

STATEMENT

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. **Marina Koleva**, Institute of Art Studies – BAS, member of scientific jury for the award of the educational and scientific degree “PhD” in the professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology

on the dissertation submitted by **Nikolay Dimitrov Dimitrov**, PhD candidate at the Department of Archaeology, Faculty of History, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, on the topic: Religious Life in Pautalia and Serdica in the Roman Period (Comparative Analysis), academic supervisor Prof. Dr. Sc. Kostadin Rabadjiev

Through time, religious life in the urban centres of Thrace has repeatedly attracted the interest of Bulgarian scholars, and Nikolay Dimitrov’s dissertation is a continuation to this tradition.

The dissertation manuscript consists of 458 pages of text, incorporating a list of references, and a 262-page catalogue, with further appendices: seven plates and thirteen maps.

The structure of the dissertation is suitably chosen and appropriate, considering the examined material. The text is comprised of an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction substantiates the topic; posits the principal objectives of the study; lists the methods applied to the analysis; comments on the territorial and the chronological scope, and the relevant historiography.

Each of the five chapters deals with the examination of the cults of a distinct group of deities, distinguished into: official cults; cults of the gods of the Graeco-Roman Pantheon; divine personifications; eastern cults; and local cults and cults of uncertain nature. All chapters follow an identical structure, in which the Pautalia monuments are discussed first, followed by those from Serdica. At the end of the sections focusing on the individual deities, and in each chapter, is offered a comparative analysis of the evidence from the two urban centres.

Greatest consideration receives the analysis of the numismatic monuments, employed as a departure point for the examination of the cults of the various groups of deities. The analysis of the numismatic material is also where most original interpretations and novel hypotheses, formulated by Nikolay Dimitrov, lie. The epigraphic monuments, which offer diverse and rich information on the cults – such as evidence of the presence of temples, of priests, of the dedicants, and of epithets of the gods are also examined and discussed in detail.

The sculptural monuments have been awarded comparatively less scrutiny. Nevertheless, for each group of images of gods has been provided an iconographic analysis; a discussion of the iconographic specifics; identified comparanda. The fact that identical iconographic types had been discussed across different types of artefacts leaves a very positive impression: for example, a discussion of the parallels between the images of gods rendered in sculpture and upon coins. The introduction to the text declares (p. 9) the use of in-depth iconographic and stylistic analysis on the monuments of art. The latter method is indeed applied, but rarely, and only in the discussion of some artifacts.

A positive quality of the manuscript is the fact that it brings together information from different monuments – for example, numismatic and epigraphic, to attempt a more in-depth and comprehensive study of the cults. The study also considers the archaeological find context, seeking to correlate the evidence obtained through archaeological investigations to the information embedded within the finds. The analysis refers also to evidence from the most recent archaeological investigations, carried out in Serdica over the last years.

The dissertation manuscript discusses numerous monuments, grouped into various categories, involving a mastery over various competences. The analysis has yielded new interpretations for some of the examined artifacts, and more precise date for others. Unpublished monuments had also been examined. The author demonstrates a critical approach to the theses of the various authors who had priorly engaged with the topic, challenging some with good arguments. In the absence of sufficient evidence, he would abstain from expressing a conclusive opinion on the cases in question.

The Conclusion is extensive and instructive, drawing together the conclusions from the individual chapters. The already formulated conclusions are further developed and expanded by an analysis of the information from the included plates and maps. The plates offer data on the number of artifacts dedicated to the individual deities, as well as on the distribution and their clustering in the two urban centres (Plates 1 and 2). Plate 3 enriches the Conclusion with combined data from the different monuments suggesting the presence of temples in Serdica and Pautalia; the remaining plates add summaries of the known priests, feast days, and epithets of the gods. The maps are also valuable, as they illustrate the territorial distribution of the discussed artefacts, as well as evidence of clustering within the urban centres or in their immediate territories.

Nikolay Dimitrov knows the scholarly research on the topic well, from the earliest publications by the late 19th – early 20th century scholars, to the most recent – including those from the last years – books, articles, and scientific reports.

Solely for the benefit of this manuscript has been conducted a systematic study of the collections of the museums within the study region and an artefact analysis.

The catalogue synthesizes the primary information for the discussed finds. Most of the photographs are of a very good quality, which is a further contribution of the work. I shall note that the link between the text and the catalogue is not straightforward, and it is advisable to consider its improvement, should the dissertation manuscript evolve into a book.

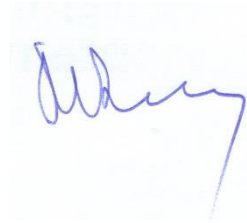
The dissertation manuscript offers syntheses on the groups of artifacts and altogether draws a picture of religious life in Serdica and Pautalia. The cult of Asclepius is singled out as the primary cult in Pautalia, by which the author has convincingly weighed in the long-standing debate on the topic. The comparison between the two urban centres has also yielded results, with the differences between the two emphasized. In addition, observations on the popularity of certain cults, as well as on the negligible distribution of others have been offered. A good example to this has been provided in the abundant and diverse evidence of observation of the eastern gods in Serdica, set against the less ubiquitous data of these cults from Pautalia.

Main contribution of the work is the formulation of the general historical conclusions on the development of the two urban centres during the Roman age; on the periods of prosperity of Serdica and Pautalia, based on evidence from the studied in the dissertation monuments (pp. 414–416). The manuscript concludes that during the second and the very beginning of the third century AD, Pautalia's growth outsailed that of Serdica, which went through a growth subsequent in the third century AD. The work also attempts to offer an explanation for this phenomenon, and proposes it stems from the position of Serdica on Via Diagonalis, the road with increased importance due to changes in the empire in the third century AD. That location of Serdica, on the road between eastern and western parts of the empire, ensures gathering of various groups of people and the influence of their culture on the local milieu.

The author's summary correctly presents the dissertation manuscript and its contributions. The PhD candidate is author of three scholarly papers, directly linked to the topic of the dissertation – two published and one in print, all in publications of the Sofia University "Sveti Kliment Ohridski".

In conclusion, it could be confirmed that the deposited manuscript is an original text with clear contributions. The minimum national requirements for acquiring of the educational and academic title "PhD", set in the Law for the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, are fulfilled.

All above allows me to vote favourably for the award of the educational and academic title “PhD” to **Nikolay Dimitrov Dimitrov**.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'M. Koleva', written on a light blue background.

10. 10. 2022

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Marina Koleva