Ötztal Alps, between Italy and Austria

For two German hikers, a pleasant day in the Ötztal (UHRTS-tol) Alps ended with a strange discovery. Taking a shortcut through the mountains, they saw a large brown object stuck in some ice. Getting closer, they realized the “object” was a dead body. Officials needed several days to free the mummified corpse, which soon earned the name Ötzi (UHRT-see) the Iceman—and turned out to have been on the mountain for a very, very long time.

Ötzi in his frozen lair
Since his discovery in 1991, Ötzi has become one of the most famous of all mummies. Scientists who have examined his remains have figured out that he lived about 5,000 years ago. It was climate, not human effort, that preserved his body for all those years. Shortly after he died more than 10,500 feet (3,200 m) high in the Alps, snow and ice covered his body. They kept Ötzi from rotting.

Experts aren’t sure who Ötzi was. Items found near the mummy include a copper ax and some arrows. These could mean he was a hunter. Yet some experts think Ötzi might have been a shepherd. In either case, the items preserved in the ice with the mummy offer clues about how people in this region lived long ago.

Another mystery surrounds Ötzi: Why did he die? Scientists know how he died. They found an arrowhead in his shoulder and think he bled to death from his wound. But who fired the arrow? Was Ötzi a criminal someone chased and shot? Did he fight with members of his own tribe? The Iceman took those answers with him to his frozen resting place.

Several people connected to Ötzi, including one of the hikers who found the body, died soon after the frozen mummy was discovered. It didn’t take long for people to wonder if removing the Iceman’s body from its frozen lair had set a deadly curse in motion.