

The work at the slate quarry

The preparatory work, or “crabotage,” consists of digging a shaft following the natural inclination of the vein. Galleries extend from the shaft toward extraction chambers measuring 25 meters by 20 meters. Between the chambers, pillars 5 to 6 meters thick support the weight of the ground. Once a level has been mined, the shaft is deepened, and today it reaches a depth of 180 meters.

Once the chamber is opened, extraction begins. The scailletons remove blocks from the ceiling. This work is carried out using black powder, a slow explosive. The blocks are then cut and sorted, and only the finest are brought to the surface. To obtain manageable blocks, the stone is split using a large wooden mallet. Until the mechanization of the mine, everything was done by hand. Thus, the scailletons climbed ladders carrying blocks that could weigh up to 100 kilograms on their backs, protected only by a simple straw cushion. Later, the good-quality stone was brought to the surface using wagons.



Once at the surface, the stone blocks undergo three stages before becoming slates: spartonnage, splitting, and trimming.

Spartonnage consists of sawing the block, using a band saw, to create spartons. The block is marked to obtain the largest possible format, since the larger the slate, the higher its value. Splitting is done by wedging the sparton between the worker's feet or in a vice. Using a mallet, the splitter drives in a splitting chisel following the plane of schistosity. The sparton is divided into quarters with the thickness of eight slates. Each quarter is then divided into two equal parts, which are further divided, and then once again. Each sheet has an average thickness of 3.5 mm.



Trimming, carried out using a punch or cutter, gives each slate one of the 36 commercial sizes. The wide range of formats is necessary due to the low yield of the slate industry: only about 15% of the extracted stone is ultimately used as slate.



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