

Contribution ID: 116

Type: not specified

Allegorists, Alchemists and Iatrochemists in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire

Tuesday 16 September 2025 13:00 (1 hour)

The Early Modern period of Europe is defined as the era spanning from the mid-15th to late 18th centuries. This periodization, however, does not correspond to a similar epoch in Ottoman history. Seated at the confluence of Southern Europe and Western Asia, the Ottoman Empire did not experience many of the decisive historical events that paved the way to the European Early Modern. In the domain of science, until the end of the 18th century, Ottomans relied on medieval Islamic treatises produced in the scholarly centres of the East, by translating, compiling, copying and explicating customized texts. The Ottoman Early Modern commenced in the 17th century when European scientific / technical material was introduced to the Empire albeit with hesitance.

The interpretation and instruction of medieval scientific (i.e. astronomical and mathematical) texts fell upon the scholars of the medrese, the traditional institution of religious learning. As alchemy was excluded from the medrese curriculum, medrese members expressed interest in this field of teaching only exceptionally. Alchemy remained in the realm of the Sufi mystics or dervishes who were regarded as 'heterodox Muslims'. The motivation of Ottoman Sufis to engage with alchemy appears to be similar to that of their ideological forerunners: to excel as perfect human beings by spiritual purification. Al-Jildaki's (fl. 14th c. in Egypt) works describing numerous experiments, without renouncing his allegorical vision, were highly praised by Ottoman alchemists, especially by the Sufi mystic Ali Çelebi el-Izniki (d. 1607). His Mücerrebname includes numerous recipes, also attesting to his interest in practical alchemy. The Sufi physicians of the 17th and 18th centuries, heirs to alchemical literature accumulated by their masters, were drawn to European iatrochemical remedies and therapies. They sought to elaborate and disseminate this new knowledge by composing formularies in Ottoman Turkish. Sufi alchemical texts comparing the process of becoming an "ideal man" with the transformation of base metals into silver and gold, continued to be re-created through the 17th and 18th centuries. Although earlier Ottoman alchemical texts can be traced, in absence of patronage and against impediments of alchemical practice, Anatolian Sufis could hardly develop individual techniques and further their chemical knowledge akin to their peers in Early Modern Europe.

Short Biography

Professor emerita of History of Science, Feza Günergun (born Baytop in Istanbul) is originally trained as a chemical engineer and holds a PhD in medical history from Istanbul University. She acted as Head of the Department of History of Science of Istanbul University from 2001 to 2023. She is the founder of the journal *Osmanlı Bilimi Araştırmaları / Studies in Ottoman Science* and was its chief-editor from 1995 to 2023. Günergun's research interests include, the transfer of modern sciences and techniques from Europe to Turkey (18th-20th c.), Turkish translations of science books, diffusion and popularization of scientific knowledge through journals, scientific instruments, science teaching in educational institutions, biographies of scientists. Günergun is an effective member of the International Academy of the History of Science and founding member of the Turkish Society for the History of Science, and was its secretary-general between 1991-2000. Among the books she co-edited are *Introduction of Modern Science and Technology to Turkey and Japan* (IRCJS, 1998, co-editor: S. Kuriyama), *Science between Europe and Asia* (Springer, 2011, co-editor: D. Raina), *Seapower, Technology and Trade – Studies in Turkish Maritime History* (Piri Reis University, 2014, co-editors: D. Couto

and M.P. Pedani), *Entre Trois Mers –Cartographie ottomane et française des Dardanelles et du Bosphore* (Arkas, 2016, co-editor: J.-F. Pérouse), *Scientific Instruments between East and West* (Brill, 2019, co-editors: N. Brown, S. Ackermann). Günergun curated two exhibitions: *Pursuing Knowledge - Scientific Instruments, Manuscripts and Prints from Istanbul University Collections* (catalogue published in 2016) and *Eduquer par l'Expérience: La Physique expérimentale au Lycée Saint-Joseph d'Istanbul* (2023).

Keywords

Alchemy, dervishes, iatrochemistry, Ottoman Empire, Sufi physicians

E-mail

fezagunergun@yahoo.com

Affiliation

Professor emerita of History of Science

Position

Primary author: Feza Günergun (Professor emerita of History of Science)

Presenter: Feza Günergun (Professor emerita of History of Science)

Session Classification: Keynote Lecture

Track Classification: Individual papers