STATEMENT

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ivo Topalilov, Institute of Balkan Studies & Centre of Thracology – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (IBCT–BAS),

Member of the academic committee pursuant to Order No. 38 RD-16/16.06.2025 issued by the Director of IBCT, regarding the organization of a competition for the academic position of Associate Professor in the field of Higher Education Area 2: Humanities, Professional Field 2.2: History and Archaeology (Ancient Archaeology), for the needs of the Regional Historical Museum – Sliven, announced in State Gazette issue No. 39/13.05.2025.

The competition received an application from a single candidate: Dr. Georgi Gospondinov Kovachev, currently serving as a curator in the "Archaeology" Department of the Regional Historical Museum – Sliven.

Dr. Georgi Kovachev possesses substantial teaching and research experience in the fields of history, archaeology, and art history. He has an extensive record of publications, participation in academic conferences, and involvement in field archaeological excavations and expeditions, as well as editorial work. His membership in both Bulgarian and American scholarly associations stands as recognition of his professional achievements.

Dr. Kovachev's scholarly interests and professional engagement date back to his student years in History at St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo, when in 1990 he was appointed curator in the Archaeology Section, a position he held until 1998. These interests naturally culminated in his doctoral studies, conducted independently between 1997 and 2000 at the same university, and successfully defended in 2001 with a dissertation entitled *"The Bulgarian Lands between Eastern Stara Planina and Strandzha in the 12th–14th Centuries."*

Dr. Kovachev further advanced his academic qualifications by pursuing a second bachelor's degree in Arts Management and Art History at the Department of Arts, College of Charleston, USA (2001–2005). This enabled him to develop a teaching career in the United States, including a position at Trident Technical College (2015–2024), where he taught Anthropology, and earlier at Battery Creek High School (2009–2012), where he taught American History, Government, and Economics. Since 2024, he has resumed his role as curator in the Archaeology Section of the Regional Historical Museum – Sliven.

The candidate is participating in the competition with two monographs, seventeen studies and articles (including two in English), and two chapters in a collective monograph, all of which have been published. His habilitation work submitted for the competition is the monograph *"Ancient Hybrid Therianthropic Creatures from Southeastern Bulgaria"* (Sofia: Kovachev Press Ltd., 2025). His second monograph, *"The Bulgarian Lands between Eastern Stara Planina and Strandzha in the 12th–14th Centuries (A Historical and Archaeological Study)"* (2002), is based on his successfully defended doctoral dissertation.

The habilitation monograph, which has undergone double-blind peer review, consists of an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion, a list of sources, bibliography and electronic resources, a list of illustrations, and the illustrations themselves, totaling 203 pages. The subject of the research is the mythological hybrid creatures of Ancient Thrace, particularly in its southeastern region, as represented on a group of ancient monuments. These creatures combine features of various mammals, birds, reptiles, and aquatic beings, and are products of human imagination – reflecting both conventional symbolic thought and conservative perceptions of nature and its philosophical connection to humanity.

The discovery of therianthropic monuments during archaeological excavations in Southeastern Bulgaria defines the main objective of the monograph: their interpretation. This is achieved through analytical examination and comparative analysis of the depictions of ancient hybrid beasts found in the region – Hippalectryon, Griffin, Pardalokamp, Hippocamp, Cerberus, and Pegasus – which form the thematic structure of the six chapters. In each of the chapters, alongside the analytical study, the previously available data are supplemented with new findings.

In Chapter One (pp. 17–48), the author analyzes the only known depiction of a Hippalectryon – a zoomorphic combination of horse and rooster – discovered in the specified geographic area: a ceramic rhyton unearthed during excavations of the Taneva Mound near the village of Topolchane, Sliven region. The main conclusion drawn is that the image on the vessel symbolizes royal power, a motif also found on the coins of Alexander III of Macedon and his Thracian successor Lysimachus (pp. 43, 47). The vessel itself, according to the author, "demonstrates the connection between Thracian aristocrats not only with Macedonian rulers and Asia Minor cities, but also with Persian institutions" (p. 48).

In Chapter Two (pp. 49–81), the author analyzes and synthesizes information regarding the griffin – "a mythical hybrid beast combining the bodies of two 'royal' creatures: the eagle

and the lion" (p. 49). Special attention is given to a silver forehead ornament discovered during archaeological excavations of the Dalakova Mound near the village of Topolchane, Sliven region, for which no exact parallels have been identified to date. Dr. Kovachev concludes that this ornament, along with other similar finds from Thrace, corresponds to Scythian cultural traditions, while also reflecting the distinctive character of Thracian decorative style (pp. 76, 79–80). The ornament from Dalakova Mound features depictions of deer or roe deer heads (p. 79). Overall, the griffin image on the ornament serves an apotropaic (protective) function (p. 80).

Chapter Three (pp. 82–107) examines the mythical creature known as *pardalokamp*, based on a bronze figurine of winged Eros riding a fantastical beast with the body of a panther and the tail of a dolphin, discovered in a burial mound near the village of Karanovo, Nova Zagora region. A detailed analysis of the panther, dolphin, and winged rider allows the author to propose that the figurine represents a combination of several mythological figures, most notably a purely imaginary creature – a marine panther, combining the torso of a large feline with the tail of a marine mammal (possibly a dolphin), ridden by a winged infant (p. 107).

In Chapter Four (pp. 108–123), the author analyzes a depiction of the mythological creature *hippocamp* – a horse-bodied figure ending in a fish tail – engraved on a ring housed in the Regional Historical Museum – Sliven. Additional finds from Bulgarian territory are considered, including a terracotta from Mesambria, an item from the Letnitsa Treasure, and a silver plaque from Mound No. 2 near Simeonovgrad, dated to the 4th century BCE. The author concludes that these hybrid therianthropic beasts were depicted either individually or in compositions with other figures. In some cases, they appear in votive imagery; in others, they are featured on personal items or as decorative motifs with aesthetic purposes (p. 122).

Chapter Five (pp. 124 – 139) focuses on the mythological creature *Cerberus*. The study centers on a bronze figurine of Cerberus discovered during rescue excavations in the area of Augusta Traiana. The figurine features three heads – central lion, right howling wolf with ears laid back, and left dog – and a serpent coiled around the body. This leads Dr. Kovachev to hypothesize the existence of a sanctuary dedicated to Hades–Serapis in the city of Augusta Traina, a theory supported by coinage from the region (pp. 138–139). While plausible, the hypothesis remains open to debate.

The final Chapter Six (pp. 140–149) is dedicated to the winged mythological horse *Pegasus*. The analysis centers on an agate gem, believed to originate from Kabyle, whose owner likely belonged to one of the two Roman cohorts stationed there.

The author convincingly concludes that the functions and symbolism of therianthropic deities – providing protection while simultaneously demonstrating power – enable the construction of metaphorical links between humans and gods, encompassing both the physical and spiritual realms. These creatures are integral to utilitarian ritual practices across various ceremonial contexts (p. 159).

The study of the transformations and adaptations of therianthropic deity imagery, based not only on material from Bulgaria but also on ancient sources, empirical data, and scholarly discourse, represents a significant contribution. It expands the scope of Thracian beliefs and ritual practices. Their use as a medium connecting Thracian aristocracy with Macedonian rulers, Asia Minor cities, and Persian institutions is particularly noteworthy and opens new avenues for research.

The publication of this habilitation monograph is a logical culmination of Dr. Kovachev's decades-long scholarly work, as evidenced by publications Nos. 14, 15, 16, and 19. It also complements nearly twenty-five years of research on religion and cults in the region during antiquity, as clearly reflected in the publications submitted for the competition.

In conclusion, I would like to state that the monograph submitted as a habilitation work meets all the necessary academic requirements. It is a significant scholarly contribution and, to date, the only work in Bulgarian historiography dedicated to therianthropic creatures in Ancient Thrace. The accompanying publications reveal the candidate as a well-established scholar and reflect his research as both a museum curator and investigator, demonstrating remarkable consistency. It is no coincidence that in 2021 he was nominated for the "Dr. Ivan Selimski" Award by the Municipality of Sliven for his contributions to the preservation of the cultural and historical heritage of Sliven and the region, as well as for his work in local history and public scholarship.

The submitted works are original, contribute to the field, and contain no evidence of plagiarism. They meet the national minimum requirements and criteria for appointment to the academic position of Associate Professor.

In light of all the above, and considering the candidate's teaching experience, I confidently vote in favor (YES) of awarding the academic title of Associate Professor to Dr.

Georgi Kovachev in Professional Field 2.2: History and Archaeology (Ancient Archaeology), for the needs of the Regional Historical Museum – Sliven.

Sofia,

October 6, 2025 Signature: