

Introduction

For she alone always knows how to defeat nature,
first by giving birth, and second, by battle.
For just as she then needed to give birth without a seed,
so does she now give birth to salvation without weapons
in order that she may be found to be a virgin through both acts,
as immutable in battle as she was when giving birth.¹

This short passage describes two main characteristics of the Byzantine Virgin Mary: she is the young woman who gave birth to Christ, the Son and Word of God, and also the fearless warrior who defended Constantinople from its enemies from about the early seventh century onward. The author, George of Pisidia, who celebrated the defeat of the Persian and Avar siege that took place in 626 CE, viewed both of these events as miraculous. Mary's virginity, which remained intact throughout the conception and birth of Christ, bore witness to his divine nature while her humanity assured the reality of the incarnation. It was also her virginity, according to George, which provided her with the strength to defeat potential invaders of the imperial city. This powerful and paradoxical figure was thus a dominant figure in the doctrine and devotion of the Eastern Roman empire, with her cult flourishing in Constantinople especially from about the sixth century onward.

As noted in several recent publications,² there has been an explosion of interest in the Virgin Mary during the last few decades.³ Articles, monographs and proceedings of conferences have approached Eastern Christian manifestations of her cult in various ways, focusing on texts, feasts, relics and material objects that were produced in Mary's honour throughout the

¹ George of Pisidia, *Bellum Avaricum*, ed. Pertusi 1959, 176.4–9 (my own translation). For further discussion of this passage, see Whitby 2020, 406–7.

² For example, Cameron 2004, 1–2; Cameron 2011, 1–3; Mullett 2011, 279–81; Harvey 2019, 344–5.

³ Two important collections of essays that approach the Virgin Mary from a broader interdisciplinary perspective are Boss 2007 and Maunder 2019.

Byzantine centuries.⁴ The early Christian and Byzantine period (between approximately the second and seventh centuries) remains the most closely studied, since late antique and patristic scholars view Mary as important for theological, liturgical and historical reasons.⁵ Controversy continues, however, over questions such as the period when Marian devotion began,⁶ the extent to which emperors or empresses were involved in promoting the cult,⁷ and whether or not it became a focus of theological controversy.⁸ Several recent studies, such as Thomas Arentzen's book on Romanos the Melodist's treatment of the Virgin, explore her transition in the course of the sixth century from theological symbol to multifaceted woman.⁹ The middle and late periods of Byzantine history remain less studied, although several conferences and their proceedings offer new approaches.¹⁰ Bissera Pentcheva's book on Mary's role as defender of Constantinople, along with her commemoration through relics, icons and processions, from the beginning of the seventh century until about 1204, provides analysis of these aspects of the cult.¹¹ There is no comparable study of the Virgin's ongoing veneration in the late Byzantine period (c. 1204–1453); however, various articles address manifestations of Marian devotion, including the pictorial representation of the Virgin's life in the fourteenth-century mosaics of the Chora monastery in Constantinople and her celebration in later hymns and homilies.¹² The whole field is opening up, but much work on the surviving textual, liturgical and material evidence remains to be done.

⁴ See, for example (in order of publication), Vassilaki 2000; Swanson 2004; Vassilaki 2005; Pentcheva 2006; Brubaker and Cunningham 2011; Allen, Külzer and Peltomaa 2015; Arentzen and Cunningham 2019.

⁵ Good introductions to this period include Shoemaker 2002; Maunder 2008; Shoemaker 2016a.

⁶ Those arguing for a very early date include Shoemaker 2016a and Kateusz 2019. Scholars who see the Council of Ephesus (431 CE) as a major watershed for the Byzantine Marian cult include Cameron 2004, 8–9; Price 2004; Price 2007.

⁷ For scholarly controversy concerning whether the future empress Pulcheria played an essential role in the events leading up to the deposition of the patriarch Nestorios in 431, see Holum 1982; Limberis 1994; Cooper 1998; Price 2004; James 2005.

⁸ For example, during the period of Iconoclasm (c. 730–87 and 815–43). For recent views on this subject, see Parry 1996, 191–201; Kalavrezou 2000; Tsironis 2000; Brubaker and Haldon 2011, esp. 32–3, 199–212.

⁹ Arentzen 2017. The PhD thesis that formed the basis of this monograph can be found in Arentzen 2014.

¹⁰ Brubaker and Cunningham 2011; Arentzen and Cunningham 2019. ¹¹ Pentcheva 2006.

¹² Lafontaine-Dosogne 1964 (1992); Lafontaine-Dosogne 1975; for texts, see for example the important verses called 'enkonomia' that were inserted into the so-called *epitaphios threnos* of Holy Saturday *Orthros* in about the fourteenth century and which express the lament of the Mother of God at the cross, see Eustratiades 1937–8; Touliatos-Banker 1984; Detorakis 1987–9; Ševčenko 2011, 249, nn. 9–10.

This book does not pretend to cover every aspect of the cult of the Virgin Mary during the early and middle Byzantine periods.¹³ However, it does engage with the idea that Mary was a multifaceted figure – or to use Averil Cameron’s memorable words, a model of extraordinary ‘capaciousness’ that was ‘all things to people at different times and places’.¹⁴ To some extent, the message was determined by purpose, intended audience or viewer, and physical setting or context. Liturgical texts, such as homilies and hymns, emphasised the Christological importance of the Virgin although they also began to weave intercessory invocation and prayer into this theological context from about the late fifth century onward.¹⁵ Historical texts, which were concerned mainly with political or military events, meanwhile described the Virgin’s role in defending the imperial city from its external foes.¹⁶ Mary appears as a powerful figure in both contexts, assuming a more symbolic than realistic aspect – although hymnographers such as Romanos sometimes portrayed her human and maternal qualities.¹⁷ I have chosen to focus on three important categories of Marian literature in Byzantium: homilies or sermons, hymns and hagiography (including not only *Lives* of the Virgin or of saints, but also miracle stories and apocalyptic narratives). Other, less religious or liturgical sources, such as histories, chronicles, poems and epigrams, must await a separate study. The sheer amount of surviving material, much of which remains to be critically edited and translated into modern languages, forbids universal coverage in the present work. I also regret that material or art historical evidence can only be mentioned briefly, or in passing, here – however, a forthcoming monograph will soon offer new approaches to this large field.¹⁸

The scope of this book, in terms of chronology and geographical boundaries, reflects my choice of literary material. Although the years 400 and 1000 CE represent rough boundaries for the study, it will be necessary occasionally to stray earlier or later by a few centuries in order to

¹³ Throughout this book, I define the ‘early’ period of Byzantine as lasting roughly from 330 to 843; the ‘middle’ as c. 843–1204; and the ‘late’ as 1204–1453. For discussion of various alternatives to this system, see *ODB*, vol. 1, 345–62.

¹⁴ Cameron 2004, 20. ¹⁵ See Chapters 1 and 2.

¹⁶ See Pentcheva 2006, 61–103, for texts and bibliography on the Persian and Avar siege of 626, for example. Some homiletic texts, such as Theodore Synkellos’ homily on the same siege, also portray the Virgin Mary in such terms; see Theodore Synkellos, *De obsidione*.

¹⁷ For the kontakia of Romanos the Melodist, see Maas and Trypanis 1963 (1997); Grosdidier de Matons 1964–81; Maisano 2002; Koder 2005; Eng. trans. Lash 1995; Barkhuizen 2012.

¹⁸ Leslie Brubaker is currently working on a separate volume that will follow this one; it will cover the material evidence, including churches, icons and other artefacts that commemorated the Virgin Mary in Byzantium. See also Acknowledgements, viii–ix, and Conclusion, 218.

include a few, but significant, sources that influenced the Greek religious texts that we will be examining. I decided, for example, to include Syriac religious poetry, including the second-century *Odes of Solomon* and the hymns and sung homilies of the fourth-century writer Ephrem the Syrian, owing to the fact that these works – along with the fifth- and sixth-century Syriac texts that followed them – provided such an important foundation for the sixth-century hymnographer Romanos the Melodist.¹⁹ The works that survive in the Georgian hymnbook which is known as the *Ancient Iadgari* were originally written in Greek; these are thus precious survivals of hymns that were sung in Greek churches and monasteries of Jerusalem and Palestine between about the fourth and sixth centuries. My study focuses inevitably on Constantinople between the fifth and tenth centuries since this is where and when the majority of Greek Marian texts were produced. However, some regional preachers and hymnographers, a few of whom (like John of Damascus and Kosmas of Maïuma) lived under Muslim rule in Palestine, also contributed to the tradition. The choice of texts may in some ways be arbitrary, but it reflects the direction that this book has taken in its exploration of the development of Greek Marian religious texts during the early and middle Byzantine periods. I have chosen to stop at the end of the first Christian millennium because of the wealth of texts that survives before that date. This is not to say, however, that later material, including the homilies of the twelfth-century writer James of Kokkinobaphos, are not important too.²⁰ I hope that future studies, including the forthcoming edition of these works by Elizabeth Jeffreys, will fill this gap.²¹

The aim of the present book is therefore to examine Mary's multifaceted aspect in Byzantine homilies, hymnography and hagiography between about 400 and 1000 CE. If we approach these separate, although closely related, literary genres on the basis of their particular liturgical or didactic aims, we see interesting developments in all three. First, it is noticeable that the earliest hymns and homilies that were composed in honour of the

¹⁹ On the question of Syriac influence on the kontakia of Romanos the Melodist, see Grosdidier de Matons 1977, 16–27; Papoutsakis 2007; Petersen 1985; Gador-Whyte 2013; Gador-Whyte 2017, 12–13; Arentzen 2017, 39.

²⁰ James of Kokkinobaphos, *Homilies*; for discussion, see Linardou 2004; Linardou 2007; Jeffreys 2019.

²¹ Elizabeth Jeffreys is currently working on a critical edition of the *Homilies*; see Jeffreys 2019. I am grateful to Professor Jeffreys for sharing the forthcoming text and translation of the *Homilies* with me. The two illustrated manuscripts, Cod. Paris. Gr. 1208 and Cod. Vat. Gr. 1162, that contain the *Homilies* are now digitised and available online at: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b55013447b/ff.image> and https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.1162.

Virgin Mary praised above all her role in the Christological mystery. Such texts, most of which were intended for delivery in liturgical contexts, used not only discursive, but also poetic and typological, language in order to teach Christians that a human, but perpetually virginal, woman conceived and gave birth to Jesus Christ, the Word of God. The inclusion of intercessory invocation and prayer to Mary began slowly but was in place by the beginning or middle of the sixth century. In subsequent centuries, but especially after about the beginning of the eighth, preachers and hymnographers also displayed an interest in legendary narratives, first expressed in apocryphal texts such as the *Protevangelion of James* and (several centuries later) various accounts of Mary's death or dormition and assumption into heaven, which they embellished with dialogue, monologue and other dramatic rhetorical devices.²² Such narrative freedom developed further in the surviving hagiographical texts, some of which departed significantly from the canonical Gospels in their accounts of Mary's life. The form, or genre, of individual texts does seem to have played a part in how Byzantine writers shaped their content.²³ I argue therefore that the Virgin's many aspects depend first on the literary genres that portray her, and second on the stage of cultic development in which they appear.

The richest and most developed phase begins after about the end of the ninth century when the whole range of Mary's qualities becomes visible. She remains above all a symbol of the incarnation in this period; however, this aspect may be overlaid with human and maternal characteristics, as she weeps at the foot of Christ's cross, and with monastic virtues, as she becomes a model of asceticism for Byzantine monks and nuns. An additional (and fascinating) quality of leadership also appears in a few hagiographical texts such as the probably late tenth-century *Life of the Virgin* that is falsely attributed to Maximos the Confessor, which describes Mary directing the activities of both female and male followers of Jesus.²⁴ To some extent, however, this wide expanse of Marian portraiture remains dependent on individual writers' choices of literary form, potential audiences and contexts of writing. I therefore argue throughout this book that

²² *Protevangelion of James* (*CANT* 50), ed. Tischendorf 1876; de Strycker 1961; trans. Elliott 1993 (2004); various Greek dormition accounts are listed at *CANT* 100; cf. Jugie 1944; Mimouni 1994 (2011); Shoemaker 2002. The title, 'Protevangelion' was only given to this work in the sixteenth century according to a Latin translation prepared by Postel 1552 (1570).

²³ Cunningham 2011a; Cunningham 2016.

²⁴ Georgian *Life of the Virgin* 94–102, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 121–9. The scholarly controversy surrounding the dates and authorship of this text is treated in Chapter 5, 192–4.

the Virgin Mary presented herself to Byzantine readers or auditors in the symbolic forms that they expected: although she became an increasingly compassionate and human interlocutor for Christian devotees, she encompassed in her person a full spectrum of theological, devotional and even polemical reflection that had developed over more than a millennium.

Marian Doctrine and Devotion in the Eastern Roman Empire up to c. 1000 CE

It is worth providing a short overview of the history of the cult of the Virgin in the late antique and Byzantine worlds, especially in view of the controversial areas in this field that were mentioned above. Although Stephen Shoemaker presents a forceful case for Marian devotion in the centuries preceding the Council of Ephesus in 431,²⁵ the textual evidence remains patchy. Shoemaker sets this phenomenon within the wider context of the emerging cult of saints, arguing that the lack of evidence concerning relics, shrines or other testimony of Marian devotion before the middle of the fifth century may be ‘simply a matter of serendipity’.²⁶ He cites a number of apocryphal and heterodox literary sources, beginning with the mid to late second-century narrative known as the *Protevangelion of James*, as evidence for Mary’s importance as a holy figure in her own right.²⁷ Such texts include several gnostic texts including the *Gospel of Mary*,²⁸ as well as early accounts of the Virgin’s dormition and assumption that survive only in Ethiopic, Old Georgian and Syriac.²⁹ All of these sources, suggests Shoemaker, have escaped the notice of scholars who tend to focus on more ‘orthodox’ or mainstream Christian ones.³⁰ The suggestion that Marian devotion developed first – and indeed flourished – in heterodox Christian communities during the first four centuries of the common era is intriguing; it is reinforced by the late fourth-century father Epiphanius of Salamis’s polemic against an otherwise unattested sect called the Kollyridians, who appear to have commemorated the Virgin Mary annually with a service at which bread was offered to God in her name.³¹

²⁵ Shoemaker 2016a; cf. Kateusz 2019. ²⁶ Shoemaker 2016a, 17.

²⁷ *Protevangelion of James*, ed. Tishendorf 1876, de Strycker 1961, trans. Elliott 1993 (2004). On the likely late second- to early third-century date for the *Protevangelion of James*, see Cullmann 1991, 423–4; Elliott 1993 (2004), 49; Vuong 2013, 32–9.

²⁸ *Gospel of Mary*, ed. Wilson and MacRae 1979; Shoemaker 2016a, 75–87. Shoemaker’s view that the ‘Mary’ of this Gospel should be identified with Jesus’ mother rather than with Mary Magdalen is not widely accepted by apocryphal scholars; see Norelli 2009, 69–70.

²⁹ Shoemaker 2016a, 100–45. ³⁰ Shoemaker 2016a, 2.

³¹ Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 79.1.7, ed. Holl 1933, vol. 3, 476; Shoemaker 2016a, 145.

Shoemaker does not neglect other, more mainstream, textual and material evidence in support of an early cult of the Virgin Mary. However, whereas the evangelists, apostolic fathers and early patristic writers mention her frequently, this is almost always in connection with her roles as 'Second Eve' and virginal mother of Jesus Christ. Second-century theologians, including especially Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons, saw Mary as the antitype of Eve: whereas the latter disobeyed God and thereby helped to bring about the Fall of humankind from divine favour, the former obeyed him and initiated a new creation and redemption.³² The qualifications of the female person who would thus reverse the disastrous consequences of God's gift of free will, by using it in the way that he intended, needed further justification – especially in response to questions about Mary's background that were circulating among pagan and Jewish opponents of Christianity.³³ It is likely that the *Protevangelion of James* was compiled partly in response to this challenge; its primary purpose is to describe, with the help of a highly symbolic and theological narrative, the purity of the young woman who gave birth to Christ, the Son of God.³⁴ As Trinitarian and Christological doctrine developed further in the course of the third and fourth centuries, Christian teachers began to focus more on Mary's role as 'Theotokos' or 'birth-giver of God'. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, describes her mysterious role as follows in his homily on the Nativity of Christ:

O, what a marvel! The Virgin mother becomes and remains a virgin. Do you see the novelty of nature? In the case of other women, there is no mother as long as she remains a virgin. When she has become a mother, she does not have virginity. But in this case, the two titles have come together in this fashion. For the same woman is at once both mother and virgin. And neither has virginity hindered the birth, nor has the birth undone virginity. For it was fitting that [Christ], having entered human life in order to make us all incorruptible, should himself originate from an incorruptible birth.³⁵

³² Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 100.4–5, ed. Marcovich 1997, 242–3; trans. Falls 2003, 152; Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.22.4, ed. Sagnard 1952, vol. 3, 378–83.

³³ The main pagan opponent, according to Origen, was the philosopher Celsus. According to Origen, Celsus questioned the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth, suggesting that Mary was a poor Jewish woman who committed adultery with a Roman soldier named 'Panthera'; see Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.28–32, ed. Borret 1967 (2005), 162–5, 268–71. On Jewish questioning of the Virgin birth, see Vuong 2013, 44–51; cf. Shoemaker 2016, 54, who doubts that the *Protevangelion of James* was composed mainly for apologetic reasons.

³⁴ Vuong 2013; Shoemaker 2016a, 54.

³⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Homily on the Nativity of Christ*, ed. Mann 1975, 273. 9–20 (my own translation).

Shoemaker is certainly correct in suggesting that devotion to the Virgin Mary existed in Christian circles well before the Council of Ephesus took place in 431. However, the nature of such veneration differed – at least in the mainstream Church – from that which was offered to martyrs and saints in that Mary’s importance lay in her role as the mother of Jesus Christ. The lack of relics and shrines in her honour also sets her apart from other holy people in this period.³⁶ The Fathers reflected on the Virgin’s purity, acceptance of God’s will and miraculous conception of Jesus, discerning prophetic and typological witness to her unique place in the history of salvation throughout the Old Testament. Even if some heterodox groups such as the Kollyridians expressed devotion to the Virgin Mary in more tangible ways, it is likely that her Christological role remained their primary impetus. In other words, whereas early Christians celebrated Mary’s role as mediator of salvation and instrument of the incarnation, they did not yet appeal to her in the way that they addressed martyred saints, as intercessors and miracle workers.

It might be useful at this point to define some terms concerning Mary’s relationship with the rest of humankind, which will be used throughout this book. I have chosen to follow Brian Reynolds’s useful distinction, for example, between the terms ‘mediation’ (*mesiteia*) and ‘intercession’ (*presbeia*).³⁷ Although these terms are often used synonymously, they indicate different activities on the part of the Virgin Mary. According to Reynolds, mediation refers to Mary’s role in cooperating with God in order to distribute grace and redemption to humankind through the incarnation of Christ. Although this definition is expressed in Roman Catholic language, it applies equally to the Eastern Christian view that Mary, who was chosen by God from the beginning of creation to give birth to his Son, the Word and Messiah, played an essential role in his dispensation for salvation. ‘Intercession’ meanwhile refers to Mary’s intervention on behalf of humanity, either collectively or individually, before God. Owing to her privileged position as Christ’s mother, which allows ‘free speech’ (*parresia*) with him, the Virgin intercedes on behalf of sinners, seeking to alleviate or even abolish their just punishments. Whereas mediation thus occurs at the point of Mary’s acceptance of the incarnation – and continues to play a part in the process of human salvation – intercession takes place at

³⁶ On the development of the cult of saints in early Christianity, see Brown 1981; Markus 1994; Booth, Dal Santo and Sarris 2011; Dal Santo 2012.

³⁷ Reynolds 2012, 152–3.

discrete moments in human history when Christians turn to the Mother of God for help or healing.

The theological significance of the Virgin, as birth-giver of God and mediator of salvation, became controversial in Constantinople at the beginning of the fifth century. It is in this period, at some point after about 400, that the first feast in honour of the Virgin was established: it was celebrated on 15 August in Jerusalem and Palestine, but during the Nativity cycle (probably on 26 December) in Constantinople.³⁸ Preachers including Hesychios of Jerusalem and Attikos of Constantinople began to deliver high-flown, but well-grounded, theological orations in honour of the Virgin, as we shall see in Chapter 2. Such panegyric language, in which the epithet 'Theotokos' featured, reflected the Alexandrian theological tradition according to which Christ remained the divine Word of God even after assuming human flesh in the incarnation.³⁹ It is this theological message that provoked Nestorios, who was appointed bishop of Constantinople in 428, along with his presbyter Anastasios, to preach against the use of the epithet 'Theotokos' for the Virgin Mary. The historian Socrates relates the story as follows:

Preaching in the church one day, Anastasius warned his hearers that 'No one must call Mary "Theotokos", for Mary was but a human being and it is impossible that God could be born from a human being.'⁴⁰

The subsequent struggle between Nestorios and his opponents, including especially the patriarch of Alexandria, Cyril, is well covered in secondary literature.⁴¹ The role that the empress Pulcheria (the sister of Theodosios II) played in this conflict, however, remains unclear. Kenneth Holm, Vassiliki Limberis and Kate Cooper together constructed a persuasive case for Pulcheria's bid to harness popular devotion to the Theotokos, which included her role as a model of asceticism, in order to strengthen her own imperial and civic claims as female ruler.⁴² This hypothesis rests especially on a text known as the *Letter to Cosmas*, which was written in support of

³⁸ Scholars believe that the feast 'in memory of Mary' was celebrated in Constantinople in connection with the Nativity of Christ, either on a Sunday before Christmas or on the day after (26 December). The latter is attested in the tenth-century *Typikon of the Great Church*, ed. Mateos 1962, vol. 1, 158–61. See also Jugie 1923b; Jugie 1944, 172–212, esp. 175–7; Capelle 1943; Constan 2003, 135.

³⁹ Recent scholarship has provided nuance to the concept of separate 'Antiochene' and 'Alexandrian' Christologies; see Daley 2015; Daley 2018, 174–99; however, some aspects of this categorisation remain useful: see Grillmeier 1975, 167–439; Hofer 2019, 461.

⁴⁰ Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.32.1–2, ed. Hansen 1995, 380. 1–3, trans. Constan 2003, 52; cf. Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.2, ed. Bidez and Parmentier 1898, 7–8.

⁴¹ See, for example, Young 1983, 213–65; McGuckin 1994 (2004); Wessel 2004.

⁴² Holm 1982; Limberis 1994; Cooper 1998.

Nestorios and after his exile to Egypt, perhaps between *c.* 435 and 450.⁴³ Richard Price has shown, however, that the date and polemical tone of this text, when compared with earlier sources, undermines Holm's case. It appears that Pulcheria's enmity towards Nestorios and promotion of the Marian cult represent later elaborations in the historical record.⁴⁴ Further, whereas later Byzantine historians and chroniclers assigned the discovery of the Virgin's robe in Palestine, its translation to Constantinople and the building of the Blachernai shrine, along with that of the Chalkoprateia, to Pulcheria, historians now believe that these activities took place somewhat later, during the reign of Leo I and his consort Verina.⁴⁵

Two aspects of the scholarly controversy concerning the empress Pulcheria remain significant for our purposes. First, the questions concerning gender, patronage and imperial piety remain applicable to the Marian cult – whether or not they should be examined in relation to this early fifth-century ruler. I shall return to these questions throughout the present book since they should be posed at every stage of the cult's development in Byzantium. Second, it is clear that the Christological controversy that involved the Theotokos in the first half of the fifth century was, at least in part, a reaction to growing devotion to the Virgin as a holy figure in her own right. The homilies and hymns that can be dated to this period do not yet appeal to Mary as protector or intercessor, as we shall see in Chapters 1 and 2; however, the shift that allowed doctrine to become infused with devotion even in theological and liturgical contexts was beginning to take place, perhaps justified by the Christological controversies of the early fifth century.

The Third Ecumenical Council thus provided an incipient cult of the Virgin Mary with the seal of ecclesiastical approval.⁴⁶ It can be no accident that churches and shrines in honour of the Theotokos quickly followed, in both Palestine and Constantinople. The church of the Kathisma, which has recently been excavated at a site halfway between Jerusalem and

⁴³ The text tells the story of Nestorios' expulsion of Pulcheria from the sanctuary of Hagia Sophia, where she was in the habit of receiving communion. When the patriarch told her that this space was reserved for priests, she responded, 'Why? Have I not given birth to God?' Nestorios then answered, 'You have given birth to Satan!', thereby incurring her permanent displeasure. See Nau 1919 (1974), 279; Price 2004, 32–3.

⁴⁴ Price 2004; James 2005; Price 2008. ⁴⁵ Mango 1998, 65–6.

⁴⁶ Note, however, Richard Price's recent suggestion that scholars have exaggerated the focus that Mary, as Theotokos, received at the Council of Ephesus in 431. This Council did not issue a doctrinal definition concerning the status of the Virgin Mary; the only documents that affirm her role as Theotokos are Cyril of Alexandria's *Second and Third Letters to Nestorios*, as well as his *Homily IV, On the Virgin Mary*, which was delivered at Ephesus soon after the condemnation of Nestorios. See Price 2019, 71–4.

Bethlehem,⁴⁷ marked the place where (according to the *Protevangelion of James*) the Virgin rested on her way to give birth to Christ.⁴⁸ Textual sources, including the fifth-century *Armenian Lectionary* and an account by a sixth-century pilgrim named Theodosios, testify to the site, as well as to the liturgical celebrations that took place there.⁴⁹ It is only in the mid sixth century, however, that two saints' *Lives* mention the church of the Kathisma, which they attribute to the generosity of a woman named Ikelia during the reign of the bishop Juvenal in the mid fifth century.⁵⁰ Here we note once again the role of a female patron in promoting the commemoration of the Virgin Mary in a material way.

Meanwhile, Leo I and his consort Verina founded the shrines (*Soroi*) at Blachernai and Chalkoprateia in Constantinople between 468 and 474, as we saw above.⁵¹ These housed (or came to house) Mary's most famous relics, the robe (or mantle) and belt.⁵² In the course of the sixth century, the emperors Justin I and Justinian I built numerous churches, some of which (including the Blachernai and Chalkoprateia) were renewed by their successor, Justin II.⁵³ Other churches or shrines that were constructed during this period include that of the 'Source' (*Pege*), which contained a spring at which healing miracles took place, and a chapel of the Theotokos in the imperial palace.⁵⁴ Justinian's official historian, Prokopios, describes these foundations in Constantinople along with others throughout the empire.⁵⁵

Another important development in this period was the addition of new Marian feast-days to the Constantinopolitan ecclesiastical calendar. To the existing feast of the 'Memory of Mary', which had been celebrated since the

⁴⁷ Avner 1999; Shoemaker 2002, 79–98; Avner 2011.

⁴⁸ *Protevangelion of James* 17.3; ed. Tischendorf 1876 (1966), 33; trans. Elliott, 1993 (2004), 64. For discussion of this site and its significance for the Palestinian cult of the Virgin, see Shoemaker 2002, 78–98.

⁴⁹ *Armenian Lectionary*, ed. Renoux 1971, vol. 2, 354–7; Theodosios, *De situ terrae sanctae*, ed. Geyer 1965, 119. See also Wilkinson 1977, 5; Shoemaker 2002, 82–3.

⁵⁰ Theodore of Petra, *Vita s. Theodosii*, ed. Usener 1890, 13–14; Cyril of Skythopolis, *Vita s. Theodosii*, ed. Schwartz 1939, 236; Shoemaker 2002, 83–4.

⁵¹ Mango 1998; Mango 1993–4; Mango 2000, 19.

⁵² Ebersolt 1921, 44–60. For the earliest texts on the discovery and translation of the robe, see Wenger 1955, 111–39.

⁵³ Mango 2000, esp. 19–21. The epithet 'Theotokoupolis' was coined by the early seventh-century writer Theodore Synkellos in his oration known as the *Inventio*; see Combeffis 1648, vol. 2, 754B: 'Ἡ βασίλις αὐτῆ καὶ θεοφύλακτος πόλις, ἣν τῆς Θεοτόκου πόλιν ὁ λέγων ἡ γράφων ἐπαινεθήσεται . . .

⁵⁴ Ebersolt 1921, 17–30, 61–6; Mango 2000, 21; Magdalino 2004 (palace chapel of the Theotokos of the Pharos).

⁵⁵ Prokopios, *Buildings* 1.iii.6 (the shrine of the *Pege*); 1.iii.10 (that of the *Heraion*); 1.iii.11–13 (a shrine to St Anna, Mary's mother, in the Deuteron); 1.iii.1–5, 1.vi.3 (Blachernai); 1.viii.20 (a Marian shrine on the Bosphoros); 11.x.24 (Antioch); 111.iv.12 (Theodosiopolis); v.vi.1 (Jerusalem); v.vii.7 (Mt Garizin); v.viii.5–6 (Mt Sinai); v.ix.5 (Jericho); v.ix.8 (Mt of Olives); and many others.

early fifth century in connection with the feast of Christ's Nativity (25 December), as we saw above, were added those of the Annunciation (25 March) and possibly of the Virgin's own birth (8 September).⁵⁶ A homily by Abraham of Ephesus, dated to before 553, mentions the introduction of the feast of the Annunciation.⁵⁷ Further support for the existence of this festival appears in a letter that was purportedly written by Justinian himself in 560, in which the emperor argues that its date, along with that of Christ's Presentation in the Temple or *Hypapante* (2 February), should be determined by that of Christmas (25 December).⁵⁸ As for the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin, a kontakion by the sixth-century hymnographer Romanos the Melodist suggests that this was also being celebrated by about the middle of the sixth century.⁵⁹ The feast of Mary's Dormition or *Koimesis* ('falling asleep') (15 August) was added to the liturgical calendar at the end of the sixth century during the reign of Maurice (582–602).⁶⁰ Although our witness, Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, was writing in the early fourteenth century, his testimony is supported by the numerous festal sermons on the subject of Mary's Dormition that survive from the early seventh century onward.⁶¹ The feasts of Mary's Conception (9 December) and Entrance into the Temple (21 November) may only have been added to the calendar at around the beginning of the eighth century.⁶² The first homilies and hymns that celebrate these festivals are dated to that period; they include works by the early eighth-century preachers John of Euboea and Germanos of Constantinople.⁶³

⁵⁶ Cunningham 2008b, 19–23.

⁵⁷ Abraham of Ephesus, *Homily on the Annunciation*, ed. Jugie 1922 (2003), 443.2.14–20; see also van Esbroeck 1968–9; Antonopoulou 1997, 167, n. 37; Allen 2011, 72, 73, n. 27.

⁵⁸ Van Esbroeck 1968–9; *ODB*, vol. 1, 106.

⁵⁹ See Romanos the Melodist, *Kontakion on the Nativity of the Virgin*, ed. Maas and Trypanis 1963 (1997), 276 80. It is likely that Romanos died in *c.* 560; see Arentzen 2017, 5. Romanos also composed at least one kontakion for the feast of the Annunciation; see Maas and Trypanis 1963 (1997), 280–89. Although Maas and Trypanis assign a second kontakion to the theme of the Annunciation, Archimandrite Ephrem Lash titles it 'On the Mother of God' and suggests that it might have been sung on 26 December; see Maas and Trypanis 1963 (1997), 289–93; trans. Lash 1995, 16–22.

⁶⁰ Jugie 1944, 172–84; Mimouni 1995, 46–71; Shoemaker 2002, 121–5. All of these scholars trace the development of the Constantinopolitan celebration of the feast of the Dormition from Eastern Christian (especially Palestinian) celebration of her memory on 15 August.

⁶¹ Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, *Ecclesiastical History* 28, PG 147, 292B. Translations of many of these sermons can be found in Daley 1998.

⁶² For discussion, see Cunningham 2008b, 24–6; Krausmüller 2011, 228–30; Panou 2018, 41–8.

⁶³ John of Euboea, *Homily on the Conception of the Virgin Mary*, PG 96, 1460–1500; Germanos I of Constantinople, *Homilies I–II on the Entrance*, PG 98, 292–320.

Liturgical texts, including homilies and hymns, in honour of the new Marian feasts proliferated from the sixth century onward. Pauline Allen argues that these displayed an increasingly 'high' and affective Mariology, citing festal orations by seventh-century preachers such as Sophronios of Jerusalem and Leontios of Neapolis.⁶⁴ Allen further shows that in addition to including intercessory invocation of the Virgin alongside the usual Christological doctrine, sermons for the feast of the Presentation in the Temple (*Hypapante*) began to 'sanatise' problematic aspects of this story, including the necessity (according to Jewish tradition) for Mary's purification forty days after the birth of Jesus (Lk 2:22) and her grief at the foot of the cross according to the elder Symeon's prophecy (Lk 2:35).⁶⁵ Whereas early Church teachers or bishops, including Origen and Cyril of Alexandria, argued that these signs revealed Mary's humanity, along with her need to be saved,⁶⁶ festal preachers from about the sixth century onward expressed no such ambiguity.⁶⁷ Their purpose, when preaching on the recently instituted Marian feast-days, was to celebrate the all-pure Virgin and Theotokos while also offering an opportunity for congregations to pray collectively for her protection and intercession.

The sixth century thus represents, as Averil Cameron and Cyril Mango have already argued, a turning point in the cult of the Byzantine Virgin Mary.⁶⁸ The beginnings of Marian devotion, which involved appeals for intercession and protection, may be detected in historical accounts of the fifth-century theological controversy; however, this trend manifests itself in liturgical texts only from about the sixth century onward. We shall see in Chapter 1 how the sixth-century hymnographer Romanos, probably influenced by Syriac liturgical poetry, contributed to the development of a fully human and maternal Virgin Mary.⁶⁹ Although his hymns may have been inspired as much by post-Chalcedonian theological considerations as by growing popular devotion to the Virgin, he succeeded in juxtaposing the powerful – and fully divine – figure of Christ and his human mother. But Mary also represented an effective intercessor for Romanos; she remained close to her Son even after his resurrection and ascension into heaven, thus providing the rest of humanity with access to the Righteous

⁶⁴ Allen 2011, 74–7, 82–4.

⁶⁵ Christian exegetes from an early date interpreted Symeon's prophecy as referring to Mary's future response to the crucifixion of her son; see Allen 2011, 84–5.

⁶⁶ Allen 2011, 79. Cf. Origen, *Homilies on Luke* xvii.6, ed. Crouzel, Fournier and Périchon 1962, 256–59; commentary on 11–64; Cyril of Alexandria, *Homily XII, On the Presentation*, PG 77, 1049C.

⁶⁷ See, for example, Leontios of Neapolis, *Homily on Symeon*, PG 93, 1580C; cited in Allen 2011, 83, n. 91.

⁶⁸ Cameron 1978; Cameron 1979b; Mango 2000, 21–3. ⁶⁹ Gador-Whyte 2013; Arentzen 2017.

Judge.⁷⁰ Romanos laid the foundations for later liturgical treatment of the Theotokos, both in homiletics and hymnography, although the themes that he introduced would develop further, especially after the period of Iconoclasm (c. 730–843).⁷¹

It is worth suggesting (although difficult to prove) that opposition to the developing Marian cult did exist in some quarters. It is possible that such a position was related to the late sixth-century controversy concerning the souls of saints after death and their efficacy as mediators of miracles and healing.⁷² Whereas some theologians argued that souls can only function through the bodies with which they are associated, thus meaning that they are inactive after death, others believed that they remain awake and can bring about miracles and healing. Narratives concerning the Virgin's own death and afterlife began to circulate widely in the Greek-speaking world, following their first appearance in both Syriac and Greek versions in about the late fifth century.⁷³ This took the debate to another level, since Mary was believed to have been assumed bodily into heaven after three days in the tomb following which, in her resurrected form, she sat at the right hand of Christ in heaven but could also appear in visions to believers at her various shrines on earth. Clear textual evidence of anti-Marian voices in the Byzantine world is nevertheless difficult to find. A few clues, such as the silence of some liturgical writers in relation to the Virgin or Maximos the Confessor's need to defend himself from an accusation of slandering the Virgin in a text known as the *Dispute of Bizya* (656/7), may suggest that opponents of the cult (even if they did not include Maximos himself) were active in the Byzantine world.⁷⁴ It is possible, as Gilbert Dagron has suggested, that some ecclesiastics were dismayed by what they viewed as an excess of devotion to saints, relics, images and the Virgin at the turn of the seventh and eighth centuries; they viewed such activity as 'idolatrous' because it involved too much belief in 'presbeia' or intercession.⁷⁵

The evidence increases during the iconoclast period, although historians have so far failed to prove conclusively that the opponents of images were also suspicious of Marian devotion. The answer to this question is likely to be nuanced; whereas iconoclasts (apart perhaps from Constantine V)

⁷⁰ Peltomaa 2015.

⁷¹ On the continuing influence of Romanos the Melodist on later liturgical texts, see Cunningham 2008a.

⁷² Dal Santo 2012; Krausmüller 1998–9; Krausmüller 2008. ⁷³ Mimouni 1995; Shoemaker 2002.

⁷⁴ Maximos the Confessor and Anastasios, *Dispute at Bizya*, ed. Allen and Neil 1999, 143. On the attribution of this text to Maximos and his disciple Anastasios, see *ibid.*, 36–7.

⁷⁵ Dagron 1992, 65.

upheld Mary's holy status as 'Theotokos', they discouraged popular veneration of her relics and icons, as well as appeals to her intercessory power.⁷⁶ At the very beginning of the controversy, the patriarch Germanos I of Constantinople (715–30) denounced unnamed people who failed to venerate Mother of God, associating them rhetorically with Jews or other non-believers.⁷⁷ Several decades later, according to the ninth-century chronicler Theophanes, Constantine V rejected the concept that the Virgin Mary, or indeed any of the saints, could intercede in response to Christian supplication; this emperor also suppressed the possession or veneration of their relics.⁷⁸ The patriarch Nikephoros claimed that Constantine tampered with the content of hymns in praise of the Virgin, implying that this had to do with excising sections that sought her help or intercession.⁷⁹ All of this evidence, which remains scattered and heavily biased, suggests that this iconoclast emperor, possibly backed by members of the clergy who were sympathetic to his cause, opposed aspects of the Marian cult including veneration of her relics and belief in her power of intercession. Nevertheless, the production of Marian festal sermons and hymns flourished as never before in this period, which suggests that suppression of the cult, if it did indeed occur, was confined to the period of Constantine V's reign and that it revived after 787 and flourished during the period of second Iconoclasm (815–43).

Eighth- and ninth-century preachers and hymnographers, backed up by historians such as Theophanes the Confessor, employed Marian praise in support of the iconophile cause. Ioli Kalavrezou and Niki Tsironis have shown how emphasis on Mary's – and by extension Christ's – humanity helped to prove that images not only could, but indeed must, be

⁷⁶ The 'Horos' or Acts of the Iconoclast Council of Hieria in 754 repeatedly stresses Mary's holiness as 'Theotokos'; see the *Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (787)*, ed. Lamberz 2008–12, 682, 690; trans. Price 2018, 675, 676. On Constantine V's alleged position with regard to the Theotokos, including the idea that she should be regarded as 'an empty purse', see Gero 1977, 146.

⁷⁷ See Germanos of Constantinople, *Homily II on the Entrance*, PG 98, 312. A century or so later, the patriarch Photios of Constantinople berated listeners (or putative listeners) who did not accept the story of Anna's miraculous conception of the Virgin Mary at an advanced age; see Photios, *Homily IX, On the Birth of the Virgin* 4–6, ed. Laourdas 1959, 91.9–94. 3; trans. Mango 1958, 166–71. It is difficult to determine, however, whether the polemic that appears in these homilies is directed at actual ideological opponents or included merely for rhetorical effect.

⁷⁸ Theophanes Confessor, *Chronicle*, ed. De Boor 1887, 439, 442; trans. Mango and Scott 1997, 607, 610. Some scholars argue, however, that passages such as these exaggerate the extent to which iconoclasts suppressed the cult of relics; see Auzépy 2001, 19–20; Brubaker and Haldon 2011, 38–40.

⁷⁹ Nikephoros, *Antirrhetikos* 11.4, PG 100, 341D: Ἐπειτα παραχαράσσει καὶ παραποιεῖται ὅσα ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτῆς ἐπεκέκλητο, καὶ ἐν λιταῖς πρὸς τὸν τεχθέντα ἐξ αὐτῆς καὶ δεήσασιν ἐν ἄσμασιν ἀεὶ ἀνεφώνουσι ὑπὲρ τῆς τοῦ κοινοῦ παντὸς σωτηρίας οἱ θεόμενοι. I am grateful to Dirk Krausmüller for informing me of this reference.

constructed and venerated in order to witness to the reality of the incarnation.⁸⁰ Mary's human and maternal qualities, which manifested themselves especially at the time of Christ's birth and crucifixion, might be expressed with the help of affective rhetorical devices such as *enargeia* (making absent things present), *ekphrasis* (description), *ethopoiia* (dramatic speech) and others.⁸¹ All of these elements had already been employed, as we saw earlier, by Romanos the Melodist in the middle of the sixth century; however, eighth- and especially ninth-century preachers and hymnographers took them to a higher level in their depiction of the loving and grieving Virgin Mary. Their purpose, by focusing on his mother, was to prove the humanity of Christ; however, this also served to make Mary appear even more accessible to human supplication as she sat in glory beside her resurrected Son in heaven.

One other product of the Iconoclast period was the elaboration of Mary's legendary life story. The late eighth- and early ninth-century hagiographer Epiphanius the Monk (of Kallistratos) produced the first biography, or *Life*, of the Virgin that survives in Greek,⁸² although earlier examples circulated in the Syriac-speaking world.⁸³ This text differs from liturgical homilies and hymns in its 'historical' approach to the holy subject. As we shall see in Chapter 5, Epiphanius was followed in the tenth century by at least three other hagiographers; although the latter provided an interesting mix of panegyric and narrative elements in their *Lives* of the Virgin,⁸⁴ Epiphanius adhered mainly to the latter approach. His effort must reflect increasing interest in the historical figure of the Virgin Mary, although he inevitably depended on New Testament, apocryphal and patristic sources for his narrative. In any case, this text inaugurates several new strands in the developing Marian tradition: these include the aforementioned interest in 'historical' narrative; the revival of emphasis on Mary's ascetic, or monastic, qualities; and, perhaps most interestingly, a willingness to diverge from apocryphal and even canonical narratives about the Virgin. Not only Epiphanius but also the later hagiographers embellish Mary's story for their own didactic purposes; such freedom indicates an ability not only of writers – but presumably also of readers or audiences – to associate certain

⁸⁰ Kalavrezou 1990; Kalavrezou 2000; Tsironis 2000. ⁸¹ Tsironis 2010; Tsironis 2011.

⁸² Epiphanius of Kallistratos, *Life of the Virgin*, ed. Dressel 1843; see also Cunningham 2019.

⁸³ Naffah 2009.

⁸⁴ John Geometres, *Life of the Virgin*, ed. Constan and Simelidis forthcoming; Georgian *Life of the Virgin*, ed. van Esbroeck 1986, Shoemaker 2012; Symeon the Metaphrast, *Life of the Virgin*, ed. Latyshev 1912. For discussion of the four *Lives* (either collectively or individually), see Mimouni 1994 (2011); Shoemaker 2005; Shoemaker 2011c; Cunningham 2016; Constan 2019; Cunningham 2019; Simelidis 2020.

aspects of the Virgin (such as personal qualities or narrative details) with particular theological messages.

The period that followed the end of Iconoclasm, or 'Triumph of Orthodoxy', in 843 thus saw the full elaboration of Marian veneration in Byzantium. The Virgin Mary, who was usually now addressed as 'Mother of God' (*Meter Theou*), presided over the apses of middle Byzantine Churches, symbolising not only the incarnation of Christ but also her own role as purveyor of his body and blood in the Eucharist.⁸⁵ Artisans, including not only icon painters but also mosaicists, sculptors, weavers and illuminators of manuscripts, began to depict the Mother of God in different aspects that were provided with recognisable epithets, such as 'Hodegetria' ('Guide'), 'Eleousa' ('Tender One') and others.⁸⁶ The ninth-century preacher George of Nikomedia described the figure of the lamenting Virgin who experienced 'searing flames of fire that penetrated her womb' as she witnessed her Son suffering on the cross.⁸⁷ And, perhaps following such homiletic treatment, the compilers and authors of liturgical books for weekdays throughout the year developed the short hymns known as *stavrotheotokia*, which commemorated the grieving Mary in concise but affective ways.⁸⁸ In addition to embodying the full act of spiritual surrender to Christ, the Virgin was envisioned as vicariously enduring his pain on the cross. Whereas Byzantine liturgical writers preferred to avoid detailed descriptions of the suffering Son of God, they could develop this aspect of divine *kenosis* fully in the person of his mother.

Another aspect of middle Byzantine devotion to the Virgin Mary was her appropriation by monastic or lay religious writers. This process began with the composition of hymnography in her honour, not only for the Marian feast-days but also for Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the year, by mainly monastic melodists.⁸⁹ As mentioned above, the early ninth-century writer Epiphanius, who may have belonged to the Monastery of Kallistratos in Constantinople, displayed an interest in Mary's ascetic prowess throughout his *Life of the Virgin*.⁹⁰ Although the late tenth-century *Life* by John Geometres may have been composed for a pious lay confraternity at the church of the Theotokos *ta Kyrou*, it also

⁸⁵ Evangelatou 2019, 77 and *passim*.

⁸⁶ For discussion of the epithets that are associated with particular icons of the Mother of God, see Ouspensky and Lossky 1983, 76–103; Baltoyanni 2000.

⁸⁷ George of Nikomedia, *Homily on Good Friday*, PG 100, 1480B (quoted and translated in Conostas 2014, 127).

⁸⁸ *Oktoechos*; see especially the hymnography for Wednesdays and Fridays.

⁸⁹ For discussion of this process, see Ševčenko 1998, esp. 112–14.

⁹⁰ Cunningham 2016, 152–6; Cunningham 2019, 319–22.

celebrated the Virgin's prayerful way of life.⁹¹ The main periods in Mary's legendary life that were significant, according to these authors, were the years (between the ages of three and twelve – or according to Epiphanius, seven and fourteen) that she spent in the Jewish temple and those that followed the ascension of Christ into heaven. She is described as engaging in constant vigils and prayer in the settings of the 'holy of holies', or innermost sanctuary, in the temple and of the 'upper room' on Zion where she lived in the care of the evangelist John after Christ's ascension. Even more significantly, the late tenth-century *Lives* of the Virgin attribute teaching and leadership roles to Mary at various points in her story. The Georgian *Life of the Virgin*, for example, goes so far as to describe the Virgin directing both the ascetic training and missionary activity of the apostles.⁹² We may ask whether such attribution of power to a female figure reflects the desire or experience of the author or, alternatively, whether it is applied uniquely to the Mother of God and not to other women.

Miracle stories, along with longer *Lives* of saints that contain embedded stories of miracles involving the Virgin, meanwhile provide us with a glimpse of lay people's responses to her miraculous presence and intercession.⁹³ The miracles that were recorded at the shrine of the *Pege* (Source) in Constantinople, for example, belong to a collection of stories that date between the fifth and tenth centuries.⁹⁴ Interestingly, they record visions of a woman who takes various forms, depending on the witnesses who encounter her. One story describes a woman 'of modest means' (γυναικὰ τινὰ μετρίαν), whereas another portrays her as 'a woman robed in purple, towering as high as the lintel [of the church doors] in the majesty of her stature'.⁹⁵ It is possible that the stories in this collection reflect the individual experiences of pilgrims to the shrine; the compiler has apparently made no attempt to harmonise such different accounts of Mary's presence, remaining close to the narratives as they were originally told. Several middle Byzantine apocalypses that describe the Virgin's tours of heaven and hell, according to purported visions of individual Christians, portray yet another image of the Mother of God.⁹⁶ Jane Baun has analysed the didactic purpose of the *Apocalypse of Anastasia* and the *Apocalypse of the*

⁹¹ John Geometres, *Life of the Virgin*. On the confraternity at the church of the Theotokos *ta Kyrou*, see Magdalino 2018.

⁹² Georgian *Life of the Virgin* 93–102; ed. and trans. van Esbroeck 1986, vol. 479/ 22, 81–90; ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 120–9.

⁹³ See Chapter 5.

⁹⁴ *Miracles of the Pege*, ed. and trans. Talbot and Johnson 2012, Introduction, xv.

⁹⁵ *Miracles of the Pege* 7 and 13, ed. and trans. Talbot and Johnson 2012, 220–1 and 234–5.

⁹⁶ *Apocalypse of Anastasia*, ed. Homburg 1903; *Apocalypse of the Theotokos*, ed. Tischendorf 1866 (1966).

Theotokos, as they portray sinners suffering in Hades for their various misdeeds in life.⁹⁷ The lively nature of these texts, as well as their hopeful portrayal of the Virgin Mary in her role as chief intercessor in heaven, assured their popularity not only in the Byzantine, but also the later Orthodox world.⁹⁸ In short, and as we will see in Chapter 5, the hagiographical or ‘popular’ treatment of the Virgin Mary differs in many ways from the theological, and increasingly formulaic, approach that predominates in homilies and hymns of the same period.

This brief overview of the development of Marian doctrine and devotion during the early and middle periods of Byzantine history does not differ significantly from that which has already achieved consensus among most historians and theologians. Although I disagree with some scholars about the extent and nature of Marian devotion in the early Church, it is undeniable that recognition of her personal holiness existed well before the beginning of the fifth century.⁹⁹ Mary’s promotion as patron and defender of Constantinople, along with acknowledgement of her intercessory power, took place especially in the course of the sixth century and reached a high point at the siege of the imperial city in 626. Shrines that contained the main secondary relics, the robe and the belt, although founded as early as the second half of the fifth century, gained impetus after this date. The defeat of Iconoclasm in the course of the eighth and ninth centuries helped to promote the cult further and it flourished especially in the centuries that followed, with the late ninth and tenth centuries seeing increased production of hymnography, homiletics and hagiography in honour of the Virgin. To return to the theme with which I began, Mary represented all things to most people: she became a multilayered symbol that worked in theological, devotional and social ways. Her gender was important, as we shall see later, but this did not inhibit Christians of all three genders (male, female and eunuch) from approaching her.¹⁰⁰ Mary symbolised creation, the Church and every human being; at the same time, according to Byzantine hymnography, she ‘was higher than the cherubim and more honourable than the seraphim’ – in other words, a member of the celestial court who stood in close proximity to God himself. In short, Mary was the meeting place of the divine and created worlds, according to a society

⁹⁷ Baun 2007.

⁹⁸ For example, F. Dostoyevsky refers to a Slavonic version of the *Theotokos* apocalypse, calling it a ‘monastic poem’, in the ‘Grand Inquisitor’ section of *The Brothers Karamazov*; see Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. McDuff 1993 (2003), 322–3; cf. Baun 2007, 259.

⁹⁹ See above, 6–8.

¹⁰⁰ For the idea that three genders existed in Byzantine culture, see Ringrose 2003.

that never forgot its place in relation to the whole Christian cosmos.¹⁰¹ Byzantine writers of every literary genre presented the variegated aspects of the Mother of God in response to, and for the benefit of, the liturgical, literary and civic circumstances in which they found themselves.

Literary Genre and Contexts of Textual Reception

The question of literary genre – that is, whether we can classify different types of text on the basis of their form, style and content – continues to perplex Byzantinists. Scholars debate whether Byzantine writers recognised separate literary forms and if so, whether they adhered strictly to such categories. Reacting in part to the German ‘Handbuch’ approach to Byzantine literature, Alexander Kazhdan questioned the concept of ‘genre’ and suggested that texts should be read on their own merits – especially with attention to the work of individual authors.¹⁰² Margaret Mullett, Panagiotis Agapitos and Martin Hinterberger defend the concept, however, arguing that ‘genre’ refers to recognised literary ‘forms’ that provide authors both with models for inspiration and opportunities for parody.¹⁰³ Some of these are well-known genres from classical antiquity, such as histories, letters or epigrams. Others, including saints’ *Lives* or *vitae*, homilies, and hymns such as kontakia and kanons, are Christian inventions. Nevertheless, some problems remain. First, as Agapitos points out, ‘what the Byzantines have to say about genre and the way in which they compose texts belonging to ancient genres (e.g. epistolography or historiography) shows a steady trend in juxtaposing convention and innovation or in experimenting with mixture and deviation’.¹⁰⁴ In other words, the authors of all kinds of literary texts played with traditional rules about genre, combining these in new ways in order to create something slightly different. Second, as Mullett remarks, the rhetorical ‘type’, which depended on performative contexts, audiences and other factors, could

¹⁰¹ Meyendorff 1974, 129–50; Theokritoff 2008; Cunningham 2010; Louth 2013, 33–49.

¹⁰² Kazhdan with Franklin 1984, viii; see also Kazhdan 1999, 1–5. Classic German handbooks include Krumbacher 1897; Beck 1959; and Hunger 1978.

¹⁰³ Mullett 1992; Agapitos 2003; Agapitos 2008; Hinterberger 2014. Martin Hinterberger defines the concept as follows: ‘The question of literary genres involves, on the one hand, the categorisation and classification of texts by modern scholarship on the basis of precise criteria and characteristic features, and, on the other, the literary practice according to which the writer, one way or another, refers to an extant tradition and texts of reference (or model texts) which he/she follows, adapts, rejects, or parodies. However, it also concerns the literary audience and their reception of a text according to their expectations of a particular genre, as developed by former experiences.’ See Hinterberger 2014, 25, with reference to Duff 2000.

¹⁰⁴ Agapitos 2008, 79.

apply to a variety of literary forms – and indeed could shift from one setting to another according to multiple readings of the same text.¹⁰⁵ Third and finally, it is evident that the boundaries between literary genres are sometimes blurred or porous; what, for example, is the difference between a festal oration and a high-style saint's life, both of which might be delivered in a liturgical setting? I shall deal with these three problems one by one, aiming in the process to justify the classification of texts that I adopt in the present book and to explain why it is important.

To begin with the definition of individual genres, it is worth noting that many of the literary forms that are useful for scholarship would not be recognised by Byzantine writers or their audiences. Nor do they correspond to ancient categories, as defined by philosophers or rhetoricians. Festal sermons, to take one example, are based on early Christian models such as the theological orations of Gregory Nazianzen.¹⁰⁶ Although we may also call them 'homilies', they differ from the more conversational, or colloquial, exegetical orations that were delivered in church on a daily or weekly basis by preachers including Origen, the Cappadocian Fathers including Gregory, and John Chrysostom.¹⁰⁷ All of these homiletic forms are Christian inventions; they were employed for didactic, panegyric and polemical reasons. There are various subgenres within the wider category of 'homiletics', but most were employed in liturgical settings – a purpose which usually governed their inclusion or not in later collections such as *menologia*, *panegyrika* and *homiliaria*.¹⁰⁸ Hagiography is also a Christian invention, which served both commemorative and liturgical functions.¹⁰⁹ The *Acts* or passions of martyrs, *Lives (vitae)* of ascetic saints and collections of miracles all belong to this category. Whereas *Acts* of martyrs follow earlier pagan and Jewish models, the *Lives* of saints are based more on rhetorical forms such as the *basilikos logos* or the *enkomion*, both of which offer praise to important people, whether living or dead. New forms of poetry that were sung primarily in liturgical contexts also developed in

¹⁰⁵ Mullett 1992, 235–6.

¹⁰⁶ Gregory Nazianzen, *Festal Orations*, ed. Bernardi 1978, Moreschini 1990; trans. Harrison 2008. Useful studies include Ruether 1969; McGuckin 2001a; Daley 2006; Beeley 2008; Elm 2012; Thomas 2019.

¹⁰⁷ On the distinctions between homiletic genres (along with the difficulty of such definitions), see Cunningham 2008c, 875–8; Mayer 2008, 570–72.

¹⁰⁸ The categorisation (and naming) of such collections is undertaken in Ehrhard 1936–52. On the possible uses of these collections in Byzantine monastic and liturgical settings, see Cunningham 2011b.

¹⁰⁹ For orientation on the genre as a whole, see Efthymiadis 2014, 1–21 ('Introduction'); Hinterberger 2014.

the Christian Church.¹¹⁰ Hymns such as the *kontakion* (sometimes described as a ‘sung homily’), the *kanon*, *sticheron*, and – specifically in honour of the Virgin Mary – the *theotokion* and *stavrotheotokion* all follow particular melodies, metrical patterns and didactic methods.

It is worth asking next whether Byzantine preachers, hagiographers and hymnographers consciously recognised these separate literary forms, along with the rules or formulaic qualities that became associated with each. The answer is not clear, especially since none of these specifically Christian genres corresponded directly with forms that Byzantine writers would have been taught in the course of their rhetorical or philosophical training. Sometimes the titles that are provided for individual texts in manuscripts provide clues – especially with regard to hymn forms that filled specific slots in liturgical service books by about the early eighth century. Festal sermons and *Lives* of saints, however, could both be called ‘*logoi*’ (‘speeches’) in middle Byzantine liturgical collections; they might both be read out in the course of offices such as the morning service (*Orthros*), although both might also have acted as private devotional reading or have been read aloud (not always all at once) in non-liturgical settings.¹¹¹ In short, whereas hymnography became increasingly well defined, as regards separate forms that occupied specific slots in liturgical celebration, the prose compositions are less easy to classify. It seems possible that Byzantine writers of homilies, *enkomia*, *Lives* of saints and other literary forms were aware of earlier prototypes, but were also happy to play with these malleable categories. Some other aspect of their composition, apart from ‘genre’, must determine their structure, style and content.

This brings us to Mullett’s suggestion that ‘the “rhetorical” type provides the occasion, function, and status and transactional relationships between the implied speaker and the implied recipient’ in any given speech or text.¹¹² The epideictic types, such as *basilikos logos* (speech in praise of an emperor), *ekphrasis*, or other set compositions that determine the content of a text depend above all on the timing, physical location and intended audience or reader. Mullett suggests that these criteria intersect with the form of literary delivery that has been chosen, thus producing a particular genre that is suited to the occasion.¹¹³ This analysis provides a way forward in our attempt to classify the various types of text that are identified in the chapters of this book. It is possible that the multifaceted Virgin Mary

¹¹⁰ Introductions to Byzantine hymnography and music can be found in Wellesz 1961; Szóvérfy 1978–9; Savas 1983; Lingas 2008.

¹¹¹ Mayer 2008; Cunningham 2011b; Antonopoulou 2013. ¹¹² Mullett 1992, 235.

¹¹³ Mullett 1992, 235–7.

responds not to identifiable literary genres (although I have chosen to categorise texts in this way as a matter of convenience), but rather to the separate contexts and audiences for which individual texts are intended. Liturgical writers and hagiographers (who could sometimes be the same people, as in the case of John Geometres) portrayed the Mother of God in accordance to the particular settings in which they found themselves.¹¹⁴ The tenth-century *Lives* of the Virgin were thus composed for audiences or readers who expected longer, more narrative treatment of the holy subject, whereas festal homilies occupied specific slots in the liturgical offices which both dictated their structure and limited their scope. Collections of miracle stories such as those that emanated from the Constantinopolitan shrine of the Source, which may be classified as ‘hagiography’, also fulfilled particular expectations: it is likely that these were read out *in situ* on particular festive occasions, such as the patronal feast of the monastery.¹¹⁵

My third point, namely, that the boundaries between these literary genres were porous, supports the hypothesis that Marian content reflected the particular contexts of oratorical or sung delivery. Byzantine preachers, hagiographers and hymnographers moved between literary form and rhetorical type with deliberate fluidity. John Geometres’ *Life of the Virgin*, for example, combines hagiographical narrative (in that it covers Mary’s legendary biography from conception through death and assumption), panegyric praise and hymnic acclamation. The text is grounded in the liturgical calendar, in that it recognises the major feast-days of the Virgin and organises its narrative around these events in her life. Some festal homilies, beginning in about the seventh century, combine narrative with Christological teaching and praise. This genre, which adorned a liturgical calendar that contained a full set of Dominical and Marian feasts by about the end of the eighth century, adopted a wide variety of rhetorical tropes and devices in its aim to celebrate, teach and delight Byzantine congregations.

Hymnography differs from prose compositions in that more structured, metrical forms are assigned to specific liturgical slots in the offices and Divine Liturgy. Christian Hannick argues that such poetry occupies

¹¹⁴ On the possible settings at which the tenth-century *Lives* were delivered, see Mimouni 1994 (2011), 75; Georgian *Life of the Virgin*, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 3, 161–64 (referring to the reading aloud of this text in Georgian monasteries); Constan 2019, 325–6 (on the liturgical settings for readings of John Geometres’ *Life of the Virgin*); Simelidis 2020 (on the possible literary background, namely, a confraternity at the church of the Theotokos *ta Kyrou* in Constantinople, of the same text).

¹¹⁵ *Miracles of the Pege*, ed. and trans. Talbot and Johnson 2012, Introduction, xiv–xviii.

a more ambiguous position than homiletics both because it is often anonymous (or difficult to assign securely to known hymnographers) and because it is unclear whether it is intended to serve a didactic or a panegyric purpose.¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, studies such as those of Derek Krueger have helped to open up our understanding of the multiple purposes of hymnography.¹¹⁷ Literary study of these texts, which analyses the role of the author, or narrator, of individual texts, as well as the ways in which congregations responded to them, suggest that hymns functioned in similar ways to festal sermons. Christological teaching, dramatic treatment of biblical or apocryphal stories, praise and invocation of the Virgin's intercessory power played varying parts in both genres. The main difference lies in the strict and limited structure of hymnographic forms, as opposed to the expandable form of festal or occasional sermons.

In spite of the flexibility and porousness of all of these Christian literary genres, which allowed writers to draw inspiration from each when composing a text for a particular setting, some fundamental differences in their treatment of Mary, the Mother of God, remain. It is for this reason that I organise the present book according to three main genres, homiletics, hymnography and hagiography, and attempt to discern why she appears in different aspects according to each. Whereas changes in her depiction also develop in a diachronic way, as we shall see in the following chapters, some basic differences seem to depend on the choice of literary form. I will argue that these variations depend on the particular settings, or contexts, and audiences for which the separate texts were intended. Whereas hymnography and festal sermons, for example, were expected to provide theological teaching and praise, hagiography (including *Lives* and miracle collections) and occasional homilies offered more narrative treatment of the holy subject.

One other aspect of the question should be mentioned here, especially in view of recent discussions of the very nature of Byzantine texts and their reception. I concur with the view that most Byzantine literature was delivered orally, owing to the fact that only a small proportion of the population was literate.¹¹⁸ This applies especially to the liturgical or para-liturgical – but always religious – texts that are covered in this study. Homilies and hymns were mostly performed in the context of church services.¹¹⁹ Although it is unclear how well Byzantine congregations

¹¹⁶ Hannick 2005, 70. ¹¹⁷ Krueger 2004; Krueger 2014.

¹¹⁸ Saenger 1982; Shawcross 2018, esp. 23–5; Jeffreys and Jeffreys 2018.

¹¹⁹ On the delivery of homilies during the Divine Liturgy or in offices, see Cunningham 1990; Antonopoulou 1997, 95–115.

understood these texts, they were spoken, read, or sung either annually or else on a daily or weekly basis. The situation is more complicated than this, however, as we shall see in the course of Chapters 4 and 5: homilies, although perhaps delivered extempore at the time of composition, often experienced an ‘afterlife’ as readings both in liturgical and non-liturgical contexts.¹²⁰ It is likely especially from the twelfth century onward that homilies were performed, along with ‘recited metrical prefaces’, in lay literary settings such as the church of the Theotokos *ta Kyrou* in Constantinople.¹²¹ They might also have been used as private devotional readings in some monasteries or lay settings. Hymns, although usually contained in service books and sung on a daily, weekly or annual basis, could occasionally be used as teaching tools or devotional readings.¹²² This was not the fate of most Marian hymns, but it shows how much Byzantine readers appreciated the theological content of these works. The most important point about all of these works, however, which applies to many other Byzantine literary genres, is their oral and performative nature. This is a topic that offers rich potential for future study – and which should alter our approach to all forms of Marian literary expression.

Gender: The Subject and Her Supplicants

The Virgin Mary and Mother of God has always attracted scholarly interest on the grounds of her female gender. Feminist approaches have ranged from celebration of Mary’s power and influence to disapproval of her role within patriarchal societies, as a symbol of obedience and submission; most studies recognise, however, the paradoxical ways in which these roles have been applied to Mary.¹²³ Gender Studies offers more nuanced methods, suggesting that literary texts and material evidence should be read with an understanding of the cultural backgrounds in which they were produced.¹²⁴ Many literary texts cannot be read at face value; they offer sophisticated and multi-layered messages that conceal deeper meanings. Since this problem pertains as much – if not more – to Marian texts of the early and middle Byzantine period as to any other form of literature, it is worth devoting some space to the subject of gender.

¹²⁰ Cunningham 2011b. ¹²¹ Antonopoulou 2010; Simelidis 2020, 133. ¹²² Skrekas 2018.

¹²³ Most scholarly studies offer nuanced approaches to Mary’s gender; see, for example, Warner 1976; Ruether 1977; Hamington 1995; Gaventa 1999; Beattie 2002; Rubin 2009.

¹²⁴ Neville 2019, 36–43; James 1997, xi–xxiv; see also the collected essays on gender in James 1997; Brubaker and Smith 2004; Neil and Garland 2013; Constantinou and Meyer 2019; Betancourt 2020.

There are two aspects of the field that we need to consider: first, it is necessary to look at the various ways in which this holy woman is portrayed in Byzantine religious texts. Mary's female nature, especially in terms of her virginity and motherhood, is central to her role in this literary tradition. Second, we must consider whether the Virgin appealed especially to women and if so, why. We should also ask whether such popularity developed or changed in the course of our chosen period. The latter approach, which has to do with the reception of Mary's cult in Byzantium, has so far received more attention from scholars than has the former. However, both are important, so I shall deal with them one by one in the discussion that follows.

Bearing in mind Leonora Neville's useful identification of traits that the Byzantines (or, as she would prefer to call them, 'medieval Romans') considered 'feminine', aspects of the Virgin's character assume importance: she is virginal, obedient to God, maternal, compassionate, and protective both of her Son, Christ, and of her devotees. However, as the early seventh-century poet George of Pisidia reminded us at the beginning of this Introduction, Mary was also pictured as an invincible warrior, defending the imperial city of Constantinople in the siege of 626.¹²⁵ If we accept Neville's view that Byzantine ideas about gender were more to do with ethical behaviour than with biological identity, then it becomes evident that the Virgin Mary – perhaps more than most other biblical or literary personages – is an ambiguous or paradoxical figure.¹²⁶ She represents the extremes of both femininity and masculinity in her person: in short, this larger-than-life figure embodies aspects of both genders. In the discussion that follows, I shall focus first on examples that reveal Mary's 'feminine' qualities, which include above all her virginal motherhood, and second on virtues that betray more 'masculine' attributes. Above all, we should bear in mind a second strand in Neville's argumentation, namely, that texts convey complex messages and should not be read literally. In their transmission of a gendered message regarding the Virgin Mary, Byzantine religious writers are less interested in discovering her 'historical' character than on upholding cultural norms or stereotypes.

To begin with the more traditional model, Mary's female gender, as evidenced in her role as Virgin and mother of Christ, is central to the Byzantine Christian tradition. She was honoured from a very early period,

¹²⁵ See above, n. 1.

¹²⁶ Neville 2019, 27–30. Maria Evangelatou also suggests contradictory roles for the Virgin Mary in Byzantine texts; see Evangelatou 2014, 294–9.

as we have already seen, for her role as the virginal mother of Jesus Christ.¹²⁷ Festal liturgical texts, which began to be produced from the early fifth century onward, primarily celebrated Mary's role in the incarnation.¹²⁸ Although preachers and hymnographers viewed this role as divinely preordained, they began to be interested in her personal (and female) response to this world-changing event. Christian exegesis of the annunciation story (Lk 1:26-38) shifted its focus during the late antique period from Mary's docile acceptance to more thoughtful consideration of Gabriel's message.¹²⁹ The latter approach built on Mary's role as 'Second Eve': preachers and hymnographers began to stress the importance of free will in each case, with the first Eve making the disastrous choice to disobey God while the second (Mary) undid this betrayal by accepting his command.¹³⁰

Greek liturgical texts, following the Syriac tradition,¹³¹ began to include dramatic dialogues between Gabriel and Mary or Mary and Joseph, which revealed her gradual shift from doubt to belief and acceptance.¹³² It is nevertheless puzzling that the same liturgical writers remained reticent about when the conception of Christ actually took place. The view that Mary was impregnated through her ear, at the moment when the archangel first addressed her, persisted until the end of our period.¹³³ It appears that various theological considerations pulled the narrative one way or the other: whereas preachers and hymnographers wished to emphasise Mary's free consent to the incarnation, they also aimed to preserve the miraculous nature of the conception and to remain faithful to the Gospel of Luke. Even so, such invented dialogues offered an opportunity for exploring Mary's feminine traits, including modesty, humility and openness to influence. She was portrayed as a pious virginal girl who was willing to obey, but appropriately cautious in her reception of an unknown stranger with a life-changing message.

¹²⁷ The most complete survey of patristic and medieval doctrine concerning the Virgin Mary remains Graef 1963 (2009). See also Gambero 1999; Boss 2007; Rubin 2009; Reynolds 2012; Maunder 2019.

¹²⁸ See Chapters 1 and 2. ¹²⁹ Constan 2003, 273-313; Allen 2011, 72-8; Arentzen 2017, 46-86.

¹³⁰ Constan 2003, 282-90. ¹³¹ Brock 1994 (2010), 125-38; Brock 2011, 9-47.

¹³² See, for example, (ps-)Proklos of Constantinople, *Homily VI, On the Theotokos* ed. Leroy 1967; Romanos the Melodist, *Kontakion on the Annunciation*, ed. Maas and Trypanis 1963 (1997), 280-89; Germanos I of Constantinople, *Homily on the Annunciation*, ed. Fecioru 1946.

¹³³ Nicholas (Fr Maximos) Constan demonstrates that this problem only began to be dealt with in the later Byzantine period; see Constan 2003, 294-5.

Liturgical writers also described and invoked the Theotokos in metaphorical and typological language.¹³⁴ This symbolic message must have developed slowly, perhaps from well before the beginning of the fifth century, and become recognisable to late antique and Byzantine churchgoers.¹³⁵ Types such as Jacob's ladder, the burning bush, Gideon's fleece, mountain, cloud and many others are not expounded or 'unpacked' in festal homilies and hymnography; however, they act as prophetic, or typological, signs of the Virgin in the Old Testament, also linking her with the creation that God has blessed and chosen to enter.¹³⁶ This is a language which not only works across time and text, but which actually signifies a reality that 'God has stamped' on creation.¹³⁷ Many Marian types allude to the 'feminine' qualities of the Theotokos: her absorption of fire or water in the cases of the burning bush and Gideon's fleece, for example, refer metaphorically to her conception and gestation of Christ, the Word of God. Such signs reflect ancient ideas about childbirth: another common type, the 'unploughed field' or paradise, produces Christ after being implanted with divine seed.

Mingled with such imagery in ways that are more often implicit than explicit, are allusions to other aspects of feminine activity. Nicholas (now Fr Maximos) Conostas analyses the ways in which Proklos of Constantinople used imagery that was associated with weaving – a job that was normally performed by women – in relation to the incarnation.¹³⁸ This metaphor, according to which Mary's womb is the 'workshop' (*ergasterion*) in which the flesh of God is woven together from divine and created material, has further symbolic associations with the temple and its veil – for which the Virgin spun the purple thread at the time of the annunciation.¹³⁹ Turning to Romanos the Melodist's treatment of the scene of Christ's nativity, Thomas Arentzen shows how Marian types and metaphors are used to depict an erotic and expectant state of

¹³⁴ Cunningham 2004; Olkinuora 2015, 65–113.

¹³⁵ Krastu Banev suggests that biblical types for the Virgin Mary originated as types for the Church; see Banev 2014.

¹³⁶ Young 1997, 152–7; Ladouceur 2006; Reynolds 2019.

¹³⁷ Michel Foucault describes this process as follows: 'in the treasure handed down to us by Antiquity, the value of language lay in the fact that it was the sign of things. There is no difference between the visible marks that God has stamped upon the surface of the earth, so that we may know its inner secrets, and the legible words that the Scriptures, or the sages of Antiquity, have set down in the books preserved for us by tradition. The relation to these texts is of the same nature as the relation to things: in both cases there are signs that must be discovered.' See Foucault 1989, 37.

¹³⁸ Conostas 1995; Conostas 2003, 315–58.

¹³⁹ Proklos of Constantinople, *Homily I.1*, ed. Conostas 2003, 136–7. On the symbolism of both the temple and its veil, see Barker 1991; Barker 2004, 27–32.

motherhood. Romanos creates, for example, a 'Marian space' in the cave of Bethlehem with imagery that evokes darkness, secrecy and fecundity.¹⁴⁰

The Virgin Mary plays an active but also problematic role in connection with the passion of Christ in some liturgical texts. Here both preachers and melodists stretch the boundaries of acceptable female behaviour, allowing Mary to break out of her more normal, or passive, response to the playing out of God's dispensation for salvation. Romanos the Melodist was the first Greek writer to describe the Virgin as an entirely human and grief-stricken mother, in his *kontakion* on her lament at the cross.¹⁴¹ According to the melodist, she followed Christ on his journey to the cross, expressing sorrow, disbelief and fear at what was happening; he responded by telling her the reasons for his acceptance of death and assuring her that she would be the first person to witness his resurrection. Following Romanos, the theme was picked up by middle Byzantine preachers and hymnographers, becoming the focus of hymns intended for Good Friday, as well as for Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the year.¹⁴² It featured in a tenth-century version of the apocryphal *Gospel of Nikodemos* and became the central preoccupation of the (probably) twelfth-century play, *Christos Paschon*.¹⁴³ The particular qualities of female grief are elaborated in all of these texts: women, including Mary, weep, cry out, let down their hair and tear at their faces with their nails.¹⁴⁴ Whereas patristic and Byzantine tradition deplores such behaviour on the part of most women, however, an exception is made in the case of the Mother of God. She acts out, or embodies, the meaning of divine *kenosis*; with her help, Christians are encouraged to participate fully in the pain that this entailed for him, but also in that which those who loved him were made to feel. There is also a paradoxical aspect to Mary's grief at the sight of Christ's crucifixion. Whereas liturgical writers and poets continue to stress the inviolability of Mary's virginity, they also describe her vulnerability as a grieving mother.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Arentzen 2017, 95.

¹⁴¹ Romanos the Melodist, *Kontakion on Mary at the Cross*, ed. Maas and Trypanis 1963 (1997), 142–9; trans. Lash 1995, 141–50.

¹⁴² For texts and analysis of this tradition, see Tsironis 1998.

¹⁴³ *Gospel of Nikodemos (Byzantine recensions)* 10.1–2, 10.1.3c–4a, ed. Gounelle 2007, 226–41 and discussion, 56–8, 63–4 (I am grateful to Dr Gounelle for bringing this passage to my attention); *Christos Paschon*, ed. Tuilier 1969.

¹⁴⁴ The classic study of this tradition is Alexiou 1974 (2002).

¹⁴⁵ As Fr Maximos Conostas points out, a passage in one of the rhetorical exercises of the twelfth-century teacher Nikephoros Basilakes (an *ethopoiia* in which Mary laments the death of Christ on the cross) supports this point: see Conostas 2014, 127. Mary cries, 'No longer am I the unconsumed bush; for I have been consumed entirely by the intelligible fire of your burial'; trans. Beneker and Gibson

As I mentioned above in connection with the topic of literary genre, middle Byzantine hagiography contains further surprises concerning the gendered behaviour of the Mother of God. Most of the surviving *Lives* of the Virgin emphasise Mary's dedication to the ascetic life; she carries out a life of seclusion, unceasing prayer and night vigils especially during the period that she spends in the Jewish temple between the ages of three and twelve and after the resurrection and ascension of Christ. This strand of Marian reflection became a preoccupation of writers such as Epiphanius of Kallistratos, John Geometres and the likely author of the Georgian *Life*, Euthymios the Hagiorite; however, it revived ideas that also appeared in letters that the fourth-century bishop sent to communities of virgins in Alexandria.¹⁴⁶ The virtues that Mary displayed as 'monastic' saint are ungendered in that they would apply to both female and male members of Byzantine communities. However, Athanasios, followed by the middle Byzantine writers, stresses aspects of asceticism that seem specifically associated with the female gender, including modesty, obedience, seriousness and others. The tenth-century hagiographers add unexpected aspects of Mary's monastic demeanour to this list, however: in addition to dedicating her life to prayer, the Virgin becomes a teacher and leader of the other apostles. This narrative, especially in the later hagiographical works as opposed to the *Life* by Epiphanius, is forthright and unequivocal, as we see in the following short passage of Euthymios the Athonite's Georgian *Life of the Virgin*:

And she was a leader and a teacher to the holy apostles, and when anything was needed, they would tell her. And they received direction and good counsel from her, to the extent that those who were near the environs of Jerusalem would return. One after the other they went before her and reported everything that they were doing and how they were preaching, and they accomplished everything according to her direction.¹⁴⁷

Although it is possible that this narrative reflects increasingly influential roles for women in middle Byzantine monasticism,¹⁴⁸ it may have a purely symbolic meaning: once again, the Virgin Mary extends the boundaries of

2016, 213. This text is incorrectly ascribed to Symeon the Metaphrast in PG 114, 209–18. I am grateful to Fr Maximos for informing me of the re-attribution of this text to Basilakes.

¹⁴⁶ Athanasios of Alexandria, *First Letter to Virgins* 12–17, ed. Lefort 1955, 73–99; trans. Brakke 1995, esp. 277–9.

¹⁴⁷ Georgian *Life of the Virgin* 99, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 126.

¹⁴⁸ Phil Booth (2015, 197) hints at the possibility of female authorship for a lost prototype of this text; however, if we accept Simelidis' thesis that the surviving version was written by Euthymios the Athonite with John Geometres' *Life of the Virgin* as its base, such influence becomes less likely; see Simelidis 2020, 128–9. For further discussion of the text, see Chapter 5, 197–9.

accepted male and female behaviour. The author intends his readers to see the Mother of God as an exceptional person who embodied the virtues and gifts of both genders.

The greatest stretch in this direction occurs in the depiction of Mary as invincible warrior who fought on the walls of Constantinople during the Avar siege of 626.¹⁴⁹ Although the texts (which belong to various genres) that are associated with this momentous event seem to construct this image of Mary for the first time, there are in fact some literary precedents.¹⁵⁰ The most important of these is the late fifth or early sixth-century *Akathistos Hymn*.¹⁵¹ Although its second prologue is traditionally thought to have been composed just after, and in honour of, the siege of 626,¹⁵² some of its stanzas, which were composed much earlier, provide a basis for Mary's celebration as protector of Constantinople. Following the typological and metaphorical imagery that denotes the Virgin's important role in the incarnation of Christ in earlier stanzas, the anonymous hymnographer suddenly invokes her as follows:

Hail, immovable tower of the Church;
Hail, impregnable wall of the kingdom;
Hail, through whom trophies are raised up;
Hail, through whom enemies fall . . .¹⁵³

It is difficult to imagine that the Virgin Mary was not, along with many of other roles, viewed as the patron of Constantinople at the time that this hymn was written. The events of 626 may have impelled Constantinopolitan Christians to interpret such protection in a more literal way, with sightings of her active role in battle being recorded for posterity.

If we consider all of the aspects of the Theotokos that have so far been described, it is clear that she embodied and acted out qualities that were traditionally associated with both the female and male genders, according to religious writers of the early and middle Byzantine periods. Since we are dealing with a largely symbolic, as opposed to historical, figure in this

¹⁴⁹ Pentcheva 2006, 61–103.

¹⁵⁰ The contemporary texts that describe this event are the *Chronicon Paschale*, Theodore the Synkellos' *De obsidione*, and George of Pisidia's *Bellum Avaricum*.

¹⁵¹ *Akathistos Hymn*, ed. Trypanis 1968; for analysis, see Peltomaa 2001 and below, Chapter 1, 53–8.

¹⁵² The second prologue reads: "To you, our leader in battle and defender, O Theotokos, I, your city, delivered from sufferings, ascribe hymns of victory and thanksgiving. Since you are invincible in power, free me from all kinds of dangers, that I may cry to you: "Hail, bride unwedded"; *Akathistos Hymn*, trans. Peltomaa 2001, 3. On the date at which this prologue was added to the *Akathistos Hymn*, along with discussion of its possible composition by the early eighth-century patriarch Germanos of Constantinople, see Huglo 1951; Simić 2017, 19; Hurbanič 2019, esp. 276.

¹⁵³ *Akathistos Hymn* 23, trans. Peltomaa 2001, 18–19.

literary tradition, it only remains to be asked why she needed to encompass such diverse – indeed paradoxical – roles. I suggest that such portrayals reflect various didactic aims on the part of both liturgical writers and chroniclers. First, these writers wished to emphasise Mary's connection with the whole of humanity: she represented the community of believers, that is, the Church, which comprised male, female and eunuch members. Second, not only did Mary represent all people, but she served as a model of the best, or strongest qualities, that characterise both women and men, according to the Byzantines. Male virtues, such as strength, courage and active agency, were revealed in Mary's protective and intercessory roles; female ones, which included chastity, obedience and maternal love, could be seen in her birth-giving and ongoing relationship with Christ. Paradox played a part here too, however: male strength could be augmented by female virginity or chastity, as had been the case with the ancient goddess Athena. Mary, the Theotokos, thus became the quintessential exponent of human virtue, offering a perfect example of the ideal relationship between God and his human image.

Devotion to the Mother of God in the middle Byzantine period was widespread, as homilies, hymns and hagiography, including collections of miracle stories, all attest. The question whether Mary attracted more female than male followers, however, remains to be proved. Most sources suggest that all three genders, including women, men and eunuchs, appealed to the Virgin for help, as did every class in society. Processions and rites that led to, or took place at, the major Marian shrines in Constantinople involved the rulers on a weekly or annual basis.¹⁵⁴ It is this universal appeal of the Mother of God that leads me to doubt the suggestion that pictorial cycles of her infancy, such as that which appears in the narthex of the early twelfth-century church of Daphni near Athens, were intended especially for female viewers.¹⁵⁵ It is more likely that the Christological meaning of her story, combined with her widespread personal appeal, made this cycle an appropriate choice for this male monastic community. The Virgin went on to become patroness of the entirely male monasteries on Mt Athos during the middle Byzantine period, where she

¹⁵⁴ Constantine Porphyrogenetos, *Book of Ceremonies*, ed. Leich and Reiske 1935 and 1939, trans. Moffatt and Tall 2012, 762, 779, 781.

¹⁵⁵ Brubaker 2019, esp. 132–7. This is nevertheless an intriguing hypothesis; Brubaker also agrees that, 'As a male monastic church, Daphni resoundingly negates any lingering assumptions that veneration of the Virgin was the singular reserve of women'; see Brubaker 2019, 146. For another gendered approach to the decoration of Byzantine churches, see Gerstel 1998; on the location of women in church, see Mathews 1971, 130–4; Taft 1998; Talbot 2010.

was (and continues to be) venerated as intercessor and model of ascetic virtue.¹⁵⁶ Mary's female gender, along with the powers and virtues that this implies, was an important part of her popularity; however, I remain unconvinced that it was valued more by women than by men.

Some literary and material evidence does, however, suggest women's special involvement in the cult of the Virgin Mary. This includes Greek amulets that are preserved in Egypt, dating between approximately the fifth and seventh centuries. Some of these short prayers, which were written down on pieces of papyrus or parchment, folded and carried close to one's person, name their owners as women who seek help or healing from the Theotokos.¹⁵⁷ There are also tales in the *Pege* collection of miracle stories, compiled in tenth-century Constantinople, that involve gynaecological medical problems. Noble or imperial women, including Eudokia, sister-in-law of the emperor Maurice (582–602), and Zoe, mother of Constantine VII (913–59), were healed of breast cancer and infertility, respectively, at this important shrine.¹⁵⁸ These are balanced, however, by miracles that involve men and their particular ailments.¹⁵⁹ Overall, we gain the impression from this and other sources that women and men appealed to the Theotokos for help in equal numbers; she was too important for either sex to be excluded from her care.

To conclude this section, it appears that Mary's female gender, although theologically and culturally significant, did not inhibit the involvement of both men and women in her cult. She became a universal symbol of the Church, or of humanity, in relationship with its incarnate God. Certain aspects of Mary's gender contributed to this symbolic role: these included her virginity, motherhood and even female leadership. Jane Baun perceives a 'majestic, militant grandmother' in the middle Byzantine *Apocalypse of the Theotokos*;¹⁶⁰ if her role in this text occasionally seems subversive, this is counteracted by the Church's ability to accommodate the importunities of a mere woman – even if she is the Mother of God. Perhaps this helps to explain the development of the cult from about the late fifth century onward: the Virgin Mary is powerful because she exists both within, but also outside, a predominantly male celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchy.

¹⁵⁶ Talbot 1996; Tsironis 2000, 33; Speake 2002, 17–18, 21–5. ¹⁵⁷ De Bruyn 2015, 122–6.

¹⁵⁸ *Miracles of the Pege* 7 and 26, ed. and trans. Talbot and Johnson 2012, 218–21, 266–7. According to Talbot, the sister of Maurice's wife Constantina was in fact named Charito. This appears to be an error on the part of the hagiographer; see *ibid.*, 430, n. 11.

¹⁵⁹ *Miracles of the Pege*, for example, 2 (Leo I), 3 (Justinian) and many others, ed. and trans. Talbot and Johnson 2012, 208–13.

¹⁶⁰ Baun 2007, 275.

Like the 'holy man' described in Peter Brown's classic study,¹⁶¹ she is thus able (like other social outsiders) to intercede fearlessly before the Righteous Judge in heaven.

The Purpose and Structure of This Book

Having provided an outline of the development of the Marian cult during our period (c. 400–1000) and introduced the topics of literary genre and gender, it is now time to explain the purpose and structure of the present study. I stated at the beginning of this chapter that, as demonstrated by numerous scholarly studies, the Virgin Mary in Byzantium remains a multifaceted and paradoxical figure. Since it is not possible to cover all of the surviving literary and material evidence concerning the Virgin in one book, I have chosen to focus on three distinct (although interactive) literary forms: homiletics, hymnography and hagiography. All three genres can be described as 'religious' in their purpose and content: unlike more 'secular', or classicising, genres such as histories, novels or epigrams, they employ Christian (although not always biblical) narratives, teach the essential truths, or doctrines, of this religion, and aim to involve their audiences or readers emotionally in this message. Homiletics and hymnography were intended primarily for liturgical contexts, while hagiography was employed in a wider variety of literary (although sometimes liturgical) contexts. However, as I attempted to show in the section on literary genre, there was much overlap between the three forms in terms of structure, content and rhetorical method.

In spite of the many similarities that exist in the portrayal of the Virgin Mary according to these separate literary forms, some differences are perceptible. Whereas homiletics and hymnography, which enjoyed a symbiotic relationship throughout the middle Byzantine period, especially stress Mary's importance in the Christological mystery, hagiography displays greater interest in her intercessory function in Byzantine society. This is not to say that homilies and hymns do not also contain such material; however, they appeal to the Virgin in particular structural or liturgical contexts, usually placing this emphasis after that of the didactic message. The *Lives* of the Virgin, collections of miracle stories and scattered accounts of miracles that occur in other hagiographical texts meanwhile reveal a variety of preoccupations. The tenth-century *Lives*, for example, are interested in the legendary narrative of Mary's whole life,

¹⁶¹ Brown 1971.

which they glean from the *Protevangelion of James* and accounts of her dormition, along with other – sometimes lost – apocryphal texts. Although there is considerable variation between the four surviving Greek *Lives*, they all revive the dormant idea of the ascetic, or monastic, Virgin Mary and also stress her role as leader of female disciples and even, in the case of the Georgian *Life*, of the apostles.

This rich array of Marian portrayals, when combined with others such as that found in the *Apocalypse of the Theotokos*, suggests that Byzantine audiences and readers were able to accept multiple messages, depending on the contexts in which these were delivered. I build here on Margaret Mullett's and Martin Hinterberger's definitions of literary genre, which suggest that the intended reception of texts helped to determine the particular forms which authors chose to employ.¹⁶² The context, whether liturgical, didactic, or for entertainment, also helped audiences to discern the intended meaning. I suggest that most Byzantines, even if they were not highly educated in letters, were capable of understanding the various symbolic or practical roles of the Theotokos, according to the separate settings in which she could be found. A supplicant at the shrine of the *Pege* in Constantinople, for example, expected to find a tall woman 'robed in purple',¹⁶³ whereas a congregant in Hagia Sophia (the church of Holy Wisdom) or any other Byzantine church pictured her as 'burning bush', 'Gideon's fleece', 'tabernacle' or 'temple'. The multiple ways in which the Virgin Mary was visualised, in both texts and images, suggest that her cult went far beyond those of most saints in that she represented at once the 'birth-giver of God', symbol of the incarnation, mediator and intercessor.

Although this book does not explore every aspect of the Mother of God in Byzantine culture or even address the majority of surviving literary genres, I hope that it provides an approach to the subject that will inspire future studies. The place of the Virgin Mary in Byzantine art and material culture still awaits full treatment. In short, Mary, the holy Virgin and Mother of God, reflects many aspects of Byzantine religious belief, culture and social structure. As the preacher Andrew of Crete stated in the early eighth century, 'She is the great world in miniature, the world containing him who brought the world from nothingness into being, that it might be a messenger of his own greatness.'¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² See above, n. 103.

¹⁶³ *Miracles of the Pege* 13, ed. and trans. Talbot and Johnson 2012, 234–5.

¹⁶⁴ Andrew of Crete, *Homily II on the Dormition*, PG 97, 1069B; trans. Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, 133.