

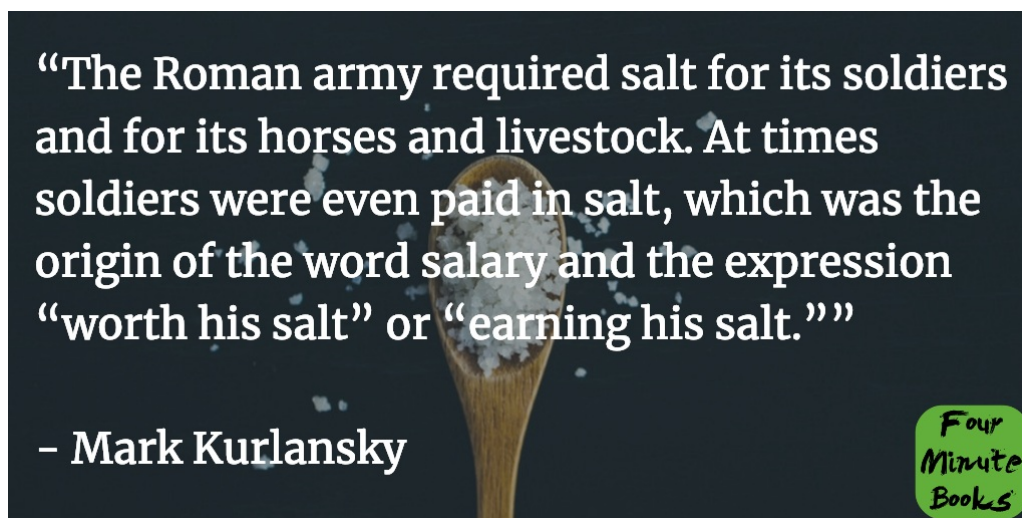
Salt: A World History Summary

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1-Sentence-Summary: *Salt: A World History* explores how the everyday mineral we know as table salt has shaped human civilization through the centuries, causing wars and the rise and fall of empires.

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



Few people realize that when we are generously showering our popcorn with salt, we are consuming two volatile and hazardous compounds. Of course, this is only the case when these elements, sodium (or natrium) and chlorine (or chloride) stand on their own. Together, they form sodium chloride – table salt – one of the essential building blocks of human life.

This mineral's vital role isn't limited to our body's chemistry, but extends throughout human history. Salt was the first international trade good and such a precious commodity that it was used as an ancient form of currency. When we discovered it as a means to preserve our food from spoiling, we desired it even more.

Salt: A World History will enlighten and educate as you follow the journey of salt. From its extraction from seawater in ancient China to the Nile Delta in Egypt, where its meat preservation properties reached the next level in mummifying corpses, to ancient Rome where salt equated to power.

Here are 3 lessons from the book:

1. One of the wealthiest, ancient, unknown people is the Celts, who built their empire on salt.
2. The demand for salt fueled and escalated the conflict between young America and Great Britain into a full-blown revolutionary war.
3. The salt industry has caused much environmental damage, but the tax levied on

it has concentrated power in the hands of a few big players.

It might not change your life, but the next time you're at a dinner party grab a salt shaker and spice things up with your knowledge!

Lesson 1: The Celts were a wealth ancient people, yet few know that their success was built on salt.

Many years ago in a mountain mine, near the Austrian border, a perfectly preserved body was found – salted like a codfish. Resting close to the town of Salzburg, which translates to 'salt castle,' the body was colorfully dressed and identified as an ancient salt miner, dating back to about 400 B.C. This well-preserved corpse later proved to be an ancient Celt.

Deriving their name from the Greek word 'hal,' which means salt, Greek and Roman historians described the Celts as huge, terrifying men in bright fabrics. Since the guardians of their culture, the Druids, did not keep written records, we know little about them. But we do know they thrived on salt.

In the salty miner's time, Celtic territory spanned huge areas of Europe. **The Celts became very wealthy by trading salt and salted goods, including salt-cured ham.**

They were also responsible for developing innovative techniques for mining the precious mineral. For example, they discovered the advantage of using bronze mining tools rather than iron ones. Who would've thought that bronze does not rust? The Celts, apparently!

Alas, despite their success as innovators, shrewd traders, engineers and formidable warriors, their time in history ran its course and they were eventually dominated by Julius Caesar's Roman forces in 50 B.C..

Lesson 2: By restricting trade and attacking their saltworks, Britain triggered the American revolutionary war.

After the fall of the Roman empire, Venice and Genoa remained influential in the business of salt. Eventually, new trade routes to India and the New World popped up.

However, since early colonists in America included self-reliant fishermen, they started to rely on salt trade less and less. They began to harvest it for themselves.

Of course, the British did not want self-reliant colonists, so they made "British salt" less expensive in an effort to damage local business. They also continued to raise the taxes on salt and imposed punitive tariffs to further control the market. Arguments turned into conflicts, which eventually exploded into the American Revolutionary War in 1775.

To weaken the rebels further, Britain completely cut off the export of salt to the colonies. **In the end, the colonists prevailed, and America was acknowledged as an independent nation in 1783, but it all started with salt.**

Salt continued to play a role in the young United States. Despite having recognized the colonist's independence, Britain initially restricted U.S. trade. This inspired a new conflict, in which the British attempted to destroy all the newly created saltworks in America. But the colonists were clever. They had built covert saltworks and canals to facilitate salt transport.

Once the war ended in 1815, towns near saltworks became hubs of prosperity and growth.

Lesson 3: Brine extraction caused homes to sink and railroad tracks to buckle, but the resulting damages tax only empowered big players.

Cheshire in northwest England had been harvesting salt from brine springs even before the Roman conquest. Centuries later, this particular kind of salt was branded as "Liverpool salt," a unique delicacy.

This prestige created a boom in the regional industry, but the excessive extraction and transport of it that resulted had an adverse impact on the environment. By 1880 about 90% of all British salt came from Cheshire county.

The air in Cheshire was constantly black from coal smoke. Huge sinkholes appeared, swallowing entire sections of towns. Meadows and pastures vanished from the landscape. Towards the end of the 18th century, a lake of more than 100 acres suddenly emerged near Northwich.

The sink it caused wreaked havoc with railroad lines and bridges. Water mains, sewer lines, and gas pipes kept breaking.

In 1891, Cheshire created a flat tax meant to compensate for all the damage the salt industry had spawned. **This tax crippled many of the small-scale producers, forcing them out of business, while big companies who could afford it began to dominate.**

Historic champions in the industry, like France and Britain, slowly fell behind as more industrially-minded players, like the United States, Germany, and China became the new market leaders, which they remain to this day.

Salt: A World History Review

Mark Kurlansky does a great job of "seasoning" what might be a boring narrative about a common, everyday product, and turn it into a delicious read. It was hard to pick just three lessons, as there's a lot more to learn, for example about Japan, the Great Wall and Gandhi's role in the story of salt. The book includes lots of photos, illustrations, and related artwork as well. I highly recommend *Salt: A World History*.

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Who would I recommend the Salt: A World History summary to?

The 29-year-old market researcher, moderating focus groups on consumer packaged goods, the 42-year-old bartender, who likes to be the smartest one in the pub, and anyone interested in history or global power struggles.