

Introduction

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The collection of essays in this volume comes at a particularly appropriate moment. Arising from a conference held in January 2001 in association with the important exhibition of representations of the Theotokos at the Benaki Museum, Athens,¹ the present volume takes a wide sweep, both chronologically and also thematically. ‘Byzantium’ in the title is interpreted to include the whole period of the Byzantine empire from the fourth and especially the fifth century to the end of Constantinople, and including later Orthodox theological and liturgical tradition. It also includes ‘western’ material from the very important early icons of the Virgin in Rome to the images and cult practices of south Italy and Sicily in late mediaeval and even modern times which show a clear Byzantine inspiration. Equally, while the impetus for the volume came from an exhibition, and thus from visual art – even from a particular form of visual art – the development of the cult of the Virgin must be studied in relation to a range of wider issues, whether historical, textual, liturgical or social, all of which receive treatment here. At the same time the subject of Mary has attracted the attention of other scholars, not least in a volume arising from another conference with a rather different but clearly related scope.² Much consideration has also been given to the fifth-century context in which the Virgin became for the first time a real focus of attention, with a number of studies relating to the context of the Council of Ephesus in AD 431, when the Theotokos title became the issue in contention.³ An international research project has been initiated by Professor Pauline Allen, Dr Leena Mari Peltomaa and others which will collect in a database all references to Mary in the period up to Ephesus, which is indeed the most obscure part of the history of Mary.⁴ Further work is planned by Dr Mary Cunningham on the important Marian hymnography and homiletic of the eighth century.⁵

The topic of this volume is therefore of considerable current interest, as well as being of obvious inherent importance, not least because Roman Catholic scholarship accounts for such

¹ The catalogue of this exhibition (Vassilaki, *Mother of God*) contains a series of substantial essays and is itself a major contribution to recent scholarship.

² R. N. Swanson (ed.), *Mary and the Church* (*Studies in Church History*, forthcoming).

³ For instance, N. F. Constanas, ‘“Weaving the Body of God”: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos and the Loom of the Flesh’, *JChSt* 3.2 (1995), 169–94. Id., *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity* (Leiden, 2003). For the role of Cyril of Alexandria in the controversy, see J. A. McGuckin, *Cyril of Alexandria, The Christological Controversy: its History, Theology and Texts* (Leiden, 1994). L. M. Peltomaa, *The Image of the Virgin Mary in the Akathistos Hymn* (Leiden, 2001) offers a detailed content analysis of the Akathistos hymn and dates it to the period between the Councils of Ephesus (AD 431) and Chalcedon (AD 451). Another notable recent book is S. J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary’s Dormition and Assumption* (Oxford, 2002).

⁴ See A. M. Cameron, ‘The Early Cult of the Virgin’, in Vassilaki, *Mother of God*, 3–15.

⁵ See also the useful recent volume by B. E. Daley SJ, *On the Dormition of Mary. Early Patristic Homilies* (Crestwood, NY, 1998).

a large percentage of the vast existing bibliography on Mariology. Much progress has been made, but as several contributors point out, there is still a great deal of work to be done on the disentangling of the often difficult and even contradictory evidence. The first puzzle is why Mary was so slow in becoming recognized as a figure of central importance for the early church, or as a figure in her own right: before the later fourth century, references are sparse indeed, and this is all the more strange in comparison with the enormous attention given to the Theotokos in the Byzantine period and her very central role in the Orthodox tradition. It is becoming more and more clear that in the later centuries her role in the earlier period was elaborated, and anachronistic stories and details developed to give her more of a history. This is especially the case with the late sources spelling out the early history of her robe and girdle at Constantinople and the alleged role of the Empress Pulcheria in relation to the veneration of the Virgin;⁶ the same phenomenon is found in connection with the prehistory of the lost Hodegetria icon, which was so important in the life of Constantinople in the Middle Byzantine and Palaiologan periods. The erroneous statements which recur frequently in the scholarly literature show that we have not yet arrived at a full understanding of all these developments, but the essays in this volume and in its predecessor together make a most important contribution, and bring the possibility of a full history of the Theotokos in Byzantium very much nearer.

It is important to recognize the late date at which attention began to be paid to the Virgin as a figure in her own right, as opposed to an essential component in Christological argument. This seems to happen very slowly, and to begin to find full expression only with the events surrounding the Council of Ephesus. Earlier Christian writers saw the importance of Mary in relation to Christ, and also to Eve, but so far as we can tell it seems to be with Ambrose (d. 397) and others from the later fourth century that she begins to be assigned a more central role. In part this is in the context of the controversies about asceticism and the virginal life. However, in Syriac literature Ephrem (d. 373) was already foreshadowing the vividly imaginative and poetic approach to the subject of the Virgin which we find in the homilies of Proklos just before the Council of Ephesus. If the Akathistos hymn in its first stage does date from the fifth century, as argued by Leena Mari Peltomaa in her recent book, its context must be this developing discourse about Mary. Its approach can be seen as essentially Christological, with the incorporation of the repeated *chairetismoi* (greetings) to Mary, and it does not develop the scenes of Mary's own childhood which were already expressed in the second-century apocryphal *Prot-evangelium of James*.⁷ Nevertheless the Akathistos later became, as it still is, the touchstone for Orthodox devotion to the Virgin, and this should perhaps lead us not to make too strong a distinction between the Christological and the more emotional and personal aspects of veneration of the Theotokos.

A set of questions raised by several of the contributors to this volume concerns the relation between the public, or 'official', and private elements of the cult of the Virgin, and the relation between doctrine and personal devotion. I would suggest that the balance varies within the time limits set by the volume, and indeed according to the surviving evidence. But religious history is

⁶ See L. James in this volume, 145–152. Angelidi, 'Un texte patriographique'. Ead., *Pulcheria. La castità al potere (c.399–c.455)* (Milan, 1998). A. M. Cameron, 'The Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Religious Development and Myth-making', in Swanson, *Mary and the Church*.

⁷ For which see J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1993).

dynamic and not static, and does not depend on a single factor at any particular time. Thus, important as the Council of Ephesus was, it was not the sole critical element in the development of veneration of the Theotokos, for, as Michel van Esbroeck has shown, there was regional variety in the development of Marian feasts, and the same post-Ephesus period saw the evolution of apocryphal (and hardly Christological) accounts of the 'Dormition' or *Koimesis* of Mary in the set of texts known as the *Transitus Mariae*. It was perhaps the possibilities offered by the secure position of Christianity in the empire from the later fourth and fifth centuries as much as the particular doctrinal concerns culminating in the clash between Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorios at Ephesus which allowed and encouraged the rich and varied developments in attention to Mary which we see more clearly in the sixth century and later. By that time, as we learn from the contributions of Henry Maguire and Brigitte Pitarakis, the signs of popular attachment to the Theotokos are becoming as well established as the more 'official' representations on the walls of churches. Similar issues arise at all periods once devotion to the Theotokos is established, and this in itself indicates that we should not be looking for a single explanation for its development. Any history of the cult of the Virgin would have to allow for multiple developments and a high degree of social and regional variety.

The title of this volume carefully refers to 'perceptions of the Theotokos', rather than to her cult, or to her place in the religious history of Byzantium, and this is of course appropriate for a volume which focuses to a large extent on visual art. Nevertheless it encourages us to ask the questions addressed by several contributors about the factors – public, official or private – which caused the Theotokos to assume such a central place in Byzantine religious life, and in the broader development of Orthodoxy. Here we may pause to consider terminology. The term 'cult' is widely used in connection with the Virgin, but it is usually so used without further definition; moreover, as Niki Tsironis rightly points out, it is strictly incorrect, certainly in Orthodox terms. However, historians of late antiquity are used to using the term in relation to saints⁸ and it is perhaps legitimate to use it here in this sense, while certainly implying veneration rather than actual worship. But we are in need of a more nuanced definition of what is meant by 'cult'. The term 'devotion', currently much used in relation to the Theotokos, seems to indicate something personal rather than Christological or doctrinal, but this term too is usually left undefined. Maguire's use of 'private' and 'public' avoids some of the problems while leaving the term 'public' in need of closer analysis. That would take us into the question of how Byzantine religious life actually worked in the context of the Byzantine state, and what factors were key in encouraging specific developments. We see some of these issues illustrated during the iconoclast period, as set out in the contribution by Nike Koutrakou, and Niki Tsironis interestingly points to the importance in Orthodox theology of popular reception, demonstrated in liturgical expression. A study of the role of the Theotokos against these backgrounds would constitute a different kind of endeavour, and this volume demonstrates how exciting that could be.

Related to the issue of public versus private is the question of the relation between the cult of the Theotokos and women's piety. After all, since the Virgin was held out as a model for all women (albeit an unattainable one) it seems reasonable to ask how women reacted, or even to

⁸ Cf. P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints. Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, 1981).

assume that she had a special appeal for women. The same assumption has been made in relation to icon veneration in a more general sense,⁹ and if that connection has validity, then surely it would be even more likely that women would be drawn to the Theotokos. After all, apart from the obvious gender connection, women in traditional societies belonged to the private sphere, from which we have a good deal of evidence of devotion to the Theotokos. However, Brigitte Pitarakis and Henry Maguire both show how difficult it is to argue from this evidence to an unequivocal position about female attitudes to the Virgin. If stories about the Virgin's intervention often feature women,¹⁰ just as women appear in iconophile texts as fervent iconophiles, we cannot take them simply at face value without considering the agendas operating in the relevant texts; equally, for every story about the Virgin involving a woman there is at least one involving a man. On another note, it is interesting that the 'feminine' weaving imagery applied to the Virgin in the fifth-century homily of Proklos is the work of a male writer who belonged to the top of the church hierarchy.¹¹ Some women were of course themselves empresses, or belonged to the imperial family of the day. Liz James ably argues in this volume against the assumption that Byzantine empresses as a class were somehow specially devoted to the Theotokos; nevertheless some may well have been, and others will naturally have included the Theotokos in their patronage of churches or their commissioning of objects. Only occasionally do we have specific information about the personal religious attachments of individual empresses. That did not stop Byzantine writers from ascribing such sentiments or acts of patronage to them, as we have seen in the case of Pulcheria. Another case is the Empress Sophia, wife of Justin II (565–578), who is credited by the Latin panegyrist Corippus with a long prayer to the Virgin, perhaps because this was thought appropriate for her as empress, following her husband's prayer to God.¹² At the same time it is not surprising if individual empresses, like their husbands, showed favour or even enthusiasm for what was increasingly established as a central part of Byzantine religious life; Irene, for example, was associated with the monastery of the Virgin on Prinkipo, where she was banished in 802 and later buried, and restored the church of the Virgin *tes Peges* in Constantinople, and Theodora (830–842) was a regular visitor to the Blachernai church of the Theotokos.¹³ Finally, Judith Herrin has connected the rising cult of the Virgin with an 'imperial feminine' on which empresses could draw for their authority and legitimacy.¹⁴ The relation of empresses with the cult of the Virgin in Byzantium could therefore be ambiguous, which is perhaps what one would have expected. Conversely, it has also been argued that the different development of the Virgin's cult in East and West, and in particular her portrayal in icons, was influenced by the existence of an empress in Byzantium, affording a rival queenly model.¹⁵ In this regard the very early Roman icons of Mary discussed

⁹ See however R. Cormack, 'Women and Icons, and Women in Icons', in L. James (ed.), *Women, Men and Eunuchs. Gender in Byzantium* (London, 1997), 24–51, esp. 31–8.

¹⁰ For some of these, see Cameron, 'The Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity'.

¹¹ See Constas, 'Weaving the Body of God'.

¹² Corippus, *In Laudem Iustini Augusti Minoris*, ed. and tr. A. M. Cameron (London, 1976), II.47–71: Sophia goes to a church of the Virgin to pray before Justin's coronation and seems to pray standing before an icon (II.50: 'ante pios vultus expansis ... palmis').

¹³ See J. Herrin, *Women in Purple. Rulers of Medieval Byzantium* (London, 2001), 104–5, 193; cf. also ead., 'The Imperial Feminine in Byzantium', *Past and Present* 169 (2000), 3–35, at 25–8.

¹⁴ Herrin, *Women in Purple*, 241–3; ead., 'The Imperial Feminine'.

¹⁵ Herrin, 'The Imperial Feminine', 14–18.

by Gerhard Wolf would mainly conform to the 'eastern' model, in which Mary is not depicted in imperial dress but with a simple robe and veil covering her head. On the other hand there are examples of the enthroned Virgin from both East and West.¹⁶ It remains true that the West did not see the vast growth in iconic depictions of the Virgin that took place in Byzantium, and in fact one might suggest that the latter may possibly have drawn benefit from the continued role of the empress in the Byzantine state and society.

Whatever exact date should be attributed to the Akathistos hymn, it is clear that hymns and invocations to the Virgin as well as the first stages of liturgical development existed at an early stage in tandem with the doctrinal debates. Moreover the basic doctrinal issues surrounding the Virgin were settled at the Council of Ephesus, so that the subsequent path was clear for developments in iconography, liturgy, church building and general consciousness. This is indeed what seems to have taken place, to judge from our evidence, by and during the sixth century, so that even if we were to agree with Leslie Brubaker and Bissera Pentcheva¹⁷ that the cult of icons and the special association of icons of the Theotokos with Constantinople belong only later, even after iconoclasm, it is clear that the Virgin had already acquired a role in religious consciousness quite different from what had been the case in the early centuries of Christianity. One of the most intriguing and difficult current problems for the scholar of Marian development in Byzantium is to match up the evidence of practical religion – belief and liturgy – with that for public cult and with what is known or can be deduced about the great surviving Marian icons. Different though often overlapping layers have to be investigated, from the pattern of regular liturgical life in ordinary churches and monasteries, with the evidence of the *theotokaria*, to the public rituals of Middle and Late Constantinople centring on the Hodegetria icon.¹⁸ It is difficult in itself to put such disparate and often sparse evidence together, and especially so when so many of the necessary sources still even now lack critical treatment. As for the essential evidence from homiletic and poetry, especially hymnography, this has only recently begun to be appreciated as contributing in an important way towards the overall development of attention to the Theotokos.¹⁹ But this may also be one of the perhaps rare cases when the rule of *lex orandi, lex credendi*, i.e. that doctrine follows the existing practice of faith, does not hold, at any rate for the early stages, for as Henry Maguire notes in his contribution, there certainly was, in the circumstances of Byzantium as a Christian state, a strong impetus from the top in such matters at

¹⁶ On these issues see R. Cormack, 'The Mother of God in Apse Mosaics', in Vassilaki, *Mother of God*, 91–105 at 93; with J.-M. Spieser, 'Impératrices romaines et chrétiennes', in *Mélanges Gilbert Dagron*, TM 14 (2002), 593–604.

¹⁷ See L. Brubaker, 'Icons before Iconoclasm?', in *Morfologie sociali culturali in Europa fra tarda antichità e alto medioevo*, *Settimane di studio del Centro italiano di studi sull'alto Medioevo* 45 (Spoleto, 1998), 1215–54. B. V. Pentcheva, 'The Supernatural Protector of Constantinople: the Virgin and her Icons in the Tradition of the Avar Siege', *BMGS* 26 (2002), 2–41.

¹⁸ In addition to the contributions here and in Vassilaki, *Mother of God*, see N. P. Ševčenko, 'Icons in the Liturgy', *DOP* 45 (1991), 45–57. Ead., 'Servants of the Holy Icon', in C. Moss and K. Kiefer (eds), *Byzantine East, Latin West. Studies in Honor of Kurt Weitzmann* (Princeton, NJ, 1995), 547–53. On icons in processions see especially G. Wolf, below, and Pentcheva, 'The Supernatural Protector of Constantinople', 15–22, denying the possibility of Marian icon processions in Constantinople until after iconoclasm.

¹⁹ See N. Tsironis below, with her PhD thesis, 'The Lament of the Virgin Mary from Romanos the Melode to George of Nicomedia: an Aspect of the Development of Marian Cult', King's College, London, 1998. P. Allen, 'Severus of Antioch and the Homily: the End of the Beginning?', in P. Allen and E. Jeffreys (eds), *The Sixth Century: End or Beginning?* (*Byzantina Australiensia*, 10) (Brisbane, 1996), 163–75, at 165–74 (seeing a 'blend

various times. That interaction, of 'official' policy and individual piety, is difficult for scholars to grasp adequately from the disparate material available, and yet it is one of the factors which make the history of the Theotokos in Byzantium so fascinating.

In the textual evidence we find many traces of the imaginative and emotional attitude to icons which was typical of Byzantium. Icons were often believed to be active; they could cure, or perform miracles, or defend themselves against arrows or other attack. They also had the power of movement, and could fly from one place to another for safety or should a need arise, as is illustrated by the supposed exploits of the Madonna di S. Sisto and of the Hodegetria retold here by Gerhard Wolf and Michele Bacci. These projections onto famous icons of very human wishes and fears are paralleled by the many tales and claims concerning old or miraculous icons which attached themselves in later centuries to places as far apart as Palestine and south Italy. These cannot be ascribed to the 'official' sphere, and nor can the spread of the Constantinopolitan tradition of the Virgin's saving of the city when under siege into the mediaeval collections of Marian miracles, as described by Bacci. Stories of Mary miracles had started much earlier, in the context of the miracles of saints and in the need to fill out in the warmth of the imagination the bare details of Christian doctrine. Significantly, icons of the Virgin occupied a major role in the lists of miraculous images which were drawn up in the ninth century under the impetus of the experience of iconoclasm.²⁰ We should think of the Virgin's fame, and that of her images, as spreading even more luxuriantly after iconoclasm, with the stories becoming ever more complex and more imaginative – Nike Koutrakou aptly writes of the 'inventiveness' of the Byzantines in this regard; indeed this very luxuriance of imagination is one of Byzantium's characteristic but unsung achievements. The important role of emotion in the Byzantine reaction to the Mother of God in literature, art and piety has been emphasized in a well-known paper by Ioli Kalavrezou,²¹ and this accounts a great deal for the attraction today of icons of the Theotokos. It was combined however with a doctrinal and theological discourse of considerable complexity, without which many icons cannot be fully expounded or appreciated. Giving due weight to both these aspects of the role of the Theotokos in Byzantium is the challenge to which the contributors to this volume have risen so admirably.

of formal and "popular" theology' in the Marian homilies of Severus). M. B. Cunningham, 'The Mother of God in Early Byzantine Homilies', *Sobornost* 10.2 (1988), 53–67. Ead., 'The Meeting of the Old and the New: the Typology of Mary the Theotokos in Byzantine Homilies and Hymns', in Swanson, *The Church and Mary*.

²⁰ See for these lists Ch. Walter, 'Iconographical Considerations', in J. A. Munitiz, J. Chrysostomides, E. Harvalia-Crook and Ch. Dendrinou, *The Letter of the Three Patriarchs to Emperor Theophilus and Related Texts* (Camberley, 1997), li–lxxviii, with J. Munitiz, 'Wonder-working Icons in the Letter to Theophilus', in L. Garland (ed.), *Conformity and Non-conformity in Byzantium, Papers given to the 8th Conference of the Australian Association of Byzantine Studies, BF 24* (1997), 115–23.

²¹ I. Kalavrezou, 'Images of the Mother. When the Virgin Mary became *Meter Theou*', *DOP* 44 (1990), 165–72; cf. her contribution 'The Maternal Side of the Virgin', in Vassilaki, *Mother of God*, 41–5.