

Conclusion

Mary, the holy Virgin and Mother of God, remained a paradoxical presence in Byzantine religious culture. As we have seen in the course of this book, she assumed different aspects according to the settings in which she appeared. To some extent, such variations reflected the aims and intended audiences that writers or artisans had in mind: the Virgin's roles as symbol of the incarnation according to Christological doctrine that began to be elaborated from the early fifth century onward or as protector and intercessor for Christians throughout the Eastern Roman empire received emphasis in different literary or liturgical contexts. By focusing on three main literary genres, namely, homiletics, hymnography and hagiography during the period of roughly the fifth to the tenth centuries, I have demonstrated only some of the myriad of ways in which the Virgin could be presented. According to this analysis, preachers and hymnographers focused especially on Mary's Christological importance – although they also invoked her intercessory power – while hagiographers were more interested in her physical (albeit legendary) presence as human mother, protector and intercessor. All of these aspects of the Theotokos were significant for the Byzantines, whether or not some (such as her female gender, power and intercessory role) fascinate modern researchers into her cult to a greater degree. For this reason, I have devoted as much attention to elaborating and explaining the theological meaning of Marian liturgical praise as to manifestations of her miraculous power. Above all, however, it is important to recognise that the two strands of this tradition are inextricably linked: most Byzantine writers saw Mary's power as emanating from her status as the virginal Mother of God. She thus assumed a place in the celestial hierarchy that went far beyond the holiness, or deification, of patriarchs, martyrs and saints. At the same time, however, Byzantine theologians were keen to emphasise Mary's humanity. Her human and physical nature guaranteed the reality of Christ's incarnation and the

extent of his self-emptying (*kenosis*) when he chose to enter creation while remaining the Son and Word of God.

The decision to divide the book into chapters that are based on the three literary genres, hymnography, homiletics and hagiography (with the first two categories being divided chronologically into two sections simply because they are so large), has yielded some interesting results. Although the categories overlap in significant ways, they each offer distinct readings of the Virgin Mary. Hymnography, especially after the development of hymn forms (such as *kontakia*, *kanons*, *stichera* and others) for specific liturgical slots and according to the usage of the Ecclesiastic and Hagiopolitan rites in Constantinople from about the seventh century onward,¹ provided concise theological teaching that could take discursive, typological or other forms. Invocation of the protective and merciful Virgin took place in this context, but usually only in specific sections of longer hymns or in shorter hymns (such as *theotokia* and *stavrotheotokia*) that were devoted to this purpose. Homiletics also offered an opportunity for theological teaching; however, this genre also allowed more opportunity for narrative or dramatic development of biblical and apocryphal stories about the Virgin Mary. Middle Byzantine preachers also increasingly invoked the Theotokos as intercessor, although as in hymnography, this preoccupation was confined to certain sections (especially the epilogues) of festal homilies. The category that I called ‘occasional’, however, could focus more – or even entirely – on Mary’s role as defender and intercessor for Byzantine Christians. Finally, hagiography offered various generic opportunities for elaboration of the Virgin’s intercessory (or occasionally punitive) interaction with Christian supplicants. These included short miracle stories, such as those associated with the shrine of the Source (*Pege*) in Constantinople, and longer *Lives* of the Virgin in which her legendary (or apocryphal) dealings with Christ and his disciples as well as with later followers received narrative treatment. Although the overlap between all three genres (in the form of hymnic sections, Christological teaching and other elements) remains significant, I have thus been able to distinguish significant differences in their treatment of the holy subject.

Another preoccupation of this book, which received detailed treatment in the Introduction and attention throughout the following chapters, has been to test the relevance of gendered approaches to the Byzantine cult of the Virgin Mary. I suggested at the beginning that gender is indeed a crucial issue in this field: Mary was pre-eminently a symbol of feminine

¹ I follow the terminology for the two rites that is adopted in Frøyshov 2020, esp. 351–2.

virtue and activity for the Byzantines. As the 'Second Eve', who undid the sin of the first human woman according to the Jewish and Christian creation narrative, Mary became the archetypal wielder of human free will according to God's original intention. This theological narrative, which is shared by Eastern and Western Christians, places females at the heart of the divine dispensation. One woman opened up the possibility of sin; another initiated the way back to redemption. Mary's other theological roles, including especially her virginal birth-giving of Christ, are also dependent on her female nature. It was only from about the late fifth century onward, however, that Byzantine liturgical writers began to emphasise Mary's human, or maternal, involvement in this process. This innovation may have occurred for didactic reasons: preachers and hymnographers realised that the reality of Christ's incarnation could be understood better in the context of his mother's humanity. However, it may also reflect an increasing interest in Mary as a figure of dignity in her own right; this is the period in which other manifestations of Marian devotion were becoming more visible. Further aspects of Mary's female gender received attention in the course of our period, but especially after about the middle of the ninth century (or the end of Iconoclasm); these included her devotion to asceticism and prayer, leadership of both female and male disciples of Christ, and lament at the cross. By about the tenth century, we are presented with the Mother of God as a fully developed human figure on the basis of homilies, hymns and hagiography. As such, however, Mary embodies the best characteristics of both genders. She is a model for all Christians to emulate and with whom to identify. Mary thus represents by the end of our period the quintessential example of the faithful Christian, or 'bride of Christ'; although this symbolism is female, it is open to Christians of both genders.

Although women did seek cures or help – sometimes of a specifically gynaecological nature – from Mary, it is not clear that they outstripped men in their supplications. The Byzantines used gender-based symbolism that transcended the literal division of people into distinct categories. Feminine imagery carried a host of meanings, which often had more to do with ethical behaviour than with biological identity. To behave like a woman involved the demonstration of particular virtues that were associated with the feminine gender, such as modesty, obedience and receptivity. Masculine virtues included bravery, endurance, strength and self-restraint. Both women and men could display the whole range of characteristics, although women had to surmount their innate weaknesses in order to acquire 'manliness'. By the tenth century, Mary had begun to

embody the ideal virtues of both genders; emphasis on her determination and even leadership in hagiographical texts such as the Georgian *Life of the Virgin* demonstrated her 'male' credentials in addition to her 'female' ones. But long before this, as we have seen, she featured as the successful 'male' warrior, fighting on the walls of Constantinople during the siege of 626.²

That preachers and hymnographers viewed the Theotokos as a model for female Christians in particular is undeniable: it became a *topos*, or convention, to encourage virgins, mothers and widows (as identifiable female categories) to venerate and imitate Mary, as we see in the following example:

Mothers and virgins, praise the one who alone was both mother and always virgin. Brides, go before her who remained an unmarried maiden, the incorrupt one who, uniquely free from the pangs of childbirth, brought forth the incomprehensible one. Childless people and widows, applaud her who 'did not know man' (Lk 1:34), but who changed the laws of infertility. Maidens, dance joyfully before the incorruptibility that gave birth to a child.³

Such passages, when read in context, however, invoke the symbolic (gendered) categories of the human race more than they do the actual categories of Christians who were assembled in church on any given day. Andrew of Crete also calls on patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, saints, kings and those who are ruled; other preachers, in similar tropes, invoke significant Old Testament women, beginning with Eve, who have been saved by Mary.⁴ Gender is thus primarily a symbolic way of thought and expression: although contemporary women were encouraged to identify with female biblical models, including Mary, men could also participate in this activity.⁵

² Pentcheva 2006, 61–103.

³ Andrew of Crete, *Homily III on the Dormition*, PG 97, 1104C; trans. Daley 1998, 147 (12).

⁴ See, for example, Proklos of Constantinople's *Homily V.3, On the Holy Virgin Theotokos*: 'On account of Mary all women are blessed. No longer does the female stand accused, for it has produced an offspring which surpasses even the angels in glory. Eve is fully healed (cf. Gen 3:17); the Egyptian woman has fallen silent (cf. Gen 39:7–18); Delilah is wrapped tightly in a shroud (cf. Judg 16:4–22); Jezebel has fallen into oblivion (cf. 3 Kgs 16:31; 18:4 [1 Kgs 16:31; 18:4]); and Herodias has been stricken from memory (Mk 6:14–29). And now the assembly of women is admired: Sarah is praised as the fertile seedbed of nations (cf. Gen 17:15–20); Rebekah is honoured as shrewd purveyor of blessings (cf. Gen 27:6–17); Leah also is admired as the mother of the ancestor (of Christ) according to the flesh (Gen 29:35; cf. Lk 3:30); Deborah is praised because she overcame nature and fought as a leader in combat (cf. Judg 4:4–14); Elizabeth is also called blessed because she conceived in her womb the leaping of the Forerunner of grace . . . (Lk 1:44)'; ed. and trans. Constan 2003, 260–3.

⁵ See Krueger's interesting analysis of such practices in the formation of the Christian 'self': Krueger 2014, 8–24.

The richness of imagery, which includes narrative, description, metaphor and typology, in the portrayal of the Mother of God remains one of the most striking, but also inexplicable, aspects of the Byzantine liturgical tradition. Why, we may ask, does this human figure – who does not feature prominently in the canonical New Testament – attract such a wealth of narratives and epithets?⁶ Why did her cult develop in the way that it did, especially following the endorsement of the title ‘Theotokos’ at the Council of Ephesus in 431?⁷ Krastu Banev’s suggestion that Mary took over the symbolic role of the Church, along with a well-developed tradition of typology associated with that concept, from about this date onward goes some way towards explaining her growing importance.⁸ However, it is also likely that her basis in history, at least for believing Christians, and humanity played a part in this process. Eastern and Western Christians began to feel the need for a female figure in the celestial hierarchy; they also sought, in the face of increasingly hierarchical and bureaucratic social systems, an intercessor before Christ, as Righteous Judge, as he sat on his imperial throne in heaven. Mary’s transition from theological symbol to merciful intercessor appears to have been sanctioned and managed by church leaders in this period: bishops preached about the Christological importance of the Theotokos, feasts were added to the official liturgical calendars, and shrines that housed her relics were founded and maintained by emperors and empresses from the second half of the fifth century onward. The texts that were produced in order to support the burgeoning Marian cult, which took many forms in addition to homiletics, hymnography and hagiography, continued to be read in liturgical and other public settings throughout the Byzantine period.

The reception of such literature by populations that were largely illiterate has become a stimulating field of scholarly study.⁹ Recent contributions to this subject explore the performative aspect of many literary genres, the differences between oral and written delivery, and the extent to which various genres were understood. In the course of the present study, I have emphasised the ways in which texts went through different phases of delivery and transmission. The surviving Marian homilies, whether festal or occasional, were probably delivered extempore or from memory at the first occasion; after this, they would be edited, either by the preacher

⁶ On the place of the Virgin Mary in the New Testament, see Brown, Donfried, Fitzmyer and Reumann 1978; Pelikan 1996, 7–21; Maunder 2007; Maunder 2008, 23–39; Maunder 2019, 21–39.

⁷ Price 2007; Price 2008; Price 2019. ⁸ Banev 2014, esp. 93–9.

⁹ Mullett 1992; Antonopoulou 2010; Pizzone 2014; White 2015; Shawcross 2018; Jeffreys and Jeffreys 2018.

himself or by scribes, and compiled into liturgical collections that were then read out at future liturgical offices, sometimes on an annual basis.¹⁰ This does not exclude, however, the possibility that literate monks or lay Christians read such books for personal devotional reasons.

In the case of hymns, which represent even more refined literary compositions, a process of selection took place. Those that were considered the best or most apposite for a given feast or day of the year were included in service books that began to be compiled from about the eighth century onward.¹¹ From that time onward, they would be sung during highly codified liturgical services that took place throughout the fixed and moveable church years, according to the *typika* that were appropriate to any given cathedral, monastery or parish church. Owing to the simpler and more formulaic language of hymns, as opposed to homilies, it is likely that this genre above all others taught basic doctrine to Byzantine Christians, which included the central role that the Virgin Mary played in the incarnation of Christ. Hymns also allowed congregations, especially through participation in the singing of refrains, to pray directly to the Mother of God for help and healing. The Byzantines' own recognition of the theological and devotional importance of hymnography is borne out in the use of this genre for educational purposes in Constantinopolitan schools and *theatra* from about the twelfth century onward.¹²

Some forms of hagiography, including collections of miracle stories and *Lives* of the Virgin Mary, seem to have circulated less widely than homilies and hymns, judging by the numbers of manuscripts that survive.¹³ Such texts often retained an association with a local shrine, such as the Source (*Pege*) in Constantinople, where they were probably read at annual festivals or other celebrations. Some of the higher style *Lives* of the Virgin, such as those by John Geometres or Symeon the Metaphrast, may have served smaller, more educated clientele; it is possible that they were read aloud in sections in particular monasteries or pious gatherings, such as lay fraternities.¹⁴ Euthymios the Athonite's Georgian *Life of the Virgin*

¹⁰ Ehrhard 1936–52; Cunningham 2011b. ¹¹ Velkovska 1997.

¹² Demetracopoulos 1979; Skrekas 2008, xx–xxxiv; Skrekas 2018.

¹³ This varies of course, depending on the text. *Lives* of saints that were chosen as readings on an annual basis in churches and monasteries throughout the Byzantine empire survive in numerous manuscripts. However, the miracle stories associated with the *Pege* shrine in Constantinople are transmitted in just one witness; see Talbot and Johnson 2012, xv; the *Life of the Virgin* by John Geometres in four; see Wenger 1955, 186–9. This can be contrasted with the transmission of many festal homilies in upwards of 100 manuscripts. On the transmission of homilies and *vitae* in Byzantine manuscripts, see Ehrhard 1936–52, passim.

¹⁴ Antonopoulou 2010; Magdalino 2018.

circulated in monasteries of Georgia, Palestine and Mount Sinai: some of the surviving manuscripts contain markings that indicate the feasts on which the separate sections of the *Life* should be read aloud.¹⁵ One other genre that I included in my discussion of ‘hagiography’, namely, the middle Byzantine apocalypses, attracted much wider readership.¹⁶ It is possible that the entertaining nature of such texts, with their vivid descriptions of heaven and hell, along with their dynamic portrayal of Mary’s intercessory power, helped them to gain such popularity.

I have offered as a hypothesis throughout this book that Byzantine readers and auditors were sophisticated in their understanding of the various roles that the Virgin Mary could play. Their judgement must have been helped by the separate contexts (liturgical, devotional or didactic) in which texts were delivered and by what they expected to hear. The solemn setting of liturgical worship in the great church of Hagia Sophia, over which the mosaic image of the Virgin and child presided from the apse,¹⁷ evoked her importance as one who is ‘greater in honour than the cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the seraphim’.¹⁸ Monks or lay people who gathered to hear a homily or sections of a *Life* of the Virgin being delivered for the first time, or read out on an annual basis in later centuries, also expected Christological teaching – although this might be embroidered with apocryphal or legendary narrative, dramatic dialogue or other rhetorical embellishments. The reading out of miracle stories or apocalypses, on the other hand, evoked a somewhat different picture of the Mother of God. It was in such literary contexts that she came to life as an active female personage who intervened on behalf of the faithful at times of war or appeared to individuals who needed personal help. Such diverse – even paradoxical – portrayals of the Virgin Mary were possible because of the variety of settings and requirements that she filled. However, there is also a theological reason for this phenomenon: the Theotokos symbolised the paradox that lies at the heart of Christian doctrine. She, after all, was the human virgin who contained the uncontainable God. Her humanity encompassed a range of attributes, as we have seen, while her purity revealed her ability to give birth to Christ, the Son and Word of God.

¹⁵ Georgian *Life of the Virgin*, ed. Shoemaker 2012, 3, 161–4.

¹⁶ The *Apocalypse of Anastasia* and the *Apocalypse of the Theotokos* survive in numerous manuscripts and were translated into a variety of medieval languages; see Baun 2007, 16–20.

¹⁷ For illustrations and discussion of this famous mosaic, see Cormack 1985, 146–58; Barber 2002, 135–6; James 2017, 317–19.

¹⁸ Τὴν τιμιωτέραν τῶν Χερουβείμ καὶ ἐνδοξοτέραν ἀσυγκρίτως τῶν Σεραφείμ . . ., *Divine Liturgy of John Chrysostom*, trans. Lash 2011, 47.

Finally, it is worth adding a few words concerning the ways forward that this study suggests. The project as a whole was originally conceived along much more ambitious lines. Leslie Brubaker and I hoped, following initial funding for the work by the British funding body the Academic and Humanities Research Council, to provide a comprehensive introduction to the literary and material evidence concerning the Virgin Mary between about 400 and 1200 CE.¹⁹ Owing to the huge amount of evidence, we decided in the end, with regret, to narrow the project down. Instead of including numerous other literary genres that bear witness to the cult of the Theotokos in the Eastern Roman world, I have chosen to focus only on hymnography, homiletics and hagiography, also limiting my timescale somewhat, in the present book. I hope nevertheless that other researchers will turn their attention to other rich sources for study along the lines that I have suggested: these might include poetry and epigrams, letters, histories and chronicles, and polemical texts. On the basis of work that I have carried out so far, it is likely that each of these genres will yield diverse results: even more aspects of the ‘multifaceted’ Virgin Mary may appear. Leslie Brubaker meanwhile plans to publish her work on the material evidence, which includes monumental art, manuscripts, icons and other media, as an accompanying volume to this one. We hope that this second instalment will appear soon; much of the research has been completed and it simply remains for the work to be written up. Brubaker and I will no doubt display differences in our approaches to the subject on which we have worked together for so long; however, we remain unified in our understanding that the Byzantine Virgin Mary was a multifaceted and paradoxical figure whose many aspects depended, to a large extent, on the various contexts in which Byzantine Christians encountered her.

¹⁹ The AHRC provided a grant, covering the costs of a full-time research assistant, at the University of Birmingham between 2003 and 2006 (see Acknowledgements, viii–ix). Two other products of this grant have so far appeared: Cunningham 2008b; Brubaker and Cunningham 2011.