

## The story of the Armenian alphabet

Carolyn Puzzovio

### Part 1: historical summary

It began with an extraordinary vision, over 1600 years ago:



In 405 AD, the remarkable diligence of Mesrob Mashtots, a monk in the Armenian royal court, was responsible for a critical landmark in Armenian history. Mesrob was commissioned by the Church to devise a suitable alphabet to replace the various types of cuneiform then in use, in order to create a new written language to unite the population and make the Scriptures available to them.

Armenia's history has been one of persecution, oppression and war, which gradually resulted in a small land locked country presently just ten per cent of its original size. In those troubled times, Mesrob believed that his new alphabet would be key to the survival of the cultural identity of a people. He was proved right and the unique 'aybuben' has played a pivotal role in Armenia's history. Even as recently as the twentieth century, when Armenia was under Soviet

control, the Russian language with its Cyrillic alphabet was poised to replace the traditional Armenian.

In 1991, when Armenia became an independent republic, things began to change and the Armenian Ministry of Culture now even has a *Department of Saving and Creating Armenian Fonts* - seizing on the opportunities offered by Unicode and OpenType to encourage the provision of good quality digital type for Armenian communications, which they see as vital to the future development of the country. Only three years ago, Armenian speakers worldwide celebrated the 1600 th anniversary of their unique alphabet, the *aybuben*.

This article provides a very brief overview of the developments of those 1600 years...

### The Armenian language

The Armenian language is an independent member of the Indo-European group of languages. (The official language of the Republic of Armenia is called *Hayeren*; the classical Armenian language used in old manuscripts and religious texts is known as *Grabar*). Originating in this remote mountainous region, the language never spread widely or permanently. However, faced by enemies on all sides and regularly subject to invasion and genocide, Armenians gradually fled their homeland and settled in many other countries. Nowadays, many more Armenians live outside of Armenia than in the country itself, so the language is an important factor in the preservation of a cultural identity which unites the Diaspora.

Of course, the unique alphabet was vitally important in this, enabling a religious and literary culture specific to the Armenian people to grow, develop and survive.

1 Armenia is a small country bordering Georgia, Turkey, Iran and Azerbaijan and includes the land of Karabagh in the East. Map drawn by Timothy Donaldson.

2 St. Mesrob's statue outside the Matenadaran library in Yerevan.

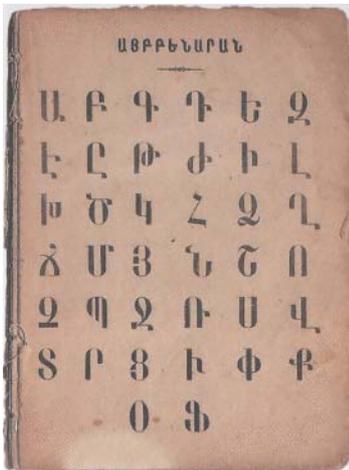
3 The capital alphabet from a children's book published in Armenia, 1906. Armenian children usually learn these forms, the original alphabet, before the lower case letters.

4 Fragment of manuscript showing the *erkatagir* – the form of uncial script used in the 11th and 12th centuries. Example from a later 14th century Gospel. © Matenadaran, Yerevan.

5 Manuscript showing the *notregir* or notary hand and two lines of *bolorgir* (in red ink). Echmiadzin, 18th century. © Matenadaran, Yerevan.



## The origins of the Armenian alphabet



Mesrob Mashtots (c.361-440 AD) is said to have seen the 36 letters of the new alphabet in a vision from God (some say in letters of fire!). It was adopted in 406 AD by an edict of the Armenian King Vramshabuh and has remained virtually unchanged since then. Mesrob was canonised for his alphabet so has since been revered as a saint in the Armenian Apostolic Church (the oldest Christian church in the world), with a tomb at Oshakan marked by an alphabet-incised stone.

Although the legend of Mesrob's holy vision is an accepted part of Armenian folklore, there is evidence of some considerable effort in his creation of the new alphabet and he was certainly a visionary.

After extensive travel and study, Mashtots began with the concept of creating a character for each phoneme in the Armenian language to develop a completely unambiguous phonetic alphabet, thus avoiding confusion in pronunciation or the need for diacritics. He also created new punctuation. Mashtots began by adopting the Greek pattern of writing from left to right and the abecedyary of the Greek alphabet was partially followed. 22 of the characters corresponded to the Greek sounds and Mesrob added fourteen to denote sounds unknown in Greek a total of 36 characters.

The true origins of the letterforms themselves still remain a mystery - but the character shapes show evidence of influence from various sources, both Eastern and Western. New theories are still being developed, but it is known that a famous Greek scribe, Rufinus, assisted with their refinement.

These original uncial letters feature simplicity, perfect proportions and good legibility. They later became used as the capital (majuscule) forms. The upright, rounded forms - a shape seen often in ancient (and modern) Armenian architecture - are known as *erkatagir*. (The name means *iron letters*, though the reason is unclear). The lower case (minuscule) characters developed from handwriting in the 11th and 12th centuries, as the scribes began to slope the letters and make them smaller. This sloped cursive style is known as *bolorgir*, meaning 'round script' - though actually its forms are often rather angular. Another style, *notregir* (notary hand), developed in the 14th century, a more upright cursive which was more economical with pen strokes and was used generally for annotation.

Two further characters, 'o' and 'f', were added in the 12th century, as words containing these sounds infiltrated from other languages - this then made the final total of thirty-eight characters which has remained unchanged since then.



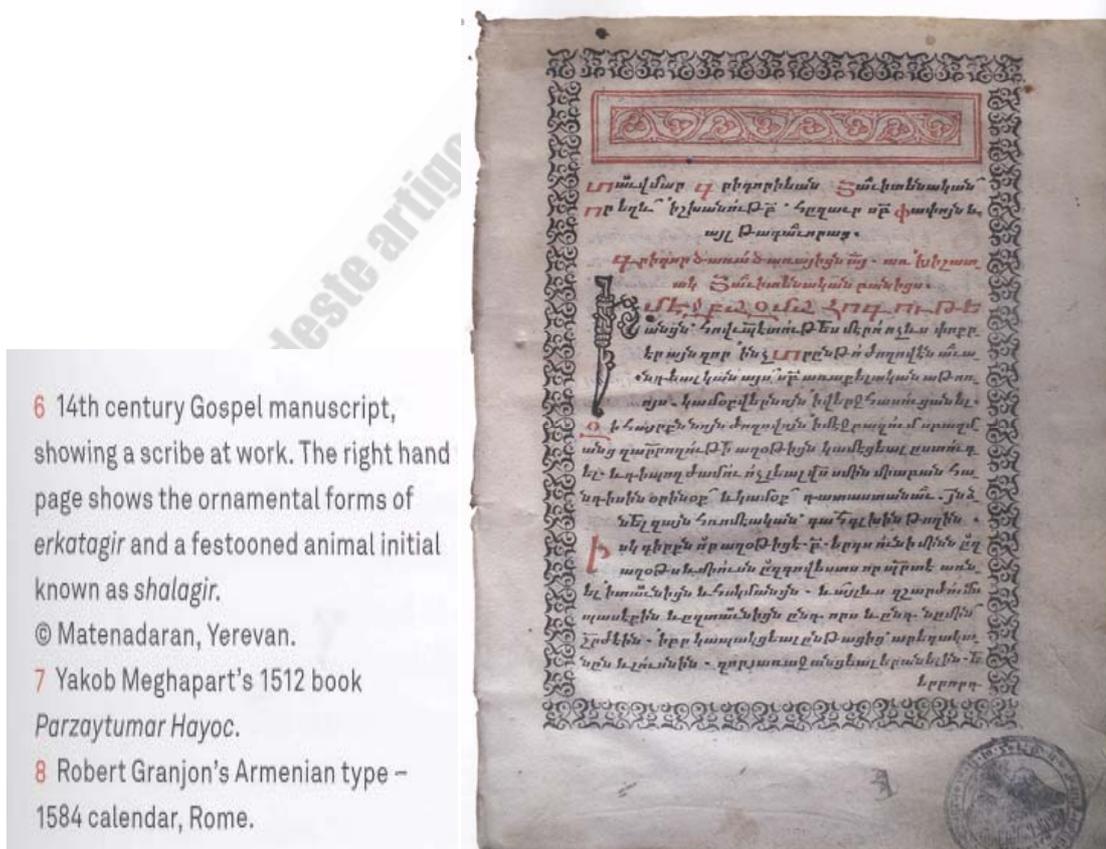
## The Armenian manuscript tradition

As planned, once the Armenians had their own written language, a programme of education of Armenian people began immediately; important works of the Scriptures were translated and thus began a rich tradition of written and illuminated manuscripts of religious and literary works. Many beautiful manuscripts, once treasured by their owners, still exist in collections around the world and some contain pages dating back to the 6th century - although complete manuscripts from this period have not survived, largely due to the sacking of monasteries. By examining these handwritten manuscripts, it is possible to trace the development of the letterforms, which reveals that they have changed little in the last thousand years. The earliest surviving fragments of a document are from the 5th century, so those most closely resembling Mesrob's original script, and can be seen in the Matenadaran Library, Yerevan - the repository for many thousands of valuable manuscripts and printed books.

Of course, the work of the scribe was the only method of creating books until the invention of moveable type by Gutenberg in the 1450s. However, where Armenian books are concerned, this period lasted for much longer and Armenia itself did not have a printing press until the late eighteenth century. Until that time, the most important developments in Armenian type production and printing took place in Europe.

## Armenian printing in Europe and beyond

Armenian manuscripts were becoming scarce in 16th century Armenia, to the consternation of the Apostolic Church leaders who felt their people should have access to the Scriptures, thus ensuring the continuation of their religion, so essential to the preservation of their culture. Mediaeval monastic libraries had been destroyed by invading troops of the Persian and Ottoman empires and foreign domination of the country made the introduction of printing to the Armenian homeland impossible for more than three hundred years after Gutenberg's invention.



6 14th century Gospel manuscript, showing a scribe at work. The right hand page shows the ornamental forms of *erkatagir* and a festooned animal initial known as *shalagir*.

© Matenadaran, Yerevan.

7 Yakob Meghapat's 1512 book *Parzaytumar Hayoc*.

8 Robert Granjon's Armenian type - 1584 calendar, Rome.

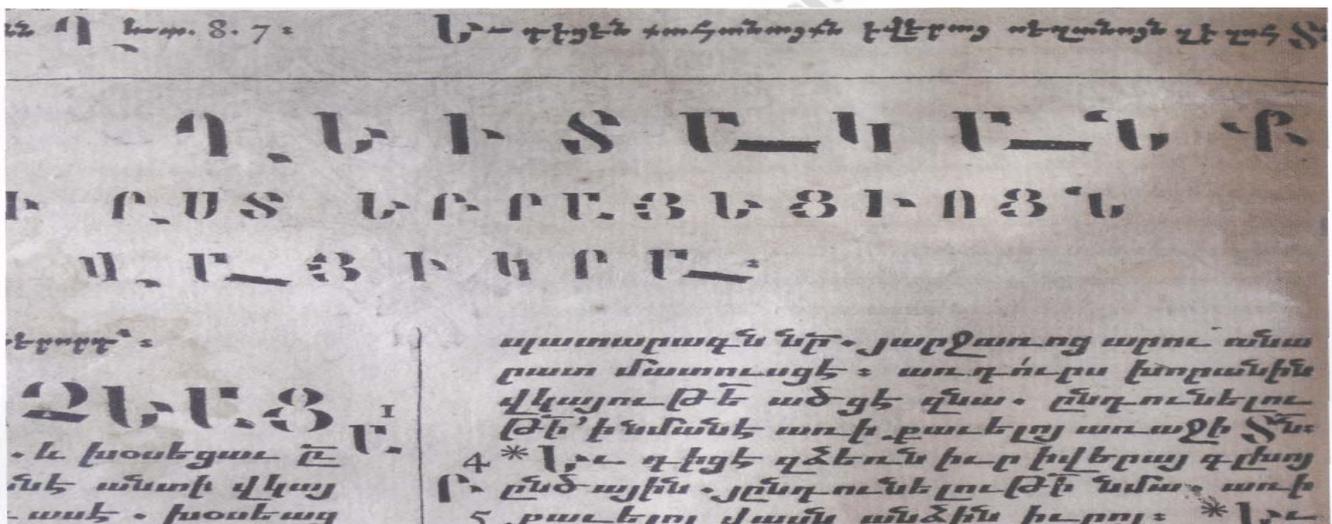
Armenian printing began in Venice in 1512 when Yakob Meghapat, a priest, published the first Armenian book, *Urbatagir*, a prayer book, with the assistance of the small and wealthy Armenian community there. His types, with upright characters, resemble the script used in

contemporary manuscripts of the time and may not have been cast but cut as woodblocks. Yakob Meghapart managed to publish five other important books during the three years the press survived.

Over fifty years later, the second Armenian printer, Abgar Dpir Toxatetsi (d. c.1572) continued printing in Venice, which was a major centre for printing in Europe at the time. However, the Vatican controlled the printing of religious books in Italy and permission from the Pope had to be sought. Abgar Dpir cast new styles of characters in 1565 using punches cut by a German punchcutter and began to use two sizes of metal type. He published his first book in Venice in 1565 entitled *Pokrik Kerakanutyun* or *Aibbenaran* and by 1569 he had published seven more books, though he moved his printing house to Constantinople in the 1560s to become the first printing press in the Ottoman Empire (and therefore closer to Armenia). Features of the books Abgar printed suggest that he was imitating the work of Yakob Meghapart.

These early attempts at printing in Armenian proved very difficult but soon, across the printing centres of Europe, a number of renowned punchcutters would be engaged to produce types for the production of Armenian religious texts, though the printers were beset by misfortune.

In 1579, with the support of the Vatican, the third Armenian printer, Hovhannes Terznetsi, enlisted the French master punchcutter and printer, Robert Granjon (1513-89), to cut the punches and cast a new type in Venice with the assistance of Abgar Dpir's son, Sultanshah Toxatetsi. Granjon presented the type specimen to Pope Gregory XIII in 1579 and printing began in Rome the following year, where this type remained in use for another century. Hovhannes Terznetsi himself returned to Venice in 1586, ordering new types.



9 A close up of Christoffel van Dyck's type. Various sizes and styles: *erkatagir*, *bolorgir* and *notregir* can all be seen.

10 *The Oskanian Bible*, Amsterdam, 1666. Christoffel van Dyck cut the punches for the type shown here on the title page. The punctuation signs and Arabic numerals seen on the page were purchased from other printers. Page size: 21 x 26 cm (copy in Matenadaran, Yerevan).

11 The Nicholas Kis types in the Armenian hymnal: *Sharaknots*, printed in 1685, Amsterdam. (This damaged copy is from the Matenadaran, a better copy can be seen – but not photographed – in the British Library).

## The Armenian Bible

After all these efforts, the Armenian communities in Europe were still no closer to achieving their real goal of producing a Bible in their own language. In 1637 Hovhannes Ankiwratsi travelled from Venice to Rome to seek permission to print the Bible but the Catholic censors were refusing to sanction this project. Hovhannes was another Armenian printer working in Venice, where he printed books using two different sizes of a *bolorgir* script, which may have been cast in Rome in readiness for the Bible. One such was *Yisus Ordi in* 1643. By then, the accepted style followed the written manuscripts which used a sloping style for the minuscule and upright majuscule letters.

The demand for Armenian books increased further in the second half of the 17th century and book production was by then greater

in Constantinople, where the largest Armenian community of the time had settled.

The most important printer working in seventeenth century Constantinople was Oskan Yerevantsi (1614-75), a priest who established a quality press and cast his *Oskanian*, a type which was used by several publishers operating in the city at that time. Other new styles of Armenian types were also cast in Constantinople.

### **The Oskanian Bible of 1666 - Christoffel van Dyck**

The most important key development since Yakob Meghapat's ground-breaking opus was the establishment of an Armenian press in Amsterdam in 1660 for the express purpose of printing an Armenian Bible. Tiring of Vatican censorship, the Armenians sought the co-operation of the Dutch, who were seen as heretics.

In Protestant north Holland, Christoffel van Dyck (1601-72), the most proficient punchcutter of the period, was cutting punches for the leading printing house of Elsevier. In 1655, Mattheos Tsaretsi had been sent by the Catholicos of All Armenians to Europe to arrange the casting of better quality type for the Bible, but the Catholic Church forbade Italian printers to teach their craft to Armenians: 'No artisans of this craft under our authority shall dare to pass the skills of this craft on to the hands of the Armenians; and those who do so out of ignorance, secretly or out in the open, shall earn dreadful punishment from us.'

So instead, Mattheos Tsaretsi ordered the block punches and matrices for large and small size Armenian characters from Elsevier in Holland. He provided the designs for the characters and Christoffel van Dyck began the task in 1658.

Of course, punchcutting was an exclusive craft, known only to a few, who were in great demand and would normally create the shapes of the characters themselves according to the suggestions of the printer. To create a type for an unfamiliar alphabet such as Armenian would have required a great deal of co-operation between the two men. By 1660, only sixty characters had been cast (one quarter of the order) and Mattheos Tsaretsi died in 1661 before seeing any printed Bibles, although he had managed to produce one book, *Jesus the Son*, in 1660.

Before his death, Mattheos Tsaretsi urged Yerevan trader Avetis Yerevantsi, to run the publishing house and continue his work. Lacking the necessary skills, Avetis turned for help to his brother Oskan Yerevantsi, the aforementioned Armenian printer working in Ottoman Turkey. In 1664 Oskan, by then a bishop, arrived in Europe to continue the task of printing the first Armenian Bible. After some trials, the Bible was finally printed in 1666 and was of a quality hitherto unseen in Armenian printing. It consisted of 1464 pages and contained beautiful engraved illustrations by Christoffel van Sichem. It is known as the *Oskanian Bible*. The type used was the one cut by Christoffel van Dyck, although the punctuation signs and Arabic numerals used were purchased from other printers. After all this effort, the first consignment of these Bibles was lost when the ship transporting them sank en route to Armenia.

Following this disaster, Oskan Yerevantsi was being harassed by both his creditors and agents of the Pope. He left Amsterdam in 1669, taking much of his equipment with him and continued the spread of Armenian printing in Europe by setting up the Oskanian press in Livorno, Italy, in 1670 and in Marseilles, France, in 1673.



### Nicholas Kis

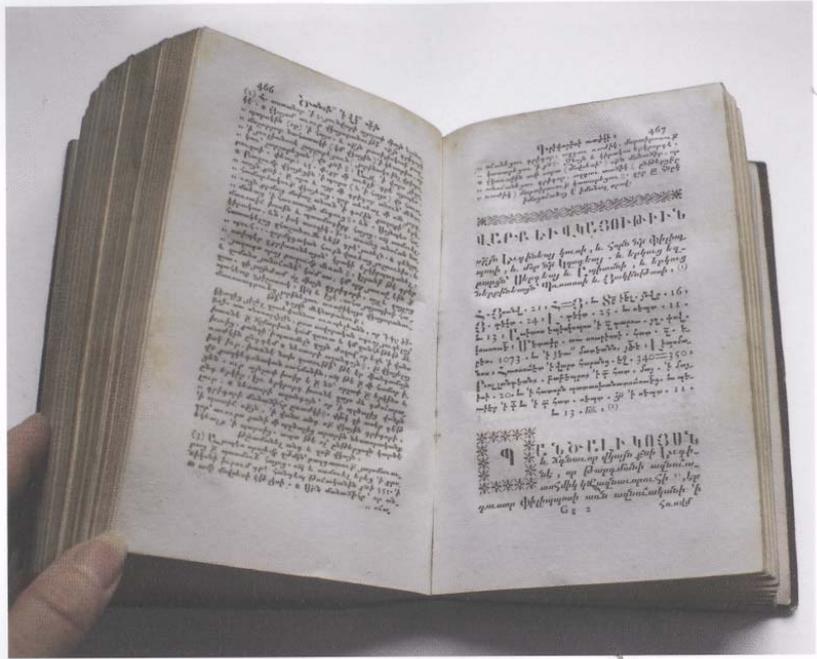
In 1685, Armenian printing in Amsterdam was revived by Mattheos Vanandetsi, who had worked with Oskan Yerevantsi in Marseilles, where Roman Catholic harassment continued.

He recorded: 7 came across an excellent master Nikolaus whom I engaged to cut, with great difficulty, the characters of the alphabet and also other kinds of notr (italic) and bolor (round) letters.'

This master was the Hungarian punchcutter, Nicholas Misztotfalusi Kis (1650-1702), a Greek and Latin scholar who had arrived in Holland in 1680 to learn the craft of punchcutting. He had quickly become a master of the craft and was in great demand for the cutting of types in Greek and Hebrew as well as the roman and italic, due to his familiarity with these more unusual alphabets. It is probable that he was emulating the type cut by Christoffel van

Dyck, as the types are quite similar, though Kis refined the style and was very proud of his creation. Mattheos Vanandetsi used these Kis types for two books in the late 1680s including *Sharaknots*, a Hymnarium, in 1685. Mattheos Vanandetsi and his family continued to print Armenian books until 1718, though another 'act of God' in the 1690s - this time an earthquake - destroyed 6,000 of these books, and the family struggled with debts. Nicholas Kis had returned to Hungary in 1690 and later his Armenian type punches and matrices were sold to the Mekhitarist religious community in Venice in 1728-9, where they continued to be the model for the Mekhitarist's types for over 70 years.





San Lazzaro

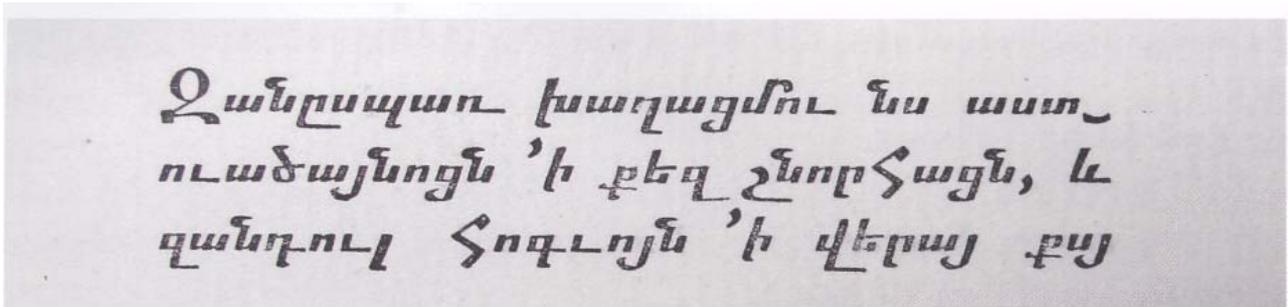
### San Lazzaro

The Mekhitarist monks had established their community on the island of San Lazzaro in the Venetian lagoon in 1717, dedicating themselves to scholarly activity and the publication of Armenian texts. At first, their books were printed for them by the Italian Michiel'Angelo Barboni but they began printing on the island around 1729 under the name of Antonio Bortoli using the Kis types. They used their own imprint from 1794 and began to use type cut by the monks themselves - the Hovhann Zohrapian Bible of 1805 is considered to be a fine example from this period. The order continues to produce books in its press to the present day.

### Armenian type in Britain

In the UK, Doctor John Fell (1625-86) of the Oxford University Press employed a German/Dutch punchcutter to cut Armenian punches in an attempt to create a complete set of founts for Oriental printing. The work was begun but never satisfactorily completed and seems only to have appeared as a few characters in a specimen book. It is possible the punchcutter, Peter de Walpergen (1646-1703), died before completing the work.

Later in the 18th century, around 1736, William Caslon (1692-1766) cut a superior Pica Armenian specifically for printing an edition of *Historica Armenica* and this appears in his specimen books thereafter.



### Armenian printing in the East

In 1640 in New Julfa, Persia (Iran), a printing press was established by Khach'atur of Caesarea, the spiritual leader of the Armenian community there. This Armenian book printed in 1641 (*Harants' Vark* or *Life of the Fathers*) was the first book to be printed in any language in the near East, though it was not of high quality.

Another important innovation close to Armenia was the Polos Yovhannisean Arapean press. Three generations of this Armenian family in Constantinople (Polos Arapean, his father Yovhannes and son, Yovhannes) continued printing in Ottoman Turkey between c.1770 and 1851. They designed and cast new typefaces for Armenian, Georgian and Turkish printing.

Although centres for the printing of Armenian books were established in other locations such as Madras and Calcutta (India) and briefly in Lvov, Poland (1616), Paris (1633) and Milan (1624), there was no printing press in Armenia until 1771, when political oppression eased. It was begun in the monastery of Holy Echmiadzin, in an adjacent building which still houses a modern printing press today. The monks prepared the founts on the premises after failing to obtain them from abroad and help was sought from the Arapean Press in Constantinople to improve their print quality. Gradually other Armenian printing houses began to appear around the country in the eighteenth and 19th centuries, reducing the need for Armenians to seek to print elsewhere. However, it is interesting to note that hand copying of religious texts continued to be economically viable into the 19th century due to the free labour of Armenian monks - and this was a tradition which continued until the early 20th century.



- 12 One of Barboni's books, printed in 1685, Venice.
- 13 One volume of *The Complete Lives of Saints*, printed by the Mekhitarists in their own press, San Lazzaro, Venice, 1810.
- 14 William Caslon's Armenian type of 1736.
- 15 Animal and bird ornamented letters – which emulate those from traditional manuscripts. *Alphabetum Armenum*, Rome, 1784.
- 16 Fournier's specimen which has similarities to Yakob Meghapart's first printed book of 1512 – *Manuel Typographique*, 1764.

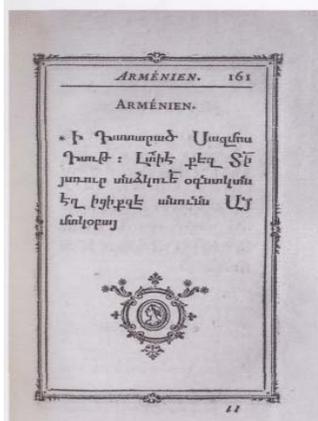
### My ongoing search for surviving specimens and typefounding paraphernalia

Although there are collections of manuscripts and printed books still in existence - many in poor condition as some of the photographs here show little remains of the typefounding materials and type specimens from the history of Armenian printing in Europe and to date I have been unable to seek those which might remain in Istanbul (Constantinople) or Yerevan although it is likely that most will have been destroyed.

In Italy there are a number of possible avenues to explore which may result in the discovery of some interesting Armenian material:

It has been suggested that the Kis punches and matrices are still preserved in the Mekhitarist archives, but Father Vertanes, the current abbot of the monastery, maintains he has no knowledge of them although some of the ornaments can be seen in the monastery's museum.

Elsewhere in Italy, the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence keeps the surviving Armenian typographical materials of the *Typographia Medicea*, the Oriental-language missionary press established in Rome in



1584. The earliest Armenian punches known to exist- those of Granjon are reputedly in the collection. The Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide (the Vatican Press, established in 1626) type specimen *Alphabetum Armenum* printed in Rome in 1784 shows the range of type then available which included ornamented capitals and two styles of text type.

In present-day Rome, the Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, Citta del Vaticano (the combined collections of the Stamperia Vaticana [dating from 1587] and the Propaganda Fide), may yield more examples of surviving punches and matrices. Many 17th century punches from these collections were seized in 1798 and 1811 by order of Napoleon and taken to Paris before being returned to Florence in later years.

L'Imprimerie Royale, the press established for the King of France in 1640, has survived as the French state printing office since and is now known as the Imprimerie Nationale S A. Its *Cabinet de Poingons*, classified as a historic monument, is a privately-owned archive of historical types, punches and matrices cared for by the company's only remaining punchcutter, Nelly Gable. In the collection are wooden boxes of punches and drawers containing their corresponding matrices and the collection includes some Armenians. The oldest is a 13pt type engraved for Louis XIII by Jacques de Sanleque in 1632 and there are two sizes of Delafond's 1826 Armenian type engraved for L'Imprimerie. The remaining Armenian punches and matrices are those known as *Propagande* which are some of those seized from the foreign-language press of the Propaganda Fide in 1811 by Napoleon's troops and therefore not returned to Italy. Mme. Gable is convinced they are the work of the same punchcutter but his identity presently remains a mystery.

During the 18th century, foundries in Europe continued to cast types for Armenian publications and they were featured in various specimen books which still survive, indicating a continuing demand from scattered Armenian communities. I doubt that the typefounding materials for these have survived.

Pierre Simon Fournier (1712-68) bought in type from Breitkopf in Leipzig to include in his *Manuel Typographique* in 1764 and the Parisian, Nicolas Gando, features a rather poor Armenian in his catalogue of 1758, which appears to incorporate stray characters from other founts.

The Netherlands continued the tradition of producing type for Armenian printing and the Enschede type specimens of 1768 & 1773 show the type cut by Fleischmann in 1757 - 663: Great Primer Armenian Upright and 664: English Bodied Armenian Upright.

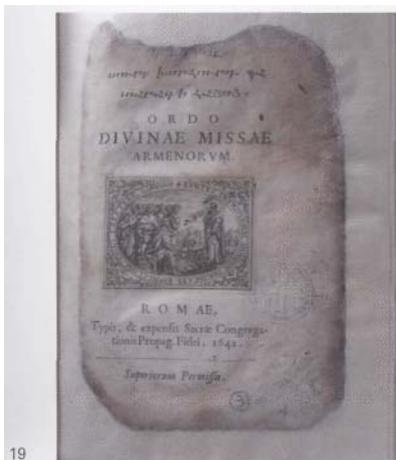
The Enschede museum at Haarlem, Holland, is still cataloguing its collection of historical typefounding materials but the curator, Johan de Zoete, is aware of quantities of Armenian type in the underground vaults and not presently available to view. However, there are some seventeen punches of Armenian characters (some broken); a drawer of matrices (some of which are galvanic/electrotype copies made from the types post-1839) and a number of printed proofs and specimens of Fleischmann's Armenian. Letters in the Enschede archives indicate that a Russian Armenian merchant bought the original Armenian materials around 1830, taking them to Tbilisi (Georgia), where he used them to print poetry.



I have seen very few display types and no evidence at all of wooden display type used in Armenian printing, although traditional engraved ornaments in the margins of the pages of religious books continued in the same style as in illuminated manuscripts. (Some of these ornaments for letterpress printing are on display in the museum in San Lazzaro and appear to be made from copper or brass). The Mekhitarists hold archives of rare books and some irreplaceable specimens were lost in a fire in 1974 - yet another twist of fate in this fascinating story.

The Matenadaran in Yerevan holds many important printed books and has been generous in allowing me access to rare examples. During the next three years, this research will continue in co-operation with its experts in order to produce a comprehensive illustrated book, which will fully and accurately explore the history and development of printing in the Armenian language. It will be published in time to celebrate the important landmark of the 500th anniversary of the first Armenian printed book by Yakob Meghapart in 1512.

20th century and current developments in Armenian lettering and type design will be explored in the second part of this article - in the next issue of *Baseline*. The author Carolyn Puzzovio is Principal Lecturer in the School of Art & Design, University of Lincoln.



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- 17 Some of the punches seized from Rome in 1811 and not returned. © Atelier du Livre d'art et de l'Estampe. Imprimerie Nationale.
- 18 Some of the original copper matrices for the Armenian types from Rome. © Atelier du Livre d'art et de l'Estampe. Imprimerie Nationale.
- 19 Robert Granjon's type still in use for Ordo Divinae Missae Armenorvm printed in Rome, at the Propagande Fidei, in 1642 – one of the precious printed book burnt in 1974 in the fire at San Lazzaro.
- 20 Undamaged page with both Armenian and Latin type.

Reproduction of samples 4, 5 & 6 permitted by Gevorg Ter-Vardanyan, the Head of the Department of the Oldest Manuscripts of the Matenadaran. All other photographs were taken by Carolyn Puzzovio.

