The present collective volume contains a number of articles on the history of the printed book in connection with the Middle East. Lutz Berger treats the problems involved in the late introduction of printing in the Islamic world. Hartmut Bobzin writes about early European printed books which contain Arabic typographical elements. Dagmar Glass' contribution is about the 19th-century printing establishments in Egypt and Syria. Ulrich Marzolph, who also did the editing of the volume, has chosen a subject from his own field of expertise, the illustrated Iranian lithography, and writes on the illustrated Akhbarnama (Tabriz 1267/1850). Ittai Joseph Tamari has written about the production of printing by the Jews of Constantinople, and, finally, Carsten-Michael Walbiner has contributed by an article on the pioneers of Arabic printing in the Arab world.

The simple outward appearance of this small book is somewhat misleading. In books about books illustrations usually abound, not here, however (which must be regretted), but that handicap is fully compensated by a thorough research on issues of an elementary nature. Let us stay for a moment with Lutz Berger's article. Why did the Muslim not immediately recognize the value and importance of the printing of books?

The final answer is not given by Berger, but the question is raised and quite thoroughly researched. Berger mentions in this respect the willingness of the Muslim to adopt useful techniques, but on the other hand the lack of entrepreneurship, guild rigidity, etc. But all these considerations do not account for the fact that Muslims did at the time in fact not perceive printing as a revolutionary change in the dissemination of knowledge. Berger also mentions the hardly interesting production of Muslim scholarship of the early 18th century as a reason for not introducing printing, but here he makes a composite mistake. The questions and considerations should rather be: Why no printing with movable types in Baghdad in the 9th and 10th centuries? Why no Islamic printing in the late 15th century, when the Jews of Constantinople had their own printing presses, visible for all Muslims? Or, if there had been printing in the Muslim world from, say, the middle of the 15th century onwards, the content of these printed books would have been more varied and the new technique would probably have stimulated many a dormant talent. But this is all hypothetical, and the Muslims have reluctantly and hesitatingly started to print only several centuries after printing spread in Christian Europe.

Without wishing to diminish the value of Berger's important contribution in this volume two more things may be said in this respect. Comparative study could have yielded more insight in the transitional period between manuscript and printing, which for the heart lands of the Middle East only started in the 19th century. Berger refers to the Chinese experience of printing, but does only little to compare Muslim printing with the spread of printing in Europe. He could have tried to use the views of Uwe Neddermeyer, Von der Handschrift zum gedruckten Buch. Schriftlichkeit und Lesinteresse im Mittelealter und in der frühen Neuzeit. Quantitative und qualitative Aspekte (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz 1998). On the level of that study it should be possible to compare, to see what is the same and what is different, and then come to a deeper insight. Personally I have sometimes thought that it is not so much the rigid guild regulations that impeded the spread of printing in the Islamic realm (in fact we do not know so much about these regulations), but rather the great divide between Islamic scholarship on the one hand and the real world on the other. That divide could be adduced as an explanation for the belated introduction of the mechanical reproduction of texts.

In other words: Was there any social connection between the text producing individuals (working with pen, ink and paper) and the engineers, technicians, metallurgists, instrument makers (often working in a system of division of labour) in the world of Islam during the 15th-18th centuries? Apparently less than in 15th-16th century Europe. Another related question: Why did Muslims not profit from the printing presses that they saw being operated in their midst (in Safawi Isfahan; in the English, French and Danish factories in India, with the Dutch in South-East Asia)? Is it not touched upon by Berger at all. And in the end Berger remains inconclusive in the matter, which I think was inevitable.

With the wisdom of hindsight one can say that the subject has far wider implications than Berger may have wished to treat. Reading David S. Landes' The wealth and poverty of nations. Why some are so rich and some so poor (New York: Norton 1999), one understands that the appalling backwardness of the Middle East and North African region still suffers from that lack of technical adaptation and innovation, among other things. Muhammad 'Umar in his work Hādir al-Misrīyyīn 'aw Sirr Ta'ākhkhurīhim (Cairo 1902) does mention the printing press in a positive way, but he ignores the consequences of the lack thereof in Egypt over such a long period. And when Shākīb Arslān published his famous treatise Limādāh ta'ākhkhara al-Muslimān wā-tagaddāma ghayrahūm (Cairo 1932), he did not mention the absence of centuries of the printing press in the Islamic realm as one of the answers to his question. That absence in Islamic lands has become an issue in modern Western discourse about Islam. Berger's contribution has been somewhat highlighted here by me because it is in principle of a different nature and stature as compared to the other contributions to the present volume. All these are informatively written, well-researched and in their being together they add value to this book as a whole. The only objection one can have, and which I often raise when I read products of German scholarship, is the language. Writing in German dramatically limits the audience. It is a pity that German scholars do not sufficiently realize that much of their efforts, often of outstanding quality, is wasted because it cannot be read in the world. Finally, the editor has resisted the temptation to give this useful book an index. To do so would have been a little bit of extra trouble, but would have given this little gem of erudition additional value.

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