

## Two Bells with 13th Century Inscriptions from Melnik

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Two bronze bells with cast inscriptions were found near the foundations of St. Nikola church situated on St. Nikola plateau at Melnik.

### 1. Despot Slav's bell

The bell was cast in two parts: the body and an upper part with a complex suspension system. The upper part is made of bronze and iron. The iron parts are the round lamella attaching a hook to the clapper and the hook itself. These parts are missing today but traces are left. The inscription is in the positive consisting of letters in relief that are nicely proportioned and delineated. The narrow channels through which the metal flowed can be seen between the parts of the letters.

The inscription is from a church-donor's. It contains the name of despot Alexius Slav, the famous ruler of Melnik in the first third of the 13th century. He is known from the written sources often in later versions. It is the first epigraphic monument with his name - despot Alexius, the pious Slav.

The inscription reveals also the name of the church. It was dedicated to St. Nicholas of Myra. The saint is named correctly ὁσίου instead of ἁγίου. He bears this nickname as he was proclaimed a saint while still alive as the bishop of the metropolitan church in Myra.

The archaeological evidence enables us to date the inscription more accurately. We could accept that despot Slav renovated the church after the earthquake in 1211 by building a bell tower and donating a bell; probably soon after that he raised the church to a metropolitan. This happened prior to May 1216 as the testament of Paul Claudopolitus, the first archbishop of Melnik and Serres, shows. Thus the inscription is dated between 1211 and 1215.

### 2. Hieromonk Theodosius's bell

The bell was discovered together with the despot Slav's one. However, it differs both in the way

it was cast and in the suspension system. It was cast together with the metal suspension hook for the clapper. Its attachment is different and it has only three lugs. The inscription is situated in the lower part along the „mouth“ and is clumsily scratched. There are no small channels to enable the proper filling of the letters and for that reason they are imperfectly and irregularly „printed“ on. The inscription repeats the models from the written sources: there are letters above the lines and the donor's name is written in two lines and with smaller letters, some of them missing.

The inscription says the exact date - ΣΨΟΗ that is May 1270. The indicator ΙΓ matching the date is written as well; the inscription says that the bell was put during the reign of Michael Palaeologus, the new Constantine.

The donor's name is hardly readable. The first two letters are normal in size while the others are smaller and are not arranged horizontally - some of them are arranged higher and some are lower, a typical feature for 13th century paleography. From the letters that are arranged higher, Δ and Μ are nicely cast. So the only name we could read for certain is the one of Theodosius hieromonk, who bears an additional name or a nickname but the only letters that are preserved are TA on the lower line. It is also the only name from the monastery we know about.

The bell was dedicated to the archstrategus Michael. The bell was to be put in the St. Archangels monastery - in the church bearing the same name.

The two inscriptions are extremely important evidence. The two bells although discovered at the same place were made in a different way. They are the earliest bells from the 13th century preserved in the Balkans. They point to the names of the two church donors - despot Alexius Slav and hieromonk Theodosius.