

## Two Representations of the Virgin



### 86 ▼ A BYZANTINE ICON OF THE KOIMESIS and A DORMITION MINIATURE

By the year 1000 Eastern and Western Christians disagreed over a number of issues, but they equally regarded Mary, the mother of Jesus, as the most lovable and loving of all God's saints. Both Byzantine and Latin Christians revered Mary as the fully human yet sinless Mother of God who served as advocate for all humanity before her Son's throne.

The cult of Mary resulted in a massive volume of religious artwork in East and West centering on the Virgin Mother. One of the more popular themes, which originated in Byzantium (possibly influenced by somewhat similar representations of the Buddha's *parinirvana*, or passing into Nirvana at death) was the "Falling Asleep" of Mary, known in Greek as the *Koimesis*. According to a tradition equally accepted in the East and the West, when Mary died, her incorruptible body was assumed into Heaven. With body and soul reunited, she was crowned Queen of Heaven. In the West, the same moment in sacred history was referred to as the *Dormition*. By whichever name they knew it, both Byzantines and Western Christians celebrated the feast day of that event as one of the most holy days in the religious calendar.

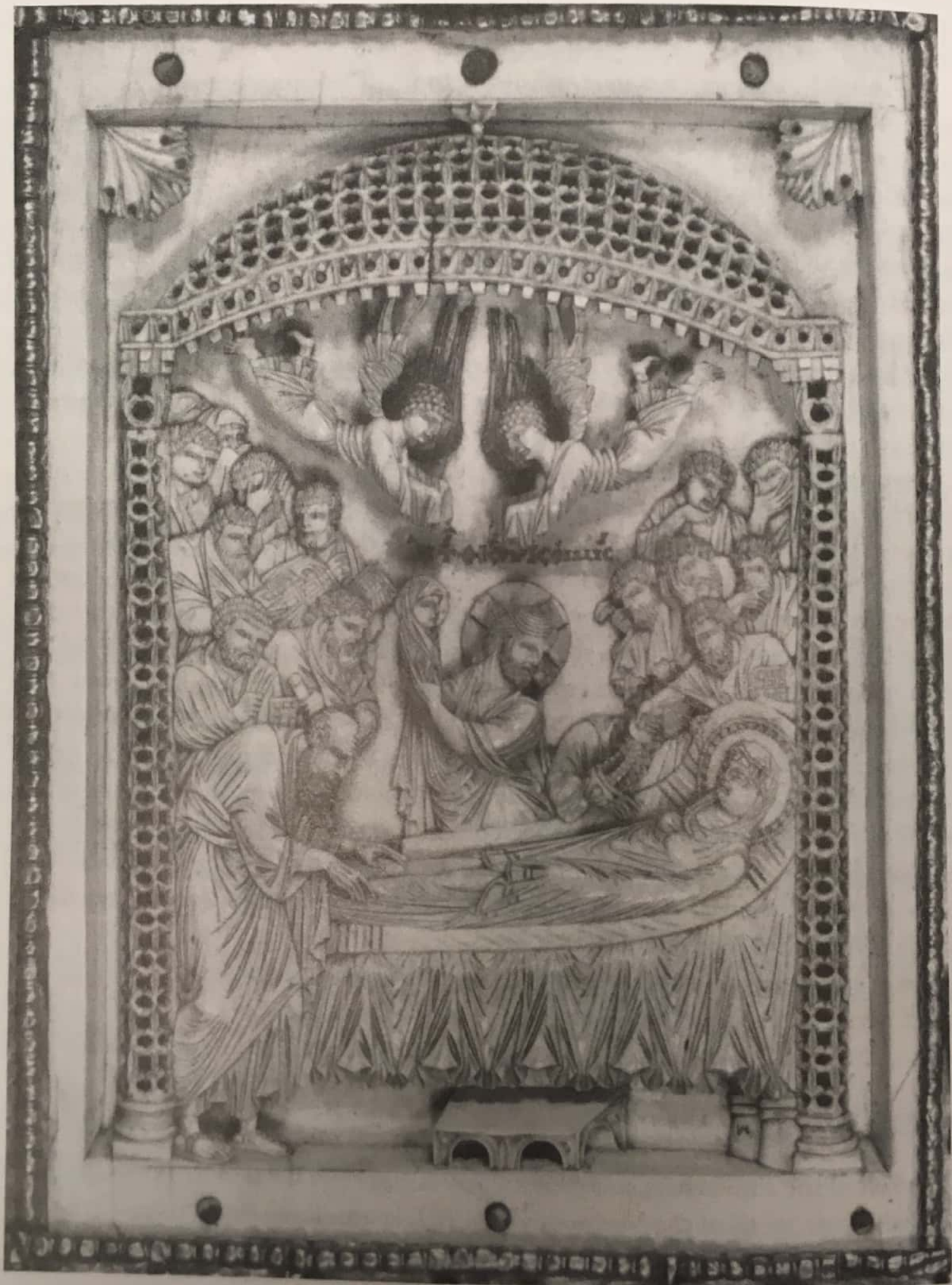
Illustrated below are two images of the *Falling Asleep*. The first is a carved icon, or sacred image, from Byzantium, dating from the second half of the tenth century. Here we see the sleeping Virgin, who could not die because she was sinless. She is surrounded by mourning apostles and disciples, including Mary Magdalene (in the far left corner covering her lower face with a veil). Saint Paul stands at the foot of her bed and Saint Peter is at the head, incensing her body. Her son, Jesus, has taken her soul in his hands, and two angels prepare to receive it into Heaven. Our second illustration is a miniature (a small manuscript painting) from the German monastery at Reichenau. This work, which dates to around the year 1000, varies somewhat from the Byzantine icon. Saint Paul is still at the foot of the bed, but Saint Peter has been replaced at the head of the bed to stand just behind the beardless Saint John, to whom Jesus commended the care of his mother as he was dying on the cross. (In the Byzantine icon John is half hidden behind Peter's censer and has his hand on the Virgin's bed.)

As you study these two masterpieces, see if you can find any iconographical and artistic connections between them.

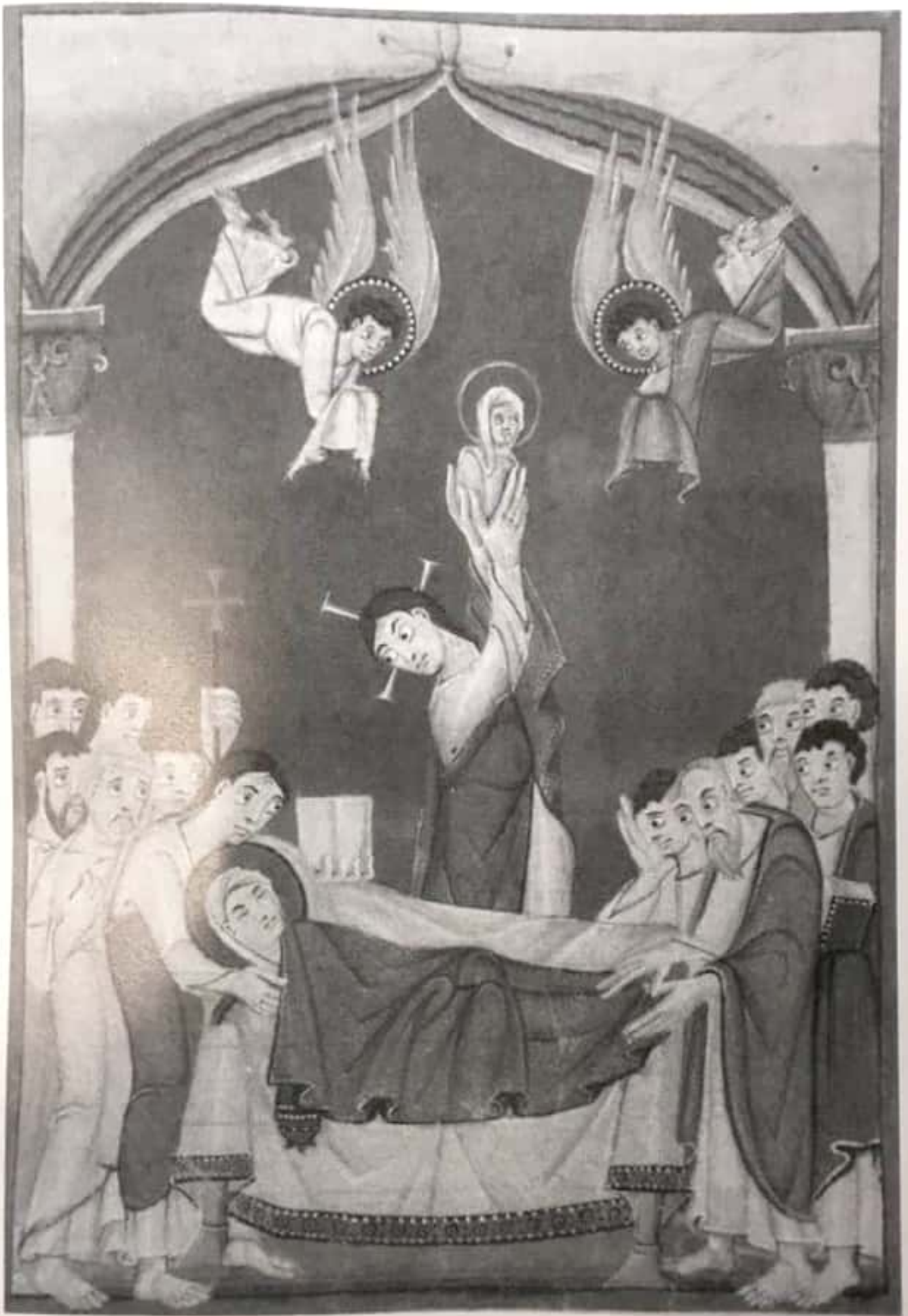
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### QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. List all of the similarities and dissimilarities between these two works of art.
2. The artistic motif of the Virgin's Falling Asleep originated in the East, where popular veneration of Mary was deep and widespread. What do the similarities in these two works of art suggest to you?







*A Dormition Miniature*