Otzi the Iceman

High in a beautiful Alpine valley on the border of Italy and Austria, a young couple went out for a hike. It was a lovely autumn afternoon in 1991. As the hikers made their way across the snow-covered rocks, they made a chilling discovery. Poking out from the melting ice was a human skull!

Looking closer, the hikers found that an entire body lay buried in the ice. They quickly left the scene and called the police.

Police investigators came to look at the body. They dug at the ice and tried to free the body. They were not able to pry it loose. Their efforts damaged the body and the scraps of clothing it was wearing. The police decided to get some help.

The police called in a scientist to look at the iceman. The scientist noticed that the iceman’s body looked like a mummy. He knew it was very old. He realized that this was a very important discovery. He dug the iceman’s body out of the ice as carefully as he could. The iceman was then flown to a laboratory.
In the lab, an archaeologist examined the body. He also looked at the tools and other items that had been found nearby. These included an ax with a wooden handle and a copper blade, a small stone knife, and a large bow with a quiver of arrows. The study of these items showed that they were over 5,000 years old!

The people who lived in the region were very excited by this news. They gave the iceman a name. They called him Otzi because he had been found near the Otztal valley. As news of the iceman spread, people all around the world took an interest. Who was Otzi the Iceman? Where did he come from? How did he live? Why did he die?

Scientists have come a long way toward answering these questions. They have learned a great deal from Otzi’s belongings about what life was like 5,000 years ago. They know that Otzi’s clothing was made from animal skins. His shoes were made of the skins of bear, deer, and wild goat. These shoes were stuffed with dried grass to make them warmer. He also had a shirt and pants made of skins. He wore a cap made of fur. He had a cape made of braided grasses. He carried a backpack and some small pouches made of birch bark.
In addition to his weapons, he had some tools. He had a tool for sharpening flint so that he could make arrowheads. He had an *awl* and some string for repairing his shoes and clothing. And he had a kit for starting fires.

He also had a slice of meat, some berries, and some mushrooms. Certainly, Otzi and the other people of his time knew how to hunt and gather food. It was clear they had to make their own clothing, as well as their own tools and weapons.

The only item that Otzi had not made for himself was probably his fine copper ax. It would have required special skills and special tools to make such an ax. Otzi probably obtained the ax from a *coppersmith*. It was most likely a highly prized possession.

Scientists have also learned a lot from studying Otzi’s body. They believe that he had a diet made up largely of grains. In Otzi’s time, grains were ground between rocks. Tiny bits of rock became mixed into the grain. As people ate the grain, the rock *particles* ground away at their teeth. Otzi’s teeth showed signs of this kind of wear. When they examined the *contents* of Otzi’s stomach, they found traces of meat along with two kinds of grain.
By examining the minerals in his teeth and bones, they have learned that Otzi spent his entire life in the mountain valleys near the place where his body was found. They believe that he was born in a small village near present-day Bolzano, Italy, and that he probably did not travel more than 40 miles from that spot throughout his life.

Perhaps most startling is the discovery of how Otzi died. Scientists made X-rays of Otzi's body. They found that Otzi had been in a fight in the hours before he died. In fact, a stone arrowhead remains embedded inside Otzi's shoulder. He has a severe cut across his right hand. Scientists are still studying the body to determine if there are other injuries as well.

No one knows for sure who attacked Otzi. Researchers believe, however, that he escaped his attackers before he died. They believe that Otzi was able to flee up the mountain and hide. This is because Otzi's tools and weapons—even his splendid ax—were at his side when he died. If the attackers had found him, they would surely have taken these valuable objects.

Instead, scientists believe that Otzi found a place to rest. He placed all his belongings neatly at his side, and stretched out on the ground. He was weak from loss of blood and in great pain from his injuries. Otzi struggled to stay alive, but his wounds were too severe. After some hours had passed, Otzi died. Snow fell, covering his body and leaving no trace of his passing.

For thousands of years, snow fell on the mountain. Otzi became buried deeper and deeper inside the heart of the glacier. There he remained until the melting ice revealed him to the hikers.
Today, Otzi rests inside a specially built, ice-lined case in the South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology in Bolzano, Italy. This museum is not far from where Otzi was born, and where he lived out his life. Tourists flock to the museum to gaze at Otzi in wonder. Scientists continue to study Otzi for more clues about his life and death. And archaeologists are searching the area where Otzi’s body was discovered to see if more bodies or artifacts can be found in the melting ice.

Otzi the Iceman is the oldest human body ever found. Because of Otzi, we can touch the distant past. We can imagine the lives of our human ancestors. Because of Otzi, we can look back through time and glimpse an ancient world.