

# THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE OCTOECHOS IN SYRIA

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THE purpose of this essay is to clarify the early history of the use of an octoechos by tracing its evolution in the West Syrian, non-Chalcedonian, Church (hereafter called "Jacobite," for clarity and convenience, but with respect for the preference of its members today for "Syrian Orthodox") and by coordinating the results with what is known of the hymnographic and musical history of the Melkite, Chalcedonian, Orthodox Church in the Near East and of the Orthodox Church at large. Reasons will be given for abandoning definitively the widespread idea that a Syrian octoechos was used as early as the sixth century, as well as that of an early Syrian disposition of Sundays in groups of eight as the basis of an octoechos. It will be seen that an octoechos was first used with hymnographic genres that were originally Melkite, not Jacobite. The chronology of its spread to other genres and of its propagation will be followed to the extent that the evidence allows, mainly on the basis of Syriac manuscripts, then ultimately in a more synthetic manner. Evidence of the passing use of a heptaechos in Syria, with a trace of it turning up in Constantinople, will be presented, and finally the question of musical similarity and difference in the melodies to which texts of different genres were sung will be raised. I am gratefully aware that I am building on the work of many others who have explored the fields of hymnody in the Christian East and have published their findings, especially Professor Heinrich Husmann of Göttingen.<sup>1</sup>

Some confusion has arisen at times because the word *ὀκτώηχος* is equivocal, and I shall try in what follows to distinguish carefully:

1. The musical or modal octoechos, that is, a theoretical or practical musical system of eight modes, distinguished from one another by their characteristic melodic formulas, intonations, and cadences, if not by their scales and ranges.

2. The liturgical or hymnographic octoechos, that is, an arrangement of hymnographic texts in identically structured sets of eight, with all texts in a given set meant to be sung to melodies in a given mode of an octonary modal system, and with the sets meant to succeed one another cyclically in a regular order, in at least part of the ecclesiastical year.

3. A book containing texts so arranged, the *Oktoechos*.<sup>2</sup>

Although a musical system of eight modes, used cyclically, and a certain amount of textual organization by mode, exists in the Church of Armenia, there are no known



Armenian liturgical manuscripts old enough to be of much help in tracing the history of the octoechos; the oldest manuscripts of the Šarakan with its choral pieces are of the thirteenth century, or in one case perhaps the eleventh.<sup>3</sup> Maronite Syrians and East Syrians (Nestorians) in modern times have nothing that can be called an octoechos. History may be another matter, in the case of the Maronites at least, but their extant liturgical manuscripts are too recent to show clear signs of an octoechos. The Copts have never had a hymnographic octoechos, and medieval and modern theoretical expositions of an octonary modal system are isolated adventures that conform neither to musical reality nor to liturgical practice in the Coptic Church.<sup>4</sup>

In Jacobite manuscripts, written indications of the number of the mode in which a text, or a group of texts, was to be sung are frequent. Evidence of a hymnographic octoechos can be found in series of modal numbers marking texts in regular numerical order, and in certain cases it can be induced from the presence of eight alternative sets of texts on the same topic in a given manuscript. The few Syriac manuscripts containing early or middle Byzantine musical notation are all Melkite,<sup>5</sup> with one qualified exception, to be examined below, which is found in a Melkite context. Jacobite and Nestorian liturgical texts have always, in fact, been devoid of musical notation, although the diacritical signs or accents marking lectionary texts may have had ephonic value when the texts were not read but cantillated.<sup>6</sup> For our present purposes, we shall do well to consider the literary genres of sung liturgical pieces separately, according to their origins. Some are originally Greek and Melkite (the functionally related genres of the canon and of stichera and kathismata in series), some are originally Syriac (those of the *madrāšā*, and *sôgîṭā*, and the *mēmṛā*, predecessors somehow of the Greek *kontakion*), and one the *ma'niṭā*, though rather more Greek in origin than Syriac, is not specifically Melkite but rather non-Chalcedonian.

#### MA'NEYĀTĀ AND TAKŠEPĀTĀ, AND THE "OCTOECHOS OF SEVERUS"

The word "octoechos" was first associated with the name of Severus of Antioch (c. 465-538), patriarch of that see from 512 until he was deposed for his monophysite tenets in 518, when Assemani used it to characterize an early eleventh-century Jacobite codex, now Vatican Syriac 94, containing Syriac *ma'neyātā* (the plural of *ma'niṭā*), which are independent strophes like Byzantine *troparia* in form and content, prefaced by one or two psalm-verses and hence perhaps the rough equivalent of Greek *antiphona*,<sup>7</sup> followed by a concluding selection of *takšepātā* (the plural of *takšepā*), which are strophes similar to the *ma'neyātā* but without the preceding psalm-verses; with very few exceptions, the codex gives indications of the mode in which each piece is to be sung.<sup>8</sup> Most of the *ma'neyātā*, and almost all of the *takšepātā*, are grouped by mode rather than by topic or feast in this codex, and that is what led Assemani to think of the Greek *books* called *Octoechoi*. Since Mār Severus' name is mentioned in the title of the of the collection and, with other names, in its conclusion (fol. 142b), the concept of the *hymnographic* "octoechos of Severus" was only one step away. Assemani himself did not take that step, but others took it afterward, and as the study of Byzantine hymnography progressed in times closer to our own the role traditionally assigned to hymno-



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# EAST OF BYZANTIUM: SYRIA AND ARMENIA IN THE FORMATIVE PERIOD

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