



# Science among the Ottomans: The Cultural Creation and Exchange of Knowledge

By Miri Shefer-Mossensohn

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Scholars have long thought that, following the Muslim Golden Age of the medieval era, the Ottoman Empire grew culturally and technologically isolated, losing interest in innovation and placing the empire on a path toward stagnation and decline. *Science among the Ottomans* challenges this widely accepted Western image of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ottomans as backward and impoverished.

In the first book on this topic in English in over sixty years, Miri Shefer-Mossensohn contends that Ottoman society and culture created a fertile environment that fostered diverse scientific activity. She demonstrates that the Ottomans excelled in adapting the inventions of others to their own needs and improving them. For example, in 1877, the Ottoman Empire boasted the seventh-longest electric telegraph system in the world; indeed, the Ottomans were among the era's most advanced nations with regard to modern communication infrastructure. To substantiate her claims about science in the empire, Shefer-Mossensohn studies patterns of learning; state involvement in technological activities; and Turkish- and Arabic-speaking Ottomans who produced, consumed, and altered scientific practices. The results reveal Ottoman participation in science to have been a dynamic force that helped sustain the six-hundred-year empire.

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#### Review

"The main argument of *Science among the Ottomans* is actually quite simple—there was such a thing as 'Ottoman Science.' This statement entails a major task. In order to establish the historicality of Ottoman science, one must differentiate it from Western science and discuss it on its own terms. This requires a discussion on the broader aspects of the history of science as a field and a discussion of the concept of 'science' itself. In addition, one should engage the question of non-western scientific traditions and, above all, present and discuss the subject of Islamic science and its history. Shefer-Mossenohn does all the above, and more, admirably." (Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, Professor of History, Middle Eastern, and Islamic Studies, New York University; author of *The Ten Lost Tribes: A World History and The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China*; and editor of *Modern Middle Eastern Jewish Thought: Writings on Identity, Politics, and Culture 1893–1958*)

"*Science among the Ottomans* will fill what has been a major lacuna in the history of science—namely, the lack of a comprehensive study of the role of science and learning in Ottoman culture. *Science among the Ottomans* is not just a significant contribution to the field but a major and unique one. No other study has attempted to place scientific learning during the Ottoman period within the wider cultural frame. Miri Shefer-Mossenohn reflects the best of the current trends in modern historiography, applying them to the sphere of Ottoman scientific and technological activity. The conclusions drawn are significant." (Emilie Savage-Smith, Emeritus Professor of the History of Islamic Science, Oriental Institute, University of Oxford; editor of *Magic and Divination in Early Islam and The Year 1000: Medical Practice at the End of the First Millennium*; and coauthor of *Medieval Islamic Medicine, Science, Tools and Magic Parts I and II*, and *An Eleventh-Century Egyptian Guide to the Universe: The Book of Curiosities*)

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#### About the Author

Miri Shefer-Mossensohn is a senior lecturer in Middle Eastern and African History at Tel Aviv University.

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