

RURAL LANDSCAPES IN SLOVENIA

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A small country in Central Europe, Slovenia nevertheless offers a variety of landscapes, and their diversity is remarkable relative to the size of the country. For natural geographical elements, the decisive factor was its location at the junction of major European landscape units, and for social geography elements, its location at the junction of different cultural spaces: Germanic, Romanic, Hungarian, and Slavic.

Slovenia's cultural landscapes are distinguished by their diversity, their incorporation in the natural environment, and high ecological and cultural-emotional value. The basic appearance of the landscapes was created in the Middle Ages, and this legacy is still quite evident. Economic and social developments in recent decades have triggered rapid changes in the appearance and function of the landscapes, especially the rural ones on which this article is focused. Rural landscapes comprise the greater part of Slovenia since built-up areas cover less than five percent of its surface and only the capital city of Ljubljana has a population over 100,000 inhabitants.

The Slovene language has two terms for »landscape«: »*pokrajina*« and »*krajina*«. A »*pokrajina*« is a spatial unit, part of the earth's surface, a region, a complex of landscape elements, primarily a concept taken from science, while »*krajina*« is the external appearance, aspect, landscape painting, physiognomy, primarily a concept taken from art. Thus, for example, geographers use the term »*pokrajina*« while landscape architects use the term »*krajina*«, even though they mean the same thing with the two expressions (Perko 1998). A landscape painter is a »*krajinar*« in the Slovene language, his painting is a »*krajina*«, and a landscape architect is a »*krajinski arhitekt*«, while the parts of Slovene territory, for example, the Julian Alps or Kras, are called »*pokrajina*«.

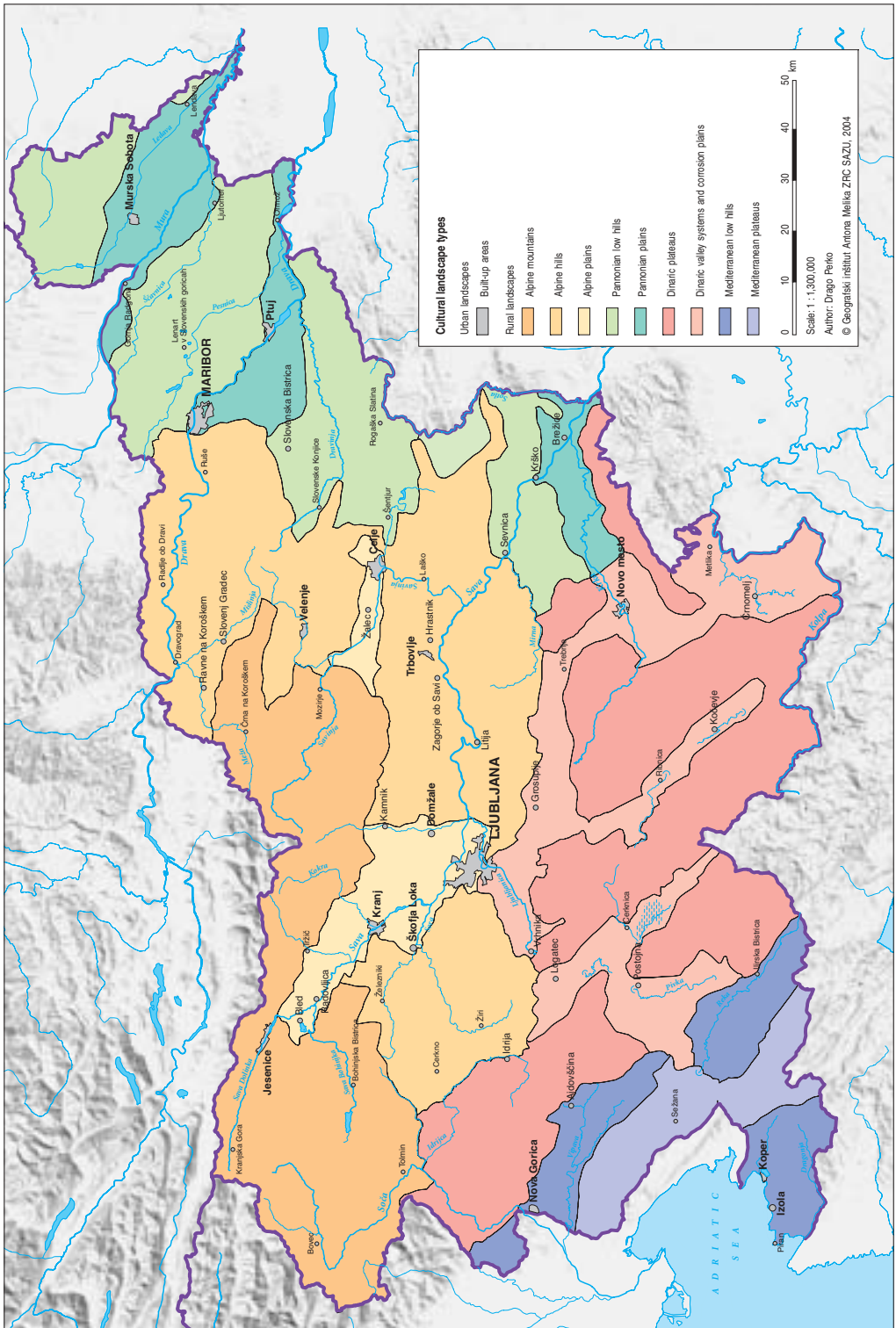
Landscape types and regions

The main natural characteristics of Slovenia's landscapes are determined by its location at the junction of the Alps, the Pannonian plain, the Dinaric Mountains, and the Mediterranean. We can distinguish four basic landscape types and nine landscape subtypes. The basic types are Alpine, Pannonian, Dinaric, and Mediterranean landscapes, while the subtypes are Alpine mountains, Alpine hills, Alpine plains, Pannonian low hills, Pannonian plains, Dinaric plateaus, Dinaric valleys or corrosion plains, Mediterranean low hills, and Mediterranean plateaus (Perko 1998; Urbanc 2002).

Favourable natural conditions foster more rapid economic and social development and with it the intensive shaping and changing of the cultural landscape; unfavourable natural conditions limit human activity, life, and the spending of leisure time.

Historical heritage of landscape development

Slovenia's location at the junction of the Germanic, Slavic, Romanic, and Hungarian cultural spaces and the several millenniums of human settlement in its territory left deep traces on the landscape. The period of medieval colonization was particularly significant since during that time the landscape acquired its most basic features, which have been preserved to the present day with only minor changes. The legacy of this period is particularly evident in the shape and arrangement of settlements and the dis-



◀ *Figure 1: Cultural landscape types in Slovenia.*

tribution of cultivated fields. Various state formations (Austria-Hungary, Yugoslavia, etc.), the administrative measures linked with them, and the level of economic development reshaped natural landscapes into cultural landscapes. We should also mention the recent years since independence during which extremely rapid and profound changes have taken place due to the changed economic and social situation.

Rural landscapes and their elements that are today the subject of the greatest admiration (isolated farms settlements high in the mountains, the varied forms of minute land division) are often the result of poverty or economic stagnation. The farmhouses characteristic of individual landscapes were constructed according to the existing level of technological development and were adapted to the different needs of different people. Climate conditions also influenced the development of the landscape. At the end of the Middle Ages, winegrowing disappeared completely in Gorenjska (northwestern Slovenia) because the climate grew colder. Today, only local site names and place names testify to its existence (Blaznik 1970). The karst region is a typical example of the dilemmas linked to a cultural landscape. The Austrian authorities encouraged the deforestation of the karst region in the 18th and 19th centuries, an archetypal devaluation of a natural environment when the marvelous forests were replaced by the barren karst landscape (Gašperšič 1995). However, it was precisely this barren karst landscape that not only carried the glories of karst phenomena into the world but also was the foundation for the formation of a unique cultural landscape. Reforestation in this case would mean the loss of natural and cultural values.

The visual appearance of and changes to the cultural landscape are decisively dependent on the characteristics and development of agricultural production. This means that the concern for the cultural



Figure 2: Technological developments greatly reduced the usefulness of the kozolec, which has become merely an ethnographic relict of past agriculture and is now threatened with extinction (photography Mimi Urbanc).



Figure 3: The original folk art that appears on the front panels of beehives is linked to beekeeping, a traditional branch of Slovene agriculture (photography Jerneja Fridl).



Figure 4: Ostrnice are thinner tree trunks with branches pushed into the ground on which hay is still dried in some Dinaric regions (photography Aleš Smrekar).



Figure 5: Stone walls that reflect the toil of past generations are collapsing in many areas due to the abandonment of farming and the subsequent overgrowth (photography Mimi Urbanc).

landscape is first and foremost connected with the agricultural policy of the government. From this viewpoint, the period following World War II must be mentioned in particular since it was marked by a negative attitude toward the farmer as a private producer and by measures regarding maximum land ownership due to which the average size of farms decreased. Only a small proportion of farmers were able to carry out modernization, not to mention that the proportion of rural population began to decrease rapidly. Simultaneously, a special class of people emerged: part-time farmers who sought extra income working in nearby factories. These people deserve credit that the countryside lived on and developed. These factors, however, prevented the normal development of Slovene agriculture (Klemenčič 1991), which – as a positive consequence – is reflected in the preservation of the particular cultural landscapes with which Slovenes are identified. Thus, administrative and political measures helped preserve Slovenia's cultural landscapes. The negative side of agriculture lagging behind other economic and social progress is evident in the abandoning of farmland, the aging of the rural population, the further fragmentation of land, the small size of farms, and old-fashioned farming methods.

Recent development and future prospects

In recent decades, a *laissez-faire* approach began to appear that will continue, particularly after inclusion in the European Union. Free market policies will further accelerate the differentiation of the countryside, which is already acquiring clear outlines. In naturally more advantageous regions, intensive farming with large-scale cultivation is developing that requires large consolidated surface areas without interfering elements (e. g., hedges, free-standing trees, the traditional *kozolec* or hayrack). At the same time, the valleys and basins are centers of civilization where numerous activities intertwine and various users of the space compete with each other. First class agricultural land is disappearing due to

expressways and the territorial growth of cities. Rural settlements are acquiring the status of suburbs, and the countryside as a whole is acquiring a different role since it is becoming a place of residence and recreation for the non-farming population. The boundaries between cities and the countryside are already quite indistinct in Slovenia. At the same time, the cultural landscape in the greater part of Slovenia is disintegrating, primarily in the low-hill and hill regions (Gabrovec, Kladnik 1997). A largely aging population remains on the farms, who are emotionally bound to the land and for the moment still maintain the appearance and function of the landscape with their work. However, further abandonment of agricultural areas is to be expected in future since there are no young people except in areas closer to cities, and these no longer cultivate the land because their education allows them to work in better-paid non-farming jobs. The complete liberalization of the agricultural market would cause a considerable decrease in the number of farms and the gradual emptying of low-hill and remote regions and thus the loss of the identity of the countryside.

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