

Free in More Than Name

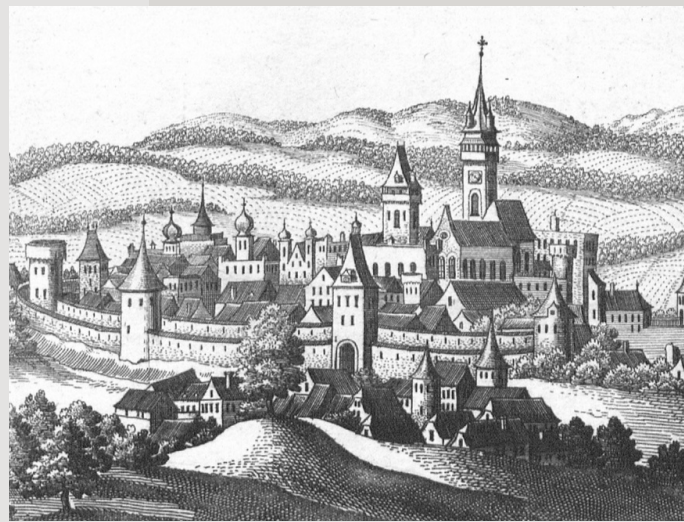
A History of Freistadt, 1224-1626

Dylan Thomas Mask

The city of Freistadt sits centrally in the Aist Valley in the northeastern quarter of Upper Austria in an area historically called the Riedmark and Machland. Known today as the Mühlviertel, it comprised the land that stretched from the left bank of the Danube northward up to the Bohemian border. Before Freistadt's founding, the Aist Valley hosted two ancient mule tracks, called the *Goldener Steigen* or Golden Paths. The first Golden Path traveled north over the Enns and Danube rivers, through the Aist Valley, and into Bohemia; the second Golden Path traveled east from Passau in Bavaria, through Muehlviertel, and onward east.

While traders seasonally utilized the Golden Paths since early antiquity, human habitation in Mühlviertel increased gradually over centuries, drawing Germanic and Slavic settlers whose two peoples collided in the region. In 906 AD, The Raffelstettner Customs Regulation shows that salt, iron goods, and even luxury Venetian trade goods such as oil, paper, and fine cloth traveled along the northward Golden Path. For centuries after the Raffelstettner Regulation, merchants continued to transport similar trade goods along the northward Golden Path, later proving exorbitantly profitable for Freistadt.

In 1143, Holy Roman Emperor, Konrad III (r. 1138-1152) donated the land in and around the Aist Valley to Garsten Abbey near Steyr. The land inventory regarding the Imperial donation made no mention of any human habitation in the area of Freistadt's later construction; in 1171 though, a feudal inventory of the hilltop market, Neumarkt im Mühlkreis, mentioned settlement with a provincial castle located due north, named Zaglau or Zahlow in Slavonic, which referred to the area of Freistadt's later construction. Pregarten, Schmieddorf, and Zaglau comprised the first settlements in and around modern Freistadt. Slavs comprised the vast majority of not only Zaglau's population but also the ethnic composition of much of Mühlviertel at that time.



Engraving of Freistadt by Georg Mathhäus Vischer dated 1674

Present-day Slavic influence in Freistadt lingers on only in subtle ways, namely in etymology. One of the aforementioned Slavonic names for Freistadt, Zahlov, survives in the contemporary Czech name for the city, Cahlov. Additionally, the village that once stood south of Freistadt, Pregarten, derived its name from the two Slavonic words "přeh" and "rhad" meaning roughly, in front of the castle. Aside from a few names though, the only physical remains of Zaglau confine themselves within the remnants of the village's provincial castle, later renamed the Salzhof.

While Slavs heavily populated Mühlviertel, the Dukes of the Austrian Babenburg Dynasty (c. 976-1246) exerted substantial political influence there, transforming not only borders but cultures.

Interestingly, the most long-lasting Austrian structures in upper Mühlviertel consist not of moats, turrets, or castles, but churches. Built sometime in the late 12th century, judging by its distinctly Romanesque style, St. Peter's Church, scenically overlooking Freistadt atop Petringer Hill, probably served as Zaglau's parish church before the construction of Freistadt began. Additionally, during and after the Babenburg period, St. Jakob's Church in Neumarkt in Mühlkreis served as the head parish for all Mühlviertel, holding not only significant religious by economic value.



Ducal seal of Duke Leopold VI "the Glorious" of Austria

Excluding Neumarkt im Mühlkreis's religious authority, the neighboring market town of Leonfelden (now Bad Leonfelden), founded in 1154, initially positioned itself as the most economically influential Austrian-controlled and populated market town in upper Mühlviertel. Situated due west of Freistadt, the fief of Leonfelden fell under Waxenberg's dominion. Similar to Freistadt, Leonfelden choicely located itself along a vital trade route that more efficiently connected trade between the Danube and the Moldau than Freistadt, though Leonfelden failed to receive the same legal privileges and preferential treatment that Freistadt later garnered. However, the Austrian Babenburgs and the Slavs soon found themselves accompanied by another economic and political entity.

In 1193, Holy Roman Emperor, Heinrich VI (r. 1191-1197) bestowed upon the Diocese of Passau complete sovereignty throughout its dominion which directly bordered the tenuously Austrian-ruled Mühlviertel. Passau, a wealthy diocese, sought religious, political, and economic expansion into neighboring provinces. In 1209, Passau's judge, Chalhoch, founded a monastery in upper Muehlviertel, Maria Schlag (shortened later to Schlägl), which he populated with monks from the Premonstresian order. The monks set to work clearing the thick forests of upper Mühlviertel, cultivating farmland and the faith of the local inhabitants, expanding Passau's economic sphere of influence in Austria, an influence felt sorely by the Babenburg Duke Leopold VI "The Glorious" (r. 1198-1230).

During the twilight of the Babenburg dynastic rule in Austria, Leopold VI transformed both the political and topographic landscape of Upper Austria, more so than the schemers and settlers from Passau. Beginning with the formal purchase of the county of Machland in 1213 from its previous noble proprietors, and the purchase of the rest of Mühlviertel's lands from its nobility in 1217, Leopold VI sought total dominion over the region. Since Mühlviertel bordered both the Diocese of Passau and the Kingdom of Bohemia, Leopold VI found himself in circular political conflict with both countries, while the Austrian Duchy's northeastern borders lay under defended.

To address strategic discrepancies, from 1220 until 1224, Duke Leopold VI plausibly, directly commissioned the construction of the city of Freistadt surely as a defensible bulwark against Passau and Bohemia but also as a permanent trading town along the lucrative Golden Paths. Unfortunately, hardly any written records survive regarding Freistadt's commission and construction. Architectural and archaeological evidence though supports this claim; the parallel street layout and the large rectangular market square, with a clear 2:3 aspect ratio, date the city to the beginning of the 13th century at the absolute earliest.

The Babenburg layout of Freistadt circa 1220-1224 transformed the once strategically and relatively economically insignificant village of Zaglau with its single muddy street smattered with a handful of houses and protected only by its provincial castle, expediently into a vibrant city. Freistadt's speedy transformation occurred as a result of two factors: the sustainability of trade, and the city's foundational Babenburg town charter, though the latter of the two proved the most immediately advantageous. The town charter endowed the fledgling free city with three invaluable privileges: the right to self-governance, personal property rights, and certain economic and market exemptions, and in turn, ducal favor that lasted long after the Babenburgs.

To settle Freistadt, Leopold VI partitioned the city into approximately 150 building plots in the walled city itself and farm plots in the surrounding countryside. With each property, subjects received so-called “free castle rights” which allowed them unencumbered use of their land. The first wave of Freistadt’s settlers consisted of free Austrians who originated from elsewhere within the Duchy of Austria.

While the first settlers undoubtedly included craftspeople, laborers, and other peasants, a vibrant merchant class almost immediately established itself in Freistadt as a result of the newly founded city’s ideal location. Shortly after the initial, predominantly Austrian, settlement of Freistadt, a second wave of settlers arrived in the city from Passau.

Aside from ecclesiastical efforts previously undertaken by the Diocese of Passau in Mühlviertel, the Bishopric sought more tangible political reach within the region. Such an opportunity arose when Bishop Gebhard I. von Plain of Passau (r. 1222-1232), owed levies to a portion of his subjects and seized upon the opportunity to resettle these people in Freistadt where many of them joined Freistadt’s emerging merchant class.

By transplanting a group of its citizen to Freistadt, Passau further spread its political influence within Upper Austria, so much so that the Diocese of Passau formed the strongest political counterforce to the largely secular settlement efforts of the Babenbergs.

With the arrival of Austrian and Bavarian settlers and the undoubted influx of capital, Freistadt’s both economic and material growth progressed speedily. Feudal deeds show that Leopold VI’s successor, his second and only surviving son, Duke Frederick II of Austria (r. 1230-1246), expanded upon his father’s consolidatory policies across the Duchy of Austria, directly purchasing vast swatches of land in Mühlviertel, as he sought to further solidify Babenberg control, much as his father before him.

Freistadt’s strategic location distinguished the city for Frederick II, not just economically but, arguably equally vitally, militarily. From documentary and archaeological evidence regarding the original Babenberg-era construction of Freistadt, fortification positioned itself as the highest material priority.

Similar to many cities built in the High Middle Ages, the layout of Freistadt centered around the protection of the *Hauptplatz* or market square. Architects populated Freistadt with residences and commercial buildings flanking the square on either side, though the internal layout and usage of commercial and residential plots in Freistadt changed over the centuries, as too changed the city’s outward fortifications.

Construction of Freistadt’s mantle wall, completed during the first half of the 13th century and consisted of earthworks and wooden palisades that surrounded the city’s vulnerable western and southern flanks since a natural cliff shielded the city’s northeastern borders, the cliffs dropping off sharply into the narrow banks of the Aist river. At the beginning of the 14th century, city masons reinforced the earthen walls with stone, while concurrently expanding the city’s mantle wall, though it remains unclear as to whether or not the mantle wall itself contained any form of battlements.

Furthermore, Freistadt’s expansive mantle wall contained a moat as old as the walls themselves, though, the moat also saw many iterations across the centuries. While the mantle wall primarily contained the moat, the inner city walls served as Freistadt’s leading protection and stood at a semi-irregular height of between 5-7 meters. Atop the inner walls, masons constructed arrow slits at equal intervals with machicolations, placed after every fifth arrow slit, which served as hatches for hurling missiles upon approaching enemy combatants.

Accompanying Freistadt's system of walls, their battlements, and the moat, stood two gates as old as the city itself: Linzertor, or Linz Gate, facing south, and Böhmertor, or Bohemian Gate facing north, both gates named logically after the locations they faced towards. For most of Freistadt's history, these two gates, and the road that led to and from them, served as the only practical means of entering and exiting Freistadt either as a merchant or a private citizen. As Freistadt fortified itself, the Catholic Church developed a foothold within the fledgling city.

St. Catherine's Church came as a relatively late religious addition to Mühlviertel with the construction of the church finishing around 1250. It stands on the southern face of the elongated rectangular square, and it closely resembles other late-Romanesque, three-aisled basilicas, typologically matching the architectural style of the other churches built during that period in Mühlviertel. After construction finished, city leadership established hefty benefices for Freistadt's parish church and its appointed clergy, endowing the clergy themselves with generous donations in the form of houses and farms, in and around the city, to secure their self-sufficiency.

As Freistadt established itself religiously and materially, Frederick II further consolidated his political control over Mühlviertel through ducal proclamation, separating Riedmark and Machland into two separate feudal estates in 1240. In 1241, the updated feudal inventory of Frederick II mentioned the fiefdom of Freistadt for the first time, then called Freinstat or Vereinstaat. Frederick II's rule unified Mühlviertel under a more centralized administration, further regulating trade, and allowing Freistadt to flourish under its charter. However, in 1246 Frederick II died unexpectedly at the Battle of Leitha River, and since he produced no male heirs, an Austrian succession crisis ensued.

After Frederick II's slaying, both Bavaria and Bohemia turned their avarice gazes toward Mühlviertel. As a consequence of previous Babenberg border disputes with the House of Přemyslid in Bohemia, young and territorially ambitious King Ottokar II (r. 1253-1278) sought to rule over the Austrian Duchies.

*Royal seal of King
Ottokar II Přemysl of
Bohemia*



To legitimize his flimsy claim, Ottokar II married the elder sister of Frederick II, Margarete von Babenburg—a woman nearly thirty years his senior—in 1252. Ottokar II's political marriage garnered him general acceptance by the Austrian nobility who saw Ottokar II as a bulwark against the rapidly encroaching Hungarian and Bavarian Kingdoms. During Ottokar II's reign as Duke of Austria and later as Duke of Styria in 1260, and as Duke of Carinthia in 1269, he instituted sweeping reforms and founded numerous cities in both Bohemia and Austria.

During Ottokar II's ambitious rule, he provenly visited Freistadt three times for extended periods in 1251, 1265, and 1276. Freistadt's merchants considered Ottokar II a generous patron of the city. Ottokar II though viewed Freistadt more hawkishly as a potential military threat, and certainly as a trading competitor, especially accounting for its vital importance in the salt trade between Austria and his home, Bohemia. In consideration of Freistadt's threatening presence, Ottokar II founded the city of České Budějovice, in 1265, due north of Freistadt, as both a military threat and economic competitor for Freistadt. Ottokar II's ambitions spread his resources far too thin as a rival claimant to his kingdom, Rudolf I of Germany and of the House of Habsburg (r. 1273-1291), pressed his advantage.

From 2-8 July 1276, after Ottokar II and the remnants of his army retreated from Vienna, Ottokar II sought refuge in Freistadt during which time he issued proclamations, attempting to consolidate his waning grip on the loyalty of his Austrian subjects, including those in Freistadt. In November, Ottokar II retreated from Freistadt into Bohemia.



"The Battle on the Marchfeld," oil on canvas, by Anton Petter

After Ottokar II's flight from Austria, Rudolf I assumed Ottokar II's Austrian titles and lands, attempting to establish himself from his Austrian subjects. In 1278, Ottokar II, with newfound military allies in Bavaria, Brandenburg, and Poland, assembled a coalition army to expel Rudolf I and his ally, King Ladislaus IV of Hungary from Austria. The two armies fought at the Battle on the Marchfeld on 26 August 1278 where Rudolf I proved victorious and Ottokar II lay slain.

With Ottokar II's death went his favor, leaving the Austrian towns that once supported him and received his patronage to grapple with their muddled allegiances. Ottokar II's supporters in Freistadt found themselves conflicted, though merchants seldom sit idly and watch lucrative opportunities roll past. Freistadt's leadership relied on the city's Babenburg city charter, which the Babenburgs designed to endure indefinitely, though Freistadt's merchants knew that Rudolf I could revoke privileges based upon Freistadt's perceived loyalty.

Needless to say, even before Ottokar II's death, Freistadt trod on treacherous ground. Almost exactly one year after Ottokar II's final visit to Freistadt, before his death on the Marchfeld, the pragmatic leaders of Freistadt renounced all allegiances to him.

They pragmatically and fervently pledged their allegiance to Rudolf I, not only in an attempt to preserve the privileges the city received from the Babenburgs but also to curry favor with whom they anticipated would claim the throne. On August 7, 1277, Rudolf I proclaimed to his subjects in Freistadt that

His Majesty Rudolf, King of the Romans by the grace of God [and] all faithful to the Holy Roman Empire, [proclaim] these letters. His Majesty considers graciously the pious and mutually beneficial requests and announces to all peoples with the testimony of this conformation that His Majesty's dear subjects of [Freistadt], whose affection towards His Majesty is most evident, bestows his grace that all merchants, no matter where they hail, shall compulsorily deposit their [wares in Freistadt], and His Majesty instructs his subjects to maintain all granted liberties and rights on the water and on the land, which they so graciously received from the Austrian Dukes, Leopold, and Friedrich. No man is therefore permitted to violate these concessions and confirmations of His Majesty in any way. But if this should occur, the displeasure of His Majesty [shall be known]. Confirmed with His Majesty's seal in Vienna dated, August 7, 1277, in the fourth year of His Majesty's enlightened reign.

Rudolf I's decree proved monumentally beneficial to the longevity of Freistadt as a center for mercantilism for centuries to come. In his decree, Rudolf I also mentioned the "most evident" loyalty of the citizens which further supports the idea that the city's leaders showed shrewd political tact when it came to their concepts of loyalty, enriching not only the crown but the city's merchants. Rewarding Freistadt for its prudence, Rudolf I reconfirmed the Babenburg's charter, namely, the right to self-government and the residents' rights over the land, though Rudolf I also expanded upon the city's immovable rights.

Much as Ottokar II and the Babenburgs before him, Rudolf I saw the potential of Freistadt as a border redoubt but more vitally as a mercantile competitor to the freshly constructed České Budějovice and other Bohemian cities, an outcome which Ottokar II quite rightly feared. To further Freistadt's market powers, Rudolf I granted Freistadt so-called rights of warehousing or stabling, which, according to his proclamation, required all merchants traveling through Freistadt to warehouse their goods within the city and make their goods available for sale for a set period of time.

This endowed Freistadt's merchants class with a recklessly appointed trade monopoly, which long stood unmatched by any town in either Mühlviertel or neighboring Bohemia for over three centuries. With a single decree, Rudolf I artificially elevated Freistadt as a regional hegemony.

While Freistadt gained much in terms of trade, the city not only maintained but expanded its relative self-rule, which it held from its founding onward. Even during Babenburg rule though, the Duke of Austria appointed *Burgrafen* or burgraves to oversee the city on their behalf.

Freistadt's growing wealth brought with it social status drawing the attention of the aristocracy. The appointed position of burgrave in Freistadt served as a lucrative posting considering that the city's lengthy heritage of burgraves passed through many local noble families.

Records show Otto II von Zelking-Schöneck as the first Habsburg-appointed burgrave of Freistadt in 1288 though, just two years later, Duke Albrecht I (r. 1283-1308) pledged Freistadt and the whole of Mühlviertel to the brothers Eberhardt IV and Heinrich I von Waldsee. One of the city's most famous burgraves though, Hans von Traun (c. 1320-1370), served as burgrave twice, from 1328-1331, and regained the title of burgrave in 1358 when Duke Rudolf IV (r. 1358-1365) requisitioned oversight of Freistadt from the von Wallsee noble family, bestowing stewardship of the town back to the aging von Traun.

While the noble burgraves of Freistadt held lucrative positions stewarding Freistadt on behalf of the reigning monarch, the city's true governance and therefore its prosperity rested solely with its merchant-led *Ratsherrn* or city council. The first documentary mention of Freistadt's city council dates to 1354, though some form of council-based governance existed much earlier. The inner city council consisted of eight members, elected by the landed merchant class. Prominent men within Freistadt's merchant class always formed the constituency of members for its council. The council biweekly in city hall, under the mayor's chairmanship, and maintained justification over all issues that beset the city.

Despite Freistadt's city council and elites' qualified exemption from aristocratic feudalism, their government hardly resembled democracy. The council often and loudly refused to hear petitions from craftspeople and other free peasants living within Freistadt's jurisdiction, which eventually fomented classist resentments that resulted in the eventual establishment of an eight-membered outer city council, beginning in 1516, which drew members from the wider male citizenry and held jurisdiction over matters of little consequence to the inner council.



Freistadt's city seal circa 1300, saying in Latin "seal of Freistadt's citizens"

Unsurprisingly, the inner council often found itself more concerned with matters of a more economic persuasion. For most of Freistadt's history, the goods that merchants transported through Freistadt remained the same: salt and iron. Of the two, salt proved the most reliably profitable considering that Austria's northern and eastern neighbors, namely Bohemia and Poland, contained hardly any natural salt deposits within their borders. Originally, salt mined in Upper Austria came from the regions of Ausee and Admont, though logistical issues hampered transit.

Around 1300, the Habsburgs assumed ownership over the salt mines in the region around Hallstatt called Kammergut, increasing their production. For centuries thereafter, the majority of salt mined around Kammergut passed through Freistadt on its journey to salt-deficient lands. Salt formed the most expensive, regulated, essential, and therefore profitable commodity for Freistadt's merchants, so much so, that sometime in the mid-14th century, the city council ordered the conversion of the Salzhof into its namesake, a castle repurposed as a warehouse to solely secure storing salt and other mercantile goods.

Behind salt, iron formed the second most profitable trade item for Freistadt. The region around the city of Steyr, located south of Linz, long mined iron ore from its surrounding mountains, smelting the ore into ingots and smithing them into iron and steel tools and weapons. While Freistadt's trading partners and competitors needed salt, they all wanted Steyr's high-quality iron. As for Freistadt's primary trading partners, merchants in Bohemia, Nuremberg, and Breslau (Wrocław) in Silesia, formed their most voracious clients, though many of Freistadt's partners and competitors, both local and foreign, looked upon the free city with envy.

On 13 May 1360, the government in Enns filed a petition to Rudolf IV regarding Freistadt's economically harmful right to warehousing. Rudolf IV ruled decisively in Freistadt's favor, instructing the people of Enns to, "leave things as they are." Despite Rudolf IV's clear position, in 1362, the government in Linz beseeched Rudolf IV seeking the dissolution of Freistadt's right to warehousing.

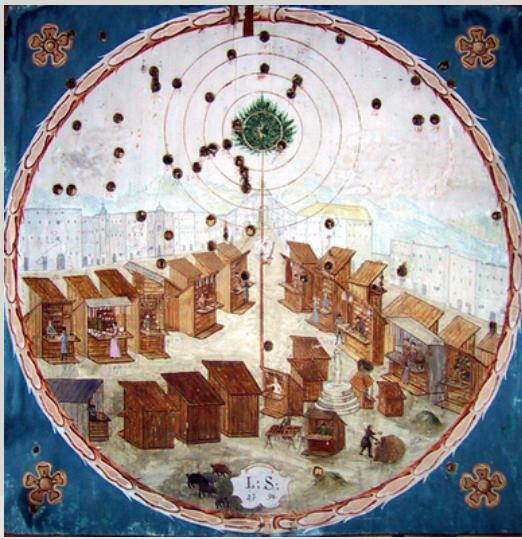


Duke Rudolf IV, oil on board, from a Prague master, around 1360

In response, on 5 June 1363, Duke Rudolf IV, in a clear act of favor toward Freistadt, granted the city the, so-called, right of mileage, allowing Freistadt the right to tax and enforce its roads, practically from Linz to the Austrian border with Bohemia. The right of mileage gave Freistadt its most expansive royal boon the city received since Rudolf I's 1277 decree nearly a century earlier, though continued Habsburg favor came with further protection and to a certain degree, closer scrutiny.

After Freistadt received the right of mileage, the city underwent transformative defensive improvements. From 1361-1396, beginning under the direct commission of Rudolf IV, Freistadt constructed a distinctly Habsburg-style castle built in the city's northeast corner, taking full advantage of the naturally present cliffside. Contrary to most Austrian cities of the Late Middle Ages though, Freistadt's castle sought not to protect the city or its citizens but its noble burgraves, aiming to retain control over the city's wealthy, influential, and often unruly merchants.

Evidence for such an odd dichotomy stems from the clear spacial separation between the castle's fortifications which cordoned it off from the city entirely, and its soaring rectangular tower which, as a clear act of supremacy, dwarfed Freistadt with its imposing shadow. While construction on the castle occurred, other fortifications within the city concurrently saw significant renovation and expansion.



Handpainted shooting target depicting Freistadt's Paulimarkt, 1794

Construction finished on the final iteration of the city's mantle wall from 1390-1393, which materialized to widen the moat. Around 1390, Freistadt masons finished construction on three additional towers: in the southeast the massive Weyermühlturn, and in the west and southwest Petringerturm and Turm im Winkel respectively. Altogether, the vigorous expansion of fortifications in Freistadt reached its conclusion by 1400.

In order to pay for the castle and other fortifications, construction that spanned four decades, Duke Rudolf IV ordered Freistadt's burgrave, Hans von Traun, to levy additional taxes on all properties in the county, proportional to each subject's land holdings, charging hefty sums for even for wealthy men. It seemed that Rudolf IV's further legal privileges in the form of the right of mileage accompanied not only more surveillance but also higher taxes. However, Freistadt's population, especially its wealthy merchants, could bear ducal scrutiny and the financial burden, and soon its population expanded beyond its castle and city walls.

In 1345, the Liebrauenkirche, or the Church of Our Lady, appears in the historical record for the first time, located just north of Böhmertor. In the late 14th century, master stonemason Frederich Schmeid declared the Church of Our Lady one of the most architecturally elegant churches in Austria, though no written record remains as to the reasons for the construction of the church. In 1354, a document regarding the church's operations mentioned that the city-funded hospital stood adjacent to the church, an institution that the city council and the wealthy, religious citizenry funded through alms and which, at least originally, Freistadt regarded with reverence.

On 15 May 1361, a Freistadt city councillor wrote to the Catholic prelate in Latin that "[in The Church of our Lady] numerous miracles occurred, both the healing of the gravely ill and the expulsion of demons." That same year, the church fell victim to fire, but the city immediately rebuilt it. As the Catholic Church established itself more tightly in Freistadt, the city's merchants sought education from the church for their children, particularly in terms of literacy and mathematics, subjects critical to mercantilism. In 1371, a trained named scribe Nyclas began serving as the first schoolmaster and town clerk of Freistadt. As early as 1404 the city constructed a purpose-built schoolhouse, located in the Mauthaus by the Salzhof.

Despite Freistadt's growing spirituality, it continued to draw not only the attention of the Habsburg Dukes but the enduring ire of its neighbors. In 1375, Freistadt petitioned Duke Albert III (r. 1365-1395) to order Lord von Zelking to refrain from legally hindering Freistadt through illegally conducting trade in nearby taverns he owned in Lasberg and Weinberg. Abrecht II agreed and said, "Don't do anything against the privileges which [Freistadt has] received." von Zelking's reprimand shows the immense power of Freistadt's privileges, however; Freistadt's monopoly applied not only to its neighbors in Mühlviertel but also to its competitors in Bohemia.

In Bohemia, a mercantile counterpoint to Freistadt formed, represented by the Lords of Rosenberg, who nearly constantly quarreled with Freistadt over its legal privileges. The Rosenbergs griped vigorously and often over Freistadt's right to enforce mercantile traffic on the roads practically between Bohemia and Linz. On 20 June 1410, Bohemian King, Wenceslaus IV (r. 1378-1419) on behalf of the Rosenbergs, sought to alter legal trade routes between Freistadt and Bohemia. Naturally, Freistadt fiercely resisted their proposed reforms since Freistadt's control over roads, tolls, and customs, by then, formed a sizeable and consistent source of the city's income. Despite Freistadt's legal retorts, merchants from neighboring Leonfelden offered to more efficiently, cheaply, and illegally transport goods to Rosenberg lands in Bohemia.

Even though the historic route from Leonfelden to Bohemia took three kilometers less, it remained legally forbidden to merchants as a result of Freistadt's privileges. Austrian or even Bohemian merchant caravans, if caught transporting trade goods from Linz to Bohemia via Leonfelden bore steep fines or even imprisonment. Under the law, the only acceptable trade route ran between Freistadt and České Budějovice, two cities near equally matched regarding their legal protections. The conflicts between Freistadt and its neighbors not only represented a deep-seated unfairness but the invaluable of the legal boons that enabled Freistadt to accrue immense material wealth over the centuries, though such regional rivalry and affluence made Freistadt a prized target.

After the gruesome immolation of Jan Hus in 1415, a violent revolt erupted in Bohemia which eventually spread to Upper Austria. The Hussite invasions of Upper Austria (c. 1420-1430) fully tested Freistadt's fortifications and the resolve of its citizens. A first, the Hussites proved tactically superior to their adversaries though, as a predominately peasant army, their ranks stood often unequipped to effectively conduct sieges.

So, in 1426, when a Hussite army arrived outside Freistadt's gates and attempted a siege, the city with its impressive fortifications and deep ladders easily outmatched their foreign foes. The Hussites' pitiful siege failed, and so they turned their ire towards the two Catholic churches outside Freistadt's walls, the aforementioned Church of Our Lady, and the Johanneskirche or St. John's Church located due south of Linzertor, looting and torching them both.

The Church of Our Lady lay in ruins over a decade; recurring threats by the Hussites delayed reconstruction, but the Hussite threat subsided around 1430, and on the southern corner of the church, the year 1447 appears on a pillar, testifying to the church's eventual reconstruction. After Hussite-caused upheaval, Freistadt's city council, understandably shaken by the palpable risk of conquest, saw the necessity for a systematic reevaluation of Freistadt's fortifications, changes that the city council found itself more than monetarily capable of financing.



*Eberhard Windeck,
the Chronicle of
Emperor Sigismund I,
1429*

Freistadt commissioned the construction of two additional city watchtowers built from 1444-1447 by the venerable master stone mason Mathes Klayndl on Freistadt's vulnerable west and south-facing ramparts respectively known as Schieblingturm and Decanthofturm. During his life, Klayndl Gothicized the two preexisting city gates, Linzertor and Böhmertor, around 1480 and Gothicized St. Catherine's Church from 1485-1501. Klayndl, perhaps more than any other single individual, deserves responsibility for the style and continuity of Freistadt's architecture.

After reconstruction and recovery, Freistadt saw piqued economic prosperity. In 1465, Freistadt hosted the Paulimarkt, a festival that lasted two weeks in January and February annually thereafter. Merchants from across Central and Eastern Europe attended, allowing Freistadt the opportunity to portray itself favorably on an international stage. The city displayed its heightened wealth primarily through the Catholic Church.

Despite only containing a little over 1000 inhabitants by the 1460s, Freistadt lavishly hosted 22 priests in its only three ornately-adorned churches. In St. Catherine's Church, Freistadt bankrolled not only the church's Gothitization but also the construction of an elaborate wooden altarpiece and ornate wooden furnishings, though the church's and the city's lavish ornamentation soon perished.

Catastrophe struck in 1507 when a fire spread throughout the city, claiming the lives of an untold score of citizens while entirely razing the city, in many tragic cases collapsing historic stone buildings to their very foundations. Klayndl, an elderly man by 1507, lived to witness his life's work desecrated; he died, a devastated man, in 1509. After the cataclysm though, Freistadt collectively pooled funds to rebuild, and as reconstruction progressed, a sense of normalcy returned to Freistadt, though it soon ended.

In 1516, fire engulfed the entire city for a second time. After the fire of 1516 though, Freistadt found itself much more sluggish to rebuild certainly considering the devastating trauma caused by the fires but also the exorbitant cost of entirely rebuilding the town, not once but twice. At the behest of the sovereign, the city constructed firewalls around many of the buildings, and adopted other measures, to prevent the further spread of fire, which worked to a great extent. As a result of Freistadt's distraction from rebuilding, the city neglected its surveillance of Leonfelden's roads.

In 1523, Freistadt's customs officials noticed a sizeable decrease in merchant traffic on its roads, despite no known drop in the production of trade goods. They discovered scores of merchant caravans traveling between Linz and Bohemia via Leonfelden's roads.

To combat the violators Freistadt relied not on a ruling of the sovereign regarding the violations but contravened themselves. In 1526, the city mustered its citizen militia to confront the violators themselves. The Bohemian caravans they encountered fought back, and in the fray of battle, one Freistadt militiaman lost his life, though the situation appeared much direr for the Bohemians.

The Freistadt militia looted their caravans while some lucky wagons succeeded in a frantic retreat across the Bohemian border into safety. Despite Freistadt's heavy-handed response, the violators doggedly persisted. In 1530, Freistadt targeted a Rosenberg caravan, which carried only luxury foods, that the lords of Rosenberg dispatched for sale at Bartholomäus market in Linz via Leonfelden.

In response, Freistadt sent 80 heavily armored, armed, and mounted militia, along with an unspecified number of mercenaries, to intercept the caravan and forcibly led them on the road to Freistadt where they humiliatingly forced them to conduct business with Freistadt's merchants instead. After such a ludicrous embarrassment suffered by the Rosenbergs and Leonfelden, Freistadt arrogantly reasserted itself as the dominant trading authority in the region at a hefty social cost.

After the 1530 raid, Leonfelden's mayor summarized the situation, facetiously calling the people of Freistadt "good companions of good faith, and [they are often] reason for lengthy and expensive bureaucracy." Leonfelden's mayor emblemized the views of many of Freistadt's proportionally disenfranchised neighbors in regard to the free city's hostile manner of conducting business. Freistadt undoubtedly strongarmed its regional, mercantile competitors through its own monopolistic policies, though violent retaliation against violating merchants only further engendered Freistadt's neighbors and competitors against them.

In 1526, the same year of Freistadt's initial raid against the Bohemian caravans, Bohemia ceded rule of its lands to the Habsburgs, relegating Freistadt's legal privileges as redundant. While the city strongarmed its economic supremacy, defensive expansions in Freistadt ground to a halt since Bohemia, Freistadt's greatest military threat and trading rival, joined with the Habsburgs. Focus shifted from expansionism toward structural repairs and technological adaptations. In their desperation to preserve the *status quo*, Freistadt not only risked stagnation but relegation. While the city's foundations, both physical and legal, remained unshakingly medieval in their nature, many in Freistadt soon proved their willingness to adapt, at least in their spirituality.

The Protestant Reformation (c. 1517-1648) soon arrived in Austria, finding a populace widely inclined to the teachings of Luther. Freistadt's wide trade relations with numerous German principalities soon brought Protestantism to the city.



Freistadt trade caravan, oil on canvas, by Herbert Wagner

In 1543, a Latin school in Freistadt appears in the historical record, the school found a suitable location directly behind St. Catherine's Church.

For the Latin school, Freistadt received a "habitation thesis," a privilege that allowed the city to hire a private lecturer from the Protestant theological faculty at the University of Vienna. With the presence of the Latin school's Protestant schoolmaster, the schoolhouse formed a vital meeting ground for Freistadt's growing Protestant community, as more citizens, especially merchants, converted to the reformed faith.

The spread of Protestant teaching deeply offended Catholic officials in Freistadt, but despite such worrying developments, in 1544, Catholic church inspectors visited Freistadt's hospital, still attached to the Church of Our Lady. The visit resulted from epidemics of the bubonic plague that ravaged Freistadt, claiming hundreds of lives in 1541 and 1562, and the inspectors railed against the appalling lack of amenities within the hospital.

The visit resulted from epidemics of the bubonic plague that ravaged Freistadt, claiming hundreds of lives in 1541 and 1562, and the inspectors railed against the appalling lack of amenities within the hospital. The Church instituted reforms that improved conditions for the ill and infirm and renovated the hospital as a whole. After the Catholic inspectors' visit, many Catholics within Freistadt complained about the presence of a Protestant teacher in the city.

In response, the city council issued the following statement, claiming that, "the [Catholic] vicar allowed this to happen. It is not within the jurisdiction of the mayor or city council to interfere in religious matters. Nothing has promoted the successful spread of Reformationist teachings more than the inability of the Catholic clergy to adapt to the [rapidly] evolving intellectual currents." While the city council rested blame squarely on the ineffectiveness of Catholic clergy in Freistadt, their subsequent decisions proved the flimsiness of their supposed neutrality.

By the Peace of Augsburg, in 1555, the majority of the Upper Austrian nobility converted to Protestantism; collectively they owned 217 castles and estates, 81 markets, and five cities. The tenets of the Reformation appealed to nobles and peasants alike, though it remained commonplace for feudal lords to forcibly convert their subjects to the religion of their choice. Among the relatively free-minded merchants of Freistadt, the Protestant community grew steadily of their own volition.

The endemic poor performance, and even baser behavior, of consecutive Catholic priests in Freistadt, formed the dominant reason for Freistadt's discontent with the Catholic Church. For example, in 1557, the city council found one priest complicit regarding a fire in his home, another they accused of instigating a brawl while armed with a dagger, and another married and "provoked God's wrath," but worst of all, the citizens of Freistadt found all their sermons unbearably boring.



Portrait of Bishop Urban von Trennbach, oil on board, 1564

In response to such blatant ineptitude, despite the city council's previous abstention from religious matters, they hired the city's first Protestant minister in 1567—though Catholic priests and Protestant pastors preached in Freistadt simultaneously for a time. The Protestant preacher, a man named Heiss, though he also referred to himself as Faber, hailed from Aigen in Upper Mühlviertel, possessed sufficient theological experience according to the city council, ingratiating himself with them, and received from them a hefty benefice and lodgings, not only for himself but also for his wife and children.

During his Christmas sermon of 1568, his evangelical rhetoric offended those in Freistadt of more Catholic sensibility, who then reported Heiss to the Bishop of Passau, Urban von Trennbach (r. 1561-1598). Freistadt's city council attempted to pacify Bishop von Trennbach, with pitiful attempts at compromise, but the Bishop von Trennbach, much like his predecessors centuries prior, sought to maintain religious as well as economic influence in Freistadt, and while the city's pleadings tenuously sufficed Heiss died unceremoniously in 1573 before Bishop von Trennbach reached any meaningful settlement. Freistadt found successors to Heiss in the pastors, Georg Eder, an evangelical zealot who began preaching in the city in 1575, and Andreas Pucher, a trained theologian from Dresden.

Eder frequently butted heads with Freistadt's Catholic clergy and Bishop von Trennbach, an open revolt even sparked against Eder in neighboring, Catholic-majority Neumarkt im Mühlkreis, though, despite Eder's religious ardor, he garnered majority approval from Freistadt's Protestants, who by then, formed over half the city's population.

In 1579, Freistadt's city council rewarded Eder's evangelical efforts bestowing upon him complete control over Freistadt's three largest churches St. Catherine's, St. Peter's, and the Church of Our Lady, along with its recently renovated hospital. During the remainder of his tenure, Eder continually fought over control of Freistadt with the Catholic Church, though despite his many detractors, Eder drastically increased the hold of Protestantism in Freistadt, while decisively diminishing the influence of Catholicism.

The Protestant clergy that followed Eder and Pucher after their deaths hardly reached their paragon discipline. Protestant clergy continued to preach openly within Freistadt, though Bishop von Trennbach routinely attempted to legally hinder Protestant activities. In 1589, Bishop von Trennbach summoned Freistadt's protestant preacher, Andreas Strum, on trumped-up charges to Passau, temporarily imprisoning him, during which time Bishop von Trennbach installed a loyal Catholic priest in Freistadt, which the city resisted vehemently.

After Strum's gross mistreatment, Catholic priests cycled through hostile Freistadt at Passau's behest, as the city, and the province at large veered toward an even steeper Protestant majority. On December 7, 1597, the Reformation Commission met to discuss the spread of Protestantism in Austrian lands, under the chairmanship of the aged Bishop von Trennbach. On the same day, the governor of Upper Austria and the auxiliary Bishop of Passau traveled to Freistadt and forcibly assembled the city government and prominent citizenry, demanding that all Protestant clergy depart the city immediately, that all churches revert to Catholic control, and that the city relinquish the Latin School to the Catholic Church.

The mayor and the city council debated their unyielding demands through the night. Early the next morning, the city council attempted to exploit a legal loophole asserting that the Catholic Church only held jurisdiction over Neumarkt im Mühlkreis's parish rather than Freistadt, though their argument failed, and Freistadt's mayor caved to the Reformation Commission's extensive demands, thus ending the "evangelical experiment" in Freistadt, at least officially.

Despite the inconvenient, official absence of Protestant clergy, by 1600, Freistadt still maintained an explicit Protestant majority. Notably, from 1607 to 1617, not a single Freistadt resident listed themselves as Catholic within St. Catherine's Church baptismal registry. While Freistadt's population certainly consisted of mostly Protestants, a Catholic minority remained within the city, and the two denominations coexisted peacefully up until 1624.

Catholics living in Freistadt likely took suitable baptismal candidates to the nearby towns of Neumarkt im Mühlkreis or Hirschbach since their communities still remained Catholic. Aside from the religious and political tensions though, Freistadt's recovery from the fires of 1507 and 1516, the bubonic epidemics of 1541 and 1562, and the Habsburg incorporation of Bohemia in 1526 seemed remarkable. Freistadt's cumulative trade for 1623—a truly tumultuous year for the Habsburgs and the Holy Roman Empire—accounted among the most profitable in the city's venerable history, tallying to a grand total of 38,985 florins, though prosperity rarely endures long.

When Emperor Ferdinand II (r. 1619-1637), a vehemently Catholic Habsburg, ascended as King of the Romans in 1619, he inflamed religious tension across the Holy Roman Empire through his counter-reformationist dogma, thus igniting the Thirty Years War. After costly Imperial victories in 1620, Ferdinand II bequeathed the lands of Upper Austria to Bavarian Elector Maximilian I (c. 1620-1628), in hopes that the Catholic, Bavarian presence would reform the Protestant-majority region. In 1623, the Bavarians, under the leadership of Count Adam von Herberstorff, commenced their occupation of Upper Austria in earnest.

To assist the Bavarians with re-catholicization, in 1624, Ferdinand II proclaimed the Reformation Patent which, in two separate decrees, ordered unilaterally that all Protestant pastors and schoolmasters leave Upper Austria within eight days or face legal persecution. In over 20 parishes across Mühlviertel, Protestant preachers, rightly fearing for their lives, promptly left their congregations, widely angering the Protestant populace.

In Frankenburg am Hausruck, the Bavarian administration expelled a popular Protestant preacher from his pulpit. The peasants of Frankenburg revolted, briefly besieging Frankenburg's provincial castle; however, the Bavarians expeditiously assembled an armed response. Von Heberstorff promised the Frankenburg rebels amnesty if they immediately desisted, and while the rebels ended the siege, von Heberstorff broke his word.

On May 15, 1625, von Herberstorff held a court to judge the rebels. Amidst a large audience, von Heberstorff gathered 36 suspected rebel ring-leaders and paired them off, informing them that he condemned them to death, much to the immense shock of the crowd. Von Heberstorff, though, notified the condemned that he would pardon half of them, deciding their fates with a roll of dice.

Left without a choice, the rebels played their games of chance, after which, the Bavarians immediately lynched the 16 losers. Von Heberstorff hoped that the "Frankenburg Dice Game," as the embittered locals referred to it, would quell rebellion; the opposite proved true. After the atrocities in Frankenburg, peasants and nobles alike, across Upper Austria, launched preparations for an organized revolt. Before the planned date of the revolt, in Lembach im Mühlkreis, the local Bavarian garrison stole a horse from a local peasant. Alerted to the theft, a group of rebellious peasants on pilgrimage retaliated against the Bavarian garrison, killing 25 men. Thereafter, the populace revolted openly, initiating the Upper Austrian Peasant's Revolt.



Facsimile portrait of Count Adam von Heberstorff, Rudolf Lehr, Landeschronik Oberösterreich



Posthumous portrait of Stefan Fadinger, Schlossmuseum Linz

A leader of the Revolt emerged in Stefan Fadinger, a wealthy aristocrat from Parz, Upper Austria. From May 1626 onward, the peasant armies, under Fadinger and other noble leaders, harried and besieged many of the Bavarian-controlled cities across Upper Austria including Eferding, Kremsmünster, Freistadt, and eventually even Linz.

By the end of May, the rebels elected Christof Zeller, Fadinger's brother-in-law, as governor of Mühlviertel, raising an army to drive out the Bavarians from their homeland.

In Freistadt, the citizens handled their disgruntlement against the Bavarian presence more judiciously. In early 1626, over 1,000 Protestants in Freistadt signed a petition against the Bavarian occupation.

Freistadt's population amounted to about 2,000 inhabitants, and still, about half of the city signed the Protestant-backed petition. The Catholic Church worried about the trajectory of Freistadt so much so that they sent a missionary named Falbius there. He shared his thoughts as to the religious demeanor of Freistadt's citizens in a letter to the prelate of Linz on April 23, 1626.

Since April 9 [I] found the people [of Freistadt] rougher and more stubborn about converting [to the Catholic faith] than in Enns; that is natural since they bordered so much closer to Bohemia. But it is more their desperate situation than malice that makes them insensitive. [I] shall not be deterred [by this.] [...] Only through [the] love of eternal life and fear of hell could the listeners be moved. 10 people have promised conversions, and 17 want further instruction. The remaining citizens are thinking of emigrating.

To Falbius, the residents of Freistadt appeared "stubborn," even arrogant, in terms of their spiritual convictions, judging not only by his curt assessment but also by the city's legal opposition to Bavarian governance. Despite Freistadt's often antagonistic position toward the Catholic Church, the merchants of Freistadt saw the open rebellion against the Bavarians as detrimental to the continuance of trade and open borders, and therefore, at least initially, restricted their support for the Revolt.



Engraving of the 1626 Siege of Linz, Landesbibliothek Linz

While the Revolt included leaders and supporters amongst the local aristocracy, as the name accurately suggests, the rebel soldiery consisted of peasants, hailing from across the province. Surely the wealthy merchants in Freistadt sought to distance themselves from such a populist movement not just on economic but classist grounds. As Freistadt's leaders grappled with their allegiances, an army of rebels, under the military leadership of the nobleman Hans Christoph Hayden von Dorf, marched northward toward Freistadt.

Alerted to the incoming enemy, the Bavarian-appointed military commander in Freistadt, Captain Albrecht Sokolowsky, commanded a mere 150 Bavarian soldiers to defend the city in the increasing likelihood of a siege. His cumulative forces also included Freistadt's militia who remained religiously and politically opposed to their Bavarian commanders.

While Freistadt outwardly stood prepared for a siege with its substantial medieval battlements; the city's inhabitants stood wholly unprepared, considering the city's endemic shortages in sundries and critical deficiencies in munitions. Hayden von Dorf's army's speedy arrival allowed Freistadt scant time to prepare; they arrived on May 26, 1626, and during the protracted siege that followed, two detailed accounts survive.

The first originates from Johann Neurittiger, Freistadt's Protestant town clerk, who kept a diary from 28 May to 16 August 1626. The second account comes from Dr. David Corner a Franciscan monk from Göttweig who, after narrowly surviving the siege, wrote a report to the prelate recounting his experience. Both accounts provide invaluable insights into the details of the siege, though both authors certainly held their biases considering that each held opposing ideological views and, to a great degree, supported opposite factions.

Neurittiger wrote regarding the arrival of the peasant army that, "as early as May 29, the city was requested in writing to declare whether or not it intended to act benevolently toward the rebellious peasants, or whether other means would be necessary." Neurittiger suggested that the rebels initially refrained from outright hostility, considering Freistadt's Protestant leanings.

Dr. Corner estimated the number of peasant soldiers surrounding Freistadt around 4,000; however, other sources approximate the number of besiegers between 8,000 to 10,000 combatants. While the precise number of besiegers remains unknown, the number fluctuated daily considering that a great many of them lived nearby.

For example, many besiegers hailed from the nearby village of Rainbach and commuted home to their families each night. The eagerness of the local peasantry to participate in the siege against Freistadt certainly corresponded to the Bavarian military presence there, but it also stemmed from their classist-minded resentments toward Freistadt's merchants.

Captain Sokolowsky and Freistadt's Catholic Mayor, Georg Pader, promptly refused Hayden von Dorf's magnanimous request to join them, even though the majority of Freistadt supported a peaceful relinquishment of the city. After the refusal of Hayden von Dorf's demands, Nurittiger wrote that "the rebels then took up positions and quarters in the suburbs on Saturday night, May 30th. Soon their sentinels appeared near the city walls and gates, marching around the city and shouting threats against the citizenry [that were behind the walls]." Any hostilities though remained nonviolent and a week-long stand-off ensued.

On 8 June though, Hayden von Dorf and his closest officers rode up to each moated corner of Freistadt and read the following declaration: "All those who want to buy a writ of passage, including women and children, and [even] soldiers, may leave the city. No harm shall befall them. After that, the peasants shall occupy [Freistadt]. Should this not happen, the peasantry shall attack and conquer the city [...] by force of arms." Hayden von Dorf gave the city 24 hours to decide, but he received no reply, so the siege commenced.

On 10 June, the rebels set fires to outlying wooden buildings surrounding the moat and began shelling the city walls. The Bavarian defenders of Freistadt immediately returned with cannon and musket fire aimed at the redoubts and entrenchments that the rebels previously dug around the moat. The rebels attempted to scale the walls on repeated attempts throughout the siege, but each time the Bavarians and Freistadt militia repelled their assaults. From June 14 until June 19, Captain Sokolowsky and Pader held negotiations with Hayden von Dorf but, neither side showed any sign of compromise, so the negotiations failed, and the siege continued.

After the unsuccessful negotiations, a second stalemate took hold. On 30 June, the rebels restarted digging entrenchments sound the city and, Captain Sokolowsky, a stubborn man, again returned fire, though carelessness cut his campaign short. On the morning of 1 July, while standing proudly atop Böhmertor's battlements, a marksman's bullet found purchase in the center of Sokolowsky's forehead, killing him instantly.

The loss of his leadership, the increasing intensity of rebel counteroffensives, the growing support for the rebels among Freistadt's citizens as the siege dragged on, and dwindling supplies led to the conquest of the city the same day. No one knows exactly who opened the city gates to the rebels, but once they entered, it spelled chaos.

Freistadt's castle fell victim first to the rebels; as they looted it mercilessly, Dr. Corner, other unfortunate Catholic clergy, and the remaining Bavarian defenders sought shelter within the castle's chapel but the rebels soon broke down the doors. Dr. Corner wrote of the assault that "everything was taken from me, my habit, my scriptures, my holy books, and especially my breviary [,] only my life were left [to me.] Some of the townsfolk and farmers who had heard my sermons saved my life." After the peasants thoroughly looted the castle, they looted the city hall and private homes owned by Catholics.

Not all Catholics in Freistadt garnered the same good fortune as Dr. Corner. By the time the peasants conquered Freistadt, Mayor Pader lay on his deathbed, the result of an unknown illness. The rebels ransacked his house, bludgeoned him in the head, and threw him out of bed; he died soon after. The rampaging rebels harried other unlucky Catholics, pillaging their property across the city.

Once Hayden von Dorf's army properly secured the pillaged Freistadt, they held it for a little over a month, during which time Protestant clergy preached openly in town once more. Hayden von Dorf reasonably expected retaliation from the Bavarians for capturing such a strategic stronghold as Freistadt, and so with what meager supplies they held, they reequipped the city for defense.

Hayden von Dorf then ordered the construction of massive entrenchments along the northward-facing Kerchbaum Pass, attempting to shield Freistadt from anticipated Bohemian aggression. All measures proved prudent strategies considering that Imperial reinforcements gathered in Hohenfurth, Bohemia, under the leadership of Colonel Preuner, to repel the peasants from Freistadt.

On 6 August, Colonel Preuner led approximately 1,000 cavalry and trained infantry through Kerschbaum Pass, and after three days of desperate combat, Colonel Preuner's troops proved victorious, and around 1,000 rebel dead lay scattered across the entrenchments and open ground of the hilly battlefields, decomposing in the sweltering summer heat.

Once Colonel Preuner's army occupied Freistadt, they arrested Protestant clergy and Freistadt's rebel collaborators. They also apprehended Hayden von Dorf, and records show him incarcerated in Linz until the end of 1627, though his fate afterward remains unknown. Needless to say, the Revolt failed. In Linz, Fadinger died and his outmatched army surrendered on July 5. On 9 November, the Bavarians won another decisive victory near Eferding, defeating the last rebel holdouts. During the Revolt, some 12,000 rebels lost their lives. Afterwards saw a worrying shift in Bavarian policy leaning heavily toward absolutism without any relentment in the persecution of Protestants, partially as further punishment for the Revolt.

From 1626 onward, as a result of the Counter-Reformation, an estimated 100,000 Protestants fled Upper Austria for Protestant principalities in Germany and elsewhere.

In Freistadt, the Counter-Reformation saw 207 men choose exile as opposed to forced conversion; however, since the registry of protestant exiles only included the names and destinations of the patriarch of each household, the number of exiles stood significantly higher, since the list omitted women, children, and other subordinate relatives. While the exact number of exiles remains unknown, anywhere between 400-600 people left Freistadt practically overnight. The registry also shows that the majority of Freistadt's Protestants resettled in the Protestant cities of Franconia, such as Bamberg, Wurtzberg, and Bayreuth.

Only Freistadt's wealthy Protestants could afford exile though, upon leaving Upper Austria, exiles forcibly paid an accrued 10% of the valuation of all their property to the state. Naturally, many of Freistadt's less fortunate Protestant residents lacked the wealth and influence to emigrate, and many Protestant families in Freistadt converted to Catholicism or practiced their chosen faith secretly. In a secluded residential cellar near the city's main square, numerical symbols and equally spaced sconces adorn the cellar's four walls. The function of such an uncanny altar remains unknown, though one popular theory suggests that it served as a secret Protestant chapel after the Counter-Reformation.

The Protestant exiles unwittingly and irreparably damaged Freistadt's economic capacity, especially coupled with the unfortunate loss of Freistadt's long-standing legal privileges, which officially reverted to the restored Habsburg state in 1628. After the violent quelling of the Revolt, the Thirty Years War still raged, and endemic conflicts across Habsburg lands meant a continued military presence in Upper Austria.

Soldiers, mercenaries, and bandits alike frequently plundered Freistadt for its remaining riches, and by the end of the Thirty Years War, Freistadt lay bare, stripped of its material wealth. One out of every three houses in Freistadt lay ransacked and vacant, and the city lacked any reasonable incentives to stimulate repopulation. Such a dramatic and all-encompassing fall from grace precluded the city's ability to emulate its former glories.

At Freistadt's economic and cultural height, it rivaled even Linz, though the Danube's course remains constant, while overland trade routes remain beholden to changes in politics and the malleability of borders. After the reversion of Freistadt's legal privileges to the Habsburgs and the catastrophic material and political ravages of the Thirty Years War, Freistadt stood as the most insignificant of its neighbors in Upper Austria: Enns, Steyr, Gmunden, Vöcklabruck, and the provincial capital, Linz.

The fact that Freistadt prospered in trade, politics, and culture for four centuries is a testament to Freistadt's prudence and resolve. The immense and arguably reckless privileges that Freistadt received from Rudolf I in 1277 and expanded by Rudolf IV in 1363, positioned Freistadt as the most privileged and wealthy trading town in Mühlviertel; however, Freistadt's city council and merchants rightfully claim responsibility for expanding and prolonging the city's prosperity, despite repeated catastrophe and hawkish competitors, asserting that, at least for a time, the city existed as free, even more than its name might suggest.

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About the Author

Historian and writer, Dylan Thomas Mask hails from Charlotte, North Carolina, and received a Bachelor of Arts in History and German from Guilford College in 2020. He served in Freistadt as an English Teaching Assistant at BG/BRG, HAK/HTL, and HLK/HLW, administered by Fulbright Austria, from 2021-2023. Dylan currently pursues a Master of Arts in Comparative History at Central European University, Vienna with aspirations of a career writing and teaching history.