

by Duncan J.D. Smith

Visitors seem well-versed in the lore of the Stephansdom. They know roughly where and what it is: a 900-year-old cathedral in the city centre dedicated to the first Christian martyr. But all too many make a beeline for the interior. In so doing they miss some of the building's more curious features.

A pagan site

There is no better description of the Stephansdom than as a shining limestone reef rising above a sea of lesser buildings. Bristling with carved ornament, it was begun in 1137, and consecrated a century later. Until 1732, it was surrounded by a cemetery, and as constructions proceeded the gravestones became part of the building itself.

But why build the Stephansdom here in the first place?

The answer lies inside the main portal: Here you'll find a Roman gravestone – an example of the deliberate inclusion of building elements from an older, pagan site of worship. The cathedral builders were respecting, but also neutralising, the old gods. Rather more prosaic is the meaning behind the iron bars left of the portal. They are official measures, or *Ells*, once used in the cloth and building trades.

Lore and legend

Moving around to the north side, the cathedral leaves the crowds behind and evokes a different history. Work on the stumpy Adlerturm was halted in 1511 when money and manpower

STONES OF VIENNA

Roman graves, Turkish cannonballs, Chinese foliage and Nazi resistance symbols mark the exterior of this house of God

Cathedral Curiosities History Lines St. Stephen's

were diverted to the city walls, in preparation for what was to be the First Turkish Siege. Local legend, however, insists that master mason Hans Puchbaum had made a deal with Satan for his artistry and then fell from the scaffolding to his death.

Opinions differ over the iron handle at the foot of the tower. The local Fiaker drivers believe it was part of a hoist; or perhaps it was a sanctuary handle affording protection to minor felons. Beyond,

at the north-east corner of the cathedral, stands the Gothic pulpit from which Saint John of Capistrano preached a crusade against the Ottomans in 1546, whilst alongside it is the exit from the cathedral catacombs, where in 1791 the body of Mozart was dispatched to a pauper's grave.

Tree of Heaven

The cathedral's east end is adorned with soberer monuments, including a statue of Christ

Until 1732, the cathedral was surrounded by a cemetery and as construction proceeded, the gravestones were repurposed as pieces of the building itself.



A Chinese Ailanthus, or Tree of Heaven, climbs the side of the church Photo: Duncan Smith

in what looks like agonising pain, affectionately known as *Jesus of the Toothache*. The antidote is on the cathedral's sunny south side, where a Chinese Ailanthus, or Tree of Heaven, is growing out of the wall, recalling the time when Austrian Jesuits attempted to establish a silk industry in the city with a hardy species of silk moth that feeds on Ailanthus leaves.

Skirting the south tower, gaze upwards. Here you can see a cannonball embedded in the middle buttress of the nave, one of a thousand catapulted at the cathedral during the Second Turkish Siege in 1683, with the date inscribed beneath it. The south side terminates with the Singertor, perhaps named after the battered tomb of a court minstrel lying alongside. This entrance was used by men when the nave was segregated, which might explain the surprising carved phallus atop one of the pilasters flanking the main portal: a helpful signpost when illiteracy was the norm!

Symbols of resistance

Rounding the final corner to re-approach the main entrance, you come upon several reminders of the dark days of World War II. One is a lantern in memory of the prelate Karl Raphael Dorr, who facilitated the reconstruction of the cathedral after it caught fire in 1945, and a second, the blackened stone nearby with a Cyrillic inscription honouring the Red Army's securing the cathedral during their liberation of the city. Helping the Allies' "underground" was the Austrian Resistance, whose secret symbol 'O5' (the first two letters of Österreich when spelt without an Umlaut) is carved to the right of the entrance. ♦

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