

# ALAS

## All About Salt



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The ALAS Project is an initiative that aims the safeguard of traditional salinas. It is carried out within the framework of an ECOS-Overture Programme. More information on this project can be obtained at [www.alas.gr](http://www.alas.gr) and [www.aegean.gr/ alas/general.htm](http://www.aegean.gr/ alas/general.htm)

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**The Salter's profession: weather and sweat**



Cover photo: Harvesting salt in the Camillone salina, Cervia (Italy)



## The salter's profession: weather and sweat

To be a salter in a Mediterranean salina is to work somewhere between earth and sea, in a coalition that requires knowledge and extremely difficult manual labour. In all the Mediterranean, a salter must be familiar with wind directions and their characteristics, be permanently attentive to tides, waves, and unexpected rains. He should master the secrets of salinity levels both technically and empirically, raise and align accurately little walls, water conduits and sluices, prepare the *petola* or roll the bottom of the crystallisers. He must smell the rain bringing wind, feel the rake-edged scraper when harvesting the saltpan, touch with the fingers undesirable salts in his product. He has to stand intolerable summer heat and drought, salt that penetrates and dries out skin, elementary living conditions, hard labour for harvesting salt and carrying it to the warehouse. Finally, being in a never-ending bottleneck, he has to be innovative in order to improve his working conditions and ameliorate salt making techniques. The profession of the salter is, therefore, something between a gardener, a seaman, and a magician, an association that is perceptible when looking at a salina varying from salt-gardens and sea-gardens to a unique cultural landscape.



Piran salters making *petola*, an algal carpet important for the purity of salt

Salt production has always been considered -not unjustifiably- as an extremely difficult manual labour. This is not only historically substantiated, but also evident in the legends about salt, whether this came from solar salinas, ebullition salinas and above all, salt-mines. Although working conditions in solar salinas were infinitely better than in salt-mines, they were still very harsh and prey to adverse weather conditions, as described by Pausanias.



Hard working conditions: in the hot hours of the day, a salter in Figueira is taking care of the *praias*

Having only a seasonal activity, the salt farmers had other occupations outside the salt-making period, usually connected to

agriculture, fishing and sometimes construction to supplement their income. In the past, salters rarely had a house in the nearby fortified towns and villages and constituted a kind of proletariat that simply offered their services to the owners and moved according to demand. All types of tasks during the different production stages were usually carried out by the same people, men, women and children.

Not long ago even the large saltworks of the Mediterranean were exploited by artisanal techniques, with the participation of a large numbers of workers. In such cases the salt proletariat in countries like Portugal, Italy or Greece was employed in the saltworks during spring and summer, whereas in agriculture and husbandry during the rest of the year.

Artisanal salinas, usually small in size, are often run by one saltworker, either the owner or the renter of the salina, helped by one or two trainees, and occasionally using women labour to carry the salt from the salina to the warehouse or the salt pile. The women of Karyotes, Lefkada, Greece, longed for the temporary job of carrying salt during harvesting in the nearby salina, and by tradition were the only ones to claim it.



Women from Kariotes, the salt Karyatids of Lefkada salinas (Greece)

In extreme cases state salinas were manned by peasants from the nearby areas, whose services were requisitioned. In Cagliari, Sardinia, farmers were forced to work together with their animals, a system that was abolished in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when farmers were replaced by prisoners. During the Venetian domination, the inhabitants of Katastari, in Zakynthos, were forced to perform all manual labour in the saltworks of the village, in return for a small amount of money and/or some salt. Similarly, in order to install new saltworks towards the end of the 16th century, the Venetian authorities in Crete employed the traditional system of enforced personal labour of the rural populations.

In the solar saltworks on the Mediterranean coast, there was normally a clear allocation of duties to those who crushed and piled the salt in the crystallisers and the others who deposited the dried salt onto wide embankments and finally, transported it away from the pans. All this work was completed by salters who were exposed to the torrid sun all day long, blinded by the glare of the salt and the sparkles of its crystals, protected by just a straw hat or a white kerchief, always sweating and thirsty, with the sharp salt stuck on their body. Those who are familiar with the Mediterranean summers will understand the working conditions of the salt-workers.

In most sites it was essential that salters possessed buildings near the salina to keep tools together with the harvested crop. Such buildings could also be used as a temporary residence, as was the case in Piran, Slovenia. Here, the families of the salters spent the summer, i.e. the entire salt-making season. Every property had one typical two-floor house along the sea brine canal. The ground floor was used to store the salt, whereas the upper one, with two rooms and a kitchen, accommodated the salters. The special interior bore windows to the north and south, and one or more versions of weather vanes to inspect weather changes. This building, encompassing even an external oven for baking bread to cater for the long stay needs of the family, is quite different from other salinas.



Traditional salter houses in Piran (Slovenia)

Because of the extreme labour required, many salinas have been abandoned or modernised, whereas the large economical and social changes have almost led to the end of the traditional salt activity in Europe and the Mediterranean. As a result, the traditional profession of salter has been gradually disregarded, even despised. The still existing salters are ageing, with almost no recruitment of young workers at present.

By tradition, know-how was transmitted from generation to generation, in most cases through a personal relationship. Within the framework of the ALAS Project, it was made possible not only to bring together old salters to learn a lot from each other (different salt producing sites in Portugal), to collect and systemise the knowledge on how to restore and cultivate traditional salinas (Piran, Slovenia and Figueira da Foz, Portugal), but even to recruit young salters, most of them on a volunteer basis, and train them in a profession of the past that may be used in order to upgrade the image of the traditional salinas in the future.



New salters trained in Pomorie, under the ALAS Project (Bulgaria)