

# TOLEDO, ROME AND THE ORIGINS OF GREGORIAN CHANT - AN ALTERNATIVE HYPOTHESIS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It has long been believed that Gregory the Great (540-604) created Gregorian chant. Since the restoration of this chant in the late nineteenth century, however, the Carolingian propaganda that created this myth has been unmasked. In the 1950's, the scholarly debate began to focus on the second half of the eighth century as the era of the origin of Gregorian chant. In that period, Roman chant was introduced in Francia, underwent some changes, and was exported throughout Europe as "Gregorian chant", still preserved in dozens of manuscripts with music notation since ca 900. Simultaneously the chant in Rome itself also changed, and was finally written down in manuscripts since the late eleventh century: this is referred to as "Old Roman chant" (Hiley, 1993). While most scholars agree on this general picture, this paper offers a new hypothesis based on computational evidence. In this hypothesis, the Carolingians deliberately created a new repertory out of Roman texts by setting them to Iberian melodies, thus replacing their own "Gallican" ones, that is, the local melodies of Francia.

## 2. CAROLINGIAN PROPAGANDA AND REALITY

Although the legend concerning Pope Gregory may have been unmasked, it seems possible that much of the Carolingian propaganda still lingers on. Since nothing about the Roman melodies before the year 800 is known with certainty, it is possible that these melodies no longer existed at all, and were basically reduced to only the chant texts, to be recited or sung to simple formulas, much as acclamations in modern times. Maybe only some ordinary chants survived. After all, the only evidence for Roman "music" is given by text sources such as the *ordines romani*, describing the mass, and the Roman (as opposed to the Gallican) psalter that formed the source for the Gregorian mass proper texts preserved in the ninth century sources of the *Sextuplex* (Hesbert, 1935). The loss of these melodies seems particularly plausible when there would have been a decline in the Roman liturgical tradition in the seventh or eighth centuries. Even when such a decline cannot be shown with certainty, the contrast between the well-documented rise of Toledo and the poorly documented history of Rome gives pause for thought.

It seems plausible that the Carolingian Renaissance was an effort to revitalize ancient Rome, including Gregory and the Apostles Peter and Paul -- for "thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church" (Mt. 16:18). The Carolingian propaganda may have concealed an agreement with the Papacy to put Rome on the map again: protection of the Papacy in exchange for the Papacy helping the Carolingians to unify their realm through the liturgy. As is well known, Pippin the Short founded the Papal State in 754 and Charlemagne was crowned "Emperor of the Romans" in St. Peter's basilica by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day of the year 800. This coronation was probably one of the most significant events in Western history.

A mass antiphoner with music notation would have been an important vehicle for such an agreement. Although disputed, Kenneth Levy has convincingly argued the existence of a lost late eighth century Carolingian archetype of the Gregorian gradual with neumatic notation (Levy, 1998). Traces of early editing in graduals copied all over Europe presuppose a manuscript with music notation preceding the earliest preserved sources. A typical example is the difference between the nearly identical verses of the graduals *Excita Domine* and *Hodie sciētis*. While the earliest sources give the complete verse of *Excita* with notation, the verse of the next gradual, *Hodie*, has only notation on the words *coram Ephraim*, marking the slightly different melos of *Hodie*'s verse (Maessen, 2008). Such details show that there must have been an authoritative source preceding the earliest surviving witnesses. Apart from Gregory as the author, the Carolingian propaganda may therefore have included the music as well. If so, where would this music have come from? In the hypothesis of this paper, Rome did not have music of its own, and the Gallican music should be replaced for the sake of Rome. The best place to look for this music seems the Iberian Peninsula, separated from the rest of Europe by the Muslim conquest.

One of Charlemagne's important advisors, Theodulf of Orleans (755-821), author of our Palm Sunday hymn, *Gloria laus et honor*, was a Visigoth, probably from Zaragoza, who admired Rome. Unlike Rome, however, Toledo, the centre of the Visigothic church, had been growing in importance since the time of Gregory's friend Leander of Seville (534-600). Leander and Gregory had met in Constantinople between 579 and 582. Leander then converted Ibe-

ria to Catholicism in 589. The Byzantine centre of Cartagena moved to Toledo in 610. Leander's brother Isidore (565-636) provided a detailed description of the Visigothic rite in the early seventh century and presided over the fourth council of Toledo (633), where he decreed a single order of praying and chanting for Iberia and Gaul. The seventh century saw increasing liturgical and musical activity in Toledo (even with different composers), continuing after the Muslim conquest of 711, at least until the end of the eighth century. It was Isidore who lamented the fact that the sound of the melodies would vanish, since there was no way to write it down: "If the sounds are not learnt by heart, they will perish, since they cannot be written" (Levy, 1998). Yet there are strong arguments that most of the lost melodies of the Visigothic/Mozarabic rite, as preserved in pitch-unreadable notation of tenth century manuscripts, already existed before the Muslim invasion (Randel, 1969). Studying the early tenth-century León antiphoner (E-L 8) we can easily see that these melodies must have been quite sophisticated (Maloy, 2014). In addition, computational analysis (based on n-gram language models of numbers of notes on syllables) shows that a significant part of these melodies is much closer to the Gregorian melos than to other preserved medieval chant traditions, including the Old Roman (Maessen & Van Kranenburg, 2018), suggesting that they may have been at the base of it.

Although the above hypothesis may seem provocative, it is less puerile to counter-arguments than one might surmise. Pfisterer's argument, for example (Pfisterer, 2002), based on text sources, that the earliest chants were created in Rome for the major feasts from the fifth century onwards, can easily be refuted as inconclusive. We need strong arguments against a Roman decline, or references to musical details in Roman sources from the seventh or eighth centuries. Such references barely exist. The best there is are general references to the liturgy and its chant, or references to specific chants in a general way. An example of the latter is the arguably only real "Gregorian" chant, *Deprecamur te Domine*, that in 597 was "sweetly sung" near Canterbury (Levy, 1998). However, there is no conclusive argument for a specific melody of this chant, simple formulas could also explain the story.

Another objection to the hypothesis may be found in the fact that the unification of monastic observance, replacing the *regula mixta* observances with the *Rule of Benedict*, was only realized after Charlemagne's death (814), under his son Louis the Pious. Since it seems easier to unify monastic observance than chant practice, a previous change in chant practice would seem unlikely. And yet, for the unification of his realm, Charlemagne may well have aimed at chant from the beginning, since chant touched everybody, not just the monks.

In the absence of more specific references, there is a distinct possibility that Pippin the Short and Charlemagne created a new repertory out of Roman texts set to Iberian melodies, replacing the Gallican ones. To accomplish this

they may have preferred Iberian melodies set to the typical Iberian textual collages (Levy's "libretti"; Levy, 1998), because newly created chants based on these melodies, contrary to those with literal biblical citations, would less likely be perceived as Iberian chants. In the margin of their newly created "Gregorian" mass propers, some chants may have escaped the control of the Carolingian propaganda. Examples of this can be found in offertories like *Erit vobis* and *Oravi Deum*, that Baroffio and Levy argued to be of possible Gallican heritage (Levy, 1998). Significantly, these offertories are also found to be outliers in computational analysis (Maessen & Van Kranenburg, 2018).

### 3. CONCLUSION

The hypothesis of this paper interprets so-called Old Roman chant as a local development of Gregorian chant. It argues that Leander may have contributed more to the Gregorian melos than Gregory. The complete repression in the eleventh century of the Beneventan and Mozarabic rites (Hiley, 1993) is seen as the ultimate result of a Carolingian agreement with the Papacy.

The hypothesis is based on computational evidence and is strengthened by the contrast between the well-documented rise of Toledo and the poorly documented history of Rome. What is at issue is the question what can be said at all about music in a period for which we have no musical witnesses and much of the circumstantial evidence is lacking. This paper shows that computational analysis of the available data can help answering this question.

### 4. REFERENCES

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