When speaking about the “Alpine Slavs” and their relations with their neighbours, we should bear in mind that the term was coined by modern historiography and was not derived from the historical sources.¹ It refers to the Slavs who, in the late 6th and early 7th centuries, settled the basins of the rivers of the Eastern Alps, the most important of which were Drava, Mura, Enns, Sava, Savinja, and Soča (Isonzo). In Late Antiquity, the core of this area belonged to Noricum Mediterraneum and further included the southern part of Noricum Ripense, the western part of Pannonia Savia, and the eastern part of Italy’s Tenth Region – Venetia and Istria. In the Early Middle Ages, the Roman provincial names were replaced with new names, and the described area was largely known under the names of Carantania and Carniola, as well as Friuli. These represented different politically organized territories.² “Alpine Slavs” is therefore a predominantly geographical term, because these Slavs never formed a politically, legally, or ethnically unitary complex in the sense of developing into a separate people with an individual identity.

We know next to nothing about the settlement of the Slavs in the Eastern Alps and pre-Alpine region.³ The question of how this region turned Slavic is therefore as much an enigma as the phenomenon that an enormous area, extending from the Baltic to the Aegean Sea and from the Elbe river to the Russian steppes, was Slavicised within an amazingly short period.⁴ Before the last decade of the 6th century there is no mention at all of Slavs in the Eastern Alps. At that time, they were

³ For recent literature, see Štih 1999a, p. 79 ff.; Szameit 2000, 71 ff. (with different accents), Szameit 2000a, 507 ff., especially 516 ff.
⁴ For a summary of current reflections and a presentation of models about the issue of the Slavic expansion in historiography, see Pohl 2002, 201 ff. Two contemporary monographs – very different in concept and content – dealing with the issues of the Early Slavs should be mentioned here: Barford 2001; Curta 2001.
probably already fighting the Bavarians in the Upper Drava Valley and penetrating into Italy across Istria or the Karst. The first reports – all from Italy – about the Slavs of the wider Eastern Alps, stem from letters by Pope Gregory the Great and Paul the Deacon’s History of the Lombards, and refer to the relations of the Slavs with their western neighbours: the Bavarians in the northwest, the Lombards of Friuli and the Roman(ised) population of Byzantine Istria in the southwest. The confrontations with these peoples decided the formation of the western border of the Slavic settlement territory in the Eastern Alps and pre-Alpine region. These conflicts also dominated the relationships of the Slavs with their neighbours in the early 7th century. Presumably around 610, the Slavs once more defeated the Bavarians near Aguntum at the upper Drava in what is today East Tyrol; in the south, and somewhat later, the Lombards succeeded in subjecting the Slavs of Val Canale, which connects Friuli with Carinthia. Those Slavs were to pay a special tribute, *pensio*, to the Lombard duke in Cividale del Friuli for over a century.

The Slavic settlement area in the Eastern Alps was incorporated – with the exception of the sparse Slavic population that fell under Byzantine rule in Istria or Lombard rule in Friuli – into the Avar supra-regional polity that had its centre in Pannonia. It was part of Avaria, and the Avars – ruled by a khagan – were their political lords and had a decisive impact on the relations the subjected Slavs had with their western neighbours. The Avar khagan had already intervened decisively in the Slavic-Bavarian clashes around 595, when the Bavarians suffered losses in the range of a tribal army. The khagan similarly determined the conditions at the border with Italy where the Avars, assisted by Slavs, laid waste to Byzantine Istria; by burning down Cividale del Friuli in 611 they most likely lent a helping hand to their ally, the Lombard King Agilulf, against the immoderately independent duke of Friuli, Gisulf II, who met with his death on this occasion. The struggle for control over the first and most important Lombard duchy

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5 Gregorii I Papae registrum epistolarum 2, IX, no. 154, X, no. 15; Paulus Diaconus, Historia Langobardorum IV 7, 10.
6 Wolfram 1995a, 78 ff.
7 Krahwinkler 2000a, 58 ff.
8 Pohl 1988, 94 ff.
9 Wolfram 1995a, 78.
10 Štih 2001b, 12 ff.