

April 26, 2023

Ann Blair, contribution to the MEBB session in tribute to Kathryn Schwartz

Warm thanks to Malika for organizing this session in honor of Kathryn Schwartz! It was such a joy to work with Kathryn and to watch her bring together in exciting new ways book history, which is a thematic interest of mine, with Middle Eastern history, which was her area of focus.

Kathryn's prize-winning article of 2017 "Did Ottoman sultans ban printing?" originated in an activity which often seems tedious--reading for a graduate field exam. I hope it can offer an inspiring example. After taking a lecture course in book history with me in spring 2010 Kathryn joined my graduate reading group on the topic in 2010-11. We had a great group, including an East Asianist, Kathryn, and a couple of Europeanists. Since I focus on early modern European history the reading list emphasized the European case, but I was also eager for Kathryn to read the literature on book history in the Arab world, quite selfishly so I could learn from her. And learn I did!

The books I came up with for my list (courtesy of Hollis) were *The Book in the Islamic World* (1995) edited by George Atiyeh and *Middle Eastern Languages and the Print Revolution* (2002) edited by Eva Hannebutt-Benz. Kathryn reacted negatively to both. In Atiyeh Kathryn found an emphasis on advancing reasons for the late adoption of print in the Islamic world. Kathryn immediately objected to the tacit assumption behind them that the European trajectory was somehow normative. And in the 2002 volume she found sentences like: "The ban on printing issued in 1485 by Sultan Ba'yezid II . . . was not valid for Arab Christians—nor for Jews and Armenians—as non-Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Empire" (as quoted in note 37). This had Kathryn make a double take: what ban on printing? She'd encountered plenty of Ottoman decrees, but no mention of that one.

This is how "Did Ottoman sultans ban printing?" got started—from a reading list for a graduate exam field that wasn't particularly close to her own, and from her determination to get to the bottom of the casual claims that she found there that the Arab world was hostile to printing. The article appeared in the leading journal in the field of book history, which is run by SHARP, the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing, and won the journal's *Graduate Essay Award*. It's a terrific article, with a complex argument and wonderfully meaty footnotes and I'd like to walk through it briefly pointing key elements of its success.

Most importantly, Kathryn was motivated. She was looking for the origins of a framework that she found misguided (e.g. dominated by comparison with Europe) and dubiously supported (where was that ban?).

1-In the first section of the paper she conducted a thorough literature review from which she concluded that the claim of an Islamic ban on printing was widespread. In particular Bernard Lewis and the translation of his work into Arabic had a powerful impact on lending it authority. But she also acknowledged authors who did not fit the claim she was critiquing—Jean-Paul Ghobrial and Dana Sajdi in 2005 and 2009 for example or Selim Nüzhet Gerçek who challenged the claim already in 1928 (note 167). Acknowledging counterevidence is a powerful way of

strengthening your point. Avoiding oversimplification is especially wise when your complaint is that others have oversimplified a complex situation!

2- In the next section Kathryn looked for the evidence for that ban. Of the four bans mentioned in some sources, she found evidence of the existence of only two sultanic decrees concerning printing and she showed that neither was a ban. Murad's firman of 1588 decreed that European booksellers should not be prevented from selling books in Arabic in the Ottoman empire—quite the opposite of a ban. And Ahmed III's firman of 1727 authorized Ibrahim Muteferrika (a Unitarian convert to Islam) to print books in Istanbul. From her examination of the context of the firman and of Muteferrika's use of it Kathryn concluded that decree served as a document that Muteferrika added to his first imprint in order to promote his press.

3- Not content to debunk a longstanding claim, Kathryn pursued a higher-order question of great interest: how did the notion that the Ottomans banned printing get started and become entrenched? Kathryn followed a long trail of citations back to the first time the claim was made. In a French book of 1584 André Thevet claimed that Bayezid II and Selim I ordered their people not to consume printed books on pain of death, but offered no supporting evidence. André Thevet was a colorful and unreliable character. He travelled to the Near East but knew no Arabic. He also travelled to the New World (near today's Rio de Janeiro) but he was sick the whole time and when he got back to Europe and published an account of his trip, he was sued by the man who actually wrote the account that Thevet published for not crediting him.¹

In the late 17th century, there was strong counterevidence to the claim of a ban: Count Luigi Ferdinando Marsigli, who lived among the janissaries as a prisoner of war and spoke the language, denied the existence of a ban on print: "The Turks, it is true, do not print their books at all. But this is not, as is commonly believed, because they are prohibited to print, or because their books are unworthy of printing." (p. 13) Interestingly he noted that already then the notion of a ban was "commonly believed."

Then in the late 18th century an official at the French royal library mentioned a specific ordinance of 1515 by Selim I and in support referred to the "manuscript notes of the secretariat of the king's library." But this manuscript is unknown and Kathryn surmised that Thevet was in fact the source in this case too (note 103). Throughout this detective work Kathryn was not afraid to delve into European sources, drawing on her excellent French, and she followed up relentlessly on all the leads she encountered.

4- Next Kathryn sought with equal tenacity to explain how one line in one unreliable source became a standard historical claim. She showed how the notion of an Ottoman ban on print was useful to historians both in Europe and in the Arab world. Europeans were happy to emphasize Eastern inferiority, and Ottoman historians of the 19th century hailed the arrival of printing in the

¹ Frank Lestringant, *André Thevet: cosmographe des derniers Valois* (Geneva: Droz, 1991), pp. 100-104. Thevet also owned the Codex Mendoza for a time and inscribed his name in this crucially important description of Aztec customs and history. The manuscript had been made to send to Spain but the ship on which it travelled was captured by French pirates who seized the manuscript. We are uncertain how the manuscript ended up in English hands in the 17th century but it is currently in the Bodleian.

19th century as the dawn of a new modern era. The account of a ban thus served the purposes and assumptions of the historians who repeated it uncritically.

The first Ottoman writer to address the history of Ottoman printing was Ahmed Cevdet Pasha (1822–95). He called printing the “most beneficial and exalted thing of all human invention.” (note 111) Ahmed Cevdet reported that Ottomans appreciated printing from the moment that they encountered it and suggested that Europeans had resisted printing more strongly than Ottomans had. But he also focused on the fact that Muteferrika had not been allowed to print religious books, and that this opposition to printing by a religious faction had impeded the spread of this important technology. Cevdet and other Arab historians of the 19th century used the story of printing in the Ottoman empire to argue that modernity required limiting the impact of religion.

Kathryn’s analysis highlights how these historians tended to see what they wanted to see. But we are surely prone to the same tendency too (though it can be hard to perceive one’s own biases), so the lesson I take away is that we need to double-check our sources and do our best not to distort or cherry-pick them. And if you’re writing a textbook (like a Bernard Lewis), quadruple check your claims!

Finally, I recommend spending some time with Kathryn’s footnotes which offer not only citations and bibliographical references but also additional context and evidence and long quotations. Discursive footnotes get a bad rap from some journals but they can really enrich a complex article like Kathryn’s. Kathryn’s article is long at almost 17,000 words but the journal was clearly willing to accept the piece nonetheless because of its quality.

Kathryn’s conclusion in this article opens the way to the rest of her work: “To understand Ottoman printing, scholars must examine the ways in which the people of particular communities incorporated it into their manuscript culture for producing, using, and thinking about texts. In other words, they ought to explore Ottoman printing with the same localized historical detail, attention to practicality, and freedom from precedence that Europeanists enjoy.” May her powerful contributions to that project continue to inspire many others!