

Traces of the Virgin Mary

Tatiana
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Ed.



in Post- Communist Europe

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Traces of the Virgin Mary in Post-Communist Europe

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09 The Worship of Mary in the Region of Asenovgrad (Central Southern Bulgaria): Sites, Rituals and Narratives

Vihra Baeva
Albena Georgieva

In this text, we will present Marian worship in one of its specific local manifestations – the cult to the Virgin Mary¹ in the region of Asenovgrad, Central Southern Bulgaria. The fact that it is one of the most representative examples of the vital and well-developed Marian cult within present-day Bulgaria, as well as our long-term fieldwork in the region (started 1996), influenced the choice of Asenovgrad as the focus of our attention.²

The methodological framework is based on the concept of local religion, as formulated and expounded by William Christian, although, for terminological reasons, we prefer to refer to it as *local religiosity* and *local religious culture*. This concept involves the distinction between two levels of Christianity – ‘an universal Christian religion, based on the sacraments, the liturgy and the Christian calendar, and a local one, based on particular sacred places, images and relics, locally chosen patron saints, idiosyncratic ceremonies, and a unique calendar built up from the settlement's sacred history’ (Christian 1989: 3). The idea of distinction between these two levels goes along with the conviction that they are not autonomous from one another. On the contrary – there is a constant process of exchange and mutual influence, manifested in the transfusion between canonical and non-canonical, oral and written, theory and practice.

Among the mainstays of local religiosity, we also rank local religious narratives, which are intimately connected to all other elements, explaining their origin and legitimating their sacred character.³ The main devotional sites in the region submit symbolic figures and stories, accepted as common marks of identity

1 For the sake of brevity and convenience, we will use in this article the appellation ‘Mary’ and ‘Virgin Mary’ to convey the typical Bulgarian *Bogoroditsa* [Gr. ‘Theotokos’, i.e. Mother of God], which corresponds to the Eastern-Orthodox tradition and reflects the emphasis on her motherly rather than virginal aspect.

2 The article was submitted for publication in 2008, edited, peer-reviewed and reshaped in 2019.

3 For the place and role of narratives in the local religious culture see Georgieva 2012.

and pointed out as a good reason for pride and local patriotism. An important role in this process is played by a specific group of local legends that could be defined as *emblematic* (Georgieva 2000a: 16). They are quite popular and are an inherent part of the region's repertoire. Being its specific *trade mark*, they are told to the visitors in much the same way as places of interest are shown. Actually, every site is bound up with its *corresponding narrative*, which explains its origin or presents the most impressing part of its history. Thus, physical object and narrative are complementary to one another: the story motivates the object as a landmark, and the object is in itself the support, the material manifestation of the story.

Our presentation of the local Marian cult in Asenovgrad region will follow three main axes: (1) devotional sites and the images belonging to them (in this case, miracle-working icons of the Virgin); (2) local feasts and ritual practices; (3) local and personal religious narratives. We will regard places, rituals and narratives as basic elements, which complement, influence and support one another, constituting the complex system of local religious culture.

Following this pattern, we will dwell on three major religious sites, which are the mainstays of Marian worship in the region: the Dormition of Mary Monastery of Bachkovo, the Annunciation of Mary Church in Asenovgrad, and the Dormition of Mary Church in Gorni Voden.

We will also focus on a more intimate, individual dimension of Marian worship, exploring the presence of the Virgin in personal narratives about miraculous healings, dreams, visions, etc., and delineating the connection between individual experience and cultural background.

Historical Reference⁴

Asenovgrad is a small town (approximately 55,000 inhabitants) in the central part of Southern Bulgaria, 19 km south of Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second largest city after the capital Sofia. The town is

crossed by important roads that connect Northern Bulgaria to the Aegean. This location, together with a long and turbulent history, has made the town and its surroundings a crossroad of different ethnic and cultural groups, and has brought about the formation of a specific local culture, including also an idiosyncratic religious tradition.

The region of Stenimachos (as Asenovgrad was called before 1934) emerged as a Christian Orthodox cult centre in the 11th century, when construction of Christian shrines began. In 1083, near the then village of Stenimachos (only 8–9 km to the south), the Dormition of Mary Monastery⁵ was founded by two Georgians⁶ – the brothers Grigorius and Aspasios Bakurian (Pakourianos). Grigorius Bakurian, a general in the Byzantine army, donated to the monastery vast lands in the region of Philippopolis (today Plovdiv), including a number of villages, such as Stenimachos and Voden.⁷

In 1206, the monastery was incorporated in the territory of the Bulgarian Kingdom under the rule of Tsar Ivan (John) Asen II, after whom Asenovgrad was eventually named. Another Bulgarian tsar, who left a trail in the monastery, was Ivan (John) Alexander (reigning 1331–1371). During the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (12th–14th century), large-scale shrine construction took place in the region: a significant number of monasteries, convents and temples were built around the Bachkovo Monastery, so the region earned the nickname of the ‘Rhodopean Holy Mountain’. It was probably at that time that the Monastery of Sts Cyricus and Julitta was established a couple of kilometres above Voden.

4 The reference is drawing mostly on Kisiov 1990; Marinova 1996; Filipov 1996 and Valchinova 2006.

5 Known also as Petrizos (Petritsoni) Monastery and, from the 17th century on, as Bachkovo monastery by the names of nearby villages.

6 Other sources identify them as Armenians (see Tavityan 2017 and cit. lit.).

7 Before the 18th century, there was one village of Voden, which later split up into Gorni [Upper] and Dolni [Lower] Voden. Since Dolni Voden has a Muslim population, it will not be discussed here. In 1986, the village of Gorni Voden officially became part of Asenovgrad.

In 1363, the Bachkovo Monastery went into the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire, being looted and destroyed, but rebuilt again at the end of the 15th century. In the Ottoman period, it preserved part of its autonomy, but came under the supervision of the Constantinople (Istanbul) Patriarchate (to all effects Greek), which was in charge of all Eastern-Orthodox institutions in the Empire. In 1878, the Bachkovo Monastery was included in the territory of the new Bulgarian State and in 1895, after fervent Bulgarian-Greek rivalry, eventually came under the jurisdiction of the Bulgarian Exarchate with the special statute of a *stauropegeal* monastery, i.e. a monastery under the direct jurisdiction of the Bulgarian Patriarch and the Synod.

Bachkovo Monastery, one of the oldest, largest and most influential monasteries in Bulgaria, a leading devotional centre and pilgrimage site, exerted great impact on the local tradition of Asenovgrad region. Another circumstance with a great impact on the specificity of the local culture was the presence of a large and influential Greek community,⁸ which inhabited this territory for several centuries.

During the Ottoman rule, under the pressure of the Turkish colonisers, part of the Greek population of Plovdiv migrated to the nearby hamlets of Stenimachos, Voden and Kuklen, thus forming a compact community known as the ‘Small Hellas’.⁹ The Greek families were wealthy, well-educated and urban, and constituted the town's elite. They were also known for their religiosity and the construction of shrines. The ‘Small Hellas’ existed up to the first decades of the 20th century, when Greeks left the region after the Balkan

8 There are still arguments among Greek and Bulgarian historians on whether this population – or part of it – was ethnically Greek, or whether, being ethnically Bulgarian, it chose Greek identity as more prestigious and economically profitable. There was also an intermediate group, called with the derogative *langeri* – ethnical Bulgarians, who identified themselves as Greeks.

9 Different historians date the migration process from the 14th up to the 16th century (Filipov 1996: 27).

Wars and WWI, and the Bulgarian-Greek repatriation agreements (signed 1927). In their place, ethnic Bulgarian immigrants arrived, forced to leave their home-places in Eastern Thrace and Macedonia, which then came within the borders of Greece. In this respect, the village of Gorni Voden is an exemplary case, since in this period its original population was completely substituted by immigrants.

Despite that the Greeks left almost seventy years ago, their influence on the cultural and religious specificity of Asenovgrad region is still distinctly discernible at present. It can be seen in the high religiosity of the local population, as well as in some peculiar local practices, which are to be found only in this part of Bulgaria.

Local Religious Culture

One of the characteristic features in the cultural profile of Asenovgrad region is the close relationship between religion and culture. Religiosity stands out as a key *identity marker* of the local population. It is especially true for the inhabitants of the three major devotional sites, Bachkovo, Asenovgrad and Gorni Voden, who in interviews typically identify themselves as very 'faithful', 'religious' and 'pious' Christians, in contrast with people from other parts of Bulgaria, whom they consider more atheistically minded.

Asenovgrad is often labelled as the 'Little Jerusalem', which promotes its special status of a 'chosen' and sacred place, protected by God and the Virgin Mary. The religiosity of the local population is manifested by the large number of shrines within the settlements and in their localities. In this respect, Asenovgrad is an exemplary case with its ten churches and over 50 chapels.¹⁰ As a result, almost every major saint has one or more places of devotion in the region, where his or her feast day is celebrated.

10 Some of the chapels were built as family sanctuaries, but they were open to outside visitors as well. Other chapels and churches were funded by donations from the corresponding quarter or from the whole town (Marinova 1996: 24–25). Still others were shrines that formerly belonged to the Bachkovo Monastery.

In the pantheon of saints, one figure stands out with its special influence and power: Mary, the patron and protectress of Asenovgrad and of the whole region. Her dominant position is demonstrated by the large number of shrines devoted to her, among which the three main devotional sites: the Dormition of Mary Monastery of Bachkovo, the Annunciation of Mary Church in Asenovgrad and the Dormition of Mary Church in Gorni Voden.

The three of them have *miracle-working icons*¹¹ of the Virgin, which are an important part of their 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu 1984). These icons enjoy great popularity and attract large numbers of believers not only from the local communities, but from farther places as well. Devotion to the icons is usually expressed in a set of ritual behaviours including touching and kissing, genuflections, prayers and offerings. The miracle-working icons play an important role in ritual activities and are taken out of the churches in processions on certain festive days. They also 'participate' in different narratives, including local legends and personal miracle stories.

The special place of the Virgin is reflected in the festive calendar as well. In addition to the universal Marian feasts, the Annunciation (March 25), the Dormition (August 15) and the Nativity (September 8), which are celebrated with great solemnity by large numbers of devotees, there are specific local feasts connected to the Easter cycle, which will be described in the following part of this text. It is also characteristic of the region that the cult to Mary as the Mother of God involves specific local practices for curing women's infertility. The idea of Mary as a source of immediate practical help in the sphere of conception and childbirth has a rather folkloric character and might be inherited from older local pre-Christian cults to the Mother Goddess.¹²

11 For an anthropological analysis of the icon in Eastern-Orthodox cultures see Dubisch 1995: 65–73.

12 Traces of such cult have been registered in the region (Marinova 1996: 23). For a similar observation on Mary as 'an ideal successor to pre-Christian mother goddess', though in a different context, see Christian 1989: 21.

The devotion to Mary is also manifest in the local narrative tradition. The Virgin is the central and most popular personage in both local legends and personal narratives. In most cases, she is preferred as a universal helper and protector instead of specialised saints such as the healers Sts Unmercenaries Cosmas and Damian or St Panteleimon, for example.¹³ The respect for the power of Mary as a miracle-worker goes along with the confidence in her mercy and with the intimate feeling of love and affection, which shows through the narratives about her and is visible in the diminutive *Sveta Bogorodichka* [Holy Little Mother of God] with which she is often referred to. The image of Mary in local religious culture is predominantly that of a mother – Mother of God, but also mother of all people and especially of the people from Asenovgrad region, who are under her patronage. Her motherly aspect is also reflected in her special relationship with women who address her as a divine protector and helper in the sphere of women's issues and motherhood.

The Bachkovo Monastery of the Dormition of Mary

The *catholicon* [primary church] of the monastery, devoted to the Dormition of Mary, was built in 1604 upon the foundations of Bakurian's church, destroyed in the 15th century. Among the numerous icons and murals in the church, the miracle-working icon of *Bogoroditsa Umilenie* [Gr. 'Theotokos Eleusa', i.e. Mary Tender Mercy] stands out with its exceptional attraction for the pilgrims.

This icon was gifted to the monastery in 1311 by two Georgian travellers, Athanasios and Okrapir, and has been preserved and venerated throughout centuries as the monastery's greatest treasure. It is situated in the right part of the nave, near the entrance, on a special *proskynetarion* [icon-stand], three steps above the floor.

13 William A. Christian features *specialist saints* vs. *generalists* like Mary and concludes that the former tended to turn over more rapidly and were eventually supplanted by the latter (Christian 1989: 21).

It is to this icon that the pilgrims go first upon entering the church to express their devotion. Undoubtedly, this image of Mary holds the first place among the miracle-working icons in the region and is considered to be one of the most important and powerful Marian icons in Bulgaria.

Another emblematic object is the so-called *dzindzifir* tree [Lat. 'Diospyros lotos', i.e. date-plum], which grows in the monastery yard¹⁴ – a rare for Bulgaria tree species, whose fruit ripen in January and are believed to cure women's sterility. 'Real life' stories about miraculously cured women, close friends or relatives, are told in support of that popular belief. Although it is not always explicitly stated in the narratives, there is no doubt that the miraculous curing is performed by Mary, the Mother of God, and therefore protectress of all mothers. This belief and the stories supporting it are among the main reasons for women's pilgrimage to the monastery.

On the slopes of the Rhodope Mountain above the monastery, there are three chapels, which are also important religious sites – the Chapel of the Protecting Veil of Mary with a holy spring, the rock Chapel known as the *Kluviya* [from Gr. 'klouví', i.e. cage, coop] and the Chapel of St Archangel Michael. These sacred places are connected with the monastery into a single cult complex and are included in the traditional route of the pilgrims who visit the shrine. The Chapel of the Protecting Veil of Mary, more popular as the *Ayazmo* [Gr. 'Agiazmo', i.e. Holy Spring], is situated at about 30 minutes' walk from the monastery. On the east side of the chapel, water pours out into a little basin in the middle of the building through three spouts. It is believed that this water is miracle-working and curing. Devotees drink from it and wash their faces, hands or sick parts of the body. However, it is thought that a better effect is achieved when the diseased bathe in the basin – at midnight, three nights running. For that reason, there is

14 See Kisiov 1990: 8.

a small building near the chapel, where the pilgrims can stay for the night. The ritual bathing in the holy spring is still practiced nowadays by the pilgrims, though mostly at daytime. During our first visit to the chapel in May 1996, we came across a group of middle-aged women in their underwear, who bathed in the icy water, singing religious songs.

This ritual practice is linked to a narrative about miraculous healing which motivates the belief in the wonder-working qualities of the spring. During the Ottoman rule, a Turkish girl was cured from epilepsy by its waters. Her family accepted Christianity and bestowed a big estate of fertile land on the monastery in thanksgiving to Mary for her miraculous help (AIF¹⁵ I 183: 6–8; 75–76).

At about ten minutes' walk from the Ayazmo, up in the mountain, the Chapel of the Kluviya is situated in a small natural cave in the steep rocks. Narrow steps cut in the stone lead to it. The shrine has two entrances – the pilgrims enter from below, perform their devotions and exit to continue climbing up the slope until they reach the Chapel of St Archangel Michael.

Squeezing through a narrow hole, as it is the case with the Kluviya, is a traditional practice, considered to be a test for one's righteousness and a way of purification from one's sins.¹⁶ Going out of the chapel, the visitor can see many threads and small straps of clothes, tied by the pilgrims on the branches of the nearby trees as offerings. This is done as an act of symbolic sacrifice with the belief that the disease will be 'left' there.¹⁷ The Kluviya is believed

15 Archive of the Institute of Folklore (now part of the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum), Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

16 A similar kind of squeezing is practised on other devotional sites in Bulgaria, such as near the Rila monastery (through St John of Rila's cave) and at Krastova Gora (through the branches of a tree). On the other hand, squeezing through the branches of a rose or briar occurs in some traditional healing rituals and magical practices of Bulgarian Christians and Muslims.

17 Leaving pieces of clothing on tree branches is another healing practice, typical of both Christian and Muslim sacred places in Bulgaria and more generally, in the Balkans.

to be a holy site, because the miracle-working icon of Mary was found there. That is why a small copy of the icon is painted on the rock chapel's wall in order to indicate its original place. Pilgrims light candles in front of the image and present gifts and money.

Close above the Kluviya, the Chapel of St Archangel Michael is located. According to popular belief, it was named after the shepherd boy Angel, who found the miracle-working icon. The chapel marks the highest point of the pilgrims' route, as well as of the ceremonial procession on the second day of Easter. The place is not associated with special local narratives, but it is regularly visited, and gifts are offered to its patron.

In the Bachkovo monastery, Bright Monday, the second day of Easter¹⁸ is celebrated in commemoration of the miraculous finding of Mary's icon: it is believed that, on that day, it was brought from the Kluviya to the monastery. Early in the morning, women make special garlands of spring flowers and greenery and decorate the icon and the special carrier in which it will be transported during the procession. While the icon is taken out into the yard, the church bells start ringing solemnly and the procession sets out. A monk with a wooden clapper comes first, followed by the abbot and the monks in ceremonial clothing, the carrier with the icon and the lay devotees. It is believed that those who carry the icon on such processions will acquire absolution of their sins and get cured. That is why a crowd of people gather around the icon, jostling and trying to get hold of the carrier or at least touch it.

The procession makes for the Kluviya, stopping at six places where the monks allegedly stopped to rest when they first brought the icon to the monastery. Since the rock chapel of the Kluviya is too narrow for the multitude of believers to go through, the procession goes around it and reaches St Archangel Michael Chapel,

18 During 'Bright Week', processions with miracle-working Marian icons are traditionally carried out both in Mount Athos and, following this example, also in Bulgaria (Gergova 2008: 13).

where the icon stays for the day. A mass is celebrated and pilgrims perform their devotions, after which everybody goes down to the locality of the Ayazmo, where the monastery gives *kurban* [boiled mutton given as a votive offering] and a ceremonial lunch takes place. Apart from the monastery's 'kurban', many private ritual meals are made as well. The families in Bachkovo have traditionally fixed places in the neighbourhood, sometimes with specially made stone tables, where they have their lunch in the open. At about four o'clock in the afternoon, the procession makes its way back to the monastery, going by another route, thus describing a symbolic circle.

The ritual activities on the second day of Easter are closely related to the local legend of the miraculous finding of the icon. Our fieldwork shows that this *emblematic narrative* is known by a large number of the interviewees and they retell it in different variants. Written versions of the story are also available in booklets, newspapers and, recently, on the internet. According to some versions, the icon was brought to the monastery from Georgia, and a few centuries later, during the Turkish invasion, monks hid it in the cave to save it from profanation and destruction. According to others, however, the icon flew by itself (or was brought by angels) to the monastery from Georgia (or even Jerusalem), because there it was not venerated enough.¹⁹ It landed at the Kluviya, and the healing water of the Ayazmo sprung out at that place.

A key moment in the narratives is the finding of the icon by two children – a brother and a sister (shepherds or goatherds).²⁰

19 Flying of holy objects is a folkloric *topos*, traditionally connected to holy sites. The motif of the Virgin Mary's flying icons is present in Bulgarian local legends, such as those of the churches in Varna, Chiprovtsi, Kritchim, Nesebar, etc. (Malchev 1999: 29–33; Anastasova 2006).

20 Miraculous finding of an icon, mostly after instructions given in a dream, is another folkloric *topos*, frequently connected to the foundation, or rather the reconstruction of a shrine, which allegedly existed in the past and was destroyed during the Turkish rule. Hidden in a cave or buried in the earth, the icon is preserved intact for centuries, and then reminds for its existence through a miraculous *omen* or a dream (Georgieva 2000b).

In some narratives, it is especially mentioned that the boy's name was Angel. While the children were taking the animals back home from pasture one evening, they noticed unusual light on the rocks of the Kluviya. Thus, they found the icon and ran to the monastery to report to the monks.

The monks took the miraculous icon to the monastery church with a litany procession and put it in the altar. To everyone's surprise, the icon was missing in the morning: it had returned to its original place in the cave by itself. After the icon ran away three times (in some versions it was fixed with chains, but even that would not stop it), a pious old monk had a dream. In it, Virgin Mary claimed that her icon should be placed not in the altar, but to the right of the church's entrance, so that everybody could have access to it and pay homage, and the icon could see how faithful every visitor was.²¹ She also demanded that every year people carry her icon to the Kluviya with litany procession on the second day of Easter.

In the legend, the Virgin expresses her will through the miraculous actions of her icon and through direct verbal imperative, revealed in a dream. Being a sacred figure, she initiates the holiday and the procession on the second day of Easter – the local people are just demanded to understand and fulfil her desire. Therefore, the holiday is interpreted not as an ordinary human deed, but – as explicitly stated in the narratives – as the fulfilment of Mary's will and thus a way to relate to the sphere of the sacred.

The Annunciation of Mary Church in Asenovgrad

The Church of the Annunciation of Mary was built in 1830 on the site of an old chapel in the neighbourhood of *Bahcha Mahala* [Garden Quarter]. Originally, the place was an orchard belonging to Bachkovo Monastery, which the monks ceded for the settlement

21 During our work in the region, we documented several versions of the story: AIF I 183: 2–5; AIF I 184: 16–19; AIF I 185: 114–116.

of Bulgarian refugees from Greece. That church holds a special place among the numerous shrines of Asenovgrad, largely due to its miracle-working altar icon of *Bogoroditsa Patevoditelka* [Gr. 'Theotokos Hodegetria', i.e. Pointer of the Way]. The icon is decorated with a garland of gold jewellery, given as votive offerings – evidences for the fulfilled prayers of the devotees, which prove the mercy of the Virgin and the power of her icon.

Two chapels have been added to the church, one of which dedicated to St John the Baptist. The chapel is remarkable for its holy spring [ayazmo] where fish live.²² It is believed that if you see the fish in the water of the spring, your prayers will be heard. The fish in the holy spring, along with the belfry's vault, which seems covered with fish-scales, have given the church the nickname *Ribnata* [The Fish Church] under which it is popular in Asenovgrad.

The Annunciation Church is also known for the eponymous Orthodox Association, which is based there. This is an informal organisation of pious Christians, predominantly women, founded at the beginning of the 20th century (1907–1910) by the local clairvoyant Sultani Shishmanova (1883–1968). Being an informal religious leader of the local Christian community, after her death, she was buried in the church yard as a sign of recognition of her special merits for the spiritual life of the town. The portrait of Sultani is still kept in the special meeting room of the Association, which was constructed at the southern side of the church and was paid for by Sultani and her husband. At the time of our fieldwork in the town in the late 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century, the Annunciation Association had about one hundred members. It was well known and highly respected by the local community and its active presence was pointed out as one of the town's emblematic features.²³

22 More about the tradition of keeping fish in the holy spring of the church in Asenovgrad, and its relation to the shrine of Mary *Zoodochos Pege* [Life-giving Spring] in Istanbul see Lubanska 2017 a, b.

23 For more details and an anthropological analysis of the Association's history see Valchinova 2006: 166–202; Baeva and Valchinova 2009.

The Annunciation of Mary Church is also associated with the litany procession with the miracle-working Marian icon to the Bachkovo Monastery on the feast of *Prepolovenie* [Halving], which takes place every year 25 days after Easter, halfway to Pentecost. On the eve of the festive day, a large number of devotees from Asenovgrad and the region, as well as from farther places, gather in the church. Three masses are served consecutively: in the evening, at midnight and early in the morning of 'Prepolovenie'. Many pilgrims spend the night in the church, attending the masses or sleeping on the balcony. Early in the morning, the icon is taken down from the iconostasis and placed on a carrier, decorated with flowers. The procession goes across the town towards Bachkovo Monastery, led by the priests of Asenovgrad and followed by many devotees, who try to get closer to the icon and touch it 'for health and good luck'. Many townspeople come out of their houses to pay homage to the icon and see it off. In the past, the procession went to the monastery on foot, but in the recent years the icon is loaded up on a truck and the pilgrims take special buses to get there.

At the monastery, the miraculous icon is welcomed with a solemn ceremony by the abbot and all the monks in festive clothing. First, the icon is put in the monastery yard, where the abbot consecrates water and blesses the believers. Then it is taken into the church and the pilgrims pay homage to the two icons – the 'hostess' of Bachkovo and 'the guest' from Asenovgrad. The flowers from the garland are also considered miracle-working, so people take some of them to their homes 'for health'. In the afternoon, the Asenovgrad icon returns to its hometown in the same ceremonial way.

In local discourse, different explanations and stories co-exist about the origin and the meaning of the tradition on 'Prepolovenie'. According to historical evidence, the miracle-working icon of Asenovgrad was donated to the Church of the Annunciation by the Bachkovo Monastery, so the litany procession on 'Prepolovenie' was initiated in commemoration of that event. Popular belief,

in turn, holds it that the two icons are ‘mother and daughter’, so every year the daughter goes to see her mother, in accord with the Bulgarian tradition of *povrathi* [return visit]: a ritual visit of the newly married woman to her parent's home. Therefore, it is said that on that day, the two icons are happy and regard people's prayers with favour. However, after their separation in the evening, they feel sad and cry, so it always rains on that day.

According to some sources (Kisyov 1990: 41–42; Marinova 1996: 125 and cit. lit.), the procession on ‘Prepolovenie’ originated in 1895/6, when the Bachkovo Monastery came under the jurisdiction of the Bulgarian Exarchate, as a demonstration of the Bulgarian affiliation of the monastery and the Annunciation Church. Quite possibly, the ‘Bulgarian’ procession was a response to an older, ‘Greek’ one, which took place on the same day.

Alternatively, according to the church chronicle, the procession was established in 1900 (Daskalova 1996: 86). In any event, it has acquired the character of tradition and has been held annually without interruption even during the period of the Communist rule (1944–1989). Since the advent of democracy, the procession has become an official event, attracting not only locals, but also devotees from the nearby regions of the Thrace Valley and the Rhodope Mountains.

In the local discourse of Asenovgrad, the procession on ‘Prepolovenie’ is bound to a miracle, which happened there in the beginning of the 20th century and is known as the ‘Angels’ Mass’ or the ‘Heavenly Mass’. According to local narratives, one night many townspeople noticed unusual light and heard the ringing of ‘heavenly bells’, and wonderful chanting. Some locals even saw a procession of angels in the sky coming from the direction of Bachkovo. The angels stopped in the Fish church, where they served a mass. Two women who were in the church at that time in order to sleep there for health attended the mass and were cured (Baeva 2001: 69–77).²⁴ An early account of this event was published in a newspaper from 1910, where the apparition was dated on Decem-

ber 29, 1909. The author Noy Angelov, a priest from Asenovgrad, had personally interviewed some of the witnesses of the miracle and conveyed their testimonies.²⁵

Soon after the Angel's Mass, a devout local woman (in most of the contemporary narratives it was Sultani Shishmanova) had a vision, in which Mary appeared and demanded that every year her icon of the Annunciation Church should be taken to the Bachkovo Monastery, because the two icons were a mother and a daughter. Mary also predicted that thousands of people would gather in Asenovgrad on that day and promised to work miracles for them. The Virgin had another demand too: she wanted the local women to establish a Christian association that should pray for the salvation of all Bulgaria and take up the organisation of the new feast.²⁶

The narratives of the miracle have acquired great popularity and have become an important element of the local oral tradition. They legitimise the local religious feast of ‘Prepolovenie’ and the religious procession to the Bachkovo Monastery on that day, drawing on the enormous authority of the Virgin Mary in the region and on her promise to make miracles for the pilgrims. Symbolically, the journey of the believers with the icon from Asenovgrad to Bachkovo repeats the model of the miraculous angels’ procession and thus ensures access to the sacred sphere and the possibility for divine intervention and divine help. The expectation of new miracles attracts large number of believers and thus the new, ‘invented’ feast has become a part of the local tradition and an emblematic event in the local festive cycle.

24 Although considered a ‘real-life’ event, the apparition in Stanimacha represents an international legendary *topos*, known to folklorists as the ‘Liturgy of Spirits’. It is documented mainly in Europe in a number of variants from the 19th and 20th centuries; medieval and early modern historians find it all over Europe. Additionally, there was a similar ‘Greek’ legend, documented in Stanimacha about a decade earlier (Dobрева 2007).

25 This report was quoted and analysed by the leading Bulgarian folklorist Mihail Arnaudov as an example of a legend, which has originated in modern times (Arnaudov [1934], 1996: 165–167).

26 For more details about the event and the corresponding narratives, see Baeva 2001: 69–76.

To a great extent, the popularity of the feast on 'Prepolovenie' from the first years to the present day is closely connected with the Association which takes an active role in its organisation. It is apparent in the ritual processions, where the members of the Association have their own reserved place just behind the carrier with the miraculous icon and the local clergy, at the head of the crowd of ordinary believers. The special relation between the Association and the feast of 'Prepolovenie' is grounded by the foundation narrative, which unites the procession, the Association and the miraculous events, legitimised by the sacred intervention of the angels and Mary. Thus, the Annunciation Association emerges as a significant factor in local religious life or, in other words, a specific actor in the field of local religiosity.

The Dormition of Mary Church in Gorni Voden

The main devotional centre of Gorni Voden, The Dormition of Mary Church, more popular as 'Mary the Golden Apple', was built at the beginning of the 19th century on the site of an older shrine on the property of nearby Sts Cyricus and Julitta Monastery, which had a convent in the village. The church was used by monks from the monastery, as well as by the lay inhabitants of the village, but at present, it functions only as a parish church, since the monastery is no longer active. In the past, a procession on Prepolovenie took place in Gorni Voden, similar to the one in Asenovgrad. The miraculous icon of Mary was taken to the Monastery of Sts Cyricus and Julitta, since the church in Gorni Voden was originally property of that monastery (Filipov 1996: 97). After a long break during socialism, the procession has been resumed on the initiative of the parish priest, but has not yet gained much popularity, probably because the feast in nearby Asenovgrad is more famous and attracts more participants.

The main 'emblems' of the church are the miracle-working alter icon of Mary of the *Hodegetria* [Pointer of the way] type and the feast of the 'Golden Apple', which is unique for Bulgaria. The influ-

ence of the former Greek population of the village is undoubted, but the question whether there are similar practices registered in Greece needs further research.

The Feast of the Golden Apple is celebrated fifteen days before Easter, on the fifth Sunday of Great Lent, when the reading of the Akathist to Mary²⁷ is completed. The official church service on that day is accompanied by a complex of specific rituals, which include incubation in the church on the eve of the feast day, ritual eating of apples and making and wearing special thread belts for curing infertility. Despite that these rituals are not canonical, but rather folkloric in character, the clergy accepts and tolerates them and in the past few years even tries to take the main part in their organisation and performance. As the local priest's wife put it in informal conversation, 'it is not exactly allowed, but it is not forbidden either, so we do it'. The feast was further approved by the presence and participation of the Bishop of Plovdiv Eparchy Nikolay at the 2008 celebration of the Golden Apple on May 21. In the recent years, it has even become a tradition for the Bishop to serve the liturgy and read a sermon on the holiday.

The symbol of the apple has a central place in the ritual actions, as well as in images and narratives. In the beginning of Great Lent, when the priest begins singing the Akathist, local women prepare garlands of greenery and apples and decorate the miracle-working icon of Mary.²⁸ On the very day of the feast, after the morning service, a couple of big baskets full of apples cut into pieces are distributed among the believers, who eat them 'for health'.

The special ritual for conceiving and giving birth is more complicated. It is recommended that both the wife and the husband should take part in it. The couple should come on Saturday

27 The Akathist to Mary is a hymn dedicated to Mary, split into four parts and sung consecutively on the first four Fridays of Great Lent. On the fifth Friday and the fifth Saturday, the whole text of the Akathist is sung.

28 Decorating Marian icons with apples is also practiced in several other shrines in the region of Plovdiv, probably following the example of the Gorni Voden Church.

evening and bring an apple as a gift to Mary (along with the other offerings that are usually given). The priest reads special prayer for *chadorodie* [giving birth] and gives them another apple, taken from the altar or from the garland above the icon, and therefore consecrated by its contact with the most sacred places of the church. The spouses should cut it into two and eat it with the seeds. It is believed that if the ritual is performed correctly and with 'strong faith', the woman will soon get pregnant and give birth to a healthy child.

The 'strong faith' in the power of the Golden Apple is supported by oral narratives, popular in the local community. Gradually these narratives come to be emitted beyond its boundaries and attract many pilgrims from different parts of Bulgaria, recently also due to the media and the internet, which spread information about the 'exotic' local feast.

The 'official version' about its establishment is fixed in a *sinaxarium*²⁹ from 1765, written by the then abbot of Sts Cyricus and Julita Monastery. It testifies of a miracle, which happened at the Gorni Voden Church: a childless woman was late for the morning service because she was coming from far away and the consecrated bread was over, so she could not get any of it. Considering it as a bad *omen*, the woman was very upset and began to cry. The priest, touched by her suffering, wondered how to help her, so he looked around and saw an apple, which had been left as an offering in front of Mary's miracle-working icon. He gave the apple to the woman, who ate it and soon got pregnant. As a sign of her gratitude, she ordered an apple of gold, which she gifted to the icon. The feast of the Golden Apple was established in commemoration of that miraculous event and many childless women were helped hereafter.

29 *Sinaxarium*, in Eastern-Orthodox tradition, is a collection of short lives of saints and accounts of events whose memory is kept on certain days of the year.

The written version of the miracle story is accompanied by a variety of oral narratives about the feast's origin, all of them weaving around the apple as a symbol of fertility and childbirth.³⁰ Some of the stories refer to events from the New Testament, like the legend according to which when Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary on the Annunciation Day, he gave her an apple and upon eating it, the Virgin got pregnant. This legend has its visual counterpart too – an icon-like image of Mary holding a golden apple with the Angel depicted in the upper right corner. The story and the image represent literally the metaphor of Mary as the 'New Eve' – just like Eve, she ate an apple given by the angel instead of the serpent, and brought redemption of the original sin, giving birth to the Saviour of Mankind. Another legend associates the apple with the idea of the immaculate conception of Mary, which is not officially accepted in Orthodox Christianity, as distinguished from Catholicism. The story holds that Mary's parents could not have a child for many years and after their fervent prayers, an angel appeared and gave them an apple, which they divided into two and ate. After that, St Anna conceived and in due time gave birth to Mary.

Additionally, there are also local legends, closer to the written version, which refer to a miracle with a childless woman. The woman wanted to pray for a child, but was confined to her bed by serious illness and could not go to church. She gave her relatives some money to light a candle, and she also sent an apple as an offering to the Virgin. Before long, the woman recovered and conceived. In commemoration of that miracle, the Feast of the Golden Apple was founded, and people came to eat apples for health and fertility.³¹

30 The apple as a symbol of love, marriage and fertility is common for Bulgarian folklore, present in wedding rituals, tales and songs. With the same meaning it also occurs in ancient Greek mythology and Greek folklore (Baeva 2013 and cit. lit).

31 For more details, see Baeva 2001: 86–94.

Despite their different plots and characters, the foundation stories of the Golden Apple have a common function: they interpret the symbol of the golden apple, motivate the celebration of the feast and explain the meaning of the ritual. In one way or another, they are all associated with the figure of Mary and support the believers' hope in her power as a patron of motherhood.

Another specific fertility ritual performed at the Golden Apple church is making and wearing thread belts. Three spools of white cotton thread are taken, and the ends of the threads are tied to the church door. Then, the church is girded with the triple thread, which afterwards is winded round and folded several times, until it becomes about 1.5 metres long. The woman who wants to conceive and give birth ties the belt around her waist, under the clothes. She is expected to conceive within 40 days, and then to wear the belt during her pregnancy. After giving birth, she should keep the belt in the baby's bed.

During our first observations of the ritual in 1997/8, the belts were made by elderly women on the very day of the feast. Recently, however, the ritual has been 'institutionalised': the belts have been prepared beforehand by the priest's wife and mother-in-law and just handed to the women together with the consecrated apples on the feast day.

A clue to the origin of this specific ritual may be discovered in the church's patron altar icon of the Dormition of Mary. Together with the usual canonical elements of the Dormition iconography, an interesting detail is added: Mary is depicted in heaven reaching her belt out toward St Thomas the Apostle. Similar images are to be found in murals from the Sts Cyricus and Julitta and the Bachkovo monasteries, probably the works of one and the same icon-painter, the Greek Alexi Athanasiu, who distributed this scene in the region (Peev 2006: 42–43). The fable of Mary giving St Thomas her holy belt after her death and during her transition to heaven occurred in apocryphal gospels and despite its non-canonical character influenced Christian art.

Since the beginning of the 10th century, the Eastern-Orthodox Church has established a special feast, dedicated to the Belt of the Virgin Mary, celebrated on August 31 in commemoration of a miracle performed by the relic on that day. Presently, the Belt is kept in the Vatopedi Monastery of Mount Athos, where it is venerated. The monks make belts, though of a different kind, which they hand down to the pilgrims for health and for the conception of childless women. The Belt of Mary feast is not very popular in Bulgaria, in contrast to Greece, which once again points to the Greek influence on the religious culture of the Asenovgrad region.³²

In this milieu, however, the cult to Mary's belt was folklorised to a great extent: the original Christian feast was replaced by a folkloric ritual; it was attached to a different day of the calendar and acquired a rather practical significance of curing infertility. The meaning of the belt-making ritual is explained by local legends describing a miracle with a childless woman, to whom Mary appeared in a dream and instructed her to make and wear a thread belt (Baeva 2001: 86–87).

Personal Narratives

A convincing expression of faith and an effective means of persuasion are the religious narratives, sharing personal experience or telling about people who received a first-hand touch to God's mercy. Every narrative is a life episode framed in words: it is hardly verifiable, but for the same reason it is hardly contestable as well. The narrative persuades the audience with its inner pattern and logic, and with its images it may sometimes release unsuspected emotions, which may resound far beyond the circle of close friends and relatives. Then the story may acquire its own life and may be transmitted from mouth to mouth; it may be permanently fixed in the community's narrative repertoire to give form to

32 Detailed research on the devotion to the Holy Belt of Mary and its impact on local religious cultures in Bulgaria and in the Balkans see in Baeva 2012.

some general and repeated collective experiences – it may become part of the local tradition.

Mary appears not only in the local narratives, but in many personal stories as well. Here some of these stories will be presented in order to outline the faith in Mary as a life strategy: as a guiding principle in one's behaviour, as a stronghold and a compensation for the dramatic deficiency in real life.

There are interviews which include some instructing episodes from the Gospel that confirm the exemplary character of Mary's life retold from the individual point of view of the interlocutor. A good illustration of this group is the narrative of Yordanka Trifonova. We talked with her on the eve of Annunciation in the Annunciation of Mary Church in Asenovgrad. She told us how the Mother of God was born; how at the age of three she was introduced in the church and was left there; how on the day of Annunciation the angel gave her a flower or a golden apple and announced to her that she would give birth to the world's Saviour; how after that she married Joseph to avoid being killed with stones for becoming pregnant without a husband; and how then gave birth to Jesus 'from her rib and remained a virgin' (AIF I 288: 8). Yordanka Trifonova spoke with an obvious admiration about all these events and distinctly underlined Mary's virtue and selflessness: 'If it was not for this day, Annunciation, there wouldn't be Jesus Christ. For no one in the world was worthy of becoming His mother. Which parent would take his child to serve in the temple at the age of three? Who would do without anything? She did without childhood and without maidenhood, didn't she?' (Ibid.: 9). Then our interlocutor assured us that Asenovgrad has always been protected against disasters, because its patron is Mary and because the citizens believe in her sanctity and honour her.

Another group of narratives, which may be defined as 'evidences'³³ testify Mary's supernatural protection as a reward for good intentions and sincere faith. This idea runs through Yordanka Trifonova's personal evidence-story. In our interview, she

expressed her deep conviction that everyone who believed and faithfully addressed Mary with prayers would be helped: 'I much pray to her and she has always much helped me, very much!' (Ibid.). To support her opinion, she told us how her fervent prayers were the main reason for the easy way in which she gave birth to her daughter: 'at home – o-o-o! – like a hen!' (Ibid.: 16). She did not want to go to hospital: 'I would not even go to that, to the maternity hospital – o-o-o, I would not go there, do not want to, I say to my husband, I feel ashamed that people would see me like that there, o-o-o, I do not want, I say. And then – for five minutes!' (Ibid.). Therefore, she was thankful for the grace received.

Yordanka Trifonova's narrative confirms Mary's power and care; it approves faith's practical benefit when one is sincere and has no doubts or hesitations. The impact such stories have on the audience makes them important part of the religious repertoire. A good fortune or a coincidence, as well as a way out of a complicated situation acquire special significance when bound with sincere faith and confidence, when following a fervent prayer or when a result of benevolent efforts and behaviour. They strengthen one's self-esteem and become the motif for further trust in the divine power.

Another group of narratives, connected with Mary, may be defined as 'compensatory', for in psychological sense that is the function they have in life. Quite exemplary is the case of Ruska Boyadzhiyska from Dolna Banya, Sofia district. We met her in 1996 on the day after the Dormition of Mary (August 15), the patron saint's day of the Bachkovo Monastery. She was one of the pilgrims, especially invited by the abbot to help in the preparations for the feast and in the cleaning after it. As she told us, from her young age she had to manage with many difficulties and ordeals: her husband, while on his military service, had

33 See Georgieva 2000a: 18. Vihra Baeva uses another term for the stories, which prove the supernatural patronage in one's life, narratives of divine help (Baeva 2001: 139–143).

been charged with the commission of theft and escaped abroad to the West. Because of that, she was literally persecuted by the Communist authorities. In the course of many years, Ruska was not allowed to get a job and was kept under observation; she was blackmailed frequently; her nerves and life were wrecked. Nevertheless, she withstood everything and preserved her psyche intact, in her inner conviction thanks to supernatural protection: 'I can tell you that a fellow woman saw me in a dream, she says: 'I saw you, you were sitting, she says, on a place, but on your right side was seated, she says, the Holy Mother of God, and on your other side St Nicola. You should know they support you!' (AIF I 185: 129). And in her own dreams two women dressed in black appear frequently: 'It seems that St Petka and the Holy Mother of God support me' (Ibid.: 127).

She told us about a dream in which she received a definite sign for her supernatural patronage. Together with other women, she slept in the St Petka Church in the town of Peshtera (in the Rhodope Mountains) on the eve of the patron saint's day (October 14). She prayed to the saint for a special dream as a confirmation of her faith and hope. Before falling asleep, she worried that her dress was going to get creased and in the morning she would have to attend the service in a creased dress. Then she dreamed that two women in black – the same that frequently appear in her dreams and whom she considers her patronesses – St Petka and the Virgin Mary – came out of the altar and brought her a blue dress, saying: 'Here is what you will put on tomorrow, don't worry!' (Ibid.: 122). Besides the fact that obviously Ruska dreamed of what she missed in life – the dress was much like the one she had when she was still a girl, the more important thing is that she felt rewarded from this dream and accepted it as a particular favour. She was thankful for it and when asked what the meaning of the dream for her is, explains: 'What it means, they just make me feel easy, because I believe...' (Ibid.: 124). Brought up in a religious family, for long time deprived of social life and in poor health, Ruska

did not give up and counteracted – *compensated* – the shortcomings in her life by faith and religious service. Visiting various monasteries and helping there, she felt adequate and incorporated in the pilgrim communities. Her dreams with the protecting figures of Mary and St Petka gave her support and served as a counterbalance to her hard life; they gave her inner stability and made her feel rewarded for her efforts and firmness.

Dreams in a way are the corrective of real life – they complement it and provide for its lacking transcendental dimension: they give form to the person's inner strength. Eventually, the aim of a dream is not so much to reveal the future to the dreamer, as to put him in contact with God (Le Goff 1998: 317). After all, Ruska's real-life achievement is that despite the serious trials and hardships, she resisted and did not give way to despair; she preserved her faith and inner strength.

A specific group consist of narratives on *visions*. The then secretary of the Bachkovo monastery, Slavcho Kisiov, told us of an occasion when Mary appeared to two of the monks (AIF I 184: 24–26). One night, father German, who was responsible for the monastery hotel, went out and saw a woman on the other side of the monastery. He set off towards her, but she disappeared. He confided his experience to Slavcho and soon after that, another monk, Sozont, came to tell him about much the same happening. Hearing steps on the corridor, he went out to see who it was and then heard the singing of a choir. He turned back and saw a woman coming towards him, who then suddenly went away 'as if she evaporated'. The monks thought that they saw Mary, and that was the opinion of Slavcho as well. When we asked about the meaning of that vision, he said the Virgin probably appeared in order to warn them of something or to sanction them 'that they have to correct some conceptions of theirs' (Ibid.: 25).

Quite different is the meaning of the vision, or rather the visions, of Kaloyan Lindev from Asenovgrad. When we talked with him (on March 25, 1999), he was in the seventh form in school

(14 years old) and helped with the preparation and organisation of the patron feast of the Annunciation Church in Asenovgrad. It was quite obvious that he was not a stranger in this community and that he did not come just to accompany his mother. Subsequently, we learned that since his childhood, he attended all the masses and that for more than a year a priest was teaching him in religious matters. He told us how he saw Mary smiling: 'It was three or four years ago. It happened on the Holy Prepolovenie. They took out the icon to Bachkovo and when they carried it in the church, the bishop was speaking outside. And above I saw the Mother of God with many angels, looking happy and pleased. The same thing I also saw in the Holy Trinity Church on the feast of the Holy Ghost. Again, when we sang with my mother, the Holy Mother of God was all smiling, and there were angels again' (AIF I 288: 31). When asked why, in his opinion, the Mother of God had been smiling, he explained: 'She was very pleased, because we were singing about her, her songs' (Ibid.).

Visions, as well as dreams, are signs of contact with the supernatural and the divine (Le Goff 1998: 327). They may be a warning or a reward; they may answer inner questions or doubts: in all cases, they motivate faith and strengthen it. They give shape to certain notions and beliefs which are interiorised by the individual and which are accepted as a pattern for understanding and experiencing life.

When it is a matter of faith and its effectiveness, and when evidence should be given about the miracle-working power of a cult or a sacred place, the most convincing and impressive narratives are those about *miraculous healings*. Sometimes, they are told as personal experience, but more often, they render the story of someone else, who, however, can be concretely named – a close friend, a relative, an acquaintance. What could be more convincing about the supernatural power of a place or about the effectiveness of certain ritual acts than the indication of those who have already been healed or who have received help?

When talking with father Mitrofan, a monk in the Bachkovo Monastery, we asked him whether people were still coming to the monastery in order to get cured from infertility or from something else. The concrete story he told us was about a family from the town of Troyan (Central Balkan Mountains) whom he met in the mountain above the monastery. He took them to the sacred places there and, in the meantime, understood that the woman was going to be operated on the liver in the Military Hospital in Sofia. He asked for her name to include her in his prayers and advised her to bathe in the Ayazmo and drink from its water. The woman fulfilled his orders, and for three evenings on end, he read the psalm-book praying for her health. She later wrote him a letter saying that when she entered the hospital and the tests needed for the operation were made, it turned out that the cysts had disappeared, and she could go home. She then came personally with her family, being very thankful. As father Mitrofan said: 'Now, I have not done anything by myself, I have prayed, I have read the psalm-book as well as some other prayers, I mention her, even now I still mention her and all her family; however, I am powerless, I cannot do anything. God has done the miracle, hasn't he, for she came with strong faith maybe and he helped her' (AIF I 183: 100). Then he added: 'This is a true case, which, even if you want, I can give you the address of that woman, I have the address, so just striking!' (Ibid.).

Slavcho Kisiov also told us about a similar 'striking' case in the Bachkovo Monastery. A woman with cancer came to him from Dobrich (North-Eastern Bulgaria). She had a dream with the Virgin Mary who instructed her to go to the Bachkovo Monastery, visit the Ayazmo and the Kluviya and bring a gift to the monastery. To fulfil the instruction, she embroidered a big tapestry with the image of the Madonna and brought it to the monastery. When visiting the holy places, she could identify in detail the landscape, which she had already seen in the dream: 'The same path, absolutely the same scenery on the way to the Ayazmo, the Ayazmo

itself, and the rock of the miracle-working icon; and now I saw them for the second time awake!’ (AIF I 184: 133). Sometime later, the woman sent money for candles and for mentioning her name during the liturgy, because, at the doctors’ surprise, she had recovered. As Slavcho concluded: ‘The big question remains: for the unbeliever, how could it be like that; for the sceptic, who is wavering in faith, maybe there is some part untruth; and for the believer: here it is what faith could do!’ (Ibid.).

We learned about miraculous healings also from Ana Petrova from Gorni Voden. Our interview with her took place on 27 March 1999 – the feast day of the Dormition of Mary Church (the Golden Apple) for that year. Ana lived in the immediate vicinity of the church and, for some years, had been a sexton in it, and it was obvious that she was not a stranger to the specific ritual, so the visitors consulted her all the time. She explained that many people came to the place – some of them were looking for help, while others were bringing gifts to express their gratitude for having children. She herself had cooked for the feast a big saucepan of the Asenovgrad’s well-known sarmi (vine leaves stuffed with rice). We asked if this is what she cooked traditionally for the feast and she explained: ‘No, I’ve just decided to do that, because my granddaughter became pregnant, and for four years she did not have any (child), so I decided to serve for health, to cook them’ (AIF I 288: 37). Further in our talk, it became clear that her daughter-in-law had also become pregnant thanks to the ‘miraculous belts’: ‘Our daughter-in-law now has a child, but we still keep the belt. (...) For eight years, she could not have any (child), our daughter-in-law’ (Ibid.: 38). Ana made the special belts for many people – acquaintances and strangers coming to the church. She assured us that they really helped and that she constantly received gifts from grateful mothers. The most convincing testimonies, of course, were the cases of her own granddaughter and daughter-in-law.

The stories analysed up to here do not comprise all genres and thematic groups of the religious narrative tradition connected to

Mary in the region of Asenovgrad, but they represent its general character and the main accents in it. The religious theme naturally appeared as one of the dominating topics in our fieldwork in the region, justifying its image as the ‘Small Jerusalem’. Its inhabitants in one way or another associate their local identity with Mary’s intermediation, and so they feel involved in all the various feasts and rituals, masses and vigils, votive offerings [kurbanj] and processions. The pilgrims also identify themselves with the holy places as their faith in Mary’s dominant power is their motive to visit those places. The very atmosphere in the sacred place and the religious community, which is formed there stimulate the spiritual experience of the devotees and activate the stories about cases of miraculous phenomena.

Like all religious activities, the cult to Mary in the region of Asenovgrad was socially ‘invisible’ and marginalised during Communist rule. After the political changes in 1989, it was not only activated and officially acknowledged, but was announced and ‘advertised’ through various media. Many people turned back to religion and many institutions tried to make use of its ‘symbolic capital’. Today, the Bachkovo Monastery and the churches in Asenovgrad are quite popular with their festive traditions and the religious or secular authorities try to be in step with the process. Besides all the traditional places and activities, some new expressions of Marian worship are invented reflecting the widening range of her power and influence, and underlying the great social resonance of her cult. It will be enough to mention few symptomatic events: in May 2002, the first and only copy of the Bachkovo icon was gifted by the citizens of Plovdiv to Pope John Paul II during his visit to the city. On June 1, 2008 (Child’s Day), the miraculous icon itself was carried for veneration from the Bachkovo Monastery to Plovdiv on the initiative of bishop Nikolay as a gift to the children of the city and in the name of their health and protection. In May 2007 and in July 2008, the Bachkovo icon together with two other miraculous Marian

icons – from the Troyan and the Rila monasteries – were gathered together for veneration in the Cathedral of St Alexander Nevski in Sofia to commemorate some important anniversaries in the history of the Bulgarian Church. What in the past was a local cult to Mary now becomes an important and emblematic part of the nation-wide significance of religious values.³⁴

Conclusions

Despite that it is enduring and lasting in time, the local devotion to Mary is susceptible to changes and transformations in line with the changing environment in its social, political, economic, technological and cultural aspects. The analysis of the local worship of Mary in Asenovgrad region is a fascinating example of the ways in which local religiosity exists and develops in the intersection of universal religion and local traditions, folklore and cultural specificities. On the local level, the general Christian figure of the Virgin acquires characteristic features, associated with her motherly aspect and her quality of a divine patroness and immediate helper in every need. Her intercession is achieved by means of sacred intermediaries that have the power to connect the common devotee with the celestial power: holy places, miracle-working icons, springs and caves. Apart from the well-known Marian feasts, idiosyncratic local holidays are observed, too, and the related ritual actions span from the canonical to the folkloric and 'magical'. Particular symbols, such as the apple, the water, and the fish, come to the fore as a material representation of Mary's sacred power and assistance. Local and personal narratives add a private, sometimes even intimate aspect to Marian devotion, binding the universal sacred figure of the Virgin with the history and geography of the local community, as well as with the individual life trajectories of the believers.

³⁴ More on the recent development of the local devotion of Mary in the region see in Baeva 2016; Baeva 2017.

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01 ZACHAR PODOLINSKÁ, Tatiana

Traces of the Mary in Post-Communist Europe

The Virgin Mary as such cannot be examined scientifically. We can, however, examine her 'apparitions' in the world, as well as the innumerable variants of Marian devotion and cult. This volume focuses on her manifestations in the post-Communist region with some geographical spillovers. It is either because post-Communist transformation concerned not only the former socialist countries, but also had an impact on the entire European region and was part of the overall post-modern and post-Communist reconfiguration of the European area. Another factor is that Marian worship is not controlled by political borders of present-day nation states. It has a wider transnational potential and impact. Nevertheless, we focused our viewfinder primarily on the post-Communist region, as we believe that thanks to its geographical and symbolic location and economic position in Europe, as well as its historical roots and traditions and common Communist history and heritage, it not only shows different traits of modernity compared to 'Western Europe', but we also face specific features and forms of worshipping of the Virgin Mary. We therefore decided to present in this volume the traces of the Virgin Mary by means of more in-depth analyses from selected countries of the post-socialist region.

By means of this publication, we can observe how the Virgin Mary is manifested in the faces of seers and pilgrims and how audio-visual means are becoming a direct part of Marian apparitions in Germany in the modern era (H. Knoblauch and S. Petschke); how she speaks through the mouth of a blind Roma woman and pacifies the ethnic and religious tensions between various groups in Romania (L. Peti); how she attributes meaning to meaningless places on the map by reallocating her presence through the geographical and time distribution of Marian dedications in Slovakia (J. Majo); how, after the fall of Communism, she revitalises the old places of her cult with new power, bringing together traditional

and non-traditional forms of worship in the secular Czech Lands (M. Holubová); how her messages are spread on the websites of new non-traditional Marian movements and how their apocalyptic warnings are being updated and localised into the specific national environment in Czechia (V. Tutr); how she addresses the readers of Marian literature differently on the shelves of bookstores in Slovakia and Austria (R. Kečka); but also how the Virgin Mary absorbs ultra-modern millennial and spiritualistic concepts of Mother Earth and Mother of the Universe, becoming the speaker of the great unified Hungarian nation (J. Kis-Halas); how she is becoming the re-discovered herald of Serbian national identity (A. Pavičević); how she absorbs the local forms of faith and folk Christianity in modern era and is thus the manifestation of grass-root Christianity and local religious culture in Bulgaria (V. Baeva and A. Georgieva); and how the path from a private to an officially recognised apparition depends not only on the Virgin Mary and the seer, but also on the overall constellation of the audience and the ability to offer a *religious ready-made event* (T. Zachar Podolinská and L. Peti).

This publication observes the current diversity of the forms of Marian devotion in post-Communist countries through different national and geographically defined contours and, in particular, the ability of the Virgin Mary to satisfy the hunger for modern spirituality and authentic religiousness, give voice to unofficial and popular religions, revitalise and redefine old places of cult and add new ones, appease war conflicts, speak out on behalf of nations and marginalised ethnic groups, and guard national and conservative values. The post-modern and post-Communist Mary thus restores ruptured traditions with love, and enchants the violently atheised European region with new miracles and apparitions, regardless of whether top Church and state representatives like it or not.

02 KIS-HALAS, Judit

Sacred Sites Reinterpreted: New Age Phenomena at a Hungarian Marian Shrine

Marian shrines were always the sites of miraculous healings and spectacular apparitions. Nowadays, they have also become the crystallisation points of the New Age phenomena. Several studies have already pointed out this trend with regard to popular pilgrimage destinations. As far as the Hungarian Marian shrines are concerned, none of them have been systematically examined from this perspective. This chapter aims to provide a deeper insight of how a Marian shrine is being re-orchestrated as a specific 'power place' in the context of alternative spiritualities, such as New Age religiosity or ethno-paganism at one Marian shrine at Máriagyűd.

From the wide-ranging New Age phenomena and religious practices that the author observed during the past decades at Máriagyűd, she chose the prominent example of an esoteric group called *Magyar MAGok* [Hungarian Seeds], which deals with diverse religious and healing activities. Their programmes include shamanic drumming sessions, tours to 'sacred sites' in Hungary and the Carpathian Basin (mostly Romania), weekend meditations, esoteric workshops, readings on the history and culture of the ancient Hungarians, such as direct kinship between the Hungarians and the Huns, or the identification of the Ancient Hungarians with the Scythians, or the Hungarian origins of the Christian Father God. In accordance with the millennial narrative, they use the elements of the alternative history of the Hungarians as well as other motifs which recall UFO-religions and ET-spiritualities, and last but not least, the idea of healing and cleansing as the basic means leading to universal well-being. The description of their unique rituals and other religious practices is followed by an analysis of the discourse on the contested authority of the shrine.

The author of the chapter focuses on the role of the Virgin Mary within their discourse. She found it interesting that Mary

is connected with the so-called *Boldogasszony* (literally [Blessed Woman]), which is a special Hungarian denomination of the Virgin Mary and, at the same time, the alleged goddess of the ancient Hungarians. 'Boldogasszony' has been used as a synonym for the Blessed Virgin Mary since the Middle Ages (cf. Madas 2002). The quest for a lost epic and a missing mythology of the Hungarians, which was inspired by national romanticism, resulted in the term gaining an ethnic taste by the end of the 19th century. 'Boldogasszony' was the most emblematic female figure of the pantheon in the re-invented Ancient Hungarian religion – the Mother Goddess (Kálmány 1885). With regard to its contemporary use, 'Boldogasszony' is also interpreted as the Hungarian equivalent of the Goddess (Bowman 2009), and is also considered Mother Earth (Gaia) and the galactic patroness of all Hungarians *par excellence*. The author put the manifold interpretations of the Virgin Mary's figure in the centre of attention, highlighting the Catholic Church's standpoint on the emergence of New Age spirituality at Catholic devotional places.

03 HOLUBOVÁ, Markéta

Manifestations of Marian Devotion in the Czech Republic – the Past and Present

According to the author of the chapter, Marian devotion in the Czech Republic should be seen not only in the light of recent highly secularised climate of Czech society. For the current dislike for official Catholicism and de-Christianisation of Czech society, we have to go back in history. In the 19th century, Czechs became liberals, nationalists or socialists. At the same time, religion ceased to play its former role and was assigned only the role of an occasionally sought-after, yet unnecessary 'folklore' anachronism, typical for village population. Religious identity was substituted primarily by national identity, as well as by class identity and a 'scientific' worldview. The rise of the Communist dictatorship after 1948 bolstered these trends and used them – mostly unmod-

ified – for its own benefit. The non-religious and anti-religious components were accentuated, while the forms of 'implicit religiosity' stayed preserved and Church organisations were forced to face systematic repression. The years 1989 and 1990 brought about radical changes in the political and spiritual history of the Czech Republic. Religion lost its principal enemy – Communism. Innumerable forms of religiosity appeared, from versions of classical and modern Christianity to the spiritual schools of the Far East.

In this context, it is very interesting that the worshiping of the Virgin Mary has remained virtually unchanged. Just like in the past, emphasis is placed today on spirituality and emotional experience, thereby fulfilling the main conditions for survival in the modern era *de facto*. In addition to the traditional forms of cult and pilgrimage rituals, there are also new forms of religiosity brought about by the 21st century, especially in abundantly visited places of pilgrimage. Due to the widespread use of the internet and e-mail communication, after centuries of pilgrimage tradition, there is for the first time no need to receive the written *votum* personally or even in representation. After 1989, visits to Czech and foreign places of pilgrimage began to appear in the catalogues of many travelling agencies. Also, bike pilgrimages represent a very popular form among young people.

On the other hand, it can be also mentioned, that despite the strong Marian tradition, the general public and as well as the religious discourse on Marian devotion connected to private apparitions in the Czech Republic is at a certain point 'marginal'. This can have two principal reasons. Firstly, the import of apparitions is caused by the absence of such apparitions at home. Secondly, the import of greater movements and groups represents a reaction to the delay of the Communist era and a smaller membership of believers.

04 TUTR, Vojtěch

The Reception of Recent Marian Apparitions in the Czech Republic in the Field of Popular Religiosity – Two Examples

Marian apparitions have always emerged throughout the history of the Catholic Church. However, they have never been given a lot of attention and have never met with so much public acceptance as has been seen since the latter half of the 19th century. The development of *mass communication* and increasing population *mobility* have partly contributed to this phenomenon. These apparitions have a new function – providing *public messages*. The Virgin Mary is no longer speaking only to the visionary; she is pronouncing prophecies and messages to all believers, laying claims to the hierarchy.

This chapter offers a comparative analysis of two examples of ‘popular religiosity’ in the Czech Republic as a spontaneous religious activity produced and operated by their charismatic leaders and opinion-makers: *Vérité* centre founded by František Mráček and *Mariánské nakladatelství* [MANA, Marian publishers] founded by František Press in Brno. Both cases are based on modern Marian apparitions and are contextualised in the current global situation and in the Czech Republic. According to the author, this goes hand in hand with the trend of modernisation and the era of mass communication.

Marian devotion plays a central role in both studied cases and is crucial for understanding the portraying her as the *Loving Mother* and *Hope of the Mankind*, as well as the *Guardian of the World* coming as the (last) *Living Warning* before the expected global catastrophe. The apocalyptic, chiliastic and millennial tone presented by both interpreters of modern Marian apparitions is being explored as well. The main issue in both cases is the expectation of the *end of the current world* order. This element was certainly activated by the approaching end of the millennium. Even though this stimulation of thoughts on the end of the world is now out of play, the charismatic leaders flexibly postponed their prediction in this re-

gard and, according to them, we should expect some global threat in the future, the outbreak of WWII, nuclear or ecological catastrophes, globalisation or total control by means of information technologies.

Another nodal point is the reference to *globalisation* as an instrument of Satan's rule over the unified world. According to the author, both studied cases are examples of modern adaptation of Christianity to the post-modern religious landscape of post-socialist Czech Republic and represent a form of *popular religiosity* which is transformed and adapted to the context of modern society and ‘Western culture’.

05 KEČKA, Roman

Contemporary Models of Marian Discourse in Slovakia

According to the 2001 census, the majority of Slovakia's population statistically follows the Catholic confession of Roman or Byzantine rites. In both rites, the Marian devotion has a considerable place in religious reflection and spirituality. This study explores the religious discourse of the Marian devotion as it appears in available books and booklets on this topic. The main focus of the chapter is a comparison of the Marian discourse in Slovakia (representing a post-socialist country) and the Marian discourse in neighbouring Austria (representing a ‘Western’ country with no socialist history). For this purpose, a sample of Mariological reflections and spiritual texts was created based on their availability in all Catholic bookstores in the capital of Slovakia (Bratislava) and the capital of Austria (Vienna). The reason for this choice is that these bookstores offer books that mirror the living intellectual and religious brainstorming and reflect Christianity, in particular the pattern of the Marian discourse of the recent decades in both countries. The study comments on the absence of modern Marian literature in Slovak bookstores. The author also analyses the Marian vocabulary and topics in the both samples. The author distinguishes three existing models of the Marian discourse in

Slovakia, all of traditional origin, portraying Mary as an unselfish and patient mother, Mary loving conditionally and restraining God's anger; Mary leading the legions against Satan and crushing his head. All three models are based on the traditional images of Mary and, within the Christian communities, are not understood as contradictory, but complementary.

Compared to Western Christianity, the Marian discourse in Slovakia lacks two recurrent models: (1) the progressive 20th/21st century model, and (2) the traditionalist and fundamentalist model. The first model has created a Marian vocabulary and contents representing a self-confident, social and communicative model of Mary. This model presents an alternative to the old models combining mild or triumphant vocabulary with mild or triumphant contents. The second model which is absent among Slovak believers is the Marian discourse of the traditionalist and fundamentalist groups of each age tolerated by official Church structures. These traditionalist and fundamentalist groups return to the old Marian vocabulary and contents that is triumphant, militant and – in this modern version – has an offensive character. This form of discourse, created as a reaction to progressive Christian groups – did not emerge in Slovakia, since there were no progressive Christian movements.

Based on the research of the author, the Slovak Marian reflection and spirituality result from traditional beliefs, having no affinity to Western progressive and traditionalist models. In this regard, it can be stated that Slovakia's isolation from the European spiritual development, which has caused traditional devotion to be fixed in its forms, is, paradoxically, continuing also after the fall of Communism in the era of religious freedom. The comparative discursive analysis of Mariological literature in Slovakia and its Western neighbour – Austria has showed that the Slovak religious landscape is far more traditional (but not traditionalist) than the current trends in the 'Western' religious discourse.

06 MAJO, Juraj

Marian Dedications within the Current Cultural Space of Slovakia

Cultural geography (as the main field in geography with no connection to religion) is strongly influenced by constructivist approaches today. Geographer Doreen Massey wrote in 2010 (Massey 2010: 107) that space is always being made and always, therefore, in a sense, unfinished. The 'always' is rather that there are always connections yet to be made, juxtapositions yet to flower into interaction, or not, potential links which may never be established. Loose ends and ongoing stories. With these ideas she perfectly outlined the relationship of space, time, and social world. In the field of religious identity and its expression it indicates not just variability of its representations but can also work as a hub to the local projections of identity interactions and how this space is formed within local actors and local circumstances.

All interactions within the various scales forms two paradigms of how place and space can be analysed – as politics and poetics of space. If the cult of the Virgin Mary prevails within the Catholic religious practice, then the poetics and politics of space can have vast forms of expression and impacts. This chapter attempts to outline the spatiality of this cult represented in dedications of sacred buildings, and open up questions on forming such distributions and regional specificities in Slovakia.

Research on the spatial aspects of dedications of sacred buildings provide interesting intersections of relations between sacred and profane as well as various levels of research resulting in a relationship between the 'politics' and 'poetics' of place. This chapter introduces such relationship within cultural geography. Although this approach is fully applicable in local or regional research, we have outlined the spatial aspects of the cult of the Virgin Mary as embodied in the dedication of sacred buildings, introducing the differences in the types of such dedication within regional and denominational aspects (such as Roman and Byzantine Catholics).

The link between time and space is observed in living as well as obliterated dedications, which helps us understand in a very broad sense the dynamics of construction and maintenance of sacred space and the projections of initiatives at various levels of political administration with an impact on the poetics of space and community.

Research on the spatial distribution of dedications in Slovakia is still a little explored field, even though the extensive data sources are relatively high in quality and quantity and enable the interpretation of different relations in various scales. In the context of important dedications, it is the Marian ones that have a significant position in church life and are the most common ones, reflecting the intensity of the worship of the Virgin Mary within the Slovak environment. The research also indicates that the importance and popularity of Marian dedications are accompanied by great diversity with growth over time. It also reflects on the background based on social changes, such as the extinction of the Kingdom of Hungary, the declaration of Our Lady of Sorrows as the patron of Slovakia, etc.

07 KNOBLAUCH, Hubert – PETSCHKE, Sabine

Vision and Video. Marian Apparition, Spirituality and Popular Religion

The chapter demonstrates that *spirituality* and *popular religiosity* are built into the Marian apparitions, thus turning them into a contemporary 'modern' phenomenon. The study refers to a series of apparitions which happened during 1999 in Marpingen, a German village close to the Western border with France. This village was the setting for a series of Marian apparitions back in the 19th century. These earlier apparitions have recently been subjected to a very thorough study by British historian David Blackbourn (1993). Whereas Blackbourn based his analysis on written documents mostly stored in archives, the authors had not only access to written documents, newspapers and books, but also the

exceptional chance to collect video-tape records from the event, and they could also rely on audio-taped statements by the seers. These data, supported by ethnographic field data, are subject to a fine-grained video-analysis provided in the chapter.

In Marpingen, it was Marion who began to have visions on May 17 and 20 near the chapel (built by the above-mentioned association) where the earlier apparitions had happened. Thereafter, the three women together had various apparitions near the chapel, mostly in the company of an increasing number of pilgrims. The sixth apparitions on June 13, 1999, was already witnessed by about 4,000 visitors, and on the ninth day of the apparitions, on July 18, 12,000 visitors turned up. The final apparitions were said to be attended by 30,000. As a hundred years before, the incident not only attracted masses, there was also some turmoil accompanying the apparitions: television stations turned up and reported critically on the event, the Church prohibited any proclamation by the seers, the seers were threatened and, finally, the village administration and the chapel association got into a conflict.

The authors pointed out that when talking about the apparition, we must be aware of the fact that this notion refers not only to a subjective experience by the seers. In order to become an apparition, it needs to be communicated. The communication of the apparition does not only draw on the verbalisation by which the apparition is being reported, i.e. reconstructed. In addition, the apparition is also being performed by the body of the seers who form part of the setting which includes the visitors in relation to the seers and the spatial constellations of other objects. Thus, the authors interpret apparition as a *communicative performance of religious action*.

However, the verbalisation of the cited vision is not, as in other cases, reconstructed *after* the vision. On the contrary, the seer (Marion) talks into a dictograph which is held by another visionary – Judith – while having the vision. In this way, the apparition is turned into a *live report*. It may be no accident that this kind of

live report is not directly addressed to the live audience. Rather, it is recorded so to be accessible to a larger media audience via audio tapes, transcripts of the visions and a number of books based on these reports. According to Auslander (1999: 39ff.), it is the '*technological and aesthetic contamination* of live performance'. The authors noted that the media are not only added to the event but are imparted in the event to such a degree that they transform it into something different. Thus, the use of the dictograph results in a format of the 'live report' on the inner visions. The microphone allows coordinating the actions of the seers with those of the crowd – a phenomenon that was virtually impossible at earlier apparitions.

According to the authors, the Marian movement is not only a static remnant of earlier periods but also a form of modern expression against rationality and secularism. The Marian apparition in question, according to the authors, is an example for the modernity of this form of religion by exhibiting the essential features of popular religion. It is not that religion has changed its contents: it is still the realm of the transcendent as the subject matter of religion. However, this subject matter is not an element of cognitive or moral belief; it is something to be experienced subjectively, the reasserting subject being the major instance and locus of religiosity. This way, the analysis of Marian apparitions is a case for the thesis of the modernity of religion and a case that demonstrates what is modern about religion.

08 PAVIĆEVIĆ, Aleksandra

Travelling through the Battle Fields. The Cult of the Bogorodica in Serbian Tradition and Contemporary Times

The chapter deals with the role of the Virgin Mary in the nation-state building process in Serbia. The beginning of the process of religious revival in Serbia coincided with the beginning of the social, economic and political crisis in the former Socialistic Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, which took place at the beginning

of the 1990s. There was an urgent need to find *new collective identity*, since the earlier had been reduced to rubble. At the *individual level*, this process primarily implied increased participation in rites within the life cycle of an individual (baptism, wedding, and funeral), followed by popularisation of the practice of celebrating family's patron saint days and, only in the end and on the smallest scale, by an increase in the number of believers taking an active part in regular church services.

On the *collective level*, the traditional closeness of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serb people and the state was the basic paradigm of such restructuring. The attempt to establish continuity with the tradition of the medieval Serb state, which implied active participation of the Church in both social and political matters, as well as the grafting of this relationship in the secular state and civil society in Serbia at the end of the second millennium, turned out to be a multi-tiered issue (Jevtić 1997).

At mass celebrations, as well as at revolutionary street protest rallies (which were plentiful in the capital during the last dozen years or so) and at celebrations of the town's patron saint days and various festivities, the image of the 'Bogorodica' [Gr. 'Theotokos', i.e. The Mother of God]; appears. Leading the processional walks of the towns, it emerges as a symbol which manages to mobilise the nation with its fullness and multi-layered meaning. The main thesis of the chapter is to explain the historical roots of her cult and her embeddedness in the national history and identity in Serbia.

The cult of the 'Bogorodica' has always had greater importance on the macro than on the micro level. This is corroborated by the fact that a relatively small number of families celebrated some of the 'Bogorodica' holidays as their Patron St Day, while a large number of monasteries and churches, as well as village Patron St Days were dedicated to one of them (Grujić 1985: 436). On the other hand, some authors believe that, with the acceptance of Christianity, it was the cult of the 'Bogorodica' which was the most developed

among the Serb population, because her main and most widely recognisable epithet *Baba*, connected to giving birth, was directly associated with the powerful female pagan divinities such as the Great Mother, Grandmother etc. (Petrović 2001: 55; Čajkanović 1994a: 339). In the folk perception, the 'Presveta Bogorodica' [The Most Holy Mother of God] is unambiguously connected to the phenomenon and process of birth-giving and, that is why, barren women most frequently addressed the 'Bogorodica' for assistance.

The observance of the image of the 'Bogorodica' was specifically connected with the so-called *miracle icons*, that is, her paintings linked to some miraculous event, either locally or generally. This was most frequently related to the icons which were famous for discharging myrrh, as well as icons which would 'cry' in certain situations, as well as those that changed the place of residence in a miraculous manner.

The use of icons in wars, either those of conquest or defensive, appears to be a widely spread practice in the Orthodox world. It was noted that Serb noblemen carried standards with images of various saints to wars, and that the cities were frequently placed under the protection of certain icons. The author shows how, travelling through towns and battlefields, throughout the decades and centuries, the 'Bogorodica' appeared through its holy image at the end of the second millennium as the protectress, advocate, Pointer of the Way and foster mother of those who were, possibly more than ever, in need of miracles and waymarks.

09 BAEVA, Vihra – GEORGIEVA, Albena

The Worship of Mary in the Region of Asenovgrad

(Central Southern Bulgaria): Sites, Rituals and Narratives

The chapter presents Marian worship in one of its specific local manifestations – the cult to the Virgin in the region of Asenovgrad, Central Southern Bulgaria. The fact that it is the most representative example of the vital and well-developed Marian cult with in present-day Bulgaria, as well as authors' long-term fieldwork

in the region (started 1996), influenced the choice of Asenovgrad as the focus of their attention. The methodological framework is based on the concept of local religion (Christian 1989: 3), reformulated by the authors into the concepts of *local religiosity* and *local religious culture*. The local Marian cult in Asenovgrad region is used as an example of how to understand this local and cultural embeddedness of religiosity, presented via (1) devotional sites and the images belonging to them (in this case, miracle-working icons of the Virgin); (2) local feasts and ritual practices; and (3) local and personal religious narratives. The authors regard places, rituals and narratives as basic elements which complement, influence and support each another, constituting a complex system of local religious culture. Following this pattern, the authors pinpointed for their analysis the three most important places of Marian worship in the region: the Dormition of Mary Monastery of Bachkovo, the Annunciation of Mary Church in Asenovgrad, and the Dormition of Mary Church in Gorni Voden. Besides the contextual information, the authors also focused on a more intimate, individual dimension of Marian worship, exploring the presence of the Virgin in personal narratives about miraculous recoveries, dreams, visions, etc. and delineating the connection between individual experience and cultural background. According to the authors, the local worship of Mary in Asenovgrad region is a brilliant example of the ways in which local religiosity exists and develops in the intersection of universal religion and local traditions, folklore and cultural specificities. On the local level, the general Christian figure of the Virgin acquires characteristic features, associated with her motherly aspect and her quality of a divine patroness and immediate helper in every need. Her intercession is achieved by means of sacred intermediaries that have the power to connect the common devotee with the celestial power: holy places, miracle-working icons, springs and caves. Apart from the well-known Marian feasts, idiosyncratic local holidays are observed, too, and the related ritual actions span from the canonical to the folkloric

and ‘magical’. Specific symbols, such as the apple, the water, and the fish, come to the fore as a material representation of Mary’s sacred power and assistance. Local and personal narratives add a private, sometimes even intimate aspect to the Marian devotion, binding the universal sacred figure of the Virgin with the history and geography of the local community, as well as with the individual life trajectories of the believers.

10 ZACHAR PODOLINSKÁ, Tatiana

‘From Periphery to the Centre’: Private Apparition of the Virgin Mary (An In-depth Qualitative Analysis of the Apparition’s Narrative with Field Journal Notes)

The overall research dataset used for the purposes of this chapter is part of ongoing research of the author on Roma folk beliefs (2006–2007), as well as on the activities of both traditional and non-traditional religious movements among the Roma in Slovakia (2003–2004, 2010–2011).

In the framework of the previous outputs from this research, the author attempted to create, with some generalisation, a typology of the elements of traditional rural *Romani Christianity* in Slovakia, elucidating the phenomena of the cultural and ethnic reinterpretation of mainstream Christianity into a Roma cultural context (Podolinská 2009). In particular, she pointed out the phenomenon of *inculturation* in which the ‘White’ Virgin Mary is culturally and ethnically ‘transcribed’ and ‘translated’ into the ‘Chocolate Mary’ that physically, mentally and spiritually fits better and corresponds to the hopes and needs of particular ‘peripheral’ ethnic community.

As Viktor Turner (1974) pointed out that what is interesting about apparitions is that they occur on the *periphery* not only from the geographical point of view (peripheries of cities, rural areas) but also at peripheral levels of society: the seers are mostly children or (illiterate) women from a socially deprived background. This chapter offers an in-depth qualitative analysis of a narrative

on private Marian apparitions of one Romani woman living in a segregated Roma settlement in Šariš region, Eastern Slovakia. The seer perfectly fits into the ‘periphery’ concept: she is an illiterate woman from a socially deprived settlement and is a member of the ethnically stigmatised community of *Cigáni* [Gypsies]. Her visions are private ones, and since they started to appear, she started her struggle for collective and public recognition. The story of her apparition thus contains the well-known part of the path of other ‘successful visionaries’ – ‘from periphery to centre’ (i.e. from marginal private/individual apparition to the central public/mass recognition). As far as visions are ‘cultural products’ (Christian 1998) produced in the process of communication (Knoblauch 2009; Knoblauch and Schnettler 2018), they are not only embedded in a particular cultural context but also in the language and aesthetic taste. For every apparition, the crucial point is to achieve collective consensus and to attract masses. This is the way from private/individual apparition to public/collective acknowledgement. This is the way from ‘periphery to the centre’. In the described case, however, the seer was able to achieve recognition only within her own family. The response of the local Roma community to her apparitions was mostly negative. Quite interesting about this case is that, according to her, she has support from the side of non-Roma local religious authorities. Based on the author’s qualitative analysis, the struggle for *collective consensus* and *ethnic code* are the most important themes of the analysed narrative on apparition.

According to the author, the peripheral and deprived life situation of the seer is embedded in her visions. In her narrative, the attempt to achieve ‘centrality’ in a marginal position is central and the recognition theme is more frequent than the description of the apparition itself. In order to offer the reader a holistic picture of research situation, the author uses not only the qualitative analysis and thematic coding, but also the perspective of multi-vocal ethnography (Tobin 1988; Clegg 2017). The interview is thus embedded in the synchronous context of field journal notes

of the author, as well as in the diachronic context of her recent memories. The qualitative analysis also includes a wider context of the thematic search of media reports on local apparitions among Roma households in Eastern Slovakia.

11 PETI, Lehel

The Marian Apparition of Seuca/Szőkefalva in the Context of Religious and Ethnical Interferences

Seuca became a known place for pilgrimage due to a blind Gypsy woman's public visions about the Virgin Mary in the first years of the new millennium. The author presents both the history of the ethnical and confessional co-existence in the village and the economic and social problems which affected the whole community. Then, the attitudes towards the apparition of the different denominations are highlighted by also presenting the way the seer attempts to question the different denominational opinions. The legitimating strategies of a Gypsy woman significantly influenced the aspects of the vision of the Virgin Mary from Seuca. In the history of Seuca, we find the practice of ethnic groups making well-defined boundaries between them, functioning as important parts of the communities. The artificial change of the ethnic structure during the Communist dictatorship changed the patterns of relations between the ethnic groups and made ethnic coexistence more problematic. The local parish that tried to expropriate the Marian apparitions has successfully integrated their messages into the ideology of ethnic reconciliation. The traditional ontological systems of religion in the communities still work and the frequent crossing of the ethnic and denominational boundaries have also promoted the strategies of the Church. In addition, the apparitions in Seuca earned the village a distinguished reputation in the region where enormous changes have taken place and where people have been forced to develop more complex strategies, or ways of life, without any pre-existing concrete models.

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