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Author: Annemarie Weyl Carr

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Review article

Mary B. Cunningham, *The Virgin Mary in Byzantium, c. 400 – 1000. Hymns, Homilies and Hagiography*, Cambridge UK, New York, Melbourne, New Delhi, Singapore: Cambridge University Press, 2021. ISBN 978-1-108-84569-4. 275pp.

As Christianity infiltrated the cultural systems of late antiquity, it developed literary genres distinctive to its own didactic, devotional, and persuasive needs. These were not formed for the purpose of speaking about the Virgin Mary, but they became the vessels into which verbal expression about her was poured, and inevitably they left their impress upon its shape. To Mary Cunningham, ‘the Virgin’s many aspects depend first on the literary genres that portray her, and second on the stage of cultic development in which they appear’ (p. 5). Her book assembles known texts on Mary from three major genres of Byzantine writing—hymnography, homilies, and hagiography—and distills from them a picture of the development of Marian cult in Byzantium over six centuries from roughly 400 to 1000 CE. Her book will be paired with a volume by Leslie Brubaker devoted in similarly comprehensive manner to material artifacts devoted to Mary from the same period. Their project is designed to answer Brubaker’s concern that ‘although there is general (though not universal) agreement the “cult” of the Virgin occurred much later than was once believed . . . it remains the case that there are numerous pre-iconoclast monuments to and portraits of the Virgin, and their character is uncertain’.¹ A number of compiled volumes have responded over the past decade to questions about the origins and formation of Marian devotion. Cunningham’s volume stands out in offering an integrated overview of Marian veneration in the Byzantine world over its formative centuries. Her book yields what will become for many of us an indispensable *vademecum*, a thoughtfully compiled working guide to a rich but complex domain.

The book’s Introduction offers compact overviews of three major themes: the role and relevance of genre, the Virgin and gender, and the development of doctrine and devotion to 1000. The latter introduces major churches, the Marian feasts, and the terms that will shape the discussion of Marian devotion, as Mary’s abiding theological themes—her mediacy between divinity and humanity and her centrality to Christology—were inflected by evidences of her personality, her maternal feelings, her emotional reactions, her biographical narrative, and her intercessory powers. Intercession serves especially to signal cultic evolution, but it is far from simply incremental. Indeed, as Cunningham says, the purpose of the book is to show

¹ Leslie Brubaker, ‘Preface’, in Leslie Brubaker and Mary B. Cunningham (eds), *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Texts and Images*, Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011, xxi.



that Marian messages are always multiple, inflected throughout their development by the varied demands of different expressive genres.

The ensuing chapters treat specific genres: two chapters on hymnography bracket two on homilies, with a fifth on hagiography. The first, 'Praise of Mary in Song', treats hymnography of the fifth and sixth centuries. Composed to teach Mary's role in the incarnation, the hymns showed her as the bringer of Christ but only slowly went on to invoke her as an intercessor. *Sub tuum praesidium* is overtly intercessory, and a concise argument in favor of its late date opens the chapter. It turns then to sections on the Syriac poetry of Ephraim and Jacob of Serugh, and on the *Iagdari*, Jerusalemite hymns composed in Greek but preserved only in Georgian translations. Fresh and fascinating, this material invites Cunningham's speculation about the role of Mary's emerging maternity, as evoked by Jacob, and of the legends of her death, as developed in Jerusalem, in stimulating intercessory invocation in the verse. It is with the *Akathistos* hymn that Mary emerges clearly as intercessor, and Cunningham again offers a compact argument in favor of its date in the early sixth century, shortly before the hymns of Romanos, with whom the chapter closes. It is with Romanos that Mary opens out as a personality, expressively maternal, engaged in Christ's ministry, and voluble as the means through which the pain of his passion is made visible. Didactic, celebrating Mary's centrality in the mystery of God's entry into creation, the early hymnography also exposes her slowly as an intercessor who can be addressed directly.

Paired chapters on homilies follow. 'From Theotokos to Intercessor' examines fifth- and sixth-century homilies on Mary. Whether espousing a one- or a two-nature Christology, the Fathers of this era concurred on the importance of Mary as the guarantor of the reality of the incarnation and the emblem of Christ's entry into nature. Growing numbers of Marian shrines were inviting popular veneration; the mounting roster of Marian feasts amplified opportunities for official rhetoric; and the imperial endorsement of Mary as the protector of Constantinople strengthened her force as mediator between heaven and earth. Church and State thus joined in opening Christology into Mariology. Mary remained an instrument through which to explicate Christology, but her presentation was enhanced with panegyric, narrative, and imagined dialogues, and so offered heightened inducement to make direct appeals to her for protection.

‘Panegyrics and Supplication’, in turn, addresses the densest phase of Marian homiletic writing from 600-900 CE, and with it the issues of Byzantine Iconoclasm. Cunningham is firm that we do not know how or how strongly iconophiles differed from iconoclasts in their attitudes to Mary, but the emphasis on the humanity of Christ which accompanied the Iconoclasm can be felt throughout the homilies. They are now clearly bound to specific feasts, and Cunningham moves through the roster of Marian celebrations, noting the homiletic themes characteristic of each. Sermons on Mary’s conception, birth, and presentation rely on the *Protevangelion*, embraced now despite its apocryphal character. *Ethopoia* is freely used to animate these events, as are appeals to see, hear, taste, and touch. The *Hypapante*, initially a dominical feast, becomes more firmly Marian as the solemnity of Christ’s humanity gives gravity to Symeon’s prediction of the sword that will pierce Mary’s heart at the Passion. Homilies on the Annunciation, now clearly tied to the feast and its springtime date, are often embellished with imagined dialogue, though it obscures the moment of Mary’s actual conception. The weight of Christ’s Passion, felt already in the sermons for the *Hypapante*, is emphatically concretized in the emergence of Mary’s lament at the cross as a homiletic theme, first from the pen of Germanos, responding to Romanos, and then of George of Nikomedia. The Dormition homilies receive particular attention in this chapter, as Cunningham probes the impact of the evolving story of Mary’s death on her role as an intercessor for humankind. The interceding Mary was occasionally seen in visions on earth, but was most often imagined at Christ’s right hand in heaven as she appears in the Dormition sermons. Also important in fostering her intercessory role were the ‘occasional sermons’ celebrating the capital city’s miraculous deliverance from assault by Mary’s maphorion. Plausibly in response to the emphasis on Christ’s humanity in the Iconoclast era, the meaning of intercession shifted in this era from Mary’s intermediacy as the ‘bridge’ between God and man to her power as a merciful and sympathetic recipient of specific petitions for help and succor.

‘Theology in Verse’, returns to hymnography, now as codified in the great liturgical compendia of the ninth and tenth centuries. It turns first to the Virgin’s festal hymnography, focusing on kanons, long hymns of adulation addressed to the feast’s subject, and theotokia, short verses honoring Mary often interspersed between the kanons’ sections. As in the preceding chapter on homilies, Cunningham surveys successive feasts, culling characteristic



emphases in the kanons of each. Many emphasize Mary's place between old and new dispensations, presenting her at her Nativity as the cosmic turning point in history when God entered his creation, portraying her in the Hypapante as the counterpart to the Temple, the dwelling-place of God on earth, and praising her in the Annunciation as the inauguration of a new creation. Abounding in typology, they probe her prophetic presence in the Old Testament and lodge her in a divinely ordered natural world, thus opening new avenues for theological and poetic exaltation. In none do moral exhortation or pleas for intercession play a significant role. Even the Dormition homilies, though vivid with contrasts of her earthly humanity and heavenly exaltation, do not go on to dwell upon her power as an intercessor. The chapter turns then to the hymnography for daily services as compiled in the *Oktoechos* or later *Parakletike*, singling out the stavrotheotokia, hymns honoring Mary at the cross sung in penitential services each Wednesday and Friday. The chapter closes with the compunctive theotokia and stavrotheotokia of the Lenten *Triodion*.

It is with this chapter that Cunningham's admonition to respect the power of genre becomes compellingly clear. The hymns seen here contrast clearly with those of the initial chapter, as praise shifts to petition: Mary's biography, her emotional engagement with her Son, her role within a divinely ordered cosmos, her availability for human petition are dimensionally greater in them, as is their bond to specific Marian feasts. They attest thus to the diachronic development of Marian devotion. But the contrast of the hymns with the contemporary homilies in the immediately preceding chapter makes it equally clear that the festal kanons explore dimensions of Marian veneration that are quite independent of the festal homilies, with very different approaches to her intercessory access, while the compunctive pleading seen in the stavrotheotokia is distinctively their own.

'Narratives about the Panagia', finally, turns to hagiography: miracle stories, *Vitae*, and the tantalizing apocalypses of the Virgin. These texts belong predominantly to the post-Iconoclastic era, though miracle stories had begun to appear already in the early Christian period. New ones emerged later, but not in the numbers one might expect, and Cunningham is sure that much such material remains yet to be discovered. The stories range from individual to empire-wide protection, and prove that the aid invoked in sermons and troparia was expected in fact, as well. The four known *Lives* of Mary imply sophisticated audiences, though that of Eustratios of Kallistratos is more historical than theological in tone.

Cunningham endorses the conclusion that the Georgian *Life* by Euthymios the Athonite is based on that of John Geometres.² Both fill in the Virgin's biography as fully as possible, emphasizing her emotional engagement with her son and building on it to make her an energetic participant also in his public ministry, especially after his death. Mary's own intercessory powers are passionately envisioned by Geometres, whose theologically laden text closes with her majestic but anguished regency at Christ's side in heaven. In sharp contrast to the *Lives*, the apocalypses of Mary were widely consumed, and Cunningham emphasizes their importance as rare testimonies to the *sensus populus*. They stretch the theology of Christian redemption to its limits, letting Mary challenge the judgment of Christ, but Cunningham resists their interpretation as subversive, arguing that a many-faceted Mary was well within the interpretive capabilities of Byzantine devotees.

The material sketched above is compendious for a 215-page text, and there are ways in which one wishes the book had been longer. That a text is historical, didactic, maternal, or intercessional says only so much; one quickly wants to know *how* it answers such an epithet. Fine as Cunningham's summaries are, their compression can feel confining. But this draws attention to a last and crucial dimension of the book's value: its superb bibliographies, above all the bibliography of original sources. There exists no cleaner, richer avenue of access to Byzantium's literary legacy on Mary than this. This is likely to be the most precious and heavily used gift of the volume. It makes accessible the texts one craves when reading Cunningham's careful summaries. It completes the volume and in some sense defines it: it is an effective, deeply thoughtful working tool for entering the rich but complex domain of Byzantine Mariology.

² The Georgian *Life* has been translated by Stephen Shoemaker, who accepts its attribution in the manuscript tradition to Maximos the Confessor: see Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Maximos the Confessor, The Life of the Virgin* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012. On this text a translation of John Geometres' *Life*, see Christos Simelidis, 'Two Lives of the Virgin: John Geometres, Euthymios the Athonite, and Maximos the Confessor', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 74 (2020): 125-59. A critical edition of John Geometres' text by Christos Simelidis and Father Maximos Constas is forthcoming in the Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library.