

AN ARMENIAN FROM MACEDONIA

The Origins of Emperor Basil I

Byzantine Emperor Basil I (r. 867-886) is commonly known by the epithet “the Macedonian,” yet the ethnic origins of Basil have long been in dispute. “Macedonian” is not suitable as an ethnic term during the ninth century. The available source material, including works by Basil’s son and grandson, illustrate that Basil was ethnically Armenian. But while royal descent from the Armenian Arsacid Dynasty, as promoted by Patriarch Photios, can be ruled out, this does not undermine Basil’s Armenian ethnicity, and in fact bolsters the theory. Several of the sources did not advance any personal agenda by describing Basil as Armenian, rather they actually may have undermined their own positions by doing so: being seen as foreigners could be deadly for those ruling Byzantium. While Basil was almost certainly ethnically Armenian, he would have, like those he ruled, considered himself a Roman and ruled like one over his ethnically cosmopolitan empire.

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Emperor Michael III crowns Basil as co-emperor, 866
Source: Madrid Skylitzes (National Library of Spain)

A group of conspirators entered the imperial bedchamber and cut down Emperor Michael III (r. 842-867) in cold blood. Michael’s corpse was soon found and his co-*basileus*, Basil, was raised to the imperial throne.¹ The murder was one of the most brutal in Byzantine history, yet Basil, Michael’s colleague, did nothing to punish the conspirators. In fact, Basil played at least some sinister role in Michael’s death. Although it is unclear whether Basil was among those that physically struck down the emperor, it is clear from the textual evidence that he was at least implicated in the murder and probably directed it. After all, he had

killed Michael’s uncle, Bardas Caesar, just one year earlier. Basil was also very close to the conspirators whose names have come down to us from history: his friends, Hovhannes Khald and Hagovpik, his brothers, Marian and Smbat, and his cousin, Acila.² At least some of these five conspirators were of Armenian descent; was Basil also an Armenian?

The issue of Basil’s origins has been a long-standing question in Byzantine studies. He has been known as Basil the Macedonian for centuries, yet that does not make him a Macedonian in the modern sense of the word. Some sourc-

es refer to him as Armenian, others as Slavic. Byzantinists have either tried to wrestle with this question, or simply ignored it, for decades. Those who supported the theory of Basil's Armenian origins include Armenian historian Sirapie Der Nersessian and Byzantine historian Peter Charanis.³ Famed Byzantine historian George Ostrogorsky agreed, but held many reservations.⁴ Others, in more general histories of Byzantium, have simply ignored the matter all together. Despite this inconclusiveness, however, looking at the textual evidence can reveal a definite answer. By rejecting "Macedonian" as an ethnic term, tracing the source material for Armenian population movements and Basil's own origins, determining the implausibility of a royal Arsacid lineage for Basil, and examining Basil's own actions, he emerges as ethnically Armenian, but above all a Byzantine emperor.

BASIL'S NON-ETHNIC ORIGINS

Although Basil's ethnic origins have been uncertain, other aspects of his origins have been definitively proven. The primary sources that discuss Basil are unanimous in stating that he had a humble background, starting life as an impoverished youth from a town near Adrianople. Constantine VII (r. 913-959), Basil's grandson, makes it clear in the *Vita Basilii* that Basil was born a commoner. Constantine creates an image of a society that wanted a common man as emperor rather than the corrupt *porphyrogenitos* Michael III and plays on Basil's humble origins as a locus of support.⁵ Early Byzantinists quickly recognized the unanimity of the source material and agreed that Basil was of humble origins.⁶ The rise in Basil's economic status came through the rich widow Danielis, who wanted good relations with Basil, the man that a priest had told her would one day wear the imperial purple.⁷

One theory of Basil's origins has him being born in 812 or 813 and shortly thereafter being taken captive by the Bulgar army of Krum (r. c.803-814). Although this theory is substantiated by the *Vita Basilii*,⁸ logistically it makes little sense. If this timing was correct, Basil would have been in his forties by the time he became a stable boy to Michael III, making him twice Michael's age. "This date would run counter to the more solid historical evidence of Basil's rise to power and relationship with Michael III. Basil was Michael's stable boy and later his close friend and confidant. Michael even forced Basil to marry his mistress, Eudokia Ingerina, and for her sake alone it is highly unlikely that Michael would have made his mistress marry someone twice her age. In all of the sources, closeness in age is implied, especially through the references to Basil as *ἀγούρον* (*agouron*) and *νεώτερον* (*neoteron*), translating to boy and junior. It is much more likely that Basil was born around 836, after the captives from Krum's campaign were returned to the Byzantine Empire under Bulgar Khan Omurtag (r. 814-831). This would put Basil's age as only slightly greater than Michael III, properly fitting with the relationship between Michael III and Basil that is clear from the source material.

GEOGRAPHIC REJECTION OF THE SLAVIC THEORY

It is clear that Basil was from the Adrianople region, referred to as Byzantine Thrace, which was included in the term Macedonia at the time of Basil.⁹ Regardless of an ethnic meaning today, in the ninth century the term "Macedonian" referred principally to the location Macedonia, making Basil, in the geographic sense, a Macedonian. Macedonia was an ill-defined physical region in the Southern Balkans that extended from Ohrid and Thessalonica into the region around Adrianople, the region that is more commonly termed Thrace. This region was settled by a variety of peoples, including the remnants of pre-Slavic peoples, Greeks, Slavs, and Armenians.

This ambiguity in the term "Macedonian" has sometimes caused it be interpreted as an ethnic term rather than the primarily geographic denotation. This gave rise to the first of three major theories on Basil's ethnic origins, the idea that Basil I was a Slav. The Arab chronicle of al-Tabari, for example, recognized Basil's supposed descent from a royal Armenian dynasty, the Arsacids, but states that Basil's mother was a Slav. This term refers to location, as the region near Adrianople did have a large Slavic population due to the Slavic incursions that led to massive demographic shifts in the Balkans since the sixth century.¹⁰ Therefore Basil's mother was from Sklavinia, or the land of the Slavs. Arab sources used the terms Macedonian and Slav interchangeably, referring to both Macedonia and Sklavinia without any real distinction.

This trend was noticed as early as the seventeenth century by Barthélemy d'Herbelot, who noted that Oriental, or rather Arab, historians referred to anyone born north of Greece as Slavs, so therefore they called Basil the Macedonian Basilios al-Seclabi, or Basil the Slav.¹¹ In short, Arab historians referred to Slavs as anyone born north of Greece, so therefore Basil the Macedonian was called Basilios al-Seclabi, or Basil the Slav. A host of Arab historians referred to Basil as a Slav, including Hamza al-Isfahani (Ispahanensis), Al-Masoudi, and Sibte ibn al-Gauzi.¹² Some scholars promoted this Slavic theory of origin for Basil, including George Finlay and Karl Hopf.¹³ Most of these scholars were themselves of Slavic or Germanic ancestry, suggesting a potential nationalist bias. This is compounded by the severe lack of evidence. The only primary sources that specifically referred to Basil as a Slav are ones in Arabic, whereas sources in other languages, including Greek, the main language of the Byzantine Empire, did not. There is still a chance that Basil could have had Slavic blood, as Macedonia was heavily Slavicized at this time. However, the singularity of vague Arabic support for a Slavic ancestry, intermingled and confused with being from Macedonia or Sklavinia, provides weak support for the Slav theory, which has effectively lost scholarly support, except as a theory of vague hypothesizes and probabilities.

CONFIRMATION OF THE ARMENIAN THEORY

With the Slavic theory effectively disproved, we are left with two theories: the Armenian and the Arsacid, the latter being a corollary to the Armenian theory. Many Byzantinists, such as Nicholas Adontz, A.A. Vasiliev, Peter Charanis, and Speros Vryonis, Jr. thought that the claim of Armenian descent for Basil was reasonable.¹⁴ Most Byzantinists, however, were still reluctant to assign an Armenian ancestry to Basil, following Ostrogorsky's opinion that such a genealogy was "far from certain."¹⁵ The evidence, however, leaves little room for uncertainty on Basil's origins. Large numbers of Armenians had been transplanted into Thrace since the time of the Emperor Maurice (r. 582-602).¹⁶ Therefore, Armenians had been settled in Thrace in significant numbers since at least over two centuries before the birth of Basil. In addition, Constantine VII stated that these Armenians kept themselves (ethnically) pure by only marrying among their own people, maintaining Armenian ethnic purity in Macedonia for generations.¹⁷ This information effectively undermines the idea of Basil having mixed ancestry. Although of course a mixed ancestry could still be within the realm of possibilities for Basil, it is unlikely that Basil's own grandson would tout this trait among the Macedonian Armenians if it were not true and did not affect his lineage.

In addition, several Byzantine primary sources explicitly state that Basil was Armenian. The *Vita Euthymii* relates that "it was Stylianos, called Zaoutzes in the Armenian dialect, seeing he was a Macedonian of Armenian descent like himself, whom [Basil] left in charge, committing to him the direction of all matters, ecclesiastical and political."¹⁸ Therefore, according to the *Vita Euthymii*, both Basil and Stylianos Zaoutzes were of Armenian descent but were from Macedonia. Constantine VII supported this, saying of his grandfather, "Now Emperor Basil – hailed from Macedonia, but traced his origins to the nation of the Armenians."¹⁹ This is perhaps the greatest proof, as it is unclear why Constantine would advertise an Armenian ancestry for his family if it were not true. Basil was also supposedly descended from Constantine the Great on his mother's side.²⁰ The political advantages of claiming such an ancestor are obvious in the Byzantine Empire; those of claiming an Armenian ancestry are not. Being from an ethnic minority was not a complete bar on imperial ambitions, but it certainly hampered an emperor's public support. An obvious example is the ethnically Isaurian Zeno (r. 474-491) in the fifth century, who faced heavy opposition due to his ethnic origins, or Tiberios III (r. 698-705) and Philippikos Bardanes (r. 711-713), who changed their Germanic and Armenian names specifically to avoid backlash against their ethnic origins. Basil's son, and Constantine's father, Leo VI (r. 886-912), provides the answer to this question. Leo relates that, like the ancients had said, it is better to embrace your ethnicity and background than to adopt a new one.²¹ Therefore he is embracing the poor origins of his father, Basil, as well as his Armenian ancestry. Yes, an Armenian heritage was not ideal, but it is what he was born

with, so he should work within those circumstances. There is no other reason for claiming descent from a minority that was religiously unorthodox and was ethnically and culturally dissimilar to the majority Greek population. This would only have created a sense of distance and division between the Macedonian Dynasty and their subjects. Without any real advantages, and in fact quite a few detriments, it is unlikely the dynasty would have claimed Armenian descent for themselves unless the Macedonian Dynasty was in fact Armenian.

In other sources there are hints that imply Basil's Armenian ancestry. As mentioned previously, the region Basil came from had had a large Armenian population since the end of the sixth century. Many of his friends were of Armenian descent, such as those that murdered Michael III. Basil's brother was named Smbat, an Armenian name.²² It is unlikely that a non-Armenian family would name one of their children one of the most common Armenian names of this period. Armenian works such as that by the thirteenth century Kirakos Gandzakets'i also proclaimed Basil's Armenian ancestry, although the only remotely contemporaneous source to mention Basil's origins is Stephen of Taron, and even he did not write until the eleventh century.²³ Although ethnic bias could play a role, this information corroborates the Armenian ancestry stated in the Byzantine sources.

THE DYNASTY'S ARMENIAN ORIGINS ASSURED

Although Basil's Armenian ancestry is certain by looking at all of the evidence, there is still one question as to whether the Macedonian Dynasty was Armenian. The marriage of Basil and Eudokia Ingerina was predicated on the fact that Eudokia was the mistress of Michael and that Michael forced this marriage to get Eudokia closer to him without arousing suspicion. This led to rumors that Leo, born before Michael III was murdered, was actually the son of Michael, not Basil. This matter was not helped by the fact that Basil did not like Leo and treated him poorly compared to his first and third sons, Constantine and Alexander, whom he adored. But the theory of Leo being the son of Michael lost support due to the work of Nicholas Adontz. Adontz argued that malicious writers were merely punishing Basil by spreading divisive rumors.²⁴ In fact, the question of which emperor sired Leo is irrelevant for the question of Leo's Armenian ethnicity, because both potential fathers were Armenian. Michael's mother, Theodora, came from an Armenian family in Paphlagonia,²⁵ so therefore Leo would have had Armenian ancestors no matter whether his father was Basil I or the less probable Michael III.

ARSACID THEORY UNDONE

Now that Basil's Armenian ancestry is established, we turn to our second question. Was Basil in fact descended from the royal Armenian Arsacid Dynasty? Several sources say that Basil was descended from the Arsacids. Constantine VII says of his grandfather, "Now Emperor Basil – hailed from Macedonia, but traced his... lineage back to the Arsacids."²⁶

Constantine explains this farfetched idea by saying that Heraclius moved the descendants of the Arsacids to Philippi, in Macedonia, and later to Adrianople to take them out of the scheming hands of the caliphs, who wished to use them to gain power in Armenia for themselves.²⁷ These people kept their ethnicity pure by marrying only among themselves, explaining the continuance of their line. Constantine VII claims Arsacid descent for Basil through Maiktes, an Arsacid, and a daughter of a certain Leo in Constantinople. Their son was Basil's father. The tenth-century Byzantine historian Genesisios also says that Basil even traced his lineage back to Trdat III, the first Christian king of Armenia.²⁸ The issue with the *Vita Basilii* in Theophanes Continuatus is that it is so laudatory and mythicized.²⁹ Omurtag supposedly recognized Basil's talent before releasing him, the typical image of an eagle shading the imperially destined child appears, and the help of God is frequent, among other obvious examples. There was of course some benefit for Constantine claiming descent from the earliest royal Christian dynasty in history. Even if Armenian descent was not the greatest for promoting the claims of the Macedonian Dynasty, Constantine VII could have been trying to make the most of this heritage by claiming descent from the most famous of the Armenian families, the Arsacids.

The greatest blow to this theory, however, is the *Vita Ignatii*. The *Vita* says that Patriarch Photios completely fabricated a pedigree for Basil.³⁰ He put the first letter of the names of Basil, his wife Eudokia, and their children, Constantine, Leo, Alexander, and Stephen, together to create the name Beklas. He then said that it was predicted that Basil's father would father such a child as Basil, named Beklas. Photios then drew a line all the way back to King Trdat III of Armenia, the first



Byzantine emperor Basil I (left) with his son, Leo VI (right)
Source: *Madrid Skylitzes* (National Library of Spain)

Christian Armenian monarch. He finally wrote all of these things on old sheets of papyrus in handwriting that resembled old Alexandrian letters and deposited them in the imperial library, where they were miraculously discovered shortly afterward. Basil had removed Photios from the patriarchate shortly after becoming emperor. The *Vita* suggests that Photios fabricated this royal ancestry for Basil in order to return to Basil's good graces. Photios was himself Armenian and was very learned, so he would have been familiar with Armenian circles and important personages in Armenian history. Constantine VII supported this illustrious ancestry to support the image of his grandfather Basil as a good choice for an emperor with a distinguished background. But why did Photios choose this line of ancestry in the first place? It is almost certain that Photios would have picked this particular genealogical line, rather than any of the countless more illustrious, more Byzantine ones, for a reason. This is further proof of Basil's Armenian ancestry, even if not his Arsacid descent. Later sources, such as Pseudo-Symeon and John Zonaras, also relate that some sources have invented a noble heritage for Basil I.³¹ Hardly a modern scholar has believed the theory of Arsacid descent. As early as the eighteenth century Charles du Cange denounced the Arsacid theory as a mere forgery.³² In more recent times, historians Nicholas Adontz, Nina Garsoïan, and Warren Treadgold have all denounced the theory as mere falsification and deceit.³³

ARSACID THEORY SUPPORTS ARMENIAN ORIGINS

If the Macedonian Dynasty were going to launch a false genealogy anyways, why would they not choose a more illustrious one? The answer again lies with Leo VI's wisdom in the funeral oration he composed for his father. Leo points out that you cannot change your ethnicity or heritage, so do the best with the genealogy you are given.³⁴ Adding a few embellishments inside this genealogy does not necessarily run counter to this ideology. In fact, it is more believable for the Armenian Macedonian Dynasty to claim descent from the Armenian Arsacid Dynasty, rather than more far-fetched antecedents such as the more respectable heroes of Greek and Roman history and mythology. Yes, Constantine VII claimed descent from Constantine the Great, but this claim was always touted far less in sources than the Arsacid connection. Although the Arsacid genealogy is false, there are further reasons why it could have been promoted, besides the fact that the Macedonian Dynasty was Armenian. There was an increase in Armenian elites immigrating into the Byzantine Empire in the period of the Amorian and Macedonian Dynasties. There was no shortage of important individuals under Michael III and Basil I who were descended from Armenians. John the Grammarian, Leo the Mathematician, Constantine the Armenian, and of course Photios are just a few of the famous Byzantines of Armenian ancestry during this period.³⁵ Historian Timothy Greenwood believed that this Arsacid claim appealed to this significant body within the Constantinopolitan elite that was of Armenian descent.³⁶ Although such an ancestry could have appealed to the in-



The murder of Bardas Caesar at the feet of Emperor Michael III
Source: *Madrid Skylitzes* (National Library of Spain)

creasing numbers of Byzantine elites of Armenian ancestry, it would still not have been anywhere near as useful as claiming descent from a previous imperial dynasty or a Greco-Roman predecessor. Nor would it have improved Basil in the eyes of the common people, who, although cosmopolitan for the Middle Ages, identified themselves as Roman and spoke Greek. Although there were some reasons that an Arsacid ancestry would have benefited Basil, it came down to making the most of his Armenian ancestry and claiming the famous first Christian dynasty of the Arsacids as his ancestors.

There is also a fringe theory that was promoted by historian Andreas Schminck. Schminck rejected that Basil was definitely of Armenian descent. He claimed that Leo VI's lack of mention of Armenian and only Arsacid in his *Funeral Oration* disproved the whole Armenian theory, as why would Leo not have known of his own Armenian origins.³⁷ But Arsacids are Armenian; therefore, stating both would be redundant. All Arsacids are Armenian, even if not all Armenians are Arsacids. Schminck countered that Photios made the whole genealogy up, so the entire idea of any Armenian descent is wrong.³⁸ This theory begs this obvious question of why would Photios specifically choose the Arsacid Dynasty out of all dynasties in world history. The answer is that Basil was in fact of Armenian descent.

The theory Schminck proposed is that Basil specifically wanted to claim a Macedonian ancestry and called himself "the Macedonian" to draw comparisons with Philip II and Alexander the Great. He cited as evidence vague comparisons in the *Vita Basilii* and one line from Genesis that lists a plethora of famous antecedents of Basil.³⁹ In Schminck's opinion, a Thracian peasant could not become emperor, but a Macedonian could. Why then is Basil's Macedonian back-

ground not advertised in any Macedonian Dynasty propaganda, while the Arsacid ancestry is promoted so much? This is because Basil was ethnically Armenian, not Macedonian, and he and his descendants promoted an Armenian ancestry, not a Macedonian one. Schminck treated Basil with a sort of disdain, sarcastically referring to him as an "honorable man" that wanted to be Macedonian.⁴⁰ This entire theory of Basil wanting a Macedonian ancestry is debunked by the strong evidence of Basil's Armenian ancestry and the promotion of an Armenian and Arsacid genealogy in the primary sources.

AMICABLE ARMENIAN RELATIONSHIP

Basil had incredibly good relations with Armenians inside and outside the Byzantine Empire during his reign. Sirarpie der Nersessian notes no real difference in Armenian emperors' actions towards the Armenians, just the same religious persecution and expansion at their expense that she notes in the policies of other Byzantine emperors.⁴¹ This makes Basil and his son Leo VI the exceptions to the rule, as both had very amicable relations with the ruling Bagratids in Armenia and with Armenian populations inside the Byzantine Empire. As mentioned previously, many of Basil's closest friends and advisors were of Armenian descent. Since Basil was Armenian, this makes his brothers, Marian and Smbat, as well as his cousin, Acila, ethnically Armenian. This means that all of the conspirators that murdered Michael III, along with Hovhannes Khald and Hagovpik, were Armenian. Under both Basil I and Leo VI, various Armenians rose to positions of prominence, including the *Logothete* Symbatios, *Ishkhan* Kurtik of Locana, Artavasdos, captain of the *Hetairoi*, or foreign guards, Theophylact Abastaktos, the father of the future Romanos I Lekapenos, and the later *basileopator* Stylianos Zaoutzes.⁴² This indicates at the very least some preferential treatment towards fellow Armenians.

The Macedonian Dynasty was additionally very welcoming to Armenian princes, although, early on, this did not necessarily indicate a long-term desire to annex the Armenian principalities, like historian Speros Vryonis, Jr. has suggested.⁴³ This positive relationship was especially pronounced when Leo VI's widow, Zoe Karbonopsina, welcomed the supplicant Ashot II (r. 914-928) in 914.⁴⁴ Basil I himself recognized the first independent Armenian king in centuries, Ashot I Bagratuni (r. 885-890), and referred to Ashot as his beloved son and Armenia as the closest ally of Byzantium.⁴⁵ Basil's emissary, a certain Nikodemos, preserved the amicable relations and exchanges between these two sovereigns from an embassy.⁴⁶ Ashot even journeyed to Constantinople in 886 to greet the new emperor, Leo VI, since he maintained an alliance with the Macedonian Dynasty.⁴⁷

Perhaps most symbolic of the new importance of Armenians during the mid-ninth century was the discovery of the relics of three of the holiest of Armenian saints in Constantinople. The relics of St. Gregory the Illuminator, St. Hripsime, and St. Gayane were discovered in a casket brought to Constantinople in the time of Emperor Zeno.⁴⁸ The Armenians had already held the relics of those saints in Armenia for generations, so the announcement of their recovery was not deemed noteworthy. The discovery of these relics, however, has been seen as a gesture of reconciliation and recognition towards the Armenians by the Byzantine authorities.⁴⁹ Regardless of the actual factuality of the discovery, it is significant that these relics were discovered when both the emperor

They had become semi-autonomous by the time of Basil I and constituted a dangerous element on the eastern frontier of Byzantium. Basil campaigned against them and captured their capital of Tephrike in 872, dispersing the movement. Although the Paulicians had previously been thought to be Armenian heretics, they have since been shown as not explicitly linked to any ethnicity, as non-Armenians also became Paulicians.⁵⁰ The Paulician sect did have its roots in Armenia, but its Armenian characteristics lessened after the reforms of Paulician leader Sergios-Tychikos at the start of the ninth century. Although many Armenians belonged to the Paulician sect, the two are not the same. In fact, its last leaders after the destruction of Tephrike by Basil I in 872 were two Greeks, Diakonitzes and Pullades.

BASIL THE ROMAN

While Basil was Armenian and was aware of his Armenian origins, he, like any Byzantine emperor, considered himself first and foremost Roman. It is important to note that none of the emperors of Armenian descent belonged to the Armenian Church, as being Orthodox was necessary for becoming emperor. The greatness of the Byzantine Empire was the primary goal of these emperors. There was no sort of national thought or sense of nationalism like exists today. As we have seen through the example of Basil, however, people of like backgrounds did support each other and ancestry could influence decisions and outlook. That said, the emperors of Armenian descent ruled as Byzantines, establishing Orthodox churches and promoting the Macedonian Renaissance, a flowering of Byzantine learning and intellectual culture.

“[T]racing the source material for Armenian population movements and Basil’s own origins... he emerges as ethnically Armenian, but above all a Byzantine emperor.”

and the patriarch were of Armenian descent. Photios had taken a considerable interest in bringing the Armenians into the Chalcedonian fold, but it is important to remember that Basil must have at the very least not opposed Photios' efforts, and more than likely he supported them. Basil had originally removed Photios from the patriarchate; he certainly would not have reappointed him to the patriarchate if he opposed his policies. Therefore the discovery of the relics is emblematic of a push under the emperor and patriarch of Armenian ancestry to reach out to Armenian Christians for discussion and improved relations.

While Basil maintained very good relations with Armenians inside and outside the Byzantine Empire, indicating an awareness of his Armenian origins, some might point to the example of the Paulicians, a heretical sect that flourished in Eastern Anatolia during the eighth and ninth centuries.

In theory, race meant relatively little in Byzantium, as Byzantine social homogeneity was based on Roman political theory and religious Orthodoxy.⁵¹ Byzantine sources, however, present a different picture, showing religious and ethnic awareness and bias. The movement of Armenians from Armenia to Byzantium exposed them to a very different culture and in some contexts this manifested itself in Armenians developing new political and cultural orientations, or a degree of assimilation, which was stronger at the core of the empire than at its peripheries.⁵² This was especially a trend due to at least trace opposition of the Byzantine majority to ethnic minorities, be they Slavic, Armenian, or any other minority. Those Armenians who played roles in the highest echelons of the government and military were heavily Byzantinized, imbibed with Greek culture and language and converted to the Orthodox faith. Prime examples are the Patriarch Photios, Empress Theodora, later canonized as St. Theodora in



Delegation of Croats and Serbs to Emperor Basil I
Source: Madrid Skylitzes (National Library of Spain)

the Orthodox Church, and Emperor Basil I. All of Basil's legislation, such as the *res gestae*, was based on Byzantine political theory, not any Armenian sensibilities.⁵³ Basil, despite his awareness of his Armenian heritage, lived and ruled as a Roman, as a Byzantine emperor.

CONCLUSION

Byzantine historian Nicholas Adontz noted, "Byzantinism, as distinct from its preceding civilization, was due to the united cooperation of various nationalities under one state. To determine the contribution of each nationality element means the elucidation, the true understanding of Byzantinism."⁵⁴ Basil I is exemplary of this definition. Basil was the very symbol of a multiethnic empire: an Armenian born and raised in Macedonia ruling as a Roman emperor in cosmopolitan Constantinople. The primary sources leave little doubt that Basil was an Armenian. The *Vita Euthymii*, the *Vita Basilii*, Leo VI's *Funeral Oration*, and the writings of Genesios, among others, asserted that Basil was Armenian and many also stated that he was descended from the Arsacids. While the Arsacid component is extremely unlikely and greatly undermined by the tell-all *Vita Ignatii*, Basil's Armenian origins stand up to scrutiny. There are Basil's many Armenian accomplices in the murder of Michael III, the many Armenians that he promoted upon his ascension, and the Armenian name of his brother Smbat. There was also no reasonable cause for why Basil I, Leo VI, or Constantine VII would have promoted their Armenian origins, which could only have hampered their position, if they were not in fact Armenian. But even then they only advertised their Armenian origins as part of descent from the Arsacids, the most notable Armenian dynasty and one with strong Christian overtones. Basil was ethnically Armenian, but his primary identity, like all Byzantine emperors, was that of a Roman and a Christian. His origins, however, illustrate not only the great level of mobility in Byzantine society, but also the rich tapestry of peoples who were part of the Byzantine Empire. III

Endnotes

- [1] Basileus was the term used by the Byzantines to refer to their emperors.
- [2] N. Adontz, "Basil I the Armenian," *Armenian Review* 9 (1956): 16.
- [3] "With the accession of Basil (867-886), a family of Armenian descent occupied the throne for almost two centuries." S. der Nersessian, *Armenia and the Byzantine Empire: A Brief Study of Armenian Art and Civilization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945), 20. "Basil was an Armenian, born in Macedonia, where numerous Armenians had been settled." P. Charanis, "The Armenians in the Byzantine Empire," *Byzantinoslavica XXII* (Prague 1961), 218.
- [4] "Basil came of a family settled in the theme of Macedonia...it is far from certain that he was of Armenian extraction." G. Ostrogorsky, *The History of the Byzantine State* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969): 232.
- [5] I. Ševčenko, trans, *Chronographiae Quae Theophanis Continuati Nomine Fertur Liber Quo Vita Basilii Imperatoris Amplectitur* (New York: De Gruyter, 2011), 79. *Porphyrogenitos* means "the purple-born" and refers to those that were born the son or daughter of a seated emperor. The term comes from the fact that imperial children were born in the *porphyra*, or the purple chamber, whose walls were made of the purple stone porphyry. Therefore the first thing imperial children would see when they were born was the color purple, the color of royalty.
- [6] C. Du Cange, *Historia byzantine duplici commentario illustrate: Familiae Byzantinae*, 2nd ed. (Venice, 1729), 138. and C. Baronius, *Annales Ecclesiastici* (Coloniae Agrippinae, 1685), Tomus X, 370B.
- [7] S. Vryonis, Jr., "The Vita Basilii of Constantine Porphyrogenitus and the absorption of Armenians in Byzantine society," in *Ευφρόσυνον. Αφιέπωμα στον Μανόλη Χατζηδάκη* (Athens: Εκδοσή του Ταμείου Αρχαιολογικών Πόρων και Απαλλοτριώσεων, 1992), 686.
- [8] Ševčenko, *Chronographiae Quae Theophanis Continuati*, 19.
- [9] Adontz, "Basil I the Armenian," 7.
- [10] Adontz "Basil the Armenian," 18-19.
- [11] B. d'Herbelot, *Bibliothèque Orientale* (Maestricht, 1776), 776
- [12] Hamzah al-Isfahani, *Hamzae Isphanensis annalium libri X* ed. I.M.E Gottwaldt (Petropoli: In commississ apud Leopoldum Voss, 1844). Abul Hasan Ali al-Masoudi, *The Book of Golden Meadows* (Islamabad: Alhamra, 2001). Sibt ibn al-Jawzi, *Mir'at al-zamān fī tāriḥ al-a'yān*, ed. Juliette Rassi (Damas: IFPO, 2005).
- [13] G. Finlay, *History of the Byzantine and Greek Empires from 716 to 1453* (London, 1854), 271. K. Hopf, *Griechische Geschichte* (Leipzig, 1867), 54.
- [14] Vryonis, "The Vita Basilii of Constantine Porphyrogenitus," 678. N. Adontz, "L'Age et L'Origine de L'Empereur Basile I," in *Études arméno-byzantines* (Lisbon: Livraria Bertrand, 1965), 108. Charanis, "Armenians in the Byzantine Empire," 218. A. Vasiliev, "The Origin of the Emperor Basil the Macedonian," *Vizantiysky Vremennik*, XII (1906), 155-157.
- [15] Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, 232.
- [16] R. Thomson, trans., *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 31-32.
- [17] Ševčenko, *Chronographiae Quae Theophanis Continuati*, 15.
- [18] P. Karlin-Hayter, trans., *Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP* (Bruxelles: Editions de Byzantion, 1970), 4-5.
- [19] Ševčenko, *Chronographiae Quae Theophanis Continuati*, 11.
- [20] Ibid., 19.
- [21] A. Vogt and I. Hausherr, trans., *Oraison funèbre de Basile I, par sons fils Léon VI, le Sage* (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1932), 44-45.
- [22] N. Tobias, *Basil I, Founder of the Macedonian Dynasty: A Study of the Political and Military History of the Byzantine Empire in the Ninth Century* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), 181.
- [23] Kirakos Gandzakets'i, *History of the Armenians*, trans. Robert Bedrosian (New York: Sources of the Armenian Tradition, 1986): 29.
- [24] Adontz, "Basil I the Armenian," 20-21.
- [25] Ševčenko, *Chronographiae Quae Theophanis Continuati*, 89. Lynda Garland, *Byzantine Empresses, Women and Power in Byzantium AD 527-1204* (London: Routledge, 1999): 96.
- [26] Ševčenko, *Chronographiae Quae Theophanis Continuati*, 11.
- [27] Ibid., 15.
- [28] Joseph Genesios, *On the Reigns of Emperors*, trans. A. Kaldellis (Canberra: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1998), 94.
- [29] Ševčenko, *Chronographiae Quae Theophanis Continuati*, 17.
- [30] Nicetas David, *The Life of Patriarch Ignatius*, trans. A. Smithies (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 2013), 118-121.
- [31] Symeon Magister, *De Leone Basilii Filio*, tr. I. Bekker (Bonn, 1838). Ioannes Zonaras, *Epitome Historiarum*, vol. iii, *Libri XIII-XVIII* (Bonn, 1897, Weber), 407-412.
- [32] Du Cange, *Historia byzantine duplici commentario illustrate*, 138.
- [33] Adontz, "L'Age et L'Origine," 105. N. Garsoïan, "Armenia, History," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, Vol. 1, edited by Joseph R. Strayer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1982), 481. W. Treadgold, "Basil I the Macedonian," in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, Vol. 2, edited by J. Strayer (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1982), 117-118.
- [34] Vogt and Hausherr, *Oraison funèbre*, 44-45.
- [35] M. Shirinian, "Armenian Elites in Constantinople: Emperor Basil and Patriarch Photius," in *Armenian Constantinople*, ed. R. Hovannisian and S. Payaslian (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 2010), 57-60.
- [36] T. Greenwood, "The Discovery of the Relics of St. Grigor," in *Byzantine Style, Religion, and Civilization*, ed. E. Jeffreys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 188.
- [37] A. Schminck, "The beginnings and origins of the 'Macedonians' dynasty," *Byzantine Macedonia, Identity Image and History: Papers from the Melbourne Conference, July 1995*, ed. John Burke and Roger Scott (Melbourne: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 2000), 65.
- [38] Schminck, "The beginnings and origins of the 'Macedonians'

An Armenian from Macedonia

dynasty,” 66-67.

[39] *Ibid.*, 68.

[40] *Ibid.*, 68.

[41] Der Nersessian, *Armenia and the Byzantine Empire*, 21.

[42] The title λογοθέτης (*Logothete*) was a Byzantine administrative position equivalent to that of a minister of state. Ishkhan was a medieval Armenian title that meant prince. The ἑταῖροι (*hetaireia*) was an imperial guard corps that was primarily composed of foreigners. The term translates to “the company,” which harks back to the old Macedonian Companions of Philip II and Alexander the Great. βασιλεοπάτωρ (*basileopator*) was a special created post that literally means “father of the emperor,” although the figures it was conferred upon were not the emperors’ genetic fathers, but rather an important administrator for the state who held an important role in relation to the emperor. It was only conferred on Stylianos Zaoutzes and Romanos Lekapenos, both fathers-in-law of emperors. For more information on the importance of these individuals in the governments of Basil I and Leo VI, see Der Nersessian, *Armenia and the Byzantine Empire*, 21. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, 242. Adontz, “Basil I the Armenian,” 13-14.

[43] Vryonis, “The Vita Basilii of Constantine Porphyrogenitus,” 679.

[44] N. Garsoïan, “The Problem of Armenian Integration into the Byzantine Empire,” in *Studies on the Internal Diaspora of the*

Byzantine Empire, ed. H. Ahrweiler and A. Laiou (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1998), 59-60. T. Greenwood, “Patterns of Contact and Communication: Constantinople and Armenia, 860-976,” in *Armenian Constantinople*, eds. R. Hovannisian and S. Payaslian (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 2010), 81, 93.

[45] Yovhannēs Drasxanakertc’i, *History of Armenia*, trans. Krikor Maksoudian (Atlanta: Scholar’s Press, 1987), 129.

[46] Greenwood, “The Discovery of the Relics of St. Grigor,” 178-181.

[47] V. Kurkjian, *A History of Armenia* (New York: Armenian General Benevolent Union, 1958), 150. A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), 304.

[48] Der Nersessian, *Armenia and the Byzantine Empire*, 41-42.

[49] Garsoïan, “The Problem of Armenian Integration into the Byzantine Empire,” 73. Greenwood, “The Discovery of the Relics of St. Grigor,” 184.

[50] N. Garsoïan, *Paulician Heresy; A Study of the Origin and Development of Paulicianism in Armenia and the Eastern Provinces of the Byzantine Empire* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967), 125-129, 232.

[51] Vryonis, “The Vita Basilii of Constantine Porphyrogenitus,” 677.

[52] *Ibid.*, 677.

[53] *Ibid.*, 691.

[54] Adontz, “Basil I the Armenian,” 21.