

ZSIGMOND CSOMA

## A Late Medieval Method of Determining the Quality of Must Used in Hungary in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

In the scholarship on the production of foodstuffs, the tests that were used in order to determine quality have only rarely been made a subject of study. And yet quality foodstuffs that were neither contaminated nor adulterated were clearly essential. Efforts to ensure provisions of high-quality foodstuffs were very much a part of peasant life in Hungary, even if, in times of famine (caused by wars, natural disasters, and other calamities), people were compelled to make do with so-called famine provisions instead of the usual alimentation simply in order to keep their families alive. Potatoes and corn both became part of the peasant cuisine in Europe because of such calamities and periods of dire need.

In the course of my research in the areas around the Danube and the Tisza Rivers in 1975–1980 as an employee of the Museum of Agriculture, I first came across an archaic manner of determining the quality of must on the farmsteads of Szank, a village in Bács-Kiskun County. The coat-of-arms of the village bears a cluster of grapes, a clear indication of the importance of this branch of agriculture in earlier centuries. In the areas around the farmsteads, grapes, which grow in the barren sand hills and limy soil and endure blasts of sand in the wind, were the only produce that actually brought in an income for the peasantry.

People have often observed that archaic methods or knowledge of these methods usually survive in areas in which peasant traditions persisted because of lack of innovation and economic and social development. Some of the methods which are still in use today may well date back to the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup> Many such traditional methods are still used today in viticulture, and in some cases they are being used with increasing frequency. On the basis of the answers that were given to my questions, I came across the method of determining the quality of must that I am presenting here in the area between the Danube and the Tisza Rivers, Szelevény, Szelevény-Halesz, Csépa, Tizzasas, Tiszaug (in Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok County), Somló (in Veszprém County), in the Káli Basin to the north of Lake Balaton (also in Veszprém County), Western Hungary (Zala and Vas Counties), and several places near the Danube Bend. In her monograph on the peasant viticulture of the Hungarian plain, Melinda Égető makes no mention of this method.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See BÁTI Anikó – CSOMA Zsigmond (eds.): *Középkori elemek a mai magyar anyagi kultúrában*. Életképek a Kárpát-medence anyagi kultúrája köréből I, Budapest, Agroinform Kiadó, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> ÉGETŐ Melinda: *Az alföldi paraszti szőlőművelés és borkészítés története a középkortól a múlt század közepéig*. Néprajzi Tanulmányok. Ed. KISBÁN Eszter. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1993.

The method in question of determining the quality of the must from different vintages is simple on the one hand, but also exemplifies the rational practicality and innovativeness of peasant tradition on the other. An egg, a small potato, an apple, or a pear was thrown into the must in order to determine whether or not the must, which, as it had already been established, was sweet to the taste, was actually of a good quality. If the egg or the potato, apple, or pear floated on the surface of the must, then the must was considered good, and everyone knew they could expect a flavorful wine with a high alcohol content. Before the spread of the hydrometers used today, the thickness and quality of the must was measured using this technique. The thick must had a high sugar content, and this prevented the egg, potato, apple, or pear from sinking. The thicker the must, the higher the sugar content (i.e. a high content of elements dissolved in the sugar that gave the wine its flavor and scent), allowing the peasants who made the wine to predict its quality, and this in turn filled them with hope concerning the prices the wine would fetch from merchants. This is why they would say, “the must will be good, because it kept the potato afloat.”

If the vintage was poor, the potato, apple, or pear would sink. If it sank to the bottom of the basin, then the vintage was particularly weak. This observation and this method became common knowledge in Western Europe beginning in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century first and foremost because of the spread of glass hydrometers in French viticulture. In 1805, and then again in 1814, József Nemes Fábián, who translated the books on French viticulture by Chaptal and his fellow authors, mentioned this implement for the first time, and later Ferenc Schams, a diligent expert on viticulture of the Reform Era in Hungary, presented the first hydrometer to be put into use (by him among other people) in Hungary.<sup>3</sup>

One is prompted to ask, what sources or data actually indicate that this simple but rational method of measuring the quality of the must drunk by the peasants was actually familiar to and used by peasants in the Middle Ages, the feudal era, and the society of the Estates?

Taxes that were levied on vineyards and wine were based on must, even as early as the period of Turkish occupation. For instance, in 1564 and 1565 the many absentee landlords in the market town of Tolna, who had vineyards in the hills of the settlements in the area, paid a high tax on must.<sup>4</sup> Taxpayers may have been able to

<sup>3</sup> On the work of Chaptal, see CSOMA Zsigmond: *Szőlészeti, borászati hagyományok, a megújulás és a közöség kötelékében: Kapcsolatok, hatások, konfliktusok Dunántúl és Európa között a 17. század végétől a 20. század elejéig*. Centrál-Európa Alapítványi Könyvek 3. Ed. UJVÁRY Zoltán. Debrecen – Budapest, 1994–1995, 51–54. On the work of József Nemes Fábián, see CSOMA (1994–1995): 51–52, 54, 63, 104, 108–109; FÁBIÁN József: *A' Bornak természetéről, készítésekről és eltartásokról való értekezés. Chaptal után*, Veszprém, 1805; FÁBIÁN József: *Vis'gáldó és oktató értekezés a' szőlő-mívelésről*, I–II, Veszprém, 1814. On the work of Schams, see CSOMA (1994–1995): 64–65; SCHAMS, Franz: *Magyarország' bortermetéséről s készítését tárgyazó folyóírás*, I–III, Pest, 1836–1838.

<sup>4</sup> KÁLDY-NAGY Gyula: *Magyarországi török adóösszeírások*. Értekezések a történeti tudományok köréből. Új sorozat 52. Ed. VARGA János. Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1970, 76–83.

get out of paying taxes by diluting the must. In terms of quantity, they could not get away with providing less than was expected, since the landlords had men equipped with sticks to measure the contents of the barrels. But the tests used to determine the quality of the must were less stringently enforced. On February 17, 1574, Emperor Maximilian gave the following instructions to Michael Khober, the auditor for the manor of Magyaróvár: “after the wine has settled, measure it in the presence of the captain using a measuring stick and draw up a corresponding statement of account.”<sup>5</sup> As these instructions make clear, it was well-nigh impossible to get away with deceit or deception when it came to quantity because of the objective method of measuring used. Diluting must, in contrast, must have been neither terribly conspicuous nor terribly rare. The lords strove to collect the feudal taxes on high-quality must that they felt they were due, but when quantities were measured, dilution went unnoticed. In addition to the ninth part he was due, a lord, after the payment of the church’s tithe, could get as much as 20% of the yield of the serf, the craftsman burgher (in rare cases the nobleman who owned a vineyard), or all of the people who paid taxes. The lord knew, however, that the wines obtained as part of the tithe were often of poor quality, so they could only be sold at taverns at a low price. And all of this was the case independent of the fact that the serfs began to measure out and drink their wines beginning on Saint Michael’s Day (September 29) and ending on Saint George’s Day (April 24). Taverns could only open their doors after April 24. A weak must yielded a weak wine. In many cases, landlords experimented with various forms of fraud and guile, and for their part the serfs strove to outwit them with their own ruses and tricks. The large number of documents concerning litigations was in part a consequence of this. In order to prevent this, the feudal administration often gave precise descriptions and instructions to the people who collected the tithe concerning how to nip in the bud the efforts of the guileful serfs to get out of their tax obligations. For instance, the people who collected the tithe for the Zichy family in the area of Somló near what was once called Nagyszöllős were given the following instructions: “and in order to preclude any kind of cheating or deception, the yield of every vineyard cultivator will be properly measured and the tithe will be determined according to this at the time of the harvest on the basis of the must.”<sup>6</sup> Later, the officials who were sent to collect the tithe (for instance the tithe levied by the bishop of Győr on the inhabitants of Tüskevár-Nagyjenő) were also told to establish the tax not in the city, but rather in the vineyards themselves, in the wine cellars immediately after the harvest, and not on the basis of the must that still had the skins of the pressed grapes in it, but rather on the basis of the must after the skins had been extracted,<sup>7</sup> before it could have been diluted.

<sup>5</sup> KENYERES István (ed.): *XVI. századi uradalmi utasítások. Utasítások a kamarai uradalmak prefektusai, udvarbírái és ellenőrei részére*, I, Budapest, Szentpétery Imre Történettudományi Alapítvány, 2002, 425.

<sup>6</sup> CSOMA Zsigmond: *Uradalmi és jobbágy-paraszti szőlő-, bortermelés Somlón*. Studia Folkloristica et Ethnographica 35. Ed. Ujváry Zoltán. Debrecen, Kossuth Lajos Tudományegyetem, 1993, 140.

<sup>7</sup> CSOMA (1993): 141.

The instructions that were given on June 10, 1684 by Imre Thökoly indicate a clear and effective way of preventing or at least detecting the dilution of must. Thökoly instructed the official in charge of collecting the tithe to throw a wild fruit into the must, or in other words, to use a method very similar to the aforementioned method used by peasants: “a skilled tithe collector can easily tell which wine will be watery and which wine will be pure; this can be determined with the use of a wild fruit. So as tithe, wines should be taken that in the future will not bring criticism on our tithe collector for their quality.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, the aforementioned method used by peasants and serfs to determine the quality of must was used by landlords as well. The tithe collector was expected to use this method in his own defense to check the quality of the must, to avoid being cheated, and to avoid shortchanging the landlord.

An earlier source is found in the description of the archbishop’s garden in Pozsony/Pressburg (Bratislava) by Bishop of Esztergom György Lippay. The garden was designed and planted by János Lippay, the archbishop’s younger brother, who later wrote a three-volume work entitled *Posoni Kert* [“Bratislava Garden”] on the basis of his experiences. In the third volume, *Gyümölcsös kert* [“Fruit Garden”], which was published in 1667, he writes the following in his description of various kinds of apples and pears: “if an apple is put into a barrel and it floats, then the wine has not been diluted. If, on the other hand, it sinks, then the wine has been watered down.”<sup>9</sup> He makes a similar observation in passages concerning pears: “when you want to see if the wine has water in it, put a pear into the barrel, and if it floats, then the wine is not diluted. If it sinks, the wine has been watered down.”<sup>10</sup>

To summarize, on the basis of the abovementioned sources, it seems clear that the method used by peasants to determine the quality of must, a method which has survived into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, was used centuries earlier, in the Early Modern Era, but also quite possibly even in the Middle Ages. It may well be a remnant of the methods used by landlords in the practice of collecting the tithe. As a form of paying taxes, the tithe was always a bitter pill for the people who had to pay the levies, and in particular for the serfs and the peasants, who had to turn over as much as one-fifth of their harvest. Thus, it is hardly surprising that people who sought to avoid paying taxes experimented with an array of ruses. One of these, and quite possibly the most widespread, was the practice of watering down must and wine. This serf ruse became a widespread peasant practice as Europe shifted from the feudal world towards bourgeois society. It was part of peasant viticulture and practical

<sup>8</sup> LEHOCZKY Tivadar: „Gazdasági viszonyok Thökoly Imre fejedelem uradalmaiban 1684-ben.” *Magyar Gazdaságtörténelmi Szemle*, 1, 1894. 146–163; 156. *Magyar Gazdaságtörténelmi Szemle* [Hungarian Economic-Historical Review] was an early example of the positivist approach to history. Numerous manorial precepts were printed in it at the turn of the 20th century.

<sup>9</sup> LIPPAY János: *Posoni Kert. Kiben Minden Kerti Munkák, Rendelések, Virágokkal, Veteményekkel, Fákkal, Gyümölcsökkel és Kerti Csömötékekkel való baimolódások...* Bécs, 1667, CLXVII, 142.

<sup>10</sup> LIPPAY (1667): CLXXIX, 153.

knowhow. The practice of using an apple, an egg, a pear, or, beginning in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a potato to determine the quality of must was a widespread method that remained in use until it began to be replaced by the use of the hydrometer.

### *Abstract*

*In the scholarship on the production of foodstuffs, the tests that were used in order to determine quality have only rarely been made a subject of study. And yet quality foodstuffs that were neither contaminated nor adulterated were clearly an essential part of peasant life.*

*On the basis of the abovementioned sources, it seems clear that the method used by peasants to determine the quality of must, a method which has survived into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, was used centuries earlier, in the Early Modern Era, but also quite possibly even in the Middle Ages. It may well be a remnant of the methods used by landlords in the practice of collecting the tithe. As a form of paying taxes, the tithe was always a bitter pill for the people who had to pay the levies, and in particular for the serfs and the peasants, who had to turn over as much as one-fifth of their harvest. Thus, it is hardly surprising that people who sought to avoid paying taxes experimented with an array of ruses. One of these, and quite possibly the most widespread, was the practice of watering down must and wine. This serf ruse became a widespread peasant practice as Europe shifted from the feudal world towards bourgeois society. It was part of peasant viticulture and practical knowhow. The practice of using an apple, an egg, a pear, or, beginning in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a potato to determine the quality of must was a widespread method that remained in use until it began to be replaced by the use of the hydrometer.*

### *Keywords*

*early 19<sup>th</sup>-century agriculture, peasant viticulture, the quality of must*

### *Rezümé*

*Késő középkori mustminőség-mérési módszer paraszti hagyománya Magyarországon a 19. században*

*Az élelmiszer-termelés és fogyasztás témájának kutatásában a minőségi vizsgálódások kérdését nemigen érintette a történetkutatás. Pedig az egészséges, nem hamisított, nem fertőzött, megfelelő minőségű élelmiszerek a paraszti táplálkozásban is nagy szerepet játszottak. Az erre való törekvés a magyarországi parasztság történetét is átszötte, még ha az ínséges időkben (háborúk, természeti katasztrófák és csapások, valamint más sanyarú körülmények) kénytelen volt is beérni az ember a maga és családja fenntartása miatt a megszokott emberi táplálék helyettesítésével, az ún. ínség-eledelek fogyasztásával.*

*A 19., de még a 20–21. században is fennmaradt paraszti mustminőség-ellenőrzési módszer több évszázados, a koraujkorig, de feltételezhető, hogy a középkorig nyúló gyakorlatot őriz. Mindez a földesúri dézsmáltatás emléke lehet. A dézsmálás, a dézsma szedése mint adózási*

*forma, mindig keserűen érintette az adózókat, azon belül is a jobbágyparasztokat, akiknek a termésük 1/5-ét kellett beszolgáltatniuk. Így az adófizetés alól kibújni szándékozók számtalan fortéllyal próbálkoztak. Ezek egyike és talán legáltalánosabbika a must-bor vizezése, hígítása volt. Ez az egykori jobbágyi ügyeskedés a rendi társadalomból a polgári társadalomba is átkerült általános paraszti gyakorlatként, mint a paraszti szőlőtechnológia és tudás része. Az almával, tojással, körtével, majd a 19. század elejétől burgonyával ellenőrzött must-borminőség általánosan elterjedt módszer volt a kis fajsúlymérő eszközök elterjedéséig.*

#### Kulcsszavak

paraszti bortermelés, mustminőség ellenőrzése, késő középkori gazdasági módszerek továbbélése