

Water

For Muslims, water is the secret of life and a blessing from God. In the Qur'an, God says '... and We made out of water every living thing.' (21: 30). According to Islamic law, it is forbidden to deprive anyone who is thirsty of water, even if the source is privately owned. According to the Hadith ('Sayings of the Prophet'), Muslims are partners in water, fire and grass – naturally occurring phenomena – that belong to all. While the right to water is an entitlement of every living being, there are water-ownership rules concerning land irrigation. For example, a well-digger gets to be the first to irrigate his land, after which water may be used in the surrounding area so long as it remains sufficient. This is usually an area of 40 cubits radius, a reserved area known as the haram. The same word is used to designate a sacred space, particularly a mosque. Harim, which is a variation of the previous word, and which passed into English as 'harem', is used to designate the part of the house to which access is forbidden, particularly the women's quarters. Throughout history, Muslim societies have worked on developing ways to maintain regular and sufficient water supplies. Like most societies the needs were diverse: drinking water, water for washing and ritual purification (wudu, ghusl), land irrigation and private and public facilities such as fountains, bathhouses and gardens. Because water was so central in the lives of most citizens, regardless of rank or social position, it was a source of inspiration for architects, engineers and craftsmen. Stretching from as far East as the borders of China, and to the West as far as the plateaus of Spain, many cultures and peoples came under the sway of Islamic civilisation, and it was the responsibility of the Muslim governor to ensure an adequate water supply for his people. Hydraulic machines were vigorously built and maintained, many of which continued to be used even after the advent of modern technology. As populations grew and cities expanded, maintaining an efficient water supply was often an arduous task, especially in the arid climate of many Islamic countries around the Mediterranean and beyond. During the Islamic period the disadvantages in climate and terrain were overcome by developing ingenious systems for water storage and transportation.



Sabil (Water Dispensary) and Kuttab (Qur'anic School) of 'Abd al-Rahman Katkhuda

Hegira 1157 / AD 1744
Ottoman
Cairo, Egypt



Small bucket

Hegira 8th century / AD 14th century
Nasrid
National Archaeological Museum
Madrid, Spain



Norias (nawa'ir) of Hama

Hegira 6th–10th century / AD 12th–16th century
Atabeg, Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Ottoman
Hama along the Orontes River, Syria