If the Pope Gregory I Legend Didn't Happen, What Did?
Can the True Origins of Plainchant Be Determined?

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Every student of music history has heard the legend of Pope Gregory I, who ruled the Catholic Church from A.D. 590-604. Supposedly, the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove landed on Gregory's shoulder and sang a bunch of plainchant melodies in his ear, which Gregory dictated to a priest, and these make up the majority of existent Gregorian chant melodies. It is evidently apparent that the veracity of the Pope Gregory legend is extremely questionable at best, given that Pope Gregory I lived centuries before the usage of plainchant became widespread. In fact, Occam's Razor would infer that it never happened. So if the legend of Pope Gregory didn't actually happen, what did? This essay will tackle the beginnings of notated music, Professor Bruno Stäblein's theory regarding the three Roman abbots, the fusion of both Roman and Frankish plainchant elements after religious and intellectual musical conflict, and the theory that Ambrosian chant pre-dates "Gregorian" chant.

Obviously, not much is known about church music of the first few centuries of Christianity, given that persecution by the Romans was in full swing. Although this would have greatly precluded the formation of official liturgy, there are a number of contemporary authors who alluded to early Christians singing in private as well as in public worship. They took their texts from the psalms and canticles of the Bible, but also composed new hymns that imitated Hebrew and classical Greek poetic forms. Responsorial and antiphonal singing may have been around since the very start. The possibility is there that these two types of singing were influencing differentiation in composition, with choral music being very simple and solo music more elaborate in terms of melody and melisma. Interestingly, musical instruments were excluded from Christian worship, likely because of their usage in pagan rites. While St. Ambrose adopted musical instruments into worship, they were likely not admitted into Roman rites until the 1100s. Speaking of St. Ambrose, he was one of the first to adopt antiphonal singing in public worship where the primary use of singing had been responsorial up to that point. Around the same time, St. Jerome would hear the long, melismatic Alleluia chant in Bethlehem and would bring it back to Rome. At his insistence, Pope Damasus adopted it into the liturgy. While initially only used on Easter Sunday, its use was extended to the whole of Paschal time, and Pope Gregory I would extend it further to all year except Septuagesima.[1]

During the time of Pope Gregory I, with the introduction of new feasts came more texts set to existing melodies. While there is no evidence that Pope Gregory I composed these melodies himself, he compiled the liturgy and music for local Roman use, and his compilation was gradually accepted by the whole western church. It took time for it to supersede the liturgical rites in England, Germany, Gaul, and northern Italy (which is where it took over from Ambrosian

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[1] Bewerunge, "Plain Chant."

chant). Nevertheless, the school in Rome kept the tradition, and they routinely sent out singers to other Catholic-run countries to reinforce this tradition. Copies of the authentic choir books in Rome would ensure the melodies were kept uniform.[2]

The 800s would see the birth of neumatic notation, and the introduction of staff notation in the mid-1000s would introduce an unprecedented level of uniformity in church music. Some changes would be made, such as the tone system and eight modes, but some "Gregorian" melodies did not fit in well with this system. If a plainchant melody contained, for example, chromatic notes other than the B-flat (the only allowed chromatic note at the time), it would be difficult to express in the accepted tone system, and some contemporary theorists even advocated that they be revised. This forced some singers and scribes to adopt curious methods, some of which differed significantly, but not enough that the "original" melody is unable to be determined. Another example would be melodic ornaments that used steps smaller than a semitone. A large amount of older chants contained these, and in staff notation based on a diatonic system, such intervals had to be substituted with either a semitone or a repetition of the same note. Non-diatonic intervals were gradually phased out. Some modern-day scholars theorize that these melodies with non-diatonic intervals may have had Oriental origin, and with the disappearance of such intervals from these melodies, plainchant became wholly Latinized.

On to the Pope Gregory legend.

The earliest manuscripts showing liturgical melodies in a clearly readable notation (diastematic neumes written on a staff) date back to the mid-11th century, over four hundred years after Pope Gregory had died. When taking staffless neumes into account, as well as the fact that they agree with diastematic signs indicating the number of notes, groupings in extended melismas, etc., it can be justifiably assumed that these melodies existed sometime between A.D. 850-900. While assumptions can be made that the developments of the liturgical calendar, liturgical texts, and liturgical music were synchronous, such assumptions are, of course, highly questionable. Moreover, at such a time as the reign of Pope Gregory, the preservation of music was almost exclusively an oral tradition. If Pope Gregory had indeed relayed these plainchant melodies from the Holy Spirit itself, the likelihood of such a large number of melodies surviving unscathed for centuries is ludicrously low. At best, truly Gregorian and pre-Gregorian chant melodies must have been far simpler and more elementary than the melodies that still exist today, recorded in the *Liber Usualis* by the Benedictines of Solesmes.[3][4] If the Pope Gregory legend

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[2] Bewerunge, "Plain Chant."

[3] Benedictines, *The Liber Usualis*.

[4] Wellesz, "Recent Studies in Western Chant."

were true, I personally would not be surprised if a dove mistakenly flew into Pope Gregory's chambers and Gregory was unintentionally inspired by its songs, as humorous as such an image might be. Ultimately, one can only speculate.

Reliance on evidence rather than wishful thinking is the method by which all scholars and researchers must operate, and therefore, admittedly, next to nothing is known about the origins of the liturgical melodies until the subject is approached from a perspective based on tangible evidence. Flash-forward to the end of the 9th century A.D. and the earliest existing manuscripts detailing liturgical melody. Of course, it cannot just be assumed that the earliest existing manuscripts are the first ever written – the highly complex and intricate notation of these manuscripts proves that there certainly were earlier manuscripts that are now lost. All available paleographic evidence infers that the earliest "Gregorian" melodies can be traced back to about A.D. 800, and that these melodies received their final form during that century. Therefore, these liturgical melodies must be assigned to a considerably later date than what has previously been believed.

In the early 1950s, Professor Bruno Stäblein of Regensburg presented his theory, utilizing two major facts: 1) Like Pope Gregory I, Pope Martinus (649-53) and three abbots of St. Peter's in Rome (Catolenus, Maurianus, Virbonus) also edited an *annalis cantus omnes* – a cycle of chants spanning an entire year – and were specifically referred to with immense praise. 2) There exist four manuscripts of the 11th to 13th centuries that contain almost the same liturgical repertory with entirely different melodies, which directly contrasts with the other sources in which the melodies are almost identical. While Dom Mocquerau of Solesmes dismissed these manuscripts as decadent variants, Dom Andoyer maintained that these so-called "decadent" variants are, in fact, older than the Gregorian repertory. Stäblein, unlike other modern scholars, labeled these other manuscripts as "Gregorian" and the Gregory-attributed manuscripts as "post-Gregorian". He theorized that the standard Gregorian repertory was actually written by Catolenus, Maurianus, and Virbonus, that their chant was used shortly before and during the reign of Gregory, that later, under Pope Vitalian, the melodies were heavily revised to be simpler, more malleable, more balanced, and more of what would be referred to as tonal, and that these iterations of these melodies are in their forms that still exist today.[56]

While a provocative theory, an important contribution, and a critical step forward, it doesn't all work. The claim that the aforementioned abbots' activity ceased around A.D. 680 is based on the theory that the list of musically inclined popes and abbots was the work of John the Archichantor who was sent from Rome to England at the time; this theory has been fully and

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[5] Apel, "The Central Problem of Gregorian Chant."

[6] Anonymous, "Iam Sol Recedit Igneus."

completely refuted, and worse yet, some scholars believe that this list is worthless and was a fabricated report of the 9th century. But even if Stäblein's dates are correct, that does not address the elephant in the room: there is still a 200-year gap between the supposed origin of the Gregorian repertory and the birth of written notation.

Moreover, each of the manuscripts attributed to the three aforementioned monks clearly originated in Rome, and the standard "Gregorian" chant actually was born in the Franco-German area of Western Europe in places like St. Gall, Metz, Einsiedeln, Chartres, Laon, and Montpellier. To put it bluntly, what is referred to as "Gregorian" chant didn't even originate in Rome – it originated in northwestern Europe.[7][8]

Speaking of which, a lot of historical evidence supports the view that "Gregorian" chant is an 8th-to-9th-century fusion of plainchant elements that were both Roman and Frankish. Of great importance are the political implications and motivations behind this fact: it was one of the most important ways by which Frankish rulers attempted to strengthen their relationship with Rome and Pope Stephen II, who, along with many Roman clergymen, visited Gaul in 752 and celebrated Mass in the Roman manner. There are even extensive and numerous records of the efforts of both Pepin and Charlemagne to establish Roman liturgy in their realm. However, the Frankish clergy resisted in an attempt to preserve their Gallican rites. Though the Roman rite emerged victorious, it only did so after having been deeply affected by Franco-German attitudes and practices. It was the Franco-German clergy and ruling body that changed "Gregorian" chant into what it is known as today, as after this religious and intellectual musical conflict, plainchant returned to Rome in about A.D. 800, just in time for the birth of music notation – at least, what would evolve into the notation used today (I'm just being careful not to piss off the guys who wrote the Hymn to Nikkal, the Epitaph of Seikilos, and Byzantine chant). This change in liturgical plainchant practices was confirmed in the A.D. 885 report of an anonymous monk of St. Gall, who spoke of the noteworthy difference between Frankish and Roman chant.

And now to nip the whole "Ambrosian chant pre-dates Gregorian chant" claim in the bud. Ambrosian chant is named after St. Ambrose, who was bishop of Milan in the late 300s. Because St. Ambrose lived about 200 years before Pope Gregory I, some might say that Ambrosian chant is even older than "Gregorian" chant, and that because many Ambrosian melodies were extremely ornate and melismatic, "Gregorian" chant was a return to simplicity and balance. However, the assumption that Ambrosian chant pre-dates "Gregorian" chant is just as ludicrous as the Pope Gregory legend. While the possibility that highly ornate melodies may have existed around the time of St. Ambrose is certainly there, any scholar or researcher can only

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[7] Apel, "The Central Problem of Gregorian Chant."

[8] Wellesz, "Recent Studies in Western Chant."

confess total ignorance as to what they might have been like and if they even had any relationship at all to the "Gregorian" or even what is known to be Ambrosian repertory. It seems unlikely, because in the 200 years following St. Ambrose, Italy as a whole suffered repeated invasions by the Huns, Goths, and Vandals, and the devastation wreaked upon the country was immense. It is hard to believe that music, the most intangible and evasive medium of artistic expression, escaped completely unscathed. The Ambrosian repertory is most likely from the 10th or even 11th century, and liturgical scholars in Rome have reached the exact same conclusion. What can be proven (or, at least, safely assumed) about St. Ambrose is that he introduced musical instruments into Christian worship and that he was one of the earliest to adopt antiphonal singing.

It can be safely assumed that what is referred to as "Gregorian" chant came out of the development that took place in the Franco-German empire under Pepin, Charlemagne, and their successors. Obviously, all of the thousands of plainchant melodies were not composed during this time, but they represent the final and only known stage of the evolution of plainchant, which may have begun with the earliest Christians or may even go back all the way to Jewish chant in Synagogue. Plainchant's innumerable changes that took place during its innumerable formative stages may never be known. How or when exactly these melodies were composed, let alone how much they have changed in the better part of two thousand years, may never be known. Simpler chants may have been less affected by oral traditions. Lesson tones, psalmodic recitations, or the Gloria of Mass XV may very well be pre-Christian heritage, as shown by studies of Jewish chant in Yemen and Babylonia as well as the Greek modal system. As for more complex and melismatic chants, it can only be proven that they are Franco-Roman products of the 8th and 9th centuries.[9][10]

So where exactly did plainchant come from? Well, no one knows. There is enough historical documentation to make a pretty decent educated guess as to where what is referred to as "Gregorian" chant came from, but the true origins of plainchant have been lost to time. But that doesn't make plainchant any less fascinating.

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[9] Apel, "The Central Problem of Gregorian Chant."

[10] Wellesz, "Recent Studies in Western Chant."

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