

# The Iceman Murder

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• **This BBC programme used the latest forensic evidence to recreate the life and death of Ötzi in a CSI – style murder investigation, which blends reconstruction with modern scientific analysis.**

The fortunate discovery of the frozen body of a man in the Ötztal Alps by two hikers in September 1991 brought to light a 5300 years old treasure trove of belongings, tools, clothes, ornaments and weapons. The find shed a ray of light on to everyday life in the late Neolithic and prompted many people to reconstruct Ötzi's equipment, some being more inspired than scientifically based. With progress in scientific methods, the specialists gradually uncovered more and more about the dead man and his world, most theories on the reasons of his death were shortly followed by TV documentaries. The new BBC programme uses the latest forensic evidence to dramatically recreate the life and death of Ötzi in a CSI – style murder investigation, which blends reconstruction with modern scientific analysis. It retraced the story of the investigation from the discovery of the body to the present day and presented us with three completely different scenarios.

In their hour long programme the makers brought together top scientists investigating the 'Ötzi case' from various parts of the world including archaeologists Tom Loy from the University of Queensland and Annalisa Pedrotti from the University of Trento and pathologists Edward Egarter Vigl from the General Regional Hospital in Bolzano and Peter Vanezis from the University of Glasgow. Using photographs, X-rays, CAT scans and charts presenting the results of analyses in a chronological order

the experts introduced three subsequent theories. The first scenario presented was of a lonely shepherd caught by a sudden change of weather high in the mountains, as his body was found only metres from where an ancient shepherd walk passes. While he was well dressed and equipped for his journey he was also weakened by a recent illness and suffering from arthritis. Such death by misadventure happens in Alps even to experienced hikers/mountaineers nowadays.

This theory was discarded in 2001 when a stone arrow head was discovered embedded in Ötzi's shoulder. This find started speculations about a violent death. The second scenario introduced Ötzi as an itinerant metal worker without reasoning why (information about the high levels of copper and arsenic in his hair probably finished on the editors' floor) and as such he would be a visiting stranger viewed with suspicion and as a metal worker also as a man with strange magical powers. In a world ruled by superstition and tradition any misfortune may have been blamed on an outsider. The drama reconstruction had Ötzi failing to heal a mortally injured member of the village, leaving in a hurry, taking only what he needed for survival and being shot into back while fleeing into the mountains.

This second theory was discarded when an autopsy showed that the arrow wound had healed (it actually might have been the recent illness mentioned

in scenario 1) and the trace element analysis of Ötzi's teeth showed that he was a local and probably never travelled further than 60 km from where he was born in his life. New discoveries of blood from four different people on Ötzi's knife, arrows and cloak became the basis for the third scenario. The late Neolithic was a time of expansion, fighting for resources and with that tribal warfare. The arrowhead in his shoulder blade and a deep 'defensive' wound on his right hand suggest that Ötzi was probably a warrior. His death was probably not an isolated incident but one of many. And so the third scenario sees Ötzi surviving an attack on his village and fleeing into mountains with what he could save.

Each of the theories was illustrated by a dramatisation. The actors involved in the reconstructions spent five weeks preparing for their roles, learning how to make fire and tools, how to cook and hunt. While their performance was impressive and convincing the reconstructions presented a number of problems. Among the relatively small ones was the fact that the social structure and division of work reflected much of modern society. For example Ötzi, who would be an elder in his time, had young children while a young adult couple had none. There is also the very important question as to if Ötzi's copper axe would be really the only one in the village including the attacking group of enemy warriors of the third scenario, especially if we take into account that he might have been a metal worker. Even if his was the only copper axe in the Alpine area, why were the flint axes set into a club like handles while the handle of his axe was well balanced? And why were all the attackers clean shaven and their leader even with a hair cut? In the third scenario the writers overlooked one

real continuity problem. The first two scenarios took place in an open settlement, the third one started with warriors attacking a palisaded settlement with a well built gate. As the inhabitants ran away from an open settlement one can only wonder why the warriors bothered with the complicated process of climbing over the gate when they could have just walked around.

Two major problems were the presentation of the spiritual world and speech. Throughout the programme a shaman like figure (spirit?) in a wooden mask and feathery cloak appeared. What was it? Was it supposed to represent the ever-present threat of death? Was it a death omen? The only possible explanation to the presence of this mysterious element were two or three sentences at about two thirds of the way through programme that Ötzi might have been a member of a totemic society and that eagles were popular totem animals because they are good killers. According to Danny Scott in Radio Times (Scott 2005) a lot of attention was paid to Ötzi's language. "We even worked with the head voice coach at the National Theatre to create an approximation of Ötzi's language," he (director Richard Dale) says. "The experts think it would have been a proto-Indo-European language, similar to Basque; a language that was able to carry across the mountains and valleys – a bit like yodelling." Despite the effort the result seemed unsatisfactory; at best the speech sounded like overexcited Teletubbies. The grunting and screeching was in conflict with the statement that they had to have a sophisticated language.

Over all the programme was enjoyable and informative. It avoided the usual traps of presenting one 'definite' story when there are multiple possibili-

ties. It showed that one set of data can be explained in different ways – i.e. Ötzi's possessions were in the first scenario chosen equipment for his journey, in the second the basics necessary for survival and in the third whatever he could salvage on his flight from enemy. It showed how interpretations change with new evidence and that we will never know for sure what really happened. The drama reconstruction tried very hard and maybe that was its problem. Maybe less would be more in this case.

## Summary

### Der Mord am Mann aus dem Eis

Doku-Drama zur Untersuchung des ältesten Mordes der Geschichte, Erstaussstrahlung von der BBC am 22. 3. 2005

Bei diesem Film handelt es sich um ein BBC-Programm, das die jüngsten forensischen Ergebnisse nutzt, um auf dramatische Weise das Leben und den Tod von „Ötzi“ im Stile einer Morduntersuchung durch Spurensicherung darzustellen und dabei sowohl die Rekonstruktion als auch die moderne naturwissenschaftliche Analyse als Methoden nutzt. Unter Anwendung von Fotos, von Röntgenaufnahmen, von medizinischen Diagnosemethoden und von Tabellen, welche die Analyseergebnisse zeigen, werden durch die beteiligten internationalen Experten die drei folgenden Theorien entwickelt: Ein einsamer Schafhirte, ein Mord an einem Fremden und das Opfer eines Konflikts zwischen Stämmen. Jedes der möglichen Szenarien wird durch entsprechende Dramatisierung in Szene gesetzt. Die Umsetzung durch die Schauspieler ist dabei überzeugend, die Darstellungen der spirituellen Welt und der damaligen Sprache sind jedoch weniger gelungen. Insgesamt ist die Sendung aber sowohl unterhaltsam als auch informativ. Sie zeigt, dass eine einzelne Datengrundlage auf verschiedene Weise gedeutet werden kann und wie solche Interpretationen sich durch neue Ergebnisse verändern können.

As it was, instead of enhancing the programme it became a place disruptive. But as I said before it was an interesting programme and despite some misgivings I did enjoy it.

*Scott, D. (2005): The Iceman cometh... to life, Radio Times, 19-25 March, p. 16*

## Information

The Iceman Murder - Docudrama re-examining the oldest murder mystery in history, first broadcast by BBC on 22/03/05.

### Assassinat de l'Homme des glaces

Cette émission de BBC s'est servie des méthodes de la médecine moderne légale pour reconstituer, à la série CSI, la vie et la mort d'Ötzi - on a réalisé l'enquête d'un assassinat en réunissant la reconstitution et l'analyse scientifique. À l'aide des photographies, radiographies, tomographies et graphiques projetant des résultats tirés des analyses, des spécialistes de tous les coins du monde ont proposé trois théories successives: celle d'un berger solitaire, de l'assassinat d'un étranger et d'une victime de la guerre tribale. Des dramatisations ont illustré les trois théories. Les représentations des acteurs ont été très convaincantes, par contre, la façon de représenter le monde spirituel et les répliques produisaient un effet gênant. En général, il s'est agi d'une émission amusante et éducative à la fois. Elle a mis en évidence qu'un même ensemble de données peut être interprété de façons différentes et que l'interprétation change avec la découverte de nouvelles réalités.