REVIEW

by Prof. I. Popova, Faculty of History, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

on the doctoral thesis by Nadezhda Zaharieva Yanakieva, a full-time PhD student in the "Culture of the Balkans" section, IBSCT – BAS, entitled ***"Roads and Buildings in the Balkans according to the Italian Travel-Writing Tradition (16th–17th Centuries)***" in Research Area 3.1. Sociology, Anthropology and Cultural Studies, Research Programme "Theory and History of Culture".

Firstly, I must note that the procedure followed by PhD candidate Nadezhda Yanakieva has been carried out in accordance with the requirements of the relevant legislation. The submitted thesis meets the minimum national requirements, and the topic under consideration is original and topical. I have carefully reviewed the submitted text and can state with confidence from the outset that the work makes a valuable contribution.

It consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, three appendices, sources and bibliography, and a list of abbreviations, totalling 239 pages.

I would like to emphasise that the thesis is devoted to an interesting issue which has not previously been the subject of in-depth research in Bulgarian historiography. The research is based on a specific range of sources, and new sources have also been introduced, enabling the doctoral candidate to reach the relevant conclusions.

In the introduction, N. Yanakieva clearly sets out the aims and objectives of her research and defines its methods. Yanakieva formulates the main objective as follows: "to fill a specific gap in research by examining the infrastructural and spatial characteristics of the Balkans in the context of Ottoman political and cultural reality, as seen through the eyes of Italian travellers". The chronological scope of the work, as indicated in the title, is defined as the 16th–17th centuries, with a justification provided for the choice of this period. The objectives of the thesis are also outlined – "the selection, translation from Italian (where the texts have not been translated into Bulgarian) and analysis of those parts of the works that contain valuable information about the roads, settlements and buildings on the Balkan Peninsula". The author also discusses the sources she has selected, noting that they include texts of various kinds – diplomatic reports, travel diaries, itineraries, commercial descriptions and personal accounts – and correctly observes that "this diversity makes it possible to trace different perspectives on the roads and infrastructure of the Balkans". Texts by Benedetto Ramberti, Catharin Dzen, Jacopo Soranzo, Paolo Contarini, Giovanni Chiaromani, Tommaso Alberti, Marino Cavalli and others have been used, a large proportion of which have been translated by her supervisor, Prof. Penka Danova. It should be noted that the doctoral candidate herself has introduced into

academic circulation a Bulgarian translation of Tommaso Alberti's text, which is a valuable contribution to the work.

The **first** chapter is devoted to the political history of South-Eastern Europe, entitled *'The Ottoman Empire and the Old Italian States, 16th–17th Centuries*', In it, the doctoral candidate traces "the historical and political context in which the Italian authors' journeys through the Balkans took place". Yanakieva correctly points out that during the 16th and 17th centuries, relations between the Ottoman Empire and the so-called old Italian states – primarily Venice, Genoa, the Papal States, Tuscany and Naples – were characterised "by dynamics oscillating between competition, conflict and pragmatic dialogue". The chapter also examines the overland routes used by Italian travellers. It is correctly noted that the so-called Middle Route, or Via Diagonalis, was the most heavily used overland route in the Ottoman Empire.

The **second** chapter is central to the thesis and is devoted to *the Via Diagonalis, or the so-called "Middle Way"*, which has been of great importance for travel through the Balkans since Antiquity, throughout the Middle Ages, and also during the period under consideration. The PhD candidate systematically traces the accounts of Italian travellers regarding the individual towns, which were major stopping points along the Via Diagonalis, focusing on the key ones – Belgrade, Sofia, Plovdiv, Svilengrad and Edirne. It is noted that the towns along the Via Diagonalis served as main stops for rest, changing horses and replenishing provisions, whilst the efforts of the Ottoman Empire to maintain infrastructure, security and logistics are also highlighted. The author also notes the interest of Italian writers in the ancient past of these cities along this key Balkan route, whilst acknowledging that they do not overlook the characteristics of the contemporary Ottoman urban environment. Sofia is examined in terms of its geographical location, urban layout and information about the Church of St. Sophia and its connection to the city's name. Plovdiv occupies a special place in the Italian descriptions, which emphasise the ancient ruins in the area. Edirne is presented as one of the most significant cities along the route, with a wealth of information on serais, markets, fortress walls, bridges, mosques, churches, inns and caravanserais.

The main Italian authors on whose texts Yanakieva draws in her analysis in this chapter are: Marcantonio Pigafetta, Giovanni Chiaromanni, Giovanni Benalla, Giovanni Battista de Borgo, Benedetto Ramberti, Jacopo Soranzo, Catharin Zen, Paolo Contarini, Marino Cavalli. In addition to the route itself, the infrastructure facilities located along its length – caravanserais, inns, markets, bridges and other structures – are systematically examined.

Special attention is also paid in this chapter to other routes leading to the central axis of the Via Diagonalis. During the period under consideration, Italian travellers entered the

Balkans mainly by sea, reaching the ports of Dubrovnik, Kotor, Ulcinj, Shkodër and Durrës. From these coastal centres, various overland routes began, which gradually converged and joined the Via Diagonalis. Yanakieva examines the characteristics of these roads, the conditions of travel along them, and their role in connecting the Dalmatian coast with the interior of the Balkans and the Ottoman road network.

This second chapter also examines the conflicting assessments by Italian authors regarding the safety and condition of the roads. The chapter's conclusion rightly notes that the Via Diagonalis retained its key importance as a major overland route linking Belgrade and Constantinople, as well as its function as the backbone of military, commercial and administrative communications in the Ottoman Balkans. Italian travelogues describe it as the best-organised and safest road in the region. It was precisely along this route that the Ottoman Empire concentrated its efforts on infrastructure maintenance, security and logistics, which is clearly evident when compared with the other roads leading to it.

The **third** chapter is devoted to the so-called *"Right Road"*, that is, the road running along the Black Sea coast, which leads from Constantinople via Edirne, Aytos, Provadia and Dobrich to the River Danube. Nadezhda Yanakieva correctly concludes that this route was used primarily by merchants and was characterised by "lower population density, a limited presence of Ottoman garrisons and relatively weak logistical infrastructure", which made it a riskier route to travel along compared to the Via Diagonalis.

Consequently, this has also led to the "Right Way" being less well documented in Italian travel writing. It is precisely for this reason that the account by Tommaso Alberti, which the author of this thesis introduces into academic discourse in a Bulgarian translation, takes on particular significance. He is one of the few Italian authors to have travelled this route and to have left a relatively detailed description of it. The thesis includes a translation of an excerpt from his text relating to the Bulgarian lands, which allows for a more in-depth analysis of the route and the facilities along it (see Appendix 1).

The subject of study in this chapter are the settlements of Kyuchukchekmede, Buyukchekmede, Silivri, Çorlu, Lüleburgaz, Babaeski, Havsa, Aytos, Provadia, Dobrich and Machin.

The author's focus is on the road infrastructure, resting places, supply options and the level of security along the route. N. Yanakieva states that Tommaso Alberti's text will be compared with Martin Grüneweg's travelogue. Although both authors pass through similar places, their perspectives differ. I believe, however, that an sufficiently in-depth comparison

between the two texts has not been carried out, which would have greatly benefited the thesis and enhanced its quality.

In the conclusion, N. Yanakieva summarises the main findings on the subject. Based on an analysis of information from 16th–17th-century Italian travelogues, the doctoral candidate reveals the complex and often contradictory image of the Balkans that took shape in the minds of Western European travellers.

Particular attention in the study is given to accounts of fortified towns, bridges, waystations, inns and caravanserais. I share the author's view that her study demonstrates that "despite all their limitations and subjectivity, 16th–17th-century Italian travel accounts represent a valuable and often unique source for studying the historical geography, infrastructure and social reality of the Balkans during the period under consideration".

I fully agree with her assertion that "the road infrastructure in the Balkans, although often described as dilapidated and dangerous, in fact reveals a picture of active improvement and care for travellers".

I also support her conclusion that bridges, caravanserais, imarets and religious complexes were not merely transport facilities, but "multifunctional spaces linked to economic, social and religious life. Markets, waqf institutions, new neighbourhoods and settlements with various functions – commercial, religious, charitable and administrative – sprang up around them."

N. Yanakieva's conclusion is correct: a comparison with Italian travelogues reveals "patterns of socio-ethnic stratification within the urban fabric, differences between fortified and lowland areas, as well as the link between key infrastructure facilities and the development of the settlement environment".

The scientific contributions of the thesis can be summarised as follows: for the first time, an attempt has been made to study the roads (Via Diagonalis and the Right Road), buildings and infrastructure in the Balkans during the 16th–17th centuries on the basis of the Italian travel-writing tradition; a corpus of information has been systematised, based on Italian travelogues and other works, some of which are little known in Bulgarian historiography; new or little-known information from Italian sources has been translated and analysed, primarily the text by Tommaso Alberti; the main characteristics of the Via Diagonalis and the Right Road have been reconstructed; it has been revealed that infrastructure sites in the Ottoman Balkans should be regarded not only as elements of transport, but as social, economic and cultural centres that structure the space around the main routes.

At the same time, certain weaknesses in the text of the thesis must also be noted. In places, there are serious typographical errors, which should have been avoided in a work of this nature. Names should be standardised; it is unacceptable to encounter different forms of the same name. As an example, I might cite *"Catharino Dzeno*" in the introduction and *"Catharin Dzen"* in the main body of the thesis. I also believe that a much more detailed comparison (which is lacking in the thesis) between the texts of Tommaso Alberti and Martin Grüneweg could serve as a starting point for a more in-depth analysis and, consequently, conclusions regarding the so-called "Right Way" and the infrastructure facilities along its route. Overall, I would note that the thesis would have benefited from a more in-depth cultural analysis.

The abstract meets the requirements; the publications are relevant to the thesis topic and have been published in academic journals.

On the basis of everything stated so far, and notwithstanding the comments made, I wish to express my favourable opinion regarding the award of the academic and scientific degree of "Doctor" to Nadezhda Yanakieva and to wish her future creative success.

Sofia Prof. Ivayla Popova

11 July 2026