

R. Hakan Kırkoğlu. *Sultan ve Müneccimi: 18. Yüzyıl Osmanlı Sarayında İlm-i Nücûm* [The Sultan and His Astrologer: *İlm al-Nujûm in the 18th-Century Ottoman Court*]. İstanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2017. 195 pages. ISBN: 9786050946635.

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Although astrology was institutionally practiced in the Ottoman court for centuries and numerous relevant materials, written and visual, have come down to us, the history of its practitioners has attracted little scholarly attention, both in Turkey and elsewhere. The scholarship on the history of science in the Ottoman context, which for over a century has produced a good deal of literature in mostly sporadic and individual ways rather than systematic and collective modes, has unfortunately paid – due to reasons beyond the scope of this paper – scant attention to such disciplines as astrology and alchemy that once enjoyed remarkable prestige among other intellectual quests and scientific practices but are now largely considered pseudo-sciences.

Recently, a new generation of scholars, including the author of this review, has started treating more seriously the relevant surviving sources as well as the socio-cultural and politico-economic contexts within which they were produced and their authors flourished. One of the latest examples is R. Hakan Kırkoğlu's book, which is the subject of this review. It is based on the author's master's thesis, "İlm-i Nücûm and its Role in the Ottoman Court during the Eighteenth Century," that he defended at Bogazici University in 2016.<sup>1</sup>

As a longtime practicing astrologer, Kırkoğlu's attempt to understand astrology's role in the Ottoman court by looking closely at the life and works of Fethiyeli Khalil Efendi (d. 1186-87/1773), the chief court astrologer, seems promising at first glance. He indeed presents valuable details, especially in those parts of the book where he displays his professional knowledge and experience as a practicing

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1 Remzi Hakan Kırkoğlu, "İlm-i Nücûm and its Role in the Ottoman Court during the Eighteenth Century" (Master's Thesis, Boğaziçi University, 2016).

astrologer and portrays the socio-intellectual life of a court astrologer on the basis of a wealthy probate inventory. Yet, as I will try to detail below in the hope that prospective researchers in this field find these remarks useful, the book also suffers from several uncertainties, theoretical ambiguities, and inconsistent and/or undeveloped arguments.

The book consists of four chapters and four appendices. The first chapter, which is rather brief, serves as a general introduction to the topic and summarizes the major points of the following three chapters. The appendices contain transcriptions of the primary sources consulted, as well as a separate article that the author deems relevant to the book's theme. In the second chapter, "Astrology as a Learned Tradition in the Ottoman Empire," Kırkoğlu briefly describes various branches of astrological practice and discusses the place of astrology in the Islamicate and Ottoman worlds in general, and the tradition of classifying sciences in particular. In the Turkish translation, the original phrase in the thesis, "learned science," has accidentally been translated as "traditional science," which thus gives the false impression that the author considers astrology a traditional/transmitted science. This is also coupled by another typo at the end of this chapter (58), where it is maintained that Islamic culture regarded astrology as a transmitted (*naqli*) science, though the context rather requires that to be rational (*'aqli*).

That the term *'ilm-i-nujūm* (or *'ilm al-nujūm*, lit. the science of the stars) is matched in a precipitate manner to astrology throughout the work without elaborating on the necessary textual and contextual discussions of it engenders several ambiguities and uncertainties. Certainly, the disciplinary boundaries between astronomy and astrology were not as fixed and stable in the past as they are today. Nonetheless, ancient experts of celestial knowledge, including Ptolemy (d. 160), did indeed distinguish (even in semantic terms) between these two disciplines in terms of their subject matter. As Kırkoğlu briefly points out by referring to George Saliba's works, from roughly the eleventh century onward several astronomers in the Islamicate realm introduced a new discipline called *'ilm al-hay'a* (lit. the science of the configuration [of the stars], i.e. astronomy), to detach astronomical activities from astrological quests.<sup>2</sup>

Although Saliba maintains that this event paved the way for the emergence and further consolidation of a clear demarcation between *aḥkām al-nujūm* (the decrees of the stars, corresponding to astrology proper) and *hay'a* and/or *nujūm* (standing

2 George Saliba, "Islamic Astronomy in Context: Attacks on Astrology and the Rise of the Hay'a Tradition," *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 2/1 (spring/summer 2002): 25:46.

for astronomy), *‘ilm al-nujūm* is known to have had multiple meanings, as revealed in sources written during different periods and in different languages. In that respect, while it is historically inaccurate to reduce this blanket term, *‘ilm al-nujūm*, solely to astronomy, it would similarly be mistaken to define it merely as astrology, for the term was associated more with a kind of broader expertise over the practical application of celestial knowledge, such as the use of the tools of observation and computation as well as temporal or spatial designations.

When it came to defining astrology, the experts on the science of the stars often tended to refer to such terms as *aḥkām* (decrees [of the stars]) and *tanjīm* (astrology). For example, in the sample transcription of Fethiyeli Khalil Efendi’s almanac-prognostication (*taqwīm*) presented in Appendix 3, even the chief astrologer himself describes his craft as *tanjīm* (142). In a similar way, the famous encyclopedist Ṭashkoprizāde (d. 968/1561), whose opinions are discussed in this chapter, often uses *nujūm* and *hay’a* interchangeably, whereas he examines almost all of those branches that one could define today as astrology under the rubric of *aḥkām al-nujūm*. Since this debate over terminology was cut short in the work, it is not always clear, for example, whether the cluster of books listed in the chart (47) as items of *‘ilm al-nujūm* are all astrological in nature.

A similar conceptual ambiguity in the second chapter is also manifested in the discussion about astrology’s place in the tradition of classifying the sciences in the Islamicate as well as in the Ottoman realm. The current literature on Ottoman taxonomies of sciences is often confined to the views of several standard names, including Ṭashkoprizāde, Nev’i Efendi (d. 1007/1599), and Kātib Çelebi (d. 1067/1657). However, especially from the fifteenth century onward, different taxonomy traditions were apparently preferred in various intellectual circles. These differences in taxonomic preferences were far more important for astrology, as this science might have been considered a discipline relying upon mathematics (which is believed to be the language of the celestial spheres), while at the same time was conventionally regarded as a natural science with respect to its aim at interpreting and/or predicting the sublunary impact of celestial phenomena.

For instance, the Avicennan/Aristotelian classification system often deemed astrology a natural science, whereas the Persianate classification, epitomized in the work of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) and exemplified in the Ottoman realm by the circle of Mollā Fanārī (d. 834/1431) in the mid-fifteenth century and by the courtly environment of astral experts in the early sixteenth century, was slanted rather toward characterizing it as a mathematical science. While it would be unfair to expect a work based on a master’s thesis to contain elaborate discussions on

each and every topic it treats, Kırkoğlu's several bold and at times contradictory statements in this chapter, such as "the Ottoman ulama tried to merge Aristotelian philosophy with the principles of Orthodox Islam" or "the Ottoman ulama and madrasa curriculum incorporated Razian thought" (55) do not do justice to the complexity of the particular issue at stake here.

The third chapter seeks to portray the socio-intellectual life of a chief astrologer at the Ottoman court through the books and other belongings listed in his extant probate inventory. In this illuminating chapter, which provides us with valuable information that is important for reconstructing the social history of astrologers, is a detailed list of books Fethiyeli Khalil Efendi possessed, some of which were intimately related to his profession and others that cast light on his personal profile as a *mudarris* and a Sufi. Although sometimes the categories used for certain items are not fully accurate – for instance, Abū al-Fidā's (d. 732/1331) *Taqwīm al-buldān* is a treatise of geography, not a book on almanac making – the list does show the works in the fields of *handasa* (geometry), *ḥisāb* (arithmetic), *'ilm al-hay'a*, *'ilm al-nujūm*, and *aḥkām al-nujūm* that Ottoman astral experts regarded as canonical from the late-fifteenth century onward. Among those canonical works that also seem to have existed in Fethiyeli Khalil Efendi's personal library are Shams al-Dīn al-Samarqandī's (d. 702/1303) *Ashkāl al-ta'sīs*, Ulugh Beg's *Zij* and its commentaries, and the works of Abū Ma'shar (d. 272/886). It is also noteworthy that the list records a translation of a recent astronomical table produced in Europe (*Tercüme-i Zic-i Frengi*), indicating that eighteenth-century Ottoman court astrologers were at least aware of, if not fully informed by, European advances in the production of new astronomical tables.

In the fourth and final chapter, Kırkoğlu tries to "decipher" (99), in the light of actual historical events, a sample of astrological decrees selected from several *taqwīms* crafted by Fethiyeli Khalil Efendi and submitted to the court during his tenure. In these annual almanacs, which were presented to the court (or the reigning sultan in particular), court astrologers first computed the horoscope of the year-transfer (i.e., the ascendant at the particular moment that the Sun completes its yearly rotation and enters the sign Aries, thereby beginning a new solar year) and then conveyed their astrological predictions as to what the upcoming year would bring to people from different walks of life. These astrological prognostications, which these sources defined as "the decrees of the ascendant of the [new] year" (*aḥkām-ı tāli'-i sāl*), were often replete with equivocations and platitudes due mostly to the genre's conventions and the conservative nature of astrology as a hermeneutic discipline. Thus, contrary to Kırkoğlu's assertion, it is indeed difficult to parallel the function of the annual predictions to that of chronicles and deem them "historical records" of the socio-political issues of their times (114).

To a certain extent, Kırkoğlu's attempt to interpret these predictions in the light of actual historical events and characterize them as valuable sources for understanding the ideological positions of courtly affiliated individuals makes sense. Yet methodologically speaking, such an approach may lead to imprecise and hasty conclusions, as it would be misleading to read into these commonplace prognostications regarding, let's say, medical issues that may emerge among the empire's subjects or the viziers' potential conspiracies (which one can easily come across in any other *taqwim* from a different year), and to attribute them to exact historical events. Pardon the analogy here, but to what extent could historians living three centuries from now, picking as their primary sources today's daily, weekly, or annual horoscope columns in popular magazines and newspapers, reconstruct the exact political atmosphere and socio-cultural issues of our time? It is beyond any doubt that astrological predictions may once in a while refer explicitly to, yet often times only hint at, certain political issues and tensions. However, when it comes to interpreting historically the court astrologers' (astrological) "interpretations" (i.e., *aḥkām*), one should not only look at how these prognostications were informed by actual historical occurrences, but also at how these predictions were read, debated, and implemented by their target audience.

Especially as regards to this last point, namely, the recognition of court astrologers' service by political authorities and the wider public, Kırkoğlu's book does not provide a wealthy set of details, aside from taking for granted certain assumptions stating that "astrology found favor among Ottoman *'ulamā* and ruling elites." (116). It is true that especially from the reign of Bāyezīd II (r. 1481-1512) onward, the recently institutionalized "office" of court astrologers routinely employed a varying number of astral experts and put them on the palace payroll in return for their standard service, including the preparation of almanacs or the delivery of auspicious moments to embark upon a military campaign or construct an imperial building. Yet it would be misleading to assume that over the four centuries of this office's existence in the court bureaucracy court astrologers were always acknowledged as key political advisors and their activities deemed favorable. Given the fact that the favor court astrologers found – or sometimes lacked – was mostly determined by the personal proclivities of their patrons (i.e., the sultans), and that extant copies of Ottoman *taqwims* are mostly available only as a single copy with little to no marginalia, the scope of these annual predictions' influence might have been more limited than is usually assumed.

One of the obvious ambiguities in Kırkoğlu's work is its target audience. Although the book rather seems to address lay readers in view of its appealing title and overall treatment of the subject matter, I doubt whether they would find the

heavy use of words, titles, and names in Ottoman Turkish or Arabic appealing. Nonetheless, it is hard to say that this academic sensitivity toward incorporating original sources into the narrative is reflected by these names and concepts' proper and accurate transcription, for sometimes even the same person or title on the same page is referred to in different ways (e.g., *Mecmû'a-i Çağmananî* (sic), *Ömer el-Çağmini el-Hârezmi* (sic), *Şerhü Çağminî*, 70).

In addition to resolving such transcription problems in potential new editions, certain arguments that are either self-contradictory or no longer valid thanks to recent scholarship in this field should also be modified. Due to space constraints, I will limit myself to pointing only at a few of them: Page 65 states that the astronomical and astrological works in Khalil Efendi's probate inventory correspond to 10 percent of his entire book collection, whereas page 69 gives the same number as 5 percent. Similarly, it is argued on page 30 that the conventions of the almanac genre were "established" by the seventeenth century, and yet a few pages later (43-44) it is stated that "the style and layout of the almanacs...were fixed at the time of Bayezid II." Ascribing the beginning of court astrologers on the palace payroll to Bâyezîd II's reign should also be revised, for we know that at least one court *munajjim* was recorded on the payroll in the later years of Mehmed II (r. 1444-46, 1451-81). In a like manner, the book argues that the earliest extant *taqwîm* with annual predictions has been dated to 1489-90 (88), although other extant examples have already been dated as far back as the early fifteenth century. Plus, one should not miss the fact that there are other surviving examples of almanacs with annual predictions produced for pre-Ottoman Islamic courts.

Curiously, the book also notes that Shukr Allâh Shirwânî (d. later than 910/1504-05), 'Aṭâ' Allâh 'Acemî (d. later than 885/1481), and Mîrim Çelebi (d. 931/1525) came to the Ottoman lands after the rise of the Safavids and helped the proliferation of Turkish translations of key astrological texts (43). While all of these individuals did in fact appear in the Ottoman realm long before the rise of Shâh Ismâ'îl, none of them wrote anything in Turkish. In addition to all of these points, some of the arguments made in the book that reference no source or study, such as "we know that freelance *munajjims* willing to grasp the attention of the ruler also communicated their annual predictions" (21) or "astrology was also imparted in the *muwaqqitkhânes* as part of the curriculum" (60) should be documented.

Finally, we should question some of the taken-for-granted assumptions that the astrology practiced by court astrologers, including Khalil Efendi, was intimately linked to esoteric/occult sciences and that there were inextricable links between the court astrologer's craft and such practices as *'ilm al-jafr* (divination by letters)

or *'ilm al-ḥurūf* (lettrism), which had obvious differences in terms of their methods and objectives as well as some aspects in common. In the beginning of his work Kırkoğlu rightfully criticizes those scholars who would too easily “lump astrology together with different types of divination,” (25) yet he cannot fully escape his own criticism in the rest of his book and, especially, in the separate article added to the appendices. To what extent would it be historically accurate to match the type of astrology practiced and represented by court astrologers to that of famous occultists and/or lettrists of the Islamicate world, such as Aḥmad al-Būnī (d. 622/1225) and ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Biṣṭāmī (d. 858/1454), or of later Ottoman judges or bureaucrats like Mawlānā ‘Īsā (d. later than 950/1543) or Muṣṭafā ‘Āli (d. 1008/1600), who were to a certain extent influenced by these earlier occultists? One should also note here that unlike what the author assumes, the science of lettrism (*'ilm al-ḥurūf*), which seeks to scientifically deploy the knowledge of the letters’ numerological/divine attributes, was not the same thing as the Ḥurūfī sect of Faḍl Allāh Astarābādī (d. 896/1394) that emerged as a whole new religious dispensation.

At any rate, Kırkoğlu’s exploration into the lives and works of an Ottoman court astrologer will help trigger scholarly interest in similar names and issues that have long been marginalized in the historiography of science in the Ottoman world.