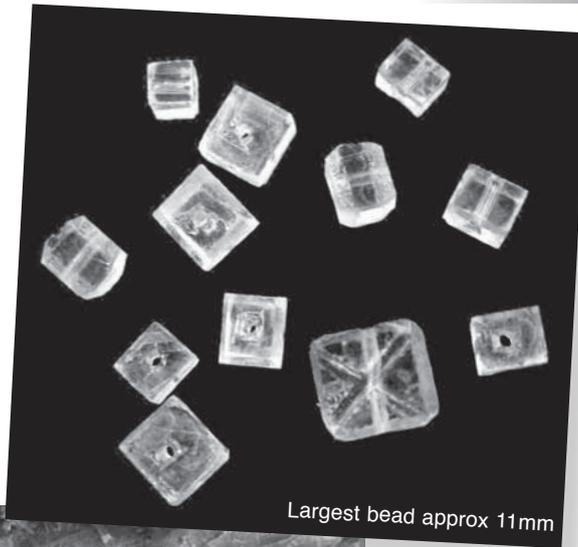


Beads from the Wieliczka Salt Mine

by Carole Morris

The beads illustrated here are made from salt dug from the historic salt mine at Wieliczka in Poland, 14km SE of Cracow, which is part of the World Heritage of material culture, and is among the most frequently visited tourist sites in Poland. The mine is visited each year by almost 800,000 people. The beads were given to me by a friend who had visited the mine and bought a long necklace of beads which she intended to cut down, make a shorter necklace, and use some of the loose beads for her lace bobbin spangles. These few were left over and made their way into my collection.

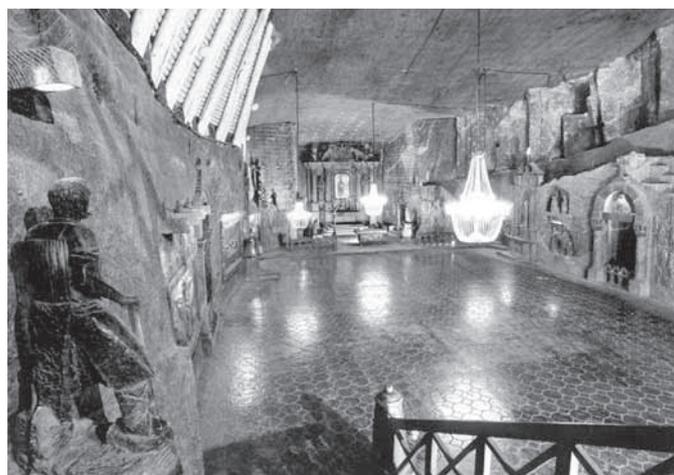


In its present form the salt mine at Wieliczka resembles a vast underground city, both mysterious and at the same time unique in the world. Today the mine consists of nine levels going down to a depth of 327m. There are 2040 chambers connected



by 200km of passages. Beneath the mine itself are numerous churches, chapels, and other vast rooms. Near the entrance is the chapel of Saint Antonius which is decorated with sculptures made of salt. Over the years air from the outside has eroded the figures so today they look like modern art or prehistoric sculptures. Other churches, like the Cathedral, are well preserved. Here even the chandeliers are made of salt. The walls are covered with sculptures of saints and scenes from the bible. Sometimes the room is used for weddings.

In 1950 parts of the mine were improved to make a museum and show mine (whilst the excavation of salt continued). The mine's unique character was recognised in September 1978 when it was entered on the first UNESCO list of the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage. In 1996 salt mining stopped as the salt deposits had been nearly completely worked out and it was opened just as a



St. Kinga's Chapel 101 metres underground

show mine.

The water of the springs in this area have always contained salt, which has been used for at least 5000 years. The water was boiled over a fire until the water evaporated and the salt remained in the pot. The mine is the oldest economic venture still surviving in Poland and salt has been mined here since the late 13th century – over 700 years – although the place is mentioned in documents much earlier than that, called Magnum Sol or Wielika Sol in 1119.

How mining began is told in an old legend about princess

Kinga, who was later beatified and is the patron saint of the miners around Krakow. She was a Hungarian princess who was to marry the ruler of Krakow. She wanted to bring a wealthy gift for her fiancé and as the people in Poland had everything except salt, she asked her father for a salt mine as a dowry, which he provided. She threw one of her rings into one of her father's salt mines and travelled to Poland. Near Krakow, in Wieliczka she told the people to dig a deep pit. The miners found salt, and enclosed in the first piece of salt they mined was the ring of Kinga.

Jewellery, beads and many other small items are still carved from the salt and sold in the

museum. For more information, see: www.kopalnia-wieliczka.pl/english/index.html



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