

SHORT PAPER

The transfer of vineyard ownership during the French Revolution: A pivotal event in the history of French wine

Rod Phillips

Department of History, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Email: roderick.phillips@carleton.ca

Abstract

In 1790, the Revolutionary government expropriated most property owned by the Church and its entities, and sold it by auction. This effectively ended the centuries-old participation of the Church in wine production in France. Focusing on Burgundy, this article sketches the contours of the sale of vineyards and other wine-related property owned by the Church. It shows that auctions fetched prices well above the assessed value of the properties that were sold and speculates on the reasons.

Keywords: Church; French Revolution; vineyards; wine

JEL classification: N53

I. Introduction

The French Revolution was a very constructive period in the long history of wine in France. Various national and regional policies broadened the ownership of wine production, encouraged better vine management, strove to improve wine quality, reduced the price of wine and made it accessible to more French people, and embedded wine in French culture. In short, the French Revolution established some of the bases for the French wine industry and the place of wine in French culture for more than a century afterward.

II. The sale of Church property

This is a work-in-progress report on changes to vineyard ownership, with a focus on Burgundy. These changes resulted from one of the most important decisions taken during the Revolution: the expropriation by the state of the assets of the French Church in 1790. This was integral to the reorganization of the Church undertaken by the new Revolutionary government, which left the Church only the property it needed

for purely religious purposes. Thus, churches where masses and other religious events, such as baptisms, took place were retained by the Church. Everything else was decreed to be “property of the nation” (*bien national*) and was to be sold to private individuals.

These sales would be by auction, so as to maximize prices paid, and the money raised would be used to pay down the massive debt left by the monarchy, which had bankrupted France by the 1780s. Rather than repudiate the debt, the new Revolutionary legislature recognized that selling off Church property would bring in millions of livres (French pounds). To this extent, the reorganization of the Church was part of a broader financial policy.

The expropriated property included religious houses (religious orders were abolished), supernumerary churches, and agricultural estates, and it accounted for about a tenth of France’s land. It included thousands of hectares of vineyards, together with vigneron’s houses, cellars, winepresses, barrels (empty and full), and implements used in viticulture. Some vineyards were owned by large religious houses, such as the Cistercians. By 1789, this order owned about 2,000 hectares of vineyards in Burgundy, including vines in some of the most prestigious districts, such as Vougeot and Corton. Other Church-owned vineyards included the modest holdings of individual parishes throughout France, often a few rows of vines scattered among a number of parcels. In Volnay, the parish owned, and the priest derived income from, about two-thirds of a hectare of vines (ADCO G 4169, Volnay).

III. The transformation of French wine production

Although there was no explicit intention to reconfigure the French wine industry (if we can call it that in 1790), the effect of the expropriation of Church vineyards was to end the centuries-old role of the Church in wine production in France. We do not know what percentage of French wine was made by Church entities and what percentage by secular owners before the Revolution, but it clearly varied by region. The Church played a much greater role in wine production in Burgundy than in Bordeaux, where the nobility was far more involved. However, the sale of vineyards was country-wide because religious houses, cathedrals, and parishes throughout France owned vines that were no longer considered necessary for the Church to function as a stripped-down institution concerned solely with spiritual matters.

It would be an immense task to list all the Church-owned properties that were expropriated and sold—even if a survey was limited to vineyards and property related to wine production. It has been done to great effect for the Rhine départements (Schieder, 1991), but the whole of France is another matter altogether. The records of auctions are archived by the location of the properties, not by the entities that owned them. It is possible to reconstitute the holdings of individual Church bodies to some extent, but they were widely scattered, and one could never be sure of capturing them all, even if all the auction records were complete.

In the Burgundy commune of Meursault, vineyards auctioned in 1791 had belonged to several entities in the village itself (the parish, chapels in the parish church, and a confrerie), as well as to more distant bodies that included the Abbey of Cîteaux, the Benedictines of Mezières, the Cathedral of Autun, and the canons of the Cathedral of Beaune. It might have been that small entities, such as chapels in a parish church,

tended to own property that was in or near the village, but that larger institutions, such as religious orders and cathedrals, owned plots of land that were more widely dispersed. The Abbey of Cîteaux notably owned vineyards in Meursault, Monthelie, Fixin, Vougeot, and many other villages in Burgundy. Wealthy entities could also afford to own vineyards in more prestigious locations.

The expropriation of vineyards and wine production facilities in 1790 represented a massive financial loss to the Church. It is likely that wine for sacramental purposes only ever represented a tiny part of the Church's production. From the 12th century, members of congregations were given only the host (a wafer representing the body of Christ) at communion, while the priest sipped the wine (representing Christ's blood) on behalf of all present. Putting aside the doctrinal issues this arrangement raised—Protestants claimed that the Church had “stolen” the wine from Christians—it meant that the Church needed very little wine for sacramental purposes. Even after the clergy consumed some of the wine with meals and on other occasions, the great bulk of the Church's wine production was destined for the market, and it was an important source of income for the Church and many clergy.

The end of the Church's participation in wine production was also a cultural blow. Wine was a vital part of Church ritual, and the New Testament, like the Old, was infused with references to wine and the grapevine. Jesus's first miracle was to turn water into wine at the wedding at Cana, and religious iconography (such as the “Christ in the wine press” genre of medieval paintings) often showed the equivalence of Christ's blood and wine. Cultivating vines and making wine were among the most spiritual of the worldly activities of the clergy, and the ownership of vast areas of vineyards had cultural meaning as well as economic value. But from the early 1790s onward, the clergy would have to buy their wine, like everybody else.

IV. Mechanics of auctioning vineyards

The sale of expropriated Church land and property, including vineyards and wine-production facilities, was a complicated and bureaucratic business. It could hardly have been otherwise when it involved many different kinds of property—vineyards, land planted in other crops, pastureland, uncultivated land, houses, cellars, mills, chapels, churches, and miscellaneous other buildings, together with agricultural tools, wine-presses, vats, and barrels—scattered throughout every region in France. There were both rural and urban properties, some valued at a few hundred livres (the main French currency denomination until 1795), others at tens of thousands.

The transfer of landed wealth from the Church to thousands of new owners had radical economic and political implications. Not only did it simultaneously expand property ownership and concentrate it (most successful bidders for Church land appear to have been property owners), but it also gave the purchasers a stake in the success of the Revolution. There was always a chance that if the Revolution failed and the Old Regime were resurrected, the Church would demand the return of its properties. Support for the Revolution became, to the new proprietors, a matter of self-interest.

The practicalities of auctioning Church property were straightforward but demanding. First, ownership by a Church entity had to be determined, and there were

occasional challenges by individuals and communities that delayed or stopped planned sales. In Burgundy, for example, the sale of a piece of land belonging to the parish church of Volnay was stopped after an objection that it actually belonged to the community (ADCO IQ 80, Biens nationaux, Volnay, October 16, 1792).

Second, expert assessors were appointed to provide a valuation of the property that would be the reserve price, the starting point of the bidding. There were generally two assessors, and they were sometimes assisted by one or more other people (often vigneron) who were familiar with the properties in question. In a few cases, the criteria and calculations that produced valuations are provided, but in the great majority, they were not specified, and the assessors simply asserted the capital value of the land.

When assessing the value of a vineyard or other piece of land, the assessors calculated the income it afforded on an annual basis, then multiplied it by 22 to arrive at the capital value. For example, the Chapelle de l'Annonciation owned 18 ouvrées of vines in two parcels in the village of Pommard, in Burgundy. (There are 24 ouvrées in a hectare.) One parcel of 9 ouvrées was judged to produce wine worth 10 livres per ouvrée per year (thus 90 livres annually), while wine from the other 9-ouvrée parcel fetched half that (45 livres annually). The total annual revenue of 135 livres multiplied by 22 gave a capital value of 2,970 livres, the sum used as the reserve price when the land was auctioned (ADCO IQ 76, Biens nationaux, Pommard, April 13, 1791).

The detailed calculations of the annual returns of a parcel of vines are generally not given in the documents referring to auctions. The assessors might have learned about the income from financial records if they were kept as scrupulously as those in the parish of Volnay. The clergy were good record-keepers in many respects, and it is possible that vineyard-related accounts that were available to the assessors are no longer extant. The assessors might also have consulted people familiar with the vines, such as the sharecropper vigneron who cultivated the Church-owned vineyards. In so far as they shared the income with the Church, they would have had a good idea of the income each parcel of vines provided, even though annual income was as volatile as harvests in the 18th century.

An “average” annual income might not appear to have been a very meaningful concept in the 18th century, when vintages varied so dramatically, from disastrous one year to bountiful the next. But it is, of course, possible to calculate an average in simple arithmetic terms from annual results, whether the annual figures were relatively stable or highly volatile. And the fact that the assessed value of the vineyards was an average that was effectively projected over 22 years made the average more meaningful. Purchasers of these properties were buying for their long-term financial benefits, not as short-term investments.

The auctions themselves were often straightforward, but they were sometimes complicated. These were candle auctions, where a candle was lit to signal the beginning of bidding, and the bidding continued until the candle went out. The highest bid was recorded, and then another candle was lit, and bidding resumed until that flame died. The auction ended when a candle was lit, burned, and died without a single bid having been made.

There is no sense in the records of how long a candle burned, although it is likely that even if they were small candles of roughly the same size, the bidding must have

lasted varying times. The purpose of this method of regulating bidding, popular in the 17th and 18th centuries, was to ensure that there would be no last-minute bids because no one could know precisely when a candle would go out. It was sometimes noted, however, that because a candle flame tends to flare up just before it dies, an astute observer might be able to place a successful bid at that very moment.

In the auctions of Church-owned vineyards and wine-production assets, bidding sometimes involved only one session, while others involved 20 or more. Only when the candle went out on a session where there had been no bids was the winning bid—that is, the highest bid in the preceding session—announced. We can imagine the bidders sitting through the final session, waiting for the candle to burn down and the flame to finally disappear with a puff of dark smoke. It might not have had the drama of a papal election, but it was an eventful moment for those who purchased or failed to purchase a piece of property previously owned by the Church.

As an example of an auction, we can take some of the property in the commune of Meursault that had belonged to the Abbey of Cîteaux, Burgundy's largest vineyard owner (ADCO 1Q 74 Biens nationaux (Meursault)). On February 23, 1791, some of it was auctioned off in 15 lots, 10 of them totaling 586 ouvrées (about 24.4 hectares), being vines planted in 10 different named vineyards, such as Bergerie and Magny. It was specified that one lot of 80 ouvrées was planted in Gamay, which might mean that the rest were Pinot Noir, the most widely planted variety in the region. In addition to land planted in vines, two lots were substantial areas of “land in different parcels” and fields. Finally, there were three lots of structures: “a building used for cultivating the estate,” “a vigneron's dwelling, composed of two small rooms,” and “a watermill with an attached room.”

The property was valued at 100,000 livres, a sum so rounded that it looks more like an impressionistic estimate than a precise valuation. But it clearly was not an outrageous estimate, because the highest bid when the first candle died was for 131,000 livres. Following that, the bidding went as follows:

2nd candle	135,000
3rd candle	140,000
4th candle	145,000
5th candle	145,500
6th candle	146,000
7th candle	150,000
8th candle	150,100
9th candle	no bid

The winning bidder, who paid almost precisely 50% more than the reserve price, was M. Lhomme Darnay LeDuquin, with no mention of his domicile or profession.

V. The sale of vineyards in Burgundy

In general, the prices paid for vineyards and wine production facilities and equipment were considerably higher than their valuations, as this example suggests. But that was also true of other Church properties sold at these auctions, so it does not necessarily

indicate that vineyards were especially sought after or that wine was thought of as an exceptionally good investment—although the prices paid certainly suggest that buyers believed they would benefit from their purchases. Paying much more than the historic returns of a vineyard might not seem to make good sense. At the time, there were no viticultural or winemaking innovations that promised to increase revenues from a vineyard, and perhaps buyers were counting on land simply to continue to increase in value, as it had for much of the 18th century.

Another explanation for the high prices paid for these properties might be that by the end of the 18th century, there was a real hunger for land in France. Population had grown steadily since the 1730s, and pressure on land was palpable and a reason for rising land values. It would be understandable if the sudden release of so much land onto the market provoked a fury of buying. The prices paid might have been even higher had the land been made available more gradually; putting so much for sale at once might well have depressed potential prices. But the drive to buy the nationalized land was clear to see.

On the whole, the successful bidders at auctions in Burgundy paid prices that were considerably higher than the valuations. As an example, between March and December 1791, 24 lots of vineyards in the District of Dijon, which included most of the Côte des Nuits region, were auctioned. Their total value was assessed at 78,457 livres, and they sold for 129,651 livres, 65% above the valuation (ADCO 1Q 149, *Registre de ventes de biens nationaux, District de Dijon, 1790–1791*). These lots ranged widely in size, from a single ouvrée (about 4% of a hectare) of vines in the village of Morey to 27.25 journaux of vines (218 ouvrées, or about 9 hectares) in the same village. The first of these lots, the former property of the parish of Morey, was valued at 97 livres and 10 sous and sold for 135 livres to Pierre Meidan, a vigneron of the same village. The second, which had belonged to the Chapel of St. Denis in Nuits-Saint George, was valued at 22,049 livres and 10 sous; it was sold to Etienne Gilles, a resident of Nuits-Saint George, for 35,400 livres (ADCO 1Q 149, *Registre de ventes de biens nationaux, District de Dijon, 1790–1791*).

Although the average price paid was two-thirds more than the valuation of the vines, some bidders paid much less and others much more. Among the apparent bargains were one and a half journaux of vines planted just outside the walls of Dijon, at the Porte d'Ouche, that had belonged to the priests of the Chapelle aux Riches. The vines were valued at 979 livres, and they were sold to Claude Roze, a citizen of Dijon, for a mere 1,000 livres. That was only 2 percent more than the value, which might indicate that the vines were in a less-than-ideal location. A vineyard of the same size and in the same area—this one owned by the Benedictines of Dijon and valued at 587 livres—was sold to another citizen of the town for 1,850 livres, more than three times its assessed value (ADCO 1Q 149, *Registre de ventes de biens nationaux, District de Dijon, 1790–1791*). Without detailed information on the two vineyards, it is impossible to say why one was valued so much less than the other, but it was presumably less productive. But that does not explain why it fetched a much higher premium than the apparently more valuable vineyard.

The French Revolution also led to changes to the ownership of vineyards (and other land and property) in territories conquered by France during the 1790s. In 1795, for example, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg was annexed to France, and the following

year, land belonging to the Church was expropriated and sold at auction. Among the sales was a vineyard of about 4.7 hectares in Cantzheim that had belonged to the Abbey of Vadgasse. Valued at 5,020 livres, it was sold for 6,500 livres to Théodore Beving, a Luxembourger who had been a monk in a religious house in northern France until religious orders were suppressed in 1790. Beving's partner in the purchase was Célestin Orvald, a former Cistercian monk who took a two-fifths share of the vineyard (Linder, 2017).

The premiums paid for vineyards in all these auctions undoubtedly reflected their perceived future value, as discussed in a study of auctions in the Mosel Valley (Storchmann, 2007). The wines of Volnay, for example, were among the most expensive in Burgundy, and half the parish's parcels of vines were located in vineyards later designated Premier Cru. The successful bidders were largely urban professionals and merchants (in Champagne, they included Jean-Rémy Moët, later of Moët-Hennessy, who acquired expropriated Church land to increase his holdings) or wealthier inhabitants of rural communities who already owned vineyards. The collective result of these auctions was that, by 1793, virtually all French wine production was in the hands of secular owners.

Small-scale vigneron and poorer peasants were largely shut out of these sales by the high prices the auctions produced, but some got a start in vineyard ownership by other means. In some parts of southern France (and perhaps elsewhere), peasants took advantage of the fluid legal conditions brought on by the Revolution simply to occupy land and plant it in vines. Some was common land—owned by communities rather than individuals—and some was land that had not been cultivated because it was too hilly or had poor soil but was suitable for vines. Legally or otherwise, the early years of the Revolution saw a dramatic change in the ownership of France's wine production.

VI. Conclusion

The transfer of vineyard ownership from the Church to secular owners was perhaps one of the most dramatic and far-reaching of the policies of the French Revolution that affected wine. However, it was far from the only one. The retail price of wine was lowered when taxes were removed in 1791, and even when taxes were reintroduced later in the 1790s, they were not as onerous as they had been under the Old Regime. Revolutionary administrations encouraged improvements in vineyard management and winemaking, and the state took over quality control from guilds (which were abolished in 1791). But the transfer of ownership of France's wine production that began in 1790 was arguably the most radical and ensuing legacy of the French Revolution for the long-term history of wine production in France.

Acknowledgments. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments and suggestions. This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

References

ADCO (various dates). Archives départementales de la Côte d'Or. Dijon: France.

- Linder, P. (2017). Another acquisition of property by a former monk: The case of Cantzheim. On Lars Carlberg, Mosel Wine, August 6. Available online at <https://www.larscarlberg.com/another-acquisition-of-property-by-a-former-monk-the-case-of-cantzheim/> (accessed September 24, 2023).
- Schieder, W. (ed.) (1991). Säkularisation und Mediatisierung in den vier rheinischen Departements 1803–1813, vols. 1–5. Forschungen zur Deutschen Sozialgeschichte, Bd. 5, Boppard: Boldt.
- Storchmann, K. (2007). Asymmetric information and markets in transition: Vineyard auctions in the Mosel Valley after the French Revolution. *Journal of European Economic History*, 35(2), 395–424.