

THE ICEMAN

In September 1991, hikers in the Alps near the Italian-Austrian border discovered the body of a man who had died approximately 5,300 years ago. Because he had died suddenly, perhaps in a storm, and had been preserved in the mountain ice, his body and the things found with his body provide scientists with rare evidence about the everyday life of a Stone Age traveler.

A broad portrait of the Iceman and his times is gradually emerging from the tests and observations. He was a fit man, between 25 and 35, about 1.6 m (5 ft. 2 in.) tall—which was short even in his day—and weighed around 50 kg (110 lbs.). Though his nose had been crushed and his upper lip folded by the weight of ice, it is clear that he had well-formed facial features that today would not draw stares.

An examination of his body revealed no sign of disease and no wounds beyond those that were inflicted during his exhumation. But scientists are still pondering the reason for the bluish tinge of his teeth, which were well worn, probably from a diet of milled grain products.

Though the mummified body was completely hairless, investigators have plucked about 1,000 curly brownish-black hairs from the recovered shreds of clothing. Those that came from the Iceman's head were only 9 cm (3 1/2 in.) long—evidence that humans had been cutting their hair far earlier than anthropologists had believed.

More mysterious were the well-defined tattoos: groups of blue parallel lines on the Iceman's lower spine, a cross behind the left knee and stripes on the right ankle. "Since all these tattoos were covered by clothing," says Konrad Spindler, head of Innsbruck's Institute for Prehistory, "they must have had an inner meaning for the man and not have had the function of identification for other tribes." Some scientists suggest that the designs might have been used to mark the passage from youth to manhood. One fact is certain: until this discovery, it was thought that tattooing originated 2,500 years later.

The Iceman was well prepared for the Alpine chill. His basic garment was an unlined fur robe made of patches of deer, chamois and ibex skin. Though badly repaired at many points, the robe had been cleverly whipstitched together with threads of sinew or plant fiber, in what appears to be a mosaic-like pattern, belying the popular image of cavemen in crude skins. "The person who made the clothes initially was obviously skilled. This indicates that the Iceman was in some way integrated into a community," says pre-historian Markus Egg, who is restoring the clothes at the Roman-Germanic Central Museum in Mainz, Germany. As for the repairs, made with grass thread, Egg says, "We assume he did them himself in the wilderness."

Shredded during the Iceman's recovery, the garment arrived at Mainz in nearly a hundred pieces and with so many bits missing that Egg has doubts about ever fully determining the fashion of the times. For further protection, the Iceman wore a woven grass cape over the garment similar to those used by Tyrolean shepherds as late as the early part of this century. His well-worn size-6 shoes were made of leather and stuffed with grass for warmth.

The Iceman's equipment revealed an unexpected degree of sophistication. His copper ax was initially mistaken by Spindler as evidence that the find dated from the Bronze rather than the Neolithic Age. But the blade turned out to be nearly pure copper, not bronze.

To archaeologists, the Iceman's fur quiver is an even rarer prize. "It is the only quiver from the Neolithic period found in the whole world," Egg marvels. Its cargo of feathered arrows marks another first. Carved from viburnum and dogwood branches, a dozen of them were unfinished. But two were primed for shooting with flint points and feathers. The feathers had been affixed with resin-like glue at an angle that would cause spin in flight and help maintain a true course. "It is significant that ballistic principles were known and applied," says archaeologist Hans Notdurfter. The quiver also held an untreated sinew that could be made into a bowstring; a ball of fibrous cord; the thorn of a deer's antler, which could be used to skin an animal; and four antler tips, tied together with grass.

The bow, which had not yet been notched for a bowstring, is made of yew, which Egg explains is "the best wood in Central Europe for bow making and the wood the famous English longbows—like Robin Hood's—were made of." Yew is relatively rare in the Alps, but the Iceman had searched out "the best material."

The Neolithic climber was also armed with a tiny flint dagger with a wooden handle; a net of grass, which possibly served as a carrying bag; and a pencil-size stone-and-linden tool that was probably used to sharpen arrowheads and blades. Two birch bark canisters may have been used to carry the embers from a fire, Egg speculates. The Iceman apparently toted much of his gear in a primitive rucksack with a U-shaped wooden frame.

The "iceman" as scientists have dubbed him, also had a leather pouch resembling a small version of the "fanny packs" worn by tourists today. Inside he carried a sharpened piece of bone, probably used to make sewing holes in leather, and a flint-stone drill and blade. A sloe berry, probably his snack food, was found at the site, along with two mushrooms strung on a knotted leather cord. The mushrooms have infection-fighting properties and may have been part of the world's oldest-known first-aid kit. The only decorative item, possibly a talisman, was a small, doughnut-shaped stone disk, with a tassel of string.

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