits (Pliny the Elder, ‘Natural history’ XXXI:39,77–80) originating from major prequaternary evaporite settings (Harding 2013). Otherwise, salt was derived from evaporated seawater in various different natural and artificial environments including natural basins along coasts

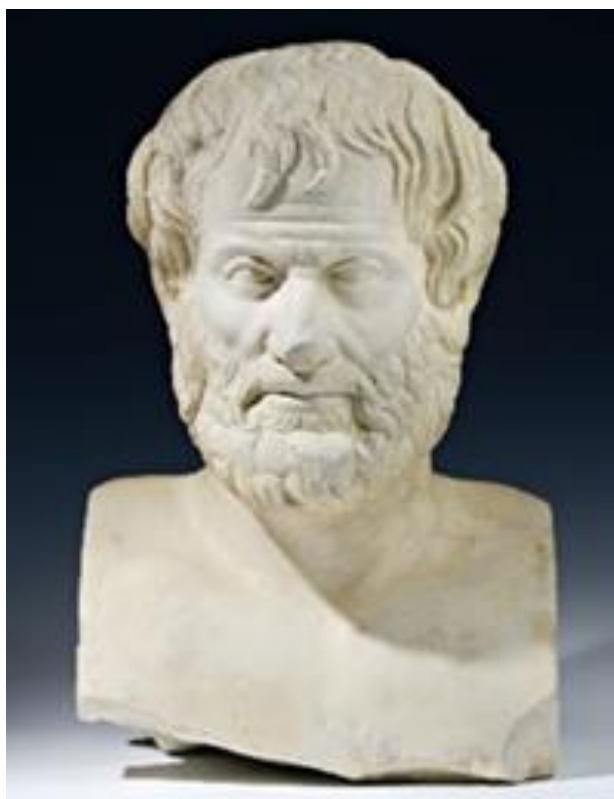


Figure 1. Bust of Aristotle - modern copy of a 2nd century CE sculpture from the Acropolis Museum, Athens (Greece). This copy: Rijksmuseum voor Oudheden, Leiden (Netherlands), object Z 2017/1.1. <https://www.rmo.nl/collectie/collectiezoeker/collectiestuk/?object=231373>

that dried out during summer (Pliny the Elder, ‘Natural history’ XXXI:39,73; Vitruvius, ‘On architecture’ VIII:3,7), from dried-out salt crusts on coastal rocks that were frequently hit by waves (Pliny the Elder, ‘Natural history’ XXXI:39,74), from surficial salt crusts in dried-out wetlands (Vitruvius, ‘On architecture’ VIII:3,7), from collected seawater that was dried in the sun probably in artificial receptacles (Nicander, ‘Alexipharmaca’ 511–520; Pliny the Elder, ‘Natural history’ XXXI:39,74), from boiling seawater or pouring seawater on burning wood (Nicander, ‘Alexipharmaca’ 511–520; Pliny the Elder, ‘Natural history’ XXXI:39/40,83), or from special salt works consisting of artificial basins filled with seawater through inlet channels and trenches that - after drainage of surplus water - was subsequently left to evaporate (Manilius, ‘Astrology’ V:682–692; Pliny the Elder, ‘Natural history’ XXXI:39,8/82; Rutilius, ‘The homecoming’ 475–484). Even salt that had been used previously for preserving meat was recovered during preparation of the food (Pliny the Elder, ‘Natural history’

XXXI:40,83). Hercules Salaris, an aspect of the demigod Hercules, was the protector of salt and salt commerce in Roman times (Morgan 2005).

According to Aldrete (2004), Stockinger (2015) and Marzano (2024) the Via Salaria (“salt road”; Figure 2) - originally leading from Rome to the Tyrrhenian Sea - was so named because salt that came from coastal marshes at the mouth of the river Tiber was transported along this road (see also Purcell 1996). The Via Salaria was later extended eastward to the Adriatic coast - where salt production also took place - to enable its transport into the Italian interior (Salmon & Potter 1996, Marzano 2024). Storage warehouses for salt were built in Rome (Marzano 2024). Even the word “salary” (Latin: “salarium”) will derive from salt-related words, and probably stems from times when people were paid in natural products (Pliny the Elder, ‘Natural history’ XXXI:41,89).

THE PROVERB

The proverb mentioned by Aristotle - explaining that it designates situations which simultaneously contain favourable and unfavourable aspects - is:

“Buying the marsh with the salt” (“τὸ ἔλος πρίασθαι καὶ τοὺς ἄλας”) (‘Rhetoric’ II:23,15).

It is evident that the proverb relates to coastal marshes where salt is present in sufficient amounts to extract it. The proverb connects well to a method of salt production (not mentioned above) that Aristotle describes for the Umbri people (note that in Roman times Umbria was considerably larger than the present-day Italian province bearing that name, and extended to the Adriatic coast; Figure 2).

“There is a place where reeds and rushes grow. They burn some of these, put the ashes into water and boil it off. When only little water is left [i.e. when the water has almost completely evaporated] and has cooled, it provides a quantity of salt.” (“ἔστι γὰρ τις τόπος ἐν ᾧ πεφύκασι κάλαμοι καὶ σχοῖνος· τούτων κατακάουσι, καὶ τὴν τέφραν ἐμβάλλοντες εἰς ὕδωρ ἀφέψουσιν· ὅταν δὲ λίπωσιν τι μέρος τοῦ ὕδατος, τοῦτο ψυχθὲν ἁλῶν γίγνεται πλήθος”) (‘Meteorology’ II:3).

Similarly, Pliny the Elder writes:

“I found in Theophrastus that the Umbri used to boil the ashes of reeds and rushes in water until only a little bit of the liquid remains.” (“apud theophrastum invenio umbros harundinis et iunci cinerem decoquere aqua solitos, donec exiguum superesset umoris.”) (‘Natural history’ XXXI:40,83).



Figure 2. Locations of the Via Salaria and Umbria in Roman-time Italy.

Pliny probably took his information from the lost work ‘On salts, soda and alum’ by Theophrastus (4th/early 3rd century BCE) (Harding 2013, Marzano 2024) who, in turn, most likely used the same source as his teacher Aristotle.

Within the context of this kind of salt production, the meaning of the proverb becomes clear: on the one hand one wants to have the purest salt possible (the favourable aspect); on the other hand this salt may be contaminated with unwanted, not completely burned plant remains (the unfavourable aspect). As “totum pro parte” the word “marsh” is used for the remains of the plants.

It is enigmatic why this method of salt production was used at all, since the amount of salt that can be retrieved in this way is considerably less than the amounts obtained at “industrial-like” facilities in large basins along the coast. Unfortunately, the ancient texts consulted do not provide sufficient information to furnish any insights on this question. However, a similar method of large-scale salt production that was in use predominantly during the 11th to the 16th centuries CE is known from the Dutch and north-west German coasts. Here - in contrast to the Mediterranean realm - temperatures are too low to allow natural evaporation of saltwater (Panten 2004, Meier 2006, Laban 2009).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Written texts from ancient cultures are important sources of information about how humans experienced wetlands in the past. In this case, exploitation of the wetland is obvious: plants from coastal marshes were collected and burned, and the ashes were boiled until salt remained. Thus, these wetlands were used as a resource to provide a substance crucial for human life.

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