

## OPINION

by **Assoc. Prof. Dimitar Vodenicharov, PhD**

Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts *Prof. Assen Diamandiev* – Plovdiv

**Regarding the dissertation on *Floor Mosaics of the Episcopal Basilica of Philippopolis – technology and techniques, condition, problems and restoration***

by **Assoc. Prof. Elena Kantareva-Decheva,**

applying for a PhD educational and scientific degree

in professional field 8.2 *Fine Arts*, specialty *Applied and Fine Arts and Design*

at the Department of Fine Arts

at AMDFA *Prof. Assen Diamandiev* – Plovdiv,

scientific supervisor **Prof. Galina Lardeva-Minkova, PhD**

The dissertation submitted for review is of interest from a scientific and practical perspective with regard to the significance of the researched topic to the needs of both the conservation and restoration programmes and the cultural heritage preservation practices. The first scientific research on ancient floor mosaics appeared in the late 19th century. Scientists faced the problem of systematizing a large number of monuments scattered over a vast area and not always subject to precise dating. The research activities focused on the problems of architecture and visual arts in different regions of the Roman Empire. With this approach, mosaic art turned out to be a special case within the general evolution of visual arts.

Assoc. Prof. Kantareva-Decheva has focused her research on the restoration of floor mosaics in *opus tessellatum* from archeological sites in Plovdiv, dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The dissertation contains 168 pages. It is structured in five chapters, preceded by an introduction, which clearly defines the subject, research goals and objectives. The body of the research paper describes the complete stratigraphic and technological investigations, as well as the restoration, conservation and display of the mosaic floors of the Episcopal Basilica of Philippopolis. The research methods are complex and include analyses of written sources, stratigraphic and technological investigations, X-ray diffraction and elemental analysis,

polarized light microscopy, etc., which emphasize the consistent academic nature of the dissertation.

The first chapter, *"Mosaics of ancient Philippopolis - condition, problems, restoration"*, presents a thorough study of 4 sites with mosaics from the ancient, late Antiquity and early Christian periods of Philippopolis, unearthed and restored in the 1980s. An in-depth analysis is made of the sites, hypothetically divided according to storage place, condition and degree of deterioration. Previous restorations of the mosaics are analyzed, as well as issues of institutional negligence caused by investment interests. An important aspect of the research is the study and analysis of the restoration issues related not only to the investigated archaeological sites, but also relevant to the cultural monuments of national significance.

Following the logic of the topic, the second chapter, *"Mosaic laying technology and techniques in Antiquity"*, clarifies the organization of mosaic studios and the various floor mosaic laying techniques, as defined by the Latin terminology, where each name consists of two parts: the first part denotes the object – *opus* (meaning “work”, “a work of art”); the second part denotes the specific mosaic-laying technique - *signinum, figlinum, sectile, barbaricum, tessellatum*, etc. Of great importance to the dissertation is the detailed analysis of the materials that were used during that period for each particular mosaic-laying technique and technological layer. A wide range of information is provided, from imperial edicts and treatises on ancient architecture to comments on topical research papers (Clarke, Dunbabin, Ling).

Chapter Three, *"Episcopal Basilica of Philippopolis - History of Research and Interventions. Mosaic floors - classification, stratigraphic investigations, style analysis and parallels"*, is based on documents from the archaeological investigations conducted up to 2015, related to the architectural structure of the building. The stratigraphic analysis undertaken during the conservation, determined the presence of uninvestigated archaeological levels and shed light on the mosaic-laying techniques of each layer. A condition assessment was performed and the factors that had influenced the mosaic layers were taken into account. Based on the stratigraphic drilling, the lowest floor in *opus signinum* was precisely dated and a hypothesis was developed for the periodization of the upper ones. The stylistic investigations and comparisons with similar sites are fully supported by visual documents.

Chapter Four, *"Mosaic-laying technology and techniques of the mosaic floors of the Episcopal Basilica of Philippopolis"*, describes the substantial analyses of all floor areas. The

final dating of the three mosaic layers was made and the original mosaic-laying technology was determined. The laboratory analyses of mortars and aggregates provided a basis for the assessment of their composition and current condition. The geological characteristics and the local origin of the tesserae were determined, which helped choose the strategies and methodology for the subsequent restoration and conservation activities.

Chapter Five, "*Conservation and restoration of the mosaics of the Episcopal Basilica of Philippopolis*", is the core part of the dissertation. After revising the restoration practices and methods of the 1980s, a project for conservation, restoration and *in situ* display was created. Even during the very first restoration activities the team was impressed by the amount of work, but also shocked by the institutional negligence of the administrative entities involved in the preservation of cultural heritage. The scientific contributions of the dissertation, declared by the PhD student in twelve bullet points, all with a strong focus on the technical and technological approach and the current mosaic restoration practices, are undisputed. But most significant of all is the end result - the Episcopal Basilica of Philippopolis, restored over the period of 2015 - 2021.

It could be noted that the dissertation lacks opinion from the archeological and restoration teams on the architectural structure of the protective building. Although the architectural solution is a separate issue, irrelevant to the topic of the dissertation, it is not clear why the foundations of the structure step into the mosaic floor area rather than outside the architectural parameters of the basilica (provided that this has complicated the restoration and display activities).

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Dear members of the Scientific Jury,

The academic practice and expertise of the PhD student Assoc. Prof. Elena Kantareva-Decheva have been proven in dozens of restored sites and continue to be acknowledged through her public commitment to the preservation of our cultural history. The systematization of analytical experience and modern technological practices in restoration, described in the dissertation, generate academic experience and contain abundant information that can be used in subsequent restorations of sites with similar characteristics. The research problem is significant and relevant to the development and preservation of national and world art.

The scientific contributions of the dissertation "FLOOR MOSAICS OF THE EPISCOPAL BASILICA OF PHILIPPOPOLIS - TECHNOLOGY AND TECHNIQUES, CONDITION, PROBLEMS AND RESTORATION" are genuine and adequately represented by the achieved result.

**All this gives me full grounds to vote *For* Assoc. Prof. Elena Nikolaeva Kantareva-Decheva to be awarded a PhD educational and scientific degree.**

27.01.2022

Assoc. Prof. Dimitar Vodenicharov, PhD