

**Şen, Ahmet Tunç.** 2025. *Forgotten Experts: Astrologers, Science, and Authority in the Ottoman Empire, 1450–1600*. Stanford Ottoman World Series. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 330 pages. ISBN: 9781503643017 (e-Book).

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Nine years after the defense of his doctoral dissertation, *Astrology in the Service of Empire: Knowledge, Prognostication, and Politics at the Ottoman Court, 1450s–1550s* (University of Chicago), Ahmet Tunç Şen treats the reader to *Forgotten Experts*. Far more than a cosmetic revision of his dissertation, he has substantially rethought and refined his study, producing a sophisticated socio-cultural history of Ottoman astrologers as historical actors. The book examines questions of identity, patronage, legitimacy, knowledge transmission, and the cultural meanings of astrology, as well as its intersections—always precarious, sometimes explosive—with religion, power, and shifting forms of epistemic authority.

The introduction (pp. 1–38) immediately captures the reader's attention by juxtaposing two dramatic events, separated by only three decades, that epitomize the fluctuating fortunes of Ottoman astrologers in the long sixteenth century. The first is the laying of the foundation stone of the Süleymaniye, timed according to calculations by the court astrologer and performed by none other than *şeyhülislam* Ebussuud Efendi. The second is the destruction of a court-sponsored observatory, authorized by a fatwa issued by one of Ebussuud's own students during the reign of Murad III. These two events establish the central tension of the book and invite the reader to follow Ottoman astrologers as they alternately gained access to the inner court or hastily sought the nearest exit. Şen proves an able guide throughout.

Tempting as it is to interpret this second event as evidence of 'scientific decline' or 'the triumph of orthodoxy,' Şen cautions against such narratives. The precarious position of astrology, he argues, was not an aberration but intrinsic to the discipline itself. Its fortunes rose and fell alongside shifting configurations of epistemic authority, changing priorities among decision-makers, and competition with other forms of 'expertise.' One of the book's major conceptual contributions lies in its refusal to rely on broad and often misleading categories such as 'occult' or 'esoteric' sciences. Instead, the author proposes 'expertise' as a more productive analytical lens—one that functions not merely as a heuristic tool but as a historically meaningful category for Ottoman actors themselves. While the Ottoman polity was hardly a full-blown meritocracy, expertise nevertheless mattered and could serve as a basis for authority, advancement, and patronage.

The book is also situated within broader historiographical debates in the history of science. Astrologers, despite their grounding in the astral sciences, have long been marginalized in the history of Ottoman science, just as Ottoman science itself has often been excluded from global narratives of late medieval and early modern scientific knowledge. Şen carefully traces the genealogy of this exclusion while noting that recent scholarship

has begun to redress it. Ottoman astrology, however, remains doubly marginalized—both within Ottoman studies and within the history of science. *Forgotten Experts* represents a significant step toward correcting this imbalance. As Şen states explicitly, the book does not merely seek to add an Ottoman chapter to overwhelmingly Eurocentric narratives or to reiterate arguments about the importance of the 'occult' in premodern history. Instead, inspired by Martin Mulso's *Prekäres Wissen*, it asks how astrology survived despite persistent epistemic, institutional, and cultural vulnerabilities, including the absence of formal educational structures and sustained critiques of its legitimacy.

Chapter 1 (pp. 39–78), 'Munajjims' Expertise,' addresses the conceptual and terminological challenges posed by the figure of the *müneccim*. Translating the term as either 'astrologer' or 'astronomer' proves inadequate, as it obscures the hybrid nature of the expertise involved. A *müneccim* combined mathematical and natural sciences with knowledge of the unseen, straddling multiple epistemic domains for which modern English lacks an equivalent umbrella term. Rather than resorting to cumbersome paraphrases, Şen judiciously leaves the term untranslated. This choice captures the breadth of the category while also delineating its limits: pure astronomers and magicians, for example, fall outside the scope of the book.

The inherently precarious nature of the *müneccim*'s expertise had important spatial and social consequences. As this form of knowledge could never be fully institutionalized within the madrasa system, its transmission depended on informal master–pupil relationships and ad hoc patronage rather than on stable curricular structures. While courts emerged as the primary sites of both practice and training, with aspiring *müneccims* apprenticed to established court astrologers, such courtly patronage remained highly personalized and contingent. Even where offices such as that of the chief *muvaqqit* provided a measure of continuity, astrology relied largely on the 'fond attachment' of individual patrons, producing constant fluctuations in the *müneccims*' remuneration, textual production, and professional opportunities. The court thus functioned as a partial substitute for the madrasa, offering resources without conferring the stability of formal institutionalization.

The epistemic ambivalence of the *müneccim*'s position was furthermore mirrored in practitioners' own reflections on their craft. Many acknowledged the speculative nature of their *aḥkām* and emphasized the probabilistic character of their judgments, signaling an acute awareness of the limits of experiential knowledge and celestial observation. At the same time, most maintained that celestial configurations offered meaningful clues to terrestrial events. Significantly, they typically framed celestial influences as subordinate to divine will. This stance might be read merely as a defensive response to accusations of astral determinism—often voiced by Sufi or juridical critics—but Şen suggests that it may instead reflect a genuine cosmology in which celestial causation operated *within*, rather than *against*, divine sovereignty.

Having laid out the broader historiographical debates and the challenges posed by the figure of the *müneccim*, the book's next four chapters follow the logic of a social history of astrology, oscillating between moments of prominence and marginalization, while also being shaped by the highly uneven visibility of astrologers in the sources. This history unfolds alongside political chronology but does not map neatly onto the reigns of individ-

ual sultans. Instead, Şen foregrounds astrologers and their changing conditions of practice, thereby decentering dynastic narratives.

Chapter 2 (pp. 79–112), ‘Persianate Foundations,’ marks the beginning of the book’s social history proper. Focusing on ‘Abdurrahman and Khitabi, the author reconstructs their careers from a body of sources that is not so much sparse in quantity as limited in its suitability for writing social history. These fragmentary references are supplemented with rare ego-documents embedded in unexpected genres, allowing Şen to produce remarkably textured biographies despite the qualitative constraints of the material. Close readings of ‘Abdurrahman’s surviving *taḳvīm* and Khitabi’s horoscope for Mehmed II’s birth introduce readers to key astrological genres and constitute welcome excursions into the more technical aspects of the profession. Both figures operated within a strongly Persianate intellectual milieu. Their careers underscore astrology’s formative, Persianate phase before its later Ottomanization.

Chapter 3 (pp. 113–52), ‘Heavenly Patronage,’ shifts attention from astrologers to their patrons, particularly Bayezid II. By his reign, the court astrologer had begun to resemble a formal office, reflecting broader processes of institutionalization that—less often recognized—were already under way. Bayezid II’s self-fashioning as a philosopher-king fostered sustained patronage of astrology, replacing earlier ad hoc arrangements. Şen situates Bayezid II’s interests within a wider intellectual context, exploring possible models such as Ulugh Beg and examining links between astrology and contemporary messianic currents. He convincingly shows, however, that apocalyptic or millenarian themes are largely absent from astrologers’ writings under Bayezid II.

In Chapter 4 (pp. 153–87), ‘Fortunes Turned,’ the reader is taken into the reign of Süleyman I. Most surprisingly, astrology’s prominence declined despite the sultan’s well-known penchant for the ‘occult.’ Süleyman appears to have favored lettrism over the technical expertise of astrologers, with the result that *müneccims* increasingly receded from the center of courtly life. The poet-astrologer Riyazi emerges as the most visible figure of this period, largely because his literary reputation secured him a place in biographical dictionaries. Riyazi’s works reveal mounting frustration over the lack of recognition for astral expertise, and his unsuccessful attempts to secure patronage illustrate the narrowing avenues available to astrologers.

The final chapter (pp. 188–224), ‘Occult Rivalries,’ examines the array of divinatory experts with whom the *müneccims* competed for authority and patronage: bibliomancers, geomancers, physiognomists, lettrists, and mystics, all offering alternative modes of prognostication. During and after Süleyman’s reign, these figures increasingly overshadowed astrologers, often adopting bolder and more prophetic tones, while astrologers continued to emphasize probabilistic judgment. As the narrative moves into the late sixteenth century, the reader reaches the dramatic events evoked in the introduction: the construction of the Süleymaniye, whose auspicious timing was determined by Riyazi, demonstrating that astrology retained practical relevance even as its prestige waned; and the construction and subsequent destruction of Taqī al-Din’s observatory under Murad III. Rather than framing its demolition as a simple clash between religion and science, Şen shows that opposition came largely from Halveti mystics, revealing a struggle among competing forms of ‘occult’ expertise first and foremost. Figures such as the lettrist-cum-geomancer

Haydar, whose confident and prophetic pronouncements contrasted sharply with astrological caution, exemplify these dynamics.

In his conclusion (pp. 225–38), Şen returns once more to the observatory's destruction and resists its use as a symbol—whether of scientific decline or of astrology's waning. Astrology, after all, persisted well into the twentieth century, producing annual sultanic *taḳvîms* replete with prognostications. What was at stake, he suggests, was not astrology per se but competition over limited resources for defining legitimate knowledge and for advising political authority. He further raises the possibility that increasing bureaucratization and centralization may have constrained innovation.

With an impressive list of archival sources from seven repositories and unpublished manuscripts from seventeen institutions (pp. 281–86), *Forgotten Experts* comes to a close as a lucid and compelling narrative that balances close reading of complex sources with broader historiographical reflection. Şen consistently resists settling on a catch-all term or a simplistic binary explanatory framework. Instead, he convincingly calls for a nuanced understanding of a plural epistemic landscape in which astrology operated side by side with other traditions. In doing so, he fills a major gap in Ottoman and global histories of science and sets a new standard for the study of astrology as a social practice.

Even so, it is the reviewer's duty to raise a few points that merit further reflection. Most notably, *Forgotten Experts* explains with great clarity *why astrology mattered* rather than *how it worked*. From one perspective, this choice is entirely justified. Detailed explanations of astrological technique would risk opening a Pandora's box and diverting attention from the book's central concerns. Yet the relative scarcity of sustained engagement with astrological sources as technical texts remains noticeable, and readers are offered only fleeting glimpses into the inner workings of astrological practice. Some additional signposting or brief methodological asides might have helped non-specialists better grasp the hybrid nature of the astrologer's expertise. Ironically, this choice also underscores the book's originality, as much existing scholarship on astrology has done precisely the opposite, focusing narrowly on technicalities for a highly specialized readership. With Şen, we learn considerably more about the man Mirim Çelebi than about what it entailed, in practice, for him to comment on Ulugh Beg's *zîj*—and that is, all things considered, a very good thing.

A second point concerns competitive diversity within astrology itself. Şen skillfully portrays clashes between astrologers, geomancers, and other experts as struggles *between* distinct epistemic strands, each claiming privileged access to the future. Less pronounced, however, is the extent to which similar forms of competition also existed *within* these traditions. Astrologers not only offered multiple interpretations of the same celestial configurations—a point Şen duly notes—but also, at times, interpreted different kinds of signs within a single work. Ottoman *taḳvîms*, for example, did not rely exclusively on astral observation but occasionally juxtaposed stellar divination with alternative prognostic frameworks, invoking fictitious entities such as *Şükür Yıldızı* or the *Ricâlî'l-Ġayb*. This juxtaposition produces an *embarras du choix*, making it difficult for the reader to decide which form of divination to follow—an issue that remains largely underexplored and perhaps ultimately unanswerable.

Finally, the book's focus on the 'long sixteenth century,' culminating in the dramatic destruction of Taqi al-Din's observatory, provides a compelling narrative arc but carries certain risks. Although Şen repeatedly emphasizes the persistence of astrology both before and after this period, readers unfamiliar with the broader chronology may nonetheless come away with the impression of a lasting marginalization of astrology after the sixteenth century, or of a marginal or largely absent Ottoman astrology prior to its Persianate infusion by 'Abdurrahman and Co. These reflections, however, should be understood less as criticisms than as openings for further research.