

SYMBOLS AND DECORATIVE MOTIFS IN THE POPULAR ARCHITECTURE FROM OLTENIA

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Abstract: Since the first stages of its existence, the dwelling has been awarded with specific signs and symbols that are based on the belief of the archaic and traditional communities on space. In the décor of the traditional architecture from Oltenia, there are met ornamental motifs that belong to the sphere of geometry, along with cosmomorphic, vegetal, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic stylised motifs. Found on certain architectural elements (porch poles, gate posts, window frames, gates, doors, etc.), they go beyond the aesthetical area and gain magical-religious significations, belonging to a traditional mentality and conception, whose roots descend far-back in history.

Keywords: traditional architecture, Oltenia, decorative motifs, symbol, traditional mentality.

Within the Romanian traditional culture, the rural architecture occupies an important position, having a special contribution to the understanding of the material culture. The adapting of the surrounding environment, the great variety of types and forms, their highly artistic value, the well-defined and logical constructive techniques, the rational and functional distributions of the plans, the matching of the proportions, the balanced distribution of the decorations and the harmonisation of the colours are, according to Grigore Ionescu, fundamental characteristics of the traditional architecture creations, from our country¹.

In Oltenia, the existence of some physical and geographical, social and historical, cultural, economic particularities, along with factors related to the customs and the traditions from a certain place, have led to the shaping of a specific architectonic profile, despite some “periods of contact” and cultural-political relations. In this space, there was born one of the most innovative traditional architecture

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¹ Grigore Ionescu, *Arhitectura populară în România*, Bucharest, Meridiane Publishing, 1981, pp. 44, 89; Idem, *Arhitectura românească: Tipologii, creații, creatori*, Bucharest, Technical Publishing, 1986, p. 25.

form our country, and not only. In the field regions from the south of the area, there have co-existed, along the centuries, two types of dwellings: the hut² and the house, built above the ground. Both of them have had a specific evolution in time and space, encompassing a wide range of forms, under the influence of the continuously increasing similar requests of the population, on addressing the shelter and the carrying out of the household activities.

The art of building, using the local raw material (clay or wood), developed along the time by the Romanian peasant, who has been both the architect and the builder of his own dwelling, in permanent complementarity with the old spiritual culture elements, are evidences that attest the existence of a specific architectonic profile. As in any other Romanian land, in this region too, the traditional architecture is similar to a dictionary that includes the elements of the constructing logics imagined by the traditional craftsman, creator of abstract forms and plastic creations, tightly connected to the local relief, climate and building material conditions.

It is well-known that the traditional man is a *homo religiosus*. He lives in an “open” cosmos, his entire existence is defined by the sacred and the profane, the two “modalities of being in the world”³, as Mircea Eliade called them. His dwelling becomes a microcosmos, and, in the same time, a sacred space: “The house has become, for the Romanians, *the microcosmic centre of his magical-mythical spiritual activity*, in which it is reflected *the order of the entire macro-cosmos*. It is the sacred place in which the autochthonous people were born, similarly to their forefathers, in which they lives, meeting difficulties, having aspirations, dreams, carrying out the customs, the traditions of his kin, and where, finally, they will meet their end”⁴. Thus, for the Romanian peasant, the house has represented not only a permanent residence of the family, something purely material that belonged to an economic order, but the spiritual centre of his living.

Since the first moments of existence, the dwelling has been attributed with complex symbols that were based on this specific concept on addressing the space. Thus, it was resorted to the initial decoration of some architectural elements, as the door, the eaves, and, later, they were extended to the entire exterior surface of the house. The manner in which the traditional craftsman was regarding the beauty and the way in which the decorative motifs were distributed is connected to a certain regard on the reality, nonetheless, a certain mentality, which goes way-beyond the aesthetical area. The presence of specific motifs such the fir-tree, astral signs, the

² For the hut-dwelling, also see: C. S. Nicolăescu Plopșor, *Bordeiul în Oltenia*, in “BSRRG”, vol. XLI, Bucharest, 1922; Gheorghe Focșa, *Elemente decorative la bordeiele din sudul regiunii Craiova*, Bucharest, 1956; Nicolae Nițu, *Originea și răspândirea geografică a bordeiului*, in “Arhivele Olteniei”, New Series, no. 7/1992; Anca Ceaușescu, *Vechi tipuri de locuință pe teritoriul Olteniei*, in “Arhivele Olteniei”, New Series, no. 24/2010, pp. 315–326.

³ Mircea Eliade, *Sacral și profanul*, 3rd edition (translation from French by Brândușa Prepcianu), Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing, 2005, p. 15.

⁴ Romulus Vulcănescu, *Mitologie română*, Bucharest, Academy Publishing, 1985, p. 452.

house snake, stylised horse heads is not a coincidence in the traditional décor of the dwelling, they were symbols for the solar spirits that would protect the household, symbolic elements that do not have a useful character, but only an aesthetical, spiritual one. Thus, the building craftsmanship concretised “the taste for beauty of the people from an area, developing, in time, an interesting dialogue with the local mythology, a dialogue after which the sacred symbols receive, implicitly, aesthetic valences. The value hierarchy of the old symbols merged into a syncretism that belongs to a cosmical traditional Christianity”⁵.

The magical customs and practices that are related to the building of the house, starting with the choosing of the dwelling place, the sacrifice of a fowl, the burying of its head under the foundation of the house, to ensure the durability of the construction, to the hanging of a small fir-tree, or green branches, on the rafters, when the roof was risen, represent proofs of a spiritual universe that mediated, partially, the making of the architectural décor, in the period of beginning⁶.

Along with a plan, the decoration of the house offers a clear image both on the unity, and the diversity, of the architecture, on the territory of our country. The decoration of some constructive elements of the house (the porch poles especially, the beams, the window frames etc.), for artistical purposes and, in some cases, magical, are of a considerable age on the territory of our country, whose roots can be found deep into history. The discoveries of metallic tools that were used for decorating the wood in feudalism, along with the up-to-present preservation of certain ornaments with pre-Christian significations (solar rosettes, horse heads) and their placement only in certain places from the house architecture, constitute proofs for the old age and the continuity of this preoccupation⁷.

The decorating of the traditional houses from Oltenia carries the print of a rigorousness and interior order feature, accentuating the character of the local people, and, in the same time, it displays a type of elegance, evidenced by the mythological signification of the depicted changes. The decorative motifs are exhibited through proper decoration techniques, the most important being the carving and the notching of the porch and console poles, the fretwork technique, and when the wood was plastered, the main role being played by the patterned stucco, the moulding and the polychromy⁸. The variety and the positioning of the elements evidence both the architecture, and the representation of some archaic symbols on certain magical practices, customs and ancestral beliefs.

⁵ Mihai Camilar, Maria Camilar, *Simboluri sacre în universul casei tradiționale din Bucovina*, available at <http://ianus.inoe.ro/M%20Camilar.htm> (accessed on July 15, 2020).

⁶ Ștefan Enache, Teodor Pleșa, *Zona etnografică Dolj*, Bucharest, Sport-Turism Publishing, 1982, p. 79.

⁷ Gheorghe Iordache, *Ocupații tradiționale pe teritoriul României*, vol. 4, Craiova, Scrisul Românesc Publishing, 1996, p. 94.

⁸ Andrei Pănoiu, *Din arhitectura lemnului*, Bucharest, Tehnical Publishing, 1977, p. 155; Ștefan Enache, Teodor Pleșa, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

What needs to be remembered as essential, is the fact that, in the life of the traditional societies, the symbol had a fundamental role, designating, most of the times, the overall vision on the existence itself. As Mircea Eliade underlines, “the symbol, the myth, the image, are related to the substance of the spiritual life, we can disguise, mutilate, but never root them out”⁹. Many times, the symbol is the expression of an image and a manner of seeing the man and the world. In the archaic cultures, these, along with the signs, are integrated within a sacred order, with magical functions and powers. Thus, as the great historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, says: “the sacred means...reality”¹⁰; and the man can live only in a sacred, pure, world, this desire expressing, nonetheless, the wish to belong to an objective reality, because only such a sacred world “participates to the being, and exists undeniably”¹¹.

The man of the archaic and traditional cultures surrounded himself with symbols, mainly to assure his openness towards the community, which denotes, nevertheless, his openness towards the Meaning. Through the symbol, seen as an “autonomous modality of knowledge”¹², the message is conveyed, the symbol “reveals certain aspects of the reality – the most profound ones – that reject any other manner of knowledge”¹³, considering only the substance of the spiritual life.

Rather often, the reality can be expressed and interpreted through the symbol. It also bears significations owing to the fact that it belongs to a system of models that values the human relation with the Universe, it has an intrinsic value, especially when it expresses, through itself, a symbolic image. The symbols are present in all the ages and the human communities, but they differ from one group to the other. We can meet symbols, insignificant for a certain society, but bearing meaning and value for another, due to the fact that they “exist only in the plan of the subject, but they are based on the plan of the object”¹⁴. Thus, the interpretation can carry personal forms, different from one individual to another, the genesis of the symbols having the mark of the straightforwardly manifested individuality, through the attitude concerning the relations with the surrounding world.

On addressing the traditional architecture, the decorative motifs that we frequently find on different architectural elements (porch poles, window frames, gates, doors etc.) exceed the aesthetic area and gain meanings, if they are approached as systems of symbols. These symbols were part of the magical-religious universe of the Romanian peasant. Thus, the Romanian traditional ornaments can be regarded as “an essential key in interpreting and understanding not only the

⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Imagini și simboluri*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing, 1994, pp. 13–14.

¹⁰ Idem, *Sacrul ...*, p. 14.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 52.

¹² Mircea Eliade, *Imagini ...*, p. 12.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

¹⁴ Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dicționar de simboluri. Mituri, vise, obiceiuri, gesturi, forme, figuri, culori, numere*, vol. I (A-D), Bucharest, Artemis Publishing, 1993, p. 46 and next.

Romanian traditional art, but our entire traditional culture, offering a rich and suggestive material, capable of decoding mentalities and conceptions of the traditional spirit, whose origins are lost in immemorable times, and that has been preserved until today as a veritable alphabet of written signs”¹⁵. The ornament, as a component that concentrates the beauty of an architectural piece, a utilitarian object, or a simple decoration, is determinant in the functional-aesthetical relation, and the associations of motifs and ornaments express the vision of the individual on the world, along with a communication manner¹⁶, because the ornament is both sign and language. A communication in which the language of beauty is one of the most general, through content, and the most particularizing, through expression and form¹⁷.

The ornament display of the traditional architecture from Oltenia is rich, encompassing both motifs met on the entire territory of our country, a consequence of the national traditional cultural unity, and motifs proper for this region. Similarly to other genres of the traditional art, in the decoration of the peasant architecture, there are met ornaments that belong to the sphere of the geometric, constituting the oldest decorative manners (such the circle, the dot, straight, broken or curved lines, the rhombus, the triangle etc.), along with cosmomorphic, vegetal, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic stylised motifs. Among these motifs, some have a greater share, determined by their frequency, along with the importance the traditional craftsmen gave to them, through tradition. In this category, there can be included the solar signs, the life-tree, the symbol of the horse. As Paul Petrescu and Georgeta Stoica note, “Related to the ancient cult of the sun, that of the dentrolation (tree cult), to a complex of beliefs involved in the eternal endeavour of the man to survive in a «hostile» nature, the plastic representation of these old «ideologies» have remained in the Romanian popular art...a kind of archaeological witnesses of some disappeared creeds”¹⁸.

If, initially, some of the ornamental motifs were not simple decorative forms, but they had magical-religious significations, being transmitters of messages, once with the passing of the time, they have been subjected to the process of desacralisation, evolving, unfortunately, only into insignificant decorative motifs.

In the traditional architectural ensemble from Oltenia, a special interest is given to the *cosmogonic* ornamental motifs, met both in the case of the huts and the surface-built dwellings. The geometric, curvilinear or rectilinear representations of

¹⁵ Georgeta Stoica, Paul Petrescu, *Dicționar de artă populară*, Bucharest, Encyclopedic Publishing, 1997, p. 50, apud Andra Jacob, *Comunicarea prin simboluri în arhitectura populară românească*, in “Sociologie românească”, vol. VII, no. 3, 2009, p. 122.

¹⁶ Delia Suiogan, *Arta populară – formă de comunicare*, in “Memoria ethnologica”, no. 26–27, January-June 2008 (Year VIII), p. 48.

¹⁷ Paul Petrescu, Georgeta Stoica, *Arta populară românească*, Bucharest, Meridiane Publishing, 1981, p. 6.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 118–119.

the Sun have a great frequency, with origins in the far past, in a form of art developed since the Neolithic.

The Sun is an archetypal symbol met in the cultures from the entire world. Since ancient times, it has been regarded as a heavenly body on which the life of the man himself depend, being perceived by him as a sacred symbol. The Cult of the Sun, considered the spring of life and death, has always been in the centre of the solar myths, and heliolatry is a basic component of the uranic religions.

For some people, the Sun represents a manifestation of the divinity, on the territory of our country the divinisation of the Sun being deeply rooted, if we are to consider the wide spreading, on the territory of the Roman Dacia, of cult that worshiped the solar god Mithra – *Dies Natalis Solis invincti*. In the Christian culture, the Sun is a symbol of Christ, of God.

In the Romanian spirituality, the Sun has had multiple valences. Being a purifying and apotropaic role symbol, the Sun used to have the mission to defend the house and the space against the malefic forces. In this manner, it is explained its presence in the décor of the porch poles and gates, considered thresholds between *the inside* and *the outside*, between the interior, which had to be guarded, and the exterior world. The sun gives life, light and warmth, in traditional concept, but it is also harmful, through the intense heat that it generates. Moreover, this star is eternal, and, yet, “it comes to life every morning and dies at dusk, that is why, it is the symbol of the resurrection, of the eternal returning of life, experiencing the temporary death”¹⁹. It is preponderantly depicted through symbols that denotes unity, perpetuation, continuity, infinite.

Along with the classical representation of the Sun, the rosette, the decoration panoply of the houses from Oltenia includes other astral signs too, such as: the circle, the solar wheel, the dot, the circle cross, the whirl (the wind-mill), the rhombus. The solar circle and the solar wheel, with the derived elements of each, form the substrate for all the other solar symbols²⁰. The circle, in the opinion of the specialists, portrays the homogeneity, the perfection, “the concentric circles representing the stages of a being, the created hierarchies”²¹. With all its above-mentioned forms, the circle is the symbol of the supreme divinity and the force, being associated, most often, to the masculine side; it is, in the same time, a symbol of resurrection and life. For most peoples, the circle is considered a symbol for protection, being endowed with the magical power of defending. Consequently, a magical furrow is ploughed to surround a house or a village, in case of menace, or the circular shape is preferred for some dwellings or settlements. Although it has a

¹⁹ Ivan Evseev, *Dicționar de simboluri și arhetipuri culturale*, Timișoara, Amarcord Publishing, 1994, p. 171.

²⁰ Romulus Vulcănescu, *op. cit.*, p. 371; v. and P. Petrescu, *Imaginea soarelui în arta populară*, in “Studii și cercetări de istoria artei”, year X, no. 1, 1963, p. 114.

²¹ Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *op. cit.*, vol. I (A-D), p. 294.

pagan origin, descending far-back in history, the motif of the circle was also taken by the Christian symbolistic.

Stylised forms of the Sun, the rosettes, appear frequently in the traditional architecture, having a distinct number of arms, closed in several concentric circles. The most frequent is the six-arm rosette, “a symbol rooted in the religious background, more precisely in the biblical theme of the world Genesis that took place in six days, a fact that generates the six essential dimensions which, according to Clement of Alexandria, represent the four cardinal points, the zenith and the nadir”²². Nonetheless, there appear rosettes with more than six arms (eight, nine or eighteen), and when the number of arms is bigger, and it is shaped in a curvilinear form, it is formed the motif of the wind-mill (or the whirl).

In the traditional architecture from Oltenia, the solar symbol is widely-spread, being sculpted on the porch poles²³, the gate posts, the gates, door frames, beams, or it is carved on the side-ways poles that are placed one side and another, before the entrance in the huts. The entering in the household yard is protected by a various-type solar rosette, the gates from Gorj area being decorated with such signs, along with the cable mouldings. Solar signs adorn the entrances of the huts from the south of Oltenia: circles enclosed in rhombuses, great X-s, concentric rhombuses whose shapes are prevalent on the cable mouldings in relief. In the north of Otenia, until almost the present days, it was preserved the decoration of the porch pole’s front side with solar rosettes, considering that they defend the house from the evil influence. Furthermore, different solar symbols are also found inside the house, on the fireplace, the furniture items, the pottery or the fabrics. Moreover, they are also present in the religious architecture, on the door and window frames.

A significant share depicts, in the traditional architectural décor from Oltenia, the *vegetal* ornamental motifs, made either in a stylised manner, sometimes in geometrical symbols, or in a figurative depiction.

²² Marius Constantin Nistor, *Ornamente și motive în arta decorării lemnului*, p. 328, available at https://www.academia.edu/11108889/NISTOR_Ornamente_%C5%9Fi_motive_%C3%AEn_arta_decor%C4%83rii_lemnului (accessed on 23.07.2020).

²³ The porch is an architectural element present at all the old houses, placed either around the house, as a belt, or only on one or two sides fie. It is not only an element that protects the exterior walls, but it also has a protection magical-symbolic role. The porch poles, an expression for the aspiration towards the heights, were invested with the role of sky pillars. They were made of different varieties of wood, carved with a hatchet and ornamented with geometrical motifs (circles, cubes, rhombuses, girdles in relief etc.), to which there were attached notched and chiselled grooves. On the poles from the north of Oltenia, there were clearly evidenced the elements of the classical column (base, trunk and capital). The trunk of the poles was squared and decorated with a variety of geometrical shapes (locally called, apples, crosses, wheels, cat’s ladder, snakes, dents), cylindrical or biconical, with vertical or swirled grooves, twistedly moulded lengthwise. (Gheorghe Iordache, *op. cit.*, pp. 98–99). Due to the zig-zag ornaments, solar symbols, in cross, the porch poles gain a protective role, of passing from one space to another, similar to the threshold, the door or the windows.

Different trees, the fir-tree, the fir-tree branches, leaves or flower pots, are all vegetal symbols, constituting variants of the same theme – *the tree of life*. Symbol of the connection between the sky and the earth, the tree of life is that *axis mundi* that ensures the connection between the man and the divinity, between this-side world and the-other-side world. The tree is one of the oldest symbols of the humanity, signifying the life in its continuous evolution, in the ascension towards the sky. Having the roots deeply thrust into the ground and the branches reaching the sky, “the tree enables the communication between the three levels of the Cosmos: the underground one, through the roots that ravish the abyss in which they are piercing; the surface of the earth, through its trunk and lower branches; the firmament, through the top branches that are attracted by the sky-light”²⁴.

Represented through different varieties, which are considered sacred (the fir-tree or the oak, for the Romanians, the olive-tree if Egypt, the linden-tree in the western Europe, the oak for the Celts), *the tree of life* symbolises, altogether, “the never-ending youth and the deathless life”²⁵. In association with other ornamental motifs, such as “the water wave”, *the tree of life* represents “the connection between the terrestrial life and the endless horizon of the water”, and the association with the *solar motif* shows “the continuity of life drained through the fir-tree top that points towards the cosmic horizon...”²⁶.

In the Romanian traditional art, the symbol of the tree is present through the image of the Hellenistic imprinting, of the Greek kantharos, transformed into a flower pot, or in the local Thraco-Dacian variant, as a fir-tree.

Present in the construction rites since the erasing of the roof rafters and the finishing of the house, as a small fir-tree, or as green branches, *the tree of life* is met, either made in relief or in the plaster, on the house walls, on the porch poles or on the gates. Moreover, in the field area from the south of Oltenia, there are frequently met “vegetal motifs as well – stylized plants or flowers, and trees in pots. In the 20th century, the decorated parts started to be coloured in blue or brick-red”²⁷. The tree of life decorates the furniture items too, respectively the cupboards form the hut-dwellings, but, especially the dowry-trunks, where it has a high frequency, directly related to the functionality of the piece, by the nuptial symbol, the fir-tree being, in the same time, the tree of the wedding²⁸.

Another category of decorative motifs, in the traditional architecture, is that of the zoomorphic representations. It ought to be mentioned, firstly, the

²⁴ Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *op. cit.*, vol. I (A-D), pp. 124–125.

²⁵ Nicolae Dunăre, *Ornamentica tradițională comparată*, Bucharest, Meridiane Publishing, 1979, p. 112.

²⁶ Marius Constantin Nistor, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

²⁷ Georgeta Stoica, Paul Petrescu, *Dicționar de artă populară*, Bucharest, Encyclopedic Publishing, 1997, p. 50, apud Andra Jacob, *Comunicarea prin simboluri ...*, p. 125.

²⁸ Viorica Tăulea, *Mobilierul țărănesc din Oltenia*, Bucharest, Sport-Turism Publishing, 1989, p. 50.

representation of *the snake*, a motif that is used quite often. A totalizer archetypal symbol, in the archaic conceptions and representations of the universe, the snake “is related to the four elements of the nature: it lives in the ground or in the water; its venom has the properties of the celestial fire or the chthonian one, and its fantastic hypostasis of winged snake (dragon) is related to the element of the air. In the mythologies of the world, it appears as a polymorphous symbol, carrying the forces of the nature, and it is considered a primordial animal, embodying of the first matter and the chaos”²⁹.

The representation of the snake in the Romanian traditional architecture seems to originate from the belief in *the house snake*, as protector of the dwelling, which lives under the threshold, under the foundation, or in the walls. According to the traditional beliefs, the house snake must not be killed, because its killing triggers, as a punishment, the death of a family member: “A snake is...in all the houses. Where there is a snake, there is luck, everything goes well and there is no harm, no charm works. God forbids to kill it, because one of the owners dies. That is called a house snake”³⁰.

A sacred animal in almost all the religions of the world, the snake left a powerful mark in the collective memory. As a guarantor of the prosperity, the lasting of the household and protective spirit of the family, “The house snake appears as an iconic image in the peasant ornaments, having the role of an apothropaic element”³¹. Specifically owing to this role, of house protector, the motif of the snake is met sculpted on the gate posts, the porch poles, at the houses from Gorj area, inside the huts, on the door pillars or a large beam from the guest room, and also on the dowry trunks and the cupboard-tables, where it is depicted in associations with cosmogonic and anthropomorphic motifs. It is met on the house walls too, where it is moulded in the plaster, or it is painted. In Oltenia, the enamelled clay snakes are placed on the entrance thresholds or on the floor³². The motif of the snake is also used on the cross of the last owner of a house, as a mark of funerary veneration, which could signify, according to some ethnologists, that the tomb to be also defended by the house snake³³.

The horse represents a decorative motif from the same category, a fundamental archetype of the collective memory. “Its symbolism reaches the two poles – upper and lower – of the cosmos... In the down-side world, the chthonian

²⁹ Ivan Evseev, *Dicționar de magie, demonologie și mitologie românească*, Timișoara, Amarcord Publishing, 1997, pp. 402–403.

³⁰ Ion Ghinoiu, *Comoara satelor. Calendar popular*, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing, 2005, p. 198.

³¹ Ivan Evseev, *Dicționar de magie, ...*, p. 405.

³² Romulus Antonescu, *Dicționar de simboluri și credințe tradiționale românești*, p. 649, available at <http://cimec.ro/Etnografie/Antonescu-dictionar/Antonescu-Romulus-Dictionar-Simboluri-Credinte-Traditionale-Romanesti.pdf>. (accessed on July 21, 2020).

³³ Romulus Vulcănescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 524–525.

one, it appears as an avatar or as a friend of the three constitutive elements, the fire, the earth and the water, and of the world. But it is also present in the upper-side world, the unranian one, associated with its three constitutive elements, the air, the fire and the water – the last two seen, this instance, in their celestial acceptance – and with the sun”³⁴.

In the Romanian traditional culture, there have been preserved pre-Christian beliefs and superstitions, connected to another local cult of the horse. A symbol for greatness, the horse is awarded with an apotropaic function, being attributed with the role of household protector. This way, it is explained the horse-head shape carvings at the porch extremities of the transversal beams in the eastern and southern part of the Carpathians³⁵. Moreover, the same ornamental motif appears in the architecture of the partially-buried dwellings from the south of Oltenia, being represented, preponderantly, as two horse-heads, carved in wood, placed on each side of the hut entrance³⁶.

The horse is a symbol for heroism and virility, representing, in the same time, a psychopomp in the Romanian Book of the Dead, as leader of the solus, towards the other world. Nonetheless, the horse, along with other symbols, is a bipolar one, is the bearer, at the same time, of the life and the death.

In the traditional house décor, sometimes, *the bird* appears as well, “an archetypal symbol of the elevation, of the aspiration for reaching the absolute values of the heaven, and a constant and universal metaphor for the soul”³⁷. A mediator between heaven and earth, the bird symbolises the rebirth, the resurrection, the renewing of the human being. In the traditional ornament, it is present since Prehistory, when it appears as an ornamental motif, on pottery³⁸. This symbol can be represented, in the perimeter of the houses from Oltenia, at the cornices that cover the shingle.

The motif of the rope, similar to the solar motif, is an ancient symbol, characteristic for the Romanian architecture, part of a complex symbolic, in which it can be glimpsed the mystery of a spirituality, whose origins are lost in history. The cord, the twine, the rope, are generally related to the symbolic of the ascension, similar to the symbol of the tree and the stair. As an ornamental motif, it appears frequently on the constructive elements of the dwellings (porch poles, window frames, interior beams), on the gate posts, or even the gates, as well as in the religious architecture. This reason, alone or in association with other symbols,

³⁴ Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *op. cit.*, vol. I (A-D), p. 235.

³⁵ Gheorghe Iordache, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

³⁶ Gheorghe Focșa, *op. cit.*, pp. 20–22.

³⁷ Ivan Evseev, *Dicționar de simboluri și arhetipuri culturale*, Timișoara, Amarcord Publishing, 1994, pp. 128–129.

³⁸ Simona Lazăr, *Simboluri ornitorfe în cultura Basarabi*, in “Arhivele Olteniei”, NS, 18, 2004, pp. 7–18; Idem, *Motive zoomorfe și ornitorfe pe ceramica culturii Basarabi*, in “Oltenia. Studii și comunicări”, XV, 2004.

has the role of house and church protector, by stopping the veil spirits. Knotted, the rope symbolises any type of connection, and it has secret or magical virtues³⁹. At the Central America civilisations, the rope is the divine symbol, “the ropes suspended in the sky symbolise, in the Maya and Mexican arts, the divine seed that descends from the firmament to fertilise the land”⁴⁰.

Rather seldom, in the traditional architecture, there appear *anthropomorphic* motifs, symbols of the man that protects the house and the entire household. As Marius C. Nistor says, “The anthropomorphised occurrence of the man, within a geometrical representation of a sculpture, does not disturb the discipline of the sacred motivation, but it rather shows the attempt of the artist to introduce the human being in that sacred background. Furthermore, ...the depicting of the man motif, in the traditional art works, makes the representation of the human being to be often confused with the unique existence, the supreme creator”⁴¹.

In Oltenia, the anthropomorphic figures are met on the gate posts from Dolj-the anthropomorphic posts, on the parapets that enclose the house porches, and in the decorative ensemble of the hut entrances from Oltenia.

Thus, the traditional craftsman has decorated the dwelling, since its construction, with complex symbols that have magical-religious significations, which belong to an ancient mentality. In the building craftsmanship there have been merged, along the centuries, the taste for beauty and the beliefs of the traditional man on space and time. Thus, the house, as both shelter and dwelling place, belonging to the material culture, has received magical features as well, through the decoration of certain architectural elements with symbolic representations with apotropaic role, in this manner belonging to the shaping of the spiritual culture, in the specified community.

³⁹ Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *op. cit.*, vol. I (A-D), p. 340.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁴¹ Marius Constantin Nistor, *op. cit.*, p. 330.