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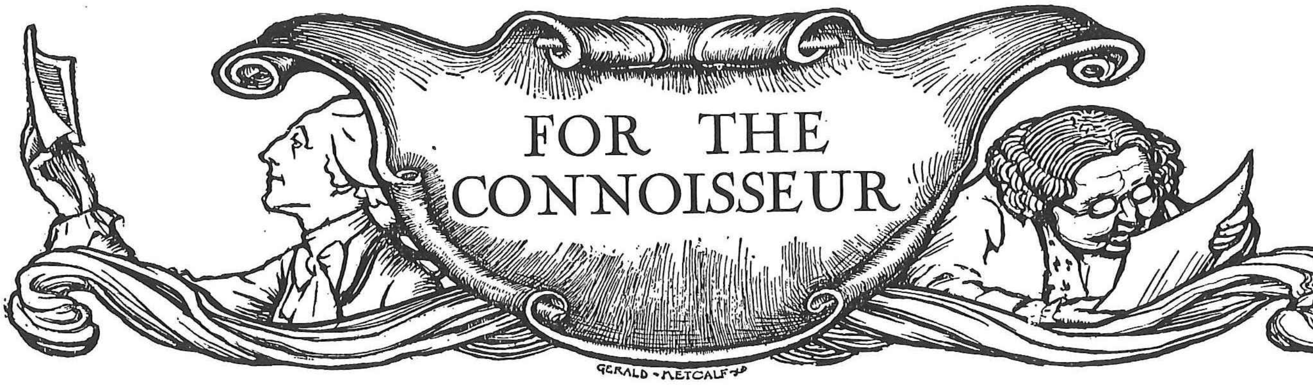


THE SALT

SALT! A breeze, a brine in the term; on lip and tongue a savour of the sea. Salt, a condiment, a remedy, a preservative; a symbol, an adjective, a sacrament—the earliest trade routes astir with its world-wide distribution.

From prehistoric days man has known the process of extracting salt from sea water; probably learned the secret of evaporation from the saline deposits that rim the seaboards of the world. It must not be supposed, however, that this phenomenon—nature ministering to man's delectation unasked—is confined to coastal regions alone. In Cyprus, in the environs of Memphis, Phrygia, Cappadocia, in Bactria especially—all distant from the sea—lakes abound, their contents charged with brine. Perhaps the most bountiful of inland seas is the lake of Tarentum, whose waters in summer are transformed into salt. A metamorphosis. The soul of the sea captive in a crystal shroud.

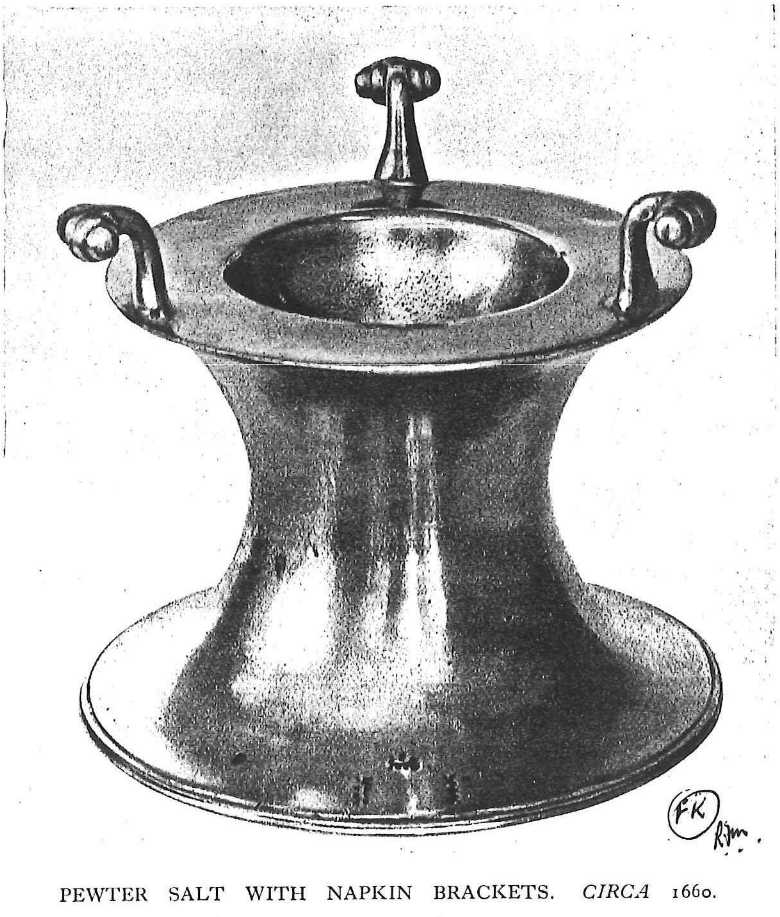
Whether the root-meaning of the term be condiment or preservative, it is from the parentage of both that sprang derivatives which outnumber the progeny of any other substantive in the language—derivatives that correspond in number to the attributes of perhaps the most richly endowed mineral in nature.

The use of salt as a condiment was not universal, but depended upon diet. Those who fed on milk and flesh, and consumed the latter raw or roasted in order not to lose its salts, needed no addition of sodium chloride. Those, however, who indulged a cereal, vegetable or boiled beef diet, required salt as a necessary adjunct. It will be seen, therefore, that the increased use of salt as a condiment coincided with an advance from nomadic to agricultural life. The important part played by the mineral in the history of commerce and religion had intimately to do with this advance: commerce busying its trade routes with the transportation of the mineral from seaboard to inland markets; religion sanctifying a beneficent provision of nature; symbol and metaphor making of salt the emblem of purity, fidelity, hospitality, incorruption. The trade routes (corseted in steel to-day) are still plying with saline cargoes; but the ways of the world are destitute now of early sentiment: except in remote lands saved from civilisation—gone the old traditions. Salt and incense, the chief economic and religious necessaries of the ancient world. Incense the fragrance of vanished years, salt the relish of animals and men. "A substance dear to the gods" according to Plato; "divine" in the words of Homer; "a sacred pledge" to Byron; "something holy in salt" to Hawthorne. Emblem of hospitality from earliest ages—where now "the covenant of salt," the covenant meal which, presided over by the little crystal "round," confirmed agreement, seasoned obligation, "partook of a sacred character and created a bond of piety and guest friendship"? Where on our sumptuous boards to-day, what post for the Master-Salt? Host at the upper table for undisputed centuries, servant now of the palate! In the immutable Church alone an enduring harbour for the legendary mineral: salt still a sacramental necessity, an essential for consecration.

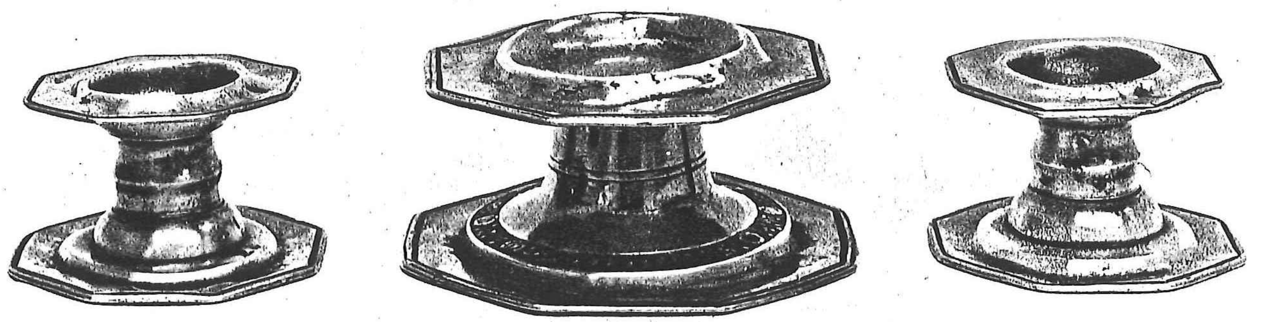
The ill-omen attached to the spilling of salt is a supreme tribute to its importance; perhaps one of the oldest superstitions in the world, and one of the most reasonable. Its origin dates probably from prehistoric times when the use of salt as a necessary of life became relatively universal; its rationale, to the exceptional virtues of the mineral, and to its sacred character. To spill salt was to waste what was costly and difficult to obtain; to waste what was sacred in character was to provoke divine retribution. The superstition may, therefore, be as universal as the use of the mineral itself, tradition, proverb and graphic art testifying to the fact. Perhaps the most notable and moving representation of the spilling of salt is to be found in da Vinci's "Last Supper," a standing salt overturned by Judas: "Amen I say . . . one of you is about to betray me!"

Consonant with the character and dignity of the mineral the salt-cellar was the most important article of domestic plate in the Middle Ages; the vessel ultimately honoured with the name of the mineral itself, "the salt"—no other term of sufficient savour to define adequately the vessel which held the sacred commodity. The honour was not one of name only, but a distinction that enlisted the highest endeavours of art to perpetuate its unique importance. To the tradition each period made its obeisance, contributed its proudest expression of plastic beauty.

Of all domestic plate the standing-salt had the most sensitive personality. However resplendent with precious vessels the cupboards of the great hall, "the salt" always occupied the post of honour in the centre of the upper table; host, condiment, social arbiter, exercising there its mysterious sovereignty. The late Sir Charles Jackson contended that "a great deal of twaddle" had been written "to the effect that the salt served to divide the lord and his noble guests from the inferior guests and menials"; but his dictum has been traversed by adverse pronouncements too numerous and documented to admit of argument. Doubtless, necessity preceded ceremonial, savour before symbol; but the advent of



PEWTER SALT WITH NAPKIN BRACKETS. *CIRCA* 1660.



SALTS OF ABOUT 1640.

" the salt " on the upper table established a pale of priority in palace, castle and manor house that prevailed undisputed for centuries. " To sit above (or below) the salt " is a phrase of venerable significance, hall-marked by proverbial adoption.

The standing-salt had generally a cover to protect its contents; the smaller cellars, in most cases, had none. This anomaly was corrected about the end of the Commonwealth period by a salt (in turn circular, square, octagonal) which had upon its upper rim three, sometimes four, super-imposed brackets: little arms stretching up for a napkin to hide the sacred mineral, to protect it from the indignities of damp, dust, inquisitive insects.

In attendance upon the standing-salt (to right and left of the lord or master on the upper table) ranged a number of smaller cellars at convenient reach of the distinguished guests. Although of diminished height and importance—couchant before their standing chief—these small receptacles were honoured by special favour of the silversmith. Their contents doubtless retained something of a symbolic nature, the near presence of the standing-salt still radiating parental authority. But when the mineral left its post of honour in the centre of the upper table, it was a departure for practical service that had no relation with symbolic tradition. It is probable that these attendant cellars were of kindred likeness, a gathering of family pieces. It is the case, however, that, after spoons, salts were the most favoured of gift offerings, and their appearance upon the upper table might well have been the cause of discordant congregation. I do not know of any standing-salt (in the strict sense of the term) in base metal, but in the smaller habitations salt-cellars in pewter were to be found in numbers, a reproduction of the silver model raising the base ware to distinguished altitude. The most important of these (with superimposed brackets) might well have assumed the duties of social arbiter on manor-house board, where seating according to priority was also faithfully observed. Those at the lower tables maintained jealously their own order of precedence, but without the intervention of the cellar. A large amount of salt was already in the provisions of the lower classes. During five or six months of the year salted meat and fish were their chief food. Root crops being unknown in mediæval times, it was the habit to kill the winter's meat in autumn, and then " salt it down."

Receptacles for the holding of salt must, obviously, have existed from earliest times; but their character is lost in the obscurity of unrecorded centuries. The earliest known English example in silver is a standing-salt at New College, Oxford, presented by Warden Walter Hill (1475-92). Of hour-glass shape, and swathed in lavish ornamentation, it represents the supreme regard for the mineral prevalent at that remote time. An early mention of a salt-cellar in base metal occurs in the records of the Pewterers' Company in the year 1351; but I know of no pewter example earlier than the seventeenth century—an interval of nearly three hundred years! The complete disappearance of all that obviously existed during those blank centuries is due not only to the softness of the base metal and to the usury of time, but to a subconscious disregard for what is not of precious or permanent importance. Silver, on the contrary, had its constitution of precious metal to ensure longevity, rigidity to guarantee duration, preciousness to induce protective care. Of later centuries—seventeenth and eighteenth—pewter specimens exist in numbers, occasionally emerging from their hiding when least expected: trencher-salts, round, octagonal, triangular, hexagonal; master-salts of singular distinction; a variety of design exceeding that of any other pewter utensil, among them specimens which seem to have had no precedent in silver. Fortunately, few examples survive to represent the period of tripod anomalies: decapitated heads crowning amputated extremities, footed freaks waiting but for a signal to hop off the table in search of their missing remains. These standardised abortions seem to have been spared the humble ware, to have been reserved for precious metal distinction.

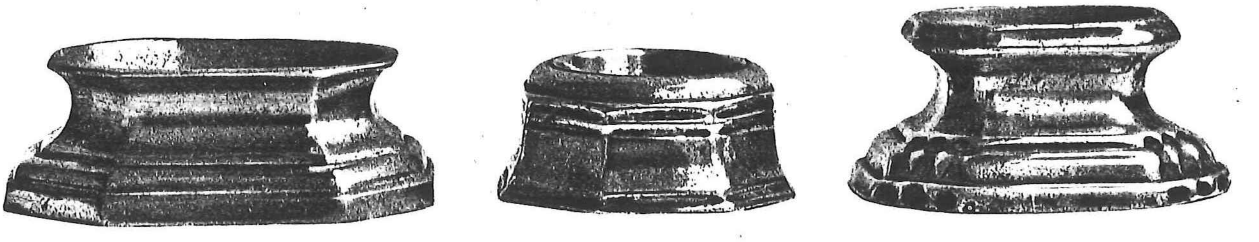
Despite its universality, the cost of salt in early days was very high. Obtained with difficulty, it was used with corresponding thrift. As a condiment, a small amount satisfied the mediæval palate; an equally small measure sufficed to represent its symbolic meaning and use. Those were pinch-of-salt days, the point of the knife doing extempore duty for the salt spoon, which was not to make its appearance until the eighteenth century. As the cost of production and transportation diminished the size and number of cellars increased in conformity with a growing demand for the mineral. But with this increase in size was lost an early daintiness of feature—the measure of pioneer frugality. That departure was the first manifestation of an evolution which was eventually to despoil the standing-salt of its official character. Two factors contributed to the ultimate decay of a tradition that for centuries had withstood the convulsions of time: the growing abundance of a commodity that had once been a distinguished rarity, and a corresponding consumption of what in early days was partaken of in scrupulous moderation. Both abased the dignity which rarity and discretion had won for the precious mineral. A disregard of its emblematic importance was the inevitable consequence.

The passing of the standing-salt sounded the knell of symbolic supremacy. Arbitrary sentinel, whose sovereign silence had ruled for centuries the upper table, voiceless now, its authority at an end. On important occasions still upon the upper board—a work of art, no longer host.

How distant the days of slow-moving convoys, of legendary trade routes. How remote the probity of early hospitality, the romance of early symbolism.

Where now the standing-salt? The soul of the sea in a silver reliquary.

A. DE NAVARRO.



TRENCHER SALTS, RESPECTIVELY OF 1720, 1650 AND 1750.