

by Duncan J. D. Smith

Everyone interested in Vienna should stroll along Fleischmarkt and Griechengasse; rarely is so much history concentrated into just 400 metres. From the Babenbergs to Billy Wilder this short walk takes a long view into the city's colourful past.

Kornhäusel and coffee

Fleischmarkt is an ancient street first documented in 1220. The name recalls the city's butchers who had their guildhall here. Although nothing remains, a curious tower overlooks the spot. This is the Kornhäuselturm erected in the 1820s as a studio by Biedermeier star architect, Josef Kornhäusel. That the buildings once surrounding it are now gone lends it a fortified look, which is perhaps the source of the legend that the architect came here to escape his nagging wife!

Although Fleischmarkt finds its origins in the meat trade, it has more recent connections with coffee. At Fleischmarkt 7 stand the original premises of coffee importer Julius Meinl. In business since 1862, the prosperous trader put up this grand building in 1899. A lively frieze along the façade depicts the story of the coffee bean from harvesting to drinking. Hollywood filmmaker Billy Wilder (*Sunset Boulevard*, *The Apartment*) was born in the same building and perhaps the familiar smell of coffee encouraged him later to take an office over a café in Beverly Hills.

A ballad singer from the plague pit

Dropping down from Fleischmarkt towards the Danube Canal is Griechengasse. This medi-

STONES OF VIENNA

On and off the Fleischmarkt, careening delivery wagons and Turkish canon made these ancient streets a danger to walk

Pedestrians Beware!

eval alley is lined with stone bollards designed to protect the walls from damage by passing carts. It was clearly a dangerous corner, as a sign hangs at either end, dating from 1912 exhorting that "Pedestrians beware of traffic! Drive slowly! Coachmen with heavy vehicles must lead their horses or send an adult escort ahead to warn pedestrians."

To one side stands the Griechenbeisl, an inn dating back to 1447. During the Turkish siege of 1529 it was the Yellow Eagle Inn standing hard against the Babenberg city wall. Cannonballs

inside the entrance show it was in the direct line of fire. Later during the plague of 1679 it was the Red Roof Inn. Nearby is where the much-loved ballad singer Augustin was hauled off in a drunken stupor to a plague pit. His miraculous survival is celebrated by the effigy outside the Griechenbeisl today.

Oldest house in the city

Both Beisl and alley are named after the Greek merchants who gravitated to the area



"Drive slowly, coachmen with heavy vehicles must lead their horses..." Photo: Duncan Smith

during the 18th century to orchestrate Vienna's trade with the Balkans and Levant. Theophil Hansen's Church of the Holy Trinity built in the 1850s replaced an earlier Greek church, the construction of which was made possible by Emperor Joseph II's Edict of Tolerance. This 1782 decree is celebrated in an inscription on the house opposite.

At the bottom of Griechengasse is a house with a Madonna and Rococo lantern. If the door is open peep inside at the old water pump and what appear to be Arabic-inscribed wood panels (translations welcome: contact@duncanjdsmith.com). In the courtyard beyond is a 13th century Babenberg watchtower. Used subsequently as living quarters, it appears in the earliest depiction of Vienna – the Babenberg family tree of 1490 at Klosterneuburg – and is the city's oldest house.

A spyhole above the door

Griechengasse now opens out onto a terrace used formerly as a meeting point by the city militia. The discreet whitewashed building beyond is a second Greek church. Unlike Hansen's flamboyant work, the older Church of St. George still abides by an imperial tenet forbidding non-Catholic houses of worship from announcing their function on the street.

Our walk concludes with the Steyrerhof at Griechengasse 4, a former inn in whose stonework you can trace Vienna's architectural development from 13th century Gothic windows to ornate flourishes of 17th century Baroque plasterwork. Note the spyhole over the doorway. The restored paintwork reveals how colourful Vienna must once have looked. ◇

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