OPINION

by Assoc. Prof. Nikolay Tanev Sirakov, PhD

Regional History Museum "Dr. Simeon Tabakov" – Sliven, University of Library Studies and Information Technologies – Sofia

member of the academic jury in the competition for the academic position of Associate Professor (Field of Higher Education: 2. Humanities, Professional Field: 2.2. History and Archaeology (Ancient Archaeology)), announced for the needs of the Regional History Museum – Sliven, in State Gazette, issue 39 of May 13, 2025.

In the competition announced by the Institute of Balkan Studies with the Centre of Thracology "Prof. Alexander Fol" at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences for the needs of the Regional History Museum "Dr. Simeon Tabakov" – Sliven, for the position of Associate Professor, documents were submitted by Dr. Georgi Gospondinov Kovachev, curator at the Archaeology Department of the Regional History Museum – Sliven.

The documents submitted by the candidate for participation in the competition comply with the minimum national requirements under Art. 26, paragraphs 2, 3, and 5 of the Act on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria (ADASRB), as well as with the requirements under Art. 18 of the Annex to the Regulations of the Scientific Council of the Institute of Balkan Studies with the Centre of Thracology "Prof. Al. Fol" at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences concerning the conditions and procedures for acquiring academic degrees and holding academic positions.

Georgi Kovachev has held a PhD in Archaeology since 2001, with a scientific specialty in 05.03.12. He graduated from Veliko Tarnovo University "Sts. Cyril and Methodius" in 1992. He worked as an archaeologist at the Regional History Museum – Sliven during the period 1991–1998 and again from 2024 to the present, actively engaging in collecting, research, exhibition, and outreach activities.

Georgi Kovachev has participated in archaeological investigations since 1988. He took part in expeditions along the middle course of the Tundzha River and in Eastern Stara Planina. The archaeological excavations in which he participated include: An Early Bronze Age necropolis near the village of Mirovtsi, Varna region (1988); An Early Iron Age tumular necropolis in the Maritsa–East region; Thracian tumuli and necropolises, and a Late Antique necropolis in Staro Selo, Sliven region (1996); Settlements from the Antiquity period in the lands of the village of Gledachevo, Maritsa–East region; An Early Byzantine and Medieval settlement (4th–6th c. and 9th–12th c.) near the village of Karanovo, Nova Zagora region; An Early Byzantine and Medieval fortress and necropolis in Sliven, in the "Hisarlaka" area (1991-

2024); An Early Byzantine and Medieval fortress "Kaleto" and necropolis near the village of Zlati Voyvoda, Sliven region (1992–1994); A Medieval monastery from the 13th–17th c. near Sliven (1993–1995). Georgi Kovachev served as a director of research, or deputy director of research of some of the aforementioned archaeological investigations.

He was a doctoral student at Veliko Tarnovo University "Sts. Cyril and Methodius" and in 2001 defended his dissertation on the topic: "The Bulgarian Lands between Eastern Stara Planina and Strandzha in the 12th–14th centuries", obtaining the educational and scientific degree of Doctor in Archeology from the Higher Attestation Commission. Since 2004 he has also held a BA in Arts and Arts Management from the College of Charleston, USA. From 2015 to 2024 he was an adjunct lecturer in Anthropology at the Technical College of North Charleston, South Carolina, USA. In addition, he taught courses such as American Government, History of America, and Economics.

Georgi Kovachev has conducted significant scientific research and produced scholarly as well as popular science publications. He has presented papers and scientific communications at conferences, symposia, and congresses. For the competition for Associate Professor, he applied with two monographs, one study, sixteen articles, and two chapters in a collective monograph. His total number of publications amounts to eleven monographs, reference works, and books, along with forty-seven studies and articles. Since the defense of his doctoral dissertation, he has published seven monographs, reference works, and books, as well as twenty-one studies and articles. In addition, his work as a scientific editor and peer reviewer should also be noted.

The habilitation work of Georgi Kovachev in the announced competition for Associate Professor is the monograph "Ancient Hybrid Therianthropic Creatures from Southeastern Bulgaria", Sofia: Kovachev Press Ltd., 2025.

The proposed work consists of an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion, a list of sources, literature and electronic publications, a list of illustrations, and illustrations.

Despite the large number of publications in the field of Thracian archaeology, art, and religion, the topic of mythical hybrid creatures in Ancient Thrace has not found a proper place in research. Therefore, every publication devoted to this subject is received with interest, especially when the edition includes observations that contribute to solving problems related to Thracian monuments.

The monograph examines monuments depicting well-known ancient hybrid therianthropic creatures discovered in Southeastern Bulgaria during regular archaeological excavations or received in museum collections under unclear circumstances. These mythical creatures represent combinations of the torso of one animal ending with the body of another living being, including birds, reptiles, and marine creatures. Unlike mythical anthropomorphic figures, the combinations do not include human parts or bodies.

The study is "based on the principles of post-processual archaeology, combined with art-historical analysis," aiming to consider the place of the archaeological find within the

context of its discovery but interpreted from the perspective of the people of antiquity who placed it in the archaeological site. In this sense, the underlying idea accompanying the artifact is regarded as static in time and conservative, according to later and modern perceptions.

The research focuses on six hybrid creatures – the Hippalectryon, Griffin, Pardalokamp, Hippocamp, Pegasus, and Cerberus. In the process of the work, an overview of the known data on their existence was carried out, along with a review of the development of the iconography of the living beings that constitute the parts of the studied therianthropic beasts – among them rooster, horse, panther, dolphin, and others.

The ceramic rhyton in the shape of a Hippalectryon represents a mythical creature with the head of a horse and the body of a rooster. In the Mediterranean world, vessels of similar shapes are known as early as the 9th century BCE, but they are most common in the period from the 7th to the first quarter of the 5th century BCE (until 480 BCE), after which they disappear as a theme in the Balkans. This is associated with the destructive campaign of Darius I in Greece. According to the author's observations, until the second half of the 2nd century BCE, the Hippalectryon was preserved in the coinage of cities in Asia Minor along the Dardanelles. According to G. Kovachev, a similar depiction can also be seen on coins of Alexander the Great and Lysimachus. The ceramic rhyton discovered in Taneva Mound near the village of Topolchane, Sliven region, is dated to the first quarter of the 4th century BCE and demonstrates an Asia Minor influence on the philosophical-ideological orientation of the buried Thracian paradynast. In the context of the burial ritual, this mythical creature also serves an apotropaic function.

The second creature considered is the torso of a griffin from the Dalakova Mound horse faceplate. This mythical being, a combination of eagle and lion, symbolizes strength, majesty, and divine power. Written sources and archaeological findings testify to the wide distribution of griffin monuments in the Ancient Near East, Egypt, Greece, the Scythian steppes, and the Far East. The author provides a thorough review of the development of the griffin's image, whose origins can be traced back to the 3rd millennium BCE. Initially associated with the protection of sacred spaces and divine domains, the griffin gradually evolved as a symbol of royal power with an apotropaic function. The monument under study, as correctly assumed by the author, is the work of a local Thracian metalworker and is more closely related to depictions from Scythian art than to those from the Near East. In the context of the burial at Dalakova Mound, the horse faceplate in the form of a griffin is not only a symbol of royal authority and dignity but also a mandatory apotropaic element intended to accompany the deceased ruler on his final journey.

The third image considered, the Pardalokamp, is a mythical creature combining features of a panther and a marine mammal, symbolizing the complex relationship between land and sea, wild nature, and its mythological dimensions. Chronologically, the monuments depicting this creature span from the 4th century BCE to the 6th century CE. The sea-panther from Karanovo is dated to the mid-1st century CE, and the archaeological context suggests that the hybrid beast served not only a decorative function for the chariot placed in the tomb but also a symbolic role connected to spirituality and the transition to the afterlife. G. Kovachev links the images of Eros riding the Pardalokamp from Karanovo and the associated Boscoreale-style

cups from Karanovo with other similar depictions from stucco works in tombs in Pozzuoli, Italy, suggesting the need for future research on this topic.

Another monument considered in the third chapter is a silvered bronze ring with a plaque depicting a hippocamp – a chance find preserved in the Regional History Museum – Sliven. The image of the sea-horse is also known from other finds in Bulgaria. These artifacts demonstrate both the influence of Greek culture and local interpretations of the mythical image. In the art of Mediterranean peoples, the hippocamp is part of funerary scenes symbolizing the journey to the afterlife. At the same time, in the Hellenistic period, it appears in compositions depicting marine thiasoi, rich with mythical creatures that emphasize the aesthetic value of decorations. During the Roman period, images of hippocamps spread widely. They appear in mosaics, coins, and architectural elements throughout the Roman Empire. The hippocamp on the ring from the Sliven Museum is yet another example of the adaptation of ancient motifs. The depiction on this ring, dated on iconographic grounds to the late 5th–4th centuries BCE, though with some doubts regarding its original execution during the specified period, is considered according to existing typologies and associated dating.

The next mythical hybrid creature examined is Cerberus, the three-headed guardian of the underworld, one of the most recognizable symbols of ancient mythology. He embodies the boundary between the world of the living and that of the dead, with the task of preventing souls from passing from the afterlife to the earthly realm and vice versa. The author examines the existing iconographic scenes from the 6th century BCE to the end of the Roman period. Among the most notable scenes are depictions of Cerberus with Hercules, who leads him out of the underworld, and with Serapis, who, in the Roman period, was often syncretized with other deities. In the territory of present-day Bulgaria, depictions of Cerberus are mostly found on coins, demonstrating the spread of monuments featuring the mythical dog and Serapis. This is evident from coin emissions from Anchialos, Serdica, Augusta Traiana, Deultum, Marcianopolis, Odessos, and Nicopolis ad Istrum. In some of these cities, Serapeums existed, while in others, the appearance of the engravings resulted from imported eastern cults among the local population. Such is the case with the bronze figurine of the specific type "Cerberus 'according to Macrobius'" found in Augusta Traiana, which is examined in the present study.

The last mythical figure presented is Pegasus, whose depiction is known from a gem discovered in Kabyle. The presence of a monument with this mythical winged horse in the city is associated with the Roman military units stationed there.

The conclusions drawn from the review of the presented mythical beasts are that the primary functions of the therianthropic creatures considered are related to their symbolism, representing a demonstration of strength and protection; the establishment of mythological connections in the form of metaphors between humans and gods, and between the physical and spiritual worlds; and their role as elements in utilitarian ritual practices during various ceremonies. The study sheds light on a little-known aspect of Thracian ancient art and culture. Including monuments from Southeastern Bulgaria expands the scope of research on Thracian beliefs and customs. The observed trends in the development of the images demonstrated in the presented artifacts provide a foundation for further study of therianthropic creatures and their role in the ancient world. Future research could focus on comparing therianthropic creatures in

Thracian art with those in other cultures of the Balkans, Asia Minor, and the Mediterranean, and exploring their connection to the social structure of Thracian tribes, including their role in royal and religious rituals. Hybrid therianthropic beasts represent a unique cultural phenomenon that transcends purely artistic frameworks and offers a window into the thinking and beliefs of ancient people. Studying their depictions and symbolism helps us better understand the relationship between humans, nature, and the divine in the ancient world, as well as the richness of Thracian cultural heritage.

The presented work is the first attempt to gather in one place the hybrid therianthropic creatures from the region of Southeastern Bulgaria. Among them, the Hippalectryon from Topolchane and the Pardalokamp from Karanovo are the only known finds of these mythical beasts in the Bulgarian lands. G. Kovachev skillfully connects their appearance and iconography with other well-known monuments from the Balkans and the Mediterranean region. A notable contribution is the consideration of the Hippalectryon's continued existence after 480 BCE, which represents a new point in the iconographic development of these mythical beasts. Alongside the role of the Pardalokamp in Thracian funerary culture, the question of the identity of the winged infant riding this creature arises, interpreted as the image of the infant Dionysus, which should be regarded as a specific feature of the Thracian manifestation in this widely known iconographic composition.

An important point is also the identification of Cerberus as a specific "according to Macrobius" iconographic type, which, supported by images from coin emissions, allows the identification of a Serapis temple in Augusta Traiana. The horse chieftain from Dalakova Mound in the form of a griffin is correctly interpreted as the work of a local Thracian metalworker, once again raising the issue of the connection between Thracian and Scythian art.

In the study, the author uses a variety of sources, including literary, epigraphic, and archaeological monuments. The research contributes to clarifying Thrace's cultural connections with the rest of the ancient world. The study is genuine, with no evidence of plagiarism. The cited bibliography is comprehensive and corresponds to the content.

The publications submitted by Georgi Kovachev in the competition cover a wide range of issues related to Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Their focus is primarily on questions concerning the development and manifestation of Thracian religion and material culture.

The contributions of these publications relate to the character of the local Thracian culture, the specificity of the iconographic representation of Thracian deities, and the manifestations of religious syncretism. On the other hand, there are publications concerning the production and distribution of domestic pottery and other items of material culture, which shed light on the daily life of the inhabitants of Ancient Thrace. All of these demonstrate a high level of expertise in the field of ancient archaeology, which gives me grounds to provide a positive assessment of the proposed scholarly output.

The overall work of Dr. Georgi Kovachev leaves an excellent impression of professionalism. His contribution to Thracian archaeology and cultural-historical heritage is particularly significant.

In conclusion, I consider the candidacy of Dr. Georgi Kovachev to meet the requirements for the academic position of Associate Professor, and I recommend him to the esteemed jury, supporting a vote "FOR" his appointment to this position.

Sliven

12 September 2025

.....

Assoc. Prof. Nikolay Sirakov, PhD