

## **Miracles of the Virgin Mary: medieval narratives through time and space.**

International workshop, Maynooth University and Trinity College Dublin.

29 March – 1 April 2017

This conference focused upon collections of miracles of the Virgin, conscious gatherings of discrete tales into a recognizable opus, transmitted through copying or printing. Particular attention was paid to the spread of this type of work from the Medieval Latin west within Europe and further afield. For the purposes of discussion at the conference, the stages of transmission and dissemination were divided into three: the origins of miraculous narratives concerning the intervention of the Virgin in Byzantium, and their adaptation and co-option in other Christian milieux; the putting together of some of these narratives in the Latin west into a “core” collection and the subsequent variation, expansion and selection of Latin tales into various evolving collections; and the translation of such collections as a means of transmission of the stories, both into western European vernaculars and into Slavic, Semitic and other Oriental languages. The focus on the creation and distribution of what were in almost all environments highly-popular miracle-tales allowed a further discussion of the purpose of such collections and the themes they encapsulated.

### 1. The Byzantine origins.

The Byzantine origins for the expressive motifs of devotion to the Virgin was explored by Mary Cunningham, who focused upon Constantinopolitan, and specifically imperial, devotion to the main shrines of the Virgin, with their rituals and shrine-books. Johan Heldt pointed to the existence of neglected compilations of Marian miracles in Byzantium that are still unedited. Francesca dell’Acqua considered the transmission of motifs into the Latin west through the key figure of the eighth-century theologian, Ambrosius Autpertus, at the Italian monastery of San Vincenzo al Volturno; the monk’s twelfth-century *vita* contained what may well be an archetypical miracle, in that his cure from a speech defect allowed him to celebrate the Virgin through laudatory orations and hymns (*laudes et carmina*). We find the exaltation of the Virgin and recitation of her miracles throughout the traditions we shall follow. Beatrice Daskas similarly centred her attention on the transmission of different Byzantine materials into a Latin setting through the translation of an early version of the great *Akathistos* hymn which was framed by a narration of the protection of Constantinople from its besiegers. There can be no doubt, then, that the devotion to the Virgin was strongly marked, in its infancy in the west, by its Byzantine or Greek origins; and one may observe that a number of popular tales that cross collections maintain and emphasise this connexion. The same reflexion for the West may also be made for Slavic lands, where, as detailed by Margaret Dimitrova, Byzantine devotional and hagiographic materials have an impact upon devotional practices.

### 2. The Latin “core”.

Sporadic references to miracles of the Virgin in earlier Latin works become crystallized during the twelfth century in shrine collections (such as Soissons, Chartres, built around secondary relics of the Virgin) and independent collections, whose interests are in a “universal” or non-localized cult of the Virgin, with emphasis

falling on the rewards of devotion, promises of salvation, and the manifestation of the presence of the Mother of God herself made through images and statues. Various collections were made, some in an Anglo-Norman context, but the main collection seems to have been a mainland European phenomenon, and it is mainly of this “core” collection, with a recognizable sequence of roughly thirty miracles that copies were made and versions developed. As discussed by Anthony Lappin, these included the Cistercian *Mariale* (sometimes connected to the apocryphal *Life of the Virgin*) and a Franciscan tract (the *Liber Marie* by Gil de Zamora, which uses miracle stories to establish theological truths or moral imperatives. Miracle stories were grouped under Marian feasts by the Dominican Iacobus de Voragine in his *Legenda aurea*, and, given the popularity and utility of this work, it proved to be the most important vector for knowledge of the selected tales in subsequent centuries.

### 3. The translations.

#### Europe

From the Latin collections, a number of vernacular translations were made.

Jean-Louis Benoît discussed the Old French translations by Adgar and Gautier de Coincy, together with a number of key observations on ways of classifying *topoi* in the tales and their liminal place between the secular world of *courtoisie* and a more strictly religious expression of doctrinal orthodoxy. Anthony Lappin looked at two miracle collections from thirteenth-century Spain: Gonçalvo de Verçeo’s versification of a select number of miracles from the “core” collection, and the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, which mix internationally-known tales with examples drawn from local shrines and the royal court, interspersed with hymns of praise and lavish illuminations. A contrast was drawn between the highly clericalized work by Gonçalvo, written before the 1230s, and the secular and political concerns of the court of Alfonso X which gave shape to the *Cantigas*. Of particular interest to the wider project is the website, the Oxford “Cantigas de Santa Maria Database” (<http://csm.mml.ox.ac.uk/>) which has attempted to map some of the Latin and vernacular collections of miracles. Matthew Driscoll adumbrated the extremely well-stocked Icelandic collections, which mix local miracles with much more widely-known European stories; the earliest, thirteenth-century examples are often found as an appendix to the *Life of the Virgin*. As is often the case with Icelandic literature, the manuscript tradition is particularly rich.

The narrative material in these collections was widely quarried, and the later middle ages saw, as foreshadowed by Iacobus de Voragine, the excerption of tales into sermon collections and *legendaries*: thus, as detailed by Virginia Langum, no Middle English collection of the Virgin’s miracles exists, but, rather, they are grouped together in other texts, such as the *South English Legendary* or the *Northern Homiliary Cycle*. Alternatively, they could be excerpted for inclusion as *exempla* in collections of pastoral material — directly the case with fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Hungarian materials as described by Zsófia Bartók. Such excerption into the vernacular followed a pattern already found in Latin, and, indeed, the two most important collectors and writers of sermon material of the fifteenth century (the German Dominican Iohannes Herolt, known to posterity as the *Discipulus* and the

Hungarian Franciscan, Pelbartus de Themeswar) provided what proved to be definitive collections of Marian miracles, editions of which were repeatedly produced by the printing presses of the late fifteenth and sixteenth century to a seemingly unquenchable market. These printings become a key point of reference in the production and dissemination of the tales. Neither Hungary nor England offered a specific and limited collection of miracles of the Virgin; nor did Italy, until the humanist and reformed Camaldolese monk Silvano Razzi in the sixteenth century determined to make a collection of tales translated into Tuscan to fill that very gap, expressing stating that he composed with the aim of providing Italians with their “own” collection. As Barbara Crostini showed, one of his main sources was Herolt, although he kept his ear to the ground and collected local miracle-stories, such as those provided by his brother, a Dominican friar. Other parts of Europe, it is to be expected, was also well-stocked with miracle-tales and miracle-collections, even if the Celtic fringe and the German heartlands unfortunately remained unexplored during the conference.

North Africa, the Mediterranean Islands, the Levant and Slavic lands

Yet Europe was not the be-all and end-all of the collections of the Virgin. The “core” collection, as Fr. Awad Wadia pointed out, was translated in the twelfth century into Arabic, perhaps originally in North Africa; a second translation was made, composed after 1260 was made, possibly via an Old French text or an oral French translation of a Latin collection; a third revision to this collection was made under the influence of an Italian version at a later point, probably at the end of the 16th century. There was, too, a translation from a Greek original (which has not survived) carried out in Rhodes in the fifteenth century.

The manuscript tradition to these Arabic versions is large and complex, and has attracted but little attention among the scholars; it is further complicated, as Cornelia Horn pointed out, by Garshuni texts. Although the Syriac tradition had little space for devotion to the Virgin in its earliest stages, this does develop, eventually culminating in a manuscript collection written during the twentieth century — a living tradition partly matched by the Ethiopian, as described by Ewa Balicka-Witakowska, which originated in a translation from the Arabic made in the 14th century but which continues copying manuscripts, adding miracles, and developing a devotion to the Virgin Mary and to some of her icons, considered to be miraculous .

Silvano Razzi’s composition of an Italian collection had ramifications far beyond Italy. As described by Johan Heldt, two Cretans of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Iōannēs Morezēnos and Agapios Landos, composed miracle collections using material, drawn from both the Byzantine tradition and Razzi’s highly popular collection, with a degree of normalization and domestication of their source. Landos’s work was printed, and received wide distribution, sparking another wave of translations in various languages: into Arabic in 1688, for example; or Bulgarian about the same time, as discussed by Desislava Uzunova (some translations of celebrated miracles, such as the Theophilus legend, had existed in South Slavonic from the fourteenth century, as well). Evidently, a desideratum will be further work on the Slavic area, particularly Russia and Poland.

## Armenia and Georgia

A further wave of Marian miracle collections is found amongst Armenian Catholics, with a late-seventeenth-century collection composed in order to advocate the use of the rosary, as outlined by Robert Phoenix; this collection, although printed, seems to have had little echo in Armenia itself, although its translation was fundamental in Georgia, as outlined by Nino Doborjginidze. The Georgian tradition preserves a number of copies of this text, together with a translation of Razzi's collection, witnessing again to its remarkable geographic reach.

## 4. Themes

Whilst the conference's major aim was to chart the presence and relation to each other of the various miracle collections in each language, a number of key themes were also outlined. These revolved around formal and theoretical narratological concerns; into the historical and anthropological understanding of cultic devotion, the reception of stories and the purpose of collections; and the important topic, given the linguistic complexity of the material and its large temporal spread, of digital humanities and the possibilities of constructing an effective database.

### Narrative

The first was the importance to the subject of a narratological approach, in studying the recensions of the tales as a means of understanding their transmission and cultural function. Here a clear desideratum will be the tracing of modifications to a sequence of archetypal tales through various translated versions to follow alterations of emphasis and detail, reflecting differing purposes whilst still recognizably remaining within the "same story". As repeatedly noted, the narratological question can be enlivened through an informed awareness of manuscript transmission, scribal recension and translatorial emphases in the shaping of individual tales.

### Politics, Culture, Ethics

A second aspect requiring consideration was the political function of the tales: a stimulating presentation by the modern sociologist Rasa Baločkaitė emphasised the subaltern use of Marian apparition stories (and associated vengeance miracles) by Lithuanians under Soviet domination, as a means to contest claims of authority by the Communist state. Such appeals to the Virgin's protection and concern may lie behind Georgian claims of equality in the competitive (and mainly Greek) monastic environment of Athos, or may be found in clerical investment in Marian devotion as a means of emphasising caste hierarchies; regal assumption of the role of key supplicant and devotee of the Virgin (seen both in Spain in the thirteenth century and Ethiopia in the fourteenth and fifteenth); or reaffirming the role of a monastic establishment in a particular cult (as Ewa Balicka-Witakowska showed with regard to the collection composed at Dābrā Zāmādu, which claims the icon of the Virgin painted by St Luke). The broad socio-economic backgrounds of the various supplicants in the miracle tales, often liminal figures themselves, however, also suggest that some of the collections' popularity came from subaltern figures who found those similar to themselves figuring, if not quite as heroes and heroines, at least as particularly favoured individuals thanks not to wealth, power, or birth, but to devotion and sincerity. As compositions which bridged cultural divisions—composed

for, and read by, laity and learned alike—the miracle tales can offer a fruitful field for enquiries into, for example, popular notions of health and sickness, as described by Virginia Langum in interrogating English sermon material; or, as argued for by Barbara Crostini in regard to Razzi's purposes, as offering a compassionate understanding of "sinful" behaviour within compromised socio-economic conditions as a counterweight to more strict and legalistic understandings of morality.

#### Digital Humanities

The question of databases was raised in connection to an intriguing demonstration of the Hungarian exempla database (<http://sermones.elte.hu/exemplumadatbazaris>) and that of the Cantigas de Santa Maria (as mentioned above). Moreover a scheme for the database with an encoding system appropriated for the project was discussed with the IT specialist Bengt Dahlqvist. It is clear that, for future comparisons, a suitable nomenclature for the miracle-stories (type, and generic title) will have to be adopted, the difficulties of a multi-lingual database confronted, and further work on a single narrative sample in the various traditions taken forward.

AL, EBW