

Have you found anything in or around the ice?

- Do not recover the object or only if it is directly threatened.
- Photograph the object and its wider surroundings.
- Mark the location.
- Write down the coordinates of the location or mark it on a map.
- Archaeological finds belong to the canton in which they were found. Report them to the relevant cantonal authority.

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Thank you very much!
For archaeological services of other cantons and information www.alparch.ch



The Lötschen Pass as a hiking destination

Nowadays, the Lötschen Pass is a popular and worthwhile hiking destination. It can be crossed in one day or combined with an overnight stay on the pass.

Starting points: Selden in Gasterntal; Lauchernalp or Ferden in Lötschental.

Accommodation options:

- Lötschenpasshütte (www.loetschenpass.ch)
- Berghotel Steinbock (www.steinbock-gasterntal.ch)
- Hotel Gasterntal (www.hotel-gasterntal.ch)
- Berghaus Lauchernalp (www.berghauslauchernalp.ch)
- Alpenhotel zur Wildi (www.zurwildi.ch)

For further information contact the local tourist authorities (www.loetschental.ch or www.kandersteg.ch).

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Useful information: Selden in the Gasterntal and Ferden in the Lötschental can be reached by public transport. The cable car between Lauchernalp and Wiler can help save a few altitude meters on the south side. The hiking trails are mountain trails (T2/T3). Sure-footedness and good footwear are required as well as appropriate clothing for the wind and weather conditions.

Publications: Albert Hafner, Schnidejoch und Lötschenpass. Archäologische Forschungen in den Berner Alpen. Bern 2015. – Hanspeter Holzhauser, Samuel U. Nussbaumer und Heinz J. Zumbühl, Die beiden Gletscher von Grindelwald. In: Heinz J. Zumbühl et al. (Hrsg.), Die Grindelwaldgletscher. Kunst und Wissenschaft. Bern 2016, 13–44.

Cover picture: The Lötschen Pass with the Ferdenrothorn in the background.

Picture Credits: cover picture: ADB, Regula Gubler; ice patch, artefacts: Marcel Cornelissen; excavation: Rolf Wenger; artefacts: Badri Redha; Albert Nyfeler painting: Verein Albert Nyfeler, Kippel; map: Federal Office for Topography and ADB, Eliane Schranz (entries).

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BERNESE ALPS
Archaeology
of the Lötschen Pass

Archäologischer Dienst des Kantons Bern
Service archéologique du canton de Berne

Service des bâtiments, monuments et archéologie
du canton du Valais | Dienststelle für Hochbau,
Denkmalpflege und Archäologie des Kantons Wallis



Melting ice and firn continue to release archaeological finds. These are often objects made of organic materials such as wood or leather, which are not preserved at most archaeological sites and therefore provide extremely rare insights into the past. Once the frozen objects have thawed, they can disintegrate within a short period of time.

The Early Bronze Age site on the Lötschen Pass in 2012. In 2017, the ice patch in the foreground had almost completely melted away. The Doldenhorn can be seen in the background.

A high alpine pass with a long history

The Lötschen Pass connects the Bernese Oberland with the Valais and has been used as a passage between the Kander and the Lötschen valleys for over 4000 years. Archaeological finds from the pass area bear witness to this, telling of a long and varied use of the pass: goods were transported, animals were driven either to markets or to pastures and wild animals may also have been hunted.

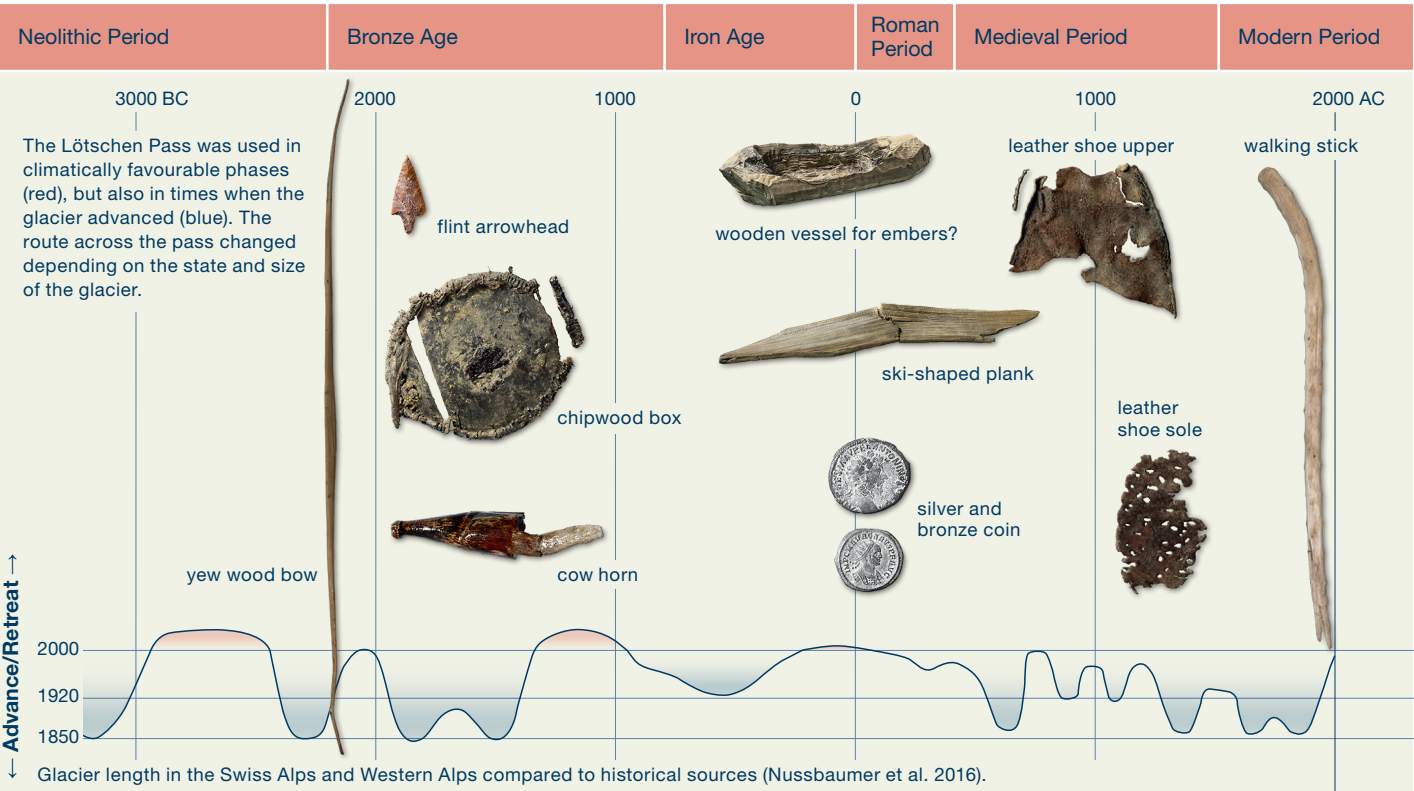
In the Middle Ages, Frutigland was ruled by the lords of Turn from the Valais. According to late Medieval written sources, the Lötschen Pass was subject to border disputes between Bern and the Valais. It was not until the 18th century, when the mule track over the Gemmi was built, that the Lötschen Pass lost its significance. Its long history, dating back to the Early Bronze Age, was only rediscovered in the 1990s.

Several bows made out of yew wood and other objects found by the painter Albert Nyfeler on the pass «in the ice» at the beginning of the 1940s could be dated to the Early Bronze Age (2200–1600 BC) with the help of radiocarbon dating.

With the general disappearance of firn and ice patches in the Alps, the Lötschen Pass has seen an increase in the discovery of historical as well as prehistoric objects since the summer of 2011.



A team member of the Archaeological Service of Canton Bern recovers a bow made of elm wood. It dates to the Early Bronze Age.



The chipwood box dating to the Early Bronze Age and parts of a bow in their original position between large stones.



The painter Albert Nyfeler lived in Kippel and repeatedly set up camp on the Lötschen Pass during the 1930s and 40s.

Almost 4000-year-old mountain equipment

The finds from the Early Bronze Age are of particular interest, as they form a unique ensemble: elm and yew wood bows, numerous arrow fragments, an object made of birch bark, a worked cow horn, leather remains and a cylindrical chipwood box of 20 cm diameter. The bottom of the box consists of a board from Swiss stone pine on which the bent side of willow wood was sewn with split larch twigs. Inside of the box, provisions were preserved: coarsely ground cereal flour. An almost identical box was found on the Schnidejoch pass in 2004.

All objects were discovered in an area measuring barely 4 m² just below the pass, on its northern side. It seems as if someone left part of his or her equipment here between 2000 and 1700 BC. Whether this person was hunting, travelling across the pass to bring animals to pastures or to trade remains a mystery.

Finds from the Iron Age to the 20th century

The archaeological objects from the Lötschen Pass attest to the continued use of the pass since the Early Bronze Age. They are often stray finds, with no stratigraphic context so their age can usually only be determined by radiocarbon analysis.

A simple but skillfully crafted vessel from the later Iron Age shows traces of charring on the inside. Perhaps it was used to transport embers for the campfire. Two coins and a ski-shaped board show that people crossed the pass in Roman times. Burials suggest a Roman settlement in Kippel to the south of the pass.

Remains of several shoes, various staves and bottoms from buckets and perhaps barrels date to the Middle Ages. The skeleton of a cow can be associated with a written source from the middle of the 17th century, which mentions that cattle were driven over the Lötschen Pass in winter.

Climate change and alpine archaeology

The melting of glaciers and ice patches in the Alps in recent decades is both a blessing and a curse for archaeology. The release of the archaeological artefacts from their frozen contexts repeatedly opens a window into the past. However, these windows are only open for a short time. Once the fragile objects are exposed to the elements, wooden and leather objects decompose quickly. Moreover, many ice patches will probably disappear completely in the next few years or decades.

The archaeological services of the Cantons of Bern and Valais regularly check the known sites in order to safeguard and study these finds for posterity. New objects are documented and recovered; the transformation of the landscape is recorded photographically. However, the archaeological services are also reliant on reports and information from the general public.