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Prognostication, Fortune, and Risk: How Early Modern People Navigated Material Fortunes Through Almanacs and Astrological Consultations

Thursday 18 September 2025 11:00 (1h 30m)

This panel challenges conventional approaches to risk studies by examining how early modern communities and individuals navigated uncertainty in their daily lives. Moving beyond the quantitative methods often deployed in assessing historical risk, we investigate how early modern people used astrological knowledge and almanacs to make critical decisions about health, commerce, travel, and agriculture. This panel places centre stage the activities of the astrologer and almanac writer, as well as the consulted individual and almanac reader, to try to understand the qualitative and lived ways early modern people navigated risk and fortune. We will explore the available predictive marketplace in early modern Europe and Ottoman world. In doing so, we will focus on what techniques astrologers used to answer the questions of clients and the contents and use of the almanac writing tradition. In this way, we turn away from traditional economic frameworks often synonymous with risk studies and offer a fresh perspective that reshapes our understanding of how early modern societies conceptualised and responded to fortune and misfortune.

Chair: A. Tunç Şen

Presenter: Jakub Ochocinski

Title of the paper: Celestial Science and Practical Knowledge: Everyday Uses of Calendars in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

This paper examines how readers in eighteenth-century Poland-Lithuania interacted with astrological predictions found in printed calendars. Throughout the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569-1795), university professors of geometry, astronomy, and astrology produced calendars containing weather forecasts, political predictions, agricultural guidance, and health advice based on astrological principles. However, when we examine how people used these texts—evidenced by annotations written in the interleaved blank pages—we find a different story: owners recorded practical information including household accounts, weather observations, travel records, recipes, and social events. Taking this contrast into account, this paper has two objectives. First, to systematically analyse the astrological content that appeared in these widely circulated calendars. Second, to investigate how readers engaged with these predictions through a close examination of their handwritten annotations. By comparing astrological forecasts produced in universities with readers' writings and marginalia, this paper aims to reveal the complex relationship between institutional knowledge and everyday practice in early modern Poland-Lithuania, offering new insights into how diverse communities navigated between university-produced predictions and their lived experiences.

Presenter: Tunahan Durmaz

Title of the paper: A 'Pathology' of Prognostications: Courtly Politics of Medical Astrology in Ottoman Istanbul in the Late 17th Century

This paper is an exercise on the little-known domain of medical astrology in the early modern Ottoman world, particularly in late-seventeenth-century Istanbul. The circumstantial evidence, particularly from medical sources, indicates that a form of medical astrology must have been practiced in the city. Nevertheless, the scope and marketplace of this practice is barely known since such evidence permits only limited contextualization. As a preliminary attempt to approach it, I propose to turn to sources in which medical knowledge intersects with that of the planets. One such genre is the *rûz-nâmes* ('book of days') that served as almanacs providing prognostications depending on possible changes in weather, seasons, and so on. Using

health-related themes such as humors, diseases, and outbreaks as analytical tools, this paper examines several *rûz-nâmes* from the late seventeenth century. It particularly focuses on one commissioned by Prince Ahmed, later Sultan Ahmed II, in the year 1095/1684, following the unsuccessful siege of Vienna in 1683 by the latter's brother Sultan Mehmed IV. Through a case study, the paper discusses (a) the role of prognostication in a post-crisis imperial context and (b) some possible historical trajectories of medical astrology in the Ottoman realm.

Presenter: Luís Campos Ribeiro

Title of the paper: How it shall speed? Astrological practices in early modern nautical culture

This paper discusses the role of astrological practice in the long overseas journeys of the early modern period. While sea travel was known to Europeans prior to this time, large oceanic voyages presented new levels of unpredictability. In practical nautical knowledge, astrology was primarily used for weather forecasting to prepare for natural conditions during the voyage. At a personal level astrological concerns varied: merchants wanted to know about the safety of their ships or cargo; ship captains and sailors sought information on the likelihood of a successful journey; and families enquired about the safe return of their loved ones. Taking as an example the practice of English astrologers, this paper examines these astrological consultations as a significant yet lesser-known aspect of early modern maritime journeys. It will show how astrology played a significant part in the decision-making processes of early modern seafarers and those related to them.

Keywords

Astrology, prognostication, almanacs, risk, fortune, early modern Europe, seventeenth-century Istanbul, navigation, agriculture, medicine

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Short Biography

Luís Campos Ribeiro is an historian of science and art, and a researcher at CIUHCT, University of Lisbon. He has awarded a PhD in History and Philosophy of Sciences by the University of Lisbon published by Brill with the title *Jesuit Astrology: Prognostication and Science in Early Modern Culture* (2023). His research focuses on the history of astrology, astronomy and medicine (Medieval and Early Modern) as well as scientific illustration. He was a postdoc researcher at the ERC Rutter Project, where he published studies on the nautical uses of astrology and the effects of early modern globalization in astrological practices. Luís is the head of the Astra Project: Historical research on astrological techniques and practices, hosted by the CIUHCT, University of Lisbon and The Warburg Institute, University of London. This project functions as an exchange and cooperation hub for historians of astrology and related topics.

Jakub Ochocinski is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at European University Institute, Florence. His doctoral thesis, “Calendars in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569-1795): Prognostication, Attention, and Annotation”, asks how calendars were written and used in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (1569-1795). Building on scholarship in the fields of the history of science/knowledge and the history of the book, his thesis shows the ways in which diverse religious, social, and linguistic communities used and interacted with new printed media in the early modern period. Jakub is co-convenor of the History of Science and Medicine Working Group at the EUI and co-investigator with Luís Campos Ribeiro on an ancillary research project, “Prognostication, Fortune, and Risk: How Early Modern People Navigated Material Fortunes through Almanacs and Astrological Consultations”.

Tunahan Durmaz is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of History at European University Institute, Florence. His research focuses on social, cultural, and political aspects of disease and illness in the early modern

Ottoman world. Emerging at the intersection of histories of knowledge and history of medicine, his dissertation project “Mood, Appetite, and Fever: Understanding Disease in Ottoman Istanbul, 1640–1691” examines how disease and illness were perceived in medical texts produced in Ottoman Istanbul between the 1640s and the 1690s. In 2024-2025, he is a research fellow at the Koç University Research Center for Anatolian Civilizations (ANAMED) in Istanbul. He is also the recipient of the 2025 Andreas Tietze Fellowship in Turkish Studies at the University of Vienna.

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