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## THE USAGE OF SCRIPTURAL NATIVITY MOTIFS IN EARLY GREEK AND SLAVONIC HYMNOGRAPHY\*

**Abstract.** In this article I will make a survey of the usage of the main nativity motifs that can be found in early Greek and Slavonic hymnography, such as the *kata stichon* hymns. Moreover, I will compare them with the nativity motifs that are mentioned in several works belonging to the homiletic literature, such as Pseudo-Chrysostom's sermon known as *In illud, Memor fui Dei, et delectatus sum* or St. Proclus' *Oratio in natalem diem Domini*, as well as with the apocryphal Gospels and Infancy Gospels. In this way, we can have an idea of the mutual references that are made between all those works, and of the different usage that they show.

**Keywords:** *kata stichon* hymns, Book of Hours, homiletic literature, Apocryphal Gospels, Nativity Motifs

By comparing Nativity motifs in the different works belonging to both the homiletic and hymnographic literature it is possible to grasp an idea of the richness of the intertextuality during the Middle Ages. Moreover, studying the usage of biblical motifs and quotations by a specific author can help us to determine their personal style compared to other authors, establishing a set of the preferred motifs employed by that hymnographer. Sometimes it can allow us to identify the composer of works whose authorship is disputed. On some occasions we can even detect the echo of a particular author in the works of others, by analysing their use of the instrument of biblical exegesis known as typology or prefiguration. On the other hand, the differences or variants can be style markers of the individual authors. Finally, this particular usage of biblical typology by an author and its influence on other works can be very useful finding the composition date of the hymnographic works as a secondary or indirect criterion.

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In this article, we will analyze different hymnographic works devoted to the Nativity, starting with one of the oldest and not so well-known poetic forms, the *kata stichon*, hymns, and continuing with some of the more famous and beautiful compositions on the Nativity: Romanos the Melodist's *kontakion* and the canons of St. Cosmas of Maiuma and of St. John of Damascus.

The hymns known as *kata stichon* are a poetic form in which each verse of the hymn contains the same number of syllables (isosyllabism) and stress is on the same syllables (homotony)<sup>1</sup>. During the Greek Antiquity, *kata stichon* was already employed for narrative texts. Afterwards, in the Christian era, liturgical poetry was composed in the *kata stichon* form starting from the fifth century and perhaps for two or three centuries onwards. The question regarding the geographic origin of the Greek *kata stichon* hymns has not been yet solved. Stig Frøyshov identified some of them in the Horologion, that is, the Book of Hours of the Resurrection Cathedral of Jerusalem (more commonly known as the “Church of the Holy Sepulchre”)<sup>2</sup>. The *kata stichon* hymns, even though they appear in the Horologion, do not seem to originate in Jerusalem, being rather supplements included in the Horologion outside of Palestine.

Frøyshov also identified several *kata stichon* hymns that were translated into Church Slavonic and included in some Russian Horologia, dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> centuries. In one of them, specifically in a short passage number 27 belonging to the Midnight service, Nativity motifs are employed in order to praise the figure of Jesus Christ, as can be read in the English translation:

<i>Book of Hours of Sinai, fol. 62v</i>	RGADA, F. 381, N° 48, fol. 39v
<p>9. ὃν ἡ πέτρα τὸ σπήλαιον ἐδείξεν καὶ ἡ μαῖα τὴν χάριν ἐδέξατο, 10. ὃν αἴστηρ καταλάμψας ἐμήνυσεν καὶ ποιμένες ἰδόντες ἐθαύμασαν, 11. ὃν οἱ μάγοι τὰ δῶρα προσήφερον καὶ Ἡρώδης τεμείν ἐβουλεύετο.</p>	<p>9. юмѹ же камень пещерѹ показа • а сѹзжачица влѣтъ прилатъ • 10. югоже зѣвѣзда просвѣтивши сѹ проповѣда а пастѹчи видѣвши дивнши сѹ • 11. юмѹ же волѣсви влѣѣ дары приносатъ • а иродѣ оубити мѹсислаше •</p>
<p>9. (You are the One) to whom the rock offered a cave and (for whom) the midwife received grace. 10. whom a shining star has revealed and whom the shepherds saw and marveled at. 11. The Lord to whom the magi brought gifts and who Herod was intending to kill.</p>	

<sup>1</sup> G. NAGY, *Greek Literature*, vol. IX, *Greek Literature in the Byzantine Period*, London–New York 2001, p. 141.

<sup>2</sup> S.S.R. FRØYSHOV, *Часослов без последований Больших Часов (вечерни и утрени): Исследование недавно изданного Часослова Sin. gr. 864 (IX в.) (окончание)*, БТ 45, 2013, p. 272–307.

As we can see, together with typical Nativity motifs such as the cave, the star, the shepherds, the *magi* and King Herod, whose basic Gospel references are Matt 2: 2–13 and Luke 2: 16–17, another, not so common, motif can be found: the midwife who received the Grace called *служаци* in Church Slavonic and *μαῖα* in Greek. This motif comes directly from the apocryphal Gospels or Infancy Gospels, specifically from the *Protevangelium of James* (19–20) and the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (13), in which it is recounted how Joseph went to Bethlehem looking for two midwives that he brought back to the cave in order to help Mary give birth.

Similarly, several homilies and hymns from the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards contain apocryphal motifs. Romanos the Melodist also draws on the *Protevangelium of James* in his *kontakion* “On the Nativity of the Virgin Mary”<sup>3</sup>. However, this motif of the midwife has no parallels in the two canons for the Vespers of the Nativity of Christ which we will discuss hereafter. So we will leave it for later and will comment earlier the other elements.

Starting with the first verse, as it is already mentioned in a footnote of the edition of the *Book of Hours of Sinai*<sup>4</sup> the expression “to whom the rock offered a cave” resembles the famous *prooimion* or prelude of Romanos the Melodist’s *kontakion* “On the Nativity” that reads as follows:

Ἡ παρθένος σήμερον, τὸν ὑπερούσιον τίκτει,  
καὶ ἡ γῆ τὸ σπήλαιον, τῷ ἀπροσίτῳ προσάγει.  
ἄγγελοι μετὰ ποιμένων δοξολογοῦσι.  
μάγοι δὲ μετὰ ἀστέρος ὁδοιποροῦσι·  
δι’ ἡμᾶς γὰρ ἐγεννήθη,  
παιδίον νέον, ὁ πρὸ αἰώνων θεός<sup>5</sup>.

Today the Virgin gives birth to him who is above all being,  
and the earth offers a cave to him whom no one can approach.  
Angels with shepherds give glory,  
and magi journey with a star,  
for to us there has been born  
a little Child, God before the ages<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> *Sancti Romani melodi cantica: cantica genuina*, ed. P. MAAS, C.A. TRYPANIS, Oxford 1963, p. 276–280. For more information on the usage of apocryphal motifs in hymns and sermons devoted to the Virgin, see T. ARENTZEN, *The Virgin in Song*, Philadelphia 2017 [= D.RLAR], p. 129; *The Reception of the Virgin in Byzantium. Marian Narratives in Texts and Images*, ed. T. ARENTZEN, M.B. CUNNINGHAM, Cambridge 2019; M.B. CUNNINGHAM, *The Use of the Protevangelium of James in Eighth-Century Homilies on the Mother of God*, [in:] *The Cult of Mother of God in Byzantium. Texts and Images*, ed. M.B. CUNNINGHAM, L. BRUBAKER, Aldershot 2011, p. 163–178; D. KRUEGER, *Liturgical Subjects*, Philadelphia 2017.

<sup>4</sup> *Livre d’Heures du Sinai (Sinaiticus graecus 864)*, ed. M.(L.) AJJOU, J. PARAMELLE, Paris 2004 [= SC, 486], p. 248, n. 27.3.

<sup>5</sup> *Sancti Romani melodi cantica...*, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> St. ROMANOS, *Kontakia On the Life of Christ: Chanted Sermons by the Great Sixth Century Poet and Singer St. Romanos*, trans. Archimandrite Ephrem Lash, New Haven 2010 [= SLS], p. 3.

Actually, this prelude of Romanos' *kontakion* was sung after the sixth ode of the canon and the Small Litany at the Vespers of the Nativity of Christ until the 12<sup>th</sup> c.<sup>7</sup>, two canons of which we will discuss later. According to the legend, this *kontakion* was revealed in dreams by the Theotokos, the Mother of God, to the famous sixth-century hymnographer St. Romanos the Melodist during the Christmas Eve. The full *kontakion* consists of 24 strophes besides the prelude and is written in the form of a dialogue between the Mother of God and the *magi*. The basic Gospel text is Matt 2: 1–14, and the Nativity motifs that appear are the manger, the cave, the star, the *magi*, Joseph and his dream, the shepherds, Herod and the three gifts of the *magi*. Unfortunately we can not comment on all of them here.

But coming back to the prelude's formula "the earth offers a cave" and the similar expression in the *kata stichon* "the rock offered a cave", in the edition of the *Book of Hours of Sinai* it is said that it does not necessarily imply a direct influence between the Book of Hours and Romanos or vice versa, for this motif was to be found already since the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> c. in several homiletic works, for instance at the end of a sermon for the Nativity attributed to St. Proclus of Constantinople<sup>8</sup>. Actually, there is a difference between those works regarding which element of nature is offering the cave: it is the earth in the *kontakion*, the rock in the *kata stichon*, and the mountains in the sermon. In this case, it can be explained through a lexical or semantic play by the authors, who are employing the rhetorical device of metonymy, for both variants (the rock and the mountains) are a part of the earth as a whole. Moreover, the verb "to offer" also differs in the three works: προσάγει in the *kontakion*, ἔδειξεν in the *kata stichon* and προσφέρει in the sermon. This passage of the sermon bears the idea of all the elements of nature offering what they have to the new-born baby Jesus, and that reads as follows:

καὶ πᾶσα ἡ κτίσις τῷ ἀπάτορι βρέφει προσφέρει τὰ ξένια· ἡ γῆ τὴν φάτνην· αἱ πέτραι τὰς λιθίνας ὑδρίας· τὰ ὄρη τὸ σπήλαιον· αἱ πόλεις τὴν βηθλεέμ· οἱ ἄνεμοι τὴν ὑπακοήν· ἡ θάλασσα τὴν ὑποταγήν· τὰ κύματα τὴν γαλήνην· ὁ βυθὸς τοὺς ἰχθύας· οἱ ἰχθύες τὸν στατήρα· τὰ ὕδατα τὸν Ἰορδάνην· [...] οἱ μάγοι τὰ δῶρα· [...] οἱ ποιμένες τὴν ὕμνωδιαν· [...] ἡ ἀνατολή τὸν ἀστέρα· [...]

All the Creation offers its gifts to the infant without father: the earth (offers) the manger; the rocks, the stone hydric urns; the mountains, the cave; the cities, Bethlehem; the winds, obedience; the sea, submission; the waves, the calm; the depth, fishes; the fishes, the stater (silver coin); the waters, the Jordan; [...] the *magi*, the gifts; [...] the shepherds, chants of praise; [...] the East, the star; [...]<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> A. LINGAS, *The Liturgical Place of the Kontakion in Constantinople*, [in:] *Liturgy, Architecture, and Art in Byzantine World. Papers of the 18. International Byzantine Congress (Moscow, 8–15 August 1991) and Other Essays Dedicated to the Memory of John Meyendorff*, ed. C.C. AKENTIEV, St. Petersburg 1995, p. 50–57, at p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> St. PROCLUS, *Oratio in natalem diem Domini*, IV, 3, [in:] PG, vol. LXV, ed. J.-P. MIGNE, Paris 1864, col. 713C.

<sup>9</sup> Translation by the author.

Here we can see again some other Nativity motifs together with the cave: the manger, Bethlehem, the *magi*, the shepherds, and the star. Furthermore, according to the commentary of the *Book of Hours of Sinai*, this topic could have been already present in a Pseudo-Chrysostom sermon known as *In illud, Memor fui Dei, et delectatus sum*<sup>10</sup> that could be in fact one of the oldest Greek sermons on the Nativity. There we can read the following:

Οἱ καιροὶ τοῦ χειμῶνος καὶ τοῦ φθινοπώρου ἀλλάγητε, καὶ παρὰ φύσιν καρποφορήσατε, καὶ τὰς ἐπικαρπίας ἑαυτῶν προσκομίσασατε τῷ ἐγκυμίσαντι ὑμῶν τοὺς καρπούς· [...] Ὡς δὲ πᾶσα· ἡ κτίσις ἠγάλλετο, ὁμοῦ καὶ γῆ καὶ τὰ ὑπ' οὐρανὸν ἐφαιδρύνοντο χάριτι.

You, the seasons of winter and autumn exchange your roles and bring forth the fruits out of season, offer your products to honour the one who has ripened your fruits. [...] All the creation has rejoiced, the earth at the same time that everything that is under the sky have shone forth with the grace.

The same idea is present also in the fourth *idiomelon*<sup>11</sup> or *sticheron* at the beginning of the liturgical service on the Vespers of the Nativity of Christ, when it says the following:

Τί σοι προσενέγκωμεν Χριστέ, ὅτι ὤφθης ἐπὶ γῆς ὡς ἄνθρωπος δι' ἡμᾶς; ἕκαστον γὰρ τῶν ὑπὸ σοῦ γενομένων κτισμάτων, τὴν εὐχαριστίαν σοι προσάγει· οἱ Ἄγγελοι τὸν ὕμνον, οἱ οὐρανοὶ τὸν Ἀστέρα, οἱ Μάγοι τὰ δῶρα, οἱ Ποιμένες τὸ θαῦμα, ἡ γῆ τὸ σπήλαιον, ἡ ἔρημος τὴν φάτνην· ἡμεῖς δὲ Μητέρα Παρθένον. Ὁ πρὸ αἰώνων Θεὸς ἐλέησον ἡμᾶς.

What shall we bring you, Christ, who have appeared on earth as man for our sake? For each creature made by you gives you thanks, bringing: The angels, their song; heaven, the star. The *Magi*, gifts; the shepherds, the miracle; the earth, the cave; the desert, the manger; and we the virgin mother. God, who is before all ages, have mercy on us.

Some of the elements of this *sticheron*, such as ἡ γῆ τὸ σπήλαιον “the earth, the cave” could be an echo of Romanos, so it could date back to the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> or the 7<sup>th</sup> c. This passage gave origin to a type of icon called after the first words of the *idiomelon* “What shall we bring you, Christ” (also known as the icon of the “Assembly of the Most Holy Mother of God”), that would date back to the 13<sup>th</sup> c. and that was very widespread in the iconography of the Byzantine and post-Byzantine periods<sup>12</sup>. This icon illustrates elements of the *sticheron* given above. At the centre we see Mary with the child Jesus. Directly above her is a star (“heaven, the star”). Beside it are angels (“the angels, their song”). To her left are

<sup>10</sup> St. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Spuria*, [in:] PG, vol. LXI, ed. J.-P. MIGNE, Paris 1862, col. 694–695.

<sup>11</sup> *Menaion*, vol. II, Rome 1889, p. 651, <https://glt.goarch.org/texts/Dec/Dec25.html> [28 II 2023].

<sup>12</sup> R. STICHEL, *Die Geburt Christi in der Russischen Ikonenmalerei. Voraussetzungen in Glauben und Kunst des Christlichen Ostens und Westens*, Stuttgart 1990, p. 118–120; On the typological images of the Virgin in hymnography, see Jaakko (DAMASKINOS) OLKINUORA, *Four Typological Images of Mary in the Hymnography for the Feast of the Entrance*, JISOCM 1, 2014, p. 33–42.

the three *Magi* (“the *Magi*, gifts”). To her right are shepherds (“the shepherds, the miracle”). At left is a figure representing the earth holding the manger (“the earth, the manger”) and at right another figure representing the desert (“the desert, the cave”)<sup>13</sup>. In the lower centre is commonly a group that varies in composition from one representation to another and may include singers, a king or kings, patriarchs, etc. On both sides of this group we see the renowned hymnographers of the eighth century, St. Cosmas of Maiuma and St. John of Damascus with scrolls bearing hymns, most probably with the canons that they allegedly composed for the Nativity of Christ, and that are sung during the liturgical service on the Vespers of the Nativity of Christ.

The theme of the canon of St. Cosmas is that Christ, having become man, has come down to earth while retaining his divine nature. Deeply moved by this event, the author glorifies him with passion and reverence and encourages others (and the whole creation) to rejoice and to praise the Lord. St. Cosmas begins his canon in the *Heirmos*<sup>14</sup> of the first ode with the words from a Nativity sermon by St. Gregory the Theologian:

Χριστὸς γεννᾶται, δοξάζσατε. Χριστὸς ἐξ οὐρανῶν· ἀπαντήσατε. Χριστὸς ἐπὶ γῆς, ὑψώθητε, Ἄισατε τῷ Κυρίῳ πᾶσα ἡ γῆ, καὶ ἐν εὐφροσύνῃ, ἀνυμνήσατε λαοί, ὅτι δεδόξασται<sup>15</sup>.

Christ is born; glorify Him! Christ comes from heaven; go to meet Him! Christ is on earth; be exalted! Sing to the Lord, all the earth! And praise Him in gladness, O people, for He has been glorified!<sup>16</sup>

And at the end of the canon in the 9<sup>th</sup> ode repeats the words of St. John Chrysostom, when saying:

Μυστήριον ξένον, ὄρῳ καὶ παράδοξον! οὐρανὸν τὸ Σπήλαιον· θρόνον Χερουβικόν, τὴν Παρθένον· τὴν φάτνην χωρίον· ἐν ᾧ ἀνεκλίθη ὁ ἀχώρητος, Χριστὸς ὁ Θεός· ὄν ἀνυμνοῦντες μεγαλύνομεν<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Here we observe a little variation comparing to the formulae of the *sticheron* “the earth, the cave; the desert, the manger”, for in the icon the two elements have switched their offerings. It could be a play by the artist for stylistic reasons. Or it could be a way of rendering the gifts more “logical” from the point of view of the artist: it would be very unlikely for the desert to offer a manger. There is a third option, and it is that it could be reflecting a pictorial tradition, for in the iconography of the painting of icons the caves tend to appear close to the characters of saints living in the desert, such as St. Elijah or St. John the Evangelist. In any case, it is a rhetorical device of metonymy as we have seen in the other variants of the texts, for the desert is a part of the whole earth.

<sup>14</sup> In the Byzantine liturgical tradition is the initial troparion of an ode of a canon.

<sup>15</sup> St. COSMAS OF MAIUMA, *Canon on the Nativity of Christ*, [http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/explanatory/ermhneia\\_xristoyenna\\_pezos\\_kanwn.htm](http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/explanatory/ermhneia_xristoyenna_pezos_kanwn.htm) [28 II 2023].

<sup>16</sup> Translation by Michael Bishop: <https://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/nativity.htm> [28 II 2023].

<sup>17</sup> St. COSMAS OF MAIUMA, *Canon on the Nativity of Christ*, [http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/explanatory/ermhneia\\_xristoyenna\\_pezos\\_kanwn.htm](http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/explanatory/ermhneia_xristoyenna_pezos_kanwn.htm) [28 II 2023].

I see a strange and paradoxical mystery. The cave is heaven; the cherubic throne is the Virgin; the manger is the place in which Christ lay, the uncontainable God, Whom we magnify in song!

The second canon, attributed to Saint John of Damascus but of dubious authorship, was written originally in iambic verse and describes those salvific actions that took place for the humankind because of the appearance of the Son of God in the flesh, as was revealed in the New Testament. In general both canons contain the same Nativity motifs: the cave, the manger, the star, the *magi*, the shepherds and the angels, with just a few differences. For instance, St. Cosmas mentions a new motif in the first strophe of the 5<sup>th</sup> ode, the census of Emperor Augustus, according to which Christ was subject to the Emperor's decree and had to register as any other person living in the Roman Empire, a clear reference to Luke 2: 1–3.

Another difference is that king Herod is mentioned in an explicit way in the same canon of St. Cosmas as a cruel and furious murderer of children, in the second and third strophes of the 9<sup>th</sup> ode, while in the canon of St. John of Damascus the character of Herod is absent. Similarly as in St. Cosmas' canon, Herod was a main evil character for Romanos too, for he devoted a whole *kontakion* to the episode of the massacre of the innocents<sup>18</sup>.

There are many allusions to the Nativity motifs in those canons, but we will comment only on one of the most interesting, in our opinion, for its multiple occurrences and symbolic interpretations. It is the reference to the *magi* that can be found twice in the canon of St. Cosmas with a compound name, calling them “stargazers” (ἀστεροσκόποι in Greek) in the second strophe of the 4<sup>th</sup> ode and again naming them “stargazing kings” (Βασιλεῖς ἀστροπολοῦντας) in the third strophe of the 8<sup>th</sup> ode. The context of the first allusion of the *magi* is the fulfilment of the words of prophet Balaam regarding the rise of the star of Jacob as a messianic prophecy of the birth of Christ (Nm 24: 17–19).

Τοῦ Μάντεως πάλαι Βαλαάμ, τῶν λόγων μνητὰς σοφούς, ἀστεροσκόπους χαρὰς ἐπλησας,  
ἀστήρ ἐκ τοῦ Ἰακώβ, ἀνατείλας Δέσποτα, Ἐθνῶν ἀπαρχὴν εἰσαγομένους· ἐδέξω δὲ προ-  
φανῶς, δῶρά σοι δεκτὰ προσκομίζοντας<sup>19</sup>.

Thou hast filled the stargazers with joy, O Lord. They knew the hidden meaning of the prophet Balaam's words. Thou hast made the star of Jacob to rise. As the first-fruits of the Gentiles it led them unto Thee. Thou didst openly receive their precious gifts. Glory to Thy power, O Lord!<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Kontakion 3 in Sancti Romani melodi cantica...*, p. 17–26.

<sup>19</sup> St. COSMAS OF ΜΑΙΟΥΜΑ, *Canon on the Nativity of Christ*, [http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/explanatory/ermhneia\\_xristoyenna\\_pezos\\_kanwn.htm](http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/explanatory/ermhneia_xristoyenna_pezos_kanwn.htm) [28 II 2023].

<sup>20</sup> Translation by Michael Bishop: <https://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/nativity.htm> [28 II 2023].



In addition, the *magi* are mentioned here as the first Gentiles or nations to worship the Lord in as a proof of the fulfilment of the messianic prophecies (as in Ps 86: 9).

The context of the second allusion shows also a very interesting subject. The *heirmos* of the 8<sup>th</sup> ode devoted to the Babylonian fiery furnace is employed to introduce the topic of the exile in Babylon. Though following the literary genre constraints Cosmas was obliged to mention the three men in the Babylonian fiery furnace in the 8<sup>th</sup> ode of the canon, here a very subtle and refined intertextual play can be detected here. Thus, in the first strophe of this same 8<sup>th</sup> ode, the *magi* are presented as the restitution of that crime against the people of Israel, making their journey the opposite way: if earlier the daughter of Babylon drove David's children from Zion as captives, plundering and stealing their treasures, now the "daughter of Babylon", that is, Chaldea, sends her own captivated children, the wise men, bringing back their treasures to David's daughter, that is the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, in order to worship the Messiah, the descendant from king David. By doing so, Cosmas follows the exegetical tradition from Irenaeus onwards of recapitulation/*anakephalaisios* in which an old sin is reverted towards salvation, being also a case of a typological reading of the Scriptures.

Ἐλκει Βαβυλῶνος ἡ θυγάτηρ παῖδας, δορυκτῆτους Δαυῖδ, ἐκ Σιών ἐν αὐτῇ, δωροφόρους πέμπει δέ, Μάγους παῖδας, τὴν τοῦ Δαυῖδ θεοδόχον θυγατέρα λιτανεύσοντα· διὸ ἀνυμνοῦντες ἀναμέλωμεν. Εὐλογεῖτω ἡ κτίσις πᾶσα τὸν Κύριον, καὶ ὑπερυψούτω, εἰς πάντας τοὺς αἰῶνας<sup>21</sup>.

The daughter of Babylon drove David's children from Zion with sword and spear. Now she sends her sons, the wise men, bearing gifts, to worship in David's city, where God has come to dwell. So let us raise the song: Let all creation bless the Lord, and exalt Him throughout all ages!<sup>22</sup>

This idea is repeated again in the third strophe of the same 8<sup>th</sup> ode, where the *magi* are referred to with the expression "stargazing kings", that we mentioned:

Σκύλα Βαβυλῶν τῆς Βασιλίδος Σιών, καὶ δορυκτῆτον ὄλβον ἐδέξατο, θησαυροὺς Χριστός, ἐν Σιών δὲ ταύτης, καὶ Βασιλεῖς σὺν ἀστέρι ὄδηγῶ, ἀστροπολοῦντας ἔλκει· διὸ ἀνυμνοῦντες ἀναμέλωμεν· Εὐλογεῖτω ἡ κτίσις πᾶσα τὸν Κύριον, καὶ ὑπερυψούτω, εἰς πάντας τοὺς αἰῶνας<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> St. COSMAS OF ΜΑΙΟΥΜΑ, *Canon on the Nativity of Christ*, [http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/explanatory/ermlhneia\\_xristoygenna\\_pezos\\_kanwn.htm](http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/explanatory/ermlhneia_xristoygenna_pezos_kanwn.htm) [28 II 2023].

<sup>22</sup> Translation by Michael Bishop: <https://www.fatheralexander.org/booklets/english/nativity.htm> [28 II 2023].

<sup>23</sup> St. COSMAS OF ΜΑΙΟΥΜΑ, *Canon on the Nativity of Christ*, [http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/explanatory/ermlhneia\\_xristoygenna\\_pezos\\_kanwn.htm](http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/explanatory/ermlhneia_xristoygenna_pezos_kanwn.htm) [28 II 2023].



Babylon captured the spoils of war and riches from the Queen of the cities of Zion. Now from Zion, Christ captivates her treasures, namely her stargazing kings themselves, bedazzled by the bright guiding star. So let us melodiously chant in praise: Let all creation bless and extol the Lord, and let it exalt Him supremely to the ages.

We see that it is repeated at the end the sentence *Let all creation bless and extol the Lord, and let it exalt Him supremely to the ages*, that reminds us what we commented earlier on the whole creation bringing its gifts to Christ, in this case singing chants of praise. And this idea is strengthened by the second strophe inserted in between the others, in which this subject is developed as association with the topic of the exile in Babylon. It reads as follows:

Ὅργανα παρέκλιε τὸ πένθος ὡδῆς· οὐ γὰρ ἦδον ἐν νόθοις οἱ παῖδες Σιών, Βαβυλῶνος λύει δέ, πλάνην πᾶσαν καὶ μουσικῶν, ἁρμονίαν Βηθλεὲμ ἐξανατείλας Χριστός· διὸ ἀνυμνοῦντες ἀναμέλψωμεν. Εὐλογεῖτω ἡ κτίσις πᾶσα τὸν Κύριον, καὶ ὑπερυψούτω, εἰς πάντας τοὺς αἰῶνας<sup>24</sup>.

Lamentation once suspended organ of song; for Zion's children would not sing in strange lands. Rising out of Bethlehem, Christ abolished all the error of Babylon, her harmony of music as well. So let us melodiously chant in praise: Let all creation bless and extol the Lord, and let it exalt Him supremely to the ages.

It tells how the chants praising the Lord of the people of Israel were interrupted by the forced exile in Babylon, and even though their oppressors ask them to sing, they refused, as a quotation of the famous Ps 137: 1–4 that, according to the King James Version<sup>25</sup>, says as follows:

1. By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.
2. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.
3. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.
4. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

Therefore, the birth of Christ would imply the restoration of the universal harmony between humans and God through the music and the sacred chants that had been interrupted with the exile in Babylon.

In the canon of Saint John of Damascus the same idea is to be found in the second strophe of the 8<sup>th</sup> ode, but in an even more developed way:

Λύμην φυγοῦσα τοῦ θεοῦσθαι τῇ πλάνῃ,  
Ἄληκτον ὕμνει τὸν κενούμενον Λόγον.  
Νεανικῶς ἅπανα σὺν τρόμῳ κτίσις,

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> However, Cosmas would rather refer to Psalm 136 in LXX.

Ἄδοξον εὐχος δειματομένη φέρειν,  
Ῥευστή γεγώσα, κἄν σοφῶς ἐκαρτέρει<sup>26</sup>.

Turning away from the guilt of its vain attempt to become as God,  
sings in praise of the eternal Word, who now empties Himself,  
the whole creation, like the three Children,  
yet in trembling, fearing in its corruption to bring  
a prayer unacceptable to God, although the (divine)  
wisdom ever maintains it in being.

Unlike St. Cosmas, St. John of Damascus does not encourage the whole creation to sing chants of praise. Instead, it states that the creation is already singing, like the three Children of the fiery furnace of Babylon, to praise the Word that was God, in the figure of Christ, having turned away from the original sin, and fearing not to be worthy of doing so, because of its temporary and ephemeral nature. However, as the composer says, the creation does not know that the Wisdom of God can make it eternal.

We can add here that a similar allusion to the Babylonian (or Chaldaean origin) of the *magi* was also mentioned in the strophe 13 of the *kontakion* of Romanos Melodos<sup>27</sup>, also associated with the fiery furnace of Babylon, and the worship of fire in the Zoroastrian religion<sup>28</sup>:

13. Ὡς δὲ ταῦτα αὐτοῖς / ἢ φαινή ἐλάλησεν,  
οἱ τῆς ἀνατολῆς / λύχνοι πρὸς αὐτήν ἔφησαν  
Μαθεῖν θέλεις, πόθεν / ἠλύθαμεν ὧδε;  
ἐκ γῆς Χαλδαίων, / ὅθεν οὐ λέγουσι· ‘θεὸς θεῶν κύριος’,  
ἐκ Βαβυλώνος, / ὅπου οὐκ οἶδασι  
τίς ὁ ποιητῆς / τούτων ὧν σέβουσιν·  
ἐκεῖθεν ἦλθε / καὶ ἦρεν ἡμᾶς  
ὁ τοῦ παιδίου σου σπινθῆρ / ἐκ τοῦ πυρὸς τοῦ Περσικοῦ·  
πῦρ παμφάγον λιπόντες / πῦρ δροσίζον θεωροῦμεν  
παιδίον νέον, / τὸν πρὸ αἰώνων θεόν.

<sup>26</sup> St. JOHN OF DAMASCUS, *Canon on the Nativity of Christ*, [http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/explanatory/ermhneia\\_xristoygenna\\_iambikos\\_kanwn.htm](http://users.uoa.gr/~nektar/orthodoxy/explanatory/ermhneia_xristoygenna_iambikos_kanwn.htm) [28 II 2023].

<sup>27</sup> *Sancti Romani melodi cantica...*, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> J. Grosdidier de Matons considers that Romanos does not distinguish here between Chaldeans and Persians, and that in this strophe he means the fiery furnace by the phrase “Persian fire” (see J. GROSDIDIER DE MATONS, *Romanos le Mélode, Hymnes*, vol. II, Paris 1965 [= SC 110], p. 65 n. 2). However, due to the insistent remarks of Romanos about the pagan religion of the Chaldeans (“they do not say, ‘The Lord is God of gods’”, “they do not know who is the maker of the things they reverence”), we could infer that here the expression “Persian fire” could refer both to the fiery furnace and to the Zoroastrian religion, from which the *Magi* were saved through the “the spark from your Child”, leaving “an all-devouring fire”, that is, the fire of paganism, and seeing “a fire which brings dew”, the fire and light of Christ.

13. When the Shining One had spoken thus, the lamps of the East said to her, “Do you wish to learn from where we have come here? From the land of the Chaldaeans, where they do not say, ‘The Lord is God of gods.’ From Babylon, where they do not know who is the maker of the things they reverence. From there it came, the spark from your Child, and raised us from the Persian fire; we have left an all-devouring fire and see a fire which brings dew: a little Child, God before the ages”<sup>29</sup>.

In the *kontakion*<sup>30</sup> an interesting comparison of the star that guided the *magi* with the pillar of fire that guided Moses in the exodus from Egypt (Ex 13: 21) can also be found, another example of Romanos’ typological exegesis:

18. [...] ἡμεῖς δὲ τούτοις / ὅπερ ἠπίσταντο / ἀντεπηρωτήσαμεν·  
 ὑμεῖς τὸ πάρος / πῶς διωδεύσατε  
 ἔρημον πολλὴν / ἤνπερ διήλθετε;  
 ὁ ὁδηγήσας / τοὺς ἀπ’ Αἰγύπτου  
 αὐτὸς ὠδήγησε καὶ νῦν / τοὺς ἐκ Χαλδαίων πρὸς αὐτόν,  
 τότε στύλῳ πυρίνῳ, / νῦν δὲ ἄστρῳ τῷ δηλοῦντι  
 παιδίον νέον, / τὸν πρὸ αἰώνων θεόν.

18. [...] He who guided those who came from Egypt himself now guides those who come to him from Chaldaeae; then by a pillar of fire, now by the star which shows a little Child, God before the ages<sup>31</sup>.

Before concluding we will return to the motif of the midwife that appeared in the *kata stichon*, and that has no other parallels in the above-mentioned texts. As we said, it was rather surprising to find an apocryphal motif originally found in the *Protevangelium of James* (19–20) and the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (13)<sup>32</sup>. But unlike those works, which mention two midwives, in the hymn *kata stichon* only one of them appears. As the midwife has no name we are not able to tell to which of the midwives of the apocryphal gospels it refers: in the *Protevangelium of James* only one of the women bears a name, Salome. That was the woman who needed to touch the Virgin Mary in order to verify that she was still a Virgin after the miraculous birth. As a result, her hand was burned and fell off her body, being cured afterwards by touching the infant. In this manner the apocryphal Gospels added this story of the midwives as a way of demonstrating Mary’s virginity after the birth. In the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* both midwives are named: the first woman who saw a bright light caused by a miracle in the cave before the infant appeared is called Zelomi, and the unbelieving woman is called Salome like in the *Protevangelium of James*. Thus, we do not know which midwife the *kata stichon*

<sup>29</sup> St. ROMANOS, *Kontakia*..., p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> *Sancti Romani melodi cantica*..., p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> St. ROMANOS, *Kontakia*..., p. 10.

<sup>32</sup> A. WALKER, *Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, and Revelations*, Edinburgh 1870, p. 11–12, 31–33.

refers to when saying that she received the grace: the first woman for being able to see the light and the miracle, or the second one, Salome, for being forgiven for her sin of unfaithfulness. Most probably it is alluding to the second one, for she was the one who “received the grace” of forgiveness of her sin of disbelief.

We would like to finish by reminding that, in spite of its absence in the canonical Gospels, this motif of the midwives has been very widespread in the medieval art, not only in the Eastern Christian churches (in Russian and Greek icons and paintings) but also in the Western Romanesque depictions (both in paintings and in sculptures). As in the Russian icon, they are represented performing the first bath of the infant<sup>33</sup>, a motif that does not appear in the aforementioned apocryphal Gospels. Moreover, there is a tradition according to which Salome was healed by pouring the water of the infant’s bath on her hand.

What we can say in conclusion, bearing in mind the studied texts on the Nativity motifs, is that during the Middle Ages all the Christian works were conceived as a whole, showing crossed influences between them: both the homiletic and hymnographic works, but also the hagiographies and of course the Scriptures (both the canonical and the apocryphal), having a reflection in the medieval Christian art too. Mainly, we have seen for instance how Romanos’s *kontakion* had an echo in later canons on the Nativity, and that his method of biblical exegesis through typology or prefiguration was widely spread in all the analysed liturgical texts. And we observed how the echo of Romanos on the fourth *idiomelon* or *sticheron* at the beginning of the liturgical service on the Vespers of the Nativity of Christ could be useful in finding out the date of the latter. In contrast, in the examples with different variants, as for instance regarding which element of nature is offering the cave to Christ (the earth in the *kontakion* and in the *sticheron*, the rock in the *kata stichon*, the mountains in the sermon, and the desert in the icon), the differences can be due to a stylistic or semantic play by the authors, who are employing the rhetorical device of metonymy, or even to the pictorial tradition in the icon.

<sup>33</sup> R. STICHEL, *Die Geburt Christi...*, p. 50–52.

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