

Oetzi's last supper

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What we eat can say a lot about us – where we live, how we live and eventually even when we lived. From the analysis of the intestinal contents of the 5,200-year-old Iceman from the Eastern Alps, Professor James Dickson from the University of Glasgow in the UK and his team have shed some light on the mummy's lifestyle and some of the events leading up to his death.

By identifying six different mosses in his alimentary tract, they suggest that the Iceman may have travelled, injured himself and dressed his wounds. Their findings are published in the December issue of Springer's journal *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany*, which is specially dedicated to Oetzi the Iceman.

The Iceman is the first glacier mummy to have fragments of mosses in his intestine. This is surprising as mosses are neither palatable nor nutritious and there are few reports of mosses used for internal medical treatments. Rather, mosses recovered from archaeological sites tend to have been used for stuffing, wiping and wrapping.

Dickson and colleagues studied the moss remains from the intestines of the Iceman on microscope slides, to find out more about his lifestyle and events during the last few days of his life. Their paper describes in detail the six different mosses identified and seeks to provide answers to two key questions in each case. Firstly, where did the Iceman come in contact with each species; secondly, how did each come to enter his alimentary tract.

In particular, the authors suggest that one type of moss is likely to have been used to wrap food, another is likely to have been swallowed when the Iceman drank water during the last few days of his life, and yet another would have been used as a wound dressing. One type of moss in the Iceman's gut is not known in the region where the mummy was found, implying that the Iceman must have travelled.

Citation: Dickson JH et al (2008). Six mosses from the Tyrolean Iceman's alimentary tract and their significance for his ethnobotany and the events of his last days. *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany*. DOI 10.1007/s00334-007-0141-7

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