containing conscious allusions to the Safavid architectural image. Rather than claiming a Safavid inspiration for Saadabad, it is my belief that Damad Ibrahim and Ahmed III were cultured Ottomans who were consciously reaffirming their allegiance to the cultural world of the early modern Islamic world by creating kastır that functioned as a visual reminder of the Ottomans’ designs on the lands of Iran. Rather than implying that Yirmisekiz Çelebi Mehmed Efendi had made his patrons susceptible to the delights and pleasures of the Christian world of Europe, the sultan and his grand vizier proved to be fully cognizant inhabitants of the early modern Islamic world. I would thus like to claim that Ahmed III and Damad Ibrahim had been conventional Ottomans in cultural and ideological terms, Ottomans who tried to stay connected with the traditions of their ancestry, and whose cultural patronage and political programmes disclosed a willingness to fashion a continuity and sense of cohesion with the wider culture and intellectual heritage of the early modern world of Islam.

Chapter 3
The First Ottoman Turkish Printing Enterprise: Success or Failure?
Orlin Sabev (Orhan Salih)

In the final scene of Jale Baysal’s play, Cemnetlik Ibrahim Efendi (Ibrahim Efendi in Paradise), the man who was a member of the Mûteferrika corps at the Ottoman court,1 but who became known for establishing the first Ottoman Turkish printing press in 1726, Ibrahim Mûteferrika is found on his deathbed complaining to the court poet Nevres, ‘There will be in inheritance piles of unsold books. They did not read what I printed.’2

In 1986, the script of this play, which is an adaptation of the biography of the first Ottoman printer, Ibrahim Mûteferrika, won first prize in a theatre competition organized by the Foundation of the Turkish State Theatre and Ballet (Devlet Tiyatrosu ve Bale Çalışanları Vakfı – TOBAV). Unfortunately, we do not know whether the play was ever staged, but we do know that it was published in 1992. As a literary adaptation meant for performance, the play, perhaps expectedly, is a mixture of fact and fiction, with fiction utilized to ‘fill in the gaps’ of the factual details of the narrative, rendering it, as Christine Brook-Rose calls it, a ‘history palimpsest’.3 In ‘history palimpsest’ fiction tends to overwrite real historical events, thereby presenting an alternative version that is perhaps more entertaining and attractive to the reading public and/or audience, but less satisfying to the historian. In these instances, fiction obfuscates ‘what really happened’.
Here I am not trying to discuss the historical accuracy or artistic merits of Jale Baysal’s play, but rather to take its final episode as a starting point for the present discussion. Baysal’s depiction of İbrahim Müteferrika’s desperate final words about the failure of his book printing enterprise is one instance of a ‘history palimpsest’.

Strikingly, the impression of the failure of Müteferrika’s effort does not originate in semi-fictitious literary works such as Baysal’s but in the first academic study of İbrahim Müteferrika’s biography, namely Imre Karácson’s article published in 1910.4 Karácson cites a letter by the Catholic Hungarian nobleman Czezarnak (César) de Saussure who, as a companion of Ferenc Rákóczi during his exile to the Ottoman empire (1717–35), met İbrahim Müteferrika in Turkey in 1732. In this letter he stated that Müteferrika’s profits were rather moderate.5 So, Karácson took de Saussure’s remark at face value and presented Müteferrika as a disappointed pioneer who had been unable to reap the fruits of his labour.6

César de Saussure’s aforementioned letter was written in February 1732 and it provides one of the few sources of biographical data about Müteferrika. Although a subject of controversy in modern historiography,7 until very recently this letter was the only source available that gave some idea of the commercial success of the first Ottoman printing enterprise. According to de Saussure, Müteferrika’s press was unsuccessful because of insufficient sales, which he attributed to the limited number of literate Turks, a lack of interest in reading and the relatively high price of printed books. The author mentions that there was a fear that the enterprise would be suspended after İbrahim Müteferrika’s death, for no Turk would take on an undertaking with such low profits.8 Much later (in fact after 1759) de Saussure added to his 1732 letter a note that İbrahim Müteferrika had died in 1738 and left nothing but piles of books. He added that such a legacy only made his descendants feel an aversion to resuming the enterprise. (Ce qui a tellement dégouté ses successeurs ou héritiers qu’ils ont entièrement abandonné son imprimerie.)9 The exact date of the appended note is unknown, but the year of İbrahim Müteferrika’s death given by de Saussure is incorrect. Rather than 1738, Müteferrika actually died a good eight or nine years later (in 1746 or 1747).10 Given this error, the fact that we are unsure whether de Saussure was an eye witness to Müteferrika’s death and the consequent situation of his printing house, we may legitimately ask if de Saussure’s version is yet another ‘history palimpsest’ that overwrites the real events.

Given the paucity of sources on the subject, scholars and litterateurs alike had no option other than to refer to de Saussure’s ‘observations’, while in the process giving his version credibility. The first was the above-mentioned Imre Karácson,11 followed by people such as Lajos Hopp,12 Jale Baysal and Hidayet Nuhoglu, the latter two referring to Karácson’s quotation after de Saussure.13

Since Karácson’s article of 1910, scholars have accepted the claim that İbrahim Müteferrika’s enterprise was rather unsuccessful and invested their efforts in searching for, and speculating about, the reasons for this alleged failure. Niyazi Berkes, a well-known specialist in Ottoman social history, points out three main conditions conducive to the successful progress of any printing undertaking, namely technological development, the production of the quantity of paper appropriate for the requirements of printing, and the existence of the necessary reading public. According to Berkes, these three conditions were absent in the Ottoman milieu. He also underlines the relatively high prices of the first Ottoman printed books and the nature of their subjects. He argues that the latter rendered the books insufficiently attractive to the majority of the reading public whose education was most likely attained through Islamic religious learning, such as the medrese students. Berkes concludes that the limited technical and restrictive economic conditions were responsible for the weak influence of the first Ottoman printing enterprise.14

A similar view is shared by A. D. Jeltyakov, who attributes the alleged failure of Müteferrika’s venture to cultural and technological underdevelopment. Not only does he see the illiteracy
prevalent in Ottoman society as an obstacle to the success of printing, but also conjectures that the literate elements of the population were uninterested in topics in the exact sciences of the kind Müteferrika printed.\footnote{15}

A combination of the above-mentioned views can also be found in J. S. Syllowicz's 1988 article on the subject, in which the first Ottoman printing enterprise is considered in terms of the different social, economic and cultural conditions prevailing in western Europe and the Ottoman empire respectively. According to Syllowicz, compared with western Europe, the Ottoman social climate was unsuitable for such an undertaking because of both mass illiteracy and the opposition of the numerous professional manuscript copyists who viewed the printing press as a threat to their profession.\footnote{16}

Hüseyin Gazi Topdemir, author of one of the most recent monographs on Ibrahim Müteferrika, assuming the failure of Müteferrika's project, stresses the same reasons, namely the paucity or the prohibitively high cost of printing paper, the low output of Müteferrika's printing press, the availability of printed books only to select individuals, the books' topics not meeting the public's expectations and, finally, their relatively high cost in comparison with that of manuscripts.\footnote{17}

Topdemir's reference to the high prices of the first Ottoman printed books comes from an article by Osman Ersoy that is especially devoted to that issue. Ersoy, who is a prominent scholar of the history of Ottoman printing, concludes that the prices of the books printed in Müteferrika's typography were quite high given the average Ottoman standard of living in the first half of the eighteenth century. According to Ersoy, along with the constant paucity of printing paper and well-trained printers, high prices must have been a significant factor behind the alleged failure of the first Ottoman printing enterprise.\footnote{18}

Ersoy's article was published in a volume on the proceedings of a symposium dedicated to the 250th anniversary of Turkish book printing, which was held in Ankara in December 1979. The volume also includes the symposium participants' comments on the papers presented and Ersoy's paper seems to have sparked a lively discussion. One of the participants, Şerafettin Turan, pointed out a methodological flaw in Ersoy's paper in that the prices of the first Ottoman printed books should be compared with manuscript prices, as found in the probate inventories of deceased Muslims, rather than measured against the average standard of living. Turan's implication is that printed book prices should be seen in the context of the book market in general, whether manuscript or printed. Thus, the cost of printed books should be measured against the standard of living of those who owned manuscript books, namely the reading public. Turan added also that the first Ottoman printed books must have had a public with specific reading interests and a higher standard of living.\footnote{19}

Şerafettin Turan's remarks are insightful in their insistence on empirical research and the utilization of the rich and massive Ottoman sources of the probate inventories (terekke defteri). Oddly enough, although these documents have been widely used for exploring social and economic aspects of the history of Ottoman everyday life in different periods,\footnote{20} except for a few early studies, dealing only partially with the presence of books in probate inventories,\footnote{21} they have only recently attracted the attention of students of Ottoman book history.\footnote{22} This attention, however, has been overwhelmingly devoted to studying the circulation of manuscripts rather than of printed books. And if Turan did significantly point to the importance of probate inventories in Ottoman book history, it seems that he failed to consider the probate inventory of the most important personality of Ottoman printed book history, namely of Ibrahim Müteferrika.

I have been fortunate enough to come across precisely that – the probate inventory relating to the possessions of Ibrahim Müteferrika, preserved in the Mufti Archives of Istanbul,\footnote{23} in the collection Kismet-i Askeriye Mahkemesi (register 98, folios 39a–40b). This source, dated 20 Rebi‘ül-ahir 1160 (1 April 1747), is thus far the most illuminating with regard to many hitherto unknown aspects of Müteferrika's personality and printing
activities. Since the document provides an inventory of Müteferrika’s possessions at the time of his death, it gives a relatively accurate idea of how many unsold copies of printed books were left in his possession. An interpretation of these figures of unsold copies, and their juxtaposition with the total number of initial prints made, not only allows us to gauge the degree of success or failure of Müteferrika’s printing project, but also, subsequently, to see to what extent the discussions and speculations about the ‘failure’ of the first Ottoman printing press have been warranted. Thus, a statistical analysis of the Müteferrika printing venture is in order. Through the analysis, I propose to explore the following issues:

- a juxtaposition of print figures to sale figures in order to judge the commercial outcomes of the Müteferrika press;
- an assessment of the popularity of the titles;
- a contextualization of the findings by relating them to the book market and the reading public; and finally
- a reassessment of the significance of the first Ottoman printing press.

But before we get to the subject, there are several issues to be considered. The first has to do with what is meant by the term ‘success’ when used in reference to the first Ottoman printing press. If we are speaking of commercial success, then the term implies not only good sales figures but also a good turnover of the investments made. However, if we use the term in a broader sense, we need to consider the printing press as a cultural product and look at the extent to which the technological innovation is adopted or rejected by society at large. While I deal with the latter in the conclusion to this chapter, on the question of commercial success it is difficult to assess to what extent the net proceeds of the sales actually covered the investments Müteferrika had made. For now, it would be reasonable to turn our attention to sales figures because they reflect printing as a mutual process in which the printer/seller and the reading public/customers are involved.

Another issue has to do with problems related to the sources used for this research. The above-mentioned inventory provides the number of printed books left on Müteferrika’s death (2981 in total); however, it does so partly by listing individual titles and partly by listing groups of titles. Given this classificatory inconsistency, it is impossible to calculate the number of unsold copies of each publication; one can only do so for those that are listed individually, which is roughly half the titles. Thus, although I shall be unable to assess the popularity of each of the Müteferrika press titles, I am able to include these titles in the total figures, which is relevant for gauging the overall success of the Müteferrika printing enterprise.

Of course, book sale figures would be almost meaningless if not juxtaposed with figures for the total number of initial printed copies. Fortunately, we can find the relevant information in a source other than the above-mentioned probate inventory, namely a book printed at the Müteferrika press – El-Cildâ’s-sâni min Târîh-i Na‘îmâ (second volume of History of Na‘îma). This book happens to be the thirteenth of the Müteferrika press editions, and provides the number of copies for each previous title published by the press except for one book – Grammaire turque ou Méthode courte & facile pour Apprendre la Langue turque (Turkish Grammar or a Concise and Easy Method of Learning the Turkish language) by Holdermann (1730). The author, however, provides figures for the initial print number of the latter. Unfortunately, we have no documentation for the total print of the last three of Müteferrika’s 16 editions, namely Raşíd Efendi’s Târîh (History) in three volumes, along with Çelebiâd Efendi’s appendix (zeyl) Târîh (printed in 1741), Ömer Bosnâvi’s Ahvâl-i Gazvât der Diyâr-i Bosna (The State of Religious Wars in the Province of Bosnia) of 1741, and the two-volume Persian–Turkish dictionary, Lisân-ı ‘Accem or Ferheng-i Şu‘ûrî, of 1742. However, one may suggest that each had a run of at least 500 copies since it is the minimum number of copies of the initial prints found in the above-mentioned list (indeed, ten of the sixteen editions whose initial print number we know is at 500 copies).
Thus, figures for both the total initial print and final numbers of the unsold copies exist for six of the Mûteferrika press titles, namely Vankulu’s Arabic–Turkish dictionary of 1729, Nazmizada Efendi’s Gülşen-i Hulefâ (Rosary of Caliphs) of 1730, Grammaire turque, Kâtip Çelebi’s Kitâb-i Cihannâmâ (Mirror of the World, 1732) and Takvimü’t-Tevrîh (Calendar of Histories, 1733) and Na’ima’s Târîh (1734).

The category of books for which we know the initial total print but where the number of unsold copies is given in groups rather than individually falls into two groups. The first includes Kâtip Çelebi’s Tuhfetâl-kibâr fi Esfârîl-Bihâr (Select Gift in Voyages) of 1729, Judâ Tedeûsu Krusinski’s Târîh-i Seyyûh der Beyân-i Zuhûr-i Aqâyûmîn ve Sebeb-i İndiham-i Binû-i Devel-i Şehâni Safveyûn (History of Traveller about Afghans’ Appearance and Reasons for the Decline of the State of the Safavi Shahs) of 1729, Târîh-i Hindîl-Garbi el-Musemmâ bi-Hadis-i Nev (History of the West Indies Called the New World) and Nazmizada Efendi’s Târîh-i Timûr-i Gurkân (History of Tamerlane), and Sâheyle Efendi’s Târîh-ul-Misrîl-Cedid: Târîh-ul-Misrîl-Kadim (History of Contemporary Egypt: History of Ancient Egypt) of 1730. The second group includes Mûteferrika’s own writings such as Usulâl-Hikem fi Nizâmîl-’Umem (The Fundaments of Wisdom with regard to the Order of Nations, 1732) and Fâyi̇zątâl-Milikâtisiyye (Features of the Magnets, 1732), as well as Ömer Bosnâvi’s Ahvâl-i Gazavât der Diyar-i Bosna of 1741.

Before turning to the numbers of unsold copies, two observations are worth making. First, there were obviously fewer unsold copies of earlier than later editions because they had been on the market for a longer period of time. Second, at the time of the inventory, some books seem not yet to have been ready for sale, as in the cases of Kitâb-i Cihânîmâ, Na’ima’s Târîh, and Raşid Efendi’s Târîh and Ferheng-i Şûrûrî. Most of these copies were unbound (cîldîsiz), unpolished (mâhresiz) and without margins around the pages (cedvâlîsiz). The unsold copies of Gülşen-i Hulefâ, Tuhfetâl-kibâr, Târîh-i Seyyûh, Târîh-ul-Hindîl-Garbi, Târîh-i Timûr-i Gurkân, Târîh-ul-Misrîl-Cedid, Târîh-ul-Misrîl-Kadim and Takvimü’t-Tevrîh were sewn (dikîlîsî), cut (kesîlîsî) and partly bound. The books of which there were very few unsold copies, such as Grammaire turque, Usulâl-Hikem fi Nizâmîl-’Umem, Fâyi̇zątîl-Milikalâtisiyye, and Ahvâl-i Gazavât der Diyar-i Bosna, were properly bound (tâmâm mücelledî). It seems that there was some connection between the demand for certain books and the success of their sale, on the one hand, and the state of their preparedness for sale on the other.

By juxtaposing the numbers of unsold copies against the number of the initial print run of each of the Mûteferrika editions, one is able to ascertain the degree of popularity that each title enjoyed. As shown in the tables and figures presented in the appendix at the end of this chapter, where the number of copies left unsold is juxtaposed with the number of the initial print, among Mûteferrika’s bestsellers were the Vankulu Arabic–Turkish dictionary (see Figure 3.1) and Grammaire turque (Figure 3.4), followed by some titles such as Usulâl-Hikem fi Nizâmîl-’Umem, Fâyi̇zątîl-Milikalâtisiyye and Ahvâl-i Gazavât der Diyar-i Bosna (Figure 3.5), as well as Na’ima’s Târîh (Figure 3.8). There are five other titles in history and geography like Tuhfetâl-kibâr, Târîh-i Seyyûh, Târîh-ul-Hindîl-Garbi, Târîh-i Timûr-i Gurkân, Târîh-ul-Misrîl-Cedid: Târîh-ul-Misrîl-Kadim (Figure 3.2), which seem also to have sold well but since they are inventoried in one group it is difficult to make a distinction between them.

Books such as Gülşen-i Hulefâ (Figure 3.3), Takvimü’t-Tevrîh (Figure 3.7) and Kitâb-i Cihânîmâ (Figure 3.6) seem to have enjoyed moderate commercial success. Only Raşid Efendi’s Târîh (Figure 3.9) and Ferheng-i Şûrûrî (Figure 3.10), which had been on the market for a good six years before İbrahim Mûteferrika’s death, sold fewer than half the print run.

Having examined the number of unsold copies and the degree of popularity of the individual titles, let us now turn to total figures to get an overall picture of the success of the other or otherwise of the Mûteferrika press. There are different estimates – 12,000, 12,500, 12,700 or 13,200 copies in total. These figures, however, seem to be overestimations. In my opinion, the safest way to reach a more
accurate estimate is to turn to the aforementioned list in Naṣīma’s Tārīḥ, which, as I mentioned earlier, gives the total initial print of 12 Muteferrika press editions (Grammaire turque is missing). The figure for these 12 editions can be calculated at 7200.30 We know from the author of Grammaire turque, Holdermann, that the total print run of the grammar was 1000 copies.31 Thus, the cumulative figure of initial print runs, of which the number of copies is known (as opposed to estimated), is 8200. As for the books for which the initial print run is unknown, as I suggested earlier, an informed and conservative figure is 500 copies for each of the last three editions. If we add the estimated figure of 1500 to the figure calculated for those books for which the initial print number is known, the total number of copies of all the printed books would be 9700. However, if we take a less conservative estimate of 1000 instead of 500 for those in the unknown category, then the total print of all Muteferrika’s printed books would equal 11,200 copies. While a definitive answer is impossible, one may opt to settle on a median number between the conservative figure of 9700 and the liberal figure of 11,200 to suggest that the total number of printed copies was in the range of 10,000 to 11,000 printed copies. If we juxtapose this figure against the number of unsold copies that Muteferrika left upon his death, which is 2981 unsold copies, as mentioned in the probate inventory, we could infer that 69.3 per cent of his editions were sold.

These figures clearly show that Ibrahim Muteferrika’s printing enterprise was far from the flasco presented in scholarly and literary sources. Indeed, as we shall see later, as a first attempt at printing, Muteferrika’s commercial enterprise was comparable with that of the early European printing presses. However, before we become euphoric about this newfound ‘success’, these figures need to be qualified and inserted in different contexts before we declare a final judgement. First, not all the printed books that were circulated in the market had actually been sold. Some of Muteferrika’s copies were presented as gifts by him or by the Ottoman court to different royal libraries in Europe – in Austria (1730),32 Russia (1731),33 Sweden (1735)34 and France (1741–42).35 Having said this, the number of such gifts could not have been high enough to warrant adjusting the sale figures we have suggested.

It is insufficient to consider only the number of copies Muteferrika may have sold in his lifetime, for these figures must be related to the market in which they circulated – the book market. In view of any market, and the book market in particular, price is the singularly most important issue, and has great implications for the success or failure of any commercial enterprise. As Osman Ersoy showed, the first printed books were far more expensive than manuscripts and were beyond the reach of even high-level functionaries.36 This confirms de Saussure’s remark that Muteferrika was unable to sell books because of their exorbitant prices. This apparently led the first Ottoman printer to reduce the initial prices, sometimes even twice, as Holdermann (in 1730),37 Muteferrika himself (in 1733 and 1734)38 and Edvard Carleson (in 1735)39 pointed out. The probate inventories of the time confirm such discounts of Muteferrika’s printed books.40 It is worth noting that the prices of some of Muteferrika’s editions such as the Yankuli dictionary and Raşid Efendi’s Tarih were discounted twice, but subsequently recovered in the late 1740s. Such discounts may have been a commercial ploy that Muteferrika implemented as a sort of ‘promotion offer’ to induce the sale of his books, which would later be priced at what had initially been set. Thus, the relatively high prices of Muteferrika’s printed books must have affected their sales negatively, which were evidently less promising than expected. We may safely conclude that Muteferrika’s enterprise was established at a high price for the printer himself. The commercial success of his business, while not disastrous, was also not staggeringly successful.

Aside from quantity of sales, we need to address yet another issue in evaluating the success of the printing press, and that is the quantity of printed books relative to the reading public’s market. Osman Ersoy has opined that Ibrahim Muteferrika could hardly have hoped for commercial success because the total print
runs of his editions were so insignificant – not even ‘a handful of
sand thrown to the sea’ or ‘a teaspoon of water given to a sick man
dying of thirst’. To treat this issue, one needs to consult the
appropriate source documents and apply a reasonable
methodology. Thus far, Turkish researchers of Ottoman printing
history have been unreasonably critical. They point out that the
total print runs of the first Ottoman printed books were much
lower than those in western Europe during the first half of the
eighteenth century. Such a synchronic comparison, so to speak, is
not very reliable because we are confronted with two identical
processes but at different stages of development. One should not
forget that Müteferrika’s effort represented the very first
introduction of the printing press in Ottoman society, while in
other parts of Europe at that time print culture was already
centuries old. In my opinion, an accurate comparison would be
between the initial stages of European (fifteenth century) and
Ottoman (eighteenth century) printing respectively. This would
represent a diachronic comparison between two processes that
developed in different ages and contexts but that are in fact
similar enough to warrant comparison. In applying such a
methodology, one could reach a more objective assessment of the
real achievements and importance of the beginnings of Ottoman
printing.

In this respect, comparing the average print runs of Mütefer-
rika’s editions with those of European incunabula, one can see
that they are identical. Early printing houses in Europe tended to
print between 150 and 1500 copies of a book and a considerable
number of presses failed after only one or two books. It is thus
not only unfair but also incorrect to claim that Müteferrika’s print
runs were too low. After all, the print run of a given book should
relate to its number of potential buyers and readers.

Some insights into the Ottoman Muslim reading public can be
gained by exploring probate inventories that include titles of
books, but this approach is problematic for several reasons. First,
the documentary basis for such a study is selective because, under
Islamic inheritance laws, the registers of deceased persons only

required inventories if the deceased person had left children
under age, if there was a dispute over the inheritance, or if there
were no heirs at all and the state treasury (beytulmâl) would thus
sequestrate the property. Second, the inventories reflect the
situation at the time of death, so it is difficult to ascertain whether
the deceased had had more books before the time of his or her
death. Some book owners may have sold, given, or donated some
or all of their books. Third, the number of book owners found in
the probate inventories does not cover the number of actual
readers, for many potential readers may not have owned books,
like the medrese students who usually made use of public waqf
libraries. Fourth, not all the registers survive. Even though the
number of preserved registers is quite considerable, it is not
possible for a single researcher to undertake the huge project of
consulting all the available material.

Given the many problems in the sources, the best that a
researcher can do is to limit the scope of his or her study in terms
of chronology, geographical span and items studied. Having this
in mind, I sought to look for book owners in probate inventories
at the time of the first Ottoman printing press, limiting the range
to the probate inventories of Istanbul. I chose to consult
inventories related to people who enjoyed askeri status and who
had left at least four manuscripts or printed books among their
possessions when they died. The reasons I chose this sample are
as follows: first, since these individuals lived in Istanbul, where
the press was established, they must have seen or heard of it;
second, as individuals belonging to the askeri class they were the
most likely to have been able to afford such relatively expensive
books; and third, as individuals who possessed more than three
books, they were probably more interested in books than those
who owned fewer than three. In the askeriye collection of the
Mufti Archives of Istanbul, I was able to track down roughly 335
deceased persons with more than three books registered during
the period between 1724–26 (1137–38) and 1747–48 (1160–61),
namely from the years when Ottoman Turkish printing started to
the years when its first stage came to an end. This figure does not,
of course, refer to the real number of persons of askeri status who were book owners because, as I pointed out in the previous paragraph, the inheritance registers do not include the inventories of all deceased persons. Another caveat regarding the sample at hand is that the book market was not limited to Istanbul, but given that it is the imperial capital city, one would still expect to have the largest concentration of the reading public. Having said this, the figure of 335 book owners with more than three books found in Istanbul probate inventories implies that as a whole, both in absolute and relative terms, the Ottoman reading public seems to have been more or less limited. De Saussure narrates that ‘the literate Turks are not so many in numbers; they are not fond of reading and they do not enjoy reading.’\(^{44}\) Holdermann made the same observation in 1730.\(^ {45}\) The print runs of even poetry collections, a favourite topic of urbane Ottomans, and the textbooks printed in the 1840s and 1850s by the order of Istanbul book sellers (sahhaf) were usually 1200 copies.\(^ {46}\) It was rare for the print run of an edition to reach 2000 copies.\(^ {47}\) In this respect, the allegation that Mütreferrika’s ‘handful of sand thrown to the sea’ seems to be incorrect. Given how limited the Istanbul reading market was in the eighteenth century, and the rather small demand for books, even in the middle of the nineteenth century, Mütreferrika’s output was not at all insufficient, but actually a bit on the ample side considering the potential of the Ottoman book market.

Special attention should be paid to the social and professional profiles of the people who bought Mütreferrika’s printed books. A cursory glance at the same Istanbul probate inventories in this regard is necessary. While I found Mütreferrika editions in only 16 probate inventories, it was immediately apparent that the first printed Ottoman books appeared in probate inventories very soon after they were printed. Thus, their high initial price seems not to have been a problem for many potential buyers, and the same seems to hold for probate inventories held in the provinces.\(^ {48}\) It is remarkable that those who owned such printed and expensive books were not only Ottoman military and bureaucratic officials but also religious functionaries. This is significant because it has been alleged that religious functionaries were the traditional opponents of the printing press.

In view of the contemporary reading public’s taste and preferences, it is important to contextualize Mütreferrika’s print production. The majority of the book owners I studied, which included five booksellers, possessed predominantly religious literature, mainly in Arabic, and samples of poetry in Persian, Arabic and Turkish. Among the religious books the most popular were, naturally, the Qur’an, a small collection of the most popular Qur’anic chapters (sura) entitled Errâm-i Serif after the sura Errâm (the Camel), the religious poem Muhammediye written by Yazıcıoğlu Mehmed in 1444, a biography of the Prophet Muhammad in verse, as well as Mehmed Birgivi’s sixteenth-century Vasiyetnâme, a book on religious dogma and practice. The latter two writings belonged to Ottoman Turkish authors and their popularity was due largely to the accessibility of the language in which they were written. In history and geography the most popular books pertained to Islamic history, especially the History of al-Tabari recounting the life of Muhammad and the emergence and development of the early Islamic state,\(^ {49}\) and travelogues written by pilgrims to Mecca.\(^ {50}\) Old Persian epics such as Şâhnâme and Hamzanâme were also among the favourites. Dictionaries, on the other hand, are seldom listed in these inventories, even in those of the five booksellers I came across. As for the constitution of the reading public, it was mainly men of religion (ulema), both scholars and students, administrative and military officials, and sometimes traders and craftsmen. In terms of gender, men considerably prevailed over women as readers.

Given such a reading public and taste in books, İbrahim Mütreferrika definitely filled a gap by printing dictionaries first. Vankulu’s Arabic–Turkish reedition of Şihâb became a bestseller. However, in his editing policy Mütreferrika was much more inclined to print historical and geographical books: nine of the sixteen editions are related to history, two others (Tuhfat and History of West Indies) combine history and geography, while the
most eminent product of his printing house was Kâtip Çelebi’s geographical work *Mirror of World*. Müteferrika, however, printed texts, which were not in line with the traditional religious or epic literature popular at the time. By printing Ottoman maritime history or the political history of Persia, the caliphate and the Ottoman empire, as well as geographical books, Müteferrika seems to have attempted to provide books that would be useful to those involved in government by offering historical works of didactic value. Indeed, as William Watson states, Ibrahim’s printing philosophy seems to have been completely utilitarian.31

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that except for one title (*Calendar of Histories*, in Persian) all the books Müteferrika printed were in Ottoman Turkish and thus more accessible to potential readers. These books could be read not only by Muslims but also by Turkish-speaking non-Muslims. In this way the printer practically exceeded the scope of the traditional Ottoman Muslim reading public. Moreover, by providing secular and utilitarian knowledge, he challenged the traditional Muslim concept of knowledge and learning, which placed the emphasis on religious matters.32 A. Ubucini claims that printing brought to the Ottomans new branches of learning that played a significant role in their progress.33

Was the first Ottoman printing press a success or failure? Ibrahim Müteferrika’s probate inventory shows no evidence that he had failed in his undertaking. While unsold copies of books he had printed constituted a large part of his assets, that is probably normal for a tradesman and enterprising person.

By the end of his life Ibrahim Müteferrika was able to sell about 70 per cent of the books he printed: quite a sufficient reward for his enterprise. Indeed, he seems to have been luckier than Johann Gutenberg, who lost his printing house through a debt to his sponsor Johann Fust. As Sigfrid Steinberg remarked, most early European printers seem to have been better printers than businessmen. They had limited commercial success because they were unaware of one important feature of printing: it requires significant advance investment and the turnover is necessarily slow.34 In fact, de Saussure seems to have been aware of these requirements in that he expressed concern that the Müteferrika enterprise might cease with the printer’s death because of the Turks’ impatience with and lack of enthusiasm for delayed long-term returns.35

Sigfrid Steinberg’s remark raises the question of if we accept that the first Ottoman Turkish printing enterprise was not a commercial failure, why did it cease production immediately after Müteferrika’s death to revive sporadically just for one edition in the mid-1750s and then only in 1784 to continue along a more stable path? Is previous scholarship incorrect in claiming that the first Ottoman Turkish printing press was a failure rather than a success? Perhaps, the hitherto negative assessments of Müteferrika’s printing press come from an impression that the invention of printing in the West was a sweeping revolution that took place in a short period of time. In her famous book, Elizabeth Eisenstein put forward the idea that the printing press was an ‘agent of change’ that resulted in a ‘communications revolution’ in which the print culture replaced the traditional scribal culture.36 In response to criticism, Eisenstein explains her use of the term ‘revolution’. Her particular notion of revolution is inspired by Raymond Williams’s oxymoronic expression ‘long revolution’37 in the sense that it is not about a fast change due to a single act, but a continuous, irreversible process, the effects of which gradually become visible in the course of its development.38 Not everyone, however, shares Eisenstein’s ‘revolution’ theory. Robert A. Houston, for example, agrees with Eisenstein that printing undoubtedly changed ways of thinking and played an indirect role in economic, social and political development in early modern Europe (1500–1800), but he qualifies Eisenstein’s thesis by stating that the impact of the printing press was neither immediate, nor direct, nor certain. The changes were slow and contingent on various social, economic and political contexts, and the printing was arguably not fully developed until the eighteenth century.39 Jacque le Goff also stresses that, upon its introduction in Europe, the printing
press met the needs of only the literate elite, and it was not until the counter-reformation that this technology was used to educate the public. Finally, Brian Richardson concludes that ‘the transition from manuscript to printed book was in some respects, then, a process of evolution.’ Indeed, some recent scholars in book history have been re-evaluating Eisenstein’s theory in radical and moderate ways. Some criticize her non-contextual approach by positing that print culture existed side by side or competed with manuscript culture well into the eighteenth century.

With respect to printing in the Islamic world, most scholars are inclined to think that the same ‘print revolution’ should have happened. However, there are a few who think that the printing press gave rise to a cultural ‘evolution’ in the Ottoman empire and Islamic world in general. So, was Müteferrika’s printing enterprise an ‘agent of change’? Earlier scholarship answered this question by referring to the supposed commercial failure of his enterprise, which was suspended after his death. But, in my opinion, İbrahim Müteferrika was an ‘agent of change’, though not an ‘agent of immediate change’.

Indeed, the transition from scribal to print culture was a slow, gradual and arduous process. In Brian Richardson’s words, old habits die hard. But at what stage in the development of printing could one speak of a ‘print culture’? This leads us to the question of how to define a print culture. So-called traditional ‘print-culture scholarship’ considers printing technology with movable type to be the beginning of print culture. However, for a print culture to dominate a scribal culture there needs to exist a social conviction in the necessity of printed ‘agents’ of knowledge and information. Thus, the establishment of a printing house is certainly a starting point in the formation of a print culture, but the spread of a print culture is contingent on the particular social context.

It seems that the cursive nature of the Arabic script, which was in general use in the Islamic world, was not particularly suited to, and subsequently led to a reluctance to adopt, printing with movable type. It was through the personal strife and effort of people like Müteferrika, and not socio-cultural demand that Muslim printing came into being. In fact, unlike many other innovations of European origin, such as cannons and firearms, the Ottomans did not apparently need the printing press. However, once introduced, it attracted attention and left traces in Ottoman cultural history.

İbrahim Müteferrika’s printing enterprise became possible because he was a confident bearer of the already developed European print culture and was probably well skilled in its arts. He was eager enough to undertake such an enterprise in an Ottoman milieu where calligraphy was esteemed and printing considered inappropriate for the Arabic alphabet. In a letter of 1737, de Laria, an interpreter at the French embassy in Istanbul, provides a noteworthy detail about İbrahim Müteferrika’s habits. According to him, although İbrahim was a Hungarian convert to Islam, he was not particularly observant. In the light of such accounts, one could assume that İbrahim was in fact a good example of a cultural dichotomy or symbiosis. In other words, he never forgot his Christian past and never became a real Muslim – he could never negate his background, which was familiar with the print culture, and could never become a ‘traditional’ Muslim for whom manuscripts were pretty enough. This explains why he was a quite adventurous ‘agent of change’. He succeeded in establishing a new enterprise and in putting in place the beginning of a long-term process of forming an Ottoman print culture.

But when was Ottoman print culture formed? Jale Baykal suggests that an important step was made in 1803 when for the first time a religious book, Birgivî’s Vâsîyetnâme, was printed in Istanbul and thus the Muslim reading public could get access to this rather popular text in printed form. According to her, during the period from 1869 to 1875, when the first Ottoman Turkish novels and plays were being written and printed, printing could adequately meet the expectations and tastes of the Muslim reading public and hence ‘was already accepted by the society’.
During that period, however, another major step made it irreversible—the printing of the Qur’an, first lithographically in 1871 and then with movable types in 1874. Apparently, only in the 1870s did Muslim society get ready to have its holy text in printed form, having waited a long enough time to be persuaded by the advantages of printing technology. The probate inventory of a certain Hadıce, daughter of Hacı Ömer Ağa from Salonica, dated 1878 and including two printed Qur’ans, suggests that printing was still not fully accepted as late as 1844 when, according to Charles White, Istanbul booksellers saw manuscript copyists as deserving to go to paradise and the printing press as made of the poisonous oleander (zakkum) plant. It seems that the 1870s were indeed a turning point in the development of Ottoman print culture. Intellectuals like Münif Pasha (1830–1910) and Celal Nurî were concerned that printing with movable type did not meet the specificities of the Arabic cursive script. But this did not deter the Ottomans from experimenting with printing with movable type. Quite the contrary, in 1879 the Council of Public Education (Meclis-i Meşrut-i Umumîye) appointed a special committee to revise the Arabic script in order to make it incursive precisely for printing purposes, but the committee was unsuccessful. Later, however, in 1914 the so-called ‘Enver Pasha’s orthography’ (Enver Paşa imlâsi), divided Arabic characters (in other words, made it incursive) and tested it in printing. Of course, what marked the end of all these problems was the introduction of a Turkish version of the Latin script in 1928.

So, by the 1870s the Ottomans seem to have become accustomed to having their books printed and the problem of the cursive Arabic script solved. If İbrahim Müteferrika could have seen these later developments he would have been very satisfied. Though we can never be certain if he died a happy or a desperate man, as in Jale Basyal’s play, Nevres’s consoling words are at least full of historical optimism. ‘Probably the next [generations] will read [your printed books] ... as well as the generations after them. Did you not pave the way?’

Appendix

Publications of the first Ottoman printing
1. Tercümecü’s-Sıhâh-i Cevheri [Lugat-i Vânkulu] (Kostantiniye, 1141/1729)
2. Tuhfetâl-Kihâr fi Esfâri’l-Bihâr (Kostantiniye, 1141/1729)
4. Târîh’l-Hindi’l-Garbi el-Müsemâ bi-Hadîs-i Nev (Kostantiniye, 1142/1730)
5. Târîh-i Timûr-i Gurkân li-Nazmîzâde Efendi (Kostantiniye, 1142/1730)
6. Târîh’l-Misri’l-Cedîd li-Süheylî Efendi; Târîh’l-Misri’l-Kadîm li-Süheylî Efendi (Kostantiniye, 1142/1730)
7. Gülşen-i Hulefâli Nazmîzâde Efendi (Kostantiniye, 1143/1730).
9. Usâlî’l-Hikem fi Nizâmî’l-Ümem (Kostantiniye, 1144/1732)
10. Fâyûzât-i Mîknûtsiyye (Kostantiniye, 1144/1732)
11. Kitâb-i Cihânînmâ li-Kâtîb Çelebi (Kostantiniye, 1145/1732)
12. Takvimû’t-Tevârîh li-Kâtîb Çelebi (Kostantiniye, 1146/1733)
13. Târîh-i Na’îmâ (Kostantiniye, 1147/1734)
14. Târîh-i Râşîd Efendi (Kostantiniye, 1153/1741); Târîh-i Çelebiçâde Efendi (Kostantiniye, 1153/1741)
16. Lisânû’l-Acem [Fezbeng-i Şu’ûrî] (Kostantiniye, 1155/1742).
Figure 3.1: Sale percentages of Tercümetû's-Sihâh-i Cevheri [Lugat-i Vânkûlû], 1141/1729

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>500</td>
<td>1</td>
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Figure 3.2: Sale percentages of Tuhfetü'l-Kibâr, Târih-i Seyyâh, Hindî'l-Garbi, Târih-i Timûr, Târihü'l-Müsir, 1141-42/1729-30

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Figure 3.3: Sale percentages of Gülşen-i Hulefâ, 1143/1730

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<td>500</td>
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Figure 3.4: Sale percentages of Grammaire turque, 1730

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<tr>
<td>1000</td>
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Figure 3.5: Sale percentages of *Usulü'l-Hikem*, *Miknätisiyye*, 1144/1732; *Ahvâl-i Gazavât der Diyâr-i Bosna*, 1154/1741

<table>
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</table>

Figure 3.6: Sale percentages of *Kitâb-i Cihannûmâ*, 1145/1732

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Figure 3.7: Sale percentages of *Takvimü't-Tevârih*, 1146/1733

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Figure 3.8: Sale percentages of *Târîh-i Na'îmâ*, 1147/1734

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<td>500</td>
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Figure 3.9: Sale percentages of Tārīh-i Raṣīd Efendi, Tārīh-i Çelebizāde Efendi, 1153/1741

Figure 3.10: Sale percentages of Ferheng-i Șu’ūrī, 1153/1742

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<td>Hindī’-Garbi</td>
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Total                     | 9700        | 2976   | 6724  | 69.3   |
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17351 (1242/1826-7)
17383 (1241/1825-6)
19314/A
19378
19835 (1234/1818-9)
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OTTOMAN TULIPS, OTTOMAN COFFEE

Leisure and Lifestyle in the Eighteenth Century

Edited by Dana Sajdi

Tauris Academic Studies
LONDON • NEW YORK
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