

CHRONICLE

Carl Drexler

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University of Arkansas – Arkansas Archeological Survey, 100 E. University, Box 9381
Magnolia, AR 71753, 870-235-4230, The United States of America;
e-mail: cdrexler@uark.edu; ORCID: 0000-0003-3286-9563

A Trip to the 2025 International Conference on the Anthropology of Salt

This past March, I had the opportunity to attend the 2025 meeting of the International Conference on the Anthropology of Salt, organized by the University of Rzeszów, University of West Alabama, and the Cracow Saltworks Museum. It was my first experience with this conference, and a rare opportunity for me to spend time abroad. What follows are my reflections on my trip, put together at the request of the conference organizers. I am grateful for the opportunity to share my thoughts, as this was an illuminating experience that changed my appreciation for the field of the Anthropology of Salt.

I should state that, unlike most of the scholars who attended this conference, I would not consider myself to be someone deeply involved in salt-related archaeology, at least not yet. My background is in Historical Archaeology (or post-medieval archaeology, from a European standpoint), and my training is within an Americanist tradition, giving me the advantages and limitations that come with that. I found my way into this group by picking up an unfinished project on a Caddo (indigenous North American) salt site in western Arkansas (Drexler and Taylor 2019). I have benefited from the support and collegiality of several American scholars steeped in salt-related research, but I am a relative neophyte. So, what follows is an account of my travels to the conference and what I experienced there as an American archaeologist new to the field and learning many things about global research on the archeology of salt and the community of scholars it draws in.

Traveling to Europe

I have not had the opportunity to go to Europe since the Society for Historical Archaeology met at Leicester, England, in 2013. I hear that, post-Brexit, that might not count anymore, so I would have to roll back that date to a visit to Switzerland in 1994, or a brief period of residence in Norway in 1992. In short, this was a rare opportunity for me to travel outside of the United States. Given that, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to add two side trips on the way to Rzeszów.

I left Magnolia, Arkansas, and drove down to the Dallas-Fort Worth airport, and then boarded a flight to Salzburg, Austria. This was a few days before the conference started, but my two side trips were best done on the way to the conference. In Salzburg, I caught a train to Hallstatt, home to the Hallstatt-Dachstein-Salzkammergut Cultural Landscape UNESCO World Heritage Site. This was a place of interest long before I took an interest in salt-related research. My professors introduced me to the Hallstatt Culture and history of archeological research at Hallstatt back in my undergraduate education, so seeing the place had been on my mind for a long time.

Seeing Hallstatt involved touring the salt mine, high up in the mountains, and the Weltgeschichte Museum and Hallstatt Charnel House, down in the city proper. The area owes its past to the presence of an evaporite salt deposit pushed high into the mountains due to the collision of the Eurasian and African plates. People have been using that deposit for the

past 7,000 years, continuing down to today (Kern *et al.* 2009). The tour took visitors into a mine that was still in operation, with conduits and pipes running through the tunnels and galleries supplying miners elsewhere in the facility (Fig. 1). It was intriguing to note that archeologists believe that the earliest stages of salt acquisition at Hallstatt used brine reduction, and it was not until the Bronze Age that true mining began there in earnest (Kern *et al.* 2009). It struck me that this was the same kind of salt reduction we see in North America, the only thing really separating the two areas technologically was the development of bronze and then using it to make mining tools. People here in North America had copper but did not develop the alloying process to it to make true bronze, as happened in Europe. I should note that the salt deposits that fed Hallstatt were only 30 m from the surface, with salt deposits here in the American southeast being much deeper, and only accessed directly through well-drilling, not mining.

I spent the day touring the mines there and taking in the interpretation of salt-related heritage in the town. I also thoroughly enjoyed touring the Weltgeschichte Museum and seeing the collection of artifacts recovered through archeological work dating back to 1846. Having read about the work at Hallstatt in my undergraduate courses and knowing a very little about the Hallstatt Culture based on them made this a special visit, encountering in person that which I had only

read about. Seeing a statue to an archeologist (Johann George Ramseur) was astounding to me. We simply do not see those in the United States. Perhaps that needs to be a new personal goal.

I did as much as I could in Hallstatt in one day, but as time grew short, I took the ferryboat back across the lake and climbed aboard the train back north, and then east, heading into Poland. Given the train's route, I took the opportunity to make my second side trip, debarking from the train in Oświęcim, southeast of Kraków. I mentioned earlier that I am trained as a historical archeologist, and my real focus in that area has been in Conflict Archaeology (Drexler 2013). In addition to studying the actual sites associated with periods of conflict, I am fascinated by how we mark, preserve, and interpret those sites (Carlson-Drexler 2008). So, having the opportunity to tour the museum at Auschwitz-Birkenau was something not to be missed. It was a necessary, though obviously heartbreaking experience.

That is a story for another time, so I will gloss over it here. From Oświęcim, I got back on the train, headed to Rzeszów. I would like to note here that the orderly, regular, and expansive (at least in comparison to Amtrak) rail network across Austria and Poland was a very pleasant experience, and I wish we had something comparable here in the United States. The trains were by far the most comfortable and lowest-stress part of the travel in this trip.



Fig. 1. Touring the salt mine at Hallstatt. The pipes are still in use by miners.

Being at the conference

I arrived at Rzeszów's train station the afternoon before the conference began, and was pleased to find it a charming town, at least it appeared so on the walk between the train station and the apartment block where I was staying during the conference. For my own reference, it is about the size of Little Rock, capital of Arkansas, though it is about 500 years older and far more walkable (and, thankfully, flatter). I strolled past the old city cemetery, then crossed the Wisłok River on the Narutowicz Bridge and followed the greenway paths to the apartment I rented for the week. The area had numerous restaurants and a mall with a giant climbing wall and a train, both of which my son would have loved. Maybe he can come on the next trip.

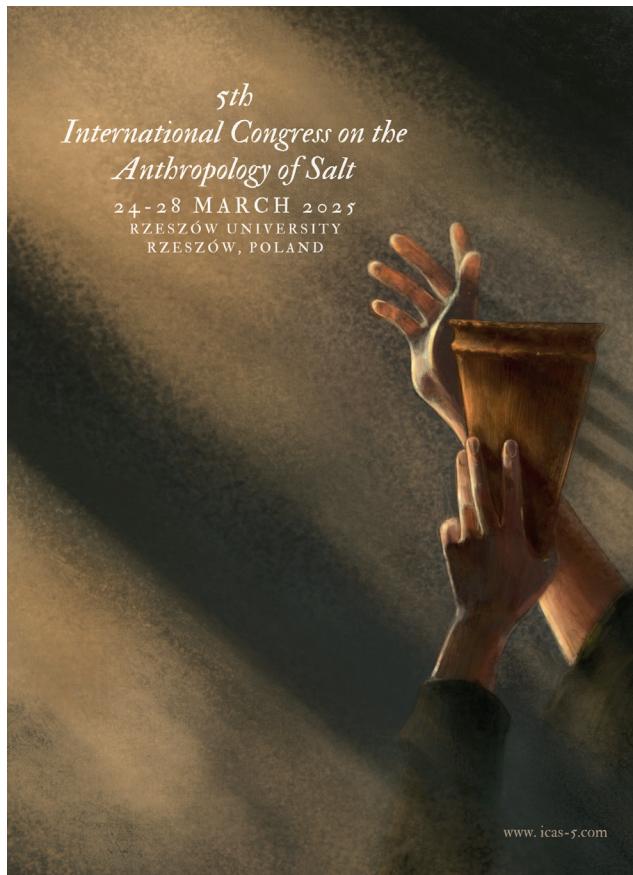


Fig. 2. Conference program cover and poster (designed by M. Szpond).

The following three days were focused on the research papers that were the core of the conference (Fig. 2). There were 55 on the schedule, including poster presentations, though there were a few that had to be cancelled for various reasons (Dumas and Dębiec

(eds.) 2025). Each day had a keynote speaker dealing with some research or insight in longer form than what the regular paper contributors were allocated. There were papers focused on every populated continent excepting Australia, though it should be noted that the distribution was not even. European sites received by far the most attention, with Asian sites coming in behind. The Americas and Africa were minimally represented with only a few in the case of the former and a single paper focused on Egypt, in the case of the latter. This is unfortunate given the work being done there by various scholars in those regions (e.g. Dumas and Eubanks (eds.) 2021; Woldekiros 2023).

The first keynote was from Nikolov and Samichkova, focusing on the Provadia-Solnitsata site in northeast Bulgaria. I do not intend to go through each paper here, but I will take a few lines on this one as it really drove home one of the fundamental differences between scholars working in Europe and those in North America. The two speakers organized their paper around the cultural sequence of Neolithic – Chalcolithic – Bronze Age, which I am aware of from undergraduate classes, but with which I am not adept because it does not apply here. In the United States, we have no such shared sequence. The Eastern Woodlands have a sequence, the Great Plains another, the Southwest its own, and that only leaves the Great Basin, California, and a few others in the United States alone. Mexico's complex and fascinating history presents its own challenges. So, there is a bit of a regional disconnect between the European archeologists and the rest, and I was a step behind most of the others in the room almost at the outset as a result.

A second moment of realization came through both the next paper (the first non-plenary one) and by watching interactions among the scholars in the room. Here in the U.S., particularly working in the U.S. Southeast, the most influential work on salt production has been done by Ian W. Brown, whose major works (e.g. Brown 1980) are focused here and significantly influence the work of people like Eubanks and Dumas, the rising generation of scholars focused in this area. Marius Alexianu, shown through this conference to be the widely acknowledged don of the field, gets cited (e.g. Eubanks and Dumas 2021) but more attention goes to Brown at present, at least among scholars who, like me, are working on salt-related topics, but are not so deeply immersed in the subject yet as to be appropriately considered salt-focused archeologists in North America. Alexianu's paper, and his warm greetings to many of the speakers, shows both the extent of his influence on the scholars in the room



Fig. 3. Conference participants (photo by M. Święcicki).

and his thoughts about what the Anthropology of Salt is and should become (e.g. Alexianu 2015; 2023). Several subsequent scholars, such as Asăndulesei, made explicit comment on his well-earned place within the history of this research area.

I do not feel it my place to go through individual reactions to most of the papers, as that would approach the role of a discussant which is neither what I was asked to do with this paper nor something that I am the right person to act as. As stated above, I am a relative neophyte here, and not in a position to provide the kind of comment that would be of much help or insight. I will only offer that the fixation on 30 km as a maximal travel distance for brine procurement and distribution seemed to be taken as gospel by many working in vastly different contexts, but I do not yet fully understand why that distance is so well accepted. Perhaps I need greater instruction in this area, but I asked a friend as was (jokingly) told in no uncertain terms to refrain from questioning the radial model of salt supply.

While not offering the insight or criticism one would associate with a discussant, I do feel free to

express my enthusiasm and awe for the range of topics and approaches brought together for the conference. I mentioned above the geographic spread of the papers, coming from all populated continents save Australia, and that mix is something rarely seen at conferences here in North America. The blend of archaeology, anthropology, history, and even theology was an added bit of diversity that, again, I rarely see in my usual spread of conferences (Fig. 3). This mix meant that papers focused on the Neolithic were given alongside others focused on living populations, drawing together peoples long separated by time but united in the production of salt through similar means.

Wieliczka

The last day of the conference took us to the Wieliczka Salt Mines, another UNESCO World Heritage Site. To be honest, I was unfamiliar with the place before this event, and it was a delight to get to experience it.

The trip started at the Saltworks Castle with a reception and collection of speakers who addressed the

geologic history of the area that gave rise to the mine, the history of salt production at Wieliczka, and various aspects of the lives of the miners and their families. Meeting in the well-appointed medieval space of the castle was a special experience, and I am grateful to the conference organizers and the Castle staff for arranging the event, which provided good context for the ensuing tour.

On the walk to the mine entrance, we passed a panel display about the Katyń Forest massacre, or “Crime of Katyń” as the display termed it. This was the massacre of Polish Army officers in the Katyń Forest by the Soviets in April and May of 1940. While I understand the historical and cultural significance of the event, making it reasonable to be foregrounded at a place where so many tourists come to learn about Polish heritage, I remark on it here in that the massacre in the Katyń Forest has an interesting place in the history of archaeology. One of the first examples of Forensic Archaeology took place there during the war, as German excavators exhumed the burials and documented the associated material culture to prove this was an atrocity attributable to the Soviets, not to them. This was one war crime of the period that was not of their making.

Our first stop around the mine complex was the Graduation Tower, a new addition to the landscape, completed around 2014. This is a massive tower and curtain wall composed of blackthorn branches. Brine from the mine is pumped up and flows through a sluice along the top of the wall, pouring down over the blackthorn, where wind and sun evaporate some of the water, creating a salty mist. Walking through this structure exposes visitors to that mist, which they hold is beneficial for those suffering from rhinitis, allergies, bronchitis, and other respiratory ailments as well as various skin diseases. This is, apparently, a significant new draw for tourists seeking relief from their various afflictions. I cannot think of seeing anything like it here in the United States.

We entered the Wieliczka mine proper through the Daniłowicz Shaft, walking down 52 flights of stairs to arrive at the true start of the tour. One hardy person among our group even did so cradling a baby. Unlike Hallstatt, Wieliczka is no longer a producing mine (it shut down mining operations in the 1990s), so it remains focused primarily on tourism. This also allows the mine to be set up differently from its Austrian parallel, with displays everywhere, and a much greater focus on artistry. The scale of its open chambers is also far different from what I saw in Hallstatt (Fig. 4). While Hallstatt had several large room-sized

spaces which they used as theaters for educational films, they were much smaller than what Wieliczka presented.

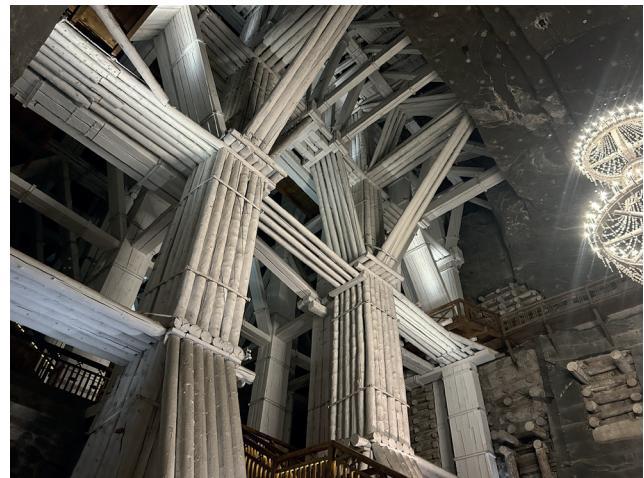


Fig. 4. Inside the Wieliczka mine.

The fine sculpture work in the mine was astounding, showing the careful work of numerous hands over decades of work. Everything was carved from rock salt. The statuary commemorating Nicholas Copernicus's visit to the mine was one of the first we encountered, but the depiction of St. Kinga's founding of the mine was perhaps the most elaborate. Beyond that, the details of the walls and floors were all carved from the rock salt, imitating, in the case of the latter, flagstones. As we progressed through the mine, it felt like the artistry built like a crescendo, culminating in the celebrated St. Kinga's Chapel. This is a marvel of craftsmanship, having been carved by only three men, working in succession, over the span of sixty-six years. It marks key moments in the life of Jesus Christ, including depictions of the Flight into Egypt and the Last Supper on walls leading to the altar, which holds relics from both St. Kinga and Pope John Paul II. Everything was made from salt, down to the crystals on the chandeliers overhead. It is justly deserving of its reputation as a singular artistic accomplishment.

I mentioned it before, but the scale of open space underground at Wieliczka is truly impressive. The only reference I had for something being so spacious but below ground is from fantasy, as my mind went immediately to the depictions of the Mines of Moria in the *Lord of the Rings* books. One wonders if J. R. R. Tolkien ever drew inspiration from Wieliczka for depicting his dwarven realms.

That space was frequently supported by massive arrangements of wooden cribbing, some of which ap-

parently had been in place for nearly 600 years, preserved in part by the salty environment within the mine. Much of this was painted white, apparently as an aid to visibility before the addition of electric light, as white reflects better. Alongside this cribbing, wooden windlasses, winches, and other machinery used in the mines over the years was on full display, showing how much labor and muscle power was needed to move miners down and salt up through the mines.

Presenting salt mining in two places

Looking at both the Wieliczka and Hallstatt mines together underscores a few commonalities that play up a difference between North America and European salt production, and in the ways that salt mining was done in these two important mines.

The biggest distinction between these mines and what we see here in the United States is that, mostly North Americans did not do a lot of salt mining in the precontact period. Brine reduction was common, of course, but actually mining rock salt was not something we see evidence of taking place extensively. A lot of that has to do with how different groups were using metal at the time. North Americans had copper, but did not develop bronze or iron industries, and the tools resulting from them, which seem to have been crucially important to extensive mining. Hallstatt's narrative places mining as beginning in the Bronze Age. With Wieliczka, it apparently did not start until the Middle Ages, when iron tools had been available for centuries.

Despite this difference, the early emphasis on brine reduction binds together approaches to salt procurement in each of these areas. The interpretation of brine reduction operations at both Hallstatt and Wieliczka describe a process essentially identical to what we see in brine reduction facilities here in the Caddo homeland of Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana. Even the forms and decorations of the pottery looked quite similar. I think it fascinating that brine reduction remained the main production strategy at Wieliczka well after the arrival of bronze and iron in the region, with mining only beginning at the time of St. Kinga. Clearly, availability of tools does not mean an immediate move to actually mining.

Between the two mines, I felt like there were very different approaches to presenting the past to the public, revolving around a balance between beauty and historical data. This likely sounds a little nebulous, but it felt to me like Wieliczka forwarded the visual spectacle more than Hallstatt did, at least within the mine.

Wieliczka's statuary, the St. Kinga Chapel, and other elaborately decorated spaces within the mine present a unique, and astonishing, visual buffet for the visitor. There is plenty of historical information presented around and in support, but I left Wieliczka fundamentally with a sense of awe at what I had just seen.

Hallstatt, at least the mine, was very different. It felt less like it was trying to overwhelm the eyes than it was trying to stimulate the brain by leading with historical and technical information. Lacking many of the vast open chambers that Wieliczka has, perhaps it would be hard to produce that same sense of overwhelm. That could be reserved for the town and the valley outside of the mine, which were truly special. Still, Hallstatt left me with a sense, not of awe, but with a sense of being educated, but also something of a cold feeling about the place. I mean that not to imply that anyone was unkind or that the town itself was not welcoming, charming, etc. I think, rather, it has to do with the way the mining has been organized at the two places. The interpretation at Hallstatt gave some background on the lives of the miners who worked the deposit high up in the mountainside. Apparently, they lived in the mine complex six days out of the week, only going down to town to see their wives and families on Sundays. By comparison, miners at Wieliczka went home every night. That distancing of miners from their families in service to the profit-making of the mine felt distasteful and bred a certain sadness for the sacrifices demanded of the men who worked the mines at Hallstatt.

I want to close with something that stuck out to me at both places, that was jarring to me as an archeologist trained in the United States after the 1990s. It has to do with the frank and unquestioned display of human remains. Hallstatt had a small interpretive building on the path from the funicular railway up to the main mine tour building that contained a burial laid out for anyone to see. Wieliczka had a set of human remains in the space used during the event as a cloak room. Photographs of human remains were present in several displays. I am not saying this is in any way wrong, but it is dramatically different from what most museums in the United States would do today. Bones are now almost never put on public display, and many places opt for drawings over actual photographs. This is entirely related to the efforts by Native American groups to regain sovereignty over their community members and to have their cultural standards regarding interactions with the dead respected. These are most visibly enshrined within the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, but

also in things like the evolving publication standards of journals like *Southeastern Archaeology*.

Of course, this is tied to the legacy of human remains recovered by archeologists being more “ours” in Europe versus “theirs” in the United States, and all the attendant contestations of power that result from that down through the years. I think North America’s changing approach to these issues is primarily beneficial, and the reason these differences noted above would stuck out is that there has been significant change.

Concluding thoughts

To wrap this travelogue up, I will reflect a little on what I learned during the trip, how my perspectives on this area of research have changed, and where I think there is some room for the Anthropology of Salt to grow in the coming years. I would reiterate that these are the musings of a relative newcomer to the field, and one whose background is substantially different from many of the scholars present.

Maybe that difference is a good place to start. I have been part of many conferences in my career, several of which see themselves as international organizations. What “international” means in those contexts usually works out as scholars from the United States, United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, South Africa, and Canada, with a growing number of Finns, with reference to the Society for Historical Archaeology. “International” usually means “anglophone”. The ICAS conference was something very different. Though the papers were given in English, the mix of scholars was much less uniform, and bringing together Central and Eastern European academics along with some South American and Asian researchers gave this meeting a much greater diversity of backgrounds, approaches, and context than many similar conferences. This was a great thing. I firmly believe that such differences can be intellectually stimulating and impart needed cause for reflection and innovation among all involved. Bringing together so many different people around one basic subject was a special experience. The conversations outside of the papers, such as at the exceptional concluding dinner in Wieliczka, helped underscore this kaleidoscope of backgrounds.

Second, despite this variety of paths taken to the conference, many of the approaches to salt production described from contexts around the world paralleled each other quite closely. Reductive brine boiling appears all over Europe, North America, and Asia in much the same process. I would add that it’s basically

the same thing as sorghum reduction, sugar cane juice reduction, and a host of other technologies that focus around eliminating water from solutions containing substances of human desire (c.f. Mintz, Smith).

Despite these convergences, it is remarkable that there is no straightforward connection between salt production, urbanism, and agricultural production. While some scholars emphasized the connection between incipient urbanism and salt production, here in the Caddo homeland there are centuries of salt production that take place without the establishment of large towns. Evidence from many areas point to many situations where salt production exists without the establishment of agriculture. There are interesting cross-cultural analyses to be done in the future.

Finally, despite the international scope of the conference, there is yet more room for the inclusion of more work to be done in areas that are already represented in this group. For my own part, I hope to see more North American papers, particularly on the material culture of salt production in the past two centuries. We also need more scholars working in Africa (particularly sub-Saharan) and Japan, and any research on places like China, which factors heavily into the history of salt production (Kurlansky), and places not yet represented at the conference, like Australia and India. Applications outside of the commonly-discussed culinary ones, such as the use of salt in nuclear reactor research beginning in the 1960s, or the environmental and cultural impacts of the production of lithium from salt deposits are areas of further research.

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