Nicholas Kis as the designer of Enschedé’s Greek without ligatures

Nicholas Kis’s Amsterdam specimen (the unique copy now in the Hungarian National Archives, Budapest) originates from around 1686. From the colophon at the bottom of the sheet we learn that Kis refers to himself as having been the first to cut such letters (‘eerst gesneden’) and offers their strikes or matrices (‘Af-slagen of Matryzen’) for sale.

There are seven lines of Greek text on the specimen sheet under the entry ‘Mediaen Griex’. Several factors contribute to making Kis’s Greek letters interesting. First of all, they are a very early example of post-Aldine Greek type without ligatures. As we know, at the end of the seventeenth century in the Netherlands, Marcus Meibomius (1630-1711) and Jan Leusden (1624-99) were engaged in freeing Greek printing types of ligatures. Their endeavours are also mentioned in the prefaces of Wetstein publications dating from 1692 and 1698. Pierre Simon Fournier’s Manuel Typographique ascribed the innovation to Leusden. The links between Leusden and Kis are fairly well known. The Amsterdam Hungarian Bible that was presented by Kis was the one offered by Leusden to the Utrecht University Council in 1687.1 Kis himself mentioned Leusden as his patron in several places. It is possible that Kis cut his Greek types without ligatures on Leusden’s advice. This supposition is supported by Harry Carter and György Buday.2 However, A. F. Johnson feels that Meibomius’s initiative preceded Leusden’s.3 I myself have yet to hear Kis mentioned in connection with Meibomius.

When he returned to Hungary in 1689, Kis brought with him most of his types, that is, his punches and matrices, but not his Greeks. In his Kolozsvár prints we find a different kind of Greek type. In his 1695 and 1701 publications he used a Mediaan Greek and in 1696 a Brevier Greek type. These have nothing to do with his Amsterdam Greek types; they were from Ábrahám Szenci Kertész’s printing-shop in Várad. The larger size may be found in Várad publications between 1651 and 1665, while the smaller occurs in a 1656 publication from the same town.

1 Acta Academiae Ulterjectinae 20 December 1687.
The inventory that was conducted in 1702, after Kis’s death, listing his counterpunches, punches and matrices, also mentions only a batch of nine counterpunches called ‘Median Graec.’ without any further description. This also supports the notion that the actual punches and matrices of Kis’s Amsterdam Greek letters were not taken to Kolozsvár.

Type specimens of Kis’s contemporaries fail to give us much to go on in our search for the sources and eventual fate of his Greek type. Later, I shall return to this question. In the course of examining numerous Dutch type specimens, I came across the Enschedé House’s stock of types, which contains a Greek type without ligatures under the name ‘Mediaan Griex (Grieks, Grieksch) No. 600’ (Enschedé, Fonderies/Typefoundries, fig. 102). The basic design of this set of characters matches Kis’s ‘Mediaan Griex’ exactly. I ascertained their identity by taking a copy of one and by placing a transparency of the other, both enlarged five times, over it (see fig. 1).

There are differences in the position of the accents relative to the main body of the letter. These would result from a different way of tying the punches of the accents to those of the vowels before striking the matrices, or—less likely in this size—from a different positioning of the loose accents.