

Praise of Mary in Song: The Early Hymnography

Song was an integral part of both Jewish and Christian worship, according to the earliest written records of each religious tradition. Moses, along with his band of Israelites and Aaron's sister Miriam, sang songs of victory after the crossing of the Red Sea, according to Exodus 15:1–21. The other Old Testament canticles, along with the entire book of Psalms, not only reflect the historical experience of the Jews, but may also have been sung in temple and synagogue worship through to the beginning of the Christian era.¹ According to the younger Pliny (c. 61–113 CE), the followers of Jesus 'met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god . . .'² Pagan tradition also involved the singing of sacred songs. Early Christians thus inhabited a world in which believers were accustomed to invoke, describe and praise their deities with words and music. Scholars do not agree about the precise ways in which Egyptian monasteries and urban churches organised the singing of the Old Testament psalms and responses in late antiquity; however, it is likely that this practice flourished especially in cathedral settings.³ Psalmody, along with the nine biblical canticles, thus played important roles in the formation of early Christian hymnography. That hymns could be used to attract converts was also recognised from at least as early as the early fourth century.⁴

¹ Note, however, Bradshaw's reservations in this regard, owing to the lack of documentary evidence; see Bradshaw 2002, 38–9; McKinnon 1986 (1998).

² Pliny the Younger, *Letters* x. xcvi.7, trans. Radice 1975, vol. 2, 288–9: 'stato die ante lucem convenire, carmenque Christo quasi deo dicere secum invicem . . .' It is interesting to note, assuming that Pliny's information is correct, that these early Christians used some kind of antiphonal or responsive singing.

³ See Frøyshov 2000; Taft 2005, 188–97; Frøyshov 2007a; Krueger 2014, 5–6.

⁴ Arkadiy Avdokhin has recently argued that Church leaders including Athanasios of Alexandria began to suppress more heterodox examples of hymnography in the course of the fourth century; see Avdokhin 2016. The power of religious song is also evidenced in the official reaction to Arius' methods of teaching prior to the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE; see Young 1983, 60–1; Williams 1987, 62–6. Extracts of Arius' *Thalia* are translated in Stevenson 1987, 330–2.

The question of genre, or literary form, is particularly complicated in the case of hymnography. To begin with, there is a close relationship between hymns and prayers – to the extent that it is misleading to separate them as independent forms. Although the psalms were composed as songs, for example, they also functioned as prayers. Many late antique and Byzantine hymns further performed a didactic role in ritual or liturgical settings. According to Matthew Gordley, this is indicated by direct address to the audience, by the expression of theological doctrine in ways that can be easily assimilated, and by vivid or dramatic use of narrative.⁵ Early Syriac and Greek hymns contain in varying degrees all of the above qualities, from direct invocation of Christ, his mother Mary, or the saints, to concise or narrative theological formulations.

This chapter deals with liturgical hymnography that placed the Theotokos at the centre of its praise or teaching, focusing on texts that were intended for church settings.⁶ It includes not only the earliest Greek examples of the genre, but also some Syriac and Georgian compositions that either influenced or transmitted such early works. Hymns that were intended mainly for public liturgical contexts began to be produced in eastern regions of the Roman empire or in Persia, where Syriac was spoken both inside and outside the Church, from at least as early as the fourth century. The earliest Greek examples survive mainly in Georgian translations that reflect liturgical practices in Jerusalem or Palestine. Hymnography that specifically praised or expounded the Theotokos began to be produced in Constantinople from the early fifth century onward. All of the surviving works, whether Syriac, Georgian or Greek, assumed particular forms according to their place within the developing offices or divine liturgies. They may be described as formal prayers to the Christian God, usually set to music, which were designed to invoke, praise and offer thanksgiving to God, the Theotokos or the saints, on behalf of the whole community. In addition to this, they taught the paradoxical doctrine of Christ's incarnation, which depended so materially on his mother Mary.

As a possible exception to this rough chronological outline, a short Greek prayer to the Theotokos, called by its Latin title, *Sub tuum*

⁵ Gordley 2011, 5.

⁶ Some songs, or poems, such as those that were composed by Gregory Nazianzen and Synesios of Cyrene in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, followed classical conventions in their vocabulary and metre; they may have been intended for small groups of friends rather than for larger congregations. However, none of these early hymns chose the Virgin Mary as their primary subject. See Wellesz 1961, 146–56.

praesidium, survives in a papyrus that now belongs to the John Rylands Library in Manchester. It is sung to this day in Oriental and Orthodox Christian liturgical services and may be translated as follows:

Under your mercy we take refuge, Theotokos. Do not overlook our petitions in adversity but rescue us from danger, uniquely holy one and uniquely blessed one.⁷

The text is frequently cited as one of the earliest examples of a prayer that appeals to Mary's intercessory power; however, its date remains controversial.⁸ Whereas Stephen Shoemaker suggests that it belongs to the fourth or even third century CE,⁹ Theodore de Bruyn prefers a later context for the prayer, for two main reasons.¹⁰ First, H. Förster has questioned the fourth-century dating of the palaeography that was suggested by its first editors, suggesting instead that it belongs to the sixth or seventh century.¹¹ Second, and perhaps more incontrovertibly, de Bruyn demonstrates that appeals to the mediating or intercessory powers of the Theotokos are largely absent in Egyptian liturgical texts before the sixth century.¹² Even 'paralitururgical' evidence, which consists of short prayers or amulets,¹³ can be dated no earlier than the fifth century.¹⁴ Such fragments, many of which appear to have had healing powers and to have been intended for female owners, testify to belief in the intercessory power of the Theotokos in Egypt from at this date, but probably not earlier.¹⁵ This fascinating material, which cannot be classed as liturgical hymnography,

⁷ John Rylands Papyrus 111 470; trans. Price 2007, 56.

⁸ See, for example, Price 2007, 56–7; Price 2008, 89–90; Shoemaker 2008b, 72–3.

⁹ The original editors of the text suggested a fourth-century date for the *Sub tuum praesidium* prayer; see Hunt, Johnson and Roberts 1911–52, vol. 3, 46. Shoemaker hints in his latest study that the papyrus may date to as early as the third century; see Shoemaker 2016a, 68–73. For further discussion, see Stegmüller 1952; Giamberardini 1969; Starowieyski 1989; Johnson 2008, 62–3.

¹⁰ De Bruyn 2015, 116–17.

¹¹ Förster 2005. In response to this study, Shoemaker cites Römer 1998, 138 and Luijendijk 2014, 30. The palaeographical question remains controversial, thus making the argument that is based on the religious context of the papyrus more important.

¹² De Bruyn 2015, 121–2; with regard to early Egyptian church dedications to 'holy Mary', see Papaconstantinou 2000, 93. Both are cited in de Bruyn 2015, 116–17.

¹³ Scholars define 'amulets' as folded sheets of papyrus or parchment that were used to obtain protection, healing, or other kinds of help. See Förster 1995, 185; de Bruyn 2015, 122.

¹⁴ De Bruyn 2015, 122–7.

¹⁵ See, for example, the fifth- or sixth-century papyrus, which, when unfolded, 'revealed a few leaves of a plant, identified as trefoil, used for menstrual periods, intermittent fever, and three-day fever' and which contained the text, 'O Theotokos, incorruptible, undefiled, unstained mother of Christ, remember that you have said these things. Again heal her who wears this. Amen.' PGM P15b.8–10; de Bruyn 2015, 124–5, n. 123.

testifies to the development of personal devotion to the Virgin in fifth- and sixth-century Egypt.¹⁶

Other early examples of hymnography that describe or invoke the Virgin Mary include, as we shall see below, Syriac poetic homilies and early Palestinian hymns that were written in Greek but survive in tenth-century Georgian translations. All of this evidence is important when we reconstruct the origins of Marian praise in the Eastern Churches; most of it belongs to the sphere of collective liturgical worship. As stated above, this material represents theology in verse, which helped to teach congregations the important role that the Theotokos played in the incarnation of Christ. Whereas earlier examples, dating from the fourth century or before, confined themselves to Christological themes, hymns that were produced from about the late fifth century onward began to invoke Mary's intercessory power. An important example that probably belongs to this period is the *Akathistos Hymn*, which alludes repeatedly – and with the help of metaphorical imagery – to the Virgin's protective qualities. It is only in the course of the sixth century, however, that the Virgin became human and even maternal, according to both Syriac and Greek liturgical poets. The *kontakia* of Romanos the Melodist, which were sung in the course of all-night vigils in the churches of Constantinople, represented a turning point in Marian liturgical writing. Not only did this hymnographer combine Greek and Syriac models in order to create a three-dimensional and human image of the Mother of God, but his work influenced both hymnographers and preachers in the centuries that followed. The fourth to the sixth centuries were thus pivotal in the history of Eastern Christian hymnography. After this period, as we shall see in Chapter 4, a multitude of Marian hymns were added to liturgical services, including not only those that were intended for newly instituted feast-days, but also many for ordinary Sundays and weekdays. Christological Councils of the fifth century may not have provided the only impetus for growing public recognition of the Theotokos; however, they allowed Church leaders to endorse this tendency and to place it at the centre of their didactic efforts. Mary acted as a link between the divine and created worlds. Not only did she guarantee the humanity of Christ by means of her divine motherhood, but she also offered humanity a way to approach and influence the judgement of the heavenly Saviour.

¹⁶ See Introduction, 33.

Syriac Liturgical Poetry

Whereas poetic homilies dominated the Greek and Latin liturgical traditions in the fourth and fifth centuries, hymns, in the form of prayer songs (*madrashé*), dialogue poems (*soghyatha*) and verse homilies (*mémrê*) were favoured in the Syriac-speaking areas of Christendom during this period and beyond.¹⁷ No proper assessment of Greek hymns and homilies that honour the Virgin can be made without taking into account the Syriac contribution.¹⁸ Because Marian liturgical poetry developed early in the Syriac-speaking world – and because this probably influenced the Greek liturgical tradition – I have chosen to include some early examples in this section of the chapter.¹⁹

Praise of the Virgin Mary, especially for her role in the incarnation of Christ, began early in the Syriac context. Although it lies beyond my rough chronological limits, it is worth mentioning here the remarkable work known as the *Odes of Solomon*, which probably dates from the late second century.²⁰ This set of hymns, which may have emerged from a Judaeo-Christian – if not gnostic – background,²¹ adopts a daring approach to gender: not only is the Holy Spirit, as is customary in early Syriac poetry, described by means of feminine imagery, but so is the Father. Ode 19 portrays Trinitarian involvement in Christ's conception in the following way:

The Son is the Cup,
And the Father is He who was milked;
And the Holy Spirit is She who milked Him;
Because His breasts were full,
And it was undesirable that His milk should be ineffectually released.
The Holy Spirit opened Her bosom,
And mixed the milk of the two breasts of the Father.
Then She gave the mixture to the generation without their knowing,
And those who have received (it) are in the perfection of the right hand.
The womb of the Virgin took (it),
And she received conception and gave birth . . .²²

¹⁷ Brock 1994 (2010), 12–15. ¹⁸ For an excellent recent study of this material, see Horn 2015.

¹⁹ The parallels between Syriac and Greek liturgical poetry, especially the kontakia of Romanos, has been much discussed in scholarly literature. See, for example, Grosdidier de Matons 1977, 16–27; Petersen 1985; Brock 1989 (1999). For good background to the whole tradition, see Murray 1975 (2004); Brock 1994 (2010).

²⁰ *The Odes of Solomon*, ed. and trans. Charlesworth 1973. See also Harvey 1994 for discussion of the feminine elements in the hymns.

²¹ Murray 1971, 378. ²² *Odes of Solomon* 19, trans. Charlesworth 1973, 82.

The hymn goes on to describe Mary's labour, which is said to be without pain; however, she gives birth 'like a strong man with desire'. The author's willingness to play with gender imagery in this ode, as in others within the same collection, indicates a creative approach to the attributes and gifts of the divine Being; these works challenge listeners or readers to see God, along with those who acknowledge him, as manifesting both masculine and feminine qualities.

The fourth-century teacher (and possibly deacon) Ephrem the Syrian, who flourished in Nisibis and Edessa between about 307 and 373 CE,²³ devoted considerable attention to the Virgin Mary in his prayer songs (*madrashé*) and verse homilies (*mêmrê*). She takes on a largely symbolic role in Ephrem's poetry, representing the 'Second Eve', the container or material of the incarnate Christ, the Church, and a transfigured creation. As Sebastian Brock notes in his introduction to Syriac Marian liturgical poetry, 'The Syriac poets – and above all St Ephrem . . . have a theological vision which might be described as holistic: for them everything in both the material and the spiritual world is mysteriously interconnected: nothing, and nobody, exists in isolation.'²⁴ Mary is the quintessential link in this interconnected universe; she provides the physical body whereby God enters creation as God-man and restores it to the prelapsarian – and also eschatological – state that he intended. Ephrem also emphasises, however, the importance of Mary's freely given consent to this event; here, with focus on the human ear as the receptacle of God's purpose, he describes the Virgin as the 'Second Eve'.²⁵ Whereas the original Eve listened to the words of the Devil and thereby brought about the Fall, Mary listened to the words of the archangel Gabriel and initiated salvation for humankind.

It is striking, in comparison with the works of contemporary Greek Fathers, that Ephrem focuses so consistently on the role of the Theotokos in his elaboration of God's dispensation for salvation. His theological position is nevertheless in line with Nicene views on the Trinity, with some of his statements about Christ's two natures echoing those of Alexandrian theologians such as Athanasios:

²³ Much has been written on the conflicting hagiographical accounts of Ephrem's life. For a recent summary, see his *Hymns on Faith*, trans. Wickes 2015, 5–14; for the earliest contemporary source concerning Ephrem's occupation, see Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 115, trans. Halton 1999, 149.

²⁴ Brock 1994 (2010), 2.

²⁵ For extensive discussion, with background on the historical and theological development of Mary's conception through hearing, see Constan 2003, 273–313.

He was lofty but He sucked Mary's milk,
 and from His blessings all creation sucks.
 He is the Living Breast of living breath;
 by His life the dead were suckled, and they revived . . .
 As indeed He sucked Mary's milk,
 He has given suck – life to the universe.
 As again He dwelt in His mother's womb,
 in His womb dwells all creation.²⁶

We see echoes here of the lactic imagery that featured in the second-century *Odes of Solomon*. The important point for us to note, however, is Ephrem's antithetical treatment of Christ's two natures. Although the Son of God suckled Mary's milk as an infant, he was simultaneously engaged in providing life to the universe. In portraying the Virgin as Christ's birth-giver, Ephrem provides her with passages of direct speech towards her son, in which she meditates on his divine and human natures. Although such hymns are affecting, in that they seem to give Ephrem's audiences access to Mary's inner thoughts, he does not reveal much about her character or emotions – apart from her experiences of awe, astonishment and the effort to understand the momentous event that she was experiencing. These are highly Christological works, which lack the human portrayal of the Virgin Mary that would appear in both Syriac and Greek liturgical poetry a century or two later. Nevertheless, she occupies a central place in Ephrem's meditations on the mystery of the incarnation. In several of his *Hymns on Faith*, for example, Ephrem applies womb imagery not only to Christ's conception and birth from Mary, but also to his generation from God.²⁷ And in *Hymn 28*, Mary's womb is juxtaposed with the tomb in which Christ was laid after death: whereas these small and restricted spaces confined the uncontainable God, he also 'bound' – or gained power – over them in his incarnation.²⁸

According to Ephrem, the Virgin Mary is the antitype for a wealth of Old Testament personages, places and objects, besides symbolising everyday aspects of creation such as palace, ship and the clothing Christ put on in his incarnation.²⁹ Each of these images conveys in some way the Christological message: Mary is the container, material, or vehicle for God's entrance into creation. In contrast again with his Greek

²⁶ Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymn on the Nativity* 4, trans. McVey 1989, 100. 149–50, 153–4.

²⁷ Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Faith* 3.13, 18.10, trans. Wickes 2015, 70, 149. For a thoughtful appraisal of Ephrem's exegetical methods in the *Hymns on Faith*, see Wickes 2019.

²⁸ Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymn on Faith* 28.6, trans. Wickes 2015, 182.

²⁹ Brock 1994 (2010), 10–11.

contemporaries, Ephrem frequently emphasises the centrality of the Eucharist in Christian life. In this context, Ephrem describes the Virgin Mary as the purveyor, or container, of the body and blood of Christ.³⁰ In addition to being his mother, Mary is Christ's sister, bride, handmaid and daughter; her relationship with him is replicated in that with the Church, or the people who are members of Christ's body.

Although Ephrem alludes to Mary's mediating role, as the locus and agent of human salvation, he never describes her as intercessor, according to the definition that I provided in the Introduction.³¹ As in the case of the fifth-century Greek preachers whose works we examined above, Ephrem's emphasis is always Christological. He does, however, suggest in some hymns that women have become special recipients of Christ's saving power, as a result of Mary's role in the incarnation:

Women heard that, behold, a virgin indeed
would conceive and bring forth. Well-born women hoped
that He would shine forth from them, and elegant women
that He would appear from them . . .³²

Mary, the Theotokos, helped to bring about salvation for all Christians; however, her female gender, which recapitulated that of Eve, offers special hope to women. This theme, which also appears in fifth-century homilies that celebrate the Virgin Mary, perhaps gains extra meaning in the light of Ephrem's well-known pastoral care for women and establishment of all-female choirs of singers.³³

In addition to Ephrem the Syrian's writings, many of which place Mary at the centre of their Christological teaching, numerous anonymous works survive in the Syriac liturgical tradition. Sebastian Brock dates many of these to the fifth or early sixth century. They include both *madrashē* and *soghyatha* that survive in both early manuscripts and later compilations.³⁴ Although T. J. Lamy published some of these works under the name of Ephrem, it appears that these attributions are untenable; they belong to a tradition which the latter helped to establish, but which continued to flourish a century or two later, thanks to many anonymous writers.³⁵ The prayer songs that are included in Brock's excellent translation of Marian

³⁰ He writes, for example, 'The Church gave us the living Bread,/ in place of the unleavened bread that Egypt had given./ Mary gave us the refreshing bread,/ in place of the fatiguing bread that Eve had procured for us.' See Gambero 1999, 115–16.

³¹ See Introduction, 8–9. ³² *Hymn on the Nativity* 8, trans. McVey 1989, 123, 20.

³³ Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Faith*, trans. Wickes 2015, 14; Harvey 2005; Harvey 2010, 17–39.

³⁴ Brock 1994 (2010), 12–13. ³⁵ Brock 1994 (2010), 13–15.

writings, *Bride of Light*, were intended for the feast of the Commemoration of the Virgin which, as in Constantinople, was celebrated on 26 December in the West Syriac calendar and on the second Friday after Christmas in the East Syriac one.³⁶

The emphasis in all of these prayer songs,³⁷ as in the authentic works of Ephrem, is Christological. One of the most extensive works, *Hymn 10*, provides antithetical statements about Christ that juxtapose his status as a tiny infant, crying and suckling milk, with that of King and Creator of the universe. The following stanza sums up this paradox concisely:

Behold, You are in Your Father, in Mary,
and on the Chariot,
in the manger, and in every place!
In truth You are in Your Father, without any doubt,
You are in Mary, upon the Chariot,
and in the lowly manger,
You are in every place, for You are the Maker,
You are in all, for You are the Fashioner.
You are from the Father,
Yet You are from Mary too . . .³⁸

The Virgin Mary gains holy status from this association, as all of the hymns make clear. She is invoked with typological and metaphorical epithets, as ‘a source of wonder to all the world’.³⁹

In addressing the Theotokos as ‘spring that provides the fountain’, ‘ship that bears joy from the Father’, ‘young dove . . . [that] carried the Eagle’, along with many other images,⁴⁰ these poets built on a rich typological tradition that was by now well established in the Syriac liturgical tradition. However, we also find some elements in the hymns that appear to be new, perhaps reflecting developments within this tradition that took place sometime between the fourth and fifth centuries. One such development is the hymnographers’ emphasis on Mary’s chaste and modest character, which makes her a perfect model for ascetic women:

Holy is her body, resplendent her soul, pure her mind,
her understanding most luminous;

³⁶ *Bride of Light*, trans. Brock 1994 (2010), 36.

³⁷ I have based the following analysis on sixteen anonymous *Hymns on Mary*, which are translated in Brock 1994 (2010), nos. 6–21, 36–73. These were edited (and attributed to Ephrem the Syrian) in Lamy 1886, vol. 2, 519–90; see Brock 1994 (2010), 17.

³⁸ Anonymous, *Hymn on Mary* 10.5, trans. Brock 1994 (2010), 56.

³⁹ Anonymous, *Hymn on Mary* 5.3, trans. Brock 1994 (2010), 45.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Anonymous, *Hymn on Mary* 7.1–3, trans. Brock 1994 (2010), 49.

her thought is most perfect,
chaste, temperate, pure,
well proved, and full of beauty.

Let the entire band of virgins rejoice in Mary,
seeing that one of their number has knelt down and given birth
to that Hero who bears up all creation . . .⁴¹

Another hymn addresses the young girls who may have been members of the women's choir for whom the work was intended, instructing them to 'leap for joy' and marvel at the wise and holy Virgin Mary.⁴² A second shift in emphasis, which differs from Ephrem's portrayal of Mary as the holy – but remote – Mother of God, is the attention which some hymnographers give to her maternal love for Christ. To cite just one example out of many, we find the following portrayal of the Nativity scene in *Hymn 10* on Mary:

She fondled Him and sang to Him;
as she kissed Him, He leapt up to meet her;
He gazed at her, smiling as a baby
as He lay in the manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes.
When He began to cry she got up and gave Him milk;
she embraced Him as she sang to Him,
swaying her knees until He became still.⁴³

The theological purpose of passages such as this is to emphasise the paradox of Christ's incarnation. This stanza contrasts with those in which he is celebrated as King and Only-Begotten Son of God. However, the poet also portrays the Virgin Mary as a motherly figure with whom his audience may identify and feel empathy. Such passages presage a development in the Greek liturgical tradition that would only reach full expression by about the middle of the ninth century.⁴⁴

Increasing interest in Mary as a human mother, who experiences both rational and emotional reactions to the incarnation, is also apparent in the dialogue hymns (*soghyatha*), which belong to the fifth or sixth century but build on a tradition of dispute literature that began in ancient Mesopotamia.⁴⁵ These hymns, which are mostly anonymous, may in

⁴¹ Anonymous, *Hymn on Mary* 1.4–5, trans. Brock 1994 (2010), 36–7.

⁴² Anonymous, *Hymn on Mary* 4.1, trans. Brock 1994 (2010), 42.

⁴³ Anonymous, *Hymn on Mary* 10.3, trans. Brock 1994 (2010), 56.

⁴⁴ Scholars have argued that emphasis on Mary's 'motherly' qualities emerged first in texts and later in images in response to iconophile theologians' interest in Christ's humanity; see Kalavrezou 1990; Kalavrezou 2000; Tsironis 2000. As I shall argue later, this theory should be adjusted in relation to the contribution of the sixth-century hymnographer Romanos the Melodist. See below, 58–65.

⁴⁵ Brock 1991; Brock 1994 (2010), 12–13.

turn have influenced the dialogic homilies that began to be composed in Greek from about the fifth century onward. They focus on biblical scenes, including the annunciation, nativity of Christ, his presentation at the temple, and others, adding long passages of direct speech between the main protagonists – as if in an attempt to create a form of liturgical mystery play. It appears, however, that dramatic hymns and homilies in both the Syriac- and Greek-speaking worlds were, like other liturgical compositions, sung or preached by the clergy within the normal offices or even eucharistic celebrations. Their purpose was didactic as well as dramatic: by emphasising the human thought processes and emotions of the Virgin Mary and other biblical characters, Eastern Christian liturgical writers conveyed the reality of the incarnation. The emphasis remained on Christ, whose simultaneous divinity and humanity were revealed through Mary, the all-pure Virgin and human mother.

The portrayal of the Virgin Mary in the dialogue hymns exhibits the full range of qualities that these two categories imply. We continue to see her more ‘motherly’ aspect in passages such as the following:

As she cuddled Him
she sang lullabies with loving words;
she worshipped her child and said,
‘Allow me, dear Lord, to embrace You . . . ’⁴⁶

However, it is the scene of the annunciation that offers the greatest scope for developing Mary’s character by means of dramatic dialogue. In a long hymn that elaborates the encounter between Gabriel and the Virgin, the hymnographer introduces a section of dialogue after ten stanzas of narrative introduction. Following the archangel’s greeting, according to Luke 1:28, we witness Mary’s doubt and distrust of this unexpected visitor, followed by gradual acceptance of his message. Her response, in which she describes what she sees (a being who is ‘made of flame’ and ‘wrapped in coals of fire’),⁴⁷ reveals not only an awareness of mystery, but also a healthy scepticism as she seeks to distance herself from the unfortunate credulity of Eve. Mary is also modest, however; she is ‘but a girl and cannot receive a man of fire’.⁴⁸ Audiences listening to this dramatic dialogue would thus have been introduced to an entirely human young woman, who experienced a variety of reactions to this momentous encounter and who eventually understood – and agreed to – the conception of God (who is ‘all

⁴⁶ Anonymous, *Soghitha* 2.5, trans. Brock 1994 (2010), 83.

⁴⁷ Anonymous, *Soghitha* 41.16, trans. Brock 1994 (2010), 127.

⁴⁸ Anonymous, *Soghitha* 41.28, trans. Brock 1994 (2010), 129.

flame') in her womb.⁴⁹ It is difficult to believe that this genre, which appears to have flourished first in the Syriac liturgical tradition, did not influence Greek homiletic and hymnographic dialogic works. A few homilies, such as (ps-)Proklos of Constantinople's *Homily VI*, followed by Romanos the Melodist's dramatic kontakia, bear a close resemblance to these Syriac prototypes.⁵⁰ The form would also be picked up later, from about the early eighth century, in Germanos of Constantinople's homily on the Annunciation, as well as in kanons composed for the same feast.⁵¹

One other important figure in the early Syriac liturgical tradition was the late fifth- and early sixth-century preacher Jacob of Serugh. Born in the village of Curtam, on the Euphrates, around the middle of the fifth century, Jacob became bishop of Serug in 519 CE. He composed more than seven hundred verse homilies (*mêmre*), many of which remain unpublished.⁵² English translations of Jacob's works remain less numerous than those of his famous predecessor, Ephrem, but are gradually appearing, along with interpretative studies of his contribution to Syriac liturgical poetry.⁵³ A collection of homilies on the Mother of God displays the same interest in her role in the incarnation that we have observed throughout this tradition, combined with attention to her ascetic and maternal qualities. Jacob stresses the mystery of this holy figure, which scarcely allows him to imagine her beauty and splendour.⁵⁴ Like his anonymous contemporaries, however, he also emphasises her motherly tenderness towards the infant Christ, as we see in the following passage:

Blessed is that one who carried, embraced, and caressed like a child
God mighty forever more, by whose hidden power the world is carried.⁵⁵

Or, in even more paradoxical language:

Blessed is she who placed her pure mouth on the lips of that One, from
whose fire, the Seraphim of fire hide themselves.
Blessed is she who nourished as a babe with pure milk the great breast from
which the worlds suck life.⁵⁶

From the *Odes of Solomon* to this late fifth- and early sixth-century liturgical writer, the Syriac tradition embraces the feminine gender, with

⁴⁹ Anonymous, *Soghitha* 41.40, trans. Brock 1994 (2010), 130.

⁵⁰ For discussion of these works, see below, 58–65 (Romanos), 101 ([ps-] Proklos).

⁵¹ For this material, see Chapters 3 and 4.

⁵² For a helpful list of Jacob's works and their current editions, see Golitzen 2007, 180–1, n. 2.

⁵³ Jansma 1965; Chestnut 1976; Alwan 1986.

⁵⁴ Jacob of Serugh, *Homily I on the Mother of God*, trans. Hansbury 1998, 20.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, trans. Hansbury 1998, 41. ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, trans. Hansbury 1998, 42.

all its attributes, not only in association with the Virgin Mary, but also with the Trinity itself.

In concluding this short section on the treatment of Mary in early Syriac liturgical hymns and homilies, it is worth repeating my view that subtle changes occurred between the time that Ephrem was writing (during the first three quarters of the fourth century) and that in which a number of anonymous writers and Jacob of Serugh flourished (fifth and sixth centuries). We have noticed increasing interest in Mary's personal qualities, as a model of asceticism, virginal girl and tender mother among the later liturgical writers. Although such details may have occurred sporadically in Ephrem's hymns, he portrayed the Virgin above all as a symbolic theological figure who stood between the divine and created worlds. She used her free will and provided Christ with human nature but remained somewhat remote from the rest of humanity in this capacity. What appears to be lacking in all of these writers, however, is an awareness – or attention to – Mary's intercessory power.⁵⁷ The only exception to this rule, which is – perhaps significantly – associated with the feast of the Dormition, is Jacob's homily on this subject. Here, after providing a narrative of Mary's death that omits many of the miraculous elements that were by this time circulating in other Syriac sources, the homily concludes by invoking the Virgin Mary's intercession on behalf of the faithful:

O Son of God, by her prayers make your peace to dwell in heaven, in the depths, and among all the counsels of her sons.
 Make wars to cease, and remove trials and plagues; bestow calm and tranquility on seafarers.
 Heal the infirm, cure the sick, fill the hungry; be a Father to orphans whom death has left destitute . . .⁵⁸

On the basis of this evidence, it is worth asking whether prayers to the Virgin Mary as intercessor before Christ, which were slow to emerge in Syriac liturgical writing, appeared in connection with speculation about her death and assumption into heaven. Narratives concerning this process appeared in written form only around the end of the fifth and beginning of the sixth century; can it be accidental that appeals to Mary's intercessory power appeared in liturgical texts at about the same time?⁵⁹ I shall return to

⁵⁷ The same conclusion is reached in Horn 2015.

⁵⁸ Jacob of Serugh, *Homily V on the Mother of God*, trans. Hansbury 1998, 99.

⁵⁹ Norelli and Shoemaker both suggest that belief in Mary's power to intercede on behalf of humanity inspired the narratives about her dormition and assumption into heaven; see Norelli 2009, 133–6 and Shoemaker 2015, 23.

this problem later, confining myself now to pointing out the circumstantial – and highly suggestive – evidence that might support such a theory.

The Georgian *Ancient Iadgari*: A Witness to Early Palestinian Hymnography?

The *Ancient Iadgari*, which was edited from seven manuscripts in 1980 and is still in the course of being translated into Western European languages, is a precious source for early liturgical celebrations in the churches and streets of Jerusalem and its surroundings.⁶⁰ This liturgical collection, or *Tropologion*, which contains hymns for the entire year (including fixed and movable feasts, as well as ordinary weekdays and Sundays), survives in a number of Georgian manuscripts, most of which are preserved at the Monastery of St Catherine in Sinai.⁶¹ Although the Georgian scribes were active in the tenth century (in some cases working at the Monastery of St Sabas in Palestine), they compiled and copied Georgian translations of a body of Greek hymnography that had been composed much earlier and which is now lost. These manuscripts include elements that would later be divided into separate books, such as the *Menaion*, the *Triodion*, the *Oktoechos* and others, in the Byzantine liturgical tradition.⁶²

The date of the material that appears in the various versions of the *Ancient Iadgari* can be narrowed down to approximately the fifth (or possibly even the fourth) through to the early seventh century. Charles Renoux, who provides translations and commentaries of some of the texts that make up the *Tropologion*, shows that the Georgian scribes sometimes created composite works that were made up of ‘layers’ of individual stanzas, collected from a variety of earlier sources.⁶³ Some of the earlier layers reveal the influence of fourth-century Christological formulations or early fifth-century liturgical homilies.⁶⁴ Stig Frøyshov has shown that, in the case of the hymns known as kanons, the earliest examples may contain

⁶⁰ *Ancient Iadgari*, ed. Metreveli, Čanġievi and Hevsuriani 1980. The hymnody for Dominical feasts is translated in Schneider 2004 (German); that for the Sunday *Oktoechos* hymnography, called the ‘Resurrection Hymns’ is translated in Renoux 2000, 2010, vols. 1–3 (French).

⁶¹ For a review of the edition and an overview of the manuscripts, see Wade 1984; cf. Jeffery 1991; Frøyshov 2012, 233–8; Galadza 2018, 52–6. A list of the manuscripts used for this edition is provided in Frøyshov 2012, 234, n. 37. The manuscripts differ considerably in their content – to the extent that the editors provide separate texts in their edition, arranged sequentially on each page for the purpose of comparison; in short, this is a compilation of versions, not simply an edition of the text.

⁶² Galadza 2018, 54.

⁶³ These layers are called ‘sxuani’ (Georgian) or ἄλλοι (‘others’ in Greek). See *Ancient Iadgari, Resurrection Hymns*, vol. 1, trans. Renoux 2000, 16–17; vol. 2, ed. Renoux 2010, 11.

⁶⁴ *Ancient Iadgari, Resurrection Hymns*, vol. 1, ed. Renoux 2000, 16–17, 42–9; Frøyshov 2007b, 166.

only two or three canticles (usually the eighth and ninth odes or, alternatively, the seventh to the ninth) or of four, rather than eight, tones for particular works.⁶⁵ Other archaic elements include the presence of the second ode, which began to be omitted from kanons especially after the early eighth century, along with the omission of theotokia at the end of many odes.⁶⁶ According to Frøyshov, a terminus ante quem for the Georgian *Ancient Iadgari* is provided by the omission of texts by seventh- and eighth-century hymnographers including Sophronios of Jerusalem, John of Damascus and Kosmas of Maiüma.⁶⁷

One of the final sections of the *Ancient Iadgari* is a hymn collection arranged in eight modes, intended for the Resurrection services of Vespers, Matins and the Eucharist that are celebrated on Sundays. The structure is roughly the same as that of the *Oktoechos*, a liturgical book that is used to this day in Orthodox churches for Sundays throughout the fixed liturgical year.⁶⁸ For reasons of space, I focus in the following discussion only on the so-called ‘Resurrection Hymns’ in the *Ancient Iadgari*, which contain a number of different forms of praise to the Theotokos.⁶⁹ Much of this hymnography uses metaphorical and typological imagery to invoke and praise the Virgin Mary.⁷⁰ Some verses also address her as intercessor, employing language that is similar to that found in the *Akathistos Hymn*. One of the most interesting sections of the *Ancient Iadgari Resurrection Hymns* is a series of Marian ‘Praises’ which appear in just a few manuscripts. These are added – at least in some manuscripts – at the end of the morning service (*Orthros*), accompanying the singing of Psalms 148–50. However, they also constitute a Mariological corpus of stanzas that could be used at various points in liturgical celebration. Many of these texts appeal to the Virgin as intercessor on a collective and personal basis.⁷¹

Sinai Georg. 18, like most of the other witnesses to this tradition, was copied in the tenth century. It contains (in addition to its festal and paschal material) the *Resurrection Hymns* of the *Ancient Iadgari*. It is fragmentary,

⁶⁵ Frøyshov 2007b, 167.

⁶⁶ *Ancient Iadgari, Resurrection Hymns*, vol. 1, ed. Renoux 2000, 19–20; 72–6.

⁶⁷ Frøyshov 2012, 237–8.

⁶⁸ *Oktoechos*, ed. Papachrone 1988. For further discussion of the *Oktoechos* in the Byzantine period, see Chapter 4, 164–6.

⁶⁹ I thus leave out of this discussion – in the hope that they will be analysed by future researchers – the hymns for Lazarus Saturday through Pentecost (see *Hymnal of St Sabas*, ed. Renoux 2008), as well as those for other feasts, with their attendant theotokia and other Marian additions.

⁷⁰ *Ancient Iadgari, Resurrection Hymns*, vols. 1–3, ed. Renoux 2000, 2010.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, ed. Renoux 2010, 20–1 (I have provided English translations on the basis of Renoux’s French version of this and the following quoted hymns).

in that it contains only six of the eight tones, two of which are plagal, in this section of the codex.⁷² Neither the theotokia of the first eight odes of the kanons (which are not always included), nor even the ninth, which is based on the Magnificat in Luke 1: 46–55, focus consistently on the Virgin Mary. Christological references to her nevertheless permeate this hymnography and she is sometimes invoked as intercessor, as we see in Ode Three of the kanon in the first plagal tone:

Virgin, unwedded Mother,
Who gave birth to Christ the Saviour,
Do not stop praying,
But intercede for us, your servants.⁷³

The *Resurrection Hymns* contained in Sinai Georg. 18 and 40 use high-flown Mariological imagery in their invocation of the Virgin, addressing her, for example, as ‘Theotokos’, ‘Mother of the Emmanuel’, ‘Mother of the King’, ‘Mother of Light’, ‘Cloud of Light’ and ‘Bride of Heaven’, along with other poetic or biblical epithets.⁷⁴ The authors of these hymns also frequently stress the physical nature of the incarnation, as we see in the following kanon, Tone Three, Ode Five:

We praise you, who were of David’s seed,
Since you received the Son of God in your womb,
You bore him in a corporeal way
And you remained, without reproach, a Virgin.⁷⁵

Another witness to the *Resurrection Hymns*, which was also compiled in the tenth century, is Sinai Georg. 34. This ‘vast liturgical encyclopedia’⁷⁶ contains not only the *Ancient* and *New Iadgari* (*Tropologia*), but also a *Horologion*, a Calendar and other elements.⁷⁷ Renoux, who has translated a part of the *Ancient Iadgari* section in his second volume of the *Resurrection Hymns*, suggests that its tenth-century scribe, Iovane Zosime, conceived of the whole manuscript as a compendium of ancient and new material, probably not intending all of its hymnography for contemporary liturgical

⁷² Ibid., vol. 1, ed. Renoux 2000, 7–8.

⁷³ Ibid., vol. 1, ed. Renoux 2000, 263: ‘Vierge, Mère inépousée,/ Qui enfantas le Christ Sauveur,/ Ne cesse pas de le prier,/ Mais intercède pour nous, tes serviteurs.’

⁷⁴ Ibid., vol. 1, ed. Renoux 2000, 60–1.

⁷⁵ Ibid., vol. 1, ed. Renoux 2000, 191 (8): ‘Toi qui germas de David (cf. Is 11:1; 45: 8), nous te louons,/ Car tu reçus en ton sein le Fils de Dieu,/ Tu l’enfantas corporellement,/ Et tu restas vierge irréprochablement.’

⁷⁶ Ibid., vol. 2, ed. Renoux 2010, 11 (‘une vaste encyclopédie liturgique’).

⁷⁷ Frøyshov 2012, 254–5; Galadza 2018, 89–90, 101.

purposes.⁷⁸ Sinai Georg. 34 shares with Sinai 18 the poetic compositions known as the ‘Praises of the holy Theotokos’, which I mentioned above. A passage of intercessory invocation, taken from the Plagal Fourth Tone in both Sinai Georg. 41 and 34, celebrates the Virgin Mary in the following way:

Rejoice, Theotokos, all-holy Virgin,
 Since because of you and through you, thanks to your child-bearing,
 All the ends of the earth celebrate you today . . .
 Who would not pray to you?
 For you save those who were owed to death,
 And, for those who were destined for torments,
 You made yourself audacious,
 At the right-hand of the One who is enthroned, your Son.
 We have no one who intercedes [for us] like you
 Besides you, yourself.
 Day and night, intercede for us,
 Before the One to whom you gave birth, God,
 For the salvation of our souls.⁷⁹

This stanza pictures the Virgin Mary sitting at the right hand of Christ in heaven and begging him day and night to save her supplicants. It could only have been written in response to early dormition legends according to which her physical, as well as emotional, proximity to her Son could be envisioned.⁸⁰ This means that the Marian ‘Praises’, unlike earlier material included in the *Resurrection Hymns*, may belong to a later – but still ‘ancient’ – stage of hymnographic composition.⁸¹

The hymnographic material contained in the Georgian *Ancient Iadgari* thus represents a rich, but diverse, repository of texts that reflects liturgical

⁷⁸ *Ancient Iadgari, Resurrection Hymns*, vol. 2, ed. Renoux 2010, 14.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, ed. Renoux 2010, 219–20: ‘Réjouis-toi, Mère de Dieu, toute sainte Vierge,/ Car de toi et par toi, grâce à ton enfantement,/ Se réjouissent aujourd’hui toutes les extrémités du monde/ . . . Qui ne te prierait?/ Car tu sauves ceux qui étaient voués à la mort,/ Et, pour ceux qui étaient destinés aux tourments,/ Tu te fais audacieuse,/ À la droite de celui qui siège, ton Fils./ Nous n’avons personne qui intercède comme toi,/ En dehors de toi-même./ Jour et nuit, intercède pour nous,/ Auprès de celui que tu as enfanté, Dieu,/ Pour le salut de nos âmes.’

⁸⁰ For outlines of the various early families of dormition traditions, see Mimouni 1995, 37–172; Shoemaker 2002, 9–77.

⁸¹ The *terminus ante quem* for this material of course remains the mid tenth century, when Sinai Georg. 41 and 34 were copied; see *Ancient Iadgari, Resurrection Hymns*, vol. 2, ed. Renoux 2010, 10–14. However, in using the term ‘ancient’ for this version of the *Georgian Iadgari*, I refer back to Frøyshov’s case for a pre-seventh-century date for the hymnbook (see above, n. 67). Whereas Renoux notes an absence of references to the dormition traditions in much of this material, we see their influence on the hymnographer’s understanding of the Virgin’s intercessory power. On the issue of dating the ‘Praises’, see *Ancient Iadgari, Resurrection Hymns*, vol. 2, ed. Renoux 2010, 20–3.

celebration in Jerusalem before the beginning of the seventh century.⁸² Renoux correctly stresses the importance of these early hymns, some of which might have been sung during the offices and stational processions which Egeria saw taking place in late fourth-century Jerusalem.⁸³ Their connection with homiletic and hymnographic development not only in the holy city, but also in the wider Byzantine – and especially Constantinopolitan – world awaits further study; it is also clear that this source is highly significant in the history of hagiopolite Marian devotion.

The *Akathistos Hymn*

Turning from the Syriac and Georgian traditions, the rest of this chapter covers developments in Greek hymnography from about the fifth century onward. The *Akathistos Hymn* is probably the earliest example of Marian hymnography to belong to this category.⁸⁴ The hymn, which is sometimes described as a *kontakion*,⁸⁵ is one of the most important literary works of the Byzantine period, as well as being a masterpiece of Marian liturgical praise. It consists of twenty-four stanzas to which three *prooemia* (prologues), the second of which may have been composed in a later century, are attached. Each stanza begins with a narrative or didactic section, which might be described as the *kontakion* sections of the hymn. These are followed by strings of salutations in the form of litanies, which address the Theotokos with a multitude of poetic images and biblical types. An alphabetical acrostic runs through the whole hymn, affirming its completeness and also perhaps acting as a mnemonic device for singers. The salutations to the Virgin employ the word ‘Hail’ or ‘Rejoice’ (*Chaire*) for each invocation, according to the rhetorical device of *anaphora* – or the repetition of the same word at the beginning of successive lines. This practice was imitated in numerous Marian homilies and hymns in the centuries that followed. The *Akathistos Hymn* is sung to this day in Chalcedonian Orthodox churches of every jurisdiction. Its full delivery takes place in Matins of the fifth Saturday in Lent, but sections of the hymn are also sung on the four Fridays leading up to that date and on some other days of the liturgical year.⁸⁶ The name that is assigned to the hymn, ‘Akathistos’, simply

⁸² For further discussion, with emphasis on the early (possibly fourth- to early fifth-century) dating of this material, see Shoemaker 2016a, 186–94.

⁸³ *Ancient Iadgari, Resurrection Hymns*, vol. 1, ed. Renoux 2000, 28–40.

⁸⁴ *Akathistos Hymn*, ed. Trypanis 1968, 29–39; trans. Peltomaa 2001, 2–19.

⁸⁵ Wellesz 1961, 192; *Akathistos Hymn*, ed. Trypanis 1968, 17.

⁸⁶ *Triodion katanyktikon*, trans. Mother Mary and Ware 1978, 54–5; 422–46. According to Wellesz, the *Akathistos Hymn* may originally have been intended for the feast of the Annunciation; he deduces this on the basis of the titles that are assigned to it in later manuscripts known as *kontakaria*.

means, 'Not sitting down'. The instruction that congregations should stand as the *Akathistos Hymn* is sung testifies to the importance and solemnity of this liturgical work.

Leena Mari Peltomaa, in her recent study of the *Akathistos Hymn*,⁸⁷ dates it to the period between the Third and Fourth Ecumenical Councils, that is, to between 431 and 451 CE – and preferably to a date as close to the Council of Ephesus (431) as possible.⁸⁸ Her adoption of this date, which challenges a scholarly consensus that has tended to place the hymn in the sixth century or even later,⁸⁹ is supported by the Christological language and doctrine that it contains. Peltomaa suggests that this teaching reflects the theological context of the Council of Ephesus and that it shows no influence from that of Chalcedon, held twenty years later.⁹⁰ In opposition to this argument (which is made largely on the basis of the hymn's theological content rather than its generic form), it is worth pointing out that no hymnographic parallels, which might explain the refined and apparently fully fledged structure of the hymn, exist in early fifth-century Constantinople. Although the *Akathistos Hymn* is more declamatory than Romanos the Melodist's kontakia, its metrical and poetic structure resembles the latter corpus more closely than any homilies that can be dated definitively to the fifth century.⁹¹

My inclination to adopt an early sixth- rather than fifth-century date for the *Akathistos Hymn*, mainly on the basis of its highly developed poetic form, is reinforced by the presence of elements which, as we shall see in the following chapter, are lacking in the homilies of Proklos, Hesychios and other early panegyrist of the Theotokos. Most fifth-century liturgical

According to the important Patmos kontakarion, Ms. P. 212 (late tenth century), the hymn was sung either during the Saturday vigils in the middle of Lent; see Wellesz 1961, 191. For further discussion of this manuscript, see Arentzen and Krueger 2016; Arentzen 2017, 175.

⁸⁷ Peltomaa 1997; Peltomaa 2001. ⁸⁸ Peltomaa 2001, esp. 49–114.

⁸⁹ Maas 1910; Wellesz 1956; Trypanis 1968, 24–5; Mitsakis 1971, 483–509; Grosdidier de Matons 1977, 32–6; Constan 2005 (a review of Peltomaa 2001).

⁹⁰ Peltomaa 2001, 85–101. Although Peltomaa 2001, 49, claims the support of Trypanis 1968, 24–5, for her argument, she has in fact misinterpreted the latter, who writes: 'I am inclined to agree with the scholars who attribute it (with the exception of Prooemium II) to the days of Justinian I. So fully finished a kontakion can hardly belong to an earlier period in the development of this literary genre, even though the insistence on the Virgin as the Mother of God (Θεοτόκος) and the triumphant expression of this suggests a date closer to the Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.)'. In other words, according to Trypanis, although the theological content of the hymn might suggest a relationship with the third Ecumenical Council, its literary structure and style place it in the sixth century, during the reign of Justinian.

⁹¹ Peltomaa bases her argument for a mid-fifth-century date mainly on its similarities in Christological terminology with sources including (ps-)Basil of Seleucia's *Homily XXXIX, On the Annunciation*, Proklos of Constantinople's *Tomus ad Armenos* and the latter's five Marian homilies. See Peltomaa 2001, 77–114.

homilies focus on Mary's Christological importance, but not on her protective or intercessory power. The *Akathistos Hymn*, perhaps reflecting the Virgin's growing importance as patron or defender of the imperial city of Constantinople, offers striking witness to this development. As we saw in the Introduction, appeals for protection from the Virgin appear not only in the famous second prologue, which was added to the hymn after 626 CE (possibly as late as in the early eighth century), but also in some of its original stanzas.⁹² Stanza 23, for example, invokes the Virgin Mary 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;
 Hail, healing of my body;
 Hail, protection of my soul,
 Hail, bride unwedded.⁹³

The second prologue, which builds on this foundation with even more explicit reference to the plight of a besieged capital city and its subsequent deliverance, adds the following lines:

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.'⁹⁴

Such invocation of the Virgin's intercessory and protective functions suggests a later date of composition than that in which Proklos of Constantinople or Cyril of Alexandria was preaching. The *Akathistos Hymn* celebrates above all, as they did, Mary's mysterious role in Christ's incarnation, but it also recognises her intercessory power.

In addition to its appeals for help in 'all kinds of dangers', the *Akathistos* teaches Christological doctrine with the help of metaphor, typology and dramatic narrative. Such didactic methods reveal the hymnographer's awareness and assimilation of earlier Greek – and possibly Syriac – liturgical texts that celebrate the Theotokos. The parallels with homilies by Proklos of Constantinople and (ps-)Basil of Seleucia are particularly

⁹² See Introduction, 31 and n. 152. ⁹³ *Akathistos Hymn*, stanza 23, trans. Peltomaa 2001, 19.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, Prooemium 11, trans. Peltomaa 2001, 3.

striking, as Peltomaa has shown.⁹⁵ Whereas most scholars agree that the homilies provided inspiration for the *Akathistos Hymn*,⁹⁶ Peltomaa takes a different view, arguing that they may all have emerged from the same religious setting and have been mutually influential. Such a process would place the composition of the *Akathistos Hymn* during the three years that led up to the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE or shortly thereafter. In my view, however, (ps-)Basil of Seleucia's *Homily XXXIX* belongs to a slightly later period, as we shall see in the following chapter. Its intercessory content suggests a date after the end of the fifth century, which perhaps brings it closer to the likely date of the *Akathistos Hymn*.⁹⁷

The Christological teaching of the *Akathistos* is remarkable both for its adherence to the terminology of the Council of Ephesus and for its poetic and typological epithets for the Theotokos. Evidence of the hymn's strict 'orthodoxy' can be found, for example, in the first prologue:

Having secretly received the command,
The bodiless one went with haste to Joseph's dwelling,
And said to her that knew not wedlock:
'He who bowed the heavens and came down
is contained unchanged but whole in you.
I see him take the form of a servant in your womb;
I stand in amazement and cry to you:
Hail, bride unwedded.'⁹⁸

The emphasis on the unchanged nature of Christ, the Word, when he entered Mary's womb and took on the 'form of a servant', reflects the teaching of such Alexandrian or Alexandrian-influenced bishops as Cyril and Proklos. The hymnographer presents complex doctrine here in the form of dramatic narrative: the archangel Gabriel (or 'bodiless one') hastens to Joseph's house, finds the Virgin Mary, and discloses his paradoxical message. Gabriel also expresses his astonishment at the sight of the mystery; his reaction will be felt by every member of the congregation who joins in the refrain, 'Hail, bride unwedded'.

Poetic or typological approaches to the role of the Virgin in this mysterious process are employed in other stanzas of the *Akathistos Hymn*, always in the form of acclamations or 'chairetismoi':

Hail, vine-twig of unfading bud;
Hail, treasure of undying fruit;

⁹⁵ Peltomaa 2001, 77–114.

⁹⁶ Maas 1910, 306; Trypanis 1968, 25; Grosdidier de Matons 1977, 35–6. ⁹⁷ See Chapter 2, 78–82.

⁹⁸ *Akathistos Hymn*, Prooemium 1, trans. Peltomaa 2001, 3.

Hail, you who till the tiller who loves humankind;
 Hail, you who cultivate the cultivator of our life;
 Hail, earth that flourishes with a fertility of compassion;
 Hail, table that bears a wealth of mercy . . .⁹⁹

Such rich imagery is not only evocative in metaphorical terms, but it also has typological connotations. Fifth-century preachers including Hesychios of Jerusalem, Proklos of Constantinople and Cyril of Alexandria compared Mary to the untilled earth out of which God created Adam.¹⁰⁰ Christ, as the Second Adam, thus recapitulated this divine act, allowing humanity to be restored to its original – but now deified – state. But the Virgin could also assume a range of other natural guises: she was the twig from which the ‘unfading bud’ would bloom, the tiller of the fertile field, the table that (in a eucharistic sense) would hold the body and blood of Christ, and so on. Such symbolism is never restricted to just one meaning in Byzantine liturgical texts such as this; it offers layers of possible interpretation, thereby suggesting the limitless qualities of the human container and nurturer of Christ. The natural imagery that appears in the *Akathistos Hymn* is also effective in its sensuality. Singers or listeners are induced to visualise lush and fertile landscapes in their mind’s eye. This is the original and undefiled creation that God created and saw as ‘good’. Mary thus stands for the receptive, but also productive, creation that was intended for salvation.¹⁰¹

Peltomaa is correct, however, in her assertion that neither the fifth-century homilies nor the *Akathistos Hymn* ‘describe Mary as a personality’.¹⁰² In other words, the Virgin is treated more as a theological concept than as a real person, with female and motherly qualities, in these liturgical works.¹⁰³ This aspect of the hymn suggests that it may have been composed earlier than the time at which our next important hymnographer, Romanos the Melodist, was active. The latter, as we shall shortly see, developed an image of the Mother of God that was both human and maternal – in fact, as Sarah Gador-Whyte has memorably put it, she became in the hands of Romanos ‘a suburban mum’.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Ibid., stanza 5, trans. Peltomaa 2001, 7.

¹⁰⁰ For further discussion of these preachers, see Chapter 2, 70–7.

¹⁰¹ For an interesting new approach to the *Akathistos Hymn* that examines especially its use of nature imagery, see Arentzen 2021.

¹⁰² Peltomaa 2001, 76.

¹⁰³ I. Kalavrezou echoes this view, writing, ‘Mary is still the Theotokos defined at the council, a concept’; Kalavrezou 1990, 166, quoted in Peltomaa 2001, 73 and 76.

¹⁰⁴ Gador-Whyte 2013, 87. In fact Gador-Whyte attributes this expression to Roger Scott in her analysis.

Nevertheless, as I argued above, the sophisticated structure of the *Akathistos Hymn* suggests to me, like numerous other scholars but *pace* Peltomaa, a date towards the end of the fifth or beginning of the sixth century. This would allow time for the hymnographer, along with other liturgical writers whose work may not survive, to have fully absorbed the doctrinal and rhetorical developments of the first half of the fifth century. The absence of references or allusions to the Council of Chalcedon in the *Akathistos Hymn* may reflect diplomacy rather than ignorance on the part of its author, since appealing to a wide range of religious opinions was more important in the post-conciliar period than propagating a divisive – if officially accepted – doctrinal definition.¹⁰⁵

Romanos the Melodist

This sixth-century hymnographer was, as many scholars acknowledge,¹⁰⁶ the greatest liturgical innovator of his period; I shall therefore focus on his work for the remainder of this chapter.¹⁰⁷ Romanos was probably born in Syria and became a deacon in Berytus (modern Beirut); he moved to Constantinople during the reign of Anastasios I. He worked as a deacon in a church that was located in a district of the imperial city called *tou Kyrou* where he composed numerous kontakia that expounded biblical (both Old and New Testament) narratives.¹⁰⁸ The Virgin Mary occupied a central place in Romanos' understanding of the divine dispensation. Scholars have not yet determined whether Romanos was inspired to develop such a dramatic portrayal of the Virgin by Greek or Syriac liturgical sources – or even, as later legend suggested, by the Mother of God herself.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, it is clear that Romanos visualised, probably in response to strong popular devotion in Constantinople during the reign of Justinian, a Virgin Mary who was entirely human and maternal while remaining mysteriously virginal.¹¹⁰ According to Romanos, Mary spoke for and as one

¹⁰⁵ N. Constatas offers this solution, which I find convincing, in his review of Peltomaa 2001; see Constatas 2005, 358.

¹⁰⁶ See below, nn. 113–14.

¹⁰⁷ For complete editions of Romanos' works, see Maas and Trypanis 1963 (1997); Grosdidier de Matons 1964–81, 5 vols. For ease of reference, I refer only to the Maas and Trypanis edition in this book.

¹⁰⁸ Maas 1906, 29; Grosdidier de Matons 1977, 178–89; Arentzen 2017, 1–6; Gador-Whyte 2017, 7–9.

¹⁰⁹ The legend that the Mother of God gave Romanos a scroll to eat, after which he was inspired to write kontakia, appears in the tenth-century *Synaxarion of Constantinople*; see *Synax. CP*, 95–6; the story is also told in the the *Menologion of Basil II* and several other *menaia* or *synaxaria* on Romanos' feast-day, 1 October. See Barkhuizen 2012, 5.

¹¹⁰ Arentzen 2014; Arentzen 2017.

of the congregation, while also occupying a privileged position as mother of Christ.¹¹¹ The richness of this characterisation, which managed to incorporate all of the elements in the Marian liturgical tradition that we have noted so far while also inventing new ones, would have an impact on Greek preachers and hymnographers for centuries to come.¹¹²

Romanos the Melodist has attracted a huge amount of scholarly interest since the beginning of the twentieth century.¹¹³ This has gained momentum in recent years, with various new studies of the sixth-century hymnographer, along with translations of his kontakia, appearing in a variety of languages.¹¹⁴ However, as Thomas Arentzen noted in 2013, there were – until quite recently – surprisingly few investigations into the role of the Virgin in the Melodist's kontakia.¹¹⁵ The problem is slowly being rectified, not only thanks to Arentzen's work on the subject, but also to contributions from Leena Mari Peltomaa and Sarah Gador-Whyte. Peltomaa, who notes that out of about sixty authentic works, nine kontakia give Mary a central role in their narratives, examines their portrayal of her as virgin, 'Second Eve', mother and intercessor.¹¹⁶ A second article, published five years later, provides focused analysis of Mary's role as intercessor according to various kontakia by Romanos.¹¹⁷ Gador-Whyte has meanwhile examined the Virgin Mary's various aspects in a more gendered way, contrasting her 'motherly' characteristics with more masculine ones, as defender of Constantinople.¹¹⁸ Following this work, Arentzen contributed a rich and provocative doctoral thesis on Romanos's treatment of the Virgin Mary,¹¹⁹ which has now been revised and published as a monograph.¹²⁰ While not denying the various categories that both Peltomaa and Gador-Whyte identified, Arentzen urges against the impression that Romanos presents a 'schizophrenic' Virgin; he argues that she appears in various kontakia as a fully integrated human being, rather than as a theological or civic symbol.¹²¹

In the discussion that follows, I largely accept this analysis on the grounds that the chief purpose of Romanos the Melodist's kontakia

¹¹¹ For a thoughtful assessment of Mary's relationship to the congregation, both through words and silence, see Frank 2019.

¹¹² Cunningham 2008a.

¹¹³ See, for example, Maas 1906; Carpenter 1932; Grosdidier de Matons 1977; Grosdidier de Matons 1980–1; Wellesz 1961, 179–97.

¹¹⁴ For example, Lash 1995; Schork 1995; Maisano 2002; Krueger 2004, 159–88; Frank 2005; Koder 2005; Frank 2006; Krueger 2006; Koder 2010; Barkhuizen 2012; Krueger 2014, 29–65; Arentzen 2017; Gador-Whyte 2017.

¹¹⁵ Arentzen 2014, 21. ¹¹⁶ Peltomaa 2010. ¹¹⁷ Peltomaa 2015.

¹¹⁸ Gador-Whyte 2013, esp. 80–1 and 87; see now Gador-Whyte 2017, esp. 70–1.

¹¹⁹ Arentzen 2014. ¹²⁰ Arentzen 2017. ¹²¹ Arentzen 2014, 21–2.

appears to be the dramatic engagement of congregations with the Virgin Mary as a sympathetic – albeit powerful – human mother. Her transition from a state of fecund or expectant (as opposed to ascetic) virginity to one of protective motherhood is one with which lay audiences (especially women) could identify.¹²² However, the deeper Christian symbolism of these dramatic narratives would not have been lost on sixth-century Constantinopolitan congregations either. Romanos portrays the transformation of humanity, or the Church, in its ongoing encounter with Christ through the agency of his mother Mary. This, I would argue, is framed within a ‘high’ or neo-Chalcedonian Christology that stresses both the divinity of Christ and his condescension in assuming human nature. The Theotokos thus acts preeminently as the person through whom Christians gain access to her Son; this role works simultaneously in her historical acceptance of the incarnation, but also in personal or collective devotion. Above all, however, Romanos portrays this process in a dramatic way, engaging his listeners dynamically with his interpretation of biblical (and sometimes apocryphal) narratives.

To begin with the Christological framework within which Romanos worked, it is worth recalling Aloys Grillmeier’s assessment that this hymnographer ‘systematically avoids speaking of Christ’s humanity. The accent is always on the divinity.’¹²³ This position is illustrated, for example, in the *kontakion* on the marriage at Cana when Christ delivers a short homily to his inquisitive mother, reminding her not only that he created the universe, but that he also planned human salvation by taking flesh from her:

‘Lift up your mind to my words and understand, incorruptible woman,
 what I will say. For when from what did not exist
 I created heaven and earth and the universe,
 I was able immediately
 To adorn at that time all that I created . . .

Revered woman, listen clearly to this: I could in another way have liberated
 those who have fallen,
 By not taking on the form of a poor servant.
 But nevertheless, I endured first to be conceived
 And then to be born as man
 And draw milk from your breasts, O virgin . . .’¹²⁴

¹²² Cf. Arentzen 2013; Arentzen 2014; Arentzen 2017, esp. 46–86.

¹²³ Grillmeier, trans. Allen and Cawte, 1995, 521.

¹²⁴ Romanos the Melodist, *Kontakion on the Marriage at Cana*, strophes 13–14, Maas and Trypanis 1963, 53–4, trans. Barkhuizen 2012, 60 (with adjustments).

Romanos also follows earlier liturgical writers, both Greek and Syriac, in describing Christ's simultaneous divinity and humanity by means of antithetical statements, as we see in his *kontakion* on the *Hypapante* (Presentation of Christ into the Temple) :

... for the One who created Adam is being carried as a babe.
The uncontainable is contained in the arms of the elder.¹²⁵

Although Romanos portrays Christ, in accordance with Chalcedonian doctrine, as both God and man, he 'retains a Christology from above' while avoiding the one-nature theology of Severos of Antioch and his followers.¹²⁶ It is now worth examining how this influenced the poet's understanding of the Virgin Mary, as virginal birth-giver and mother of Christ.

Romanos portrays Mary, as the first witness of Christ's incarnation, reflecting on this mystery as she cradles the infant Christ in her arms. She struggles to comprehend Christ's simultaneous divinity and humanity, as we see in another stanza of the *kontakion* on the *Hypapante*:

While the angels sang in praise of the Lover of mankind, Mary was walking,
carrying him in her arms,
and pondering how she had become a mother yet remained a virgin.
Realising that the birth was beyond nature, she was afraid and trembled.
Reasoning to herself she said,
'What title can I find for you, my Son?
For should I call you, as I see you, man, you are more than man,
who kept my virginity unsullied, only Lover of mankind.

Should I call you perfect man? But I know your conception was divine.
None of humankind is ever
conceived without union and without seed, as you were, sinless One.
And if I call you God, I marvel as I see you like me in all things,
for you have nothing which differentiates you among humans,
even though without sin you were conceived and born.
Shall I suckle you or give you glory? For the facts proclaim you
God without time, even though you have become man, only Lover of
mankind.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Romanos the Melodist, *Kontakion on the Presentation in the Temple*, strophe 1, Maas and Trypanis 1963, 27, trans. Lash 1995, 28.

¹²⁶ Grillmeier, trans. Allen and Cawte, 1995, 520.

¹²⁷ Romanos the Melodist, *Kontakion on the Presentation in the Temple*, strophes 3–4, Maas and Trypanis 1963, 28–9, trans. Lash 1995, 28–9.

The Virgin also recognises the consequences for herself of this miraculous birth. In the less well-known second *kontakion* on the Nativity of Christ, she exclaims:

‘I do not deny your grace, which I experienced, O Master,
nor do I discount the rank which I attained on giving birth to you;
for I rule over the world
since I have carried your power in my womb, I have power over all . . .’¹²⁸

Romanos occasionally goes so far as to call Mary ‘Queen’, implying that ordinary people may approach her as long as they address her with appropriate respect and deference.¹²⁹ A high Christology thus implies a high Mariology in the works of Romanos. However, it is precisely within this theological context that the hymnographer describes the Virgin’s essential role as mediator and intercessor for Christians.

Romanos the Melodist, perhaps building on the imagery of the *Akathistos Hymn*, refers frequently to Mary’s role as intercessor before Christ. Such passages, as in later Byzantine hymnography, frequently appear in the closing strophes of the *kontakia*; they reflect the homiletic convention of closing speeches with respectful invocation of the holy subject or subjects. In the last three strophes of his first *kontakion* on the Nativity of Christ, Romanos has the Virgin herself pray to Christ on behalf of the rest of humanity. An extract of this speech reads as follows:

‘For I am not simply your mother, compassionate Saviour;
it is not in vain that I suckle the giver of milk,
but for the sake of all I implore you.
You have made me the mouth and the boast of all my race,
and your world has me as a mighty protection, a wall and a buttress.
They look to me, those who were cast out
of the Paradise of pleasure, for I bring them back.’¹³⁰

Romanos more often invokes either Christ or the Virgin in his own voice, speaking for the rest of humanity as he seeks their help:

¹²⁸ Romanos the Melodist, *Kontakion on the Nativity* 11, strophe 2, Maas and Trypanis 1963, 10 (my own translation).

¹²⁹ This occurs, for example, in Romanos’ *Kontakion on the Annunciation* 1, strophe 1: ‘Come, let us accompany the archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, / and greet her as mother and nourisher of our life. / For it is not fitting only for the general to greet the queen, / but it is also permitted for the lowly to see her and address her, / whom all the generations proclaim blessed . . .’; Maas and Trypanis 1963, 281; trans. Barkhuizen 2012, 29.

¹³⁰ Romanos the Melodist, *Kontakion on the Nativity* 1, strophe 23, Maas and Trypanis 1963, 8; trans. Lash 1995, 11.

We implore you, O All-Holy, Long-Suffering, Life and Restoration, Source of goodness,
 look down from heaven and visit all those who ever trust in you;
 rescue our life, Lord, from all constraint and affliction,
 and, in the faith of truth, guide us all,
 at the prayers of the immaculate Mother of God (Θεοτόκου) and Virgin.
 Save your world, and those in the world, and spare us all,
 you who, for us, became man without change, only Lover of mankind.¹³¹

The kontakion on Mary at the cross, which must have been intended for the vigil on Good Friday, invites congregations to share her doubt and extreme grief at the impending crucifixion of her son. Niki Tsironis correctly notes the influence of this powerful hymn on subsequent Byzantine treatments of this theme, both in hymnography and homiletics.¹³² As in his other kontakia, Romanos portrays the dynamic encounter between Christ, as like a lamb he is ‘being dragged to slaughter’,¹³³ and his mother, who is apparently following the procession to Golgotha. The kontakion contains a prologue, in which the hymnographer calls to the congregation to ‘praise him who was crucified for us’,¹³⁴ followed by seventeen strophes. The latter present a dramatic dialogue between Mary and Christ, with the former speaking for seven strophes and the latter for nine. The seventeenth strophe is voiced by Romanos who, by means of direct address to Christ, sums up soteriological meaning of his incarnation and crucifixion – also acknowledging his gift of ‘freedom of speech’ (*parresia*) to the ‘honoured Lady’ (*tē semne*).¹³⁵

Christ remains in this kontakion, as in the others that we have examined, the God and Creator who knows exactly why he must undergo such suffering and how the story will end. When the Virgin asks why (when he could perform miracles and give life to corpses such as Lazarus) he does not simply give an order for Adam and the rest of humanity to be raised up from Hades, she does not receive a direct reply. Instead Christ explains, using medical imagery, that Adam and Eve need healing:

¹³¹ See for example, Romanos the Melodist, *Kontakion on Presentation at the Temple*, strophe 18; Maas and Trypanis 1963, 33–4; trans. Lash 1995, 34. Cf. *Kontakion on the Marriage at Cana*, strophe 21, Maas and Trypanis 1963, 56; *Kontakion on Mary at the Cross*, strophe 17, Maas and Trypanis 1963, 148–9.

¹³² Tsironis 1998, 114–18; see also Cunningham 2008a, 259.

¹³³ Romanos the Melodist, *Kontakion on Mary at the Cross*, strophe 1; Maas and Trypanis 1963, 142; trans. Lash 1995, 143.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, Prologue; Maas and Trypanis 1963, 142; trans. Lash 1995, 143.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, strophe 17; Maas and Trypanis 1963, 149; trans. Lash 1995, 150.

By intemperance, by gluttony,
 Adam became ill and was borne down to the lowest hell.
 And there he weeps for the pain of his soul.
 While Eve, who once taught him disorder,
 groans with him, for with him she is ill,
 that together they may learn to keep the physician's order.
 Have you now understood? Have you grasped what I say?
 Once again, Mother, cry out, 'If you pardon Adam,
 forgive Eve also, my Son and my God.'¹³⁶

It is possible that by focusing on the need to 'heal' Adam and Eve, rather than providing a detailed theological explanation of Christ's crucifixion, Romanos wishes to shift the focus towards Mary's intercessory role in human salvation. Alternatively, this may simply reflect his awareness that contemporary congregations were more interested in the human, rather than the theological, impact of this world-changing event. In any case, the emphasis shifts in the next two strophes to whether or not Mary will see her son again. Christ reassures her, following a long-standing patristic tradition, that she will be the first to see his resurrected body:

When he heard this, the One who knows all things
 before their birth answered Mary, 'Courage, Mother,
 because you will see me first on my coming from the tomb ...'¹³⁷

Although courage is restored in the fifteenth strophe, the Virgin reveals her inner doubts and sorrow in all of her preceding speeches. She is a fully human mother, who shouts, protests and sheds tears in her efforts to dissuade Christ from his tragic purpose. She mourns the fact that she alone is faithful since the disciples, including Peter, have all abandoned their teacher. But above all, she weeps because this is her child who is on the way to unjust slaughter. The contrast between Mary's ignorance, which causes such lament, and Christ's calm understanding of the reason for his crucifixion is conveyed mainly, as we have seen, by means of direct speech. This drama, which is resolved when Mary is taught the truth and declares that she is 'conquered by love',¹³⁸ depicts an emotional transition from doubt to belief in the resurrection of Christ. But above all, it is worth noting an element that would survive into later Byzantine liturgical treatment of this theme: namely, that the pain and suffering which Christ experienced on the cross can best be expressed through the experience of his

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, strophe 10; Maas and Trypanis 1963, 146; trans. Lash 1995, 147.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, strophe 12; Maas and Trypanis 1963, 146; trans. Lash 1995, 148 (with one small adjustment).

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, strophe 15; Maas and Trypanis 1963, 148; trans. Lash 1995, 149.

mother. This helps to explain the emphasis not only in hymnography for Good Friday, but also in the short hymns known as stavrotheotokia which are sung throughout the year, on the suffering of the Virgin Mary. Whereas Western medieval theologians, liturgical writers and iconographers shifted focus to a suffering Christ, their Byzantine counterparts preferred to show the depth of this pain through the experience of his mother.¹³⁹

The most striking innovation in Romanos the Melodist's portrayal of Mary thus consists in his literary development of her character by means of dramatic dialogues and monologues according to the rhetorical device of *ethopoiia*. Such treatment is not confined to the Theotokos; as Georgia Frank and others have shown, the hymnographer explores the thoughts and reactions of many other biblical and even apocryphal characters in his effort to bring their narratives to life for sixth-century congregations.¹⁴⁰ In the case of the Virgin Mary, we join her at the scene of the nativity, reflecting in solitude or welcoming three exotic visitors, at the meeting with Symeon in the temple, at the marriage at Cana, on the way to the cross and in many other settings. Romanos skilfully draws his listeners into an empathetic relationship with Christ's mother, encouraging them to enter into her state of awe, tender love for her divine Son, fear, and perplexity. The underlying purpose of such teaching is of course to convey the paradoxical doctrine of Chalcedonian Christianity. However, what appears to be new is the liturgical poet's interest in engaging his audience fully in this mystery, which is not merely remembered as biblical narrative but is also experienced sensorially in liturgical and sacramental ceremony.

Conclusion

Although Byzantine Marian hymnography may have been slow to develop, it had earlier roots in the Syriac and Jerusalem liturgical rites, as evidenced by later Georgian compilations of hymnbooks. Such praise was inspired in the first place by Christological reflection on Mary's important role in the incarnation of Christ. She is described in the Syriac hymns of Ephrem and other melodists as the 'bridge' between God and humanity. However, the Theotokos also represents a microcosm of the universe, embodying the transfigured creation into which God chose to enter in his human incarnation. Intercessory content, which reflected growing belief in Mary's own

¹³⁹ For vivid discussion of the Virgin Mary's lament at the foot of the cross, as depicted in Byzantine texts and icons, see Constan 2014, 124–8.

¹⁴⁰ Frank 2005; Krueger 2005; Krueger 2006; Arentzen 2017, 14–16; Gador-Whyte 2017, 1–11.

transition to heaven after death and her consequent 'freedom of speech' with her Son, began to appear in the course of the fifth, but especially in the sixth century in both Oriental and Byzantine Christianity. It is witnessed in short prayers, or amulets, that have been discovered in Egypt, in many of the sung homilies and hymns of the Syriac churches, and in the early Byzantine *Akathistos Hymn*. The early stichera and kanon stanzas that appear in the Georgian *Ancient Iadgari*, or hymnbook, which reflect the Jerusalem rites before the seventh century, are more difficult to date. However, they offer ample witness to growing devotion to the Theotokos in this region. Although Mary thus has both doctrinal and intercessory importance before the middle of the sixth century, she remains, in the words of Ioli Kalavrezou, 'a concept' rather than a human, and above all, maternal person.¹⁴¹ It is finally in the hymns of Romanos the Melodist that we see a truly rounded portrayal of the Mother of God. This creative hymnographer used narrative, dramatic dialogue and direct address in order to bring biblical stories, along with their chief protagonists, to life for Constantinopolitan congregations.

The reception of the various hymnographic traditions that I have described in this chapter varied, according to time, place and liturgical setting. Some aspects of this hymnody are universal: regardless of their place in divine liturgies, offices or private prayer, such texts offer praise, invocation and theological instruction. The choirs or individuals who sang the hymns would obviously have absorbed such content the most, whereas listening congregations – even if they joined in refrains or 'alleluias' – might not have heard every phrase or nuance. Susan Ashbrook Harvey has shown that not only men, but also women, participated in the singing of hymns in the Syriac churches.¹⁴² There is no evidence for such a practice in the Greek-speaking world, apart from the likelihood that female monastics sang the psalms and their responses, along with other hymnography, in their monasteries. What we can say is that kontakia such as those composed by Romanos the Melodist were intended to be understood. This hymnographer uses relatively simple koine Greek, lively narrative, dialogue and apostrophe in order to engage his audiences. Hymnography remained one of the most important ways in which theology was taught in the Byzantine Church – as it continues to be today in modern Orthodox Churches. It also provided an opportunity for direct address and supplication to the Theotokos, who represented the meeting place of humanity and divinity in both theological and intercessory terms.

¹⁴¹ Kalavrezou 1990, 166. ¹⁴² See above, n. 33.