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A. Tunç Şen, *Forgotten Experts: Astrologers, Science, and Authority in the Ottoman Empire 1450–1600* Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2025. Pp. 352. ISBN 978-1-5036-4265-2. \$65.00 (hardcover).

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For more than four hundred years the Ottoman court maintained a permanent political office for astrologers. From the fifteenth century to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, one to six ‘*munajjims*’ were appointed at any one time to manage timekeeping, compile almanacs, identify auspicious moments and produce astrological reports on key policy issues. Their labours left behind a huge paper trail that Ahmet Tunç Şen has carefully mined for his groundbreaking new book, *Forgotten Experts*. Across five substantive chapters, Tunç Şen paints a detailed picture of the institutionalization and subsequently undulating cultural and political position of the astrological unit between 1450 and 1600, while simultaneously advancing an argument about the nature of scientific expertise.

Following a body of recent anthropological and historical work that now approaches astrology and divination through the language of ‘expertise’, Tunç Şen is clear that the divinatory part of the science of the stars was a field that required considerable technical skill. Although some readers might feel uncomfortable applying what reads like a nineteenth-century concept to the premodern world, Tunç Şen sees ‘expert’ and ‘expertise’ as early modern categories with cognate terms in the ‘medieval Islamicate lexicon’ (p. 11). Indeed, the Ottoman state was an ‘empire of experts’. To feed their empire-building projects, Mehmed the Conqueror and his son Bayezid II cultivated ‘an enviable hub of arts, sciences, learning, and commerce’ (p. 111), teeming with experts ranging from lawyers to handle territorial expansion to architect-engineers to erect empire-worthy monuments. One key strength of Tunç Şen’s book is his efforts to read the history of court *munajjims* within this constellation of expertise – for astrologers were among these ‘experts of empire’, playing

crucial roles in both internally advising and externally legitimizing political regimes. Unlike the modern ‘specialist’, Ottoman astrologers generally claimed proficiency in more than one field. Yet Tunç Şen makes it abundantly clear that they possessed special skill, training and knowledge, and on that basis were regarded, and consulted, as authorities on the future.

Having amply demonstrated this in Chapters 1 and 2, the rest of the book shows that, even at the peak of their influence, astrologers’ expertise was decidedly ambivalent. On the one hand, across the centuries the court invested substantially in around forty chief *munajjims*; furthermore, their advice was generally taken very seriously. Selim I, for instance, changed his plan to attack Rhodes in 1519 when his astrologers revealed that the timing was inauspicious. Yet on the other hand, astrologers were subject to near-constant disparagement and criticism, and their position was made even more precarious by the fact that, unlike their European counterparts, Ottoman *munajjims* lacked a home base in educational institutions. Although astrology was taught in madrasas in other times and places, it was not part of the standard curriculum in the long sixteenth century, and while we have become accustomed to think of great Ottoman observatories as teaching sites, in reality these were constructed ‘only once in a long while’ (p. 114). Furthermore, there was no professional corporation or guild structure for astrologers as there was for other experts, nor a strong book market through which they might cultivate alternative clientele. This meant that astrology was not a particularly appealing career path. In such a context, more than any other, contemporary expert budding astrologers were ‘desperately reliant on royal favor’ (p. 114).

Forgotten Experts shows that it was the court that sustained astrological training, practice and knowledge transmission. In this sense, Tunç Şen argues, the Ottoman State *created* experts. The expertise of *munajjims* was not self-evident or innate but, like all expertise, was socially constructed. Moreover, this construction was in need of continual maintenance. If the sultan could give, he could also take away. Tunç Şen helpfully reminds us

that although historians often place astrology under the same ‘occult’ umbrella as other forms of divination, these fields were always in competition with each other, jostling for ‘social capital and epistemic recognition’ (p. 37). Some Ottoman leaders preferred to turn to other experts on the future, including dream interpreters, geomancers, and letrists, in the process sidelining *munajjims* in the court.

In the early modern Ottoman Empire, astrologers were precarious. If expertise is socially constructed, predicated on cultural and institutional support, it is correspondingly dependent on the preservation of the forces that brought it into being. Chapter 4 reveals this in disturbingly familiar detail. In the mid-sixteenth century, in the context of ‘a tightening of available resources’ (p. 186), the astrologer ‘Ali, or Riyazi (d. circa 1587), found himself writing a treatise dedicated to Süleyman I that reads much like a modern grant proposal. Replete with a project description, a statement of challenges in the field, a budget outlining the cost of astronomical instruments, and something like an annotated CV, the treatise also included a clear statement of impact: Riyazi’s astrological research programme would lead to the construction of a talisman to repel bubonic plague. Like that of so many other precarious scholars, the proposal fell on deaf ears. At his death, the astrologer left behind masses of autobiographical material attesting to his disappointment in his failed career.

Whereas many ‘global’ histories of science limit their engagement with Ottoman knowledge to (a) grandiose but in-passing remarks about an Ottoman ‘renaissance’, or to (b) drawing simplistic conclusions about Ottoman scientific vitality from the evidence of a single scientific treatise – two tendencies that our author wryly censures – Tunç Şen’s deep research makes an important and refreshingly substantive contribution. Specialists have been awaiting *Forgotten Experts* since his important ‘Reading the Stars in the Ottoman Court’ (*Arabica*, 2017), and this book does not disappoint. Although at times repetitive, with the occasional excessive tangent, *Forgotten Experts* is clearly written and argued, its analytical choices

always diligently defended, making it especially useful for students. With it, the field moves significantly closer to the empirical basis needed for wide-ranging comparative analyses of premodern astrology.

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