

Review

of the academic works of Dr. Nikolay Tanev Sirakov, participant in the competition promulgated in the *State Gazette* No. 57/9 July 2021 for receiving the academic position of **Associate Professor** in the professional sphere of higher education 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, Professional Field, 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Studies, for the needs of the Regional Museum of History – Sliven

by Prof. Dr. Vassil Markov, Lecturer of Ancient Cultures in the Culturology Department, Faculty of the Arts of the *Neophyte Rilski Southwest* University, member of the Academic Panel with Order No. 90 ПД-16/22.07.2021 of the Director of the *Professor Alexander Fol* Institute of Balkan Studies with Centre of Thracology of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

Only one candidate – Dr. Nikolay Tanev Sirakov – has applied to take part in the competition. Dr. Nikolay Tanev Sirakov obtained his MA in Archaeology in 1999 at the St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo. In 2003, he completed his MA of Finance at the St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo with educational degree Master of Economics. In 2017, he completed an MA programme in Culturology at the New Bulgarian University and obtained his Master of Art History degree. In 2017–2018, he was PhD student at the New Bulgarian University under the PhD Programme on Theory of the Arts. He defended successfully his dissertation work on *The Language of the Thracians along the Middle Course of the Toundja River* and obtained his PhD degree in the professional field of Art Theory and academic specialisation in Art History and Visual Research.

Between 2003 and 20013, Dr. Nikolay Tanev Sirakov worked as curator-archaeologist at the *Dr. Simeon Tabakov* Regional Museum of History – Sliven. He is member of the Union of Scientists in Bulgaria – Sliven Branch.

Dr. Nikolay Sirakov complies with the minimum national requirements for **Associate Professor** in professional field 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences. He participates in the competition for the academic position of **Associate Professor** in Professional Field, 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Studies with one habilitation work, three monographs (in co-authorship) and 11 research papers (4 autonomous and 7 in co-authorship).

The habilitation work of Dr. Nikolay Sirakov – *Ancient Articles of Adornment from the Regional Museum of History – Sliven*. Sliven, Obnova Publishers, ISBN 978-619-7445-42-8 contains 152 p. text and a rich annex named *Images* that consists of photographs with 98 images of the ancient articles of adornment and 20 drawings of fibulae. The monograph is structured in three chapters, as well as *Introduction* and *Conclusion*, and detailed bibliography.

In the *Introduction* the author presents the issues connected with the emergence and evolution of the articles of adornment during the Antiquity, familiarises with the materials used and with the technologies for the processing of precious metals and of precious and semi-precious stones. Attention is focused on the semantic charge of the images, as well as on the apotropaic and magic functions of the articles of adornment during the Antiquity.

In the beginning of the chapter *History of the Articles of Adornment* Dr. Nikolay Sirakov presents the history of metal extraction in the Sliven region during the Antiquity. Ore mining and metal production during the Chalcolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages are discussed, indicating the concrete evidence about these processes in the investigated region: ore mines, miners' settlements and traces of metal extraction and metalworking. Then the author introduces the issue with the appearance of the emporia in the region: the Tuida marketplace on the territory of the present-day town of Sliven as a centre of trade, including of metal extraction, metalworking, and possibly more specifically of the jeweller's art.

A special place in the text of this chapter is devoted to the deposits and extraction of gold as the principal material for the jeweller's art from the Chalcolithic Age until the end of the Antiquity. The main gold-mining regions in Anatolia, in the Balkans, and more specifically on today's Bulgarian territory, are outlined, indicating the role of gold yield by panning gold-bearing sand from the gold-bearing rivers in Ancient Thrace. There is also a separate emphasis on silver mining in Anatolia, in the Balkans and in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The second part of Chapter One makes a survey of peak achievement of the jeweller's art in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Aegean culture, the Etruscan culture, in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, and making an artistic analysis also of individual remarkable monument. Although the character of the text here tends to resemble a textbook, I find that this part of the monograph is a necessary preparation for the next two chapters devoted specifically to the presentation of the monuments of ancient art kept at the Regional Museum of History – Sliven. In my opinion, the monograph would have gained more if the subtitles of the periods in the history of the jeweller's art during the Antiquity had been formulated more precisely and with a view to the issues addressed, and not merely with the laconical *Egypt, Aegea, Etruscan, etc.*

Chapter Two is devoted to the articles of adornment for the head in the ancient collection of the Regional Museum of History – Sliven. The author initially addresses three monuments symbolising the attaining of immortality in Ancient Thrace. The gold wreath from the Kitova Mogila tumulus in Krushare village, Sliven region, is interpreted in such an aspect on the basis of a broad comparative analysis. Special place is devoted to the two gold masks found in the Yakimova Mogila tumulus near Krushare village, Sliven region, and the mask from Daskalova Mogila. The author links with sound arguments these ritual objects with the immortalisation rites in Ancient Thrace and the transformation of the Thracian king who had passed through death into anthropodaimon and god. It is interesting to note also the author's theory about the presence of the golden ratio in the mask from Daskalova Mogila. That theory needs to be verified with respect to the other famous masks from the territory of Thrace.

Attention is devoted to the hairpins as part of the hairstyles of the women during the Roman Age. The emphasis is on the presence of the image of a phallus on a bronze hairpin found on a ritual platform in the Popova Mogila tumulus in Trapoklovo village. On the basis of broad comparative analysis connected with the symbolism and functions of the phallus during the Antiquity, the author interprets the phallus not only as a symbol of fertility, but also as a symbol of reincarnation and rebirth in a new life, in the spirit of the Thracian Orphic religion.

The collection of ancient earrings, rings, necklaces and beads owned by the Regional Museum of History – Sliven is also presented. Dr. Sirakov dwells in detail on a cult scene depicted on a bead and its parallels that he finds in the mythology and cult practices of Ancient Mesopotamia, and associates with the transfer of the ancient mystical knowledge.

Chapter Three of the reviewed monograph is devoted to the articles of adornment for the body in the collection of the Regional Museum of History – Sliven. The author first familiarises us with the role and the evolution of the fibula as a functional object and as an article of adornment. The fibulae in the Museum's collection are presented in catalogue form in comparative plan with analogous monuments and in chronological order. With respect to the rings, the author makes an extensive introduction into the history and typology of that article of adornment, with special emphasis on the gems of the rings and their workmanship. Dr. Sirakov dwells in detail on the artistic characteristics and the possible semanticism of the image on the gem of the gold ring from Yakimova Mogila in the Krushare village near Sliven. The hypotheses proposed by the author result from a broad comparative-historical and artistic analysis. The inscription on the ring-seal from Dalakova Mogila near Topolchane village, Sliven district, is also subjected to detailed comparative-historical analysis. Here the author launches with arguments the thesis that the ring belonged to the Thracian paradynast Seuthes II. The gold rings with images of Demeter and Hera from Kitova Mogila near Krushare village, Sliven region, are also presented in comparative plan. The images of Artemis, the Sphinx and Hermes on the gold rings from Taneva Mogila near Kaloyanovo, Sliven region, are subjected to semantic analysis in the context of the ancient Greek mythology, religion and cult. That part of the monograph presents also a number of ancient rings – part of the Museum's collection and originating from the region explored, as well as rings with unknown provenance. The text of Chapter Three ends with presentation of the ancient bracelets, the metal plaques and appliqués from the Museum's collection.

Dr. Nikolay Sirakov has summarised in the Conclusion the principal theses in the text on the history and functions of articles of adornment during the Antiquities. The work would gain more if there had been a summarised text with the author's vision based on his concrete research on the collection of ancient articles of adornment in the Regional Museum of History – Sliven.

The bibliography of the reviewed monograph is extensive and presents the studies on these research issues sufficiently completely.

Dr. Nikolay Sirakov participates in the competition with three other monographs – all three in co-authorship. The book *The Horse and Its Mythological Transformations. Three Ancient Monuments from the Collection of the Regional Museum of History – Sliven* is in co-authorship with Georgi Kovachev. The authors present in a broad comparative plan the emergence, role and place of the horse in the prehistoric and ancient cultures, as well as the processes of its mythologisation and its association with certain deities, heroes and mythological kings. They introduce three remarkable monuments as well: mythological transformations of the horse kept at the Regional Museum of History – Sliven, a ceramic rhyton in the form of a *hippalectryon* from Taneva Mogila, a silver rhyton with centaur's protome from Dalakova Mogila and an image of a hippocampus on a bronze ring kept in the Museum. As a result of a broad and in-depth comparative-historical and artistic analysis of analogous monuments from the Eastern Mediterranean, in Chapter One the authors argue that the *hippalectryon* on the clay rhyton from Taneva Mogila ought to be perceived as royal symbol in Thrace. The centaur's protome from the royal burial in the Dalakova Mogila tumulus is interpreted in Chapter Two as a royal sign connected with the ancestors, apotropaic and mythological symbol guaranteeing the rebirth of the initiated Orphic. The hippocampus on the bronze ring is analysed in Chapter Three of the book. The image is interpreted in a

broad comparative plan of the ancient mythology and the images of the hippocampus in the ancient Mediterranean visual art. The Conclusion summarises the principal theses in the text. The bibliography is detailed. A merit of the monograph can be seen in the rich Annex consisting of 128 images, most of which are adduced as parallels to the examined exhibits from the collection of the Regional Museum of History – Sliven.

The book *Pages from the History of Kaloyanovo Village* (co-authors Nedelcho Mitarkov and Minko Stefanov) and the book *Under the Banner of Freedom: the Goryani in the Sliven Region*. Sliven, 2021 (co-authors Maria Pavlova and Penka Dimitrova) are Dr. Sirakov's contribution to the research of the local lore, history and culture of the Sliven region.

Dr. Nikolay Sirakov has submitted for his participation in the competition 11 articles, ten of which in Bulgarian and one in English; four of them are autonomous and seven in co-authorship. They can be organised in several thematic circles according to the character of the issues researched, reflecting the author's academic interests and research.

The thematic circle of research articles on the presentation and introduction in academic circulation of newly-found cultural-historical monuments is the biggest. These are predominantly the articles resulting from the archaeological explorations *in situ* of Dr. Nikolay Sirakov in the Sliven, Nova Zagora and Haskovo regions, in the published series of the National Archaeological Institute with Museum of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences: *Archaeological Discoveries and Excavations*, *Archaeological Explorations of the Tuida Late Antiquity and Medieval Fortress in Sliven*, *An Ancient Site on the Territory of Zornitsa Village, Haskovo Municipality* (in co-authorship with Vesselin Ignatov), *Terrain Explorations in the Villages Nauchene, Nova Zagora Municipality and Strupen, Sliven Municipality* (in co-authorship with Vesselin Ignatov).

The second group of articles focus on publishing unknown and little known monuments of the ancient jeweller's art and toreutics, and their analysing in an artistic, semantic and functional aspect: *Silver Rhyton with a Protome of Centaur* (in co-authorship with Georgi Kovachev), *Erotic Bronze Hairpin*, *The Golden Ratio of the Gold Mask* (in co-authorship with Denis Sirakov and Marieta Sirakova). Special attention in this group should be given to the candidate's article *The Thracian Heritage in the Regional Museum of History – Sliven: on the Semantics and Functions of the "Female "Objects" in the Royal Burial*, where the group of "female objects" is interpreted as a sign of sacred marriage of the deified Thracian dynast with the Great Goddess, after he passes through death.

Dr. Nikolay Sirakov's study *Stefan Gidikov – Patriot from Sliven and Supporter of Georgi Rakovski* can be attributed to a third group of articles on the local lore in the Sliven region.

On the whole, it should be pointed out that in the academic monographs and papers submitted for the competition, the candidate for the position of **Associate Professor**, Dr. Nikolay Sirakov, has attained significant research findings, including research discoveries *in situ*, results from the scientific analysis of monuments of ancient toreutics and ancient jeweller's art. It is necessary to add to them the candidate's contribution to the research and popularising of the local lore history of Sliven and its region.

More comments and recommendations can be addressed to the texts of the reviewed research publications. However, this is not the most important thing. The most important thing is that

the colleague Nikolay Sirakov has coped successfully with a complex and difficult research task that is interdisciplinary in character.

Conclusion:

In view of everything stated above, I would recommend to the distinguished Academic Panel to confer to Dr. Nikolay Tanev Sirakov the academic title of **Associate Professor** in the professional sphere 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, Professional Field, 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Studies.

Reviewer:

/sg./ Prof. Dr. Vassil Markov

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Blagoevgrad