

Wachau (Austria)

No 970

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The Wachau Cultural Landscape
<i>Location</i>	Federal Province (<i>Land</i>) of Lower Austria
<i>State Party</i>	Republic of Austria
<i>Date</i>	24 June 1999

Justification by State Party

The Wachau cultural landscape has long influenced developments in town planning and construction, ecclesiastical and secular architecture, and landscape design in the Danube area.

Because of their architecture, their homogeneous development, and their location within a landscape cultivated by man and surrounded by almost untouched nature, the many towns, villages, and groups of buildings are of outstanding universal value as combined works of nature and of man.

Criterion ii

The Wachau exhibits a rare density of examples of the interaction between human economic and cultural activities within a given landscape. There is a significant correlation between the typology of the architectural monuments and the characteristics of the landscape.

Many periods of humankind's history are reflected in the distinctive and high-quality sites dominated by churches, monasteries, castles, and ruins, all of them monuments of the highest European level. They are located in the midst of a stunning natural setting where many spatial arrangements and single objects, representative of successive stages of their history, have remained unchanged.

Criterion iv

Within the existing pattern of European river landscapes, the Wachau has preserved an exceptional degree of historical integrity and authenticity, without industrial and technological interventions or harmful impacts on its environment.

At a time when many of Europe's traditional places and landscapes are threatened by irreversible change, the historic cultural landscape of the Wachau constitutes an outstanding example of the fruitful interaction between the works of man and an intact natural environment. It can justifiably claim to be in an exemplary state of conservation in terms of cultural history, topography, natural space, and ecology.

Criterion v

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a group of *sites*. It is also a cultural landscape, as defined in paragraph 39 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*.

History and Description

History

Clearance of the natural forest cover of the Wachau by man began in the Neolithic period, although radical changes in the landscape did not take place until around 800, when the Bavarian and Salzburg monasteries began to cultivate the slopes of the Wachau, creating the present-day landscape pattern of vine terraces. In the centuries that followed, the acreage under cultivation fluctuated, under the influence of changes of climate and the wine market and acute labour shortages and the resultant wage increases in the 17th century.

As a result, the forest recolonized the upper edges of the vine-growing land; viticulture in the valleys was replaced by other agricultural activities. The soils of the fallow areas, degraded by failed attempts at cultivation, have never recovered, which explains the distinctive types of special vegetation found in these habitats (dry grassland, shrubs, and woodland).

In the 18th century, hillside viticulture was actively promoted in ecologically optimal regions. The areas released in this way were given over to pasture, with the ensuing economic consequences: some enterprises had to close down while others were enlarged. It was at this time that viticulture was finally abandoned in the upper stretches of the Wachau.

Developments of the countryside in the 19th century had particularly far-reaching consequences for the Wachau. The appearance of *Phylloxera*, the ravages of war, and increasing competition from the Burgenland and Italy necessitated changes in business structures, the areas under cultivation, the methods of viticulture, and the acreages. Apricot growing, typical of the Wachau ever since, began to take over the valleys and lower slopes. The ratio of acreages devoted to viticulture and fruit growing respectively continues to be closely linked with recurrent fluctuations in markets for the products, giving the Wachau its characteristic appearance.

There has been human occupation in the Wachau from Palaeolithic times, as shown by the figurines from Galgenberg (c 32,000 years old) and Willendorf (c 26,000 years old). The region of Krems and Melk was densely settled as early as the Neolithic period (4500–1800 BCE), and there have been many finds from the Bronze Age (1800–800 BCE). In the Iron Age the Illyrian Hallstatt Culture (800–400 BCE) was gradually replaced by the La Tène Culture coming from the west: at this time the Celtic kingdom of Noricum developed to the south of the Danube.

When the Romans annexed Noricum in 15 BCE, the Danube became the frontier (*limes*) with the Germanic peoples to the north. Mautern (*Favianis*) was an important frontier garrison town where one of the Roman Danube

fleets was stationed. The *limes* collapsed at the end of the 4th century, and Noricum found itself on one of the main invasion routes from the north.

In 453 St Severinus, the "apostle of Noricum," founded the first monastic community in the province outside the gates of Mautern. As a result of his activities Mautern developed into an important spiritual and religious centre, where pilgrims assembled and departed for Italy.

The name "Wachau" is first mentioned in 853 as *locus Wahowa*. Krems first appears as *Urbs Chremisa* in 995, making it the oldest Austrian town to be mentioned in a document. The Wachau is the setting of the *Nibelungenlied*, the great German epic poem, which was written some time after 1200 and depicts the political situation at that time. It mentions the Wachau towns of Pöchlarn (*Bechelaren*), Melk (*Medelike*), and Mautern (*Mutoren*).

In 976, the Wachau came under the rule of the Babenberg margraves, beginning with Leopold I. The Austrian march was elevated to a dukedom in 1156 and bestowed upon the Babenberg Henry II Jasomirgott, who renounced his claims to Bavaria.

The great knightly family of the Wachau, the Kuenrings, came to the Babenberg march in the 11th century. When the line died out, the major part of their lands passed to Duke Albrecht V (King Albrecht II) in 1430. Owing to the fragmentation of land holdings and the absence of large unified administrative structures, the burghers of the Wachau enjoyed considerable freedom as early as the Middle Ages, enhanced by the *ius montanum de vinea*. The four towns of St Michael, Wösendorf, Joching, and Weissenkirchen formed an independent community from about 1150 to 1839, to be reunited in 1972 as Wachau or Tal Wachau.

Even after the power of the Habsburgs had been consolidated, the Wachau was repeatedly the arena for armed conflicts. During the Hungarian invasions of the late 15th century, Krems and Stein were besieged in 1477 by Matthias Corvinus.

The Counter-Reformation (1530–1620) had a strong impact in the Wachau, until Protestantism was finally repressed under the Göttweig abbot Georg II Falb (1612–31). His support for eleven Austrian Benedictine abbeys was a major contributory factor to the importance attained by the Austrian abbeys (and Göttweig in particular) in the Baroque period. Victory over the Protestants also found expression in the construction of churches, chapels, and small monuments.

From 1700 onwards, artistic and architectural monuments that are among the most important examples of Austrian Baroque were built in the Wachau. These include the rebuilding of Melk Abbey (begun in 1702), the conversion of the Canons' Abbey in Dürnstein (1715–33), and the large-scale rebuilding of Göttweig Abbey from 1719 onwards.

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries the Wachau began to lose its historic importance. The closures of monasteries in Austria and the secularization of Bavaria destroyed age-old ties. River transportation was increasingly superseded as a result of competition from road transport and from 1909 onwards by the railway. The late 19th century saw a

new perception of the Wachau, as the "Golden Wachau," a blend of history and legend, art and folklore, wine and hospitality. An action committee was set up in 1904 for the economic promotion of the Wachau, with the participation of all the local communities between Krems and Melk. In more recent times, there has been a return to the historical roots of the region, resulting in the intensive promotion of "sustainable" tourism, with the vineyards protected by law.

Description

The Wachau is the name given to the Danube valley between Melk and Krems, together with the slopes and the adjoining *Dunkelsteiner Wald* (Dunkelsteiner Forest) and the southern *Waldviertel*, which are essential parts of the cultural landscape both visually and functionally.

The long water gap cutting through the south fringe of the Bohemian Massif is entirely crystalline, while Tertiary and Quaternary deposits are found in places where the valley broadens out, as well as in the *Spitzer Graben*. Of these, the deposits of clay and loess in the regions of Weissenkirchen and the entrances to the Wachau have a major impact on land configurations.

The *Spitzer Graben*, a left-bank tributary of the Danube, is part of the primeval Danube, which in the Tertiary period flowed to the west of the Wachau on its northern fringe and then followed the present-day course of the river from Spitz onwards. The course of the valley is determined to a large extent by the fault line system of the southern fringe of the Bohemian Massif. Not only the Danube, but also its tributaries of this region follow these geological "weak" points.

Depending on the genesis of the valley landscape, extensive level stretches of the peneplains of the Bohemian Massif alternate with craggy steep slopes, loess-covered gentle surface configurations in the wider parts of the valley, and narrow valley floors. Each of these parts of the landscape reveals specific anthropogenic influences, which are much more intensive on the sunny than on the shady side, the latter largely retaining their original state. Specific locations result from basic spatial conditions, the geological and edaphic environment, and an exposed position. The depth of the valley reinforces the favourable thermal conditions of large areas by effectively screening them against strong winds from the west and in particular from the north.

The small-scale alternation of widely differing local conditions, caused mainly by the relief, has a high degree of ecological relevance. A further significant factor is a marked west–east gradient exerting a Pannonian-Pontic influence in the Lower Wachau, whereas the west is characterized by a Central European transitional climate. In the levelled zones of the peneplain and the upper valley slopes, the harsher plateau climate of the *Waldviertel* prevails. Another characteristic feature is the universal outflow of cold air, which is why the annual mean temperature within the nominated area varies between 9°C in the region of Krems and 5°C around the *Jauerling*.

The basic layouts of the Wachau towns date back to the 11th and 12th centuries. Mautern developed from a 2nd century Roman *castellum* in the 4th and 5th centuries into a fortified small town, and its core has been largely preserved. The forms of settlement that emerged as a result of continuous expansion, mostly during the 16th and 18th

centuries, remained widely unchanged up to the 19th and even the early 20th century. Some villages, such as St Lorenzen and Bacharnsdorf, have their origins in late Roman *burgus* complexes.

The development of the settlements with their homogeneous character becomes evident in the town structures, both in the fabric and arrangement of the houses on mostly irregular lots and in the street patterns, which have remained practically unchanged since the late Middle Ages. Some town centres have been extended to some extent on their outer fringes by the construction of small residential buildings, mostly from 1950 onwards.

Typical features of the medieval market towns are the small fortified castles and towers. In Weissenkirchen there are several examples erected in the 13th and 14th centuries which are still partly visible. Outside the town boundaries are to be found fortifications and barriers dating from the late Middle Ages or the early modern period.

The buildings in the Wachau towns date from more recent periods than the street plans. In the 15th and 16th centuries, stone construction began to replace the wooden peasant and burgher houses. Traces of this are to be seen in the large number of houses built in rubble stone masonry. The constructional material is complemented by the local character of the houses, with hipped and half-hipped roofs emphasizing their cubic form.

The largely uniform house typology ensures the homogeneous character of the old settlement areas. Most of the houses are two-storeyed, with projecting or receding facades, gables, and eaves facing the streets. The vintners' farmsteads, which are oblong, U-shaped, or L-shaped or consist of two parallel buildings, date back to the late Middle Ages and the 16th–17th centuries. In a few towns, such as Schönbühel, Aggsbach-Dorf, and Oberloiben, the buildings date mainly to the 19th and 20th centuries.

The single-storeyed farmsteads, with two to four units arranged around a courtyard (partly with arcades), appear to be two-storeyed because of the sub-cellars that are characteristic of the Wachau. The partly tiled hipped, saddleback, and half-hipped roofs with varying eaves and ridge heights create a diversified pattern. This effect is intensified by some imposing vineyard farmsteads that dominate the townscape, some of them with integrated chapels (eg St Pöltner or Prandtauer Hof in Joching, Kellerschlössl in Dürnstein, Erlahof in Spitz), as well as by numerous historically significant complexes, such as castles, mostly dating from the 16th and 17th centuries (eg Rossatz, Spitz), or by ecclesiastical buildings.

Most of these farmsteads, with lateral gate walls or integrated vaulted passages and service buildings, feature smooth facades, for the most part altered from the 18th and 19th centuries onwards. Street fronts are often accentuated by late-medieval/post-medieval oriels on sturdy brackets, statues in niches, wall paintings, and sgraffito work, or remnants of paintwork (frequently from the late Renaissance or the Mannerist periods, a few from the late Middle Ages) or rich Baroque facades. The late-medieval and post-medieval configuration is still noticeable in many farmsteads and houses – in the strict simple facade design, the ground floor scantily equipped with windows, an elaborate residential floor, and the attic storey. The steeply pitched, towering hipped roof occurs so frequently that it

can be regarded as an architectural characteristic of the Wachau house; in many places, such as the historic building complex of Markt Weissenkirchen, it can still to some extent be found in its original proportion.

In towns or market towns, such as Spitz, Dürnstein, Weissenkirchen, Krems, and Emmersdorf, the vintner house type is joined by a substantial stock of late medieval and post-medieval stately homestead buildings and the houses of burghers, craftsmen, and merchants, particularly in Melk, Krems, Stein, and Emmersdorf. Many houses have preserved their internal layout, mostly from the middle of the 16th century onwards.

Many late medieval farmsteads have retained their interior layout and configuration to a large extent (service rooms on the ground floor, living rooms on the upper floor, followed by the attic storey). On the ground floor, large gates open unto a vaulted passage and/or corridor, as well as the service rooms. Large press rooms are usually situated on the sides (sometimes with preserved wooden press and lever), usually connected from the courtyard side with the sub-cellar, located on the ground level or a little lower, which then leads down to the deep cellar. Weissenkirchen is noted for its extensive cellar systems, often encompassing several storeys (press room, sub-cellar, deep cellar). These rooms, partly stone- or brick-vaulted and partly hewn out of the bedrock, with many niches, are interconnected by steep staircases and have been expanded since the Middle Ages because of an increasing need for space. Large cellars still exist today in, for example, the Kellerschlössl in Dürnstein or near the Erlahof in Spitz, in the so-called Burgstock.

The 18th century buildings which still serve trade and craft purposes and are partly integrated in the town structure, such as taverns or inns, stations for changing draught horses, boat operators' and toll houses, mills, smithies, or salt storehouses, frequently go back to the 15th and 16th centuries.

In 1827, the former *Pionierkaserne* (Engineer Barracks) was built in Krems, where a number of factories and commercial enterprises were also established in the 19th century. The landing stages and stations of the Danube ferry and passenger navigation, as at Aggsbach-Dorf, Spitz, and Rossatzbach, date from the early 20th century. The complex that dominates the townscape of Melk, the Birago Barracks, was built in 1910–13.

On the outskirts of Krems and Melk are to be found largely unchanged buildings from the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century. From the middle of the 19th century onwards, commercial, industrial, communal, and utilitarian buildings were built as the town expanded. Representative residential buildings, apartment blocks, and villas show Historicist and local-style features (in part Secession-style ornamentation or framework); a district of villas on the model of the *Wiener Cottage Verein* was created in Melk.

A fine example of building in harmony with the landscape is the railway line built in 1909 between Krems and Emmersdorf. It was adapted and adjusted to the topographical conditions as far as possible, making an organic link with the landscape.

There is a number of castles dominating the towns and the Danube valley. Many of them began to fall into decay from

the 15th century onwards. Apart from the ruins of Hinterhaus and Dürnstein, the Aggstein castle ruins are among the most important structures of this type in Austria, by virtue of their size and historic significance, as well as their excellent state of preservation. The smaller knightly castles and other fortified structures from the 13th and 14th centuries are still in evidence, as, for example, at Weissenkirchen. The *Teisenhoferhof*, built in 1439-68, is a castle-type four-wing complex that forms a whole with the fortified church. The *Gozzoburg* in Krems is an example of a town castle which developed from a fortified house of the second half of the 11th century.

Many architecturally and artistically significant ecclesiastical buildings dominate both townscape and landscape. The numerous Gothic and Baroque churches and chapels with their magnificent towers incorporate Romanesque wall cores or the whole or parts of medieval churches. The fortified churches of St Michael and Weissenkirchen are among the outstanding buildings of this type to be found in Lower Austria. Many places of worship feature splendid Baroque interiors and furnishings (with a few late Gothic pieces) or murals dating back to the 12th century.

The extensive complexes of the abbeys of Melk, Dürnstein, and Göttweig, in part dating back to the Middle Ages, are among the finest Baroque buildings in Austria. Towering high up on a rock, Melk Abbey, a perfect exemplar of a Baroque synthesis of the arts, forms the gateway to the Wachau in the west, while Göttweig Abbey, since its refurbishment in the 18th century, symbolizes Baroque imperial demands that went beyond the monastic purposes.

While the Church was the main patron of the arts, the second half of the 16th century was characterized by an increasing tendency on the part of newly prosperous burghers to commission works of art, thus enabling artists to create outstanding works in the fields of painting, sculpture, architecture, and arts and crafts. Around 1500 these artists usually came from Augsburg, Regensburg, and Passau, but the majority of those who came around 1700 were from Italy. Many important Austrian architects, painters, and stuccoists created their main works in this region.

The narrow valley and bends of the Danube prevent any overall view of the Wachau. In the course of the centuries, structures of special significance were built at a number of high points, offering splendid views. The most important of these are Melk Abbey, Schönbühel (castle and monastery), the ruins of Aggstein, Dürnstein, and Hinterhaus, as well as the lookout towers of *Weiglwardt*, *Ferdinandswarte*, and *Donauwarte*.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The preservation of the historic cultural landscape of the Wachau encompasses a number of overlapping levels of protection:

- Federal laws

The first level of protection is afforded by the 1923 Monument Protection Act. It focuses on outstanding historic monuments (of which there are currently some

1000 in the nominated area). Protection covers both the building material and the traditional appearance. The historic, artistic, or other cultural significance and public interest in the conservation of a property is determined in the first instance by the *Bundesdenkmalamt* (Federal Office of Historic Monuments) as the authority responsible for the protection of monuments.

For monuments owned by the federal or a provincial government or certain other corporations under public law, institutions, funds, or legally recognized churches or religious communities, public interest is taken for granted. Thus in the Wachau cultural landscape, all important monumental buildings and other monuments are in public ownership, and all ecclesiastical monuments (churches, monasteries, etc) are listed for preservation. Monuments in private ownership are only listed for preservation if public interest in their conservation is declared as such by notice of the *Bundesdenkmalamt*.

Other federal laws that contribute to the protection of the Wachau are the following: Act on Water Law 1959 (as amended in 1997); measure for the privatization of the waterways board and establishment of the public limited company *Österreichische Donau-Betriebs-Aktiengesellschaft*, 1992; Hydraulic Construction Promotion Act 1985; Hydrography Act 1979; Forestry Act 1975 (as amended in 1995); Environmental Impact Assessment Act 1993 (as amended in 1996).

- Federal regulations

The following regulations are applicable in the Wachau: Waterways Regulation 1985; Regulation of the Federal Minister of Public Economics and Transport concerning traffic regulations for waterways 1993.

- International agreements

The Convention on the Regulation of Navigation on the Danube 1960 and the Inland Navigation Memorandum of the Federal Government 1992 (on occasion of Eastern opening and the completion of the Main-Danube Canal) apply to the Wachau.

- Provincial laws (Lower Austria)

Nature Conservation Act; Environmental Planning Law 1976; Building Code 1996; Provincial Roads Act; Act on Affairs of Power Supply in Lower Austria; Hunting Law 1974; Fishing Law 1988; Camping and Youth Camps Act.

- Regulations of the Lower Austrian Provincial Government

Regulation on Natural Preserves; Regulation on a regional environmental planning programme, Lower Austrian Central Area.

- Additional protective measures

Conservation areas:

Nature Conservation Area Wachau and surroundings (c 46,300ha);

Nature Conservation Area Göttweig Hill and Surroundings (c 225ha)

Nature Reserve Jauerling-Wachau (c 3600 ha).

In addition to the nature conservation areas, a large number of natural monuments are protected by notices issued by the regional administrative authority.

European Diploma Wachau:

On 5 September 1994 the Wachau was inscribed on the list of properties coming within the scope of the "Natura 2000" network of European sites initiated by the European Union. This imposes constraints on development within the designated areas.

Management

The open countryside of the Wachau is largely privately owned and consists of small lots. Much of the forest is owned by farmers, and the remainder by farmers' associations, the Austrian Federal Forests, or the church or local communities.

The historic cultural landscape of the Wachau in the nominated area comprises some 5000 monuments. The majority of these are privately owned, mostly by families who have been residents of the region for many generations. Their awareness of traditional values ensures full preservation of these buildings. This is also true of numerous buildings owned by the Republic of Austria, the *Land* of Lower Austria, and other corporations under public law and the recognized churches.

Overall professional responsibility for the conservation of the historic cultural landscape of the Wachau is vested in the *Bundesdenkmalamt* (Federal Office of Historic Monuments) and the *Landeskonservatorat für Niederösterreich*, both based in Vienna. The former maintains a complete inventory of historic monuments in the Wachau.

For the protected areas (nature conservation areas, nature reserves, natural monuments) responsibility for overall management rests with the *Amt der NÖ Landesregierung, Abteilung Naturschutz* (Office of the Lower Austrian Provincial Government, Nature Protection Department) based in St Pölten. This body also has overall responsibility for the European Diploma Area; at local authority level this is handled by the *Arbeitskreis zum Schutz der Wachau* (Working Party for the Protection of the Wachau), located in Dürnstein.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

As with any "organically evolved landscape ... which retains an active social role in contemporary society closely associated with the traditional way of life" (*Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, para 39), it is not appropriate to talk of conscious conservation. The Wachau has developed in response to social and economic forces over several thousand years, and each stage in its evolution has left its mark on the landscape. This historical evolution is abundantly visible in the latter-day landscape.

For a variety of economic, political, and environmental reasons there have been few, if any, radical interventions over history, even in the later decades of the 20th century, which have obliterated or distorted evidence of the organic growth of the Wachau. For the past half-century protective

measures have been progressively introduced which will ensure its conservation in the future.

Authenticity

The authenticity of the Wachau may be judged to be high. It conserves the fundamental elements of a continuing cultural landscape as defined in paragraph 39.ii of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*: "... one which retains an active social role in contemporary society closely associated with the traditional way of life and in which the evolutionary process is still in progress. At the same time it exhibits significant material evidence of its evolution over time." These qualities are manifested in the agricultural and forested landscape, in the layouts of the towns, and in the conservation and authenticity of individual monuments.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the Wachau in April 2000.

Qualities

The Wachau is a stretch of the Danube valley which has high visual landscape qualities, and which retains to a remarkable degree material evidence of its historical evolution over more than two millennia, in the form of towns and villages, outstanding architectural monuments, and a largely vineyard agriculture.

Comparative analysis

The most immediate comparison is with the vineyard landscapes of the middle Rhine and Mosel valleys in Germany. However, neither has conserved its essential historic character so completely as the Wachau, nor such abundant traces of its long history.

In many ways the Wachau can be compared with the Italian cultural landscape of the Cinqueterre, which is already inscribed in the World Heritage List, where there is the same harmonious interrelation between water, mountain ranges, and human settlements. However, in this case the linking feature is the sea rather than a great river, and it lacks the outstanding monumental features in the form of impressive buildings and picturesque historic towns that distinguish the Wachau.

ICOMOS comments

Whilst there is considerable protection by a series of overlapping laws and regulations and a number of bodies at federal, state, and municipal level are responsible for their implementation, ICOMOS believes that it would be desirable to set up some form of coordinating commission to oversee the continued protection and preservation of the defined landscape as a unit. Its membership should comprise representatives of all the institutions involved.

At its meeting in June 2000 the Bureau requested the State Party to establish a coordinating commission on the lines proposed by ICOMOS. Documentation has been supplied which confirms that this request has been complied with by the State Party.

Brief description

The Wachau is a stretch of the Danube of high visual landscape quality which preserves intact and visible many traces, in terms of architecture, urban design, and agricultural use (principally for the cultivation of vines), of its continuous and organic evolution since prehistoric times.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii and iv*:

Criterion ii The Wachau is an outstanding example of a riverine landscape bordered by mountains in which material evidence of its long historical evolution has survived to a remarkable degree.

Criterion iv The architecture, the human settlements, and the agricultural use of the land in the Wachau vividly illustrate a basically medieval landscape which has evolved organically and harmoniously over time.

ICOMOS, September 2000