

# AN ARCHITECTURAL VARIETY SPECIFIC TO OLTENIA. THE *CULA* (OLD BOYARS' HOUSE)♦

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**Abstract:** The cula type edifices, which represent the tower-shaped buildings, appeared out of the necessity of refuge and defending. They are met in our country, in the southern territories, between the Carpathians, the Danube and the rivet Olt, with a prolonging to the river Argeș. From the architectonic point of view, the elements specific for the cula type edifices existed as starting with the 17<sup>th</sup> century at the boyars' houses. But, in the most well-known and better preserved forms, they appeared in the Phanariot period. They had been built by the small and middle boyars from the countryside. The cula type edifices from Oltenia fulfilled different functions, dividing them in three categories: refuge and defending cula or temporary house; watching, signaling and alarm cula; permanent dwelling-cula.

**Keywords:** the cula, Oltenia, reinforced housing, arhitecture.

Along the princely houses, the boyars' houses and mansions, the old boyars' residences (called *cula* at singular) are constructions that belong to the category of the civil buildings that have been lasting since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in a less or more advanced stage of degradation. If in Transylvania, for the purpose of defending, had been built rural fortresses and in Moldova monasteries with strong walls, in Wallachia, had been built the *cula*. As a real fortresses, with thick walls, stroke through by ramparts, the *cula* is constituting in a type of construction representative in the Romanian architecture. These houses stand for the pages from the history of Oltenia's territory that bring eloquent proofs about the fight carried on by the people of this territory against the invaders from the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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In our country, the *cula* appear in the southern territories, comprised between the Carpathians, the Danube and river Olt, with extension to the river Argeş (fig. no. 1). But, the spreading area of this type of construction, well-defined starting with the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is extending in the entire Balkans' space, especially in Albania and Serbia. It is also present in the regions from France, Spain and Italy.

According to the definition from dictionary, the *cula* represents: “1. tower shaped building, with the rectangular base (that functioned, in the past, as a defending place). 2. (Arch.) Circular tower, cupola, arch. Vaulted tower in the princely palace, in which was kept the treasury. 3. (Arch.) Vaulted cellar; underground gallery. 4. (Arch.) Boyars' mansion, (fortified) house of an estate’s landlord”<sup>1</sup>. The researcher who concerned himself with this type of construction defined it as: “fortified rural house, with several superposed floors, having a door braced with iron, protected with an oak bar that it is placed crosswise towards the interior in order to enhance its resistance. The door sometimes has lateral ramparts for the purpose of firing with a rifle from the interior”<sup>2</sup>, “fortified tower-shaped dwelling, a «fortress-house»”<sup>3</sup>.

As regarding the etymology of the word “*cula*”, it derives from the Turkish word “Kula” that it is used with the significance of tower. Yet, this doesn't mean that the construction has the same origin.

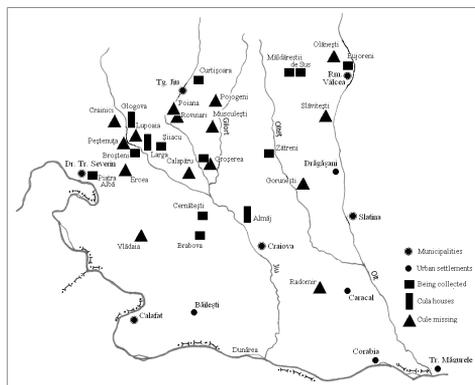


Fig. no. 1 The spreading of the *cula* type edifices in Oltenia (remake after Radu Crețeanu, Sarmiza Crețeanu, 1969)

<sup>1</sup> \*\*\*, *Romanian Explicative Dictionary*, the second edition, The Romanian Academy, “Iorgu Iordan” Institute of Linguistics, Bucharest, Univers Enciclopedic, 1998, p. 247.

<sup>2</sup> N. Ghica-Budești, *Evoluția arhitecturii în Muntenia și Oltenia*, IV. *Noul stil românesc din veacul al XVIII-lea*, “Datina Românească”, Vălenii de Munte, 1936, p. 118.

<sup>3</sup> Radu Crețeanu, Sarmiza Crețeanu, *Culele din România*, Bucharest, Meridiane, 1969, p. 6.

In some researchers' opinion<sup>4</sup>, the model of the Romanian *cula* type edifices was borrowed from the Balkan Peninsula. Corina Nicolescu sustains the idea that, through its structure and the construction pattern, the *cula* type edifices are related to the tower-houses spread in the Balkan region and considers that from here they passed to the north of the Danube<sup>5</sup>. Indeed, the fact that in our country the *cula* type buildings are present only in Oltenia, in the region of frontier with Bulgaria and Serbia, can sustain this opinion. But, the affirmation lacks, somehow, grounded arguments, because the simple resembling in name and form with the constructions from the south of the Danube can't be decisive in this respect.

The similarities between Balkans' *cula* and that from Oltenia are, indeed, numerous but they resulted from their development in the same historic circumstances. When the Turks had come in this part of Europe, they had found the old Roman guarding towers that were corresponding to their fundamental need of defending the empire; they had copied and had reproduced them exactly<sup>6</sup>. In the south of the Danube, they were necessary for a longer time than in the Romanian territories, fact that determined the maintaining of the Roman shape, while in Oltenia the *cula* type edifices reached an evolved stage. So, "a Balkan influence on the *cula* type edifices from Oltenia can't be taken into consideration but only to prove, in the Balkan area, the existence of the tower-shaped *cula*, with a veranda of arched poles above, with the same constructive type and with an interior structure"<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, the constructive characteristic of the Romanian *cula*, determined Grigore Ionescu to consider it as having some original features: "Belonging to the art genre called citadel, whose far origin must be sought in Persia and Minor Asia, related as concept with the fortified house spread during the Turkish occupation in the Balkan countries, in Macedonia, in Bulgaria, in Albania, in Serbia, the Romanian *cula* represents a version with many original features"<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, such constructions, equipped with defending means, existed in Oltenia starting with the 17<sup>th</sup> century, such is, for example, the house of the Glogoveanu boyars from the village Glogova, Gorj District.

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<sup>4</sup> Al. Tzigara Samurcaș, "Arta în România", in *Convorbiri literare*, XLI, (1907), no. 1 (January), p. 91-92.

<sup>5</sup> Corina Nicolescu, *Case, conace și palate vechi românești*, Bucharest, Meridiane, 1979, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Iancu Atanasescu, Valeriu Grama, *Culele din Oltenia*, Craiova, Scrisul Românesc, 1974, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Grigore Ionescu, *Arhitectura pe teritoriul României de-a lungul veacurilor*, Bucharest, Ed. Academiei R.S.R., 1982, p. 451.

On the other side, we must take into consideration the genesis of the cula type edifices and the role that the peasants' houses from the Subcarpathian region. Radu and Sarmiza Crețeanu find a striking similarity between these and the *cula* type edifices: “with their socle made of masonry work or boulders, high and stroke through by ramparts and with the interior staircase that allows the access to the fists floor, these houses – numerous in the past in the Subcarpathian area of Wallachia, but not anymore today – often present the pronounced appearance of a small *cula*”<sup>9</sup>. In the architecture of the *cula* we discover constructive elements and techniques taken from the peasants' dwellings. The frame work from the brick laying of the last floor of the *cula* from Brabova (Dolj District) constitutes a proof in this respect, attributing the construction from the Dolj District locality to the type of original Romanian *cula*, with a pronounced autochthonous character<sup>10</sup>.

The cula from Oltenia comes from the tower-*cula* that originated, in its turn, from the fortified tours that functioned as a guard and watch position. These constructions appeared from the necessity of refuge and defending of some wealthy families but also because they wanted to supervise everything that was happening around them. Because the lack of the evidences, we can't precisely establish the date when the first *cula* appeared in our country. What it is know, is the fact that, certainly, the oldest *cula* type buildings, known in Wallachia, date from the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>11</sup>. But, characteristic features of the *cula* type edifices had already existed from the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, at some of the boyars' houses. They took shape in a general situation of insecurity and fear that was characterizing that time the south part of the country, because of the invasions that came across the Danube. The weakening of the central power that didn't have any resources for securing the country's defensive system, determined the boyars to take security measures for their life and properties. In this way, there appeared the fortified boyars' buildings, considered by some researchers as being precursory to the properly *cula* type edifices<sup>12</sup>.

But the real *cula* type edifices, in their most known and well-preserved shapes, appeared in the Phanariot era. They had been built by the small and middle boyars from the countryside, as a refuge and defending post in front of the Turkish plundering bands. The rulers and the great boyars had built

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<sup>9</sup> Radu Crețeanu, Sarmiza Crețeanu, *Culele*, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Elisabeta Ancuța-Rușinaru, “Despre două cule din județul Dolj”, în *Revista muzeelor și monumentelor. Monumente istorice și de artă*, year XLVIII, no. 2, 1979, p. 77.

<sup>11</sup> Grigore Ionescu, *Arhitectura*, p. 456.

<sup>12</sup> Radu Crețeanu, Sarmiza Crețeanu, *Culele*, p. 10.

churches and monasteries with fortified walls. There are well-known, at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Turkish invasions that had come from over the Danube, of the pasha from Vidin, Osman Pasvan-Oglu, (1801-1802, 1806) and also the devastating incursions of the bands of thugs (called *cârjalii*) or the groups of outlaws (*haiduci*) that attacked the villages and the cities from the north of the Danube. Facing this situation, the wealthier dwellers tried to defend their goods by themselves, building fortified houses that were assuring them a certain protection. Such dwellings, built by the constructors from the rural environment, were similar to the towers. They were all built with thick walls, fortified, stroke through by ramparts, had massive doors and deep cellars.

But the emerging of the *cula* in this period is tightly related to different causes. The boyars were also afraid by the possible rebellions of the peasants, subjected to numerous abuses, impoverished by taxes and duties. That's why, many of the *cula* edifices were built near the mansions and the boyars' houses, especially near those that functioned as guarding and signalling posts. Around them, the terrain was cleared in order to observe the possible attacks.

At that time, the *cula* type buildings had a ground floor, used as a cellar, and one or two floors, to which the access was done on an interior staircase. The construction had two exists: one in the front and another on the opposite side, where the security staff was. At the last level, above the front exit, there was a look-out tower sustained by wooden pillars.

During the Turkish invasions from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the next one, a great number of *cula* type edifices and watching-tower that formed, along with several monasteries, a communication, defending and security network on the courses of the main rivers near the Carpathians or in the Oltenia's Subcarpathic region<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, the *cula* had an important role in preventing the attacks of the invaders. The danger signal was transmitted at night, with the help of the fire and during the day, with smoke. This was launched from the watching-towers near the Danube and was directed to all the dwellers from the villages and cities, no matters the social class to which they belonged. In a relatively short period of time, the news of the danger arrived to the north side of the Wallachian Plain. Such a communication network was made of the *cula* type buildings from the Valea Jiului. The signal started from the *cula*-tower from Zăvalu to the hermitage Robaia and from here to the *cula* type buildings from Foişoru, Țuglui, Braniştea, all the way to Craiova.

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<sup>13</sup> Teodor Octavian Gheorghiu, *Arhitectura medievală de apărare din România*, Bucharest, Editura Tehnică, 1985, p. 308.

Also, numerous *cula* type edifices had been built during the ruling of Tudor Vladimirescu, many of those who constructed such structures being Tudor's pandour captains<sup>14</sup>.

Although the *cula*, from the architectonic point of view, had as a model the boyars' house that existed at that time and that, due to the needs of defending against the groups of invaders who had come from the Turkish garrisons over the Danube, had to be fortified<sup>15</sup>. Most of them were placed on the top of the hills, in the points with a wide view that would offer good visibility. The building materials were diverse, according to the resources of the person who was building it, the local raw material, but also to the purpose for which they had been built. Generally, the walls were masonry-worked (quarry or river stones, burned brick or stones mixed with bricks) or wooden. No matters the construction material, all the walls were consolidated with oak beams, put as a part integrated in the masonry layer at diverse floors<sup>16</sup>. The thickness of the walls wasn't uniform to the last floor, but it was reduced with almost 10-15 cm at each level.

The most spread type of Romanian *cula* is that of a prismatic building, with square or rectangular, very similar to the square one, plan. Such a *cula* includes a ground-floor and one or two floors. The walls are made of stone or brick, with the thickness varying from 0.7-1 m, plastered and painted in white. The ground-floor, with one or two rooms, was used for depositing food, tools and, in case of danger, animals. Its walls were stroke through by ramparts (very narrow orifices). The floors had the rooms in which people lived, whose number varied according to the size of the *cula* and its functions. The rooms had low heights, of 2.5 m and are covered with boards made of thick oak beams<sup>17</sup>. The connection between the ground-floor and the other floors was made through an interior wooden staircase. At the Romanain *cula*, the staircase was fixed, unlike those from the Bulgarians and Turks, where it was detachable or retractable to the superior side.

At the last floor, the *cula* from Oltenia, near the dwelling rooms, had also a veranda (look-out tower) with arcades supported by short and thick cylindrical columns made of bricks<sup>18</sup>. It was always situated on the side

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<sup>14</sup> M. Davidescu, *Monumente istorice din Oltenia*, Bucharest, Meridiane, 1964, p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> A. Pănoiu, *Arhitectura și sistematizarea rurală în județul Mehedinți (sec. XVIII-XIX)*, Bucharest, National Museum of History, 1983, p. 178.

<sup>16</sup> Iancu Atanasescu, Valeriu Grama, *Culele din Oltenia*, p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> Grigore Ionescu, *Arhitectura*, p. 452.

<sup>18</sup> Radu Crețeanu, Sarmiza Crețeanu, *Culele*, p. 14.

from where it might have come an attack. From here it comes its important role, of watching and signalling spot. This fact expresses either the fact that they wanted to use the rustic porch or it might have developed under the influence of the Brâncoveanu style architecture. The look-out tower is specific for the *cula* from Oltenia and lacks entirely in other regions.

The access in the *cula* is done through a door, usually situated on the main facade or one of the lateral sides, made of oak beams, having a locking system and being flanked by ramparts.

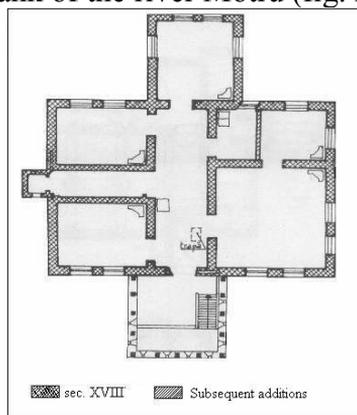
The oral tradition mentions the existence in the *cula* type edifices of some vaults – hidden places in which the boyars kept their values (money, guns, jewellery, muniments etc.) that were better preserved there in case of attacks. They were situated under the steps of the staircase that provided access to the superior floors or in other secret places (behind the icons or pictures, in the spots the lamp posts were fixed etc.).

In Oltenia was developed the type of residence-*cula*, with an open gallery at the last level and the annexe-*cula* of the residence<sup>19</sup>. If we take into consideration the structure variations, the *cula* from Oltenia has two floors (those from Curtișoara, Măldărești, Cernătești, Brabova etc.) or only one floor (Tudor's *cula* from Cerneți – Piatra Albă, the *cula* edifices from Broșteni, Bujoreni, the former *cula* from Radomir etc.).

The elements that characterize the architecture of the *cula* existed, as we were saying, starting with the 17<sup>th</sup> century, at the boyars' houses. Such a house-*cula* is that of the Glogoveanu boyars, built in the village and commune Glogova, placed on the left bank of the river Motru (fig. no. 2).



A.



B.

Fig. no. 2. A. The house of the Glogoveanu boyars (Glogova, Gorj District); B. The plan of the ground floor

<sup>19</sup> Teodor Octavian Gheorghiu, *Arhitectura medievală*, p. 308.

It seems that as regarding the building of the house, can be distinguished two different architectonic stages. In the first stage, it was built a cellar on the ground, construction attributed to Necula Glogoveanu, documentary attested at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. There were made thick walls, of almost a meter and a half, form narrow bricks, with river boulders at the basis<sup>20</sup>, stroke through by many ramparts. Consequently, starting from that period, appeared some elements of fortification specific for the *cula* buildings. The cellar was made of two rooms with cylindrical vaults and strong arches. A detailed description of those architectural elements is realized by Ileana Cioarec in her study about the Glogoveanu boyars: “in the first room there is only one arch, and in the second, there are six arches that lean upon the walls and the two square-shaped piastres. In the bottom of the last room there is a section that doesn’t have a vault, but a straight, wooden ceiling. In this place it used to be a trap door whose opening, now covered, can be observed at the extremity of the ceiling. This trap could be used only to descend in the cellar and not as a stair that allowed the access into the house”<sup>21</sup>. The entrance into the cellar is done on the south-eastern lateral facade, similar to that from a *cula*. In her study on the masonry civil architecture from Wallachia from the 14<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Sinigalia Tereza shows the presence, on the side opposed to the entrance, of another cellar<sup>22</sup>.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century there had been done additions, consisting of a floor and two exits. The author was either Matei Glogoveanu, imperial councilor under the Austrian regime, or his son Ioniță Glogoveanu. The frontal exit includes the entrance and the staircase with access at the first floor and, above, a look-out tower leaned upon wooden pillars and that from the opposite side was a guarding building that had ramparts<sup>23</sup>. Above it there was the *sacnasiu* (a small room, prominent as compared with the facade of the building, enclosed with windows or shutters). In this stage also, there had been remade entirely the floor “slightly overhanging in the continuous console”<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Cristian Moiescu, *Arhitectura epocii lui Marei Basarab*, Bucharest, Meridiane, 2002, p. 49.

<sup>21</sup> Ileana Cioarec, *Boierii Glogoveni*, Craiova, Alma, 2009, p. 50.

<sup>22</sup> Tereza Sinigalia, *Arhitectura civilă de zid din Țara Românească în secolele XIV-XVIII*, Bucharest, Vremea, 2000, p. 331

<sup>23</sup> Radu Crețeanu, Sarmiza Crețeanu, *Culele*, p. 16.

<sup>24</sup> Cristian Moiescu, *Arhitectura*, p. 49.

The look-out tower, characteristic for this type of house from Oltenia, has a brick and mortar parapet and it is limited by a row of wooden columns that support six beams, made from the same material, nicely shaped and ornamented with notches<sup>25</sup>. From here, it continues with a central corridor, entering into the five rooms of the ground-floors, two on each side and one at the bottom, the *sacnasiu*. After the enlarging done in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the construction gains the features of a boyars' house and fortress, in the same time.

In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the constructive and architectonic forms are more evolved. The aspect of fortified house was starting to be attenuated. The most conclusive example in this regard is that of the two *cula* type edifices from Măldărești, Vâlcea District: the Greceanu cula and Duca cula. The oldest of them, Greceanu cula, was built towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Nae Paharnicul, as an addition to the defending tower from the anterior century, becoming a fortified dwelling. Its plan had the shape of the letter L. The *cula* was made of a ground floor and two more floors. Unlike the anterior constructions, the cellar of the *cula*, made of three rooms, is slightly deepened into the ground, has a separate entrance and doesn't communicate with the rest of the building<sup>26</sup>. The entrance at the first floor is separated and it is done through a door placed little higher as confronted to the ground level, strengthened and provided with a defending rampart. The rooms in which people inhabited from the two floors are covered with cylindrical vaults, nicely decorated and, also, the look-out tower, placed at the superior floor, on the corner, above the staircase. At the intermediary floor, the *cula* has a "loggia".

Once with the disappearance of the invasions' danger and with the ceasing of the peasants' rebellions, the *cula* type edifices lost their initial use. Some of them were renovated and transformed in common houses. As Grigore Ionescu said, "naturalizing as a dwelling for the freeholders and gents, the *cula*-house loses entirely its aspect of fortified construction and gains, with the help of the local masons, a new look with a national character"<sup>27</sup>. Others, were deserted and few of them transformed in museums.

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<sup>25</sup> Grigore Ionescu, *Arhitectura pe teritoriul ...*, p. 461; Anca Brătuleanu, *Curți domnești și boierești din România. Valahia veacurilor al XVII-lea și al XVIII-lea*, Bucharest, Ed. Simetria, 1997, p. 89

<sup>26</sup> Radu Crețeanu, Sarmiza Crețeanu, *Culele*, p. 25.

<sup>27</sup> Grigore Ionescu, *Arhitectura populară în România*, Bucharest, 1971, p. 64.

It is the case of the *cula* from Cernătești (commune Cernătești, Dolj District) built in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (fig. no. 3). The building has a rectangular plan, with the sides of 9 and 7 m. The cellar has a direct entrance, placed on the same facade with the floor entrance. Instead of the look-out tower from the last level, it is built a wooden balcony, with a rustic aspect. At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the building had some additions, consisting of a second level. In time, the *cula* was consolidated and renovated several times. At the initiative of the primary-school teacher Nicu Pârvulescu, in 1972, was fitted up a museum of the history from the Cernătești village that houses object of popular culture specific for the dwellers from that region: items reflecting the traditional occupations (at the ground floor), archaeological exhibits: Neolithic stone hammers, Roman coins, arrows and spear heads from the feudal age etc. (at the first floor), specific clothes, textile items for interior, household objects (at the last floor)<sup>28</sup>. The *cula* was in a relatively well-preserved state because of the repairing works done due to the funds donated by the descendants of the Cernătescu family and to those of the local administration. Today, the building is an architectonic monument and a museum of national interest.



Fig. no. 3 The *cula* from Cernătești (Dolj District)

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<sup>28</sup> Elisabeta Ancuța-Rușinaru, “Despre două cule”, p. 78.

Real fortresses erected on the high places, the *cula* type edifices from Oltenia, represented, in the old times, strategic nuclei for the defending against the invaders bands that attacked our country's territory. They present the history of these places but also the mastership, the ability of our forefathers who, with reduced quantities of raw materials, built real national values. Nowadays, the importance of some of them was regained after the restoration and their introduction in the touristic circulation, as museums.