

CULTURE AND HOUSING – IN THE ROMANIAN VILLAGE AND IN THE HOMERIC TRADITION

Corina Pantelimon-Bistriceanu²⁰²

ABSTRACT

The spatial dimension is not just one of the coordinates of cultural development, but rather a condition for its manifestation. This is easily seen in the analysis of family culture. By researching sociological and ethnographic data related to the organization and functioning of the traditional Romanian family in rural spaces, the article interprets these data in order to restore the importance of physical, natural, and material references in understanding the cultural formula of the family. Even though they have been treated more from an economic perspective, these references carry and generate visions of the world and life. The research into the composition of the family household, both at the level of forms and architecture as well as at the level of materials used, reveals a mode of human social life that extends and does not separate itself from nature. Additionally, it represents an organizational method that, by specializing in space, can maintain its continuity at universal dimensions. This process does not arise from a historical perfection of construction forms but from the initial stages of these forms that have become matrices surviving into contemporary Romanian family tradition. The study of this reality is complemented by its comparison with the Homeric household, which, in an interpretation of its material forms, closely resembles the Romanian model.

Keywords: household, culture, tradition, Homer, Odyssey.

1. CULTURE AND SPACE

Cultures form organically through a society's assimilation of a spatial arrangement. This does not necessarily imply a stable horizon, as is the case with sedentary societies, although sedentarization, through its constancy, fosters a deeper connection between space and society. Leo Frobenius distinguished between two different systems of paideumatic perception of space: the Eastern system defines space as the cave of the world; the Western system, on the contrary, as the vastness of the world. The sense of the interior or, conversely, that of the exterior has generated different constructions in terms of the culturalization and socialization of space:

“In Africa, the feeling of the cave corresponds to the Arab encampment, the Atlantic rain-fed structure; in Europe, to the ancient Etruscan rotunda; in Asia, to the basilica, which has become the central structure, whose dome is, for example, for Spengler nothing other than a replica of the celestial cave set above the inner courtyard. The

²⁰² Researcher at the European Center for Ethnic Studies, Professor at the *Spiru Haret University*, E-mail: corinabistriceanu@yahoo.com.

Berber hut, the Ethiopian fortress, the Kotoko palace, the Cretan palaces, the Rhine citadel, and the Gothic dome represent architectures of the feeling of vastness²⁰³.

A certain condition of the encounter between space and human perception gives rise to a specific cultural, paideumatic disposition of populations: the feeling of the cave leads to the emergence and the weight caused by the sense of the inexorable, of the destiny from which one cannot escape; the sense of vastness fosters a passion for exploration, a thirst for novelty, and the development of individual character – qualities that, in the end, can overcome fate.

In no civilization is space perceived and defined in a uniform manner. Lived space is the medium through which the cultural articulation of the social takes place, and this occurs not only through occupational conditioning based on the resources available in a given area, for example, but also through the imposition of a sacred universe that is fundamentally and unconsciously accepted²⁰⁴. Initially, in traditional cultures, space was distinguished by a fundamental and exclusive criterion: sacred space was the realm of fundamental social reality, distinct from and opposed to profane space, and habitation was oriented according to these two dimensions²⁰⁵. With modernity, the industrial city transforms the space around it, in accordance with the logic of the proliferation of industrial productive activities. Postmodernity proposes the development of the dynamic urban form (dynamopolis, according to the term proposed by Constantin Doxiadis²⁰⁶), which leads to the destabilization and fluidity of boundaries. This process is not a cultural evolution, but quite the opposite. Leo Frobenius said, 100 years ago:

“The metropolis means death for everything that is brilliant and seeks to realize itself fully, for the free evolution of the sense of space. In the metropolis, a great phenomenon of paideumatic life comes to an end, which is entirely natural, since this confinement results in the loss of the sense of vastness in various ways. (...) There is such an immanent connection between the paideuma and human life that the loss of the paideumatic sense of space also results in the disappearance of man himself”²⁰⁷.

²⁰³ „În Africa, sentimentului grotei îi corespunde tabăra arabilor, construcția impluvială atlantică, în Europa, construcția rotundeii etrusce antice, în Asia, bazilica devenită construcție centrală, a cărei cupolă nu este, de exemplu, pentru Spengler altceva decât o replică a grotei cerești așezate peste curtea interioară. Construcția chiliei berbere, fortăreața etiopiană, palatul kotoko, palatele cretane, cetatea de pe Rin și domul gotic reprezintă arhitecturi ale sentimentului vastității.”, in Leo Frobenius, *Paideuma*, Bucharest, Meridiane Publishing House, 1985, p. 140.

²⁰⁴ Lucian Blaga, „Despre personanță” [“About Stylistic Imprint”], „Cultură și spațiu” [“Culture and Space”], in Lucian Blaga, *Trilogia culturii [The Trilogy of Culture]*, Bucharest, World Literature Publishing House, 1969.

²⁰⁵ Mircea Eliade, „Spațiul sacru și sacralizarea lumii” [“The Sacred Space and the Sacralization of the World”], in Lucian Blaga, *Sacru și profanul [Sacred and Profane]*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 1992, pp. 21-63.

²⁰⁶ Constantin A. Doxiadis, *Ekistics: an introduction to the science of human settlements*, London, Hutchinson, 1968.

²⁰⁷ „Metropola înseamnă moartea pentru tot ceea ce e genial și vrea să se realizeze pe deplin, pentru libera evoluție a sentimentului spațiului. În metropolă ia sfârșit un mare fenomen al vieții paideumate, lucru întru totul firesc, deoarece claustrarea aceasta are drept urmare pieirea sentimentului vastității, în diferite moduri. (...) Între paideuma și viața oamenilor există o asemenea legătură imanentă încât pierirea sentimentului paideumatic al spațiului are drept urmare și dispariția omului însuși”, in Leo Frobenius, *quoted work*, p. 142.

Oswald Spengler [1933], Lewis Mumford [1961], Arnold Toynbee [1939] share the same vision of the overpopulated, hyperdynamic city, which takes the dimensions of its assertion – conquest and accumulation – to the extreme, and ultimately becomes a necropolis, a city of death, hindering human existence within the cultural frameworks that established it. Among these, the family is the first and most important.

2. THE TRADITIONAL HOMESTEAD AS A UNIVERSAL FORM OF CULTURE

Space as a place, with concrete dimensions, is best represented in family culture – as a dwelling, a home, a household. In Romanian culture, particularly in traditional peasant culture, the place is first and foremost the double of man, his cosmic projection. Every person, like everything, has their place, and maintaining this place means upholding order, the universal balance. The earth is not merely a source of food, nor merely a shelter; as a family place, it is the cosmos – not created by man, but one that creates man, through its grounding in full humanity, the familial kind. In his research on space within village family culture, Ernest Bernea observed that research, no matter how multidisciplinary and meticulous it is, cannot exhaustively describe the way in which man and his place coexist, for space itself becomes a category and a form of understanding upon which a vision of life is built²⁰⁸.

“In the old Romanian village, the house is viewed in a manner distinct from that of the urban population. The general mindset of archaic villages rejects the urban way of conceiving the home. Whether more or less developed, richer or poorer, young or old, the people of our old settlements saw the house as an object that was not only material but also spiritual, not only for sustaining daily life but also for promoting traditional spiritual values. There, the house is a true tapestry of spatial connections; strong local roots make the house and yard a kind of origin and a defining form for most human activities”²⁰⁹.

In the world of tradition, space is not homogeneous: neither within the house, where the hearth, the threshold, the corners, and the eaves shelter genies and spirits that constantly intervene in human daily life; nor in the open space of the surroundings, sharply separated from other worlds toward which passage is fraught with risk. There are bad places, where the continuity of good order is broken and imbalance is possible and frequent (bridges, superficial structures over the unknown,

²⁰⁸ Ernest Bernea, *Spațiu, timp și cauzalitate la poporul român [Space, Time and Causality for the Romanian People]*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2005, pp. 17-18.

²⁰⁹ „În vechiul sat românesc, casa este văzută într-un mod deosebit de cel al populației urbane. Mentalitatea generală a satelor arhaice refuză modul citadin de a concepe locuința. mai evoluat sau mai puțin evoluat, mai bogat sau mai sărac, tânăr sau bătrân, omul vechilor noastre așezări vedea în casă un obiect nu numai material, ci și spiritual, nu numai de întreținere a vieții cotidiene, ci și promovare a unor valori spirituale tradiționale. Casa este acolo o adevărată țesătură de legături spațiale; puternice rădăcini locale fac din casă și curte un fel de obârșie și formă determinantă pentru cele mai multe activități umane”, in *Ibidem*, p. 34.

or corners, where the horizon closes in and where most accidents occur, are such examples). There are good places, those that gather around the person and in which they are sheltered: the house, the courtyard, the yard, the flower garden, the neighborhood, the village, and its surroundings are stations where goodness settles, as a stable landmark, and is delimited, by boundaries, from what is not stable. The “white world”, a space confined to the familiar horizon of the village, meant for living, is separated from the potentially dangerous, chaotic realm of the unknown and the foreign, yet it is also connected to it by roads and paths, some well-trodden, others forgotten.

According to architect Sebastian Moraru, a house is a complete space, whose creation takes as long as it takes for a flower to become fruit.

“From wood, clay, stone, and plaster, a new universe was born one summer in a barnyard. Entering this universe, the stone reevaluated its gray existence and became a white foundation; the oak from the coast extended its energies into pillars, beams, and sills; the twigs from the grove formed a new, geometric thicket in the hearth and the chimney; the firs from the hilltop found peace in the ceiling planks and the roof shingles, while the clay from the ravine seeped in, as the binding agent of the idea, into the walls, the foundations, and the chimneys”²¹⁰.

The materials are temporarily detached from the places where they were born to coalesce into human construction; so great is the closeness between the domestic space and the natural one that they can sometimes be confused. The architecture of the house is the same as that of the natural world, and the architects discover that:

“beneath the house’s foundations lie not only thick oak planks, but bears sleeping deeply in the darkness of the earth; that within the wooden and clay walls of the whitewashed house is a white field – from which pure light can be gathered; that at its corners, the house does not end merely in joined wooden ends, – but in wooden stumps; that the porch posts are in fact enchanted trunks, with their roots in the house’s foundation, and that they bear fruit, being enchanted, sometimes apples, sometimes quinces, and sometimes even little stars; that the large beam atop the porch pillars is a peak, like the hill on the horizon, that a spiral ridge around the staircase pillar is a vine, but that it has borne, under the eaves, some wooden butterflies; that the porch railing is not just a cut plank, but is made of clover, tulips, and little fir trees; that this oak edge of the door is not a twist, but a house snake, guardian against evil; that the beams in the corners of the house are diligent little horses; that the beams running in a circle beneath the eaves are slender rafters; that the roof of the house, at its very top, is the house’s sky, and that the shingles at its peak, finely notched, are cheerful birds, larks,

²¹⁰ „Din lemn, din lut, din piatră și din var, s-a născut, într-o vară, un nou univers într-o bățatură. Intrând în acest univers, piatra și-a reevaluat existența cenușie și a devenit albă temelie; stejarul de pe coastă și-a prelungit energiile intrând în stâlpi, în grinzi și în tălpoaie; nuielele din crâng și-au făcut un desigur nou, geometric, în bățătura vetrei și în coșare; brazii de pe culmea dealului s-au liniștit în scândura tavanelor și în șindrila acoperișului, pe când lutul din râpă s-a insinuat, liant al ideii, în pereți, în temelii și în hornuri”, in Sebastian Moraru, *Casa, satul și devenirea în tradiția românească [The House, the Village and the Becoming in Romanian Tradition]*, Saeculum Vizual Publishing House, 2011, p. 38.

and, finally, that neither the sun nor the moon are absent from the house; they are the two carved circles to the left and right of the gate”²¹¹.

In stark contrast to functional homes – devitalized spaces, aestheticized to conform to artistic canons long detached from natural reality – the dwelling as a household is a living universe, in which man finds his place. Not to become a master, not to accumulate possessions and wealth that would sustain him through time, but to enter – and better yet – into his destiny, which can be fulfilled only because it is limited. Moreover, time is, in turn, material and materialized in the structure of the house, for nothing is made to last beyond the span of a human life. Everything is perishable; the roof, the pillars, the walls, the fences – they all age like everything else. But this

“is in the nature of things: for the matter of this house is joyful. It rejoices that the heaviest burden to bear, that of time, does not weigh upon it. The material seems to know that it will not be made to bear more than it is capable of carrying, and that, once it has become part of the structure of this peasant house and, once ennobled by this new state of its own, it will end beautifully; for it will end in due time. The material seems to know that the entire structure of the house is conceived in full acceptance of natural decay, and that nothing in the house aspires to defy eternity, but everything is engaged in the friendliest of relationships with time. It seems to know that somewhere, in the clay found everywhere in its body, in the very mortar that binds it, this house has incorporated time; it has, in fact, embraced it from the very beginning, ever since the thought that was its first foundation and which built it; time lies in the foundation of this house”²¹².

In every household, family culture restores the primordial unity between space and time, between spirit and matter. Every family is, in fact, a cyclical pattern of endings and beginnings that make up the traditional and human meaning of eternity.

²¹¹ „sub temeliiile casei nu sunt numai tălpile groase de stejar, ci sunt urșii care dorm adânc în întunericul pământului; că în peretele de lemn și de lut al casei văruiate este un câmp alb – de pe care se poate culege lumina curată; că la colțurile ei, casa nu se încheie numai în capete de lemn îmbinat, – ci în căței de lemn; că stâlpii pridvorului sunt de fapt tulpini fermecate, cu rădăcinile în temelia casei, și că ei rodesc, fermecați fiind, când mere, când gutui, iar câteodată chiar steluțe; că grida mare de pe stâlpii foisorului e o culme, ca a dealului din zare, că o creștătură elicoidală în jurul stâlpului de la scară e viță de vie, dar că ea a rodit, sub streășină, niște fluturi de lemn; că pălimarul pridvorului nu e doar scândură tăiată, ci e făcut din trifoi, din lălele și din brăduți; că marginea aceasta de stejar a ușii nu e o torsadă, ci șarpe de casă, păzitor de rele; că grinzile din colțurile casei sunt căluți vrednici; că leațurile ce dau roată pe sub streășină sunt căpriori zvelți; că acoperișul casei, în partea lui de sus, e cerul casei și că șindrilele din vârful său, crestate subțirel, sunt păsări vesele, ciocârlani, și, în sfârșit, că nici soarele, nici luna nu lipsesc din casă; sunt cele două rotocoale cioplite de-a stânga și de-a dreapta porții”, in *Ibidem*, pp. 44-45.

²¹² „este în firea lucrurilor: pentru că materia din casa aceasta e bucuroasă. Se bucură că povara cel mai greu de îndurat, aceea a timpului, nu o apasă. Materia pare a ști că nu va fi pusă să se încarce cu mai mult decât este ea în stare să ducă, și că, odată intrată în alcătuirea acestei case țărănești și, odată înnobilită prin această nouă stare a ei, va sfârși frumos; căci va sfârși la vreme. Materia pare a ști că întreaga alcătuire a casei este concepută în deplina acceptare a fireștii degradări, și că nimic din casă nu ambiționează să înfrunte veșnicia, ci totul este angajat în cele mai prietenești raporturi cu timpul. Ea pare a ști că undeva, în lutul care se află pretutindeni în trupul său, în înșeși mortarele care leagă, casa aceasta a înglobat timpul; ea și l-a asumat, de fapt, de la bun început, încă din gândul ce a fost temeiul dintâi și care a ctitorit-o; timpul se află în fundația acestei case”, in *Ibidem*, p. 39.

3. FORMS OF SPATIAL SANCTIFICATION

The fundamental way in which local cultures take shape is through the integration of the family, as a cultural unit, into the domestic sphere. Just as the family is the primary cultural matrix, it is also the first formula for the orderly integration of space into what constitutes the household's cosmos. The earliest forms of mutual assimilation between space and the human family remain largely unknown to us. Architect Silvia Păun researches the matrices of habitation and uncovers humanity's particular concern, dating back to prehistory, to find its religious vision within a suitable horizon. Yet this endeavor was not so much a constructive and creative one; it was not so much the act of devising a formula for habitation that defined the traditional human, but rather the act of finding and integrating oneself into the matrices and rhythms of cosmogony. That is why, the author shows, the earliest forms of family settlements are ovoid and apsidal, and their primary function is sacred.

“To protect what was most precious to him – his faith in the Creator – man conceived the apse, which optimally focused on the holiest part of the building. The arched shape of the apse wall provides a space conducive to the sanctuary and ensures that balanced, frontal protection of the altar. When creating the form of the apse, aside from the semicircular one, man settled, perhaps not by chance, on the shape of the egg, which carries the embryo of earthly (or cosmic) life – and not merely because it was familiar and readily available. But also, because he sought to achieve a directional form such as that offered by the ellipse of the egg. Compared to the circle, the ellipse has the advantage of a longer diameter, its oval having, a priori, 2-4 reference points, which help to more easily establish a desired direction”²¹³.

This primary form, discovered rather than imagined or created, as I mentioned, in the way the celestial dome settles above the world, in the way the horizon unfolds its concentric proximities around man, is reproduced in the oldest tombs, altars, hearths, and houses: in traditional Romanian architecture, we find it in the *bordei*, a semi-subterranean dwelling, a geomorphic structure that still survives today, in some places, serving as storage, in hearths or mobile ovens (*țesturi*), or in seasonal or temporary settlements (*surle*). The architecture of the household, which contained and reproduced cosmogony – and anthropogony, for conception was the vital center of the family settlement – was one and the same with the settlement's alignment with rhythms and coordinates that were both natural and sacred, and for this reason, it was fundamentally ritualized.

²¹³ „Pentru a proteja ce avea mai de preț, credința în Creator, omul a imaginat absida, care focaliza optim locul cel mai sacru al edificiului. Forma arcuită a peretelui absidei oferă spațiul propice sanctuarului și asigură acea protecție echilibrată, frontală a altarului. Când a creat forma absidei, în afară de cea semilunară, omul s-a oprit, poate nu întâmplător și la forma oului, ce poartă embrionul vieții pământene (sau cosmice) și nu numai fiindcă îi era familiar și la îndemână. Ci, deopotrivă, și pentru că urmărea să obțină o formă direcționată cum este cea pe care o oferă elipsa oului. Față de cerc, elipsa are avantajul prezenței unui diametru mai lung, ovalul ei având, apriori, 2-4 repere, care ajută la fixarea mai ușoară a unei direcții căutate”, in Silvia Păun, *Absida altarului [The Apse of the Altar]*, Per Omnes Artes Publishing House, 2000, p. 166.

“Considering the world to be in a continuous process of becoming – with a permanent openness to the unfolding of things – the local folk conception transformed the power of being of things through ritual, in order to pass them through and place them in beauty, leaving us, especially in architecture, major examples. As Prof. Vasile Vetișanu pointed out in his 1989 book – (...) ritual causes everything to enter the ‘fabric of the whole’ in such a way that it also acquires some of the meanings of the sacred”²¹⁴.

The value of traditional architecture was explained by Silvia Păun through five dimensions of the sanctification of inhabited space. The first refers to “understanding the place” as a possible center of the world, a site for the manifestation of the sacred, the knowledge of its fundamental traits, of its spirit, the *genius loci*, and of the possibility of reiterating God’s primordial creation. The second dimension consists of the ritual foundation of the settlement, through sacrifice, its extraction from chaos, the establishment of centrality (driving in the stake, the peg, lighting the fire), and consecration (attracting fertility, abundance, and power). The third dimension involves the rites of animating the house, its birth, and its connection to heaven and earth (foundations, roof, vertical and horizontal architectural elements, as well as the building materials used), to water (the well), to humans (as the measure of one’s home, in all their forms: as a newborn, a youth, a man or woman, an elder, or the deceased), to animals (the pasture, the stable, the hayfield), and to vegetation (the garden, the orchard, the field, the forest, the pond, etc.). The fourth dimension signified the marking of privileged places: the hearth, as a focal point and altar, source of all blessings, place of purity and symbol of the family; the chimney, as an upward opening toward the Creator; the window, a place of passage and balance (“*neither in the house, nor outside, neither in the sky, nor in the earth*”, as a riddle goes), the door and the threshold, as an opening and a closing, the final front line for the battles between the protectors and the enemies of the house. The fifth dimension was the actual construction of the house, respecting the order and the roles of each of its parts²¹⁵.

4. EXPRESSIONS OF SPATIAL KINSHIP

Romanian villages, organized into clans and family groups as free settlements – not the enslaved villages, whose precarious condition was the consequence, not the cause, of their enslavement – were themselves organically constituted, with the

²¹⁴ „Considerând lumea într-o continuă facere – cu deschiderea permanentă spre devenirile lucrurilor – concepția populară autohtonă a transfigurat puterea de a fi a lucrurilor prin ritual, pentru a le trece și a le așeza în frumos, lăsându-ne, mai ales în arhitectură, exemple majore. După cum arăta prof. Vasile Vetișanu în cartea sa din 1989, – (...) ritualul face ca fiecare lucru să intre în «urzeala întregului» în așa mod încât să dobândească și ceva din rosturile sacralului”, in Vasile Vetișanu, *Deschideri filosofice în cultura tradițională [Philosophical Perspectives in Traditional Culture]*, Eminescu Publishing House, 1989, quoted by Silvia Păun, *România – Valoarea arhitecturii autohtone [Romania – The Value of the Local Architecture]*, Per Omnes Artes Publishing House, 2003, p. 248.

²¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 248–256.

“body of the estate”, the “home”, and the people bound to one another “*like the organs of a human body*”²¹⁶. Each village had at its center the home (family households), cultivated fields, pastures, and forests; in addition to these, one could also count the marsh, the pond, the reed bed, the glades, the vineyards, the mill fords, and the gardens. Romanian families, “stem families”, settled in households following the neolocal model, meaning that married sons left their parents’ home equipped with a plot of land on which they established their own household; only the youngest son remained in his parents’ household, where he was obligated to care for them in their old age and to perform memorial rites for them after their death. Here is how Henri and Paul Stahl describe the composition of a household in the village center:

“The house, usually situated on the edge of the road, had a precise orientation, facing south with the living room toward the east. The outbuildings were arranged around the house so that they were all within easy reach of the household: opposite the house, or further back, stood the summer kitchens; the stable and other outbuildings were located further back, toward the end of the garden, with a fence dividing the ‘barnyard’ in two to prevent animals from entering the front yard”²¹⁷.

The outbuildings were made primarily of wattle, brushwood, and reeds. Their forms ranged from simple walls sheltering the animals from the wind to enclosed stables, raised with lofts or extended with sheds where fodder was stored; from food pits, dug in the shape of a funnel, wide at the bottom and narrow at the opening, with the inside burned to dry them out, to built-in pantries attached to the house, sometimes with an upper floor and housing, in addition to food, clothes and fabrics, tools or wine barrels. The house, surrounded by a porch or veranda enclosed by a railing or balustrade, which sometimes extended into an open gazebo at the front, had a first room, the entrance hall, a space used mainly for passage and storage of frequently used objects (such as a water bucket), a main room with a hearth, oven, table (usually round and low), bed, benches (long, backless seats), stools, a *blidar* (an open cupboard with shelves), shelves, a chest, and a rod or beam (a pole suspended from the ceiling on which either clothes or pots were hung) and all other items necessary for cooking, dining, and women’s indoor work (tools for weaving, spinning, and embroidery), among which an icon was never missing, and, possibly, a pantry. Gradually, especially in the 20th century, a clean, formal room also appeared, with windows facing the street, without a stove, where luxury items were kept (the dowry of marriageable daughters, the finest furniture and fabrics used only on major holidays), where guests could be accommodated, but which was not

²¹⁶ Henri Stahl and Paul Stahl, *Civilizația vechilor sate românești [The Civilisation of the Old Romanian Villages]*, Bucharest, Scientific Publishing House, 1968, p. 12.

²¹⁷ „Casa, obișnuit așezată pe marginea drumului, avea o orientare precisă, fiind cu fața spre miazăzi și cu oadaia de locuit spre răsărit. Acareturile erau dispuse în jurul casei, astfel încât să fie toate la îndemîna gospodăriilor : vizavi de casă, sau mai spre spate, stau bucătăriile de vară; grajdul și celelalte acareturi mai departe, spre fundul grădinii, printr-un gard despărțindu-se «bătătura» în două, pentru a împiedica animalele să pătrundă în curtea din față”, in *Ibidem*, p. 44.

inhabited by the household members. The windows, doors, ceiling beams, hearth, and eaves – or, outside the house, the fence and gate – are protected with sacred symbols: pots, animal skulls, or carved symbols meant to attract good fortune and ward off evil.

Paul Stahl, in his comparative study of households in Southeast Europe, notes the holistic nature of the Romanian household. This refers, first and foremost, to the inclusion, in every household, of the claim on all local resources:

“every household must engage in an activity that provides it with everything necessary for life; every household practice agriculture, raises livestock, needs water, and so on; therefore, every household must have access to all economic categories of land”²¹⁸.

In a document from 1719, cited by the same Paul Stahl, a landowner declared: “I, having nothing else with which to pay him, gave him three plots of land in the village of Lățcani, on the Moldavian River, which are in the Suceava region, but these plots are my share that comes to me from other brothers, with hayfields in the open, in the forest, and in the pastures, with a mill ford and all the income”²¹⁹.

Secondly, the continuity preserved within the expanding family is noted, as its young members are transplanted into a new household:

“(…) the obligation to have a house (...) is always the result of a collective effort, especially in the past, when everyone built their own house without hiring skilled builders. Just as every woman, in order to marry, had to know how to weave and sew, every man had to know how to handle an axe. Nicolae Iorga states that every peasant was also skilled in carpentry and needed no help to cut, carve, assemble, and even make ornaments. (...) This work is carried out by a group of varying size; we can see this even in cases where a master builder oversees the work, surrounded by family members who will eventually live in the house. The future owner’s obligation to assist the master builder is stipulated in this case in the verbal agreement between them, which specifies each party’s duties in detail. Men and women work together; there are specific tasks for each, with the heaviest work reserved for the men. They cut the wood, hew the beams and planks, and assemble them; the women plaster, whitewash, and then decorate the walls at regular intervals. Usually, parents, brothers, and sisters work alongside the young man who is getting married. Even the sons who have left their parents’ home are called upon to help their younger brother, just as they themselves

²¹⁸ „fiecare gospodărie trebuie să desfășoare o activitate care să-i asigure toate cele necesare traiului; fiecare practică agricultura, creșterea animalelor, are nevoie de apă și așa mai departe, prin urmare fiecare trebuie să aibă acces la toate categoriile economice de pământ”, in Paul Stahl, *Triburi și sate din sud-estul Europei [Tribes and Villages in Southeastern Europe]*, Paideia Publishing House, 2000, p. 115.

²¹⁹ „Eu, neavând cu altă cu ce-i plăti, i-am dat dumisale trei locuri de casă din sat din Lățcani, pe apa Moldovii, ce sunt la țănutul Sucevii, însă aceste locuri este partea mea ce mi să vine despre alți frați, cu locuri de fâneață în câmp și în pădure și în hăleștei, cu vad de moară și cu tot venitul”, in Vasile Mihordea, Ioana Constantinescu and Corneliu Istrati, *Documente privind relațiile agrare în veacul al XVIII-lea. Moldova [Documents Regarding Agrarian relations in the 18th Century. Moldova]*, II, 1966, p. 134, quoted by Paul Stahl, *quoted work*, p. 115.

were once helped. The circle of close relatives is often expanded; neighbors participate as well”²²⁰.

The collective effort once again unites the clan and signifies the birth, within it, of a new household unit. Meals are also shared during construction, and the completion is celebrated:

“In northern Moldova, after the walls have been erected, the floor of the house is covered with large stones and earth; the host calls the musicians, and a party is organized during which the girls and boys dance and tamp down the floor”²²¹.

5. LEGAL FORMS OF DOMESTIC SPATIAL ORGANIZATION

Housing within family culture is customary governed within a system of folk law which, according to Romulus Vulcănescu, is based on a communal legal concept known as peasant law or customary law, and on legislation that structured community life according to local custom²²². This custom divides people into locals (those who legitimately belonged to the clan or lineage inhabiting a given territory, village, or hamlet) and outsiders (those who did not belong there, the foreigners). The locals had all the rights provided by the law regarding settlement, household, roads, mountains, forests, or water, etc.; the outsiders were given only certain conditional permissions, for a limited time or outside the village boundaries, called “*slobozenii*”²²³.

²²⁰ „(...) obligația de a avea o casă (...) este întotdeauna rezultatul unui efort colectiv, mai ales în trecut, când fiecare își construia casa fără să facă apel la constructori calificați. Așa cum fiecare femeie, pentru a se căsători, trebuia să știe să țese și să coase, fiecare bărbat trebuia să știe să mănuiască securea. Nicolae Iorga afirmă că fiecare țaran se pricepea și la dulgherie și n-avea nevoie de niciun ajutor pentru a tăia, ciopli, asambla și chiar a face ornamente. (...) Această muncă este făcută de un grup mai mult sau mai puțin numeros; o putem vedea chiar în cazul în care un meșter constructor conduce lucrările, înconjurat de membrii familiei, care urmează să locuiască în casă. Obligația viitorului proprietar de a-l ajuta pe meșterul constructor este prevăzută în acest caz în acordul verbal încheiat între ei, care specifică exact îndatoririle fiecăruia. Bărbați și femei muncesc împreună; există operații specifice pentru fiecare, cele mai grele fiind rezervate bărbaților. Ei taie lemnul, cioplesc grinzile și scândurile și le assemblează; femeile tencuiesc, vâruiesc și ornamează apoi pereții la intervale de timp regulate. De obicei părinții, frații și surorile muncesc alături de băiatul care se căsătorește. Chiar băieții care au părăsit casa părintească sunt chemați să-și ajute fratele mai mic, așa cum au fost și ei ajutați. Cercul rudelor apropiate este deseori depășit; vecinii participă și ei”, in Nicolae Iorga, *Negoțul și meșteșugurile în trecutul românesc [Trade and Crafts in the Romanian History]*, București, 1906, p. 75, quoted by *Ibidem*, p. 118.

²²¹ „În nordul Moldovei, după ce au fost ridicăți pereții, se acoperă planșeul casei cu pietre mari și cu pământ; gazda cheamă lăutarii și se organizează o petrecere în timpul căreia fetele și băieții joacă și bătătoresc pământul planșeului”, in Dimitrie Dan, *Comuna Straja și locuitorii săi. Studiu istoric, topografic și folcloric [The Straja Commune and Its Inhabitants. A Historical, Topographic, and Folkloric Study]*, Cernăuți, 1897, p. 26, quoted by *Ibidem*, p. 119.

²²² Romulus Vulcănescu, *Etnologie juridică [Legal Ethnology]*, Academy Publishing House, 1970, pp. 48–49.

²²³ *Ibidem*, p. 50.

The choice of the settlement site, following traditional guidelines and a specific ritual, as mentioned earlier, was made by the leader of the clan or family line; the eponymous hero would throw a spear, mace, or arrow to determine the heart of the settlement, where a pole – a pillar of the sky – would be erected, or more recently, a wayside shrine or a cross; when the village or its founder had sufficient resources, a church. The households of the leaders were grouped around this focal point; the village roads converged here. The village is a cultural unit with its own institutions, possessing legal capacity through its community; the hamlet, lacking a community and created by the splitting off of groups of relatives from the village, remains dependent on it.

“The village differs from the hamlet in its legal capacity to enter into and dissolve certain obligations, to create laws, and to enforce them. The hamlet, as an annex of the village, lacks traditional rural institutions: a church and a cemetery; it is set back from the village road and cannot act against the interests of the village community on which it legally depends”²²⁴.

Within these units of communal life, new households were established under the protection of the parental household: either within it, through the allocation of a plot of land to each male descendant by the head of the large household; or outside it and the village center, on the village estate, “on the hill” or “in the valley”, in a “new” or “old” location. Sometimes, these settlements were arranged as farmsteads, specifically intended for newlyweds, evolving into “villages of newlyweds”. The construction was organized with this in mind. The porch posts and the beams of the ceiling in the entrance hall, in addition to their sacred properties, were important elements in the legal tradition, used as measuring tools and instruments of calculation “to mark the material and spiritual obligations of the head of the family (man or woman) toward state, ecclesiastical, boyar, or communal administrative bodies, and to record the personal property rights over the dwelling built by them”²²⁵.

Furthermore, the interior organization of the household and the house was arranged according to traditional norms that separated spaces designated for specific forms of sexual or generational activities.

“The porch, the entrance hall, the stove, the gazebo, etc., were not only structural components of the building but also elements of the customary legal organization of domestic space, work, and rest within the home. On the porch, work was done in the summer and fall: spinning, carding, weaving, and threshing. Also on the porch, only the man slept during summer. And when the woman slept beside him, the man would

²²⁴ „Satul se deosebește de cătun prin capacitatea lui juridică, de a face și desface unele obligații, de a crea legi și a le aplica. Cătunul, ca anexă a satului, este lipsit de instituțiile rurale tradiționale: biserică și cimitir, e retras de la drumul vicinal și nu se poate ridica în contra intereselor obștii satului de care depinde legal”, in *Ibidem*, p. 52.

²²⁵ „a însemna obligațiile materiale și spirituale ale capului familiei (bărbat sau femeie) față de organele administrative de stat, ecleziastice, boierești sau obștești și pentru a consemna drepturile de proprietate personală asupra locuinței edificate de el”, in *Ibidem*, p. 56.

position himself so as to block the entrance. In the hallway, however, the woman reigned supreme. She bustled about there all day and filled the entire room with her activity. The remarks the man made to his wife when she overstepped her bounds were clear: ‘Don’t spread out any further than the hallway allows’ or, ‘Woman, you’ve stuck the hallway in the stove’ (the bedroom)”²²⁶.

Hospitality was also governed by universal rules and signs. A stick leaning against the door signaled the absence of the household’s masters; no one had the right to move the stick without risking punishment. But the master’s presence was not always necessary to receive a guest:

“in Oltenia (...), the wooden cellars built at ground level had their doors left open after the harvest, so that any passersby could enter and drink as much of the new wine as they wished, either as a gift or in honor of the absent host. For this refreshment, a clay cup was left out, and sometimes a bowl of polenta with a piece of pastrami. Hospitality in the host’s absence was valid only if the established rules were followed. If the traveler sought to take a cup of wine with him, he was liable to severe punishment. In the cellar, he could drink an entire barrel and not be blamed”²²⁷.

6. THE COMPREHENSIVE CONCEPT OF THE HOUSEHOLD

The family, the home, and the household are rather different manifestations of the same reality than distinct forms of human organization or units. In economics, they form the foundation of the rural economy²²⁸. In culture, the household is the center of domestic life, as well as of cultivation and fundamental, primary education through the mother tongue. In law, it is the primary legal unit that establishes or abolishes values and laws, some strictly necessary for survival, others useless or even dangerous; the family ensures the internalization of good laws – those of tradition, for the most part and until recently – until the essential norm becomes the standard;

²²⁶ „Prispa, tinda, soba, foișorul etc. nu erau numai părți constitutive ale construcției, ci și elemente de organizare juridică cutumiară a spațiului domestic, a muncii și repaosului în casă. Pe prispa se muncea vara și toamna la melițat, dărăcit, la războiul de țesut, la desfăcut știuleții. Tot pe prispa vara numai bărbatul dormea. Iar când dormea și femeia alături, bărbatul se așeza astfel încât să bareze intrarea. În tindă, în schimb, stăpânea numai femeia. Ea trebuia acolo toată ziua și ocupa cu activitatea ei întreaga încăpere. Expresiile adresate de bărbat femeii lui când depășea limitele erau clare: «nu te-ntinde decât cât ți-e tinda» sau «muiere, ai băgat tinda-n sobă» (camera de dormit)”, in *Ibidem*.

²²⁷ „în Oltenia (...), pivnițele de lemn construite la suprafața solului, după recoltă aveau ușile lăsate deschise, pentru ca trecătorul să poată intra și bea din vinul nou, cât simțea nevoia, fie de pomană, fie în cinstea gazdei absente. Pentru această înfruptare era lăsată o cană de lut și uneori o coajă de mămăligă cu o bucată de pastramă. Ospitalitatea în absența gazdei era valabilă numai prin respectarea regulilor prestabilite. Dacă trecătorul căuta să ia cu el o cană cu vin era pasibil de pedeapsă aspră. În pivniță putea să bea un butoi întreg și nu i se reproșa nimic”, in *Ibidem*, p. 57.

²²⁸ Gabriel Popescu and Nicolae Istudor, „Gospodăria țărănească în economia rurală” [“The peasant household in the rural economy”], in ***, *Probleme de politică agrară [Agricultural Policy Issues]*, 4, ASE Publishing House, 2017, Available at: <https://www.mdr.ro/documente/brosuri/Gospodaria-taraneasca-in-economiarurala.pdf>, Accessed on January 23, 2026.

it supervises, judges, punishes, and rewards the behavior of each of its members promptly and directly. In religion, the family or household are, as Ștefania Cristescu-Golopenția shows, units of spiritual life, initiation, and magical-religious practice.

“Our research has led us to realize that the true motives behind the perfect social structure represented by the household family in any Romanian village must henceforth be sought not only in economic factors, but equally in spiritual ones”²²⁹.

Starting from the observation that previous research has recognized the relevance of the economic aspect of community life, Ștefania Cristescu-Golopenția considers and recommends the household as a complete sociological unit, moving beyond previous approaches, which viewed the household as a predominantly, if not fundamentally, economic unit – as a sum of movable and immovable property, inhabited and used by people and sustained by their collective labor.

“The sociological monograph studies (...) the household from two perspectives: 1) first, as determined by: a) external natural factors, that is, by the land on which it was born and by the people as biological beings who make up the family group (the cosmological and biological frameworks) and b) the internal factor, that is, by the spirit of past generations preserved in old customs (...) (the biological and historical frameworks). 2) Secondly, the sociological monograph studies the household as a social phenomenon in itself, that is, as an organically structured unit of economic, spiritual, legal, and political-administrative manifestations, a unit born of the special kind of life that connects humans to animals and things, a unit that carries its deep meaning within itself!”²³⁰.

Precisely by bringing together different ages and genders, home and livestock, land and tools, distinct kingdoms and species – not merely in association, but in a full and solid community – the family-household signifies a unit of social life in the broadest sense of the term. The study of the household becomes the central issue of understanding society, through which one can gain insight into both the outward aspects of village social life and the intimacy of the family world. Moreover, acquiring this kind of knowledge serves both to understand how beliefs, interests, and needs – material and spiritual – across all categories and types of human

²²⁹ „Cercetarea noastră ne-a făcut să ne dăm seama că adevăratele motive ale structurării sociale perfecte pe care o reprezintă familia gospodărească din orice sat românesc trebuie căutate de acum înainte nu numai în factorul economic, ci în egală măsură și în cel spiritual” , in Ștefania Cristescu-Golopenția, *Gospodăria în credințele și riturile magice ale femeilor din Drăguș (Făgăraș)* [*The Household in the Beliefs and Magical Rites of the Women of Drăguș (Făgăraș)*], Paideia Publishing House, 2002, p. 33.

²³⁰ „Monografia sociologică studiază (...) gospodăria din două puncte de vedere: 1) mai întâi ca determinată: a) de factori naturali externi, adică de pământul pe care s-a născut și de oamenii ca ființe biologice care-i compun grupul familial (cadrele cosmologic și biologic) și b) de factorul intern, adică de sufletul generațiilor trecute păstrat în vechile obiceiuri (...) (cadrele biologic și istoric). 2) În al doilea rând apoi, monografia sociologică studiază gospodăria ca fenomen social în sine, deci ca pe o unitate organic structurată de manifestări economice, spirituale, juridice și politico-administrative, unitate născută din genul special de viață ce leagă omul de animale și lucruri, unitate ce-și poartă sensul adânc în sine însăși”, in *Ibidem*, p. 34.

existence crystallize into current solutions to the problems of the present, and to attune oneself to the vibrations of immutable forms.

“The household, as a social reality superior to the individuals who temporarily comprise the family group, thus not only determines their entire economic activity down to the smallest details, but it also specifically shapes, permeates, and colors the entire range of spiritual activities of the people who serve it. This specifically Drăgușan spirituality, determined first and foremost by the eternal existence of the household, can thus be called domestic spirituality”²³¹.

7. THE FAMILY COSMOS IN HOMER’S EPICS

A detailed portrayal of the spatial dimension of the family is provided by the Homeric epics, which serve as the sources of ancient European family culture. The first of these, the *Iliad*, is the epic of the chaos that follows the violation and desecration of the family space: Paris, a guest and stranger in the home of Helen and King Menelaus, violates the protected space, desecrates the sacred realm of marriage, and abducts the wife. Even as he attempts to build a new family with Helen under the protection of the strongest walls of one of the most powerful kinship groups – for the family of Priam and Hecuba is the true Trojan citadel – he does nothing but bring the disease of destruction into the very heart of this family, within the walls of Troy. Contagious, the chaotic force of familial sin cannot be overcome by the numerous and virtuous Trojan family. Paris is the first and true Trojan horse; according to another law, older and less subject to human control, Paris and Helen should have gone into hiding to avoid punishment not only from the dishonored husband and his kin, but also from the rapist’s family. The crime was the same, regardless of which family suffered it. Except that Helen is seen as a trophy and in this capacity is brought before King Priam; and in this capacity, the entire army of Troy and the finest sons of the city-state mobilize to defend her. But in vain; not even the sacrifice of Hector, the heroic embodiment of all family virtues, can restore the balance shattered by his brother. Chaos engulfs Troy and touches all who take part in the great war. Aphrodite herself, the one who inspired Paris’s crime, is wounded²³², as is Ares²³³.

On the contrary, *The Odyssey* is the story of the restoration of the family cosmos, of the integrity of the family space in Ithaca, where we find not a city but a household. The family cosmos will be restored both through the reunion of the

²³¹ „Gospodăria, ca realitate socială superioară indivizilor care-i compun vremelnic grupul familial, nu le hotărăște astfel numai întreaga lor activitate economică în cele mai mici amănunte, ci ea determină, pătrunde și colorează specific și întreaga gamă a activităților spirituale ale oamenilor care o servesc. Spiritualitatea aceasta specific drăgușană, determinată în primul rând și esențial de existența eternă a gospodăriei ar putea fi astfel denumită spiritualitate domestică”, in *Ibidem*, p. 55.

²³² Homer, *Iliada [Iliad]*, translated in Romanian by George Murnu, Book V, 328–336, Univers Publishing House, 1985, p. 138.

²³³ *Ibidem*, Book V, 838–845, p. 154.

spouses (the resourceful Ulysses and the wise Penelope) and of the generations – the father with his heir, the well-behaved Telemachus, exactly at the age when he can become a true successor – as well as through the spatial restoration of the household, in its landholdings and movable property; through the revival of the hearth, the spatial center of the domestic universe.

In this interpretation, the moments of the dissolution and reestablishment of family culture are clear and manifest on a universal level. After the destruction of the family space and the dissolution of its culture, restoration requires time and a new order, a new balance, on earth and in heaven. Ulysses is not the bravest of the Greek heroes, but he is the most cunning. In his wanderings, he does not lose his way or resign himself to his fate: when the epic begins, the hero had already been stranded for seven years on the island of Ogygia, home to the goddess Calypso (*kalypso*, incidentally, means “to hide”); all the other heroes of the Trojan War had already met their fate: they were either dead (buried, and thus settled, arranged within a familial and ritual framework), or had returned home. Ulysses, however, has been detained:

“here, in the forests, lives a goddess/daughter of tough-minded Atlas, who knows/the ocean depths and by himself holds u/those gigantic pillars which separate/earth and heaven. That’s the one whose daughter/prevents the sad, unlucky man from leaving/Her soft seductive speech keeps tempting him/urging him to forget his native land/Odysseus yearns to see even the smoke/rising from Ithaca and longs for death”²³⁴

says Athena, compassionately submitting his condition to the judgment of Olympus. Everything is already laid bare in these few verses: Ulysses (“he who stirs the wrath” of the gods) is alone and yearning: for Ithaca, for his hearth, and for the peace he deserves. Having obtained the gods’ consent – the harmony that is first established on the divine plane – Athena, his guardian and protector, begins the process of arranging his return home: this will begin not with him, not with his “captor”, Calypso, but with the hearth, the focal point to which Odysseus is called, that is, the center of his family. These are the spatial and action-oriented poles of the epic, between which cosmic balance will be restored: the individual and the domestic nucleus. We do not encounter the term “family” very often in *The Odyssey*; the entire epic, however, is dedicated to the invincible force that draws people back to the hearth of their home.

“I’ll go to Ithaca and urge his son/to action and put courage in his heart/so he will call those long-haired Achaeans/to assembly, and there address the suitors/who keep on butchering his flocks of sheep/and shambling bent-horned cattle. I’ll send him/on a trip to Sparta and sandy Pylos/ to learn about his father’s voyage home – /he may hear of it somewhere – and to gain/a worthy reputation among men”²³⁵.

It is no small matter for the goddess of wisdom to be concerned about the wealth of livestock in the hero’s household; for, just as “good reputation”, fame, is gained by stepping outside the walls of the home, its preservation is achieved within those walls, in both moral and material prosperity.

²³⁴ Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by Ian Johnston, 2002, Book I, 69–78, p. 5.

²³⁵ *Ibidem*, Book I, 116–125, pp. 6–7.

In Ithaca, we find the place of an almost scattered family, invaded by the suitors/guests – those who do not come, like strangers, to be received, feasted, and then sent on their way with gifts, as custom required, but who instead remain, revel, and squander the household's wealth until they succeed in displacing what is the very heart of the home: the prudent wife, Penelope. Hospitality is regulated, much as in the Romanian peasant household, in different forms depending on whether the master of the house is present or absent.

The suitors are not ordinary guests; they do not come to seek lodging from the host, but rather with the claim of replacing him, for no household – especially a distinguished one like that of Ulysses – can remain without a leader. As suitors, these outsiders remain within the bounds of the estate; and even if they do not have access to the inner rooms, they occupy the courtyard, where they spend their time amusing themselves, and the dining hall. Their status as uninvited yet legitimate guests, by virtue of their claim to lead a masterless household, is limited by the distance at which the valuables are kept, sheltered within the inner circles of the home. The precise state of this familial degradation, through the dissipation of both people and goods, is what Athena, the goddess of wisdom, seeks to observe:

“She raced down from the peak of Mount Olympus/sped across to Ithaca, and then just stood there/at Odysseus' outer gate before the palace/on the threshold, her hand still gripping the bronze spear/in the form of Mentos, a foreigner, the chief/who ruled the Taphians. There she met the suitors/those arrogant men, who were enjoying themselves/playing checkers right outside the door, sitting down/on hides of cattle they themselves had butchered/Some heralds and attendants were keeping busy/blending fine wine with water in the mixing bowls/Some were wiping tables down with porous sponges/and setting them in place, while others passed around/huge quantities of meat. Godlike Telemachus/ observed Athena first, well before the others/He was sitting with the suitors, his heart troubled, picturing in his mind how his noble father/might get back, then scatter the suitors from his home/win honour for himself and reassert control/of his own household”²³⁶.

In the ancient family, the authority of the leader (*archon* or *pater familias*) extended equally over all its members (wife, parents, natural or adopted sons, slaves, freedmen), over the household domain (house and land), livestock, and material goods; the family itself was a complete form of communal life, a unified organism. Within this ordered structure – yet incomplete due to the absence of its head, its leader – Penelope becomes the focal good, the most valuable asset, and precisely the one most fiercely coveted by the suitors. Unlike the ease with which Helen could be persuaded to abandon her home, Penelope cannot be dislodged from her household; not so much in a spatial sense (for she rarely emerges from her chambers), but in a cultural one, as she persistently – almost obsessively – engages in the same activity of weaving, which defines her as the mistress of the fate of Odysseus's house. In the most obscure and narrow of the concentric circles organizing the home, in her

²³⁶ *Ibidem*, Book I, 134–153, p. 7.

upstairs dwelling (the women's quarters in the ancient house), the prudent Penelope hides like a spider within the web she weaves; the shroud of Laertes, her father-in-law, is her final duty as both wife and daughter-in-law. A weaver, like Athena, she has direct access – though it may be interpreted as involuntary – to the fulfillment of the family's destiny.

Maria Vania Cavalli²³⁷, discussing Moses Finley's analysis of the Homeric world, starts from this concentric unity of the *oikos*, examining its dynamics and its connections with its material components – above all, the goods kept within the household and the possessions at a distance: fields, vineyards, orchards, and so on. She regards this familial organization as a model for the political organization of the city.

“The *oikos* provides to the institutional dimension of the new political community an internal organizational model based on the principle of self-sufficiency (...) that the *oikos* of Homeric age elaborated”²³⁸.

The patriarch, the *basileios*,

“is the individual who, after having learned and mastered, through a trial-and-error path, the practical abilities and ethical qualities necessary to lead the new *oikos*, spreads them across the whole family”²³⁹.

Of all the human models of antiquity, Ulysses seems the closest to this role – not merely, or not primarily, as a warrior hero (many of his martial deeds may even suggest a prudence quite foreign to the often reckless bravery – opposed to moderation or wisdom, and sometimes verging on madness – that other heroes of the great war, such as the “great” Achilles or Ajax the Telamonian, claimed as the guarantee of their fame²⁴⁰), but as a man devoted to his family and to duty. In the management of the Homeric and Hellenic aristocratic household, this survival of leadership capacity was identical to the survival of the family itself; it was embodied in the traditional charisma of the *archon* or *basileus*, or, in the later Latin version, the *pater familias*.

Within this cultural model, the *oikos* reproduced a pyramidal organization similar to the great houses of Mycenaean civilization. After the collapse of their dominance, only those who were able to preserve sufficient economic resources and administrative qualities could devise and implement strategies of survival in the reorganization of society. By contrast, Romanian society – being a community

²³⁷ Maria Vania Cavalli, “The Homeric Aristocratic Oikos: a model of socio-economical aggregation”, in *Gaia. Revue interdisciplinaire sur la Grèce ancienne*, 12/2008/2009, pp. 69/76, Available at: https://www.persee.fr/doc/gaia_12873349_2009_num_12_1_1527, Accessed on February 12, 2026.

²³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

²³⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁴⁰ Moreover, the shadow of Achilles, as fearsome in the realm of the dead as he had been on the battlefield in life, revealed to Odysseus that the price of warlike fame is much lower after death than during life: “I'd rather live/working as a wage-labourer for hire/by some other man, one who had no land/and not much in the way of livelihood/than lord it over all the wasted dead”, in Homer, *quoted work*, 2002, Book XI, 624–628, p. 203.

grounded in family culture, not a *polis* – saw the role of the patriarch stabilized once and for all by tradition; it was not he who upheld tradition, but tradition itself, as an essential form of ancient family culture, with even matriarchal connotations, that upheld the head of the household, as well as all the other members of the family. The management of the household was carried out collectively, and a house abandoned by its leader was not endangered by external sieges (such as that carried out by Penelope's suitors in Ithaca during Odysseus's absence).

“Homer describes a production chain (...) fully controlled by the Basileios, who undertakes those efforts needed to intensify and diversify the production on which the survival of the oikos is based”²⁴¹.

The absence of Odysseus, the withdrawal “to the countryside” of Laertes, his father, and the youth of Telemachus, his son, had left the household without any male structure. The family was affected, but not irreparably, for in the absence of the men it was safeguarded through the exceptional merits of the wife, the prudence of the son and the slaves, and with the protection of the gods. The material side of the household was managed wisely by the slaves, especially by the swineherd Eumaeus and the cowherd Philoetius – those who, together with Telemachus, would support Odysseus in the struggle to reclaim his home from the suitors. The immaterial side, the family's moral order, was precisely the stake of Penelope's domestic resistance. The foundation of masculine and feminine roles is clearly emphasized here: the man ensured the guarding and material protection of the house (the family, the household, its members, and all its goods) and contributed to the increase of prosperity; the woman guaranteed the family's moral order, stability, and the fidelity of its cultural values. In Odysseus's case, the detailed portrayal of the consequences of his absence highlights the effects of the lack of male protection, but also the possibility of compensating for it through the steadfastness of feminine moral order. As the certainty of his return home begins to emerge, the management of movable goods – arms, ornaments, and provisions – also becomes important; this explains the anger at the squandering of wealth by the suitors, the concern for the rich gifts of the Phaeacians, and the care taken not to lose them once he reaches Ithaca. The master of the household must live at the center of it, like a king at the center of his kingdom; the dwelling is the physical and moral core of the domain. He must demonstrate both moral and administrative qualities²⁴². And if he departs, he must return within a short time, so that his strength and authority are not forgotten, and so that the resources necessary for the family's survival are not exhausted.

Since *The Odyssey* is considered to represent a historical stage later than that of *The Iliad*, Cavalli believes that it proposes

²⁴¹ Maria Vania Cavalli, “The Homeric Aristocratic Oikos: a model of socio-economical aggregation”, in *Gaia. Revue interdisciplinaire sur la Grèce ancienne*, 12/2008/2009, p. 71, Available at: https://www.persee.fr/doc/gaia_12873349_2009_num_12_1_1527, Accessed on February 12, 2026.

²⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 74.

“the new model of ‘global competence’ sponsored (...) by Odysseus, finds his roots in the heroic *paideia*”²⁴³.

Moreover, the new *basileus* adapts and adds new qualities to his status, such as skill, versatility, and tenacity²⁴⁴, which – if viewed from a spatial perspective – imply new capacities for appropriating land, whether as cultivated field or dwelling. In fact, land and the spatial and material attachment to the household become the new criteria by which the leader is defined. Setting out for war, Odysseus never truly severed himself from his home. This immaterial yet strong and constant bond made him aware of all dangers and even enabled him to resist the episodes of conjugal temptation: with the goddess Circe, the young Nausicaa, or the nymph Calypso, each of whom presented obvious advantages²⁴⁵. Fidelity, which for Penelope is a vocation, for Odysseus is an ideal. Wisdom, restraint, and prudence – traits that belong to the conjugal vocation – lead each of them, though in different ways, not to recognize one another immediately as spouses after twenty years of separation, but first to test each other in order to determine whether they are still, in truth, husband and wife. For Odysseus, Penelope has passed the test, having resisted – more than an ordinary woman – the persistent and aggressive assault of the suitors, preserving within the household the same place she had occupied from the beginning. For Penelope, however, Odysseus must undergo several tests, for the woman, as the heart of the household, must be more cautious: when she yields, the entire house is yielded. Odysseus must recover his strength and physical skill, demonstrated through the handling of his weapon (the bow of his youth); the moral strength and courage to claim and reconquer his home, proven by driving the invaders from the domestic space; the legitimate authority over the house and its people (his recognition by Telemachus and the slaves; the punishment of the disloyal servants and the reward of the faithful ones, as was proper for the master of the house); and finally, the strength of memory and authority over the conjugal space. Feigning not to recognize him, Penelope orders that the marital bed – carved by Odysseus himself – be brought into the outer hall; thus, the supposed guest is to be received with the highest honor, but in the place reserved for strangers. Odysseus reacts with an outburst of anger, partly because he is not granted the recognition he expects²⁴⁶, and partly because the woman’s command seems absurd to him:

“Woman, those words you uttered are very painful. Who’s shifted my bed to somewhere else? That would be difficult, even for someone truly skilled, unless a god came down in person – for he could, if he so wished, set it elsewhere with ease. But among men there is

²⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 75.

²⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁴⁵ Félix Buffiere, *Miturile lui Homer și gândirea greacă [Homer’s Myths and the Greek Thought]*, Univers Publishing House, 1987, pp. 310–311.

²⁴⁶ The question here is: what kind of *basileus* is the one who waits for his recognition from a woman? He has defeated all suitors, is revered by his son and by the slaves, yet still nothing persuades Penelope to receive him into the intimate interior of the household’s conjugal life.

no one living, no matter how much energy he has, who would find it easy to shift that bed/ For built into the well-constructed bedstead 240 is a great symbol which I made myself with no one else. A long-leaved olive bush [190] was growing in the yard. It was in bloom and flourishing – it looked like a pillar. I built my bedroom round this olive bush, till I had finished it with well-set stones. I put a fine roof on it and added closely fitted jointed doors. After that, I cut back the foliage, removing the branches from the long-leaved olive bush. 250 I trimmed the trunk off, upward from the root, cutting it skillfully and true with bronze, so it followed a straight line. Once I'd made the bedpost, with an augur I bored out the entire piece. That was how I started. Then I carved out my bed, till I was done. In it I set an inlay made of gold, [200] silver, and ivory, and across it I stretched a bright purple thong of ox-hide. And that's the symbol I describe for you"²⁴⁷.

Only from this point onward, after Odysseus – equally skilled in carpentry as in war – demonstrates the integrity of his household memory, will he be able to be reintegrated, through Penelope, into the culture of the family interior, which is under her authority.

Through this type of family culture, Maria Vania Cavalli argues, classical antiquity will come to define itself through a

“new moral code emphasizing land as a good to desire and defend. Even if this transition does not reach the birth of the polis yet, we are not far from that, as the polis will institutionalize this organizational model centered on private owned land, determined its full success, even by means of the colonization phenomenon, that is, to the export and reproduction oversea of the model mastered in the homeland”²⁴⁸.

8. THE HOMERIC HOUSEHOLD

But what does the household of a chieftain such as Odysseus contain? What constitutes the domain of the family, and who makes up this community so well integrated that it may be likened to a powerful city – perhaps even more powerful than Ilion? For while Troy, with its indestructible walls built by the gods, before whose gates the greatest heroes of antiquity are sacrificed, is ultimately weakened from within – its own men becoming those who bring down its gates and walls to make way for destruction – Ithaca, the small and poor island, and Odysseus's peasant household endure, even when no man remains to defend them.

At the center of Odysseus's domain stands the house. Within it live the members of the family, strangers are received, and valuable objects are kept safe. Odysseus's house is that of a leading man of Ithaca:

“this place surely is the splendid palace/belonging to Odysseus. It's easy/to recognize, even when one sees it/among many others, for here there is/building after building,

²⁴⁷ Homer, *quoted work*, 2002, Book XXIII, 232–260, pp. 412–413.

²⁴⁸ Maria Vania Cavalli, “The Homeric Aristocratic Oikos: a model of socio-economical aggregation”, in *Gaia. Revue interdisciplinaire sur la Grèce ancienne*, 12/2008/2009, p. 75, Available at: https://www.persee.fr/doc/gaia_12873349_2009_num_12_1_1527, Accessed on February 12, 2026.

and this courtyard – /it’s finished off with walls and coping stones/and there’s a double gateway well fenced in/No man could criticize a house like this/I notice many men are eating here – /there’s smoke from roasting meat above the house/and a lyre is playing. A god made that/to serve as our companion at a feast”²⁴⁹.

The enclosure is walled, and the gates, wide and solidly closed, are meant to protect rather than to keep out intruders. Evidence of this is that the suitor-invaders are already inside, like guests who refuse to leave until one of them can establish himself in the house as Penelope’s husband, as the new head of the household. Extremely important and protected by taboos against touching – and, of course, by prohibitions against striking – are the outer walls (another similarity with a fortified city); apparently, this type of high wall, which blocked the view and curiosity of passersby, featured a carefully crafted and very sturdy gate, with “sounding” thresholds made of bronze or other metals.

Beyond the courtyard lay the porch or colonnade, a space belonging to the house but exterior to its core. Roman villas later called this space the *atrium*, a transitional area where strangers were received and assessed: those who were to leave immediately were separated from those who would stay, join the host in feasts, and whose stay could extend for days. In *The Odyssey*, the porch is where guests slept, however illustrious or well-received they were by their hosts, on textiles or animal skins spread on the floor. Games or feasts of the guests also took place in the courtyard or porch – it was a space where they could remain even without the presence of the hosts.

In the hall of feasting, one dined seated on a throne-like chair, at individual tables, while conversation took place and singers performed. Adjacent was the master’s chamber and the marital bed (strictly for conjugal use; abandoned by Odysseus, it was no longer occupied even by Penelope). Like every other room, the hall had a threshold charged with symbolic meaning, crafted from stone. (Thresholds were made of the sturdiest materials; aside from exterior ones, which were of metal, and the hall’s threshold, made of stone, the chambers had thresholds of oak.) On the day of his return – and on the day the suitors were punished – Odysseus seated himself on or near the threshold, as his son himself urged him to do:

“Thinking it might be advantageous/Telemachus sat Odysseus down inside the well-constructed hall/beside the entrance made of stone”²⁵⁰.

This positioning on the threshold can have a dual significance: on one hand, it may signal hesitation to enter the hall, due to the precarious status he is pretending to have; on the other hand – and more plausibly – it reflects the guarding of the entrance and exit by the one most entitled to do so. As for the women’s chambers, they were isolated in hard-to-reach places, either on the upper floor (“the upper house”) or possibly in a tower. Penelope, Helen, or Circe lived with the other

²⁴⁹ Homer, *quoted work*, 2002, Book XVII, 337–348, p. 307.

²⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, Book XX, 317–319, p. 366.

women – slaves or free (in the case of mortals) – in these elevated quarters, from which they would descend via tall staircases.

The marital bed, the symbol of marriage, and the spouses' chamber were, however, on the ground floor. If one spouse died and the other remarried, custom required abandoning the old bed and building a new one. As for the bed constructed by Odysseus himself, it was a special one, as we have seen.

The central symbol of the house, invoked in oaths and appearing as a substitute for the entire homeland in Odysseus's lament, is the fireplace, the hearth. As a focal place, not only for food preparation but also as a radiant center of warmth and light, the hearth is where libations and sacrifices are made, and certain protective deities of the household are invoked. Hestia, one of Zeus's sisters and guardian of the celestial fire, is the protective deity of the domestic hearth. Notably, next to the hearth are arranged the chairs of the household's women-ladies, and it is also the place where strangers are observed and assessed.

Beyond the house itself – likely situated within the city near other homes – Odysseus's family domain includes the cultivated fields, the garden, the orchard, and the vineyard where Laertes had retired, as well as the stables, sheepfolds, and other animal shelters. A brief description of Odysseus's wealth is given by the swineherd Eumaeus, who expresses his anger at seeing it squandered in the feasts of the suitors:

“My master used to be a man of substance/beyond all measure. No warrior hero/in Ithaca itself or on the mainland/possessed what he did. Twenty men combined/did not have so much wealth. I'll tell you this – /on the mainland he's got twelve cattle herds/as many flocks of sheep and droves of pigs/and wide-ranging herds of goats, all of these/tended by foreign herdsmen or his own/And here, on the edges of this island/graze roaming herds of goats, eleven in all/with loyal servants guarding every one”²⁵¹.

As for Eumaeus, he looked after the pigs.

“The swineherd built it by himself to house the pigs/property belonging to his absent master/He had not told his mistress or old Laertes/He made it from huge stones, with a thorn hedge on top/and surrounded on the outside with close-set stakes/facing both directions, made by splitting oaks trees/to leave the dark heart of the wood. Inside the yard/to hold in the pigs, he packed twelve sties together/In each of these fifty wallowing swine were penned/sows for breeding. The boars, in a much smaller group/stayed outside. The feasting of the noble suitors/kept their numbers low, for the swineherd always sent/the finest of all fattened hogs for them to eat/There were three hundred and sixty boars there – four dogs/fierce as wild animals, always crouched beside them/These the swineherd, a splendid man, had raised himself”²⁵².

Besides the domain of the house, the fields, and the stables (land), the household's wealth also included the family's weapons and ornaments, kept in special rooms, as well as wine and textiles.

²⁵¹ *Ibidem*, Book XIV, 122–133, p. 245.

²⁵² *Ibidem*, Book XIV, 9–24, p. 242.

9. CONCLUSION

The household is the place where the family exists – the only place where it can exist. Within this universe, there are clear boundaries and limits, yet nothing is marginal, nothing is insignificant. Even the smallest objects, the most trivial animals, form part of the family's balance. This seems to be the message of the Homeric family epics, as well as of the peasant family culture, which remained strong in Romanian society. Paul Krause, a subtle Homeric exegete, notes:

“This is the ultimate message of Homer's two epics: Where family is found, life is found; where family is found, true beauty is found; where family is found, piety is found; where family is dissolved, only death and destruction follow. Homer's message of the meaning in life couldn't be clearer. Odysseus does not find peace until he returns home and reclaims his home from intruders. Duty to family is the highest call of men and women in the Iliad and Odyssey. It is fitting that the Iliad and the origin of the Trojan War start with the dissolution of family while the Odyssey ends the Trojan War with the reconciliation of a family. The reconciliation is made even more triumphant given the trials and temptations that beset both Penelope and Odysseus. Homer's epic of the family is profoundly traditional in its advocacy. It is unsurprising that Christianity, the religion of love and family, took a liking to Homer's works and themes. Furthermore, Homer's Odysseus is a profoundly conservative figure. Odysseus is moved by love for family and fatherland, the love of the real, and desire to be reunited with Penelope with whom he shares an indissoluble bond despite the interference of goddesses and other women. Odysseus' odyssey began because of the dissolution of a family it comes to an end – finally bringing him the happy rest he seeks – when he reunites with his family. Home, according to Homer, is where the family is”²⁵³.

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²⁵³ Paul Krause, “Homer's Epic of the Family”, in *The Imaginative Conservative*, 2018, Available at: https://www.academia.edu/37604931/Homers_Epic_of_the_Family, Accessed on February 12, 2026.

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