

Review

The Congress of Manastir, the Rightful Pride of our Folk

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Abstract

The Congress of Manastir is an important link in the chain of century-long efforts that the Albanian people made ‘with rifle and with pen’ for the defense of our national existence and for securing the country’s freedom and independence. Its roots lie in the centuries-old struggle of the Albanian people against foreign invaders who trampled Albanian land, against the Ottoman feudal reaction and the clerical one, against the neighboring chauvinistic circles and the great powers that supported them. The path of the letters was long and difficult, full of sacrifices and unstoppable. Although thorny, those who loved the light walked courageously, despising the centuries-old darkness. This titanic effort, as long and arduous as it was, has its roots deep in history. As a representative of the Union, Gjergj Fishta was elected Chairman of the Alphabet Commission. In his sensational lecture “On the Latin Alphabet”, as an orator he excelled

above all Albanian orators, where he spoke for more than an hour and a half amidst the amazement and admiration of those present. The Union alphabet designed by Fishta summarized the most positive features of the existing alphabets and the Congress accepted it as the only Albanian alphabet. Time has shown the justice of this decision: it became the only national alphabet. The Renaissance dream was realized: one alphabet, one language, one nation.

Keywords: *alphabet, congress, Monastery, independence, language, Ottoman, nation, history*

Introduction

The Congress of Manastir constitutes an important link in the chain of centuries-long efforts undertaken “with rifle and with pen” by

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the Albanian people to defend national existence and to secure the freedom and independence of the country.

Its roots lie in the multi-century struggle of the Albanian people against foreign invaders who trampled Albanian lands; against Ottoman feudal and clerical reaction; against chauvinistic circles in neighboring countries; and against the Great Powers that supported them.

Although this struggle was unequal and marked by extraordinary sacrifices, paid with the blood of thousands of patriots, our people succeeded in creating and preserving a national, democratic Albanian culture.

The Congress of Manastir is one of the most important events in the Albanian national movement, representing the colossal efforts of our people to protect and develop Albanian culture, language, and writing.

With exceptional determination in its struggles against all the storms that swept over Albanian lands throughout the centuries, while confronting the efforts of various empires to eradicate and assimilate it, the Albanian people demonstrated a fervent love for their language and culture, for their development, and for the progress of the country. In this way, they proved their unwavering resolve to defend them with the same legendary heroism and bravery with which they fought for centuries for the freedom of the homeland.

Despite living under foreign domination, and particularly under the harsh and barbaric yoke of Ottoman feudal lords who pursued policies of assimilation and denationalization, denying Albanians their nationality and education in their mother tongue, at a time when the Greek Patriarchate of Istanbul and chauvinistic circles in neighboring states sought to erase the name and language of the Albanians, the struggle for Albanian culture and writing assumed particular importance. It became an integral part of the political and armed struggle of the Albanian people against Ottoman bondage, clerical reaction, and chauvinistic neighbors in the pursuit of national liberation.

The Historical Development of Albanian Writing

Our thirty-six golden letters... The Albanian alphabet marked its 117th anniversary on 22 November of this year since its unification at the Congress of Manastir, precisely where its standardization became a cornerstone of both language and nation.

The road of letters was long and arduous, filled with sacrifice and perseverance. Although thorny, those who loved enlightenment advanced courageously, scorning centuries-old darkness. This titanic effort, as lengthy and demanding as it was, has its roots deep in history.

The earliest Albanian works known to us today are religious and didactic in character, such as those by Buzuku, Budi, Bogdani, and others. These works emerged at a time when the Catholic Church strongly opposed the use of the vernacular as a liturgical language. Faced with the danger of the spread of Islamization and the ideas of the Reformation, the Church was compelled to permit the limited publication of certain religious works in native languages for the instruction of religious doctrine.

The Albanian language is one of the oldest languages of the Balkan Peninsula, just as the Albanian people are among the oldest peoples of this region. Like two other Indo-European languages, Romanian and Lithuanian, Albanian began to be written relatively late. The first Albanian book known to us today is *Meshari* by Gjon Buzuku, published in 1555. However, this date should not be considered the beginning of Albanian writing. Various facts demonstrate that Albanian must have been written long before Buzuku.

This does not refer merely to the three well-known documents—the *Formula of Baptism* by Pal Engjëlli, the *Vocabulary* of Arnold von Harff, and the *Gospel Pericope*—but rather to the existence of a genuine writing tradition. The presence of such a tradition has been acknowledged by several renowned Albanian and foreign scholars, including the Austrian albanologist Norbert Jokl, the Arbëresh scholar

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Gaetano Petrotta, Eqrem Çabej, Mahir Domi and others.

In addition to linguistic arguments, historical testimonies also confirm that Albanian was written prior to Buzuku. Notable among these is the testimony of the French monk Brocardus, behind whose name stands the Archbishop of Tivar, Guillaume Adam. In a report from 1332, he clearly refers to the use of Albanian writing in everyday life and to the existence of books in the Albanian language. He states: *“Although the Albanians have a language entirely different from Latin, they nevertheless use the Latin script in all their books”*¹

This testimony is further corroborated by the statement of Marin Barleti, the renowned biographer of Skanderbeg, who in his Latin work *De Obsidione Scodrensis* (p. 27) writes: *“Some writings came into our possession—more fragments than annals—in which there was more discussion of the restoration carried out by our ancestors on this city (Shkodra) than of its construction. There it was written in the vernacular that a certain Roza and her sister Fa were the first founders of Shkodra, and therefore its fortress is called Rozafa.”*¹

Judging from these facts, we may conclude that the Albanian language was written at least from the thirteenth century, and possibly even earlier.

The reasons why Albanian was written relatively late compared to some other Indo-European languages must be sought in historical and political circumstances that prevented our ancestors from cultivating their mother tongue at an earlier stage.

Referring to the fact that from Roman times onward, our country was subjected to centuries-long domination by foreign invaders who attempted by every means to assimilate it, which as a result, had our ancestors were forced to stand with sword in hand to defend their lives, honor, and language.

Religion also played a negative role when imposed upon our people. Catholicism allowed only Latin as a liturgical language, the language of the Roman conquerors, while Orthodoxy permitted only Greek, the official language of the Byzantine Empire.

Similarly, Islam, spread in Albania by the Ottoman invaders, accepted only Arabic as the liturgical language, while Turkish functioned as the language of administration.

The earliest works known to us are religious and didactic in character, such as those by Buzuku, Bardhi, and Bogdani. They appeared at a time when the Catholic Church, historically opposed to the use of the vernacular in liturgy, was compelled, in the face of the spread of Islam and Reformation ideas, to allow limited publication of religious works in native languages.

The authors of these works employed an alphabet based on Latin, supplemented with several Cyrillic characters. This alphabet, first encountered in Buzuku and later refined by northern authors, became traditional in Catholic religious writings and continued to be used in Shkodra until 1909, even after the Congress of Manastir.

With socio-economic changes and the emergence of capitalist elements, the process of Albanian nation-building also developed, albeit with significant obstacles that slowed its pace. Nevertheless, it forged its own path, and alongside it the Albanian national movement gained momentum. Our Renaissance figures, through extraordinary efforts, left us a rich cultural legacy: the great Naim Frashëri, who burned like a candle to illuminate Albania; the immortal Sami Frashëri; Koto Hoxhi; and hundreds of others with enlightened minds, unmatched courage, and pure hearts. For the Albanian school and alphabet, the illustrious teacher Petro Nini Luarasi fought throughout his

¹ Marin Barleti, *The Siege of Shkodra* (translated by Henrik Lacaj), 2nd ed., Tirana, 1967, p. 35.

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life and was killed by enemies; Papa Kristo Negovani was massacred by Greek chauvinists, along with thousands of other patriots.

As early as 1825, Naum Veqilharxhi became the first compiler of an Albanian primer using original letters, which he refined and completed twenty years later.

At the International Congress of Eastern Peoples held on 10 October 1899, Jeronim de Rada presented his ideas, valuing Albanian as a language superior to any classical language and as a precious treasure for scholarship.

In 1872, Konstantin Kristoforidhi compiled another primer in both dialects.

The Istanbul Alphabet, which may be considered the greatest achievement of this effort prior to Manastir, was compiled by prominent patriots: Sami Frashëri, Jani Vreto, Pashko Vasa, and Hoxha Tahsin.

Despite some members of the Istanbul Society advocating other variants, Sami Frashëri insisted on a Latin-based alphabet with some Greek letters. Using the Istanbul ABC, also known as Sami Frashëri's alphabet, which spread rapidly, the works of Naim Frashëri were published.

The alphabets of the *Agimi* Society and the *Bashkimi* Society of Shkodra, together with the Istanbul Alphabet, became central topics of discussion at the Congress of Manastir.

Manastir as a Vilayet Center and the Birthplace of the Albanian Alphabet

Skanderbeg and Ali Pasha of Tepelena made an extraordinary contribution to transforming Manastir into a vilayet center and the birthplace of the Albanian alphabet. Albanian resistance dating back to the time of Gjergj Kastrioti, an early stronghold against Ottoman occupation, compelled the Sultan to deploy large military forces. To support these forces, various economic structures were built, completely altering the city's appearance and transforming it into a city of consuls, which also enabled its emergence as the center of the all-Albanian national movement. Aware that he could not defeat the Albanian hero

by force, the Sultan sought to pacify the region through Islamization. Consequently, it was no coincidence that the first mosque in the Balkans was built precisely in this city. Following the first mosque, many others were constructed, eventually numbering seventy-two, turning Manastir into the most important and attractive religious center, and later a military one as well.

Like Skanderbeg, Ali Pasha of Tepelena, beyond his desire for Manastir's independence from the Turks as an ancient Illyrian center, also confronted the issue of the Vlachs. As is known, he burned Voskopojë and several other places not for plunder, as his opponents claim, but to uproot Greek propaganda. This led to the displacement of many Vlach families, who migrated to Macedonia and consequently to Manastir.

They possessed knowledge of several languages and crafts, giving a significant impulse to economic development, trade, and craftsmanship, and paving the way for Manastir's transformation into a vilayet center.

The Congress of Manastir, which lasted ten days, required substantial financial resources, provided by some of the wealthiest Albanian families. As an important economic center, Manastir enabled certain Albanian families to accumulate wealth and use part of it in support of national causes, including the Congress of Manastir. The congress was held at the Liria Hotel of the Gërmenji family. It is impossible not to mention the Qiriazi family, the most patriotic family in the Albanian nation throughout all periods after the Frashëri family, from whom they drew national and patriotic inspiration.

The Albanian Language as a Means of National Unity

The Congress of Manastir was not merely a congress of the Albanian alphabet. No—it was far broader and more meaningful, because language was viewed as the indispensable instrument for awakening and deepening national consciousness and unity.

Although some of the most renowned figures of the National Renaissance, including

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Faik Konica and others, did not participate for various reasons, they welcomed and highly valued this historic event.

The congress was held in the presence of 150 delegates from all regions of Albania, as well as Albanian communities in Romania, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Egypt, and America—Albanians of all religious communities: Muslims, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Protestants, educated individuals united by a great national goal.

Amid tendentious writings of media propaganda from states with anti-Albanian policies, claiming that “Albanians are barbarians,” “uncivilizable,” or “destined to be dispersed”, the Congress began its work.

As a representative of the *Bashkimi* Society, Gjergj Fishta was elected Chairman of the Alphabet Commission. In his renowned address “*On the Latin Alphabet*,” he shone above all Albanian orators, speaking for more than an hour and a half amid the astonishment and admiration of those present. The address delivered by the Catholic priest Gjergj Fishta deeply moved all participants, to the extent that a Muslim cleric rose and embraced him publicly.

The *Bashkimi* alphabet designed by Fishta summarized the most positive features of existing alphabets, and the Congress accepted it as the sole Albanian alphabet. By unanimous vote, the Congress decided to set aside the Istanbul Alphabet and to write Albanian exclusively with a Latin alphabet of thirty-six letters. Time proved the correctness of this decision: it became the only national alphabet.

The Congress also decided to establish an Albanian printing press in Manastir under the direction of Gjergj Qiriazi. A distinguished participant in the Congress was the scholar, poet, and patriot from Shkodra, Ndre Mjeda. Eight of his thirteen proposals were approved. Although he spoke thirteen foreign languages and lived in several countries, he placed no language above Albanian.

It was also decided that after two years a second congress would be held in Ioannina to address orthographic and literary issues and to

make efforts toward merging the Gheg and Tosk dialects into a unified language.

One of the four greatest historical, linguistic, literary, cultural, educational, and state-forming events—referred to by scholars of history, linguistics, literature, folklore, didactics, and culture—will remain the Congress of Manastir. By eliminating other alphabets, it clearly expressed the idea and will of the Albanians that unity of alphabet, unity of language, and unity of culture have been and remain prerequisites that legitimize and render functional the political unity of the nation.

The Renaissance dream was realized: one alphabet, one language, one nation.

The Spread of Albanian Schools and Writing as Part of the National Movement

The Congress of Manastir gave new impetus to the struggle of our people against the Young Turk regime, and particularly to the struggle for Albanian schools and writing. At the end of 1908 and the beginning of 1909, Albanian patriots continued to spread Albanian schools and literacy throughout the country.

All these efforts, as part of the national movement, were carried out in fierce struggle against Young Turk and clerical reaction. To disguise their propaganda against Albanian schools and writing, the Young Turk Central Committee “*Union and Progress*” published a demagogic declaration in March 1909 stating that the committee “... *would remain neutral and would not intervene in the choice of the Albanian alphabet.*”³

Such a declaration was distributed to all Albanian clubs; however, it had no calming effect and was regarded as yet another intrigue and attempt to deceive Albanians.⁴

In order to eliminate all Albanian clubs and societies, the Young Turks passed a parliamentary decision in July 1909 to close Albanian clubs.

Albanian patriots protested against Young Turk terror. Dielli wrote at the time that “today conditions in Albania are worse than during the

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era of Abdul Hamid, and the Albanian language is persecuted more than ever before,"⁵ calling on Albanians "to unite and engage in the true struggle against the enemies of our nation, the final and decisive struggle against the Young Turks."⁶

Further momentum in the struggle for Albanian schools and writing was provided by the Congress of Elbasan, convened in the first week of September 1909.⁷

The establishment of the Elbasan Pedagogical School for the training of teachers for Albanian schools crowned the efforts of our patriots to develop Albanian education and culture.⁸

Conclusion

The Congress of Manastir was not merely a congress of the Albanian alphabet. It was far broader and more meaningful, because language was seen as the indispensable instrument for awakening and deepening national consciousness and unity.

One of the four greatest historical, linguistic, literary, cultural, educational, and state-forming events to which scholars of history, linguistics, literature, folklore, didactics, and culture have referred, and will continue to refer, remains the Congress of Manastir. By setting aside other alphabets, it clearly expressed the idea and will of the Albanian people that unity of alphabet, unity of language, and unity of culture have been and remain prerequisites that legitimize and ensure the functioning of the political unity of the nation. The founding of the Elbasan Pedagogical School for the preparation of teachers for Albanian schools was the crowning achievement of the efforts of our patriots in developing Albanian education and culture

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