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Between Myth and History: The Carantanian Legacy – (Mis)uses of the Carantanian Myth in Slovene Historiography

Abstract:

This paper explores the (mis)uses of the Carantanian myth in Slovene historiography as a key element in the construction of Slovene national identity. It offers a critical and systematic analysis of early Slovene historiography. Since the Carantanian myth, rooted in Johann Gottfried Herder's (1744–1803) ideas on language, culture, and nationhood, gained particular prominence during the period of Romantic nationalism in the nineteenth century, special attention is given to the work of historian and playwright Anton Tomaž Linhart (1756–1795), as well as to that of two historians: Franc Kos (1853–1924) and his son Milko Kos (1892–1972). Their editions, translations, and interpretations of medieval sources played a crucial role in shaping twentieth-century Slovene historical thought. The paper then contrasts their interpretations with those of contemporary historians who have deconstructed the myth. Through a selection of case studies, it illustrates how the Carantanian myth continues to influence Slovene political and religious iconography, above all because of its long-standing entrenchment in national historical narratives. The paper concludes by reflecting on the broader challenges of interpreting medieval sources beyond nationalist frameworks and aims to foster further scholarly engagement with the complex interplay between myth, history, and national identity.

Keywords: Carantania, Carantanian myth, Anton Tomaž Linhart, Franc Kos, Milko Kos, Slovene historiography, political iconography

Introduction¹

The Carantanian myth holds an important place within Slovene collective memory, functioning both as a historical narrative and a symbol of national identity. According to the myth, the early medieval Slavic principality of Carantania is portrayed as the direct predecessor of the modern Slovene state, with the Carantanians themselves regarded as ancient Slovenians. Elements such as the ducal inauguration ceremony at Karnburg (Slovenian: *Krnski grad*) are often celebrated as evidence of early democratic traditions and a longstanding continuity of Slovene nationhood. Although rooted in certain historical realities, these narratives were heavily shaped by the needs of nineteenth century Romantic nationalism and evolved through various political contexts to suit the demands of different eras.²

The goal of this paper is to examine how historical scholarship has contributed to the construction and eventual deconstruction of national narratives related to Carantania and the Carantanian myth. To illustrate this process, the paper analyses three case studies: the work of historian and playwright Anton Tomaž Linhart (1756–1795), alongside that of two prominent medieval historians of the Middle Ages, Franc Kos (1853–1924) and Milko Kos (1892–1972), whose editions, translations, and interpretations of medieval sources significantly shaped twentieth century Slovene historical narratives. Their major works, *Versuch einer Geschichte von Krain und der übrigen südlichen Slaven Oesterreichs* (hereafter *Versuch*), *Gradivo za zgodovino Slovencev v srednjem veku* (hereafter *Gradivo*), and *Srednjeveška kulturna, družbena in politična zgodovina Slovencev: izbrane razprave* (hereafter *Srednjeveška zgodovina Slovencev*), serve as central examples for understanding how the Carantanian myth influenced scholarly practice.³

The paper is structured into six sections. It begins with a brief overview of historical Carantania and the key elements of the Carantanian myth. Following this, it delves into the development of the myth within historiography, with particular emphasis on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The analysis initially draws on the work of Anton Tomaž Linhart and then focuses on historians Franc and Milko Kos. Finally, the paper reflects on contemporary

¹ This paper was originally presented at the International Conference for Young Scholars *Vestigia: Myths & Narratives*, which took place between 24 and 26 April 2025 at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. The title of the presentation was *Between Myth and History: The Carantanian Legacy*, presented by Matej Vodopivec and Tamara Logar.

² Peter Štih, “Karantanci, zgodnjesrednjeveško ljudstvo med Vzhodom in Zahodom,” *Zgodovinski časopis* 61/1–2 (2007): 47–58.

³ The titles of the works can be translated as follows: *Versuch einer Geschichte von Krain und der übrigen südlichen Slaven Oesterreichs* (An attempt at a history of Carniola and the remaining Southern Slavs of Austria), published in two volumes in 1788 and 1791; *Gradivo za zgodovino Slovencev v srednjem veku* (Sources for the history of the Slovenians in the Middle Ages), published in five volumes between 1902 and 1928 and *Srednjeveška kulturna, družbena in politična zgodovina Slovencev: izbrane razprave* (Medieval cultural, social, and political history of the Slovenians: selected Studies), published in 1985.

historiographical approaches that stress the necessity of critical distance when dealing with medieval sources, warning against the projection of modern concepts such as nationhood onto early medieval tribal societies. By examining the uses of the Carantanian myth in earlier Slovene historiography and how it reshaped over time, this paper offers a case study in the complex relationship between history, myth, and identity, a dynamic that remains relevant not only for Slovenia but for all nations engaged in reimagining their pasts.

Carantania and the Carantanian myth

Carantania, a Slavic principality, was the earliest early medieval tribal community to form in the Eastern Alps, emerging during the second half of the seventh century. Carantanian society had polyethnic roots, comprising Slavic settlers, including Croats, Bulgarians, and Dudlebs, as well as the native population (Vlachs) who predated the Slavic migrations.⁴ Despite their polyethnic roots, the Carantanians developed to be a distinctly Slavic people which means that the leading class of Carantania was defined as being Slavic. External observers considered Carantanians to be a Slavic people, from Lombard historian Paul the Deacon, who said that in Carantania there lives a Slavic people (*gens Sclavorum*) to the main primary source for Carantania *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum* which states that Carantanians are Slavs with a special name (*Sclavi qui dicuntur Quarantani*).⁵ The Carantanians were the first Slavic people to be successfully Christianized and were also the only group to form and maintain a distinct ethnic identity in opposition to the Avars.⁶

The political and cultural centre of Carantania was the Zollfeld plain (*Gospodsvetsko polje*), together with Karnburg. Another important centre of power likely existed at ancient Teurnia, near Spittal an der Drau. By approximately the year 800, an independent principality of Carniola had also developed to the south of Carantania. The territory of Carantania included the Lungau region and the valleys of the Mur and Enns rivers. In the north, its border extended across the eastern Alps, while in the east it reached across the Fischbach Alps.⁷ However, the exact territory of Carantania, especially the

⁴ Herwig Wolfram, "Karantanija med vzhodom in zahodom: Obri, Bavarci in Langobardi v 8. in 9. stoletju," *Zgodovinski časopis* 45/2 (1991): 177–87.

⁵ Peter Štih in Vasko Simoniti, *Na stičišču svetov: slovenska zgodovina od prazgodovinskih kultur do konca 18. stoletja* (Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2009), 33–35. The main primary source for the history of Carantania, *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum* was written in Salzburg in the 870s.

⁶ Herwig Wolfram, *Grenzen und Räume: Geschichte Österreichs vor seiner Entstehung, Österreichische Geschichte 378–907* (Berlin: Ueberreuter, 1995), 311. For a more detailed overview of Carantanian history see Wolfram, "Karantanija med vzhodom in zahodom;" Peter Štih, *Ozemlje Slovenije v zgodnjem srednjem veku: osnovne poteze zgodovinskega razvoja od začetka 6. do konca 9. stoletja* (Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta, Oddelek za zgodovino, 2001), 34–48; Štih and Simoniti, *Na stičišču svetov*.

⁷ Ernst Bruckmüller, *Avstrijska zgodovina* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 2017), 34–35.

question of how much of the territory of present-day Slovenia was included in Carantania, remains a topic of debate. Historians like Herwig Wolfram (1934) and Heinz Dopsch (1942–2014) have tried to show that Carantania's southern border stretched over the Sava River, perhaps even to the lower Krka River.⁸



Image 1. Peoples in the Eastern Alpine Region in the 7th and 8th Centuries [Source: Peter Štih et al. *Na obeh straneh Alp: slovensko-avstrijska zgodovina* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 2025), page 28, author of the map: Mateja Rihtarič].

The scholarship surrounding Carantania faces a significant challenge: the scarcity of primary sources.⁹ This gap has been filled by historians' interpretations, which has often opened the door for history to be placed in the

⁸ Peter Štih, "Strukture današnjega slovenskega prostora v zgodnjem srednjem veku," *Slovenija in sosednje dežele med antiko in karolinško dobo: začetki slovenske etnogeneze, Situla: razprave Narodnega muzeja Slovenije* 39 (Ljubljana: Narodni muzej Slovenije, 2000), 355–94.

⁹ Particularly for the archaeological sources for the history of Carantania, see: Paul Gleirscher, *Karantanien: das slawische Kärnten* (Klagenfurt: Verlag

service of nationalist agendas. Carantania was no exception. Symbols associated with Carantania, such as the Prince's Stone (*knežji kamen*), Maria Saal (*Gospa Sveta*), the Duke's Chair (*vojvodski prestol*), Zollfeld, Karnburg, and the ceremony of ducal inauguration (*ustoličevanje koroških vojvod*), came to form, what is now referred to as, the Carantanian myth (*karantanski mit*). This myth considers Carantania to have been the first Slovene state, its symbols deeply tied to Slovene national identity, and its dukes seen as leaders of the Slovene nation in a period when it was still free, before eventually falling under foreign domination. In this narrative, the time of Carantania represents the era of a glorious Slovene past, lost during the so-called dark Middle Ages and revived during the nineteenth century national awakening. By establishing a national history that stretches back to the Carantanian princes, the Slovene nation could finally differentiate itself from other nations and construct a long and ancient history for itself.¹⁰

A fundamental element of the Carantanian myth is the ritual of the enthronement of the Carantanian dukes, which is associated with the already mentioned Prince's Stone. This ritual came to symbolize the supposed democratic and popular character of what was believed to be early Slovene political culture. In nineteenth- and twentieth-century national narratives, the ritual was often presented as proof of the ancient sovereignty of the Slovene nation. Contemporary historiography has, however, emphasized that such interpretations project modern concepts of nationhood and democracy onto an early medieval ritual, whose meaning was rooted in its own symbolic and social context. The ritual was a dynastic as well as a regional practice, not a constitutional act of the "Slovene nation". Accordingly, many recent studies have criticized these nationalist readings, especially the earlier ones, and highlighted the problems of equating Carantanian dukes with "Slovene princes".¹¹

The Carantanian myth played a crucial role for Slovene national awakeners during the nineteenth century. Without it, the construction of a supposed ancient and glorious history of the Slovene nation was considered impossible. As a result, Carantanian symbols were consciously and forcefully integrated

Carinthia, 2000), 77–81; new, revised and expanded edition of this work has since been published, see: Paul Gleirscher, *Karantaniën: slawisches Fürstentum und bairische Grafschaft* (Klagenfurt: Mohorjeva Hermagoras, 2019); Jochen Giesler, *Der Ostalpenraum vom 8. bis 11. Jahrhundert: Studien zu archäologischen und schriftlichen Zeugnissen*, Frühgeschichtliche und provinzialrömische Archäologie 1 (Stuttgart: M. Leidorf, 1997), 122–36, 155–59, 166–68; Stefan Eichert, *Frühmittelalterliche Strukturen im Ostalpenraum: Studien zu Geschichte und Archäologie Karantaniens*, Aus Forschung und Kunst, Bd. 39 (Klagenfurt: Verlag des Geschichtsvereines für Kärnten, 2012), 35–37, 106–8, 138–54, 194, 228, 312–23, 343–45.

¹⁰ Peter Štih, *The Middle Ages between the eastern Alps and the northern Adriatic: select papers on Slovene historiography and medieval history, East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 450–1450* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 17–24.

¹¹ Peter Štih, "O modernem (ne)razumevanju in (ne)poznavanju stare zgodovine na primeru ustoličevanja koroških vojvod," in *Stiplovske zbornik*, Dušan Nečak, ed., *Historia: znanstvena zbirka Oddelka za zgodovino Filozofske fakultete* 10 (Ljubljana: Oddelek za zgodovino Filozofske fakultete, 2005).

into Slovene national identity and collective memory.¹² For the purposes of this paper, the main assumptions of the Carantanian myth can thus be summarized as: (1) Carantania was the direct predecessor of the modern Slovene state; (2) the Carantanians were ancient Slovenians; (3) Carantania was the first and only free Slovene state before the establishment of the Republic of Slovenia; (4) the Carantanian dukes were leaders of the free Slovene people; (5) the use of Carantanian symbols is crucial for Slovene national identity; and (6) the ceremony of ducal inauguration is evidence of early (Slovene) democracy.

The Carantanian myth also found widespread resonance in Slovene culture, extending beyond historiography itself. In literature, it already appeared with the poet France Prešeren (1800–1849), who in works such as *Krst pri Savici* (1835) depicted the Christianisation of Carantania as a national tragedy and an end of freedom. Poets in later times, including Jovan Vesel Koseski (1798–1884) and Anton Aškerc (1856–1912), further developed Carantanian themes, often framing them as allegories of national perseverance, endurance and liberation. In the early twentieth century, the myth was reworked by Oton Župančič (1878–1949), Rudolf Maister (1874–1934), and Janez Menart (1929–2004), who tied the Carantanian past to questions of Carinthian identity and to the broader idea of Carantania as the “cradle of Slovene national identity”. Dramatists such as Metod Turnšek (1909–1976) and Lev Detela (1939–2023) adapted the myth for the stage and in novel form, making note of the Carantanian struggle for freedom and interpreting it as a timeless parable of Slovene independence. Religious authors integrated Carantanian motifs into Christian-national narratives, using symbols like the Prince’s Stone and the pilgrimage church of Maria Saal to put forward the continuity between medieval Carantania and the modern Slovene nation.¹³

Beyond literature and religion, the myth was also present in the visual arts and popular culture. Political caricatures and satirical prints published during 1918–1919 portrayed Carantania and its symbols, showing how strongly the myth had infused public imagination in times of national crisis. Visual artists, including painters and sculptors of the twentieth century, repeatedly returned to Carantanian motifs, especially the Prince’s Stone, to symbolize sovereignty and democratic tradition. In this way, the Carantanian myth was never limited to scholarly interpretation alone but became a shared cultural code expressed across literature, drama, religion, satire, and visual art—one that reinforced the Slovene sense of identity, endurance, and continuity well into the modern era.¹⁴

The historical reality, however, was different. Early medieval societies did not exist in the form of nations as we understand them today. They were tribal, polyethnic, and evolved significantly over time and space. Many such

¹² dr. Lev Centrih: *Zgodovina slovenskih dežel v srednjem in novem veku: Ali je bila Karantanija slovenska država*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8AKLtEMwY> (accessed 29 April 2025).

¹³ Igor Grdina, “Karantanski mit v slovenski kulturi,” *Zgodovina za: vse za zgodovino* 3/2 (1996): 51–65.

¹⁴ Grdina, “Karantanski mit v slovenski kulturi.”

societies eventually disappeared from history, for instance the Avars. While some degree of continuity between the Carantanians and modern-day Slovenians certainly exists, it is a methodological and interpretative error to equate the Carantanians, who were a distinct early medieval ethnic group, with the ancient Slovenians.¹⁵ In the chapter on historiography below, we will explore in greater detail how this assumption developed, particularly from the period of national awakening onwards.

Misuses of the Carantanian myth

The Carantanian myth is a symbolic construction often used to support the modern idea of Slovene national identity, ethnic continuity, and sovereignty. It is thus not simply a recollection of early medieval history but a construct that has come to be represented in Slovene society through a handful of often mythologized symbols. These symbols carry great symbolic weight in the narratives of national identity, early democracy, and cultural autonomy of Slovenia. The most important among them are the ceremony of ducal inauguration, the Prince's Stone, the Carantanian panther (*karantanski panter*), and the Duke's Chair.¹⁶ Today, such symbols are often invoked in Slovene public discourse. However, far from being purely historical references, these symbols are increasingly misused to promote nationalist agendas, distort history, and falsify simplistic narratives of Slovene ethnic continuity and political entitlement. This chapter examines the most noticeable examples of such misuses in the wider Slovene society.

One of the most prominent and visually institutionalized misuses of the Carantanian symbols in contemporary Slovenia is shown in the painting adorning the lobby of the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia.¹⁷ The painting, actually a fresco, was created in 1958 by an academic painter Slavko Pengov (1908–1966) and depicts the history of the Slovenians from settlement to the beginning of the renewal period after the end of the Second World War.¹⁸ The second scene of the fresco depicts two important symbols of

¹⁵ dr. Lev Centrih.

¹⁶ For more on the ducal inauguration see: Peter Štih, "Ustoličevanje koroških vojvod med zgodovino in predstavami: problemi njegovega izročila, razvoja in poteka kot tudi njegovo razumevanje pri Slovencih," *Zgodovinski časopis* 66/3–4 (2012); Peter Štih, "Die Kärntner Herzogseinsetzung und der Fürstenstein als slowenischer Erinnerungsort," in *Vom Meer zu den Bergen: Festschrift für Marija Wakounig*, Christoph Augustynowicz and Ferdinand Kühnel, eds. (Vienna – Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2024), 149–58.

¹⁷ "Freska zgodovina Slovencev," https://www.dz-rs.si/wps/portal/Home/odz/umetnost/freskaZS!/ut/p/z1/jZDBCoJAFEW_pYYvb3zM1st20cFIrqRyy2YT-GNArqiFpCX5_QKijx7e7lnLt4wCEGXiXPXCZdrqqkGPKFL66-ExA_oAZSmy7xEAXh0d-s8eBacB4F9jBwKX7ghSdnBRAMHcNFj5nUMn-cRIptP8_HPEZzmjwB8fN4HLguVfl5FqtRcSuCNUItGNPqjGeqs6-p2pa-GGfd_rUilZCP2mSg1_KZlqO4i_SahLxlj82oozmb0BfgY_eA!!/dz/d5/L2dBISEvZ0FBIS9nQSEh/#! (accessed 29 April 2025).

¹⁸ Katarina Mohar, "Stensko slikarstvo Slavka Pengova pred in po letu 1945," *Studia Historica Slovenica* 16, no. 3 (2016): 749–67.

the Carantanian myth: the Prince's Stone and the heraldic symbol of the Carantanian panther. The symbol of the Carantanian panther is not historically attested and serves only the broader narrative of glorifying Slovene history.¹⁹ Even more so, the Carantanian panther was, for example, a symbol of Slovene paramilitary units during the times of the Slovene independence process, which illustrates how deeply the misuse of the myth is embedded in Slovene nationhood.

The second symbol that appears in the fresco is the so-called Prince's Stone. Contrary to the Carantanian panther, the Stone is historically attested. The Stone, a carved Roman column base, was a ceremonial throne used in the ducal inauguration ritual of Carantania. The ritual emphasized popular consent over divine right or noble lineage. As such, the ritual has a symbolic meaning of early democracy. The Stone is preserved and located in the *Wappensaal* of the *Landhaus* in Klagenfurt.²⁰

A depiction of the Prince's Stone also appears on the main doors of St. Nicholas Cathedral in Ljubljana (*Ljubljanska stolnica*), which were created in 1996, and on the national side of the Slovene two-cent euro coin. The doors, also called Slovene doors, were made by sculptor Tone Demšar (1947–1997), with the assistance of Franci Petrič (1960) and Roman Kamšek.²¹ The doors are decorated by a relief that depicts the 1250-year-long history of the Catholic church in Slovenia. The historical depictions start at the bottom and move through the period up to the top of the doors, finishing with the depiction of pope John Paul II, who also blessed the doors during his visit to Slovenia in 1996.²² The inclusion of the Prince's Stone among the scenes on the cathedral doors, and its appearance on the Slovene two-cent coin, illustrates how Carantanian symbols have been absorbed into the national and religious iconography of modern Slovenia.

The symbols, such as the ducal inauguration ritual, the Prince's Stone, and the Carantanian panther are symbols that are often used and depicted in Slovene society. While some, like the Prince's Stone, can be historically attested, others, like the Carantanian panther, are modern inventions without attested medieval origins. Their contemporary uses tend to discord their historical meaning and significance to promote an idea of uninterrupted Slovene ethnic continuity and early Slovene democracy. This kind of usage of symbols reflects trends in nationalist historiography, where history is selectively interpreted to serve present-day ideas and ideologies. A critical examination of these symbols is essential to correctly understand the medieval heritage they claim to represent.

¹⁹ *Karantanski panter je mit*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyF5Wl7WYiw> (accessed 29 April 2025).

²⁰ "Herzogstuhl Maria Saal - Landesmuseum," <https://landesmuseum.ktn.gv.at/standorte/herzogstuhl> (accessed 29 April 2025).

²¹ Ana Lavrič, *Ljubljanska stolnica: umetnostni vodnik* (Ljubljana: Družina d.o.o., 2007), 41.

²² Ibidem.



Image 2. The symbols of Carantania used in modern-day Slovenia: 1. Carantanian panther [photo: <https://seeklogo.com/vector-logo/26086/carantanian-panther> (accessed April 29, 2025)]; 2. Main doors of St. Nicholas' Cathedral in Ljubljana (photo: Matej Vodopivec); 3. Detail of the prince's stone on the main doors of St. Nicholas' cathedral (photo: Matej Vodopivec); 4. Prince's stone on two-cent euro coin in Slovenia [photo: <https://en.numista.com/catalogue/pieces237.html> (accessed April 29, 2025)]; 5. Fresco number two in the lobby of the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia (© ZRC SAZU, Umetnostnozgodovinski inštitut Franceta Steleta, photo: Andrej Furlan).

Historiography of the Carantanian myth

The historiography of Carantania has a long tradition and is inseparably linked to the history of the Slovene nation-building process.²³ The Protestant reformer Primož Trubar (1508–1586), together with Adam Bohorič (c. 1520–1598), laid the foundations for the codification of the Slovene language.²⁴ Protestant writers recognized the existence of a supraregional community defined by its shared language, and out of this awareness a form of Protestant patriotism emerged.²⁵ Building on this patriotism, the nation-builders of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries began transforming the Slovenes

²³ For a detailed overview of the historiography about Carantania from the 15th to the 18th century see: Darja Mihelič, "Karantanija v očeh zgodovinarjev od konca 15. do 18. stoletja," *Zgodovinski časopis* 31/3 (1977): 287–328.

²⁴ Peter Štih, "Poglavje iz nacionalizirane zgodovine ali O zgodnjerednjeveških začetkih zgodovine Slovencev," in *Mlinaričev zbornik I.*, Darko Friš, ed., *Studia Historica Slovenica: časopis za humanistične in družboslovne študije* (Maribor: Zgodovinsko društvo dr. Franca Kovačiča, 2005), 5: 112.

²⁵ Štih, "Poglavje iz nacionalizirane zgodovine," 112–13.

into a nation with its own language, culture, and view of history.²⁶ The so-called Zois Circle, a community of educated individuals such as Anton Tomaž Linhart, Valentin Vodnik (1758–1819), and Jernej Kopitar (1780–1844), which gathered around the Carniolan nobleman Žiga Zois (1747–1819), was the most notable expression of this endeavour. For instance, between the years 1797 and 1800, Valentin Vodnik published the first Slovene newspaper, *Lublanske novice*, and wrote a collection of poems entitled *Pesme za pokušino* (1806). The linguist Jernej Kopitar, a proponent of the Pannonian-Carantanian theory, laid the foundations for the scientific study of the Slovene language. Yet the figure who had the greatest impact on later Slovene historiography was the historian and playwright Anton Tomaž Linhart.²⁷

Anton Tomaž Linhart was the first to establish a direct link between the continuity of the Slovenian language and the ethnic continuity of the Slovene nation. His starting point was the existence of a special language community of the Slovenians that existed already in the early Middle Ages or perhaps even earlier. Through the methodological approach of accepting language as a historical source, he deeply influenced the next generations of historians.²⁸ In the second volume of his *Versuch*, he discusses the history of the South Slavic people. In the introduction to this volume, he wrote: “The Slavic historians, out of misunderstanding, vain patriotism, or deference to authority, misused the name of the Illyrians and set this false idea into motion in order to provide the Slavic nation—whose earlier history was obscure to them—with an honourable antiquity through the deeds and fortunes of this once so famous people.”²⁹ Interestingly, he criticizes the older Slavic historians for the incorrect use of the name Illyrians³⁰, but he commits a similar error himself, only with the term Slavs: “I have even proven that the name Slavs is original and have demonstrated its root in the language.”³¹ He claims that the Slavs are an

²⁶ Ibid., 113.

²⁷ On the 250th anniversary of the birth of Linhart, a monograph was published offering an insight into Linhart’s life and work. For Linhart as a historian, see: Ivo Svetina, ed., *Anton Tomaž Linhart: jubilejna monografija ob 250-letnici rojstva* (Ljubljana – Radovljica: Slovenski gledališki muzej, Muzeji radovljiske občine, 2005), 291–310.

²⁸ Štih, *The Middle Ages between the eastern Alps and the northern Adriatic*, 14–15.

²⁹ “Die slavischen Geschichtschreiber haben aus Misverstand, aus eitelm Patriotismus, oder vom Ansehen geleitet, den Namen der Illyrier gemisbraucht, und diese falsche Idee in den Gang gebracht, um der slavischen Nation, deren ältere Geschichte ihnen dunkel war, in den Thaten und Schicksalen dieses ehemals so berühmten Volkes ein ehrenvolles Altertum zu verschaffen.” (Quote translated from German to English by Matej Vodopivec.)

³⁰ The Illyrians were a people attested from the 5th century BC in the Balkans in Greek and Roman historiography. There have been many misinterpretations about them in historical writing. See, for instance, Stane Gabrovec, “Iliri,” in *Enciklopedija Slovenije*, 4 (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1990).

³¹ “Also habe ich ja sogar bewiesen, daß der Name Slaven original sey, und die Wurzel desselben in der Sprache gezeigt.” (Quote translated from German to English by Matej Vodopivec.)

ancient people, not a secondary or mixed group. He uses language as a tool of national legitimacy, an idea that would later become very important in Romantic nationalism. Linhart draws on linguistic similarities among Russians, Carniolans, Germans, Latins, and Greeks to argue that all these peoples once lived together and shared a cultural-linguistic space. He proposes that the Slavs were a unified ancient people, closely related to the most “prestigious” European civilizations. This represents a clear projection of noble and ancient roots onto the Slavs and, by extension, onto the Slovenians. For Linhart, language is not merely a tool of communication; it is a proof of historical-political legitimacy:

“(…) But if the Slavs—such as, for example, the Russians and the Carniolans, the most distant in the north and south—have precisely the same word for the same idea, (...) then, I believe, the historian has no choice but to assert, with the greatest historical probability: that the Slavs, Germans, Latins, and Greeks once chose their signs of ideas jointly, and that there was thus a time when they lived together and belonged to a single community. This may suffice to justify my theory regarding the origins of the Slavs, and at the same time to illustrate the method by which I conduct my linguistic analysis.”³²

Finally, Linhart describes the early Slavs as an independent and proud people:

“(…) they constituted a considerable tribe, which defended its independence under its own dukes against the powerful Lombards, Avars, and Franks until the time of Charlemagne; although they eventually submitted to the feudal system of the Franks, the characteristic features of the old Wendish constitution still clearly shone through, and they preserved their language and customs—the distinguishing marks of a nation—in their original form.”³³

³² “(...) Aber wenn Slaven, (...) z. B. Russen und Krainer, die äussersten im Norden und Süden, für die nämliche Idee eben dasselbe Wort haben, (...) dann, glaube ich, bleibt dem Geschichtsforscher nichts anders übrig, als mit der größten historischen Wahrscheinlichkeit zu behaupten: a.) Daß sich die Slaven, Deutscher, Lateiner und Griechen (...) gemeinschaftlich gewählt haben. b.) Daß also eine Zeit war, in welcher sie beisammen gewohnt und zu einem Stamme gehört haben. So viel mag zur Rechtfertigung meiner Theorie von dem Ursprunge der Slaven hinreichen, und zugleich die Art, wie ich die Sprache analytisch untersuche, erklären.” (Quote translated from German to English by Matej Vodopivec.)

³³ “(...) sie einen beträchtlichen Stamm ausmachen, der seine Unabhängigkeit unter eigenen Vojvoden wieder die mächtigen Longobarden, Avaren, und Franken bis auf Karl den Großen vertheidigte, dann zwar dem Lehenstheile der Franken sich unterwarf, aber die charakteristischen Züge der alten wendischen Verfassung noch unter demselben hell durchschimmern lässt, und Sprache und Sitten, die unterscheidenden Zeichen einer Nation, in origineller Form erhalten hat.” (Quote translated from German to English by Matej Vodopivec.) Citations are taken from: Anton Tomaž Linhart, *Versuch einer Geschichte von Krain und der übrigen Südlichen Slaven Oesterreichs*, vol. 2 (Laibach: Verlage bei Wilhelm Heinrich Korn, 1791), chapter: Vorrede.

From these citations, it is clear that Linhart: (1) considers linguistic continuity to be equivalent to ethnic continuity, (2) claims that the Slavs have a long and independent history with glorious beginnings, and (3) presents the Slavs as an ancient people rather than a secondary or mixed group.

Based on these concepts from Linhart, Slovenians could finally show that they had a long history of their own. One of the main critics of the Carantanian myth is the president of the Slovene Academy of Sciences and Arts and the professor of medieval history at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana, Peter Štih (1960). Peter Štih summarized this wrong interpretation: "The Slavs indeed settled a great part of present-day Austria in the Early Middle Ages, but it was Slovene historiography that turned them into Slovenians."³⁴ And herein lies the heart of the Carantanian myth. It is based on certain historical truths, such as the settlement of Slavs, but it was later interpretations that forcefully changed those Slavs into Slovenians, and Carantania's symbols into symbols of Slovene national identity.³⁵

Slovene medieval historians Franc Kos and his son Milko Kos shaped the Carantanian myth in the late nineteenth and during the twentieth century.³⁶ Their publications, translations, and interpretations of early medieval sources helped to solidify the perception of Carantania as a direct predecessor of the modern Slovene nation-state. Although both historians made significant contributions to the development of Slovene medieval studies, their works must be critically re-evaluated for how they projected modern national ideas onto the early medieval past. Franc Kos belonged to the first generation of professional Slovene historians. In his monumental work, *Gradivo*, he aimed to compile and critically examine all available sources related to Slovene history from the years 500 to 1246. Each volume included extensive introductions in which Kos provided historical context. A critical analysis of Kos's work reveals several methodological problems. Firstly, the title, *Sources for the History of the Slovenians in the Middle Ages*, is anachronistic. It retroactively applies the modern national identity of Slovenians to a period when such a concept did not exist. In the introduction to the second volume, covering the period from 801 to 1000, Kos writes: "The land in which the Slovenians [sic!] lived a

³⁴ Štih, *The Middle Ages between the eastern Alps and the northern Adriatic*, 17.

³⁵ A substantial body of scholarly literature has developed around this topic within Slovene historiography, see for example: Peter Štih, "Plemenske in državne tvorbe zgodnjega srednjega veka na slovanskem naseljenem prostoru v Vzhodnih Alpah," *Slovenci in država: zbornik prispevkov z znanstvenega posveta na SAZU (od 9. do 11. novembra 1994)*, Bogo Grafenauer et al, eds. (Ljubljana: Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti, 1995), 21–45; Bogo Grafenauer, "Ustoličevanje koroških vojvod, gradnja slovenskega državnega mita in vpliv na oblikovanje slovenskega naroda v 19. stoletju," in *Plemenske in državne tvorbe zgodnjega srednjega veka na slovanskem naseljenem prostoru v Vzhodnih Alpah*, Bogo Grafenauer et al, eds. (Ljubljana: Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti, 1995), 61–66.

³⁶ For an older perspective on the importance Kos' work for Slovene historiography, see: Bogo Grafenauer, "Pomen dela Franca Kosa v razvoju slovenskega zgodovinarstva," *Zgodovinski časopis* 8 (1954): 118–24.

thousand years ago was called Slovenia [sic!] (*Sclavinia, Sclavinia tellus, partes Sclaviniae, partes Sclavinenses, partes Sclavorum, fines Sclaviniae, Sclavorum patria*, etc.).³⁷ However, terms like *Sclavia* and *Sclavinia* were commonly used Latin expressions referring broadly to Slavic peoples and territories in medieval sources, without any connection to the modern Slovene nation. This projection of Slovene identity onto the early medieval Slavs served the national agenda of establishing a long, continuous, and prestigious history for the Slovene people. It reflected the broader intellectual trends of the time, heavily influenced by Romantic nationalism, in which linguistic continuity was often equated with ethnic and national continuity.³⁸

Milko Kos continued and expanded upon his father's work. His most notable contributions to the Slovene medieval histories are collected in the book *Srednjeveška zgodovina Slovencev* (Medieval History of Slovenians), edited by Bogo Grafenauer and published in 1985. Although considered one of the cornerstones of Slovene medieval historiography, this work must be approached critically. The title, Medieval History of Slovenians, is again anachronistic. Kos's framing implies the existence of a Slovene nation during a period when medieval societies were fundamentally tribal, fluid, and with polyethnic roots.³⁹ This problem becomes even clearer in his treatment of Carantania. Kos devoted an entire chapter to the State of Carantanian Slovenians (*Država karantanskih Slovencev*) further cementing the link between early medieval Carantanians and modern Slovenians. In his interpretation of the *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum*, the most important primary source for Carantanian history, Milko Kos claimed that the text refers not merely to Carantanians but to Carantanian Slovenians, extending even to Slovenians living outside Carantania. He also interpreted the military successes of the Carantanians, as recorded in the *Conversio*, as victories of the Slovene people. This selective reading overlooks the fact that primary sources use the ethnic term Carantanians (*Quarantani*), with no mention of "Slovenians". Moreover, Kos's interpretation of the defeat of the Avars portrays the Slovenians as active agents, joining the Franks and Bavarians, even though the primary source simply mentions Carantanians without any national identification.⁴⁰ By doing so, Kos reinforced the myth of a glorious Slovene past, a free nation resisting foreign domination, until the subjugation under the Frankish feudal system.

³⁷ "Zemlja, po kateri so pred tisoč leti prebivali Slovenci (!), se je zvala Slovenija (!) (*Sclavinia, Sclavinia tellus, partes Sclaviniae, partes Sclavinenses, partes Sclavorum, fines Sclaviniae, Sclavorum patria itd.*)."

(Translated from Slovenian to English by Matej Vodopivec.) Franc Kos, *Gradivo Za Zgodovino Slovencev v Srednjem Veku*. Druga Knjiga I. 801-1000 (Ljubljana: Leonova družba, 1906), VII.

³⁸ On this topic extensively in: Štih, *The Middle Ages between the Eastern Alps and the Northern Adriatic*, 9–71.

³⁹ Štih and Simoniti, *Na stičišču svetov*, 33.

⁴⁰ For Milko Kos' extensive interpretation of *Conversio* see: Milko Kos, *Conversio Bagoariorum et Carantanorum* (Ljubljana: Znanstveno društvo, 1936).

In light of new findings

In modern Slovene historiography, many prominent voices have emerged, rejecting the Carantanian myth and advocating for a more accurate re-evaluation of primary sources within their proper historical context. The first criticism of the nationalistic approach to Slovene history appeared in the 1980s. At the Conference of Slovene Historians in Celje in 1982, Slovene historian Ferdo Gestrin (1916–1999) and Croatian historian Nada Klaić (1920–1988) argued that searching for the Slovene nation in the early medieval period is a misguided task. Nada Klaić's position met with strong opposition from the Slovene historian Bogo Grafenauer (1916–1995), a staunch proponent of interpreting the history of Carantania as part of Slovene national history. Grafenauer shaped Slovene historical scholarship in the last third of the twentieth century and consolidated the Carantanian myth as a central element of the national past.⁴¹ By the end of the twentieth century, the most prominent critic of the nationalistic view of Slovene history was the historian Sergij Vilfan (1919–1996).⁴² He was especially against the view that the Slovene history was nothing more than suffering of Slovene people under foreign rulers and that the most glorious part of Slovene history was the Carantanian period. Based on his argumentations it is no longer possible to insist on historical concepts of Slovene national history, as they developed at the end of eighteenth and at the beginning of nineteenth century.⁴³ Other historians of the contemporary period of Slovene historiography include, but are not limited to: Peter Štih, Andrej Pleterski (1955), Jernej Kosi (1982), Miha Kosi (1965), and Rok Stergar

⁴¹ Peter Štih, "Pledoaje za drugačen pogled na starejšo slovensko zgodovino," *Nova revija* 307–308/26 (2007): 194–206. This article is of particular interest because it discusses the maps used by historian Milko Kos to construct a visual geographic image of early Slovene history. The most important of these maps, *Slovenci po naselitvi* (The Slovenes after Settlement), depicts the Carantanian "golden age", when Slovenes supposedly occupied a vast territory. It also shows a great loss of Slovene territory due to Germanization. In this article, Peter Štih reflects on the fact that Milko Kos projected modern ideas of nationhood and ethnicity back onto the early medieval past. In doing so, he created the illusion of a vast, unified Slovene territory, even though there is no historical evidence to support such a claim. This image of Carantania should therefore not be understood as historical reality, but rather as part of the broader process of 19th-century national myth-making. For more on these maps, see pp. 203–205 of this article.

⁴² Vilfan's view of nationalistic approaches to Slovene history evolved throughout his career. In one of his most famous works, *Pravna zgodovina Slovenije od naselitve do zloma stare Jugoslavije* (1961), he has not yet fully developed this line of thought. However, in his later writings, towards the end of his career, he clearly articulated the foundations of this new approach to Slovene national history. See for example: Sergij Vilfan, *Zgodovinska pravotvornost in Slovenci* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1996).

⁴³ Peter Štih, "Čas merjen z vatlom in platno s stopinjami": Vilfan kot kritik nekatereh zakoreninjenih predstav o slovenski zgodovini," *Arhivistika, zgodovina, pravo: Vilfanov spominski zbornik*, Nataša Budna Kodrič, ed. *Gradivo in razprave* 30 (Ljubljana: Zgodovinski arhiv Ljubljana, 2007), 178–86.

(1973).⁴⁴ In light of their new research, the Carantanian myth has been systematically deconstructed, and Carantania began to assume its correct place within Slovene historiography.

The deconstruction of such national myths requires a rigorous and methodologically sound approach. First, historians must critically analyse the sources by returning to the original documents, re-evaluating them within their historical context, and identifying anachronistic interpretations. Second, a historiographical analysis is necessary, examining how earlier historians interpreted the past and understanding how the socio-political contexts of different periods shaped historical narratives, often revealing underlying nationalist agendas. Third, historians carefully deconstruct national myths by separating modern political or cultural identity constructs from the actual evidence of early medieval societies, avoiding the projection of modern identities onto the early Middle Ages. Throughout all these steps, historians employ interdisciplinary approaches, collaborating with linguists, archaeologists, anthropologists, art historians, and experts in auxiliary historical sciences. By applying these methods, historians become aware of elements of continuity and discontinuity, gaining a nuanced understanding of historical change, ethnic fluidity, and the evolution of ethnic identity. Lastly, it is crucial to remain attentive to public history and reception, reflecting on how myths are received and utilized in public discourse. This includes analyzing monuments, coins, and parliamentary symbolism. In doing so, scholars bridge the gap between academic research and popular memory.⁴⁵

Conclusion

The Carantanian myth, once central to the construction of Slovene national historiography, has in recent decades been deconstructed by scholars employing critical, interdisciplinary methods. The works of historians such as

⁴⁴ What follows is an overview of the topic of Carantania, the Carantanian myth and of Slovene national identity and myths surrounding it. It is by no means exhaustive, but it should allow the reader to gain a solid understanding of the Carantanian myth, as well as offer a starting point for further research. For Štih's extensive critique of the Carantanian myth see, apart from the already cited works: Peter Štih, "Slovansko, alpskoslovansko ali slovensko?: o jeziku slovanskih prebivalcev prostora med Donavo in Jadranom v srednjem veku (pogled zgodovinarja)," *Zgodovinski časopis* 65/1–2 (2011): 8–51. Another critic of the Carantanian myth is researcher and professor Andrej Pleterski. For his works see: Andrej Pleterski, "Je poljudno – 'znanstvena' diskusija mogoča?: v odgovor Jožku Šavliju in Ivanu Tomažiču, NR, 11. okt. 1985," *Naši razgledi* 34/21 (1985): 634–35; Andrej Pleterski, "Karantanski Slovani in Neslovani," *Arheološki vestnik* 36 (1985): 351–57. For an overview of Slovene national awakening in the 19th century, see: Jernej Kosi, *Kako je nastal slovenski narod: začetki slovenskega nacionalnega gibanja v prvi polovici 19. stoletja*, Zbirka Naprej! (Ljubljana: Sophia, 2013); Jernej Kosi in Rok Stergar, "Kdaj so nastali 'lubi Slovenci'?: o identitetah v prednacionalni dobi in njihovi domnevni vlogi pri nastanku slovenskega Naroda," *Zgodovinski časopis* 70/3–4 (2016): 458–88.

⁴⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Zamišljene skupnosti: o izvoru in širjenju nacionalizma* (Ljubljana: Studia humanitatis, 2007), 59–71, 91–109.

Sergij Vilfan, Peter Štih, Andrej Pleterški, Jernej Kosi, Miha Kosi, and Rok Stergar have decisively moved beyond the nationalist paradigms that shaped earlier interpretations. Through contextual source analysis and heightened historiographical awareness, these scholars have dismantled the notion of Carantania as a proto-Slovene state, instead presenting it as one of many fluid polities with polyethnic roots in the early medieval Alpine region.

And yet, despite this academic re-evaluation, the Carantanian myth continues to exert a powerful hold over Slovene collective memory. It endures in political discourse, public rituals, religious iconography, and national symbolism. This testifies to the myth's deep cultural entrenchment. This coexistence of critical historiography and persistent popular myth reveals a striking dichotomy: while professional historians rejected nationalist teleologies, the legacy of those earlier narratives remains embedded in the public imagination.

Recognizing this tension is essential. The case of Carantania exemplifies how national myths, even when intellectually dismantled, can live on as emotionally resonant frameworks that shape identity and memory. Rather than erasing these myths, contemporary historiography must continue to engage with them critically, yet empathetically, as part of a broader reflection on the role of the past in shaping modern national consciousness.

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Graphic attachments

Image 1. Peoples in the Eastern Alpine Region in the 7th and 8th Centuries. [Source: Peter Štih et al. *Na obeh straneh Alp: slovensko-avstrijska zgodovina* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 2025), 28; author of the map: Mateja Rihtarič].

Image 2. The symbols of Carantania used in modern-day Slovenia: 1. Carantanian pant-

her [photo: <https://seeklogo.com/vector-logo/26086/carantanian-panther> (accessed April 29, 2025)]; 2. Main doors of St. Nicholas' Cathedral in Ljubljana (photo: Matej Vodopivec); 3. Detail of the prince's stone on the main doors of St. Nicholas' cathedral (photo: Matej Vodopivec); 4. Prince's stone on two-cent euro coin in Slovenia [photo: <https://en.numista.com/catalogue/pieces237.html> (accessed April 29, 2025)]; 5. Fresco number two in the lobby of the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia (source: © ZRC SAZU, Umetnostnozgodovinski inštitut Franceta Steleta, photo: Andrej Furlan).

Između mita i povijesti: Karantansko naslijeđe – (zlo)upotreba karantanskog mita u slovenskoj historiografiji

Sažetak:

Ovaj rad tematizira (zlo)upotrebu karantanskog mita u slovenskoj historiografiji kao ključan element u izgradnji slovenskog nacionalnog identiteta. Rad pruža kritičku i sistematsku analizu rane slovenske historiografije. Budući da je karantanski mit, temeljen na idejama Johanna Gottfrieda Herdera (1744–1803) o jeziku, kulturi i nacionalnosti, posebnu važnost stekao tijekom razdoblja romantičarskog nacionalizma u 19. stoljeću, posebna se pozornost obraća radu povjesničara i dramatičara Antona Tomaža Linhart (1756–1795), kao i radovima dvojice povjesničara: Franca Kosa (1853–1924) i njegovog sina Milka Kosa (1892–1972). Njihova izdanja, prijevodi i interpretacije srednjovjekovnih izvora odigrali su ključnu ulogu u oblikovanju dvadesetostoljetne slovenske historijske misli. U radu se potom uspoređuju njihove interpretacije s interpretacijama suvremenih povjesničara koji su dekonstruirali ovaj mit. Odabirom nekolicine studija slučaja prikazano je na koji način karantanski mit nastavlja imati utjecaj na slovensku političku i religijsku ikonografiju, ponajprije zbog svoje dugotrajne ukorijenjenosti u nacionalnim povijesnim narativima. Rad završava promišljanjem o širim izazovima interpretacije srednjovjekovnih izvora izvan nacionalnih okvira i nastoji potaknuti daljnje akademsko bavljenje složenim međudnosom mita, povijesti i nacionalnog identiteta.

Ključne riječi: Karantanija, karantanski mit, Anton Tomaž Linhart, Franc Kos, Milko Kos, slovenska historiografija, politička ikonografija

Pro Tempore

ČASOPIS STUDENATA POVIJESTI BROJ 20 2025.

Pro Tempore

Časopis studenata povijesti,
godina XX, broj 20, 2025.

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Oblikovanje
FF Press

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Odsjek za povijest Filozofskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu

Tisak
d. o. o. Studio moderna

Naklada
Tiskano u 75 primjeraka.

ISSN: 1334-8302

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Izdavanje ovog časopisa finansijski je omogućeno:

sredstvima koja je ustupio Odsjek za povijest Filozofskog fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu

sredstvima dobivenim na Natječaju za studentske programe Studentskog zbora Sveučilišta u Zagrebu

Redakcija časopisa Pro tempore im iskreno zahvaljuje na finansijskoj podršci.

Časopis se ne naplaćuje.

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