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Kaleidoscopic reception: An essay on some uses of Kassia

Per-Arne Bodin

Alexander Kazhdan, in his biographical note on Kassia in *A History of Byzantine Literature*, concludes with a somewhat desperate summary of our knowledge:

If, however, the story of the bride-show is mere legend and the letters of Theodore were sent to another Kassia, the whole biography falls apart. We can be sure only that Kassia lived in the first half of the ninth century and that she was a nun in a Constantinopolitan convent.¹

It is true that Kassia remains something of an ‘empty signifier’, using the language of discourse studies, and the same can be said of our knowledge of the scope of her oeuvre. But that does not mean that the study of her legend has nothing to tell us.

The aim of this essay is not to investigate the historical Kassia, the famous hymnographer of the ninth century, but rather to consider the many different uses of her ‘trademark’ across different forms of culture: from liturgical settings and learned literature to popular television series and music. In order to grasp a fuller picture, we need to take a point of departure in the Byzantine legend.

The biography and the legend

One of the perhaps most intriguing episodes in Byzantine history is the bride-show of the year 821, which was organized by the empress Euphrosyne for her stepson the emperor Theophilos. She gathered

¹ Kazhdan 1999, 317.

the most beautiful girls in the empire for her son's consideration and assembled them in one of the halls in the palace in Constantinople. He would hand to the girl he chose a golden apple. The name of the most beautiful girl in the row was Kassia. Struck by her beauty, the young emperor approached her and said, alluding to the apple in his hand: "Truly through a woman flow the wicked things", referring to the sin and suffering that followed upon Eve's transgression. Kassia promptly responded and answered: "But through a woman flow abundantly the better things", referring to the Incarnation, and the Virgin Mary giving birth to Christ, the Saviour of the World. Embarrassed by the quick and witty answer, Theophilos gave the apple not to Kassia, but to the girl next to her, Theodora, who then became his spouse and the new empress.

This episode is known from Byzantine chronicles and has been retold in almost every survey of Byzantine history of literature, from Karl Krumbacher in 1897 onwards.² Much painstaking research has been dedicated to confirming whether this episode really happened, or whether it should be interpreted as a story invented for some other purpose. Krumbacher was sure that the bride-show had taken place and was a historical fact.³ Fact or fiction, the story has been crucial for the reception of Kassia. As for the biographical details of her life, they are generally understood to be the following.

Kassia was born around 805 into a wealthy family and died in the 860s. She founded a convent in 842 and is the addressee of three letters written by Theodore the Studite. The letters are addressed to Kassia, but the identity of the Kassia referred to is, like the bride-show, subject to much debate (as noted by Kazhdan in the citation above). In the letters, Theodore expresses his gratitude for the help and support he has received. He had been in confinement due to his defense of icons during the second period of iconoclasm and Kassia had, based on these letters, been hailed as a brave defender – yet another event that has been contested.

Kassia was canonized as late as in the nineteenth century by the Greek church, but she is not considered a saint in the Slavic Orthodox

² See e.g. Krumbacher 1897, 312–315, and Sherry 2013, 15–21.

³ Krumbacher 1897, 312–315. For a more recent discussion, see Rydén 1985.

tradition.⁴ Her feast day falls on September 7 or 20, depending on what calendar is observed. She is named after the second daughter of Job (Job 42:14), as noted by Krumbacher.⁵ The name is written Keziah in Hebrew but Kasia in the Septuagint. It would even be possible to connect the two Kassias using the apocryphal text the *Testament of Job*, in which we learn that Kasia wrote and performed hymns, and which states that if one wishes to know the work of the heavens one should listen to the hymns of Kasia/Keziah.⁶ The *Testament of Job* could, in fact, well be used to construct Kassia's biography, and to study the question of gender and her hymnographic heritage. This striking connection of her name with her hymns has been left out in the many studies of Kassia; the scholarly literature is rich, but often simply repeats the story given by Krumbacher.

Up to fifty hymns are attributed to Kassia and twenty-three of them are included in the liturgical handbooks of the Orthodox Church. Some of them have their own melodies composed by Kassia signified as *idiomela*, the Byzantine term, or *samoglasny* in the Slavonic tradition. Kassia supposedly also wrote aphorisms, so-called *gnomai*. There is still no scholarly edition of her collected works and the attribution of texts to Kassia thus remains contested.

Liturgical use

From a theological perspective, Kassia's main strength is her very intricate use of typological interpretations. Her hymns and even her dialogue with Theophilos are typological, comparing Eve in the Old Testament with Mary in the New Testament. She is using the Kanon with great skill, the hymnographic genre where this trait is highlighted. In the Russian tradition her Kanon for Holy Saturday is widely known among believers. It is used twice in the Passion week: on Good Friday evening, when it is sung as a part of the burial service of Christ, and on Easter night just before Midnight and the Easter Service. Its beginning

⁴ Afinogenov 2017.

⁵ Krumbacher 1897, 317.

⁶ Haralambakis 2014.



Fig. 1: *Slavonic Triodion* (eleventh–twelfth century), *Beginning of the Kanon for Holy Saturday.*

in Church Slavonic – *volnoiu morskoiu*, that is “by the wave of the sea”, with the instrumental case used – is a token of the end of Christ’s passion and the beginning of Easter, on the border of death and resurrection. The hymn is quite difficult to understand, and enigmatic when sung in Church Slavonic, the liturgical language of the Russian orthodox church. The instrumental dative in the Greek text, *kymati thalases*, might give the same enigmatic impression to a Greek believer:

He who once
hid the pursuing tyrant
by the waves of the sea,
was hidden beneath the earth
by the children of those he had saved.
But let us, as the maidens,
sing unto the Lord,
for he is greatly glorified.⁷

⁷ Tripolitis 1992, 81.

In a very dense form Kassia exposes incarnation, and the similarities and differences of the Old and New Testaments, by juxtaposing the Jews passing the Red Sea with the death and resurrection of Christ. In the Triodion, the liturgical book for the Great Lent, there is a reference to Kassia as the author of the first part of the Kanon, but this attribution is not transmitted in any way to worshippers. There are no hymnbooks for the congregation as there are in the Lutheran or Catholic church practice. Kassia's hymns have become a part of the ocean of hymns that constitute the liturgical practice of the Orthodox church. The same can be said about Kassia's Hymn of the Fallen Woman, sung in the Matins of Great Wednesday in a divine service dedicated to the sinful and repenting woman. In liturgical practice it is embedded with other hymns and prayers and is sung somewhere in the Russian monastic tradition, three hours from the beginning of the service.

At the end of the nineteenth century, a complete Greek service text with hymns and prayers for all the divine services for Kassia's feast day was written.⁸ The Russian Byzantinist Tatiana Senina has translated it into Church Slavonic and has herself also written a complete service text in Church Slavonic, although the nun of the ninth century is not canonized in the Slavic tradition. Her text plays several times with the similarities between Kassia's name and the spice *Cinnamomum cassia*.⁹ A different sort of liturgical use of Kassia is found in the nineteenth-century pastor, poet, and thinker N. F. S. Grundtvig's translation and expansion of the Hymn of the Fallen Woman, included in the hymnbook of the Danish Lutheran Church (number 151) with Kassia's authorship referenced. This includes for example the following lines, referring to the sinful woman:

Himlen sig til jorden bukked,
den gang du blev støvets søn;
bøj dig nu til hjertesukket,
øre dit til angers bøn!

⁸ Afinogenov 2017.

⁹ *Pesnennoe posledovanie prepodobnyia Kassiany*, http://kassia.listopad.info/akolouthia/St_Kassiana_1889.pdf, accessed 16.7.2022.

O Marias søn, du bolde,
døm mig ej med læber kolde,
skjul mig i din kærlighed!

The very sensuous character of Kassia's poem is rendered in the Danish text with the word *hjertesukk*, "the sigh of the heart", and the prayer with the wish that the lips of Jesus will not be cold, and that the sinner will be pardoned at the Final Judgement. This hymn is in full use in the Danish Lutheran church practice alongside other renderings of Byzantine hymns by Grundtvig.

Kassia's route to secular fame

Kassia's route to fame among scholars seems to have begun with Karl Krumbacher's work from 1897. This was followed by, for example, Henry Tillyard's musical analysis of Kassia's hymns in 1911, including music scores and translations into English. Another early German Byzantinist, Karl Dieterich, of the same generation as Krumbacher, characterized Kassia's literary work in 1909 in a rather devastating way, describing her poems as clumsy. Dieterich claimed that she can hardly be considered a poet at all: "Denn die paar religiösen Gedichte, die von ihr überliefert sind, sind zu stümperhaft, als dass man ihre Verfasserin nun gleich zur Dichterin stempeln könnte."¹⁰ Later scholarship has given much more credit to her work, and she is now highly appreciated and widely recognized as a figure of historical significance in Byzantine literature.

An important step in the study of Kassia was taken by Ilse Rochow in her 1967 study, *Studien zu der Person, den Werken und dem Nachleben der Dichterin Kassia*. Antonia Tripolitis' *Kassia: The Legend, the Woman and Her Work* (1992), is mainly an edition of Kassia's hymns in Greek, provided with English translation. Notable recent works include, among others, Kurt Sherry's monograph *Kassia the Nun in Context: The Religious thought of a Ninth-Century Byzantine Monastic* (2013), as well as a great number of articles from the last twenty years, such

¹⁰ Dieterich 1909, 120.

as a chapter on Kassia in Andrew Mellas' *Liturgy and the Emotions in Byzantium*. The studies of Sherry and Mellas will be discussed below, not for contributing to our knowledge on Kassia, but for their connection to gender studies. Another scholar relevant for studying the *Nachleben* of Kassia is the above-mentioned Tatiana Senina, with her vast scholarly works on Kassia, including translations of her hymns into Russian, previously known in Russia almost only in Church Slavonic. Senina is herself a nun and has taken the name of Kassia.

In this essay, reflecting on the reception of Kassia, I wish to continue the work once started by Ilse Rochow. When she studied Kassia's *Nachleben*, she concentrated on Greece and the Balkans. My examples will be of another character and drawn from other contexts, but also with a kaleidoscopic intention: reception is here used for indicating a loose connection between "the real Kassia" and the later works created in her footsteps.

Pasternak

My starting point will be the Russian Nobel Laureate Boris Pasternak (1890-1960), pivoting different contemporary uses of the liturgical work of Kassia. Besides his interest in Biblical texts, manifested in numerous underlinings and excerpts in his Bible, he copied an extensive number of texts from Orthodox hymn books in Church Slavonic, while he was working on his novel *Doctor Zhivago*.¹¹ He excerpted hymns written for various religious feasts, sometimes commenting on them. Coming himself not from a Christian but a Jewish family, he had not learned the texts in childhood or in school. Perhaps because of this, the Christian tradition had a special freshness for him, as he noted himself in a letter from 1959.¹²

Pasternak thus made copies of hymns written for various religious feasts, especially those from the Kanon. In *Doctor Zhivago*, Lara's friend Sima explains to her the special trait of typology while Zhivago is eavesdropping. This part of the novel is set in the time of revolution

¹¹ Bodin 1976.

¹² Pasternak 2005, 472.

and civil war; however, the theme of the talk is not violence, politics and devastation, but Orthodox Byzantine hymnography:

A lot of liturgical texts bring together the concepts of the Old and New Testaments and put them side by side ... In this frequent, almost

constant juxtaposition, the antiquity of the old, the novelty of the new, and the difference between them emerges with peculiar clarity.¹³

Sima then continues her lecture on the Kanon genre: “Leaders and nations were relegated to the past. They were replaced by the doctrine of individuality and freedom.”¹⁴ She goes on to reflect on Kassia’s hymn about the harlot who washes Christ’s feet with her hair and quotes the hymn in Church Slavonic. The hymn, the *sticheron*, is sung in Orthodox Church practice on Wednesday in Passion week, as noted in the passage of the liturgical use, and is here rendered in English:

O Lord, the woman fallen into many sins, sensing your Divinity, takes up the order of myrrhbearer, lamenting she brings you myrrh before your entombment. ‘Woe is me!’ she says, ‘for night contains me, the longing for excess, gloomy and moonless, the eros of sinfulness. Accept my springs of tears, you who weave from the clouds the water of the sea; bend down to me, towards the groanings of my heart, you who bowed the heavens by your ineffable selfemptying. I will tenderly kiss your undefiled feet and wipe them again with the tresses of my head; those feet at whose beat in the twilight of Paradise, resounding in her ears, Eve hid in fear. Who can trace out the multitude of my sins or the abyss of your mercy, O my soul-saving Saviour? Do not cast me, your handmaid, aside, you who unmeasurably bear great mercy.’¹⁵

Sima responds to the hymn with the exclamation: “What familiarity, what equal terms between God and life, God and the individual, God

¹³ Pasternak 1958a, 422, my translation.

¹⁴ Pasternak 1958b, 370.

¹⁵ Mellas 2020, 152; Mellas’ translation with minor revisions.

and a woman!”¹⁶ She moves on by quoting the boldest expression of this idea to be found in the whole Orthodox tradition: “God was made man so that Adam should be made God!” Kassia is not mentioned by name in the novel, only her hymn is quoted.

In *Doctor Zhivago*, the harlot is, as is frequently the case, equated with Mary Magdalene. Kassia is only alluding to this by describing the sinner “as taking the order of myrrhbearer”. The two poems about Mary Magdalene in the novel’s final chapter are inspired by the hymn of Kassia, as can be understood both from the lecture of Sima and directly from reading the poems, which share the night time backdrop, the corporality and the brave mixing of semantic levels with Kassia’s hymn. Eternity visits Magdalene as one of her former clients:

O where would I be now,
My teacher and my Saviour,
If eternity did not await me
At the table, at night,
Like a new client
Caught in the net of my craft?¹⁷

For Pasternak, Christianity implies freedom and individuality, not for one people or nation but for every single person. He finds evidence of this in Kassia’s hymn about the harlot, as well as in the Kanon genre’s comparison between the events of the Old and the events of the New Testament. Kassia’s hymns thus have multiple functions in Pasternak’s novel. They enable Pasternak to formulate of the novel’s philosophy of history, dividing the old world and the world of Christianity, the hymn about the harlot is used aesthetically in the novel’s prose part and in the two Magdalena poems, and the sticheron furthermore formulates Doctor Zhivago’s views on the familiarity between God and woman.

¹⁶ Pasternak 1958b, 372.

¹⁷ Pasternak 1958b, 503, “Magdalene”.



Fig. 2: *Kassia's sticheron on the harlot*, Parham ms 36, f. 8v. (sixteenth century).

Kassia, the Christmas hymn, and the imperial context

The comments on freedom and individuality in *Doctor Zhivago* are drawn from orthodox hymnography and especially from Kassia's hymns. Another Russian author, the well-known Byzantinist Sergei Averintsev, focuses on another of her hymns, the *sticheron* for Christmas day. He observes the duality in Kassia's text and in Byzantine thought in general between the empire and the heavenly kingdom. He notes:

внутренне чуждые миру классической древности и в своем двуединстве составляющие формообразующий принцип «византизма», — императорская власть и христианская вера — возникают почти одновременно. Византийские авторы любили отмечать, что рождение Христа совпало с царствованием Августа.

Intrinsically alien to the world of classical antiquity, the imperial power and the Christian faith arose almost simultaneously, both in their dual unity constituting the formative principle of Byzantinism.

Byzantine authors liked to note that the birth of Christ coincided with the reign of Augustus.¹⁸

Averintsev then quotes Kassia's hymn, here given in its entirety in English:

When Augustus became monarch upon earth,
The multitude of kingdoms among men was ended.
And when Thou wast incarnate of the Holy One,
The multitude of divinities among the idols was put down.
Beneath one universal empire have the cities come,
And in one divine dominion the nations believed.
The folk were enrolled by the decrees of the emperor,
We, the faithful, have been inscribed in the name of Deity.
Oh, Thou our incarnate Lord,
Great is Thy mercy, to Thee be glory.¹⁹

In Kassia's hymn, this duality is conspicuously diminished or even erased. For Averintsev it was, as it seems, worrying in all ways, even alluding to the condition of living in the late Soviet Union with its formidable system of repression. Kassia's hymn was a kind of reconciliation for "the little man" in Byzantium, living as he did in a formidable authoritarian society controlled by emperor and Church. The subjection to the mundane power was equal to the subjection to God.

A quite specific use of Kassia is found in a book by one of the most famous conservative imperial thinkers in post-soviet Russia, Egor Kholmogorov, who often refers to Russia's Byzantine heritage. Kholmogorov is close to Putin and his ideas constitute one of the components in what is today called Putinism. Kholmogorov refers to Kassia's hymn on Christmas and draws a bold parallel between Stalin and Augustus, wanting to illustrate the complexity of giving total blame or total praise to Stalin. Kassia was conciliatory to the emperor Augustus in her hymn, despite him being a tyrant, and, by the way, causing the tribulation of Mary and Joseph in the census. Kholmogorov is in this

¹⁸ Averintsev 1977, 59. My English translation.

¹⁹ Tillyard 1911, 427–428.



Fig. 3: *Kassia: A Romance of Byzantium*, back-cover.

manner finding, in a peculiar way, an excuse for Stalin in Kassia's hymn, though without referring to her authorship.²⁰ What Kholmogorov finds in Kassia is her admiration of the Christian empire.

Averintsev and Kholmogorov are both fascinated by the empire, seen by Averintsev as a threat, and by Kholmogorov as a special "historical choice" for Russia. Both are quoting Kassia's hymn on the Birth of Christ. They use Kassia in the ongoing discussion on the role of the Byzantine heritage in Russian culture and its implication in today's Russia.

²⁰ Kholmogorov 2020.

Three ‘Byzantine romances’

The stories about Kassia are intriguing and they have been retold in almost all surveys of Byzantine literature, especially that of the bride-show. They have also been used frequently in popular culture and here I want to draw your attention to three examples.

In 1934, the American author of Greek origin, George Handrulis, published his novel *Kassia: A Romance of Byzantium*. It makes much out of the scene of the bride-show and turns the story into a *ménage à trois* between Kassia, Theophilos, and Theodora. The novel adds another element in the inclusion of Kassia’s love for a military commander, Akillas, who calls Kassia “a beautiful and fragrant rose of Constantinople” alluding to the fragrant herb Kassia is said to have used in perfumes.²¹ The only illustration contained in the book reflects the romance character of the story. It depicts Kassia sitting in her nun’s cell, writing, while the light falls on her from a window far above, suggesting that her room is situated in a cellar. Her dress is that of a catholic nun, and she is young and pretty, with dreamy eyes. Handrulis’s book was republished in 2021, with the back-cover blurb reading: “The work has been selected by scholars as being culturally important and is part of the knowledge base of civilization as we know it.”²²

The Russian nun Kassia, that is Tatiana Senina who was mentioned above, has written a series of novels with the title *Kassia*, in which the focus is on the iconoclastic controversy.²³ Kassia lived during the time of the iconoclasm, and she could be depicted as having been a dissident in her youth, as an iconophile in the time of official iconoclasm. The novels on Kassia are historical narrations about the turbulences of history and ecclesiastical controversies of the time, written from an apologetic perspective. Kassia is strong, brave, intelligent, and self-indulgent. In a way Kassia’s novels on Kassia are adventure stories not unlike Handrulis’s *A Romance of Byzantium*, but also historical lessons on ninth-century Byzantium. In the appendix to the novels there

²¹ Handrulis 1934, 60.

²² Handrulis 2021.

²³ Senina 2015.

are comprehensive lists of scholarly works that were consulted by the author. There is accordingly a contemporary Russian orthodox nun with the name of Kassia, continuing the tradition from the ninth-century Kassia, or perhaps inheriting it. The juxtaposition of a romance/novel with scholarly references indicates both Senina's two roles and Kassia's own *Nachleben* in scholarly literature, as well as in fiction of different kinds and different qualities.

My third example offers a rather a different use of Kassia in popular culture. Kassia is one of the characters in the TV-series "Vikings", in which she plays the role of a scheming, powerful and cruel Byzantine woman swaying her influence over two powerful men. This storyline unfolds in the fifth season. The woman is called Kassia, and there is no doubt of her identity: she is lavishly dressed in a kind of Byzantine fashion and performs the song of the sinful woman. However, she is portrayed as an evil and wicked person partaking in the power games of the time, which is rarely the case for Kassia. The actor performing the role of Kassia is the famous British actress Karima Adebibe, who is of Greek ancestry. In *Vikings Wiki* Kassia's role in the series is summarized as follows: "Kassia is the beautiful Byzantine nun. She appears to be of noble birth. Nuns are supposed to be celibate, but she undergoes a not-so-secret affair with Emir Ziyadat Allah."²⁴ Further below in the article she is presented fairly accurately and the spurious bride-show, her hymns and her *gnomai* are mentioned. This echoes the interpretations of Handrulis's and Senina's historical romance novels, using the bride-show as a sensational and intriguing plot element in their works.

Feminist theology

Kassia is depicted as a true saint in most renderings of her biography: generous to the poor, brave in her defense of icons in the time of iconoclasm. In the aphorisms, in the *gnomai*, she appears rather haughty and irritated, as in the long row of her sayings beginning with "I hate" and continuing with different objects as for example:

²⁴ Viking Wiki, <https://vikings.fandom.com/wiki/Kassia?so=search#Biography> (accessed 16.6.2023).



Fig. 4: *Karima Adebibe in the role as Kassia in “Vikings”.*

I hate the one who teaches knowing nothing.
I hate the quarrelsome one; for he does not respect the holy.
I hate the miser and especially one who is wealthy.
I hate the ungrateful one like Judas.
I hate the one who rashly slanders friends.²⁵

Kassia is important in contemporary feminist theological discourse: the bride-show, Theodore the Studite’s letters, and her *gnomai* are said to show her consciousness of gender. At least three Russian orthodox nuns have written works about Kassia, her hymns and her aphorisms. The “feminist turn” on interpretations of her has one meaning in Russia, where the church and conservative society understand feminism as a derogatory notion, but another meaning in Western scholarship where

²⁵ Tripolitis 1992, 113.

feminism is rather mainstream. Even Krumbacher, in the beginning of his book from 1897, connects Kassia with the women's movement of his time, and links her work to the *Frauenbewegung* so much discussed all over Europe at the time:

Für die Beurteilung und Schlichtung des uralten, gegenwärtig durch die Frauenbewegung in das Stadium der höchsten Aktualität getretenen Streites über die Bedeutung und Eigenart der geistigen Fähigkeiten des Weibes gibt es kein besseres und zugleich anziehenderes Hilfsmittel, als eine sorgfältige Betrachtung der geistig hervorragenden Frauen in der Geschichte und besonders in der Litteratur und Kunst.²⁶

For a while the name of Kassia is thus included in the same discourse as that of Strindberg or Tolstoy, who were very occupied with the question of women at the end of nineteenth century.

Sherry's book, mentioned earlier, contains a chapter with the title "Kassia, the feminist".²⁷ He argues that the situation for women was more favorable in the Byzantine Christian era than it had been in late Hellenistic period. His main example of this is that Kassia is able to offer her bold answer to the emperor at the bride-show, a scene which has, as noted, been seen by many scholars as spurious: "The bride-show exchange provides the most striking example of Kassia's defiance of these misogynistic presuppositions."²⁸ Sherry also refers, with good reason, to the *gnomai* which reference the virtue of being a strong woman, as in this case on the prophet Esdras:

Esdras is witness that woman
together with truth prevail over all.²⁹

Sherry goes on to note, quite correctly, that Kassia takes no interest in pondering upon motherhood, although the Virgin Mary is at the centre

²⁶ Krumbacher 1897, 365.

²⁷ Sherry 2013, 23–41.

²⁸ Sherry 2013, 23.

²⁹ Sherry 2012, 29.

of her theology.³⁰ Another scholar, Gheorghina Zugravu, characterizes Kassia's work in her doctoral dissertation as follows: "it is from Kassia's liturgical works that one discerns her self-internalized feelings of martyrdom and femininity, frequently choosing these two categories as the subjects of her panegyric".³¹

Recently, Kassia's work and persona have been related in different ways to issues of prostitution and trafficking. Katherine Kelaidis of the National Hellenic Museum argues for the human rights of sex workers in her article "St. Kassiani, Sex Workers, and FOSTA-SESTA".³² An article by Carol P. Christ bears the title: "Kassiani: Placing a Woman at the Center of the Easter Drama".³³ These works refer to the Hymn of the Fallen Woman, often called the Hymn of Kassiani in the modern Greek fashion. But let me stress once more: Kassia in modern American or Western European feminist discourse, and Kassia considered by Russian women theologians today, is framed in quite different contexts and have quite different implications. Gender is indeed an important issue for Kassia, and the relation between male and female is crucial for her. Andrew Mellas goes even further and claims that "she is not simply a male or female protagonist, but a universal figure that undoes stereotypes and lives above gender".³⁴ Noting the fact that the Hymn of the Fallen Woman was often sung by males, Derek Krueger finds this another trans-gendering aspect of Kassia's hymn in his book *Liturgical Subjects*.³⁵

To conclude, Kassia is included in feminist discourse starting with Krumbacher. It is a discourse that suits our time, but whether the details of her life and work be true or untrue, it might be seen as ahistorical to apply the modern term "feminism" to an author from premodernity. That said, the questions of gender identity are certainly of importance for understanding the works of Kassia.

³⁰ Sherry 2013, 38.

³¹ Zugravu 2003.

³² Kelaidis 2018. FOSTA-SESTA are two US laws against trafficking.

³³ Christ 2015.

³⁴ Mellas 2020, 165.

³⁵ Krueger 2014, 157.

Icons

Kassia is depicted, although rarely, on the icon “The triumph of Orthodoxy” celebrating the council in 843, and the reinstating of icons. She is represented as one of the defenders of icons alongside the empress Theodora and other women listed in Dionysios of Fournas’s *The Painter’s Manual* from the eighteenth century.³⁶ She is also depicted on the title page of the Venice edition of *Triodion* from 1601, in which she is given a spectacular place vis-à-vis Christ in an illustration showing the hymnographers of the Orthodox Church.³⁷

Kassia is almost never depicted alone in ancient icon painting. She is, however, listed in Dionysios, in which attributes are given for each saint. Kassia is mentioned as the last once among the poets as “The holy woman Casia” and the text proposed for her speech scroll is the beginning of the hymn about the harlot.³⁸ In Russia, although she is not recognized as a saint there, she is sometimes depicted in icons alongside the speech scroll *Volnoiu morskoiu*, by the wave of the sea.

Kassia icons are accordingly a new phenomenon, and they can be compared with the depiction of Kassia in Handrulis’s novel. Their style is that of the nineteenth century, or in a semi-Byzantine style, as seen in the Russian icon included here.

Music

Kassia composed music to some of her own hymns, as has been discussed in the article by Tillyard mentioned above. In recent decades her compositions have been made famous in many countries and in different contexts as “ancient music”. For example, there is a CD from 2021 titled “Hymns of Kassiani,” which was introduced and conducted by Alexander Lingas. Moreover, her hymn for Wednesday

³⁶ Dionysios 1974, 63.

³⁷ Zugravu 2013.

³⁸ Dionysios 1974, 63.



Fig. 5: Two late icons: left, a Greek icon depicting Kassia with the Greek text of the hymn of the sinful woman; right, a Russian icon with the first hirmos of the Kanon for Holy Saturday on the speech scroll.

in Passion week, that is her *sticheron*, was the inspiration for an early composition by Mikis Theodorakis. The fifth song of the Kanon for Holy Saturday is one of the hymns set to music by the Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki in his work for choir *Utrenja*, that is, Matins. This is perhaps the most modernistic and chaotic part of the whole work and Kassia is anonymous, since the whole Kanon is used in the composition with no indication of her authorship. In 2021 premiered an opera entitled “Kassia: Songs of Care”, composed and directed by Burak Özdemir and performed by Musica Sequenza Berlin. The aim of the work was “to re-interrogate Kassiani’s legacy as the ‘first feminist artist’”³⁹ – thus a combination of musical reception and feminist ideology.

To conclude this brief survey, Kassia is very well-known, perhaps one of the most famous Byzantine historical characters, and she is one

³⁹ <https://musicasequenza.com/projects/kassia/> (accessed 2023-11-10).

of the most famous women in Byzantine literature alongside Anna Komnena. Her liturgical works are widely used, but she remains almost always anonymous. Both her literary work and her more or less fictive biography appear frequently in different areas of modern culture. In music her compositions are a part of European cultural heritage, and both her music and her liturgical texts have influenced numerous composers. In scholarship there exists a great number of studies based on her, especially from recent decades. Kassia is actually not understudied, but indeed overstudied in scholarship of the last decades. The fact that we know so little about her has made her extremely suitable for both academic and literary speculation, for deep philosophical and theological musings, and for gender theorists to offer insights into her literary work and her persona. In broad terms the many uses of Kassia can therefore shed light on the handling of the Byzantine cultural legacy in modern times.

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