

# Salt of the Alps: ancient Austrian mine holds Bronze Age secrets

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All mines need regular reinforcement against collapse, and Hallstatt, the

world's oldest salt mine perched in the Austrian Alps, is no exception.

But Hallstatt isn't like other mines.

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So far less than two percent of the prehistoric tunnel network is thought to have been explored, with the new round of reinforcement work, which began this month, protecting the dig's achievements, according to chief archaeologist Hans Reschreiter.

"Like in all the mines, the mountain puts pressure on the tunnels and they could cave in if nothing is done," Reschreiter told AFP.

Hallstatt was recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1997 and the work aims to protect it for "future generations", said Thomas Stelzer, governor of Upper Austria state where the mine is located.

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The vast deposit of sea salt inside was left by the ocean that covered the region some 250 million years ago.

### **3,000-year-old stairs**

Among the most striking archaeological discoveries was that of an eight-metre-long wooden staircase dating back to 1100 BC, the oldest such staircase found in Europe.

"It was so well preserved that we could take it apart and reassemble it," Reschreiter said.

Other items date back much further. Excavated in 1838, an axe made from staghorn dating from 5,000 BC showed that as early as then, miners "tried hard to extract salt from here," Reschreiter said.

In the mid-19th century, excavations revealed a necropolis that showed the site's prominence during the early Iron Age.

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