

<b>STN</b>	<b>Starostlivosť o zachovanie kultúrneho dedičstva Odsol'ovanie poréznych anorganických materiálov obkladmi</b>	<b>STN EN 17891</b>  76 0107
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Conservation of cultural heritage - Desalination of porous inorganic materials by poultices

Táto norma obsahuje anglickú verziu európskej normy.  
This standard includes the English version of the European Standard.

Táto norma bola oznámená vo Vestníku ÚNMS SR č. 12/23

Obsahuje: EN 17891:2023

**137928**



EUROPEAN STANDARD

EN 17891

NORME EUROPÉENNE

EUROPÄISCHE NORM

October 2023

ICS 71.060.01; 97.195

English Version

## Conservation of cultural heritage - Desalination of porous inorganic materials by poultices

Conservation du patrimoine culturel - Dessalement des matériaux inorganiques poreux par application de compresses

Erhaltung des kulturellen Erbes - Entsalzung poröser anorganischer Materialien durch den Einsatz von Kompressen

This European Standard was approved by CEN on 23 July 2023.

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**EN 17891:2023 (E)****European foreword**

This document (EN 17891:2023) has been prepared by Technical Committee CEN/TC 346 “Conservation of Cultural Heritage”, the secretariat of which is held by UNI.

This European Standard shall be given the status of a national standard, either by publication of an identical text or by endorsement, at the latest by April 2024, and conflicting national standards shall be withdrawn at the latest by April 2024.

Attention is drawn to the possibility that some of the elements of this document may be the subject of patent rights. CEN shall not be held responsible for identifying any or all such patent rights.

Any feedback and questions on this document should be directed to the users’ national standards body. A complete listing of these bodies can be found on the CEN website.

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## Introduction

Salts are often present in stones and other porous substrates as agents of decay of chemical, biological or anthropogenic origin. They can originate from surface deposition of atmospheric pollutants, from capillary transport or from external sources such as wind driven marine aerosol and from the material itself, and may be present due to previous, unsuitable, restoration interventions.

The salts most often encountered in building materials are sulfates, chlorides, nitrates and carbonates of sodium, potassium, ammonium, calcium and magnesium. Frequently present are the sulfates: gypsum ( $\text{CaSO}_4 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ), mirabilite ( $\text{Na}_2\text{SO}_4 \cdot 10\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ) and thenardite ( $\text{Na}_2\text{SO}_4$ ), epsomite ( $\text{MgSO}_4 \cdot 7\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ) and other hydrates, the chlorides halite ( $\text{NaCl}$ ) and sylvite ( $\text{KCl}$ ), the nitrates niter ( $\text{KNO}_3$ ) and nitratine ( $\text{NaNO}_3$ ), and the carbonates thermonatrite ( $\text{Na}_2\text{CO}_3 \cdot \text{H}_2\text{O}$ ), trona ( $\text{Na}_3\text{H}(\text{CO}_3)_2 \cdot 2\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ). Less frequently double salts can be observed e.g. apthitalite ( $\text{K}_3\text{Na}(\text{SO}_4)_2$ ), carnallite ( $\text{KMgCl}_3 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ). Minor occurrence of phosphates and nitrites can be found.

In general, several types of soluble salts coexist and the ionic species present, depending on the conditions, can interact with each other to form complex salts or lead to crystallization phenomena within and/or on the surface of the object.

The solubility of any individual salt within a given system varies greatly and is influenced by the concentration and type of other salts in the system and on the temperature. Generally, the concentration of soluble salts in the substrate is highest near the surface, though increased salt contents can occur inside to considerable depths.

Salts can damage the fabric of porous inorganic materials and lead to different decay morphologies sometimes causing substantial loss of material from the object. In addition, water-soluble salts have an influence on conservation measures such as cleaning, consolidation, treatment with hydrophobic materials and painting or plastering, often hindering them. The extent of deterioration and its appearance depend, for a given material, on the type of salt(s) crystallizing, the amount of salt(s) present, and the environmental conditions, as well as the presence of moisture, leading to crystallization cycles.

Reduction of the salt content (desalination) is an essential prerequisite for reducing the deterioration rate of the object and for the success and durability of a conservation measures. However, it is also recognized that in some systems desalination may at best be only partially successful.

Desalination by poultices is one of the most common methods used to reduce salt content from objects.

The term desalination is used to indicate a reduction in the ion content of water-soluble salts, preferentially in the near surface layers of the substrate, rather than a removal of all salts from the substrate at depth.

Before any intervention/application to reduce salts and their ensuing damage, it is advisable to consider investigation and relevant interventions to prevent excessive moisture penetration as part of a holistic conservation approach.

Desalination is a decision that should be taken only after having carried out exhaustive investigations which take into account all the aspects related to damage by salts, such as the type of salts present, their origin, their amount and distribution, as well as the surrounding environmental conditions. Information on previous treatments can be necessary.

Desalination of painted substrates will require additional considerations in order to evaluate the feasibility of desalination by poultices. Where there is a lack of cohesion, paint could be lost during treatment and some pigments or support compounds may react adversely during the poultice treatment.

In an indoor environment, to prevent the occurrence of salt dissolution-crystallization cycles due to relative humidity changes, it is recommended where possible to stabilize the indoor climate [1].

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When all possible interventions to prevent ongoing salt contamination have been considered and carried out, actions may be taken to reduce the quantity of salt(s) by a process of salt ion extraction also termed “desalination”.

NOTE To mitigate the presence of salts, apart from poultices, other actions such as the use of water baths, or sacrificial porous renders/plasters, or plant halophyllous vegetation, or the application of sulphate reducing bacteria, or crystallization inhibitors, or electrochemical methods can also be proposed. These methods fall outside the scope of this document.

Based on the above consideration this document specifies a procedure to reduce the amount of soluble salts/ions present in a porous inorganic material by a process of poultice desalination, outlining the requirements for the selection of poultice components and the procedure for application and monitoring the desalination.

Desalination by poultices refers to a removal of soluble salts, i.e. their ions, from the pore system of porous inorganic materials such as natural stones, bricks, terracotta, mortar, render/plaster and wall paintings. Treatments can be carried out *in situ*, or in a conservation/restoration workshop for movable objects.

Today a wide variety of poultices are used as single products and mixed with argillaceous materials (clay poultices, diatomaceous earth, bentonite, attapulgit, sepiolite) using rapid methods of application.

Desalination using poultices relies on the principle that salts dissolved in water are transported from the salt-contaminated porous materials into the poultice. The transport of salt solutions can take place both by ion diffusion and by movement of the fluid.

Very early on, the risk of removing the most soluble salts and leaving behind the less soluble ones (and risking greater ensuing damage) needs to be mentioned.

Poultices should be ideally chosen which do not leave behind any residues, particularly on fragile surfaces. Any residues which do result need to be identified and removed, if possible, to prevent harm to the substrate. Where there is any doubt that residue removal could not be carried out successfully, a separating layer such as Japanese paper should be used.

## 1 Scope

This document specifies a methodology applying poultices for the desalination of porous substrate constituting cultural heritage. The desalination methodology can be applied:

- to salt-loaded porous inorganic materials affected by salt weathering, and/or
- to allow conservation treatments incompatible with soluble salt(s) contamination, or
- to prevent salt damage where contamination is known to be present.

In all cases the desalination aims to decrease the salt content.

Furthermore, this document gives the fundamental requirements for the desalination operation and guidelines for the choice of the most appropriate poultice components according to the characteristics of the substrate and types/quantities of salt(s) present in order to optimize the desalination process.

## 2 Normative references

The following documents are referred to in the text in such a way that some or all of their content constitutes requirements of this document. For dated references, only the edition cited applies. For undated references, the latest edition of the referenced document (including any amendments) applies.

EN 15898, *Conservation of cultural heritage — Main general terms and definitions*

EN 16085, *Conservation of Cultural property — Methodology for sampling from materials of cultural property — General rules*

EN 16455, *Conservation of cultural heritage — Extraction and determination of soluble salts in natural stone and related materials used in and from cultural heritage*

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