REVIEW

Prof. DSc Pavel Pavlovich, Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies, Faculty of Classical and Modern Philology, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski.

Re: Dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology. Academic specialization: History of Bulgaria (History of the Bulgarian Lands, 15th–17th centuries).

Title: *Epidemics in the Bulgarian Lands in the 16th–18th Centuries***.**

Author: Yana Mihaylova Georgakieva, Department of History of Bulgaria, Faculty of History, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski.

Procedural Details

By Order No. RD-38-114/10.03.2026 of the Rector of Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, I was appointed a member of the scientific jury for the defense of the above-mentioned dissertation, and by Protocol No. 1/17.03.2026 of the jury meeting, I was assigned to prepare a review.

The materials submitted by the candidate comply with the normative requirements in the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ZRASRB), the Regulations for its implementation (PPZRASRB), and the regulations of Sofia University for obtaining the educational and scholarly degree "Doctor." The abstract accurately and comprehensively reflects the content of the dissertation. The submitted publications meet the minimum national requirements for scholarly activity: one is published in a scientific journal indexed in Scopus, and the other—co-authored with Nevena Gramatikova—is published in a peer-reviewed, non-indexed edition.

The dissertation is an original work by Ms. Georgakieva and contains no elements of plagiarism.

Review of the Dissertation

The dissertation comprises an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, and a bibliography, totaling 305 standard pages. An additional section (pp. 306–410) presents

extensive tables and illustrative appendices that document the author's systematic work with the source material.

The study examines perceptions of the spread, prevention, and treatment of endemic diseases—above all, plague—in the Bulgarian lands between the 16th and 18th centuries, with attention to both Muslim and Christian communities.

The argument unfolds in a clear and logical sequence. It begins with the theological framework of prophetic medicine, disease as an expression of divine predestination, and related occult practices; proceeds to a source-based analysis of epidemic spread; and concludes with an examination of preventive and therapeutic measures. Each chapter functions as a self-contained line of inquiry, defined by a specific body of sources and a coherent thematic focus, which the author develops consistently.

The **Introduction** (pp. 5–38) outlines the chronological and thematic scope of the study, surveys the historiography, discusses the nature of the available sources, and explains the structure and methodology. It also provides a thorough overview of modern approaches to pandemics in the medieval and early modern periods, along with a concise account of plague as a disease.

Chapter One (pp. 39–121) addresses plague within the Muslim intellectual and religious tradition, focusing on "prophetic medicine"—a domain situated at the intersection of empirical observation and theological reasoning. The author offers a nuanced discussion of the central theological dilemma: whether disease is caused by God, who by definition cannot do evil, or by an autonomous agent, which would appear to limit divine omnipotence. Closely connected to this issue is the tension between predestination and human free will, which could lead either to passive fatalism or to active resistance to disease (pp. 40–56).

The terminology used to denote plague and epidemic disease is analyzed with precision (pp. 45–47). The discussion then broadens to include magical and occult healing practices (pp. 56–60), before turning to their concrete manifestations among Muslim and Christian communities in the Bulgarian lands (pp. 69–121). The author traces theological debates in medieval Islam over the permissibility to flee an epidemic if it is divinely ordained, and shows how these debates shaped local attitudes. In practice, believers frequently resorted to prayers, incantations, talismans, and medical remedies. Comparative references to Christian traditions highlight patterns of interaction and mutual influence.

The chapter also examines travel accounts by Western European visitors, demonstrating that while these often reflect elements of Sunni theological fatalism, they are equally shaped by polemical stereotypes and the expectations of their intended audiences.

A particularly valuable contribution is the paleogenetic analysis of skeletal remains from burial sites in the village of Kalenik and the Gyur Chesma locality near Karnobat (pp. 109–110). This analysis confirms the presence of *Yersinia pestis* in one case, thereby providing empirical support for identifying the generic term *wabāʾ* ("pestilence") in the sources as referring specifically to plague.

Chapter Two (pp. 122–190) explores the demographic dimensions of epidemics in the Bulgarian lands, which were a crossroads for plague transmission during the period under study. The chapter offers a detailed historiographical review and addresses the challenges of reconstructing plague routes, including the role of localized reservoirs of infection and the influence of environmental, climatic, demographic, social, and political factors. Together, these variables produced cyclical patterns of outbreak and subsidence of plague in the Bulgarian lands (p. 155).

The author also examines patterns of internal migration triggered by epidemics (pp. 160–174). Drawing on tax registers, she argues that affected populations often left plague-stricken areas temporarily and returned once conditions improved. In some cases, individuals used such movements to evade taxation. Overall, demographic losses appear to have been offset by population growth in the 16th century.

The demographic crises of the 17th and 18th centuries, however, had more lasting socio-economic consequences, including tensions related to taxation during periods of epidemic mortality (pp. 174–188).

Chapter Three (pp. 191–251) focuses on preventive and therapeutic practices. Following an overview of the relevant literature, the author presents original research on medical manuscripts preserved in the libraries of Vidin (Osman Pazvantoğlu) and Samokov (pp. 208–210). She demonstrates how theological injunctions to remain in epidemic areas coexisted with practical efforts to seek remedies deemed compatible with divine predestination. The chapter also considers the therapeutic use of food.

One of the study's major strengths lies in its treatment of epidemics as a theological as well as a social phenomenon. Drawing on prophetic *ḥadīth* and scholarly treatises, the author

reconstructs debates among Sunni scholars concerning predestination and human agency, while also highlighting discrepancies between doctrinal ideals and lived practice. A comparative perspective reveals a parallel evolution in Christian attitudes, from the early condemnation of flight as sinful to more pragmatic responses in the early modern period.

The author persuasively argues that Muslims in the Bulgarian lands were not strict fatalists, as they are sometimes portrayed in European travel literature. Rather, their attitudes were shaped by a theological framework that emphasized the interplay between divine predestination and human agency, as articulated in the doctrine of *kasb* (acquisition). Within this framework, preventive measures, treatment, and even temporary flight from affected areas were not understood as defiance of divine will, but as legitimate expressions of human action.

The dissertation makes a substantial scholarly contribution. Particularly noteworthy is the integration of historical and philological analysis with paleogenetic methods, allowing long-standing historiographical assumptions to be tested empirically. The author also introduces into scholarly circulation a number of previously unpublished and in some cases uncatalogued manuscripts from the Oriental Collections of the Bulgarian National Library. Through its paleogenetic component, the study places Bulgaria on the map of international plague research.

The research draws on an impressive and diverse body of sources, including administrative and narrative texts, as well as unpublished medical manuscripts and works on prophetic medicine. The author demonstrates thorough familiarity with both primary materials and modern scholarship, and with adjacent fields such as pandemic studies and paleogenetics. The result is a work of considerable erudition and strong interdisciplinary scope.

The dissertation is clearly written, well structured, and stylistically polished. The final version reflects this reviewer's recommendations submitted during the internal defense.

Conclusion

The dissertation by Yana Georgakieva offers a comprehensive and insightful analysis of epidemics in the Bulgarian lands during the 16th–18th centuries. It elucidates both the theological interpretations and the practical responses of Muslim communities, while also incorporating Christian perspectives. The inclusion of paleogenetic analysis constitutes a significant contribution to the broader field of European plague studies.

In light of the above, I give the dissertation my unconditional approval and recommend that the scientific jury award Yana Georgakieva the degree of Doctor in professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology, specialization History of Bulgaria (History of the Bulgarian Lands, 15th–17th centuries).

Sofia, April 30, 2026

Prof. DSc Pavel Pavlovitch

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