

7. From Barbarians to Charlemagne

We have seen the rise of monasteries after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine. And we have examined the Daily Offices and the development of the Mass in the early Middle Ages. But we need to understand something of the political developments of the time because the church history and political history go hand in hand. We will look briefly at Northern Europe (Gaul) under the Merovingian Dynasty, the wars on the Italian peninsula leading to the invasion of the Lombards, and the conversion of England by St. Augustine of Canterbury and the Benedictines.

THE FALL OF ROME AND ITS AFTERMATH

Europe had experienced waves of migration for several centuries. Germanic tribes pushing westward and southward had put increasing strains on Rome's northern border along the Danube. In the late 4th century, Rome was no longer able to hold back the tide, and the invaders entered Roman territory. In 410, Visigoths sacked the city of Rome. The Visigoths moved on to Gaul and from there to the Iberian Peninsula.¹⁴ Barbarians continued to flow into the Western Empire, and in 476 a confederation of tribes under Odoacer deposed the Roman Emperor Romulus Augustulus, marking the official end of Roman rule in the West. Odoacer pledged loyalty to the emperor in Constantinople. But Odoacer in turn was defeated by the Ostragoths under Theodoric in 493. Theodoric "the Great" would rule until 526. In 535, the Roman Emperor Justinian sensed a chance to reconquer the territory of the Western Empire that had been lost. Twenty years of costly war with the Ostragoths significantly weakened both sides and left the Italian Peninsula depopulated. Another Germanic tribe, the Lombards, seized the opportunity and claimed large swaths of Italy.

¹⁴ The Visigothic Kingdom would convert to Christianity and flourish in Spain until it was conquered by Muslims in 711-712.

In Gaul, western Germanic tribes known as the Franks had been aligned with Rome in the 5th century. The various tribes would be united by Clovis I, who established the first Frankish dynasty. From Clovis's grandfather, Merovech, they derived the name Merovingian (descendants of Merovech). By his death in 511, Clovis would conquer most of what had been Roman Gaul. In 496, Clovis was baptized into the Catholic faith, which led many of his people to convert as well. Thus Clovis became an ally of the papacy and would be considered the founder of France.

Consider some of the people most prominent in our study and how their lives fit into this historical context at the end of the Western Empire:

- St. Augustine (354-430) would write *City of God* in response to the sacking of Rome in 410.
- Boethius (480-524) would serve in a powerless Roman Senate and then at the real seat of power as right-hand man to Theodoric the Great.
- St. Benedict (480-543 or 547), the same age as Boethius, would found monasteries in Italy during Theodoric's reign and live to see the war between Justinian and the Ostragoths.
- Pope Gregory I (540-604), son of a Roman Senator, would grow up as Justinian fought the Ostragoths and come of age as the Lombards established their kingdom.

ANTIPHON AND PSALMODY

Psalmody is a term often used to describe the singing of psalms in certain Protestant traditions. The Puritans, for example, brought metrical psalmody with them to the American colonies. But psalmody refers more generally to any singing of psalms and has roots far older than any form of Protestantism. Yet there are interesting links. One who wanted to trace the origins of modern Protestant psalmody would find his way back to Gregorian chant and its precursors. That is just one of the ways that the ancient music presented in our study has remained a vital part of worship today.

An antiphon is a Latin chant sung in association with a psalm, typically before and after the psalm. The term *antiphon* has a complex history. It appeared in early Greek writings to signify the interval of an octave. It was sometimes used to describe the alternate signing of male and female choirs

(which would naturally produce vocal parts an octave apart). Lady Egeria, who will make a cameo appearance later in this course, used the term to describe a piece sung with a psalm in the liturgy of 4th-century Jerusalem. But the understanding that would have applied in medieval liturgy owes much to St. Ambrose who used the term to describe chants repeated as a refrain after each verse of the psalm. St. Benedict applied the term to a separate chant sung with a psalm.

The texts of antiphons tend to be short and have biblical origins. The antiphon melodies were crafted to make a unified whole with the psalm and to provide a clear cadence on the final note, providing a sense of completion.

Now let us consider a specific antiphon performed in the accompanying video. As you listen to this structure—antiphon / psalm / antiphon—try to hear the specific sections. Also, you will see the chant notation—the written notes, using a system we will call Black Notation. We will learn more about notation soon. This antiphon is taken from an important collection of liturgical texts and melodies called the *Liber Usualis* or, literally, the Usual Book (the book usually used). This collection, a cornerstone of chant practice, contains chants for the Mass and for many texts of the Offices. It was compiled in 1896 by the monks of Solesmes. The singing you will hear is by the monks at Our Lady of Clear Creek, a Benedictine monastery recently established in Oklahoma – the same monastery that we visited in Unit 5 of this course. The monastery has extended many courtesies to us, and we thank them for allowing us to reproduce the recording for this course.

Follow the text as you listen.

Antiphon

Ecce ancilla Domini:
fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum.

Psalm 126 (Vulgate)

1 canticum graduum Salomonis nisi Dominus aedificaverit domum in vanum laboraverunt qui aedificant eam nisi Dominus custodierit civitatem frustra vigilavit qui custodit

2 vanum est vobis ante lucem surgere surgere postquam sederitis qui manducatis panem doloris cum dederit dilectis suis somnum

Antiphon

Behold the handmaid of the Lord:
be it done unto me according to thy word.

Psalm 127 (King James)

1 (A Song of degrees for Solomon.) Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.

2 It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep.

3 ecce hereditas Domini filii mercis fructus
ventris

3 Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD:
and the fruit of the womb is his reward.

4 sicut sagittae in manu potentis ita filii
excussorum

4 As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man;
so are children of the youth.

5 beatus vir qui implebit desiderium suum ex
ipsis non confundentur cum loquentur inimicis
suis in porta

5 Happy is the man that hath his quiver full
of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they
shall speak with the enemies in the gate.

Gloria patri

Antiphon

Ecce ancilla Domini:
fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum.

Antiphon

Behold the handmaid of the Lord:
be it done unto me according to thy word.

The *Gloria Patri* (sometimes known as the Lesser Doxology) is typically added after the last verse of the psalm.

CHARLEMAGNE AND ALCUIN OF YORK

Charlemagne set the wheels in motion for significant advances in education and in efforts to recover the intellectual resources of antiquity. Music was not just an incidental beneficiary of this movement. Reading and music-making both were essential to worship and to learning, so it is no surprise that Charlemagne would focus much of his effort on raising the musical standards and finding ways to transmit and preserve musical knowledge. Here we see the beginnings of musical notation, first using a system of neumes to provide a graphic representation of the melody.

While Charlemagne himself was not well educated, he understood its importance and enlisted the best minds he could find, most notably Alcuin of York (735-804). Alcuin received his education at the school founded by Egbert, the Archbishop of York and brother of the King of Northumbria. Egbert was greatly influenced by Bede the Venerable. The school at York was one of the finest at the time and had a library unequalled in Western Europe. Upon graduation, Alcuin became a teacher at the school and rose to the post of headmaster. He became a deacon and lived as a monk.

When Alcuin was sent to Rome in 781 to carry a petition to the pope, he met Charlemagne and was persuaded to join his entourage of scholars. From 782 to 790 Alcuin resided at the court of Charlemagne where he managed the court school and provided instruction for Charlemagne and his family. But Charlemagne encouraged a much wider reform of education, including an effort to standardize curricula and write textbooks. These would promote the use of a more learned form of Latin to counter its digression into regional dialects. Alcuin is credited with establishing the *trivium* and *quadrivium* as the basis of education.

Alcuin's schools also set up a regimen for teaching music and the singing of chant in the Roman form.

Charles [Charlemagne] was greatly annoyed by the French mode of singing; for, besides, that their harsh guttural dialect was by no means adapted to melody, the people imagined the beauty of singing to consist in the loudness of the tone, and consequently endeavored to out-scream each other. The reproach of the Italians was not unjust, that the French roared like wild beasts. It was only necessary for Charlemagne to have once heard the Roman church music, to cause him to desire and attempt an improvement in that of his own subjects. The national vanity of the French rendered them unwilling to admit the superiority of the Roman singing, but Charles proved that it was far better, and commanded that it should be adopted. Pope [Adrian I] who willingly seconded all the king's efforts for the reformation of the church, presented him with his two best singers, Theodore and Benedict, one of whom Charles established at Metz and the other at Soissons. There, everyone who desired to teach singing in any of the other schools, or to become a chorister in a church, was now compelled to acquire the Roman method of singing; in consequence of which this art became thenceforth general on this side of the Alps, and as perfect as the discordance of the French voices would permit.¹⁵

The standardization of music instruction in the Roman Rite would result in a standard repertoire of chant that would become known as Gregorian chant.

¹⁵ Frederick Lorenz, *Life of Alcuin* (London: Thomas Hurst, St. Paul's Church-Yard), 57-58 .