

THE INSCRIPTION ON THE FRONT OF THE BELL TOWER
OF THE CHURCH OF ST ATHANASIUS, THE VILLAGE
OF KURCHOVO, VALOVISHTA DISTRICT

Georgi Mitrinov, Emmanuel Moutafov

Abstract: The article is devoted to preserved old Bulgarian and Greek inscriptions on the front of the bell tower of “St Athanasius” church in the village of Kurčovo (Greek Karidohory), Valovišta District (Greek Sidirokastro region).

Key words: Bulgarian church - historical heredity, Old Bulgarian villages in district Seres (Greece), Bulgarian history, Bulgarian language, Bulgarian Cyrillic epigraphy.

The village of Kurchovo/Kurchevo, Demir Hisar region (Gr. Καρυδοχώρι) is among the earliest in the region. Its name occurs in an Ottoman tax record of 1617 with 130 non-Muslim households (hane) and in 1625, the households already went down to 110 [**Grozdanova, 1989:** 287]. Interestingly, unlike the neighbouring village of Krushevo, Demir Hisar region (Gr. Αχλαδοχώρι), where in 1617, 439 households of ore miners were recorded, and in 1625, the number went down to merely 222, no ore miners in the village of Kurchovo were mentioned in that period though ore miners were already available in the 19th century. Besides, researchers would include this village into the villages, known once by the name of Murvashko villages (from ‘murva’ – cinder, coal dust), in the mountainous area between the rivers of Mesta and Struma, where locals have been earning their living by mining and iron-smithery since olden times [**Kunchov, 1970, 1:** 227]. No Ottoman records of the village’s earlier existence are available for the time being.

The later information is from the second half of the 19th century. According to the records of the Bedel-i askeri tax of 1873 paid by non-Muslims for exemption from Ottoman military service, the village of Kurchovo, Demir Hisar kaza, had 176 households with 580 Bulgarians. The data was published in 1878 in a voluminous book in French, released by the editorial staff of the Istanbul-based *Le Courrier d’Orient* daily and titled *Ethnography of the Vilayets of Adrianople, Monastir and Salonica* [**Statistika, 1995:**135].

According to G. Strezov, there were 180 Bulgarian houses in the village in 1891. Most of the villagers dealt with stockbreeding. Some of the Bulgarians were coal miners, and 8 households earned their living by iron ore mining, i.e. they belonged to the group of miners in Murvashko region. There was one school with 50 pupils. The author mentions also the Church of St Athanasius with an ancient inscription found in its vicinity [**Strezov, 1891**: 853].

V. Kunchov in his study *Macedonia. Ethnography and Statistics* wrote that by the end of the 19th century, there were 1,150 Bulgarians who had accepted the jurisdiction of the Bulgarian Exarchate [**Kunchov 1970, 2**: 484]. In his work *Travelling along the Valleys of the Struma, Mesta and Bregalnitsa...* he noted that the village had 180 Bulgarian households [**Kunchov, 1970, 1**: 108]. He mentioned the temper of the local Orthodox Bulgarians: 'The people from the mountainous villages near Krushevo are rather public-spirited. Liturgies have been officiated in Slavonic since olden times in the churches of Krushevo, Kurchovo and of some other villages ... When the Bulgarian Exarchate was established, the entire mountainous area of the kaza led by Krushevo renounced the Greek Bishop, proclaiming this in special petitions (mahzars) to the authorities' [**Kunchov, 1970, 1**: 106]. Kunchov went further to say that in 1875 even teachers have been hired by the Bulgarian schools, but in the meanwhile the villagers of Krushevo and Kurchovo instead of recognising the Greek bishop, shaved off his beard. Many of the local Bulgarians were sentenced for doing so, and the story significantly harmed the national cause of the Bulgarians in the area [**Kunchov, 1970, 1**: 104].

Unfortunately, there are no extant records of the struggle of the villagers from Kurchovo for Bulgarian Church autocephaly in the archives of the Bulgarian Exarchate, kept at the Central State Archives, Sofia. But then again, a detailed account of the Christian families in the village has survived in the parish register of 1906-1907, sent by the Exarchate for filing in the entries. The cover of the register reads: 'Village of Kurchovo, Demir Hisar kaza, diocese of Melnik, Vilayet of Salonica'. The name of the priest, who has made up the list, is also mentioned: Father Ivan Angelov [**Kurchovo CSA**: 276]. Among the trades of the locals, entered in the register, 'farmhand' is the most frequently occurring, specified at times as 'ploughman'. Flock and herd keepers were also widely spread. Of the crafts, the most popular has been coal mining (18 people), all of them working in the region of Komotini, in the areas of the villages of Maroneia and Kirka. The guild of masons had 14 representatives; there were 6 tailors, 5 carpenters, 4 combers, 3 grocers, 3 millers, 2 guards of monasteries on Mount Athos, 2 menders, as well as a cotton beater, a sawyer, a çiftçi (farmer), a shoemaker, a butcher, a carter, a fuller, a smith, a stonemason working in Russia; a teacher and a zaptiah (Turkish police officer). There were also 4 hired hands (gündelikçi). Interestingly, the best part of all the artisans in Kurchovo went all the way to Komotini to make a living by coal mining. Still, Kurchovo was among the earliest ore mining villages in Murvashko region, which V. Kunchov mentioned as well, with only the villages of Kručevo and Kurčovo being included in this group of the Valovišta District [**Kunchov, 1970, 1**: 227].

An Old-Bulgarian inscription of the days of King Kaloyan found in the vicinity of the village certainly has a point of interest (1197–1207). Academician

Yordan Ivanov gives information about it in his book *Bulgarian Antiquities across Macedonia* [Ivanov, 1931: 29–34]. He visited the site in 1916 and wrote that it was a hill to the east of the village taking an hour of walking up a meandering path to reach it. Atop of the hill, there were ruins of an ancient fortress and of an old church of St Athanasius. On 2 May, the day of the patron saint, the entire village would climb up to attend the mass. The sole extant antiquities atop of the hill were two enormous granite blocks (up to 8 m in height). The tale has it that once upon a time these formed the entrance to the church. The inscription was carved on the eastern granite block, from the side of the entrance. It was a four-line inscription, reading in the author's interpretation:

1. АЗЪ ВРАНА ДУКА ВЕЛИКЪ
2. СЪТЪВОРИХЪ ГРАДА КРИЦВА
3. ... ЗА МОЛИТЪ
4. ВЪИ КАΛΟΙΩ(ΑΝΑ) Ц(Α)РЪ.

'I, Vrana, megas doux (Grand Duke) set up the fortress of Kritsuva... at the request of King Kaloyan'.

The present Church of St Athanasius is located in the southernmost part of the village, next to the graveyard. The building has been renovated along with its interior, which holds little hope of finding extant old icons with vestiges of Cyrillic inscriptions or of Bulgarian inscriptions in Greek script, as well as of Greek inscriptions with anthroponymy, toponymy and oecconomy of Bulgarian provenance.

Following 1926, the name of Kurchovo was changed to Karidochori (Walnut Village) and local Bulgarians became minority ethnic group due to Anatolian and later, Pontic Greek colonists. Local culture changed radically though nowadays the cultural society bears the name of the patron saint of the village church, St Athanasius.

A bell tower is several metres away to the north of the church. It is a four-storey building with window embrasures on each floor except for the ground one. The apertures on the second floor are narrow and arched. On the third and the fourth floors the embrasures are wider, divided by a cylindrical column. On both sides, arched ceilings have been formed. The columns have ornamentation in the upper ends on which the two vaults rest. The window aperture on the third floor is narrower than that on the fourth and the columns are wider in diameter. On the fourth floor, where the bells are, the window embrasure is much wider, the columns are thinner and metal rods bind the lower parts of the vaults. The parts connecting the columns with the vault are also decorated. Over each of the vaults of the floors and over the entrance, there is an artistically shaped niche on the outer side, slightly carved inward. It spreads in a wide band over the niches on the first and the second floors. The one over the entrance spreads on the vaulted part and is extended in its both ends in a horizontal plane as far as the ends of the wall. The niche on the upper storey is similarly shaped. The entire bell tower has been smoothly painted in white. There is additional decoration on the second floor, on the southern and eastern sides below the lower ends of the window aperture, near the corners of the walls, which is not well discernable due to outer plastering.



Fig. 1. The bell tower of the Church of St Athanasius, Kurchovo, southeast side

Apart from that, on the eastern side of the second floor, by the lower sides of the window aperture, small rectangular niches are made holding inscriptions. The niche on the southern side is placed to one side of the window conch and the Greek inscription has been carved here. It is elongated horizontally, with a vaulted upper part, which in both ends turns into a short horizontal line. The niche on the northern side adjoins the window conch, being elongated in a horizontal plane without a vaulted upper part. The inscription in it is in Bulgarian, in Cyrillic script.

The inscriptions have been carved, leaving narrow interlinear spaces. The one in Bulgarian is a six-line inscription carved on an irregularly shaped rectangle slab.

- p. 1: ТОВА КАМБАНАРИО
- p. 2: НАПРАВИ СА САС РА
- p. 3: КА НА Г. МАНОЛНА
- p. 4: КОСТАНДИНОФ И САС(Ъ)
- p. 5: 1860 НЕГОВАТА РАК(А)
- p. 6: СЕПТЕМВР(И) ІА' (ІІ)

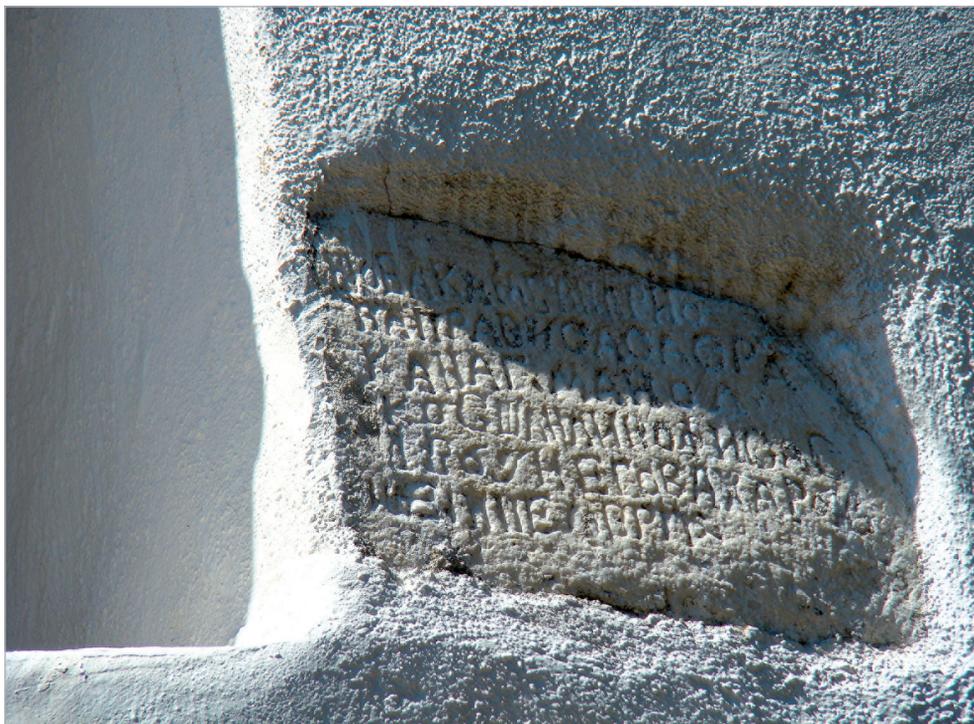


Fig. 2. The Bulgarian inscription in Cyrillic letters on the bell tower

Epigraphic peculiarities:

The script is uncial with elements of minuscule hand. The grapheme **T**, for example, is written as *m*. Graphemes differ in size. In the patronym КОСТАНДИНОФ, the sound *н* is denoted by the Cyrillic grapheme **Н** and by the grapheme **N**.

Dialectal peculiarities:

Dialectal peculiarities were established, typical of the local western Bulgarian Rup dialects as part of the eastern Bulgarian dialects: using the particle *ca* instead of *ce*, typical of the eastern Bulgarian dialects. The text has been composed in everyday language with the Old-Bulgarian big yus in the word *ръка* <OBg. рѣка, replaced with the substitute *a* (*рака*), rather than with the Old Church Slavonic substitute *ѣ*: рѣка. Voiced consonant *в* in final position is devoiced: *Костадиноф*, which is an influence of Modern Greek orthography. Unlike the final position, the use of the grapheme *ѣ* is omitted in medial position in the conjunction “*сасъ*”: *сас*.

What we have here is a word order untypical of the colloquial language: *Това камбанарио направѣ са сас...*, because it is a word-for-word translation of the Greek text given below, which was the leading one. The Greek word transcribed as “камбанарио” < “καμπαναρίο” suggests that such an assumption would be correct.



Fig. 3. The Greek inscription on the bell tower

The male Christian name *Κοσταδιν*, which, on the face of it, seems to derive from two names, *Κοστα* and *Κοσταδιν*, piques interest. It occurs in records of the thirteenth century (Заумов 1988). Looking narrowly, however, one would make a conclusion that here the Greek spelling and reading of the Christian name intervened, where NT is pronounced as hard non-Greek “g”. The scribe was not sure if Greek “ντ” had to be written as ΗΔ, given the phonetic laws of his region.

The Greek inscription on the bell tower is an eight-line one, also carved on a slab.

- l. 1: 1860
- l. 2: Ε[ΠΟΙΗΘΕΙ] ΜΕΝ ΤΟΥΤΟ ΤΟ
- l. 3: ΚΑΜΠΑΝΑΡΙΟ ΕΝ ΤΗ
- l. 4: ΙΑ΄ ΣΕΠΤΕΜΒΡΙΟΥ ΕΚ ΒΑΘΡΩΝ
- l. 5: ΔΕ ΔΙΑ ΧΕΙΡΟΣ
- l. 6: ΚΥΡΙΟΥ ΜΑΝΟΛΗ ΚΟΣ/
- l. 7: ΤΑΝΤΗΝΩΒΑ ΚΟΠ(ΟΥ)
- l. 8: Κ΄ ΤΟΝ ΕΞΟΔΩΝ

Translation: ‘1860. This bell tower was built on 10 September from its foundations with Mister Manol Kostadinov’s own fair hands, putting forth (his) efforts and at his expense’.

Epigraphic peculiarities:

The Greek inscription was not carved quite precisely with a clearly visible effort to bear a resemblance to the script of the medieval Byzantine inscriptions, especially in the rendering of the character Σ as C and Ω.

Linguistic peculiarities:

It is a standard form of wording for a donor. Linguistically, only the name of the donor in Bulgarian genitive case, singular is interesting here, which, thus rendered, would be more correct in the Bulgarian inscription given above. Thus the family name КОСТАΝТНΩΒ (Kostadinov) has become КОСТАΝТНΩΒΑ to express possession more convincingly, though Slavic family names are indeclinable in Modern Greek (see ΚΟСТАΝΔΙΝΟΦ). In other words, in this case the Bulgarian language has influenced the Greek language. Another detail, which in no uncertain terms provides a proof of a Bulgarian authorship of the inscription, is the spelling of the family inflectional ending as –OB, rather than as –ΟΦ, as in the case of Slavic names in Greek language. The end position of –ΟΦ, however, occurs in the Cyrillic text. Here ΜΑΗΟΛΗΑ again logically becomes ΜΑΝΟΛΗ in Greek (gen. sing.).

Arguably, both the Cyrillic and the Greek inscriptions had been carved by the same hand, using the standard donor's loan in Greek, spelling the donor's name with Bulgarian influence in grammar, i.e. Bulgarian was his mother tongue and he translated the wording to his native language due to the strong Greek ecclesiastical presence in the region. An interesting inversion is witnessed in the phonetic spelling of the donor's name, which, in the Bulgarian inscription, is spelt following the Greek grammar rules and in the Greek inscription, following the Bulgarian grammar rules as far as the scribe was familiar with them. And, last but not least, one should bear in mind that the inscriptions were cut in 1860, when the Bulgarian Exarchate was constituted without knowing if it would survive. Apparently, they were meant to draw both supporters of the Exarchate and of Phanar (Fanari/Fener – literary 'lantern' – region of Istanbul with Christian Orthodox population) to the parish church. In the scribe's mind, Bulgarian and Greek mixed, which is evidenced by the spelling of the donor's name that he probably never saw spelt correctly in either language.

The texts make it clear that Manol Konstantinov has been the donor and builder of the bell tower. No information of such a builder, who has lived and worked in Kurchovo in the 1850s and the 1860s, is available for the time being. He must have been well-off to be able to fund the construction of a bell tower of the church. It was obviously in the period of which G. Strezov wrote in his short notes on the village of Kurchovo, when iron ore mining had fallen into decay and the best part of the working local males, which used to make their living by mining, switched to other occupations. The data of the parish register of the Christian families in the village, compiled for the needs of the Bulgarian Exarchate, does not show frequent occurrence of the Christian name Kostadin, and even less frequent is the surname Manolov. Though there was every possibility this combination of a Christian and surname in the name system of the village to be repeated in five or so decades, no such repetition is available according

to the information of the early twentieth century (Kurchovo CSA). Still, in all likelihood the donor/builder has lived locally. Be it otherwise, he would hardly invest funds and efforts to erect a bell tower of the local church.

The two inscriptions in the bell tower of the Church of St Athanasius in the village of Kurchovo are of great importance to the Bulgarian ecclesiastical and historical heritage in the Aegean region. What we have here, on the one hand, is one of just the few in Northern Greece extant church front inscriptions in Bulgarian, written in Cyrillic script of the days of Bulgarian National Revival. It is important, on the other hand, to find extant parallel Bulgarian and Greek inscriptions in a religious monument, which is a rare occurrence in the churches of the former Bulgarian Christian villages in the Aegean region. Such inscriptions are yet to be studied in detail and finding data about our history of the National Revival Period in once Bulgarian villages in present-day Northern Greece, that would shed new light on our common history, lays in store for us.

REFERENCES

- Грозданова, Е. 1989.** *Българската народност през XVII век.* Демографско изследване. София, 1989.
- Иванов, Й. 1931.** *Български старини из Македония.* София, 1931.
- Кънчов, В. 1970, 1.** Пътуване по долините на Струма, Места и Брегалница, Битолско, Преспа и Охридско. – В: Кънчов, В. *Избрани произведения. Т. 1.* София, 1970.
- Кънчов, В. 1970, 2.** Македония. Етнография и статистика. – В: Кънчов, В. *Избрани произведения. Т. 2.* София, 1970.
- Кърчово ЦДА:** 276. Централен държавен архив, ф. 246К, оп. 10, а.е. 276, 197 л.; оп. 9, а.е. 504, 31 л.
- Статистика 1995:** *Македония и Одринско. Статистика на населението от 1873 г.* София, 1995.
- Стрезов, Г. 1891.** Два санжака от Източна Македония. – *Периодическо списание на българското книжовно дружество, кн. 36*, 1891, с. 853.

Correspondence addresses:

Georgi Mitrinov – Assoc. Prof., PhD
Institute for Bulgarian Language
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences
52 Shipchenski prohod Blvd, bl. 17
1113 Sofia, Bulgaria
e-mail: mitrinov@abv.bg

Emanuel Mutafov – Assoc. Prof., PhD
Institute of Art Studies
Bulgarian Academy of Sciences
21 Krakra Str
1000 Sofia, Bulgaria
e-mail: moutafov1@gmail.com