
B O O K S' R E V I E W S

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Jiří Langer and Helena Bočková. *Obydli v Karpatech a prilehlych oblastech Balkanskych. Synteza mizinarodniho vyzkumu.* Mezinarodni Komise pro Studium Lidove Kultury v Karpatech a na Balkane. Ostrava 2010 (Smira – Sprint, s.r.o., 932 pages, with several hundred black-and-white and colour photographs.

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The idea of conducting international research on the Carpathian and Balkan folk culture was first mentioned in the Polish, Czech and Slovak ethnographic circles in the 1950s.¹ Field research and editing work have been conducted for many years, on the basis of cooperation agreements between the Academies of Sciences of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Yugoslavia, Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine and Hungary. Using uniform models of questionnaires,² scholars from participating institutions, academics and museum employees working for the International Committee for the Study of Carpathian and Balkan Folk Culture carried out research projects on selected topics of their native folk culture and later published their findings. Among the key research issues were architecture and house-building in the Carpathian and Balkan countryside.

The synthesis, which is the subject of the present review, constitutes the result of over fifty years of research on this subject.³ Its authors *cum* editors, Jiri Langer and Helena Bockova, made a remarkable effort and presented the readers with an aesthetically pleasing, exquisite album complete with a professional and comprehensive description and numerous photographs. It offers a full picture of residential architecture and principles of construction in the region of Carpathian Mountains and the Balkans.⁴ The visual and research material was collected mostly in the second half of the 20th century, but the content is very broad and reaches deep into the origins and

¹ More information on this subject can be found in M. Godyń's article entitled *The International Committee for the Study of Carpathian Folk Culture*, included in the present volume.

² Unfortunately, not all scholars adhered to the questionnaire model, which made it more difficult to formulate syntheses and make generalizations.

³ The publication of the synthesis was preceded by many articles and the study *Dum v Karpatech a prilehlych oblastech balkanskych* by J. Langer and H. Bočková, published in Rožnov pod Radhostem in 1999 by the Wallachian Open Air Museum in Rožnov. The book featured many illustrations and a comprehensive summary in English. According to J. Langer, it constituted a kind of an outline for the synthesis.

⁴ Unfortunately, the album was published only in the Czech language, in as few as five hundred copies.

history of folk architecture. Thus, the synthesis is more exhaustive than any open air museum exhibition or monograph.

The publication has a good, clear layout. Its core consists of chapters directly concerned with the spatial design of a village, the functions of various spaces within the household, preferred structures, materials and construction methods used in specific parts of buildings, heating systems and decoration of rooms and façades. There is also a chapter on home and family relations. Each section is accompanied by a separate set of relevant photographs grouped by country.

A characteristic feature of the structure of this synthesis is that the described products of culture are presented with their historical background, with particular emphasis on ethnic idiosyncrasies. The authors refer not only to the field research material, but also to oldest records, archival data and literature, providing information on the origins, development and diversity of the studied objects and their elements in a broad context of geographic, social and economic conditions. What is more, the publication describes every significant, innovative and controversial statement heatedly discussed by researchers, authors and editors of national syntheses, as well as its critical assessment. Personally, I count this approach among the positive aspects of the work, even though the authors seem to have been focused more on including as much data as possible than attention to editorial detail (for instance the hierarchy of chapter numbers, punctuation and legibility of the appended maps). The synthesis was meant to present maximum information on the subject of folk architecture, as well as on the ongoing discussions and supported theories. Due to the small number of copies (five hundred) in circulation, I shall present a brief summary of chapter content.⁵

The **Introduction** enumerates the aims of the research on folk housing architecture. These objectives are deeply rooted in the tradition of ethnology and cultural anthropology, which may be evidenced by the term *obydli* used in the title. It reflects not only the assumed views on the products of human work, but also on lifestyle and on arranging space according to social and cultural needs in historical context. Short paragraphs are devoted to clarifying the usage of given terms throughout the publication (their ethnographic/ethnological meaning and associations), describing the development of theoretical and field research on folk architecture in mountain regions and the projects carried out under the auspices of the International Committee for Studies of the Carpathian and Balkan Folk Culture, enumerating the Committee's members, recounting the relevant regulations, conferences and publications. Separate paragraphs focus on the long-lasting contents-related and technical issues linked with the actualisation of national syntheses and with the residential architecture of the Carpathians and the Balkans discussed herein.

⁵ This is justified due to the fact that the publication was written in the Czech language, which is difficult to understand for non-Slavonic readers.

Chapter one contains a characteristics of geographic features and social conditions in the studied area (the Carpathians and the Balkans), with particular emphasis on the core of its economy – shepherding – and the related location of settlements. The history of settling the mountain regions, organisation and forms of settlement are presented chronologically, from archaeological findings regarding the earliest human dwellings to mediaeval colonisation waves (settlements based on Magdeburg Rights) and modern times. The description includes an interpretation of Ruthenian, Byzantine and Ottoman law as well as common law (the so-called Wallachian Law). It should be noted that, despite the concise form, the outline contains critical comments on the theoretical background of the subject and its concepts, as well as suggestions for further reading.

Chapter two concerns forms of rural settlement and spatial design of villages and buildings in the context of natural environment and economy. The layout of the settlement influenced the entire social and cultural life of its inhabitants, as well as their identity and disassociation with the residents of neighbouring villages. The authors describe the types and rules of rural spatial design in parts of Europe and in the Balkans (e.g. the linear village, the dense and diffuse spatial arrangement, Turkish settlement models, clan settlements), its characteristic feature: the custom of locating buildings around a central courtyard, and their changes throughout subsequent eras. A separate section is devoted to urban planning schemes of Balkan towns in historical context. Regrettably, there is no mention of Carpathian towns. Moreover, the album does not contain cadastral maps of the described village types, graphical projections of particular building or data on their position in relation to other structures.⁶ It does, however, include a recapitulation of conclusions as to the basic settlement tendencies in this part of Europe.

Chapter three deals with the construction of houses in horizontal and vertical perspective, i.e. their graphical projections and the division of the interior according to the primary functions of particular rooms with their origins and historical development. Each of the types is presented in great detail along with data on where in the research area it can be found. The description includes theoretical and methodological comments. Again, the major drawback of the publication is the lack of vertical and horizontal projections of the described structures.

Chapter four contains a description of building materials and types of construction used in particular elements of the structure (e.g. wall bases, the walls, the roof, doors and windows, the floor). The fact that both the materials and the construction methods depend heavily on regional environment and the availability of given natural

⁶ Such illustrations may be found in the above-mentioned *Dum...* (1999). Considering its date of publication and its out-of-print status, I find my dissatisfaction justified. Even the beautiful and well captioned photographs do not compensate for this lack.

resources (e.g. stone, wood, clay, straw) is particularly emphasised. The existing forms and types are presented with considerable detail in the context of historical changes. The chapter also lists regional names for each construction type. Separate sections are devoted to building regulations pertaining to rural and town architecture, imposed by the state or by landowners, especially in the newly established settlements. Such laws usually led to considerable standardisation of housing and utility buildings.

Chapter five covers types of hearths, stoves, kitchens and chimneys found in houses in the Carpathians and in the Balkans. It contains their thorough and detailed description, as well as the enumeration of basic and secondary functions of such objects.

Chapter six deals with the aesthetics of a rural dwelling, which comprises both the architecture itself and its decorated elements (gables, façades, portals, doors, shutters etc.), as well as interior design (wall paintings, furniture, tableware and kitchen utensils, images of saints and other items of religious cult, artificial flowers), the details of which are carefully described. A separate section is devoted to the builders of architectural objects. The authors focus mainly on professional carpenters belonging to craft associations. The information is scant, and there is no mention of the makers of iron fittings or other decorative elements of rural households.

Chapter seven is the last chapter directly concerned with housing architecture in the Carpathians and the Balkans. It deals with the interrelations between the house and the family. In ethnographic research conducted so far, the issue was studied and discussed separately. However, the authors of the synthesis decided to present the connection between different family types (one- and multi-generational family) and housing architecture, lifestyle, household economy and celebrations. A significant, if not paramount role in these relations was played by the rules of colonisation and the laws of inheriting and distributing the land. They influenced the lives of all inhabitants, with regard to the utilisation of both the public and the private space. The publication enumerates and describes family models and their structure in the region of Carpathian Mountains and the Balkans, as well as the types of household economy, thus explaining the choice of a given kind of housing with particular arrangement of rooms and furnishings.

Chapter eight serves as the conclusion, but does not contain the usual detailed recapitulation of facts and interpretations, as these are in most cases presented in the relevant chapters. Instead, it constitutes the synthesis of general reflections, where the authors outline initial research postulates, the difficulties that arose in the process of completing national syntheses of rural folk architecture, the applied techniques and methods, as well as various hypotheses and results. These are confronted with the conclusions reached in the international synthesis of housing architecture in the Carpathians and the Balkans. Particular emphasis is placed on similarities and differences between various regions and the mutual influence (e.g. regarding the form, type of construction or materials used) between parts of Europe (e.g. the Mediterranean and

Turkey) that has been noted in the course of history. The chapter also includes the enumeration of architectural features characteristic for both regions, i.e. the Carpathian Mountains and the Balkans, their description and the causes of their distinctiveness. A separate section is devoted to cognitively inspiring questions and thoughts on the interpretation of the process of development of housing architecture in Balkan towns and villages. They pertain to the infrastructure in central-eastern and south-eastern Europe, e.g. the spatial arrangement of given rooms, the methods and materials of construction or furnishings. The conclusions connect these issues with their historical, political and social – especially religious – context.

Chapter nine contains a brief outline of methods of protecting the relics of folk architecture and the list of major open-air museums in the studied region. The museums are listed alphabetically by country and their description typically includes information on the year of opening, the founders and the showpieces to be seen there, along with their technical and cultural characteristics.

The **appendix** complementing the publication includes over one hundred pages and contains synthesized information based on the literature of the subject and presented in the context of economic and social conditions. These pertain to:

- the history of Wallachian settlements in the Carpathians and the Balkan Peninsula;
- cross-cultural contacts with the inhabitants of the Mediterranean in the Antiquity and the Middle Ages, and their influence on Balkan architecture;
- the period of Ottoman expansion in Europe (1354–1912) and its multilateral effects (with particular emphasis on architecture);
- questions, concepts and interpretations pertaining to ethnicity, ethno-genesis, migration and multi-ethnic culture, arising in connection with the analysis of architectural relics registered in the studied area;
- the influence of the architecture connected with higher social strata (monasteries, churches, towns, manor houses) on folk structural design in Carpathians and the Balkans;
- interpretations connected with the development of the spatial design of the household in horizontal and vertical graphical projections taken from the national syntheses (Czech, Hungarian, Slovakian, Polish, Ukrainian, Romanian, Bulgarian and Yugoslavian);
- the concept of the extended family in the Balkans;
- relations between the Carpathian and Balkan folk constructions and European architecture.

The final sections of the synthesis consist of a **list of suggested further reading** and schematic **maps**. The charts show the studied area, country borders in selected historical periods (including the regions under Ottoman rule), major travel routes, types of rural settlements and location of buildings with regard to the road, vertical tendencies in spatial arrangement, building materials most commonly used in the

19th century, methods of construction of wooden roofs and walls, types of thatching, as well as varieties of hearths, kitchens and hallways. Those maps are, in their majority (especially from I-M-II onward), used in atlas publications illustrating the range of a given cultural (material or social) phenomenon. I consider them illegible, however, since they do not refer to any geographical orientation points. The authors' explanation that the materials provided by national teams of researchers were scarce may be understandable, but does not justify publishing maps set 'somewhere in space'. Fortunately, the album contains over one hundred pages of colour photographs illustrating types of construction and interior design from the studied region, which may compensate for the publication's other shortcomings.

The synthesis of the Carpathian and Balkan folk architecture constitutes the result of many years of research conducted by scholars who are no longer professionally active or have passed away. They had the chance to personally experience the subject matter they studied, analysed, photographed and described. The world they knew has ceased to exist, yet their scientific work enriches our knowledge of historical folk culture and is an integral part of European cultural legacy as well as the basis for future research projects. This would not have been possible without the commitment of the authors and editors of this publication – Jiří Langer and Helena Bočková, who have earned the gratitude of the entire ethnological milieu.