

OPINION

of Prof. Dr. Albena Georgieva

on the selection of **Associate Professor** in the sphere of higher education **3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences**, in Professional Field 3.1. **Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Studies** for the needs of the Regional Museum of History – Sliven with **Dr. Nikolay Tanev Sirakov** as the only candidate

Dr. Nikolay Sirakov has obtained three MA degrees: Archaeology (1999), Economy (2003) and Art History (2017), and he has a PhD degree in Art History and Visual Arts since 2017. The qualifications obtained are a prerequisite for his successful work as curator and archaeologist (for the 2003–2013 period), and since 2013 – Director of the *Dr. Simeon Tabakov* Regional Museum of History – Sliven. As the publications submitted for the competition suggest, the main focus of his research interests comprises regional archaeological finds, as well as phenomena and individuals from the local history of the Sliven region. From the very start I shall point out that the good knowledge of the sites of local archaeology and history, as well as of the objects kept in the regional museum, combined with their comprehensive investigation and interpretation, is both professional obligation and a mission of a museum worker, and especially for the Director of the museum. In this sense, I appreciate highly Nikolay Sirakov's competences as museum specialist working with the aim of broadening, deepening and popularising the knowledge connected with the regional archaeological excavations and with the artefacts exhibited at the Regional Museum of History – Sliven.

The habilitation work which the candidate has submitted for the competition is the monograph *Ancient Articles of Adornment from the Regional Museum of History – Sliven* (2021). The study presents clearly and convincingly the principal line in the author's research, as well as the methods of observation and analysis used by him. The book presents the emergence of the early metalworking and the archaeological evidence of the mining and processing of metals in the Sliven region, notably copper, iron, gold and silver, and parallels are drawn with similar processes in Europe and in the world. The historical evolution of the technologies and equipment and tools used. Special attention is devoted to the development of the jeweller's art in Sumer, Egypt, the Aegean region, Etruria, Greece and Rome. Then different types of articles of adornment kept at the Regional Museum of History in Sliven are examined consistently: articles of adornment for the head (wreaths, masks, hairpins, earrings, necklaces, medallions, beads, etc.) and for the body (fibulae, rings, bracelets, plaques, appliqués and mirrors).

Each object is described in detail, indicating its provenance and the context of its finding, as well as its characteristic features, dating and links with definite ancient traditions of workmanship. Judging by concrete forms or images, the author launches assumptions about its purpose and about its possible symbolism – a rather difficult task in view of the remoteness in time, the absence of written evidence and the need for a comparison to be made with a large number of cultural facts from the traditions of the various peoples in ancient times. The role of the articles of adornment for the wellbeing, rank and social prestige of the individual, for the belonging to a military or religious organisation, for securing protection against evil forces and bad influences is presented. The author examines the various objects and the images on them both as a reflection of the existing views on the transition to the World Beyond after death, and of the possibilities for reincarnation and for securing immortality of their owner. The book is abundantly illustrated with photographs and drawings.

Nikolay Sirakov's style of work, demonstrated in his monograph and consisting in comprehensive presentation of the entire facts connected with the archaeological site, tracing parallels and links with other analogous artefacts from closer and more remote areas in the Antiquity and the search for an in-depth insight in the context and symbolism of the form and images, can be perceived in his articles as well. It is interesting to note the description and the interpretation of the bronze hairpin found in the Popova Mogila tumulus and defined by the author as "erotic." The phallus depicted on it is interpreted synchronously with the notions and beliefs in ancient times as a symbol of life, luck and fertility (p. 276). The fact that the hairpin was placed in a subtumular embankment is perceived as "mysterical concealing" (p. 277) and is associated with the notions about the structure of the microcosmos, the rebirth and fertility in Nature, and the energy immortality beyond death.

Nikolay Sirakov shares interesting observations also in the article *The Thracian Heritage in the Regional Museum of History – Sliven: on the Semanticism and the Functions of the "Female Objects" in the Royal Burial* (2019). The author points out that the objects placed in the grave were deliberately selected and taken out of their everyday use, being designations of social, ideological and religious notions, which "may be viewed as signs and symbols of a text built in advance" (p. 297). According to his interpretation, placing female objects in the dynast's grave was symbolic presentation of his sacred marriage (hierogamy) with the Goddess-Mother after his death. That marriage is a guarantee for his new birth in the World Beyond.

Most of the other texts with which Nikolay Sirakov is applying for the academic position of **Associate Professor** are written in co-authorship, which is easily explainable in view of the high degree of teamwork typical of archaeologists and historians. One of the books published in co-authorship with Georgi Kovachev is also devoted to three ancient monuments from the collection of the Regional Museum of History – Sliven, with mythological transformations of the horse: combination between horse and bird (*hippaelectryon*), between horse and human creature (*centaur*) and between horse and fish (*hippocampus*). After drawing parallels with different ancient cultural traditions, these mythical creatures are interpreted as designating chaos or a wild/uncultured state, as mediators with the World Beyond and as classifiers to denote the dynast's omnipotence, and the harmony and domination attained by him over the elements through mastering them.

An important book with the participation of Nikolay Sirakov is devoted to the Goryani in the Sliven region. The authors state the following in the Preface: "The Goryani movement, which emerged as a sign of disagreement with the Bolshevik regime imposed in Bulgaria with the help of the Red Army, was the first massive and longest-lasting anti-communist resistance in the countries from the Eastern Bloc. The Goryani movement was on the largest scale and best organised on the territory of the Sliven region, but few people know that" (p. 5). As very little was known or written about the Goryani movement, the reader would like to learn more – in the event that new and more detailed data are found in the future. Other collective monographs with the participation of Nikolay Sirakov as archaeologist, focus on the settlement history of the villages Kaloyanovo and Zhelyo Voyvoda near Sliven. Being essentially useful and containing diverse information, these texts create a poor impression with their numerous mistakes and unedited language and orthography, as well as with the incompletely cited sources of information.

In my opinion, of particular interest among the articles written in co-authorship is the one in co-authorship with Vladimir Demirev and devoted to the images in relief of a "stone herd." Since I am personally familiar with the monument, I find that it would

be appropriate to introduce it in academic circulation, to clarify the issues that it raises and to create thus an impetus for research on it to continue. The remaining articles with other authors aim at popularising different archaeological finds from the Sliven region over the years.

The arguments presented above, albeit brief, outline Dr. Nikolay Sirakov as a profound researcher of the Sliven region and a good connoisseur of the valuable ancient objects kept at the Regional Museum of History – Sliven. His research occupations contribute to raising the prestige and popularity of the institution he is heading, and give hope that his creative development will continue in the future as well. It is my belief that he deserves to be conferred the academic position of **Associate Professor** in the sphere of higher education **3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences**, in Professional Field 3.1. **Sociology, Anthropology and Culture Studies**, for which he is applying.

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