

The Myth of the Masterbuilder

A Psychoanalytic Perspective

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At first glance, architecture may seem to be far removed from psychoanalysis. Architecture refers to the design of buildings. Psychoanalysis can be thought of as the study of inner meaning. Buildings are literally materials that have been shaped by their designers so that they fulfill particular functions: first, to remain standing; then, to provide a residence, a place of business, or a house of worship. But on further thought it becomes obvious that architecture is suffused with meaning. Even the rudest of structures has meaning to its occupants; for example, a simple hovel may feel to its users as if it is a sturdy refuge from the elements. A house of worship has meaning far beyond its primary function of serving as a place for reverence to the divine; such a building touches on and interacts with an abundance of complicated emotions in those who practice their faith within it.

The question is not whether buildings have meaning for those who use them but rather how to get at such meaning.

We propose to exploit an unusual opportunity for gaining entrée to the inner experience of those who make use of a particular religious structure. Mythical stories have a hold on people—and last for many years—because they express, play with, and resolve the conflicts and stresses that are crucial in a given culture. Such stories, then, when explored psychoanalytically, yield up inner meanings connected to the subject matter of the story. In Romania, mythical stories have played an especially central role. “Dominated by foreign power and subjected to corrupt leadership,” notes Ted Anton (1996), “Romanians survived primarily through the shared experience of telling stories” (p. 30). One of these stories, perhaps the most widely celebrated, takes, as its subject matter, architecture; it describes the legend

of the building of the Monastery of Arges in the town of Curtea de Arges.¹ (See figure 1.)

In this paper we will investigate the mythical story about the building of this church. Our goal is to analyze the story and to use this understanding of the underlying psychological and cultural function of the story to gain insight into the effect that the building has on those who make use of it.

The Myth of the Masterbuilder²

As the story begins, the Black Prince, the upper-class ruler, is walking along the Arges River with the masterbuilder, Manole, and nine skilled workmen. They are searching for a site where they can build a church. They come upon a shepherd who is playing a “*doina*” on his flute; a “*doina*” is a gentle, sad song. The Prince asks him whether he has seen any locations where there was an unsuccessful attempt to construct a building. The shepherd says that there is such a place, a place where “my dogs bark and bay.” The Prince chooses that location for the church and charges Manole to build the tallest church ever.

The workers build during the day, only to have their structure collapse during the night. The same thing happens day after day. The Black Prince threatens them with death if they cannot complete the church. One night Manole has a dream in which “a whisper from above” tells him that the building will continue to fall down unless they sacrifice a human being by enclosing her in one of the walls. And that person cannot be just anyone. It has to be the first woman, the beloved wife or sister of one of the builders, who comes to them the next day with their midday meal. They are enjoined not to warn their loved ones to stay away.

The next morning Manole climbs on the scaffolding and sees his wife, Ana, on the road bringing them their food and drink. He prays to God to send torrential rain that will prevent her from reaching him. Soon there is a horrible storm, but Ana somehow keeps coming closer and closer. Then he prays for a powerful wind that will stop her. God listens to his prayer. There is a gale, but she forges ahead and

¹ When using its formal name, we will call it the “Monastery of Arges”; at other times, we will refer to it as “the church.” It was originally built as a church and has remained a church. A building for a monastery was added in the seventeenth century, and the “Monastery of Arges” became the name of the complex. The name also became attached to the church but is inaccurate, as the building has been in continuous use as a church.

² The myth was first recorded in 1793 (Talos, 1973). Vasile Alecsandri published what is considered the standard version in 1852 (Ricketts, 1988, p. 1143). Specialists in Romanian folklore (Pop and Ruxandoiu, 1976; Itu, 1994) do not speculate when the myth originated. The earliest possible date would be the time when the church was built, the early sixteenth century. After the first version

reaches the builders.

Manole, who loves his wife deeply, puts her within the construction site and says they will pretend to wall her in. As the building covers her more and more, she cries out about how scared she is and how much it hurts, but Manole continues building. She mentions that the wall is breaking her womb and the baby within it. Although enraged, Manole keeps constructing the wall around her. The language of the story is sensuous as it describes how “the wall covers Ana, up to her small ankles, up to her thin calves, up to her fragile ribs, up to her soft lips, up to her pretty eyes.”

Some time later, the Black Prince comes to pray at the completed church, which is the most splendid and stately house of worship in the world. He asks Manole and the workers, who are on the roof, whether they are capable of constructing another building that is even more beautiful. They boast that they are. The Black Prince proceeds to attempt to murder them by taking away the scaffolding and trapping them on the roof. Manole and the workers have a desperate plan for survival. They make wings out of shingles so that they might try to fly off the roof. In attempting to escape, the workers fall to their deaths. When Manole is about to jump, he hears a voice from within the wall, “Manole, Manole, Master Manole, this wall is hurting me so. This wall is breaking my baby. My life is wasting away.” As he is listening to his wife’s voice, he jumps, crashes onto the ground, and dies there. The story ends, “And from that very spot, a quiet spring emerged. It was a spring with salty water like teardrops.” (See figure 2.)

The Message of the Myth

What is the central message of this folk story that became possibly the most celebrated myth in a country that especially valued its folklore?

One of us (Ruxandra Ion) spent her childhood in Romania in Curtea de Arges and was familiar with the myth from a young age. She recalls the following anecdote.

Growing up under communism, I attended a class on political ideology that was designed to indoctrinate us. The theme of the class was that communism, as

of the myth was composed, it would have evolved as it was transmitted orally until it was finally written down. Our quotations from the myth are taken from the standard version (in Toma, 1988, pp. 159–167), as translated by Ruxandra Ion. A number of scholars point out that similar stories about other structures exist throughout Europe, with notable examples existing in Greek, Serbo-Croatian, Hungarian, Albanian, Bulgarian, and Macedo-Romanian cultures; there is also evidence of such stories in India (see especially the detailed examination in Dundes, 1996). Mircea Eliade (1992; 1994) had a great interest in the Myth of the Masterbuilder and wrote an entire book exploring it. He notes that it is “a myth central to the spirituality of the Romanian people” (Ricketts, 1988, p. 1142).



FIGURE 1. The Monastery of Arges as it appears in modern times.
Photograph by Ruxandra Ion.

developed by the Romanian dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, was the perfect system. At the age of 12, I remember asking the teacher, If communism is so perfect, why is television broadcast for only two hours per day, why do we not have reliable heat in the winter, and why do we often suffer from hunger? The teacher could not deny these facts. He said that we all had to make “sacrifices” in constructing the ideal society. He noted that we had an honorable mission in assisting the Communist Party in its heroic endeavor. He pointed out that such “selfless sacrifice” had been known throughout Romanian history. Nothing could illustrate this better than the legendary story of the building of the Monastery of Arges in our town. Manole for the sake of a higher purpose had sacrificed his wife and walled her into the foundation of the building. We should all feel proud, he concluded, to be part of the



FIGURE 2. Monument built in the nineteenth century to memorialize Manole's spring. Photograph by Ruxandra Ion.

collective effort of making sacrifices so that the ideal society could be built for the future.

A textbook (Toma, 1988) from the communist era in Romania takes a similar approach to the myth. It instructs the students to write an essay including the point that "the sacrifice makes Manole stronger; he sacrifices what he holds dearest in the world: his beloved wife and his own life ultimately" (p. 167). The textbook requires the students to conclude their essays by expanding on this passage: "The legend has the following meaning: It symbolizes in dynamic metaphors the sacrifice on behalf of creation. It is one of the most valuable Romanian folk creations" (Toma, 1988, p. 167).

A teacher of communist ideology and the writer of the textbook during the

communist era saw the central message of the story as extolling sacrifice for the sake of a higher purpose. It is striking that the view from the bitterest enemies of the communists was much the same. Constantin Davidescu (n.d.), a political scientist, studied the Iron Guard, a fascist movement in Romania during the 1930s and 1940s. He noted the viewpoint of the Iron Guard: "The sacrifice, as a heroic act necessary to the reconstruction of the Romanian nation, has its representation in the popular legend of [Master] Manole."

We bring up the evidence from these three sources because it is so consistent; in each case the myth is seen as extolling self-sacrifice for the sake of a higher cause. The communists and the fascists could appeal to this understanding of the myth because it rang true to the way the Romanian people had responded to the story for many years. It should be added, though, that both the communists and the fascists distorted the meaning of the myth for their own purposes. They saw the myth as encouraging self-sacrifice for a higher cause, but they substituted their own preference of a higher cause for the cause that the myth describes. The Iron Guard saw the higher cause as the ruthless, dictatorial, intolerant form of government that they wanted, while the communists saw the cause as the failing economic system that the party was perpetrating on the country. Both ignored the higher cause around which the myth is organized, namely, the building of a church for the greater glory of God.

The Myth of the Masterbuilder developed through the oral tradition (the period of its creation began sometime after the completion of the church in the early sixteenth century and ended when the myth was written down in the middle of the nineteenth century). There is one large generalization that holds true for this entire span of time: life was miserable for the vast majority of the Romanian people (Georgescu, 1991; Pop, 1999). Most Romanians lived in three principalities (Wallachia, in which the Monastery of Arges is located; Moldavia; and Transylvania). Nearly all the Romanians were peasants; many were serfs. The three principalities were independent only for the briefest time; usually they were under the control of the surrounding powers (the Ottoman empire, Hungary, Austria, and Russia). The large countries exploited the principalities. As an example, from the second half of the sixteenth century until 1821, Wallachia, except for some short periods, was under Ottoman control. During much of this time the Ottomans extracted large payments from Wallachia, and these payments ensured that most of the Romanians in the principality, who were peasants, would be kept impoverished. Wars were frequently a part of Romanian life. At times the principalities revolted; at other times the surrounding powers invaded the principalities. Often the larger countries fought each other on Romanian soil, and the people living there suffered. Many Romanian men were drafted into the armies of the larger countries and fought

and died in their wars. Romanians suffered from poverty, illness, and the threat of violent death.

The concept of collective or group trauma, developed by psychoanalytic historians (e.g., Volkan, 1997; Welsh-Jouve, 2003; Binion, 2003) applies to the experience of the Romanian people in this era. Unless defended against, a trauma leaves a great many people feeling helpless, ashamed, enraged, and humiliated (Volkan, 2003, p. 223).

Another effect of the Romanians' tragic experience over so many years was a view of the omnipresence of dark forces, along with the belief that with faith in the divine one might hope for protection, and could seek it, but could not count on it. Even today it is common for Romanian peasants to look at many happenings and say either "*e lucrarea disvolului*" (it's the Devil's doing) or "*e lucrarea Domnului*" (it's God's doing). There was a general sense that a person had little power; one's life was in the hands of larger forces.

The Myth of the Masterbuilder, we would argue, provided a collective defense that helped the Romanian people cope with their group trauma. The story does not deny the lived reality of the people that the world is dangerous and hurtful. It does not extend to listeners the hope of gaining control over their lives. But it says, in essence, if you persist through the pain of living, see the pain as a sacrifice, and remain faithful to a higher calling, you will find meaning in life, and you will be able to connect to the positive forces, the divine presence, which will offer you protection or rewards after death. Moreover, through such sacrifice a person is enabled to feel self-esteem, to have a satisfying sense of who one is that helps offset physical discomfort and pain; as a result, the physical discomfort and pain feed a positive sense of who one is.

How the Psychological Experience of the Characters Carries the Message of the Myth

Our next task is to analyze the psychological experience of the characters. One may ask, why would we treat the characters as if they are real people? They are merely fictional creations. The reason is that the listeners to the story identify with the characters, and the listeners' psychological reaction to the story is based on these identifications. In looking at the characters' experience, we concentrate on their emotions, because emotions point to what is most important for an individual. A story has its greatest impact when the listeners experience the emotions of the characters in the story.

The main character in the story is Manole, the masterbuilder. The listener is quickly put into the mood of the story when Manole and the others come across

the shepherd who is playing melancholy music. It is possible that the story itself was sung and was in the form of a “doina,” the kind of sad tune that the shepherd is playing (Itu, 1994). After Manole learns that a beloved wife or sister will have to be immolated within the walls in order for the structure to be built, he is so dedicated to the higher purpose of completing the church that he is committed to following through on the murder; and he remains committed even when he sees that his beloved wife will be the victim. There is no doubt that he loves his wife and that the sacrifice is an enormous one for him. When she keeps coming toward the work site despite the rainstorm, Manole’s “heart [is] aching” and he cries; and when she arrives, he is “enraged.” The sensuous description of her loveliness underlines to the listener how severe his loss is, and the revelation that she is pregnant makes his suffering excruciating. As he is about to leap off the building with his wings made of shingles, he hears her voice, and the pain is so unbearable that he loses consciousness. A stream is created at the spot where he crashes to his death. His sadness is so great that it continues to be expressed for centuries as the salty water, like tear drops, continues to flow.

Manole’s experience is poignant. He makes the ultimate sacrifice; he undergoes extraordinary suffering in order to remain true to his higher calling of building a house of worship, a tribute, in stone, to God. The extent of his suffering defines the power of his creation. Manole provides the model of an ego ideal for the listener, who vicariously experiences what Manole has experienced. The listener comes away from the story with the lesson that suffering has its rewards. It enables one to feel esteem for oneself; it justifies the misery of one’s life.

There is also a secondary message that is expressed through Manole’s experience. Manole is the masterbuilder; he is described as “the best of all.” We may think of him as a great architect; in the mythical story, he has designed a church “that is more splendid and more stately than any other [church] in the whole world.” In other words, he is an artist with surpassing talent. In Romania, during the period in which the story was composed, there was an emphasis on being modest, on not standing out, on not having pride. Eliade (1992) notes that there was a pervasive avoidance of perfection, so that one did not appear too skilled, too much like God. For example, a builder would often leave some small part undone, or a peasant creating a piece of needlework would leave one line unfinished.

The situation of an artist created a dilemma. For a building to be outstanding, as was appropriate for a tribute to the divine, the creator had to be outstanding; but to be outstanding meant to stand out, and that was discouraged. In the story, the builders suffer a punishment because of their pride in their accomplishment. After they boast that they are capable of constructing a more gorgeous church, the Black Prince sentences them to death. The ostensible reason, of course, is that he does not

want another church built that would surpass the one he has commissioned. But the message to the listener is that it is wrong and dangerous to be too prideful. While Manole is among those who is killed, it is not clear whether he is one of those who participated in the boasting. The story, we think, was constructed in this way so that the emphasis would not be taken away from the main theme, of Manole's suffering for a higher purpose. But the secondary message still comes through, that pride is to be avoided.

While female listeners could hear about Manole's experience and take in the message of the story, one could not expect them to identify with Manole as easily as men would. Perhaps one reason for the mythical story's great impact among Romanians is that it also provides a woman, Ana, with whom female listeners can identify, and it is striking that the message Ana's psychological experience expresses is complementary to the message that stems from Manole's experience.

Ana is selfless, nurturing, and giving. She provides an ego ideal for women. She is intent on taking care of her husband and the other men by bringing them food and drink. After the torrential rain, she falls down again and again but still keeps forging ahead. Even the gale-force winds cannot stop her. She shows enormous strength in fulfilling her duties.

An anonymous woman from a farming background in Curtea de Arges recalled the following anecdote in a personal interview:

I remember how the women in our agrarian community needed great strength and will power to help the family get by. My mother often brought lunch to the men in the field, to the men of the family and the hired workers. She would take me along during the period when I was two to five years old, and sometimes we walked with the food as far as ten kilometers. I used to complain that the walking was tiresome and the bags were too heavy. She told me how important and honorable it was for us as women to feed the men on time. When the women contributed in this way, it helped them to be well thought of in the community and to feel positively about themselves.

Ana makes the ultimate sacrifice. She suffers as the wall encloses her. She expresses how it feels, "The wall hurts me so." She cries out that the baby within her womb is being crushed. Manole sacrifices his beloved wife for the church, but Ana herself is sacrificed. She is the key ingredient that enables the building to stand.

A female listener to the story takes away a similar message to that of a male listener who identifies with Manole. The typical female listener shares in Ana's pain, and she feels that Ana's suffering was justified ultimately in that it played

an essential role in the construction of this church that honors God. Without Ana's loyalty, and without her tragic death, the building would never have been completed. Women, as well as men, were enabled to feel that their sacrifices, for a higher calling, justify their lives. A woman, adopting Ana as an ego ideal, could strive to be as nurturing and as giving as Ana is in the story. One must also add that Ana's obedience is valorized. When Manole asks her to stand in the wall so they might play at walling her in, she accedes to his request.

Here we feel we must comment on the role of women as it is depicted in the story. The Myth of the Masterbuilder both assumes and reinforces the patriarchal structure of society. Ana's chief role is to take care of the men and to bear and nurture children. In the story she functions as the object that Manole most values, and it is shown that he values her for her loyalty, her obedience, her beauty, her sexuality, and her childbearing. She is the possession that makes his loss so enormous. She has no part in any decisions. He is the one who must choose whether or not to murder her for the sake of the building. She is not consulted; in fact, he deceives her in order to encourage her to comply. As Ileana Alexandra Orlich (2002) has noted, Ana has "limited participation at the social, political and cultural levels" and the story "communicates to the reader . . . the sources of authority in Romanian society and their hierarchical order" (p. 14). (On Ana's role, also see Antoniu, 1996.)

We think, though, that women may have had a role in composing the parts of the story that tell of Ana, because ultimately she is given personhood and a voice. As we noted, she is allowed, within the patriarchal structure of society, to feel that she has a valued role and acts heroically, especially in her battling the elements to bring the food and drink to the men. And as she is walled in, she is permitted to express her pain. She is more than an object that Manole sacrifices; she is a person whose cry of agony is heard. Even well after her death, her voice comes to Manole: "This wall is hurting me so. This wall is breaking my baby. My life is wasting away!"

There is one more character named individually in the story, the Black Prince. While Ana is treated as a real person with whom listeners can identify, the Black Prince is not. The depiction of him reveals the attitude of the people who created this folk legend towards their rulers. He is portrayed as being evil, selfish, ruthless, and grandiose. He does not care for his workers or for the populace or even for God; he builds the church as a reflection of his own greatness, not to honor the Lord. In the beginning, he does not hesitate to threaten the builders with murder if they are unable to construct a church, at his chosen spot, that will remain standing. The workers build a magnificent church; Manole goes so far as to sacrifice his beloved wife so that the church can be completed. How does the Black Prince reward them? He is afraid that they will build a more beautiful church elsewhere.

If he cared about serving the Lord, he would be grateful to see other churches that contributed to the greater glory of God; but no, his interest is that his church would surpass all others. He kills Manole and the other skilled workers.

The people of the peasant class, as suggested by the Myth of the Masterbuilder, had contempt for the aristocratic rulers and saw these rulers as being dominated by selfish motives and as having no concern for their well-being. It is notable that there is not a hint of revolt in the story. It seems that the people believed that the political order, organized around the autocratic rule of the royal family, was immutable; it was the way things were. They considered themselves powerless to influence the structure of society.

An enduring folktale like the Myth of the Masterbuilder can have a complexity that enables it to work at different levels. We wonder about a countervailing interpretation of the story that many people in Romania who have reverence for the myth would find to be shocking.

If Manole were a real person, one would have to consider the following interpretation of his experience. His dream that he should murder someone as a sacrifice to the success of his building does not come from some mystical source; it comes from within him. He has a wish to commit this murder, and he surely knows from the first that it is his wife who is to be sacrificed. By unconsciously depicting the message in his dream as forced on him from above, he provides the perfect rationalization for killing his wife; he did not want to do it, but had to do it, in order to accomplish a higher purpose. The story offers few possible hints as to why he would want his wife dead. The text states that, while dead, she assures the success of the building; the implication is that, alive, she stands in the way of its creation. Or one might consider the story's mention that she is pregnant. Does Manole feel jealous of this future rival for her affection, or does he, as an artist, feel envious of a woman who can create something, a life, that surpasses the creation of any man?

Manole, of course, is not a real person. But listeners to a story identify with the main character's experience. Might something else have been operating for many male listeners? Might the story have unconsciously transmitted to them an additional message: that it is acceptable to have murderous wishes toward your wife? Through neglect or domination, you might well sacrifice her to your work or your other higher goals. She does not matter as much as your own personal interests.

While we are far from insisting on the validity of this interpretation, we note that it does seem to solve one puzzle that we found in the literature on the myth; commentators seem to have a surprising lack of concern about Ana's homicide. For example, in the textbook from the communist era, the instructions to the students

in writing an essay on the myth guide them to talk about Manole's loss but see it as fully justified as a "sacrifice for the higher cause"; Ana's tragic experience of getting killed while having no say in her fate is ignored (Toma, 1988).

How the Myth Mediates the Worshiper's Experience of the Monastery of Arges

We now turn to the topic of the emotional experience of those who viewed and made use of the Monastery of Arges. (See **figure 3**.) How does the mythical story of its construction, known intimately by many people who worshiped in this church, help reveal to us their emotional experience?

Our starting point is the belief, central to Romanian culture, and further reinforced by Christianity, that the universe is divided between the sacred and the mundane, between the spiritual realm and the physical world. The spiritual realm has a profound impact on everyday life. The demonic forces are of great power and make life perilous. The only hope people have is to align themselves with the positive forces, that is, the protection of the divine. A church allows people to come into the presence of Providence.

In the Myth of the Masterbuilder, the Black Prince wants to build his church at the spot where something eerie has been happening. At this location, attempts to construct a building have failed, and dogs, who can sense otherworldly vibrations, "bark and bay" when they come nearby. A portal into the supernatural realm resides there. No simple building can withstand the forces that are at large. It is an apt location for a church, because a church encloses on earth a portion of the spiritual realm. But a church must be worthy of fulfilling this awesome role; it must be powerful and special in order to serve as God's dwelling.

When Manole and his workers try to build the walls, they collapse. In a dream, Manole learns what would transform the building into one that would stand. He must sacrifice a human being by walling her into the building, and this person cannot be anyone but must be the beloved wife or sister of one of the workers; no doubt, it is decided from the beginning that the person is to be Manole's wife.

There is a long tradition of human sacrifice; one need only think of the story of Abraham's attempt to sacrifice his son Isaac in the Old Testament and the Christian motif of the sacrifice of Jesus. Eliade notes that there are many myths, as well as documented instances, of a person being walled into a structure to assure its completion. The various stories, Eliade (1972) argues, have in common a single ideology: "[a] construction . . . must be animated, that is, must receive both life and a soul. The 'transference' of the soul is possible only by means of a sacrifice; in other words, by a violent death" (pp. 182–183). We see two separate ideas expressed



FIGURE 3. The Monastery of Arges by J. Schönbrunner as it appeared in the nineteenth century.

in Ana's immolation in the Myth of the Masterbuilder. First, the church, by being animated, by receiving her soul, becomes powerful enough to serve its sacred function. The sacrifice, moreover, demonstrates that Manole is willing to give of himself. Through his sacrifice, he makes himself worthy of creating a building that is suitable to its profound purposes.

One question sometimes asked is why the "whisper from above" that appeared in Manole's dream would require him to undertake such a dreadful act. This question ties into the nature of the positive forces, as understood in Romanian culture. A divine voice is doing Manole the favor of telling him what the world is like. If he wants to build the church, he can do so only by carrying out the sacrifice. It is beyond God's power to make things different. When Manole prays to God

to prevent Ana from reaching him, God listens and tries to help. But His power is limited. He can create forceful storms, but He cannot change the unfolding events.

Worshippers at the Monastery of Arges are readied to approach it by means of their intimate acquaintance with the legendary story of its construction. With the myth in mind, they view the building as awesome. It has to it a great power, a power strong enough to enable the building to serve as an enclosure, on earth, of a piece of God's realm. The building is animated; it has a soul. Ana's vital presence has been transmitted to it. The church is numinous; the special circumstances of its construction assure that it has the Holy Spirit within it. Its being built in a location that has access to the spiritual forces further guarantees that the building is in vital contact with the divine realm. Worshipers are also primed to appreciate its beauty and majesty, because they understand that the church was so magnificent that the Black Prince murdered the builders to prevent another comparable structure from being erected.

The single most important lesson of the story involves sacrifice. As we have argued, the story enjoins people to be selfless and to withstand sacrifice in their lives in order to contribute to a higher purpose. Just as Manole sacrificed in order to build a church that could fulfill its demanding and sacred role, the worshipers must sacrifice in order to be worthy of praying in the church. The worshipers, moreover, by sacrificing in the service of the divine, identify themselves not only with the holy figures and martyrs of Christian history but also with Jesus himself. Confronted by the Monastery of Arges, a church associated with the Myth of the Masterbuilder, they are reminded of their sacred task of devoting themselves to the service of the Lord.

A passage (Pop and Ruxandoiu, 1976, p. 334) in a variant of the myth makes these themes explicit. It begins with Ana's lament:

"Manole, Manole,
My beloved,
My sweet lover,
The wall is hurting me.
It breaks me."
Manole heard her, sighed and said:
"Be quiet, my dear, beautiful lover.
God wants to bring you to him.
And God wants us to complete this church,
To be a place where people celebrate His might."

The passage states directly what is implicit in the standard version of the myth: Ana is being sacrificed so that the church will be powerful enough to be a building in which worshipers may celebrate God's might.

The architecture of the building works together with the legendary story of the church's construction to produce the emotional effect that the building has on those who worship there.

In 1512, Prince Neagoe Basarab of Wallachia began building the church, which was dedicated to the Virgin Mary. His son-in-law, Prince Radu of Afumati, completed it in 1526. In 1517, although not yet finished, the church was consecrated on the day of the Assumption of the Virgin with great pomp; even the Patriarch of Constantinople was in attendance. The close connection between the church and the Virgin Mary underlines the theme of sacrifice that the church inspires in the minds of those who worship there.³

Over the centuries the church suffered damage from minor earthquakes and fires, but it has maintained its integrity. Three major renovations were undertaken, two in the seventeenth century and one in the nineteenth century.

Let us consider how a typical worshiper who knew and believed in the Myth of the Masterbuilder might have viewed the church.

The worshiper is struck first by the church's height; for centuries it was far taller than any other building in sight. The verticality of the building is emphasized by its four domed towers, three surmounting the entry vestibule and the largest, central dome rising to a height of 86 feet over the center of the sanctuary. At its pinnacle, each dome is surmounted by a triple-barred cross elevated on a golden, pear-shaped orb, and additional triple-barred crosses decorate the building. With so many large crosses, which represent the Trinity, the building is clearly identified as a Christian sanctum. Looking up at the soaring domes, the worshiper pictures the building as reaching toward the heavens. The nearby spring, said to have formed at the spot where Manole plunged to his death, draws the worshiper's attention to the church's height. (In the late 1800s, a small building was constructed in a French style to memorialize Manole's spring; see **figure 2**). Trapped on such a high roof, Manole and his workers, according to the myth, tried to fly off with wings made of shingles, but the worshiper can see that they could not survive a leap from such a height.

³ The description of the church and the account of its history are based on the following sources: Reissenberger, 1867; Samuelson, 1883; Sinigalia, 2005; and two websites: Curta de Arges Monastery, n.d., and The Monastery of Curtea de Arges, n.d.). The authors wish to thank Ann Marie Yasin, Ph.D., of Northwestern University for her expert advice regarding church architecture.

The church's bulk and solidity impress the worshiper. The sanctuary of the church is trefoil in plan, with a large central apse and smaller apses projecting to either side. The rectangular entry vestibule (*narthex*) spans the width of the church and creates the impression on the exterior of an elongated building. The church was designed to withstand the seismic torsion forces caused by earthquakes in the area, and therefore it departed from the standard Greek Orthodox cross-in-square model, which has a square sanctuary with a central dome and apse on axis with the entrance, flanked by two smaller side apses. While the purpose was to withstand tremors, the existence of earthquakes in the area no doubt played a role in the genesis of the story in which it is a challenge to build walls that will remain standing, the meaning to the worshiper is that the church has the strength to contain within it powerful spiritual forces. For the worshiper, the image of the building's strength is reinforced by the sense of Ana being entombed within the walls.

The church was built of limestone masonry and adorned with marble and mosaic; Neagoe Basarab is said to have brought some of the materials from Constantinople. An architectural moulding carved to resemble a rope encircles the exterior of the church and divides the exterior walls into two registers. The lower portion of the wall features tall, narrow windows encased by heavy stone frames. The upper register is adorned with sculpted blind arcades, the centers of which feature square and circular relief panels carved with intricate Arabian, Persian, and Georgian motifs. A worshiper was surely meant to understand the church with its rich decoration and harmonious design as honoring the Divine.

Such a building, moreover, is a suitable home for the positive forces of Christianity, and the dark forces of Romanian folklore clearly have no place there. The earliest surviving description of the church, from 1517, notes that it "resemble[s] God's paradise" (Monastery of Curtea de Arges, n.d.). The church, in other words, was seen from the beginning as being consonant with God's realm.

The worshiper receives similar impressions of sanctity, beauty, and strength from the interior of the church. There are rich decorations, including twelve columns with floral ornaments, votive frescoes, and liberal use of marble and gilded bronze. In 1526 Dobromir of Targoviste painted two mural frescoes. The royal court of Neagoe Basarab and his wife, Princess Despina, is the subject of one of them. The other fresco portrays their daughter Roxanda with her husband Radu of Afumati. The fresco depicts Princess Roxanda as the official founder, holding the model of the church, even though her father was the founder. The emphasis on this angelic-looking woman may remind the worshiper of the church's connection to two women, the Virgin Mary and Ana, both of whom are associated with the ideal of sacrifice. The theme of death further comes to mind as one sees the necropolis, where Neagoe Basarab and other royal figures are entombed.

Additional frescoes from later times depict Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and Apostles, along with scenes from the Old and New Testament. The impression is of being in a safe, secure, and holy sanctum, with reminders of death and religious sacrifice all around. The worshiper may well think, "It is this for which Manole sacrificed his wife's life, as well as his own." The building seems all the more somber and sacred as the worshiper recalls the Myth of the Masterbuilder.

Conclusion

Using an interpretive method that draws on psychoanalysis, we have attempted to accomplish two purposes. We analyzed an influential Romanian story, the Myth of the Masterbuilder. Our starting point was the assumption that, for a story to retain its power and popularity over centuries, it must serve a function within the culture. Unless people are moved by and benefit from the story, they will not pass it on from generation to generation. We concluded that the chief function of the story was to offer a defense against the group trauma from which the Romanian people suffered. The story told people: If you tolerate your suffering and you sacrifice for a higher purpose, you will be rewarded. You will have the satisfaction of making a contribution, and you will have reason to have justifiable pride in yourselves. This message helped lessen the chronic despair that can stem from a group trauma.

We chose to analyze this myth for a particular reason; it revolves around an architectural theme. It describes the legend of how the Monastery of Arges was built. We saw this as an opportunity to explore the meaning of this structure; in other words, to discover the emotions that the building elicits in its users. We found that the story prompts worshipers to feel awe at the building, to see it as powerful, numinous, and magnificent. The story encourages them to be inspired to sacrifice themselves in their service to the divine. We argued that the architectural features of the building work together with the influence of the story to produce a joint effect on those who worship there. This essay, then, can be described as a case study of the emotional impact of a building.

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