

# WHAT IMAGES OF OXEN CAN TELL US

## Metaphorical meanings and everyday working practices

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### Introduction

Although it seems that researchers from the humanities interested in working animals pay far more attention to the horse than the ox,<sup>1</sup> there are individuals who have made some important observations about the significance of oxen in human history. For example, in her recent contribution on harnessing oxen using two basic forms of yoke,<sup>2</sup> Cozette Griffin-Kremer (2007: 66) describes these draught animals which, from the time when they were first domesticated and worked until they disappeared from farms as a result of mechanisation, have used their harnessed energy and strength to pull tree trunks and rocks, as well as powering various tools, equipment and transport devices – from ards, ploughs, carts and sledges to threshing machines and mills – as "a wonderful machine that transformed the surface of the earth". In his book *Horses, Oxen and Technological Innovation* John Langdon (1986: 8) writes that, apart from mules and donkeys, "oxen carried all the burden for ploughing and hauling in ancient times". Rolf Minhorst (1990: 37), the author of a detailed historical study of draught animals in Germany,<sup>3</sup> observes that "the draught ox had revolutionised the agriculture of the Neolithic period" and that "cattle husbandry in Europe has determined our cultural development from the very beginning". Quite a number of fundamental cultural values have also been identified in relation to attitudes to domesticated animals on other continents. Relevant anthropological studies have identified syntagms such as the African "cattle complex" (Campbell 2005: 97; cf. Evans-Pritchard 1940, 1950). And a very topical observation was made by one of the prime movers of Slovene ethnology, Vilko Novak, who in 1961 wrote that "much more than arable farming, everyday dealings with domesticated

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<sup>1</sup> For example, François Sigaut (1998: 1082), French expert in the history and anthropology of agrarian techniques, wrote that "the ox – in spite of its historical importance, which is no less than that of the horse – has disappeared, without comment" or at least not in sufficient depth.

<sup>2</sup> This appeared in the proceedings of the study conference *Les bovins: de la domestication à l'élevage* (2006). In France over the last fifteen years quite a number of texts have been devoted to the working ox. They have appeared in particular in two publications – the proceedings of two study conferences with the title *Les boeufs au travail* (1997, 1998) (Smerdel 2009: 38).

<sup>3</sup> Doctoral thesis not yet available on interlibrary loan.

animals of every kind shapes and marks the work, thought processes and speech of those engaged in farming" (Smerdel 2005: 342; cf. Novak 1961).

When during my past research work I began to appreciate the essence of man's cohabitation with the ox – the extent of their quiet, humble indispensability and the way their significance was integrated into the structure of everyday farming life – it led me to explore the relationship between man and ox in terms of the continuity of everyday working practices, or the cultural aspects of working oxen within agrarian civilisation. My research work was comparative, but based on Slovene material – in manuscript form or printed, pictorial and comparative material sources, literature and the findings of field work.

My fieldwork trips (in 2001, 2003, 2004, 2006 and particularly 2007) involved recording testimony on oxen in farming families and village communities; on the sociable nature of some basic farming tasks – ploughing, harrowing, towing and driving; on castration, shoeing, care, feeding and pasturing; on ox-drivers and the naming of oxen; on training, harnessing and communicating with working oxen; on diseases and treatments; on choosing new oxen and selling those that had "served their time"... A testimony that speaks convincingly of their former significance.

For in Slovene ethnic areas, right up until the 1960s, the main working animal which was part of a many centuries-long natural and cultural annual cycle, and with which man had to communicate during the working process, was the ox. That was the case in most Slovene regions – particularly in hilly and mountainous areas, where the ploughing of steep land can hardly be imagined without them – and on the majority of the most numerous, medium-sized farms. Where oxen were used, smaller farms usually had one, medium-sized farms a pair of oxen, and large farms two or three pairs. Elsewhere, for instance in the low-lying villages around Pivka, it was said that the "rich ones" worked with horses, the "middle ones" with oxen and that the poor harnessed cows (Smerdel 2005: 357). In poor villages in Slovene Istria, where there was "*mižèrija*" and heavy clay soil that could not be ploughed with horses or donkeys, larger farms has a pair of oxen, some had a donkey or two, but on the poorest farms they lacked even that. It is quite widely thought that in the Slovene countryside horses were a status symbol, a recognised mark of a more prosperous farmer and the social dream of the poor one. But during research into farmers and draught animals, in addition to village environments and individuals within them who rated most highly the horse and its capacity for work, there also emerged some real "ox zones". Within them "oxen were like gold", they

literally "made bread" for their masters, oxen were a measure of wealth and of a dowry, and care for their health was often greater than that for human members of the farm community (Smerdel 2005: 375; 2007: 141, 147). On many Slovene farms they were regarded as members of the family, who found their place in family photo albums or in framed photographs hanging in visible places in the main living quarters of the farm.

The former role of oxen in everyday life and culture is also eloquently attested by surnames such as Volavc, Volavšek, Volarič, Voler (*vol* is Slovene for ox, tr. note), as well as by geographical names scattered across Slovenia – Volavlje, Volarija, Volovljek, Podvolovljek, Volovnik, Volavče, Volovja reber. And how charmingly present are oxen even today – not only in the village but also the urban environment – in various sayings that reveal their previous currency and meaning: "hungry enough to eat an ox", "work like an ox", "as tired as an ox" and so on (Smerdel 2005: 342).

In addition to material and social elements, an exciting contribution to uncovering the nature of the relationship between man and ox is undoubtedly made by spiritual cultural sources – including not only literature and folklore but also the visual arts. For the story of the cohabitation of man and ox in recorded history begins with the latter: with the artistic element or sign of *Aleph*, the first sign of the Hebrew alphabet, from which originates the Greek *alpha* and the Latin *A*. In other words, with the symbol that in Semitic languages primarily meant *ox* or *cattle*, also symbolising this through the form of a head with horns (Kallir 1961: 19).

But before we take a stroll through a virtual collection of Slovene visual sources or works of art from the Slovene ethnic space in which oxen can be seen (plus some examples from elsewhere for purposes of comparison), and we try to analyse what they tell us, it is essential, because of the need to understand specific historical phenomena, to first briefly summarise – on the basis of various Slovene sources and literature – certain findings about the history of the relationship between man and ox (or cattle in general) in Slovene ethnic areas.

### **A short historical overview of the cohabitation of man and ox in Slovene lands**

A suitable place to begin is the findings of bones and cattle skulls (the latter in the Slovene National Museum), which confirm that in pre-Roman times the local population bred and used for work medium-sized shorthorn, short-headed cattle of the breeds *Bos primigenius brachyceros*, *brachycephalus*. It is thought by some that the Slovenes brought with them

when they settled the area the light, single-coloured longhorn (*megaceros*) cattle kept by Huns and Slavic tribes on the steppes, and by others that they were adopted in the Noric Alps, where they had been introduced by the Romans.<sup>4</sup> And it was these Noric cattle that became the basis for the light-coloured cross-bred cattle in the Eastern Alps, such as the silver-white or yellow-brown Old Carniolan breeds, which until recent decades were known as "*plavke*" (blonds).<sup>5</sup> (Perhaps this old breed or its later descendants, or the South Styrian light-coloured breed, can also be discerned in Lower Carniola, the Kozjansko area and around Pivka in the names for oxen Plávc and Plávček.)<sup>6</sup>

So it seems that in Slovene areas, until the second half of the 19th century, i.e. until the agricultural associations became very active (and the activity of fattening and trading oxen appeared), there was no more systematic cross-breeding; "everything was crossed with everything else. Farmers divided their stock only by colour, not by breed" (Britovšek 1964: 137–138). Thus on peasant land as well as landowners' estates there were mainly small, weak cattle, with the worst situation prevailing in Lower Carniola and Inner Carniola (*ibid.*), and it is possible to trace this situation back via archive resources – mainly the legacy inventories of local manors, but also land registers and other documents – to the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. For example, as far as Carniola was concerned, "although cattle were numerous, they were small, very thin and weak, and compared to neighbouring provinces of little real value" (Britovšek 1964: 130–132). Individual manors would raise 30 to 40 head of cattle, while on tenants' properties, on full-size or half-size farms (15 to 20 hectares) in Upper Carniola there would be on average 5 to 6, and in Lower and Inner Carniola 3 to 5. And for the latter two it is also reported that, because of recurring infectious diseases, there was "a real

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<sup>4</sup> Novak 1970: 378. For example, Raepsaet (2002: 40-41) writes that, particularly in Roman times, there were intensive efforts at selection and improvement of breeds. He cites Columella, who counted four in Italy. And he mentions "large oxen" or large cattle that the Romans produced by careful cross-breeding for weight and height, also in the provinces, where this had a strong influence on domestic cattle breeding, in some places leading to the disappearance of lighter, smaller local breeds.

<sup>5</sup> Novak (*ibid.*) states that until the second half of the 19th century in Slovene areas there prevailed light, single-coloured cattle and then – under the influence of farming associations – new breeds were deliberately introduced: Simmental cattle around Ljubljana and especially on the plains known as Dravsko polje and Mursko polje, as well as in the Prekmurje region; Pinzgauer cattle in the Gorizia and Tolmin areas, and sometimes Dravsko polje, Mursko polje and Prekmurje – partly as the pedigree remnants of domestic Noric breeds; imported cattle from the Mur Valley; the South Styrian breed of light-coloured cattle in the central part of Styria and Lower Carniola; and so on. (Novak 1970: 387-388). Today in Slovenia there are brown-and-white cattle that are held to be an autochthonous Slovene breed (derived from autochthonous single-coloured Bohinj cattle, enriched with the Pinzgauer breed) and two "traditional" Slovene breeds – spotted and Slovene brown cattle (the first derived from the population of Swiss Simmental cattle from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, while the second is the result of almost a century of selective breeding, from 1904, with pedigree stock that came to Slovenia from Switzerland and Austria, which are still known among breeders under the name Montafon cattle, and which are grey to dark brown). (Čepon et al 2002: 14-16).

<sup>6</sup> Archive of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, field notes and the field notes of Inja Smerdel (I. S.), 2001.

shortage of draught animals", due to which local lords were forced to lend animals to their serfs "if they wanted the land to be worked and feudal obligations met" (ibid.). This led to a special form of leasing of livestock (*Zinnsvieh* or "tax cattle") – mainly draught animals – in which the serf had to pay the owner a kind of duty. In Slovene lands this practice, which those involved referred to as "iron cattle", was particularly widespread, and as early as 1525 its abolition was recommended, as it burdened farmers or their heirs with the payment of "perpetual duties", which did not end even with the death of the animal (ibid.), and the majority of these leased animals were most probably oxen. But even in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century it is reported that on most of the feudal estates in Lower Carniola and many estates in Inner Carniola there prevailed leased stock, with most of them being oxen. With regard to the latter, a particularly eloquent testimony is offered by the complaints of Lower Carniolan and Inner Carniolan owners and stewards of manors to the court rectification commission, which report that the great majority of serfs either only partly carry out, or even fail to carry out, the *corvée* involving draught animals prescribed in the land register.<sup>7</sup> Due to a lack of draught animals, and because the lord often forbade peasants to use exhausted leased animals, estates were compelled to rear more oxen if they wanted the land to be worked. For ploughing usually three to four pairs of oxen were used, but on clay soil even as many as six pairs;<sup>8</sup> and where there was a shortage of oxen, then cows would also be harnessed. (Due to exhaustion and poor feed these were then worse milkers; the consequence was sterility and lack of stock; Britovšek 1964: 133–134).

The problems arising from the difficult lives of the rural population in feudal times and the dependence on domestic cattle, especially oxen, that conditioned almost everything else, is also strongly reflected in the Slovene oral tradition: for example, written Upper and Lower Carniolan variations of songs and the fairy-tale story of *The Villein's Little Oxen* tempt us to conclude that they preserve the memory of the harsh institution of leased cattle.<sup>9</sup> And one

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<sup>7</sup> Draught and carting *corvée* in Slovene lands are recorded in older, medieval land registers (cf. numerous references in Kos 1954).

<sup>8</sup> According to data from the Salzburg archbishopric land register for the Brežice estate for 1448, the heavy medieval wooden plough, which was gradually replacing the older ard (which demanded significantly fewer draught animals), called for three pairs of oxen and according to some 18<sup>th</sup> century data as many as five pairs. A reduction in the number of draught animals was enabled only by the introduction of the metal plough, which began to be produced industrially in the Austrian monarchy from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onwards (cf. Grafenauer 1970: 215-216). But many individuals recall beginning to use them only in the 1930s, between the two World Wars.

<sup>9</sup> When a cow has two ox calves, both with silver hooves and golden horns, or vice versa, the lord finds out and will use any means possible to have them handed over. But in the fairy tale the two little oxen help their farmer (in most versions St. Martin) to trick the lord and thus to remain as his irreplaceable helpmates (In *Slovenske ljudske pesmi* 3 – Slovene Folk Songs 3, 339-346; Smerdel 2005: 350)

other transfer from the material to the spiritual: in centuries past there must have reigned among the Slovene farming population an overwhelming fear of recurring infectious diseases,<sup>10</sup> the consequence of which was the loss of cattle and thus the cornerstone of the life of the farmer and his family. This fear was reflected in beliefs and consequently in visual images: in intercessions for health to specific saints; in votive pictures showing a kneeling farmer and cattle as the subject of the request; and in figural votives in the form of a cow, a cow with a calf, an ox, or a pair of yoked oxen. The number of votive images of supplication or thanksgiving relating to cattle in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is undeniable testimony to the fact that, at least at that time, for the Slovene farming population the loss of cattle was the worst possible calamity. People "usually have more compassion at the death of cattle than when a person dies" is one comment recorded in 1808 (Makarovič 1991: 28).

The poor state of oxen in Slovene fields before the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was in contrast to the lively trade in oxen and their use for carting on Slovene roads. Even in the 14<sup>th</sup> century there was already a flourishing trade, with its cycles dependent on the seasonal nature of farm work, and in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, for example, peasant traders were permitted to purchase livestock in Hungary, Ptuj, Radgona, Celje or the Slovene March – oxen, pigs, horses and sheep – and drive them to Carniola for sale there. Further to the west, in what we now know as Italy, they could export only livestock raised on their own farms (Kosi 1998: 141). This "Ljubljana" or "Karst road", a transport artery between Hungary and Italy, was the most important medieval route across Slovene territory, and in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries it represented, even on a European level, an important trade route. It was also one of the most important livestock routes, primarily towards Venice; the export along it of livestock from Hungary to "German lands" is mentioned as early as in the town privileges for Varaždin (now in Croatia) from 1209. From around 1478, for example, data on the Emperor's income from the levy on the trade in livestock across Carniola suggest that the transit of 9000 oxen was expected; the data for Ljubljana for 1544 show that individual traders drove herds of 300 to 400 oxen along the road; and in his diaries Marin Sanudo mentions the report of an eyewitness who in June 1532, between Ptuj and Ljubljana, saw a herd of 310 oxen. Around Postojna, according to a land register from 1498, numerous abandoned farms were allowed to be sold for the pasturing of drivers' oxen (Kosi 1998: 207, 222–223).

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<sup>10</sup> The oldest relevant testimony dates back to 1224, when cattle plague wreaked havoc across Styria and Carinthia (Makarovič 1991: 28).

Until 1728, when it was widened and improved, the Vienna-Trieste "trade road" was suitable only for pack animals, riders and stock drivers, but after that date for carters, who were mainly peasants from agriculturally inactive areas close to road connections. There was a general rule that anyone who owned a pair of oxen or horses could become a carter. Many others who lived close enough to the road (strongly connected with transport), who were not attracted by the carter's way of life tried to derive an income by providing draught animals. And ox teams must have offered a very picturesque sight, as they are strikingly present in the writings of foreign travellers through these areas in the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For example, in Styria in 1804 – beyond Konjice, where there is a "high, very steep mountain, steeper than Sömmering" – Seume observed how "34 oxen and 6 horses pulled a goods cart, although on level parts of the road 6 horses sufficed". In 1828 James Tobin described the approach to Trieste, where everything indicated that "we are approaching a major trading centre". There were both light and heavy carts with "up to 24 oxen and 12 drivers, who were yelling wildly and cracking their whips in order to encourage their fine, strong harnessed beasts up the slope" (Smerdel 2005: 352; cited from Trobič 2003).

Carters and their animals, including oxen, gradually disappeared from the main arteries with the construction of the Vienna-Trieste railway, which was completed in 1857. This brought tangible economic changes: where possible, farmers began to be more actively engaged in farming and the countryside took on "a much more agrarian appearance than before" (Trobič 2003: 33, 135). Changes in raising cattle were brought about primarily by the increasing demand for milk in large centres and the organised purchase of milk had a great impact on the agricultural economy in general. Farmers began increasingly to produce fodder crops instead of grains and the breeding of oxen was in many places largely abandoned. However, in some places, even as late as the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the ox remained the main working animal, both in the fields and in the woodlands.

The 1960s was the time when in Slovenia, as in many other parts of Europe, mechanisation in the shape of the tractor began to replace working animals. But in one of the villages near Pivka, when the first farmer bought a tractor in 1967, there was scepticism: "He won't plough over my land", they said. And in 1971, when a second farmer bought one, some were still full of mockery: "Now that he's taken off his harness, we won't see him ploughing again" (Smerdel 2005: 353). Many farming households needed quite some time before they could accept tractors instead of oxen – machines instead of the living creatures they were used to working with, although they soon realised that they eased and shortened their everyday tasks.

The memory of oxen is still very much alive in the Slovene countryside, while even today there is still the odd farmer who, on the basis of experience,<sup>11</sup> still yokes his ox for certain tasks, not least because of a sense of attachment to this four-legged working companion.

### **The virtual collection of works of art featuring oxen and what it tells us of the past**

The extent to which working cattle, especially oxen, were until recently vital to their owner's survival is eloquently attested – in addition to some sentences in literature and oral testimonies – by two works of art. The painter, graphic artist and sculptor France Kralj (1895–1960), from the Dolenjska (Lower Carniola) region, recognised their significance in impoverished Dolenjska villages and in 1938 articulated this visually in his destroyed concrete statue entitled "Nature (Slovene woman, farming image)", which side-by-side places a bovine, a mother, a child and a sheaf of wheat. The folk artist and mason Jernej Bartolato from Pliskovica on the Karst, with his monument to the karst ox erected in 2006 is also direct in the way he describes their significance in words. Below the ox's head is the inscription: "Once far around, we people of the Karst ploughed with oxen, yoked them and pulled loads. Without oxen we would not have survived, so we loved them."

My research into reflections of various aspects of working cattle, especially draught oxen, in visual art came about through a traditional research approach: through the search for old pictorial material that would bear witness to the use of these animals in Slovene areas prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. For the former – in addition to manuscript and many printed sources – also offers material sources in the shape of objects in museum collections, while the latter brings numerous oral testimonies gathered through field work and eloquent photographic sources. But then the number of images burgeoned and in recent years I seem to have "seen oxen" wherever I looked: on farms, in museums, in galleries, in books, in catalogues and so on. My virtual collection of visual images now includes 170 Slovene and 125 foreign works of various kinds, both profane and sacred, employing various technologies and various iconographies. The main aspect considered when collecting them was their content rather than aesthetic criteria. I focused in particular on realistic images of draught oxen, or portrayals of oxen engaged in basic arable and other farming tasks, in stylistically and thematically varied works from different historical periods. Later, to try and throw light

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<sup>11</sup> For example, that when ploughing for or harvesting potatoes, or when ploughing a vineyard, a tractor leaves the soil too flattened and without enough air.

on symbolic differences, as well as those relating to meaning and values, I also collected some images of cows and bulls. As well as works of art of all kinds – frescoes, oil paintings and paintings on wood, water colours, drawings, graphics, statues and reliefs – I also included suitable examples of folk art as having equal testimonial value: votive pictures, images of saints, painted beehive panels, decorated everyday objects, votive figures, models and toys. These include some illustrations of fables, folk tales and children's poems. The collection is rounded off by picture postcards bearing suitable images and miscellanea both past and present, including coats-of-arms, helmets, masks, inn signs, stamps, political symbols, logos, souvenirs and so on.

An analytical overview confirmed that assorted visual images can serve as a source for earlier periods for which we lack other, more weighty sources, but precisely because of this it is necessary to interpret them with circumspection. For instance, we can only hope that painters were faithful, exact observers of reality. That, for example, medieval masters, as well as following the models then in circulation in Europe, also painted some scenes on the basis of what they observed in their environment and that they included in these in a recognisable way local material elements such as dress, tools, etc. The need for caution when making use of pictorial sources is confirmed by some contemporary analogies – such as Manček's illustrations for the Slovene fable *The Horse and the Ox* published in the children's magazine *Rainbow* (May 2008: 8; cf. Bolhar 1975: 102-104). The painter and illustrator Marjan Manček, to whom the countryside and its way of life is not unknown, fairly appropriately placed a horse collar on a horse pulling a plough, but the ox is "yoked" twice. Around its neck he painted a single yoke with an ox bow, while at the same time across its forehead and round its horns there is a strap holding in place the kind of pad that used to be placed beneath a forehead yoke.

With regard to earlier periods for which we have primary material and oral sources, we can judge visual works with images of draught oxen engaged in various tasks as reasonably faithful reflections of everyday reality in which oxen were simply present and until recently irreplaceably so. But let us now look at their portrayals from a temporal and narrative viewpoint. Possibly the first picture from Slovene areas<sup>12</sup> in which an ox is depicted – specifically "a yoked pair transporting a large barrel" – is a fresco from a tomb at the Roman

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<sup>12</sup> These include Slovene ethnic areas in neighbouring countries such as Austria and Italy. My virtual collection also includes as domestic material individual images from Istria, which until the 20th century was still a fairly unified cultural space (and was even contained within one state – the Habsburg and then the Austro-Hungarian monarchy).

necropolis at Nevioudun (the archaeological site at Drnovo near Krško), probably from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD (Božič et al 1999: 258). Nor are medieval depictions all that common. From 1490, for instance, there is a fresco with a scene of ploughing from a cycle of monthly tasks painted in the succursal church of Hrastovlje by Janez of Kastav. The two oxen are only partially visible, and sadly without a yoke, but the picture represents an important source in researching the history of Slovene ploughs. A possibly earlier image can be found in the small church of St. Andrew in Gosteče in Gorenjska (Upper Carniola), with its 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century frescoes, where at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was still possible to see on the wall, based iconographically on the *Imago pietatis* and referring to Holy Sunday, a plough, a harrow and an ox resting on its knees (Smerdel 2008: 57; cf. Stele 1944). And then there are the frescoes in the succursal church of St. Brikcij at Volarje near Tolmin, which were painted around 1540 by Jernej from the Škofja Loka area. Among them there is a moving scene of the transport of the saint's coffin, connected with the legend that the team of oxen that carried the body towards Aquileia stopped in this very spot and that then the oxen refused to move until a church was built there (Gaberšček 2005: 107). The image of the transport of a saint's body,<sup>13</sup> its subsequent burial and the building of a church or monastery at the location where the oxen stopped (recognising his saintliness), was depicted twice more during the Baroque era: both times in connection with St. Notburga from Eben, a popular patron saint among farmers (Schauber, Schindler 1995: 479), and with her final wish: when she died, her body should be laid on a cart drawn by two oxen and where they stopped, that was where she should be buried. The scene of the transport of St. Notburga's coffin was depicted by two Slovene Baroque painters: Valentin Janez Metzinger in 1754, in an oil painting in a side chapel of the parish church of St. Matthias in the village of Slap near Vipava; and Fran Jelovšek in 1762, in a fresco above the altar in the church of St. Notburga in Groblje near Domžale.

From the 18<sup>th</sup> century we must now look further back – first to 1515, when the master Leinhard Pampstl or probably one of his pupils, created the Hema relief with exceptional images of draught oxen; this is the third of the six by the same hand for Gurk Cathedral in Carinthia. The relief shows the countess Hema supervising the building of the church, while the pair of draught oxen pulls a cart laden with stones (Hartwagner 1969). And then to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the "century of topographers" in which interest in local lands, "in their honour and

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<sup>13</sup> With regard to the origin of the image of an ox (or bull) that draws a saint's body, Frelj (2006: 33) writes that it is necessary to look to the Mediterranean: "Probably the idea came from Egypt, where the transport of the Pharaoh's sacrophagus was connected with yoked oxen or bulls. It was transported to the holiest place: first the temple and then the grave. There the deceased Pharaoh crossed into the kingdom of the dead and took on the image of Osiris."

glory, called forth men who threw themselves wholeheartedly into their immortalisation" (Stopar 1971: 3). Alone or with their associates they drew, engraved and printed images of all the major settlements, monasteries, castles, courts and so on; sometimes these featured small genre scenes in which it is possible to see cattle or oxen at pasture or pulling a load. An example is the panorama of Hagenegg Castle in Carinthia (not far from Bad Eisenkappel) from Valvasor's *Topography of Carinthia* from 1681,<sup>14</sup> and Hrastovec castle in Zgornja Voličina in the Slovenske gorice area from Vischer's *Topography of Styria*, also from 1681 (Stopar 1971: 17, 45). In the foreground of the first etching Andrej Trost depicted a team of oxen and in the second (based on Vischer's sketch) there are cattle grazing in front of the castle. But the Carniolan polymath Valvasor deserves credit for yet another engraving of a team of oxen (also Trost's work) in a scene showing wheat being placed in a *kozolec* hayrack in the work *Glory of the Duchy of Carniola* from 1689 (Rupel 1936: 256).

The topographic works of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were followed in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century by graphic series "named after individual publishers and stimulated by the Romantic stirrings of the time"; these "suites" were popular right across Europe (Stopar 1993: 63). For the Slovene regions of Carniola, Styria and Carinthia the most important were Wagner's (Carniola), Lampl's and Kaiser's (both for Styria). The last two involved the work of three brothers – Joseph, Carl Joseph and Leopold Kuwasseg. In his lithographs Joseph (1799–1859), who was also trained in visual theory, created a model for the depiction of panoramas in two or even three planes. In the first, in the emphasised foreground, there are often genre figures or scenes that imbued his images with authenticity (Stopar 1993: 64). And it is genre scenes<sup>15</sup> in the panoramas from the first half of and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century by various painters that show teams of oxen or cattle grazing. For example, Franz Seraph Kurz zum Thurn und Goldenstein (1807–1878) in the drawing "Bohinjska Bela – View of the Church of St. Margaret" from around 1845 (pastoral scene), or Anton Hayne (1786–1853) in the oil painting "Around Kranj" from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (genre scene with a team of oxen).

There are no scenes of rural labour featuring yoked or grazing oxen in works by Slovene historical realist painters – in spite of their attachment to material life. Painters such as Jean-

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<sup>14</sup> Janez Vajkard Valvasor, *Topographia Archiducatus Carinthiae modernae*, Heervorgebracht zu Wagensperg in Crain, 1681 (Graphic Office of the National Museum of Slovenia).

<sup>15</sup> In Slovene art history, genre was defined by Luc Menaše as scenes of "ordinary people going about their everyday life". It is also defined in terms of everyday life by Ksenija Rozman and Milček Komelj (Košak 2007: 36, 37).

François Millet (1815–1875)<sup>16</sup> and Rosa Bonheur (1822–1899), who depicted the rural landscape and its inhabitants, did not appear in Slovenia until the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century there were some genre scenes showing teams of oxen, bearing witness to their presence in everyday and festive rural life in Slovenia: for instance, transporting dowries, ploughing vineyards, working in a port and so on. Particular painters – including Janez Šubic (1850–1889) as well as certain foreign artists (Ludwig Bassini, Ferdinand Wüerst) – executed them for the encyclopaedic work *Österreich-ungarische Monarchie in Wort und Bild*, for the volumes *Steiermark* and *Das Küstenland (Görz, Gradiska, Triest und Istrien)*, that were printed in Vienna in 1890 and 1891.

And then the new, artistically different 20<sup>th</sup> century arrived. In Slovenia there were many stylistically diverse painters, graphic artists, illustrators and sculptors who, in one way or another, inspired in different ways, used images of cattle – primarily oxen and bulls. In addition to the Impressionists (the Sava club), we entered the new century with the Vesna group:<sup>17</sup> painters whose programme rested on literary narration and descriptive domesticity, on rural genres and on everything that spoke of "Sloveneness" (Mikuž 1998: 11). We in a sense drove into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the unique picture postcard<sup>18</sup> from 1904 by the Vesna member Maksim Gaspari (1883–1980), who under the strong influence of Secessionist art painted an image of carting hay (most probably with an ox team) in a stylised Slovene countryside. This was the image that helped create the Vesna group's basic slogan: "From the nation, for the nation" (Bogataj 2000: 13).

The visual artists whose work belongs to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and the past decade) can, in terms of iconography, be roughly divided into two groups: those born in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>, whose work appeared up until the middle or final quarter of the

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<sup>16</sup> Millet was from a farm on the Cotentin peninsula in Normandy; he had worked the land himself and never forgot this (Raynal 1951: 73).

<sup>17</sup> The Vesna group was formed among Slovene painters at the University of Vienna in 1903. Its members (Maksim Gaspari, Saša Šantel, Gvidona Birolla, Fran Klemenčič, Maks Koželj, Svitoslav Peruzzi and Hinko Smrekar; also the Croats Kerić, Krizman and Meštrović) saw painting – like speech or poetry – as a means of getting closer to the Slovene past and present (Mikuž 1998: 10). They strove above all for the thematic liberation of Slovene art from foreign, particularly German influences, through the development of "domestic" themes and wished to create a real Slovene art. By directing their attention towards rural life they tried to bring art closer to the widest possible circle of people (Bogataj 2000: 9).

<sup>18</sup> Picture postcards – "visual and communicative products" as Bogataj (2000: 10) labels them – are an international cultural phenomenon that appeared in the 19th century. Gaspari contributed to their historical development. Early, one-off, hand drawn or painted picture postcards were actually plain postcards with illustrations (Bogataj 2000: 7, 9).

last century; and those born in the next five decades, whose work appeared in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or its final quarter, and up until the present. The work of the first group of painters was undeniably determined by *genius loci*: the villages and landscapes in which they were born and often lived (or to where they moved). For example, France Kralj (1895–1960), a painter, graphic artist and sculptor from Zagorica near Grosuplje in Dolenjska, who after Realist beginnings and folk inspiration turned to Expressionism and after 1923 painted merely rural themes (Komelj 1991: 372, 373). Lojze Perko (1909–1980), a painter from Stari trg near Lož in Notranjska, whose "life and artistic vision were connected with the mystery of the Notranjska earth" – landscape elements "in harmony with the people who settled this land" (Mikuž 1981: 21, 22). Lajči Pandur (1913–1973) from Štajerska, "a painter of the Pannonian plain and life upon it" faithfully followed domestic themes, portraying the Prekmurje region, the Pannonian soil and the people "that live on and from it" (Gabršek Prosenč, Vetrih 1974). And even Zoran Mušič (1909–2005), from Bukovica near Volčja Draga on the edge of the Karst, a painter, graphic artist and master draughtsman of contemporary Europe, but particularly Karst landscapes. In the time of their youth or working lives, oxen played a visible role in the farm life of almost every part of Slovenia and so in the work of all of these artists, as well as some of their fellow travellers,<sup>19</sup> when they depicted the Slovene countryside and genre scenes, oxen would appear, completely realistically.

The second group of painters is different in this regard: although even here one should not neglect the influence of place. So, for example, with regard to Vladimir Makuc (1925– ), from Solkan near Nova Gorica, the art historian Kržišnik said at an exhibition of his work "every landscape shapes its people".<sup>20</sup> It seems that a particularly strong influence came from the Karst and from Istria (home to powerful white oxen). But oxen appear in the work of this group as a kind of metaphor for archaic life (e.g. Makuc), as symbols of endurance, strength and wealth, or as symbols of regional identity (e.g. Mire Cetin, Jože Spacal, Miša Strman). Otherwise, they gradually disappear – as they do from farms in real life. And where cattle of some kind appear in works of art, it is usually as an intellectual reflection of Antique myths of heavenly bulls or demi-gods (e.g. Karl and Rok Zelenko, Andrej Pavlič), while specific painters and sculptors quite often portray bulls because of their well-known, perennial

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<sup>19</sup> Tone Kralj (1900, Zagorica, Grosuplje – 1975, Ljubljana), painter, graphic artist and sculptor; Avgust Črnigoj (1898, Trst – 1985, Sežana), painter; Božidar Jakac (1899, Novo mesto – 1989, Ljubljana), painter and graphic artist; France Mihelič (1907, Virmaše – 1998, Ljubljana), painter, graphic artist and illustrator; Maks Kavčič (1909, Gradišče – 1973, Maribor), painter; Maksim Sedej (1909, Žiri, Dobračeva – 1974, Ljubljana), painter, graphic artist and illustrator.

<sup>20</sup> This quote from Zoran Kržišnik is from the catalogue for an exhibition of Makuc in Wiesbaden in 1994.

symbolism (e.g. Jože Pohlen, Zvest Apollonio and others). It is said that such works sell well in the business world, as symbolised by the "Charging Bull" on Wall Street.<sup>21</sup>

### **The testimony of the iconographic categorisation of the virtual collection**

When categorising the virtual collection in terms of iconography,<sup>22</sup> I was surprised to discover in visual art (in its widest sense – including souvenirs, logotypes and so on) almost all the cultural elements of everyday and festive life that can be explored through the relationship between man and ox – including material as well as social and spiritual elements. Thanks to this, it was possible to find for most of the represented works appropriate comparative photographic material,<sup>23</sup> which not least bears witness to how sensitively the eye of the artist perceives the realities of life, regardless of how these are then artistically interpreted.

Analysis of works of art that appeared in Slovene areas containing iconographic images of cattle, particularly oxen or draught oxen, and a comparative survey of similar foreign examples,<sup>24</sup> make possible a division into no less than thirty recognisable thematic elements,<sup>25</sup> which I usually note in passing, as their citation is eloquent enough on its own. I only draw attention to specific ones – for example, among social themes, children's work or farming tasks in which children and oxen meet, and the use of oxen as symbols of regional identity. With regard to themes that speak of particular farming processes, I reveal and explain in more detail certain material cultural elements – such as different types of yoke and the use of a goad or whip when working with oxen.

The categorised themes begin with **oxen and bulls as embodiments or symbols of strength** and other qualities (in the work of Ajlec, France Kralj, Pandur, Boljka, Jože Spacal, Apollonio etc.; see the mosaic-like pictorial appendix 1). That is, with father bull or the ox, which is "the bull's uncle" as the Swiss proverb has it, illustrating a different symbolism. Since Classical mythology onwards, the bull has symbolised fertility, irrepressible and elemental desire, raw

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<sup>21</sup> The bronze statue of a supernaturally large bull by Arturo di Modica, which since 1998 has stood on Wall Street in New York, and which symbolises aggressive financial optimism and prosperity.

<sup>22</sup> The ongoing catalogue includes all the relevant or available data on individual works of art.

<sup>23</sup> Most of them are from the archive of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum in Ljubljana.

<sup>24</sup> There could undoubtedly be more of these if I carried on collecting them.

<sup>25</sup> The works in the virtual collection are arranged in terms of these thematic elements (and in each category are chronologically ordered first Slovene and then foreign works): drawings, pictures, graphics and suitable examples of folk art; statues, models and folk art; reliefs; illustrations; past and present miscellanea; picture postcards.

sensuality and irresistible male strength,<sup>26</sup> as is also shown by the contemporary collected works. The bull is an image of raw power, blind endurance and fearlessness, but at the same time, an unreflective, rash creature (Germ 2006: 26, 27; cf. Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1993). And the ox, the castrated bull, the animal helper, symbolises submissiveness, diligence, calm strength, endurance and patience.<sup>27</sup>

These are followed by images of **divine bulls** and reflections of the divine **Apis, Zeus and the demi-god Minotaur** (in the work of Karl and Rok Zelenko, Pavlič, and from elsewhere the work of artists such as Picasso; see pictorial appendix 2).

One cannot ignore images of the **mother cow** (see pictorial appendix 3). In this regard, we could mention the inciteful observation by Marvin Harris (although referring to the Indian context) that cows are the necessary "factories for giving birth to oxen" (Harris 1989: 16). The importance of their fertility, their health and maternal role is witnessed by votive figures of a cow and her calf. (Perhaps these were the inspiration for the similar images in the work of France Kralj.) During my field trips I wrote, for example, that future working oxen were selected from calves on the basis of their physical characteristics and on what their mother, the cow, was like.

Then there are **breeds** of cattle recognisable in different visual images; some of those that were widespread in Slovene lands are particularly clearly present in votive figures, models and souvenirs in the form of an ox (see pictorial appendix 4). Different breeds are also frequently connected with **portraits** of oxen<sup>28</sup> (the work of Ive Šubic, Karl Zelenko, Strman, and others such as Fragonard and Rubens ...; see pictorial appendix 5).

Then there are depictions of various farming tasks: **ploughing**<sup>29</sup> (Skola, Puteani, France and Tone Kralj, Jakac, Perko; and elsewhere, e.g. Antique and medieval images, also Rosa Bonheur, Millet, Mendica; see pictorial appendix 6); **threshing** (in foreign depictions; see pictorial appendix 7); **grape picking** (in foreign depictions; see pictorial appendix 8); **hauling wood** (Perko and e.g. Vernatel, Chen Xinru; see pictorial appendix 9); **harnessing and**

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<sup>26</sup> These meanings are emphasised by the bull's powerful horns, one of the traditional phallic symbols (Germ 2006: 27). Here it is worth recalling warriors' helmets or masks with horns.

<sup>27</sup> In Christianity the ox, thanks also to the role it has in the Bible, has almost completely replaced the bull in visual art (Germ 2006: 28).

<sup>28</sup> Portraits of animals as an independent iconographic image appear in the Baroque (Germ 2006: 19).

<sup>29</sup> This includes images of rulers ploughing, such as the first Přemysl on a fresco from the second quarter of the 12th century in the rotunda castle chapel in Znojmo, Moravia (cf. the iconographic image of Cincinnatus's plough; Hall 1991: 44), and ploughing furrows with a team of oxen, by which means the course of the walls of a town under construction is determined (Smerdel 2008: 7; cf. Forni 1997).

**driving** (Benesch, Janez Šubic, Pandur, Jakac; and e.g. Rosa Bonheur, Pueyrredón, Malančec; see pictorial appendix 10); **carting hay or cereals** (Valvasor, Mayer, Gaspari, Mihelič, Perko and e.g. Rosa Bonheur, Pallière; see pictorial appendix 11); **carting manure or litter** (Hayne, Sedej, Markovec; see pictorial appendix 12); **carting barrels** (Antoinette Macovitz, on Spanish votive pictures; see pictorial appendix 13); **carting wood** (on foreign votive pictures and picture postcards; see pictorial appendix 14); **carting stones** (on the third Hema relief by Pampstl; see pictorial appendix 15); and **work in port, hauling vessels** (Kuwasseg, Bassini and e.g. Bellows; see pictorial appendix 16). In all these images it was possible to recognise different types of yoke and the use of a goad or whip.

Next is a sequence of generic content, connected in particular with care for draught animals, including oxen, and the end of their working life: **pasture** (Goldenstein, Benesch, Mušič, Pogačnik, Makuc, Kavčič, Pandur and e.g. Millet, Wenzhau; see pictorial appendix 17); **watering** (Perko, Makuc and e.g. Berchem; see pictorial appendix 18); **riding** (only in foreign depictions; see pictorial appendix 19); **shoeing** (Pogačnik and e.g. Dubuisson; see pictorial appendix 20); **transporting livestock by water** (Mušič and e.g. van Goyen; see pictorial appendix 21); **resting** (Puteani, Pandur, Perko and e.g. Singer Sargent, Van Gogh, Malančec; see pictorial appendix 22); **fairs** (Pogačnik, Perko and e.g. Roos, Malančec; see pictorial appendix 23); and **slaughtering oxen** (particularly in medieval pictures; see pictorial appendix 24).

Then social images: **families**, when people are depicted together with their oxen (France Kralj and e.g. von Harnier; see pictorial appendix 25); **children and oxen** at pasture, riding, ploughing and carting (Skola, Würst, Pogačnik and e.g. Corabœf; see pictorial appendix 26); **weddings**, at which in some places (for example, Slovenia and France) oxen would pull the cart with the dowry (Janez Šubic and Bellangé; see pictorial appendix 27); and **funerals**, at which, in both sacred and profane depictions, oxen appear in front of the funeral cart, hauling the deceased's coffin (the already mentioned frescoes and in Perko, also e.g. Simone Lamberti; see pictorial appendix 28).

We should also not overlook the spiritual content connected with **religious folk beliefs**: for example, believing in the power of patron saints when it comes to the health of animals, which is reflected in votive figures of oxen yoked in pairs and in votive pictures showing a kneeling farmer with a bovine, the object of the plea; or the veneration of trees, such as the spruce with two crowns beneath which an ox went to kneel and in which appeared the Holy

Cross<sup>30</sup> (examples of folk art: votive figures and pictures and pilgrimage pictures; see pictorial appendix 29).

The last two themes are the ox as an **allegorical ancient figure** and as a symbol of **regional identity**. The first of these is represented only by the Slovene artist Makuc (see pictorial appendix 30), in whose poetic bestiary<sup>31</sup> oxen appeared in Istria, in the village of Hrastovlje,<sup>32</sup> where they inspired him as an archaic phenomenon. And then they became – and remain until this day – reminders of disappearing times and ways of life. With regard to oxen as a symbol of regional identity (see pictorial appendix 31), let us consider this in more detail, in relation to four selected themes.

#### **Four selected themes:**

##### **1 – Oxen as a symbol of regional identity**

It was in the Slovene part of Istria and even more markedly in the Croatian part that oxen became a symbol of regional identity. These were of the Podolian breed, which under the name of Istrian cattle is seen as an autochthonous breed and thus a source of national pride – appearing, for instance, on Croatian special issue postage stamps in 2007. These almost glowing white, longhorn, enduringly strong, mild, strikingly beautiful oxen have also long represented an attractive image for many painters of different types, using different techniques and have also joined the ranks of Istrian souvenirs; they have even become the logotype of one of the Istrian political parties (see pictorial appendix). The use of the *boškarin*<sup>33</sup> as a souvenir figure has led to these animals becoming one of the fundamental elements of Istrian identity, as the breed is a "special feature of Istria and not spread across neighbouring areas" (Blagonić 2000: 31).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Šmitek (2004: 77) describes this kind of event on Oslov vrh near Bele vode. It was followed first by pilgrimages and then the building of the church of the Holy Cross (between the years 1850 and 1857). Many pilgrimage pictures show, above the church, a spruce with two crowns, between which is the Crucifix and beneath which lies an ox.

<sup>31</sup> Containing, as well as oxen, sheep and birds.

<sup>32</sup> In the 1950s Makuc often spent time in Hrastovlje: first as a student, uncovering the frescoes in the church, and later as their copyist for the National Gallery. "The work was still archaic, as was the village and its people" he said about his then experience. "Whoever had a pair of oxen was a genuine farmer," he recalled. (From a conversation recorded in his studio, 11 January 2010.)

<sup>33</sup> This name is often used today to refer to an Istrian breed of cattle, although it is also a popular name for individual oxen (for example, Boškarin and Gajard or perhaps Bakin were yoked together; cf. Smerdel 2009: 46, 49).

<sup>34</sup> Blagonić here cites Devereux (1990), that the classification of elements of identity takes place at the level of the category "they", which is facilitated by perception of the category "we" (Blagonić 2000: 31).

A different case is the example of the "Bloke ox", which became one of the elements of the Bloke regional identity. These tough working animals, common in this southern corner of Slovenia – Slovene brown (grey to dark-brown) cattle, still known among breeders as Montafon cattle (Smerdel 2009: 48) – were employed across a large part of Slovene areas and never just around Bloke. But it seems that, to the people of Bloke, oxen were such an important, integral part of life (for work and trading), that they simply took them as their own. In recent years their image has come to be used "at tourist and other festive events",<sup>35</sup> while the local artist Strman from the village of Gradiško, upon the initiative and with the help of his friend Jože Ogradarjev, a farmer from a neighbouring village, has in Zavrh erected a monument to them. The statue is shaped out of wire – for, as the artist said, "there are no more oxen, but their spirit is captured in silhouette". The inspiration for it was "simply in the air: people's memories". And in 2009, when the statue was officially unveiled, Jože Ogradarjev read to the people of Bloke his "ode" to the ox (which of course rhymes in the original, tr. note): *"The Bloke ox is already a legend, / but we must not forget / so we've made him a body / that needs neither water nor hay. / Me and my friend Mišo / have made him an apartment, / where I hope he lives for years / never to be forgotten. / As a lad / with my father I drove an ox / that pulled here and there, / if it wasn't done right / we were both in trouble."*

## 2 – Children and oxen

The last part of this verse brings us to the second selected theme: the relationship between children and oxen. This can be anticipated with a look at a relatively small number of works of art, especially scenes of ploughing and pasturing (in a panorama of the town of Novo mesto by Oton Skola from 1836; in the fresco with scenes of the Biblical sower by Tone Kralj in Lokev near Divača from 1942-43; in Pogačnik's "Little Herders" from 1949; and elsewhere e.g. in a fresco at Sesto al Reghena from around 1780, Corabœf from 1910; see pictorial appendix); otherwise it can be discerned in numerous eloquent photographic studies, in subtle comments in memoirs, in certain realistic rural tales<sup>36</sup> and in the reminiscences of those

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<sup>35</sup> This is written in a brochure about the "Bloke ox" produced by pupils of the Tone Šraj Aljoša primary school in Nova vas in the school year 2008/2009.

<sup>36</sup> For instance in the youthful memories of George Sand from the first half of the 19th century, from the French region of Berry, in the story "Le labour" (from *La mare au Diable*): "A child of six or seven [...] was walking along a furrow parallel with the plough, constantly jabbing the oxen in the flanks with a long, light stick with a metal tip. The proud animals trembled beneath the child's small hand." Or in the tale by the Slovene writer Prežihov Voranc "Jirs in Bavh" set in the first half of the 20th century: "We children started working with animals at an early age. I still had not started school when I began to lead oxen at ploughing and hauling, and thus helped my father..." (From the manuscript of the author's article "When training oxen meant training for the children", prepared for publication within the EARTH programme.)

interviewed during field work. In most of the small number of Slovene studies that touch upon this theme, it is possible to read only the age at which children began to work, plus now and then which farming tasks they were first involved in. For example, in the Koroška (Carinthia) village of Sele between the two World Wars children began to work at around the age of six, and until the age of nine they performed tasks such as leading animals to pasture, picking potatoes and "leading an ox during ploughing"; at the age of fifteen or sixteen they were able to take on adult work (Makarovič 1994: 228). In the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, when farming began to undergo some dramatic changes (demanding more labour),<sup>37</sup> there were two basic age ranges: in Austrian lands in 1760 it was thought that children aged five to six should be included in certain tasks, while from nine to twelve they could be given more demanding work (Makarovič 1995: 132; cf. Puhar 1982: 286, 315). The task that until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century could first be entrusted to children was watching over animals at pasture; and leading oxen during ploughing was undoubtedly one of the most responsible jobs that a child could perform. Girls were rarely included,<sup>38</sup> but boys almost always so – at the age of eight or nine, sometimes as young as five or six (depending on their skills and the needs of the farm) – as it seems that in this way boys grew into future farmers. This is picturesquely described in the words of the farmer Borišk from Rodež in Zasavje: *"The youngest of us led the oxen, the next youngest pushed the forecarriage and father ploughed. I began at the front and gradually moved back – from the oxen to the plough."*

Some of the pictorial images of ploughing allow us to make the attractive supposition that children and oxen often worked together millennia ago. It is worth, for instance, looking closely at the well-known group of images from the late Bronze Age (2300–1800 BC), carved into the rock at Mont-Bégo in the French Alps, in which is depicted ploughing with draught cattle, probably oxen, and an ard. In certain scenes there is a ploughman behind the ard – an expressively large human figure – while in front the animals are led by a noticeably smaller person, presumably a child.<sup>39</sup> And we can draw similar conclusions about the comradeship of

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<sup>37</sup> Crop rotation, indoor stock rearing, etc.

<sup>38</sup> Only in those instances where there was no choice: when there was no boy in the family, or at least not of a suitable age, then girls had to do the work.

<sup>39</sup> These scenes are not in the Vallé des Merveilles, but near Fontanalbe, on the north-east side of the Bégo massif. They are particularly symbolic and reveal the great importance of ploughing for people who had only just left the Neolithic Age, but also they very practically connect oxen, man and the plough (Rinieri-Villain 1997: 8–10). The tiny human figures in front of the oxen could actually be children; but it is nevertheless worth bearing in mind "spontaneous perspective". This is a method of depicting visual components by arranging them in the same plane – as for instance children do and as was done in early stages of art. Figures and objects were depicted as they were felt or imagined to be, without any understanding of spatial depth (thus more distant figures can be larger if they are seen as particularly important, etc.).

children and oxen from the ploughing scene in the already mentioned cycle of monthly tasks in the medieval fresco (from 1490) in the succursal church in Hrastovlje. The ox driver is thought to be a child or teenager, as he is a little smaller than the ploughman and is wearing different clothes and headgear (also in comparison to other adult figures in the fresco). In his hand he has a whip or perhaps a goad.

### **3 – The use of a goad or whip**

The goad or whip, or ordinary switch, was – alongside the human voice (through a rhythmic melodic wave of the oxen's names plus commands) – the main implement used by people to communicate with working oxen. Here we are dealing with communication via touch,<sup>40</sup> but also through certain meaningful sounds made by the whip; with the physical actions – touching the draught animal with a switch, with the handle of the whip or prodding the ox with a goad – that accompanied spoken commands (Smerdel 2009: 58, 59). The simplest and most basic implement from which both whip and goad probably developed was a switch cut from a bush. Thus for example from around 1422–1411 BC at Teb we find a tomb painting of threshing (the tomb of Menna; Mekhitarian 1954: 76). The use of a hazel or dogwood switch was also recounted by certain interviewees during my field research.

The use of a goad in Slovene areas is attested only by a single written observation from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which describes "a stick with an iron point, with which oxen are sometimes prodded and driven" (Erjavec 1880; in Smerdel 2009: 58). Is there also one on the medieval scene of ploughing in Hrastovlje from 1490? The ox driver is holding a stick, the end of which cannot be seen, in both hands – in a similar way to how the French man and boy drive oxen in the painting by Corabœuf "*Labours ligériens*" from 1910 (Bourrigaud 2006: 66–67). When a ploughman holds a goad he does so in one hand, usually pointing downwards towards the animal's rump (see pictorial appendix), just as drivers (in most collected visual material) hold a whip in one hand, usually pointing upwards. An exception is the scene of ploughing in the medieval English *Luttrell Psalter* from the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Backhouse 2000: 17), in which the driver of a team of four oxen is portrayed in a similar posture and with a similar hand position as that in Hrastovlje, but in it he holds a long whip. The use of a goad, especially widespread in the Mediterranean, is revealed by individual medieval images from Italy and France (see pictorial appendix). Pictet, for example, from early 19<sup>th</sup> century Piedmont, reports that the ploughman "in his right hand holds a reed fourteen

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<sup>40</sup> There were mainly two kinds of contact: working (to soothe or encourage) and affectionate.

feet long, known as a *cana*, which has at one end a needle (or point) and at the other a scraper for cleaning soil from the plough" (Smerdel 2009: 62; cf. Pictet 1802: 4 (363)). The same kind of goad with a scraper in some parts of Croatia and in Spain is attested by drawings in Bratanić's work *Orača sprave u Hrvata* (1939: 89) and photographs in the catalogue of the collection of farming implements in the Spanish *Museo del pueblo Español* (Mingote Calderon 1990: 78); the use of the same implement when ploughing with oxen in modern Tunisia is described by Patricia Anderson (2007: 251, 252); particularly attractive and picturesque is its depiction in an Italian votive picture from 1863, in which *Madonna dei Fiori* saves from lightning a farmer and his children who are ploughing a field (Ciarrocchi, Mori 1960).

And then the whip, the use of which in France was described thus: "sometimes a pseudo-sign of wealth; a distinguishing sign of a farmer who wanted to be a driver and who imitated carters in areas where horses were less popular" (Juston 1994: 49). But early use of a whip or whip-like (sound making) implement when driving teams of oxen – during ploughing, not carting – is undoubtedly revealed by certain Egyptian tomb paintings: for example, a scene of ploughing from the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty (18<sup>th</sup> century BC) from Teb (Pisani 1997: 30), and another scene from around 1200 BC from the same location (Mekhitarian 1954: 149). A similar whip – a stick with two thongs – can also be seen in the hand of a ploughman on an Antique goblet known as "*coupe du labourage*", exhibited in the Louvre (Raepsaet 2002: 170). For the Slovene cultural space, in which in some past centuries use of a whip prevailed when working with oxen, a convincing report is an engraving by Trost in Valvasor's topography of Carinthia from 1681, a genre detail of a cart drawn by oxen on a panorama of Hagenegg Castle.<sup>41</sup> Wherever the whip was used it was seen as an indispensable communicative tool. If necessary it was used to give a little poke, but otherwise "the whip was merely shown to the animal..." It was usual to walk ahead and show the ox which way to go. "You whirled it around your head and the ox went with you and turned." was how they recalled it in villages around Pivka (Smerdel 2005: 368). This was often referred to as "luring" the ox. Where they also cracked the whip – for example in Istria – it was said that the ox was "under the whip". Many other farmers thought that a whip was an unnecessary luxury. But in places and on farms where

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<sup>41</sup> Engraving by Andrej Trost in Janez Vajkard Valvasor's *Topographia Archiducatus Carinthiae modernae*, Heervorgebracht zu Wagensperg and Crain, 1681. In the fresco of a team of oxen from a tomb at the Roman necropolis at Neviodun (the archaeological site at Drnovo near Krško), probably from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, the stick that the driver holds looks neither like a goad (it is rather short) nor a whip (Božič et al 1999: 258).

oxen (and not horses) were the farmer's pride and joy, a whip was nevertheless a visible and audible symbol (Smerdel 2009: 63).

#### **4 – Different kinds of yoke**

A visible sign of the prosperity of a farmer – decades ago a handsome pair of oxen, and now "at least a John Deer tractor" – from at least the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards in most parts of Slovenia were decorated yokes.<sup>42</sup> (The different kinds are shown by the Slovene Ethnographic Museum's collection and by those in some regional museums.) In Slovene areas there could be found both basic kinds of ox yoke used in Europe and elsewhere (cf. Brunhes Delamarre 1969; Fenton 1986): the head yoke or forehead yoke (in the north of Upper Carniola and in Carinthia), and the neck yoke. There were two variations of the latter: the Mediterranean bow yoke, which is reported from the Littoral, Inner Carniola, and from the central part of Lower Carniola and Styria; and the Slavic yoke or frame yoke, reported from the western part of Lower Carniola and Styria. In some places, at least in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a double yoke would be replaced by two single yokes, in the belief that "it's easier to work with each animal separately; one ox could always be a bit more lively – like a person" (Smerdel 2005: 368). This change was perhaps a belated response to the numerous 19<sup>th</sup> century texts on the maltreatment and inappropriate harnessing of animals (in the farmer's newspaper *Kmetijske in rokodelske novice*) and to the promotion of the idea of single harnessing in something similar to a horse collar. For example, in 1871 the vet Bleiweis wrote that the head yoke caused too much suffering as the ox "has to pull everything with its head". For him, the best form of harness for the health of working animals was undoubtedly the collar (Smerdel 2007: 203).

But the kind of harness established in Germany for oxen and cows (cf. Jacobeit 1957; Minhorst 1990) was in Slovene lands used only in Alpine regions (such as Upper Carniola and Carinthia), as can be seen on a panorama of the town of Kranj from the first half or middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, "with a pastoral scene and chapel". In the foreground, the painter Anton Hayne (1786–1853) depicts an ox pulling a cart laden with manure or a leaf basket, which is definitely wearing a collar. A more schematic picture, but one in which three oxen are clearly harnessed in a collar, is painted on a beehive panel with the year 1897, found in Lokovica above Libuče in Carinthia (Škafar, Makarovič 2000: 210, 211), on which is

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<sup>42</sup> This is affirmed by material from museum collections. The oldest preserved yoke, with the year 1770, is the only known example from the 18th century (it is kept by the Loka Museum in Škofja Loka); the other decorated yokes are mainly from the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th. The oldest example in the Slovene Ethnographic Museum collection has carved onto it the year 1852.

depicted work in the fields: two oxen are ploughing and one is pulling a harrow. Otherwise, for single harnessing (especially for tasks where it was enough to harness a single animal, or an ox and a horse), all the main kinds of yoke were used in Slovene areas. But the collected visual images – such as a scene of ploughing to plant vines in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Istria,<sup>43</sup> an ox portrait by Ive Šubic from 1956 (Bassin 2009: 71), a depiction of a draught *boškarin* and a clay model of a cow from Lower Carniola (see pictorial appendix) – show only a single yoke with an ox bow.

In visual images from Slovene areas (and sometimes elsewhere) there can also be identified all the common types of harness used here. The oldest known image of a head yoke or forehead yoke can be seen on the third Hema relief from 1515 in Gurk Cathedral, in a scene showing stones being carted. This type of yoke can otherwise be found on other images dating as far back as 1800 BC: for instance, on two scenes of ploughing in Egyptian tomb paintings from Teb, from the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty (Pisani 1997: 30). Among the oldest in Central Europe is the medieval fresco from the rotunda castle chapel in Znojmo, Moravia, in a scene in which the first Přemisl is ploughing with oxen in a field before he is called to the castle to become the ruler (Karbusický 1966: 56, 57). The widespread use of this kind of yoke in France and Spain, and even in Paraguay, is attested by the examples of toys and models of draught oxen, as well as images on picture postcards (see pictorial appendix).

The oldest instance in Slovene lands of the Slavic or frame yoke, used for pulling with the neck, is in Würst's engraving from 1890 of a Slovene Styrian farm in front of which stands a team of oxen.<sup>44</sup> A very realistic frame yoke can also be seen on some votive figures from Styria from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>.<sup>45</sup> In other European countries where the frame yoke was widespread there are some attractive folk art products in which it can clearly be seen: from Slovakia, with the year 1778, a ceramic jug from Tupava painted with a team of oxen (Pastierková 2005: 139) and a picture on glass of St. Wendoline from Liptovska Lúžna;<sup>46</sup> from Hungary the decorated carved lid of a box with a mirror from Szentgál, with an image of a plough and a team of oxen (Sáfrány 2003: 118); and from Romania a model (or toy) of oxen with a frame yoke (Berte-Langereau 2000: 132). And from neighbouring Croatia

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<sup>43</sup> Hugo Charlemont, ploughing for planting grapevines in Poreč, depiction from *Österreich-ungarische Monarchie in Wort und Bild, Das Küstenland*, Vienna 1891, p. 367.

<sup>44</sup> Ferdinand Würst, from *Österreich-ungarische Monarchie in Wort und Bild, Steiermark*, Vienna 1890, p. 211.

<sup>45</sup> For instance, on votive figures from the church on Brinjeva gora near Zreče (from the collection of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum) or figures from the succursal St. Cross church above Bele vode (Regional Museum, Celje).

<sup>46</sup> This picture was kindly passed on to me by Marta Pastierková from the Slovak National Museum in Martin.

comes an ink drawing by Fedor Malančec, from 1955, from his series "Fair in Koprivnica" (Jalšič Ernečič 2007: 11).

And now, images of the other kind of yoke for pulling with the neck – the Mediterranean or bow yoke. Among the selected Slovene works, it can be seen on three graphics: Bassini's depiction of life in the port of Trieste (Canal Grande) from the late 19th century,<sup>47</sup> the already mentioned picture postcard by Gaspari from 1904 and Pogačnik's "The Old Blacksmith's" from 1960 (Smrekar et al 2001: 12, 13); but also on two folk items: a model of a cart pulled by a pair of oxen from Planina near Rakek from 1833<sup>48</sup> and a votive figure of an ox team from the succursal church of St. Leonard below Lepenatka in the Upper Savinja Valley from the 1930s. The first of these – a very realistic, faithful model – shows a particular variation of this kind of yoke which was used in Inner Carniola, while the one from St. Leonard shows the Styrian or Upper Savinja variation. The two picturesque images from Gaspari and Pogačnik reflect how they were charmed by richly decorated Lower Carniola yokes; we can assume these, in the second half of the 19th century, were among other things an expression of changed social and economic relations following the abolition of feudalism.<sup>49</sup> Elsewhere in Europe, the bow yoke was particularly common in Britain (cf. Fenton 1969, 1986), but the earliest visual representations come from Greece and Etruria. It is clearly visible, for example, on a genre figure of a ploughman from Beocija, from around 600–575 BC, that is on display in the Louvre and on a bronze Etruscan statuette (a model) of a ploughman from Rome (Contini 2000: 46). But it also seems likely that the yoke depicted on a scene showing the counting of the spoils of war from a Mesopotamian relief from the place of Nimrud, dated around 800 BC, is similarly a bow yoke.

### **Some concluding remarks**

Let me now draw a brief conclusion. Cattle and in particular oxen – those patient working companions with their invaluable, enduring strength – and bulls – those animal "gods" of

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<sup>47</sup> Ludwig Bassini, "Leben im Hafen", picture from *Österreich-ungarische Monarchie in Wort und Bild, Das Küstenland*, Vienna 1891, p. 73.

<sup>48</sup> From the collection of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum.

<sup>49</sup> As a reflection of actual conditions (and the importance of oxen as wealth) we can understand what is said about a fair in the tale *Sosedov sin* (The Neighbours' Son, 1868) by the Slovene writer Josip Jurčič (1844–1881), a faithful recorder of everyday life who was born on a poor Lower Carniolan farm: "Happy is the small farmer, who a year ago bought some young oxen, nicely pastured and fattened them, and looks forward to the day when they can be sold for a handsome profit." (Jurčič 1969: 13)

fertility and other symbolic meanings – were for centuries, even millennia (and in some places still are) man's everyday working companion and also had a role in certain festive and religious practices. The extent to which these creatures are present in visual art is such that it is almost impossible to encompass. If we think, for example, only of the bovine figures scattered around the Mediterranean; of representations of their heads or horns on helmets, on various vessels; of images of oxen in Christian iconography; and so on. There are many things that are not encompassed by my virtual collection, as my analytical endeavours were focused on material elements: everyday farming and animal husbandry tasks (e.g. ploughing, pasturing) in which oxen were included, and the implements connected with these (e.g. yokes, whips). I was also focusing on the Slovene cultural space, although I did include, wherever possible, appropriate comparative material. The basic answer to the initial question of what images of oxen can tell us – at least from the 17th century onwards – is given below.

In the past three centuries or so oxen, that were clearly present and important in rural life, might appear in both sacred and profane visual works along with other elements of farm tasks (as well as in relation to life's milestones) and in particular as animal figures portrayed in various genre scenes, in the foreground of panoramas of castles, churches, towns and so on. Along with the people accompanying them they were a vital ingredient of the local, familiar landscape and life depicted by Slovene painters of the first half of the 20th century, whose work can be labelled to a greater or lesser extent as an artistic illustration and confirmation of rural reality. In this regard, it is exciting to realise that they reveal almost all the diversity of farm work in which oxen were involved and that they also testify to subtle social ingredients, such as children working with oxen and the inclusion of these beasts in farming families.

Many artists visually recorded what they knew or what they saw. Thus, for example, the gestation of an image that included oxen was described (in a letter to a friend in 1945) by painter Lojze Perko: "The early morning sky was dark and bleak. I painted a ploughman that I came across in the fields" (Mikuž 1981: 22). Artists began to portray oxen for their own sake or for purely artistic reasons only in the second half of the 20th century and the early 21<sup>st</sup> – in other words, at a time when they were disappearing from everyday farm life. Some became metaphors for the archaic, others symbols of marked strength, endurance, wealth and regional identity. And if we end with their words – the eloquent statements of painters Vladimir Makuc, Jože Spacal and Miša Strman – this is picturesquely revealed to us.

Makuc was moved by oxen as "an archaic phenomenon – if you compare them to cows they are so big and strong". And also in connection with work: "The work was still archaic, as was the village and its people [...] whoever had a pair of oxen was a genuine farmer", he said, recalling his impressions from Hrastovlje in Slovene Istria. Spacal observed that Karst oxen live in his memory "as a symbol of riches and strength. Today they are rare, but at one time they were the pride of every Karst farmer. I am inspired by their strength and dynamics ... their shape, the raised back, the horns..." And Strman – the creator of the monument to the Bloke ox, who spent his holidays at his grandfather's on the Bloke plateau, while carting hay and driving away the horse flies, listened to epic tales of past events, of trading oxen and of how much they meant to people both materially and spiritually – all this he compressed into his representation, which he accompanied with the words "There are no more oxen, but their spirit is captured in silhouette..."

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