

The Story of Ötzi

[The following narrative is based on a manuscript that was found in 1967 in an ancient archaeological site near the Tisenjoch mountain pass. The site is on the Austrian side of the present border between Austria and Italy. The manuscript was written on vellum sheets that were found in a copper box that the researchers found in a dry cool cave with a small opening. The pages were stuck together by time and could not be taken apart without destroying them. Finally, in 2014, it became possible to read what there was of it by using X-ray technology. The translation was largely guesswork guided by intuition, and took several years.

[Ötzi's body was discovered in 1991, but the archaeologists did not realize that the manuscript might be related, because it had not yet been read. Whether it is related is now a subject of debate, and the public has not been informed. This story is therefore out of bounds as far as science is concerned. The manuscript nevertheless tells a story that is compatible with what is known of Ötzi and the way he must have died. The author has taken some liberties, creating a free modern translation, extrapolating from the story as written, and giving names to the people who are not named. Any errors are the author's responsibility. But try to identify a single one.]

My name is Gunt. Here I tell the story of how my wise friend met his end. I had only seventeen winters when this happened, but now I have seen 40 and I approach the end of my life. I write this so others may remember, and they shall know that even the best man can turn onto the wrong path, face untrue accusations, and that the course of life may not be fair.

His name was Hant, but he was called Wir because he was a wise man and healer who traveled from place* to place. He had wealth, such as a metal axe that I had never seen before, and I have not seen since. But his real wealth was in his wisdom. He taught me to read and write** when he visited here and I was a child. He stayed with my family for a month because he had an injury to his chest from a fall on the trail. He showed me many other things. He could heal wounds and sickness and he knew about plants and animals. I have passed on some of that knowledge.

But the last time he came here, our leader, Horun, was old and sick. He had been our leader for many years, since long before I was born. Hant told him that his time was near, but he would help as much as he could. Although winter was coming on, Hant went out and found some plants that might help with Horun's pain and give him a more peaceful end. He told me at the time that it was all he could do. There is no cure for old age.

Hant cared for Horun for about half a month. At last, Horun died peacefully in his sleep, and the trouble began. Hant had grown attracted to Horun's daughter, Sil, a woman of about 16 summers§ and quite ready to take a husband. Hant saw no reason why he could not settle here and take Horun's place. After all, he was growing old himself. He wanted to become Sil's mate and spend the rest of his days here. I thought that all of my family and friends would benefit from Hant staying and sharing what he knew with us.

Sil did not want that. She publicly accused Hant of killing her father and making improper advances to her. I do not know if he did, but it would be unlike him. One of the men in the town, our best hunter, supported her. His name was Farlmed, and he was also one of our best traders, who led some of our men and women through the pass during the summer and exchanged our bows, bowls, dishes and carvings for their goods. We had wood, but little good stone, and they made things of stone but they had little good wood. So this trade flourished, when it could.

Farlmed said that Hant must leave our place. At first, he refused and said he wanted to stop his wandering, and he had much to teach. Those who wanted to learn would have to come to him. But then a young man attacked him and injured him slightly on the thumb. Hant was quite a warrior as well as a healer, and the young man was left lying in the mud. But Hant realized there was more trouble ahead and he gathered his possessions and left. He left me a valuable copper box, saying he did not want to carry the weight

Hant went toward the pass, to the south, even though the snow had begun to fall. This was a rash decision for two reasons: first, most people would not survive the journey over the pass at this time of year. I think that Hant could, if anyone could. Second, he was going to our trading partners, and next year, if Farlmed had his way, they would be told that Hant had escaped from justice. Perhaps Hant thought that by then he would be farther south, and the people of that region, I have heard, allow all kinds of lawlessness. Had Hant gone north, the word would have spread quickly, and we are proud people, intolerant of those who commit a crime, even if it is only a rumor. And as far as I know, Hant was guilty of nothing.

Farlmed was not satisfied. He gathered together some of us and we followed Hant up the pass. I was with them, although I took no part in what happened. After a day's climb, we had not caught up with him. We saw his fire above us, and envied him for his camping skills. We had not prepared to spend the

night. We had little wood, and we made only a small fire and had a meager dinner. Some of us said that Hant was feasting, which only made others angry. I knew that Hant had many years of experience at camping, and I said nothing.

After a cold night, we started upward again. We found Hant's footprints in the snow. He was still ahead of us, but the pass grew steeper. Farlmed urged us on. About mid-day we saw him above, and some of us cried aloud. He must have heard us, because he seemed to move faster, although perhaps we were moving more slowly because the trail was steeper. Soon, though, we were only a few hundred yards behind him. He was walking steadily, but some of us were trying to run after him, and falling down in the snow. Farlmed, however, was striding upward as well as he could. He knew the pass from his trading journeys. I lagged behind. Hant was now on the steepest part of the pass, and we were not, and we moved faster.

At last we were closer to him, and Farlmed brought out his fine yew bow. He had arrows that were tipped with the stone arrowheads he had obtained from the people on the other side of the pass. He had hunted and killed many deer and mountain goats with them. He continued to walk forward, fitting an arrow to the string, as I imagine he had many times before. At last, when he deemed that he could make the shot, he released an arrow. It missed and Hant still climbed. I wonder now why he did not turn and shoot his own arrows at

us. Perhaps he thought he could still escape. Maybe he accepted that he might be killed. Possibly he did not want to take the life of another man.

The snow began to fall again, and we continued upward. Farlmed chose another arrow, and when we were closer, he shot Hant in the left shoulder. Hant fell forward. We continued upwards, with Farlmed stopping for a moment to recover his lost arrow. When we stood around Hant's body, Farlmed tried to remove his arrow from it, but only the shaft pulled out. Harlmed swore, complaining that he had lost his arrowhead. A few laughed. One person said we should take Hant's copper axe, but Farlmed strung another arrow, and said that robbing a dead man would be a sin against the gods and the man who did it would lie next to him. We then left Hant there and returned down the mountain.

Farlmed then gave Sil no choice but to accept him as his mate, although he had one already. He was not kind to her in the way he made her accept him, or afterward. He became the leader of our place, but he did not live very long. I had seen only 25 winters when he died. He was killed by one of the people over the pass. It was difficult for our trading party to return without him, but they did.

This ends my story.

*No "place" is named. This (in the language of the document) must have been a universal word for a town, your own town or some other town. Of course, they must have had names. The name of the "place" where Gunt lived is not specified, although we know approximately where it was. Place is used as a substitute in the translation, maybe poorly. Village, town, settlement, hamlet, thorp, etc. are synonyms.

**The “writing” was not like anything we use. It was a combination of pictographs and logographs that presented many problems for the translators. For instance, the pictographs for deer and goat differ only in the shape of the horns. It was only after one of the translators suggested that the end of the manuscript was about the death of Ötzi that they were able to work backward, using the few facts that they knew. See the disclaimer in the introduction; this is a free translation created by me.

§ Apparently men’s lives were measured in winters, and women’s lives were measured in summers. That, at least, seems to be clear from the manuscript.