İbrahim Müteferrika and the Printing Press: A Delayed Renaissance

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In 1727, an Ottoman Muslim by the name of İbrahim Müteferrika was granted permission by Sultan Ahmed III to begin printing books of a non-religious nature. While printing presses are known to have existed in the Ottoman Empire and the Islamic world previous to 1727, Müteferrika's press, called the *Dârü't-tibâ'ati'l-ma'mûre*, but more widely known as the *Basma-khâne* (printing house), was the first instance of a Muslim-owned printing press in the Islamic world. The Basma-khâne instigated a delayed renaissance that led to a prolonged period of development in movable-type printing in the Arabic script. The press issued its first book in 1729, two years after the licence was granted.¹ In total, the Basma-khâne printed seventeen works in twenty-three volumes, with a total print run of approximately thirteen thousand books between 1729 and 1742.² Of these, surviving copies are now scattered all over the world. McGill University is fortunate to hold copies of fourteen of the twenty-three volumes; all fourteen have been recently digitized.

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¹ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Maṭba'a."

² *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. "İbrâhîm Müteferrika"; Orlin Sabev, "The First Ottoman Turkish Printing Enterprise: Success or Failure?" in *Ottoman Tulips, Ottoman Coffee: Leisure and Lifestyle in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Dana Sajdi (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007), 63–89 (71–72); Maurits van den Boogert, "The Sultan's Answer to the Medici Press? İbrahim Müteferrika's Printing House in Istanbul," in *The Republic of Letters and the Levant*, ed. Alastair Hamilton, Maurits H. van den Boogert, and Bart Westerweel (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 265–93 (269–70).

This paper will highlight the Basma-khâne's achievements, the most prominent of which was the impetus the press gave to the development of large-scale printing in the Middle East.³ The Basma-khâne challenged the traditional Ottoman manuscript culture, but religious, economic, and social factors specific to the Ottoman Empire led to a slower adoption of the new technology there than in Europe. Taking into consideration the development of Arabic printing in Europe, including that of printing Arabic script, and the impact of this development on the print culture of the Ottoman Empire, this paper will argue that two prominent reasons for the delayed renaissance in printing were (i) the competitive relationship between manuscripts and printed books and (ii) the discrepancy between Müteferrika's intention to produce affordable books and their actual cost. While most scholarship on Müteferrika and the Basma-khâne claims that the press initiated a revolution in the print medium, it is my position that this revolution in movable-type printing in the Arabic script took place over a prolonged period of time.

İbrahim Müteferrika and the Arabic Script

The Ottoman Empire came into existence in 1299 when Osman I laid siege to and conquered Anatolia. Continuing northward, Osman took possession of most of what remained of the Byzantine Empire, and in doing so, laid the foundations of the largest Empire the pre-modern world had ever known. The Ottomans' initial strength was due to their modern warfare techniques and advanced military technologies relative to their adversaries. However, some two hundred years after its founding, the Empire began to lose ground technologically as Europeans entered the early stages of the Renaissance.

By the eighteenth century the Ottoman Empire had been surpassed by Europe in several realms of technology. One such realm was printing. Europe had gradually gained the ability to produce and disseminate knowledge more rapidly and on a larger scale than had ever been possible with prior practices of oral or manuscript communication, and the most obvious lasting result was the

³ Geoffrey Roper, "The Printing Press and Change in the Arab World" in *Agent of Change: Print Culture Studies After Elizabeth L. Eisenstein*, ed. Sabrina A. Baron, Eric N. Lindquist, and Eleanor F. Shevlin (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 250–67 (250–52).

Figure 1. A map of the western Mediterranean Sea. Kâtip Çelebi, *Tuhfet ül-kibar fi esfar ül-bihar* (Istanbul: Dârü't-tibâ'ati'l-ma'mûre, 1729). Courtesy of Rare Books and Special Collections, McLennan Library, McGill University, Montreal.

Enlightenment.⁴ While some Western technologies found favour in the Ottoman Empire, the printing press was largely rejected with contempt by the Muslim majority, although it was deemed acceptable for the minority *millets* (religious communities) of the Empire, namely, the Jewish and Christian communities. These communities, who were actively learning from and disseminating printed material, enjoyed close relationships with their co-religionists in Europe, which kept them at the forefront of the new technology. In fact, after the *Reconquista* in Spain, a significant Jewish community moved to the Ottoman Empire and began printing books there as early as 1490.⁵

İbrahim Müteferrika was born in 1675 in present-day Cluj, Romania, which was at that time part of the Ottoman domain. He was of Christian origin, although the debate continues as to whether he was Protestant or Unitarian; in either case, he probably fled Hungary due to religious persecution and converted to Islam in the early eighteenth century.⁶ Müteferrika was a polyglot with linguistic talents that enabled him to work as a diplomat, a translator, and a scholar. We know he read, wrote, and probably spoke Hungarian, Latin, Greek, Arabic, and Ottoman Turkish, among other languages.⁷ His name, *Müteferrika*, is a title meaning “court steward.” It was bestowed upon him by the Ottoman Porte and ensured his prominence within the Empire’s bureaucracy. Many of the other details of his life remain unknown; however, we know Müteferrika was intent on putting an end to Ottoman arrogance, which he perceived in their rejection of this aspect of European technological achievement.

The Arabic alphabet is a cursive script with twenty-eight letters, twenty-three of which consist of four forms for each letter: isolated,

⁴ Many studies have investigated the role of printing in the Enlightenment. Some of the most influential are: Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1995); Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998); Richard B. Sher, *The Enlightenment and the Book: Scottish Authors and Their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland, and America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006).

⁵ Metin Kunt, “Reading Elite, Elite Reading,” in “Printing and Publishing in the Middle East,” ed. Philip Sandgrove, supplement, *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 24 (2008): 89–100 (90); J.R. (Wayne) Osborn, “The Type of Calligraphy: Writing, Print, and Technologies of the Arabic Alphabet,” (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 2008), 160, <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/2fq2k8fc>.

⁶ van den Boogert, “The Sultan’s Answer,” 266.

⁷ Ibid.

initial, medial, and final. The remaining five letters lack a medial form – that is, any letter that follows one of these five cannot be connected and must take on the initial form, even though it is in the middle of the word. Arabic exists as a cursive script only, and cannot be written without connecting the letters (with the exception of spaces between words and the five letters mentioned above). The combinations of some letters in a particular order result in a blended glyph. In such instances, the blended glyphs often bear little resemblance to the original letters in their separate forms. Whereas the letters of the Latin alphabet had a block form that could be replicated in separate pieces of carved wood or moulded lead relatively easily, Arabic was much harder to divorce from the act of handwriting. Inventing Arabic type was difficult because of the lack of block letterforms and the immense variety of possible connections between letters.⁸

There is scant information about the development of Arabic type in Europe or elsewhere; however, there are plenty of examples of printed texts from the period. Most of these were produced with lead type. While European-produced type would eventually become quite legible, “the aesthetics of Arabic calligraphy were clearly completely foreign and incomprehensible ... we can hardly blame them for this, but quite a long time – at least 100 years – were to elapse before this barrier began to be broken down, and printed Arabic appeared in Europe that began to approximate even to orthographic, let alone calligraphic norms.”⁹ The biggest impediment to the development of a smooth and legible Arabic type was the lack of reliable language tools, a factor which prevented Europeans from understanding the materials they were trying to print. As will be shown, European attempts at crafting a legible and ornate script went through many iterations.

The evolution of Arabic script in Europe began in 1514 when Gregorio de Gregorii published the first Arabic book using movable type. The book was the *Ṣalāt al-sawāʾi* (Book of Hours), a Melkite

⁸ Orlin Sabeve, “Formation of Ottoman Print Culture (1726–1746): Some General Remarks,” in *New Europe College Regional Program 2003–2004 and 2004–2005* (Bucharest: New Europe College, 2007), 293–333 (315); Geoffrey Roper, “The History of the Book in the Muslim World,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, vol. 2, ed. M.F. Suarez, and H.R. Woudhuysen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), accessed 7 July 2014, <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198606536.001.0001/acref-9780198606536>.

⁹ Geoffrey Roper, “The Travails of Euro-Arabic: Calligraphy, Logography and Typography in the Early Modern Period,” *Dabireh Collective*, last modified 1 August 2009, <http://dabirehcollective.com/article/28>.

prayer book.¹⁰ The letters were printed from woodcut type in order that the book would mimic the look and feel of a manuscript, which was a common characteristic of printed material both in Europe and later in the Muslim world. The reasons for the production of this book are unknown, as are the names of the typesetter and typographer, but we do know that the prayer book was destined for the Ottoman Empire.¹¹

The type used in the *Ṣalāt al-sawāʾi* is similar to *naskh*, a script commonly used in Islamic manuscripts. Naskh was perfected by the eighteenth century, and became the most important script in the Ottoman Empire, largely due to its use for small and medium size Qurʾān, as well as its frequent use for non-Qurʾānic texts such as traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad (*ḥadīth*), Qurʾānic exegesis (*tafsīr*), and law (*uṣūl al-fiqh*).¹² Müteferrika would use naskh and *thuluth* (another calligraphic script) in his printed volumes; that he did so is one example of his concern for maintaining the aesthetics of manuscript culture while integrating new technology. By balancing its newness with the familiarity of well-known scripts, Müteferrika sought to lessen the foreignness of the printing press in the eyes of the Ottoman reading public.

Europe and the Printing of Arabic Texts

The impact of the printing press in Europe on the book trade in the Middle East remains debated; the technology is perhaps best regarded as having been an instrument of social change as opposed to a simple cause of it.¹³ Printing presses in Europe produced works on various subjects, including history, religion, and languages. One noteworthy

¹⁰ Hartmut Bobzin, *Between Imitation and Imagination: the Beginnings of Arabic Typography in Europe* (Beirut: Orient-Institut der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, 1999), 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹² Yasemin Gencer, “İbrahim Müteferrika and the Age of the Printed Manuscript” in *The Islamic Manuscript Tradition: Ten Centuries of Book Arts in Indiana University Collections*, ed. Christiane J. Gruber (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 154–193 (162); Adam Gacek, *Arabic Manuscripts: A Vademecum for Readers* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 162.

¹³ For a summary of the debate between technological determinism and cultural studies in the history of the book, see Leslie Howsam, *Old Books and New Histories: An Orientation to Studies in Book and Print Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 46–53.

press was the Venice-based *Typografia Medicea*, which published numerous Arabic texts for distribution in the Ottoman Empire, some of them translated by scholars. The aim of this press was “to print a whole series of Arabic works including the translation of the Bible and of the Four Gospels, the Canon *Medicinae* of Avicenna, and the anonymously-edited text of the *Kitāb Nuzhat al-mushtāq* by al-Idrīsī,” a geographical text from the twelfth century which included maps.¹⁴ This goal was especially impressive given the paucity of Arabic language resources in Europe in the developing years of type. The dearth of resources led to the poor production of many Arabic texts, either because of an inaccurate translation, or a confusion of letters. For example, the addition or subtraction of diacritics would alter the text entirely.¹⁵

The translations of Arabic-language religious texts were especially problematic, in part due to the gross misunderstanding of Islam by Europeans. For example, *Muslim*, denoting a practitioner of Islam, was mistranslated “Muhammadan” in several European languages, and the error persisted until relatively recently. The assumption underlying this mistake is that the term must be parallel to *Christian*, which denotes a follower of Christ. Muslims do not consider Muḥammad to be divine, seeing him rather as a prophet. Worshipping Muḥammad would be tantamount to apostasy in Islam, and calling Muslims “Muhammadans” is inappropriate for this reason.

Despite such errors, Europeans played an important role in the development of the printing press in Muslim civilization. The first Qurʾān printed in Europe was that of the Venetians, Paganino and Alessandro Paganini in 1537/38.¹⁶ The Venetian Qurʾān is thought to have been printed with the intention of exporting it to the Ottoman Empire.¹⁷ This book presents many typographical problems. For instance, there is the inconsistency noted by Maurice Borrmans who,

¹⁴ Encyclopaedia of Islam, s.v. “Maṭba‘a.”

¹⁵ Bobzin, *Between Imitation and Imagination*, 14–16; Muhsin Mahdi, “From the Manuscript Age to the Age of Printed Books” in *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East*, ed. George N. Atiyeh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 1–17 (1–4).

¹⁶ Arjan van Dijk, “Early Printed Qurʾans: The Dissemination of the Qurʾan in the West,” *Journal of Quranic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2005): 136–43 (136); Maurice Borrmans, “Observations à propos de la première édition imprimée du Coran à Venise,” *Quaderni di studi arabi* 8 (1990): 3–12 (9).

¹⁷ Angela Nuovo, “A Lost Arabic Koran Rediscovered,” *The Library*, 6th ser., 12, no. 4 (1990): 273–92 (282); Borrmans, “Observations,” 3–12 (5); Roper, “The Travails of Euro-Arabic.”

while analyzing the type of the Venetian Qurʾān, asks, “Why does the alphabet employed ignore the dental *dāl* and rather transform it into an interdental *dāl* by adding the diacritical mark, but then ignore, on the other hand, the interdental *tāʾ* and reduce it to a plosive *tāʾ* by giving it two diacritical marks rather than three?”¹⁸ The lack of attention to detail and care in reproducing the Qurʾān encouraged Muhsin Mahdi to speculate that such copies “must have led Muslim readers of the Koran to think that only the Devil himself could have produced such an ugly and faulty version of their Holy Book.”¹⁹

These typographical issues are exacerbated in the German translation of 1616 by Salomon Schweigger. The title-page of this edition reads: “*Alcoranus Mahometicus, das ist der Turcken Alcoran, Religion und Aberglauben*” (“the Muhammadan Qurʾān, which is the Turkish Qurʾān, religion and superstition”).²⁰ This dismissal of Islamic beliefs as “superstition” highlights the general European contempt for Islam as a whole and Muslims more generally during this period, even if such Qurʾān were not meant for exportation to the Ottoman Empire or to the Muslim world.

One final example of a poorly produced Qurʾān is that issued by the Officina Schultzio-Schilleriana press in Hamburg, Germany, in 1694. The title-page in Arabic reads: “*al-Qurʾān wa hiya shar[ī]ʿah al-Islāmiyah*,” but the diacritical marks for the *yaʾ* in *sharīʿah* are missing, and ideally the title should have read *al-sharīʿah*. The title translates as: “the Qurʾān and it is the religious law of Islam.” The name underneath suggests the author to be Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh.²¹ Obvious problems exist in the text. The most glaring has to do with the fact that Muslims consider the Qurʾān to be the literal word of God, and as the Prophet Muḥammad is considered to be the messenger of God, he is therefore not the “author” of the Qurʾān (as the frontispiece suggests). Moreover, the Qurʾān is not a codebook of Islamic law, but rather forms the base from which Islamic law is derived. In addition to these grave errors (from a Muslim standpoint),

¹⁸ Borrmans, “Observations,” 9. Translation is my own. The original text of the quoted passage reads as follows: “mais pourquoi l’alphabet employé ignore-t-il la dentale *dāl* et la transforme-t-il en interdental *āl*, en y ajoutant toujours un point diacritique supérieur, alors qu’il ignore, par contre, l’interdentale *tāʾ* et la réduit à un *tāʾ* occlusif en ne lui donnant que deux points diacritiques supérieurs, au lieu de trois.”

¹⁹ Mahdi, “From the Manuscript Age,” 1.

²⁰ van Djik, “Early Printed Qurʾāns,” 137.

²¹ Mahdi, “From the Manuscript Age,” 2.

the Latin title identifies the Prophet Muḥammad as *pseudoprophetae* (false prophet). There is no indication that this particular printed Qurʾān was to be exported to the Ottoman lands, but the edition does represent another bundle of mistakes and antipathetic claims.

Figure 2. Title page complete with typographical and grammatical errors.
 Abraham Hinckelmann, *Al-Coranus, s., Lex islamitica Muhammedis, filii Abdallae pseudoprophetae / ad optimorum codicum fidem edita ex museo Abrahami Hinckelmanni*. (Hamburgi: Ex officina Schultzio-Schilleriana, 1694),
 2. Courtesy of Early Western Korans, Brill.

The issues noted above, and other misrepresentations of one of the great monotheistic faiths, supported Ottoman hostility towards the new Western invention that perpetuated these misconceptions.²² In addition, Europeans' general ignorance of and antipathy towards Islam contributed to the Ottomans' belief in their own superiority and fuelled their unwillingness to participate in the developing technologies coming out of Europe. However, the errors in printed material from Europe provided Mütefferika with another reason for the Ottoman Empire to open its own printing houses; namely, to prevent and counter such errors. Mütefferika discusses this issue in his *Vesilet üt-tibā'a* (*The Means of Printing*), which was his plea to

²² Ibid., 4.

the Ottoman Porte in 1727 to allow him, a Muslim, to open the first movable-type printing press in the Empire.

Speculation continues concerning the reasons for the Ottomans' delay in making use of the new technology. Scholars offer various theories ranging from the conservatism of the Ottomans and Muslims generally, to the effect of two *fermans* (edicts) purportedly issued against the printing press in the late fifteenth century (by Sultan Bâyezîd II in 1485) and again in the early sixteenth century (by Sultan Selîm I in 1515).²³ The fact that no known texts printed by Muslims with movable type existed in the Ottoman Empire prior to the eighteenth century lends partial credence to the assertion that the two *fermans* had indeed forbidden Muslims from owning or using printing presses, but there is unfortunately a complete absence of primary archival corroboration.²⁴ However, Arabic block prints have been located in Egypt that date to the tenth century.²⁵ Orlin Sabeв explains that "during the reign of the Muslim ruler of Andalusia (Muslim Spain), Abd ar-Rahman an-Nasir (912–61), official administrative documentation in printed form was sent to the provincial governors."²⁶ This suggests that printing was not completely unknown to the Arab Muslim populations, but the line of argument is difficult, if not impossible, to prove, and bears only marginal relevance to the current study. Given that no printed text in Arabic script produced by a Muslim has been dated to the Ottoman Empire (with the exception noted) prior to the eighteenth century, and given the documented production of texts by the millet communities in Hebrew, Greek, and Armenian as early as the fifteenth century, it becomes even more plausible that the *fermans* were issued.²⁷ However, without the documents themselves, we are left to speculate and debate the reasons why it was so long before

²³ Waḥîd Gaddûrah, *Le début de l'imprimerie arabe à Istanbul et en Syrie: évolution de l'environnement culturel, 1706–1787* (Tunis, Tunisie: Université de Tunis, Institut supérieur de documentation, 1985), 80–90; Osborn, "The Type of Calligraphy," 200–213; Hidayet Y. Nuhoğlu, "Müteferrika's Printing Press: Some Observations," in *The Great Ottoman-Turkish Civilisation*, ed. Kemal Çiçek, vol. 3, *Philosophy, Science and Institutions* (Ankara, Turkey: Yeni Türkiye Publications, 2000), 83–90 (83); Kunt, "Reading Elite, Elite Reading," 96–99; Sabeв, "Formation of Ottoman Print Culture," 313.

²⁴ Encyclopaedia of Islam, s.v. "Maṭba'a."

²⁵ Sabeв, "Formation of Ottoman Print Culture," 312.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Osborn, "The Type of Calligraphy," 160; Sabeв, "Formation of Ottoman Print Culture," 311; Nuhoğlu, "Müteferrika's Printing Press," 83.

a printing press owned and operated by a Muslim appeared in the Ottoman Empire.

The reasons discussed so far indicate a general reservation against embracing the printing press and its potential. Perhaps the Ottomans adopted new technologies only as needed.²⁸ Indeed, it has been suggested that the production of manuscripts was already “too efficient to be displaced by a new technology [that was] too cumbersome and too expensive to become an immediate alternative.”²⁹

Vesilet üt-tibā’a: A Printing Manifesto

Mütefferika wrote his printing manifesto, the *Vesilet üt-tibā’a*, in 1727, one year prior to the opening of the Basma-khāne.³⁰ Mütefferika’s treatise encouraged the use of the printing press, and was inserted as an appendix to his *Vankulu Lüğati* (1729), an important Arabic language dictionary.³¹ In this manifesto, Mütefferika outlines ten reasons why the Empire should adopt the new Western technology:

1. for the educational benefits provided by the printing of dictionaries and secular works;
2. for the renewal and restoration of knowledge produced by Muslims;
3. for error-free, legible books produced in longer lasting ink;
4. for large quantities of affordable printed books;
5. for the ability to include indices and tables of contents for the easier retrieval of information;
6. for the eventual elimination of ignorance through the mass production of books;
7. for the strengthening of the Empire through learning;
8. for the ability of new technology to restore the Empire’s power and prestige;

²⁸ Sabev, “Formation of Ottoman Print Culture,” 314.

²⁹ Kunt, “Reading Elite, Elite Reading,” 97.

³⁰ William J. Watson, “İbrahim Mütefferika and Turkish Incunabula,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88, no. 3 (1968): 435–44 (436).

³¹ The McGill copy of the *Vankulu Lüğati* does not contain this important manifesto nor is it located in any of the other Basma-khāne texts held by McGill.

9. for the removal of the Islamic book trade from Christian hands and;
10. for the increased glory of the Empire as the Islamic state.³²

Of these, Mütefferika argued that the most important was the tenth benefit. The Empire needed to adapt this technology and devote itself to educating the population:

At the time of consenting by royal order to the completion of this matter, for the strengthening of science, the lord of the fortunate conjunction and of the age, the conqueror of nations of Iran and Turan [Central Asia], the glorious, the noble, the powerful Emperor of the world, may God exalt and strengthen him, with His Majesty's support your servant will overcome doubt and solve the difficulties with God's help, and this Western activity to become visible where it was formerly invisible. This art's introduction being arranged, and its appearing on a propitious day because of the Imperial assent, it will cause a glorious exaltation of fortune and unceasing joy. Books, like those mentioned above, coming into being in the Ottoman domains, completely aside from their meeting the needs of the Muslims, is an important event in itself, ennobling Islam and being a means to happiness of the Muslims. The various peoples of the world, that is, the Arabs and foreigners, the people of the Turks, Tatars and Turkmen, Kurds, Uzbeks, Chagatay, Hindi and Sindi, Persians and Maghribis [North Africans], Yemenis, Greeks, Ethiopians and the Sudanese, all together having been exalted by Islam, they have need of various kinds of books. Therefore, introducing and bringing about this important and great work certainly increases and augments the glory and majesty of the Ottoman state, and is the cause of a glorious victory for the Empire and a splendid preface and a glorious superscription, lasting until the day of judgment. It will be remembered with goodness by the tongues of the world and will bring forth the good prayers of all believers; without dispute, printing is a means to enliven and make happy the Muslims.³³

The *Vesilet* was submitted to all three central authorities of the Empire: the Grand Vizir (*Şadr A'zam*), the Grand Mufti (*Seyh*

³² Gencer, "Age of the Printed Manuscript," 156–157; appendix, "Ottoman Imperial Documents Relating to the History of Books and Printing," trans. Christopher M. Murphy, in *The Book in the Islamic World: the Written Word and Communication in the Middle East*, ed. George N. Atiyeh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 283–92 (286–92).

³³ Appendix, "Ottoman Imperial Documents," 291–92.

al-Islam), and the religious authorities (*‘Ulamā’*).³⁴ All three authorities agreed to allow Mütefferika to open a printing press. The agreement was based on Mütefferika’s proposal of the various subjects he wished to print, which fleshed out his first reason for adopting the Western technology: “in order to master Arabic, accurate and comprehensive dictionaries are important. Furthermore, if there are numerous books on history, astronomy, logic, the affairs of the state and nation, and geography, this altogether will create tremendous educational benefits.”³⁵ The ensuing ferman of Sultan Ahmed III, issued in 1727, noted that “copies will be printed of dictionaries, and books about logic, astronomy and similar subjects, and so that the printed books will be free from printing mistakes ... the religious scholar specialising in Islamic Law, the excellent *Kazi* [religious judge] of Istanbul, Mevlana İshak and Selaniki’s *Kazi*, Mevlana Sahib and Ghalata’s *Kazi*, Mevlana Asad ... and the *Şeyh* of the Kasim Paşa Mevlevihane, Mevlana Musa ... will oversee the proofreading.”³⁶ This ensured that the religious authorities would remain involved in the production of texts and that the texts themselves would be of a secular nature, in accordance with the parameters agreed upon and laid out in the *Vesilet*.

There are two significant cultural factors in the trepidation with which Muslims regarded the printing press. First, Islamic religious documents are believed to contain the literal word of God, and thus all Qur’anic passages and even partial quotations are considered sacred. Muslims believe, as is documented in the Qur’ān, that the written word is preferred by God to any other form of dissemination. One specific example from a calligraphic specimen in McGill University’s collection reads: “he who writes in beautiful calligraphy In the name of God, the most gracious, the most merciful, is ensured entrance to paradise.”³⁷ Mechanical presses threatened the sanctity of the written word.

³⁴ Watson, “İbrahim Mütefferika and Turkish Incunabula,” 436.

³⁵ Appendix, “Ottoman Imperial Documents,” 289.

³⁶ Ibid., 285.

³⁷ Maḥmūd Fakhrī Afandī, “İjāzah (calligrapher’s licence),” 1846–47. Arabic Calligraphy AC31, Rare Books and Special Collections, McLennan Library, McGill University, Montreal. “man kataba bi-ḥusn al-khatt bism Allah al-raḥmān al-raḥīm dakhala al-jannah.” Translation is my own.

Figure 3. *Ijāzah* (calligrapher's licence) with text written in an elegant naskh script and attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad. See note 37 for transcription.
Courtesy of Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University.

Second, calligraphy was a prestigious and established profession. The calligrapher, tasked with copying the Qurʾān along with other educational and religious texts, was viewed with tremendous respect and had to undergo rigorous training in order to earn an *ijāzah* (licence), which was issued by a master calligrapher.³⁸ Calligraphy was a significant industry that employed an estimated ninety thousand calligraphers, most of whom resided in Istanbul.³⁹ The printing press would eventually displace this guild of workers, thereby affecting the economy and potentially threatening the Sublime Porte's popularity. Niyazi Berkes notes that after the issuing of the ferman from the Sublime Porte and the *fetva* (Islamic legal opinion) from the Grand Mufti in favour of Müteferrika's initiative, "calligraphers constituted the main opposition group; they even staged a protest against the printing press."⁴⁰ The calligraphers did so to protect their own livelihoods and to ensure the safety of the Islamic religion. They strove to defend their specialized skills and prevent the loss of their social position. However, it should be noted that the *fetva* excluded the printing of the Qurʾān, *ḥadīth*, *kalām* (theology), *tafsīr*, and *uṣūl al-fiqh*, all truly religious materials.⁴¹ With these exclusions the

³⁸ Gacek, *Arabic Manuscripts*, 51–55.

³⁹ J.S. Szyliowicz, "Functional Perspectives on Technology: The Case of the Printing Press in the Ottoman Empire," *Archivum Ottomanicum* 11 (1986): 249–59 (251).

⁴⁰ Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1964), 40.

⁴¹ Kunt, "Reading Elite, Elite Reading," 94.

calligraphers were ensured at least some measure of protection for their craft.⁴²

Production of Texts

The texts produced by Mütefferika were of a secular nature and were meant to foster educational reform through the dissemination of knowledge. The texts included dictionaries, histories of foreign lands, travelogues, scientific works, and one work on Turkish grammar written in French. This last text, we must assume, was printed to help Europeans improve their linguistic skills and their understanding of the Ottoman Empire.

Figure 4. Jean Baptiste Daniel Holdermann, *Grammaire turque ou methode courte et facile pour apprendre la langue turque avec un recueil des noms, des verbes, et des manieres de parler les plus necessaires a savoir, avec plusieurs dialogues familiers* (Istanbul: Dârü't-tibâ'atü'l-ma'mûre 1730), 1. Courtesy of Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University.

42 Berkes, *The Development of Secularism*, 40.

Each of the works offers different insights into the world surrounding the Ottoman Empire. Maps were sometimes included to help elucidate these territories, which spanned the foreign lands of the West Indies to the more familiar lands of Europe and North Africa. The order in which Müteferrika began printing texts replicated the order he described in the *Vesilet*. He began with a dictionary (*Vankulu*). The next eleven works were of history, though two of these combined the disciplines of history and geography (*Tuhfet* and *Tarih ül-Hindi'l-Garbi* [*The History of the West Indies*]).⁴³ These texts do not, it must be said, match our current understanding of the priorities of the Empire's reading public. Rather, the works printed suggest that Müteferrika's first concern was to remain within the parameters of the ferman of Sultan Ahmed III, and thus to refrain from printing religious texts which might have found a wider readership. In addition, we may assume that Müteferrika was trying to encourage educational reform through the distribution of enlightening texts of, presumably, less popular topics.⁴⁴

Recent scholarship has uncovered a plethora of primary documents relating to the circulation of Müteferrika's publications.⁴⁵ Sabev notes that "Müteferrika was able to sell about 70 percent of the books he printed: quite a sufficient reward for his enterprise."⁴⁶ However, even with a distribution of 70 percent of an estimated thirteen thousand total printed volumes, which included a number of books given to emissaries as gifts, the impact on the mass population would have been minimal.⁴⁷ Hence, the activities of Müteferrika's press from 1729 until his death in 1745 did not set off an immediate knowledge revolution among Ottoman subjects; rather, the most that can be said is that they represented the first step in the spread of a print culture across the Empire.

Müteferrika's work laid the foundation upon which later printing developments in the Ottoman lands grew. Printed materials in the Middle East were already well-developed in Egypt, Lebanon, and Turkey by the mid-19th century, as demonstrated in the proliferation

⁴³ Sabev, "Ottoman Turkish Printing Enterprise," 77–78.

⁴⁴ Kunt, "Reading Elite, Elite Reading," 98–99; Sabev, "Ottoman Turkish Printing Enterprise," 77–78; Sabev, "Formation of Ottoman Print Culture," 307.

⁴⁵ Sabev, "Ottoman Turkish Printing Enterprise," 67–68; Sabev, "Rich Men, Poor Men: Ottoman Printers and Booksellers Making Fortune or Seeking Survival (Eighteenth-Nineteenth Centuries)," *Oriens* 37, (2009): 177–90 (180–182).

⁴⁶ Sabev, "Ottoman Turkish Printing Enterprise," 78.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

of printed texts in Egypt after the founding of the Bulaq press by Muḥammad ‘Alī Pasha in 1820, for example.⁴⁸ However, printed books continued to compete with manuscripts: the “prolonged use of handwritten codices was facilitated by the privileged status of calligraphy in Islamic cultures, distrust of novelties and the relatively limited production and poor distribution of printed materials.”⁴⁹ Mütefferika may have suspected that this would be the case, for he himself does not seem to have been ready for a complete rupture with tradition in the production of texts.⁵⁰

The printed books of the Basma-khāne are comparable to European incunables in that they maintained much of the look and feel of manuscripts.⁵¹ Similarities include the *serlevha* (frontispiece or ornamental headpiece), colophons, calligraphic scripts, and catchwords. Yasemin Gencer argues that these “styles thus can be seen as not only providing a visual lexicon for these new printed books; they also constitute a high standard to which the printed books could be held to which Mütefferika aspired.”⁵² The physical form of Mütefferika’s products is evidence that the shift from traditional calligraphy to printed books was gradual.

The *serlevha* contained the *besmele* (the formulaic beginning of all Islamic books: *bism Allah al-raḥmān al-raḥīm* [In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate]) at the top of the page. It also contained stylistic and floral designs that were, presumably, produced by woodblock.⁵³ Mütefferika seems to have used at least four different woodcuts for the *besmele* over the course of his printing career.⁵⁴ These woodcuts demonstrate an evolution in production values and a deepening understanding of the artistic principles of creating woodcuts. Indeed, by Mütefferika’s fourteenth book, the woodcut used for the *besmele* is admirably similar to manuscript calligraphy.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Roper, “The Printing Press,” 252–262.

⁴⁹ Tatjana Paić-Vukić, *World of Mustafa Muhibbi, a Kadı from Sarajevo* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 2011), 70.

⁵⁰ Gencer, “Age of the Printed Manuscript,” 167–68; Sabev, “Formation of Ottoman Print Culture,” 318.

⁵¹ Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin. *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing 1450–1800* (London: NLB, 1976), 83–89.

⁵² Gencer, “Age of the Printed Manuscript,” 175.

⁵³ Ibid., 168.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 182.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 168.

Figure 5. The gilding of this particular serlevha was done by hand.
Mustafa Naima, (Istanbul: Dârü't-tibâ'ati'l-ma'mûre, 1734), 4. Courtesy of
Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University.

Figure 6. Mustafa Naima, *Tarih-i Naima* (Istanbul: Dârü't-tibâ'ati'l-ma'mûre, 1734), 4. This printed besmele is in thuluth, the script commonly used for chapter headings and titles in manuscripts. Courtesy of Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University.

The serlevha and besmele were almost identical to their manuscript counterparts and thus prepared the reader for an experience similar to that of reading a manuscript. It is difficult not to construe the similarity as a strategy designed to allay Muslim trepidation regarding the foreignness of printed books.

Figure 7. Another printed besmele formula in thuluth. The woodcut is finer and more detailed than that of the earlier besmele as seen in figure 6. The *tarwīs* (serif) of the *aliḥs* are more pronounced, as are the tails of the final letters. Asım Efendi Küçükcelebizade, *Tarih-i Celebizade* (Istanbul: Dârü't-tibâ'ati'l-ma'mûre, 1741), 13. Courtesy of Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University.

Beneath the serlevha with the besmele in thuluth script the reader would encounter the main body of the text in naskh script. Both naskh and thuluth, often paired together, were prominent scripts in Ottoman manuscripts in particular, and in Islamic manuscripts in general.

Figure 8. Incipit from Mustafa Naima, *Tarih-i Naima* (Istanbul: Dârü't-tibâ'atî'l-ma'mûre, 1734), 4. The text is in naskh, a common Ottoman manuscript hand that was adopted by the Basma-khâne. Courtesy of Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University.

Each of Müteferrika's printed works contains a colophon, which includes information about the production of the edition and is similar to those found in manuscripts. The colophons from the Basma-khâne include the publisher's name (Müteferrika), the place of publication (Constantinople/Istanbul), and the date of publication. In a further instance of similarity, some of the colophons appeared in the V-shaped pattern common to manuscripts.

حوادث غریبه ظهوری و هرج و مرج ملل متنوعه و قومی ارام و سکونت
بولیوب کاه میان افراتیانه فتنه و کاه مجسمانده شقاق و نفاق و عصیان
و غمیه و قومی تقریبه هر یوم توح درای حروب و قتال احتمالی در کاه
لیدی بوجهر بلا مهلکه سندن رکنان چقمق و بونهلکه عظیمه کردیندن
ساحل سلامتہ جان اتحق فکر و ملاحظہ سی اندیشه سیله سرکردن
وادی حیرت یکن اشرف خان جانیندن در دولت علیه یه کونیدی ملک
اوزنا ایچی زمین و لغوب صوب ما مور سنه عزت تمکله بوجہ بیان دخی
وفاقت و بوفرضی غنیت عباد و بوجہ حمد اتم جد ابوبله برتقرب دلفریب
ابله ممالک محروسه دولت علیه عثمانیه یه وصول برله سلامت و راحت
و اطمینان مبسر اولدی الحمد لله علی ککل الحال و الیه المرجع المآل
تمت الترجمة بعون الملك الوهاب فی غرة شهر ذی الحجه سنه احدى
واربعین و مائه و الف تمت النسخة الفریبه علی ابدی النسخة المأمورہ
بعمل الطبع بدار الطباعة المعبرون فی غرة صفر طبر سنه اثني واربعمین
وما یحوال فی البلدة الطیبة قسطنطنیہ
صانها لله عن الألف
والبلیه

Figure 9. The colophon of a Basma-khâne printed book (on the history of Safavid Iran) in the V-shape reminiscent of those found in a manuscript. Jan Tadeusz Krusiński, *Tarih-i seyrah der beyan-i zuhur-i Agvaniyan ve sebeb-i inhidam-i bina-i devlet-i Şahan-i Safeviyan* (Istanbul: Dârü't-tibâ'atî'l-ma'mûre, 1729), 220. Courtesy of Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University.

Mütefferika's inclusion of catchwords, a feature common in early European printed books, demonstrates another link to manuscripts. Collectively, all of these similarities are representative of the close adherence of the printed book to established norms of written communication. The retention of traditional manuscript features must be seen as a tactic employed by Mütefferika in order to produce finely crafted printed books that did not present a complete rupture from the usual reading experience.

Cost of Printed Books

Perhaps the most significant impediment to the sales of printed books was the actual cost of their production. Mütefferika noted in his *Vesilet* that the manufacture of printed books would make information more economically accessible to the general Ottoman public, thus enabling a movement towards educational reform. Since this reform did not occur, we must see this claim of economic accessibility as a mistake on the part of Mütefferika. Mütefferika had little to no experience in running a business and he appears to have lacked realistic ideas of the costs that printing would entail.⁵⁶ The price of Mütefferika's books ranged from one *kuruş* (the Ottoman currency of the time) for his *Vesilet* pamphlet, to forty-four *kuruş* for the *Cihannüma*, a world geography totalling 698 pages that included twenty-seven maps and thirteen diagrams.⁵⁷ These prices put the ownership of a printed book out of the reach of the ordinary Ottoman citizen. According to a grocery list from the Dutch embassy in Istanbul in 1755, one *kuruş* could purchase a kilogram of rice or corn, five kilograms of barley, soap, or candles, or more than ten kilos of beef, although it should be noted these prices were for foreigners and were more than likely higher than they would have been for a local. Moreover, "the sum of 1 *kuruş* was less than a day's wages when Mütefferika was first appointed interpreter to the Sublime Porte – he received 60 *akce*, or 1.5 *kuruş* per day."⁵⁸ Finally, Mütefferika's *terrek defteri*, a document that lists a deceased person's belongings, lists his horse at the same value as a single copy of the *Vankulu Lügati*.⁵⁹ Thus, to claim that

⁵⁶ Gencer, "Age of the Printed Manuscript," 182.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 178; Kunt, "Reading Elite, Elite Reading," 95.

⁵⁸ van den Boogert, "The Sultan's Answer," 277.

⁵⁹ Gencer, "Age of the Printed Manuscript," 160.

printed books would be affordable for a section of the population large enough to instigate an educational reform was indeed too optimistic.⁶⁰

Müteferrika should have been aware of the potentially high price of printed books before writing his *Vesilet*. The cost of paper remained high well into the nineteenth century.⁶¹ Moreover, the colouring of maps, which were included in a number of texts, such as the *Cihannüma*, was expensive. In addition, the use of handmade woodcuts (at least four different ones) for the besmele was an added expense that Müteferrika seems to have neglected.⁶² While the cost associated with producing a manuscript remained higher than that for producing a printed work, the difference between the production of a manuscript and a printed work was that the expenses for a manuscript were paid most often through patronage. Through patronage, capital for materials was provided up front, ensuring that the cost of production would be covered. In contrast, Müteferrika paid for the materials of his own enterprise, including the presses, without being able to depend on a commission, and thus took the risk upon himself to sell his product. In his attempt to create a book trade in which books were to be produced for mass consumption, Müteferrika demonstrated a rupture with tradition, but also exposed a lack of foresight; the reading public was simply not ready for such an innovation. In 1784, some decades after Müteferrika's activity, a state-owned printing press successfully produced textbooks for mass consumption to supply the newly founded Military Engineering School.⁶³ Without the necessary start-up capital or the ability to produce the affordable books that Müteferrika anticipated, the Basmakhâne was destined to have financial difficulties.

Although the printing press was able to produce clear texts quickly, as Müteferrika had promised, the costs of these texts were not as affordable as Müteferrika had initially claimed. Perhaps for this reason above all, the establishment of the printing press did not have the immediate impact Müteferrika believed it would. Granted, Sabev asserts that Müteferrika did in fact sell 70 percent of his printed volumes. Nevertheless, cost emerges as a major reason for the slowness with which printing took root in the Ottoman Empire. Why did the printing of books cease for decades after Müteferrika's initiative?

⁶⁰ van den Boogert, "The Sultan's Answer," 277.

⁶¹ Szyliowicz, "Functional Perspectives on Technology," 255.

⁶² Gencer, "Age of the Printed Manuscript," 182; Szyliowicz, "Functional Perspectives on Technology," 255.

⁶³ Szyliowicz, "Functional Perspectives on Technology," 250.

In addition to cultural aversions to and political injunctions against print, marketing was part of the problem. Mütefferika's texts were not popular choices; they were selected and priced with the elite in mind. As Kunt notes, Mütefferika "was publishing elite books for the reading elite; both by subject matter and by the high prices charged his was an exclusive press."⁶⁴ This conclusion contradicts Mütefferika's intended aim as expressed in the sixth benefit of his *Vesilet*: "with the price of books becoming low, every single person can possess books, and furthermore, the widespread dissemination of books in town and country serves as a means of reducing ignorance."⁶⁵ Mütefferika was a pioneer in the printing and selling of books, but also a man lacking in business know-how with an inability to understand the limits of his reading public.⁶⁶ The books he produced were simply too expensive for broad appeal, and the selection of books was too innovative for the taste of most of the population.⁶⁷

Delayed Renaissance

Donald Quataert has estimated that, in the Ottoman Empire, only eleven publications appeared annually prior to 1840.⁶⁸ The fact that printed books did not have the immediate impact Mütefferika thought they would is indicative of his lack of entrepreneurial know-how but also of the climate in which he was working. The attempt to create "printed manuscripts" may have been an appealing idea but the reality was that a printed book was only slightly cheaper than a manuscript. There were also issues with the limitations placed on publications, most notably the interdiction preventing the publishing of religious works. This factor was a major deterrent to the spread of the printing press in the Ottoman Empire, and one that is regularly undervalued when analysing Mütefferika's press. The Basma-khâne's importance lies in its influence as a prototype for the Westernization program that would not be fulfilled until the Tanzimat reforms of the 1860s.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 99.

⁶⁵ Appendix, "Ottoman Imperial Documents," 290.

⁶⁶ Sabev, "Ottoman Turkish Printing Enterprise," 78.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 77.

⁶⁸ Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700–1922* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 167–68.

Müteferrika's lasting legacy was his ability to convince the Sultan that changes needed to take place within the Empire, primarily through the adoption of Western technologies. As Niyazi Berkes noted, "İbrahim was the man to introduce the idea of change and progress and modern scientific thinking into Turkey."⁶⁹ İbrahim Müteferrika's *Dârü't-tibâ'ati'l-ma'mûre* should thus be seen as an impetus for change, but a change that would not really arrive until the second half of the nineteenth century, when wide reforms ushered in printed books, pamphlets, and newspapers for the enlightenment of the populace.

SOMMAIRE

Cet article relate l'histoire de la première presse à imprimer appartenant à un musulman en pays où est pratiqué l'islam. Grâce à sa presse, la *Dârü't-tibâ'ati'l-ma'mûre*, İbrahim Müteferrika a été actif entre les années 1729 et 1742. Il a lancé des ouvrages portant sur des sujets non religieux. Son triomphe se mesure non seulement par tout ce qu'il a publié mais encore par l'influence considérable qu'il a exercée à titre de pionnier du livre islamique. Même s'il n'a pas fourni sur-le-champ une contribution capitale dans la vie intellectuelle de l'Empire ottoman, Müteferrika a cependant préparé le terrain à l'établissement de nombreuses imprimeries au Moyen-Orient.

⁶⁹ Berkes, *The Development of Secularism*, 39.