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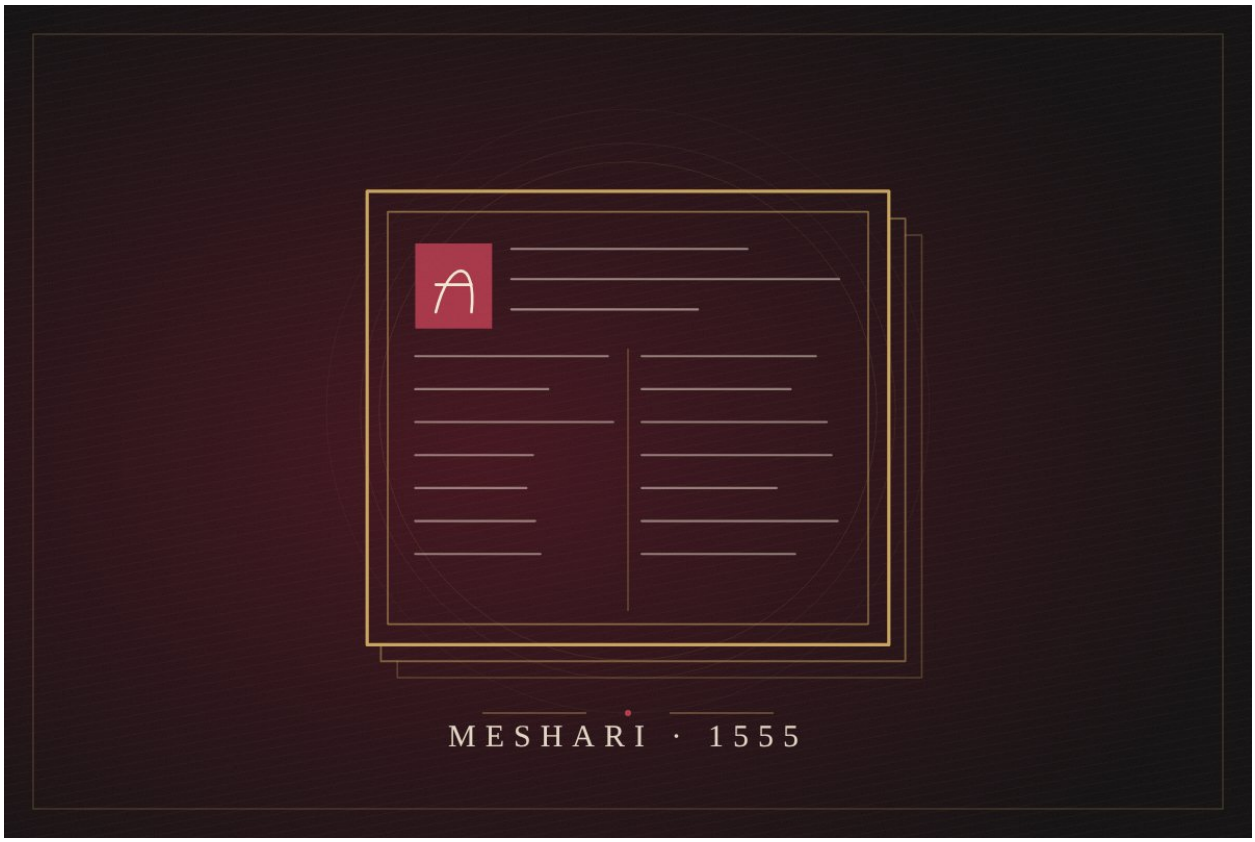
Heritage

Gjon Buzuku's Meshari: the oldest printed book in Albanian

A book without a title page, a single copy in the Vatican and a short note by the author telling us why he wrote it

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Translated from the Albanian original by the editors.



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The oldest known book printed in Albanian has no title page. It is missing its first leaf and the 16 leaves after it, so we do not know what the author called it, nor exactly where it was printed. We call it the *Meshari* (the Missal), because it contains a translation of the main parts of the Catholic Mass and liturgy. Its author was Gjon Buzuku, a Catholic priest from northern Albania.

What it contains

The surviving copy has about 188 pages, with the text set in two columns. Inside are the liturgies for the main feasts of the church year, passages from the Bible, commentary from a prayer book, and parts of the ritual and the catechism. The aim was practical: to give believers and priests a text in their own language for the daily services.

The language of the book is Gheg, the northern dialect. From its features, scholars have suggested that Buzuku was probably from the Shestan and Krajë area, near Shkodër and its lake. This is a conclusion drawn from the language of the text, not something the author says himself.

The author's note

At the end of the book, in a note called a colophon, the author introduces himself as John, son of Bdek (Benedict) Buzuku, and says that the work was begun in 1554 and finished in 1555. There he also explains his reason: he had seen that our language had nothing intelligible from the Holy Scriptures, and he wanted his people to understand how great and merciful the Lord is. He also asks readers to go to church more often.

> *A single book, without a title or a printing date, is enough to show that Albanian was being written with care and ambition in the middle of the sixteenth century.*

The alphabet

Buzuku wrote in the Latin alphabet, but he needed signs for sounds that Latin does not have. For this he borrowed some letters from medieval Cyrillic alphabets and from Greek. For example, a letter of Greek origin is used for the sounds *dh* and *th*, while a letter of Cyrillic origin is used for *q*, *gj* and sometimes *g*. It was a clever solution to a problem that Albanians would go on debating for three and a half centuries, until the Congress of Manastir in 1908.

Where and when it was printed

The place of printing is not known for certain. Two possibilities have been proposed: Venice or Shkodër. The research of the Italian scholar Lucia Nadin leans towards Venice, perhaps in the printing house of Bernardino Bindoni, but this too remains a hypothesis. No document proves it conclusively.

How it was found

The only known copy is today in the Vatican Library. It was found in 1740 by Gjon

Nikollë Kazazi, archbishop of Skopje. After that the book was forgotten and was rediscovered in 1909. In 1930 Father Justin Rrota made the first photocopy and brought it to Albania, and in 1968 the linguist Eqrem Çabej devoted a major study to it.

Albania in 1555

To understand Buzuku's daring, we have to look at the time. In the mid-sixteenth century almost all Albanian lands were under Ottoman rule. Shkodra had fallen in 1479, after a long siege, and many noble families had left for Italy. In the north the Catholic Church still kept parishes and priests, but often with few resources and with clergy who did not know Latin well. At the same time the Council of Trent (1545–1563) was taking place in Europe, aiming to strengthen the Catholic Church after the Reformation. Buzuku's book, written to help local priests, belongs to this climate, but the initiative seems to have been his own.

Other early evidence of Albanian

Besides the baptismal formula of 1462, we have some other evidence of Albanian before Buzuku. The German knight Arnold von Harff, who travelled to the Holy Land in 1496–1499, noted in his diary a small Albanian glossary of everyday words and phrases a traveller needed, such as numbers, greetings and questions about the road. A short text with parts of the Easter gospel, written in Albanian in Greek letters, is kept in the Ambrosiana Library in Milan and is usually dated to the fifteenth or sixteenth century. These fragments show that Albanian was written from time to time, but the Missal is the first complete book we have.

A treasure for linguists

For the history of the language, the Missal is of exceptional value. It preserves forms that modern Albanian has lost or changed: old words, verb and noun forms, and a sound system that lets us see what Gheg looked like four and a half centuries ago. In 1968 Eqrem Çabej published the full text with a facsimile, transcription and introductory study, making it accessible to scholars. Many Albanian etymologies that Çabej later treated in his works rely in part on Buzuku's evidence.

Why it matters

The Meshari is not the oldest evidence of written Albanian. As early as 1462, Pal Engjëlli, archbishop of Durrës, recorded a short baptismal formula in Albanian in a letter written in Latin. But the Meshari is the first known book, and its fluent language has led many scholars, Çabej among them, to think that there must have been other writings before it that have not reached us. This is an interpretation, not a proven fact, but it is a question

worth keeping open.

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