Orlin Sabev


Over the past two decades, book history has emerged as a useful tool for understanding the development of cultural trends in the Islamicate world. Scholars have studied printed petitions to access the public sphere, epistolary poems to shed light on administrative coteries, and medieval library catalogues to ascertain the availability of works on specific topics to city dwellers. Book history has also grown into an intellectual destination in its own right, as scholars have increasingly turned to examining the discrete contexts in which people produced, collected, and consumed these texts, such as printing presses, libraries, and classrooms.

Orlin Sabev’s established body of work on İbrahim Müteferrika (d. 1747), the first person to print texts in Ottoman-Turkish with the permission of the imperial authorities, falls mainly into this latter camp of book historical scholarship. Several years ago, Sabev came across Müteferrika’s probate inventory in the “Mufti Archives of Istanbul” (p. xii). The inventory was composed after the printer’s death, and owed its existence to the daughter, a minor, whom he left behind. Its list of Müteferrika’s remaining possessions of value, including his unsold printed titles, his manuscript books, and his home and machinery, has led Sabev on a research program examining the financial concerns of Müteferrika’s enterprise, the degree of its success, and the nature of print culture in the Ottoman empire.

As is claimed by the title of Sabev’s latest monograph, *Waiting for Müteferrika: Glimpses of Ottoman Print Culture*, this work is one of glimpses. Across seven chapters, including an introduction and conclusion, Sabev draws from Ottoman cultural history in order to situate Müteferrika. The book synthesizes Sabev’s earlier research and publications, and claims to revolve around the guiding question of “whether the time preceding the late introduction of Ottoman Turkish printing was lost or wasted in waiting for the first printer, if one can speak of a “waiting” at all” (p. xi). Yet two main theses emerge from the book’s contents, both of which focus temporally upon the periods during and after the introduction of print. One of Sabev’s contentions is that “Ottoman Turkish printing appeared exactly in the first half of the eighteenth century” because of the confluence of Müteferrika’s “capable and enterprising” nature, the Ottoman elite’s “demand for certain texts”, and “the willingness of the rulers to support such an enterprise financially and institutionally” (p. xxii). The other is that “Müteferrika was an “agent of change”, though not an agent of immediate change” (p. 90).

Sabev relies mainly on twentieth and twenty-first-century scholarship in Turkish, English, and French to investigate the various offshoots of these two
theses. His primary sources include for the most part European and Ottoman accounts of printing, the titles and ownership inscriptions of books printed by Müteferrika, and the probate inventories of a dozen Istanbulite booksellers and printers in addition to Müteferrika's own aforementioned probate record.

The introduction of Waiting for Müteferrika rehearses the “existing [historiographical] answers” to the question of “why the Ottomans were for so long reluctant to adopt the printing technology and thereby to facilitate the multiplication of their texts” (p. xiv). It then turns to surveying the standard explanations for the flip “question of why Ottoman Turkish printing was introduced in the first half of the eighteenth century” (p. xviii). Next, in his first chapter, Sabev examines both Ottoman accounts of Europeans’ “strange arts [‘acāyib’ and ‘garib’]” of “printing, theater and opera”, and “western accounts about the Ottoman “strange” abstention from printing and some other western technological achievements” (p. 2). His goal is to “figure out the change in perception of these arts throughout the centuries”, and he argues that “the Ottomans encountering the West became gradually more accustomed to western culture, particularly printing and performing arts” and that “European “strange” arts were adopted by the Ottomans only through the personal efforts of westerners who…happened to implement services in the Ottoman court, such as İbrahim Müteferrika” (pp. 2, 11, 13).

Chapter two works “to reveal Müteferrika’s portrait and self-portrait” through the narrative sources about his life (p. 17). As Müteferrika hailed from the town of Kolozsvár before becoming a subject of the Ottoman empire and entering the imperial court, Sabev searches to understand how Müteferrika “managed to combine in some harmony two seemingly opposing identities” (p. 35). Sabev’s “hypothesis is that Müteferrika himself likely created a far more favorable self-image [in the view of the Ottoman court] through mystifying the circumstances that led to his conversion” from Christianity to Islam (p. 17). Sabev’s third chapter considers the motivations behind Müteferrika’s move to print, and the forces that shaped what Müteferrika printed (pp. 37–42, 42–55). He argues that, in addition to “Müteferrika’s personal enthusiasm in responding to an increasing demand of the Ottoman elite for books on certain topics”, the “alternative method of text multiplication” that his works provided “revis[ed] and transform[ed] the Ottoman and Muslim concept of science” (p. 55).

In Sabev’s fourth chapter, he evaluates whether Müteferrika’s press should be considered a financial success or failure given that his probate record indicates that he sold “about 70 percent of his prints” (p. 74). Sabev concludes that the “inventory leaves no impression that he had failed in his undertaking, though the unsold copies of the books printed by him constitute a large part of his assets” (p. 74). Through a subsequent section, Sabev compares Müteferrika’s probate inventory to those of 12 other Istanbulite booksellers and printers who