

## A STATEMENT

about the dissertation "The production of artistic metal in early medieval Bulgaria (based on the finds data)", presented by Assoc. Prof. Stella Doncheva, PhD

for obtaining the scientific degree "Doctor of Science"

in a professional field 2.2. History and archeology, scientific subject area Archeology  
(Medieval Bulgarian archeology)

by Assoc. Prof. Angel Nikolov, PhD.

Faculty of History, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski "

Department of History of Bulgaria

The dissertation "Production of artistic metal in early medieval Bulgaria (based on the finds data)" presented by Assoc. Prof. Stella Doncheva, PhD. consists of an introduction, seven chapters, divided into two parts, conclusion, lists of cited literature and abbreviations, three appendices with illustrative materials, tables and graphs, as the total volume of the main text is 549 pages, and the appendices - 365 pages.

The introduction draws the reader's attention to the need to reconstruct the model of technological development in early medieval Bulgaria (this development is defined as a set of technical and technological stereotype, production traditions and influences from other cultures) through the prism of production centers documented by archeology /p. 8/. The subject and purpose of the dissertation are clearly defined. The work reflects the results of the author's long-term research on over 3,000 belt sets discovered during the archeological excavations of the three early medieval centers for artistic metal production from the first half - mid 10<sup>th</sup> century, located near the capital city of Preslav - near the village of Novosel (Shumen municipality), Zlatar village (Veliki Preslav municipality) and Nadarevo village (Targovishte municipality). In particular, Assoc. Prof. Doncheva PhD has focused her efforts on "presenting the belt as a single and strictly organized composition, composed of separate and morphologically, technologically and stylistically related details (buckles, belt ends and appliqués) - elements of the ornate leather strap ... Additionally are presented the numerous finds from studies abroad that were discovered in synchronous cultures and prove the role of the ornate belt in the medieval costume at that time. The set belt marks an ethno-cultural affiliation presented in connection with the other accessories to the belt set, as well as in view of the stylistic features of the constituent elements on it,"/p. 11/.

The following seven research tasks have predetermined the structure of the dissertation, which undoubtedly has an interdisciplinary character /p. 13/, and through the methodology and tools of several scientific disciplines it reveals new opportunities for

research in the field of archeology, economic and social history, art history, history of technology and others.

**Part I** of the dissertation consists of three chapters, dedicated respectively to the *general characteristics and features of the metal-plastic elements of the belt sets* (buckles, belt ends and appliques) /Ch. 1/; element analysis of raw materials and products from the three centers for production of artistic metal /Ch. 2/; *Reconstruction of belt sets and the functioning of belt sets as a symbol of social and ethnic affiliation in today's Bulgarian lands* in the context of rich comparative material from Southeast and Central Europe and from different regions of the Eurasian zone /Ch. 3/.

The typology of belt sets from Novosel, Zlatar and Nadarevo that Stella Doncheva suggests is noteworthy as an indisputable contribution in this part of the dissertation. The typology is based on a comprehensive description of a large number of materials following a detailed form of the characteristics of this type of finds /pp. 15-22/, as Appendix I /pp. 1-64/ and Appendix II /pp. 1-132/ contain abundant material illustrating this key segment of the main text.

The methodological systematization and interpretation of the production of the three production centers have allowed the author to suggest convincing and reliable reconstructions of belt sets, taking into account their local variations and specifics /pp. 257-267/.

The section "The belt - a symbol of social affiliation" (Chapter 3.1) is definitely worth mentioning. Quite rightly, Stella Doncheva notes that from ancient times this part of the costume has a "clearly expressed ethnic color", and its perception is very complex and goes along two lines - "folk, based on the notions of the magical ritual role of the belt in the life of the individual and the community; and military-aristocratic, which originated in the heroic era and became popular when the war became a factor in interethnic relations"/p. 229/.

The sources used by the author for the functioning of belts of different design and decoration as a symbol of power, prestige, social status, and even as an "amulet" /p. 230/ among the Eurasian nomads, and at least from the 6th century onwards among their "sedentary" neighbors (Byzantium, Persia, China), convince us that the interest in this element of men's costume in early medieval Bulgaria is not an end in itself.

Stella Doncheva joins those contemporary authors who believe that in the period before the conversion to Christianity and immediately after that the belt was a sign of military affiliation and investiture in the structure of the military class: "The identification of the ornate belt as an insignia used by the old Bulgarian official aristocracy explains the presence of the numerous and varied belt elements. They are the product of masters who worked for the needs of a ruler and aristocrats with different ranks in the official hierarchy. It is very probable that the richly decorated belts were ordered by the ruler and then distributed to the aristocracy according to rank" /p. 235/.

The author's arguments seem acceptable that if at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> - beginning of the 9<sup>th</sup> century such belt sets were intended for a not very numerous military-aristocratic elite,

then a century later, at the beginning of 10<sup>th</sup> century, the decorated belt gradually was "profaned", and its widespread popularity among the general population led to mass production of predominantly copper alloy castings.

For the time being it remains debatable whether and to what extent, however, this trend, evidenced by the production of the three famous production centers in the northeastern Bulgarian lands, should be explained with the emergence of a "specific poly-ethnic collective culture" at the same time in Eastern Europe /p. 236/.

In any case, in a future preparation of the text for printing, I would recommend that this section be included at the beginning of the work as a panoramic introduction to the historical significance of the topic. It is not necessary to change the place of the second and third sections of chapter 3, which make a good introduction to chapter 4.

Here I will not elaborate further on the full of specific technical details presentation in Ch. 2 /"Element analysis of raw materials and products"/, but I cannot ignore the great importance for our and foreign historiography of the fact established in the course of these studies that the bulk of raw materials used in production centers in Novosel, Zlatar and Nadarevo, originates from deposits in the Burgas-Strandzha ore region /pp. 119-220; the laboratory results of the analyzes are presented in the form of tables and graphs in Appendix III, pp. 1-95/. By the way, here I want to note that the author has summarized her research on this issue in an article, which for objective reasons she failed to include in the attached list of her selected publications on the topic: Doncheva, S. Strandzha ore fields - a source of raw material for the production of artistic metal in medieval Bulgaria. - In: The cultural heritage of Strandzha. Wealth, risks, challenges. Comp. A. Nikolov. Sofia: University Publishing House "St. Kliment Ohridski ", 2019, 45-71.

**Part II** of the dissertation consists of four chapters, united around the great theme of technology and practice of jewelry production in the Middle Ages: mining and metallurgy /*Ch. 1*/; metals and alloys: structure; properties; base metals and alloys used in artistic metal complexes; chemistry and alchemy /*Ch. 2*/; tools and devices: foundry practice; cleaning, grinding and finery of castings; forged relief, stamping, artistic engraving /*Ch. 3*/; technology and practice: foundry and forging practices, metal coatings, artistic decoration, connecting elements, drawing /*Ch. 4*/. It can be said that here the author has successfully achieved her goal to clarify the level of technologies used by Bulgarian masters from the first half of the tenth century. The presentation is appropriately supplemented with abundant pictorial material in Appendix I /pp. 65-139/.

In the conclusion, Stella Doncheva has summarized the main conclusions of her research. Based on the fact that the belt sets studied by her are monuments of a purely secular nature, made in local production centers, the author finds the origin of their form and ornamentation in the Bulgarians' own cultural tradition, whose roots go back to the "interaction between late Avar and Bulgarian practice in the production of belt sets" /pp. 495-496/. In the tenth century the elements inherited from the proto-Bulgarian tradition were combined with Byzantine plant ornaments in the decoration of the belt sets /p. 496/, and at the same time there was a process of "desacralization" and transformation of the belt set into a

specific manifestation of the popular tendencies in the Eurasian fashion, from which Bulgarians, Hungarians and Russians were influenced in different ways and with different intensity /p. 499/. Noting that materials from the excavations at Novosel, Zlatar and Nadarevo account for the existence of a large-scale organized production of artistic metal in the vicinity of Preslav, the author rightly concludes that "the rich pictorial program that the finds display is a reflection of its creators' creative potential and artistic a sense. These are not ordinary craftsmen, but actually jewelers – creators of a world saturated with vivid imagery" /p. 501/.

I would like to note that in the brief review made in the conclusion by Stella Doncheva of the written sources in which Bulgarian belts are mentioned /p. 497/, no Byzantine author appears. A little above in the text of the dissertation, however, it is stated, with reference to N. Mavrodinov, that the Byzantines witnessed the practice of wearing such belts, defined as "Bulgarian belts", consisting of gold and silver belt ends and appliques" /p. 496/. The quoted article by N. Mavrodinov is not available to me, but the same scholar in his later publication<sup>1</sup> reproduces „Ζωνάρια δὲ λιτὰ καὶ οὐ Βουλγαρικὰ σαγία“ in Pseudo-Mauricii Strategicon<sup>2</sup> - the sentence which was misinterpreted of in our older historiography<sup>3</sup> and which was subsequently translated relatively more correctly by G. Tsankova-Petkova "To wear narrow belts and not to use Bulgarian cloaks"<sup>4</sup>. By the way, this specific example of the consequences of "over-trusting" established researchers in our science gives me the reason to suggest that the problem of written sources should find a place in the beginning and not in the conclusion of the printed version of the dissertation.

After the conclusion there is a list of used literature /pp. 503-547/, a list of abbreviations used /p. 548/ and reference for the contributions of the dissertation /p. 549/.

An integral part of the work is the three appendices with a total volume of 365 pages, which we had the opportunity to mention in the course of our presentation.

In conclusion, I would like to summarize that the dissertation presented by Assoc. Prof. Stella Doncheva, PhD. is a serious contribution to the study of artistic metal in early medieval Bulgaria and significantly enhances our knowledge of artistic and technological skills of craft communities from the three production centers that functioned actively in the first half of the tenth century. The social and symbolic role of belt sets during the same period in the context of a wide range of comparisons with similar material, mainly from South-Eastern and Central Europe, is clarified. Based on this, and having in mind the numerous

---

<sup>1</sup> Мавроудинов, Н. Старобългарското изкуство. Изкуството на Първото българско царство. София, 1959, с. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Pseudo-Mauricii Strategicon XII B 1.8.

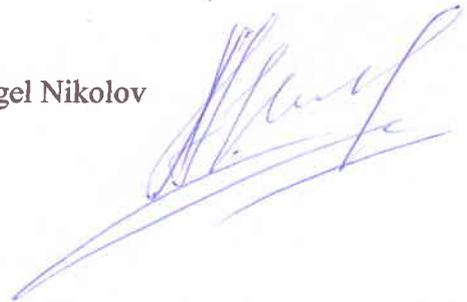
<sup>3</sup> For a review of the literature on the subject, see: Димитров, Д. Днешното състояние на въпроса за прабългарския характер на златното съкровище от Надисентмиклош. – Известия на Българското историческо дружество, XXII-XXIV, 1948, с. 370; Рашев, Р. Прабългарите през V – VII в. София, 2005, с. 173.

<sup>4</sup> ГИБИ. Т. II. София, 1958, с. 289. Such an understanding of the text is adopted in the German translation of E. Gamilscheg – Das Strategikon des Maurikios. Einführung, Edition und Indices G. T. Dennis. Übersetzung von E. Gamilscheg [= CFHB, 17]. Wien, 1981, S. 421: „Außerdem (tragen die Soldaten) schmale Gürtel, aber keine bulgarischen Mäntel“. In the English and Russian translations of the text a different logic is adopted, which, however, does not change the meaning of the expression "Bulgarian cloak" – Maurice's Strategikon. Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy. Transl. by G. T. Dennis. Philadelphia, 1984, p. 138: „Their mantles should be simple, not like the Bulgarian cloaks“; Стратегикон Маврикия. Изд. подг. В. В. Кучма. Санкт-Петербург, 2004, с. 203: „Необходимо носить также простые накидки, но не болгарские саги“.

publications presented by her on the topic of the dissertation, as well as the availability of the required number of citations, I propose to the esteemed Scientific Jury to award Assoc. Prof. Stella Doncheva, PhD. the degree "Doctor of Science" in a professional field 2.2. History and archeology, scientific subject area Archeology (Medieval Bulgarian archeology).

Sofia 12.08.2020

Assoc. Prof. Angel Nikolov

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Angel Nikolov', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the left.