CHAPTER TEN

THE EARLY MEDIEVAL “STATE” AND THE TRIBAL FORMATIONS IN THE SLAVIC SETTLEMENT AREA OF THE EASTERN ALPS

Terminological Issues

Every attempt to establish which early medieval political formations were “states,” and which criteria justify the use of that term, runs into the same basic problem and that is the definition of an early medieval state. Whoever thinks that it will be easy to find the answer to this question in the quite extensive scientific literature produced by the Slovene and wider former Yugoslav historiography, which researched early medieval Slavic “states,” is in for an unpleasant surprise. These issues were indeed discussed as if the definition of an early medieval state was self-evident and the question itself did not exist at all. Nada Klaić was one of the rare historians who, as early or as late as in 1971, pointed out that Yugoslav historiography had addressed neither the issue of the origin of the “state” nor the definition of the term, even though there had been no lack of opportunities or motives.¹ Her words were however largely ignored. Writing in 1976 on the issue of state formation among the Southern Slavs during the Middle Ages, Ivan Beuc, to quote but one example, dealt with the problem of defining an early medieval state in a single sentence in a footnote, stating that already Friedrich Engels (!) had provided general instructions on how to identify the existence of a medieval state in “The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State.”² Beuc not even deemed it necessary to explain to the reader that Engels, and with him historical materialism as a whole, saw the state as a means of coercion in the hands of the ruling class to defend itself against the ruled, or as an apparatus for ruling that was alienated from human society when it split into irreconcilable antagonisms.³ According to this definition, social stratification is the

¹ Klaić 1971, 142 and note 2.
² Beuc 1976, 65.
³ A formulation of the state from as late as 1988 in Bibič 1988, 384.
conditio sine qua non of every state, and this was not a new finding; Marxist theory saw the causes for social stratification in the economic, internal development of the individual social community. Based on this thesis, the Polish historian Łowmiański elaborated criteria that could be used to establish whether a society had already made the transition from a tribal union to a higher quality – a state.4

These were the theoretical premises used in Slovenia after the Second World War to re-evaluate the oldest Slovene history, that of Carantania.5 The reinterpretation of (largely) previously known historical sources sought to demonstrate that the development of Carantania was for the most part nothing but a matter of the internal organic development of its society, and it was among others claimed that “the emergence of a common territorial name (by which is meant Carantaniens (!) and not Carantania, note P. Š.), and not a tribal name, was undoubtedly connected with the lordship of the Carantanian prince over the entire territory of the principality, thus providing evidence that the tribal union was already changing into a firmer state organisation.”6 But this conclusion is false because “Carantanians” was not a territorial name, but a tribal one, explicitly attested in contemporary sources.7 The emergence of this name cannot be interpreted in the sense that a tribal union was changing into a state organisation, but rather that the new name resulted from a specific ethnogenetic process – the formation of the tribe of the Carantanians. And because early medieval tribes (gentes) were not communities of shared origin, but in principle poly-ethnic communities – whether Slavic, Germanic, or steppe nomadic – which were not connected into entities by blood relationship, but by

4 Łowmiański 1963, 14–21. The criteria are: hereditary princely lordship, the existence of a princely military force separate from the army of the people, and the existence of public taxes on which the prince himself decided, not the people's assembly. According to Łowmiański, these criteria testify to the existence of state power in the hands of the prince and separate from the tribal organs, reflected as the result of social stratification and the separation of the ruling class from the common members of the tribe. Cf. Grafenauer 1964, 220 and note 37.


7 E.g. Slavorum gens in Carnuntum, quod corrupte vocitant Carantanun (Paulus Diaconus, Historia Langobardorum V, 22); Samo nomine quidam Slavus manens in Quarantaniis fuit dum gentis illius (Conversio Bagaroiorum et Carantanorum, c. 4); Baaz de genere Carantania Schlauniorum (TF 1, no. 589).