

RECENT FINDINGS REGARDING THE EARLY ARABIC PRINTING IN THE EASTERN OTTOMAN PROVINCES

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The article encloses a preliminary description of a rare copy of an early Arabic printed book authored by the Metropolitan of Aleppo (and two times Patriarch of Antioch) Athanasios Dabbās, *Risāla waḡīza tūḡaḡu kayfiyyat at-tawba wa-l-ʿiṭirāf wa-fī-mā yalzamu l-muʿtarif wa-l-muʿarrif*, i.e., *Brief epistle that explains how repentance and confession are done and what the one who confesses and the confessor have to do*, preserved at Bibliothèque Orientale in Beirut. This is the last book printed in the Aleppo press by Dabbās, in 1711. After a preliminary presentation of the information provided about this book by bibliographers since the beginning of the 19th century, the contents and the visual aspects of the book are discussed. The author's comments address the possible sources of the Arabic text, influences on Dabbās's opinions on repentance and confession, and connections to other similar texts that circulated in the Christian communities of the Near East in Ottoman times. This is a glimpse of one of the topics that is comprised in the European Research Council Advanced Grant (ERC AdG 2019) project *TYPARABIC. Early Arabic Printing for the Arab Christians. Cultural Transfers between Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Near-East in the 18th Century*, which was awarded to the Institute for South-East European Studies of the Romanian Academy in Bucharest (as Host Institution) and will be conducted by the author of the present article, Ioana Feodorov (as Principal Investigator).

Keywords: Early Arabic printing, Athanasios Dabbās, *Epistle on Repentance and Confession*, Aleppo press, beginning of the 18th c., Antim the Iberian, circulation of ideas.

The Institute for South-East European Studies of the Romanian Academy has been awarded this year a European Research Council Advanced Grant (ERC AdG 2019) for the project *TYPARABIC. Early Arabic Printing for the Arab Christians. Cultural Transfers between Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Near-East in the 18th Century*. In my capacity as Principal Investigator, I shall lead a team of nine Senior and Junior Researchers for five years, 2020–2024. To put it in a nutshell, we plan on researching the beginnings of Arabic printing in Eastern Europe and the Middle East in the first half of the 18th Century, the history of the first printers and print presses that produced books here in the Arabic language and with Arabic types before 1800, and the contribution of East-European printers, princes, and Church hierarchs to the transfer of the printing know-how and technologies to the Ottoman provinces of present-day Syria and Lebanon. Although the main corpus of the project is made of Christian Arabic books, the project will also consider printing in Arabic for the Muslim and the general situation of printing (in Greek, Hebrew, and

Turkish) in the Imperial capital of Istanbul and several major printing centres across the Ottoman realm.

My preoccupations with the location of copies of the Christian Arabic books printed in the Romanian Principalities, in Ottoman Syria and Lebanon, have resulted so far in a book¹ and several studies and articles published at home and abroad.² The interest for this domain, born in the '70s of the last century, at a time when the International Association for South-East European Studies was taking shape in Bucharest³, took a new turn in 2016, when the Romanian Orthodox Church celebrated the Church printers and the ecclesiastic literature that they printed in several languages and scripts. While discussing Antim the Iberian's rich book-printing yield, his Arabic and Greek books became one of the salient topics that were discussed in scientific reunions. Almost five years later, the harvest is quite rich: through a joint effort of researchers from many countries, several copies of rare books printed in Aleppo and Beirut were located and new information keeps surfacing. The efforts that I made to locate the books that were described by bibliographers more than a century ago⁴ and were never seen afterward, nor surveyed by recent scholarship, lead to discoveries worth announcing to the interested researchers of early Arabic printing. I am summarizing henceforth my latest findings, which are set to become topics of in-depth surveys within the wider framework of our TYPARABIC project.⁵

One of the most active agents of change in the early 18th century Patriarchate of Antioch was undoubtedly Athanasios Dabbās. His sojourn in Wallachia starting with 1698 helped him acquire typographic skills and tools, sufficient as to initiate the first Arabic printing work in Ottoman Syria, and in the Near East at large.⁶ He is also known for his compositions and translations from Greek.⁷ In 1711 he wrote

¹ *Tipar pentru creștinii arabi. Antim Ivireanul, Atanasie Dabbās și Silvestru al Antiohiei*, Preamble by HH Dr. Casian Crăciun, Archbishop of Dunărea de Jos, Foreword by Dr. Doru Bădără, Brăila, 2016, 378 p.

² "The Arabic Book of the Divine Liturgies Printed in 1745 in Iași by Patriarch Sylvester of Antioch", *Scrinium*, 16, 2020, p. 1–19; "New data on the early Arabic printing in the Levant and its connections to the Romanian Presses", *Revue des études sud-est européennes*, LVI, 2018, p. 197–233; "Beginnings of Arabic printing in Ottoman Syria (1706–1711). The Romanians' part in Athanasios Dabbās's achievements", *ARAM*, 25, 1–2, 2013 (2016), p. 233–262; „Livres arabes chrétiens imprimés par l'aide des Principautés Roumaines au début du XVIII^e siècle. Répertoire commenté”, *Chronos. Revue d'Histoire de l'Université de Balamand*, 34, 2016, p. 7–49; etc.

³ The International Association for South-East European Studies was founded in April 1963 by a group of scholars (historians, philologists, ethnologists, historians of the art) from several countries of Europe and the Middle East, under the auspices of UNESCO. Romania has held the position of the General Secretary ever since. It has remained active to this day, with its latest International Congress held in Bucharest in September 2019 (with more than 400 speakers).

⁴ Two centuries even, if we consider that the earliest source, Schnurrer's *Bibliographia arabica*, is dated 1811.

⁵ I express my deep gratitude to Geoffrey Roper, who kindly read my text and made useful suggestions to me, and Carsten Walbinger, who provided me with essential information on Ulrich Jasper Seetzen.

⁶ Ioana Feodorov, "Beginnings of Arabic printing in Ottoman Syria (1706–1711)...", p. 237 sqq.

⁷ Joseph Nasrallah, *Histoire du mouvement littéraire dans l'Église melchite du V^{ème} au XX^{ème} siècle (1516–1724)*, Vol. IV, t. 1, Louvain – Paris, 1979, p. 137–144.

a *Brief Epistle on How to Repent and to Confess* (*Risāla waḡīza tūdaḥu kayfiyyat at-tawba wa-l-'i'tirāf*). Unlike other works of his that seemed to have been prepared for printing, this one was actually printed, seemingly the last one in a rather long series of titles that started in 1706. The same year, and apparently before printing this *Risāla*, Dabbās had printed three other works. Two were his translations from Greek, and they formed one volume of 421 pp.: a) *The Divine Sermons* (*Al-Mawā'iz aš-šarīfa*), a collection of sixty-six homilies by Athanasios IV, Patriarch of Jerusalem (1452–1460), accompanied by a foreword written by Patriarch Chrisantos of Jerusalem, and b) an *Easter Sermon* of St John Chrysostom (*Maqāla li-l-Qiddīs Yūḥannā Famm aḍ-Ḍahab*). The third work was the *Oktoechos* or *Paraklitikon* (*Kitāb al-Baraklitikūn* or *Al-Mu'azzī*), in two volumes that comprise 806 pp. altogether. This was the first printed version of the Arabic *Oktoechos*, which Dabbās had revised, based on the Greek text.⁸ It is no surprise that the costs for its printing were covered by the Patriarch of Antioch, Cyril V Ibn az-Za'īm. Dabbās's composition, the *Risāla waḡīza tūdaḥu kayfiyyat at-tawba wa-l-'i'tirāf*, was obviously considered important enough to be added to this list of books printed in 1711, the last year that the press functioned. For the first three titles, the providers of financial means are known: they were Patriarch Chrisantos of Jerusalem and Patriarch Cyril V of Antioch. Dabbās's work was printed at his own expense, and he seems to have spent all his resources in this, as immediately afterward the press closed down, or at least no book printed after 1711 is known.

Three historians of Oriental book-printing mentioned this book in the 19th century. The first description was published by Ulrich Jasper Seetzen (1767–1811), a German physician and scientist who journeyed through Syria, Palestine and Yemen in 1803–1811.⁹ One of his tasks was to collect Oriental books and manuscripts for the Ducal library in Gotha. These precious copies of the first Arabic books printed in the Ottoman realm are preserved, to this day, at the Gotha Branch of the Forschungsbibliothek Erfurt. Seetzen published in No. 76 of "Intelligenzblatt der Jenaischen Allgem. Literatur-Zeitung", issue of 13 July 1805, a brief descriptive list of his acquisitions: *Nachricht von den in der Levante befindlichen Buchdruckereyen Von U. J. Seetzen in Haléb 1805* (cols. 641–654). Book titles were printed in Arabic script,

⁸ This *edition princeps* was republished five times (in 1767, 1784, 1816, 1856, and 1866) in the press installed by 'Abdallāh Zāher, Dabbās's former disciple, at the St John the Baptist monastery in Šuweyr. See John-Paul Ghobrial, „The Ottoman World of 'Abdallāh Zāher. Shuwayr Bindings in the Arcadian Library”, in *The Arcadian Library: Bindings and Provenance*, ed. by Giles Mandelbrote and Willem de Bruijn, Oxford, 2014, p. 222. As here the Aleppo edition is not taken into consideration, the first one is considered that of 1767.

⁹ Seetzen learned Arabic in Syria and Palestine, became familiar with the Arab way of life, and was the first to make a scientific survey of the Dead Sea. He did not return to Germany, and died in Yemen in 1811. See Ulrich Jasper Seetzen's *Reisen durch Syrien, Palästina, Phönicien, die Transjordan-Länder, Arabia Petraea und Unter-Aegypten*, edited and commented by Professor Dr. Fr. Kruse, Berlin, 1854–1859, 4 vols.; Carsten Walbiner, "Ulrich Jasper Seetzen [in Aleppo (1803–1805)]", in Neil Cooke and Vanessa Daubney (eds.), *Every Traveller Needs a Compass. Travel and Collecting in Egypt and the Near East*, Oxford, 2015, p. 197–204.

with mistakes accountable either to Seetzen's manuscripts or to the press-workers' poor knowledge of this language (if any at all). The catalogue was drawn by Seetzen while he was still residing in Aleppo, where he had arrived in November 1803.¹⁰ The catalogue begins with two books from the Aleppo press production, printed in 1706 (list items 1 and 2): the *Gospels* ([14] + 93 + 253 pp.)¹¹ and the *Book of the Holy and Pure Gospels or the Brightly-Shining Lamp* (566 pp.). These are actually two versions of the Gospels, the second comprising comments excerpted from the Church Fathers (as in a *Lectionarium*)¹². Placed on p. 170–171 and scarcely described, item 4 is a copy of the *Risāla waḡīza tūḡaḡu kayfiyyat at-tawba wa-l-ʿi-tirāf* of Aleppo, printed in 1711. After the Arabic title, the only data provided is that the book has 170 pp. and it is an 8°-format. Seetzen states that he could not find in the book the place and the year of its printing, but he was assured by locals that it was produced in Aleppo. Also, he found that the paper and printing features were similar to those of the first books listed in his catalogue, which comprised the indication “Aleppo”.¹³

Christian Friedrich von Schnurrer¹⁴ repeated this information in his *Bibliotheca Arabica* (Halae, 1811), on p. 273–274, under the cat. no. 271. He mentions the identical data provided by U. J. Seetzen and gives the precise reference to his published acquisition list. Schnurrer added a description of the book contents, which he might have composed himself: *Tractatus brevis de recta ratione Poenitentiae et Confessionis et quid confessarii et confitentis, nunc prima vice impressus in usum Christianorum* (“Brief treaty on repentance and confession, and what the confessor and the penitent should do, now printed, for the first time, for the Christians' use”). It is possible that Schnurrer did not see the copy of Gotha, but he was, as always, well informed on the sources concerning early printing and book collections that were available in Western Europe at the time.

¹⁰ C. Walbiner, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

¹¹ A scan of this book (CRV 130) is accessible here: aleph23.biblicad.ro:8991/F/6B8CYHPSAC3DMGPHJCPP54G12RFILHJB69N5C9JEV3GQCSRHXV-17246?func=full-set-set&set_number=014523&set_entry=000001&format=999. A description is available in *Antim Ivireanul. Opera tipografică (Antim the Iberian. The Printing Work)*, coord. Archim. Policarp Chițulescu, ed. D. Bădără, I. M. Croitoru, G. Dumitrescu, and I. Feodorov, Bucharest, 2016, p. 88–96 (with 11 ill.). A scan of this chapter is accessible at: <https://ioanafeodorov.academia.edu/>.

¹² Existing copies of this book are rare. There is none in Romania. The copy in the Gotha Branch of the Forschungsbibliothek Erfurt (shelf-mark Theol. 2 F 58/3) was presented by Carsten Walbiner on p. 24–25 of “The Christians of Bilād al-Shām (Syria): Pioneers of Book-Printing in the Arab World”, in *The Beginning of Printing in the Near and Middle East: Jews, Christians and Muslims*, ed. by Klaus Kreiser, Wiesbaden, 2001. Walbiner also commented on its contents in “Melkite (Greek Orthodox) approaches to the Bible at the time of the community's cultural reawakening in the early modern period (17th – early 18th centuries)”, in *Translating the Bible into Arabic: Historical, Text-critical and Literary Aspects*, ed. by Sara Binay and Stefan Leder, Beirut – Würzburg, 2012, p. 55, 58–61. Apparently without any knowledge of the Gotha copy, Seetzen's catalogue or Walbiner's research on this book, Sergey Frantsuzov drew a description of another copy, which he located in 2018 in the collections of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of St Petersburg (“Le premier Lectionnaire arabe orthodoxe imprimé”, in *Istorie și cultură. În onorem academician Andrei Eșanu*, Chișinău, 2018, p. 459–468).

¹³ I am grateful to my colleague Oana Iacubovschi for translating from German this passage of Seetzen's list.

¹⁴ Chr. Fr. von Schnurrer (1742–1822), a theologian, philologist, and Oriental-books bibliographer, was chancellor of the University of Tübingen.

Several decades later, Julius Theodor Zenker records this book at no. 1613 on p. 197 of his *Bibliotheca orientalis: Manuel de bibliographie orientale* (t. I, Leipzig, 1846), giving only the Arabic title and the indication “(impr. à Aleppo)”.

More than a century later, Georg Graf, in his *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur* (Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, III, 1949), on p. 129, having recorded two manuscripts of this text, briefly mentions that it was printed: “Gedruckt [Aleppo 1711] (16^o)¹⁵”.

In his *Histoire du mouvement littéraire dans l'Église melchite du V^{ème} au XX^{ème} siècle (1516-1724)*, when describing the manuscript versions and providing a list of six copies preserved in Lebanon and Syria¹⁶, Joseph Nasrallah mentions that a printed version was made in 1711 in the Aleppo press.¹⁷ His description of Dabbās's work is based on the manuscript copies, not on the printed book, which he seemingly did not see, but read about in Schunrrer's bibliography. He gives the title that he found in some of the manuscripts (not indicated precisely): *Risāla waḡīza tūdaḡu kaiḡiyyat at-tawba wa-l-'i'tirāf wa-ḡī-mā yalzamu l-mu'tarif wa-l-mu'arrif*, i.e., *Brief epistle that explains how repentance and confession are done and what the one who confesses and the confessor have to do*. Nasrallah also mentions a second title, placed by Dabbās in the foreword of his work: *Silk ad-durr an-nazīm ḡī sirr at-tawba wa-l-'i'tirāf al-qawīm* (*The String of Well-Strung Pearls or the Powerful Mystery of Repentance and Confession*), and gives the structure of this work: foreword, three parts, and a conclusion, whereas the three parts are teachings on repentance in general, confession, and the qualities required of a confessor, respectively. He comments that this work is a compilation of various authors, probably Greek in their majority. In footnote 286 (same page), he evokes a handwritten note on one of the manuscripts (again, not indicated precisely) that this work was “collected and compiled from the *Garden of the Fathers*.”¹⁸

Finally, the Tunisian historian of early Arabic printing Wahid Gdoura, who did not see a copy of this book either, mentioned the title in a list (n. 103, on p. 146) in his work *Le Début de l'imprimerie arabe à Istanbul et en Syrie: Évolution de l'Environnement Culturel (1706–1787)*, published in Tunis in 1985. He probably found the title in the above-mentioned work by Nasrallah, one of his preferred sources.

A rare copy of the printed *Risāla waḡīza tūdaḡu kaiḡiyyat at-tawba wa-l-'i'tirāf* is preserved at Bibliothèque Orientale in Beirut (shelf-mark 203.133).¹⁹ It is

¹⁵ There is no knowing where he took from the information that this is a 16^o-format.

¹⁶ *Šarḡe* 8/74 (1711), *Deyr eš-Šīr N.C.* 711 (1758), *Al-Ma'ūnāt* 41 (1797), *Balamand* 177 (1770), and two at the Antiochian Orthodox Patriarchate of Damascus, *Patr. Orth. Damas* 1581 (1870) and *Patr. Orth. Damas* 1575, 3; cf. J. Nasrallah, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹⁷ This information is repeated *ibidem*, p. 146.

¹⁸ The anonymous writer of the note may have been referring to the Coptic collection *Apophthegmata Patrum* or *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, whose versions (some in Ethiopic and Greek) were translated and circulated widely all across the Arab East.

¹⁹ I express my thanks to Stefano di Pietrantonio, for drawing my attention to the presence of this book at Bibliothèque Orientale, and to Fr Ronney al-Gemayyel, SJ, for confirming this information to me. The scan of the book and the approval to publish Figs. 1 and 2 hereafter were sent to me by Mrs. Magda Nammour, reference librarian at the Bibliothèque Orientale in Beirut, to whom all my gratitude goes.

an 8° format of 171 unnumbered pages, later numbered in pencil, possibly by a librarian. Deteriorated by usage and badly eaten by bookworms (the same as the printed text inside), the book cover is made of brown leather over thick cardboard, with a non-figurative pressed-stamp on both front and back covers. The shape of this stamp, a polygonal medallion, was widespread in binding workshops all over the Ottoman East.²⁰ The inside-sheet of the front cover holds a modern rectangular stamp: “Université St.-Joseph, *Al-Maktabat aš-Šarqiyya*, Bibliothèque Orientale”. The book has the shelf-mark 8D3/28. The Bibliothèque Orientale catalogue gives the following description:

رسالة وجيزة توضح كيفية التوبة والاعتراف وفيما يلزم المعترف والمعرف طبعت حديثاً لنفع
المسيحيين - [روميه] : [د.ن.]، 1711. - [171 ص.] ؛ 16 سم

Besides the title, as given above, this description gives the year 1711 (Gregorian calendar), no press mentioned, 171 pages, and 16 cm (dimension?). In its unified catalogue, the Library of the Saint-Joseph University indicates Aleppo as the publication place.

There are eleven text lines per page and, starting with page 2, a catchword is placed on all the verso pages, as in manuscripts. Incidentally, this is a feature found in the Arabic texts of all the books printed by Dabbās, both in Wallachia and in Aleppo.

The first page (Fig. 1), on the left of the front cover inside-sheet, holds an identical title to the one indicated by Nasrallah as present in manuscripts of this work: *Risāla waḡīza tūḡaḡu kaiḡiyyat at-tawba wa-l-ʿi-tirāf wa-ḡi-mā yalzamu l-mu-tarif wa-l-mu-arrif*, i.e., *Brief epistle that explains how repentance and confession are done and what the one who confesses and the confessor have to do*. Next come the words: *ḡubi-at ḡadīḡ^{am} li-manḡaʿi l-maḡḡiyyīn*, “recently printed for the benefit of the Christians”. The title page is richly decorated, with an elaborate vignette on top, above the title, followed by a smaller portion of the same vignette and a Seraphim (I return to the decoration later). Written in pencil, the date 1711 (Ar. ١٧١١) appears, and, to the lower left, the word *rūmiyya*, probably to be read “Rome”²¹. As the title page does not provide any information on the place where the book was printed, the bibliographer might have proposed this city, the main source of Arabic printed books that reached the Near East. Two round ownership-stamps are visible: a small, faded one, and a larger one, belonging to “Université Saint-Joseph”.

Page 2 begins with the Christian *basmala*: *Bi-smi l-ʿĀb wa-l-Ibn wa-r-Rūḡ al-Muḡaddas Allāḡ al-Wāḡid*. This is followed by thirteen lines of lauds addressed to God, ending in the upper part of page 3. The twelve lines that follow, composed in the 3rd person, are occupied by the titles of, and lauds to, the former Patriarch Athanasios

²⁰ Luminița Kövari (Library of the Romanian Academy) indicated to me that this polygonal form was used also quite extensively in Romanian book-binding workshops of the 17th–18th c., in many versions, but this specific center-model is not a familiar one here.

²¹ The reading *rūmiyy* is also an option, if the bibliographer intended to mark the Greek-Orthodox, Byzantine-rite tradition of the book-content, but the position of this word at the end of the title page, after the year (1711), indicates that this was intended to be the presumed city of the press.

Dabbās, ending with the word *'Amīn* in the middle of page 4. Immediately after, a text in the 1st person, seemingly composed by the author of the book, Athanasios Dabbās, reports on the chief reason for writing this work: his awareness of the lack of knowledge of the Christians in his eparchy about repentance and confession. Thus, the author felt compelled to right this wrong and collected in this Epistle, from the “garden of the teachers’ books”, some of its overflowing flowers (*ḡanaytu la-hum min riyād kutub al-mu'allimīn ba'd 'azhār fawā'idi-hi*). The structure of the book is presented afterward (p. 6): it is divided into three parts, with an Introduction and an Ending. The main text divisions are Part One, “On repentance altogether”; Part Two, “On total repentance, which is the secret confession”; Part Three, “On what the confessor needs to do”. The rest of this opening text, i.e., 16 lines on pp. 6-7, contains advice and recommendations to the reader, to study this epistle and observe all its teachings, for the benefit of his soul and God’s forgiveness. The phrase ends in the customary request to the reader: *wa min-ka d-du'ā al-mustaḡāb*, “I call for your prayers.” All through the text, the author will address *al-mu'min*, “the devout”.

From p. 8 to p. 19, the Introduction, *Al-Muqaddima*, “explains who should repent, what are the requirements of repenting, and the advice to proceed to it.”

Part One, “On repentance altogether”, beginning on p. 19, line 4, is divided into four chapters.

1. Ch. 1, “On the definition of repentance”, pp. 19–20.
2. Ch. 2, “What is repentance”, pp. 20–21.
3. Ch. 3, “On the two kinds of repentance” (inner and outer), pp. 21–23.
4. Ch. 4, “On soul-searching (*fahṣ ad-damīr, fahṣ an-naḥs*), which is the reason and sign of repentance”, pp. 23–31.

Part Two, beginning on p. 31, is divided into five chapters.

1. Ch. 1, “On the definition of confession, how to make it, and its requirements”, on pp. 31–40.
2. Ch. 2, “On contrition” (*insihāq*)²², pp. 40–42.
3. Ch. 3, “On determination”, pp. 42–51.
4. Ch. 4, “On the fulfilment of the canons”, pp. 51–58. This chapter is followed, on pp. 59–69, by a *Note (Tanbīh)* discussing the case of the deceased who did not confess his sins before dying.
5. Ch. 5, “On the fruit and the benefits of confessing”, pp. 69–73.

Part Three, beginning on p. 73, has a slightly different title than the one first indicated: “On what the priest who receives the confession needs to do”. This part is made of five chapters too.

1. Ch. 1, “On how he needs to be and behave”, pp. 73–82, starting with “On how he has to be”.
2. Ch. 2, “On what the priest must do and what his task is, to achieve this holy sacrament”, pp. 83–112.

²² *Insihāq* = contrition, penitence, repentance, cf. *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. M. Cowan, 4th ed., 1994, Ithaca, NY, p. 466, s.v. *saḥaqa*.

- 1) Pp. 83–99: To hear confession, the priest must observe certain regulations and possess certain skills (seven sections). These include: to have the approval of his Bishop (here a note is inserted, explaining the hierarchy of priests and Bishops according to Old Testament and New Testament teachings); to be knowledgeable in the divine spirituality (to be able to explain the delicate matters that he may hear during confessions); to be resolute, intelligent, and considerate; to keep the secret of all that was told to him, until he dies; at the time of hearing a confession he must be pure of all mortal sins; not to make any distinction between the rich and the poor who come to confess to him.
- 2) Pp. 99–112: During the confession, the priest must observe certain rules (three sections).
 3. Ch. 3, “On the sins that the confessor needs to know about, to examine them when confessed, and the one who confesses must know about, to search his soul”, pp. 113–166, divided into four sections.
 - 1) “On sins and their roots”.
 - 2) “On sins against the Holy Spirit”.
 - 3) “On sins that breach God’s Ten Commandments.”
 - 4) “On sins that breach the Covenant with God.”

The Ending, *Al-Ḥātima*, on pp. 167–171, begins with the explanation: “This is about what the spiritual and the bodily parents need to teach their children.” The last four lines, typeset in a *cul-de-sac* shape, provide information about the book (Fig. 2): “The year one thousand seven hundred and eleven of the Christian era. To our Lord, eternal glory and everlasting gratitude, Amen.” On the lower third of the page, after the text ends, is printed the smiling head of an angel, with a halo and wings beneath it (an Italian-style *putto*).

Four blank pages follow, one – the inside of the back-cover. A handwritten note at the top of the third blank page, which was covered in large black ink strokes, is completely illegible.

To support his comments and advice, the author cites St John of Damascus (Part One, Ch. 1), passages from the Old Testament (p. 40–42), the episode of David the Prophet and Nathan (p. 55), the *Numbers* (pp. 56–57). He evokes Basil, Peter, and Dionysius, the Patriarchs of Alexandria, Gregory the Theologian, Basil the Great, and John Chrysostom (p. 52–53), Solomon the Wise (p. 81), Paul the Apostle, and Malachi the Prophet (p. 85).

To understand the foundations of Dabbās’s theological thinking and spiritual teachings enclosed in this book, his other works and the history of his contacts need to be considered. The first question that comes to mind is why did Dabbās feel the need to address the topics of repentance and confession in a personal composition. The answer to this question can be gleaned by surveying some other actions that he took in his eparchy of Aleppo, especially after returning from his long sojourn in Wallachia.

For instance, Athanasios Dabbās worked together with Elias Faḥr (Ilyās Ibn Faḥr at-Ṭrābulṣī, d. 1758) on a comment regarding the first section of the trilogy *Ekthesis* of Gabriel Severus *The Curing Antidote to the Poison of the [Archbishop of] Philadelphia* (*At-tiryāq aš-šāfi min samm al-Fīlādelḥī*). This book discussed the main points of

contention between the Byzantine-rite Church of Antioch and the Latin Church.²³ According to Louis Cheikho, Dabbās wrote a *Catechism of the Orthodox Faith*.²⁴ This would have been another attempt at improving the knowledge of the Orthodox faith in the Patriarchate of Antioch, at a time when the Latin propaganda, organized by tireless Jesuit missionaries, was most active.

In 1716, more than a decade after his return to Aleppo, where he had resumed his pastoral control of the parish that he agreed to lead after he had temporarily relinquished the Patriarchal See of the Church of Antioch, Dabbās issued a Directive that indicated to the Christians of the Antiochian Church how to lead a righteous life and to behave in Church and at home. Among others, he forbade the Christening of infants later than 40 days since birth, stating that the death of an infant while unbaptized was a mortal sin for the parents.²⁵ The definition of mortal sins is one of the main topics that Dabbās discusses in his *Risāla waḡīza*, in such minute detail that the reader is left with the impression of his awareness of a pervasive ignorance on the part of the common people of his eparchy.

The second important question concerns the possible sources of Dabbās's views on sin, repenting, and confession. I can advance two answers at this time, both connected to his visits to Wallachia.

In 1711, at the time the *Risāla waḡīza* was printed, Dabbās had already translated Dimitrie Cantemir's *The Divan or the Wise Man's Disputation with the World, or the Litigation between Soul and Body* (Romanian title: *Divanul sau gâlceava înțeleptului cu lumea sau giudețul sufletului cu trupul*), whose title he translated into Arabic as *Ṣalāh al-ḥakīm wa-fasād al-‘ālam ad-damīm* (*Salvation of the Sage and Ruin of the Sinful World*).²⁶ The final version of this text, revised by Gabriel Farḥāt²⁷, was seemingly ready in 1705.²⁸ *Book One* and *Book Two* of

²³ See Bernard Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient au temps de la Réforme catholique (Syrie, Liban, Palestine, XVI^e–XVIII^e s.)*, Rome, 1994, p. 476; Joseph Nasrallah, Pr. Rachid Haddad, *Histoire du mouvement littéraire dans l'église melchite du V^{ème} au XX^{ème} siècle (1724–1800)*, vol. IV, t. 2, Louvain – Paris, 1989, p. 115–116.

²⁴ He was contradicted by Joseph Nasrallah, in the absence of a copy of this work. See J. Nasrallah, *Histoire du mouvement littéraire dans l'église melchite du V^e au XX^e siècle (1699–1250)*, vol. III, t. 1, Louvain – Paris, 1983, p. 135.

²⁵ Abbott Paul Carali (Būlus Qar'ali) edited two chapters of Dabbās's Directive, *On baptism* (Ch. 3) and *On the deceased* (Ch. 4), in "Manšūrāni li-l-baṭriyark Aṭanāsiyūs Dabbās wa-l-muṭrān Iḡnāṭiyūs Ḡarbū", *Al-Maḡalla al-sūriyya*, 1, 15 Jan. 1928, Part 3, p. 77, after comments on p. 6–8. See also Bernard Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient*, p. 524.

²⁶ Dabbās translated the Greek version of Cantemir's book, which was prepared in 1697–1698 by the Romanian prince's Greek teacher Jeremiah Cacavelas, with the title: *Kritirion ī dialexis toy sofoy me ton kosmon ī krisis tīs psychīs me to sōma, dia mochtou kai filoponias Iōannou Dīmītriou Kōnstantinou Boeboda*. The Arabic translation is a fairly accurate transfer of the Greek version of Cantemir's text.

²⁷ See Dimitrie Cantemir, *Salvation of the Sage and Ruin of the Sinful World*, Arabic edition. English translation, notes and Indices by Ioana Feodorov, TSEC, vol. VI, Leiden: Brill, 2016, p. 64–70; eadem, "The Arabic Version of Dimitrie Cantemir's *Divan*: a Supplement to the Editor's Note", *Revue des études sud-est européennes*, XLVI, 2008, p. 195–212.

²⁸ As I explained in the previously mentioned book (p. 66), the Arabic *Divan* was probably prepared for printing as well, but the financial situation of the press did not allow Dabbās to see this project through.

Cantemir's work are his composition, while *Book Three* is Cantemir's translation, from Latin, of a book authored by Andreas Wissovatus, one of the chief theologians of the Polish Unitarians.

Cantemir's work comprises passages that include the same references as the *Risāla waḡīza*, in connection with the idea of repentance, sin, and confession. Thus, in *Book One*, Chapter 43, the same examples of sinners and repentance are offered.

"He finally liberated himself from your grip, realized the filthy mischief that you did to him, decided to confess his sin truthfully, as the Prophet Nathan explained to him. So the penitent Prophet chanted, saying: 'Have mercy upon me, Lord, by thy great mercy' (*Ps* 51, 1), or when he says: 'I know my faults, and my sins are permanently in my sight' (*Ps* 51, 3)."

Moreover, repentance and confession come up when the translator (or translators, if we count Farḥāt in) add comments concerning the idea of Purgatory.

"O you! Do not imagine that after the ruin of the framework of your body and the separation from your soul, and if you die without repentance, your sins would be forgiven, in a hell where there is no repentance and no acknowledgment of mistakes. [For no imaginary Latin *purgatorium*, or even one hundred of those, would do any good to you, since there is no confession and no repentance in hell.]"

As a whole, this work is devoted to teachings on the way to Salvation and how to acquire a place in Heaven. Naturally, repentance and confession come up in the flow of Cantemir's (and Wissovatus's) discourse. Repentance, and the advice to atone, appear (sometimes in strong words) more than twenty-four times in the *Ṣalāḥ al-ḥakīm*, in *Book One* and *Book Two*, the ones that were composed by Cantemir, not by Wissovatus. In *Book Three*, at least twenty passages refer to repenting and confessing one's sins early in life, and regularly. The wisdom and the tone of Wissovatus's work are also perfectly aligned with the one in Dabbās's *Risāla waḡīza*:

"You who used God's grace for evil deeds, should you also be granted by God time to repent? This rarely happens. Beware not to give the flower of your life to Satan, and present to God the dry stalks. Beware not to fall in the pit of despair with sin, for we have been given a lot of examples of repentance and remorse. Do not rest at all, because the end of your life is unknown. Do not think that you will abandon sin when it will abandon you."

If we were to speculate, we could imagine that, while translating Cantemir's book, Dabbās encountered several passages where the Latins' claims were briefly mentioned, including the ones about the existence of purgatory, which are closely related to the discussion about sin and atonement. This was an incentive for him to address, in his own *Risāla waḡīza*, the contentious issues of repentance, confession, and sin, to enlighten the Arabic-speaking audience of Ottoman Syria, who were also facing the forceful Jesuit propaganda. In any case, a comparison of the two texts, Cantemir's *Ṣalāḥ al-ḥakīm* and Dabbās's *Risāla waḡīza*, bears a great probability of discovering similarities between them, both in content and in form.

Another book, originating in Wallachia, holds a close similarity to Dabbās's *Risāla waḡīza*. It was written by Antim the Iberian, a very important person in several of Dabbās's projects, the first and foremost being printing in Arabic. During his long sojourn in Bucharest, he was in close contact with the brilliant Georgian-born scholar, whose rise to the rank of Bishop he could witness while in Bucharest. In 1705, Antim, then Bishop of Râmnic, printed in his second press, which he had installed there when moving from Bucharest, a book of 50 pages (25 folios, numbered on the recto page as in manuscripts, i.e., 50 pp.) that he had written himself: *Brief Teachings on the Mystery of Repentance (Învățătură pre scurtu pentru taina pocăinții)*. The small book, an 8^o format, is printed in Romanian with Cyrillic script, in black ink, 18 lines per page.²⁹ Its structure is not far from Dabbās's epistle.

Part One, beginning on p. 2, has four divisions.

1. On repentance, in brief, with some useful teachings (p. 2–10).
2. On repentance, what it is, how to achieve it, and how to proceed to its first step (p. 10–22).
3. On confession (p. 22–28).
4. On how to achieve the penance (p. 28–30).

Part Two, beginning on p. 30, has two divisions.

1. How the confessor must be, and how he must hear confession, and how he must set people straight (p. 32–35).
2. What the confessor should ask the one who confesses and how he must begin (p. 35–50).

The book was addressed to clergy and laity alike. Its declared purpose was to contribute to the improvement of the Christians' conduct and to teach priests how to advise the devout, during confession, on how to rectify their bad behaviour. Antim wrote and printed this text in Romanian to grant it a wide circulation. Among Antim's works, this was one of the most appreciated by the Romanian readership.³⁰ Thus, his teachings on repentance, sin, and confession, made available in the vernacular, reached the widest Romanian audience possible.

Since Antim's work was not available in Greek (as far as we know), Dabbās could only have become acquainted with them through their conversations, which must have been frequent, for several years, as they often met at Court and worked together in two of Antim's print presses. Again, they seem to have had a similar outlook on many theological and ritual points, as a comparison of the two texts demonstrates. Here is just one relevant example, out of the many available.

Part Three of the *Risāla waḡīza*, Ch. 1, "On how he needs to be and behave", starts with: "On how he has to be". Here, Dabbās defines the confessor and his required features, from all points of view (p. 73–75).

²⁹ See the description by Archim. Policarp Chițulescu in idem (coord. ed.), *Antim Ivireanul. Opera tipografică*, Bucharest, 2016, p. 132–133.

³⁰ One single copy is preserved today, at the Library of the Romanian Academy in Bucharest.

“Know that the priest charged with hearing confession, which is a great authority over all the kingdoms of the world, its glories, all its nations and realms, needs to be endowed with all holy virtues and have all the spiritual and bodily qualities together. He must be righteous, pious, pure, intelligent, and chaste in his conduct, with a pure mind, to have a humble heart, to be mild-tempered in his interactions, to embody perfection to its utmost extent, in all respects, to have a good reputation, to be agreeable, resourceful, well-spoken, strong-minded, stern in his assertions, to avoid banter, mockery, and idle talk, to be pleasant to talk to, and the best educator possible, in order to tend to his flock. For if he cannot discipline himself, how would he be able to discipline others?”³¹

In Antim’s *Brief Teachings on the Mystery of Repentance*, the definition of the confessor is placed in Part Two³²: “How the confessor must be, and how he must hear confession, and how he must set people straight” (p. 32–35). This is the part that closely resembles the text above.

“The priest who accepts the difficult and challenging task of hearing confession has to be elderly, or at least 40 years of age, honest, devout, leading a good life, well-spoken, a well-doer, he must not be a drunkard, nor a tavern-goer, nor an irritated man, nor someone who utters profanities or swears, and, in brief, he must avoid, as much as possible, to be a source of scandal or a bad example for the common people. Second, he has to be enriched with education and good deeds, and to understand the Holy Books and the Canons of our Church, which will help him rectify the people who confess to him.”

As for the *form* of this book, some remarks can be made at first glance regarding the salient features of the types and typesetting. The Arabic types are identical to those used in the Aleppo press for the second edition of the Gospels, financed by the Cossack hatman Ivan Mazepa.³³ They are completely different from the first set of types used in the books printed in 1706–1707, which had a nicer, more regular shape, and showed a greater resemblance to the Arabic types cast in the press of Antim the Iberian at the Monastery of Snagov. Having surveyed several copies of the books printed in Aleppo, I can safely state that there was a change in the type between 1707 and 1708. As happened in the Romanian presses as well, when a set of type became too worn-out to be used for further printing, it was replaced with a new set of types. This one, the last one made in Dabbās’s press, is considerably less elegant than the one used in his first books of 1706, which still reflected the influence of Antim the Iberian’s printing style.

Also, differences are visible in the typesetting of this book, as compared to earlier ones. This reveals the option of the typesetter for a text version closer to the

³¹ I am grateful to Dr. Charbel Nassif (CEDRAC, Beirut) for kindly reading the passages that I translated from Arabic and suggesting improvements.

³² *Despre taina Pocăinței (On the Mystery of Repentance)*, in Sfântul Antim Ivireanul, *Despre păstorirea credincioșilor*, text selection, introduction and comments by Fr Adrian Agachi, Bucharest, 2016, p. 203.

³³ Besides the copy of the 1708 edition of the Aleppo *Gospels* preserved at the Library of the Romanian Academy in Bucharest (CRV 155 A), a copy in the library of the Melkite Catholic Monastery of St John of Šuwayr in Khenchara (Matn region of Lebanon) was recently presented online by the Ambassador of Ukraine to Lebanon, after a visit there. See the presentation at <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/30481953.html>.

pronunciation of the Arabic-speaking readers of Ottoman Syria. E.g., the letter *dāl* is frequently replaced by *dāl* and *īā* has become *tā* (especially in numerals), reflecting a Middle Arabic reading. This occurs not only in frequent words such as *alladī*, but also in verbs: *‘aduba* (to be pleasant, agreeable) > *‘aduba* (p. 72), or *hadaba* (to educate, instruct, correct, set right) > *hadaba* (p. 73). On the other hand, the typesetter of the 1711 book correctly typesets *‘ilā* with *‘alif maqṣūra*, not *yā*, as the one of the 1708 book had done.

Besides the possible ties of the *Risāla waḡīza* with the Romanian Principalities in terms of contents (sources, influences), a definite factor of closeness is its decoration. The book is poorly decorated, with only a few ornaments that complement the text. Several ornamental elements are common to books printed in Wallachia and those of Dabbās’s press in Aleppo. We recognize easily, several times on each page, the complex star that separates lines and paragraphs, which is also present in all the Aleppo books, as well as in those printed in Beirut during Sylvester’s patriarchal tenure.³⁴ The element that forms the vignette on the title page is identical to one of the elements in Antim’s presses, and also one present in books printed in Iași before 1700. The Seraph on the same page is also found in the Aleppo Gospels of 1708 and in two Romanian church-books printed in Iași in 1747.³⁵ Its source could be common, possibly a book printed in Venice or Moschopoli. The Baroque aspect of the Angel on the final page, which is also present in the 1711 *Oktoechos* or *Paraklitikon* of Aleppo³⁶, may suggest the involvement of Abdallah Zāḥir, Dabbās’s disciple in the Aleppo press, who was in favour of the Western-style illustration of the books printed in Italy.

A final note takes us to 1747, a time when Patriarch Sylvester of Antioch had resumed, in Iași (Romanian Principality of Moldavia), the printing work of his predecessor, Athanasios Dabbās. In the above-mentioned list of Seetzen’s acquisitions, a book printed in 1747 is briefly mentioned, with minimal information given: *Kitāb muršid al-ḥāṭi’ fī sirr at-tawba wa-l-i’tirāf*, i.e., *The Sinner’s Guide to the Mystery of Repentance and Confession*. The information provided by Seetzen is that it was a book enclosing VIII pp. (*Introduction*) + 286 pp., in-8⁰, printed in 1747. No press indication is given. Could this be a re-print of Dabbās’s *Risāla waḡīza tūdahū kaiḡiyat at-tawba wa-l-i’tirāf* of 1711, revised by Sylvester? As I have no information on the location of a copy of this book, this path will have to wait.

The information that I presented here encloses the preliminary remarks that I was able to formulate after a cursory analysis of Dabbās’s *Brief epistle that explains how repentance and confession are done*, printed in Aleppo in 1711. I have also provided suggestions for further research. The rest is yet to come.

³⁴ See Ioana Feodorov, “New data on the early Arabic printing in the Levant and its connections to the Romanian Presses”, *Revue des études sud-est européennes*, 56, 2018, p. 233, fig. 13.

³⁵ *Liturgier (Book of the Divine Liturgies)*, CRV 255, and *Triodion*, CRV 262.

³⁶ The copy at the Library of the Romanian Academy has the indicative CRV 161 A.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

