

The History of the Albanian Alphabet: A Case of Complex Cultural and Political Development

By STAVRO SKENDI (New York)

I

The history of the Albanian alphabet has been a long and complex one. The territorial divisions of the country — north and south — with their different cultural zones have played a significant role; the confessional groups — Roman Catholics, Moslems, and Orthodox Christians — which exist there have also been an important factor. But the political interest of foreign powers have added to that history a rare complexity and uniqueness¹⁾.

The first reference to an alphabet for the Albanian language was made by a Dominican Brother Brochart, who in 1332 presented to Philippe de Valois, King of France, a report, in which he spoke about his experiences in the various countries he had visited, in order to induce the king to undertake a crusade. Referring to the northern Albanians, he wrote: ". . . although the Albanians have a language quite different from that of the Latins, they use the Latin letters in all their books²⁾."

1) The author would like to express his gratitude to the Social Science Research Council for the grant it awarded him to study during the summer of 1958, the archives in Vienna, on which a great part of this article is based.

2) Cf. „Advis directifs pour faire passage d'outre-mer“, par le frère Brochart, in Documents relatifs aux croisades, contained in F. A. Baron de Reiffenberg, ed., Monuments pour servir a l'histoire des provinces de Namur, de Hainaut et de Luxembourg, Brussels, 1846, IV, p. 294. But the Latin original, Directorium ad passagium faciendum, is now attributed to the southern Frenchman and Dominican Guillelmus Adae, archbishop of Antivari, and Friar Brocardus has become pseudo-Brocardus. Cf. G. Schirò, Jr., Storia della letteratura albanese, Milan, 1959, p. 10. This does not diminish, however, the significance of the passage; on the contrary, it increases its importance, for the Albanian Catholic dioceses of the north depended on the archbishopric of Antivari and in the first half of the 14th century they took part together with it in the fight against Slavic Orthodoxy. Cf. M. V. Šuflyay, „Die Kirchenzustände im vortürkischen Albanien. Die orthodoxe Durchbruchszone im Katholischen Damme“, in L. v. Thallóczy, ed., Illyrisch-Albanische Forschungen, Munich and Leipzig, 1916, I, pp. 201 and 214.

We actually see the Latin characters in one of the first records of the Albanian language, a baptismal formula in the Roman Catholic rite, dating from 1462 and included in a pastoral letter by Pal Engjëlli (Paulus Angelus), archbishop of Durrës. It is in the Geg (northern) dialect and the manuscript is preserved in the Laurentian Library of Florence³). Another Albanian record, antedating the one just mentioned perhaps by half a century, and according to some scholars by more, is a manuscript of a fragment of the New Testament, followed by an Eastern chant, of the Byzantine rite, written with Greek letters and found in the Ambrosian Library in Milan⁴). The dialect used in it is the Tosk (southern), that of the Orthodox Christians. The alphabets of these two documents testify to the two cultural influences which prevailed in Albania before her complete conquest by the Turks: Latin-Catholic to the north of the Shkumbi River, Greek-Orthodox to the south of it.

It took some time for the first printed works in Albanian to see the light. These were ecclesiastical books or dictionaries written by the Catholic clergy of the north. First in order comes the *Messale* (1555) by Gjon Buzuku, probably a bishop in northern Albania, printed with an alphabet based on the Latin one, but with some Cyrillic letters⁵). Obviously the proximity of the South Slavic lands, particularly the Dalmatian littoral with which the Albanian Catholic clergymen were in touch, influenced him to adopt certain Cyrillic characters for Albanian sounds which Latin letters could not convey. They belong to Western Cyrillic, employed by Croatian Catholics in the sacred texts of popular language⁶). But Buzuku's alphabet does not seem to have had followers, for in Pjetër Budi's (1566—1623) works, as for instance, in the *Christian Doctrine* (1618), we

³) The manuscript was first published by N. Jorga, *Notes et extraits pour servir à l'histoire des croisades au XV-e siècle, 4-e Série (1453—1476)*, Bucharest, 1915, pp. 194—198.

⁴) Cf. N. Borgia, *Pericope evangelica in lingua albanese del secolo XIV da un manoscritto greco della Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Grottaferata, 1930*. Text of the original is included in p. 26.

⁵) For facsimiles of passages, see M. Roques, *Recherches sur les anciens textes albanais*, Paris, 1932, Plate I, and for the reproduction of the whole copy, N. Ressuli, *Il „Messale“ di Giovanni Buzuku*, *Studi e testi* 99, Città del Vaticano, 1958.

⁶) Cf. M. Roques, *op. cit.*, p. 12, who calls it bukvetica of Bosnia (Bosančica), and the treatment of Slavic elements in the text in M. Camaj, *Il „Messale“ di Gjon Buzuku*, *Contributi linguistici allo studio della genesi*, Rome, 1960, pp. 56—66.

meet a different script, although founded on the Latin one⁷). Budi's alphabet, with slight changes, was employed in the *Dictionary* (1635) by Frang Bardhi and in *Cuneus Prophetarum* (1685) by Pjetër Bogdani. It was preserved until the outset of the 20th century by the Jesuit priests of Shkodër, who continued to publish in it. This system is usually called „the Alphabet of the Ancient Writers of the North“, for it was used by them; it is also referred to at times as “the Catholic Alphabet“, because only the Catholic part of the Albanian population wrote in it. It remained, however, restricted to the province of Shkodër.

In the south also the first printed works in Albanian were church books and dictionaries, but the copies we possess are of a much later date than those of the north, namely, from the 18th and 19th centuries. The explanation for this difference in time should be sought in the position of the Catholic and Orthodox churches during the Turkish domination. The Catholic church in Albania in the first three centuries was suspect to the Porte, owing to its ties with the Vatican and the Catholic West, enemies of the Turkish empire; and the pressure of islamization on its following was at times very heavy. The Catholic clergymen felt the need to translate and compile ecclesiastical works in the vernacular for the education of the people. Although nothing is known about Reformation and Counter-Reformation among the Catholics of Albania — it is probable that Reformation did not extend as far south as their lands — the fact that the Counter-Reformation in Croatia and other South Slavic lands was active and that several works were written in the popular language might have influenced the Catholic clergy of Albania in doing likewise. The Patriarchate of Constantinople, on the other hand, enjoyed, from the time of the Turkish conquest, the protection of the Turkish state and had become in effect one of its administrative institutions. It was when Russia stepped forth as the protectress of the Orthodox Christians in the 18th century — this was also the period of the decline of the Turkish empire — that the position of the Orthodox Church in Albania began to deteriorate. The pressure of Islamization weighed heavily upon the faithful, and it was necessary to strengthen their belief⁸). The works in Albanian produced

⁷) See facsimiles of passages in M. R o q u e s , op. cit., Plates III and IV.

⁸) Cf. S. S k e n d i , „Religion in Albania during the Ottoman Rule“, SOF, XV (1956), pp. 311—327.

by the Orthodox for religious propaganda were not devoid at times of hellenizing tendencies.

Few, however, are the books which have been written in Albanian by the Orthodox Christians of the south. As it would be expected, their alphabet in general is Greek. By the 18th century a Greek cultural center had developed in Voskopojë (Moskhopolis), near the present city of Korçë, which exercised a powerful influence in the south. Two polyglot dictionaries appeared, one by the archpriest Theodor Kavallioti, entitled *Dictionary of Popular Greek, Vlakh, and Albanian*, included in his *Primer (Prōtopeiria)* (1710), and the other by Master Dhanil, a clergyman and a teacher, called the *Tetraglot Dictionary* (1802), because Bulgarian was added. Both writers had received their education in Voskopojë, and employed Greek letters for the Albanian part. In the introduction of his work, written in poetry and in Greek, Master Dhanil made clear that his aim was to hellenize the Vlakh, Bulgarian, and Albanian populations⁹). In Berath, south of the Shkumbî River, Konstandin Berati wrote a Greek and Albanian primer in the second half of the 18th century in which he adopted the Greek script for the Albanian part. It is interesting that an alphabet is found in it, based mostly on Cyrillic and glagolitic, in which only two Albanian lines have been written¹⁰). Elbasan, a town in central Albania, boasts of an independent system, which J. G. v. Hahn, the Austrian Consul in Janina and the father of albanology, believed to resemble the ancient Phoenician alphabet. It was used only in that town and it could be understood here and there in Berat; it served for ecclesiastical as well as business purposes. Hahn's opinion was that it was of long tradition and that Master Theodor (Haxhifilipi) (d. 1806), a teacher and a preacher in Elbasan, who had studied in Voskopojë, had adopted it for his writings¹¹). Albanian scholars, however, have disagreed with Hahn as to the antiquity of the alphabet, attributing its creation to Master Theodor himself, one of them expressing even the opinion that it was "a cursive Greek alphabet of the 18th cen-

⁹) See the text in E. Legrand, *Bibliographie albanaise, complétée et publiée par H. Gûys*, Paris and Athens, 1912, entry 121, pp. 50—51.

¹⁰) Dh. S. Shuteriqi, K. Bihiku, M. Domi, and others, *Historia e letërsisë shqipe (History of Albanian Literature)*, Tiranë, 1959, I, pp. 313—314.

¹¹) Cf. J. G. v. Hahn, *Albanesische Studien*, Vienna, 1853, I, pp. 294 and 296. The complete treatment of the alphabet is comprised in pp. 280—296.

ture, individually stylized"¹²). More recently it has been maintained that this alphabet, composed of 53 letters, shows Slavic, Greek, and Latin influences¹³). In 1949, among documents from the well-known Orthodox monastery of St. John, near Elbasan, a short manuscript written in Albanian with a special and hitherto unknown alphabet was discovered. The document contains the passions of Christ and certain fragments of the Gospels in a language more archaic than that of Master Theodor. Although maintained that it is based on glagolitic¹⁴), judging by the facsimile fragment in the book (p. 317), one would be inclined to think that Greek has served as its basis. The manuscript is believed to have been written at a time when the Archbishopric (called also Patriarchate) of Ohrid favored translations of the sacred books into the vernacular in order to oppose islamization more efficiently, perhaps in the first half of the 18th century. It is called the „Alphabet of the Anonymous of Elbasan“^{14a}). In 1827 were printed in Corfu the four Gospels in the Greek original with the Albanian translation on the side, for which the Greek characters were employed — the 24 Greek letters plus nine special ones. It was the work of a group of translators under the supervision of Grigor Argjirokastriti (from Gjirokastër), an Albanian bishop of the island of Euboea. Apparently, it was well received by the Tosk population, for in 1885 there was a second edition in Athens¹⁵). Another independent alphabet and primer was published in 1845 by Naum Veqilharxhi, from a village near Korçë, but he alone made use of it¹⁶). Konstantin Kristoforidhi, this able and prolific purist from Elbasan and Hahn's teacher of Albanian, employed two alphabets for the various books of the Bible he translated for the Foreign and British Bible Society. Whenever he translated in the Geg dialect, he adopted the Latin, or better the "European let-

¹²) Cf. G. Petrotta, *Svolgimento storico della cultura e della letteratura albanese*, Palermo, 1950, p. 183; E. Çabej, *Elemente të gjuhësisë e të literaturës shqipe* (Elements of Albanian Linguistics and Literature), Tiranë, 1936, p. 32.

¹³) Cf. Dh. S. Shuteriqi, and others, *op. cit.*, p. 322. A facsimile of a passage is on p. 320.

¹⁴) *Ibid.*, p. 318.

^{14a}) Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 317—319.

¹⁵) Cf. F. Konitz a, „Mémoire sur le mouvement national albanais“, Bruxelles, Janvier 1899, in Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Politisches Archiv (hereafter HHStA, PA) XIV/18, Albanien XII/2, p. 1; E. Çabej, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹⁶) A facsimile of the title page and a passage, transcribed in Latin letters and translated in French, is included in E. Le grand, *op. cit.*, pp. 79—80.

ters", proposed by R. Lespius in his *Das Allgemeine Linguistische Alphabet* (1854), as for instance, in the four Gospels (1866); and whenever his translations were in the Tosk dialect, he made use of the Greek characters, as for instance, in the *Psalter* (1868¹⁷). In 1877, an Orthodox Albanian born in Rumania, Vasil Dh. Ruso, published *Pelasgjika, shqip a plla alfavita* (*Pelasgika, a Simple Albanian Primer*), written with Greek letters and dedicated to his sons¹⁸).

With the total occupation of Albania by the Turks after Skënderbeg's death (1468) and the gradual islamization of the inhabitants, the Arabic or Turkish alphabet was introduced. However, the documents we possess in such a script date from the 18th century. They stem from the south with Muhamed Kyçyku's (alias Çami) long poem *Erveheja* (1820¹⁹); from Berat, a center of Oriental culture, with the poems of Nezim Trakulla (d. 1760); from the north with Mulla Hysen Dobraçi's "anachreontic" poetry²⁰). Some of the writers were Sunnis and others Bektashis, adherents of a pantheistic sect of Shia Islamism which thrived in southern Albania. Their subjects were both worldly and religious in inspiration, influenced by Oriental culture. Islam in Albania, being not on the defensive, like the Christian churches, did not have to concentrate on religious writings. One hears also of an alphabet with Turkish letters composed around 1861 by a certain Daud Boriçi from Shkodër²¹). In 1877, a learned Albanian who had travelled in the West and lived in Janina, Tahsin, published an Albanian alphabet, based on Turkish characters, which was considerably diffused in that province, but he was soon arrested and sent to Istanbul²²): Albanian not enjoying the same status as languages within the Turkish empire.

Attempts at forming Albanian alphabets were not wanting also in the Albanian diaspora. The descendants of the Albanians who emigrated to and settled in Greece, primarily toward the end of the

¹⁷) See examples of his Latin and Greek alphabets in *idem.*, entry 272, p. 101, and entry 296, p. 108, respectively.

¹⁸) Cf. G. Petrotta, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

¹⁹) See a facsimile of a passage of the ms. in Dh. S. Shuteriqi, and others, *op. cit.*, p. 287.

²⁰) See about Albanian literature with Arabic-Turkish alphabet in *ibid.*, pp. 249—301; it is the most extensive treatment up to now.

²¹) Cf. G. Petrotta, *op. cit.*, p. 184; Dh. S. Shuteriqi, and others, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

²²) F. Konitza, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

14th and in the beginning of the 15th century, wrote their mother language with Greek letters. Such an example is the manuscript of a small Greek - Albanian Dictionary (1809) by Marko Boçari, which the Suliot hero of the Greek Revolution wrote for F. Pouqueville, French Consul in Janina²³). An Albanian Alphabet According to the Dialect Spoken in Greece, founded on Greek script, was published in Athens in 1882 by Anastas Kullurioti from the island of Salamina. Among the Italo-Albanians, who stemmed from the Albanians who left their fatherland after the Turkish conquest and lived in the southern part of Italy and Sicily, the alphabets adopted by their writers were Latin. Although by origin Tosks and Orthodox Christians, they had become in Italy Uniates and had come under Latin-Italian cultural influence. Only Demetrio Camarda made use of the Greek alphabet in his *Grammatologia comparata della lingua albanese* (1864) and its *Appendice* (1866), in substance the alphabet introduced by Hahn in his *Albanesische Studien*, which seemed to him complete and reasonable²⁴). Hahn had adopted Latin characters, like j, or Greek ones with diacritical signs, like σ (š), for sounds which were particularly Albanian. But even Camarda did not stick to it, for in some translations he used the Latin script.

If we exclude the "Alphabet of the Ancient Writers of the North", which lasted more than 300 years, the other alphabets were short-lived, used generally only by the individuals who created them or in extremely narrow areas. The choice of the Greek or Latin alphabet as a basis depended greatly on the culture of the individual who devised it or the cultural zone in which it emerged.

II

The interest in the Albanian language began to grow after the formation of the Albanian League, commonly called the League of Prizren, created in 1878 in order to oppose the decisions of the Berlin Congress which ceded Albanian territory to the neighboring states. Albanian patriots became aware of the shaky structure of the Turkish empire and feared dismemberment of their country. Efforts were

²³) Cf. E. Çabej, *op. cit.*, p. 32. It was published by L. Skendo, ed., under the title *Fjalori i Marko Boçarit*, (Le lexique de Marc Botzari), Tiranë, 1926.

²⁴) Cf. D. Camarda, *Grammatologia comparata della lingua albanese*, Prato, 1864, p. 11. His alphabet is contained in p. 14.

then made for the development of Albanian consciousness and the union of the three confessional groups. The cultivation of the Albanian language — the common link — would best serve the purpose. Accordingly, the League formulated a program of administrative autonomy, laying stress on the use of written Albanian and the opening of Albanian schools, with both of which the alphabet question was inextricably connected.

While the League was active in Albania opposing with arms encroachments upon her territory, a cultural-educational society, called the Society for Albanian Publications²⁵), was constituted in 1879 in Constantinople with the aim of promoting publications in the Albanian language. At the head of it were the two brothers Frashëri, Sami (known in Turkey as Şemseddin Sami Bey) and Naim, the latter the apostle-poet of Albanian nationalism, assisted by prominent Albanians of the Orthodox and Catholic faiths. This society devised an alphabet based on Latin characters with some Greek letters, like ð (th in father) and θ (th in breath) — Sami and Naim had studied in the Greek gymnasium of Janina — and some independent ones, like h (gj), created by Sami himself for particular Albanian sounds. Adopting the principle of one letter for each sound, this alphabet was linguistically well-founded. It was called „the Constantinople Alphabet“ or „the Frashëriot Alphabet“ because of the Frashëri brothers. In it the society published its organ *D r i t a*, an Albanian ABC and primer, and several textbooks.

The Constantinople alphabet was adopted by various publications of the Albanian colonies — in Bulgaria, Rumania, and elsewhere — and by a large part of Albania proper. The reports of the Austrian consuls in Albania advise that by 1905 the Constantinople alphabet

²⁵) This author has met the name of this society as *Drita*, Society for the Development of the Albanian Language, and Society for the Printing of Albanian Letters. Based on the writing „Mbi lëvizjen e rilindjes“ (On the Revival Movement) by J. Vreto, one of the founders of the Constantinople society, and included in Dh. S. Shuteriqi, ed., *Antologji e letërsisë shqipe* (Anthology of Albanian literature), Tiranë, 1955, pp. 176—179, he believes that Society for Albanian Publications should be the correct name. The confusion with *Drita* (the Light), used by such prominent scholars like F. Konitza and Professor K. Gurakuqi, seem to have resulted from the fact that the books written in the 1880's by members of the Constantinople society, primarily by Naim Frashëri, owing to governmental restrictions in the Turkish capital, were published by its Albanian branch in Bucharest, which took the name *Drita* after the appearance of the homonymous review of the society in Constantinople.

was used by the major part of the population, Orthodox as well as Moslem, which lived in the south, and had extended northward beyond Durrës, as far as Dibër and the region south of Prizren²⁶).

At the outset the educational-linguistic movement of the Albanians, spurred by the League of Prizren, was supported by the Porte, for it emphasized the nationality of the Albanians as an obstacle to the expansion of the Slavs and the Greeks in the Balkans. But as soon as the danger passed, both the League and the Constantinople society were suppressed. It was in keeping with the constant policy of the Porte. The Sultan was opposed in principle to any nationalist movement of the Albanians, especially the Moslems, who constituted the majority of the Albanian nation. The interests of the empire made him impose upon the Moslems, irrespective of their national origin, Turkish or Arabic education. An uniform spirit of religion and state language had to be created in this way in order to build a dividing wall between the Christian and Moslem elements. To break this wall between the Albanians would have menacing consequences for his authority, particularly when the national currents of the populations held together by common religion and Turkish language would be intensified in the empire. The policy of the Porte, therefore, with regard to Albanian national consciousness and language, was directed toward the creation of a deep enmity between Moslems and Christians²⁷).

In accordance with such a policy, written Albanian had been banned and Albanian schools had been prohibited. The schools were Turkish for the Moslem and Greek for the Orthodox Albanians. Only in the period between the Congress of Berlin and the Turkish Constitution (1908) were some Albanian schools alternately opened and closed in Korçë, and its surroundings, as the domestic policy of the Porte, owing to European pressure, oscillated between reform and conservatism. But even then Albanian Moslems who had entered the schools were obliged to abandon them²⁸). The Patriarchate of Constantinople also concurred in the policy of separation. It op-

²⁶) Cf. „Mémoire über Albanien (Ende 1901 bis Anfang 1905)“, Wien, April 1905, HHStA, PA XIV/28, Albanien XX/3, p. 14. This memorandum was written by Kral, Austro-Hungarian Consul in Shkodër.

²⁷) Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 2, and Calice to Gołuchowski, Constantinople, 16. November 1898, No. 49B, HHStA, PA XIV/24, Albanien XIV/4.

²⁸) „Mémoire über Albanien (Ende 1901 bis Anfang 1905)“, p. 2.

posed Albanian language and education because they meant the loss of its influence and consequently the establishment of an Albanian independent church. The Greek clergy anathematized the Albanian letters and those who taught them, for any departure from Greek was held by it to be instigated by „the enemy of the faith“. As the Foreign and British Bible Society and American missions had been instrumental in translating the holy books into the Albanian language as well as teaching it, Protestantism was regarded as „the enemy of the faith“²⁹).

However, in Shkodër, two schools, a Franciscan seminary and a Jesuit institution, where Albanian was taught, were founded before 1878, subsidized by Austria-Hungary and under her *Kultusprotectorat*. Later other schools were opened, for it was the policy of the Dual Monarchy, as often repeated in the reports of its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to support the development of Albanian consciousness through national culture in order to bring about a united Albania as a counterpoise to the Slavs³⁰). The Italians also began to establish toward the end of the 19th century their schools in Shkodër and in towns of the coast, where Albanian was taught. A rivalry between the two powers was inevitable.

In 1899 an Albanian literary society, *Bashkimi* (the Union), was formed in Shkodër by Monsignor Preng Doçi (Dochi), abbot of Mirdita, in close collaboration with the Albanian Catholic clergy. It set as its first task the formation of an alphabet, its principal composer being the abbot himself. This alphabet was based totally on Latin characters, representing the special Albanian sounds by digraphs, the second member of which was h: dh (ð), th (θ) xh (dž), ch (č), gh (gj), etc. Several textbooks for the Catholic schools of the north were printed in it, subsidized by the Austro-Hungarian government. But in spite of Doçi's claim that the *Bashkimi* alphabet was „uniform, practical, and esthetic“, proper for propagation, and that

²⁹) See circular letter in Greek of the archbishop of Kastoria, Philaretos, addressed to the priests and the population of the group of villages called Vakëf-s (Vakouphokhōria), and dated Korytsa (Korçë), 20. September 1892, in HHStA, PA XIV/21, Albanien XIII/18.

³⁰) Cf. „Memorandum“, Szomolány, 4. Oktober 1907, unsigned, HHStA, PA XIV/28, Albanien XX/7—8, pp. 1—2. It explains Austro-Hungarian policy toward Albania. See also „Mémoire über Albanien (Ende 1901 bis Anfang 1905)“, pp. 1, 2, 13—19.

it had been adopted in a considerable part of northern Albania³¹), it remained limited to the province of Shkodër.

Three years later a new literary society, *A g i m i* (the Dawn), was constituted in Shkodër by another Catholic cleric, Dom Ndre Mjeda, a philologist and a poet, who created another alphabet. Mjeda's alphabet, too, was founded wholly on Latin letters, but contrary to Doçi's, it followed the principle of one letter for one sound, making use of diacritical marks for sounds particular to Albanian, as for instance, g' (gj), k' (kj), n' (nj), etc. Mjeda's alphabet had found approval in the International Congress of the Orientalists, held in 1902 in Hamburg, and had the support of the Catholic Episcopate in Shkodër and of the majority of the Catholic clergy. A conflict then arose: the *A g i m i* alphabet vs. the *B a s h k i m i* alphabet³²). The Dual Monarchy could not remain neutral in it.

The policy of the Austro-Hungarian government in the question of the Albanian alphabet was to strive and bring about a unified alphabet which would serve to consolidate its influence in Albania. It considered Mjeda's alphabet representative of a certain progress and closer to the Constantinople alphabet than that of the *B a s h k i m i*, with its „inherent Italian character“. Moreover, the followers of Mjeda and those of the Frashëris were inclined to make concessions for a unified alphabet, but not the abbot of Mirdita³³). The Austro-Hungarian government which had first subsidized the publication of textbooks in the *B a s h k i m i* alphabet turned now its favor to the Mjeda script. The problem of the alphabet was significant to it also from the point of view of church policy, because without its solution the peace of the Shkodër Episcopate and the normal development of the schools could not be achieved³⁴).

The Italians had already been using in their schools the *B a s h k i m i* alphabet. At this juncture, however, they seemed to manifest a special interest in the textbooks written with that alphabet³⁵). Besides,

³¹) Cf. Monsignor Dochi to Zwiedinek, Wien, 16. Februar 1906, HHStA, PA XIV/7, Albanien V/2.

³²) Cf. „Mémoire über Albanien (Ende 1901 bis Anfang 1905)“, p. 16.

³³) Cf. ibidem; Kral to Gołuchowski, Scutari, 23. März 1906, No. 30, sehr vertraulich, HHStA, PA XIV/24, Albanien XIV; Dochi to Zwiedinek, Wien, 16. Februar 1906, HHStA, PA XIV/7, Albanien V/2.

³⁴) Cf. Kral to Gołuchowski, Scutari, 23. März 1906, No. 30, sehr vertraulich, HHStA, PA XIV/24, Albanien XIV.

³⁵) Cf. Dochi to Zwiedinek, Wien, 16. Februar 1906, HHStA, PA XIV/7, Albanien V/2.

the Italians attempted to use for their cultural propaganda in Albania the Italo-Albanians, but up to a certain extent, for there was also independent movement among the latter. Two Albanian linguistic congresses were held in Italy, one in 1895 and the other in 1897, both including in their program a unified alphabet³⁶). The two most famous poets of the Italo-Albanians, Girolamo de Rada (1814—1903) and Giuseppe Schirò (1865—1927), devised each an alphabet founded on Latin letters and employed it in their works. But only the Catholics of Shkodër showed an interest in the linguistic activities across the Adriatic; the Moslems and the Orthodox Christians paid almost no attention to the publications which were produced there³⁷).

Konstantin Kristoforidhi continued to write in the post-League period. When he died in 1895, he left in a manuscript form an Albanian-Greek dictionary, written in Greek letters. The Greek government managed to get hold of it and in 1904 it published it under the title *L e k s i k o n t ē s a l v a n i k ē s g l ō s s ē s* (Dictionary of the Albanian Language). It seized the opportunity to make its own propaganda. We read in the foreword: „it [the dictionary] is delivered . . . as a valuable educational tool to teach the brave Albanian people, through practical example, that only with the help, leadership, and inspiration of the Greek letters and the Greek language“ they would be enlightened³⁸).

Faik Konitza, a learned Albanian who contributed greatly to the purification of the language, used his own alphabet in publishing his review *A l b a n i a* (1897—1909) in Brussels and later London. It resembled that of *B a s h k i m i*. Konitza strove to make his alphabet the basis for the unification of the various others, but he failed.

The post-League era witnessed many other individual alphabets. Pater Gjergj Fishta (1871—1940), the national Albanian poet, himself a Franciscan and a member of the society *B a s h k i m i*, made them the object of satire in his *W a s p s o n P a r n a s s u s* (1907). The following are some of its verses, translated freely:

With every mushroom springs forth a man of letters,
Who, with brain fevered by tales and newspapers,
Composes at last and gives birth to an ABC.

³⁶) Cf. G. Petrotta, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

³⁷) „Mémoire über Albanien (Ende 1901 bis Anfang 1905)“, p. 13.

³⁸) Cf. K. Kristophoridēs, *Leksikon tēs alvanikes glōsses*, Athens, 1904, p. 8

Yes, a mule's offspring. But again poor Albania
 By them will be divided into as many chunks and pieces
 As there are letters from A to Z.

III

The chaotic situation created by the multiplicity of alphabets continued until 1908, when the Young Turks came to power. Albanians had taken part in their revolution and many had joined „the Committee of Union and Progress“. The program of the Young Turks satisfied their demands to enjoy the same rights as the other peoples of the Turkish empire. And the proclamation of the Constitution gave a strong impetus to their nationalist activity. Clubs (literary-educational societies with unavowed political aims) and societies were established in important towns of Albania, newspapers in Albanian began to be published, and Albanian schools were opened. The Albanians were trying „to catch up“.

The most urgent question was a unified national alphabet. Its absence was an obstacle to the growth of national consciousness and the union of Tosks and Gegs, for there could be no communication between them. The appeal for a congress to solve the alphabet problem was made by the Salonica newspaper *Liria* (The Freedom), published by Midhat Frashëri, the son of Abdul Frashëri, the organizer of the Albanian League, and the nephew of the Frashëri brothers of the Constantinople alphabet. The task of organizing it, however, fell upon the Albanian club of Monastir (Bitolj) which bore the name *Bashkimi* (the Union). This club was among the first to be formed (August, 1908), and it acquired importance as it was in the capital of the vilayet³⁹). The meeting was held in Monastir, from November 14 to November 22, 1908⁴⁰), attended by delegates

³⁹) Cf. for members of the Council, see Pósfai to Aehrenthal, Monastir, 30. August 1908, No. 54, HHStA, PA XIV/14, Albanien XI/2.

⁴⁰) It is surprising that the dates of the duration of the Congress are not exactly known even today by Albanian scholars. Professor Mahir Domi of the University of Tirana writes an article, „Kongresi i Manastirit dhe zgjidhja e çështjes së alfabetit (13—23 Nëntor)“ (The Congress of Monastir and the Solution of the Alphabet Question, 13—23 November 1908), *Zëri i Popullit* (The Voice of the People), Tiranë, 19. November 1958, p. 3, and Professor Karl Gurakuqi of the University of Palermo, Italy, gives as dates of that Congress 12.—20. November 1908 in his article „Për historinë e alfabetit t'onë“ (For the History of Our Alphabet), *Shqiptari i Lirë* (The Free Albanian), New York, 30 June 1960, p. 3.

from Albanian clubs, societies, towns, schools, and colonies abroad⁴¹).

The Congress was chaired by Midhat Frashëri. The speeches of the first two days with respect to the alphabet were general in character. They helped, however, to create a warm and brotherly atmosphere in which the serious work was to develop. Although each representative had come resolute to defend the alphabet of his liking — and many spoke out their minds — soon each became aware, in that mixed crowd, that it was important to achieve union, no matter which alphabet was chosen. The delegate who contributed most to the creation of the atmosphere of brotherhood and understanding was Pater Gjergj Fishta, who extolled the work of the *B a s h k i m i* alphabet, but concluded: „I have not come here to defend any one of the alphabets, but I have come to unite with you and adopt that alphabet which the Congress would decide upon as most useful for uplifting the people“⁴²).

An alphabet committee of eleven members was elected, composed of the most cultured among the delegates, with Pater Fishta as its president. For three days in succession the committee deliberated on the question of a common alphabet, giving the Albanian *b e s a* (word of honor) that nothing would be divulged prior to the final decision.

As the discussions in the general meeting hinged mostly on the three main alphabets — Constantinople, *B a s h k i m i*, and *A g i m i* — the alphabet committee limited itself to three questions: a) should one of the three alphabets be chosen; b) should parts of each alphabet be amalgamated for the formation of a new alphabet; and c) should a new alphabet be created⁴³).

The committee dwelt long upon the three questions, particularly since letters and telegrams arrived from many parts of Albania and the colonies expressing their preferences for the alphabets. Finally two currents emerged. One favored a new alphabet on the basis of Latin letters: 25 letters were chosen and the rest, corresponding to particular Albanian sounds, were built by digraphs. The new alpha-

⁴¹) See for the names of the delegates and the places which delegated them the very interesting and detailed „Report of the Albanian Congress in Monastir 1/14 November 1908“ by George D. Kyrias, vice-president of the Monastir Club, Monastir, 20 January 1909, included in HHStA, PA XIV/15, Albanien XI/6, and Pósfai to Aehrenthal, Monastir, 23. November 1908, No. 73, vertraulich, HHStA, PA XIV/15, Albanien XI/6, pp. 3 and 17.

⁴²) G. D. K y r i a s, op. cit., p. 7.

⁴³) Ibid., p. 11.

bet was almost identical to that of *Bashkimi*. The other current supported the adoption of the Constantinople alphabet. It was not easy to discuss some of its letters. Only the character *đ* took up two whole sessions of the committee. Those who were in favor of adopting the Constantinople alphabet were four Moslem Tosks — Midhat Frashëri; Shahin Kolonja, editor of the newspaper *Drita* (the Light) of Sofia; Bajo Topulli, an active patriot intellectual; Nyzhet Vrioni, member of an influential feudal family — and Dom Ndre Mjeda⁴⁴). Obviously Dom Ndre Mjeda supported the Constantinople alphabet first, because, like his own, it was founded on the principle of one letter for each sound, and secondly, because the Latin alphabet was similar to that of his rival, the abbot Preng Doçi. At the end the committee resolved that the two alphabets — the Constantinople and the new Latin alphabet (see the copy of the resolution on separate table) — would be the only ones to be used and that all Albanian schools were obliged to teach both to their pupils.

Midhat Frashëri made known to the Congress the decision of the committee. Then Pater Fishta, in his capacity of the president of the alphabet committee, justified it. He said that the Constantinople alphabet alone would be sufficient to answer the needs of the Albanian nation, but in order to have books printed abroad and for telegrams a purely Latin alphabet was necessary. As a last touch, he referred to the Germans who made use of two alphabets, the Gothic and the Latin⁴⁵). The decision of the alphabet committee was accepted by the Congress.

The resolution on the alphabet question at Monastir was a significant step toward the unification of the Albanians. Although not the ideal solution, which would have been a single alphabet, it was a wise one. The Constantinople alphabet could not have been discarded, for it had a long tradition and had been widely diffused. A considerable number of books had been published in it. However, by eliminating all other alphabets, the Monastir decision rendered easier the communication among Albanians: a paper or a book published in the south could now be read in the north and vice versa. It also contributed to making Moslems and Christians more conscious of their common patrimony.

⁴⁴) Ibid., p. 19.

⁴⁵) Ibid., p. 12.

IV

But shortly after the Monastir Congress obstacles began to arise. Albania was not in a uniform state of civilization. The Moslems of the north were backward and fanatic, especially in Kosovë (Kosmet), and could not well understand the cultural efforts of their more emancipated brothers of the south. They were rather reluctant to adopt a script that was not that of the Koran⁴⁶).

The Young Turks tried to make the most of this situation. Standing for the „unity“ of the empire and for a centralistic policy, they feared that the Latin alphabet laying stress on common nationality — the very contrast between the Latin and Turkish alphabets would make the Albanians aware of their national identity — would unite the Albanians and eventually detach them from Turkey. The principle of religion, Islamism, was still a force in the empire and the Young Turks could not neglect it, although at the outset they tried to keep it in the background, because of the interconfessional character of their revolution. They directed their efforts, therefore, to attract the Albanian Moslems to their side by an Islamic agitation, attacking the Latin alphabet⁴⁷).

As early as February, 1909, the Albanian club of Filat, a town in northwestern Greece of today, wrote a letter to Bashkimi of Monastir, which had become the central Albanian club, complaining: „We have repeatedly written to you that the Young Turk Committee (Cemiet) in Filat is very much biased against the Albanian language. Now it shows [the bias] quite openly; it gathers the peasants and tells them that the Sultan is an opponent of the Albanian language . . . At the same time it asks them to sign a declaration against the use of the Albanian script“⁴⁸). The Korçë club, Dituria (The Knowledge), was very upset to read in the newspapers that „in Constantinople a society had been formed with the aim to propagat[e] [the wrting of] the Albanian language with Turkish letters“⁴⁹). Hodjas

⁴⁶) Cf. Lukes to Aehrenthal, Üsküb, 29. November 1908, No. 191, geheim, HHStA, PA XIV/15, Albanien XI/6.

⁴⁷) Cf. Kral to Aehrenthal, Scutari, 16. April 1909, No. 59, HHStA, PA XIV/15, Albanien XI/16; E. [krem] b. [ey] V. [lora], Die Wahrheit über das Vorgehen der Jungtürken in Albanien, Vienna and Leipzig, 1911, p. 16.

⁴⁸) Cf. German translation of original letter, Filat, 19. Februar 1909, in Pósfai to Aehrenthal, Monastir, 7. März 1909, No. 10, geheim, Beilage I, HHStA, PA XIV/15, Albanien XI/6.

⁴⁹) Cf. German translation of original letter, Korçë, 23. Februar 1909, Beilage II, in *ibid.*

and ulemas were telling the people that the Latin alphabet was the instrument of the „infidel“ and the use of it a sacrilege; the proper alphabet for the Moslem was that in which the Koran was written⁵⁰).

The support lent by the Young Turks to the Turkish alphabet brought a disappointment among the nationalist minded Albanians. The friendly understanding which had existed between the Albanian club of Monastir and the Young Turks was affected so deeply as to be transformed into open hostility. The minds of the Albanians were now preoccupied with the efforts of the Young Turks to impose the Turkish alphabet⁵¹).

On 23 July 1909, the Young Turks, under the cover of an „Ottoman Albanian Constitutional Committee“ (*O s m a n l i a r n a u t m e ş r u t i y e t k o m i s i o n i*), organized a congress in Dibër. It was heavily attended by Albanian delegates, both from the north and from the south⁵²). Although the primary aim of the Young Turks was to use it as a demonstration for the European and Ottoman public that Albania was for the constitution and ready to defend it⁵³), the questions of the Albanian schools and the Turkish alphabet were raised, causing long discussions. The supporters of the Turkish alphabet were numerous and it was resolved at the end that Albanian would be taught in all the schools, but that one was free to make use of the Latin or Turkish alphabet in writing it⁵⁴).

The Young Turks had succeeded not in obtaining a concession but in reality in giving a blow to the Latin alphabet. They intensified their efforts. They organized demonstrations in various Albanian towns in favor of the Turkish alphabet. The stand of the Young Turks in the question of the alphabet was their last attempt to cast the torch of dissension between the Christian and Moslem Albanians and thwart their union.

⁵⁰) Cf. Kral to Aehrenthal, Scutari, 16. April 1909, No. 59, HHStA, PA XIV/15, Albanien XI/6.

⁵¹) Cf. Pósfai to Aehrenthal, Monastir, 7. März 1909, No. 10, geheim, HHStA, PA XIV/15, Albanien XI/6.

⁵²) See for a list of delegates, Pósfai to Aehrenthal, Monastir, 19. Juli 1909, No. 52, geheim, and Kral to Aehrenthal, Scutari, 5. August 1909, No. 106, in HHStA, PA XIV/15, Albanien XI/7.

⁵³) See the first five points of the resolution in *Vendimet e Kongresit të Dibrës, më 10 të Korrikut 1909* (Resolutions of the Congress of Dibër, 10 [23] July 1909), Monastir, 1909—1325, pp. 1—3.

⁵⁴) Cf. *Ibid.*, art. 4 p. 4; Pósfai to Aehrenthal, Monastir, 2, August 1909, No. 57, HHStA, PA XIV/15, Albanien XI/7; Kral to Aehrenthal, Scutari, 5. August 1909, No. 106; HHStA, PA XIV/15, Albanien XI/7.

But the Albanian patriots, despite odds, did not retreat. They entered the struggle. The Albanians had a linguistic argument in their favor: written Arabic was poor in vowels and written Turkish had vowel symbols which represented several sounds, depending on the law of vowel euphony, as for instance, *o*, *ö*, *u*, *ü*. From September 2 to September 10, 1909 they held a congress in Elbasan to discuss the question of the Albanian schools and the creation of a teacher's school. While the congress was in session, members of the Young Turks Committee of Elbasan harangued the peasants of the districts surrounding the town to pay no attention to the work of the congress⁵⁵). Concerning the schools, the congress decided that it was the duty of the Monastir club to introduce the Albanian language in all the schools of Albania, and that meant in the Latin alphabet⁵⁶).

On 19 February 1910, an imposing demonstration took place in Korçë in which some 15,000 people protested against the intended introduction of the Turkish alphabet by force. Many speeches were delivered in support of the „Albanian letters“, and a prayer was said by the hodja, Hafëz Ali, who also blessed them. Telegrams were sent to the Albanian deputies in Constantinople and their answer was an encouragement to stick to the demands⁵⁷).

Despite official orders of the Committee of Union and Progress and the Turkish government to remain neutral in the question of the alphabet, the Young Turks agitated more and more. The mufti of Monastir, Rexheb Nureddin, forwarded to the notables of Janina a pamphlet in which the Turkish letters for transcribing Albanian were recommended. The Albanian club of that city immediately wired the Grand Vizier and the Minister of Education protesting and stressing the resolution of the Tosks to abide by the Latin alpha-

⁵⁵) Cf. Pósfai to Aehrenthal, Monastir, 20. September 1909, No. 72, vertraulich, HHStA, PA XIV/15, Albanien XI/7; Biliński to Aehrenthal, Janina, 15. September 1909, No. 54, HHStA, PA XIV/15, Albanien XI/7.

⁵⁶) See art. 8 in „Beschlüsse“, Pósfai to Aehrenthal, Monastir, 20. September 1909, No. 72, vertraulich, Beilage IV, HHStA, PA XIV/15, Albanien XI/7.

⁵⁷) Cf. Bornemisza to Aehrenthal, Monastir, 1. März 1910, No. 13, geheim, HHStA, PA XIV/24; Albanien XIV; E. b. V., op. cit., p. 20; „Gjuha e shkolla shqype në kohën e xhemietit“ (Albanian Language and School at the Time of the [Young Turk] Committee), Leka (Shkodër), IX (1937), p. 469.

bet. Being the main club of the vilayet of Janina, it advised the other Albanian clubs of the province to do the same⁵⁸).

As the demonstrations in favor of the Turkish alphabet continued, the opposition on the part of the enlightened Moslems of the south became stronger. Characteristic is the protest of the club of Filat to the Porte, when it learned that 12 hodjas planned to demonstrate in support of the Turkish script; the telegram ended: „We will shed the rest of our blood for the Latin alphabet“⁵⁹). In the south the Bektashis, considered heretic by the Orthodox Moslems, played also an important role in supporting the Latin alphabet. However, in central and northern Albania, if we exclude Elbasan, the propaganda of the hodjas had been successful⁶⁰).

It is natural to ask at this point about the position of Shkodër during this period of alphabet struggle. The situation there was different. The Catholics had their own confessional schools, under the protection of Austria-Hungary, which were private in character and, therefore, not under the jurisdiction of the Turkish educational authorities. They could not be drawn into the arena of the alphabet conflict. In the Catholic schools Albanian had been taught from the very outset with Latin characters; a change in them was impossible. The same may be said about the Italian schools. The action of the Young Turks in the alphabet question concerned the government schools, and in Shkodër it could affect only the Moslem Albanians. There was no problem, for the Moslem population of Shkodër was extremely conservative⁶¹). Only a meeting was held in the beginning of February, 1910, called by some hodjas, where a Üsküb (Skopje) resolution favoring the Turkish alphabet was adopted⁶²). Toward the end of the same month, however, the Catholics demonstrated in favor of the Latin alphabet⁶³).

⁵⁸) Biliński to Aehrenthal, Janina, 3. März 1910, No. 17, vertraulich, HHStA, PA XIV/24, Albanien XIV.

⁵⁹) Biliński to Aehrenthal, No. 19, vertraulich, Janina, 7. März, 1910, No. 19, vertraulich, HHStA, PA XIV/24, Albanien XIV.

⁶⁰) Cf. Halla to Aehrenthal, Durazzo, 11. März 1910, No. 10, HHStA, PA XIV/24, Albanien XIV.

⁶¹) Cf. Kral to Aehrenthal, Scutari, 10. Oktober 1908, No. 97, and 16. April 1909, No. 59, in HHStA, PA XIV/15, Albanien XI/6.

⁶²) Cf. Zambaur to Aehrenthal, Scutari, 20. März 1910, No. 33, vertraulich, HHStA, PA XIV/24, Albanien XIV.

⁶³) Cf. E. b. V., op. cit., p. 20.

It was decided in the Monastir Congress of 1908 that after two years a second congress was going to take place. The Latin-Turkish alphabet struggle sped it up. On 21 March 1910, a second language congress, organized by the partisans of the „national alphabet“, met in Monastir to clarify the whole situation. It declared: „The pure linguistic question of the Albanian alphabet, which had been definitely solved in the Congress of Dibër, has come up again and has given place to crises and contradictory currents of opinion. This question, which interests solely the Albanian element, has even acquired an internal political significance since it regards education in the whole Ottoman nation and the interest of the authorities. The government, coming back to the primitive decision which was the most logical, has encouraged the partisans of the Turkish language, causing regrettable deeds, incompatible with the constitutional regime which we even enjoy . . . The congress unanimously declares that the question of the Albanian language, however much it has deviated from its basis, belongs exclusively to the Albanians; and it is desirable, in the true Ottoman interests, that it should not get away from its natural sphere“⁶⁴).

The rift between the Young Turks and the Albanian nationalists had become deep. It was useless any longer to make demands to the Constantinople government, for it had taken a hostile attitude. The Grand Vizier, Ibrahim Hakki Pasha, told a prominent Albanian deputy: „The government considers the desire to adopt the Latin characters [on the part of the Albanians] as the first step to be detached from Turkey . . . The government must do everything, and will do everything, to prevent the adoption of the Latin alphabet“⁶⁵). At the instigation of the Turkish government, the Ş e y h Ü l İ s l a m , the supreme Moslem authority, sent to all the muftis of Albania on 5 April 1910 a circular letter which read: „We hasten to inform you that on 22 March 1326 [1910], through an official letter to the Ministry of Education, we have drawn the attention of this (Ministry) not to accept the Latin alphabet for the Albanian language and to pay attention that its use in the Albanian schools be strictly forbidden, and we address therefore this circular letter to all the muftis of the

⁶⁴) C. Libardi, *I primi moti patriottici albanesi, nel 1910—1911—1912*, Trento, 1935, II, Document 18, pp. 262—263.

⁶⁵) Text in Pallavicini to Aehrenthal, Constantinopel, 16. März 1910, No. 16, vertraulich, HHStA, PA XIV/24, Albanien XIV.

Albanian cities and districts that they should act accordingly"⁶⁶). The Young Turks had trampled on their promise regarding the Albanian language and script and had offended Albanian national feelings by founding in April 1910 in Constantinople a club, called „the Educational Circle“ (*m a h f i l - i m e a r i f*), under government protection, for the enforcement of the Turkish alphabet⁶⁷). Also a newspaper with Turkish letters, the first and the last one, was published in Constantinople⁶⁸).

As the Constantinople government was unable to reach its aims by propaganda, it resorted to force. It abolished the Albanian clubs and societies, suppressed the newspapers, and shut the schools, as well as the printing houses in Monastir, Salonica, and Korçë, abolishing at the same time the Albanian language from the program of the government schools. The revolts which had already started in the north, not originally for the question of the alphabet but against the centralistic policy of the Young Turks and for the preservation of privileges, spread all over Albania. By September, 1912, the insurgents were in a position to impose upon the Porte their demands, among which the opening of the Albanian schools and the use of the Albanian language were conditions *sine qua non*. Soon the Balkan war broke out, and Albania declared her independence (28 November 1912), abolishing thus the Turkish alphabet for good.

In the following years the Latin alphabet triumphed. The Constantinople alphabet gradually receded and went out of use. The reasons seem to have been twofold. First, it was easier, as Pater Fishta said in the Monastir Congress, to have publications printed in the Latin script. Secondly, during the periods of Greek occupation of southern Albania, the Moslems had been persecuted. Anything Greek was apt to be considered inimical, and even the Greek letters of the „Frashëriot alphabet“ were bound to be resented.

We have seen in this survey how the Albanian alphabet reflected the complex historical conditions of the country and how at the same time it ended by becoming a moulding force. Efforts for creating an alphabet were first disparate, influenced by confessional groups and cultural zones, and only gradually showed tendencies

⁶⁶) Text in E. b. V., op. cit., p. 21.

⁶⁷) See letter of Albanian publicist Dervish Hima in *Pára* to Aehrenthal, Salonik, 5. April 1910, No. 75, HHStA, PA XIV/10, Albanien V/8.

⁶⁸) Cf. E. b. V., op. cit., p. 18.

toward unification. In this process the interests of foreign powers played a double role: those which ruled the country — the Turkish empire and to a certain extent the Patriarchate of Constantinople — tried to use the alphabet as a dividing force; those whose aim was to increase their influence — Austria-Hungary and Italy — endeavored to use it as a unifying factor. Caught in these cross-currents, the Albanians were coming of age, becoming increasingly more conscious of their national identity and of the danger inherent in the multiplicity of alphabets. When they succeeded in restricting the use first to two alphabets and later only to one, they made the alphabet a unifying force. With the adoption of the Latin alphabet also abandoned the Orient and turned toward the West. It may be said that the history of the Albanian alphabet is in essence the history of the Albanian people.