

Wittgenstein Award Project
“Mobility, Microstructures and Personal Agency in Byzantium”

Forum Moving Byzantium XVIII

The Virgin ‘Wider than Heaven’. From Pseudo-Dionysius to the Theological Controversies Which Opposed Byzantium to Rome between the Seventh–Ninth Centuries

The Wittgenstein Project Team invites you to our eighteenth group discussion meeting. “Forum Moving Byzantium XVIII” will take place on **Monday 04.02.2019**, from **17:00** to **18:30**, at the Department of Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies (University of Vienna, Postgasse 7, 1010 Vienna, Staircase 1, Third Floor, Hörsaal).

The Forum Moving Byzantium XVIII will provide the unique opportunity to discuss with **Ass. Prof. Francesca Dell’Acqua Boyvadaoğlu (Università di Salerno)** her current work on **“The Virgin ‘Wider than Heaven’. From Pseudo-Dionysius to the Theological Controversies Which Opposed Byzantium to Rome between the Seventh–Ninth Centuries”**. Francesca Dell’Acqua is Assistant Professor in History of Medieval Art at the University of Salerno and holds the Habilitation to Associate Professorship. She has been affiliated with the ‘Moving Byzantium Project’ since 2017. Her current work explores the idea of Mary as emblem of wisdom and authority in the medieval period and how this impacted on the idea of female authority and leadership in past and present societies.

Her presentation fits into the strand of the ‘Moving Byzantium’ Project that deals with ‘People, Texts, and Ideas on the Move’. It will investigate the intangible cultural transfer of texts, religious thought, and figural images. It will also touch upon the question of figural images as being related to high or low culture between the eastern Mediterranean and the Latin West. The idea of the *Platyτέρα*, that is the Virgin Mary with a womb ‘wider than heaven’, is alluded to by the pseudo-apostolic author Dionysius the Areopagite in his treatise on the *Divine Names*. Perhaps by no coincidence its earliest known figural developments coincide in dating with his writings. The textual and material image of the *Platyτέρα* was used to emphasise the mystery of the Incarnation of an incommensurable God in the small womb of a woman, and also to extol this very woman and her role in the divine economy of salvation.

This presentation will address the fact that the *Platyτέρα* was connected to Mary’s Assumption into heaven because Christian exegetes believed that she deserved an exceptional transition to the afterlife as she had once contained the uncontainable God in her womb. It will first address the question of Mary’s Dormition and Assumption into heaven, and then the related concept of the *Platyτέρα*. It will highlight the role of Pseudo-Dionysius and of Greek homilies on the Dormition composed between the seventh–eighth centuries and their reception in the Latin West. Finally, it will refer to figural renderings of the *Platyτέρα* which articulate a refined discourse about the womb of Mary as ‘wider than heaven’ – a discourse pitched at an intellectually high audience.

After a short introduction by Ass. Prof. Dell’Acqua, there will be ample time for discussion moderated by Prof. Karin Krause (University of Chicago) on the basis of the following preparatory readings:

1. Brown, P., ‘Images as a Substitute for Writing,’ in *East and West: Modes of Communication*, eds. E. C. Chrysos, I. N. Wood, The Transformation of the Roman World 5 (Leiden, 1999), 15–34.
2. Cameron, A., ‘The Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Religious Development and Myth-Making,’ in *The Church and Mary*, ed. R. N. Swanson, Studies in Church History 39 (Woodbridge, 2004), 1–20.
3. Cavallo, G., ‘Testo e immagine: una frontiera ambigua,’ in *Testo e immagine nell’alto Medioevo*, 2 vols., Settimane 41 (Spoleto, 1994), 1: 31–62.
4. Cunningham, M., ‘Mary as Intercessor in Constantinople during the Iconoclast Period: The Textual Evidence,’ in *Presbeia Theotokou. The Intercessory Role of Mary Across Times and Places in Byzantium (4th – 9th Century)*, eds. L. M. Peltomaa, A. Kulzer, P. Allen, Veröffentlichung zur Byzanzforschung 39, Denkschriften der phil.-hist. Klasse 481 (Vienna, 2015), 139–152.

Some of the questions that will be put forward for discussion are:

- Mary has been defined by Simon Claude Mimouni ‘a system of values’, and she was pivotal in the discussion (and the resolution) of important theological controversies about the natures, the ‘wills’, and the depictability of the Incarnate God. Averil Cameron noted the ‘extraordinary capaciousness of the model of the Virgin’, that is her capacity ‘to be all things to people at different times and places’. So, which were the values attached to Mary? Can we define a specific set of values?
- Was the exaltation of the Virgin Mary was particularly boosted during the period of theological controversies about the natures, the ‘wills’, and the depictability of the Incarnate God (late seventh–mid ninth centuries)?
- How texts and images interact? Do they belong to different realms? Or are they different facets of the same prism of culture?

If you are interested in attending the event, please contact Ms. Paraskevi Sykopetritou (Project Coordinator) in order to receive further information and the relevant reading material: paraskevi.sykopetritou@univie.ac.at

For further information and updates on future events you may also consult our website: <http://rapp.univie.ac.at/>

We hope that you can join our Forum for fruitful discussions!