

History

Although Austria's territorial heartland has always been modest in size, its monarchy ruled an empire that spanned continents and was once the last word in politics and high culture. How did it happen and how did it all change over time? To really understand this, it's useful to know more about the civilisations and empires that figure in its colourful past. Civilisations & Empires is therefore where this history starts. Afterwards we take a trail through themes of post-WWII neutrality (Neutral, Nice & Not Guilty), uprisings (To the Barricades), Jewry (Jewish History in Austria) and foreign invasion of its territory (The Enemy at the Gate), culminating in one of the world's most enduring family dynasties (Keeping it in the Family – the Habsburgs).

CIVILISATIONS & EMPIRES

It would be an understatement to say that alpine regions of Austria were inhospitable places during the Ice Age some 30,000 years ago. They were virtually impenetrable for human and beast. It's therefore not surprising that while mammoths were lumbering across a frozen landscape, the more-accessible plains and Danube Valley in Lower Austria developed into early showplaces of civilisation. A visit to the Naturhistorisches Museum in Vienna (p129) contains two fascinating stone Venus statuettes that are reminders of this era.

When the Celts settled in the late Iron Age (around 450 BC) they also chose the valley of the Danube River and salt-rich regions around Salzburg, encountering Illyrians who had wandered there from the Balkan region. Gradually an Illyric-Celtic kingdom took shape, known as Noricum, that stretched from eastern Tyrol to the Danube and eastern fringes of the Alps in Carinthia.

The Romans, who crossed the Alps in force in 15 BC and settled south of the Danube River, carved up these regions into administrative areas and built fortresses (*Limes*) and towns such as Carnuntum (p178), Vindobona (the forerunner of Vienna), Brigantium (Bregenz; p368), Juvavum (Salzburg; p266), Flavia Solva (Leibnitz in Styria), Aguntum (p325) and Virunum (north of Klagenfurt). However, the Western Empire created by the Romans collapsed in the 5th century, leaving a vacuum that was filled by newly arriving tribes: the Germanic Alemanni in Vorarlberg, Slavs who pushed into Carinthia and Styria, and Bavarians who settled south of the Danube in Upper and Lower Austria, Tyrol and around Salzburg. The Bavarians proved to be the most successful, and by the 7th century they had most regions of Austria in their grip, creating a large German-speaking territory.

Discover more about the history of Austria from the Babenbergs through to the country's entry into the EU in *The Austrians: A Thousand Year Odyssey* by Gordon Brook-Shepard.

TIMELINE

30,000–25,000 BC

The 30,000-year-old Venus of Galgenberg (aka Dancing Fanny) and the 25,000-year-old buxom beauty, the Venus of Willendorf, are crafted – both are now in Vienna's Naturhistorisches Museum.

5300 BC

The Neolithic 'Ötzi' dies and is mummified in a glacier in the Ötztal. He's found in 1991 and several Austrian and Italian women ask to be impregnated with his frozen sperm.

800–400 BC

The Iron Age Hallstadtkultur (Hallstadt Culture) develops in the southern Salzkammergut, where settlers work salt mines. Around 450 BC Celts arrive in the region and build on this flourishing culture.

THE CAROLINGIANS STRIKE BACK

But at this time it was still possible to talk only about tribes, not fully fledged empires. This changed in Europe and in Austria itself with the growth of the so-called Carolingian Empire in the 6th century. This was Europe's most powerful empire in its day. It originated in western France and Belgium, grew into a heavyweight under Charlemagne (747–814) and took its inspiration from the Romans. Significantly for future Austria, Charlemagne created a buffer region in the Danube Valley, later dubbed Ostmark (Eastern March), which shored up the eastern edge of his empire, and in 800 he was crowned Kaiser (see boxed text, below) by the pope.

Fate took another decisive turn in 976, when the Eastern March landed in the hands of Leopold von Babenberg (940–94), a descendent of a noble Bavarian family. The Babenbergs were a skilful family who in the 11th century expanded their small territory to include most of modern-day Lower Austria (with Vienna), and a century later Styria (1192) and much of Upper Austria. In 1156, under the Babenberg monarch Heinrich II 'Jasmirogott', the Eastern March (still a political fence at that time) was elevated to a duchy (ie with its own duke and special rights) and Vienna became its capital.

THE EMPIRE OF THE HABSBURGS

The Babenberg dynasty, however, ran out of heirs in 1246 when one of its rulers, Duke Friedrich II, died in battle with neighbouring Hungarians over a border dispute. This had enormous ramifications for future Austria because it led to the catapulting of another noble family, the Habsburgs, to power in Europe. In a twist of bad fortune, a Bohemian monarch of the day, Ottokar II, married Friedrich's widow and in 1273 refused to recognise the election to king by prince-electors (see boxed text, opposite) of another noble whose star was rising in Central Europe – the Habsburg Rudolf I (1218–91).

This caused one of the most celebrated clashes in Austrian history when in 1278 the House of Habsburg and Bohemian arch rival Ottokar II (who also controlled Styria and Carinthia) fought it out on the Marchfeld, situated 30km northeast of Vienna. Ottokar, held up while trying to penetrate Drosendorf's fortress en route to the battle (p178), was killed in battle, allowing the Habsburg family to reign over the Holy Roman Empire.

That was pretty much the way things remained for over 500 years. It's only a modest simplification to say that between the era in which mammoths roamed the frozen wastes and the next important change – the arrival of 164cm, low-rise Napoleon in the early 19th century – Austria had seen early human settlers (the ones who carved those Venus statuettes), two major civilisations (Illyrians and the Celts), one Roman Empire and two families (the Babenbergs and the Habsburgs) control the land.

The patron saint of Austria is Saint Leopold III of Babenberg (1096–1135).

The distended lower jaw and lip, a family trait of the early Habsburgs, is discreetly downplayed in official portraits.

AUSTRIA & THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE

The Holy Roman Empire was Europe's oddest 'state'. Its foundations were laid when Charlemagne's father, Pippin, rescued a beleaguered pope and became Patricius Romanorum (Protector of Rome), making him Caesar's successor. The title 'Kaiser' is derived from 'Caesar'. Pippin, with Italian spoils on his hands (one being the present-day Vatican), gave these to the pope. Charlemagne continued this tradition as protector, and in 962, with the crowning of Otto I (912–73) as Holy Roman Emperor, the Empire was officially born.

Kings in the Empire were elected in political horse-trading by a handful of prince electors, but to take the next step and become Kaiser (and protector of the pope), the pope had to crown the king. Depending on how feisty the pope happened to be, this brought other troubles. In 1338 enough was enough, and the electors threw the pope overboard, deciding they could elect their own Kaiser.

In 972, just before Otto I died, borders of the Empire included present-day Austria, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Germany, Holland, Belgium and much of the Italian peninsula. These borders ebbed and flowed with the times. When Rudolf I arrived in 1273, it all – or what remained of it – belonged to the Habsburgs.

The Empire was formally buried in 1806 when Napoleon Bonaparte tore through Europe, and by the time the Austro-Hungarian Empire took shape in 1867 (a dual monarchy of Austria and Hungary), it was little more than a dim and distant reminder of medieval times.

The French Revolution of 1789–99 was a political explosion that ushered in a new age of republicanism in Europe, and it challenged surviving feudalistic anachronisms like the Holy Roman Empire. Thus, although Napoleon was soundly defeated in Leipzig in 1813 and, finally, at Waterloo in 1815, his advance across Europe caused its collapse. The Habsburgs survived, however, and in the post-Napoleon Vormärz (Pre-March) years, they dominated a loose Deutscher Bund (German Alliance) comprising hundreds of small 'states' cobbled together in a period of cultural flourish – called the Biedermeier period.

Given that ordinary citizens at the time were kept on a short leash by their political masters, it's not surprising that they began to seek new freedoms. In 1848, inspired by the February 1848 revolution in France, Austrians demanded their own parliament (p33). One was created and met (without Hungary, a Habsburg possession at the time, and without parts of Italy that had been in Habsburg hands) in July that year. But revolution and a democratic parliament failed to endure in Austria.

In 1867 a dual monarchy was created in Austria and Hungary, arising out of an attempt by the Habsburgs to hold onto support for the monarchy among Hungarians by giving them a large degree of autonomy. This Austro-Hungarian Empire would grow to include core regions of Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovine, as well as regions like the Voivodina in Serbia, and small chunks in northern Italy, Romania, Poland and the Ukraine.

The roots of Austria's Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP; Austrian People's Party) go back to 1887; a forerunner of the Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs (SPÖ; Social Democratic Party of Austria) was founded a year later.

Vienna's population peaked at more than two million between 1910 and 1914. After WWI, Vienna was one of the world's five largest cities.

15 BC–AD 600

The Romans establish relations with Celts and Celtic-influenced Noric tribes. From 15 BC Roman occupation begins in the three provinces of Rhaetia, Noricum and Pannonia. Slavic, Germanic and other tribes later overrun the territories.

800

The Frankish king Charlemagne is crowned Holy Roman Emperor. The troublesome Avars are routed and disappear, creating an Eastern March that passes into the hands of Charlemagne's successors Otto I (912–73) and Otto II (955–83).

976 & 996

The Babenbergs are entrusted with the Eastern March in 976, administer it as margraves, and in 996 this appears for the first time in a document as Ostarrichi.

1156

As consolation for relinquishing Bavaria, which fell into Babenberg hands after a local conflict, Austria becomes a duchy (Privilegium Minus) and the Babenberg ruler Heinrich Jasomirgott (1107–77) becomes Austria's first duke, residing in Vienna.

1192

Styria is given to Babenberg Leopold V (1157–94) on the condition that it stays part of Austria forever. Styria at the time includes chunks of Slovenia and various parts of Lower and Upper Austria.

1246–78

The last Babenberg dies in 1246 and Habsburg rule begins when Rudolf I is elected king of the Holy Roman Empire in 1273; he defeats Bohemian Ottokar II in the Battle of Marchfeld in 1278.