

PAPER

Arabic Books in Flux: The Early Publications of the American Syria Mission (1835-1860)

SESSION

*Unstable Objects: Shifting Genealogies of Art, Artists, and Images in the Middle East*

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ABSTRACT

Studies on Arabic printing in cities such as Beirut and Cairo emphasize the press' late 19th century modernizing role, particularly its standardization of production and aid in spurring fin de siècle intellectual movements. Although the late 1800s witnessed a widespread transformation from scribal to printing practices, the press' noteworthy nascent stage in Arabic book production (ca.1820s-1850s) may be exemplified by the Presbyterian American Syria Mission's Arabic publications printed in Beirut for the region's multi-confessional residents. In this earlier period, print still existed within a larger network of local manuscripts, leading to a dynamic interface between these two modes of book production and their conventions at a time when local conceptions of books and their functions were being altered significantly.

This paper examines products of the American mission's early religious and secular publications, such as *kitab fasl al-khitab fi usul lughat al-'rab* [1836], *kitab al-bab al-maftuh fi a'mal al-ruh* [1843], *kitab majmu' al-adab fi funun al-'arab* [1855], and *kitab al-'ahd al-jadid* [1860], as dynamic textual objects produced in response to various local and external impulses. I explore how changes in the content, format and aesthetics of these books reflect shifts in the mission's proselytizing goals and responses to local religious and communal concerns. For instance, the mission's earliest publications aimed at attracting a wide audience of Christian and Muslim readers by displaying conventions similar to those found in local scribal traditions. By the late 1840s, as publications of local religious groups and Catholic missionary bodies featured more prominently in the region, the American mission's books acquired a pointedly stark aesthetic that diverged from its earlier practices. At the same time, when local scholars became increasingly interested in solidifying a non-Ottoman identity and traversing the confines of sectarianism, the mission's publications showed a growing inclusion of secular subject matter. In analyzing the mission's changing publications throughout its early years, which at times embodied a modernist spirit of innovation, this paper aims to illustrate a highly adaptive situation when diverse local religious values, societal interests, visual conventions, and notions of the book were in flux.