

**The Coptic *Psalmos*:
Text and Architext, or, Composing
in an Oral Music High Culture**

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It happened in 1998 during the Coptic Holy Week (Pascha). I was conducting my first fieldwork in Wadi an-Natrun¹ (Natron Valley), in Lower Egypt, on the edge of the Great Western Desert. In Antiquity, this region was called Scetis, and besides the now uninhabited Nitria and Kellia, it was the centre of early monasticism. The largest monastery, that of St Bishoi (El Anba Bishoi), where I was welcomed, is right next to the “Syrian” Monastery, and somewhat farther that of the Romans and the famous Monastery of St Macarius, which, together with their plantations, were, in ancient times and even in the early 2000s, the last outposts of permanent human culture before the desert. (The situation has been changing in these last years.)

Father Abakir helped me the most with the first steps. He showed me the liturgical books of the community, he gave me a bilingual book for believers so that I could follow the ceremonies and showed me where it was best to place my tape recorder, where it would not be knocked down or switched off by curious youngsters among the visitors. He told me beforehand how long the Office was going to be, and in general he understood my typical “European” questions well. He had very little time, for normally he was the first and the last in the church, he opened and closed it, checked the liturgical books and vestments, and acted as the warden, keeping guard over the cleanliness of the church. In his childhood, in one of the churches of Cairo’s Shubra quarter, he studied chant from a blind cantor. Later—if I remember well—he studied medicine. This slender, agile young man, blessed with a beautiful voice, after only six years in monastic vows, at age 35, was

¹ In transcribing Arabic and Coptic proper names and other words, there are various traditions and usages. Here I prefer common, not precise (scholarly) transcriptions, mostly without diacritical marks, except in notes.

the musical director of the monastery, in perfect relationship with the former director, Father Ammonios, representative of the old generation. Father Abakir practiced chant with the novices, and arranged the casting of lectors and soloists, too.

During the first Hour on Good Friday, for some reason, the recording of the *Psalmos* he sang marvelously did not work out. Almost in despair, I asked him to sing it for me once again, whenever he would have time. He kept putting it off; he might even have been bothered by my indiscretion. Maybe. After the Easter Sunday ceremonies, late in the evening, I helped him to roll up the carpets in the choir and the naves. They had been trampled upon by the more than a hundred resident monks (the community also includes a few anchorites, and some other monks serving in various other places in Egypt or abroad), hundreds of visitors (about a thousand on Holy Thursday and Good Friday), and they had been covered by sand blown into the church by the hot desert wind through the cracks of the ancient walls. These carpets had to be protected, because Easter Monday was a major feast also for Muslims, and thousands of Copts and Muslims visited the relics of St Bishoi. We carried the heavy carpets into one of the side chapels, and by the end, we were very dirty. Then he loosened up. On Monday at noon, he finally cracked, and we met in a quiet chapel. I asked him to sing once again the *Psalmos* I had missed on Friday. “But it is Monday!”—he objected. In the end, at my insistence, he sang the *Psalmos* but it was only a dim echo of the chant as he had sung it at the ambo on Good Friday, in the presence of the Coptic Pope and a croud of monks and visitors.

I relate this anecdote, because it is very edifying in *all* of its details. Father Abakir’s reaction—“But it is Monday!”—was the most authentic possible from a man who lives in an archaic liturgical and musical culture. He is a learned man who speaks English perfectly, he dealt with a lot of visitors, and he knew how to operate a video camera or a mobile phone better than I did at the time. (I got my first mobile phone in 2003.) Yet on an Easter Monday, he cannot sing—that is: it is essentially not in him to sing the *Psalmos* of Good Friday on the “wrong”

day, even though he teaches chant, and he could sing in any situation any of the tunes off the top of his head.

1) The Copts Today²

The greater part of the Coptic Orthodox³ Church's faithful (estimated between six and sixteen million) live in Egypt, in a Muslim environment that is becoming more and more fundamentalistic. The Copts include rich owners and politicians, like the famous Boutros Ghali family, as well as very poor fellaheen. As a minority with an unstable status, they try to live in peace with the majority. From time to time, one hears of atrocities committed in rural regions, today even in major cities.

One of the symbolic figures of the integration of the Copts is the 117th pope of Alexandria and patriarch of the the See of St Mark. After his election as pope in 1971,⁴ Shenouda III († 17 March 2012), earlier a monk of the Syrian monastery, was kept under house arrest in the Monastery of St Bishoi. (It is said that he made a vow in front of St Bishoi's relics that if he would be elected, he would make the monastery great. Maybe it is an invented story, but he, originally a monk of the "Monastery of Syrians" had in fact made Deir Anba Bishoi great.)

The renaissance of the Coptic Orthodox Church,⁵ starting with that of the monasticism, began during the reign of the previous pope, Cyril VI (1959–1971), who is considered by many to have been a saint. Even

² The summary of Maria Cramer about the actual situation of the Coptic Church has become dated: *Das christlich-koptische Ägypten Einst und Heute. Eine Orientierung* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1959). She wrote that there were 300 monks living in eight monasteries (see below, note 5). In twenty years, even the data of the excellent book of Otto Meinardus has become obsolete in many details: *Monks and Monasteries of the Egyptian Deserts* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, rev. ed., 1989).

³ I refer mostly to the Orthodox Copts; there are about 160,000 Coptic Catholics, mostly in Egypt, too.

⁴ See Barbara Watterson, *Coptic Egypt* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988), pp. 175–77.

⁵ On the beginnings of this religious renaissance, see Otto Meinardus, *Monks*, pp. IX–XI. It is significant that in 1986 there were more than 700 monks living in eleven monasteries, mostly young and middle-aged man (Preface, p. X). The number of the monks is—as I know—increasing exponentially.

today there are so many vocations that—as I know—only the Syrian monastery accepts older novices. One of the monks remarked somewhat facetiously that today they can choose from a large selection of tall 27–28-year-olds with at least one university diploma.

This Coptic renaissance also manifested itself in the reign of Pope Shenouda III in large-scale building projects—if they were allowed—in cities, but even in the desert, at the monasteries: instead of mud huts, most of the monks live in high-rise concrete block houses. (These modern monks suffer more on account of the weather than their famous anchorite predecessors. Once, we visited a modern-day anchorite and his simple dwelling dug halfway down into the earth, which seemed like a more bearable environment.) Next to the twin-monasteries (St Bishoi and that of the “Syrians”), a year after my first journey, a new basilica was built, which can house about three thousand pilgrims who come in large numbers for greater feasts. During these pilgrimages, the pope moves to his residence outside of the monastery in order to conduct the festal ceremonies. Some years ago another new, enormous church was built next to the walls of the Syrian monastery.

My recordings bear witness to the influence that these demonstrations of mass religion have on the attitude of the monks, or on how the electrically amplified sound (so noisy everywhere in the East) affects fine vocal techniques that are better suited for the acoustics of smaller churches. The first problem is perceived by many: some of them—if they can—hide in hidden corners in quiet indignation, while the other problem, unfortunately, is not really considered to pose any real danger. The twentieth and twenty-first-century globalisation reached the Egyptian Copts mostly in major cities, with a Muslim majority, but the digital culture even affects the rural population, and reaches even more the very influential, at least one and a half million-strong American Coptic orthodox diaspora in a fairly religious Catholic and Protestant environment. Many thousands try to make ends meet as foreign workers in the large cities of secularised Europe, or in the Gulf countries. But both Muslims and Copts, in their own country or abroad, are characterised at the same time by a strong determination to preserve their own culture

intact (this strong determination is generally considered—without any proper distinction—an attitude of fundamentalism) and an unreflective acceptance and use of the products of modern technological civilisation.

2) The Coptic Church Music Culture, and the Motives of my Fieldwork

This explains why I decided to visit a monastery, namely the Deir Anba Bishoi. For centuries the highest level of Coptic liturgical singing was maintained in cathedrals by deacons⁶ and blind cantors.⁷ If the musical culture of these cathedrals and larger churches had been properly documented at least 40–50 years ago,⁸ it would have greatly assisted our understanding of the life and activity of the early medieval Roman Schola, but this opportunity was unfortunately missed by scholars of liturgical history and musicology. Not so long ago in the cities on weekends during the whole Saturday night, well-prepared laymen sang the Hours of the Divine Office.⁹ Today, as I know, only a few such reliable places remain. The work load of modern industrial societies is destroying the traditional religious life of cities. Some authentic chanting may be heard in remote villages, too, but the long and complex lit-

⁶ Ragheb Mofteh, Marian Robertson, Martha Roy, and Margit Tóth, “Music, Coptic/Description of the Corpus and Present Musical Practice,” in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, ed. Aziz S. Atiya (New York: Macmillan, 1991), vol. 6, p. 1724.

⁷ Ragheb Mofteh, and Martha Roy, “Music, Coptic/Cantors, Their Role and Musical Training,” in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. 6 (New York and Toronto, 1991), pp. 1736–38.

⁸ Recordings of Ragheb Mofteh were made in studio (see previous note, p. 1737, and note 18 below), not *in situ*. The large collection of Borsai of Coptic and other oriental liturgical music at the Institute of Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences is not yet catalogued, still less studied, nor has the evaluation of Margit Tóth’s smaller collection of recordings begun.

⁹ E.g. about the “Advent” *Psalmodia*, see De Lacy O’Leary, *The Coptic Theotokia* [Text from Vatican Cod. Copt. xxxviii. Bib. Nat. Copte 22, 23, 35, 69 and other Mss. including fragments recently found at the Dêr Abû Makâr in the Wadi Natrun] (London, 1923); and Ilona Borsai, “Une type mélodique particulier des hymnes coptes du mois de Kiahk,” *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 13 (1971): 73–74.

urgy cannot be celebrated there in its entirety. Nowadays the Coptic liturgy can mostly be observed in its true splendour in male monasteries.

In any case, on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday with the participation of the pope, his clerical assistance, and the two chief cantors, and with hundreds or even thousands of lay men and women St Bishoi functions as a special monastic *and* secular cathedral. For three consecutive years (1998–2000), I collected chant in Deir (Dayr) Anba Bishoi (St Bishoi Monastery);¹⁰ in the meantime I visited Syriac regions (Turkey, Syria, Lebanon) and attended liturgical functions of the Syriac and Coptic Orthodox diaspora in Vienna and Hungary. Finally, in 2008, I received permission to visit the Monastery of the Syrians (Dayr as-Suryan, St John Kame Monastery),¹¹ and that time I had the opportunity to work with my assistant, Miklós István Földváry, amidst optimal conditions.

The long history of Coptic chant is shaped by the fact that the monks bring from different regions of Egypt (or even the American diaspora) the melodic variants they learned in childhood. Those are then gathered up by someone in order to teach them to others.

* * *

Coptic church music until today lives in an ecclesiastical high culture which—from a musical point of view—is still primarily oral. This means basically two things: (1) The liturgical texts were very strictly and accurately recorded in books, for many centuries without any real change. For instance, from the twelfth-century lectionary for Holy Week, attributed to Patriarch Gabriel II (Gabriel ben Turaik)¹² anyone today could easily sing the Gospel text and the concomitant *Psalms*.

¹⁰ Otto Meinardus, *op. cit.*, pp. 105–20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 121ff.

¹² Its oldest extant manuscript, dated 1273, is edited by O.H.E. Burmester, *Le lectionnaire de la Semaine Sainte. Texte copte édité avec traduction française d'après le manuscrit add. 5997 du British Museum* (Paris, 1933).

The religious life of Copts was not disturbed by liturgical reforms.¹³ (2) The handing down of the melodic material (which was most likely more or less fixed already in late antiquity) took place without any written notation. This was the result of a synthesis of two opposing tendencies that we must consider.¹⁴ From the comparison of recordings of the last decades, it can be concluded that, in accordance with the way oral cultures usually function, the *essential melodic structures* are very stable, even while there are frequent *variations*. This manifests itself, depending on the cantor, in strong tendencies of ornamentation¹⁵ within certain melodic and textual types, but it also influences the pitch¹⁶ and sometimes the structure.

In the Coptic church, one must also take into account (and this is what I call *oral high culture*) that from time to time the tendency of free variation is checked by the organised teaching activity of certain greatly influential singers (formerly all blind cantors).¹⁷ Today this process of “unification” is supported not only by institutions like the seminary in Cairo: in the recently built huge cathedrals and other churches the faithful listen to the best singers (with electric amplification) in

¹³ “Today’s Coptic Rite is basically the usage of Scetis somewhat modified by later reforms. The Patriarch Gabriel II Ibn Turayk (1131–1145) reduced the number of anaphoras to the present three, and Gabriel V (1409–1427) composed a *Liturgical Order* to unify the divergent usages of Egypt.” Robert Taft, “Praise in the Desert: The Coptic Monastic Office Yesterday and Today,” *Worship* 56/6 (1982): 516. Minor reforms in the nineteenth century did not touch important points. See, for example, concerning the introduction of twelve Greek compositions into the liturgical books of the Coptic Church in 1854–1861 by the patriarch Cyril V, O.H.E. Burmester, “The Greek Kirugmata, Versicles and Responses, and Hymns in the Coptic Liturgy,” *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 6/2 (1930): 393, no. 3–4.

¹⁴ Generally, Ilona Borsai, “Music of the Coptic Rite,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980), vol. 4, p. 733. Further: Ragheb Mofteh, Marian Robertson, Martha Roy, “Music, Coptic/The Oral Tradition,” in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. 6, p. 1730.

¹⁵ The most detailed case study is Ilona Borsai-Margit Tóth, “Variations ornementales dans l’interprétation d’un hymne copte,” *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 11 (1969): 91–105.

¹⁶ E.g. Ilona Borsai, “Deux chants caractéristique de la Semaine Sainte Copte,” *Studies in Eastern Chant* 4 (1979): 17–24.

¹⁷ See above, note 7.

large crowds never seen before; recordings of their chanting are played in homes and cars, on CDs, on the internet, and by radio stations; and this strongly influences the way others sing. These recordings undoubtedly contribute to the positive self-esteem of an oppressed minority (and perhaps also to the survival of Coptic church music in general, even if not in its best form). It is also clear that it leads to a significant increase in uniformity, especially to a radical simplification in the techniques of melodic embellishment, and to the gradual disappearance of the quarter-tone system. Strictly outside the confines of church liturgy, lately one can hear certain popular adaptations, with instruments and in the style of Arabic pop music. This very strictly monophonic music (which was never—not even occasionally—accompanied by another voice) is now accompanied by the electric instruments of European origin, which are entirely incapable of playing quarter-tones well.

Unfortunately, the process of simplification started a long time ago. After the twelfth-century reform, only three Anaphoras survived. The Liturgy of Saint Cyril was last celebrated in the 1940s; there are still some clerics who know the Anaphora of Saint Gregory (at least some parts of it), but recordings, even among those made 50–60 years ago, only exist—as we know—of the Liturgy of Saint Basil. Today basically the Liturgy of Saint Basil is used.¹⁸ Although in Coptic popular opinion, this Liturgy is considered to be the highest product of Coptic church music, due to the extensive research and study already accomplished on it, I concentrated on the Hours of the Divine Office and, most especially, on the order of Holy Week, with its structure of constant repetitions and “extras” (among them many Greek items). If fieldwork is begun a few days before Palm Sunday, even the “per an-

¹⁸ Margit Tóth (1920–2009), a Hungarian ethnomusicologist, expert in Coptic chant, at first working together with Ilona Borsai, living during decades in Cairo, produced an extremely detailed edition of the Liturgy of Saint Basil, as recorded in studio from some excellent cantors, taught by the great Mu'allim Mikha'il. See *The Coptic Orthodox Liturgy of St Basil*, with Complete Musical Transcription, compiled by Ragheb Mofteh, music transcription by Margit Toth [recte: Tóth], text edited by Martha Roy (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998). On the recordings, see the Introduction, p. X.

num” order of the Divine Office can be observed,¹⁹ and until Easter, there are also three Masses.

3) Holy Week and Easter Services and Ceremonies

3a) Pascha: Holy Week and Easter

The Coptic term, Pascha (*pascha*, *al-basha*), denotes, in the strictest liturgical sense of the word, Holy Week (the “Week of the Sufferings,” *usbú’ al-âlâm*) and the Eve of Easter Sunday; in a larger sense it includes also the whole day of Easter Sunday (*fash*), even the Evening Offering of Incense on Easter Sunday.²⁰

According to the terminology of Western (Latin) Christianity, this period can be described as 1) the last two Hours of Palm Sunday, 2) Holy Week (Latin *hebdomada maior*)—beginning on the Eve of Holy Monday, 3) the (Latin) Pascha, i.e. the night of Holy Saturday or the Vigil of Easter (*vigilia Paschalis*), together with Easter Sunday (*Dominica resurrectionis*), 4) comprising the Eve of Easter Monday, too.

Although the books for common use that contain the services of the period sometimes²¹ indicate²² the beginning of Pascha at the ninth Hour (none) of the day of Palm Sunday, only after the Holy Liturgy and the Office of the Dead, some books²³ also seem to include not only Palm Sunday, but also, as a preparatory period or a transition from the former part of Lent, the Saturday of Lazarus—from its

¹⁹ Short resumé in Taft, “Praise in the Desert,” pp. 513–36.

²⁰ Georg Graf, *Verzeichnis arabischer kirchlicher Termini*, 2nd ed. (Louvain, 1954), s.v. *basha/basha* and *fash*. The former is the Arabic transcription of the (Greco-)Coptic word *pascha* in its actual (Arabised) Bohairic pronunciation; the latter is used generally by the Arabic-speaking Christians in the Middle East as an equivalent for Easter (Easter Sunday or/and Eastertide, i.e., the fifty-day period until Whitsunday).

²¹ E.g. in “The Book of the Holy Pascha” (Coptic: *Pgóm nte pipascha ethouav*).

²² By an inserted “Order of the Holy Pascha” (*tartíb al-basha al-muqaddasa*).

²³ In the “Order of Holy Week” (literally “Order of the Week of the Sufferings”: *tartíb usbú’ al-âlâm*) the “Order of the Holy Pascha” is inserted at the very beginning of the book, before the services on the Day of Lazarus.

Midnight Hour held on Saturday at dawn. In this larger sense,²⁴ the Coptic Pascha is a period of approximately eight days.

Consequently, I use the term in the strict sense, but sometimes (when there is no ambiguity) in the wider sense, too, because, in the first place, it is the usage of the Coptic church, and secondly, the aforementioned two days prepare Holy Week not only in their theological aspects, but also by the fact that they comprise some liturgical elements that are typical for Holy Week. (The same transition can be noted at the end of the period, from the Eve of Holy Saturday).

In calculating the date of Easter, the Coptic Orthodox Church follows the methods of the Eastern and Oriental²⁵ churches. Generally, there is a divergence of two weeks from the Western Gregorian (CE) calendar, because the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Christians use the Julian one. Also, there are some corrections particular to the Coptic church.²⁶

²⁴ O.H.E. KHS-Burmester, *The Egyptian or Coptic Church: A Detailed Description of Her Liturgical Services and the Rites and Ceremonies Observed in the Administration of her Sacraments* (Cairo, 1967), p. 271. In the description of the Pascha, pp. 269–302.

²⁵ The term “Oriental Orthodox” is used for the Non-Ephesian or Pre-Ephesian (“Nestorian”) and Non-Calcedonian or Pre-Calcedonian (“Monophysite” or “Miaphysite”) Orthodox Churches.

²⁶ In Egypt, the Gregorian calendar is used in everyday life side by side with the Islamic calendar (A.H.). In the liturgy, however, the Copts use their own calendar according to the era of the martyrs, which commenced on 29 August in 284 CE. The Coptic year—just as the ancient Egyptian year—is divided into 13 months (12 months with 30 days, one with 5 or 6 days). The months bear their Bohairic name (originating from ancient Egyptian), but the Copts generally use Copto-Arabic names based on the Bohairic pronunciation. The year begins with the month of Thout (Copto-Arabic *Tût*), i.e., September 11th–October 10th (Gregorian); the feast of Easter can fall into the months *Baramhât* (Copto-Arabic), i.e., March 10th–April 8th and *Baramûda* (Copto-Arabic), i.e., April 9th–May 8th. About the Coptic calendar in general: Burmester, *The Egyptian or Coptic Church*, p. 12. For more detail: M. Chaîne, *La Chronologie des temps chrétiens de l'Égypte et de l'Éthiopie* (Paris, 1925). On the calculation of the Pascha, see S. Kent Brown, “An Easter Calendar on Limestone,” *Acts V*, vol. 2, parts 1–2 (1993), pp. 79–90.

3b) The Liturgical Order of the Services—General Features of the Pascha (Bascha)²⁷

The theological and spiritual importance of the Coptic Holy Week (Bascha) as the centre of the liturgical year is emphasized by its very special liturgical character. Some traits of the Pascha (all of them seems to be very ancient liturgical usages) are in close relation with the fact that Easter is—both theologically and historically—the core of the celebration of the mystery of Christ. The uncommon structure, the content, and the “performance” of the canonical Hours are the most remarkable features of the Coptic Orthodox Pascha. (Practically the same is relevant for the Coptic Catholic Pascha, too.)

The Canonical Hours. The most remarkable feature of the Pascha is both the structure and content (and thus the language and the way of the performance: chanting/recitation/prose) of its canonical Hours.

Each day the Egyptian Orthodox Church holds seven canonical Hours (Morning prayer, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, Compline, and Midnight prayer with three Nocturns), which are common both in the cathedral/parish rite and in the monasteries. The monks also recite an extra office before retiring to sleep. The main elements of the Hours are: the successive overlapping recitation of psalms by different monks in the community, the Gospel reading (invariable throughout the year), prayers (collects), *troparia* and *theotokia*, Kyries, the *Trisagion*, and the Lord’s Prayer. In the actual Coptic usage everything is said (recited

²⁷ A detailed description of the Holy Week and Easter services (but from the first three days only the morning prayer of Wednesday is elaborated): Burmester, *The Egyptian or Coptic Church*, pp. 269–302. Earlier: “Rites and Ceremonies of the Coptic Church, part XI: Holy Week Services and Ceremonies,” *Eastern Churches Quarterly* 11/7 (1956): 321–35. Gérard Viaud, *La Liturgie des Coptes d’Égypte* (Paris, 1978), pp. 45–66, gives only an outline for the general public, emphasizing some “interesting” details. For understanding the theological background, a useful reading is Adel Sidarous [Sidarus, Sidarouss] S.J., “La Pâque Sainte ou La Semaine Sainte selon la liturgie copte,” *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 17 (1967): 3–43. Prescriptions in liturgical rubrics are compared with the practice (usages) of an important monastery (based on field-work in 1968): idem, “La Semaine Sainte à Daïr as-Suryân,” *Bulletin de la Société d’Archéologique Copte* 20 (1969–70): 5–29. The main source of the former study is E. Lanne, “Textes et rites de la liturgie pascale dans l’ancienne église copte,” *L’Orient syrien* 6/1 (1961): 279–300.

recto tono) in Arabic.

At the conclusion of the offices of Compline, of the Midnight prayer, and of the Morning prayer, a daily choral service (*Psalmodia*) is held, but it is not a service of psalmody, i.e. recitation of psalms, but a chanted service—mostly in Coptic—of Old and New Testament odes, *theotokias*,²⁸ *psalmis*, *lobshs*, and hymns for the saints.

The Hours are prayed together (even in the monasteries): nowadays in cathedrals and in parish churches the *Psalmodias* of the week are performed on Saturday evening, throughout the whole night.

On the other hand, during Holy Week the day (reckoned from sunset to sunset) is distributed between five evening Hours (first, third, sixth, ninth and eleventh) and those of the day (morning prayer, third, sixth, ninth and eleventh). On Good Friday there is a twelfth Hour inserted after the eleventh.

The basic form of every Hour is as follows:

- Introductory prayers (priest, Arabic prose)
- “Prophecies,” i.e. lesson(s) from the Old Testament; they are indicated as “prophecies” even if not taken from prophetic books; the liturgical books edited for the general public indicate an Arabic recitation, but in El Anba Bishoi at least the beginning is generally read in Coptic (lector or lectors)
- Doxology at the end of the prophecy (lector, Arabic)
- Prayers, Kyries, doxology, Our Father, “The hymn of the ... Hour of the ...” (priest/community, Arabic prose)
- The praise of the Lamb (*thók te tigóm*, three variants for the different Hours) repeated twelve times (community, Coptic/Arabic, chant)
- Our Father (community, Arabic prose)
- Psalm-versicle (*psalmos*, soloist, Coptic chant)
- Introductory dialogue to the Gospel-reading (soloist/community, Greek recitation)
- Gospel-reading (priest as lector, Coptic-Arabic recitation)
- Introductory to the *tarh* (soloist/community, Coptic)

²⁸ O’Leary, *The Coptic Theotokia* (see note 9), p. IV: “The *Theotokia* of the Coptic Church corresponds to the *Parvum Officium B. V. Mariae* of the Western Church.” On the *Theotokias*, see Ilona Borsai, “Métrique et mélodie dans les Théotokies coptes,” *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 22 (1980): 16–60.

- Explanation of the Gospel-reading (*tarh*) (lector, Arabic prose)
- Response (*lóbsh*) (community, Coptic chant)
- Metanias (in the morning service) (priest, Greco-Coptic recitation)
- Intercessions with Kyries (priest/community, Arabic recitation)
- Kyries (priest/community, Coptic recitation)
- Closing benedictions (priest, Arabic recitation)

The main variable (recited or chanted) elements (the “*propria*”) of the Hours are the 1) prophecy (prophecies), 2) the psalm-versicle (*psalmos*) and 3) the Gospel-reading. The musical high point is undoubtedly the extensive, mostly embellished solo psalm-versicle (*psalmos*), which can be compared with the gradual (psalm-versicle) of the Latin Gregorian liturgy.

From Monday until the morning prayer of Maundy Thursday, which is excluded, a basic “contracted” form of the Hours is performed: there is no Mass, nor *Psalmodia*, and the ten Hours are divided into three blocks of 3 + 4 + 3 Hours, each block without a break. The order of the Hours in the Monastery of El Anba Bishoi and in the Monastery of the Syrians is as follows:

5–7:30 AM:	9 th , 11 th of eve, 1 st of day (morning prayer) ²⁹
11 AM–1:30 PM:	3 rd , 6 th , 9 th , 11 th of day
5–7 PM:	1 st , 3 rd , 6 th of eve of the following day.

From Maundy Thursday on, there are more and more special elements in the services of Holy Week that give rise to insertions between the Hours (e.g. on Maundy Thursday after the ninth Hour the service of foot-washing) or to the normal structure of the Hours (e.g. incensing and procession with the Crucifix on Good Friday); from the eve of Holy Saturday, even constitutive elements of the *Psalmodia* (e.g. *troparia*, *theotokia*) and of the yearly canonical office (e.g. prose psalmody) can be noticed.

The Divine Liturgy. During the first three days and on Good Friday there is no Eucharistic service, the morning or evening offerings of in-

²⁹ The contraction into three series is a normal way of celebrating the Hours.

cense are also omitted. There are slight changes (readings skipped, added chants, or insertions) as compared to the usual manner of celebration.

The *Psalmodia* is mostly lacking, too, however typical genres of this service appear in the sixth and ninth Hours of the day on Good Friday, and, in the eve of Holy Saturday before the morning offering of incense, a service of the *Psalmodia* is added. Consequently, the strong Marian element of this service, the extensive choral (community) singing of strophic hymns and, in close relation to this, the *giusto* genres with accompaniment of cymbals, are mostly lacking or restricted to some Hours of the “triduum sacrum.”

Continuous Reading of Entire Books of the Bible. According to the rubrics, the Gospel of St Matthew should be read (in Arabic) at the morning prayer of Tuesday, the Gospel of St Mark at the same Hour on Wednesday, the Gospel of St Luke on Thursday at the morning offering of incense, but in practice these readings are neglected.³⁰ In the same way, the entire reading of the Gospel of St John in the evening of Holy Saturday, at about 6 p.m., before the midnight Hour is neglected in the present day practice. (The reading of the Gospel is the duty of the monks in their cells.) Nonetheless, at about 1 AM on Holy Saturday, after the third and the sixth Hour of the eve of Saturday is the solemn reading of the Apocalypse of St John by the members of the community in Arabic prose, while the poetic sections are chanted in Arabic. (There are some indications that in ancient times the whole Bible was read in *lectio continua* during the Pascha.)

The Instruments. The use of cymbals and triangles is mostly avoided. There is, on the other hand, a very typical use of cymbals, of gruesome effect, accompanying the creepy melody of the Greek (and Arabic) processional hymn, “Judas, Judas, the lawless one” in the morning offering of incense on Maundy Thursday.

Censing. There is not any censing during the canonical Hours, with the exception of the sixth, ninth, twelfth Hour of Good Friday.

³⁰ Burmester, *The Egyptian or Coptic Church*, p. 274.

Prayers for the Dead with the offering of incense are not recited from the ninth Hour of Palm Sunday until the morning offering of incense on Holy Saturday. There is a special service for the dead at the end of the Holy Liturgy of Palm Sunday (incorporated into the Liturgy), for those who may die during the following week. This special office shows—in its transitional form—a certain anticipation of the Offices of Holy Week, comprehended as Offices for the deceased Christ!

The liturgical and musical effects caused by these changes are:

1) The proportion of the texts of the liturgical services (canonical Hours and Divine Liturgy), which are chanted or recited solely in Coptic (Greco-Coptic) or in Coptic and Arabic, are significantly higher than in other periods of the year when the Arabic prose recitation of the psalms is an important factor; the musical style of the performance is parallel to this archaic linguistic character.³¹

2) The proportion of Old Testament readings (partly parallel in Coptic) is also momentous: within the yearly cycle, there is no lesson taken from the Old Testament in the Divine Liturgy. On Maundy Thursday and on Holy Saturday, however (even if at a rather exceptional place, during the distribution of the Holy Communion, and not in the catechetical part of the Liturgy), there are Old Testament lessons; generally, in the Divine Liturgy only the psalms (the psalm-versicle before the Gospel reading, and Ps. 150 during the Communion) are taken from the Old Testament, while in the canonical Hours and in the *Psalmodia* the psalms and the odes come from the Old Testament. (No Old Testament lesson is read outside the Pascha except during Lent, before the Gospel of the morning offering of incense.) In the Pascha, the proportion is the reverse: a very large number of Old Testament readings *versus* rather exceptional psalm recitations. Even the responsorial chanting of Ps. 150 during the Communion is omitted. On the other hand, the singing of the psalm-versicle before the Gospel is an important feature, common both in the Divine Liturgy and in the canonical Hours of Holy Week.

³¹ Serge de Beaucueil, O.P., "Un problème crucial: la langue liturgique," *Les Cahiers Coptes* 4 (1953): 9–11.

The Place. The Holy Week ceremonies from Palm Sunday afternoon until the eve of Holy Saturday are not performed in the choir, but in the nave (except for the Divine Liturgy on Maundy Thursday, which is in the sanctuary and in the choir) of the main church of St Bishoi monastery. This nave is separated from the choir by a wooden screen, because—following Hebrews 13, 12–13—Jesus suffered “without (=outside) the gate.” Black curtains with white crosses hanging on the walls and on the screen, and the covering after the services of books left on the lecterns (pulpits) that were removed from the choir into the nave, give extreme austerity to the church.³²

4) The Holy Week *Psalmos*

Adel Sidarous S.J. described the liturgical usages of the Syrian Monastery, the twin-monastery of that of St Bishoi, in the 1960s. He writes that the solo-tutti chanting of the psalm-versicle (“les quelques versets des psaumes”) before the Gospel reading is the most impressive point of the Hours in Holy Week.³³ The *Psalmos* is common both in the Divine Liturgy (it can be compared in his liturgical place to the Latin *Graduale*)³⁴ and in the canonical Hours of Holy Week. Whereas the common *Psalmos* is a short chant, most of the *Psalmos* (at least ten per day) are chanted to a special tune for Holy Week, and some of them to another tune (see later). Members of a monastic community (like a big Schola) or the priests, deacons, and even laymen³⁵ of a cathedral or a parish church (all of them of different talents and aptitudes) must be able to apply the tune to texts of different length and content, and perform the lengthy *Psalmos* (at least 5–10 minutes, but sometimes as long as 20–30 minutes) in a very melismatic manner.

³² Burmester, *The Egyptian or Coptic Church*, pp. 269, 274.

³³ Sidarous, “La Pâque Sainte,” p. 13.

³⁴ Burmester, *Le lectionnaire de la Semaine Sainte*, p. 179.

³⁵ Borsai, “Deux chants caractéristique,” p. 15.

4a) The Textual and Musical Structure of the *Psalmos*

The text of the *Psalmos* is always four half-lines from the Psalms with the Greek word “*lexis*” in the middle, which has no function at all in the performance. After the first, second, and fourth half-line, there is an Alleluia-refrain—it means that the text, along with the music, is divided into three main parts. (See Figure 1 on the next pages.)³⁶

The whole piece is practically equivalent to a tripartite *cantus responsorius*.³⁷ The introduction is always “*Psalmos tó David*” in the Greek of the Septuagint, which is not always printed in the liturgical books. This is always sung by a soloist. In the *Psalmos*’ which are sung in the so-called “*Adribi*” tune³⁸ (and these are vast majority in the Holy Week), the soloist continues singing the Psalm, interrupted by the Alleluia-responses of the choir. Then someone else sings the introduction to the Gospel, while the first soloist, if he is a priest³⁹ (placing a white head-stole upon his head) reads from the Coptic Gospel. Both the Psalm and the Coptic Gospel are sung from the pulpit and facing East.

³⁶ English translation of the *Psalmos* of the first Hour of the eve of Wednesday, at the middle of the page of the bilingual 1982 edition: *Pgóm nte pipascha ethouav.—Taq̄s usbú’ al-álám* (“The Book/Order of the Holy Pascha”) from the exemplar of the author, used at Holy Week in 1998. “A psalm of David. (Ps. 58/59,13–14 [=16–17]) For thou has been my supporter: and my refuge in the day of mine affliction. (*lexis*) Thou art my helper, to thee, my God, will I sing: thou art my supporter, O my God, and my mercy. Alleluia.” The Alleluia-refrain after the first and second half-line is not written in the liturgical books.

³⁷ Borsai, “Deux chants caractéristique,” p. 14.

³⁸ On the tune- (Arabic *lahn*-)system of the Coptic music, see Ilona Borsai, “Y a-t-il un «Octoéchos» dans le système du chant copte?” *Studia Aegyptiaca* 1 (1974): 39–53.

³⁹ The soloist of the *psalmos* is not obligatorily a priest; for example in St Bishoi Monastery there were several novices singing *psalmos*. See Borsai, “Deux chants caractéristique,” p. 15.

Figure 1:



الساعة الاولى من ليلة الاربعاء من البصخة المقدسة - المزمور - الانجيل

لم تر و لم يعطر عليها في يوم غضبي . هذه التي مدبروها في وسطها
 مثل اسد ترار تخطف خطفاً وتأكل نفوساً بالظلم والرشوة
 وأراملها يكثرون في وسطك و رذل كهنتك ناموسي و دنسوا
 مقاسي و لم يميزوا بين المقدس والمدنس و بين النجس والظاهر
 و حججوا عيونهم عن سموتي و صرت مرذولا في وسطك . رؤساؤك
 مثل ذئاب يخطفون خطفاً و يسفكون دماء كي يأخذوا ما ليس
 لهم و أنبياؤها الذين مسحوم يسقطون اذ يرون باطلا و يسألون
 و هم ينطقون كذبا : مجدداً للثالث الاقدس .

ΨΑΛΜΟΣ ΝΗ : ΙΣ ΝΕΜ ΤΑ

ⲛⲉⲙ

المزمور ٥٨ : ١٣ و ١٤

ⲀⲔⲬⲱⲡⲓ ⲛⲏⲓ ⲛⲟⲩⲣⲉϥⲱⲡⲓ
 ἐρου : νεμ οτμαλφωτ δεμ πέρου -
 οτ ἀπαροχρεχ . (Δεξις)

صرت ناصري
 و ملجائي في يوم شدتي
 (جلت)

ⲛⲟⲕ πε παβηθουσ ἀπαερψαλιν ἐ -
 ροκ πανοτϥ : χε η̅ⲟⲕ πε παρϥϥⲱⲡⲓ
 ἐροκ πανοτϥ παναι ἀλ̅ .

أنت معيني لك ارتل
 يا الهي . لانك أنت ناصري
 الهي و رحمتي : مليلويا .

ΕΨΑΛΜΟΣ ΚΑΤΑ ΒΑΤΘΕΟΝ

الانجيل من متى

Κεϥ κβ : α̅ - τ̅α

ص ١٢٢٢ و ١٢

ⲀⲔⲬⲟⲩ ⲁϥⲉⲣⲟⲩ ⲱⲛⲱⲟⲩ Ⲁⲛ
 η̅ⲛⲟⲩⲥ Ⲓⲏⲥ δεμ ρανπαρβολη εϥ -
 ρω̅ⲓⲙⲟⲩ : χε ⲥⲟ̅ⲛⲓ η̅ⲛⲟⲩⲥ ϥμετοτρο η̅ -
 τε νιφνοτ̅ⲓ : η̅ⲛⲟⲩⲣⲱⲓⲓ η̅ⲛⲟⲩⲣⲟⲩ ⲉ̅ⲁϥ̅ⲓⲣⲓ η̅ -
 οτϥⲟⲩ ⲉ̅ⲡⲉϥϥⲱⲛⲓ : Ⲁⲟⲩⲟⲩ ⲁϥⲟⲩⲱⲣⲓ η̅ⲛⲉϥ
 ⲉ̅βⲓⲁⲓⲕ ⲉ̅ⲙⲟⲩⲥ ⲉ̅ⲛⲏⲉⲧⲟⲁⲣⲉⲙ ⲉ̅ϩⲟⲩⲏⲓ ⲉ̅ⲡⲓ -
 ρⲟⲩ ⲟⲩⲟⲩ ⲁ̅ⲛⲟⲩⲟⲩⲱⲩⲱⲩ ⲉ̅ⲓ .

ثم احلهم يسوع
 بمثال قثلا . يشبه
 ملكوت السموات . رجلا
 ملكا صنع عرسا لابنه .
 فأرسل عبيده ليدعوا
 المدعويين الى العرس فلم
 يريدوا ان ياتوا

ⲀⲔⲬⲓⲛⲟⲩⲙ ⲁϥⲟⲩⲱⲣⲓ η̅ⲣⲁⲛⲕⲉ ⲉ̅βⲓⲁⲓⲕ
 εϥρω̅ⲓⲙⲟⲩ : χε ἀ̅ⲣⲟⲩⲟⲩ η̅ⲛⲏⲉⲧⲟⲁⲣⲉⲙ χε

فأرسل أيضا عبيدا آخرين
 قثلا قولوا للمدعويين

<i>lahn Adribi</i> (“sorrowful tune”)	<i>Psalmos</i>
<i>Psalmos tó Daud</i> (solo)	
1a (solo)+Alleluia (choir)	A
1b (solo)+Alleluia (choir)	A
2a–b (solo)+Alleluia (choir) (a):	x+2 nd half of A
(b):	A

Ilona Borsai⁴⁰ was the first one to describe the liturgical and formal characteristics of the *Psalmos*.⁴¹ She even notated two recordings made on site⁴², and on their basis she prepared a melodic sketch or a model-melody.⁴³ This great Hungarian scholar, ethnomusicologist, and founder of Coptic musicology, of excellent proficiency in Classical philology and Coptology, derived the *terminus technicus* “Adribi” from the Coptic word *eterhévi*, meaning “sad.” (This was probably later turned into a geographical term.) Its original meaning is the same as that of the frequently used Arabic word *al-hazayni* (*huzn*). The same tune is used in the Offices of the Dead throughout the entire year; thus during Holy Week, Christ’s funeral office is continuously sung.⁴⁴

Borsai describes the musical structure of the *Psalmos* very accurately.⁴⁵ the first two melodic lines are repeated over the two textual lines, of course, in a slightly varying form. The structure of the lines is invariable, however, consisting of modules repeated in small bits. The third and fourth psalmic lines are not divided by Alleluia-refrains. The third melodic line in the beginning intensely varies the basic line. At this point, melodic sequences or improvised elements may occur (although even these draw upon a fixed repertory), and then the end of the third line is as usual. The fourth line is once again essentially identical to the first two. Ilona Borsai compared this structure—very aptly—to sonata

⁴⁰ Born in Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca, October 4, 1924 - died in Budapest, August 7, 1982. See the complete bibliography of Ilona Borsai (compiled by Teréz Kapronyi) in *Ethnographia* 94 (1983): 306–11.

⁴¹ Borsai, “Deux chants caractéristique,” pp. 13ff.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 19–24.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 26–27.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 24–27.

form, as if the third line were the “development” of the sonata form, although without the contrast in tonality.⁴⁶

Here I restrict myself to supplementing the conclusions of Borsari and the small amount of relevant scholarly literature.

4b) *Ke iper tou*: Introduction of the Gospel-Reading in Adribi Tune

First, one additional occurrence of the Adribi melody. In the last of the contracted Hours,⁴⁷ the Greek introduction of the Gospel is not sung with the usual simple tune, but, divided into three parts, to the long Adribi melody.⁴⁸

Even if the melody was not discussed, it is known that this addition to the last Hour already existed in the 1960's⁴⁹ (in earlier times perhaps even in other Hours). Father Serapion, my “spiritual director,” said once: “If we have some spare time, we use it for contemplation.” The monks have no breakfast anyway (nor the visitors), and before the lunch prepared for visitors or the supper allowed even for the monks—always *foul* (beans), with olives and bread—there are long vocal meditations during the first three days of Holy Week at the end of the contracted series of Hours.

The application of the same model-tune to the Greek text results in a new, three-line form: exposition—“development”—recapitulation. On my recordings, the performance of this form is in the following arrangement: choir—solo—choir. (There is no Alleluia-refrain):

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 25–27.

⁴⁷ E.g. in the sixth Hour of the afternoon series (first, third, sixth Hours of the Eve of the following day).

⁴⁸ I have recorded it many times.

⁴⁹ Sidarous, “La Pâque Sainte,” pp. 13–14: “L’invitatoire grec de l’évangile και υπερ του est proclamé *recto tono* par un chantre. Il est cependant chanté solennellement, sur le ton du psaume, à la dernière Heure qui clôt l’office. Il est alors divisé en quatre parties, chantées alternativement par les deux choeurs.”

lahn Adribi: Ke iper tou

- | | |
|-----------|-----------------------------|
| 1 (choir) | A |
| 2 (solo) | x+2 nd half of A |
| 3 (choir) | A |

4c) *Psalmos'* with Shami (Syrian) tune

Secondly, I would like to point out certain occasions when the Adribi melody is supplemented by another one. According to the non-Arabic scholarly literature,⁵⁰ only the daytime eleventh Hour on Holy Tuesday and the last, supplementary twelfth Hour on Good Friday are sung to the Shami (Syrian)⁵¹ tune (*lahn ash-shâmî*). In both Hours, the first line is taken from Ps. 44/45, but the rest is different (*Pek'thronos ... Óo-uniatph/Pek'thronos ... Ousmyrna*; the short title *Pek'thronos* refers to the second *Psalmos*). From my research on site, but partly also from an ordinary leaflet (ordinal book), it became clear that the *Psalmos* would be sung with the Shami melody on yet another two occasions. This, too, was brought to my attention by Father Serapion in 1999, at my second visit in St Bishoi. (That time, on the first second of the Psalm Sunday Liturgy at the new, big cathedral, my microphone was damaged by an electrical power surge ... As a recompense, this very clever man explained all of the Holy Week ceremonies to me.)

This is the case in the third Hour during the Eve of Maundy Thursday and in the first daytime Hour of Maundy Thursday. The text of the psalm is *Av'tshinon*, but in both cases the rest is different (*Av'tshnon ... Tshi'smé/ Av'tshnon ... Dshe ene*). Both prepare the Gospel reading about the betrayal of Judas very deliberately, and accordingly, the first psalmic verse is applied to the ill-fated, lawless disciple. In its second occurrence, that is, in the first Hour, just before the *Psalmos*, the specially inserted hymn "Iudas, Iudas, o paranomos" is sung in procession, first in Greek, then in Arabic, with the accompaniment of eerie-sounding cymbals. The Shami melody is first used before the pericope with the metaphors of God's Kingdom (this, too, makes reference in the

⁵⁰ E.g. Sidarous, "La Pâque Sainte," p. 13, note 2, and following him, Borsai, 1974, (see note 38), p. 49, note 12.

⁵¹ Sidarous, "La Pâque Sainte," translated it as "Grec."

end to the treachery of Judas); on Good Friday, it comes right before the pericopes about Christ's burial (taken from all four Gospels in proper order). Here the meaning of the Psalms is summarized. They are connected by the same melody: Christ's tomb, in front of which the veneration of the Holy Sepulchre is held, is in fact a throne, but it was built by Judas. At least, this is Father Serapion's theological interpretation.

The occurrences of *Psalms*' with the tune (*lahn*) *Shami* are as follows:

The Eleventh Hour of Tuesday of the Holy Week

Psalms Pek'thronos ... Óouniatph (Ps 44,6; 40,1)

Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: [Alleluia]

the sceptre of thy kingdom is a sceptre of righteousness. (*lexis*) [Alleluia]

Blessed is the man, who thinks on the poor and needy:

the Lord shall deliver him in an evil day. Alleluia.

Evangelion: Mt 25,14–46; 26,1–2 (The kingdom of heaven, the talents; the coming of the Son of man; “the Son of man is betrayed”)

The Third Hour of the Eve of Maundy Thursday

Psalms Av'tshnon ... Tshi'smé (Ps 54,21.1)

His words were smoother than oil: [Alleluia]

yet are they darts. [Alleluia]

Harken, O God to my prayer:

and disregard not my supplication. Alleluia.

Evangelion: Mc 14,3–11 (the ointment of Jesus in the house of Simon the leper; Judas betrays Jesus)

The First Hour of Maundy Thursday

Praxis (Acts 1,15–20: the death of Judas)

Ioudas o paranomos

Psalms Av'tshnon ... Dshe ene (Ps 54,21.12)

His words were smoother than oil: [Alleluia]

yet are they darts. [Alleluia]

For if an enemy had reproached me, I would have endured it:

and if one who hated me had spoken vauntingly against me, I would have hid myself from him. Alleluia.

Evangelion: L 22,7–13 (“prepare us the Passover!”)

The Twelfth Hour of Good Friday

Psalmos Pek'thronos ... Ousmyrna (Ps 44,6.8)

Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: [Alleluia]

the sceptre of thy kingdom is a sceptre of righteousness. (*lexis*) [Alleluia]

Myrrh, and stacte, and cassia are exhaled from thy garments. (*lexis*) [Alleluia]

Evangelion: Mt 27,57–61; Mc 15,42–16,1; L 23,50–56; J 19,38–42 (burial of Jesus)

4d) *Pek'thronos*

Ilona Borsai must have heard *Pek'thronos*, which the community always anticipates with almost tangible excitement, as something that is considered the greatest achievement of Coptic church music. Although Borsai was right in highlighting the Adribi tune, which is sung in the 44 *Psalmos*' of the Holy Week 44 times (or, because of the repetition at the half-lines of each *Psalmos*, 44x4 times)—and this indeed is the most characteristic melody—the greatest accomplishment, however, the most important “edifice” of Coptic, or generally the Oriental Christian church music, is actually the *Pek'thronos*. This is a worthy counterpart to the greatest of Indian ragas—in my opinion, it may even exceed them.

The unusual performance of the *Pek'thronos* on Good Friday is even more monumental (also in terms of length) than that of the first three *Psalmos*' with the Shami tune, which lasts about 20 minutes, while the *Pek'thronos* on Good Friday may be even longer than 25 minutes. It is something unique. The 44 *Psalmos*' with tune Adribi are considered equal to each other in importance. But the *Pek'thronos* (with both texts and the two *Av'tshinon*) is more than a mere application of a tune to different texts. (I think it can also shed important light on the question of forming new compositions from a model-tune in the history of Gregorian chant.)

The performance of the *Psalmos* with the Shami tune is different from that of the Adribi tune. During the first three occurrences of the Shami, the soloist sings the “*Psalmos tó David*” introduction. Then it is not the soloist, but the entire choir (that is, the best singers of the community) that sings the Shami melody to the first half-line of the psalm.

The Alleluia at the end is sung by all. The rest, divided into two parts, is sung by the soloist alone. (I am not sure if it was a deliberate dramatic element, but at one time everybody, except the soloist, left the choir, and they only returned for the Alleluia-refrain.)

lahn Shami (Syrian tune): *Psalmos*
Psalmos tó David (solo)
 1a (choir)+All. (choir) B
 1b (solo)+All. (choir) A
 2a–b (solo)+All. (choir) (a): x+2nd half of A
 (b): A

To the best of my knowledge, the relevant musicological works do not analyse this melody. The Coptic name for the tune, *Shami*, also obscures a very important element. The Copts know—even young Coptic bloggers used to write about it—that there is a joyful, and a sad part in it. Yet I have never seen it written anywhere, either in liturgical books or ordinaries, that the Shami tune consists of two parts: the first melody (B) is typically “major” in character, strongly vocalised, made up of many small modules, full of repetitions. Then, half-lines 2–4 of the *Psalmos* are sung in two divisions to the clear Adribi tune (A). The application of the melody to the third line works the same way as the introductory formula to the *Ke iper tou* before the Gospel reading. (Therefore, to the former 44x4 occurrences of the Adribi tune, we must add the 4x3 lines of the Adribi hidden within the Shami tune in 4 *Psalmos*,’ and—if I am not wrong—10 repetitions with *Ke iper tou*.)

The result is a monumental two-part form and a contrast in tonality within the same piece, but this musical contrast is not created by a modulation; it is a deliberately “composed” division of two tonally different pieces. The two parts of the tune are built differently, as are, of course, the character, size, and quantity of the modules of vocalisation. This form of the Shami tune is then boosted in the *Pek’thronos* on Good Friday as much as possible by the best and most inventive performances by the greatest singers, which are characterised by a special technique of vocal decoration that is capable of filling up

even slower pieces.

The greatest part of the big *Pek'thronos* is sung by a soloist, but in alternation with the choir, which responds not only with the Alleluia but also with words of the first psalmic half-line. These are the longest examples of Coptic vocalisation, that is, melismatic singing without words. It is not rare for the soloist or the choir to vocalize on a single syllable for three minutes. The long vocalisation is one of the most outstanding features of Coptic church music, and naturally, these vocalisations are sung by the best available singers. Four times I was lucky enough to listen to the singing of Ibrahim Ayyad, permanent escort of the pope, then partially Deacon (Dr) Roshdi, also from the pope's entourage, as well as the choir of St Bishoi and of the Syrian Monastery. In Coptic church music, these are long minutes of intense ecstasy—which is a clear refutation of those who always and exclusively emphasize sobriety in Christian liturgy.

Let us review the structure, casting, and timing (according my 1998 recording in the St Bishoi Monastery) of the Psalmos *Pek'thronos*, as follows:

<i>Psalmos tó David</i> (<i>lahn Shami</i>)		monk of the Dayr Anba Bishoi	0'20''
1a	pek'thronos	Ibrahim Ayyad	1'50''
	phnouti	choir	1'05''
	sha eneh	Ibrahim Ayyad	4'20''
	ente pieneh	choir	3'30''
Alleluia	Alle-	Ibrahim Ayyad	3'25''
	-eluia	choir	3'05''
[<i>lahn Adribi</i>]			
1b	A	Ibrahim Ayyad	3'00''
Alleluia		choir+congregation	0'10''
2!	xx+A	deacon Roshdi WB Dous	3'35''
Alleluia		choir+congregation	0'10''

The individuality of the performance is secured by a natural kind of ornamentation which European ears are unfit to follow, as well as by the insertion of transitional or even dominant notes. These, in my opin-

ion, are kept within a certain limit. The choir always sings the series of smaller modules in a set order, but their ornamentation gives a natural type of heterophony to the performance.

As an exception, Ibrahim Ayyad at times and at certain points changes the major melody of Shami into minor. At first it seems like a coincidence, but the note that is intoned a bit too low sets a pattern, and it becomes a transitional phrase in minor linking the two principal parts together. It is here where oriental creativity can and may flourish.

5) Composition in Coptic Music?

The Coptic liturgy has no need or use for the composition of new pieces. The set repertory of liturgical items is not supplemented even for the sake of new saints. Instead the Coptic liturgy is characterised by the gradual omission of certain items, (e.g. of the double *Psalmos*, indicated in some Hours in the liturgical books, but not yet chanted). For example, in 1968 the ceremonies during Maundy Thursday lasted as long as twelve hours,⁵² but nowadays it lasts no longer than seven or seven and a half hours. At times the monks asked me if I did not think it was too long. I was on the verge of collapsing, but I always replied: unfortunately, it was much too short for me. And it was not untrue: one's perception of time is radically altered among the Copts.

Can we speak about composition in Coptic music? In the strict sense of the word, no. The force of the "genre" seems to be more strong (in the long history of the Church and even today) than the creativity, at least in a Western meaning. But the word "genre" is not the best to describe the phenomenon of the "tune for a special liturgical function." I borrow the term "architext" (as introduced by Gérard Genette)—in some way a more precise expression than the rather general concept of "genre"—from literary criticism.

The architext in Coptic music—as I use this term—is the liturgically assigned tune itself (Arabic *lahn*), which means: 1.) a complex of as-signations, 2.) a complex of melodic turns and modules, 3.) a complex

⁵² Sidarous, "La Pâque Sainte," p. 23.

of rules prescribing how to vary the order of the modules, and 4.) a complex of rules of the application of the chant to the biblical (psalm) or liturgical (*Ke iper tou*) texts, or, 5.) even of rules for the selection of the biblical text, at least regarding its form (mainly four half-lines for a *Psalmos*; three half-lines are something very special).

It seems to us Westerners that the applied text disappears under the “architext.” But, first of all, with the help of translations, the Coptic believer knows very well what kinds of theological content are combined, connected by the lines of the architext, and this fact gives each piece individuality despite the “same” tune. (This is in the strictest sense of the word a *logiké latreia*, a *latreia* through the *logoi*.) The counterpart consists of some peculiar pieces which are strongly individualised; I think it is the case of the *Psalmos Pek'thronos*. As a distant parallel, we can consider the tracts in the Latin Liturgy (e.g. *Deus Deus meus* in mode 2, highlighted on Palm Sunday).

Postscript

Individualisation does not mean composition, yet. But there are certain signs, however, that the seeds of a typical “composer-like” mentality are beginning to make their appearance, especially insofar as the analytical approach is concerned. I think one kind of analytical approach underlies a new neume-writing from the end of the twentieth century.

Father Abakir of St Bishoi often consulted a small booklet. After much entreaty, he finally showed me the Coptic notation. He did not tell me the name of the man who invented it, only that I could find him in one of the churches of Cairo where extraordinary things, apparitions of the Holy Virgin, had happened before. The next Sunday, I went to see this parish priest, an amateur inventor of musical notation, who used to be an engineer. Obviously he realised something that Europeans had realised many centuries back, in the Carolingian era: What is least important is the pitch and the melismatic decorations, because people know them, and they are variable. These cannot be accurately recorded, and if they are, we set the course of their certain atrophy. What is really important is the groupings of intense and less intense notes, their ele-

ments, and the way they relate to each other, and also, the differentiation of several groups, which are repeated in different parts of the musical piece. See Figure 2, which is a part of the big *Pek'thronos*. The text of *Av'tshnon* is written above the notation.

It would be the subject of another study to explain how these work. Listening to Coptic music, studying the extremely detailed transcriptions of the aforementioned Hungarian ethnomusicologists, both of them wonderful scholars, Ilona Borsai and Margit Tóth, we must be attentive to the analytical ability of the Coptic engineer: to the way he marks beats, important ornamental characteristics of some notes, changes of formal units, quasi-rhythms, and sequences.

Is it possible that in this awkward notation, which is suitable for the preservation and handing down of the greatest achievements of Coptic church music, we see a new initiative of musical composition within the framework of orality? Or is this the beginning of the death of Coptic liturgical music? That is the question.

The author of this article is very thankful to the desert fathers: the abbot-bishops and the monks of the mentioned monasteries for their hospitality, for their helpfulness, and that they take care faithfully of the treasure of one of the most important sacred music cultures of the world, being impoverished.

Figure 2:

