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# Cultures of Expertise in the Eastern Mediterranean

## Introduction

This special issue aims to explore cultures of expertise and the role of experts in the Ottoman Empire and the broader Eastern Mediterranean from the early-modern period to the late nineteenth century. An analytical focus on individuals positioning themselves as 'experts' as well as on the practices and bodies of knowledge they have at their disposal and provide upon request as a form of 'expertise' sheds light not only on expertise but also on moments of transformation in knowledge cultures more broadly in the Ottoman Empire and beyond. In juxtaposition, the following case studies suggest that 'experts' and 'expertise' are valid overarching analytical approaches to examine shifts in knowledge cultures across time. It is important to clarify that while paying close attention to the terminology at play in various case studies and source languages, we do not seek to provide a fixed, universally applicable definition of experts in an Ottoman or Eastern Mediterranean setting. Instead, we approach debates and disagreements that historical actors found relevant about various forms and claims of expertise as signposts indicating larger epistemological shifts and pressures on existing knowledge cultures.

The following introduction further explores the intricate relationship between expertise and knowledge cultures and proposes an overarching approach that emphasizes practices, interpersonal dynamics and moments of conflict and contestation as key elements in the study of expertise in transregional settings. It sets a frame for six case studies that subsequently explore cultures of expertise in the Eastern Mediterranean at different points in time and in different social, professional and regional environments. An epilogue revisits the question of terminology in the context of expertise, gathering the various expressions at play when expertise is being discussed by historical actors in the Eastern Mediterranean across time, and inquiring about patterns, shifts and continuities, thereby bringing together insights from all case studies under the lens of a conceptual history perspective.

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## Why Study Expertise in a Transregional/Transimperial Setting?

In recent years, dynamics of knowledge transformation and processes of knowledge circulation have also been at the centre of an increasing number of studies in the Ottoman and Eastern Mediterranean context. Knowledge as an analytical category, however, has proven itself to be notoriously difficult to study or even to capture systematically in transregional environments. Ideas are often abstract or implicit, their movements only becoming legible sporadically in the effects they have had on historical actors and materialities. To hypothesize about transformations in knowledge cultures more comprehensively, it is therefore more productive to explore individuals, material culture and knowledge in close conjunction.

It is against this backdrop that we have deliberately chosen the concepts of experts and expertise as entry points into an exploration of transregional knowledge cultures. Our shared interest in expertise goes back to an earlier collaboration on questions of knowledge circulation in transimperial contexts in the framework of the SPP *Transottomanica*.[1] Looking at the history of ideas together with issues of translation, as well as at trajectories of knowledge production and transmission and borrowing our key frame of reference from social anthropology, we set out to 'follow the knowledge' and traced specific concepts, ideas and bodies of knowledge across time and space. Two aspects in particular remained sidelined by this earlier knowledge-centred approach: On the one hand, the interpersonal relationships and power dynamics that shaped knowledge cultures, channelling or limiting the movement of certain ideas while promoting others, still deserves closer attention. On the other hand, moments of activating and utilizing knowledge in everyday interactions to achieve certain goals or legitimize particular choices clearly stood out as important but had been difficult to capture through the lens of knowledge circulation alone.

Taking a closer look at experts and expertise in the transimperial context of the Eastern Mediterranean combines both lines of questioning: In the following, we explicitly understand experts as practitioners who preserve, activate and apply knowledge. Through their everyday performances, they contribute to both the legitimization and stabilization but equally to the diversification and transformation of knowledge cultures. The focus on experts as actors provides an opportunity to add to the growing field of research on knowledge circulation in transregional settings by merging the history of ideas and concepts with moments of practice and performance and attention to materialities.

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## How to Study Expertise in a Transregional Setting?

Thinking about experts and expertise conceptually, a three-pronged approach is suggested here: First, we have borrowed from the sociologist E. Summerson Carr the notion that expertise is *something that people do, rather than just hold*. Second, we look at *expertise as relational*, created in moments of multilateral encounter, interaction and communication. Viewed from this perspective, expertise is something that needs to be recognized by others just as much as it is claimed by the individuals who see themselves as experts. This is highly relevant in a transregional setting characterized by mobile actors, brokerage and hybridity, where expertise has multiple audiences and various registers and enables individuals to switch between different frameworks, translating their claims, competences and skill sets in full or in part as they do so. Third, it has already been pointed out that expertise is a *diffuse and highly contested concept*. The following discussions not only acknowledge this challenge, but also tap into the heuristic potential that comes with the lack of clear-cut and uniform definitions and conceptualizations of expertise. The case studies assembled here prompt us to view discussions about expertise as signposts indicating broader disruptions and transformations of knowledge cultures. When expertise is claimed or denied, when the need for an expert in a certain field arises or when different groups of actors claim to know the same thing in different ways, underlying shifts in knowledge culture can be anticipated. Looking closely at encounters and performances marked by expertise, it becomes possible to map out these shifts and inquire about the role mobility and the movements of actors, ideas and material culture play in shaping and channelling knowledge cultures. In an analogy to Eric Dursteler's concept of *linguistic ecologies*, we pay particular attention to the interplay of actors, practices, ideas and materialities that enable and reproduce knowledge cultures – thus mapping out *ecologies of knowledge*. Actors and their practices are studied in close conjunction with terminologies used to describe experts and expertise in specific historical contexts and sources, in an attempt to connect approaches from conceptual history with concrete moments of practice. Collectively, we are thus asking about patterns and shifts in the conceptualization of expertise, inquiring in particular about changes brought about by processes of bureaucratization and professionalization in the fields of education and state administration, but also exploring situations of epistemological pluralism with a variety of cultures of expertise coexisting, overlapping and mutually impacting each other.

In a transimperial and transregional setting like the Eastern Mediterranean, questions of mobility and translation bear a particular relevance. Expertise is generally understood as a phenomenon shaped by historical and cultural contexts and as an ongoing, dynamic process that involves individual actors with their interests and resources, but also plays out on interpersonal levels. In the contact zone of the Eastern Mediterranean, we encounter specific forms of expertise: Experts often emerge as intermediary figures with the ability to negotiate between different, even competing knowledge cultures, bridging gaps across time and space and translating not only across various languages, but also across political, ethnical, religious, and social conflicts and power struggles in the region. Like the *dragomans* studied by Natalie Rothman, experts can be



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regarded as being 'formed and transformed' in this contact zone. The Transottoman and Eastern Mediterranean contexts are best explored by looking at translation not as a binary process, but as a cluster of overlapping, interdependent and multidirectional activities shaped by specific parameters and conditions with regard to the multilingual, intercultural and interconfessional dynamics of the transimperial constellation. A broad conceptual outlook on translation as mediation not only between different languages, but across various linguistic, religious and cultural environments and between different genres, temporalities and social contexts underscores sociopolitical functions of translation in addition to linguistic aspects, emphasizing the vital role of translation in the creation, maintenance and delineation of transimperial spaces of interaction and exchange. Consequently, we encounter transimperial experts who skilfully broker between different linguistic, cultural and regional contexts – and thus also play a part in shaping the very boundaries of certain knowledge cultures. The contribution by Hasan Çolak, 'Multilingualism as a Form of Transcultural Expertise: A Study of Multilingual Ottoman Muslim Intellectuals in the Eighteenth Century' is instructive here, as it hones in on aspects of translation and the activities of translators in the multilingual and transcultural contexts of the early modern Ottoman Empire, pointing to gaps and misconceptions in our current understanding of the knowledge cultures and practices that shaped historical processes of translation. Interested only in the final product of a translation as a word-to-word conduit between different languages, later audiences and researchers have often failed to grasp that in multilingual scholarly environments of the early modern period, translations were the result of collaborations and co-productions that brought various translators of different ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic backgrounds together in complex processes of negotiation and exchange. Çolak demonstrates that early modern translators themselves contributed in no small part to this narrow and partial understanding of their work process by staging themselves as individual actors and their activities as individual achievements and products of their singular proficiency and expertise.

In addition to being closely entangled with moments of translation and brokerage, transimperial expertise is characterized by mobility and interconnectedness: On the one hand, both spatial and social mobility play key roles in shaping both the biographical trajectories of experts and their access to different knowledge cultures. Polina Ivanova's paper 'Non-Professional Expertise: On the Early Modern Transformations in Armenian Manuscript Production Viewed from Ottoman Tokat and Crimea' highlights this dimension as it reconstructs the biography of an early modern scribe and his role as an expert. Step'anos from Tokat's trajectory aptly illustrates the interplay between spatial mobility and cultures of expertise: His travel experiences, notably his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, held symbolic value and were seen as indicative of his elevated social and economic status by his peers. In addition, his eagerness and availability to move between various centres of trade and scholarship led to an increased attention, appreciation and demand for his work among potential audiences and sponsors of manuscripts. In her contribution, Ivanova emphasizes how public perceptions could outweigh professional training as a scribe at one of the early modern scriptoria when it came to being recognized as a scribe-expert.

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Transimperial experts like Step'anos from Tokat had the potential to re-combine information, concepts and practices from different contexts into new patterns adjusted to the specific demands of their surroundings. Switching between different codes of conduct and knowledge cultures, they showcased their ability to translate or otherwise mobilize unfamiliar knowledge as part of their expertise. One could go so far as to argue that experts were formative figures in imperial contexts, as in adapting to newly-emerging challenges of governance and imperial cohesion, expanding empires depended upon transimperial experts to generate and implement new ideas and skill sets. Conceptualizing experts as transimperial brokers, we find them crossing not only spatial, but also social boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean. Expert identity could, at least temporarily, overwrite the general principles of social status or religious hierarchy, as the example of foreign advisors and military consultants at the Ottoman court illustrates. In his contribution titled 'Expertise and Sedition: Perspectives from the Ottoman Army of 1769,' Yusuf Karabıçak traces Ottoman perceptions of military expertise, investigating the role of foreign military advisors in the eighteenth century. At this juncture, as the Ottomans found themselves enmeshed in several costly and draining campaigns, military expertise was in particular demand, and Ottoman state officials were facing questions of how to best assess the value of different approaches to governance and warfare while at the same time examining the actual capabilities of the individuals that claimed mastery of these approaches. Access to foreign knowledge and the ability to transfer insights from external contexts into an Ottoman environment emerged as key indicators for valid expertise in these fields, at times overwriting the age, social origin, educational background or experience of the individuals involved. The author further argues that despite being rendered and valued as *foreign*, these conceptions of expertise did not in fact reproduce external influences, but remained very much rooted in an eighteenth-century Ottoman context. Being recognized as an expert was closely tied to questions of security and the ability to impose social order and prevent sedition, thus harking back to key concepts of Ottoman political thinking.

The crossing of social and geographical boundaries added ambiguity and peril to the trajectories of transimperial experts. One who was recognized as an indispensable specialist today could find himself denounced as a traitor or accused of all-too-radical disruption tomorrow. This danger underscores the second feature of transimperial expertise: It is relational, socially embedded and dependent upon the recognition of others, as Meriç Tanık underlines in her contribution titled 'Proving One's Worth: Agronomists', Forestry Engineers', and Veterinarians' Rhetoric on the Essential Utility of their Expert Knowledge.' She focuses on moments of contested expertise that emerged from the late nineteenth century onwards between different communities of Ottoman experts engaging with knowledge about agriculture, forestry and animal husbandry. These disputes pitted professionals trained in newly-established state institutions against local actors with long-standing expertise in their respective occupations, such as farming and horse care. The ensuing debates in which all actors involved attempted to convince their respective communities of their expert status and consequent value were highly publicized and often had a performative character, with outside professionals being ridiculed in front of local communities and striking back in



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professional journals in their efforts to prove the worth of the expertise they provided, while dismissing their critics and promoting a sense of professional standards and community. Tanık's contribution also stands as a reminder that transimperial experts invariably performed to multiple audiences at once. Investigating the different forms of relations and interactions involved in making an expert and recognizing expertise, a number of constellations can be distinguished: Experts perform to communities of fellow specialists and others who also claim expertise in their field – who then either validate their performance or emerge as rivals, leading to counterclaims and mutual allegations of being 'wrong experts' or imposters. The contribution by Lale Diklitaş on 'Claiming Expertise against Orientalists and Reviving Islamic Knowledge in the Republic: İslâm-Türk Ansiklopedisi (1940–1948)' illustrates this aspect: The author zooms in on a key moment of transformation in knowledge cultures in the post-Ottoman context in Republican Turkey, capturing debates centred on the (de-)legitimization of religious knowledge and questions of authority to interpret and disseminate knowledge about Islam. These debates unfolded between translators of the western-Orientalist *Encyclopaedia of Islam* under the auspices of the Turkish Ministry of Education and religious scholars (*ulema*) steeped in the former Ottoman religious and intellectual tradition, who set out to publish an alternative encyclopaedia and journal. The contribution looks into the strategies used by the actors involved in these publications to claim continued relevance for themselves and their fields of expertise, underlining the importance of biographical references and credentials in this regard and honing in on discussions about specific entries in the respective encyclopaedia projects that sparked controversies. Considering different audiences of expertise, the contribution stresses that the debates were closely followed not only in Turkey, but by scholars across the Islamic world. In addition to competing with rivalling authorities in their respective fields, experts also engaged with potential patrons and sponsors, for example in the context of imperial power dynamics and court culture. Here, an emphasis lies on showcasing and also culturally – and not least, economically – validating expertise. Lastly, experts also both engaged with and set themselves apart from laypersons and those who were not (yet) initiated, thus activating mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, drawing boundaries between the categories of expert and layperson and, through their actions, marking or even newly creating certain fields of knowledge as expertise. As the following case studies illustrate, all three dimensions can be found overlapping and mutually impacting each other in the trajectories of transimperial experts. The contribution by Aude Aylin de Tapia on 'Cappadocia as a Field for Expertise: Paths of Three Rum 'Experts' of Cappadocia in Search of a Historical Identity' exemplifies this approach, tracing how different actors contributed to the establishment of the region of Cappadocia with its history, geography, and ethnography as a field of expertise in the context of an emerging transregional Hellenization movement during the second half of the nineteenth century. Introducing three key actors who contributed to the production of scholarship on Cappadocia, she underlines how Rum identity and thus being native to the region became closely entangled with authority to speak and write about historical Cappadocia. While also engaging with western travel writing and research, authors published in Greek and Karamanli-Turkish and were thus reach-

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ing out to different audiences – in the region itself, but also in larger Ottoman cities, notably in Istanbul, where both Cappadocian immigrants and intellectual elites of the Hellenization movement crossed paths and engaged with knowledge about Cappadocia as relevant for thinking about their roots and emerging national identity. A strong concern of these scholars was the correction of what they perceived as false information and negative perceptions of Cappadocia.

In this special issue, we study understandings, legitimations, and trajectories of expertise by juxtaposing and discussing a wide variety of empirical contexts and case studies. Taking a selection of case studies with a broad geographical and chronological scope as a starting point, we discuss concrete empirical examples to shed light on the interplay between actors, practices, and ideas in shaping transimperial knowledge cultures. This deliberate focus on concrete moments of acquiring, transmitting, or utilizing expertise is also necessary to further question and overcome preconceived analytical categories when engaging with transimperial cultures of knowledge. Looking at expertise as a practice also provides an opportunity to move beyond text and text-based tradition and, operating with a broader concept of knowledge, also include tacit knowledge, embodied ways of knowing, and materialities in the study of knowledge cultures.

## From Experts to Expertise: State of the Art

In order to define the phenomenon of 'expertise' we have been looking for inspiration in multiple directions, as it seems that the concept has been studied in various disciplines, starting with philosophy of science, sociology, and anthropology, but not least as a part of history of science, knowledge and ideas. From the philosophical perspective, expertise is a very fruitful, but also a very challenging concept. The interest consists in providing a definition for the nature of expertise, in trying to comprehend the type of knowledge that is essential for experts, in acknowledging and explaining the difference between novices/laypersons and experts by appealing to different kinds of intellectual resources. Expertise is also concerned with experience-oriented knowledge, practical knowledge, multiple forms of relevance characteristic of applied knowledge. Even though the knowledge component is essential for conceptualizing expertise, historians have thus far argued that defining experts and expertise should not primarily be based on the description of the knowledge base but rather needs to take into consideration the complex system of social interactions and communication processes. The social context and environment are responsible for *demand* with concrete expectations from the experts, like e.g. the involvement of the Ottoman Empire in multiple wars makes acute the need for those with foreign military expertise. But the social demand does not liberate experts from the need to prove the *credibility* of their expertise. Without credibility, without trust there is no expertise. Gaining trust lies at the core of expertise, with experts expected to prove their credibility, which was in the Ottoman Empire particularly connected with the approval of the authorities in charge. Dealing with cultures of expertise in the Eastern Mediterranean, it seems that defining the body of knowledge that is provided as expertise is crucial for understanding the particular



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character of the regional and transregional context, in examining both premodern and modern phenomena of expertise.

Who is actually an expert? Our initial inspiration for this issue came from sociology of knowledge, in particular from reading Ronald Hitzler and his reflections of the nature of an expert in modern societies. According to sociologist Hitzler, there are five criteria that are essential in order to perceive the nature of an expert and the knowledge substance he disposes in order to be recognized as an expert. First of all, he underlines the *professional character* of modern expertise, which has to be proved through licenses and diplomas from public institutions. As Polina Ivanova argues in her contribution, however, the issue of being 'professional' was already significant in the early modern context. Focusing on the figure of the scribe, she argues that they can be seen as 'non-professional experts' of their time. Even though they could not provide any kind of formal certification or institutional affiliation, they were still recognized as experts by their communities because of their access to the valuable knowledge that they were ready to market as expertise. On the contrary, the contribution by Meriç Tanık points out how modern professionalization can hinder or impede social recognition in a conservative society. The second point made by Hitzler concerns '*Klasseninteressen*' of the professional experts, their demand to be acknowledged as such, but also their request for the *autonomy* and *authority* of their expert knowledge to be respected by power-holders and politicians. The contribution by Aude Aylin de Tapia, where Cappadocian belonging and identity seem to be necessary for the authority to be regarded as an expert in the region, and equally Lale Diklitaş's case study, where representatives of the former Ottoman *ulema* insist on their unique authority concerning access to religious knowledge and confront 'secular' translators who emphasize the autonomy of their linguistic expertise, further illustrate this aspect.

The third important aspect pointed out by Hitzler deals with the *antagonistic* character of expertise. The expert identity does not exist in a vacuum; the essence of being an expert should be considered a relational phenomenon. Similar as in applying apophatic or negative theology, expert identity can be defined by negation, by what cannot be said of being an expert, namely experts are *not* '*laymen*' or novices on the one hand. On the other hand, experts are *not decision-makers*, especially in the political sense. Thus, from the point of view of sociology of knowledge, neither laypersons nor politicians can be considered experts, which applies in both directions. Experts lose their status if they profess laicity or become politicians and thus decision-makers themselves. This antagonistic feature in elaborating the essence of expertise seems to be fruitful in defining one as an expert. What we see in many of our case studies is an idea of *wrong* or *fake experts* as antagonists of the real bearers of expertise. Thus disqualifying other scholars, translators, agronomists, or historians as ignorant, outdated, or unprofessional helped to frame one's knowledge and performance and indicate a belonging to a community of true, real experts. Across all contributions, we find attempts of historical actors performing as experts to lionize their own qualities by criticizing their opponents. The potential danger in the case that a military expert would be involved in decision-making and initiate sedition can be well recognised in the case study by Yusuf Karabıçak.

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The fourth and final aspect emphasized by Hitzler refers to the *sociology of knowledge* of the expertise. What categorizes the knowledge applied by experts as 'expertise'? Here, according to Hitzler, experts should be distinguished not only from 'laymen,' but also from 'specialists,' when they provide problem-solving strategies. It is the *quality* of the expert's *knowledge* that makes the difference; experts are capable of visualizing the problem that needs a solution; they use metaphors, models and theories and offer an abstract solution to a problem unlike the laypersons who look for quick, concrete and practical answers, which are often regarded as insufficient. Therefore, an expert's systematic knowledge allows them to work out reasonable hypotheses for successful problem solving and use their experience from concrete cases in order to develop their knowledge and adapt their 'expertise' for the future. The last section of Hitzler's article summarizes *what makes an expert*. He comes to the conclusion that the most important knowledge component that an expert needs to possess is how to *present himself* as an expert. It is *staging oneself* as an expert that merits recognition and acknowledgement in the social environment or a sociopolitical context. The performative aspect in acting as an expert is of particular interest for our research inquiry into cultures of expertise. It implies that language conventions and ritualization provided stability of roles between experts and laypersons through communication, but these elements also indicated to whom and in which *communicative situations* ('*Kommunikationssituation*') the role of an expert is to be assigned. This aspect seems also particularly meaningful for the case studies in this special issue, where an expert's ability to communicate his competencies seems decisive for their success in being recognized as experts. In contrast to the well-established opinion in the research on the role of institutions as an essential element to back up expertise in the history of Western Europe, this aspect seems less relevant for the examples from the Ottoman Empire and Eastern Mediterranean – not least because of the lack of universities as centres of scholarly culture until the modern period.

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