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OPINION

by Prof. Dr. Gergana Ruseva

on the materials submitted for the competition for the academic position of "Associate Professor" in the professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology (Documentary Studies, Archival Science, Paleography, Historiography, and Source Studies), announced in the State Gazette, Issue 53 of 9 June 2026.

Chief Assistant Professor Dr. Strahil Valentinov Panayotov who is the sole candidate has submitted his application and supporting materials for the announced competition for the academic position of Associate Professor in the professional field 2.2. History and Archaeology (Documentary Studies, Archival Science, Paleography, Historiography, and Source Studies).

Given the substantial body of material submitted for the competition, the candidate's own modest presentation of his achievements, and my personal interest in his research, I have taken the liberty of presenting a somewhat more detailed opinion.

Dr. Strahil Panayotov's scholarly work is distinguished by a rare combination of philological expertise, historical erudition, and direct epigraphic engagement with original cuneiform artifacts. His professional trajectory linked to academic circles such as Heidelberg, the Free University of Berlin, and the British Museum reflects the systematic development of wide-ranging expertise in a highly specialized field in which knowledge of ancient languages is only one of the prerequisites for serious scholarly research. As an Assyriologist, Dr. Panayotov works directly with the signs impressed on the clay surface, identifies individual scribal hands and traditions, assesses the physical condition of tablets, traces parallel manuscripts, and reconstructs the place of individual fragments within larger textual compositions before proceeding to their philological and historical interpretation.

His work as a curator of Assyrian medicine at the British Museum where he deals directly with cuneiform medical texts from Nineveh and their scholarly and digital processing is particularly illustrative of this capability. His professional experience in international research projects, including BabMed and NinMed, has enabled him to collaborate with other leading international scholars in reconstructing the foundations of Mesopotamian medicine.

Panayotov investigates how ancient Mesopotamians created, systematized, transmitted, and applied knowledge in practice of the human body, disease, and treatment, as well as how they understood magic and the world. For Dr. Panayotov, cuneiform tablets are not merely carriers of text. The materiality of the artifact – its dimensions and shape, the layout of the writing surface, the arrangement of signs, the colophon, rubrics, the scribe's handwriting, the presence of images, the archaeological context, and even the history of its preservation – all play a role in the interpretation. This gives rise to his ability to transform what might initially appear to be a minor epigraphic issue into a starting point for addressing a much broader historical question. A colophon can provide information about the organization of a library; the shape of a tablet, about the function of the text; the specific version of a medical prescription can illustrate the transmission of knowledge across the centuries; and the placement of a text within a catalogue can reveal the principles by which ancient scholars organized medical knowledge itself.

Central among the presented works is the habilitation thesis **Mesopotamian Eye Disease Texts: The Nineveh Treatise** (published in the series *Die babylonisch-assyrische Medizin in Texten und Untersuchungen* 10 by the prestigious academic publisher De Gruyter), co-authored with the world-renowned Assyriologist Mark Geller. The work focuses on Mesopotamian cuneiform medical texts concerning eye diseases, specifically the Nineveh IGI treatise. This corpus of original cuneiform manuscripts forms part of the Nineveh Medical Encyclopedia from the

Library of Ashurbanipal (7th century BCE) and constitutes an invaluable source for the history of medicine. However, the significance of Strahil Panayotov's work extends beyond the critical edition of a specialized medical corpus – an epigraphic achievement of considerable merit in its own right. Beyond the specific texts, Panayotov reconstructs a long-standing tradition of medical knowledge that evolved over more than two millennia. He traces the evidence from early Sumerian sources (3rd millennium BCE), through Old and Middle Babylonian and Middle Assyrian material, to the systematized medical corpora of the 1st millennium BCE. In doing so, Panayotov demonstrates that the Nineveh texts are the product of a long history of accumulating, copying, editing, and rearranging medical knowledge. Comparing manuscripts from Nineveh with materials from Nippur, Ur, Assur, Hattusa, Ugarit, Emar, Sippar, Babylon, and Uruk makes it possible to trace the specific mechanisms of this transmission – how recipes, therapeutic formulas, and incantations passed from one corpus to another and were subsequently edited and rearranged. Linking medical texts to actual healing practices is both interesting and of scholarly significance. Comparing the technical language of medical treatises with information from the royal correspondence of Nineveh reveals the connection between codified medical knowledge and the treatment of specific individuals, including the king Esarhaddon and members of the royal family.

Another significant aspect of the study is its broad comparative perspective. Mesopotamian ophthalmology is compared with Egyptian medical papyri, Hittite texts, the Hippocratic Corpus, Dioscorides, Celsus, the Babylonian Talmud, and the later Syriac medical tradition. The comparison encompasses specific substances and therapeutic techniques—animal liver, honey, mineral and botanical ingredients, copper-based preparations, bandages, and methods of drug administration—as well as the broader structure of medical prescriptions. These parallels are not used to postulate a unidirectional "influence" flowing from Mesopotamia to later medical traditions. Panayotov acknowledges the complexity of historical contacts and examines the similarities within the context of the movement of people, substances, and knowledge, as well as a possible result of similar practical solutions to comparable medical problems.

Consequently, this habilitation thesis makes a significant contribution to international scholarship in several areas: as a critical edition of a primary cuneiform corpus; as a reconstruction of the history of Mesopotamian ophthalmology; as an investigation into the mechanisms of the transmission and editing of medical knowledge; and as a contribution to the history of medicine in the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean.

His work on eye diseases demonstrates Strahil Panayotov's ability to collaborate with some of the world's leading Assyriologists and medical experts and to reconstruct a major medical textual tradition; meanwhile, his monograph **Die Lampe am Krankenbett**, dedicated to Mesopotamian prayers addressed to Nuska, the god of light, is grounded in an analysis of the interplay between text, object, ritual action, and divine presence. The primary textological task involves publishing the available duplicates of KAR 58 (= VAT 9030), arranged in a score-style transliteration and accompanied by facsimile copies of the extant cuneiform artifacts. This undertaking demands a very high level of epigraphic and paleographic expertise. When dealing with damaged texts, the researcher must synthesize the evidence visible on the original artifact with archival photographs, copies, parallel manuscripts, and linguistic patterns. It is precisely in such instances that the distinction becomes apparent between merely utilizing a previously published cuneiform text and producing a critical edition that can serve as a foundation for subsequent scholarship. The monograph also centers on the relationship between Nuska, light, and the oil lamp; the lamp is revealed not merely as an attribute of the deity, but as a material manifestation of his presence within the ritual. Its nocturnal light performs a function comparable to that of the sun, and Nuska whose material counterpart is the oil lamp is the "King of the Night"; he acts as an intermediary

between the human world and Enlil, the god of winds and storms, while his connection to Ea places him within the realm of ritual healing and incantatory knowledge. Here, Dr. Panayotov demonstrates that prayer cannot be understood independently of its ritual context. In healing practices and rituals to neutralize the effects of adverse dreams, the prayer is recited at a precise time and in front of a specific object, accompanied by specific gestures. The gesture of raising the hand is analyzed through both textual and iconographic evidence. Thus, the monograph illustrates a consistent feature of Panayotov's approach: a text is best understood when restored to the material and ritual environment in which it originally functioned.

Research on the **Assur Medical Catalogue** and the **Nineveh Medical Encyclopedia** holds a particularly significant place in Strahil Panayotov's scholarly output. Here, the focus shifts from the content of a specific medical prescription to the very architecture of medical knowledge. Dr. Panayotov demonstrates the wealth of information regarding ancient scientific classification that can be gleaned from the catalogue's structure. The sequence of texts, incipits, rubrics, colophons, tablet formats, and the interconnections between various series allow for the reconstruction of the principles by which ancient scholars organized medical material. This subject matter is explored in a particularly interesting way in the study *Witchcraft in Medicine: the Ashur Medical Catalogue and Relevant Nineveh Series Reexamined*. Panayotov examines the relationship between therapeutic texts and anti-witchcraft practices in Ashur and Nineveh during the Neo-Assyrian period, questioning the applicability of the modern, rigid distinction between "medicine" and "magic." He demonstrates that texts intended to counteract sorcery which are not included in the well-known recension of the Nineveh medical encyclopedia could be produced according to the same material standards as medical tablets, and that anti-witchcraft techniques could fall under the general category of remedy and treatment. The study also addresses the intriguing issue of the bodily regions believed, according to Mesopotamian concepts, to be affected by magic. Through an analysis of the structure of medical series and a comparison with other texts, Panayotov concludes that the lower torso area – specifically the abdomen and kidneys – holds particular significance. This leads to his critique of the traditional translation of SAG ŠÀ as "epigastrium." The author proposes the more descriptive "upper abdominal region," noting that Mesopotamian bodily taxonomy does not align precisely with modern anatomical terminology and that the concept may encompass both internal and external bodily spaces. This example illustrates a broader principle in Panayotov's work: ancient categories should not automatically be translated using modern scientific categories.

The First Medical Work on Phlegm: Towards Its Textual Criticism and Medical History offers a particularly instructive example of research based on unpublished and difficult-to-access primary material. The study focuses on tablet IM.202652 from the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad, dating to the late second millennium BCE. Panayotov identifies the text as the earliest known medical treatise to systematically address phlegm, secretion, coughing, and related respiratory issues. Crucially, this is not merely an isolated prescription but represents systematized, specialized medical knowledge. Panayotov links the text to the fifth tablet of the Bronchia series from the Nineveh medical encyclopedia, which was compiled centuries later. Thus, a historical line of transmission, editing, and systematization of medical knowledge emerges, connecting a text from the late 2nd millennium BCE with the seventh-century BCE Nineveh recension, with the tablet in question serving as evidence of the medical tradition's continuity. Panayotov also draws parallels between the therapies described in IM.202652 and Hippocratic texts concerning internal diseases, highlighting elements related to bodily fluids, seasonality, and regimen. At the same time, he explicitly acknowledges the lack of direct written evidence that would justify claims of a direct influence on the Hippocratic school. It is precisely this combination – the boldness to pose a major

historical question alongside the discipline to avoid claiming more than the sources allow – that I find particularly valuable in all his research.

Another avenue of research is explored in the study **Healing in Images and Texts: The Sickbed Scene**. Here, Panayotov moves beyond the confines of traditional philological analysis, combining cuneiform texts with visual evidence of healing practices. His research focuses on the so-called "sickbed scene," attested on cylinder seals and, notably, on amulets associated with the demons Lamashtu and Hulbazizi. Methodologically, it is significant that the images are not treated merely as illustrative supplements to what is already known from the texts; rather, they are viewed as independent historical sources capable of preserving information about ritual actions, spatial organization, participants, and objects. Strahil Panayotov compares these images not only with the texts inscribed on the amulets themselves but also with medical, incantatory, and ritual texts from other manuscripts, drawing an important methodological distinction between the correspondence of text and image on a single object and interpretative reconstructions based on the comparison of different artifacts. The concept of "flat perspective" proves particularly productive, describing the transformation of the healing ritual's three-dimensional space into the two-dimensional composition found on the amulet. This allows the positioning of the bed, healers, protective beings, lamp, censer, and other elements to be conceptualized as part of a reconstructed ritual space. Specific outcomes include the identification and reinterpretation of individual elements such as the lamp of Nuska, the censer and the act of fumigation, objects from the ritual against Lamashtu, and the figure of Bidu, guardian of the underworld. Panayotov also attempts to reconstruct the distribution of roles between the patient and the healer, including the recitation of various incantations. To my mind, the most interesting conclusion is that text and image need not stand in a relationship of simple illustration. A visual scene can combine motifs from several distinct apotropaic and healing traditions, functioning in a manner analogous to an incantation. Thus, the image acquires its own ritual efficacy. This study stands as one of the clearest examples of Panayotov's ability to interpret the various facets of the artifact – text, image, form, and function – as components of a unified cultural system.

A different approach, yet one logically linked to his broader thematic focus, is found in **Cuneiform Demons and Modern Viruses**. At first glance, a comparison between Mesopotamian demons and modern viruses might seem overly bold. However, Panayotov does not propose a historical equation of the two. He is interested in the broader issue of how societies conceptualize the invisible agents of disease. The study examines the classification, origins, etiological function, and visualization of Mesopotamian demons, including *utukku*, *Alû*, and *Lamashtu*. The demon is invisible, difficult to identify, and capable of inflicting various forms of suffering. Precisely for this reason, it must be assigned a name, an image, and a place within a specific system so that therapeutic or apotropaic measures can be taken against it. Of particular interest is the question of visualizing the invisible through hybrid creatures and imagery on amulets and medical tablets. The comparison with modern viruses serves not to erase historical distinctions, but to address the anthropological question of how humans transform an invisible danger into an intelligible and manageable object.

One of the most consistent themes in the research of Dr. Strahil Panayotov is his focus on the materiality of the text. This is particularly evident in his study of "handle-tablets" – amuletic tablets dating from the 2nd to 1st millennium BCE. This class of artifacts raises a question that traditional philology might easily overlook: why was a specific text inscribed on an object of this particular shape? In addition to providing a detailed analysis and translation of the text, Panayotov examines how these tablets might have been worn, suspended, or displayed, their context within the home, temple, or palace, and the relationship between their physical form and their intended function.

Diverse textual genres – incantations, rituals, administrative documents, royal inscriptions, hemerologies, menologies, and genealogical lists – prove to be united not by their content, but by a specific material format. Here, his contribution aligns with the broader contemporary focus on the text as a material and visual object, yet it is grounded in the specific expertise of a cuneiform epigrapher. For in cuneiform, the material medium is not merely an external shell for the text; the act of writing on clay along with the size, shape, surface layout, and intended use of the object is inextricably linked to the production and functioning of knowledge itself. This same sensitivity to the material artifact is evident in his work on damaged tablets, where archival excavation photographs enable the reconstruction of signs that can no longer be deciphered on the original. The study of tablet A 373 from Istanbul is particularly illustrative in this regard. Here, the archival photograph serves not merely as an illustration for the research but as an independent epigraphic source. Such work demands an excellent command of cuneiform paleography and the ability to critically compare different states of the same artifact. This represents a significant contribution, as the researcher is not simply interpreting an existing text but recovering information that would otherwise be lost to scholarship.

In **Pros and Cons of Mesopotamian Medical Texts**, Dr. Panayotov addresses not only the immense potential of cuneiform medical sources but also the limitations regarding the conclusions that can be drawn from them. There is a strong temptation to equate an ancient term for a plant, mineral, body part, or ailment with a modern scientific category. However, such identifications can be misleading if they rely solely on etymology, established translation traditions, or superficial symptom similarities. Panayotov insists that, whenever possible, philological conclusions should be verified through other methods such as chemical analysis, archaeobotany, and the study of material remains. This is a hallmark of methodological maturity. Sound epigraphy lies not in the conviction that every ancient term can be definitively translated, but also in the ability to pinpoint exactly where the limits of secure knowledge lie.

This caution is evident in his other research as well – whether comparing Mesopotamian and Hippocratic medicine, reconstructing medical text series, identifying images, or translating anatomical terms. Panayotov proposes hypotheses – sometimes bold ones, yet he typically indicates their level of certainty and seeks the material evidence against which they can be tested.

The translation of the **Assyrian King List** into Bulgarian directly from Akkadian is significant beyond its value as a purely philological undertaking. One of the primary sources for Assyrian political and dynastic history thus becomes accessible to Bulgarian students, historians, and readers who do not work with the Akkadian language. The development of a specialized field depends largely on establishing its own terminological and translational toolkit, enabling primary sources to be incorporated into university curricula and broader historical discourse. In this sense, Panayotov's work also contributes to strengthening the field of Assyriology in Bulgaria. This is naturally linked to his teaching activities, which encompass introductions to the Akkadian language and cuneiform script, courses on Assyriology and cuneiform cultures, and practical exercises in writing on clay tablets. Foremost among these contributions, I would place the work with original cuneiform artifacts, often fragmentary, unpublished, or difficult to access. This constitutes the foundation upon which the rest of his research is built. The publication, reconstruction and comparison of such texts expand the source base of Assyriology. A second aspect is the reconstruction of textual traditions. Medical studies, in particular, demonstrate how individual prescriptions, incantations, and diagnostic formulas can be traced across centuries and various centers. This process reconstructs not only the history of a specific text but also the history of its revision and incorporation into larger corpora. A third significant contribution lies in the study of ancient systems of knowledge organization. Work on the Assur Medical Catalogue and the Nineveh

Medical Encyclopedia reveals that the sequence of texts, their format, and their method of serialization provide insight into how Mesopotamian scholars perceived the relationships between diseases, body parts or regions, and therapeutic practices. Catalogues and colophons cease to be merely peripheral, auxiliary data and become primary sources for the history of scientific classification. A fourth contribution involves rethinking the relationships between medicine, magic, and religion by reconstructing categories relevant to Mesopotamian culture itself. A fifth significant contribution is the expansion of the source base beyond written texts. Images on amulets, tablet shapes, early archaeological photographs, and material traces of use are incorporated into the analysis alongside the cuneiform text. In this sense, Panayotov works at the intersection of philology, epigraphy, the history of medicine, religious studies, iconography, and material culture studies. Finally, I would emphasize that his research consistently places Mesopotamian material within a broader historical perspective. Comparisons with Egyptian, Hittite, Greco-Roman, Aramaic, and Syriac medical traditions raise the question of the circulation of knowledge in the ancient world. The particular value of this approach lies in the combination of a broad comparative horizon and a cautious attitude toward overly straightforward genealogies of influence.

The body of scholarly work presented here establishes Strahil Panayotov as a researcher with a clearly defined profile in the fields of Assyriology, cuneiform epigraphy, and the history of Mesopotamian medicine. He combines two qualities that characterize him as a scholar with original ideas and the ability to analyze material on multiple levels using the methodologies of several disciplines: an exceptional focus on minute epigraphic details and the ability to perceive the broader historical issue lying behind them. To me, the most significant aspect of his scholarly output is neither the sheer volume of material analyzed (which is immense), nor the breadth of his thematic range. Rather, it is the quality of his engagement with the primary source. In Panayotov's work, a cuneiform tablet is never reduced merely to a transliterated text; it remains an object created by a specific scribe for a specific purpose within a particular intellectual and social context. His critical scholarly rigor is another essential quality. While Panayotov does not shy away from broad historical questions, sometimes proposing bold reconstructions, he simultaneously demonstrates a keen awareness of the limitations inherent in the source material. Distinguishing between secure readings, probable reconstructions, and hypotheses; exercising caution when identifying ancient diseases, plants, and anatomical categories; and striving to verify philological conclusions against material evidence – these are hallmarks of a mature research approach.

Equally important is the fact that his work enjoys international visibility and is linked to leading centers and projects in contemporary Assyriology, while his teaching and translation activities simultaneously foster the presence of cuneiform studies within the Bulgarian academic landscape. In such a highly specialized field, the ability not only to conduct research at an international level but also to impart the practical skills required to read and interpret cuneiform texts holds particular value.

The body of scholarly work presented—characterized by its originality and thematic coherence, high level of epigraphic and philological competence, and engagement with primary sources (including, in many instances, unpublished or hard-to-access materials) along with significant contributions to the study of Mesopotamian medicine and cuneiform culture, international scholarly activity, teaching experience, and last but not least, the recognition his work has received from other specialists in the field (Dr. Panayotov's works are cited in numerous prestigious international academic publications), provide ample grounds for me to recommend with confidence to the distinguished members of the jury that Dr. Strahil Valentinov Panayotov be appointed to the academic position of Associate Professor in Professional Field 2.2. History and

Archaeology (Documentary Studies, Archival Science, Paleography, Historiography, and Source Studies).

Sofia, September 22, 2026

Prof. Dr. Gergana Ruseva

**Gergana
Ruseva**

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by Gergana
Ruseva
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