

STATEMENT REPORT

by Assoc. Prof. Tanya Dzhanzeva

on the PhD thesis

‘The anthropomorphic plastic art of the Late Eneolithic cultures Varna, KGK VI and KSB – possibilities for interpretation’

by **Vanya Mladenova Stavreva**

under the procedure for acquisition of the educational and scientific degree ‘Doctor’ in the Higher education scientific field 2. Humanities, the Professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology, and the Doctoral program Archaeology – Prehistory – Neolithic – Chalcolithic period at the Department of Archaeology, the Faculty of History at the ‘St Kliment Ohridski’ University of Sofia, Bulgaria

Academic supervisor: Associate Prof. **Petya Georgieva**, PhD

This statement was written following the order of the Rector of the ‘St Kliment Ohridski’ University of Sofia (№ ПД - 38-619/ 18.11.2022); the decision of the Faculty Council at the Faculty of History (15.11.2022); the corresponding entry in the Register for members of scientific juries at the University of Sofia (№ 30/ 15.11.2022) and the Protocol of the first session of the Scientific Jury (Protocol №1 from 22.11.2022).

Provided documents

The statement is based on a *reference* proving that the submitted work and the published papers meet the minimal National requirements for acquisition of the scientific degree "Philosophy Doctor" in the Professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology; a *declaration of original academic authorship* of the dissertation; a *curriculum vitae* of the PhD candidate; a *diploma* for the educational and qualification degree ‘Master in Archaeology’; four original submitted *papers* (of which one already published); a *synopsis* of the PhD thesis in Bulgarian and English language; the text of the dissertation, a catalogue of the finds, and appendices (tables and maps).

Professional biography of the candidate

Vanya Mladenova Stavreva had been working as a journalist, and was later, in 2018, assigned the post of a curator at the Department of Archaeology at the Regional Historical Museum – Vidin. She acquired a higher education diploma for the educational-qualification degree ‘Master in Archaeology’ at the ‘St Kliment Ohridski’ University of Sofia (2018), where she continued her studies as a full-time doctoral student (2019-2022).

Characterization of the doctoral thesis

The voluminous deposited work contains main text consisting of 421 pages (350 pages for the introduction, the seven chapters and the conclusion, and 69 more pages cited bibliography); a catalogue of finds with a total of 3,349 entries comprising textual descriptions (200 pages) and illustrations (297 tables); a catalogue of the sites where anthropomorphic figurines were found (55 pages) and 27 maps showing the distribution of the various types of studied objects.

The *main subject* of the PhD thesis is closely associated with some of the important topics of the current archaeological research. *The title* corresponds to the focus of the study, and to the essence of the main question. The nature of the research requires that *specific limitations* be indicated – especially those associated with the actual opportunities for interpretation of the anthropomorphic objects. Accordingly, these are discussed already at the beginning of the text (p. 9 and again on p. 35-38). The observation of the author – that such finds ‘might have had various functions and even contained several symbolic layers in diverse time periods, at various places, and among individual social groups, even within the same community’, and therefore the interpretation of the objects requires ‘a very good knowledge of the culture and the ways of thinking of the people’ using them (p. 34) – clearly demonstrates the courage of the author, as well as certain risks taken, since even the opportunities to address some of these requirements most favourably, do not guarantee a ‘correct’ reading of the artifacts.

The PhD thesis is based on the analysis of an *impressive number* of 3,349 diverse finds, found in 232 sites. Two hundred and twenty items/fragments of the total number of objects included in the catalogue, are published for the first time by the author of the dissertation, which most definitely represents a contribution of V. Stavreva.

Because of the lack of a broader, more extensive comparative study on the anthropomorphic figurines that explores the category ‘as a whole and in the socio-economic context of the three Late Eneolithic cultures’ (p. 4), V. Stavreva's *main goal* is to ‘analyze... and to offer... possible interpretations’ about the role of the objects ‘in the socio-economic context of the Late Eneolithic cultures of Varna, Kodzhadermen-Gumelnitsa-Karanovo VI and Krivodol-Salkutsa-Bubani’ (p. 5).

Thus, the *specific tasks and methods* are presented clearly and correspond to the stated aim. The author states explicitly that the typology of the finds falls outside the scope of the thesis due to the presence of numerous other typological schemes and classifications. Here, a supra-regional consideration of the existing schemes would be a positive factor, and to some extent this has been resolved by outlining individual categories of anthropomorphic themes and appearances, and determining their specific characteristics and distribution.

The structure correlates well with the main goal and the objectives, and clearly demonstrates the ambition of V. Stavreva to deliver a comprehensive and multi-directional research. The text is excellent in stylistic and grammatical terms, the main content being appropriately distributed, thus shaping an introduction, seven chapters (in a sequence consistent with the outlined individual stages for analysis and synthesis of the information), a conclusion, a catalogue and appendices.

The main parameters of the work are stated aptly in the *introduction*. In the *first and the second chapters*, which are similar in nature, a very large number of publications, including various theoretical developments (I) and published interpretations of the relevant anthropomorphic figures and finds, associated with the subject (II) are skilfully presented in a logical sequence. On the basis of this representable bibliographic sample is traced the development of the research on the subject – according to the approaches of various theoretical schools. Furthermore, accentuated periods distinguishable by their specific features have also been successfully identified.

Chapter three also includes a review of publications, this time focusing on the heterogeneous approaches applied by various authors when constructing hierarchical classifications of the

finds. The author establishes specific criteria leading to the so-called "systematization" of the anthropomorphic figurines. Subjectively determined major 'variations of the images' are indicated, allowing for some freedom in the selection of the key features used to characterize the finds.

The fourth chapter coherently links to the previous one, and is of particular interest, as it demonstrates the qualities of V. Stavreva to work with numerous and variable archaeological materials. The author identifies 'characteristic images' among the anthropomorphic plastic objects of the considered cultures. These are grouped into 'common themes' and 'individual images', and are accompanied by comments on their semantics. A very detailed information regarding their territorial distribution, combined with data resulting from the multi-layered analysis of the archaeological contexts shapes the *fifth chapter*.

The following, main Chapters *six and seven* discuss the questions regarding the 'functional interpretation' (VI) and the place of the figurines within the correspondent 'socio-economic context' (VII). Large quantities of variable data, carefully selected and skilfully arranged in the smooth text of the exposition, are used to support certain theses, preferred by the author. A valuable part of the *conclusion* is the characterization of those features typical of each of the three studied 'cultures'.

Additional comments

The efforts of V. Stavreva to apply a *complex approach* in her work are impressive. She considers archaeological and ethnographic data, information referring to the sphere of the art studies and the history of religion, some results of anthropological examinations of skeletal remains, chemical and tomographic analyses of relevant finds, data resulting from the application of experimental approaches, as well as observations on specific categories of finds (the so-called zoomorphic objects, models of dwellings, certain vessels and tools), *et cetera*.

Therefore, the comments below in no way diminish the qualities of the PhD thesis. Still, when exploring the role of the anthropomorphic plastic art in the 'socio-economic context of the Late Eneolithic cultures', it would not be superfluous to direct more attention to certain *debatable aspects* referring to the essence of the cultural phenomena, their characterisation, territorial range, and chronological position – considering both the general trends and the regional variations of the cultural dynamics. However, logically, these complex issues remain outside the main scope of the thesis, and the arduous work on their comprehensive examination is not considered as a mandatory prerequisite.

Regarding the interpretation of some of the 'main visual themes', a certain preference of the author towards a particular option could be perceived, which is understandable – given that the emphasis is placed on offering 'possibilities for interpretation'. In this sense, while the images defined as representing a figure 'with a child' are not questionable, some other examples (e.g. figures in 'cloche dress', 'grotesque' images, such reflecting 'medical and pathological conditions') are suitable as a presented theoretical possibility, but still not conclusively provable – due to the great variety of factors that can affect the shaping and the final touches contributing to the appearance of the item.

Variations in certain details of some of the translated statements are negligible, given the complexity of the topic and the broad expertise of V. Stavreva. This, as well as the occasional presence of somewhat controversial claims, is often compensated by the offered detailed

observations and the clear summary of the results. Finally, when publishing the text, an indication in the title of the full names of the cultural phenomena would be beneficial.

Summary

Undoubtedly, the PhD thesis contributes to the study of the anthropomorphic plastic art. The research on such a large number of finds requires a good knowledge of the archaeological materials and contexts, awareness of the theoretical trends, as well as an aspiration to tackle complex scientific matters comprehensively. The demonstrated efforts, skills and perseverance, along with the implementation of a complex approach, are fully recognised.

The skilful use of the available information is evident and successfully aligns with the strengths of the doctoral student. Regarding the degree of objectivity of studies focused on such topics – the clear title, the main goal and the specified tasks clearly demonstrate the freedom, granted when processing various data and choosing directions for the interpretation of the anthropomorphic plastic art.

The goals and the objectives have been achieved within the established framework of the research. The obtained results correspond to the stated contributions of the thesis. The main text is clear and coherent, grammatically correct and stylistically explicit, all illustrations and appendices are carefully prepared and containing high-quality images. This version of the thesis also demonstrates that the author followed the main recommendations.

Conclusion

After careful consideration of the submitted texts and documents, and taking into account the successfully fulfilled minimal National requirements for this professional field, I give my **positive assessment** for awarding Vanya Mladenova Stavreva the educational and scientific degree "**Doctor**" in the Higher education scientific field 2. Humanities, and the Professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology.

03/02/2023

Author of the statement:
(Associate Prof. Tanya Dzhanfezova)