

Mining Shafts

The numerous horizontal and slanted shafts that branch out from the main tunnel were dug by miners to reach veins of silver, most of which extend diagonally through the mountain. Some of the shafts are dozens of meters long, indicating particularly rich veins that were worth following despite the danger of a cave-in. Others barely depart from the main passage; these were likely dug to evaluate the quality of a specific vein and abandoned once the lode proved disappointing.

Mine shafts were dug in a highly systematic manner despite their apparent haphazard placement within the tunnel. The miners in charge of deciding which veins to pursue were seasoned specialists who could judge the quality of a lode from the consistency and color of the rock around it. They were quick to leave unproductive veins and move on to other ones, since digging into the mountainside using only chisels and hammers was extremely time-consuming.

Nonetheless, the job of a miner, no matter how skilled, was hazardous

and uncomfortable. Wearing cloth masks stuffed with pickled plums, whose citric acid helped them stay alert in the dusty tunnels, workers would squeeze into the narrowest of crevices and suspend themselves above gaping chasms to extract bits of ore—all in the faint light of oil lamps fashioned out of seashells. Children as young as 10 worked in the mine, and reaching the age of 30 was a cause of great celebration for a miner.