

# The Byzantine Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption

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## ABSTRACT

Fundamental to the development of preaching on the Mother of God was the introduction of special feast-days in her honor into the liturgical calendar. This process is unfortunately difficult to reconstruct, owing to the lack of liturgical and historical sources for the period before the ninth century. The end of the Virgin Mary's life remains a relatively uncertain moment in the Christian story. Our understanding of the end of Mary's life improves considerably, however, once we reach the late fifth and sixth centuries, when there was suddenly an efflorescence of diverse traditions, both narrative and liturgical, all celebrating the Virgin's departure from this world. This sudden proliferation of traditions calls for an explanation: something about this topic and its narrative traditions must have resonated with the issues and concerns of the early Byzantine world. The present contribution will focus on the origin of the Byzantine traditions of the Virgin Mary's dormition and assumption, as also as on the christological and doctrinal signification of the Virgin Mary's cult. Our analysis will be based on the previous scholarship and the Marian canons promulgated by the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451).

## Introduction

The end of the Virgin Mary's life remains a relatively uncertain moment in the Christian story.<sup>1</sup> Since the early Christian centuries, this event inspired both

<sup>1</sup> About Virgin Mary's doctrine of Assumption both in Ancient Christianity and in Byzantium see indicatively: Martin Jugie, *La Mort et l'Assomption de la Sainte Vierge. Etude historico-doctrinale*, Studi e Testi 114 (Città Del Vaticano, 1944); Paul E. Duggan, *The Assumption Dogma: Some Reactions and Ecumenical Implications in the Thought of English-speaking Theologians* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1989); Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption*, The Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford, 2006); Nicholas Conostas, *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity. Homilies 1-5, Texts and Translations*, SVigChr LXVI (Leiden and Boston, 2003); Vasiliki Limberis, *Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the creation of Christian Constantinople* (London and New York, 1994); Dominique Cerbelaud, *Marie. Un parcours dogmatique* (Paris, 2004); Karl Rahner, *Maria, Mutter des Herrn. Mariologische Studien* (Berlin, 2004); Maria Vassilaki (ed.), *Images of the Mother of God. Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium* (Farnham, 2005); Mary B. Cunningham, *Wider than Heaven. Eighth-century Homilies on the Mother of God* (New York, 2008); Gerhard

apocryphal and canonical literature. Our understanding of the end of Mary's life improves considerably once we reach the late fifth and sixth centuries, when there was suddenly an appearance of diverse and rival traditions, both narrative and liturgical, all commemorating the Virgin's departure from earthly life.<sup>2</sup> These traditions flourished during a period where they resonated with the issues and concerns of the early Byzantine world (450-600 AD). When we refer to the traditions of the Holy Virgin's Dormition and Assumption we refer to literary texts whose origin and authorship are doubtful, mainly non-canonical texts written in Coptic and deriving from the Monophysite worlds.

It was in the beginning of the fifth century that the new literary *genre* in the field of the Christian apocryphal literature began, that of the *Dormitio* or of *Transitus Mariae* texts.<sup>3</sup> These texts fall into three groups, or better into three apocryphal traditions, depending on the "creed" of the Dormition they follow.<sup>4</sup> The first group includes texts accepting Mary's Dormition and date back to the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, *i.e.* texts of the Syrian tradition. We can cite *e.g.* the *Syrian Dormitio* known as the *Five Books* by king Abgar of Edessa. On the other hand there is also a Greek text, the *Dormitio* of Ps.-John, which preserves the same tradition.<sup>5</sup> The second group includes texts accepting Mary's Assumption distinct from the Dormition and date back to the first half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, *i.e.* texts of the Coptic tradition, but also of Arab and Ethiopic provenance. These texts offer a different end of the Holy Virgin's life: there is a resurrection of Mary before her body's removal by Jesus on a chariot of light. The most illuminating text about this 'version' of Mary's Dormition is the *Gospel of the Twelve Apostles*. There is also the Greek text of John the Evangelist, published and translated into French by A. Wenger, which contains a resurrection by the reunification of Mary's body and soul in Heaven.<sup>6</sup> The third group includes texts accepting Mary's assumption with or without resurrection and date back

Ludwig Müller, *Katholische Dogmatik. Für Studium und Praxis der Theologie* (Freiburg, Basel and Wien, 32010); Leslie Brubaker, Mary B. Cunningham (eds), *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium. Text and Images*, Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Studies 11 (Farnham, 2011). About a wide bibliography on the Holy Virgin's Traditions and Her Dormition and Assumption, see S.J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions* (2006), 419-453.

<sup>2</sup> About these diverse and rival traditions, see S.J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions* (2006), 142-206. See also Brian E. Daley, "'At the Hour of our Death': Mary's Dormition and Christian Dying in Late Patristic and Early Byzantine Literature", *DOP* 55 (2001), 71-89.

<sup>3</sup> See the text: Monika Haibach-Reinisch (ed.), *Ein neuer 'Transitus Mariae' des Pseudo-Melito* (Rome, 1962).

<sup>4</sup> D. Cerbelaud, *Marie* (2004), 180-4.

<sup>5</sup> This *Dormition* is supposed to have been written by John, Archbishop of Thessalonica. It was published by Martin Jugie (ed.), *Homélies mariales byzantine (II)*, PO 19.3 (Paris, 1926), 344-438; M. Jugie, *La Mort* (1944), 139-50. It has also been translated into the English language by Prof. Brian Daley. See Brian E. Daley SJ, *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies* (Crestwood, NY, 1998), 47-70.

<sup>6</sup> Antoine Wenger, *L'Assomption de la T. S. Vierge dans la tradition byzantine du VI<sup>e</sup> au X<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Archives de l'Orient Chretien 5 (Paris, 1955), 210-41; and Frédéric Manns, OFM, *Le Récit de la*

to the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, *i.e.* texts by Theoteknos of Livias who is the first to speak of an assumption (ἀνάλημψις) and of dormition (κοίμησις).<sup>7</sup>

My aim is not to present the ancient traditions and their texts, as they have been presented in an amazing way by previous scholars already, such as Martin Jugie,<sup>8</sup> Simon Claude Mimouni,<sup>9</sup> Antoine Wenger,<sup>10</sup> Michel van Esbroeck,<sup>11</sup> and quite recently Stephen Shoemaker<sup>12</sup>. My aim is to focus on the early Byzantine religious texts (6<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century), both apocryphal and canonical, concerning the departure of the Holy Virgin into heaven.

## The Byzantine Texts on Mary's Dormition

The Byzantine narrative texts on the Dormition can be divided into two categories: a) the texts that narrate the event of the Dormition and can be regarded as Διηγήσεις or Αφηγήσεις and b) the homilies which also have a teaching purpose, that is to teach the belief in the Dormition.<sup>13</sup>

The first Greek narrative, apocryphal text referring to the Dormition is the ancient *Transitus by St John, the Theologian and Evangelist*<sup>14</sup>, which is the source for the next texts concerning the Dormition and Assumption; its full title is the following: *Narrative by St John, the Theologian and Evangelist, concerning the Dormition of the All-Holy Theotokos and How the Undeified Mother of Our Lord Was Translated*. This narrative was first published and translated into French by Antoine Wenger, while we have also a modern English translation

*dormition de Marie (Vatican grec 1982), Contribution à l'étude des origines de l'exégèse chrétienne, Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Collectio Maior, 33 (Jerusalem, 1989).*

<sup>7</sup> A. Wenger, *L'Assomption* (1955), 277-91; B.E. Daley, *On the Dormition* (1998), 71-81.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Jugie, *L'Immaculée Conception dans l'Écriture sainte et dans la tradition orientale*, Collectio Editio Cura Academiae Mariana Internationalis, Textus et Disquisitiones, Bibliotheca Immaculatae Conceptionis 3 (Rome, 1952); *id.*, *La Mort et l'assomption de la Sainte Vierge: Etude historico-doctrinale*. Studi e Testi 114 (Vatican City, 1944); *id.*, 'La Mort et l'assomption de la Sainte Vierge dans la tradition des cinq premiers siècles', *Echos d'Orient* 25 (1926), 5-20, 129-43, and 281-307.

<sup>9</sup> Simon Claude Mimouni, *Les traditions anciennes sur la Dormition et l'Assomption de Marie. Études littéraires, historiques et doctrinales*, SVigChr, Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language, 104 (Leiden and Boston, 2011)

<sup>10</sup> See note 5.

<sup>11</sup> See indicatively, Michel van Esbroeck, *Aux origines de la Dormition de la Vierge: Etudes historiques sur les traditions orientales* (Brookfield, VT, 1995); *id.*, 'Le Culte de la Vierge de Jerusalem à Constantinople aux 6<sup>e</sup>-7<sup>e</sup> siècles', *Revue des Etudes Byzantines* 46 (1988), 181-90.

<sup>12</sup> See note 1.

<sup>13</sup> About a catalogue of all these texts either in Greek, Latin or in oriental languages see S.J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions* (2006), 419-35.

<sup>14</sup> A. Wenger, *L'Assomption* (1955), 17-95 (commentary) // 209-41 (Greek text, *apparatus criticus*, French translation). About an English translation and a modern annotated commentary of the Greek narration by St John the Evangelist, see S.J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions* (2006), 351-69.

by Stephen Shoemaker. The Eastern church owns two narratives of the Dormition: that of John the Evangelist and the narrative-homily of John of Thessalonica, which was delivered sometime between 610 and 649.<sup>15</sup> The first can be found in several manuscripts, both Greek and Latin, dating from the 10th century. This account is regarded by some as the most ancient one, by others the most ancient is believed to be that of Ps-Melito of Sardis<sup>16</sup> which must have been written by 550 at the latest. All we can assume is that the narrative by John the Evangelist, or the Vat. Gr. 1982, is very closely related to the first narrative, that by Ps-Melito. The text by John narrates the last days of the Virgin Mary's earthly life. Briefly, the content of the narrative reads as follows: An angel appears to Mary to whom he gives a palm and announces to her her death to happen within three days. Mary ascends the Mount of Olives, where the Angel appears again and gives her instructions for the preparation of her death. Mary returns to her home where she prays. She invites friends to inform them of her death. Meanwhile John arrives who is being informed about the instructions of the angel. Then the other apostles also arrive, including Paul. Peter asks the other apostles to pray together, for God reveals them the reason for this sudden alert. John leaves the house and informs the apostles for the upcoming event. The morning of the second day (time not specified exactly) the apostles enter the house and greet Mary. The evening of the second day Peter invites the crowd. Mary leaves her home to fulfill her last prayer, according to the instructions of the angel. The third hour of the day Jesus arrives, whom Mary welcomes with joy and jubilation. Jesus provides guidance to Peter on the funeral of Mary. After the preparation of the funeral couch, the procession leaves the house to Gethsemane. The Jews attack with abusive way against the casket, but the angels blind them. But a Jew, the Great High Priest Jefonias, approaches the casket. His hands are cut away. He confesses and he is being cured. The apostles put the body in the tomb and discuss the authentic teaching. After three days Jesus returns. The angels carry her body to heaven and place it into the paradise. The body is placed under the tree of life and the soul recombines with the body. The apostles return to the field of preaching.

The second Byzantine narrative is the legends of Galbius and Candidus, one short and one long.<sup>17</sup> These legends can be found in manuscript Sinait. Gr. 491 which narrate the origin of Mary's robe at the Church of Blachernae. According

<sup>15</sup> B.E. Daley, *On the Dormition* (1998), 47-70 (English translation and short commentary). F. Halkin, 'Une légende byzantine de la Dormition: L'Épître de Jean de Thessalonique', *Revue des Etudes Byzantines* 11 (1953), 156-64 (Résumé of John of Thessalonica); S.J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions* (2006), 210-1; Bernard Capelle, 'Les anciens récits de l'Assomption et Jean de Thessalonique', *Recherches de Théologie ancienne et médiévale* 12 (1940), 209-35.

<sup>16</sup> Monika Haibach-Reinisch (ed.), *Ein neuer 'Transitus Mariae' des Pseudo-Melito* (1962).

<sup>17</sup> See A. Wenger, *L'Assomption* (1955) / (111-39 commentary // 293-312 Greek text, *apparatus criticus*, French translation).

to the short document the empress Pulcheria asked the Patriarch of Jerusalem Juvenal, who would travel to Constantinople for the fourth ecumenical council, to carry with him Mary's body.<sup>18</sup> Juvenal answered that this specific relic did not exist. According to an ancient tradition the apostles found the tomb empty on the third day after the funeral service. As on the occasion of our Saviour in the tomb was left nothing except the grave-clothes. The Empress begged the Patriarch to send her this particular relic – *i.e.* the grave-clothes – in order to be placed at the church of Blachernae, which has been built for this purpose. The second legend narrates that the robe was found by the two patricians Galbuis and Candidus. They found the relic at a Jew woman's home where she kept it in a box. The two patricians manufactured a similar box and replaced it with that, that contained the robe. They stole that box and they brought it back to Constantinople. The emperors Leo I and Verina sheltered it worthily at the Church of Blachernae.

Both legends are profusely represented in the hagiographical literature of the Greek Church. This relic is often mentioned by the chroniclers and chanted by the panegyrists. The deposition of Mary's robe at the church of Blachernae is included as a feast on 2 July into the liturgical calendar. For the earliest datable reference to the presence of the Robe at Blachernae we are indebted to Theophylact of Simocatta. Writing at the beginning of the seventh century, *i.e.* already almost a century and a half after the alleged date of the relic's acquisition, he says that 'the emperor Maurice, in the twentieth year of his reign, went to the church of the Mother of God which the Byzantines, who hold it in awe, call Blachernae. This shrine stands in high honour with the faithful and is the object of great devotion on the part of the city. It is said that the clothing [*peristolía*] of the Virgin Mary (whom we Romans correctly – and alone – call 'the God-bearer') is deposited there in a gold-encrusted casket [*sêkos*]. Due to the lack of sources we do not know with certainty about the establishment of the Church of Blachernae nor about the origin of the marian relic, nor even about the institution of this feast'.<sup>19</sup>

Another important, perhaps the most famous tradition on the Holy Virgin's Dormition and Assumption, is undoubtedly a brief work known as the *Euthymiac History*.<sup>20</sup> This legend was inserted into the homilies by John of Damascus

<sup>18</sup> About Marian relics at Constantinople see, John Wortley, 'The Marian Relics at Constantinople', *GRBS* 45 (2005), 117-187, reprinted in id., *Studies on the Cult of Relics in Byzantium up to 1204* (Farnham, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> J. Wortley, 'The Marian Relics at Constantinople' (2005), 179-80.

<sup>20</sup> Michel van Esbroeck, 'Un témoin indirect de l'Histoire Euthymiaque dans une lecture arabe pour l'Assomption', *Parole de l'Orient* 6-7 (1975-6), 485-8; Bernard Kotter (ed.), *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskus V. Opera homiletica et hagiographica* (Berlin, 1988), 536-9; Basile Lourié, 'L'Histoire Euthymiaque. L'oeuvre du Patriarche Euthymios/Euphemios de Constantinople (490-496, † 515)', *Warszawskie Studia Teologiczne* 20 (2007), 189-221; A. Wenger, *L'Assomption* (1955), 136-9.

on the Dormition, where it is identified as a quotation from ‘the third book of the *Euthymiac History*, chapter 40’. The *Euthymiac History*, as quoted in John’s homily, describes an incident that is supposed to have occurred during the events of the council of Chalcedon. While Juvenal and the other bishops of Palestine were present for the council, the imperial couple, Pulcheria and Marcian, enquired about the relics of the Virgin Mary, asking that Mary’s remains be sent to the imperial capital, in order to protect it. In response, Juvenal briefly narrates the events of Mary’s Dormition, explaining why there are actually were no bodily relics. Three days after Mary’s burial, Juvenal explains, the apostle Thomas finally reached Jerusalem, and, having missed the events of Mary’s Dormition, he requested that the tomb be reopened, so that he might pay his respects. When the apostles opened the tomb, they were startled to find no body, but instead only Mary’s funeral robe. Juvenal then concludes by referencing the passage from Ps.-Dionysius’ *The Divine Names*,<sup>21</sup> after which the imperial couple requests that Juvenal send them the garment. When Juvenal returns home to Jerusalem, he fulfills their request, and Marcian and Pulcheria enshrined the robe in the church of Blachernae, the Constantinopolitan church that housed this famous relic. We know that the legend developed sometime between 550 and 750, making it a potential witness to the earliest development of the Dormition traditions.<sup>22</sup>

In the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century John of Thessalonica composed an homily for the Dormition, probably composed for the introduction of the 15 August feast in the liturgy of Thessalonica during the early seventh century. We must note that John was metropolitan of Thessalonica, 610-649 and he is best known about the compilation of the Miracles composed in favor of St. Demetrius, during the Slav siege of Thessalonica from 614-616. The scholars place the homily on the list of the apocryphal texts composed for the Dormition. In this situation, John was faced with the problem of explaining to his congregation why their ancestors had failed to observe this austere feast and, more generally, why this tradition had suddenly appeared only at such a late date. John’s homily is based on the Greek text, the *Transitus* by John the Evangelist, edited by Wenger. John of Thessalonica’s homily itself was delivered sometime between 610 and 649 placing it at the very end of the period under primary consideration. Generally the scholars regard that this homily was delivered to initiate the celebration of the feast of the Dormition on 15 August in that city. There are two versions of that homily: the first one is the earliest, while the second one is a later, interpolated version, which none the less occasionally bears important witness to the earliest traditions. This homily was first published by Martin Jugie, while

<sup>21</sup> *De divinis nominibus* III 2 (PG III 681): [...] καὶ αὐτὸς καὶ πολλοὶ τῶν ἱερῶν ἡμῶν ἀδελφῶν ἐπὶ τὴν θέαν τοῦ ζωαρχικοῦ καὶ θεοδόχου σώματος συνεληλύθαμεν, παρῆν δὲ καὶ ὁ ἀδελφόςθεος Ἰάκωβος καὶ Πέτρος, ἡ κορυφαία καὶ πρεσβυτάτη τῶν θεολόγων ἀκρότης [...].

<sup>22</sup> See S.J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions* (2006), 207-8.

Francois Halkin in 1953 published a *résumé* of that homily.<sup>23</sup> Johns' homily is a text that became well known during the Middle Ages in the Christian Greek-speaking East and thus experienced different influences and songs.<sup>24</sup>

The most important Greek homilies<sup>25</sup> on Mary's Dormition and Assumption<sup>26</sup> of the Early and Middle Byzantine period are by authors who flourished since the 7<sup>th</sup> century: Andrew of Crete, Germanus of Constantinople, John of Damascus, Theoteknos of Livias,<sup>27</sup> Modestus of Jerusalem, John Geometres,<sup>28</sup> and Kosmas Vestitor.<sup>29</sup> In this article we will focus on John Geometres' homily, as he introduces the 'double assumption', as A. Wenger has pointed out. Geometres' text is very difficult and is open to many interpretations. Father Gordillo<sup>30</sup> sees the key of all the difficulties, that Geometres' text poses, in a short phrase: «Τοῦ δὲ [τοῦ θανάτου] τὴν διάλυσιν συνιστῶν, τῆ ἀκαταλυσία σεμνύνομαι», that is to say: 'By accepting the dissolution of the body from death, I honor the body's exemption from the dissolution.' *Ἀκαταλυσία* means body's indissolubility; *συνιστῶν* means reunion. If we would like to make a catalogue with the natural events ascribed to human beings after death, we can contrast the supernatural events ascribed to the Holy Virgin.<sup>31</sup>

#### Natural Events

**μετάστασις:** departure from this world  
**φθορά:** natural corruption  
**διάλυσις:** soul separation from the body

#### Supernatural events

**μετάθεσις:** translation into Heaven  
**ἀφθαρσία:** incorruption  
**ἀκαταλυσία:** the body's exemption from the dissolution.

In this text John Geometres states only the incorruption of the body and not its resurrection. Above he says that Mary's soul ascended the heaven without the body, and the body without the soul. Geometres does not deny the reunion of these two elements in heaven. The Byzantine Church is in peaceful possession of the belief in the Assumption of Mary from the time of John Geometres.

Overall the above traditions differ from each other in the following points:

a) Dormition to death and transportation of the body into Heaven; b) burying

<sup>23</sup> F. Halkin, 'Une légende byzantine de la Dormition' (1953), 156-64.

<sup>24</sup> See note 4; S.J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions* (2006), *passim*.

<sup>25</sup> These *Homilies* have been translated by Brian Daley into his aforementioned study.

<sup>26</sup> Roberto Caro, *La Homiletica Mariana Griega en el Siglo V*, 3 vols. Marian Library Studies NS 3-5 (Dayton, OH, 1971-1973).

<sup>27</sup> Theoteknos of Livias' *Homily* has also been published and translated into French by A. Wenger, *L'Assomption* (1955), 271-92.

<sup>28</sup> A. Wenger, *L'Assomption* (1955), 363-415.

<sup>29</sup> Antoine Wenger, 'Les homélies inédites de Cosmas Vestitor sur la Dormition', *RÉB* 11 (1953), 284-300.

<sup>30</sup> M. Gordillo, 'L'Assunzione corporale della SS. Vergine madre di Dio nei teologi bizantini (sec. X-XV)', *Marianum* 9 (1947), 44-89.

<sup>31</sup> A. Wenger, *L'Assomption* (1955), 197.

of the body, and after a time, its move into Heaven or its reunion with the soul; c) a 'simultaneous' Assumption of both the body and the soul with or without their immediate reunion (= resurrection). Thus all the narratives involve also the miraculous reunion and appearance of the Apostles around the Theotokos.<sup>32</sup>

### Iconography of the Holy Virgin's Assumption

The Dormition of the Theotokos is celebrated on August 15, the same calendar day as the Roman Catholic's Feast of the Assumption of Mary. Dormition and Assumption are different names for the same event, Mary's departure from earth, although the beliefs are not entirely the same. The Orthodox Church teaches that Mary died a natural death, like any human being; that her soul was received by Christ upon death; and that her body was resurrected on the third day after her repose, at which time she was taken up, bodily only, into heaven. The development of Marian feasts, which did evolve through tradition and believers' emotions never took a dogmatic character in the Orthodox Church. Mary's tomb was found empty on the third day. Roman Catholic teaching holds that Mary was 'assumed' into heaven in bodily form. Some Catholics agree with the Orthodox that this happened after Mary's death, while some hold that she did not experience death. Pope Pius XII, in his Apostolic constitution, *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950),<sup>33</sup> which dogmatically defined the Assumption, left open the question of whether or not Mary actually underwent death in connection with her departure, but alludes to the fact of her death at least five times. Both churches agree that she was taken up into heaven bodily. The Orthodox belief regarding Mary's falling asleep is expressed in the liturgical texts used of the feast of the Dormition (August 15) which is one of the *Twelve Great Feasts* of the Orthodox Church, and is held by all pious Orthodox Christians. The Dormition is known as the Death of the Virgin in Western art, where it is a reasonably common subject, mostly drawing on Byzantine models, until the end of the Middle Ages. The *Death of the Virgin* by Caravaggio, of 1606, is probably the last famous Western painting of the subject.

<sup>32</sup> D. Cerbelaud, *Marie* (2004), 180-4. Christa Shaffer, *Koimesis, Der Heimgang Mariens: Das Entschlafungsbild in seiner Abhängigkeit von Legende und Theologie*, Studia Patristica et Liturgica 15 (Regensburg, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> Pope Pius XII, *Apostolic Constitution, Munificentissimus Deus Defining the Dogma of the Assumption*, AAS (1950), 735.

Interest in the death of Mary existed in Palestine by the late fourth century, possibly connected with the tradition surrounding her tomb in the Kedron Valley. An early witness to this interest is St. Epiphanius of Salamis, and his words are surprising. He writes, "œ[N]or do I say that she remained immortal; but I also will not say definitively that she died." Through the hymns for the feast of the Dormition and the Synaxarion the Church depicts the story of Mary's passing from this life and her translation into Heaven. Having asked to be given notice of her coming repose, the Archangel Gabriel appeared to the Mother of God three days prior, announcing her coming sleep and handing her a palm branch from Paradise which indicated that in death she would overcome corruption.