

# OPINION

By Dr. Ivan Dimitrov Valchev, Assoc. Prof. of Classical Archaeology, Faculty of History at Sofia University “St Kliment Ohridski”, member of the Scientific Jury, order № 291-PД/03.07.2023 of the Director of the Institute of Art Studies – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

Concerning the dissertation of **Elina Antonova Anastasova** for acquiring a PhD on the subject: *Personifications in Roman Art from the Territory of Bulgaria* (I-III c.) with academic advisor Assoc. Prof. Dr Marina Koleva

(Institute of Art Studies – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences)

Elina Anastasova's dissertation is dedicated to the deities-personifications in Roman art from the territory of Bulgaria. The so-called "personifications" by contemporary researchers are extremely heterogeneous in terms of origin, history, cult and image and their generalization in one study, and for the Roman era with its diversity and ongoing processes of syncretism, hides quite a few problems. Nevertheless, as is evident from the results, such a study has its place, and it contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the provincial Roman culture that flourished in the eastern parts of the Balkans in the first three centuries after Christ.

Research on the role and place of personified deities in Greco-Roman religion and art has a long history, but to date it has remained peripheral to Bulgarian historiography. This fact determines the relevance of the topic of the dissertation, which fits into the contemporary scholarly trends evident in the research devoted to personifications over the last few decades, correctly used and cited by the PhD candidate.

The aims and objectives of the dissertation are clearly and concretely formulated and fully correspond to the title of the dissertation (p. 4). To achieve them, stylistic, iconographic, comparative, and cartographic methods have been used to extract the maximum information from the available monuments (pp. 4-6).

The object of study in the dissertation are the monuments of stone sculpture representing deities-personifications. For a more complete picture Elina Anastasova draws parallels from bronze sculpture, glyptic works, and provincial coinage.

The territorial extent was Bulgaria, within which fell parts of four Roman provinces - Upper and Lower Moesia, Thrace, and Macedonia (pp. 6-7). The chosen approach differs from the approach that has become traditional in recent years, in which monuments from the boundaries of one (or more) Roman provinces are considered in their administrative entirety. Restricting the study to the lands of Bulgaria allows, on the one hand, a full introduction to the artefacts, including those from autopsy, and on the other hand suggests a comparison between territories with different administrative

status, cultural traditions, and ethnic and social composition of the population. The latter, in turn, makes it possible to clearly identify the different influences and trends reflected in the stone sculpture of the four provinces. It should be noted that the doctoral student is familiar with monuments from the remaining lands outside the territorial scope of the provinces in question, and they are appropriately drawn as parallels to the artifacts from Bulgaria.

The historiographical overview is concise and to the point and clearly shows the achievements to date in terms of deity personifications and outlines the research prospects for the PhD student.

Chapter one is devoted to personifications in ancient art. An overview is given of the idea of personifications and of the various terms used in the literature to designate the personages under consideration. Already here the diversity of the deities labelled as 'personifications' becomes apparent. This gives rise to the need to formulate a definition and criteria for the purposes of the study and Elina Anastasova has risen to the task (p. 20).

Chapter two discusses the personifications of natural phenomena. In this and the following chapters, a unified and logical approach is followed with a review of information on the origin and development of personifications, an analysis of the monuments from Bulgaria, drawing parallels from Bronze Age sculpture, glyptic and coinage, and a summary. I consider the paragraph "Territorial scope" (p. 59) to be incorrectly titled. The territorial scope of the study is formulated in the Introduction, and that is Bulgaria, while in this case we are dealing with the distribution of the monuments of a particular deity-personification. Regarding river deities, it would be useful to draw as a parallel the relief from Kornofolia, Greece, representing the river god Hebros, bearing the epithet κύριος, lord (IAegT E477). This monument, together with the votive tablet from Asenovgrad region (Cat. RB 5), shows a real veneration of the river gods, and by private individuals.

The third chapter deals with the monuments depicting Eros. They are very varied both in iconography and in function and character. Elina Anastasova has appropriately separated the images of Eros with a torch (Genius of Death) into a separate section because they carry a different message and are used only in a sepulchral context.

In Chapter Four, *Personifications of Qualities and Virtues*, only one monument from Durostorum (today's Silistra), interpreted as a representation of Pudicitia, is discussed. The proposed identification is not entirely convincing. As the author herself notes, the iconography of Pudicitia was often used for honorific and tomb statues, and in the case of Durostorum it is most likely a tomb sculpture (p. 105).

The chapter on personifications of the states of the body discusses images of Hygeia and the Genius of Death (Eros with torch). The inclusion of Hygeia in the group of deity-personifications does not seem to me entirely justified. Her very name is indeed associated with health, but at least in the Roman era she was a health goddess, not a symbol of health. The proliferation of monuments, her veneration in a Thracian

setting alongside Asclepius, and the longevity of the cult show characteristics very different from those of the other deities included in the study.

The last sixth chapter is quite rightly the most voluminous. It examines the monuments of Bonus Eventus, Nemesis, Nike-Victoria and Tyche-Fortun, and their relationship to imperial propaganda. Depictions of the deities are common in Roman coinage, and this shows the importance of their images as carriers of messages that needed to reach the inhabitants of the empire. Elina Anastassova has correctly accounted for this role of personifications and in the text reaches interesting and important conclusions, among which I would single out the analysis of several monuments from Augusta Trayana (pp. 219-229) and of an acroterion from Kasnakovo (pp. 215-217).

In conclusion, the results of the analysis of monuments carried out in the previous chapters are presented in a synthesized form. Some of the information repeats the interpretations and conclusions already drawn, but summarized observations on personifications in Roman art from the territories of Bulgaria are also presented. It is here that the differences between the individual deity-personifications become most apparent, making it possible to trace the different paths of penetration and influence. In the Conclusion, the different functions of the images of the personifications should become clearer. In the case of Nemesis, for example, almost all the monuments bear witness to a real cult of the goddess, and so do not a few of those bearing the image of Fortuna, while in the case of Helios and Selene we could hardly insist on paying real divine homage. Such an analysis, however, is already in the realm of the history of religion.

The bibliography includes 436 titles and shows the author's awareness of current trends in foreign historiography regarding personified deities.

The study is based on 227 monuments included in the catalogue. The artefacts are described in detail, all the necessary information about the place of finding and storage is available, previous publications are correctly cited, and the dating is given. Ten maps are included as appendices to give a visual idea of the distribution of the monuments commented on.

Some factual errors can be found in the text. For example, on p. 120 discussed is the post and title γραμματεύοντος, whereas in fact the position is γραμματεύς. The friezes of the temple of Jupiter at Oescus are sometimes called frieze-architrave blocks (pp. 154, 158, etc.) or architraves (pp. 273, 299). The acroterion from Kasnakovo is referred to as a capitulum (pp. 284 and 296). A few punctuation errors can be found also in the text.

The abstract and the statement of contributions correctly reflect the contents and the main achievements of the author in the dissertation.

Elina Anastasova is the author of five scientific publications directly related to the topic of her dissertation. All five are already out of print.

Elina Anastasova's dissertation is an original work, and I found no signs of plagiarism in the text.

In conclusion, I can safely say that the aims and objectives set in the dissertation have been met. Elina Anastasova's text has its indisputable scientific contributions. The first comprehensive study of the personified deities in the stone plate of Bulgaria shows the perspectives for such analyses and undoubtedly enriches our knowledge of ancient art, religion and the culture of the population that inhabited the Bulgarian lands in antiquity. Revised dating and interpretations have been proposed for some of the monuments, which in their entirety are logical and convincing. The text shows a good knowledge and correct use of professional terminology on the part of the PhD student.

Considering the overall qualities of the dissertation, I declare to the esteemed jury that the dissertation has high scientific merit and meets the requirements of the PhD ADASRB and I vote "For" awarding of the degree of Doctor of Education and Science to the full-time PhD student **Elina Antonova Anastasova**.

Sofia,

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Assoc. Prof. Ivan Valchev