

Wine cellars in the vineyard (Aszófő, Hungary, 2012, László Mód).

Hungarian vineyard landscapes in transition

A case study from Lake Balaton

by **László Mód**

The wine regions of Hungary that are still important today began to take shape in the Middle Ages, largely under the influence of the increasingly profitable wine trade. One after the other landowners planted vines on hillsides that had previously been covered with forest or scrub. They created a cultural landscape that ensured suitable conditions for agricultural production. Wherever necessary, terraces were built to prevent destructive erosion. Economic and social processes since the end of the 19th century have brought substantial changes as a result of which the vines have been replaced by other crops in many cases, or vine-growing and wine-making has lost its earlier role. In the 19th and 20th centuries, a number of vineyard hills became densely populated as urban areas expanded. In other places, including the area around Lake Balaton, the hillsides that had been planted with vines were gradually transformed into recreational areas.¹ In addition to the spread of spa culture, the views over the lake led many urban dwellers to

buy up vineyards and press houses or build summer cottages for themselves. Newcomers began to appear on the vineyard hills that had previously been owned by local people and the attitude of these newcomers to the landscape fundamentally differed from that of the original inhabitants. At first, the spread of tourism only concerned the areas along the waterfront and for a long while had little effect on the vineyard hills and arable fields that were regarded as economically more valuable.² There were, of course, exceptions: in a number of settlements the vineyards destroyed by phylloxera³ had been bought up by entrepreneurs in the early 20th century who subdivided them and sold the plots as building sites for villas.

In this study I attempt to trace the transformation of the vineyard hills and their change of function through the example of a settlement close to Lake Balaton. The processes that occurred here were very similar to the phenomena that could be observed in other places. The region actually comprises a range of low hills that run for 70-80 km along the

abstract

The author traces the transformation of vineyard hills and their change of function through the example of a small village close to Lake Balaton. Under the impact of tourism these areas are gaining a new function: besides agricultural production they are now acquiring a recreational role. As part of this process there have also been substantial changes in the use of the buildings used to process grapes and store wines as the new owners have converted them into second homes or holiday homes. In certain respects the buildings on the vineyard hill also reflect this transformation in the relationship between the landscape and man. The newcomers no longer look on the landscape as a source of livelihood but as a kind of refuge where they can escape urban life from now and then.

KEY WORDS: Vineyard landscape, tourism, cultural heritage.

north side of the lake. Over the past decades they have undergone an increasingly intensive transformation and have become recreational areas. I chose one segment of the vineyard landscape that I judged to be a suitable indicator of the changes that have taken place over the past decades. This segment comprises the buildings, cellars and press houses located in the vineyards, most of which were bought up by newcomers who converted them for their own purposes.⁴ The changes made to the buildings reflect the changes that have taken place in the relationship between the landscape and man.

I hope my case study provides further data for research on tourism in the area of Lake Balaton. From my point of view, the vineyards around the lake are special arenas in which different ideas about land use and leisure time could be captured and even poised against each other.

The place and research methods

As mentioned in the introduction, I carried out my research in a village called Aszófő beside Lake Balaton where, for many centuries, vine-growing and wine-making played a significant role in the lives of the local people. It was not by chance that I chose this settlement: in 2011 my family purchased a small vineyard here. I helped to cultivate the vines and the time I spent on the vineyard hill gave me the opportunity to gain an insight into the economic and social changes currently taking place. Thanks to this special research position I was able to make many observations and conduct interviews with local vine growers and newcomers. During my fieldwork I took part in spontaneous discussions about the present conditions and future usage of the vineyard landscape and vineyard buildings. Beside these interviews, I recorded many interviews with older people who could evoke their memories from the 1940s and 1950s. On the one side it was very useful to gain an inside point of view about the cultural phenomena as a member of the community; on the other side this special position created several dilemmas and problems, for example, where are the borders of fieldwork and everyday life? I principally wished to learn what people thought about the vineyard landscape and, in particular, their place and role in it. For years I have always tried to participate in the local feast held regularly on the vineyard hill as this provides an excellent opportunity to meet the vineyard owners and make new acquaintances. In the course of my research I was able to use archival sources and maps that served as a point of reference for analysis of the changes that have taken place in the use of the landscape. These can mainly be found in the Archive of Veszprém County in which different type of documents offer the opportunity to conduct research in this special field. There are registers about vine growers and vineyards and architectural surveys about the vineyard buildings.

“THE HUNGARIAN WINE INDUSTRY TRIED TO MEET THE DEMANDS OF THE SOVIET UNION’S MARKET FOR MASS WINES, WHICH BROUGHT THE NEGLECT OF QUALITY CONSIDERATIONS.”

Vineyard landscapes, winescapes

Vineyards are the products of human activity and of the interaction between man and the natural environment.⁵ In many cases they are located in regions in which human presence reaches back into the distant past. Besides the natural factors (geographical location, topography, soil, microclimate), it is differences in vine-growing and wine-making procedures that lie behind the diversity of the vineyards. The vineyard landscape is closely related to the tangible (structures, settlement systems, etc.) and the intangible cultural heritage (rituals). Traditional vineyard landscapes are threatened by abandonment, erosion and landslides. Thus, integrated management needs to include provisions for restoration, revitalization and development that is coherent with the structure of the landscape.⁶

According to Gary L. Peters, American viticultural landscapes or winescapes came into being as a result of human activity and can be seen as the encounter of the natural landscape and the environmental needs of the grape vine. In his opinion they are shaped by three factors.

1. The grape vine and its needs; 2. the natural environment that meets these needs; 3. the vine-grower and wine-maker who determine not only the varieties planted but also the methods of planting and cultivation and, in the final analysis, the end product in the bottle.

These factors can only be interpreted in a wider context. Peters emphasizes that human decisions about viticulture may also considerably affect the look of the viticultural landscape or winescape, for example, the different growing practices, including how the vines are trained and pruned.⁷

Features of Hungarian vineyard landscapes

The places in which vines were cultivated were clearly separated from the areas used for other forms of farming: arable fields, common grazing land, meadows, etc. Vines were planted in places considered most suitable for them, in one or more con-

tiguous areas that in most parts of the Hungarian-speaking territories were called *hegy* or *hőgy* (=hill).⁸

Fences were erected around the vineyards: in Western and Northern Hungary hedges were planted or a ditch dug and filled with briars and pruning brush, while in hilly regions stones removed from the vineyard were piled up around the edge and briars allowed to grow on them to form a living fence. On steep slopes, stones removed from the soil were used to build small barriers and

terraces to protect the topsoil. Ditches were dug in an attempt to channel rainfall and soil washed away was collected at suitable spots in pits. In Eastern Transdanubia, the region between the Danube and Tisza Rivers and the south of the Great Plain, vineyards were surrounded by ditches and bushes, and fruit trees and



Key informants (Aszófó, Hungary, 2013, László Mód).



Pressing grape berries inside the vineyard building (Aszófó, Hungary, 2012, László Mód)

forest trees were planted along the edge in the soil that had been removed.⁹

If the grapes were traditionally processed on the hill, there would be buildings that were used for the processing and storage of wine. The appearance of such buildings faithfully reflected the social position of the owner. In many parts of Northern Hungary, places used to store wine were not built in the vineyards themselves but beside a road leading to the hill close to the village where the bedrock was most suitable for building cellars. Whole groups of cellars were built in such locations. The nature and external appearance of vineyard buildings show a distinctive regional distribution that in many cases was related to the technology used to produce must, and to natural endowments. The cellar rows are generally located close to the villages although they are sometimes found several kilometers away from the center of the settlement. The cellars and press houses that are separate from dwellings were primarily used for making and storing wine. They may also have been suitable for storing other kinds of agricultural produce or as a place to store various farm implements.¹⁰ The vineyards also contained important community buildings. These included the guard's house where the guard hired for the whole year lived. Chapels, statues of patron saints or crosses were often erected at crossroads. Some of these were paid for collectively by the owners; others were votive gifts from individuals. The bells in the vineyards not only served the purpose of official church liturgy, they were also objects of popular religiosity: even in the early 20th century it was still customary to ring the bells to ward off storms or hail.¹¹

The phylloxera epidemic that swept through the vine-growing countries of Europe in the last third of the 19th century resulted in enormous changes in the territorial extent of the vineyards in Hungary. Together with the dramatic reduction in area that followed the destruction caused by the pest, there was also a substantial topographical shift in the plantations. Only 60% of the vines in hilly regions were replanted, while the proportion of sandy areas on the plains increased substantially. Simultaneously with the regional shifts in the wine regions, in many cases their former socio-economic functions also changed.¹²

The socialist-type reorganization of agriculture and the in-

roduction of large-scale vine-growing also constituted a major change in the course of the 20th century. During and after the Second Five-Year Plan, most of the vine plantations were moved from the hillsides to the foot of the hills and the plains. On the one hand this shift led to a deterioration in the quality of the wines and on the other to a move away from vine-growing areas whose traditions reached back for centuries.¹³ Up to 1989 and the change of political system, 64.7% of the vineyards had belonged to the so-called socialist sector, and 35.3% were privately owned. This meant that the attempt to involve vine-growing in kolkhoz-type cooperatives had not been completely successful. Moreover, despite the increased production area and the use of large-scale cultivation methods, there was a substantial deterioration in the quality of wine during the decades of communism. For political reasons, the Hungarian wine industry tried to meet the demands of the Soviet Union's market for mass wines, which brought the neglect of quality considerations.¹⁴

Following the change of political system, most of the vineyards again passed into private ownership, leading to another wave of far-reaching changes. The volume of exports to the West was very small, while the Eastern markets collapsed virtually overnight. In the course of privatization most of the large socialist production units (state farms, cooperatives) disintegrated, while the private wineries that had been operating from the latter half of the 1980s successfully survived this period.

A case from Lake Balaton

The settlement, with its population of around 400, has two vineyard hills, one of which (Öreghegy/Old Hill) lies to the west of the village and the other (Vörösmál/Red South Slope) to the east. I conducted my fieldwork on the latter hill where, exceptionally, the buildings are not scattered but arranged along a cart road. The area takes its name from the reddish color of the soil, especially after heavy rain. In contrast to the other vineyard hill, this hill has a past that only reaches back to the mid-19th century. In the early 1840s the local landholders requested permission to plant vines from the abbot of Tihany, their landowner. The area the landholders wished to convert into vineyards had previously been cultivated as arable land. They needed to change the form



Bedroom in the loft of a wine cellar (Aszófő, Hungary, 2017, László Mód).

of cultivation because there was no longer any possibility for further expansion on the other vineyard hill. The reason behind the move was almost certainly that they hoped to achieve a higher profit from wine than from grain. The abbot gave his permission and they soon set about the work. Within a few years, vines were flourishing on the slopes. In 1844 they submitted a new request to the landowner, asking him to provide them with stone to build wine cellars. From the end of the 1840s the group of buildings that has enjoyed protected monument status from the 1970s gradually took shape. The landholders first built cellars, then press houses in front of the cellars, to be used primarily for processing the grapes. These single-room buildings housed various items of equipment (tubs, wine presses, grape crushers, etc.). The press houses had thatched roofs as it was easy to obtain reeds, which grew in abundance around the lake. The attic space of the stone buildings was used to store the hay mown in the vineyard; this later served as fodder for horses and cattle. The buildings were not suitable as permanent dwellings which, in any case, was not necessary because most of the landholders were local residents who lived in the nearby village.

The vineyard hill also played an important role in social life. For the most part, men regularly visited the cellars, where they also celebrated each other's name days. A local feast took shape on the vineyard hill, arising out of the destructive hailstorm of the early 1870s. In 1872 one of the vineyard owners erected a stone cross among the vines to avert a similar natural calamity in the future. Each year on the anniversary of the hailstorm, the vine-growers gathered at the cross where, with the participation of the Catholic priest, they prayed to the Almighty to protect the vines from natural disasters. This religious practice ceased during the Communist period, but the growers revived it from the early 1990s. Each year on the first Sunday after Whitsun the faithful go to the

cross and then, following a ceremony celebrated by the Catholic priest, they visit each other's cellars. Thus, the use of the vineyard landscape also has a sacral dimension, although this is closely intertwined with a very important social aspect. At present this local feast is the only occasion when the vine-growers and owners of summer cottages can come together as part of a visible community.

The traditional way of life began to change dramatically from the end of the 1950s when the communist authorities set about the rapid radical transformation of agriculture and land ownership. The local inhabitants were forced to give up their landholdings, including their vineyards. From the late 1950s these passed into the possession of the agricultural cooperatives, which attempted to cultivate the land with the participation of their members. This represented an enormous rupture in the life of the community as the peasant farms were liquidated and traditional values fundamentally changed. Many of the press houses and cellars on the vineyard hill remained in the hands of the previous owners, but the cooperative tried to cultivate the vineyards, although with little success. The main reason for this failure was that vine cultivation was very labor-intensive and the cooperative was unable to provide the necessary manpower. As a result, the cooperative was obliged to return some of the vineyards to their former owners, who began cultivating them again, now on their own land. In the 1970s and 1980s grapes could be sold for a relatively high price; in this way the agricultural sector provided an additional income for the local people, although at the cost of significant labor input. In the meantime, the vineyard hill's appearance also began to change as the traditional forms of cultivation gave way to new, less labor-intensive methods.

High cordon training was introduced and agricultural machinery came into general use for soil cultivation and plant protection. However, from the 1970s and 1980s, growing numbers of people gave up vine-growing and tried to sell their holdings. Some of them had moved away from the village and were unable to tend to their vineyards. In other cases, the young generation showed no interest in continuing the work of ageing family members – and so the vineyards were sold. In these decades the relative prosper-

“UNDER THE IMPACT OF TOURISM THESE AREAS ARE GAINING A NEW FUNCTION: BESIDES AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION THEY ARE NOW ACQUIRING A ROLE IN RECREATION.”

ity and low fuel prices made it possible for urban dwellers, particularly people living in Budapest, to buy rural houses, vineyard press houses or plots of land on which to build second homes in the vicinity of Lake Balaton. In Aszófő, the proportion of urban newcomers gradually rose to such a high level that they now represent the majority on the vineyard hill and only a very small percentage of local people own press houses. Most of the new owners did not buy the plots with the intention of cultivating vines and making wine. Their primary purpose was to own a second home close to Lake Balaton, where they could spend their leisure time. Besides swimming, the views over the lake and the

vineyard hill environment offer them excellent opportunities for recreation. Agricultural production was of little significance to them as they had no experience of vine-growing or could not find locals to cultivate the vines for them. This is the reason why most of the vines around the press houses owned by newcomers were cut down, neglected or replaced with fruit trees. Of course, there were, and still are, people who have undertaken to care for the vines; this involves a substantial financial outlay. Since the press houses had been mainly used to process grapes and store wine, the new owners converted the buildings to meet the new demands, taking into account the regulations governing historic buildings. One way of doing this was to give new functions to interior spaces. The attic space that had previously been used to store hay was converted into living rooms or bedrooms by raising the ceiling. Entrances were opened in the roof and stairs built for easy access. The opening in the gable that had been used to toss the hay into the attic was transformed into a window and glazed. Substantial modifications were also made to the press houses: parts of the interior were converted into a kitchen and dining area. The area around the buildings was also transformed: the natural flora of the vineyard hill was replaced with non-native decorative plants and trees. Most of the new owners visit the vineyard hill in the summer period and at weekends. Some of them move out of the city and into their holiday homes during the summer months. In recent years a new phenomenon has also been observed: some owners are offering their buildings as accommodation for tourists. One of the underlying factors is that growing numbers are turning away from places of mass tourism, especially around the shores of the lake, and seeking “refuge” in the vineyard hills that are less frequented by tourists.

The article has been an attempt to examine a recent phenomenon: changes occurring in the use of the vineyard hills in the region of Lake Balaton. Under the impact of tourism these areas are gaining a new function: besides agricultural production they are now acquiring a role in recreation. As part of this process there have also been substantial changes in the use of the buildings used to process grapes and store wines as the new owners have converted them into second homes or holiday homes. In certain respects the buildings on the vineyard hill also reflect the transformation in the relationship between the landscape and man. The newcomers no longer look on the landscape as a source of livelihood but as a kind of refuge where they can escape from urban life from time to time. ✖

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- 3 It is a vine pest which was brought from North America to Europe in the middle of the 19th century.
- 4 In this wine region, the general practice after the harvest was to process the grapes on the vineyard hill and to store the wine there. This is why there are so many cellars and press houses. These buildings reflected the local methods of cultivation as well as the social status of the vineyard owners.
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