A History of Austria

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Austria’s story stretches across millennia, from the first human settlements along Alpine lakes to the development of a thriving modern republic at the heart of Europe. The territory now known as Austria has witnessed the rise and fall of powerful kingdoms and empires, been shaped by the ebb and flow of peoples and cultures, and played a pivotal role in some of the most consequential chapters of European and world history. This book provides a comprehensive account of Austria, tracing its evolution from prehistory to the present day, while paying close attention to both dramatic turning points and quieter undercurrents of social, cultural, and economic change.

Long before “Austria” appeared on any map, the region was home to ancient communities that left enduring traces in its caves, river valleys, and lakesides. The legacy of pile dwellings at Mondsee and other lakes, remarkable finds like the Venus of Willendorf, and the mysterious burial mounds of Hallstatt testify to a vibrant and creative prehistoric society. Over time, new waves of settlers—Celts, Romans, and Germanic tribes—brought their own distinctive customs and technologies, laying the foundation for the land’s later transformations.

With the emergence of the Ostmark under Charlemagne and the long dominion of the Babenbergs, Austria began to forge its own political identity. The centuries that followed, dominated by the Habsburg dynasty, would see Austria ascend to the first rank of European powers. As rulers of a glittering yet often troubled multiethnic empire, the Habsburgs presided over eras of military crisis and cultural efflorescence alike. Their legacy, shaped by the defense against the Ottomans, the courts of Baroque Vienna, and the reforms of Maria Theresa and Joseph II, is still deeply felt in Austrian art, architecture, and collective memory.

The revolutions and national movements of the nineteenth century, along with the seismic shocks of war and imperial collapse in the twentieth, ushered in new challenges and opportunities for Austria. The country was transformed through dissolution, occupation, dictatorship, and—ultimately—rebirth as an independent, democratic republic. The wounds of the Nazi period, the struggles of the postwar years, and Austria’s reinvention as a neutral bridge between East and West are integral to understanding the nation as it is today.

“A History of Austria” is not just a chronicle of kings and empires, battles and treaties. It is also a story of ordinary people—farmers along the Danube, miners in the Alps, urban artisans, artists, scientists, and migrants—who together shaped the country’s identity and destiny. Along the way, Austria became recognized both for its

contributions to global culture and for its hard-won lessons in coexistence and reconciliation.

By drawing on the latest research and weaving together political, economic, and cultural perspectives, this book aims to present Austria’s rich past in all its complexity. Whether the reader’s interest lies in the drama of great events or the subtle evolution of everyday life, the following chapters offer an invitation to discover the enduring significance of Austria’s unique place in European history.

CHAPTER ONE: Prehistoric Austria: The Earliest Settlements

The story of Austria begins not with emperors or empires, nor with the grand architecture that now graces its cities, but in the dim recesses of time, long before the concept of "Austria" itself would have held any meaning. To understand the earliest inhabitants of this land, we must journey back tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands, of years, to an era when the landscape was dramatically different, shaped by the colossal forces of ice ages and the slow, inexorable march of human evolution. The fertile river valleys, particularly that of the mighty Danube, and the sheltered caves of the Alpine foothills offered refuge and resources to the first pioneering groups of humans who ventured into this part of central Europe.

During the vast expanse of the Paleolithic, or Old Stone Age, which lasted until approximately 8000 BC, Austria was a land of stark contrasts. Massive glaciers periodically advanced from the Alps, covering large swathes of the mountainous west and south, while the eastern lowlands experienced tundra-like conditions or, during warmer interglacial periods, temperate forests. These dramatic climatic shifts dictated the migratory patterns of both animals and the early humans who hunted them. The evidence for this deep past is often fugitive, buried under layers of sediment or lost to erosion, but what has been unearthed paints a fascinating picture of resilience and adaptation.

The earliest traces of hominin presence in the region are sparse and subject to ongoing research. While direct evidence of very early hominins like *Homo erectus* or *Homo heidelbergensis* within the precise modern borders of Austria is limited, finds in neighboring regions suggest their likely presence in the wider central European landscape. These early groups would have been small, mobile bands, reliant on scavenging and rudimentary hunting, using simple chopper tools fashioned from pebbles and flakes of stone. Their lives were inextricably linked to the movements of large game and the availability of edible plants, a constant search for sustenance in a challenging world.

It is with the arrival of Neanderthals (*Homo neanderthalensis*) that the archaeological record in Austria becomes more distinct. Neanderthals, well-adapted to the cold climates of Ice Age Europe, inhabited the region for tens of thousands of years. Cave sites, such as the Gudenus Cave in Lower Austria, have yielded Neanderthal tools and the remains of the animals they hunted, including cave bears, mammoths, and woolly rhinoceroses. The Gudenus Cave, excavated as early as the 1880s, provided some of the first clues to Neanderthal occupation in Austria, revealing flint tools characteristic

of the Mousterian industry, a toolkit defined by carefully prepared cores from which flakes were struck to create points and scrapers.

Life for these Neanderthal groups was a constant struggle against the elements and a search for food. They were skilled hunters, capable of bringing down large prey, and evidence suggests they lived in small family groups, utilizing caves and rock shelters for protection. Their cognitive abilities, once underestimated, are now recognized as sophisticated, likely involving complex social structures and perhaps even rudimentary forms of symbolic expression, though concrete evidence for the latter in Austria from this period remains elusive. The interactions, if any, between these established Neanderthal populations and the first anatomically modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) arriving in Europe are still a topic of intense scientific debate and research across the continent.

Around 40,000 years ago, anatomically modern humans, our direct ancestors, began to spread across Europe, eventually replacing the Neanderthals. This period, known as the Upper Paleolithic, witnessed significant developments in tool technology, hunting strategies, social organization, and, most strikingly, artistic expression. Within Austria, sites from this era provide compelling evidence of these changes. The arrival of *Homo sapiens* coincided with new cultural traditions, such as the Aurignacian, characterized by more refined blade tools, bone and antler implements, and the first clear evidence of personal adornment and art.

The most iconic and celebrated find from Paleolithic Austria, indeed one of the most famous prehistoric artifacts in the world, is the Venus of Willendorf. Discovered in 1908 during railway construction near the village of Willendorf in the Wachau Valley, this small statuette, barely eleven centimeters high, has captivated imaginations ever since. Carved from oolitic limestone, a type of rock not found in the immediate vicinity of Willendorf, and tinted with red ochre, the figurine depicts a voluptuous female figure with exaggerated breasts, belly, and vulva, while her face is obscured by what appears to be a coiffure or headdress.

Dated to around 29,500 years ago, belonging to the Gravettian culture, the Venus of Willendorf is a powerful symbol of prehistoric art. Its purpose remains a subject of speculation. Was she a fertility goddess, a symbol of abundance and survival in a harsh Ice Age world? Was she an amulet, a teaching tool, or perhaps even a form of prehistoric pin-up? While definitive answers are likely to remain elusive, her very existence speaks volumes about the cognitive and symbolic capacities of her creators. The fact that the limestone was transported from elsewhere suggests networks of exchange or mobility, and the careful craftsmanship indicates the importance placed upon such objects.

Willendorf itself has proven to be a site of immense archaeological significance, yielding not just *the* Venus, but also other, less complete female figurines and a

wealth of stone tools and animal bones. These finds indicate that the loess terraces overlooking the Danube at Willendorf were repeatedly occupied by Gravettian hunter-gatherer groups. These people were specialized mammoth hunters, and their encampments provide a window into their daily lives, their diet, and their sophisticated understanding of their environment. The climate during the Gravettian period was cold and arid, and the landscape was a vast, open steppe, ideal for herds of mammoth, reindeer, and wild horses.

Other sites in Lower Austria, such as Aggsbach and Krems-Wachtberg, have also yielded important Upper Paleolithic remains. At Krems-Wachtberg, archaeologists unearthed the remarkable burial of twin infants, dating back around 27,000 years. This discovery, one of the oldest known burials of twins, included grave goods such as ivory beads and was covered with red ochre, suggesting complex burial rituals and a deep emotional or spiritual response to death even in these ancient societies. Such finds offer poignant glimpses into the social and symbolic worlds of these early Austrians.

The toolkit of Upper Paleolithic peoples was far more diverse and specialized than that of their Neanderthal predecessors. They produced long, slender stone blades, which could be used as knives or modified into other tools like burins (for engraving) and end-scrapers (for working hides). Bone, antler, and ivory were also extensively used to create needles, awls, spear points, and harpoons, as well as items of personal adornment like beads and pendants. This technological sophistication allowed for more efficient hunting and processing of resources, contributing to their success in the challenging Ice Age environment.

Artistic expression was not limited to portable items like the Venus figurines. While Austria does not boast the spectacular painted caves found in southwestern Europe, such as Lascaux or Altamira, evidence of engravings on bone and stone tools, as well as personal ornaments, shows a clear aesthetic sense and symbolic thought. These artistic endeavors likely played a role in rituals, storytelling, and the transmission of cultural knowledge from one generation to the next, binding communities together.

As the last glacial maximum began to wane, around 20,000 years ago, the climate started a slow, fluctuating journey towards warmer conditions. The massive ice sheets retreated, and the landscape began to transform. This ushered in the later phases of the Upper Paleolithic, such as the Magdalenian culture, known for its exquisite bone and antler work and refined hunting techniques, particularly for reindeer. Evidence for Magdalenian presence in Austria, while perhaps less spectacular than the preceding Gravettian, shows a continued adaptation by hunter-gatherer populations to the changing environment.

Around 10,000 BC (or 12,000 years ago), a more significant climatic shift marked the end of the Pleistocene epoch and the beginning of the Holocene, our current geological epoch. This transition also signaled the end of the Paleolithic and the dawn

of the Mesolithic, or Middle Stone Age. The Mesolithic in Austria, lasting roughly from 8000 BC to around 5500 BC, was a period of profound environmental change and human adaptation. The vast, open steppes that had supported herds of mammoth and woolly rhino gave way to expanding forests of pine and birch, followed by mixed oak forests.

This "forestation" of Europe had a major impact on animal populations. The megafauna of the Ice Age largely disappeared, replaced by forest-dwelling animals such as red deer, roe deer, wild boar, and aurochs. Human groups had to adapt their hunting strategies and toolkits accordingly. The large, cooperative hunts for mammoth herds were no longer viable. Instead, Mesolithic hunters focused on smaller game, often pursued individually or in small groups within the denser woodland environment. This period saw the widespread adoption of the bow and arrow, a more effective weapon for forest hunting.

The stone tool technology of the Mesolithic is characterized by microliths – small, geometrically shaped flint blades that were hafted onto wooden or bone shafts to create composite tools like arrowheads, barbs for spears, and sickles for harvesting wild plants. These microliths represent an efficient use of raw materials and a high degree of technical skill. Archaeological sites from this period are often smaller and more scattered than those of the Upper Paleolithic, suggesting that Mesolithic populations may have been more mobile, following seasonal resources.

In Austria, Mesolithic sites are found in various settings, from river valleys to Alpine regions. The retreat of the glaciers opened up higher altitude areas for seasonal occupation. People continued to hunt and fish, but there was also an increasing reliance on plant foods, such as nuts, berries, and roots, as the forests provided a richer bounty. The Danube and other rivers and lakes became even more important for fishing and as sources of waterfowl.

The Mesolithic was not simply a period of "waiting" for agriculture to arrive. It was a dynamic era of innovation and adaptation, where human societies developed new ways of living in a dramatically altered world. They possessed an intimate knowledge of their environment, understanding the seasonal cycles of plants and animals, and exploiting a broad spectrum of resources. While their material culture might appear less "spectacular" than the great art of the Upper Paleolithic or the monumental constructions of later periods, their success in colonizing and thriving in the post-glacial landscapes was a significant achievement.

Evidence for Mesolithic settlements is sometimes found in caves and rock shelters, continuing a pattern from the Paleolithic, but open-air sites near water sources are also common. These may represent seasonal camps, occupied for specific activities like fishing or hunting. The social organization likely remained based on small, relatively egalitarian bands, though regional variations undoubtedly existed.

The spiritual or ritual life of Mesolithic peoples is harder to reconstruct than that of their Paleolithic ancestors, due to a relative scarcity of elaborate burials or iconic art objects comparable to the Venus figurines. However, the careful burial of the dead, when found, suggests continued respect for deceased individuals and perhaps beliefs in an afterlife. Red ochre, a pigment used since the Middle Paleolithic, sometimes continues to appear in Mesolithic graves, hinting at a continuity of certain symbolic traditions.

The end of the Mesolithic period in Austria, as elsewhere in Central Europe, was heralded by the arrival of a revolutionary new way of life: agriculture. This transition, often termed the Neolithic Revolution, did not happen overnight but was a gradual process involving the adoption of domesticated plants and animals, the development of pottery, and a shift towards more settled village life. These developments, originating in the Near East, slowly spread across Europe, reaching the Austrian lands around the middle of the 6th millennium BC.

The Mesolithic hunter-gatherers who had roamed the Austrian landscapes for millennia would eventually encounter these new farming communities, or the ideas and technologies they brought with them. The nature of this interaction – whether it was a peaceful adoption of new ways, a displacement of existing populations, or a more complex mixture of acculturation and integration – is a key question explored by archaeologists. What is clear is that the arrival of agriculture would profoundly transform the region, laying the groundwork for the societies that would follow.

The legacy of these earliest inhabitants, the Paleolithic and Mesolithic peoples, is not written in grand monuments but in the subtle traces they left behind: a scattering of stone tools, the bones of their prey, a carved figurine buried for millennia. Yet, these remnants tell a crucial story of human endurance, ingenuity, and the very beginnings of culture in the heart of Europe. They were the true pioneers, the first to call the mountains and valleys of what would one day be Austria their home, successfully navigating a world of ice, forests, and constant change. Their deep history forms the foundational layer upon which all subsequent chapters of Austria's past are built.

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