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A History of Austria

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Introduction

Austria's history is as layered and dynamic as the Alpine landscapes that define its geography. Nestled in the heart of Central Europe, Austria is a nation whose narrative has been profoundly shaped by its position at the crossroads of diverse cultures, empires, and ideologies. From its earliest prehistoric settlements to its significant role in European and world affairs today, the story of Austria is one of adaptability, cultural synthesis, and enduring legacy.

The land that is now Austria has fascinated historians and archeologists alike, offering a continuous record of human settlement extending back to the Paleolithic era. The discoveries at Hallstatt and other sites have illuminated Austria's formative role in the rise of early Celtic societies. With the arrival of the Romans and the subsequent establishment of key urban centers, Austria became intricately linked to the larger currents of European civilization, setting the stage for centuries of continuity and transformation.

Following the collapse of Roman authority, waves of migrations brought new peoples and identities to the region. Framed by shifting borders and alliances, Austria emerged as a medieval borderland, or Ostmark, under the auspices of Charlemagne's expanding realm. The legacy of the Babenbergs and, more pivotally, the Habsburgs, shaped the heart of Central Europe for over half a millennium, forging a multiethnic empire whose influence stretched far beyond its core territories. The Habsburg period ushered in an era of imperial splendor, but also one marked by religious conflict, military challenge, and profound societal change.

The dramatic revolutions, wars, and diplomatic efforts of the 19th and early 20th centuries would see Austria's transformation from imperial powerhouse to a small republic grappling with its identity and future. The trials of the First Republic, the trauma of Nazi annexation, and the devastation of World War II gave way to a spirit of renewal and reconstruction in the postwar Second Republic. Austria's declaration of permanent neutrality and commitment to democracy became defining features of its modern statehood, fostering stability and prosperity as Europe itself was reshaped.

Today, Austria stands as a testament to resilience and reinvention. As a member of the European Union, it occupies a unique position, balancing its historical traditions with the demands and opportunities of a rapidly integrating continent. The study of Austria's history offers insights not only into the fortunes of a single country but also into the broader historical forces—migration, conquest, culture, and diplomacy—that have shaped the destiny of Europe itself.

In "A History of Austria," we will journey from the earliest traces of human presence on the Danube to the halls of Vienna's imperial palaces, and from the trauma of war to the vibrancy of modern democracy. Through empires, revolutions, crises, and comebacks, Austria's story is one of continual transformation—a remarkable tapestry woven from the threads of many peoples and many histories.

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CHAPTER ONE: Prehistoric Austria: The Dawn of Settlement

Long before empires rose and dynasties held sway, the land now known as Austria was a canvas for the earliest human stories in Europe. For hundreds of thousands of years, nomadic bands traversed the varied landscapes of the eastern Alps and the Danube basin, leaving behind faint but compelling traces of their passage. The very bedrock of Austrian history is set in this deep past, a time of ice ages and shifting climates, vast forests and winding rivers, where survival was the primary art form and nature held undisputed dominion.

The story begins in the Lower Paleolithic period, an epoch stretching back into the mists of time, potentially a million years ago or even more. While definitive evidence from this earliest phase is scarce and often debated, scattered stone tools found across Central Europe suggest that hominins, early human ancestors, were present in the region. These were simple tools, handaxes and flakes, crafted for cutting, scraping, and pounding – the basic necessities of a hunter-gatherer existence in a challenging environment.

Imagine these early inhabitants navigating a landscape dramatically different from today. Great ice sheets periodically covered much of Europe, extending south and influencing the climate even in areas not directly glaciated. The valleys and foothills of the Alps would have presented a complex mosaic of environments: frozen plains during glacial maxima, thawing valleys and emerging forests during warmer interglacial periods. Large mammals like mammoths, woolly rhinos, and giant deer roamed the open areas, providing potential, though often dangerous, prey.

Life was precarious and dictated by the seasons and the movements of game. These were not settled people; they lived in temporary camps, perhaps near caves or rock shelters offering protection, following herds and foraging for edible plants. Their social groups were likely small bands, bound together by kinship and the shared struggle for survival. Each tool they crafted, each fire they managed to keep burning, represented a triumph of ingenuity against formidable odds.

As time progressed into the Middle Paleolithic, roughly 300,000 to 30,000 years ago, the archaeological record becomes clearer. This period is often associated with Neanderthals, though early anatomically modern humans were also present. Finds from sites in Austria, including parts of Lower Austria and Styria, show a greater sophistication in toolmaking. Techniques like the Levallois method, which allowed for more predictable flake shapes, demonstrate a developing cognitive ability and

planning.

Caves became more important shelters during the colder periods. Archaeological excavations in some Austrian cave systems have unearthed layers of sediment containing animal bones, charcoal from ancient hearths, and stone tools, painting a picture of repeated, though perhaps seasonal, occupation. These sites serve as windows into the diet, hunting strategies, and daily routines of these ancient people. They hunted ibex in the mountains, deer in the forests, and possibly utilized resources from the rivers.

The Upper Paleolithic, beginning around 40,000 years ago, saw the firm establishment of anatomically modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) in Europe. This era is marked by a dramatic increase in the complexity and diversity of tools and technologies. Blade production became widespread, allowing for the creation of specialized tools like points for spears, burins for working bone and antler, and scrapers for preparing hides.

Perhaps even more remarkably, the Upper Paleolithic is the period when we see the first clear expressions of art and symbolic thought. While famous examples are found elsewhere in Europe, the spirit of this creativity likely extended into the Austrian region. Evidence of personal ornaments, carved objects, and perhaps even early forms of musical instruments speaks to a burgeoning culture and a growing sense of identity beyond mere survival.

As the last Ice Age began its retreat, ushering in the warmer, wetter Holocene epoch around 10,000 BCE, the landscape transformed once more. The vast grasslands and cold steppes gave way to expanding forests. The megafauna of the Ice Age, like mammoths, disappeared, prompting a shift in hunting strategies. This transitional period is known as the Mesolithic.

Mesolithic people in Austria adapted to the changing environment by focusing on smaller, forest-dwelling animals such as deer, wild boar, and aurochs. Fishing and fowling also became increasingly important sources of food, particularly along the major river systems like the Danube and its tributaries. Their tools evolved to match these new needs, with the development of smaller, geometric microliths used as points and barbs on arrows and spears, suggesting a more efficient, projectile-based hunting technique.

Mesolithic sites are often found near lakeshores and rivers, locations that offered easy access to diverse resources. Temporary camps were still the norm, but the people of this era possessed a deep knowledge of their local environment, moving seasonally to exploit different food sources as they became available. Their technology, while still based on stone, bone, and antler, was finely tuned to the opportunities presented by the expanding woodlands.

The truly revolutionary change in human history – the advent of agriculture – arrived in the Austrian region during the Neolithic period, beginning around the 6th millennium BCE. This transition marked a shift from a nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle to one of settled farming communities. The fertile areas along the Danube and its tributaries were particularly attractive to the first farmers migrating from southeastern Europe.

These early Neolithic settlers cleared forests, planted crops like wheat and barley, and domesticated animals such as cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs. This new way of life allowed for more permanent settlements, typically consisting of timber-framed houses grouped together to form small villages. The need to store surplus crops and process food led to the development of pottery, which became an essential part of daily life.

The Linearbandkeramik culture, named after the distinctive linear decoration on their pottery, is one of the most well-known early Neolithic cultures in Central Europe and its influence extended into parts of Austria. These communities were among the first to truly shape the landscape, transforming forests into fields and establishing a rooted connection to the land. The remains of their villages and burial sites offer insights into their social structures, which were likely based on kinship groups, and their belief systems.

Life in a Neolithic village, while offering greater security in terms of food supply, also presented new challenges. Reliance on crops made communities vulnerable to environmental changes, crop failures, and pests. The settled lifestyle also likely led to new forms of social organization and potentially increased instances of conflict over land and resources, a contrast to the more flexible social structures of hunter-gatherers.

Following the Neolithic, the Bronze Age dawned, a period characterized by the discovery and use of metal – first copper, then bronze, an alloy of copper and tin. Beginning in Austria around the late 3rd millennium BCE, this technological leap had profound implications for society. Metal tools and weapons were stronger and more durable than those made of stone, bone, or wood, leading to advancements in agriculture, craftsmanship, and warfare.

Access to copper and tin resources, and the knowledge of how to extract and process them, became sources of power and wealth. Trade networks expanded significantly to facilitate the movement of raw materials and finished goods across long distances. Archaeological evidence from the Bronze Age in Austria includes hoards of metal objects, elaborate burial sites containing prestige goods, and fortified hilltop settlements, suggesting increasing social stratification and the emergence of warrior elites.

Different Bronze Age cultures flourished in the region. The Early Bronze Age saw the emergence of distinct regional groups. The Middle Bronze Age is often associated with Tumulus cultures, characterized by burial mounds. The Late Bronze Age witnessed the spread of the Urnfield culture, named for its practice of cremating the dead and placing their ashes in urns buried in large cemeteries. This period also saw the construction of larger, more complex settlements, some with defensive structures, indicating a potentially more volatile time.

These Bronze Age communities were skilled metalworkers, producing not only tools and weapons but also intricate jewelry and decorative objects. They were also farmers and pastoralists, further shaping the landscape through intensive agriculture and animal husbandry. The trade routes established during this era, particularly along the Danube and connecting with areas to the south and north, laid the groundwork for future economic and cultural exchange.

The centuries leading up to the first millennium BCE saw the Late Bronze Age societies reach a peak in complexity and interconnectedness. They had transformed parts of the landscape, developed sophisticated technologies, and established social hierarchies. While stone tools were still in use, bronze artifacts were becoming increasingly common, altering daily life, warfare, and ritual practices.

This extensive period of prehistory, spanning hundreds of thousands of years, laid the fundamental human groundwork for the land that would eventually become Austria. From the early hunter-gatherer bands following game across glacial landscapes to the settled farming and metalworking communities of the Bronze Age, each era contributed to the human imprint on the region. They adapted to its unique geography, harnessed its resources, and developed the initial forms of social organization and culture that would evolve over millennia. The story of Austria's human past is not just about later empires and political shifts; it begins in this deep and fascinating prehistoric era, the dawn of settlement, where the first human footsteps pressed into the soil.

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