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# Inheritance without the heritage: fig trees and the ecological effects of imaginative attachments to *fetih* (conquest)

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**ABSTRACT**

Turkey's transformation from a multi-religious and multi-ethnic empire into a nation-state has caused the dismissal, transformation, replacement, denial and destruction of several unrecognised material and immaterial heritage. The livelihoods and diverse artisanship once ingrained into nature and its medians have been shattered after decades of war, generations killed in violence and later with the destructive effects of neoliberalism. Built on the understanding that heritage is beyond the cultural and the human, this paper connects a series of ethnographic data collected in a historically Jewish and Greek neighbourhood of Istanbul, Balat and Fener, to understand the interplay between the heritage as an imagined realm and the physical relationship to the inherited. Specifically, it focuses on how the new inhabitants have been developing rapport and making sense of this historic area and its native flora (ie fig trees) through *fetih* (conquest). The paper reads *fetih* as an imaginative heritage-making attempt and a reference point used in the processes of heritage removal and ecological destruction perpetrated by the area's inhabitants of 1950s onwards. By studying the interplay between cultural and ecological heritage as co-created realms, it questions the limits of the very idea of heritage as a social concept.

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My arrival to Istanbul in July 2021 for my ethnographic field research was marked by multiple environmental catastrophes. During my very first week, both the heatwaves and the marine mucilage, or what the people call *deniz salyası* (sea snot/sea saliva), was effecting everyone's sensorial experience of the city. The regular sea breeze Istanbulites would experience was now replaced by a sticky, slimy feel on their skin. The Bosphorus Sea was covered with a dark, oozy substance, and the mash odour was palpable. The heatwave was causing another catastrophe: the wildfires. Although the wildfires were taking place on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, hundreds of kilometres away from Istanbul. For those living in older parts of the city, surrounded by abandoned historic wood houses, the risk of a fire outbreak was simply too close.

This was also the case for the Balat and Fener (B/F) settler-residents in Fatih, by the Golden Horn. I was spending the early days of July hunting for a flat in that particular

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area. During the apartment hunting process, I have also been learning about the current residents' sense of belonging to the neighbourhood to which they historically did not belong.

Fener has been the heartland of Greek Orthodox heritage, with Ecumenical Patriarchate, Greek High School for Boys and the Pammakaristos Church marking the cultural topography of the area with their architecture. The significance of Greek heritage in Fener was also present with the domination of Greek residents, who had been there for generations until the 6–7 September pogroms of 1955. Balat, on the other hand, had been one of the two major Jewish residential centres of Istanbul (along with Hasköy) for several centuries (Galante 1941; Karmi 2010). The current residents, however, are those who migrated to the area, some of which by settling into the abandoned houses, most of them had lived under deprived conditions and are composed of migrants from Anatolia, the Balkans, as well as Romanis. Those who have been living in the area had also experienced the worst mucilage of the Golden Horn area in the 1980s, which resulted in the area being marked by heavy foul smell until the area was cleared of mucilage. Those who survived the decades of poverty and stench, who have been living in the area for 40 to 70 years, call themselves Old Balatlis – to set themselves apart from even the newer ones, the hipsters who had not survived the worst days of the neighbourhood but were enchanted by the beauties of historical buildings.

The real estate agents I engaged with were encouraging me to arrange a flat that is not old or historical, nor wooden, nor near any trees or greens. Concrete buildings were always safer compared to the unsettling, unknown historical ones. The locals' impulsive response against the buildings older than their residence in the neighbourhood was palpable and even a bit overwhelming. The repeating advice I received was to choose a modern flat.

The real estate agent's warnings against the tangible heritage of the trees and the wooden buildings were accompanied by B/F settler-residents' stories of struggles with the local heritage. The landlords (and their neighbours) were complaining about their failed attempts to remove or tame the ecological beings, often trees, native to the area. While some of those stories were as simple as their inability to tear down the decaying abandoned houses that are today posing a risk of fire, others were about how, up until a couple of decades ago, before all the heritage protection laws, one could easily burn down an old wooden building to replace it with a brand-new modern one. Every time the heritage protection laws were raised as a topic of complaint, I would hear at least one note about their failed attempt to cut down (not trim but completely remove) the trees nearby. Combined with the news on wildfire outbreaks, every historic building in the neighbourhood was a cause of anxiety to the residents as every untamed and decades-neglected house was a fire risk. The fear of burning alive was in almost every real estate conversation and deep into people's eyes when the subject arose. The neighbourhood's untameable character was in the topography, on its narrow streets, and furthering the anxieties about a fire break: 'A fire truck could never enter this street'.

After, despite all the alarming warnings, I still moved into a wooden house; the neighbours kept welcoming me to the neighbourhood while listing their suggestions for the house: 'Why don't you talk to the landlord and cut down the fig trees? The roots of the fig trees are too invasive. They should not be allowed to grow close to a house'. I had yet to discover this to be part of a pattern amongst the B/F settler-residents' conspicuous

obsession with (and fight against) the fig trees; a pattern that later became the starting point of this article. Built on looking closely at the anxieties around fig trees in Balat, this paper reveals how heritage sustainability hinges on the transmission of everyday ecological knowledge. The stark divergence between Greek and Anatolian folk beliefs around fig trees illuminates a broader rupture: the displacement of not just communities, but entire systems of ecological understanding and practice.

This paper was researched and written as part of an ongoing project on the political imaginaries of Turkey beyond its borders and how Turkey's imperial dreams are engineered through various enterprises in post-Ottoman geographies. In this broader study, one of the emerging themes is the interplay between narration and violence and the long-term effects of this narrative-building. By using the ethnographic data collected during the years 2021 and 2022, this paper uses B/F settler-residents' uneasy relationship with the area's ecological heritage.

I am aware that this entire anxiety may well turn into a broader project in itself and link us to the imaginaries of geopolitics and socio-historical anxieties. For this particular paper, I use the case of fig trees as an instrumental reference to delve into the layers of multiple forms of knowledge (social, economic, ecological and social in an interwoven way) and their significance in heritage-building processes. The paper argues that the B/F settler-residents' lack of historical connections to this neighbourhood results in an uneasy relationship with the heritage sites present in the neighbourhood, combining a desire to make sense and connect to the area and an inability to do so. They neither have the knowledge nor the former residents to explain to them the spiritual, economic, or utilitarian significance of any of the material or ecological heritage present in the area. In their pursuit to make sense, the B/F settler-residents developed a destructive attitude that obtained a spiritual meaning through the concept of *fetih* (conquest), referring to the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul in 1453, as it gains them an ancestral right to possess the non-Turkish past.

On the third layer, the paper takes a closer look at the concept *fetih*. It develops its critical analysis around this concept as an imaginative attachment of the newcomers to the ecological heritage. It suggests that *fetih* emerges in the process of claiming heritage as a notion newcomers cling onto to make sense of their right to possess and to warrant their own destructive attitudes. By doing so, this paper questions the limits of the very idea of heritage as a social concept and reflects on the intelligibility of national heritage embedded in its ability to destroy other narratives that taint the neatness of a single dominant one.

## Istanbul: a city of desires

Istanbul is a city that manifests various desirous attachments between herself and its residents, yet it also promotes hopes and simultaneously creates obstacles and challenges. It offers a discordant relationship between the physical and desiring attachments it generates. Everybody desires green areas in the city, but the strongest or most significant green they see on a daily basis is the grass and the sickly shrivelled pine trees near the highways, greyed and suffocated by the ever-present car exhaust. I want to bring forward the historical and political significance of desire a little bit.

Istanbul is a 1000-year-old city marked by multiple desires attached to multiple imaginaries. It is a city of entangled desires and desiring subjects. For its current residents, it is a city of non-belonging and estrangement, marked by the forceful and violent separations of those native to the city, unleashing entangled desires. The descendants of its former, I call native, residents still mourn the loss of the heart of the city, Constantinople, making Istanbul an object of longing for many Greeks.

It is suffice to argue that the systematic erasure, displacement and destruction of diverse material and immaterial heritage caused by Turkey's transformation from a multi-religious and multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire is felt most strongly in the former capital Istanbul. Helaine Silverman's work on contested cultural heritage provides a crucial theoretical framework for understanding how such transformations create sites of heritage struggle. As Silverman argues, heritage becomes deeply contested when different groups compete for the right to define, use and control cultural and physical spaces. She emphasises how the formation of nation-states often intensifies these contests, as new political entities attempt to establish legitimacy through selective heritage claims while suppressing others. This framework helps us understand how Istanbul's heritage – both cultural and ecological – has become a battleground where different groups struggle over competing claims to authenticity and belonging. The concept of fetih (conquest) emerges as a key mechanism in this contest, providing ideological justification for certain heritage claims while delegitimising others.

Today's conversations between two Istanbulites almost always begin with 'where are you from' – to understand where their family migrated from to Istanbul. Roughly over 92% of Istanbul's contemporary residents' families have moved to the city from elsewhere, all in the last 70 years, resulting in several scholars referring to Istanbul as a city of non-belonging (Bora 1999; Pamuk 2005; Türker 2000, 2001, 2003). Öncü (1999), a renowned Turkish sociologist, suggests that a true Istanbulite does not exist, that it is a myth. What Öncü calls 'myth' corresponds to the fact that belonging to the city requires a certain amount of imagination, storytelling and fantasy. The fantasy, Öncü points out, is designed to fill the gap that has resulted from lacking the human link to the city's oral and affective traditions and knowledge.

The material conditions that enable forgetting are deeply intertwined with the legal frameworks that govern heritage. As Karaca (2021) demonstrates, the dispossession of artworks and cultural assets through waves of state violence has created not just physical absences, but also shaped how knowledge about Istanbul's Ottoman past is produced and maintained in museums and art historical narratives. These absences and silences around non-Muslim cultural production help imaginative narratives of belonging to obtain social meanings.

The city's violent history profoundly impacts its contemporary residents' desires and imaginative narratives about the city and their connections to it. Those who migrated to the city in the second half of the 20th century kept calling it 'Tası topragı altın Istanbul [Istanbul, of golden land and soil]', marking the hope that drove them to Istanbul. That driving force increased the city's population sixfold from 1950 to 1990. Yet, in line with Silverman's analysis of how heritage sites become battlegrounds for competing narratives and claims to authenticity (Silverman 2010), the lack of belonging Istanbul offers over the last century leads to contested heritage claims through competing narratives about the city.

Macdonald's (2013) prominent work on Europe's 'memory complex' is in line with the complex operations around imaginaries and heritage manifested in Istanbul. In 'Memorylands' elucidates how heritage becomes most intensely contested precisely when historical continuity is disrupted. In fact, heritage-making often emerges as a response to experiences of discontinuity, where people attempt to forge connections with a past they fear losing or have already lost. Memory complex then operates through what she calls 'past presencing' - the ways in which the past is made present through various cultural practices and forms (18). Her formulation is immediately relevant to understand Istanbul's fraught relationship with its past and the ways in which Istanbul's residents attempting to connect to the city's past through various imaginative practices. As Macdonald argues, the very act of heritage-making often emerges from anxieties about loss and discontinuity – a dynamic that surfaces in how contemporary Istanbulites attempt to forge connections to a city from which they feel historically displaced. Imaginative connections offered in the context of Istanbul, then, is those of the settlers': conquest.

We have come to learn that this saying also signifies the treasure-hunt dreams of the newcomers: a desire to prey on the former residents' heirloom of those violently separated from their own heritage. Conquest is a right the newcomers inhabited, promoting a hope to beat this beasty city. I am referring to another Turkish phrase here that goes: 'Oh Istanbul, I will (eventually) beat you'.

This settler attitude driven by the desire to capture and own the city has taken a more organised format in the Islamist populist narrative that evolved in the last two decades. *Fetih* emerges as one of the most organised techniques, with an existing religio-nationalist narrative attached. That is the Prophet Mohammad's famous hadith that endorses the commander and the army that will conquer Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire back then. According to the Encyclopedia of Grant Istanbul History, the hadith goes as 'Verily, you shall conquer Constantinople. What a wonderful army will that army be, and what a wonderful commander will that conqueror be'. This includes references to several authoritative and trusted sources, including Munawi and Suyuti. This resulted in repeated attempts to capture the city, starting with what is known as the First Arab Siege of Constantinople, between the years 674–678 AD, led by Mua'wiyah of the Ummayad Caliphate. In 1453, the prophetic desire to conquer the city was later accomplished by an Ottoman Sultan, Mehmet the Second, who later on gained himself the title Fatih, the Conquerer.

## Conquest: an imaginative attachment to the city of non-belonging

Istanbul's conquest by Sultan Mehmet II (ie. *Fatih Sultan Mehmet*) marks a critical historical moment not only for accomplishing a prophetic dream, but also signified the Muslim victory over the Orthodox Patriarch. As soon as Constantinople was conquered, Mehmet the 2$^{nd}$ converted Hagia Sophia into a mosque and temporarily moved the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church to the Church of Holy Apostles. Holy Apostles was demolished only 8 years after the Patriarchate was located there to pave space for a mosque built under Sultan Mehmet's earned title *Fatih*, the conquerer (Erbey and Erbas 2017). And the Patriarchate was once more relocated.

Conquest-driven desirous changes, demolitions, constructions and relocations mark the entire historical peninsula's topography. Fener and Balat, the two neighbourhoods with a significant Greek and Jewish heritage, have been administratively connected to the broader *Fatih* area since the early years of the Turkish Republic (Aysev Deneç 2014; Gur 2015). Further, the new inhabitants' desiring relationship with the area has also been marked with conquest, which has also become part of the everyday fabric.

As I explored in my former work (Sehlikoglu 2021), the desiring relationship comprises the meanings and fantasies one attributes to the city to fulfil one's own desires. It includes an element of imagination, although it is not like the way Weiss (2009) explored in Arusha, Tanzania, where inhabitants fantasise about being in America and adjust these fantasies to the materiality available to them. The imagination at stake in Istanbul is not determined by media representations of a distant place and culture that is perceived to be better than what is immediately present. The imagination that shapes the desiring relationship between Istanbulites and their city is built on whatever is materially left in the city. The inhabitants fill the gaps between what the city offers and what they can acquire from those offerings through fantasies. A number of scholars have studied this from what is missing, through notions of affect, ghostly presence, or haunting (Das 2007; Dinçer 2010; Kwon 2008); yet few of them attempted to understand how the new inhabitants made sense of the gaps. *Fetih* provided the hook for the newer residents, like B/F settler-residents, to fill those gaps. As argued across this paper, *fetih* only offers a destructive attachment and thus fails to provide a prominent ground to establish a notion of heritage.

In Hazal Aydın's extensive report on the various versions of the word conquest used across the Fatih area, we can follow the economic significance of this desiring relationship (Aydın, 2023). By the time Aydin collected her data (2023), there were 23 locations with the name 'fetih', 27 locations with the name 'Ottoman' and 13 places with the name '1453' the year of Constantinople's fall. The majority of these locations are restaurants and local shops opened by the local *investors/esnaf*, indicating that the conquest discourse and the imagined domination are embraced and incorporated into the centre of the national and Islamic subject's everyday economy. In the report, Aydın states: 'A workplace becomes an extension of one's political affiliation and a representation of one's identity. It contributes to a larger discourse and becomes one's means of being a part of a larger body of ideas. Therefore, while Erdoğan's mega construction or transformation projects intend to conquer the city at the macro level, the same practice is sustained at the micro level in one of the conservative quarters of the city'. According to the same report, non-profit organisations with names related to conquest, such as The Conqueror's Grandchildren 1453, witnessed an increase after 2013, which was also the year of the Occupy Gezi Movement. The existence of over 60 public places with reference to the imperial past and especially an overwhelming emphasis on the word *fetih* -and not *fatih*, which is the name of the area itself, is an immediate signifier of the need for claiming ownership and possession. Further, Aydın also draws attention to the fact that conquest-named places increase around the areas where Greek or other non-Turkish NGOs, schools, temples, or other meeting points and connects this increase to the uneasy sense of belonging new residents of the area have with the city itself.

As the uneasy relationship is attempted to be navigated through domination around the theme of fetih/conquest, any failure to do so creates anxiety. A good example of that would be Pammakaristos Church and its seminary in the Balat area, where I also conducted ethnographic fieldwork.

The Pammakaristos Church was established in the 13th Century as a monastery and was the last pre-Ottoman building to house the Ecumenical Patriarchate. In 1561, it was converted into a mosque and gained its new name, *Fethiye*: mosque of the Conquest (Aksoy 2022; Aziz 1949). Although it was converted into a museum in the early republican period, the building was opened up for prayers during the Adnan Menderes regime of 1960. Heavy construction was continuing in the main building while I was conducting my research. I was able to frequent another building that once belonged to the Pammakaristos Church, though. Right across from the main church was a 100-year-old building in which one of my research participants was living as a tenant. 'It was a seminary (*ruhban okulu*), I was told' she explained.

It is not customary to use buildings with such historical value as a residence since they would be classified as religious/cultural historical buildings with first-degree status. They would also not be easily renovated, as renovations of first-degree buildings are the object of very strict regulations.[1] Yet, her landlord had fought to change the status of the building from first-degree to second-degree, after which he could complete the renovations and rent it out. Anıtlar regulates all of the heritage buildings in Turkey with a status independent of the local governance, municipalities and even the presidency. Anıtlar was established and structured with the hope that Turkey's diverse heritage will be evaluated and protected in a manner independent of local, personal, or political gain. This gives them a unique power and authority over various heritage sights in Turkey. Yet, they would not have significant control over the ecology, only over the buildings themselves.

She has a very large garden in her backyard, which only has two very young saplings. Considering the fact that orthodox seminaries are known for using gardens for long hours of spiritual reflection, the lack of older trees suggested that the landlord or one of his contractors had done a cleaning. In any untouched green area, there would be fig trees popping up to Eğin with. Yet, even with my most generous estimations, not one single tree older than 20 years could be found in the garden. The spiritual and heritage value the trees once had in the monastery was lost not too long after the monastery lost its status.

The imaginative attachments to heritage, in this context, requires theoretical frameworks beyond Western traditions that reduce imagination to fantasy or unreality. My concept of *takhayyul*, which I develop extensively elsewhere (Sehlikoglu 2025) offers a transformative capacity rooted in Classical Arab Scholarship where imagination operates as a terrestrial yet celestial faculty that simultaneously engages with worldly conditions while connecting to prophetic truth (*haqiqa*). Unlike Appadurai's (1996) formulation, where imagination merely mediates consciousness rather than creates, *takhayyul* provides creative potential that aligns with Castoriadis (1987) understanding of imagination as 'creation ex nihilo'. In Istanbul's context, these imaginative attachments function as 'terrestrial imagination that is simultaneously realistic and worldly yet also prophetic' – shaping how communities relate to place and history while informing

doxastic thinking and political action. The *fetih* imaginary operates through the trialist structure of the sensible, imaginable and intelligible, providing 'great advantage over dualist thought' that limits our understanding of political imagination's transformative power.

## Conquest and ecological care: both friends and foes

While the conquest was offering the non-heritage attachment to the city's new inhabitants and inadvertently (and sometimes deliberately) establishing a habit of destruction, the new populism in Turkey was also using the notions of conquest and ecology in paradoxical ways.[2] It was May 2022 when I found a leaflet from the Fatih municipality on my doorstep. President Erdogan on the front, an opaque background of the city walls, the leaflet was inviting the residents of Istanbul to plant saplings *Fetih Coşkusuyla* (with the excitement/spirit of conquest) in the Garden of Nation (*millet bahçesi*) built in the former Istanbul (Atatürk) Airport as part of 569th anniversary of Istanbul's Conquest celebrations. The entire design of the project carries several symbolic statements, in taking over the airport formerly named under Turkey's founder's name, turning it into a public part titled the 'nation', and all visually presented under Erdoğan's name and face (Image 1).


**Image 1.** 'Let's plant a sap with the excitement of conquest' digital copy of the leaflet. Downloaded from Turkey's ministry of environment, urbalisation and climate change website on September 11, 2023: https://csb.gov.tr/haydi-istanbul-fetih-coskusuyla-fidan-dikmeye-bakanlik-faaliyetleri-34127.

This deployment of conquest narratives reflects how the imaginative elements of Islamist politics operate through what I have identified as the interconnectivity of cosmological references across the Balkans-to-Bengal complex. The neo-Ottoman self-imaginaries mobilise particular historical memories while simultaneously expanding what is politically possible. Unlike simplistic nationalist frameworks, these imaginative elements tap into affective and emotive registers that enchant followers through connections to a prophetic truth (*haqiqa*) that transcends conventional understandings of temporality (Sehlikoglu 2025). The conquest narrative thus functions as a form of *takhayyul* that transforms historical events into political currency by enabling followers to imagine themselves as part of a continuous spiritual and political lineage while concealing the destruction of alternative heritage narratives.

The annual *fetih* celebrations always add another, more ritualistic layer to the desiring conquest-driven attachments to the city. And just to give another context, *fetih* celebrations were introduced to the Turkish public in 1953 to mark the 500th anniversary of Istanbul's conquest (Tağmat 2014) and had not been continued as an annual celebration.[3] Despite the early republican period's claim, the regular celebrations of conquest and for them to gain popularity is achieved during the AKP regime. There are several articles published in Turkish academic journals that present Fetih celebrations with the same theoretical framework, that is Eric Hobsbawm's 'the invention of tradition' (Bölükbaşı 2013; Çoruk 2016; Davutoğlu 2010). The invention of tradition is part of the series of attempts to build an imaginative hook to the inheritance that was not the heritage of its inhabitants.

This particular campaign was organised by the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey and co-sponsored by Turkey's Ministry of Environment, Urbanisation and Climate Change and Housing Development Administration of the Republic of Türkiye (TOKİ), Turkey's state-sponsored housing programme, supported by the same ministry. Somewhat counterintuitively, TOKI is not responsible for creating a positive effect on the ecology in Turkey. Rather, it has been reported as an institution destructive to the environment. Destructive by cutting trees and harming the habitat.

What the state-sponsored plantation campaign had focused on planting industrial, easy-to-grow saplings, many of which were pine trees. It is very hard for me not to compare the Turkish state's promotion of pine trees, as opposed to, fig trees, and the Israeli campaigns to 'plant a pine tree in Israel' that threatens and, on a number of occasions, strategically replaces the trees that are native to the land, including olive and acacia trees. Several scholars explained to us how promoting pine trees over olive trees in the region signifies a settler attitude (Aranda 2020; Braverman 2009a, 2009b; Gorney 2017; Shani 2018), which also makes it easy for me to draw parallels between these two contexts. Pine trees are easier to grow and maintain; they are evergreen- and do not have any immediate traditional economies attached to them. Turkish attitude may not be too different.

## Fig trees: an uninherited ecology

Sevil, the next-door neighbour, married into a family from her own village in North Anatolia 30 years ago. Her husband's family had moved to Balat area 30 years earlier, in the 1960s. She then becomes a member of an ultra-conservative Sunni Ismailağa group,

also called the Çarşamba group, whose headquarters is just a few hundred metres up from Sevil's house in a neighbourhood called by the same name *Çarşamba*. She takes up a black cloak as a requirement for women in the community 10 years into her marriage.

She had a long history of my landlord's battles with the small garden he owns at the back of his house. He kept pouring cement into his fight against the weeds. 'The worst weed is the fig trees'. 'Why are the fig trees so bad?' I ask. She responds, '(ay yok yok yok) oh no no no they grow to burst a wall, collapse your entire house. Haven't you heard the saying "planting a fig tree into one's household (*ocağına incir ağacı dikmek*)"?'. The proverb simply means causing a finite harm into one's household, a harm that will cause a growing but certain destruction. The fig trees were such a source of fear that other neighbours and even random strangers – I assume to be living nearby – kept providing similar suggestions for their removal. With fear in their eyes again, they were insisting I cut down the trees in the garden or those in the garden of the abandoned house next door to mine. Sometimes, they suggested that I should pour cement here and there to stop the weeds or to seal the dampness. I was never able not to raise my eyebrows, which inadvertently resulted in them telling me about the times they successfully cut down the fig trees and saved their or their neighbour's house from collapsing. They would pepper the story by describing how badly 'the roots had invaded the house's foundation' and how timely their intervention was.

Another one told me that her mother poured cement on the soil to stop the weeds from growing. The entire neighbourhood of Balat/Fener is full of fig trees, and those trees behave like weeds. Fig trees are invasive and random, popping up on unexpected corners across the neighbourhood. They stand at the intersections of contrasting imaginative cosmologies, and Balat/Fener provided an awkward space to observe their contestations, as explored below.

Dominating weeds, or any plants that behave like weeds, by unleashing a battle against them is one type of relationship people could have with the fig trees. I observed the repeating pattern of chopping them down in every other instance and pouring cement on where the trees might or tend to grow. This type of destructive domination is also based on one layer of knowledge: a knowledge of the threat or the risk and thus to be eliminated. This domination by destruction does not involve a knowledge not deep enough to develop practical strategies for adapting, living together, and domesticating without destruction. I can see how older fig trees have been grafted to grow better fruits. Grafting can only be done to younger trees anyway. Another knowledge, of course, involves techniques for protecting the buildings from invasive roots, which does not domesticate but enables coexistence.

There is also another layer of knowledge that I call cosmological. The cosmological layers are about how any knowledge locates fig trees into a particular cosmology and forms values on and around them. One of these cosmological layers is inevitably in Genesis, and another in Greek mythology. In both layers, fig trees and fig leaves act as protectors. In Greek mythology, fig trees protect humans from malevolent creatures, just like the bay trees also present in B/F and attempted to be chopped down by the neighbours in Balat. These layers are significant in establishing a sustainable sense of heritage in everyday socialities. The cosmological significance of fig trees in Greek and Anatolian folk beliefs contrasts with each other, and I want to explore this contrast further. Fig trees function as 'landscape artifacts', as Laura Ogden famously coined

(2002), to refer to those that materialise historical processes and power relations across generations, making their presence or absence politically significant.

Herein, I would like to draw on the conversation I had with one of the several people I had talked with. Beyza, a pious woman from Central Anatolia and a university graduate with a PhD in humanities, reminded me that ordinary Muslims (referring to lower-class Sunni Muslims of rural Anatolia) seldom like fig trees. 'Just like mulberry trees', she explains, 'the fig trees are believed to be where *ecinnis* gather in Anatolian folk belief'. The mulberry and fig trees both have sticky fruits dropped down, resulting in a filthy surrounding around the trees, with flies and mosquitos. The *ecinnis*, plural for *cin/jinn/djinn*, one of the creatures of God with the ability to possess or strike humans to the extent of leaving lifelong marks on humans, inhabit around anywhere that is dirty. And they also like anything sweet. If there is an abandoned fig or mulberry tree, one shall not go near them. Otherwise, there is a risk of being struck by a djinn.

Although this folk belief around fig trees exists only amongst Muslims (and not Christians), it cannot be traced in the hadith or Quran. On the contrary, the fig is one of the five plants mentioned in the Quran, surat-at-tin, where God swears by the fig and the olive, which gives figs and fig trees a somewhat sacred status if we follow the text. However, folk beliefs do find their way into traditional religion, as studied and discussed, especially by feminist scholars of the Middle East and North Africa (Mernissi 1975).

My neighbours later confirmed Beyza's explanation. Sevil was hesitant to talk to me about djinns before. Once I struck up a conversation on the topic of djinns, she later on kept warning me against standing under a fig tree, climbing one, or pouring anything into its soil.

While these set of beliefs explained my neighbours' attitudes, the native inhabitants' temptation to grow fig trees, to the extent of making them native to Balat/Fener region, was unexplored. Indeed, as I furthered my interviews and expanded my focus beyond the current residents, it became apparent that the new inhabitants' and the native Balatlı's beliefs around the fig trees contrast significantly.

This relationship between humans and nonhuman actors represents what might be understood as 'more-than-human sociality' where landscapes are co-created through ongoing interaction (Tsing 2013). Carol Bardenstein's (1998) offers cultivated plants as 'threads of memory' for displaced communities. Her analysis of how botanical practices mediate between presence and absence in dispossession contexts helps explain the native residents' intimate connections to these trees and the current inhabitants' drive to eliminate them. The fig trees thus operate not merely as physical entities but as what Bardenstein calls 'dialectical objects' that materialise competing claims to place and belonging.

Niki is a Greek woman whose family members used to live not too far from Balat for several generations. She does not necessarily have the knowledge to explain to me the significance of bay trees or fig trees. However, she was appalled by my observations on the recurrent discomfort and dislike of the Balatlılar about the fig trees. How can people have anything against them? A similar unease was expressed by an Armenian friend, too. More importantly, they both provided me with an extended version of the famous phrase Sevil and others had kept quoting: ocağına incir ağacı dikmek (planting a fig tree into one's household). The full version of the same saying was 'incir ağacı kesenin ocağına

incir ağacı dikilir', meaning, 'Those who cut a fig tree plants another into their household'. The longer version dooms anyone who was to come after fig trees. The full saying was not promoting the destruction of them, it was protecting the trees. Both Armenians and Greeks shared this belief. I have, later on, collected several anecdotal stories about the dramatic fate of those who ignored this saying and the belief by cutting down a fig tree in their garden, only to later witness a horrendous misfortune on their household and families.

The Istanbulite Jews I interviewed had been too young and too urban to provide me with any anecdotes about fig trees. However, the existing literature about the Jewish households gave glimpses of their love of fig trees their grandparents once had in their garden (Kohen 2020). Yet, the fig trees have a particular significance in the Jewish faith. Like it is in the Islamic faith, the fig trees are mentioned in the Jewish holy book Talmud, marking them with a spiritual value (Goor 1965). More importantly, the fig trees are also cherished for their resemblance to Jewish people, with their ability to grow and spread roots in unexpected places. Fig trees' inherent qualities are believed to represent the Jewish presence and history, with similarities in their ability to survive, manifest and flourish no matter how harsh the circumstances are (Smith 1960).

## Imagination, cosmology and ecology

Cosmological references are quite significant in understanding how ecological imaginaries are engineered collectively. These cosmological references, beliefs and tales around ecological beings have gained them heritage status also due to their significance in social and economic values in the way they are interwoven. Those economic values of ecology were ingrained into everyday life through livelihoods and artisanships. Take, for instance, the mulberry trees. Tamar's and Selva's families have migrated to Istanbul from Eğin, a historically Armenian region with vibrant economic and trade ties with the rest of the Ottoman geography. Tamar is half Armenian and half Turkish, whereas Selva is Turkish, with some scattered vague information about her grandmother's Armenian heritage.

How the locals imagine themselves and the town they belong to concerning the world is informed by its ecology, nature, pastoral sight and the sensorial experiences these elements provide. Turkish people from the Eğin region suggest that the word Eğin is the ancient Turkish for the garden of Eden/heaven/God due to its striking beauty with greens (not the wilderness of a thick jungle but a forest of civilised trees), hills and river with turbulent flows. Etymologically, the word Eğin is believed to come from the Armenian word Akn (Ակն), meaning spring.

The area Eğin is overflown with mulberry trees, not for any reason other than silk production. The region had been known for its production of silk carpets for hundreds of years. Mulberry leaves are the leading food for silkworms, making the trees essential to the industry. After the Armenian genocide in the early 20$^{th}$ Century, the trees in Eğin were left for the fruits to be rotten. That is, if the remaining Turkish and Kurdish residents did not use them to make molasses and mulberry candies called *pestil*.

All Selva knows about this past is two disconnected facts: That the carpets of Eğin were once very famous and that there are too many mulberry trees for anyone to continue collecting and making molasses. Without the knowledge of silk production and the significance of mulberry leaves for that industry, Selva always assumed that the famous

Eğin carpets were woollen. For Tamar, whose great-grandparents escaped the genocide just in time and sought refuge in Istanbul under Muslim names, silk carpets made in Eğin was a legend.

Most of the artisans and traders of silk carpets were Armenian, who were vital in connecting the heritage of silk production and silk carpets, ecology and economy through their labour. The livelihoods and artisanship once ingrained into Eğin nature and its medians as trees, birds and various elements of the habitat were shattered after decades of war, generations killed in the Armenian Genocide and the consequent wars, and later with the destructions enabled by a neoliberal economy which values particular types of production over others. The mulberry trees' significance to the region is almost entirely unknown, yet the disconnected sets of knowledge about the mulberries and carpets remain.

Although the significance of mulberry trees provides an example of the economy of the ecology, they also inform how cosmologies are constructed. They are still an essential part of the Eğin imaginaries and longing for this small town. However, the entire *industry* (in traditional terms) around silk carpet production, including dye-making, threading, weaving and more ecological skills such as worm maintenance, is lost. The livelihoods were removed, although associating Eğin with mulberry trees, has remained.

It is reasonable to suggest and underline that the cosmological references and connections to the contemporary inhabitants' sense of self and belonging and their heritage-making attempts are not disconnected from the economic value of ecology. In fact, once the economic value and significance of various trees is removed, along with the entire labour economy evolved around it, the destructive behaviour is inevitably accelerated. In this process, *fetih* emerges not as the driving force but perhaps as an emotive reference of legitimacy.

The notion of conquest, while offering a dominant narrative of legitimacy, is still insufficient to establish genuine belonging. This insufficiency manifests in the compulsive urge to mark territory through concrete structures – a materialisation of presence that seeks permanence through the very substance that negates the ecological heritage. In this context, native flora, particularly fig trees, emerge as more than mere botanical entities; they become proxy contestants in a broader struggle over belonging.

The multiple layers of heritage-making processes and the native inhabitants' violent removal from their geographies thus leave a disconnected sense of knowledge that is attempted to be filled with imaginaries and desires. This same challenge is even greater when it comes to Istanbul. What makes Istanbul's case particularly compelling is that its ecological elements – like the persistent fig trees – are not passive witnesses to these transformations. They actively participate in the contestation of space through their biological persistence, creating ongoing tensions in the settler-residents' attempt to establish unchallenged possession. I will now introduce you to Istanbul as a city of desire and non-belonging before I move on to its inhabitants' imaginative attachments.

The entanglement between the displaced communities and their botanical heritage creates what I call 'ecological witnesses' to pre-Republican pluralism. What is particularly striking about the B/F case is how this heritage erasure, typically orchestrated through state apparatus, is instead enacted through everyday practices of ordinary residents. The fig trees thus become sites where macro-political projects of homogenisation are reproduced through micro-level acts of ecological violence, revealing how heritage destruction

operates not just through official channels but through the quotidian anxieties and actions of urban inhabitants.

## Battle of conquest between B/F settler-residents and the fig trees

The anxiety fig trees create is the anxiety around the fig trees' agentive ability to root into the conquest, to weaken it. It is possible to grow invasive trees close to the households yet this knowledge, to tame or contain the fig trees, is lost. The only existing narrative of belonging, through conquest, and the fig trees are silently resisting. The B/F settler-residents' arboreal anxieties become institutionalised through bureaucratic mechanisms, transforming fig trees into what Braverman terms 'natural witnesses' that challenge the very legitimacy of conquest through their persistent rootedness.

It is not just that fig trees cannot be conquered; rather, the trees themselves act as weeds that pop up, take over, dominate, and have the risk of destroying an *ocak* from its very foundations. The battle between fig trees and the new residents of B/F is a battle between the settler conqueror and a 1000-year-old native.

The constant battle between the two actors reminds us of several discussions around the Anthropocene, especially the stream triggered by Anna Tsing's contribution to the field of anthropology, where she defines the destructive behaviours of the industrial human, or, in her own words, 'post-enlightenment modern man' (Tsing 2016). Anthropocene has been used to refer to the activities of human industry that have reached a level that is comparable to, or perhaps beyond, the natural geological processes.

I have discussed, so far, the ways in which trees and especially fig trees, as the ecological heritage that is embedded into the imaginative, social and even economic part of the everyday fabric, attempted to be flattened and how this speaks to the new inhabitants' desire for conquest.

B/F inhabitants' inability to cope with, make sense of, or nourish their neighbourhood habitat is not separate from the broader destruction of the neighbourhood's heritage. Therefore, the long durée of violent heritage removal in Istanbul is also not disconnected from the ecological destruction. Neither is it disconnected from the anxieties enabled by fast-pacing neoliberalisation of the city, making Istanbul heavily vulnerable to catastrophes, including fire and earthquakes. The anxieties are connected and the tendency to seek refuge in cement is both same and simultaneously depressing (to me).

And I would like to bring in another example to make my point here. In 2013, Occupy Gezi sparked as a resistance against the city's smothering cement. In the aftermath of Occupy Gezi, the city council poured something unbearably familiar to the city's inhabitants: cement. The area, which was historically an Armenian Cemetery, was occupied by the youth to protect the trees, was instantly flattened by the municipality – with the same speed at which cement dries and becomes concrete.

Nationalist heritage-making practices, in other words, do not marginalise only humans but also ecological beings such as trees living subjects which destructively transform the ecological fabric of the city. Further, the particular narrative-writing and self-imagination around conquest both legitimises destruction and, over a particular period of time, it turns this destruction into a habit. The only way to connect becomes through destructive domination. This is how I locate notion of heritage beyond the cultural and the human. Rather, I suggest that the interplay between the tangible and the

ecological heritage evolve into co-created realms. The destruction inflicts any element that is unable to defend itself against the destructive dominance of *fetih*.

While displacement and urban mobility characterise many global cities, Istanbul's case reveals particular patterns of heritage contestation. Unlike gradual demographic shifts typical in urban centres, Istanbul experienced abrupt ruptures through organised violence against non-Muslim communities, creating what Brubaker (1998) terms 'ethnic unmixing'. This produced not merely a change in personnel but a fundamental rupture in knowledge transmission and heritage practices. While all cities undergo transformation, the specific character of Istanbul's demographic shifts – occurring through pogroms, population exchanges and targeted policies – resulted in distinctive patterns of heritage contestation where newcomers lack access to previous residents who might facilitate continuity through shared knowledge and practices.

Further, the *fetih* narrative demonstrates how heritage is constructed not only through backward-looking nostalgia but through forward-oriented aspirations. As Boym (2001) distinguishes between 'restorative' and 'reflective' nostalgia, the conquest imaginary represents a restorative project that seeks to establish an unbroken connection to a selectively remembered past while projecting specific aspirations for the future. B/F settler-residents' engagement with ecological heritage thus reflects both an attempt to legitimise their presence through historical claims and to assert particular visions of modernity through practices like cement-pouring and tree removal. The trees' persistent growth despite attempts at elimination embodies a form of 'slow resistance' to conquest narratives – their roots and seedlings continuing to emerge through cracks in the concrete, challenging the settlers' dominance. Their rejection of fig trees represents not only detachment from past knowledge systems but active investment in future-oriented imaginaries of urban development predicated on conquest narratives.

## Conclusion

This paper uses settler-residents' uneasy and somewhat changing relationship with the trees native to B/F. Those multiple layers are in fact essential in manifesting a sense of belonging. The former inhabitants of B/F, who were natives to the area, had harvested a particular type of flora and had done so vis-a-vis to their own cosmological references, carrying symbolic meanings attributed to those trees, often prompting connections across humans, non-humans and non-physical at spiritual levels.

Turkey's transformation from a multi-religious and multi-ethnic empire into a nation-state has caused dismissal, denial and destruction of a number of unrecognised material and immaterial heritage. This paper connects the series of ethnographic data on the concept of *fetih* (conquest) heritage removal and ecological destruction. By doing so, it furthers the notion of heritage beyond the cultural and the human and questions the interplay between the human non-human heritage as co-created realms.

This paper, therefore, carries a trifold task. It questions the limits of the very idea of heritage as a social concept. It reflects on the intelligibility of national heritage embedded in its ability to destroy other narratives that taint the neatness of a single dominant one. It then questions the notion of margin by suggesting that a narrative such as *fetih* created several groups of imagined winners and thick layers of multiple margins, simultaneously.

At the third layer, it then locates the non-human heritage in the middle of the heritage studies.

Through the framework of *takhayyul*, we can understand how imaginative attachments to heritage operate not merely as fantasy but as transformative capacities that shape material realities. The conquest narrative functions as a form of *takhayyul* that enables settler-residents to claim legitimacy through historical connections while simultaneously justifying ecological destruction. This trialist structure of the sensible, imaginable and intelligible helps explain why fig trees have become such contested sites – they represent not just physical entities but embodiments of competing cosmological and imaginative relationships to place that cannot be reconciled through the dominant narrative of conquest.

Lastly, I would like to highlight that imagination is not to be studied simply as unreal or irrational. When a large group of people shares an imaginative reference, understanding, or perception, then, by default, it can be exchanged. The sub-elements that make the realm of imagination meaningful and exchangeable can also be studied ethnographically. In the case of this article, however, multiple layers of knowledge are at play. Although the materials are shared, the sets of realities built on them are significantly different. Different sets of cosmological references, vocabularies, narratives and even value systems are established around those shared elements, such as fig trees.

## Notes

1. In Turkey, historic buildings are under regulations of Anıtlar, who decides on the 'degree' of a building's historical value based on the artwork, time it was erected, and other significant matters.
2. This note also joins the existing argument and debates on the populisms' internal paradoxes. For an example on specifically in the context of Turkey, see Öniş and Kutlay (2020).
3. 500th anniversary of conquest celebration in 1953 was especially a curious one not only because the Early Republican regime was known to have separated itself from the Ottoman heritage but also because they were more interested in creating rituals to mark liberation from the Western occupiers. Each city of Turkey would have another time to annually celebrate their liberation from various forms of mandate regimes shortly after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and/or First World War. This has started shifting under the AKP regime towards celebrating the Ottoman conquest of those cities instead of liberation from the European powers. I would like to note that 500$^{th}$ anniversary of conquest celebrations was part of a series of political intimidations the Inonu regime was pursuing against their Greek (Rum) citizens. For the party's systematic discrimination and intimidation against Greek and other non-Turkish citizens, see Alexandris (1982) and Aktar (2000). To understand Ismet Inonu's life-long battle against the Greeks both as a military man and as a political leader, it is possible to refer to his biography authored by Metin Heper (1998). Also see Saglam (2022) about the challenges of tracing Greek heritage.

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