

ANCIENT CHURCH MUSIC - OLD ROMAN CHANT

Posted on March 1, 2019 by Patrick



Ever heard the claim: "Pope Gregory the Great came up with Gregorian chant?"

For centuries, it has become common wisdom that the venerable pope was the source of what we now know of as Gregorian chant, and the assumption that it was the chant tradition of the Roman Church - apparently the sole one - was a given. Many - scholars and laymen alike - repeat this attribution, often without question. However, certain discoveries in the 19th century (which were not given proper attention until the 20th century!) has shook the foundations of centuries of pious retelling.

Before 1890, no serious enquiry had been made into the direct origins of Roman Chant or its forerunners. It was in that year when a monk from the famous [Benedictine abbey of Solesmes](#), Dom [André Mocquereau](#) (1849-1930), as part of his research into the manuscript tradition of Gregorian chant, published an account of three books he discovered in the Vatican Library: two Graduals (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Archivio di San Pietro, MS lat. 5319 and MS F. 22) and an Antiphony (MS B.79), all dating from somewhere between the 11th and the 13th century.

Now what intrigued Dom Mocquereau about these manuscripts was that although the material in these sources covered the same liturgical feasts as did the Gregorian books (showing that they were related to each other in that they were both Roman chants), it was melodically distinct from both it, as well as with Ambrosian chant. He wrote a letter to his abbot:

"I must tell you of a discovery we made at the Vatican, and that continues to astonish us. Perhaps Dom Pothier will be able to explain what I am going to say? It is a 12th-century Gradual, certainly of the Roman liturgy, with the exception of some slight peculiarities, but in which the chant is not the one used in all manuscripts in all countries. This is a singular exception that intrigues me. For a time, I had thought that the Ambrosian chant had replaced the Gregorian chant; but this is not the case, because in this new chant the universal Gregorian chant is easy to recognize, but with constant variations that give it a very special character. This is surely an Italian manuscript, as proven by the notation. One note that I found, I no longer know where, advances the unsubstantiated notion that it belonged to St. John Lateran. We have yet to see the Archives at that Basilica; are surprises of this kind awaiting us there, perhaps? I have no idea. I would be most interested to know what the Reverend Father Dom Joseph Pothier thinks about all this. I have not yet studied this curious manuscript in detail, because I had hoped to manage to get it to Solesmes."

Dom Pothier wrote a reply dated the 8th of April:

"... bring us as many details as possible. What do the variations in the chant or the text consist of? ... we must have a good analysis of it; it is on that analysis that we will base the research needed to understand the nature of the variations, their origins and their cause ... the more numerous and the more accurate the details, the narrower the scope of the guesswork will be. ... Traditions thrived in prior times; at St. Peter's they still use not only ancient hymns, but even a special Psalter that dates from far back."

Eventually publishing the results of his study of the manuscripts, Dom Mocquereau then concluded that this repertory, which he recognized as distinct from Ambrosian and Gregorian chant, seems to date from a "relatively recent period, when the rules of Gregorian composition were beginning to fall into disuse." ([Paléographie Musicale](#), Volume II, pp. 4-5, footnote 1). In short, it was a later corruption of Gregorian chant.

Contrary to this view, fellow Benedictine Dom Raphael Andoyer, who after analysing the same sources, expressed the opinion in 1911-12 that they actually represented an earlier stage of musical development than that of Gregorian - a stage he defined as 'pre-Gregorian' (ante-grégorien). For Dom Andoyer, these melodies are the ones which Pope Gregory the Great organized and revised (thus he views Gregory's 'authorship' of plainchant, rather than composing it outright, in the strict sense) into what would become known as Gregorian chant.

After this, the subject was abandoned and no new or authoritative conclusions were reached until 1950, when German musicologist [Bruno Stäblein](#) published several articles dedicated on the subject, declaring these manuscripts to be prime examples of a chant tradition he called *Altrömisch*, or Old Roman. From his time on the problem of Old Roman chant became the object of wide-ranging investigation, and even today it claims the close attention of many experts.

We must note here a couple of interesting and inescapable questions, for which an explanation was needed: among the hundreds of medieval manuscripts of Gregorian chant, there is not one which is known to have been used or written at Rome before the mid-13th century, and the very few sources of definite Roman origin which date from before that period contain similar material to that of Gregorian books, but are different from a melodic point of view - and these manuscripts happen to be the ones which Dom Mocquereau discovered (and dismissed as late corruptions)!

In Stäblein's view, both the 'Old Roman', which he takes to be the one edited by Gregory the Great, and the newer 'Gregorian' - a later revision which he dated from the reign of [Pope Vitalian](#) (657-672) -

coexisted and were being used simultaneously in Rome. Basing his argument on the evidence of an *Ordo Romanus* which ascribes an active interest in the revision of chant to eight Popes - from [Damasus](#) (366-384) to [Martin](#) (649-653) - and to three abbots of the Roman monastery of St. Peter (Catolenus, Marianus and Virbonus), Stäblein held that the three abbots are to be credited for the reformation of Roman chant.

The transformation, according to him, would have taken place before 680, when John the archicantor of St. Peter's was sent by [Pope Agatho](#) (reign 678-681) to England, ostensibly to teach singing there. This dating, in Stäblein's opinion, is confirmed by what certain sources relate about the work of Vitalian, during whose pontificate the chant in the Papal liturgy was apparently performed by the group of cantors named Vitaliani after their founder.

By the 11th to the 13th centuries, Stäblein continues, the situation was such that the Old Roman style of plainchant continued to be employed in the monasteries of the Lateran, while the Papal palace used the 'Gregorian'. The substance of his argument went largely unchanged as time went on, though Stäblein was compelled to make slight adjustments due to the criticism of other scholars (for example, about the mission of the cantors to England).

In brief, he hypothesizes the idea of a transformation at Rome of Old Roman into Gregorian, and the coexistence of the two traditions (respectively, as the chant of the Papal liturgy and the chant of the other Roman churches) until the 13th century.

A similar position was taken up by [Joseph Smits van Waesberghe](#), who believed however that the monastic institutions of Rome used Gregorian chant, while the secular clergy kept using the Old Roman style of plainchant.

His idea was criticized, however, by other scholars due to his excessive dependence on the *Liber Pontificalis* (which has undergone intense modern scholarly scrutiny) and for making an over-strict and historically unfounded distinction between Roman monks and secular clergymen. His critics also raised an objection used against Stäblein's thesis: that there is no incontrovertible proof either that a reform of chant took place in 7th-century Rome or that the two repertoires existed side-by-side there until the mid-13th century.

Allowing for more or less personal emphases, other scholars (such as [Fr. Stephen J.P. Van Dijk](#) O.F.M., and Ewald Stammers) accepted Stäblein's idea of the coexistence of the two repertoires, and also took into account a fact confirmed by liturgical historians, according to whom Rome had witnessed over a long period the coexistence of the Papal liturgy (which was undergoing a continual, yet gradual, process of reform) and the liturgy of the presbyteral tituli, i.e. the parish churches served by non-Curial clergy.

In 1954, [Michel Huglo](#) published an exhaustive directory (*Le chant 'vieux-romain': liste des manuscrits et témoins indirects, Sacris Erudiri* 6) of Old Roman sources both direct - that is, Graduals and Antiphonaries - and indirect, demonstrating thereby that this chant was the official repertoire at Rome towards the mid-8th century, in about 1140, and in the 13th century.

Old Roman was thus to be seen as a local repertoire of specifically Roman origin (like the Ambrosian chant of Milan or Beneventan chant) which had nonetheless spread into central Italy and had even left traces in the monastic centers of the Carolingian Empire (Stäblein has shown that it was in use as far away as St. Gall in present-day Switzerland in the 9th century) before Gregorian chant had gained the upper hand.

Although he came to no conclusion regarding the origins of Gregorian chant, Huglo was prepared to state that Old Roman was the only form of chant familiar to the entire Roman clergy of the period; and this was a clear enough indication that the origins of Gregorian should be looked for outside Rome.

Musicologist [Helmut Huckle](#) took up the challenge, when developing an alternative line of argument to that of Stäblein. In Huckle's view, the point of departure of Gregorian is Old Roman, which underwent a transformation in Frankish territory during the Carolingian era.

As everyone who has studied the history of the Roman Rite pretty much knows, the Roman liturgy starting from the Middle Ages is actually a hybrid between the Gallican family of rites and the original liturgy in use at Rome.

It all started in 754, when the first King of the Franks, Pepin the Short decreed the adoption of the Papal liturgy in his kingdom. It was the time when the Roman liturgy, which until then, apart from the Anglo-Saxon mission Church, had possessed and laid claim to recognition only for Rome and its environs,

advanced in a short time to becoming the liturgy of a great empire.

Of course, as soon as the Roman way of worship was introduced in Frankish territory, it started to absorb local elements. It is often related that Charlemagne, Pepin's son, once asked Pope Hadrian I to provide an authentic Roman sacramentary for use throughout the empire, which the latter sent to the court at Aachen around in the year 785-786.

The intention was to preserve it as the authentic "standard" of the text attributed to Pope St. Gregory the Great and to disseminate it throughout all of Charlemagne's domain through copies, thereby unifying the whole empire under one liturgy - that of Rome. However, the sacramentary the Pope sent soon proved to be ill-suited to the Emperor's plan: it only contained the liturgy for certain feasts, which would make it ill-adapted to the daily liturgical needs of a parish!

When complaints reached the ear of the Pope, his excuse was saying that he merely picked from the Lateran library what seemed to him to be the best sacramentary he had! Recognizing the obvious unsuitability of the book, the court liturgists decided to correct the text (especially its rather mediocre Latin) and then to augment it with a supplement - derived from the local traditions - so that it could serve for the daily liturgy. The result of this work is the *Hadrianum*, aka the Hadrian Sacramentary.

Eventually, this hybrid Roman-Frankish liturgy started creeping its way into the Eternal City itself, eventually supplanting its own parent altogether. Church life in Rome was stagnant during the *saeculum obscurum* of the first half of the 10th century; there was a liturgical vacuum, which the Gallo-Roman liturgy refilled.

This took place both through the direct intervention of the Holy Roman Empire and by the settlement of the *Cluniacs* in monasteries of Rome or its neighborhood.

Hucke's idea was that Old Roman chant would have shared the same fate as that of the Roman liturgy, to which it is tagged: it would have encountered the Gallic repertoires and would have been transformed into what would be known into later ages as 'Gregorian' not only by an inevitable process of 'contamination' but above all by being deliberately adapted for aesthetic reasons.

Whatever the value of the latter motive, it should not be forgotten that musical notation did not exist

yet, and the repertory would have been handed on by memory.

Hucke's idea received support from writers such as [Willi Apel](#) and [Robert J. Snow](#), while [Walther Lipphardt](#), although claiming that Gregorian chant was the Frankish version of a Roman original, maintained that the melodic material exported from Rome was accepted in Frankish domains without any modification; thus Gregorian would be nothing more than the Roman chant of the 9th century.

Apart from this detail, these are the broad lines of the second hypothesis: the birth of Gregorian in what is now France as a result of the impact of Roman chant on the local Gallican traditions.

Part of the reason why Gregorian chant succeeded in gaining the upper hand, it seems, was facilitated by two factors: the invention of a process of writing the melody, which represents a turn in musical history, and its being attributed to one of the most famous characters in Christendom - Pope St. Gregory the Great.

There are now various alternative theories as to how Gregorian chant got its name, aside from the standard interpretation that it was named after Gregory the Great, and not without their own critics.

One proposes that the name actually refers to a different Gregory (one popular candidate here is the 8th-century pope Gregory II) - a theory that already existed even before Old Roman chant was actually discovered - while another says that the name was actually the result of (Carolingian?) propaganda by appealing to higher authority to give vindication for the abandonment of local chant traditions in favor of the (Frankish-) Roman style of chanting.

After all, who could go wrong with Gregory's music?

Patrick lives in Japan. He supports the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite according to the Missal of Bl. Pope John XXIII.

The [photo](#) shows an early medieval illuminated manuscript, ca. 12th-century.

