

IN THE NEWS...

THE FAMOUS HAUSLABJOCH 'ICEMAN' - ANOTHER CARBON DATING ANOMALY?

As most members will already know from their newspapers, last September the frozen and wind-dried body of a young man in his mid-twenties was found by German ramblers in a glacier that had melted more than normal, high in the Tyrolean Alps on the very border between Italy and Austria. The body was immediately dubbed the 'Iceman of Hauslabjoch', or more simply 'Iceman'. Before carbon dating could be carried out on him, archaeologists who studied his flanged metal axe and other accompanying artefacts confidently identified him to the beginning of the European Age, that is, to about 2,000 BC.

Then onto the scene stepped our now familiar Oxford and Zurich laboratories. From tissue samples their readings showed Iceman to be considerably older than archaeologists expected - in fact, to circa 3,300 - for European archaeology a period still in the late Stone Age. Furthermore the *Times* of February 10 reported that 'using the techniques that showed the Turin shroud to be a late medieval forgery' the laboratories insisted 'the margin of error in this case is less than 1 per cent.'

But a complication arose when, unknown to the Zurich and Oxford laboratories, it emerged that grasses found closely associated with the man's clothing (and not deriving from the immediate vicinity where he was 'found'), had been sent to an Innsbruck laboratory. These Innsbruck dated to substantially below 3,000 BC. Fearing the possibility of contamination Oxford and Zurich ran their dating again using fresh samples, only to achieve similar results to their first ones. In the event Innsbruck gave ground, conceding their results must have been 'wrongly published'.

However this still left the rather more serious anomaly of how a Stone Age-dated human being could have been carrying a Bronze Age-dated axe. The chink of a get-out emerged when a laboratory in Mainz, analysing the metal content of the axe, revealed this to have insufficient tin to be considered truly bronze. This allowed it to be classified a copper axe. Yet although the appearance of simple copper axes in Europe had been dated as far back as 2,800 BC, ones with the flange of the Iceman's example have been thought to be substantially more recent. As one bemused British archaeologist acknowledged on a BBC Horizon television programme shown April 27, the Iceman radiocarbon datings seem to be 'designer-made to embarrass the prehistorians.' Curiously, the archaeologist did not seem to consider the other alternative - that the true culprit for embarrassment just might more deservedly be the carbon dating process itself...