

Principles of discovering the written heritage of a wine region: Tokaj-Hegyalja before phylloxera

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ABSTRACT

It can be argued that it is not useless for a 21st century community, intending to engage in modern cultivation, to explore the written memories of the past. Learning about other people's opinions can help a cultural community – in our case, the Hungarians, more specifically the Hungarians living in the Tokaj-Hegyalja region – understand itself better. It can help them work out what is actually true in their own tradition, what has been passed down as legend, and it is vital to maintain awareness of these legends so they may live on. However, it is more important that they gain an understanding of the land – even from a soil perspective – that they cultivate. They will learn about its former state, as well as who had what idea and when regarding the soil, the terroir and its impacts. The same applies to the grapes grown here and the wines produced. Who knows, perhaps even the solution to a current problem may be aided by the old knowledge that the scholarly language of the 18th century, Latin, has so far hidden from those living today.

This study traces the process through which knowledge about Hungarian wines evolved, from legends to scientific presentation, and also offers another process, namely how Hungarian-language wine literature spread after and in parallel with Latin, German, and French equivalents, in the first half of the 19th century.

KEYWORDS

history of Hungarian winery, wine terminology, history of viticulture books, cultural history of Hungary

It is a cliché, even for those who do not possess a background in wine and viticulture, that the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was a period of phylloxera epidemics in the history of wine

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production. Most of the European vineyards were destroyed, grape varieties disappeared and have only been recently rediscovered by experts. It is not a new topic in common conversation that climate change, continuing today, means that the cultivation of vines, as well as all crops, is on a different basis than it was even half a century ago. Soil management has also changed, and as a result soils are not simply studied and described in a different way, but are in fact radically different from what they used to be, for instance, hundreds of years ago. So the question is: why is it interesting to research the written heritage of the history of viticulture and wine production in this context? What can we expect from a detailed study of viticulture and winemaking in a particular historical period?

The answer is very simple, according to those who live under the spell of today's applied knowledge approach: there is no use searching for old documents. They might say, in a form of indulgence, that this centuries-old information might be "interesting". However, it is a very complex heritage, even if we consider only the written sources of the entire history of wine-making and viticulture, and this heritage contains a wealth of knowledge that is still useful today, whether in terms of viticulture or wine production.

The documentation in the archives basically constitutes records of ownership, management and profitability. In addition to documents relating to the vine and wine trade, they also contain manuscripts describing the rules of farming (village laws, legislation of wine communes, etc.).¹ Ownership is closely linked to today's protection of origin. Anyone who wants to develop a marketing promotion for the wine they produce today based on facts and on the authentic – not just fabricated – qualities of the grape and wine can rely on the presentation of a terroir's past. From the decisions of village authorities, or even from the text of the wine community laws, one can learn about the cultivation of a particular area, and the procedures used in the past. The first documents of this kind from the Hegyalja – Mád, Tállya² – date from the last decades of the 16th century and allow us to describe the changes of cultivation over the last four hundred years as a process.

Printed written heritage can be used in an even more complex way, with lessons that go far beyond the history of viticulture and wine-growing. No printed description of Hungarian wine regions is known from before the 18th century. The published memoirs of merchants, diplomatic missionaries and adventurers travelling to the Hungarian Kingdom tell us, of course, that they drank good wine, and that the Hungarians were drinkers of wine – this latter characteristic being one of the elements in the 17th century 'mirror of people'.³ (Völkertafel – Table des peuples – Tavola delle Nazioni – Tabla de los Pueblos).

The first known thesis on Hungarian wines was written in 1712 by a member of a German family from Bártfa, as a student at the Protestant *gimnasium illustre* in Toruń, under the chairmanship of the local teacher Peter Jänichen.⁴ Paul Keler then settled in Toruń, became a citizen and traded with Tokaj wines. His thesis was republished in 1731,⁵ with an extended

¹See for instance the series Égető, M. (ed.) (2002–2011).

²Village laws of Tállya: Kalmár, J. (1968), pp. 145–153; Égető, M. (ed.) (2002), pp. 50–58.

³Ötvös, P. (1999).

⁴Keler, P. (1712); Jänichen, P. (1731).

⁵Jänichen, P. (1731), pp. 215–255.: Dissertatio de vineis Vngariae; pp. 255–278.: Beschreibung des vornehmsten Wein-gebürge in Ungarn; p. 272.: „Die Werckzeuge, die bey dem Weinbau gebrauchet werden.

version by Jänichen, who chaired its examination. In this publication, either he or perhaps Keler himself wrote a summary in German and a German–Hungarian–Latin glossary of the viticultural equipment used in Hegyalja was also published.

Another interesting feature of the 1731 edition is that a part of the *Meletemata*, written, edited and published by Jänichen, also contains a contemporary description of the legendary library of Matthias Hunyadi. The original manuscript of Naldo Naldi's text is also preserved in Toruń. Jänichen was aware of the plans for the publication of this manuscript – Martin Schmeizel from Jena and Matthias Bél from Pozsony had planned to publish it – and, ahead of his scholarly contemporaries, published the first description of the renowned bibliotheca. The publication of the two works in one volume is also a linking of two important elements of the early modern Hungarian image; the history of the *Bibliotheca Corvina* and the Tokaj wine.⁶ It is the author's conviction that the rector of the school of Toruń did this on purpose. Just as the scientific methods of researching and writing the history of the Corvina library were initiated at that time, so the representation of the Tokaj wine region was given a scientific apparatus.

János Péter Komáromy received his doctorate in medical studies from the University of Basel in 1715, and his doctoral thesis was on Hungarian wines, with an emphasis on the Sopron wine region. However, he also dedicated a chapter to the Tokaj wine.⁷ He established the basis of a tradition in the literature which has resulted in separate books or at least in separate chapters in the summary descriptions on the physiology of Tokaj wines and their use against certain diseases.

Between 1717 and 1726, Johann Adam Raymann reported annually to the European professional community on the volume of the Tokaj-Hegyalja vineyard production and the features of the wine.⁸ At the University of Halle, Johann Melchior Welsch, under the chairmanship of Friedrich Hoffmann,⁹ used these publications to write a thesis in 1721 on the nature and benefits of Hungarian wines and their various medicinal uses.

Later the attention was focused on the soil characteristics of the Tokaj terroir, and in 1732 Daniel Fischer¹⁰ published a book about it. The doctor from Késmark summarised the scientific references to the soil of the vineyards of Hegyalja, which had been published from the 16th century onwards. He also expressed his own opinion on the 'Tokaj medical soil', which contained gold according to the legend.¹¹ This gold content is then also present in the grape vines. The legend was documented from the 15th century, Galeotto Marzio, who lived at the court of Matthias Hunyadi, also mentioned it. Although it has not yet been possible to carry out a critical analysis of the relevant texts, it is certain that it appeared in several places in the 18th century and is still alive today. One of the sources of this opinion is attributed – wrongly – to be a work by the Swiss physician Paracelsus. Of course, the critical analysis of the written

⁶About this generally see Monok, I. (2022).

⁷Komáromy, J. P. (1715).

⁸Raymann, J. A. (1720); Raymann, J. A. (1720a); Raymann, J. A. (1723); Raymann, J. A. (1725).

⁹Welsch, J. M. (1721).

¹⁰Fischer, D. (1732).

¹¹Viczián I. (2017).

heritage does not – and does not intend to – eliminate the legend, but the philological analysis has brought and may bring many new documents to the attention of scholars.¹²

Meanwhile, in the Hungarian Kingdom, the need arose for a scientific description of the country's individual territorial units and regions. From the soil and hydrogeographic conditions, to the local production and farming methods, to the cultural and educational institutions. The first such major series of books is connected to Mátyás Bél (1684–1749) with the *Notitia Regni Hungariae*.¹³ In his 1737 vol he described Zemplén county, including Tokaj-Hegyalja. This work will become one of the main sources¹⁴ for the description of the county by Antal Szirmay (1747–1812) (*Notitia topographica, politica Inclyti Comitatus Zempleniensis*).¹⁵ Szirmay was an active politician, the parliamentary representative of Zemplén County, and a winemaker himself. He also published a separate presentation of the Tokaj-Hegyalja wine region in Latin – *Notitia... montium et locorum viniferorum Comitatus Zempleniensis...*, in 1798¹⁶ –, and, following its success, in a shorter version in Hungarian (*A tokaji vagy is hegyaljai szőlőknek öltetéséről, jó míveléséről a szüretelésről, a boroknak tsinállásáról és meg tartásáról...*, 1810).¹⁷

But Mátyás Bél not only influenced the scholars who followed him, he organised the works of his predecessors. One of his sources for describing the wine regions was his fellow citizen of Pozsony, János Matolai, a viticulturist and oenologist who had studied theology in Wittenberg. Already in 1723 Bél published his work *Hungariae antiquae et novae prodrromus*,¹⁸ in which Matolai presented the wines of Sopron and of Hungary in general in the genre of letters (*Commentatio epistolica de vino Semproniensi et de vineis et vino Hungariae*). János Matolai then dedicated a special publication to Tokaj wine: *Disquisitio physicomeditica de vini Tokajensis cultura, indole, praestantia et qualitatibus*, in the *Acta Academiae Caesareae Leopoldino-Carolinae Naturae Curiosorum*, published in Nürnberg (1744).¹⁹

According to Tímea N. Kis²⁰ Samuel Domby's doctoral dissertation (*Dissertatio... de vino Tokajensi*, 1758)²¹ from Utrecht is the transition between the earlier partly empirical, partly legendary descriptions and the scientific oenological text. Indeed, if we study Domby's sources carefully,²² we find that he processed the oral tradition in the same way that he studied the scientific literature of his time. His work then became the basis for a series of descriptions of Tokaj-Hegyalja beginning in the late 18th century. Friedrich Jacob Fucker (1748–1805),

¹²Monok I. (2017); Adamik L. (2017). cf. Kis T.N.–Orbán Á.–Sipos E. (2025), Kis T. N. (2025a).

¹³Bél, M. (1735–1742).

¹⁴About his sources in details see the study of Áron Orbán in this edition: Orbán Á.–Pető, G. (eds.) (2022); cf. Orbán Á. (2025).

¹⁵Szirmay A. (1803).

¹⁶Szirmay A. (1798).

¹⁷Szirmay A. (1810).

¹⁸Bél, M. (1723).

¹⁹Matolai, J. (1744). A facsimile edition with critical notes: Orbán Á.–Pető G. (eds.) (2025).

²⁰Kis T. N.–Pető G. (eds.) (2022).

²¹Domby, S. (1758).

²²Gyárfás, Á. (1983); Kis, T. N. (2023), Kis T. N. (2025).

a German medical doctor from Kassa, introduced the territory more through the eyes of a traveller (*Versuch einer Beschreibung des Tokayer Gebirges*, 1790),²³ with precise indication of the terroir, but especially of the biological impacts of the wine.²⁴ The English natural scientist Robert Townson (1762–1827), after exploring the whole of the Hungarian Kingdom (1793), described the country in detail (*Travels in Hungary*, 1797). Since his travelogue was published in English,²⁵ French,²⁶ and Dutch,²⁷ 19th-century travellers set out on their journeys having read his text. He also dedicated two chapters to Tokaj and Hegyalja. In one, he describes the vineyards, the wines and the winemaking activities, and in the other he analyses in detail the soil conditions in the region.²⁸

János Dercsényi (Weisz) (1755–1837), in addition to his medical degree, had also acquired a serious knowledge of natural science (mineralogy) and law lived in Transcarpathia near Hegyalja and through his wife had close ties with the Hegyalja.²⁹ He published his book on Tokaj wine production in German, already using Fucker's work (*Über Tokay's Weinbau*, 1796).³⁰ This book, as well as Antal Szirmay's Latin work, were almost immediately published in Hungarian in Kassa. Its translator, a teacher from Sárospatak, Gábor Óri Fülepi (1739–1823), undertook the work with the intention of creating Hungarian equivalents of scientific terms already established in German.³¹

The period is a time of Hungarian language reform, so the books on wine also form part of the Hungarian linguistic heritage. The same is true of the German language, since the dialect equivalents of the vineyard and wine-making terms used in the 18th and 19th centuries were already understood by only a few German intellectuals. They are now an integral part of the German linguistic cultural heritage.

If we look at the chronological list published in [appendix](#) of our study, it is clear that in the first half of the 19th century, descriptions of Tokaj-Hegyalja were already published in Hungarian.

To sum up, therefore, it can be argued that it is not useless for a 21st century community, intending to engage in modern cultivation, to explore the written memories of the past. Learning about other people's opinions can help a cultural community – in our case, the Hungarians, more specifically the Hungarians living in the Tokaj-Hegyalja region – understand itself better.

²³Fucker, F. J. (1790); Fucker, F. J. (1801).

²⁴Blaskó, K. (2009).

²⁵Townson, R. (1797). *Travels in Hungary, with a Short Account of Vienna in the Year 1793*. London: Robinson.

²⁶Townson, R. (1799. 1800. 1803).

²⁷Townson, R. (1800–1801).

²⁸See Rózsa P. (2011). cf. Rózsa P. (ed.) (1999). *Robert Townson magyarországi utazásai: az 1997. szeptember 26-án Debrecenben tartott "Townson Emlékülés" előadásai – Robert Townson's Travels in Hungary: Proceedings of the "Townson Symposium" held in Debrecen, 26th September, 1997*. Debrecen: KLTE. A facsimile edition with critical notes: Rózsa P. (ed.) (2023). *Robert Townson, Tokaj, its Vineyards and Wine, Tokaj szőlőskertjei és bora, A Londonban 1797-ben, Párizsban 1798-ban és a Hágában 1800-ban kiadott könyvek Tokaj-Hegyalja fejezeteinek hasonmása. Europica varietas Tokajensis, Acta Universitatis Tokajensis Sárospatakinii, Patrimonium culturale, Fontes, VII. Budapest–Sárospatak: L'Harmattan, THE.*

²⁹Kiss, L. (1999). With facsimile edition of the works of Dercsényi.

³⁰Dercsényi J. (1796. 1800).

³¹Dercsényi, J. (1796–1810).

It can help them work out what is actually true in their own tradition, what has been passed down as legend, and it is vital to maintain awareness of these legends so they may live on. However, it is more important that they gain an understanding of the land – even from a soil perspective – that they cultivate. They will learn about its former state, as well as who had what idea and when regarding the soil, the terroir and its impacts. The same applies to the grapes grown here and the wines produced. Who knows, perhaps even the solution to a current problem may be aided by the old knowledge that the scholarly language of the 18th century, Latin, has so far hidden from those living today.

But if a winegrower, winemaker or wine lover living in the 21st century reads the books of those times merely as a curiosity, their erudition and horizon will certainly be enriched.

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Appendix

Chronological list of books referring to Tokaj-Hegyalja mentioned in the notes

1712–1731: Paulus Keler–Peter Jänichen, *Dissertatio de vineis Ungariae, Beschreibung des vornehmsten Weingebürges in Ungarn*, 1731.

1715: Komáromy János Péter, *Dissertatio physico-medica inauguralis De vino Hungarico Soproniensi*, 1715.

1717–1726: Johann Adam Raymann, *Special-Historie der An. 1718. in Ober-Hungarn gehabten Weinlese etc. Évenkénti tudósítások a Tokaj-hegyaljai szőlőtermés és a bor jellemzőiről*, 1717–1726.

1721: Johann Melchior Welsch–Friedrich Hoffmann, *Dissertatio ... de vini Hungarici eccellente natura virtute et usu*, 1721.

1723: Matolai János–Bél Mátyás: *Commentatio epistolica de vino Semproniensi et de vineis et vino Hungariae in H. antiquae et novae prodromus*, 1723.

1732: Daniel Fischer, *De terra medicinali Tokayensi*, 1732.

1737: Bél Mátyás, *Notitia Hungariae...*, *Comitatus Sarosiensis, Zemplinensis, Ungváriensis et Bereghiensis*, 1737.

1744: Matolai János, *De vino Tokaiensi*, 1744.

1758: Domby Sámuel, *Dissertatio... de vino Tokajensi*, 1758.

1790–1801: Friedrich Jacob Fucker, *V. einer Beschreibung des Tokayer Gebirges*, 1790–1801.

1793–1797: Robert Townson, *Travels in Hungary*, 1793–1797.

1796–1800: Dercsényi János, *Über Tokay's Weinbau*, 1796, 1800.

1796/1810: Dercsényi János, *A tokaji bornak termesztéséről, szűréséről és forrásáról*, sine anno.

1798: Szirmay Antal, *Notitia historica, politica, oeconomica montium et locorum viniferorum comitatus Zempleniensis*, 1798.

1801–1813: Jean-Antoine-Claude Chaptal–Fábián József, *A' boroknak termesztésekről, készítésekről és eltartásokról való értekezés; – és Visgálódó és oktató értekezés a' szőlő-mívelésről*, 1801–1813.

1810: Szirmay Antal, *A tokaji vagy is hegyallyai szőlőknek ültetéséről, jó míveléséről, a szüretelésről, a boroknak tsinállásáról és meg tartásáról*, 1810.

1815: Mittelpacher Lajos, *Rövid oktatás a szőlő művelésről*, 1815.

1822: François Sulpice Beudant, *Voyage minéralogique et géologique en Hongrie*, 1822.

1829: Görög Demeter, *Azon sokféle szőlő-fajoknak lajstroma*, 1829.

1838: Szabó Dávid, *A mádi bor természet- és orvostudományi tekintetben*, 1838.

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