

Printing in the history of the Ottoman Empire and its impact on the scientific and cultural movement

Dr. Hassad Abdessamed♦

Yahya Fares University of Medea . Algeria
hassad.abdessamed@univ-medea.dz

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9851-5570>

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Abstract: Undoubtedly, the emergence of printing in Europe in its advanced form significantly contributed to bringing about positive changes in the region's cultural features and its societies. This accelerated the wheels of development and progress, transitioning Europe from cultural stagnation to the Renaissance, geographic discoveries, the Industrial Revolution, and widespread colonialism after the balance of power shifted. This cultural impact eventually reached other societies, including the Ottoman Empire, where the introduction of printing was notably delayed. Most historians agree that printing officially entered the Ottoman Empire in the 18th century, three centuries after Europe. This delay in adopting such a pivotal tool contributed to the growing imbalance between the Islamic East and the Christian West. This study will trace the transfer of this technology to the Islamic world and its impact on scientific and cultural domains.

Keywords: Printing; the Ottoman Empire; transcription; manuscript.

♦ *Corresponding Author : Dr.Hassad Abdessamed*

Introduction:

Most historians agree that the invention of the printing press by the German Johannes Gutenberg in 1444 marked a significant cultural turning point in the history of human societies, particularly in Europe. This invention played a crucial role in launching a profound knowledge revolution by facilitating the widespread dissemination of books in a short period, compared to previous eras. Consequently, this had a positive impact on Western societies, which were the cradle of this modern invention, leading to significant changes in the ideas of its people. This accelerated development and progress, swiftly moving the region from a period of cultural stagnation to what is known as the European Renaissance. It then quickly transitioned from the constraints of the Middle Ages, or the so-called Dark Ages, to the era of geographical discoveries, and eventually to reaping the benefits of this vast progress in various fields, particularly in science and technology, which materialized in the Industrial Revolution. These transformations culminated in widespread colonial activity that spanned all continents of the world.

This cultural impact was not confined to Europe alone but gradually spread to other societies, contributing to the transformation of the cultural landscape in various regions. Among these regions was the Ottoman Empire, which experienced a notable delay in the adoption of this modern technology. Many historians agree that printing technology did not reach the Ottoman Empire until the 18th century, approximately three centuries after its introduction in Europe. Moreover, the Arab provinces under Ottoman rule did not see the introduction of printing until the 19th century, with many areas only receiving this technology after being occupied.

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From the above, it can be said that this delay in adopting such a crucial cultural tool was one of the most important factors contributing to the imbalance between the Islamic East and the Christian West, and a major reason for the widening gap between the two. This eventually fueled European ambitions in Ottoman lands, which ultimately resulted in the occupation of most of its territories. Therefore, this study aims to shed light on several key issues, starting with the real reasons behind the delay in the introduction of printing in the Ottoman Empire, followed by an exploration of the stages of its emergence and spread within Ottoman lands. Throughout this study, we will also seek to clarify for the reader the impact of the delayed introduction of printing on the scientific and cultural life in the region.

A- The Emergence of Printing in Ottoman Lands

The discovery of printing is considered one of the greatest achievements of humanity in the second millennium AD. Many historians and writers affirm this, such as Victor Hugo, who said, "The invention of printing is the greatest event in history. It is the mother revolution. With it, the mode of expression of humanity was completely renewed." The impact of the printing press on intellectual work was as significant as the invention of writing (Qaddoura, 2010, p. 15). Historians agree that printing effectively contributed to eradicating illiteracy in European societies, supported the success of the Reformation and the scientific revolution, and bolstered national languages and cultures in all Central and Western European countries. Thus, printing was a fundamental factor in Europe's dominance over the world. In contrast, the delayed introduction of printing in the Ottoman Empire and reliance on handwriting slowed the development of scientific and cultural movements, causing them to lag behind European countries.

01- Jewish and Christian Printing Presses:

Non-Muslim minorities in the Ottoman Empire benefited from the prevailing atmosphere of religious tolerance to engage in various religious, cultural, and political activities. Some historians even describe the 15th and 16th centuries as a "golden age" for these groups (Qaddoura, 2010, p. 104). Notably, the Ottoman sultans allowed non-Muslim communities to establish printing presses, while they prohibited Muslims from printing books in Arabic script. For instance, Sultan Bayezid II (Al-Sallabi, 2007, pp. 151-153) in 1485 and Sultan Selim I (Al-Attar, 2009, pp. 57-59) in 1515 imposed such restrictions. Historical records indicate that printing first appeared in the Ottoman Empire in 1493, when a printing press was established in Istanbul by two Jewish brothers, Samuel and David ibn Nahmias. Their publications primarily served the interests of the Jewish community in the region. Subsequently, other printing presses were founded in various locations, but they were always owned by Jewish or Christian communities, such as the Armenians and Greeks (Mosenson, 2019, pp. 159-160).

In 1505, 1510, and 1511, additional Jewish printing presses were established in Istanbul, marked with the phrase "Printed during the reign of Sultan Bayezid." More presses were founded during the reign of his son, Sultan Selim I, in 1513, 1515, 1516, 1518, 1519, and 1520. Jewish communities also managed to establish printing presses in other cities such as Salonika in 1512, Aleppo in 1515, Cairo in 1557, and Safed in 1577. An Armenian printing press was established in Istanbul in 1567, followed by a Greek printing press in 1627 (Pears, 2018, Web). Turkish Jew, Oram Galante, mentions that Jews brought their printing press to Turkey in 1492, producing 19 books in Istanbul and Salonika during the reign of Sultan Bayezid II (1481-1512), and 33 books during the reign of Sultan Selim I

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(1512-1520). Among these titles were the Torah with Hebrew commentary, published in 1494, and a book on Hebrew grammar, published in 1495 (Qaddoura, 2010, p. 105).

Jews also printed an Arabic Torah translated by Saadia Gaon in 1551 using Hebrew script. However, printing in Arabic script did not enter Istanbul until the first third of the 18th century (Zaydan, 1967, p. 404).

02- The Ottoman Official Printing Press:

In contrast to the widespread presence of Jewish and Christian printing presses mentioned earlier, the rest of the Ottoman society continued relying on manual copying, a process that was time-consuming, produced fewer books, and was more expensive. This situation persisted until the early 18th century when Sultan Ahmed III permitted the establishment of the first Islamic printing press. The credit for this decision goes to İbrahim Müteferrika, an Ottoman diplomat from Transylvania, who imported six printing presses from Europe to his home in the Fatih district of Istanbul. He began experimenting with printing in Arabic script even before receiving official authorization from the Sultan.

In 1726, he submitted a petition to the Grand Vizier at the time, Nevşehirli Damat Ibrahim Pasha, showcasing the technical capabilities of the printing press and highlighting the numerous benefits of printing books. İbrahim Müteferrika was not the first Ottoman Muslim to propose the idea of printing to the palace; Ibrahim Bégoui, an Ottoman historian and administrative official, had presented the idea to the palace in the mid-17th century, emphasizing that printing would greatly benefit Ottoman society and significantly speed up the production of books compared to the prevailing manual copying method (Mosenson, 2019, p. 160).

Despite all efforts, the benefits of printing were unfortunately recognized only a century after Ibrahim Bégoui's

idea. This acknowledgment came when İbrahim Müteferrika presented his memorandum (the "Printing Device Memo"), which highlighted eleven points on the importance of printing, including:

- **Preservation of Cultural Heritage:** The decline of manuscripts and the disappearance of many texts, coupled with the reluctance of copyists to reproduce large old volumes, made it evident that the only solution to preserve and disseminate this heritage more widely was to adopt printing (Qaddoura, 2010, p. 135).
- **Growth and Dissemination of Knowledge:** Printing would facilitate the expansion of knowledge among an increasing number of Ottomans.
- **Ease of Knowledge Recovery:** Manuscripts could be destroyed in wars and could not be replaced, whereas printed books could be reproduced easily.
- **Reduced Printing Costs:** The cost of printing a book was significantly lower compared to copying a manuscript.
- **Longer Lifespan of Printed Books:** Printed books had a longer life than manuscripts, which could lose their ink over time.
- **Restoration of Printing to Muslims:** After being dominated by Christians, printing was reintroduced to Muslims.

İbrahim Müteferrika received official permission to establish a printing press in 1727. Between 1729, when the first book was published, and 1742, when the press ceased operations, it printed 17 titles and issued at least 500 copies of each. Some titles had up to 1000 copies. The publications were mostly dictionaries and books on history and geography, as the license forbade printing religious texts (Quran, jurisprudence, hadith, etc.). Unfortunately, in the 1740s, the Ottoman society faced economic difficulties and military problems on its borders, leading to a decline in printing activities. Despite attempts to reform and improve conditions, there was intense public debate over printing, which eventually led to restrictions

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and the eventual closure of the press (Mosenson, 2019, pp. 161-162). Additionally, a fatwa issued by the Sultan's mufti allowed only the printing of non-religious books and strictly prohibited printing the Quran, hadith, and jurisprudence texts. The reformists had to accept these restrictions to achieve their goals and demonstrate the importance of printing (Qaddoura, 2010, p. 146). These factors collectively contributed to the limitation and decline of printing activities.

Subsequently, other printing presses were established in Istanbul that printed books in Arabic. One of the most notable was the Al-Jawa'ib Press, founded by Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaaq in the mid-19th century. It played a significant role in publishing dozens of important Arabic books and also published the Al-Jawa'ib newspaper (Zaidan, 1967, p. 404).

B- Factors Contributing to the Delay in the Introduction of Printing:

It is evident from the previous discussion that the adoption of printing technology was delayed by three centuries which is a remarkably long period during which significant progress could have been made within Ottoman society. However, the ruling authorities did not address this issue in the Arab and Islamic sectors until the early 18th century. This raises several questions about the real reasons behind this delay. How can one explain the Ottoman attitude towards the printing press, given their extensive engagement in science and literature and their substantial contributions to civilization, despite being fully aware of the benefits that printing had rapidly provided for the dissemination of knowledge in Europe? Moreover, it is known that the Ottomans engaged with Western civilization in various fields, particularly military ones, and benefited from European expertise to continue their conquests and preserve their gains. Why did the printing press find acceptance among some groups while being completely rejected by others? Another question

concerns the issue of granting licenses for non-Islamic groups to establish printing presses while prohibiting Islamic groups from doing so.

Researchers have differing views on the factors behind the delay in the adoption of printing. Several factors have been suggested, including:

1- Prohibition and Restriction of Printing:

Some researchers have noted that fatwas were issued prohibiting printing, particularly of religious texts. One such fatwa was a decree during the reign of Sultan Bayezid II, which prohibited printing. Ahmad al-Shuqayri states that there is no reliable historical source for this fatwa. There was also a fatwa from the scholars of Al-Azhar, which deemed the printing of religious books impermissible but allowed the printing of other books such as those on history, literature, and other sciences. This suggests that the Ottoman fatwa was also likely specific to the prohibition of printing religious texts.

The scholars argued that moving from oral transmission to writing, and then from writing to printing, negatively impacts the acquisition of knowledge. They believed that learning through writing after hearing from teachers required effort and that knowledge was better retained through this laborious process. Some individuals might not remember what they learned by heart, but if they wrote it down, the knowledge became firmly established in their minds. Students had to borrow books and manually copy what they needed quickly before returning them. Printing, however, made it too easy for students to acquire books, leading them to collect more than they could effectively read or understand. This convenience was viewed as detrimental to genuine learning (Shuqayri, 2012).

The traveler André Tivi, who visited the East in 1549, reported that the Ottoman Caliphate center announced it would impose the death penalty on anyone using printed books. He

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attributed this decree to Sultan Bayezid II in 1483, which was later reaffirmed by Sultan Selim I in 1515. This decision was made a few decades after the invention of the printing press, indicating a lack of understanding of its importance and its impact on human knowledge, coupled with fears of distortion in religious sciences, which led to a stringent stance against printing (Qaddoura, 2010, p. 121).

2- Readers' Familiarity with Handwritten Books:

Readers had grown accustomed to reading beautifully handwritten books, which often sparked their curiosity. The art of Arabic calligraphy and manuscript writing was highly developed, making the transition to the simpler typefaces used in printing challenging (Qaddoura, 2010, p. 137).

03- Resistance to Printing by the Ottoman Empire:

Some argue that the Ottoman Empire opposed printing to maintain the established systems in the territories it controlled, as modern European discoveries, including printing, were seen as threats to this status quo. Printing allowed for the production of a large number of books at a lower cost, making them accessible to the general public, which could lead to changes in public opinion. An educated populace is harder to rule with an autocratic approach, and the spread of ideas about freedom could undermine the legitimacy of the ruling authority, potentially destabilizing the state. This resistance was not only from the ruling authorities but also from influential political groups and the Janissary corps, which violently opposed any form of innovation (Qaddoura, 2010, p. 127). This mirrors the European experience after the invention of the printing press, where the church's control over thought and education was challenged once printed books, including the Bible, became widely available. This led to intellectual liberation, the Protestant Reformation, cultural renaissance, political

revolutions, the Industrial Revolution, and the rise of colonialism.

04- Manuscript Writing versus Printing:

For communities under Ottoman rule, manual transcription of knowledge was considered far more honorable than printing (Press, 2018). The craft of handwritten manuscripts held great cultural value and was viewed as a form of artistic expression (Hnash, 2012, pp. 116-120). The Ottomans maintained a strong association between writing and legitimate authority, especially concerning religious texts, and any use of Arabic typefaces for printing raised issues of legitimacy from the emergence of printing.

05- Economic Dependence on Manuscript Writing:

A significant number of scribes and writers relied on manuscript writing as their primary source of income. The craft of writing by hand was not only a traditional practice but also a livelihood for many.

06- Cultural Prestige of Manuscripts:

Manuscripts were highly esteemed, especially among the elite, and owning beautifully decorated manuscripts was highly desired. Their cultural value and aesthetic appeal contributed to their demand and status.

07- Superstitions Surrounding Printed Books:

There were widespread superstitions, such as the belief that printed books were the work of the devil and had malevolent purposes. This resulted in a very limited acceptance of printed books compared to the quickly sold-out manuscripts.

08- Production of Inferior Quality Manuscripts:

The introduction of lower-quality manuscripts, using cheaper paper and less ornate calligraphy, led to a reduction in their price compared to precious manuscripts. This strategy aimed to counteract the appeal of less expensive printed books. As this method became widespread, the number of scribes and

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manuscript producers increased, and competition intensified. Thus, the delay in adopting printed books was not only due to official decisions and religious fatwas but also because of the fierce competition between mechanical and manual production methods, which led to printed books collecting dust on shelves (Mossenson, 2019, pp. 164-165).

09- Sensitivity of Printing Religious Texts:

Printing religious texts, especially the Quran, was considered highly sensitive in the early days of printing. There were concerns and doubts about potential errors in printing, especially given the complexity of Arabic script compared to Latin letters (Qaddoura, 2010, p. 116). The risk of errors in printed texts could lead to misleading the uneducated. Handwriting can be corrected or the copy containing the error can be discarded, unlike printed text with an error, which is distributed in large quantities and cannot be retrieved. This error is irreparable and uncorrectable. However, with advancements in printing technology and the ability of printing machines to handle complex Arabic scripts accurately, and due to the Muslim desire to revive faith and community, printing was eventually adopted (Mossenson, 2019, p. 166).

The idea of adopting printing was present and debated multiple times between opponents of this modern technology and supporters who advocated for its use. The latter group succeeded in demonstrating the importance and benefits of printing for Islamic society. However, the matter did not materialize due to several obstacles, both financial and technical (Qaddoura, 2010, p. 118). Another issue worth mentioning is the technical challenge related to the difficulty of engraving Arabic letters, which have complex geometric shapes and change depending on their position within a word. This raises the question: how did non-Arabs in Europe manage to produce numerous books in Arabic to serve colonial and missionary

objectives in Oriental language institutes and universities, while Arab Muslims, who mastered the language and the art of metal engraving, could not adapt this invention to their language? Therefore, it can be argued that these reasons are not convincing for the delay in adopting printing, and that the opposing group managed to impose their perspective due to their influence and the society's support of their ideas.

10- Professional Resistance to Printing in the Ottoman Empire

The resistance to printing was largely a professional issue that threatened the livelihoods of a vast group, including scribes, both in official positions documenting transactions in official records, and independent scribes, as well as paper and ink manufacturers, suppliers of writing tools, illustrators, and bookbinders. According to the observations of the Italian captive Luigi Marsigli, who was held in captivity for a long time and released in 1682, the copying and writing profession was flourishing, as he noted that in Istanbul alone, there were approximately 80,000 scribes.

It can be said that widespread acceptance of printing only emerged in the 19th century, during which the number of printing presses increased to 77 in Istanbul alone (Mossensohn, 2019, p. 167).

C- Printing in the Arab World:

1. The Levant: The 17th century witnessed the establishment of the first printing press in the Arab world, which was Christian-operated and located in Deir el-Qozhia in 1610 (Press, 2018). The first Arabic printing press appeared in 1706 in Aleppo, operated by the Orthodox Christian community. This was followed by the establishment of two more printing workshops: one in the Choueifat area of Mount Lebanon in 1734 and another in Beirut in 1751. The creation of these presses marked a significant advancement, aligning with the period's

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intellectual development. Printing played a crucial role in accelerating the dissemination of knowledge and was an effective tool for reformists and advocates of openness to achieve their goals and spread their ideas (Kadoura, 2010, p. 19). Notable books published by the Aleppo Christian press in the early 18th century include: the Bible, the Sermons of St. John, a brief treatise on repentance derived from Greek texts, the Sermons of Father Athanasius of Jerusalem, and the Psalms (Kadoura, 2010, pp. 194-196). Additionally, there were polemical works between Orthodox and Catholic communities, such as: the Sword of Truth, the Three Issues, the Rock of Doubt, the Antidote to the Philadelphian Poison, the Constraining of the Obstinate Community, The Certain Proof of the Corruption of the Heretics, and The Grave Refutation of Denying the Divine Sacrifice (Kadoura, 2010, pp. 208-209).

Furthermore, the American press in Beirut, transferred from Malta in 1822, printed scientific, medical, and mathematical books authored by Beirut College professors for their students. It also printed some literature, poetry, history, and Christian religious books like the Torah, with a unique typeface known as the American type. The Catholic press of the Jesuit Fathers, established in 1848, published literature, history, Arabic language books, and religious and educational texts, becoming one of Syria's largest and most sophisticated presses. In 1857, the Syrian press of Khalil Khoury was founded and published numerous legal, literary, and historical books, followed by the al-Bustani press in 1867, known for its publications such as "The Comprehensive Dictionary," "The Encyclopedia," and "The Gardens of Paradise." Lastly, the Literary Press of Khalil Sarkis, established in 1874, specialized in printing newspapers and books.

2- Egypt:

The earliest press in Egypt was established by Napoleon Bonaparte during the French campaign in 1798, intended for printing publications and orders in Arabic. This press, known as the "Public Press," began its work at sea and, upon the French forces landing in Egypt, distributed publications to the Egyptians. It was based in Cairo and served the campaign's needs until the French left Egypt in 1801. The press produced various materials, including Arabic, Turkish, and Persian publications, as well as two French newspapers.

Egypt remained without a press for 20 years until Muhammad Ali established the Bulaq Press in 1821. The Bulaq Press was notable for printing important works such as "The Ajrumiyyah" (a grammar textbook), "The Art of War," a book on dyeing, an Italian-Arabic dictionary, and the biography of Alexander the Great. It also printed hundreds of significant Arabic books on medicine, mathematics, natural sciences, military arts, literature, poetry, exegesis, Hadith, and other sciences.

Other private presses were established, including one by Pope Cyril IV of the Copts in 1860, and the Nile Press founded in 1866. During the reign of Khedive Ismail and Khedive Abbas II, numerous presses emerged, mainly publishing political and scientific newspapers (Zaidan, 1967, pp. 405-409).

D- The Impact of Printing on Missionary Activity:

The Papal Church relied on the introduction of printing presses to the Ottoman provinces to aid missionaries in disseminating their specialized religious texts and producing newspapers and bulletins promoting Christianity (Hayajneh, 2014, pp. 727-747). As European countries obtained various privileges, particularly in the Levant during the 19th century, missionary activity expanded significantly. One of the most notable missionary organizations in the Levant was the Jesuits (Baher, 2006, p. 143), who established Arabic and French

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presses that printed books and newspapers, greatly aiding in the dissemination of their ideas (MMPV, 1897, p. 38). Beirut and its surrounding areas, such as Mount Lebanon, were among the first in the Levant to experience the arrival of printing, leading to the publication of many books, especially religious ones. During the 19th century, several presses were established in Beirut, contributing to the cultural advancement of the region through increased book production. Among these presses were:

- The Mar Musa al-Dawwar Press in Qozhia, established in 1808.
- The first press in Beit ed-Din, established by a Maronite named Hanna Beyk al-Saad in 1853.
- The Lebanese Government Press in Beit ed-Din, founded in 1863 by order of Daoud Pasha, known as the "Lebanese Press."
- The Ottoman Press owned by Ibrahim Beyk al-Aswad, established in 1891.
- The Lebanese Press of Khalil Effendi Bakhos in Babbda, established in 1894.
- The Cedar Press in Jounieh, Kesrouan, founded in 1895.
- The Al-Safa Press in Aley, Shouf, founded by Beka Nasser al-Din in 1898 (Baher, 2006, pp. 149-150).

In parallel with the activities of Christian presses in the Arab world, European presses also printed several Arabic books with a Christian focus, including the Bible and Christian religious texts. These books were widely disseminated across the Ottoman Arab territories, particularly in the Levant. This situation attracted the attention of the Ottoman authorities, who actively opposed the spread of these publications (Qaddura, 2010, p. 151).

In the city of Aleppo, a vibrant Christian literary movement emerged, characterized by the revision of Orthodox books and their translation into Arabic since the 17th century. This included the revision and editing of religious texts, the creation

of new books, and the translation of certain Greek texts into Arabic. This activity was primarily driven by missionaries who aimed to translate all Christian books into Arabic, the official language of communication among Arab Christians. Syriac, on the other hand, was only used in specific areas of Mount Lebanon and some villages near Damascus (Qaddura, 2010, p. 168). By the early 18th century, the number of books published by missionaries reached 11 out of 19 books printed between 1734 and 1787. Most of these missionaries were Jesuits and Franciscans, who translated and printed these books in Arabic (Qaddura, 2010, p. 222).

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this study has yielded several key findings:

1- Delayed Introduction of Printing: The late adoption of printing technology in the Ottoman Empire resulted in a clear civilizational lag and widened the gap between the Islamic East and the Christian West.

2- Reluctance to Embrace New Ideas: The ruling authority's persistent hesitation to adopt new ideas and its apprehension towards them contributed to the delay in the adoption of printing.

3- Privileges Granted to Jews and Christians: The facilitation and privileges granted to Jews and Christians allowed them to achieve their immediate and long-term goals, while Muslims, both foreign and local Arabs, were denied the opportunity to engage in this activity.

4- Isolation of Ottoman Society: The Ottoman society's adherence to traditional legacies and its difficulty in adapting to new developments extended beyond the scope of printing and affected various other areas.

5- Internal and External Resistance: Multiple parties contributed to the delay in the emergence of printing to protect their own interests. Internal parties aimed to preserve their

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privileges, while external forces sought to stifle progress and reform within the Ottoman state.

6- Conflict Between Traditional and Modern Crafts: A significant and intense conflict emerged between traditional craftsmen, who constituted a large segment of society and depended on their craft for livelihood, and the owners of modern technologies, who were a smaller bourgeoisie able to rapidly dominate the market. The issue was fundamentally about survival and imposing their logic.

7- The delay in the introduction of printing had a negative impact on the intellectual and cultural development of Ottoman societies. This effect was particularly evident in the religious domain, where Jewish and Christian control over printing presses played a role in the internal destabilization of the Ottoman state, especially through the activities of the Donmeh Jews—a topic that requires dedicated study. Meanwhile, Christians in the Levant managed to spread Christianity, creating significant problems for the Ottoman state in the region and contributing effectively to the penetration of Western Christianity, as reflected in the extensive privileges they obtained.

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