

**Kassia: A female hymnographer of 9<sup>th</sup> century Byzantium and her hymnographic poem on the Vesper of Holy Tuesday**  
**Kassia: Una himnógrafa en Bizancio del siglo IX y su poema himnográfico en la víspera del Martes Santo**

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**Abstract:** For over 1000 years many men and a few women wrote hymns in Byzantium. Their contribution to world literature and to Greek letters constitutes a vast and priceless treasure of sacred poetry. It is impossible to exaggerate the value of this hymnography, since it expresses, as nothing else can, the spiritual riches, faith and beauty of Eastern Christendom. All these hymns are still chanted today in many languages in Orthodox Churches in every part of the world. Other hymns remain unknown; hidden in manuscripts, stored in monastic libraries, they are waiting to be discovered and edited.

**Keywords:** Byzantine poetry, Kassia, Byzantine hymnography, Holy Tuesday, Romanos the Melodist.

**Resumen:** Más de 1000 años, muchos hombres y algunas mujeres escribieron himnos en Bizancio. Su contribución a la literatura universal y las letras griegas, constituye una vasta e inestimable tesoro de la poesía sagrada. Es imposible exagerar el valor de este himnografía, ya que expresa, como ninguna otra cosa, la riqueza espiritual, la fe y la belleza de la cristiandad oriental. Todos estos himnos se cantan todavía hoy en muchos idiomas en las Iglesias Ortodoxas en todas las partes del mundo. Otros himnos permanecen desconocidos; escondidos en manuscritos, almacenados en las bibliotecas monásticas, están esperando a ser descubiertos y editados.

**Palabras Clave:** Poesía bizantina, Kassia, himnografía bizantina, Martes Santo, Romano el Meloda.

**Summary:** 1. Introduction. 2. Life of Kassia. 3. Kassia's hymnographic *oeuvre*. 4. Kassia's *troparion* Κύριε ἢ ἐν πολλαῖς ἀμαρτίαις. 5. Aesthetic analysis of Kassia's hymnographic poem. 6. Survival of the sinful woman in other hymns. 6. Conclusion. Sources and Bibliography.

## 1. Introduction

It's obvious that the Byzantine female hymnography<sup>1</sup> was not flourished specially in Byzantium. We have the names of hundreds male hymnodists who came from all parts of the Byzantine *oecumene*, from Greece, Italy, Palestine, and Syria, as well as from the islands of Crete and Sicily. These hymnodists came from all classes of Byzantine society, from the obscure man who signed his hymn *ὁ ἁμαρτωλός* (the sinner) till to the Emperor Justinian I (r. 527-565 AD) who wrote in imperial red ink the *troparion*, *Ὁ μονογενῆς Υἱὸς*

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction in Byzantine Hymnography there is a vast bibliography. Cf. e.g. N. B. THOMADAKIS, *Βυζαντινὴ Ὑμνογραφία καὶ Ποίησις*, Thessaloniki, 1993; K. METSAKES, *Βυζαντινὴ Ὑμνογραφία*, Athens, 1986; Barry Baldwin, *Anthology of Byzantine Poetry*, Amsterdam, 1985; C.A. TRYPANIS, *Medieval and Modern Greek Poetry: An Anthology*, Oxford, 1951; Edgon WELLESCZ, *A History of Byzantine Music and Hymnography*, Oxford, 1961.

καὶ Λόγος τοῦ Θεοῦ (Only begotten Son and Word of God), and then ordered its insertion into the Divine Liturgy. Despite the great number of male hymnodists, we know only six feminine names that composed hymns: Γρηγορίς, Μάρθα, Θεοδοσία,<sup>2</sup> Θέκλα,<sup>3</sup> Κασσία and Παλαιολογίνα<sup>4</sup>. The fame of Kassia the Melodist outshines by far all other women writers in both medieval and Modern Greek writing.

## 2. Life of Kassia

Kassia was born between 805 and 810 in Constantinople into an aristocratic family.<sup>5</sup> Three Byzantine chroniclers, Pseudo-Symeon the Logothete,<sup>6</sup> George the Monk<sup>7</sup> (a.k.a. George the Sinner) and Leo the Grammarian,<sup>8</sup> claim that she was a participant in the “bride show” organized for Theophilus by his stepmother Euphrosyne.<sup>9</sup> Smitten by Kassia’s beauty the young emperor Theophilus approached her and said, “Through a woman trickled forth the baser things [referring to the passions coming as a result of Eve’s transgression].” Kassia responded saying, “But through a woman came the better things [referring to the blessings resulting from the Incarnation of Christ]”. His pride was wounded, Theophilus chose another bride, Theodora.

About Kassia’s life and her unsuccessful effort to be married with Theophilus, we have many sources from both Byzantine and the modern times.<sup>10</sup> In this paper we will present the sources from the Byzantine era and especially a source from the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>2</sup> E. CATAPHYGIOTOU-TOPPING, “Theodosia: Melodos and Monastria”, *Diptycha* 4 (1986-1988), p. 384-405.

<sup>3</sup> E. KATAPHYGIOTOU-TOPPING, ‘Thekla the Nun: In Praise of Women’, *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 25 (1980), p. 353-370.

<sup>4</sup> E. KATAPHYGIOTOU-TOPPING, “Women Hymnographers in Byzantium”, *Diptycha* 3 (1982-1983), p. 98-110. Topping has refuted older opinions, that Kassia was the only woman hymnographer in Byzantium.

<sup>5</sup> For an introductory article about Kassia, cf. G. SCHIRÒ, “La seconda leggenda di Cassia”, *Diptycha* 1 (1979), p. 303-315.

<sup>6</sup> Ed. Im. BEKKER, *Symeon Magister*, *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, Bonn, 1838, p. 624-625.

<sup>7</sup> Ed. Eduard VON MURALT, *Georgii Monachi dicti Hamartoli, Chronikon ab orbe condito ad annum p. Chr. n. 842 et a diversis scriptoribus usque ad a. 1143 continuatum*, Saint Petersburg, 1859, p. 700.

<sup>8</sup> Ed. Im. BEKKER, *Leonis Grammatici Chronographia*, *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, Bonn, 1842, p. 213-214.

<sup>9</sup> W. TREADGOLD, “The Problem of the Marriage of the Emperor Theophilus”, *GRBS* 16 (1975), p. 325-341. In this article there is an analytical explanation of Theophilus’ marriage with Theodora, which is dated exactly on 5 June 830 and not in 821, as some scholars have claimed. The episode with Kassia is acceptable by Treadgold. Cf. also, W. TREADGOLD, “The Bride Shows of the Byzantine Emperors”, *Byzantion* 49 (1979), p. 395-413; E.W. BROOKS, “The Marriage of the Emperor Theophilus”, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 10 (1901), p. 540-545.

<sup>10</sup> About these sources, cf. Ph. BLACHOPOULOU, “Βιβλιογραφικό δοκίμιο για την Κασ[σ]ία-Κασ[σ]ιανή”, *Byzantinos Domos* 1 (1987), p. 139-159 (here at p.147-148).

and the second one a poem from the 14<sup>th</sup> century in 29 iambic verses. The first source is from John Zonaras' *Epitome Historiarum*, in which he narrates us the marriage of Theophilus with Theodora, the unsuccessful attempt of Kassia to marry with Theophilus and Kassia's decision to build a monastic convent:

Γυναῖκα δ' ἑαυτῷ εἰσοικίσασθαι βουληθεὶς ὁ Θεόφιλος, πολλὰς πολλαχόθεν ὠραίας κόρας συνήγαγεν, ἐν αἷς ἦν καὶ ἡ Εἰκασία, παρθένος καὶ τὸ εἶδος καλὴ καὶ τῶν λοιπῶν ὑπερφέρουσα καὶ λόγοις ὠμιληκυῖα καὶ τὸ γένος ἐπίσημος. περιῆει γοῦν ταύτας θεώμενος καὶ μῆλον κατέχων χρυσοῦν, ἴν' αὐτὸ ἐπιδῶ τῇ δοξάσῃ αὐτῷ ἀρεστῇ· ἐπεὶ δὲ ἦλθε κατὰ τὴν Εἰκασίαν περιῶν, θαυμάσας ἐκείνην τῆς ὠραιότητος ἔφη “ἐκ γυναικὸς ἐρρῦη τὰ φαῦλα.” ἡ δ' ἡρέμα καὶ μετὰ σεμνοῦ ἐρυθήματος εὐστόχως πὼς ἀπεκρίνατο “ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ γυναικὸς πηγάζει τὰ κρεῖττω.” ὁ δὲ καταβροντηθεὶς ὥσπερ τῷ τῆς παρθένου λόγῳ τὴν μὲν παρῆλθε, τὸ μῆλον δὲ τὸ χρυσοῦν τῇ ἐκ Παφλαγονίας Θεοδώρα παρέσχετο. ἡ δ' Εἰκασία τῆς βασιλείας ἀποτυχοῦσα μονὴν ἐδείματο, ἢ τὴν ἐκείνης κλησιν ἔσχεν ἐπικλησιν, καὶ ἐν αὐτῇ μονάσασα ἑαυτῇ ἔζη καὶ τῷ θεῷ, τῆς λογικῆς παιδείας μὴ ἀλογήσασα. ὅθεν καὶ συγγράμματα ἐκείνης εὐρίσκονται εὐπαιδευσίας χαρίτων οὐκ ἄμοιρα. καὶ ἡ μὲν οὕτω διέθετο τὰ καθ' ἑαυτὴν καὶ ἀτευκτήσασα βασιλέως φθαρτοῦ τῷ παμβασιλεῖ ἑαυτὴν ἐμνηστεύσατο; καὶ ἀντὶ γεηρᾶς βασιλείας τὴν ἐπουράνιον ἐκκληρώσατο. ὁ βασιλεὺς δὲ Θεόφιλος τὴν Θεοδώραν ἑαυτῷ συνοικίζει καὶ ὁμοῦ ταύτην καὶ τῷ γαμηλίῳ στεφάνῳ καὶ τῷ βασιλικῷ ταινιοῖ διαδήματι καὶ τοὺς γάμους τελεῖ.<sup>11</sup>

The second source is from a certain monk named Ephraim in the 14<sup>th</sup> century who wrote a world chronicle. In this world chronicle we are informed about the beauty contest which took place in the Byzantine Palace:

Θεόφιλος σχεῖν αὐζυγον βίου θέλων  
κοινωνὸν ἅμα τοῦ κράτους καὶ τοῦ λέχους,  
χορὸν συνῆξε παρθένων πολλαχόθεν,  
καλῶν ἀπασῶν, ὅψιν εὐπρεπεστάτων.

<sup>11</sup> Th. BÜTNER-WOBST (ed.), *Ioannis Zonarae epitome historiarum libri, XIII-XVIII*, Tomus III, Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae, Bonn, 1897, p. 354-355. Unfortunately we don't have any translation in a modern language, so we give its Latin translation: “Uxorem ducturus Theophilus multas formosas puellas undecunque arcessevit, inter quas et Icasia virgo fuit, tum formae praestantior ceteris, tum erudita, tum genere illustri nata. Dum igitur eas spectans circumit, aurem ponum manu tenens, quod ei quae placuisset daret, cum ad Icasiam venisset, eius pulchritudinem admiratus “A muliere” inquit “emanerunt mala”. Cui illa placide et cum honesto rubore sollerter respondit: “Sed et meliora e muliere exuberant”. At ille virginis oratione velut attonitus, ea praeterita malum aurem Theodora ex Paphlagonia oriundae dedit. Icasia vero cum regno excidisset, monasterium de suo nomine condidit, in quo sibi et deo vixit, eruditione litterarum non neglecta. Unde et scripta eius reperiuntur, in quibus neque doctrinam neque gratiam desideres. Et sic illa res suas administravit et mortali rege frustrata regi omnium nupsit, pro terreno caeleste sortita. Rex vero Theophilus Theodoram simul et nuptiali corona et regio diademate ornat nuptiasque celebrat”.

**2315** ἐν αἴσπερ ἐξέλαμψε τῶν ἄλλων πλέον,  
οἷος σελήνης πλησιφαοῦς τις κύκλος.  
Σώματος ὥρα, λαμπρότητι τοῦ γένους  
καὶ μαρμαρυγαῖς τῶν λόγων Εἰκασία.  
χρυσοῦν τι μῆλον ἀμέλει φέρων ἄναξ  
**2320** περιπολῶν ἦν τὸν χορὸν τῶν παρθένων,  
μνηστρον σκοπῶν δοῦναί τι τοῦτο φιλτάτη.  
ὡς οὖν θεᾶται παριῶν Εἰκασίαν,  
κάλλους περιττοῦ θαυμάσας κόρην ἔφη  
«διὰ γυναικὸς φαῦλα πάντ' ἀπερρῦη»  
**2325** ἡ δ' ἠρέμ' ἀντέφησεν εὐστόχως ἄγαν  
«ἀλλ' ἐκ γυναικὸς πηγάζει καὶ βελτίω».  
ὁ δ' αὖ παρῆλθε θαυμάσας τὴν παρθένον,  
καὶ δούς τὸ μῆλον παρθένω Θεοδώρα,  
χώραν ἐχούση πατρίδα Παφλαγόνων  
**2330** πλὴν εὐπατριδῶν πατέρων κατηγμένη,  
κοινωνὸν αὐτὴν ἄγεται κράτους λέχους,  
τὴν Εἰκασίαν παραβλέψας, ὡς ἔφην.  
ἢ μὴ τυχοῦσα κοσμικῆς ἐξουσίας σκηπτουχίας  
οὐ νυμφίου τε γηγενοῦς βασιλέως  
**2335** πλουτεῖ νοητὸν παντάνακτα νυμφίον  
καὶ βασιλέως οὐρανῶν κληροουχίαν,  
μονάσασα δὲ καὶ μονὴν δειμαμένη  
ἤσκειτ' ἐν αὐτῇ, προσλαλοῦσα ταῖς βίβλοις·  
ἦς μεστὰ συγγράμματα χαρίτων ἔφου.<sup>12</sup>

Kassia found a convent in 843 in the west of Constantinople near the walls of Constantine and became its first abbess.<sup>13</sup> *Πάτρια Κωνσταντινουπόλεως*, a chronicle from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, informs us about Kassia's convent:

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<sup>12</sup> *Ephraemi Chronographi Caesares*. P.G. 143, cols. 2311-2339. Unfortunately we don't also have any translation in a modern language, so we give its Latin translation: "Jam Theophilus appetens vitae sociam imperii simul torique participem, chorum undecumque collegit virginum, quarum etsi nulla non erat formosissima inter has tamen magis emicabat, qualis est lunae cumniliatus orbis, venusio corpore et generis splendore sermonisque etiam dignitate Icasia. Aurem ergo pomum manu gerens ehorum virgineum rex circumibat, ut hunc gratissimae daret arrhabonem. Ut autem vidit in transito Icasiam, formam eximiam mirans puellae, ait. Cuncia obneverunt mala per multerem. Illa submissee, sed prudenter admodum, atqui ex muliere meliora manant, ait. Rex admiratus virginem praeteriit; pomoque tradito virgini Theodoraе, patriam quidem habenti Paphlagoniam, sed de patriciis genitae parentibus, hanc simul imperii torique participem fecit, praeterita, ut iam dixi, Icasia; quae ubi mundanum non est adepta sceptrum terrenique regis nuptiis excidit, spiritalem et omnium regem sponsum lucrata est et caelestis regni sortem. Monialis enim, condito monasterio, in hoc se exercuit literis dans operam; eiusque exstant pleni lepore libri".

<sup>13</sup> I. ROCHOW, *Studien zu der Pesron, den Wirken und dem Nachleben der Dichterin Kassia*, München, Akedemie Verlag, 1967, p. 26-29.

Ἡ μονὴ τὰ Εἰκασίας ἐκτίσθη παρὰ Εἰκασίας μοναχῆς εὐλαβεστάτης καὶ σεβασμίας γυναικός, ώραίας τῷ εἶδει· ἦν δὲ κοσμικὴν οὖσαν Θεόφιλος ὁ βασιλεὺς ἰδὼν λαβεῖν γυναῖκα ἠθέλησεν, εἰπὼν ὡς ἄρα «διὰ γυναικὸς ἐρρήη τὰ φαῦλα». Ἐπεὶ δ' ἐκείνη σοφωτάτη ἦν, μετ' αἰδοῦς πῶς ἀντέφησεν· «ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ γυναικὸς πηγάζει τὰ κρείττονα». Ταῦτα ἀκοῦσας ὁ Θεόφιλος ταύτην μὲν εἶασε, Θεοδῶρα δὲ ὃ ἐπεφέρετο χρυσοῦν μῆλον δεδώκει. Ἡ οὖν Εἰκασία τῆς βασιλείας ἀποτυχοῦσα τὸ τῶν μοναζουσῶν ἐνδιδύσκειται σχῆμα, κανόνας πολλοὺς καὶ στιχηρὰ καὶ ἄλλα τινὰ ἀξιοθαύμαστα ποιήσασα.<sup>14</sup>

Although many scholars attribute this to bitterness at having failed to marry Theophilus, a letter from Saint Theodore the Studite indicates that she had other motivations for desiring a monastic life.<sup>15</sup> It had a close relationship to the nearby monastery of Stoudios,<sup>16</sup> which was to play a central role in re-editing the Byzantine liturgical books in the 9<sup>th</sup> century and the 10<sup>th</sup> century, so they were important in ensuring the survival of her work.

### 3. Kassia's hymnographic *oeuvre*

Among the works of Kassia we must first of all mention her liturgical poems (hymns, *stichera*, *kontakia*). These liturgical poems take their most important place in Kassia's literary work. As an author of liturgical hymns she was famous in her age. Byzantine chronicles and *Πάτρια Κωνσταντινουπόλεως* mention her hymns. The Byzantine writer Theodore Prodromos (12<sup>th</sup> century) mentions an oral tradition according to which Kassia has authored the four *odes* of the *kanon* for Holy Saturday.<sup>17</sup> About 1300 the last Byzantine church historian Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos includes Kassia in his catalogue of Byzantine hymnographers.<sup>18</sup> She is the unique woman among her male colleagues. Still today there is obscurity about if Kassia is the author of the hymns which are located in the liturgical books and liturgical manuscripts and bear her name.<sup>19</sup>

As already has mentioned Kassia has composed an extended number of liturgical hymns which are concluded in the liturgical books of Eastern Christendom, such as the *Menaia* and the *Triodion*. Tradition and manuscript authority ascribe to Kassia 49 religious hymns and

<sup>14</sup> Th. PREGER (ed.), *Scriptores Originum Constantinopolitarum*, Vol. 2, Leipzig, 1907, p. 276-277.

<sup>15</sup> The letters of Saint Theodore the Studite addressed to Kassia were reprinted in ROCHOW 1967, p. 20-22. About female monasticism in Byzantium cf. indicatively Dorothy ABRAHAMSE, "Women's Monasticism in the Middle-Byzantine Period, Problems and Prospects", *Byz. Forsch.* 9 (1985), p. 35-58.

<sup>16</sup> For the Monastery of Stoudios, see indicatively Peter HATLIE, *The Monks and Monasteries of Constantinople, ca. 350-850*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> P.G. 133, col. 1236.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. W. CHRIST- M. PARANIKAS, *Anthologia Graeca Carminum Christianorum*, Lipsiae, 1871, p. XLI.

<sup>19</sup> I. ROCHOW, "Werke und Nachleben der byzantinischen Dichterin Kassia", *Helikon* 6(1966), p. 705-715, here at p. 709.

261 secular verses in the form of epigrams and gnomic verses or moral sentences (e.g. I hate the rich man groaning as if he were poor). These works are found in numerous manuscripts dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and bear the name Kassia, or Eikasia or Ikasia. According to Antonia Tripolitis, “Manuscript scholars suggest that Eikasia and Ikasia are copyist’s errors that resulted from the annexation of the feminine article ‘n’, a common mistake of the scribes”.<sup>20</sup> The most widely spread Kassia’s hymn is the troparion *Κύριε ἡ ἐν πολλαῖς ἁμαρτίαις* and is sung in the Vesper service of Holy Tuesday.<sup>21</sup> Other great poems of Kassia are the extended *Kanon* for the repose of the dead, the *sticheron*, *On the Birth of Christ* (otherwise, “When Augustus reigned»), the *sticheron*, *On the Annunciation of the Holy Virgin*, *stichera* on various saints etc.<sup>22</sup> A hypothesis that Kassia authored the Akathistos Hymn has no scholarly justification.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4. Kassia’s *troparion* *Κύριε ἡ ἐν πολλαῖς ἁμαρτίαις*

- 1 Κύριε ἡ ἐν πολλαῖς ἁμαρτίαις περιπεσοῦσα γυνή,
- 2 τὴν σὴν αἰσθομένη θεότητα
- 3 μυροφόρου ἀναλαβοῦσα τάξιν,
- 4 ὀδυρομένη μύρον σοι πρὸ τοῦ ἐνταφιασμοῦ κομίζει·
- 5 οἴμοι! λέγουσα, ὅτι νύξ μοι ὑπάρχει,
- 6 οἴστρος ἀκολασίας ζοφώδης τε καὶ ἀσέληνος,
- 7 ἔρωσ τῆς ἁμαρτίας·
- 8 δέξαι μου τὰς πηγὰς τῶν δακρῶν
- 9 ὁ νεφέλαις διεξάγων τῆς θαλάσσης τὸ ὕδωρ·
- 10 κάμφθητί μοι πρὸς τοὺς στεναγμοὺς τῆς καρδίας
- 11 ὁ κλίνας τοὺς οὐρανοὺς τῇ ἀφράστῳ σου κενώσει·
- 12 καταφιλήσω τοὺς ἀχράντους σου πόδας,
- 13 ἀποσμήξω τούτους δὲ πάλιν
- 14 τοῖς τῆς κεφαλῆς μου βοστρύχοις·
- 15 ὧν ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ Εὐὰ τὸ δειλινὸν
- 16 κρότον τοῖς ὠσὶν ἠχηθεῖσα τῷ φόβῳ ἐκρύβη·
- 17 ἁμαρτιῶν μου τὰ πλήθη καὶ κριμάτων σου ἀβύσσους
- 18 τίς ἐξιχνιάσει, ψυχοσῶστα σωτήρ μου;
- 19 Μή με τὴν σὴν δούλην παρίδῃς
- 20 ὁ ἀμέτρητον ἔχων τὸ ἔλεος.

<sup>20</sup> A. TRIPOLITIS, *Kassia: The Legend, the Woman, and her Work*, London, 1992, p. xi-xii.

<sup>21</sup> For this hymn there is an extended analysis below.

<sup>22</sup> About these hymns as also about epigrams and gnomai, cf. A. KAZHDAN, *A History of Byzantine Literature. (650-850)*, Athens, The National Hellenic Research of Foundation. Institute of Byzantine Research, 1999, p. 320-326. About the whole text of these hymns, epigrams and gnomai, cf. TRIPOLITIS 1992, passim.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. KAZHDAN 1999, p. 322, footnote 15.

English Translation according to Andrew R. Dyck's Translation

Lord, a woman who fell into many sins,  
Recognizing Your Divinity,  
Took up the myrrh-bearer's office,  
With tears brought you myrrh before your entombment.  
"Ah me!" she said, "night is upon me,  
The goad of incontinence, gloomy and moonless,  
To lust after sin.  
Receive my streams of tears,  
You who use clouds to draw the water of the sea;  
Bend to my hearts groans,  
You who bent the heavens with your ineffable abasement.  
I shall cover with kisses  
And wipe again  
With the hair of my head  
The immaculate feet of You,  
Whose footfalls echoing in her ears,  
Eve in paradise at even-tide hid herself in fear.  
Soul-saving savior, who will track down  
the numbers of my sins and the depths of your judgement?  
Do not overlook me yours servant  
You who have pity without measure."

### 5. Aesthetic analysis of Kassia's hymnographic poem

Kassia's literary fame rests on her *sticheron* of *troparion*, formally known by its first line: *Κύριε ἢ ἐν πολλαῖς ἀμαρτίαις* (Lord, she who had fallen in many sins). In the manuscripts medieval scribes entitled: this poem *Εἰς τὴν πόρνην* (To the Harlot). To many generations of Greek Orthodox it is familiar known as *Τὸ τροπάριον τῆς Κασσιανῆς* (The troparion of Kassia). Admired, popular and beloved, this hymn is universally acknowledged to be a masterpiece of religious poetry. This hymn was republished, translated and ingeniously commented on by Professor A. R. Dyck<sup>24</sup>. It is not the first time that the «sinful woman» of the Gospel of Luke (7.37-48),<sup>25</sup> appears in Greek poetry: Romanos the Melodist devoted to

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<sup>24</sup> A. R. DYCK, "On Cassia KYPIE H EN ΠΟΛΛΑΙΣ...", *Byzantion* 46(1986), p. 63-76. Professor Dyck's study will be our guide for our commentary.

<sup>25</sup> Lk. 7. 37-48: "And behold, a woman in the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment, and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and began to wash His feet with tears and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed His feet and anointed them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had bidden Him saw it, he spoke within himself, saying, "This man, if he were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is who

her a *kontakion*.<sup>26</sup> According to Russian Byzantinist Alexander Kazhdan, the hymn is referred not to Mary Magdalene, as Mary's name never being mentioned. Whereas Romanos, according to Dyck, follows the plot of the Gospel, Kassia, on the other hand, turns from the sphere of human morals to the metaphysical relation between the sinner and God: the heroine of her hymn cherishes no claim to the better than anybody else (a Pharisee, for instance), but in the humbleness she genuflects before the Lord and asks for His forgiveness.<sup>27</sup> The language of the *troparion* is a mosaic composed of words, phrases, and echoes from the Scriptures, especially the Psalter. The hymn is consecrated, intense and brief, consisting of a little more than 100 words. Yet the Byzantine nun-hymnographer portrays in it universal human emotions, the fundamental Christian drama of sin and salvation. The *troparion* possesses both beauty and richness of meaning. One scholar appreciated "The way in which dramatic and narrative elements are blended, and the final player, wherein the need of one sinner is absorbed into the cry of a whole suffering world [...]"<sup>28</sup>.

The structure and style of Kassia's *troparion* are influenced by the seven Penitential Psalms (6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129, 142), three of which (37, 50, 142) are chanted during the *Orthros* of Holy Wednesday. Like these psalms the *troparion* is addressed to God, praises His mercy and contains confession and prayer. Kassia, however, was no mere imitator of the Psalmist. Her *troparion* is more complex in structure, more subtle in its psychology and more dynamic in movement. Hers is a new song, a distinct Byzantine Lenten psalm, inspired by the prose of Saint Luke. According to A. Dyck, the "sinful woman" of Luke's Gospel (7, 36 ff.) appears not for the first time as a poetic subject. Kassia's *troparion* has points of contact with Romano's poetry and especially with his tenth *kontakion*, including the metaphor of night to describe the woman's state: Romanos, *Prooemium* II.1: ἐν κατανύξει *ibid.*, stanza 6, 1.4: "ἦν ἐν σκότει καὶ ἦλθες ἰδεῖν με τὸν ἥλιον": (7): Kassia, lines 5-6: "ὄτι νύξ μοι ὑπάρχει,/ οἴστρος ἀκολασίας ζοφώδης τε καὶ ἀσέληνος".

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toucheth him, for she is a sinner." And Jesus answering said unto him, "Simon, I have something to say unto thee." And he said, "Master, say on." "There was a certain creditor that had two debtors. The one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he freely forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will love him most?" Simon answered and said, "I suppose that he to whom he forgave most. And He said unto him, "Thou hast rightly judged." And He turned to the woman and said unto Simon, "Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house: Thou gavest Me no water for My feet, but she hath washed My feet with tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. Thou gavest Me no kiss, but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss My feet. My head with oil thou didst not anoint, but this woman hath anointed My feet with ointment. Therefore I say unto thee, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little." And He said unto her, "Thy sins are forgiven".

<sup>26</sup> Cf. ROCHOW 1967, p. 42 and K. KRUMBACHER, "Kassia", *SBBAW, philos.-philol. und hist. Cl.* 1 (1897), p. 322-323. Romanos also alludes to the harlot at canticum 52, α', 3: "ἐν αὐτῷ γὰρ (sc. τῷ ἱατρείῳ τῆς μετανοίας) ἡ πόρνη ὑγίανεν".

<sup>27</sup> DYCK 1986, p. 66 f.

<sup>28</sup> H. J. W. TILLYARD, "A Musical Study of the Hymns of Kassia", *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 20(1911), p. 420-485 (here at p. 433)



Kassia's *troparion* consists of a single strophe in which two different voices are heard. First, the sacred poet herself speaks in a brief introduction. Then in the longer dramatic portion we hear the voice of the Sinful Woman disclosing the *pathos* of her life, the change from *ἀμαρτία* (sin) to *σωτηρία* (salvation). The poem opens with a short, four line preamble: the woman fallen into many sins brings Christ myrrh for burial. In the preamble, we are at the end of the story, Christ is dead, and Mary assists at his burial.

The introduction to the woman's speech is framed by the two longest lines of the poem (verses 1 and 4; 18 syllables each). We begin with a description of the woman's sinful state (1, 5-7); the turning-point, expressed in the second line, is not so much restated as dramatized in the speech as a whole; then follows the woman's acceptance of service as a step in her redemption (lines 3-4 and lines 12-14). The word *Κύριε* (Lord), with which the poem begins, sets the tone. Addressing the Lord, the sacred poet presents her hymn to Him. At the same time she summarizes the story first told by St. Luke, all the while subtly refining and deepening it. With a long dignified phrase Kassia the Nun introduces her subject: *ἡ ἐν πολλαῖς ἀμαρτίαις περιπεσοῦσα γυνή* (a woman who fell into many sins). There is here a difference between the other hymnographers and Kassia, as to the woman's characterization: the hymnographers insist on calling the sinner a *πόρνη* (harlot), Kassia, nevertheless vividly describes the woman's utter degradation. It is the very onset of spiritual perception (note aorist *αἰσθομένη*) in l. 2, which makes the darkness surrounding the woman in ll. 5-7 seem so oppressive.<sup>29</sup> The woman's acceptance of the office of myrrh-bearer (ll. 3-4) is an outward sign of an inner change. One reading this line for the first time might be tempted to refer these words to the purchase of myrrh prior to the woman's acceptance at Simon's house, a scene dramatized, after Saint Ephraim the Syrian, by Romanos the Melodist (cant. 10, stanzas 9-10). The "office of myrrh bearer" conjures another New Testament scene, that in which the Magi present myrrh, among other gifts to the infant Jesus. In fact, the myrrh will be needed for embalming the body of the crucified Christ. In all these three cases, which were mentioned, the gift of myrrh represents an honor, which flows from the spiritual insight mentioned in line 2 (*τὴν σὴν αἰσθομένη θεότητα*).

After this brief yet suggestive introduction, the second voice enters the *troparion*. From the lips of the Sinful Woman herself we hear her confession and prayer. The cry *οἴμοι* with which the woman begins is unexpected. "Woe's me!" constitutes a loan from ancient Greek tragedy, frequently employed by hagiographers and hymnographers, so as they mention some frightful fact or situation; Kassia uses it to make the goad of sin palpable. The imagery of darkness in lines 5-6 includes a metaphorical application of *ἀσέληνος* (moonless), which

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<sup>29</sup> The harlot's change of heart appears as a reaction against her previous way of life in the anonymous hymn for the Wednesday of Holy Week printed at *Analecta sacra spicilegio solesmensi parata*, ed. J.B. PITRA, 1 (Paris, 1876), p. 478-480, stanza β': "ἡ πρώην ἄσωτος γυνή/ἐξαίφνης σώφρων ὄφθη/μισήσασα τὰ ἔργα/ τῆς αἰσχροῦ ἀμαρτίας/ καὶ ἠδονὰς τοῦ σώματος/ διενθυμουμένη/ τὴν αἰσχύνην τὴν πολλήν/ καὶ κρίσιν τῆς κολάσεως,/ ἢν ὑποστῶσιν πόρνοι καὶ ἄσωτοι [...]". Cf. also the oppressive darkness conjured by Aristophanes' choir of birds. *Aves*, stanzas 693-695: "Χάος ἦν καὶ Νύξ Ἐρεβός τε μέλαν πρῶτον καὶ Τάρταρος εὐρύς, γῆ δ' οὐδ' ἀήρ οὐδ' οὐρανὸς ἦν. Ἐρέβους δ' ἐν ἀπέροσι κόλποις τίκτει πρῶτιστον ὑπηνέμιον Νύξ ἢ μελανόπτερος ὠόν [...]", (Ed. F. W. HALL-W. M. GELDART, *Aristophanis Comoediae*. Tomus I, Oxford OCT, 1967).

is ordinarily an epithet of night.<sup>30</sup> According to Kazhdan, “the epithets of darkness, an obvious characteristic of night, are extended in the poem to the sensual desires of the sinful woman. [...] It seems at this point that Kassia turns to the episode of Simon’s banquet: the streams of tears, the kisses, the wiping of feet with the locks of her hair—all these actions are borrowed from the Gospel, but in the poem they acquire a specific role [...]”.<sup>31</sup> Lines 5-7 (“Ah me!” she said, “night is upon me, the goad of incontinence, gloomy and moonless, to lust after sin”) refer to a death-like state, more horrible than the physical death. In l. 4 (With tears brought you myrrh before your entombment). These lines, according to A. Dyck, offer a new dimension to the woman’s grief, which may not have been only for the death of the Savior, as one at first assumes reading these lines, but also for her own moral fallen state.<sup>32</sup>

Lines 8-14 comprise a statement of her offerings. Each offering involves a part of her: the streams of her tears, the groans of her heart, the kissing of His feet, and wiping of them with the hairs of her head: what she is offering is herself. Though in lines 8 and 9 her tears are by rhetorical hyperbole streams, He can receive them since He fills the sea with water. The bending to an individual is easily compared to the bending of the heavens (ll. 10-11; cf. Ps. 17,10).<sup>33</sup> She asks God to “bend” toward her sorrowing heart. Confession, tears and prayer to a merciful God begin to heal the Sinful Woman, to liberate her from her sin-filled past. Looking now to the future, she promises Christ to kiss His feet again and to dry them with her hair. Divine love has erased the “moonless night” of guilt and sin. We must also note the contrast of ll. 9 and 11: it is as an explosion of water filling the sea is opposed to an implosion when a void is left by the *κένωσις*.<sup>34</sup>

At this point and while we would expect a penitential conclusion, Kassia’s Sinful Woman

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. DYCK 1985, p. 69 (footnote 23), where Dyck explains the term *ἀσέληνος*.

<sup>31</sup> KAZHDAN, 1999, p. 318-319.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. The Byzantine “Patroclus-excuse” (DIOGEN, 7, 47 with test), an allusion to line 19, 301-302, where the Trojan women bewail their own troubles on the pretext of Patroclus’ death.

<sup>33</sup> For the phraseology of lines 8 and 10 (“τὰς πηγὰς τῶν δακρύων [...] πρὸς τοὺς στεναγμοὺς τῆς καρδίας” cf. Andrew of Crete, Great Canon, lines 183-184: “Τὰ δάκρυα, σωτήρ, τῶν ὀμμάτων μου καὶ τοὺς ἐκ βάθους στεναγμοὺς/ καθαρῶς προσφέρω βοούσης τῆς καρδίας [...]”). For lines 9 and 11 (“ὁ νεφέλαις διεξάγων τῆς θαλάσσης τὸ ὕδωρ; ὁ κλίνας τοὺς οὐρανοὺς τῆ ἀφράστῳ σου κενώσει”) note E. NORDEN, *Agnostos Theos. Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede*, Leipzig-Berlin, 1913, p. 175 ff., esp. p. 201 ff., p. 220 ff., who contrasts forms of divine predication current in Greek paganism and in Oriental religions or religious influenced by Oriental conceptions, including Christianity.

<sup>34</sup> *Κένωσις*, according to A. Kazhdan, designates ‘emptiness’, and Kassia evidently played on its double meaning. The confirmation of our explanation is found in the anonymous drama *Christus Patiens* (verses 2418-2420: “[...] ὡς Μαγδάλ’ εἶπε Μαρία πιστουμένη, πρώτη δραμοῦσα, πάντ’ ἀκριβωσαμένη καὶ τὴν κένωσιν μηνύσασα τοῦ τάφου”, Grégoire de Nazianze, *La Passion du Christ. Tragédie*, Introduction, texte critique, traduction notes et index de André TUILIER, Paris, Le Éditions du Cerf No 149, 1969, p. 324. in which Mary Magdalene is said to be the first to have arrived at Christ’s tomb and to have witnessed its *κένωσις*: by having emptied His grave (i.e. by being resurrected), says Kassia, Christ bent the heavens. Cf. *τάφου κένωσις* in Photios, Homily XII on Holy Saturday, ed. B. LAOURDAS, *Φωτίου Ὁμιλίου*, Ἑλληνικά Παράρτημα 12, Thessalonike, 1959, p. 123.14: “[...]καὶ γὰρ διὰ σὲ καὶ τάφου κένωσις καὶ θανάτου νέκρωσις καὶ Ἄδου καθαίρεσις καὶ τριήμερος ἔγερσις [...]”.

recalls Eve, the first woman who sinned. The introduction of Eve has caused difficulty. Tillyard found Eve's presence in the poem a "pedantic" intrusion. Eve had run from God, the Sinful Woman to Him. Her trust had vanquished all fear. Both Eve and the subject of Kassia's poem are sinful women, but their behavior in their presence of their God is totally opposite. Eve attempts to be hidden, the other, pours out tears of repentance. Topping points to the contrast of Eve the disobedient and the repentant harlot in Lenten sermons and hymns as precedent for the allusion to the first sinful woman. She says that in the Great Canon of Andrew of Crete "upbraids his soul for imitating Eve rather than the *porne*".<sup>35</sup> The reference to the *porne* is as follows: "Τὰ δάκρυα τὰ τῆς πόρνης, οἰκτίρμον, κάγω προβάλλομαι/ ἰλάσθητί μοι, σωτήρ, τῆ εὐσπλαχνία σου" (lines 57-58; cf. line 307 ff.) Another source for Kassia's *troparion* is the oration on the sinful woman by Saint Amphilochius of Iconium, a cousin of Saint Gregory of Nazianzus and a friend of all three Cappadocians.<sup>36</sup> Dyck asserts that "the pure feet of Christ serving as the link between the scenes at Simon's house and in the Garden of Eden".<sup>37</sup> Both Eve and the *πόρνη* of Kassia's poem are sinful women but their behavior in the presence of their<sup>38</sup> God is totally opposite: the one attempts to hide (Gen. 3, 8), the other pours out tears of repentance.<sup>39</sup> If we follow Professor Dyck's opinion, "The two women become for all mankind negative and positive exempla of the behavior of a sinful mortal".<sup>40</sup> Eve and the sinful woman don't follow a pious life and they both remember God and their sins, only after they hear His footsteps.

The verb *ἐξιχνιάσει* in line 18 suggests a link between the two couplets comprised in lines 15-16 and lines 17-18. God did indeed "track down" Eve, in spite of her vain and foolish effort to hide. The rhetorical question "[...] κριμάτων σου ἀβύσσους/ τίς ἐξιχνιάσει;" is modelled on Rom. 11, 33: "ὦ βάθος πλούτου καὶ σοφίας καὶ γνώσεως θεοῦ· ὡς ἀνεξερεύνητα τὰ κρίματα αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀνεξιχνίαστοι οἱ ὁδοὶ αὐτοῦ".<sup>41</sup> We can say that Eve's and Kassia's sins are related here. Then follows the phrase *ψυχοσῶστα σωτήρ μου*, the first

<sup>35</sup> E. CATAFYGIOTOU-TOPPING, "Kassiane the nun and the sinful woman", *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 26,3 (1981), p. 201-209 (here at 206 f.).

<sup>36</sup> P.G. 39, 71B ff. Cf. K. HALL, *Amphilochius von Ikonium in seinem Verhältnis zu den großen Kappadoziern*, Tübingen and Leipzig, 1904, p. 61, 63.

<sup>37</sup> Cosmas of Jerusalem alludes to the 'pure feet' of Christ in connection with the harlot; but this reference is for the sake of a contrast along the lines of that of Romanos: τῶν ἰχνῶν σου ἐπελάβετο τῶν ἀχράντων κεχραμμέναις παλάμαις (P.G. 98, 476 A). Cf. Amphiloch. Icon., P.G. 39, col. 77B and 80A and the anonymous hymn (n. 12 above), stanza α'.

<sup>38</sup> With the word 'their' I mean that both Kassia and the sinful woman sense God as their personal God.

<sup>39</sup> Saint Cyril's of Alexandria notion that she anointed and wiped Christ's feet while standing behind him, and could only come before him after her sins had been forgiven (P.G. 72, col. 624 A) is, of course, without support in the text.

<sup>40</sup> DYCK 1986, p. 72.

<sup>41</sup> Rom. 11, 33: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!" Cf. also Ps. 35,7: "τὰ κρίματά σου ἄβυσσος πολλή". Cf. also Kassia's Canon for the Dead: "Υψος καὶ βάθος τίς ἐκφράσαι δύναται/ τῆς σῆς σοφίας, Χριστέ [...]".

invocation of the Deity within the woman's speech. According to Professor A. Dyck "with its doubling of the  $\sigma\omega$ - element it seems like other figures of repetition, to heighten the pathos still further".<sup>42</sup>

The *troparion* then concludes with the Sinful Woman's last petition: "Μή με τὴν σὴν δούλην παρίδης ὁ ἀμέτρητον ἔχων τὸ ἔλεος" (Do not overlook me yours servant, You who have pity without measure). The imitation of the penitential Psalms, though palpable, is integrated seamlessly into the new context: Ps. 50,1: "ἐλέησόν με, ὁ θεός, κατὰ τὸ μέγα ἔλεός σου καὶ κατὰ τὸ πλῆθος τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν μου ἐξάλειψον τὸ ἀνόμημά μου"<sup>43</sup>; Kassia, ll. 19-20: "Μή με τὴν σὴν δούλην παρίδης ὁ ἀμέτρητον ἔχων τὸ ἔλεος"<sup>44</sup>. The Sinful Woman now addresses God as her personal Redeemer, *ψυχοσῶστα, Σωτήρ μου* (Savior of souls, my Savior). Thus the prayer, which begun with a cry of despair and guilt, ends with a statement of faith and hope. The hymn which begun with an image of a lost soul ends with the image of that soul redeemed by God's infinite loving mercy, as Topping points out.<sup>45</sup>

The poem on Mary Magdalene, as Dyck correctly stresses, begins on a milder note which then rises sharply with the onset of the woman's speech (*οἴμοι*) and continues to ascend until it comes to the climax. The language is simple and direct, the use of rhetorical figures restrained. At several points metrical correspondence underlines parallelism of sense. Elements taken from literary models (Scriptures, Romanos the Melodist, Church Fathers) are not carelessly pasted on but made to form an organic part of their new environment. The Old Testament type (Eve), forms an apt contrast with the sinful woman and points a moral.

## 6. Survival of the sinful woman in other hymns

According to Ilse Rochow<sup>46</sup> the form of the «sinful woman» is appeared also in other Eastern Christendom hymns, which are sung on Holy Wednesday and are ascribed by mistake to Kassia. These hymns are in the following way:

i) Inc. Σὲ τὸν τῆς παρεθένου υἱόν, πόρνη ἐπιγνοῦσα Θεόν... is ascribed from the manuscripts to Kosmas of Μαῖουμα

ii) Inc. Τὸ πολύτιμον μύρον..., is ascribed also to Kosmas Μαῖουμα

iii) Inc. Ὅτε ἡ ἀμαρτωλός..., is ascribed in part to Kosmas Μαῖουμα, as also in part to John the Monk. According to Rochow it can not be ascribed to Kassia, because this hymn is

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<sup>42</sup> DYCK 1986, p. 73 (cf. note 40).

<sup>43</sup> Ps. 50, 1: Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness; according unto the multitude of Thy tender mercies, blot out my transgressions.

<sup>44</sup> For the petition *μή με [...] παρίδης* cf. Andrew of Crete, *Great Canon*, 1.76 (μη ὑπερίδης με). Kassia, Canon for the Dead: "τῶν δούλων σου πάριδε/ τὰ ἐν ἀγνοίᾳ, σωτήρ,/ καὶ γνώσει πταίσματα./ Ὡς ἔχων μακρόθυμε,/ φιλανθρωπίας ἄπλετον πέλαγος,/ τῶν πρὸς σὲ μεταστάντων μὴ στήσης ὄλωσ τὰ παραπτώματα/ ἐν τῇ ἐτάσει/ αὐτῶν κατὰ πρόσωπον [...]"

<sup>45</sup> TOPPING 1981, p. 209.

<sup>46</sup> ROCHOW 1967, p. 56-57.

confirmed already from the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>47</sup>

iv) Inc. Ὡ τῆς Ἰουδα ἀθλιότητος..., is ascribed either to Kosmas Maïouma or to John the Monk

v) Inc. Ἡ ἀμαρτωλός..., is ascribed also to Kosmas Maïouma or to John the Monk

vi) Inc. Ἡ βεβυθισμένη..., is ascribed to John of Damascus

vii) Inc. Σήμερον ὁ Χριστός..., is ascribed to someone Byzantios

viii) Inc. Ἦπλωσεν ἡ πόρνη..., is ascribed either to John of Damascus or to John the Monk

ix) Inc. Προσήλθε γυνή..., is ascribed to Byzantios

x) Inc. Ἡ ἀπεγνωσμένη..., is supposed to be John of Damascus' hymn<sup>48</sup>.

## 6. Conclusion

Across the more than ten centuries which separate us from the Byzantine nun, Kassia the Nun and Hymnographer communicates the reality of the Christian passover from death to life, as well as her serene belief in the transformnig grace of divine *philanthropia*. Kassia invites such identification by presenting her situation with such vividness and pathos. Kassia can be said to have laid bare the human soul in a poem of extraordinary concentration and power.

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<sup>47</sup> ROCHOW, 1967, p. 57.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. ROCHOW, 1967, p. 235, footnotes 522-534 for the bibliography about these hymns.

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