CHAPTER THREE

ON THE MODERN (MIS)UNDERSTANDING OF OLD HISTORY IN THE CASE OF THE ENTHRONEMENT OF THE CARINTHIAN DUKES

In late February 2005, the then new Slovene Minister of Education, Milan Zver, suggested in one of his first interviews that one of the “elements of Slovene history which have been unjustly ignored” and which “students taking A-levels should know” was the “importance of the Carantanian oath to the development of western democracies,” to which “even president Clinton referred when he visited our country.”

The “Carantanian oath” the minister obviously had in mind was the enthronement of the Carantanian princes or Carinthian dukes, which by way of Jean Bodin’s (1530–1596) writings on the Republic (“Les six livres de la Republique,” 1576) entered the “contractual theory” on the origin of the state, serving as an example of the contractual transfer of sovereignty from the people to the monarch. The passage on the enthronement in Bodin’s classical work became topical again in the late 1960s, when the Slovene American Joseph (Josip) Felicijan, who studied history in Ljubljana and emigrated in 1945, discovered that the American president Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) had among others marked the page (p. 129) in his copy of Bodin’s book (the 1580 edition) which addresses the enthronement of the dukes of Carinthia. Based on this detail, Felicijan came to the conclusion that the Carinthian enthronement should be considered as one of the sources of the American Declaration of Independence from 1776, in whose first section Jefferson addressed the equality of people and the inalienability of their basic rights. The spiritual foundations of American (and consequently global) democracy thus included the enthronement of the Carantanian princes/Carinthian dukes, and this was the Slovene contribution to the development of western democracies to which the minister referred in his interview. There is no reason to criticise the

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1 Zver M., Nimamo ne neumnih otrok ne slabih šol (interview), in (newspaper) Dnevnik 26. 2. 2005, 30.
2 Felicijan 1967.
minister, whose interview I use here merely as a recent example illustrating the issue that will be discussed below, since he only quoted an idea that prevails among a segment of the public and is also part of the self-image of the Slovenes.

What is (or could be) more meaningful is that the interviewee did not make the above statement as citizen Milan Zver, but as the Minister of Education and Sport of the government of the Republic of Slovenia, and that this government judged that the theme should be included in the history curriculum, because history “shapes the national identity more than anything else.” And since a minister has of course the power and leverage to implement his opinion, we must ask ourselves whether this theme really belongs in the history curricula? Can we really consider the enthronement of the Carantanian princes (or, more accurately, the enthronement of the later dukes of Carinthia, the only version of which we have some detailed knowledge) an important Slovene contribution to global democracy? The question is indeed whether the society of the Carantanians, who are in simplified and generalised terms identified straightforward as Slovenes, was really structured in such a unique democratic way (expressed by the enthronement) that it had a no less than global impact and significance by way of its reception in the modern age? Or is all this rather a misunderstanding of a ceremony and its related literary tradition, an understanding projecting modern terms (or at least modern contents of albeit ancient terms), modern notions, institutions, and values into a distant past, constructing rather than reconstructing this history? The question then is whether there is any merit to the notion quoted by the minister, or is it just “historical gossip” that the Carantanians/Slovenes influenced the American and consequently global democracy?

3 It suffices to have a look at the titles or contents of some syntheses of old Slovene history which refer straightforward to the “arrival and settlement of the Slovenes in the Alpine lands” in the Early Middle Ages (Gruden 1912), the “arrival of the Slovenes” and the “state of the Carantanian Slovenes” (Kos M. 1955), or the history of the Slovene nation “from settlement onwards,” “Samo’s state and the state of the Carantanian Slovenes” (Grafenauer 1978a), suggesting no less than that the Slovenes settled the Alpine-Adriatic region as a fully formed identity community. That this amounts to (subconscious) retrograde nationalisation of history and constructing the history of modern nations in periods when they did not yet exist, is addressed in Štih 2005, p. 105–132.

4 On the general problem or phenomenon of the past received primarily at the mythological level, see Flacke 2001; Graus 2002, 49 ff.