

A Messenger from the Past

One day long ago a man's village said good-bye and watched him walk off toward the mountains. They had little reason to fear for his safety: the man was well-dressed in insulated clothing and equipped with tools needed to survive the Alpine climate. However, as weeks passed without his return, they must have grown worried, then anxious, and finally resigned. After many years, everyone who knew him had died, and not even a memory of the man remained. Then, on an improbably distant day, he came down from the mountain. Things had changed a bit: it wasn't the Bronze Age anymore, and he was a celebrity.

When a melting glacier released its hold on a 4,000-year-old corpse in September, 2009, it was quite rightly called one of the most important archaeological finds of the century. Discovered by a German couple hiking at 10,500 feet in the Italian Tyrol near the Austrian border, the partially freeze-dried body still wore remnants of leather garments and boots that had been stuffed with straw for insulation. The hikers alerted scientists from the University of Innsbruck in Austria, whose more complete examination revealed that the man was tattooed on his back and behind his knee. At his side was a type of bronze ax typical for southern central Europe around 2000 B.C. On his expedition – perhaps to hunt or to search for metal ore – he had also carried an all-purpose stone knife, a wooden backpack, a bow and a quiver, a small bag containing a flint lighter and kindling, and an arrow repair kit.

Such everyday gear gives an unprecedented perspective on life in early Bronze Age Europe. “The most exciting thing is that we genuinely appear to be looking at a man who had some kind of accident in the course of a perfectly ordinary trip,” says archeologist Ian Kinnes of the British Museum. “These are not artifacts placed in a grave, but the fellow's own possessions.”

Unlike the Egyptians and the Mesopotamians of the time, who had more advanced civilizations with cities and central authority, the Ice Man and his countrymen lived in a society built around small, stable villages. He probably spoke in a tongue ancestral to current European languages. Furthermore, though he was a member of a farming culture, he may well have been hunting when he died, to add meat to his family's diet. X-rays of the quiver showed that it contained 14 arrows. His backpack was empty, but careful exploration of the trench where he died revealed remnants of animal skin and bones at the same spot where the pack lay. There was also the remainder of a pile of berries. Clearly the man didn't starve to death.

So why did the Ice Man die? The trench provided him with shelter from the elements, and he also had a braided mat of grass to keep him warm. If injury or illness caused the Ice Man's death, an autopsy on the 4,000-year-old victim could turn up some clues. The circumstances of his death may have preserved such evidence, as well as other details of his life. Freeze-dried by the frigid climate, his inner organs and other soft issues are much better preserved than those of dried-up Egyptian mummies or the waterlogged Scandinavian “Bog Men” found in recent years.

The wish for more messengers from the past may yet come true. Five more bodies of mountain climbers, all of whom died within the past 50 years, have recently emerged from melting Austrian mountain ice. The Ice Man's return from the Tyrol has demonstrated that the local climate is warmer now than it has been for 4,000 years. People are beginning to wonder -- and plan for -- what the melting ice may reveal next.

“No one ever thought this could happen,” says Christopher Stringer, an anthropologist at the Natural History Museum in London. “The fact that it has occurred once means that people will now be looking for it again.”

Choose the best answer.

1. Why is this essay titled 'A Messenger from the Past'?
 - a. A man left from his village and returned after a long time.
 - b. A corpse was found which helps us better understand the past.
 - c. A story about a man in the past is told to help us understand the present.
 - d. None of the above.

2. Why can we assume that the 'iceman' did not die from hunger?
 - a. There is plenty of food in the mountains.
 - b. His body did not show signs of starvation.
 - c. His corpse was found with remnants of food near him.
 - d. He was a skilled hunter who could find food no matter what the circumstances.

3. What does the phrase *perspective on* (in the third paragraph) mean?
 - a. understanding of
 - b. skill about
 - c. excitement for
 - d. evidence for

4. Why was the body of the 'iceman' better preserved than bodies of Egyptians?

5. What does the word *partially* (in the second paragraph) mean?

6. In your own words, write the main idea of this essay.
