

*Narratives about the Panagia  
Miracle Stories, Hagiography and Apocalypses*

It is convenient to include miracle stories and narrative accounts concerning the Virgin Mary's birth, life, death and posthumous activities within an all-encompassing category which I shall call 'hagiography' in this chapter. Such material shares certain characteristics: it may (although there are significant exceptions to this rule) be written in a low-brow or even colloquial style,<sup>1</sup> display an interest in historical narrative and deviate – sometimes quite intriguingly – from more 'official' or theological literary treatment of the Theotokos.<sup>2</sup> After the anomalous second- or third-century apocryphal text known as the *Protevangelion of James*,<sup>3</sup> mention of the Virgin Mary in hagiographical texts did not begin to appear until about the middle of the fourth century.<sup>4</sup> Even after this, with the exception of the various accounts of Mary's dormition that began to circulate from about the end of the fifth century onward,<sup>5</sup> miraculous or hagiographical stories concerning the Virgin were not produced in any great quantity until the late sixth or early seventh century. From that period onward, such texts began to proliferate – although, arguably, they never overtook the quantity of miracle stories and biographies associated with other saints who had come to be celebrated in the Byzantine liturgical calendar.<sup>6</sup>

The material to be discussed in this chapter includes stories about posthumous miracles performed by the Virgin Mary or by her relics (usually a garment) contained in miracle collections, *enkomia* or *vitae* of other saints, as well as some other literary genres such as histories and chronicles. I will also examine four hagiographical texts that are dedicated to the Theotokos herself. These works form a group that displays common

<sup>1</sup> Browning 1981; I. Ševčenko 1981.   <sup>2</sup> See the discussions in Baun 2004; Baun 2011.

<sup>3</sup> *Protevangelion of James*; for discussion, see Introduction, 5–7, and nn. 22, 27, 33, 34.

<sup>4</sup> For background, see Maunder 2008, and especially Shoemaker 2008b.

<sup>5</sup> Jugie 1944, 103–67; Mimouni 1995, 75–344; Shoemaker 2002; also see Chapter 3, 116–19.

<sup>6</sup> For background on this subject, see *BHG*; Efthymiades 2011; the Dumbarton Oaks Hagiography Database at: [www.doaks.org/research/byzantine/resources/hagiography-database](http://www.doaks.org/research/byzantine/resources/hagiography-database).

narrative themes, even if each text possesses unique preoccupations and aims.<sup>7</sup> The four hagiographical texts include a *Life of the Virgin* written by Epiphanius, who may have been a monk at the Constantinopolitan Monastery of Kallistratos towards the end of the eighth or beginning of the ninth century,<sup>8</sup> a more sophisticated composition by the late tenth-century writer John of Geometres,<sup>9</sup> a contemporary Georgian version of Geometres' text by Euthymios the Athonite<sup>10</sup> and another Marian *Life* that is attributed to Symeon the Metaphrast.<sup>11</sup> Finally – as a kind of appendix to the chapter – I shall look briefly at the ninth- or tenth-century apocalypses that deal with Mary's tour of hell and paradise in the period just before or after her death; these texts, which Jane Baun has explored so fruitfully in various recent studies, contain a hagiographical element in that they provide narratives about the Virgin's life or afterlife.<sup>12</sup> And, like miracle stories and *Lives of the Virgin*, they reveal much about the Virgin Mary's cult and intercessory role in Byzantium.<sup>13</sup>

A brief comment on the literary genre, or the validity of assigning many of the texts described above to that of hagiography, is necessary here.<sup>14</sup> We should remind ourselves again that the boundaries between separate genres were porous in the hands of Byzantine writers.<sup>15</sup> Thus, John Geometres' *Life of the Virgin*, although described by scholars as 'hagiography', is also a series of rhetorical meditations, or orations, on events in the life of the Theotokos that correspond with their liturgical celebration as feasts.<sup>16</sup> Many of the middle Byzantine festal sermons which we examined in Chapter 3 take the form of (or are described in manuscripts as) *enkomia*. And the liturgical or monastic locations at which sermons, *enkomia* or *Lives* of the Theotokos were delivered may not always have differed. Nevertheless, it is convenient to categorise the literary evidence to be examined in this chapter as 'hagiographical'. We will be concerned above

<sup>7</sup> Mimouni 1994; Cunningham 2016. <sup>8</sup> Epiphanius of Kallistratos, *Life of the Virgin*.

<sup>9</sup> John Geometres, *Life of the Virgin*. As will be evident here as well as later in the present chapter, I am fully convinced by Christos Simelidis' argument that this text served as a basis for the Georgian *Life* that Euthymios the Athonite produced during the final decades of the tenth century; see Simelidis 2020. For further discussion, see below, 192–4.

<sup>10</sup> Georgian *Life of the Virgin*. <sup>11</sup> Symeon the Metaphrast, *Life of the Virgin*.

<sup>12</sup> Baun 2004; Baun 2007; Baun 2011; cf. Arentzen 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Especially the *Apocalypse of the Theotokos* and the *Apocalypse of Anastasia*. For detailed discussion of these texts and much useful analysis, see Baun 2007.

<sup>14</sup> On the function of literary genres in Byzantium, see Patlagean 1979; Mullett 1990; Mullett 1992; *ODB*, vol. 2, 832; Agapitos 2008.

<sup>15</sup> See Introduction, 23–4; Mimouni 1994 (2011), 75–6; Cunningham 2016, 139–42.

<sup>16</sup> Wenger 1955, 186; Kazhdan 2006, 263 (treating only the 'homily' on the Dormition); Antonopoulou 2011, 26, n. 79.

all with narratives – whether written in a low or high literary style – that deal with Mary's personal history, characteristics and activities in this or the next world. There tends to be less emphasis in these texts on her place in Christological doctrine or in the wider scheme of God's dispensation and more on her relationship with individual Christians – although this may not always be the case in more sophisticated theological works such as John Geometres' *Life of the Virgin*. Such teaching, while popular and apparently acceptable to the official Church, could sometimes (but not always) deviate from more rigorous formulations of Christian atonement and salvation.

Jane Baun has recently challenged theologians and historians to include 'low-brow' and 'popular' religious texts in their studies of the formation of Byzantine Christian doctrine. She suggests, following Cyril Mango, that such literature 'brings us into closer contact with reality than the stilted compositions of the educated élite',<sup>17</sup> arguing that it reflects the beliefs and practices of the Byzantine faithful.<sup>18</sup> Hagiographical and apocalyptic texts which, judging from the number of surviving manuscripts, circulated widely and continued to be read in later centuries not only in Greek but also in many other languages, also helped to shape Christian doctrine. This 'sensus fidelium', as it is called in the Roman Catholic tradition, should not be underestimated as a force in the development of Byzantine ideas about the Mother of God, divine intercession and the afterlife.<sup>19</sup> It is my broad agreement with this thesis that has led me to devote a chapter to miracle stories, hagiography and apocalypses that deal with the Virgin Mary. In the discussion that follows, I shall attempt both to highlight the unique characteristics of these various literary forms and to assess their significance in the Marian cult as a whole.

### **Miracle Stories Involving the Virgin Mary**

Stories of the Virgin Mary's appearance to individual Christians, either in person or in dreams, are rare before about the middle of the sixth century. There are exceptions to this rule, such as Gregory of Nyssa's account, in the fourth century, of Gregory Thaumaturgos' (the Wonderworker's) waking vision of a figure who 'had the appearance of a woman, whose noble aspect

<sup>17</sup> Baun 2011, 201, quoting Mango 1981, 52–3.

<sup>18</sup> Discussions of the distinction between 'official' and 'popular' expressions of devotion to the Theotokos appear also in Cameron 2004, 20; Cameron 2005, xxviii–xxx; Shoemaker 2008b; Cameron 2011, 3–4.

<sup>19</sup> Baun 2011, 202–3.

far surpassed normal human beauty'. Gregory of Nyssa tells us that although the night was dark, she appeared to his namesake 'as if a burning lamp had been kindled there'. After she and her companion, who is identified as John the Evangelist, had settled the doctrinal matter that had been worrying the saint, they disappeared from view.<sup>20</sup> This story neatly juxtaposes Mary's function as a holy intercessor with her own importance in doctrinal terms. It remains, however, a somewhat isolated example against a background of growing Christian devotion towards saints and their relics, as well as belief in their ability to mediate divine power in the created world.<sup>21</sup>

It was in the sixth century, beginning in the Latin-speaking West, that miracle stories involving the Theotokos began to appear in greater quantity. Owing to the fact that many of these stories reflected contact with Eastern Christendom, either because of pilgrimage to the Holy Land or simply due to oral transmission from one region to another, it is worth examining them in the context of this study. Gregory of Tours, writing between approximately the middle of the sixth century and his death in 594, included several miracles involving the Virgin in his *Libri miraculorum*.<sup>22</sup> These include a story about builders who were constructing a basilica in honour of the Virgin during the reign of Constantine and who were granted a vision in which she showed them how to move heavy columns with the help of a machine and one about a Jewish boy, son of a glass-blower, who was thrown into the furnace by his father for having partaken of the Christian eucharist but survived, thanks to the intervention of the Theotokos. The second of these stories, along with another concerning a pilgrim who was on his way from Palestine to his home in Gaul, involved the Virgin Mary's relics: in the former, she spread her mantle over the boy in the furnace and in the latter, the pilgrim discovered the indestructibility of pieces of her clothing that he was carrying home after his pilgrimage.<sup>23</sup> Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540–604) told the story of a young girl called Musa, who experienced a vision of the Virgin Mary one night. The Theotokos informed Musa of her approaching death and told her that she would be included in a group of holy virgins belonging to her entourage. After thirty days, during which she had time to reform her way

<sup>20</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of St Gregory Thaumaturgos*, PG 46, 909D–912C; trans. Gambero 1999, 93–4.

<sup>21</sup> For general studies of this growing trend, see Brown 1981; Markus 1994; Frank 2000; Dal Santo 2012; Hahn and Klein 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Libri miraculorum, In gloria martyrum* 8, 9, 18, ed. Krusch 1885, 493–4, 499–50.

<sup>23</sup> These stories are all summarised or translated (as excerpts) in Gambero 1999, 354–8.

of life, the girl duly died.<sup>24</sup> This story was transmitted to the Byzantine world by means of its inclusion in the eleventh-century spiritual anthology known as the *Evergetinos*;<sup>25</sup> it is also likely that Gregory's *Dialogues* were circulating in a Greek translation well before that period.<sup>26</sup>

John Moschos, perhaps writing in Rome but using material that he and his friend Sophronios, future patriarch of Jerusalem, had gathered in the course of their travels through Palestine and Egypt, added to the collection of miraculous stories involving the Virgin Mary.<sup>27</sup> These tales included that of the Jewish glass-blower's son (also narrated by Gregory of Tours, as we saw above),<sup>28</sup> along with several more disturbing examples of Mary's punishment of unrepentant sinners. In one story, the Mother of God threatens an actor named Gaïanas, who has been performing an act in the theatre in Heliopolis (Lebanese Phoenicia) in which he blasphemes her. She appears three times, warning him to stop performing the scene, but Gaïanas refuses to obey. Finally, when he is taking an afternoon nap, she reappears and cuts off his hands and feet with her finger. On waking up, Gaïanas lies there 'just like a tree trunk' and then admits that he has received a just reward for his actions.<sup>29</sup> In another interesting story, John relates how an abbot had a vision of 'a woman of stately appearance clad in purple', accompanied by 'two reverend and honourable men' (whom he identified as John the Baptist and John the Evangelist), who refused to enter his cell unless he destroyed a book containing writings by Nestorios.<sup>30</sup> Another tale describes how Kosmiana, wife of a patrician named Germanos, was approached by the Mother of God, accompanied by some other women, and forbidden entrance to Christ's tomb in Jerusalem unless she renounced her allegiance to the Miaphysite Church. After being admitted to communion by a Chalcedonian deacon, she was thereafter allowed 'to worship unimpeded at the holy and life-giving sepulchre of Jesus Christ'.<sup>31</sup> Mary is invariably described in these stories as a dignified figure, dressed in purple, who is easily

<sup>24</sup> Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* 4.18, ed. Vogüé and Antin 1980, 70–3; PL 77, 348–9; trans. Gambero 1999, 369–70.

<sup>25</sup> *Evergetinon* 1.vii.A.6; trans. Archbishop Chrysostomos and Hieromonk Patapios 2008, vol. 1, 58–9; noted by Baun 2011, 212.

<sup>26</sup> Fischer 1950; Dagens 1981. For scepticism concerning the authenticity of this work, see Clark 1987.

<sup>27</sup> John Moschos, *The Spiritual Meadow*.

<sup>28</sup> John Moschos, *The Spiritual Meadow, Supplementary Tales* 12; ed. Mioni 1951, 93–4; trans. Wortley 1992, no. 243, 227–9.

<sup>29</sup> John Moschos, *The Spiritual Meadow* 47; PG 87, 2901D; trans. Wortley 1992, 38.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 46; PG 87, 2900D–2901C; trans. Wortley 1992, 37–8.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 48; PG 87, 2904A–C; trans. Wortley 1992, 39.

identifiable as the Theotokos. It is likely that such descriptions were based on iconography that was becoming increasingly standard in this period; the confidence with which writers such as Gregory of Tours and John Moschos describe Mary's appearance and garb suggests their familiarity with her portrayal in icons, wall paintings and manuscripts.<sup>32</sup>

Miracle stories were also produced in the middle Byzantine period, although perhaps not in the profusion that one might expect, given the growing importance of the Mother of God both during and after the period of Iconoclasm. Stephen the Deacon's *Life of St Stephen the Younger*, probably composed at the beginning of the ninth century, relates how the saint's mother (named Anna like her forerunner in the Old Testament) prayed for a child during the all-night vigil at the church of Blachernai. On falling asleep as she prayed for the third time, Anna received a vision of the Mother of God who promised that she would conceive a son.<sup>33</sup> The ninth-century *Life of St Irene of Chrysobalanton*, another Constantinopolitan saint, tells how this abbess was granted a vision of the Mother of God in response to her prayers concerning a nun who had become possessed by demons.<sup>34</sup> St Theodora, consort of the iconoclast emperor Theophilus, dreamed that she saw the holy Theotokos, holding the infant Christ in her arms, reproaching her husband and beating him because of his stance against icons.<sup>35</sup> And, dating probably from the tenth century, there is the famous account in the *Life of St Andrew the Fool* in which the Mother of God appeared to all who were present at the all-night vigil in the church of Blachernai, emerging from the sanctuary accompanied by a large retinue of prophets, patriarchs and saints. She prayed on behalf of everyone there, as well as for the whole world, and then spread out her veil over the congregation. According to the hagiographer, 'for a long while the admirable men [Andrew and Epiphanius] saw it stretched out over the people, radiating the glory of the Lord like amber. As long as the most holy Theotokos was there the veil was also visible, but when she had withdrawn they could no longer see it.'<sup>36</sup>

The Virgin Mary makes brief, but significant appearances not only in the *Life of St Andrew the Fool*, but also in the probably contemporary *Life of*

<sup>32</sup> Barber 2000; Maguire 2011; Lidova 2019.

<sup>33</sup> *Life of St Stephen the Younger* 4, ed. Auzépy 1997, 92–3; trans. 183–4.

<sup>34</sup> *Life of St Irene of Chrysobalanton* 13, ed. Rosenquist 1986, 52–64.

<sup>35</sup> *Life of the Empress Theodora* 8; trans. Talbot 1998, 372.

<sup>36</sup> *Life of St Andrew the Fool*, ed. and trans. Rydén 1995, vol. 2, 254–5. See also Rydén 1976.

*St Basil the Younger*.<sup>37</sup> Both texts provide lengthy accounts, inspired by apocalyptic literature, of the heavenly kingdom with its Ruler, Christ, the Mother of God, and the ranks of attendant angels. In one significant passage, the author of the *Life of St Basil the Younger*, Gregory, describes his vision of Christ crowning and robing his mother in this context:

The first to come to Him was the Mother of His holy incarnation and His nurturer, the immaculate and supremely holy Virgin Mary, the undefiled tabernacle of His awe-inspiring incarnation. Immediately taking the wondrous crown He wore on His holy and immaculate head, a crown of multicoloured flowers, precious gems, and noetic pearls, fabricated in many colours and in a divine fashion, He placed it on her holy head . . . In addition He gave her also the first robe, which was awesomely woven and noetically fabricated from heavenly imperial linen and purple (cf. Lk 16:19, Rev. 18:12, 16), the robe which He Himself wore after His incarnation . . . After honouring her as His Mother, He rose up and seated her on the most awe-inspiring divine and fiery throne of His glory (Mt 19:28, 25:31) positioned near Him, having extolled and praised her in the presence of all the saints from the ages, for her spiritual purity and magnanimous and very great divine forbearance amid terrible circumstances . . .<sup>38</sup>

The hagiographer ranks the Virgin as second only to Christ; after her comes John the Baptist 'whom [Christ] honoured worthily and extolled above all and deemed worthy of rank and honor second only to the Mistress and Lady of all'.<sup>39</sup> Although Epiphanius, the narrator in the *Life of St Andrew the Fool*, experiences a similar vision, he does not see the Mother of God in glory. An angel (described as 'a dazzling man dressed in a garment that was like a shining cloud') explains her absence as follows:

Our distinguished Lady, the Queen of the heavenly powers and God-bearer, is not present here, for she is in that vain world to support and help those who invoke God's Only Son and Word and her own all-holy name.<sup>40</sup>

Whether they envision her in heaven or on earth, these tenth-century hagiographers stress the Virgin's glory and power. Her devotees regularly visit her shrines in Constantinople, where they can expect to find forgiveness of sins and healing. A young thief in the *Life of St Andrew the Fool* flees

<sup>37</sup> *Life of St Basil the Younger*; on the probable date and provenance of the *Life*, see Sullivan, Talbot and McGrath 2014, 7–11. The editors discuss the relationship between the *Lives of St Andrew the Fool* and *St Basil the Younger* on p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> *Life of St Basil the Younger* 116, ed. and trans. Sullivan, Talbot and McGrath 2014, 645–7.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 117, ed. and trans. Sullivan, Talbot and McGrath 2014, 647.

<sup>40</sup> *Life of St Andrew the Fool*, ed. and trans. Rydén 1995, vol. 2, 60–1 (with one adjustment).

to the Virgin's oratory of the Myrelaion after breaking his promise to reform himself. After anointing himself with oil and praying to the Virgin for help, he sees 'a woman standing before the doors of the holy sanctuary dressed in fine linen and purple. Her face [is] shining, more dazzling than the sun'. The vision expels the demon that has seized the boy, after which he addresses her icon, offering 'fervent thanks to the Mother of God, swearing an oath that he [will] never more steal, nor fornicate nor fraternize with fools and sinners'.<sup>41</sup>

The contexts or audiences for which these *Lives* were intended unfortunately remain unclear. Sullivan, Talbot and McGrath suggest (with respect to the *Life of St Basil the Younger*) that the text may have circulated in a monastery or monasteries where it offered ethical teaching to the brethren. They also posit that the text was consumed in sections throughout the year, rather than as a single reading on the feast-day of the saint. Both the length of the *Life* and its organisation into discrete sections or episodes support this hypothesis. However, it is also possible that the text was composed for a lay audience since it concerns itself with people of all classes and genders: the ethical teaching, which stresses charity as a virtue, relates especially to people who have the means to do good works. Above all, the lively narratives that are contained in both *Lives*, including both apocalyptic visions and cautionary tales, would have attracted readers or audiences from diverse social backgrounds.<sup>42</sup>

From about the tenth century onward, miracle stories associated with water also began to be recorded in Constantinople. Three important Marian shrines, namely, the complexes at Blachernai, the Hodegon Monastery and the shrine of the *Pege* ('Source'), contained baths (*lousmata*) or springs (*pegai*). According to the anonymous tenth-century text known as the *Patria*, miracles took place at the spring of the Hodegon Monastery: 'many blind people saw again at the spring there, and many miracles happened'.<sup>43</sup> Another important Constantinopolitan shrine of the Virgin that incorporated water was the Blachernai church and monastery.<sup>44</sup> The empress Verina probably founded this shrine, which was originally located just outside the Theodosian land walls (and later included within

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, ed. and trans. Rydén 1995, vol. 2, 110–11.

<sup>42</sup> See the extensive discussion of this question in the *Life of St Basil the Younger*, ed. Sullivan, Talbot and McGrath 2014, 19–24.

<sup>43</sup> *Patria* 111.27, ed. and trans. Berger 2013, 150–1; Magdalino 2007, 35.

<sup>44</sup> Other pools associated with Marian shrines in Constantinople included the Theotokos *ta Areobindou* and *ta Armatiou*. See Magdalino 2007, 34; *Patria* 111.59, 62, ed. and trans. Berger 2013, 170–3. Such pools were often run by fraternities.



them),<sup>45</sup> shortly before 475.<sup>46</sup> In its earliest phase, the shrine consisted of a round or octagonal sanctuary (known as the 'Soros'), which contained the most important relic of the Virgin, a robe; several centuries later this would be described as a mantle or mandylion.<sup>47</sup> The early sixth-century emperor Justin I added a three-aisled basilica to the complex, which was remodelled by Justin II and his consort Sophia, later in the same century.<sup>48</sup> There was also a pool or bath at the Blachernai complex, which must have been there even before its foundation.<sup>49</sup> Most accounts of the Virgin Mary's veneration at the sanctuary focus on her robe or, from the eleventh century onward, a holy icon that performed on a weekly basis what came to be known as 'the usual miracle'.<sup>50</sup> However, the pool played a ceremonial role when the emperor and his entourage paid a special visit to the shrine on certain Fridays during the year.<sup>51</sup> According to the tenth-century *Book of Ceremonies*, the royal visitors first entered the holy *Soros* where they said special prayers and then venerated and lit candles before an icon of the Virgin and Child known as the 'episkepsis'. Following these rites, they immersed themselves three times in the sacred bath that adjoined the *Soros*.<sup>52</sup> This description suggests a more ceremonial than impromptu role for the Blachernai pool. Nevertheless, it reinforces the association between the Virgin Mary and water, which represented an important aspect of her cult in the imperial city throughout the middle Byzantine period.

The shrine of the Virgin of the Source (*Pege*) was based at a sanctuary that was located just outside the walls of Constantinople. Like the shrine at Blachernai, the *Pege* was believed to have been founded in the second half of the fifth century, again during the reign of Leo I. An anonymous writer collected and wrote down the miracle stories that were associated with this shrine, from the time of its foundation to the tenth century.<sup>53</sup> He described

<sup>45</sup> The walls were extended by Herakleios, following the siege of the Avars and Persians in 626. See Janin 1964, 163.

<sup>46</sup> Mango 2000, 19.

<sup>47</sup> Much has been written on the relic of the robe or mantle. See, for example, Ebersolt 1921, 44–53; Baynes 1955; Cameron 1979b; Weyl Carr 2001; Wortley 2005.

<sup>48</sup> Mango 2000, 21. <sup>49</sup> See Janin 1964, 161–71; Mango 1998, 62–3.

<sup>50</sup> Pentcheva 2006, 145–63. <sup>51</sup> Ebersolt 1921, 48, 51.

<sup>52</sup> Constantine Porphyrogenetos, *Book of Ceremonies* 11.12, ed. Leich and Reiske 1935, trans. Moffatt and Tall 2012, 552–6. According to Janin, the ceremony was performed 'from time to time', but always on a Friday. See Janin 1964, 170.

<sup>53</sup> The collection of forty-seven miracles is preserved in a twelfth-century manuscript in the Vatican Library (Vat. gr. 822, fols. 180v–207v) and was first edited in the *Acta Sanctorum Novembris* III (Brussels, 1910). It is now accessible, along with introduction and commentary, in *Miracles of the Pege*, ed. and trans. Talbot and Johnson 2012. See *ibid.*, xv.

the legendary origins of the shrine, asserting that the fifth-century emperor Leo had discovered a spring just outside the walls of Constantinople when he was searching for water for a thirsty blind man. The Virgin Mary appeared to him, directing him to the spring. When the man drank the water, his sight was miraculously restored. The emperor then built a small shrine on the site, which was called a *kataphygion* or ‘place of refuge’.<sup>54</sup> In the sixth century, the emperor Justinian constructed a domed church in honour of the Mother of God after being cured of a urinary infection by water from the *Pege*.<sup>55</sup> This church, to which a male monastery was soon attached, became a focus for both imperial and lay pilgrimage.<sup>56</sup> The Byzantine emperors visited the spring on Ascension Day; on this occasion, the patriarch celebrated a Divine Liturgy, which was followed by a meal.<sup>57</sup>

In addition to such imperial patronage, ordinary people visited the spring throughout the year, seeking healing from the water or sometimes from oil lamps that were hanging before an icon of the Virgin. The miraculous healings that took place at the shrine of the *Pege* were facilitated either by the Theotokos herself, who appeared to her supplicants in visions, or by her icon. However, they were always brought about by means of physical substances – water from the spring, mud from its banks or oil from the lamps that were hanging in the sanctuary. For the most part, the pilgrims ingested these liquids; it is also noticeable that the illnesses were often internal ones, consisting of gastric, urinary or intestinal infections or tumours. Dropsy, or bloating due to fluid retention, was also a common ailment. The beneficiaries of Mary’s intercession ranged from emperors and their wives or relatives to common people; she appears to have acted without discrimination in her service to Christians of every gender and class. And, interestingly, the author of the miracles tells us that ‘Eudokia’, sister-in-law of Maurice (582–602 CE), did not recognise the Virgin when she encountered her in a vision; she appeared to be a woman ‘of modest means’ (*gynaika tina metrian*).<sup>58</sup> In another story, however, a monk perceived her as ‘a woman robed in purple, towering as high as the lintel [of the church doorway] in the majesty of her stature’.<sup>59</sup> Such discrepancies probably reflect the diverse nature of these tales, which were compiled over

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 2, ed. and trans. Talbot and Johnson 2012, 208–11.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 3, ed. and trans. Talbot and Johnson 2012, 210–13.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, ed. and trans. Talbot and Johnson 2012, xv.

<sup>57</sup> Constantine Porphyrogennitos, *Book of Ceremonies* 1.18, ed. Leich and Reiske 1935, trans. Moffatt and Tall 2012, 108–14; Ebersolt 1921, 61–2.

<sup>58</sup> *Miracles of the Pege* 7, ed. and trans. Talbot and Johnson 2012, 220–1. On the identity of this individual, see Introduction, n. 158.

<sup>59</sup> *Miracles of the Pege* 13, ed. and trans. Talbot and Johnson 2012, 234–5.

several centuries; however, they may also reveal something about the status of individual devotees and how they expected to encounter the Mother of God.

Jane Baun suggests various ways of classifying the accounts of Marian miracles, which help us to evaluate their significance. She divides apparitions, for example, into categories on the basis of intention or purpose, which range from healings to intercession. After dividing the material up in this way, Baun is able to distinguish chronological developments with regard to some themes, with instances of Mary appointing tasks to her devotees or combating heresy belonging mainly to the earlier or late antique period, while her assistance in military matters appears increasingly frequently in later texts.<sup>60</sup> Baun also creates a useful distinction between the Virgin's physical and visionary appearances.<sup>61</sup> Her ability to appear to Christians in person even after death is described in a literal fashion in some texts: the miracle stories that were collected at the shrine of the *Pege*, for example, describe her appearances (in various guises) to individuals who pray to her there.<sup>62</sup> It is significant that from about the late ninth century onward, Mary appears less often in person, preferring henceforth to intercede or perform miracles by means of her icons.<sup>63</sup> Baun qualifies her conclusions in this study by admitting that they are based only on a representative selection of miracle stories dating from between the sixth and eleventh centuries. It is unfortunate that the very popularity of anthologies of such texts has led to their neglect by scholars. The numbers of manuscripts in which they are transmitted, combined with the focus of Bollandists and other editors on saints whose cults are objects of historical interest,<sup>64</sup> has caused many collections of Marian miracles to remain unedited.<sup>65</sup> My observation above, concerning the limited amount of

<sup>60</sup> Baun 2011, 204–6. Some miracle stories involving the Virgin's robe or mantle appear in middle or late Byzantine histories and chronicles. See, for example, the patriarch Photios' account of the role played by Mary's garment (*stolē*) in the siege of Constantinople by the Rus' in 860 (see Chapter 3, n. 167); the presence of her mantle (*maphorion*) at Romanos I Lekapenos' mission for peace with the Bulgarian ruler Symeon in 926 (Skylitzes, *Synopsis historiarum* 10.12, ed. Thurn 1973, 219, trans. Wortley 2010, 212); and Alexios I Komnenos' use of the same relic as a standard when fighting the Patzinaks in 1089 (Anna Komnene, *Alexiad* v.11.3.9, ed. Reinsch and Kambylis 2001, vol. 1, 212, trans. Sewter 1969, 225–7).

<sup>61</sup> Baun 2011, 200–1. <sup>62</sup> See above, nn. 58–9.

<sup>63</sup> Baun 2011, 206. See also Pentcheva 2006, 75–103. It is also worth remembering here the ongoing debate concerning the physical manifestation of saints, or indeed the Virgin Mary, in visions as opposed to these holy figures' impersonation by angelic or divine powers, which had been taking place from approximately the sixth century onward. See Krausmüller 2008; Dal Santo 2011; Dal Santo 2012.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, the methods that are outlined in Delehaye 1921; Delehaye 1927.

<sup>65</sup> Baun 2011, 204–5.

such material that survives from the middle Byzantine period, should thus remain tentative – pending future editions of a body of literary texts that is potentially of great interest, not only with regard to the cult of the Mother of God, but also for theological and historical reasons.<sup>66</sup>

In summary, miracle stories convey much about the hope that Byzantine Christians placed in their protector and intercessor, the Mother of God. She could appear, either in person or glimpsed through icons or dreams, to those who placed their faith in her; at the same time, however, she could wreak awful vengeance on sinners and heretics. In theological terms, the portrayal of the Virgin Mary in texts such as these resembled that of other major saints. The Theotokos had the power to persuade, cure and sometimes punish Christians who were in trouble. She was not seen as co-redeemer in the sense of having unlimited power as intercessor before God.<sup>67</sup> Rather, endowed with the *parresia* or ‘freedom of speech’ with God that was shared by other saints, Mary interceded with him on behalf of the rest of the human race. Her feminine, and sometimes explicitly maternal, aspect was increasingly emphasised in texts written during or after the iconoclast period.<sup>68</sup> See, for example, the appeal made by St Stephen the Younger’s mother Anna for a child:

‘Theotokos, refuge of those who run towards you, anchor and protector of those who seek you in pain, most safe port for those who are drowning with faint hearts in the great sea of life and most opportune ally for those who in despair summon you to their aid, glory of mothers and adornment of daughters, you who have transformed into happy assurance, by giving birth to the God-man, the most shameful condemnation of the whole female sex, owing to our first mother Eve – have mercy on me, hearken, and break the bond that is in me, just as was done for your progenitor Anna who bore you, and show your maternal mediation in allowing me to bear a male child that I may offer this gift to your Son and God.’<sup>69</sup>

<sup>66</sup> It is worth injecting a plea here for the production of less ambitious (as opposed to critical) editions of hagiographical texts. Instead of the lengthy – and not always productive – exercise of collating hundreds of manuscripts, some scholars are increasingly recognising the value of choosing several of the best manuscripts and publishing editions which, even if not representative of the whole tradition, provide the scholarly world with working tools. See D’Avray 2001, 31–3 (with reference to Western medieval sermons).

<sup>67</sup> For discussion of the extent to which that position was taken by some later Roman Catholic theologians, see Graef 1963 (2009), 332, 377. I do not agree, as will be discussed below, that John Geometres supported the concept of Mary’s role as co-redemptrix, as Graef (1963, 155–6) argues; cf. Galot 1957; Jugie 1944, 561–2.

<sup>68</sup> Kalavrezou 1990; Kalavrezou 2000.

<sup>69</sup> *Life of St Stephen the Younger* 4.15–24; ed. Auzépy 1997, 92 (my translation).

Nevertheless, as we shall see later in relation to some middle Byzantine *Lives* of saints and apocalypses, Mary could sometimes wield considerable power in the heavenly court. She ranked higher than any other saint or even angelic power because of her maternal relationship with Christ and assumption into heaven after death. The boundary between orthodox and more heterodox views on the Virgin's place in the celestial hierarchy was occasionally permeable, as a few of the surviving texts reveal.<sup>70</sup>

### Middle Byzantine *Lives* of the Theotokos

The orthodoxy of four surviving middle Byzantine *vitae* of the Virgin Mary is not in question, although these texts provide teaching that is not always strictly in line with that found in biblical or even well-known apocryphal texts. The four *Lives* offer narrative, praise and supplication in honour of the holy Theotokos.<sup>71</sup> Although they are organised in different ways and display separate preoccupations, the texts are all hagiographical in nature. In other words, they attempt to elucidate the full life story, including the birth, life, death and afterlife of the Mother of God. In view of the silence of the canonical Gospels on so many aspects of Mary's life, our four hagiographers also employ both patristic and apocryphal sources in their pursuit of her story. The practice of stringing together separate apocryphal narratives concerning the Virgin's conception, infancy, motherhood of Jesus, and activities during his ministry and passion, as well as her own death and assumption into heaven, is known to have begun – perhaps first in Syriac-speaking milieux – from about the fifth century onward.<sup>72</sup> Charles Naffah is in the process of classifying and editing fifth- and sixth-century Syriac manuscripts that combine the various phases of the Virgin Mary's life into continuous narratives.<sup>73</sup> It is not known whether the Byzantine *Lives* were inspired by an early Greek translation of such a source or whether this genre evolved independently within the

<sup>70</sup> See below, 205–7.

<sup>71</sup> An excellent overview of these *Lives* is provided in Mimouni 1994 (2011). Although he lists a fifth *Life* (*CANT* 94; *BHO* 643–5), which he describes as 'Nestorian', I have omitted it from this study since it seems to have circulated within an eastern Syriac (Nestorian) milieu and remains difficult to date. The earliest manuscripts for this *Life*, which was edited by E. A. W. Budge in 1890, are dated to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. See Mimouni 1994 (2011), 105–12. For further discussion of the four *Lives*, see Cunningham 2016, 152–8.

<sup>72</sup> Naffah 2009; Norelli 2009.

<sup>73</sup> Earlier editions of these traditions include Wright 1865; *Syriac Life of the Virgin*, ed. Smith-Lewis 1902. For a fascinating account of the lives and Sinai research projects of the Scottish sisters Agnes Smith-Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson, see Soskice 2009.

Greek-speaking Christian world. What is clear is that the literary and theological tendencies of at least three of the *vitae* reflect a period in which Marian doctrine and devotion were well developed; they express interest in the Virgin Mary as an exceptionally holy person in her own right who is capable of interceding on behalf of Christians and assisting their salvation.

It is necessary first to address questions of date and literary context for the four hagiographical texts. After this, I shall move on to analyse their narrative content, before exploring what they reveal about the Marian cult in Constantinople between the early ninth and late tenth centuries. The problem raised at the beginning of this chapter regarding 'low' and 'high' (or popular and élite) styles of hagiographical texts should also be addressed in relation to these *vitae*. Whereas the late eighth- or early ninth-century *Life* by Epiphanius of Kallistratos may have appealed to a wide audience, judging by its simple literary style and message,<sup>74</sup> the three remaining texts are complex in literary and theological terms. John Geometres' *Life of the Virgin* contains sophisticated theological reflection on Christological themes along with its narrative and devotional content.<sup>75</sup> Symeon the Metaphrast's *Life*, while short on narrative detail, represents an elegant panegyric oration in praise of the Theotokos.<sup>76</sup> And the Georgian *Life*, which is attributed to Maximos the Confessor but inspired by Geometres' work,<sup>77</sup> provides a somewhat simplified version of the latter with focus especially on Mary's ascetic and didactic activities as a disciple of Christ.

Scholarly attention has so far focused mainly on the dating and provenance of the surviving Byzantine *Lives of the Virgin*. Both Michel van Esbroeck and Stephen Shoemaker have argued that a lost Greek *Life of the Virgin*, which was attributed to, but not necessarily composed by, the seventh-century theologian Maximos the Confessor, was the earliest exponent of the Marian hagiographical tradition in the Greek-speaking Byzantine world.<sup>78</sup> This text was then translated from Greek to Georgian by the monk Euthymios the Athonite (or Hagiorite), in the late tenth century.<sup>79</sup> Shoemaker's arguments are based

<sup>74</sup> Epiphanius of Kallistratos, *Life of the Virgin*, ed. PG 120, 185–216; Dressel 1843, 13–44.

<sup>75</sup> John Geometres, *Life of the Virgin*, critical ed. forthcoming, Conostas and Simelidis, DOML; section on the Dormition, ed. Wenger 1955, 363–415; see also Simelidis 2020. For a detailed study of John Geometres' literary achievements, see Kazhdan 2006, 249–2.

<sup>76</sup> Symeon the Metaphrast, *Life of the Virgin*, ed. Latyshev 1912. <sup>77</sup> Simelidis 2020.

<sup>78</sup> Georgian *Life of the Virgin*, ed. van Esbroeck 1986, vol. 2, v–xiii; ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 14–22. Van Esbroeck employs four main arguments, which are mainly literary and historical, to support the attribution of the *Life* to Maximos. For a summary of these, along with criticism, see Mimouni 1994, 81–5.

<sup>79</sup> I refer to this text in the discussion that follows, along with its references, as 'the Georgian *Life of the Virgin*'. See van Esbroeck 1988b; Georgian *Life of the Virgin*, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 2–3. Euthymios the Athonite was born in Georgia between 955 and 960 and died in Constantinople,

mainly on internal evidence: they include the author's dependence on early apocryphal sources concerning the Virgin's death and assumption into heaven, his awareness of both Palestinian and Constantinopolitan traditions regarding her relics, and the influence of the text on later writers including George of Nikomedia, John Geometres and Symeon the Metaphrast.<sup>80</sup> Phil Booth and Christos Simelidis have since challenged such an early date for the Georgian *Life of the Virgin*, arguing for its production no earlier than the middle or end of the tenth century.<sup>81</sup> Booth accepts the existence of a lost Greek prototype for Euthymios the Athonite's Georgian translation of the text, but prefers to place this in the tenth century.<sup>82</sup> He offers various arguments that disprove either Maximian or even seventh-century authorship of the text, finally suggesting that the author was more likely inspired by George of Nikomedia's homilies on the passion and resurrection of Christ than the reverse.<sup>83</sup> Simelidis proposes an even simpler explanation for the date and literary context of the Georgian *Life of the Virgin*. Having compared it closely with the former work, Simelidis argues that the late tenth-century translator Euthymios the Athonite based his work directly on Geometres' text. Thus the bilingual abbot produced a revised, and somewhat simplified, version of the text for his Georgian readers. This means that the Georgian *Life* represents nothing more than a paraphrase – albeit a highly sophisticated one – of a complex theological Greek text that was produced during the final decades of the tenth century.<sup>84</sup>

The textual analysis that Simelidis provides in his recent article provides, to my mind, a definitive answer to this long-running debate. He offers detailed and convincing proof that Euthymios the Athonite depended on John Geometres' *Life of the Virgin* in order to produce a version that would appeal to less sophisticated but spiritually motivated audiences in Georgia. Simelidis focuses on sections in the text that have been simplified in the Georgian version, along with others that expand the number of biblical references: both of these features are characteristic of Euthymios' methods

*c.* 1028. He served as *hegumenos* of the monastery of Iveron from 1005 to 1019. Euthymios translated a number of other theological and hagiographical texts from Greek into Georgian, and a few, including a work that is inspired by the life of Buddha, known as *Barlaam and Ioasaph* and falsely attributed to John of Damascus, from Georgian to Greek. See *ODB*, vol. 2, 757; Simelidis 2020, 137–44. It is worth noting, however, that Shoemaker proposes a different translator, based at the monastery of St Sabas in Palestine, for the *Life of the Virgin* in an article that he wrote in response to Booth 2015; see Shoemaker 2016b, 135–42.

<sup>80</sup> These arguments are elaborated in Shoemaker's Introduction to the Georgian *Life of the Virgin*, 17–22; cf. Shoemaker 2005; Shoemaker 2006b; Shoemaker 2011c, 53–6.

<sup>81</sup> Booth 2015; Simelidis 2020. <sup>82</sup> Booth 2015, 149–50.

<sup>83</sup> Booth 2015, 197–9. Shoemaker responded to Booth's various arguments in Shoemaker 2016b.

<sup>84</sup> Simelidis 2020, esp. 128–9, but also *passim*.

of translation and metaphrasis.<sup>85</sup> John Geometres, when drawing on biblical, apocryphal and patristic sources for his composition, manages to combine a number of literary forms, including narrative, homiletic and panegyric, into one harmonious composition. Although the success of this rhetorical exercise reflects John's literary skill and originality, it also follows centuries of refinement in Marian liturgical expression. The hymnographic and homiletic genres that have been studied so far in this book all helped to inspire John Geometres' work. It is also likely that new emphasis on various aspects of the Virgin Mary's character, including her ascetic labours, involvement in Christ's ministry and apostolic mission, and emotional demeanour at the foot of the cross reflect a relatively late, and highly developed, phase in her cult. Rather than accept Shoemaker's proposal that these aspects of Marian devotion began much earlier than was previously thought in the Eastern Christian world,<sup>86</sup> I agree with Simelidis that they only reached full expression, thanks especially to John Geometres, in the late tenth century.

Now that we have eliminated a hypothetical early seventh-century prototype, the hagiographical text that is attributed to the Constantinopolitan monk Epiphanius of Kallistratos emerges as the earliest example of the genre.<sup>87</sup> This *Life* has received some scholarly attention, but still awaits detailed literary analysis.<sup>88</sup> Most recent studies agree that Epiphanius, a monk and priest who may have lived at the Kallistratos monastery in Constantinople at the end of the eighth and beginning of the ninth century, produced not only this *vita*, but also one on the apostle Andrew.<sup>89</sup> Alexander Kazhdan places him among the monastic literati of

<sup>85</sup> Simelidis 2020, 145–55.

<sup>86</sup> For this argument, especially in relation to Mary's lament, see Shoemaker 2011b; cf. Georgian *Life of the Virgin*, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 22–35, 174, n. 71. For studies of the development of affective devotion in Western medieval spirituality, see Bynum 1982; Fulton Brown 2002; McNamer 2010.

<sup>87</sup> Epiphanius of Kallistratos, *Life of the Virgin*. The text is accessible in two editions, PG 120 and Dressel 1843. These are based on separate manuscripts, belonging to the Marciana Library in Venice and the Vatican Library, respectively, and differ significantly in some of their readings. A critical edition would be desirable but is not (to my knowledge) forthcoming. For discussion of the two editions of the texts, see Mimouni 1994 (2011), 89. I am currently preparing a translation and commentary of the text for the TTB series at Liverpool University Press.

<sup>88</sup> Dräseke 1895; Jugie 1944, 258–9; Beck 1959, 513; Kazhdan 1999, 307; Shoemaker 2005, 457–8. A more detailed study appears in Cunningham 2019.

<sup>89</sup> Epiphanius of Kallistratos's *Life of the apostle* (BHG 102) is edited in Dressel 1843, 45–82 and in PG 120, 216–60. It should be noted, however, that E. Kurtz placed the *Life of the Virgin* in the eleventh century; see Kurtz 1897, 216, cited in Kazhdan 1999, 307, n. 26. The association of Epiphanius with the Monastery of Kallistratos in Constantinople is not well attested but is widely accepted by scholars.



the early ninth century in Constantinople, who included such important figures as Theodore of Stoudios and his brother Joseph, Theophanes the Confessor and the nun Kassia.<sup>90</sup> Epiphanius' *Life of the Virgin* contains a number of interesting characteristics, which set it off from the tenth-century hagiographical texts that followed it. For example, it is clear that Epiphanius approaches his material with a biographical or 'historical' purpose. He states at the beginning of his text that, since none of the apostles or early Fathers who wrote about Mary provided full accounts of her life from beginning to end, such a biography is needed.<sup>91</sup> Epiphanius seeks at the outset to establish the authority of his literary sources. He avoids texts that he calls 'apocryphal' or 'heretical', but does cite earlier authors including 'James the Hebrew' (either the putative author of the *Protevangeliion of James* or that of a polemical early seventh-century text known as the *Doctrina Jacobi*),<sup>92</sup> John of Thessalonike, Andrew of Crete and Eusebios of Caesarea as authoritative sources on various aspects of Mary's life.<sup>93</sup>

After a brief prologue in which he sets out his aims and cites his sources, Epiphanius provides a genealogy for the Virgin Mary. This traces the ancestry of both parents, Joachim and Anna, on the basis not only of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, but also of apocryphal and patristic traditions.<sup>94</sup> The object of the exercise is, as for some other eighth-century writers, both to demonstrate the royal and priestly lineage of the Virgin Mary (with her father Joachim belonging to the tribe of David and her mother Anna to a priestly line) and to underline her links with the rest of the human race.<sup>95</sup> Epiphanius also stresses the familial relationship between various women who featured prominently in Mary's life, including her cousins Elizabeth (mother of John the Baptist) and Salome who

<sup>90</sup> Kazhdan 1999, 396–97.

<sup>91</sup> Epiphanius of Kallistratos, *Life of the Virgin*, PG 120, esp. 185–9A; Dressel 1843, 13–15.

<sup>92</sup> *Protevangeliion of James*; Sargis of Abergia, *Doctrina Jacobi nuper baptizati*, ed. Déroche 1991. Déroche (1991, 49) suggests this as Epiphanius' source.

<sup>93</sup> Epiphanius of Kallistratos, *Life of the Virgin*, PG 120, 188B; Dressel 1843, 14.

<sup>94</sup> Epiphanius of Kallistratos, *Life of the Virgin*, PG 120, 189; Dressel 1843, 15–16. One of the closest sources for this section of Epiphanius's account is John Damascene's *On the Orthodox Faith* IV.14, ed. Kotter 1973, 199–200. For a good summary of patristic (both Syriac and Greek) traditions concerning Mary's royal and priestly genealogy, see Brock 2006.

<sup>95</sup> Other eighth-century writers (in addition to John of Damascus) who mention Mary's royal and priestly lineage include John of Euboea, *Homily on the Conception of the Virgin Mary*, PG 96, 1489B–C, and Kosmas Vestitor, *Oration on Joachim and Anna*, PG 106, 1012A.

was also a midwife.<sup>96</sup> After an account of Anna's conception of the Virgin, Epiphanius moves on to her birth, infancy in the temple and betrothal to Joseph, followed by the part of her life that overlaps with the canonical Gospel accounts. The *Life* concludes with an account of the Virgin's activities after Christ's ascension into heaven (she led a life of asceticism and performed many miracles for the people of Jerusalem), followed by her death and burial. Epiphanius is careful in his epilogue to calculate the exact number of years that the Theotokos lived (he numbers these at seventy-two),<sup>97</sup> but – unlike the other Marian hagiographers – he does not discuss her assumption into heaven or the translation of her relics to Constantinople.<sup>98</sup> In short, this is a 'factual' (at least in the eyes of its author) account of the Virgin Mary's terrestrial life, which attempts to set straight the discrepancies in the canonical Gospels and to fill in the many gaps that persist in both biblical and patristic sources.

The *Life* by Symeon the Metaphrast (+ c. 1000) is the shortest text in the group.<sup>99</sup> Like many of the Metaphrast's reworkings of earlier *Lives* of saints, the redactor aims to produce a polished but somewhat impressionistic account of his subject.<sup>100</sup> It is noticeable that Symeon follows the Gospel narratives more closely than do the other three hagiographers; he also omits many details in Mary's story that belong only to the apocryphal and patristic traditions. Those that he does include, however – among which are a brief account of Anna's conception of Mary, the latter's dedication and upbringing in the temple, and her betrothal to Joseph – reveal similarities with the other three Byzantine *Lives* of the Virgin Mary. Nevertheless, certain features in the hagiographical narratives that reflect

<sup>96</sup> Epiphanius of Kallistratos, *Life of the Virgin*, PG 120, 189C, Dressel 1843, 16: Κατὰ μητέρα ἡ θεοτόκος ἦν οὕτως· Ματθᾶμ ὁ ἰερεὺς ἀπὸ Βηθλεέμ, εἶχεν θυγατέρας τρεῖς· Μαρῖαν, Σωβὴν, καὶ Ἄνναν. Ἡ μὲν Μαρῖα ἔτεκεν Σαλώμην τὴν μαῖαν· ἡ δὲ Σωβὴ ἔτεκεν τὴν μητέρα Ἰωάννου τοῦ Βαπτιστοῦ· ἡ δὲ Ἄννα ἔλαβεν Ἰωακείμ τὸν ἀδελφὸν τοῦ πατρὸς Ἰωσήφ· καὶ κατέβη Ἄννα νύμφη εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν εἰς πόλιν Ναζαρέτ· καὶ συνώκησεν Ἄννα τῷ Ἰωακείμ ἔτη πενήτηκοντα, καὶ τέκνον οὐκ ἐποίησαν. 'With regard to her mother, the [lineage of the] Theotokos was as follows. The priest Matham, who was from Bethlehem, had three daughters, Mary, Sobe and Anna. Mary gave birth to the midwife Salome, while Sobe bore the mother of John the Baptist. But Anna took Joachim, the brother of Joseph's father [as her husband]. And Anna went down as a bride into the city of Nazareth in Galilee and lived with Joachim for fifty years, and they did not produce a child.'

<sup>97</sup> Epiphanius of Kallistratos, *Life of the Virgin*, PG 120, 216B; Dressel 1843, 44.

<sup>98</sup> This leads Mimouni to classify this as a 'dormitionist', as opposed to an 'assumptionist', text in the Byzantine dormition tradition. See Mimouni 1994 (2011), 92.

<sup>99</sup> Symeon the Metaphrast, *Life of the Virgin*. According to Latyshev's edition, the text was intended as a liturgical reading for 15 August. Its title announces that it covers the holy birth and upbringing of our all-holy Lady, the Theotokos, that of her son, Jesus Christ, and aspects of her life including her death and the appearance of her relics in Constantinople. See Latyshev 1912, 347.

<sup>100</sup> On Symeon the Metaphrast's literary methods, see Høgel 2002; Høgel 2014.

a monastic background, such as consistent stress on Mary's ascetic practices and apostolic leadership, are lacking in the Metaphrastic *Life of the Virgin*.<sup>101</sup>

John Kyriotes Geometres, who was a contemporary of Symeon the Metaphrast, went further in producing a long and complex panegyric work in honour of the Mother of God.<sup>102</sup> Like Symeon, Geometres was one of the most important literary figures of the second half of the tenth century.<sup>103</sup> He began his professional life as an imperial officer, but later retired and possibly became a monk and priest in Constantinople. In addition to the *Life of the Virgin*, John composed epigrams, hagiography in verse and prose, and progymnasmata.<sup>104</sup> His hymns on the Mother of God build on the traditional form of the *chairetismos* while also employing rhetorical wordplay in an innovative manner; his homily on the Annunciation represents a significant contribution to the genre.<sup>105</sup> Although John Geometres' *Life of the Mother of God* remained unedited in its entirety until very recently, it has attracted notice from theologians, liturgists and Marian scholars in the course of the last century.<sup>106</sup> Roman Catholic scholars have been intrigued both by the high Mariology of this text<sup>107</sup> and by its teaching concerning the Virgin's assumption into

<sup>101</sup> Scholars including Martin Jugie and Antoine Wenger have debated the relationship of Symeon the Metaphrast's *Life* with that of John Geometres but have reached no definitive conclusions. Whereas Jugie argued that the former was based on the latter, with the Metaphrastic version omitting most of the theological and spiritual content of Geometres' work (to the extent that it is only a fifth of its length), Wenger suggested the reverse. It is just as possible, according to Wenger, that John Geometres, who was a contemporary of Symeon, used both his version and the *Life of the Virgin* by Epiphanius of Kallistratos as a basis for his more meditative (but still narrative) approach to the subject. See Jugie 1923a; Jugie 1944, 320–1; Wenger 1955, 193–5. For a summary of the debate and the lack of a convincing solution, see Mimouni 1994 (2011), 103–5.

<sup>102</sup> It is possible that John was named Kyriotes because he was born in the western district of Constantinople known as *ta Kyrou*; his epithet 'geometer' has no known cause, although it has been suggested that it conveys the sense that he was a 'globe-trotter', or in other words, 'a poor and humble fellow, roaming around'. See Sajdak 1931; Mercati 1935; Kazhdan 2006, 249. Whereas some scholars suggest that John Geometres became a monk, Paul Magdalino argues that he became a member of a lay confraternity at the church of the Theotokos *ta Kyrou*; see Magdalino 2018, 118–19.

<sup>103</sup> For an excellent reassessment of John Geometres' literary achievements, see Simelidis 2020, 129–36; cf. Lauxtermann 1998; Dermoen 2001.

<sup>104</sup> Scheidweiler 1952; Kazhdan 2006, 251; Simelidis 2020, 130–5.

<sup>105</sup> John Geometres, *Homily on the Annunciation* (BHG 1158). Wenger describes this sermon as 'magnifique' and notes that it provides some indication of the content of the first section of John Geometres' unpublished *Life of the Virgin*. See Wenger 1955, 186, 189. Various works by John, including the Marian texts, are analysed in Kazhdan 2006, 262–6.

<sup>106</sup> See, for example, Jugie 1944, 316–22; Wenger 1955, 185–205; Galot 1957; Baun 2007, 282–5.

<sup>107</sup> J. Galot argues, for example, that John Geometres (alone of Byzantine writers) elevates Mary to the role of 'Co-Redemptrix' with her son, Christ; see Galot 1957. For further discussion, see below, n. 130.

heaven.<sup>108</sup> Geometres promotes an exalted view of the Mother of God, picturing her as ‘Queen of all created nature’ and as ‘standing at the right hand of her Son and King’.<sup>109</sup> Considering the theological importance of this text, it is strange that it has waited so long to receive a critical edition.

As Fr Maximos Conostas recently discovered, Michel van Esbroeck and Antoine Wenger planned such an edition from about the middle of the twentieth century. Although a manuscript which van Esbroeck had prepared was thought to have disappeared, it was recently discovered in the archives of Wenger that are held at the Assumptionist House in Paris.<sup>110</sup> Fr Maximos Conostas and Christos Simelidis are using this draft as a basis for a new critical edition of the text. Pending the appearance of this long-awaited publication, I have consulted the best surviving manuscript witness, Cod. Vatic. Gr. 504, which was copied in 1105 and contains the entire text, along with Wenger’s edition of the final section on the Virgin’s dormition and assumption.<sup>111</sup> It has not been possible in the present circumstances to gain a detailed understanding of the text; however,

<sup>108</sup> Jugie suggests that Geometres teaches a doctrine of ‘double assumption’, that is, he suggests that the Virgin’s body and soul were raised separately to heaven but, as in the case of all other human beings, await reunification at the final day of judgement; see Jugie 1944, 316–20. Wenger, who describes this section of the *Life* as ‘un pur chef d’oeuvre’, follows C. Balić and M. Gordillo in contesting Jugie’s interpretation, offering a different interpretation of Geometres’ somewhat ambiguous wording. He concludes that Geometres follows the mainstream Byzantine view that the Virgin Mary was granted an early resurrection, but avoided stating this explicitly – in other words, he preferred to hint at this event as a ‘mystery’. See Balić 1948; Gordillo 1947; Wenger 1955, 196–200.

<sup>109</sup> John Geometres, *Life of the Virgin* 1, ed. and trans. Wenger 1955, 364–5; Βασιλισσάν τε πάσης ἀναρρηθῆναι τῆς γεννητῆς φύσεως . . . καὶ ἐκ δεξιῶν παραστῆναι τοῦ ταύτης υἱοῦ τε καὶ βασιλέως . . . This passage is also cited in Graef 1963 (2009), 154.

<sup>110</sup> Conostas 2019, 326–31; cf. Shoemaker 2005, 449, n. 27. While scholars waited for this work to be completed, they have at least had access to the final section of the text (about one-fifth), which deals with Mary’s death and assumption into heaven. This is published, along with a French translation, in Wenger 1955, 364–415.

<sup>111</sup> I greatly regret the fact that I am unable to wait for the publication of Conostas and Simelidis’ critical edition of the text. Nevertheless, I would like to acknowledge here their assistance with regard to its content, as well as Simelidis’ generosity in sharing his article in *DOP* (Simelidis 2020) with me before it was published. There are four surviving manuscripts that contain the text in its entirety or in fragments. Vatic. Gr. 504 (written in 1105) is undoubtedly the best witness since it transmits the whole text in fols. 173v–194v. The minuscule script is clear and contains few orthographical errors. Paris gr. 215 (thirteenth century) is badly damaged, although Wenger does not indicate exactly which sections of the text are missing. Genoa 32 (fourteenth century) contains the entire text, but was not employed by Wenger for his edition of the section of the *Life* on the dormition. A fourth manuscript, held at the Bodleian library in Oxford, contains a text that is copied from the Genoa witness, according to its Latin translator, Balthasare Corderio. See Wenger 1955, 186–88. It is also important to mention that a separate critical edition of John Geometres’ *Life of the Virgin* has been prepared by A. Benia, ‘Ἰωάννη Γεωμέτρῃ, Εξόδιος ἢ προπεμπτήριος εἰς τὴν Κοίμησιν τῆς ὑπερηνδόξου Δεσποίνης ἡμῶν Θεοτόκου: Πρώτη ἐκδόση καὶ μελέτη τοῦ κειμένου’ (unpubl. PhD thesis, University of Athens, 2019). I have not had access to this text either.

I hope at least to comment on aspects of the text that are relevant to this discussion.

John Geometres divides his panegyric work into distinct sections that correspond to major episodes, or festal celebrations, in the life of the Theotokos.<sup>112</sup> It is possible that these sections were intended as separate readings, either in a private or a liturgical context, for separate days in the liturgical year. They are usually introduced by short titles and are made up of narrative sections accompanied by theological discussion. Nevertheless, the whole text presents the Virgin Mary's life in chronological order, finishing with an extended account of her dormition, assumption into heaven and the translation of the robe to Constantinople. This narrative material is framed throughout the work by prayerful meditation on its theological and spiritual significance. While clearly based (like the other hagiographical texts that we have so far examined) on apocryphal and patristic sources that treat this subject, John Geometres also employs both scripture and his own imagination in developing Marian themes. As part of the hagiographical and exegetical tradition that had been evolving since the early ninth century, this text represents one of the most sophisticated treatments of the Virgin Mary's role in the divine dispensation.

The Georgian *Life of the Virgin* represents, as we saw above, a translation that was completed, either at the Monastery of Iveron on Mt Athos or in Constantinople, by the monk and later abbot Euthymios the Athonite (c. 955/60–1028).<sup>113</sup> Eleven manuscripts survive, bearing witness to the popularity of the text in monasteries from Georgia to Mt Sinai.<sup>114</sup> Even if we accept, as I do, Simelidis' conclusion that Euthymios adapted John Geometres' set of orations on the Virgin (known as the *Life*) as he produced a version that would be understandable to a mainly monastic, Georgian audience, the text is significant in its own right. The Athonite translator not only simplified but also enhanced his version of Mary's story in various ways. Since Shoemaker's excellent translation and commentary appeared in English, it has begun to attract notice from scholars who are interested not only in the cult of the Virgin, but also in the role of women in early and medieval Christianity.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>112</sup> Wenger characterises the text as 'un traité, sous forme de sermon, destiné à être lu plutôt qu'à être prononcé'. He bases this statement not only on the unusual structure of the text, but also on its literary complexity and even obscurity in some sections. See Wenger 1955, 192.

<sup>113</sup> Georgian *Life of the Virgin*, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 2–3. If Simelidis is correct in his dating of John Geometres' *Life of the Virgin*, on which this translation was based, then Euthymios' work would have been completed either after 979 or 989 CE; see Simelidis 2020, 155–7.

<sup>114</sup> Van Esbroeck 1986, vol. 2, xxx–xxxii; Georgian *Life of the Virgin*, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 3.

<sup>115</sup> See, for example, Kateusz 2019, 131–49.

Following its model, the *Life of the Virgin* by John Geometres, the Georgian version relates the whole story of Mary's life, beginning with her conception, birth and dedication to the temple and ending not only with her death and assumption into heaven, but also with a short excursus on the translation of the relics, a robe and a belt, to Constantinople. Unlike the surviving apocryphal narratives, the *Life* also focuses on Christ's life, passion and resurrection, providing the Virgin Mary with an important role throughout this narrative. Following her son at each stage of his public ministry, Mary attracts female disciples whom she personally guides and teaches. She is present at Christ's interrogation and torture, standing outside the door of the courtroom and transmitting the news to his disciples.<sup>116</sup> She stands at the foot of the cross and is entrusted to the care of the beloved disciple, as the Evangelist himself relates (John 19:26–7), but the hagiographer also describes her suffering in detail: 'And the abundance of the sufferings and the wounds pierced your heart: streams of blood came down from his wounds, but fountains of tears came down from your eyes. How could you bear to behold such a dreadful sight, unless the grace and power of your son and Lord strengthened you and confirmed for you the glory of his mercy?'<sup>117</sup> After the crucifixion, Mary is made responsible for finding a tomb and arranging for the burial of Christ's body.<sup>118</sup> She remains by the tomb and is the first person to see the resurrection; she then informs both the disciples and the myrrh-bearing women of this event.<sup>119</sup> Following Christ's ascension, the Theotokos becomes the apostles' leader and guide: she instructs them in asceticism and directs their missions. The *Life* continues with an account of the Virgin's dormition and assumption, which follows the conventional Greek treatment of this theme in liturgical texts. The author stresses the incorruptibility of Mary's body while asserting the reality of her death; he states that the apostles were afraid, when placing her body in the tomb at Gethsemane, to 'lay their hands upon the holy and utterly blessed body, for they saw the light that enveloped it and the grace of God that was upon it'.<sup>120</sup> This is followed by an account of the translation of Mary's robe to Constantinople (using the traditional narrative involving two fifth-century patricians, Galbius and Kandidus), along with brief mention of the holy belt; the two relics were housed at the shrines in the churches of the Blachernai and the

<sup>116</sup> Georgian *Life of the Virgin* 76, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 103–4.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* 78, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 105–6.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* 86–90, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 112–17.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.* 92–3, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 119–21.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.* 115, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 140.

Chalkoprateia, respectively.<sup>121</sup> The hagiographer concludes with a hymnic section that celebrates Mary with the help of metaphorical, typological and intercessory language,<sup>122</sup> along with reflections on her miraculous assumption into heaven.<sup>123</sup>

All four of the middle Byzantine *Lives of the Virgin* emphasise Mary's importance within the larger story of Christ's incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection. To a greater or lesser extent, their authors are prepared to adapt both New Testament and apocryphal accounts in order to demonstrate this point. Three of the *Lives* (excluding the Metaphrastic one) also share narrative peculiarities, some of which may reflect the monastic (or pious lay) backgrounds of their authors, as I have demonstrated in earlier studies.<sup>124</sup> For example, the Virgin described as receiving a vision in the temple at the age of twelve (while carrying out nightly vigils), attracting female disciples, pursuing an ascetic life especially after the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, and (in the case of the Georgian *Life of the Virgin*) even directing the missions of the apostles during the years that followed. The prominence of the Mother of God especially within texts such as the Georgian *Life* has led scholars to ask whether this reflects a 'feminist' outlook on the part of the author; as Shoemaker notes in one study, this message 'presents a stark contrast with the exclusion of women from church leadership at the time when the text was composed'.<sup>125</sup>

One explanation for this anomaly might be that the Georgian *Life of the Virgin* (or certain elements within it) preserves earlier traditions concerning the position of women in the Church that were later suppressed.<sup>126</sup> However, the question why Euthymios the Athonite would have included

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. 124, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 147–8. On the main Marian relics in Constantinople, the robe and the belt, see Wenger 1955, 111–39; Cameron 1979b; Weyl Carr 2001; Wortley 2005; Shoemaker 2008a; Krausmüller 2011.

<sup>122</sup> Georgian *Life of the Virgin* 125, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 149–51.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. 128, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 154.

<sup>124</sup> See Cunningham 2016, 152–6; Cunningham 2019, 313–18. It is noteworthy that Symeon the Metaphrast omits many of these variations, preferring to follow more faithfully the narratives found in the *Protevangelion of James* and other accepted apocryphal sources.

<sup>125</sup> Shoemaker 2005, 455.

<sup>126</sup> Ally Kateusz, for example, argues that the Georgian *Life* preserves much earlier apocryphal teachings, some of which recalled a period when women, including the Virgin Mary, served alongside men as priests. One passage in particular, which survives in the Georgian manuscript Tbilisi A-40, states that 'the holy Theotokos . . . sacrificed herself as the priest and she was sacrificed'; see Kateusz 2019, 131–49. Van Esbroeck also upheld the authenticity of this passage in his edition and analysis of the Georgian *Life*; see Georgian *Life of the Virgin* 74, ed. and trans. van Esbroeck 1986, vol. 2, 64. Shoemaker argues, however, that the meaning of the passage is ambiguous since it gives no clear indication of the subject's gender; see Shoemaker 2005, 448; Georgian *Life of the Virgin*, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 190, n. 1.

such radical ideas when rewriting the story of the Virgin remains. Shoemaker suggests that it would have been easier for a monastic (as opposed to a lay or secular) writer to portray Mary, as well as her female followers, as important figures in the early Christian community: 'the absence of actual women may have made this representation considerably less threatening than it would have been in a mixed, urban setting'.<sup>127</sup> Although this explanation helps to explain the freedom with which Euthymios approached his subject, it still does not fully explain his agenda in elevating Mary to such a powerful position throughout the text.

The answer may lie in the high Mariology that characterises both the Georgian *Life of the Virgin* and its source by John Geometres. John elaborates this doctrine especially in the closing chapters of his *Life*, which deal with the dormition and assumption of the Virgin. These events served to reveal – not only to the apostles who witnessed them but also to the wider Christian community in subsequent centuries – the exceptional holiness of Christ's mother Mary. Geometres writes that the apostles carried 'that supercelestial body, which had borne that unlimited nature and contained the uncircumscribable' and placed it in the tomb. This is followed by a return to more earthly imagery when he states that 'she went into the earth, ceding to the common law of nature while also withdrawing towards her Son and Bridegroom, towards the heavenly bridal chamber . . .'.<sup>128</sup> The paradoxical juxtaposition of earthly and heavenly natures is thus applied to Mary as well as to Christ in this text; she takes on the glory of heavenly existence while remaining subject to death (but not corruption), like other human beings. The Georgian *Life of the Virgin* employs similar language in its description of Mary's death and assumption. Euthymios, like John Geometres, reminds his audience that this event assured the presence of human nature in heaven – thus guaranteeing the final resurrection of all Christians.<sup>129</sup> In her position of queenly power, as the bride of Christ in heaven, Mary also has the power to intercede on behalf of those who pray to her; she is infinitely generous and merciful towards her devotees. The high-flown quality of passages such as these has led some scholars, including Jean Galot and Hilda Graef, to suggest that John Geometres, alone among Byzantine theologians, accorded the role of 'co-redemptrix' to the Virgin Mary.<sup>130</sup> Since this

<sup>127</sup> Shoemaker 2005, 466.

<sup>128</sup> John Geometres, *Life of the Virgin* 30–1, ed. and trans. Wenger 1955, 386–7.

<sup>129</sup> Georgian *Life of the Virgin* 128, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 154.

<sup>130</sup> This hypothesis rests on a technical definition of Christian redemption, which has been worked out especially in the context of the Roman Catholic theological tradition. It is based on a few key



teaching was not commonly accepted in the Eastern Christian tradition, which preferred to stress Mary's solidarity with the rest of the human race even though she was exalted by her role in the incarnation, it is likely that rhetorical hyperbole rather than dogmatic experimentation lies behind such remarkable passages.

In any case, if we read the late tenth-century *Lives of the Virgin* as carefully constructed theological statements about Mary, then their depiction of her as a powerful mother, disciple and leader of the apostles begins to fall into place. From a rhetorical point of view, we need first to understand that she, as the holy subject of these panegyric works, is bound to take centre stage. Next we may note that John Geometres and Euthymios the Athonite, building on at least five centuries of liturgical and theological reflection concerning the Mother of God, recognised that Mary represented an essential link in God's saving dispensation for humanity. God entered creation as a human being while remaining fully divine. The Virgin Mary was chosen as the receptacle for the incarnation; however, her feminine qualities also enabled her to maintain a particularly close and emotional relationship with her Son. It is remarkable that meditation on the latter aspect of Mary's position led monastic writers such as Euthymios to picture her at the centre of Christ's mission, passion, resurrection and legacy; we can only speculate that Athonite veneration of the Mother of God encouraged such reflection.<sup>131</sup> It is unlikely that this author intended a radical restructuring of church leadership on the basis of his hagiographical composition. Nevertheless, it offered an idealistic vision of the earliest Christian community in which male and female followers of Jesus served together on equal terms.

It only remains to discuss briefly the circumstances and possible reception of the four middle Byzantine *Lives of the Virgin*. The late eighth- or early ninth-century *Life* by Epiphanius, which was composed by a monk-priest in a Constantinopolitan monastery, was probably intended for a monastic audience. The text might have been read out in an all-night vigil before one of the great Marian feasts in order to educate the audience concerning the Virgin's life story.<sup>132</sup> The literary context and purpose of the

passages in John Geometres' text that concern Christ's passion, which suggest that Mary suffered along with him on behalf of humankind. See Galot 1957; Graef 1963 (2009), 154–5.

<sup>131</sup> On the Virgin Mary's role as patroness of the monasteries on Mt Athos, see Speake 2002, 17–18.

<sup>132</sup> According to a sample of manuscripts that are available online, it appears that Epiphanius of Kallistratos's *Life of the Virgin* is usually assigned as a reading either for the feast of her Nativity (8 September) or Dormition (15 August); see the Pinakes database, Institut de Recherches et d'Histoire des Textes in Paris, at <https://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr>. For descriptions of the various

longer *Life of the Virgin* by John Geometres was more exclusive. According to Simelidis, John may have composed this work for performance within a lay confraternity at the church of the Theotokos *ta Kyrou* in Constantinople.<sup>133</sup> The text survives in only four manuscripts, which suggests limited circulation not only at the time of its composition but also in subsequent centuries.<sup>134</sup> Although this confraternity, which was made up of devout lay Christians, sought spiritual inspiration at its weekly 'readings', it also expected high-style rhetorical expression that would do justice to its holy patroness, the Mother of God. According to marks or titles in the surviving manuscripts, it is likely that the text was divided into sections for delivery on separate Marian feasts throughout the liturgical year.<sup>135</sup> John Geometres' *Life of the Virgin* thus follows that of Epiphanius in including an ascetic focus; however, it also offers fresh theological and metaphorical reflection on the Theotokos to an audience that was well versed in this rich liturgical tradition.

The Georgian *Life*, following its erudite model, is also divided into sections that reflect the festal cycle of the Virgin Mary's life, beginning with her Nativity in early September and finishing after her death and assumption in the middle of August. Shoemaker has demonstrated how these sections were used as readings in Georgian monasteries throughout the Caucasus and Near East, helping monks and nuns to reflect on the historical and theological meaning of Mary's life.<sup>136</sup> This work, as Simelidis has demonstrated, is somewhat simplified in relation to the *Life* by John Geometres; however, it also contains long sections of theological reflection and panegyric praise of the Mother of God. The *Life* by Symeon the Metaphrast, like other redactions of this kind, offers an elegant, although shorter, version of the narrative. This text is included in Metaphrastic liturgical collections as a reading for the feast of the Dormition (15 August). It might have been read out in monastic or cathedral vigil services on an annual basis.

The manuscript evidence for all four middle Byzantine *Lives of the Virgin* thus suggests that they were written and subsequently disseminated

manuscripts, see Ehrhard 1936–52, vols. 1–3, passim. A useful aid for locating Ehrhard's descriptions of individual manuscripts exists in Perria 1979.

<sup>133</sup> Simelidis 2020, 133. Cf. Magdalino 2018 on this confraternity and its literary as well as devotional practices.

<sup>134</sup> See above, n. III.

<sup>135</sup> For example, Vat. gr. 504, fol. 176v, col. 2 (Annunciation); fol. 178r, col. 2 (Nativity of Christ); fol. 184v (the Passion), etc. The scribe also includes marginal notes (in red) that indicate subject matter, such as Christ's temptation (Mt 4:1–11, etc.) at fol. 183r, col. 2. See also Simelidis 2020, 133–4.

<sup>136</sup> Georgian *Life of the Virgin*, ed. and trans. Shoemaker 2012, 161–4.

for liturgical use – whether this occurred in public or, in the case of John Geometres' *Life*, more restricted settings. The divergence of some of these texts from traditional narratives (whether canonical or apocryphal) concerning the Virgin Mary, along with their surprising emphasis on her personal power and influence among Jesus's followers, must reflect her growing importance during the middle Byzantine centuries. Although Epiphanius of Kallistratos, writing at the beginning of the ninth century (and perhaps aware of iconoclast opposition to her cult), avoided offering excessive praise to the Theotokos and never invoked her intercessory power, Symeon the Metaphrast, John Geometres and Euthymios composed their works a century and a half later for audiences or readers who expected such devotional content. The freedom with which the tenth-century hagiographers approached their subject thus reflects the Virgin's dominant position within the doctrinal and devotional life of the Church in this period.

### Apocalyptic Views of the Panagia

My final category of texts is that of the apocalypse, although it should be noted here, as in the case of other genres discussed in this chapter, that the boundaries of this literary form are flexible. Passages conveying apocalyptic visions, or the fate of human beings in heaven and hell, may occur, for example, in hagiographical texts such as the *Life of St Andrew the Fool*, as well as in treatises and homilies.<sup>137</sup> I shall confine my attention here to a few ninth- and tenth-century texts that are exclusively concerned with such narratives, including especially the two that are known as the *Apocalypse of the Holy Theotokos* and the *Apocalypse of Anastasia*. These two accounts of visionary tours of paradise and hell feature in Jane Baun's ground-breaking study of medieval apocalypses as windows into the beliefs and practices of Byzantine Christian communities.<sup>138</sup> They are significant for our purposes both because they deal with the Virgin Mary's role as intercessor and, as Baun argues, because they stretch the theology of Christian redemption to its limits, placing Mary in a position that in fact challenges Christ's role as merciful Saviour of humankind.

<sup>137</sup> *Life of St Andrew the Fool*, ed. Rydén 1995, vol. 2, 46–63. See Alexander 1985 for background on this tradition.

<sup>138</sup> Baun 2007.

The *Apocalypse of the Theotokos*, which Baun dates to the ninth or tenth century although it is based on a much earlier literary tradition,<sup>139</sup> opens by describing a vision that is granted to the Virgin Mary as she prays on the Mount of Olives. She is taken first to see Hades, where sinners are punished in many different ways and locations on the basis of their particular transgressions. The 'Panagia Theotokos' is moved by their suffering, although she is less sympathetic to those who denied correct belief in the Trinity or herself, along with Jews and practitioners of incest or other crimes. She seeks an audience with God the Father and prays to him for mercy towards all of the other sinners, calling on the assistance of all the saints when he refuses to listen to her entreaties. God eventually relents and grants a brief period of respite to the sinners, between Easter and Pentecost, when their punishments in Hades will pause. The *Apocalypse of Anastasia*, which Baun dates slightly later, around the turn of the tenth century,<sup>140</sup> is more complex, involving the journey of a nun named Anastasia through six levels of the next world, beginning with the heavenly throne of God and ending with a zone reserved for the punishment of well-to-do sinners. Like the *Apocalypse of the Theotokos*, that of Anastasia not only provides a vivid description of the fate of human beings after death but also acts as a cautionary tale with regard to Christian doctrine and morality. The *Apocalypse of Anastasia*, although less concerned with the intercessory role of the Theotokos than that which focuses solely on that holy figure, does allude to her at various points in the text, describing her in one instance as someone who 'entreats and beseeches God, saying, "Master, have mercy on the creation of your hands, and on your world, and do not destroy them."'<sup>141</sup>

In her exploration of the dynamics of intercession and mercy that are described in these, as well as earlier, apocalyptic texts, Baun highlights their authors' subversion of orthodox or 'official' Christian understanding of salvation. Whereas, according to scripture and mainstream patristic tradition, Jesus Christ should represent the preeminent mediator and saviour for ordinary Christians, he has shifted, according to this literary tradition, into the role of Righteous Judge. Baun argues that, as universal monarchs, God the Father and Christ his Son work on the basis of an 'amnesty' model of relations between rulers and their people. In these circumstances, Christian sinners must seek powerful advocates in order to secure

<sup>139</sup> For a discussion of the problems associated with dating such complicated traditions as these apocalypses, both of which were transmitted in numerous manuscripts and versions besides being translated into numerous languages, see Baun 2007, 16–18.

<sup>140</sup> Baun 2007, 60. <sup>141</sup> *Apocalypse of Anastasia* 14, trans. Baun 2007, 403.

forgiveness and salvation; only the saints or, pre-eminently, the Mother of God, are able to fulfil this function. Thus, from being a figure who aligns herself with the merciful intentions of a benevolent God, Mary is frequently portrayed in apocalyptic texts as being at odds with her divine Father and Son. Baun describes this configuration as ‘a dysfunctional family’; Mary, in the *Apocalypse of the Theotokos*, is a ‘majestic, militant grandmother’ who manipulates her heavenly family in order to achieve the results that she seeks.<sup>142</sup>

The main difference between middle Byzantine apocalypses and the other literary genres that we have examined in the course of this book, including sermons, hymns and hagiography, thus lies in their configuration of the celestial hierarchy. Baun argues that whereas mainstream, or liturgical, texts present Mary as a fully integrated member of the heavenly power structure, enjoying a fond and synergic relationship with her son – who is also merciful and a lover of humanity (*philanthropos*) – the medieval apocalypses depict her as an outsider. According to the *Apocalypse of the Theotokos*, Mary demands to be taken on a tour of the underworld and, on being shocked by what she sees there, storms ‘the gates of heaven to badger an unwilling God and Christ into acting in a way contrary to their normal inclinations’.<sup>143</sup> These different perceptions of the dynamics of Christian salvation, which Baun labels ‘orthodox’ and ‘popular’, must have co-existed in Byzantine spirituality. Judging by the numbers of apocalyptic manuscripts that survive, not only in Greek but also in other languages, the latter outlook exerted considerable influence even if it was not expressed in mainstream theological or liturgical settings.

## Conclusions

The material that I have surveyed in this chapter, which can be described in general terms as ‘hagiographical’, presents an aspect of the Virgin Mary which at times seems far removed from the more theological, or Christological, view that predominates in liturgical poetry and homiletics. Mary, as a dignified but powerful woman – usually dressed in purple – intercedes, according to hagiographical texts, on behalf of all Christians who appeal to her. Whereas many *Lives* of saints, including those that celebrate the Mother of God herself, emphasise Mary’s loving relationship and cooperation with her divine Son, some Byzantine apocalypses picture

<sup>142</sup> See the discussion in Baun 2007, 267–318. <sup>143</sup> Baun 2007, 278.

her as a determined advocate who is forced at times to oppose God's righteous will.

Two main issues require discussion in my conclusion to this brief overview of the Marian hagiographical tradition between approximately 600 and 1000 CE. First, it is worth asking whether significant developments occurred in the portrayal of Mary, the Theotokos, in hagiographical or apocalyptic texts throughout these centuries. Second, we should return to the question that Jane Baun has posed concerning the relationship between 'official' and 'popular' strands of the Marian tradition.

With regard to developments in the hagiographical, or panegyric, treatment of the Virgin Mary in this period, it is necessary to allude once again to the significant 'spanner in the works' that van Esbroeck and Shoemaker introduced by their early dating of the Georgian *Life of the Virgin Mary* that is attributed to Maximos the Confessor.<sup>144</sup> The widely accepted scholarly view that the Virgin Mary came to be viewed as a tender and maternal figure in response to Iconoclasm, achieving full-blown literary and iconographical treatment especially after the middle of the ninth century, needed to be reassessed in the light of this evidence.<sup>145</sup> However, if the Georgian *Life* was indeed based on that of the late tenth-century writer, John Geometres, then it fits well with parallel literary developments of this period. George of Nikomedia would remain an early proponent of this movement, with his affective treatment of Mary's lament at the cross and the tomb of Christ influencing not only hagiographers, but also hymnographers and hagiographers of the tenth century.<sup>146</sup> The growing emphasis on emotion and the senses, which Tsironis traces in liturgical and hagiographical writing of the eighth and ninth centuries, thus follows a trajectory that begins in festal homilies and spreads into hymnography and devotional works such as the tenth-century *Lives* by (ps-)Maximos, John Geometres and Symeon the Metaphrast.<sup>147</sup> Although I thus adhere to the view that affective literary treatment of the Mother of God flourished especially after the end of Iconoclasm, it is worth remembering that such rhetorical emphasis is present (although not dominant) in earlier liturgical texts. As we have seen in earlier chapters, hymns and homilies of the

<sup>144</sup> For discussion of the dating of this text, see above, 192–4.

<sup>145</sup> Shoemaker 2011c, in response to Kalavrezou 1990; Kalavrezou 2000; Tsironis 2000; Tsironis 2005.

<sup>146</sup> See especially George of Nikomedeia, *Homilies on Great Friday* and *On the Virgin Mary at the Tomb*. Studies on the influence of these homilies on post-Iconoclast art include Maguire 1981, 96–108; Barber 1994, 204–5; Ševčenko 2011.

<sup>147</sup> Tsironis 2011, esp. 195–6.

sixth to early eighth centuries could also focus on Mary's motherly qualities, in relation to both the infancy and the suffering of Christ. Romanos the Melodist provided dramatic dialogues in order to portray the Virgin's emotional relationship with her son. Eighth-century preachers including Germanos of Constantinople and Andrew of Crete developed these themes in their sermons on Marian feasts, emphasising the reality of Christ's incarnation by means of his mother's humanity.<sup>148</sup> Even as such texts prefigure later developments in the tradition, it is possible to perceive trends in hagiographical writing between the early seventh and late tenth centuries. The later witnesses in this tradition, including the *Lives* by John Geometres, Euthymios the Athonite (the Georgian *Life*) and Symeon the Metaphrast, epitomise a movement towards a higher and more mystical style of panegyric celebration of the Mother of God. As in the case of late ninth- and early tenth-century preachers, these hagiographers avoid precise statements about the Virgin's physical nature – whether these concern her conception or death and assumption into heaven. Unlike some early eighth-century counterparts, the middle Byzantine writers stress the theological rather than the literal meaning of Mary's life. They are conscious not only of the misconceptions that might arise from detailed scrutiny but are also influenced by the increasingly exalted style of Marian praise that by this time permeated all liturgical worship. Such awareness does not prevent a theologian such as John Geometres from exploring his subject with expansive enthusiasm; however, he is more inclined to digress into theological and poetic meditation than to investigate the historical basis for his narrative.

How then do we assess the influence of high-style texts such as the *Lives* of Symeon the Metaphrast and John Geometres, as opposed to those that display a more 'popular' aspect? One way of approaching this question is to look at the reception of the various genres by Byzantine Christians. Judging by the numbers of surviving manuscripts, along with the translation of individual texts into other languages, it appears that lower-style, more narrative, hagiographical and apocalyptic texts enjoyed a wider audience than did more literary works such as John Geometres' orations on the Virgin Mary. It is surprising, considering their frequently heterodox content, that the official Church apparently condoned the writing and dissemination of apocalypses and miracle stories about the Virgin Mary. Orthodox Christians from a variety of

<sup>148</sup> Cunningham 2008a, 252.

backgrounds and ranks – even within the ecclesiastical hierarchy – probably read and enjoyed this literature, perhaps regarding it as morally and spiritually improving.

We may conclude that modern concerns with regard to the ‘subversive’ nature of such material may be misplaced. Like many believers of the twenty-first century, Byzantine Christians were capable of assimilating conflicting messages as long as they understood their literary or theological contexts. Miracle stories and apocalypses, which were known to have a mythical or legendary aspect, could be appreciated as moral tales or simply enjoyed for their entertainment value. The liturgical life of the Church, which was packed with more orthodox teaching with regard to the Mother of God, would have guided the faithful successfully in their understanding both of her importance in Christological terms and of her submission to the Trinitarian God. Most importantly, the tradition as a whole maintained a consistent emphasis on the Virgin’s physical link with the rest of humanity. This rule applies as much to high-style panegyric texts such as John Geometres’ *Life of the Virgin Mary* as it does to collections of miracle stories or apocalypses throughout the Byzantine period.