


ARTICLE

The Historical Development of the Alphabets Used in Albanian Old Texts from the 16th–18th Centuries

Florina Çitaku¹ , Shkumbin Munishi^{2*} 

¹ Department of Albanian Language, Faculty of Philology, University of Prishtina “Hasan Prishtina”, Prishtina 10000, Kosovo

² Faculty of Philology, University of Prishtina “Hasan Prishtina”, Prishtina 10000, Kosovo

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of various alphabets to write the Albanian language throughout different historical periods. Early Albanian authors primarily wrote in the Latin alphabet, employing a simple phonetic system that included a few special characters. The choice of alphabet during this time was influenced by religious and cultural factors—Catholic writers predominantly used the Latin script, while Orthodox writers often opted for the Greek alphabet. The diversity of alphabets reflected broader religious and cultural influences, blending elements of both Western and Eastern traditions. Beyond the Latin alphabet, the use of Greek and Arabic scripts further contributed to the complex evolution of Albanian writing, shaped by religious and social factors. In the 18th century, under Ottoman rule, political and religious influences led to the adoption of the Arabic alphabet, particularly by the (Baytaji) Bejtexhi poets. However, due to its consonant-heavy nature, the Arabic script was not well-suited for accurately representing Albanian phonetics, creating significant challenges. During this period, efforts were also made to develop original alphabets for Albanian, such as the Elbasan and Berat scripts, which aimed to establish a standardized writing system. Nevertheless, between the 16th and 18th centuries, Albanians lacked a unified alphabet, and attempts to create one persisted well beyond this period.

Keywords: Alphabets; Phonemes; Sound; Latin Alphabet; Greek Alphabet; Arabic Alphabet; Ancient Albanian Author

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Shkumbin Munishi, Faculty of Philology, University of Prishtina “Hasan Prishtina”, Prishtina 10000, Kosovo; Email: shkumbinmunishi@uni-pr.edu

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 24 August 2025 | Revised: 12 September 2025 | Accepted: 19 September 2025 | Published Online: 16 October 2025
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i10.11785>

CITATION

Çitaku, F., Munishi, S., 2026. The Historical Development of the Alphabets Used in Albanian Old Texts from the 16th–18th Centuries. *Forum for Linguistic Studies*. 7(10): 1410–1421. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i10.11785>

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2025 by the author(s). Published by Bilingual Publishing Group. This is an open access article under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

During their cultural and social development, different social communities, often linguistically differentiated, have created different alphabets to communicate with each other and perform different functions, not only through speech, but also in writing. The process of alphabet development has evolved gradually, moving from the creation of various pictographic signs, which have taken more abstract forms over time, to represent concepts, to phonemic alphabets that reflect certain sounds of the language. The creation of an alphabet has often relied on older alphabets that were previously known.

In Europe, among the earliest and most popular alphabets taken as a basis for the creation of later phonemic alphabets was the Phoenician alphabet, which was the basis for the creation of the Greek alphabet, and subsequently other alphabets such as the Latin alphabet, which later became the main alphabet in the world. The Cyrillic alphabet was also developed, with which some of the Slavic languages have been and continue to be written. Thus, when we talk specifically about the development of alphabets in Europe, most Indo-European languages created their own alphabets, of course, adapting them to their phonological systems. In general, the alphabets created over time developed as a result of the social, cultural, and economic circumstances of the time.

In the case of the Albanian language, although numerous historical linguistic studies reveal it as one of the oldest languages used in the Balkan Peninsula, its written documentation appears very late, in the fifteenth century, when the so-called “Formula e pagëzimit” (“Baptism Formula”) was written in 1462 by the archbishop of Durrës Pal Engjëlli. This document, consisting of a single religious phrase, is written in the Latin alphabet.

In general, the oldest Albanian writings, known so far, are written in the Latin alphabet, since in the Middle Ages, when these documents were written, Latin and the Latin alphabet were very widespread among the peoples of Europe. Most of the languages of Western and Central Europe were written using the Latin alphabet, as this was also related to the fact that Latin had become the language of Western Christianity.

On the other hand, due to the tradition and influence of the Eastern Byzantine Church, Greek, the Eastern Slavic

languages, and some of the South Slavic languages were written in the Greek alphabet or the Cyrillic script. Within this duality of alphabets, in the earliest recorded writings and books that pertain to the Albanian language, Albanian appears written in the Latin alphabet. Likewise, the second-oldest known document written in Albanian—specifically, Arnold von Harff’s Glossary^[1]—was written in the Latin script. On the other hand, the third-oldest known document written in the Albanian language, The Easter Gospel (or The Gospel Pericope), is the first Albanian text found written in the Greek alphabet.

If we analyze the alphabets used in these early documents—two of which have religious content and one secular—we observe that the document belonging to the domain of Catholic Christianity (The Baptismal Formula) is written in Latin script, whereas the document thematically tied to the Byzantine Orthodox rite (The Easter Gospel or The Gospel Pericope) is written in Greek script. The third document (Arnold von Harff’s Glossary), which is a small vocabulary of Albanian words collected across Albanian-speaking regions by a German traveler in 1496, is written in the Latin script because the author himself used the Latin alphabet to write his native language.

2. Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of historical Albanian texts (16th–18th centuries), focusing on the graphemic systems used by early authors. Primary sources such as *Meshari*, Matrënga’s catechism, Budi’s doctrinal works, and Bogdani’s writings were examined alongside secondary philological studies. The analytical framework combines comparative-historical linguistics with a philological examination of graphemes.

3. The First Texts Written in Albanian in The XVI–XVII

The first work written in Albanian was a translated book, in “*Meshari*”, written by Gjon Buzuku in 1555 (he lived during the 15th century). It is a book that remains the first text of medieval Albanian, in which Albanian was written in significantly more integral texts than in the first Albanian documents. This book, which in terms of theme

was a religious book belonging to the Catholic rite, was written in the Latin alphabet. “*Meshari*” (The Missal) is one of the most thoroughly studied works by philologists and linguists of Albanian texts, both from a linguistic and literary standpoint, and also from a historical perspective. Numerous scholars have dealt with the complexities surrounding the first documented work in the Albanian language, the *Meshari*, including, including Dhimitër Shuteriqi^[2], Mahir Domi^[3], Eqrem Çabej^[4], Ibrahim Rugova^[5], Selman Riza^[6], Rexhep Qosja^[7], and Yll Rugova^[8], as well as foreign scholars such as Mario Roques^[9] and Norbert Jokl^[10], among others. These researchers have produced significant findings, though, naturally, certain issues remain open to further discussion. For example, Jokl pointed out that *Meshari* is written in the Latin alphabet of the Gothic type, used in northern Italy^[10]. He further argued that “the general character of the types is Gothic, but this Gothic is not that of Germany, but of northern Italy”. In this sense, it should be emphasized that the development of the Albanian alphabets must be viewed in close connection with the social, cultural, religious, and historical developments of the Albanian people in the Balkans. Moreover, the use of different alphabets for the writing of the Albanian language should also be seen in the context of cultural and religious influences on Albanians, influences that came from both the Catholic West and the East, initially Byzantine Orthodox, later Muslim. In addressing the use of the Latin alphabet in the book *Meshari*, among other things, we will examine the issue of which letters were used in this book and by whom, and where they were carved and printed. In linguistic literature, various analyses have been conducted regarding the alphabet used by Buzuku, and the opinions differ. A detailed analysis of the *Meshari* alphabet was carried out by Eqrem Çabej in 1968, in the critical study he published on Buzuku’s work. Mario Roques, a French scholar, stated that the typographers who worked on the layout of *Meshari* must have used Slavic Cyrillic letters, specifically from the *bukvica* alphabet used in Bosnia, because the Latin alphabet did not have five special characters: %, @, [, {, |, .,^[9]. The alphabet used in *Meshari* is the first alphabet that roughly reflects the phonetic system of the Albanian language of that period. The type of letters was similar to those used in Venice in 1523–1537, where books and masses were published in the Slavic language of the Bosnian Catholics. Since the Latin alphabet did not cover all the phonemes of

the Albanian language, the author supplemented them by borrowing special symbols from a Slavic–Cyrillic source. Some letter combinations were also used^[4]. Consequently, *Meshari*’s alphabet is characterized by the polyvalence of many graphs and by the polygraphy of many sounds.

According to Çabej, the alphabets used among Albanians are nothing more than a graphic expression of Buzuku’s writing system^[4].

Mario Roques classifies the use of Latin letters in *Meshari* as semi-Gothic in style^[9]. This statement has been discussed by Yll Rugova, who argues that these letters belong to the Italian Gothic style (*rotunda*) rather than the Germanic one^[4]. Rugova supports Jokl’s claim, identifying the style of the *Meshari* letters as Venetian round. “This is not the Gothic of Germany, but that of Northern Italy^[10]. In addition, *Meshari* contains several new and distinctive letters for Albanian, which reflect sounds that are not present in the Latin script. As mentioned, in *Meshari*, we also find some new letters, unique to Albanian. This is because Albanian has several distinct sounds that are not represented by the Latin script. The form in which they appear in *Meshari* is unusual. Their arrangement within the text is irregular, which raises doubts about whether it was done by a professional hand. According to Anton Rrota, Norbert Jokl, and M. Roques, these letters have their origin in the typographic sorts used in Venice for Slavic languages, and particularly for publications in the Cyrillic alphabet^[11]. The letter 8 may also have been a variation of the Greek alphabet, although in Bosnian publications it appears as γ. Also, a Greek letter is the disproportionately small ε. The wavy form of 9, which closely resembles the Greek ξ, can be considered an original selection. These letters, despite differing scholarly opinions—some of which suggest that certain special signs may have originated from typographers’ astrological symbols^[5]—are, in our view, carved specifically for the *Meshari*, based on the forms of *Bosančica*. These letters, of course, are not rotunda. In the continuation of discussions on the Albanian alphabet and typography, Eqrem Çabej, in a detailed study of the graphic peculiarities of *Meshari*, identifies five special Albanian letters. Among them, he includes ‘ε’ for /dʒ/ and ‘εε’ for /tʃ/, and states that the use of several signs for the same sound is a consequence of the lack of different typographic sorts in the printing press^[4]. This type of polyvalent graphic system was later used by other philobiblical

authors such as Budi, Bardhi, and Bogdani (**Table 1**). What is special about Buzuku is that he was the first to use the doubling of certain letters, such as ‘l’ for ‘ll’ -> /ɫ/ in today’s pronunciation, and he also used other letter combinations and diacritical marks. Additionally, he used ‘s’ for both /s/ and /ʃ/, ‘r’ for both /r/ and /r̥/. He also used letter groups formed in different ways, such as consonant + consonant (‘ck’ for /k/ and ‘gn’ for /ɲ/, etc.), which seems to be influenced by Latin, perhaps even Italian, and consonant + vowel (gi for /j/, qu for /k/ (for example, ‘gjithë’ as /jit̪h̥/; ‘kush’ as /kɔʃ/). For the ‘xh’ (/dʒ/) sound, he combined special letters like @ε, or a Latin letter with a special one, such as ge. As for diacritical marks,

Buzuku used only one (gñ for /ɲ/). In Buzuku’s alphabet, the same letter represented different sounds, and the same sound was represented by different letters with different graphic forms. According to Osmani, this has been best elaborated by Domi. Thus, 17 letters had more than one phonetic value, 12 sounds were represented by a single letter, 9 sounds by two graphic signs, 8 sounds by three graphic signs, and 3 sounds by four graphic signs^[12].

This graphic polyvalency of Buzuku, according to Çabej, represented a notable flaw in the history of the Albanian alphabet. In general, for the 36 current phonemes of Albanian, Buzuku used over 60 signs (graphemes)^[4].

Table 1. Distinctive Graphemes and their Use by Early Albanian Authors.

| Phoneme | Buzuku (Meshari, 1555) | Budi (Doctrine, 1618) | Bardhi (Dictionary, 1635) | Bogdani (Cuneus Prophetarum, 1685) |
|-----------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| /y/ | 8 (or open 8) | 8 (closed 8) | 8 (open, following Buzuku) | 8 (closed variant) |
| /dʒ/ (xh) | ε, gε, @ε | ε (stylized) | ε | ε + some additional Latin variants |
| /ɲ/ (nj) | Gñ | gñ | gñ | gñ |
| /ɫ/ (ll) | ll (doubling of “l”) | ll | ll | ll |
| /ʃ/ (sh) | s (used for /s/ and /ʃ/) | sh | sh | sh |
| /θ/ (th) | 99 | 99 (stylized) | 99 | 99 |
| /ð/ (dh) | 9 | 9 (stylized) | 9 | 9 |
| /z/ (zh) | Absent | ε or z | ε/z | ε/z |
| Ə (ë) | distinguished with diacritic | represented with special form | occasionally marked | used more systematically |

Notes:

- Buzuku used about 60 signs for 36 phonemes; his system shows strong polyvalence (several signs for one sound).
- Budi simplified Buzuku’s system, retaining but stylizing several special signs.
- Bardhi followed Budi’s model, while adopting more open forms for some graphemes.
- Bogdani further refined and consolidated the system, also incorporating influences from typographers such as Robert Granjon.

In some cases, a phoneme was represented by one, two, or even three variants. Despite this, the alphabet used by Buzuku is not considered a complicated one but rather an economical one, as only 27 signs (22 Latin and 5 created by the author) represent all the phonemes that Albanian has today. In the work *E mbësueame e krishterë* (The Christian Doctrine) by Lekë Matrënga (1567–1619), published in Rome in 1592, the use of only the Latin alphabet is observed, with no Greek letters, and with a diacritical mark only for “nj”: /ɲ/ (“gñ”: /ɲn/)^[13]. Anton Rrota noted that the author used digraphs, tri-

graphs, and quadrigraphs to express the sounds of Albanian, but the use of these combinations made the text difficult to read^[11]. As shown in **Table 1**, Matrënga used a combination of elements from different graphic systems, including Latin and Greek writing, to express the phonetic peculiarities of Albanian. This work is of great importance for the history of the Albanian alphabet, as Matrënga was the first to use special graphemes for the sounds of Albanian. “E mbësueame e krishterë” is the first book written in the Arbërisht dialect, classified as a variant of Tosk Albanian. This work was printed with Roman letters. The letters used were preferred by the printing presses of the time, from the 16th century, and were used instead of the rotunda Gothic letters in Germany. Matrënga uses the letter ‘ð’ for /d/ and /ð/ (e.g., /vðekur/, /ðeu/); ‘l’ for /l/ and /ɫ/ (e.g., /falemi/, /ghlielae/ – gjellë -> /jɛˈlɛ/); ‘R’ is used by the Arbëresh author for /r/ and /r̥/ (e.g., /krejt/, /sbier/ - sbjerr); ‘z’ (/dz/) for both c and z (e.g., /zilli/ -> /dzilli/), etc. Matrënga uses the Latin letter ‘x’ for /ʃ/ (e.g., /xeite/, /ixtae/); ‘gl’ for lj (e.g., /biljae/, /nðegliésae/, /bilj/, /nðëljesë/); ‘Ç’ (the affricate /tʃ/) in Matrënga’s work appears as ‘cci’ (e.g., /cciae/ – çë -> /tʃiˈɛ/); ‘gj’ (/j/) appears

with the letters ‘cgh’, ‘cghi’, ‘ch’ (e.g., /cghithae/ -> /cji'θe/); ‘H’ is represented by ‘x’, ‘cx’, ‘xh’, ‘cxh’ (e.g., /mbacxenae/ -> /mbatʃenae/, /cluxenae/ -> /kluʃenae/). Matrënga does not use the modern vowel ‘y’, but instead uses /i/ (e.g., /i ðijti/ -> /i 'dyti/, /detirae/ -> /dɛ'tirɛ/), as is the case in the Arbëresh dialect, and for the vowel ë, he uses the old Latin diphthong æ, as shown in **Table 1**. (e.g., /tæ miræ/ -> të mirë, /ixtæ/ -> ishte), thus being the first of the old authors to graphically distinguish the ë phoneme from ‘e’, representing it with the digraph ‘æ’. In this context, Mario Roques noted that Matrënga was the first old author who also represented the dental consonant /ð/ with the modern grapheme and its phonetic value. In Matrënga’s alphabet, the consonant ‘zh’ (/ʒ/) is missing. During the composition of his book, Matrënga mainly relied on the Latin-Italian alphabet, which is completely understandable considering the geographical and socio-cultural circumstances. However, he also used two graphemes from the Greek alphabet. This was rightly noted by the scholar Matteo Mandalà^[14]. He also states that the alphabet used by Matrënga is quite original, although it is not characterized by simplicity or internal coherence. As a result of the merging of different alphabetic systems (Greek, Latin, Italian, and dialectal graphic variants from Sicily and Southern Italy), as well as diacritical marks, he created his own graphic system. However, despite creating different combinations, he was unable to fully reflect the phonological system of Albanian. It was impossible for him to use the 25 letters of the Latin-Italian alphabet and these combinations to cover a third of the phonemes of Albanian. Another old Albanian author, Pjetër Budi, one of the masters in using the Albanian alphabet, uses a simpler, more concise alphabet with scientifically supported solutions^[15]. According to Selman Riza, Budi made 13 significant changes to the graphic system^[6], Raka observes that the changes were minimal. Budi did not use any graphic marks except for three or four Greek alphabet characters, which were commonly used in the Latin and Italian alphabets of the time. Additionally, he did not use any letters from the Cyrillic-Slavic alphabet. Besides studies on Budi’s life and work, evaluations have also been made regarding his graphic system^[16]. Rugova notes that the letters used in *Doktrina e kërshenë* (*The Christian Doctrine*) are of the same Roman-cut style as those in Matrënga’s work, adapting to the requirements of the time^[4]. According to Rugova, Bartolomeo Zanetti’s printing press

printed his books, all of which were in Roman letters, including italics in the text^[8]. Budi’s entire activity spanned four years, 1618–1621, and produced three works: *Doktrina e kërshenë* (*The Christian Doctrine*) in 1618, *Pasqyra e të rrëfyemit* (*The Mirror of Confession*) in 1621, and *Rituali roman* (*Roman Ritual*) in 1621. In these works, the author used an alphabet similar to that of Buzuku, which indicates that he might have known his graphic system, even though he never mentioned it in any of his works.

For example, as shown in **Figure 1**, in *Meshari*, Buzuku introduced several distinctive graphemes such as ‘8’ for /y/, ‘ε’ for /dz/, and digraphs like ‘gñ’ for /ɲ/. These characters illustrate the adaptation of the Latin script to uniquely Albanian sounds.



Figure 1. Differences between the graphemes used by Buzuku and Budi.

It can be said that with Budi, Bardhi (1606–1643), and Bogdani (1625–1689), we find the continuation of special letters for the sounds of the Albanian language for y, z, th, dh (y, z, θ, ð), which were first introduced by Buzuku. However, Budi is more cautious in their representation regarding the type. As for the engraving of the letters for Budi’s books, it remains unclear to this day who performed the engraving, even though the engravers at the Propaganda Fides printing house were Giacomo Antonio Mori and Giambattista Sotile. It has generally been said that italic and Roman letters were used in Budi’s first two publications, letters for which the same sorts were used for their engraving, because engraving special letters for both styles was expensive and time-consuming. The number 8, sometimes even 8, was used for y, while a special sign was engraved for th. Regarding the 8 sign, Budi made a small stylization by modifying it from Buzuku and Bardhi. They used this grapheme more open at the top, while Budi brought it much closer to a closed form, often giving us a closed 8. Budi’s graphic system had some innovations, although it seems his alphabet approximates Buzuku’s al-

phabet, in some cases, phonetic values were changed. In this regard, Osmani^[17] states that Budi, with his originality and simplification of Buzuku's alphabet, took a step forward, thus having a special influence on his contemporaries and successors. Osmani^[17] explains that from his own graphic system, Budi removed two special signs from Buzuku: 9 for *dh* (/ð/), and doubled it for *th* (/θ/), 99. According to Osmani, Budi stylized these signs for typographical reasons, since the printing press only had those letters. He may have wanted to be original in his alphabet or perhaps did so for aesthetic reasons^[17]. The other special letter Budi used was *ε* for the Latin *z*. The reason Budi used these three special signs was the inability to find other letters to replace them, thus Budi only stylized them and assigned a phonetic value to each sign. On the other hand, Pjetër Bogdani, whose creativity was the most perfected among all the earlier works of the so-called filobiblical authors, tried to further refine the alphabet he had used, although in most cases, his alphabet was almost identical to that of Budi and Bardhi. Rugova points out that Robert Granjon, a renowned designer and typographer known for his contributions to graphic design and the creation of various typefaces, introduces alphabets for several well-known languages—such as Arabic, Armenian, Greek, Hebrew—and one for Albanian, called *alphabetum epiroticum* (Epirus alphabet), which is mentioned in Bogdani's 1685 publication *De vita Iesv Chrsi Salvatoris mundi (On the Life of Jesus Christ, Savior of the World)*^[8]. Granjon brought many innovations to his work regarding the alphabet, attempting not to mix his alphabet with Latin letters and stating that he sought letters of "Arbëresh character, as desired," but he was unable to find them. As a result, Bogdani incorporated the use of several Greek letters. A common feature of the medieval authors' books written in Albanian is the use of 20 identical letters (graphemes), of which 11 appear without variants. On the other hand, what distinguishes Buzuku is the use of 5 special letters and the distinction of the phoneme *ë* from Bogdani, as well as the use of two Greek letters. In total, Buzuku used around 70 signs for 36 Albanian phonemes, some of which were repeated. Osmani notes that Pjetër Budi used 50 signs, Frang Bardhi used 58, Pjetër Bogdani used 69, and Da Lece used 60. In the series of old texts written in the Albanian language, the work of Frang Bardhi, the Latin-Albanian Dictionary of 1635, represents the first work in the field of Albanian lexicography. Moreover, this text

is the first in the Albanian language without religious content. The alphabet used by Bardhi is similar to that of Budi, but not exactly the same. However, Osmani observes that the differences are minimal, thus making it a mixed Latin alphabet, with three special letters and significant variation in usage^[17]. Bardhi is a follower of Budi's alphabet. This is also evidenced by the preservation of three special signs from his alphabet, such as *dh*, *th*, *y*, and *z*. However, Bardhi did not stop there but also represented the letter *dh* (/ð/) with a specific symbol, and for *y* (/y/), he used an open 8, following Buzuku rather than Budi, who used a completely closed one (8), as Osmani explains^[17]. It is possible that this form of usage was due to typographical reasons, considering the fact that during the 17th century, there were limited writing techniques. At that time, book printing in non-Latin languages, aimed at spreading Christianity, was carried out by the Typographia Poliglotta of Propaganda Fides in Rome, founded by Francesco Ingoli along with his assistant, typographer Stefano Paolini, as Pizzorusso explains^[18], and Rugova notes that this happened in 1626^[8]. Sedaj explains that the Typographia Poliglotta of Propaganda Fides printed the first work in the Albanian language, namely Bardhi's dictionary, in 1635^[19]. Demiraj notes that Bardhi was the first student to be registered in the college established by Propaganda Fide in Rome^[20]. Tomor Osmani emphasizes that the use of the Latin alphabet in Albanian works may have been influenced by two factors: the writing tradition of the language and the educational environments in which the authors of old Albanian literature were developed and educated^[21]. Both of these observations seem partial because, when talking about the writing tradition of the Albanian language, we cannot speculate about the existence of any writing tradition, as no such tradition has been found or proven so far. Furthermore, the influence of the educational environments in which the old authors were schooled should be seen in close connection with their religious affiliation and the fact that their education was carried out in a religious context, especially considering that the schools of that time were run by religious institutions. In this sense, since Buzuku, Budi, Bogdani, and Matrënga were Catholic priests, their works were written using the Latin alphabet, while, on the other hand, for example, since the old Albanian text of the "Gospel of Easter" was found within a Greek codex of the 16th century and since it belonged to the Orthodox rite, it was written with

the Greek alphabet. In this sense, it must be considered that, in the Middle Ages, the religious element was a fundamental characteristic of both individual and collective identity.

4. The Alphabets of the Albanian Language in the Writings of the 18th Century

The extension and consolidation of the Ottoman Empire's power in the Albanian territories during the 15th–16th centuries had multiple social, cultural, and religious influences. The Albanian language and its writing were not immune to this influence. In the field of Albanian writings, this influence became especially evident after the 17th century. Apart from linguistic influences and borrowings from Turkish into Albanian, in the 18th century, the influence of Turkish on the Albanian language was also reflected in the writing and the use of the alphabet. In the Ottoman Empire, Turkish was a language that, although belonging to a different language family, was written using the Arabic alphabet, mainly due to cultural and religious influences. In this context, in the 18th century, the Arabic alphabet also began to be used in Albanian writings. The first Albanian writings based on the Arabic alphabet can be found with the so-called *bejtexhinj* poets (the term *bejtexhinj* means “poets” in Albanian), such as Nezim Frakulla from Berat (1680–1760), Hasan Zyko Kamberi (18th–19th century), Muhamet Kyçyku (1784–1844), etc., who belong to the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century. The Arabic alphabet, which is a consonantal alphabet, was not entirely suitable for writing Albanian because a single graphic symbol was used to represent three to four different vowels, leading to ambiguities in adequately and accurately representing the meaning of words. The use of the Arabic alphabet for writing Albanian began during Ottoman rule, when Albanians who had converted to Islam over time started using the Arabic alphabet in their letters and documents. This use was more widespread in religious and administrative circles, as these areas were more directly influenced by the Ottoman authorities. In this sense, the Arabic alphabet was used to write Albanian due to the socio-economic and cultural connections established within the Ottoman Empire, which had a significant influence on the lives of Albanians. Dibra points out that, according to some recent studies, there is a group of Bektashi manuscripts

written with the Greek alphabet, as well as some written with both the Greek and Arabic scripts^[22]. During this period, Albanians used a modified form of the Arabic alphabet to accommodate Albanian sounds that did not exist in the standard Arabic alphabet. This is one reason why this writing system was not widespread across Albanian society, but remained mostly confined to religious and intellectual circles. One of the main difficulties in using the Arabic alphabet for Albanian was adapting the sounds of Albanian to the Arabic script. The Albanian language has many sounds that do not exist in languages that use the Arabic alphabet (such as certain unique vowel and consonant sounds). To overcome this problem, Albanian writers used several strategies, including modifying certain Arabic letters and creating new letters to represent sounds not included in the standard Arabic alphabet. One of the most interesting practices was the use of Arabic letters to form a “modified alphabet” for Albanian, which was more suitable for representing the specific sounds of Albanian, but this was a limited practice and not widely used. The Arabic alphabet for Albanian had direct use in some areas of Albania, as well as in Kosovo, Montenegro, and Chamëri, where most Albanians were Muslim and where the Ottoman administration had a strong influence. In these regions, the use of the Arabic alphabet for Albanian was more widespread and was used for personal writings and administrative documents. It should be noted that Albanian writings in the Arabic alphabet have also been found in many inscriptions discovered in various regions of Albanian territories. In his 2024 study, Zekaj documents over 450 inscriptions written in the *ta'lik* style with the Arabic alphabet^[23]. According to Zekaj, these inscriptions are mainly chronograms and epigraphs written on Islamic religious objects, such as mosques, grave plaques, epigrams on castles, clock towers, residential buildings, urban works, fountains, and boundary walls. They are written on limestone, marble plaques, columns, plastered surfaces, and materials like wood or leather. In the continuation of the discussion of Albanian writings with different alphabets, Albanian writings from the Islamic tradition using the Greek alphabet must also be mentioned. As Dibra notes, these are primarily texts of an Islamic religious nature from the Bektashi rite, written in the Greek alphabet^[22]. Albanian writings with the Cyrillic alphabet are even rarer. Although the Albanian territories are surrounded by Slavic peoples, when it comes to graphic symbols, the Albanian language

has not adopted many Cyrillic graphic signs in old texts to date. The Cyrillic alphabet is thought to have been created by the Byzantine theologians Cyril and Methodius in the 9th century, as a continuation of the Glagolitic alphabet, which was used to write Old Church Slavonic. This alphabet was later primarily used for writing in several Slavic languages. It found usage in Russian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Macedonian, and other languages. As for its use in Albanian, it can be said that some Cyrillic-Slavic alphabet signs have been noticed in the “*Meshari*” (Missal) of Buzuku. In the 18th century, Albanian began to be written with special alphabets as well. The idea of writing Albanian with a unique alphabet represents a new development in the history of the use of the Albanian alphabets. From several documentary sources about the alphabets of the Albanian language, there are two connections between reports of the “inventors of alphabets” and the “invented alphabets” themselves. As for the invented alphabets of Albanian, two different alphabets have been found so far in archives: two different alphabets in the notebook of the Anonymous of Elbasan; numerous writings with the alphabet that is considered to be that of Teodor; two lines of text with the alphabet of Kostë Berat in the Berat Codex; eighty-nine pages with the alphabet of Vallerait from the Supplement Grec file in Paris. Rugova notes that two different alphabets were found in the notebook of the Anonymous of Elbasan, writings attributed to Teodor and Kostë Berat, as well as other documents discovered in the Paris archives^[8]. The early alphabet of Elbasan has attracted the attention of both Albanian and foreign scholars. Hoxha reports that this alphabet used up to 40 graphic signs, 35 of which were common and 5 rare, while some sources describe it as having 54 letters. However, Eqrem Çabej, as cited by Sylejmani, states that it had 53 letters. This alphabet was used by Albanians in Elbasan, Berat, and by merchants in exile, and its goal was to create an alphabet independent of the Latin, Greek, and Arabic alphabets. This unique Albanian alphabet was used in the Elbasan Gospel manuscript, written by an author who is known in the history of Albanian writing as the Anonymous of Elbasan. This text is the first translation of the Orthodox Bible and is preserved in the Monastery of St. John Vladimir, now in the Central State Archive in Tirana. This manuscript contains translations of the four gospels into Albanian and is one of the oldest documents of Albanian literacy. According to Rugova, the year 1949 marked an

important step in the development of the Albanian alphabet, which had a strong influence on authors and scholars seeking to create an accurate writing system for Albanian^[8]. This alphabet is a small notebook, approximately 10×7 cm in size (roughly A6), from the collection of Lef Nosi, and later the National Library of Albania. It closely resembles the ancient Phoenician alphabet, which was used for religious and commercial purposes, meaning it was used only by priests and merchants at that time. This usage caused quite a stir, but it was the only one of its kind in its time. One of the most notable studies on the Elbasan alphabet is that of Rajko Nahtigal, who, in his 1923 work, analyzes the Elbasan script as one of the earliest known writing systems specifically created for the Albanian language^[24]. According to Nahtigal, the creation of this alphabet to write Albanian reflects the efforts to preserve the Albanian language against external pressures and the cultural changes present. Essentially, this author emphasizes that this alphabet was a product of local intellectual efforts to assert linguistic and cultural identity. Furthermore, discussing the structure and features of the Elbasan alphabet, Nahtigal points out that this alphabet consists of unique letters that were not borrowed from the Latin, Greek, or Slavic alphabets. In this sense, Rajko Nahtigal considers the Elbasan alphabet an attempt to create an autonomous and original writing system^[24]. This approach, manifested through the writing of Albanian with a unique and original alphabet, was later followed by other authors and writers who, over the years, worked on researching and discovering a comprehensible and complete alphabet for the Albanian language. The Archbishopric of Ohrid politically and materially supported the translation of holy books into Albanian in the first half of the 18th century, in order to resist Islamization. Religious conflict was also present regarding the use of the alphabet because there was a kind of political strategy concerning who and how the alphabets were used. From the numerous analyses conducted on this alphabet, the name of the author has not been found, and for this reason, it has been referred to as the Anonymous Alphabet of Elbasan. For many years, it has been called anonymous, and its early discovery does not allow for much knowledge regarding this alphabet. Some called it a special alphabet, while others referred to it as anonymous due to the mystery surrounding its discovery. There were many speculations and judgments about this alphabet, as well as admiration from authors and

fellow countrymen of different eras. There were also particular remarks from certain authors. No opinion was the same; there were similarities, but all referred to it as unique and anonymous. This is the oldest and most original alphabet of all time and holds special value in the history of the Albanian language. From here, the interest began for the formulation or creation of an alphabet for our language, so as not to use foreign alphabets. Among the different judgments and admirations from fellow countrymen, authors, and scholars of ancient times, who also criticized this alphabet, we highlight some of them. Among those who have studied the origins of the Elbasan alphabet is Prof. Dhimitër S. Shuteriqi, who in 1954 argued that the script is based on the Slavic alphabet—primarily Glagolitic—since it is the oldest Slavic script, itself adapted from the Greek alphabet^[2]. Osmani, in his 1987 study, noted that there were 12–13 words discovered, among which 7 were proper names, 5 were common nouns, and one was a conjunction^[21]. Shuteriqi emphasized that the language used in the translation of the Elbasan alphabet was more archaic than the one used by Teodor Haxhifilipi. If we compare it to today's alphabet, it is very incomplete, as very few discoveries were made regarding it later on. Between 1750–1850, there was a great desire for a specific Albanian alphabet, primarily in Central Albania, specifically in Elbasan. The main evidence for the creation of an Albanian alphabet during this time was the “Gospel Manuscript,” 1761, a work by Gregory of Durrës. In Elbasan, two alphabets were created. The alphabet of Todri (Thodhri Haxhifilipi) was discovered by the Albanologist Johann Georg von Hahn (1811–1869), while another alphabet was created based on the Berat Codex (in later studies, it is also claimed that this alphabet was created in Elbasan). This manuscript, with 154 pages, was written between 1764 and 1798. The manuscript bears the name of Kostë Berat, and on page 194, we find two rows of Albanian text written with an original 37-letter alphabet, influenced by Glagolitic. In some cases, the writers have provided sometimes incorrect solutions, such as different diacritical marks, graphic tools like additional or doubled graphic signs, etc. This is due to a range of anomalies and difficulties in reading the Albanian graphic signs and their combinations in Greek, which stemmed from the presence of Albanian sounds that do not exist in the phonetic system of Greek. In the 18th century, efforts were made to create other Albanian alphabets, such as those of Gjirokastra and Vellara,

which had a limited number of signs and were mainly based on Latin and Greek. The alphabets of Elbasan, Berat, and Vellara are examples of these efforts, while the more serious efforts for the unification of the Albanian language came during the National Renaissance period. The Gjirokastra alphabet is found with a graphic system of 22 letters, while the Vellara alphabet has 30 letters, based on Latin and Greek. Jan Vellara made an attempt to create an original alphabet for Albanian. Zekaj states that more than 450 inscriptions written in the Arabic alphabet in the ta'lik style have been identified in Albanian-speaking territories. Many of these inscriptions are found in historical centers such as Elbasan, which served as a significant hub of religious, educational, and cultural life during the Ottoman period. These texts form a vital part of the written Oriental heritage in the region^[23]. It is believed that the same happened with the alphabet of Hoxha Tahsini. The main reason for such non-acceptance is thought to be the cost of printing, as special printing presses were needed. The Albanian attempt to create a special alphabet for writing Albanian is a matter that requires a deeper scientific discussion, which should consider various socio-cultural, religious, and historical aspects of the Albanian people and their language. We believe that the creation of this special alphabet for Albanian in Elbasan should be viewed at least on two levels. First, the development of this special alphabet should be seen as an effort to reflect the specific structural elements of Albanian in the phonemic system of writing, unlike the phonemic systems of Latin, Greek, or even Slavic languages. The use of previous Latin and Greek alphabets revealed the shortcomings of the graphemes in writing all the sounds of Albanian. Second, the development of an alphabet with special, original graphemes for Albanian should also be seen as an attempt at ethnic and linguistic differentiation by the authors of the time in a situation where religious texts belonging to the Orthodox rite were mainly written in Greek. In other words, it seems to us that in this case, we have an effort for ethnic differentiation and the manifestation of a distinct identity from the Greek-Orthodox one, and in these cases, these two goals were realized through the creation and use of a completely different alphabet for Albanian. Another manuscript is authored by the Greek writer, poet, and doctor Jan Vellara, who created an 86-page work containing notes and grammatical phrases in both Greek and contemporary Albanian from 1801^[25]. He created these phrases to teach

Albanian to Greek speakers. Vellara used a variant of the southern Albanian dialect, with an alphabet of 30 letters, based primarily on the Latin alphabet and to a lesser extent on the Greek alphabet. Dhimitër S. Shuteriqi, in his 1978 work, identifies this alphabet as the fourth original Albanian script, following those attributed to Pope Totasi, the *Berat Codex* from 1764, and Dhaskal Todhri^[2]. In the 18th and 19th centuries, efforts to create original alphabets were observed, which in most cases were adaptations of existing alphabets from peoples with a tradition of written language cultivation. Thus, the Elbasan alphabet, the Berat alphabet (the earliest from 1731), and that of Theodor Haxhifilipi, who created a 52-character alphabet, began to see broader usage.

Comparative perspective: The Albanian case parallels similar alphabetic developments in Balkan and European languages. For instance, Romanian writers also adapted the Latin alphabet with diacritics to represent local phonemes, while Slavic traditions created Cyrillic to accommodate distinct sounds. These parallels highlight Albania's place within broader European linguistic transformations.

5. Conclusions

This paper addressed the use and historical development of the Albanian alphabet from the 15th century to the 18th century, focusing on writings from what are known in Albanian studies as the “older authors” (16th–17th centuries), as well as the alphabets used in the Albanian writings of the 18th century. The use of the Albanian alphabets in these centuries is discussed chronologically. The examination of the use of alphabets in written Albanian texts from the 16th to the 18th century shows that during this period, the Albanian language was initially written using the Latin alphabet, less frequently with the Greek alphabet, and later also with the Arabic alphabet, but also with special alphabets created specifically for the Albanian language. The written documents testify that Albanian was rarely written with the Cyrillic alphabet. Initially, it was mentioned that in the first documented writings in the Albanian language, the Latin alphabet was used, and this continued to be the case in other Albanian books and texts of the 16th and 17th centuries. The works of the so-called early authors, such as *Meshari* by Gjon Buzuku, written in 1555^[26], *E mbësuarë e krështerë*

(The Christian Doctrine) by Lekë Matrënga^[13], published in 1592, and the writings by Pjetër Budi^[15] in the early seventeenth century, Frang Bardhi who produced his dictionary in 1635, and Pjetër Bogdani with his major work from 1685, are all written in the Latin alphabet. In the 18th century, the Ottoman influence brought the use of the Arabic alphabet in Albanian writings, especially among the Bejtexhinj poets, but during this period, there were also efforts to create original alphabets for writing Albanian, such as the Elbasan alphabet and the Berat alphabet. As for the use of alphabets for writing Albanian in the 16th–18th centuries, it should first be noted that the use of various alphabets was the result of religious and cultural influences. It is quite clear that authors who were Catholic priests (Buzuku, Budi, Bogdani, Bardhi) used the Latin alphabet for writing Albanian in their biblical texts, while in writings of the Byzantine Orthodox rite, the Greek alphabet was used. Later, the Ottoman influence, and consequently the influence of Islam, caused authors from this faith group to also use the Arabic alphabet. In all this variety, for a long time, Albanian did not have a unified script of its own, and the use of different alphabets led to many variations in the way of writing and phonemic representation. In Albanian writings from the 16th to the 18th centuries, despite the use of certain alphabets, the authors of the time were forced to adapt those alphabets to the phonetic needs of the Albanian language, often creating new graphic symbols to represent the unique phonemes/sounds of Albanian, for which there were no corresponding symbols in the Latin, Cyrillic, or Arabic alphabets. In the 18th century, efforts to create and use an original alphabet for writing Albanian became more prominent. The writings found in Elbasan, Berat, and other places show the efforts of some authors to create a unique alphabet for their language. Since the effort to write Albanian with a special alphabet in religious texts appears among authors of the Byzantine Orthodox rite, it can be said that the move to write these texts with a special alphabet, instead of using the Greek alphabet, was not only a linguistic differentiation but also a manifestation of the specific Albanian ethnic, cultural, and religious identity of these authors. In conclusion, it can be stated that linguistic and typographical analyses of old texts show that Albanians have always aimed to preserve their linguistic identity, despite external influences. Furthermore, the history of the development of the Albanian alphabets and the challenges

faced by the Albanian language in its documentation and standardization fundamentally reflect the situation of the Albanian people during those difficult historical periods.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, F.Ç. and S.M.; methodology, F.Ç.; validation, F.Ç. and S.M.; formal analysis, F.Ç.; investigation, F.Ç.; resources, F.Ç.; data curation, F.Ç.; writing—original draft preparation, F.Ç.; writing—review and editing, F.Ç.; visualization, F.Ç.; supervision, S.M.; project administration, F.Ç.; funding acquisition, F.Ç. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research received no external funding. The study was conducted independently as part of the author's doctoral research at the University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina," Faculty of Philology.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study because it is based exclusively on the analysis of historical and linguistic sources and did not involve human participants or animals.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable. This study is based exclusively on the analysis of historical and linguistic materials and did not involve human participants.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study. The data supporting the findings of this research consist of previously published historical and linguistic sources cited in the References section.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analy-

ses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

References

- [1] Von Harff, A., 1496. Glossary. In *Travel Accounts and Descriptions of Medieval Europe*. J. M. Heberle: Cologne, Germany. pp. 220–235. (in Albanian)
- [2] Shuteriqi, D., 1978. *Albanian Writings from 1332 to 1850 Renaissance*: Prishtina, Kosovo. (in Albanian)
- [3] Domi, M., 1994. *Gjon Buzuku and "Meshari"*. Toena Publications: Tirana, Albania.
- [4] Çabej, E., 2008. *Albanian Studies: Selected Works*. Academy of Sciences and Arts of Kosovo: Prishtina, Kosovo.
- [5] Rugova, I., 2000. *Albanian Literature: History and Theory*. Kosovo Academy of Sciences: Prishtina, Kosovo.
- [6] Riza, S., 2009. *Works 5*. Academy of Sciences and Arts of Kosovo: Prishtina, Kosovo. (in Albanian)
- [7] Qosja, R., 1994. *Albanian Literature and Writers*. Dituria Publishing House: Tirana, Albania. (in Albanian)
- [8] Rugova, Y., 2022. *Albanian Typography 1555–1912*. Varg: Prishtina, Kosovo.
- [9] Roques, M., 1932. Two Books of Hours from the 16th Century in Bosnian Cyrillic. *Revue des Études Slaves*. 12(1–2), 49–69. DOI: https://www.persee.fr/doc/slave_00802557_1932_num_12_1_7506 (in French)
- [10] Jokl, N., 1930. The Albanian Missal of Gjon Buzuku, 1555. *Journal of Comparative Linguistics in the Field of Indo-European Languages*. 57(3), 145–188. (in German)
- [11] Rrota, J., 2021. *On the History of the Albanian Alphabet*. Franciscan Publications: Shkodër, Albania. (in Albanian)
- [12] Osmani, T., 2008. *The Path of Albanian Letters*. Academy of Sciences and Arts of Kosovo: Prishtina, Kosovo. (in Albanian)
- [13] Matrënga, L., 1592. *The Christian Doctrine*. Guglielmo Faccioto: Rome, Italy. (in Albanian)
- [14] Mandalà, M., 1989. Luca Matranga and the Arbëresh Linguistic Tradition through Unpublished Historiographical Sources. In: Guzzetta, A. (ed.). *The Contribution of Albanians in Italy to the Development of Albanian Culture and Civilization*. pp. 207–233. (in Italian)
- [15] Budi, P., 1618. *Christian Doctrine*. Propaganda Fide: Rome, Italy. (in Albanian)
- [16] Raka, F., 2004. *The History of Albanian Literature*. Dukagjini: Prishtina, Kosovo. (in Albanian)
- [17] Osmani, T., 2009. *Tradition and Modernity in Linguistic View III*. Camaj Pipa: Shkodër, Albania. (in Albanian)
- [18] Pizzorusso, G., 2004. *The Satellites of Propaganda Fide: The Urban College and the Polyglot Printing House*.

- Miscellany from the French School of Rome. Italy and the Mediterranean. 116(2), 471–498. (in Italian)
- [19] Sedaj, E., 1983. Latin-Albanian Dictionary, 1635. Renaissance: Prishtina, Kosovo. p. 28. (in Latin and Albanian)
- [20] Demiraj, B., 2016. Frang Bardhi's Dictionary in the Manuscript Heritage of Nikollë Keta. *Philological Studies*. 1(1–2), 45–60. (in Albanian)
- [21] Osmani, T., 1987. History of the Albanian Alphabet. School Book: Tirana, Albania. (in Albanian)
- [22] Dibra, F., 2022. Beyond Aljamiado: Albanian Literary Texts of the Islamic Tradition in Greek Alphabet. *Philological Studies*. 1(3–4), 51–86. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62006/sf.v1i3-4.4974> (in Albanian)
- [23] Zekaj, R., 2024. Historical and Linguistic Values of Inscriptions with the Arabic Alphabet in Albania. *Univers*. 13(13), 21–34. Available from: <https://albanica.al/univers/article/view/3795> (in Albanian)
- [24] Nahtigal, R., 1923. On the Elbasan Script and Its Use in Writing. *Language And Ethology*. 1(1–2). (in Croatian)
- [25] Vellara, J., 1801. Manuscript with Notes and Grammatical Phrases in Both Greek and Contemporary Albanian. Unpublished. (in Greek and Albanian)
- [26] Buzuku, G., 1555. Meshari, Facsimile edition. In: Zamputi, I. (Ed.). *Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Albania*: Tirana, Albania.