

St. Peter – one of Viennas eldest churches?

A new approach to an old question

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Abstract: The church of St. Peter in the first district of Vienna is a baroque building with a well-known date of completion. On the contrary, it's nowadays nearly thoroughly vanished predecessor first mentioned in 1137 was of unknown origin. Its history dated probably back to early high medieval or – as some do suggest – even Roman times.

Especially the assumption of Roman roots derives from one small detail, shown in a plan carried out in the year 1676. The original being lost, the only information concerning the churches floor plan is preserved in a copy published in the year 1872. This very copy shows a few stairs leading – as it seems – down to a deeper located floor, a situation quite unusual for a church. Research from the end of the 19th century onward interpreted this supposed condition as a strong hint, if not a proof of reused remnants. Probably some kind of luxurious tessellated floor – once part a prestigious Roman building – was preserved as the medieval churches floor. This as a result had a strong influence on the discussion of the churches date of origin. The idea of the roman floor became equated with an early date of construction probably between the 9th and the 10th century.

Two excavations were carried out very close to the walls of the baroque church, the last one in 2007 – the mystery of age and origin remained unsolved.

This new research approach tries to incorporate all information that could be deemed from the 19th century onwards to have a new look on the excavation work that was done, including small rescue excavations and observations. Find and feature levels were compared to each other to ascertain or to discard the situation of a potential reuse of Roman remains. As this theory was based on the assumption of the deeper lying floor, it was inevitable to demystify the Plan of 1676. A new concept concerning the particular levels of find and feature in and around the church had to be thought of.

Finally only by working on the whole complex of archaeological, geological and written sources the church of St. Peter's medieval predecessor in its setting can undergo reevaluation.

Keywords: Reuse of roman remnants – church and settlement area – cemetery

Introduction

In the bygone century Vienna's historical tradition believed the church of St. Peter in the first district to be one of the oldest medieval churches at the very least in the cities old centre if not in all of Vienna. More than that: the church was considered to be the nucleus of an early settlement cell. This is strange enough, because the building we are looking at nowadays is squarely baroque (Fig. 1). There are no visible traces of a medieval predecessor, although it is well known that there was an earlier medieval building quite in the

same place, probably completely replaced by the early modern church. This older church was first mentioned in 1137 and – quite contrary to the baroque building – is of unknown origin.



Fig. 1 – The baroque church of St. Peter in Vienna's first district.

Whenever the beginning of medieval settlement activities becomes the focus of interest the question of St. Peter's medieval origin is of increasing significance. A settlement nucleus going back to the turn of the 9th to 10th century in the north eastern corner of the former roman fortification is generally accepted, a second

nucleus of similar age probably surrounding the old church of St. Peter has long been a matter of archaeological and historical discussion and interest (PERGER/BRAUNEIS 1977, 18f; OPPL 2010, 224). Up to now four very different lines of argumentation were used to support the idea of a very early medieval origin of old St. Peter, a beginning that was probably rooted in a roman predecessor: First there is the churches quite unusual north-south orientation (OPPL 2010, 221), second the churches patronage (PERGER/BRAUNEIS 1977, 19f; BRUNNER 1994, 400) and third the fact that the church is mentioned in 1137 prominently (PERGER/BRAUNEIS 1977, 20) in the contract of Mautern, a treaty, that is describing an exchange of property. The fourth and probably most important point – especially from an archaeological point of view – is the idea of a deeper lying church floor, constructing a certain and overwhelming tableau out of almost nothing: the image of an impressive roman predecessor and a medieval church rising like a phoenix reborn out of its late antique precursors remnants. The main source for this theory was the earlier mentioned construction detail, shown in a plan carried out in the year 1676. After the original got lost in fire, the only information concerning the churches floor plan is preserved in a copy published in the year 1872 (CAMESINA 1872, fig. 5). The copy depicts the apsis and on each side of the church a flight of stairs (Fig. 2). As mentioned before, this was the main argument supporting the idea of an unusually early building period of the church between the 9th and the 10th century or even earlier.

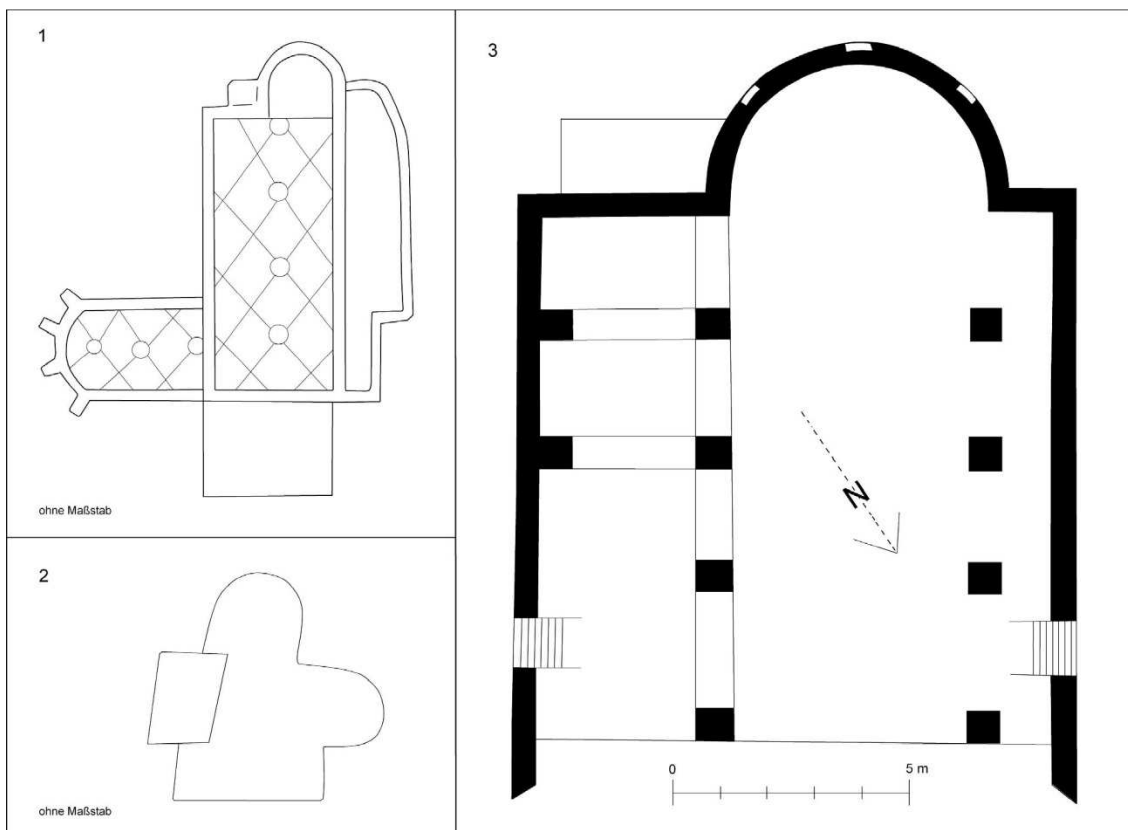


Fig. 2 – Ground view of the vanished medieval church. The right hand depiction published by Comesina showing two flights of stairs, placed on opposite sides of the churches nave.

To clarify the situation and encourage further research it was inevitable to look at those different lines of argumentation closer to liberate and encourage a discussion, which had gone stuck in repetition and

dangerous routine void of new impulses (GAISBAUER 2012).

The north-south orientation

The unusual north south orientation of the church, diverging clearly from the usual and expected east-west adjustment is quite evident. There are at least a few depictions and maps that confirm the special state of orientation. They show the medieval church with its entrance to the north and the apsis to the south.

Adherent to the east side of the church, there is the dominating chapel of St. Valentine and connected to the Apsis a smaller and less prominent annexe of unknown use.

As to the idea of remnants of a prominent roman building causing this strange aberrant orientation: a lot of research concerning the roman fortress had been done over the last ten and more years, but there was no reliable hint of any that important roman building in the respective area.

So the main question is, if there is any chance that the orientation derives from medieval conditions. It would not be too far-fetched to think of the Churches entrance having been directed towards the developing settlement structure. This line of argumentations distinct weakness is but, that differentiated knowledge of the surrounding structures in the progression of the different medieval periods is not available at the moment (GAISBAUER 2010). Building archaeology has only recently begun to present results about prevailing structures, while excavations in their dependency on building activities could offer no new ideas on this topic. The patronage of St. Peter

The use of St. Peter as a patronage is said to go back to the 9th or 11th century. So the patronage is pointing as well to a very early building period, as well as to an in comparison unspectacular beginning in high medieval times (CSENDES 2001, 65f; PERGER/BRAUNEIS 1977, 19f). There is no way to decide which approach is more valid which leaves every researcher in urgent need of further decision guidance.

The contract of Mautern

The contract of Mautern is mostly used to emphasise an early building period of old St. Peter. As a matter of fact this naming in 1137 is but a proof that the church existed by that time and nothing more, which is not surprising at all. The mentioning in this contract does nothing more than stating existence, it does not offer any further information concerning the churches real age.

The theory of a deeper lying church floor – A closer examination of the surrounding surface levels

In most and far less prominent cases the discussion of an unexpected floor level would start with a closer look at the surrounding area and presumptive anomalies of the surface levels.

Two drilling profiles did not help any further in understanding the sequence of surrounding stratigraphy, so the attention had to shift towards the excavation results, regardless of their age or quality. In connection with archaeological efforts around 1900 there is report about a certain depression close to or even engulfing the medieval church. This depression was called “valle lactis” in high medieval times (1295-1307), which seems to refer to the prominent depth of this surface condition (KENNER 1907, 27). Even in a 3D land Modell of the 19th century a slight bruise in the surface is discernible. So it might be possible, that the church was built on

uneven ground, building measures taking the differing level into account, when preparing the church floor (Wien Museum, Schausammlung Inv. – Nr. 31.020)

It should also be taken into consideration, that the surrounding cemetery area must have had some influence on the circumjacent surface.

Excursus: the cemetery around St. Peter

Like in many similar archaeological situations with proof of a medieval church and a corresponding cemetery, research tends to see every grave and even the smallest and most indefinite human remain related to this Christian, medieval graveyard. A certain tendency to omit other possibilities such as prehistoric or roman burials is obvious. While there is generally no argument to object a prehistoric approach, the roman origin of burials is normally to be excluded because of the fact that St. Peter was built on the territory of the former roman fortress. As roman settlement/military area and roman cemetery are quite a contradiction, no traces of roman burials should be expected. On the other hand there are hints that the religious biddings that created this strict dividing line between the area of the dead and the living where further loosened towards the end of the late roman period in the meanwhile transformed roman fortress as corresponding archaeological circumstances – detected in the roman fortress of Carnuntum – have shown (GUGL/KASTLER 2007 495f). In case of St. Peter especially one deposition is of further interest. Remains of two human beings were found at the corner Petersplatz 9/Kühfußgasse 2 placed on a roman mortar floor or pavement and covered with soil interspersed with roman brick fragments (KENNER 1907, 33; MOSSER 1998,8) . The absence of any (at least any documented) medieval or early modern finds material makes the question urgent, if this might probably be a late roman burial situation.

Excavations in the vicinity of St. Peter

The idea of a very old medieval church of St. Peter goes hand in hand with a supposed early settlement nucleus in the churches proximity (Fig. 3).

Especially two excavations very close to the church held the capacity to provide further knowledge on this nucleus in question. One in 1965 (MELZER/MOßLER 1967, 130f) – more or less the observation of building actions that were undertaken to build a garage on the western side of the church – and one in 2007 (FETTINGER/HOFER 2007, 71) – this one modern and promising, but in a discouraging small area next to the main entrance stairs on the eastern side of the church.

Concerning the excavation of 1965 there is a big and very inconvenient obstacle to be mentioned: Nearly all of the documentation and a lot of the finds material had disappeared especially – as it seems – all artefacts that were pleasant to the eye. What remained were the less decorative objects which in return gave the early high medieval pottery quite a chance to persist. At least there are three objects from the time of 1000 up to the 12th Century – three objects neither from the same period nor part of corresponding vessels (Fig. 4)

Based on this, we have to consider this material to be at least once removed and relocated. There for the evidence for surrounding settlement in the 10th/11th century has to be accepted as very limited if not non-existent.

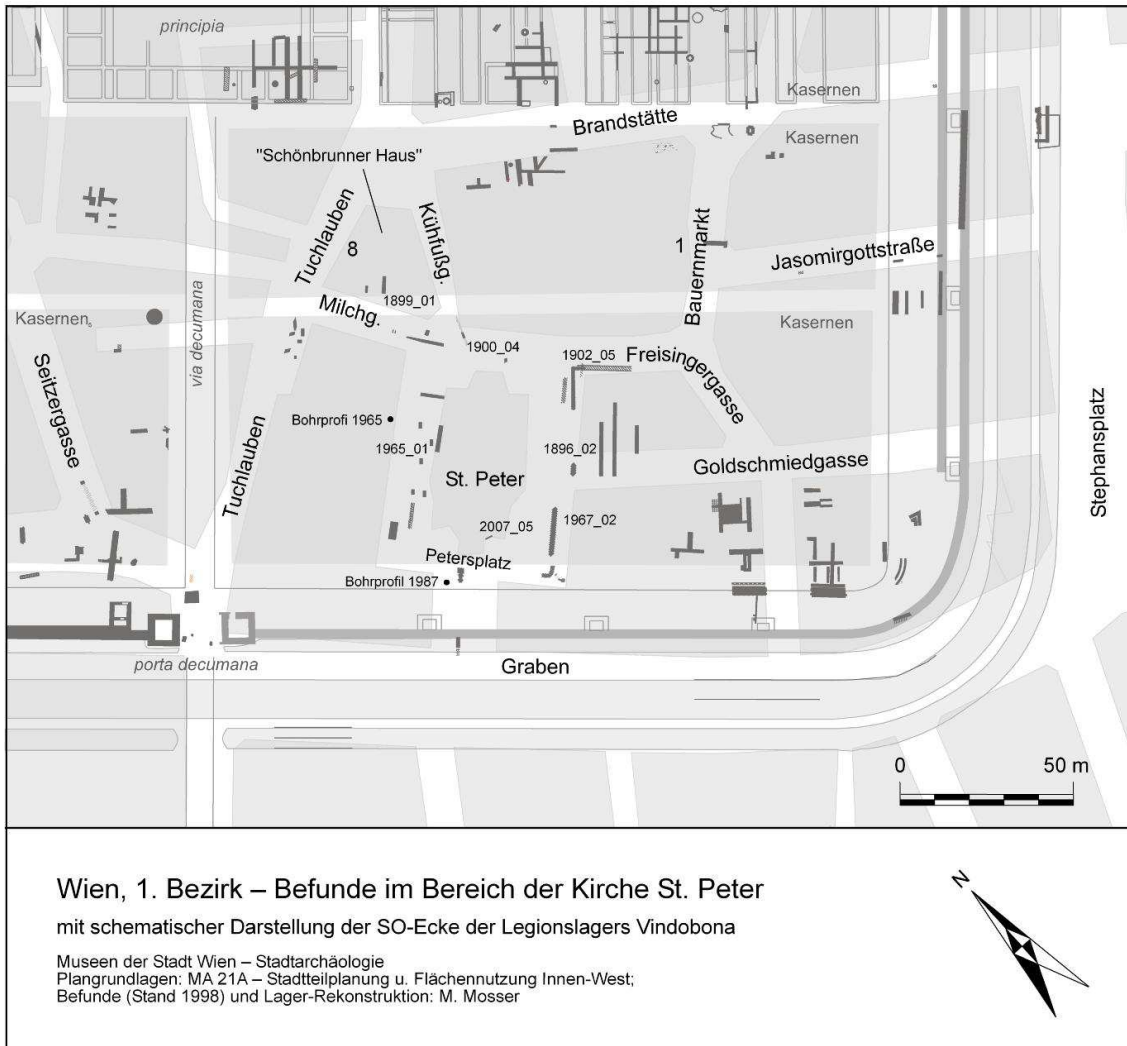


Fig. 3 – Excavations in the vicinity of St. Peter

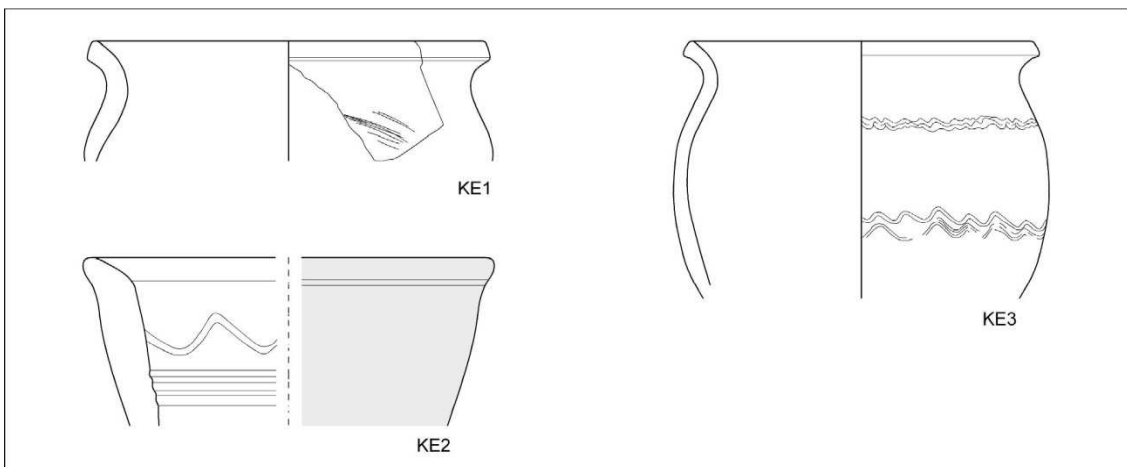


Fig. 4 – high medieval pottery that was excavated in 1965 (drawings U. Eisenmenger)

The recent excavation that took place in 2007 covered only a very small area. The excavated archaeological features turned out to be a late medieval rubble wall (Fig. 5) (MITCHELL/SCHÖN 2002, 463-465) that very

likely belonged to the small eastern annex attached to the apsis, a part of the building that was depicted in 1540. This fragment of foundation and wall were definitely not part of the original high medieval church building.

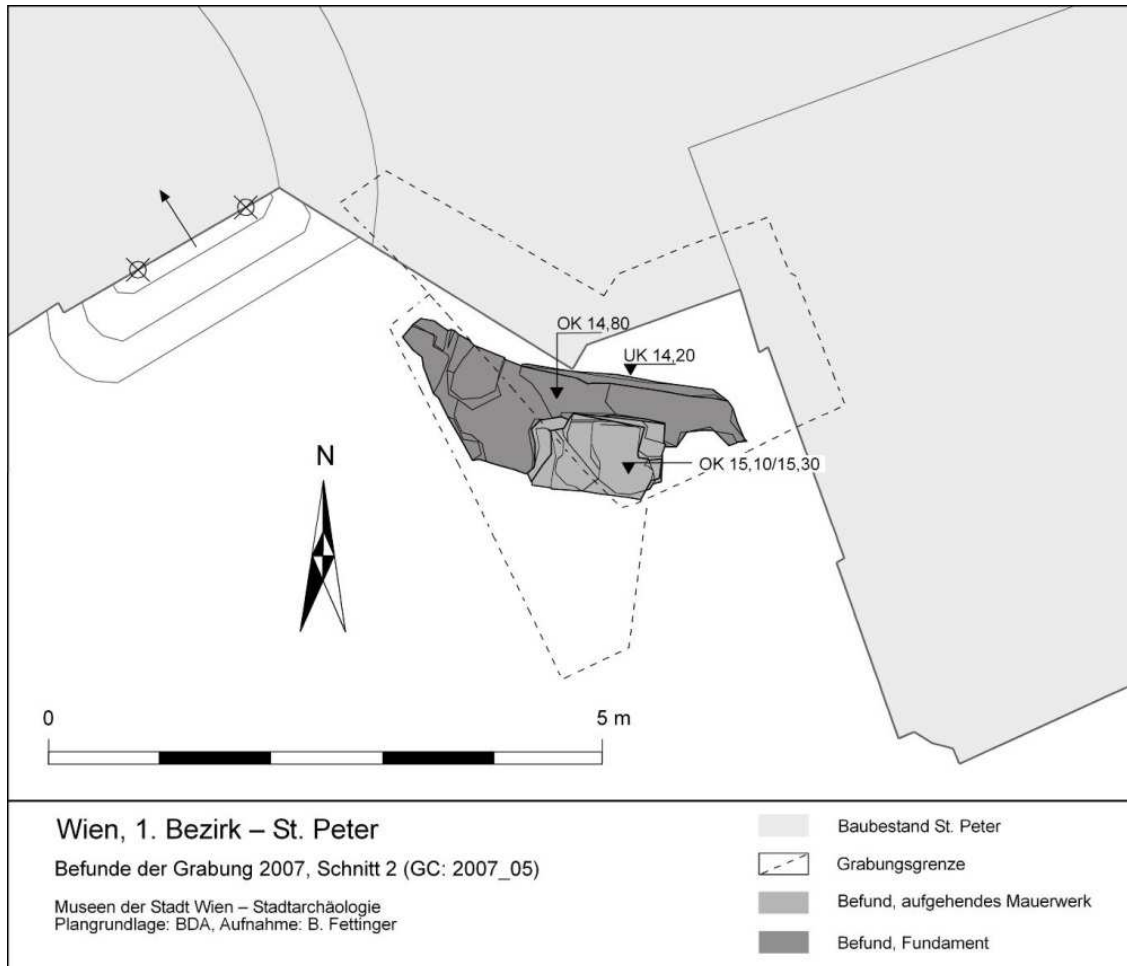


Fig. 5 – Plan showing the late medieval rubble wall that was excavated in 2007. (map: B. Fettingner, adaption G. Gruber/S. Uhlirz)

A flight of stairs: downward, upward and somewhere

It is quite evident that no line of research – no matter if based on full-fledged excavation, prospection or study of the geological external preconditions and historical sources – was in the position to provide any solution for the flight of stairs and the floor levels in question so far. On the contrary every twist and turn in the scientific discussion came once more down to the incomplete sketch of the churches outlines and the depiction of the stairs lacking comment or further description. In any case the depiction is even inexplicit concerning the question, if the flight of stairs is leading down or up (CAMESINA 1872 fig. 5).

Working on the descriptions of the desolate medieval church, a short time before it was demolished, finally disclosed a detail with the potential to change perspectives in the true sense of the meaning. Embedded in criticism concerning the condition of the church building and its interior a “Gruff” with windows opening to the surrounding cemetery area was mentioned. It has to be emphasised, that never before a medieval crypt became part of the discussion, while the vault of the baroque church was a well-known fact (CAMESINA

1872, 21). The windows obviously built as part of the foundation walls mentioned make it even more possible, that the object in question was a relic of the churches medieval building period and by that a medieval crypt that fully deserves this term.

Taking a crypt into consideration could change the functional interpretation of any stair, no matter if its direction was up or down. Down leading stairs were probably not designed to reach the church floor level, but the crypt. In case that the plan was to indicate upward leading stairs, this construction was helpful to bridge the step between external ground level and elevated church floor level, that was the result of the half subterranean crypt. The existence of this zone can be deduced from the line telling us about the windows, providing the Crypt more or less effective with some light.

For the moment, this new line of argumentation is highly theoretical and there is not much chance for procuring any kind of archaeological proof. Even if the baroque reinvention of St. Peter left any traces of the old church to be unearthed, an appropriate excavation is not to be expected in the near future. The main idea behind this research approach was to demystify the highly overrated interpretation of a plan. In addition the new discoveries on the medieval church probably will have the potential to encourage further research, stimulating archaeological interest as well as historical.

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