

## THE LAST JOURNEY OF PATRIARCH ATHANASIOS III DABBĀS TO WALLACHIA AND THE EDITORIAL PROGRAM OF THE PRINTING PRESSES OF ALEPPO AND BUCHAREST

---

ARCHIM. POLICARP CHIȚULESCU\*

**Abstract** The present paper discusses the editorial program of the first Arabic printing press of Aleppo (1706–1711), established with the assistance from Wallachia, and it aims at clarifying if it was influenced by the editorial program of the Bucharest printing press in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. A key actor is the renowned Patriarch of Antioch, Athanasios III Dabbās, who travelled to Wallachia and learned the art of printing from Antim the Iberian, hegumen of Snagov monastery and later the Metropolitan of Ungrovlahia. Thanks to the patronage of Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu, Athanasios was able to establish his printing press in Aleppo and develop his own editorial program aimed at serving the needs of the Arabic-speaking Christians of the Patriarchate of Antioch in the larger context of the contacts between Rome and the Ottoman Levant.

**Keywords** Athanasios III Dabbās, Antim the Iberian, Arabic printing, Arabic-speaking Christians, Catholic missionaries in the Levant.

Travel has always been driven by different needs and reasons. Knowledge of distant people and places was a strong motivation for some travellers to endure the difficulties of travel, the great

---

\**Library of the Holy Synod; Institute for South-East European Studies, Romanian Academy.*  
perepolycarpe@gmail.com.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3869-8884>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26424/philobib.2025.30.1.01>.

This research is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement no. 883219-AdG-2019 – Project TYPARABIC).

\*\* I hereby thank Ioana Feodorov and Yulia Petrova for the very useful suggestions they made when reading my text.

expense and length of the journey, the unfavourable weather, the danger of robbers, the diseases that swept the lands, and other hardships. In addition, on many occasions, great material and spiritual needs sent the Orthodox bishops on the road in search of support for their faithful flock. The Orthodox bishops of the East lived in Ottoman lands, where Christians often faced various religious and political challenges from their Muslim rulers. A major issue for the clergy of the Church of Antioch was the never-ending taxes to acquire the see of bishop or patriarch, to pay the debts of churches and Christians who could not survive for lack of support and were forced to convert to Islam to escape burdensome tax obligations. In addition, the growing interest of Rome through its missionaries, whose presence had increased significantly, to attract the Christian communities of the Levant to Catholicism, was the last and greatest challenge.<sup>1</sup>

It was in this difficult and delicate context that the former Patriarch of Antioch, then Metropolitan of Aleppo, Athanasios Dabbās, set out for the Romanian principalities.<sup>2</sup> He was born in Damascus in 1647 and studied for some time with the Jesuits. He was tonsured a monk in the monastery of St. Sava in Palestine, where he learned Greek. For a time, Dabbās worked in Bethlehem. Apparently, on July 5, 1685, he became patriarch of Antioch with the support of the Franciscans and contested the patriarchal See with Cyril al-Zaʿīm. However, the Ecumenical Patriarchate recognized him in this office. In 1694, Athanasios conceded the patriarchal See to Cyril, becoming Metropolitan of Aleppo with the right of succession to the patriarchal See, which occurred in 1720 upon Cyril's death. Athanasios Dabbās had a remarkable literary activity, consisting in translations from Greek into Arabic as well as in original works. He travelled to Eastern Europe, to Wallachia, where he made a good impression on Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu, who supported him by printing books in Arabic both in Wallachia and Aleppo.

Some bishops of the Church of Antioch were scholars by vocation; they knew Greek, since it was the international language in all Orthodox countries. Greek was also the original language of the Byzantine Christian texts, from which Antiochian scholars made translations to help Arabic-speaking Christians understand church services and the Scriptures. The return to Greek texts and their translation into Arabic was an attempt by the Antiochian Church to recover its Byzantine roots. Probably with this in mind, Athanasios Dabbās, in the preface to the Psalter printed in 1706 – the first book printed in Aleppo – mentions Aleppo as part of the province of *Syria Secunda*, the ancient name of a region within the former Byzantine Empire.<sup>3</sup> This awareness of belonging to the great family of the Byzantine Churches led the Orthodox Patriarchs, in times of crisis, to call upon the canonical support of the Ecumenical Patriarchate

---

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient au temps de la Réforme catholique (Syrie, Liban, Palestine, XVII<sup>e</sup>–XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Rome: Ecole française de Rome, 2014), 102, 385–6.

<sup>2</sup> This information is from Joseph Nasrallah, *Histoire du mouvement littéraire dans l'Église melchite du V<sup>e</sup> au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle: Contribution à l'étude de la littérature arabe chrétienne*, vol. 4: *Époque ottomane 1516–1900*, tome 1: 1516–1724 (Louvain–Paris, 1979), 132–7, 379 [hereafter *HMLÉM*].

<sup>3</sup> *Syria Secunda* or *Syria Salutaris* was a province in the late Roman Empire and the Byzantium, with Apamea as its administrative center. I thank Yulia Petrova who indicated this to me and shared with me her translation from Arabic into English of the prefaces of all the editions printed in Aleppo by the Patriarch Athanasios Dabbās.

of Constantinople and the financial support of the Orthodox rulers of Eastern Europe and Russia. The growing need for Orthodox liturgical, patristic, catechetical, and dogmatic books, the high price of manuscripts, their rarity, as well as the circulation of books printed in Arabic and sent from Rome to Syria by the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, gave hope to the Orthodox clergy that they could solve the problem of the lack of books by calling on the help of the Western Church.

Before the schism of 1724, the Orthodox bishops had quite good relations with the Latin missionaries in the Levant, which sometimes gave them the courage to appeal directly to the Pope. But this sympathy led some to believe that these bishops had become Catholics, which I think is an exaggeration. Moreover, according to Bernard Heyberger, to see the Orthodox bishops' openness to Catholicism as a desire for conversion, or to see them as Latins, is to think exactly like the Latin missionaries, which I think is also an exaggeration.<sup>4</sup> Not even the confessions of faith signed by Athanasios Dabbās convinced Rome to trust and support him in any way.<sup>5</sup> This proves Joseph Nasrallah's conclusion that "le catholicisme d'Athanasios fut toujours intéressé," that is, his "Catholicism" was not a sincere act confirmed by deeds.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, when the time came, Dabbās would prove the contrary by attending the anti-Latin synods and signing the offensive documents issued by them. Thus, Athanasios Dabbās, like his predecessors Meletios Karma and Makarios al-Za'im, unsuccessfully tried to obtain the support of the rich and powerful Church of Rome for the publication of his translations from Greek into Arabic.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to Arab scholars and Latin missionaries, Athanasios Dabbās had friends among the Greek clergy. He was a close friend of Chrysanthos Notaras, who was ordained Metropolitan of Caesarea in Palestine in 1702 and became Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem in 1707.<sup>8</sup> Dabbās and Notaras met at the court of Constantin Brâncoveanu, Prince of Wallachia, but mostly in Constantinople, where measures were being worked out to counteract the proselytizing activities of the Latin missionaries.<sup>9</sup> It was Chrysanthos Notaras who composed the text of a very harsh encyclical against the Latins in the Levant, which was adopted by the

---

<sup>4</sup> Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient*, 391.

<sup>5</sup> For the confession of faith to Rome of July 4, 1686, signed after he lost the patriarchal throne in favor of Cyril Za'im, and for the confession of his Catholic faith in a letter dated October 1, 1711, addressed by Athanasios Dabbās to Pope Clement XI, see Nasrallah, *HMLÉM* 4.1, 136. About Dabbās' relations with Rome, see Bernard Heyberger, "Réseaux de collaboration et enjeux de pouvoir autour de la production de livres imprimés en arabe chez les chrétiens (XVII<sup>e</sup>–début XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)," 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, Vassa Kontouma, and Bernard Heyberger (Turnhout: Brepols, 2023), 403–4. After these actions, however, Dabbās did not do anything in his writings or in his pastoral activity that would reveal his Catholic faith; on the contrary, as we shall see, he would fight against the missionary activities of the Latins in the East and against the schism within the Church of Antioch.

<sup>6</sup> Nasrallah, *HMLÉM* 4.1, 141.

<sup>7</sup> Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient*, 393.

<sup>8</sup> Penelopi Stathi, *Νοταράς Χρύσανθος: Πατριάρχης Ιεροσολύμων, πρόδρομος του Νεοελληνικού Διαφωτισμού* (Athens, 1999), 12.

<sup>9</sup> In 1700, both Athanasios Dabbās and Chrysanthos Notaras took part in the consecration of the Monastery of St. George, built in Bucharest by Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu.

Synod of Constantinople in 1722, with the participation and support of the Patriarch Athanasios III Dabbās.<sup>10</sup> As Patriarch, Athanasios declares in the preface to the Greek-Arabic *Liturgikon* printed in 1701 at Snagov, near Bucharest, it was in Constantinople that he had heard of the famous Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu, who was always generous in his support of the holy places of the Orthodox East.<sup>11</sup>

In this context, in 1700, Athanasios Dabbās, like many of his predecessors, made his way to Wallachia, to the court of Constantin Brâncoveanu. At the prince's court, he was received with great honour, although he was no longer the Patriarch in office. In Wallachia, Athanasios Dabbās met a friend of Chrysanthos Notaras, Antim the Iberian, a Georgian who had mastered the art of printing in Cyrillic, Greek, Georgian and Arabic scripts. Dabbās' hope for Brâncoveanu's help was so great that, paraphrasing a quotation from the biblical prophet Isaiah, he called the prince "the brightest star of rulers, a new saviour" for the Patriarch and his people, "through whom they could see wonderful things; therefore," said Athanasios Dabbās, "the poor people of the East and the people of Arabia and their holy clergy bless the God-given wisdom" of Brâncoveanu: "Our Church of Antioch, once exalted and rich, now poor and humble, testifies with her mouth to your praise." These enthusiastic words of praise are included in the preface to the *History of the Patriarchs of Antioch*, which Dabbās translated from Arabic into Greek at Brâncoveanu's court in 1702 and dedicated to his Wallachian benefactor.<sup>12</sup>

These eulogistic words follow the success of Dabbās in Wallachia, where two books essential for divine worship were printed especially for him in Greek and Arabic: a *Liturgikon* (Snagov, 1701) and a *Book of Hours* (Bucharest, 1702). These were the first books in the world to have been printed in Arabic by the Orthodox for the Orthodox. In the preface to the Greek-Arabic *Liturgikon*, Athanasios Dabbās confesses that he had "hastened from the ends of the earth, from the lands of the great city of God, Antioch, to this land [of Wallachia] [...] to see and learn for certain all that we had heard from afar" (i.e., of Brâncoveanu's generosity). Dabbās mentions with amazement what he saw in Wallachia: flourishing churches and monasteries, schools, printing presses and books in the language of the people, things that were very difficult to achieve in his own country.<sup>13</sup> Athanasios Dabbās took courage, as he himself says, also because Constantin Brâncoveanu had supported the other Apostolic Patriarchates (Constantinople, Alexandria, and Jerusalem). In this preface, Dabbās also describes the situation of the Antiochian Christians: "Most of the priests of this country are very poor and so needy that they lack the most necessary things for their earthly life"; "the Arabic books they use are

<sup>10</sup> Stathi, *Νοταράς Χρύσανθος*, 152.

<sup>11</sup> Ioana Feodorov, *Tipar pentru creștinii arabi: Antim Ivireanul, Atanasie Dabbās și Silvestru al Antiohiei* (Brăila: Muzeul Brăilei 'Carol I,' 2016), 274.

<sup>12</sup> A bilingual Greek and Romanian edition is available in Vasile Radu and Kiril Korolevski, "Istoria Patriarhilor de Antiohia," *Biserica Ortodoxă Română* 48, no. 9 (1930): 851–64; 48, no. 10 (1930): 961–72; 48, no. 11 (1930): 1039–50; 48, no. 12 (1930): 1136–50; 49, no. 1 (1931): 15–32; and 49, no. 2–3 (1931): 140–60 [hereafter *The History of the Patriarchs of Antioch*].

<sup>13</sup> Feodorov, *Tipar pentru creștinii arabi*, 270–1.

handwritten and they have to pay a lot for them,” which prevented them from carrying out their mission as shepherds of souls.

The printing of the liturgy in the bilingual Greek-Arabic edition of Snagov (1701) was a great help for priests and faithful, because the common people did not know how to read, and the liturgy was a way of catechizing. The bilingual Greek-Arabic text also had a specific purpose, to help priests say certain parts of the liturgy in Greek, according to the tradition, perhaps out of attachment to Byzantium, but the essential prayers were read in Arabic. Let us not forget that there is evidence of a circulation of priests and bishops to and from the neighbouring patriarchates of Jerusalem and Egypt,<sup>14</sup> where not only Arabic but also Greek was spoken.<sup>15</sup>

The preference for books of worship, prayers and asceticism is a specific feature of Orthodoxy, which tends to mysticism and contemplation rather than dogmatism and rationalism, a fact that has surprised some scholars.<sup>16</sup> However, this does not mean that there was a disregard for dogmatic treatises in the Church of Antioch. It is important to note that one of the greatest dogmatists and apologists of Orthodoxy, St. John of Damascus, came from Damascus. This is the main reason why Athanasios Dabbās primarily printed liturgical books, not polemical or other books. As I will show below, he also wanted to print other types of Christian books, but only the lack of financial means forced him to limit himself to the most urgent needs. As for polemical books, he did not print any, not necessarily out of sympathy for the Latins, but because he needed to be on good terms with them. The split of the Church of Antioch in 1724 created a polemic between the Orthodox and the Uniates, each trying to define its position and doctrine.<sup>17</sup> Thus, from 1724, when two parallel hierarchies were established in the Church of Antioch, the Orthodox and Uniate (Greek Catholic) bishops did not seek dialogue, but rather initiated a fierce debate cultivated by the missionaries of Rome. The first Orthodox books in Arabic against Catholic dogmas also appeared in the Romanian lands in the first half of the eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup>

Dabbās benefited from a daring project to print books in Arabic in Wallachia by a team of printers who did not know the language; the success was due to the printer, the hieromonk

---

<sup>14</sup> And even from Constantinople.

<sup>15</sup> Greek-speaking theologians who wrote and fought against Latin propaganda in Syria came to the Levant from Egypt. One of the most famous examples is Eustratios Argenti. See Kallistos Ware, *Eustratios Argenti: A Study of the Greek Church under Turkish Rule* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964) and Chrysostomos Papadopoulos, *Ιστορία της εκκλησίας Αντιοχείας* (Alexandria, 1951).

<sup>16</sup> Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient*, 149.

<sup>17</sup> The division of the Church of Antioch was a long process. Cyril Tanas received recognition from Rome in February 1729 and officially accepted Catholic dogma on April 15, 1730, but in February 1744 he received a *pallium* from the Pope as a symbol of ecclesiastical power. Konstantin A. Panchenko and S. A. Moiseeva, “Mel’kitskaia katolicheskaia tserkov,” in *Pravoslavnaia entsiklopediia*, vol. 44 (Moscow, 2016), 647.

<sup>18</sup> Ioana Feodorov, *Arabic Printing for Christians in the Ottoman Empire. The East-European Connection* (Berlin–Boston: De Gruyter, 2023), esp. 4.3 and 6.3. An analysis of these books is available in Archim. Policarp Chițulescu, “Livres polémiques imprimés en arabe, en Moldavie et en Valachie, au milieu du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle,” *Scrinium* 20 (2024): 1-31.

Antim the Iberian. This Georgian had been a monk at the Holy Sepulchre, then was brought to Moldavia by Patriarch Dositheos of Jerusalem to learn the art of printing. From there, around 1690, Antim went to Wallachia to implement a well-thought-out plan to print books of Orthodox polemics and apologetics in Greek. This program of strengthening Orthodoxy with the support of the princes of Moldavia was initiated by the Patriarch of Jerusalem Dositheos while he was in Moldavia. The prince of Wallachia, Constantin Brâncoveanu, who had Dositheos and Antim the Iberian as close friends, also joined the program. Thus, Constantin Brâncoveanu commissioned Antim to organize the printing activity in Wallachia since 1691.<sup>19</sup>

Antim was a man of many talents. A polyglot, he translated the sacred texts into Romanian so that the people could understand the divine services. He wrote and prefaced books, worked as a printer, even after he became a bishop, since he had mastered the art of printing and trained apprentices. He climbed the hierarchical ladder, becoming Bishop of Râmnic (1705) and three years later Metropolitan of Wallachia (1708). He founded the first public library and a printing press for books in Greek and Romanian at the Monastery of All Saints, which he founded in Bucharest, the capital of Wallachia. During his years in Wallachia, Antim printed 66 books: 31 in Greek, 26 in Romanian, 4 in Romanian and Slavonic, 1 in Slavonic, 1 in Greek and Romanian, 2 in Greek and Arabic, and 1 trilingual (Greek, Romanian and Slavonic). Almost half of the works that came out of Antim's seven printing presses, i.e., 32 titles, were liturgical books. Antim printed six polemical books in Greek, three of which are massive tomes.<sup>20</sup>

In my study of the Greek-Arabic *Liturgikon* printed by Antim in Snagov in 1701, I compared the text of the liturgy in the two languages. I noticed that Antim left some additional explanations in red, and these are still maintained in the Arabic Orthodox *Liturgikon*.<sup>21</sup> Both the Greek and Arabic books printed in Wallachia, the *Liturgikon* and the *Book of Hours*, proved their effectiveness by their wide circulation among Arabic-speaking Christians, as evidenced by a significant number of copies preserved to this day.<sup>22</sup> The quality of the paper, the neat graphics of these books, the large letters, the indications for priests marked in red, made these books true objects of typographic art.

The meeting between Athanasios Dabbās and Antim the Iberian had other important consequences. Antim's editorial program was relatively varied. He mainly printed books of worship in Romanian, Greek, Slavic and Arabic, but also books of spiritual instruction for the

---

<sup>19</sup> On typographic activity in the Danubian principalities, see Doru Bădără, "The Beginning of Printing and Print Culture in the Romanian Principalities," in *Arabic-Type Books Printed in Wallachia, Istanbul, and Beyond: First volume of the collected works of the TYPARABIC project*, ed. Radu-Andrei Dîpratu and Samuel Noble (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2024), 123–44.

<sup>20</sup> Arhim. Policarp Chițulescu, "Câteva aspecte privind filoleenismul lui Antim Ivireanul," in *Mărturii de istorie și cultură românească*, vol. 3, ed. Mariana Lazăr (Bucharest: Muzeul Național Cotroceni, 2024), 43.

<sup>21</sup> Archim. Policarp Chițulescu, "Analyse comparative du texte gréco-arabe du Hiératikon imprimé à Snagov en 1701," in *Arabic-Type Books Printed in Wallachia, Istanbul, and Beyond: First volume of the collected works of the TYPARABIC project*, ed. R.-A. Dîpratu and S. Noble (Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2024), 211–42.

<sup>22</sup> I am grateful to Nicholas Bishara, junior researcher on the TYPARABIC project, who is mapping the copies of the *Liturgikon* and the *Book of Hours* in Romania and beyond, for sharing this information with me.

people, books of polemics with Catholics and Protestants, the latter ordered by Eastern Christian scholars and bishops. With the financial support of Constantin Brâncoveanu, Antim sent to Georgia, his native country, a printing press and a printer, his disciple Mihail Ștefanovici. Between 1709 and 1711, the latter printed 10 books, which I had the opportunity to examine personally several times in Georgia, at the National Manuscript Center in Tbilisi and at the National Library of Georgia.<sup>23</sup> Thus, with the support of Wallachia, the *Gospel* (1709), the *Psalter* in two editions (1709, 1711), the *Liturgikon* (1710), the *Book of Hours* (1710), the *Catechism* (1711), and probably a Bible, of which only fragments are preserved today, were published.<sup>24</sup> In these Georgian books, the graphics are similar to those of Wallachia. As one can easily understand, the editorial program in Georgia was inspired by that of Antim, who had printed the same books in Wallachia.

We can consider that Antim the Iberian played a certain role in defining the editorial program of Athanasios Dabbās for Arabic-speaking priests and believers. He himself emphasizes that he did not ask for the creation of an Arabic script in Wallachia, nor for the printing of books in Arabic, a complicated and costly undertaking, but that Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu himself took this initiative and commissioned the master printer Antim the Iberian to carry out this project.<sup>25</sup> As if having a premonition that in a few years Russia would offer him nothing but promises for the activity of the Aleppo printing press, Athanasios Dabbās addressed Brâncoveanu in Bucharest as early as 1702, saying that “none of the Orthodox princes before you had honored this Patriarchal See of Antioch with such a compassionate gesture, that is, the printing of Arabic books, except your Excellency, enlightened and crowned by God.”<sup>26</sup> After spending several years in Wallachia, Athanasios Dabbās returned to Aleppo in Syria around 1704 with everything he needed to start printing books.<sup>27</sup>

The first book printed in the Aleppo press – and the first book ever printed in the East with Arabic type – was the *Psalter*. On the verso of the title page is the coat of arms of Constantin Brâncoveanu. This gesture is an act of gratitude on the part of Dabbās for the help he received from Wallachia to continue in Aleppo the printing of Arabic books that had already begun in Snagov and Bucharest. Since printing books required not only skilled people but also high costs,

---

<sup>23</sup> I studied these printed books in 2023 while participating in the conference “Georgian Manuscript Heritage” organized by the Korneli Kekelidze Georgian National Center for Manuscripts on the occasion of its 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the 1050<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Georgian Monastery of Iviron on Mount Athos.

<sup>24</sup> Gheorghe Popp, “Tipar românesc în Georgia,” in *Studii de bibliologie*, vol. 2 (Bucharest, 1967), 29–46; Mihail Stanciu, “Sf. Antim Ivireanul, ipodiaconul Mihail Ișvanovici și începuturile tiparului georgian,” *Ortodoxia* 3 (2015): 83–100.

<sup>25</sup> *History of the Patriarchs of Antioch*, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română* 48, no. 9 (1930): 863.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Feodorov, *Arabic printing for the Christians in Ottoman Lands*, 162–5; Virgil Cândea, “Dès 1701: Dialogue roumano-libanais par le livre et l'imprimerie,” in *Le livre et le Liban jusqu' à 1900: Exposition*, ed. Camille Aboussouan (Paris, 1982), 287–8; Basile Aggoula, “Le livre libanais de 1585 à 1900,” in *Le livre et le Liban jusqu' à 1900*, 300–1.

in December 1706 Athanasios Dabbās wrote to the Russian Tsar Peter the Great, informing him that he had set up a printing press in Aleppo, where a *Psalter* had already been printed.<sup>28</sup> To persuade him to support the Aleppo press financially, Dabbās offered the tsar some copies of the books printed in Wallachia and Aleppo. Dabbās also outlined his editorial program, stating that there was a need in the Levant for the printing of books indispensable for worship, among which he mentioned the *Gospel*, the *Epistle Book*, the *Euchologion*, the *Octoechos*, the *Anthologion*, the *Triodion*, the *Pentecostarion*, and the *Typikon*, of which he was able to print only a few.<sup>29</sup> Almost all of these books were already printed by Antim in Wallachia in Greek, Romanian or Slavonic. The discussion with Antim and the practical need for books of worship may have inspired the Antiochian bishop in formulating his editorial plan. But Dabbās was to receive help not from the tsar of Russia but from the Ukraine, from the hetman Ivan Mazepa and his colonel, Daniel Apostol.

It was not until 1711, through the intercession of Patriarch Chrysanthus Notaras, that Athanasios Dabbās received alms from Russia, but it was a modest sum.<sup>30</sup> The sum received was probably used to print in Arabic the voluminous book of sermons written by a patriarch of Jerusalem named Athanasios.<sup>31</sup> The book was commissioned in Aleppo by Patriarch Chrysanthos Notaras, who also wrote its preface.<sup>32</sup>

Athanasios Dabbās wanted to print more than liturgical books. He tried to obtain other works to be translated and printed in Arabic, since his interests included historical chronicles, dictionaries and, above all, the works of the Church Fathers. His collaborator and friend Gabriel Farḥāt made a list of what he wanted to bring from the West. Among the authors sought by Dabbās, we should mention St. John Chrysostom, of whom the bishop wanted “all that could be found,” St. John of Damascus, Athanasios the Great, Epiphanius of Salamis, all that could be found of the chronicles of Philo of Alexandria and the Byzantine George Kedrenos, the works of Theodoretos of Cyrhus, namely *The explanation of the difficult places in the Old and New Testaments*, the works of Suidas,<sup>33</sup> and “all that would be of this kind.”<sup>34</sup> Dabbās’s publishing horizons were quite wide, as he pursued works that would help him in his mission as a shepherd

---

<sup>28</sup> Vera Tchentsova, “Les documents grecs du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Pièces authentiques et pièces fausses,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 79, no. 1 (2013): 191.

<sup>29</sup> Tchentsova, “Les documents grecs du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle,” 191.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Nasrallah believes that the author is the Patriarch of Jerusalem Athanasios IV (1452–60), see *HMLÉM* 3.2, 52–55, but according to other scholars the authorship may be attributed to Athanasios II (12th–13th c.); see Yulia Petrova, “The Prefaces of the Christian Arabic Books Printed in Wallachia and Syria in the Early 18<sup>th</sup> Century,” in *Arabic-Type Books Printed in Wallachia, Istanbul, and Beyond: First Volume of Collected Works of the TYPARABIC Project*, ed. R.-A. Dıpratu and S. Noble (Berlin–Boston: De Gruyter, 2024), 275.

<sup>32</sup> Petrova, “The Prefaces of the Christian Arabic Books,” 276–7.

<sup>33</sup> The Lexicon of Suidas was widely used for translation from Greek. A few decades earlier, Meletios Karma had requested from Rome another lexicon by Varinus Phavorinus, and not that of Caesar Baronius, as Heyberger thinks. See Heyberger, “Réseaux de collaboration,” 394.

<sup>34</sup> Tchentsova, “Les documents grecs du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle,” 182; Heyberger, “Réseaux de collaboration,” 405.



of souls. In 1714, he made a new attempt to obtain financial support from Peter the Great, who was not as interested in helping the Christian East as Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu and the rulers of Ukraine.<sup>35</sup>

With Wallachian support, the printing activity started in Aleppo in 1706 was limited to twelve books. During his stay in Wallachia, Athanasios Dabbās had the opportunity to see the works printed in other languages by Antim the Iberian, which were used in the churches and monasteries he visited. Dabbās was also able to see books and draw inspiration from either the library of Constantin Brâncoveanu or that of the Wallachian Metropolitanate. Both libraries were very rich, which is proven by the fact that when the Turks plundered the other capital of Wallachia (Târgoviște) in 1737, they were able to load over 80 boxes of books hidden in a secret chamber of the Metropolitan Library.<sup>36</sup> While in Constantinople, Athanasios Dabbās met with the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, Dositheos II, who resided there, as well as other prominent hierarchs. The Metochion of the Holy Sepulcher in Constantinople had a rich library, which was reorganized in the mid-seventeenth century by Patriarch Nektarios and greatly enriched by Patriarchs Dositheos and Chrysanthos of Jerusalem.<sup>37</sup> The Greek books printed in Venice, Rome, Paris, and other places in Western Europe that were for sale in Constantinople or in the possession of these hierarchs could also have been sources of inspiration for Athanasios Dabbās' editorial plan.

All the books printed by Dabbās were pioneering publications in the Arab Christian world. None of the books he published from his printing press in Aleppo had ever been printed anywhere before. Thanks to Athanasios Dabbās, 'Abdallāh Zāḥir learned the printer's craft in Aleppo while working and supervising the work of this press.<sup>38</sup> After embracing Union with Rome in 1720, 'Abdallāh Zāḥir opened a printing press in 1733 on Mount Lebanon, at the monastery of St. John the Baptist in Šuwayr, where he worked until his death in 1748. The editorial program of Athanasios Dabbās paved the way for the publication of liturgical books for all the Christians of the Levant, especially for those united to Rome, for they reprinted in Šuwayr, in numerous editions, the books first printed by Athanasios Dabbās. The editions of the Aleppo press could be used by both communities, since no elements of anti-Catholic polemics were found in them. In fact, as far as books of worship are concerned, 'Abdallāh Zāḥir and his successors reprinted the texts of Athanasios Dabbās.

Both Athanasios Dabbās and Antim the Iberian were fluent in Greek. Having met in Wallachia, they certainly discussed and consulted with each other when it came to printing Arabic Orthodox liturgical books, the first of their kind in the world. It should be noted that it

<sup>35</sup> Tchentsova, "Les documents grecs du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle," 184.

<sup>36</sup> Konstantinos Dapontes reports on this robbery, which was not a singular event, in *Éphémérides Daces ou Chronique de la guerre de quatre ans (1736–1739)*, vol. 2, ed. Émile Legrand (Paris, 1881), 34.

<sup>37</sup> Vassa Kontouma, "Vestiges de la bibliothèque de Dosithée II de Jérusalem au Métouchion du Saint-Sépulcre à Constantinople," in *Bibliothèques grecques dans l'Empire ottoman*, ed. André Binggeli, Matthieu Cassin, and Marina Détoraki (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), 293.

<sup>38</sup> Căndeia, "Dès 1701: Dialogue roumano-libanais," 287–8; Aggoula, "Le livre libanais," 301; Nasrallah, *HMLÉM* 4.2, 113 etc.

was not only the publishing program in Wallachia that influenced the indefatigable Athanasios Dabbās, but also the format of the books and the way they were embellished with engravings in the spirit of the Byzantine Orthodox tradition.

The books printed by Athanasios Dabbās were donated to priests and churches,<sup>39</sup> while the Greek Catholic printing press of the Monastery of St. John the Baptist in Šuwayr sold its books at fairs.<sup>40</sup> In addition to the editorial program and the graphic design of his books, Athanasios Dabbās managed to bring from Wallachia the idea and the model of a Christian catechetical work on the Sacrament of Penance. Chrysanthus Notaras had written a similar work in 1702 (published in Venice only in 1724), and in 1704, when Athanasios Dabbās was still in Wallachia, Antim the Iberian was preparing a similar work. Antim's work saw the light of print in 1705 in Râmnic. I have compared the editorial program of Athanasios Dabbās not only with that of Antim in Wallachia, but I have also extended the comparison to the editorial program in Georgia. As I mentioned earlier, the latter was also influenced by Antim the Iberian, which may indicate a unity of thought in the Orthodox Church's book-printing strategy.

**Table 1. Comparison of the Editorial Program of Aleppo, Wallachia, and Georgia**

<b>1. THE BOOK OF PSALMS</b>		
<b>ALEPPO</b>	<b>WALLACHIA</b>	<b>TBILISI</b>
1706, 1709, Arabic 2 editions	1694, Romanian, 2 editions (Bucharest) 1700, Greek (Snagov)	1709, Georgian
<b>2. THE GOSPELS</b>		
<b>ALEPPO</b>	<b>WALLACHIA</b>	<b>TBILISI</b>
1706, 1708 Arabic  1706, 1708 [ <i>Tetraevangelion</i> ] Arabic	1693, Greek and Romanian (Bucharest) 1697, Romanian (Snagov)	1709, Georgian
<b>3. THE BOOK OF THE CHOSEN PEARLS FROM THE SERMONS OF ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM</b>		
<b>ALEPPO</b>	<b>WALLACHIA</b>	<b>TBILISI</b>
1707 Arabic	1691 (Bucharest)	-
<b>4. THE EPISTLE BOOK</b>		
<b>ALEPPO</b>	<b>WALLACHIA</b>	<b>TBILISI</b>

<sup>39</sup> Petrova, "The Prefaces of the Christian Arabic Books," 273, 276.

<sup>40</sup> Volney [Constantin-François de Chasseboeuf], *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte pendant les années 1783, 1784 et 1785* (Paris, 1787), 178. I have quoted this work from the copy I have in my library.

1707 Arabic	1683 Romanian (Bucharest)	1709 Georgian
<b>5. PROPHETOLOGION (HOLY BOOK OF THE PAREMIA)</b>		
<b>ALEPPO</b>	<b>WALLACHIA</b>	<b>TBILISI</b>
1708 Arabic	- 1683, Romanian (Iași, Moldavia)	-
<b>6. BOOK OF THE PARAKLITIKI (OCTOECHOS)</b>		
<b>ALEPPO</b>	<b>WALLACHIA</b>	<b>TBILISI</b>
1708 Arabic	1706, Râmnic (Slavonic-Romanian)	-
<b>7. BRIEF EPISTLE THAT EXPLAINS HOW REPENTANCE AND CONFESSION ARE DONE AND WHAT THE ONE WHO CONFESSES AND THE CONFESSOR MUST DO</b>		
<b>ALEPPO</b>	<b>WALLACHIA</b>	<b>TBILISI</b>
1711, Athanasios Dabbās	1705, Antim the Iberian (Râmnic)	-

Dabbās printed in Aleppo two editions of the *Lectionary* (1706 and 1708), with the text divided into fragments in the order of the feasts of the Orthodox Church – i.e., beginning with Easter Sunday, the Resurrection of the Lord (the Gospel of John) – and two editions of the *Tetraevangelion* (1706 and 1708), with the text arranged in the canonical order of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John).<sup>41</sup> At the time, the *Lectionary* was specific to the Slavic world and was used in worship, but in the case of Dabbās’ editions, they also included patristic commentaries. Since Dabbās wanted the Holy Scriptures to be as widely distributed as possible among Christians, perhaps this accompaniment of the biblical text with commentary was intended to eliminate the risk of misinterpretation on the part of readers, whether clergy or laity.

While researching the copies of the mentioned *Lectionary* and the *Tetraevangelion* preserved in the libraries of Lebanon, I found that they had been used not only by the Orthodox Christians of the Patriarchate of Antioch, but also by the Greek Catholics, as well as by the Armenians and Maronites.

<sup>41</sup> In fact, Athanasios Dabbās was the first to introduce the Greek model of the Gospels beginning with Easter Sunday. He was also able to see this edition in Wallachia, where the first Romanian edition was printed in Bucharest in 1682. An analysis of this *Lectionary* and a *Tetraevangelion* is available in Rami Wakim, “Patriarch Athanasios III Dabbās’ Gospel. Origin and Characteristics,” in *Arabic-Type Books Printed in Wallachia, Istanbul, and Beyond: First Volume of Collected Works of the TYPARABIC Project*, ed. R.-A. Dipratu and S. Noble (Berlin–Boston: De Gruyter, 2024), 291–308.

Here we would like to add further clarification. In the preface<sup>42</sup> to the 1706 *Tetraevangelion*,<sup>43</sup> Athanasios Dabbās urges Christians to have the Gospel Book in their homes and to read it. Most scholars who have written about the Gospels printed by Athanasios Dabbās in Aleppo have interpreted this exhortation as a Protestant influence.<sup>44</sup> We can hardly agree with this view. It should be taken into consideration that the greatest Eastern Fathers and theologians, including St. John Chrysostom, St. Basil the Great, St. John of Damascus, and others, urge all Christians to read and meditate on the Holy Scriptures.<sup>45</sup> So, Athanasios Dabbās makes these statements following the traditional line of the Eastern Church. The prudence of the Eastern Church is evident in the interpretation of Sacred Scripture, which is not allowed to those who do not have the theological culture and spiritual life.<sup>46</sup> On the contrary, by exhorting

---

<sup>42</sup> Yulia Petrova has studied the historical, philological, and cultural significance of the prefaces of Athanasios Dabbās in “The Prefaces of the Christian Arabic Books,” 267-90.

<sup>43</sup> In the introductory pages v–vi, which are not numbered.

<sup>44</sup> Heyberger, “Réseaux de collaboration,” 406; Carsten Walbner, “Melkite (Greek Orthodox) approaches to the Bible at the Time of the Community’s Cultural Reawakening in the Early Modern Period (17<sup>th</sup>–early 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries),” in *Translating the Bible into Arabic: Historical, Text-Critical and Literary Aspects*, ed. Sara Binay and Stefan Leder (Beirut, 2021), 58–61.

<sup>45</sup> The great Eastern preacher John Chrysostom, whose sermons have been translated into vernacular languages, including Arabic, invites his readers to read the Scriptures. He says: “What a great good is the reading of the divine Scriptures, beloved. It makes our soul a philosopher, it raises the mind to heaven, it makes us thank God for everything [...]. Therefore, I urge you to read the Divine Scriptures with great zeal. If we read often what is written in it, we will also enrich our knowledge [...]. So let us read the Scriptures! With great devotion.” See Homily XXXV on Genesis, PG 53, col. 323. Speaking of the enrichment of knowledge through the reading of Sacred Scripture, he insists that not only monks should read it, but especially the laity, who live in the world and are constantly exposed to spiritual threats (Homily II on the Gospel of Matthew, PG 47, 48). Chrysostom also emphasizes the great spiritual benefits given to those who read the Scriptures (Homily II on the Gospel of Matthew, PG 47, 48), saying that the Scriptures contain spiritual medicine for every soul, so they must always be studied (Homily XIII on Genesis, PG 53, 54; Homily I on the Statues, PG 49, col. 16; Homily on Poor Lazarus, PG 48, col. 992). All these ideas, which insist on the great spiritual gain that comes from the constant reading of Sacred Scripture by all Christians, are summarised in a special homily entitled *On the Use of Reading the Holy Scriptures*, PG 51, col. 87-88. St. Basil the Great begins his *Commentary on the Psalms* by emphasizing how important it is for all people to read the Scriptures, since they are inspired by God and contain the medicine for all spiritual diseases, and each person should take from the Scriptures what he needs for his spiritual sickness (Homily I on the Psalms, PG 29, col. 209). In his *Ekthesis akriivos*, St. John of Damascus devotes an entire chapter to the importance of Sacred Scripture, insisting that all Christians must read it in order to learn how to fight sin and gain spiritual benefits (*Dogmatica*, PG 94, col. 789-1228).

<sup>46</sup> Because of the danger of misinterpretation of Scripture by those untrained in biblical and theological matters, Patriarch Dositheos II of Jerusalem is very harsh in his *Confession of Faith* (1672) and states that reading the Scriptures is not permitted to all, which is not in accordance with Orthodox thought and practice. In 1723, the Orthodox patriarchs wrote a confession of faith that adopted (with minor differences) the text of Dositheos’ confession. Although in practice the old tradition was followed, Athanasios Dabbās also signed this text, which was addressed to the non-Juror Anglicans who called themselves “The Catholic

Christians to read the Holy Gospel, Athanasios Dabbās affirms his attachment to the ancient concept of the Eastern Church, which exhorts all to the knowledge of the divine word.

At the same time, the books printed by Dabbās were characterised by some peculiarities. For example, the 1707 *Epistle Book* had an innovation: it contains the text of the epistles of the Apostles, divided by days and feasts, correlated with commentaries from the work of St. John Chrysostom. We can say that this was something unique for the edition of this liturgical book. Likewise, the structure of the volume of the Sermons of St. John Chrysostom, printed in Aleppo in 1707, contains 34 homilies, while the Greek (Venice, 1675) and Wallachian (Bucharest, 1691) *editio princeps* contain 14 homilies, belonging to other ecclesiastical authors too. Thus, Dabbās could afford a certain degree of freedom in his editorial method, not focusing only on the available models of the liturgical books of the time.

As we mentioned at the beginning of this study, Athanasios Dabbās did not print books of polemics with the Latins because the schism in the Church of Antioch had not yet officially occurred, and not for reasons of sympathy or “communion” with the Latin dogmas, as J. Nasrallah stated.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, as the year of the schism (1724) approached, Dabbās became more and more involved in taking a stand against the Latin presence in the Church of Antioch. In 1720, he encouraged translations of anti-Latin authors such as Gabriel Seviros as a response to Bellarmin and Possevin and urged his “children to return to their church and not to be taken over by the darkness of the West.”<sup>48</sup> In addition, Dabbās translated and published in London the anti-Latin book of the Greek Orthodox Bishop Ilias Miniatis *The Rock of Offense* (1721). Beginning in 1722, meetings on the Catholic question in Syria were held in Constantinople, at which Dabbās was present and was one of the signatories of the decisions adopted there. Therefore, the editorial program adopted by Dabbās in 1701 and 1706 was linked to the strict needs of the time, among which the liturgical books were the most constantly needed.

Thus, a certain solidarity of Orthodoxy in general can be observed,<sup>49</sup> manifested between an Arab (Dabbās), a Georgian (Antim the Iberian), a Romanian (Constantin Brâncoveanu), and a Greek (Chrysanthos Notaras). This would manifest itself with greater

---

Remnant of the British Churches.” These were the Anglicans who refused to take the oath before the new King William of Orania, the son-in-law of King James II, who had offended Anglican national and religious sentiment by converting to Catholicism. See Vasile Loichiță (ed.), *Mărturisirea patriarhului Dositei (1672), Mărturisirea atribuită patriarhului Chiril Lucaris (1629), Enciclica patriarhilor răsăriteni împotriva non-juraților (1723)* (Iași, 2019), 15, 83. For a discussion of the reading of Scripture by the faithful, see 109. Surprisingly, in the second preface to the Bible, printed in Romanian in Bucharest in 1688 by Prince Șerban Cantacuzino, Dositheos II advocates the reading of the Bible by the faithful and praises the prince’s efforts to make “the Holy Scriptures available to men, women and youth in their own language.” The Holy Scripture was considered by the Patriarch to be a great help in the spiritual struggle of every Christian. See Ioan Bianu and Nerva Hodoș, *Bibliografia Românească Veche*, vol. 1: 1508–1716 (Bucharest, 1903), 289–90.

<sup>47</sup> Nasrallah, *HMLÉM*, 4.2, 7.

<sup>48</sup> Nasrallah, *HMLÉM*, 4.1, 141–2, note 321.

<sup>49</sup> On this union of Orthodox forces from distant lands, see Hilary Kilpatrick, “From Venice to Aleppo: Early Printing of Scripture in the Orthodox World,” *Chronos* 30 (2014), 47.

intensity after the death of Dabbās in 1724, the year in which, as we have already pointed out, the Church of Antioch was to be divided into two parts, one of which would be united with Rome. From that moment on, the relationship between the Orthodox, the Latins and the Uniates changed completely.<sup>50</sup> The polemical actions progressed on a significant scale, which can be observed in the contents of the Arabic books published by Patriarch Sylvester of Antioch in Wallachia and Moldavia in the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>51</sup>

In conclusion, we can state that Athanasios Dabbās was influenced to a certain extent by the editorial program he observed during his visits to Wallachia. Antim's rich experience as a printer and the extensive activity of the printing presses in Wallachia helped Dabbās set his editorial priorities for the benefit of his Church. He improved the Arabic editions through personal contributions as well, not focusing exclusively on the models available at the time.

---

<sup>50</sup> Nasrallah is very categorical in saying that the Catholic missionaries destroyed harmony within the Patriarchate of Antioch. In 1724, the Church of Antioch, which lost its identity, was divided into two branches: one (the Greco-Catholic) became more Roman than Catholic, and the other more Constantinopolitan than Antiochian. Nasrallah, *HMLÉM*, 4.2, 7. We should not forget that the Uniates also had conflicts with the Latin missionaries sent to the Levant by the See of Rome. See Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient*, 490.

<sup>51</sup> I have presented the contents of these Arabic books printed in the Romanian Principalities between 1745 and 1747 in my article "Livres polémiques imprimés en arabe."