One of the hallmarks of the Ottoman eighteenth century is the Tulip Age (1718–1730). Historians called it so because of the tulip gardens cultivated in different parts of Istanbul. Their refined fragrance replaced the smell of the gunpowder that prevailed during the preceding wars. In addition, in those years there was a place in the Ottoman capital where, for the first time, one’s nose could sense another kind of smell: the heavy smell of the oil-based ink, used in the first Ottoman Turkish printing press. In fact, this aroma existed even earlier, from Jewish, Armenian and Greek Orthodox printing houses that were established during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but it was during the Tulip Age that printing technology with movable type was introduced to the Ottoman Turks themselves.

The adoption of this technology was closely connected with sociocultural developments during the Tulip Age, and that is why the contextualisation of the first Ottoman printing press within the framework of these developments is unavoidable. The major trend that started during the Tulip Age was the so-called Westernisation of the Ottoman Empire, which was to a great extent sparked by the first long-term Ottoman embassy to France. The almost one-year long embassy that took place in 1720–21 provoked among the Ottoman elite a remarkable interest in Western culture, luxurious lifestyle, architectural styles such as rococo and baroque, and findings in the fields of geography, astronomy, biology, and medicine. The Western influence, however, did not replace traditional Ottoman culture immediately and completely. It was adapted rather than merely adopted.

---


thus creating, in Fatma Müge Göçek’s words, a “cultural dichotomy” or, in Rifaat Ali Abou-el-Haj’s expression, a “cultural symbiosis.” In such a cultural atmosphere, much more open to its Western counterpart than in previous times, the Ottoman elite, or at least a part of it, being inclined to make use of selected Western achievements, supported the establishment of typography to print books for the Turkish-speaking Muslim reading public.

The Ottoman authorities did not initiate, but supported such a printing enterprise, which was entirely a private and personal undertaking. It was İbrahim Müteferrika, who initially enjoyed the moral and financial support of Said Efendi, one of the officials to join the embassy to France, that established the first Ottoman printing press.

İbrahim Müteferrika was a Transylvanian-born Hungarian Protestant who studied to become a minister and belonged to the Unitarian denomination. During the revolt of Imre Thököly against the Austrian occupation of Transylvania in the early 1690s, he became an Ottoman subject and later converted to Islam, taking the name İbrahim. In 1716 he was elevated to the position of permanent Müteferrika, owing to which he was nicknamed Müteferrika. Müteferrika was the name of a corps at the Ottoman court, whose members were especially attached to the person of the sultan and used for more or less important public or political missions. İbrahim Müteferrika, in particular, was employed in diplomatic missions and some bureaucratic services. His last service seems to have been the direction of what was presumably the first Ottoman paper mill at Yalova, near Istanbul, in the years 1744–47. İbrahim died at the end of January 1747, and an inventory of all his goods, as well as the unsold books he

---

3 Göçek, East Encounters West, 81.
7 There are controversial views, according to which Müteferrika died in 1745, 1746 or 1747. See the latest articles on this issue: K. Beydilli, “Müteferrika ve Osmanlı Matbaası, 18. Yüzyılda İstanbul’da Kitabiyat,” Toplumsal Tarih 128 (2004): 44–52; E. Afyoncu, “İbrahim