

The 5,000 Year-Old glacier murder mystery: *Who killed the iceman?*

The corpse of a man who had been frozen in ice for over 5,000 was discovered in 1991 lying on top of an Alpine glacier. Scientists call him The Iceman. As the ice melted, so it revealed information about a man who had lived long ago, shedding light on his life and finally his violent murder.

The Iceman was buried in snow that froze and protected his body from decomposition. This layer of snow was buried deep in the glacier for many thousands of years.

However, the ice that had been there for millennia finally started to melt in the 1980s, revealing the grave of The Iceman and the secrets that died with him. Many people now attribute this melting to global warming.

Who was the Iceman?

His body was discovered by walkers on the 29th September 1991, in the Italian Alps. The ice had mummified the corpse, meaning that the body was almost in the same state as when he died in the distant past.

Scientists have studied The Iceman and believe that he was probably in his mid-forties, which would have made him an elderly man for that historical time.

He had with him various tools and weapons, including an axe with a copper blade. The axe was a Copper Age “must-have” item, and tells us that The Iceman was an important man of social significance and possibly great wealth.



Where did the iceman come from?

After taking samples from his teeth, his bones and his intestines, scientists think that he probably came from the Valle Isarco, near the modern-day Italian town of Bressanone.

His finger nails revealed that in the last six months of his life The Iceman had suffered from ill-health. He may also have suffered from some stomach-aches, as his tummy contained eggs from a parasite.

However he was still well enough to eat, and for his last meal he had enjoyed venison with some cereal, probably ground into a type of bread.

How did he die?

The Iceman headed off on his final journey poorly prepared, as his bow and arrows had not been properly finished. He also did not have adequate clothing for climbing up into the mountains (a place of often treacherous conditions).

Scientists consider that he must have been rushing, perhaps trying to get away from his foes. Ultimately they caught up with him. He died as a result of an arrow wound in his back.

Iceman's last journey

Scientists have been able to chart The Iceman's last journey, based on the moss and pollen samples found on his clothes. He had climbed

from the forest into the mountains of the Alps. He had made this journey in either the late spring or early summer.

The wound in the Iceman's left shoulder blade was exactly the same place that prehistoric hunters used to kill their prey using only one arrow. The arrow hit the Iceman in an artery, and he bled to death. He dropped dead in the same place his body would be discovered over 5,000 years later.

Why did someone kill the Iceman?

When the Iceman's body was discovered, he had with him the axe with a copper blade. So rare and expensive was this item that scientists feel that his death could not have been a random attack or his killers would have stolen it.

Instead the evidence suggests that his murder was likely to be political. The man's age and weapon indicate he was powerful, and as so little preparation went into his journey it is likely that he left his home in a hurry trying to escape from danger.

It seems he may have fallen out with other men who

Activities

(1) Think about what would happen if your school bag was lost and frozen in ice for thousands of years (perhaps whilst on a Geography Field Trip to the Alps!). What would it tell scientists of the future about you, and how we live today?

(2) Woolly mammoths are sometimes found that have been frozen in ice for 1000s of years. Some scientists hope to use **DNA samples** to bring them back to life. Do you think this could really happen, or is it just science fiction?

wanted the power that he had. Sadly it seems Iceman's enemies did catch up with him in the end. He bled to death in the snow that then kept his body safe for so many long centuries.

Further research

National Geographic regularly reports on this story. June 1993 and July 2007 issues are worth seeking out. Or go online at:

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2007/07/iceman/hall-text> You can even conduct your own autopsy at:

<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2007/07/iceman/iceman-graphic-interactive>