

Campanile Epigraphy

A Study of Bells and Their Inscriptions in the Romanian Communities in Transylvania (18th–20th Centuries)

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*“Live long to lament with
those who mourn, with
touching sounds to soothe
those who repent.”*

BELLS PERFORM a wide range of functions in human communities, such as calling the believers to the divine service, announcing deaths, protecting the community’s lands and sounding the alarm in case of fire or danger of any kind. Bells and their sound have always had a rich symbolic connotation, but also a practical side, shaping and influencing people’s behavior and attitudes within a community. Each bell sound contains a certain meaning, a “code,” a system of messages or information.¹ Also, the sound of bells helps to create the regional identity. The territory circumscribed by the sound of a bell tells of classical beauty, it emerges as an enclosed space outlined by the sonority of the centre, dominated symbolically by the church and its belfry. Through

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the bell's sound, man is integrated into this space and identifies with it.² Bells are generally valued for their sound, yet they are not confined to the status of mere sounding objects.³ Bells can also be examined and classified according to the inscriptions on them. In the Western literature, campanile epigraphy is considered a distinct research field, capable of providing information about old beliefs and traditions, bringing a major contribution to social history and providing data pertaining to national and local history.⁴ At the same time, bell inscriptions offer a wide range of information of chronological, religious and secular nature, being also a valuable tool used in identifying distinctive attitudes and behaviors.

On the basis of these assumptions, the present study proposes a thorough investigation of the texts engraved on bells, in order to determine whether any of the abovementioned aspects can be detected in the case of the bells belonging to the Romanian communities in Transylvania. To this end, we draw on a variety of sources: archives, monographs, parish chronicles, church press and periodicals, etc.

The inscriptions on Transylvanian bells provide a more or less complete diary of the bells' specific history.⁵ It is true that most of the bells are clearly engraved with the "birth year." On some of these sounding instruments, such as those in Ighiu (Alba County), Camăr (Sălaj County),⁶ Pâclișa (Alba County),⁷ Cheud (Sălaj County),⁸ the years 1764, 1797, 1800, 1843, 1875 were practically the only identification marks.

The texts engraved on the metal body sometimes capture glimpses of everyday life, because bells, just like people, have a destiny filled with pleasant or less pleasant events. Through its inscription, the bell "verbalizes"⁹ its personal background: "My predecessor kidnapped by oppressors was turned into a murderous gun, and I was born to proclaim the victory of justice;"¹⁰ "I was created in the days of Bishop Ioan and came back to life under the pastorate of Bishop Nicolae."¹¹ The inscriptions mentioning the bell's "birth year" and fragments of personal history also provide an indication of the human traits ascribed to these acoustic instruments.¹²

The high cost of purchasing a bell was usually quite a problem, and therefore a donor had to be shown due appreciation. The best way to do this was by including his name in the bell's inscription, during casting.¹³

Outstanding personalities of the secular and the religious world were acknowledged as having made bells donations. For instance, the bell at Mesteacăn, Hunedoara County, was donated by Archbishop and Metropolitan Andrei Șaguna, in the year 1862.¹⁴ The bell of the old Orthodox Romanian Church in Cluj was donated Major General Teleki and dates back to the year 1796.¹⁵

The examination of the bells revealed engravings of donors' names, dating back to the 18th century (Luca Ion of Anuța or Loghin of Anuța for the church in Ciuguzel, Alba County in 1741;¹⁶ Nicolae Ștefanoviciu for the old Orthodox Church in Cluj;¹⁷ Oprea Ioan Sora, Erei Popa George in 1773 for the church in Sibiel, Sibiu County¹⁸), to the 19th century (Cosma Ignat for the church in

Apahida, Cluj County, in the year 1875¹⁹), or to a time closer to our own (Marian Turda donating the bell for the church in Agârbiciu, Cluj County;²⁰ believers Crișan and Feneșan Gligor purchased a bell in 1928 for the church in Luna de Sus, Cluj County, and their example was followed in the same year by believers Petru Iacob, Pavel Ion, Mureșan Sâie and Cadiș Ilie;²¹ Father Ernest Ionașcu and his wife for the Orthodox Church in Războieni in 1959).²²

Most donors' names were male, but there were also women's names engraved on some of the bells, albeit fewer in number. Most likely, this might be explained by the contemporary positions and attitudes towards the social role of women, their "escape" from the private area being still restricted. Therefore, on one of the bells in Rusești (Cluj County) the inscription is "Mariș Floare née Roșu,"²³ and on another, from the same locality, the inscription mentioned the names "Hetea Maria, Mariș Ilie."²⁴ On the third bell, belonging to the village of Rodna Nouă (Bistrița), the text engraved was "purchased courtesy of Ilena Sângeorzan."²⁵ On one of the bells in Ilva Mică the inscription is, "This bell was bought by Ileana Anton, Sofia Neamț and Vasile Cristea in 1935."²⁶ Also, on the bell of the Orthodox Parish of Vințu de Jos (Alba County) the inscription is "Gheorghe and Cătălina Aron,"²⁷ on the middle bell of Vâlcele village (Covasna County) the inscription says: "Donated to St. Pantilimon Church by Neculae Zin and goodwife Bogaly Ágnes, Vâlcele, 1924,"²⁸ and on that of Măguri-Răcățău (Cluj County) we read: "Gheorghe Toader and his wife Rozalia from Măguri-Răcățău."²⁹

However, most bells were bought individually or through the joint effort of ordinary people. Some of them did not live in the locality the donation was made for. Such examples include George Toader and his wife Rozalia from Măguri-Răcățău commune, who donated a bell for the church of Stănești village, in Cluj County.³⁰ The bell of Cojocna, Cluj County, was purchased by the staff of the railway station at Tunel.³¹ The one in Vâlcele, Covasna County, was purchased with money collected from the guests coming to the resort,³² well-known since the time of the Roman Empire.

Whether they were personalities of the religious or civil life or simple people, men or women residing or not in the village where the bell donation or purchase was made, their kindness was highly valued. Their effort was rewarded by having their names recorded in the church's "Golden Book" and constantly recalled, either by the village priest or by the people, who could see and read them on the bells. Most bells were bought by believers for the churches of the localities they lived in, which indicates the close relationship between the community and the environment, between the community and the church. If social bonds were not strong enough so as to shape a proper community, this had to be developed symbolically,³³ through collective effort.

A particular way of developing this community spirit involved the joint efforts meant to endow churches with the bells the believers so much longed for. This

endeavor of the entire community was also mentioned on the bell inscriptions: “This bell was purchased with money collected from the believers in Ilva Mică through the perseverance of Father Ioan Bal, in 1922.”³⁴ “Bought by the Greek-Catholic believers of Cheud commune, in the year 1929.”³⁵ “This bell was melted down and made bigger through the donations of the people of Derșida;”³⁶ “Donated by the Romanian Greek-Oriental people from Sumusfalău;”³⁷ “contribution of the faithful people of Bica parish.”³⁸

By joining the extended family of the community, bells became a common good and the inscriptions sometimes mentioned the parish or village they belonged to, thus providing an additional element for identifying the community property. Bells were part of the community inventory, they were in its service and could not be estranged.

Such inscriptions, dating from the 18th and 19th centuries, included mentions of the village or the church for which the bells had been cast. The bell of Pianul de Sus village, of 1761, was engraved with “Pianul românesc;”³⁹ the one in Cojocna, cast in 1848, belonged to “G.O. [Greek-Orthodox] Ecclesia.”⁴⁰ On the bell cast in Apahida in 1924, the text “Orth.-Rom. Parish”⁴¹ was engraved. “This bell was made on account of the Băsești Holy Church.”⁴²

Bell inscriptions were a means of keeping names alive, so the local elites were extremely interested in this issue.⁴³ On some bells the name of the village priest is mentioned: “the pastor serving this holy church, Nicolae Cado”;⁴⁴ “donated by the believers from Miluani, the priest was Simion Nosa”;⁴⁵ “purchased in 1903 when Father Ioan Negrea was serving”;⁴⁶ “through the perseverance of Father Ioan Bal 1922”;⁴⁷ of the archpriest, “the archpriest in Regen was Petru Maior”;⁴⁸ “the archbishop was I. Bașa”;⁴⁹ “This bell was made with money collected through the effort of Revered Father Ioan Moga from Előpatak in the year 1863.”⁵⁰ By mentioning the names of the parish priests, they sought to preserve the memory of those who had played an important part in erecting places of worship, such an example being the church in Pianul de Sus (Alba County). The names of the two priests who made an outstanding effort to build the church in 1761 appear on the inscription which separates the chancel from the nave, as well as on the bell: “Father Moise, Father Ion.”⁵¹ Also, on the body of some bells the central ecclesiastical hierarchy is indicated: “This bell has been granted to the Loman church . . . during . . . Bishop Andrei Șaguna”;⁵² “the Bishop was Nicolae Colan, the Dean was Nicholae Vasiu and the parish priest was Fodor.”⁵³

Bells even immortalized the names of some emperors or kings, thus blurring the boundary between the religious and the secular element by means of the monarch’s person (“Francis Joseph I, Emperor and King”;⁵⁴ “in the time of Francis Joseph”;⁵⁵ “In the days of King Ferdinand I of United Romania”).⁵⁶ Similar inscriptions, a blend of religious and secular, appear on the bells in the French Ardennes

area: “during Pope Pius VII, King Louis XVIII, vicar of François Cassiaux de Saint-Thomas-en Aragonne.”⁵⁷

The metal the bell was made of could also play the role of diptych, ensuring the prestige of an individual, of an elite or of some members of the hierarchy. The bell inscriptions which included names of emperors, kings or metropolitans, bishops or deans, also played an important chronological role.

Featured on objects dedicated mostly to divine worship, a series of inscriptions on the Romanian bells in Transylvania contain glorifications (“Gloria in excelsis Deo”;⁵⁸ “ad gloriam Dei 1808”;⁵⁹ “To the praise and glory of God”),⁶⁰ praise addressed to the saints (“In honor of St. Paraskevi”;⁶¹ “Your sound, like the teachings of St. John Chrysostom, is to fill the people’s hearts with faith”),⁶² religious teachings and incentives (“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you”).⁶³ Bell inscriptions contain further information related to the functions performed by these objects of worship.⁶⁴ Thus, the bell in Cetatea Braşovului is engraved with the text “Live long to lament with those who mourn, with touching sounds to soothe those who repent.”⁶⁵ The inscription on the bell of Vinţu de Jos is the following: “Our souls to find comfort in the sweet sound of the bell of our people from Vinţu de Jos.”⁶⁶ The function of the believers gathering in the church is also mentioned by the inscription on the bell found in Buciumi village (Sălaj County): “strongly calls upon him in this saint place to cherish the word of God.”⁶⁷ Although these acoustic instruments were mainly associated with events and matters of an ecclesiastical nature, they nonetheless show that history is created all around us and bells may very well capture it.⁶⁸ Whether the events concern the life of the local community or that of the nation as a whole, in bell inscriptions sad or happy events are recorded and further transferred to posterity. The bell of the Greek-Catholic Church in Ighiu, Alba, reminds of a tragic event in the commune’s history: “After the entire village burned.”⁶⁹ The bell of the wooden church in Reghin recalls an event related to the renovations made between 1790 and 1791: “were renovated per pagum Magyar-Regen.”⁷⁰ Bell inscriptions may refer to sad or happy events in our country’s life. Thus, one of the bells of the Orthodox Cathedral in Sibiu reminds of World War I and of how some bells had to be melted down for military needs: “My predecessor kidnapped by ruthless oppressors was turned into a murderous gun.”⁷¹ The Great Union of 1918, an important event in the life of all Romanians, is mentioned in the inscription on the bell in Bica village (Cluj County), which was made “15 years after the Union of all Romanians.”⁷²

The analysis of the inscriptions on the bells belonging to the Romanian communities in Transylvania has brought to light a wealth of information, previously little known. Whether they record years, the names of the people who contributed to the purchase of bells, ecclesiastical and secular hierarchies, happy

or sad events in the life of the communities or of the country, the texts engraved on the bells' metal bodies have played an important role in the recording of facts, but also in preserving them over time. Finally, a thorough analysis of such inscriptions comes to outline distinct attitudes, beliefs and "voices."



Notes

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2. Alain Corbin, *Les Cloches de la Terre: Paysage sonore et culture sensible dans les campagnes au XIX-e siècle* (Paris, 1994), 99.
3. Percival Price, *Bells and Man* (Oxford, 1981), XVI.
4. John Camp, *In Praise of Bells: The Folklore and Traditions of British Bells* (London, 1988), 34.
5. Jason Kaminski, "Kolokol: Spectres of the Russian Bell," Ph.D. Dissertation (Sydney, 2006), 195.
6. Dionisie Stoica and Ioan P. Lazăr, *Schița monografică a Sălajului* (Șimleu Silvaniei, 1908), 217.
7. Ioana Rustoiu and Dănilă Vaida, *Cronica parohiei Pâclișa (1901–1944)* (Alba Iulia, 2008), 154.
8. National State Archives, Sălaj Branch (hereafter cited as NSAS), *Fond parohia greco-catolică Cheud*, file 6/1927–1947, fol. 7v.
9. Satis N. Coleman, *Bells: Their History, Legends, Making, and Uses* (Westport, Connecticut, 1971), 74.
10. "O sărbătoare înălțătoare. Sfințirea clopotelor. Pelerinaj la biserica catedrală," *Telegraful român* (Sibiu) 39–40 (1926): 3.
11. Ibid.
12. A very common but nonetheless revealing indication of the "humanization" of bells is the following: "Our bell was in the war!" See Elena Crinela Holom, "Bells As a Marker of Identity: A Model of Collective Sensibility in the Modern and Contemporary Romanian Rural World," *Transylvanian Review* 7, 2 (Summer 2008): 89.
13. Camp, 35.
14. "De la sate: Sfințirea bisericii și școalei din Mesteacă," *Telegraful român* 120 (1926): 506.
15. Florian Mureșan, *Biserica din deal sau vechea BOR din Kolozvár-Cluj și slujitorii ei* (Cluj, 1942), 15–16.
16. Ilie Morar, *Monografia localității Ciuguzel la opt secole de atestare documentară (1203–2003)* (Alba Iulia, 2003), 27.
17. Mureșan, 15–16.
18. Zosim Oancea, "Biserica monument istoric Sfânta Treime din Sibiel," *Mitropolia Ardealului* (Sibiu) 5–6 (1972): 448.
19. Florian Mureșanu, *Biserici și preoți din protopopiatul ort. rom. al Clujului* (Cluj, 1946), 13.

20. Ibid., 11.
21. Ibid., 44.
22. Inscription on the bell of the Orthodox church in Războieni, Alba County.
23. Mureșanu, 48.
24. Ibid.
25. Pamfiliiu Grapini, *Monografia comunei mari Rodna Nouă, din fostul district al Năsăudului (adi comitatul Bistrița-Năsăud) împreună cu note istorice despre valea Rodnei* (Bistrița, 1903), 102.
26. National State Archives, Bistrița-Năsăud Branch (hereafter cited as NSABN), *Oficiul parohial greco-catolic Ilva Mică*, file 20/1921–1967, fol. 28.
27. National State Archives, Alba Branch (hereafter cited as NSAAB), *Fond parohia ortodoxă Vințu de Jos*, file 1/1923, fol. 1.
28. National State Archives, Sibiu Branch (hereafter cited as NSASB), *Fond Manuscrise Varia, Monografia comunei Vâlcele*, file II/542, p. 45.
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34. NSABN, *Oficiul parohial greco-catolic Ilva Mică*, file 20/1921–1967, fol. 28.
35. NSASJ, *Fond parohia greco-catolică Cheud*, file 6/1927–1947, fol. 7v.
36. Ileana Petrean-Păușan, Gheorghe Chende-Roman, and Ioan Ghiurco, *Bisericile de lemn din Sălaj* (Zalău, 2008), 77.
37. Mureșanu, 60.
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41. Ibid., 19.
42. Irineu Pop-Bistrițeanul, *Băseștiul și ilustrul său bărbat George Pop* (Cluj-Napoca, 1995), 67.
43. Kaminski, 198.
44. Rustoiu and Vaida, 153.
45. Archives of the Orthodox Archpriesthood of Zalău, Forna Florian Cristian, *Parohia ortodoxă română Dolu: Date privitoare la istoricul bisericii parohiei Dolu cu ale filiei Miluani*.
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48. A. Popa, “Biserica de lemn din Reghin,” *Acta Musei Napocensis* (Cluj-Napoca) 16 (1997): 408.
49. “De la sate: Sfințirea bisericei și școlai din Mesteacăn,” 506.
50. NSASB, *Fond Manuscrise Varia, Monografia comunei Vâlcele*, file II/542, p. 45.
51. Neaga, 938.
52. Archives of the Orthodox Metropolitan Bishopric of Transylvania, Sibiu (hereafter cited as AOMTS), *Fondul Consistoriului*, file V 1052/915, no. 9548.

53. Mureșanu, 48–49.
54. “O sărbătoare înălțătoare,” 3.
55. AOMTS, *Fondul Consistoriului*, file V 1052/915, no. 9548.
56. “O sărbătoare înălțătoare,” 3.
57. Corbin, 144.
58. Ioan Marta and Ioan Aron, *Pianu de Jos: Contribuții monografice* (Bucharest, 1990), 40.
59. Grapini, 102.
60. Sima, 21.
61. NSAAB, *Fond parohia greco-catolică Ighiu*, file 1/1915, fol. 31.
62. Bartolomeu Baiulescu, *Monografia comunei bisericesti gr. ort. române a Sfintei Adormiri din Cetatea Brașovului cu acte și dovede* (Brașov, 1898), 48.
63. Ștefan I. Vădeanu, *Cebu Silvaniei, străveche cetate voievodală românească: Monografie istorico-religioasă* (Baia Mare, 2007), 102.
64. Kaminski, 196.
65. Baiulescu, 48.
66. NSAAB, *Fond parohia ortodoxă Vințu de Jos*, register B1/1909–1927, fol. 91.
67. NSASJ, *Fond parohia greco-catolică Buciumi*, file 10/1915–1919, fol. 3.
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69. NSAAB, *Fond parohia greco-catolică Ighiu*, file 1/1915, fol. 31.
70. Popa, 408.
71. “O sărbătoare înălțătoare,” 3.
72. Sima, 21.

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Bells are generally valued for their sound, yet they can also be examined and classified according to the inscriptions they bear. In Western literature, campanile epigraphy is considered a distinct research field, capable of providing information about old beliefs and traditions, bringing a major contribution to social history and providing data pertaining to national and local history. At the same time, bell inscriptions offer a wide range of information of chronological, religious and secular nature, being also a valuable tool used in identifying distinctive attitudes and behaviors. On the basis of these assumptions, the present study proposes a thorough investigation of the texts engraved on bells, in order to determine whether any of the abovementioned aspects can be detected in the case of the bells belonging to the Romanian communities in Transylvania. To this end, we draw on a variety of sources: archives, monographs, parish chronicles, church press and periodicals, etc.

Keywords

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