

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE CAUCASUS CULTURE– Script

OVERVIEW

Alphabets were created as the primary tool to keep records of historical events, culture and people, to allow people to transmit information and to share and preserve knowledge. Each culture possesses a language and developed its own alphabet based on the phonemic structure of their spoken language. Each society invented their alphabet with symbols and characters unique to their culture to be used easily by their speakers.

There were numerous distinct spoken languages in the Caucasus, however, not all languages had written form. In the 20th century, there were 50 languages spoken in the Caucasus.

Georgian and Armenian have had literary traditions since the early Middle Ages. In the North Caucasus and Azerbaijan, Arabic was the main language of written communication. The scripts in use changed several times depending on the political situation.

For example, the Latin alphabet was introduced in 1925. In 1938 the Cyrillic alphabet was introduced and has been used ever since. The Soviets created many alphabets based on the phonetic structure of the languages spoken in the Caucasus.

For the Soviets, to establish the socialist system, the non-Russian periphery needed to be transformed both materially and culturally. Thus, education was regarded as a vital tool in their efforts to combat illiteracy and disseminate their propaganda. One of their first moves after the revolution was the inauguration of a social policy known as *Korenizatsija* (nativization or indigenization).

The goal of it was to create a single socialist community out of all of the Soviet Union's diverse minority nationalities by means of a uniform national culture. To create both a socialist worldview and socialist state, the drive to increase literacy was thought essential in spreading socialism among the minority nationalities. However, widespread illiteracy and the lack of uniform alphabet were major obstacles to tackle.

The creation of alphabets for each of the individual nations within the Soviet Union was an arduous effort with insufficient human resources and facilities. To create new alphabets, the Soviets needed to find qualified scholars and teachers and to build educational infrastructure to teach the people the new alphabets and a new culture, and to adapt them to the new socialist system. The Soviets accomplished this task by using strict methods and through an assimilation policy. Almost a century under the Soviet system made indigenous languages and their alphabets dysfunctional and hampered the progress of their cultures.

ANCIENT PERIOD

Georgian Alphabet: According to the Georgian chronicle *The Lives of the Kings of Kartli*, the proto-Georgian script *Asomtavruli* was invented in the 4th century BCE by King Parnavaz I of Iberia. According to the Georgian chronicler Leonti Mroveli, King Parnavaz spread the Georgian language and created Georgian *mtsignobroba* (script or literacy).

Armenian Alphabet: The early inscriptions of the Urartian Kingdom used Assyrian cuneiform and the language of the Urartu, known as *Urartian*, did not belong to the Indo-European language family.

POST – CLASSICAL PERIOD

SOUTH CAUCASUS



Nuskhuri Script of Mikael Modrekili 10th century

GEORGIA: There are two theories on the creation of the Georgian script. The first one is that it was created by King Parnavaz in the 4th or 3rd centuries BCE, and the second one was that the Armenian script, along with the Albanian script, was invented by the Armenian Bishop Mesrop Mashtots in 400 CE.

Georgian had three scripts: from the 5th to the 9th century – Georgian’s first written form was *Asomtavruli* (Mrglovani - rounded):

ა	ბ	გ	დ	ე	ვ	ზ	თ
ანი	ბანი	განი	დონი	ენი	ვინი	ზენი	თე
თანი	ინი	კანი	ლასი	მანი	ნანი	ჩიე	ონი
პარი	ჯანი	რე	სანი	ტარი	ვიე	უნი	ფარი
კანი	განი	ყარი	შინი	ჩინი	ცანი	ძილი	თსილი
ხარი	ყარი	ჯანი	ხანი	ჰე	ჲე		

From the 9th to 11th century *Nuskhuri - Khutsuri* (angular-lower case) was used for religious texts.

ა	ბ	გ	დ	ე	ვ	ზ	თ
ანი	ბანი	განი	დონი	ენი	ვინი	ზენი	თე
თანი	ინი	კანი	ლასი	მანი	ნანი	ჩიე	ონი
პარი	ჯანი	რე	სანი	ტარი	ვიე	უნი	ფარი
კანი	განი	ყარი	შინი	ჩინი	ცანი	ძილი	თსილი
ხარი	ყარი	ჯანი	ხანი	ჰე	ჲე		

From the 11th century the modern script *Mxedruli* (military; secular), which is used only for non-religious texts, has been used.

The Georgian alphabet has undergone relatively few changes since the Middle Ages, with the exception of a few letters added and removed in the 18th-19th centuries. Currently, the alphabet stands as such:

Տ	Թ	Զ	Ը	Ե	Յ	Շ	Պ	Օ	Յ	Լ
a	b	g	d	e	v	z	t	i	k'	l
[a]	[b]	[g]	[d]	[e]	[v]	[z]	[tʰ]	[i]	[kʰ]	[l]
Թ	Ե	Օ	Յ	Մ	Ր	Տ	Դ	Ս	Պ	Կ
m	n	o	p'	zh	r	s	t'	u	p	k
[m]	[n]	[o]	[pʰ]	[ʒ]	[r]	[s]	[tʰ]	[u]	[pʰ]	[kʰ]
Ը	Կ	Մ	Խ	Շ	Տ	Չ	Կ	Ջ	Յ	
gh	q'	sh	ch	ts	dz	ts'	ch'	kh	j	h
[v]	[qʰ]	[ʃ]	[tʃʰ]	[tsʰ]	[dz]	[tsʰ]	[tʃʰ]	[x]	[ç]	[h]

Asomtavruli was created in Armazistsikhe (near Mtskheta) and Nekresi (in Kakheti). The oldest Georgian inscription was found in the Georgian Church of Peter the Iberian in Bethlehem and dates to 430. In Georgia, the oldest inscription was discovered at *Bolnisi Sion* and is dated to 494.



Bolnisi inscriptions in Asomtavruli script dated to 494.

ARMENIA: In Armenian Churches, the liturgical services were conducted in Greek and Assyrian, and to understand the Bible, there was a need to construct an alphabet for the Armenian language.

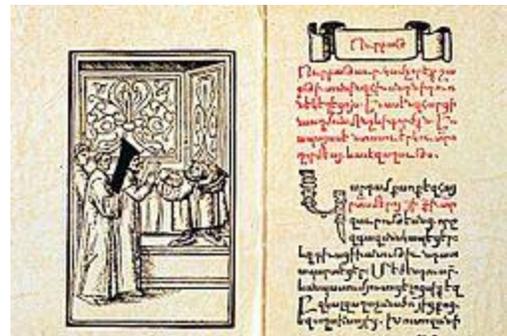
After the adoption of the Christianity in the 4th century, the Armenian alphabet (aybuben) was invented by Mesrob Mashtots to translate religious texts and the Bible, and was a pivotal invention in the development of Armenian history and national identity. The Armenian alphabet is of Greek and Persian origin. The Classical Armenian language *Grabar* was used until the 13th century, but is now only used as the liturgical language.



Classical Armenian Grabar

The Armenian alphabet originally had 36 characters where each sound had its own corresponding letter. The alphabet was created based on the Greek, Aramaic and Syriac scripts. At the end of the 12th century, three more letters were added to the Armenian alphabet.

Urbatagirk (Friday Book) was the first book printed in the Armenian alphabet in Italy in 1512 by the founder of the Armenian printing Hakob Meghpart, and was dedicated to the Holy Cross symbolizing Christ. The content was both religious and secular. The *Sagmosaran Psalter*, *Kharnaypntur tumar* (First calendar), the *Voskanyan Bible* (First Bible) and the *Arhest Hamaroghutean* (Art of Arithmetic) were all printed between the 16th and the 17th centuries in Europe.



In the 17th century, Baldasar Dpir and the German historian Johann Joachim Schröder made great contributions in describing the modern spoken Armenian language which was called *Ašxarhabar* (civil language).

AZERBAIJAN: The Aramaic script was widely used in Southern Azerbaijan in the 1st century. The holy book of the Zoroastrians, the Avesta was written in the Pahlavi letters.



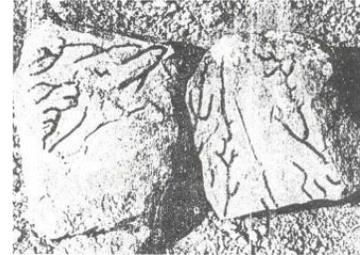
With the spread of Christianity in Caucasus Albania in the 4th century, a script was created by the monk Mesrop Mashtots and the translation of church books into Albanian began. One Caucasian Albanian inscription carved on a stone has been found in Mingachevir, Azerbaijan and dates back to the 7th century.

Albanian inscription found in a church in Mingachevir

Between the 4th and the 8th centuries, early Turkic tribes settled in Nuvadi village and used a Runic script.

Runic inscriptions on the Garga Dashi rocks

After the Arab conquest and with the spread of Islam in the 7th century, the Arabic script (Persian form) was utilized by the Azerbaijanis until 1924. However, the Arabic script was very poorly suited to Azerbaijani phonetically.



NORTH CAUCASUS

CHECHNYA: In this period the Chechen language remained unwritten.

Questions:

- 1- With the spread of Christianity, why did the languages in the South Caucasus develop scripts?
- 2- Why is the appearance of written texts in the writing of manuscripts a significant development?

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EARLY MODERN PERIOD

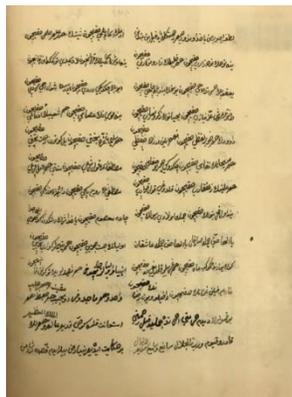
SOUTH CAUCASUS

GEORGIA: In the 18th century, punctuation marks for the Georgian alphabet were introduced by Patriarch Anton I of Georgia.

In the 18th century, the Georgian script was also used for North Caucasian languages during Georgian missionary activities in the area.

ARMENIA: In the 18th century, a new form of cursive writing was created for Armenian under the name *Notr'gir*. *Notr'gir* notary script was a mix of the scripts *Bolor'gir* and *Sta'gir*. It was developed by scribes to rapidly record information.

AZERBAIJAN: The 32-letter Perso-Arabic script was used in Azerbaijan in the 18th century.



Text from *Leyli və Məcnun* in Azerbaijani 18th century

One of the first printed publications was the *Tibbname* (Book of Medicine), written by Muhammed Yusif Shirvani in Azerbaijani in 1712.

NORTH CAUCASUS

CHECHNYA: There was no written language in Chechnya until the 19th century.

Questions:

1-Why were alphabet reforms not an issue in the 18th century?

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- 1- <https://azerbaijan.az/en/information/107>
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19TH CENTURY

SOUTH CAUCASUS

GEORGIA: The Georgian language has its own unique alphabet with 33 letters. Old Georgian had 38 letters, but five Old Georgian letters were eliminated from the alphabet in the late 19th century.

In the 19th century, *Mkhedruli* was used as the primary alphabet for written Georgian, but the Georgian Church continued to use the Mkhedruli, Asomtavrulu and Nuskhuri alphabets.

The Society for the Spreading of Literacy was founded by Dimitri Kipiani, Ilia Chavchavadze, Niko Tskhvedadze, Iakob Gogebashvili, Akaki Tsereteli, Ivane Machabeli, Raphiel Eristavi and David Karichashvili in 1879. They introduced some changes in the Georgian script, eliminating five letters (Ⴡ, ႁ, Ⴣ, Ⴤ, Ⴥ) that no longer corresponded to sounds in Modern Georgian.

ARMENIA: Eastern Armenian would be based on the dialect of the Ararat plain and on the language spoken by the Armenian intellectuals in Tbilisi, Georgia in the 19th century.

The linguist and philologist Manuk Abeghyan proposed a number of orthographic changes which were mentioned in his writings in the late 1890s.

AZERBAIJAN: Mirza Fatali Akhundov was one of the first Azerbaijani intellectuals who advocated reforming the Arabic script for the Azeri language by pointing out the inadequacies of the Perso-Arabic alphabet.

20TH CENTURY

SOUTH CAUCASUS

GEORGIA: The modern Georgian alphabet is called *Mkhedruli*. It is a secular alphabet, there is no distinction between upper and lower case letters, each Georgian sound is represented by only one letter and it is fully phonemic.

The Soviets did not change the Georgian alphabet since Georgia had a deep attachment to their national identity and heritage and had very high literacy rates. Also, Georgians fought hard to preserve linguistic separatism and self-determination. They continued publishing books in the Georgian alphabet, and in 1929, 71 % of the books were printed in Georgian.

By the mid-1970s, Georgian was still the first language of the Georgians, Svans and Megrelians and 94% of Georgian children were attending Georgian language schools. In 1989, 98% of the population were fluent in Georgian. Therefore, by the end of the Soviet Union, Georgians were one of the least Russified nations.

ARMENIA: In the Armenian alphabet, each letter has a capital and lower-case form.

During the Soviet era, Armenia was an ethnically and linguistically homogeneous country. As in the Georgian case, the Soviet authorities did not substitute the Armenian alphabet with either Latin or Cyrillic, since the Armenians had high literacy, a well-established literary tradition and a strong ethnic identity and heritage.

During the Soviet period, an orthographic change was implemented in 1922. The government passed a decree to remove the classical etymological spelling through the unification of some symbols, discontinuation of the standardized norm of writing of diphthongs which were no longer pronounced etc. and to make the Armenian orthography more phonetic.

Classical Armenian Grabar is used today only in the Armenian Apostolic Church as a liturgical language.

AZERBAIJAN: In 1919, after the Soviets took power, the People's Commissariat for Education, *Narkompros* was established. The *Narkompros* proposed switching all the national alphabets from the Arabic and the Cyrillic scripts to the Latin.

In 1920s, there were debates on the problems of switching the alphabet, such as the loss of the older literature, the increase in illiteracy, and the cost. Supporters of alphabet change argued that liquidation of illiteracy with the new alphabet would be much faster and would cost much less.

On 21 July 1922, the Central Executive Committee of the Azerbaijan Republic approved the project of adopting a new alphabet based upon the Latin script proposed by the head of the Committee, Samed Agamaly-ogly.

The Latin alphabet in Azerbaijan was made compulsory for newspapers and official use in 1925. In 1926 the First Turcological Congress was held in Baku. During eight days of debate, the reasons for retaining the Arabic script, and the benefits and costs of converting to the Latin alphabet were discussed. The congress envisaged a common Latin-based Turkic alphabet, and this New Turkic Alphabet was later approved in 1927–1928 by the All-Union Central Committee on the New Turkic Alphabet. Between 1927 and 1930, the five major Central Asian languages substituted the Latin alphabet for the Arabic.

Despite the efforts spent to create a common Latin alphabet for the Turkic languages, the new, i.e. Latin, alphabet was replaced with modified versions of the Cyrillic alphabet throughout Central Asia between 1938 and 1940. In addition, beginning in 1938, all non-Russian schools were required to teach the Russian language. The Soviets claimed these changes were necessary to combat illiteracy, particularly in the countryside, and to bring the minority peoples of the Soviet Union up to the cultural level of the Russians.

While these claims may have had merit, another purpose was to isolate the Turkic republics from the influence of Turkey.

With the passage of the state language law in 1995, Azerbaijan became the first Turkic republic to adopt the Latin alphabet. This change was carried out with relative ease as the language is quite similar to Turkish, and the switch was supported by the former president Ebulfez Elchibey as both a way to move closer to Turkey and to reassert Azerbaijan's Turkic identity. Azerbaijan's next president, Heydar Aliyev, likewise supported the transition to the Latin alphabet, seeing it as a means to create a distinct Azerbaijani identity, and on 1 August 2001 announced a deadline for the mandatory alphabet change. The leadership's commitment to this policy combined with the country's high rate of literacy both contributed to a smooth transition as well as bringing Azerbaijan closer to Turkey and Europe.

The state language written with the Latin alphabet is used in books, education, and all official documents, as well as in the press and other media. Although minority languages can be used in education, provided that there is a need and that such use conforms with national laws, a 2002 law passed by the Milli Mezhlis required the use of Azeri for all government work.

NORTH CAUCASUS

CHECHNYA:

In the 1920's, the Soviets also worked on the development of writing systems for languages which did not have indigenous written form before the Revolution. The Soviet government preferred the Latin script rather than Cyrillic in order not to provoke any anti-Russian reaction among the Moslem peoples in the North Caucasus since the switch to the Cyrillic alphabet would be considered as an attempt at Russification.

In 1925, the Latin script was made obligatory for the North Caucasian people that had previously used Arabic. Despite the enthusiastic claims by some national communists in the North Caucasus that the adoption of the Latin alphabet would be an instrument of liberation and civilization for the region, others were solidly opposed to the measure. Muslim clerics wanted to continue the use of Arabic, particularly in their religious schools, the use of Russian and the Cyrillic alphabet was advocated by the Russified leftist intelligentsia. However, the Chechens used Arabic until 1937 and then switched to Cyrillic.

In 1992, Chechnya declared independence from Russia and demanded the Latin alphabet henceforth be used for Chechnya, but this was never realized. Cyrillic is still used in Chechnya today.

Questions:

- 1- Why was the transition from Arabic to Latin and then to Cyrillic considered necessary?
- 2- Why didn't the Soviets change the Georgian and Armenian alphabets to Cyrillic?

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