STATEMENT

on the scientific works of Assistant Professor Dr Svetozar Simeonov Angelov, the only participant in the competition for the academic position of Associate Professor in the professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology (History and Culture of the Balkans in the 15th – 17th centuries), State Gazette No. 5/17.01.2025 (for the needs of the Centre for Slavic-Byzantine Studies "Ivan Dujčev" at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski)

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I will start my opinion with the observation that the procedural rules of the announcement and organization of the current competition, including the processing of the documents of the only candidate in it, Assoc. Dr. Svetozar Angelov, fully comply with the requirements of the Law on the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations of the Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. In other words, the minimal national requirements for the academic position of Associate Professor have been met and the procedure is in accordance with the law.

The candidate has submitted as his habilitation thesis a monograph entitled ‘Kyustendil as a Spiritual Christian Centre through the Ages. The Metropolitan Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God’ (Sofia, 2025, 198 pp.).

In the Introduction (pp. 7-13) Svetozar Angelov clearly formulates the main aim of his study: to "make a synthesized overview of the history of the city of Kyustendil as a spiritual, Christian center over the centuries, and a comprehensive study of the Metropolitan Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God" (p. 7). The brief review of sources and scholarly literature on the topic in the following pages of the book argues for the need for a comprehensive interdisciplinary study on the Christian history of a significant ecclesiastical center in the central part of the Balkan Peninsula, a topic that is entirely appropriate for the writing of a monographic work, especially given the candidate's scholarly interests and overall research output. Furthermore, the special focus of the study on the main church of Kyustendil, the Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God, is due to the fact that it has not been the subject of a comprehensive study so far (p. 12).

The first part of the book under the title 'Kyustendil Spiritual Centre of Christianity (Historical Atmosphere)' (pp. 15-72) is quite naturally structured into three separate sketches devoted to the fate of the town during the ancient, medieval and Ottoman eras.

In particular, the first section of the chapter focuses on the earliest Christian monuments from Pautalia (including the impressive fourth-century inscription of a dogmatically worded prayer to the Holy Cross, pp. 24-25); it presents the earliest evidence regarding the city's bishops from the first half to the middle of the sixth century, expressing skepticism about the thesis that one of the participants in the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553, Phocas, was bishop of Pautalia (p. 26); a summary of the seven Christian temples in the late antique city that have been documented so far archaeologically is presented, with attention to the architectural design, plastic and mosaic decoration of the episcopal basilica no. 2 in the fortified part of the city (p. 27-28), as well as the particularly impressive mosaics with typical early Christian art zoomorphic and floral

decorations in the extramural basilica No. 7 (pp. 28-29). It is interesting to note Svetozar Angelov's assumption that the closest parallels to the Pautalian mosaics can be found in Aquileia and, more generally, in the early Christian art of Italy (p. 29), which is logical in view of the city's belonging to Illyricum (cf. p. 24), which traditionally formed part of the diocese of the Roman Church until the thirties of the eighth century.

The section on medieval Velbazhd deals with the extinction of Pautalia in the course of the Slavic and Avar-Slavic invasions, a not very clear process whose most tense phase falls roughly between the fires, that caused the destruction of the episcopal basilica in 568-569, and the latest coinage material found in the early Byzantine city, which dates from the reign of the emperor Maurice (582-602) and comes from Basilica No. 1 of Hisarlaka (pp. 30-31). Attention is paid to the new Slavic name of the town, the earliest fixation of which Svetozar Angelov is contradictory, once linking it to a charter of Basil II of 1019 (p. 30), and then states that the existence of the bishopric of Velbazhd within the Bulgarian Church (reestablished/established by Boris-Michael – see p. 33) was first reflected on the synthronon of the church of St. Achilles around the end of the 10th – beginning of the 11th century, c. 35). An overview of church life during the Byzantine rule is given, including the lead seals of the bishops of Velbazhd (p. 37). The annexation of the town to the Second Bulgarian Empire (between 1198 and 1203) is not overlooked, as is the participation of the metropolitan of Velbazhd Anastasius in the union of Tsar Kaloyan with the Roman Church (pp. 38-39). Further on, the political vicissitudes in the fate of Velbazhd are traced in connection with its passing successively to Nicene, again Bulgarian, and Serbian rule, and finally to the Dragaš principality – a time of uncertainty about the status of the Velbazhd bishopric/metropolitanate, which eventually by the seventies of the fourteenth century found itself once again under the supremacy of the Ohrid archbishopric, and it was in this position that it came under Ottoman rule after the death of Constantine Dragaš in 1395 (c. 39-44).

The third section of the first chapter presents the new conditions under which the Orthodox Church functioned under Ottoman rule, focusing on the demographic changes in Kyustendil – the town became the centre of a sanjak and a large Muslim population arrived there, which several times exceeded the number of local Christians. Svetozar Angelov rightly points out that this situation, which lasted for centuries, reflected negatively on the Christian community in Kyustendil and church life was relocated to the periphery and surroundings of the town – to the church of St. George in Kolusha, the village of Slokoshtitsa, etc. (pp. 49-50). A place is also given to the question of the jurisdiction of the Ohrid archbishopric over the greater part of the Kyustendil sanjak, which until 1557 also concerned the status of the bishops of Kyustendil, called in the first centuries of Ottoman rule "of Banya" or "of Kolassia"; on pp. 51-58, the necessary clarifications are made concerning the change in the name of the bishopric and various sources are cited to illustrate the titulature of the metropolitans of Kyustendil during the period 1557-1766, when the diocese was under the supremacy of the Patriarchate of Peč. The situation of Kyustendil during the rebellions of the Kirdzhalis and during the Tanzimat era, when the city largely lost its administrative importance, is presented, and by 1873-1874 the number of non-Muslim households, among which the Bulgarian element was dominant, reached 43% of the population (p. 61). Against this background, the position of the Kyustendil metropolitanate within the Patriarchate of Constantinople after 1767 is examined; the hierarchs of the diocese are briefly presented until the struggle of the Bulgarian ecclesiastical community against the last Greek metropolitan Ignatius and the arrival of the exarchist metropolitan Hilarion in 1872 (pp.

63-68). The reasons for the protracted closure of the Kyustendil diocese, which ended with its final incorporation into the Sofia diocese, are detailed (p. 70).

The second chapter of the monograph is devoted to the Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God (pp. 73-168).

The first section of the chapter (pp. 73-91) presents historical information about the temple, its architecture and its construction stages. An account from 1765, recently published by Maria Polimirova, documents its existence at that time; a new church building was constructed in 1816, and two years later Greek masters painted the royal icons. According to Svetozar Angelov, the construction of the church took place without permission from the Ottoman authorities, and its status was formalized by a Sultan's firman in 1833, by which Mahmud II authorized the reconstruction of the existing church building, around which a whole complex of other buildings took shape – a metropolitan's residence, a school, utility buildings and a metochion of the Rila Monastery. It is a valid observation that the church is largely unique in its architectural design: 'The overall cult building houses two temples – one dedicated to the Virgin Mary is located on the first level and a second, dedicated to St. Nicholas of Myra, formed on the upper level' (p. 81). A valuable scholarly contribution in this section is the author's study and publication of some marginal notes from the liturgical books of the Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God (presented separately and in more detail in the last section of the book).

The next section (pp. 93-155), entitled "Icons, Iconostasis and Church Furnishing in the Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God in Kyustendil", consists of a series of essays in which systematically are examined the iconostasis on the second floor (with doors from the 16th-17th centuries, which are more or less synchronous with the main cross and the rhipidia of the main iconostasis); the Greek icons from 1818 (six royal icons painted by the Epirus masters Lazaros and his nephew Lazo of Ano Soudena, today Ano Pedina); the icons of Hristo Dimitrov from the second floor of the church (painted ca. 1814-1815.); the icons from the main iconostasis (painted at different times by the painters Philip, Ivan Dospevski, Vasil Popradoykov); the icons from the festal and apostolic order of the main iconostasis (by an unknown painter from the first half of the 19th century); the frescoes in the church; the patron icon above the entrance to the nave of the church (1850); the tomb of Metropolitan Hilarion of Lovech and Kyustendil (1799-1884). It makes a very good impression that in this section of the book the author has tried to critically present the history of the research of each of the analyzed monuments, offers readings of inscriptions, clarifies and corrects the interpretations available in the scientific literature. By the way, it is worth mentioning that Svetozar Angelov had the good opportunity to carry out his research after the completion of the restoration works that took place in 2021-2022 under the direction of Dr. Stefko Aenski, which led to the cleaning of the icons, as well as to the disclosure of some of the earlier frescoes in the altar and a number of structural features of the church building (see pp. 12-13, 81, 146).

The last section (pp. 157-168) is devoted to the old printed books of the Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God. The earliest among these editions is a psalter published in the Kiev-Pechora Lavra in 1697; a number of books published in the 18th-19th centuries in Moscow, Kiev, Vienna, Budapest, etc. are documented. Svetozar Angelov has published here a number of marginal notes, which undoubtedly are of high scientific value.

In the conclusion (pp. 169-172) the author has briefly outlined the more important observations and conclusions drawn in the main exposition.

Along with the undoubted scientific merits and contributions, Svetozar Angelov's work also has some shortcomings. For example, the author has failed to mention the decision of the so-

called "Council of Photios" of 880, by which the Bulgarian Church effectively acquired autocephalous status (p. 33). On p. 69 he refers to the "Kresna-Razlog Uprising of 1903", which is clearly an oversight. In note 202 on p. 71-72, as an illustration of the literary activity in the Kyustendil region in the 12th-13th centuries, by some misunderstanding appeared the title of the book "Fragments of the complete Zlatostruy from the collections of the Regional Historical Museum – Kyustendil and the Centre for Slavic-Byzantine Studies "Prof. Ivan Duychev" at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (Ed. and introductory study by A. Dimitrova, Ya. Miltenov, V. Velinova, A. Nikolov. Sofia, 2017) – the fragments published in this edition are parts of a later Russian manuscript, which has no relation to the literary processes in the Bulgarian lands during the mentioned era.

In spite of these critical remarks, I believe that the monograph proposed in the framework of the competition represents an original and contributing work, which testifies to the high professional qualities of Svetozar Angelov as an experienced and erudite researcher, who approbated the general directions of his scientific activities as early as with his dissertation "Monumental Painting in Western Bulgaria in the 16th century (Sofia and Kyustendil) - Conservatism and Innovation" (defended in 2009). This impression is fully confirmed by the 21 publications attached to the competition documentation, some of which were co-authored.

Svetozar Angelov has participated in 8 research projects related to the study and preservation of cultural and historical heritage, digitization of manuscripts and archival materials, etc. In the last five years his teaching activity at the Faculty of History of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" has included the guidance of seminar classes on the History of Byzantium (in special. "History and Archaeology) and the elective courses "The Art of Byzantium and Monumental Painting in Bulgaria from the 4th to the 14th Century" (in a Bachelor's specialisation) and "Text and Image in Wall Painting of Medieval Bulgaria" (in the Master's program); at the Faculty of Geology and Geography he teaches the course "History of Art" (in the speciality "Tourism").

Taking into account the above, I have every reason to vote positively for the election of Assistant Professor Dr. Svetozar Angelov to the academic position of Associate Professor in the professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology (History and Culture of the Balkans in the 15th-17th centuries).

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