

Study finds modern relatives of Otzi alive and well in Austria

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Ötzi the Iceman, a well-preserved natural mummy of a Chalcolithic (Copper Age) man from about 3300 BC, who was found in 1991 in the Schnalstal glacier in the Ötztal Alps, near Hauslabjoch on the border between Austria and Italy. Credit: Wikipedia.

(Phys.org) —A team of researchers from Innsbruck Medical University has found 19 modern humans living in Austria with the same genetic defect as the ice-man Ötzi, the APA News Agency is reporting. The ice-man was found by German tourists and is believed to have lived approximately 5,300 years ago.

Ötzi, named for the region in the Alps where his remains were discovered, has enjoyed worldwide fame since his discovery, owing to his well preserved remains. Over the past twenty years, the ice-man has been studied by various scientists looking for clues that might reveal the nature of the world he inhabited. In addition to his body, researchers also found artifacts that are believed to have belonged to him—the cause of his death, ranging from an arrow wound, to a blow on the head has also been the subject of much research and conjecture. In this latest effort, the researchers were looking to determine if anyone alive today can be tied genetically to the ancient ice-man.

To find out, the researchers asked males of all ages living in the Austrian state of Tyrol, to donate blood samples for DNA testing. Subsequent analysis revealed that 19 of 3,700 volunteers had the same genetic mutation as the ice-man, indicating that they were related to the same ancestors as Ötzi—no mention was made regarding whether anyone alive today could actually be one of his descendants, however. The research team has already reached out to partners in Switzerland and Italy to organize a similar study to determine if there are matches in other nearby locales. Those men identified as a match in the original study have not been told of their connection to the ice-man.

Study of the ice-man has revealed that he had Lyme disease, that he was approximately 46 years old at the time of his death, was approximately five foot two, was likely from Sardinia originally, and had a predisposition to heart disease. It's still not known what he was doing in the Alps, or why he was killed, likely from falling after being shot in the collarbone by an arrow. His stomach contents indicated he ate a diet heavy in meat and because he was carrying a bow and arrows, researchers have speculated that he was likely either a hunter or a soldier. His remains have been kept in cold storage to prevent decay since his removal from his final resting place.

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