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“The Virgin Mary and the Natural World:
Byzantine Conceptions of Sacrament and Creation”

This paper will explore the mediatory, or sacramental, role of the Virgin Mary in the Byzantine Christian tradition, according to liturgical texts and ritual practice. Often, Mary was described and invoked by means of biblical typology or metaphors drawn from the natural world. Most of the resulting epithets refer to Mary as container or mediator of a God who was believed to be immanent in creation, owing to his incarnation as God and man and ongoing presence in the Christian sacraments. Mary’s essential role in mediating the encounter between the divine and created realms was expressed not only in liturgical poetry but also in art and ritual. The Byzantines expressed strong association of the Virgin Mary with sources of water (for healing miracles), apses of churches (where the eucharistic offering was consecrated), and relics and icons (through which the faithful were invited to encounter divine power). The paper explores the highly suggestive and symbolic liturgical language that was used for such encounters.