

# Vienna Subterranea

*beneath the Austrian capital*



by Duncan J D Smith

It was the Austrian journalist Karl Kraus (1874–1936) who declared that the streets of Vienna are paved with culture, unlike other cities that make do with asphalt. Austria’s most trenchant satirist was, of course, being cynical. For Kraus, Vienna’s imperious nineteenth-century streets were a sham, executed in a backwards-looking idiom favoured by the penultimate Habsburg emperor, Franz Joseph I (1830–1916). The emperor

was a man not taken by such icons of modernity as telephones, underground railways and flushing toilets. So the Vienna that emerged was a strait-jacket in stone — in reality little more than cleverly stuccoed red brick — that helped mask the endemic bureaucratic corruption that came with a monarchy that had been on the throne for over six centuries; it also acted to stem unofficial (read dangerous) intellectual development.

One suspects that if Kraus were alive today he would be unsurprised to find his words still holding true. The terrible destruction wrought on Vienna at the end of the Second World War has

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*Die Straßen Wiens sind mit Kultur gepflastert,  
die Straßen anderer Städte mit Asphalt*

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Karl Kraus (1874–1936)

been seamlessly repaired; the city's more obvious charms are once again purveyed to an endless stream of undemanding tourists: coffee houses, classical music, and the gilded trappings of the imperial court. It seems that the Viennese themselves and their visitors all prefer it this way.

The majority of visitors arriving in Vienna have never heard of Kraus. The few that do will

The signposts to this intriguing underworld are all too easily missed.

perhaps try to uncover what lies *behind* the city's seemingly easygoing façade. For answers they might turn to Kraus's analytical contemporaries, such as Sigmund Freud and Ludwig Wittgenstein. But there is another

dimension still to this ambiguous metropolis, one easily accessible to those who know where to look. This is subterranean Vienna, well concealed beneath the historic First District, at the very heart of the Old Town. Whether revealed or concealed these secretive locations can speak just as eloquently of the city's long history as their more famous above-ground counterparts.

The signposts to this intriguing underworld are all too easily missed. One is the curiously curving row of baroque houses at the northern end of Naglergasse, flanked by a Sushi bar and a shop purveying smokers' paraphernalia (a retail juxtaposition quite typical for the trend-conscious *Altstadt*). These houses are a stunning example of continuity in the urban landscape

RIGHT: the mysterious St. Virgil's Chapel (Virgilkapelle) beneath Stephansplatz was discovered quite unexpectedly during construction work in the nineteen seventies (photo by Duncan J D Smith)

for they sit *exactly* above the long lost site of the rounded northwest corner of the Roman fortress of Vindobona. The two are separated by some twenty metres of gradually accumulated building debris providing archaeologists with a palimpsest of the city's development.

Geography dictated the location of Roman Vindobona, founded as it was in the late first century AD on an elevated platform of glacial boulders, rising conveniently above the Danube floodplain. The river was not only an important trading



waterway for the Romans but also the frontier of their eastern empire, along which a line of identical fortresses was erected. At the centre of each of these fortresses there was a crossroads: that of Vin-dobona lay where Vienna's oldest square, Hoher Markt, now stands. Formerly a fish market, the square is today home to the city's most profitable *Würststand*, one of three hundred or more such sausage kiosks in the city, frequented around the

Pay a visit to the nearby Stubentor metro station, into which the battered remnants of one of the city gates have been cleverly incorporated.

clock by carnivorous locals and students, business people and nightclubbers alike. One wonders whether the Romans ever had an equivalent on their main street (Via Principalis), which once ran this way. The place to make enquiries is the anonymous looking post-war building at number 3, where a steep staircase leads down to the remains of a Roman house with underfloor heating (*hypocaust*), now the focal point of the fascinating Römermuseum (Roman Museum).

The Romans buried their dead immediately outside the perimeter wall of their fortress, in Vienna's case probably where the city's main square, Stephansplatz, now lies. Indeed a Roman

pre-Christian gravestone is incorporated into the square's eponymously named cathedral, the Stephansdom. With no effort made to remove the stone's Latin inscription, perhaps the cathedral's architects wanted to recall the old pagan gods in what was the city's new Christian place of worship.

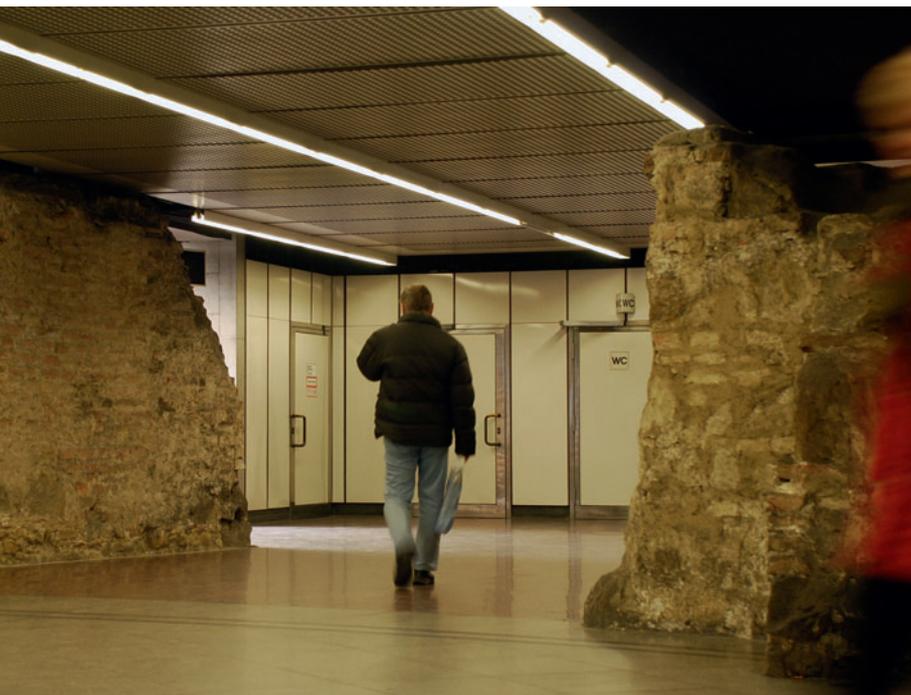
#### DOWN INTO THE CATACOMBS

Beneath the cathedral, which was founded in the mid-twelfth century, there is a labyrinthine crypt, with catacombs reaching far beyond the building's perimeter walls. Great piles of exhumed bones were stacked here like firewood after the city's graveyards were cleared on health grounds in the mid-eighteenth century. And here in these same catacombs are a number of copper urns containing the pickled entrails of the Habsburg royal family. The Habsburgs' hearts and bodies on the other hand were placed in different city churches, so as to ensure the dynasty's omnipresence even in death.

The cathedral crypt is huge. An altogether more intimate experience is offered by the enigmatic St. Virgil's Chapel (Virgilkapelle), the ruins of which were found unexpectedly in the 1970s during the construction of a tunnel for the U1 metro. The chapel, reached via escalators in front of the cathedral, is shoehorned between a public convenience and a metro controller's office. Preserved

behind a sheet of grubby plate glass this vaulted Gothic chapel is a real mystery. No record exists of its construction nor does it seem to have had a conventional entrance. Half submerged in what would have been the cathedral graveyard, it might have been built to hold the remains of Saint Coloman, in an attempt to raise Vienna to a bishopric. That never happened and instead the chapel became the private crypt for a wealthy family of merchants (they installed an altar dedicated to St. Virgil hence the name). In time another funerary chapel was built directly over it, and when this burnt down in the 1780s all trace of the original chapel was lost.

LEFT: the remains of a Renaissance city gate are cleverly integrated into the busy metro station at Stubentor (photo by Duncan J D Smith)



By the fifteenth century Vienna was home to the Habsburgs, and well on its way to becoming the capital of the Holy Roman Empire. Not all the city's inhabitants benefitted, however, most notably the Jews. Under the earlier Babenberg dynasty Vienna's Jewish population had been permitted to create their own quarter within the city, albeit a walled and gated one. At its heart was the mediaeval Or-Sarua Synagogue, containing one of the most important Talmud schools in the German-speaking world. By contrast, the Habsburg Archduke Albert V (1404–1439) persecuted the Jews, accusing them of collusion with the rebellious Protestants of Bohemia. This use of anti-Semitism to divert attention from domestic crises set a dangerous precedent that would end in the Holocaust.

As a result of Albert's pogrom, Vienna's venerable mediaeval synagogue was burned to the ground in 1421. Its stones were later used to build the city's first university. For six centuries the charred ruins remained concealed until their rediscovery in the 1990s during the construction of sculptress Rachel Whiteread's Holocaust Memorial in what is today Judenplatz. The poignant remains are reached via a tunnel beneath the Misrachi-Haus Torah school, which stands in one corner of the square. Since 1981, when a gunman killed several worshippers in another Vienna synagogue, an armed guard has kept watch over both monument and school, while well-heeled locals, seemingly oblivious to the burden of such history, frequent the handful of fancy restaurants that now line the square.

### THE CITY WALL

A very genuine threat to Habsburg power arrived at the gates of Vienna in 1683. The Second Turkish Siege led by the Ottoman Grand Vizier Kara Mustafa might have been successful had the city's crumbling walls not been significantly strengthened in the immediate wake of the first siege in 1529. Erected at the order of Emperor Ferdinand I (1556–1564) the colossal new brick walls encircled the entire city, broken only by a series of fortified gateways and stone-clad defensive bastions. Ironically, in 1848 the walls that had earlier saved Vienna nearly brought disaster upon the city, when home-grown revolutionaries, disgruntled



Rachel Whiteread's stark Holocaust Memorial (left) at Judenplatz sits directly above the charred ruins of a mediaeval synagogue (photo by Duncan J D Smith)

by poverty and unemployment, used them as protection against the emperor's own troops. The incumbent Emperor Franz Joseph rang the changes by ordering the dismantling of the walls in favour of a grand boulevard known as the Ringstrasse. The imposing buildings erected along its length served well to obscure the real purpose of the boulevard, namely to provide a means of moving troops across the city more effectively in the event of further domestic trouble.

The modern visitor to Vienna might be duped into thinking that Vienna never had a city wall, so thorough was the emperor's destruction of it — but fragments have survived. The Palais Coburg, for instance, a luxurious hotel located in a former baroque palace, sits atop one of the old bastions. A glimpse into the foyer reveals huge broken brick vaults, and tantalising glimpses down through the floor into former casemates, along which the emperor's soldiers and cannons once moved invisibly.

The hotel doorman probably won't let you stray too far, so instead pay a visit to the nearby Stubentor metro station, into which the battered remnants of one of the city gates have been cleverly incorporated. Most passengers emerging from the U3 line do so in a hurry: they seem not to question why walls that are elsewhere tiled are here faced with monumental blocks of cut stone. The handful of faded period pictures pinned up in a nearby display cabinet tell the story of the rise and fall of this once magnificent Renaissance gateway — but few stop to take note.

Another old bastion can be found near Schottentor. The M $\ddot{o}$ lkerbastei is graced by the house where Beethoven wrote his only opera *Fidelio*, as well as the doorway in which Orson Welles first appears as Harry Lime in the film *The Third Man*. The bastion is named after the Benedictine monks of Melk, whose mighty monastery can be found

archaeological excavations at Michaelerplatz have revealed subterranean Vienna for all to see (photo by Duncan J D Smith)



farther up the Danube. In 1629 the monks were granted the right to move forty cartloads of wine from their vineyards in the country to the Melker Hof, a large building just inside the bastion, at Schottengasse 3, where the monastery's abbots resided whenever they visited Vienna. Labyrinthine cellars reaching down two storeys were constructed beneath the building, sturdy brickwork providing the stable temperatures required to store the wine prior to sale.

Vienna once boasted a handful of such monastic cellars most of which have been reinvented as cosy if somewhat contrived *Keller* restaurants, where hearty food and folksy musicians are the order of the day. An exception is the cellar beneath the Melker Hof, today part of the premises of *Tostmann Trachten*, purveyors of traditional Austrian clothing such as lederhosen, dirndls, and forest-green loden felt jackets. Access to the cellar is by means of an innocent-looking staircase in one corner of the shop. It was down here in September 1944 that hundreds of Viennese cowered as their city was pummelled by a series of Allied air raids. Each morning there would be a head count to ensure that everyone had survived, and on one occasion a woman was found to be missing. She re-emerged several days later some distance away near the cathedral, by now quite deranged from the trauma of getting lost. The story reveals that from the Middle Ages until the Second World War Vienna's underground structures were interconnected, creating a hidden world that mirrored the one above it. Beneath every house there was a cellar, and below every road there ran a tunnel.

#### SUBTERRANEAN VIENNA REVEALED

For today's urban explorer it is a pity that the post-war construction of metro tunnels, underground car parks, and new sewer pipes has gradually disconnected subterranean Vienna. However, there is one location where the underground city has been partially revealed for all to see. The tongue-twisting *Archäologisches Grabungsfeld Michaelerplatz* is a ruin-filled hole directly in front of the main entrance to the Hofburg, the Habsburgs' former city palace. The result of excavations in 1992, this open air site acts as a permanent record of the built history of Vienna. Cheek by jowl the various jagged

fragments carry metal signs identifying them: Roman frescoed house walls from the first to fifth centuries AD, a mediaeval well from the thirteenth century, the walls of the former imperial pleasure gardens from the sixteenth century, and later vaulted brick house cellars, all punched deep into the Viennese clay. There is even mention of the old Burgtheater that once stood here, where Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Così fan Tutte* received their premieres. More prosaic but no less interesting is a length of finely-constructed drain, made up of bricks each stamped with the Habsburg double-eagle. The drain is just a tiny part of the city's far-reaching wastewater system.

Modern engineers are still digging down into the historic soil of Vienna to create foundations for

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their glass and concrete buildings. It will surely be a long time before these hold any great interest for the historian. The city's last subterranean endeavour of note was probably on the Graben, the long-filled defensive ditch that ran down one side of the Roman fortress. Here an underground public toilet was constructed in 1905, hailed today as

being possibly the world's oldest such facility still in use. It is identified at street level by a lantern inscribed 'Herren'. Behind elegant *Jugendstil* balustrades, painted green to mimic the weathered copper roofs of the city's baroque churches, a staircase leads down into the gloom, where double doors glazed with bevel-edged glass open into a surprisingly elegant space. The floor is well tiled, the walls clad in marble, and the ceiling broken up by a false skylight that emits a pale green glow. Beyond the traditional porcelain sinks and gilt-edged mirrors stand the urinals. But these are no ordinary urinals. On the wall above them hangs a copy of an 1883 patent lodged by one Wilhelm Beetz, inventor of the odourless, freezeproof and flushless *Ölurinoir*. Beetz erected more than seventy public conveniences across the city according to his



this lantern on the Graben marks the entrance to one of the world's oldest subterranean toilet facilities (photo by Duncan J D Smith)

patent but only this one was built underground, presumably so as not to offend those promenading along what is still one of the city's most grand thoroughfares.

In a city famous for its suppressed desires and grandiose façades it is perhaps telling that an exciting account of Vienna's history is to be found underground. The best informed of Vienna's visitors take Karl Kraus' advice and don't take Vienna's architecture at face value. But those who are really in the know look not just at what lies *behind* Vienna's architecture, but also at that which lies *beneath* it. ■

Duncan J D Smith is an urban explorer, travel writer, historian, and photographer. He is the author of 'Only in Vienna', one of a series of guidebooks by Duncan that probe the hidden corners of various European cities. Find out more at [www.duncanjdsmith.com](http://www.duncanjdsmith.com).