



**MIDDLE EAST STUDIES IN ACTION  
COMMITTEE FOR UNDERGRADUATE MIDDLE EAST STUDIES POSTER  
SESSION, MESA 2023**


## **‘Acceptable Human Knowledge’: Arabic Printing as a Technology of Proto-Colonialism**

Stella Metcalf

My research focuses on the Medici Oriental Press (“Press”), the first significant Arabic moveable-type printing press, which opened in Rome in 1584. The Press enjoyed a papally-secured monopoly on the printing of “foreign language” texts with the goals, as its mission statements emphasized, of converting non-Christian Arabs and of forging relationships with Arab-Christian communities to extend papal control within the Ottoman Empire. The story of the Medici Oriental Press reveals the complications of global power structures for scholarly work, and the essentially political nature of knowledge production and dissemination. While scholars such as Eckhard Leuschner and Gerhard Wolf have argued that the academic work of the director of the Medici Oriental Press, Giovanni Battista Raimondi, was at odds with the wider proto-colonialist aims of the Catholic Church, I argue that, in fact, he pursued his specific vision of knowledge production as technology to assert Catholic dominance over the Ottoman Empire. Though his intentions were derailed by financial and political struggles, Raimondi’s intellectual bent nevertheless demonstrates a continuity with the political and religious aims of the Holy See. Using Raimondi’s letters and examining his printing choices and methods of distribution, I explore how he developed the view of Arabic printing specifically as a technology of power and control, contextualized by the Counter-Reformation and a Catholic desire to outpace Protestant knowledge production. These practices constituted the beginning of Orientalist frameworks for understanding the so-called “East” in contrast with the “West.” I argue that scholars have overinterpreted Raimondi’s actions as a subversion of the aims of Catholic institutional authority and funders of the Press. Instead, his pursuits furthered claims of “cultural” domination over the Ottoman Empire, which served as a backdrop for later discourses of power.



## ‘Acceptable Human Knowledge’: Arabic Printing as a Technology of Catholic Power

Methods	Thesis	
Review of the literature	<p>The story of the Medici Oriental Press reveals the complications of global influences on scholarly work, and the essentially political nature of knowledge production and dissemination. Some scholars have suggested that Raimondi’s individual scholarly aims subverted or were at tension with the evangelizing mission of the Papal authority. However, through an examination of the global and diplomatic forces at play, and Raimondi’s theorizing of secular knowledge for religious aims, I show that Raimondi’s intellectual bent demonstrates a continuity with these forces, even as his intentions were derailed by financial and political struggles.</p>	
Primary source analysis using Raimondi’s letters and writings		<b>Conclusion:</b>
Analysis of the decisions of the Press	<p>Raimondi’s intellectual bent demonstrates a continuity with the political and religious aims of the Holy See if these are interpreted more broadly. Scholars have overinterpreted Raimondi’s actions as a neutral scholarly pursuit at tension with Catholic authority and as a means of receiving institutional funding for the Press. These arguments, however, have failed to acknowledge how these interests were forged in a moment in which Catholicism entered a scholarly competition against Protestant forces, and Raimondi’s intellectual passion and interest reflected this idea of Catholic primacy rather than suggested an implicit rebellion against Catholic power.</p>	
Fitting the Press into the broader historical processes and diplomatic relationships of the papacy		

**Cite this article:** Metcalf S (2024). ‘Acceptable Human Knowledge’: Arabic Printing as a Technology of Proto-Colonialism. *Review of Middle East Studies* 57, 165–166. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2024.14>