

SYMBOLIC FUNCTIONS OF SALT AND RELATED SIMILES IN ORIENTAL CURSES AND BLESSINGS¹

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Salt has a polymorphic symbolic functionality that recommends it as one of the most impressive and effective symbols ever. Like many other basic symbols of a remote origin, its perception was ambivalent. Most of its symbolic functions derive from its practical features. It has been valued both for its corrosive and therefore destructive nature, and for its antiseptic and preservative qualities. And this is why its imagery was all the time positive as well as negative within the same type of cultural environment. For example, it was Elisha who cured the waters that made the land infertile with salt², while in other contexts in the Jewish or Mesopotamian cultural milieux, the salt waters possess negative connotations. In the epic of *Enuma Elish*, Tiamat, who was a personification of the salt waters, was threatening with the destruction of the newly begotten world and the gods until she was eventually slain by the god Marduk who split her body into two parts, subsequently creating heaven and earth³.

Salt was mainly a physiological necessity rather than simply a commodity. Indeed, modern science has proved the fact that an average daily amount of 5–15 g was sufficient for the ordinary people to have in their diet. Yet, in time, salt began to be perceived as a culturally implemented taste as well. If we compared these figures to the an average of 280 g a day in the United States at the middle of the 20th century, we would clearly perceive the difference between the two types of situations⁴.

Primarily, salt has always been an indispensable element for the human alimentation and animal breeding⁵. It helped preserving aliments and therefore was perceived as a symbol of permanence and eventually of unreversed eternal time. In everyday life it was not only counted among the most appreciated culinary flavouring and table condiments⁶, but even as a separate dish⁷. One of the oldest texts mentioning the importance of salt as one of the basic needs for human existence is a Sumerian proverb that can be read as follows: “When a poor man has died, do not (try to) revive him! (When) he had bread, he had no salt; (when)

¹ Article elaborated within the project CNCSIS Romania entitled ‘The Salt Water Springs of Moldavia: Ethnoarchaeology of a Polyvalent Natural Resource’, code 414/2007, no. contract 167/2007.

² 2 Kings, 2, 21: “And he went forth unto the spring of the waters, and cast the salt in there, and said, Thus saith the LORD, I have healed these waters; there shall not be from thence any more death or barren land” (KJV edition).

³ *ANET*, p. 60–67; F.B. Lovell, *Biblical and Classical Myths*, in *The Classical Journal*, 50, 1955, 6, p. 271–273.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 229.

⁵ Several different Oriental sources mention the use of salt for animal breeding. We provide only few examples in this respect. In the book of Isaia, salt provender was to be given to the animals for their foraging (Isaia, 30, 24). Another interesting paragraph belongs to a Hittite source about the training of the horses, i.e. the so-called Kikkuli text: here we are told that, on an oven, crushed salt was mixed with water and given to the horses together with malt in one of the stages of breaking in (A. Kammenhuber, *Hippologia Hethitica*, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1961: I, Vs. II, 26–39).

⁶ Job 6, 6: “Can that which is unsavoury be eaten without salt? or is there any taste in the white of an egg?” (KJV edition).

⁷ J.E. Latham, *The Religious Symbolism of the Salt*, coll. “Théologie historique”, Éditions Beauchesne, Paris, 1982, p. 55; idem, *Salt*, in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 12, p. 8059; A.. Dalby, *Food in the Ancient World from A to Z*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003, p. 290–291.

he had salt, he had no bread”⁸. Here we notice it valued not only as one of the main components of the meal, but an essential one for the human survival. Due to the fact that salt production, distribution, and consumption is far from being impeded or restricted nowadays, usually people easily forget how important this element was for ordinary life in Ancient times. In the societies of the Near East, the rights to control and extraction over the salt exploitation areas were usually a royal monopoly⁹, it was the king who would appeal to sheperds among the harvesters. This was due to the fact that pasturage activity was basically related to this kind of activity, because of their need to use salt for animal foraging. In a previous article, while analyzing the agreements between the Great King of Hatti, Tudhaliya IV, and his cousin Kurunta of Tarhuntašša, we proved that the same pattern of exploitation was curently applied in Anatolia at the Late Bronze period¹⁰. Besides, the importance of the salt exploitation areas in ancient times was so important that we have evidences in the treaties of the 14th–13th centuries of wars fought between states in order to ensure control over the resources (i.e. between Siyannu and Ugarit)¹¹. The salt extraction areas were also sources of prestige and effective power in any competition for political supremacy and legitimacy, sufficient enough to be given in exchange for the admitted legitimacy of an usurper king. Still there are also instances recorded in the documents of Ugarit when salt exploitations remained in private use and they were even exempted from the due taxes. The property, entrusted to former outstanding royal functionaries were supposed to be resold and the rights preserved even for the new owner¹².

Three passages of an outstanding Jewish writer belonging to the Graeco-Roman period also deals with salt as a separate dish of the table, as well as a condiment and a necessary intake for the offerings to the Temple of Jerusalem. Philo of Alexandria, while speaking in his *Contemplative Life* about the Therapeutae and their simple life of abstinence, self-control and fasting let us know about their habit of eating the salt flavoured with hyssop as a different part of their meal, joined only by common bread and spring water, just enough to keep them from hunger and thirst. There are three passages that mention the importance that salt had for the religious life of the Therapeutae community. The first one concerns the Sabbath meal and the way they are fastening, where salt was taken as a separate meal: “Still they eat nothing costly, only common bread with salt for a relish flavoured further by the daintier with hyssop, and their drink is spring water. For as nature has set hunger and thirst as mistress over mortal kind they propitiate them without using anything to curry favour but only such things as are actually needed and without which life cannot be maintained. Therefore they eat enough to keep from hunger and drink enough to keep from thirst but abhor surfeiting as a malignant enemy to soul and body”¹³. Two other instances are related to the preliminary feast. In the second passage concerning this religious group, salt is only a seasoning, while wine is replaced by pure water within the sacred banquet: “In this banquet (...) no wine is brought during those days but only water of the brightest and clearest, cold for most of the guests but warm for such of the older men as live delicately. The table is kept pure from the flesh of the animals; the food laid on it is loaves of bread with salt as a seasoning, sometimes also flavoured with hyssop as a relish for the daintier appetites”¹⁴. The third paragraph deals with

⁸ D. Potts, *On Salt and Salt Gathering in Ancient Mesopotamia*, in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 27, 1984, p. 228.

⁹ J.E. Latham, *op.cit.*, p. 251, n. 3; D. Potts, *op.cit.*, p. 236–246, 253–257, 269–270; M.L. Hetzler, M.L., *The Word šš in Ugaritic (About the Occurrence of Salt-taxes in Ugarit)*, in *Annali. Istituto Orientale di Napoli*, 18, 1968, p. 359–361.

¹⁰ *On Salt Extraction and Symbolism in Oriental Sources*, B.A.R. Series, London (forthcoming). See also the paragraphs related to the salt exploitations in central Anatolia in the editions of the Bronze Tablet and of the Ulmi-Teshub Treaty: H. Otten, *Die Bronzetafel aus Boğazköy. Ein Staatsvertrag Tuthalijas IV*, SBoT 1, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1988, p. 17; G., Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, Scholars Press, Atlanta, Georgia, 1999, p. 116–117; the translation and commentaries provided by Harry A. Hoffner, Kathleen R. Mineck and Theo van den Hout in the chapter 9, entitled *Hittite Historical Texts*, in Chavalas, M.W. (ed.), *The Ancient Near East. Historical Sources in Translation*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA-Oxford-Carlton, Victoria, 2006, p. 253–279; H.A., Hoffner, *The Ulmitešub Treaty (Kbo 4.10=CTH 106) with a New Join*, in K. Emre et al. (eds.), *Anatolia and the Ancient Near East. Studies in Honor of Tahsin Özgüç*, Ankara, 1989, p. 200; O.R. Gurney, *The Treaty with Ulmi-Tešub*, in *Anatolian Studies*, 43, 1993, p. 23–28.

¹¹ PRU IV: 71–75 = RS 17.335+379+381+235, lines 57–63 and PRU IV: 291 = RS 19.81. See also D. Potts, *op.cit.*, p. 252–253; C. Carusi, *Recherche sur le sel dans la Méditerranée orientale de l'Age du Bronze Récent*, in A. Figuls, O. Weller (eds.), *La Trobada internacional d'arqueologia envers l'expoatació de la sal a la prehistòria i protohistòria*, Cardona, 6, 7 i 8 de desembre del 2003, p. 265.

¹² PRU III: 124–125 = RS 15.147; PRU III: 124 = RS 17.167+163.

¹³ Philo, *The Contemplative Life*, 37 (LCL, 363, p. 134–135).

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 73 (LCL, 363, p. 159).

the same context of the sacred banquets of the Therapeutae. Here, their tables are compared by Philo with those that held the loaves of the propositions in the Temple: “When everyone has finished his hymn the young men bring in the tables mentioned a little above on which is set the truly purified meal of leavened bread seasoned with salt mixed with hyssop, out of reverence for the holy table enshrined in the sacred vestibule of the temple on which lie loaves and salt without condiments, the loaves unleavened and the salt unmixed”¹⁵.

Sharing the salt with a person or even a community was a token of friendship or could be perceived as a sufficient warranty that a concluded agreement or treaty was meant to be respected. We also have several examples in this respect. The Akkadians used the expression “to eat the salt of (a person)” in order to point that the covenant with a person was realized, which allowed the mutual reconciliation between individuals. In a similar way, the Samaritans mentioned their sharing the salt with the king of Persia as a proof of friendship while stating: “Now because we eat the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to behold the kings dishonour, therefore we have sent and informed the king, that search be made in the book of records of your fathers...”. It is also a sign of close alliance. Latham even believed that in this specific case “the Samaritans were referring to a treaty or a covenant”¹⁶. Another interesting case that lead to a similar image of sharing the salt as a symbol of “table-fellowship” is that of the verb used at the very beginning of the *Acts of the Apostles* when Jesus was said to eat with the Apostles after His resurrection for everybody to be entrusted of the fact that He was truly alive: “And, being assembled together with them (= συναλιζόμενος), commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me”. The verb employed here, even if a hapax in the New Testament, had a double meaning: either “to eat salt with”, “to eat at the same table with”, “to take salt in common” – thus leading to the idea of partaking salt together in a communal meal – or “bring together”, “collect”, “assemble”¹⁷. And even up to the present day salt maintained its significance in the Semitic world as the symbol of the communal meal. In the desert, where salt is a necessity of life, sharing the salt with your guest has for the Arab people the meaning of entering into an alliance, the host being thus compelled to ensure protection¹⁸.

The custom of using salt in the sacrificial rites, magic spells and incantations was a common feature of many Oriental peoples since the remotest times. The Assyrian incantations proper to the so-called Maqlû series specifically indicate the fact that no sacrificial meal and no burning of incense were valid without the presence of the salt: “O Salt, created in a clean place, / For food of gods did Enlil destined thee, / Without thee no meal is set out in Ekur, / Without thee god, king, lord and prince do not smell incense”¹⁹. This text is most probably the same with the one cited by R.J. Forbes in his *Studies in Ancient Technology* – about which unfortunately he indicated no reference whatsoever –, where the salt produced in a ‘pure place’ was destined to Enlil and the other great gods²⁰. The specific denomination of salt as a “salt of gods” is also mentioned in the Hittite rituals, in a context related to people’s oblivion in providing proper sacrificial meals to the gods²¹. An interesting example that proves the use of the salt in the Mesopotamian temples is that of the Akkadian texts mentioning the reconstruction of the É-kur temple in Nippur under the rule of Naramsin and Sharkalishari, where the salt deposited in a specific storage facility of the temple was used both for the cultic

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 81 (LCL, 363, p. 163–165).

¹⁶ Ezra, 4, 14. We followed here the translation given by Latham in *The Religious Symbolism...*, p. 50 and the examples given at p. 45–46. The KJV edition we currently use provides a slightly different reading: “Now because we have maintenance from the king's palace, and it was not meet for us to see the king's dishonour, therefore have we sent and certified the king that search may be made in the book of the records of thy fathers”. The word employed here, *melach*, and translated as “to have maintenance”, literally means “to eat salt”.

¹⁷ G.H.W. Lampe (ed.), *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1961, p. 1298: “to eat salt with”; H.G. Liddell, R. Scott (ed.), *A Greek-English Lexicon*, revised and augmented throughout by Sir Henry Stuart Jones, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 1694: “eat salt with, eat at the same table with”; “bring together, collect, assemble”; A. Bailly, *Dictionnaire grec-français*, rédigé avec le concours de E. Egger, édition revue par L. Séchan et p. Chantraine, Ed. Hachette, Paris, 1950, p. 1838: «rassembler, réunir»; J.E. Latham, *op. cit.*, p. 57–61 for the whole discussion.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 52.

¹⁹ D., Potts, *op.cit.*, p. 230–231. With slight differences also reproduced by M. Levey in *Gypsum, Salt and Soda in Ancient Mesopotamian Chemical Technology*, in *Isis*, 49, 1958, 3, p. 340: “You, a salt, who are born in a bright spot..., without you no meal in the temple is prepared. Without you, god, king, lord and noble do not enjoy a sacrifice”.

²⁰ Forbes, R.J., *Studies in Ancient Technology*, III, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1955, p. 168, mentioning the desert salt in this case and those of the Jewish offerings; also J.E. Latham, *The Religious Symbolism...*, p. 35.

²¹ S. Erkut, *Hititlerde tuz ve kullanımı*, in *Bellekten*, 54 (209), 1990, p. 2–4.

purposes and for the rations of the skilled and unskilled workmen who were working at the reconstruction of the temple. Such specific chambers used as storage facilities of salt may have been used in the early temples of Mesopotamia, the transport and supply of salt being provided through leather bags and augets. The literary testimonia prove that at least in the cults of Aššur and Ishtar salt played an important role in the performance of the cultic rites, being sometimes poured out on the ritual meals²².

Salt that is not supposed to become tasteless²³ was the sign of the eternal covenant between God and the chosen people – the “salt of covenant” or the “covenant of salt”²⁴ – and was sprinkled on or mingled with the offerings at the Temple: “And every oblation of thy meat offering shalt thou season with salt; neither shalt thou suffer the salt of the covenant of thy God to be lacking from thy meat offering: with all thine offerings thou shalt offer salt”²⁵.

According to the Jewish tradition, the blessing of the God could be easily transformed into a curse if the prescriptions of the Law and the covenant were not observed. Thus, God can turn the fresh waters into salt waters²⁶, and the fertile land into a barren one of brimstone and salt²⁷, a salt marsh²⁸, an uninhabited salt land²⁹ or a salt pit³⁰. Accordingly, salt and other types of similes (chaff, wax, fog, dew etc.) were employed both as symbols of destruction if the action performed by man displeased God or as a symbol of revival and blessing. First type of situation is the expressed by non-observance of the covenant and disobedience of man: in Isaiah, 5, 24: “Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: because they have cast away the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.” But man’s disobedience and his getting cursed could turn into a blessing of the divinity as in Jeremiah, 17, 5–8: “Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord. For he shall be like the heath in the desert, and shall not see when good cometh; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land and not inhabited. Blessed is the man that trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is. For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit”. The second type of situation explicitly refers to the sins committed by the people. The prophetized destruction of Babylon, was similar to that of the Sodom and Gomorrah, because of the sins and injustice towards the weak, oppressed and undefended individuals (as orphans and widows)³¹. But the punishment could have been reversed if they had ceased to do evil and returned to the obedience of God³².

The same theme of punishment determined by the sin is also encountered in the Mesopotamian tradition regarding Atrahasis. In the Assyrian version of the myth presents the way the land became barren and infertile, being covered with salt crystals, because of the curse proffered by Enlil. The text of the epic cycle of Atrahasis has a repetitive structure and shows clear analogies with the biblical story of the Deluge. Similar to Noah, the hero of this story is urged by the god Ea to build an arch whose name was “the Preserver of Life”³³. Enlil, enraged because of the fact that people became hostile (D I, 27), and disturbed by their clamour and

²² D. Potts, *op. cit.*, p. 231–232, 265–266; A. Goetze, *Remarks on the Ration Lists from Alalakh VII*, in *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*, 13, 1959, 1, p. 34–38 (esp. p. 38) In a similar case, the Temple of Jerusalem had the Parah Camber, where the hides of the sacrificial animals were salted. See E.J. Latham, *op. cit.*, p. 64; *DEI*, 699.

²³ Usually the rock-salt is the most chemically stable and preserved its taste. The salt-sea could have easily become insipid due to its chemical instability caused by its impurities. Compare to the examples given in Job, 6, 6 and in the New Testament paragraphs, yet with symbolic connotations: Matthew, 5, 13; Mark, 9, 50; Luke, 14, 34; Colossians, 4, 6 and even Mark, 9, 49. See also *DCI*, p. 296–297.

²⁴ II Chronicles, 13, 4–5; Numbers, 18, 19.

²⁵ Leviticus 2, 13. Also J.E. Latham, *op. cit.*, p. 29–30, 42–49.

²⁶ Wisdom of Sirach, 39, 22–27.

²⁷ Deuteronomy, 29, 23.

²⁸ Psalm 107, 34.

²⁹ Jeremiah, 17, 6.

³⁰ Zephaniah, 2, 9.

³¹ Isaiah 1, 10–30; 13, 11–19.

³² Isaiah 1, 18–19.

³³ *ANET*, p. 105: X, 2–12

uproar set up his assembly of gods, determined not only to bring about plagues upon the people³⁴, rains and floods, but also to make the earth barren and salty and to withdraw its yield: “Below was dammed up the flood / so that it rose not from its source. The land withdrew its yield, / It turned the breast of Nisaba. / During the nights the fields turned white, / (As) the broad plain brought forth salt crystals. / Her bosom revolted / So that no plant came forth, no grain sprouted. Upon the people was placed fever / The womb was bound and issued not offspring³⁵”.

In incantations and magical or therapeutic rituals, salt and its related similes also had positive and negative connotations. Salt was prescribed in the recipes of Boğazköy and Aššur in order to restore potency. A therapeutic ritual provided a potion where the salt be scattered upon a bird and put together with a mountain plant and beer: “If a man’s potency comes to an end in the month of Nisannu, / you catch a male partridge (?), / you pluck its wing(s), strangle it and / flatten (it), scatter salt (on it), / dry (it); you pound (it) up together with mountain *dadānu-plant*, / you give (it) to him to drink in beer and then / that man will get potency³⁶”.

As a purifying device it was used in the Šurpu-type ritual tablets where it prevented the influence of the evil tongue: “[Incantation]. The table[salt, formed in] the mine, / who [are imbued with life], table-salt! / (Partaking) in all existing rites, / carried in to the evening meal, carried in to the great meal, / passing the time at the base of heaven (and) at the lock of heaven. / A man with bathed head speaks (thus) to you: you cleanse, you purify the mouth of the humans, may the evil tongue stand aside!”³⁷. Here the text is important not only because it mentions the presence of salt in the ritual meals, but also because it acts as a ‘detergent’, while removing any potential impurity. Usually the idea of using a ‘detergent’ was primarily encountered in the Hittite world. Such substances could have included water, plants, flours, salt, blood, fire, clay or different types of mixtures³⁸. Yet we meet other types of situations where salt and other substances (usually named ‘effective similes’) acted as transfer, substitute or even analogy-type substances. In the case of the substitution rites, “the evil is not just transferred for the purpose of disposal, it is transferred so that the consequences of the evil will fall on the bearer of impurity instead of the patient³⁹”.

Two other interesting examples of salt as a purifying and protecting device comes from Hittite sources. The first text is a parturition ritual performed in the last day of pregnancy. It was intended to relief the women experiencing difficulties while giving birth. In this instance the Sun God is invoked and ritual activities performed to placate the angry deities Anzili and Zukki while stating that as the salt belonging to the saltlick never exhausted, the life of the offerant should be preserved for ever⁴⁰. Here the importance of salt as a symbol of permanence and incorruptibility is also to be underlined that is usually evoked with both positive and negative connotations⁴¹. The second example is an analogical situation presented in the magical ritual of Hantitaššu, where the Sun God is also invoked to “lick away” the conjuration in the same way as the sheep would lick and swallow the salt⁴².

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 1005–1006 and especially D iii, 9–12: “The pestilence [prompt]ly put an end / to their clamor! [Like] a storm it shall blow upon them / Aches, dizziness, chills, (and) fever”.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 106: D iii, 54–61.

³⁶ R.D. Biggs, *ŠA.ZI.GA. Ancient Mesopotamian Potency Incantations*, Texts from Cuneiform Sources, II, J.J. Augustin Publisher, Locust Valley, New York, 1967, p. 56 (= *KUB*, 4 48 1:1–7). See also *KUB*, 37 80, *LKA*, 95 r. 4, *LKA*, 98 8 and D. Potts, *op.cit.*, p. 230.

³⁷ Reiner, E., *Šurpu. A Collection of Sumerian and Akkadian Incantations*, AfO Bht 11, Im Selbstverlage des Herausgebers, Graz, 1958, p. 46 (= the tablet IX, 34–41).

³⁸ Among the examples presented in the previously mentioned tablet IX there are the tamarisk (§1–9), the ‘purification-plant’ (§ 9–16), the ‘pure reed’ (§ 17–25), the ‘soap-plant’ (§ 26–33), the cedar (§ 42–48), the juniper (§ 49–57), the incense (§ 96–106), Gibil or the ‘high prince’ (§ 107–118) and ‘the high-waters’ (§ 119–128).

³⁹ Wright, D.P., *The Disposal of Impurity. Elimination Rites in the Bible and in Hittite and Mesopotamian Literature*, Scholars Press, Atlanta, Georgia, 1987, p. 32–74.

⁴⁰ G.M. Beckman, *Hittite Birth Rituals*, second revised edition, StBoT 29, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1983, p. 76–77.

⁴¹ For example, in the case of Lot’s wife and her transformation into a pillar of salt because of her alleged disobedience. See Genesis 19–23–26. In this case it symbolizes permanence and curse. E.J. Latham, *op. cit.*, p. 64–72 for the whole discussion and Chevalier, J., Gheerbrant, A., *Dicționar de simboluri. Mituri, vise, obiceiuri, gesturi, forme, figuri, culori, numere*, III (P–Z), Ed. Artemis, București, 1995, p. 190–191.

⁴² *HRH*: i, 20–23.

Similar to the Jewish and Mesopotamian traditions, in the Hittite world, salt and other similes were sprinkled in the rituals of certain gods (as for example was the case of Pirwa⁴³) or when a curse was uttered especially in a magical ritual⁴⁴. At least two cases are very important in this latter respect⁴⁵. They show the use of salt in magical rituals mainly because of its inconsistency of shape, that easily lead to desintegration and destruction. The first example is the so-called “Hittite Soldier’s Oath”, where the bodies of the enemies of Hatti were cursed to desintegrate in the same manner as the mixture prepared on a pan was mingled and scattered: “He places sinews (and) salt in their hands. He throws them on a pan and speaks as follows: «Just as these sinews split into fragments on the hearth – whoever breaks these oaths, shows disrespect to the king of Hatti land, and turns his eyes in hostile fashion upon the Hatti land, let these oaths seize him! Let him split into fragments like the sinews, let him be scattered like salt! Just as salt has no seed, even so let the man’s name, seed, house, cattle (and) sheep perish →»”⁴⁶. Now several mentions about this text and its importance. The presence of the pan and of the hearth lead to the conclusion that actually the salt – together with the other fragments – was thrown on fire in order to crackle, which was an ordinary custom in Brahmanic sacrifice, Greek or Semitic world⁴⁷. Secondly, the curse was put upon those who would dare to break the oath. It expressed the same idea with similar cases in the Jewish and Near Eastern societies: the curse was to be inflicted upon those disobeyed, disrespected and broke the covenants, oaths, treaties, salt representing in these cases one of the multiple similes employed usually in magical practices as transfer, substitute or analogy-type substances. Thirdly, these types of effective similes are usually chosen because of their rapid desintegration, that would normally facilitate the focusing, visualization and comprehension of the whole process by any individual. Finally, the mention that the salt has no seed and the analogy of this situation with the disappearance of that specific person’s name, seed, house and animals underline the idea of infertility, lack of perpetuation, vanishing and destruction, specific for this symbol when a curse was uttered. The analogies like this are common in the Hittite, Mesopotamian, and Old Testament texts⁴⁸ employing both salt and other types of effective similes. Some of these similes were even initially misinterpreted as representing salt. For instance, an example in this respect could be that of chaff (in Hittite, *ezzan*), regarded as salt because of similar properties⁴⁹. The story goes like this in the Ullikummi myth: Kumarbi, while accepting the monster Ullikummi as his kindred and giving him a name, tried to completely destroy the great city of Kummiya and crush the Storm-god, Teshub, like the chaff⁵⁰. Therefore chaff here is a symbol of dispersal and destruction.

The second case of discussion when we deal with the inconsistency of shape in magical rituals is that of the rite to preclude the domestic quarrels. Here we deal with substitution and not analogy: “Afterward the Old Woman takes salt, bl[ood, fat] and wax. She makes the wax into tongues and waves [them over the two] sacrificers. She also waves the salt and the [...] blood over them, [present]s it to them and they [flatten it] with their left hands. The Old Woman speaks as follows: «In whatever curses you indulged, let now the Sun-god turn those curses (and) tongues toward the left!» And she throws them to the hearth”⁵¹. In this case the Old Woman was the person that perform the ritual, not necessarily aged but experienced. Compared to the Šurpu-

⁴³ *IBOT*, II, 131 Rs 10–11; F. Imparati, *Obligations et manquements culturels envers la divinité Pirwa*, in *Orientalia*, 59, 1990, p. 167, n. 11 ; p. 181, n. 68; *HED*, 5, p. 60.

⁴⁴ See for example the famous “Soldier’s Oath”.

⁴⁵ We will separately deal with the symbolic aspects regarding barren salty lands and the custom of sprinkling salt upon devastated cities or temples in a different article.

⁴⁶ *ANET*, p. 353.

⁴⁷ D.R. Hillers, *op. cit.*, p. 183; Latham, *op. cit.*, p. 67–69.

⁴⁸ See examples in D.R. Hillers, *op. cit.*, p. 183–185. Two suggestive cases from the Bible. One in the Psalm 68, 3: “As smoke is driven away, so drive them away: as wax melteth before the fire, so let the wicked perish at the presence of God.”, and the other in the book of Hosea, 13, 2: “And now they sin more and more, and have made them molten images of their silver, and idols according to their own understanding, all of it the work of the craftsmen: they say of them, Let the men that sacrifice kiss the calves.”

⁴⁹ A similar case of using chaff in the Hittite analogic magic as a purifying device (just like salt) is the following: “As the wind chases away the chaff and carries it far across the sea, so also may it chase away the bloodshed and impurity of this house and carry them far across the sea”. H.A. Hoffner, jr., *Alimenta Hethaeorum. Food Production in Asia Minor*, American Oriental Series 55, American Oriental Society, New Haven, Connecticut, 1974, p. 32.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 33; F.Ch. Fensham, *Salt as Curse in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East*, in *The Biblical Archaeologist*, 25, 1962, 2, p. 50; E.J. Latham, *op. cit.*, p. 68; D.R. Hillers, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

⁵¹ *ANET*, p. 350.

type incantation, where salt was a purifying device meant to prevent the influence of the evil tongue, here it was a necessary ingredient, together with blood, for the spell to be concluded. The wax tongues were supposed to replace the real tongues, thus becoming their substitutes. This is why they symbolically suffered the infliction of evil, were waved over the two sacrificers, flattened with the left hand and thrown into the hearth, with the salt and blood, for the whole composition to melt and sprinkle. And exactly as in the previous case and that of the parturition ritual, the Sun-God was the supernatural power invoked to accomplish the substitution. He was invoked and not ordered to perform the operation. And of course, the symbolism of the opposites is to be mentioned here. Most probably the left side was the wrong side, the malefic one, because the sacrificers flatten the wax tongues with their left hands and the Sun-God was invoked to turn the tongues toward the left side.

The previously mentioned examples regarding the ambivalence of salt and its related effective similes in ancient times urge us to consider that the symbolic functionality changed mainly according to the admitted purpose or use. And this symbolic functionality proceeds in many instances from at least three basic features that salt has: (1) inconsistency of shape that makes it be easily dispersed and desintegrated; (2) its corrosive nature, which can easily make a land infertile, but also cures waters and stops plagues; (3) its persistence, that transforms salt into a symbol of incorruptibility, permanence and even of eternity: once sprinkled, it never returns to its initial state.

