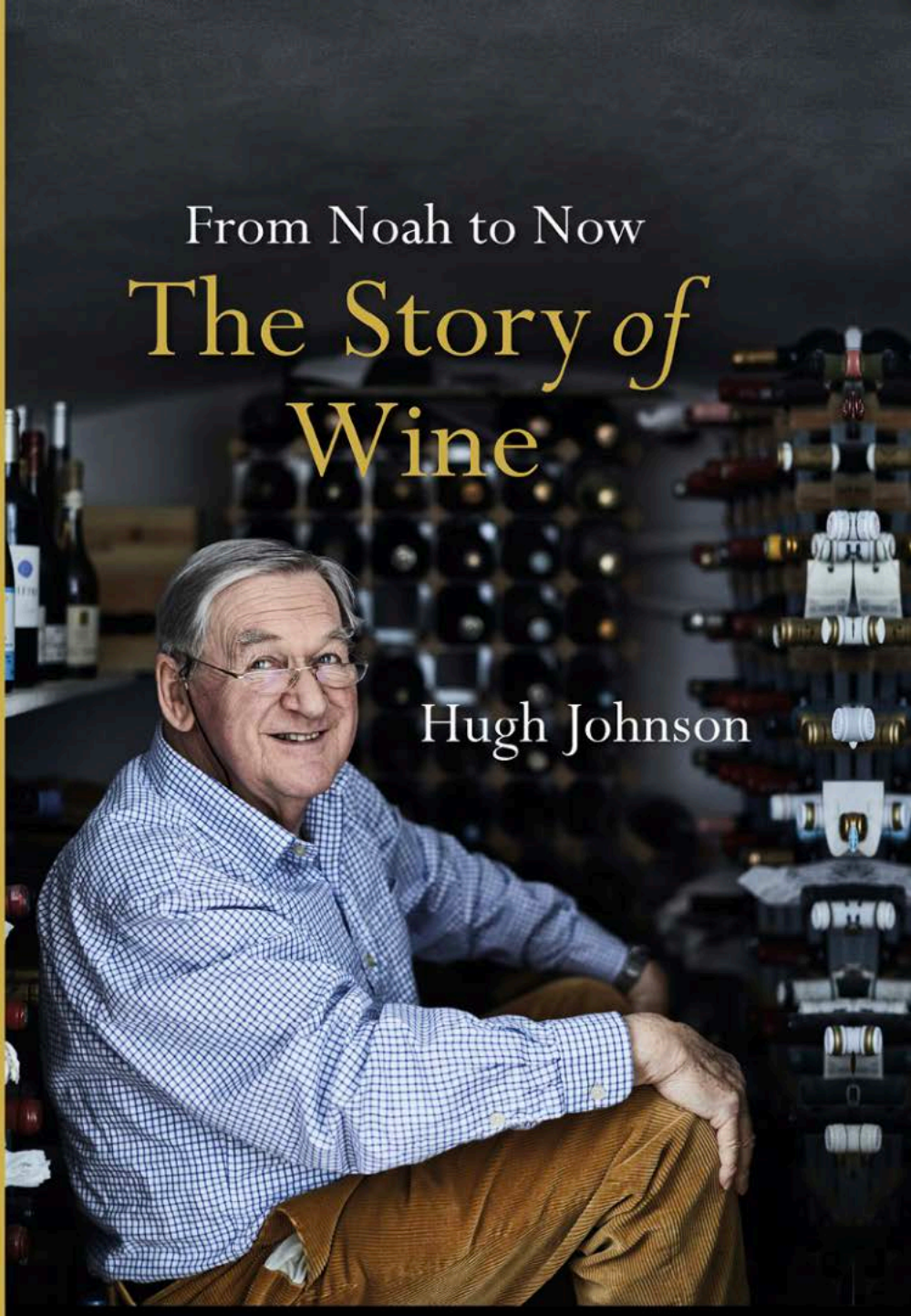
From Noah to Now

# The Story *of* Wine



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New Edition

Foreword *by* Andrew Roberts

CHAPTER 8

## A GREENER COUNTRY

No one disputes that France was to become the motherland of wine, but the circumstances of her insemination are a battleground between historians. In brief, there are those who believe what Roman writings, backed up by Roman remains, tell them, and those whose Gallic pride leads them to look much further back, and to claim that it was the forgotten predecessors of the Celts who established wine-growing in France. Some even argue that Stone Age Frenchmen were vignerons. There are enough grape pips in a settlement site on Lake Geneva to indicate that the wild vine (certainly indigenous to France) was being exploited there 12,000 years ago or more.

Prehistory is turned on its head by this school of thought, which holds that civilization began in the west and spread its influence eastwards. According to this 'Celtic' school, the achievements of the west are ignored because they were never written down; written records are the only reason why we credit the peoples of the east with discoveries and inventions made by others.

The Celts of Gaul were certainly an active and aggressive race. They dominated almost the whole of Europe north of the Alps in the time when Athens dominated Greece. They invaded Italy, occupied Lombardy (founding Milan) and reached Rome, settled briefly in Asia Minor, and in the aftermath of Alexander the Great they even penetrated his Macedonian kingdom, reaching as far as Delphi, and founded a settlement on the Danube at Belgrade.

There is no arguing with the fact that they appreciated wine. The evidence of the Vix Crater (*see* Chapter 4) of 600BC is conclusive. The ancient Gauls had extensive contacts with the Mediterranean wine world over a long period; they were a ready market for Greek and Etruscan wine; if the wine vine was a native plant in France, then surely they must have made wine for themselves.

The Roman evidence says not. The account from the classics is that Greeks from Asia Minor, the Phocaeans, established the colony of Massalia (Marseilles) in 6000BC, planted vines and traded with the natives. The Celts from the interior of Gaul had not even reached the south of France by this time: the inhabitants were Ligurians and Iberians, respectively from northern Italy and Spain.

The enormous success of Massalia was due to the natives' thirst for wine, but it is even doubted (by some authorities) that it had its own vineyards. Some say the Greeks taught the natives to become adept at wine growing, others that all 'Massaliote' wine was imported from Greece or the Greek colonies in Sicily and southern Italy.

If there were vineyards in Celtic Gaul, they were not down on the Mediterranean coast, where the Gauls began to arrive in about the fifth century BC. They must have been in the interior, attached to such tribal settlements as Bourges, Chartres, Metz, Reims, Amiens, Troyes and Bibracte (of which more in a moment), growing native grapes (the climate would have excluded Mediterranean vines) and, more-over, subject to the disapproving looks of the Druids, who anticipated certain sects of Christianity in their moralistic stance towards wine. It is easier to believe the authors who say that France had no wine – and difficult otherwise to understand the enormous prices Gallic chieftains would pay for it. Diodorus Siculus, admittedly writing rather later, about the time of Christ, ensured himself fame with the statement that 'Italian merchants, prompted by their usual cupidity, regard the Gauls' thirst for wine as a godsend. They take the wine to them by ship up the navigable rivers or by chariot overland and it fetches incredible prices: for one amphora of wine they receive one slave, thus exchanging the drink for the cupbearer.'[1]

MASSALIA BECAME PART OF THE YOUNG ROMAN EMPIRE in about 125BC, but continued to be regarded as a Greek town. The magnificence of the Roman buildings, monuments, theatres and aqueducts of Provence, in masonry as fine as any in the Empire and far ahead of anything in Gaul, is said to be due to the Greek tradition of craftsmanship in Massilia, as the Romans called it. Young Romans even came here to be educated in preference to making the longer trip to Athens.

The first true colony of the Romans in France was founded a few years later, along the coast to the west at Narbo, near the mouth of the river Aude. Narbo (Narbonne) became the capital of the province of Narbonensis, and indeed of the whole of what the Romans called Gallia Transalpina – Gaul across the Alps, the creation of the great pro-consul Domitius Ahenobarbus. Like all Rome's great colonial cities, it was based on veterans from the army (who did not have to be native Romans; army service conferred the coveted rights of citizenship on Roman and barbarian alike). It was the period after the destruction of Carthage when wine growing was spreading like wildfire in Italy. Some of the soldiers would have been the sons of wine growers and known all about vineyards. They planted the hill slopes near Narbonne, today's Corbières, Minervois and the Coteaux du Languedoc. These are the first extensive vineyards in France that we can be certain about. They provided the trading strength of a province that was to control all of France south of a line from the Spanish border to Geneva.

ROME'S WAR TO THE DEATH WITH THE CARTHAGINIANS had already given her another prize. With the defeat of Hannibal in 200BC, the coastal parts of Spain became the first two great overseas provinces of her Empire. The northern province, eventually extending right to the Atlantic, became Tarraconensis, based on what today is Tarragona. The southern province, modern Andalusia, was called Baetica, from the river Baetis, now the Guadalquivir, at whose mouth the town of Gades (Cádiz) had been founded a thousand years ago by the Phoenicians.

Wine was no stranger to these provinces. It was the Carthaginians' wine-growing skills, inherited from the Phoenicians, that had caused Cato's envious outcry, 'Delenda est Carthago'. Columella was a native of Cádiz. Wine from the coastal parts of Spain soon be-

came commonplace in Rome. Pompeii traded with Tarragona, both buying and selling wine, which argues the quality of the Spanish product. Marcus Porcius, the millionaire merchant we met in Pompeii, had a wine estate here. Enormous quantities of Baetic wine reached Rome (the voyage normally only took a week). Most of it was described as ordinary, but one wine, Ceretanum, picked out by the poet Martial (who, although poor, had expensive tastes), was apparently highly regarded. If it came from Ceret, which seems probable, Martial was the first writer to write about sherry. The modern name of Ceret is Jerez de la Frontera.

The Phoenicians had not stayed on the seacoasts, but used the navigable rivers to go far inland. In Portugal (Lusitania to the Romans), they had sailed up the Tagus and the Douro (where Greek, although not Phoenician, coins have been found). In Spain they used the Baetis and the one considerable river of the Mediterranean coast, the Iberus – to us the Ebro. They left traces up the Ebro as far as Alfaro in Rioja. The Roman legions went farther, and colonized what today is the wine region of the Rioja Alta. The towns of Calahorra, Cenicero and Logroño were all Roman veteran colonies (Cenicero means crematorium). In a field near the Ebro at Funes, no more antique or dramatic looking than any long-abandoned agricultural building, is the entire layout of one of the wine bodegas that must have dotted the region to supply the troops. Its sizeable cisterns, beside the four lagars for treading the grapes, indicate that it could produce and store as much as 75,000 litres, or nearly 3,000 amphoras of wine.[2]

In the middle of the first century BC, the Gauls step from the twilight of illiterate barbarism, gleaming with jewelled armour and ringing with battle cries, into the full light of history. It was their fortune to meet one of the greatest commanders and administrators of the ancient world, and one of its most lucid chroniclers – Julius Caesar. Domitius Ahenobarbus had already established Roman power in the south. Political contact had been made, and one powerful tribe of central Gaul, the Aedui, whose stronghold of Bibracte lay just to the west of what is today the Côte d'Or, seeking Roman help against its foes (and not averse to the luxuries of Roman life), had asked for and been given the title of Friend and Ally of the Roman people.

Rome soon realized the unstable nature of the tribal make-up of Gaul. Pillaging hordes of Teutons from the north hacked their way into what Rome was beginning to regard as its sphere of influence. Rome sent soldiers, who were three times thrashed. Rome and Gaul had common cause in beating off this invading savagery. The consul Marius then raised an army which defeated the Teuton, German and Swiss tribes, near Turin and at Aix-en-Provence. The tribes of Gaul were confused and divided as to whether to welcome or resist this formidable neighbour.

It was the custom of those times for armies in the field to be accompanied by a bazaar of traders, who sold accessories to the soldiers and bought their booty from them on the spot. Prisoners were auctioned there and then, and taken off to be sold at a good profit as slaves.

Constant fighting among the 60 tribes who divided Gaul assured that there was never a shortage of prisoners for sale. The currency most in demand by the conquering chieftains was wine. Wine was heavy, took time to transport, needed warehousing. Even before the Romans had subjugated Gaul, therefore, there was a wine trade network, beginning with the Rhône Valley as the route from the Provincia Narbonensis northwards. When Caesar reached Chalon-sur-Saône, he found two Roman wine merchants already in business there.

Caesar's Gallic War was over in only seven years. It began with a call for help from the Aedui, involved marches all over France at amazing speed, sieges and even sea battles, included expeditions to Britain and Germany, and ended with the 60 tribes subdued, organized and paying tribute to Rome. One historian has described the whole episode as a gigantic slave raid. On the other hand, many of the Gauls were fatally tempted by the allurements of Mediterranean civilization – of which one of the greatest, to them, was wine. Caesar took note that a couple of northern tribes refused to be lured. Wine, they said, was a Roman trap. It dulled their fighting power. They might have noticed that it didn't dull the Romans'.

TRAP OR NOT, INNUMERABLE GAULS voluntarily joined the Roman army; the aristocracy sent their children to Rome; and the Romans were realistically generous in offering the privileges of citizenship, on certain conditions, to the conquered tribes. A Roman colony was a settlement by army veterans, but scarcely less dignity was accorded a town with 'Latin rights'; the native aristocracy were made Roman magistrates with full Roman citizenship which their children inherited.

Under Augustus, Gaul entered an era of peaceful prosperity and varied industry it could never have imagined under the old tribal system. His great general Agrippa founded and fortified towns (often on the sites of old Gallic settlements) and drove the straight no-nonsense Roman roads through forests, over mountains and across rivers. The heart of Agrippa's road network was Lyon, where the waters of the Rhône, draining the Alps, merge with the broad slow-moving Saône that Caesar had described as 'a great river of incredible tranquillity'. Lyon was Roman Gaul's second capital, succeeding Narbonne in the south. It rapidly became the second-greatest wine port in the world, after Rome itself.

UP TO THIS TIME, THE BEGINNING OF OUR ERA, there is no clear evidence of any vineyards in France north of the Mediterranean zone, defined by the Alpes-Maritimes in the east and the Cévennes in the west. The wine trade, though, was enormous – pouring up the narrow corridor of the Rhône to reach central and northern France and Germany, and trundling by caravan, rather more laboriously, northwest up the valley of the Aude, which is not navigable much above Narbonne, through the lowland gap past what is now Toulouse, or over the shoulder of the Cévennes and down the rivers Tarn or Garonne to the west coast at Burdigala – Bordeaux.

Bordeaux, with its almost-perfect situation on the estuary of the Gironde, had customers in Ireland, Britain (a *negotiator Britannicus* was identified on the waterfront in the first century BC), around the north coast of France to Holland and even as far as the Baltic. Gallic seamen were not timid. We know from the Greek geographer Strabo, who made the first mention of 'Burdigala' in the reign of Augustus, that it had no vines of its own. An 'emporium' he called it; a store.

There were two rival routes north into Germany – where the garrison legions were an im-

portant market. One went down the river Mosel and one down the Rhine. Everything possible was done to avoid the cost of overland freight. The Romans even planned to dig a canal to link the Saône to the Mosel.

Who were the customers in these unexpected northern markets? In Ireland the king's court was famous for its feasting. Britain had an active maritime trade, concentrated in Cornwall where the tin mines supported an unusually wealthy society. And of course there were thirsty Gauls at all stages in between.

The much-respected French historian Roger Dion has postulated a credible scenario for the advance of wine growing north into central and western France from its suntrap in the Midi. It starts with the observant eyes of the Romans (or perhaps the earlier Greeks) scanning the hillside woods and scrubland for plants they knew. The vine, they knew, grew with the olive. In the Mediterranean zone, the oak is an evergreen plant; juniper, box, myrtle, thyme and countless herbs form the earth's prickly carpet. These are the conditions that made their vines welcome in the Midi and Provence; they were virtually in Italy still. The evergreen oaks gave them heart. They rode northward and found the evergreen aromatic flora extending almost to the top of the Cévennes, fronting the Mediterranean.

Then they were over a crest, and in a greener, more humid country, without olives, where the oaks shed their leaves, and there was more grass than herbs. Not vine country, surely. They had reached the northern limit of the zone they knew. Going up the Rhône, they had reached the steep scarps of hill we call Hermitage and the flood-scoured bluffs of the Côte Rôtie above Vienne. Their sharp incline towards the south gives these singular slopes a more Mediterranean vegetation than their surroundings.

Going over the shoulder of the Cévennes towards Bordeaux they had reached Gaillac in the country of the Ruteni, a tribe whose silver mines gave them wealth and the habit of trade. Dion believed Gaillac is where they thought vine country stopped. If they could make wine here, why cart it all the way up from the coast? Save the carriage and supply Bordeaux from the watershed above it, using the river Garonne. If this is what happened, Gaillac, in what became known as the High Country, was supplying Bordeaux with wine before it had a vineyard of its own. (Later generations in Bordeaux never entirely lost their jealousy of High Country wine, and did their best to suppress it.) To this day, Gaillac has vine varieties peculiar to itself: the Fer-Servadou, Ondenc, L'en de l'Elh, Duras (perhaps what Cato called the Duracina). Their wine is of no very special quality by today's standards. But why should this remote spot have ancient indigenous grapes unless it is a survivor from before the time that the great mainstream vineyards of Aquitaine began?

Bordeaux's first vineyards of its own must have been planted very soon after Strabo's visit – indeed, in the very generation when (in 43AD) the Romans under Claudius conquered Britain. In 71, Pliny recorded not only the fact of vineyards in Bordeaux, but also what he knew about their grapes – which was not very much. He was confused by the fact that the same tribe, the Bituriges, had two settlements, one at Bordeaux and one at Bourges in central France (which certainly had no vines). And everybody has been confused since, because the Bituriges gave their own name (of Biturica) to the vines they planted, which were already well-known elsewhere under the name of Balisca.

The Balisca vine, we are told by Columella, was an excellent hardy and productive plant originally from Dyrrachium, a town on the Adriatic, since called Durrazzo and now Durres. Today it is in the aloof little country of Albania; then it was part of Epirus, the northern Greek province with the highest reputation for its wine. I have not been able to trace the Balisca back to its homeland, but it is thought-provoking that this might be where the ancestral Cabernet vine came from, whose progeny includes the Cabernets Sauvignon and Franc, the Merlot and the Petit Verdot – all the red-grape varieties of Bordeaux. It is a long-held article of faith in Bordeaux (Adrien Valois believed it in 1675) that the very name Biturica has survived, corrupted to Vidure, a name still used locally for the Cabernet Sauvignon.

Certainly the Balisca was widely grown in Rome's Spanish provinces (where it was known as Cocolubis: even then the infuriating intricacies of synonymy were making life complicated). Roger Dion has an intriguing theory that the Roman Spanish vineyard that supplied vines to Bordeaux was none other than Rioja; principally on the grounds that this is where the Romans, following the river Ebro inland from the Mediterranean, planted vines nearest to the north coast of Spain – whence it is a very short sail to Bordeaux. In the 19th century we will see how Bordeaux repaid this ancient debt.

There is no question of there having been wild vines growing at Bordeaux already, waiting for the Bituriges or the Romans to domesticate them. In fact, Bordeaux is an unpromising site for any sort of agriculture except pasture. The site of the town was chosen for a port because a respectable bank of gravel fronts the river here on the outside of a wide crescent curve, with marshes or low alluvial land, subject to flooding, almost all around. It lies shortly above the confluence of the Garonne and the Dordogne, where the Garonne is still not too wide; but these are the thoughts of a trader looking for a safe and convenient haven, not a farmer.

It is rare, in fact, to find any ancient settlement in a place so unsuitable for growing its own food. Bordeaux's gravel is mean and hungry. It can only have been with a good deal of industry and recourse to manure that its first vines were persuaded to grow. The commercial argument was the overriding one. There was a well-established market for wine, and ships coming from the north to fetch it. If Bordeaux could supply the wine itself, without the expense and risk of bringing it down-river from Gaillac and beyond, all the profits would stay in Bordeaux. From its inception, Bordeaux was destined to be linked to the British Isles.

It was a rather different story over on the other trade route, the Rhône Valley. The first great 'emporium', going north, was a town of the powerful and (to the Romans) friendly tribe, the Allobroges, whose considerable territory extended from the east bank of the Rhône all the way east to the Alps at the lake of Geneva. The territory of Vienne includes the great granite outcrop called Hermitage, the broad Rhône swinging around its foot in a long left-hand bend that gives the hill the full benefit of the sunshine reflected off its waters. To plant vines here was not the calculated risk it was at Bordeaux; this was a bit of

Mediterranean coast, evergreen oaks and all, conveniently shifted 150 miles inland. The same goes for the hills across the river from Vienne above Ampuis and Condrieu, on the west bank. The intelligence of the Allobroges is evident from the fact that their territorial boundary crossed the Rhône to include these sun-baked slopes – the Côte Rôtie.

There was apparently no need to bring up vines from the Mediterranean to grow here. All the indications are that the vine they chose was already growing in their woods. The grapevine, always a variable plant, is most variable near the limits of its natural habitat. Perhaps a mutation produced a clearly superior vine that they baptized as Allobrogica. (Perhaps, on the other hand, they used the vine that Virgil had praised as producing Rhaetic wine in the Italian Alps.)

In any case its wine, sold at Vienne, had within 90 years of Virgil's death (as Pliny points out) become a challenger to the first growths of Rome. It was particularly appreciated for its sharp flavour of pitch, or burnt resin, which seems a rather unreverential addition to a particularly fine wine. Some scholars are happy to think that the Allobrogica has become the Petite Syrah of the modern Rhône. Another suggestion is the Mondeuse of the Savoie Alps (a much underrated grape for forthright, fruity red). One of the synonyms of the Mondeuse is Grosse Syrah; another, which might link it with Rhaetic, is Refosco, a grape of northeastern Italy. There are also scholars who see in the Allobrogica the ancestor of the Pinot family, and hence of the red wine of Burgundy and Champagne.

The centre of gravity of Roman Gaul was Lyon, another 30 miles, or three days' hauling, for the gangs of slaves who pulled the barges upstream from Vienne. Lyon was the distribution centre for various routes northwards, and Gaul's greatest emporium. Northwards from Lyon, the wine was sent up the much easier Saône to Chalon, where its road journey began, either west towards the Loire or northwards by weary ways to the nearest point on the Seine, Meuse or Mosel. The troops manning the German frontier were fond of sweet southern wine; none of the austerum of the Alps for them. Amphoras of Andalusian sunshine were hauled by the hundred thousand to cheer their watches on the rainswept chain of forts they called the Limes, listening and waiting for the unpredictable Teuton raids.

After Chalon-sur-Saône, Agrippa's road runs northwest along the Saône for a few miles to Verdun at the confluence of the Doubs, then turns due north for Dijon. Most of this stretch can still be seen, sometimes as a minor road as straight as a spear, sometimes as a farm track, or just as a field boundary. Approaching Dijon, it converges with the line of hills to the west. Today you can clearly see their middle and lower slopes are covered with vines. Is this what the Romans saw? Nobody knows exactly when Burgundy's Côte d'Or was first planted, but there is less mystery about why.

Rome's first allies among the Gauls were the Aedui, whose stronghold of Bibracte lies in the Morvan hills not very far to the west, behind the range of the Côte d'Or. Under Augustus, they abandoned Bibracte on its hilltop to found, with Imperial blessing and Roman help, the new city of Augustodunum, or Fort Augustus. Augustodunum has long since been shortened to Autun. In Roman days it was one of the principal cities of Gaul, but too high and cold to grow vines. On the other hand, its civitas (county would be the approximate modern equivalent) included and ended with the Côte d'Or; a magnificent opportunity for the Aedui to plant vineyards and make wine in, as it were, a shop window on the principal north-south artery. A river would have been better, they had to admit. The Côte d'Or, indeed, is the only great vineyard of ancient foundation without the benefit of a river at the door.

The first clear account we have of the Pagus Arebrignus, which the vine-growing Côte was then called, is in a plaintive address to the Emperor Constantine delivered when he visited Augustodunum in 312. The palmy days of the Empire were already past. The later years of the last century had seen catastrophic incursions deep into Gaul by barbarians from beyond the Rhine. Augustodunum was pillaged in 269 and 276 by Germans and Alamans. It was the fortuitous arrival of another tribe with gentler manners, the Burgundians from the Baltic, that helped restore the former Aeduan capital to its dignity and prepared it to meet its emperor. It also gave Burgundy its name.

The vineyards of the Côte, the orator told Constantine, although envied by all, are in a sorry state. They are not like those of Bordeaux which have limitless space to expand. They are squeezed in between the rocky hilltop and the marshy plain where frosts ruin the crop. In this narrow strip (which anyone who knows the Côte will recognize), the vines are so old, he said, that they are exhausted, and the soil cannot be worked because of the tangle of ancient vine roots. Also the main roads, even the great military road, were so potholed that half a load was enough to break a wagon. The bottom line, unsurprisingly, was that the loyal citizens were having difficulty with their taxes.

How old is old? How long had it taken the vineyard to reach the state described (allowing for hyperbole) by the worthy orator? It sounds as though the vines were cultivated on the system of provignage – not one recommended in the Roman textbooks – which consists of laying the trunk along the ground to form new roots by layering. Each year the new shoots and their fruit are supported above the ground by a temporary light stake. Provignage would account for a surface tangled with old roots – but in how long who can say?

Suppose the trouble started with the barbarian invasions, and the vineyard was well established before that, it seems reasonable to date the planting of the Côte d'Or in the first half of the third century. The great city of Lyon went into decline at this time, although whether this was cause, effect or coincidence we don't know. Those who argue an earlier date point out that the town of Beaune was already flourishing a century before that; even remains of pruning knives and effigies of Bacchus have been found. Amphoras stopped being delivered to Augustodunum in the second century, which argues the use of barrels. It seems probable that they were barrels of the local wine.

We are frustrated when we try to find precise starting dates for France's other vineyards, too. Their sites follow a clear logic: the nearness of an important town, almost always a river, and in every case, especially as we move north, a good steep hill. The Romans knew how cold air runs like water down slopes to form, like water, pools at the bottom. The pools

are frost pockets, fatal to a good crop.

Certain prominent hilly outcrops in otherwise relatively flat country are known to have been among the first vineyards of the Gallo-Romans. The chalk hill of Sancerre, almost as much a landmark on the Loire as Hermitage on the Rhône, is a good example. Another is St-Pourçain-sur-Sioule, at the confluence of the rivers Allier and Sioule near the Roman road from Lyon to Bourges and the Loire. Auxerre, on the way north to Paris, is a probable Gallo-Roman vineyard, and Paris itself a certainty. The Emperor Julian, known as the Apostate, who rejected the Christianity of his predecessor Constantine and tried to return the Empire to the old true gods, stayed for two years at Lutetia, the little proto-Paris on the Ile-de-la-Cité, and enjoyed the wine grown on, presumably, the hill of Montmartre.

The mountain of Reims is another obvious candidate. Reims, the capital of Champagne, is hollow with chalk quarries cut by the Romans for building stone. The south slope of its 'mountain', overlooking the river Marne, has all the qualifications. Although there seems to be no positive evidence of Gallo-Roman vineyards where champagne grows today, it would be surprising if they missed such an opportunity – and there was a villa at Sparnacus, Roman Epernay, which in the fifth century was occupied by the patron saint of Reims, St Rémi.

Most of these Gallic vineyards, with the probable exceptions of Bordeaux and the Rhône, were planted when the edict of Domitian, banning planting in the provinces, was still theoretically in force. We do not know whether they had special permission from Rome or (as seems more likely) local needs and desires overcame any scruples (and means of enforcement). There was, in any case, a convenient dodge available: any land owned by a Roman citizen could be described as 'Roman' – and hence eligible for planting. Nonetheless, when the beleaguered Emperor Probus repealed the edict in 280 ('Citizens', he said, 'plant vines and grow rich'), it gave a powerful new impetus to wine growing. It seems likely that many of the vineyards of the Loire were planted in the fourth century. The Loire completed the process that had started with the Biturica in Bordeaux and the Allobrogica in the Rhône Valley – western and eastern grape varieties invaded the valley from their respective ends. Today along the Loire, the Cabernet lies down with the Pinot, and the Gamay of Burgundy with Bordeaux's Sauvignon Blanc.

The turbulent times of the later Empire concentrated more power in the north than ever before. Successive emperors had added to the fence-and-ditch frontier line against the Germans, pushing it beyond the Rhine, so that at its greatest extent this great curtain between 'civilization' and the barbarians ran for 342 miles and was manned by 25,000 soldiers, or one for every 24 paces of its length. Its name of the 'Limes' was derived from a word for a track across country, but with its earthworks, watchtowers, fortresses and, for more than 100 miles, a 10-foot stone wall, it was perhaps Rome's greatest piece of military engineering. One stretch runs for 18 miles in a straight line without deviating by more than a single pace.

The barbarians saw their chance when the Empire was attacked on its distant eastern flank by the Persians. In 260, this bulwark was decisively breached by the Germans and Franks (who went on to sack such towns as Autun). Far from spelling the end for Roman power in the north, barbarian pressure intensified Imperial commitment. Cologne, and then Trier, was made an Imperial capital. Further Frankish raids followed, but in his short reign Probus put new heart into the Empire.

His successor, Diocletian, began a new chapter of firm administrative control, in which Trier, his Augusta Treverorum, was promoted to the capital of the Western Empire, and to hold sway over a region stretching from northern Britain to North Africa. The future Emperor Constantine was brought up at Trier. This was the period, in the fourth century, that gave the city palaces and baths on a scale that is still deeply impressive. Julian's generalship again routed the Germans at Strasbourg in 357 – this was during his residence in Paris. His successors, Valentinian and Gratian, reigned as emperors at Trier, Gratian being educated by the poet Ausonius from Bordeaux. Trier's hour of glory lasted until the end of the fourth century, when its powers passed to Aries in Provence. The insatiable Germans and Franks sacked it four times in the following 50 years.

Roman officers at these distant outposts must have been at least as eager for a supply of wine as their friends at home. At the end of such a long journey, though, the price would have been high and the quality far from certain. The historian Tacitus tells us that the people of the country drank an inferior sort of beer. The prospects for vineyards in the darkness of the north must have seemed remote – unless, as seems perfectly possible, there were wild vines here, too. There are those who believe that the Riesling is a selection from a native German vine.

Probably Germany's first vineyards were planted in the same spirit as those of Bordeaux. Trier was a flourishing emporium for Imperial wine: what if vines could be made to grow on the steep forest slopes around? The three elements were present: city, river and hills. Here the choice of hill made all the difference. A steep south-facing slope not only caught all the meagre warmth of the sun, it sheltered vines from the north winds, rapidly drained off the excessive rainfall, and by tilting the surface at the sun's rays received them perpendicularly rather than low-angled and diffuse.

Trier was surrounded by suntrap vineyards hanging from improbable slopes, perhaps from as early as the second century. Our evidence, when it comes, is of a long-established and flourishing vineyard scene in the second half of the fourth century; the scene described in a much-quoted poem by the Imperial tutor Ausonius.

The Mosel reminds Ausonius of his native Bordeaux, where grapevines are reflected in the river Garonne. He speaks of rich villas with smoking chimneys, of boatmen calling out insults to the workers among the vines, of the delicate fish playing in the river, and in a famous passage, of the hillsides mirrored in it:

> What colour paints the river shallows, when Hesperus Has brought the shades of evening.Moselle is dyed with the green of her hills; their tops quiver In the ripples, vine leaves tremble from afar And the grape clusters swell, even in the crystal

stream.

Ausonius was one of the last Roman citizens to see the Mosel as a vision of peaceful fecundity. When he died in 391, the defences of the Empire needed only a determined push to bring them down. His grandson, on his own estate near Bordeaux, was reduced to a landless labourer by the invaders.

There remains the question of Roman Britain. The logical probability is that the Romans would certainly have planted vines, even in this misty outpost of their Empire. Enough grape pips have been found, in London, in Gloucestershire and Wiltshire, to suggest that wine was made. But proof is lacking, and we are left only with the certainty that Britain was a voracious market for imported wine. The cult of Bacchus had an eager British following: evidence has been found in 400 places, ranging from whole mosaic floors to marble statues to the sumptuous silver dish found at Mildenhall in Suffolk, which represents Bacchus supervising the journey of the spirit to paradise.

Excavations near Colchester, Britain's Roman capital, have identified at least 60 apparently different sorts of wine – or rather their containers. In the earlier years of Roman Britain they came principally from Italy and Spain, and included both Falernian and Baetican. Later, the principal source of amphoras is the Rhine, with less evidence of wines from Bordeaux than the known history of Bordeaux would lead us to expect. But barrels rarely leave traces, and all the indications are that from the start the barrel was the standard container of Bordeaux.

Trier is a good place to study the effects of the barbarian invasions. It bore the full brunt. Roman writings are bound to give us the view that the best you could hope for from a barbarian was a speedy death on a sharp sword. True, there were pillaging tribes whose attentions were always messy and usually terminal. But the Germans and the Franks and the Alamans were not only old foes of Trier, they were old neighbours, and undoubtedly customers for Trier's wine. Of all the misguided and forlorn attempts to stave off barbarian invasion, the most ill-conceived was an edict forbidding the sale of wine and oil across the frontiers. It was as good as an invitation to break down the door.

Having despatched Roman authority from the city, they are unlikely to have destroyed houses that would shelter them better than their own. Trier is, in fact, magnificently preserved; not only its immensely solid stone Porta Nigra, but the soaring brick walls of its baths and what is known as the Palace of Constantine have clearly not been put to the sack with any real conviction.

The same is true of the vineyards. The wisest move was to encourage the wine growers, not to butcher them. There is no certainty about what happened as we enter the 'Dark Ages', but patchy records show that life, at least in favoured places, went on as before, but without the Roman soldiers. Fortunatus, an occasional poet and Bishop of Poitiers in the sixth century, wrote of his delight in finding the Mosel just as Ausonius had described it two centuries before – at least as to its vineyards; he is not specific about the boatmen or fish. But every saint did not have the same experience. St Prosper, a hundred years before Fortunatus, wrote: 'If the whole ocean had swept over Gaul, its receding waters could not have left it more devastated; the cattle have disappeared and the seeds of the fruits of the earth. No traces are left of the vines and olive trees….'[3]

Gibbon described Rome's decline and fall as 'the triumph of barbarism and religion'. The Age of Emperors was succeeded by the Age of Saints. Constantine had made the empire Christian; he'd also established the Imperial capital at Constantinople. Rome had little power left. Franks, Vandals, Goths and Visigoths moved into an almost unresisting Europe – the Vandals eventually took command of the western Mediterranean from North Africa, the Visigoths eventually succeeded in conquering Spain. The last legions of Rome made common cause with Franks and Visigoths against the fearsome menace of Attila and his reputed half a million Huns, checking him in a horrific shambles near Châlons (in Champagne) in 451. But now it was the Franks who controlled – and gave their name to – northern France. All that was left of the administration of the mighty Roman Empire was its church.

In a real sense the Church was a creation of ancient Rome, was organized in the Roman fashion, but had no army to rout, or troops to be pulled back to headquarters for a last-ditch stand. Its early bishops were members of the Romanized upper or learned classes of the provinces of the Empire. When Rome's temporal power was gone, those that survived continued as far as possible the Roman pattern of life in the vestments of priests or bishops.[4]

Monks were something different. They opposed personal spirituality to the worldly wisdom of the Church. The monastic idea is said to have come to the hermit St Anthony in the Sinai desert in Egypt in about 300AD. In the same generation his superior in Alexandria, St Athanasius – who is credited with the Creed – brought monasticism to Trier. Trier probably had the first monastery in Europe – established almost as soon as the Empire became Christian, almost as soon as the first monastery anywhere, and long before the sad scenes that Salvianus recounted with such masochistic relish.

But initially stronger than the scattered monastic brethren, whose ascendancy still lay in the future, was the well-tried hierarchical priestly system, organized in dioceses that were none other than Rome's old secular constituencies. Saintly bishops are credited with many miracles, but perhaps their greatest was the maintenance of organized agriculture (of which wine growing was an important part) through the three centuries when it must have seemed that hell's legions were massing in the east, to bring yet another wave of sackings and pillage.

The great triumph of the Church in France took place in Reims in 496. The pagan Frankish king, Clovis, was baptized by a bishop whose name, Rémi, suggests that the tribe the Romans had found in Champagne five centuries earlier had been submerged rather than extinguished. We have already met St Rémi living in a Roman villa at Epernay and perhaps growing vines.

Many of the early bishops are associated in legend with wine growing, starting with St Martin, a soft-hearted legionary from Hungary (the story goes that he divided his uniform cloak with a shivering beggar), who in 371 became Bishop of Tours. St Martin is credited with starting wine growing in Touraine; also with the discovery of pruning, by watching a

abbey lands in Paris occupied the left bank of the Seine, was born, wrote his chronicler, on a great wine estate in Burgundy. Another St Gregory, Bishop of Langres in eastern France, was not content with the wine supply of his episcopal lands and moved his seat to Dijon. St Ermelund planted a great vineyard near the mouth of the Loire, St Didier another at Cahors. Bishop Nicetius of Trier was patron of the wine growers of the Mosel, and St Goar of the vineyards of the lower Rhine.

The bishops were soon rivalled by the growing power of the monasteries. They dominate the Middle Ages and we shall discuss them in their appropriate chapter. But all the struggles of the Franks are dwarfed in historical perspective by their great successor and first Holy Roman Emperor, Charlemagne.

## Endnotes

### 1—CELTS AND CASKS

The amphora was superseded for the transport of wine by the barrel in the course of the third century AD; when, that is, the flow of wine from Rome to its northern colonies was reversed, and it was the Celtic races who began to furnish Italy.

The barrel as we know it was a Celtic invention: exactly as we know it, since hardly any changes have taken place in the art of the cooper, the barrel maker, for 2,000 years. Wood and metal were the Celts' favourite materials. So skilful were they with roof beams that some of the more ambitious of the stone vaults of Rome could not have been achieved without Celtic carpenters to make the templates. Iron woodworking tools have been found from the La Tène culture of Switzerland in the fifth century BC which would be familiar in a cooper's shop today. The earliest barrels even had iron hoops, which gave way to wooden encircling bands in Roman times, only to be reinstated in the barrels of the 17th century. The historic trend has been for barrels to become shorter and fatter – otherwise there has been almost no change.

The Romans soon realized the superiority of the light, resilient, rollable barrel over the cumbersome fragile amphora, particularly in cooler northern climates with high humidity. The one advantage of the amphora that the barrel did not possess was that it could not be made airtight. Wood 'breathes'; wine cannot be 'laid down' to mature for years in a barrel, as it can in an amphora.

### 2—IN A GLASS, LIGHTLY

Wine was first drunk from pottery, occasionally and ceremonially from gold, but by as early as the late Bronze Age, about 1500BC, also from glass.

The technique of firing a glassy or 'vitreous' substance onto solid objects was discovered in about 4000BC. (On pottery it is called faience; on metal, enamel.) In about 1500BC the idea of a hollow glass vessel appeared – possibly in Egypt. It was made by dipping a cloth

known all over the Near East until about 1200BC, then apparently lost in the first 'Dark Age', to reemerge in the eighth century BC, with Egypt, Phoenicia and Syria as glassmaking centres, but also workshops in Italy and Celtic Europe.

The idea of glassblowing, instead of the sand-core method, originated in Syria in the first century BC. A blob of molten glass on the end of a metal tube was blown, probably into a mould at first, then freely into a bubble that could be 'marvered' into shape.

Glassblowing spread rapidly around the Roman Empire, with Syrian or Alexandrian craftsmen setting up workshops, especially in Italy, Gaul and the Rhineland – hence the similarity of styles wherever it was made. Roman glass beakers or tumblers survive in surprising numbers, appearing extremely frail because they are so light; their metal contains no lead. In fact they are quite resilient and rather like Bakelite in texture – now often with a lovely nacreous lustre.

Small bottles for scent are common; larger ones for wine rather rare. A superb example, made like a miniature amphora with two handles, is in the Cathedral Museum at Speyer on the Rhine. There is no real evidence, though, that Romans used glass wine bottles for storage. They were in practice only decanters for use on the table.

Glassmaking survived the fall of the Empire, with the Rhineland as a continuing centre. It tended to be concentrated in forested areas where there was plenty of fuel for the furnaces. Wine glasses, however, ramained objects of luxury until the 18th century.

### 3—WATERY WAYS

The Rhine route was marginally more watery and less on rutted roads than the Mosel route; a good deal of wine even reached Britain this way. There was also a route from the Saône to the Seine and down to the English Channel, and another across to the Loire and west to the Atlantic.

Calculations have shown that from the Mediterranean to England, the relative costs were in the following order, from cheapest to most expensive: by sea round Spain; by land to Bordeaux, then sea; via the river Loire; via the Seine; via the Rhine; via the Mosel – and the last costing three times as much as the first.

If this makes the German routes look absurdly costly, perhaps the explanation is that Britain bought the surplus from the German garrisons, or even conceivably that the amphoras were emptied of their original southern contents in Germany and sent on to Britain filled with lower-grade local German wine.

### 4—ON THE GOVERNMENT OF GOD

The fate of Trier in the fifth century was vividly painted by the moralist Salvianus in his book *On the Government of God*. Even allowing for his view that the barbarian attacks on the Empire were God's retribution for its decadence, it seems that standards had slipped badly:

slaves to appetite and lust…they reclined at feasts, forgetful of their honour, forgetting justice, forgetting their faith and the name they bore. They were the leaders of the state, gorged with food, dissolute from wine-bibbing, wild with shouting, giddy with revelry.… The wealthiest city of Gaul was taken by storm no less than four times …the very rulers of the city did not rise from their feasts when the enemy were actually entering the gates…all vices reigned at once – extravagance, drinking bouts, wantonness – all the people revelled together. They drank, gamed, committed adultery. Old and honoured men waxed wanton at their feasts; men already almost too feeble to live proved mighty in their cups; men too weak to walk were strong in drinking.… Those whom the enemy had not killed when they pillaged the city were overwhelmed by disaster after the sack.… Some died lingering deaths from deep wounds, others were burned by the enemy's fires and suffered tortures even after the flames were extinguished.…There lay all about the torn and naked bodies of both sexes, a sight I myself endured. These were a pollution to the eyes of the city, as they lay there lacerated by birds and dogs. The stench of the dead brought pestilence on the living: death breathed out death.… What followed these calamities? The few men of rank who had survived destruction demanded of the emperors circuses as the sovereign remedy for a ruined city.'