

## Introduction

There are substantial challenges that stand in the way of producing clear analyses of Coptic chant (Arabic: *alḥān*), the liturgical music of the indigenous Oriental Orthodox Church of Egypt. There are linguistic challenges; Bohairic Coptic, the church's liturgical language, has not been used as a common vernacular since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> And there are musical challenges; there is no known notational system for the Coptic Church's extensive hymnody, which is entirely oral, monadic, sung mostly *a capella* by male deacons, and transmitted almost exclusively through rote learning.<sup>2</sup>

These factors contribute to the paltry attention Coptic chant has received in scholarship. Recent efforts, especially by scholars whose positionality as Coptic contributes to a more incisive reading of Coptic hymnody,<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Hiroko MIYOKAWA, 'The Revival of the Coptic Language and the Formation of Coptic Ethnoreligious Identity in Modern Egypt', in *Copts in Context: Negotiating Identity, Tradition, and Modernity*, ed. by Nelly van DOORN-HARDER (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), pp. 151–156, here p. 151.

A quick perfunctory remark on languages used in this chapter: Coptic is the latest development of the Ancient Egyptian language, directly following Demotic, and adopting a Greek script. It was commonly used in Egypt until overtaken by Arabic after the Arab conquest in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. It possesses a number of dialects: the main two are Sahidic (for Upper Egypt) and Bohairic (for Lower Egypt). The latter is the dialect used in all liturgical rites of the Coptic Church. Greek is also used in the Coptic liturgical rite, but transliterated into Coptic – a project undertaken in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century at the direction of Pope Cyril IV; cf. Mounir SHOUCRI, 'Cyril IV', in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, ed. by Aziz SURYAL ATIYA (Macmillan, 1991), pp. 677b–679a, digitally published in *Claremont Coptic Encyclopedia*, <https://cdl.claremont.edu/digital/collection/cce/id/556/rec/1>. For all translations and transliterations of Coptic and Greco-Coptic text used in Coptic hymnody, I have referred to Anthony ABOSIEF, *Coptic Hymns: A Book of Hymns for All Occasions of the Coptic Year* (Hayward, California: Saint Antonius Coptic Orthodox Church, 2000). For Greek transliteration and translation, I have referred to examples in Kenneth LEVY, 'The Trisagion in Byzantium and the West', in *International Musicological Society. Report of the Eleventh Congress. 1972*, ed. by Henrik GLAHN (Copenhagen: William Hansen, 1974), pp. 761–765.

<sup>2</sup> My forthcoming chapter in *Scriptor, Cantor & Notator: The Materiality of Sound in Chant Manuscripts* (Brepols, forthcoming in 2022) discusses the usage of *hazzāt*, a mnemonic script common in the Coptic church, which gives indications of melodic direction within certain highly melismatic chants. Though not musical notation, modern usage of this mnemonic script, which reminds and guides cantors through melismas, does seem to be indigenous to the Coptic Church.

<sup>3</sup> See Nicholas Joseph RAGHEB, *The Transmission of Coptic Orthodox Liturgical Music: Historical and Contemporary Forms of Theorization, Translation, and Identity Construction*, unpublished dissertation for Doctor of Philosophy in Music, Faculty of Music, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2019; Carolyn RAMZY, 'A Musical Inheritance: Coptic Cantors and an Orally Transmitted Tradition', Library of Congress, 2009, <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihms.200155645/>; Carolyn RAMZY, 'Music:

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## Ancient or modern? The Coptic Trisagion and its historical antecedents

### Abstract

The music of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt has only been studied by a handful of twentieth century scholars, though, more recently, it has started to garner more widespread attention. The music is entirely oral and transmitted through rote learning. However, the author believes that these melodies have proven to be impressively resilient and durable over time, with melodic content that is constant and consistent.

This paper presents the Trisagion (or the "Thrice-Holy" Hymn) of the Coptic Liturgy of the Catechumens, comparing current notational transcriptions of the Coptic Trisagions with those of the Byzantine and Gregorian traditions, with the hope of providing a context of this central and widespread Eastern Ordinary chant.

**Keywords:** history of music; oral liturgical chant; Coptic hymnody; Byzantine music; Greek hymnody; Trisagion; theory of music

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**Secondary language(s):** Old Greek; Coptic; Arabic

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stand in stark contrast to the few early- to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Western scholars who have studied Coptic music as some sort of vestige of pharaonic Egypt. Ernest Newlandsmith, an English musician commissioned by Ragheb Moftah<sup>4</sup> to transcribe Coptic chant in Western notation in the 1920s and 30s, claimed the music to be “ancient Egyptian” and “buried under an appalling degree of debris of Arabic ornamentation”.<sup>5</sup> Even more recent scholars, using less prescriptive methodologies, fall prey to Pharaonism<sup>6</sup> in Coptic music, as Severine Gabry points out:

“Ces idées sont notamment celles de Hans Hickmann, Ilona Borsai et René Ménard. Ils ont tous trois étudié la musique copte en lui conférant une descendance pharaonique indéniable, sous le prétexte discutable que les Coptes seraient les *vrais égyptiens*, purs héritiers des traditions de l’Égypte ancienne. Ce type de discours contribue amplement à développer un sentiment nationaliste très fort chez les Coptes et semble étroitement lié à cette volonté de mettre en valeur la « culture Copte ».”<sup>7</sup>

[These ideas are notably those of Hans Hickmann, Ilona Borsai and René Ménard. All three studied Coptic music as undeniably of Pharaonic descent, though under the questionable pretext that Copts were the true Egyptians and pure heirs to the traditions of ancient Egypt. This type of discourse contributes immensely to the development of a very strong nationalist sentiment among Copts and seems closely linked to a determination to highlight ‘Coptic culture’.] (*Translation by author.*)

Such scholarship lends the Coptic Orthodox Church – and its music – a sense of the obscure and arcane. Some, like David Hiley, conjecture that Coptic chant could be “the nearest analogue to the period in 8<sup>th</sup>-century Europe immediately before the first ever codification of a musical repertory, that of Frankish Gregorian chant”.<sup>8</sup> Others, like Papathanasiou and Boukas, maintain that it is “quite probable that in its early stages Coptic chant adopted the Byzantine eight mode system”.<sup>9</sup> It is what underpins this final claim – a possible linkage between Coptic *alḥān* and Byzantine hymnody – that has drawn my attention.

\* \* \*

In this paper I will discuss the modern Coptic Trisagion (Greek: ‘thrice holy’), which is part of the Liturgy of St. Basil, the Coptic Mass Ordinary. I will analyse my transcriptions of the chant into Western musical notation, discussing the chant’s melodic syntax and its attached Greco-Coptic text. Following this, I will compare my transcriptions of the modern Coptic Trisagion to

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Performing Coptic Expressive Culture’, in *The Coptic Christian Heritage: History, Faith, and Culture*, ed. by Lois M. FARAG (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), pp. 160–176; Carolyn RAMZY, ‘Modern Singing Sons of the Pharaohs: Transcriptions and Orientalism in a Digital Coptic Music Collection’, *Ethnologies* 37/1 (2015), pp. 65–88, <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1039656ar>; Mena Mark HANNA, *Towards a Structural Theory of Coptic Chant*, unpublished dissertation for Doctor of Philosophy in Music Composition and Critical Writing, Faculty of Music, University of Oxford, 2010; Mena Mark HANNA, ‘How Early Can You Go? Coptic Chant in Western Transcription’, *Journal of the International Society for Orthodox Church Music* 3 (2018), pp. 138–150, <https://journal.fi/jisocm/article/view/88725/47910>.

<sup>4</sup> Ragheb Moftah was a twentieth-century scholar of Coptic music and is known as the father of modern Coptic musical studies. He was responsible for commissioning multiple transcriptions of Coptic chant into Western musical notation, presented Coptic chant recordings at the 1932 Congress of Arabic Music in Cairo, and established the Music and Hymn Faculty at the Higher Institute of Coptic Studies in 1954. For more details see RAMZY, ‘Modern Singing Sons of the Pharaohs’ (↵ footnote 3) and the web resource curated by Carolyn RAMZY, *Coptic Orthodox Liturgical Chant & Hymnody: The Ragheb Moftah Collection at the Library of Congress* [Special Presentation in the Library of Congress Performing Arts Encyclopedia], <https://www.loc.gov/collections/coptic-orthodox-liturgical-chant/about-this-collection/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ernest NEWLANDSMITH, ‘The Ancient Music of the Coptic Church: A Lecture Delivered at the University Church, Oxford, on May 21, 1931’, in *Coptic Orthodox Liturgical Chant and Hymnody*, <https://loc.gov/item/ihas.200155827>, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> For more on Pharaonism in Coptic music, see RAMZY, ‘Modern Singing Sons of the Pharaohs’ (↵ footnote 3).

<sup>7</sup> Séverine GABRY, ‘Processus et Enjeux de La Patrimonialisation de La Musique Copte’, *Égypte/Monde Arabe* 2009/5–6 [= *Pratiques du Patrimoine en Égypte et au Soudan*], pp. 133–158, here p. 136, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ema.2896>. Emphasis by Séverine Gabry.

<sup>8</sup> David HILEY, ‘Review of Studies in Eastern Chant, Vol. IV’, *The Musical Times* 123/1674 (1982), p. 567.

<sup>9</sup> Ioannis PAPATHANASIOU and Nikolaos BOUKAS, ‘Early Diastematic Notation in Greek Christian Hymnographic Texts of Coptic Origin. A Reconsideration of the Source Material’, in *Palaeobyzantine Notations*, III (Leuven, Paris, Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2004).

its historical antecedents through a study by Kenneth Levy which compares three Byzantine Trisagion sources from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The Trisagion is a central hymn in the eastern Mediterranean (it is far less common in Western tradition). As Levy points out, it is the most widespread of Eastern Ordinary chants<sup>10</sup> which makes it fertile for Coptic-Byzantine comparison. It is a hymn with a proven provenance on the Byzantine side, and a storied history: tradition has it that the chant was transmitted by angels to the youth of Constantinople in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE to quell a restive earthquake.<sup>11</sup> It is the subject of studies by Kenneth Levy, Sebastià Janeras, and Dimitri Conomos.<sup>12</sup> My hope is to understand this chant both within its contemporary sung tradition and within a larger shared historical context.

My interest in this chant's provenance could be extrapolated to wider studies of provenance in oral chant traditions. Despite its lack of a notational system, Coptic chant has proven to be surprisingly durable. Part of my dissertation was a catalogue raisonné of 20<sup>th</sup> century efforts of transcribing Coptic chant into Western notation, looking at the various transcriptive adventures of Ernest Newlandsmith, René Ménard, Ilona Borsai, Margit Tóth, and Marian Robertson. What I discovered was a corpus of oral chant that has maintained a melodic consistency over a century of transcription and over vast areas of geographic dispersal. I surmise that this is "an indication that a measure of constancy has indeed been attained in this oral tradition".<sup>13</sup>

### Melodic chant structure

Structurally, the music of the liturgy of St. Basil can be divided into three categories:

- 1) Strophic chants, or music based on a repeating verse structure, which can vary in length and complexity but are normally syllabic and straightforward enough to be sung by the congregation. The musical material contained in alternating strophes are often sufficient for the construction of the entire hymn.
- 2) Through-composed chants with a relatively continuous structure featuring various brief phrases (Arabic, *maḥāt*) interlocked together to form larger, identifiable sections. Once again, these hymns can vary in length and complexity, but are mostly sung by a choir of cantors standing outside the iconostasis in two lines, facing each other at right angles to the sanctuary. These chants have been termed as "typical"<sup>14</sup> and can be melismatic.
- 3) Intoned recitation, or a cantillation that is simplified to fit the inflection and rhythm of text. Intoned recitation tends to have an ambitus of only two or three tones and are largely syllabic with prescribed cadential formulas. The majority of intoned recitations are either prayers (Arabic: *awshīyyah*, pl. *awāshī*) offered during the services sung by the officiant, or the deacon's relaying of the priest's biddings (Arabic: *al-ubrūsāt*, from Greco-Coptic **Προσευχῆ** derived from Greek, *proseukhē*).

The Coptic Trisagion is a strophic hymn. It is one of the most commonly sung hymns in the Coptic corpus. Syllabic and repetitive, it is one of the simplest congregational liturgical chants of the Coptic Church. Finally, it is regularly sung in Greek not Coptic, although the text read is a Coptic transliteration of the original Greek text.

### Transcription and analysis of the Coptic Trisagion

The modern Coptic Trisagion is sung during the celebration of the Liturgy of St. Basil, immediately after readings from the Acts of the Apostles and the Synaxarion.<sup>15</sup> In the Coptic

<sup>10</sup> LEVY, 'The Trisagion in Byzantium and the West' (↵ footnote 1), p. 761.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth LEVY and James MCKINNON, 'Trisagion (Gk.: "Thrice Holy")', in *Grove Music Online* (2001), <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.28396>.

<sup>12</sup> Conomos points out that the ease and suitability of transmission of the Trisagion, both in its modern day and historical iterations, is rooted in its founding legend: a simple, syllabic melody universal in its accessibility, coming from the heavens above; cf. Dimitri CONOMOS, *Byzantine Trisagia and Cheroubika of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries: A Study of Late Byzantine Liturgical Chant* (Thessaloniki: Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies, 1974).

<sup>13</sup> HANNA, 'How Early Can You Go? Coptic Chant in Western Transcription' (↵ footnote 3), p. 138

<sup>14</sup> NEWLANDSMITH, 'The Ancient Music of the Coptic Church' (↵ footnote 5).

<sup>15</sup> The synaxarion (derived from Latin *synaxarium*) is described as having become a "liturgical book" and "is a formal compilation of the lives of the martyrs, saints, and religious heroes of the Coptic church"; see Aziz Suryal ATIYA and René-George COQUIN, 'Synaxarion, Copto-Arabic', in *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (↵ footnote 1), pp. 2171b-2190a, <https://cdl.claremont.edu/digital/collection/cce/id/1792/rec/1>.

tradition, the verses are split into the sides of the church, with opposing rows of cantors denoted as 'northern' (Arabic: *bahrī*) and 'southern' (Arabic: *qibī*); the first and third verses of the hymn are sung by the 'northern' side, and the second and fourth verses by the 'southern' side. This is a common detail in the Coptic liturgical book, *al-khūlāqī* (an Arabic corruption of *Euchologion*), with the rubric of 'B' or 'Q' denoting blocks of Arabic and Coptic text to indicate when and which hymns or parts of the liturgy should be sung in alternation. This is usually applied to strophic hymns.

Music example 1 is my transcription of the Coptic Trisagion into Western musical notation.<sup>16</sup>

Music example 1:  
ΔσΙΟC Ο ΘΕΟC  
(*Agius o Theos*),  
Coptic Trisagion,  
transcribed into  
Western musical  
notation

♩ ≈ 76

Verse 1  
*bahrī*



Δ - σΙΟC Ο ΘΕ - ο - C: Δ - σΙ - οC Ι - CΧΥ - ΡΟC: Δ - σΙ - οC Δ -



ΘΑ - ΝΑ - ΤΟC: Ο ΕΚ - ΠΑΡ - ΘΕ - ΝΟ ΞΕΝ - ΝΕ - ΘΕΙC: Ε - ΛΕ - Η - CΟ - ΝΗ - ΜΑC.

Verse 2  
*qibī*



Δ - σΙΟC Ο ΘΕ - ο - C: Δ - σΙ - οC Ι - CΧΥ - ΡΟC: Δ - σΙ - οC Δ -



ΘΑ - ΝΑ - ΤΟC: Ο CΤΑΥ - ΡΩ - ΘΕΙC ΔΙΗ - ΜΑC: Ε - ΛΕ - Η - CΟ - ΝΗ - ΜΑC.

Verse 3  
*bahrī*



Δ - σΙΟC Ο ΘΕ - ο - C Δ - σΙ - οC Ι - CΧΥ - ΡΟC: Δ - σΙ - οC Δ - ΘΑ - ΝΑ - ΤΟC: Ο



Α - ΝΑC - ΤΑC ΕΚ - ΤΩΝ ΝΕΚ - ΡΩΝ ΚΕ Α - ΝΕΛ - ΘΩΝ ΙC ΤΟΥC ΟΥ - ΡΑ - ΝΟΥC: Ε - ΛΕ - Η - CΟ - ΝΗ - ΜΑC.

Verse 4  
*qibī*



ΔΟ - ΞΑ Πα - ΤΡΙ ΚΕ ΥΙΟ ΚΕ Δ - σΙ - Ω Π - ΝΕ - ΤΜΑ - ΤΙ: ΚΕ - ΝΥΝ ΚΕ Α - Ι:

♩ ≈ 80 *poco rit.* ♩ ≈ 66



ΚΕ ΙC ΤΟΥC Ε - Ω - ΝΑC ΤΩΝ Ε - Ω - ΝΩΝ: Α - ΜΗΝ: Δ - ΣΙΑ ΤΡΙ - ΑC Ε - ΛΕ - Η - CΟ - ΝΗ - ΜΑC.

<sup>16</sup> This transcription is descriptive: it intends to capture every ornament, degree of micropitch, and

As a syllabic, doxological hymn, an analysis of the Trisagion is highly dependent on the text. For the original Greco-Coptic text, with a translation into English according to Anthony Abosief,<sup>17</sup> see Table 1:

Table 1:  
ΑΓΙΟΣ ὁ Θεός  
(*Agios o Theos*),  
Coptic Trisagion,  
Greco-Coptic text  
with translation into  
English

<b>The first verse:</b>
ΑΓΙΟΣ ὁ Θεός: ΑΓΙΟΣ ΙΣΧΥΡΟΣ: ΑΓΙΟΣ ΑΘΑΝΑΤΟΣ: ὁ ἐκπαρθένου γεννηθεῖς: ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς.
<i>Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, Who was born of the Virgin, have mercy on us.</i>
<b>The second verse:</b>
ΑΓΙΟΣ ὁ Θεός: ΑΓΙΟΣ ΙΣΧΥΡΟΣ: ΑΓΙΟΣ ΑΘΑΝΑΤΟΣ: ὁ σταυρωθεῖς διημᾶς: ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς.
<i>Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, Who was crucified for us, have mercy on us.</i>
<b>The third verse:</b>
ΑΓΙΟΣ ὁ Θεός: ΑΓΙΟΣ ΙΣΧΥΡΟΣ: ΑΓΙΟΣ ΑΘΑΝΑΤΟΣ: ὁ ἀναστὰς ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν καὶ ἀνελθὼν ἐς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς: ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς.
<i>Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, Who rose from the dead and ascended into the heavens, have mercy on us.</i>
<b>The fourth verse:</b>
Δόξα Πατρὶ καὶ Υἱῷ καὶ ἁγίῳ Πνεύματι: καὶ νῦν καὶ ἀεὶ καὶ ἐς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων: ἀμήν: Δεῖτε τὴν Τριάδα ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς.
<i>Glory be to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and forever and unto the ages of ages. Amen, O Holy Trinity have mercy on us.</i>

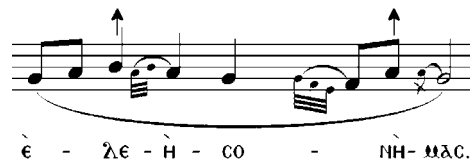
From a cursory glance of the Trisagion transcription in Music example 1, one can see a largely syllabic, diatonic hymn with a repetitive strophic form and an ambitus around a perfect 5<sup>th</sup>: 'E' (sometimes quarter-tone sharp) to 'B' (quarter-tone flat, though sometimes this note is pushed slightly sharp during cadential phrases).

For the most part, with the exception of an 'E' in some appoggiaturas, the first and second verses have an even smaller ambitus, 'F' sharp to 'B' quarter-tone flat. It is not until the third verse that the 'E' quarter-tone sharp becomes an important structural note. This is due to a textual extension in the third verse. The penultimate phrase before the final cadential phrase [ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς (*eleison eemas*)] of the first and second verse – ἐκ παρθένου γεννηθεῖς (*ek partheno gen ne thees*) and σταυρωθεῖς διημᾶς (*estavroa thees deemas*) – are each six to seven syllables. In the third verse, the corresponding phrase is ἀναστὰς ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν καὶ ἀνελθὼν ἐς τοὺς οὐρανοὺς (*anastas ektoan nekroan ke anelthoan ees toos oo ranos*): sixteen syllables. The hymn accommodates these extra syllables by lengthening the phrase considerably, adding an 'E' quarter-tone sharp on the word θῶν (*toan*). The 'E' is reiterated almost immediately in the final fourth verse; the first through third verses are nearly identical with the exception of the added text in the third verse and its corresponding phrases and the cadential phrase of the third verse, which, as one will see, differs quite significantly.

The cadential phrases of the first and second verses (➤ Music example 2) are indistinguishable, starting on a 'G' and rising to a slightly sharp 'B' quarter-tone flat with a notable pause between verses:

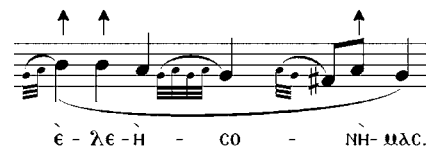
rhythmic and metric gradation of the performer. It is not a rendering of the base melody of the chant. Fashioned after Margit Toth's transcription of the Coptic Liturgy of St. Basil – see Ragheb MOFTAH and John GILLISPIE, *The Complete Liturgy of St. Basil Performed by the Choir of the Institute of Coptic Studies* (Cairo: Higher Institute of Coptic Studies, 1967; republished Sydney: Coptic Orthodox Electronic Publishing, 1998), note heads with flags pointed up signify the main melody (insofar as I could determine this), and smaller note heads with flags pointed down signify ornamentation. The symbol '♯' indicates a quarter-tone sharp and the symbol '♭' indicates a quarter-tone flat. Arrows pointed up indicate a sharp microtonal inflection less than a quarter-tone. This transcription is based on the sound recording of *The Complete Liturgy of St. Basil*, see above.

<sup>17</sup> ABOSIEF, *Coptic Hymns: A Book of Hymns for All Occasions of the Coptic Year* (↵ footnote 1), pp. 84-85. This translation reflects modern Coptic liturgical usage.



Music example 2:  
Ἁγίος ὁ Θεός  
(*Agios o Theos*),  
Coptic Trisagion,  
cadential phrase of the  
first and second verses

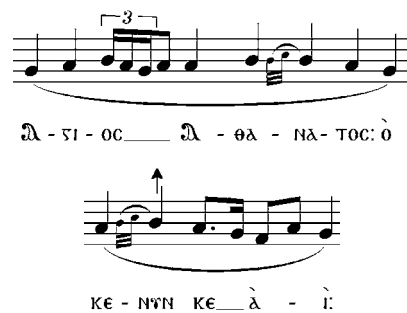
Conversely, the cadential phrase of the third verse starts on a slightly sharp 'B' quarter-tone flat and moves down in stepwise motion to a 'G' (► Music example 3). Instead of a pause at the end of the phrase, the cadence of the third verse acts as an anacrusis into the fourth verse, moving quickly into the only verse that differs in musical and textual material.



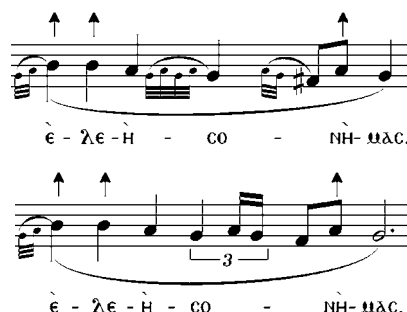
Music example 3:  
Ἁγίος ὁ Θεός  
(*Agios o Theos*),  
Coptic Trisagion,  
cadential phrase  
of the third verse

One can often hear the fourth verse sung by both northern and southern sides of the choir, *bahrī* and *qibfī*, though in the *Euchologion* it is clearly marked *qibfī*. I can assume this is for both musical and spiritual reasons: singing the fourth verse in unison furnishes the prayer with a sense of finality. Additionally, the verse differs textually, providing a conclusion to the textually and melodically repetitive meditation of the three previous verses; notice the chant's translation in Table 1.

Unlike the first three verses, the fourth verse moves between 'E' quarter-tone sharp and 'G', but as the three prior verses, it also peaks on a 'B' quarter-tone flat. Although there are phrases in the fourth verse that are reminiscent of the first through third verses (► Music example 4) and the cadential phrases are nearly identical to that of verse three (► Music example 5), the fourth verse is much more centered on 'G' and also includes concluding words sung in quick succession – **Ἀμεν Ἁγία Ἐτριάς** (*Ameen Agia Etrias*) – before the final iteration of **ἐλεησον ἡμᾶς** (*eleison eemas*).



Music example 4:  
Ἁγίος ὁ Θεός  
(*Agios o Theos*),  
Coptic Trisagion.  
Top excerpt is from  
verse 3 and the bottom  
excerpt is from verse 4.  
Both share a similar  
melodic contour: step-  
wise ascent to 'B' and  
stepwise descent to 'G'.



Music example 5:  
Ἁγίος ὁ Θεός  
(*Agios o Theos*),  
Coptic Trisagion.  
Top excerpt is the ca-  
dential phrase from  
verse 3 and the bot-  
tom excerpt is the  
cadential phrase from  
verse 4. The cadential  
phrase remains con-  
sistent.

### The Coptic Trisagion and its counterparts

The first thing one notices when comparing the Coptic Trisagion with any of its near Eastern or even Western counterparts is the divergence of text. In Eastern and Western ordinary chants, the text is a simpler – thrice holy: *Holy God, Holy and mighty, Holy and undying, Have mercy on us*. The Coptic Trisagion has additional text interpolated after the invocations, creating a more substantial verse structure. Below, you will notice the English translation of the additional text in bold, with the original Coptic sublinear to it:

*Holy God, Holy and mighty, Holy and undying (Who was) born of the Virgin*  
ὁ εκπαρθενο γεννηθεις

*Holy God, Holy and mighty, Holy and undying (Who was) crucified for us*  
ὁ σταυρωθεις διημας

*Holy God, Holy and mighty, Holy and undying (Who rose) from the dead and ascended into the heavens*

ο ἀναστας εκτων νεκρων κε ἀνε-  
λθων ις τους ουρανους

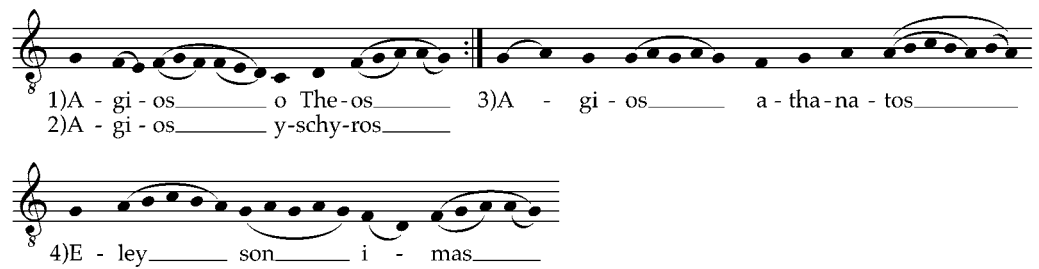
Music example 6:  
Ἄγιος ὁ Θεός  
(*Agios o Theos*),  
Coptic Trisagion:  
structural reduction  
of my transcription of  
the Coptic Trisagion  
based on shared text  
with the Byzantine  
and Western Trisagions

In order to compare the melodic structure of the different trisagions, I focus strictly on the text shared between the Coptic and Byzantine traditions. Reducing my Coptic Trisagion's Western notation transcription to its structural melody and focusing only on shared text, yields the following (➤ Music example 6):



Levy's study, presented in 1972, will be the focus of my comparison with the Byzantine tradition.<sup>18</sup> In his study, Levy compares three Byzantine iterations of the Trisagion with its Gregorian counterpart. In the Western Church, the chant is sung only at the Adoration of the Cross on Good Friday, when it is chanted alternately in Greek and Latin with the Improperia (or the Reproaches of the Savior). This Trisagion was chanted all over post-Carolingian Europe specifically for this single occasion of the liturgical year (➤ Music example 7).<sup>19</sup>

Music example 7:  
The Gregorian-Roman  
Trisagion (Benevento  
VI. 34, fol. 117<sup>v</sup>,  
12<sup>th</sup> c.), as sung on  
Good Friday through-  
out post-Carolingian  
Europe<sup>20</sup>



Levy describes this piece of chant as a liturgical recitative (though it can also be described as a composed melody) and draws attention to the relation between melody and text.<sup>21</sup> He notes that the first two invocations (*Holy God, Holy and mighty*) are melodically and rhythmically identical. It is the third (*Holy and undying*) which adds a "modicum of upward thrust".<sup>22</sup> Incidentally, this upward thrust on the third invocation can also be observed in the Coptic Trisagion (note the top excerpt of Music example 4). Notice, specifically, the meter of the text, with longer beats falling on '-os' of 'Agi-os', '-os' of 'The-os', and, again, the upward melodic motion of 'Agi-os Athanatos'. Entirely unlike the Coptic trisagion, however, is the melismatic nature of the Western Trisagion, intrinsic to its description as a liturgical recitative; this is a dramatic contrast to the simpler syllabic thrice-holy of the Coptic tradition.

The three Byzantine sources Levy examines date variously from the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. The first (➤ Music example 8), the Trisagion psaltai of the Mass ordinary, first appears in a Slavonic source from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, though Levy's source for the chant is from a Byzantine source from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. This is the prime chant of the Trisagion in Byzantium. Her seat

<sup>18</sup> LEVY, 'The Trisagion in Byzantium and the West' (↵ footnote 1).

<sup>19</sup> Jean Michel HANSSENS, *Institutiones Liturgicae de Ritibus Orientalibus*, III (Rome: Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1932), pp. 110–156.

<sup>20</sup> LEVY, 'The Trisagion in Byzantium and the West' (↵ footnote 1), pp. 761, 765.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 761–762.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 762.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 765.

1)A - gi - os \_\_\_\_\_ o The - os \_\_\_\_\_  
2)A - gi - os \_\_\_\_\_ y - schy - ros \_\_\_\_\_

Music example 8:  
Byzantine Psaltai  
Trisagion from the  
Mass Ordinary  
(Kastoria 8, fol. 69,  
13<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>23</sup>

3)A - gi - os A - tha - na - tos 4)E - ley - son \_\_\_\_\_ i - mas

at the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and its wide distribution in the West are unquestioned, the shared features with the Gregorian Trisagion, including the modal region around low 'G' and the "text determined repetition scheme".<sup>24</sup> Also note its similar melismatic nature, again giving it the feel of a liturgical recitative, and the direct melodic parallel existing with the first two invocations. Structurally, this bears a resemblance to the Gregorian Trisagion (➤ Music example 7).

For the purpose of this paper, however, the next two iterations of the Byzantine Trisagion are of primary interest. The first (➤ Music example 9) is simply the priest's Trisagion response to the psaltai of Music example 8. It is not as common as the Trisagion psaltai; as Levy states, it really exists in the "mixed monastic traditions of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries".<sup>25</sup>

1)A - gi - os \_\_\_\_\_ o The - os \_\_\_\_\_ 3)A - gi - os

Music example 9:  
Byzantine Priests'  
Trisagion from the  
Mass Ordinary  
(Koutloumoussi 457,  
fol. 194<sup>v</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>26</sup>

A - tha - na - tos \_\_\_\_\_ 4)E - ley - son i - mas \_\_\_\_\_

The second (➤ Music example 10) is a Trisagion performed during the Epitaphios – the icon procession that takes place on Holy Saturday. Both of these Trisagion examples are sourced from the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Melodically they are similar; the most notable differences are the Kalophonic melisma colouring at the end of the word 'Agios' in the first two invocations in the Epitaphios Trisagion, and differing textual emphases in the closing cadential melismas.

1)A - gi - os \_\_\_\_\_ o The - os \_\_\_\_\_ 3)A - gi - os

Music example 10:  
Byzantine Epitaphios  
Trisagion (Ambros.  
Gr. 476, fol. 238<sup>v</sup>,  
14<sup>th</sup> c.)<sup>27</sup>

2)A - gi - os \_\_\_\_\_ y - sch - ros \_\_\_\_\_  
4 A - tha - na - tos \_\_\_\_\_ 4)E - ley - son \_\_\_\_\_ i - mas

Comparing Music example 6 with Music examples 9 and 10, one can immediately notice common properties between the modern Coptic Trisagion and these 14<sup>th</sup>-century predecessors. One can see similarities in the melodic construction of the chants (ignoring their respective modalities), similarities in textual emphasis, and in rhythmic construction. Notice the durational and rhythmic patterns on certain words: the initial iteration of 'Agios o Theos' is strikingly similar (➤ Music example 11). The 'A' of 'Agios', acting as an upbeat to a longer '-gios', and the 'o' and 'The-' of 'o Theos' similarly in brief, passing duration to '-os'.

<sup>24</sup> LEVY, 'The Trisagion in Byzantium and the West' (↵ footnote 1), p. 762.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 763.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 765.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 765.



Music example 11:  
a) The first 'Agiōs'  
invocation of the first  
verse of Coptic  
Trisagion (top);  
b) the first 'Agiōs'  
invocation of Byzantine  
Priests' Trisagions  
from the 14<sup>th</sup> century  
(bottom)

As noted above, this is a pattern that persists in the Western trisagion as well. With that in mind, it could be said that this is a natural text setting of the words, which is quite straightforward when comparing syllabic portions of melody using the same text. However, there is further melodic content that bears similarities between Coptic and Byzantine Trisagions. For example, note that the opening 'A' in the Coptic version dipping down to an 'F#' before settling on the tonal centre of 'G', is not dissimilar to the same introductory function of the Byzantine chant (again Music example 11). Moreover, the ambitus of the chants is identical; both chants range from an 'E' to a 'B' with 'G' as the tonal centre. And in both cases, the melodic peak of 'B' occurs in the third iteration of the invocation, on 'Agiōs Athanatos'.

Closing cadential phrases on the words 'Eleyson imas' (ΕΛΕΗΣΟΝ ΗΜΑΣ) share little in common, however. In the Coptic Trisagion, the cadential phrase is a syllabic, stepwise motion from 'B' quarter-tone flat, dipping down to 'F' sharp with a passing-note on 'A', before resolving to 'G' (< Music example 3). -CON (i.e. '-son') bears the longest notational emphasis, with the syllable apportioned a two-beat duration. Of course, there is, at the very least, a similar notational emphasis in the Byzantine Psaltai Trisagion of the 12<sup>th</sup> century (< Music example 8) and the Epitaphios Trisagion of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (< Music example 10). The cadential phrasing of the Psaltai Trisagion also further curious similarity, with its 'A' to 'F' flourish before 'G' acting as a direct inversion of the Coptic Trisagion cadence.

### Brief concluding remarks

Some scholars of Coptic music have been quick to dismiss potential shared melodic characteristics between Coptic and Byzantine chants with the same text. As Robertson, Moftah, and Roy write:

"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 hymns *The Only-Begotten* (Greek: *ho monogenes*) 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."<sup>28</sup>

In citing their different melodies, it is clear that the authors' claim rests upon a comparison to the contemporary Greek Trisagion and not any historical antecedents, such as those examined in the present study. Although the authors mention "many texts" that are "common to both the Coptic and Greek Churches", they neglect to mention that some of these chant texts are properly referred to in Coptic hymnody as Greek hymns, such as the three Greek chants of the Resurrection celebration: the 'First Greek Part' (also called ΤΟΝ ΣΙΝΑ, *Ton Sina*), the 'Second Greek Part' (also called ΤΟΥ ΛΙΘΟΥC, *To Lithos*), and the 'Third Greek Part' (also called ΤΗΝ ΑΝΑCΤΑCΙΝ, *Teen Anastaseen*).

Another factor which should be taken into account in any Byzantine and Coptic comparative study is historical evidence. Shams al-Ri'āsah Abū al-Barakāt Ibn Kabar wrote in 1320 CE that the Arabic word *lahn* (the singular form of *alḥān*) is a musical tone or scale that corresponds with liturgical text according to "mood, season, or festivity", classifying eight

<sup>28</sup> Marian ROBERTSON, Ragheb MOFTAH, Martha ROY and Margit TOTH, 'Music, Coptic', in *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (< footnote 1), pp. 1715a-1747b, <https://ccdl.claremont.edu/digital/collection/cce/id/1446/rec/1>.

Coptic tones in a manner similar to the *maqam* of Arabic music theory or to the Byzantine *octoechos*.<sup>29</sup> Such a connection, apparently, is convincing enough for Papathanasiou and Boukas to draw larger potential linkages between Coptic and Byzantine hymnody circulating around Greek hymns written in Sahidic Coptic, probably from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, and possibly from Hermoupolis, Egypt.<sup>30</sup>

The authors are correct, however, in pointing out that “the relation of Greek and Coptic music is a study still in its infancy”.<sup>31</sup> Although I would readily admit that the present study is cursory, it would be remiss of me not to draw attention to the fact that Coptic chant is an entirely oral tradition. I would not advocate that the current Coptic Trisagion is ancient, despite my purposely provocative title. It is a modern hymn, sung by modern cantors in a living tradition. But for an oral tradition, melodic and structural similarities to Greek chants using the same text that originated in the 12<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries is striking enough. There are demonstrable comparative transcriptive studies of Coptic Hymnody that establish a maintained and homogeneous melodic consistency over areas of wide geographical dispersal. Digging back and seeing what fossilised remains exist in this living tradition can only happen through the aid of chant systems that were fortunate enough to have developed systems of notation.

<sup>29</sup> RAMZY, ‘Music: Performing Coptic Expressive Culture’ (↵ footnote 3), p. 162.

<sup>30</sup> PAPATHANASIOU and BOUKAS, ‘Early Diastematic Notation in Greek Christian Hymnographic Texts of Coptic Origin’ (↵ footnote 9), p. 162.

<sup>31</sup> Ragheb MOFTAH, Margit TOTH and Martha ROY, *The Coptic Orthodox Liturgy of St. Basil with Complete Musical Transcription* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1998).