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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ – RESEARCH ARTICLE

ETHNIC APPROPRIATION OF FOLK NARRATIVES AND ARCHITECTURE IN THE POST-OTTOMAN BALKANS

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ABSTRACT

Folk narratives about a master builder who falls or flies from the structure he built, similar to the myth of Icarus, are widespread in the Balkans. One such narrative, involving the Selimiye Mosque in Edirne, was first recorded in Bulgaria at the end of the 19th century. This narrative became a focal point of transnational debate between Turkish and Bulgarian nationalist rhetoric during a period of interstate tension in Thrace in the 1930s and 1940s. It intersected with the appropriation of Ottoman architectural heritage and the formation of national identity within a transnational context during the first half of the 20th century. After revealing the diversity of these folk narratives, this article explores how nationalist movements engage with modern reinterpretations of these narratives in the context of Ottoman architectural appropriation. While exploring this debate, the article highlights the tension between the syncretism of the narratives and the processes of national identity formation.

Keywords: Folk Narrative, Nationalism, Selimiye, Master Manol, Mimar Sinan.

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OSMANLI SONRASINDA BALKANLARDA HALK ANLATILARININ VE MİMARLIK MİRASININ SAHİPLENİLMESİ

ÖZ

Bir yapı ustasının, İkarus efsanesine benzer şekilde, inşa ettiği yapıdan düşmesi veya uçarak kaçması, Balkanlar'da yaygın bir halk anlatısıdır. Bu içerikteki anlatılardan biri Edirne'deki Selimiye Camii'ni de konu eder ve ilk olarak 19. yüzyılın sonlarında Bulgaristan'da kaydedilmiştir. Bu halk anlatısı, 1930'lar ve 1940'lar boyunca Türk ve Bulgar milliyetçi söylemleri arasında millî sınırları aşan bir tartışmanın odağı haline gelmiştir. Bu süreçte, Osmanlı mimari mirasının milliyetçi akımlar tarafından sahiplenilmesinin ve ulusal kimlik oluşumlarının kesişiminde kalmıştır. Bu makale, bu halk anlatılarının çeşitliliğini ortaya koyduktan sonra, milliyetçi hareketlerin bu anlatıların çağdaş yorumlarına, Osmanlı mimari sahiplenmesi bağlamında nasıl yaklaştığını irdelemektedir. Bu yaklaşımlar ve tartışmalar irdelenirken, makale halk anlatıların senkretizmi ile ulusal kimlik inşası arasındaki gerilimi ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Halk Anlatısı, Milliyetçilik, Selimiye, Manol Usta, Mimar Sinan.

Introduction

Variations of the same themes in folk narratives exist in multiple languages and belong to a shared vernacular culture throughout the Balkans. For centuries before the emergence of modern nation-states, folktales and folk ballads evolved and intertwined as they migrated among geographies and languages. In the modern era, as vernacular culture began to be seen as the national genius of burgeoning nations, ballads were increasingly viewed through the lens of nationalism. Folklore has played a prominent role in "nationalist claims for legitimacy" following the breakup of empires, as seen in many Eastern European nations. "Folkloric practices and customs" became the basis for claiming national boundaries as well as defining the identity of individual villages.[1] In the Balkans, epic poetry was particularly significant, serving as "a marker of national existence and the right to national self-

[1] Timothy Baycroft, "Introduction", *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe During the Long Nineteenth Century*, (ed.) Timothy Baycroft and David Hopkin, Brill, Leiden 2012, p. 5.

determination" after achieving national independence.[2] This coincided with nationalist movements' attempts to claim Ottoman-era architectural heritage as part of their national identity. Incorporating the multi-ethnic and multilingual Ottoman Empire's architectural legacy proved particularly challenging in the age of nationalism. It raises the question of how nationalisms reconcile themselves with the syncretic folk heritage of the Balkans and the cosmopolitan character of the Ottoman-era architecture.

The process of claiming the architectural heritage of the Balkans, in some instances, involved drawing on folk narratives shared across multiple cultures and addressing the tension between imperial legacy and nationalist narratives. A folktale or folk ballad had the potential to authenticate a nationalist claim thanks to its supposed immemorial connection to the cultural and historical roots of the nation. To explore their role in nationalist narratives, this article focuses on multiple versions of a specific plot in Balkan folk narratives featuring a master builder punished by a formidable ruler. It examines Turkish reactions to Bulgarian appropriations of the folk narrative involving the Selimiye Mosque in Edirne, which is uniquely situated near the boundary between the two nation-states. By closely analyzing how nationalists interpret and react to these folktales, this article uncovers how post-Ottoman nation-states navigate the cultural hybridity in Balkan folk stories and the cosmopolitanism of the Ottoman architectural legacy.

1. Bulgarian and Turkish Nationalisms and the Ottoman Architectural Heritage

Under Ottoman rule, communities were organized under the *millet* system which recognized religious communities as distinct entities, such as the Orthodox population corresponding to the Rum *millet*. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 20th century, belonging to an Ottoman millet or an ethnicity was not straightforward. The Orthodox Bulgarians were recognized as a separate community from the Rum *millet* when the Bulgarian Exarchate was established in 1872.[3] However, there were Bulgarian-speaking peasants

[2] Joep Leerssen, "Oral Epic: The Nation Finds a Voice", *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe During the Long Nineteenth Century*, (ed.) Timothy Baycroft and David Hopkin, Brill, Leiden 2012, p. 18.
[3] Paraskevas Konortas, "Nationalisms vs Millets: Building Collective Identities in Ottoman Thrace", *Spatial Conceptions of the Nation, Modernising Geographies in Greece and Turkey*, (ed.) P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, Thalia Dragonas, and Çağlar Keyder, I.B. Tauris, London 2010, p. 171.

who identified as Christian and chose to follow the Greek Orthodox Church. Neither religion, language, nor former belonging to a *millet* could provide an unambiguous answer to the question of who belonged to a certain nation. In this context, carving homogeneous nations out of the complex ethnic and religious diversity of the Ottoman Empire was a challenge for its successor nation-states.[4] The relationship between Bulgarian and Turkish nationalist movements was particularly contentious. From the perspective of the Turkish nationalist movement, Bulgarians were former subjects of the Empire, and their territorial or political gains at the expense of burgeoning Turkish nationalism were seen as humiliating.

Turkish nationalism emerged in stages and arose from the Muslim *millet* in the Ottoman Empire. After Ottomanism and the vision of an Islamic nation failed to safeguard the unity of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire, Ottoman elites inclined toward Turkish nationalism.[5] Early definitions of the Turkish nation mainly covered the Muslim population of Anatolia during the Turkish Independence War and in the first years of the Republic. The first two decades of the Republic witnessed the formation of an ambiguous definition of belonging to the Turkish nation, where Islam, rather than ethnic consciousness or language, determined who was considered a Turk.[6] Nevertheless, shortly after the foundation of the Republic, the emphasis was on the roots of the modern Turkish nation in "Anatolian civilizations" as well as the recent Muslim Ottoman past.[7]

In Bulgaria, rural identity, as well as language and religion, was key in the search for authentic Bulgarian identity. One of the crucial milestones of Bulgarian nationalism was Greece's independence in 1821, which paved the way for the establishment of the Bulgarian Church and the end of Greek domination over the Orthodox community in the Ottoman Empire. There was rivalry among Balkan nationalisms over incorporating populations and

[4] For an overview of the nation-states that emerged after the fall of the Habsburg and Ottoman empires in this regard, see *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building*, (ed.) Karen Barley and Mark von Hagen, Westview, Boulder 1997.
[5] The nation would initially correspond to the Turks and Muslims in Anatolia and Thrace. Soner Cagaptay, *Islam, Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who is a Turk*, Routledge, New York 2006, p. 7.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 156-157.
[7] Çiğdem Atakuman, "Cradle or crucible: Anatolia and archaeology in the early years of the Turkish Republic (1923-1938)", *Journal of Social Archaeology*, Volume 8, No 2, 2008, p. 225.

territories into their images of the nation.[8] Bulgarian intellectuals saw "the farmers" as the 'genuine' Bulgarians, in contrast with the townspeople and urbanites who were often Hellenized.[9] Bulgarian nationalism emphasized folk culture to navigate the ethnically complex imperial legacy. In this context, peasants symbolized more than just rural life; they served as authenticators of national identity amidst the rivalry of nationalist movements.

Multi-religious and multi-lingual basis of Ottoman-era architecture, evident both in vernacular and monumental forms, made it a challenging subject for ethnic appropriation. The Ottoman royal corps of architects and the cohort of builders working under it came from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Building records of the Süleymaniye Complex in Istanbul vividly show this diversity.[10] Buildings commissioned by the Ottoman ruling elite could reflect their diverse backgrounds and life stories within the Ottoman architectural decorum.[11] Nevertheless, the scarcity of information about the lives of masons, master builders, and members of the Ottoman royal corps of architects makes it difficult to obtain reliable facts about their ethnic backgrounds, leaving the field susceptible to conjecture and open to speculative nationalist appropriation. Nationalist movements incorporated historical personalities and monuments, such as Selimiye,[12] Rila Monastery,[13] and Poganovo Monastery,[14] into nationalist narratives, commemorative

[8] Vemund Aarbakke, "Urban Space and Bulgarian-Greek Antagonism in Thrace, 1870-1912", *Balkan Heritages Negotiating History and Culture*, (ed.) Maria Couroucli and Tchavdar Marinov, Ashgate, Surrey 2015, p. 29.
[9] *Ibid*., p. 29-30.
[10] Ömer Lûtfi Barkan, S*üleymaniye Cami ve İmareti İnşaatı (1550-1557)*, [Türk Tarih Kurumu], Ankara 1972-1979, 2 volumes.
[11] Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire*, Reaktion Books, London 2007.
[12] Ahmet Sezgin and Beril Sarısakal, "Sanctuary of A Thousand Adventures: Selimiye in The Besieged, Occupied, And Liberated Edirne", *The Muslim Journal*, Volume 113, No 3, 2023, p. 307-332; Ahmet Sezgin, "Selimiye as a commemorative monument in modern Turkey", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Published online on January 21, 2025, (May 31, 2025).
[13] Tchavdar Marinov, "The 'Balkan House': Interpretations and symbolic appropriations of the Ottoman-era vernacular architecture in the Balkans", *Entangled Histories of the Balkans*, Volume 4, (ed.) Roumen Dontchev Daskalov, Diana Mishkova, Tchavdar Marinov, and Alexander Vezenkov, Leiden, Brill 2017, p. 551-552.
[14] Stefan Rohdewald, *Sacralizing the Nation through Remembrance of Medieval Religious Figures in Serbia, Bulgaria and Macedonia*, (trans.) Tim Barnwell, Brill, Leiden 2022, p. 810-812.

culture, or architectural historiography while delineating boundaries of national identity both geographically and demographically.

Ottoman-era timber frame houses in the Balkans, like the Ottoman monumental architecture, were the result of a cultural process involving diverse, multilingual populations. The same type of timber house, whose construction process involved builders and inhabitants from diverse backgrounds, was found throughout the Balkans and western Anatolia. Tchavdar Marinov's extensive investigation reveals the commonalities in the appropriations of the Ottoman-era vernacular architecture in the Balkans within the diverse national contexts, aims, and narratives. Balkan scholars assumed pre-Ottoman roots for Ottoman-era timber-framed houses in the Balkans, an autochthonous character for their development in the national homelands, and a prominent role for master builders in the formation of their architectural character.[15] In the 1930s, Bulgarian architectural historiography labeled Ottoman-era vernacular architecture in Bulgaria as the "Bulgarian house",[16] while in Turkey, it was identified as the "Turkish house" within a largely formalist historiographical framework.[17]

Overall, nationalist perspectives on the formation of timber-framed houses failed to acknowledge the collective cultural contributions of a multilingual society in vernacular architecture. In the same vein, architectural history writing in the Balkan countries tended to adhere to the boundaries of modern territories when defining the national vernacular that was part of the Ottoman-era architectural heritage. Consequently, these nationalisms purportedly claimed an independent and innate development of their national vernacular architecture. The cosmopolitan architectural culture of the Ottoman Empire and the ethnically ambiguous positions of individuals within it were also contested topics in architectural history writing, which often sought to attribute ethnic authorship to monumental Ottoman architecture. To claim monumental architecture for the Bulgarian nation, the involvement of Bulgarian master builders in the construction of Ottoman architecture was emphasized in architectural history writing. Architectural heritage in the

[15] Marinov, "The 'Balkan House'", p. 446-447 and p. 590.
[16] Tchavdar Marinov, "Constructing Bulgarian Heritage: The Nationalisation of the Byzantine and Ottoman Architectures of Melnik", *Balkan Heritages Negotiating History and Culture*, (ed.) Maria Couroucli and Tchavdar Marinov, Ashgate, Farnham 2015, p. 98.
[17] Sibel Bozdoğan, "Vernacular Architecture and Identity Politics: The Case of the 'Turkish House'", *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Volume 7, No 2, Spring 1996, p. 7-18.

Balkans presented a challenge for nationalist architectural historiography because it was based on the collaborative contributions of various ethnic groups. As a result, these complexities had to be addressed to create consistent nationalistic narratives in the Balkans.

2. Master Builder and the Themes of Fall and Flight in Folk Legends

One of the common themes of folk narratives in the Balkans and the Mediterranean is the demise of the architect or mason following a strife with a cruel ruler. A similar theme appears as early as in the ancient Greek myth revolving around Daedalus and his son Icarus. Daedalus is considered both a historical and mythical figure,[18] as well as being "the legendary first architect of the Greek world".[19] He was believed to be the creator of works of art and inventions, such as the creator of the animated statues mentioned in Plato's *Meno*, and the architect of the famous Labyrinth in Knossos for King Minos of Crete.[20] In the myth, King Minos imprisoned Daedalus and his son because he had explained the way out of the Labyrinth to the imprisoned Minotaur there. Daedalus makes wings for himself and Icarus to escape their imprisonment, which was their punishment. The ancient myth of Daedalus has a drama that resonates almost universally across successive periods and various geographies: a powerful and angered ruler confronting a genius of artistic and craftsmanship skill.

The demise of the master builder in the myth of Daedalus and Icarus echoes one of the most widespread folk narrative themes about the construction of monuments in the Balkans. Emilia Ivancu and Tomasz Klimkowski refer to this plot, where the protagonist flies or falls from a high building following animosity with the ruler, as a convergence of the folk narrative of construction requiring a human sacrifice and the Icarian myth.[21] Plots revolving around the theme of the Icarian myth vary in terms of the

[18] Marcello Barbanera, *The Envy of Daedalus: Essay on the Artist as Murderer*, Wilhelm Fink, München 2013, p. 7.
[19] Spiro Kostof, "The Practice of Architecture in the Ancient World: Egypt and Greece", *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession*, (ed.) Spiro Kostof, Oxford University Press, New York 1986, p. 4.
[20] Pierre Grimal, *The Concise Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, (ed.) Stephen Kershaw, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1990, p. 117.
[21] Emilia Ivancu and Tomasz Klimkowski, "From Jericho to Argeș, Deva, Dynas Emrys, and Surami: The Myth of Construction between Curse and Sacrifice", *Acta Philologica*, Volume 49, 2016, p. 59.

circumstances of the protagonist's fall or flight from a structure. In the Karst region in Slovenia, there are folktales with the theme about a young builder falling from the top of the church tower.[22] In a Romanian version, the "foundation sacrifice motif", in which a master mason named Manole has to sacrifice a human in order to complete a monumental structure, combines with the Icarian myth. A group of masons begins to build either a bridge or a monastery, but whatever they construct gets crumbled after the night. The master mason's pregnant wife is immured within the structure as a human sacrifice to ensure the building's completion. Following this tragic event, the masons are challenged by a prince who asks if they can construct a more beautiful building. When they affirm that they can, the prince leaves masons under the scorching sun on the roof of their own creation. Determined, the masons fashion wooden wings and attempt to fly down from the structure. Just as Manole is about to descend, he hears his wife's cries from within the walls and decides to jump down, meeting his tragic end.[23] This indeed sounds like the merging of the Icarian myth with another common plot in folk narratives involving immuration of human sacrifice victims. This plot centers around a mason's wife or bride who is immured to ensure completion of a church or bridge.[24] Setting aside intricate questions of the historical evolution of symbolic transformation and cultural adaptation, the inclusion of familial figures and the master builder's determination to challenge his fate are worth emphasizing. The Romanian folk narrative explores a nuanced interplay between the ruler's fierce force and the master builder's determination to shape his own destiny, albeit ultimately leading to his demise.

In a similar Romanian version of the plot, from the spot where the master mason has fallen grow "a beautiful well and healing waters". This version takes place at the time of the legendary Romanian ruler Radu Negru who is believed to govern Wallachia in the 13th century and depicted with "exceptional cruelty".[25] In the narrative, the detail of the well incorporates local heterodox religious elements, resonating with both local superstitions, Orthodox Christianity, and Islam. The theme of a flying or falling hero and a water source where he meets the earth is a theme shared by various religions and sects. At the Demir Baba Tomb in Razgrad province in Bulgaria, there are rock formations that are believed to be footprints of King Marko and of

[22] Monika Kropej, "Folk Storytelling between Fiction and Tradition: the 'Walled-Up Wife' and Other Construction Legends", *Studia Mythologica Slavica*, Volume XIV, 2011, p. 64-65.
[23] Ivancu and Klimkowski, p. 58-59.
[24] Kropej, p. 62-69.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 63-64.

his winged horse, Sharko,[26] as well as footprints of Virgin Mary, Ivan of Rila, and the Holy Ghost.[27] Songs and legends from Bulgaria and Serbia also include narratives of "water springs appear[ing]" where Sharko steps.[28] A recent version includes the Muslim term kurban (sacrifice) to convey the victimhood of the person sacrificed for the construction.[29] The narrative of the master builder echoes the Icarian myth and shares elements of the recurring motifs of a flying figure, miraculous descent, the subsequent emergence of a water source, and the sacred spot. Thus, the master builder in the story could be perceived with connotations to these syncretic stories and sacred locations.

These characters and plots, which apparently converge the Icarian myth with folk narratives of human sacrifice for construction, remain recognizable within diverse southeastern European folktales and folk ballads, while retaining unique features specific to the local geography or language in which they are told. In the Moldavian version, the theme of flying and "foundation sacrifice motif" come together in the folk ballad beginning with the prince of Moldavia's order for the construction of a church. When the structure repeatedly collapses during the construction, the architect gets guidance from a witch. He follows the advice to immure his wife and child. The prince discovers the crime and punishes the architect by placing him on the roof, from which he tries to escape with wings and falls to his death.[30] The confrontation with the ruler, the subsequent punishment, or a high structure in the folk narratives distantly recalling the Icarian myth and "foundation sacrifice" can also be found in regions far beyond the Balkans. Among the narratives that revolve around the antagonism of a ruler, there is a 5th century story involving Al-Nu'man I ibn Imru al-Qays (r. 390–418), the king of the

[26] Vassil Markov, "Mythological Symbols From the Thracian Megalithic Sanctuaries, Christian and Muslim Sacred Places on the Balkans", *Review of Anthropology and Philosophy of the Sacrum*, Volume 1, No 2, 2017, p. 63. King Marko is Marko Mrnjavčević who lived in the 14th century and became a prominent figure in South Slavic folklore.
[27] Vasil Markov, *Kulturno Nasledstvo i Priemstvenost: Nasledstvo ot Drevnoezicheskite Sveti Mesta v Bulgarskata Narodna Kultura*, Neofit Rilski, Blagoevgrad, 2007, p. 123–210, cited from Markov, "Mythological Symbols", p. 65. Ivan of Rila, a Bulgarian hermit who lived in the 9th and 10th centuries, is revered as a saint.
[28] Markov, "Mythological Symbols", p. 64.
[29] In one of her interviews in Bulgaria conducted in 2006, Magdalena Lubanska recorded a Muslim version of the folktale about Manol, intertwined with the concept of *kurban* (sacrifice). Magdalena Lubanska, *Muslims and Christians in the Bulgarian Rhodopes*, De Gruyter, Warsaw 2015.
[30] Eric Tappe, "A Rumanian Ballad and Its English Adaptation", *Folklore*, Volume 95, No 1, 1984, p. 113-114.

Lakhmid Arabs, and the architect Sinimmar. This story stands out due to its form of punishment and therefore its resemblance to the folk narrative versions of the Icarian myth. In the story, Sinimmar is the architect of a palace at Khawarnaq in Mesopotamia. According to the story, he is executed by being thrown from a tower of the palace to prevent him offering his service to other kings or to punish him after his claims about his ability to build a palace superior to the Khawarnaq Palace.[31]

Exploring the link between human sacrifice, martyrdom, and the construction of structures across cultures reveals intriguing themes. These themes, along with the antagonism between the ruler and the builder, cross boundaries of ethnicities or religions. The construction rituals and symbolisms practiced by construction corps were at the roots of the shared themes found in various narratives. Masons played an instrumental role in the thematization of the ritual of constructions, culminating in the folk ballads.[32] Regarding the folk narratives of Manol, the ethnic lineage of their evolution is disputed, but it is possible that there was a transition from construction rituals to folk oral culture.[33] Although "nationalist folklore studies" played a leading role in the investigation of the evolution and meaning of these folk narratives, it is reductionist to study an item of folklore as if it is unique to a particular ethnicity or society.[34] The diversity and extent of the folk narratives, with their recurrent plots and characters, indicate the supra-linguistic and supra-religious nature of the evolution of the ballad.

An apparent convergence of the Icarus myth and folk narratives involving human sacrifice, recorded in both Bulgarian and Turkish, vividly illustrates the translingual adaptations of shared themes and plots in Thrace. The Bulgarian ballad version of the folk narrative replicates the plot found in the Moldavian version within an Ottoman context. It was first recorded by the folklorist Marco K. Tsepenkov (b. 1829- d. 1920) in 1893 in the journal *The Folklore and Ethnography Collection* covering Bulgarian folk culture. The

[31] Bechir Kenzari, "Construction Rites, Mimetic Rivalry, Violence", *Architecture and Violence*, (ed.) Bechir Kenzari, ACTAR 2011, p. 160.
[32] Petar Skok, *Iz Balkanske komparativne literature: rumunske paralele 'Zidanju Skadra'"*, [Skopsko naučno društvo], Skoplje 1929, cited from Mircae Eliade, "Master Manole and the Monastery of Argeş", *The Walled Up Wife*, (ed.) Alan Dundes, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1996, p. 79.
[33] Mircea Eliade, *Zalmoxis: The Vanishing God*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1972, p. 176.
[34] Roderick Beaton, "The Greek ballad 'the Bridge of Arta' as Myth", *The Walled Up Wife*, (ed.) Alan Dundes, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1996, p. 63.

ballad begins with the Sultan pledging to construct a mosque in Edirne. He finds a talented master builder to build an unprecedented mosque without a consideration for the expense. Then, like in the versions of the ballad recorded in Romania, Moldavia, and Slovenia, the Sultan challenges the master with the question if he could build a comparable mosque. Following an affirmative response, the annoyed Sultan orders the execution of the master. The master asks for a few more days to complete the minaret from which he eventually tries to fly away with the wings he makes. Indeed, he flies with the wings but then he lands on his adze, which cuts him and causes him to bleed to death.[35] The inclusion of the adze in the otherwise recognizable narrative might have been intended to indicate the master builder.

Tools such as the adze, yardstick, compass, and square were used in engravings, miniatures, and other depictions to symbolize the craft of master builders and architects. As one of the simplest and most fundamental carpentry tools, the adze was a fitting symbol linking the tragic end to the profession. Indeed, in Japan, an intriguingly similar folktale about a master builder involves an architect's tool. After the construction of Himeji Castle at the beginning of the 17th century, master carpenter Sakurai Genbei brought his wife to see it. She noticed that the tower was leaning slightly. Distressed about this, Genbei leapt to his death with a chisel in his mouth.[36] In both the Bulgarian and Japanese narratives, the tool stands for the craft and the honor associated with it. When the master builder dies, the presence of the tool unequivocally connects his martyrdom-like death to the craftsmanship he proudly pursued. The builder's tools serve as universally recognizable symbols, emerging in cultures that were most likely isolated from each other.

The adze, as a symbol, also appears in folk narratives recorded in Turkey that resemble the Bulgarian version of the folk narrative about the mosque in Edirne. These can be considered part of the evolution of folk narratives involving master builder, flying or falling, and human sacrifice, as well as echoing the story of Sinimmar.[37] A folktale about the 18th century

[35] Marko K. Tsepenkov, "Predaniya Za Litsa i Mesta", *Sborniku za Narodni Umotvoreniya, Nauka i Knizhnina*, Volume XII, 1895, p. 195-201.
[36] Jennifer Mitchelhill, *Samurai Castles: History / Architecture / Visitors' Guides*, Tuttle Publishing, Tokyo 2018, p. 46.
[37] The story of Sinimar reverberated in Ottoman narratives about architects, and he occasionally served as a benchmark for assessing the qualities of Ottoman architects. Mustafa Çağhan Keskin, "Türk Kültüründe Mimar Anlatıları", *Journal of Turkology*, Volume 34, No 1, 2024, p. 365-367.

Çapanoğlu Mosque in Yozgat in Central Anatolia features the climax of the master builder's flight from the building. The master builder of the Mosque disappears after laying the foundations but returns years later to complete the building. The building's patron, a member of the local Çapanoğlu dynasty holding a position akin to a regional voivode, plots to kill the master builder to prevent him from creating another masterpiece. Upon this plan being revealed to him, the master builder flies from the minaret, while his apprentice remains behind, saying, "The adze stays on the ground".[38]

In 1954, Turkish journalist Nezihe Araz published a very similar folktale after hearing it in Edirne. In the story, the finial (*alem*) of one of the four minarets of Selimiye was still missing just before its completion. When Selim II (r. 1566-74) noticed this, he fiercely demanded an explanation about the missing finial. Mimar Sinan (d. 1588), the Ottoman architect of Selimiye and the head of the Ottoman royal corps of architects, then placed the finial, with one foot on a wall and the other miraculously on one of the balconies of the revered Üç Şerefeli Mosque in Edirne. Afterwards, he vanished from sight and dropped his adze at the hill called Hıdırlık while flying to Istanbul.[39] Although the overall plot is very similar, the subtle differences between the Bulgarian and Turkish versions are worth exploring. In the Turkish version, while the adze retains its paramount symbolic importance, it does not signify the honorable death of the master builder as it does in the Bulgarian tale. Instead, the act of leaving the personal tool in Edirne can be interpreted as an acknowledgment of the city's historical significance as a former Ottoman capital and the possessor of the largest Ottoman dome. This detail also opens up multiple syncretic readings of the story. After Sinan dropped his adze at Hızırlık, an apprentice named Hıdır[40] picked it up and called out to Sinan, who told to keep it. Tomb of Hıdır Baba is located at the same spot.[41]

Hıdır Baba's namesake, Khidr, is a legendary figure whose perception in heterodox forms of Islam, including Alevi traditions, parallels

[38] Zekeriya Karadavut, *Yozgat Efsaneleri*, unpublished Master's thesis, Selçuk University Institute of Social Sciences, Konya 1992, 217-218. I thank the anonymous reviewer of the *Journal of Balkan Research Institute* for drawing my attention to this folk narrative and its source.
[39] Nezihe Araz, "Selimiye efsaneleri", *İstanbul*, No 4, 1954, p. 20-21. The story is still being told and publicized. For example see Hasan Akarsu, *Söylenceler Denizi*, Okur Yayınları, İstanbul 2015, p. 43-44.
[40] Hızır and Hıdır are both variants of Khidr in Turkish.
[41] Araz, "Selimiye", p. 21.

the image of Saint George in the Balkans. This adds a syncretic layer to the folktale, potentially associating Khidr's name with it, albeit through a namesake. Khidr appears in almost all hagiographies of sufi saints (*Menâkıbnâme*), where his encounters with sufi saints (*veli*) are recounted.[42] His name in the folktale about Selimiye evokes his portrayal in the hagiographies as vanishing, flying, or appearing instantly. Indeed, Anatolian folktales still recount miraculous appearances and teleportations of saint figures to aid in battles or the construction of mosques.[43] In Edirne, various folktales depict the Hıdırlık Hill as a site associated with Khidr's presence or manifestations.[44] The hill, in fact, is a tumulus and a place of veneration that has been significant since pre-Ottoman times, through successive pagan, Christian, and Ottoman periods.[45] Consequently, the folk tale recorded by Araz builds a link between the construction of the Sunni orthodox mosque, Selimiye, the heterodox saint Khidr and his namesake local saint Hıdır Baba. The complexity of the narrative reflects the multiple intertwined layers: a rich tradition of folk tales apparently converging the myths of Icarus and human sacrifice for construction; the construction of the Ottoman dynastic mosque; the entangled relationship between the Ottoman capitals; and the syncretic Islamic figure Khidır and revered sites related to him. Through this folk story, the supra-ethnic and in many cases syncretic folk culture in the Balkans engages with one of the region's most prominent dynastic and Muslim monuments.

3. Ethnic Claims over Thrace and the Debates Surrounding Selimiye

Thrace's mixed population at the beginning of the 20th century primarily consisted of Greek, Bulgarian, Turkish speaking communities and Jews. Nationalist movements claiming to represent these ethnicities in Thrace competed fiercely for the region. Three nation-states, namely Greece, Bulgaria, and Turkey had to address the mixed demographics, unsettled issues about the rights of minority populations, and irredentist claims, particularly in their border regions. In this historical context of ethnic strife, the folk

[42] Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *Hızır-İlyas Kültü*, Kabalcı, İstanbul 2012, p. 33.
[43] Satı Kumartaşlıoğlu, "Tayy-i Mekan Motifli efsanelerde savaşların gizli kahramanları", *Millî Folklor*, Volume 16, No 128, 2020, p. 48-59.
[44] Mustafa Çağhan Keskin and Mustafa Kaan Sağ, "Edirne Hıdırlık Tepesi [Hızır Makamı]: Senkretik Bir Kült Merkezi'nin Oluşumu ve Ortadan Kaldırılması", *Millî Folklor*, Volume 17, No 133, 2022, p. 226.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 224.

narrative revolving around the Icarian myth had circulated in international and national media, prompting responses from nationalist movements. International newspapers published the folk narrative in 1912 and in 1913 in their reports about Edirne during the Balkan Wars.[46] *The Times* wrote that, according to folk legend, just before the completion of the Mosque, the Ottoman Sultan was anxious about Sinan, a Bulgarian architect, building another monument to rival Selimiye. So he disclosed his intention to execute Sinan after the completion of the mosque. As the fourth and last minaret was completed, Sinan outsmarted the Sultan by flying away with the wings he made.[47] Such news coverage in newspapers intertwined Sinan with the folk story, effectively turning it into a focal point for competing nationalist claims. For Turkish nationalists, it posed a challenge to the presumption that Ottoman architectural heritage was intrinsically Turkish.

Bulgarian travellers to Edirne mention that they were told folktales about Selimiye, which echo Tsepenkov's version of the folk ballad about the monument. Mikhail Madzharov describes a folktale he encountered during his travels in the second half of the 19th century, in which a master builder was thrown from the minaret of Selimiye.[48] Dobri Minkov, who visited Edirne and Selimiye as a teenager in 1870, recalled the folktale of the architect of Selimiye flying from its minaret in a 1920 article in the Bulgarian magazine *Iliustratsiya Svetlina*. He began by emphasizing the prominence of Selimiye as the "greatest Turkish monument" with 999 windows. According to Minkov, the architect of Selimiye, Sinan, was a Bulgarian by birth. In his version of the story, similar to Tsepenkov's account, Sinan was to be executed to prevent him from building another matching monument. Upon learning of this, Sinan attempted to escape from one of Selimiye's minarets by flying with wooden wings.[49] (Fig 1) It is noteworthy that Minkov's narration of the folk narrative was presented almost as a travelogue, contributing to the introduction of Edirne to readers. His account intertwined the name of Sinan with the folk ballad, suggesting Bulgarian claims over Selimiye. This

[46] "Adrianople", *The Times* [London], December 31, 1912, p. 3; "Adrianople", *Evening Mail*, January 1, 1913, p. 4; "The most sacred spot in European Turkey", *The New York Times*, January 19, 1913, p. 3.
[47] "Adrianople", p. 3.
[48] Svetla Gyurova and Nadya Danova, *Kniga za bulgarskite Hadzhii*, Bulgarski Pisatel, Sofia 1985, pp. 46-47.
[49] D. M. [Dobri Minkov], "Odrin prŭdi petdeset godini. Kak Odrintsi praznuvakha reshenieto na cherkovniya vŭpros," *Ilustratsiya Svetlina*, No VII-VIII, 1920, p. 3-6.

amounted to an appropriation of the folk narrative, amid the uncertainty and strife surrounding Edirne during the Turkish War of Independence.

Figure 1: Photo of Selimiye on the cover of the VII-VIII issue of *Iliustratsiya Svetlina* in which Dobri Minkov's piece was published.

Source: "Odrin", *Ilustratsiya Svetlina*, No VII-VIII, 1920, cover.

Such folk narratives and the direct or implied remarks about Sinan's ethnicity gained attention in Turkey during the 1930s, a unique historical context when Sinan was being elevated to the status of a national hero. Even before the establishment of the Turkish Republic, Turkish intellectuals were

increasingly aware of the historical burden of Sinan's ethnicity and made efforts to prove his Turkish origins.[50] The Republican period further institutionalized this effort through a state-sanctioned program aimed at affirming Sinan's Turkish identity. Concurrently, significant emphasis was placed on the annual commemorations of Sinan. These commemorations played a crucial role in solidifying Sinan's place in the pantheon of historical figures of the Turkish Republic.[51] During the 1930s, commemorations of the anniversary of Sinan's demise, alongside commemorations of the fall and liberation of Edirne, were an integral part of the nationalist rhetoric that substantiated ethnic sovereignty over Thrace in the early decades of the Turkish Republic. In addition to Edirne, commemorations of Sinan were also held in smaller urban centers, such as Babaeski, in front of mosques attributed to him. Due to their proximity, these commemorations in Thrace resembled a regional event. Both local and national newspapers highlighted the widespread character of these events across Thrace, noting their extent "from Edirne to Çanakkale".[52] Similarly, the documentation and restoration of Sinan's works in Thrace were conceived as a unified project.[53] As Giorgio Gasco demonstrates, subsequent visualization of architectural heritage after a campaign of restorations in Edirne during the 1930s and 1940s aimed to create a collective vision in which the idea of nation appears as a landscape of monuments.[54] Sinan's works were a key part of this landscape of monuments, about which architects, based at state institutions and municipalities in Thrace, regularly published articles. Thrace was portrayed as a unique landscape where "masterpieces of Turkish architecture and Sinan school" could be found collectively in their full diversity.[55] More than any other building, Selimiye had the power to reinforce ownership claims through

[50] Gülru Necipoğlu, "Creation of a national genius: Sinan and the historiography of 'classical' Ottoman architecture", *Muqarnas,* Volume 24, 2007, p. 141-183.
[51] Ahmet Sezgin, "Commemorations of Sinan: creating a national hero in Turkey in the 1930s", *International Journal of Islamic Architecture*, Volume 12, No 1, 2023, p. 73-107.
[52] "Sinanın yıldönümü", *Cumhuriyet*, March 31, 1931, p. 1 and 2; "Mimar Sinan", *Akşam*, April 1, 1931, p. 2.
[53] State-appointed architect in Edirne took on the task of compiling the works of Sinan in Thrace. "Sinan günü", *Cumhuriyet,* March 29, 1933, p. 2.
[54] Giorgio Gasco, "The Contribution of the Turkish Historical Society to the First Stage of the Governmental Program for the Protection of Monuments in Edirne (1933-1941): Preservation Policies and Ideology in the Representation of Architectural Heritage", *Belleten,* Volume 76, No 276, 2012, p. 685.
[55] Mazhar Altan, "Yıldönümü Münasebetile Koca Sinan", *Cumhuriyet,* April 9, 1940, p. 2. Mazhar Altan was responsible for the restoration of Sinan's works. "Trakyada Sinanın bütün eserleri tamir ettiriliyor", *Cumhuriyet*, April 2, 1939, p. 2; "Sinan günü", *Cumhuriyet,* p. 2.

architecture and to embody territorial anxieties due to its prominent position on the map and its historical significance. Newspaper reports about the commemorations, headlines and captions of photographs of Selimiye described Edirne as "the last stand of Turks in Europe", Selimiye as "a monument facing Western civilization" and declared the "Turkishness of Edirne". [56] These published speeches and articles drew on a set of defensive vocabularies that linked architectural heritage to the geopolitical definition of Thrace. They identified the new and still tenuous national boundary marked by Selimiye between Turkey and the former Ottoman lands in Europe.

The Republican project to elevate Sinan as a national hero and the related commemorations were astutely observed by Turkey's Balkan neighbors in the 1930s. In 1932, the Greek newspaper *Eleftheron Vima* published a report about Sinan and the commemorations held for him. The newspaper accurately traced these commemorations back to the Union and Progress era, a crucial period for the rise of Turkish nationalism. *Eleftheron Vima* interpreted the publications about Sinan and commemorations of him in Turkey as a manifestation of "Turkism". The report demonstrated a thorough understanding of the sources related to Sinan from both the Ottoman and Republican eras. It drew parallels between the Sinan era in Ottoman architecture and the Justinian era in Byzantine architecture. Referring to Turkish historian Ahmed Refik [Altınay], *Eleftheron Vima* claimed that Sinan was a Greek and the nephew of the architect of the Fatih Mosque, the first sultanic mosque in Istanbul.[57] In the same vein, N. Papazoglous scrutinized primary sources to substantiate the claim of Sinan's Christian Greek origins.[58] The Greek newspaper not only recognized the Turkification intentions behind these commemorations but also actively participated in the debate. This sparked a transnational discussion on emerging national identities and the appropriation of Ottoman cultural heritage during a crucial period of nation-building for both countries. In the Turkish newspapers, there was reaction against the claims made by the Greek press. *Vakit* responded to both *Eleftheron Vima*'s and *Messager d'Athenes*' reports about Sinan which refuted his Turkish origins and "his power" in art stemming from the "Turkish culture". *Vakit* reminded its readers of the Turkish History Thesis to

[56] "Güzel Edirnenin yüce günü", *Cumhuriyet,* November 25, 1934, p. 1; "Bugün Edirnemiz bayram yapıyor", *Cumhuriyet*, November 25, 1935, p. 1.
[57] S., "O Christianos Sinan Pasas, o Megas Architekton," [*Eleftheron Vima*], [1932], newspaper clipping at the Digital Library of Modern Greek Studies Anemi, Id no. 000348456.
[58] Avr. N. Papazoglou, "Sinan o Architekton: Katagogi, oikogeneia, ethnologia aftou," *Epetirides*, 1938, p. 443-460.

demonstrate that Anatolian civilization gave birth to the Aegean civilizations and eventually contributed to the Byzantine and the Ottoman architecture.[59] These exchanges between national newspapers illustrate that the appropriation of Ottoman architectural heritage was not only a matter of national identity formation within nation-states but also a significant aspect of transnational debates on heritage and territory.

A similar transnational debate over the Ottoman legacy emerged between Bulgarian and Turkish authors in national newspapers in the 1930s. At the height of the popularity of commemorations for Sinan during this period, a speech by Bulgarian writer and ethnographer Stilian Chilingirov, appeared in a Bulgarian newspaper and brought significant attention in Turkey. Chilingirov later authored a book about Bulgarian contributions to various nations, which closely aligned with the content of his earlier speech. This book was well-received for its aim to foster national pride and highlight Bulgarian creativity through numerous examples.[60] Chilingirov explored the Turkified Bulgarians' contribution to Ottoman architecture, occasionally using folk legends as sources. He acknowledged Selimiye as an architectural marvel and, drawing on the folk ballad about the monument, cautiously suggested that Sinan might have originally been Bulgarian and later Turkified. He recognized the contradictions in the folk ballad, such as the discrepancy between the fate of Sinan and Manol, and linked this to the Bulgarian reluctance to accept the Turkification of Manol, which led to the story depicting his escape and death.[61] Chilingirov's focus on Turkification was linked to contemporary historiography, which framed the Muslim population in Bulgaria as partly the result of forced conversions.

[59] In *Vakit*, the report by *Eleftheron Vima* was fully translated into Turkish. "Mimar Sinan için", *Vakit*, April 16, 1932, p. 1 and 4.
[60] Dimo Minev, "Kritika i retsenzii," *Spisanie na Druzhestvoto na Zavurshilite Vissheto Turgovsko Uchilishte-Varna*, Volume 3, No 4, 1938, p. 396.
[61] Stiliyan Chilingirov, *Kakvo e dal Bulgarinut na drugite narodi*, Fondatsiya Bulgarsko Delo, Sofia, 1941 [first published in 1938], p. 69-70.

Figure 2: Wall painting of Master Manol flying on the wall of National School of Folk Arts in Shiroka Laka.

Source: Photo by Vesko Shekerov, google maps image, https://maps.app.goo.gl/CnukR3cCxfVWDBgZ8, (18.07.2024).

This perspective, reflecting a nationalistic bias, often characterized the five-century Ottoman period as a "yoke," "slavery," or "dark age".[62] By emphasizing these themes, he intertwined the architectural legacy of Selimiye

[62] Rossitsa Gradeva, "Conversion to Islam in Bulgarian Historiography: An Overview", *Religion, Ethnicity and Contested Nationhood in the Former Ottoman Space*, (ed.) J. Nielsen, Brill, Leiden 2012, pp. 187-222. The topics of forced conversions and assimilation were frequently covered in history textbooks in Communist Bulgaria. Their reception in these textbooks reflects shifts in the perceived scope of forced conversions across different periods, while maintaining a consistently resentful perspective. Myumyun Yasharov Isov, *The Most Different Neighbour: the image of the Ottomans (Turks) and the Ottoman Empire (Turkey) in Bulgarian textbooks on history in the second half of the twentieth century*, The Isis Press, Istanbul 2022, p. 59-62. I thank the anonymous reviewer of the *Journal of Balkan Research Institute* for bringing this point and source to my attention.

with the contested history of populations assimilated into Islam, particularly Bulgarian-speaking Muslims. He suggested that Sinan originated from the Rhodope region in Bulgaria.[63] In a similar fashion, in 1947, a publication about Shiroka Laka, a village in the Rhodope Mountains renowned for its vernacular architecture and folklore, mentioned that Master Manol was originally from that Rhodope village.[64] (Fig 2)

Responding to Chilingirov's speech preceding this book, a sarcastic headline on the front page of *Zaman* -"Our mosques are the work of a Bulgarian!"- appeared alongside news about the commemoration of the occupation of Edirne in Bulgaria. For the Turkish audience, historical revisionism and appropriation of Ottoman architectural heritage was in the same frame of narrative. *Zaman* then called for a response from architects in Turkey.[65] Responses to this "ridiculous claim" came promptly, aiming to affirm Sinan's Turkish identity. Both of the responders, architects B. Kemal and architect Samih, challenged the notion of a sophisticated Bulgarian architectural culture. Samih viewed Selimiye as the culmination of the development of "Turkish architecture" through its stages: Asia, Seljuk, Bursa, and ultimately Edirne. In contrast, he argued that Bulgarian "national architecture" lacked significant monuments to support its claims.[66] Thus, Ottoman architecture was perceived not as a supranational heritage but as a site of nationalist contestation, the appropriation of which was shaped by nationalistic frameworks. Like in the case of the exchange between Greek and Turkish newspapers, the debate was over the Ottoman legacy as well as being about the ethnicity of an individual.

Sedat Çetintaş, a prominent Turkish architect renowned for his work in surveying and drawing Ottoman architecture, also contributed to the debate with an article. He paraphrased an anecdote narrated by D. Venedikov in the newspaper *Zora*, which concluded with the claim about the architect of Selimiye being a Bulgarian.[67] This claim was based on a folk interpretation of an upside-down tulip relief on the muezzin lodge, suggesting that the relief was carved incorrectly because the architect had not yet converted to Islam and later adopted the name Sinan. Çetintaş ridiculed and refuted this claim by

[63] Chilingirov, p. 71.
[64] D. A. G. [Dimitar Georgiev], "Sinan", *Shiroka Luka, Prosvetno Ognishte v Rodopite*, (ed.) Dimitar Georgiev, T. T. Dragiev i Sie, Sofia 1947, p. 45-46.
[65] "Meşhur camilerimiz bir Bulgar eseri imiş!", *Zaman,* March 25, 1935, 1 and 7.
[66] "Gülünç iddialar ve mimarlarımız", *Zaman,* March 27, 1935, p. 3.
[67] Chilingirov also quoted the anecdote by D. Venedikov in his book. Chilingirov, pp. 70-71.

underlining the presence of "Turkish legends" about the tulip, arguing that this story is not relevant to the origins of the architect. He also pointed to the lack of a Bulgarian "cultural history" and, like Samih, emphasized the depth and historical evolution of Turkish architecture even before the construction of Selimiye.[68] Çetintaş's brief discussion highlights a distinction between high architectural culture and folk narratives, dismissing the latter as inadequate for architectural history. His rejection of Bulgarian claims further reinforces Selimiye as a subject of formal architectural scholarship, rather than one entangled with folk interpretations. The photo at the beginning of the article depicted Selimiye with a large Turkish flag between its minarets, capturing a climactic moment in the commemoration of the liberation of Edirne. This scene was a commemorative ritual rooted in the Bulgarian occupation of Edirne during the First Balkan War, when the presence of a Bulgarian flag at Selimiye had caused significant grievance.[69] By juxtaposing this photo with Çetintaş's article, the newspaper contextualized the response within both the historical and the ongoing Bulgarian-Turkish disputes. (Fig 3)

[68] Sedat Çetintaş, "Cahil Bir Bulgarın Safsataları", *Cumhuriyet*, May 9, 1935, p. 7.
[69] Sezgin and Sarısakal, "Sanctuary", pp. 307-332.

Figure 3: Photo of Selimiye. The caption incorrectly refers to the building as the Süleymaniye Mosque.


Cahil bir Bulgarın safsataları

«Zora» ya göre Büyük Türk mimarı Sinan Bulgardır!

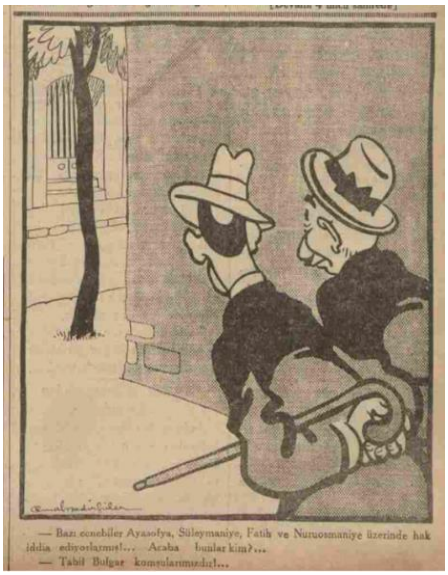
Dahi Türk mimarı Sinanın şaheseri Süleymaniye

Source: "Dahi Türk mimarı Sinanın şaheseri Süleymaniye", *Cumhuriyet*, May 9, 1935, p. 7.

Readers of the newspapers also participated in this debate over Ottoman architecture and modern national identities. R. Erlevent, writing in the reader's corner of *Cumhuriyet*, began with a folktale shared by a retired Bulgarian officer at an aviation conference in Ruse in 1926. This was a folktale featuring a Bulgarian master builder named Mihal as the protagonist. In the tale, the Ottoman Sultan asked Mihal to build him a grand mosque in Edirne because he could not find such a talented master builder among the Turks. After the mosque was completed, the Sultan was pleased with the result but uneasy that it had been built by a Christian. When Mihal refused to convert to Islam despite the Sultan's request, he was imprisoned in one of the minarets. Mihal crafted wooden wings and flew from the minaret, but fell into

the Maritsa River and drowned after a saw he was carrying cut the wing. The tale was one of the versions of the folk narrative about Selimiye, with the meaningful addition of the Maritsa River. The Maritsa River, which originates in contemporary Bulgaria and forms part of the Greek-Turkish border as it flows into Turkey, adds a layer of geopolitical significance to the narrative. This addition effectively situates the story within contemporary geopolitics, illustrating Bulgarians' historical quest for national identity, love for their homeland, and aspiration for freedom. Erlevent aptly recognized the resemblance between the tale and the myth of Icarus. According to him, the tale was an adaptation of the myth, which was published in the books by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education.[70] Erlevent's eager contribution to the debate demonstrates the extent of individual reactions to the perception of Bulgarian subversion in the formation of modern Turkish identity, through the figure of Sinan.

Figure 4: A caricature depicting two men casually discussing Bulgarian claims over Ottoman architectural heritage.



Source: Cemal Nadir Güler, [untitled caricature], *Akşam*, August 10, 1935, p. 1.

[70] Erlevent, "Mimar Sinan", p. 10.

In the following months, the debate over the ethnic appropriation of Selimiye continued to appear in the newspapers. A caricature on the front page of the daily newspaper *Akşam* addressed the controversy openly. In the dialogue of two companions walking together, one asked about the ethnic claims on Hagia Sophia, Süleymaniye, Fatih and Nuruosmaniye, major Byzantine and Ottoman monuments from different periods. The other sarcastically replied that it was "the Bulgarian neighbors".[71] (Fig 4) The unease expressed in the sarcastic joke highlighted that, although the physical boundaries between the neighboring states seemed to be stabilized, the boundaries concerning the cultural legacy of the Ottoman Empire remained contentious.

The tension stemming from the irredentist rhetoric of Bulgaria reached a new phase in the 1940s with the Bulgarian occupation of Greek Thrace. Bulgaria attempted to assimilate the Bulgarian speaking Muslim population in the Rhodope area into state-sanctioned Bulgarian identity.[72] This period also saw a new cycle of Bulgarian ethnic claims over Sinan and the subsequent reverberations in the Turkish press. In September 1940, renowned journalist and author Falih Rıfkı Atay began his column titled "some nonsense publications'' acknowledging recent positive Bulgarian efforts for mutual understanding between Turkey and Bulgaria. Nevertheless, he was very critical and disparaging about the Bulgarian newspapers because of their efforts to create a "climate of resentment and discord". As an example of such an attitude, Atay referred to a column in a Bulgarian political periodical, which was evidently one of the publications presenting Master Manol as a hero of Bulgarian aviation. In the story that Atay paraphrased, Sinan was claimed to be a pioneering Bulgarian aviator due to his construction of wooden wings and subsequent flight, similar to the plot of the story that Erlevent objected to. Atay concluded that such publications altogether were detrimental to peace in the Balkans.[73] Like Çetintaş and Erlevent, Atay was concerned about Bulgarian encroachments on Turkish identity, even if these issues appeared in niche publications. He directly linked the debate to bilateral relations, thereby revealing that the republican elite expected Turkey's new

[71] Cemal Nadir Güler, [untitled caricature], *Akşam*, August 10, 1935, p. 1.
[72] Hristos Iliadis, *Trakya Tehdit Altında*, (trans.) Lale Alatlı, Trakya Üniversitesi Balkan Araştırma Enstitüsü, Edirne 2021, p. 44.
[73] Falih Rıfkı Atay, "Bazı manasız neşriyata dair", *Ulus*, September 18, 1940, p. 1 and 5.

national identity and the subsequent claims of national genius, as well as its territorial integrity, to be respected.

In the same vein, and recalling similar newspaper reports from 1935, national newspaper *Vatan* labeled the recent Bulgarian claims an "old sickness". It linked the rise of these claims to the emboldenment following Bulgaria's territorial gains during the Second World War, such as Dobruja on the Black Sea coast.[74] *Akşam* published a caricature depicting a Bulgarian peasant on a hilly landscape, trying to pull away Selimiye while a ghostly image of Sinan looked on from a distance.[75] The depiction of Sinan was based on one of his earliest portraits by the artist Hasan Rıza, thereby challenging the audacious Bulgarian claims with the purportedly authentic portrait.[76] The portrayal of the Bulgarian as a peasant was on a landscape contrasting with the urban architectural culture of Istanbul. The caricature aptly captured the rift between the Bulgarian claim based on the folk culture and Sinan's life intertwined with the dynastic Ottoman architecture in cosmopolitan Istanbul. This portrayal was also disparaging, as it belittled both the rural roots of Bulgarian nationalism and the folk-based claims. Since the late Ottoman period, Bulgarians have often been depicted as crude and industrious peasants, with Bulgaria being seen as a "modern village".[77] By drawing on this stereotype and contrasting it with the "Turkish architecture" endorsed by official historiography, the caricature ridiculed the Bulgarian claim and reinforced the view of Turks as the sole inheritors of the Ottoman monumental architectural heritage. (Fig 5)

[74] "Mimar Sinan'a sahip çıkıyorlar", *Vatan*, September 20, 1940, p. 1 and 4.
[75] "Bulgarlar mimar Sinana sahip çıkıyorlar", *Akşam*, September 22, 1940, p. 1.
[76] It was claimed to be a copy of a portrait brought from Italia. Tosyavizade Rifat Osman Bey, "İrtihâlinin 339'uncu Sene-i Devriyesi Münasebetiyle Büyük Türklerden Mimar Koca Sinan b. Abdulmennân", *Milli Mecmua*, Volume 7, No 83, 1927, footnote 1, p. 1339.
[77] For the Bulgarian image in Ottoman travel writings see Mürsel Gürses, *II. Meşrutiyet dönemi gezi kitaplarında 'öteki' imgesi ve bu imgeyi oluşturan ögeler*, Unpublished PhD thesis, Sakarya University, Sakarya 2012, pp. 301-306.

Figure 5: Caricature depicting a Bulgarian peasant attempting to remove Selimiye, with Sinan in the background.

Source: "Bulgarlar mimar Sinan'a sahip çıkıyorlar", *Akşam*, September 22, 1940, p. 1.

Journalist and educator Hakkı Süha Gezgin, one of the authors responding to the Bulgarian claim, noted that many ethnicities, like in the case of Alexander the Great, assert that Sinan belongs to their nation. He argued that in order to conceive a genius like Sinan, a nation should have beforehand erect monuments like "Seljuk sanctuaries, Timurid mausoleums, mosques of Cordoba, and Bukhara palaces and caravanserai". The Bulgarian claims, he contended, lacked such historical precedents and therefore lacked veracity. Additionally, anthropological research on Sinan's skull determined his ethnicity, further disproving the Bulgarian claims.[78] Similarly, Turkish educator İsmail Hakkı Baltacıoğlu proposed that Sinan was the culmination

[78] Hakkı Süha Gezgin, "Mimar Sinan Meselesi", *Vakit*, September 22, 1940, p. 1 and 2.

of centuries old Turkish architectural culture and "a phase of a collective development of art".[79]

These arguments represented a more developed iteration of Çetintaş's response, which was grounded in the concept of national schools of architecture and their historical evolution. Selimiye, or any single Ottoman monument, had to be viewed within the broader context of the evolution of Ottoman architecture, which was seen as a reflection of Turkish genius. In response to the Bulgarian claims based on a folk narrative, the Turkish press adhered to the established official narrative on Turkish art and architecture, effectively aligning individual perspectives with the official narrative. The debate, originating from one of the most diverse folk narratives in the Balkans, intersected with contemporary geopolitics, official architectural historiography, and the formation of modern national identities. There was apparent concern that a more substantial Bulgarian claim to Ottoman architectural heritage, emerging from seemingly casual references to a folk narrative, could challenge both the modern Turkish identity, which venerates Sinan as a national hero, and the established official historiography of architecture. This concern spurred a series of vigorous reactions against contemporary Bulgarian refashioning of the story.

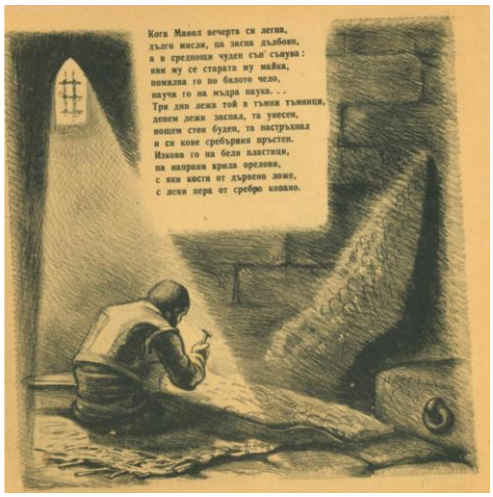
Indeed, in 1949, Bulgarian poet and writer Asen Rozkvetnikov wrote a children's book titled *Master Manol* largely following the plot of the folk ballad Tsepenkov recorded. The 28-page book features colorful illustrations depicting various scenes and has a twist- a romantic subplot involving the Sultan's daughter and Master Manol during the construction of the "marble mosque" of Sultan Selim.[80] (Fig 6 and 7) As a widely distributed children's book, this could represent a step toward elevating the folk hero Master Manol to the status of a national hero, merging his identity with that of the historical figure Sinan.

[79] İsmail Hakkı Baltacıoğlu, "Sinan Niçin Türktür", *Yeni Adam*, October 3, 1940, p. 2.
[80] Illustrations were by the Bulgarian painter and academic Ilya Petrov. Asen Raztsvetnikov, Maistor Manol, Durzhavna Pechatnitsa, Sofia, 1949.

Figure 6: Cover of the children's book *Master Manol.*

Source: Asen Raztsvetnikov, *Maistor Manol*, Durzhavna Pechatnitsa, Sofia, 1949, cover.

Figure 7: Imprisoned Master Manol crafting wings.



Source: Asen Raztsvetnikov, *Maistor Manol*, Durzhavna Pechatnitsa, Sofia, 1949, [no page number].

The book includes multiple references to Manol's awareness of and pride in his Bulgarian ancestry and identity. When questioned by the Sultan, Manol explains that he learned the art of building from his grandfather and father, who died after falling from a tower he had built in Salonica. Manol and the Sultan's daughter, who had promised her Bulgarian mother that she would marry a "Bulgarian hero", fall in love. During the construction, Manol challenges Sultan Selim, declaring himself with a "Bulgarian heart" and expressing his intention to eventually build a church for the Bulgarians greater than Selim's mosque. Angered, Selim orders Manol to be imprisoned in a dungeon, where he secretly constructs two wings. Given a brief opportunity to be at Selimiye's minaret at his request, Manol uses his wings to fly away over Thrace.[81] One of the final poems in the book depicts Bulgarian peasants working the land in Thrace. This imagery suggests that the protagonists aspired to the purity and preservation of Bulgarian ethnicity exemplified by these peasants. The story acknowledges the cosmopolitan and ethnically ambiguous nature of the Ottoman palace. Manol and the Sultan's daughter navigate their identities within the complex and often uneasy dynamics of high Ottoman culture, while aspiring to the purity and continuity of Bulgarian ethnicity as represented by the Bulgarian peasants. The narrative concludes with an ambiguous ending for Master Manol, reflecting a hopeful future for Bulgarian identity despite its turbulent history.

Conclusion

The folk narrative about Master Manol originated long before the advent of modern nations and nation-states. In Southeastern Europe, this prevalent and syncretic narrative intriguingly intertwined with the history of Ottoman architecture in Edirne. Folk narratives such as the tale of Master Manol and Selimiye enabled local communities and syncretic populations to form their perspectives on the architect and his masterpiece. The 20th century decisively introduced nationalist perspectives that shaped the interpretation of the character, plot, and meaning of these folk narratives. Its reinterpretation in Bulgaria, and the strong reaction it provoked in Turkey, positioned the folk narrative within the context of competing nation-states. Nationalist movements were eager to adopt folk cultures as foundational elements of their nations. However, as demonstrated by the diversity of the folk narratives of

[81] *Ibid*.

Master Manol, hybridity is an inherent aspect of folk culture and at odds with attempts to establish singular and unified cultural narratives. Binary frameworks, such as Bulgarian versus Turkish, dominated the reinterpretation and response to the folk narratives, hindering in-depth discussion about Ottoman heritage and its folk perception. Neither the modern Bulgarian nor Turkish reception of the folk narrative acknowledged its fluid and syncretic nature. Instead, in Turkey, the focus was on validating Turkish historiography. As a result, once political motivations dissipated, the folk narrative and the associated debates largely faded from prominence.

In the 1930s and 1940s, despite the casual and rather unimpactful nature of the refashioning of the folk narratives about Master Manol in Bulgaria, the Turkish response was pronounced. The emergence of a fierce transnational debate occurred at a crucial time for Turkey, as it was solidifying its territorial integrity and forming its national identity. Even inconsequential references to these stories in Bulgaria were viewed as subversive in Turkey, as they challenged the newly established Turkish identity and its pantheon of national heroes. Consequently, any challenge to Sinan's Turkish identity, even a reference to a folk ballad or folktale, was perceived as an affront to the very concept of Turkish national genius. Binary frameworks for interpreting history and personalities are particularly pronounced during times of territorial anxiety. During this period in Turkey in the first half of the 20th century, clearly defined boundaries and identities based on binary oppositions were preferred over the ethnically complex picture of history suggested by folk narratives. The fluidity and syncretism of folk narratives can be seen as potentially subversive to burgeoning national identities that seek to establish stable and dominant national identities. This is especially true during times of nation-state formation and the creation of their pantheon of heroes.

Neither did the Bulgarian interest in claiming the architect of Selimiye became mainstream or official, nor did Turkish responses regain their previous intensity after the 1940s. In Bulgaria, Master Manol remains part of the folklore, but without necessarily linking him to Ottoman monuments or identifying him as Sinan. The transnational debate dissipated as Turkish national identity, its narrative about Ottoman architecture, and its boundaries in Thrace solidified. Selimiye was perceived to be situated more at the western edge of a nation-state rather than at the contentious intersection of nation-states. This highlights the influence of shifting boundaries on the perception of architectural heritage. Anxiety over national boundaries in

Turkey during its early decades intensely refashioned Selimiye as both a marker of identity and territory, and a topic of transnational debate.

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