2009

Biographies of Mary in Byzantine Literature

Luigi Gambero

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The interest in the earthly life of the Mother of God goes back to the Christians of the early generations. This explains the flourishing of a certain type of Marian apocrypha that seem to be generous in offering information about her person and the vicissitudes of her life. The unknown authors of such writings tend to increase details not given in the sober accounts of the Holy Scriptures, whose purpose was much different. Some centuries later, in the same line of interests, the Byzantine literature began to offer writings dealing rather extensively with the life of Mary. However, these cannot be defined as real biographies of Mary, since the literary genre used for these writings still remains the homiletic genre which continued being the classical liturgical instrument to proclaim, explain and comment on Holy Scripture. Perhaps this kind of new literary genre may be called biographic homily. Some of these Marian biographic homilies emerge as typical examples of a new trend in Byzantine Marian literature that appeared toward the end of the first Millennium.

1. Mary’s Life by John the Geometer

To begin, there is a famous work by John the Geometer, notable because it seems to be the reference point for a similar work, the Georgian biography, which we will study later.

*Marianist Father Luigi Gambero is a professor at the Marianum in Rome and the International Marian Research Institute at the Marian Library (University of Dayton, Ohio). The author of Mary and the Fathers of the Church (Ignatius Press, 1999), he is also the editor of volumes 3 and 4 and co-editor of volume 5 in the series Testi mariani del secondo millennio.

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John the Geometer, so-called because of his competence in mathematics, was also named Kyriotes by the monastery of Kyrou where he retired. His origins are unknown; he was probably born around 930 in Constantinople. It seems that under the reign of Emperor Nikephoros II Phokas (963-969), John was given an important military task from which he was removed by Nikephoros’s successor John I Tzimiskes (969-976). Having fallen into disgrace, probably because he was a follower of the murdered Nikephoros, John retired to the cloister of Kyrou, but we do not know for sure whether he became a monk. It is also quite uncertain whether he was appointed metropolitan of Mytilene.¹

Surely John was among the most significant poets of the middle-Byzantine epoch and his profound culture, both sacred and profane, did not inhibit his poetic inspiration. His poetry is sincere, often profound, always supported by a high and noble style. In his compositions he shows the depth of his feelings and frequently also the strong passions and struggles that shaped his spiritual life. At the same time, in his writings he was able to insert here and there remarks which sounded learned or free, easy or humorous, depending on their contexts. This way of writing allows us to discover between the lines the most genuine and real aspects of his human personality.

It may be suitable to remember that Geometer nourished a deep and sincere devotion to the Mother of God. He celebrates her in five of his hymns, in which the perfection of the style competes with the depth of the doctrine. He glorifies Mary’s divine motherhood, her virginity, her royalty, her greatness, her mediation, and many other among her privileges. John dedicates to Mary various odes, written in a typically Byzantine style and inspired by a deep sensitivity, in which his devoted love towards her reaches new peaks. John believes in Mary’s absolute purity and holiness. He frequently celebrates her with enthusiastic accents and expressions, as in the following quotation:

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Rejoice, o virgin body, shaped by the divine hands. Rejoice, o Virgin, since no sin of the mortals entered into you. Rejoice, o most immaculate body, because you gather within yourself both heavenly and earthly beauty.²

In other hymns, Mary is referred to as mother of “incorruption,” of “grace” and “eternal life.”³ He writes that she is “purer than the seraphim”⁴ and, though she gave God human flesh, she did not give him “the uncleanness of flesh.”⁵ Mary “destroys the shame of our forefathers”⁶ and bears nothing of “the burden of our evil.”⁷ Indeed, John the Geometer has a high concept of the moral richness and holiness of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Her exemption from original sin might certainly correspond to his Marian teaching in general, but this is not the same as to say that John explicitly teaches Mary’s exemption from Adam’s sin. Hence, as far as the Immaculate Conception is concerned, I think that we cannot agree with M. Jugie who considers John a believer in this Marian privilege. The Eastern theologians could speak of complete holiness and absence of all sins in Mary without referring at all to original sin.

John the Geometer also wrote an extensive and beautiful homily, “On the Annunciation of the Mother of God.” In this homily he names Mary “hope of the two worlds and their immense decor.”⁸ Another of his homilies, one dedicated to the

² Hymn 3, PG 106, 861B.
³ Hymn 1, PG 106, 856 A.
⁴ Hymn 1, PG 106, 856 C.
⁵ Ibid.
⁶ Hymn 2, PG 106, 857 B.
⁷ Hymn 3, PG 106, 861 B.
⁸ PG 106, 865 C. Towards the end, he adds a long series of chairetismoi. This edition of John’s works is available in the PG 106, 805-1002. It contains his hymns, odes, and his homily on the Annunciation. For studies on the hymns, see: V. Laurent, “Les poesies mariales de Jean Kyriote le Geometre,” Echos d’Orient 31 (1932): 117-120; J. Sajdak, Ioannis Kyriotis Geometrae Hymni in Sanctissimam Deiparam, Analecta Byzantina, fasc. 1 (Poznan: Sumptibus Societatis litterarum posnaniensis auxilio Ministerii instructionis publicae, 1931). The Homily on the Dormition (or Life of Mary) has never been published in its entirety. It has been transmitted in three manuscripts: Vat. Gr. 504 (copied in 1105); Paris, Gr 215 (13th cent.); Genova, 32 (14th cent.). What has drawn attention to our author in the present time is the publication of more or less extensive extracts from this Life of Mary, which is his greatest work, notable in the whole history of Byzantine Marian theology. M. Jugie reported some extracts in his
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mystery of Mary's Dormition, has been edited by A. Wenger through a collation of two manuscripts.9

But John's Marian masterpiece, which has drawn attention to his person and literary activity in our time, is a long biography of the Blessed Virgin, written in the form of a homily on her Dormition which narrates and celebrates the events of her life in chronological order and in the frame of the liturgical feasts. From a theological point of view, this work seems to be the first Byzantine synthesis of Marian doctrine made by an author who was both a profound theologian and a refined man of letters. Unfortunately, this work has not yet been published in its totality10; only extracts have been cited rather recently by some known scholars, like Martin Jugie,11 Jean Galot,12 and Antoine Wenger.13

The occasion for this homiletic biography was the celebration of the mystery of Mary's Dormition as the culminating moment of her earthly life, but as a matter of fact, the content of the homily very imperfectly corresponds to the title. About Mary's Dormition, the author speaks only at the end. John's real
aim was to write a complete biography of the Mother of God and underline her participation in the life, passion, and resurrection of her Son. Let me quote a passage where the general lines of the entire work are clearly exposed:

The Virgin Mary, after giving birth to her Son, was never separated from him in his activity, his dispositions, his will, even if, contrary to Christ, she was separated as a person. When he went away, she went with him; when he worked miracles, it was as if she worked them with him, sharing his glory and rejoicing with him. When he was betrayed, arrested, judged, when he suffered, not only was she everywhere present beside him and even realized especially then his presence, but she even suffered with him or rather, if it be not rash to say it, she suffered still more than he did. 14

The author has some doubts about a certain exaggeration in this statement; therefore, he tries to attenuate it by making it precise that there is an abyssal difference between the divinity of the Son and the creaturely weakness of the Mother:

Terribly sundered, she would have wished a thousand times to suffer the evils she saw her Son suffering. 15

Like her antitype Eve, Mary was directly shaped by the hand of the Creator himself; in fact, at the beginning a special power of God intervened for her creation. His human nature was enriched to the point that in her person the harmonic balance between body and soul was perfect. 16 Commenting on Elizabeth's words, "Blest are you among women" (Lk 1:47), John exclaims:

You are blest among women, above all women taken all together, but even women are blest in you, just as men are blest in your Son; or, to put it in a better way, there exists between the two groups a perfect reciprocity: Just as through one woman and one man curse and sorrow were handed down to the other human beings (cf. Rom 5, 12), in the same way blessing and joy were transmitted to us through one woman and one man. 17

14 Quoted by Wenger in "L'Intercession de Marie en Orient du VIe au Xe siècle," 66.
15 Ibid.
16 Jugie, L'Immaculée Conception, 186, quoting directly from Cod.Vat. 504.
17 Ibid.
A passage in John’s account of the Annunciation is interpreted by Martin Jugie as a statement in favor of the mystery of the Immaculate Conception. In fact the Holy Spirit is seen like a paranymph coming again upon her to prepare the way for the Son and to decorate the nuptial chamber. But this purification or decoration ought to be considered as an extra intervention, because a preceding purification already occurred.18

Concerning Mary’s participation in the passion of her Son, John is conscious that our human mind cannot understand the reasons for Mary’s sufferings, as it cannot understand other mysteries, for instance, the virgin birth. Therefore, he stresses the motivations suggested by faith, having recourse to the will of God. Just as Christ gave himself as ransom for us, so he gave his Mother as ransom for us at every moment. John expresses this thought in a passage directly addressed to Jesus:

We give you thanks for having suffered for us such great evils, and for having willed that your Mother should suffer such great evil, for you and for us, so that, not only should the honor of sharing your sufferings earn her a participation in glory, but that the memory of the sufferings endured for us should lead her to work for our salvation, and that she should keep her love for us.19

These statements unequivocally prove that the Geometer believed in Mary’s “compassion,” and that her enduring of the sufferings because of Christ’s passion and death obviously adds something to the sufferings of Christ. But it is not easy to understand what difference John establishes between the redemption worked by Jesus Christ as unique redeemer and the reconciliation effected by Mary. His language is a bit exaggerated in stressing the participation of the Mother of God in the passion of Jesus.

Following a tradition, attested also by George of Nicomedia, John the Geometer thought that Mary awaited the resurrection of her Son at his sepulcher and became the first witness of this event. After Jesus’ ascension, she in a certain way replaced her

18 Ibid., 187.
Son, playing a central role in the primitive Church, directing and sustaining the apostles and the disciples. In addition to the sorrows she already endured during Christ’s passion, she suffered also for the Church’s sake, as a “universal mother,” bearing in her heart the very sufferings of the apostles.

The last section of this work extensively deals with the mystery of Mary’s final destiny. The author collects plenty of information handed down by the apocryphal literature of the many Transitus. But when we come to the long passage explaining John’s opinion of Mary’s bodily assumption, we realize that there are problems related to the interpretation of the text. John seems to teach Mary’s assumption in the way we understand this mystery.

He emphasizes the parallelism between Mary’s assumption into heaven and her Son’s ascension. For, as Christ rose on the third day, so Mary, too, was translated on the third day. As in the case of her Son, so also in hers, the funeral linens were left folded up in the tomb with fresh marks of the body imprinted on it, so that not only through her Son, but also through herself, our nature has been introduced into heaven. 20

But, on the other hand, he uses a terminology which is a little enigmatic, when he speaks of Mary being raised to the heavens, so-to-say, at two different times: “first as spirit without the body” and “it is the body which is raised without the spirit.” 21 It is not easy to capture the real meaning of this terminology. Probably it can be explained by the homiletic purpose of this text. The concern of a homilist is to draw the attention of the faithful to the mysteries of faith, without worrying about the logical development of the narration. However, John clearly teaches the bodily assumption of the Mother of God.

Contemplating Mary’s glory in heaven, John is convinced that she continues to play a role in favor of us, namely, a role of mediation. Mary is the second mediatrix after the first Mediator, because she is the God-bearer. She is the Queen who seems to render the King more merciful; and, like the Holy

21 Ibid., 393.
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Spirit, she is another Paraclete.\(^{22}\) With his teaching, John clearly lets the Byzantine tradition progress in the matter of Mary’s spiritual motherhood. According to him, Mary is our mother, “mother of all and of each one, even more than our mothers, loving us more than one can express.”\(^{23}\)

2. The Georgian Life of Mary

A Life of Mary, come down to us in a Georgian translation, according to the manuscripts, pretends to be the most ancient among the other products of this kind of literature. In fact, it refers to the prestigious name of Maximus the Confessor (†662) as its author, but the attempts to solve the problems regarding its authenticity and chronology, did not lead to satisfactory results up to now. We can just notice that its text is heavily dependent on Geometer’s work.

This biography, also presented in the form of a homily about Mary’s Dormition, is a long text published by Michel-Jean van Esbroeck in 1996, with a French translation.\(^ {24}\) The Georgian translation was done from the Greek original by the monk Euthymius Agiorithes (†1028) in the years between 980 and 990. Van Esbroeck is inclined to attribute the work to Maximus, who, according to him, might have drawn it up in his youth or, in any case, before 626. From its contents, Theodore Syncellus (†7th cent.) seems to have taken inspiration and even phrased some materials for his panegyric celebrating the victory gained by the Emperor Heraclius over the Avars (626). If this biography was truly written by Maximus the Confessor, we ought to accept the hypothesis that it influenced the other analogous works.

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\(^{22}\) Cf. Wenger, L’Assomption . . . Etudes et documents, 408. The title “paraclete,” attributed in the New Testament to the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7) and to Jesus (1John 2:1), probably has been attributed also to Mary by Irenaeus of Lyon (Haer. 5, 19, 1).


\(^{24}\) Maxime le Confesseur, Vie de la Vierge, ed. Michel-Jean van Exbroeck, CSCO 478-479 (2 vols.; Lovanii: E. Peeters, 1986). The text of Esbroeck is the result of a collation of two manuscripts, Tbilisi A-40 (11th cent.), which is the base of his edition, and Jerusalem Patriarchate 108 (11th-12th cent.).
This hypothesis of Van Esbroeck, supporting the authenticity of Maximus's Life of Mary, sounds exciting indeed, because of some deductions he is able to draw and formulate:

- This first biography of the Blessed Virgin and the beginning of this literary genre could be dated back to the seventh century;
- The literary genre that later on was developed by renowned writers would have as a basis a very remarkable Marian biography;
- Moreover, this writing would show an authorship of prestige like Maximus the Confessor's.

If the researches carried out up to now do not allow a sure attribution of this work to Maximus the Confessor, nevertheless such persistent uncertainty about its authorship does not lower its literary and theological value. It provides us not only with an extensive account about the life of the Mother of God but also with a precious document worthy of our Christian tradition, because of the seriousness of its style and contents. It shows a clear structure and follows a rigorous biographic criterion, so that it is easy to distinguish its sections.

The author begins with a kind of introduction by addressing abundant praises first of all to God because of his providential plans and also to the Blessed Virgin herself. The following sections can be divided this way:

- events concerning Mary's early years: her nativity, the time she lived with her parents, the years she spent in the temple of Jerusalem
- the period of the Annunciation and the visitation to Elizabeth (a commentary on the Magnificat is also added)
- a section dealing with the problems of St. Joseph, the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem, the adoration by the Magi, the slaughter of the innocents, Jesus' circumcision
- other events that followed: the presentation of Jesus in the temple, the flight to Egypt, the return to Nazareth, Jesus' childhood, his finding in the temple and his hidden life
- Mary's presence at the baptism of her Son and during his entire public life (According to the author, she continually followed him.)
- Mary's participation in the sufferings of her Divine Son (According to the author, in that moment Simeon's prophecy was fulfilled. The author introduces also the presence of Mary at the sepulcher of her Son.)
- Mary after her Son's resurrection (According to the author, she is the only witness of Christ's resurrection and, until the day of his ascension,
she was present each time the risen Lord appeared to his apostles and disciples. Afterwards, she was a pattern and a guide for them, and she remained at Jerusalem until her death which occurred when she was eighty years old.)

— Mary’s death and burial (According to the author, the apostles return to Jerusalem in order to witness the event. The Mother of God hands over her soul to her Son who came escorted by the angels. Mary’s funeral and burial are followed by miracles. The apostle Thomas arrives after three days’ delay, and Mary’s tomb is opened in order to let him venerate for the last time the body of the Theotokos, but the tomb appears empty.)

— events afterward (The narration describes the finding of Mary’s garment in the tomb, its transfer to Constantinople and the building of the Blacherne shrine, where the precious relic was kept and venerated.)

— final comments (At the end, the author explains the meaning of Mary’s Dormition, of the praises addressed to her for her glorious transit into heavenly glory, and of her intercession for us. The biographical account ends with a final invocation.)

The author of this singular work shows an extraordinary clearness in understanding the meaning of Christian tradition and the criteria that must warrant its authenticity and its ecclesial value. Therefore, he accurately chooses the sources of his narration.25

— The gospels are the first and most important source. Towards them the author shows a marked faithfulness. Other information or hypotheses are welcome only insofar as they agree with this main source.

— The Fathers of the Church are the second main source. The author calls them Theophoroi; he says that their words are full of wisdom, since they are dictated by the Holy Spirit. Some Fathers are explicitly mentioned, namely, Gregory Thaumaturgus, Athanasius of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, the pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite.

— As far as the Apocrypha are concerned, only those that are quoted and confirmed by the Fathers of the Church can be exploited.

— The author draws inspiration from the liturgical texts, too, which he abundantly quotes. With regard to the liturgical dimension of this

writing, E. Toniolo, a patrologist of the Marianum, made an interesting
discovery: in the final section of this life of Mary, the author inserts the Akathistos Hymn.  

Although this author seems not always able to base his account on the Scriptures or the Fathers of the Church, in treating his materials he shows the intention to follow serious purposes and rigorous criteria. He takes care that his narration is always in accord with the truths of faith concerning the Mother of the Lord, namely, her divine motherhood, her virginity, her total holiness. For instance, he bases on these foundations his account about Mary’s Dormition and Assumption into heaven.

But his main criterion seems to be the consciousness that the holy Virgin is perfectly united with her Son in all events of his earthly life: annunciation, birth, hidden life, public ministry, passion and death, apparitions of the risen Lord, Mary’s presence in the Upper Room in order to guide and support the Church, and the definitive union with her Son in heavenly glory. On this last point, we notice that the author leaves some important details in the dark, as for instance, the final destiny of Mary’s body:

The blessed Apostles, by order of the Holy Spirit, satisfied the demand of their brother [Thomas] and with fear opened the tomb. But on opening it, they did not find the glorious body of the holy Mother of Christ, since it had been transferred where her Son and God had willed. In fact, this latter had wanted to be buried in a sepulcher after he endured death in his body for our salvation, and the third day he rose again from the dead. Likewise, he deemed it good that the immaculate body of his most holy Mother should be placed in a tomb. Thereafter, according to his will, it was to be carried to the eternal incorruptibility, where both human components should be again united to one another, since this is the way by which the Creator decided to honor his Mother.

This Life of Mary ends with a double invocation. The first one was composed by the author, who wanted to implore

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26 Cf. TMPM, 2:183.
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grace, mercy, and intercession for himself. The second one was added by the translator, the monk Euthymius Agiorithes, who says that he prepared the translation at Mount Athos and asks also for mercy and salvation:

O Christ, king of glory, through the intercession of your Mother, the holy Virgin Mary, have mercy on the poor Euthymius, who translated from Greek into Georgian this holy book about the Life of the holy Mother of God, at Mount Athos.28

We are confronted with a remarkable document, whoever the actual author of this biographical homily about Mary may be. If it is ever possible to demonstrate that the authorship belongs indeed to Maximus Confessor, then we can say that Maximus was a forerunner and opened the way to other similar works.

3. Life of Mary by Epiphanius the Monk (9th Century)

About this monk, little is known. He probably died at the beginning of the ninth century. We only know that he was a priest and monk in the Constantinopolitan monastery of Kallistratos. Very few writings have come down to us under his name. Among them deserve to be mentioned a life of St. Andrew, in which the author reports for the first time the legend about the apostolic origins of the Church of Constantinople, and a homily on the life of the most Holy Mother of God, that can be considered one of the most ancient examples of this literary genre.29

Of course, he first exploits the data of the New Testament; but, at the same time, he does not hesitate to add a generous portion of apocryphal material and some information drawn from previous writers like Andrew of Crete and John of Thessalonica. However, the homily as a whole is constructed in a somewhat original way. Epiphanius thought that Mary's life lasted seventy-two years. At the age of seven she was offered by her parents to the Lord in the temple of Jerusalem, where

28 CSCO 479:121.
29 The text of this biographical homily is published in PG 120, 185-216.
she spent six-and-a-half years. When she was twelve years old, she heard a mysterious voice saying to her: “You will give birth to my Son.”

She was fourteen when she was married to St. Joseph, whom Epiphanius introduces as a widower about seventy years of age with many sons and daughters. Evidently, the purpose of Mary’s wedding with Joseph was to give her “protection and the preservation of her undefiled virginity.”

With Jesus and Joseph’s family, she had to flee into Egypt where they lived until Jesus reached the age of five. When Jesus died on the cross, Mary was so brokenhearted by sorrow that she did not go to the sepulcher with the other women.

After Jesus’ ascension, the apostle John took her to the house he had purchased on Mount Sion. In the last years of her life, Mary performed many miracles, healing sick people and freeing those overcome by impure spirits. Besides, she helped the poor and the widows, giving them alms and affection. The apostles remained near her until her death. When she was laid in the tomb, “all present looked on as her body became invisible before their eyes.”

Thus, Epiphanius presents Mary’s death and burial as a miraculous event; but, as a matter of fact, he does not affirm explicitly the bodily assumption. Epiphanius praises Mary’s admirable purity, which God exalted above that of all other women, and he does it to the point that he considers this purity almost alien to human nature.

The author not only describes Mary’s grave and dignified bearing after the manner of other Christian writers, for instance like Athanasius, but also her physical appearance, according to the Byzantine canon of beauty. He supposes that she had a light complexion, light brown hair and eyes black eyebrows, a straight nose, a long face and long hands and fingers. Listening to this description, we can easily imagine a Byzantine icon of the Theotokos, so Epiphanius gives us the

30 De vita B. Virginis 6, PG 120, 193 B.
31 De vita B. Virginis 8, PG 120, 196 B.
32 Cf. De vita B. Virginis 20, PG 120, 209 A.
33 Cf. De vita B. Virginis 22, PG 120, 212 A.
34 De vita B. Virginis 25, PG 120, 216 A.
35 Cf. De vita B. Virginis 6, PG 120, 192 C-193 B.
Evidence that in his time Byzantine iconography about Mary was already flourishing. On the whole, this Marian biography is a somewhat poor work; it does not contain the theological richness of the lives of Mary by John the Geometer and the Georgian translator.

4. Simeon Metaphrastes (†ca. 1000)

He was also named Logothetes (accountant of the State). Simeon is the most outstanding writer of the tenth century in the field of hagiography and, as a true hagiographer, he also wrote a biography of the Blessed Virgin. This work can worthily stand beside the other similar works we have already discussed.

For a long time the chronological dates of this life remained a true riddle and oscillated within a period going from the seventh to the fourteenth century. Serious research allowed the specialists to place Simeon within the tenth century. According to some information given by Marc, metropolitan bishop of Ephesus (†1444), Simeon’s birth might have occurred during the reign of the Emperor Leo VI (886-912), at Constantinople, in a noble and rich family. But we have to admit that we are unable to confirm Marc’s source. Michael Psellos (†1078) testifies that Simeon emerged in different fields of activity and gained a remarkable experience in public administration. Therefore, he became Logothetes under emperors Nikephoros II Fokas (†969), John I Zimiskes (†976), and Basil II (†1025). According to some historical sources which seem to deserve trust, Simeon became a monk towards the end of his life. Already at the time of Michael Psellos, Simeon was venerated as a saint; and this detail was confirmed also by the aforementioned Marc of Ephesus.

Simeon Metaphrastes left an impressive number and variety of writings—not all published yet. He wrote historical, poetical, canonical, and devotional works; but he owes his fame to his collection of lives of saints, a work named Menologion or Synaxarion. This is the most famous work to appear in the field of Byzantine hagiographic literature in the tenth century. Its purpose is more moral than historical, and its very large diffusion is attested by the number of manuscripts available still today, namely at least 693. We can consider it a very useful work because of the abundant information he transmits on the lives
and the deeds of many saints. Simeon was accused of contriving not only deeds but persons as well; however, such a charge seems to be unjust. It is not improbable that Emperor Basil II (†1025) himself may have persuaded Simeon to compose the new Menologion to be used in liturgical celebrations.

Because of its great success, the work was frequently amplified in later times by unknown authors, and many are the problems to be resolved in order to identify the authentic Metaphrastian text. In this regard, Albert Ehrhard did a tremendous job. He was able to identify 149 lives written and later on re-elaborated by Metaphrastes himself. The fact that most of these lives were worked over by Simeon Metaphrastes explains his name (in Greek, metaphorazein means “to translate”). Simeon’s effort were aimed to make his texts acceptable in style and manner of presentation to the taste of his contemporaries. However, these works were not subjected by him to a critical methodology; hence, the historical errors present in the sources were reproduced in the new versions, since the interest of the author was chiefly moral and devotional, not historical.

The Menologion is still used in the Byzantine liturgy and, in its pages, Mary is frequently mentioned. The edition of the Menologion available in Migne is one where the text is mixed with many interpolations of non-Metaphrastian texts. The biographies of saints cover the days of the entire liturgical year, from the beginning of September to the end of August.

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36 Ehrhard divided these authentic biographies into three different categories. Few of them were incorporated in the new collection almost without any change in comparison with the first text. Most of them were done all over again both in their presentation and in their style. Some were copied from older collections. Cf. A. Ehrhard, Die Legensammlung des Symeon Metaphrastes und ihr ursprünglicher Bestand (Freiburg i. Br., 1897), 46-82; id., “Symeon Metaphrastes und die griechische Hagiographie,” Römische Quartalschrift für christliche Altertumskunde und für Kirchengeschichte 11 (1897): 521-553; id., Überlieferung und Bestand der hagiographischen und homiletischen Literatur der griechischen Kirche von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des 16. Jahrhunderts, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur [hereafter TU], Bd. 50-52 (3 vols.; Leipziger C. Hinrichs, 1937-39), 1/2, TU 51:306-717; H. Delehaye, “Le Ménologue de Métaphrastes,” Analecta Bollandiana 17 (1898): 448-452.

37 PG 114-116.

M. Jugie proposed that there is a strong dependence of Metaphrastes’s Marian biography on the work of John the Geometer\(^3\); but we prefer to exclude this hypothesis because of chronological reasons. Both authors were contemporaries, and it is unlikely that they might have influenced each other. In general, Simeon speaks often of the Virgin Mary in his writings, but his Life of Mary obviously is totally concentrated in the discourse about the Mother of God. Though his work was elaborated in the form of a homily to be delivered on the feast of Mary’s Dormition, we notice a certain transition from the homiletic style to the biographic style.\(^4\) We realize that it enters into the same literary genre as the life of the other biographers already mentioned. In fact, its contents are in the line of a true biography, since the author reports the events and the deeds of the Mother of God during her earthly life.

Beginning with a kind of declaration of intentions, Simeon explains that his narration is done in the form of an encomium because of the extraordinary personality of the Virgin and the role as God’s dwelling place that she was called to play. Therefore, he means to expose all events in which she was involved, since they are the result of the divine plan of salvation. This is the main topic of his narration; from this topic he never wants to divert, not even when he deals with topics that might appear secondary to it.

Simeon intends to base the account of these events on the faith of chosen and credible witnesses. Not any person whatever is able to testify in an efficacious way. He explicitly mentions the names of three authoritative witnesses—Gregory of Nyssa, Athanasius, and Dionysius the Areopagite—and enumerates the conditions that they have realized in their relationship to the Blessed Virgin: each of them accurately wrote about the Virgin Mary, taught a notable doctrine, and led an exemplary life. But the supreme condition Simeon wants to stress above all others consists in being always confirmed by the testimony of the Gospel.\(^4\)


\(^4\) Simeon’s works are available in PG 114-116. As for the Menologion, cf. the works by Albert Ehrhard and H. Delehaye cited in n. 36 on page 45.

\(^4\) *Oratio de Sancta Maria*, 1, PG 115, 529D-531A.
At the beginning, Simeon briefly presents the episodes related to the period of Mary's infancy and childhood: her birth in extraordinary circumstances, her presentation in the temple, her wedding with Joseph. Afterwards he gives more space to the narration of the main events in the life of Christ, from the mystery of the Annunciation to his Ascension into heaven. Simeon particularly stressed the role played by Mary in these events, showing that she lived in a profound union with her Son. This appears more evidently in the mystery of Jesus' passion and death:

We will narrate how she always lived together with her Son; how she always stayed beside him, especially in the most difficult moments. In fact, she did not separate from him even during the time of his passion, when all the others, namely the disciples, friends and acquaintances, having abandoned her Son quite alone, took flight; and again when the others, after remaining just a short time, foreswore him. Such being the case, let us leave out the other topics and face this one.42

When Simeon describes the scene of the Virgin at the foot of the cross, following a literary tradition already established, he lets her pronounce a lament addressed to her Son, which is drawn up in terms of surprising moderation. Additionally, among the developments which Metaphrastes introduces into the text of the Gospel, there are some especially interesting details in the very context of the account of Christ's passion. For instance, he speaks of a presence of Mary at the Last Supper:

When Jesus celebrates the divine mystery (that is, the Eucharist) and gives the teaching of his great humility (that is, the washing of the feet) while sitting among his disciples, he orders his mother to take care of the women who serve at table. In this way, through his mother, he benevolently welcomes them and, eating together with them, he seems to thank them for their help.43

Another example refers to the Johannine detail of the blood and water that came from the pierced side of the Redeemer:

42 Oratio de S. M., 27, PG 115, 550C-551A.
43 Oratio de S. M., 27, PG 115, 551.
With prudence and reverent ardor, even after the death of her Son, she collected that water and that blood, which continued gushing out from his open chest.44

The Gospels do not say anything about what Mary did after the death of her Son. On the contrary, Simeon shows her in full participation, even through her mother's grief and sorrow:

Then the Virgin completely devoted herself to the preparation of all that was needed for the funeral. First of all, it was necessary to take down from the cross the divine body and to find a fitting sepulcher.45

She knew that in the very place of Calvary there was a new sepulcher. Such was to be the tomb for Jesus, not only because he was the Son of God, for whom whatever sepulcher, strictly speaking, would have been unworthy and indecorous, but also because, if there were other corpses, doubts could arise about the body of the risen Lord. Thus, Mary went to the owner of the sepulcher, who was Joseph of Arimathea, and convinced him to go to Pilate in order to ask for the body of the Lord.46

After the burial, the Mother of the Lord never left the sepulcher, so that she was the only witness to the events that accompanied the glorious resurrection of her Son from the tomb. Thus, she had to be considered the first witness of Jesus' resurrection; though she did not immediately relate what happened, she did so later:

It seems that the glorious message of the resurrection was first given to her and she became able to contemplate, as much as possible, the splendor of her Son. So the Mother of God, by seeing Jesus' resurrection more clearly than the women who brought spices to the sepulcher (myrophores) confirmed those people who had to announce it better than the women themselves could do.

These women, while announcing that they had seen the risen Lord, did not mention the Virgin, because they feared to throw a shadow of suspicion (on the veracity of the event), if they had presented the testimony of the Mother. In this case they would be believed less.47

44 Oratio de S. M., 32, PG 115, 553.
45 Oratio de S. M., 33, PG 115, 553-554.
46 Ibid.
47 Oratio de S. M., 36, PG 115, 556.
As for the account of Mary's Dormition, Simeon recalls the explicit witness of the Pseudo-Areopagite in *De divinis nominibus*. 48 About the story of the origin and cult of the Marian relics kept in the shrine of Blacherne at Constantinople, Simeon seems to agree with the information deriving from the *Euthymiac History*, an apocryphal story of the ninth century. 49 The events are known. The holy Virgin is about to die; the apostles are miraculously carried back to her residence; she entrusts her soul to the hands of her Son. The contact with her body causes numerous wonders. Afterwards, the corpse is triumphantly brought to Gethsemane and buried in a new sepulcher.

At this point, Simeon follows the witness of Juvenal, Bishop of Jerusalem (†458). After three days, the tomb was opened again, in order to allow the apostle Thomas, who came late, to venerate the body of the Mother of God; but the body was no longer there. Only the garment (*maphorion*) was left. Finally, we read the story about the translation of the garment to Constantinople by two high Byzantine officers, Galbios and Candidos. They made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and came to Capernaum, where the Holy Family was said to have dwelt for awhile. Here the precious relic was kept by a pious woman in her house. The two pilgrims succeeded in obtaining from the woman the holy relic and so they brought it to Constantinople, where it was honored in the shrine of Blacherne. 50

Metaphrastes likes to stress that the Mother of God herself provoked this story, namely, sent an inspiration to Galbios and Candidos, "because she wanted to grant her city [Constantinople] the most holy treasure, that is, her garment." 51 Further on, Simeon repeats the same idea: "The most blessed Virgin wanted to give the Byzantines this divine and most holy treasure." 52 The story occurred in the time of Emperor Leo I (457-474). Thus, according to Simeon Metaphrastes, this tradition explains the origin of the shrine of the blessed Virgin at Blacherne.

48 Oratio de S. M., 39, PG 115, 558.
50 Oratio de S. M., 38, PG 115, 556-557.
51 Oratio de S. M., 44, PG 115, 561 B.
52 Oratio de S. M., 48 PG 115, 563 A.
As conclusion, we can point out that Simeon in his Life of Mary puts a special emphasis on the human emotions of the Mother of God, attributing to her a genuinely motherly attitude that appears in her loving and merciful concern for her people.

Concluding Note
These biographies of the Mother of God entered the Byzantine theological literature as a new literary genre, one which surpasses the apocryphal genre and attempts to combine biographic information with theological reflection. We said that their authors preferred to keep the homiletic genre even for this kind of literature. Such a choice is understandable, because the homily is, for the Byzantines, the normal way to insert a text in the liturgy that they consider the great masterpiece of their theology and piety. In fact, theology in the Eastern Church has to be a prayed theology, and the same must be said of the Marian doctrine.