The Horizons, Limits, and Taxonomies of Ottoman Knowledge

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My subject is rather ambitious, but I hope its preliminary character will justify it. I aim to map the Ottoman world of knowledge. I am not going to embark on philosophical and epistemological discussions;[1] speaking of a "world of knowledge", I have in mind a mental universe delineating what can be known by man, how it can be known, and last but not least, what is not to be known, being a prerogative either of God or a few select initiates. I do not intend to delve into the progress of the Ottomans' historical, geographical, or natural knowledge as such, that is into a history of Ottoman science.[2] What I describe as a "world of knowledge" has more to do with the way they conceived the limitations of human knowledge; in other words, my subject is Ottoman epistemology and gnosiology. The focus, however, will be not so much on the subject's philosophical dimensions. Rather, I will seek to explore its historical development: the way the horizons of this mental universe were delineated in space and time; the way these horizons expanded or contracted; the

1 On the newly emerging field of "history of knowledge", see, e.g., Peter Burke, *What is the History of Knowledge?*, Cambridge 2015; *Journal of the History of Knowledge*, 1/1 (2020) [Forum: What is the History of Knowledge?] https://journalhistoryknowledge.org/1/volume/1/issue/1/

2 On the latter, see the preliminary remarks by Sonja Brentjes, "Pride and Prejudice: The Invention of a 'Historiography of Science' in the Ottoman and Safavid Empires by European Travellers and Writers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries", in John Brooke – Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu (eds), *Religious Values and the Rise of Science in Europe*, Istanbul 2005, 229–254 and Justin Stearns, "Writing the History of the Natural Sciences in the Pre-Modern Muslim World: Historiography, Religion, and the Importance of the Early Modern Period", *History Compass* 9/12 (2011), 923–951; the latest contributions (following the rich and pioneering contributions by Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu) are by Miri Shefer-Mossensohn, *Science Among the Ottomans: The Cultural Creation and Exchange of Knowledge*, Austin 2015, and Harun Bekir Küçük, *Science Without Leisure: Practical Naturalism in Istanbul, 1660–1732*, Pittsburgh 2020.

way this universe was seen as having limits, showing fields that could not (or should not) be known; the way these limits shifted to and fro in the continuum of reality; and, finally, the way knowledge was organized into taxonomies of science, demonstrating hierarchies of the world in relation to what was deemed necessary, useful, or harmful to man.

As was noted above, this discussion will remain preliminary. First and foremost, there was no such thing as "an Ottoman", or indeed an "Ottoman world of knowledge". Although the intellectual history of the Ottoman world is still at an embryonic stage, it is clear that there was no single "Ottoman culture" (even if we confine ourselves to the Muslim, Turkish-speaking part of the population, which will form the main focus of this study). Different social groups, local traditions, gender hierarchies, ideological trends, and lines of thought influenced every individual's *Weltanschauung*. What is really important in terms of social history is to see the field described above as an especially constructive vantage point for observing the interplay of different layers of culture representing varying groups of society: thus, one may presuppose the existence of a "popular" or folk culture, as well as a Sufi one, both slanting more towards a "magical" worldview, while ulema (religious scholars') circles would seek to interpret (or, alternatively, reject) such traditions within a very rational and strict framework of an ontological hierarchy. Neither of these narratives was static or immutable: most notably, Kâtib Çelebi's widening of the source base marks the beginning of a new process from the mid-seventeenth century on, which arguably led to the rise of a more scientific view connected with an artisanal and mercantile culture by the early eighteenth century. The present study will try to take into account these differences, but surely there is much work to be done before we can safely associate ideas with social groups in the Ottoman case.

Secondly, the scope of the research would be enormous were it to study the world of knowledge throughout the Ottoman populations. ources are extremely scarce regarding popular beliefs. Given these limitations, I will emphasize here the learned tradition (of various levels of education and literacy) in urban settings. Ideological currents pertaining

to ethnoreligious groups other than the ruling Muslim Turkish-speaking elite must be taken into account, as the latter was by no means isolated and aloof from influence (and vice versa): thus, Greek, Jewish, and Arab sources must be brought into the greater picture.

Now, what I tried to define as the world of knowledge has horizons: fields that are within its reach, not because it is forbidden or dangerous to go further, but because they are the furthest fields conceivable. There are horizons in time: namely, every culture at a given moment has a conception not only of how far it can trace back human history, but also of whether it can predict future developments. There are horizons in space: every conception of the world has well-known (or less well-known) territories, beyond which there are *terrae incognitae*, either to be explored or considered places *par excellence* for wonders and strange phenomena. Finally, there are what can be called horizons in verticality: from the microcosm of the human body and its functions to the macrocosm of the supralunary world, relations, hierarchies, and correspondences that influence the way we think of the universe and what can be known about it. In other words, as put by Gottfried Hagen:

> Ottoman world interpretation organized the knowledge derived from experience of the world in four dimensions. The experience of space uses the two horizontal dimensions, and the resulting description of our world is called geography. The dimension of time yields history. The fourth dimension, the vertical, can be taken as a metaphor for the relation between man and God… [T]he presence of this dimension in the perception and interpretation of the "others" is a dominant feature of Ottoman culture. In other words, to keep with the metaphor, looking around (geography) and looking back (history) are inextricably linked to looking up (theology).[3]

[3] Gottfried Hagen, "Afterword: Ottoman Understandings of the World in the Seventeenth Century", in Robert Dankoff, *An Ottoman Mentality: The World of Evliya Çelebi*, Leiden 2006 (2nd ed.), 215–256 at 215–216.

Horizons in Time

Islamic historiography had already incorporated information on ancient history by the late ninth century.[4] Initially, there were two major trends in such histories, one which focused on sacred history, i.e. the line of prophets from Adam to Muhammad, and another stemming mainly from Persian tradition and enumerating royal dynasties. Later, they were merged into a vision of history glorifying both the Muslim community as the apex of prophetic communities and the Abbasid Caliphate (or subsequent ones) as the culmination of imperial authority. This tradition was mostly based on sacred history and the biblical traditions of prophets ("a synchronized presentation of Islamized Biblical history, Arab history, and Persian history" as Franz Rosenthal puts it),[5] whereas non-Muslim history was mainly presented in the form of ethnological descriptions until the post-Mongol era, when translations of chronicles started to find their way into histories.[6] A special place was reserved for the ancient Greek world, emphasizing the series of philosophers known after the medieval translation movement under the Abbasids; evoking wisdom as they did, they were partly Islamicised in order to be appropriated into a pattern of divine plans culminating in the revealed wisdom of the Prophet. The same Islamisation and appeal to ancient wisdom happened with the figure of Prophet Suleyman or King Salomon.[7]

Although interest in universal histories had initially waned, it had long been rejuvenated by the time the Ottomans began to write his-

4 On Ottoman universal histories and their incorporation of ancient history, see Marinos Sariyannis, "Ancient History in Ottoman Universal Histories", in Ovidiu Olar – Konrad Petrovszky (eds.), *Writing History in Ottoman Europe (15th–18th Century)*, Leiden (forthcoming); cf. also Hagen, "Afterword", 233–234.

5 Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, Leiden 1968, 135.

6 Rosenthal, *A History*; Chase F. Robinson, "Islamic Historical Writing, Eighth through the Tenth Centuries", in Sarah Foot and Chase F. Robinson (eds.), *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, vol. 2: *400–1400*, Oxford 2012, 238–266; Konrad Hirschler, "Islam: the Arabic and Persian Traditions, Eleventh–Fifteenth Centuries", in Sarah Foot and Chase F. Robinson (eds.), *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, vol. 2: *400–1400*, Oxford 2012, 267–286.

7 See Allegra Iafrate, *The Wandering Throne of Solomon. Objects and Tales of Kingship in the Medieval Mediterranean*, Leiden 2016.

tory. Thus, the first histories composed in the Ottoman lands went back to the mythical Persian kings and the pre-Islamic prophets. Mevlana Şükrullah's *Bahjat al-tawarikh* ("Splendor of histories"), composed in Persian in the late 1450s, introduced more detailed descriptions of ancient Greece. Şükrullah's history is especially interesting for us, since it introduces both a multilinear past and an even more remote, cosmological time of quasi-eternal cyclism. Thus, on the one hand his account of philosophers puts together figures from ancient or Hellenic Greece (Pythagoras, Thales, Aristotle, Galen, Hermes Trismegistus) with the Quranic wise Loqman, as well as figures associated with ancient India in the context of a trend in the magic tradition.[8]

> The Indian philosopher Keynaş created the science of *narenciye*; in his times, a very pious king on the name of Adreyanus reigned in India. The philosopher Keynaş wrote a book on *narencat* and in this matter, he made Adreyanus' and other kings' heart to follow him. He lived for 840 years.[9]

The reference to Hadrian (Adreyanus) shows the amalgamation of different traditions; in the same vein, the Prophet Idris, inaugurating the second thousand-year cycle in the history of humanity, is identified with Enoch ("Prophet Idris's name is Hanuh"), although it is also noted that "the Greeks call him Urmus, and the Arabs Hermes".[10] Furthermore, Şükrullah's vision of ancient Greece is also influenced by apocryphal legends that presented all ancient heritage as pagan remnants of an infidel, corrupt past. Several histories of pre-Ottoman Istanbul (Constantinople), dated to the second half of the fifteenth century but reiterated in various sources well into the seventeenth, focus on stories of depravity and corruption and the resulting disasters, implying thus that the city should

8 On these traditions, see Jean-Charles Coulon, *La Magie en terre d'Islam au Moyen Âge*, Paris 2017, 81–110.

9 Şükrullah Efendi, *Behcetü't-tevârîh: tarihin aydınlığında*, ed. Hasan Almaz, Istanbul 2010, 271.

10 Şükrullah Efendi, *Behcetü't-tevârîh*, 119.