The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium

TEXTS AND IMAGES

Edited by Leslie Brubaker and Mary B. Cunningham

An **Ashgate** Book

The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium

To Averil Cameron who first problematised the Byzantine cult of the Virgin, and to Judith Herrin, who brought gender studies to Byzantium.

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List of Abbreviations

AASS	*Acta sanctorum*, 71 vols. (Paris, 1863–1940)
ACO	*Acta conciliorum oecumenicorum*, 4 vols. (Berlin– Leipzig, 1922–74)
AnalBoll	*Analecta Bollandiana*
ARAM	Society for Syro–Mesopotamian International Conference (Oxford)
ASOR	American Schools of Oriental Research
BAR	British Archaeological Reports
BBTT	Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations
BCA	Bibliothèque des cahiers archéologiques
BF	*Byzantinische Forschungen*
BHG	*Bibliotheca hagiographica graeca*, ed. F. Halkin (3rd ed., Brussels, 1957)
BMGS	*Bulletin of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*
BZ	*Byzantinische Zeitschrift*
CahArch	*Cahiers Archéologiques*
CChr, ser.gr	Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca
CChr, ser.lat	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina
CPG	*Clavis Patrum Graecorum*, ed. M. Geerard, 3 vols (Turnhout, 1974–83)
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
DACL	*Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*
DChAE	*Deltion tes Christianikes Archaiologikes Hetaireias*
DOP	*Dumbarton Oaks Papers*
EB	*Études byzantines*
EEBS	*Epeteris Hetaireias Byzantinon Spoudon*
EO	*Échos d'Orient*
GCS	Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte (Leipzig, 1897–)
GOThR	*Greek Orthodox Theological Review*
GRBS	*Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
IAA	Israel Antiquities Authority

IRAIK	*Izvestija Russkogo Archeologičeskogo Instituta v Konstantinopole*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JECS	*Journal of Early Christian Studies*
JÖB	*Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik*
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
LXX	The Septuagint
M	*Mishnah*
Mansi	G.D. Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* (53 vols in 58 parts, Paris–Leipzig, 1901–27)
ODB	*Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 3 vols., eds A. Kazhdan et al. (Oxford, 1991)
OCA	Orientalia Christiana Analecta
OCP	*Orientalia Christiana Periodica*
PG	Patrologia Graeca
pl.	plate
PO	Patrologia Orientalis
QDAP	*Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine*
RAC	*Reallexikon für antike und Christentum* (Stuttgart, 1950–)
REB	*Revue des Études Byzantines*
RHE	*Revue d'Histoire Écclésiastique*
ROC	*Revue de l'Orient Chrétien*
RSBN	*Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Neoellenici*
SC	Sources chrétiennes
SP	Studia Patristica
ST	Studi e Testi
SubsHag	Subsidia Hagiographica
SVTHQ	*St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*
TM	*Travaux et Mémoires*
TTH	Translated Texts for Historians (Liverpool University Press)
VC	*Vigilia Christianae*
VV	*Vizantijskij Vremennik*
ZDPV	*Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palaestina-Vereins*
ZRVI	*Zbornik radova Vizantološkog Instituta*

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Preface

The papers in this volume were mostly delivered at a conference held in August 2006, as the concluding segment of a research project sponsored by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) on 'The Mother of God in Byzantium: Relics, Icons, and Texts'. Under these auspices, Mary Cunningham assessed the corpus of eighth- and ninth- century homilies on the Virgin Mary, translating and providing commentaries on those that she believes authentic. The results of this work appeared in her book, *Wider Than Heaven: Eighth-Century Homilies on the Mother of God* (Crestwood NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2008). Mary also hopes to publish a larger study in which these works will be contextualised, mainly in literary and theological terms, in the future. We are also currently working on a joint book that will juxtapose literary with visual aspects of the Virgin's cult, focusing especially on the intersection between images of the Theotokos and the long-standing cult of relics during the eighth and ninth centuries.

My own initial concerns were focused on the confused position of the Theotokos in later Byzantine reports about what we now call iconoclasm ('iconomachy', the image struggle, to the Byzantines). As all Byzantinists know, the early seals of Leo III followed established imperial tradition and depicted the Virgin Mary.[1] And, whatever his later activities may have been, Leo is not normally accused of denying the importance of the Virgin and her relics. Leo's son, Constantine V, however, is sometimes portrayed in later sources as being opposed to both. Theophanes the Confessor, who wrote in the early ninth century, treated Leo as an orthodox and pious ruler, but accused Constantine V of renouncing the divinity of Christ and arguing that Mary was not the Mother of God.[2] So far as we can tell, this was a (probably deliberate) misrepresentation, but it is worth examining its inspiration. This seems to

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[1]   See O. Zacos and A. Veglery, *Byzantine Lead Seals* (Basel, 1972), nos. 23, 25, 27–33 and, for the seal of the later 'iconoclast' emperor Leo V and his son Constantine bearing an image of the Virgin, see no. 48.

[2]   Theophanes, *Chronicle* 415.24–30; trans. C. Mango and R. Scott, eds, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor. Byzantine and Near Eastern History, A.D. 284–813* (Oxford, 1997), 576.

have been Constantine's *Questions* (*Peuseis*), the core ideas of which were soon afterwards elaborated in the definition (*horos*) of the iconoclast Council of 754.[3] This text mooted the basic iconoclast premise that an image of Christ shows only his human nature, and thereby denies his divinity; it then targeted images of the Virgin, saints, prophets and apostles. The central argument here was that those who believed that 'simple mortals' (like Mary) could be represented – since there was not a problem with conflating the human and divine – were ill-advised. Images of the Virgin Mary were unnecessary, and an insult to her memory, for she lived eternally beside God.[4] That is to say, Mary's death and assumption into heaven had received widespread acceptance by the Church from about the late sixth century onward. But although the iconoclasts rejected images of the Virgin, they did not refuse to honour her; if anything, Mary's status increased.[5] As Paul Magdalino has noted, the final session of the iconoclast council of 754 was held at Blachernai – a site firmly associated with the Theotokos – which scarcely suggests a lack of reverence to the Virgin Mary.[6] The impact of 'iconoclasm' on the ways in which the Byzantines thought about the Theotokos was most pronounced after the debate was over, when the victorious pro-image faction apparently realised that their trump card – the visibility of the human Christ, which meant that portraits of Jesus confirmed the validity of the Incarnation (and iconoclasts, by saying that Christ could not be represented, were thereby denying the Incarnation) – meant that an emphasis on the Virgin as Christ's human mother underscored their main point in a dramatic and – as the so-called nuclear family became increasingly the norm in the ninth century – socially appropriate way. The epithet *meter theou* ('Mother of God') first appears in the ninth century, and coincides with imagery stressing the Virgin's emotional interaction with her son.[7] As Stephen Shoemaker demonstrates in this volume,[8] Mary's emotional life was not invented *sui generis* in the wake of iconoclasm, but her new role in

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[3]   Mansi xiii, 245E–252B; S. Gero, *Byzantine Iconoclasm During the Reign of Constantine V, with Particular Attention to the Oriental Sources*, CSCO 384, Subsidia 52 (Louvain, 1977), 74; T. Krannich, C. Schubert and C. Sode, *Die ikonokasticsche Synode von Hiereia 754. Einleitung, Text, Übersetzung und Kommentar ihres Horos, nebst einme Beitrag zur Epistula ad Constantiam des Eusebius von Cäesarea von Annette Stockhausen*, Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 15 (Tübingen, 2002), 16–20.

[4]   Mansi xiii, 272B–277D; Gero, *Constantine V*, 78–80; D.J. Sahas, *Icon and Logos. Sources in Eighth-Century Iconoclasm. An Annotated Translation of the Sixth Session of the Seventh Ecumenical Council* (Toronto, 1986), 99–105.

[5]   Mansi xiii, 345A–B.

[6]   P. Magdalino, 'Léglise du Phare et les reliques de la passion à Constantinople (VIIe/VIIIe – XIIIe siècles)', in J. Durand and B. Flusin, eds, *Byzance et les reliques du Christ* (Paris, 2004), 21.

[7]   See I. Kalavrezou, 'Images of the mother: when the Virgin Mary became meter theou', *DOP* 44 (1990), 165–72, and Niki Tsironis, 'Emotion and the senses in Marian homilies of the Middle Byzantine period', below, 179–96.

[8]   See S. Shoemaker, 'A mother's passion: Mary's role in the Crucifixion and Resurrection in the earliest Life of the Virgin and its influence on George of Nikomedeia's Passion homilies', below, 53–67.

Orthodox dogma meant that it took on an increased importance after 843, and profoundly affected Marian verbal and visual imagery thereafter.

This puts our research into a broader context, and that was also the aim of the conference recorded here. The conference papers began by looking at fifth- and sixth-century antecedents for the cult of the Theotokos in the Holy Land and in Constantinople, then turned to its acceleration and diffusion, with particular emphasis on the development of feast-days, epithets, relics and icons. Our aim was to develop and expand the important work gathered at the Athens conference of 2001, published in M. Vassilaki, *Images of the Mother of God. Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), as well as that of the conference held that same year in Chester, published in R.N. Swanson, ed., *The Church and Mary*, Studies in Church History 39 (Woodbridge, Suffolk and Rochester NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2004). This aim was realised: the papers published here open up new perspectives on virtually all facets of Mariological study, from the archaeological and visual to the textual and performative.

As we discussed drafts of the contributions that follow with their authors, two issues recurred repeatedly. First, despite the huge amount that has been published on the Mother of God over the past decade, there remain large areas of Marian study that remain unproblematised. For example, although there is general (though not universal) agreement that the 'cult' of the Virgin occurred much later than was once believed – there is an increasing consensus that the ninth or tenth century seems more likely than the fifth or sixth – it remains the case that there are numerous pre-iconoclast monuments to and portraits of the Virgin, and their character is uncertain: were they simply commemorative, did they respond to local cults, or did Mary play some as yet unexplored role? Second, while we are increasingly aware of why the Byzantines venerated the Virgin in particular ways, the registers or levels of that veneration remain unstudied: why were particular groups, at particular times or in particular places (for example, the monks at Mount Athos) drawn to the Mother of God? How does veneration of the Virgin intersect with the hierarchies of gender and status? The papers in this volume have brought us closer to responding to some of these issues, and both Mary and I would like to thank our contributors for pushing Marian studies beyond its sometimes comfortable boundaries; we are also grateful for their patience with us as we bombarded them with questions along the way.

A few remarks about editorial practices that we have adopted in this volume are in order here. As regards the spelling of names, we have chosen to use Greek rather than Latin transliterations, except when a name is more commonly used in its anglicised form, as in 'John Chrysostom' or 'Constantine V'. In every chapter except for that of Margaret Barker, we have cited the Old Testament using Septuagint rather than Hebrew numberings (as in the case of the Psalms especially). There is not complete consistency throughout the volume in the choice to use the Greek font or transliterations when citing Greek texts or words. The various contributors have made different choices

with respect to this problem; we hope nevertheless that there is consistency within their separate chapters.

Leslie Brubaker

Introduction
The Mother of God in Byzantium: Relics, Icons, Texts

Averil Cameron

The last few years have seen a remarkable surge of interest in the subject of the cult of the Virgin in late antiquity and Byzantium, and it shows no sign of abating. An important milestone was certainly the exhibition of icons of the Mother of God held at the Benaki Museum in Athens in 2000, with the rich catalogue edited by Maria Vassilaki, containing many essays by specialist scholars as well as entries on the objects in the exhibition, and the subsequent conference volume also edited by her.[1] These two volumes brought together the work of historians and art historians alike, and this has been a major feature in other recent publications. Another milestone was the publication of Nicholas Constas's article, 'Weaving the body of God', in 1995,[2] which opened many eyes to the possibilities of studying the language and imagery of Marian homilies, followed by his book on the homilies of Proklos of Constantinople.[3] Brian Daley's modest translation and commentary on some early Byzantine Marian homilies is a mine of information on some of the still mysterious homilies of the seventh and eighth centuries.[4] Mary Cunningham has since published a supplementary volume of translations, with commentary, on the eighth-century festal sermons.[5] Leena Mari Peltomaa's redating of the *Akathistos Hymn* to the fifth century required a real mental adjustment to those

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[1]   M Vassilaki, ed., *Mother of God, Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art* (Athens and Milan, 2000); *eadem*, *Images of the Mother of God. Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium* (Aldershot, 2004).

[2]   N. Constas, 'Weaving the body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos and the loom of the flesh', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3.2 (1995), 169–94.

[3]   N. Constas, *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity. Homilies 1–3, Texts and Translations* (Leiden, 2003).

[4]   B.E. Daley, S.J., *On the Dormition of Mary. Early Patristic Homilies* (Crestwood NY, 1998); see also the Syriac homilies, e.g. M. Hanbury, trans., *Jacob of Serug. On the Mother of God*, with introduction by S. Brock (Crestwood NY, 1998).

[5]   M.B. Cunningham, *Wider Than Heaven: Eighth-Century Byzantine Homilies on the Mother of God* (Crestwood NY, 2008).

of us who had seen it as at least sixth century – and her argument is still being assimilated.[6] Another collective volume with several papers on the early period was *The Church and Mary*, published in 2004, and based on papers originally given in 2001 and 2002.[7] The supposed role of the Empress Pulcheria as the champion of the cult of Mary has attracted both support and scepticism, the latter in the light of a growing realisation of the extraordinary extent to which later Byzantine narratives retrojected the realities of their own day back into this early period.[8] We have also had Stephen Shoemaker's important book on the early legends of the Dormition (Koimesis) and Assumption.[9] Archaeology has also contributed: a fifth-century church was discovered in 1992 near Mar Elias, south of Ramat Rahel and south of Jerusalem, and identified as having built at the site of the rock known as the Kathisma, or 'seat' of the Virgin, in 1997; it has also been argued that another church of Mary in the Wadi Kidron beside the Garden of Gethsemane was erected at the site believed to mark Mary's tomb.[10]

Both the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Oxford Patristic Conferences (2003 and 2007) included workshops on Mary, and there have been recent research projects on the Theotokos not only in Birmingham but also in Vienna and Australia. Most obviously, there have also been important publications dealing with icons of the Virgin, or on the Virgin's 'relics' (not real relics of course), and the texts associated with them from Constantinople,[11] as well as on the wonder-working Marian icons recorded in post-iconoclastic literature like the late ninth-century *Letter of the Three Patriarchs*.[12] From the point of view of

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[6]   L.M. Peltomaa, *The Image of the Virgin Mary in the Akathistos Hymn* (Leiden, 2001); the *Akathistos Hymn* was the source of a wealth of iconographic material in later Byzantine art, and a repository of Marian images later to become classic. Doubts have been expressed about Peltomaa's early dating by e.g. N. Constas, in *SVThQ* 49.3 (2005), 355–8 and B.V. Pentcheva, *Icons and Power. The Mother of God in Byzantium* (University Park PA, 2006), 15–16.

[7]   R.N. Swanson, ed., *The Church and Mary*, Studies in Church History 39 (Woodbridge, Suffolk and Rochester NY, 2004); see Averil Cameron, 'The cult of the Virgin in late antiquity: religious development and myth-making', ibid., 1–21; M.B. Cunningham, 'The meeting of the old and the new: the typology of Mary the Theotokos in Byzantine homilies and hymns', ibid., 52–62; J. Baun, 'Discussing Mary's humanity in medieval Byzantium', ibid., 63–72; K. Linardou, 'The couch of Solomon, a monk, a Byzantine lady and the Song of Songs', ibid., 73–85.

[8]   Support: Kate Cooper, 'Empress and *Theotokos*: gender and patronage in the Christological controversy', ibid., 39–51; scepticism: R.M. Price, 'Marian piety and the Nestorian controversy', ibid., 31–8; Cameron, 'Cult of the Virgin', 9–13; Pentcheva, *Icons and Power*, 15.

[9]   S.J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption* (Oxford, 2002); see also *idem*, 'Death and the maiden: the early history of the Dormition and Assumption apocrypha', *SVThQ* 50 (2006), 59–97.

[10]   See, on both, Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 79–98, 98–107, with bibliography; see however the chapter by R. Avner in this volume.

[11]   For instance A.-M. Weyl Carr, 'Threads of authority: the Virgin Mary's veil in the Middle Ages', in S. Gordon, ed., *Robes and Honor. The Medieval World of Investiture* (New York, 2001), 59–94.

[12]   J. Chrysostomides, E. Harvalia-Crook and C. Dendrinos, eds, *The Letter of the*

theology as well as art history Athanassios Semoglou has traced the gradually developing association of the Theotokos in Byzantium with the theme of the Ascension,[13] while Bissera Pentcheva has argued for a gradual and late development of the processional liturgies of Marian icons in Constantinople.[14]

Why has the subject of the Theotokos become so much in vogue?[15] When I think of the material available when I first wrote on the subject in the 1970s, this seems an intriguing question.

Writing of the period after Chalcedon, Brian Daley has memorably said that 'the figure of Mary emerged like a comet in Christian devotion and liturgical celebration throughout the world'.[16] One might argue there has been a similar explosion in modern scholarship in the last decade or so. A possible explanation might be that the subject of the Theotokos appeals to every kind of Byzantinist, whether art historian, liturgist, historian or editor of texts. It also lends itself to, or partakes in, a very wide range of other current issues, including, for example, the ever-present questions relating to the transition from late antiquity to Byzantium. Thus it seems striking that many recent publications on the Theotokos deal with the formative period of Byzantium, from late antiquity to the post-iconoclastic period, as though the figure of the Theotokos was a kind of litmus test for change. Other currently popular topics to which the figure of the Theotokos is highly relevant include that of narrative, especially as it relates to the consideration of apocryphal stories and the embroidery of sparse scriptural detail. The growth of pilgrimage, the development of specific localised cults, the relation between official and popular religion, and between Christological doctrine, private piety and liturgical development, the rise and relation of icons and relics, and indeed questions about gender all lend themselves well to studies which focus on the Theotokos. The sheer capaciousness of the theme of the Theotokos is surely one of the main reasons for its fascination – she can be, and has been, all things to everyone. That is of course why it is hard to arrive at convincing general theories, but also why there is the space for so many excellent new studies. Indeed, we can look forward to more, since as usual in Byzantine matters, so many of the most relevant texts have not been, or are only now being, studied in detail.

One of the problems in understanding the early growth of attention to the Theotokos is the apparent gap between the second-century apocryphal writing known as the *Protevangelion of James*[17] – the text which, together with

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Three Patriarchs to the Emperor Theophilus and Related Texts (Camberley, 1997).

[13]   A. Semoglou, *Le voyage outre tombe de la Vierge dans l'art byzantin. De la descente aux enfers à la montée au ciel* (Thessalonike, 2003).

[14]   Pentcheva, *Icons and Power*, focusing closely on the question of icon processions rather than on the broader issue of the cult of the Theotokos.

[15]   See also the ongoing work of Sarah Jane Boss at the Centre for Marian Studies (currently located at Roehampton University), including the recent collaborative volume of essays, S.J. Boss, ed., *Mary. The Complete Resource* (London and New York, 2007).

[16]   Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, 6.

[17]   C. Tischendorff, ed., *Evangelia Apocrypha* (Leipzig, 1876, repr. 1966); E.

the *Akathistos Hymn*, forms the basis of so much later imagining about the Virgin in visual art, homiletic and hymnography – and the beginnings of real attention to the Virgin in our sources from the late fourth, and particularly the fifth century onwards. This is a problem which demands more attention, in that the *Protevangelion* seems so developed for its date, and yet in a sense so isolated. It needs to be set in the broader context of apocryphal writings of a similar period, which have also been attracting a very substantial amount of recent scholarship, and its similarities and differences studied in more detail. It is also interesting to note that the second- and third-century apocryphal acts of the apostles also began to attract attention and to be reworked in the late fourth or rather the early fifth century, as part of a re-remembering of the apostolic age. Indeed, the *Life and Miracles of Thekla* – written in Anatolia in the fifth century (and with no allusion to the Theotokos) – may provide a kind of parallel to the rediscovery of the apocryphal life of the Virgin which we find expressed in the Akathistos.[18] The elaboration of the imagery and typology in the early fifth-century homilies is too striking not to have a background, and Nicholas Constas brings out its roots in the Apocrypha.[19] Once made, and whatever the explanation for the seeming gap in consciousness, the connection with the early stories of the Virgin allowed imaginations to run riot, as we see happening in homiletic and hymns from the fifth century on, and indeed in a whole nexus of later apocryphal narratives.[20]

The document on Mary issued in 2005 by the Anglican and Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC II)[21] speaks of a 're-reception' of Mary in both Churches, and an Anglican writer at the time headed an article about it with the title 'There's nothing to fear about Mary'. It is striking that this officially agreed document says next to nothing about the Eastern Church, although it does indeed testify to the fascination and the importance of Mary for all Christian traditions.

The subject has also raised methodological questions, for instance in relation to gender: did the flourishing cult of the Theotokos somehow express

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de Strycker, S.J., *La forme la plus ancienne du Protévangile de Jacques. Recherches sur le Papyrus Bodmer 5 avec une edition critique du texte grec et une traduction annotée*, Subsidia Hagiographica 33 (Brussels, 1961); trans. J.K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament. A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford, 1993; repr. 2005), 57–67.

[18]   See S.F. Johnson, *The Life and Miracles of Thekla. A Literary Study* (Cambridge MA, 2006).

[19]   Constas, *Proclus of Constantinople*, 325–8.

[20]   Shoemaker, 'Death and the maiden'; *idem*, 'The Virgin Mary in the ministry of Jesus and the early Church according to the earliest *Life of the Virgin*', *HTR* 98.4 (2005), 441–67; see also M. van Esbroeck, *Maxime le Confesseur: Vie de la Vierge*, CSCO 478–9, Scriptores Iberici 21–2 (Leuven, 1986), a later Georgian translation of a seventh-century Greek original attributed to Maximos Confessor. Later Byzantine *Lives* of the Virgin were written in the ninth century by Epiphanios, and the tenth by Symeon Metaphrastes (with 'censorship' of some uncanonical material) and John the Geometrician.

[21]   *Mary. Grace and Hope in Christ*, The Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission: An Agreed Statement (London, 2005).

or have implications for the position of Byzantine women?[22] And how far does the rich corpus of Byzantine art with the Theotokos as its subject relate to the broader issues about religion in Byzantine society? Is our understanding of the cult over-influenced by the admittedly seductive evidence of Marian icons and visual representations?

Many scholars are undoubtedly driven to this subject by religious motives, but for others, I would argue that Mary, or the Theotokos, fascinates because of her infinite variety, her capacity to escape whatever formulation we may try to impose upon her. She is both ordinary woman and the Mother of God. With touching homeliness the sixth-century Piacenza pilgrim wrote of venerating 'what they said was the flagon and the breadbasket of Saint Mary' at Diocaesarea and then of reclining on the very couch at Cana where Jesus attended the wedding and even ('undeserving though I am') writing on it the names of his parents.[23] The same Mary became in Byzantine art and thought the very symbol of orthodoxy. In the words of the Akathistos, she is indeed 'the woman in whom all opposites are reconciled'.[24]

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[22]   L.M. Peltomaa, 'Gender and Byzantine Studies from the viewpoint of methodology', *Anzeiger der philosophisch-historischen Klasse* 140.1 (2005), 23–44, at 29–33.

[23]   J. Wilkinson, trans., *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* (Warminster, rev. edn, 2002), 131.

[24]   *Akathistos Hymn*, Ikos 15.

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Section I: The Early Cult of the Virgin Mary: Pilgrimage, Miracles, Art and Texts

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1

The Initial Tradition of the Theotokos at the Kathisma: Earliest Celebrations and the Calendar

Rina Avner

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the issue of how the recent archaeological excavations at the site of the early Christian complex of the Kathisma on the Jerusalem–Bethlehem road (Figure 1.1) meet the relevant historical sources, contributing to a better and clearer picture of the earliest site in the Holy Land dedicated to the veneration of Mary Theotokos. It will also demonstrate how this holy place influenced the development of Marian worship in Jerusalem and affected the liturgy in the churches, both Eastern and Western.

In early Christianity the Kathisma (Greek for 'seat') was the name of a specific rock situated between Jerusalem and Bethlehem and hallowed by popular Christian lore. From the very beginning this distinguished rock was said to have been the seat on which allegedly the pregnant Virgin Mary sat to rest on the journey to Bethlehem, prior to Christ's birth.[1] This early legend of Mary's repose is recorded in the apocryphal *Protevangelion of James*, composed in the middle of the second century.[2] Chapter 17:2–3 relates that within three miles from Bethlehem, Mary had a vision in which she saw two people – one happy and rejoicing, the other sorrowful and mourning. Then as 'they

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[1]   Y. Tsafrir, L. Di Segni and J. Green, *Tabula Imperii Romani: Iudaea Palaestina Eretz-Israel in the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Periods* (Jerusalem, 1994), 101–2; A. Kloner, *Archaeological Survey of Jerusalem, the Southern Sector* (Jerusalem, 2000), 90, site [106] 92; R. Avner, 'The recovery of the Kathisma church and its influence on octagonal buildings', in G.C. Bottini, L. Di Segni and D. Chrupcala, eds, *One Land – Many Cultures: Archaeological Studies in Honor of Fr. Stanislav Loffreda*, Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Collectio Maior 42 (2003), 173–86; R. Avner, 'The church of the Kathisma: its influence and role in the history of architecture and mosaic' (unpubl. PhD thesis, University of Haifa, 2004).

[2]   J. Gijsel and R. Beyers, *Libri de nativitate Mariae. Corpus Christianorum Apocryphorum* (Turnhout, 1997), 1–4; F.L. Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford, 1958): 'Book of James', 711.

came to the midst of the way', feeling the child pressing within her, she asked Joseph to help her descend from the ass and stopped for a rest.[3] The following chapter relates that Joseph went to look for a cave where Mary could give birth discreetly.

Much later, in the sixth century, Theodore of Petra[4] and Cyril of Scythopolis[5] recorded that a church and monastery had been built in the fifth century at the site of the Kathisma and that the founder, a widow named Ikelia, had dedicated the church of the Kathisma to Mary Theotokos. The earliest mention of a site named Kathisma, midway on the road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, is found in the Armenian lectionary dated by Renoux between 417 and 439.[6] This latter source, reflecting the liturgy of Jerusalem in the fifth century, also mentions a feast of the Theotokos celebrated on 15 August in the church of the Kathisma, situated at the second milestone,[7] halfway on the road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem.

In 1899, the site of the Kathisma was correctly identified by Dr von Riess.[8] He argued that the Arabic name of a large water reservoir, called locally *Bir Qadismu*, has preserved in a corrupted form the original Greek name of the 'Kathisma'. In fact, during an excavation which I directed in 2000, we uncovered, close to the reservoir, walls and water installations dated to the early Byzantine period that abut the reservoir. Thus, it is clear that *Bir Qadismu* was contemporary with the excavated complex and that it was one of several Byzantine reservoirs which served the early Byzantine monastic complex which we excavated.[9]

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[3]   *Protevangelion* 17:2–3 in C. von Tischendorf, ed., *Evangelia Apocrypha* (Leipzig, 1876), 32–3; E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, eds, *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R.M. Wilson (London, 1963), 383; J.K. Elliot, ed., *The Apocryphal New Testament. A Collection of Apocryphal Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford, 1993; rev. edn 2005), 63–7.

[4]   Theodorus Petraeus, *Vita sancti Theodosii*, 12, 4–14; H. Usener, ed., *Der heilige Theodosius* (Leipzig, 1890), 13–14; A.J. Festugière, ed. and trans., *Les moines d'Orient. Les moines de Palestine, Cyrille de Scythopolis: Vies des Saints Jean L'Hésychaste, Kyriakos, Théodose, Théogenios, Abramios; Théodore de Petra: Vie de Saint Théodose* 3 (Paris, 1963), 108–9. For the date, 531–6, see ibid., 86; for 536–47, see J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims Before the Crusades* (Jerusalem, 1977), 214.

[5]   Cyril of Scythopolis, *Vita Theodosii*, 236, 20 – 237, 2; Festugière, *Les moines d'Orient*, 57–85; J. Binns and R.M. Price, trans, *Cyril of Scythopolis: The Lives of the Monks of Palestine* (Kalamazoo MI, 1991), 262–3. For the date c. 557, see Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 214; for pre-558, see Binns and Price, *Cyril of Scythopolis*, xi, li.

[6]   A. Renoux, ed., *Le codex arménien Jérusalem 121*, PO 36/2 (1971), 181. For slightly different dates, see B. Capelle, 'La fête de la Vierge à Jérusalem au Ve siècle', *Le Muséon* 56 (1943), 19–20; Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 213.

[7]   A. Renoux, 'Un manuscrit du lectionnaire arménien de Jérusalem (Cod. Jer. Arm.121)', *Le Muséon* 74 (1961), 383.

[8]   Dr von Riess, 'Kathisma Palaion und der sogennante Brunnen der Weisen bei Mar-Elias', *ZDPV* 12 (1899), 19–23.

[9]   R. Avner, 'Jerusalem, Mar Elias – the Kathisma church', *Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 117 (2005); http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.asp?id=106&mag_id=110 (accessed 5 August 2008).
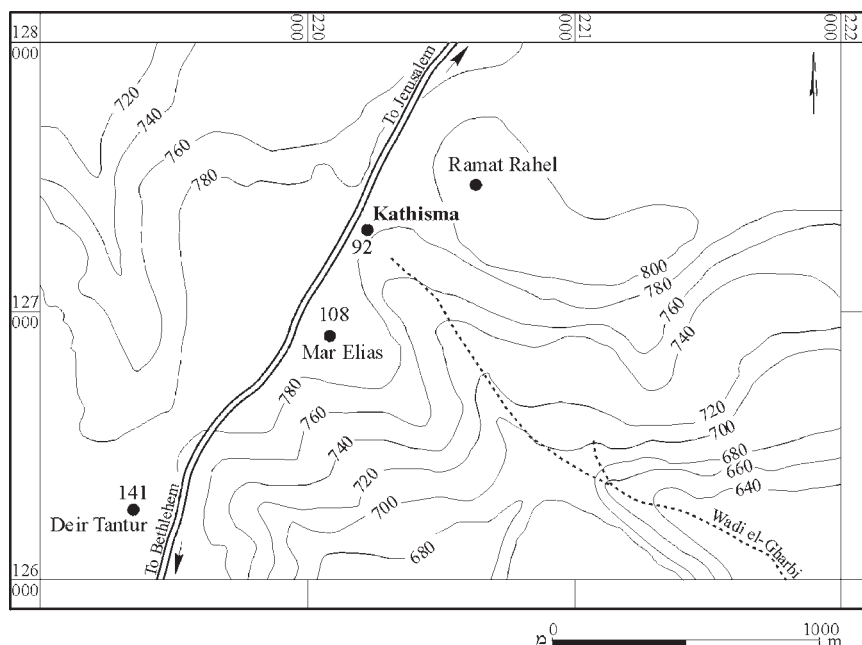
Fig. 1.1   Location map.

However, in the 1960s, a basilical church of more humble dimensions (c. 12.6 x 26.3 m)[10] than the large octagonal church which we revealed near *Bir Qadismu* was uncovered by a team of archaeologists headed by Aharoni at a site included in the area of the modern kibbutz Ramat Rahel, situated on the north-eastern ridge with respect to our site on the Jerusalem–Bethlehem road (Figure 1.1). This church was erroneously identified by Testini as the lost church of the Kathisma.[11] It should be noted that at the time of Aharoni's excavations, in the 1950s and 1960s, the reservoir was situated in the no-man's land between the state of Israel and the Kingdom of Jordan. Aharoni and his team could not therefore survey the site we excavated by *Bir Qadismu* or be impressed by the abundant surface finds that appeared here: mosaic *tesserae* of various colors and sizes, marble fragments, ceramic roof tiles and early Byzantine pottery shards and glass. Now, however, our archaeological discovery of the much larger monumental church and monastic complex, coupled with more thorough research of the historical evidence with regard to our site along the road, as well as the results of new excavations at Ramat

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[10]   Y. Aharoni, *Excavations at Ramat Rahel. Seasons 1961 and 1962* (Rome, 1964), plan 1.

[11]   P. Testini, 'The Kathisma church and monastery', in Y. Aharoni, A. Ciasca, G. Garbini, M. Kochavi, P. Matthiae, and L.Y. Rahmani, eds, *Excavations at Ramat Rahel, Seasons 1959–60* (Rome, 1962), 73–91.

Rahel headed by Oded Lipshitz and Manfred Oeming,[12] allow us firmly to establish the correct identification of the ancient site of the Kathisma. In the present chapter, therefore, the archaeological results of the excavated site at *Bir Qadismu* will be examined on the basis of past research with a view to confirm the correct identification of the Kathisma and to reconsider its history. Special attention will be paid to the feast of the Theotokos and its dedication and celebration in the Kathisma, with reference to the relevant literary sources. I will focus on the major and basic studies by Jugie,[13] Capelle,[14] Renoux[15] and Aubineau,[16] as well as on related studies by Milik,[17] Wilkinson,[18] Ray[19] and Shoemaker,[20] concerning the question of the identification of the site and its original cult.

The archaeological data and related historical information

The first archaeological remains of the monastic complex, with its octagonal church of the Kathisma, were revealed accidentally during construction work when a lane was added to the modern motorway leading from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Two rescue excavations were conducted in 1992 and 1997.[21] In 1999 we were joined by the late George Lavas and Eirini Rosidis, from the University of Athens, for an additional season. This was made possible by the cooperation of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, the owner of the terrain.[22] Evidently, most of the masonry of the ancient buildings was

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[12]   O. Lipschits, M. Oeming, Y. Gadot, B. Arubas and G. Cinamon, 'Ramat Rahel, 2005', *Israel Exploration Journal* 56 (2006), 227–35.

[13]   M. Jugie, *La mort et l'assomption de la Sainte Vierge*, ST 114 (Vatican City, 1944); *idem*, 'La première fête mariale en orient et en occident: l'Avent primitif', *EO* 22 (1923), 129–52; *idem*, 'La fête de la dormition et l'assomption de la sainte Vierge en orient et en occident', *L'année théologique* 4 (1943), 11–42.

[14]   Capelle, 'La fête', 1–33.

[15]   Renoux, 'Un manuscrit du lectionnaire arménien', 361–85; *idem*, 'Le codex arménien', *Le Muséon* 75 (1962), 383–98.

[16]   M. Aubineau, ed., *Les homélies festales d'Hésychius de Jérusalem*, Subsidia Hagiographica 59 (2 vols, Brussels, 1978), vol. 1.

[17]   J.T. Milik, 'Notes d'épigraphie et de topographie palestiniennes', *Revue Biblique* 66 (1959), 550–75; *Revue Biblique* 67 (1960), 354–67.

[18]   Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 163.

[19]   W.D. Ray, 'August 15 and the development of the Jerusalem calendar' (unpubl. PhD thesis, University of Notre Dame IN, 2000).

[20]   S.J. Shoemaker, 'Christmas in the Qur'ān: the Qur'ānic account of Jesus' Nativity and Palestinian local tradition', *Jerusalem Studies in Islam and Arabic* 28 (2003), 11–39.

[21]   Both were directed by the author on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority. R. Avner, 'Jerusalem Mar Elias', *Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 13 (1993), 89–92; *eadem*, 'Jerusalem, Mar Elias – the Kathisma church', *Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 20 (1998), 101*–103*. The final report will be published in the monograph series, *IAA Reports*.

[22]   R. Avner, G. Lavas and E. Rosidis, 'Jerusalem, Mar Elias – the Kathisma church', *Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 20 (1998), 89*–92*.
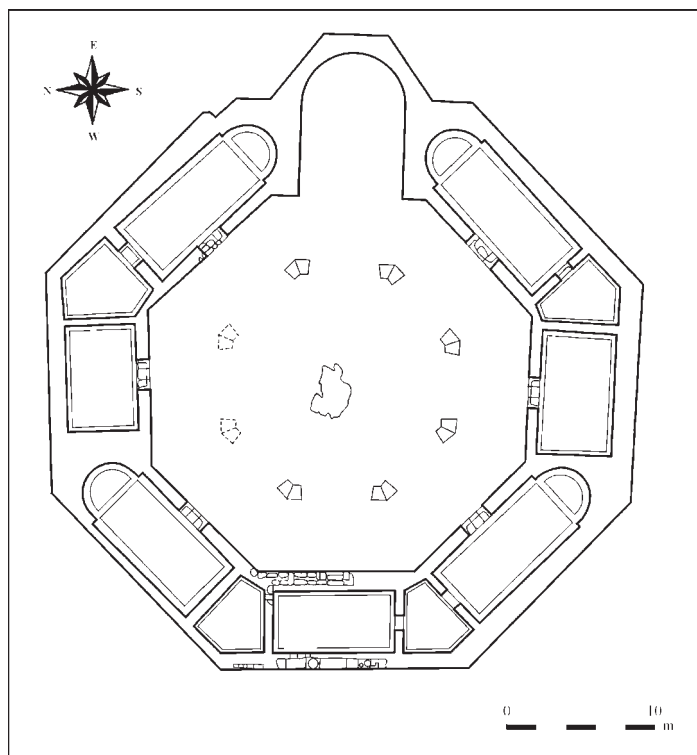
Fig. 1.2   The Kathisma Church in the 5th century: plan.

removed in ancient times to serve as building material in new constructions
in the surrounding villages, as reported in the twelfth century by the Russian
pilgrim, abbot Daniel.[23] Indeed, most of the walls have not survived, but
fortunately their layout can be retraced, thanks to preserved margins of floor
mosaics which have been uncovered, as well as surviving plaster bedding of
the foundations of the rooms. Most of the doorways were carefully constructed
and they were quite wide (1.80–2 m).

   The plan of the Kathisma church (Figure 1.2.) was based on the principle
of three concentric octagons. In the innermost octagon, precisely at the
geometrical centre of the church, a large chunk of bedrock was revealed.
Irregular in form, it is approximately 3 m long and about 2.5 m wide, and it
rises to about 20 cm above the level of the surrounding floor. It is clear that
the rock was kept in full view throughout the entire period that the building
served as a church. We can thus surmise that the rock was the focus of the
church and no doubt the *raison d'être* for the construction of the building.

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[23]   G. Le Strange, ed. and trans., *The Pilgrimage of the Russian Abbot Daniel (1106
A.D.).* The Library of the Palestine Pilgrim Text Society 4 (London, 1896), 38–9.

Twenty-four probes were dug throughout, in almost all of the rooms and areas of the church, revealing three layers of floors, one on top of the other. Thus, three phases of the octagonal church were detected. The dating of the original first phase, according to coins retrieved underneath the lowest floors and their beddings, is from the first half to the mid-fifth century.[24] In the probe excavated close to the centre of the church and to the west of the rock (probe 1–1 in Figure 1.2), under the earliest floor of the original phase of the church, a segment of a foundation wall was revealed relating to the holy rock, but predating the church building (marked as 'w140' in the plan in Figure 1.2). To date, the earliest small finds that we retrieved from sealed archaeological contexts do not predate the fifth century: this segment of the ancient wall should therefore be dated to the first half of the fifth century. Consequently, I suggest that this wall should be attributed to the earliest historical chapter of the site, perhaps referred to in the Armenian Lectionary, prior to the fifth-century octagonal church constructed by Ikelia. This early wall is archaeological evidence suggesting that the rock was hallowed and venerated already in the fifth century, possibly in a modest shrine built over the rock. The date of the first phase of the octagonal church, provided by the numismatic finds, is in accordance with the historical date of Ikelia's church, as provided by Cyril of Scythopolis. He explicitly reported that at the time when St Theodosios joined the monastery of the Kathisma, Ikelia was constructing the church there, which she dedicated to Mary Theotokos.[25] This detail enables us to refine the dating of the church close to 456.[26]

The second phase of the church is dated by coins retrieved above the floors of the first phase and below the floors of the second phase, as well as in the beddings of the floors of the second phase. These provide a date in the first half of the sixth century and not later then the monetary reform of Justinian in 538.[27] This date is relevant to the issue of the identification of the site, which we will come back to later in the discussion concerning the 'Old' and 'New Kathisma' monasteries.

The third phase is dated by coins, pottery and glass fragments to the first half of the eighth century; this has already been treated elsewhere.[28]

The holy rock, the alleged seat of the Virgin, is mentioned as such for the first time by Theodosios the Pilgrim between 510 and 530.[29] He reports:

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[24]   Donald Ariel and Gabriela Bijovsky deciphered the Byzantine coins. Ariel will publish the numismatic chapter of the excavation's final report in *IAA Reports*.

[25]   See note 5 above.

[26]   L. Di Segni, *Cyril of Scythopolis, Lives of the Monks of the Jerusalem Desert* (Jerusalem, 2005), 251, n. 3; D.J. Chitty, *The Desert a City* (London, 1966), 212.

[27]   I thank Donald Ariel and Gabriella Bijovsky for deciphering the coins. See note 24 above.

[28]   R. Avner, 'The Kathisma – a Christian and Muslim pilgrimage site', *ARAM* 18–19 (2007), 541–57.

[29]   Tsafrir, Di Segni and Green, *Tabula Imperii*, 50; Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims*, 5, 185.