Journal of the International Society for Orthodox Church Music

Vol. 9:2 (2025), Section III: Conference Papers, pp. 88–95
ISSN 2342-1258
https://doi.org/10.57050/jisocm.163102

The Greek Repertory in Ruthenian Irmologia as a Key to Some Questions of Byzantine Musicology

Marcin Abijski
Orthodox Theological Seminary in Warsaw, Poland
abijski@gmail.com

From the very moment they emerged, the staff-notated Irmologia of the Western Rus' featured Greek hymns.[1] These hymns are unique because, while Byzantine music was being recorded using highly conditional, "symbolic" notation, the Irmologia recorded these hymns using a convenient and, most importantly, rhythmically comprehensible musical language. A comparative analysis of these hymns with later Greek versions, especially in the "New Method," raises many questions. Although in eastern Slavic musicology, this repertoire is considered supplementary and has been largely ignored for many years, it can serve as both a key to understanding many issues primarily related to the melodic structure of Byzantine chant and a secondary source of information about the nature of Byzantine music.[2] The Irmologia primarily fixed the melismatic hymns of the Divine Liturgy with staff notation, but they also include simpler melodic hymns that confirm a very strong and enduring oral tradition over subsequent centuries.[3]

It is commonly believed that the Suprasl Irmologion of Bogdan Onisimovich, compiled in the Suprasl Monastery between 1598 and 1601,[4]

1 Александр Вовк, «Грекоязычные песнопения в западнорусских нотолинейных рукописях», *Opera Musicologica* 2, no. 8 (2011): 54–80.

2 Крістіан Ганнік, «Слов'яно-Русский церковний спів і його візантійські джерела», in *ΚΑΛΟΦΩΝΙΑ. Науковий збірник з історії церковної монодії та гимнографії* 1, ed. Крістіан Ганнік and Юрій Ясіновський (Видавництво ЛБА, 2002), 38.

3 Marcin Abijski, "Grecko-bizantyński repertuar w Irmologionie supraskim Bogdana Onisimowicza 1598–1601," in *Hymnografia i śpiew cerkiewny w Rzeczypospolitej, Latopisy Akademii Supraskiej* 13, ed. Marzanna Kuczyńska and Alicja Zofia Nowak (Wydawnictwo Scriptum, 2022), 142.

4 Marcin Abijski, "Bogdan Onisimowicz – śpiewak rodem z Pińska," *Prawosławni w dziejach Rzeczypospolitej. Latopisy Akademii Supraskiej* 1, ed. Urszula Pawluczuk (Wydawnictwa Fundacji Oikonomos, 2010), 47–56; А. В. Конотоп, «Древнейший памятник украинского нотолинейного письма – Супрасльский ирмологий 1638–1639 гг.», *Памятники культуры: новые открытия* (1981): 233–240; Юрій Ясіновський, «Супрасльський ірмолой Богдана Онисимовича як пам'ятка Київської митрополії», in *ΚΑΛΟΦΩΝΙΑ. Науковий збірник з історії церковної монодії та гимнографії* 8, ed. Крістіан Ганнік and

© Marcin Abijski, 2025.
This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the CC BY 4.0 international license.

is the first and the oldest staff-notated source of Greek hymns. However, this assumption is not entirely accurate. While the manuscript can be considered the oldest known surviving one, it should be noted that the Greek hymns were likely added to it later, around the mid-seventeenth century. They are scattered throughout the book and recorded on empty pages in sections that do not correspond to their content.[5]

Nevertheless, the Suprasl Irmologion remains one of the most important sources of the Greek repertoire written in square notation. Recently, researcher Evgeniya Ignatenko identified the Cherubic hymns in the Suprasl Irmologion. When comparing them to sources written in Middle Byzantine notation, it was found that the majority of these hymns are compositions by Byzantine musicians of the Palaeologan era (John Glykys, Longinos Ieromonachos, John Kladas, Manouel Doukas Chrysaphes, Joachim the monk of Charsianites, the domestikos Servias, and Anthimos Lavriotis). Analytical comparison of one of the Cherubic hymns (by John Glykys), conducted by Evgeniy Skurat, provided evidence of a rather liberal use of exegesis and the multivariant interpretation of Middle Byzantine notation with its system of great hypostases.[6]

Figure 1. Cherubic Hymn by Manouel Doukas Chrysaphes. Suprasl Irmologion 1598–1601, Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine (Kyiv), I 5391, f. 516.

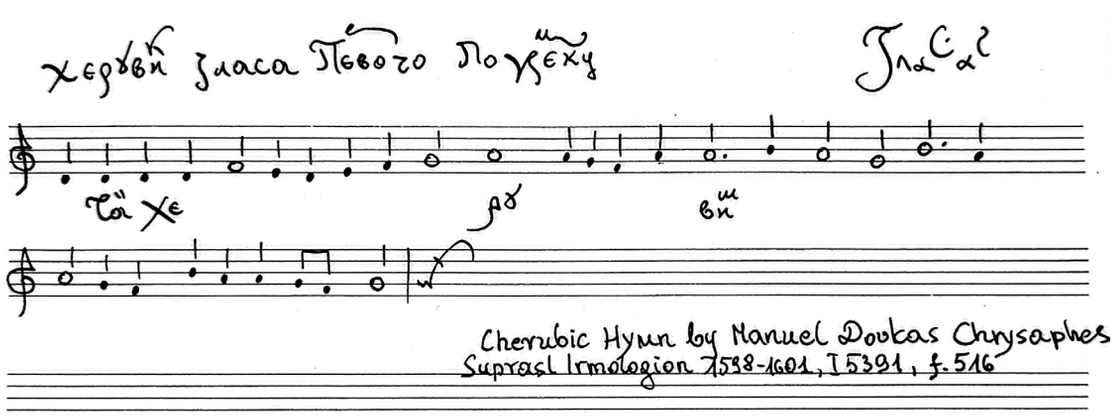

Figure 2. Cherubic Hymn by Manuel Doukas Chrysaphes, transcribed by Marcin Abijski.

Юрій Ясіновський (Видавництво УКУ, 2016), 46–88.

5 Л. А. Дубровіна, «Супрасльський Ірмолой 1601 року: деякі аспекти кодикологічного дослідження», *Рукописна та книжкова спадщина України*, 1 (1993): 13–20.

6 Євгенія Ігнатенко, «Атрибуція грецьких співів з українських і білоруських ірмолоїв кінця XVI–XVIII століть», *Студії мистецтвознавчі: Театр, Музика, Кіно* 1(65) (2019): 35.

The majority of Greek hymns in notated Irmologia are papadic (melismatic) chants of the Divine Liturgy. In rare cases, other types of hymns appear, corresponding to composition styles such as the extended sticheraric or syllabic style. In each case, specific questions arise regarding the rhythm, melody, and modal structure of the hymns. When studying the phenomenon of Byzantine hymns recorded in staff notation, it is essential to carefully compare them not only with analogous examples documented in neumatic notation but also with the practice of singing and the possibility or free vocal interpretation. For a long time, the Byzantine repertoire of Irmologia was considered a local variant of Western Rus' origin, with no direct relation to the original Byzantine melos. Such a conclusion was very logical, as melodically, most of these hymns simply do not resemble the melodies deciphered and recorded by the "Three Teachers." Their translations mostly employ "exegesis," i.e., a melismatic style of deciphering. It is quite likely that these hymns were simply transcribed from melodies heard. Although there is evidence confirming that local singers were trained in Byzantine singing by Byzantine masters,[7] the manuscript pages contain a lot of information that suggests that the study was primarily conducted at a practical level, without significant theoretical preparation:

- The texts of hymns are always written in Cyrillic, often with elementary mistakes.
- The name of the composer is never mentioned (this is significant because Byzantine masters willingly recorded their names, and copyists sought to emphasize the attribution of hymns).
- Intonational formulas (apechemata) often do not correspond to the actual modal attribution of the hymn.
- Many hymns do not indicate the mode (and this is key to the vocal representation of the modal structure).
- The names of the modes do not correspond to the Byzantine modal structure.
- The names of the modes do not correspond to the Byzantine system of authentic-plagal modes (the system of 1–8 modes, which is characteristic of the Slavic tradition, is used.
- The mode is often indicated incorrectly (which hinders the correct placement of the musical scale).
- There are many errors in the texts (notable attempts to phonetically represent the Greek language, as it was spoken).
- In the territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (present-day Ukraine, Belarus, Poland), there are almost no Byzantine neumatic manuscripts that could serve as primary sources for transcription.

7 Abijski, "Grecko-bizantyński repertuar," 142; Marcin Abijski, "The Problem of Reviving the Singing Tradition of the Suprasl Monastery of the Annunciation on the Basis of the Manuscript Irmologion (1598–1601)," in *Church, State and Nation in Orthodox Church Music. Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Orthodox Church Music, University of Joensuu, Finland, 8–14 June 2009*, ed. Ivan Moody and Maria Takala-Roszczenko (ISOCM, 2010), 117.

There is a significant stylistic discrepancy between the Greek decipherments that have come down to us (Gregory, Chourmouzios) and their staff-notated counterparts. It is quite logical and reasonable to assume that either the Greek exegeses of the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries have little to no connection to the Middle Byzantine melodies, or Slavic singers had an imprecise understanding of Byzantine singing and created something resembling Greek hymns but in their own style.

However, there are nearly unnoticed pieces of evidence indicating that Byzantine melos (melody) in the late sixteenth century was practically identical to what was preserved orally until the era of Petros Lampadarios (mid-eighteenth century and beyond, including up to the present day). We find these pieces of evidence in the second oldest notated Irmologion—the Lviv manuscript from the late sixteenth century. It is known that many Greeks visited Lviv by the end of the sixteenth century.[8] They were not only merchants and teachers but also hierarchs. In this manuscript, which is associated with the Lviv Brotherhood, we find three very interesting examples. The manuscript itself is very valuable because it was written by the hand of one scribe, and the Byzantine repertoire recorded on its pages certainty belongs to the last years of the sixteenth century. Therefore, its repertoire reflects the melodic style of the era when the "new sticheraric style" had not yet fully developed in Byzantine chanting. The first two important hymns are kontakia for the Nativity of Christ and Theophany ("Today the Virgin" and "Today you have appeared"). The first one is in the third mode, and the second is in the fourth mode. Although denied by many scholars, the accurate and reliable reconstruction of these hymns indicates the remarkable stability of the oral tradition.[9]

Among researchers, there is an opinion that the melodic irmologic model, first recorded as the "short irmologion" (σύντομο ειρμολόγιο), is a new composition (νέα μελοποίηση) from the eighteenth century. Contrary to this opinion and approach, Greek protopsaltoi, especially those associated with the singing tradition of the Great Church (the throne of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople), continue to emphasize the special role of memorizing all hymns and singing without the use of chant books. The existence of melodies from the late sixteenth century that are identical to those used today not only indicates that the melodic framework has remained unchanged over the centuries but also suggests

8 Юрій Ясіновський, «Львівський Ірмолой кінця XVI — початку XVII ст. — найдавніша нотолінійна пам'ятка церковної монодії», in *КАЛОФОНІА. Науковий збірник з історії церковної монодії та гимнографії* 1, ed. Крістіан Ганнік and Юрій Ясіновський (Видавництво ЛБА, 2002), 261; Marcin Abijski, "Grecko-bizańtyjski repertuar w Irmologionie supraskim Bogdana Onisimowicza 1598–1601," in *Hymnografia i śpiew cerkiewny w Rzeczypospolitej, Latopisy Akademii Supraskiej* 13, ed. Marzanna Kuczyńska and Alicja Zofia Nowak (Wydawnictwa Fundacji Oikonomos, 2022), 141.

9 The hymns have been reconstructed and performed by the author of this article. See Marcin Abijski, "Lvov Irmologion (16th century), byzantine kontakion 'Η Παρθένος σήμερον,'" posted January 29, 2024, https://youtu.be/X3wFmjmV7zQ?si=2K3yqye20dI5oMrM; "Lvov Irmologion, kontakion 'Epefanis simeron,'" posted January 25, 2024, https://youtu.be/Qi-AsL7HwRU?si=GJew8hS1Jw3vBR1p.

the possibility of the parallel existence of melismatic models (as reflected in ancient Rus' kontakaria, for example), recorded in manuscripts alongside the strong oral tradition.

Figure 3. Kontakion "И Парфенос симерон" ("Today the Virgin") from the Lviv Irmologion, late sixteenth century, Vasyl Stefanyk National Scientific Library of Ukraine (Lviv), MB 50, f. 119v–120r.[10] Transcribed by Marcin Abijski.

10 For the facsimile of the original hymn, see Jurij Jasinovs'kyj and Carolina Lutzka, *Das Lemberger Irmologion* (Böhlau, 2008), 240–241.

The accuracy of recording the melodies of the mentioned kontakia provides a clear answer to another question: Did Slavic singers know the precise melodies or did they only record the skeleton of the melodic structures, as was common in the neumatic system? The positive answer, confirming a good understanding of Byzantine melodic patterns, complicates the search for an answer to the question of why melismatic hymns differ so significantly between the neumatic system (from the late eighteenth century) and the notation systems of musical texts. An example of this can be found in the same manuscript. It also contains the Bulgarian (Byzantine) Cherubic Hymn and the Ton Despotin. The inclusion of the second hymn in the manuscript is not without reason, as there was a Greek hierarch, St. Arsenios of Elasson, residing in Lviv at that time. This hymn was likely sung by him, and it is possible that he, being a teacher at the Brotherhood school, passed this melody on to the singers. In many places, it resembles the melismatic version of the hymn known as the "ancient chant" (αρχαίον μέλος) that is still used today. The first phrase of the hymn (Τον Δεσπότην) is recorded without explanation (εξήγησης). Further on, a relatively brief melody is fixed, but a tonal mutation is noticeable and the hymn (as in the transcription of the New Method) does not end in the original mode.

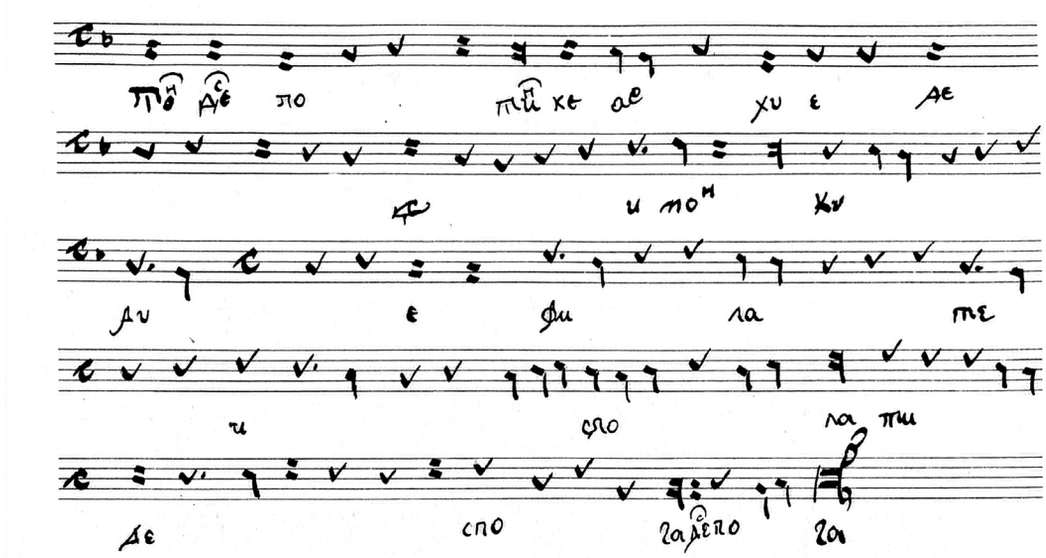

Figure 4. Ton Despotin. Lviv Irmologion from the late sixteenth century, Vasyl Stefanyk National Scientific Library of Ukraine (Lviv), MB 50, f. 119v. Transnotated by Marcin Abijski.

In these examples there is also a noticeable modal compatibility with the theory of Chrysaphes. Even the second mode of Ton Despotin (although the mode is not mentioned at the beginning of the hymn) is recorded with the note sol, and the first part of the hymn (before the modal mutation) can easily be sung in the modern mode of the second Byzantine mode (soft chromaticism – μαλακό χρώμα).

On the pages of the Supraśl Irmologion, ca. 1598–1601, there is another very important hymn: the Great "Multanskiy" Polyeleos. In its structure, it also almost exactly coincides with the rhythm and melody of the Byzantine singing style known to us today the result of the work of the Three Teachers. It accurately reflects the first, fourth (legatos), and fourth plagal modes. Elements of "echemata" (ηχήματα) and melismatic vocalizations such as πάλιν and λέγε also appear.[11]

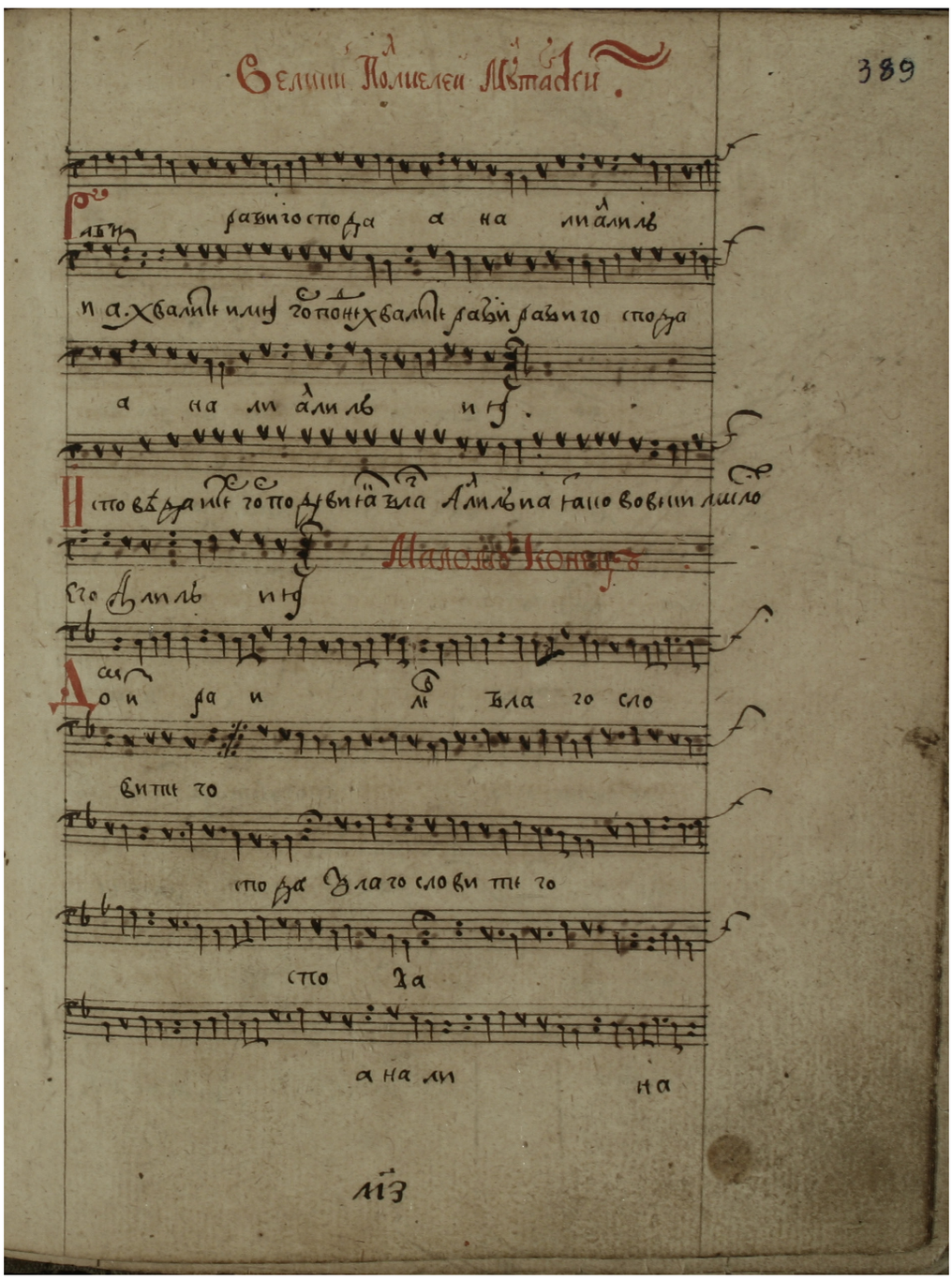

Figure 5. Multansky Polyeleos, Suprasl Irmologion 1598–1601, Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine (Kyiv), I 5391, f. 389.

11 Монахиня Иудифь (Сибирякова), «Великий полиелей Мултанский (По Ирмологиону Супрасльского Монастыря, XVI в.): Опыт воссоздания древнего памятника церковного певческого исскуства», *Вестник ПСТГУ V: Музыкальное искусство христианского мира* 2(3) (2008): 163–216.

Thus, the staff-notated irmologia, especially the oldest ones dating back to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, confirm the existence of a strong oral tradition of both irmologic and more melismatic types. By comparing these compositions with neumatic manuscripts dating from the fourteenth century onwards, we gain valuable information about the melody, rhythmic structure, modal system, exegesis of the "encrypted" (taynozamknennye) signs of the great hypostases, and the overall character of Byzantine melos in the Byzantine and post-Byzantine periods.

Bibliography

Abijski, Marcin. "Bogdan Onisimowicz – śpiewak rodem z Pińska." In *Prawosławni w dziejach Rzeczypospolitej. Latopisy Akademii Supraskiej* 1, edited by Urszula Pawluczuk. Fundacja Oikonomos, 2010.

Abijski, Marcin. "Grecko-bizańtyjski repertuar w Irmologionie supraskim Bogdana Onisimowicza 1598–1601." In *Hymnografia i śpiew cerkiewny w Rzeczypospolitej, Latopisy Akademii Supraskiej* 13, edited by Marzanna Kuczyńska and Alicja Zofia Nowak. Fundacja Oikonomos, 2022.

Abijski, Marcin. "The Problem of Reviving the Singing Tradition of the Suprasl Monastery of the Annunciation on the Basis of the Manuscript Irmologion (1598-1601)." In *Church, State and Nation in Orthodox Church Music. Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Orthodox Church Music, University of Joensuu, Finland, 8–14 June 2009.* Edited by Ivan Moody and Maria Takala-Roszczenko. ISOCM, 2010.

Jasinovs'kyj, Jurij and Carolina Lutzka. *Das Lemberger Irmologion*. Böhlau, 2008.

Вовк, Александр. «Грекоязычные песнопения в западнорусских нотолинейных рукописях». *Opera Musicologica* 2, no. 8 (2011): 54–80.

Ганнік, Крістіан. «Слов'яно-Русский церковний спів і його візантійські джерела». In *КАЛОФОНІА. Науковий збірник з історії церковної монодії та гимнографії* 1, edited by Крістіан Ганнік and Юрій Ясіновський. Видавництво ЛБА, 2002.

Дубровіна, Л. А. «Супрасльський Ірмолой 1601 року: деякі аспекти кодикологічного дослідження». In *Рукописна та книжкова спадщина України* 1. Академперіодика, 1993.

Ігнатенко, Євгенія. «Атрибуція грецьких співів з українських і білоруських ірмолоїв кінця XVI–XVIII століть». *Студії мистецтвознавчі: Театр, Музика, Кіно* 1(65) (2019): 29–38.

Конотоп, А. В. «Древнейший памятник украинского нотолинейного письма – Супрасльский ирмологий 1638–1639 гг.». *Памятники культуры: новые открытия* (1981): 233–240.

(Сибирякова), Монахиня Иудифь. «Великий полиелей Мултанский (По Ирмологиону Супрасльского Монастыря, XVI в.): Опыт воссоздания древнего памятника церковного певческого исскуства». *Вестник ПСТГУ V: Музыкальное искусство христианского мира* 2(3) (2008): 163–216.

Ясіновський, Юрій. «Супрасльський ірмолой Богдана Онисимовича як пам'ятка Київської митрополії». In *КАЛОФОНІА. Науковий збірник з історії церковної монодії та гимнографії* 8, edited by Крістіан Ганнік and Юрій Ясіновський. Видавництво УКУ, 2016.

Ясіновський, Юрій. «Львівський Ірмолой кінця XVI — початку XVII ст. — найдавніша нотолінійна пам'ятка церковної монодії». In *КАЛОФОНІА. Науковий збірник з історії церковної монодії та гимнографії* 1, edited by Крістіан Ганнік and Юрій Ясіновський. Видавництво ЛБА, 2002.