



History

Source: Atiya, Aziz S. (ed.), *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. 6, (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1991), p. 1731-1736.

Possible Sources and Antecedents:

There are three primary traditions from which Coptic music very likely absorbed elements in varying proportions: the Jewish, the Greek, and the ancient Egyptian.

Possible Jewish Influence. Many aspects of the Jewish services were adopted by the Christian church in Egypt. As elsewhere in the primitive church, the whole of the Old Testament was probably adopted, with the Psalter being the oldest and most venerated song book. The Alleluia (Ps. 105-150) and Sanctus (Coptic: ḲΟΥΑΒ ḲΟΥΑΒ ḲΟΥΑΒ..., “Holy, holy, holy”) (Is. 6:3) are two notable hymn texts that have become an integral part of the Coptic rites. According to John Gillespie, the benediction, *Baruh Ahtah Adonai* (“Thanks be to Thee, O Lord”), was also adopted by the Copts. However, how much Jewish liturgical music came into the Coptic church, either from Jerusalem or Alexandria, must remain a matter of speculation at this point. To date, no specific melodies have been identified as belonging to both traditions. Hans Hickmann even postulated that although the music from the synagogue played an important role in the development of the Syrian and Byzantine liturgies, in Egypt the case might have been reverses, that is, Jewish music in Egypt could itself have been influenced by the pagan Egyptian liturgies.

Possible Greek Influence. The Greek koiné (κοινή), which was the *lingua franca* of the eastern Mediterranean, became the language of the primitive Christian church. The Hellenized centers of Egypt – Alexandria in particular – produced notable Greco-Egyptian music theorists and teachers such as the grammarian Didymus of Alexandria (first century A.D.), for whom the “Didymian Comma” (an interval between a major and minor tone) is named; Pseudo-Demetrius of Phaleron (first century A.D.), who wrote the first composition manual known in music history; Claudius Ptolemy (second century A.D.), whose *Harmonics* became the standard mathematical treatise on music; Alypius of Alexandria (c. 360 A.D.), whose comprehensive survey of Greek notation made the deciphering of Greek music possible; the poet-teacher Dioscorus of Aphrodito (fourth century); the Gnostic Valentinus (fourth century); and Proclus (421-485).

Two manuscripts containing early Greek musical notation have been found in Egypt. The first one is pre-Christian; it dates from about the middle of the third century B.C. and is one of the most ancient pieces of musical notation yet discovered (Zenon, Cairo Museum, no. 59532). The second is a hymn fragment dating from the middle of the third century A.D. (from the Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1786, ed. Grenfell and Hunt). Recognized as the earliest example of notated Christian hymnody, it was probably once part of the Coptic repertoire, although it is not known to the church today. A study of these two manuscripts, as they have been transcribed by modern scholars, shows that both contain an ambitus and intervals much larger than those normally heard in Coptic music; nor are the interval progressions similar. However, there may be some cadential

likenesses. Another manuscript discovered in Egypt is hymn fragment, *Hymn of the Savior*, ascribed to Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-220), which, however, may date from an earlier period. Only the text is given. Three more papyri from Egypt, edited by Jourdan-Hemmerdinger, contain a system of dots related to letters of the text, which may perhaps indicate a type of musical notation. Two of these date from the third century B.C. but one of them (British Museum, Inv. 230), found in the Fayyum and dating from the third or fourth century A.D., appears to be from a Psalter written in Greek. None of these has yet been deciphered into musical form. One other manuscript of Egyptian provenance, dating from the fifth or sixth century A.D., is controversial. Covered with circles of varied sizes and colors, it was considered by A. Gulezyan of New York to represent musical notation, which he transcribed into Western notation and subsequently published. Jourdan-Hemmerdinger, viewing it as a possible development from the system of dots, has tentatively identified it as an elementary manual of practical music. Eric Werner and René Ménard, on the other hand, do not consider it to be any kind of musical notation.

Although it is obvious that many texts are common to both the Coptic and Greek Churches, it does not necessarily seem to follow that the melodies have been held in common as well. For example, the great hymn *The Only-Begotten* (ὁ μονογενής) and the Trisagion have the same text in both traditions, but the Greek and Coptic melodies for them are entirely different. In view of this fact and other supporting observations, one might tentatively propose that both the melodic style and individual melodies of the Coptic church appear to have remained distinct. However, since the relation of Greek and Coptic music is a study still in its infancy, no comprehensive or definitive statement can be made about this problem at present.

Possible Egyptian Influence. Despite Greek influences in the urban centers, in the pharaonic temples and throughout the rural areas in general, ancient Egyptian music continued to be performed. "The people though, felt, and sang 'Egyptian'" (Hickmann, 1961, p.17). Horudsha, a harpist, and 'Ankh-hep, a temple musician and cymbal player (both first century A.D.), are two professionals whose names indicate their Egyptian roots.

Hickmann proposed a connection between the Kyrie and the ancient Egyptian rites of the sun-god, and according to Baumstark, litanic form of the Isis prayer is found in the Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1380; even the invocations of the saints in the Roman formulary are closely related to this ancient cult. In the *Songs of Isis and Nephthys* (Middle Kingdom texts, trans. Both Faulkner and Schott), evidence exists of antiphonal singing, which still remains today as a basic feature of Coptic music. This practice was also known among the Therapeutae, an ascetic sect of Alexandria (c. 100 B.C.). Another Coptic musical characteristic that might have existed in pharaonic Egypt is the vocalize and/or melisma. After research into Middle Kingdom texts, Hickmann suggested that certain repeated syllables (transliterated by him as χε, χε, χε...) might be interpreted as such. Further, some Gnostic texts contain vocalizes said to be built on the seven "magic vowels." Pseudo-Demetrius of Phaleron referred to this phenomenon as well, calling it "kalophony." Other holdovers from ancient Egypt could be the use of professional blind singers in the performance of the liturgical services, and the use of percussion instruments in certain rituals. Hickmann and Borsari felt that the folk songs of Egyptian

villagers have melodies and rhythms similar to those of Coptic chant. Much more research needs to be done, however.

From the Beginning of the Church to the Council of Chalcedon:

Like other Christian churches in the early centuries, the Coptic church was a national one. It used the musical style and perhaps even some melodies familiar to the people. According to Baumstark, the primitive liturgical texts were, for the most part, improvisations. The rites developed gradually, and varied from region to region. But there was throughout the church a common font of texts meant to be sung. The Coptic *hos* might possibly be assigned to this first period. De Lacy O'Leary, maintaining that the earliest hymns were composed in imitation of the Psalms, suggested that such works should be dated before the second half of the third century. In this regard, he cited three hymns from Coptic services that appear to have derived from the Syrian rite or "its Byzantine daughter," the *Gloria in Excelsis* (Luke 2:14), the *Trisagion*, and the Prayer of Esaias (excerpts from Is. 8 and 9, not to be confused with the canticles). This last hymn is no longer found in recent Coptic liturgical books. For its part, the Coptic church probably influenced the rites of the Syrian church, for by 350, public observation of the daily office (the Third, Sixth, and Ninth Hours) had begun in Syria, and it is reasonable to suppose that the general plans of psalm chanting and lessons were suggested by the already existing monastic practices of Lower Egypt. However, the outline of the Coptic *Horologion* might not really have taken shape until the fifth century.

The Copts adopted Saint Paul's classification of songs suitable for worship (Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16), Psalms (Greek: ψαλμοί, Coptic: Ψαλλμος), hymns (Greek: ύμνοι, Coptic: ἔμνοϣ), and spiritual songs (Greek: ὠδαί, Coptic: ϣωλῆ). Some experts feel that these terms refer to the texts to be used, whereas others propose that they relate to the style of singing. According to Werner, the psalms, hymns, and canticles were established as three distinct forms on the fourth century.

As to the three divine liturgies, their texts must have been set in the fourth and fifth centuries, when the church at Alexandria played a very active role throughout the Mediterranean. Although the authors of the liturgies came from Cappadocia, each had close ties with Egypt. Saint Basil the Great (c. 330-379) served an apprenticeship in a Pachomian monastery before introducing monasticism into Byzantium; Saint Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 257-337) was a pupil of Didymus the Blind in the renowned Catechetical School of Alexandria; and Saint Cyril I the Great (412-444), as patriarch of Alexandria, stood at the head of the Coptic church.

In these early centuries, the church expressed varying attitudes towards music. At its inception, the church used music as a means of attracting proselytes; an example is the story of Philemon, "the disciple of Saint Peter," who is credited with converting many souls by means of his beautiful singing.

The church fathers had various attitudes toward music. Clement of Alexandria did not approve of instruments, but accepted singing. He did, nonetheless, seek to ban chromatic and nondiatonic scales from church music as being too voluptuous. Origen (c.

185-254), that controversial figure in Coptic church history, attested the wide use of singing in many languages throughout the church. Saint Athanasius I (326-373), patriarch of Alexandria, sought to keep psalm singing from becoming overelaborate; the Copts have ascribed to him the hymn *The Only-Begotten* (the Greek church ascribes it to the Emperor Justinian I, who is said to have written it in 528; the Syrian church ascribes it to Severus of Antioch, c. 465-538). Saint Basil, the author of the liturgy bearing his name, defended the singing of psalms both antiphonally and responsorially, a practice popular in many lands including Egypt, Libya, Palestine, and Syria. According to De Lacy O'Leary, it was Saint Basil who introduced this more melodious, antiphonal type of singing into the Byzantine church to supplement an older, more severe style known as "Alexandrian." Although this scholar describes the new style as "Syrian," if one considers Saint Basil's own remarks, the antiphonal style must have already been known in Egypt and elsewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean. Though not a church father, Arius (c. 250-336), author of the Arian heresy, should also be mentioned, for he versified his theology in a collection of hymns known as *Thalia* (Feast), composing them on the models of popular folk songs in an effort to win the people to his cause.

In the monastic communities, attitudes toward music varied as well. Palladius' *Lausiac History* relates that in the days of Saint Antony, "the habitations of the monks were accepted as tabernacles of praises, and Psalms, and hymns..." and it was expected that the monks "should pray continually and be ready [to sing] Psalms and [to recite] the Office before they went to sleep." It is also told that when Saint Antony and Saint Paul met, "they said together the Psalms twelve time... and then they sang and prayed until morning." However, as the monasteries developed, the monks, in their extreme asceticism, condemned music. An anecdote from John of Mayuma tells of Abbot Silvanus (fourth century) who, as a monk first at Scetis, then at Sinai, and finally in Palestine, felt that singing hardened the heart, was a primary act of pride, and that as such, was not for the monks but rather for those outside the monasteries. Abbot Pambo (c. 320-373) was another to deplore any use of music.

In these early centuries of Christianity, the influence of the Coptic church and its liturgical services was felt not only throughout the eastern Mediterranean, but beyond. Through the efforts of Coptic missionaries, who spread the Gospel even as far as Ireland, and through traces left by the Theban Legion in northern Italy, Switzerland, and down the Rhine Valley, remnants of the Coptic faith were left throughout western Europe. Music probably followed closely upon this trail. Stanley Lane-Poole, as quoted by Atiya, has called Irish Christianity "the child of the Egyptian Church" (Atiya, 1968, p.54), and one is tempted to wonder if those early Coptic missionaries brought a bit of their own highly developed music with them to this distant land and left it along with their names. According to O'Curry, the famous Irish harp may have come from Egypt. In Ireland are found three representations of a harp without a forepillar. The first such items hitherto discovered outside of Egypt, they are an ornamental cover of an Irish manuscript dating from at least 1064; a drawing taken from one of the ornamental compartments of a sculptured cross at Monasterboice set up before 830; and a similar monument at the old church of Ullard, County Kilkenny, which appears to be even older than the Monasterboice item. O'Curry also felt that the quadrangular harp of the ancient Tuathe Dé Danaan people, though not exactly the same, could have been modeled upon the early

Greco-Egyptian harp of this same form. How these harps were introduced into Ireland is unknown at present.

As well as missionaries, Coptic monasteries influenced ritual in Europe. To cite one example, the established Coptic recitation of twelve psalms was almost certainly the basis of the similar twelve-psalm series in the Gallic and Roman churches. As yet, no melodies have been discovered that are identical to any specific Coptic hymns or chants, but there is a similarity of style (intervals, ambitus, rhythms), particularly in the simpler Coptic syllabic chanting. Baumstark, in discussing the Roman hymn of the Cross, “We adore thy Cross” (Latin: *Crucem tuam adoramus*), opined that the original ideas and even certain expressions (which came into Roman usage via a Byzantine troparion) go back, as some papyrus fragments show, to extreme antiquity, and seem to derive from Christian Egypt. Also, two ancient formularies in the Roman rite have special kinship with Alexandrian usage; for the original combination of “Let us bend our knees” and “Arise” (Latin: *Flectamus genua* and *Levate*), ancient Egypt alone offers corresponding phrases, still used by the Copts during Lent (Greco-Coptic: ἀναστῶμεν: κλινώμεν τὰ γόνατα).

After the Council of Chalcedon (451) to the Arab Conquest (642/643):

After the Council of Chalcedon, the Copts severed ties with the Byzantine and Roman churches, and purposely withdrew unto themselves, vowing to keep their traditions uncontaminated. What exactly happened regarding music is unknown. However, there is some indication that the Copts kept their music distinct and apart from Byzantine influence. Specific mention is made in the *History of the Patriarchs* of the people rejoicing when Patriarch Isaac (686-689) had the liturgies restored in the churches of the Orthodox (Coptic) which had been prohibited due to Melchite (Byzantine) domination. Elsewhere in the same *History* there is a description of the monks going forth from their monastery, *Dayr Anba Maqar*, singing their traditional sacred songs to greet the patriarch, who had been exiled from Alexandria to this desert retreat. This work further states that long after the Arab conquest, during the reigns of Patriarchs Christodoulos (1046-1077), Cyril II 91078-1092), and Michael IV (1092-1102), the Copts worshiped separately from all other Christians and kept their own rituals.

Despite their self-imposed separation from Byzantium and Rome, the Copts continued to maintain contact with the Syrian church and its music. During the fifth and sixth centuries, there was a flourishing music school at the Syrian Monastery of Saint Sabas near the Dead Sea where Coptic monks came to study. Ere, they were probably acquainted with the form known as *kanon* (Greek: κανών), which, in Coptic usage, became a hymn with strophes of five lines, distinguishing by a refrain of two lines. A Coptic melody type bears its name (Arabic: *lahn qanūn*).

After the Arab Conquest (642/643):

When the Arabs entered Egypt, they brought a new religion and language, but this made no change in the Coptic rituals. Coptic still remained in general use among the Christians even as late as the reign of Patriarch Zacharias (1104-1032) and though the Gospels and other church books had been put into Arabic under the rule of the Patriarch

Philotheus (979-1003), Cyril II continued to conduct the Divine Liturgy entirely in Coptic. Manuscripts dating from the seventh through the nineteenth centuries show that the texts of the ancient hymns – the Theotokia, Psalis, *turūhāt*, and so on – were kept in Greek, Greeko-Coptic, and Coptic with little or no alteration. It seems logical to assume that the music also remained essentially intact. As has been indicated above, even after Arabic was introduced into parts of the rites for those who no longer understood Coptic, this did not seem to change the basic elements of the music (rhythms and melodic lines).

Coptic manuscripts, probably dating from the tenth or eleventh centuries (Rylands Library at Manchester; Insinger Collection, Leiden Museum of Antiquities) contain unusual signs as yet undeciphered. Some scholars have tentatively suggested that they may be a sort of ekphonic notation (a system of symbols placed above the syllables in a text) that fell into disuse. At the Mount Sinai Monastery of Saint Catherine, many ancient manuscripts of hymn and psalm texts have been discovered. None is in Coptic, but there are several in Arabic, with the earliest dating from 977. A study of these Arabic manuscripts could be very useful, for although Saint Catherine's is Greek Orthodox, it has a complicated history connected to Egypt yet to be fully elucidated.

During the Middle Ages, three authors described the rites and musical practices of the church. The first, Ishāq al-Mu'taman Abū Ibn Al-'Assāl (thirteenth century), devoted a chapter from his *Kitāb Majmū' Usūl Al-Dīn* (The Foundations of Religion) to a discussion about the growth of music in the church, citing Scripture and historic events (this chapter has been edited and translated by Georg Fraf as "Der kirchliche Gesang nach Abu Ishāq... ibn al-'Assāl," Vocal Church Music According to Abu Ishāq...). The second, Yuhānā ibn Abī Zakāriyyā Ibn Sibā' (late thirteenth century) detailed contemporary usages of liturgical music in his opus, *Al-Jawharah Al-Nafīṣah fī Ulūm al-Kanīṣah* (the Precious Essence... ed. and trans. Jean Périer as *La Perle précieuse*). The third author, Shams al-Ri'āsah Abū al-Barakāt Ibn Kabar (early fourteenth century), penned *Misbāh Al-zilmah fī Idāh al-Khidmah* (the Lam of Darkness, ed. and trans. Louis Villecourt as *La Lampe des ténèbres*), in which he listed and specified the use of many melodies (Arabic: *alhān*) known to the church in Egypt. Although he reported certain local variations in the order and choice of *alhān*, the names of the songs and practices he discussed are virtually the same today.

These three authors also outlined the Coptic schema of the *oktoechos*, which had been developing for many centuries in Egypt, Syria, and Byzantium. A term of several meanings in the early church, *oktoechos* eventually came to refer to a group of eight adaptable melody-types (*echoi*) used in the Byzantine church in a cycle of eight Sundays to correspond with an eight-week liturgical cycle. Their invention is attributed to Saint John Damascene (d. 754), but his contribution was probably one of organization since they were already in existence long before his time. His classification of the *echoi* into four authentic (χόριοι, i.e. "lords"), to be paired with four plagal (πλάγος, "side," or perhaps πλάξ, "flat and broad"), was likely based on some symbolic principle rather than any purely musical reason.

The expression *oktoechos* first appeared in the *Plerophoria* by John of Mayuma (c. 515) in an anecdote indicating that this word referred both to a kind of prayerbook and to a collection of songs arranged from a musical standpoint. According to E. Werner, the term may originally have derived from the Gnostic term *Ogdoas*, which, as the number eight, was identified with the creator and the essence of music in an apocryphal hymn of

Jesus that probably originated in Egypt or southern Palestine in the middle of the second century. The philosophic ideas of the Ogdoas, the Gnostic magic vowels as they related to the tones of a cosmic octave, the four essential elements (air, water, fire, and earth), and four essential qualities (dry, humid, hot, and cold) – all indiscriminately mixed with more or less biblical concepts, and arising in Egypt and southern Palestine during the second and early third centuries – further contributed to the formation of the *oktoechos*. The alchemist Zosimos of Panopolis (now Akhmim) (c. 300) is credited with a brief passage about *echoi* found in a treatise that basically concerns alchemy. However, the work is likely Byzantine, dating from the late eighth or early ninth century. Herein, Pseudo-Zosimos established a system of *echoi* based on six series of four elements (represented by the Greek symbols for the numbers 1 to 4) to produce twenty-four entities that were to serve as the foundation for the composition of all the hymns and other religious melodies.

In the Byzantine and Syrian churches, the *oktoechos* was systemized only in the eleventh century. Two centuries later, Ibn al-‘Assal, following this lead, quoted the priest Ya’qub al-Maridani, who stated that the sense of hearing has eight levels of feeling (temperaments), and that therefore songs must be based on eight kinds of *echoi* (Arabic: *alhan*); these he then classified and described. In the early fourteenth century, Abu al-Barakat embraced this same classification and described its usage in Egypt as follows: The first (πρωτος) and fifth (πλδληρηθοϋ) *echoi* excite joy, and are used for pure and glorious feasts; their temperament is hot and humid. The second (τεντερος) and sixth (πλδλητεντερος) humble us, and are used for times of humility and humiliation like Holy Week; their temperament is cold and humid. The third (τριτος) and seventh (βδρις, from Greek βαρύς, “heavy”), make us sad, and are therefore most frequently used for funerals and burials; their temperament is hot and dry. The fourth (τετδρτος) and eighth (πλδλητετδρτος) encourage bravery, lift the heart, and are meant to encourage the listeners, not put fear into their souls; their temperament is cold and dry.

In all other descriptions of the Coptic *alhan* and their usage, Abu al-Barakat made no further reference to these eight *echoi*, nor are they known or mentioned elsewhere in Coptic church music. Thus, whether the schema of the *oktoechos* was merely theoretical or actually put into practice by Coptic musicians is an open question.

Regarding a possible Arabic influence on Coptic music over the years, it has been observed that there are some traces of similarity between Coptic incantillation and Qur’an chanting. However, at this writing, it would be impossible to say who borrowed and who lent. The Arabs may have had some effect on the singing style of certain individuals, but for the traditional manner of singing transmitted by the cantors as a whole, it would be difficult to pinpoint anything as specifically Arabic. The ultimate provenance of the improvisational style heard in both Coptic and Arabic cantillation, as well as in other Middle Eastern musical systems, is unknown at present. This entire problem is yet awaiting much-needed comparative study.

In conclusion, some remarks about authors should be made. Although Coptic artists, composers, and writers have largely remained anonymous by tradition, the authors of a few hymns have been identified. Mention has been made of how some left their names in the Psalis. Other ascriptions have been noted in their historical context. In the

currently used *al-Absalmudiyyah al-Kiyahkiyyah*, the following are some of the more prominent authors names as having contributed to hymns to the collection, some more prolifically than others: for Psalis Mu'allim Yu'annis (six Coptic paraphrases), Sarkis (nine Greek paraphrases) and Nicodemus (nine Coptic Psalis); for *mada'ih* and paraphrases in Arabic 'Abd al-Masih al-Masu'di from Dayr al-Muharraḡ, al-Baramudah of Bahnasa, and Fadl Allah al-Ibyari; and for hymns in Arabic with fequent Coptic terms and phrases interpolated, Patriarch Mark VIII (1796-1809), Mu'allim Ghubriyal of Qay, Abu Sa'd al-Abutiji, and Jirjis al-Shinrawi.

RAGHEB MOFTAH
MARIAN ROBERTSON
MARTHA ROY