

Theology and Poetry in Early Byzantium

Theology and Poetry in Early Byzantium examines the *kontakia* and thought-world of Romanos the Melodist, the sixth-century hymnographer whose vibrant and engaging compositions had a far-reaching influence in the history of Byzantine liturgy. His compositions bring biblical narratives to life through dialogue, encourage a level of participation unparalleled in homiletics and push the boundaries of liturgical expression of theology. This book provides an original analysis of Romanos' poetry, drawing attention to the coherence of his theology and the performative nature of his rhetoric. The main theological themes which emerge encourage the congregation to enact the life of Christ and anticipate the new creation: restoration of humanity to God, recreation in the incarnation and life of Christ, and liturgical participation and transformation in that life. By analysing the rhetorical performance of theology in the *kontakia*, the book provides new insights into religious practice in late antiquity.

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The *Kontakia* of Romanos the Melodist

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CAMBRIDGE
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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781316505618

DOI: 10.1017/9781316492512

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First published 2017

First paperback edition 2021

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-14013-4 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-316-50561-8 Paperback

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Cambridge University Press
978-1-316-50561-8 — Theology and Poetry in Early Byzantium
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For Michael

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Preface

This book examines Romanos the Melodist's vibrant theological poetry, which until recently has received too little attention in its own right. Thankfully there now appears to be a resurgence of interest in Romanos and so, as one of my colleagues suggested, perhaps we are now in the midst of a 'Romanos renaissance'. In my own contribution, I examine theological ideas and their rhetorical vehicles, focusing on Romanos' theology of salvation and the performative techniques he employs. The key concepts which help to construct Romanos' coherent vision are God's correction and perfection of humanity, the inauguration of a new creation, participation in that creation and anticipation of its final consummation. Romanos' *kontakia* were liturgical texts and, through clever use of rhetorical devices including metaphor, paradox, typology and characterization, Romanos educates his audience and engages them in a performance of their own salvation.

Romanos' thought-world is important for understanding his ideas and to this end I endeavour to consider the inspiration of earlier Greek and Syriac preachers and poets on Romanos' *kontakia*, the deep influence of scripture and its typological significance, the centrality of liturgical performance and sensory perception, the impact of rhetoric and its embodiment, and the effects of different cultural interactions. The *kontakia* enact a lived theology in a time of complex doctrinal controversy and intercultural contact and give us insights into sixth-century lay practice and the communication of theology to a wide audience.

I started work on Romanos as a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne, under the supervision of Roger Scott, to whom I owe a great deal. Roger's careful reading has been extremely helpful, as have been his encouragement to publish, his generous introductions to other scholars and his continued interest in the project. My thanks go also to Ruth Webb and Mary Cunningham, who generously gave up their time to guide me through the PhD while I was in London and afterwards.

The book has undergone many changes since the dissertation, and I would like to thank all those who helped me to reshape the manuscript. I thank my PhD examiners, Pauline Allen and Niki Tsironis, for their suggestions for transforming the dissertation into a book, and the readers of

Cambridge University Press for their critical analysis of my manuscript at varying stages of development. I am particularly grateful to Derek Krueger for his detailed and insightful criticism of my work, which challenged my thinking and spurred me to make radical revisions, resulting in a book of, I hope, much more depth and wider interest. I also thank Michael Sharp at Cambridge University Press for seeing the potential in the manuscript and for patiently allowing me to recraft it.

I am very grateful to Mich, Peter, Gaye, Neil, Pip, Jean, Tom, Andrew, Matthew, Miranda, Benita and Callum who at different times entertained our son Samuel while I worked, encouraged me to finish it and generally supported me through the process. I thank Matthew and Miranda particularly for their determination to look after Samuel and give me time to work while we were in Cambridge, enabling me to make the most significant revisions.

My especial thanks go to Michael, to whom I dedicate this book, for puzzling with me for so long about Romanos and for his constant love and support; and to Samuel, for whom Romanos is a bit of a mystery, but who has an insatiable love of books and may one day read this one.