

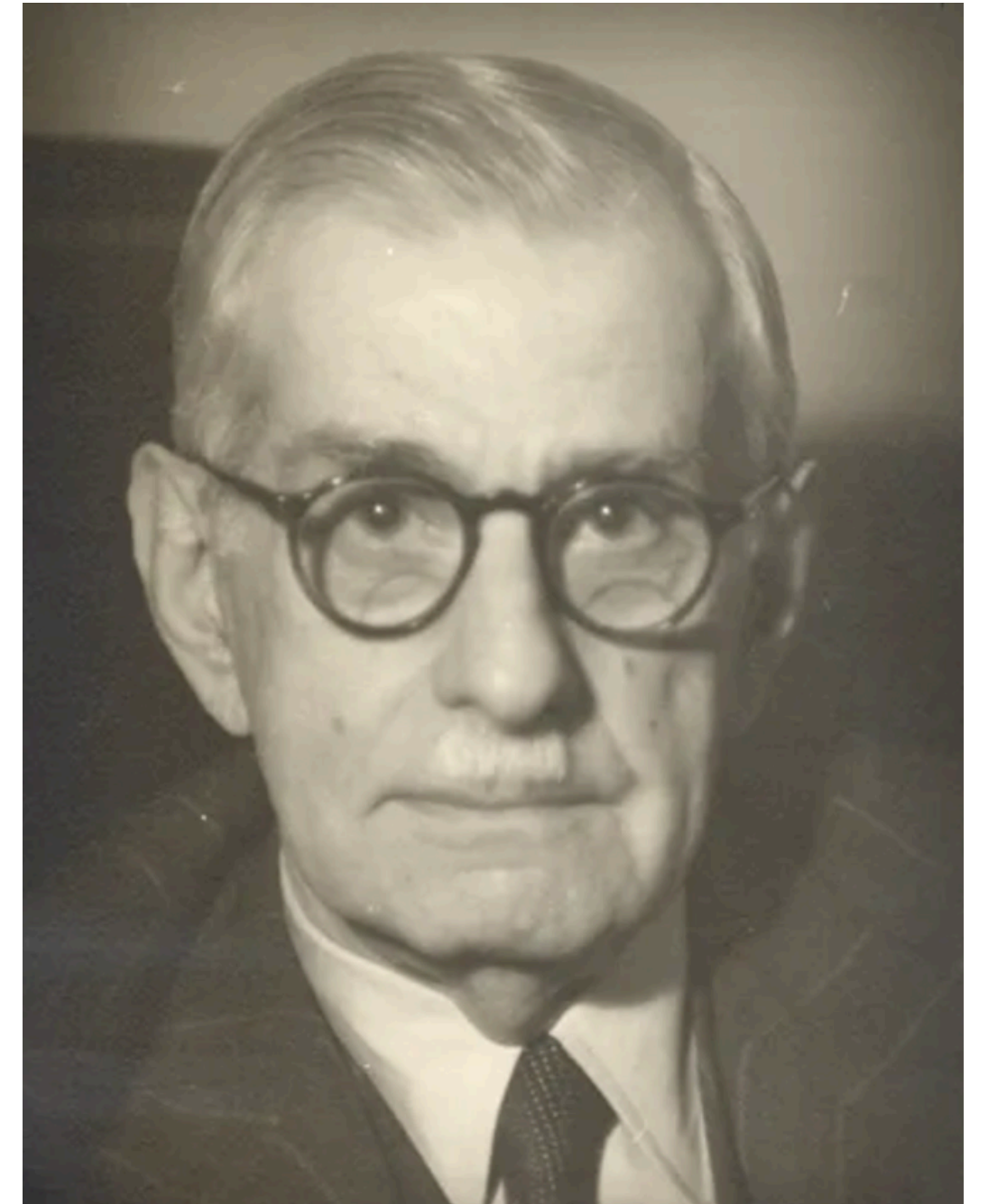
Beyond Science and Religion: Adnan Adıvar and Aydın Sayılı on the Question of Ottoman Decline

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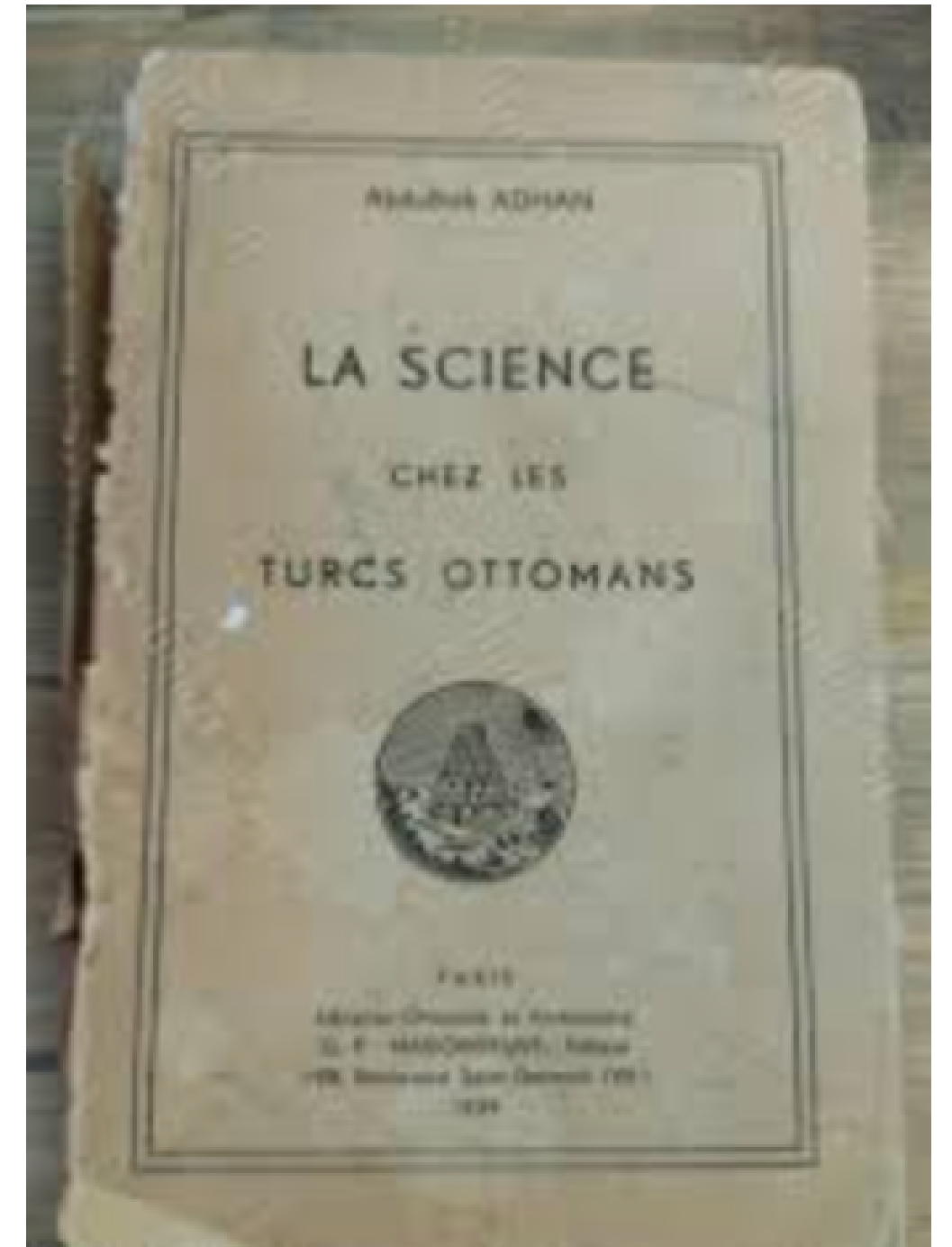
Science and Religion
26 March 2026

Adnan Adivar (1882-1955)

- Born to an elite family in 1882.
- Graduated from Medical School in Istanbul and continued his studies in medicine at the University of Berlin in 1905.
- Returned to Istanbul following the deposition of Abdulhamid II and the proclamation of Second Constitutional Era in 1909.
- Adivar joined the military as a military medic and served in Libya.
- In 1917, Adivar married to Halide Edip, a renowned novelist and public intellectual, who became particularly active following the Ottoman defeat in 1918.
- Adivar joined Mustafa Kemal's effort to organize a resistance movement against the Allies' invasion of Anatolia.
- Adivar played an active role in the early republican governments, serving as the first Minister of Health.



- In 1925, Adivar became one of the founders of first opposition party allowed by the government, *Terakkiperver Cumhuriyet Fırkası* (Progressive Republican Party).
- When the party was closed down a year later by the government, Adivar went to exile to London and later Paris where he focused on his scholarly work in the field of history of science.
- When Adivar was in Paris, he befriended George Sarton, and they started personal correspondence in 1932.



- During his Paris years, Adivar's interests in the Ottoman history of science were influenced by Orientalists and the "new history" of Aldo Mieli.
- Published his first work in the field, *La Science chez les Turcs Ottomans* (**Science among the Ottoman Turks**), in 1939 .
- Adivar returned to Turkey after the death of Atatürk as he was pardoned by the new government in 1939.
- He published *Tarih Boyunca İlim ve Din* (**Science and Religion throughout History**) in 1944.

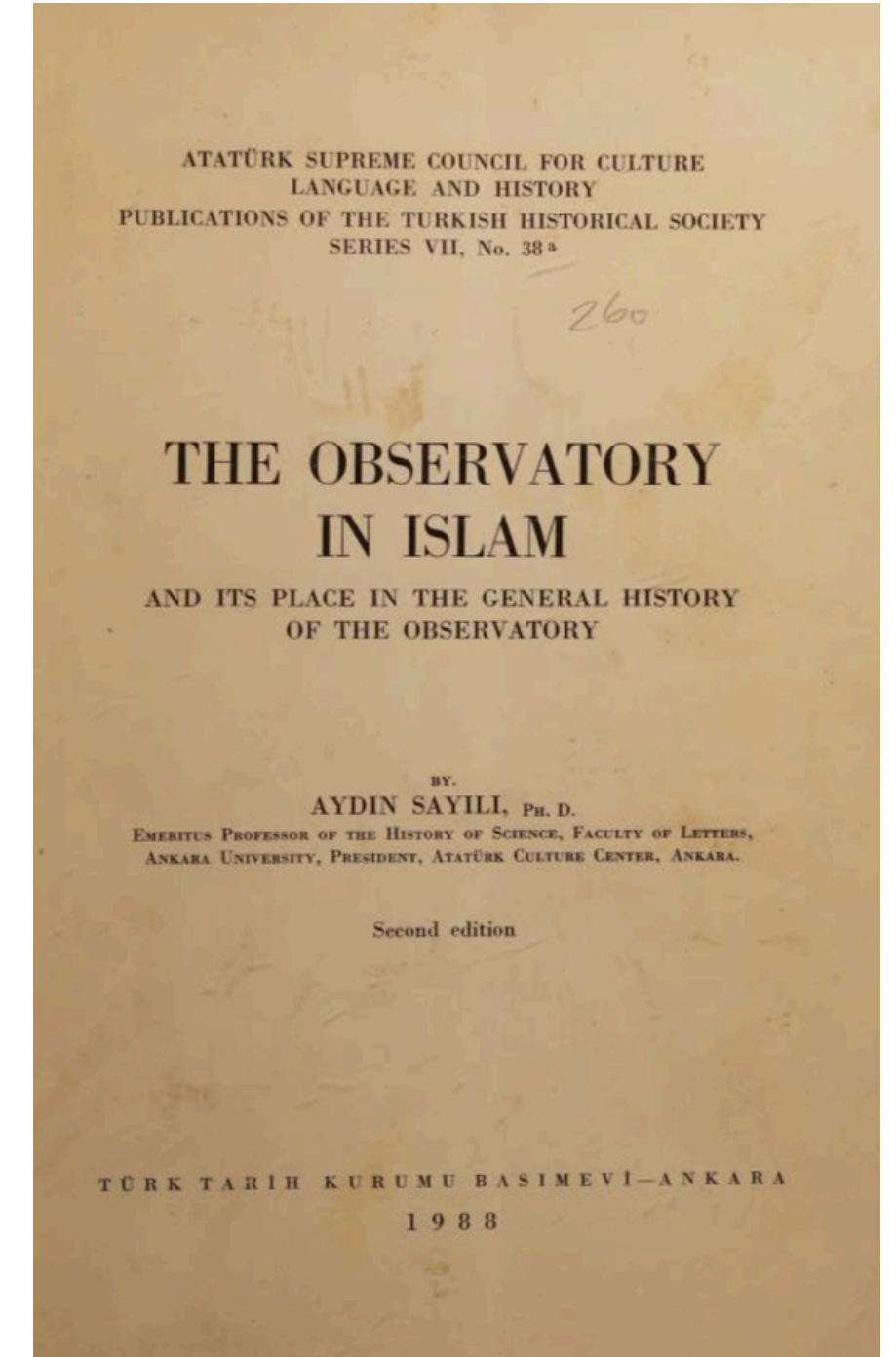


Adivar's Argument

- The Ottomans failed to develop an original and cumulative tradition of science. Rather, they continued **Arabic and Persian scientific tradition**.
- The decline was mainly due to **the primacy of theology and astrology**, and the institutional power they yielded over scientific conduct.
- Ottoman intellectuals were also to blame as they turned down the chance to absorb **European scientific knowledge**.
- The second book examines the relationship between science and religion in broader terms.
 - argues that scientific conduct advances when it is autonomous from **religious dogmatism**.
- Agrees with Draper's conflict thesis. Unlike Ahmet Midhat's commentary on Draper, Adivar denies Islam's exceptional role with regard to Christianity.

Aydın Sayılı (1913-1993)

- Sent to Harvard University by the Turkish government to study history of science.
- Completed his PhD under the supervision of George Sarton in 1941.
 - Dissertation title: “**The Early History of Science and Learning in the Moslem World**”
 - The dissertation is recognized as the first PhD awarded in the field of history of science.
- Sayılı returned to Turkey in 1943 and appointed as the professor of History of Science at Ankara University.
- In 1960, Sayılı published “**The Observatory in Islam and Its Place in the General History of the Observatory**”
- Sayılı was selected as a full member of International Academy of the History of Science in 1961.



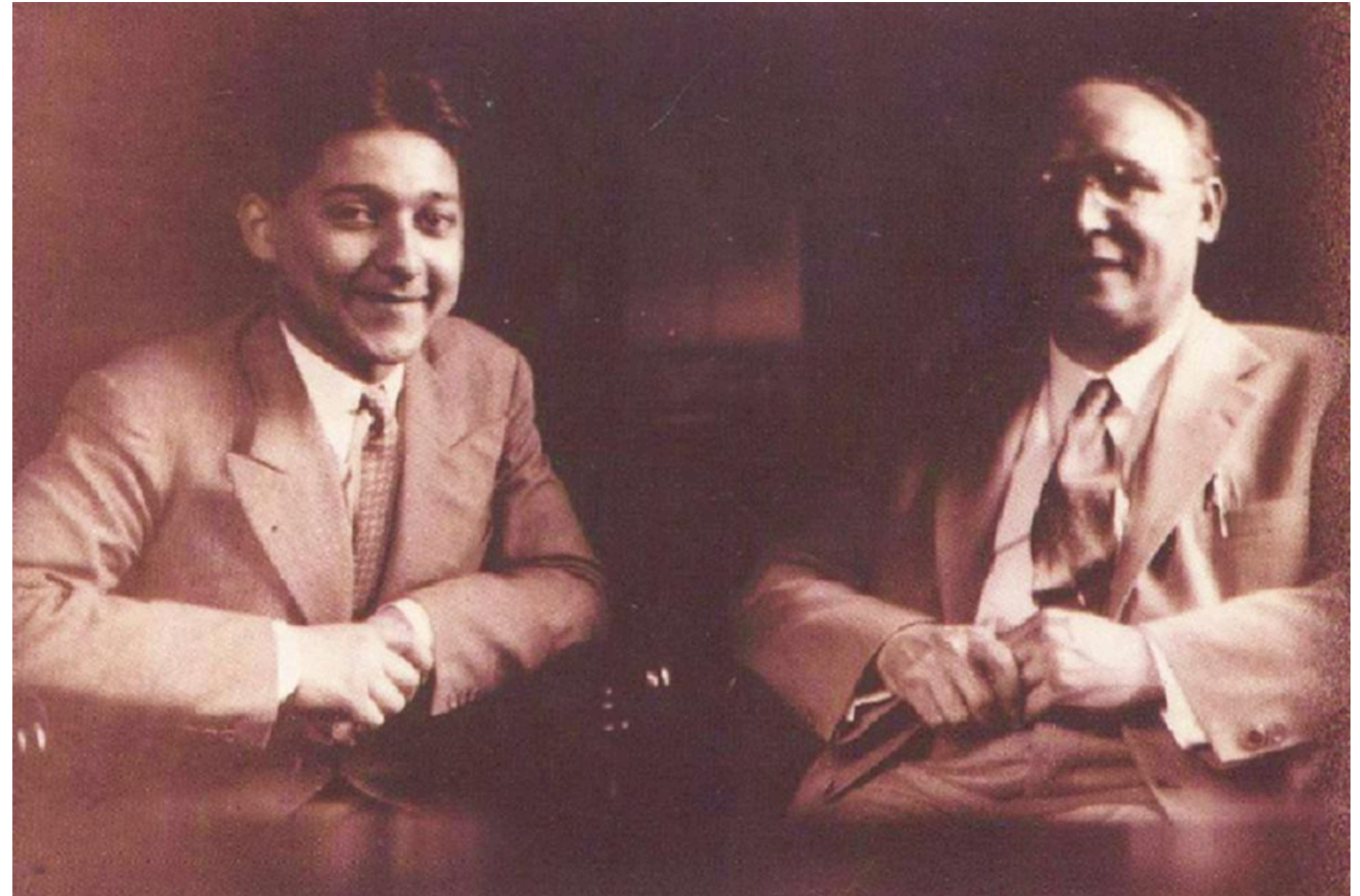
Sayılı's Argument

- The Islamic world was not only a transmitter of knowledge from the Ancient Greek sources to Europe. But it originally contributed to the development of scientific practice.
- **The observatory as an institution** is an example of Islamic contribution that later inspired the Copernican Revolution in Europe.
- However, scientific activity in the Islamic world, Ottomans included, started losing its “intellectual vitality” they once had from the sixteenth century onwards.



Miniature by Ala ad-Din Mansur-Shirazi, late 16th century

- According to Sayılı, the internal dynamics of the empire, i.e. failing to reconcile faith and science, are not sufficient to explain the decline of scientific activity. It also had to do with reaching to “the limits of Ancient Greek’s scientific legacy.”
- To explain this decline, Sayılı refers to the newly emerging concept of “**Scientific Revolution.**”
- Even if the Ottomans had succeeded in taking Vienna in 1683, they would have still declined since Europe had already experienced the scientific revolution around the same period.



Aydın Sayılı and George Sarton (Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, *Aydın Sayılı (1913-1993) At Work: His Scientific Biography*)

Conclusion: Beyond Historiography

- Both authors' political background informed their historiography:
 - i.e. Adivar's discord and Sayılı's concord with the ruling elite, Kemalists, of the Republican Turkey
- While Adivar embraced a culturalist and negative attitude towards Islam, Sayılı sought to expand temporal and spatial boundaries of scientific conduct in history.
- Despite their divergence, they converged at the point that the role of religion must be diminished in order to develop scientific inquiry that is "proven" historically.
- Both accounts lacked the study of Ottoman scientists, networks, and manuscripts in their immediate context.

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