
The Greek Font Society

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Abstract

The Greek Font Society is a part of Greece standing against a predominantly easy-going culture.

Background and goals

The text that follows is a translation of a text that originally appeared in Greek in Εὔτυπον (Eutypon), the newsletter of the Greek T_EX Friends Group (see <http://www.eutypon.gr>). The text has been translated into English by the original author.

A non-profit organization committed to studying meticulously, creating superbly and offering openly: the Greek Font Society (GFS) was founded in 1992 with the express aim of contributing to the research of Greek typography and supporting Greek typefaces in a digital environment. Its Board of Directors consists of Mikhail V. Sakellariou (President), Lili Macrakis (Vice-President), Dimitris G. Portolos (Secretary), Lena G. Savidis (Treasurer), Giorgos E. Agouridis and Eleftheria Giakoumakis. GFS's type design program began through the collaboration of the then Vice-President Mikhail Macrakis and its artistic director, the painter-engraver Takis Katsoulidis, with the type designer and typography researcher George D. Matthiopoulos and the philologist Eleni Tsialta. The current working group consists of George Matthiopoulos (artistic director) and type designers Mikhail Semoglou and Natasha Raissaki. GFS operates on limited resources which leave no space for promotional campaigns; it will continue to function as long as this is manageable. Operational costs are usually covered by subventions, grants and financial support from various state and non-state bodies.

The Greek Font Society was established to fill the observed gap in systematic research of the importance of Greek typeface design for visual communication as well as to emphasize the specific weight of history, the reverberation and consolidation of visual forms in an area of artistically illiterate publishers with low typographic expectations within Greece. It seeks to offer a solution today to a problem which initially should have been addressed systematically as long ago as the late 19th century, in order to enjoy its fruits today.

GFS's work is well-described by its impressive motto: always study and continuously train your eyes! That's why they investigate the past of Greek typography, study the design rules that formed it, digitize and preserve historical Greek typefaces, and

finally make them available to the public. Its typefaces provide support for the "extended" Greek block of Unicode, while older typefaces include the original ligatures and abbreviated forms — end result: as far as possible, each typeface is intended as a complete tool for the user and a historical sample to every new type designer who may wish to learn the history of his/her art before attempting to design.

Although polytonic Greek is technically supported, this does not mean that GFS's statutory goals include reversion to the polytonic system. (As of 1982, the official grammar of the Greek state is monotonic Modern Greek.) GFS is not a literary or linguistic union that can take a collective position on issues outside its area of expertise. Its goal is to reinforce and promote Greek typography in our globalized milieu, that is, it stretches out to reach users not necessarily located in Greece but every user of the Greek language around the world. Since the Greek script has evolved through several forms during the millennia, different scholars should be offered the technical prospect of using it in their own ways: be it Greek or non-Greek researchers of Homer, annotators of Papadiamantis, historians studying Thucydides or critics of El Greco's work, all need to use Greek typefaces for the special needs of their sectors.

Typefaces

The public is therefore offered a continuously widening choice of Greek OpenType fonts freely distributed under the SIL Open Font License, including important historical samples and new designs which respect the typographic tradition and avoid the insensitive and ignorant copying of Latin-based standards. As GFS survives on donations, it offers its cultural work for free, only to remind those who tend to forget that there is an alternative way of living apart from profit-making and also in its attempt to make a positive step towards the others, even to the disadvantage of one's personal gain.

In opposition to the argument made by many that the Greek alphabet is in risk of extinction, because its letters become more and more similar to the glyphs of Latin script fonts, GFS states that the main enemy is not the Latin script itself but rather an aversion to the knowledge of the past and its teachings, the statements of our present leaders which lulls our vigilance, the spiritual sybaritism typical of contemporary Greeks along with the poor quality of most Greek libraries and the taking of minimum pains for every effort. Now, 'effort' is one keyword for the Greek Font Society, along with the second keyword of 'offer': five majuscule typefaces

are offered, together with GFS Complutum Classic (with new capital letters) from the 16th century, three typefaces from the 18th century, another three from the 19th century and seven typefaces from the 20th/21st century — all free of charge! Naturally we can only expect more free GFS fonts.

As for our present (L^A)T_EX, GFS offers five free fonts: GFSDidotTeX, GFSBodoniTeX, GFSPorsonTeX, GFSNeoHellenicTeX and GFSArtemisiaTeX. That is, we do provide specific fonts and a web page dedicated to T_EX, combined with a presentation of the Department of Mathematics at the University of the Aegean and the Laboratory of Digital Typography and Mathematical Applications. All this is thanks to a collaboration of the GFS with a member of our Greek T_EX Friends group, Antonis Tsolomitis. Needless to say, all OpenType fonts can be used directly with X_YL^AT_EX/X_YL^AT_EX.

Publishing

The Greek Font Society is also productive in publishing, since it has translated and designed Robert Bringhurst's renowned book "The Elements of Typographic Style," Crete University Press, Iraklion, 2001, with a grant by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. For the occasion of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, GFS designed and published, also with the kind support of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, a set of seven bilingual not-for-sale publications (English, French, German, Modern Greek, Italian, Russian, and Spanish) of the 14 Olympic Odes of Pindar using historical Greek typefaces from the 15th to the 20th century for the ancient Greek text. The Ancient Greek text was typeset in seven digital redesigns (one for each language) of the most celebrated Greek typefaces elaborated in several European countries. This publication was aimed at asserting that the Olympic Games, far from becoming used up as an instance of immoderate commercialization, ought to be generating a cultural dialogue uniting all nations. The set was offered as a gift to all of the participating Olympic Committees in the Games and sent to a range of libraries in Greece and abroad.

In 1995 the GFS organised an International Conference, "Greek Letters: From Tablets to Pixels" at the Institut Français d'Athènes in 1995, with Greek and foreign participants who presented their research on the history, aesthetics and technological future of the Greek typefaces. The proceedings of the Conference are downloadable in Greek from the GFS's website, and their English translation by Mikhail S. Macrakis (ed.), "Greek Letters: From Tablets to Pixels", was published by Oak Knoll Press, New Castle, Delaware, 1996.

GFS is also preparing an anthology of Greek typography, presenting books which have impacted the typography of Greek publications from the era of earliest typography to mid-20th century, as well as historical information on the publishers and typographers who created them. The anthology will aim at making Greek typographic history accessible to all and enabling Greek graphic designers to come into contact with the history of their art by offering images and data kept hidden on library shelves.

Interview: George Matthiopoulos

Mr George Matthiopoulos works as a type designer for the Greek Font Society. He kindly agreed to answer the questions which Εὐτυπον put to him.

Q: What makes Greek typographic history worth attention and study?

A: The history of every aspect of the art and techniques which shaped the course of modern Greek culture is, in my view, self-evidently worthy; add to this that a better understanding of the typographic tradition aids the creative assimilation of the globalized visual communication by new generation graphic designers.

Q: Would you say that the Greek script receives its value through the ages on the simple grounds of being the carrier of the Greek language and civilization or does it have its own value due to some important people that have served it?

A: Letters are primarily communication symbols of a language, but in the course of time they develop a timeless aesthetic connection with language. The Greek alphabet originated without many modifications from the Phoenician alphabet and the Latin alphabet was derived from the Greek. [According to the American scholar Barry B. Powell, the alphabet is a Greek invention: see Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet, Cambridge University Press, 1991.] So, any couplings between language and aesthetics are not metaphysical and immovable ideas (in the Platonic sense), but are rather shaped by the historical process: historical changes, such as the transition from majuscule to miniscule script (around the 9th century) or the simplification of the typographic case by removal of the Byzantine ligatures (in the mid-18th century) were not undertaken by individual persons but resulted from already existing changes in everyday practice.

Q: In an age of abundant impressive technological means, with many technical issues resolved, do you think that the artistic component of typography is served or oppressed by technological advancements?

A: Like the tools of every form of art, computers and their software may prove to be means of emancipating those who realize the capabilities and the limitations of these means, but for their lazy-minded users they only foster their shallow minds. Now, shallowness flourishes around us.

Q: Can you highlight the reasons why typographic culture is absent in the Greek society today? Could it be a matter of culture in general and of the utilitarian notion of knowledge?

A: Yes, I think the answer is there. How can there be typographic education when education in general is becoming an even more distant dream for the majority? I mean here real Culture, not the industrialized product of our grade-aholic educational system we have all come to accept. Aesthetical culture is even more demanding than the general education and this is a field in which modern Greece is still held back. Add to this the loss of the popular elegant taste which sprang spontaneously from the people until just a few years ago. The “mincing machine” called television has ground everything from one end to the other into a colorless and tasteless mass. You see, the increased money we have made in the recent decades is not enough in itself.

Q: Would you like to share your experience from contemporary typographic culture in other European countries? Are there any immediate initiatives that can be taken?

A: The states that have always had a tradition of typography continue to support typographical practice and bring new ideas. Even non-central European countries like Spain and Portugal have already organized the education of type design. Indeed, they all have the privilege of drawing upon the centuries-long research and background of Latin script typography, from which we can benefit only indirectly. The issue of typographic education is big and difficult to deal with in a general way. There has been more progress lately compared to what was happening a decade ago, but there is a long way to go. The Greek Font Society tries to lay the foundations, in order for all who become sensitive to the issue to be able to refer to sources. The Union of Greek Graphic Designers has also recently demonstrated an actual interest and we will continue to work with them. Both the School of Graphic Arts at the Athens Technological Educational Institute and the Athens School of Fine Arts currently promote the teaching of typographic art more dynamically, as well as private educational centers and other schools. Still, I am not sure whether this is a momentary interest by certain individuals today or something that might

be long-lived. Greece is unfortunately not the place to make easy predictions.

Q: Given that young people use text editing in their computers from a very young age, do you think that there are proposals to introduce typographic education in at least the secondary education level by providing stimuli and asking for speculation on the aesthetics of our texts?

A: That would definitely be very good indeed, but I am afraid that Greek secondary education has other more important issues to address first.

Q: Are you bothered by the completely unaccented Greek appearing often on the TV, mainly on the news broadcast? [News captions, headlines and transcriptions on Greek TV news is almost always typed without even a tonos (the monotonic accent symbol) on vowels.]

A: No, not personally. I am rather bothered aesthetically by the monotonic Modern Greek. The GFS does not claim the role of a philological leader. In a sense we are “accent neutral”, if I may use this neologism. As a Society, we offer the maximum range in our products, that is, polytonic Greek fonts, so that anyone can use them in any way they see fit.

Q: How do you explain the contradiction of a downgraded visual appearance of our texts in our age where image aesthetics and visual representations keep the leading role?

A: I think I referred to this before. Those who deal in visual communication in Greece today rarely possess any aesthetical culture which presupposes knowledge of the historical tradition. Most standards are imported to Greece and remain unassimilated.

Q: Let me ask you a reasonable question: Have any of those who are par excellence interested in the diachronic Greek language and advocate it so far embraced, promoted or supported your work? I refer to philologists, historians, archaeologists, theologians, Universities, the Church, etc. [The Eastern Orthodox Church has never adopted monotonic Modern Greek and still uses the polytonic grammar in its services and most of its communication.]

A: Not to the extent that one would actually expect, but then again what else has been institutionally embraced by them? Nothing, so this does not leave us out either. Nevertheless, individual entities from all of the above have individually expressed their solidarity with our work.

Q: Your website includes a special page devoted to \TeX and offers \TeX -compatible fonts. How do you appreciate this interest of people from exact science?

A: I am a type designer myself, but through my father’s love for Mathematics I have developed an

intimate and warm relation with Science — although I do not particularly succeed in it. Furthermore, the late Mikhail Macrakis, the actual founder of GFS, was a physicist. This bidirectional relationship between the GFS and people from exact science came as no surprise to me, but, if we need to be objective about this, that is still a welcome mystery. Obviously, typography has indeed touched an unknown, until recently, sensitive string of the more “practical minds”, as the cliché goes. I suppose we all ought to be grateful to Dr Donald Knuth who identified this sensitive string and to Dr Antonis Tsolomitis, Department of Mathematics, University of the Aegean, Samos, Greece, who makes such a remarkable effort to keep this bridge open in the geographical region to the east of Greece. Our reference to \TeX would have been impossible without his initiative and contribution and I would like to take this opportunity to thank him warmly. [Naturally, with the advent of \XeTeX it is now possible to use any OpenType or TrueType font directly, something that has greatly simplified the job of many people.]

Q: You support the Open Source “movement — free software for all. Can you explain why to us?”

A: As long as the Greek Font Society manages to survive on grants, we have to return the trust demonstrated to us by offering our work to those who ask for it. The need to spread the knowledge about Greek typography is too big to be hindered by our making economic demands on those who seek this knowledge. “You can’t receive anything from someone who hasn’t got anything” and “share with others what others have offered you”: that is our idea on the issue.

Q: The verbal poverty of Modern Greeks inevitably affects the separate professional sectors too, who normally turn to the adoption of predominantly English terms in spite of the richness of Greek terminological variants. Since “the start of wisdom is in the study of the names” according to Antisthenes, does the Greek Font Society intend to compile an integral dictionary of typographic terminology?

A: You are right. Terminology in our field is desperately poor, but the technology of graphic arts changes at such a fast rate that it is no longer possible to catch up with the tide. Mikhail Macrakis had also wished a glossary of typographic terms, so we started an early effort during the translation and design of Robert Bringhurst’s book “The Elements of Typographic Style” (Crete University Press, Iraklion, 2001), which included a relevant Appendix. I have collected much material since then, but haven’t managed to get the time to organize it. In any case, I believe that apart from the descriptive and explanatory definition of lemmas, the very onomatopoeia of terms is beyond my knowledge.

Q: Finally, on the occasion of our communication, please allow me to congratulate you on behalf of all of the members of the Greek Font Society for the work you offer us and above all for the high quality level and the sensitivity it shows. I thank you for your time!

A: I thank you in my turn for the opportunity you gave us to present the Greek Font Society.

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