

# After 5,000 Years, The Mystery of Fritz Just Won't End

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Italy and Austria Bicker

Over Copper Age Corpse;

A Hiker Stakes His Claim

By MATTHEW KARNITSCHNIG

BOLZANO, South Tyrol—One spring day in about 3300 B.C. a bearded, 5-foot-3, middle-age man in a bearskin cap was traversing the Tyrolean Alps when a flint arrowhead pierced his fur pelt and bore into his back. He bled to death in the snow.

On Sept. 19, 1991, two German hikers, Erika and Helmut Simon, stumbled on the remains of the unlucky Copper Age wanderer. What at first looked like a rusty can or a doll turned out to be the best preserved prehistoric corpse ever



found—ancient remains that have also sparked very modern quarrels.

The Simons are fighting to get a finder's fee. Austria and Italy have sparred over the nationality of Frozen Fritz, as the corpse was dubbed. The charges and countercharges have dredged up questions about the Versailles Treaty, Nazi henchman Heinrich Himmler and the whereabouts of Fritz's private parts.

The ridge where the Simons discovered the body runs along a border between Austria and Italy that has only existed since 1919. After World War I, the Italians occupied German-speaking South Tyrol. The conquest was recognized under the Treaty of Versailles and left Tyrol divided, with its northern and eastern sections remaining in Austria. Yet the exact location of the border remains a matter of hot debate.

The Simons' discovery has been a boon for the region and for a museum built to display Fritz's remains. The iceman draws about 150,000 additional tourists and \$4.9 million annually to Bolzano, one study con-

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# The Iceman Cometh, and Provoketh Discord

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cluded. Each day hundreds of museum visitors peer through a small window into an igloo-like chamber, where, in nearly 100% humidity at 21 degrees Fahrenheit, Fritz lies on a slab much as he was found: his left arm stretched awkwardly across his right shoulder, a strange snarl on his leathery brown face.

A Fritz ("Ötzi" in the local dialect) industry has sprung up: Shopkeepers peddle chocolate bars, wine and mousepads with the Copper Age man's image. In 2001, a Bolzano theater premiered "Frozen Fritz," a musical about the iceman.

Recently, a Bolzano court ruled in a suit brought by Mr. Simon that the Simons have the right to be recognized as Fritz's finders, a prerequisite for suing for a reward.

"We won't accept anything under 150,000 euros (\$120,000)," says Mr. Simon, a 66-year-old retired custodian from Nuremberg. The government of South Ty-

rol has offered 50,000 euros.

One recent afternoon in the living room of his three-bedroom apartment on a quiet street in Nuremberg, Mr. Simon, a passionate hiker, was dressed in traditional Alpine garb, including a green-checked shirt with horn buttons. A short, portly man with a white beard, he said he and his wife have been insulted at every turn by the South Tyroleans.

At an iceman symposium in Bolzano in 2001, organizers wouldn't let the couple in unless they paid the entry fee of more than \$60. The Simons can't even get into the new museum that houses Fritz without buying a nearly \$10 ticket. Particularly galling, Mr. Simon says, was that his and his wife's names weren't included on a 13-foot stone monument erected near the site where they discovered Fritz. The pair have been left to do their own advertising by handing out business cards that refer to them as Fritz's discoverers.

"The South Tyroleans have either con-

tempt for us or they're just ignorant," Mr. Simon says.

Indeed, the Simons' court fight cuts right to the heart of a broader dispute over Fritz that surfaced just days after his discovery: Who can claim him, Austria or Italy?

Though national borders didn't exist in Fritz's time, there were distinct ethnic groups. Initial DNA tests suggested Fritz is related to northern European and Alpine populations. The contents of his stomach and tests on the isotopes in his teeth and bones, meanwhile, indicate the food he ate and the water he drank were from the Italian side of the border. The question is whether that makes him a *Homo tirolensis*, as some Austrians call him, or an Italian.

For the Simons, the nationality question is more than academic. In Austria, anyone who makes a valuable historic find on public land has automatic ownership rights. In the Simons' case, that would have likely earned them a handsome finder's fee. Italy, however, is less generous in such cases.

After the Simons found Fritz's body, which was still half submerged in ice, they immediately informed the caretaker of a nearby lodge. As it wasn't clear whether the body was located on Austrian or Italian territory, the caretaker took the matter up with authorities in both countries.

After looking at the map, both sides concluded the find was made in Austria, and Austrian authorities responded. Initially they assumed Fritz was a lost mountaineer. That summer, a warm wind from Africa had deposited Saharan sands on the glaciers along the frontier between Austria and Italy, accelerating the melting of the glaciers. A number of bodies emerged from the ice, some after several decades.

Once Rome got wind of the find's significance, Italy asked for an official survey of the border. Following the rules laid down in the Versailles Treaty, the surveyors determined the body had been found about 100 yards inside Italian territory.

In the end, the governors of North and South Tyrol agreed that South Tyrol would have ownership but that Austria's University of Innsbruck would take temporary custody of the body to carry out research on Fritz.

That led to another icestorm. The Austrian researchers found that Fritz had been between 40 and 50 years old when he died, and he had broken ribs, severe frostbite, and arthritis in his spine and hip. But when South Tyrolean scientists examined him in 2001, they uncovered



Fritz in his freezer at the archaeology museum in Bolzano

the most dramatic find of all: the arrowhead lodged in his left shoulder. They also found a gouge in his right hand and other wounds that Fritz probably sustained in the struggle that ended his life.

Eduard Egarter Vigl, the doctor in charge of Fritz's conservation, says the Austrians should have found these key clues when he was in their possession. "Under the circumstances, it was impossible to not blame the North Tyroleans and Austrians" for not finding the arrowhead, he says.

The Austrians say they simply overlooked it.

"We saw it but then forgot about it because we had discovered so many other interesting things," says Dieter zur Nedden, a senior radiologist at the University of Innsbruck.

Then there is the delicate question of Fritz's private parts. In an early article on the iceman, the Austrian scientists reported that his genitalia appeared to be missing. The disclosure sparked rumors that Fritz had been castrated, a ritual known in Mediterranean and North African countries but not in Alpine Europe. That spurred two journalists to suggest in a book that Frozen Fritz was a fake—a castrated Tibetan mummy brought to Europe by SS chief Heinrich Himmler to prove that Germanic culture is an ancient civilization.

The theory collapsed, however, when a closer examination of Fritz revealed that his private parts were intact; they had just been hard to locate because of severe dehydration.

Konrad Spindler, a University of Innsbruck professor who led the Austrian research on the iceman, says emotions have often gotten the best of both sides. Dr. Spindler, who is German, says the South Tyroleans still haven't forgiven him for speaking out against their use of human remains as a tourist attraction. A life-size model of Fritz would be more dignified, he says.

"The South Tyroleans don't like it if outsiders tell them what to do," he says.

That's unlikely to stop the Simons, however. "The South Tyroleans are betting on a biological solution because they know we're old, but we have two sons and they'll fight on," Mr. Simon says.

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