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Unesco Swiss World Heritage Sites

Lavaux Vineyard Terraces

In geometric precision, the Lavaux Vineyard Terraces stretch for about 30km along the northern shores of Lake Geneva, from the Chateau de Chillon to the eastern outskirts of Lausanne in the Vaud region. The terraces are an outstanding example of a 1000-year relationship between humans and the environment.

Many of the landscape's historical features and buildings have been preserved, as have the traditional methods of agriculture and related cultural traditions. An abundance of records reveal the development of land ownership, control and protection over the centuries right up into modern times. The region's future protection is enshrined in Swiss law, strongly supported by local communities.

A Latin inscription on the worship of wine and the remains of a substantial Roman villa in the village of Saint-Saphorin hint that Lavaux was probably cultivated for wine already in Roman times. The city of Lausanne itself grew from the Roman camp on a major Roman Road along Lake Geneva (Via Romana). No doubt local wine growers were in great demand.

Later, the region came under control of the Dukes of Savoy, the Bishop of Lausanne and then Bern, before joining the Swiss Federation in 1803.

The oldest written testimonies on grape cultivation in the Lavaux region date from the 9th century. By the 12th century, the Bishops of Lausanne had gifted large parcels of land to several Cisterian and Benedictine Abbeys.

Until the Reformation, these Abbeys managed the landscape, introduced terraces and developed roads to export their wines. Many of the current boundaries and roads follow these medieval lines. By the 14th century, the monasteries leased out most of their land to tenants who cultivated it as mixed farms, against the payment of a percentage of their crops.

By this time, many of the families who still farm the area today had become established. An example is the Chappuis family, whose presence as vine growers dates back to 1335.

The first testimonies of any active control of the region commenced in 1368. Wine cellars were defined and local wines were encouraged. 'Foreign' wines and distillation were discouraged (the latter used up too much manure and timber required for the vineyards).

In 1536, Lausanne came under the control of Berne. Several wealthy patrician families from Berne started to acquire land in Lavaux. Wine growing became carefully controlled to keep up quality.

By the 1800s, the land had been broken up into many small plots owned by a huge diversity of landowners, including many wealthy secular and ecclesiastical families. This made work on these plots increasingly inefficient. Once the canton of Vaud joined the Swiss Federation, a period of agricultural reform followed. Terraces were rationalized and erosion control implemented.

In 1849, the road connecting Lausanne to Vevey along by the edge of the lake was widened. The railway was constructed in 1861.

One of the biggest threats to the area was "phylloxera", a vine disease first appearing in 1886. Growers had to change their methods to enable chemical treatment of vines. Many of the old methods disappeared, as newly grafted vines were planted along lines rather than the traditional 'goblet' fashion.

Change came also with stricter regulation at the Canton level: The Statute of Wine was introduced to maintain wine quality, but also to secure a decent income for local wine growers. This ended the relative freedom of the wine growers.

Following World War II, the expansion of Lausanne and other towns attracted growers to leave their plots. Improved transport enabled growers living in towns. Mixed farming finally disappeared, and with it any orchards, cows and pigs. Between 1957 and 1977, legislation was introduced to permanently protect this valuable part of Swiss culture. Resisted by many initially, it is now seen as essential to save the local wine-making traditions and also the vineyard landscape.

The final major alteration to the landscape was the building of the A9 Autoroute along the upper edge of the site, in a proposed buffer zone outside the protected area.

Based on: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1243>



Lavaux Vineyard Terraces from Lake Geneva, after a week of rain

Photo: Erik Charlton (http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lake_Geneva_Lavaux.jpg, Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license)



Lavaux Vineyard Terraces up close

Photo: Patrick Denoréaz (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lavaux_Patrimoine_mondial_2007_10_06.JPG)