

ASSUMPTION

The taking up of Mary into heaven. The calendar of feasts of the Coptic Church celebrates the death of the Virgin Mother of God and the ascension of her soul into heaven on 21 Tubah. The metamorphosis or conveyance of her body into heaven is placed on 16 Misra. There is thus a 206-day interval between these two complementary feasts. None of the Eastern churches has preserved this state of affairs, apart from the daughter church of Ethiopia.

The Coptic Tradition

The Copts have an [abundant](#) literature on the Assumption, which was in part described by A. van Lantschoot in 1946. The Ethiopian texts were published by V. [Arras](#) in 1973 and 1974. To understand the strangeness of the 206 days that separate the process of the Assumption into two phases, it is necessary to give a general survey of the tradition.

Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopoulos in the fourteenth century attributes to the emperor Maurice (582-602) the fixing of the feast to 15 August (PG 147, col. 292). This date corresponds to the construction by the emperor of a new church at Gethsemane, the dedication of which took place on 23 October but in which the celebration of the Virgin is placed on 15 August (Garitte, 1958, pp. 302-303, 365).

The Georgian tradition has further preserved the memory of a congregation on 17 August at the Nea, the new Saint Mary's built by Justinian in 543. In addition, the Georgian Menaia, or hymnic calendar, retains on 16 August a commemoration of the deposition of the Virgin "from Sion to Gethsemane." Finally, a Georgian Transitus attributed to Basil mentions apostolic "prescriptions" creating a kind of *quatriduum* from 14 to 17 August. Since the Nea was destroyed in 614, as was also the Church of Maurice, and only Saint Sion was rebuilt with Gethsemane, it follows that the cycles of which traces remain in Georgian are from the

period of Justinian, before the date of 15 August was fixed upon. The development of the liturgy there implies a “holy” week of the Virgin, imitating that of Christ and running from 9/10 August to 16/17 August (van Esbroeck, 1981, pp. 284-85).

In all probability, this is the origin of the date of 7 August among the Copts, who separated from the usage of Jerusalem before the fixing of the feast on 15 August. The occasion is made clear in the panegyric of MACARIUS OF TKOW by pseudo-Dioscorus, a Coptic pseudepigraph. When Juvenal of Jerusalem came back from the Council of CHALCEDON, this text relates, the dissidents assembled at the church in the valley of Jehoshaphat on 21 Tobe, the feast of the death of Mary among the Copts.

However fictitious may be the sequel to the story, which has Peter the Fuller’s formula intoned by the assembled crowd, the information remains significant. From the beginning, the sanctuary of Gethsemane became the symbol of opposition to Chalcedon. Nor is the date of 29 January any more fortuitous. It falls in the octave of the Epiphany (see FEASTS, MAJOR), which at the beginning of MONOPHYSITISM was identified with the Nativity by literal exegesis of Luke 3:23, Jesus being thirty years old at his baptism and having been born in divine and human natures simultaneously.

There was already a movable feast of Mary shortly before 25 December at the end of the fourth century, before the introduction of Christmas on that day. Among the Greek Orthodox, the feast was transferred by the emperor JUSTINIAN, as the Annunciation, to 25 March. Before that, it remained on 26 December or later, the Sunday in the octave of Christmas or, by substitution after the Epiphany, in Monophysite circles. From 7 to 16 January we have thus a week parallel to that of 10 to 17 August. That of 29 January lent itself to the celebration of the death of the Virgin at the time when the distinction of the two natures at Chalcedon was understood as detrimental to the title *Theotokos*.

It is known that after Juvenal's return a certain Theodore or Theodosius became a counterbishop for the opposing faction. The latter's activity is certainly expressed in the liturgy. Furthermore, the structure of the legends of the Dormition justifies an initial association of the December festival with the death of Mary. The Latins are witness to this state of affairs: Gregory of Tours at the end of the sixth century knew a feast "in the middle of the month of January" for the death of the Virgin.

For its part, the Virgin's *natalis dies* occurs on 15 August for the first time among the Latins in a [Wurzburg](#) capitulary going back to about 675, although traces of 18 January appear concurrently (Morin, 1911, p. 313). The variation from 16 to 18 January is explained by the third day on which, among the Copts, the apostles hear the promise of the assumption of the body for 16 Misra.

The numerous legends of the Assumption may be divided into two groups. The first describes the unique destiny of Mary, marked by the descent of an angel who hands over the palm of immortality. The apostles [assemble](#) close to Mary only in Jerusalem. The attempt by the Jews to destroy her body is presided over by the high priest Jephonias. The second group is characterized by a preliminary gathering of the apostles at Bethlehem, by continual censings, by the replacing of the palm by a dry stick, and by the reduction of Jephonias to an ordinary Jew of exceptional stature, the leader of the adversaries.

Reserving the question of a theological concept that the body of the Virgin is a real temple, we may consider that the story in the Syriac letter of CYRIL OF JERUSALEM on the destruction of the Temple has influenced an episode in the second legend (Brock, 1977, p. 283), and that it is thus a little later than the beginning of the fifth century, when these ideas were still matters of some interest. The other [legend](#) is earlier. All the texts preserved in Coptic belong to the first form of the legend. It seems probable that the Marial feast near 25 December had been linked with the death of Mary, according to the most ancient

representations.

On the contrary, the second type, which includes Bethlehem, would in origin be linked with the celebration of the Nativity in the month of August. There is indeed for 13 August a Synaxis preserved in Georgian at the church of the Kathisma three miles from Jerusalem on the road to Bethlehem. This church was in fact the foundation of a woman whose name was Ikelia and was consecrated by Juvenal around 450 on 2 December (Garitte, 1958, p. 301). It seems almost certain that this was not the first church there, as B. Capelle thinks (1943, pp. 21-22). Juvenal, who was trying to introduce the date of 25 December to Jerusalem, had reason to establish there an advance post to promote the celebration of Christmas on 25 December.

The transplanting of the Virgin's death to the month of August entailed the second cycle of legends. At that point when Maurice fixed the feast at 15 August, the text that seems trustworthy is the Greek legend (*Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca* 1055), attributed without hesitation to John the Evangelist. This is an epitome of the second form, the developed types of which attempt with a powerful argument to attribute it to John. Fortunately, the diligence of John of Thessalonica has preserved for us a double reconstruction of the first legend (*Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca* 1144d and 1144), and A. Wenger has recovered a form of the ancient legend (*Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca* 105bd). Thanks to the parallel versions of Ethiopic, Georgian, and Irish, these permit a glimpse of the earliest state of this first type, of which there is also a Syriac fragment of the fifth century. To this type belong all the following Coptic derivatives (cf. van Esbroeck, 1981, p. 267):

- C.1 The *Transitus* published by Révillout (1907), pp. 174-83.
- C.2 *Cyril of Jerusalem*, ed. Forbes Robinson (1896), pp. 24-41, to which corresponds the Pierpont Morgan M 597, fols. 46-74

- (*Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis* 671b). A related version is found in W. Budge (1915), pp. 49-73, which corresponds to the Pierpont Morgan M 583, pp. 139-57, recently published by A. Campagnano (1980), pp. 152-94.
- C.3 [Evodius](#) of Rome, fragmented. W. Spiegelberg (1903), pp. 2-4, and Pierpont Morgan M 596, pp. 20-25, and M 598, pp. 1-9 (*Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis* 667).
 - C.4 [Evodius](#) of Rome, Bohairic version, ed. P. A. de Lagarde (1883), pp. 38-63, and Sahidic version, ed. F. Robinson (1896), pp. 162-84 (*Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis* 666).
 - C.5 *Theodosius of Alexandria*, Vatican 61, Bohairic version, ed. F. Robinson (1896), pp. 90-126, and M. Chaine (1934), pp. 272- 314 (*Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis* 671).
 - C.6 *Theophilus of Alexandria*, ed. W. H. Worrell, (1923), pp. 249- 321.
 - C.7 Bohairic fragments, ed. H. G. Evelyn-White (1926), pp. 55-58.

The text C.2 is unfortunately fragmentary. All its elements form part of the first group. The interest of these pages lies in the fact that the announcement of the Assumption of the body on 16 Misra may have been made without passing by the tomb at Gethsemane. But the fragmentary state of paragraph 129,23 leaves the door open for a good many improvements. The texts attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem (C.2) replace the Dormition in the more general framework of the Life of the Virgin, which is evoked to counter Ebionite and Harpocratian heretics.

The point is to oppose ideas of mere “fantasy”; it has to be shown that there really is a tomb, and that the Virgin is not a phantom. The witnesses to the Dormition adduced by C.2 belong to the Johannine cycle of Prochorus: John, Peter, Verus, and James. The Ethiopic version of C.2 published by V. [Arras](#) in 1974 (pp. 1-33) is a development in the same line as C.2 in connecting the witnesses with the cycle of Prochorus. The doctrinal attacks seem to be aimed at the disappearance of the body

according to the complete witnesses of C.1.

C.3 and C.4 base their accounts of the facts on another group of witnesses: Evodius, the successor of Peter at Antioch before Ignatius; Peter; Alexander; and Rufus. The presentation of the facts corroborates the doctrinal attacks of C.2. The role of John is reduced to very small dimensions. It is probable that the two presentations and the two groups of witnesses correspond to the respective traditions of the apthartodocetic Gaianites and those of the Severians, who formed a majority in the Coptic church. We may gain some idea of the [antiquity](#) of these representations by noting that the cycle of Dionysius the Areopagite, born toward the beginning of the sixth or the end of the fifth century, is a rejoinder from Juvenal. Dionysius, Titus, Timothy, and Hierotheus are present at the Dormition.

PULCHERIA, the wife of the “impious” Marcian, demands the body of Mary from Juvenal, for she has learned of the existence of the tomb. Juvenal explains that the body disappeared from the tomb at the moment when the apostle Thomas, at first absent, came back and asked for the tomb to be opened (*Historia euthymiaca, Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca* 1056e). This defense *pro domo* is intended to cast a shadow upon the erroneous presentations of the Chalcedonian Marcian. [Dionysius the Areopagite](#) speaks of the body that received God, *theodokhon soma* (PG 3, col. 681), transferring the [Nestorian](#) adjective to the inanimate body of Mary alone. Conversely, C.5, the discourse of Theodosius, was obliged to show that the body of Mary was the object of an assumption different from those of the bodies of Enoch and Elijah. The two Coptic types, C.2 and C.4, thus have their source in developments prior to 500. This is not the case with the blossoming of the second group, but the latter is transmitted practically only in Arabic.

The Arabic Tradition

The Arabic tradition on the Assumption touches the Coptic world very closely. Almost all the attributions come back to Egyptian bishops. But the body of the [legend](#) belongs almost always to the second group. The following is a preliminary description of the Arabic corpus:

- The *Transitus* in six books. Edited from a recent manuscript by M. Enger in 1864 (*Bibliotheca Hagiographica Orientalis* 633- 38), this text exists in a tenth-century manuscript pointed out by G. Graf (1915), p. 340, and today at Bryn Mawr College.
- Under the name of CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, a homily for 21 Tubah has been published (1927), pp. 210-48.
- Under the name of Cyril of Alexandria, a homily for 16 Misra (1927), pp. 248-60.
- Theodosius of Alexandria, Vatican Arabic 698, 85-102. Translation of C.5.
- *Transitus*, in Paris Arabic 150, translated by J. Leroy (1910), pp. 162-72.
- Theophilus of "Landra," Vatican 698, 41-48, translation of the Greek homily of Theoteknos of Livias, *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Graeca* 1083u.
- Vatican Arabic 170, 317-39, homily of Cyriacus of Bahnasa.
- A variant of the *Historia euthymiaca* published by M. van Esbroeck (1975-1976), pp. 485-88.
- *Transitus* of John the Evangelist, in Vatican Arabic 698, fols. 51-84.
- Coptic Museum in Cairo 105 (Hist. 477), fols. 145-54.

The [legend](#) in six books, based on Syriac models, goes back to copies of the sixth century. The very artificial construction of the six books is based on the story of the finding of the book written by the apostle John. This discovery was made at Ephesus by three monks from Sinai at the invitation of Cyril of Jerusalem. The cycle of the finding of the Cross and of JUDAS CYRIACUS is included in the report of the Dormition. The end

of the text alludes to [apostolic](#) canons appointing three Marial feasts for 24 December, 15 May, and 13 August. The inclusion of Bethlehem in the story of the Dormition is central. In theory, each of the six books was composed by two apostles, but one can scarcely see how this principle could be applied in the course of the narration.

Forms A.2, A.3, and A.5 combine this [legend](#) with elements from the cycle of Prochorus (C.2). A.7 contaminates the two groups even further. A.8 is particularly interesting, because it is a witness to the *Historia euthymiaca*, relating how the apostle Thomas arrived too late and prompted the authentication of the disappearance of the Virgin's body. But in A.8 it is Eudocia or EUDOXIA who makes the request for the relic, not Pulcheria. A.10 develops the episode of Thomas. Coming from India, Thomas, traversing the region on the clouds, meets with the Virgin carried up into heaven. She leaves him her veil as a relic, and Thomas lets it fall in Egypt at the Monastery of the Fountain, west of Akhmim. There are parallels to these legends in a Latin form (Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina 5348- 50). The Virgin's two linen robes are collected by Verus (in Coptic, Bibros) in C.2, which also relates the building by Constantine and his sons of the church for the feast of the disappearance of the Virgin on the night of 20 Tobe. Gregory of Tours in his work *In gloria martyrum* at the end of the sixth century also speaks of the basilica built by Constantine.

The Coptic traditions, as we see, have collected their elements at all the stages of the development of the legends about the Dormition of Mary. We may add that MICHAEL and GABRIEL play considerable roles in the first group of legends, and that the book of the enthronement of each archangel, peculiar to the Copts, derives from the tradition about the Assumption of the Virgin, in type C.2, which gives a large place to the disciples of John, Verus, and Prochorus.

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