Assembling ‘Cosmopolitan’ Pera: 
An Infrastructural History of Late Ottoman Istanbul

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In the nineteenth century, the Pera (Beyoğlu) district of Istanbul, the capital of the Ottoman Empire, became an internationally recognized center of commerce, finance, culture, art, and recreation, in the context of the empire’s rapid integration into world capitalism. The district’s built environment changed radically, manifested in the newly erected apartment buildings, arcades, gardens, and monumental hotels and embassies. This transformation was dependent on largescale destruction of the previous spatial order of the district, as well as on environmental connections to distant and nearby peripheries of Pera, such as Terkos and Kasımpaşa. This dissertation examines this process by locating infrastructure as an integral part of ‘assembling’ Pera in the late nineteenth century.
Pera’s rise to prominence has been studied as an experiment in municipal governance, modernization in urban space, and cosmopolitan sociability. This dissertation shows that it was first and foremost a material process, which remade a complex and extended geography within and beyond Pera’s boundaries in fundamentally unequal ways. The critical study of infrastructures reveals the complex encounters forged in this process between different regions, humans and animals, the past and the present, and the living and the dead. More specifically, under two parts respectively titled “Creative Destruction in the Making of Modern Pera” and “Provincializing Pera,” this dissertation focuses on four infrastructural projects and issues that proved to be crucial, especially from the foundation of the Sixth District Municipality (Altıncı Daire-i Belediye) in 1857, into the start of the twentieth century. The destruction of the medieval Genoese Walls; the construction of the Tünel (Tunnel, ‘the world’s second oldest subway’) and the connected transformation of a Muslim cemetery (the Petits-Champs des Morts or Küçük Kabristan) into a garden (the Jardin des Petits-Champs or Tepebaşı Bahçesi); the establishment of a centralized waterworks from Terkos to Pera; and sewage connections between Pera and Kasımpaşa are studied in this dissertation not as manifestations of cosmopolitan urbanism but rather as enablers of Pera’s making as a material as well as a discursive unfolding. This undertaking challenges the frame of cosmopolitanism under which the district’s and other Mediterranean port-cities’ stories have been conventionally told. Rather than taking Pera’s ‘cosmopolitan’ identity as a given, this work uses the history of infrastructures to explore the material conditions of possibility of the district’s claim to such fame. As such, it also explores the role of nonhuman actors, as well as the networks of policymaking, finance, and expertise, in
assembling ‘cosmopolitan’ Pera, which entailed rewriting its history, recreating its sensory borders, and transforming urban and environmental topographies.