Who Killed the Iceman?

Scientists try to solve an ancient murder mystery.

The men faced off with their weapons drawn. They fought to the death for more than a day. When it was over, bloody stab wounds and bruises covered their bodies. At least one man was dead.

A Weird Find

In 1991, hikers found a man’s frozen body high in the mountains of Italy. He was lying facedown in melting ice. He was clutching a knife in his right hand. A backpack, a copper ax, and a bow with arrows were stacked nearby.

At first, investigators thought the man had been dead only a short time. They were amazed to find that he had been dead for a very long time. In fact, the man had died some 5,300 years ago. His body had been preserved, or mummified, by the ice. He is the oldest mummy ever found.

Scientists nicknamed the iceman “Otzi,” for the Otzval Valley in the Italian Alps, where he was found.

Experts are piecing together the last moments of Otzi’s life. At first, they thought he had frozen to death. New tests, however, may show that Otzi’s death is the oldest—and coldest—case of murder ever!
Researchers found a stone arrowhead stuck in Otzi’s back. They think it caused the wound that killed him. The scientists also found bruises and deep gashes all over his body.

His weapons and clothing had traces of blood from four people on them. Blood on Otzi’s leather and fur coat tells experts that he might have been carrying a wounded friend after the battle.

“I think ... he shot at least two different people and retrieved his arrow,” said Tom Loy, a scientist who is studying the case. “He was in a combat situation for between 24 to 48 hours before he died.”

Ancient Turf War?
Why was Otzi fighting? We will probably never know. But Loy has an idea. Otzi was an expert hunter who stalked mountain goats and other animals. Maybe he was wandering on another hunter’s land. Otzi might have been caught up in an ancient turf war.

Scientists are still trying to solve the mystery. The mountain region where Otzi was found has had warm weather this year. The ice there is melting fast. Now experts are looking for more evidence at the crime scene. Who knows? They might even find more ice mummies!

—Kari K. Ridge

This knife was found in Otzi’s hand.

Otzi carried this handmade ax.

The mummy and his tools date from more than 5,000 years ago.