

*Panegyrics and Supplication: Homilies
from c. 600 to 1000*

The body of the God-bearer, then, is a source of life because it received into itself the entire life-giving fullness of the Godhead; it is the precious treasury of virginity, the heaven above us, the earth that produces God, the first-fruits of Adam's dough that was divinised in Christ, exact image of [creation's] original beauty, divinely sealed guardian of God's ineffable judgements, dwelling-place of virtues . . .¹

This remarkable passage, preached by the eighth-century preacher Andrew of Crete in a homily on her Dormition, expresses succinctly the importance of the Virgin Mary in Byzantine theology. She symbolised the receptive creation that Christ, the Word of God, chose to enter through his incarnation. But Mary also played a prophetic role in this tradition, as the 'messenger' that bore witness to the 'greatness' of divinity. In both ontological and ethical terms, the Virgin thus enabled her son to recreate the fallen world, including humanity, according to his preordained dispensation. In addition to virginal motherhood and discipleship, intercessory power became – especially after about the beginning of the sixth century – a distinguishing quality of the Theotokos. Preachers addressed all of these topics in their festal, exegetical and occasional homilies on the Mother of God. However, as we shall see in the course of this chapter, they could be woven together differently in response to the purpose, context and audience of each occasion.

From approximately the beginning of the seventh through to the end of the ninth century, the production of homilies in honour of the Mother of God entered its most productive phase. The reasons for such a flowering of panegyric and exegetical writing are unclear, but it is possible that the relatively recent introduction of feasts honouring important events in the Virgin's legendary life was a stimulus. As we saw in the Introduction, these festivals were mostly added to the liturgical calendar – first in Jerusalem and then in Constantinople – in the course of the sixth through to the early

¹ Andrew of Crete, *Homily I on the Dormition*, PG 97, 1068C (my translation).

eight centuries.² After the ninth century, homilists (who could include bishops, priests, and lay men such as emperors or court officials) continued to preach in honour of the Theotokos; however, judging by the surviving texts and manuscripts, they were not as prolific as their predecessors. This may reflect the fact that a corpus of sermons (now acting as readings) for individual Marian feasts had become so popular that new works were only rarely allowed to replace them.³

Preachers of the earlier period, including Andrew of Crete, Germanos of Constantinople, John of Damascus and George of Nikomedia, sometimes produced 'trilogies', or series of sermons in three parts, which were delivered in the course of single all-night vigils.⁴ Such sermons were transmitted for the most part in liturgical collections intended for use in cathedrals, parish churches and monasteries.⁵ The Marian works appeared especially in panegyric collections for the fixed liturgical year; the sermons were assigned to the feasts of Mary's Nativity (8 September), the Commemoration of Joachim and Anna (9 September), the Entrance into the Temple (21 November), Conception (9 December), Annunciation (25 March) and Dormition (15 August). Additional celebrations included the feast of Christ's Presentation in the Temple or 'Meeting' with Symeon (*Hypapante*), celebrated on 2 February, and the commemoration of the deposition of Mary's robe at Blachernai (2 July) and of the belt at Chalkoprateia (31 August). Preachers who composed new works from the end of the ninth century onward included such important figures as the patriarch Euthymios,⁶ the emperor Leo VI,⁷ Neophytos the Recluse,⁸ Michael Psellos,⁹ John Geometres¹⁰ and James Kokkinobaphos.¹¹

² See Introduction, 11–12.

³ Theodora Antonopoulou observes that whereas the smaller number of later homilies in liturgical collections reflects the fact that well-established feasts were already provided with readings, this evidence does not necessarily reflect a reduction in new compositions. Nevertheless, 'the prescription of set sermons indicates a reluctance for the majority of preachers to compose new speeches'. See Antonopoulou 1997, 111–12.

⁴ Chevalier 1937. ⁵ Ehrhard 1936–52; Cunningham 2011b.

⁶ Euthymios of Constantinople, *Enkomion on the Holy Belt; Homilies I, Ia, II on the Conception of the Virgin Mary* (BHG 1138, 134a–c), ed. Jugie 1922 (2003); ed. Jugie 1926 (1990).

⁷ Leo VI, *Homilies I, XII, XV and XX, On the Annunciation, Dormition, Nativity and Entrance of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Antonopoulou 2008.

⁸ Neophytos the Recluse, *Homilies on the Nativity and the Entrance into the Temple of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Jugie 1922 (2003).

⁹ Michael Psellos, *Sermons on the Annunciation, the Entrance into the Temple, and the 'Usual Miracle'*, ed. Jugie 1922 (2003); Fisher 1994.

¹⁰ John Geometres, *Homily on the Annunciation* (BHG 1158), PG 106, 811–48.

¹¹ James Kokkinobaphos, *Homilies on the Virgin Mary*, PG 127, 543–700; a critical edition is currently being prepared by E. Jeffreys.

Sometimes such authors' works would be gathered into 'special' collections or volumes devoted exclusively to their oeuvre, as in the case of Leo VI and John Xiphilinos;¹² for the majority of such Middle Byzantine texts, however, space would be made in the evolving liturgical collections where they would sometimes displace more famous earlier models.

The problems associated with the study of middle Byzantine homiletics (like those of the earlier period) remain acute, as Theodora Antonopoulou has repeatedly emphasised.¹³ When attempting to identify the extant corpus, scholars remain dependent on older studies of Byzantine religious literature, such as those by Karl Krumbacher and Hans-Georg Beck.¹⁴ There is no extension – at least to date – of the invaluable catalogue of patristic texts (extending through the eighth century), which Maurice Geerard published between 1974 and 2003.¹⁵ In addition to this, not only do some homilies remain unedited or wrongly identified in manuscript catalogues, but the attribution of many others is uncertain. The highly conventional nature of Middle Byzantine Marian preaching means that it is often difficult to be sure of the authenticity of individual works; in some cases, sermons may even be attributed in manuscripts to more than one author. Such problems undoubtedly hinder our study of the development of doctrinal, literary and devotional themes in Marian festal sermons; nevertheless, as I shall argue in this chapter, it is possible to discern unique qualities in the work of individual preachers as well as theological and literary developments throughout our period. It would be misguided, as in the case of earlier Marian homilies, to delay further study on the grounds that critical editions, secure attributions and even modern translations do not yet exist.

In the course of this chapter, I will examine seventh- to tenth-century Marian sermons according to their subject matter, thus dividing the discussion into sections based on the festal or occasional nature of the surviving orations. With regard to the festal sermons, I have followed the order of feasts according to the Byzantine liturgical calendar which begins on 1 September. Thus we begin with homilies composed for the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin (8 September), then the Entrance into the Temple (21 November) and so on, up to the Dormition (15 August). Although it is impossible to be comprehensive in my coverage, I shall attempt to provide as

¹² Ehrhard 1938, vol. 2, 208–42; 1939, vol. 3, 523–722; Antonopoulou 1997, 95, n. 4, III.

¹³ Antonopoulou 1998; Antonopoulou 2011; Antonopoulou 2013.

¹⁴ Krumbacher 1897; Beck 1959. However, see also Kazhdan 1999 and 2006 for useful discussions of homiletics, as well as other genres of Byzantine literature.

¹⁵ *CPG*, with revised versions.

much detail as possible in the analysis of separate categories within the genre as a whole. Homilies on the Virgin Mary range from high-style panegyric works (called 'logoi' or 'enkomia' in the manuscripts that transmit them) to exegetical homilies that focus more on biblical or apocryphal narratives. 'Occasional' homilies, such as those on the sieges of Constantinople in 626 (attributed to Theodore Synkellos) and 860 (by Photios), adopt a more discursive literary style than the festal orations, although they may offer even more opportunities for displaying the authors' classical training and rhetorical eloquence. The various genres – to the extent that they can be formally determined – offer different insights into Marian doctrine and devotion in the middle Byzantine period.¹⁶ They thus testify to the various aspects of Mary's Christological and intercessory roles, which depended so much on the contexts in which she was invoked both in Constantinople and elsewhere in the medieval Christian world.

The Virgin Mary's role in the Christological mystery that lies at the heart of Christian revelation remained a central preoccupation for preachers in both festal and occasional contexts.¹⁷ As we saw in the Introduction, this doctrine, which had been elaborated especially at the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon in 431 and 451 CE, respectively, defined Mary as the one who had been preordained to conceive and bear Christ, the Son and Logos who was co-eternal with the Father, when he became incarnate. The Virgin's essential part in this process inspired growing theological reflection, especially after the Council of Ephesus, on her purity, holiness and capacity, as one who was 'higher than the heavens and wider than the whole of creation . . . [since] no one dwelt in [her] except the Craftsman and Creator and Maker of heavenly and earthly things'.¹⁸ Festal preachers describe this doctrine discursively, but also resort frequently to typological or metaphorical language in order to express the way in which a human being could contain, convey or otherwise offer access to divinity itself. Such signs (for example, types involving

¹⁶ As discussed in the Introduction, 20–5, the classification of Marian sermons remains problematic: the boundaries between 'festal' and 'occasional' homilies are porous, with considerable variation in structure, content and style existing within each category; see Cunningham 2008c; Mayer 2008. However, the distinctions that do exist – at least in theory – between these groups are significant enough to justify my decision to treat them separately. Similarly, I regret the omission (for reasons of space) of homilies on Dominical feasts (such as the Nativity of Christ), which also deal with the Theotokos, in this study. I hope that future studies of Mary's role in the homiletic genre as a whole will succeed in filling these gaps.

¹⁷ For an excellent new study of Christological developments in Marian sermons of the seventh and eighth centuries, see Iverites 2019.

¹⁸ John of Euboea, *Homily on the Conception of Mary*, PG 96, 1488A–B; trans. Cunningham 2008b, 188–9.

the tabernacle or temple and its furniture) may also refer subtly to the various ways in which God revealed himself both before and after his incarnation – whether in the words of prophecy or scripture or in sacraments such as baptism and the Eucharist.

Marian sermons frequently open with summaries of God's whole dispensation of salvation, beginning with creation and leading towards the final resurrection, as they describe how Mary reversed Eve's sin and enabled the restoration of God's image in humanity by giving birth to the second Adam, Christ.¹⁹ In addition to celebrating the Virgin's exalted role as Theotokos and Mother of God, however, preachers consistently point to her humanity, stressing the genealogy that led to her legendary parents, Joachim and Anna, the physical nature of her birth and death, and (with some variation among individual homilists) her maternal qualities vis à vis Christ and the rest of humanity. Although typology played an important role in Marian festal sermons from the seventh century onward, I shall save detailed discussion of this topic for the chapter on hymnography since it is in that liturgical genre that this method of exegesis is fully refined.²⁰ I will confine myself in this chapter to tracing changes in the Christological depiction of Mary in festal and occasional sermons, also seeking to determine whether variations in dogma that have been noticed by some scholars (for example, with respect to her conception and death) are visible in the writings of individual preachers.²¹

Another aspect of Marian preaching that developed noticeably from the seventh century onward was a willingness to accept apocryphal, as well as biblical, sources as a basis for celebrating the Virgin's conception, birth, life and death.²² Some feasts, including the Virgin's Nativity, Entrance into the Temple, Conception and Dormition, depended on such sources since the canonical New Testament provides scant information about these aspects of Mary's life. As several scholars have recently noted, liturgical writers from the early eighth century onward began openly to cite the *Protevangelion of James*, the late second- to early third-century gospel that contained a narrative concerning the Virgin's conception from an elderly

¹⁹ On the use of Adam/Eve and Christ/Mary typology, which had been used since at least the second century by Christian writers including Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons, see Graef 1963 (2009), 29–31; Reynolds 2012, 55–6.

²⁰ See Chapter 4, 146–9.

²¹ See, for example, Jugie 1952 (with regard to homilies on Mary's Conception); Jugie 1944; Wenger 1955; Mimouni 1995 (homilies on Mary's Dormition).

²² For general introductions to the apocryphal sources concerning the infancy, life and death of the Virgin Mary that circulated in the Greek-speaking Byzantine world, see Shoemaker 2002; Norelli 2009.

(and previously sterile) Jewish couple, Joachim and Anna, her dedication to the temple at the age of three, betrothal to Joseph, annunciation and birth-giving of Christ, and the flight into Egypt.²³ Whereas patristic writers including Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa were aware of this source, they avoided alluding to it by name.²⁴ Suddenly, in the eighth-century sermons on the Conception, Nativity and Entrance of the Mother of God into the Temple, we find this text being openly quoted and interpreted – often in an intertextual way that combined its narrative with that of the canonical Old and New Testaments.

Further strands of the apocryphal traditions surrounding the ‘dormition’, or death, and assumption of the Virgin Mary influenced Greek homilies on this subject even earlier, with John of Thessalonike and Theoteknos of Livias employing various versions of the story from as early as the beginning of the seventh century.²⁵ I shall explore in the course of this chapter the responses of individual preachers to the Marian apocryphal traditions during the middle Byzantine centuries. Whereas most of these orators accept and elaborate these narratives enthusiastically, a few also allude to reservations in some (unidentified) circles concerning their veracity or orthodoxy while others appear to employ them with more care than did others.

Finally, I am interested in the expression of devotion towards Mary, the Mother of God, as intercessor in the middle Byzantine period, on the basis of the homiletic evidence. We will examine the form and manner of preachers’ invocation of the Virgin Mary as protector and advocate of the rest of humanity before her Son, Jesus Christ. Scholarly attention has focused in recent years on the development of a more ‘maternal’ image of the Virgin in texts and art during the iconoclastic centuries: Ioli Kalavrezou and Niki Tsironis have argued that this process was linked to iconophile defence of the reality of Christ’s incarnation according to the Chalcedonian definition of two natures in one hypostasis.²⁶ Eighth- and ninth-century Marian sermons provide ample evidence to substantiate this theory, suggesting that ideas about Mary’s (as well as her mother Anna’s) motherly qualities developed much earlier in texts than they did in art. However, it is worth looking more closely at such literary passages in order

²³ *Protevangelion of James*; for discussion of this text, see Introduction, n. 27. On its reception by eighth-century homilists, see Panou 2011, 139–43; Cunningham 2011a.

²⁴ Elliott 1993, 49; Panou 2011, 66–71.

²⁵ Daley 1998, 7–9; for background on the various traditions concerning Mary’s Dormition, see below, 116–19; cf. Mimouni 1995; Shoemaker 2002.

²⁶ Kalavrezou 1990; Tsironis 2000; Kalavrezou 2000.

to provide nuance to this argument. As Annemarie Weyl Carr has recently argued, the Virgin's *eleos*, or 'mercy', was not always associated with personal affect in this period, nor was it directed towards the Christian faithful, as opposed to Christ.²⁷ It is also noticeable that the term 'Mother of God' (whether appearing in Greek as *Meter Theou*, *Theometor* or other forms) remained a formal and dogmatic term in this period, being used synonymously with 'Theotokos' and other epithets. More affective invocation of the Virgin, combined with indications that she enters into the feelings of her supplicants, appeared consistently in homiletic writing only after the end of Iconoclasm.²⁸ Writers including George of Nikomedia, John Geometres and Euthymios the Athonite envisaged Mary as a tender, sorrowing mother who suffered unendurable pain at Christ's death on the cross.²⁹ However, the extent to which post-iconoclast preachers focused on Mary's human and maternal qualities continued to vary. It is important to consider the liturgical context, intended audience and purpose of individual sermons when assessing their content, since such factors could influence the manner in which homilists chose to portray the Virgin.

The corpus of sermons written for various feasts – as well as for occasional celebrations – of the Mother of God between the seventh and tenth centuries is surprisingly diverse in spite of an increasingly conventional repertoire of theological teachings, typology and narrative or intercessory content. Such diversity seems to depend more on the creative contributions of individual preachers than on the historical development of Marian veneration. Nevertheless, as I hope to demonstrate, it is possible to discern some doctrinal and devotional trends in the course of this period. Progress from an exalted and remote 'Theotokos' to a more human and maternal 'Mother of God' continued to grow between the seventh and tenth centuries in liturgical texts as well as in art; in addition to this, we are able to discern an increasingly personal aspect in Marian devotion, which reflects changes in Byzantine Christian spirituality during this period. Iconoclasm played a role in this process, but it remains unclear

²⁷ Weyl Carr forthcoming. I am very grateful to the author for showing me a draft of this article, which was originally delivered at a Colloquium on emotion at Dumbarton Oaks Research Library in Washington, DC.

²⁸ One exception to this rule, as we shall see later, is (ps-)John of Damascus' *Homily on the Nativity of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Kotter 1988. This employs more affective language in relation to the Virgin than is found in most eighth-century Marian festal sermons.

²⁹ On the theme of Mary's lament at the cross, as handled in Byzantine liturgical hymns and homilies, as well as in art, see Alexiou 1974 (2002), 62–131; Maguire 1981, 91–108; Tsironis 1997; Tsironis 1998; Shoemaker 2011c; Tsironis 2011.

how much the iconophile understanding of the Virgin Mary differed from that of the iconoclasts. In any case, it is probably liturgical changes, including the addition of homiletic and hymnographic texts within a variety of new settings throughout the liturgical year, which contributed most to this process.

The Conception, Nativity and Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

Elaboration of the narrative of the Virgin Mary's conception, birth and childhood, as recounted in the second-century *Protevangelion of James*, began, as I suggested above, only from about the eighth century onward in liturgical homilies and hymns.³⁰ Some eighth-century writers referred to both events in the same text (either prose or verse) – whether this was intended for the feast of the Nativity or that of the Entrance of the Virgin into the Temple.³¹ This suggests that these festivals had only recently been accepted into the calendar and were not yet being celebrated consistently throughout the empire.³² The narrative about Mary's infancy did, however, form part of the accepted repertoire of liturgical tradition from about this time onward. Many preachers elaborated the apocryphal story in the same way that they did the New Testament accounts: they interpreted the theological meaning of the narrative, showed its relationship with canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, and sought to involve their congregations in a dramatic re-enactment of the events that it described. The last of these endeavours could be enhanced by means of the rhetorical device of *ethopoiia* (dramatic characterisation). Preachers sometimes invented pensive monologues for Joachim and Anna, along with dialogues between the latter and Zacharias, the high priest who received the three-year-old Mary in the temple, the archangel Gabriel, Joseph, and other characters who featured in the apocryphal story of Mary's infancy.³³

Official acceptance of the *Protevangelion* narrative from the first half of the eighth century onward reflected growing theological emphasis on the

³⁰ See above, n. 23. ³¹ Cunningham 2008b, 32–3.

³² It is interesting to note, for example, that John of Euboea, writing in the middle of the eighth century, lists the main Marian feasts, but omits those of the Entrance into the Temple and the Dormition. Later in the same homily, however, he adds the latter to his 'decalogue', or list of ten feasts, emphasising its importance as 'the last and great one': John of Euboea, *Homily on the Conception of the Virgin Mary*, PG 96, 1473C–1476B, 1497B–1500A; Cunningham 2008b, 24, 182–3, 194–5.

³³ On the use of dialogue in Byzantine homiletics, see La Piana 1912 (1971); Kecskeméti 1993; Cunningham 2003.

Virgin Mary's human nature, which guaranteed that of Christ. Mary's genealogical roots were traced through her parents, Joachim and Anna, to the Old Testament king David – although sometimes Anna was described as belonging to the priestly lineage of the Levites.³⁴ Preachers also stressed the righteousness and good standing of this holy couple within the Jewish community, which made the rejection of Joachim's offering to the temple all the more humiliating. Sermons celebrating the Conception, Nativity or Commemoration of Joachim and Anna on 9 September adhered to the narrative found in the *Protevangalion of James* in asserting that the former went out into the wilderness to pray and fast for forty days while Anna remained at home, lamenting both her own sterility and the absence of her husband.³⁵ It is also noticeable that preachers frequently used this opportunity to celebrate the harmony of Joachim's and Anna's marriage. John of Euboea, probably writing in the early eighth century on the Conception of the Virgin, vividly describes Anna's distress at the absence of her 'dearest husband', inventing a monologue in which she questions whether he is even still alive.³⁶ The eighth- or ninth-century lay preacher Kosmas Vestitor also stresses this pious partnership, which he contrasts with the more dysfunctional relationship of Adam and Eve:

[Anna was] a woman who rejected all evil; a woman who lived faithfully before God with her husband; a woman who regularly attended the temple of God along with her own spouse, with prayers, fasts, and pleasing, bountiful gifts; a woman who in unanimity of soul and bodily chastity always possessed constancy of understanding with her husband.³⁷

³⁴ See, for example, John of Euboea, *Homily on the Conception of the Virgin Mary*, PG 96, 1489C: '[The Jews] accepted that it was he who advanced in wisdom from God and men (cf. Lk 2:52), and that Mary, the holy Theotokos, was from a royal and priestly tribe, according to how they reckoned this customarily among themselves', trans. Cunningham 2008b, 189–90; Kosmas Vestitor, *Homily on Holy Joachim and Anna*, PG 106, 1012A: 'For the righteous progenitors of the Theotokos were truly perceived in advance as worthy of being related to Christ in flesh and of being honoured as belonging to a famous family, by which I mean a kingly and priestly one. For the Theotokos takes her genealogy from both, since the two tribes became intertwined in different ways from the beginning . . .', trans. Cunningham 2008b, 143. For discussion of traditions (including Syriac) concerning the Virgin Mary's genealogy, see Brock 2006.

³⁵ This contrasts with the narrative found in four middle Byzantine *Lives of the Virgin* (to be discussed in Chapter 5, 191–205): according to those texts, Joachim prayed in the temple instead of retreating into the wilderness. See Epiphanius of Kallistratos, *Life of the Virgin*, ed. Dressel 1843, 16, PG 120, 189C; Symeon the Metaphrast, *Life of the Virgin 2*, ed. Latyshev 1912, 348. 10–15; John Geometres, *Life of the Virgin*, Vat. gr. 504, fol. 173v, col. 1; Georgian *Life of the Virgin 3–4*, ed. Shoemaker 2012, 38–9.

³⁶ John of Euboea, *Homily on the Conception of the Virgin Mary*, PG 96, 1472B–C, trans. Cunningham 2008b, 180–1 (8).

³⁷ Kosmas Vestitor, *Oration on Joachim and Anna*, PG 106, 1005–6, trans. Cunningham 2008b, 140 (3).

Euthymios of Constantinople, preaching towards the end of the ninth century, further praises the couple's blessed marriage, which he envisions in terms of 'piety, ascetic endeavour, and every godly virtue'.³⁸ Such emphasis on the holiness of this marriage is noteworthy since, according to Jugie, the sermon was probably delivered in the first instance to a male monastic audience.³⁹

As Eirini Panou has recently shown, preachers of our period also emphasised the ascetic qualities of Joachim and Anna, which rendered them worthy of divine favour.⁴⁰ They identified the typological connection between the elderly couple's conception of Mary and that of the prophet Samuel from Hannah and Elkanah (1 Kgs 1-2 [1 Sam 1-2]). However, some of the earlier orators also emphasise the fact that conception, when it did take place due to God's miraculous intervention, occurred in an entirely natural way. Andrew of Crete, after recounting the story of their sterility and prayers to God to be granted a child, describes the fulfilment of the elderly couple's request in detail:

[The divine power] stimulated [Joachim] into fruitfulness and [Anna] into producing a child; and having meanwhile sprinkled the withered passages of the reproductive organs with the juices of sperm production, it brought them from infertility into productivity.⁴¹

John of Euboea describes the same phenomenon, more metaphorically, in the following way:

... blessed is the descendant and daughter of David who comes forth from your loins and belly. For you are earth while she is heaven. You are of clay, but through her those who are of clay become heavenly.⁴²

(Ps-)John of Damascus is explicit about the Virgin Mary's physical conception from both parents, but also explores the emotional bond between parents and child, as we see in one passage of his homily on the Nativity of the Theotokos:

Blessed are the loins and the womb from which you sprouted forth!
Blessed are the arms that carried you and the lips which tasted your pure

³⁸ Euthymios of Constantinople, *Homily I on the Conception of the Virgin Mary* 2, ed. Jugie 1926 (1990), 442. 40-1.

³⁹ Jugie 1922 (2003), 479. ⁴⁰ Panou 2011, 111-17.

⁴¹ Andrew of Crete, *Homily I on the Nativity of the Virgin Mary*, PG 97, 816C-D, trans. Cunningham 2008b, 80 (6).

⁴² John of Euboea, *Homily on the Conception of the Virgin Mary*, PG 96, 1477B, trans. Cunningham 2008b, 184 (12).

kisses – the lips only of your parents that you might always be a virgin in every way!⁴³

In contrast to such graphic – and sometimes affective – accounts of the conception of the Virgin Mary, however, some later preachers became more circumspect. Late ninth- and early tenth-century preachers such as George of Nikomedia, Euthymios of Constantinople and Leo VI emphasised the prayerful supplications of Joachim and Anna to God before they conceived Mary, avoiding any mention of the physical nature of the reproductive process.⁴⁴ Panou has argued that some middle Byzantine preachers went so far as to teach that Mary's conception took place as a result of prayer, rather than through sexual intercourse;⁴⁵ however, I am not fully convinced by this theory. Theodore of Studios, as Panou herself records, wrote between 809 and 811/12 to correct a hermit named Theoktistos of his mistaken – even heretical – notion that the Virgin Mary had been conceived without physical union taking place between her parents.⁴⁶ The fact that such discussions took place at all indicates that some uncertainty surrounded this subject, probably inspired by increasing emphasis on Mary's purity and status as the one who had been chosen by God – from the very beginning of his saving dispensation – to bear his Son. Nevertheless, middle Byzantine preachers remained committed to the theological doctrine that the Virgin represented Christ's physical link with the rest of humanity. If she had escaped the normal methods of conception and birth, along with death, the reality of his incarnation would have been undermined.

Interest in Mary's family background, physical conception and emotional bonds with her parents reflected, according to Niki Tsironis, an iconophile campaign to reinforce – in opposition to a perceived dualist tendency in iconoclast theology – the human nature that Christ received directly from his mother.⁴⁷ Such dualism consisted in the alleged denial by iconoclasts that any aspect of the created world, including not only Christ's human body but also physical reminders of him, such as relics or icons,

⁴³ (ps-)John of Damascus, *Homily on the Nativity of the Virgin Mary* 6, ed. Kotter 1988, 175. 13–15, trans. Cunningham 2008b, 61. For further commentary on this passage, see Tsironis 2011, 192.

⁴⁴ George of Nikomedia, *Homily on the Conception of St Anna*, PG 100, 1365C–1369D; Euthymios of Constantinople, *Homily II on the Conception of St Anna* 2, ed. Jugie 1925 (1990), 451–2; Leo VI ('the Wise'), *Homily XV, On the Nativity of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Antonopoulou 2008, 221–6.

⁴⁵ Panou 2011, esp. 114–17.

⁴⁶ Theodore of Studios, *Letter 490*, ed. Fatouros 1992, 16–20; Panou 2011, 113.

⁴⁷ Tsironis 1998, 180; Tsironis 2000; Tsironis 2005; Tsironis 2010; Tsironis 2011.

could be transfigured or infused with divine power. Tsironis has also shown how preachers of this period attempted by rhetorical methods to involve their audiences in the sensual and emotional aspects of both biblical and apocryphal stories. Congregations were invited metaphorically to see, hear, smell, touch and taste the narrative of the incarnation; this should be assimilated not simply by means of text and hearing, but by full physical participation in the liturgical celebration.⁴⁸ Such experience could also now be reinforced by emphasis on an apocryphal narrative that seemed to have both biblical and theological foundations – even if it lacked full canonical credentials based on patristic or conciliar endorsement. The Virgin Mary, according to eighth-century and later liturgical writers, possessed a biography that linked her, and therefore Christ as well, to a royal and righteous lineage that had been foretold by prophets and implicitly accepted by earlier Christian tradition.

There is evidence to suggest that, in spite of liturgical writers' acceptance of the Marian apocryphal tradition by the middle of the eighth century, some individuals or groups within the Church remained opposed to this trend.⁴⁹ Such material is difficult to interpret since it takes the form of polemic, which was a common feature in Byzantine homiletics;⁵⁰ nevertheless, it appears often enough to suggest that eighth- and ninth-century preachers were not always sure that their message would be received enthusiastically. Germanos I of Constantinople, preaching before 730, referred to 'those who are moving their tongues against' Mary in his second homily on her Entrance into the Temple, and rebuked them for failing to acknowledge the events that he described.⁵¹ Tarasios, who was patriarch of Constantinople from 784 to 806, inveighed against those Christians who claimed that Anna gave birth to Mary after seven, rather than nine, months of pregnancy. He accused them of having learned such teachings from 'heretics', who had 'fallen from truth and rectitude.'⁵² Just over a century later, Photios, who was also patriarch of Constantinople, attacked unnamed people who did not accept the story of Anna's miraculous conception of Mary at an advanced age.⁵³ It is unclear whether Photios was criticising these opponents merely for doubting the truth of the miracle or for

⁴⁸ Tsironis 2011, esp. 183–8. ⁴⁹ This issue is discussed in Panou 2011, 117–43.

⁵⁰ See Cunningham 1999. On the wider issue of polemic in Byzantine literature, see Cameron 1991b; Déroche 1991; Cameron and Hoyland 2011; Cameron 2014.

⁵¹ Germanos of Constantinople, *Homily II on the Entrance*, PG 98, 312A, trans. Cunningham 2008b, 164.

⁵² Tarasios of Constantinople, *Homily on the Entrance* 6, PG 98, 1485D. According to Eirini Panou, John of Damascus, Andrew of Crete, the *Synax. CP* and the *Synaxarion* of Basil II also defended Anna's nine-month pregnancy; see Panou 2011, 127.

⁵³ Photios, *Homily IX, On the Birth of the Virgin* 5, ed. Laourdas 1959, 91. 26–92. 12; trans. Mango 1958, 167–8; cf. Panou 2011, 118.

rejecting the witness of the apocryphal narrative. Nor is it evident, as in the case of earlier preachers' adversaries, just who they were, especially when Photios associated them later in the same sermon with pagans or, possibly, classicising intellectuals.⁵⁴ All of the above examples suggest that the acceptance of Marian apocryphal texts continued to be questioned by some prominent Christians throughout the eighth and ninth centuries. Such opposition may have been directed for the most part against the non-canonical nature of such texts; however, it also seems to have focused occasionally on particular aspects of these narratives.

Any opposition to apocryphal texts, along with other aspects of the Marian cult, would appear to have been weak and short-lived, however, judging by the extent to which they featured in many sermons that are dated both to this period and later. Popular preachers such as Andrew of Crete, John of Damascus and George of Nikomedia relied extensively on the *Protevangelion of James*, along with apocryphal accounts of the dormition, in their sermons. Increasingly, as we saw earlier, such material attracted as much exegesis and dramatic elaboration as did the canonical biblical texts.⁵⁵ Coverage of the Virgin Mary's Entrance into the Temple was also based entirely on the narrative of the *Protevangelion*, which relates that, having reached the age of three, the holy child was taken by her parents to the temple in Jerusalem and dedicated to God as a gift of thanksgiving. The second-century text relates how, following a procession to the temple with 'the undefiled daughters of the Hebrews', the priest placed Mary on the third step of the altar where 'she danced for joy with her feet and the whole house of Israel loved her'.⁵⁶ The child then remained in the temple until she reached the age of twelve, being 'nurtured like a dove' and receiving 'food from the hand of an angel'.⁵⁷

Although the date when the feast of the Virgin Mary's Entrance into the Temple (21 November) was added to the Constantinopolitan liturgical calendar remains unclear, most scholars accept that this must have

⁵⁴ Mango suggests in his introduction to this sermon that Photios may have been directing his tirade against a rival school of intellectuals in ninth-century Constantinople, which possibly leaned towards the study of Plato and the Neoplatonist philosophers more than he liked. See Mango 1958, 163–4.

⁵⁵ Panou suggests that George of Nikomedia represented the culmination of this process, since he treated apocryphal texts such as the *Protevangelion of James* with as much reverence as scripture in his homilies on the Mother of God. See Panou 2011, 110.

⁵⁶ This image is inspired by David dancing before the Lord, as recounted in 2 Kgs 6:14 [2 Sam 6:14] (although the Greek text of the LXX says that David 'struck upon tuned instruments before the Lord'; see Pietersma and Wright, trans., 2007, 281).

⁵⁷ *Protevangelion of James* 7.3–8.1, Elliott 1993, 60.

occurred around the beginning of the eighth century – or possibly even later.⁵⁸ As I suggested above, flexibility about full-scale celebration of the feast in different regions may be indicated both by its absence in earlier liturgical sources, such as the Morcelli calendar,⁵⁹ and by some eighth-century preachers' tendency to celebrate Mary's dedication to the temple in sermons on her Conception or Nativity.⁶⁰ As the apocryphal narrative of this event already suggests, the acceptance of this female child into the Jewish temple in Jerusalem was replete with theological significance. According to the *Protevangelion of James*, Mary was even received into the innermost sanctuary, or 'holy of holies', of the temple.⁶¹ Middle Byzantine preachers developed the typological meaning both of the temple and of its innermost sanctuary. The Virgin was thus described as the 'living temple' that superseded the lifeless temple of stone: she was being prepared to contain, as the temple's sanctuary had done before her, the limitless and eternal God who would become incarnate in her womb.⁶² Preachers, along with hymnographers, developed a typology in connection with the Jewish temple that expressed succinctly the sacred nature not only of the temple itself, but also of the objects and furnishings within its precincts, which had conveyed or revealed the living God to his chosen people. Mary, as

⁵⁸ See Cunningham 2008b, 24–6; Krausmüller 2011, 228–30; Panou 2018, 46–7. Some scholars believe, however, that the feast was introduced earlier than the early eighth century, arguing that it was related to the inauguration date (20 November) of the sixth-century (Justinianic) church of the Nea in Jerusalem; see Carlton 2006, 103–5; cf. Harrison 2006, 150. Earlier discussion of this question occurs in Vaillhé 1901–2; Chirat 1945. The absence of pre-eighth-century hymnography, homilies and other liturgical evidence for the feast suggests that, whereas the dedication of the Nea church may have influenced the eventual choice of date for the feast, this process may have occurred several centuries later. The difficulty of authenticating early eighth-century homilies for the feast, including those that are attributed to Germanos of Constantinople and Andrew of Crete, is addressed in Chirat 1945, 128–30. On three spurious unpublished homilies that are attributed in manuscripts to Andrew (Cod. Athon. Laurae E147 (CPG 8201); Cod. Athon. Esphigmenou 76; Cod. Panteleimon 300), see Brubaker and Cunningham 2007, 243, nn. 49–50. Another homily on the Entrance that is listed as unpublished among Andrew of Crete's works (CPG 8202) and which is contained in two twelfth-century manuscripts (Athen. 2108 and Hierosol. Sab. 60) is in fact excerpted from Andrew's *Homily I on the Nativity of the Virgin*; see Brubaker and Cunningham 2007, 244. For a recent summary of the questions surrounding the institution of the feast of the Entrance, see Kishpaugh 1941, 30–6; Olkinuora 2015, 34–8.

⁵⁹ *Morcelli Calendar*, vol. 1, 33–4. This calendar probably dates to around the early eighth century; see Krausmüller 2011, 229.

⁶⁰ For example, Andrew of Crete, *Homily I on the Nativity of the Virgin Mary*, PG 97, 820B–C; John of Euboea, *Homily on the Conception of the Virgin Mary*, PG 96, 1481B–1489A. John also fails to mention the feast of the Entrance into the Temple in his list of ten great feasts; see above, n. 32.

⁶¹ Although the *Protevangelion of James* does not mention this detail in its narrative of Mary's upbringing in the temple, it is mentioned later in the text, at Chapter 13.2; see Elliott 1993, 62.

⁶² See, for example, Andrew of Crete, *Homily IV on the Nativity of the Virgin Mary*, PG 97, 877D–880B; (ps-)John of Damascus, *Homily on the Nativity of the Virgin Mary* 10, ed. Kotter 1988, 180; Germanos I of Constantinople, *Homily I on the Entrance*, PG 98, 293, 301.

Theotokos, became the antitype of Moses' tabernacle, the ark of the covenant, the jar that contained manna, the seven-branched candlestick and, as we have seen, the temple itself. The theological meaning of the apocryphal narrative, which contained rich intertextual association with the Old and New Testaments, dominated most homiletic discourse. Such a preoccupation, which is visible in both sermons and hymns, was concerned above all with the Christological aspect of Marian veneration; the Virgin's preparation for her future role as 'birth-giver of God' was associated above all with the ritual purity of a sacred precinct belonging to the Jews that would give way to a new covenant, namely, God's physical entrance into creation through her flesh.

Although middle Byzantine preachers thus focus above all on the theological and typological symbolism of this feast, they sometimes seek to engage their audiences in the human and dramatic aspects of the narrative. The two sermons that are ascribed to Germanos of Constantinople, for example, both invent dialogues when describing the encounter between Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, and the high priest Zacharias.⁶³ Such direct speech is used in order to expound the theological meaning of the events that are unfolding, as the parents express their thankfulness to God and the nature of their gift while the priest acknowledges his own understanding of its significance – obviously informed by his awareness of the typological and prophetic background of the offering. However, the preacher also used this trope in order to convey dramatically the human dimension of the story. The second sermon on the Entrance, for example, has Anna confess to the priest the range of emotions that she experienced, first in sterility and then in receipt of God's favour and the miraculous gift of a child.⁶⁴ Congregations, on hearing these words, might have been moved to sympathise with Anna and to follow her example in seeking God's help for problems such as sterility, childbirth or any form of emotional distress. Like all other feasts, that of the Entrance into the Temple thus conveyed not only a Christological message, but also a human dimension that was directly associated with this theological teaching. That women played a major role in the story may have added to its appeal for many lay Christians throughout the Byzantine period and beyond.

To stray slightly beyond our period, it is worth noting that, alone among middle Byzantine preachers, the twelfth-century preacher, James of

⁶³ Germanos I of Constantinople, *Homilies I-II on the Entrance*, PG 98, 300A–304B, 312D–316B.

⁶⁴ Germanos I of Constantinople, *Homily II on the Entrance*, PG 98, 313A–316B.

Kokkinobaphos, comments on the unusual aspect of the narrative of Mary's Entrance into the Temple – namely, that a female child should have been admitted into a Jewish precinct that had so far been frequented only by priests. James is aware of the gender barrier that is deliberately being overturned in the apocryphal narrative when he comments that it was an 'innovation' (*kainotomian*) for a girl to enter a place that was normally occupied only by men.⁶⁵ After some close exegesis of the relevant passage in the *Protevangelion of James*, the preacher concludes that Mary's unique purity and future role as birth-giver of God justifies her presence in the temple. It is possible that his awareness of a female patron, for whom this 'desk' homily may have been specially composed, also influenced James Kokkinobaphos' treatment of gender issues in this story.⁶⁶

Christ's Presentation in the Temple or 'the Meeting' (*Hypapante*)

Pauline Allen provides a useful overview of the early and middle Byzantine homiletic tradition associated with the feast of Christ's 'Meeting' in the temple with Symeon, which had been celebrated in Jerusalem since as early as the fourth century.⁶⁷ As Allen notes, the feast was marked by both a stationary liturgy and the use of lighted candles in both Jerusalem and Constantinople, where it was introduced into the liturgical calendar either in 527 or 542.⁶⁸ Although the feast of the Presentation began as a purely Christological celebration, marking the transition of the old covenant (symbolised by the prophet Symeon) to the new, it moved in the course of the sixth and seventh centuries towards a more Mariological focus. This was based on two factors: first, the celebration of Mary's purification forty days after giving birth to Christ and second, remembrance of the biblical passage in which Symeon predicted that a sword would pierce her heart (Lk 2:35); the latter passage, following rather negative reception by early theologians such as Origen,⁶⁹ came to be interpreted by later preachers as

⁶⁵ James of Kokkinobaphos, *Sermon III*, PG 127, col. 621 A–B.

⁶⁶ On James's female patron, see Jeffreys 2014; Jeffreys 2019, 282–3.

⁶⁷ Allen 2007, esp. 3–8; Allen 2011, 78–84. On the feast, see further Leclercq 1948; Aubineau 1978, 2–4. Although originally celebrated on 14 February (forty days after the earlier feast of the Nativity of Christ on 6 January), the feast of the Presentation was moved forward to 2 February after that of Christ's Nativity had moved back to 25 September. This occurred towards the end of the fourth century. See Talley 1986, 134–41.

⁶⁸ Allen 2007, 2–3. George Kedrenos recorded the introduction of the feast during the reign of Justin I. See Kedrenos, *Historiarum compendium*, ed. Bekker 1838, vol. 1, 641.

⁶⁹ See Introduction, n. 66.

referring to the sorrow that the Virgin Mary would experience on witnessing her son's death on the cross. It is also likely, however, that emphasis on the Theotokos in later homilies on the feast of Christ's Presentation in the Temple reflected her increasing importance, in both Christological and devotional terms, in the Byzantine Church.

The attribution and dates of post-sixth-century homilies on the feast of the Presentation remain especially problematic. Two sermons, attributed to Leontios of Neapolis and Sophronios of Jerusalem, belong to the seventh century, a dubious work which has been excluded from John Damascene's authentic works may be dated to the eighth, and a sermon that is attributed variously to Athanasios, Proklos and George of Nikomedia, along with one by Leo VI, may belong to the ninth or early tenth centuries.⁷⁰ Emphasis on the purification of Mary (as well as of the infant Christ) appears in both seventh-century works. Leontios provides intertextual discussion of the sanctification that she experienced when the Holy Spirit came upon her and the power of the Highest overshadowed her at the conception of Christ (Lk 1:35), stressing the divine nature of this birth and the purity of the virginal mother. The focus here remains Christological, reinforced by antithetical statements that describe the infant being embraced by motherly arms even while having the cherubim as his throne.⁷¹ Both Leontios and Sophronios interpret Symeon's prophecy to Mary as referring to her pain at the passion: they acknowledge the uncertainty and doubt that not only she, but also the myrrh-bearers and apostles, will experience, but point forward towards the resurrection, which will release them from this fear.⁷² The two seventh-century preachers use this festal opportunity to emphasise orthodox doctrine concerning the two natures of Christ; the Virgin Mary's role in this mystery, as 'God-bearer' yet human mother, thus receives attention more for dogmatic than devotional reasons.

The sermon that is attributed to the eighth-century monk and preacher, John of Damascus, characterised by Allen as a 'dry composition . . . [which] could well be a desk homily',⁷³ explores at some length Symeon's statement to Mary about the sword piercing her soul.⁷⁴ Like his predecessors, this

⁷⁰ See Allen 2007, 7–8, for a list and descriptions of these sermons.

⁷¹ Leontios of Neapolis, *Homily on the Presentation*, PG 93, 1569D.

⁷² Leontios of Neapolis, *Homily on the Presentation*, PG 93, 1580C–D; Sophronios of Jerusalem, *Homily IV, On the Presentation*, ed. Duffy 2020, 102–47.

⁷³ Allen 2007, 7.

⁷⁴ (ps-)John of Damascus, *Sermon on the Presentation of Christ into the Temple* 10, ed. Kotter 1988, 390–1.

homilist interprets Symeon's words as referring to the Virgin's doubt and pain at Christ's future passion, which he describes in vivid language. She will suffer in her heart what Christ experienced in physical terms. However, the following biblical phrase, 'that the thoughts of many may be revealed', is understood to refer to the enlightenment that will follow the resurrection. The homily ends with praise for the Theotokos in the form of *chairetismoi*, invoking her intercessory and protective role in relation to the rest of humanity.⁷⁵

The homily on the Presentation that is attributed variously to Athanasios, Proklos and George of Nikomedia, offers a straightforward, exegetical approach to the feast.⁷⁶ The preacher expounds the Lukan pericope verse-by-verse, endeavouring by means of exclamations and direct questions to bring the event to life for his congregation. He praises Mary's purity and virginity, which reveals the divinity of her Son, but also emphasises her humanity as she mourns his death on the cross.⁷⁷ The sermon expresses less overt praise for the Mother of God, however, which perhaps suggests an earlier – possibly seventh-century – date. Leo VI's sermon on the same subject, which is dated to the period 894–6,⁷⁸ begins with Christological focus; however, the preacher emphasises Mary's role as Christ's virginal mother throughout the oration in order to underline the mystery of the incarnation. The overturning of the old covenant, which is nevertheless met in the person of Symeon – as well as typologically in the Theotokos – leads up to celebration of Mary's role in initiating a new creation. The sermon ends with praise for the 'Virgin and Mother' who made possible this saving dispensation and who also acts as protector and intercessor for the empire and its faithful inhabitants.⁷⁹

The focus of the feast of the Presentation thus remained Christological, but preachers increasingly – especially from the seventh century onward – stressed its Marian content. Most homilies allude to Mary's purification after forty days only in order to show how her virginal birth bore witness to Christ's divine and human natures. Symeon's prophecy concerning the sword that would pierce the Virgin's soul is understood to refer to her suffering at Christ's passion; this reveals her close association (in both

⁷⁵ (ps-)John of Damascus, *Sermon on the Presentation of Christ* 14, ed. Kotter 1988, 394–5.

⁷⁶ Allen discusses the date of the (ps-)Athanasian sermon (*CPG* 2271), noting that it shares four passages (practically verbatim) with the sermon by Sophronios and arguing that it must be dated to a period well after the Council of Chalcedon (451). Owing to the well-developed Marian emphasis in this homily, it seems likely that it is dated to the seventh century or later; see Allen 2007, 7–8.

⁷⁷ (ps-)Athanasios, *Homily on the Presentation*, PG 28, 996D. ⁷⁸ Antonopoulou 1997, 69.

⁷⁹ Leo VI, *Homily XXVIII, On the Presentation of Christ*, ed. Antonopoulou 2008, 400–1.

physical and emotional terms) with her Son and it would be overturned when he was resurrected from the tomb.

The Annunciation

As we saw in Chapter 2, homilies on the Annunciation began to appear long before the feast was added to the Constantinopolitan liturgical calendar during the reign of Justinian.⁸⁰ The theme of the archangel Gabriel's announcement to the Virgin Mary and her acceptance of the incarnation of Christ (Lk 1: 26–38) was recognised early as initiating God's dispensation for the overturning of the consequences of the Fall and bringing about human salvation. Early homilies on this subject, which were not always associated with any formal celebration of a feast, include works by Hesychios of Jerusalem,⁸¹ (ps-)Proklos of Constantinople⁸² and others. Many of these works contain dialogic sections incorporating direct speech – both between Gabriel and the Virgin Mary and between the latter and Joseph. It is not known why this topic became so associated with the rhetorical device of *ethopoiia*, that is, characterisation through invented speech (either monologue or dialogue), but it may reflect influence from the Syriac liturgical tradition. Byzantine preachers, as well as hymnographers, used dialogue in order to help congregations identify, on a personal and emotional level, with the Virgin Mary. Building on the brief, but also dialogic, narrative of Luke's Gospel, liturgical writers revealed dramatically her initial fear and doubt, followed by gradual acceptance of the integrity of the divine messenger and the saving content of his news. It is nevertheless puzzling that Byzantine liturgical tradition neglected both the Virgin's *fiat* and the question of the moment at which Christ was actually conceived in its portrayal of the Annunciation. Building on a long-standing tradition that Mary was impregnated by means of her ear, as soon as the archangel Gabriel addressed her, preachers, hymnographers and iconographers often implied that the incarnation took place at the moment of their encounter.⁸³ Such an interpretation is contradicted, however, by another strand in the tradition, namely, the dialogue between Mary and Gabriel in which the

⁸⁰ See Chapter 1, 11–12. For discussion of the earlier homiletic tradition, along with sixth- and seventh-century preaching on the Annunciation, see Allen 2011, 72–8.

⁸¹ Hesychios of Jerusalem, *Homilies I and II, On the Hypapante*, ed. Aubineau 1978, 24–43, 61–75; Caro 1971, vol. 1, 40–53.

⁸² (ps-)Proklos of Constantinople, *Homily VI, On the Theotokos*, ed. Leroy 1967.

⁸³ Constan 2003, 294–9.

former is slowly persuaded to accept her role in the incarnation, thereby allowing the process to begin.⁸⁴

The dialogic qualities of two long sermons on the Annunciation that were composed by the eighth-century bishops Andrew of Crete and Germanos of Constantinople have been explored at length elsewhere. Scholars have shown how the former preacher emphasises the theological meaning of the Virgin Mary's dialogue with Gabriel, whereas the latter creates a lively and personal re-enactment of their encounter.⁸⁵ It is difficult to imagine how this homily would have been performed in church – either when it was first delivered or in subsequent public readings – since long sections of the text are composed entirely of direct speech. The moment at which Mary finally gives her assent to the incarnation serves not only to portray her acceptance of this news, but also to express recognition of her own role in the mystery and joy at its outcome:

I shall sing psalms and praise the Lord 'for he has looked upon the humility of his servant; for behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed' (Lk 1:48). And the people of the nations will praise me without ceasing.⁸⁶

Later sermons for this feast, including works by Photios, John Kyriotes Geometres, Leo VI, Michael Psellos and James Kokkinobaphos, abandoned such extensive use of dialogue. They focused instead, like many of their precursors, on the inaugural nature of the feast (although the Conception and Nativity of the Virgin could also be treated in this way), its witness to the reality of the incarnation, and the entrance of God, as Son and Logos, into the created world. Many of these homilists employed high-flown language in their panegyric orations: the beauty of the natural world in springtime was seen as reflecting God's entrance into his creation.⁸⁷ Photios, for example, who probably preached his oration in Hagia Sophia in the presence of the emperor,⁸⁸ used bridal imagery when describing the Virgin Mary's encounter with the archangel. She was chosen by God as a pious and virginal girl to become his bride and initiate salvation for the human

⁸⁴ This apparent contradiction, which has important theological implications, does not worry early Byzantine preachers such as Germanos of Constantinople or Andrew of Crete.

⁸⁵ Kazhdan 1999, 61–4; Cunningham 2003, 110–12; Arentzen 2019.

⁸⁶ Germanos I of Constantinople, *Homily on the Annunciation*, PG 98, 329D, ed. Fecioru 1946, 91, trans. Cunningham 2008b, 234 (4).

⁸⁷ For parallels between textual and visual imagery of springtime in relation to the Annunciation, see Maguire 1981, 42–52.

⁸⁸ Photios, *Homily VII, On the Annunciation*, ed. Laourdas 1959, 74–82; trans. Mango 1958, 139–49; on the context of this homily, see Mango 1958, 138.

race.⁸⁹ John Geometres provided a striking contribution to the genre with his oration on the Annunciation complementing his longer *Life*, or set of orations, on the Mother of God.⁹⁰ Geometres offers throughout this sermon a masterly juxtaposition of opposites: earthly and heavenly, virgin and mother, old and new – all of which reveal not only the beginning of a new dispensation, but also the paradox of the incarnation. He focuses not only on the physical role of the Theotokos, but also on her feelings, thoughts and eventual acceptance of God's will. This portrait depends on earlier accounts, such as that by Germanos, but raises the subject to an even higher theological level. This tenth-century writer works within a long tradition, employing for example a well-established repertoire of types and metaphors for the Virgin Mary; however, he also underlines her essential roles both in guaranteeing Christ's humanity and in revealing his unchanging divinity. It is also noticeable, as in the case of Photios, that John Geometres portrays the Virgin's personal virtue and modesty (which are monastic ideals) to a greater extent than did his eighth-century predecessors. She is envisioned as a real and pious person who plays an essential role in God's dispensation for salvation.

Mary's Lament at the Cross

Like the feasts of Christ's Presentation in the Temple and the Annunciation, the Virgin Mary's lament at the foot of the cross, which was commemorated on Good Friday, was inspired by a biblical rather than an apocryphal source. The Gospel of John, which describes briefly Mary's presence at the foot of the cross and Christ's words both to her and to 'the disciple standing by' (Jn 19:26–7) (who was understood in later tradition to be John the Evangelist) led liturgical writers, including the sixth-century hymnographer Romanos, to develop the theme of the Virgin's lament at the death of her Son. Her maternal pain, as we saw earlier, could be connected with Symeon's prophecy to her when he encountered Christ in the temple and said that 'a sword shall pierce your soul' (Lk 2:35). Niki Tsironis has argued that, following Romanos' development of the subject in a *kontakion* on Mary at the cross, Germanos of Constantinople – or perhaps a contemporary preacher – elaborated this theme in a sermon on the same subject. The text includes an emotional monologue in which the Virgin addresses her Son, asking why his death is necessary and how it fits

⁸⁹ Photios, *Homily VII, On the Annunciation* 7, ed. Laourdas 1959, 80–2; trans. Mango 1958, 146–8.

⁹⁰ John Geometres, *Homily on the Annunciation*, PG 106, 811–48; John Geometres, *Life of the Virgin*, ed. Conostas and Simelidis, forthcoming. See Chapter 5, 197–9.

into God's plan for salvation.⁹¹ This sermon may represent a link between the hymn by Romanos and an oration for Good Friday by George of Nikomedia, in which the emotional response of the Virgin Mary to her Son's death is developed even more fully. According to Tsironis, George's oration for Good Friday represents the first example of a Marian homily on the crucifixion of Christ. The orator uses Mary's involvement in the passion in order to emphasise Christ's full humanity as he died on the cross. Her pain, which she experiences as a burning fire within her entrails,⁹² reveals the Virgin's physical, as well as emotional, relationship with her Son. It is likely, as both Tsironis and Kalavrezou have argued, that such emphasis on Mary's human emotions reflected iconophile insistence on the humanity of Jesus Christ, which he gained from the physical nature of his mother. There is also, however, a theological symmetry in her involvement in his life, from conception to death and resurrection. Whereas she experienced no pain in conceiving and giving birth to her divine Son, Mary was vulnerable or, to speak metaphorically, torn apart – like the veil of the temple – at his death. Her life thus mirrored his, in that she experienced the full pain of his mortality but also saw him resurrected from the dead three days later. It is striking, as Tsironis and Conostas have both suggested, that post-iconoclastic liturgical writers chose to emphasise this paradox, thus illustrating the full *kenosis*, or divine self-emptying into humanity, not only of Christ, the Word of God, but also (metaphorically) of his mother Mary.⁹³

Although the Virgin Mary's lament at the foot of the cross was only treated by a few Byzantine preachers, it was developed further in hymnography – especially in the so-called 'enkomia' (in fact laments)⁹⁴ for Good Friday matins and the short stavrotheotokia ('cross or crucifix hymns in honour of the Theotokos') that were sung throughout the liturgical year especially on Wednesdays and Fridays. We shall examine this hymnography in the next chapter; for now, it is worth commenting merely that the relationship between the homiletic and hymnographic treatment of this theme awaits further study. It is interesting to note that the Virgin's lament appeared also in non-liturgical contexts, such as hagiography in her honour and even in the Byzantine recensions of the apocryphal *Gospel of*

⁹¹ (ps-)Germanos of Constantinople, *Homily on the Burial of the Lord's Body*, PG 98, 269C–277B. Tsironis suggests an eighth- or ninth-century date for the homily, although it is attributed in some manuscripts to Germanos II; Tsironis 1998, 223–8. See also Taft 1990 (1995), 83, who attributes the homily to Germanos II (1222–40); Beck 1969, 668.

⁹² George of Nikomedia, *Homily on Good Friday*, PG 100, 1468A; cf. Conostas 2014, 127.

⁹³ I am indebted to the work of Fr Maximos Conostas in presenting this argument: see Conostas 2014, esp. 124–8; cf. Tsironis 1998, 286–8.

⁹⁴ For bibliography, see Introduction, n. 12.

Nikodemos.⁹⁵ A more maternal aspect of the Virgin Mary appears in all of these literary genres, expressing a close and fully engaged relationship with her divine Son.

The Dormition and Assumption

Before looking at the homilies that were composed for the feast of Mary's Dormition (15 August), it is worth summarising briefly the literary accounts that inspired them. The legend has no biblical foundations but is based on various apocryphal narratives concerning the Virgin's life, death and afterlife. There can be no doubt that these stories helped to justify Mary's growing importance in both Christological and intercessory terms within the late antique Church. They affirmed, in ways that are similar to the witness of Christ's passion and resurrection to his divine and human natures, both her humanity and her miraculous (or deified) qualities.

The legends concerning the death and assumption of the Virgin Mary into heaven appeared first in texts dating from the end of the fifth or beginning of the sixth century – although it is likely that they circulated, perhaps orally, in the Eastern Christian world for several centuries before this time.⁹⁶ Different traditions survive in a variety of languages, with two main versions circulating in the Byzantine empire as well as in the regions that it influenced, including the West. Stephen Shoemaker, following the attempts of Antoine Wenger and Michel van Esbroeck to establish 'families' of texts,⁹⁷ classifies these as the 'Palm of the Tree of Life' and the 'Bethlehem' versions; there are also versions to which Shoemaker assigns titles including 'Coptic' and 'A-Typical'.⁹⁸ The prototype for the 'Palm of the Tree of Life' version is preserved only in a set of Syriac fragments known as the *Obsequies of the Holy Virgin*, which belongs to the earliest period of Marian dormition accounts.⁹⁹ These fragments contain scattered episodes belonging to a longer narrative of Mary's death and assumption, including an account of a heavenly tour that she experienced immediately after her translation to heaven.¹⁰⁰ A sixth-century Greek version of this narrative became the basis for John of Thessalonike's early seventh-century

⁹⁵ *Gospel of Nikodemos (Byzantine recensions)* 10.1–2, 10.1.3c–4a, ed. Gounelle 2007, 226–41 and discussion, 56–8.

⁹⁶ See Mimouni 1995; Shoemaker 2002; Shoemaker 2015.

⁹⁷ Wenger 1955, 66; van Esbroeck 1981. ⁹⁸ Shoemaker 2002, 25–77.

⁹⁹ Shoemaker 2002, 33; trans. Wright 1865, 42–51.

¹⁰⁰ Shoemaker 2002, 34. According to Shoemaker, a complete version of this earliest narrative survives only in an Ethiopic translation, called the *Liber Requiei*. He provides a translation of the latter, along with its Syriac counterparts, in his Appendix A, 290–350.

homily on the Dormition. The 'Bethlehem' version of Mary's dormition circulated in a Syriac text known as the *Six Books*,¹⁰¹ as well as in a Greek *Discourse on the Dormition* that was attributed to John the Evangelist.¹⁰² Either one or both of these two sources influenced most of the subsequent homiletic treatment of the Virgin Mary's dormition in the Greek-speaking Byzantine world.

The 'Palm of the Tree of Life' version of Mary's dormition begins with her meeting on the Mount of Olives with an angel who informs her of her approaching death and gives her a palm branch from the Tree of Life. The Virgin then returns to her house in Jerusalem, where she begins to prepare herself for this event, informing her female servants and arranging her affairs. The apostles are then transported miraculously from their various missions around the inhabited world, with John arriving first at the house. The rest of the apostles arrive shortly after this, followed by Christ with a company of Old Testament prophets and angels. Mary then dies and Christ receives her soul, handing it to the archangel Michael who takes it directly to heaven. The apostles prepare a bier and process with Mary's body to the tomb at Gethsemane. During this procession, however, a Jew (sometimes described as a high priest) named Jephonias attempts to upset the bier. An angel cuts off his arms at the elbows, however, as he grasps the bier; he then repents and is healed. The apostles then continue to the tomb and place Mary's body inside, sealing it with a stone. They keep watch outside the tomb, waiting for Christ to return. After three days, he reappears and takes the body, along with the apostles, up to heaven where the body and soul are joined together again. The apostles then return to earth in order to fulfil their missions while the Virgin Mary remains in paradise, seated next to the Father and the Son.¹⁰³

The 'Bethlehem' version is meanwhile transmitted in several Syriac versions including the *Six Books* narrative, some of which survive in ancient palimpsest manuscripts. The most influential text to emerge from this family, as we saw above, is the Greek *Discourse on the Dormition*, which was attributed to St John the Theologian (or Evangelist). According to van Esbroeck, this was a medieval 'best-seller', which survives in over 100 Greek

¹⁰¹ The *Six Books* survives in a number of Syriac manuscripts; see the edition by Wright 1865. For discussion, see Shoemaker 2002, 46–57.

¹⁰² *Transitus of (ps-)John the Evangelist*, ed. Tischendorf 1866; trans. Elliott 1993 (2004), 701–8.

¹⁰³ This abbreviated summary is based on that provided in Shoemaker 2002, 37–8. Certain details, such as the apostles' conversation concerning Christ's 'mysteries' as they wait outside the tomb and the tour of heaven and hell after the Virgin's resurrection, appear in some early versions but are not picked up in the later homiletic tradition.

manuscripts, as well as in Georgian, Arabic, Latin and Church Slavonic versions.¹⁰⁴ The 'Bethlehem' version of the narrative differs from the 'Palm of the Tree of Life' story in that it places Mary in Bethlehem, whence she visits Jerusalem in order to pray at Christ's tomb. She receives her angelic visitation, informing her of her approaching death, at the tomb. The Virgin then returns to Bethlehem where she is joined by the apostles (who are transported miraculously to her house from their various missions). After this, she performs some miracles and then prepares to die. As Shoemaker has suggested, this version of the dormition story contains a distinctly anti-Judaic aspect: the Jews obstruct or even attack the Virgin Mary at various points in the narrative, with the story about Jephonias being elaborated to an even greater degree than in the 'Palm' version.¹⁰⁵ Whereas some narratives belonging to this version omit any mention of Mary's bodily assumption into heaven or resurrection, others do include this element of the story.¹⁰⁶

There has been scholarly controversy concerning the possibility that some of the Bethlehem narratives reflect an earlier tradition (sometimes called 'Dormitionist'), which has not yet taken the step (as in the case of the 'Assumptionist' tradition) of affirming the Mary's early resurrection in heaven following her bodily assumption.¹⁰⁷ In addition, whereas Mimouni, Daley and a few other scholars have argued for the association of the earliest legends of Mary's assumption with an anti-Chalcedonian doctrinal position,¹⁰⁸ Shoemaker maintains that there is no such connection. He prefers to see the separate literary traditions surrounding the legend of Mary's dormition as reflecting diverse – and sometimes even gnostic – Christian perspectives in the late antique world. According to him, variations in the narratives concerning the Virgin Mary's death and assumption did not reflect particular doctrinal positions; rather, they emerged from a growing Marian devotion that was common to both 'orthodox' and 'heterodox' Christian communities in the Near East.¹⁰⁹ Whereas Mimouni acknowledges that direct evidence for a connection between Miaphysite belief and interest in the Virgin Mary's fate after death is lacking, he points to the coincidence of the discussions leading

¹⁰⁴ Van Esbroeck 1981, 269; Mimouni 1995, 118–27; Shoemaker 2002, 51.

¹⁰⁵ Shoemaker 1999; Shoemaker 2002, 51–2. ¹⁰⁶ Mimouni 1995, 125–7. Shoemaker 2002, 52.

¹⁰⁷ The main proponents of the two sides of the argument are Mimouni 1995, 18–21 (who argues for the chronological priority of the 'Dormitionist' legend) and Shoemaker 2002, 20–5 (who contests any chronological development – or organic relationship – between the two traditions).

¹⁰⁸ Cothenet 1961; Mimouni 1995, esp. 1–21, 664–6; Daley 1998, 7–12. Mary Clayton (1998, 25–6) also takes up this theory.

¹⁰⁹ Shoemaker 2002, esp. 15–25, 256–62.

up to – and following – the Council of Chalcedon in 451 and the first emergence of Syriac texts on the dormition.¹¹⁰ In my view, this subject requires further investigation, with focus on both internal and external aspects of the surviving texts, for an answer to be reached.¹¹¹

The third important source for middle Byzantine preachers was one which they regarded as apostolic – as opposed to the apocryphal sources that provided the outlines of the story. This was the short passage in (ps-)Dionysios the Areopagite's *Divine Names*, which had circulated widely since its probable composition in late fifth- or early sixth-century Syria.¹¹² The author, who was believed by Byzantine commentators to be the apostle who is mentioned in Acts 17: 34, was invoked reverently by Andrew of Crete, as 'a man learned in sacred doctrine . . . to whom hints of the mysterious representations of super-celestial minds were revealed, in a way worthy of the angels'.¹¹³ The significant passage in the *Divine Names* is in fact phrased so ambiguously that some modern scholars have suggested that the 'life-giving and God-receiving body' (ζωαρχικοῦ καὶ θεοδόχου σώματος) – which the author claims to have witnessed along with the other apostles – refers to the Eucharist rather than to the recently deceased Virgin Mary.¹¹⁴ Whatever its author may originally have meant, the text was interpreted as a witness to Mary's deathbed scene by Byzantine liturgical writers from about the seventh century onward. (Ps-)Dionysios expresses this vision (whether eucharistic or Marian) in mystical terms, describing how the apostles – including especially his 'teacher', Hierotheos – experienced an ecstatic 'communion with the things praised' as they met together in the holy place.¹¹⁵

The feast of the Virgin Mary's *Koimesis* or Dormition ('falling asleep') was first celebrated in Jerusalem, probably in connection with her tomb near Gethsemane and its associated church.¹¹⁶ It was added to the Constantinopolitan liturgical calendar at the end of the sixth century,

¹¹⁰ Mimouni 1995, 665.

¹¹¹ It is also worth noting in this context that some ambiguity concerning Mary's actual death exists in the Roman Catholic Church; see Jugie 1944, 506–82; cf. Shoemaker 2002, 9–17.

¹¹² (ps-)Dionysios the Areopagite, *The Divine Names* 111.2, ed. Suchla 1990, 141. 1–17; trans. Luibheid 1987, 70.

¹¹³ Andrew of Crete, *Homily II on the Dormition*, PG 97, 1060D, trans. Daley 1998, 127 (9).

¹¹⁴ (ps-)Dionysios the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names* 111.2, ed. Suchla 1990, 141. 6; for discussion, see Jugie 1944, 99–101; Andreopoulos 2016, 80–2. This theory is strongly contested in Shoemaker 2002, 29–30.

¹¹⁵ καὶ τὴν πρὸς τὰ ὑμνούμενα κοινωνίαν πάσχω . . . (ps-)Dionysios the Areopagite, *The Divine Names* 111.2, ed. Suchla 1990, 141. 12; trans. Luibheid 1987, 70.

¹¹⁶ The church, which was built around a first-century necropolis, was probably built in the fifth century. It is not mentioned in the Jerusalem *Armenian Lectionary*, but appears to have featured in

but may not have been celebrated consistently in churches throughout the empire until about a century later. The earliest surviving homilies, including those by John of Thessalonike, Theoteknos of Livias and possibly (ps-) Modestos of Jerusalem, date from the seventh century. However, a flowering of liturgical sermons for the feast, including several 'trilogies' or three-part homiletic series, took place in the course of the eighth century. These include the series of Dormition sermons that are attributed to Germanos of Constantinople, John of Damascus, Andrew of Crete and Kosmas Vestitor. Some preachers, including Theodore of Stoudios, Leo VI and John Geometres, continued to compose sermons in honour of the feast in subsequent centuries; however, their output was less prolific (although of equal theological and devotional importance) than that of their eighth-century counterparts.

The introduction of the feast of the Virgin Mary's Dormition into the Western (Latin) church calendar took place during the papacy of Sergius (687–701), who was a Syrian by birth.¹¹⁷ According to Wenger, however, the reference in the *Liber Pontificalis* may refer merely to a procession on 15 August, not to the feast itself. He suggests that the feast was already in use by the middle of the seventh century (perhaps under Pope Theodore, 642–9), after which the need for appropriate homilies and readings on this subject began.¹¹⁸ It was during the following centuries that Latin compilers of homiliaries and other liturgical collections began to translate the orations of Andrew of Crete, John of Damascus, Germanos of Constantinople and Kosmas Vestitor. Latin preachers themselves were constrained by earlier condemnation of apocryphal texts such as the *Transitus* attributed to (ps-)Melito of Sardis that were circulating in the West.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, the eighth and ninth centuries saw the beginnings of preaching on this subject, much influenced by Byzantine prototypes, by figures such as Paul the Deacon¹²⁰ and Ambrosius Autpertus.¹²¹

In the discussion that follows, I shall focus primarily on Greek homilies that were produced in Thessalonike, Constantinople and Palestine between the seventh and tenth centuries. This is a body of material that

the fifth-century Patriarch Juvenal's plan to promote the Chalcedonian definition of Christ's two natures after 451. See Bagatti, Piccirillo and Prodomo 1975, 11–82; Shoemaker 2002, 98–107.

¹¹⁷ *Liber Pontificalis*, ed. Duchesne, vol. 1, 376; Jugie 1944, 196, n. 1. See Dell'Acqua 2019, 239–41; Dell'Acqua 2020, 262.

¹¹⁸ Wenger 1955, 141.

¹¹⁹ This occurred in response to the Gelasian Decree. See Dobschütz 1912, 334–57. For discussion of the reception of the Dormition tradition in the West after the ninth century, see Jugie 1944, 360–88.

¹²⁰ Paul the Deacon, *Homilies I–II on the Assumption*; Lambot 1934; Wenger 1955, 144, nn. 2–3.

¹²¹ Ambrosius Autpertus, *Homily on the Assumption of Mary*; see also Dell'Acqua 2020, 103–5, 262–4.

was produced in honour of the feast especially after it became well established in churches from the beginning of the eighth century. As in the case of other Marian festal sermons, this analysis attempts to trace variations in doctrine, literary or theological themes, and devotional aspects, such as Mary's intercessory role or maternal qualities. It will become clear on the basis of this discussion that whereas doctrinal consensus concerning this important event in the Virgin's life was established early, preachers could be innovative in their theological emphasis, rhetorical method and devotional response to the feast. It is possible to discern not only variation between individual preachers, but also the development of certain preoccupations, such as Mary's human or maternal relationship with her Son, in the course of these centuries.

With regard to the narrative of the dormition story itself, small differences appear between the various Byzantine homilies. Shoemaker has noted, for example, the emphasis on some 'gnostic' elements in seventh-century texts such as John of Thessalonike's influential homily on the Dormition.¹²² When the evangelist John (Christ's 'beloved' disciple) returns to the house on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, Mary addresses him as follows:

'Remember that [Christ] loved you above all the Apostles; remember that you, rather than any of the others, leaned on his breast. Remember that it was to you alone, as you reclined on his breast, that he spoke the mystery that no one knows except me and you, since you are the chosen virgin, and since he did not wish me to grieve, for I was his dwelling place. For I said to him, "Tell me what you have said to John", and he gave you a command and shared it also with me.'¹²³

Passages such as this suggest that Christ conveyed secret knowledge to certain disciples or even to his mother Mary; the recipients vary according to different gnostic traditions, but the elements of exclusivity and mystery are always present. A detail which was not mentioned by John of Thessalonike, but which may reflect earlier – and possibly heterodox – accounts of the dormition is the *charta*, or leaf of papyrus, which Mary passes on to the evangelist John, according to the eighth-century preacher Kosmas Vestitor. This text, according to Kosmas, contained mysteries which Jesus had revealed to his mother when he was still a small child.¹²⁴ The relationship between the apostles, who sometimes

¹²² Shoemaker 2002, 54, 205, 210–11, 217, 251.

¹²³ John of Thessalonike, *Homily on the Dormition* 6, ed. Jugie 1925 [1990], 384.5–13, trans. Daley 1998, 53.

¹²⁴ Kosmas Vestitor, *Homily II on the Dormition*, ed. Orbán 2000, 108.123–109.143; see also Wenger 1953, 287–89.

vie with each other when presiding over Mary's death-bed, the inclusion or not of the incident involving Jephonias and, above all, the manner in which the deceased Virgin is placed in the tomb and how soon she is assumed into heaven may also vary in the separate homiletic accounts. It is striking, for example, that the early eighth-century patriarch Germanos of Constantinople diverges from other Byzantine preachers in suggesting that Mary's body disappeared almost immediately after the apostles placed her reverently in the tomb at Gethsemane. Before they could even seal the tomb, 'as all looked on . . . the Virgin's pure body was taken away'.¹²⁵ Such variation could perhaps be justified on the grounds that these events were associated with apocryphal, rather than canonical, sources. However, homilists were also frequently motivated, as we shall see below, by theological or literary considerations. Above all, Byzantine preachers emphasised the mysterious nature of the Virgin Mary's death and assumption into heaven, as they developed what Brian Daley calls 'a cultivated vagueness' with regard to the events that they were celebrating.¹²⁶

Another aspect of these sermons that could vary from writer to writer was the extent to which they displayed interest in, or knowledge of, the topographical features of the scenes that they described. Most of the Byzantine preachers believed, according to the 'Palm of the Tree of Life' version of the legend, that Mary was living in the highest (and most ancient) part of the city of Jerusalem, known as Mount Zion, at the time when their story began. She occupied the house that included an upper room where Jesus had presided over the last supper with his disciples (Mt 26:17-30; Mk 14:12-25; Lk 22:7-38; Jn 13:1-17: 26) and appeared to his disciples at the time when Thomas doubted his resurrection (Jn 20:26-9). Of the preachers who might be expected to know the holy city well, (ps-) Modestos of Jerusalem displayed little awareness of its topography.¹²⁷ Theoteknos of Livias, Andrew of Crete and John of Damascus, all of whom either originated or worked in the region of Palestine, meanwhile revealed their knowledge of the location of the house on Zion and the

¹²⁵ Germanos I of Constantinople, *Homily II on the Dormition*, PG 98, 369C, trans. Daley 1998, 177.

¹²⁶ Daley 1998, 27.

¹²⁷ Daley notes that the ninth-century patriarch, Photios, doubted the authenticity of this homily. See Photios, *Bibliotheca*, Cod. 275, ed. Henry 1977, vol. 8, 119; PG 104, 244C; Daley 1998, 42, n. 41. It is noteworthy that the author refers to the doctrine of Christ's two wills (divine and human), which was affirmed at the third Council of Constantinople (680-1); Daley 1998, 15. M. Jugie is also sceptical of the homily's authenticity, assigning it to the end of the seventh or beginning of the eighth century; see Jugie 1944, 214-23.

tomb, with its associated church, in the garden of Gethsemane. Andrew, although probably preaching either in Constantinople or on Crete at later stages in his ecclesiastical career, remembered the marble slabs in the upper room on Zion on which pilgrims could still see imprints of the Virgin's continuous kneeling prayers.¹²⁸ Both preachers also described the church at Gethsemane either literally or in terms that were intended to evoke its allegorical meaning.¹²⁹ It appears that John may even have been preaching during the vigil of the Dormition in that location, as he addressed his congregation in following words: 'You see, dear fathers and brothers, what this illustrious tomb has to say to us . . .'¹³⁰

Mention of the Virgin's relics in the homilies on the Dormition, especially the robe (or robes) and the grave clothes, occurred frequently, perhaps indicating an interest in promoting veneration of these objects. It is puzzling that some preachers who lived between the early seventh and tenth centuries (including John of Thessalonike, Kosmas Vestitor and John Geometres) described Mary offering two robes to a pair of faithful widows who served her. If we consider the fact that one robe, housed at the church of the Blachernai at least from the early seventh century onward, attracted devotion in Constantinople, it is difficult to see why these Byzantine orators felt the need to mention two garments.¹³¹ The grave clothes, which either remained in the tomb or were assumed into heaven along with the Virgin's body according to different preachers, were sometimes mentioned in the closing sections of the Dormition homilies.¹³² One other object received emphasis in many sermons, namely, the palm branch that the angel gave to the Theotokos at the beginning of the narrative and

¹²⁸ Andrew of Crete, *Homily I on the Dormition*, PG 97, 1073A, trans. Daley 1998, 104. [J.-P. Migne erroneously printed this homily as the second in the trilogy; see Daley 1998, 115, n. 1.]

¹²⁹ Andrew of Crete, *Homily II on the Dormition*, PG 97, 1064C–1065D, trans. Daley 1998, 129–30. [This homily is printed in PG as the first in the series, according to Daley 1998, 135, n. 1.] John of Damascus, *Homily III on the Dormition*, ed. Kotter 1988, 550.16–551.45; trans. Daley 1998, 233.

¹³⁰ John of Damascus, *Homily II on the Dormition*, ed. Kotter 1988, 536.1–4, trans. Daley 1998, 222; see also Daley 1998, 230, n. 35.

¹³¹ See, for example, John of Thessalonike, *Homily on the Dormition* 6, ed. Jugie 1925 (1990), 385.26; Daley 1998, 54. Two robes are also mentioned in the Georgian *Life of the Virgin* 105, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 132.

¹³² See, for example, John of Thessalonike, *Homily on the Dormition* 14, ed. Jugie 1925 (1990), 401.34–402.2, trans. Daley 1998, 67 (John says that the shroud remained in the tomb after Mary's body was assumed into heaven; however, he does not relate what happened to it after that); Germanos I of Constantinople, *Homily II on the Dormition* 9, PG 98, 369C, trans. Daley 1998, 177 (Germanos says that 'the shroud was then gently taken up into the air from the Apostles' hands in a light cloud . . .'); John of Damascus, *Homily II on the Dormition* 17, ed. Kotter 1988, 535.11–12 (John suggests here that the burial cloths were left behind, after the Virgin's body was assumed into heaven); (ps-)John of Damascus, *The Euthymiac History*, ed. Kotter 1988, 536.5–539.68; trans. Daley 1998, 224–6.

which she then entrusted to her caretaker, the apostle John. Some preachers, such as John of Thessalonike, suggested that this object would later become a miracle-working relic, as we see in the following passage:

When the holy Theotokos, Mary, was about to lay aside her body, the great angel came to her and said, 'Rise, Mary, take this branch of palm, which he who planted Paradise gave to me, and give it to the Apostles so that they may carry it as they sing before you, for after three days you will lay aside your body . . . And do not be concerned about the palm branch; for by it many shall be healed, and it shall be a norm of testing for all who live in Jerusalem.'¹³³

That veneration of the tomb itself, along with any objects that were associated with the life or death of the Virgin Mary, continued even after the Muslim occupation of Jerusalem is attested by John of Damascus, in the final section of his first homily on the Dormition:

Just as if one should store up costly ointment in his clothes or in some other place, and later remove it, some trace of the fragrance would remain when the ointment is gone, so now, too, that holy, sacred, and spotless body, full of divine fragrance, that boundless spring of grace . . . still did not leave that tomb without honor: it gave it a share of divine fragrance and grace, and left it as a source of healing and of all good gifts for those who approach it in faith.¹³⁴

Another feature of most Dormition homilies was anti-Judaic polemic, which often featured in the section of the narrative concerning Jephonias, the doubting Jew who lost his hands when attempting to overturn the Virgin Mary's bier as it was being carried from the house on Zion to the tomb.¹³⁵ Although preachers took the opportunity to castigate the Jews, blaming them for their unbelief and responsibility for Christ's passion, they also suggested that the miraculous restoration of Jephonias' hands, after touching the bier, caused them to believe in the sanctity of the Virgin.¹³⁶ John of Thessalonike stated that, following the miracle, Peter allowed Jephonias to remain alone with Mary's body for three hours, blessing her and reading out witness texts from 'the holy books of Moses

¹³³ John of Thessalonike, *Homily on the Dormition* 3, ed. Jugie 1925 [1990], 378.21–379.13; trans. Daley 1998, 49–50 (with adjustments).

¹³⁴ John of Damascus, *Homily I on the Dormition* 13, ed. Kotter 1988, 499.12–19, trans. Daley 1998, 198.

¹³⁵ Shoemaker 1999. The anti-Judaic element is even stronger in narratives associated with the 'Bethlehem' tradition; see Shoemaker 2002, esp. 51–2.

¹³⁶ See, for example, Theoteknos of Livias, *Homily on the Dormition* 19–20, ed. Wenger 1955, 280.20–282.9; trans. Daley 1998, 75–6.

and the other prophets'.¹³⁷ This offered what would have been regarded as a positive interpretation of an ancient – but undeniably polemical – section of the narrative, while also linking it to the kind of typology that was especially associated with liturgical praise of the Theotokos. John of Damascus also attempted a more optimistic spin on this story, concluding his version with the words, 'So a crisis can often be the mother of decisions that are for our good.'¹³⁸

The doctrinal position of the various preachers, as regards Mary's death and assumption into heaven, was largely consistent, although it could be expressed in different ways. From the seventh through to the tenth century, Byzantine homilists emphasised the reality of the Virgin's death although they also stated that her body was incorruptible. The seventh-century Palestinian preacher Theoteknos of Livias wrote, for example:

And even though the God-bearing body of that holy one did taste death, it was not corrupted; for it was kept incorrupt and free of decay, and it was lifted up to heaven with her pure and spotless soul by the holy archangels and powers . . .¹³⁹

Andrew of Crete, in the early eighth century, stated that the Virgin Mary 'obeyed the laws of nature and reached the end of life',¹⁴⁰ while John Geometres, at the end of the tenth, affirmed more graphically that 'she went to the earth, complying with the common law of nature'.¹⁴¹ Even as they recognised the reality of Mary's death, however, the various preachers stressed the incorruptibility of her body – even after three days in the tomb. This miraculous aspect of her person was linked with her perpetual virginity, before, during and after the birth of Christ, as John of Damascus stated succinctly in the following passage:

It was fitting that she, who preserved her virginity undamaged by childbirth, should have her body preserved from corruption even in death.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ John of Thessalonike, *Homily on the Dormition* 13, ed. Jugie 1925 [1990], 400.22–33, trans. Daley 1998, 66. This preacher also states that Jephonias had been a high priest in the Jewish temple before his conversion to Christianity.

¹³⁸ John of Damascus, *Homily II on the Dormition* 13, ed. Kotter 1988, 530.18–19; trans. Daley 1998, 217.

¹³⁹ Theoteknos of Livias, *Homily on the Dormition* 15, ed. Wenger 1955, 278.12–15, trans. Daley 1998, 74 (4).

¹⁴⁰ Andrew of Crete, *Homily I on the Dormition*, PG 97, 1073A–B, trans. Daley 1998, 104. Later in the same sermon, Andrew expanded on this statement, writing that 'the Mother of God, without altering anything of the laws of our nature, obeyed the law laid upon us and completed her life in the flesh under the same conditions as we do, though she entered and left this life in a wonderful way'; PG 97, 1085C, trans. Daley 1998, 112–13.

¹⁴¹ John Geometres, *Life of the Virgin* 31, ed. Wenger 1955, 386–7.

¹⁴² John of Damascus, *Homily II on the Dormition* 14, ed. Kotter 1988, 531.24–5, trans. Daley 1998, 218.

Reasoning such as this reflected a long-standing patristic belief in the connection between physical virginity and the eternal and incorruptible life of God, as Trinity, and the angels. In the same way that Christ's virginal birth from Mary revealed his divine, as well as human, nature, it also protected her from the dissolution after death that affects all other human beings. Andrew of Crete pursued this mystery somewhat further in his first homily on the Dormition, asking how the separate parts of Mary's body could be reassembled after her assumption into heaven. He ascribed this process to the Creator's inscrutable will, asserting that something entirely new and different must have taken place in the destiny of this otherwise mortal woman.¹⁴³

Most Byzantine preachers preferred to remain apophatic with regard to what happened in heaven, once Mary's body and soul had been assumed separately and at different times, however. Such ambiguity has led Martin Jugie to suggest that certain later theologians, including John Geometres, developed an idea of Mary's 'double' assumption into heaven.¹⁴⁴ They argue that according to this tenth-century orator, Mary's body and soul remained separated after being assumed into heaven, awaiting there the day of general resurrection like all other human beings. After close inspection of the relevant passage, I am able to agree with Wenger that John did not deny that Mary's body and soul were reunited in heaven; he sought rather to distinguish the manner of her assumption from that of Christ's ascension.¹⁴⁵ Most earlier preachers, while avoiding clear statements

¹⁴³ Andrew writes as follows: 'For as her womb was not corrupted in giving birth, so her flesh did not perish in dying. What a miracle! The child put corruption to flight, and the tomb did not admit of corruption . . . I do not know if the parts of her body were all immediately joined to form a single, composite whole – for I shall make little philosophical speculation on these things, since the Creator apparently saw fit, in his inscrutable mind, to honour his mother this way – or if each part emerged over the other, one taking its new position on the outside, the other on the inside, after they had all been separated from each other; or if the sequence [of reconstitution] which supernaturally ran its course in her was strange and different, and all happened in a truly new way in her, as she received beyond her own nature a supernatural structure that lies beyond all words and all knowledge of ours.' Andrew of Crete, *Homily I on the Dormition*, PG 97, 1081D–1084B, trans. Daley 1998, 110–11.

¹⁴⁴ Jugie 1944, 316–22. Antoine Wenger, however, asserts – on the basis of a close reading of Geometres' text – that whereas this author affirms (like all other Byzantine theologians) Mary's incorruptibility after death, he leaves the question of her early resurrection open – that is to say, as a mystery. See Wenger 1955, 197.

¹⁴⁵ John Geometres, *Life of the Virgin* 48, ed. Wenger 1955, 396.31–398.5: Καὶ τὸ παραδοξότερον· εἰς οὐρανοὺς ὑπόμηνη καθάπερ τὸ πνεῦμα δίχα τοῦ σώματος, οὕτω καὶ νῦν τὸ σῶμα δίχα τοῦ πνεύματος, ἵνα καὶ τὸ πρὸς τὸν ἰδὸν ὁμοῦ καὶ τὸ πρὸς δοῦλους δεῖξη καὶ κοινὸν ὁμοῦ καὶ διάφορον· αἰρομένη μὲν εἰς οὐρανοὺς, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὅλη καὶ πρὸ τῆς ἀναστάσεως, καθάπερ ἡμεῖς μετὰ τὴν ἀνάστασιν, καὶ ὅλη μὲν καθάπερ καὶ ὁ ταύτης υἱός, ἀλλὰ διηρημένη καὶ μετὰ τὴν διάλυσιν. Wenger translates this passage as follows: 'et ce qu'il y a de plus merveilleux, c'est que, élevée d'abord jusqu'aux cieux comme l'esprit sans le corps, c'est maintenant le corps qui est élevé sans l'esprit, afin de montrer par là à la fois ce qu'elle a de commun et de différent tant avec son Fils

about the Virgin Mary's early resurrection, implied that this was the outcome of her miraculous assumption into heaven. To take one example, Germanos of Constantinople (after breaking with tradition by suggesting that Mary's body flew up to heaven before the tomb could even be sealed) described her heavenly destiny in the following words:

In this way, when you had suffered the death of your passing nature, your home was changed to the imperishable dwellings of eternity, where God dwells; and becoming yourself his permanent guest, Theotokos, you will not be separated from his company.¹⁴⁶

Germanos further indicated that by entering heaven in body and soul, the Virgin Mary joined Christ in allowing human nature (in its deified form) to be eternally present in heaven. As John Geometres put it, two centuries or so later, 'in this manner, it is not only by the Son, but also by her, that our nature was introduced into heaven and rules over all visible as well as invisible things'.¹⁴⁷

The importance of the dormition narrative for the Virgin Mary's role as protector and intercessor thus rests on belief in her proximity to Christ in heaven, following her death and assumption. It is no surprise therefore that the various sermons that honoured the feast of the Dormition frequently stressed this aspect of Marian devotion. Such emphasis was present in the seventh-century homilies as much as in the later works. If any development can be detected, it lies in the ways that Mary's intercessory function tended to be invoked. Whereas the early seventh-century works often stressed Mary's role as 'queen', 'fortification', 'protector' or 'ambassador', sermons dating from the early or middle of the eighth century onward mentioned more frequently her role as 'God-bearer' or 'mother', suggesting that her close relationship with Christ offered hope of intercession, or even salvation, for the human race. Germanos of Constantinople in fact went further than some of his contemporaries in attributing (perhaps hyperbolically) all salvation to the agency of the Mother of God:

No one is filled with the knowledge of God except through you, all-holy One; no one is saved but through you, God-bearer (Θεοτόκος); no one is free of danger but through you, Virgin Mother (Παρθενομήτορ); no one is

qu'avec nous. En effet, elle est élevée aux cieux mais tout entière, et avant la résurrection, comme nous le serons nous-mêmes après la résurrection. Elle est élevée tout entière comme son Fils, mais divisée et après la disjonction.'

¹⁴⁶ Germanos of Constantinople, *Homily I on the Dormition*, PG 98, 348B; trans. Daley 1998, 159 (with one adjustment).

¹⁴⁷ John Geometres, *Life of the Virgin* 41, ed. Wenger 1955, 392.32–4.

redeemed but through you, Mother of God (Θεομήτορ); no one ever receives mercy gratuitously except through you, Container of God (Θεοχώρητε).¹⁴⁸

Byzantine preachers employed affective language to varying degrees in their descriptions of the relationship between Mary and Christ, or between either of these figures and their faithful followers. Although some increase in such language is noticeable in Marian sermons after the end of Iconoclasm, it is not entirely absent from the works of earlier preachers. Theoteknos of Livias, (ps-)Modestos of Jerusalem and Germanos of Constantinople all described Mary's nurturing of Christ as a baby in vivid terms.¹⁴⁹ John of Damascus, when describing his own love for the Mother of God, was even more prone to rhetorical – even erotic – outbursts of emotion:

Having come to this point in my discourse, I am – if I may express my inner feelings – on fire with hot and restless yearning, I am seized with a thrill of awe and bathed in joyous tears, imagining that I could embrace that blessed and beloved bed, so full of wonders . . . I pressed my eyes, my lips, my forehead, my neck, my cheeks to her limbs, rejoicing in these sensations as if her body were present and I could touch it, even though I knew full well that I cannot see the one I long for with these eyes.¹⁵⁰

However, it was from the ninth century onward that emotional expressions of love and devotion, expressed by preachers on behalf of their audiences, were manifested most fully. George of Nikomedia's sermon on the lament of the Mother of God at the foot of the cross set a precedent for the kind of language that appeared in John Geometres' oration on the Dormition.¹⁵¹ The artistry with which the latter contrasted Mary's joy at her 'falling asleep' with her grief at the foot of the cross shows the extent to which such panegyrists were able to adapt rhetorical methods to the task of expounding a theological message.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Germanos of Constantinople, *Homily I on the Dormition*, PG 98, 349C, trans. Daley 1998, 160–1 (8) (with adjustments).

¹⁴⁹ Theoteknos of Livias, *Homily on the Dormition* 5, ed. Wenger 1955, 274.4–8, trans. Daley 1998, 71–2; (ps-)Modestos of Jerusalem, *Enkomion on the Dormition*, PG 86, 3297C–3200A, trans. Daley 1998, 93; Germanos I of Constantinople, *Homily I on the Dormition*, PG 98, 348A–B, trans. Daley 1998, 159 (6).

¹⁵⁰ John of Damascus, *Homily II on the Dormition* 5, ed. Kotter 1988, 522.1–523.4; trans. Daley 1998, 209.

¹⁵¹ George of Nikomedia, *Homily on Great Friday*, PG 100, 1457–89; see Tsironis 1998, 279–89.

¹⁵² John Geometres, *Life of the Virgin* 21, ed. Wenger 1955, 378.32–380.9. Both emotions reveal Mary's human nature as well as her unconditional love for Christ. The orator seeks to show in an exaggerated way the extent to which both grief and happiness draw human beings closer to God.

Byzantine sermons on the Dormition thus present the Virgin Mary as a human being who was destined for a miraculous end. They emphasise the reality of her death, like that of Christ, but also the incorruptibility of her pure and virginal body. The manner of her death, which was painless and involved no physical dissolution, bore witness to her role as the container and birth-giver of God. Thus Mary's virginity was connected with – or indeed led to – the miraculous state of her body after death. The assumption into heaven, which most authors (following the dominant apocryphal tradition) describe as happening three days after Mary's burial, led to the mysterious reunion – indeed resurrection – of her body and soul in heaven. This destiny also allowed the Virgin to play an ongoing role as intercessor *par excellence* in Byzantine society. Although she occasionally manifested herself on earth in visions or dreams, Mary was more often pictured at the right hand of Christ in heaven. Her maternal relationship with him, which preachers described in relation either to his infancy or to his death on the cross, allowed the Virgin to enjoy a unique *parresia*, or 'freedom of speech' with her divine Son.

Occasional Homilies

This category includes a group of sermons that were composed for special, or occasional, events, such as the celebration of victory against enemy attacks, the consecration of Marian churches or translation of her relics, or the dedication of an icon of the Mother of God. The choice to analyse these homilies as a group is my own; their classification as 'occasional homilies' does not reflect a systematic generic concept on the part of Byzantine writers. Nevertheless, it is clear that orations celebrating Constantinopolitan victories over enemies including Persians, Avars, Arabs and Slavs share certain characteristics. Many of these texts attribute the city's deliverance from danger to the Virgin Mary. Unlike the festal homilies that we have examined so far, the emphasis falls more on Mary's intercessory and protective roles and less on her Christological importance. Although the seventh- and eighth-century texts refer to her as 'Virgin', 'Theotokos', 'Theometor' or even 'Mother of God', the figure that they portray is strong and intimidating; she displays few of the maternal or affective qualities that are described in post-iconoclastic festal sermons. The occasional orations also emphasise that the salvation of the imperial city depends on the Virgin Mary's favour. They enjoin their audiences to undertake prayer and vigils, seeking her intercession especially at times of military danger.

Two orations, which might also be described as narrative treatises, are ascribed in manuscripts to the early seventh-century synkellos Theodore.¹⁵³ This figure, who was an ecclesiastical assistant to the patriarch Sergios, appears to have been an eyewitness both of the translation of the Virgin's robe from Hagia Sophia to the Blachernai shrine after an attack on Constantinople by the Avars in 623 and of the devastating siege by both Avars and Persians in 626. The homily is divided into two parts: the first describes the theft of the robe by Galbios and Kandidos and its translation to the church of the Blachernai during the reign of the late fifth-century empress Verina, while the second provides an account of the return of the relic to Blachernai after it was placed in the Great Church for safekeeping during the Avar attack of 623.¹⁵⁴ As Averil Cameron emphasised in a seminal article on the subject, this homily reveals a developed cult of the Virgin Mary by the beginning of the seventh century, while also bearing witness to the sanctity of the Blachernai robe.¹⁵⁵ Theodore Synkellos' homily on the siege of 626 represents one of three contemporary literary witnesses to this event.¹⁵⁶ The orator describes the day-to-day unfolding of events, showing at each stage how the Theotokos intervened in order to bring victory to the Byzantines. Scholars have worked to unravel conflicting historical accounts of this siege, especially since later Byzantine historians embroidered the narratives that were provided by contemporary eyewitnesses including Theodore Synkellos. Confusion has arisen, for example, over the role played by icons of the Theotokos in the course of the siege; according to Theodore Synkellos, these were placed on the western gates of the city, presumably for prophylactic reasons.¹⁵⁷ Elsewhere in the text, emphasis is placed on actions which the Mother of God initiated herself (although without making herself visible), including the entrapment of Avars near one of her churches outside the city walls,¹⁵⁸ sinking a fleet of the enemy's boats (*monoxyla*),¹⁵⁹ and eventually causing both the Avar khagan and the Persian emperor to give up hope and

¹⁵³ Theodore Synkellos, *Inventio*, ed. Combefis 1648, Loparev 1895; Theodore Synkellos, *De obsidione*, ed. Sternbach 1900.

¹⁵⁴ On the legend of the translation of Mary's robe to Constantinople, see Wenger 1955, III–39; Weyl Carr 2001; Wortley 2005.

¹⁵⁵ Cameron 1979b.

¹⁵⁶ The other two are George of Pisidia's *Bellum Avaricum*, ed. Pertusi 1959, and the *Chronicon Paschale*, ed. Dindorf 1832. For more analysis of the siege of 626 and its literary sources, see Hurbanić 2019.

¹⁵⁷ Theodore Synkellos, *De obsidione* 15, ed. Sternbach 1900, 304.4–9; trans. Makk 1975, 18–19.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 19, ed. Sternbach 1900, 305.37–306.12; trans. Makk 1975, 21–2.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 33, ed. Sternbach 1900, 311.17–40; trans. Makk 1975, 31–2.

retreat.¹⁶⁰ Similarities between these two texts include a tendency to compare events in Christian history with Old Testament antecedents and an emphasis on Mary's role as chief defender,¹⁶¹ or as intercessor before the Christian God, of Constantinople.

An oration with a similar agenda is that which is attributed to Germanos I of Constantinople, celebrating the deliverance of the imperial city from an Arab attack in 718.¹⁶² This text, which adopts a similar style to that of Theodore Synkellos' sermon on the siege of 626, addresses praise to the Mother of God (*Theometor*) for protecting Constantinople from 'Saracens, enemies of the confession that proclaims the glory of Christ'.¹⁶³ The preacher describes how this alien army, which was huge and irresistible, launched itself against the city without realising that it was protected by an invincible 'rampart', the Mother of God herself. Similar use is made of Old Testament examples of victory as in Theodore Synkellos' sermon on the siege of 626: the preacher cites the Jews' flight from Egypt, led by Moses, as a precedent for the divine favour experienced by Byzantines in the course of this siege.¹⁶⁴ References to the Theotokos are framed in more Christological language than was the case in Theodore Synkellos' sermon; however, the author attributes victory and the successful defence of the imperial city entirely to her intercessory agency. He also states more than once that such favour must be maintained by annual celebration of events such as this, during which panegyric praise to the Virgin should be offered throughout the night.¹⁶⁵

The two orations which the patriarch Photios delivered in commemoration of a Russian attack on Constantinople in 860 display characteristics that are similar to the previous examples.¹⁶⁶ According to this

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. 39, ed. Sternbach 1900, 314.1–17; trans. Makk 1975, 35–6.

¹⁶¹ See Wenger 1955, 117–18, who identifies an interest in Old Testament history as one of Theodore's defining characteristics as a Christian orator.

¹⁶² Germanos I of Constantinople, *Homily on the Deliverance of Constantinople*, ed. Grumel 1958. Several scholars, including Speck 2003, Darrouzès 1987, 7–8, and Kazhdan 1999, 58, have expressed doubts about the authenticity of this homily. It is variously ascribed to an anonymous author who was active about a century later or to Germanos I's namesake and successor, Germanos II (patriarch of Constantinople, c. 1222–40).

¹⁶³ *σαρακηνοῖς τοῖς ἀντιπασσομένοις τῇ ὁμολογίᾳ τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ . . .*, Germanos I of Constantinople, *Homily on the Deliverance of Constantinople* 9, ed. Grumel 1958, 193.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. 12–15, 19, ed. Grumel 1958, 194–7.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. 17, 23, ed. Grumel 1958, 195–6, 198. It is passages such as these which may account for the assignment of the homily to the Friday on which the *Akathistos Hymn* is sung, during the fifth week of Lent. Other manuscripts assign the text to the feast of the Dormition (15 August); see Grumel 1958, 183–5.

¹⁶⁶ Photios, *Homilies III and IV*, ed. Laourdas 1959, 29–52; trans. Mango 1958, 82–110. For further bibliography both on the homilies and on the events that they describe, see Mango 1958, 74, n. 1.

contemporary account, followed by some later historians, an army of Rus' had unexpectedly descended on Constantinople from the Black Sea, laying waste to islands in the Bosphoros and the surrounding countryside, before mounting a siege against the imperial city.¹⁶⁷ The emperor Michael III happened to be absent on a military campaign, thus leaving the city in a vulnerable position. Photios describes in the second sermon, delivered after the sudden and apparently miraculous retreat of the Rus', how he sought the protection of the Mother of God, leading the people in prayer and processing around the walls of the city with her robe:

Immediately as the Virgin's garment went round the walls, the barbarians gave up the siege and broke camp, while we were delivered from impending capture and were granted unexpected salvation.¹⁶⁸

The patriarch attributes this victory directly to God, who has forgiven his people, but also implies that their prayers to the Virgin Mary played a role in this outcome. These orations, which are written in a classicising style with reference to mythological as well as Christian imagery, express sound doctrine with regard to Mary's Christological role while also addressing her as intercessor and protector of Constantinople – sometimes with the help of military language:

We put you forward as our arms, our rampart, our shield, our general: may you fight for your people!¹⁶⁹

Sermons that commemorate relics or the consecration of churches in the Virgin Mary's honour offer similar opportunities for invocation of her intercessory power. For example, Germanos of Constantinople's homily on the consecration of the Virgin's shrine (probably at the church of the Chalkoprateia), her belt and the swaddling clothes of Christ expresses unqualified praise for the Theotokos. Germanos understands the physical objects associated with the Virgin and her Son as offering access to their power and mercy; their enveloping properties can also be seen as protecting (in metaphorical terms) the people, their church and the whole city.¹⁷⁰ Employing affective language that is reminiscent of Theodore the Synkellos' description of an earlier patriarch's emotion on seeing the

¹⁶⁷ For a summary of this narrative, along with critical evaluation of the literary sources including Photios' homilies, see Mango 1958, 75–7.

¹⁶⁸ Photios, *Homily IV, On the Departure of the Russians* 4, ed. Laourdas 1959, 45. 23–31; trans. Mango 1958, 102–3.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 7, ed. Laourdas 1959, 52. 8–9; trans. Mango 1958, 110 (with adjustments).

¹⁷⁰ See, for example, Germanos I of Constantinople, *Homily on the Holy Belt*, PG 98, 377B–C.

Virgin's robe, Germanos describes the feelings of those who come to venerate the belt as follows:

Who, having gazed earnestly and with faith on your honoured belt, Theotokos, is not filled at once with delight? Who, on fervently falling down before it, has left without his petition being granted? Who, on contemplating your token, does not immediately forget every affliction? Words cannot express the nature of joy, wellbeing, and happiness that have been enjoyed by those [people] who come and stand in your sacred church, in which you have been well pleased for your honoured belt to be placed . . . ?¹⁷¹

Another sermon, which has been attributed variously in manuscripts to Germanos, Michael Synkellos and Niketas of Paphlagon, describes the physical and spiritual veneration of Mary's holy relics by devout Constantinopolitan Christians.¹⁷² Material manifestations of holy personages inspire an emotional response on the part of middle Byzantine panegyrists. Although such language may be exaggerated for rhetorical reasons, it conveys the theological teaching that the incarnate God, along with his human mother, continued to manifest himself in creation through the sacraments, relics and even painted icons. Such points of contact demand in turn a physical and emotional response on the part of the Byzantine faithful.

Intercession

It should be evident, on the basis of the discussion so far, that allusions to the Virgin Mary's intercessory power in middle Byzantine homilies depends to a large extent on the context and subject matter of individual orations. Preachers who composed orations for the great Marian feasts did invoke the help and protection of the Mother of God, usually reserving such passages for their closing sections or epilogues; however, they tended to be more preoccupied in the body of the text with expounding her place in the Christological mystery that was being celebrated. Even feasts such as the Virgin Mary's Nativity or Entrance into the Temple, which were based on the *Protevangelion of James* rather than the canonical New Testament, were interpreted as events that led up to the incarnation of Christ rather

¹⁷¹ Germanos I of Constantinople, *Homily on the Holy Belt*, PG 98, 381C, trans. Cunningham 2008b, 254–55 (10).

¹⁷² Anon., *Homily on the Translation of the Belt of the Theotokos*, ed. Combefis 1648, vol. 2, 791. Dirk Krausmüller attributes the homily, which he edits and translates in a slightly different version, to a Studite monk and synkellos named Michael; see Krausmüller 2021. Another important late ninth-century homily is that by the patriarch Euthymios; see Euthymios, *Enkomion on the Holy Belt*, ed. Jugie 1922 (2003), 505–14.

than as Marian celebrations in their own right. Nor did the Virgin's relationship with Byzantine Christians represent the primary focus of such orations. Preachers would praise the Theotokos for her physical and moral purity, address her by means of an inexhaustible supply of biblical types and metaphors, and describe her essential role in the conception, birth and ministry of Christ; however, appeals for intercession – although occasionally present in festal homilies – were more often reserved for those which I have described as 'occasional'. One important exception to this rule, however, were the numerous sermons on the Dormition of the Virgin, which invoked her mediating power in relation to Christ. This must have to do with the narrative content of such sermons, which describe Mary's assumption into heaven and subsequent position of power and influence.¹⁷³

It is worth reminding ourselves here of the shifting meaning of 'intercession' in the middle Byzantine period.¹⁷⁴ According to Byzantine orthodox doctrine, Mary did not wield power in her own right; rather, she sought to influence God on the basis of the *parresia* ('freedom of speech') which she possessed both as his mother and, following her death and assumption, companion in heaven. Nevertheless, some homilies and hymns convey the impression that the Virgin Mary herself was capable of working miracles or even 'saving' Christians.¹⁷⁵ It is possible that such passages represent either hyperbolic expressions (which should not be taken literally) or that liturgical writers actually did blur the boundaries between divine and mediated power. We should also distinguish, as Annemarie Weyl Carr points out, between the concepts of *eleos* ('mercy') as an active – but not necessarily affective – quality and as a more 'reactive', or descriptive, quality. Weyl Carr argues that hymnographic portrayal of Mary's intercessory aspect in the middle Byzantine period is based on the antique concept that mercy is primarily acted out: as a property of God, it manifests itself in benevolence and justice.¹⁷⁶ This may help to explain why some homiletic invocation of the Theotokos appears to be one-way: preachers, on behalf of their congregations, called on the Mother of God to help them, defend the city or work other kinds of miracles. Appeals to

¹⁷³ It is striking, however, that Byzantine iconography did not exploit this theme to the extent that Western artists did, with their depictions of the Virgin ascending in glory or being crowned by Christ. Byzantine icons instead portray the deathbed scene in which Christ receives Mary's soul, pictured in all its vulnerability as a swaddled baby, before transferring it to the care of the archangel Michael who will take it to heaven. See, for example, two tenth-century icons (in ivory and steatite) that are reproduced in Evans and Wixom 1997, 155–6 (Pls. 101–2).

¹⁷⁴ For recent discussion of this question, see Cunningham 2015.

¹⁷⁵ See, for example, Germanos of Constantinople's *Homily 1 on the Dormition*, quoted above, n. 148.

¹⁷⁶ Weyl Carr forthcoming.

her intercessory power did not always convey the sense that she would automatically respond or that, if she did, such action would be inspired by her personal (or even maternal) love for humanity.

Such an approach to the intercessory function of the Virgin Mary appears to have changed in response to iconophile emphasis on the humanity of Christ, as Kalavrezou and Tsironis have argued; by the second half of the ninth century, preachers such as George of Nikomedia drew their audiences closer to the Mother of God by emphasising her tender and maternal feeling as she stood at the foot of the cross.¹⁷⁷ The portrayal of an entirely human figure must have encouraged Christians to view Mary as a sympathetic and merciful recipient of their petitions for help. I would argue, however, that conventions of a long-standing liturgical tradition, which often upheld the formal – and above all Christological – view of the Theotokos, meant that variations in her portrayal as intercessor depended as much on the creative intentions of individual preachers as it did on changing perceptions over time. It remains important, when assessing this aspect of the homiletic tradition, to consider the variety of influences that may have played a part in preachers' portrayal of Mary as intercessor and advocate for the rest of humanity.

Conclusion

The various homiletic forms that have been examined in this chapter represent an important body of evidence concerning the Virgin Mary in the middle Byzantine period. The conventional nature of such texts, which often begin with flowery prologues that appear indistinguishable one from another, masks actual variation in their treatment of biblical or apocryphal narratives, didactic method and praise or invocation of the Mother of God. In analysing so many sermons in the course of one chapter, I have inevitably condensed important aspects of their content and manner of expression. Nevertheless, I hope that this study will offer a general interpretative framework from which future studies may begin.¹⁷⁸

Development in Marian preaching between the seventh and tenth centuries may be traced in various ways. First, it is noticeable that Christological preoccupations – in other words, the didactic need to demonstrate the Virgin Mary's essential role in the incarnation of Christ,

¹⁷⁷ Kalavrezou 1990; Kalavrezou 2000; Tsironis 2000.

¹⁷⁸ It is worth noting again here Fr Evgenios Iverites' work on the theological content of early eighth-century Greek homilies; see Iverites 2019.

remained constant throughout our period. Seventh-century festal and occasional homilies already viewed the Theotokos as the guarantor of Christ's human and divine natures, as propounded at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Such teaching developed further in the course of the eighth and ninth centuries, perhaps in response to Iconoclasm, with elaboration of biblical types that reveal Mary's role, as a created but also sanctified receptacle for God. Her Jewish lineage, as attested in the second-century *Protevangelion of James*, terrestrial life and actual death (even if this process was reversed after three days in the tomb) also served to demonstrate the Virgin's link with the rest of humanity. Second, as I suggested in relation to festal sermons on Mary's Conception, Nativity and Entrance into the Temple, preachers from about the early eighth century onward began openly to employ and expound the second-century apocryphal narrative known as the *Protevangelion of James*. However, sermons which were assigned in manuscripts to the separate feasts of Mary's Conception, Nativity and Entrance into the Temple still frequently strayed from one topic to another – sometimes including all three – perhaps in response to the fact that celebration of the three feasts remained variable in different parts of the empire during this period. A narrative concerning the Virgin's death and assumption into heaven, based on the Syriac *Obsequies of the Holy Virgin*, was accepted into the Greek homiletic tradition even earlier, with seventh-century preachers such as John of Thessalonike, Theoteknos of Livias and possibly (ps-)Modestos of Jerusalem contributing homilies on this subject. And finally, the progression from an impersonal, but powerful, intercessory figure to a more tender and motherly Virgin Mary may be traced through comparison of supplicatory sections in various festal and occasional homilies. I have argued that whereas such a development did occur between the seventh and mid ninth centuries, probably as a result of iconophile emphasis on the humanity of both Christ and his mother, variation remained, being determined either by generic conventions or by individual authorial approaches to the Virgin Mary.

The Marian homiletic tradition consisted of many strands, from which individual preachers wove images of this holy figure that suited their particular didactic or devotional purposes. The richness of this literary tradition, which remains to be fully appreciated by scholars, gave impetus to a richly allusive and intertextual process of liturgical preaching. Not only did existing sermons inspire others on similar or related subjects, but they also informed a growing hymnographic tradition, which will be explored in the following chapter.