

Dawn of the Aztecs, Written in Stone

A series of stones carved with images of snakes, warriors, and headless prisoners has been found at the sacred Aztec site of Tenochtitlan in Mexico City's historic center. The 25 images, carved from gray and red volcanic rock, were embedded in the floor of the plaza in front of the Templo Mayor complex, where the Aztecs performed thousands of ritual killings before the Span-



ish conquistadores arrived. The stones date to between 1440 and 1469, during the reign of Moctezuma I, and describe the birth of Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of war and the sun. Bas-relief images of serpents with gaping mouths, a warrior carrying a shield and dart thrower, and a weeping captive on his knees with his hands bound behind his back, all tell the

story of a cosmic war between the sun, moon, and stars that preceded the birth of the supreme Aztec deity and the beginning of Aztec culture. Raul Rodríguez Barrera, who is leading the excavation for the Mexican National Institute of Anthropology and History and the Mexican National Council for Culture and the Arts, says, "It is a historic document in stone, a narrative of war, sacrifice, and death."

—JULIAN SMITH



What Ailed the Iceman?

It's been more than 20 years since Ötzi, the 5,300-year-old Neolithic iceman, was found in the Italian Alps. Since then, researchers have figured out what he likely ate as his last meal (wild einkorn wheat bran) and how he died (an arrow to the back that pierced an artery). They have also sequenced his maternal DNA, determining that his lineage was genetically rare and has since gone extinct.

Now researchers have investigated the rest of Ötzi's genome, thanks to the Y-chromosome DNA found in bone from his left hip. Ötzi's paternal ancestors moved into Europe from the Near East more than 6,000 years ago. Further, he was lactose intolerant, had type O blood, had brown hair and eyes, and may have had Lyme disease—his DNA carries sequences from the bac-



teria responsible for the illness, which is tricky to identify even today.

"We think that the iceman must have had at least some early symptoms, such as fever and temporary weakness,"

says Albert Zink, head of the Institute for Mummies and the Iceman at the European Academy of Bolzano in Italy. "In a later stage, Lyme disease can affect the joints and the nervous system, but we don't have any proof of that for the iceman."

In other recent work, scientists probed thin tissue slices from the arrow wound and a laceration on Ötzi's hand. They used an atomic force microscope to trace the surface of the tissue and create a 3-D rendering. The resulting images included doughnut shapes that are the hallmark of red blood cells. Zink says finding blood cells and the clotting protein fibrin—and no sign of healing—at the arrow wound site indicates that Ötzi died within minutes of being shot.

—NIKHIL SWAMINATHAN

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