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#### SAINT CASSIA – SOCIO-CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS ELEMENTS RELEVANT FOR HER HYMNOGRAPHIC LIFE AND WORK

Mihail-Lucian I. DUMITRACHE (a)\*, Nicușor TUCĂ (b),

\*Corresponding author

(a) “Ovidius” University of Constanta, Romania, [d.mihailluc2012@yahoo.com](mailto:d.mihailluc2012@yahoo.com)

(b) “Ovidius” University of Constanta, Romania, [tucanicusor@yahoo.com](mailto:tucanicusor@yahoo.com)

#### *Abstract*

The present work investigates, in an interdisciplinary framework, the personality and the contribution of Saint Cassia (c. 810 – c. 865) in the context of the 9<sup>th</sup> century Byzantium specifics, analyzing the socio-cultural, religious and educational dimensions of the epoch. The premise is that Saint Cassia is not an ordinary, marginal figure but an emblematic model of Christian woman, cultivated, hymnographer and theologian, whose work was integrated in the Orthodox liturgical canon.

**Keywords:** Saint Cassia (also Kassia, Kassiane or Kassiani); Byzantium; iconoclasm; hymnography; melodion

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

The present study unfolds on four major directions: the historical context of the post-iconoclast Constantinople, with accent on the restoration of the Orthodoxy and the cultural rebirth during the period of the Amorion dynasty; the social structures and the condition of the woman in the Byzantine Empire, highlighting the limited but significant tendency towards the affirmation of the feminine voices, especially in the monastic environment; the educational Byzantine system, where the classic *paideia*, a conception specific of Ancient Greece aimed at cultivating the human spirit by philosophy and science, is intertwined with patristic theology, creating the framework for Cassia's intellectual training; the biographic and hagiographic profile of Saint Cassia, with accent on her hymnographic and theological contribution.



The research underlines the originality of Cassia's theological and poetical language, inspired by the patristic writings but ennobled by a special lyrical sensibility. The choice of monasticism to the detriment of the imperial marriage is interpreted as an act of spiritual freedom and a theological calling. The methodology of the work combines historical, philological and theological analysis, offering an integrated perspective on a remarkable feminine figure.

## **2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE POST-ICONOCLAST CONSTANTINOPLE AND THE RESTORATION OF THE ORTHODOXY**

In this approach, we do not just want to answer the question “who was Saint Cassia?” but also – by the investigation of the social structures, of the forms of implementation of the education and of the woman's status, in general, during that epoch of Byzantium, but also of her personality features – to argue for the way Saint Cassia has become an emblematic icon for the Orthodox spirituality and liturgics and, *in extensis*, a relevant and atemporal model for all the Christian women.

The 9<sup>th</sup> century, coinciding with the period when Saint Cassia lived, is defined by two major phenomena: the definitive conclusion of the iconoclast crisis and the consolidation of a new ideological synthesis, but also a complex dynamic of social stability and cultural renaissance, helped by the reconfiguration of the imperial power under the Amorian dynasty, later on known as the Macedonian Renaissance. The triumph of the Orthodoxy of 843 “was not a simple political act” (Alexakis A., 2009, 114), of restoration of a cult, but a refounding of the Byzantine identity, “reestablishing the visual grammar of the Orthodoxy” (Alexakis A., 2009, 114). The art, the liturgy and the written culture became central pillars of the imperial cohesion, delimiting a favourable environment for the affirmation of a creative personality, like Cassia, and created the necessary premises for her to be able to contribute, significantly, to the spiritual patrimony of the Empire.

The end of the second period of the iconoclasm, consecrated by the local Synod of Constantinople (March 843), marked a founding moment in the history of Byzantium, an inflection point going by far beyond the simple return of the icons in the church, becoming an act of ideological refounding of the Empire. After over a century of internal disunion, which had weakened the State especially in front of the external Arabic and Bulgarian pressures, the restauration of the cult of the icons became a powerful politico-social binder, around a common symbol of faith and identity, between army, population, and clergy.

The period of the Amorian dynasty rule (820–867) was one of transition, marked by fluctuating imperial policies, yet, which, as a whole, prepared the ground for the cultural stability and the bloom of the Macedonian epoch. Michael II “the Stammerer” (820–829) reigned under the sign of political pragmatism, trying to manage the iconoclast conflict by a policy of moderate tolerance. In contrast, Theophilos (829–842), his son, self-titled “restorer of the authentic Orthodoxy” (Brubaker L., John Haldon J., 2011, 324) was an iconoclast, a zealous persecutor of the iconodules, Cassia being one of these iconodules.

He will impose by force his religious policy, yet, paradoxically, he will also propose a remarkable cultural opening in the Empire, becoming an important patron of the education and of the arts. Theophilos' contradictory attitudes, highlighted by the policies proposed, had a direct and formative impact on Cassia as well: the persecution gave her theological motivation, and the cultural patronage gave her the form and intellectual tools. Because, it seems, without persecution, her message would have been less urgent, and without that cultural renaissance, her form would have been, maybe, less convincing.

Michael III's rule (842–867), begun under the regency of his mother, Theodora, marked the definitive triumph of the Orthodoxy and opened the way for what the historians call “the first Byzantine Renaissance” or “the pre-Macedonian Renaissance” (Shepard J., 2008, 234). After fully taking over the power, Michael III also stood out by his support of the cultural and theological circles in the capital, thus,

increasing the level of the urban elites' education. The activity of certain great scholars, such as Leo the Mathematician and, especially, the Patriarch Photios the Great, was achieved under imperial patronage.

The three emperors of the Amorian period succeeded, each in his own way, in managing the tensions between the religious ideology, uplifting and with long term effects, and the need of stability, pragmatic and with immediate effects. As a whole, Michael II preferred the compromise, Theophilos imposed the iconoclasm by force, while Michael III orchestrated the triumph of the icon.

### **3. THE SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND THE CONDITION OF THE WOMAN IN THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE**

The monasteries for nuns, especially those from the great urban centres, functioned not just as spaces of ascesis, but also as important centres of culture, education and feminine power. In these communities, considered an alternative and spiritually superior *oikos* to that of the world, the women had access to libraries, participated to the copying of manuscripts, studied theology and composed hymns. As Alice-Mary Talbot shows, the intellectual life in the monasteries could reach remarkable levels, of true focars of feminine erudition (Talbot A.-M., 2019, 287).

The analysis of Saint Cassia's intellectual and spiritual training requires a deep investigation of the 9<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine educational system. Far from being a static system, education in Byzantium was a living organism, which, although socially stratified and often restrictive, managed to preserve and reinterpret a vast cultural treasure, becoming a fundamental pillar of the imperial identity. For women, although submitted to certain social constraints, *monasticism* and *private education* represented essential ways of affirmation, allowing some figures, such as Saint Cassia, to overcome the gender barriers by mastering the intellectual instruments of the epoch (Garland L., 1999, 104).

The official ideology claimed that the education of a girl ought to be limited to the duties of the home (*oikos*), to the study of the lives of the saints and to the memoration of the Psalms, to train her to be a good Christian wife and mother. This vision was reinforced by the rhetoric discourse of the Church, which was promoting an ideal of modesty and withdrawal.

However, the Byzantine society acknowledged the spiritual equality of women, which permitted the development of alternative educational channels. The limitations were, therefore, rather of social and cultural order than of dogmatic order. The girls from aristocratic families benefited frequently of a private education, received at home from tutors, training that could reach a very high level, including not just the ABCs but also the study of classical literature, rhetoric and philosophy, as proved by figures such as Cassia or, later on, Anna Comnena (Garland L., 1999, 104).

Another fundamental way, and maybe the most important for the feminine education, was monasticism. The monasteries of nuns provided an institutionalized framework for a life dedicated to study and prayer, representing an alternative to the marital destiny. The lady superiors of such monasteries were often very cult women, turning their establishments into true centers of feminine spirituality and erudition.

Cassia is the perfect example of this double opportunity: she first benefited of the private education specific of the aristocracy, then went deeper and capitalized on this training in her own monastery, which she turned into a hub of hymnographic creation (Ieropoulou K., 2013, 45).

### **4. SAINT CASSIA'S BIOGRAPHICAL AND HAGIOGRAPHIC PROFILE**

The study of any Byzantine personality needs to start from the social context that modelled her existence, and in the case of Cassia, this context is a privileged one, which allowed her access to educational and cultural resources inaccessible to the majority of the women of the respective epoch.

Sources agree, according Anna M. Silvas (2006, 17), in placing her in the higher ranks of the Constantinopolitan society, born around the year 810, in an aristocratic and influent family. Her father, though not identified with precision, would have held the rank of *kandidatos* (Bardak, B. 2021) at the imperial court, a honorary title given to the high-ranking officers of the palace guard, which attests a proximity to the power circles. The 10th century Enciclopedic Lexicon, *Suda*, although laconic, offers an essential entry at *kappa 1217*, confirming both her literary activity, and her intellectual status: “Cassia, a woman full of wisdom, composed troparia and other poems” (Adler A., 1931). In its turn, *Synaxarium Constantinopolitanum*, while not dedicating to her a detailed entry for her celebration day (7 September), mentions her in other contexts as “the one from among the nobles” (Delehay H., 1992), unequivocally confirming her belonging to the imperial elite.

The central episode of Cassia’s lay biography, which captivated the Byzantine and modern imagination, is her participation to “the choosing of the bride”, organized around the year 830, for the young emperor Theophilos. The story has reached us by three tenth century chroniclers: Symeon Logothete, Georgios Monachos (“The Sinner”) and Leo Grammaticus, whose chronicle is often included in the corpus *Theophanes Continuatus* (Bekker I., 1838, 90). Although there are small variations, the narrative core is constant. Symeon Logothete, considered the source closest to the events, offers the classical version: the mother Empress Euphrosyne brought together the most beautiful virgins of the Empire in the Tricline of the Pearl, and Emperor Theophilos, with a golden apple in his hand as a symbol of his choice, drew close to Cassia. Impressed by her beauty, yet wanting to test her spirit, as well, as Georgios Monachos let us know, he addressed to her a sententious verse alluding to Eve: “By the woman, therefore, the evil things have flown [in the world]” (Bekker I., 1838, 791). Cassia’s prompt reply, according to Leo Grammaticus, full of theological spirit, referring to the Virgin Mary, was: “But also by a woman, spring forth the very best things” [“Καὶ ὑπὸ γυναικὸς ἄριστα ἐκβλύει”] (Bekker I., 1838, 213), “and Theophilos, being amazed [by the answer] – Theophanes Continuatus informs us – passed her by” (Bekker I., 1838, 91), offering the apple to Theodora of Paphlagonia.

Regardless of whether the dialogue took place exactly as it is related or not, it functions as a perfect parable of Cassia’s vocation. Her answer is not a simple spiritual reply but a testimony of deep faith, counterbalancing the anthropology of the fall (Eve and sin) by the theology of the Embodiment (the Virgin Mary and salvation). Her choice of not becoming an empress is not presented as a failure, but as a spiritual victory.

After the episode from the court, Cassia withdraws from the world and, using her considerable family fortune, founds a monastery of nuns in Constantinople, in the area known as Xerolophos, the seventh hill of the town. A decisive factor in the destiny of Cassia’s work was “the close relation” she cultivated with Studion Monastery, an erudition hub and the stronghold of the iconodule movement and the core of the liturgical reform that modelled the Orthodox cult for the following centuries. By this affiliation, Cassia’s Monastery became part of a strong network of theological, political and cultural influence.

Cassia’s profile cannot be complete without highlighting her dimension of testifier for the faith (*homologetria*), a quality that gave her an immense moral authority in the post-iconoclast Byzantine society. Cassia’s firm commitment in favour of honouring the holy icons, during a period during which Emperor Theophilos had resumed the iconoclast policy, is well-documented. One of her most famous gnomic verses, functioning as a manifesto of her profetic conscience, is: “I hate silence when it’s time to speak” (Wellesley M., Toth P., 2016). Late hagiographic sources, corroborated with modern analyses, such as the one of the German researcher Ilse Rochow, mention that she suffered physical persecutions for her faith, including the humiliation of whipping (Rochow I., 1967, 42). Although the details can be beautified hagiographically, the historical core of her suffering for the faith is plausible and essential for understanding her status after 843, when the Empire entered a period of glorification of those who

suffered for the icons. These “testifiers” (*homologetai*) enjoyed an immense moral authority, often superior to that of the official hierarchy. The fact that Cassia was one of them gave her a legitimacy that neither her aristocratic rank, nor her poetic genius could have given to her by themselves. Her suffering “sanctified” her voice.

After having founded the monastery and after the Triumph of the Orthodoxy, contemporary sources or the sources close to her time become silent regarding Cassia. The exact date of her death is not sure, being situated by most researchers before the year 867, at the end of Michael III’s rule. Late chroniclers, such as Michael Glykas, Theodoros Prodromos și Ioannis Zonarae, mention a voyage of Cassia in the south of Italy and her death on the Kasos Island of the Dodecanese. The legend of her death on the Kasos Island is not, therefore, necessarily a historical fact, but rather a proof of the expansion and localization of her cult, an indicator of her posthumous fame.

No analysis of Cassia’s hagiographic profile can omit the legend related to her most famous hymn, the *Troparion for Holy Wednesday*, and to Emperor Theophilos who, bitten by regret, would have visited Cassia in her monastic cell and, finding the hymn unfinished, would have added the verse “whose steps having been heard by Eve by noon in Heaven, for fear she hid herself” (Kassiani, 2025) – the most likely a late hagiographic construction, unattested at all in the early sources. This narrative turns a failed love story into a parable of repentance and forgiveness. It is, in essence, a dramatization of the central theme of the hymn itself: the sinner who, in front of Christ’s holiness, admits his sinful state and receives forgiveness.

The strongest proof of Cassia’s status of saint and theologian is the massive and durable integration of her work in the fundamental cult books of the Orthodox Church: *Triodion* (for the Lent) and *Menaia* (for the saints with a fixed date) (Whitehead D. et al., 2014). This fact constitutes an implicit, yet undeniable, canonic validation, of her authority. Using the modern critical editions, we can identify a sure hymnographic corpus of about 50 hymns, of a remarkable theological coherence and poetic mastery (Touliatos D., 2001).

Another masterpiece is the brief canon (*tetraodion*) of the Matins of the Holy Saturday, which explores the mystery of Christ’s mystic silence in the grave (“He who closed the abyss lies before us dead; and as a corpse the Immortal is wrapped in linen with sweet spices and laid in a tomb. The women come to anoint Him with myrrh, weeping bitterly and crying: ‘This is the most blessed Sabbath on which Christ sleeps, but on the third day He shall rise again.’”, Kontakion, tone six, 649), of an overwhelming solemnity and proves Cassia’s capacity to articulate the deepest mysteries of the faith in an extremely powerful liturgical language. As we can read in a commentary in *The Lenten Triodion* (2002, 647): „The first, third, fourth, and fifth canticles of this canon are the work of Mark the Monk, Bishop of Hydrous, and the last four canticles are by Kosmas of the Hof City. The irmoi are the work of Kassiani.” (See also in the Mattins, on The Holy Saturday: Canticle five, 3<sup>rd</sup> troparion, 648; Canticle seven, irmos, 650; Canticle eight, irmos, 650; Canticle eight, 4<sup>th</sup> troparion, 651). The integration of a hymn in the liturgical cycle of the Orthodox Church is not a simple act of aesthetic recognition, but a validation of the fact that the respective text expresses correctly (*Orthodoxy*) the faith of the Church.

Among her maxims, of a classical concision, there are: “I hate the one that speaks a lot and says nothing useful”, “Better righteously defeated than unrighteously victorious” or the sharp observation against stupidity - “Foolishness is an absolute evil, with no remedy”. These verses reveal a lucid spirit, a moralist using poetry not just for divine praise, but also to criticize mores (Hunger H., 1978, 165). Her criticism against vices springs from an ascetic perspective, which sees these weaknesses as obstacles in the way to the knowledge of God.

Cassia’s life can be read as an icon of the way to deification (*theosis*). Her trajectory – from a good education (*logos*), through testifying suffering (*martyria*), to hymnographic creation (*doxa*) – represents a model of the synergy between divine grace and human effort. She is not just a historical character or a

literary figure, but a living model of holiness, whose spiritual, cultural and theological relevance remains intact. In this way, Cassia becomes a living icon of holiness, an atemporal model of courage, intelligence and faith for all generations.

In the end, we need to reaffirm the *fundamental thesis of the research*: the validation of Saint Cassia not just as a genius in her quality of hymnographer (*melodos*), but also as an authentic theologian (*theologos*) in the deepest sense of the Orthodox tradition. The central argument of the present approach is that her status of theologian does not represent an anachronic reevaluation, but an implicit, yet uncontested, recognition by the ecclesial conscience of Byzantium. The application of the title of *theologos* to a 9<sup>th</sup> century woman, a title reserved traditionally to exceptional figures such as Saint John the Evangelist or Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, is fully justified in Cassia's case by the fact that her hymnography is not poetry *on* the dogma, but *dogma expressed poetically*. Cassia is not a theologian *in spite* of the fact that she is a poet, but becomes a theologian *by* the fact that she is a poet whose work has been recognized by the Church as a canonic, Orthodox expression, of her faith.

Saint Cassia's emergence was a phenomenon deeply anchored in the historical, social and cultural realities of her epoch. Without any of these three elements – the theological demand of the epoch, her intellectual offer or her strategic platform – it is very likely that Cassia's genius would have remained a private voice, lost in history. Their convergence explains her ascent to the canonic status.

Her authority does not rely on a hierarchic-administrative function (as that of a bishop), but on a charismatic authority, validated liturgically. She is the living proof that for a Byzantine woman, the monastic way was not just a refuge, but could be the most efficient way of acquiring a legitimate public voice. She did not contest the masculine power structures frontally, but joined them providentially providing an answer to the question Who is the Mother of God, creating a parallel sphere of feminine authority. From this sphere, she produced a work of such a quality that the masculine power structures (the hierarchy of the Church) felt compelled not just to acknowledge her, but also to assimilate her at the heart of their liturgical life.

For her heritage to remain a vivifying source, the academic research needs to continue. The present work opens the way to new horizons: ecdotic (realization of a complete, bilingual and commented, critical edition of her entire work), comparative analysis (in depth study of her connections with the Syriac hymnography, to better understand the thematic and stylistic sources of her penitential poetry), study of the reception (systematic investigation of the reception and translation of her work in the Slavonic and Romanian manuscripts, to follow her impact in the entire Byzantine space) and theological synthesis (by integrating her theological vision on repentance, creation, liberty in a contemporary Orthodox discourse on spirituality, gender and role of the culture in the life of the Church).

In the light of these approaches, Saint Cassia's figure will be fully restituted not just to the Byzantine patrimony, but also to the universal and atemporal treasure of Christ's Church.

## CONCLUSION

The specificity of the socio-cultural and religious configuration afferent to the 9<sup>th</sup> century Byzantium, reflected by the condition, the educational and evolutive restrictions versus opportunities of the woman in the Byzantine Empire, put their mark pregnantly on Saint Cassia's development and work. Saint Cassia is a memorable personality of this historical stage, whose presence in the Christian cult is highly valuable, continuing to evolve in reverberations of high and intense sensibility, by the profoundness, subtlety, elegance, intelligence and, not in the last place, the faith deeply rooted in her soul and her activity.

She is not just a historical character or a literary figure, but a living model of holiness, whose spiritual, cultural and theological relevance remains intact. So, Cassia becomes a living icon of holiness, an atemporal model of courage, intelligence and faith for all the generations.



The application of the title of theologos to a 9<sup>th</sup> century woman is fully justified in Cassia's case by the fact that her hymnography is not poetry on the dogma, but dogma expressed poetically.

The conclusion of the present work is that Saint Cassia represents a paradigm or a living icon of the way to deification, but also an *atemporal model of synthesis between culture, faith and creation*, contributing in a unique and profound manner to the spiritual and liturgical patrimony of the Orthodox Church.

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