Faith in Water, Water in Faith

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1 Introduction

And We made from water every living thing.
Q 21:30

When offered the opportunity to guest edit this volume of *Material Cultures in the Muslim World* on the topic of water, I was humbled and honored, but also apprehensive. Water is ubiquitous throughout the Muslim world, just as it is across the globe—contextualized within the Islamicate world. However, it was imperative for this volume to go beyond the omnipresent paradigm of religiosity and examine water from a multiplicity of approaches. *Faith in Water, Water in Faith* is meant to convey that message: the human race requires water to survive, and as a species, we hold faith that water will be ever-present. For most in the industrialized world, open a tap and water flows. In turn, the sacred nature of water in Islam must be acknowledged. Therefore, in keeping with the vision for the journal, this volume views water through an interdisciplinary lens with consideration of the diverse and wide-ranging aspects of social and cultural history, politics, and technology across the Muslim world, temporally and spatially.

“Water is a basic and absolute element of life whose wise use is emphasized in Islamic teachings. It is also a moral obligation on one’s part to conserve water because it is meant to perpetuate life on Earth” (Naiz, 2010). Within the Quran and hadiths, there are countless references to water. The sanctity of water is expressed time and time again, but the work of water is not neglected. Similarly, as the reader moves through the articles in this volume, the productive, powerful, and potent role of water across time and space is explored, from intricate and ancient water systems sustaining life in arid climates to mechanisms of control for self-aggrandizement. The development of hydraulic technologies and water management systems are also examined, along with the cultural forces and social implications at play. The work of water is not simply technologies and irrigation systems; contributors to *Faith in Water, Water in Faith* situate water as a literary trope and artistic expression through fables and legends, zoomorphic forms, and engraved objects, all imbued with meaning.

Dr Filiz Çakır Phillip’s detailed analysis of a thirteenth-century jug from Mosul provides not only an examination of its form and function but also illustrates the fluidity of language and borders (contemporary and constructed) occurring during this time. “A Humble Vessel for the Water of Life” reveals an object engraved with intent. The vessel, housed at the Aga Khan Museum, bears inscriptions in Arabic and Persian. Further, Dr Çakır Phillip connects the inscriptions with divine attributes, heroic tales, and the search for eternal life that would have been understood by any wealthy patron or court.
In “Fantastic Fountains and Where to Find Them: A Re-examination of the Textual and Material Evidence on Liquid Architecture from the Medieval Islamicate World,” Dr Federica A. Brolio brings together numerous textual sources inextricably linking, primarily, descriptions from tales of ʾAlf Laylah wa-Laylah to highly stylized animal forms as watersources throughout the medieval Muslim world. Dr Brolio’s essay utilizes archaeological findings, art historical writing, and literary prose to recreate the extraordinary waterscapes of palace architecture.

The necessity for water to build and sustain a society is understood, and therefore, drinkable water is the greatest gift one can give. Charitable structures, known as sabils, provided potable water to the public and became an integral part of the urban landscape from ca. 596/1200 throughout much of the Muslim world. Hammams (public baths) and ablution fountains were also noted as pious gifts to the public from the ruling or wealthy classes. Although the intentions are debatable, either strictly for charity or raising the donor’s status, these acts still provided the greatest gift, water.

2 Access to Clean Water Is a Basic Human Right

On 28 July 2010, through Resolution 64/292, the United Nations General Assembly explicitly recognized the human right to water and sanitation and acknowledged that clean drinking water and sanitation are essential to the realization of all human rights.

UNDESA, 2010

Reinforcing the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs resolution, the World Health Organization called on the Member States “to ensure that national health strategies contribute to the realization of water – and sanitation-related Millennium Development Goals (WHO, 2010) while coming in support to the progressive realization of the human right to water and sanitation,” in May 2011 (WHO, 2011). The director-general pushes further and calls upon all to mobilize in support of relevant UN water-related initiatives, working in unison to address this growing international crisis. Yet, in a 2019 report published by the WHO, 785 million people lack access to a basic drinking-water service, including 144 million people who are dependent on surface water (WHO, 2019). This crisis has only worsened since then – estimates exceed 1 billion people – and access to clean water, with its necessary life-sustaining qualities, remains out of reach to much of humanity. Lack of access to clean water and sanitation is responsible for the transmission of deadly diseases, including cholera, diarrhea, dysentery, hepatitis A, polio, and typhoid across the globe.

In addition to NGOs, namely the UN and WHO, I would be remiss not to discuss the humanitarian work of the Aga Khan Agency for Habitat (AKAH) and their flagship initiative, the Water and Sanitation Extension Program (WASEP), which began in 1997. Having partnered with over 400 rural communities throughout Pakistan, WASEP has developed water sanitation systems that are run and maintained by the local community. This model not only provides clean water but also offers water independence and livelihoods for local populations. Furthermore, in areas where WASEP systems have been incorporated, there has been a 60% reduction in water-borne infections. Similar investments from AKAH in India and Afghanistan have witnessed analogous positive results.

Within the framework of water projects in Southeast Asia, Prof. James Wescoat’s article, “Water and Work in Mughal Gardens and Landscapes,” reveals the complex role of water in material culture. Prof. Wescoat contextualizes Mughal gardens and their
waterworks through a study of human and animal labor, and what their labor meant politically and economically without losing sight of the significant spiritual aspects of water in Mughal garden design.

In Dr Nicolas Morelle's essay, "Naldurg Fort, Deccan, India: Dam, Fortifications, Palace," we remain in Southeast Asia – specifically the Deccan region of India – but take a different approach toward the water, highlighting the interplay between water, architecture, defense, and warfare. Aside from tremendous inequity in accessing potable water, it has been weaponized through acts of aggression and war. In history, warring factions, governments, and rulers have used water control and access to demonstrate power and authority. During violent acts, including the destruction of water infrastructures, namely wells and dams, rival factions have gained ground in combat and decimated local communities (Kohler, 2020). Water scarcity leaves populations vulnerable in many ways; the opposite aggression, water inundation, leaves people equally destabilized and at risk.

The weaponization of water in disputes is not relegated to a distant past. For a brief historical moment, the action was called out and considered taboo, "... water became embedded in an international enterprise to delegitimize inhumane warfare and protect civilians and the environment. Rather than an object to be used at will in conflict, water was flagged as warranting restraint" (Grech-Madin, 2021). This humane endeavor, introduced by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), was short-lived if ever fully recognized by international actors (ICRC, 1949 and 1977). Far too many recent hostilities and wars have demonstrated how deliberate choices of state and non-state actors have led to needless accounts of suffering and death (Breslin, 2002).

In "Falaj communities in Oman – Techno-socio-economic complex, legal aspects and ethnohistorical observations from Birkat al-Mawz, al-Ḥamrā’, and Misfāt al-‘Abriyin", co-authors Dr Birgit Mershen and Prof. Soumyen Bandypadhyay present a thorough and thoughtful analysis of the socio-economic exchange, indeed reciprocity, inherent in water distribution, irrigation, jurisprudence, and oasis communities in Oman. Grounded with historical specificity, Drs Mershen and Bandypadhyay, through extensive documentation of the falaj system, note that the technology pre-dates Islam in Oman and has continued into the Islamic period, sustaining agriculture and providing drinking water in the arid environment of the Gulf region. As a natural hydraulic technology for water distribution, the falaj system relies heavily on climate. If rain does not fall, the source of the falaj – whether a qanat-falaj, falaj ʿaynī, or other falaj technology – a highly equitable system, also fails.

Today, climate change with its associated water scarcity endangers humanity writ large. As discussed above, clean and fresh water is vital for life to prosper. Current models indicate our water supply to be at a critical breaking point due to climate change (Schewe et al., 2014). The universal impact of water scarcity cannot be overstated. Without water security, oasis communities – such as those discussed in the essay by Drs Mershen and Bandypadhyay – towns, cities, countries, and continents begin to fail. Left unchecked, the result of climate change on sustainable water accessibility presents graphic indicators of failure, creating both scarcity and inundation, with devastating outcomes on a global scale (Goling, 2016). In keeping with the vision of this journal and having defined material culture widely, Water in Faith, Faith in Water presents the physical presence of monuments and artifacts, and that they are not only materials but artistic creativity, identities, memorial expressions, and traditions (Pradines, 2021).

I am greatly indebted to Prof. Stéphane Pradines for allowing me the opportunity to guest edit this volume on such a timely and critical topic. Furthermore, I thank the authors for their contributions to the study of material culture in Muslim societies; Ms Kira Intrator, Aga Khan Agency for Habitat; Ms Kylie Gilchrist for helping with
organization and editing; and the editorial board of Material Cultures in the Muslim World; along with Brill’s team, especially Teddi Dols, editor for the Middle East & Islamic Studies, Alexander Khaleeli, copy editor, Peter Groen, production editor Journals, and Maurits van den Boogert, publishing director for the Middle East & Islamic Studies. Before closing, I would like to dedicate this volume to two of my long-time mentors and dear friends, Dr Johanna Movassat and Mr. András Riedlmayer. Without their mentorship and support over the years, I would not be where I am today.

About the Author

Dr Sharon C. Smith is an associate researcher with the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT. Previously, Smith served as founding director of the Aga Khan Documentation Center at MIT, Curator for the Middle East and Africa at Arizona State University, and Visual Resources Librarian for Islamic Art at Harvard University.

References


Notes

1. Dr Filiz Çakır Phillip, curator, Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, Canada.
2. Dr Federica A. Broilo is a lecturer of Islamic Art in the Department of Communication Sciences, Humanities and International Studies at the University of Urbino (Carlo Bo), Italy.
3. In Arabic, یُٓتَلُّبُ للهْ َوَبِنَةٍ, translated in English as One Thousand and One Nights, and transliterated as ‘Alf Laylah wa-Laylah.
4. سَيْبِيل, transliterated as sabil or sebil; plural, سَيْبُلُ or subul.
5. For an overview of the Aga Khan Agency for Habitat’s projects, see https://www.akdn.org/our-agencies/aga-khan-agency-habitat.
7. James Wescoat is Professor Emeritus of the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT. Prof. Wescoat has long been involved in the documentation, production, and study of water systems in Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on India and Pakistan, from Mughal gardens to the present day.
8. Dr Nicolas Morelle is an associate researcher of LA3M, CNRS, Aix-en-Provence, France. An archaeologist and geographical surveyor, Dr Morelle specializes in the military architecture of Europe and Persianate India.
9. Dr Birgit Mershen is a research associate at the Seminar for Oriental and Islamic Studies, Ruhr-University, Bochum. Professor Soumyen Bandypadhyay is the Head of the School and the Sir James Stirling Chair in Architecture at the Liverpool School of Architecture, United Kingdom.
10. As noted by the authors, the root of falaj (فَلاَج) comes from the Arabic word “to split.” The falaj system ensures sustainable water sharing within the community.