A History of Vienna

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Introduction

Vienna, the capital city of Austria, stands as one of Europe's most iconic and enduring urban centers, its history woven intricately into the fabric of European civilization. Perched elegantly along the banks of the Danube, Vienna is renowned for its opulent palaces, grand boulevards, and coffeehouse culture, but beneath its elegant façade lies a story shaped by centuries of ambition, creativity, conflict, and resilience. This book, *A History of Vienna*, endeavors to provide a comprehensive account of the city's evolution—from its prehistoric roots to its present-day status as a cosmopolitan, internationally significant metropolis.

Tracing Vienna's journey across millennia unveils a narrative that mirrors the broader currents of European history. From humble beginnings as a Celtic settlement known as Vedunia, and later the pivotal Roman outpost of Vindobona, the site that would become Vienna was shaped early on by competing civilizations and cultures. The city's strategic position on the Danube made it a crossroads for trade and conquest, fostering an enduring diversity that is still evident in its streets and neighborhoods today.

Over the centuries, Vienna was continually transformed by the ambitions of dynasties and the tides of empire. As the seat of the Babenbergs and later the powerful Habsburgs, Vienna not only expanded in size and prestige but also rose to become the epicenter of one of the world's most influential monarchies. The city witnessed the flowering of Baroque art and architecture, the intellectual ferment of Enlightenment ideas, and the dazzling innovations of modernist thought and design. Vienna's musical legacy alone—with names like Mozart, Beethoven, and Strauss—left an indelible imprint on global culture.

Yet Vienna's greatness was not achieved without adversity. The city endured the strains of religious upheaval during the Reformation, the existential threats of Ottoman sieges, occupation and devastation in the Napoleonic and World Wars, and the moral and material scars inflicted by totalitarianism and conflict. Episodes such as the interwar period's experiments with social democracy, the trauma of the Anschluss, and the challenges of postwar division all left lasting marks on Vienna's collective memory and physical landscape.

In recent decades, Vienna has emerged from the shadows of its tumultuous past to reclaim its place as a vibrant, innovative, and forward-looking European capital. The city's ability to bridge its imperial heritage with the demands of modernity has made it a model of urban quality of life, multicultural coexistence, and economic and social innovation. From the bustling Ringstrasse to the renewed creative energy of its

museums and universities, Vienna today is as dynamic and diverse as at any time in its long history.

This book seeks to unravel the many layers of Vienna’s past, illuminating the events, personalities, and social forces that made the city what it is. Through twenty-five chapters, readers are invited to journey through time—from ancient settlements to the city’s role at the heart of Europe today. Each period marks not only a chapter in Vienna’s story but also a touchstone in the broader history of Europe itself. Vienna’s past is one of transformation and endurance—a testament to the resilience and creativity that have always been at the city’s heart.

CHAPTER ONE: Early Human Settlement and the Neolithic Vienna Basin

Long before the first foundation stones of Vienna were laid, before even the faintest whispers of its future name echoed along the Danube, the land itself was ancient. The Vienna Basin, a vast, somewhat triangular depression cradled between the Eastern Alps, the Carpathians, and the Pannonian Plain, has been a stage for geological dramas for millions of years. Its creation involved the slow dance of tectonic plates, the rise and fall of primordial seas, and the relentless sculpting power of water and ice. The mighty Danube, then as now, carved its path through this landscape, a silver ribbon carrying sediments and stories yet unwritten, destined to become a vital artery for life and commerce.

Imagine this nascent basin: a varied terrain of river plains, gentle hills, and dense woodlands, gradually taking shape. The climate, too, underwent immense transformations, shifting from warmer periods to the biting chill of successive ice ages. These glacial epochs played a crucial role, as meltwaters deposited vast quantities of gravel and sand, and winds carried fine loess soil, blanketing parts of the basin with a fertile layer that would, much later, prove irresistible to the first farmers. The Vienna Woods, a verdant fringe to the west, would have been part of a much larger expanse of primeval forest, teeming with wildlife that early humans would eventually come to hunt.

Pinpointing the very first human footsteps in the immediate vicinity of what would become Vienna is a task fraught with the challenges of deep time. Evidence from the Paleolithic, or Old Stone Age, is scarce within the modern city limits, though the broader Austrian region has yielded tantalizing clues of Neanderthal and early Homo sapiens presence. These nomadic hunter-gatherers, living in small, mobile bands, would have pursued herds of mammoth, woolly rhinoceros, and reindeer across the Ice Age tundra. Their lives were a constant search for sustenance and shelter, leaving behind only the most ephemeral traces – a lost stone tool here, the scorched bones of a long-forgotten campfire there. The Vienna Basin, during the harshest glacial periods, might have been a less hospitable hunting ground compared to more sheltered valleys or cave-rich areas.

As the last great ice sheets retreated, around 10,000 BCE, the climate warmed, and the landscape transformed. Forests of pine and birch, then oak and elm, reclaimed the land. This was the Mesolithic, or Middle Stone Age, a transitional period where hunter-gatherer communities adapted to these new, richer environments. They developed more refined toolkits, with smaller, more specialized flint implements known as

microliths, used for hunting agile forest game like red deer and wild boar, and for fishing in the increasingly abundant rivers and streams. While direct evidence of Mesolithic settlements within Vienna itself remains elusive, it is highly probable that small groups traversed the area, drawn by the Danube and its tributaries, and the burgeoning life they supported. They would have known the forested hills, the marshy riverbanks, and the clearings where game congregated, their existence tied intimately to the rhythms of nature.

The truly transformative chapter in the story of early human settlement in the Vienna Basin began with the arrival of the Neolithic, or New Stone Age, around the middle ofthe 6th millennium BCE. This wasn't an invasion of conquering armies, but rather a slow, creeping wave of change – a revolution in human lifestyle that had originated thousands of years earlier in the Near East. The Neolithic brought with it agriculture: the cultivation of crops like emmer and einkorn wheat, barley, and pulses, and the domestication of animals such as cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs. For the first time, people began to settle in one place, to build permanent homes, and to shape the land to their needs.

This profound shift rippled across Europe, often following the great river valleys, and the Danube was a prime conduit. The fertile loess soils of the Vienna Basin, deposited by ancient winds, offered ideal conditions for early agriculture. The pioneers of this new way of life brought not only seeds and livestock but also a new technology: polished stone tools, far more efficient for felling trees and working wood than their chipped predecessors, and the revolutionary art of pottery, allowing for the storage of grain and the cooking of food in new ways.

The first widespread Neolithic culture to take root in the Vienna Basin, and indeed across a vast swathe of Central Europe, is known to archaeologists as the Linear Pottery culture, or *Linienbandkeramik* (LBK), named after its distinctive pottery decorated with incised linear patterns – spirals, meanders, and bands. Arriving around 5500 BCE, these early farmers established small hamlets, typically on slightly elevated terraces near rivers or streams, avoiding flood-prone areas but ensuring access to water and fertile land. Their settlements were not yet villages in the modern sense, but clusters of characteristic longhouses.

These LBK longhouses were impressive structures, often up to 30 or 40 meters in length and 5 to 7 meters wide. Built from timber posts with wattle-and-daub walls and thatched roofs, they were designed to house an extended family group along with their livestock and grain stores. Imagine the scene: a clearing in the ancient forest, smoke curling from the roofs of several such dwellings, the sounds of children playing, cattle lowing, and the rhythmic thud of stone axes or the grind of quern-stones transforming grain into flour. Life was undoubtedly hard, a constant round of tilling the soil with simple wooden ploughs or digging sticks, tending animals, hunting to supplement the diet, and gathering wild plants.

The pottery of the LBK people is one oftheir most enduring legacies. Crafted by hand without the potter's wheel, the vessels were often globular or hemispherical, with a remarkable consistency in form and decoration across vast distances, suggesting a shared cultural tradition and perhaps even a common symbolic language. These pots were not merely utilitarian; the care taken in their decoration hints at an aesthetic sense and a desire to imbue everyday objects with meaning. Besides pottery, their toolkit included polished stone adzes and axes for woodworking, flint blades and scrapers for various cutting and processing tasks, and bone tools for awls and needles.

The spiritual life of these early Viennese farmers is harder to reconstruct, as they left no written records. However, their burial practices offer some clues. The dead were typically buried in individual graves, often in a flexed or contracted position, sometimes accompanied by grave goods such as pottery vessels (perhaps containing food or drink for the afterlife), stone tools, or personal ornaments like shell beads. The careful arrangement of these burials suggests a respect for the deceased and a belief in some form of continued existence.

Evidence for LBK settlements has been found at several locations within the modern city of Vienna and its immediate surroundings, particularly in areas like Essling, Aspern, and other districts in the flatter, eastern parts of the city where loess soils are prevalent. These sites, often discovered during construction projects, yield a treasure trove of information in the form of postholes from their longhouses, pottery shards, stone tools, animal bones, and carbonized seeds, allowing archaeologists to piece together a picture of their lives.

The world of the first farmers was not static. Over centuries, the LBK culture evolved and was eventually succeeded by other Neolithic and Chalcolithic (Copper Age) cultures. Around 4900 BCE, a new cultural expression, the stroked pottery culture (*Stichbandkeramik* or SBK), emerged, possibly developing from the LBK or representing a new wave of influence. Their pottery featured punctured, rather than incised, designs. Subsequently, the Lengyel culture, originating further southeast in Hungary, became dominant in the Vienna Basin from around 4700 BCE.

The Lengyel period saw further developments in settlement patterns, with some sites becoming larger and more organized, perhaps indicating an increase in population and social complexity. Some Lengyel settlements, particularly in other parts of Central Europe, show evidence of defensive enclosures – ditches and palisades – suggesting that life was not always peaceful and that competition for resources or inter-group conflict might have occurred. Their pottery was often highly polished, sometimes with red or yellow slip, and included distinctive forms like pedestalled bowls and anthropomorphic (human-shaped) vessels, hinting at a rich symbolic and ritualistic life. The famous Venus von Langenzersdorf, a small, stylized female figurine found near Vienna, dates to this period and is a testament to their artistic expression.

Agriculture continued to be the mainstay of life, with an increasing emphasis on cattle. The forests were gradually cleared for fields and pasture, slowly transforming the landscape. The tools remained largely stone-based, though the Lengyel people were certainly aware of copper, which was beginning to be exploited in other regions. This period represents a bridge to the Chalcolithic, or Copper Age, when the first metal tools and weapons started to appear, heralding another significant shift in technology and society.

Archaeological investigations in Vienna have unearthed numerous traces of these successive Neolithic cultures. For instance, excavations in Wien-Oberlaa revealed an extensive LBK settlement, providing valuable insights into their building techniques and daily routines. In Wien-Vösendorf, south of the city, a significant Lengyel settlement with burials was discovered, yielding finely crafted pottery and tools. The area around the Bisamberg, a prominent hill overlooking the Danube to the north of Vienna, has also proven rich in Neolithic finds, suggesting it was an attractive location for early settlers, perhaps offering a strategic vantage point as well as fertile slopes.

Consider the rhythms of their existence, dictated by the seasons. Spring would bring the intensive labor of ploughing and sowing, using simple ard ploughs pulled by oxen or humans. Summer was a time for tending the crops, weeding, and perhaps supplementing the diet with fishing in the Danube or hunting in the still-extensive forests. Autumn was the crucial harvest season, a period of intense activity to gather and store enough grain to last through the winter. Winter itself would have been a time for indoor activities: mending tools, weaving textiles from flax or wool (indicated by spindle whorls and loom weights found at sites), storytelling, and huddling around the hearth for warmth.

The health of these early agriculturalists was a mixed bag. While farming provided a more stable food supply than hunting and gathering, it also led to a less varied diet, potentially resulting in nutritional deficiencies. Living in close proximity to domesticated animals could also have increased the risk of certain diseases. Skeletal remains from Neolithic burials sometimes show evidence of arthritis, dental problems, and periods of malnutrition. Life expectancy was short by modern standards, with high infant and child mortality rates.

Despite these hardships, the Neolithic way of life was remarkably successful and resilient. It laid the foundations for all subsequent human development in the Vienna Basin. The act of settling down, of investing labor in a particular piece of land, fostered a deeper connection to place. It allowed for the accumulation of surplus, which in turn could support larger populations and, eventually, the emergence of craft specialists, traders, and more complex social hierarchies. The small farming hamlets of the Neolithic were the distant ancestors of the villages, towns, and ultimately the great city that Vienna would become.

The transition from the late Neolithic to the Chalcolithic (Copper Age), beginning in the Vienna Basin sometime in the 4th millennium BCE, was gradual. Copper was initially rare and probably a prestige item, used for ornaments or small tools, and didn't immediately replace stone for everyday tasks. However, the knowledge of metallurgy, the ability to extract and work metal, was a revolutionary technology that would eventually transform societies. The search for copper ores and the trade in copper objects would have stimulated new networks of exchange and interaction.

During this transitional phase, cultures like the Baden culture (c. 3600-2800 BCE) became prominent in the region. Baden settlements are found in the Vienna Basin, and their characteristic pottery – often dark, burnished wares with distinctive channelling – marks another stage in the cultural sequence. They were advanced farmers, continuing to cultivate the fertile loess, and their society shows signs of increasing differentiation. Some Baden sites have yielded evidence of wheeled vehicles (indicated by model wheels), a significant innovation for transport and agriculture.

The exploration of Vienna's Neolithic past is an ongoing endeavor. Each new construction project in the city or its suburbs holds the potential to uncover further evidence, offering fresh insights into the lives of its earliest settled inhabitants. The archaeologists who meticulously excavate these sites are like detectives of deep time, piecing together the story from a Fflint flake, a pottery shard, or the discolored soil that marks the ghost of a longhouse post. Through their work, the silent millennia before Vienna was Vienna begin to speak.

These first farmers were not Austrians, nor Germans, nor any other modern nationality. They were simply people, seeking to make a life for themselves and their families in a promising landscape. They cleared the forests, tilled the soil, and built their homes where the city of Vienna now stands, their presence a quiet but foundational layer in the deeply stratified history of this remarkable place. Their legacy is not in grand monuments, but in the very act of settlement, in the transformation of the wild into a humanized landscape, paving the way for all the vibrant, complex, and sometimes tumultuous history that was to follow. The echoes of their existence, though faint, are a reminder that Vienna's story begins not with emperors and palaces, but with the humble toil of its first agricultural communities by the Danube.

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