

THE TATTOOS OF ÖTZI THE ICEMAN: *Medicinal or symbolic?*

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Recently the National Museum held an exhibition about body art and its relationship to identity. As part of this display visitors were introduced to 'Ötzi', the oldest known example of a tattooed body. Ötzi was named after the region in the Ötztal Alps near the Similaun mountain refuge in north-west Italy, where he was discovered in 1991 by hikers in a thawing glacier pool. Currently he is kept preserved in a perfectly controlled environment in the South Tyrol Museum of Archaeology, in Bolzano, Italy, where he provides an invaluable view into Neolithic man's life and environment.

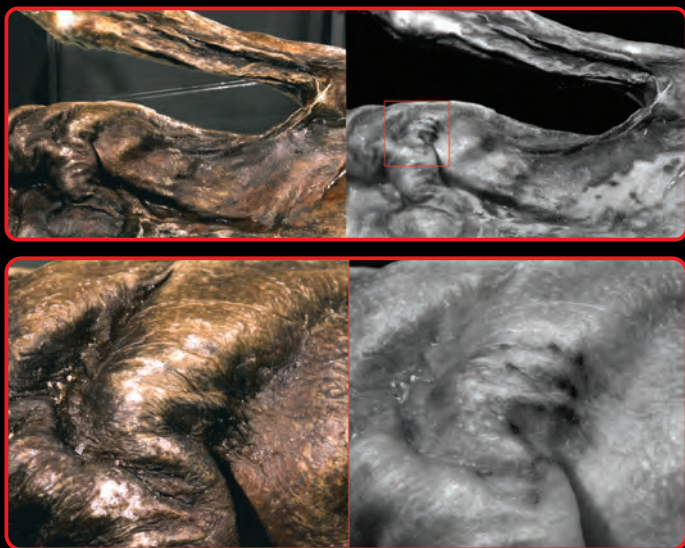
Ötzi's mummified remains, along with an assortment of possessions such as his clothing, a bow and arrows, a dagger and sheath, and an axe were remarkably well preserved by the glacier that enshrined him for about 5 300 years. Careful examination of his body and effects has provided a wealth of information about the Copper Age and stimulated a profusion of discussions about the man, his life and his demise.

Some of the most popular dialogues revolve around Ötzi's 61 tattoos that were created by rubbing soot into incisions. They are simple groupings of one to seven lines of varying lengths and thicknesses, placed parallel to the longitudinal axis of his body. There are also two crosses present on his right knee and ankle. The popularity of these discussions could be attributed to how this find has challenged or contradicted previously believed theories on the origins and practice of tattooing, medicine and acupuncture therapy.

Originally investigators concurred that these tattoos were most likely therapeutic in nature rather than communicative or aesthetic. Their location above joints commonly linked to musculoskeletal ailments and key acupuncture lines makes it plausible that they served either as treatment for, or markers of, chronic pain. Clinical examinations of Ötzi's body have shown clear indications of osteoarthritis and musculoskeletal injury and strain. Some visible injuries or degeneration have correlating tattoos while others do not. Similarly some tattoos are located over clearly afflicted areas, while some are present where no ailment is evident. However, these theories easily become circular in nature. Much of this is based on the



Mapping Ötzi's tattoos.
(Photo: EURAC/M.Samadelli/M.Melis)



Additional tattoo found by multispectral imaging.
(Photo: EURAC/M.Samadelli/M.Melis)

deduction that Ötzi suffered from chronic pain due to mechanical back injury, lower lumbar compression, sciatica, referred pain and joint strain.

In 2015 the application of new imaging techniques, observing beyond the visible spectrum, led to the unexpected discovery of a previously unseen tattoo on the lower right side of Ötzi's chest. This discovery has brought the overall acceptance of the 'medicinal' theory into question since the tattoo is not, like the others, located on or near a joint.

Ötzi is one of many mummified remains with tattoos. Other examples such as those discovered in the Scite tombs of Pazyryk in the Ural Mountains of Siberia (6th century BCE), differ in that their markings are far more elaborate or pictorial. One of these, known as the 'Prince of the Scites' or the 'Scites Warrior', has decorative tattoos on his arms, chest, back and right leg, as well as point-like tattoos along his spine that do not indicate any ornamental function. Their application and placement are assumed to have a therapeutic or ritualistic function.

Similarly the recently discovered remains of a 1 000 year old Peruvian mummy revealed two distinct types of tattoos. Simplified geometric tattoos located on the back of her neck were made using a different substance than the rest of her tattoos. The pigment used included plant material which seems to support the idea that they held some curative or ritualistic significance.

However, it is equally possible that Ötzi's tattoos served a decorative purpose. Simplicity does not necessarily denote meaninglessness, and culturally not all tattoos are communicative. The time that it takes to execute a tattoo, its permanence, and painfulness imply a contemplation and presence of mind that cannot be thoughtless. In some instances tattoos play an integral role in the expression of ego, the development of personal identity, and the practice of spirituality and ritual.



Knife and sheath found with the mummified remains of Ötzi.
(Photo: EURAC/M.Samadelli/M.Melis)

The artefacts found with Ötzi indicate an understanding of design without being overly decorative. Sensitivity to both form and function are evident. Undoubtedly, time was spent creating an object that would work well while also being visually pleasing. This is especially clear when viewing his knife sheath. Time, effort and thought were spent on creating an appealing design that, if merely utilitarian, could have been achieved in a much simpler and faster manner. This same rationale could be applied to the visual character of his tattoos.

It can be argued that Ötzi's tattoos are too elaborate to be mere markers that chart areas of chronic pain. Creating a composition of painful marks where one small dot would suffice, seems excessive. While possible motives are interesting to debate, they remain unquantifiable.

References

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