

Fluid Stories

In October 1920 a young man began to keep a journal about his trips to Eyüp.¹ In later decades he would become one of Turkey's best-known cultural historians and an important teacher of traditional arts such as calligraphy, paper marbling, and book binding. In 1920, however, Ahmet Süheyl Ünver was only twenty-two, about to both graduate from medical school and complete his training in calligraphy at the Madrasa of Calligraphy (Medresetü'l-Hattâtîn).² The first few pages of his journal consisted of a few pasted-in photographs, a list of Eyüp's Sufi lodges and their appointed meeting days, and an index of his various visits to the district.

But the journal really began on the next page. With great care, Ünver composed a bismillah in careful thuluth script, "In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful." A brief signature followed in the style of practiced calligraphers: "*Hurrirre Süheyl*" (Süheyl wrote this). This was a page of careful, attentive beginnings.

Following the opening bismillah, Ünver carefully transcribed a long prayer in Arabic from a book entitled *The Virtues of Halid (Menakıb-ı Halidiyye)*.³ The prayer addressed Halid bin Zeyd—"Peace be upon you, O Companion of the Messenger of Allah"—and asked for his intercession on behalf of those who visited. At the bottom of the prayer Ünver made a note to himself that the prayer was "to be read on visiting the holy tomb." Beneath the passage he included four stamps of the seal of the tomb's attendant (*türbedar*) and added a final explanation: "The seals which are given in the holy tomb of His Excellency Halid. They dip them in water and then drink the water as an offering [*nezr, Ar. nadhr*]."⁴

The fact that Ünver chose to make a note of this specific act suggests how important water was to the act of visiting Halid bin Zeyd's tomb. Although Ünver never precisely identifies the well, it is likely that the water was taken from the tomb itself, offered to visitors by its then-attendants Şemsettin Efendi or his son Refik Özgül.⁵ Persons, prayers, and a place brought into relation. This is one enactment of place.

But crucially, this act of place making depended on a material substance: water. Pilgrims visit the tomb of Halid bin Zeyd, offer their prayers, arrange their bodies in gestures of respect, and drink from the water provided by the tomb's attendant. Pilgrims were linked to this place through their encounters with water.⁶

You find water in many places in Eyüp. It flows from the faucets in the inner courtyard of the mosque. It flows from ablution fountains in the mosque's outer courtyard. It flows through wells and cisterns. It flows through old streambeds, though these are largely lost from view. But water never exists on its own; it requires objects and infrastructures to make it accessible in particular ways. Water is offered, sold, and shared; it leaks, links, springs, and sustains.

Through water, Eyüp is linked to many places and times. There are fluid connections to Istanbul, Ottoman geographies, and the broader world of Islam. Water is the matter of life. As the Qur'an teaches, and as is often inscribed on Ottoman-era fountains, "From water every living thing" (*Min al-ma kul shayyin hayyin*): "Have those who disbelieved not considered that the heavens and the earth were a joined entity, and We separated them and made from water every living thing? Then will they not believe?"⁷ In addition to this work of connection, water bears witness to the wonder of creation.⁸ As Annemarie Schimmel notes, "Water not only has the power of purifying people externally, but also becomes—as in other religious traditions—a fitting symbol for the purification of hearts. Water is constantly quaking and moving—that is . . . its act of exalting the Lord in unison with all other creatures."⁹ Beyond water itself, the Qur'an provides reference to a fluid vocabulary including the sea (*bahr*), the river (*nahir*), and springs (*aynan*).¹⁰ These forms of water flow through a range of stories, most of all in reference to the creation of the world but also in key encounters such as that between Moses and Khidr.¹¹

However, those stories were often shared across and between multiple communities. For example, stories about Khidr both "spanned great distances and became not only an example of cross-cultural contacts, but the very embodiment of both the distances between cultures and the ways in which they intersect."¹² Water—both as a material substance and as something about which stories are told—is woven into histories of cross-cultural and interreligious encounters in Anatolia and the Middle East.¹³

Yet for water to circulate through human worlds, it requires infrastructures: vessels, pipes, fountains, bottles, cups. It requires social relationships to maintain those infrastructures: tomb attendants, municipal workers, friends. For this reason, geographers and others have long been interested in how the relationship between humans and water is mediated by social and technological systems.¹⁴ Elsewhere, scholars of religion and material culture have explored the capacities of "sensational forms . . . relatively fixed modes for invoking and organising access to the transcendental [that offer] structures of repetition to create and sustain links between believers."¹⁵



FIGURE 6. Visitor drinking from a fountain in the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan, May 2014.

This chapter brings those arguments together by focusing on Eyüp’s “fluid stories,” a concept that takes inspiration from the etymological link between the word *rivayet* and the qualities of flow, transmission, and connection associated with water. As Mehmet Efendioglu notes, “The term *rivayet* [Ar. *riwāya*], which has in the dictionary meanings of ‘to water, to drink deeply from a spring; to transmit,’ is used with the meaning of ‘transmitting, through a document, hadith and similar reports [and] attributing them to the one who transmits or undertakes [that act].”¹⁶ Beyond the etymological link, the concept encourages us to consider water’s simultaneous movement through stories about Eyüp and through its material infrastructures. Water’s capacity to mediate makes it a key substance for this place of Islam, but this capacity is only religiously appropriate when water’s mediating role becomes invisible.¹⁷

I make two linked arguments. First, water is important to Eyüp because it links multiple places, times, people, and registers.¹⁸ These include links between the tomb of Halid bin Zeyd and the well of Zamzam in Mecca, between the present and centuries-old traditions of healing waters, between people who drink water and those whom they have lost, between states of illness and health, and between the mundane world of human affairs and a world of the divine.

Second, water’s capacity to mediate and sustain these links makes it an object of contestation. Because water is “bound in intimate and more distant relations with other persons through shared material habits and habitats,”¹⁹ it plays an important role in creating a community of Muslims. At the same time, because water can be

so easily shared, its use (or misuse, as the case may be) generates anxieties about practices that seep through the boundaries between Muslim and non-Muslim, between appropriate and forbidden forms of practice. Rather than argue that there is a fixed “Muslim” or “Islamic” understanding of water, this chapter explores some of the ways that Eyüp’s fluid stories help to make this a place of Islam.

I organize the chapter according to the infrastructures that make water available in Eyüp. In doing so, I hope to highlight both relationships shared across multiple sites and the ways that these sites’ uses can diverge. Despite being a common substance, water—and the fluid stories it carries—is not a single thing.

THE WELLS OF ZAMZAM

Among the many priceless objects housed within the tomb of Halid bin Zeyd, there is a small well. Covered with a marble stone (*bilezik taşı*) and still possessed of a wooden pulley to draw water up from the cistern below, this is likely the well whose water was translated into Süheyl Ünver’s journal in 1920.²⁰ Although there are many wells in Istanbul, this is one of the few known for sharing a source with the well of Zamzam in Mecca. Rather than point to the physical impossibility of such a hydrologic relationship, we are better served by taking the claim seriously: how do the waters of Zamzam help us understand the geographies of Islam differently? Precisely because water connects in unexpected ways, it reminds us that even imagined geographies rely on material substances—mediums—to instantiate shared practices, meanings, and the places linked to them.

The most common story of Zamzam runs like this: The Prophet Abraham brought his wife, Hagar, and son, Ismail, to Mecca, where he left them. Near death from thirst, Hagar and Ismail were rescued by the divinely aided discovery of the well of Zamzam.²¹ Today the well of Zamzam in Mecca is located within the precincts of the Masjid al-Haram and is still associated with healing properties.²² As several hadith report, the Prophet stressed the importance of drinking the water of Zamzam not simply in order to slake one’s thirst but also as a kind of worship.²³ Yet beyond Mecca itself, there are several sites around the world that have come to be considered as having “zamzam” water, including the Great Mosque of Kairouan in Tunisia and the tomb of Hacı Bektaş in central Anatolia.²⁴

It is not clear when the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan came to be associated with the well of Zamzam. However, an inscription commemorating Sultan Ahmed I’s rebuilding of the tomb of Halid bin Zeyd in the early seventeenth century suggests that the association between Eyüp Sultan and Mecca was already established by that time. Mehmet Nermi Haskan’s history of Eyüp includes several stories (*rivayetler*) that have been transmitted about the well. In one story, the friends of Halid bin Zeyd dug a spring here after burying him, after which the Byzantines turned it into a well. In another story, the daughter of a Byzantine emperor suffering from an affliction of the nerves (*sinir hastalığı*) was cured by washing with

the water of this spring after seeing the water in a dream. Because of this spring's healing powers, it came to be known as an *ayazma* (holy spring).²⁵

Precisely because *ayazma* are so often associated with Greek Orthodox sites of worship, it might seem strange to speak of *ayazma* in Eyüp. By and large, Eyüp's wells today are rarely identified as *ayazma*. However, Eyüp's hydrologic topography is in some respects an inheritance from the district's Byzantine history. Prior to the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, this district was known as Cosmidion, after the construction of a church and monastery dedicated to two saints, Cosmas and Damian, known for their power as healers.²⁶ The monastery was a well-known destination for both residents of Constantinople and visitors to the city.²⁷

While it is not precisely clear where the monastery was located, the district of Cosmidion became what is now known as Eyüp. Given the role that water played in the Byzantine traditions associated with Cosmidion, it is highly likely that at least some of these waters were known as *ayazma*, even if they are not called such today. For example, Süheyl Ünver, quoting from Evliya Çelebi, mentioned an *ayazma* known as the Küplüce Ayazma that once sat on a high hill above the road to Kağıthane, surrounded by trees.²⁸

Indeed, one could draw Eyüp into a constellation of *ayazma* still found around contemporary Istanbul, including examples found in neighborhoods traditionally associated with Istanbul's Greek-speaking population (Rum), such as Zeytinburnu's Church and Monastery of St. Mary of the Fish (Balıklı Meryem Ana Rum Ortodoks Manastiri)²⁹ and Ayvansaray's Church of St. Mary of Blachernae (Meryem Ana Kilisesi).³⁰

To be clear, this is not to say that the well in the tomb of Halid bin Zeyd is really a "Byzantine" shrine. Such a description mobilizes the chronotope of origins discussed in this book's introduction and tends to reproduce an understanding of places as being only defined by internally coherent and consistent essences. Rather, it should call our attention to the persistence of *ayazma* in Istanbul, and the capacity for this devotional geography to both change and remain.³¹

Ways of knowing did not map neatly onto stable positions of "Christian" and "Muslim." Indeed, foreign, non-Muslim visitors to Eyüp during the nineteenth century similarly mentioned the relationship between the well in the tomb and the "famous well of Zemzem [sic] at Mecca," a belief that "[added] to the sanctity of the spot, and augment[ed] the vigilance with which the approaches [were] guarded."³² Another English-speaking visitor in the 1830s similarly described the presence of "miraculous water . . . drawn up in silver buckets, and presented to the faithful in vases of the same metal."³³ Those who were healed by the "salutary qualities" of the well would leave "a part of [their] dress as a votiva tabula: and these rags of superstition are seen over holy wells in Turkey, as they are in Africa, Ireland, and other parts of the world."³⁴ In the case of the latter, the observer mapped Eyüp Sultan onto a broader geography of superstition—Turkey, Africa, Ireland—that coincided with the contours of English imperialism.



FIGURE 7. Zamzam water for sale near Mosque of Eyüp Sultan, May 2013.

Yet knowing the well in the tomb to be associated with Zamzam is not simply an abstract, intellectual relationship. As Ünver's opening note makes clear, this relationship was tangible and embodied. That affective relationship continues to resonate today.

One afternoon in Eyüp in 2013, for example, I was sitting with Serdar, a deeply pious man who often spent time in Eyüp's various *türbe*. Our conversation that day turned to the ritual practice of drinking from the faucets in the mosque. As someone who had once worked in the tomb of Halid bin Zeyd itself, he declared that there was, in fact, a key difference between the water that flowed from the faucets in the courtyard and that available in the tomb itself. The courtyard's water, he said, was simply municipal water, but as for the water that came from the well inside the tomb itself, that was zamzam water.

Serdar was by no means alone in making that connection. Conversations with other interlocutors and a variety of news reports also highlight the relationship between the well in the tomb and the well of Zamzam in Mecca. A restoration project that closed the tomb between 2011 and 2014, rendering the well off-limits to visitors, briefly generated controversy when some worried that the restoration work would disrupt the well's supply of water, mixing it with the system of canals that Istanbul's water agency (İSKİ) had built to manage the district's runoff.³⁵

During my fieldwork it was particularly ironic that even though the well inside the tomb had been closed to the public because of the restoration project, visitors to Eyüp Sultan could purchase small bottles of "authentic" zamzam water from vendors in the vicinity of the mosque, who stocked prayer beads, headscarves, Qur'ans, and a range of other religious paraphernalia.³⁶ The zamzam water had thus come to connect Eyüp to Mecca in a slightly different form. These small

bottles were sometimes distributed at some of the more expensive restaurants around the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan during Ramadan. These restaurants' sense of distinction came from their provision of zamzam water to those able to afford their relatively expensive iftar meals.

The zamzam story of Eyüp Sultan encourages us to think about the geographies of Islam differently. Instead of imagining the world of Islam as a "universal" and these local sites "as so many queer particularities that should be either eliminated or protected," we could ask instead how it is that unconnected localities "sometimes [enter] into provisionally commensurable connections."³⁷ This zamzam geography, to stretch Annemarie Mol and John Law's formulation, is fluid, one whose continuity is secured not by its fixity but by its capacity for gradual change.³⁸

THE FOUNTAINS OF THE INNER COURTYARD

Even though some are never able to drink from the well inside the tomb itself, everyone who visits the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan can drink from the four fountains located in the mosque's inner courtyard. While many major Ottoman-era mosques have a source of water in their courtyard—most often an ablution fountain (*şadırvan*)—the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan is slightly different. Instead of being filled with a central *şadırvan*, its inner courtyard is filled with a small fenced-in plot of earth, from which grows a large poplar tree.

At each of the four corners of the fenced-in plot is a small fountain decorated with the imperial seal (*tuğra*) of Sultan Selim III and a *sikke* associated with the Mevlevi Sufi order.³⁹ Sometimes referred to as the Fountains of Need (Hacet Çeşmeleri) or Fountains for Marriage Prospects (Kısmet Çeşmeleri), these fountains are frequently used by visitors to the mosque and are woven into the broader patterns of visitation.⁴⁰ Some people will visit the four fountains in sequence, while others will drink from only one. Many people use the small metal cups chained beside each spigot, but others cup their hands and bend low to drink. Others bring empty plastic water bottles to take the water home. For a few, the drinking is less important than the act of opening and closing each spigot in turn.

Like the stories of zamzam, these contemporary encounters with water in the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan have a long history. For example, a 1954 article describing Eyüp Sultan as the place where "the troubled find their comfort" points this out.⁴¹ The author—probably male—boards a ferry from central Istanbul to Eyüp. On the ferry the author observes a group of young girls (*genç kızlar*) laughing and joking, discussing dancing, Hollywood artists, and their upcoming social engagements. On disembarking from the ferry the author loses sight of the girls but finds them again in the mosque itself. The girls, now quiet and respectful, pray in the mosque's courtyard before circling the plane tree, opening and closing each of the four faucets in sequence. "Those who open the faucets," the author observed, "will be proposed to" (*açanların kısmeti açılmış*).⁴²



FIGURE 8. Fountains in the inner courtyard of the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan, October 2012.

The waters of these fountains have thus become woven into gendered expectations about fertility and marriage. As with the stories of zamzam, these fountains' relationship to the future predates the twentieth century.⁴³ The gendered dimension also complicates how we read the sources, as the observers of the practices are almost invariably men; their observations thus become a way to identify gendered forms of difference. As one American observer described the scene in 1913, “[The women] raise their heavy veils and bathe pale, delicate faces in the marble basins, then pause before the grille and stand in silent prayer, outstretched palms upturned for the blessing of Allah.”⁴⁴ Although this particular observer described these women as an exotic curiosity, there are likely other instances in which proper devotional practice is also linked to judgments about where and how women should move through the mosque and tomb.

Moreover, although discussions of these fountains almost invariably frame this act of drinking water as something unique to the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan (and, by extension, the tomb of Halid bin Zeyd), water and devotional practice are often woven together across Turkey.⁴⁵ Similarly, there is also evidence that encounters with the future—such as praying for marriage—similarly persist.⁴⁶ In offering these observations, my aim is not to say that what happens in the mosque is exactly what happens at other sites across Turkey today; neither is it to characterize devotional practices today as essentially fixed or unchanged. However, there are suggestive parallels between the devotional relationships with water in Eyüp Sultan and those typically related with more “rural” practices of Islam.⁴⁷ To date,

many of these dynamics seem to have escaped attention in discussions of Islam in contemporary Istanbul.

WELLS ON THE MARGINS

Beyond the central mosque, there are several other wells found in Eyüp. These wells are—or were—on the “margins.” While their marginal position is sometimes the result of physical location, it has more to do with the kinds of devotional activities that take place beside them. Their ongoing presence suggests forms of enchantment that continue to circulate through Istanbul today.

One of the wells most frequently described is one that was reputed to help people find lost or missing things. Evliya Çelebi’s account of Eyüp is the one most frequently drawn upon, and it has been circulated widely in newspaper columns and other publications, both with and without attribution.⁴⁸ The well was located somewhere on the large hill that rises behind the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan. In one essay, published in 1941 in the magazine *Yedigün*, the author related this version of Çelebi’s story:

Were one to lose something, they ought to first perform their ablutions and then perform two *rak’as* (Tr. *rekat*) upon the *musalla* beside the well. Then, after reciting a Fatiha and gifting its reward to the Holy Spirit of His Excellency Joseph (blessings upon him), they ought to call into the well’s opening, “*Ey sahib-i pîr!* For the love of His Excellency Joseph the Loyal, what happened to my relative or my child or this lost thing of mine?”⁴⁹

The well, Ahmet continued, was supposed to answer. A second version of the story, written by Münevver Alp in the 1960s, includes a similar set of details:

Those who lose something, who haven’t heard for a long time from one missed, who wonder whether a wish will come true used to go to the well of intention [*niyet kuyusu*] in Eyüp Sultan. They’d leave their homes having resolved to go and having performed their ablutions [*niyetli ve abdestli çıkarlar*] and as soon as they entered Eyüp Sultan, they’d visit the *türbe*, and standing in front of the Window of Need wish for true perception [*basiret*] for their heart and eyes. After, they’d reach the wishing well by ascending the narrow and steep path with the cemetery on either side.⁵⁰

On the one hand, we could pass off these references to Evliya Çelebi as mere myth, records of an age long since passed. On the other hand, the repeated references to Çelebi’s story suggest that there is something enduring about wells like this one. Moreover, these wells are not unique to Eyüp. The shrine complex of Merkez Efendi in central Istanbul also has a well-known “wishing well” (*dilek kuyusu*) attached to it.⁵¹ These wishing wells and the stories attached to them highlight the capacity of water to link the registers of lost and found, there and here. The importance of these wishing wells across Istanbul prompts us to consider how water provides a sense of orientation in a disorienting city. Finally, these wells also

suggest forms of devotional practice that do not map neatly onto a landscape of mosques and other official sites of Islam.

Yet despite the ongoing importance of these sites, they also exist on the margins of “accepted” religious practice today. Most often, practices of visiting wells are castigated as examples of superstition (*hurafe*, Ar. *hurafat*) and novelty (*bidat*, Ar. *bid’ah*). During my fieldwork between 2011 and 2013, I would occasionally become party to conversations about the “wishing well” supposedly located in Eyüp. The existence of any such well was universally denied by the staff who worked in the vicinity of the mosque. “There’s nothing like that” (*Öyle bir şey yok*), they would tell people when visitors approached them in the mosque.⁵²

On one occasion I was speaking with an acquaintance in the courtyard of the *sıbyan mektebi* where I taught several days a week. A woman entered the courtyard and asked us if we knew where the wishing well and the “door of repentance” (*tövbe kapısı*) were. My acquaintance replied, “You don’t need to go anywhere at all, so long as the Surah at-Tawbah is in your heart.” “Besides,” he added, pointing at the mosque, “you’re here, [where] there’s a glorious Companion [*koskocaman sahabe var*].” His point was clear: there was no need to go looking for these other superstitious things.

However, there was indeed a well. A short way down the road from the *sıbyan mektebi* and the mosque there sat a small metal box in the courtyard in front of the tomb of Mirimiran Mehmet Ağa. Painted black and secured by a metal padlock, it seemed somewhat incongruous in the otherwise empty courtyard. When I first arrived in Eyüp, its presence had been pointed out to me by Ali, an imam at one of the local mosques who had grown up around the center of Eyüp. There’s a well under there, he told me, that people used to drink out of. When we were kids, he added, we even used to pee in there until the municipality came and covered it up.

Although Ali didn’t offer the exact date that the well had been covered, it likely followed the municipal electoral victory of the Welfare Party in 1994. As I detail in the next chapter, this project of policing superstitious forms of devotional practice was linked to the restoration of the district’s historical religious fabric. Covering the well and thus physically preventing people from drinking its water was connected to an attempt to cleanse the district of inappropriate and unclean things.⁵³

Even though the well was covered and locked, it continued to be a site for furtive devotional practice. Small groups—often, though not always, women—would gather around the well in the evenings or at night, and especially during the month of Ramadan. In some cases people simply faced the well while offering their prayers. At other times, however, someone might stand on top of the box itself, turning and turning until they grew dizzy.

People who chose to pray beside the well often attracted negative attention from other passersby. One afternoon in 2013, for example, I was sitting with my

acquaintance Serdar in the tomb of Mirimiran Mehmet Ağa, where he was working as an attendant collecting small donations. A man donated a few liras, and Serdar handed him a receipt. The man walked out but quickly poked his head back in, saying, “Just thought you should know, there’s a woman out there”—pointing in the direction of the covered well—“praying” (*namaz kılıyor*).

Serdar jumped up and glanced out the window. The woman had quickly finished her prayers and was already walking away. He stepped out and called politely, “*Hanım efendi*, what were you doing? Do you know that there’s no benefit to praying there?”

When he came back inside, I asked him, “Does that happen a lot?”

“Yes,” he replied. “There are some people who even still want to light candles, which we know is absolutely not a part of Islam; that’s a part of Christianity, as you know.”⁵⁴

Istanbul has long been a city of shared devotional geographies. Although its Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities each claim distinct sacred sites, there are also places where those boundaries can leak.⁵⁵ Eyüp is one such place. Nineteenth-century non-Muslim visitors often mentioned that the mosque itself was closed to non-Muslims; to be able to drink from its fountains was a privilege reserved for Muslims. However, the marginal character of Eyüp’s other wells makes possible other forms of devotional encounter. For some—like Serdar—this leaky boundary provokes anxiety and the desire to sharply separate between “Christian” and “Islamic” practices and places.

Yet Serdar’s concern also speaks to a broader debate between Muslims over the appropriateness of mediation. There are a variety of terms that circulate through these debates, but two especially important terms are *shirk* (Tr. *şirk*) and *tawassul* (Tr. *tevessül*). The former, commonly translated as “idolatry,” is forbidden because it involves associating God with other divinities.⁵⁶ *Tawassul*—typically translated as “intercession”—is often associated with the capacity of saints or the Prophet Muhammad to advocate for the community of believers on the Day of Judgment.⁵⁷ Yet both terms share a common interest in mediation. In the case of the former, idolatry plays out when believers ascribe divinity to the mediating substance, person, or material; in contrast, intercession is permissible because the materiality of mediation disappears “in the act of conveying something . . . in order to redirect attention to what is being mediated.”⁵⁸ From the perspective of *tawassul*, any blessings associated with water are the result of God’s grace and nothing more.

These debates about Eyüp’s waters and wells signal water’s capacity to connect people with lost objects, distant places, and an unknown future. This capacity speaks to water’s role as a “semiotic form” in Eyüp, a “material manifestation that makes [an understanding of Islam] available to, interpretable, and, in most cases, replicable by other people.”⁵⁹ People can share fluid stories precisely because the water is material, tangible, in and of the world.

PROVIDING WATER, MAKING PIETY MATTER

A short distance from the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan is another form of water: the *sebil* of Mihrişah Valide Sultan.⁶⁰ *Sebil* can carry a range of meanings in Turkish, including a sense of “road” or “path” that underpins an explanation of one’s actions, as in *fi sebilillâh*, on the path of Allah.⁶¹ More often, however, it refers to a specific type of urban institution: a building staffed by an individual (or individuals) who distribute water for free to passersby.⁶² The *sebil* played an important role in urban life across the Muslim world, but they became an especially prominent part of cities in the Ottoman Empire in general and Istanbul in particular.

Motivations for building a *sebil* were complex. Political power and patronage were one important part of the story. In Istanbul, these *sebil* were often located in visually or symbolically prominent locations, thus communicating and reinforcing the position of those who endowed them.⁶³ In the case of the complex of Mihrişah Valide Sultan, it was located at the intersection of two important roads: the main road that followed the Golden Horn back in the direction of central Istanbul and the short road that led between the water and the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan. It thus stood along one of the primary roads that would have channeled visitors to the mosque and served as a backdrop for a new sultan’s public investiture. However, more than simply expressing Mihrişah Valide Sultan’s power and authority, this *sebil* also provided a shared infrastructure for urban citizenship, one that may have facilitated a common urban experience based on “practices, rituals, and habits.”⁶⁴

Yet *sebil* were also devotional acts, an especially noteworthy instance of “ongoing charity” (*sadaka-i câriye*), a term that refers to acts of charity whose benefits continue indefinitely.⁶⁵ Suggestively, the word for “ongoing”—*cariye*—is etymologically associated with the flow of a stream, highlighting another way that fluid stories move through both discursive and material worlds. These acts of enduring charity could take diverse forms, including the building of a road or bridge, the planting of fruit trees, the endowment of a school or mosque, or even the raising of a good child.⁶⁶

Today the *sebil* stands dry. The reasons for its closure were complex. The establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 led to the wholesale reorganization of the charitable system that had managed complexes like that of Mihrişah Valide Sultan.⁶⁷ In the 1930s and 1940s, Istanbul municipal officials also worried that many of these public water systems were vectors for diseases and bacteria like typhoid fever and *E. coli*.⁶⁸ At the same time, *sebil* and other Ottoman-era buildings were defined by some as objects of the past without a place in a modern city.⁶⁹ From one point of view, this form of piety no longer flows.

However, there are still ways that the *sebil* persists in Eyüp. Were you to walk the path from the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan to the top of the hill that rises behind it, you would pass a gleaming marble grave about halfway up the hill. The grave is that of Mahmud Esad Coşan, the former leader of the İskenderpaşa Community



FIGURE 9. Detail of *sebil* of Mihrişah Valide Sultan, December 2012.

(*Cemaat*).⁷⁰ Coşan passed away in 2001 in Australia, but his body was returned to Istanbul. At any time of day there may be a few people sitting at the edge of the well-maintained plot, reciting a portion of the Qur'an or simply offering a Fatiha for his soul. Most passersby, however, encounter the grave by means of an old man with a trimmed white beard, an easy smile, and a prayer cap on his head.

He calls out, a slight accent shaping his vowels: Water, free of charge, freeeeeeee of charge. *Su bedava, bedaaaaaaaaava*. As people slow, he hustles one, two, three small plastic cups of water into their hands. If they protest, saying they could never drink all that water, he smiles and presses one more into their hands. Don't worry, he says, give it to someone else. Thank you, these passersby say. May Allah be content, others respond, *Allah razı olsun*. Regardless of how they phrase it, the spirit is the same: an expression of gratitude for the giving of water.

For the old man, giving water away is a devotional practice, what Christiane Gruber has aptly called an act of "securing good."⁷¹ He is the caretaker for Mahmud Esad Coşan's grave, a duty that deliberately recapitulates older traditions of the *türbedar* (tomb attendant). In addition to distributing water, he tends the flowers planted on the grave and polishes the marble until it is sparkling clean. Distributing water and thus recapitulating the functions of a *sebil*, albeit in a different form, continues to serve as a pious act for this man and for many of those associated with the İskenderpaşa Community.

GIFTS OF WATER AND CEMETERY ECOLOGIES

Encounters with water provide one means for people to share an experience of and with place. Sometimes, as in the case of the fountains in the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan, drinking the water becomes a means to share in the sacredness woven through Eyüp Sultan; in other cases, as with the wells at Eyüp's margins, sharing water generates anxieties about definitions of "proper" Islam. Yet there is a final, less noticed form through which water is shared: the small troughs or cups carved into the gravestones of Eyüp's cemeteries.⁷² Known as both *kuşluk* (derived from *kuş*, bird) and *suluk* (derived from *su*, water), these objects collect rainwater for the animals who live in the cemetery.⁷³

Cemeteries are typically thought of as places of human social relations, but as a range of scholars have come to argue, cemeteries also function as key sites for non-human ecologies.⁷⁴ The cemetery rising from the back of the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan is filled with nonhuman species: there are redbuds and cypresses, rose bushes and trees of heaven, crows and pigeons, dogs, cats, and rodents. Some of these ecologies are maintained through accident and improvisation, but these *kuşluk* and *suluk* signal an intentional effort to care for other species.

Scholars of Istanbul have recently begun to consider the relations between humans and nonhuman species from a variety of perspectives.⁷⁵ Christiane Gruber, for example, has looked at Ottoman-era birdhouses attached to mosques as



FIGURE 10. Feeding pigeons near the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan, June 2012.

“articulat[ing] an ethics of engagement with nonhuman others.”⁷⁶ Similarly, there is a growing body of scholarship on the place of nonhuman species within Islam.⁷⁷ Eyüp’s cemeteries have been and continue to be an important interface between human worlds and divine, animal, and natural worlds that exist alongside. How is that interface created and sustained? In part, the provision of water might be one way that an ecology of care is sustained.

CONCLUSION

According to the story [rivayete göre], some of these waters extend back to the times before Istanbul was captured by the Turks five centuries ago.

—AHMET SÜHEYL ÜNVER, “CONCERNING POPULAR KNOWLEDGE OF THE HEALING QUALITIES OF SOME OF ISTANBUL’S BITTER AND SWEET WATERS”

Istanbul is a city defined by its multiple densities. Two of the most important are its stories and its waters. Indeed, it is striking how frequently Istanbul’s stories mention water, and how any discussion of its waters will make references to the city’s stories, as with the epigraph that begins this section. By placing stories and water in conversation, this chapter has followed how water and story combine to make Eyüp a place of Islam. Examining both water’s central role in devotional practice in Eyüp and debates over its capacity to sustain connection helps us think about the geographies of Islam in four overlapping ways.

First, water provides a rich point of departure for understanding how places are formed both through embedded practice and symbolic relationships that link those places to elsewhere. We cannot understand the importance of Zamzam to Eyüp, for example, without considering the well of Zamzam in Mecca. Yet water also links places to the past. Some of Eyüp's waters derive their importance from their connection to deeper histories, some of which trace the contours of the district's Byzantine past. Places are not hermetically sealed boxes but "articulated moments . . . where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself."⁷⁸ Focusing on water also challenges the assumption that the Mosque of Eyüp Sultan is an essentially "urban" site. Kimberly Hart has usefully called our attention to the persistent urban bias in scholarship on Islam.⁷⁹ When we follow water, we see that it brings ostensibly "rural" practices into the city in unexpected ways. Rather than seeing "urban" Islam as the default, we might think in terms of fluid stories to help us imagine the relationship between the urban and the rural differently.

Second, storytelling is a key practice through which people define shared places of Islam. Scholars have done well to consider the role that genre, narrative, and print culture play in these projects and have called our attention to the importance of shared modes of writing, reading, and interpretation.⁸⁰ But water might be thought of as a different kind of semiotic form, one that can be shared between many different people in ways distinct from books, manuscripts, or cassette tapes. It is water's capacity to be shared widely that often makes it such an object of contestation and concern.

Third, water is also interesting because it is so deeply interwoven with broader discussions about charity, care, and mutual responsibility. Providing water in Eyüp, whether in the form of Mihrişah Valide Sultan's *sebil* or in the form of an attendant distributing water beside the tomb of Mahmud Esad Coşan or in any number of other ways, is an act that constitutes social relationships.⁸¹ Like any number of other contexts, the place of water has shifted in far-reaching ways over the course of the past century. The development of a municipal water system and the expansion of private water delivery have brought benefits, but they have also transformed how many in Istanbul today interact with water. Perhaps bringing our focus back to water, stories, and Islam will encourage us to think about other forms of enchantment and relationship that might bind people to their city and each other in different ways.

Fourth, Eyüp's fluid stories ask us to think about the multiple ontologies of water. Rather than thinking of water as a single substance—say, two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen—following water along its various stories and infrastructures asks us to consider both common qualities and the ways that water is encountered differently. Water never exists apart from the infrastructures and

objects through which it becomes accessible and ingestible: cups, ewers, beakers, troughs, wells, fountains, springs, and more. Similarly, what water is depends in part on how people know it. Thus Süheyl Ünver's brief essay asks us to consider the different modes—that of the people (*halk*) and that of the hydrologist—through which water was defined, known, and ingested.⁸² Ünver's article suggests that these different ways of knowing “healthy waters”—and thus enacting water in this place—were multiple, one perhaps existing alongside each other.

In the second part of the book I turn from these practices of storytelling to a second mode of making Eyüp a place of Islam: building. As readers will notice, many of the themes that I introduced in this section reappear, albeit in slightly different form. Water shows up in the chapter on Ramadan; stories about Halid bin Zeyd continue to matter; and, as we see at the beginning of the next chapter, the story of Eyüp's transformation during the 1990s begins with the case of a curious fountain.