THE CAIRENE SABIL: FORM AND MEANING

The object of this study is to determine the connections between Islamic doctrine and sabil building, and particularly to demonstrate that the characteristic features of the sabils in Cairo have their sources in the Quran and the hadith. Studies thus far have concentrated solely on architectural description and have overlooked the symbolic meaning of these structures.

Because from ancient times mankind has always been aware that water is essential to life and survival and that it plays a part in every biological process, not surprisingly it has also played a major role in a variety of mythological and religious cosmogonies. When the Ionian philosopher Thales of Miletus (624-545 B.C.) replaced the gods with natural law as the force governing all phenomena, he made water the central element in his theory. Even Newton in De Natura Acidorum assumed that all substances can be reduced to water.

All civilizations have also necessarily been preoccupied with the problems of supplying water, which they have solved by building aqueducts, cisterns, and wells, and devising other means of ensuring a steady water supply. The question then arises, do structures in the Islamic world that provide water simply represent yet another supply system, or do they display features inspired by the shari'a and, because of that, represent an architectural type that is distinctly Islamic?

A quick survey of structures comparable to the sabils in the ancient civilizations that once occupied the area covered by Islam is needed before the question can be answered, for first we must ascertain whether any connections existed between ancient and Islamic sabils, or whether the latter were entirely the creation of Islamic civilization.

In pharaonic Egypt¹ wells were dug in the Nile basin, in the oases mainly for irrigation and in the desert for drinking water. Among the last, the major known achievements of the Egyptians are the wells dug during an expedition by Mentathotep IV to the Hammamat Valley; a well inside the temple built by Siti I on the road to the gold mines in the ʿAlaqi Valley, and the water station, with its hieroglyphic inscriptions, on the Red Sea in the Gazuz Valley which is attributed to the Twenty-sixth Dynasty. Neither that inscription nor Egyptian papyri mention any religious dictum about the charitable offering of water to the thirsty, however, as is the case in Islam.²

The importance of water for survival was also well recognized by the ancient Mesopotamian and Persian civilizations, whose water god was named Ea.³ Although there is indisputable evidence that both peoples built wells, cisterns, and canals to supply palaces and houses — as, for example in Sargon palace in Khorsabad (722-705 B.C.)⁴ — there are no known references to their having built them as an act propitiating a god that would make their structures comparable to the sabils built in Islamic towns.

Water-supply systems built in ancient Greece, for example the sixth-century B.C. pipeline in Athens ordered by Pisistratus and the so-called well with the nine canals,⁵ were built of finely cut stone and plastered on the inside. The Greeks also used earthenware pipes that were sometimes glazed. There were public fountains as well as public and private cisterns, but again no evidence that their construction had any particular religious significance.

The Roman Empire, of course, had an extraordinarily well-developed water supply system, both public and private. Aqueducts were constructed to transport water from high places, and lead pipes carried it to secondary cisterns, fountains, baths, and other public buildings.⁶ Romans collected their water from public fountains; in some places, water consumption per person reached fifty gallons a day. The water supply elements were formed as lakes or fountains, or sometimes both in one composition; they were adorned with columns and sculpture. Wealthy Romans also built fountains in the atriums and patios of their villas, executed in marble or granite and decorated with bronze nymphs. In Pompeii water was used as a decorative element in living spaces: bronze lion’s heads
were installed in mosaic-decorated niches from which water flowed. In the palace of Augustus, water ran from a niche into a large rectangular basin surrounded by columns. Clearly the Romans appreciated clear running water, and used it to help decorate the monumental buildings they constructed to commemorate their heroes and honor their dead. They were probably the first to use it for symbolic purposes. Western cultures continued the practice of building fountains in central squares as a public service and as decoration for a public place.

The word sabīl—derived from the verb sabala, "to let fall, drop, to let hang down, to close eyes or to shed tears"—means "a road, or a path." In the Quran it is used both literally and metaphorically. An example of its literal use can be found in surah 3:97, wa-kitābī 'ašā al-nāsī hijī ṣalā al-baytī man istaṣ'a'ā taliyhi sabīlān ("And pilgrimage to the house is a duty unto Allah for mankind, for him who can find a way thither"). An example of metaphorical use is fi sabīlihi, "on behalf of God and his religion," that is, to fight against the infidels as a religious duty (jihād), to seek knowledge, and to perform charitable acts ordered by God. Another is surah 25:27; yā laytanī ittakahadhtu ma' a al-Rasūli sabīlān ("Ah, would that I had chosen a way together with the Messenger [of Allah]"), where sabīl means "in the Prophet's way, the true way." Another is surah 4:15, 'aw yaj'ala Allāhu lahunna sabīlān ("Allah appoint them a way"), where sabīl is used in the sense of "acquiring an object," or "a way out of difficulty or trouble." The expression ibn al-sabīl, meaning literally, "son of the road," has the metaphorical meaning al-musāfir alladhī unqūṣ'a bihi, that is "tramp." The use of sabīl to refer to a public drinking building or fountain is probably derived from its meaning referring to a work done on behalf of God.

Scholars have given all sorts of reasons for the use of water in an architectural setting. Grabar sees it as a visual composition for the embellishment of inner and outer spaces: "For instance water in the shape of streams, a pool or fountains in fancy gardens around or within buildings serves to identify it as a palatial setting rather than a sanctuary." Jones regards it as an element for environmental treatment in secular buildings or for ritual washing in mosques: "Its use for decoration as well as coolness is best seen in house and palace architecture rather than in religious buildings, where the paramount function of water is for ritual purposes." Eleanor Sims, in her study on markets and caravanserais, notes that "an assured source of water was needed for drinking, bathing and ritual ablation."

According to Ardalan and Bakhtiar, "Water, cold and wet, is symbolically the giver of life, who is merciful in sending down rain, the element that purifies and returns life to its primordial state. In Islam water also symbolizes the descent of revelation; in ablation through water, the Muslim is symbolically returning into his primordial state." Ardalan's interpretation marks an important step in defining the symbolic meaning of water, but his sole support for it is a reference to a study by Corbin.

For the Muslims the Quran and Sunna are the only sources of law. They define for them their way of life—behavior, manners, rules for business and for social relations. Verses in the Quran upon which this belief is based include surah 6:38, "We have neglected nothing in the Book [of our decrees]," and surah 18:54, "And verily, We have displayed for mankind in this Quran manner of similitudes." Water was stressed in Islam not only because of its importance to the maintenance of life and the cultivation of land, but also because of the importance of ritual ablation and because of the numerous references to water in the Creation. Surah 21:30, "And We made every living thing of water, will they then believe?"; surah 24:45, "Allah hath created every animal of water"; and surah 25:54, "And He it is Who hath created man from water," clearly state that the omnipotence of Allah is revealed in the creation of all creatures from water.

Water also represents spiritual purity, as symbolized by ablation and the resurrection of mankind metaphorically expressed by references to fertility returned to fallow land. Examples are found in surah 25:48-49, "And We send down purifying water from the sky, that We may give life thereby to dead land, and We give many beasts and men that We have seated to drink thereof."

Offering water to pilgrims on their way to Mecca was already a custom in pre-Islamic times in the Arabian peninsula, for Mecca was a place of sanctity long before Islam. Surah 9:19 says, "Count ye the slaking of pilgrim's thirst and tendance of the inviolable places of worship as [equal to the worth of] him who believeth in Allah and the last day and striveth in the way of Allah? They are not equal in the sight of Allah. Allah guideth not wrongdoing folk." There are no verses directly exhorting the Islamic faithful to quench the pilgrim's thirst, however, but the hadith does include exhorta-