REVIEW

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on the dissertation of **Assoc. Prof Elena Nikolaeva Kantareva-Decheva**

FLOOR MOSAICS FROM THE BISHOP'S BASILICA OF PHILIPPOPOLIS – TECHNOLOGY AND TECHNIQUE, CONDITION, PROBLEMS, RESTORATION,

with academic supervisor Prof Galina Lardeva-Minkova

The dissertation presents thoroughly the complex processes related to the conservation and restoration of the floor mosaics of one of the largest early Christian churches in Europe – the Bishop's Basilica of Philippopolis. Based on extensive stratigraphic and technical-technological studies, many facts have been analyzed and summarized, which are important for clarifying specific problems related to the periodization of the various mosaic layers in the basilica building. The text examines in detail the development of the ancient construction crafts related to laying floors and making mosaics; last but not least, it trace the various influences and processes related to the spread and development of the Christian religion and culture in Southeast Europe, and in particular in Philippopolis in the II-III and IV-VI centuries. Considering the objective and the tasks defined in the study, it can be summarized that Kantareva-Decheva's text goes beyond the usual framework of stratigraphic research and is rather an interdisciplinary work focused on the theoretical field of in-depth historical and cultural analysis and the consideration of innovative processes and the use of modern technologies in the practical restoration work on the recovery, preservation and display of ancient mosaics. In their career, a few researchers have the chance to work on such an impressive in size and complexity archaeological site, such as the Basilica of Philippopolis. Even rarer are the cases in which, in addition to being scientists, they are called to professionally organize and lead a team of specialists and volunteers in parallel in the field and in laboratory conditions. The contributory nature of the present work is in the combination of such aspects of shared rare research experience, which in addition to the theoretical framework of the study extends and enriches in several directions: **practical research, technical-analytical (empirical) and expert-organizational** – related to the implementation of a certain set of activities for the restoration of the mosaics and the construction of a protective building, etc.

Over the past century, the history of the ancient city of Philippopolis has been thoroughly studied. Despite the numerous publications and archaeological research by many authors in this field, contemporary researchers of Plovdiv's cultural heritage still do not have a sufficiently diverse set of methodological and practical prescriptions for conservation and restoration of ancient mosaics to support their empirical fieldwork or in restoration studios and laboratories. In this regard, the shared theoretical and practical experience is extremely valuable for any future and current researcher interested in the nature of the issues discussed in the dissertation, but also in the planning of activities

and developing strategies for preservation of archaeological sites of Late Antiquity or Early Christianity cultural heritage.

The title of the doctoral thesis *Floor mosaics from the Bishop's basilica of Philippopolis – technology and technique, condition, problems, restoration*, clearly defines the topic, subject and various theoretical aspects of the research. The dissertation contains 176 pages, structured in introduction, exposition in five chapters, conclusion, contributions, a list of publications and bibliography. The text contains 130 illustrations, of which 126 are in color and 4 in black and white. In summary, the main problems in it are discuses in the following parts:

The **introductory part** of the dissertation clearly and accurately presents the purpose, subject and methods of the research. Five research tasks are identified, which are clearly formulated and aimed at specific analyzes and the compilation of a program for conservation, restoration and exhibition of the mosaic floors of the Episcopal Basilica.

1. The first chapter of the dissertation, entitled *Mosaics from the ancient Philippopolis - condition, problems and restoration*, discusses uncovered floor mosaics of ancient buildings (II-III and IV-VI c. A.D.). It also offers a classification, which divides the mosaics into two main groups – according to their place of storage and condition, and according to their degree of restoration and suitability for exhibition. The chapter presents information about the current state of the dismantled and restored mosaics, some of which urgently need processing and conservation. The condition of the mosaics from the two Early Christian basilicas, the late antique building “Eirene” and the building with the floor mosaic "Sea Scene" are examined. An important emphasis in this part of the study is the evident contribution of the candidate to the restoration of the floor mosaics of the Early Christian basilicas mentioned in the text.

2. The second chapter of the study, *Technology and techniques for building mosaic floors in ancient times*, comments on the organization of the work of mosaic studios in the age of Antiquity. It pays special attention to the description of the various ancient techniques for laying flooring: the **earliest technique** used - ***Opus barbaricum*** (*Pavimentum Barbarica*); the most common type of antique mosaic flooring - ***Opus tesselatum*** – a technique that uses small ***tesserae*** - ***Opus vermiculatum***; ***Opus sectile***, in which stone tiles are configured on the floor to create a geometric or figural image; ***Opus signinum*** - a technique of building flooring, which is made of a mixture of lime mortar with ceramic fragments, in which are embedded square tesserae or small stone fragments. When tesserae or stone fragments are not embedded in this type of flooring, it is called ***cocciopesto***.

3. The third chapter of the study is entitled *The Bishop's Basilica of Philippopolis- history of studies and interventions. Mosaic floors - classification, stratigraphic studies, style analysis, parallels*. This chapter of the dissertation analyzes many facts related to the stratigraphic studies of the three mosaic floors of the early Christian church. Various eastern and western influences are identified in the examined mosaic layers, partial analogies are found with compositional solutions from ancient mosaics from other buildings studied in Plovdiv and on the territory of Bulgaria. Based on the

research, a general periodization of their construction is made, two periods are identified, consisting of three construction phases:

- ✓ **First construction period** from the second quarter of the IV century to the beginning of the V century, with three construction phases:
  - **Phase I** - construction of the mortar floors ***opus signinum*** in the central nave, southern and northern nave, narthex, northern portico, southern portico and its adjacent premises;
  - **Phase II** - laying the mosaic of the lower layer in the central nave;
  - **Phase III** - laying the mosaics of the lower layer in the southern and northern nave, narthex, northern and southern portico and its adjacent rooms.
- ✓ **Second construction period**: from the middle of V century to the middle of VI century
  - **Phase I** - laying the mosaic in the narthex and northern portico;
  - **Phase II** - laying the mosaic of the upper layer in the central nave and the apse, southern and northern nave, southern portico;
  - **Phase III** - laying the mosaics from the upper layer along the northern and southern part of the presbytery.

4. The fourth chapter focuses on the technology and technique of laying the mosaic floors of the Bishop's Basilica of Philippopolis. Based on the expert stratigraphic studies and technical-technological analysis, it is established that in almost all rooms with mosaics there are three floors laid on top of each other:

- **The first floor** of the Basilica is made of pink mortar in the technique *Opus signinum, terminus post quem*, and during its uncovering was discovered a coin of Emperor Licinius I (308-324).
- **The second floor** of the Basilica is made of mosaic in the *Opus tesselatum* technique, laid in several stages between the middle of IV and the beginning of the V century.
- **The third floor** of the Basilica covers the earliest mosaics and was laid in the *Opus tesselatum* technique between the end of the V and the first half of the VI century.

The second part of the chapter presents and summarizes information related to the number of laboratory tests performed on tesserae and mortars over the past four decades. Research shows that ancient craftsmen and technologists possessed a wide arsenal of technical skills to achieve impressive richness in the coloring of the mosaic floors using a variety of local materials. What is unique about the mosaics of the Bishop’s Basilica is that the extraordinary variety of colors and their shades (more than forty) is achieved solely with rock tesserae.

The presented results for the relevance of the studied materials contribute to the development of a strategy and methodology for their restoration and preservation. This information is important and

is extremely beneficial for any current and future researcher working for the preservation of ancient cultural heritage and mosaic floors from previous historical periods.

5. The fifth chapter is entitled *Conservation and restoration of the mosaics from the Bishop's Basilica of Philippopolis*. It examines two main periods related to the research and restoration activities of the *Bishop's* Basilica of Philippopolis:

- **Initial period** of conservation and restoration works carried out on the floor mosaics of the Basilica until the beginning of the current restoration - 1983-2000. The problems of the untreated mosaics are commented on - mainly their supporting foundations and the use of epoxy resin by the restoration teams in the past. In the mid-1980s, epoxy resin with filler was replaced by bright red epoxy foaming resin. It was used by Yordan Mlekanov for the restoration and casting of the supporting foundations of the mosaics from the so-called "Residence" and some of the mosaics of Bishop's Basilica in Plovdiv.
- Period of implementation of the project Conservation, restoration, display and construction of protective cover of the Bishop's Basilica of Philippopolis, financially supported by the Foundation America for Bulgaria and the Municipality of Plovdiv in the period 2015-2020. **Here the author shares her personal contribution in the process of planning, approval and implementation of one of the largest restoration projects in the country in the last decade**. The extensive work associated with the restoration, relocation and return of the mosaics, the strengthening of the terrain, the construction of the protective building and retaining wall, etc., is described.

Conclusion:

After reading the dissertation of Elena Kantareva-Decheva, I am of the opinion that **the research is significant and has a contributing nature**. The shared scientific experience of the author, related to the restoration of the floor mosaics of the Bishop's Basilica of Philippopolis, is valuable, well-structured and analytically thorough. The dissertation has an artistic orientation and follows the design and implementation of the conservation of a site not only of regional but of European importance. In this sense, the listed contributions are related to a work that in its relevance and essence is important for the preservation of world cultural heritage, and this presupposes that the dissertation of Kantareva-Decheva to be considered important and significant.

I give a **positive assessment** and recommend to the Scientific Jury to award the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" to Elena Kantareva-Decheva.

February 14, 2022 Assoc. Prof. Alexander Vassilev Gyoshev, PhD