

## Treasures from the Archives: a Portuguese Antiphony from 1600



The antiphony is over 2'6" wide when open – here at pages 224-225

This is one of the largest books in the Westminster collections, measuring roughly 52cm x 40cm x 10cm. It's an antiphony, or antiphonal - a book of the sung parts of the Mass, for use in church services.

Huge books like this were used in churches from the Middle Ages into the Renaissance. Unlike a Book of Hours, which was made for private prayer, an antiphony was supersized for group worship. Their size was crucial – the antiphony needed to be big enough that the music could be easily

seen from a distance by a whole choir of singers. This one is over 2'6" wide when open! (To see how this would work, have a look at this example [of a choral group singing from an antiphony at Michigan University.](#))

The music is in block notation on five line staves in red ink; the words are in Latin, in black ink – the contrasting colours make it easier to keep track of the lines of music. The capitals are sometimes in red, or black, or decorated in a variety of ways. The University of Louisville suggests that as well as making the text beautiful, this can help singers mark their place on the page.



A page showing a *Kyrie Eleison* with decorated K



Red and black capitals A and D

The pages are made of vellum, or parchment, which is very thin animal skin (usually calfskin). The front page of the book is a dedication in Latin, which says the book was made by Father Roderick a Doloribus Monaco Alcoba in 1600, for Father Joaquim de Azvedo, born in Salgueiral [in Portugal], 'of an illustrious family'. This means our antiphonal is quite a late example – Boehm & Nogueira say the golden age of the antiphon was the 13<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and ours was written at the very end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in 1600.



Dedication on first page



The front cover



Detail of repair on p233

So, four hundred years after its creation, how is the manuscript holding up? Well, the antiphonal was given to Westminster College by James Grant Esq, at some point after 1899, but we don't have any further information on who Grant was. Sadly, at some point (we think before it was given to the College) the volume has been damaged by water – the water stain is visible on the top of the dedicatory page, for example. But great care has also been taken of it over its lifetime, as can be seen on page 233, where the page has been repaired by sewing the two sides of a tear together. For now, it is being kept safely in the archives, but hopefully one day we will be able to repair the water damage and see it restored to its full glory again. Maybe we will even be able to sing from it!

Helen Weller, Archivist  
November 2021

### Bibliography

Abigail Katherine Major, "16<sup>th</sup> Century Antiphon" at 'Wonders of Nature and Artifice' (Fall 2017)  
<https://wonder-cabinet.sites.gettysburg.edu/2017/cabinet/16th-century-antiphon/>

Anon, "Illuminating the Manuscript Leaves: Medieval Music, an illuminated leaf from an Antiphonal, France, early 15th century" at University of Louisville: <http://digital.library.louisville.edu/cdm/antiphonal/collection/mss/>

Barbara Drake Boehm & Alison Manges Nogueira, "Painting in Italian Choir Books, 1300-1500", at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (March 2009)  
[https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/choi/hd\\_choi.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/choi/hd_choi.htm)

Pablo Alvarez, "Singing the Antiphony" at University of Michigan Library (2014)  
<https://apps.lib.umich.edu/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/singing-the-antiphony-mich>

Susan Boynton and John Thomas Glasenapp, "Celebrating the Liturgy's Books" at Columbia University (2002)  
<https://liturgical.columbia.edu/>