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## Cellars in town and countryside. Wine storage architecture and the social relations of production in East Central Europe

Over the course of time viticulture has exerted a powerful influence on the shape of the agrarian landscape and the habitats of the producers in the many regions of Europe and the world, where wine growing formed a substantial part of the local economy. This influence which is conditioned by the physical, biological and technical requirements of the cultivation of the vines, the processing of the grapes, and the storage of the wine, varied according to such factors as climate, the technological solutions adopted, the social relations and the general economic conditions of wine production, and their historical evolution. With regard to the storage of wine, Roger Dion in his magisterial *Histoire de la vigne et du vin en France* stated very categorically: «*La manière de conserver le vin est un [...] trait par lequel la viticulture méditerranéenne traditionnelle se distingue de celle du reste de la France*»<sup>1</sup>, and he attributed this contrast to the influence of climate and tradition. Whereas the fragile wines of the north had to be sheltered from the great differences of temperature in the course of the seasons in subterranean caves which are an essential element of the wine – growers house in the northern and continental areas of wine production, under Mediterranean climatic conditions the more robust wines of the south could be stored in cellars on the ground floor of the dwellings of their producers. This difference in the location of storage once corresponded with the use of different recipients for the conservation of the wine – wooden barrels in the northern caves vs. the terracotta vessels in the cellars of the south (e. g. the Roman amphora) – and according to Dion the Mediterranean wine – growers remained faithful to this solution even when they replaced the earthen vessels by barrels<sup>2</sup>. The French ethnologist

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<sup>1</sup> Dion, Roger – *Histoire de la vigne et du vin en France des origines au XIXe siècle*. Paris, 1977, p. 7. Reprint of the first edition 1957.

<sup>2</sup> Although it is not common in English and German (both languages know only the word «cellar» / «Keller», derived from the latin «cellarius»), I use the French notions «cellier» (au rez-de chaussée) and «cave» (subterreanean) to designate the different locations for wine storage.

Charles Parain has contested Dion's argument by attributing more weight to the changing economic circumstances of wine-production: «A côté des causes climatiques, ont joué, avec au moins autant de poids, des raisons économiques de nature variée. [...] contrairement au climat, l'économie est sujetté à des changements continuels, plus ou moins brusques. Pour l'histoire de la maison vigneronne, il est donc nécessaire de tenir compte des changements apportés à la destination du vin dans une même région à des époques successives»<sup>3</sup>. This is an important point since it reintroduces the perspective of historical change and the importance of social relations of production into the unhistorical and climate – deterministic opposition between Mediterranean cellars and continental caves constructed by Dion<sup>4</sup>.

Drawing attention to the fact that there is no necessary physical connection between the location where the grapes are processed, and the place where the wine is stored, Parain distinguished three elementary architectural solutions to the problem of wine storage within the French territory which he thought to constitute a sequence of historical evolution and diffusion, and which could be combined to form a great number of regional variants: the unvaulted cellar on ground level as the most ancient form; the vaulted cellar situated under the living rooms of the producers which implies the construction of housings with two floors and is seen as having evolved from the unvaulted cellar; finally the subterranean cave located under the dwelling house. These elementary forms and their possible combinations condition the architectural shapes of the farmsteads, but in Parain's typology they always form an integrated part of them<sup>5</sup>. The galleries broken into the chalky rocks of the Loire valley at Saumur and Vouvray appear as the only example of caves visibly separated from the houses of their owners all over the French territory<sup>6</sup>.

The spatial segregation of the house and the cave which Parain considered to be exceptional and unique in the context of France, is however a very common trait of wine storage architecture in Central and East Central Europe. In many wine – growing regions in the eastern parts of Austria (Lower Austria, Burgenland, Styria), Moravia<sup>7</sup>, Western Slovakia<sup>8</sup>, Slovenia<sup>9</sup>, parts of Hungary and Romania

<sup>3</sup> Parain, Charles – «La maison vigneronne en France». In Parain, Charles – *Outils, ethnies et développement historique*. Paris, 1979, pp. 135-187, here p. 144.

<sup>4</sup> This deterministic and ahistorical aspect of Dion's work contrasts sharply with his general attitude which gives priority to changing economic conditions over ecological ones in explaining the major traits of the historical geography of French viticulture.

<sup>5</sup> Parain – *La maison vigneronne...*, pp. 146-147.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 170.

<sup>7</sup> Frolec, Vaclav – *Die Weinbaukultur in Mähren im Kontext der europäischen Entwicklung*. «Ethnologica Slavica». 17 (1985), pp. 13-59.

<sup>8</sup> Kahounová, Eva – *Deux types traditionnels de la viticulture dans la Slovaquie de l'ouest*. «Studia Historica Slovaca». 6 (1969), pp. 193-237.

<sup>9</sup> Lamprecht, Otto – *Flur und Siedlungsformen im steirischen Weinbaugebiet*. «Mitteilungen des naturwissenschaftlichen Vereins für Steiermark». 72 (1935), pp. 39-60.

(Transylvania)<sup>10</sup> cellars and caves are frequently located at the outskirts of the settlement area or in the vineyards, sometimes in a considerable distance from the dwellings of their owners<sup>11</sup>.

In the province of Lower Austria which constitutes the focus of the following statement, no less than 1.107 agglomerations of caves (named «Kellergassen» in the local idiom) located outside of the housing estates of the settlements have been counted during a recent investigation<sup>12</sup>. Typologically these constructions show a range of variation spanning from the simple cave dug into a soil of clay or alluvial sand with only the entrance visible on the surface (Fig. 1 and 5), to one or two storied buildings where the press and the equipment used in the vinification procedures are located on the ground floor («Presshaus» – the French «cellier» or «chais») and from where the subterranean cave with the barrels is accessible (Fig. 2 and 5). Whereas through agglomeration the first type evolves into whole streets located on suitably graded tracts of land the buildings of the second type, when grouped together, can assume the shape of an entire village – a village without chimneys (Fig. 3).

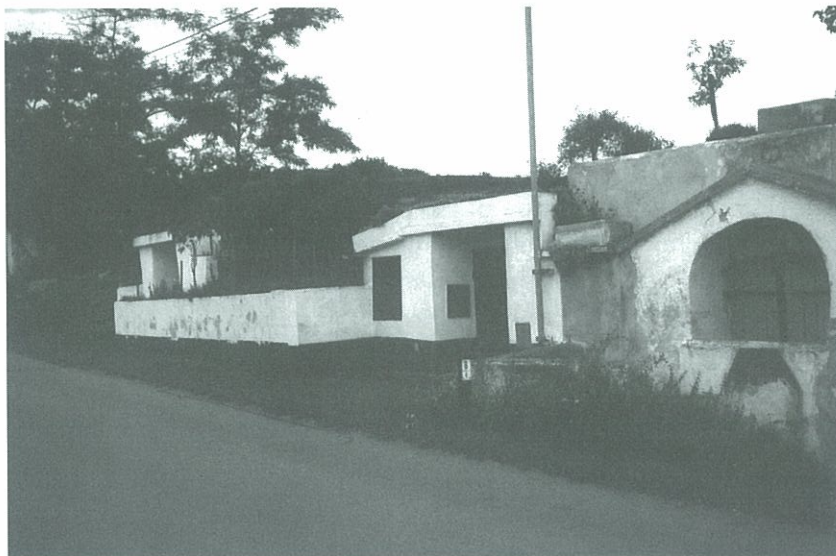
Considering the geographical distribution of these agglomerations of caves and cellars, every observer familiar with the historical geography of viticulture in East Central Europe encounters a geographic paradox insofar, as the most extensive groupings are not found in those regions where viticulture is or has been most intensive and monocultural, but in those parts of the countryside where a mixed agriculture based on grain growing and viticulture predominated/s. In those wine growing centers whose origins can be traced back into the Middle Ages, frequently producing quality wine for export (e.g. the outskirts of Vienna, the region of Krems and the stretch of the Danube valley called «Wachau», Bratislava and the nearby range of the Little Carpathian Mountains, the settlements around Lake Neusiedl), the phenomenon of cellars and caves outside the housing estates is completely absent.

Until the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century viticulture in East Central Europe as well as in other European wine growing regions outside the Mediterranean area was to a very large extent part of the urban economy centered on towns invested with trading privileges. Medieval cellars and caves were located in the towns or

<sup>10</sup> Vincze, I. – *Ungarische Weinkeller*. «Acta ethnographica». 9 (1960), pp. 119-145.

<sup>11</sup> When I prepared this contribution to the *II. International Symposium of the History and Civilisation of Vine and the Wine* I was firmly convinced that this spatial segregation of the house and the cave is a peculiar trait of the wine storage architecture of the regions discussed in this paper. The contributions to the symposium by Alan Huetz de Lempis and Javier Iglesia Berzosa on traditional wine storage architecture in Castilla y León and the evolution of viticultural landscapes in the Spanish Douro basin proved that I was wrong, and that is what these meetings are really good for.

<sup>12</sup> Schmidbaur, Andreas G. – *Die niederösterreichischen Kellergassen*. Vienna: University of Technology, 1990, p. 85. Eine Bestandsaufnahme, phil. Diss., manus.



**Figura 1** – Alignment of caves («Kellergasse») in Mitterretzbach, Lower Austria.



**Figura 2** – A row of cellars, each containing a wine press, other equipment, and the entrance to the cave in Falkstein, Lower Austria.



**Figura 3** – The agglomeration of cellars forms a «village without chimneys» at Wildendürnbach, Lower Austria.



**Figura 4** – Main square with town hall in Retz, Lower Austria (under the medieval town center is an extensive network of caves for the storage of wine).

Fig. 5a

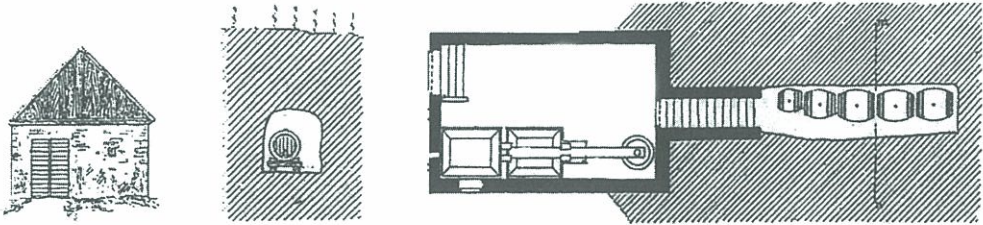
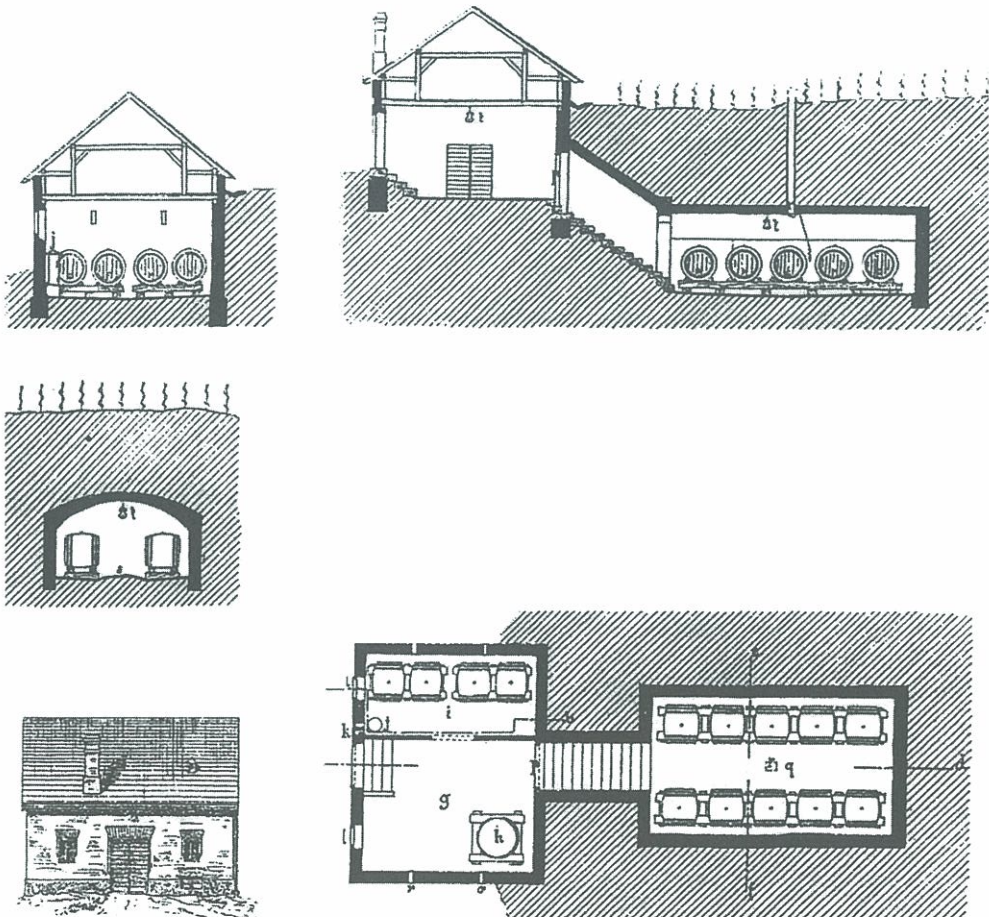


Fig. 5b:



**Figure 5** – Sketches of a traditional (a) and a modernized (b) cellar with cave (1880) (Source: J. Jablanczy, Weinkeller und Presshaus, in: Die Weinlaube. Zeitschrift für Weinbau und Kellerwirtschaft 12 (1880) 325-331).

at those monasteries and noble castles, whose owners were engaged in viticulture or received feudal rents in the form of wine. The small Lower Austrian town of Retz at the border to Moravia (Fig. 4) is a perfect example for this type of urban wine economy. Until to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the town exerted a monopoly in the trade of wine over nine villages in its surroundings. According to the town charters only the members of the civic community had the right to buy grapes and must during the vintage season in the villages to be fermented and stored in the town cellars and sold to customers coming mainly from Bohemia. The population of the villages was composed of wine dressers cultivating the vineyards of the town bourgeoisie or small producers who sold their unprocessed grape harvest. One of the most spectacular features of the town of Retz, founded at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century on top of a hill of very compact alluvial sand, is the huge network of underground caves laid out over several subterranean floors and connected to every house within the medieval town walls. Today a major tourist attraction, this troglodyte part of the town once housed the major part of the yearly vintages of the whole region. In the suburban villages a couple of houses in the center of the villages were also equipped with cellars and caves within the housing area, but the first traces of caves or cellars separated from the farmsteads date from the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and become more frequent only since the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>13</sup>.

Whereas the absence of outside caves and cellars in the county of Retz until the 18<sup>th</sup> century and their construction during this century and thereafter can be seen as an outflow of the historical town – country relationship and its evolution in this region, i. e. the urban monopoly in the wine trade and its abolition, in other wine growing regions of Lower Austria where no town exerted such powerful influence on the local market conditions, the slightly earlier appearance of cellars and caves outside the housing estates – the earliest traces date from the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>14</sup> – requires a different explanation. Most probably in these regions much less specialized in viticulture, producing a low quality wine for local consumption or the interregional trade, wine was not stored locally, but sold unfermented immediately after the harvest. Fermentation took place during transport to the consumption places, for example on the boats transporting the wine in autumn on the Danube. Frequent mentions of the fact that this wine was only «winter-wine» suggest that it was not easily storable because of his poor quality and low content of alcohol and therefore destined for consumption during the cold season.

<sup>13</sup> Landsteiner, Erich – *Weinbau und Gesellschaft in Ostmitteleuropa*. University of Vienna, 1992, 124 ff., 152 ff., 238 ff. Phil. Diss., manus.

<sup>14</sup> Schmiedbaur, *Kellergassen*, 108.

The contrast between an urban wine economy producing wines of distinct quality for export and disposing, besides the monasteries and the noble seats, of the main storage capacities for wine, and a peasant viticulture producing low quality wine for immediate consumption which had no need of storage facilities, persisted until the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century marks a major break in the historical evolution of the viticultural landscape of Lower Austria. The devastations of the Thirty Years' War, which hit the towns in certain aspects more than the countryside, the breakdown of the wine export, and the deteriorating terms of trade of wine due to the general economic recession in Central Europe in this period, caused a severe crisis of the urban sector of viticulture. During the period of reconstruction in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century viticulture shifted more and more to the countryside and became an integral part of the peasant economy especially in the northeastern part of the province of Lower Austria (this part of the province north of the Danube is traditionally called «Weinviertel»)<sup>15</sup>. The driving force behind the expansion of viticulture during this second growth cycle was the demand emanating from the city of Vienna which in this period became the rapidly growing capital of an expanding empire. Its population grew from ca. 30.000 inhabitants at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to 110.000 around 1700 and 175.000 in 1754. At the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Vienna, a former wine-exporting town, which until this point in time had restricted the entrance of wine into its walls to the product of a delimited region in its vicinity dominated by urban wine-growers, opened its gates to the cheap wines produced in growing quantities in the villages of the «Weinviertel» and destined for mass consumption. Fifty years later the influence of this powerful demand was already felt in southern Moravia<sup>16</sup>.

It is evident that the zone which provided Vienna with the cheap wines for mass consumption coincides neatly with the area where cellars and caves outside the settlements became more and more numerous during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Here a peasant viticulture developed which favored a new grape vine particularly apt to produce high yields on fertile soils. Due to the topography of the villages and the fact that the farmsteads were not equipped with space to store the wine, the villagers constructed new cellars and caves in places appropriate to this purpose on the village territories, mostly in the vicinity of the newly planted vineyards but often also in considerable distance from the housing estates. On

<sup>15</sup> See Landsteiner, Erich – «Wine growing and alcohol production. Long-term perspectives on East-Central Europe, 16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries». In Maldonado Rosso, Javier, ed. – *Actas del I. simposio de la asociación de la vid y el vino*. El Puerto de Santa Maria, 2001, vol. 1, pp. 489-502.

<sup>16</sup> Landsteiner, Erich – «Weinbau und bürgerliche Hantierung. Weinproduktion und Weinhandel in den landesfürstlichen Städten und Märkten Niederösterreichs in der frühen Neuzeit». In Opll, Ferdinand, ed. – *Stadt und Wein*. Linz/Donau, 1996, pp. 17-50.

the basis of a highly productive viticulture faced with the growing demand of an expanding urban center and the custom of partible inheritance a peasant society began to take shape. Rapid demographic growth not only led to the expansion of the villages but also to the agglomeration of cellars and caves connected with them, since every producer was eager to secure himself a degree of economic independence through the construction of a cave for the storage of wine. In this way in the course the 18<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the «Weinviertel» became the region of the «Kellergassen».

The easy access to and the widespread ownership of cellars, caves and even presses provided the basis of a very marked economic individualism among these peasant wine producers. When at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the government of Lower Austria began to promote the foundation of cooperatives, the response was very positive in those parts of Lower Austria where sharecropping relations had developed during the early modern period (mainly the viticultural zones of the Danube valley) whereas the wine growing peasants of the «Weinviertel» refused themselves completely to this new form of economic organization. Due to the fact that most of them owned caves and a wine press they felt no need for it. Today, about a century later, the «Weinviertel» is the crisis zone of Austrian viticulture where small, unspecialized producers with technologically outdated equipment are faced with a market structure dominated by a couple of large wine merchants who determine the terms of trade of the wine usually sold in barrels at a very low price<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> See Landsteiner, Erich – «Teilbau und Lohnbau, Über zwei Formen der Arbeitsorganisation im Weinbau des Kremser Raumes». In *1000 Jahre Krems – am Fluß der Zeit*. Studien und Forschungen aus dem niederösterreichischen Institut für Landeskunde 24. St. Pölten, 2001, pp. 186-220, esp. 213 f.