

# Namazgah as an anomalous architectural typology: Historicizing open-air prayer and interiority in Ottoman İstanbul

*Aykırı bir mimari tipoloji olarak namazgah: Osmanlı İstanbul'unda açık havada ibadet ve içselligi tarihselleştirmek*

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## Abstract

*Namazgahs – open-air prayer spaces widespread across Ottoman cities and travel routes – occupy an ambiguous position within architectural history. Despite extensive documentation and typological classification, they have largely remained peripheral to architectural theory, often treated as residual religious installations or inert heritage objects. This article argues that such marginalization stems not from architectural deficiency, but from the namazgah's resistance to dominant assumptions equating architecture with physical containment, interiority with volume, and sacred space with monumentality. Studying fifty-five namazgah sites from sixteenth- to nineteenth-century Ottoman İstanbul, the physical remains of which are still locatable within the contemporary city, the author reframes the namazgah as a flexible spatial framework rather than a discrete building type. Drawing on critical historiography and semantic analysis as well as a close examination of architectural constituents, typological constellations, and historical functions, the study demonstrates that namazgahs operate through relational assemblages and bodily practices that produce coherent spatialities without enclosure. Historically, they functioned not only as places of prayer but also as wayfinding devices, rest stops, gathering grounds, and sociocultural nodes embedded within landscapes of movement. By tracing the progressive reduction of these functions in modern contexts, the article shows how namazgahs have been transformed into symbolically sacred yet spatially inactive remnants. In response, it proposes the namazgah as a critical lens for rethinking an architectural interiority that is generated through orientation, relationality, and spatial inscription. In doing so, the study contributes to debates on architectural typology, sacred space, and design practices at the limits of enclosure.*

**Keywords:** Namazgah, sacred space, architectural typology, open-air prayer spaces, interiority.

## Öz

*Tarihsel olarak Osmanlı şehirlerinde ve seyahat yollarında yaygın olarak karşımıza çıkan açık hava ibadet alanları olan namazgahlar, mimarlık tarihinde muğlak bir konum teşkil eder. Kapsamlı bir şekilde belgelenmiş ve çeşitli tipolojik sınıflandırmalara konu olmalarına rağmen, bu yapılar bugüne dek genellikle kalıntı dini yapılar veya atıl miras nesneleri olarak ele alınarak mimarlık kuramının büyük ölçüde çeperlerinde kalmışlardır. Bu makale, bu dışlanmanın, mimari bir eksiklikten ziyade, namazgahın (mimariyi kapalı alanla, iç mekânı hacimle ve kutsal mekânı anıtsallıkla özdeşleştiren) hâkim var sayımlara gösterdiği dirençten kaynaklandığını savunur. Yazar, namazgahları, onaltı ila ondokuzuncu yüzyıl Osmanlı İstanbul'undan kalan ve fiziksel kalıntıları günümüzde hala erişilebilir olan elli beş örnek üzerinden inceler ve münferit bir bina tipolojisi yerine esnek birer mekânsal çerçeve olarak yeniden ele alır. Yöntem olarak eleştirel tarihyazımı ve semantik analizin yanısıra namazgahın mimari bileşenlerinin, tipolojik konfigürasyonlarının ve tarihsel işlevlerinin yakından incelenmesine dayanan bu çalışma, namazgahların, ilişkisel düzenekler ve bedensel pratikler yoluyla, kapalı bir mekândan azat olmakla birlikte kendi içinde hala tutarlılık sergileyen mekânsallıklar ürettiğini ortaya koyar. Tarihsel olarak namazgahlar sadece ibadet yerleri değil, aynı zamanda yön bulma araçları, dinlenme durakları, toplanma alanları ve hareket peyzajlarına gömülü sosyokültürel düğüm noktaları olarak da işlev görmüştür. Makale, bu işlevlerin modern zamanlardaki kademeli azalmasını izleyerek, namazgahların nasıl sembolik olarak kutsal ancak mekânsal olarak pasif kalıntılara dönüştüğünü gösterir. Buna karşılık, namazgahı, yönelim, ilişkisellik ve mekânsal kodlama yoluyla üretilen türden bir mimari içselligi yeniden düşünmemizi sağlayan eleştirel bir merceğe olarak ele almayı önerir. Böylece çalışma mimari tipoloji, kutsal mekân ve iç mekânın sınırlarını zorlayan tasarım uygulamaları hakkındaki tartışmalara katkıda bulunmaktadır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Namazgah, kutsal mekân, mimari tipoloji, açık hava ibadet mekanları, içsellik.

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## Introduction

Namazgahs – open-air prayer spaces found across the Ottoman geography – constitute a conceptually challenging architectural phenomenon. Despite their widespread historical presence across cities, landscapes, and travel routes, they occupy a curiously unstable position within the historiography of Islamic and Ottoman architecture. They are repeatedly documented in inventories (Özdamar, 1988; Tiryaki, 2005), encyclopedia entries (Arseven, 1970; Baysun, 1979; Ayverdi, 1989; Wensick, 1993; Diez, 1997; Bozkurt, 2006; Tiryaki, 2006), and regional surveys (Öztürk, 2010; Gökçe, 2013; Arslan, 2020; Şancı, 2020). Yet they remain relatively marginal to architectural theory and resist attempts at a stable typological classification. On the one hand, they appear to lack those qualities that conventionally qualify a spatial construct as “architecture,” such as physical containment, volumetric interior, and a coherent building envelope (Tanyeli, 1999). But they also produce a strong sense of interiority at the same time. This capacity becomes particularly visible in well-preserved examples such as the Azebler Namazgah (1407) in Gelibolu (Figure 1), where a minimal set of architectural elements organizes orientation, directionality, and collective gathering in an otherwise open landscape. As a result, the namazgah has tended to be treated either as a residual category within mosque architecture or as a minor religious installation peripheral to larger discussions of spatial production, urban form, and interiority.

This marginalization is not due to a lack of historical or material complexity. On the contrary, namazgahs have historically assumed a wide range of configurations, scales, and functions. They appear along pilgrimage and trade routes as wayfinding devices and rest stops; at the outskirts of cities as sites for Eid and funeral prayers; within recreational landscapes as gathering grounds; and, at times, embedded within dense urban fabrics through their association with fountains, cemeteries, bridges, or promenades. Architecturally, they consist not of a single form but of constellations of

discrete elements (e.g., qibla stones, sofas, mihrabs, minbars, fountains, trees, walls). Functionally, they have operated not only as places of worship but also as social, pedagogical, and infrastructural nodes. Yet these spatial, functional, and relational multiplicities have rarely been addressed beyond descriptive or classificatory frameworks.



**Figure 1. Azebler Namazgah (1407), Gelibolu. (Source: Author)**

Existing scholarship on namazgahs has therefore produced a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, the typology is exceptionally well documented: inventories enumerate hundreds of examples (Eyice, 1958; Derman, 1975; Özdamar, 2016; Tiryaki, 2010); classification systems organize them according to location, function, or architectural components (Genim, 1978; Özdamar, 1988; Akmaydalı, 1994; Orman, 2004; Öztürk, 2010; Tiryaki, 2010; Arslan, 2020); and regional studies continue to expand the geographical scope of known cases (Önge, 1969; Tanman, 1981; Kürüm, 2007; Yavaş, 2009; Bayraktar, 2012; Gürbıyık, 2018). On the other hand, these same studies tend to treat the namazgah as a trans-historical object, the meaning of which is mostly assumed rather than properly interrogated (Tanyeli, 1999). Consequently, the existing literature’s emphasis on preservation, theological function, geographic distribution, or stylistic variation has often resulted in a reductive understanding of the namazgah – which not only obscures the namazgah’s historical variability but also undermines its spatial and experiential capacity to operate at the intersection of movement, landscape, and social life.

This study addresses this gap by proposing a shift to conceptual and spatial analysis. It argues that the difficulty of situating the namazgah within established architectural categories is not a shortcoming to be resolved, but a critical condition to be examined. Rather than approaching the namazgah as a deficient mosque or a proto-building, the author proposes to read it as an anomalous spatial typology whose architectural significance lies precisely in its resistance to enclosure, fixity, and singular function.

Methodologically, the study draws on a combination of field observations, visual documentation, and morphological analysis of a broad sample of namazgahs. These are examined not as isolated objects, but as spatial systems embedded in larger territorial, infrastructural, and ritual networks. By historicizing the emergence of different namazgah configurations, the article seeks to demonstrate that the namazgah operates as a spatial marker (i.e., a device of orientation rather than habitation) through a form of spatial production that is situational rather than structural. Through this historical-critical examination, conducted primarily by way of examples from Ottoman Istanbul between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, the study ultimately aims to show that namazgahs offer an alternative way of thinking about architectural interiority, which does not necessarily depend on the production of an exterior boundary, but instead emerges through bodily orientation and relational assembly. To make this argument accessible beyond specialized discourse, interiority is approached here not as an abstract concept, but as a spatial effect that can be observed, described, and analysed through concrete architectural elements and practices. Thus, the focus here is on how specific architectural components work together to produce an experiential field that functions as an “interior” in use, if not necessarily in form.

The following sections first review the existing literature on the subject; then examine the semantic instability of the terms used to describe namazgahs; followed by an analysis of their constituent elements, configurations, and functional roles; to be completed by a discussion reflecting on

the namazgah’s broader implications for architectural theory.

## Literature Survey

Scholarly engagement with the namazgah dates back to the early twentieth century and has unfolded across several disciplinary trajectories, most prominently within art history, Islamic studies, architectural history, and heritage documentation.

### Early definitions and descriptive accounts

From the outset, the typology entered academic discourse primarily through encyclopaedic entries and lexicographic definitions in Western sources (such as the 1913/1936 editions of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*), where it was framed as an open-air prayer place associated with specific ritual functions such as Eid, funeral, or rain prayers (Burton-Page, 1993; Wensick, 1993; Hillenbrand, 1993; Diez, 1997). These early canonical texts established a descriptive baseline, defining the namazgah through its location outside settlements, its orientation toward the qibla, and its minimal architectural articulation. Much of the subsequent literature reiterates these canonical descriptions, often implicitly.

The first sustained body of work along this line of thought in the Turkish context emerged through art-historical entries (Arseven, 1966) and district surveys conducted in the mid-twentieth century (Eyice, 1958; Konyalı, 2021). These studies approached the namazgah as part of broader inventories of architectural monuments, particularly along historic routes or within specific neighbourhoods. While instrumental in documenting surviving examples and situating them within local histories, these contributions tended to treat the namazgah as a secondary or supplementary structure. The emphasis remained on identification, dating, and stylistic attribution, rather than on spatial logic or socio-functional roles.

## Typological and regional studies

From the 1970s onward, a more specialized literature began to form, authored primarily by architects, architectural historians, and preservation specialists, marking the emergence of the first explicit attempts to classify namazgahs as a distinct architectural typology. Various authors proposed categorization systems based on criteria such as location, auxiliary function, or architectural components (Derman, 1975; Genim, 1978; Özdamar, 1988). These efforts significantly expanded the analytical vocabulary surrounding namazgahs and demonstrated that they were neither accidental nor marginal constructions, but rather products of deliberate spatial practices transmitted across generations.

The most influential phase in this trajectory came with the proliferation of inventory-based and systematizing studies from the late twentieth century onward. Comprehensive surveys documented hundreds of namazgahs, particularly in İstanbul, often organizing them into increasingly refined typological grids (Akmaydalı, 1994; Özdamar, 2004; Orman, 2004; Tiryaki, 2005; Öztürk, 2010; Arslan, 2020). These works represent a major scholarly achievement in terms of empirical coverage and have become indispensable reference points for all subsequent research. At the same time, their classificatory ambition introduced a subtle shift: the namazgah was increasingly treated as a stable object whose defining characteristics could be exhaustively catalogued.

Parallel to these inventory-driven approaches, a smaller yet significant body of work began to address the namazgah from a more conceptual and linguistic perspective. These studies drew attention to the semantic overlap between terms such as musalla, namazgah, and eidgah, while emphasizing the difficulty of assigning fixed meanings to these categories across different geographies and historical periods (Tanyeli, 1999). By foregrounding language, ritual practice, and socio-cultural context, this line of inquiry – with which the present study most directly aligns itself – implicitly challenged the assumption that namazgahs could be

understood through a single trans-historical typological framework.

## Recent studies and expanding perspectives

Since the early 2000s, the literature has diversified further through focused case studies, restoration reports, and thematic investigations into:

- Fringe sites in İstanbul such as Çatladıkapı, Kuyucubaşı, Bulgurlu, and Veliefendi (Demirel İşli, 2013; Maden, 2014; Sarıdikmen, 2015; Erdoğan, 2021; Uğuryol, 2021)
- Other sites across Anatolia such as Bodrum, Aydın, Eskişehir, Konya, Samsun, Tokat, Sivas, Malatya, Diyarbakır, and Mar-din (Karpuz, 2006; Kürüm, 2007; Yavaş, 2009; Bayraktar, 2012; Yavuzılmaz, 2013; Demirarslan, 2017; Gürbıyık 2018; Arslan, 2020; Şancı, 2020; Açikel, 2022), and
- Balkanic examples from former Ottoman territories such as Kosovo and Macedonia (Xhibo, 2012; Gökçe, 2013; Acun, 2012).

While this expansion has enriched the empirical field and brought previously overlooked examples into view, it has also reinforced a fragmentation of perspectives. Many studies remain confined to narrowly-defined geographic or functional scopes, making it difficult to draw broader interpretive conclusions without reverting to generalized classifications.

Taken all together, this body of scholarship reveals a persistent tension between documentation and interpretation. On the one hand, namazgahs are among the most thoroughly inventoried yet least theorized spatial formations within Islamic architectural history, mostly subject to an object-centred and typological analysis. On the other hand, the predominance of descriptive, preservation-oriented, or functionally reductive approaches has tended to frame the namazgah either as a relic of a completed past or as a sacred site of worship – to be nostalgically preserved in either case. As a result, namazgahs are usually approached through what they are, rather than through how they operate as spatial environments.

The article addresses this gap by treating these limitations not as oversights to be corrected, but as indicators of a deeper conceptual problem. That is to say: The difficulty of fixing the namazgah within stable architectural, functional, or semantic categories suggests that it may be more productively understood as a historically variable constellation of practices and elements rather than as a discrete building type. The same difficulty also suggests that the problem is not simply terminological, but theoretical – in the sense of reflecting a broader limitation in architectural discourse within which interiority is often equated with enclosure. The study thus builds on the existing literature while moving beyond to reinterpret namazgahs as intentional spatial configurations that generate interiorities without enclosure, thereby contributing both to Ottoman architectural history and to broader debates in architectural theory.

## Material and Methods

The study adopts a qualitative, historically grounded, and interpretive research design that combines archival scholarship with in-situ spatial analysis. Methodologically, it is positioned at the intersection of critical historiography and material fieldwork, informed by phenomenological interpretation.

The methodological orientation of the study rests on three interrelated premises:

- Drawing on critical historiography, the study treats typology not as a fixed category but as a historically produced construct. Rather than asking what the namazgah “essentially is,” the research investigates how it has been described, assembled, used, and transformed across time.
- In contrast to volumetric or enclosure-based definitions of architecture, the study adopts a relational understanding of spatial production. Architecture is approached as a field of relations (e.g. between elements, bodies, orientation, and landscape) rather

than as an autonomous object. This perspective allows the namazgah to be examined as a spatial constellation rather than as an incomplete building.

- Informed by phenomenological and practice-oriented approaches, the study considers space as activated through bodily alignment, ritual gesture, and collective presence. The namazgah’s interiority is therefore examined not as a physical enclosure but as an experiential condition generated through orientation and performative repetition.

The empirical core of the study consists of fifty-five namazgah sites in Istanbul dating roughly from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, the physical remains of which can still be located within the contemporary city. These sites were identified through cross-referencing major inventories, regional surveys, and historical sources as well as field visits conducted by the author. A deliberate methodological decision was made to exclude namazgahs that are documented in archival inventories but are no longer extant in any material form (i.e., those that have completely disappeared without a trace). This delimitation is justified based on: a) the study’s emphasis on spatial logic and relational assembly (which requires direct engagement with material configurations), and b) the author’s interest in examining the tension between historical function and contemporary condition (which can only be meaningfully addressed through sites that retain at least partial physical presence). The selection of cases was thus guided by their state of preservation, typological diversity, geographical distribution, and documentation availability. This selective strategy does not aim at statistical representativeness, establishing instead a materially verifiable corpus that is suitable for spatial and morphological analysis and is large enough for identifying recurring patterns and variations.

Within this methodological framework, a systematic review of primary and secondary sources was conducted to identify dominant classificatory

schemes and recurring assumptions. Particular attention was paid to semantic ambiguities and to shifts in interpretive framing over time. Each of the fifty-five selected sites were visited and documented through photographic documentation, direct observation, schematic readings, and archival descriptions from existing literature. Rather than producing exhaustive measured drawings, the survey prioritized diagrammatic documentation, noting how elements interact spatially and how orientation is inscribed into the site. Building on field observations, the study conducts a constituent-based morphological analysis, instead of classifying namazgahs according to rigid typological grids. In order to do this, recurring spatial operators (such as location and topographical setting, orientation markers, ground articulations, vertical accents, water-related infrastructures, and threshold elements) were identified and the relationship between these operators were examined with the aim of tracing recurring patterns of assembly across examples in varying conditions. Finally, historical accounts, literary descriptions, and archival references were scanned to reconstruct the historically multifunctional roles of namazgahs, which were then compared with present-day site conditions observed during field visits. This comparative method enabled the identification of non-typological constellations as well as the mapping of these constellations as historically contingent configurations – rather than timeless categories and fixed classes.

The namazgah sites examined in this study present a wide spectrum of material states and intervention *histories*, ranging from those preserved, maintained, or restored in situ to others that have been partially conserved, reduced to fragments, or survive only as vestiges (see Table 1). More critically, a significant number of cases reveal complex trajectories of intervention, including reconstruction, relocation, reconstitution, and evocative reinterpretation. Such trajectories make it clear that namazgahs cannot be approached as unitary or stable entities; rather, each site constitutes a historically layered assemblage whose current condi-

tion is the outcome of successive and often heterogeneous transformations. In this sense, individual namazgahs demand to be historicized through the reconstruction of their own site-specific biographies, attentive to shifts in material fabric, spatial configuration, and locational context. This observation applies equally to those sites that appear relatively stable (i.e. preserved, conserved, or restored in situ) as their apparent continuity often conceals incremental or episodic interventions. However, given that such detailed documentation and classification are already partially addressed in existing inventory-based studies, and considering the limited space and thematic scope of the present study, these complexities are not analysed here in depth. Instead, they are acknowledged as a necessary framework for understanding the heterogeneity of the corpus and as a potential direction for future research.

As one final note: While the study is informed by a phenomenological sensitivity to spatial experience, its methodological emphasis is placed on the analysis of material configurations and their relational logic, as observed and interpreted by the author. This focus reflects a deliberate decision to foreground the spatial conditions that make such experiences possible, rather than to document them through user-based narratives at this stage. Nevertheless, incorporating experiential accounts from visitors, current users, and local communities would offer an important complementary perspective, particularly in relation to the lived production of interiority. Such an approach is being developed within an ongoing, extended research project that will address namazgahs through ethnographic and interview-based methods.

## Results

### Vocabulary, Semantics, and Conceptual Drift

The difficulty of capturing the namazgah within stable categories is reflected first in the semantic instability of the terms used to describe the namazgah.

**Table 1. Chronological list of fifty-five namazgahs, showing construction dates, later interventions, and current status (Prepared by the author).**

Construction Date	Repair Dates	Location	Namazgah	Current Status
15.yy	1624/5, 1715	Keçecipiri	Okmeydanı	Reassembled survival
15.yy	17.yy, 1935	Anadolu Hisarı	Anadolu Hisarı (Toplarönü)	Restored
1458-60		Salacak	Fatih Sultan Mehmet	Fragmentary remain
1546	1571, 2010	Kazlıçeşme	Kazlı Çeşme	Fragmentary remain
1548/9		Seyitnizam	Hacı Bayram Can	Reassembled survival
1550-51	1865, 1946-47	Bostancı	Çatalçeşme	Reconstituted fragment
1578/9	1609/10	Dolmabahçe	Hüseyin Usta	Relocated fragment
1585	1813, 1931	Yedikule	Hacı Evhaddin	Fragmentary remain
1586/7		Zeynep Kamil	Darü's-saade Ağası Mehmed Ağa	Reconstituted fragment
1600-01	1741/2, 1921/2	Ayrılıkçeşme	Ayrılık Çeşmesi	Conserved ruin
1617-18		Topçular	Sadrızam / Öküzcü Mehmed Paşa	Conserved ruin
1644/5		Davutpaşa	Mahpeyker Valide Sultan	Reconstructed presence
1653/4	1804	Selimiye	Müşahip Ali Ağa	Reconstituted presence
1658/9		Merdivenköy	Merdivenköy Mama Çeşmesi	Fragmentary remain
1659	1995	Gebze	Hünkar Çayırı	Conserved ruin
1660/1	1835	Kısıklı	Büyük Çamlıca / Subaşı	Fragmentary remain
1702/3	1806	Küçüksu	Mihrişah Valide Sultan	Reconstructed presence
1720/1		Çubuklu	Çubuklu	Fragmentary remain
1721/22	2010	Menzilhane	İbnül Emin Ahmed Ağa	Restored
1728/9		Karacaahmet	Ali Paşa	Fragmentary remain
1735/6		Defterdar	La'li Mustafa Ağa	Enclosed
1749/50	1972, 2005-14	Ortaçeşme	Beykoz Terazili Çeşme	Fragmentary remain
1752-53	1972	Ortaçeşme	Beykoz Orta Çeşme	Fragmentary remain
1753-54		Düğmeciler	Derviş Mustafa Efendi	Fragmentary remain
1761-62		Defterdar	Derviş İbrahim / Kuyubaşı	Relocated fragment
1763/4	1960	İncirköy	Sultaniye / Paşabahçe	Reconstituted presence
1767/8	1974	Salacak	Ayşe Hatun / Çiçekçi	Evocative reconstruction
1767		Veliefendi	Veliefendi Yeşiltepe	Reconstructed presence
1772/3	1960, 1975	Zühtüpaşa	Hacı Ömer Efendi	Relocated fragment
1779/80		Kadırga	Esmâ Sultan	Restored
1780	1800, 1838/9, 1961-76	Göztepe	Selamiçeşme / Ali Ağa	Relocated fragment
1786/7		Piyalepaşa	Kadınlar Çeşmesi / Nakşidil Valide Sultan	Restored
1791/2		Sakarya	Silahtar Ağa	Conserved fragment
1793/4	1930, 1996	Rasimpaşa	Ladikli (Çuhadar) Ahmet Ağa	Reconstituted presence
1794/95	1862, 2000	Zeynepkamil	Rodosluzade Ayşe Hatun / Duvardibi	Fragmentary remain
1811/2		Selimiye	Hafız İsa Ağa / Miskinler Tekkesi	Restored
1812/3	1966	Selimiye	Nevnihal Hatun	Anastylized fragment
1813	1874/5	Sultantepe	Paşalimanı / Hüseyin Avni Paşa	Restored
1814	1953	Defterdar	Münzevi Koca Ahmet	Fragmentary remain
1818/9	1843/4	Hasköy	Hüsrev Paşa / Hasköy Turşucu	Restored
1823/4		Selimiye	Hacı Mustafa Ağa / Selimiye	Fragmentary remain
1831/2		Kısıklı	Selami Ali Efendi	Fragmentary remain
1831/2		Bostancı	II. Mahmud Han + Bostancıbaşı Derbendi	Fragmentary remain
1839		Bahçeköy	II. Mahmud Bendi	Reconstructed presence
1839/40	1985	Vişnezade	Bezmialem Valide Sultan	Restored
1842/3		Yeşilköy	Sultan Abdülmecid / Yeşilköy	Preserved in situ
1844/5		Acıbadem	Tayfur Ağa / Baba ve Oğul / Acıbadem	Reconstituted presence
1845 öncesi		Zeynep Kamil	İbrikdar Hüseyin Ağa / Kapıağası Mevkii	Fragmentary remain
1878		Yıldız	Yıldız Sarayı	Fragmentary remain
1886/7	1988	Y. Dudullu	Adile Sultan	Restored
1887/8		Burhaniye	Nazif Paşa	Fragmentary remain
1894/5		Merdivenköy	Gözcü Baba	Vestigial remain
1905/6		Ortaköy	Mehmet Neşet Ağa	Reconstructed presence
1915/6	1984	Barbaros	Karacaahmet Şehitlik	Reconstituted fragment

Across Islamic geographies and historical periods, a dense and overlapping vocabulary has been employed to refer to open-air prayer spaces, often without clear distinctions or consistent usage.

Rather than constituting a problem of imprecision, however, this linguistic plurality offers an important insight into the conceptual and functional openness of the namazgah as a spatial practice.

At the core of this semantic field lie the terms *musalla* and *namazgah*, both of which broadly de-

note a place allocated for praying purposes (Wen-sick, 1993). *Musalla*, of Arabic origin, refers to a space where *salat* is performed, while *namazgah* – which is a Persian compound combining *namaz* (prayer) with the locative suffix *-gah* – functions as a direct translation of the same idea (Tanyeli, 1999). While these terms are often treated as interchangeable in modern scholarship, historical usage suggests that neither was restricted to a single spatial form. Instead both acquired additional meanings particular to outdoor and collective prayer practices (Akmaydalı, 1994; Kürüm, 2007). As these terms became associated with open-air settings, further semantic layers emerged. Definitions increasingly emphasized openness, scale, and episodic use, referring either to expansive prayer grounds outside settlements or to sites designated for specific collective rituals such as Eid or funeral prayers (Bozkurt, 2006). The introduction of more function-specific terms – most notably *eidgah*, derived from *Eid* (Hillenbrand, 1993) – did not resolve this ambiguity, but rather expanded the conceptual field. In many cases, *musalla*, *namazgah*, and *eidgah* were used concurrently or interchangeably, making it difficult to determine whether a given term referred to a distinct typology, a particular ritual function, or merely a situational use of space (Tanyeli, 1999).

This conceptual drift is further complicated by the proliferation of analogous terms employed both in scholarly literature and in popular usage – such as *set*, *seki*, *masjid*, *open masjid/mosque*, *suffe*, and *makam* (Özdamar, 1988). Some of these terms (such as *secdegah*) emphasize the act of prostration (Erdoğan, 2021), while others (such as *kiblegah*) highlight the direction of prayer (Tiryaki, 2005). Still others (such as *mastaba* and *dome*) foreground architectural aspects (Demirarslan, 2017), whereas terms like *Friday masjid* (Öztürk, 2010), *open-air mosque/masjid* (Kürüm, 2007), and *summer masjid/venue* (Şancı, 2020) underscore the temporal or climatic conditions under which worship takes place. Rather than converging toward a stable definition, this vocabulary reflects a persistent tendency to describe *namazgahs*

through partial attributes such as gesture, direction, surface, or occasion, each isolating one aspect of a spatial phenomenon that resists totalization. This semantic richness becomes particularly legible in the writings of Evliya Çelebi (Gökçe, 2013). In his descriptions, *namazgahs* appear alongside a wide array of terms that blur distinctions between worship, gathering, conversation, rest, leisure, and contemplation (e.g., *ibadetgah*, *sohbetgah*, *teferrüçgah*, *mesiregah*, *aramgah*, *niyazgah*, *mebedgah*, *ta'atgah*, *iremghah*, *çemenzar*, *lalezar*, *şükufezar*, *hiyaban*, and *drahtistan*). The adjectives he employs similarly emphasize openness, elevation, freshness, and pleasure as much as sanctity (e.g., *ferahfeza*, *koyah*, *mürtefi*, *müferrih*, *havadar*, and *hoşhava*). This lexical abundance does not only embellish the *namazgah* but also reveals a spatial condition that cannot be reduced to a singular religious function or architectural identity.

From a historiographic perspective, the persistence of this plurality challenges the assumption that *namazgahs* can be retroactively stabilized as a coherent, trans-historical typology. Attempts to impose rigid definitions (or to construct hierarchies between terms) according to a presumed architectural completeness risks obscuring the very qualities that enabled *namazgahs* to operate across diverse contexts. The overlapping and sometimes contradictory vocabulary that is used for defining the *namazgah* instead suggests that these spaces historically functioned as flexible spatial frameworks capable of accommodating variously shifting rituals, social practices, and environmental conditions. Recognizing this diversity is therefore a critical step in rethinking how *namazgahs* should be approached analytically. To understand how such multiplicity was materially supported, it is necessary to move from language to construction (i.e., from words to the architectural constituents through which *namazgahs* articulated space).

### Architectural Constituents and Spatial Logic

Despite their apparent architectural minimalism, *namazgahs* are rarely the result of accidental or improvised arrangements (Genim, 1976; Hillenbrand,

1993). Rather than consisting of a single, unified structure, they are composed through the deliberate bringing together of a limited set of architectural constituents whose relationships, rather than their formal repetition, generate spatial coherence. It is this compositional logic that situates the namazgah at the boundary between architecture and non-architecture.

At the most fundamental level, the namazgah is constituted by two indispensable conditions: a) *orientation toward the qibla*, and b) *the preparation of a surface suitable for prayer*. These conditions may be materialized in the simplest possible manner – through a single standing stone and a marked ground plane – or elaborated through more complex assemblages of architectural elements. Importantly, however, the addition of new elements does not produce a linear progression toward architectural completeness. Instead, each constituent operates as a spatial operator whose meaning and effect depend on its relation to others within a given constellation. As seen in Figure 2, the Ayşe Hatun Namazgah (1767/8), also known as the Çiçekçi Namazgah, survives in a radically fragmented condition, with only its qibla stone surviving. However, even in this evocatively reconstructed form, the combination of a qibla stone and a defined ground surface demonstrates how minimal architectural intervention can generate a coherent spatial field oriented toward prayer.



**Figure 2. Ayşe Hatun (Çiçekçi) Namazgah (1767/8), Salacak. (Source: Author)**

**The qibla stone** occupies a central role within this system. Positioned at the edge of the prayer area and aligned toward Mecca, it functions simultaneously as a directional marker and a spatial

threshold. By indicating orientation, it establishes a privileged axis within an otherwise open field; and by acting as a barrier (*sütne*), it secures the integrity of the prayer against the possibility of someone passing in front. As illustrated in Figure 3, this dual role is still clearly visible in the qibla stone of Nazif Paşa Namazgah (1887/8), which remains largely intact even if tightly squeezed between contemporary buildings and passing-by traffic, nevertheless still reinforcing directional alignment and spatial focus. In other examples, the qibla stone may stand directly on the ground, be elevated on a pedestal, or planted on a raised sofa. These variations do not alter its fundamental role but demonstrate the adaptability of the namazgah's spatial logic to different sites and conditions.



**Figure 3. Nazif Paşa Namazgah (1887/8), Küçük Çamlıca. (Source: Author)**

Closely associated with the qibla stone is **the sofa** – also referred to as *set*, *seki*, or *sahn* – which provides a level, clean, and demarcated surface for prayer. Unlike a mosque, the sofa does not define an interior volume; instead, it distinguishes a ritual ground from its surroundings through a subtle elevation, material differentiation, or edge articulation. Its proportions are typically wider than deep, reinforcing the lateral organization of prayer rows while maintaining openness toward the surrounding landscape. Variations in height – from being at the same level with the ground to half-elevated and fully elevated platforms – introduce further differentiation, often determining which additional elements may be incorporated into the namazgah constellation. As shown in Figure 4, this is evident in the half-elevated sofa of the Hacı Bayram Can

Namazgah (1548/9), combined as it is with a free-standing qibla stone and a mihrab embedded in the back of an adjacent fountain.



**Figure 4. Hacı Bayram Can Namazgah (1548/9), Seyitnizam. (Source: Author)**

In more elaborated examples, **the qibla wall**, which typically incorporates a mihrab niche, replaces or supplements the qibla stone. While this wall introduces a stronger sense of spatial definition, it rarely functions as a boundary in the conventional architectural sense. Its height and permeability maintain visual and environmental continuity with the surroundings, even as it reinforces orientation and ritual focus. In certain cases, the solidity of the qibla wall approaches that of an impenetrable façade, particularly in large-scale prayer grounds used for Eid or Friday prayers. Yet, even here, the absence of lateral enclosure prevents the formation of a fully encapsulated interior volume.

In other instances where no qibla wall exists, **the mihrab** may itself substitute or be carved into the qibla stone, embedded in the body of a fountain, or exist as a freestanding element. Some of these variations can be observed in the remains of the Anadoluhisari Namazgah and the Okmeydanı Namazgah (15th-17th centuries), both preserved in varying degrees of restoration – the former in its presumed totality and the latter in fragments (Figure 5).

The presence of **the minbar**, usually positioned to the right of the mihrab, signals the namazgah's capacity to host sermons and large congregational gatherings. Architecturally, the minbar introduces vertical articulation, visual prominence, and performative hierarchy into an otherwise horizontal spatial field. In some examples, domed or conical

kiosks, secondary staircases, or elevated platforms accompany the minbar, further diversifying its range of spatial possibilities and underscoring the fact that functional intensification does not necessitate architectural envelopment (also shown in Figure 5).



**Figure 5. Anadoluhisari Namazgah and Okmeydanı Namazgah (15-17th c.). (Source: Author)**

Other constituents such as **fountains, wells, and pools**, extend the namazgah's spatial logic beyond ritual practice. By providing water for ablution, drinking, and rest, these elements integrate bodily maintenance and social pause into the prayer environment. Their spatial relationship to the sofa ranges from mere proximity to immediate adjacency, or even direct integration – as in elevated (*fevkani*) namazgahs built on top of fountain reservoirs. Sometimes resulting in situations where the presence of the fountain overpowers the namazgah remains, such configurations nevertheless blur distinctions between infrastructure and ritual space, reinforcing the namazgah's role as a node within broader networks of movement and daily life. As shown in Figure 6, an adjacency of this sort is clearly visible in the Tayfur Ağa Namazgah (1844/5), mostly known as the Father-Son Fountain, where the full-bodied presence of the water reservoir appears like a freestanding building on its own and suppresses to a great extent the importance of the qibla stone which lies half-buried in a nearby flower bed.



**Figure 6. Tayfur Ağa Namazgah (1844/5), Acıbadem. (Source: Author)**

Equally significant, though often overlooked, are elements such as **trees** (*sayeban*) that provide shade and mark the site within the landscape. Acting as natural canopies, these trees contribute to spatial differentiation of the namazgah from the daily flow of life, just as their symbolic associations with axis, shelter, and continuity enhance the namazgah's perceptual presence. As illustrated in Figure 7, this condition can still be observed even in the completely reconstructed form of Mihrişah Valide Sultan Namazgah (1702/3), where the slightly elevated sofa, the adjacent square fountain (1806), and a prominent tree together create a layered spatial configuration that combines natural and constructed elements.



**Figure 7. Mihrişah Valide Sultan Namazgah (1702/3), Küçükusu. (Source: Author)**

When they are present, **stairs**, **ramps**, and **doorframes** further indicate and articulate varying degrees of access and orientation, often aligning entry paths with the mihrab axis. Notably, even when a doorframe is employed, it rarely implies enclosure; it rather stages a threshold that heightens the experience of spatial transition. Such articulations are evident in the remains of the Okmeydanı

(15-17th c.), Derviş Mustafa Efendi (1753/4), and Esmâ Sultan (1779/80) namazgahs which survive in varying states of preservation. As shown in Figure 8, stair elements not only facilitate access but also reinforce axial alignment and spatial sequencing within the otherwise open setting.



**Figure 8. Stair details from the remains of Okmeydanı (15-17th c.), Derviş Mustafa Efendi (1753/4), and Esmâ Sultan (1779/80) namazgahs in Keçeci Piri, Düğmeciler, and Kadirga, respectively. (Source: Author)**

Finally, **epigraphs** include information about the sponsor, builder, original building and restoration dates. They typically incorporate various ornamental forms as well as other textual excerpts such as poems or verses.

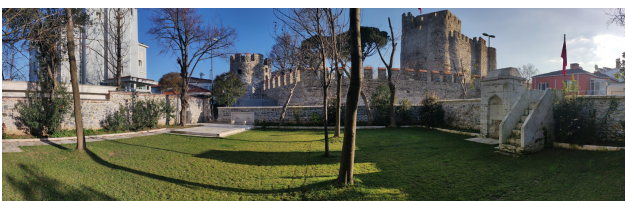
What unites these diverse constituents is not their formal similarity or repetition, but the consistency of their relational roles. Within a single namazgah, elements rarely repeat themselves; instead, each appears once, assuming a specific position within the spatial constellation. Regularity emerges not from modular replication but from recurring patterns of relationship across different examples. This relational logic allows namazgahs to accommodate a considerable variation while maintaining a recognizable spatial identity. Seen in this light, the namazgah operates through the strategic placement of minimal elements that structure orientation, pause, and gathering within open space. Understanding this spatial logic is essential for grasping how namazgahs could historically support a wide range of functions and social practices.

### Typological Constellations in Ottoman Istanbul

The architectural constituents and relational principles described in the previous section do not manifest uniformly across all namazgahs. Rather than forming a single typological model, they combine in different constellations shaped by location,

function, scale, and historical circumstance. Ottoman İstanbul offers a particularly productive field for examining these variations, not because it represents a normative condition, but because of the city's layered geography, infrastructural density, and long continuity of use. Within this context, namazgahs emerged in response to distinct socio-spatial demands, giving rise to identifiable yet adaptable typological constellations.

One of the most formally articulated constellations is **the mihrab-and-minbar type**, typically located outside city walls or at the margins of dense settlements (Akmaydalı, 1994; Tiryaki, 2010; Öztürk, 2010; Arslan, 2020; Derman, 2022). These namazgahs functioned as large-scale prayer grounds, particularly for Eid, Friday, and funeral prayers. Architecturally, they are characterized by a ground level or lightly elevated sofa (Derman, 1975), a substantial qibla wall incorporating a mihrab and a stone minbar positioned to its right. As seen in Figure 9, a notable example is the Anadolu Hisarı Namazgah (15-17th c.), where the remaining mihrab and minbar elements indicate a spatial configuration designed to accommodate large congregations. Despite the presence of elements commonly associated with mosque architecture, the absence of lateral enclosure and roofing prevents the establishment of a conventional interior. The emphasis remains on orientation and congregation rather than spatial closure of a building.



**Figure 9. Anadolu Hisarı Namazgah (15-17th c.), Beykoz. (Source: Author)**

A second major constellation is **the menzil type**, associated with travel routes connecting İstanbul to other regions, including pilgrimage paths toward the holy cities (Özdamar, 2016; Tiryaki, 2010; Öztürk, 2010; Arslan, 2020; Derman, 2022). Positioned at regular intervals along roads, these namazgahs operated as infrastructural nodes

within broader logistical networks that combined orientation, rest, and ritual. As illustrated in Figure 10, this condition is visible in the remains of the Çatalçeşme Namazgah (1550/1) and the Kazlıçeşme Namazgah (1546), both located along historical transportation routes in İstanbul while being preserved in the form of reconstituted or maintained fragments. Typically integrated with fountains or wells, the menzil type examples provided water, shade, and a marked prayer surface for travellers, caravans, and military units. In these cases, the namazgah's spatial logic extends beyond ritual performance to encompass bodily maintenance and pause within landscapes of movement.



**Figure 10. Çatalçeşme (1550/1) and Kazlıçeşme (1546) namazgahs. (Source: Author)**

Within and around the city's recreational landscapes, a distinct **recreation and excursion constellation** emerges (Derman, 1975; Özdamar, 2016; Tiryaki, 2010; Öztürk, 2010). These namazgahs were embedded in meadows, promenades, and waterside sites frequented during leisure outings, particularly in warmer months. The Veliefendi Namazgah (1767), now surrounded by dense urban development, provides a historically prominent example. As illustrated in Figure 11, the site retains its spatial organization despite its much-altered context, demonstrating how namazgahs could function as gathering points within social itineraries that included picnicking, conversation, and informal learning. Architecturally, such examples often feature a raised sofa, proximity to water, and shaded areas, reinforcing the namazgah's role as a mediator between worship and everyday social life.



**Figure 11. Veliefendi Namazgah (1767), Zeytinburnu. (Source: Author)**

Another recurrent constellation involves **namazgahs integrated with fountains**, either through direct attachment or spatial adjacency (Tiryaki, 2010; Orman, 2004). In some cases, the mihrab is embedded into the back of a fountain, with the prayer surface positioned immediately in front; in others, the qibla stone stands independently beside a water structure. As shown in Figure 12, this relationship is clearly visible in the Bezmialem Valide Sultan Namazgah (1839/40), where distinctions between ritual space and urban infrastructure are collapsed, situating prayer within systems of water distribution and public amenity.



**Figure 12. Bezmialem Valide Sultan Namazgah (1839/40), Valideçeşme. (Source: Author)**

**Elevated namazgahs** constructed on top of fountain reservoirs represent a further elaboration of this logic, stacking functions vertically (Derman, 1975; Orman, 2004). As illustrated in Figure 13, the Adile Sultan Namazgah (1886/7) exemplifies this arrangement, in its relatively preserved and restored condition, where a half-elevated sofa sits directly above the water reservoir.



**Figure 13. Adile Sultan Namazgah (1886/7), Dudullu. (Source: Author)**

More marginal yet conceptually revealing perhaps are **namazgahs associated with burial stones or cemeteries**, which often consist of little more than a qibla stone placed near a grave marker (Tiryaki, 2010). These sparse arrangements foreground the namazgah's role as a point of orientation and remembrance rather than congregation. As shown in Figure 14, this condition is evident in the Şehitlik Namazgah at Karacaahmet Cemetery, where the three-panel qibla stone (1915/6) survives in a flattened form next to *musalla* stones.



**Figure 14. Şehitlik Namazgah, Karacaahmet Cemetery. (Source: Author)**

Similarly, **covered or partially covered examples** (Kürüm, 2007) – sometimes referred to as *secdegah* (Derman, 2022) – remain exceptional within the Istanbul context, all the while introducing the possibility of limited roofing within a typology that is otherwise resistant to full enclosure. As shown in Figure 15, the La'li Hacı Mustafa Efendi Namazgah (1735/6), now fully enclosed, was originally covered only from above and flanked by fountains. This transformation highlights both the flexibility and the vulnerability of the namazgah form under changing historical conditions.



**Figure 15. La'li Hacı Mustafa Efendi Namazgah (1735/6), Defterdar. (Source: Author)**

What unites these diverse constellations is not their adherence to a fixed typological hierarchy, but their reliance on a particular logic of assembly. Each constellation mobilizes the same limited set of constituents (i.e., orientation markers, surfaces, thresholds, support elements) all the while responding to distinct spatial demands. Similarly, these constellations cannot be reduced to static categories as they overlap, hybridize, and transform over time, at the same time as they reflect changes in urban development, mobility patterns, and social practice. The overarching tendency of existing scholarship to treat these constellations as timeless categories risks flattening their historical specificity. When viewed through a historicized lens, however, it becomes clear that different namazgah configurations emerge in response to specific conditions: e.g., expansion beyond city walls, intensification of travel routes, cultivation of recreational landscapes, or shifts in funerary practice. Recognizing these conditions allows the namazgah to be understood not as a singular architectural type, but as a flexible spatial framework whose form and function are continuously negotiated through time (see Table 2). This typological plurality also helps explain the difficulty of assigning a single function to namazgahs.

## Functional Reduction and Contemporary Absence

The typological plurality outlined in the previous section corresponds to an equally complex field of functions historically assumed by namazgahs. Far from serving a single, fixed purpose, these spaces operated through overlapping roles that combined ritual practice with orientation, mobility, sociability, and everyday life (Tanyeli, 1999; Gökçe, 2013). Understanding this functional multiplicity is essential for grasping both the historical vitality of the namazgah and the conditions that have led to its contemporary marginalization.

## Orientation and Wayfinding

At its most fundamental level, the namazgah functioned as a **wayfinding device**. By marking the direction of the qibla within open and often unfamiliar terrain, it oriented travellers, pilgrims, and local inhabitants alike (Özdamar, 1988). This orientation was not merely geographic but also ethical and spiritual, aligning bodily movement with a broader cosmological order. This role is clearly visible in the Nakşidil Valide Sultan Namazgah (1786/7), located in Piyalepaşa and preserved in a relatively intact condition. As shown in Figure 16, the qibla stone, positioned on an elevated terrace, continues to function as a directional marker even within the dense and noisy environment of the contemporary city. In this sense, the namazgah's primary function was not to contain activity but to structure direction and perception within space.

**Table 2. A historicized cross-affiliation of various properties of namazgahs (Prepared by the author).**

Historical Context	Pre-Ottoman / Seljukian	Ottoman	Contemporary
Location	Outside the city	Intercity	Countryside
Type	Musalla / Eidgah / Military camp	Menzil	Recreation (Mese)
Architectural Component	Barrier, qibla wall, mihrab, minbar	Qibla stone, prayer sofa, fountain	City Square (Meydan)
Type of Prayer	Eid, Friday, Tarawih prayers	Regular daily prayers (vakit)	Burial stone
Dominant Function	Wayfinding, prayer, gathering, rest, sociocultural hub		Funerary or no function
Conceptual Character	Ambiguous void	Menhir	Vacuum
Spatial Quality	Space of gathering and prayer	Space of movement and exchange	Space of internalization



**Figure 16. Nakşidil Valide Sultan Namazgah (1786/7), Piyalepaşa. (Source: Author)**

### **Ritual Use and Scalability**

Once orientation was established, the namazgah readily assumed its role as a **prayer place**, accommodating a range of ritual practices from individual daily prayers to large congregational events such as Eid, Friday, Tarawih, or funeral prayers (Diez, 1997; Hillenbrand, 1993). The namazgah's capacity for scalability – from a solitary qibla stone to expansive prayer grounds – demonstrates that collective worship could be spatially supported through simple alignment, surface preparation, and minimal architectural articulation rather than through the production of an interior volume. As illustrated in Figure 17, this scalability is evident in the Hünkar Çayırı Namazgah (1659), preserved in a relatively good condition and located well outside the metropolitan municipal area, where the expansive meadow setting still allows the site to accommodate large populations of picnic-goers.



**Figure 17. Hünkar Çayırı Namazgah (1659), Gebze. (Source: Author)**

### **Gathering, Ceremony, and Public Life**

Beyond ritual performance, namazgahs frequently operated as **gathering spaces** within both urban and rural contexts. Historical accounts and archival

sources indicate their use during celebrations, sacrificial ceremonies, military assemblies, archery trainings, wrestling competitions, and even punitive spectacles (Wensinck, 1993; Hillenbrand, 1993; Konyalı, 2021; Tiryaki, 2005). As shown in Figure 18, for instance, the Ayrılık Çeşmesi Namazgah (1600/1), which, although in an abandoned condition now, once functioned as a ceremonial departure point where armies, pilgrimage caravans, and imperial *surre* processions were bid farewell. In such instances, namazgahs functioned as secondary city squares: that is, as open yet marked spaces where social visibility and collective presence could be staged (Özdamar, 1988; Tanyeli, 1999; Konyalı, 2021). This role situates the namazgah within a broader spectrum of public spaces, challenging contemporary distinctions between sacred and civic domains. In this respect, namazgahs can also be read in relation to the notion of “third place” (Oldenburg, 1999) and more recent discussions on shared public space. Like cafés, squares, or informal gathering grounds, namazgahs historically functioned as socially accessible environments situated between domestic and institutional domains, enabling interaction, exchange, and collective presence without strict programmatic constraints. This alignment positions the namazgah as a historically specific precursor to contemporary shared space paradigms, while also expanding them toward a more relational and non-enclosed understanding of publicness.



**Figure 18. Ayrılık Çeşmesi Namazgah (1600/1), Rasimpaşa. (Source: Author)**

### **Rest, Infrastructure, and Movement**

Closely tied to their location along roads, meadows, and water sources, namazgahs also served as **rest stops** within landscapes of movement (Tüfekçioğlu, 1998; Xhibo, 2012). Equipped with fountains, wells, shade-providing trees, and level surfaces, they offered travellers, armies, and nomadic communities a place to pause, rest, perform ablutions, and gather strength before continuing their journeys (Tanyeli, 1999; Genim, 2012). As shown in Figure 19, for instance, the Sultan II. Mahmud Namazgah (1839) was originally constructed for workers employed at the nearby water dam and later became integrated into recreational use, serving visitors who came to the area for excursions and picnics. In this regard, the analogy drawn in some sources between namazgahs and modern service stations is instructive here (Derman, 1975), highlighting their role as nodes within broader infrastructural systems rather than as isolated religious sites.



**Figure 19. Sultan II. Mahmud Namazgah (1839), Bahçeköy. (Source: Author)**

### **Sociocultural Interaction and Informal Learning**

In addition to these functions, namazgahs acted as **sociocultural hubs and informal educational grounds**. Particularly during warmer months, they facilitated communal interaction outside the confines of built interiors. Conversations, teaching, storytelling, and shared meals often unfolded around these sites, fostering peer-to-peer knowledge exchange and reinforcing social bonds (Konyalı, 2021). Literary sources describing

namazgahs as *sohbetgahs* (i.e., places of conversation) underscore their role in supporting such forms of collective life that exceed ritual obligation (Gökçe, 2013). As illustrated in Figure 20, this condition can be observed in a historical photograph of the Kazlıçeşme Namazgah (1546), where the sofa has been temporarily appropriated by the general public as grounds for a coffeehouse.



**Figure 20. Kazlıçeşme Namazgah (1546), Zeytinburnu. (Tiryaki, 2010, p.96)**

What is striking, when viewed through this historicized lens, is the contrast between this functional multiplicity and the namazgah's contemporary condition. In modern contexts, namazgahs have been progressively stripped of all but a single attributed function: that of a sacred prayer site. Paradoxically, this narrowing has occurred alongside their increasing disuse. While the idea of the namazgah has been sacralized – often protected as heritage or symbolically honoured – the physical sites themselves are no longer or rarely activated for prayer or gathering. Many survive as fenced remnants, isolated markers, or inert fragments embedded within urban redevelopment projects. This condition is most evident in the Münzevi Koca Ahmet Namazgah (1814), located in Defterdar and preserved in a highly fragmented form. As shown in Figure 21, the broken qibla stone now stands on the terrace of a restaurant, completely losing touch with its original spatial and functional context. This functional reduction has significant spatial consequences. Namazgahs increasingly appear as voids within the urban fabric as spaces that are preserved yet inaccessible, visible yet untouchable. Their presence introduces a form of negative space, a ghostly trace of former practices, and a sacred residue that interrupts spatial continuity without generating activity.



**Figure 21. Münzevi Koca Ahmet Namazgah (1814), Deftardar. (Source: Author)**

The historical trajectory traced here suggests that the namazgah's marginalization is not the result of their architectural insufficiency, but of a profound shift in how space, function, and sacrality are conceptualized. As architectural practice increasingly equates sacredness with enclosure and monumentality, and as urban life relegates collective ritual and pause to specialized interiors, the namazgah loses the conditions that once sustained its relevance. Yet it is precisely this condition of loss that renders the namazgah both a critical lens and a productive conceptual device by the help of which we may rethink interior space, sacred practice, and architecture more broadly.

### **Discussion: Interiority without Enclosure**

This study has demonstrated that the namazgah cannot be adequately understood through stable typological, functional, or architectural definitions. Instead, it operates as a flexible spatial framework, which shows considerable semantic, anatomical, typological, and functional variety, while still producing a sense of interiority in all of its forms.

Approaching the namazgah as an interior space may initially appear counterintuitive, given its open-air condition and public accessibility. However, the findings suggest that interiority does not need to be equated with physical containment. In the case of the namazgah, interiority is generated experientially – through bodily alignment, directional orientation, and collective synchronization – rather than through walls, roofs, or bounded volumes. In this respect, the namazgah challenges dominant architectural assumptions that associate

interior space with privacy, enclosure, or domesticity.

From a spatial perspective, the namazgah reinforces this condition by functioning as a marker rather than a container. Its constituent elements (e.g., qibla stones, mihrabs, sofas, minbars, and associated infrastructural components) do not enclose space but articulate relationships within it. None of these elements produces an “inside” on its own; instead, they modulate the surrounding field, creating thresholds, axes, and points of pause within an otherwise open field. The namazgah therefore does not invite occupation in the conventional sense of habitation. Rather, it renders its surroundings inhabitable by structuring orientation and use. This distinction foregrounds the possibility that architectural significance may reside in spatial effects rather than in formal completeness.

One of the most consequential implications of this spatial logic lies in the namazgah's relationship to movement. Positioned along roads, at thresholds, and within landscapes of passage, namazgahs operate as spaces of transition rather than destinations. By stabilizing the direction of the qibla, they establish a transversal axis that cuts across the landscape, aligning bodily movement with a cosmological order. In this sense, the namazgah is better understood as a spatial catalyst that mobilizes attention, structures perception, and embeds meaning within movement rather than containing it. This mobilizing dynamic situates the namazgah within broader spatial systems that operate through repetition without enclosure. As suggested in earlier scholarship (e.g., Careri, 2002), the hypostyle halls of the early Great Mosque tradition produce continuity and openness through columnar fields rather than bounded rooms. Networks of namazgahs similarly structure territorial space through recurrent points of orientation, transforming the landscape into a legible and navigable field. In doing so, the namazgah participates in the production of space at a territorial scale, translating abstract cosmological principles into embodied spatial experience.

Beyond movement, the namazgah also mediates the relationship between body, landscape, and

meaning. Through a minimal architectural intervention, it brings the scale of the environment into alignment with the human body, creating a temporary yet effective condition of heightened awareness, attention, and belonging within open space. This condition is neither private nor enclosed, yet it produces a sense of orientation and belonging. By inscribing direction, rhythm, and pause into the landscape, the namazgah thus transforms an undifferentiated ground into a structured place. It is through this act of spatial inscription that the namazgah participates in the construction of the world as a meaningful environment rather than as a neutral backdrop.

The contemporary disappearance or functional reduction of namazgahs sharpens the relevance of these observations. As architectural and urban practices typically equate interiority with envelopment and sacredness with monumentality, spatial forms that operate through openness, relationality, and movement are rendered obsolete or unintelligible. Namazgahs persist (if, when, or where they do) as protected remnants or symbolic markers, stripped of the practices that once animated them. Yet this very marginalization exposes the limits of dominant architectural paradigms and invites us to reconsider alternative and layered modes of spatial production and experience.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that the namazgah should be understood not as a fixed architectural typology, but as a dynamic spatial constellation that operates through semantic openness, minimal construction, typological variability, and functional multiplicity. The study has also shown that the namazgah can be read as an “interior” space – both in the experiential sense of producing a feeling of being inside and in the literal sense of being a space of turning inward.

This reconceptualization carries broader implications for the history and theory of architecture. Before anything else, it contributes to ongoing discussions in architectural theory that challenge bi-

nary distinctions between interior and exterior, architecture and landscape, and sacred and secular space. It also complicates established assumptions that equate interiority with bounded space and sacredness with monumentality. Instead, it suggests that architectural coherence and experiential depth may emerge through alignment, repetition, and minimal intervention within open, dispersed, and quotidian environments. In this sense, the namazgah expands the conceptual boundaries of both architecture and interior architecture – mobilizing instead a trans-scalar reading all the way from furnishing to geography – thus offering an alternative framework for understanding how space can be structured, inhabited, and made meaningful.

The study also contributes to discussions on cultural heritage in the late Ottoman context by foregrounding a spatial form that has largely remained marginal within dominant historiographies. Rather than treating namazgahs as incomplete or peripheral structures, it positions them as integral components of broader socio-spatial systems linking mobility, ritual, infrastructure, and public life. At the same time, the contemporary condition of namazgahs reveals the consequences of shifting architectural and urban paradigms. The reduction of their functional multiplicity to a singular, symbolic role has rendered many of these sites inactive, fragmented, or inaccessible. This transformation underscores the need to reconsider how heritage is defined, preserved, and activated, particularly in cases where spatial meaning depends on use, movement, and relational practices rather than on formal integrity alone.

At the same time, these residual open-air voids retain a latent potential within the contemporary city. Particularly in dense urban environments such as İstanbul, namazgah sites may be reconsidered as micro-ecologies and shared open spaces that offer environmental relief, social encounter, and moments of psychological pause. Their minimal architectural footprint, permeability, and embeddedness within existing urban fabrics position them as alternative models for low-impact, multi-functional public space – capable of accommodating rest, reflection, and informal gathering without

requiring intensive construction or programmatic overdefinition.

With all its contributions aside, the study inevitably has its own limitations. Its primary focus on Ottoman Istanbul, while offering a rich and layered case, does not fully capture the diversity of namazgah practices across different Islamic geographies. In addition, the analysis has relied predominantly on qualitative and interpretive methods, which, while appropriate to the research questions, may be complemented in future studies by more systematic spatial or comparative analyses. Future research may extend this inquiry in several directions. Comparative studies across different regions and periods could further clarify the variability and adaptability of namazgahs. Investigations into analogous open-air ritual spaces in other cultural contexts may also deepen the theoretical implications of interiority without enclosure. Finally, contemporary architectural and urban design practices may benefit from exploring how similar spatial logics can inform new approaches to public, sacred, and hybrid spaces.

In this context, the study's central notion of "interiority production" also acquires a contemporary critical dimension. As namazgahs lose their relational and performative conditions, the forms of interiority they once generated are significantly weakened, displaced, or rendered latent. Interiority, no longer sustained through collective bodily alignment and repeated spatial practices, persists only as a symbolic or residual condition. This transformation not only reflects the erosion of specific ritual infrastructures but also signals a broader shift in how interiority itself is produced in contemporary urban environments, which are increasingly detached from open, shared, and processual spatial frameworks.

Ultimately, the namazgah is not proposed here as a model to be replicated or revived, but as a lens through which to interrogate assumptions embedded in architectural theory and practice. In doing so, it opens a space for reimagining interiority beyond enclosure – an inquiry that remains particularly urgent in contemporary contexts where ques-

tions of mobility, openness, and shared space increasingly challenge our inherited spatial norms. It should also be further noted that this study does not pursue a full discursive analysis of the examined namazgahs as assemblages entangled within broader social, cultural, and political fields, nor does it seek to reconstruct their operation as historically specific spatial apparatuses. Rather, it lays an initial groundwork by mapping the terrain, delineating the corpus, and identifying the heterogeneous conditions of their material and spatial formations. In this sense, the present work should be understood only as a preliminary step that opens the way for subsequent studies aimed at tracing the multiple genealogies, discursive formations, and regimes of intervention through which these sites have been produced, transformed, and re-signified over time.

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**Previous Presentation and Publication:** An earlier version of this study has been presented at the Current Issues in Interiors Symposium organized by Yaşar University's Department of Interior Architecture and Environmental Design.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest related to this study.

**Ethical Approval:** This study does not involve experiments on human participants, animal subjects, or the collection of personal data requiring institutional ethics committee review. The research is based entirely on field observations of publicly accessible architectural sites, visual documentation of physical remains, and analysis of previously published primary and secondary sources. Accordingly, formal ethics committee approval was not required under applicable national and institutional regulations. Scientific and ethical principles were observed throughout the preparation of this study,

and all works consulted are properly cited in the references.

**Data Availability:** The data supporting the findings of this study derive from (a) field observations and photographic documentation of the fifty-five namazgah sites examined, all of which are publicly accessible architectural remains located within the contemporary city of İstanbul, and (b) previously published sources cited in the reference list. The photographic documentation and observational records produced by the author during field visits are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. No datasets were generated or deposited in a public repository in connection with this study.

**AI Disclosure:** All scholarly content of this study – including the research questions, theoretical framework, methodology, empirical analyses, and conclusions – was entirely produced by the author. During the preparation process, AI-based tools [ChatGPT version 5.2 (OpenAI) and the latest version of Grammarly] were used in a limited capacity solely for language editing and improving clarity of expression. The AI-generated outputs were carefully reviewed and verified by the author.

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