Buildings and other architectural spaces articulate the separation of Islamic believers from non-believers in ways that parallel, yet are not quite the same as, legal and doctrinal designations. In the context of the Islamic Rum Seljuk (1077–1307) and Ottoman Empires (1299–1923) that once ruled the region, followed by the Republican Turkish State (1923–present), this has sometimes become an architectural division distinguishing who is perceived as Muslim from who is ‘non-Muslim’. This has not simply been a matter of creating buildings that have welcomed some groups and individuals but barred others from entering.¹ This distinction also includes the division of the greater community of Muslim believers from non-believers, and a more opaque category of controlling community expectations and understandings of acceptable spirituo-religious behavior. These definitions are contentious and their spatial embodiment articulates tensions that are negotiated in various ways.

Islamic practice in Anatolia is not monolithic, nor has it been in the past. This diversity amongst Muslims is expressed in the architectural record, particularly if we include structures built in ephemeral materials, in the provincial regions beyond the immediate reach of the capital. The communities that have contributed to this religious and architectural variety have sometimes found themselves at odds with the leaders and advocates of majority practice, although a study of the movement of ideas and the intertwining of religious lineages reveals the pitfalls of arguing for strict binaries as well as for denominational uniformity. The Alevi communities of Turkey and its bordering nations give expression to this diversity within Islam. The term Alevi is generally used to refer collectively to a number of groups with a common structure of spiritual and family lineages, who hold related beliefs and ceremonies and self-identify as Muslims in spite of eschewing certain common Muslim practices.² The word Kizilbash, ‘red head’, was also used to refer to the ancestors of today’s Alevis during the Ottoman Empire, appearing as a term in government documents as well as in nineteenth-century European anthropological literature.³ Alevi recognition of certain aspects of Shi’ism, their particular devotion to the Prophet Muhammad’s (d. 632) son-in-law Ali Ibn Abu Talib (d. 661), and the reputation held by Alevis for unsanctioned and secretive practices has created a Muslim Other within a Muslim-ruled society. Aleviism is thought to have arrived in Anatolia as early as the thirteenth century, and the Sunni majority has often viewed the Alevis as heretics, or even as practitioners of a non-Islamic religion, during the last 500–700 years. This Othering therefore spanned the Rum Seljuk and Ottoman periods, and resulted in the inclusion of Aleviism as a

¹ Spaces designated for religious education or prayer assembly exemplify the ways in which architecture can create physical divisions through walls, portals and enclosed courtyards, signage, cordoning, and guard stations that manifest excluded precincts with associations of sacrality, privilege, and even legal rights.


³ ‘Red heads’ refers to the red, gored headgear worn by the Kizilbash. The term was widely replaced by ‘Alevi’ in the twentieth century.
banned sectarian practice during the closure of religious orders and institutions that accompanied the formation of the Republican Turkish State.

The research for this project has relied on oral histories and anthropological accounts of Alevism, the author’s interviews with Alevis and site visits to extant architecture surviving from the past three centuries in Alevi communities in Turkey, as well as comparisons with other forms of Turkish Muslim religious architecture. Documentation of Ottoman attitudes towards the Alevi-Kizilbash appears clearly in the early sixteenth century, when the Sunnite Ottoman Empire had a strict anti-Kizilbash policy due to that community’s ties to Shi’ism and allegiances to the enemy Safavid Empire (1501–1722) of neighboring Persia; while sacred precincts are datable through oral histories to the same period, the architectural record is more limited. This chapter assembles the pilgrimage sites of Eyüp Sultan and the tekke (Sufi lodge) and cemetery of Karyağdı in Istanbul, a building in the village of Dağyurdu formerly used for the communal Alevi religious ceremony known as the cem, and the Cogi Baba cem evi (‘house of the cem’; pl. cem evleri) and tomb in the Sivas Province, to examine the specific approaches of this Muslim minority towards their religious precincts.6

1 Alevi Sacred Precincts and ‘Tactics’

There are clear contrasts that can be made between what some Alevis refer to as the Sunnis’ ‘mosque culture’ and Alevi use of buildings for assembly and pilgrimage.6 The Alevi people and their beliefs have a strong relationship to the Anatolian landscape, which draws connections to an historical geography of natural features, village settlements, and entombed saints that configure a pattern of pilgrimage. Alevi sacred precincts, both those shared with other Muslims and those unique to the Alevi community, can elucidate these connections and showcase Alevi approaches to their tensions with state-sanctioned Islam.7 The architecture of Alevi communities is not generally the specific cause or locus of these tensions, but many aspects of the interpretation and visibility of these structures is a direct result of the Anatolian socio-political and religious environment in which Alevis live.

Alevi architecture articulates varied interpretations of Islamic practice, if not so much a direct contest over specific sites, by demanding ‘tactical’ approaches to protecting and maintaining their community during times of persecution. Some sites are remote, unnoticeable, or indistinguishable from other local building types. We also see examples of sacred precincts that succumb to

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5 Site visits to cem evleri and ziyaretler spanned the period 2008 to 2011. Interviews were conducted by the author in Istanbul, central and northeastern Anatolia and amongst the Alevis of London, primarily in 2009 and 2010. In many instances, discussions took place in a group setting. Some Alevis continue to feel discomfort in revealing their identity, although this is less common now than even a few years ago. For these reasons, the names of several individual speakers have not been included. The guidance, observations and teachings imparted were received with great appreciation.

6 ‘Cami kültürü’ (mosque culture) is a term used frequently in conversations with the author to refer to the more dominant Sunni Islamic surroundings in which Alevis live.

7 While the Turkish Republic has been vociferously committed to a national government and legal system that functions autonomously from religious rulings, the election of the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi or AKP (Justice and Development Party) in 2007 allowed for an increased role for the expressly Sunni Muslim Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı (Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs), as well as an opportunity for high-ranking leaders to express their own support of Sunni Islam. The secularism promised by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic in the 1920s, appeals to Alevis who continue to hope for increased religious freedom in a secular state. This is in contrast to the state support and favoritism shown to Sunni Islam during the Ottoman Empire, which periodically resulted in Alevi persecution.