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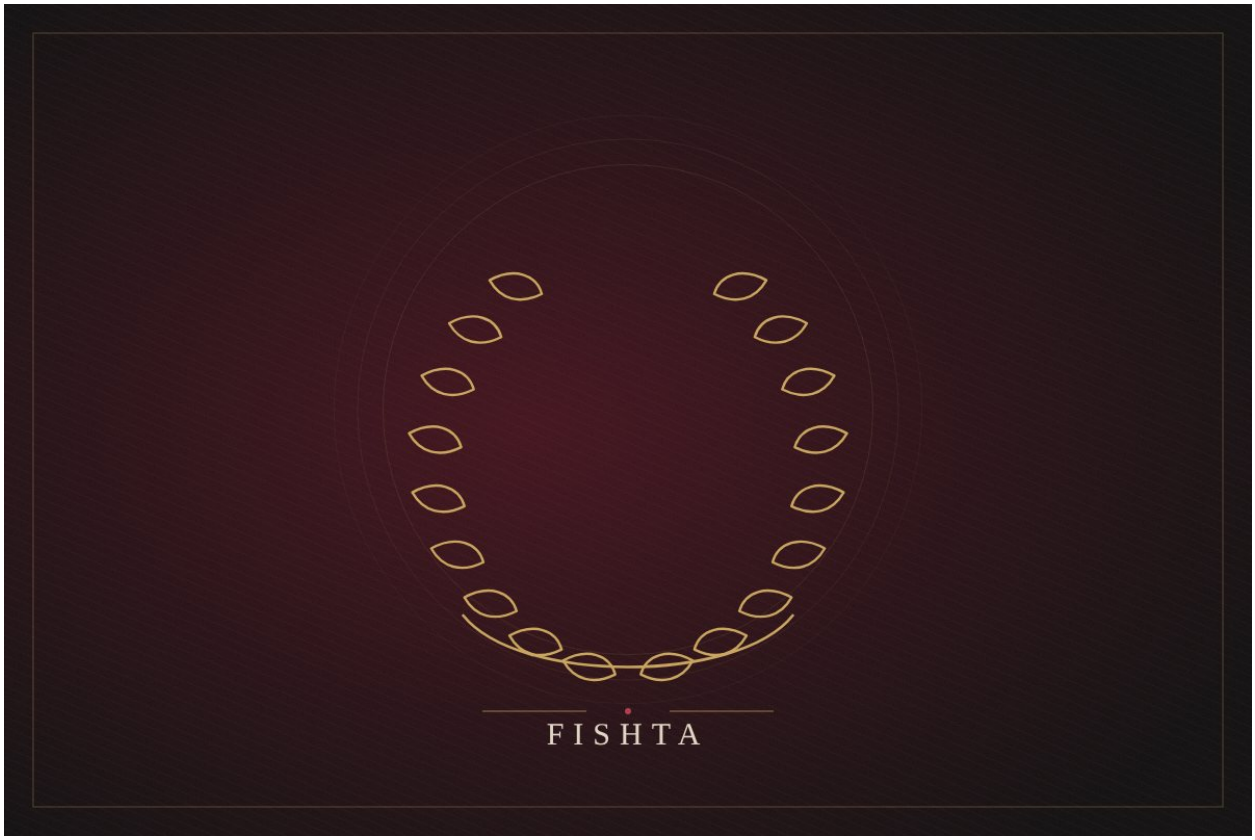
Heritage

Gjergj Fishta and The Highland Lute: the epic of the Albanian highlands

The Franciscan from Zadrima, chair of the alphabet commission at the Congress of Manastir, the journal Hylli i Dritës and the thirty-canto epic poem that was banned for almost half a century

3 November 2026 / 2 min read

Translated from the Albanian original by the editors.



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Gjergj Fishta was born in 1871 in the village of Fishtë in Zadrima, near Lezha. He was educated by the Franciscans in Shkodra and then studied philosophy and theology in Bosnia, where he came to know the cultural movement of Catholic Croats and Bosnians. He became a Franciscan priest and returned to Albania in the 1890s.

A man of culture

Fishta was a teacher, journalist and organiser. At the **Congress of Manastir** in 1908 he chaired the commission that prepared the unified alphabet in Latin letters that we still use today. In 1913 he founded the journal **Hylli i Dritës**, "The Day-Star", one of the most important Albanian cultural journals of the first half of the twentieth century.

After the First World War he took part in the Albanian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference (1919), which defended Albania's territorial integrity. Later he was elected a member of the Albanian parliament.

The Highland Lute

His life's work was the epic poem **Lahuta e Malcís**, "The Highland Lute". He wrote and expanded it over decades, and the complete edition appeared in 1937, with thirty cantos and about 15,000 lines. The poem tells of the wars and resistance of the northern highlanders defending their lands from the mid-nineteenth century to 1913, interweaving historical events with figures from folk mythology, such as the zanas and oras.

Fishta was inspired by the songs of the lahuta players, who sang heroic verses to the lahuta in the guest rooms of the highlands. He used their rhythm and language, a rich Gheg, and gave the poem a national spirit.

> *The Highland Lute is history, legend and song at once. It gives a voice to a world that was disappearing.*

Banned and restored

Fishta died in 1940 in Shkodra. After 1944 the communist regime declared him an enemy and his works were banned. For almost half a century, young generations grew up without reading him. Only after 1990 was The Highland Lute freely republished in Albania, and it was also translated into English by the scholar Robert Elsie and Janice Mathie-Heck.

Today scholars read the work with admiration for its language and poetic power, but also with a critical eye on some of its attitudes towards neighbours, shaped by the conflicts of the time.

Why we remember him

1. **He helped directly to create our alphabet.**
2. **He turned folk song into literary epic.**

3. **The story of his banning** reminds us how fragile cultural memory can be.

Sources

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