CHAPTER 19

European Books for the Ottoman Market

Zsuzsa Barbarics-Hermanik

Introduction

In addition to Islamic drawings, miniatures and works of calligraphers specific Ottoman albums – the so-called muraḳḳa’s1 – in the Topkapı Palace Museum Library in Istanbul also contain European engravings from the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the Yaqub Bey album, for instance, there are Florentine prints from the 1460s and 1470s.2 Other muraḳḳa’s contain engravings by the German engraver Hans Brosamer (with a scene from the Old Testament story of Samson and Delilah) or the Flemish publisher Johannes Wierix (with a theme of the ‘Last Supper’) from the mid-sixteenth and second half of the sixteenth century respectively.3 So, contrary to the Ottoman’s

2 It is generally assumed that these prints were acquired during the reign of Mehmed II (1451–1481) who had good relations with Lorenzo de Medici and kept generally on very good terms with the Florentines. In the late 1460s, for instance, there were about 50 Florentine houses trading in and with the Ottoman Empire. See Halil İnalcık, The Ottoman Empire. The classical age 1300–1600 (London, Phoenix, 1994), p. 135. Mehmed II, however, had explicitly encouraged cultural contacts between the Ottoman Empire and the Italian territories. In addition to the above mentioned Florentine engravings, Italian maps as well as a great number of scientific books in various languages in the fields of geography, history, philosophy and medicine reached the palace library in this period. See Julian Raby, ‘Mehmed II Fatih and the Fatih Album’, Islamic Art, I (1981), pp. 44–46; Ibid., ‘A sultan of paradox. Mehmed the conqueror as a patron of the arts’, Oxford Arts Journal, 1 (1982), pp. 3–8; Günel Renda, ‘Europe and the Ottomans. Interactions in art’, in H. Inalcik & G. Renda (eds.), Ottoman civilisation (Ankara, Ministry of Culture, 2002), pp. 1048–1089.
supposed lack of interest and knowledge about Europe and European printed materials these engravings document close cultural and mercantile ties between the Ottoman Empire and the European book market.

Nevertheless, until recent times research into the interrelations between the Ottoman Empire and ‘the world around it’ concentrated primarily on territorial strategies and on political and military conflicts. Following the tradition of nineteenth-century orientalist scholarship, the diversity of the Ottoman world was emphasised together with its inferiority in culture and religion. The encounters between the Ottoman Empire and ‘Europe’ were delineated according to the Orientalist dichotomy of a ‘Muslim’ versus ‘Christian’ world. Furthermore, the stereotypical image was stressed of the Ottoman civilisation as static and averse to the adoption of new (Western/European) ideas and techniques forbidden by religious law. In that context aniconism of Islam in general and the religious practice of avoiding any printing press and printed materials in particular were stressed for a long time.

Recent studies, however, show that the Ottomans were far from being prisoners to the ‘extreme conservatism of Islam’ as suggested by the representatives of the traditional Eurocentric paradigm. Moreover, these studies also argue for the Ottomans’ centrality to the Renaissance and the early modern era by looking at shared patterns. According to this the Ottomans were not passive observers but active creators/agents of political and ‘global’ economic systems of that time. Therefore, the paper’s hypothesis is that the Ottoman Empire did

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