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From the grape to the vat: traditional buildings and installations for the production and storage of wine in Cyprus (18th - 20th century)

Cyprus, an island of 9,250 sq. kilometres at the eastern end of the Mediterranean, has been a wine-producing area since antiquity and the vine is still widely cultivated on the island, more than any other kind of fruit. Almost one quarter of the agricultural population is engaged in viticulture, at least part-time, and derive a large proportion of their income from the vines (Roumbas 1993, 47).

According to archaeological evidence, the cultivation of the grape goes back to the early 2nd millennium B.C. (Karageorghis 1993, 32). Strabo calls Cyprus «εὔοινος», which means «abounding in wine» (14.6.5), and scenes connected with the god of wine, Dionysos, as well as «the First Wine Drinkers» are represented in mosaics in the so-called «House of Dionysos», a Roman villa (2nd/3rd century A.D.) in Paphos (Michaelides 1992, 27-37). By that time the Cypriot wine was widely exported.

In the Middle Ages the most celebrated wine was Commandaria which received its name from having been grown on the property of the Commandery of the Knights Templar at Kolossi, near Limassol.

Ludolf von Suchen, a priest of the church of Suchen in Westphalia, who visited Cyprus between 1336 and 1341, described the different kinds of grapes on the island and concluded that «*in all the world are not greater nor better drinkers than in Cyprus*»! (Cobham 1908, 18).

Estienne de Lusignan, writing in 1580, refers to the wine of Cyprus as «*the best in the world*» and Saint Gregory believed that Solomon planted in his garden some vines, which he had transported from Cyprus (Lusignan 1580, 222).

The most exaggerated compliment for Cypriot wine, however, is the one expressed in the report of Father Angelo Calepio of Cyprus, Doctor Theologian of the Dominican order, who was in person in Nicosia, the capital of the island, when the city was taken by Ottoman arms (September 9, 1570). He writes that

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one of the inducements of the Sultan Selim II for attacking and conquering Cyprus in 1571 was his fondness for the excellent wines produced there (Cobham 1908, 125). Selim II was known by the nickname «Selim the Sot», which reflects his passionate attraction to wine, although it was forbidden by his religious laws.

Cyprus was captured by the Ottomans from the Venetians, who held sovereignty over the island for 89 years (1489-1571). Under Venetian rule the wine trade, especially that of Commandaria, was continually growing and large quantities of Cypriot wine were then exported to Venice and also to Ragusa and the rest of Europe as far as England. Between the years 1420 and 1445, Cypriot vine cuttings were imported to the Madeira islands (Psaras 1993, 97).

During the period of Ottoman rule (1571-1878) and the subsequent period of British administration (1878-1960), Cypriot wine continued to be a main product and one of the principal articles of export. It is often mentioned in travellers accounts, consular reports and historical documents.

Although vines and wines have 4,000 years of history in Cyprus, in this short paper we will focus our attention on the period from the 18th to mid-20th century in an attempt to elucidate the processing from the cultivation of the vine to the production of wine (from the grape to the vat), with special emphasis on the buildings and installations for the production and storage of wine.

FROM THE GRAPE TO THE VAT

References to viticulture in the past are largely limited to wine. Our basic source of information about vine planting to harvesting and wine-making to marketing during the 18th century, is the study *Wines of Cyprus*, 1772, by Giovanni Mariti, Correspondent Member of the Academy of Agricultural Experts of Florence, who spent seven years in Cyprus, from 1760 to 1767.

What we read in Mariti's study is not very different from the viticultural practices as described by Doazan, the French Consul at Larnaca, in his comprehensive report, dated November 18, 1855, on vine-growing in Cyprus. In the same year A. Gaudry in his book *Recherches scientifiques en Orient* devoted a long chapter on viticulture and wrote that Cyprus wines were justly among the best in the world.

Viticultural practices did not change much since that time until the middle of the 20th century – and even later. Traditional methods of cultivation are still used today in some vine-growing areas especially on the Troodos mountains.

Vine-growing has always been a very demanding business associated with toil and many difficulties. As a Cypriot proverb says, «a vine needs a hump-backed man». In the hilly areas vineyards are planted on terraces and dry stone walls

had to be built in order to help retain moisture and prevent soil erosion. The ground had to be ploughed three times with a wooden plough driven by oxen. The vine cuttings used to be buried in order to develop roots and they were left in the ground until their planting (Doazan in Kyriazis 1931, 285, and Rizopoulou – Egoumenidou 1989, 20). The method of planting and the instrument used is similar to that described by Mariti and bears the same name: «scala». It was an iron rod pointed at the end and the cultivator had to put his foot on it and push it into the ground (Mariti (1772) 1984, 38-39. See also description by Doazan in Kyriazis 1931, 285). The traditional «scala», preserved to date, is V-shaped with wooden handles and an iron end, and is used in the same way. Planting was a co-operative affair; relatives and friends used to help and at the end they participated in a feast.

The labourers took particular care to uproot all the weeds, which grew among the vines. The latter were also pruned to retain their short stunted shape, which still characterises the vineyards of Cyprus.

According to Mariti, at harvest time the workers gathered the grapes, put them in baskets made of wicker or reeds and loaded two or four of them on each donkey to carry them to the house where they spread them on terraced floors (Mariti (1772) 1984, 45,47). According to E. Lusignan (1580), the ripe grapes were left on the flat roofs of the houses in the sun for three days, so that «its ardour might consume whatever water might remain in them. Then, being trodden, and the pips and stalks removed before fermentation, the wine which afterwards was made was of a great perfection» (Lusignan 1580, 223). Mariti's description of the pressing of the grapes is very illuminating: «Then by hand with shovels they take up the grapes from the terraced floor and move them to a room they call «Linos» which slopes down on one side and is polished or paved with tiles or covered with boards. Here they throw the grapes and trample them and beat them with mallets and gradually put them through the wine-press which they call «Patitiri» and they repeat this operation once or twice if necessary» (Mariti (1772) 1984, 48).

The traditional wine-presses are still known by the ancient name, «Linos», and were still in use until a few decades ago. The installation was housed in a spacious oblong room covered with a flat roof and functioned with the help of a long beam, actually two beams one on top of the other, which acted as a lever. The lever passed between two pillars, which restricted its movements and at the same time supported the roof. One end of the beam entered a deep opening in the rear wall, which acted as a fulcrum to the lever of the press. The other end of the beam was penetrated by a screw, the lower end of which was fixed into a heavy stone weight. The section of the winery to the side of the fulcrum was built at a higher level and was separated from the rest. It was this part that was used for the pressing of grapes which were stored on this raised platform, called «tzyathi»

(from the ancient Greek word κύαθος, κύαθιον, meaning a bowl). The function of the wine-press was based on a lever system of the second type, like a nutcracker. The stone weight at the one end of the beam counter balanced the grapes at the other end. The weight was raised and lowered when two or three men turned the screw, and the grapes, which were covered with layers of planks, were pressed accordingly. The must ran through a hole in the lower part of the «tzyathi» in a big jar half-buried in the floor. Such large wineries belonged to rich families or to many owners. Several stone-built structures which housed this type of wine-press are still preserved in vine producing villages and representative examples have been declared «Ancient Monuments» and restored by the Department of Antiquities. The original installation, however, had survived only in the wine-press of the village of Lania and a copy of it has been reconstructed in a similar winery in the neighbouring village of Omodos, both in the district of Limassol. A spacious winery, which was used by the whole community, is preserved in the small village of Phikardou. Its date is carved on its wooden door: 1774 (For this type of wine-press see Sinos 1984, 360-363 and Rizopoulou – Egoumenidou 1989, 20-22. It has also been described by Doazan in Kyriazis 1931, 293-294).

Another simpler and less expensive type of wine-press was common in villages where small scale viticulture used to be the main occupation of the inhabitants. The installation is still to be found in the corner of a ground floor room in old houses. The horizontal beam, through which passes the screw, is fixed in the corner walls. The grapes spread on the flat roof («doma»), are thrown through an opening («louros») to a stone area («tzyathi»), enclosed by a low parapet. The opening usually consists of a bottomless jar incorporated into the flat roof. The grapes are first trampled on the pressing ground and then pressed in a barrel. In order to do this, the screw is rotated with a wooden or iron bar («liveri»). The pressed grapes are spread again on the paved area to be beaten with a long piece of wood («matsouka»). The above procedure is repeated until all the juice has been extracted. The juice runs through a hole in the lower part of the parapet into an earthenware jar («podoshi», from the verb υποδέχομαι which means receive) half-buried in the floor before being transferred into large wine-jars for fermentation.

Must could also be extracted by pressing the grapes by men barefoot at the «patitiri». The latter could be a stone built pressing ground or, according to Doazan's report, a jar with a wide open mouth (Doazan in Kyriazis 1931, 296). Furthermore, there is the grinder («alestiri»), still in use today for pressing grapes. It consists of a wooden trough with two cylinders inside which crush the grapes when set in motion by hand. The must is poured into a jar placed under the grinder.

The procedure of fermentation is as described by Mariti: «*Once the must has been transferred to the other jars, they keep it boiling for the indispensable period of forty days. The jars are never filled to the brim so that when the must effervesces it does not overflow... Others adopt a different method. When the must is put in the jars, they seal the mouths, leaving only a small hole so that it can receive air and breathe while it boils and on the island this method is considered the best*» (Mariti (1772) 1984, 51). Mariti informs us as well about the preparation of the jars in which wine was to be stored. Some used to heat the vessels and spread hot tar or pitch all around the inside, but the wine-makers usually primed the insides with a hot mixture of pitch and turpentine as soon as the jars came out of the kiln, and thus the priming was more easily absorbed (Mariti (1772) 1984, 53). This procedure was recorded in detail in the early 1960's by the German archaeologist Roland Hampe in the village of Phini, the last place where the large wine-jars continued to be made until 1972. It is worth mentioning, however, that this kind of treatment was an ancient custom evidenced in pitched wine amphorae found in Paphos (Karageorghis 1993, 42). The taste of pitch in Cypriot wines is an issue much discussed in negative terms. According to consular reports of the 19th century, however, although the tarry flavour was highly disagreeable to most tastes, the natives were very partial to these wines and considered them extremely wholesome (see the report of the Vice-Consul White in Papadopoulos 1980, 82, Savile 1878, 106). The French Consul Doazan, in his report of 1855, comments also that the taste of pitch, which was detestable for European consumers, was sought after by the Orientals (Kyriazis 1931, 308-309. For interesting points on this subject see in Vandyke Price 1993, 83-85).

It took between 40 and 60 days for the potter to make a series of the large wine jars, in which wine was traditionally kept. Their usual decoration are relief ropes, which can take the form of a snake, but also incised or impressed geometric patterns. Sometimes they bear the sign of the cross and/or inscriptions, occasionally related to wine drinking.

Thousands of such wine jars (called «pitharia» from the ancient word «pithoi») are still found in the storerooms of old houses in the wine producing villages all over Cyprus. They have a pointed bottom and their lower part is usually buried in the ground. Many of them are recorded in 18th century registers of property belonging to monasteries, very often in association with wine-presses. Their presence testifies to the wide consumption of wine.

In monasteries there was a long tradition of wine making, since many of them are built in mountain regions where vines were cultivated and wine had been made for centuries before. Consequently, many wine-presses are found in the possession of monasteries.

From the countryside wine was transported in skins, also pitched or tarred inside, to Larnaca, the main port of the time. There, according to Mariti, the wine was emptied in barrels, usually fitted with iron hoops. Mariti mentions that some merchants had in their stores, besides barrels and the usual earthenware jars, «vats expertly made with a good glaze». In such containers wine remained for a year (Mariti (1772) 1984, 67, 69).

In 1801, the Rev. Edward Daniel Clarke related the strength of Commandaria with the manner in which it was kept: «*In casks neither filled nor closed. A piece of sheet lead is merely laid over the bung-hole; and this is removed almost every day, whenever persons visit their cellars to taste the different sorts of wine proposed for sale. Upon these occasions, taking the covering from the bung-hole, they dip a hollow cane or reed into the liquor, and by suction drawing some of it, let it run from the reed into a glass*» (Cobham 1908, 380). This smart way of wine tasting is illustrated in a presentation of a Cyprus wine cellar dated c. 1890, and is still practised.

Barrels with iron or wooden hoops, are recorded by the late 18th century among the personal belongings of rich merchants in Larnaca (Rizopoulou – Egoumenidou 1998, 19 and 35, note 69) and Doazan reports as late as 1855 that earthenware jars and skins were the only wine containers in Cyprus, so that a barrel maker could find a job only in Larnaca and Limassol – the second port of importance on the island. What is even more important, is the lack of proper cellars for the storing of wine; these cellars, known as «cannabis», built slightly under ground and containing barrels in two or three series, were to be found in Larnaca and Limassol and were used exclusively for Commandaria (Doazan in Kyriazis 1931, 297-298). About 90 years earlier, Mariti refers to the storage places in Larnaca as being long rooms with barrels placed on beams or low walls. He states: «*the storage places are always on the ground floor and there are no underground cellars*» (Mariti (1772) 1984, 68).

In 1856 a traveller published anonymously in the *Dublin University Magazine* (No. CCLXXXIV, Vol. XLVIII, August 1856, pp. 175-189), under the title «Cyprus», a text with three chapters, the first of which is devoted to «The Wine Cellars of Salina» (Salina is only a mile from Larnaca proper, which lies inland, and takes its name from the salt pans in the vicinity).

His description of the wine cellars recalls oriental fairy tales; they were «*caves of considerable dimensions, partly artificial, partly natural, in which the inhabitants of old saved the most precious treasures from the grasp of the Levantine pirates, the entrances being curiously concealed*». The traveller and his friends visited the wine cave of a Cypriot. Passing through arched and narrow passages in sandy ground, they emerged into a wide and spacious vault («*into a huge bell of sand*») with twenty or thirty jars and casks at the further end. All of them contained

Commandaria, some of twenty years old. The wine they tasted was ice cold and the whole apartment was very cool. The host assured the guests that the air circulated freely by a thousand minute channels through the sand above. The chamber was dark and illuminated with torches held by the servants (op.cit. pp. 176-177).

A very important feature of the good wine, were the lees, a thick layer of dregs deposited in the barrel. The lees, called also «mana» (mother) or flowers of wine, were thought to have the property of maturing and clarifying the wine, of giving it «body», aroma and flavour. New wine having kept for two years in a barrel with lees 60-80 years old, became as good as a 10-year old wine (Doazan in Kyriazis 1931, 298-299). According to Mariti, barrels with a rich deposit of lees, if one could find them on sale, cost four times the value of a barrel without lees (Mariti (1772) 1984, 70-71). Even now, Commandaria is bottled after careful blending through the traditional system known as the «mother» system («mana»), which is the topping up of selected old stocks with younger ones. With this system, high quality and uniformity are secured (Psaras 1993, 104).

The oldest and best wine was kept for the most important events in a family's life. It was customary on the birth of a child, for the father to bury a jar full of wine well sealed. This was kept until the day of his or her marriage, when it was served at the wedding feast, and distributed among relatives and friends (Mariti (1769) 1971, 116).

For serving wine traditionally, people used gourds, hollowed and pitched inside. These were richly decorated, not only with geometric patterns but also with animals and birds from exotic countries, hunting scenes or with people drinking in a popular tavern, scenes full of energy and life, appropriate to vessels used for serving wine, especially at wedding feasts.

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