



# **The Virgin in Song: Mary and the Poetry of Romanos the Melodist (Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion)**

*Thomas Arentzen*

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According to legend, the Virgin appeared one Christmas Eve to an artless young man standing in one of Constantinople's most famous Marian shrines. She offered him a scroll of papyrus with the injunction that he swallow it, and following the Virgin's command, he did so. Immediately his voice turned sweet and gentle as he spontaneously intoned his hymn "The Virgin today gives birth." So was born the career of Romanos the Melodist (ca. 485-560), one of the greatest liturgical poets of Byzantium, author of at least sixty long hymns, or *kontakia*, that were chanted during the night vigils preceding major feasts and festivals.

In *The Virgin in Song*, Thomas Arentzen explores the characterization of Mary in these *kontakia* and the ways in which the *kontakia* echoed the cult of the Virgin. He focuses on three key moments in her story as marked in the liturgical calendar: her encounter with Gabriel in the Annunciation, her child's birth at Christmas, and the death of her son during Good Friday. Consistently, Arentzen contends, Romanos counters expectations by shifting emphasis away from Christ himself to focus on Mary—as the subject of the erotic gaze, as a breastfeeding figure of abundance and fertility, and finally as an authoritatively vocal woman who conveys the secrets of her son and the joys of the resurrection.

Through his hymns, Romanos inspired an affective relationship between Mary and his audience, bringing the human and the holy into dialogue. By plumbing her emotional depths, the poet traces her process of understanding as she apprehends the mysteries that she embodies. By giving her a powerful voice, he grants subjectivity to a maiden who becomes a mediator. Romanos shaped a figure, Arentzen argues, who related intimately with her flock in a formative period of Christian orthodoxy.

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