

# RECENSIONI

## ESTRATTO

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(LA) BIBLIOFILIA

Rivista di Storia del Libro e di Bibliografia

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Diplomatici e libri in età moderna.

Tra vecchi e nuovi mondi

A cura di Daniele Bianconi e Elena Valeri



Leo S. Olschki Editore  
Firenze

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*Direttore:* EDOARDO BARBIERI

*Comitato scientifico:*

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*The Medici Oriental Press. Knowledge and Cultural Transfer around 1600*, edited by Eckhard Leuschner and Gerhard Wolf, Firenze, Olschki, 2022 (Biblioteca di Bibliografia. Documents and Studies in Book and Library History, 216), pp. xxxii e 502, ill. con 57 figg. b/n, ISBN 978-88-2226-7924, € 55,00.

The *Typographia Medicea* was founded at Rome in 1584 by Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici (1549-1609; from 1587, Grand Duke of Tuscany), with the support of the Pope, Gregory XIII. Under its inspired director Giovanni Battista Raimondi (c. 1536-1614), the press produced a series of publications, long recognised as philologically, typographically, and aesthetically ahead of their time. Among these were several works in Arabic: the gospels; grammars by Ibn al-Ḥāḥib (d. 1249) and Ibn Ājurrūm (1273/4-1323); the famous geography by al-Idrīsī; Ibn Sīnā's *Qānūn fī l-tibb* ('Canon of Medicine') and *Kitāb al-najāh* ('Book of Salvation'); the Arabic recension of Euclid's *Elements* by Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (1201-1274); a confession of faith for the Eastern Christian churches; an alphabet; and the *Kitāb al-taṣrīf* ('Book of Derivation'), a treatise on morphology by al-Zanjānī. There were works in Syriac, including a missal, and a grammar by the Maronite, George 'Amīra. Besides these productions in the 'Oriental' languages, the press also published books in Italian and Latin: among them, an Italian version of St Augustine's *Confessiones*; the famous guide to the Holy Land, *Trattato delle piante et immagini de sacri edifizi di Terra Santa* (1609), by the Franciscan friar, Bernardino Amico; and Catholic liturgical texts.

Notwithstanding the significance and far-reaching influence of some of these individual productions, the press as a commercial endeavour was short lived, and, ultimately, unsuccessful. This was in large part a consequence of Raimondi's and the press's never-wholly complementary aspirations: to further European scholarship; to serve the missionary agendas of the Roman Catholic Church; and to produce books with commercial value to be sold across the Muslim world. The enterprise suffered a series of blows: in 1593, the foreman, Matteo Neroni, stole a number of books; two years later, Ferdinando de' Medici withdrew his financial support; sales were never close to as high as envisaged. A reinvestment in the project by Ferdinando's son, Cosimo II, enabled Raimondi to see several more publications through to completion. But Raimondi himself died shortly afterwards. The press's archives, the types, and a substantial collection

of Oriental manuscripts were brought to Florence, and later distributed between several local libraries.

The current volume – the fruit of a collaboration between art historians, historians of the book, and specialists in Middle-Eastern languages – approaches the *Typographia Medicea* as «one of the most important laboratories of global cultural translation in the Early Modern period» (p. xi). Eight essays illuminate intellectual and practical dimensions of the press's work, the scholars, artists, and craftsmen behind its publications, and the production histories of some of the books. The essays are complemented by twenty-one 'archival documents', with commentaries, intended to flesh out «the cultural, economic and political conditions and the *Weltbild* responsible for the ambitious global vision – and also for the pitfalls – of the Medici Press» (p. xxii), and as prompts to further enquiry.

At the centre of the press's history is Giovanni Battista Raimondi – mathematician, Orientalist, and the driving force behind the enterprise's polymathic and polyglot vision. Angelo Michele Piemontese's chapter brings together testimonies illustrative of Raimondi's youth in Naples and later career in Rome. Mario Casari uncovers a document in Raimondi's own hand revealing what he rightly identifies as Raimondi's idiosyncratic view that Persian is «the finest, the prettiest, and the wittiest language in the world», seemingly «a gift from God to mankind in order to express the conceits of Poetry» (p. 41). This offers a glimpse into Raimondi's broad-ranging interests beyond the achievements of the press. Casari shows that Raimondi's appreciation of the elegancies of Persian emerged from his private study of manuscripts among his collection and was articulated in the context of an anti-Aristotelian attitude towards human languages, specifically Raimondi's sympathy with the naturalism of Bernardino Telesio (1509-1588). Among the many invaluable sources that make up the documents, the transcription of Raimondi's Roman diary between 1590 and 1610 is particularly illuminating, both as an insight into his 'personal network', and as an illustration of how «his *Typographia* was a kind of newsroom for anyone connected with or interested in all things 'Oriental' in Rome around 1600» (p. 285). Beyond Raimondi, Evelyn Lincoln surveys the family of Leonardo Parasole, who carved some of the woodblocks used for the images in the Medici Press editions of the Arabic gospels; Parasole's and his extended family's «personal and professional attachments» show «how the values of the traditional family workshop combined with the religious fervor of the time to shape Counter-Reformation Roman life» (p. 101).

A clear strength of this collection is its emphasis on the 'transcultural exchanges' (p. xviii) that enabled the press's work. One of «the key figures in the foundation of the *Typographia Medicea*» (p. 17) was the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, Ignatios Ni'matullah (c. 1505-1587). Hazim Alabdullah presents some notes by the Patriarch on Christian-Muslim theological controversies; although the history of Ni'matullah's 'conversion' to Islam, and flight from Diyarbakır in 1576 remains somewhat obscure, Alabdullah has been able to reconstruct the details of his journey to Venice, and then to Rome. A large part of Ni'matullah's contribution to the Medici Press was the collection of manuscripts he carried from the Ottoman Empire to Italy (detailed in an inventory, pp. 381-391); two lists of desiderata contain books not among the patriarch's library, which Raimondi directed his agents Giovanni Battista Vecchietti and his brother Gerolamo to seek during their travels in Egypt, Syria, and Persia (pp. 183-189). Another Eastern Christian who played a role in the press's history was George 'Amīra, later Maronite Patriarch of Antioch. While a student at the Maronite College in Rome, 'Amīra «copied various grammatical texts for Raimondi's use» (p. 68). Margherita Farina shows through a learned discussion of 'Amīra's *Grammatica Syriaca* (1596) that he was «deeply involved in issues that are crucial to the Syriac grammatical tradition» (p. 85), but that he was also able to present this tradition «duly adapted to the descriptive strategies of Latin grammar» (p. 93). Another former student of the Maronite College involved

with the press was Yuhannā al-Ma‘madān al-Ḥaṣṣrūnī. Three Arabic letters sent from al-Ḥaṣṣrūnī in Florence to Raimondi in Rome (pp. 211-219) echo the concerns of other Eastern sojourners employed by early modern scholars in Europe: a sense of betrayal, and indigence. Several of the documents bring into sharper focus Raimondi’s ‘global vision’ (p. xxii): his correspondence with the Florentine senator, Donato dell’Antella, concerning a scheme to sell the press’s Arabic books in Morocco (pp. 195-204); and Raimondi’s *memorandum* on relations between the Papacy and Persia, and request to Pope Paul V to help in acquiring manuscripts from the Persian court (pp. 345-361).

Raimondi’s Eastern collaborators were involved in work towards a Polyglot Bible, which never came to fruition. However, Raimondi did oversee the printing of the gospels in Arabic (1590) and Arabic and Latin (1591). Caren Reimann reconstructs some of the background to these books and shows that the latter was supported financially by Donato dell’Antella and the courtier, Cipriano Saracinelli. Neither man, however, received much of a return on his investment; projected dedications to Pope Gregory XIV and Philip II of Spain came to nothing, and two hundred years later more than a thousand copies remained unsold at the Palazzo Pitti in Florence. Annette Hoffmann explores the history of Bernardino Amico’s *Trattato*, an exception to the press’s principal focus on books in Oriental languages. She argues – rather speculatively, based on the evidence of a new version of the press’s *impresa* – that the book «might have been the first publication with which Raimondi tried to reconnect the publishing house to the Medici» (p. 125). Raimondi’s hopes for a ‘good profit’ (p. 145) seems more likely as an explanation for his interest in the work than the connection between Amico’s concern with architectural drawing and Euclid (p. 141). Raimondi’s business sense is evident, too, in Eckhard Leuschner’s assessment of his editions of two liturgical books, the *Pontificale Romanum* (1595; second edition 1611), and the *Caeremoniale episcoporum* (1600); contrary to the press’s Oriental publications, these productions were guaranteed ‘best sellers’ (p. 147). Leuschner also makes the case, however, that the works «fit neatly into the larger conceptual and cultural framework of the *Typographia Medicea*» (p. 147); the illustrations’ stylistic unity was «part of a larger, post-Tridentine strategy of liturgic unification and Church centralization», mirroring the Medici Press’s relation to «a Papal strategy to coordinate and centralize the Church’s missionary efforts» (p. 159).

The essays and the documents together more than fulfil the editors’ aims. Leuschner also thoughtfully points to several ‘open questions’ (p. xxii): the nature of the relationship between the Medici Press and its publications and the missionary arms of the Catholic Church, for instance. It is very much to the credit of the editors, the contributors, and the publisher that they have provided a wealth of material that will enable historians to begin exploring this and other topics.