

## Byzantina Symmeikta

Vol 16 (2003)

SYMMEIKTA 16



### The Body and the Senses in the Work of Cassia the Hymnographer: Literary Trends in the Iconoclastic Period

Niki TSIRONIS

doi: [10.12681/byzsym.909](https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.909)

Copyright © 2014, Niki TSIRONIS



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

#### To cite this article:

TSIRONIS, N. (2008). The Body and the Senses in the Work of Cassia the Hymnographer: Literary Trends in the Iconoclastic Period. *Byzantina Symmeikta*, 16, 139–157. <https://doi.org/10.12681/byzsym.909>

NIKI TSIRONIS

THE BODY AND THE SENSES IN THE WORK  
OF CASSIA THE HYMNOGRAPHER:  
LITERARY TRENDS IN THE ICONOCLASTIC PERIOD

The biographic evidence about Cassia the Hymnographer, one of the few named famous women of Byzantium, who lived in the ninth century, is scarce and to a certain extent confused<sup>1</sup>. The well-known legend that presents her as the young girl that participated in the bride-show organized by Euphrosyne for her son Theophilos, heir of the emperor Michael II, could be considered to fit with her character as it emerges through her poetry<sup>2</sup>. Sharp, intelligent, passionate and with strong views, Cassia wrote numerous hymns that, although recently gathered and published, have not yet

---

1. See my introduction to *Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὑμνωδός*, 2nd ed. Athens 2002, 7-38 and esp. 9-20. See also K. KRUMBACHER, Kasia, *Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akad. d. Wiss. philos.-[philologische] und hist. Kl.* 1897, 305-370; C. ÉMERAU, Hymnographi Byzantini, *EO* 22, 1923, 11-25 and esp. 14-16; H.-G. BECK, *Kirche und theologische Literatur im byzantinischen Reich*, Munich 1959, 519; Ilse ROCHOW, *Studien zu der Person, den Werken und dem Nachleben der Dichterin Kassia*, Berlin 1967; Elisabeth CATAFYGIOTOU-TOPPING, Women Hymnographers in Byzantium, *Diptycha* 3, 1982-1983, 98-111 and esp. 107-110; A. TRIPOLITI, *Kassia: The Legend, the Woman and her Work*, New York-London 1992 (unfortunately, I have not been able to see it). M. LAUXTERMANN, Three Biographical Notes, *BZ* 91, 1998, 391-405 and lately, A. KAZHDAN (in collaboration with Lee SHERRY and Christine ANGELIDI), *A History of Byzantine Literature (650-850)*, Athens 1999, 315-326, (henceforth: *Byzantine Literature*), who presents critically older bibliography. Although Lauxtermann's biography is well-founded the close reading of Cassia's work that is attempted here partially challenges his conclusions.

2. For the bride-show in relation to Cassia see the non-conclusive articles by W. TREADGOLD, The Bride-Shows of the Byzantine Emperors, *Byzantion* 49, 1979, 395-413; Id., The Problem of the Marriage of the Emperor Theophilos, *GRBS* 16, 1975, 325-341 and the discussion in L. RYDEN, The Bride-Shows at the Byzantine Court - Reality or Fiction, *Eranos* 83, 1985, 175-191; LAUXTERMANN, *op.cit.*, 391-397 and KAZHDAN, *Byzantine Literature*, 315-317.

appeared in a much-needed critical edition<sup>3</sup>. One should note at the outset that her literary style is so distinct that, in some instances, it may almost be used as an exclusive criterion for the establishment of authorship in her extant work, as demonstrated in the characteristic word play Cassia employs in her hymn in memory of the saints Eustratios, Auxentios, Eugenios, Orestes and Mardarios<sup>4</sup>. Playing with the sound of words in a manner that reminds us of the style of her *gnomai*, she refers to Eustratios as the one *στρατευθείς* (recruited) by God *ἐν τῇ ἐπουρανίῳ στρατιᾷ* (in the heavenly army) and proved pleasing to the *στρατολογήσαντι* (recruiter, i.e. God). Auxentios is the one who has *ἐπαυξήσας εἰς πλῆθος* (augmented greatly) the talent entrusted to him by God, Eugenios is the most pleasing sapling of the divine *εὐγένεια* (nobility), Orestes is described as *ὡραῖος τῇ μορφῇ* (handsome in appearance) who spent his life *ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσιν* (on the mountains), while, finally, Mardarios is the transparent and shining *μαργαρίτης* (mother of pearl). It was due to her wit and her outstanding literary style that her poetry survived and part of it was even included in the liturgical books of the Church<sup>5</sup>.

In the present paper I shall attempt a close reading of her poetry (leaving aside the *gnomai* that fall under a different category<sup>6</sup>) exploring references relevant to the Iconoclastic debate, at the time in which Cassia lived and composed her work<sup>7</sup>. In particular, I shall explore obvious points of interest such as references to icons and their worship, and points, perhaps, less obvious –but still relevant to the Iconoclastic debate–, such as references to the notion and imagery of the body, senses and feelings. I shall also explore references to the Mother of God that is also relevant to Iconoclasm. As already shown elsewhere<sup>8</sup>, Iconophile writers dedicated the vast majority of their works, especially those belonging to the genre of homiletics and hymnography, to the Virgin Mary, employing her as a metonymy for the cult of images. This «use» of Mary

3. Her poetic work was collected and published for the first time as a corpus in 2002 but without critical annotations. See *Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὑμνωδός*, 41–89.

4. Although ROCHOW (as above, note 1) notes the difficulty in distinguishing the genuine from the spurious works. For the hymn see, *Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὑμνωδός*, 53–54.

5. See below.

6. KAZHDAN, *Byzantine Literature*, 323–326; CASSIA, *Gnomai*, Athens 2002, and esp. my comments in pages 85–92. See the excellent study of the *gnomai* by M. LAUXTERMANN, *Byzantine Poetry from Pisides to Geometres*, vol. 1, Vienna 2003, 248–262, 270.

7. This is one point on which all scholars that have dealt with Cassia agree upon; see for example KAZHDAN, *Byzantine Literature*, 317.

8. Niki TSIRONIS, The Mother of God in the Iconoclastic Controversy, in Maria Vassilaki (ed.), *Mother of God. Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, Milan–Athens 2000, 27–39.

was based on the equation of the various parameters of Iconophile argumentation that formed part of the standard understanding of the audience of the period. Along with the Virgin that stood as a symbol for Incarnational theology, the preoccupation of the theologians and writers of the period with its various aspects is reflected in their literary products, namely homilies and hymns that survive from this period<sup>9</sup>.

Modern discourse on the body, marked at the theoretical level by the work of Michel Foucault and in the field of Byzantine studies by that of Peter Brown, to mention just two key examples, tends to draw a distinction between the theological and the physical body<sup>10</sup>. The example of Cassia clearly shows that during the Iconoclastic period the defense of the theological body involved the physical in a direct way that implicated further the senses and the feelings. The affirmation of the body as a side-effect of the assertion of Incarnational theology would determine to a great extent the molding of the character of Orthodoxy but would also influence the style of Byzantine art as well as the attitude of Byzantine society towards the natural body and all that it implicates (dress code, social behavior, attitudes towards pleasure and so forth)<sup>11</sup>.

The immediate purpose of the present study, however, is to focus on the work of Cassia the Hymnographer and explore, on the one hand, possible references to Iconoclasm and on the other hand, the ways in which Cassia employs the body, the senses and the feelings in her poetry. From her poetic corpus I shall focus on the troparion on the matins of Wednesday of Holy Week (otherwise known as the

---

9. For the full development of the argument see Niki TSIRONIS, *The Cult and the Lament of the Virgin Mary in the Iconoclastic Period* (under preparation). H. MAGUIRE, *Image and Imagination: The Byzantine Epigram as Evidence for Viewer Response*, Canadian Institute of Balkan Studies, Toronto 1996, examines the emotional response of the viewer relating surviving epigrams to the iconography of the Crucifixion drawing remarkable conclusions especially for the period from the ninth to the twelfth centuries. I am grateful to Christine Angelidi who brought the article to my attention.

10. M. FOUCAULT, *The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, London 1984; Id., *The Care of the Self*, vol. 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, London 1984; P. BROWN, *The Body and Society. Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, London-Boston 1988. See also the volume of collected studies by Liz JAMES (ed.), *Women, Men and Eunuchs. Gender in Byzantium*, London-New York 1997, and esp. Averil CAMERON, *Sacred and Profane Love: Thoughts on Byzantine Gender*, 1-23 and esp. 7.

11. The volume of the Proceedings of the Symposium entitled *Byzantium Matures. Choices, Sensitivities, and Modes of Expression (Eleventh to Fifteenth Centuries)*, Christine ANGELIDI (ed.), Athens 2004, has just appeared shedding light precisely on these aspects of the body discourse. See the introduction to the volume by Christine ANGELIDI, *op.cit.*, 15-22.

troparion on Mary Magdalene), the *heirmoi* of Saturday of Holy Week, the *doxastikon* on Christmas Eve, the troparion on the martyr Christine and the *Canon for the Dead*.

Until the present day the troparion on Mary Magdalene (as it is commonly called) is considered one of the most moving and vivid examples of Byzantine poetry, and it is not by accident that, although the work of a woman<sup>12</sup>, it was included in the liturgical books of the Church and it is still sung on the eve of Tuesday of Holy Week (matins of Wednesday). The troparion comprises four strophes in which the theme of the repentance of the sinful woman is treated. In the first three strophes Cassia elaborates on the woman bringing myrrh in order to anoint the feet of the Lord and vividly describes the distress of her sinful soul. In line four of the fourth strophe the troparion changes topic drawing a parallel between the woman and Eve who also came to know her sin and was hidden from the sight of the Lord when he appeared in Paradise. The poem ends with the woman's plea to the merciful Lord to save her.

It has to be noted that the title «troparion on Mary Magdalene», a title adopted by Kazhdan in his study of Byzantine literature<sup>13</sup>, part of which is his treatment of Cassia, rests on thin grounds as it is not generally accepted that the sinful woman is Mary Magdalene, as the name is not referred to anywhere in the troparion<sup>14</sup>. Mary Magdalene is not portrayed as a sinner anywhere in the Gospels and the seven demons from which Christ liberates her do not suggest a promiscuous life<sup>15</sup>. As for the scenes where women with myrrh approach Jesus, these are found in the Gospel according to St John (12.3), where Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anoints the feet of Jesus with myrrh, whereas in the Gospel according to St Matthew the scene takes place in the house of Simon (who in this gospel is referred to as a leper whereas elsewhere he is referred to as a Pharisee) and the woman that approaches Jesus holding a vase made of alabaster is not presented as a prostitute. The information about the sinful woman derives from the vivid account of the scene in the Lucan Gospel (7.36–50). The reason why Magdalene is identified with the sinful woman is because it is in this scene that

---

12. See, for example, the reference of Prodhomos to Mark of Hydrounta, who was «commissioned to replace Cassia's four odes included in the *Canon for Holy Saturday*, because it was unsuitable to mix «feminine composition» with the words of Kosmas», to use the expression of KAZHDAN, *Byzantine Literature*, 317. For the text see, *PG* 133, cols. 1235D–1237A.

13. KAZHDAN, *Byzantine Literature*, 318.

14. DYCK, op.cit. (in note 1), 63–76; Elisabeth CATAFYGIOTOU-TOPPING, Kassiane the Nun and the Sinful Woman, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 26, 1981, 201–209.

15. See for example Luke 8.2.

Jesus prophesies his death, linking the myrrh of the anointment with that of his funeral. In both the scenes of the Crucifixion and the Burial it is Mary Magdalene that is present and anoints the body of Jesus with myrrh. The grounds for the identification were offered by the act of the anointment and, hence, the myrrh-bearer Magdalene has been identified with the sinful woman that once anointed the feet of Jesus in an act of repentance. For her troparion Cassia is inspired by the account of the incident as described in the Lucan Gospel.

Cassia presents the harlot that comes to anoint Christ's feet in a way that accentuates the participation of the body: repentance, which is the main subject-matter of the poem, is expressed through a bodily attitude of humility, the anointing of the feet of the Lord, in a way that conveys the deep contrition of the heart of the woman. Consent to the way of God is manifested in the bent back of the woman and her weeping eyes. The *metanoia*, the change of mind, does not take place in the abstract but in the specific temporal and spatial reality that envelops the entire person, as he is perceived in Byzantine theology. The body is not punished, but is used as a vehicle for the expression of the suffering of the soul. The bodily attitude of the woman reveals the personal relationship with Christ, the face-to-face contact that enables her and every faithful to attain to his salvation, that is, God.

Sinfulness is described as a dark night of transgression, gloomy and murky, an *eros* of sin. The use of the word *eros* implies the carnal form of *agape*, the lust, and the woman is shown realising the shift from the *eros* of sin to the love of God in a way that echoes the mystical tradition of the Church<sup>16</sup>, that is, abandoning the outer person in order to give birth to the inner one that will exist in the presence of God. The harlot sheds tears of repentance and uses the curls of her hair to rub the feet of Christ. She refers to the sighs of her heart and pleads with Christ to bend (Him too) over her heart, «the One who has bent the Heavens through your ineffable *kenosis*», she says. The woman follows the example of Christ's self-emptying in changing her mind, emptying it from the *eros* of sin and seeking her salvation. The kissing of the all-holy

---

16. See for example the distinction between *eros* and *agape* in the work of Origen as discussed by A. LOUTH, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, Oxford 1981, 66-67 and Averil CAMERON, *Sacred and Profane Love*, 11. For the treatment of the transformed *eros* whose focal point was the divine quest and for the place of suffering in this context, see, Jostein BØRTNES, *Eros Transformed: Same-Sex Love and Divine Desire. Reflections on the Erotic Vocabulary in St. Gregory of Nazianzus's Speech on St. Basil the Great*, in T. HÄGG and Ph. ROUSSEAU (eds), *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 2000, 180-193. See also Kallistos Ware, *The inner unity of the Philokalia and its influence in East and West*, Athens 2004, and esp. 47-54.

feet of Christ manifests the participation of the body and the way in which it is used in order to express the repentance of the woman. The sinfulness of the woman and the guilt that accompanies it urging her to repentance are paralleled to the guilt Eve felt in paradise when she heard the footsteps of God approaching at dusk and was hidden out of fear. The troparion ends with a supplication for her salvation, the plea marking the ultimate scope and value of Incarnational theology. It is remarkable how tightly the body is linked to the *metanoia*, which is the changing of mind and the way in which the use and the abuse of the body are insinuated in the context of sin and salvation through the personal relationship of the woman –and hence of every believer– with Christ.

Notable is the way in which the senses are manifested in the poem, linked not only with the body but also with the feelings of the person. Hence, the tears denote the sorrow of the woman in view of the sins she has committed and the kissing of the feet of the Lord the love of virtue and of God. The troparion provides an interesting example of the way in which Incarnational theology is coupled with an emphasis on the body, the senses and feelings, at least as far as they are expressed in literature. Also remarkable are the blurred boundaries between the specific historical moment and the cosmic dimension of Christ's presence on earth, specifically in the scene described in the troparion.

The same cosmic dimension of Christ's mission on earth is echoed in the *heirmoi* of Saturday of Holy Week that were composed by Cassia<sup>17</sup>. The four odes composed by Cassia refer to the Passion of the Lord, employing vivid imagery related to the Creation that witnesses the awesome death of her Creator. Odes four and five refer to the prefiguration of the Passion by Habakkuk and Isaiah, respectively. Creation is presented in an almost personified form, possessing not only senses but also feelings that enable her to look at the awesome mystery and react psychologically being astonished at the sight of Christ hanging on the cross, exclaiming that nobody else is holy apart from the Lord<sup>18</sup>. The personification of nature is not only a common feature of homiletics that employs it regularly, especially in homilies on the Passion of the Lord, but it was adopted early on by artists representing the Crucifixion<sup>19</sup>. The

---

17. From the *heirmoi* of the canon of the matins of Saturday of Holy Week, Cassia is considered to be the writer of odes 1, 3, 4 and 5. For the text see, *Κασσιανή ἡ ὑμνωδός*, 43–46.

18. Ode three, *Κασσιανή ἡ ὑμνωδός*, 44.

19. Maria VASSILAKI – Niki TSIRONIS, Representations of the Virgin and their Association with the Passion of Christ, in *Mother of God*, 453–463.

emphasis lay on the body of the Lord hanging from the cross<sup>20</sup> aims at intensifying the emotional response of the audience and accentuating the sacrifice of Christ.

In the fourth ode, Christ is described drawing the power of the tyrants to a close by speaking to those in the Hades<sup>21</sup>. The plural in which the noun 'tyrants' is set could be thought of as a reference to the Iconoclast emperors, for if Cassia referred simply to death it would be in the singular. Moreover, the word employed, *δυνάστες*, is one that commonly refers to the tyrannical rule of civil rulers rather than other<sup>22</sup>. If we accept this hypothesis, what Cassia says is that, through his death on the cross, Christ has brought to an end the rule of Iconoclasts, thus clearly relating the death of Christ to Incarnational theology, and hence stating that the views of Iconoclasts were made void due to the theology of the Incarnation.

In the fifth ode, the Incarnation of Christ is referred to with the word *θεοφάνεια* (theophany)<sup>23</sup>. It was precisely on the grounds of the appearance of God on earth through his incarnate Logos that the cult of icons was defended. Finally, the blurring of boundaries between the living and the dead, between past and present time is seen at the point where Isaiah is described crying out that the dead will rise and those in the tombs will stand up and all those on earth will be overjoyed. This notion of circular time where past, present and future coexist refers to the time of the divinity, the eighth day, when God shall be all in all; the day that the Resurrection of the dead will take place as a result of the Incarnation of the Lord<sup>24</sup>.

The *doxastikon* on the eve of Christmas<sup>25</sup> is a laudatory poem glorifying the mystery of the Incarnation in the context of its impact on the empire, in the sense that it refers to the ceasing of *πολυαρχία* (the divided rule before advent of Christ and Augustus)<sup>26</sup>. Cassia refers to the outcome of the Incarnation of the Lord using a vocabulary that could be linked once again to the Iconoclastic controversy, if we take into consideration the allusion she makes to the ceasing of the veneration of idols as

20. Lines 2-5, ode three, in *Κασσιανή ἡ ὕμνωδός*, 44.

21. Lines 3-4, ode four, in *Κασσιανή ἡ ὕμνωδός*, 45.

22. *Σὺ δυναστῶν διέκοψας κράτος, Ἀγαθέ, / ὁμιλῶν τοῖς ἐν ᾿Αἰδῇ...*: lines 3-4, ode four, in *Κασσιανή ἡ ὕμνωδός*, 45.

23. *Θεοφανείας σου, Χριστέ, τῆς πρὸς ἡμᾶς συμπαθῶς γενομένης...*: lines 1-2, in *Κασσιανή ἡ ὕμνωδός*, 46.

24. See also below, with reference to the *Canon for the Dead*.

25. *Κασσιανή ἡ ὕμνωδός*, 56.

26. G. W. H. LAMPE, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford 1961, 1115, s.v. *πολυαρχία*.



a result of the Incarnation<sup>27</sup>. Although, common as a feature in the early Christian thought, the use of the word idols, at the time of Iconoclasm, may well be thought of as a reference to the accusations of Iconoclasts against the Iconophiles. The specific assertion may well be considered a covered response to the charges of Iconoclasts: the veneration of idols ceased as a result of the Incarnation that justifies, in turn, the veneration of icons not as idols but as living testimony of the assumption of matter by God. And she continues saying that all cities were united under one worldly kingship while all nations believed in one godly lordship<sup>28</sup>.

Further down, the use of the words *ἀπεγράφησαν* and *ἐπεγράφημεν* brings to mind the vocabulary used in numerous homilies and hymns of the period which refer to the act of «writing» in its various literal and figurative senses, insinuating nonetheless the circumscribability of Christ and hence referring to the cult of images<sup>29</sup>. Remarkable is Cassia's technique of relating past historical events to the extra-temporal dimension of soteriology as well as to the dominant issues of her day.

The poem dedicated to the memory of the martyr Christine<sup>30</sup> is also a laudatory poem that comprises four strophes in which the physical description of the martyr as a soldier of Christ is combined with the recounting of her psychic qualities (her brevity, her fight against the demons, her resistance to the tyrants, her martyrdom and her joyful dance in Christ). The author moves from the particular to the general, i.e., from the description of the martyr and the recounting of her martyrdom to a more general statement voiced by the angels in the middle of strophe three (line eight forward) that is widened even further in strophe four where the first three laudatory lines are followed by the declaration that the folly of idolatry was brought to a close by women. Let us follow more closely the way the poem develops.

The description of the martyr resounds the athletic imagery that was traditionally employed for the martyrs of the faith in the early Christian period. Christine is

27. *Καὶ σοῦ ἐνανθρωπήσαντος ἐκ τῆς Ἀγνῆς/ ἡ πολυθεΐα τῶν εἰδώλων κατήργηται...*: lines 3-4, in *Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὑμνωδός*, 56.

28. *Ὑπὸ μίαν βασιλείαν ἐγκόσμιον/ αἱ πόλεις γεγέννηται/ καὶ εἰς μίαν Δεσποτείαν Θεότιτος/ τὰ ἔθνη ἐπίστευσαν*: lines 5-8, in *Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὑμνωδός*, 56.

29. On this occasion Cassia says that the nations were registered in a list, *ἀπεγράφησαν* (see LAMPE, *PGL*, 190, s.v. *ἀπογράφωμαι*), while we, the faithful, we were enrolled in the name of deity, *ἐπεγράφημεν ὀνόματι Θεότιτος* (for the word *ἐπεγράφημεν*, see LAMPE, *PGL*, 519, s.v. *ἐπιγράφωμαι*). Lines 9 and 11, in *Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὑμνωδός*, 56. On the metaphorical use of manuscript vocabulary see Niki TSIRONIS, *The Use of Writing Vocabulary in the Iconoclastic Period* (under preparation).

30. *Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὑμνωδός*, 48-51.

presented as a soldier holding in her hand the cross as a weapon (strophe one, line one), having her faith protecting her chest as a *thorax* (strophe one, line three), her hope as a herald (strophe one, line four), her love as a bow (strophe one, line five). At this point, attention should be drawn on the body as an expression of the psychological attitude of the martyr towards her persecutors, as well as to the point-by-point description of her outfit. Beheaded by the tyrants, she is presented dancing in Christ interceding for the souls of the faithful (strophe one, lines eight and nine). Death is presented as relatively unimportant, as the martyr not only becomes the mediator for the salvation of the souls of the faithful but also, filled with joy, she is presented dancing in Christ, an image that is telling of the participation of the body in the kingdom of God.

The powerful, vibrant description of the soldier is followed by the athletic imagery encountered in the second strophe where she is said to have fought an athletic fight bravely<sup>31</sup>, setting aside the weakness of nature (nature or sex?) and managing to resist against the tyrants. It is true that one cannot be sure whether Cassia refers to the weakness of female sex or of human nature in general; however, it seems she refers to the gender if we take into consideration the context and other relevant references in the poem. In the first strophe, where the description of the martyr as a soldier is given, Cassia says that the martyr bravely triumphed over the punishments of the tyrants. In strophe three, the enemy is said to have been vanquished by a woman<sup>32</sup> while in strophe four Cassia says that women have brought to an end the error of the madness of idolatry<sup>33</sup>. In both cases the weapon employed for the victory over the enemy was the cross. Although Kazhdan, following the current trend of scholarship, has used references to the cross in order to prove the possibly Iconoclastic beliefs of Cosmas the Melode, I think that this is not the case since the cross, just like the Mother of God, was used by both sides and, indeed, it was the interpretation that mattered and which defined the content of the reference rather than the employment of the symbol itself<sup>34</sup>. I would rather suggest that the Iconoclasts used the cross as an abstract symbol, whereas the Iconophiles employed it as a reminder of the actual sacrifice of

31. ἀθλητικὸν ἄγωνα ἠγωνίσαστο...: line 4, in *Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὑμνωδός*, 49.

32. Πέπρωκεν ὁ ἐχθρὸς ὑπὸ γυναικὸς ἡττηθείς: line 10, in *Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὑμνωδός*, 50.

33. ὅτι καὶ γυναῖκες κατήργησαν τὴν πλάνην τῆς εἰδωλομανίας: lines 5–6, in *Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὑμνωδός*, 51.

34. See A. KAZHDAN, *Kosmas of Jerusalem: a More Critical Approach to his Biography*, *BZ* 82, 1989 (= IDEM, *Authors and Texts in Byzantium*, London 1993, X) 122–132; Id., *Kosmas of Jerusalem: Can we Speak of his Political Views?*, *Le Muséon* 103, 1990 (= IDEM, *Authors and Texts in Byzantium*, XI), 329–346.

Christ and treated it as a real relic<sup>35</sup>. Women are associated with the resistance to the tyrant and are identified with the myrrh-bearers as the specific reference to the myrrh demonstrates: it was women that were not scared of the tyrant, that trampled on the wicked one and were strong enough to follow Christ; they were the ones that hastened towards the smell of His myrrh, mediating for our souls<sup>36</sup>.

So much the athletic imagery, the use of the words tyrant and tyrants in strophes one, two and three of the poem, as well as the two distinct references to women, may be thought of as suggestive of the Iconoclastic controversy if one considers, first, the example of Theodore the Stoudite who makes ample use of athletic imagery with reference to those who resisted the Iconoclasts<sup>37</sup>, and second, the fact that Cassia may well have been herself a victim of the Iconoclastic persecution if she were really the recipient of Theodore's letter no. 370<sup>38</sup>. Could these references to gender coupled with the use of the adjectives «bravely» and «manly», in strophes one and two, be considered as indicative of a specific preoccupation of Cassia with the question of gender? Moreover, could they be thought of as giving some grounding to the theories pronounced with reference to the place of women in the Iconoclastic debate<sup>39</sup>? This is not the place for the question to be discussed, but it definitely needs to be reconsidered in the light of the latest research.

The *Canon for the Dead* is undoubtedly Cassia's longest surviving poem; it comprises seven odes each of which comprises three strophes and is followed by a

---

35. See for example the acts of the seventh Ecumenical Council where the Iconoclasts are referred to as «enemies of the cross» (MANSI XII, 1130E). The cross is clearly interpreted in relation to Incarnational theology and the sacrifice of the Lord. For the skepticism with which synodal acts should be viewed see E. CHRYSOS, *The Synodal Acts as Literary Products*, in *L'icône dans la théologie et l'art. Les Études Théologiques de Chambésy*, Genève 1990, 85-93. However, in this case, the question is not relevant as what matters is the final product and the witness it bears to literary trends of the ninth century. See also, Niki TSIRONIS, *The Lament of the Virgin Mary from Romanos the Melode to George of Nicomedia: an Aspect of the Development of the Marian Cult*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of London 1998, 205-209; EAD., *The Cult and the Lament of the Virgin*, chapters 3 & 4.

36. *Κασσιανή ἡ ὑμνωδός*, 51.

37. *Theodori Stouditae Epistulae*, ed. G. FATOUROS [CFHB 31], Berlin - New York 1991, nos. 217 and 539, lines 6-7 and 30, respectively.

38. εἴπερ οὕτω προείλου ἐν τῷ νυνὶ διαγμῷ πάσχειν ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ, οὐκ ὅτι ἐμαστιγώθης πάλαι ἀρκουμένη, ἀλλὰ γὰρ καὶ αὐθις σφαδάζουσα οἶονεῖ καὶ φέρειν οὐκ ἰσχύουσα τὸν πυρπολούμενον ἔρωτα τῆς καλῆς ὁμολογίας: op. cit., no. 370, appendix; *Κασσιανή ἡ ὑμνωδός*, 94-95 and esp. 94.

39. *Κασσιανή ἡ ὑμνωδός*, 17-18 with notes. See Averil CAMERON, *Sacred and Profane Love*, 1-23; R. CORMACK, *Women and Icons and Women in Icons*, in JAMES (ed.), *Women, Men and Eunuchs*, 24-51.

*theotokion*<sup>40</sup>. In the first ode Cassia makes a recapitulation of Christian history from the Creation of man *ex nihilo* (ἐκ μὴ ὄντων ... παρήγαγες) and the Fall to the Incarnation and the prospect Resurrection of man at the Second Coming of Christ<sup>41</sup>. The beginning and the end of time are presented so closely linked that it seems as if the remote past of the Creation and the distant future of the Last Judgment are of the same immediate concern to the author, as if they are both taking place in her own day. The circular notion of time and the obliteration of its linear sequence, seen elsewhere in the poetry of Cassia, are evident once again at this point. The subject matter of the canon is properly developed in the following six odes. The theme of the Second Coming of Christ, the Last Judgment and the separation of the just from the unjust is developed with special emphasis on its description through an appeal to the senses. The apocalyptic imagery of the third ode is given through vivid images: the sound of the trumpet, the rushing of the dead in fear and haste, the hurrying of the angels, as the skies and the earth are trembling, while the elements are resolved out of dread at the coming of the Savior<sup>42</sup>. Christ is described as the keeper and treasurer of life and death, of both bodies and souls<sup>43</sup>; his voice, that will only call the worthy ones, is described as all sweet<sup>44</sup>. In the fifth ode the portrayal of hell is reminiscent of the imagery employed in the description of sinfulness in the troparion of the sinful woman: without end is hell for those who lived their lives in sinfulness, unspeakable the crying, the roaring and the worms, the dark fire and the dreariness<sup>45</sup>. In the sixth and seventh odes Cassia refers to the awesome sacrifice of Christ that has brought hope both to the living and the dead<sup>46</sup>. Frequent are the pleas addressed to Christ and to the Mother

---

40. Κανὼν ἀναπαύσιμος εἰς τὴν κοίμησιν. Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὕμνωδός, 58-78.

41. First ode, *Canon for the Dead*, in Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὕμνωδός, 58-59.

42. τῆς σάλπιγγος ἠχούσης (line 3, strophe 2); Νεκρῶν ἐν τρόμφῳ καὶ σπουδῇ/ τῶν τάφων ἀποτρεχόντων (lines 1-2, strophe 2); καὶ ἀγγέλων φοβερῶν/ σου προστρεχόντων, κύριε (lines 4-5, strophe 2); Τοῦ οὐρανοῦ τε καὶ τῆς γῆς/ σαλευομένων, οἰκτιρμῶν (lines 1-2, strophe 3); καὶ στοιχείων λυομένων ἐν φόβῳ (line 3, strophe 3): *Canon for the Dead*, in Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὕμνωδός, 61-62.

43. Ὁ τῆς ζωῆς/ κύριος καὶ τοῦ θανάτου, Χριστέ,/ ὁ σωμάτων καὶ ψυχῶν ταμίης τε (lines 1-4, strophe one): *Canon for the Dead*, in Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὕμνωδός, 63.

44. ἀξίωσον ὡς φιλόνητος/ φωνῆς τέ σου ἀκοῦσαι/ τῆς γλυκείας καλούσης εἰς ἀνάπαυσιν τούτους, δεόμεθα. (lines 8-11, strophe 2): *Canon for the Dead*, in Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὕμνωδός, 63.

45. Ἀτελεύτητος ὄντως/ τοῖς ἀσώτως ζήσασιν/ ἔστιν ἡ κόλασις,/ ὁ βρυγμὸς καὶ σκώληξ/ καὶ κλαυθμὸς ἀπαράκλητος, κύριε,/ καὶ τὸ πῦρ ἐκεῖνο/ τὸ ἀφεγγές, τὸ σκότος πάλιν (lines 1-7, strophe 2) *Canon for the Dead*, in Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὕμνωδός, 66.

46. *Canon for the Dead*, in Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὕμνωδός, 68, 70-71.

of God to save their people; in the last ode the supplication is addressed to those who have paved the way dying before us; the strophe ends with the words: «especially those of you who were granted freedom of speech, plead with the Creator on my behalf»<sup>47</sup>. A last point that should be brought to attention is the scene where the righteous are described in paradise dancing together with the angels<sup>48</sup>. The scene reminds us of the hymn on the martyr Christine where she is portrayed beheaded dancing in Christ.

The appeal to the senses as well as the way in which death is viewed by Cassia reveals her understanding of the human person as a whole, body and soul together, life and death forming an entire, unbreakable whole. Man exists in a universe that forms a natural part of the Creation of God; man and nature participate and respond to the calling of God revealed in his Incarnation and life-giving suffering on the cross.

As mentioned above, each ode is followed by a *theotokion*, i.e. a short laudatory strophe in honour of the Mother of God<sup>49</sup>. The use of the *theotokia*, typical of the literary genre of canons, is already suggestive of an Iconophile *milieu*, since their use was introduced by the Iconophile writers of the period and remained a characteristic of their literary works. In the majority of the *theotokia* included in the canon, the Virgin is supplicated as the mediator, while emphasis is laid on her purity and virginity. Extreme emphasis on her virginity after she gave birth to the Lord is given both in the *idiomelon* on the Annunciation<sup>50</sup>, as well as in the *theotokia* of the *Canon for the Dead*. Cassia makes a direct reference to the depiction of the Mother of God and to the honour that should be ascribed to her icons in the fifth ode of the canon<sup>51</sup>.

As for the rest, the imagery of the *theotokia* of the *Canon for the Dead* does not present any particularly noteworthy features. The theme of genealogy is combined with the exclamation at the thought of the mystery of the Incarnation, the mystery of the uncontainable God contained in the womb of Mary that is of a higher status than the cherubims and seraphims and so on. In the *theotokion* of the fourth ode, the

47. Lines 1-9 and esp. 7-9, strophe 2: *καὶ ὅσοι παρρησίας/ εἰτύχετε, τὸν κτίστην/ ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ καθικετεύσατε*: *Canon for the Dead*, in *Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὕμνωδός*, 76.

48. *μετὰ τῶν ἀπείρων νοερῶν δυνάμεων,/ μαρτύρων ὁσίων τε/ καὶ ἀποστόλων καὶ προφητῶν/ ποίησον πρεσβείαν ὑπὲρ τῶν μεταστάντων,/ χορεύειν σὺν ἀγγέλοις*: *theotokion* to the seventh ode, *Canon for the Dead*, in *Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὕμνωδός*, 75.

49. LAMPE, *PGL*, s.v. *θεοτοκίον*, 639.

50. *Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὕμνωδός*, 57. Interesting is the fact that in the three conclusive lines of the poem Cassia lays all the emphasis on the virginity of Mary: *A virgin you give birth/ and after birth/ you remain a virgin*.

51. *Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὕμνωδός*, 67.

imagery of the Virgin as protectress of the Christians (pride and protectress, refuge, wall and port) is resumed and placed in the context of a supplication<sup>52</sup>. The *theotokion* of the fifth ode, however, presents interesting features, as it recapitulates the doctrine on the natures, energies and wills of Christ while it concludes with the assertion that he assumed human flesh from a woman, *whose countenance we honour in paintings/icons* (ἥς τὴν θεῶν τιμῶμεν τοῖς πίναξιν)<sup>53</sup>. This is an extremely remarkable instance where the Mother of God is referred to in the context of a reassertion of the Christological doctrines of the Church, among which the veneration of icons is mentioned. Its importance relies first of all in the fact that it proves that the poetess –and presumably her audience– regarded Iconoclasm as a Christological controversy and were fully conscious of it as such. Second, because it relates the Christological controversy to the Mother of God, who has been used as the symbol *par excellence* of Incarnational theology on the basis of which the cult of icons was defended. Third, because the Virgin is referred to in relation to her iconography (depicted in icons) that would dominate post-iconoclastic art and would elevate the Mother of God to the most essential symbol of Orthodoxy in subsequent centuries.

Truly, no other work of a writer of the Iconoclastic period includes such a direct reference to the cult of icons in relation to the Virgin<sup>54</sup>. It is perhaps the most direct reference to the veneration of images in the entire homiletic and hymnographical corpus of the middle Byzantine period. The direct or indirect references to the body, the senses and the feelings in Cassia's work could be considered as part of her wider Christian worldview that developed around Incarnational theology. In her hymnographical corpus she elaborates on notions that derive from a specifically Iconophile understanding of Incarnational theology. Equally unique to her references to icons, are Cassia's references to the female gender. Could we explain these references on the grounds of the surviving testimony of the legends surrounding Cassia's person, according to which she was an exceptional woman for her age, direct and straightforward when she felt an answer was required?

52. Σὺ τῶν πιστῶν/ καύκημα πέλεις, ἀνύμφευτε,/ σὺ προστάτις, σὺ καὶ καταφύγιον,/ χριστιανῶν τεῖχος καὶ λιμὴν/ πρὸς γὰρ τὸν υἱόν σου ἐντεύξεις φέρεις, πανάμωμε...: lines 1-5, in *Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὕμνωδός*, 65.

53. The reference, apart from its importance for the argument of the present paper offers us a *terminus post quem* for the date the author composed the poem, which must have been after 843, since such an open assertion of the veneration of the images could not have circulated prior to the Triumph of Orthodoxy: *Κασσιανὴ ἡ ὕμνωδός*, 67.

54. At this point we obviously exclude the treatises in defence of the holy icons composed by various writers of the period.

I shall now turn to the background of the Iconoclastic controversy and will try to relate the features noted in Cassia's poetry to the dominant topics of the theological discourse of the period. The various issues or trends of the theological discourse which left their imprint on the literature of the time cannot be easily singled out and studied since, for the most part, they represent a change in the emphasis or in the manner that iconology is employed within the framework of rhetoric. However, as in the case of Byzantine art, the study of literature may reveal subtle changes that are taking place over the course of centuries and which, when set against the background of the theological developments of the time, may uncover the symbolic language that preachers, hymnographers and their audience shared and understood. Towards this end, however, we must try to pinpoint, what these trends were, and how were they related to the theological issues of the day.

First of all, it would be worth noting that Iconoclasm, although not always perceived as such, was yet another Christological debate and would eventually be resolved in what proved to be the last oecumenical council, namely, that of Nicaea II (787). The cult of images, linked with the circumscribability of God, was thus defended on the basis of the Incarnation of the Lord and its implications. Like in all previous Christological heresies, in Iconoclasm we may detect the fight against the ongoing threat of a dualistic interpretation of the Incarnation of the Word on behalf of the Iconoclasts<sup>55</sup>. In other words, since the early Christian period thinkers had the tendency to interpret the incarnate Logos in terms that betrayed a dualistic understanding of the world. The assumption of human nature by the Word of God presented a great challenge to the neat separation between good and evil as supported by the Gnostic sects of the second and third centuries and their followers (Manichaeans and others)<sup>56</sup>. These sects might have died out as such, but their strand of thought persisted and is encountered underlying heresies such as Arianism, Nestorianism, Monotheletism, Theopaschism and, lastly, Iconoclasm. It is not an accident that Iconophile writers of the eighth and ninth centuries refer to Iconoclasts as followers of these heresies<sup>57</sup>. And it would be a mistake to consider the equation as a simple polemical *topos* without deeper meaning. The common denominator of all these heresies was a dualistic background, that is, the reaction against the destruction of a

---

55. M. H. SHEPHERD, Jr., Christology: A Central Problem of Early Christian Theology and Art, in K. WEITZMANN (ed.), *Age of Spirituality*, New York 1980, 101-120.

56. H. CHADWICK, *The Early Church*, 2nd ed. London 1990, 35-38, 160 and *passim*.

57. See for example the Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, in MANSI XII, cols. 1011, 1027, 1047, 1123.

trimmed, logical understanding of the world where evil would be separated from good by a clear buffer. Incarnational theology, as developed in the early and middle Byzantine period, allowed no space for such a distinction. By its very nature it found its natural expression in mystical theology that, in its turn, gave to Orthodoxy its main characteristics in terms of doctrine and ritual<sup>58</sup>.

The connection between the cult of images and Incarnational theology is revealed in the writings of John of Damascus who views Orthodoxy as a 'seamless whole', to use the expression of Andrew Louth; the veneration of icons is proclaimed by men and women that were created by God as body and soul. As body and soul are united in human nature, in the same sense, spirit and matter may exist harmoniously and participate in the heavenly kingdom. A possible rejection of one or the other would lead to a falsification of the most basic precept of faith: the belief in the soteriological effect of the Incarnation of Christ through which matter was sanctified and man was given the opportunity to be saved not as an abstract spirit-soul but as a whole person<sup>59</sup>. The absence of barrier between the living and the dead manifests one of the most distinctive characteristics of Byzantine theology: the understanding of earth and heaven, human and divine, this life and afterlife, body and soul, matter and spirit, as a whole created by God and called to participate in his kingdom. It is not the nominal nature of things that determines their fate but the use they are put into; everything created by God is inherently good and provided it chooses -through its own free will- to attain to its Creator it has the possibility to be sanctified. These notions are amply evident in the poetry of Cassia as was demonstrated above with reference to specific examples.

John of Damascus rejects the dualism that led Iconoclasts to believe that we may not venerate the images because God (the good) cannot be possibly depicted on matter (the evil). From what we may gather from the surviving -undoubtedly biased- Iconophile sources, it was not so much the uncircumscribability of God that dictated

---

58. LOUTH, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*; V. LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 4th ed. Cambridge 1991, 23-43; for the use of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite by John of Damascus see A. LOUTH, *St John Damascene. Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology*, Oxford 2002, 171-2 and elsewhere.

59. It is precisely this notion that is expressed in the Orthodox doctrine of Resurrection; the *apocatastasis* involves the redemption and glorification of matter as a whole. In the words of Kallistos Ware, «at the Last Day the righteous will rise from the grave and will be united once more to a body - not such a body as we now possess, but one that is transfigured and «spiritual», in which inward sanctity is made outwardly manifest»: T. WARE, *The Orthodox Church*, 4th ed. London 1993, 261.



the Iconoclastic rejection of images as much as the deeply rooted belief in the unworthiness of matter<sup>60</sup>. And it was right to that point that John and the other Iconophile writers of the period answered, supporting the view that since human nature (i.e. matter) was assumed by Christ in his Incarnation, so God can be depicted on images, first because he was historically seen as a man and second because, through his incarnation, Christ has sanctified the matter, or, at least, has given it the possibility to be sanctified. The importance of this point was indisputable since its rejection would obliterate the entire soteriological dimension of the Incarnation. Hence, Incarnational theology was found at the very core of the Iconoclastic controversy.

Incarnational theology had important implications for various other issues that are all interrelated and which occupy an important place in the literature of the Iconoclastic period. I refer to what may be considered aspects of human nature, the nature assumed by Christ and essential aspects of which are the body, the senses and the feelings. The affirmation of Incarnational theology from the Iconophile point of view led to a concurrent assertion of these faculties of human nature.

The theme was all but new in Byzantine theology. To mention just a couple of examples I shall refer to the sixth century writer, Leontios Byzantios, and the seventh century Anastasios Sinaites. Leontios in his short treatise on the body laid the foundation of an argument that served to defend the doctrine against the heretical views of the *Aphthartodokitai* that persisted on ascribing immutable qualities in the human nature of Christ<sup>61</sup>. Leontios defended the corruptibility of the body of Christ and behind it the perfection of the two natures of the incarnate Word. In the seventh century Anastasios Sinaites also wrote on the body answering to the Theopaschites, who held the exact opposite views than those of the *Aphthartodokitai*, namely, that the divine participated in all aspects of the Passion<sup>62</sup>. Anastasios elaborates the Aristotelian understanding of the body, referring specifically to the senses and to the distinction between what can be perceived by the senses, the organs through which

---

60. See for example NICEPHOROS, *Ἀντιρρητικός I*, PG 100, 277C-280A; THEODORE THE STOUHITE, *Ἀντιρρητικός III*, PG 99, cols 429B-429D.

61. His treatise against the *Aphthartodokitai* is the second in the series of three treatises that Leontios wrote under the general title «Against Nestorians and Eutychianists» and it must have been delivered between 525 and 527. For the text see PG 86, cols. 1316D-1353C. For the biographical evidence with reference to Leontios and a study of the whole of his work see E. FRATSEAS, *Ο Λεόντιος ο Βυζάντιος. Βίος και συγγράμματα. Κριτική θεώρηση* [Ph.D. diss., University of Athens 1984].

62. On Anastasios see the classical work of Anna KARTSONIS, *Anastasis. The Making of an Image*, Princeton 1986.

things and feelings are detected and the intellectually perceived<sup>63</sup>. Up until the sixth oecumenical council, the Church was concerned with the definition of the human body of Christ, his human soul and their hypostatic union to the divine nature in death<sup>64</sup>. The writings both of Leontios and Anastasios with reference to the body would be extensively read by the Iconophile writers of the eighth and ninth centuries, and used in their argumentation in defense of the holy images.

The explanation of this development is twofold: first, the fact that the body, the senses and the feelings form the most essential, or rather, characteristic part of human nature, and it was on the basis of these aspects that the completeness of Christ's humanity was defended; second (and linked to the previous one) was the fact that these aspects were related to the cult of icons. Or rather, that it was precisely due to their relationship to the humanity of Christ that images acquired such an important place and came to be regarded as a quintessential part of the faith in the sense that John of Damascus expresses it<sup>65</sup>.

The body and its deriving aspects were linked both to the doctrine and to the ritual involved in the *proskynesis* of the holy images, since icons could not possibly be perceived outside of the liturgical context within which they operated and which appealed to all five senses (sight, smelling, hearing, feeling, taste) and, furthermore, required the full participation of the body<sup>66</sup>. Feelings were involved in that the faithful were supposed to relate in a certain way not only to the divine but also to its depiction. Hence, the act of prostrating and kissing that was part of the normal ritual surrounding the cult of images expressed a further assertion of the 'human' way of relating to the divine: through the feelings as expressed through one's own body. Furthermore, feelings affirmed the personal relationship between the faithful and the

63. Αἰσθητὸν οὖν ἐστὶ πᾶν τὸ μὴ ἐκ τῶν πέντε τούτων αἰσθήσεων ὑποπίπτον – αἰσθητήριον δὲ τὸ ὅλον τοῦ σώματος ὄργανον τὸ τὰς αἰσθήσεις τηροῦν – αἰσθητικὸν δὲ πᾶν ζῶον αἰσθησιν φόβου καὶ θανάτου ἔχον. Νοητὸν οὖν ἐστὶ τὸ διαφεύγον τὰς πέντε ἡμῶν αἰσθήσεις. ed. K.-H. UTHEMANN, *Anastasioi Sinaitae, Viae Dux* [Corpus Christianorum 8], Brepols-Turnhout 1981, II. 5, 98-104 in page 56; G. Tsigaras, *Die Dastellbarkeit Christi nach Theodoros Studites*, Vienna 1988, esp. 8-15, 23-24. For the iconology of Anastasios see the excellent study of G. TSIGARAS, *Εἰκόνα καὶ Λόγος. Εἰκονολογικά σχόλια στον Αναστάσιο Σιναΐτη*, Xanthi 1999, and esp. 22 with notes.

64. τὸ δὲ πανάγιον σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ καὶ πέπονθε, καὶ ἐτρώθη τοῖς ἡλίοις καὶ τῇ λόγχῃ, καὶ αἷμα καὶ ὕδωρ ἐξήγαγε, καὶ ἐκ ζωῆς νεκρὸν ἐγένετο: *Anastasioi Sinaitae, Viae Dux*, op.cit., II. 5, 105-126 and esp. 120-122 in page 57; KARTSONIS, *Anastasis*, 36-39.

65. LOUTH, *St John Damascene*, *passim*.

66. G. GALAVARIS, *The Icon in the Life of the Church. Doctrine-Liturgy-Devotion*, Leiden 1981, 3 ff. and *passim*.

divine, a relationship that was not abstract and mental but concrete and palpable. Although often repeated, the distinction between the approach of the Iconophiles and the more 'spiritual', 'intellectual' and 'de-materialized' approach of Iconoclasts – indicative of the dualistic mentality inherent in their views – is one that needs further elaboration and application with reference to specific source material<sup>67</sup>.

In short, Incarnational theology on the basis of which the veneration of icons was defended, implied not only the worthiness of matter for the artistic representation of the divine, but also reaffirmed the human qualities of man, which together with matter, have recovered their inherent 'goodness' (lost with the Fall) due to the Incarnation.

The Virgin Mary was the ideal personage to embody all these precepts in that, first of all, she was the primordial premise of the Incarnation, the one in whose womb the divine and human natures were interwoven for Christ to be born and, at the same time, she was a human being that embodied not only the human characteristics quoted above but also the example of the ideal use of the possibilities given to a human who would attain to God. For these reasons, Mary became the most important symbol used by the Iconophile writers during the eighth and ninth centuries but also remained the key for a correct understanding of Orthodox theology in subsequent centuries, as in her face we are given the message of Incarnational theology in a condensed form.

Hence, behind the massive literary Marian corpus of the Iconoclastic period one may read the concomitant notions the Byzantine audience understood, i.e. the equation between the cult of images and the defense of matter (body, senses and feelings), as well as the cult of the Virgin. A striking example of this network of relevant issues is provided in Cassia's *theotokion* to the fifth ode of the *Canon for the Dead* that we examined above.

It would be only natural to have these dominant issues that preoccupied theologians during the Iconoclastic period reflected in their writings and, in general, in the literature of the period in question. The emphasis laid on matter and its worthiness for the defense of images was also expressed through the prominence of references to the body, the senses and the feelings. Homiletics and hymnography of the Iconoclastic period mark a clear change of stress in the way these aspects are presented, both in homilies and in hymns.

If my reading is correct and if these notions are truly linked to the issue of Iconoclasm, the corpus of Cassia offers the modern reader a unique opportunity to put his finger on the dominant trends of the Iconoclastic period. The obliteration of

---

67. See for example the study of TSIGARAS, *Εἰκόνα και Λόγος* (as in note 63).

boundaries between life and death, body and soul, created and uncreated, visible and invisible, material and spiritual, as formulated in the doctrine of Incarnational theology propounded by the Council of Nicaea II, were to become the most characteristic feature of Orthodox theology and to be identified with and expressed through the cult of the Virgin and of icons. As a side effect, the body, the senses and the feelings, all crucial aspects of humanity, were involved in the exposition of Incarnational theology. Their central place was imprinted on the literature of the Iconoclastic period affecting its stylistic development, that it was now marked by a distinct lyrical tone, that would persist and become a characteristic Feature of Byzantine literature thereafter. And Cassia's work presents us with one of the most interesting examples to be encountered in hymnography. The way the body and the senses are presented in the literature of the period is suggestive of the Orthodox worldview as formulated at the end of the Iconoclastic period, after centuries of Christological controversies and doctrinal developments<sup>68</sup>.

---

68. I am greatly indebted to Professors. A. Markopoulos and V. Atsalos, and to my colleague George Calophonos for their comments on the draft of this paper. I am also grateful to Kimberley Diorio for the proofreading of the text.

