



History of Austria: Facts, Period, Map & Wars

Austria – the pinnacle of European culture. It had to suffer the vicissitudes of time to acquire the stature it enjoys today. History weighs heavily on Austria. From [Roman](#) ruins and the Habsburg dynasty to the most recent victims of the Nazi regime, Austria is a wonderful playground for scholars eager to learn more.

History of Austria



History of Austria: Austria's past is much greater than the small territory it occupies today and spills over its modern-day borders into the realms of all of its neighbors. It is often hard for modern Austrians to come to terms with their history because it is filled with oppression, war, and mistreatment of various ethnicities. From its earliest point in history, the territory was a place of strife. Its geographic position in central [Europe](#) means Austria's destiny was bound to be the point of conflict – if not militarily, then ideologically. Because of its geographical position and unapproachability,

Austrian territory saw the Iron Age culture known as Hallstatt very late, approximately 800 BCE. The Illyrians were the region's first settlers, living there until 400 BCE. The Celtic migration displaced the Illyrians and the tribes of the Norici and Tauris. A confederation of Alpine tribes, known as the Rhaetian people, was formed around 500



BCE. They remained dominant in the mountains of Vorarlberg and Tyrol even during 200 BCE when the Celts founded the Kingdom of Noricum in the east. At the turn of the century, Noricum was pressed from the north by the Germanic tribes.

Around 15 BCE, it became part of the [Roman Empire](#). Roman rule of the region that is today Austria lasted for around five hundred years and was relatively peaceful until the rule of Marcus Aurelius. He came into the region in 172 to defend it from a Germanic invasion. Tribes such as the Marcomanni, Quadi, and Naristi, north of the Limes, threatened the Roman Empire.

This could be considered the first time Vienna claimed fame, as Roman historian Aurelius Victor claimed Marcus Aurelius died near there. The Roman conflict with the Germanic tribes continued after the death of Aurelius, and in 493, the Roman rule of modern-day Austria came to an end.

Migration Period



Time c. 300–800 or later, Place Europe and the Mediterranean region, Event Tribes invading the declining Roman Empire

The migrations and conflicts in the region continued as Avars became the dominant power at the beginning and then the Bavarians in the 7th century. In 791, Charlemagne



led his Frankish army, joined by the **Bavarians**, against the Avars, opening much of the region for settlement. In 955, **King Otto I** and the German Confederation defeated the Hungarians, who were joined by the Bavarian rebels. Otto's victory brought him prestige and power, which he used to proclaim himself Holy Roman emperor in 962.

The first written evidence of Austria dates from 996 CE, when it is mentioned as “the Eastern Land” or, in local German, Ostarrichi. This area was a part of the German Kingdom and started its history as a military district on the southeastern frontier of [Germany](#). However, as we know, when the Ostarrichi region was mentioned by name in 996, that was not the definitive start of Austrian history.

The region already had a very complex heritage, with various tribes and peoples inhabiting the area. None of the groups who previously lived in what is modern-day Austria disappeared, and they all left their distinctive mark on the territory.

The Bavarians comprised the bulk of Austrian society, while the Alemanni formed the majority in the western regions – toward Lake Constance. Thus, the modern Austrian demography reflects its history, with many Germanic, Slavic, Hungarian, Celtic – and even Roman – traces still lingering in its social makeup.

Margrave of Austria

In 976, **Leopold I** became the first margrave of the **Babenberg dynasty**. The early Babenberg margraves controlled only a small portion of today's Austria. The Bavarians continued to push the border farther to the east along the Danube, and in 1002, they reached the area around modern-day **Vienna**. When the area became relatively stable, regional power blocs started to form.

Austria met the non-Germanic but Christian kingdoms of Bohemia, Hungary, and Poland to the north and east. The margrave of Austria seemed a petty political player when compared to these great kingdoms. Even within the kingdom, the dynasty did not have full control. Much of the territory was controlled by clerical authorities, such as the archdioceses of Salzburg and Passau. The rest of the territory was under the feudal system; therefore, it was controlled by noble families.



The area near Vienna started as a Roman military camp, but its position on the Danube allowed it to develop into a trade center. The commercial advantages of the city further grew once the Babenbergs moved their residence to Vienna in 1150 (some say this happened as early as 1145).

Early Babenberg period

In the 13th century, the Babenbergs had managed to rise to power. They gained control over both Austria and Styria by using their entrepreneurial and diplomatic skills. Through marriage, they also managed to ally themselves with the Holy Roman Empire's ruling family, the Hohenstaufen dynasty.

The good fortune of the Babenbergs in Austria did not last for long. Cue the Habsburgs. On August 26, 1278, Rudolf I of Habsburg defeated Ottokar II, King of Bohemia in the **Battle of the Marchfeld**, turning the Habsburgs into the ruling dynasty of Austria.

The Battle of the Marchfeld marked the end of the Babenberg dynasty. The Habsburgs would raise their position and go on to become the imperial rulers of the Holy Roman Empire, but they intended to rule the whole world. Austria was only a small element, a starting point for a dynasty that would propel itself into the ruling world of Europe.

The entry of the Habsburgs, who originally came from Switzerland, into the political scene changed what it meant – and still means – to be an Austrian. After the long interregnum that followed the death of the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, Rudolf was the first king of Germany, and through him, the Habsburgs became the kings of [Germany](#).



House of Habsburg



TS HISTORICAL

House of Habsburg (Coat of arms of the Counts of Habsburg)

They were also known as count-kings, a term coined by historians to differentiate the rulers who reigned until 1438 when the Habsburg dynasty finally obtained the imperial title. The Habsburgs claimed Austria, Styria, and Carniola, and Rudolf divided these territories between his two sons, Albrecht I and Rudolf II. Due to a mutual agreement in 1283, Albrecht became the sole heir of the Habsburg lands.

In the 14th century, the imperial mantle of Germany was up for grabs, and the Habsburgs won it, but the power struggle in Germany weakened the Habsburgs and undermined their interests in their power base in Switzerland.

In 1313, the forces of the Everlasting League raided the Abbey of Einsiedeln and, in 1315, defeated the army of Leopold of Habsburg. This was a turning point not only for Swiss history but also for the Habsburg dynasty. The power of the League grew, and in 1315, it turned to become a confederation. By the 15th century, the Habsburgs were



excluded and ejected from their home base in Switzerland, and the Confederation took over the rule. It was during the reign of Frederick the Fair that the Habsburgs started styling themselves as “of Austria,” or “dominum Austriae” – the rulers of Austria.

In the 14th century, however, the Habsburg was a house divided. By 1379, Albert III gained the heartlands of Upper and Lower Austria, while Leopold III took everything else. For another century, the lands of the Habsburgs would remain divided. The Habsburg territory split again in 1396, making some adjustments during the 1400s. Two lines sprouted: the Leopoldina and the Albertian, but the brothers and cousins kept quarreling about the territories they inherited.

The House of Austria was split into three parts: Lower Austria – this is now Lower and Upper Austria; Inner Austria – the Adriatic territories, Carniola, Carinthia, and Styria; and Upper Austria – Tyrol and Habsburg possessions in Swabia and Alsace. With conflicts right and left, the Habsburgs continued growing and increasing their wealth and authority. Albert II of Germany, who later became Duke Albert V by inheritance, married the daughter of Sigismund, King of the Romans. Albert would go on to inherit that title, with some saying he was the first Holy Roman emperor of the Habsburg line (officially, though, that claim belongs to Frederick III, who came after Albert).

The internal conflicts came to a head in 1404 in the form of a civil war, soon followed by the Hussite Wars, when the prejudice and religious persecution of minorities boiled over. Alongside the Hussite Wars, the [Ottoman](#) invasion of eastern Europe was of great significance for the future of the whole continent. The Habsburg response to these events would shape the region’s political scene for the next three centuries.

In the late 15th and early 16th centuries, Maximilian I reunited the Austrian lands that had been divided since the 14th century. However, another issue was eating away at the elites of Europe: the Reformation, which left ripples throughout central and Eastern Europe.

The reformation also sparked a strong counter-reformation, leading to more instability. During the [Middle Ages](#) and later, heading into modernity, the Habsburg control over large swathes of Europe continuously changed boundaries and hands. Most of this



change came because of internal conflicts as well as the ongoing feud with the Ottomans.

The second half of the 16th century saw the decline in the worth of the lands of Germany and central Europe. The Habsburg hereditary lands that lay on the Danube were developing fast because of the trade routes of this great river. But when the trade shifted to the Adriatic Sea, the rest of western Europe started developing and grew richer. In addition to the economic decline, there were also religious problems, internal squabbles, and Ottoman invasions.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, the Austrian land would, once again, be divided into Lower, Upper, and Inner segments, with separate rulers controlling them. The 17th century would present yet another challenge soon enough. **The Thirty Years War**, one of the most vicious of all European conflicts, ended in defeat for the Austrians, and their dreams of a Catholic Europe were shattered. With its economy dwindling as Western Europe sought colonialist ambitions, the over-reaching Habsburg Empire steadily declined.

The Peace of Westphalia, which brought an end to the Thirty Years War and the Eighty Years War between Spain and the Dutch Republic, crushed the Habsburg dreams of a universal monarchy. The trinity between the dynasty, the church, and the aristocracy created the Habsburg Monarchy, a new regime that had a profound impact on Austrian history.

In the 18th century, there were widespread reforms in Austria, spearheaded by Empress Maria Theresa and later, her son, [Joseph II](#). Nevertheless, she was a traditionalist and a zealous Catholic, so the persecution of Protestants continued.

The 18th century also witnessed the Russo-Turkish War, in which Russia made gains in Eastern Europe. On the other hand, the [French](#) Revolution brought about a rational rejection of the past and an insistence on national uniformity. As such, it was a threat to the Habsburg dynastic rule since it opposed all the ideas that the revolution promoted. Shortly afterward, the Napoleonic Wars took a toll on the Habsburgs since, after the Napoleonic Wars, nationalism and liberalism were on the rise throughout Europe. After



multiple revolutions sparked in Vienna and elsewhere throughout the empire, the pressure kept mounting.

Ausgleich | Austro-Hungarian history

In 1866, Austria went to war with Prussia, which did not help matters at all. After the Austro-Prussian War, a compromise was agreed upon, also known as Ausgleich, and Austria-Hungary came into existence. The Habsburg Monarchy was transformed into a condominium – a political territory in which multiple powers share equal rule – in which the Magyars ruled Hungary, and the Austrian-Germans, with the Habsburgs on the throne, ruled the rest of the empire.

The arts had been gaining traction for some time, but the second half of the 19th century saw a significant increase in economic expansion and liberal thought. These changes were partially reverted near the end of the 19th century. The beginning of the 20th century saw escalation between Russia, Austria, the Ottoman Empire, and Western Europe, which led to the First [World War](#). During this period, various nationalistic movements were guided by other European powers, which led to the dissipation of the empire. The Czech went this way, and the Croatians went that way. There were attempts to revive interest in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but things had changed dramatically.

The German-Austria state was a leftover state that no one wanted. The Allies persisted for the new state to be named the Austrian Republic, and it became the First Austrian Republic in September 1919. Modern Austrians are a nation without history. Maybe it would be correct to say that Austrian history is without a nation.

A multiethnic hodgepodge, the people of Austria struggle to construct their national identity even today. Maybe even more so today than in the past, with all the migrants and refugees they have received with open arms, proving they are no longer stuck in their past conflicts. It is a tolerant, open, and modern nation, capable of accepting its past as it is and boldly looking into the future.