

## Exploring Arabic Printing in 18th century Lebanon and Syria: Perspectives from Western Sources and Travellers\*\*

The 18th century witnessed a significant transformation in the intellectual and cultural landscape of the Levant as printing made its beginning in the Christian communities of Lebanon and Syria. This groundbreaking development marked a departure from the centuries-old tradition of manuscript production, offering a new medium for the preservation, dissemination, and exchange of knowledge. During this period, the Ottoman Empire was a vast, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious entity, comprising diverse communities, including Muslims, Christians, and Jews.<sup>1</sup> The Ottomans had a complex relationship with printing; while they recognized the value of printed materials, especially for administrative and military purposes, they were also cautious about its potential impact on traditional authority and Islamic orthodoxy.<sup>2</sup> To delve deeper into this pivotal period, we explore the early days of Arabic printing in Lebanon and Syria through the lens of Western sources and travellers. These visitors, including diplomats, missionaries and scholars, provided valuable insights into the early Arabic presses they encountered. Their observations, often shaped by their own cultural backgrounds and political motivations, offer a unique perspective on the technical, cultural, and religious challenges faced by local printing establishments. After briefly reviewing the history of printing in Europe and its introduction to Lebanon and Syria, we will examine

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Tijana KRSTIĆ and Derin TERZIOĞLU eds., *Entangled Confessionalizations? Dialogic Perspectives on the Politics of Piety and Community-Building in the Ottoman Empire, 15th-18th Centuries*, Piscataway, Gorgias Press, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> See the recent volume edited by Radu DIPRATU and Samuel NOBLE, *Arabic-Type Books Printed in Wallachia, Istanbul, and Beyond. First Volume of Collected Works of the TYPARABIC Project*, Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter, 2024 (*Early Arabic Printing in the East*, 2).

18th-century West European books and the accounts of western travellers who reported on these printing presses. Their reflections on book production in Lebanon and Syria will be highlighted. Finally, we will synthesize these reports to assess the new insights and valuable information their narratives provide about the history of printing in the Levant.

## 1. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE BEGINNINGS OF ARABIC PRINTING

Arabic printing originated in Europe and later spread to the Arab world, especially in present-day Syria and Lebanon. This overview highlights its beginnings and early developments in both regions.

### *Early Arabic printing in Europe*

The first known book printed with movable Arabic types was produced in Italy in 1514 by a Venetian printer named Gregorio de Gregori.<sup>3</sup> It was an Arabic translation of the *Horologion* for the Melkite<sup>4</sup> community, titled *Kitāb ṣalāt al-sawā'ī* (*Book of Hours*). The colophon indicates that the printing of this work was completed on Tuesday, September 12, 1514, in Fano by the Venetian typographer Gregorio de Gregori during the pontificate of Pope Leo X. It seems that Syrian notables commissioned this work, or at least that De Gregori printed this *Kitāb* at their request and expense. Due to publication rights issues, this book was printed in Venice rather than in Fano as mentioned in the colophon.

Following the printing of *Kitāb ṣalāt al-sawā'ī*, editions of Arabic books were printed in Italy. The second known printed book in Arabic was a polyglot Psalter published in 1516 in Genoa. This edition included texts in Hebrew,

<sup>3</sup> Celeste GIANNI and Michele TAGLIABRACCI, “Kitāb ṣalāt al-sawā'ī: protagonisti, vicende ed ipotesi attorno al primo libro arabo stampato con caratteri mobili”, *Culture del testo e del documento*, 38, 2012, p. 131-185; Charbel NASSIF, “Kitāb ṣalāt al-sawā'ī (1514): le premier livre arabe imprimé au monde”, in *Facsimile Kitāb ṣalāt al-sawā'ī*, éd. Rami Wakim and Charbel Nassif, Raboueh, Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarchate, 2024. Article published in Arabic, French and English.

<sup>4</sup> The Melkites are the Christians of the Patriarchates of Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria who accepted the teachings of the Council of Chalcedon (451) and followed the Byzantine rite. The term “Melkite” (from the Syriac *malkoyo*, meaning “royalist” or “imperial”) was initially used by non-Chalcedonian Christians to refer to those who remained loyal to the Byzantine imperial Church. After the split of 1724 in the Melkite Patriarchate of Antioch, whose territory mainly covers Lebanon and Syria, the term Melkite became exclusively associated with Greek Catholics. Cf. Ignace DICK, *Les Melkites Grecs-Orthodoxes et Grecs-Catholiques des Patriarcats d'Antioche, d'Alexandrie et de Jérusalem*, Turnhout, Brepols, 1994.

Greek, Arabic, and Syriac, with Latin translations and commentary. The Arabic script shows a *magribī* influence, likely due to Genoa's extensive trade connections with North Africa. Despite its historical importance, the quality of this book was low, both in terms of printing technique and the accuracy of the Arabic text. Between August 9, 1537, and August 9, 1538, a Qur'ān was printed in Venice, comprising 464 pages. Known as the *Venetian Qur'ān*, it was produced by the printers Paganino and Alessandro Paganini. Considered lost, even legendary, for a long time, a copy was discovered around 1987 in the Franciscan library of San Michele in Isola, Venice.<sup>5</sup>

Several printing centres appeared from the end of the 16th century in Rome, Paris, London, and Leiden, particularly for Middle Eastern Christians.<sup>6</sup> In Rome, Arabic books began to be published from 1566. The first work was the Catholic profession of faith.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it is a book for Arab Christians to declare their adherence to the Catholic faith.<sup>8</sup> Printing was undoubtedly a

<sup>5</sup> Pier Mattia TOMMASINO, *The Venetian Qur'an: A Renaissance Companion to Islam*, Pennsylvania Press, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. For a recent account on the Venetian Qur'ān and an up-to-date bibliography, see Antonella GHERSETTI, *Arabic Printing in Italy: Venice as a Case Study*, in *Icons, Ornaments, and Other Charms of Christian Arabic Books. Second Volume of Collected Works of the TYPARABIC Project*, ed. Oana Iacubovschi, Samuel Noble and Ioana Feodorov, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston, 2024 (EAPF, 4), p. 145-148.

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey ROPER, "Arabic Biblical and Liturgical Texts Printed in Europe in the 16th-18th Centuries", in *Lucrările Simpozionului Internațional Cartea. România. Europa, ediția a II-a, 20-24 septembrie 2009*, Bucharest, Editura Biblioteca Bucureștilor, 2010, p. 174-186; Geoffrey ROPER, "England and the Printing of Texts for the Orthodox Christians in Greek and Arabic, 17th-19th Centuries", in *Travaux du Symposium international Le Livre. La Roumanie. L'Europe, Troisième édition, 20-24 septembre 2010*, Bucharest, Editura Biblioteca Bucureștilor, 2011, p. 430-443.

<sup>7</sup> *Fidei orthodoxae brevis et explicata confessio quam Sacrosancta Romana Ecclesia docet. I'tiqād al-'amāna al-urūdūksiyya kanisat Rūmiyah*, Rome, Collegium Societatis Iesu, 1566. An apologetic work was printed between 1560 and 1580 in Rome and attributed to the Jesuit Giovanni Battista Eliano (1530-1589). It is titled: *Haḍā muṣāhabah rūḥāniyyah bayn al-'ālimayn, wa-ism wāhid minhumā shayḥ Sinān wa-ism al-āḥar Aḥmad al-'ālim, allatī kānat fī ruḥū 'ibimā min al-Ka'bah, nāfi'ah li-kull Muslim wa-Muslimah* ("This is a spiritual conversation between two scholars, the name of one of them is Shaykh Sinān and the name of the other is Aḥmad the scholar, which took place during their return from the Ka'ba; it is useful to every Muslim man and woman"). This book aims to criticize Islamic teachings from a Christian perspective. Cf. Aurélien GIRARD, "Comment reconnaître un chrétien d'Orient véritablement catholique? Élaboration et usages de la profession de foi pour les Orientaux à Rome (xvi<sup>e</sup>-xviii<sup>e</sup> siècles)", in *L'Union à l'épreuve du formulaire. Professions de foi entre Églises d'Orient et d'Occident (xiii<sup>e</sup>-xviii<sup>e</sup> s.)*, ed. Marie-Hélène Blanchet and Frédéric Gabriel, Louvain-Paris-Bristol, Peeters, 2016, p. 235-257; Aurélien Girard, "Giovanni Battista Eliano", in *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History*, vol. 7: *Central and Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and South America (1500-1600)*, ed. David Thomas, John Chesworth et al., Leiden, Brill, 2015, p. 724-731.

<sup>8</sup> In the same year, the archbishop of Valencia, Martín Pérez de Ayala (1504-1566) commissioned a brief catechism in Valencian Arabic. It contained prayers and instructions in Arabic and the teaching of basic Christian doctrine to the newly converted Muslim population: *Doctrina christiana en lengua arábiga y castellana*, Valencia, Ioan Mey, 1566. Cf. Teresa Soto, "La lengua de la gente común y no los priores de la gramática arábiga". *La Doctrina christiana en lengua*

means to preach the Catholic faith to these “schismatics and heretics” of the Christian East, as they were commonly called in Catholic circles. Subsequently, there were some liturgical works and a catechism book in Garshuni (Arabic written in Syriac characters) for the Maronites. In 1590-1591, the famous Gospel with numerous engravings was produced at the Medici printing press.<sup>9</sup> We know of two editions: Arabic (1590-1591) and Arabic-Latin (1591).<sup>10</sup>

During the stay of the Melkite Patriarch of Antioch Aṭanāsiyūs Dabbās<sup>11</sup> in Wallachia and at the request of Voivode Constantin Brâncoveanu, a Greek-Arabic *Liturgikon* was printed in Snagov in 1701, and then a *Horologion* in Bucharest in 1702, by the efforts of the monk Anthim the Iberian (of Georgian origins).<sup>12</sup>

### *Printing in Syria and Lebanon*

We can identify three Arabic printing presses that were established in the 18th century:<sup>13</sup> one in Aleppo, a second located in Shuwayr (also known as Khenchara, situated in the Metn district of Mount Lebanon), and a third one in Beirut.<sup>14</sup> Around 1705, upon his return from Bucharest in Wallachia to Aleppo, the Patriarch of Antioch Aṭanāsiyūs III Dabbās (†1724) brought

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arábiga y castellana (1566) de Martín Pérez de Ayala”, *Ilu. Revista de ciencias de las religiones*, 24, 2019, p. 125-141.

<sup>9</sup> Sara FANI and Margherita FARINA, *Le vie delle lettere. La Typographia Medicea tra Roma e l'Oriente*, Florence, Mandragora, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> *Evangelium sanctum Domini nostri Iesu Christi. Al-inḡil al-muqaddas li-rabbīnā Yasū' al-Masih*, Rome, Typographia Medicea, 1590.

<sup>11</sup> In 1694, Dabbās was the Patriarch of Antioch in rivalry with Cyril III Za'im. That same year, a compromise was reached: Cyril took control of the entire Patriarchate, except for Aleppo, which was considered the principal Christian city, and settled in Damascus. Meanwhile, Dabbās remained in Aleppo, where he was appointed Metropolitan of the city while retaining the title of Patriarch with the right of succession. He later governed the Patriarchate from 1720 to 1724. See Joseph NASRALLAH, *Histoire du mouvement littéraire de l'Église melchite du v<sup>e</sup> au xx<sup>e</sup> siècle*, IV.1, Louvain, Peeters, 1979, p. 132-133.

<sup>12</sup> Ioana FEODOROV, *Arabic Printing for the Christians in Ottoman Lands. The East European Connection*, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter, 2023 (*EAPE*, 1), p. 143-161, 255-262.

<sup>13</sup> We will not cover the Qozhaya printing press in our study. The Maronite bishop Sarkīs al-Rizzī, a former student of the Maronite College in Rome, who was once a hermit in Qozhaya before becoming the bishop of Damascus in 1596, brought back from Italy a printing press with Syriac characters and installed it at the Monastery of Saint Anthony – Qozhaya. A bilingual Syriac-Garshuni Psalter was printed there in 1610. Father Joseph Moukarzel has already referenced the Western sources that discuss it in his study “Le psautier syriaque garchouni édité en 1610. Enjeux historiques et présentation du livre”, *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph*, 63, 2010-2011, p. 511-566.

<sup>14</sup> For an overview of the history of printing in present-day Lebanon and Syria, see I. FEODOROV, *Arabic Printing...*, *op. cit.* [note 12]; José BALAGNA, *L'Imprimerie arabe en Occident (xv<sup>e</sup>, xvii<sup>e</sup> et xviii<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, Paris, Maisonneuve et Larose, 1984; Raphaëlle ZIADÉ, *L'Art des chrétiens d'Orient*, Paris, Citadelles & Mazenod, 2022, p. 406-419.

printing implements with him. Between 1706 and 1711, we count eleven Arabic books printed in Aleppo, including the Psalter, with a second edition. ‘Abd Allāh Zāhīr worked there for ten years. As a declared pro-Catholic, Zāhīr was forced to leave Aleppo in 1722 following persecutions by the Patriarch Aṭanāsiyūs Dabbās, supported by Constantinople and the Ottomans. After several moves between Shuwayr and Zouk Mikael, he settled permanently in 1731 in the Monastery of Saint John the Baptist in Shuwayr and founded a printing press with his assistant Sulaymān Qaṭṭān and the Shuwayrite monks.<sup>15</sup> The printing press was active from 1733 to 1899. We count thirty-three books published by this printing press, twenty-three of which are from the 18th century.<sup>16</sup> These books were reprinted several times, as needed.

A Greek Orthodox Arabic printing press operated at the Cathedral of Saint George in Beirut during the 1750s, producing at least three liturgical books.

## 2. WESTERN SOURCES OF THE 18th CENTURY

We have identified five works that discuss the printing presses of 18th-century Syria and Lebanon before the end of this century.

### *Transactions philosophiques de la société royale de Londres and Journal des Sçavans*

The French version of the journal *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*,<sup>17</sup> entitled *Transactions philosophiques de la Société royale de Londres*, published in 1741, includes a mention of the first book printed in Constantinople in 1728, titled *Tuhhfat Ilkibar*.<sup>18</sup> A footnote provides an overview of the history of printing in the Levant.

<sup>15</sup> One must recall that, influenced by the Latin missionaries who settled in the Near East as early as the 17th century, the Melkite Church of Antioch split into two distinct branches in 1724: Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic. While the resulting religious rivalry and competition between these two communities had detrimental effects on a human level, they positively contributed to the establishment of printing presses in Lebanon in the modern era. The printing presses of Aleppo and Shuwayr played a significant role in spreading the faith through their publications, although these works did not adopt an overtly apologetic tone. On the split of 1724, cf. Bernard HEYBERGER, Željko PAŠA, Ronney EL GEMAYEL (dir.), *La division du patriarcat grec d'Antioche en 1724 et la construction des identités confessionnelles orthodoxe et catholique*, Rome/Beyrouth, Pontificio Istituto Orientale/CEDRAC-USJ, 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Būlus NAZHĀ, *250 ‘am<sup>m</sup> ala wafāt al-šammās al-‘allāmah ‘Abd Allāh Zāhīr 1748-1998 mu‘assis al-maṭba‘ah al-‘arabiyyah al-ūlā*, Khenchara, Basilian Shuywarite Order, 1998, p. 25-28.

<sup>17</sup> Launched in 1665 by Henry Oldenburg, *Philosophical Transactions* is the world’s oldest scientific journal, created to advance early science and generate modest revenue. Following Oldenburg’s death, its management passed to Royal Society secretaries.

<sup>18</sup> This book was printed at the Mūtefferrika Press, which was founded in Istanbul and operated most actively from 1726 until 1747, the year of its founder Ibrahim Mūtefferrika’s death. Cf. Orlin

La première Imprimerie qui ait été établie dans le Levant n'a pas plus d'un siècle d'antiquité, elle le fut au Mont Liban, mais elle ne subsista pas long-tems, il n'en est sorti qu'un Psautier en Langue Syriaque. En 1707 ou environ Athanase, Patriarche d'Antioche, homme fort zélé pour les Sciences, quoiqu'il y fût peu versé, fonda une Imprimerie à Alep, mais au bout d'un an ou deux elle fut détruite par le même Patriarche qui l'avoit établie, et qui fut contraint d'y mettre le feu pour se garantir de la persécution dont la barbarie et l'ignorance des Mahométans le menaçoient. Cette Imprimerie n'a mis au jour que trois Livres Arabes, [à savoir] un Psautier avec dix Cantiques et quelques Antiennes suivant le Rit[e] Grec, un Recueil de 30 Homélies tirées de S. Jean Chrysostome, et un autre Volume d'Homélies faussement attribuées à un S. Athanase qu'on suppose avoir été Patriarche de Jerusalem. Il y a 12 ou 14 ans que l'on imprima dans un Monastère de Grecs Catholiques de l'*Anti-Liban* la Traduction Arabe d'un Livre intitulé *la Bilancia del Tempo*, composé par le P. Niéremberg Jesuite: la forme de ce Volume est in 4° et l'Imprimeur promet dans un Avertissement de mettre sous Presse le *Traité de la perfection Chrétienne* du P. *Alphonse Rodrigue* Jesuite, traduit aussi en Arabe.<sup>19</sup>

In this journal, the printing press of Qozhaya is mentioned, which published a Psalter. As for the one in Aleppo, Aṭanāsiyūs III, Patriarch of Antioch, a man “not at all learned but very zealous for the sciences”, founded a printing press in Aleppo “around 1707” (actually, in 1706). According to this report, only three Arabic books came out of this press: a Psalter of David, a collection of thirty homilies by St. John Chrysostom, and “a volume of homilies falsely attributed to a supposed Saint Aṭanāsiyūs, Patriarch of Jerusalem”. The note continues that this printing press did not last long; after a year or two, the Patriarch was forced to destroy it and even set it on fire to avoid the persecution that the barbarity and ignorance of the Muslims threatened him with. As for the printing press in Shuwayr, it is mentioned that it had already published the Arabic translation of a devotional book titled *La Bilancia del Tempo*,<sup>20</sup> composed by the Jesuit Father Nieremberg. It also mentions that in the preface of this work, the printer promised to publish the Arabic translation of *Treatise on Christian Perfection* by the Jesuit Father Alonso Rodriguez.

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SABEV, *The Müteferrika Press. Arabic Typography in an Ottoman Context*, Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter, 2025 (EAFE, 5).

<sup>19</sup> *Transactions philosophiques de la Société royale de Londres. Année 1732*, Paris, Piget, 1741, p. 153 (the original orthographic forms are preserved).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Carsten WALBINER, “The Appearance of Nieremberg’s *De la diferencia entre lo temporal y eterno* in Arabic (1734): a Turning Point in the History of Printing and Publication in the Arab World?”, in *Livres et confessions chrétiennes orientales: une histoire connectée entre l’Empire ottoman, le monde slave et l’Occident (XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, ed. Aurélien Girard, Bernard Heyberger and Vassa Kontouma, Turnhout, Brepols, 2023, p. 427-440.

These details found in a footnote of *Transactions philosophiques de la Société de Londres* are also presented identically in the *Journal des sçavans* published in 1742.<sup>21</sup> The original English version of the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* of 1732 does not mention Arabic printing presses at all.<sup>22</sup>

This journal does not provide the exact number of books printed from the Aleppo printing press, and the dates concerning the printing press in Aleppo are not correct. Additionally, we have no information from other sources about the fate of the printing press in Aleppo or its destruction by Dabbās. After 1711, the Aleppo press ceased operations for reasons that remain unclear. The Shuwayrite Annals report that Zāḥir ordered work tools in Aleppo to be sent to him and started operating in 1728.<sup>23</sup> Certain engravings in the prints of Shuwayr have their origins in Aleppo prints, suggesting that Zāḥir may have borrowed some tools, although this remains a hypothesis.<sup>24</sup> In this text, it is mentioned that the printer claimed in a notice that he would publish the *Treatise on Christian Perfection (Al-kamāl al-masīḥī)* by Father Alonso Rodriguez, which was also translated into Arabic. However, this information is not accurate. Firstly, which notice is this? Is it the preface to the Arabic version of *La Bilancia del Tempo (Mizān al-zamān)*? That preface does not mention this promise. Furthermore, the Arabic translation of the *Treatise on Christian Perfection* was not printed in Shuwayr but in Rome, at the Oriental Typography, in two volumes, in 1765 and 1767. Moreover, this Arabic version, translated by Pierre Fromage,<sup>25</sup> was reviewed by 'Abd Allāh Zāḥir, who was a

<sup>21</sup> *Journal des sçavans*, 126, 1742, p. 248-249.

<sup>22</sup> *Philosophical Transactions*, 424, 1732, p. 338. The difference between the English and French versions may stem from an editorial adaptation, to cater to the French readership's interest in Oriental studies. The French editors might have added details about Arabic printing presses based on supplementary sources, or to enrich the content, independent of the original English text.

<sup>23</sup> Khenchara, *Shuwayrite Annals*, p. 22. The Shuwayrite Annals are a lengthy account detailing, year by year, the major events related to the history of the Basilian Shuwayrite Order, the Patriarchate of Antioch, various archdioceses, as well as civil history. Cf. Charbel NASSIF, "La scission de 1724 et ses répercussions jusqu'en 1729 racontées par les Annales chouérites", *La division de l'Église rûm d'Antioche en 1724, op. cit.* [note 15], p. 405-438.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Charbel NASSIF, "Les gravures des livres imprimés au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle au monastère Saint-Jean-Baptiste à Khenchara – Mont Liban", *Collectanea Christiana Orientalia*, 21, 2024, p. 73-96.

<sup>25</sup> Pierre Fromage (1687?-1740) was a French Jesuit priest. Ordained in 1707, he served as the regional superior of the Levant mission from 1723-1724, and again from 1727-1730. He led missions in Lebanon, stationed in Aintoura from 1724-1726, and in Saida from 1731-1737, before moving to Aleppo, where he served from 1737 until his death in 1740. Father Fromage enriched the Arabic library with over 32 volumes that he translated. He benefitted from 'Abd Allāh Zāḥir who helped refine Fromage's Arabic translations of European publications and his own writings into correct Arabic. See Kamīl ḤUŞAYMAH, *Al-yasū' 'iyyūn wa-l-ādāb al-'arabīyah. Siyār wa-āṭār*, Beirut, Dar el-Machreq, 2009, p. 203-208.

close collaborator of Fromage.<sup>26</sup> Could it be possible that there were plans to publish this work in Shuwayr?

### *Géographie de Busching*

In his monumental geographical work printed in 1780, the German Anton Friedrich Büsching (1724-1793) mentions the presence of a printing press at the Shuwayr Monastery. Büsching mistakenly considers the Shuwayr monastery to be Maronite instead of Greek Catholic.

Deir Hannah Schwoyer, ou couvent de Jean de Schwoyer: il doit son surnom à une montagne: il est Maronite & avait une imprimerie.<sup>27</sup>

### *Kurze Uebersicht seiner biblischkritischen Reise nach Rom*

In his book on his biblical-critical journey to Rome, published in 1783, the Danish scholar Jakob Georg Christian Adler (1756-1834) refers to the Psalter printed in Shuwayr, based on his research and encounters in Rome.

Die Uebersetzung der Melchiten, die auch zum Theil von den Maroniten gebraucht wird, und auf dem Berg Liban im Kloster S. Johannis des Täufers, Schoair genannt, zum fünften Mal im Jahr 1770 gedruckt ist, auch schon 1725 von dem Mißionscollegium zu London in zweien verschiedenen Formaten aufgelegt worden, ein Muster einer schönen Uebersetzung, und von allen, in Ansehung der Sprache, die reinste, hat also.<sup>28</sup>

Adler mentions the fifth edition of the Psalter printed in Shuwayr and references the Psalter published in London in 1725.<sup>29</sup> He considers the Shuwayr translation a model of beauty and accuracy and regards its language as the purest form of Arabic.

<sup>26</sup> For a description and extensive comments on the *Mizān al-zamān*, see Joseph MOUKARZEL, “The First Arabic Book Printed in Lebanon in 1734: A Codicological and Historical Approach”, in *Icons.*, *op. cit.* [note 5], p. 157-186.

<sup>27</sup> *Géographie de Busching, abrégée dans les objets les moins intéressans, augmentée dans ceux qui ont paru l'être, retouchée par-tout, & ornée d'un précis de l'histoire de chaque État. Vol. 8 comprenant l'Empire ottoman, l'Arabie et la Perse*, Lausanne, Société Typographique, 1780, p. 329.

<sup>28</sup> Jakob Georg Christian ADLER, *Kurze Uebersicht seiner biblischkritischen Reise nach Rom*, Altona, J. D. A. Eckhardt, 1783, p. 135.

<sup>29</sup> *Kitāb Zabūr Dāwūd al-malik wa-l-nabī wa-aydan maḍmūnātuhā ma' al-šahādāt al-mutaqābilah min al-'ahd al-'atīq wa-l-ḡadīd tumma wašāya Allāh al-'ašr kamā fi ali-šāḥ al-'iṣrīn min siḡr al-hurūḡ wa-l-ṣalāt al-rabbānīyah kamā fi ali-šāḥ al-sādis li-l-qiddīs Mattā*, London, 1725.

*Einleitung ins Alte Testament*

In the 1790 edition of *Introduction to the Old Testament*, the German biblical scholar Johann Gottfried Eichhorn presented the Psalter of Shuwayr.

Die Melchiten leiten ihre Uebersetzung des A. T. in Arabischer Sprache von Abdallah Ben Alphadl (عبد الله بن الفضل) einem Melchiten, her, der noch vor dem zwölften Jahrhundert zu Antiochien geblüht haben soll. Ihre Recension hat man wohl am ersten in dem Psalter zu suchen, der A. 1753 in einem District vom Libanon, Kesroan, der meist von Melchiten bewohnt wird, im Kloster Johannis des Täufers gedruckt ist. Dies bestätigt auch die in demselben zu Grund liegende Eintheilung des ganzen Psalters in sieben Theile, nach den sieben Wochentagen, welche den Melchiten eigen ist.

Mit dem Text dieser Ausgabe stimmt ein Psalter, zu London zum Besten der morgenländischen Christen A. 1725 von der Englischen Gesellschaft de propaganda cognitione Christi zum Druk befördert, an dem Salomon Negri Theil gehabt hat, überein. Endlich, einige Excerpte des Melchitischen Textes hat Herr D. Stark in seinen gelehrten Prolegomenen zu den Psalmen aus dem dreyzehnten Codex der königlichen Bibliothek zu Paris gegeben. Sie harmoniren genau mit den beyden genannten Psalteren (Ps. IV, 2; XXV, 22; XXXI, 17.).<sup>30</sup>

In this passage, the author traces the Psalms text back to Abd Allāh ibn al-Faḍl al-Anṭākī, who lived before the 12th century (actually, 11th century). The author mentions the 1753 edition, which is the third edition of the Psalms, following those of 1735 and 1740. He notes the division of the Psalms into seven parts according to the Melkite tradition. Additionally, he points out that the text of this edition corresponds to that of the 1725 Psalter printed in London.<sup>31</sup> The text is followed by a commentary – which we have omitted here – on its content, comparing the Melkite text with earlier editions and noting that it differs significantly from other known versions. The differences are too substantial to be considered mere errors or interpolations.

The editions of Shuwayr and London<sup>32</sup> differ in minor details, like particles and synonyms, and both closely follow the Greek original where earlier recensions show Syriac additions. However, the Shuwayr edition sometimes incorporates elements from Greek-Arabic versions, such as in

<sup>30</sup> Johann Gottfried EICHORN, *Einleitung ins Alte Testament*, vol. I, Reutlingen, Johannes Grizinger, 1790, p. 544-546.

<sup>31</sup> In the London Psalter, each psalm is followed by an explanation.

<sup>32</sup> This edition was prepared by Salomone Negri (c. 1665-1727), a Melkite native of Damascus and a teacher of Arabic. See John-Paul GHOBRIAL, “The Life and Hard Times of Solomon Negri: An Arabic Teacher in Early Modern Europe”, in *The Teaching and Learning of Arabic in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Jan Loop, Alastair Hamilton and Charles Burnett, Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2017, p. 310-332.

Psalm 2, 12. The 1725 London edition appears to be based on a manuscript that borrowed certain Arabic terms from the Syriac-Arabic Psalter, as seen in Psalm 68, 2.

*Route de l'Inde, ou Description géographique de l'Égypte, la Syrie, l'Arabie, la Perse et l'Inde*

In his work published in 1798, *Route de l'Inde, ou Description géographique de l'Égypte, la Syrie, l'Arabie, la Perse et l'Inde*, on p. 172, the French publicist and translator Pierre-François Henry (1759-1833) speaks about Syria, noting the scarcity of books in the region and the lack of interest in educating the youth. He mentions the establishment of the only printing press in all of Syria in 1733 at the Mar Hanna Monastery, located in the mountains of the Druze. 'Abd Allāh Zāhir's zeal for spreading knowledge in Aleppo aroused the resentment of religious authorities, who obtained an order from the Sultan to decapitate him. Zāhir was warned in time and took refuge in the mountains of Lebanon, where his life was safe.

Rien n'y est plus rare que les livres, et l'on y néglige presque entièrement l'éducation de la jeunesse. Il n'y avoit pas une seule imprimerie dans toute la Syrie, jusq' en 1733 qu'on en établit une dans un couvent de religieux, situé au milieu des montagnes des Druses, appelé Mar-hanna. Elle le fut par les soins d'un Turc nommé Abdallah, dont le zèle pour répandre les connaissances à Alep, excita contre lui le ressentiment des ministres de la loi, qui obtinrent du sultan, l'ordre de lui couper la tête. Abdallah fut heureusement prévenu à temps, et se sauva dans les montagnes du Liban, où il mit ses jours en sûreté.<sup>33</sup>

A footnote presents the monastery of Shuwayr as follows.

Ces religieux sont de l'ordre de Saint-Basile, et vivent très-durement. Tous travaillent à quelque métier. Ils recueillent autour de leur couvent des vins de fort bonne qualité.

The mention of conflicts between the pro-Roman Melkites and the Orthodox Melkites, as well as the interference of Ottoman authorities in this matter, highlights the severity of the situation. It shows how a religious issue also profoundly impacted the social and daily life of the Melkites. The conflict was not merely a religious one, but it affected the entire confessional system. Indeed, this conflict, among other factors, led to the 1724 schism within the Melkite Patriarchate of Antioch.

<sup>33</sup> Pierre-François HENRY, *Route de l'Inde, ou Description géographique de l'Égypte, la Syrie, l'Arabie, la Perse et l'Inde, ouvrage dans lequel on a renfermé un précis de l'histoire, et le tableau des mœurs et coutumes des peuples anciens et modernes, qui ont habité ces différentes contrées, depuis les temps les plus reculés, jusqu'à nos jours*, Paris, Carteret-Dentu, 1798, p. 172.

### 3. WESTERN TRAVELLERS

We were able to identify four Western travellers who discussed printing in Lebanon and Syria. Volney will play a significant role in this section, as he addresses this topic more extensively than the others.<sup>34</sup>

#### *Carsten Niebuhr*

Carsten Niebuhr (1733-1815) was a German mathematician, cartographer, and explorer in the service of Denmark. He participated in the Danish Arabia expedition to Egypt, Arabia, and Syria between 1761 and 1767.<sup>35</sup> He provides us with two pieces of information about the Shuwayr printing press: it is beautiful, and books from this press are often found in European libraries.

Die Griechen haben ein Kloster bey dem Dorfe الشوير Schoeir, und in demselben die schöne arabische Druckerey, woraus man nicht selten Bücher in den Bibliotheken der Europäer findet.<sup>36</sup>

#### *Stefanus Schulz*

Stefanus Schulz (1714-1776) was a German scholar who travelled to the East in the service of a Jewish mission (1740-1757). He was in Shuwayr in 1755. He mentions that the Provincial Father, who was the superior in this context, showed him the printing press. There was only one press and a composing stick, in which individual letters or types were arranged to form words, lines, and paragraphs of text. However, it lay flat on a table instead of resting on a slanted frame, like in European printing presses. The typefaces were cast in France, but the unique font design was the creation of Sulaymān,

<sup>34</sup> It is worth noting that Vassili Grigorovitch Barsky (1701-1747), a Greek Orthodox monk and traveller from Kyiv, spent over twenty years exploring Central and Southeastern Europe and the Near East, documenting his journeys in an autobiographical account. In his description of the Saint John Monastery in Shuwayr on Mount Lebanon, Barsky makes no mention of the printing press, as his visit occurred before its installation in 1733. Vassili GRIGOROVITCH-BARSKI, *Pérégrinations (1723-1747)*, Geneva, Éditions des Syrtes, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Ib FRIIS, Michael HARBSMEIER and Jørgen Bæk SIMONSEN eds., *Early Scientific Expeditions and Local Encounters: New Perspectives on Carsten Niebuhr and "The Arabian Journey": Proceedings of a Symposium on the Occasion of the 250th Anniversary of the Royal Danish Expedition to Arabia Felix*, Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2013; Lawrence J. BAACK, *Undying Curiosity: Carsten Niebuhr and the Royal Danish Expedition to Arabia (1761-1767)*, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Carsten NIEBUHR, *Voyages en Arabie et dans d'autres pays circonvoisins*, vol. II, Amsterdam-Utrecht, S.J. Baalde-Barthelemy Wild, 1780, p. 369; Carsten NIEBUHR, *Reisebeschreibung nach Arabien und andern umliegenden Ländern*, vol. II, Kopenhagen, Nicolaus Möller, 1778, p. 454.

a deceased monk and the founder of this printing press. Schulz bought two books: the Psalter and *Mizān al-zamān*.

Als wir aus der Kirche nach Hause kamen, führte mich der Pater Provincialis in die Druckerei des Klosters, woselbst nur eine Presse und ein Schriftkasten war, welcher ebenso eingerichtet ist wie die in Europa, nur dass er gerade auf einem Tisch lag, und nicht, wie unsere, auf einem schiefen Gestell ruhte. Die Buchstaben haben sie in Frankreich gießen lassen, die Form aber hat der Urheber dieser Druckerei, ein nun schon verstorbener Mönch namens Soliman, vorgemalt; daher ist dieser Typus recht nach orientalischer Art. Ich [kaufte] den Psalter und den geistlichen Zeitmesser. Die hiesigen Mönche reden das Arabische so deutlich, zierlich und rein, dass es ein Vergnügen ist, auch nur zur Übung der Sprache mit ihnen umzugehen.<sup>37</sup>

In this text, the foundation of the printing press is attributed to Sulaymān Qaṭṭān, while it was actually ‘Abd Allāh Zāhīr who was its founder. Additionally, Sulaymān was not a monk but a layperson. No source mentions that the type casting was done in France. It is known that the Shuwayrites imported typefaces from Italy in 1868 but not before. This information deserves to be closely studied to confirm its accuracy.<sup>38</sup> The composing stick lay flat on the composing table instead of the usual tilted frame due to the large number of Arabic characters and their complexity, as Volney clearly explains.

#### *William George Browne*

William George Browne (1768-1813) was an English traveller whose journey took him through Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean. During his visit to Shuwayr in 1797, he observed that only Arabic works were being printed there. Due to the high cost of paper and the lack of demand for books, the printing presses were idle that year.

After a journey of two days, through a rugged route along the ridge of the mountain, arrived at the convent of St. John, where the printing-office is. Paper being dear, and no demand for books, the press is stopped. Arabic books alone were edited.<sup>39</sup>

This information is correct. The book *Qatf al-azhār fi ‘ilm al-dimma wa-l-asrār* (*Picking the Flowers in Moral theology and Sacraments*) was printed earlier

<sup>37</sup> Stephan SCHULTZ, *Der Leitungen des Höchsten nach seinem Rath auf den Reisen durch Europa, Asia und Africa*, vol. 4, Halle im Magdeburgischen, Hemmerde, 1774, p. 452.

<sup>38</sup> For the most recent and detailed comments on this topic, see Aurélien GIRARD, “Des moines et des livres: une imprimerie arabe chez les basiliens shuwayrites (melkites grecs-catholiques) au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle”, in *Icons...*, *op. cit.* [note 5], p. 111-135.

<sup>39</sup> William BROWNE, *Travels in Africa, Egypt, And Syria, from the Year 1792 to 1798*, London, Cadell Junior, W. Davies, T. N. Longman, O. Rees, 1799, p. 408.

in 1797. Subsequently, the printing press did not produce any book until 1802, when a doctrinal text authored by Germanos Adam was published.<sup>40</sup>

*Constantin-François de Chassebœuf, comte de Volney*

Volney was a French philosopher, writer and orientalist (1757-1820). He stayed at the Shuwayr Monastery from March to October 1785. He is the orientalist who has written the most about Arabic printing, particularly that of Shuwayr. In his famous book *Les ruines ou méditation sur les révolutions des empires* (1791), Volney considers that civilization has made significant progress thanks to two key phenomena: the establishment of states based on a common language and the role of printing, which enables the accumulation of knowledge and the formation of genuine public opinion. Volney considers printing to be a sacred art, a divine gift of genius, as it has laid the foundations of education and fostered an ever-growing climate of Enlightenment. In his view, printing is what draws the dividing line between Europe and the Orient, as it serves as the vehicle for the dissemination of knowledge and the creation of public opinion.<sup>41</sup> We reproduce almost the entirety of his travel account to Shuwayr, followed by our own commentary.

In chapter 29, *On the Pashalik of Saïda, also called Acre*, Volney mentions the monastery of Shuwayr and continues as follows:

Son principal mérite est une imprimerie Arabe, la seule qui ait réussi dans l'Empire Turk. Il y a environ cinquante ans qu'elle est établie. [...] les Jésuites, [...] déployaient dans leur maison d'Alep le zèle d'instruction qu'ils ont porté partout. Ils avaient fondé dans cette ville une école où ils s'efforçaient d'élever les enfants des chrétiens dans la connaissance de la religion romaine, et dans la discussion des hérésies [...]. Les Latins d'Alep, excités par les Jésuites, ne tardèrent pas de recommencer, comme autrefois, à argumenter contre les Grecs. [...] Les Latins résolurent de s'initier dans le scientifique de l'Arabe. Mais comme la logique exige une connaissance méthodique de la langue, et que les chrétiens, exclus des écoles musulmanes, ne savaient que l'arabe vulgaire, ils ne pouvaient satisfaire par écrit leur goût de controverse. Pour y parvenir, les Latins résolurent de s'initier dans le scientifique de l'arabe. [...] Moyennant quelques bourses, la science si vantée de la grammaire et du nahou, fut introduite chez les chrétiens. Le sujet qui se distingua le plus par les progrès qu'il y fit, fut un nommé Abd-allah-zâker; il y joignit un zèle particulier à promulguer ses connaissances et ses opinions. On ne peut déterminer les suites qu'eût pu avoir cet esprit de prosélytisme dans Alep; mais un accident ordinaire en Turquie vint en déranger la marche. Les schismatiques, blessés des

<sup>40</sup> *Šarḥ al-ta'lim al-masīḥī fī qawā'id al-īmān al-qawīm.*

<sup>41</sup> Antoine LULTI, "Et la civilisation deviendra générale": L'Europe de Volney ou l'orientalisme à l'épreuve de la Révolution", *Dire et faire l'Europe à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, La Révolution française*, 4, 2011, <http://journals.openedition.org/lrf/290> [accessed January 31, 2025].

attaques d'Abdallah, sollicitèrent sa perte à Constantinople. Le Patriarche, excité par ses Prêtres, le représenta au Visir comme un homme dangereux: le Visir, qui connaissait les usages, feignit d'abord de ne rien croire; mais le patriarche ayant appuyé ses raisons de quelques bourses le Visir lui délivra un Kat-cherif, ou noble-seing du Sultan, qui, selon la coutume, portait ordre de couper la tête à Abd-allah. Heureusement il fut prévenu assez à temps pour s'échapper; et il se sauva dans le Liban où sa vie était en sûreté; mais en quittant son pays, il ne perdit pas ses idées de réforme, et il résolut plus que jamais de répandre ses opinions. Il ne le pouvait plus que par des écrits: la voie des manuscrits lui parut insuffisante. Il connaissait les avantages de l'imprimerie: il eut le courage de former le triple projet d'écrire, de fondre et d'imprimer; et il parvint à l'exécuter par son esprit, sa fortune et son talent de Graveur, qu'il avait déjà exercé dans la profession de Joaillier. Il avait besoin d'un associé, et il eut le bonheur d'en trouver un qui partagea ses desseins: son frère, qui était supérieur à Mar-Hanna, le détermina à choisir cette résidence; et dès-lors, libre de tout autre soin, il se livra tout entier à l'exécution de son projet. Son zèle et son activité eurent tant de succès, que dès 1733 il fit paraître les pseumes de David en un volume. Ses caractères furent trouvés si corrects et si beaux, que ses ennemis mêmes achetèrent son livre: depuis ce temps on en a renouvelé dix fois l'impression; l'on a fondu de nouveaux caractères, mais l'on n'a rien fait de supérieur aux siens. Ils imitent parfaitement l'écriture à la main; ils en observent les pleins et les déliés, et n'ont point l'air maigre et décousu des caractères arabes d'Europe. Il passa ainsi vingt années à imprimer divers ouvrages, qui furent la plupart des traductions de nos livres dévots. Ce n'est pas qu'il sût aucune de nos langues; mais les Jésuites avaient déjà traduit plusieurs livres; et comme leur arabe était tout-à-fait mauvais, il refondit leurs traductions, et leur substitua sa version, qui est un modèle de pureté et d'élégance. Sous sa plume, la langue a pris une marche soutenue, un style nombreux, clair et précis dont on ne l'eût pas crue capable, et qui indique que si jamais elle est maniée par un peuple savant, elle sera l'une des plus heureuses et des plus propres à tous les genres. Après la mort d'Abdallah, arrivée vers 1755, son élève lui succéda; à celui-ci ont succédé des Religieux de la maison même; ils ont continué d'imprimer et de fondre; mais l'établissement est languissant et menace de finir. Les livres se vendent peu, à l'exception des pseumes, dont les chrétiens ont fait le livre classique de leurs enfans, et qu'il faut, par cette raison, renouveler sans cesse. Les frais sont considérables, attendu que le papier vient d'Europe, et que la main d'œuvre est très-lente. Un peu d'art remédierait au premier de ces inconvéniens; mais le second est radical. Les caractères arabes exigeant d'être liés entre eux, il faut, pour les bien joindre et les aligner, des soins d'un détail immense. En outre, la liaison des lettres variant de l'une à l'autre, selon qu'elles sont au commencement au milieu ou à la fin d'un mot, il a fallu fondre beaucoup de lettres doubles; par-là les cases, trop multipliées, ne se trouvent plus rassemblées sous la main du compositeur; il est obligé de courir le long d'une table de dix-huit pieds de long; et de chercher ses lettres dans près de neuf cents cassetins: de là, une perte de temps qui ne permettra jamais aux imprimeries arabes d'atteindre à la perfection des nôtres. Quant au peu de débit des livres, il ne faut l'imputer qu'au mauvais choix que l'on en a fait; au lieu de traduire des ouvrages d'une utilité pratique, et qui fussent propres à éveiller le goût des arts chez tous les Arabes sans distinction,

l'on n'a traduit que des livres mystiques exclusivement propres aux Chrétiens, qui, par leur morale misanthropique, ne sont faits que pour fomenter le dégoût de toute science et même de la vie.<sup>42</sup>

In chapter 39, titled *On Arts, Sciences, and Ignorance*, he speaks again about the printing press of Shuwayr.

Cette influence de l'imprimerie est si efficace, que le seul établissement de Mar-hanna, tout imparfait qu'il est, a déjà produit chez les Chrétiens une différence sensible. L'art de lire, d'écrire, et même une sorte d'instruction, sont plus communs aujourd'hui parmi eux qu'il y a trente ans. Malheureusement ils ont débuté par un genre qui en Europe a retardé les progrès des esprits, et suscité mille désordres. En effet, les Bibles et les livres de Religion ayant été les premiers livres répandus par l'imprimerie, toute l'attention se tourna sur les matières théologiques, et il en résulta une fermentation qui fut la source des schismes de l'Angleterre et de l'Allemagne, et des troubles politiques de notre France. Si, au lieu de traduire leur Buzembaum, et les misanthropiques rêveries de Nieremberg et de Didaco Stella, les Jésuites eussent promulgué des livres d'une morale pratique, d'une utilité sociale, adaptée à l'état du Kesraouân et des Druzes, leur travail eût pu avoir pour ces pays, et même pour toute la Syrie, des conséquences politiques qui en eussent changé tout le système. Aujourd'hui tout est perdu, ou du moins bien reculé: la première ferveur s'est consumée sur des objets inutiles. D'ailleurs, les Religieux manquent de moyens; et si Djezzâr s'en avise, il détruira leur imprimerie; il y sera porté par le fanatisme des gens de loi, qui, sans bien connaître ce qu'ils ont à redouter de l'imprimerie, ont cependant de l'aversion pour elle; comme si la sottise avait un instinct naturel pour deviner ce qui peut lui nuire.<sup>43</sup>

Volney was the first who provided a catalogue of works published in Shuwayr, listing thirteen items. In fact, he enumerates fifteen books. Under no. 3, he mentions *Kitâb ihtiqâr abâtil al-'âlam*, which was published in two volumes, and under no. 12, he includes two works: the *Epistolary* and the *Evangelion*. Volney mentions also that four people worked at the printing press and four on bookbinding.

We summarize Volney's remarks and then proceed to comment on them. Volney observes that the primary asset of the Mar-Hanna Monastery is its Arabic printing press, the only one to have succeeded within the Ottoman Empire. He describes how the Jesuits in Aleppo founded a school to instruct Christian children in the Latin faith and to refute heresies, which led the local pro-Catholic

<sup>42</sup> C.-F. de VOLNEY, *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte, pendant les années 1783, 1784 et 1785*, Paris, Volland, vol. II, 1787, p. 174-179; C.-F. de VOLNEY, *Travels Through Syria and Egypt in the Years 1783, 1784, and 1785 Containing The Present Natural and Political State of those Countries, their Productions, Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce with Observations on the Manners, Customs, and Government of the Turks and Arabs*, London, G. G. J. Robinson, vol. II, 1788, p. 191-196.

<sup>43</sup> C.-F. de VOLNEY, *Voyage en Syrie...*, *op. cit.* [note 42], p. 415-417; C.-F. de VOLNEY, *Travels Through Syria ...*, *op. cit.* [note 42], p. 454-455.

community to study Arabic formally under Muslim scholars to better engage in theological debates. ‘Abd Allāh Zāhir, distinguished for his proficiency and zeal, began spreading his ideas and knowledge, inciting opposition from the Orthodox clergy, who complained to the Ottoman authorities, demanding his beheading. Zāhir was ultimately forced to flee. He was no stranger to the advantages of the press and had the courage to undertake the three-fold project of writing, founding types, and printing. Relocating to Mount Lebanon, Zāhir resolved to publish his views using the printing press and, by 1733, successfully printed the Psalms. Volney notes the exceptional quality of Zāhir’s typefaces, which faithfully imitated Arabic handwriting, surpassing European standards, so that even the Greek Orthodox purchased his book. Zāhir spent twenty years printing various works, primarily translations of Catholic devotional books translated by the Jesuits and refined by Zāhir, who enhanced the clarity and elegance of the language. After Zāhir’s death, around 1755, his disciple<sup>44</sup> and, later, some of the monks continued his printing work. However, Volney notes that the press was facing challenges: low sales, except for the Psalter, high production costs due to imported European paper, and the time-consuming manual labour needed for Arabic type setting. According to Volney, the influence of the press was so effective that the establishment of Mar-Hanna alone, imperfect as it is, already produced a noticeable difference among Christians. The art of reading and writing, and even a basic level of knowledge, were more common among them at that time than they had been thirty years before. However, he criticized the emphasis of publishing mostly religious and mystical works for Christians, arguing that it restricted the appeal of printed books and impeded educational development. Volney further contends that this theological focus diverted attention from more practical, socially beneficial literature that could have transformed the local community’s intellectual and political landscape. He noted that Jezzar, Pasha of Acre (1775-1804),<sup>45</sup> drove by the “*fanatisme des gens de loi*”, could destroy the Shuwayr printing press, as the “*gens de loi*” had a deep-seated aversion to it.

Let’s scrutinize Volney’s remarks closely. He mistakenly considers Nicolas Sāyegh to be Zāhir’s brother, when he is actually his cousin. He listed only 15 works printed there until his visit to the monastery in 1785, whereas in reality there were, up to that date, 26 works, including seven reeditions. Zāhir died in 1748, while Volney states that it was around 1755. The *Book of Psalms* was published in 1735, but Volney suggests 1733. He notes that it was reprinted ten times; however, until 1785, the Psalter was only reprinted five times (1740, 1753, 1764, 1770, 1780). Linking the learning of the Arabic

<sup>44</sup> Sulayman Qaṭṭān. Volney doesn’t mention his name.

<sup>45</sup> Jezzar Pasha (1720-1804) was a prominent Ottoman military leader and governor, best known for his role as Pasha of Acre from 1775 until his death in 1804.

language with controversy is somewhat exaggerated. It should not be forgotten that the Melkites used literary Arabic in their prayers, and that the Metropolitan of Aleppo, Malātiyūs Karmah, had translated the *Liturgicon*, *Horologion*, and *Euchologion* as early as the beginning of the 17th century. Furthermore, one might wonder why he is so aggressive against Christianity. Volney and Charles-François Dupuis (1742-1809) were the first modern writers to advocate the Christ myth theory, i.e., the view that Jesus had no historical existence. Volney and Dupuis argued that Christianity was an amalgamation of various ancient mythologies, and that Jesus was a mythical character.<sup>46</sup> In his book *The Birth of Orientalism*, Urs App states:

Volney not only reduces major elements of Christian dogma to features of sidereal worship but declares that the Savior himself, Jesus of Nazareth, represents a solar myth and must thus be regarded as a mythological rather than a historical figure. The Christians may have faith in their Son of God, “this restorer of the divine or celestial nature” who in his infancy led “a mean, humble, obscure, and indigent life”.<sup>47</sup>

#### 4. REASSESSING THE LEGACY OF ARABIC PRINTING THROUGH CONTEMPORARY WESTERN EYES

Western sources and Orientalist accounts provide valuable insights into the Arabic printing presses in the Levant, though their narratives sometimes contain inaccuracies or require verification. These accounts shed light on key aspects of the historical development and significance of these presses, but they also reflect the biases and misunderstandings of their time.

ʿAbd Allāh Zāḥir faced persecution by the Orthodox community in Aleppo, an episode vividly portrayed in some Western accounts. This persecution illustrates the complex religious dynamics that influenced the printing activities in the region. Liturgical books printed in Shuwayr served both the Greek Orthodox and the Greek Catholic communities, highlighting the cross-denominational use of these texts despite the sectarian tensions of the time.<sup>48</sup> Economic factors played a role in the fluctuating activity of the presses. The high cost of paper and occasional lack of demand sometimes caused the

<sup>46</sup> Walter WEAVER, *The Historical Jesus in the Twentieth Century: 1900-1950*, Pennsylvania, Trinity Press International, 1999, p. 45.

<sup>47</sup> Urs APP, *The Birth of Orientalism*, Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, p. 458.

<sup>48</sup> This is also documented in the 19th century. Edward Robinson and Eli Smith in their journal of travels in 1838 mentioned that the Arabic printing press at the monastery of Shuwayr supplied liturgical books to both Greek Catholics and Greek Orthodox. Edward ROBINSON and Eli SMITH and others, *Biblical Researches in Palestine and the Adjacent a Journal of Regions: Travels 1838 & 1852*, London, John Murray, vol. II, 1856, p. 505.

Shuwayr press to remain idle for extended periods, reflecting the economic difficulties faced by early Arabic book printers.

Several common misconceptions about the Shuwayr press persist. These include errors about its founding and the date of ‘Abd Allāh Zāḥir’s death, confusions regarding his successor, and the misidentification of the monastery of Shuwayr as a Maronite establishment, when it was, in fact, Greek Catholic. Further, Nicolas Sāyegh is mistakenly described as Zāḥir’s brother when in reality he was his cousin. Additionally, inaccuracies are found in the lists of books attributed to the Shuwayr press, showing that the historical record of its production needs a careful re-evaluation. One prominent point mentioned in these sources is the role of French involvement in creating Arabic printing type: the claim that this type was exclusively developed in France is questionable and needs further verification. Similarly, the destruction of the Aleppo printing press by Patriarch Aṭanāsiyūs Dabbās was not mentioned in any Eastern or Western source and requires particular caution, suggesting that a more nuanced investigation of this event is needed. The Shuwayr printing press, established by ‘Abd Allāh Zāḥir, holds particular importance. Its books are frequently found in European libraries, which confirms their value and influence beyond the Levant.

Each author presents events according to his own perspective. For example, Volney’s writings, though detailed, must be understood within the context of the Enlightenment, a period marked by both intellectual progress and Eurocentric views. This context helps explain how the biases of Orientalists shaped their portrayal of Middle Eastern history. Volney, like many of his contemporaries, was influenced by the Enlightenment’s emphasis on reason and critique, but this also led to a tendency to frame Eastern societies as exotic or backward in comparison to Western ideals. In sum, while Western sources contribute valuable information about the Arabic printing presses in the Levant, they must be critically examined to correct inaccuracies and account for the broader historical and cultural context.

The texts of Adler and Eichhorn provide a textual analysis of the Melkite Psalter of Shuwayr. Adler acknowledged the linguistic purity and scholarly value of the Shuwayr Psalter, while Eichhorn analyzed the variations between the Shuwayr and London editions, as well as earlier editions. The editions are presented as faithful to the Greek original, though they occasionally reflect the influence of Greek-Arabic and Syriac-Arabic texts. This comparative approach underscores the significance of these translations in the broader context of biblical scholarship and their role in the Melkite and Eastern Christian traditions.

Western travellers' notes and sources notably lack any references to the printing press in Beirut, which raises questions about its visibility and significance in the mid-18th century. This absence suggests a possible oversight or underestimation of the role of Beirut in printing activities, in the broader context of Arab printing history. The little circulation of the few books it produced can also explain its lack of visibility.

The exploration of Arabic printing in 18th-century Lebanon and Syria through the eyes of Western travellers of those times reveals a complex tapestry of cultural, religious, and technological interactions. From its early beginnings in Aleppo to the flourishing press at Shuwayr, these accounts provide valuable insights into the spread of knowledge and the challenges faced by printers in the Ottoman Empire. These presses managed to produce a substantial number of works, many of which found their way into European libraries, underscoring their enduring historical importance. The study of printing presses in Lebanon and Syria through the perspective of Western travellers offers a nuanced understanding of cultural exchange and technological innovation in a diverse and dynamic region. It invites further research to uncover additional texts and manuscripts that can enrich our understanding of this pivotal period in the history of printing in the Middle East. In the 19th century, interest in printed Arabic books surged, attracting prominent scholars such as Christian Friedrich von Schnurrer (1742-1822), a theologian and bibliographer who focused on Arabic printing and served as chancellor of the University of Tübingen,<sup>49</sup> Baron Antoine-Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838), a French bibliophile who advanced the study of Arabic literature,<sup>50</sup> and Louis Cheikho (1859-1927), a Jesuit Chaldean priest and pioneer of Eastern Christian literary research, who contributed to the publication of Christian Arabic manuscripts and endeavoured to trace the history of Arabic printing.<sup>51</sup> Their work significantly enriched the understanding and appreciation of Arabic printed literature.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that these small printing presses fell far short of meeting the needs of Christians in Lebanon and Syria. Except for Aleppo, where books were freely given to priests and parishes, Arabic printing presses, faced with difficulties in obtaining essential typographic materials and tools, were forced to price books beyond the reach of poorer Christians. In rural areas, prayer books were scarce, and schoolchildren lacked educational texts. A Jesuit

<sup>49</sup> Christian Friedrich SCHNURRER, *Bibliotheca Arabica*, Halle, I.C. Hendel, 1811. For comments on the way Schnurrer inventoried and described the Shuwayr books, see Carsten WALBINER, "The Collection, Perception, and Study of Arabic Incunabula from the Near East in Europe (17th-early 19th Centuries)", in *Arabic-Type Books...*, *op. cit.* [note 2], p. 201-204.

<sup>50</sup> *Bibliothèque de M. le Baron Silvestre de Sacy*, Paris, Imprimerie royale, 2 vols., 1842-1846.

<sup>51</sup> Cheikho published his history of Arabic printing (*Tārīḥ fann al-ṭibā'ah fī al-Mašriq*) in the Jesuit journal *Al-Mašriq* between 1900 and 1902.

missionary in 1859 recounted that even in the best schools, children often arrived with torn volumes or heirloom manuscripts, each unique, resulting in as many lessons as students. According to him, this shortage of books was a chief cause of the religious and literary ignorance pervading the Christian communities of the East.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Michel JULLIEN, *La nouvelle mission de la Compagnie de Jésus en Syrie (1831-1895)*, Tours, A. Mame et fils, vol. II, 1898, p. 88: “Cependant ces minuscules imprimeries étaient loin de suffire aux besoins du pays. La difficulté qu’elles avaient de s’approvisionner des matières et des instruments nécessaires à leur industrie les obligeait à tenir le prix de leurs livres trop haut pour les pauvres Libanais; les gens de la campagne manquaient donc de livres de prière, et les écoliers d’ouvrages scolaires. ‘Combien de fois n’ai-je pas vu dans nos meilleures écoles, écrit un missionnaire en 1859, les enfants venir en classe avec un manuscrit ou un volume déchiré, vieil héritage de famille. Tous ces textes étaient différents les uns des autres, de sorte qu’il y avait autant de leçons que d’élèves. Ce manque de livres pour l’instruction des enfants est l’une des causes principales de l’ignorance religieuse et littéraire dans laquelle vivent les chrétiens d’Orient”.