

REVIEW

by assoc. prof. Dr. Mario Ivanov Ivanov, National Institute of Archaeology with Museum at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences,
member of a scientific jury appointed by Order No ПД-38-404/12.07.2024 r. of the Rector of the Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”
on a competition for academic position of “ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR” in professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology (specialty Archaeology – Museology) for the needs of Department of History of the Sofia university “St. Kliment Ohridski”,
announced in State Gazette No 55/ 28.06.2024.

Chief assistant Dr. Iliana Georgieva Borisova-Katsarova is the only one candidate in the announced competition. She fulfils the requirements of the national law for the position “associate professor” in professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology (according to article 26, (2) of the Law for development of the academic staff in Republic of Bulgaria and article 1a (1) of Regulations for applying of the same law.

Iliana Georgieva Borisova-Katsarova was born on February 7th, 1970 in Sofia. She graduates in Department of Archaeology of the Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” with a MA on Classical Archaeology. In 2002 the candidate obtained a PhD degree at Faculty of History of the Sofia University in specialty “Museology”. Her doctoral thesis is entitled “Archaeological museums and museum expositions in situ in Bulgaria – problems and achievements”. During the period 2002 – 2008 I. Borisova-Katsarova held an expert position in Sofia state archive and Central state archive, meanwhile engaged as honorary assistant at the Department of Cultural heritage of New Bulgarian University and the Department of Archives and additional historical disciplines of Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. From 2008 on she holds the position of chief assistant in Department of Archaeology of the Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” managing the MA Museology program of the Department. From 2010 on I. Borisova-Katsarova is member of ICOM. The candidate is experienced field researcher who participated in many archaeological excavations. She was a head of the excavation team or held leading position at least in eight different sites, some of which lasting for several seasons.

For the purpose of the announced competition I. Borisova-Katsarova presents a monograph, four studies (one in a referee scientific journal) and thirteen articles two of which in referee journals as a co-author. In the presented list of her scientific publications there are two articles presented during the PhD procedure and five others are short excavation reports that could not be considered as real scientific publications. It is not entirely clear for me why the candidate does not present several (five) other publications on museology themes that fit perfect with the purpose of the competition.

The scientific production of the candidate covers different fields of research. On the first place should be mentioned the museology themes which have specific significance in the professional interests of I. Borisova-Katsarova (applications 5, 7 – 9, 20). Part of these researches are based on the PhD researches of the candidate while others are genuine studies on different aspects of museology.

Secondly, there are several publications of different archaeological finds (applications 2, 6, 17 and especially 24 and 25) every one of which has their own specifics. Among the studies in this category the researches on Roman pottery clearly stand out.

Publications of excavation results are common place in the professional career of every archaeologist. Several articles could be placed in this inhomogeneous category (applications 15, 21 and 23). Here could be mentioned a number of short excavation reports of the candidate published in the “Archaeological discoveries and excavations” series of NIAM. The last ones are of no significance for the purpose of the competition.

A logical step forward is the systematization of the field results of the excavations of the “West gate of Serdica” site, carried out by the candidate for several years. The first overviews on the fortification system and development of the Roman town are published in three important studies (applications 16, 18 and 22). The complete presentation of the archaeological structures, stratigraphy and finds forms the main basis of the monograph presented by the candidate (application 1) that I will comment below.

The book “The western gate of Serdica – archaeological survey and socialization” presents an unusual and more or less unique combination of archaeological and museological research of an archaeological site in urban environment. The work is in two parts – different and yet bound to each other.

The first part is of pure archaeological nature and, in its essence, presents a regular publication of excavation results of the archaeological complex of the western gate of the Roman Serdica. The complete and on time publication of archaeological excavations in the Bulgarian capital is a quite rare in the last decades. The work of I. Borisova-Katsarova makes a significant progress in our knowledge on the development of the ancient town and deserves admirations by the only fact of its existence. It should be noted here that the new archaeological data are presented together with the additional information from the older excavations carried out between 1972 and 1980. The last ones being still unpublished are practically unavailable to the scholars. The structure of the book is based on functional criteria: every chapter contains a different element – fortification, street system, drainage and water supply and architectural remains. I suppose that the impossibility of precise dating of many structures is the reason for the choice of the author. A common overview on chronological development of the complex is presented in the final chapter IV.

There is no doubt that one of the main accents in the research is the fortification system of Serdica. Due to the accurate observations on the excavated part of the urban city wall I. Borisova-Katsarova makes series of important conclusions, reconsidering some older opinions and proposing new solutions. The complex situation of the excavations of a site in modern urban space is additionally complicated by the unfinished field work of the first excavation campaigns during 70s and 80s of the 20th century. In her analysis of the archaeological contexts I. Borisova-Katsarova demonstrates an accurate observations, critical approach and thorough appreciation of the available data. The author successfully fulfills the task to gather maximum information form the preserved archaeological field record regardless of the modern interventions and earlier excavations of the site.

The author offers a precise analysis, correctness and logical structure. I. Borisova-Katsarova avoid to impose new theories preferring rather to present the results in the form of scientific discussion with arguments in favour of her opinion. She proposes an entirely new hypotheses on many subjects. There is no need here to comment in detail every single element of the archaeological complex. In the next lines I will try to emphasize the most important contributions of the research as well as to discuss some, in my opinion, controversial points.

Establishing more or less acceptable chronology of the site, i.e. of the town, is one of the main contributions of the reviewed monograph. The correct field observations and adequate methodology forms the basis of the chronological scale of Serdica that is complemented with several new periods covering the timespan between late 2nd and early 7th c. AD. Nevertheless, I am obliged to mention that future excavations and publication of other significant sites most probably would make corrections in certain periods. As for the present state of researches the proposed chronology is acceptable as a whole.

Next important topic of the research is the definition of the chronology of the town fortification. Of major significance here are the observations of the author on the first fortification system of Serdica known also from the epigraphic evidence. The west gate of Serdica is one of the few sites where the fortification is studied within its stratigraphic context. The last one is presented by stratigraphic cross-sections and photos. This approach allows to compare the archaeological finds with the corresponding layers. Another point of significance the chronology of the outer fortification wall established in the second half/ end of the 5th c. AD. According to the archaeological contexts the proposed chronology is acceptable. Out of question is the value of the documentation of all the fortification elements – towers, gate and *proteichisma*. In this chapter, I think, a little more comprehensive comment on the gate structure, shape of the towers etc. in the context of other similar elements from Serdica (there are two other gates and many towers known so far) and other provincial towns would be of use for the purpose of analysis. Such an approach would support the author's main conclusions and would contribute to emphasize the peculiarities of the Serdica wall within the fortification tendencies of the age.

Important elements of the fortification system are the dugout structures researched in front of the west wall and identified as defensive ditches (*fossae*). Although similar structures have been discovered in front of the north and east walls of Serdica, I have serious doubts for their real defensive function. Additional archaeological evidence is needed to prove the function of these structures. Another questionable issue is the superstructure of the first wall that should have been made of bricks according to the author. The archaeological data are not explicit regarding the subject what makes the statement of the author a matter of debate. All the town walls in Thrace, built during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, are in *opus (vittatum) mixtum* technique. My personal observations and field researches testify that walls entirely made of bricks in Serdica are no earlier than the last quarter of the 4th c. AD. Exactly at that time were built the first public buildings with brick masonry – the *balneum* known today as St. George rotunda, the late antique bath at the mineral spring, Early Christian Basilica No 2 etc. The presented examples are arguments in favour of the opinion that the first town wall was made in *opus mixtum* and later reparations (late 4th c. AD) are in brick masonry. An undoubtful contribution of I. Borisova-Katsarova is the archaeological confirmation for the change in course of the first western wall in nord-east direction. This fact confirms the theory according to which the Late antique fortification wall follows exactly the same contour as its Roman predecessor.

Of significance are also the observations of the author on the street network and especially the ones concerning the presence of *via sagularis*. The excavations of the sewer and water-conduit system added some new details on the functioning of the street infrastructure in Serdica.

Very important information is presented about the earliest periods in the habitation of the place. Although in restricted areas, the traces of 1st and early 2nd c. AD structures and layers are registered in several places. Of importance for the chronology of the town are the

burnt layers caused by the sudden raid of the Costoboci in 170 AD. These observations confirm that the area of the west gate was also destroyed as the most of the other parts of the town. Here is to be noted that Aselius Aemilianus does not govern the province in 177/178 AD but the given date is *terminus ante quem* for his governorship.

For the historical development of the town is of significance the opinion that Serdica was spared during the raids of the Goths in mid-3rd c. AD. This statement, although has its reasons, should be additionally proved by other excavations. The next chronological limits ca. end of 4th, ca. middle of 5th and in the end of 6th c. AD as a whole could be considered good enough markers of the end of the sixth, seventh and eighth period of the town. The evidence from the other sites confirms the proposed dates. The periods formulate by I. Borisova-Katsarova complete the existing so far chronological scale of Serdica that makes it one of the few archaeologically confirmed periodization of a Roman town in Bulgaria.

It should be mentioned the contributions of the author on last period of the site – the Early Medieval age. I. Borisova-Katsarova propose a critical analysis of the earlier hypotheses giving many new data about the different possible interpretation of the previous excavation results.

Except the established chronological aspects of the site, of undoubtful importance is the high quality of archaeological documentation. All the fortification elements, buildings, pavements, layers and other structures are thoroughly documented and presented in the publication. The cross-sections though limited in number are informative enough.

The overall view of the author on the chronology of the complex as well as on Serdica's development is presented in Chapter V. Here is proposed the genuine opinion that during the course of 4th c. AD the first fortification wall has no more defensive functions and was even partly demolished because of the realization of the new "imperial" project for enlarging the city by building a new wall. The idea is already published by the author, but here is developed in its fullness. There is not enough data for the denial of the proposed interpretation, but it would be noticed that, for the moment, there are no sufficient data for reconstruction of the whole layout of the new fortification wall, especially in the south area of the town. We do not possess also certain data about the state of completion of the project. For now, I state the opinion that the hypothesis has enough reasons but still requires additional argumentation.

Concerning the broader issue of urban fortifications in Thrace, I. Borisova-Katsarova as a whole accepts (although not clearly formulated) the opinion of G. Mihailov according to whom the construction of the city walls is part of the imperial policy for defending the province as well as a sign of prestige for the communities. There is no place for this discussion here but the outer menace on the Balkan provinces can hardly be denied as a prime reason for building urban walls in Thrace. The question for the existence of a kind of provincial defensive system composed by the city fortifications in my opinion could not be supported. The scarce epigraphic documents clearly indicate a direct imperial intervention in the process of urban fortifications. However, there were different approaches to every case. The only feature in common is the main goal – to prevent future incursions upon important provincial centers.

The second part of the I. Borisova-Katsarova's monograph focuses on the conditions and ways of presentation of the archaeological sites *in situ*. The first chapter is dedicated on legal basis that form Bulgarian and international documents (laws, charters, regulations etc.) in the field of protection, restoration and presentation of the archaeological heritage. An important note here is the lack of proper definition of "archaeological heritage" in the national

legislation. The author makes a critical overview on the weakness of the project documentation, most important of which are the lack of control and clear account of the funds used in every stage of implementation.

The next chapter focuses on the project for conservation, restoration and socialization of the complex “West gate of Serdica”. Here, the author presents a thorough overview of the project documentation, its implementation and the problems archaeological team faced with during the process. I. Borisova-Katsarova comments every stage of the project proposing many arguments in favour of different possible solutions, especially regarding the efforts to preserve archaeological structures and elements in its original state of discovery. Essential part of the analysis is the author’s commentary on the principles of exposition of the archaeological substance. In the same time, it is noted the necessity of compromise regarding some places that need special treatment because of its state of preservation, environmental specifics or safety reasons. The author highlights several shortcomings of the project: the lack of clear markers distinguishing genuine structure from restored parts; the layout and trace of the visitor’s path; limited number of information points; the lack of expositional windows giving insight to the earlier structures; limited access for disabled people; the irrelevant graphic reconstruction of the west gate on the east façade of the complex. In every single case the author offers detailed analysis of the situation and better solutions.

The final chapter of the second part of the book presents the west gate complex in the context of all other *in situ* preserved archaeological sites in Sofia. On the first place is given a thorough overview on national legislation in the field of archaeological heritage. The author underlines the shortcomings of the system and insists for immediate corrections of the territorial limits of the archaeological reserve Serdica – Sredets. Further in her review I. Borisova-Katsarova gives a comment on the excavated and exhibited in time archaeological sites on the territory of the capital. Here I would add the Late Roman bath preserved under the modern building on 47, Knyaginya Maria Luiza blvd. Surprisingly the author does not propose a comment on the amphitheatre of Serdica – one of the most prominent monuments of the archaeological heritage of Sofia that is left without proper treatment over 15 years. For all the sites is proposed an expert evaluation of the concepts and methods used and the place of the new complex of the west gate in the common practice. As a result of the analysis I. Borisova-Katsarova brings forward the conclusion that in the future exhibition practice the archaeological sites in Sofia would be better preserved and exposed under protective coverage because of the specific climate conditions in Bulgaria. The importance of the preservation in maximum authenticity of the original archaeological substance is underlined once again. Other questions of different kind are discussed which solution should be result of the combined work of a large team of specialists of different expertise as a guarantee for positive approach to fragile archaeological heritage.

At the end of the book I. Borisova-Katsarova presents in brief the main achievements of the excavations and her research on the exhibition process and final state of the complex “West gate of Serdica”. The problems are highlighted together with their possible solutions. The author gives some important instructions regarding the national legislation, institutional responsibility, archaeological excavations, conservation, restoration and exhibition of archaeological site.

The monograph of I. Borisova-Katsarova is a genuine and in-depth study on a specific problem, unique in a kind regarding the dual nature of research. The book has its place among the still insufficient number of monographs concerning excavations of archaeological sites in

Sofia. Undoubtedly, it will remain among the obligatory publications on the history of Serdica.

The observations of the author are precise, correct, reasoned and presented with a sufficient degree of criticism. It should be highlighted the discussion style of the author's text, her search for compromise and lack of assumed statements. The publication is provided with sufficient number of illustrations – photos and drawings. As a significant shortcoming should be mentioned the absence of the archaeological finds, presented in appropriate form. Nevertheless, part of the artifacts, especially the ones with qualities of chronological markers, are described in the text with their contextual positioning. The future publication of the finds is promised to be prepared as a separate publication.

Except of the pure archaeological qualities of the monograph, I. Borisova-Katsarova offers a comprehensive analysis on the site and the project for its exhibition and socialization. She discusses the entire complex of problems regarding the excavation, conservation and exhibition of the archaeological heritage of the capital Sofia in the complex urban space. As a result, the author postulates important conclusions and guidelines to future researchers and specialists in the field of protection of the cultural heritage. These observations are not restricted to the capital only but have universal value for all archaeological sites discovered in urban environment.

The candidate Iliana Borisova-Katsarova has substantial professional experience and comprehensive scientific knowledge. Her scientific publications demonstrate definitive qualities and abilities to analyze and synthesize a different kind of information. All the observations made, give me enough reason to express my entirely “POSITIVE OPINION” and to recommend to the Faculty of History of the Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” to appoint the candidate Iliana Georgieva Borisova-Katsarova on the academic position “associate professor” on specialty “Archaeology – Museology”.

October 8th, 2024
Sofia

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(assoc. prof. Dr. Mario Ivanov, NIAM at BAS)