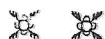


AN EARLY CHRISTIAN
MUSICAL MANUSCRIPT OF SIX LEAVES
ORIGINATING IN EGYPT ABOUT THE
FIFTH TO THE SEVENTH CENTURY

*Of Coptic Origin, Belonging to the
Earliest Remnant of Christian
Musical Notation*

Property of
H. ARAM GULEZIAN
Caldwell, New Jersey



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NEW YORK · 1952

A COSMOLOGICO-MUSICAL MANUSCRIPT
OF THE FIFTH TO THE SEVENTH CENTURY FROM EGYPT

IT IS BELIEVED THAT THESE SIX LEAVES, DISPLAYING AN APPARENT EARLY METHOD OF COPTIC MUSICAL NOTATION, CONSTITUTE SOME OF THE EARLIEST MUSIC WRITTEN IN THE CHRISTIAN ERA

MUSICAL MANUSCRIPT ON VELLUM. *Each vellum leaf is a little more than 12 inches square [see below], and displays groups and horizontal arrangements of variously sized and varicolored circles, ranging in diameter from 1 to 3/16 inch. One leaf displays inscriptions in two scripts, while groups of words and single words are found upon two of the other leaves.*

Egypt, V-VII Century

A UNIQUE GROUP OF DOCUMENTS OF COPTIC NOTATION. THE POSITIVE RECOGNITION THAT THE MANUSCRIPTS ARE AMONG THE VERY FEW REMNANTS IN EXISTENCE OF GRAPHIC DESCRIPTION OF PTOLEMY'S "HARMONIA MUNDI" AND THAT THE MANUSCRIPTS POSSESS THE GRAPHIC COORDINATION OF THIS EARLY EGYPTIAN-CHRISTIAN CONCEPTION OF THE Gnostic PERIOD SEEMS TO PLACE THE DATE AS OF THE FIFTH TO THE SEVENTH CENTURY, A.D.

These leaves were submitted for examination to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where Dr. Ludlow Bull, Associate Curator of the Egyptian Department, noted that one of the inscriptions on leaf now referred to as no. 4, was Coptic and the other was Arabic or a derivative script. At Dr. Bull's suggestion, a photograph of leaf no. 4 was sent to Prof. W. H. Worrell of the University of Michigan. Prof. Worrell suggested that the cursive inscription was in the Persian language (which uses the Arabic script), and he gave the meaning of the words in the Coptic inscription.

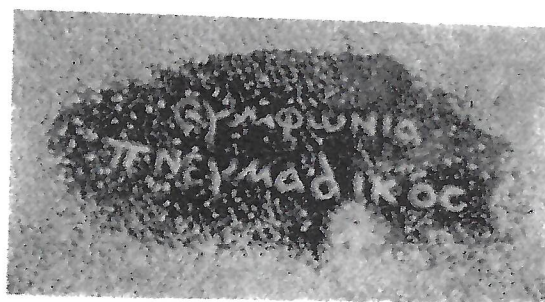
Photographs of the inscribed leaves were sent to Dr. George Sobhy, Bey of Cairo, a student of Coptic archaeology. Dr. Sobhy supplied translations of most of the Coptic phrases and of the scattered words which appear at various places, but made no suggestions about the colored circles.



[DETAIL OF LEAF 1]

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE LEAVES

LEAF 1. At the top center of the leaf now numbered 1, is the phrase *symphonia pneumadikos* [sic] in a Coptic script, for which Dr. Bull suggests "spiritual music" as a translation. To the left and slightly lower is the phrase *hagios hymnodos*, in Greek minuscule letters, which Dr. Bull translates "sacred hymn-singer" (Dr. Sobhy reads "holy hymns").



[DETAIL OF LEAF 1]

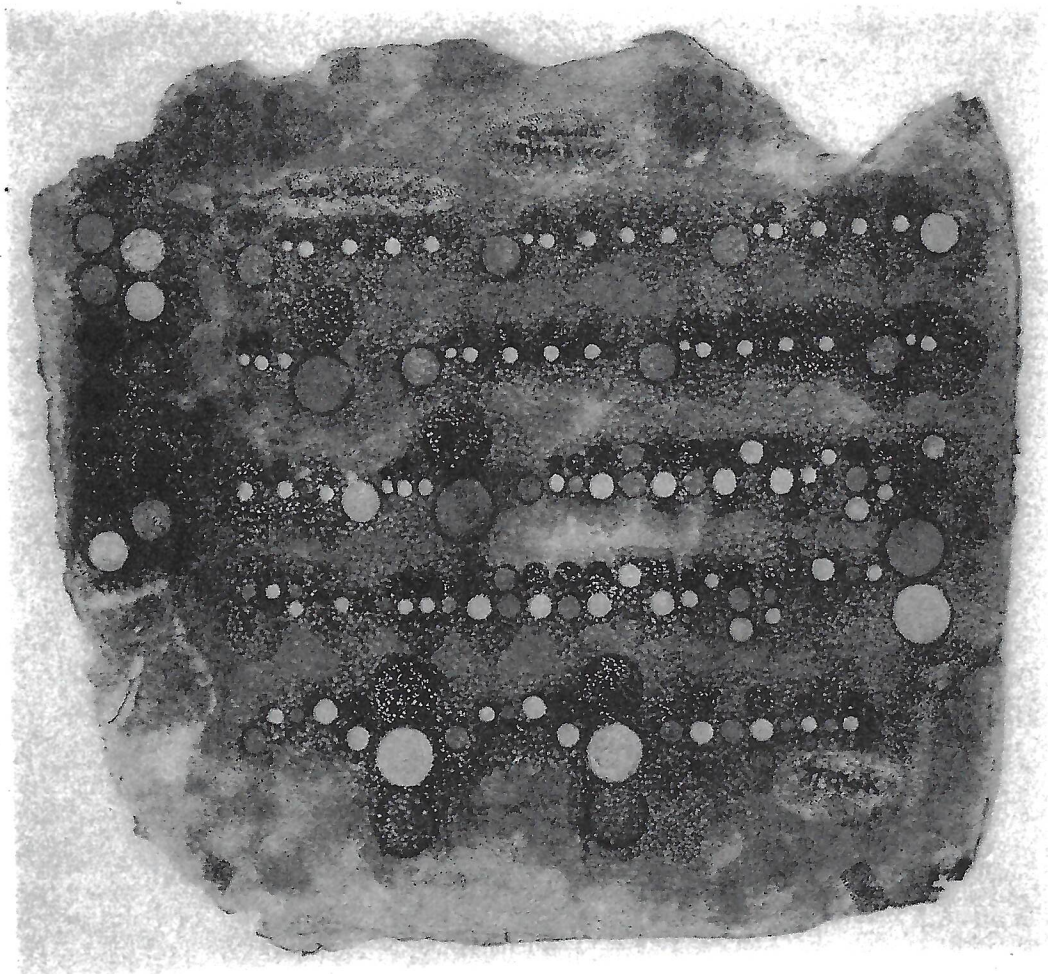
Above the double *vertical* column of circles at the left side of the leaf is the Coptic word *shosht* (key), and below the column is the Coptic word *sente* (foundation). Just above the first circle in the first horizontal line of circles is what is probably intended for the Coptic word *hēts* (beginning). The first letter has been reversed and resembles a Greek minuscule final sigma, as in the word *hagios* above. Below the last line of circles, to the right, appears the Coptic word *pdjōk*, meaning "the end."

The approximate size of this leaf is 14 inches high and $15\frac{3}{4}$ inches wide.

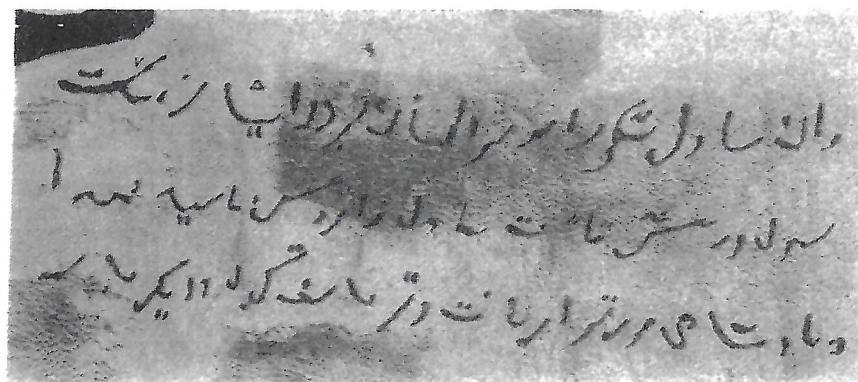
[See illustrations above and opposite]

LEAF 2: The approximate size of this leaf is 15 inches high and $15\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide. There are no inscriptions on this leaf.

LEAF 3: The approximate size of this leaf is $13\frac{3}{4}$ inches high and $14\frac{3}{4}$ inches wide. There are no inscriptions on this leaf.



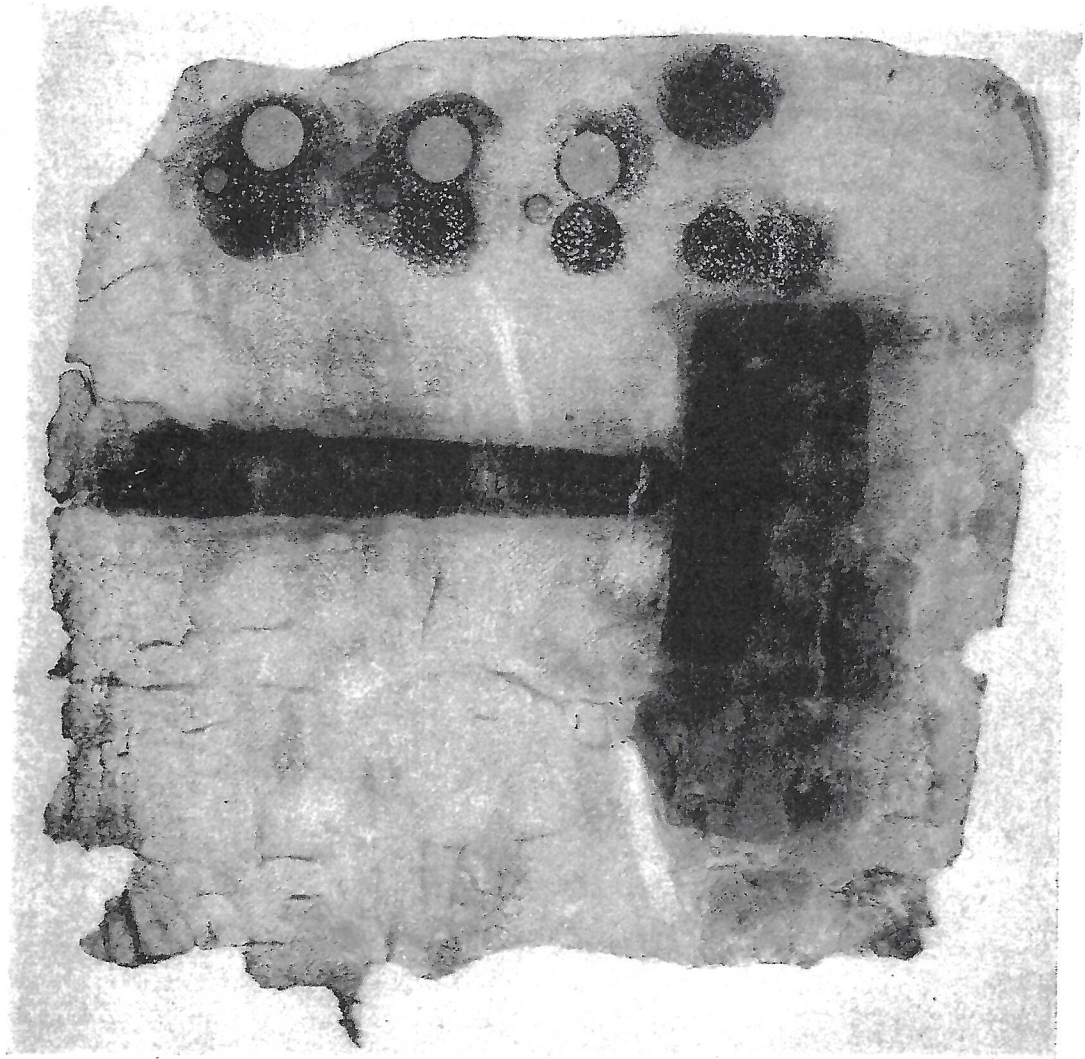
[LEAF 1, *reduced*]



[DETAIL OF LEAF 4]

LEAF 4: At the left center of leaf no. 4 appears the word *(p)archagge lou* (the archangel), divided into two lines and written in Greek capitals, except that the second *a* in the word is in a common Coptic form. To the right of this is what would seem to be intended for the Coptic phrase *pdjoom hn ermenia etouaab* which might be translated "the book of sacred interpretation". The late great Egyptologist Dr. Georg Steindorff, to whom photographs were sent by Dr. Bull, suggests that this title might be read "the book and the holy interpretations", that is, a text and the commentaries on it. He notes that the Coptic is in the Sahidic dialect and suggests that the leaves might perhaps date from about the fifth or sixth century, A.D. The approximate size of this leaf is 13 inches high and 14½ inches wide.

[See illustrations above and opposite]



[LEAF 4, *reduced*]

LEAF 5: At the top of this leaf, just to the right of the center, is a large circle in outline, containing four smaller black circles. To the right of this are four black circles, each smaller than the preceding one. Just to the left of these circles is the Coptic word *seou* (time). The approximate size of this leaf is $12\frac{1}{4}$ inches high and $14\frac{1}{4}$ inches wide. [See frontispiece]

LEAF 6: There are no inscriptions on this leaf. The approximate size of this leaf is $13\frac{1}{2}$ inches high and $13\frac{1}{8}$ inches wide.

INTERPRETATIONS

1. The vellum leaves and the translations of the Coptic words written on them, were shown to Mme. Sina Lichtmann and Mr. Dudley Fosdick of the Roerich Museum of New York and to Mr. Avedis Derounian, and it occurred to them, for the first time, in view of the presence of the phrase *hagios hymnodos* on leaf 1, which may be rendered "sacred hymn singer", that the circles on the six leaves might be a form of musical notation. The words "key", "time", "beginning", "end", then took on a definite significance. The words were considered with reference to the places on the leaves where they occur. The word "key" is written over a vertical double column of circles which is at the left side of leaf 1. It became important to study carefully the vertical group since this was the guide to deciphering the contents of the six leaves. The vertical group contains twelve different colors; seven circles, one above another in the left-hand column, and five in the adjoining column, arranged in such a manner that the musical authorities concluded that the whole corresponded to our major scale. Each color, therefore, represented a particular note in the scale. The colors in the left-hand column are as follows, starting at the bottom:

Yellow
Dark brown
Ultramarine
Green
Black
Red
Light blue

The color of the adjoining five circles, established as the semi-tones are, from the bottom:

Pink
Reddish brown
Tan
Orange
Gray

Guided by the order of the group designated "key", corresponding to our major scale, with chromatic steps separately indicated in addition, the following designations were made, starting at the bottom:

Yellow	was designated	Do—C
Dark brown	" "	Re—D
Ultramarine	" "	Mi—E
Green	" "	Fa—F
Black	" "	Sol—G
Red	" "	La—A
Light blue	" "	Ti—B

The semi-tone:

Pink	"	"	C sharp
Reddish brown	"	"	D sharp
Tan	"	"	F sharp
Orange	"	"	G sharp
Gray	"	"	A sharp

The "length" or "value" given the individual circles is shown at the top of leaf 5. The Coptic word *seou* (time) appears to the left of a group of circles *not in color*. The method of indicating the length of each note was evidently the relative sizes of the circles. The large circle is assumed to be the equivalent of a full note; the next smaller a half note; the next a quarter, the next an eighth and the last a sixteenth. The largest circle contains four circles within it. This indicates that one among the row of circles in this group was intended as a quarter part or quarter note. The circle to the right next but one to the largest, is similar in size to the four mentioned above. The conclusion that it was intended to represent a quarter note seems obvious. Therefore, the circle between the largest and the quarter, would seem to be a half note, and the gradation of the other sizes to be the method of showing the length of each note.

Utilizing the clues thus supplied, the ancient music was transcribed into the scale used today. This was done by Mme. Sina Lichtmann of the Roerich Museum, New York City, Director of the Roerich Academy and formerly of Vienna; Mr. Dudley Fosdick, also of New York, and other musical authorities on the staff of the Roerich Museum.

Having determined the note in the scale that each color represented, the next step was to take the first circle in the first horizontal line of circles under the Coptic word "beginning" (shown on leaf 1). After ascertaining to which color in the scale it corresponded, it was then compared with the group alongside the Coptic word *seou* (time) (shown on leaf 5), to determine its length or value. Thus we had the first musical note translated to our modern notation. The same process was continued with every circle in the horizontal lines on the six leaves.

Each leaf was transcribed separately. When all six had been completed, the musical transcription of leaf 1 was performed. On reaching the last note, each of the others was performed until it was found that "musically" leaf 2 (as now numbered) properly followed.

Only after many changes in the order of performance was the musical continuity finally found to be as shown. The six vellum leaves make up two separate hymns. The first hymn is comprised of leaves 1, 2, 3 and 4, forming one complete hymn. Leaves 5 and 6 make up the other complete hymn. No measure division is found on the original vellum leaves.

Frequently two or three vertically connected circles appear in the hymns. This may indicate the presence of harmony. The most important conclusion is the apparent use of the twelve-note scale, *viz.* the vertical group shown at the left of leaf 1.

It must be admitted that the order chosen for the leaves on the basis of musical continuity disregards the words "the end" at the bottom of leaf 1. However, while the phrase does not appear on any of the other leaves, it is possible that the words "beginning" and "end" were placed here to indicate clearly how the leaf, or the book to which it belonged, should be held in order to read the music correctly. The addition of human figures, etc., at the top of each leaf may have been based partly on the same purpose. The inscriptions in Coptic and Greek are in red ink, now rather dark in color. The Persian inscription on leaf 4 which may, of course, be much later than the others, is in black ink.

2. Dr. Eric Werner, Professor of Liturgical Music at the Hebrew Union College of Cincinnati, Ohio, and Chairman of the Hebrew Union School of Sacred Music, New York City, has specialized in musical research of antiquity. He reports as follows concerning the present Coptic documents: "The manuscripts have certainly a musical significance, but it is not for the purpose of a practical application of music; the scale of circles is a graphic representation of Ptolemy's *Harmonia Mundi*. Claudius Ptolemaeus of Alexandria was the celebrated mathematician, astronomer and geographer of the second century, A.D.

"The Ptolemaic cycles and epicycles are clearly visible on the manuscripts, and the 7+5 spheres, which appear on the left of leaf 1, indicate the Zodiac in a musical interpretation. In the early Middle Ages, following Greek and Babylonian tradition, every attempt was made to coordinate the planets, their constellations and conjunctions with definite musical modes. The manuscripts, therefore, are among the very few remnants of graphic description of that theory, coordinating Ptolemaic cosmological-musical ideas with Egyptian-Christian conceptions of the Gnostic period during the fifth and sixth centuries." (Dr. Werner refers to the collection of the Oxyrynchus Papyri, edited by Grenfell and Hunt where a few similar, although non-musical counterparts may be found.)

"A study of the Ikhwān es-Safā (the Brotherhood of Purity, a famous Islamic theological work) and the identification of the colors of each sphere with certain celestial bodies, musical modes and seasons, might establish this early musico-cosmologic theory. The manuscripts are of most unique value since they show that the Ptolemaic conception did not only spread Westward as hitherto imagined, but influenced the entire Near and Middle East, so that similar Arabic ideas of the harmony of the spheres, as expressed by Al Farabi, Ibn Sina, Al Kindi, and other writers, including the Ikhwān es-Safā, were not necessarily the product of their familiarity with ancient Greek theories, but might have come to them *directly* through such manuscripts as are described here."

As to the script on leaf 1, Dr. Werner thinks that the Greek term *symphonia pneumatikos* can easily be interpreted as "cosmic symphony" and *hagios hymnodos*, likewise as the Holy Hymn Creator, namely God.

With regard to the three lines of Arabic script, identified as Persian, it is reported that they seem to have no bearing on, or reference to, the older Coptic script. They are believed to have been written later than the Coptic, and a date for them might be between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, A.D.

A study of the Judeo-Arabic theory and philosophy of music, in which the identification of the planets, the Zodiac, and other celestial bodies, with distinct modes of music playing an important part, has been published by Dr. Werner. The study is found in the Hebrew Union College Annual of 1941 and 1943. In a volume *The Sacred Bridge*, Dr. Werner pays special attention to the cosmologico-musical ideas of some of the Church Fathers.

Although the code as indicated on leaf 1 is of a definite musical nature, so that it might be eventually transcribed in modern notation, Dr. Werner thinks that these manuscripts, as graphic representation of Ptolemy's *Harmonia Mundi* are for other than a *practical* application of music.

In order to stress the importance of Dr. Werner's published study in the Hebrew Union College Annual, volume XXI, 1948, and its bearing upon the musical manuscript described here, we quote the following excerpts from his article:

Page 244: "Some of these speculations were brought to Egypt, the bulwark of Hellenism in general, and of Pythagoreanism, in particular. There they were expanded and

corrupted under the double spell of Egyptian mythology and Judaeo-Christian canonic and apocryphal cosmogony. The Ogdoas was identified with the supreme Deity by the Gnostics and considered the fountainhead of *'musica mundana'* by Hellenized Christians. As such we encounter it in the apocryphal hymn of Jesus and his disciples whose dance around their master strongly suggests some cosmic symbolism, perhaps the Zodiac." (Apocryphal Acts of Saint John.)

Pages 288 to 292: "Closely related to the ethos doctrine is the venerable principle of the harmony of the spheres. This ancient and beautiful conception was, as we know, one of the keystones of Pythagorean cosmology. *But today, it has begun to appear that the idea of sounding spheres originated much earlier, in Egyptian, perhaps also in Babylonian culture.* Apparently, it belonged to the esoteric doctrines of the priestly classes. . . . Ptolemy and Aristides Quintilianus fashioned very concrete and mathematically elaborate systems of cosmic harmony, developing some of the ideas of Nicomachus of Gerasa . . . Philo is the most vigorous advocate of the Pythagorean idea; to him, the heavens are the archetype for all musical instruments. The purpose of the musical structure of the cosmos is to provide the accompaniment for hymns of praise. The seven planets are compared to the seven strings of the lyre . . ."

Page 303: "As to chords and harmony; this much disputed question can be answered briefly—we have indubitable proof of the existence of chords—the inhabitants of the Near East used this species of primitive harmony, the simultaneous striking of two different tones, with a chord as the result. Going far beyond this, Farmer quotes a passage of Ibn Sina which can hardly be understood as other than a description of the early *organum*. Our passage likewise adds to the evidence, already convincing, that chords were known and utilized in the Near East, but they are rather an exception than a common feature".

3. Prof. Jacques Handschin, Director of the Institute of Musicology of Basel University, Basel, Switzerland, an eminent international musicologist, who has made a special study of this early Ptolemaic theory, suggests a slightly different interpretation of the manuscripts. While not excluding the possibility of reference to Ptolemy's *Harmonia Mundi*, he is much more inclined to consider the various colors of the circles as a literal implementation of the *chromatic* music, since *chroma* in Greek means color. He, therefore, assumes that the manuscripts represent tunes that correspond with the chromatic scale, or at least contain many chromatic elements.

In conclusion, the immediate provenance of these vellum leaves would undoubtedly be of interest. In 1896, the brothers Hadji Sarkis Gulezyan and H. Aram Gulezyan, architects and builders who had lived in Asia Minor and in Egypt, came to this country with their family, bringing with them many treasured relics, some collected in their travels and others, family heirlooms of many generations. Among the family papers and other objects were six vellum leaves, those described in these pages.



[LEAF 5, *reduced*]