

## **Despot Slav's Tower-Belfry in the Church St. Nikola in Melnik**

**Violeta Nesheva**

One of the two church bells recently discovered in St. Nikola (Nicholas) church in the town of Melnik (Gerassimova, see this issue of „Arheologia“). The bell of despot Alexius Slav is related to a tower-belfry, unearthed during the archaeological excavations at the church. The tower-belfry is seen on a photograph taken in 1900 in its outlook from the National Revival period after a reconstruction made in the 19th century.

Almost nothing remains from the Mediaeval tower (Figs. 2, 3) because the material it was made from was taken and re-used later; however, what has remained provides enough evidence for a graphic reconstruction (Fig. 4). Initially it was built as a freestanding architectural unit on a trapezium-shaped stone platform to the southwest of the church and was almost square in plan. The existence of at least two more floors above the ground floor is assumed - middle and upper ones for the bell department, with arch-shaped openings for the light to enter and for the bell ringing to be heard, with tiled roof with wooden construction. The total height including the roof was most probably about 15-16 m. The tower, functioned both as a belfry and as a guard tower dominated the citadel silhouette of the Mediaeval town of Melnik. The tower was built from crushed stones and white mortar, with some tufa and bricks for the arches and the vaults. The entrance faced south and the main road, connected the church - the metropolitan center until the mid 18th century - with the castle of the feudal lord. A small stone staircase led to a basement with tile covered floor.

The tower was ascended most probably by a spiral staircase, and from the last floor level the bell was reached by a rope tied to the clapper.

The construction of the tower-belfry is dated to 1211-16 according to archaeological evidence and written sources. It is related to the two following historical events: a) the reconstruction and renovation of St. Nikola church after a devastating earthquake; b) despot Alexius Slav (a member of the Bulgarian royal dynasty of Assenevtsi) proclaimed Melnik as his capital where he lived between 1209-30 and turned it from a bishopric into a metropolitan.

Despot Slav's tower-belfry is among the earliest known monuments of this type in Bulgaria and on the Balkans. Its closest parallels regarding the position, plan, building technique and functions are the tower-like belfries in the Sadovo monastery (Lovech region, 13th century), the Holy Trinity monastery near Tarnovo and St. Nikola church in Stanichene (14th century) as well as several Byzantine bell towers of the same type in present-day Greece, built between the 11th and the 15th centuries.

According to the inscription, the second bell is related to St. Charalampios - St. Archangels monastery, situated on the same plateau to the southeast of the basilica of St. Nikola. This monastery was built in at the very beginning of the 13th century and functioned until the late 19th century; today it is in ruins. The patron appearing in the catholicon is the archstrategus (archangel) Michael to whom the bell was dedicated.