



Book Review: Sabev, Orlin. *Waiting for Müteferrika: Glimpses of Ottoman Print Culture* (Istanbul: Academic Studies Press, 2018), p. 200. ISBN: 978-161-8116-18-5

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The new study by Orlin Sabev, *Waiting for Müteferrika: Glimpses of Ottoman Print Culture*, published in the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Series of the Academic Studies Press, deals with the curious case of Ibrahim Müteferrika's 18th century printing press. The title of Sabev's study, which corresponds to the title of Samuel Beckett's play "Waiting for Godot", signals to the reader that the topic in hand is related to a complex subject, where the question of timing of printing itself becomes controversial. The title certainly prompts questions related to the position of a modern reader regarding the subject (Who do we perceive as waiting? Were they really waiting?) but also tries to solve the academic confusion regarding the issue of print in the premodern Ottoman era.

The book contains five chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. The structure of the book is designed to follow several crucial aspects of Ibrahim Müteferrika's printing endeavour: the scholarly and religious attitudes towards printing in the era before Müteferrika; his own biography and career path; the establishment of the printing press in Istanbul; the immediate or near immediate results of Müteferrika's project; later developments in Ottoman printing culture. The outline of the book is clear and explains different notions related to the reception of the printing press such as strangeness ('*ajā`ib*, *gharā`ib*) in a comprehensive way. The study also contains a useful bibliography that also includes unpublished archival sources in Ottoman Turkish. The chapters start with different mottos, literary or activist quotations that Sabev puts in context with the subject of a particular chapter.

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After the Introduction that carries the title, *In Search of Lost Time?*, which traces different academic debates on the appearance of the print in the Ottoman domains, the first chapter, *The Strange Arts: Printing and Other ‘‘Oddities’’*, deals with the first Ottoman encounters with printing abroad, through reports of ambassadors and travellers, but also European observations of Ottoman attitudes towards printed books. It tells us how printing was considered one of the ‘‘strange arts’’ that provoked curiosity, but was nevertheless considered somewhat redundant in the context of manuscript oriented tradition of the early modern Ottoman Empire. The second chapter, *Out of the Ordinary: Ibrahim Müteferrika’s Mind-set*, tries to track different and often contradictory facets of Müteferrika’s biography, including the stories of his conversion to Islam and his previous religious allegiance(s) that may have affected his vision of the printing project. The third chapter, titled *Deus ex Machina: The Müteferrika Press*, engages with material aspects of printing and its absence in the Ottoman domains. At the same time, it maps the pre-print scene in Istanbul, describing what led to the establishment of a printing press and, finally, what was printed by it. The author also aims to explain choices behind the books that were printed, often relying on a dichotomy of religious – secular. The fourth chapter, *They Hadn’t Read My Prints: Success or Failure*, focuses on material results of Ibrahim Müteferrika’s print endeavour through analysis of different factors related to the production and circulation of first printed books. The fifth chapter, *Virgin or Poison: The Making of Ottoman Print Culture*, deals with the aftermath of Müteferrika’s printing project, and points to alternative ways of interpreting ‘‘belatedness’’ of the print and its reception in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Orlin Sabev discusses a range of different academic opinions regarding the lack of print in pre-18th century Ottoman context, dividing their findings into several categories, including psychological and ideological, socioeconomic, as well as sociocultural, technical and aesthetic, and finally financial reasons for seeming disinterestedness of the Ottomans in this type of technology. While elaborating on these reasons, Sabev appears non-committed to any of them particularly, mostly because of the inherent bias of posteriority that historians reflected on this question. Thus, instead of exclusive focus on this absence, the author decided to stress the emergence of print in the 18th century and positive developments that led to it. In that process, the author did not disregard the pre-18th century Ottoman imaginings of the print; if observed closely, the reader can see transformations in Ottoman attitudes toward the written word from a source of curiosity to an urgent necessity by the end of the 19th century.

Orlin Sabev devotes a significant portion of the book to the investigation

of the curious case of Ibrahim Müteferrika's printing project by looking at the biographical information concerning his life taken from different Ottoman and non-Ottoman sources. While his versatile personality gleams from different documents, his public persona remained tied to his reputation as the first Ottoman Muslim printer both among his contemporaries and generations that followed. The author devoted much of his attention to the fact that Müteferrika had Protestant roots, but how much it directly affected his entrepreneurship is harder to ascertain. More than one single factor – including a peculiar publishing policy that preferred nonreligious books – collided in order for the first printing house to emerge.

The major part of the book is devoted to discussions on the emergence and impact of the print, both its material implications (financial aspects of the endeavour, for example), as well as the effect it had on expanding the range of published books (from 'secular' to 'religious') and thus on the consequent change of the intellectual scenery of the late Ottoman Empire. In that regard, the fifth chapter (*Virgin or Poison: The Making of Ottoman Print Culture*) is especially important, because it outlines the gradual transformation of Ottoman print culture from predominantly manuscript-oriented culture to a printed one. This metamorphosis is most convincingly illustrated by decorations on the printed books that resembled ornamentations in manuscripts and were added by hand (pp. 94-97) – the introduction page, for example, served as a familiar visual image, thus implying continuity, rather than rupture, with previously dominant manuscript culture.

The book sheds light on different aspects of the emergence of the first Ottoman printing press. It also opens multiple questions related to both the historical event of Müteferrika's endeavour, and to modern historiographical attitude not only towards printing in the context of the Ottoman Empire, but also to questions of decline and comparison to developments in European public sphere. In that context, one further question can be posed: while comparisons with late medieval/early modern European experience with print is valid, is it possible to extend them to other non-European societies, such as the premodern China or India? What would be the meaning of the Ottoman 'experiment' with print then?

This book is recommended for scholars and students wishing to know more about the 18th century material and technological developments and the effect that Müteferrika's printing project had on the centuries to come. While we can conclude that the Ottomans were not 'waiting' for the printing saviour to change their public sphere, Müteferrika's endeavour shows the extent of individual entrepreneurship amid the established tradition of manuscript production.

