On 26 March 2001, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Tetterode firm, the Amsterdam University Library received the Athias cabinet on permanent loan from this graphic company. The extensive Typographic Library of the firm found its way to the University already in 1971. During the summer of 2001 the jubilee of Tetterode was celebrated with an exhibition in the University Library; the cabinet and an additional selection of original Hebrew and Yiddish books and broadsheets were on show. It was decided to give the cabinet a place in the reading room of the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana amidst the famous Rosenthaliana collection of Amsterdam Hebrew and Yiddish printing from the seventeenth century onwards. The material, secured in thirty-five drawers, comprises around 583 steel punches (fifteen series) and 3086 copper matrices (fifty series, representing perhaps thirty-five different types) for square (merhibba), semi-cursive (rashi), Yiddish (waybertaytsh) and current Hebrew script, and further old lines of type. Some punches and matrices may date back to the seventeenth century.

The cabinet was probably named after the Amsterdam Jewish printer and type founder Abraham ben Raphael Hezekiah Athias (1684/85-1746). He inherited the material from a distant relative, Immanuel ben Joseph Athias (d. 1714), a printer and type founder too.

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1 See Quaerendo. A Quarterly Journal from the Low Countries Devoted to Manuscripts and Printed Books 2 (1972) 79-80. On the cabinet: 'This is a unique collection which may eventually find a new destination, if not in its city of origin then somewhere else. Its sale, if such an event should take place, will provide one of the few possible occasions on which sets of pre-nineteenth-century punches and matrices are likely to come onto the market.'

2 J.A. Lane, 'Het Athiaskastje', in Een punt voor typografie. De Typografische Bibliotheek in de Universiteitsbibliotheek Amsterdam (Amsterdam 2001) 20-21; compiled by the Department Early Printed Collections of the University Library.


5 Little is known about Abraham Athias, but see I.H. van Eeghen, De Amsterdamse boekhandel 1680-1725 vol. 4 (Amsterdam 1967) 168, 275; vol. 5 (1978) 341.

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A HIDDEN TREASURE IN THE ATHIAS CABINET

whose father, the famous printer Joseph ben Abraham Athias (1634/35-1700), started a type foundry in 1681. On 25 February 1761, the material was sold, and the three sons of the printer Solomon Proops, Joseph (1718-86), Jacob (1722-79) and Abraham (1733-92), acquired the cabinet with its precious content. Proudly they immediately published their new acquisition in the preface of their *Biblia en dos columnas, Hebraico y Español* and in a Yiddish almanac of the following year. In this period Amsterdam was the centre of Hebrew printing in the world and the Proops brothers almost held a monopoly in this field. But by the end of the eighteenth century the decline began and David Proops (1774-1849), Jacob’s son, was the last member of the dynasty to continue the printing office. After his death the firm existed some fifty more years under the name Levisson and Proops, but on 28 March 1917, the furniture of the office was sold at public auction. The type foundry Tetterode, from 1901 renamed ‘Lettergieterij Amsterdam’ (L.A.), acquired the main part, including the Athias cabinet. In his last, posthumously published study the historian of Dutch Jewry Jaap Meijer complained bitterly about this inglorious end of the golden age of Jewish printing in Amsterdam. In the hands of the *goyim* the graphic heritage of Athias and Proops was buried in a free-floating Diaspora grave, he stated. However, with this remark Meijer did Tetterode (L.A.) wrong. Under the direction of the gifted typographer S.H. de Roos the punches and matrices were not only ordered properly, but impressions of them were also made, and the material was administered and studied carefully. Antiquarian Hebrew and Yiddish books of several Amsterdam Jewish printers were collected for the Typographic Library in order to determine the printing types more precisely. Thus, the type foundry was able to produce from the old matrices new Hebrew square and semi-cursive (rabbinic) types in different sizes, which were called Athias Type. In the 1920’s and 30’s some bibliophile Hebrew publications could be printed with new ‘old’ letters, like an edition of the biblical Book Malachi with

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