

A. EDITORIAL

Working on the Ottoman perceptions of nature: assessment of a research project

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Six years ago, funding provided by the European Research Council under the program Consolidator Grant 2017 saw the launch of “Geographies and Histories of the Ottoman Supernatural Tradition: Exploring Magic, the Marvelous, and the Strange in Ottoman Mentalities”, or the GHOST project¹ for short. It is now with a mix of pleasure and sadness that we present the fourth and last

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issue of our online journal, “*Acai'ib*: Occasional Papers on the Ottoman Perceptions of the Supernatural”.

Among the activities we conducted during the time that has elapsed since the publication of the previous issue (all can be seen in the “News” section of our site: <https://ghost.ims.forth.gr/news/>), the most important was of course the international workshop on “Knowing and controlling nature in Ottoman culture: scientific and occultist approaches in a global perspective”, which took place in Rethymno on November 16–18, 2023. Of the 23 papers presented, the reader will find eight in this issue, providing an abridged proceedings. Two of the contributors sent extended versions of their papers, which are published in the first section of this issue. Added to the articles and research reports published in the previous issues of our journal, as well as to the proceedings volume of the eleventh “Halcyon Days in Crete” international symposium (14–17 January 2022) on “Enchantments and disenchantments: early modern Ottoman visions of the world”, which will hopefully be published within 2024, they make a respectable corpus of material on the Ottoman perceptions of nature and the supernatural: a corpus that was, directly or indirectly, produced by the GHOST project.² In addition, we hope to be able to produce three monographs within 2024, authored by Marinos Sariyannis, Zeynep Aydoğan and Işık Demirakın, on various aspects of the topic.³ Moreover, we have been engaged in a series of internation-

2 For the contents of the papers presented in these two symposia, see M. Sariyannis, “International workshop “Nature and the supernatural in Ottoman culture” (Istanbul, December 14–15, 2019): a report”, *Acai'ib: Occasional papers on the Ottoman perceptions of the supernatural*, 1 (2020), 105–116 <https://doi.org/10.26225/7hrz-g004>; idem, “Halcyon Days XI international symposium ‘Enchantments and disenchantments: early modern Ottoman visions of the world’ (Rethymno, January 14–17, 2022): a report”, *Acai'ib: Occasional papers on the Ottoman perceptions of the supernatural*, 3 (2022), 125–152. <https://doi.org/10.26225/dqzv-s094>

3 To these papers one must also add: M. Sariyannis, “The limits of going global: The case of ‘Ottoman Enlightenment(s)’”, *History Compass*, 2020;e12623 <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12623>; idem, “«Nous étions tous stupéfaits et effrayés» : Émotions ottomanes face au surnaturel”, *Turcica*, 53 (2022), 277–306 <https://doi.org/10.2143/TURC.53.0.3291340>; idem, “A Tale of Two Cities: Jābaršā/Jābalqā and Their Metamorphoses”, *Der Islam*, 101/1 (2024), 162–192 <https://doi.org/10.1515/islam-2024-0006>; idem, “Transculturality in magical practices: the case of the Vernardakis Codex”, in Hasan Çolak (ed.), *Formation and Circulation of Knowledge in the Ottoman Empire: A Connected and Transcultural History of Ottoman Muslim and Orthodox Communities* (Syracuse, forthcoming); F. Coşkun, “Heavens, World, and Human Beings in the Ottoman Cosmographies”, in Ch. Ferella, T. Pommerening, and U. Steinert (eds), *Living Bodies, Dead Bodies, and the Cosmos* (Tübingen, forthcoming). Finally, Feray

al conferences, public lectures, interviews and other ways to disseminate our research agenda and findings.⁴

Thus, an obvious result of the project is the production of a significant body of scholarly studies, which arguably open new paths in the study both of Ottoman cultural history and of Islamicate mysticism and occultism. Submissions to our journal were made not only by members of the core project team, but also by other scholars (Gülçin Tunalı Kaçan, Edhem Eldem, Amila Buturović), in addition to all of our peers who participated in our three conferences. When the project began in early 2018, academic exploration of perceptions of the supernatural and of occult sciences in Ottoman culture was largely uncharted territory. However, in the ensuing years, studies of occultism in other regions of the Islamicate world were gaining momentum. Six years later, we can confidently assert that this field is now much less obscure. We can take pride in the fact that we feel that the GHOST project played its modest role in this development.

Our working hypothesis is based on the idea that the study of ideas and techniques must involve connecting them with broader social and cultural developments. Occultism, as with all cultural phenomena, is rooted in specific

Coşkun organized a dossier on nature and the supernatural, with participation of members of the team, in *Toplumsal Tarih* 356 (August 2023) <https://tarihvakfi.org.tr/dergiler/toplumsal-tarih-sayi356/>

4 Members of the team participated in panels at the CIEPO-22 conference (Sofia, September 2018), at the second and third ENSIE conferences (December 2020, September 2021), at a series of workshops in the Freie Universität Berlin (July 2019, February 2020), in the 34. Deutsche Orientalistentag in Berlin (September 2022), at a round table at the University of Strasbourg (December 2022), and in the Turkologentag 2023 in Vienna (September 2023). Lectures were delivered at the Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Vienna, October 2019), at the Otto Spies Memorial Lecture in Bonn (February 2020) and the Freie Universität Berlin (February 2020). Finally, the project was presented in the series of lectures of the ANAMED library (March 2021), at the Institute of European Studies of the University of California, Berkeley (March 2021), in a W'OTSAP meeting (July 2021), and in three interviews: in Açık Radio <https://acikradyo.com.tr/podcast/234419> in websites: The Thinker's Garden, October 2020 <https://thethinkersgarden.com/the-ottoman-supernatural-tradition/> and EastEast, May 2021 <https://easteast.world/en/posts/357> Last but not least, the theatrical group Splish-Splash, in collaboration with the Institute for Mediterranean Studies/FORTH, presented the black comedy "Ayşem", written under the scientific guidance of Yannis Spyropoulos and Marinos Sariyannis in order to popularize and communicate parts of the actions and output of the research programs GHOST and JaNET, in Rethymno and Athens (June 2022).

dynamics of a given cultural and social context. We should therefore not regard these branches of knowledge as homogenous episteme and practice. Instead, we should examine which social groups endorsed or opposed which specific “occult” practice, the contexts in which they did so, the reasons for opposition, and how distinctions such as scholarly and vernacular intersect with social status and ethnoreligious identities in this domain. Our approach to studying Ottoman culture in relation with the supernatural has been comprehensive. We have made a concerted effort to include the intellectual and cultural history of non-Muslim Ottomans and have already produced knowledge on Greek Orthodox occult practices. We are eager to engage with scholars specializing in the Ottoman Jewish, Slavic, and Armenian communities, with the hope that the field will continue to expand and diversify in the future. The concept of transculturality, as developed by Wolfgang Welsch in the 1990s,⁵ can effectively be drawn upon. Rather than recognizing distinct cultures such as Muslim, Greek Orthodox, Jewish, and others within a political imperial structure, this model advocates for the understanding of intertwined hybrid traditions within an imperial culture. Our research demonstrates that this model is perfectly compatible with the study of vernacular and scholarly belief in the supernatural and potential points of access to it. The diffusion of cultural elements from vernacular to scholarly settings (“trickle-up”), the popularization of learned magic and ideas into the lower urban strata (“trickle-down”), as well as the different “trickle-across” effects of diffusion between the different ethnoreligious traditions of the Ottoman Empire (but also of the Mediterranean basin at large) form a landscape characterized by fluidity, hybridity, and persistence.

Another feature of our approach is that it seeks to distinguish itself from both a traditional “history of science” approach, where occultist belief is regarded as an impediment that gradually declines to make way for sound scientific

5 W. Welsch, “Transculturality. On the changing constitution of contemporary cultures”, in Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (ed.), *Migration and Cultural Change. Focus of the Journal for Cultural Exchange*, Vol. 1/45 (Stuttgart 1995), 39–44; A. Benessaïeh, “Multiculturalism, Interculturality, Transculturality”, in A. Benessaïeh (ed.), *Amérique transculturelles/ Transcultural Americas* (Ottawa 2010), 11–38; S. Autiero and M. A. Cobb (eds), *Globalization and Transculturality from Antiquity to the Pre-Modern World* (London 2022); H. Çolak, “İbrahim Müteferrika and the Ottoman Intellectual Culture in the Early 18th Century: a Transcultural Perspective”, R. Dıpratu – S. Noble (eds), *Arabic-Type Books Printed in Wallachia, Istanbul, and Beyond* (Berlin 2024), 3–20 at 5-6.

knowledge, and a “history of occultism” approach, where occult knowledge is viewed as either an integral part of science, or as an independent subject for functional and genealogical study. Rather, our field remained rooted in cultural and intellectual history, with a focus on studying beliefs and techniques within the framework of Ottoman cultural and social dynamics. We view these beliefs and practices as integral parts of the Ottoman *Weltanschauung*—a dynamic worldview, evolving with social and cultural shifts. One of our main research goals, indeed, was to investigate whether the supernatural was perceived as omnipresent or gradually fading from the observable world. In essence, our study aligns more closely with the history of knowledge: a burgeoning field that integrates artisanal and other non-scientific practice, skills, and approaches to dealing with failure, ignorance and the unknown.⁶

In this context, when faced with occultist beliefs or accounts of miraculous events, cultural historians question the extent to which these beliefs were truly widespread and well-founded, despite the prevalence of texts discussing them. Some scholars have referred to this as a *croissance clignotante* (“flickering belief”):⁷ a partial, selective belief, where practices can also be conceived at times as a pastime akin to games. Others refer to ‘doubts’, rather than beliefs, or to a distinct category (‘aliefs’) based on a habitual, automatic belief-like attitude, often in conflict with one’s explicit beliefs and more akin to the history of emotions, rather than that of ideas.⁸ We may never be sure whether a practitioner of lettrist magic, an astrologer or a geomancer writing manuals or treatises on their craft were really believing in its reality; and some of these practitioners indeed

6 On this term see P. Burke, *What is the History of Knowledge?* (Cambridge 2015); C. Zwierlein (ed.), *The Dark Side of Knowledge: Histories of Ignorance, 1400 to 1800* (Leiden 2016); S. Dupré and G. Somsen, “The History of Knowledge and the Future of Knowledge Societies”, *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, 42/2–3 (2019), 186–199; J. Östling and D. Larsson Heidenblad, *The History of Knowledge* (Cambridge 2023); see also the “Forum: What is the History of Knowledge?” in the first issue of *Journal for the History of Knowledge* (2020), edited by Dupré and Somsen.

7 J.-P. Boudet, *Entre science et nigromance. Astrologie, divination et magie dans l’Occident médiéval (xiiie-xve siècle)* (Paris 2006), 533.

8 W. G. Pooley, “Doubt and the Dislocation of Magic: France, 1790–1940”, *Past & Present*, 2023 <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtad002>; T. Szabó Gendler, “Alief and Belief”, *Journal of Philosophy*, 105/10 (2008), 634–663; cf. M. Pfeffer, “The Contribution of the Early Modern Humanities to ‘Disenchantment’”, *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*. 16 (2021), 398–405.

left written traces of their doubts.⁹ This plea for caution applies not only to belief in the supernatural, but also to the ‘materialist’ tendencies we occasionally encounter. Such nuance is, of course, hard to distinguish in our sources. Nevertheless, it is important to remain attentive to their existence, especially before generalizing and theorizing upon the results of our research. At the very least, one may attempt to reconstruct Lucien Febvre’s *outilage mental*: the mental toolbox or equipment, which frames the understanding of time, of nature, of causality in a given moment of historical time and which allows or prohibits trespassing the borders and restrictions of a system of established beliefs.¹⁰

In this vein, our research within the framework of the GHOST project has examined topics as diverse as the reasoning of divination and magic in the Ottoman tradition, the use of tropes related to magic and the marvelous in early Ottoman epics, images of and polemics around sainthood and miracle-working, and the marvels and wonders of the world as seen in cosmographical texts but also chronicles and other sources. Our research has also investigated various aspects of Islamicate occult sciences in the Ottoman period, vernacular practices and the history of emotions, the position of occult and theological sciences in the classification of knowledge, the role of science in the process of disenchantment (and the very existence of this process), as well as theological disputes pertaining to the human agency. In sum, our research endeavors have encompassed a range of subject matter from a variety of approaches that have served to demarcate the place of the supernatural in the Ottoman worldview(s), the technology connected to it, and the complex and intersecting political, social and ideological factors influencing it. As part of this process, the research team closely studied a vast array of sources, including geographical and encyclopedic treatises, literary works, biographies and chronicles, grimoires and compendia of magic and divination, as well as archival material.

Given expected completion of the project, and publication of all associated materials within 2024, we hope that our scientific output has sufficiently encompassed all of the points described above, that it raises new directions for inquiry and that it sheds light on sources and subject matter heretofore unstud-

9 See e.g. a late (mid-nineteenth century) example in G. Tunali, “An Ottoman Astrologer at Work: Sadullah el-Ankarâvi and the Everyday Practice of *İlm-i Nücûm*”, in F. Georgeon and F. Hitzel (eds), *Les Ottomans et le temps* (Leiden 2012), 39–59.

10 These points were brought up in the final discussion of our 2022 symposium, transcribed in Sariyannis, “Halcyon Days XI international symposium”, 132–152.

ied. From the supernatural field (i.e. things pertaining to God and angelic beings, including miraculous appearances) to human access and control over this field (i.e. occult knowledge and sciences), as well as the preternatural (i.e. the domain of things that belong to the order of nature but cannot be explained by the human intellect), we sought to explore the various ways in which Ottomans of varying socio-cultural status dealt with the invisible, the unpredictable, the inexplicable. Moreover, we have attempted to investigate how, when, and to what extent these dynamics changed with time; we sought to test concepts such as enlightenment, disenchantment, or secularism, and to examine whether the sources and dynamics we studied fit into their parameters. In this brief editorial I will not delve into the results of these efforts: each one of us may have formed differing opinions, as one would expect given the complexity and breadth of these questions, and the views of the present author will be presented in his forthcoming monograph. At any rate, it is our hope that the corpus of our scientific publications does contribute to this *problématique*, or, at least, that it clears a path for future such studies.

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