Konrad A. Antczak, *Islands of Salt: Historical Archaeology of Seafarers and Things in the Venezuelan Caribbean, 1624–1880*. Leiden, the Netherlands: Sidestone Press, 2019. 426 pp. (Paper €49.95)

Islands of Salt examines two small, semiarid, isolated Venezuelan islands with natural salt pans and no human settlements. La Tortuga and Cayo de Sal are specks of flat land in the Caribbean Sea. It is hard to imagine them as islands with fascinating histories, but that is what they are. Konrad Antczak pieces together his impressive historical and archeological research to uncover how people, things, and the environment came together around an essential commodity in the Atlantic world: salt.

The book focuses on the seafarers who extracted salt seasonally from La Tortuga and Cayo de Sal from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. Chapter Five describes the environmental, physical, and biological processes that result in natural shallow pools of salt. Seafarers mostly “harvested” the crystal by raking the pans. (For a brief period, Dutch seafarers “cultivated” salt by improving yields in La Tortuga.) After it was harvested, the salt was bagged and transported to ships before entering the Atlantic economy. The grueling work required seafarers to live on the islands for weeks. The things that they left behind in the campsites, which both Antczak’s parents, Andrzej and Maria Magdalena Antczak, and later Konrad himself excavated over several decades, provide a trove of archaeological findings.

Antczak argues persuasively that the vibrant ceramics, glassware, metal objects, and animal remains reflect the seafarers’ pioneering role in globalizing patterns of consumerism. A book of such ambition and complexity, however, necessarily transcends its punctual conclusion. In Chapter Two, Antczak proposes a model to reconstruct the way humans, things, and the environment meshed together through time and space into “assemblages of practice.” In dialogue with current debates in historical archaeology, this theoretical framework aims to weave a thick fabric of the past by expanding disciplinary boundaries. Antczak’s deft engagement with the recent, cutting-edge literature of maritime history, in particular, shows the promising synergy between maritime archeology and Atlantic history.

Chapter Two, on the theoretical framework, is followed by thematic chapters that explore the chronology and geopolitics of the islands’ exploitation (Chapter Three), the seafarers that visited them (Chapter Four), and their methods of gathering salt (Chapter Five). The themes provide the necessary dimensions to analyze the archaeological record in ways that illuminate the seafarers’ “assemblages of practice” centered on eating, drinking, and socializing (Chapter Six). Overall, the layered approach succeeds in delineating the relationships among

humans, things, and “seascapes.” However, the choice requires a trade-off. The four historical periods that the book reconstructs are divided within the thematic chapters. This organization, at times, requires readers to connect the dots across chapters.

Each of the four historical periods studied is a valuable case study in its own right. Those concerning La Tortuga are the strongest, thanks to the most thorough extant documentary and archaeological records. The first period focuses on the Dutch cultivation and harvesting of salt from 1624 to 1638. This foray ended violently, as a survivor immortalized in a memorable song about a confrontation with the Spanish forces. The second one addresses New England's fishing industry during the eighteenth century, recovering the unexpected centrality of La Tortuga's salt (referred to in that context as *saltertuda*). Remarkably, the 1715 Treaty of Commerce between Great Britain and Spain included an entire article to ensure the “Freedom to gather Salt in the Island of Tortudos” (p. 85). The two historical periods related to Cayo de Sal reveal the more local and mundane salt raking and contraband in the Venezuelan Caribbean during the eighteenth century and the Venezuela government's neglectful leases of its saltpan to foreign merchants during the nineteenth century.

This book is a thing of beauty. It contains a wealth of high-resolution photographs of the islands, scenes of the fieldwork, and the artifacts (often next to useful outlines of their original shapes). Maps, tables, diagrams, and illustrations also enhance and enrich the arguments while providing a treat for the senses. The colors and textures of the Atlantic world come alive page after page.

Antczak's tour de force is an important multidisciplinary contribution to the current renaissance of maritime studies. It should also be of interest to a wide range of scholars of global commodities, material culture, and imperial history and archaeology in the Caribbean, Venezuela, the United States, and the Atlantic.

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