

**Iconography of *The Dormition of the Virgin* in the 10th to 12th centuries.
An analysis from its legendary sources**

**Iconografía de *La Dormición de la Virgen* en los siglos X-XII.
Análisis a partir de sus fuentes legendarias**

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Abstract: This article* seeks to highlight whether and to what extent the medieval iconography of the Dormition of the Virgin reflects the central or peripheral details of three apocryphal texts whose authors are Pseudo-John the Theologian, Archbishop John of Thessaloniki and Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea. To do this, we will put in direct relation the narrative details of these three apocryphal legends with the characters, gestures, actions and circumstances set forth in the Byzantine and Western representations of this iconographic motif over the 10th-12th centuries.

Keywords: Medieval art, iconography, the Mary's Dormition, Apocrypha, *Koimesis*, 10th - 12th centuries.

Resumen: El presente artículo busca poner de relieve si y en qué medida la iconografía medieval de la Dormición de la Virgen refleja los detalles centrales o periféricos de tres textos apócrifos, cuyos autores son el Pseudo Juan el Teólogo, el arzobispo John of Thessaloniki y el Pseudo José de Arimatea. Para ello, pondremos en relación directa los pormenores narrativos de esas tres leyendas apócrifas con los personajes, gestos, acciones y circunstancias plasmados en las representaciones bizantinas y occidentales más sobresalientes de este motivo iconográfico durante los siglos X-XII.

Palabras clave: Arte medieval, Iconografía, Dormición de María, *Koimesis*, apócrifos, siglos X-XII.

Sumario: 1. Literary sources of *The Dormition of Mary*. 2. Images of *The Mary's Dormition* in the 10th-12th centuries. 2.1. The *Koimesis* in Byzantine art at the end of the High Middle Ages. 2.1.1. The Byzantine Dormition in the 10th-11th centuries. 2.1.2. The Byzantine *Koimesis* in the 12th century. 2.2. *The Dormition of Mary* in Western art of the 10th-12th centuries. 2.2.1. The Dormition in the Western miniature. 2.2.2. *The Dormition of Mary* in Western monumental art. 3. Iconographic analysis of the Dormitions of the 10th-12th centuries. 4. Conclusions. Sources and Bibliography.

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1. Literary sources of *The Dormition of Mary*

As it is well known, there are no historical data or biblical references that allow us reconstruct the precise circumstances of the death and burial of the Virgin Mary. In the absence of such canonical documents, among the Christian

communities of the Middle East some pious, apocryphal legends of alleged apostolic tradition emerged very soon, that tried to write the “official story” of the death of the Messiah’s mother.¹ Convinced of the superhuman condition of the *Theotókos*, the anonymous authors of these apocryphal legends did not hesitate to imagine that the death, funeral, burial and even the eventual resurrection of the Virgin were marked by a series of miraculous phenomena and incredible prodigies.

As the title of our article states, we limit here our research to the study of the legendary sources of the Mary’s Dormition, now dispensing with the analysis of its many and rich theological and patristic sources, that we have studied in another paper.² However, within the immense *corpus* of apocryphal writings of the Old and New Testaments, for the purposes of this paper we are interested only in the apocrypha of the Assumption, i.e., those directly related to the death and assumption of Mary.³ Among these, we have chosen the three which, because of their antiquity and originality, stand out above other similar later apocrypha and surely derived from the first three. These three primeval apocrypha are: the *Treatise of St. John the Theologian on the Dormition of the Holy Mother of God* (called the *Book of St. John the Evangelist*, or Pseudo-John the Theologian,⁴ whose wording is estimated from the 4th century or before);⁵

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¹ Almost all scholars date the first Assumptionist apocryphal to the 4th century. However, some scholars argue that the earliest apocryphal versions go back to the 2nd century, when the alleged heretic Leutius, and even the text of Pseudo-John the Theologian, would have been written.

² See the text “La Asunción de María. De la leyenda al dogma”, which constitutes the Chapter 5 of our book *Ancilla et Regina. Aproximaciones a la iconografía mariana in la Edad Media*, Saarbrücken, Editorial Académica Española, 2011.

³ For an overview of the New Testament apocryphal, especially those of the Assumption, in Spanish translation cf. Aurelio de Santos Otero, *Los evangelios apócrifos*, Salamanca: La Editorial Católica, Col. Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 148, 2006, 705 p. For other Assumptionist apocryphal of Arabic or Coptic tradition, cf. Gonzalo Aranda Pérez, *Dormición de la Virgen. Relatos de la tradición copta*, Madrid: Editorial Ciudad Nueva/Fundación San Justino, Col. Apócrifos Cristianos, 2, 1995, 324 p.; and Pilar González Casado, *La dormición de la Virgen. Cinco relatos árabes*, Madrid: Trotta, 2002, 218 p.

⁴ Pseudo-John the Theologian, *Tratado de San Juan el Teólogo sobre la dormición de la Santa Madre de Dios*. We assume the bilingual (Greek / Spanish) text of this apocryphal of the edition given by Aurelio de Santos Otero (2006: 576-600). From now on we will quote the passages of this apocryphal with the name of its author, and the chapter of his text in Roman numerals, followed by the page of the edition of Santos Otero in Arabic numerals: for example, Pseudo-John the Theologian, XII: 581.

⁵ Cf. Santos Otero 2006: 574.

The Dormition of Our Lady, Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary, written by John, Archbishop of Thessaloniki⁶ (known as the *Book of John of Thessaloniki*, dating back to the beginning of the 7th century);⁷ and *De transitu Beatae Mariae Virginis (auctore Pseudo-Josepho ab Arimathea)*,⁸ somewhat late recasting of the two aforementioned writings.

At first, we believe it is necessary to synthesize the essential content of that trio of legendary texts. Ignoring a series of miraculous healings, divine punishments and other fabulous incidents described by one or another of these three Assumption's apocrypha, we could summarize the elements in which all of them agree to a greater or lesser extent, in spite of several variants. While praying at the tomb of Jesus, or while she was at her home in Bethlehem, according to two of these legends, Mary received the announcement of her forthcoming death through the archangel Gabriel⁹ (or a simple and anonymous angel), who gave her in addition a palm brought from Paradise for her burial.¹⁰ Received the announcement of her imminent death, the Virgin returned home in Bethlehem with the three maidens who serve her, and there she asked God to send her John the Evangelist and the other apostles, in order to see them again, to announce her death and say goodbye to them.¹¹ Arrived from Ephesus on a cloud,¹² John spoke with Mary, who commented on the promise made by her son, Jesus, when guaranteeing her that, in the trance of her death, He would come with the angels to receive and transfer her soul to heaven.¹³ After a powerful voice saying "Amen", the Holy Spirit summoned all the apostles, living and dead, making them come on bright clouds from the farthest corners of the earth to Bethlehem, to attend Mary in her death. By virtue of the Holy Spirit the

⁶ John of Thessaloniki, *Dormición de Nuestra Señora, Madre de Dios and siempre Virgen María*. We take here the bilingual (Greek / Spanish) text of this apocryphal according to the edition given by Santos Otero (2006: 605-639). From now on we will quote the passages of this apocryphal with the name of its author, with the chapter of his text in Roman numerals, followed by the page of the edition of Santos Otero in Arabic numerals.

⁷ Cf. Santos Otero 2006: 646.

⁸ Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, *De transitu Beatae Mariae Virginis (auctore Pseudo-Josepho ab Arimathea)*. We use here the bilingual text (Latin / Spanish) of the edition given by Santos Otero (2006: 640-653). From now on we will quote the passages of this apocryphal with the name of its author, with the chapter of his text in Roman numerals, followed by the page of the edition of Santos Otero in Arabic numerals.

⁹ Pseudo-John the Theologian, I-III: 576-577. John of Thessaloniki, III-IV: 609-612. According to the latter author, "the great angel" announces her death to Mary, and does so at her house before she leaves to the Mount of Olives at the angel's own suggestion. (*Ibid.*).

¹⁰ Pseudo-John the Theologian, III: 577; John of Thessaloniki, III: 609-611; Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, IV: 643.

¹¹ Pseudo-John the Theologian, IV-V: 577-578; John of Thessaloniki, III-IV: 609-612. Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, V: 643-644.

¹² Pseudo-John the Theologian, VI-X: 578-580; John of Thessaloniki, III: 609-611; Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, VI: 644.

¹³ Pseudo-John the Theologian, VI-X: 578-580; John of Thessaloniki, III: 609-611.

apostles came all at once to the Mary's house, with great joy of her.¹⁴ Then each apostle, including Paul and Thomas (contrary to what Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea describes),¹⁵ relates the Virgin from where and how he came to Bethlehem on a resplendent cloud.¹⁶ While the *Theotókos* prayed with the apostles in her home in Bethlehem, there was a great thunder, a loud voice was heard and an army of angels and seraphim surrounded the house of Mary,¹⁷ much to the surprise of people of Bethlehem and many inhabitants of Jerusalem, while many miraculous healings were produced.¹⁸ Determined to attack the Virgin and the disciples, the Jewish priests, when being prevented from doing so by a divine punishment, requested the Roman governor to send a *quiliarch* with his troops against the mother of Jesus and the apostles. However, the apostles, when carrying their Lady lying on her bunk bed, were conducted on a cloud by the Holy Spirit from Bethlehem to the Mary's house in Jerusalem, safe from the Jews' attacks.¹⁹ On Sunday, soon after Mary asked the Apostles to pray, and to burn incense,²⁰ Jesus Christ came between glows in her mother's house with a great thunder and under the waves of an intense perfume, escorted by a multitude of angels, cherubim and seraphim, all of them singing heavenly hymns.²¹ After comforting her, Jesus told his mother that on that same day her body would be transferred to Paradise and her soul would rise to heaven.²² Blessed by Jesus, and after blessing herself the disciples, Mary began to pray and asked her Son to grant through her intercession all thanks requested by those who invoke her as a mediator.²³ At the command of the Messiah, asking Peter to initiate the psalmody, the Virgin got up from her bed, blessed every apostle and exhaled her last breath in the middle of an ineffable light and an exquisite perfume.²⁴ Jesus then received the soul of his mother,²⁵ and wrapping her in a few veils of

¹⁴ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XI-XII: 580-581; John of Thessaloniki, VII: 618-620; Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, VII-VIII: 645.

¹⁵ Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, VII: 645.

¹⁶ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XVI-XXV: 583-587.

¹⁷ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XXVI-XXVIII: 587-588; Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, XI: 647

¹⁸ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XXVI-XXVIII: 587-588.

¹⁹ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XXIX-XXXVI: 588-592; Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, XIII: 648. El Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea sitúa la amenaza de ataque de los judíos después de la muerte de María. (*Ibid.*).

²⁰ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XXXVII-XXXIX: 592-593; John of Thessaloniki, VI: 615-618.

²¹ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XXXVII-XXXIX: 592-593; John of Thessaloniki, XII: 630-632; Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, XI: 647.

²² Pseudo-John the Theologian, XXXVII-XXXIX: 592-593.

²³ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XL-XLIV: 594-596.

²⁴ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XLI- XLV: 595-597.

²⁵ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XLIV: 596; Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, XI: 647.

indescribable glow, delivered it to the archangel Michael to be moved to Paradise.²⁶ Then the Apostles, ordered by the Redeemer to carry the Mary's corpse to a new tomb on the city's outskirts, placed it in the coffin and took it where the Master had ordered.²⁷ While conducting in funeral procession the *Theotókos*' body, a Jew called Jephonias (or an anonymous pontiff, according to John of Thessaloniki, or a certain Reuben, according to Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea) wanted to desecrate it broking down the coffin, but an angel cut off both his arms, which were hung from the coffin.²⁸ But, after proclaiming at the request of Peter the wonders of Christ and Mary, the defiler was awarded the miracle of the recovery of his arms and his conversion to Christianity.²⁹ At the end of this miracle, the apostles moved the Virgin's corpse in the coffin to the Garden of Gethsemane and deposited it in a brand new tomb, which gave off a delicious scent. For three days many songs of unseen angels were heard. But, at the stopping of such songs on the third day, the Apostles confirmed that the body of Mary has been driven to Paradise³⁰ and afterwards they saw many saints, prophets and angels coming to venerate the relic of the Virgin, between angelic hymns and in the middle of a fragrant perfume.³¹ Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea adds the fabulous episode according to which the doubting Apostle Thomas, absent during the funeral of the God's mother, and seeing her at the time of her Assumption into heaven while he was coming late on a cloud from India, asked her the cingulum with which she was girded by the apostles when shrouding her.³² Thomas will use the Marian cingulum as a testimonial sign to prove to the disciples the immediate resurrection and bodily Assumption of Mary into heaven.³³ Finally, many clouds returned each apostle to the place from where they had been lifted before the Mary's Dormition.³⁴

Even arousing the suspicion and rejection of many Church Fathers, among them St. Jerome, the essential content of these three apocryphal writings was adopted without excessive cautions by some other Fathers, Doctors and medieval theologians, while being aware of the implausibility of most of its episodes and

²⁶ John of Thessaloniki, XII: 630-632.

²⁷ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XLI- XLV: 595-597; John of Thessaloniki, XII: 630-632; Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, XIV: 648-649.

²⁸ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XLVI- XLVII: 597-598; John of Thessaloniki, XIII: 632-637; Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, XIV: 648-649. According to Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, the arms of the defiler were dried on the coffin, without having been cut.

²⁹ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XLVI- XLVII: 597-598; John of Thessaloniki, XIII: 632-637; Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, XV: 649.

³⁰ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XLVIII-L: 598-600; John of Thessaloniki, XIV: 637-639; Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, XVI: 649.

³¹ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XLVIII-L: 598-600.

³² Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, XVII: 649-650.

³³ Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, XVIII-XXI: 650-652.

³⁴ Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, XXII: 652.

details. On such legendary narrative foundations they built a solid structure of devotional poetic digressions, reflections, catechetical comments and doctrinal exegesis, with the purpose of raising the credulous piety of the faithful and making more affordable the inapprehensible enigmas of the dogmas. Throughout the Middle Ages a Mariological hybrid *corpus* was thus solidified, in which fantasy and reality, legend and history, reason and faith are mixed in an inextricable warp. Nothing, perhaps, best illustrates the central data recycling of those apocryphal Assumption's tales by the Church Doctors than the synthesis made by St. John Damascene (675-749), after he confessed to have received it from Juvenal, Archbishop of Jerusalem:

Taking the word, Juvenal replied: "The Holy Scripture inspired by God does not tell what happened in the death of the Holy Theotókos Mary, but we rely on an ancient tradition and very true that at the time of her glorious Dormition, all the holy apostles, which roamed the earth for the salvation of the nations, were assembled in an instant through the air in Jerusalem. When they were close to her, angels appeared to them in a vision, and a divine concert of the higher power was heard. And so, in a divine and heavenly glory, the Virgin gave her holy soul in the God's hands in an ineffable way. As for her body, receptacle of the godhead, it was carried and buried in the midst of songs of angels and apostles, and deposited in a coffin in Gethsemane, where the angelic choirs singing persevered for three days endlessly. After the third day, having ceased these songs the apostles present opened the coffin at the request of Thomas, who was the only one who had been far from them, and who, arrived on the third day, wanted to venerate the body which had brought God. But they could not find in any way her body worthy of all praise; they found only the funeral gowns set there, from which emitted an ineffable perfume that penetrated them, and they closed the coffin. Full of admiration before the mysterious prodigy, here is the only thing that they could conclude: he who in his own person is worthy to become incarnate in her and to become man, God the Word, the Lord of glory, and who kept intact the virginity of his Mother after his birth, had still wanted, even after his departure from below, to honor her virginal and immaculate body with the privilege of incorruptibility; and with a translation before the common and universal resurrection. Being present then the Apostles, the Holy Apostle Timothy, the first bishop of Ephesus, and Dionysius the Areopagite, as the great Dionysius himself witnesses in his addresses to the apostle Timothy, concerning the blessed Hierotheus, also present at that time...³⁵

³⁵ Saint Jean Damascène, *Deuxième discours sur l'illustre Dormition de la Toute Sainte et toujours Vierge Marie*, 18. in Saint Jean Damascène, *Homélie sur la Nativité et la Dormition* (Texte grec, introduction, traduction et notes par Pierre Voulet), Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, Coll. Sources Chrétiennes, 1961, p. 173.

From another perspective, with a subtle and poetic language, Jacob of Serugh (c. 451-521) had already confirmed also the use of the apocrypha by medieval theologians, in exposing his own case: In a homily for the feast of the Mary's Dormition, he synthesizes the hard work of the heavenly powers and of the earthly apostles in the death and burial of the Son of God's Mother, in line with the comments made by the apocrypha:

*Ad Matrem usque huius Iesu Christi Filii Dei,
Mors venit, ut ipsa eius calicem gustaret.
Imperavit Dominus excelsis virtutibus et supernis,
flammanibusque legionibus, igneis Cherubim.*

*Descenderunt angelorum turmae secundum cohortes:
alta voce cecinerunt gloriosa iubila.
[...] Stat electorum duodecim chorus Apostolorum,
qui virginalia corpus benedictae Mariae sepelit.*³⁶

After this first approach to the apocryphal literary sources of the Virgin's death, it is time to study the corresponding artistic representations.

2. Images of *The Mary's Dormition* in the 10th-12th centuries

The liturgical feast of the Dormition of Mary and its corresponding iconography are founded in their beginnings not only in these apocryphal legends already mentioned, but also in many sermons, hymns, comments and dogmatic treatises of some Church Fathers and Doctors, theologians, philosophers, homilists, hymnographers, liturgists and other writers of the Eastern Church, such as St. Modest of Jerusalem († 634),³⁷ St. Andrew of Crete († 720),³⁸ St. German of Constantinople (733),³⁹ the Archbishop John of Thessaloniki (7th century),⁴⁰ St. John Damascene (675-749)⁴¹ and St. Theodore Studita (759-826).⁴² These Greek-oriental contributions on the Virgin's Death will be supplemented then with other similar doctrinal contributions on the part of some ecclesiastical writers of the Western Church.

³⁶ Jacob of Serugh (c. 451-521), *Homilia de sancta Dei Matris Dormitione et sepultura*. In Sergio Alvarez Campos (comp.), *Corpus Marianum Patristicum*, vol. V, Burgos, Aldecoa, 1981, p. 96

³⁷ St. Modest of Jerusalem, *Encomium in dormitionem Deiparae*, PG 86, 3288 ss.

³⁸ St. Andrew of Crete, *In dormitionem Deiparae*, PG 97, 1053 ss; and 1081 ss.

³⁹ St. German of Constantinople, *In sanctam Dei Genitricis dormitionem*, PG 98, 345 ss.

⁴⁰ Of this writer, see the apocryphal book that we will mention later, many of whose details we will assume in the iconographic analyses that we will propose in our article.

⁴¹ See the aforementioned bilingual book (Greek/French) Saint Jean Damascène, *Homélies sur la Nativité et la Dormition* (edition of Pierre Voulet), 1961.

⁴² St. Theodore Studita, *Laudes in dormitionem Deiparae*, PG 99, 719 ss.

Then, inspired by such literary sources, the iconography of the *Koimesis* or Dormition of Mary appeared in the Byzantine world, and some time later it will be adopted, and readapted in the Western area. It is however impossible to pinpoint the exact year—or, at least, the century—when the first *Koimesis* began to be represented. In the light of the massive destruction of images in the Byzantine Empire during the iconoclast crisis (726-843), it would be possible to surmise that there were some images of the Virgin's Dormition before the 10th century. However, such a conjecture cannot be confirmed in an irrefutable way with the documents that we have at our disposal. The only truth is that, according to the unanimous opinion of the experts, the first surviving images of the *Koimesis* date back to the 10th century. Such certainty justifies our methodological decision to begin the period to investigate precisely in this century. On the other hand, we extend this period until the 12th century, a date whose end marks clearly the emergence of a new artistic and cultural era: the Late Middle Ages.

Our purpose in this dissertation is to try to show whether and to what extent the medieval iconography of the Dormition of the Virgin reflects the central or peripheral details of the three aforementioned Assumption's apocrypha. To restrict ourselves now to the iconography of the *Koimesis* during the 10th-12th centuries, and after ruling out the impossible attempt to study comprehensively all the remaining images of the subject in the chosen period, we will discuss here some of the most outstanding representations of this Marian issue in the Byzantine and Western art during the three centuries under scrutiny. The criteria used to choose the works of art to be analyzed are based above all on the originality of its narrative proposal and on the quality of its stylistic-formal execution, according to the almost unanimous support of the experts. Both criteria influence the notable chronological and geographical-cultural dispersion of the chosen works of art, a dispersion which is particularly noticeable in the various territories subject to the political or cultural influence of Byzantium.

2.1. The *Koimesis* in Byzantine art at the end of the High Middle Ages

2.1.1. The Byzantine Dormition in the 10th-11th centuries

Four Byzantine icons in ivory and soapstone from the 10th century with images of the *Koimesis* and two other similar works of the 11th century exhibit the same compositional structure and the same descriptive elements of the studied topic: the first four are preserved in the Houston Museum of Fine Arts,⁴³ in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna,⁴⁴ at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in

⁴³ *Icon with Koimesis*, Byzantine (Constantinople), mid-10th century, ivory, 10.6 x 8.7 x 1.4 cm. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas. Repr. in color in Evans, Wixom (eds.) 1997: 149-150 (analysis), n° 95.

⁴⁴ *Icon with Koimesis*, Byzantine, 2nd half of 10th century, golden soapstone, 13 x 11.2 x 1.7 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Viena. Repr. in color in Evans, Wixom (eds.) 1997: 155-156 (analysis), n° 102.

New York City,⁴⁵ and in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich⁴⁶ (the latter almost identical to that of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York); the two copies of the 11th century are the ivory icon from the Cluny Museum in Paris,⁴⁷ and the almost identical panel of a polyptych in ivory of the twelve Great Feasts, belonging to the Museum of Darmstadt (Germany).⁴⁸



Fig. 1
Fig. 1. *Icon with Koimesis*, ivory, mid-10th century, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.



Fig. 2
Fig. 2. *Icon with Koimesis*, soapstone, 2nd half of 10th century. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Due to the very limited space available, taking into account the tiny dimensions of the ivory or soapstone plates,⁴⁹ the composition is simplified to the maximum in these six sumptuous works. Therefore, in all of them only the essential characters and episodes are assumed: the Virgin lying horizontally on the bed, whose head (except in the twin copies of Cluny and Darmstadt) is facing right side; the apostles, gathered on both sides in two symmetrical groups, the first one around Peter, located at the head of the bed, while the other group of

⁴⁵ *Icon with Koimesis*, Byzantine (Constantinople), end of 10th century, ivory, 18.7 x 14.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Repr. in color in Evans, Wixom (eds.) 1997: 154-155 n° 101.

⁴⁶ *Icon with Koimesis*, Constantinople (?), last quarter of the 10th century, ivory. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich. Repr. in Schiller 1980, Band 4,2: 348, fig. 587.

⁴⁷ *Icon with Koimesis*, Byzantine, 11th century, ivory, Museum of Cluny, Paris. Repr. in Toscano 1960, vol. 2: 177, fig. 145. Giuseppe Toscano (*Ibid.*) dates this ivory work to the 12th century.

⁴⁸ Repr. in Coche de la Ferté 1981: 425, fig. 539, and p. 456, n° 539.

⁴⁹ As already indicated, the dimensions of the first three quoted icons are 10.6 x 8.7 x 1.4 cm, 13 x 11.2 x 1.7 cm and 18.7 x 14.9 cm, respectively.

disciples is gathered in the opposite side, directed by Paul, who always embraces the Mary's feet; standing in the center of the composition, like a balancing fulcrum, Jesus takes in his arms the soul of his mother, represented as a newborn wrapped in girdles, and raises it to his right, to the left of the painting (except for the icons of Cluny and Darmstadt, in which he does it in the opposite direction), to give it to a pair of angels (except in the Vienna's item, with a single angel), fluttering above the Messiah with their hands covered by ritual veils, in a sign of respect not to touch directly the soul of Mary. Except for the luxurious deathbed, the rich embroidered fabrics, and a pedestal in the center of the lower edge of the panel, there are no other furniture or scenic accessories in these six precious icons.



Fig. 3

Fig. 3. *Icon with Koimesis*, ivory, end 10th century, Metropolitan Museum, New York.



Fig. 4

Fig. 4. *Icon with Koimesis*, ivory, last quarter of the 10th century, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich

In the two works of Houston and Vienna, the apostle John –represented as an old man with gray hair and beard to signify his old age on the island of Patmos⁵⁰— inclines with affection his head on the chest of Mary. In the items of Vienna, Munich, Cluny, Darmstadt, Houston and New York, to signify the funeral in progress, Peter balances a censer, an appreciable gesture –for the raised position of his arm— even in the ivories of Houston and New York, despite the fact that in both the hand and the censer have disappeared. As an exception, the twin icons of Darmstadt and Cluny embody twice the soul of the Virgin, one still in the arms of Jesus, the other already in the hands of an angel who leads it to heaven in the upper right corner.

⁵⁰ The evangelist John was the only apostle to die of natural death, while all his other colleagues suffered martyrdom.

The compositional structure of the Dormition of an icon in the 2nd half of the 11th century from the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai⁵¹ is much more complex than the previous ones, a work that is just a fragment (something more than half) of a bigger composition. Around Christ carrying the soul of Mary, represented as a newborn wrapped in girdles, you can see there only six apostles –among them John bringing his head near the chest of the Virgin, Paul hugging her feet and Peter with his raised right arm (quite deteriorated), almost certainly waving a censer⁵²—, as well as a holy bishop with *omophorion*⁵³ with black crosses (one or two other bishops should have been depicted in the missing part of the panel), and three women inside a house, peering out the windows. In the sky there is a half-dozen angels, three of them carrying to paradise the soul of Mary on the right side, as well as on the left an apparent cloud/alveolus with two characters (angel and apostle? two apostles?), while at the top edge a choir of seraphim, with its six wings intertwined around their heads, form an arc to symbolize the heavenly Eden where the *Theotókos* will enter. We will discuss later on the identity and the role of these holy Bishops and these three women, as well as on the nature and function of these “clouds”.

The great narrative restrictions imposed on the theme of the *Koimesis* by the short dimensions of the icons in ivory, soapstone or wood (as well as in the miniatures on parchment, which we will discuss later), disappear in the large areas of the murals that illustrate the theme. The largeness in height and width of these mural paintings allows the designer of the iconographic program and the painter to deploy a greater amount of descriptive detail and doctrinal content, which will tend to become both more profuse and explicit the larger the parietal surface available.

The Dormitions of the rock churches of Cappadocia,⁵⁴ in particular those of the Göreme Valley,⁵⁵ are important for their prototypical nature and their early

⁵¹ Repr. in Lazarev 1967: s.p., fig. 323.

⁵² In fact, that is the gesture and instrument that Peter exhibits in other Byzantine icons, such as those in Munich, Vienna, Cluny, Darmstadt and New York

⁵³ Made with white wool decorated with black crosses, the *omophorion* is in the Eastern Orthodox Church a distinctive ceremonial attire of the bishops, to signify their spiritual authority over the faithful.

⁵⁴ For these Byzantine cave churches of Cappadocia and the iconographic programs of their respective mural paintings, there are some indispensable monographs, such as Nicole and Michel Thierry, *Nouvelles églises rupestres de Cappadoce, Région du Hasan Dagin* (Avant-propos par André Grabar), Paris: Klincksieck, 1963, 248 p. + il., s.p.; Spiro Kostof, *Caves of God. The Monastic Environment of Byzantine Cappadocia*, Cambridge, Mass / London: The MIT Press, 1972, 296 p.; Nicole Thierry, *Haut Moyen-Âge in Cappadoce, Les églises de la région de Çavusin*, Tome I, Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1983, 197 p. + il., s.p.; and Catherine Jolivet-Lévy, *Les églises byzantines de Cappadoce. Le programme iconographique de l'abside et de ses abords*, Paris, Editions du CNRS, 1991, 392 p.+185 pl. Kostof is interested in the morphological aspect of the architectures, rather than the iconographic programs, which he considers, with rather superficiality, from a stylistic-formal point of view.

date (with their first manifestations in the 10th century as most of experts state, and even, according to others, already since the 9th century). Among the many Cappadocian mural *Koimesis*, we can highlight the most representative.

The iconographic program of the Tokali Kilise (“circular church” or “church with ornament”, of St. Basil in Göreme 7),⁵⁶ composed of three parts –the ancient church (Tokali 1), the New Church (Tokali 2) and a funerary crypt⁵⁷—, includes a *Koimesis*, whose dating ranges according to the experts between the beginning of the 10th century⁵⁸ and mid⁵⁹ or the end of this same century.⁶⁰ When analyzing this very deteriorated Dormition –that occupies in front of the Transfiguration two small niches in the corridor between the *prothesis* and the central apse⁶¹ of the Tokali 2⁶²—, its description made by Jolivet-Levy is eloquent. According to this specialist, the *Koimesis* of the Tokali 2 (New Church)

⁵⁵ About these Cappadocian cave churches Spiro Kostof points out: “We might cite here the Dormition of the Virgin, present at Agaç Alt and Yılanlı. The pictorial formulation of this theme, in whatever form, probably has its origin in post-Iconoclastic art. The earliest known example in monumental painting, East or West, is the detailed Dormition sequence in S. Maria de Gradellis in Rome at the end of the ninth century, program we have already encountered in the discussion of Basilian picture cycles.” (Kostof 1972: 203).

⁵⁶ Jolivet-Lévy 1991: 94. On the style of the mural paintings of the Tokali kilise Charles Delvoye says: “Dans cet art populaire, sans grand savoir technique, se manifeste un sens réel de l’harmonie des couleurs. La composition est très dense: les personnages se serrent les uns contre les autres et occupent toute la hauteur de chaque zone. Les accessoires, les indications de paysages, sont autant que possible supprimés. La narration est vive, alerte, bien rythmée, riche en notations réalistes.” (Delvoye 1967: 236).

⁵⁷ Jolivet-Lévy 1991: 94.

⁵⁸ Delvoye (1967: 236) dates the frescoes of the Tokali kilise to the beginning of the 10th century. Marie-Louise Thérél (1984: 47) also dates them to the 10th century.

⁵⁹ According to Carolyn L. Connor (1991: 40) the Dormition of the Tokali kilise, dated, according to him, to the secondo half of the 10th century, constitutes one of the earliest monumental examples of this Marian theme.

⁶⁰ According to Jolivet-Lévy, “La datation des peintures [de la Tokali kilise] vers le milieu du X^e siècle (930-960 environ), jadis proposée par G. de Jerphanion, demeure la plus vraisemblable et elle est confortée par les comparaisons possibles avec des ivoires et miniatures contemporains, ainsi qu’avec le décor du Pignonnier de Çavusin (963-969), qui fournit un *terminus ante quem*. Certaines particularités du programme iconographique suggèrent, d’autre parte, de localiser l’atelier de peintres actif à Tokali, dans la capitale régionale, Césarée de Cappadoce. M. Restle, cependant, après avoir placé le décor de Tokali 2 à la fin du X^e siècle (avec des repeints postérieurs), attribue maintenant l’ensemble au XIII^e siècle.” (Jolivet-Lévy 1991: 108).

⁶¹ Jolivet-Lévy 1991: 102.

⁶² According to Jolivet-Levy, “Les circonstances qui présidèrent à la fondation et au décor de la Nouvelle église [de la Tokali kilise] restent difficiles à préciser. Il s’agit à l’évidence d’un monument prestigieux, dû au patronage de personnages influents, qu’il est tentant d’identifier, avec Nicole Thierry, à des membres de la riche famille locale des Phocas. L’ampleur des proportions, le soin apporté au décor architectural, la richesse de la technique picturale, qui recourt au lapis-lazuli pour le bleu des fonds, à l’or pour certains nimbes, la complexité et la nouveauté de l’iconographie, la qualité du style enfin, sont exceptionnels.” (Jolivet-Lévy 1991: 108). In contrast, Charles Delvoye, referring to these cave churches in Cappadocia in general,

follows an advanced and innovative schema, with Christ enthroned in high over the rainbow, surrounded by angels, and on the right the apostles who come on the clouds (represented by a sort of medallions), as stated in the inscription (in Greek) *oi apostolu erjómenu (epi ton) nefelon*. On the lower sector, Christ *I(esou)s X(risto)s*, standing behind the bed, presented the soul of his mother to an angel. Mary was lying with her head to the left, Paul rolled to his feet and Peter probably at the bedside. Three women tearful on the lintel of a door are added to the apostles; in the back plane, you can see an architectural background.⁶³

Next to the exceptional *Koimesis* of the Kiliçlar kilise (Göreme 29, Cappadocia),⁶⁴ whose mural paintings the experts date back, for their style, at the beginning or in the middle of the 10th century,⁶⁵ stands out in addition to the Dormition of the Ayvali kilise⁶⁶ (Church of St. John, in Gullu Dere n° 4, Cappadocia).⁶⁷

and the Tokali kilise in particular (which he estimates to be dated to the 10th century, and even to the late 9th century, with paleo-Christian influences) sees in all of them a sign of awkwardness, decadence and archaism, when saying: “Le caractère populaire de cet art se manifeste dans le dessin, maladroit mais expressif et d’une grande spontanéité, et dans le goût pour la narration qui emprunte bien des éléments de l’illustration aux évangiles apocryphes, eux-mêmes nés de cette propension du peuple pour les belles histoires racontées avec force de détails. Le contraste est net avec l’art aristocratique et théologique de la capitale, qui se soumettait à une stricte discipline dans le choix et la répartition des sujets.” (Delvoye 1967: 235-236).

⁶³ Jolivet-Lévy 1991: 102-103.

⁶⁴ According to Jolivet-Lévy, (1991: 137) the iconographic program of the Kiliçlar kilisesi (Göreme 29), an “archaic” style church dedicated especially to the account of the life of Christ, exceptionally includes, on the southern wall, the Dormition of Mary, usually absent in other churches of the same group.

⁶⁵ On that respect Jolivet-Lévy states: “Bien que les peintures de Kiliçlar, de belle qualité, aient été attribuées par G. de Jerphanion à la fin du X^e siècle, elles sont généralement placées aujourd’hui vers 900 (R. Cormack, M. Restle, N. Thierry, A.W. Epstein), sur des critères essentiellement stylistiques. Plusieurs particularités du programme iconographique s’accordent mieux, à notre avis, avec une datation postérieure au tout debout du X^e siècle, dans le second quart, voire, comme l’a récemment proposé Judith Clavé, vers le milieu du siècle.” (Jolivet-Lévy 1991: 141). Lyn Rodley (1994: 159) also dates them back to the beginnings of the 10th century.

⁶⁶ Repr. in Nicole Thierry 1983: s.p., pl. 72 d (the whole) and pl. 73 (detail); in Thérel 1984. s.p., pl. VI; in Rodley 1994: 158, n° 118 (detail little visible). Marie-Louise Thérel (1984: 47) dates this *Koimesis* of the Ayvali kilise back to 913-920, a dating shared by Rodley (1994: 157).

⁶⁷ Nicole Thierry 1983: 159. According to Jolivet-Lévy (1991: 151-154), the Ayvali kilise is not in Göreme but nine kilometers southwest of Ürgüp; it is a single church and has no Dormition in its iconographic program.



Fig. 5. *Koimesis*, fresco, 10th century, Ayvali kilise, Güllü Dere n° 4, Cappadocia.

Occupying the Western half of the north wall of the north chapel, this fresco of the Ayvali kilise, today very deteriorated and whose dating is very discussed,⁶⁸ is described in detail by Nicole Thierry, who also draws attention to the epigraphic inscriptions embedded in it. According to the analysis of this author, the focal point of the painting is the particular gestural dialog between the moribund Virgin, lying on her bed, and her son, Jesus, bowed before her to collect her soul, which is represented as a fusiform figurine wrapped with bands which comes out of her mouth in sign of having exhaled her last breath. Flying over the head of Mary, the archangel Michael comes to receive the Marian soul in his hands, covered by his own mantle.⁶⁹ After indicating the attitude and

⁶⁸ According to Lyn Rodley (1994: 157), this *Koimesis* dates from 913-920, in the Macedonian period, since the two independent twin churches, although communicated by a corridor, that make up the Ayvali kilise set, are dated by an inscription in the reign of Constantine VII. However, Jolivet-Lévy (1991: 154) recognizes that its date of execution is very controversial among the specialists, several of whom place it between the third quarter of the 11th century and even the beginning of the 14th, a date which she considers too late.

⁶⁹ The analysis of this *Koimesis* provided by Nicole Thierry is very illustrative: “Le sujet est défini par les inscriptions; à gauche de la tête de Christ: H METACTACIC TIC METPOC TOY KIPHOY, H KYMICIC (...) Le trépas de la Mère du Seigneur: La Dormition. La Vierge, vêtue du *omophorion*, est étendue au centre, ses deux bras sont posés sur elle, les mains croisées. Le lit est plat, porté par des gros pieds cylindriques. Le Christ (IC XC), situé en arrière, se penche vers sa mère pour saisir l’âme qui s’échappe de sa bouche comme un dernier souffle, ce geste du Christ, cette âme qui sort du corps, sont des images exceptionnelles pour l’iconographie traditionnelle de la Dormition. L’âme est une curieuse petite figure à corps fusiforme enveloppé de bandelettes, seul son aspect effilé la différencie des représentations habituelles semblables à celles d’un enfant dans ses langes. L’inscription accompagne le geste du Christ: PSYCHENDIKEON IN XIPI KYRIOU [...]. Les âmes des justes (sont) dans la main du Seigneur. L’ange psychopompe (AGGELOC) vole au-dessus de la tête de Marie, les deux mains tendues sous un pan de manteau pour recevoir l’âme.” (Nicole Thierry 1983: 159).

identity of some of the apostles,⁷⁰ Nicole Thierry does not forget to point out that “this Dormition is moving away from the usual iconography for its realistic nature.”⁷¹

The *Koimesis* of Sakli kilise (“hidden church”, Göreme 2 a, Cappadocia)⁷² – dated in the 11th century by most of experts,⁷³ and that occupies with the Transfiguration the west wall of the temple⁷⁴— presents on an abstract background a very simple and flat composition, with a few characters and without architectural decoration. The *Koimesis* of Yılanli kilise (“Church of the snakes”), Cappadocia,⁷⁵ exhibits a relative similarity with that of the Sakli kilise, even if the latter introduces as an exception the absolute absence of the body of the Virgin Mary, an absence that Nicole and Michel Thierry interpreted as the moment of death of the Mother of God.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ The comment made by Nicole Thierry on this Dormition of Ayvali Kilise is very interesting: “Les apôtres, seuls assistants de cette scène, sont groupés de part et d’autre du lit; on voit écrit à chaque extrémité and Y MAZITE les disciples. A la tête du lit, Jean (IONAIC) barbe et cheveux blancs, agite l’encensoir de la main droite et tient la botte à encens dans l’autre. Paul est derrière, reconnaissable à sa calvitie et à sa barbe noire. Les quatre derniers apôtres ne sont pas nommés non plus. Aux pieds de Marie se tient Pierre (ΠΕΤΡΟΣ), serrant contre lui une botte à encens (?) et avançant vers le Christ comme s’il lui parlait. Derrière lui on reconnaît André à ses cheveux hirsutes; en arrière on voit encore quatre apôtres anonymes. Ainsi, seuls Pierre et Jean sont nommés.” (Nicole Thierry 1983: 159).

⁷¹ The author goes on to say that this *Koimesis* of the Ayvali kilise “illustre le moment où le Christ saisit l’âme de sa mère pour la confier à l’ange psychopompe, cependant que Pierre l’interroge: « Qui d’entre nous a l’âme aussi blanche que Marie? » Et le Seigneur répond: « Ceux qui se gardent du péché. » Le texte de l’apocryphe assimile la Vierge aux justes, comme l’inscription de la peinture tirée du Livre de la Sagesse 3, 1: « Les âmes des justes sont dans la main du Seigneur ». On comprend bien qu’il s’agit là d’une image préférentielle des décors funéraires, le salut de Marie pouvant servir de préfiguration au sort du chrétien. Marie elle-même étant la meilleure figure d’intercession auprès du Christ-juge.” (Nicole Thierry 1983: 159).

⁷² Repr. in Coche de la Ferté 1981: 382, fig. 328 (detail of the Virgin, Christ and John).

⁷³ Stierlin 1988: 112; Jolivet-Lévy 1991: 85-87. According to Jolivet-Lévy (*Ibid.*), the whole of the pictorial decoration of the Sakli kilise in Göreme 2 a (church of St. John the Baptist) can be attributed to the middle or third quarter of the 11th century, although this researcher sees two contemporary authors in different sectors of the temple (*Ibid.*: 87).

⁷⁴ Jolivet-Lévy 1991: 86.

⁷⁵ Repr. in Nicole et Michel Thierry 1963: s.p., pl. 51 b (the whole); pl. 52 a (detail of Jesus and angel); and pl. 52 b (detail of apostles and bed). Marie-Louise Thérrel (1984: 47) states that this *Koimesis* of the Yılanli kilise is before the 10th century.

⁷⁶ In reference to this *Koimesis* of the Yılanli kilise, Nicole and Michel Thierry state: “Il s’agit d’une iconographie de la Dormition unique jusqu’à présent. La couche funèbre vide ne permet pas le doute: ce n’est pas le cercueil fermé des funérailles, qui serait plus épais (la présence de Jéphonias n’est pas un argument, car il est souvent représenté dans les Dormitions traditionnelles); ce n’est pas non plus le tombeau d’après l’assomption. C’est le moment même de la mort de la Vierge qui est illustré; Jésus vient d’arriver, suivi de l’archange Michel, et a recueilli l’âme de Marie. L’inscription, dont il ne reste que les premières lettres, ne permet pas d’expliquer cette image, qui ne répond pas aux textes connus. En Cappadoce, les représentations

In the Church of the Theotókos in El-Adra (Egypt), in Deir el-Surian (“monastery of the Syrians”), built by the Copts in the 10th century in the desert of Ouadi Natrun, 100 km far from Alexandria,⁷⁷ there is a fresco of the Dormition,⁷⁸ dated by Henri Stierlin in 980,⁷⁹ as was as the remaining frescoes of this monastic temple.⁸⁰ With a very simple composition on an abstract background, just outlined by a blue arc full of stars, symbolizing the heavenly paradise, in this Egyptian mural Mary looks asleep in her bed, flanked by a number of apostles, while her soul (such as a newborn wrapped in girdles) is held in the arms of Christ, under the watchful eye of two angels that stand as a guard of honor in two separate medallions, shaking each one a *flabellum*.⁸¹

A substantially similar framing of the *Koimesis* is observed during the 11th century in the Byzantine murals of the Balkans and Greece. So, forming part of a set of frescos of clear Constantinopolitan influence, embodied in the Hagia Sophia Cathedral in Ohrid (Republic of Macedonia),⁸² the scene of the Dormition⁸³ located on the west wall⁸⁴ and datable between 1037 and 1056,⁸⁵

de cette scène s'apparentent à l'iconographie byzantine traditionnelle. De même, la petite figure nue dans la main du Christ et le geste de l'ange du Seigneur sont des détails propres à la Dormition d'Yilanli kilise.” (Nicole and Michel Thierry 1963: 106). Marie-Louise Thérél (1984: 47) says that the figure of the Virgin in this *Koimesis* of the Yilanli kilise has been erased by rainwater.

⁷⁷ Stierlin 1988: 112.

⁷⁸ Repr. in color in Stierlin 1988: 113, fig. 100.

⁷⁹ Marie-Louise Thérél (1984: 48) dates this Dormition back to the first quarter of the 10th century, accepting the opinion of H.G.E. White, who dates it to 926-927. (*Ibid.*, note 242).

⁸⁰ Stierlin affirms that, despite the Islamic presence in Egypt, the Copts represented these frescoes (now very deteriorated) with a firm and stripped style, with incisive graphics and net colors, which reveal a quality artist. He further argues that this Syrian source of the monks could explain the close kinship between these paintings and the contemporaries of Cappadocia. (Stierlin 1988: 112).

⁸¹ Marie-Louise Thérél analyses this mural that way: “Dans un monastère syrien de la Haute-Égypte, à El-Adra, une fresque, daté du I^{er} quart du X^e siècle représente, dans l'abside nord de l'église, la Dormition de la Vierge accompagnée, peut-être, de son Assomption. L'image de Marie, étendue sur son lit, est conforme à l'image de la *Koimesis*, mais d'autres détails viennent s'y ajouter. Aux côtés du Christ qui recueille l'âme de sa Mère, deux archanges portent un flabellum tandis qu'au sommet de la conque, deux anges supportent une mandorle. Malheureusement la détérioration de la voûte ne permet pas de distinguer la figure inscrite dans la gloire. Il est vraisemblable qu'elle représentait la Vierge Marie emportée au paradis.” (Thérél 1984: 48).

⁸² According to Henri Stern (1966: 108-109), the frescoes of the cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Ohrid dating from 1037 to 1052, made by this autocephalous episcopate, erected after the defeat of Tsar Simeon of Bulgaria at the hands of Basil II (1017), favored the influence of Constantinople, since his archbishop Leon was friend of the patriarch Michael Cerularius and his ally in the fight against the primacy of Rome. For this reason he requested Constantinopolitan artists to realize these paintings.

⁸³ Repr. in Talbot Rice 1968 [1935]: 262, fig. 234.

not only marks a step forward in its technique and style,⁸⁶ but begins to assume a growing iconographic relevance⁸⁷ in the light of the theological teachings of some Eastern Church Fathers.⁸⁸ To the classic simple composition, centered around the horizontal Virgin, lying on her bed between two groups of apostles (plus the three holy bishops), and the vertical axis of Christ carrying the Mary's soul between two angels fluttering with ritual veils on their hands, this *Koimesis* of Hagia Sophiain Ohrid adds as a new feature two large clouds or alveoli in the sky, symmetrically arranged in both upper corners, each of which hosts six flying characters (the apostles).

Among the mural decorations of the church of the Dormition in Dafni near Athens, dating c. 1080, the mosaic of the Virgin stands out above the main door in the west wall of the naos.⁸⁹ Even if it should not be exaggerated, the undoubted pioneer character of this Greek mosaic *Koimesis*⁹⁰ marks a notorious doctrinal progress, in accordance with the growing cult to the Mother of God and the strengthening of an increasingly explicit and exhaustive Mariology.⁹¹

⁸⁴ According to Tania Velmans (1999: 122), among the frescoes of the naos of the church of Hagia Sophia in Ohrid with the cycle of the great liturgical feasts, only the Nativity and the Dormition of the Virgin are preserved.

⁸⁵ Henri Stern dates them from 1037 to 1052; Velmans (1999: 104) dates them to 1040; Talbot Rice (1968 [1935]: 262-265) places them c. 1050 or little before 1056.

⁸⁶ According to Talbot Rice, this Dormition of Hagia Sophia in Ohrid, despite its somber colors, exhibits an excellent drawing and its composition is balanced, dignified and well made, with a quite remarkable quality in its whole. For this reason, when considering it a great work, a true example of the best style of the mid-Byzantine monumental painting, he supposes it to be painted by a master with close ties to Constantinople. (Talbot Rice 1968 [1935]: 262-265).

⁸⁷ According to Velmans (1999: 122), by then (c. 1040) the *Koimesis* was still a little diffused subject, and since then it has become almost obligatory.

⁸⁸ According to Velmans (1999: 122), the iconography of Hagia Sophia in Ohrid plastically expresses the mystical value of the homilies of Saints Basil and John Damascene.

⁸⁹ Repr. in Nieto 1950: s.p., fig. 32. According to Charles Delvoye, the *Koimesis* that decorates the Church of the Dormition in Dafni was placed on the west wall of the naos, on the door that comes from the narthex "in the place that this subject will occupy more and more frequently." (Delvoye 1967: 232). Cf. also Velmans 1999: 124.

⁹⁰ According to Charles Diehl, the earliest example of the Dormition of Mary "is found in Daphni, where, standing above the entrance door, the series of (great) feasts" ends, as a consequence of the progressive devotion to the Virgin, whose life, drawn from the apocryphal Gospels, is increasingly illustrated from the 11th century." (Diehl 1926, Tomo II: 500).

⁹¹ Tania Velmans comments on this: "This development of the cycle of the great feasts testifies, despite its dogmatic value, a new narrative tendency. The desire to tell is a concession of a humanist type in relation to the severe laconism of the past. In Dafni is also accentuated by the presence of the story of the Childhood of Mary that decorates the narthex. The Dormition of the Virgin on the west wall of the naos, will generally retain this location in the future. In the simplified scene with Christ carrying the soul of his Mother, and the apostles gathered around the mortuary bed of Mary, three holy bishops are added: Dionysius the Areopagite, James the Lord's brother and Bishop of Jerusalem, Hierotheus and sometimes Timothy. The cycle of the

The main church of the monastery of Hosios Lukas in Phocis (Greece), whose mosaics and frescoes dating back to 1040,⁹² has in the lunettes of the crypt some scenes of the great feasts, including the Dormition.⁹³ Even in a poor state of conservation (each face has been scraped),⁹⁴ this fresco shows the traditional treatment of this Marian theme: behind the Virgin, lying on a bed, that the apostles flank by the headboard and footboard, Christ at the center holding in his arms the soul of his mother as a child, while two little angels fly over the scene in symmetrical pose between a simple architectural implant of two small buildings at both ends of the lunette.

2.1.2. The Byzantine *Koimesis* in the 12th century

Both in the small icons as in the great murals, the iconographic theme of the Dormition of Mary experienced during the 12th century in the Byzantine art a significant complication in composition and a growing narrative detail, when assuming each time with greater ease the unheard-of apocryphal stories. It is true that, by the spatial constriction imposed by their small size, some Byzantine luxurious icons of the 12th century still keep the extreme simplicity of composition, the scarcity of characters and the absence of scenery that we saw in the first icons of the 10th and 11th centuries, described at the beginning of our paper. Such a synthetic proposal in some Byzantine sumptuous works of the 12th century can be seen, for example, in the *Koimesis* in ivory from the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, and in the icon in soapstone with the twelve Great Feasts, belonging to the treasure of the Cathedral of Toledo.⁹⁵

However, the Byzantine icons of the Dormition tend to get in the 12th century a growing complexity. The *Koimesis* on the predella of a Bulgarian Icon of the Virgin of Tenderness⁹⁶ –an icon dating back to the 11th and 12th centuries, from the monastery of Zarzma, today in the Georgian Art Museum in Tblisi⁹⁷— still preserves a relative simplicity. Although incomplete, lacking a wide swath to the left this Bulgarian Dormition offers the essential guidelines, with the Virgin on a rich bed with plinth, seven pricked apostles (Peter with censer and John leaning

Life of Mary does not correspond with any canonical text but with episodes of the Proto-Gospel of Jacques and other apocryphal accounts” (Velmans 1999: 124-125).

⁹² According to Velmans (1999: 104), the mosaics and frescoes of the main church of the monastery of Hosios Lucas in Phocis, date back to c. 1040, and present a style similar to those of the church of Hagia Sophia in Ohrid, which are of the same date.

⁹³ Connor 1991: 11 and 40; Velmans 1999: 104.

⁹⁴ Repr. in Connor 1991: s.p., fig. 77.

⁹⁵ Repr. in Nieto 1950: s.p., fig. 38; in Talbot Rice 1968 (1935), fig. 423, p. 456, and in Coche de la Ferté 1981: 427, fig. 548, and p. 457, n° 548.

⁹⁶ The scenes of the twelve great liturgical feasts of the Eastern Church, including the Dormition of Mary, surround this icon on its four sides, as a frame or *predella*.

⁹⁷ Repr. in Velmans 2001, 498, fig. 237 (the whole of the icon), and p. 499, fig. 241 (Dormition).

over the chest of Mary), Christ without mandorla holding the soul of his mother, a flying angel with his hands veiled, and two simple houses on the right.

A greatest richness of narrative and doctrinal content can be seen in an icon from the Monastery of Novgorod, today in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.⁹⁸ Despite the simplicity of its structure and the absolute absence of architectural scenography, this Russian icon introduces –along with the conventional stance of Christ, Mary, the twelve Apostles and four angels hovering in the center of the scene— several interesting developments: over the usual presence of the three saint bishops, coated with cruciferous *omophorion*, there are twelve “clouds”, each of them containing an apostle, while in the upper edge of the scene two angels lead the soul of Mary into a blue semicircle, to illustrate her spiritual assumption to heaven.

The Dormition of the Virgin, dating back to the end of the 12th century or beginning of the 13th century⁹⁹ –an integral part of the iconostasis of the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai¹⁰⁰ —, also exhibits a relative complexity. With a simple layout, as in the precedent items, this Sinai icon presents the same characters and situations, including Christ without mandorla holding the soul of his mother, with the only variants to include a holy bishop, distinguishable on the left sector for his episcopal dress, and to put as urban framing two synthetic buildings, dome-shaped the one on the left, and with a triangular pediment the one on the right.¹⁰¹

The exuberance of the *Koimesis* increases significantly in the Byzantine mosaics and frescoes of the 12th century. This can be seen in the monastic church of the Panagia Phorbiotissa in Asinou, Nicosia (Cyprus), whose paintings were executed in 1105-1106 by anonymous Constantinopolitan artists,¹⁰² commissioned and sponsored by the *magistros* Nikephoros under the reign of the emperor Alexios I Komnenos.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Repr. in Alpatov 1976: s.p., fig. 21 (detail) and fig. 22 (the whole). In this *Koimesis*, with a simple composition and without architectures, one observes Christ, Mary, the apostles and the holy bishops, as well as twelve clouds, each with an angel and an apostle, plus four angels in the center, and above a semicircle with angels in the “entrance”, representing heaven.

⁹⁹ Weitzmann 1980c: 222, n° 57.

¹⁰⁰ Repr. in Weitzmann, Chatzidakis, Miatev and Radojic 1968: s.p., pl. 35 (in color); in Weitzmann, Chatzidakis, Radojic 1980b: 57, fig. 57; and in Wharton 1988: 78, fig. 3.17.

¹⁰¹ Kurt Weitzmann states about this *Koimesis*: “Outwardly the general impression is of greater calm. The turbulent treatment of the draperies is abandoned in favor of a much more simplified approach. However, the emotional element is not only retained, but has, in fact, been intensified through the coloristic means of a freer brush technique. [...] Instead of the traditional emphasis on strong local colors, the painter of the Dormition preferred subdued colors such as olive green in sensitive nuances and tones; these, by means of the symbolic values associated with colors, help bring out the funereal significance of the scene.” (Weitzmann 1980b: 24).

¹⁰² Velmans 1999: 137-138.

¹⁰³ According to Charles Delvoye, “Les fresques exécutées dans l’église de la Panagia Phorbiotissa à Asinou in 1105-1106, grâce a la générosité du magistre Nicéphore, présentent le grand intérêt d’être les seules oeuvres de la peinture byzantine du début du XII siècle sûrement



Fig. 6. *Koimesis*, fresco, 1105-1106, Panagia Phorbiotissa, Asinou (Cyprus).

Among these frescoes of the Panagia Phorbiotissa in Asinou, highly praised by some specialists,¹⁰⁴ the Dormition, painted on the west wall of the nave,¹⁰⁵ reflects the traditional compositional structure: the two groups of apostles surrounding the luxurious bed of Mary (whose head is oriented right side) and two saint bishops coated with episcopal clothing with black crosses escort Christ (without mandorla, with a simple cruciferous nimbus) carrying the soul of the Virgin under the short effulgent arc (the open heaven), while two flying angels are disposed to receive in their hands the Mary's soul. A relative novelty in this

datée.” (Delvoye 1967: 243). According to Lafontaine-Dosogne (1987: 161-162), the pictorial decoration of the Panagia Phorvriotissa of Asinou was conceived in 1105-1106 by the magister Nicephorus, high official and probably general of Alexis I (such frescos were repainted in part and even modified in 14th century, although many conserves their original state, Among them some Great Feasts). The same author states: “la beauté des visages, la variété très étudiée des attitudes, la façon de souligner par le drapé les hanches et les cuisses rappellent Daphni, avec moins de grâce mais plus de vigueur. La douleur s’exprime plus fortement dans la Dormition de la Vierge —dans cette fresque apparait pour la première fois dans la peinture d’église, semble-t-il, le motif des femmes en déploration dans les baies d’un édifice.” (Lafontaine-Dosogne 1987: 162).

¹⁰⁴ Not a few experts have highlighted the serious beauty of these Asinou frescoes. Charles Delvoye, for exemple, says: “elles montrent un goût pour la sveltesse des silhouettes, la vivacité des mouvements et une harmonieuse élégance des formes qui les apparente aux mosaïques de Saint-Démétrius (ou Saint-Michel) de Kiev.” (Delvoye 1967: 243). On the other hand Annabel Jane Wharton maintains that the frescoes of the Panagia Phorbiotissa in Asinou were made with grave simplicity, and their main characters have some monumental presence in front of the flat painting, while the secondary figures are smaller and less numerous, although all have an expressed emotional expressiveness, as manifested by the fact that “the gestures of the apostles in the *Koimesis* are evocative of intense emotion, but except for tragic, linearbrear lines, the figures are only decorously dramatic in their expressions of grief.” (Wharton 1988: 78-79).

¹⁰⁵ Repr. in Guillou 1974: s.p., pl. VIII (color); in Wharton 1988: 78, fig. 3.17; in color in Evans, Wixom (eds.) 1997: 112; in Velmans 1999: 138, fig. 121.

mural of Asinou is showed in the presence of two tearful women (these are the same two ladies, although duplicated in two different circumstances), observable through the windows of the two buildings, located *en pendant* on both sides of the painting.



Fig. 7. *Koimesis* (left half) fresco, c. 12th century, Panagia Mavriotissa, Kastoria (Greece).

Among the vigorous and expressive frescoes¹⁰⁶ of the monastic church of the Panagia Mavriotissa in Kastoria (Macedonia, Greece), whose dating is very controversial,¹⁰⁷ the *Koimesis*¹⁰⁸ located on the west wall offers an interesting set of developments on the standard schema. At the head of the sumptuously embroidered bed of Mary, dressed in luxurious clothes, all the apostles (chained by Peter, leaning on the bed) are gathered, with the exception of John and Paul, who, bowing on the chest of the Virgin and hugging his feet, respectively, met in their usual place their traditional role. Without mandorla of glory and with a simple cross-shaped nimbus, Christ lifts to his left (the painting's right) the soul of his mother, whom two little angels come to pick up with their hands covered

¹⁰⁶ According to Annabel Jane Wharton (1988: 115), the *Koimesis* of the Panagia Mavriotissa in Kastoria –dated by her to the 11th century, considering it by regional authorship— possesses an intense expressiveness, founded in the strong contrast of colors, including the extensive use of black, and the dramatic exaggeration of characters and gestures. These features, according to the author, reveal the intention to exaggerate the dramatic style of the murals of Hagia Sophia in Ohrid, which has led some to think that the painter was a local artist, who had worked with the master of paintings of the Archbishop's cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Ohrid.

¹⁰⁷ Dated for some back to the 11th century (Wharton 1988: 115), and by others to the 12th century, Tania Velmans, in contrast, following other experts (which she mentions), dated it to 1295, by adding besides that these frescoes of the Despotate of Epirus, in the north of Greece, in a rather provincial style, present a program that usually takes into account the iconographic innovations of the time. (Velmans 1999: 201-202).

¹⁰⁸ Repr. in Wharton 1988: 114, fig. 4.16 (detail) and fig. 4.17 (diagram of the whole); and in Velmans 1999: 225, pl. 86 (only the left half part of the fresco).

by ritual veils. Behind Paul, himself counterbalancing in the right sector with the ten grouped apostles, a pleiad of great archangels, luxuriously decked out in imperial dresses and carrying sticks, serve as a guard of honor to the dying *Theotókos*. In addition at the bottom of this fresco of the Panagia Mavriotissa of Kastoria the architectural scenography stands out, composed of four buildings, one of which frames the figures of two outwardly holy bishops, coated with a cruciferous *omophorion*, while two other houses shelter three women on the left sector and two other women on the right side. If that is not enough, the scene of the angel with a sword cutting off the arms of the defiler Jew is also included in the center of the bottom edge, which implies in this fresco the synchronicity of two different times, mixing in a single composition the successive episodes of the Virgin's death and the transfer of her coffin in the funeral procession for burial.

Among the frescoes in the church of St. Nikolas Kasnitzes in Kastoria (Macedonia, Greece), the iconographic program manifests as a whole a certain irregularity,¹⁰⁹ and whose Mannerist style some experts related to the Nerezi *Koimesis*,¹¹⁰ frescoed at the end of the 12th century (c. 1191),¹¹¹ offers a compositional scheme: all characters (two groups of apostles, plus two bishops), and some scenic elements (two buildings) are arranged in symmetrical balance around the coordinate of Jesus bearing the soul of Mary, and the abscissa of the Virgin, with the head facing right side of the painting. The pair of flying angels to the left of Christ to receive the soul of Mary in their veiled hands is the only element without an analogous symmetric reference, two angels that in any case maintain a certain compositional correspondence (a “virtual symmetry”) with the epigraphic inscriptions (*IC XC / H KOIMHCIC*)¹¹² inserted to the right of the Redeemer.

As part of the admirable mosaics that decorate the Martorana Church (St. Mary of the Admiral) in Palermo, made almost surely by Greek artists,¹¹³ the Dormition in mosaic,¹¹⁴ performed between 1143 and 1151 (as well as the

¹⁰⁹ According to Wharton, the disarticulated surfaces of the church of St. Nicholas Kasnitzes in Kastoria led to a continuous narrative, not architecturally conceived. For example, since the *Koimesis* was not centered on the west wall above the entrance of the nave, but being shifted to the left to make room for a smaller Transfiguration, perhaps led the artist to reverse the normal position of the Virgin, to reinforce the movement of the eyes from left to right. To the east the praying virgins appear in the apse, while in the pediment the Deisis appears. (Wharton 1988: 122).

¹¹⁰ According to Wharton (1988: 123), the paintings of this church of St. Nicholas Kasnitzes in Kastoria are related to those of Nerezi, by their elongated figures, with dramatically delineated features, being independent of the plane on which they act.

¹¹¹ Repr. in Coche de la Ferté 1981: 390, fig. 372; in Wharton 1988: 122, fig. 4.21.

¹¹² *I(ησού)C X(ριστό)C / H KOIMHCIC*, whose translation is “Jesus Christ” / “The Dormition”.

¹¹³ According to Henri Stern (1966: 112), the mosaics of the Martorana of Palermo (including the *Koimesis* in one of the secondary vaults) have been attributed to Greek artists, such as most of the mosaics of the Siculo-Norman group.

¹¹⁴ Repr. in Diehl 1926, Tome II: 551, fig. 261; in Lazarev 1967, s.p., fig. 358; in Delvoye 1967; 346, fig. 130; in Talbot Rice, 1968 [1935]: 213, fig. 189; in Schug-Wille 1969: 193.

remaining mosaics of this temple)¹¹⁵ in one of the secondary vaults, has been the subject of countless praise, not only for its antiquity¹¹⁶ and its relative pioneering nature,¹¹⁷ but also for its convincing expressiveness¹¹⁸ and its narrative profusion.¹¹⁹ Also here the layout is arranged in perfect symmetry: seven apostles stand at the foot of the bed, headed by Paul, to whom four other apostles and three holy Bishops, chaired by Peter, shaking a censer, respond at the bedside. Both groups keep a perfect harmony with the two great angels who fly in the center and with the two buildings erected on the left and right of the painting, with the only difference that solely the house on the right is inhabited by two women in tears. In the center we see once again the foreseeable plot of the horizontal Mary lying on the bed, the vertical Jesus lifting up in his arms the soul of his mother, and John leaning his head on the Mary's chest.

Among the interesting frescoes of the church of the Transfiguration in the Spas-Mirozhsky monastery in Pskov (Russia),¹²⁰ dating before 1156,¹²¹ the *Koimesis*¹²² exhibits a composition in rigid symmetry. Behind the luxurious bed of Mary, of embroidered fabrics, Christ raises left the soul of his mother (as a

¹¹⁵ This final date of 1151 is shared by Delvoye (1967: 346); Schug-Wille (1969: 193) and Talbot Rice (1968: 313).

¹¹⁶ According to Charles Delvoye (1967: 237), the Martorana *Koimesis* “est une des plus anciennes, après celle de Daphni, dans la peinture murale et aussi une des plus dépouillées”. In turn, Schug-Wille (1969: 193) argues that this Palermo Dormition dates after that of Dafni, the oldest interpretation of this subject on a grand scale.

¹¹⁷ According to Schug-Wille (1969: 193), this *Koimesis* of the Martorana, for its harmony between figures and architecture, is very close to the schematic conventions of the illuminators of manuscripts on the same subject, so it played an important role in the diffusion of this scene in the West, almost never painted until then.

¹¹⁸ Velmans comments on this: “Among the other great festivities [represented in the mosaics of the Martorana of Palermo], in the Dormition of the Virgin a new sensitivity emerges. The apostles, leaning on the body of Mary, are really saddened and the two women, added, make eloquent gestures.” (Velmans 1999: 132).

¹¹⁹ Charles Delvoye describes this Marian painting of the Martorana: “To the left and to the right are the apostles who, according to a tradition attested by St. John Damascene, were united by three holy bishops, recognizable by their cruciferous *omophorion*: St. Dionysius Areopagite, first bishop of Athens, Hierotheus and Timotheus, first bishop of Ephesus. To the head Saint Peter balances the censer. On the other side Saint Paul rests his head against the Virgin's feet while Saint John, already old, puts his on the bed of Mary. This mosaic differs from that of Daphni by the introduction of architectural backgrounds according to a motif found in miniatures from the first half of the 12th century. In front of the building on the right there are two women who mourn.” (Delvoye 1967: 257-258).

¹²⁰ According to Velmans (1999: 139), the Church of the Savior of the Transfiguration in the monastery of Pskov has an especially archaic iconographic program, although with new themes and avant-garde details.

¹²¹ Lazarev (1967: 227) dates it to c. 1156, and considers these frescoes with a similar style to those of the church of St. Panteleimon of Nerezi. Tania Velmans (1999: 139) holds the same date.

¹²² Repr. in Lazarev 1966: 247, fig. 46.

newborn wrapped in blankets), flanked by two archangels who do honor guard to him covered with courtly robes, while the other two angels are hovering the Savior with their hands veiled with large cloths. The apostles and three bishops, with their characteristic ecclesiastical dress, are concentrated in two groups at both ends of the bed, with Peter shaking a censer in the header, in balance with the group of disciples at the feet of Mary, headed by the reverent Paul, while the gray-haired John leans over the chest of the Virgin. Culminating the strong symmetry in both ends of the fresco, two buildings shelter each two plaintive women.



Fig. 8
Fig. 8. *Koimesis*, mosaic, 1143-1151, Martorana, Palermo.



Fig. 9
Fig. 9. *Koimesis*, fresco, before 1156, monastery of Spas-Mirozhsky, Pskov (Russia).

Among the frescoes in the church of the Panagia Arakiotissa (Panagia tou Arakos) in Lagoudera (Cyprus), painted in 1192 under the sponsorship of the donor Leo Autentis,¹²³ the Dormition depicted in the west lunette¹²⁴ accentuates the expressiveness of all characters,¹²⁵ including the customary three bishops,

¹²³ According to Velmans, “The decoration of the church of Panagia Arakiotissa (Panagia ton Arakon) in Cyprus (1192), executed one year after the occupation of the island by the Crusaders, has been preserved almost entirely. [...] Among the great festivities, the Nativity shows Mary as a sweet and thoughtful young woman. It appears thus in almost all scenes, with a fresh incarnation, as if through its youth and beauty it is sought to move the viewer.” (Velmans 1999: 173). This date of execution of the *Koimesis* (1192) is also confirmed by Henry Maguire (1996: 64-65).

¹²⁴ Repr. in Maguire 1996: 64, fig. 57.

¹²⁵ According to Velmans, “Even in the Dormition, in the western lunette, [Mary] is represented with that same freshness in the face, while the apostles, in turn, appear deeply grieved. One of them is hiding his face with his hand, St. John leans over the chest of the Theotókos, Christ surrounded by a mandorla of light, looks at her and carries her soul in the form of a small child, in his arms.” (Velmans 1999: 174).

coated with their *omophorion* with black crosses.¹²⁶ However, this Cypriot mural brings no novelty to the already traditional symmetrical arrangement of its characters and architectures.

2.2. The Dormition of Mary in Western art of the 10th-12th centuries

2.2.1. The Dormition in the Western miniature

Over the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries the Byzantine iconographic theme of the *Koimesis* was assumed relatively often in Western Europe, where it was adopted as an effective catechetical and devotional stimulus, although adapting and reinterpreting it with not a few and significant variants. Such Western reinterpretations were, at first, verified in numerous miniatures of illustrated codices and, somewhat later, albeit rather less assiduously, in some reliefs of porticoes or capitals, and in some mural frescoes. These Eastern iconographic models were introduced in Europe through the quick resource of copying again and again in the monastic and palatine scriptoria the icons and miniatures from the Byzantine world. As Otto Demus points out, even though there were some patterns in the Italian manuscripts of late antiquity, the theologians and artists of the monastery of Reichenau and other Carolingian *scriptoria*, responsible for producing imperial manuscripts, copied and adapted avidly the new Byzantine iconographic formulas of the life of Christ.¹²⁷ However, what Demus affirmed about the Carolingian *scriptoria* is extrapolable to other Western early medieval *scriptoria*, located beyond the strict temporal and territorial limits of the specific Carolingian domain.

As it was to be expected, in those Western subsidiaries miniatures the versions of the Dormition adopted unambiguously the simple and synthetic structure that we observed in Byzantine counterparts (icons and miniatures). Such a simplification of composition and story-telling of the *Koimesis* is observed in most of the Western miniatures, such as, for example, in the Dormitions of the of St. Aethelwold Benedictional (975-980) at the British Library in London,¹²⁸ the Pontifical of Archbishop Robert (c. 980-990, quite similar to Aethelwold's) at the Bibliothèque Municipale de Rouen,¹²⁹ the Sacramentary of Verdun, Paris,¹³⁰ the

¹²⁶ According to Henry Maguire, the inexpressiveness and rigidity of the three bishops, one of whom identifies as James, the “brother” of Jesus, first bishop of Jerusalem (1996: 64), contrast with the tearful and saddened apostles. (*Ibid.*: 64-65).

¹²⁷ Demus 1970: 89-90. As an example of this Western practice of copying the Byzantine, Demus sets the Dormition of the Cod. Lat. 4452, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich, c. 11th century.

¹²⁸ Dormition of the Virgin, miniature of the St. Aethelwold Benedictional, London, British Library, ms Add. 49598, fol. 102v. Repr. in Thérél 1984: s.p., pl. VIII, fig. 11; in Schiller 1980, Band 4,2: 354, fig. 604.

¹²⁹ Dormition of the Virgin, miniature of the Pontifical of Archbishop Robert (c. 980-990), Bibliothèque Municipale, Rouen, fol. 54v. Repr. in color in Bango Torviso 2003: 219, fig. 208. This Rouen miniature, made in the Winchester scriptorium, is very similar in structure and

Gospels of Bernulf (c. mid-11th century) at the Utrecht Archbishop's Museum,¹³¹ the Prumer Gospels of Manchester (2nd quarter of 11th century),¹³² the St. Erentruder Pericopes (c. 1140), today in Munich,¹³³ the Berthold of Regensburg Pericopes (2nd half of 11th century), New York,¹³⁴ the Regensburg-Prufening's Psalter in Munich (c. 1180)¹³⁵ or the Prumer Antiphony (12th century).¹³⁶

All these images in European illuminated codices exhibit the same conventional structure of Byzantine ivories. Mary lies horizontally on her deathbed, parallel to the bottom edge of the folio, except in the St. Erentruder Gospels, while –contrary to the classic Byzantine posture— the head of the bed is oriented left of the painting, except in the Bamberg Troparium et Sequentarium, as well as in the Rhineland Pericopes in Paris, in whose death and funeral's scenes the head of the bed is oriented right of the folio.

As in the Byzantine *Koimesis*, also in these Western miniatures Christ almost always is located in the center behind the deathbed, in an attitude of receiving in his arms and raising left the soul of his mother. However, there are not a few exceptions to this convention, as you can see in the two scenes from the Rhineland Pericopes in Paris: at the scene of the death in this Parisian codex, Christ appears half-length at the top of a semicircle (heaven), extending the arms to receive the Mary's soul, which two angels offer to him standing on the ground according to an opposite approach to the apocryphal tradition and to the Byzantine iconography; in the subsequent scene of funeral, Christ is shown on the same arc of circle, but now as a static and expressionless bust. On the other hand, in the St. Aethelwold Devotional and the Bamberg Troparium et Sequentarium the person of Christ, rather than manifested clearly through his entire body, is suggested just using an open hand, which, on the upper edge of the scene, emerges from a luminous nimbus, ready to receive the spirit of Mary in her way up to heaven.

decoration to that of the Benedictional of St. Aethelwold (produced in the same scriptorium), but, unlike the latter, it only represents the Virgin in her bed with four women (not three) around her, obviating also the representation of the apostles and the angels.

¹³⁰ Dormition of the Virgin, miniature of the Sacramentary of Verdun, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, ms lat. 18005, fol. 118v. Repr. in Thérel 1984: s.p., pl. IX, fig. 14.

¹³¹ Repr. Toscano 1960, vol. 2: 182, fig. 150; in Schiller 1980, Band 4,2: 352, fig. 599.

¹³² Repr. in Schiller 1980, Band 4,2: 353, fig. 602.

¹³³ Repr. in *Ibid.*: 353, fig. 603.

¹³⁴ Repr. in *Ibid.*: 353, fig. 601.

¹³⁵ Repr. in *Ibid.*: 357, fig. 612.

¹³⁶ Repr. in *Ibid.*: 357, fig. 612.



Fig. 10

Fig. 10. *Dormition of Mary*, miniature, St. Aethelwold Benedictinal, 975-980. British Library, London



Fig. 11

Fig. 11. *Dormition of Mary*, miniature, Bernulf Gospels, Reichenau-Umkreiss, mid-11th century, Archbishop Museum, Utrecht

In Western miniatures the soul of the Virgin is often depicted under the conventional aspect of a newborn wrapped in girdles, almost always larger than in its Byzantine counterparts, although it rarely manifests itself in the form of a bust of a woman bust more or less developed (as in the Verdun Sacramentary, in the Bernulf Gospels, in the St. Erentruder Pericopes, in the Gospels of the Padua cathedral, in the Bamberg Sequentarium et Troparium and in the Pericopes of emperor Heinrich II), or even under the guise of an adult woman, on a small scale (as seen in the Regensburg-Prüfening Psalter and in the Rhineland Pericopes in Paris).

In the Western miniatures the number, location, and attitudes of the apostles do not always respond to the Byzantine canon. It is true that some Western illuminated images retain many of the essential elements of the well-known model of Byzantium, in particular its distribution into two symmetrical groups of six individuals (even though they generally discard the poses and the actions of Peter, Paul and John), as can be seen in the Bernulf Gospels, the Verdun Sacramentary, the Prümer Gospels, the Bamberg Troparium, the Gospels of Padua and the Pericopes of Heinrich II. However, in many other cases, the number of apostles is restricted drastically, almost disappearing, their distribution in space is verified without a pre-established order and the pruritus of symmetry is abandoned, as can be seen in the St. Aethelwold Benedictinal, in the St. Erentruder Pericopes, in the Pericopes of Berthold of Regensburg, in the Regensburg-Prüfening Psalter and in the Rhenish Pericopes of Paris.

If that were not enough, in the Western miniatures the attitudes of the apostles are more static, and expressionless than in Byzantine art, to the point of leaving almost always the traditional gestures of Peter, Paul and John, embracing Mary's head or feet, leaning on her chest, swinging the censer, carrying the palm, singing canticles or carrying the bunk or the corpse of Mary. The only exceptions to such

apostolic passivity are those exhibited by the Verdun Sacramentary, the Pericopes of Heinrich II and the Rhenish Pericopes of Paris (funeral scene), in which John is observed swinging a censer and other apostles carrying processional crosses, while in the case of Verdun one of the disciples holds a hyssop in his vessel of holy water.



Fig. 12

Fig. 12. *Dormition of Mary*, miniature, Prümer Gospels, 2nd quarter of the 11th century, Manchester



Fig. 13

Fig. 13. *Dormition of Mary*, miniature, Pericopes of Heinrich II, c. 1007-1012. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich

The angels experience a similar modification in the Western miniatures. Except the Pericopes of Berthold of Regensburg, where only an angel appears, and the Rhenish Pericopes of Paris, where none of them attends the Virgin's funeral, in almost all the Western miniatures two, four or six angels appear flying almost always in symmetry, even if they sometimes flutter in uninhibited disorder (St. Erentruder Pericopes, and Prümer Antiphonary) or even stay standing on the ground (Rhenish Pericopes of Paris, in the scene of death).

Apart from the inevitable bed, coffin or sarcophagus (as the case may be), domestic furniture and urban-architectural scenography disappear in most of these Western miniatures: however, such scenery is preserved in the relatively similar Dormitions of the Gospels of Bernulf and Padua (hosted under a "classic" construction, standing on columns and crowned with a triangular pediment), the St. Aethelwold Benedictional (framed by a heavy round arch), the Berthold of Regensburg Pericopes (whose transit/burial is staged under a vast semicircular arch, topped by three suggestive buildings with towers) an, very prominently in Gospels Prümer (whose Dormition is surrounded by walls and buildings with towers, which identified primarily the earthly Jerusalem, where the death of the Virgin takes place, in the second instance could constitute also a symbolic reference to the heavenly Jerusalem, where Jesus leads through his angels the soul of his mother).

2.2.2. The Dormition of Mary in Western monumental art

By comparison with the rich compositional complexity, the doctrinal, symbolic depth and the extensive chronological and territorial diffusion of the mural representations of the *Koimesis* in the Byzantine world, the monumental images of the Dormition in the European West exhibit, on the contrary, an extreme structural simplicity, a notorious significant poverty and a very little spread in time and space. In fact, outside of the mural works (mostly mosaics) made in Italy by Byzantine artists, such as those inserted in the already analyzed Church of Martorana in Palermo, we do not know in Europe from 10th to 12th centuries some significant parietal paintings on the death of Mary: a very simple fresco with this subject (c. 872-882) in the church of St. Mary of Egypt in Rome, built on the structure of the Roman temple of Portuno,¹³⁷ serves as the only exception to this rule.



Fig. 14. *Dormition of Mary*, stucco, 10th century. San Pietro al Monte, Civate

With a somewhat more comforting result, at least five examples of sculptural images of the Dormition of Mary in churches of Italy and France come to compensate to some extent the great European pictorial vacuum on the subject under analysis. A relief in stucco in the temple of San Pietro al Monte in Civate (Lecco, Italy) outstands for its old age (10th century): this relief represents the supreme moment in which Christ comes along to the now deceased Virgin to take her shrouded corpse, located on the bed in dynamic obliquity:¹³⁸ surrounded by two groups of sad apostles, Jesus, at the foot of the burial bed, blesses his mother with his right hand, holding a closed book in his left hand; two angels, fluttering in the right sector over Christ and the deceased, transfer the Mary's

¹³⁷ Repr. in Schiller 1980, Band 4,2: 377, fig. 657.

¹³⁸ Repr. Toscano 1960, vol. 2: 212, fig. 180; in Schiller 1980. Band 4,2: 362, fig. 624.

soul, represented as a girl's head, into heaven in their veiled hands; a synthetic architectural scenery fills the bottom of the left sector, denoting Mary's house in Jerusalem and the city of Jerusalem itself.

Interesting are also two reliefs of the 12th century, very similar in composition and complementary for the concept, carved in the balcony of the Abbey of Santa Maria in Vezzolano (Piedmont, Italy): the first of them, dedicated to the burial of Mary,¹³⁹ presents the twelve apostles arranged in a circle at the moment of introducing the Virgin into the sarcophagus, with expressions of controlled grief; the second relief, dedicated to the subsequent resurrection and bodily assumption of the Mother of God,¹⁴⁰ depicts the scene in which the angels, after waking Mary from the dream of death, begin to lift her body to lead it to paradise.

The tympanum of the parish church of Notre-Dame-des-Anges in Cabestany (Roussillon, France), dating back to the 2nd half of the 12th century,¹⁴¹ represents in a tight structure various episodes of the death of the Virgin: in the left corner her resurrection by the power of Christ is appreciated; in the right angle one observes her bodily assumption into heaven, led by the angels in a mandorla; in the middle of the tympanum the Redeemer, in an attitude of blessing with an open book in hand, is accompanied by his mother, figured in the classic pose of the *Virgo Orans*, in a clear reference to her Assumption in body and soul into heaven.

The tympanum of the west portico of the Notre-Dame cathedral in Senlis (Oise, France),¹⁴² c. 1170,¹⁴³ whose central part occupies the enthronement of Mary in heaven, has in its lower register (lintel) two scenes that are complementary: to the left (very damaged), the burial of the mother of God, with the apostles in attitude to introduce her corpse in the sarcophagus, while two flying angels transfer her infant's soul to heaven;¹⁴⁴ to the right, the resurrection of the Virgin,¹⁴⁵ with six solicitous angels in dynamic action, occupied in raising and leading to heaven the resurrected body of the *Deipara*.

Finally, the tympanum from the church of Saint-Pierre-le-Puellier, c. 1175, now in the Bourges Museum,¹⁴⁶ is divided into two registers, separated by a heavy architectural structure, articulated by round arches: the lower register –by far the most extensive, although today very destroyed— is dedicated to various

¹³⁹ Repr. in Toscano 1960, vol. 2: 206, fig. 174.

¹⁴⁰ Repr. in *Ibid.*: 214, fig. 182.

¹⁴¹ Repr. in Therel 1984: s.p., pl. XII, fig. 21.

¹⁴² Repr. in *Ibid.*: s.p., pl. I, fig. 1.

¹⁴³ Although considered proto-Gothic, we consider here the tympanum of Senlis (c. 1170), because it is within the chronological period of the 10th-12th centuries that we have fixed as temporal limits to this article

¹⁴⁴ Repr. in Schiller 1980, Band 4,2: 365, fig. 629; in Therel 1984: s.p., pl. I, fig. 1.

¹⁴⁵ Repr. in Schiller 1980, Band 4,2: 364, fig. 627; in Therel 1984: s.p., pl. I, fig. 1; in Toscano 1960, vol. 2: 208, fig. 176 (scene of angels carrying the body of Mary).

¹⁴⁶ Repr. in Schiller 1980, Band 4,2: 362, fig. 625.

episodes of the Dormition of Mary; ¹⁴⁷ the upper register is divided into two scenes, which include the Burial of the Virgin, to the left, and on the right, his bodily Assumption into heaven, wrapped in a mandorla, driven by two great flying angels. ¹⁴⁸

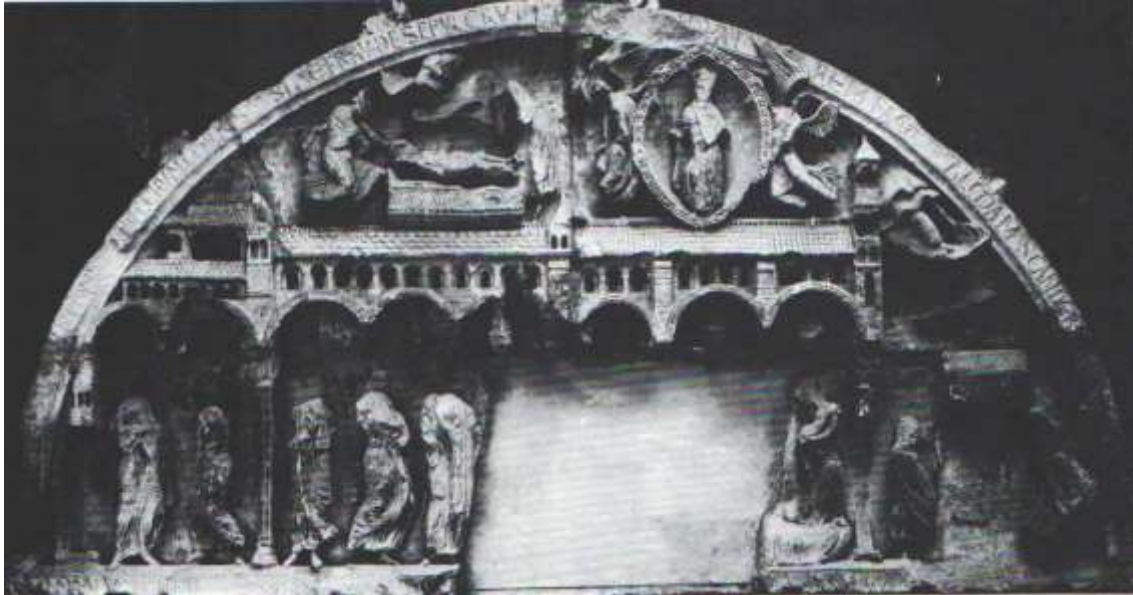


Fig. 15. *Dormition of Mary*, tympanum from the church of Saint-Pierre-le-Puellier, c. 1175, Museum of Bourges

¹⁴⁷ Marie-Louise Thérel analyses the lower sector of this tympanum in these terms: Les images groupées en deux registres, sur le bas-relief de Saint-Pierre-le-Puellier, illustrent le récit d'un transitus: le pseudo-Mélon vraisemblablement; leur signification est explicitée par des inscriptions gravées tout autour du monument. Sous un complexe architectural qui évoque une église en coupe longitudinale, deux personnages se tiennent debout, à l'angle inférieur gauche; cette scène est désignée par l'inscription: PALMAM VICTRICI FERT ANGELVS: elle représente la remise du *brabéion* par l'archange Michel à Marie. L'image centrale, disposée sous les six arcades du monument, a été mutilée, mais les personnages conservés aux extrémités permettent d'identifier la scène et de rétablir l'inscription qui la désigne: HIC GENITRI(cis) DES(ide)RATUS (animam) MATRIS DEI FERT. Elle représentait donc la Dormition de Marie. Deux personnages, à gauche, s'avancent vers un troisième, Jean peut-être, qui accueille les apôtres et les introduit dans la chambre auprès du lit de Marie dont on aperçoit, à droite, la partie inférieure du corps. Debout au pied de ce lit, un ange tend ses mains voilées pour recevoir, des mains du Christ, l'âme de la Vierge. Le dernier compartiment de ce registre représente le transport, par deux apôtres, du cercueil de la Vierge pareil à une châsse, au-dessus duquel un ange, ailes déployées, figure « les milices angéliques portées par les nuées ». La trace d'une silhouette évoque le geste de Jéphonias essayant de renverser ce cercueil.” (Thérel 1984: 58-59).

¹⁴⁸ Marie-Louise Thérel describes thus the upper sector of the tympanum of Saint-Pierre-le-Puellier: “Deux scènes se partagent le sommet du tympan: à gauche, l'ensevelissement de Marie par deux apôtres tandis qu'un ange encense le corps de la Vierge; à cette image correspond l'inscription: IMPONITVR PVLCHRVM CORPVS SINE FRAVDE SEPVLCHRVM. Enfin, à droite, Marie est emportée au ciel dans une gloire par deux anges. Deux inscriptions, l'une sur le bord droit de la base du tympan, l'autre au-dessus de cette image, précisent le sens de cette scène: CORPVS MATRIS DEI FERTVR AD COELVM ET IESVS AD PATREM FECIT ALMAM SCANDERE MATREM. Il s'agit donc bien de l'assomption corporelle de la Vierge.” (Thérel 1984: 59).

3. Iconographic analysis of the Dormitions of the 10th-12th centuries

After this long journey through texts and images, it is time already to bring to light the direct impact that the three apocryphal writings already mentioned could have exerted on the Byzantine and Western images of the Dormition analyzed here, according to the purpose of trying to show that the descriptive details of the various paintings explicitly reflect one or the other of the narrative details of these apocrypha. In this vein, we can fearlessly state that each element of this persistent narrative structure displayed in the chosen works of art draws directly from the apocryphal sources or from some theological commentary derived from them, as we shall try to highlight later.

In the context of the conventional iconographic ordering of the early medieval *Koimesis*, an element that excels in the first instance is the situation of Mary, who, covered with dark dresses, usually lie (almost always with her eyes closed) on a luxurious bed, adorned with rich embroidered fabrics. All of this is in tune with what Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea indicates: “*Tunc beata Maria lavit se et induit se sicut regina et exspectabat adventum filii sui, sicut promiserat ei.*”¹⁴⁹

The attitude of the apostles surrounding the Virgin’s bed is due to the fulfillment of the promise made by Jesus to his mother at her request, in the sense of being accompanied during her death through her own son, to take personal charge of her soul,¹⁵⁰ and by his twelve disciples to guard her, to say her goodbye and to comfort her.¹⁵¹ For this purpose, the Lord, taking every one of the apostles, the living and the already dead under the martyrdom, from the farthest corners of the earth, made them come miraculously on bright clouds to the house of Mary. Thus Pseudo-John the Theologian points out the miraculous presence of the apostles next to the deathbed of Mary:

¹⁴⁹ “Then the blessed virgin Mary cleaned herself and adorned herself like a queen and remained waiting for the arrival of her Son, in accordance with his promise.” (Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, V: 643-644).

¹⁵⁰ “Among the many things that the mother inquired of her son during the time that preceded the Passion of the Lord are those concerning her death, about which she began to ask him in these terms: « O most dear son, I pray to your Holiness that, when it is time for my soul to leave the body, let me know it three days in advance; and then you, dear Son, take charge of her in the company of your angels ».” (Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, I: 641).

¹⁵¹ “Then [Mary] began to pray in this way: « My Lord Jesus Christ, who by your extreme goodness you were pleased to be begotten by me, hear my voice and send me your apostle John so that his sight may give me the first fruits of joy. Send me also your remaining apostles, those who have already flown to you and those who are still in this life, wherever they may be, so that, upon seeing them again, I may bless your name, always praiseworthy. I feel encouraged because you take care of your servant in every thing ».” (Pseudo-John the Theologian, V: 578). On the other hand, Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea indicates: “*Dixit eis beata Maria: « Ego filium meum rogavi, antequam sustineret passionem, ut ipse et vos essetis ad obitum meum; et annuit mihi hoc donum. Unde sciatis quod die crastina erit transitus meus. ».*” (Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, X: 646).

And the Holy Spirit said to the apostles: “Come all of you on the wings of the clouds from the [last] ends of the earth, and gather in the holy city of Bethlehem to assist the Mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is in shock: Peter from Rome, Paul from Tiberia, Thomas from the center of India, Jacques from Jerusalem.”¹⁵²

And later this same author completes the episode:

Also Marc, still alive, came from Alexandria along with others, [coming], as has been said, for all countries. Peter, snatched by a cloud, was in the midst of heaven and earth, sustained by the Holy Spirit, while the other apostles were also caught up in the clouds to meet together with Peter. And so, in this way, as we have said, were coming all at once by the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵³

In almost all the Dormitions analyzed here the apostles surround the head and the feet of the deathbed of the Messiah’s Mother, in an attitude of prayer and veneration toward her, translating this way visually the apocryphal story:

Afterwards we entered [the apostles] in the place where the mother of our God was and, prostrate in act of worship, we said: “Don’t be afraid or afflicted. The Lord God, to whom you gave birth, will get you out of this world gloriously”. And she, rejoicing in God her Savior, incorporated herself on the bed and said to the apostles: “Now I believe that our Lord and Master comes from the heaven, to whom I want to contemplate, and that I have to get out of this life in the same way with which I have seen you coming here.”¹⁵⁴

Or, as expressed in the third legendary author:

¹⁵² Pseudo-John the Theologian, XII: 581. In the same way John of Thessaloniki, after pointing out that the evangelist John was already in Mary’s house, says: “And at the very moment when they came out of the chamber, a great thunder came, so that all those present were prisoners of the disturbance. And when the noise of thunder ceased, the apostles were landing at the door of Mary in the wings of the clouds. They came in the number of eleven, each flying on a cloud: Peter the first and Paul the second; the latter also traveled on a cloud and had been added to the number of the apostles, because the principle of faith owed it to Christ. After the other apostles also gathered at the gates of Mary riding on clouds. They greeted each other and looked at each other, startled to see how they had come to meet in the same place. And Peter said, « Brothers, let us pray to God, who has gathered us together, especially since Brother Paul is among us ». When Peter had said these words, they arose (all) in an attitude of prayer, and lifted up their voice, saying, « Let us pray that we may know that God has gathered us together.” Then everyone bowed to the other to pray ».” (John of Thessaloniki, VII: 618-619).

¹⁵³ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XIV: 582.

¹⁵⁴ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XV: 582-583.

And, when [Mary] was about to ask [each apostle] where he came from or why he had come to Jerusalem, behold, (suddenly) all the disciples of the Lord, with the exception of Thomas called Didymus, were carried in a cloud unto the door of the chamber where the blessed [virgin] Mary was. Thus, they stopped and then came in and worshipped the queen, waving with these words: “Hail, Mary, full of grace; the Lord is with thee”. She then stood up and, leaning, she began to kiss them and gave thanks to God.¹⁵⁵

In the works of art studied here the attitude of the apostles is of deep emotion (almost always, sadness and weeping) and devout recollection, often reflecting an attitude of prayer and psalmody, very in tune with the episodes of death, funeral and burial embodied in them, and in full accordance with the apocryphal sources. Thus, Pseudo-John the Theologian, after stating that “when [Mary] had finished her prayer, said to the apostles: “Burn incense and put yourselves on prayer,”¹⁵⁶ adds that, upon arriving to the house of Mary in Jerusalem,¹⁵⁷ once left her home in Bethlehem, the apostles got up and were singing hymns for five days uninterruptedly.¹⁵⁸ No less explicit is Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea indicating that the Virgin asked the disciples of Jesus:

“Watch and pray with me so that, when the Lord comes to take charge of my soul, he find you keeping vigil”. Then all [the apostles] promised to remain vigilant. And they spent all night in vigil and worship, singing psalms and singing hymns, accompanied by great lights.¹⁵⁹

However, even in the Dormitions of the simplest composition the identity and action of the main apostles, especially Peter, John and Paul, can be often detailed. Peter is always located at the head of the bed, sometimes swinging a censer, to mean the funeral ceremony, at other times inclined, touching with his hands the bed’s head, as if he wanted to lift the litter, or embracing and raising the head of

¹⁵⁵ Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, VII: 645.

¹⁵⁶ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XXVI: 2006. On the other hand, John of Thessaloniki (VI: 615) states: “In saying that, Mary called all those who stood by her and said to them, « Arise and pray ». And after they had prayed, they sat talking among themselves about the wonders of God and the wonders he had wrought.”

¹⁵⁷ “Then the apostles arose, and went out of the house, carrying the litter of [their] Lady, the mother of God, and leading their way toward Jerusalem. But at once, according to what the Holy Spirit had said, they were caught up in a cloud and met in Jerusalem in the house of the Lady.” (Pseudo-John the Theologian, XXXII: 590).

¹⁵⁸ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XXXII: 590.

¹⁵⁹ “*Dixit eis beata Maria: « [...] Vigilate et orate mecum, ut, quando venerit Dominus ad animam meam suscipiendam, vigilantes vos inveniatur ». Tunc omnes promiserunt se vigilare. Et vigilaverunt et adoraverunt per totam noctem cum psalmodiis et canticis cum magnis luminariis.*” (Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, X: 646).

Mary to suggest the transfer in funeral procession of the Mary's body and her burial in the tomb. These different poses and gestures of the successor of Christ respond to some passages of the apocrypha. According to John of Thessaloniki, in effect, after the Virgin lay down on her bed at the end of her prayer, "Peter sat at her head and John to her feet, while the other apostles surrounded the bed."¹⁶⁰ On the other hand, the gesture of Peter embracing the head of Mary may also represent the passage of Pseudo-John the Theologian, according to which, at the moment of death of the Mother of God, Peter, Paul, John and Thomas embraced her feet to feel sanctified.¹⁶¹ Despite such an explicit statement, it should be noted that, for the reasons set out below, Byzantine artists prefer to distribute this proximity of the favorite disciples in three privileged points of the bed: Peter at the bedside, Paul at its feet, John in the middle and behind, usually resting his head on the chest of the Virgin.

Peter's stance waving a censer is explained by two essential reasons, in close mutual relationship. First of all, it responds to Mary's repeated request that the Apostles burn incense as her death approaches.¹⁶² Furthermore, in view of the enormous difficulty of translating visually the prayer or the singing of hymns and psalms, the attitude of balancing the censer is, in our view, the most effective way by which the painter can visualize the leadership assumed by Peter in these prayers and songs: not in vain, as the successor of Christ, he is the Supreme Pontiff and the main celebrant of Mary's funeral,¹⁶³ according to the mandate that the Messiah himself made him. According to Pseudo-John the Theologian, in fact, "Then the Lord turned and said to Peter: "The time has come to start the

¹⁶⁰ John of Thessaloniki, XII: 630.

¹⁶¹ "And at the moment of leaving her immaculate soul, the place was flooded with perfume and an ineffable light. And behold, there came a voice from heaven saying, « Blessed are you among women.» Peter, then, as I, John, and Paul and Thomas, have hurriedly embraced her holy feet to be sanctified." (Pseudo-John the Theologian, XLV: 597).

¹⁶² "And when their prayer was finished, [Mary] said to the apostles, « Burn incense and pray»." (Pseudo-John the Theologian, XXVI: 587). This same author confirms in another passage: "On this same Sunday the mother of the Lord said to the apostles: « Burn incense, for Christ is already coming with an army of angels »." (Pseudo-John the Theologian, XXXVIII: 593).

¹⁶³ John of Thessaloniki expresses it thus: "And Peter said: « Brothers, let us pray to God, who has gathered us together, especially since Brother Paul is with us ». When Peter had said these words, they arose (all) in an attitude of prayer and raised their voice saying: « Let us pray that we may be given the knowledge of why God has gathered us together ». Then each one bowed to the other to pray. Peter therefore says to Paul, « Paul, my brother, rise up and pray before me, for I am overcome with unspeakable joy because you have come to the faith of Christ. » Paul said to him, « Dismiss me, Peter, my father; for I am but a neophyte, and I am not worthy to follow in the footsteps of your feet; how, then, am I going to pray before you? You are, in effect, the luminous column, and all the brothers present are better than I am. Then, Father, pray for me and for all, that the grace of the Lord may remain in us. » Then the apostles were glad because of Paul's humility and said, « Father Peter, you have been made head of us; now you are the first. » Peter, therefore, put himself in prayer [...]" (John of Thessaloniki, VII: 619-620).

psalmody”. And, singing Peter, all the heavenly powers responded the Hallelujah. ¹⁶⁴

On the other hand, Paul, thanks to his role as an inescapable doctrinal teacher of Christianity, ¹⁶⁵ acquires a primordial role in the Byzantine *Koimesis*, through the significant attitude of embracing the feet of the Virgin, either in a gesture of farewell and demand of sanctification, ¹⁶⁶ or in gesture of conducting the bed/coffin of Mary in the process of funeral and burial. ¹⁶⁷

Even more interesting are the position and situation of the old John the Evangelist, who in the Byzantine *Koimesis* always looks strongly inclined – almost as in *Proskynesis*— over the lying body of Mary, often supporting or drawing his head on her chest. Such an unusual attitude and circumstances are explained, in our view, by four complementary reasons: first of all, because of his status as a “beloved disciple of Jesus,” John enjoys the priceless privilege of being the first apostle to be convened by the Virgin and the first to go to meet her in her house for assisting her during her death; ¹⁶⁸ furthermore, on the same condition, he had received from Christ, dying on the cross of Calvary, the charge of looking after Mary with loving care; ¹⁶⁹ thirdly, the kneeling gesture –almost

¹⁶⁴ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XLIV: 596.

¹⁶⁵ According to the account of John of Thessaloniki, when the apostles came on clouds to Jerusalem, they came “Peter the first and Paul the second; the latter also traveled on a cloud and had been added to the number of the apostles, because the principle of faith owed it to Christ. “ (John of Thessaloniki, VII: 619).

¹⁶⁶ We have already seen how Pseudo-John the Theologian (XLV: 597) affirmed that Peter, Paul, John and Thomas embraced Mary's feet at the moment of her death, so that they might be sanctified. According to this same apocryphal, Paul came from Tiberia or the land of the Tiberians, a city near Rome. (Pseudo-John the Theologian, XIX: 588-589).

¹⁶⁷ “And the twelve apostles, after depositing their holy body in the coffin, took it away.” (Pseudo-John the Theologian, XLV: 597). and John of Thessaloniki: “And the apostles, bearing the precious body of the most glorious Mother of God, Our Lady and ever Virgin Mary, deposited it in a new tomb [there] where the Savior had appointed them.” (John of Thessaloniki, XIV: 637-638).

¹⁶⁸ “And, while she [Mary] was in prayer, I presented myself, John, whom the Holy Spirit snatched and brought in a cloud from Ephesus, and left me in the place where the mother of my Lord lay. So I went as far as she was and praised her Son; then I said: « Hail, o mother of my Lord, the one who begot Christ our God! Rejoice, because you will come out of this world very gloriously ».” (Pseudo-John the Theologian, VI: 578-579).

¹⁶⁹ “And the holy mother of God praised God because I, John, had come to him, remembering the voice of the Lord who said: « Behold your mother and behold your son».” (Pseudo-John the Theologian, VII: 579). In this same order of ideas, John of Thessaloniki expresses: “And while they were thus chatting, behold, there appears John the apostle, knocking at the door of Mary. Then he opened it and went inside. But when Mary saw him, she was troubled in her spirit and sobbed and wept, and then cried out in a loud voice, « My son, my son, do not forget the recommendation your Master made to you when I was crying next to the cross and I said to him: You go away, my son, and to whom you leave me confident? Who will I live with? And he said to me while you were present and heard: John is the one who will keep you. Now, my son, do not forget the recommendations made for my sake and remember that He

in ceremonial *proskynesi*— of John before the Mother of God can be interpreted either (according to the archbishop of Thessaloniki) as the gesture of supplication of the beloved apostle, asking the Lord to die himself together with Mary in order to obtain her protection,¹⁷⁰ or (according to Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea) as the request for forgiveness that John addressed to the dying *Theotókos* for having abandoned her for so long, and not having taken care of her as ordered by Jesus from the cross on Golgotha;¹⁷¹ finally, it is very significant that the designers of the iconographic programs and the Byzantine artists in their *Koimesis* the gesture of John resting his head on the chest of Mary, as if they wanted to repeat—in perfect parallelism—the precedent gesture of the Evangelist, resting his head on the chest of Christ at the Last Supper.¹⁷²

We cannot ignore the important detail that, according to the account of Pseudo-John the Theologian, the process of Mary's dormition, initiated in her home in Bethlehem and abruptly interrupted by the hostility of the Jews, concluded in the Virgin's house in Jerusalem, after the apostles, transferring her lying on her litter to save her, were caught up in a cloud by Holy Spirit's power and led directly to the Mary's home in Jerusalem. So this author relates:

Then the Apostles rose up and went out of the house carrying the litter of [their] Lady, the Mother of God, and directing their steps on the road to Jerusalem. But at once, according to what the Holy Spirit had said, they were caught up by a cloud and met in Jerusalem in the Lady's house. Once there, we got up and were singing hymns for five days uninterruptedly.¹⁷³

made you the object of a special love among all the apostles »." (John of Thessaloniki, VI: 615-616).

¹⁷⁰ "When John heard that she was about to leave the body, he fell on his knees and said in sobs, "O Lord, who are we, that you have shown us these tribulations? Yet, in effect, we had not forgotten the first, and behold, we must suffer another. Why do not I leave the body too, so that you protect me, o Mary?" (John of Thessaloniki, VI: 617).

¹⁷¹ "The apostle and evangelist John was transferred from Ephesus; entered into the room where the blessed Virgin Mary was and greeted her with these words: « Hail Mary, Mary; full of grace; the Lord is with you ». She in turn replied, « Thanks be to God »; and she arose, and kissed John. Then she said to him: « O my dearest son, why have you forsaken me for so long and have not heeded the charge your Master gave you concerning my custody, as he commanded you while he was on the cross? ». Then he, falling on his knees, began to ask her forgiveness. And the blessed [Virgin] Mary blessed him and kissed him again." (Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, VI: 644).

¹⁷² "Remember that you were the only one who could recline on his [Jesus'] chest. Remember that He confided only to you his secret when you were reclining on his chest, a secret that no one has known outside of you and me, since you are the virgin and (the) chosen. As for me, He did not want to grieve me, for I came to be his room. [...] and He gave you orders and you participated to me. Now therefore, my son, John, do not forsake me." (John of Thessaloniki, VI: 616).

¹⁷³ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XXXII: 590.

In that order of ideas, the apocryphal detail of these luminous clouds that carry the apostles in their initial coming to Bethlehem and in their subsequent flight to Jerusalem with the dying Mary in her litter is reflected in two of the works of art analyzed here. In the remaining fragment of the icon (2nd half of the 11th century) of the Monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai, such clouds seem to be reflected in the upper left corner of the painting, in an alveolus (the only surviving, a number of other likely in the missing fragment) in which there are two characters in bust (perhaps an angel and an apostle, or perhaps two apostles). More obvious is the depiction of these clouds in the fresco of the church of Hagia Sophia in Ohrid (c. 1050), in whose two upper angles (today quite blurred) two elongated alveoli, each one housing six apostles, appear.

As we have seen, the Byzantine *Koimesis* of the 10th-12th centuries (but not the Western ones of the same period) often include, together with the inevitable Apostles, two or three holy bishops, clad in their distinctive *omophorion* of black crosses, as seen in the two icons of the monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai, in the frescoes of Hagia Sophia of Ohrid, the Panagia Mavriotissa in Kastoria, the Panagia Phorbiotissa in Asinou, the Panagia Arakiotissa in Lagoudera, the church of St. Nicholas Kasnizes in Kastoria and the cathedral of the monastery Mirozshky in Pskov, as well as in the mosaic of the Martorana in Palermo. The inclusion of such bishops in the Byzantine *Koimesis* responds to the aforementioned statement of St. John Damascene in his second homily on the Dormition of Mary: ¹⁷⁴ in fact, bearing the testimony of Archbishop Juvenal of Jerusalem, the Damascene argues that, together with the apostles, also St. Timothy, first bishop of Ephesus, St. Dionysius the Areopagite and St. Hierotheus attended the death of Mary. ¹⁷⁵

No less important is the exhaustive statement of the apocrypha about the two houses of Mary in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, where her death begins and ends respectively. This explains why many of the Dormitions analyzed here insist in representing in symmetrical arrangement at both ends of the scene the two buildings or constructs, of variable scale and complexity. Such double constructions are not so much due to the undoubted desire to create an aesthetically appealing “scenography” and to strengthen the almost constant symmetry of the composition, as above all to the deliberate purpose of “re-creating” poetically the interior and the exterior of the houses of the Virgin in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, where her death and funeral happen, while continuing to become, by the way, a suggestive metonymic allusion to the whole village of Bethlehem and the entire city of Jerusalem. This direct relation between text and image regarding to both symmetrical constructions is evident in many of the works of art analyzed here, namely, in the surviving fragment of the icon of the Monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai, the icon of the iconostasis of the same monastery in Sinai, in the Prümer Gospels of Manchester, in the Pericopes of

¹⁷⁴ See our note 35.

¹⁷⁵ Saint Jean Damascène, *Deuxième discours sur l'illustre Dormition de la Toute Sainte et toujours Vierge Marie*, 18. in Saint Jean Damascène, *Homélies sur la Nativité et la Dormition*, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

Berthold of Regensburg, in the Regensburg-Prüfening Psalter of Munich, in the tympanum of the church of San Pietro al Monte in Civate, in the fresco of the crypt of Hosios Lukas in Phocis, in the church of the Panagia Mavriotissa in Kastoria, in the Panagia Phorbiotissa in Asinou, in the Panagia Arakiotissa in Lagoudera, in the church of St. Nicholas Kasnitzes in Kastoria, in the Martorana in Palermo, in the cathedral of the monastery Mirozshky in Pskov and in the tympanum of the church of Saint-Pierre-le-Puellier.

It remains to elucidate the identity and the role played by the sorry women who, in two or three, stand sometimes peeking out from the windows or arches of the buildings of the architectural scene in some Byzantine *Koimesis*; such a situation can be seen in the fragment of an icon of the monastery of St. Catherine in Sinai (with three women in the house on the right, who probably had a similar reference in the missing part to the left), in the frescoes of the Panagia Mavriotissa in Kastoria (with three ladies on the left, and the other two on the right), of the Panagia Phorvriotissa in Asinou and the Mirozshky monastery in Pskov (both frescoes reflecting two women in each of the two symmetrical houses), as well as in the mosaic of the Martorana in Palermo (which includes only two women in the building on the right). The inclusion of such women in the Byzantine *Koimesis* cannot be explained as a mere aesthetic resource to “animate” the scene with anecdotal details, nor, as some have argued, as a representation of the Jewish people of Jerusalem. On the contrary, the massive presence of these tearful women inside the buildings in some Byzantine Dormitions is plainly justified since they represent the three maidens that, according to the concordant accounts of the three apocrypha, accompany Mary in her death. This is expressed, for example, in Pseudo-John the Theologian:

And when [the announcement of her death] heard it from the lips of the holy archangel, [Mary] returned to the holy city of Bethlehem, taking along with her the three maidens attending to her. Then, after she has rested a little, she stood up and said to them: “Bring me a censer, for I am going to put myself in prayer”. And they brought it to her, as they had been commanded.¹⁷⁶

Not less explicit is the story of John of Thessaloniki:

And over the hour of Terce a great thunder sounded from heaven and a perfume fragrance was exhaled (so soft) so that all the bystanders were overwhelmed by sleep, excepting only the apostles and three virgins, whom the Lord had made watch over to bear witness of the funeral of Mary and her glory.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Pseudo-John the Theologian, IV: 577-578.

¹⁷⁷ John of Thessaloniki, XII: 630.

If this were not enough, Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea tells us the identity of these three maids friends and servants of Mary, when saying that she, sensing her death close, “begged all her relatives to look after her and provide her (some) comfort. She had next to her three virgins: Sophora, Abigea and Zael.”¹⁷⁸

From any perspective by which it is considered, Christ is undoubtedly the most outstanding character in the Byzantine and Western High Medieval Dormitions. Christ looks almost always standing up in an attitude of receiving in his arms, lifting it to heaven the soul of his mother, depicted under the appearance of a newborn wrapped in strips or blankets. All this translates literally the unanimous account of the apocrypha studied here. According to these three legends, seated on a throne of cherubim, Christ descends from the heavenly paradise, escorted by countless armies of angels, archangels, seraphim and powers,¹⁷⁹ to receive the soul of his mother,¹⁸⁰ according to a promise that He made to her.¹⁸¹ Such promise is told us by Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea:

He [Jesus], for his part, welcomed the plea of his beloved mother and said: “Oh room and temple of the living God, oh Blessed Mother, oh Queen of all saints and blessed among all women! [...] How can I leave you after having been beggotten and fed by you, after having led me into the flight to Egypt and suffered many troubles for me? Know, then, that my angels always guard you and will keep you until the moment of your death. But [...], when you see me coming to meet you in the company of the angels and the archangels, the saints, the virgins and my disciples, be sure then that the time has come for your soul to go to be separated from the body and transferred by me to heaven, where it will never experience the slightest tribulation or anguish”.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁸ Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, V: 644.

¹⁷⁹ Pseudo-John the Theologian writes: “And while they [the apostles] were praying, there was a thunder in the sky, and a terrible voice was heard, like [the roar of the] chariots. And then a great army of angels and of powers appeared, and a voice was heard as of the Son of man. At the same time, the seraphim circled around the house where the holy and immaculate virgin and mother of God lay.” (Pseudo-John the Theologian, XXVI: 587). On the other hand, John of Thessaloniki enunciates: “And behold (suddenly) the Lord appeared on the clouds with a uncountable multitude of angels. And Jesus in person, accompanied by Michael, entered the chamber where Mary was, while the angels and those outside surrounded the room sang hymns.” (John of Thessaloniki, XII: 630).

¹⁸⁰ “*Adveniente die dominica, hora tertia, (...) descendit Christus cum multitudine angelorum et accepit animam suae matris dilectae.*” (Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, XI: 647).

¹⁸¹ “Mary then opened her mouth and gave thanks with these words: « I bless you because you have not displeased me in regard to your promise. For you have repeatedly told me not to command angels to come for my soul, but to come (in person) for it. And all things are fulfilled in me, o Lord, according to thy offering. Who am I, poor child of me, to have made me worthy of such great glory? » And in saying these words she filled her task, while her body smiled to the Lord.” (John of Thessaloniki, XII: 630-631).

¹⁸² “*Tum suscepit deprecationem dilectae matris dixitque ei: «O aula et templum Dei vivi, o puerpera benedicta, o regina omnium sanctorum et benedicta super omnes feminas (...).*”

Several centuries earlier, Pseudo-John the Theologian expressed as well the fulfillment of the messianic promise:

And at the same moment Christ appeared seating on a throne of cherubim. And, while we were all in prayer, there were countless multitudes of angels, and the Lord [was] full of majesty upon the cherubim. And behold, a resplendent effluvia irradiated on the Holy Virgin by virtue of the presence of his only begotten Son, and all the heavenly powers fell to ground and worshipped him.¹⁸³

The persistent reference of the apocrypha to the cohorts of angels that accompany Christ in his descent at the bedside of his mother explains why, in all the images of the Dormition in the 10th-12th centuries, there is always some angels or archangels who flutter through the sky or stand firm, as guard of honor, to the side of the Messiah.

Always according to the account of the three aforementioned apocrypha, after a dialogue of comfort and farewell between Mary and her Son,¹⁸⁴ in the course of which he confirms to her the transfer of her soul and her body to heaven,¹⁸⁵ “the Lord, after extending her pure hands, received her holy and immaculate soul.”¹⁸⁶ As the Virgin’s death takes place, Christ wraps her soul in a shimmering veils, and gives it to the archangel Michael to transfer her to heaven,¹⁸⁷ while the angels sing heavenly songs, and an indescribable glow and a sweet scent expand through the house.¹⁸⁸

Quomodo te deseram postquam tu me portasti et nutristi, fugiendo in Aegyptum detulisti et multas angustias pro me sustinuisti? Ecce scias quia angeli mei semper custodierunt te et custodient usque ad transitum tuum. Sed (...) cum videris me cum angelis et archangelis, cum sanctis et cum virginibus et cum meis discipulis ad te venientem, scito pro certo quod anima tua separabitur a corpore et in caelum eam deferam, ubi nunquam penitus tribulationem vel angustiam habebit ». (Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, II: 641-642).

¹⁸³ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XXXVIII: 593.

¹⁸⁴ “The Lord then went to his mother and said: « Mary. » She replied: « Here I am, Lord. » He said to him: « Do not worry; rejoice rather and your heart be glad, for you have found grace to be able to contemplate the glory that has been given to me by my Father. » The holy mother of God then raised her eyes and saw in him such a glory, which is ineffable to the mouth of man and incomprehensible.” (Pseudo-John the Theologian, XXXIV: 591).

¹⁸⁵ “The Lord stood by her and went on to say: « Behold, from this moment your body will be transferred to paradise, while your holy soul will be in heaven, among the treasures of my Father, [crowned] with an extraordinary radiance, where [there is] peace and joy [own] of holy angels and even more ».” (Pseudo-John the Theologian, XXXIV: 591).

¹⁸⁶ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XLIV: 596.

¹⁸⁷ “But He took her soul and put it in the hands of Michael, not without having first wrapped it in some like veils, whose radiance is impossible to describe.” (John of Thessaloniki, XII: 631).

¹⁸⁸ “And while [as Mary died] the angels sang the passage from the Song of Songs in which the Lord says: « As the lily among thorns, so my friend among the daughters, » came such a glow and a perfume so soft that all the bystanders fell on their faces (just as the apostles fell

Although all the works analyzed here represent clearly and explicitly the central moment of the Dormition and the reception of Mary's soul in paradise, two of them suggest also the further process of her burial in a funeral procession. In the *Koimesis* of Yilanli kilise and in that of the Panagia Mavriotissa of Kastoria such a suggestion is expressed by the presence of the defiler Jew Jephonias¹⁸⁹ next to the litter/bier of the Virgin, as well as, in the fresco of Kastoria, through the complementary punisher angel wielding the sword. Such characters and iconographic details visually translate the concordance between the three apocrypha, whose core content Pseudo-John the Theologian expresses thus:

Then, behold, during the march [of the funeral procession], a certain Jew named Jephonias, strong in body, attacked impetuously the coffin worn by the apostles. But suddenly an angel of the Lord, with invisible force, separated the two arms of their respective shoulders by using a sword of fire, and left hanging them in the air at the sides of the coffin.¹⁹⁰

As could not be expected in such incredible legends, this fabulous episode of the attempted profanation concludes in a happy ending with the miraculous healing of the severed arms, and the conversion of the sacrilegious Jew to Christianity,¹⁹¹ after recognizing and proclaiming the praises of Mary and Jesus.¹⁹²

when Christ was transfigured in their presence in the Tabor), and for an hour and a half none was able to stand up.” (Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, XI: 647).

¹⁸⁹ The defiler Jew, who, according to Pseudo-John the Theologian, is called Jephonias, in the account of John of Thessaloniki (XIII: 634) is an anonymous pontiff, while in Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea (XIV: 648) he receives the name of Reuben.

¹⁹⁰ Pseudo-John the Theologian, XLVI: 597. As we have already pointed out, this episode of the defiler is also reported (though with minor variants) by John of Thessaloniki (XIII: 633-637) and Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea (XIV-XVI: 648-649).

¹⁹¹ In the words of Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea: “Then the apostles, dismayed by such great clarity, rose up to the rhythm of psalmody, and began to move the holy corpse from mount Zion to the valley of Jehoshaphat. But when they reached the middle of the road, a certain Jew named Reuben came up to them, intending to throw the coffin on the floor with the corpse of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Suddenly his hands were dried up to the elbow, and, by degree or by force, he went down to the valley of Jehoshaphat, weeping and sobbing, seeing that his hands were rigid and attached to the coffin and he was not able to bring them back to themselves. Then he begged the apostles to obtain health and become a Christian by their prayers. They then bowed their knees and begged the Lord to deliver them. In that very moment he obtained, in effect, the healing and began to give thanks to God and to kiss the plants of the Queen and of all the saints and apostles. Immediately he was baptized in that place and began to preach the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Pseudo-Joseph of Arimathea, XIV-XV: 648-649).

¹⁹² This is what the first apocryphal affirms: “At the beginning of this miracle, all the people of the Jews exclaimed in a loud voice: « It is truly God the son you gave birth to, o Mother of God and ever Virgin Mary! » And Jephonias himself, summoned by Peter to declare the wonders of the Lord, rose up behind the coffin and shouted: « Holy Mary, you who begot

4. Conclusions

At the end of this long series of iconographic analysis, we can infer some substantial conclusions:

At first, all the Byzantine and Western images of the Dormition of Mary studied here reflect to a greater or lesser extent the main characters, events, circumstances and details described by the three apocryphal texts under scrutiny.

However, given the impossibility of illustrating every one of the innumerable details imagined by such legends, the intellectual and material authors of these works of art decide to choose the essential of them and, in any case, those of easier visual representation.

On the other hand, the plastic composition which translate the events narrated in those anonymous stories adopts a variable complexity, depending on the technique and the historical period: the more determinant and coercive the support (ivory, soapstone, wood, parchment) and the older the work (10th-11th centuries), the simpler the compositional structure and the narrative development; on the contrary, the greater the amplitude and freedom offered by the support (fresco, mosaic, architectural relief) and the more advanced is the time (12th century) the more complex the composition and the more detailed in details is the narrative sequence .

Such a relationship between simple and complex also varies considerably depending on the area where the works of art are produced: the compositional complexity, the descriptive exuberance and the conceptual eloquence characteristics of the Byzantine *Koimesis* are contrasted with the structural simplicity, the narrative conciseness and the conceptual austerity typical of the Western Dormitions.

The difference between Byzantine and Western artists is also appreciated when measuring the interest in the iconographic theme of the death of the Virgin: while the Greek-oriental artists show an obvious enthusiasm in designing, producing, disseminating and consuming from a relatively early date (at least since the 10th century, and, according to some, since the 9th century) those countless images of the *Koimesis*, which come to illustrate plastically one of their

Christ, God, have mercy on me. » Peter then addressed him and said to him: « In the name of her Son, gather the hands that have been separated from you. » And just as he said this, the hands that were hanging from the coffin where the Lady lay, separated and joined Jephonias again. And with this he believed himself and praised Christ the God who was begotten by her.” (Pseudo-John the Theologian, XLVII: 598). With slight variants the episode is also collected by the other two apocryphal. According to John of Thessaloniki, the Jews who were about to kill the apostles in the moment of transferring the body of Mary to the tomb were blinded by the angels, except for a certain pontiff (whose name does not mention), who rushed on the coffin, with the intention of throwing it to the ground. But his hands remained attached to the coffin, after being detached from his trunk at the elbows. In pleading with tears to the apostles to have mercy on him, Peter promised the healing of his arms if he believed in Christ and in Mary. The miracle of healing was obtained by the pontiff after blessing and proclaiming praises to the Virgin for three hours. (John of Thessaloniki, XIII: 633-637).

most endearing great liturgical feasts, Westerners artist, on the other hand, exhibit a certain coldness and affective distance in front of this iconographic /doctrinal subject, when in producing their sporadic Dormitions they are mechanically inspired by the Byzantine models, stripping them of many essential ingredients, until obtaining some impoverished “reinterpretations”, of little religious fervor.

Finally, all these many differences in the treatment of the iconographic motif of the Mary’s Dormition allow us to glimpse the different mentality and spirituality of the Byzantines and the Westerners of the 10th-12th centuries: if the former seem to seek a religiousness imbued with devotion, blind faith and symbolism, Westerners on the other hand seem to want to live their religion with a certain distance and with a more cold and objective rationality.

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