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### THE VIRGIN IN SONG: MARY AND THE POETRY OF ROMANOS THE MELODIST

Thomas Arentzen  
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The study of Byzantine hymnography has begun to blossom during the last decade, and an increasing number of scholars from different fields have paid a great deal of attention to this important literary form. One emerging niche among this group are Romanos scholars who dedicate much of their time and energy to the most prominent hymnographer of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, a focus of scholarship which has flourished after the ground-breaking work by José Grosdidier de Matons, including critical editions of Romanos's *kontakia*.

Thomas Arentzen is without doubt one of the most prominent researchers in this group of Romanos scholars as the author of a number of important papers. His recent book *The Virgin in Song: Mary and the Poetry of Romanos the Melodist* – a reworking of his doctoral dissertation *Virginity Recast: Romanos and the Mother of God*, submitted to the theological faculty of the University of Lund (Sweden) in 2014 – is a valuable addition to the traditional approaches employed in the study of hymnography. Moreover, it is a much-awaited contribution to Byzantine Marian scholarship (here, the term 'mariology', often abhorred by Orthodox theologians, is not suitable by any means: Romanos is not a dogmatic theologian, but a poet).

The first of the book's four main chapters, *The Song and the City*, explores the context of Romanos's hymns in sixth-century Constantinople and the Marian devotion of the same century. Chapter 2, *On the Verge of Virginity*, discusses erotic dimensions in the texts (as Arentzen calls them), particularly in Romanos's *kontakion On the Annunciation*. The third chapter, *The Mother and Nurse of Our Life*, concentrates on the image of the breastfeeding Virgin, especially in the *kontakia On Nativity (I)* and *On the Nativity of the Virgin*. The final chapter, *A Voice of Rebirth*, presents the connection between Christ's birth, death and resurrection, and Mary's role in these events.

The book is certainly thought-provoking, not only because of its content, but also because of its unexpected writing style. In addition to theology, Arentzen studied creative writing and literature, and it shows – the style of the book, at times, takes on the feel of a narrative. However, I am not convinced that his approach to writing always does justice to the creativity of his scholarship: at times, it makes for a pleasant reading experience and the book is easy to approach (even for a non-academic audience, I would imagine), but a more concise and straightforward presentation might make his arguments more useful to an academic readership. Clothing the study almost to the point of narrative could become tiring to comb through to expose its scholarly core, and does not always leave enough room for a detailed engagement with previous scholarship.

Overall, I agree with Arentzen's characterization of Mary as a manifold character: this was essential to her popularity in Byzantium. However, I sometimes think that he is unnecessarily provocative in his use of terminology, perhaps with not enough reflection on the suitability of

these terms in a sixth-century context. For example, Arentzen does not reflect extensively on the notion of sexuality in a historical context, even though sexual aspects dominate Chapter 2. I would sometimes be cautious with his reading of Romanos's hymns: it is true that the *kontakion* on the Annunciation includes erotic language, but Arentzen seems to discard the possibility of Romanos's audience bearing an ascetic Virgin in their minds, as a result of being exposed to older Marian traditions, while hearing the hymn. Perhaps the erotic language between Mary and Gabriel was heard more as irony or spiritual longing than explicit erotic attraction?

In summary, Arentzen's work represents an important opening in the study of Byzantine hymnography. I might not agree with all of Arentzen's ideas and I am not always convinced by the book's arguments, but it provides a deeper way of reading hymnography as experienced poetry, rather than merely as a component of liturgical services. Such an approach is warmly welcome in the field of patristic theology.

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