

A STATEMENT

By Assoc. Prof. Albena Zdravkova Milanova, PhD.

Centre for Slavo-Byzantine Studies "Prof. Ivan Dujčev" at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

a member of the scientific jury, appointed by order № RAD-16-059 / 24.06.2020
for conferring the scientific degree "Doctor of Science" in a professional field 2. Humanitarian sciences, 2.2 History and archeology, scientific subject area: Archeology
on the topic: "The production of artistic metal in early medieval Bulgaria (based on the finds data)" written by Assoc. Prof. Stella Doncheva, PhD,
Branch of NAIM at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences – Shumen

The candidate for the scientific degree "Doctor of Sciences" Assoc. Prof. Stella Doncheva, PhD meets the requirements of the Law for development of the academic staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for its implementation and the Regulations for development of the academic staff at Shumen University "Episcopo Konstantin Preslavsky". According to the documentation submitted to me, the procedural requirements have been met and I have not found any breaches. The candidate's work was discussed at an extended department council on 16/06/2020, which unanimously decided to direct to public defense of the dissertation of Assoc. Prof. Stella Doncheva PhD, "Production of artistic metal in early medieval Bulgaria (based on the finds)".

The chosen topic about the production, type and use of metal belt sets in the immediate perimeter of the new capital center in the tenth century is particularly relevant, studies a significant scientific problem and undoubtedly contributes to developing our ideas about particular and very specific aspects of the then booming artistic and craft activity in and around Veliki Preslav. The considered issue is completely different from the one on which the candidate defended her PhD dissertation in 2000, and it meets the procedural requirements. I would like to draw attention to the fact that the proposed dissertation adds to the author's previous scientific contributions in the field of early medieval metal production, in which Assoc. Prof. Doncheva has established her leading role in the last 15 years. It is evidenced by the implemented international projects and the attached publications on the topic in Bulgarian, Russian and English - 20 in number, including three monographs, one - in co-authorship with St. Bonev. They consider various issues addressed in the dissertation and this forms a group of preliminary research in order to make the large summary proposed in the dissertation following an obviously well-considered research program. In this sense, I regard the award of the degree "Doctor of Science" not only as an assessment of the specific qualities of the

presented dissertation, but as a greater recognition of the candidate's ability to find new and important scientific topics for considering the complexity of many dynamic social and cultural processes in the tenth century in Bulgaria, to study and analyze them, and to draw significant conclusions. The presented publications are a vivid reflection of the scientific achievements of the candidate in our and foreign literature on the chosen topic. I would like to share that in my opinion the title of the dissertation does not correspond precisely enough to the object of study, which does not cover the entire early medieval metal production, but only belt sets of two (Novosel and Zlatar) and partially of a third production center (Nadarevo), nor the geographical and chronological frameworks of the study, as stated in the introduction (in particular p. 10), i.e. they do not cover the whole time of early medieval Bulgaria, but only a small part of its historical existence in the first half and middle of the tenth century, and do not cover its entire territory, but only a limited region around the capital Veliki Preslav. Despite this clarification which is necessary from a methodological point of view, the large number of finds (over 3,000) was correctly assessed as a sufficiently "reliable guide to outline the general trends in the production of metal objects during that period" (p. 14 and other places).

The volume of the presented dissertation is completely sufficient for such a fundamental study. It consists of 494 pages of synthetic-analytical text, a list of references and abbreviations (44 pages), one page with the author's contributions and three appendices with photographs, graphics, and tables, 365 pages in total. Instead of consistently presenting the content of the dissertation, I will try to summarize those elements that within my own competence seem to me essential for assessing the qualities of the candidate for the degree of "Doctor of Science".

The great merits of the dissertation stand out in the very first pages with the clear formulation of the goals, tasks, sources and research methods, which fully correspond to the best established scientific standards in modern science. A particularly significant achievement is the real, and not just declared, as often happens, interdisciplinary approach. The combination of methods from various fields of humanities and technical knowledge requires meticulous preparation, orientation and use of diverse literature, as well as in-depth knowledge of archeology, history, chemistry, physics, metallurgy and mining, which are definitely beyond every scholar's capacity. Stella Doncheva has managed to cope perfectly with this challenge and to balance skillfully and professionally in each of these disciplines.

The two-part structure of the work was chosen quite rightly. It corresponds to the two large groups of questions to which the author seeks answers. The first is related to the study of

the production which is dominated by the presence of the pieces of the belt sets in all three centers. The candidate concentrates her research efforts on the pieces of the belt sets and examines them in the three chapters of the first part from different aspects and in a wide comparative pattern (typology by type, shape, decoration, reconstruction of the belt setting, its function, general and specific features in every one of the three centers, elements' composition of the materials used). The second problem, to which the four chapters of the second part are devoted, covers the issues of production technology at all its stages from the extraction and supply of raw materials through the making of models and providing the necessary tools and devices to foundry and jewelry techniques. It seems to me that, in view of the logic of the exposition, the places of the second and third chapters of Part I should be swapped. In Chapter 3 the title of Part 3.2 Belt sets from Southeast Europe does not correspond to its content, which applies only to materials from different regions of Russia (pp. 237-247). Scientific narrative could also be improved by clearer logical connections were made between the individual parts to limit the sense of incoherence in the text.

One of the significant contributions that will be used for many years ahead is the vast empirical material gathered in the course of Assoc. Prof. Doncheva's personal long-term research in the field and in the museum collections, as well as her detailed knowledge and examination of each piece. The high research qualities possessed by the author are best expressed in the direct examination of each piece, and some theoretical assessments and historical-cultural interpretations could be more convincingly supported by bibliographical references and a clearer connection with the considered concrete material.

Assoc. Prof. Doncheva's decision to approach to the first of its kind in our country study of the element composition of selected archaeological specimens is fundamental, and innovative, and showed extremely valuable results. For the purpose she used the so-called RJE-method to compare her study with the element composition of ore developments and thus to establish the origin of the metal, which she fairly connects with the Burgas-Strandzha ore fields. Data on the composition of the used metals are a completely new source of information about medieval production, and allow us to draw conclusions that are important for different features of medieval life in our lands such as interregional contacts and specializations, strategic areas of economic interest, trade relations, regional economy and even the political priorities of the state at certain times. Her conclusions about the technological process with all its stages and the related tools and equipment are no less contributing. They fit into the modern and rapidly developing research field related to the study and reconstruction of ancient techniques and technologies and the increased global interest in projects in the field of

experimental archeology or history. Stella Doncheva draws important conclusions about the lack of direct connection between developed metal production and territorial proximity to raw materials, the importance of ingots, free trade in materials and finished products, the high organization and mass production practiced by foundries around Preslav, about their serious knowledge of the physical properties of metals and alloys, based on practical experience and the transmission of craft traditions and the ability to influence and change them if desired, to control the production process, to dose impurities. Extremely curious is the panorama of the full range of foundry and jewelry tools, indicative of the level of practiced crafts in the vicinity of the Bulgarian capital. With enviable methodological ingenuity Stella Doncheva asks the appropriate questions to her sources in order to present a convincing and complete picture of practically all aspects (material, technological, social, and artistic) in the activities of the three metalworking centers around Veliki Preslav.

I fully accept the author's contributions, which she has presented very modestly and sparingly, in contrast to the voluminous and comprehensive work, but the single page on which they are presented gives a fairly clear idea of her main merits in the field of metal production in the region of Veliki Preslav. I would like to emphasize in particular the generalized "open" typology, which has allowed her not to fall back on irrelevant classifications, but to distinguish serial production from individual orders, as well as the specifics of the work of each of the three centers. I consider well-founded and important her thesis about the desacralization of the old-Bulgarian belt in this period, the study of which is very important in the context of the change of the general cultural model after the conversion to Christianity. The idea of having a "pictorial program" in belt sets (pp. 29, 116) needs additional arguments, as the outlined repertoire of decorative motifs is quite standard and common to a wide range of decorative practices at the time (book decoration; ceramics, stone sculpture, bone), both in Preslav and in the vast Byzantine and Mediterranean world. Moreover, as Assoc. Prof. Doncheva, well emphasizes, the used motifs have lost their original symbolism and perform an exquisitely decorative-ornamental role (which, incidentally, makes it meaningless to clarify their primary meaning in different cultures - pp. 110-117). The existence of a "program" presupposes the exact opposite - an embedded conceptual idea that is clearly understandable for both craftsmen and users.

An integral part of the dissertation is the three appendices, which have individual and contributing significance with their high informative value. They successfully illustrate the author's analyzes and directly support her arguments. I would like to pay special attention to the importance of the proposed original graphic reconstructions of belts based on a wide range

of parallels from well-dated complexes in the country and in similar cultural situations and different types of sources - archaeological finds, images and texts (Fig. 1.3.76, 78, 80, 81). The richness of this "illustrative" part of the work is great, as it not only illustrates the typological diversity of the finds, but also offers an exclusive repertoire of images of objects from similar cultures, tables and graphs with data on the elements of the metal composition of single products and groups of products.

The author's summary booklet of the dissertation fully and adequately reflects the content of the dissertation.

Similarly to any human work, the presented study is not deprived of opportunities for improvement. To the series of technical errors I would add the surprising abbreviation *Opp. cit.* which the author systematically uses in the footnotes. It must be corrected with *Op. cit.*, i.e. the generally accepted and obligatory spelling with one "p", since it is well known to have originated from the Latin *opus citatum*. The work would also benefit greatly from a thorough proofreading to refine the syntax, the use of prepositions and punctuation (especially the indiscriminate use of the comma) according to the Bulgarian language norms. It is also appropriate the toponyms mentioned in the text to be written in the language in which the dissertation is written, i.e. in Bulgarian. Undoubtedly, the entire scientific apparatus could be inspected, as its presentation is lacking the necessary coherence.

None of these remarks can belittle the author's broad expert knowledge on the subject, which allows her to purposefully interpret the facts and critically consider them, to substantiate her theses with full argumentation, referring to her good bibliographical knowledge, which serves her analysis well. The whole work is a proof of professional competence, of having one's own ideas on the issues under consideration, of a critical view and analytical competence. This is a research completed at a very high level. It is distinguished by its contribution to a significant issue. Appreciating highly the presented dissertation work "The production of artistic metal in early medieval Bulgaria (based on the finds data)", as well as the author's indisputable competence and professionalism, her practical field experience, her previous research achievements and their unconditional acceptance by specialists, I strongly recommend conferring the scientific degree "Doctor of Historical Sciences" on Associate Professor Stella Milcheva Doncheva, PhD.

12/08/2020



Assoc. Prof. Albena Milanova, PhD