The Mother of God and the Natural World: Byzantine Conceptions of Sacrament and Creation

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This article examines the connection between Mary, the Mother of God, and a transfigured natural world, as depicted in Byzantine liturgical texts and experienced in the lives of Orthodox Christians. Although these two aspects of Marian devotion may seem unrelated, they both reinforce the Virgin Mary's theological role as the meeting-place between the divine and created spheres. Byzantine hymnography and homiletics use typology not only to express Mary's role as the receptive creation into which God entered, but also to convey a sacramental meaning specifically linking the Theotokos with the mysteries of baptism and the Eucharist. More tangible reminders of her link with the material elements that play a part in spiritual renewal and healing can be found in the shrines, often endowed with miraculous pools and springs, that existed in medieval Constantinople. Both formal liturgical and popular association of the Theotokos with a transfigured creation thus reinforced her role as Christians' main intercessor before God in the Byzantine world.

> Hail, favoured one, the all-gold jar of manna and the tabernacle truly made of purple, which the new Bezaleel adorned in golden style! Hail, favoured one, forever purple God-bearing cloud and spring eternally pouring out grace for everyone![1]

Praise of Mary, the Mother of God, takes many forms in Orthodox liturgical worship. Passages such as the above, which appear not only in surviving Byzantine festal homilies but also in the hymnography that is still sung in offices of the great Marian feasts, may bewilder a visitor who encounters this tradition for the first time. Instead of instructing the faithful in a discursive or literal way by means of lessons and sermons, the Orthodox Church presents congregations with a fully developed exegetical interpretation of Scripture, much of which is expressed by means of prophecy, typology, and song (often the biblical canticles). Such didactic practice, which is especially espoused in the Eastern Christian tradition, must reflect a belief

[1] Germanos, *Homily on the Annunciation*, in D. Fecioru, 'Un nou gen de predica in omiletica ortodoxa,' *Biserica Ortodoxa Romana* 64 (1946): 71; trans. M. B. Cunningham, *Wider Than Heaven. Eighth-Century Homilies on the Mother of God* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2008), 226.

that the Christological mystery is best expressed by means of poetic, and especially biblical, language. The purpose of this liturgical synthesis is to reveal the complete and integrated pattern of God's saving dispensation, from the moment of creation (Genesis 1) to Pentecost and beyond. Scripture is the material out of which Orthodox hymnography is woven: the resulting rich tapestry allows believers to understand better—or to put it another way, to pray and experience better—the Christological meaning of Scripture, which is expounded in both the Old and the New Testaments.[2]

Typology possesses a metaphorical dimension that expresses in a mysterious way God's ongoing immanence in creation.[3] Leaving aside for now the scholarly debate concerning whether typology as an exegetical method is primarily historical or allegorical in its aims,[4] it is worth examining its function in Marian liturgical celebration. The Mother of God, as the physical space and means whereby God became man, has attracted more typological treatment in Orthodox liturgical writing than any other biblical figure.[5] This form of praise, with special reference to Mary's role in the Christological mystery, appears to have originated in the fourth century—although it may have been adapted from earlier literary references to the Church.[6] It flourished especially after the Council of Ephesus (431), appearing in the poetic sermons of bishops including Proklos of Constantinople, Hesychios of Jerusalem, Basil of Seleucia, and many others.[7] The *Akathistos Hymn* represents an important link in this tradition, although scholars remain undecided about exactly where and when this Marian hymn was composed.[8] Many biblical types that came

[2] For good introductions to this subject, see E. Theokritoff, 'Praying the Scriptures in Orthodox Worship', in *Orthodox and Wesleyan Scriptural Understanding and Practice*, ed. S. T. Kimbrough (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2005), 73-87; E. A. Briere, 'Scripture in Hymnography: A Study in Some Feasts of the Orthodox Church' (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1983); Hugh Wybrew, *Orthodox Feasts of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary. Liturgical Texts and Commentary* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2000).

[3] For a useful explanation of Marian typology, see P. Ladouceur, 'Old Testament Prefigurations of the Mother of God', *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 50, nos. 1-2 (2006): 5-57.

[4] F. W. Young, following Sebastian Brock, argues that patristic typology expresses an eternal or 'sacramental' timeframe in liturgical contexts, thus transcending the historical associations of individual Old Testament types. John Breck meanwhile defends the historical nature of typology, as opposed to forms of allegory that identify eternal meanings. See F. M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. 140-60; S. Brock, *The Luminous Eye. The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1985); J. Breck, *Scripture in Tradition. The Bible and its Interpretation in the Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2001), 21-31.

[5] For further discussion, especially in the Byzantine context, see M. B. Cunningham, 'The Meeting of the Old and the New: The Typology of Mary the Theotokos in Byzantine Homilies and Hymns', in *The Church and Mary*. Studies in Church History 39, ed. R. N. Swanson (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2004), 52-62.

[6] K. Banev, '"Myriad of Names to Represent her Nobleness": The Church and the Virgin Mary in the Hymns of Byzantium', in *A Celebration of Living Theology. A Festschrift in Honour of Andrew Louth*, ed. J. A. Mihoc and L. Aldea (London: Bloomsbury T. & T. Clark, 2014), 75-103.

[7] N. Constas, ed. and trans., *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity. Homilies 1-5, Texts and Translations* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003); M. Aubineau, *Les homélies festales d'Hésychius de Jérusalem*, Subsidia Hagiographica 59 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1978); Basil of Seleucia, *Homilies* (PG 85:27-474).

[8] L. M. Peltomaa has recently argued that the *Akathistos Hymn* was written in the period between the

to be associated with the Mother of God, such as the burning bush (Exod 3: 1-8), the cloud (Exod 19:9, 16-18), and the mountain (Exod 19:16-20, ff.; Dan 2:334; Hab 3:3; Isa 2:2), reinforce her association with creation. However, Mary is understood to represent a transfigured creation: the objects that such types evoke are those special places in which God has chosen to reveal himself to humanity.

In the discussion that follows, I would like to explore two specific aspects of Mary's association with nature, according to Orthodox theological teaching. The first has to do with the typological expression of this mystery in liturgical texts, with special focus on the Virgin's place as the physical *purveyor* of the sacramental encounter with Christ, especially in baptism and the Eucharist; the second concerns the less regulated, but possibly even more visible, role that she played in relation to holy springs or pools in Byzantine Constantinople from about the fifth century onward. Although these two topics may appear unrelated—in that the first represents a literary, or liturgical, mode of expression and the second a more spontaneous experience—I shall argue that both reveal the symbolic, and even ontological, connection between a transfigured creation, according to the inaugurated eschaton, and Mary, the Mother of God. Both thus possess a 'sacramental' aspect, in that they assist an encounter between the divine and earthly realms—whether this occurs in the context of liturgical worship or in less regulated moments of religious activity.

Typology of the Mother of God in liturgical texts: a sacramental meaning?

To begin our discussion with liturgical texts, it appears that Byzantine hymnographers and preachers employed certain images and types for the Mother of God in order to evoke her place within the Christian mysteries. Building on the idea that Mary provided Christ with his human nature, from the moment of his conception in her womb, liturgical writers taught, with the help of poetic and typological imagery, that she represented the source, or material, from which elements such as water, bread, and wine were derived. We see this role illustrated in liturgical texts that associate the Mother of God either with the physical vessels or materials associated either with baptism (the font and blessed water) or with the Eucharistic rite (bread, wine, and the objects—such as the altar or chalice—in which these are contained).

Some textual examples will serve to demonstrate this point. To begin with the sacrament of baptism, we already find allusions to this mystery in the *Akathistos Hymn*. The anonymous author describes the Virgin Mary both as the source of the living water and as the vessel in which it is contained in the following stanza:

councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), thus challenging the long-standing acceptance among scholars that it is a sixth- or even seventh-century composition. See L. M. Peltomaa, *The Image of the Virgin Mary in the Akathistos Hymn* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), esp. 113-4. For a critical review of this thesis, see the review by N. Constas in *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (2005): 355-58.

Hail, since you make the many-streamed river gush forth;
Hail, you who prefigure the baptismal font;
Hail, you who take away the filth of sin;
Hail, basin who washes clean the conscience […][9]

The association of the Mother of God with the material agents of spiritual rebirth, water and the baptismal font, was picked up by later Byzantine hymnographers. Their compositions, like the *Akathistos Hymn*, continue to be sung in offices of the Orthodox Church today. A sticheron in both Small and Great Vespers for the feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God compares her to 'the fountain of Life that gushes forth from the flinty rock' (alluding to Exod 17:6).[10] Although the type refers to Moses' smiting of the rock in Horeb when the people of Israel were thirsty, it points forward not only to Mary's role in the incarnation, but also to the living water of baptism through which Christians are granted eternal life in Christ.

The 'sealed spring or fountain (*πηγή*)', which is an allusion to the Song of Songs 4:12, also appears in homilies and hymns for various feasts of the Mother of God. A fifth-century example can be found in Hesychios of Jerusalem's fifth homily in honour of the Virgin Mary. In an extensive allusion to the garden imagery of Song 4:12, he writes: 'The Bridegroom whom you bore called you "an enclosed garden" and "a sealed spring"; he spoke of you before, in the Songs, as "sealed spring" […] he called you [this] because the River of Life came out of you and filled the inhabited earth, but the nuptial branch did not deplete your spring.'[11] The image of the sealed spring, like that of the closed gate of the temple (Ezek 43:27-44: 4), recalls above all Mary's virginity. This paradoxical Christological teaching, which implies both a rich potency but also inviolability,[12] could also have connections with the sacrament of baptism. New life is conferred on Christian initiates by means of water; Christ, the 'River of Life', imparts spiritual life after flowing out of his created source, the Mother of God.

Another fifth-century example, this time from the West, can be found in a sermon by the pope Leo I, who compared the virginal womb of the Theotokos to the Church (or more specifically, the baptismal font), also emphasising the role of the Holy Spirit both in Christ's incarnation and in the rite of baptism: 'By the Spirit, Christ is born from the body of his unsullied Mother; by this same Spirit, the Christian is reborn

[9] *The Akathistos Hymn*, Stanza 21; trans. Peltomaa, *The Image of the Virgin Mary in the Akathistos Hymn*, 17.

[10] Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware, *The Festal Menaion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969; repr., S. Canaan, PA: St Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1998), 99, 104.

[11] Hesychios of Jerusalem, *De S. Maria Deipara* V.2, in Aubineau, *Les homélies festales d'Hésychius de Jérusalem*, 162.

[12] T. Arentzen, 'Virginity Recast: Romanos and the Mother of God' (PhD thesis, Lund University, 2014); forthcoming as *The Virgin in Song: Mary and the Poetry of Romanos the Melodist* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).

from the womb of the holy Church'.[13] Biblical types that foreshadow the holy spaces of Christian religious celebration, the furniture and vessels therein, and even the bread and wine of the Eucharist, also appear frequently in Byzantine liturgical texts. The feast of the Virgin Mary's Entry into the Temple focuses in its hymnography on the replacement of the old temple, which was made of bricks and mortar, by the living Theotokos. Mary receives her formation in the innermost sanctum, the 'holy of holies', within the Jewish temple, thus becoming the holy—and living—space that will contain God in the new dispensation. As George of Nikomedia writes: 'The Law prefigured you most wonderfully as tabernacle, jar of manna, strange ark, veil of the temple, rod of Aaron, temple never to be destroyed, and gate of God […]'[14] The Eucharistic association of such imagery may not be obvious, but it is embedded typologically in this text. Within the sanctuary, the manna that was contained in the jar (Exod 16:32-33) symbolises the body of Christ. The Old Testament jar of manna prefigures both the paten and the chalice of the new dispensation, which will contain the body and blood of Christ. As in the case of other types connected with the tabernacle or temple, the Mother of God represents the sacred space, its furniture, or the vessels that contain the holy elements.[15] She thus mediates the mystery of sacramental encounter, acting as a bridge between God and humanity. It is also significant that the Theotokos can be the antitype of all such Old Testament objects at once. She thus stands not only for the whole of a transfigured creation, as we saw earlier, but also—and more specifically—as the sanctified space and holy vessels which God, the Logos, has chosen to enter and inhabit.

It is perhaps worth concluding this section of my article by recalling that an image of the Mother of God, holding the Christ child, adorns the apses of many Byzantine and modern Orthodox churches. This iconography is usually understood to symbolise the central doctrine of Orthodox Christianity, namely, the Incarnation, which serves to justify its placement in the sanctuary, just above the altar.[16] Beyond this, however, we may ask whether it is possible that the placement of the Mother of God within this sanctified space reflects her role both as source and container of the sacrificial body of Christ.[17] Without the Theotokos, Christ, the God-man whose body and blood are offered to the faithful in the Eucharistic sacrifice, would not be

[13] Leo I, Sermon 29.1 (PL 54:227); trans. L. Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church. The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, trans. T. Buffer (San Fancisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 227.

[14] George of Nikomedia, *Kanon on the Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple*, *Canticle Nine, November Menaion*, 274; trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware, *The Festal Menaion*, 191 (with adjustments).

[15] Ladouceur, 'Old Testament Prefigurations of the Mother of God', 9.

[16] See R. Cormack, 'The Mother of God in Apse Mosaics', in *Mother of God. Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, ed. M. Vassilaki (Athens: Skira, 2000), 91-103.

[17] I am indebted to Maria Evangelatou for suggesting this idea to me in private correspondence. She will explore it further in a future article, '"*Κρατήρ ευφροσύνης καί αγαλλιάσεως ανεξάντλητος*" ("Inexhaustible Krater of Joy and Jubilation")': The Theotokos as Bearer of the Eucharist in Byzantine Culture', in *The Reception of the Mother of God in Byzantium: Marian Narratives in Texts and Images*, ed. T. Arentzen and M. B. Cunningham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

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in our midst. It is nevertheless important to remember that the Virgin Mary's role in this context is not a priestly one; rather, she represents the place where Christ and humanity become one. She contains God, even as she represents the Church and indeed the whole of the transfigured creation.

The Mother of God in the physical landscape of Byzantine Constantinople

Another way in which Orthodox Christians have come to recognise Mary's identification with creation is through her association with holy places, especially springs or pools, in the physical landscape. Although this phenomenon continues in the modern world, I shall focus in the discussion that follows on the imperial city of Constantinople, between about the late fifth and the fifteenth centuries. Literary and archaeological records of miracles associated with particular Marian shrines in this city survive throughout this period. Many of these sites possessed holy springs or pools that offered healing power, thanks to the mediation of the Mother of God.

I have already raised the question whether Byzantine (or indeed modern) congregations fully understood the complex, and deeply theological, typology concerning the Mother of God that was expounded in hymnography and festal sermons. Whatever the answer to that question may be, it is likely that the Christian faithful—at least those who frequented Marian pools and springs in Constantinople—fully recognised the healing power of these watery shrines. It is significant that holy springs were often associated with sanctuaries (known as *ἁγιάσματα*) dedicated either to the Virgin Mary or to her mother, St Anna.

Eirini Panou has argued recently that the association of both Mary and St Anna with holy pools of water may have begun in Jerusalem.[18] A pool (or more precisely two adjoining pools), located just north of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, was associated in early Christian tradition with the story of the healing of a paralytic in John 5:2. This site came to be commemorated by a three-aisled basilica in the middle of the fifth century. However, perhaps because of a long-standing tradition that associated the pool of Bethesda with the home of Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, the church was re-dedicated to the Virgin Mary sometime before AD 530. Various literary sources, dating from the fifth century onward, describe the pool in Jerusalem as a place of miracles and healing. One such text, a fifth-century 'amulet' preserved in a papyrus discovered at Oxyrhynchus, called both on Christ ('the God of the probatic pool') and the Virgin Mary (named as 'Our Lady the Theotokos') to heal a woman named Ioannia from her fever.[19] In addition to its healing power,

[18] E. Panou, 'Aspects of St Anna's Cult in Byzantium' (PhD thesis, The University of Birmingham, 2011; soon to be published by Francis and Taylor); Panou, 'The Church of Mary in the Probatic Pool and the Hagiasmata of Constantinople', in *Patristic Studies in the Twenty-First Century. Proceedings of an International Conference to Mark the 50th Anniversary of the International Association of Patristic Studies*, ed. B. Bitton-Ashkelony, T. de Bruyn, and C. Harrison (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 635-50.

[19] C. Wessely, ed. and trans., *Les plus anciens monuments du Christianisme* écrits *sur paypyrus*, Patro-

the probatic pool in Jerusalem was associated from an early date with baptism and spiritual purification. Such symbolism may have been intended (albeit implicitly) in the Gospel of John; it was further developed by early Christian writers including Tertullian, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, and others.[20]

Whether or not the healing, baptismal, and Marian associations of the probatic pool in Jerusalem were closely related, it is possible that this body of water created a precedent for similar sanctuaries in Constantinople. In the latter context, the springs or pools of water at Marian shrines played no explicit baptismal role; rather, they served either as sites for ritual bathing or as centres of miraculous healing.[21] As in the case of liturgical texts that use typology or poetic imagery in order to suggest Mary's connection with physical objects or substances such as water, such functions would have reinforced the association of the Virgin Mary with created matter—even if they did not always display an explicitly sacramental aspect. Three of the most famous Marian shrines in Constantinople—all of which included churches and monasteries in their complexes—namely, the Blachernai, the 'Source' (*Πηγή*), and the Hodegon, had springs or pools associated with them. Ritual activities, as well as miracles, occurred at these sites. It is worth examining the surviving literary sources that deal with these shrines in order to explore how they featured in the liturgical and devotional lives of Constantinopolitan Christians.

The most important Constantinopolitan shrine of the Virgin that incorporated water was the complex known as the Blachernai.[22] This site, which was originally located just outside the Theodosian land walls (which were later extended in order to enclose it),[23] was probably founded as a Marian sanctuary by the empress Verina shortly before AD 475.[24] 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. 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

logia Orientalis 18 (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1924), 417-20; Panou, *Aspects of St Anna's Cult in Byzantium*, 25.

[20] See Panou, 'The Church of Mary in the Probatic Pool', 637-38.

[21] One exception to this statement is the church of the Chalkoprateia, which contained a baptistery with a pool. However, this function within the church does not appear to have been linked explicitly with veneration of the Virgin Mary—apart from being contained within a whole complex that was dedicated to her. On the church of the Chalkoprateia in Constantinople, see T. E. Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople, Architecture and Liturgy* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1971), 28; C. Mango, 'The Chalkoprateia Annunciation and the Pre-Eternal Logos', *Deltion tes christianikes archaiologikes etaireias* IV, 17 (1993-94): 165-70.

[22] Other pools associated with Marian shrines in Constantinople included the *Theotokos ta Areobindou* and *ta Armatiou*. See P. Magdalino, 'Medieval Constantinople', in *Studies on the History and Topography of Byzantine Constantinople*, ed. P. Magdalino (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), I, 34; such pools were often run by fraternities and were known as *lousmata*.

[23] The walls were extended by Heraclius, following the siege of the Avars and Persians in 626. See R. Janin, *Constantinople byzantine: développement urbain et repertoire topographique* (Paris: Institut Français d'Études Byzantines, 1964), 163.

[24] C. Mango, 'Constantinople as Theotokoupolis', in Vassilaki, *Mother of God*, 19.

in the same century.[25] There was also a pool or bath, known as a *λούσμα*, associated with the shrine, which must have been there even before its foundation.[26] Most accounts of the Virgin Mary's veneration at the sanctuary of the Blachernai focus more 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'.[27] The pool played a ceremonial role when, on certain Fridays during the year, emperors paid a special visit to the shrine.[28] According to the tenth-century *Book of Ceremonies*, the royal visitors first entered the holy Soros where they performed certain prayers, venerated and lit candles before an icon of the Virgin and Child known as the '*episkepsis*', and then immersed themselves three times in the adjoining sacred bath.[29] This description suggests a more ceremonial than impromptu role for the Blachernai pool. Nevertheless, it suggests an association between the Mother of God and water—in Constantinople, as well as Jerusalem.

The shrine of the Virgin of the Source (*Πηγή*) was based at a sanctuary—again just outside the walls of Constantinople—and was believed also to have been founded in the second half of the fifth century during the reign of Leo I. Thanks to a tenth-century collection of miracle stories associated with this shrine, it is possible to reconstruct not only the origins of the Pege sanctuary, but also the history of its use during the Byzantine centuries.[30] The anonymous author describes the legendary origins of the shrine, relating that 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 *Kataphyge* or refuge. 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. This church, to which a male monastery was soon attached, became a focus for both imperial and lay pilgrimage.

[25] Mango, 'Constantinople as Theotokoupolis', 21.

[26] See Janin, *Constantinople byzantine*, 161-71; C. Mango, 'The Origins of the Blachernai Shrine at Constantinople', *Actes du XIIIe Congrès International d'Archéologie Chrétienne*, vol. 2 (Rome: Pontifical Institute of Christian Archaeology and Split: Archaeological Museum, 1998): 62-63.

[27] E. N. Papaioannou, 'The "Usual Miracle" and an Unusual Image: Psellos and the Icons of Blachernai', *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik* 51 (2001): 177-88; B.V. Pentcheva, *Icons and Power*: *The Mother of God in Byzantium* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2006), 145-63; C. Barber, *Contesting the Logic of Painting: Art and Understanding in Eleventh-Century Byzantium* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 80-98.

[28] J. Ebersolt, *Constantinople: Recueil d'études, d'archéologie et d'histoire* (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1951), 48, 51.

[29] Constantine Porphyrogennetos, *Book of Ceremonies* II.12, trans. (with Greek edition of the Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae, Bonn 1829) A. Moffatt and M. Tall, *Constantine Porphyrogennetos, The Book of Ceremonies*, Byzantina Australiensia 18 (1-2) (Canberra: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 2012), vol. 2, 551 – 56. According to Janin, the ceremony was performed 'from time to time', but always on a Friday. See Janin, *Constantinople byzantine*, 170.

[30] A.-M. Talbot and S. F. Johnson, trans., *Miracle Tales from Byzantium* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

The Byzantine emperors visited the spring on Ascension Day; on this occasion, the patriarch celebrated a Divine Liturgy, which was followed by a meal.[31]

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 many pilgrims did not recognise the Virgin when they encountered her in visions; she appeared to be a woman 'of modest means' (*γυναῖκα τινα μετρίαν*).[32]

The monastery of the Hodegon lay closest to the centre of the imperial city; it was located between the Great Palace and the sea, not far from the churches of Hagia Sophia and Hagia Irene. According to legend, the monastery had been founded by the empress Pulcheria in the early fifth century. It possessed the famous icon which was believed to have been painted by St Luke and which had been sent from Palestine to Constantinople by the empress Eudokia.[33] In spite of such legendary credentials, however, the literary sources for the monastery of the Hodegon date from the second half of the ninth century onward; the famous procession of the Hodegetria icon through the streets of Constantinople on Tuesdays may have begun at this time, although sources concerning its institution are dated no earlier than the eleventh century.[34]

Another aspect of the Hodegon monastery—in common with the shrines at Blachernai and the Source—was an ancient and holy spring. Although this pool was later somewhat eclipsed by the Hodegetria icon, it continued to function as a site of miraculous cures throughout the Byzantine period. A lay confraternity tended both the holy spring and the icon at the Hodegon monastery, distributing holy water and oil to the faithful who attended the Tuesday procession and the weekly fairs that

[31] Constantine Porphyrogennetos, *Book of Ceremonies* I.18, trans. Moffatt and Tall, Constantine Porphyrogennetos, vol. 1, 108-14; J. Ebersolt, *Sanctuaires de Byzance. Recherches sur les anciens trésors des églises de Constantinople* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1921), 61.

[32] Talbot and Johnson, *Miracles Tales from Byzantium, 221.*

[33] Pentcheva, *Icons and Power*, 124 -27.

[34] C. Angelidi and T. Papamastorakis, 'The Veneration of the Virgin Hodegetria and the Hodegon Monastery', in Vassilaki, *Mother of God*, 373-87; Pentcheva, *Icons and Power*, 109-43.

were held at the monastery.[35] Thus Christians encountered the intercessory power of the Mother of God, as mediated through the material substances of water, oil, and sometimes earth, at various holy shrines in the imperial city. Whether or not they witnessed a vision of the Virgin Mary herself, these Christians would have experienced her mediating role between divine power and their own, earthly, existence in an intensely physical way.

Conclusion

It is necessary now to draw together the evidence presented by liturgical, devotional, and historical texts concerning the Virgin Mary's mediating role between the divine and created worlds in Byzantium. With respect to the liturgical evidence (in the form of Marian hymns and homilies), writers consistently employed poetic images or biblical types that identified Mary with the created world. This didactic method invariably conveyed a Christological message: Mary, the Theotokos, represented the physical container of God the Word, as witnessed in types such as the tabernacle, the temple, the ark, and others. She could also be portrayed as the means of access to God, as revealed in Jacob's ladder (Gen 28:10-17), the closed gate of the temple (Ezek 43:27-44), and Elijah's chariot of fire (2 Kgs 2: 11-13). However, as we have seen, a few of the Old Testament Marian types exhibit more formal connotations of the two main Christian sacraments, baptism and the Eucharist. In this context, the Mother of God represents the material substance—or vehicle—by means of which initiates are reborn into new life in Christ and continue to participate in his life-giving and eternal Person.

The literary evidence associated with three important Constantinopolitan shrines (*ἁγιάσματα*) in Mary's honour, those of the Blachernai, the 'Source' (*Πηγή*), and the Hodegon, reinforces the impression of her connection with the created elements—in this context, especially water. The shrine at Blachernai, which included a pool that was fed by a spring, played a largely ceremonial role in the lives of Byzantine emperors. The fact that they immersed themselves three times in the pool on occasional Fridays throughout the year suggests some kind of purifying rite that mimicked their original baptism. The association of this pool with the Mother of God would have been reinforced by the presence of her icon, made of silver, in a conch on its right-hand side.[36] The shrine at the Marian church of the Pege—on the other side of town—also served ceremonial and devotional needs. However, this sanctuary stood out as a site that enabled Christians of every station in life to encounter the Virgin

[35] Angelidi and Papamastorakis, 'The Veneration of the Virgin Hodegetria', 379; N. P. Ševčenko, 'Servants of the Holy Icon', *Byzantine East, Latin West: Art Historical Studies in Honor of Kurt Weitzmann*, ed. D. Mouriki, et al. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 548-50.

[36] Constantine Porphyrogennetos, *Book of Ceremonies* II.12, trans. Moffatt and Tall, Constantine Porphyrogennetos, vol. 2, 554; Ebersolt, *Sanctuaires de Byzance*, 51.

Mary either in person (through visions) or by means of the water with which she was associated. The Hodegon Monastery, located at the heart of Constantinople, also possessed a pool that offered healing and comfort to the faithful. This body of water came to be associated with the intercessory power of the Mother of God, especially when the weekly ceremony involving the icon of the Hodegetria was instituted towards the end of the eleventh century.

The extent to which Byzantine Christians understood the Christological foundations on which the Virgin's power was based is difficult to determine. Hymns, which were sung on a daily basis in churches and monasteries throughout the empire, reinforced this message poetically and with the help of biblical imagery. Whether or not the complexity of such typological teaching was fully understood, the epithets by which the Theotokos was invoked conveyed vividly her connection with the created (and transfigured) world. Marian shrines such as the churches at Blachernai, the Pege, and the Hodegon, with their associated pools, would have reinforced this message by tangible—and sometimes healing—means. The combined impact of these various witnesses to Mary's ongoing presence in the world must have allowed Byzantine Christians to experience her power as intercessor in both body and spirit.

Faith and practice represent two central aspects of most world religions. In the case of Byzantine (and indeed modern) Orthodox Christianity, it is inappropriate to separate what might be termed 'orthodoxy' ('right belief') and 'orthopraxy' ('right practice'), since the two aspects of religious life are so closely entwined. One of the achievements of the iconoclastic controversy of the eighth and ninth centuries was to establish the inseparable connection between God's transcendent nature and his ongoing presence in the created world as a result of the Incarnation. Faithful Christians were henceforth expected to respond to this presence in appropriate ways—that is, not only with their minds and souls, but also with their bodies. Such a response applied also to Mary, the Mother of God, who came to symbolise in her person the meeting-place of the divine and human natures of Christ. Byzantine Christians assimilated this theological message not only by listening (or even responding antiphonally) to Christian hymnography that emphasised the Christological and intercessory importance of the Mother of God, but also by experiencing her power in more tangible ways. The sacred landscapes of both Jerusalem and the 'Queen of Cities', Constantinople, reinforced this message not only by means of churches and monasteries that were dedicated to the Mother of God, but also with the help of relics, icons, and watery shrines.