

The Iceman Revisited

by Robert M. Campbell, RFSPE



Reinhold Messner and Hans Kammerlander viewing Ötzi
(© South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology / Paul Hanni)

In 1991, the anthropological world was amazed to learn about the discovery of “The Iceman,” the natural mummy of a Copper Age (or Chalcolithic) man who was buried in ice for over five millennia. He was nicknamed Ötzi for his location in the Ötztal Alps region, where he was found very near the Italian/Austrian border. An unseasonably warm season had exposed his upper body, where an intrepid couple exploring the region happened to discover him. It is believed he lived around 3350–3105 BC.

I wrote an article entitled “The Iceman,” published in *Telicom* Vol. 12, No. 1 (July 1996), based on the seminal book written by lead professor and anthropologist Konrad Spindler of the University of Innsbruck. Spindler first published his book in German, *Der Mann im Eis* (München: C. Bertelsmann, 1993); then a year later, in English, *The Man in the Ice: The Discovery of a 5,000-Year-Old Body Reveals the Secrets of the*

Stone Age (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994).

Without again reviewing the entire case, two details stand out for me from that original and fascinating episode of discovery. First, two days after Ötzi was found, famed mountaineer Reinhold Messner and companion Hans Kammerlander “just happened to be passing by” this very remote Alpine location and viewed the Copper Age man *in situ*, still partially encased in ice. What were the chances of that happening?

Second, it was initially unclear whether Ötzi was found in Austria or Italy. One result was that, while the body and most effects were taken to Innsbruck, the axe (quite an important artifact) went to a small Italian police station, where it stayed until the provenance was determined. It was later established that the site was approximately 100 meters on the Italian side of the border.



The Ötztal Alps

The Iceman now resides in a carefully climate-controlled environment in the South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology in Bolzano, Italy, where he has been studied extensively by experts. We know many things about him, including how he died (shot from behind by an arrow), what he ate for his last meal, his overall health, and how he made his clothing and weapons. He remains a significant and valuable glimpse into the Copper Age world.

My wife and I visited the Ötztal Alps recently and, on a whim, went in search of Ötzi. The Austrian hamlet of Vent (pop. 125) is as near as one can get; and, even then, it requires a further trek of 5 to 6 hours into the mountains to reach the site. We're not quite that intrepid; and, indeed, for us, the day

was more about the motor journey, navigating remote back roads through gorgeous countryside to the destination in this picturesque corner of Europe. There, we stood at the edge of Vent and gazed south, wondering what human life must have been like 5,000 years ago.

General knowledge: Why is Reinhold Messner usually acknowledged as the greatest of all mountaineers? As the keystone of an amazing and storied career, Messner is the only person to summit Mount Everest from the more difficult Tibetan side, alpine style: alone and without supplemental oxygen. Almost as impressive, he made it down again after being stretched to the utmost level of human endurance. What an incredible feat! Ω