

Lund University
Centre for languages and literature, Greek
B. A. Thesis
Supervisor: Professor Staffan Wahlgren
Autumn 2006

Emperor, savior, murderer

The tendency of two 10th century Byzantine
chronicles towards Basil I

Jonas Nilsson

Table of contents

1. Introduction.....	2
1.1 Aim.....	2
1.2 Corpus and previous research	3
1.3 Theoretical framework and method.....	5
2. Background.....	10
2.1 The Byzantine empire.....	10
2.2 Basil the Macedonian	11
3. Analysis	12
3.1 The matter of accession	12
3.2 Defender of the empire	23
3.3 The affairs of state	33
3.4 Marital issues.....	45
3.5 A temper befitting an emperor.....	46
4. Conclusion.....	51
4.1 Basil according to the Continuer.....	51
4.2 Basil according to the Logothete	54
4.3 Summary.....	56
Bibliography	59

1. Introduction

1.1 Aim

The aim of this paper is to perform a comparative analysis of two Byzantine chronicles focused on their tendency towards emperor Basil I (r. 867-86). The chronicles in question are the so-called chronicle of Symeon the Logothete and the collection of writings that is commonly referred to as *Theophanes Continuatus*. Both are thought to have been written during the active reign of Basil's grandson Constantine VII (945-59). As the tendency of the chronicles will be discussed further on it will suffice for now to say that the latter has a distinct panegyrical disposition towards Basil, while the former does not.

The fact that they are clearly differently biased illustrates one of the major problems of studying Byzantine literature as historical sources, namely that the material is remarkably scarce and when multiple sources do exist they have a conspicuous tendency to disagree in several important respects, which in the face of the lack of other historical evidence makes it hard to estimate their reliability. Therefore this paper is intended not only to examine the tendency of the chronicles towards Basil, but also how this tendency is expressed and conveyed to the reader, in other words the narrative structure of the tendency, assuming that a deepened understanding of these structures would also help determining the reliability of the chronicles as historical sources.

To be specific, the following two issues will be addressed:

- What manner of tendency towards Basil is conveyed by each of the chronicles? As what manner of a man and emperor do they portray him? In which respects do they agree and in which respects do they disagree?
- How is the tendency of the chronicles expressed and conveyed to the reader? Which narrative strategies are employed by the authors in order to express their respective tendency towards Basil?

1.2 Corpus and previous research

The exact definition of what constitutes a Byzantine chronicle is not an entirely uncontroversial matter. In the end of the 19th century Karl Krumbacher divided the Byzantine historical writings into two distinct categories, the history and the chronicle. The former was described as concerning itself with providing a rational and impartial analysis of the causes and effects of the events of a limited historical period, while the latter was distinguished by its intention to explain the workings of divine providence throughout the entire history, from creation up until the author's own time. However, more recent research has shown that this theoretical distinction cannot be upheld when applied to the actual texts and consequently it has been abandoned as an analytical tool, but remains in matters of terminology.¹

The combined Byzantine historiographical works provides accounts for nearly the entire period of the empire's existence, but unfortunately they are generally considered to be fairly unreliable as historical sources. One historian writes:

The Byzantines had inherited from the traditions of late Roman literature the view that all historical writing should serve a didactic end. The Byzantine author set about recording the past for a purpose, whether to praise his patrons, abuse his enemies, attract reward, or generally to present a version of the past which fitted contemporary political and religious dogma and served current ends.²

In addition to this, there is virtually no documentary material that could have been used to verify or contradict the accounts of the chronicles and histories.³ Accordingly, the usefulness of Byzantine historiographical works as historical sources is often completely dependent on the possibilities of interpreting its tendency accurately and applying this interpretation on the analysis of the material. There does not however appear to have been conducted any major studies on the tendency of the Byzantine chronicles in itself or on the narrative strategies employed by the Byzantine authors to convey this tendency to their readers. This paper can therefore be seen as an attempt to probe a very limited area of this possibly vast field of research.

However, on the subject of narrative structures in general there has been some interesting scholarly activity. Most recently Jakov Ljubarskij contributed with an article on the subject “Narrative Structures in Byzantine Historical Writings”, in which he advocates what he regards as a different approach to Byzantine historical writings. His arguments concern many different aspects of this and without taking a stand for or against most of them

¹ Rosenqvist (2003), pp. 20-22.

² Whittow (1996), pp. 9f.

³ Whittow (1996), pp. 1-3.

it will suffice to state that the relevant aspects as far as this paper is concerned are firstly his intention to study the narrative of the writings mentioned instead of only using them as historical sources and secondly his assertion that the Byzantine historians implemented narrative structures specifically to realise their ideological and literary intentions in the text.⁴

As regards the two specific chronicles that will be studied here, they both have somewhat obscure origins. *Theophanes Continuatus* is the commonly used designation of a collection of works that, as the title implies, were intended to continue the chronicle of Theophanes Confessor, whose account ends in 813. It consists of four independent sections, of which the second one, known as *Vita Basili*, will be used in this study. The *Vita Basili* is a biographical account of the life and reign of Basil I and its author is anonymous. It was however commissioned, or possibly even written, by Basil's grandson Constantine VII.⁵ The edition used here is Ihor Ševčenko's *Chronographiae quae Theophanis Continuati nomine fertur Liber quo Vita Basili Imperatoris amplectitur*,⁶ and references to it will henceforth be abbreviated *VB*.

The identity of the author of the chronicle of Symeon the Logothete is likewise unknown, even the name Symeon and the title Logothete that are traditionally used to designate it are merely used for the sake of convenience, since there appears to be no contemporary accounts that ascribe the authorship of the chronicle to anyone.⁷ The edition that will be employed here is Staffan Wahlgren's *Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae Chronicon*,⁸ and references to it will henceforth be abbreviated *SL*.

Since the identities of both authors are unknown, for the sake of simplicity they will henceforth be denominated "the Continuer" and "the Logothete" respectively and the pronoun used to designate them will be the masculine singular in both cases.

When the chronicles have been mentioned in previous research the remarks about their respective tendencies have been fairly uniform. The *Vita Basili* is described as a panegyric biography, highly tendentious in favour of the Macedonian dynasty and especially its founder Basil I.⁹ These remarks are especially uncontroversial since the Continuer himself clearly states that his account of Basil's life and deeds is intended to erect "a standard of virtue – a

⁴ Ljubarskij (1998), pp. 5-22.

⁵ ODB, pp. 2061f.

⁶ *Chronographiae quae Theophanis Continuati nomine fertur Liber quo Vita Basili Imperatoris amplectitur*, edited and translated by Ihor Ševčenko, Berlin – New York 2005.

⁷ Wahlgren (1996), pp. 4-9.

⁸ *Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae Chronicon*, edited by Staffan Wahlgren, Berlin – New York 2006.

⁹ Whittow (1996), p. 8; Rosenqvist (2003), p. 102; ODB, p. 2062.

statue, and a model for imitation” for Basil’s posterity.¹⁰ The Logothete on the other hand gives no such obvious indications of his tendency, but scholars have generally described his account as unfavourably disposed towards Basil and the Macedonian dynasty and favourably inclined towards the Lekapenos family, who assumed power in 919. The first one to do this appears to be Ferdinand Hirsch, who argues that that Logothete’s selection of episodes to relate is motivated by a desire to emphasise the unfavourable aspects of Basil’s character and presents a few examples of such episodes. Other scholars appear to have agreed with these sentiments.¹¹

Even so, these conclusions mainly seem to regard the nature of the tendencies on a general level, more specifically if the chronicles are favourable or unfavourably disposed towards certain individuals, families or ideologies. No detailed study that aims to discern the nuances of the tendency and not only its general inclination appears to have been conducted.

1.3 Theoretical framework and method

The two central theoretical concepts in this paper are of course *tendency* and *narrative*. Consequently these concepts need to be explored in some detail, as does the relationship between them. Tendency could be described as a distorting lens, or rather one of the distorting lenses, between the narrative and the historical reality it claims to reflect. In studies of texts as historical sources it is an obstacle that has to be overcome in order to approach the underlying historical reality, whereas here it is the object of the study itself. How then can such a study be conducted? If the historical reality was available for direct examination a comparison between narrative and reality would be possible, but obviously it is not and an attempt to discern it by using the chronicles would to a great extent require assumptions to be made regarding the tendencies of the narratives, which in turn would result in a circular argument. Accordingly, to outline the historical reality in order to compare it with the narratives can only be attempted if it can be done without taking tendency into account and thus very few conclusions would be possible to reach in this way.

On account of this the historical reality can in almost every vital respect only be regarded as a virtual point of reference, as it will be assumed that both chronicles reflect the same reality but in different ways. This has two major implications. Firstly, it means that the narratives cannot be regarded as entirely separate from the historical reality, or taken as

¹⁰ *VB*, § 1. The Greek text of the quote reads: ὁ πρὸς ἀρετὴν κανών τε καὶ ἀνδριὰς καὶ τὸ ἀρχέτυπον τῆς μημήσεως (editor’s translation).

¹¹ Hirsch (1876), pp. 62-68, 82-85; Jenkins (1965), p. 96; Wahlgren (1996), p. 9; Rosenqvist (2003), p. 103; Whittow (1996), p. 8.

“given” to speak with Ljubarskij, since this point of reference, however virtual it may be, is needed to make the comparison between the narratives relevant. Secondly, it must be concluded that it can not be determined which narrative corresponds most closely with said reality, or, to continue using the metaphor, which lens is least distorting. It is entirely possible that one of the chronicles presents a perfectly accurate historical account, but which one can not be determined by a comparison between them and it is just as possible that they are both equally misleading. What can be examined is the difference between the methods used to present the information that is relevant for the portrayal of Basil and the consequences of this difference.

At this point another limitation must be considered, namely that it cannot be assumed that both chronicles were written based on the same source material. Due to the amount of time elapsed between the reign of Basil and the writing of the chronicles it can be taken for granted that the authors must have relied on some sort of source material when composing their accounts, but it cannot be determined what kind of material they used or to which extent they had access to the same sources. This is a problem that simply cannot be circumvented in any decisive way without an examination of these primary sources, which sadly are lost. In many instances it will not be possible to determine whether the information conveyed in the narrative has been selected due to the tendency of the author or if the selection was dictated by the material he had available and the analysis has to be conducted with a certain sensitivity in respect to this uncertainty. Nevertheless, the overall narrative strategies to portray Basil can reasonably be ascribed to tendency, since these must be determined by a conscious choice by the author and even if it cannot be presupposed that every Byzantine author wrote with a clear ideological agenda, as they are usually represented as doing, they can be assumed to be aware of how their accounts were going to be read by their contemporaries, who seems to have expected a historical narrative to be morally consistent. Even if a chronicler just copied a passage from his sources he still had to determine how to incorporate it into his narrative and even if he decided to go even further and use the overall narrative strategy as it appeared in his sources, he still made a conscious choice to do so, a choice he would not have made if he deemed the tendency of his source to be misleading.

One issue of definition remains. What exactly is a narrative strategy that conveys tendency? The concept of narrative strategy is intended to be very straightforward. What separates a narrative from a random selection of words is that the words are structured in a way that makes the text convey information to the reader. The narrative strategy is simply to be understood as the way the author chose to structure his text. As regards the tendency it can

be assumed that the authors of the chronicles both had an opinion about Basil, whether this opinion had been formed based on an impartial analysis of their own sources or imposed by the necessities of an ideological agenda. In either case they would strive to convey what they regarded to be the accurate representation of the emperor, in other words to inform the readers of the historical facts in a way that would make them share the opinion of the author. On account of this each of them would employ narrative strategies that he perceived would convey the information to the reader as accurately as possible. Consequently any part of the narrative that expresses information relevant for the portrayal of Basil will be regarded as having been structured in accordance with a narrative strategy chosen to make the reader understand the information conveyed in a way that corresponds with the tendency of the author, thereby conveying that tendency to the reader.

To facilitate the analysis of the narratives a theoretical model will be employed to provide an initial method of distinguishing different ways of conveying tendency. It is by no means intended to be exhaustive, but rather to identify what can be regarded as some fundamental strategies that can be used to structure the narrative in a way that corresponds with the tendency that is intended to be conveyed. The intention is that if more complex narrative strategies can be identified in the chronicles, it will be possible to analyse them based on the definition of these fundamental elements. The model consists of the following five basic narrative strategies and the possibilities and limitations of each of them will be discussed below:

- Direct statements
- Indirect statements
- Selection of information to relate
- Reinforcement
- Explanation

The definition of a *direct statement* is very straightforward. It is simply a clear and direct assertion about the state of things. Obviously, not every direct statement in the texts is considered to be a direct statement in the capacity of narrative strategy, but only the ones that are relevant to the object of the study, in this case Basil, meaning that only assertions about Basil, his qualities, flaws, virtues, vices and so on, can be regarded as belonging to this specific category of narrative strategies. Due to the lack of subtlety a direct statement can be regarded as reflecting the opinion of the author as he prefers to present it publicly, which is

not necessarily his actual opinion and thus a direct statement need not always reflect the tendency of the narrative accurately.

An *indirect statement* has all the characteristics of a direct statement. The difference is that an indirect statement implies something more than what is being said directly. Naturally, it is a more subtle way of conveying information and could be used to express opinions that the author for some reason felt prevented from expressing directly. The difficulty in examining them in the analysis of the narrative is of course the matter of interpreting them correctly. It must be kept in mind that what appears to be an indirect statement might in fact be a direct statement without any intended insinuations, but if the underlying message can be discerned with a certainty beyond reasonable doubt it can be assumed that it is an accurate representation of the author's opinions. Generally, it can be considered more likely that a statement is intended to convey an indirect message when the assertions made directly appear to be trivial or vague, or when the message it seems to imply is in contradiction with contemporary political or religious dogma.

Through his *selection of information to relate* the author portrays individuals indirectly through their actions. For instance, instead of stating directly that someone was courageous, the author could chose to include an episode where that person behaves in a courageous way. This is of course also a more subtle way of expressing tendency, since it leaves the readers seemingly free to draw their own conclusions. It is however not entirely unproblematic to interpret these accounts. Firstly, the Byzantines that were the intended audience of the chronicles in many respects had different values and a different view of the world than is prevalent today and therefore it cannot be assumed that they would draw the same conclusions from a given episode as a modern reader would and this must be taken into account when interpreting the narratives. Previous research concerning Byzantine mentalities as well as the values expressed in the chronicles themselves will be instrumental in avoiding anachronism in this respect. Secondly, the way different episodes are related to each other must be taken into account. The authors may have chosen to include some episodes for the sole purpose of providing a necessary background to other episodes and this means that if an episode can be regarded as fulfilling such a function it must be taken into consideration that although it might also be interpreted as conveying tendency this might be unintentional and that its inclusion in the narrative might not be part of the author's narrative strategy in this respect. Thirdly, as has been mentioned above, the authors probably did not have access to the same sources and their selection of episodes to relate was of course dependent of the information they had available. Similarly, differences regarding the selection of episodes that

is related in the chronicles can also be explained by differing priorities. Different authors have different interests and consider different things to be important enough to include it in their narratives. Consequently, as the selection of information to relate can be determined by the source material available and the personal interests of the author as well as tendency, a certain degree of cautiousness will be required in the analysis to avoid jumping to conclusions based on differences of this kind between the chronicles.

Reinforcement is simply any combination of the strategies mentioned above, for instance to state something directly and then reinforce the statement by recounting an episode where the same notion appears evident, or simply to repeatedly use the same strategy. As a combination of the categories above it is of course liable to the same difficulties regarding interpretation as they are. Use of reinforcement can generally be seen as a means of stressing the notion in question, but instances where the author does not reinforce his assertions or insinuations when he could be expected to do so must also be taken into account.

Finally, the term *explanation* will also be used in a very straightforward way. It will be regarded as a statement made after an account in order to explain how the account should be interpreted, to make sure the reader does not draw any conclusions from it that the author has not intended. Such an explanation can be regarded as a clear indication of the tendency of the narrative.

The analysis will be conducted with these possibilities and limitations in mind. It will be thematically organised in five chapters, dealing with different aspects of Basil's life and deeds. The first one, *The matter of accession*, concerns Basil's rise through the imperial hierarchy and eventual accession to the throne. In the second chapter, *Defender of the empire*, the accounts of his skill as a military commander and the general conduct of warfare under his reign is examined, while the third one, *The affairs of state*, provides an analysis of how the chronicles portray Basil's ability and values as regards civil and ecclesiastical administration. The fourth chapter, *Marital issues*, concerns Basil's marriage and the fifth and final one, *A temper befitting an emperor*, regards his temper as it is represented in the narratives. Since a division of this kind always has to be done in a somewhat arbitrary way situations will in all likelihood arise where a specific topic that is discussed may have relevance in more than one of the chapters and thus be examined on several separate occasions. In these situations unnecessary repetition will be avoided as far as possible and a full account of the subject will be given when the conclusions of the paper are discussed.

2. Background

This chapter is intended to provide a brief outline of the circumstances under which the events described in the chronicles took place. A concise account of the major events of Basil's life will also be provided, to avoid burdening the analysis with such details. This account will be uncontroversial in the sense that it is supported by both chronicles as well as modern research.

2.1 The Byzantine empire

To begin with a matter of terminology, although the term 'Byzantine' is a useful designation for the empire ruled from Constantinople until its fall in 1453, it was never used in this way by its contemporaries. Throughout its entire existence it never claimed to be anything but the Roman empire and its inhabitants consequently called themselves Romans. The Roman empire did however undergo drastic changes during the two millennia it existed. It was divided in two administrative parts in 285, the western half ceased to exist as a political entity in 476 and, despite efforts to reconquer parts of this territory, a crippling war against the Sasanian empire of Persia in the beginning of the 7th century left the empire too weak to resist the Arab invasions that followed, depriving it of a substantial part of its territory, including its wealthiest provinces. The term 'the Roman empire' is closely associated with political hegemony, pagan religion and the Latin language, whereas the empire in 867, the year of Basil's accession, was a predominantly Greek-speaking, profoundly Christian state that never again would dominate the Near East. To distinguish between these very different phases of the empire's development, the term Byzantine has been introduced to designate the latter.¹²

The Byzantine empire did survive the onslaught of the Arabs, but much of the society and culture of late antiquity did not and the Arabs posed a constant military threat that kept the imperial armies on the defensive for more than two centuries. Nevertheless, the empire avoided fragmentation, remaining a highly centralised state controlled by a single emperor in Constantinople, and through the transformation of the late Roman institutions it had inherited the civil administration, the fiscal infrastructure and the armed forces were successfully adapted to the new circumstances. Imperial authority was soon reasserted in the west and by the middle of the 9th century Byzantine commanders in the east, exploiting the increasing instability in the Islamic world, were starting to feel sufficiently confident to take the offensive. At this time the enemies who posed the most immediate threat were a number of

¹² Whittow (1996), pp. 96f.

Arab emirates on the eastern border of the empire, Melitene and Tarsos being the most important of these, whose sheer purpose was to raid Byzantine territory, as well as the warlike Armenian sect known as the Paulicians, who controlled the area around the city of Tephrike on the upper Euphrates. Things appear to have taken a turn for the better in the east before Basil assumed power, but during his reign and those of his successors the imperial armies managed to first transform the eastern frontier zone into an area of secure Byzantine hegemony by neutralising the threat posed by the Arab raiding emirates and the Paulicians and then expand the territory of the empire through conquest. When Basil's great-great-grandson and namesake Basil II died in 1025 the empire was substantially larger and wealthier than it had ever been since the catastrophe of the 7th century.¹³

2.2 Basil the Macedonian

Basil hailed from Macedonia and appears to have been raised under humble circumstances in a peasant family. When he first came to Constantinople he was employed by a man called Theophilitzes, who later recommended him to the emperor Michael III. Apparently, Michael had received a refractory horse as a gift and since none of the members of his retinue was able to tame it Basil was allowed to try, succeeded and was enrolled in Michael's service by the impressed emperor. From then on Basil appears to have made a remarkable career. He was soon given the title of *protostrator* and was later promoted to *parakoimomenos*, grand chamberlain. When the emperor's uncle Bardas, who held the position of Caesar, junior emperor, was murdered in 866 Michael promoted Basil in his stead and when Michael himself was murdered in the next year Basil automatically ascended to the position of sole emperor. Basil officially had four sons, Constantine, Leo, Stephen and Alexander, of which at least the final three were born by the empress Eudokia Ingerina. Stephen was consecrated to the church and Constantine, who was the eldest and the intended heir, died young. Basil ruled for 19 years before he died from wounds he had sustained during a hunting trip and was succeeded by Leo.¹⁴

¹³ Whittow (1996), pp. 98-133, 165-181, 310-390.

¹⁴ Treadgold (1997), pp. 453-455, 458f, 461.

3. Analysis

3.1 The matter of accession

By any standards it must be considered quite remarkable that a man of such humble origins as Basil's managed to ascend to the position of emperor, although it would probably be considered more remarkable to modern readers than to his contemporaries, because even though the imperial power had long been hereditary in practise, no worldly rules had ever been set up for the appointment of the emperor, who in theory was considered to be chosen by God alone.¹⁵ This should, theoretically, make the subject of legitimacy completely redundant in the eyes of the Byzantine author and it would seem to imply that pointing out that a specific emperor was chosen by God was considered simply as stating the obvious and that no moral judgement on the character of the emperor could be derived from it, since both good and bad emperors were supposed to be chosen by God to the exact same extent.

On account of this it is remarkable that the Continuer seems so preoccupied with the issue of divine providence in his account of Basil's path towards the throne. He relates that when Basil was but a small child and his parents were working in the field while he was sleeping an eagle came flying, perched itself above the sleeping child and spread its wings to provide shade for him. This alarmed his mother, who chased away the eagle, but it returned a further two times that day and, the Continuer writes, many times more during Basil's childhood, quite often providing shade for him when he was asleep. The Continuer states directly that this was clearly a sign from God, an intimation of Basil's future glory, but also that it attracted very little attention at the time, since no one expected such events to happen in a family of simple and humble people.¹⁶ He also recounts that Basil's mother received visions in her dreams on three separate occasions. In one of them she was visited by the prophet Elijah who said to her clearly that God would make her son emperor, while the other two were more obscure, but they were interpreted by suitable people, one as meaning that a brilliant and great fortune awaited Basil and the other that he indeed would become emperor.¹⁷ Furthermore, when describing how Basil first arrived in Constantinople he writes that the abbot of the monastery of St. Diomedes received a vision where the patron saint ordered him to go out to the gate, call out the name 'Basil' and bring into the monastery whoever answered the call, for that man had been anointed emperor by God. It took three

¹⁵ Mango (1980), p. 219.

¹⁶ *VB*, § 5.

¹⁷ *VB*, §§ 8, 10.

such visions before he complied and his call was answered by Basil who happened to be resting on the steps of the monastery. He was duly brought in and treated like an honoured guest.¹⁸ Further on he relates that Basil was honoured above the rest of Theophilitzes' retinue by a monk who had been given the gift of foresight and thus saw him “as a great emperor of the Romans anointed by Christ”.¹⁹ Similarly, when Michael's mother Theodora saw Basil for the first time the Continuer describes how she recognised on him certain marks that her late husband had foretold that their successor would have.²⁰ Moreover, in his account of Basil's career he points out directly a few times more that Basil's accession was ordained by divine will,²¹ and he also claims that on the day Basil assumed supreme power news reached Constantinople announcing great victories and the ransoming of many Christian prisoners, “as if God wished to signify the change for the better in Roman affairs”.²²

The Logothete seems to agree that Basil's accession was indeed ordained by divine providence. Concerning Basil's arrival in Constantinople he writes that Basil arrived on a Sunday evening and since he was tired after his journey he lay down to rest outside St. Diomedes, which was a public church at the time.²³ He continues:

τῇ δὲ νυκτὶ ἐκείνῃ ἐκάλεσε θείᾳ φωνῇ τὸν προσμονάριον λέγοντα· ἐγερθεὶς εἰσάγαγε εἰς τὸ εὐκτήριον τὸν βασιλέα. ὁ δὲ ἐγερθεὶς οὐδένα εὑρεν πλὴν αὐτὸν τὸν Βασίλειον κείμενον ὡς πένητα, καὶ ἐπιστραφεὶς ἔπεσεν εἰς τὴν κοίτην. Πάλιν οὖν ἐκ δευτέρου ἥλθεν αὐτῷ ἡ τοιαύτη φωνή. ὁ δὲ ἐξελθὼν καὶ κατασκοπήσας καὶ μηδένα εὑρών, ἐπιστραφεὶς ἔκλεισε τὸν πυλῶνα καὶ ἀνέπεσε. καὶ εὐθέως μετὰ ρομφαίας τις δέδωκεν αὐτῷ εἰς τὴν πλευρὰν λέγων· ἐξελθὼν εἰσάγαγε ὃν βλέπεις ἐξωθεν τὸν πυλῶνος καίμενον οὐτός ἐστιν ὁ βασιλεὺς. ἐξελθὼν οὖν μετὰ σπουδῆς σύντρομος καὶ εὑρών Βασίλειον μετὰ τῆς πήρας καὶ ράβδου εἰσήγαγεν ἔσωθεν τῆς ἐκκλησίας.²⁴

This is roughly the same story as the one told by the Continuer, with the one noteworthy difference that the vision is received by the *προσμονάριος* ‘gate-keeper’ in the Logothete's account, as opposed to the *καθηγούμενος* ‘abbot’ in the Continuer's version, which could

¹⁸ *VB*, § 9.

¹⁹ *VB*, § 11. The Greek text reads: ὡς μέγα(ν) βασιλέα τῶν Ἦρωμαίων ὑπὸ Χριστοῦ κεχρισμένον (editor's translation).

²⁰ *VB*, § 15.

²¹ *VB*, §§ 14, 20.

²² *VB*, § 29. The Greek text reads: ὥσπερ ἐνδεικνυμένου θεοῦ τὴν ἐπὶ τὰ κρείττω τῶν Ἦρωμαϊκῶν πραγμάτων μεταβολὴν (editor's translation).

²³ *SL*, chapter 131, § 13.

²⁴ *SL*, chapter 131, § 14. Translation: “During this night a divine voice called to the *prosmonarios* and said: “Rise and bring the emperor into the oratory.” He rose and found no one except the same Basil, lying down like a beggar, and he turned around and went to bed. The voice of this nature came back to him for the second time. He went out, looked around and found no one, turned around, closed the gates and went to bed. Someone immediately gave him a blow to the side with a sword and said: “Go out and bring in the one you see lying outside the gates: he is the emperor.” He went out with haste, trembling, found Basil with his purse and walking stick and brought him into the church.” (my translation).

perhaps be considered somewhat less prestigious, but it still seems like an unimportant distinction in the larger perspective. The Logothete also mentions that Theodora thought Basil to be the one who would destroy their family, but he does not specify her reasons for doing so further.²⁵

The Continuer is however not content with stating repeatedly that Basil was appointed to be emperor by God, he also makes an effort to point out his extraordinary suitability for the position. He begins his entire narrative by claiming that although Basil grew up under humble circumstances in Macedonia, he was the descendent of noble ancestors, tracing his lineage back to the Arsacid kings of Armenia on his father's side and to Constantine the Great and Alexander on his mother's side.²⁶ He goes on to state that as “the scion of such parentage, Basil straightaway displayed many harbingers of future glory”.²⁷ Further on he recounts an episode where the child Basil impresses the Bulgarian ruler by his noble appearance and high breeding.²⁸ He also relates Basil's ancestry to the subject of divine providence by mentioning a prophecy that foretold that a descendent of the Arsacids would be made emperor, but immediately after making this point about Basil's noble origins he goes on to state that his accession was welcomed by virtually the entire population of the empire, since they all wanted the direction of the public affairs to be in the hands of a man who himself had experience of occupying a lower station in life and who therefore could put a stop to the injustices committed by the rich against the poor.²⁹ In this way the Continuer informs his readers that through his noble ancestry and humble upbringing, Basil combined in his own person the best of two worlds. He also relates how Basil's father brought him up and instructed him in all good things, leaving him in possession of many virtues, and remarks that “all this brought him universal good will, and he was beloved by all and dear to everyone.”³⁰ This is of course all quite vague and the Continuer has an inclination to referring evasively to Basil's virtues without providing examples of how he demonstrated them. For instance, he states that although the others who were part of Theophilites retinue were men of excellence, Basil was far superior to the others and that his employer's love for him and admiration for his superior qualities increased because Basil “showed his excellence in deeds of hand and

²⁵ SL, chapter 131, § 16.

²⁶ VB, §§ 2f.

²⁷ VB, § 3. The Greek text reads: ἐκ τοιούτου γεννητόρων προελθών ὁ Βασίλειος, εὐθὺς πολλὰ τῆς ὕστερον δόξης σύμβολα εἶχεν ὑποφαινόμενα (editor's translation).

²⁸ VB, § 4.

²⁹ VB, § 19.

³⁰ VB, § 6. The Greek text reads: ἐξ ὅν εὔνοια παρὰ πάντων αὐτῷ καὶ || τὸ πᾶσιν εἶναι προσφιλῆ καὶ ἔρασμιον. (editor's translation).

wisdom in matters of soul, and he was prompt and efficient in carrying out whatever orders might be given him.”³¹ Still, nothing is said about the tasks Basil actually performed in Theophilitzes’ service, save for one episode where the Continuer writes that Theophilitzes was dispatched to the Peleponnesus on some business connected with the public treasury and that Basil accompanied him and assisted him in performing his duties,³² but the claim that he was the best man in Theophilitzes’ service and the praise bestowed upon his virtues certainly implies that whatever he did must have been something important.

In fact, the Continuer only mentions three actual exploits accomplished by Basil before he reached high positions in the imperial hierarchy. Two of them, one where he defeated a Bulgarian in a wrestling match and one where he killed an exceptionally large wolf, can definitely be regarded as reinforcing the notion of his physical prowess, but no other virtues are demonstrated.³³ The third one is the episode where he manages to tame Michael’s horse. According to the Continuer it was an excellent horse, but exceedingly refractory and on account of this it cantered away when Michael left it unattended for a moment. No one else was able to capture it, but Basil managed to accomplish this feat, mounting it by jumping off his own horse, and according to the Continuer this caused the emperor to be so impressed with his courage and sagacity that he immediately took him over from Theophilitzes and enrolled him in his own service.³⁴ Again, the episode certainly portrays Basil as possessing physical strength, courage and even to some extent the sagacity that is mentioned, but it hardly demonstrates any other virtues that made him suitable to be emperor. After this point in the narrative the Continuer mentions no accomplishments that could explain Basil’s successful career. Instead he explains Basil’s promotion to the rank of *protostrator* by stating vaguely that Michael had grown fond of him because he surpassed others in all things and had distinguished himself on many occasions, and when relating that he was later made *parakoimomenos* the Continuer only remarks that it was unexpected. He does however mention that it was Bardas who had persuaded Michael to remove the previous incumbent from office, since he wanted to appoint a man loyal to himself in his stead, and this probably implies that the reason for Basil’s unexpected promotion was that Michael felt threatened by Bardas increasing influence and therefore wanted to appoint someone he trusted to be loyal to himself. In the same paragraph the Continuer also mentions that Michael’s fondness for Basil

³¹ *VB*, § 9. The Greek text reads: ἐφαίνετο [...] καὶ κατὰ χεῖρα γενναῖος καὶ κατὰ ψυχὴν συνετὸς καὶ πρὸς τὸ κελευόμενον πᾶν δέξις τε καὶ ἐπιτήδειος. (editor’s translation).

³² *VB*, § 11.

³³ *VB*, §§ 12, 14.

³⁴ *VB*, § 13.

increased daily, which reasonably would signify a certain degree of trust.³⁵ The Continuer's efforts to emphasise Basil's many virtues and disinclination or inability to relate what Basil actually did to earn his promotions seems to imply that he wanted his readers to take for granted that a man of such remarkable talent, virtue and loyalty would rise rapidly through the ranks of the imperial administration and consequently not feel the need of any further explanation.

The Logothete on the other hand is quite specific concerning the tasks performed by Basil in the beginning of his career and makes no vague statements about his virtues, nor does he mention any noble ancestors. He states clearly that Theophilitzes employed Basil to take care of his horses and in no way implies that he ever had any other responsibilities. Theophilitzes does however appear to have been fully satisfied with Basil's performance and impressed by his skill in this particular field, because when Michael received the unruly horse and complained that he had no courageous man to take care of his horses Theophilitzes, who happened to be present, responded and recommended Basil to him. The Logothete goes on to relate that Michael sent for Basil, who arrived with haste and quickly made the horse as docile as a sheep. Michael was greatly pleased by this and enrolled him to take care of the imperial stables.³⁶ Thus the only virtue of Basil's that is displayed through the Logothete's selection of information to relate is his extraordinary skill as a groom, but it is also explained in a straightforward way how this skill was all he needed to be employed in imperial service. From this point on the Logothete becomes significantly more vague concerning the reasons for Basil's promotions. Basil does not figure in the narrative at all until he is made *protostrator*, after the previous incumbent had been executed for conspiring against Bardas, and there is no explanation as to why Basil of all people was appointed. Similarly, when describing how the previous *parakoimomenos* was deposed the Logothete simple states that Basil was promoted in his stead on the same day. He does however mention that this appointment incurred the jealousy of Bardas.³⁷ Since Bardas himself was second in status only to the emperor it is hardly possible that the Logothete meant that the Caesar was jealous because he had wanted the position for himself, nor does he mention anything about any schemes by Bardas to have one of his own men appointed. Instead, the most reasonable explanation for this jealousy is that Bardas thought that Michael favoured Basil unjustly. Interestingly enough, the Logothete seems to agree. He writes that Petronas, the commander

³⁵ *VB*, §§ 13, 16.

³⁶ *SL*, chapter 131, §§ 7, 15.

³⁷ *SL*, chapter 131, §§ 23, 31.

of the eastern armies, won a great victory against the army of Melitene and even managed to kill the emir Umar, arguably the most troublesome enemy of the empire at the time. Immediately after recounting this important military success, that apparently improved the Byzantine situation in the east immensely, the Logothete remarks that despite “the toils and brave deeds against the enemy of others, the emperor’s love for Basil increased and he thought him to be the only one who served him.”³⁸ Thus in the Logothete’s account it seems likely that the key to explaining Basil’s remarkable career is to be found solely in his personal relationship with Michael and not in any specific virtues that made him eligible for promotion, for the only such virtue that is mentioned or implied is his talent for taming and taking care of horses and those skills are unlikely to have taken him further than the imperial stables.

But no matter what qualities Basil possessed that helped him climb the ladder of the imperial hierarchy his career opportunities would inevitably have had their limits were it not for the timely deaths of Bardas and Michael. Concerning the murder of Bardas the Continuer’s narrative is quite detailed. He writes:

Ἄρτι δὲ τοῦ βασιλέως Μιχαὴλ μετὰ Βάρδα τοῦ θεί(οῦ) καὶ Καίσαρος κατὰ Κρήτης ἐκστρατεύοντος, καὶ σοβαρώτερον τοῦ Καίσαρος χρωμένου τοῖς πράγμασι καὶ ἔξουσιαστικώτερον ἐκφέροντος τὰ προστάγματα, ἥρξαντο πυκναὶ καὶ συνεχεῖς αἱ κατ’ αὐτοῦ διαβολαὶ καθ’ ἐκάστην τῷ βασιλεῖ Μιχαὴλ διαγγέλλεσθαι. ἐν Κήποις δὲ γενομένων αὐτῶν [...], καὶ εἴτε κατὰ τύχην εἴτε κατὰ σπουδῆν τῆς τοῦ βασιλέως αὐλαίας [ἥτοι κόρτης] ἐπὶ χθαμαλοῦ καὶ ἐπιπέδου ταθείσης τόπου, τῆς δὲ τοῦ Καίσαρος ἐν ἀπόπτῳ καὶ ὑψηλῷ³⁹

He goes on writing that Bardas’ enemies seized upon this apparently plausible pretext and convinced Michael that the Caesar was now openly insulting him to feed his own ambition. As has been mentioned above, the Continuer appears to imply that Michael had already begun to feel threatened by Bardas’ growing influence and he states that at this point the emperor resolved to have the Caesar killed, but since Bardas had the support of many powerful officials and generals he was deterred from doing so in the open and instead decided to have him assassinated as he entered the imperial tent at daybreak to discuss the matters at hand.

³⁸ SL, chapter 131, § 26. The Greek text reads: ἄλλων μὲν οἱ πόνοι καὶ τὰ κατὰ τῶν πολεμίων ἀνδραγαθήματα, ἡ δὲ τοῦ βασιλέως ἀγάπη πρὸς τὸν βασίλειον ἐξεκέχυτο καὶ τοῦτον μόνον ἐνόμιζεν εἶναι τὸν θεραπεύοντα αὐτόν. (my translation). Concerning the importance of Petronas’ victory, see for instance Whittow (1996), p. 311.

³⁹ VB, § 17. Translation: ”Soon afterwards, when Emperor Michael and Bardas, his uncle and caesar, were about to set out on a campaign against Crete, the caesar handled matters with much arrogance and issued orders with much imperiousness; and frequent and persistant slander directed against him began to reach Emperor Michael every day. When the expedition arrived at Kepoi [...], whether by chance or by design, the imperial tent was pitched on a low and level ground, while that of the Caesar was set on a high and prominent spot.”

However, the Continuer relates, when the opportune moment was at hand the men who had been selected to perform the deed lost their nerve and refused to carry out the murder. When Michael realised this he sent word to Basil in desperation, claiming that if the men could not be rallied and convinced to carry out their orders Bardas would surely see through his scheme and retaliate by killing him instead. Upon hearing this Basil, who appears to have known nothing of the plan to assassinate Bardas until then, feared for the emperor's safety and "forthwith instilled the cowardly with courage and the trembling with boldness and prodded them into carrying out the imperial will."⁴⁰ Consequently, according to the Continuer's account Basil did play a crucial part in the murder of Bardas, but only because it was absolutely necessary in order to save the emperor's life. He had known nothing about the scheme until he was involuntarily dragged into it and did nothing other than acting like any faithful servant of the emperor should.

From a moral perspective, the Logothete gives a far less flattering account of Basil's involvement in the murder of Bardas. He writes that there was much suspicion between Basil and Bardas and that each of them sought to kill the other, but that it was Basil who acted first. He managed to win Symbatios, Bardas' son-in-law, over to his cause with lies and ὅρκοι φρικτοί 'terrible oaths' and together they managed to convince Michael that Bardas was harbouring designs on his life. Furthermore, the Logothete claims that the expedition against Crete was conceived by Basil with the sole purpose of providing him with an opportunity to have the Caesar assassinated. Bardas apparently had his doubts about partaking in the expedition, but Michael and Basil assured him with oaths that he could join them without fear. When the expedition had arrived at Kepoi, the Logothete relates, Basil decided to bring his plans to fruition and when Bardas went to see the emperor in the morning Basil and his henchmen followed him inside the imperial tent where Basil gave him a blow with his sword during his discussion with Michael, whereupon the henchmen joined in the murder while the emperor watched in silence.⁴¹ Even though the superficial events recounted by the Logothete are roughly compatible with the ones in the Continuer's narrative, the Logothete portrays Basil as the sole driving force behind the murder of Bardas. He lied and swore false oaths on several occasions, he contrived the entire scheme and he even took part in the murder personally, while Michael's involvement is reduced to giving his tacit consent. The Logothete does of course mention that Bardas wanted to have Basil killed as well and in light of this the

⁴⁰ *VB*, § 17. The Greek text reads: θᾶττον θαρραλέους ἐποίησε τὸν δειλὸν καὶ τὸν τρέμοντας εὐθαρσεῖς καὶ τῇ τοῦ βασιλέως αὐτοὺς ὑπηρετήσασθαι βουλῇ διηρέθισεν. (editor's translation).

⁴¹ *SL*, chapter 131, §§ 33-37.

assassination of the Caesar might possibly be interpreted as some sort of pre-emptive attack, but that still does not make Basil any less of a ruthless murderer.

As regards the murder of Michael the Continuer argues that he only had himself to blame and he claims that he will illustrate this by revealing what kind of life Michael had made for himself. He explains:

ἐντεῦθεν εἰδέναι λογιζόμενος ἔχοι πᾶς ὁ βουλόμενος ὅτι καὶ τὸν βασίλειον θεία ψῆφος σαφῶς ἦν ἡ ἐπὶ τὸ ἄρχειν καλέσασα (ἀδύνατον γὰρ ἦν ὡς εἶχεν ἔχοντα συστῆναι τὰ πράγματα) καὶ ὅτι μετὰ ταῦτα αὐτὸς ὁ Μιχαὴλ καθ' ἑαυτοῦ τὰ ξίφη ἡκόνησεν καὶ τὰς τῶν ἀνελόντων αὐτὸν ἐτόνωσεν δεξιὰς καὶ εἰς τὴν οἰκείαν σφαγὴν διηρέθισεν τοσοῦτον ἑαυτὸν τῶν καθηκόντων ἐξεδιήγησεν, καὶ τοσοῦτον πρὸς πᾶσαν | παράνομον ἐξεβακχεύθη πρᾶξιν, καὶ οὕτως τά τε θεία ἐξωρχήσατο καὶ πρὸς τοὺς τῆς πολιτείας ὄμοιν καὶ τῆς φύσεως νόμοιν ἐξύβρισεν.⁴²

He proceeds with some direct statements, claiming that Michael dishonoured the imperial majesty by spending all his time and all the public funds drinking and carousing in the company of foul and depraved men and, what was worse, scoffed at and mocked the sacred rites of the Christian faith, making them the object of sneering, jest and derision. He proceeds to reinforce these statements by recounting some of Michael's foul deeds.⁴³ He also writes that Basil was very much aggrieved by Michael's behaviour and made every effort to guide him back on the right path, but all his words fell on deaf ears and Michael instead started to resent him for not taking part in his pleasures and even tried to have him killed. Since he could find no plausible pretext for having him executed he tried to have him assassinated during a hunting trip, but the assassin failed to accomplish his task, apparently because he tried to kill a guiltless man, which implies some sort of divine protection. After failing to assassinate Basil, the Continuer relates, Michael instead resolved to introduce another co-emperor, namely one of his immoral drinking companions that went by the name Basiliskianos, and when this became known throughout the palace the emperor's derangement appeared obvious to everyone.⁴⁴ After recounting this episode the Continuer proceeds to describe some of Michael's evil deeds, claiming that he killed, blinded and mutilated innocent men, squandered the public funds and neglected the maintenance of the army. He even

⁴² *VB*, § 20. Translation: "Anyone who so desires should thus be able to draw his own conclusions from this and realize that it was clearly Divine Decree that had summoned Basil to assume power (for it was impossible that matters could have gone on the way that were), and that once this happened it was Michael alone who sharpened the swords against himself, who gave strength to the right hands of his slayers, and who provoked them to his own slaughter: so far did he stray from his duties, so frantically did he indulge in all kinds of lawless deeds, so totally did he debase things divine and so insolently break the laws of both society and nature." (editor's translation).

⁴³ *VB*, §§ 20-23.

⁴⁴ *VB*, §§ 24f.

remarks that Michael was about to despoil churches in an attempt to raise more money and that there was an impending danger that he would have the magistrates executed and their property confiscated.⁴⁵ Then, after having spent eight whole paragraphs reviling Michael the Continuer states briefly:

δι’ ἂ δὴ πάντα συμφρονήσαντες τῶν ἐν τέλει οἱ δοκιμώτατοι καὶ τὸ ἔμφρον τῆς συγκλήτου βούλης, διὰ τῶν προκοιτούντων τοῖς βασιλεῦσι στρατιωτῶν ἐν τοῖς παλατίοις τοῦ ἀγίου μάρτυρος Μάμαντος ἀναιροῦσιν αὐτον, ἐκ τῆς ἄγαν οἰνοφλυγίας ἀνεπαισθήτως τὸν ὑπνον τῷ θανάτῳ συνάψαντα.⁴⁶

This sudden conciseness and lack of detail certainly seems suspicious, as does the absence of any information on the part played by Basil in this. By his silence on the matter the Continuer obviously wants to imply that he had nothing to do with the murder, but given the biographical nature of his account one might at least expect some sort of comment as to whether he was opposed to the apparently justified murder, supported it, took an active part in it or knew nothing about it until it had taken place. If the Continuer really believed Basil to be completely innocent he probably would have pointed it out. Perhaps Basil's involvement was common knowledge when the chronicle was written and silence therefore a better defence than denial, or maybe the Continuer was well aware of it, but decided to omit it to avoid making his narrative morally confusing to his readers. In either case the Continuer seems to argue that the magnitude of Michael's depravity not only fully justified his murder, but also served to prove that Basil's accession was indeed ordained by divine providence.

Once again the Logothete begs to differ. According to him, Basil was angered by Michael's desire to elevate Basiliskianos to imperial status and therefore decided to murder him. He accomplished this by first having dinner with the emperor and, finding some pretext for going into the imperial bedchamber, he twisted the bar used to keep the doors shut, making them impossible to close. Then, when Michael was drunk and sound asleep, he returned accompanied by a small group of trusted men, entered the bedchamber and had both Michael and Basiliskianos killed.⁴⁷ Even though the Logothete does portray Michael as a drunkard and a fairly incompetent emperor, he does not go nearly as far as the Continuer and he does not imply in any way that these shortcomings could serve as justification for murder.

⁴⁵ *VB*, §§ 26f.

⁴⁶ *VB*, § 27. Translation: "Wherefore the most worthy among the magistrates and the wise members of the senate banded together and caused Michael to be slain in the palace of the holy martyr Mamas by the guards posted in front of the imperial bedchamber and he passed imperceptibly from sleep to death in his drunken stupor." (editor's translation).

⁴⁷ *SL*, chapter 131, §§ 46-51.

On the contrary, he makes it quite clear that the assassination was a morally despicable act that even incurred divine disapproval. In the beginning of his account of Basil's reign he remarks that he finds it necessary "to write about the divine revenge against those who killed Michael as well as that which befell each of them on different occasions". He proceeds to recount how many of Basil's accomplices met different grisly ends, but he does not mention Basil at all, even though he was the one who instigated the crime.⁴⁸ This should reasonably be interpreted as a subtle way of demonstrating what sort of punishment Basil deserved and surely would have been submitted to, had God not had a different purpose for him. The Logothete also writes that when Basil came to church, probably the first time after his accession, to partake of the Communion the patriarch Photios called him "a robber and a murderer, unworthy of the divine Communion".⁴⁹ Whether the Logothete faithfully relates what Photios said or uses him as a spokesman for his own opinions about Basil, the statement reflects the apparent tendency of the chronicle quite well. Furthermore, in the beginning of his account of Basil's reign, just before relating the episode with Photios, the Logothete mentions that there was a terrible earthquake in Constantinople, lasting for forty days and forty nights, and that it completely destroyed a church called Sigma.⁵⁰ This episode might have been included as an indication of divine disapproval, but as the Logothete does not comment it further there is no way to be sure. The Continuer does mention that Basil had Sigma rebuilt,⁵¹ but he writes nothing about any earthquake and gives no other reason as to why that specific church needed to be rebuilt, and unless the Continuer simply did not have access to any sources that mentioned the earthquake, this differing selection of information to relate seems to imply that the event was considered to have political or moral implications.

But the question remains: why does the Continuer constantly emphasise the importance of divine providence in Basil's career if it was taken for granted by his contemporaries that God himself appointed every emperor, the good ones as well as the bad ones? His effort to use his account of Michael's depravity to prove that it was divine will that Basil became emperor certainly suggests that it was not considered entirely self-evident that accession to the throne always implied divine favour, but the Continuer's repeated references to divine providence might also serve another purpose. If the accession of every new emperor was

⁴⁸ SL, chapter 132, § 2. The Greek text of the quote reads: *γράψαι καὶ τὴν παρὰ Θεοῦ γενομένην ἐκδίκησιν εἰς τὸν τὸν Μιχαὴλ διαχειρισαμένους καὶ ἡ πέπονθεν ἔκαστος αὐτῶν ἐν διαφόροις καιροῖς* (my translation).

⁴⁹ SL, chapter 132, § 5. The Greek text of the quote reads: *ληστὴν καὶ φονέα [...] καὶ ἀνάξιον τῆς θείας κοινωνίας* (my translation).

⁵⁰ SL, chapter 132, § 4.

⁵¹ VB, § 80.

orchestrated by God a chronicler who wanted to give a panegyrical account an emperor's life could not do this simply by portraying him as anointed by God, since that criteria applied equally to good and bad emperors. Thus he would also have to convey the impression that this particular emperor belonged to the former category. The Continuer appears to have two strategies for achieving this. Firstly, by stressing Basil's noble descent, extraordinary talents and many virtues, secondly, by portraying him as utterly devoid of ambition. He writes that when his father died Basil felt that the time had come for him to travel to Constantinople and display his virtues, but he was restrained from doing so by his love for his mother and consequently chose to stay with her and help lighten her burdens. It was not until she had received her visions and urged him to go that he finally consented.⁵² Similarly, when a noble and wealthy woman called Danelis learned of the greatness inherit in Basil's future and requested that he should enter into a bond of spiritual brotherhood with her son, the Continuer relates that Basil attempted to reject the appeal because it would be inappropriate for a man of such apparent insignificance to join in such a bond with the son of a woman of distinguished reputation.⁵³ Furthermore, the accounts of the murders of Bardas and Michael in no way portrays Basil as having any ambition what so ever, despite the fact that he is the main beneficiary in both cases, or even as being the slightest bit pleased on account of his increased power. The Logothete on the other hand agrees that Basil's accession to the throne was ordained by God, but in his narrative the driving force behind Basil's remarkable career nevertheless appears to be his ruthless ambition and nothing else. When he perceived Bardas to become a threat to his ambitions he had no qualms about deceiving those who trusted him with false oaths and did not hesitate to murder his rival in cold blood. And when Michael tried to circumvent his position of power by elevating Basiliskianos to imperial status he ruthlessly defended his standing by committing an act of murder and treason so foul that several of his accomplices were killed in divine retribution and usurping the imperial dignity for himself.

In conclusion, the degree of ambition ascribed to Basil differs greatly between the chronicles and this appears to be a matter of some importance. As it were, Basil became emperor because the two persons above him in the imperial hierarchy were brutally murdered and on account of this the Continuer appears eager to demonstrate that he was no power-hungry usurper. Accordingly, even if his references to divine providence to some extent were considered as stating the obvious, their frequent recurrence serves to implicitly emphasise that

⁵² *VB*, §§ 7f.

⁵³ *VB*, § 11.

it was indeed divine will and not personal ambition that was the driving force behind Basil's accession to the throne.

3.2 Defender of the empire

The Byzantines perceived the military triumphs and defeats of the empire to be directly dependent on divine approval. If a regime was truly favoured by God it would be expected to be successful in warfare, while repeated defeats would be seen as a certain sign of divine disapproval.⁵⁴ On account of this a chronicler who wanted to give a favourable account of the deeds of an emperor would in all likelihood be sure to portray him as a successful military commander. However, one must keep in mind that when giving an account of the military affairs of a given period of time the author's freedom in shaping his narrative would be severely restrained by actual facts since the territorial gains and losses he would relate would have to correspond with the contemporary territory of the empire, something that his audience could be expected to be aware of. As it were, the Byzantines were fairly successful in their military enterprises during the reign of Basil⁵⁵, but what is more interesting when examining the tendency of the chronicles is to which degree the credit for the successes, as well as the blame for the occasional setbacks, is ascribed to Basil personally and to which extent this distinction seems to be considered important.

The Continuer writes at length about military matters, devoting roughly a third of his text to the subject. He introduces this part of his narrative with the following passage:

Ἐπεὶ οὖν τὰ οἰκεῖα καὶ λάως εἶχεν αὐτῷ καὶ κατὰ σκοπὸν εὔσεβῆ καὶ θεάρεστον, ἐκάλει δὲ αὐτὸν ἡ ζέουσα περὶ τῶν ὅλων φροντὶς καὶ πρὸς ὑπερορίους στρατείας, ὡς ἂν τοῖς οἰκείοις πόνοις καὶ τῇ αὐτοῦ ἀνδρείᾳ καὶ γενναιότητι πλατύνοι μὲν τὰ ὄρia τῆς ἀρχῆς, πορρωτέρῳ δὲ συνώσῃ καὶ ἀπελάσῃ τὸ δυσμενές, οὐδὲ τούτων ἡμέλησεν, [...]⁵⁶

By using the words *οἰκείοις* and *αὐτοῦ* the Continuer emphasises the personal commitment and efforts of Basil in his military campaigns, making it quite clear from the beginning that the emperor was no mere figurehead whose presence on the throne made God inclined to grant his armies victory, but a commander who would lead his army in person, expose himself to danger and submit himself willingly to suffering and hardships as, the Continuer goes on to

⁵⁴ Mango (1980), p. 219; Whittow (1996), pp. 136, 142f, 150-152.

⁵⁵ Treadgold (1997), pp. 455-461; Whittow (1996), pp. 314f.

⁵⁶ *VB*, § 36. Translation: "Now that domestic matters were running will for the emperor and in accordance with his pious goals pleasing to God, his deep solicitude for the state as a whole summoned him to foreign campaigns, so that he might by his own efforts, courage, and excellence extend the boundaries of his realm, force out his foes, and drive them far off. Nor did the emperor neglect that task." (editor's translation).

inform his readers, he thought that a ruler truly worthy of the name should do.⁵⁷ This has to be taken as a rather direct statement that personal commitment on the battlefield was an important imperial virtue and that Basil did indeed possess it. This statement is reinforced soon thereafter by an episode where Basil first helps his troops build a bridge across the Euphrates, submitting himself to manual labour and carrying heavy loads, and then once they have crossed the river inflicts a crushing defeat on the army of Melitene by inspiring his troops and astounding the enemy with his courage and fortitude.⁵⁸

Apart from stressing this personal commitment in military matters the Continuer portrays Basil generally as a skilled and successful commander. He writes that since the army had been neglected during Michael's reign Basil's first priority was to supply the military forces with sufficient resources and giving them proper training before sending them to battle, stating directly, albeit vaguely, that after taking these prudent measures he was able to "celebrate many triumphs and win countless victories".⁵⁹ Further on he reinforces this statement by giving accounts of three successful campaigns, apart from the one already mentioned against Melitene he recounts the events of one against Tephrike and one against Syria.⁶⁰ He also states that when the city of Taranta sues for peace and Basil accepts he does so showing ἐπιεικεία 'magnanimity' and almost immediately refers to his "magnanimity blended with courage and his justice combined with strength".⁶¹ This would seem to imply that the Continuer feels a need to explain that Basil did not make peace with his enemies out of cowardice or because he doubted his ability to defeat them in battle, but rather on account of the goodness of his heart, a virtue which in no way lessened the magnitude of his strength or courage.

The Continuer does however not only recount the military triumphs of Basil, but also those of several of his subordinates. He writes that when Chrysocheir, the leader of the Paulicians, invaded Roman territory Basil dispatched the entire army against him, commanded by the *domestikos* of the *Scholai*, a high-ranking military officer. When Chrysocheir decided to withdraw the *domestikos* sent two of his subordinate commanders to pursue him, which resulted in a battle where the Paulicians were soundly defeated and their

⁵⁷ *VB*, § 37.

⁵⁸ *VB*, § 40.

⁵⁹ *VB*, § 36. The Greek text reads: *τὰ πολλὰ τρόπαια ἔστησεν καὶ τὰς μυρίας νίκας ἀνείλετο* (editor's translation).

⁶⁰ *VB*, §§ 37, 40, 46, 48f.

⁶¹ *VB*, § 38. The Greek text reads: *τὸ μετὰ τοῦ ἀνδρείου ἐπιεικὲς καὶ μετὰ τῆς δυνάμεως δίκαιον* (editor's translation).

leader killed by a Byzantine soldier while retreating.⁶² Further on, a fleet from Tarsos, led by the emir in person, is defeated and the emir killed by the garrison of Euripos, commanded by Oiniates, the *strategos* of Hellas.⁶³ The Patrician Niketas defeats a raiding fleet from Crete on two separate occasions.⁶⁴ Nasar, the commander of the fleet, is not only successful in defeating two naval expeditions sent by the sultan of Africa, but also manages to conduct a successful campaign in Sicily and on the Italian mainland in between.⁶⁵ A general named Leo conquers Tarentum in Italy.⁶⁶ Nicephoros Phokas subdues several cities and is victorious in many battles against the Arabs.⁶⁷

Apparently there was no lack of worthy candidates if one wanted to distribute the credit for the military successes of the empire to others than the emperor and the Continuer seems to regard this as a matter that requires some explanation. After giving an account of the capture of two cities by Basil he proceeds:

τὴν δὲ τῶν Μανιχαίων πόλιν τὴν Καταβάταλα καλουμένην κατὰ τὸν καιρὸν ἐκείνον διὰ τῶν οἰκείων στρατηγῶν ἐξεπόρθησεν. ἀλλ’ οὐ τοσοῦτον ἡ δὲ ἐτέρων πρό(σ)θεσις εὑφραινεν, *〈ὅσον〉* ἡνία τὸ μὴ τοῖς αὐτοῦ πόνοις καὶ κινδύνοις τὰ τρόπαια ἵστασθαι.⁶⁸

Again, the Continuer uses an indirect statement to explain that Basil's absence during some of the military triumphs of the empire was not due to any desire to leave the dangerous and difficult tasks of warfare to others, but that he was simply prevented by other important matters from taking an active part in every military enterprise. The Continuer does however only reinforce this statement in a reasonably clear manner once. Just before he starts to relate the episode where Basil dispatches the *domestikos* of the *Scholai* against Chrysocheir he informs his readers that Basil busied himself with civil matters, dealing with embassies from various nations, praying in churches and taking care of the usual matters of state administration as well as the courts.⁶⁹

It might be a rather obvious statement that the emperor had many civil responsibilities that demanded his attention and prevented him from leading every important military campaign and perhaps this is why the Continuer does not stress the matter further. He does

⁶² *VB*, §§ 41-43.

⁶³ *VB*, § 59.

⁶⁴ *VB*, §§ 60f.

⁶⁵ *VB*, §§ 63-65.

⁶⁶ *VB*, § 66.

⁶⁷ *VB*, § 71.

⁶⁸ *VB*, § 46. Translation: "At the same time he had the Manichaean city, Katabatala by name, taken by his generals; all the same, he was less delighted by having *〈his dominions〉* enlarged through others, than he was vexed at not setting up the trophies by his own toil and braving the dangers himself." (editor's translation).

⁶⁹ *VB*, § 41.

however employ a number of other narrative strategies to diminish the importance of the military efforts of Basil's subordinates. The episode in which Chrysocheir is defeated is introduced in the following manner:

οὐ διελίμπανε δὲ ὅμως καθ' ἐκάστην εἰς τὸν ἱερὸν καὶ θεῖον ναὸν εἰσιὰν καὶ ἵκετεύων τὸν κύριον [...] τοῦ μὴ πρότερον τοῦ βίου ὑπεξελθέν πρὶν ἡ τὸν τοῦ Χρυσόχειρος ὄλεθρον ἐπιδεῖν καὶ τρία βέλη τῇ αὐτοῦ καὶ τα>πῆξαι μιαρῷ κεφαλῇ. ὃ καὶ γέγονεν ὕστερον.⁷⁰

Accordingly, after giving his account of the defeat, capture and death of Chrysocheir, the Continuer finishes the story by relating how Chrysocheir's head was sent to Basil who recalled his prayers and shot three arrows at the severed head. By starting and finishing the story in this way the Continuer creates what could be called a narrative frame which turns the episode into a story of how Basil's prayers were answered by God instead of a story of how Chrysocheir was destroyed through the efforts of the subordinate commanders. Also, when narrating the events of the battle in which the Paulician army is defeated the Continuer recounts what appears to be a sophisticated battle plan that was drawn up by the commanders, but after describing how this plan was successfully put to use and the enemy army put to flight he remarks that it surely was "the emperor's continuous prayers that filled them with terror and drove them to their destruction.",⁷¹ reminding his readers of the crucial part the emperor played in every victory due to the favour bestowed upon him by God, which must be assumed entitled him to a sizable part of the credit for this particular victory as well. Similarly, when relating the episode in which the garrison of Euripos, under the command of the *strategos* of Hellas, defeats a fleet from Tarsos he begins his account by stating that an Arab fleet was defeated "through the emperor's persistent prayers to God, his own prudent ordinances and his proper handling of affairs",⁷² goes on to describe the events that took place and finishes by summarising that the enemy fleet suffered a resounding defeat "owing to the prayers of the emperor and to the prowess of the defenders".⁷³ Again, he employs a technique of narrative framing and emphasises the active part in the victory played by Basil through his

⁷⁰ *VB*, § 41. Translation: "For all that, he would enter the holy church of God every day without fail, and beseech the Lord [...] that he should not depart this life before witnessing the downfall of Chrysocheir and fixing three arrows in that man's foul head. Which thing later came to pass. (editor's translation).

⁷¹ *VB*, § 42. The Greek text reads: τῆς τοῦ βασιλέως τούτους [...] ἐπιμόνου ἐκδειματούσης εὐχῆς καὶ συνελαυνούσης πρὸς ὄλεθρον. (editor's translation).

⁷² *VB*, § 59. The Greek text reads: ταῖς τοῦ βασιλέως επιμόνοις δεήσεσι πρὸς θεὸν καὶ ταῖς ἔμφροσι διατάξεσι καὶ τῇ δεούσῃ τῶν πραγμάτων μεταχειρίσει (editor's translation).

⁷³ *VB*, § 59. The Greek text reads: ταῖς τοῦ βασιλέως εὐχαῖς καὶ ταῖς τῶν ἀντιπαρατάξαμένων ἀλκαῖς (editor's translation).

prayers. The *strategos* of Hellas is mentioned only briefly and the Continuer points out that he organised the defence following an imperial order.⁷⁴

The Continuer does however seem to make little effort to ascribe to Basil the credit for the achievements of the other commanders mentioned above. He certainly portrays Leo in a distinctly unfavourable light, stating that he attacked and captured Tarentum only to divert Basil's attention from the fact that he had previously betrayed and caused the death of a fellow commander, but this episode is part of a larger narrative describing the fates of some of the prominent commanders in the west and no effort is made to give Basil any direct credit for the capture of Tarentum.⁷⁵ There is also a passage where the Continuer relates that Basil helped Nasar solve some problems with desertion, but even though it gives a favourable account of Basil's resourcefulness it can not be assumed that it was included simply to emphasise the achievements of Basil at Nasar's expense, since it is needed to explain the delay of the naval expedition, which according to the Continuer made the Arabs overconfident and unprepared for the attack, thus contributing significantly towards the victory.⁷⁶ When summarising Nasar's achievements the Continuer does not mention him by name, but ascribes the victories to the naval forces, and states that this "gave the emperor ample opportunity for expressing thanks and acknowledging gratitude to God."⁷⁷ This could reasonably be seen as an attempt to belittle the efforts of Nasar, but no stress is laid on any active part played by Basil. Furthermore, both the Patrician Niketas and Nicephoros Phokas seem to be given full credit for their victories. Niketas is described directly as *καλῶς ἀφηγούμενος* 'an outstanding commander'⁷⁸ and Nicephoros is praised for being a "diligent and vigilant man, noble and wise in both deed and counsel"⁷⁹ who accomplished "many deeds of wisdom, gallantry on the field of battle, and nobility."⁸⁰ The magnitude of the praise bestowed upon Nicephoros may perhaps be explained by the prominent part the Phokades played in Byzantine politics during the reign of Constantine VII,⁸¹ but nevertheless there appears to be a general trend in *Theophanes Continuatus* towards a decreasing eagerness to

⁷⁴ VB, § 59.

⁷⁵ VB, § 66.

⁷⁶ VB, §§ 62f.

⁷⁷ VB, § 65. The Greek text reads: [...] βασιλεῖ πολλὰς ἀφορμὰς παρασχὼν τῆς πρὸς θεὸν εὐχαριστίας καὶ ἀνθομολογήσεως. (editor's translation).

⁷⁸ VB, § 61 (editor's translation).

⁷⁹ VB, § 71. The Greek text reads: ἀνὴρ ἐπιμελής τε καὶ ἄγρυπνος καὶ κατὰ χεῖρά τε καὶ βουλὴν γενναιός καὶ συνετός (editor's translation).

⁸⁰ VB, § 71. The Greek text reads: πολλὰ καὶ συνέσεως ἔργα καὶ πολλεμικῆς ἀνδρείας καὶ γενναιότητος ἐπεδειξατο. (editor's translation).

⁸¹ Whittow (1996), pp. 347f.

ascribe as much credit for the victories as possible to Basil personally. The episodes concerning Chrysocheir's death and the battle of Euripos are the first two major victories achieved by Basil's subordinates that are mentioned and here the Continuer makes an obvious effort to magnify the part played by Basil at the expense of the commanders who were present, while Niketas is given full credit for his victories, Nasar allowed to be at least the central character in the story of his own accomplishments and Nicephoros excessively praised. Perhaps the Continuer felt that he had made his point concerning the importance of Basil's personal relationship with God and strategic planning in a larger perspective in his account of the first two episodes, or perhaps not only Nicephoros Phokas had powerful descendants at the court of Constantine VII, but it is not a matter that can be explored in further detail here.

Still, it must be concluded that the Continuer does make sure to ascribe Basil a sizable part of the credit for the military successes of the empire during his reign, large enough for him to outshine by far all other possible candidates for the part as the hero of the narrative, and that the effort he makes to achieve this clearly implies that he did consider the distinction a matter of considerable importance.

Then what about the occasional failures? The Continuer does in fact admit a single outright military failure by Basil in person, describing how Basil besieged the city of Adata, but soon learned that a holy man inside the city had predicted that he would not be able to capture the city and that it would instead be captured by a descendant of his, named Constantine, many years later. When Basil heard this, the Continuer relates, he was angered and pressed the siege even harder, but eventually had to give up and withdraw his army. Thereafter the Continuer goes on to marvel at the insight of this holy man, remarking that the city was indeed captured recently by Basil's grandson Constantine.⁸² Thus the only instance where the Continuer is prepared to admit that Basil himself failed in a military enterprise is when the story can be used to praise the reigning emperor, Constantine VII, which could serve as a reminder that if the Continuer was indeed trying to flatter anyone through his portrayal of Basil it was certainly not Basil himself, who had been dead for well over half a century.

The Byzantines did however suffer other defeats during the reign of Basil and concerning this there are some interesting differences between the accounts of the Continuer and the Logothete. The arguably most severe setback in military matters was the sacking of Syracuse by the Arabs and in this case the chronicles agree on the main points of the

⁸² *VB*, § 48.

narratives, namely that an Arab fleet attacked the Byzantine possessions on Sicily and besieged Syracuse, which prompted Basil to dispatch a fleet to relieve the city, but it arrived too late and Syracuse was plundered. The Logothete writes that Basil had just started to build a new church when he received word of the plight of Syracuse:

ἀσχολουμένων δὲ τῶν πλοίων ἐν τοῖς κτίσμασι καὶ ἐκχοισμοῖς τῆς Νέας ἐκκλησίας ἐγένετο βραδύτης τοῦ στόλου καὶ τοῦ λαοῦ, καὶ παρεδόθη ἡ αὐτὴ Συράκουσα πρὸ ὀλίγου πρὶν ἡ φθάσαι τὸν στόλον, [...]⁸³

This has to be seen as an indirect statement saying that the reason for the fall of Syracuse was that Basil neglected to keep the fleet prepared for an attack because he wanted to use the crew as construction workers, which would place the blame for this catastrophe on him. The Continuer on the other hand tells a different story. He states that the Arabs in Syria started to build ships to attack the Byzantines and that Basil for this reason gathered the naval forces in Constantinople, but decided that the crew should assist in the construction of the church, “lest the bands of sailors should become unruly from *(too much) leisure*”⁸⁴ He goes on to inform his readers that the Syrian Arabs were deterred from attacking when they learned that the Byzantines were well prepared and that when Syracuse was attacked the same fleet was dispatched *εὐθέως* ‘immediately’ as a relief force. The blame for the delay is placed on unfavourable winds and the indolence of Adrian, the commander of the fleet.⁸⁵ He also points out that this Adrian “happened to be the admiral of the fleet at that time”,⁸⁶ indirectly stating that he was not handpicked by Basil, which seems as an attempt to further shift the blame away from the emperor. Thus when the Logothete indirectly places the blame for the fall of Syracuse on Basil’s negligence the Continuer, almost as if he is defending Basil against the exact accusation put forward by the Logothete, claims firstly that the fleet had to be gathered in Constantinople to prevent an attack from Syria, secondly that the decision to engage the crew in the construction of the church was a prudent one as it prevented them from becoming unruly, thirdly that this did not cause any delay, stressing that the fleet was dispatched immediately, and finally that Syracuse fell because of adverse winds and the incompetence of a commander whose appointment Basil had little to do with. The accounts of the actual events

⁸³ SL, chapter 132, §12. Translation: “Since the crew of the fleet was engaged in the founding and excavation of the New church a delay of the people and of the expedition arose and the same Syracuse was given up shortly before the expedition arrived, [...]” (my translation).

⁸⁴ VB, § 68. The Greek text reads: *ώς ἂν μὴ σχολάζων ὁ ναυτικὸς ὄχλος ἀτακτότερος γίνοιτο* (editor’s translation).

⁸⁵ VB, §§ 68f.

⁸⁶ VB, § 69. The Greek text reads: *ἔτυχεν τότε τῆς ναυτικῆς δυνάμεως ἔξηγούμενος* (editor’s translation).

that took place are roughly compatible, but through their narrative of the underlying causes they assign the blame differently.

In a similar episode the Logothete recounts that Basil was persuaded by slander to relieve Andrew, the *domestikos* of the *Scholai*, of his command, which was given instead to a man called Stouriates, who took the field against Tarsos, suffered defeat and lost the entire army, which made Basil reinstate Andrew.⁸⁷ The Continuer tells the same story, but with two noteworthy differences. Firstly, he gives an account of Andrew's achievements, praises him for his courage and wisdom and points out that it was Basil who, appreciating these virtues, promoted him and gave him important commands. Secondly, when writing that Basil was persuaded by slander he apparently feels the need to give an explanation in his defence and states that "even sensible men are deceived when they are told things meant to please them".⁸⁸ Consequently the account of the Continuer is somewhat more lenient concerning Basil's lack of judgement in deposing Andrew than the version given by the Logothete, but if the sole purpose of *Theophanes Continuatus* was to portray Basil in the most flattering light possible it is hard to see why this episode was included at all. Perhaps the story was well known when the chronicle was written and the Continuer thought it better to say something in defence of Basil than to pretend it did not happen at all, perhaps Andrew, like Nicephoros Phokas, had influential descendants during the reign of Constantine VII, or perhaps the chronicle simply is not as blatantly biased as it is usually thought to be. In any case, the scope of this paper does not allow of a further investigation of this issue.

Apart from giving an impression of poor strategic judgement on Basil's part in the two episodes above the Logothete also gives an account of an outright military failure suffered by Basil in person. He writes that Basil took the field against Tephrike, engaged the enemy army in combat, was defeated and nearly captured. He goes on stating that when Basil had returned to Constantinople after this defeat he sent his brother-in-law, Christopher, against Tephrike instead and that this Christopher achieved a great victory, plundered the city and razed it to the ground.⁸⁹ Thus Christopher succeeded exceptionally where Basil had failed miserably, which gives an impression of Basil's skills as a commander that is hardly compatible with the one given in *Theophanes Continuatus*. The Continuer does however also give an account of the same episode. According to him Basil invaded Paulician territory, but his courage and sagacity deterred Chrysocheir from meeting him in battle and so the Paulician army withdrew

⁸⁷ SL, chapter 132, § 25.

⁸⁸ VB, § 50. The Greek text reads: ἀπατῶνται [...] πολλάκις καὶ φρόνιμοι, λεγομένων αὐτοῖς τῶν καθ' ἡδονήν (editor's translation). The account of Stouriates defeat follows in § 51.

⁸⁹ SL, chapter 132, § 7.

and focused on defending Tephrike, leaving Basil free to pillage the countryside, which he apparently did with considerable conviction, gathering booty and captives. But when he reached Tephrike itself, the Continuer relates, he first tried to capture it by means of skirmishes and a brief siege, saw that it was solidly fortified and hard to capture and therefore avoided the long delay that a siege would involve, instead withdrawing his army intact from enemy territory with the rich booty and many captives.⁹⁰ Thus according to the Continuer Basil's attempt to capture Tephrike was only a brief foray intended to test the defences and not an attempt serious and foolhardy enough to nearly get the emperor captured, while his withdrawal was not a necessary retreat after a humiliating defeat, but an organised and prudent withdrawal of a victorious army after a successful campaign. Again, the chronicles agree on the brief outline of the events, that Basil attacked the Paulicians and returned without having captured Tephrike, but still gives remarkably different accounts of Basil's achievements.

In connection with this episode the Logothete makes an interesting remark, stating that Basil “often lost many Romans when engaging Arabs.”⁹¹ It is hard to discern exactly what he wants to say with this statement and the interpretation is further complicated by the fact that *πολλάκις* ‘often’ might as well be taken with ‘engaging’ as with ‘lost’. He might intend to say that many soldiers bravely gave their lives in battle with the infidel, which would be a statement quite neutral in relation to Basil, or that Basil’s many wars cost many soldiers their lives, in which case it would be difficult to determine if it is really meant as criticism since the Continuer for instance seems inclined to praise Basil for his eagerness to fight the enemies of the empire, but, partly because the statement is placed in the middle of an account of a humiliating defeat, it would seem slightly more likely that it is meant as a less than flattering comment on Basil’s skills as a general.

The Logothete does however also recount military victories achieved by Basil on two separate occasions. The first episode concerns his campaign against Melitene, where the only information given is that he “returned having taken a large body of captives and fought many

⁹⁰ *VB*, § 37.

⁹¹ SL, chapter 132, § 7. The Greek text reads: *πολλάκις συμβαλὼν Ἀγαρηνοῖς πολλοὺς τῶν Πωμαίων ἀπεβάλετο.* (my translation).

battles”,⁹² and the account of the second one is equally brief, stating that Basil took the field against Germanikeia in Syria and “returned having pillaged this (city) and taken captives”.⁹³

Taken together the Logothete’s selection of information to relate gives a complex image of his tendency towards Basil as the supreme commander of the Byzantine forces. His account of the fall of Syracuse and the deposition of Andrew undoubtedly indicates that he did not think very highly of Basil’s strategic judgement, although the fact that he was persuaded to relieve Andrew of his command might be regarded as an extenuating circumstance even though he does not point it out himself. Regarding his personal skill as a commander the picture is however more complicated. There is of course the vague remark that he lost many Romans in his wars against the Arabs, which should probably be regarded as an indirect way of criticising him, and the account of his failed assault of Tephrike where he was nearly captured himself. This episode is however not necessarily included mainly in order to portray Basil as an incompetent general. Concerning the emperor’s near capture the Logothete writes:

ἐν δὲ τῇ τοιαύτῃ φυγῇ τοῦ βασιλέως Θεοφύλακτος ὁ Ἀβάστακτος, ὁ πατὴρ Ῥωμανοῦ τοῦ μετὰ ταῦτα βασιλεύσαντος, διέσωσε τὸν βασιλέα παρὰ μικρὸν κρατούμενον· δὲν ἐπιζητήσας ὁ βασιλεὺς μετὰ ταῦτα καὶ εὑρὼν καὶ γνωρίσας (πολλοὶ γὰρ ἔλεγον τῷ βασιλεῖ, ὅτι εγώ εἰμι), ὁ δὲ τὴν τιμῆν ἀφεὶς τόπον βασιλικὸν ἦταστο, οὐ καὶ τετύχηκεν.⁹⁴

Thus the episode can be used to legitimise Romanos’ usurpation of the imperial power in 919 and there is no reason to assume that this is not the main purpose behind the selection of information to relate in this case. Consequently it cannot be concluded that the Logothete included the episode because he wanted to reinforce the notion of Basil’s incompetence regarding military matters, since even though it certainly could serve that purpose it might just as well simply be the means to an end.

Furthermore he chose to include two accounts of successful military campaigns conducted by Basil in person, but apart from pointing out that Tephrike was captured by Christopher after Basil had failed he writes nothing about the victories of Basil’s subordinates

⁹² SL, chapter 132, § 15. The Greek text reads: *αἰχμαλωσίαν πολλὴν ποιησάμενος καὶ πολλοὺς πολέμους ὑπέστρεψεν* (my translation).

⁹³ SL, chapter 132, §17. The Greek text reads: *ταύτην ἐκπορθήσας καὶ αἰχμαλωτίσας ὑπέστρεψεν* (my translation).

⁹⁴ SL, chapter 132, § 7. Translation: “During the emperor’s flight under such circumstances Theophylaktos Abastaktos, the father of Romanos who was emperor after this, barely saved the emperor when he was about to be captured by the Arabs. After this the emperor sought for him, found him and verified his identity (for many said to the emperor: “I am (he)”), but he declined the honour and requested imperial status, which he also received.” (my translation).

that the Continuer duly, albeit reluctantly, reports. If the Logothete had the explicit intention of portraying Basil as utterly unfit for military command, why did he include the accounts of his victories when he just as easily could have omitted them? He also could have denied Basil the credit for the successful conduct of war during his reign by bestowing it upon his subordinate commanders instead, because if being outshone by other generals did not reflect unfavourably upon the emperor, why would the Continuer make an effort to deprecate the efforts of victorious Byzantine commanders? It is of course entirely possible that the Logothete's selection of episodes and statements was determined by his own sources, that he for instance did not have access to any accounts of the victories of Basil's subordinates, but this seems somewhat unlikely, since if there were no reliable accounts it seems unlikely that the Continuer would use unreliable ones or fabricate the episodes only to belittle the achievement of those involved. If there on the other hand were reliable accounts, but the Logothete was denied access to them, it would seem likely that they were kept hidden by the regime of Constantine VII, but if Constantine thought it to be in his interest to keep the accounts hidden, why would he allow them to be used in *Theophanes Continuatus*, as is stated in the very first sentence of that chronicle. And even if the Logothete for some other reason lacked access to these accounts he still could have omitted the information that he did have access to.

In conclusion, the Logothete gives a distinctly critical account of Basil's leadership in military matters, portraying him on several occasions in a far less than flattering light, but there is still no reason to believe that he had the explicit intention to deprive Basil of the credit for the generally successful conduct of warfare during his reign.

3.3 The affairs of state

The responsibilities of the emperor did of course extend far beyond providing for the defence of the empire. Apart from handling financial and judicial matters as the head of the civil administration he was also regarded as ultimately responsible for the management of ecclesiastical affairs.⁹⁵ According to the Continuer neither of these obligations had been fulfilled to a satisfactory extent under Michael's rule. As regards the former he informs his readers that when Basil had assumed supreme power he found the imperial funds to be all but depleted and consequently this problem was the first one to be addressed. Basil did this by finding the records of the extravagant gifts his predecessor had lavished on undeserving

⁹⁵ Mango (1980), p. 220.

individuals and ordered that a significant part should be returned to the treasury, whereupon he began to meet the most urgent expenses and administer the affairs of state in a suitable manner.⁹⁶

Then what was the suitable manner in which to administer public affairs? In the Continuer's account the most distinguishing features of Basil's policy appears to be his "compassion towards the poor" and "justice dispensed equally."⁹⁷ The Continuer stresses this point by reinforcing it continually through his narrative. He recounts that Basil carefully selected and promoted the very best men for office and describes their foremost obligations, apart from not succumbing to corruption, as follows:

[...] πασῶν τῶν ἀρετῶν πλέον τιμῆσαι δικαιοσύνην, καὶ ισότητα πα||ρασκευάσαι ἐμπολιτεύεσθαι πανταχοῦ, καὶ τὸ μὴ καταδυναστεύεσθαι ὑπὸ τῶν πλουτούντων τοὺς πένητας, μηδὲ ἀδίκως ζημίᾳ τινὰ ὑποβάλλεσθαι, ἀλλὰ ῥύεσθαι πένητας καὶ πτωχὸν ἐκ χειρὸς στερεωτέρων αὐτοῦ, καὶ κατὰ μικρὸν ἀναλαβεῖν τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ὕσπερ ἀπὸ τῶν φθασάντων ἡδη λειποψυχοῦντάς τε καὶ ἐκλείποντας, καὶ ἀναρρωνύντας ἐπὶ τῆς ἀρχαίας ἄπαντας εὐετηρίας σπουδάζειν ἀποκαθιστᾶν.⁹⁸

He goes on to relate how these officials, motivated by the virtues on whose account Basil had selected them as well as the personal zeal shown by the emperor in these matters, eagerly tried to outdo each other in doing what was right. Thus, claims the Continuer, did justice return to the empire and everyone could live their lives in peace and prosperity, without fear of having one's possessions unjustly appropriated by those of higher station.⁹⁹

The Continuer also writes that Basil installed suitable men to act as judges, cleared and restored a building called The Brazen House at his own expense and set it up to be a general court, offered daily sustenance to those who came to Constantinople in order to seek redress for offences done to them, since they would otherwise not have the means to stay until the matter was concluded, discovered and abolished a pretext for injustice used by some officials when drawing up tax registers and even took part in the judicial proceedings in person whenever he could find the time to do so. After describing these measures taken by Basil the Continuer concludes by explaining that they should be regarded as "significant and

⁹⁶ *VB*, § 28.

⁹⁷ *VB*, § 72. The Greek text reads: *τὸν πρὸς τοὺς πένητας ἔλεον* and *τὴν πρὸς πάντας δικαιοσύνην τε καὶ ισότητα* respectively (editor's translation).

⁹⁸ *VB*, § 30. Translation: "[...] to honour justice above all other virtues, to cause fairness to prevail everywhere, to see to it that the poor were not oppressed by the rich, nor that anyone suffered any harm unjustly, but rather that the poor and needy man should be delivered out of the hands of those who were stronger than he, and that little by little, people should revive who had already given up the ghost, as it were, and were on the very brink of dying from all that had happened beforehand; to give all men renewed vigor and to endeavour to restore them to their former prosperity." (editor's translation).

⁹⁹ *VB*, § 30.

considerable proof of his care for his subjects and of his desire that no one be wronged at another's hands”,¹⁰⁰ clearly stating the purpose of his selection of information to relate. At another point in his narrative he recounts that Basil found the Civil law in great disarray, amended it and organised it into chapters.¹⁰¹ He does not explicitly state what purpose this served, but it could reasonably be assumed that it is to be understood as serving the same purpose as the previously mentioned judicial measures.

Further on the Continuer gives an account of an episode where an official, motivated by a desire to prolong his own tenure in office, suggested to Basil that tax assessors should be sent out to formally reassess rural possessions whose owners have died in order to increase imperial revenues, but that since Basil could not find anyone who was both willing and reliable enough to entrust with this undertaking he decided that it should remain undone, preferring to forgo the extra revenues rather than risking that his subjects would suffer misfortune at the hands of unreliable officials.¹⁰² Since this episode concerns things that Basil did not do rather than things that he did its inclusion in the narrative can only be motivated by the author's desire to state something indirectly through the selection of information to relate. In this particular case there are two obvious ways to interpret it. Firstly, it can be seen as another example of Basil's compassion towards the poor and commitment to justice, secondly, as an explanation of why the tax revenues during Basil's reign were not as high as they could be expected to be, serving as a defence against possible accusations of fiscal mismanagement.

The influence of Christian values on the Continuer's efforts to stress Basil's concern for the poor and infirm is quite evident and he gives an interesting example of this when recounting the financial problems that Basil had to take care of in the beginning of his reign. After describing the measures taken by Basil he goes on to mention that God caused many buried treasures to be discovered at a later date on account of the emperor's charity and justice towards the poor.¹⁰³ This also serves to demonstrate that there were no real contradiction between charity and justice on one hand and efficient fiscal management on the other, but that piety was the essential imperial virtue. As long as the emperor behaved in a manner befitting a true Christian, God would provide for the rest.

¹⁰⁰ *VB*, § 31. The Greek text reads: *τοιοῦτον καὶ τοσοῦτον τῆς περὶ τὸ ὑπήκοον κηδεμονίας αὐτοῦ καθέστηκε γνώρισμα, καὶ ὅτι ὑπ' οὐδενὸς οὐδένα ἀδικεῖσθαι ἐβούλετο* (editor's translation).

¹⁰¹ *VB*, § 33.

¹⁰² *VB*, § 99.

¹⁰³ *VB*, § 29.

As regards the state of the ecclesiastical matters when Basil assumed supreme power the first issue that the Continuer brings up is that Michael had left the churches in a severe state of disrepair and he points out that Basil, due to his love of God and respect for all things divine, made sure not to neglect them.¹⁰⁴ Later on he writes:

[...] ἐπιμελείᾳ τε διηγεκεῖ καὶ τῶν πρὸς τὴν χρείαν | ἐπιτηδείων ἀφθόνῳ χορηγίᾳ καὶ παροχῇ τοὺς μὲν τοῦ πτώματος ἡγειρεν, τῇ ἀσφαλείᾳ καὶ κάλλος προσθείσ, τῶν δὲ τὸ ἀσθενὲς ἐνισχύσας διὰ τῆς τῶν δεόντων ἐπιβολῆς καὶ ἐπανορθώσεως, τοῦ μὴ καταρρυθῆναι, ἀλλὰ πρὸς ἀκμὴν αὐθίς ἐπανελθεῖν καὶ νεότητα ἐγένετο αἴτιος.¹⁰⁵

He proceeds by describing at length and in detail the various construction projects that Basil undertook. He mentions by name no less than 29 churches and chapels that Basil either beautified, repaired or rebuilt from the foundations and claims that he also restored about a hundred other pious foundations.¹⁰⁶ He also names a further 16 churches and chapels, as well as a single monastery, that were founded by Basil, giving special attention to the construction of the so-called New Church, which he describes in detail.¹⁰⁷

Then what was the purpose of these extensive construction projects? When writing about the construction of a shrine dedicated to the Mother of God at a marketplace called Phoros the Continuer states that Basil ordered it because he saw that the spiritual needs of the people living and working in the area were being neglected.¹⁰⁸ And at the end of the account of these projects he describes them as “activities that are a hallmark of piety toward the Godhead”.¹⁰⁹ That the construction, maintenance and beautification of churches was regarded as serving the purposes of pleasing God and providing for the spiritual well-being of the people is a notion that is hardly surprising to the modern reader and something that there is every reason to assume was taken for granted by the Continuer’s contemporaries, which probably is why he doesn’t feel the need to point it out further. It seems to be understood that resources spent on glorifying God and providing for the spiritual needs of the people were always well spent and that such expenses demanded no further justification. Consequently, the Continuer’s lengthy descriptions of Basil’s extensive construction projects serves to

¹⁰⁴ *VB*, § 32.

¹⁰⁵ *VB*, § 78. Translation: ”By lavishing constant care upon them and by liberally providing all the things that were needed (for their restoration), he raised some of them from ruin and made them not only sturdy, but beautiful; in other shrines, he had weak spots reinforced by appropriate additions and improvements, and (in this way) he caused them not to fall in ruins, but to revert to the prime of their youth.” (editor’s translation).

¹⁰⁶ *VB*, §§ 78-82, 93f.

¹⁰⁷ *VB*, §§ 76, 83-85, 91, 93f.

¹⁰⁸ *VB*, § 93.

¹⁰⁹ *VB*, § 94. The Greek text reads: ἀφ' ὅν μάλιστα ἡ περὶ τὸ θεῖον ὁσιότης χαρακτηρίζεται (editor’s translation).

portray him as an emperor who understood the importance of piety, not only for the salvation of souls but also for the prosperity of the empire.

The Continuer does not, however, include only churches in his account of Basil's building programme. He also mentions other edifices, such as imperial residences, an imperial playing field and a bath, that were constructed either on the palace grounds or other places used as resorts by the emperor and describes their beauty and opulence.¹¹⁰ Unlike the churches these buildings appears to have been built simply for the enjoyment and comfort of the imperial family and can hardly be assumed to serve either the purpose of glorifying God or ensuring the spiritual well-being of the people. The Continuer even explains that the reason for his detailed descriptions of their beauty is that "such beauties are not accessible to any eye",¹¹¹ stating directly that the public had little if any access to them. Yet the Continuer praises Basil on account of them, remarking for instance that some of the imperial residences that had been built "give an intimation of our emperor's magnanimity and love of beauty".¹¹² The claim that the construction of residences for the imperial family, whose members surely already enjoyed housing of considerable extravagance, reflected Basil's magnanimity seems quite odd. It might perhaps be explained by a notion that the edification of beautiful works reflected the character of the one who was responsible for them, or that the construction of building of such magnificence served to glorify the empire as a whole, thereby promoting the interests of its residents and indirectly exalting the God who provided for its prosperity and granted victory to its armies. It is also possible that the comment refers to the works of art that adorned the building, which seems to have been largely sacred in its nature and on account of this could be considered to serve the same purpose as the beautification of the churches, or simply that the Continuer considered magnanimity to be a word that described the actions of Basil well in general and that he therefore used it without further thought in this particular instance. Either way, the Continuer appears to feel a need to provide justification for at least some of the projects. Concerning the establishment of the imperial playing field he explains that it was justified since the area previously designated for such practises had been used for the foundation of the New Church.¹¹³ He also justifies the construction of two of the imperial houses with the following explanation:

¹¹⁰ *VB*, §§ 86, 89-92.

¹¹¹ *VB*, § 87. The Greek text reads: *τὰ τοιαῦτα κάλλη οὐ πᾶσιν εἰς ὄφασιν πρόκειται* (editor's translation).

¹¹² *VB*, § 90. The Greek text reads: *τὸ μεγαλόψυχον καὶ φιλόκαλον τοὺς ἀνδρὸς ὑπεμφαί|νοντα* (editor's translation).

¹¹³ *VB*, § 86.

μὴ βουλόμενος γὰρ τὰ δημόσια χρήματα, ἀπερ οἱ ἐκ τοῦ ὑπηκόου φόροι γεννῶτες αὐξάνοθσιν, εἰς οἰκείας καταναλίσκειν χρείας καὶ τὸν ἔτερων πόνους τὴν τὸν * * * τῶν τράπεζῶν ἡδύνειν ἢ συγκροτεῖν, τὸν τοιούτους οἴκους ἐπενοήσατο, καὶ προσόδους ἐκ γεωργίας ἀπέταξεν ἐν αὐτοῖς ἴκανάς, ἀφ' ὧν ἡ βασιλικὴ πανδαισία αὐτοῦ τε καὶ τῶν μετ' αὐτὸν ἄφθονον καὶ δικαίαν τὴν χορηγίαν ἔμελλεν ἔχειν ἀεί.¹¹⁴

To claim that Basil built these houses in order to alleviate the burden of taxes on his subjects seems like a rather poor explanation, since there appears to be no reason why he had to build new houses to assign agricultural incomes to cover the expenses of his imperial banquets, but the inclusion of the explanation still indicates that the Continuer felt a need to justify the construction projects and emphasise Basil's concern for the well-being of his subjects. Even though the edification of buildings for the pleasure of the imperial family appears to have been considered in itself as something praiseworthy in a larger perspective, it was not considered to be self-evident that the resources required to achieve it were always money well spent, unlike the expenses lavished on construction, improvement and maintenance of churches.

The Logothete gives a different picture of Basil's efforts in the field of construction. Apart from stating briefly that Basil founded a branch of a monastery in honour of his son Constantine the only building project that he mentions is the foundation of the New Church,¹¹⁵ which in itself could be explained by the fact that his accounts are significantly briefer in general than those of the Continuer, but his account of this particular project also seems to be intended to inform his readers about things other than the events of the construction itself. The first time it is mentioned the Logothete states that Basil initiated the construction after having bought many houses that occupied the intended location, but then he immediately proceeds to relate how Basil's decision to use the crew of the fleet as construction workers led to the sacking of Syracuse by the Arabs,¹¹⁶ as has been discussed above, thus using the foundation of the church to provide a background to the story about the fall of Syracuse, pointing out Basil's lack of strategic judgement rather than his efforts to glorify God and ensure the spiritual well-being of his subjects. He brings up the subject again in another paragraph further on:

¹¹⁴ *VB*, § 91. Translation: "as he did not wish that public funds, which are created and made to grow by taxes levied upon subjects, be spent on his private requirements, and that the toil of others be used to season and support the table of * * *, he devised these houses and assigned to them considerable income from agriculture. Their revenues were to provide in perpetuity an abundant and legitimate source to cover the cost of his own imperial banquets and of those (given) by his successors." (editor's translation).

¹¹⁵ *VB*, §§ 12, 14, 19, 21.

¹¹⁶ *SL*, chapter 132, § 12.

πολλὰ δὲ χαλκουργήματα κατέαξεν ὁ βασιλεὺς λόγῳ τῆς Νέας ἐκκλησίας, ἀλλὰ καὶ μάρμαρα καὶ ψηφῖδας καὶ κίονας ἐκ πολλῶν ἐκκλησιῶν καὶ οἴκων ἀνέλαβεν εἰς κατασκευὴν αὐτῆς. ἐν οἷς στήλῃ ἵστατο χαλκῆ ἐν τῷ σενάτῳ, σχῆμα ἐπισκόπου φέροντα. ἐκράτει δὲ ἡ αὐτὴ στήλη ἐν τῇ χειρὶ ῥάβδον ἔχουσαν ὅφιν ἐντετυλιγμένον. ταύτην καταγαγόντες ἀπέθηκαν ἐν τῷ βεστιαρίῳ. Κατελθόντος δὲ τοῦ βασιλέως καὶ ἀπελθόντος, ἔνθα ἵστατο ἡ στήλη ὅπθῃ, ἐνέβαλε τὸν δάκτυλον αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τὸ στόμα τοῦ ὄφεως. ὧν δὲ ἐκεῖ ζῶν ὅφις ἔδακε τοῦ βασιλέως τὸν δάκτυλον· ὃς μόλις δι’ ἀντιφαρμάκων ἴαθη, θαυμασάντων πάντων ἐπὶ τούτῳ.¹¹⁷

This forms a striking contrast to the account given by the Continuer, since instead of relating how Basil rebuilds, repairs and beautifies a multitude of churches it depicts him despoiling many other churches in order to provide material for the construction and adornment of a single new one. Furthermore, the inclusion of the episode where Basil is bitten by the snake immediately thereafter could reasonably be interpreted as an attempt by the Logothete to express that these measures incurred some sort of divine disapproval, perhaps a warning. This cannot be stated with certainty, but the fact that Basil just barely recovered from the injury and the widespread amazement caused by the event seems to point in this direction. The Logothete goes even further. He continues his account by relating that Basil ordered that a statue of Solomon should be taken from the palace, remoulded to carry his own name instead and put down into the foundations of the church, with the purpose of “bringing himself forth as a sacrifice to the foundation of such nature and to God.”¹¹⁸ Basil’s preoccupation with his personal identification with the church could be seen as an indication that his motives in building and embellish it might not be the glorification of God, but rather the glorification of himself, which would make the crime of despoiling other churches worse, since it might otherwise be at least partly justified by the intention of using the materials taken to honour God in an even more magnificent manner. If the episode was interpreted in a way more well-disposed towards Basil it would still seem to hint a certain fixation with the construction of the church, which would make him inclined to give undue precedence to it, reinforcing the notion of his poor judgement, strategic in the case of the fall of Syracuse and moral as regards the despoiling of churches.

¹¹⁷ SL, chapter 132, § 14. Translation: ”The emperor broke into pieces many bronze works for the sake of the New Church, but he also brought up marble, mosaic tiles and roof pillars from many churches and houses for its construction. Among these was a bronze statue carrying the image of a bishop that stood in the senate. The same statue held a crosier in its hand with a snake coiled around it. When they had taken it down they put it away in the closet. But when the emperor came there and went to the place where the statue stood upright he put his finger into the mouth of the snake. There was then a living snake and it bit the emperor’s finger, which barely healed with the use of antidote, and everyone was amazed at this.” (my translation).

¹¹⁸ SL, chapter 132, § 14. The Greek text reads: ὥστε θυσίαν ἔαυτὸν [...] τῷ τοιούτῳ κτίσματι καὶ Θεῷ προσάγων. (my translation).

Concerning construction projects there is another interesting difference between the chronicles, namely that while the Continuer only mentions those carried out by Basil, which is hardly surprising in light of his efforts to magnify Basil's military successes at the expense of his subordinates, the Logothete actually mentions a church and a monastery founded by the patriarch Ignatius as well as a nunnery founded by the patriarch Photios.¹¹⁹ This difference is however not necessarily an expression of their respective tendencies towards Basil. When mentioning these foundations the Logothete also mentions that each patriarch is buried in the monastery that he founded, meaning that the purpose of including the episodes might as well be to inform the reader of where the patriarchs are buried, in which case it would only be natural to also mention that they had founded the monasteries themselves, while the Continuer's silence regarding all construction projects except Basil's could reasonably be explained by the fact that his chronicle is much more biographically inclined than the Logothete's, which could make the less significant accomplishments of the patriarchs fall outside the intended scope of his narrative.

Regarding Basil's dealings with these patriarchs the chronicles once again give differing accounts, although they agree concerning the broad outline of the events: that Ignatius was patriarch during Michael's reign, but was deposed and replaced with Photios, who in turn was deposed by Basil soon after he had assumed power after which Ignatius was once again made patriarch and this time remained in his see until his death when Photios was chosen by Basil to succeed him again. As has been related above, the Logothete claims that Photios reviled Basil when he came to partake in the Communion, and he goes on writing that Basil was angered by this and therefore had him deposed. Further on, when recounting Ignatius' death, the Logothete mentions that Basil restored Photios as patriarch, but gives no further comment.¹²⁰ According to the Continuer Basil considered the deposition of Ignatius to be unfair and when he came to power he therefore "restored her true bridegroom to the church and their true father to the flock", but he also acknowledged that Photios was not to blame for the injustice that had been committed, treated him well and duly restored him after the death of Ignatius.¹²¹ Thus the chronicles agree on what happened, but concerning the reasons why it happened they offer two different explanations, which are both perfectly plausible, since the deposition of Ignatius could easily be considered unjustified even in account given by the

¹¹⁹ SL, chapter 132, §§ 8, 16.

¹²⁰ SL, chapter 132, §§ 5, 16.

¹²¹ VB, §§ 32, 44. The Greek text of the quote reads: *τὸν γυνήσιον νυμφίον τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ καὶ τοῖς τέκνοις τὸν πατέρα κανονικῶς παρασχών* (editor's translation).

Logothete,¹²² and it is also entirely possible that each of them has some truth to it. In either case, each of the chronicles offers an explanation that is fully compatible with the rest of their respective narrative of the manner in which Basil managed the affairs of state.

Spreading the Christian faith was another vital task that was expected to be executed by the emperor, who was considered to be the “equal of the apostles”, chosen by God to bring about the conversion of all those who had not yet embraced the true faith.¹²³ The Continuer relates several such efforts by Basil. He writes that when a number of Slavic tribes who had previously rebelled against Byzantine rule asked Basil to allow them to return to the empire he found their request reasonable, accepted it and forthwith dispatched priests and an imperial agent to accompany the Slavic envoys back, “above all in order to rescue these ⟨tribes⟩ from spiritual danger, restore them safely to their former faith, and deliver them from the sins of ignorance or ⟨rather⟩ folly.”¹²⁴ He also reports that although the Bulgarians had formally converted to Christianity the religion was not yet firmly established and in danger of being abandoned, but that Basil through persuasion and generous gifts induced them to accept an archbishop and allow the establishment of bishoprics all over their territory, which eventually caused them to utterly abandon their old customs and remain Christian.¹²⁵ Furthermore, he recounts that Basil also used generous gifts to lure the people known as the Rhos into concluding a treaty and accepting an archbishop, who managed to convert many to Christianity by performing a miracle, namely throwing a bible into a furnace and removing it unscathed after the fire had gone out several hours later.¹²⁶

Whether or not the purpose of this missionary work was purely religious cannot be determined with any certainty here, but the benefits derived from its successes were definitely also political, since the conversion to Christianity implied a recognition of the ultimate authority of the emperor in Constantinople and a commitment to maintaining peaceful relations with other Christians, which at least in theory made the converted peoples less likely to wage war against the empire.¹²⁷ These advantages could however not be derived from the conversion of Jews, which motivates examining the accounts of Basil’s efforts to convert them separately. The Logothete mentions that Basil had as many Jews as he could baptised,

¹²² SL, chapter 131, § 28.

¹²³ Shepard (2002), p. 230.

¹²⁴ VB, § 54. The Greek text reads: ὡς ἀν πρὸ τῶν ἄλλων τοῦ ψυχικοῦ τούτους κινδύνους ἐξέληται καὶ πρὸς τὴν προτέραν πίστιν ἐπανασώσηται καὶ τῶν ἐξ | ἀγνοίας ἢ ἀνοίας ἀπαλλάξῃ πλημμελημάτων αὐτούς. (editor’s translation).

¹²⁵ VB, § 96.

¹²⁶ VB, § 97.

¹²⁷ Mango (1980), p. 220; Shepard (2002), p. 231; Treadgold (1997), pp. 556f.

provided them with spiritual fathers from the nobility and offered them protection as well as many gifts,¹²⁸ but he says nothing at all about the missionary activity amongst the Slavs, Bulgarians or Rhos. This is an interesting selection of information to relate, since there is no reason to doubt that there were such activity, as it is unlikely that the Continuer could have gotten away with making up an account of an undertaking of such importance, and the conversion of the hostile neighbours of the empire should, due to the political benefits derived thereof, reasonably be considered as more important than the baptism of the Jews. Could it be that Basil's efforts to convert the Jews should actually be seen as something blameworthy? This seems unlikely in light of the Continuer's account of the episode:

Εἰδὼς δὲ ὅτι ἐπ’ οὐδενὶ τοσοῦτον ὅσον ἐπὶ σωτηρίᾳ ψυχῶν ὁ θεὸς ἐπευφραίνεται, καὶ ὅτι ὁ ἔξαγων ἄξιον ἐξ ἀναξίου ὡς στόμα χρηματίζει Χριστοῦ, οὐδὲ περὶ τὸ ἀποστολικὸν τοῦτο ἔργον ἀμελῆς ἐφάνη καὶ ῥάθυμος, ἀλλὰ πρώτα μὲν || τὸ τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἔθνος, τὸ ἀπερίτμητόν τε καὶ σκληροκάρδιον τὸ ὅσον ἐπ’ αὐτῷ, εἰς τὴν ὑποταγὴν σαγηνεύει Χριστοῦ.¹²⁹

He goes on relating that Basil summoned the Jews to disputations where they were required either to present proof of the truth of their beliefs or duly convert to Christianity and that many of them on account of this, although also tempted by the material rewards offered by the emperor, agreed to be baptized. He does however proceed to inform his readers that after Basil's death the majority of them "returned like dogs to their own vomit", and immediately explains that this in no way reflected poorly on Basil, who was rewarded by God on account of his zeal.¹³⁰ As it were the Jews were considered especially hard to convert since previous attempts had shown that they often proved to be insincere in their conversion if pressed to accept baptism. The Ecclesiastical Council of 787 had even decreed that it was preferable to let them live according to their own customs than accept them as insincere converts.¹³¹ In light of this it seems likely that the Logothete's account was not intended to portray Basil as doing something morally wrong, but rather as being more than a little naïve, since although the ambition to convert the Jews might be admirable enough it defied commonly accepted wisdom to believe that it could be achieved by coercion or generous gifts. This would also explain why the Continuer feels the need to give an explanation in Basil's defence and

¹²⁸ SL, chapter 132, § 10.

¹²⁹ VB, § 95. Translation: "Aware that God cherishes nothing more than the salvation of souls and that he who brings forth the worthy from the worthless is the spokesman of Christ, the emperor did not show himself careless or indifferent to this apostolic work, but captured the nation of the Jews, uncircumcised and obstinate as it was when left to itself, and led it to submission to Christ." (editor's translation).

¹³⁰ VB, § 95. The Greek text of the quote reads: πάλιν [...] πρὸς τὸν οἰκεῖον ὡς κύνες ὑπέστρεψαν ἔμετον (my translation). The editor's translation reads: "like unto dogs, returned to their own vomit".

¹³¹ Mango (1980), p. 93.

emphasise that nothing pleases God like new converts. But if this explanation is correct, why then would the Logothete avoid mentioning that Basil's attempt was a failure? His intentions would undoubtedly have been easier to discern if he had, but then again that might be just the point. If it really was commonly accepted that Jews could not be converted with force or bribes it would be unnecessary to state directly that Basil's attempts failed and not doing so would simply make the criticism significantly more subtle.

The Logothete also recounts another episode that portrays Basil's judgement in a less than flattering light. It concerns the increasing influence of the so-called Santabarenos. He writes:

Λέων δὲ ὁ Σαλιβαρᾶς συνοψίζει Φωτίῳ πατριάρχῃ Θεόδωρον μοναχόν, ἀρχιεπίσκοπον Εὐχαῖτων, ὃς εὐλαβῆ καὶ ποιοῦντα τεράστια καὶ προορατικόν. Φώτιος δὲ τοῦτον βασιλεὺς βασιλεῖ μεσιτεύει καὶ συνοψίζει· εἰς ὃν ὁ βασιλεὺς ἀρεσθεὶς (πρὸς γὰρ τὰς ἐπιθυμίας αὐτοῦ δέκειτο) εἶχεν ἐν τημῇ πολλῆ. ὃς ἀθυμοῦντα τὸν βασιλέα περὶ τοῦ τελευτήσαντος νιοῦ αὐτοῦ Κωνσταντίνου διὰ τὸ φίλτρον, ὅπερ εἰς αὐτὸν εἶχεν, ἐπλάνα καὶ ἐπηγγέλλετο δειξαὶ ζῶντα, ὃ καὶ ἐποίησεν.¹³²

He proceeds to relate that Basil did see an apparition in the image of Constantine later and that on account of this and many other things "from that which adheres to Apollonios", which Santabarenos had been initiated in, Basil came to have much faith in him.¹³³ This refers to writings about the pagan miracle-worker Apollonios of Tyana, who was sometimes described in a favourable light in Byzantine sources, but mostly denounced as a charlatan, possibly in league with evil spirits.¹³⁴ The Logothete clearly signifies his opinion of Santabarenos so-called miracles by stating that he deceived Basil when performing them and consequently it seems reasonable that he held Apollonios in a similar regard. His conciseness on the matter also implies that he took it for granted that his readers shared this opinion. However, the episode should probably not be interpreted as signifying that the orthodoxy of Basil's faith was in question. Instead the reasonable interpretation seems to be that Basil failed to recognize the fraudulent nature of Santabarenos so-called miracles and displayed a severe lack of judgement in having dealings with such a devious man and allowing himself to be influenced by him. As an example of Santabarenos ability to manipulate Basil the Logothete recounts that he managed to convince the emperor that his son Leo had designs on his life by

¹³² SL, chapter 132, § 21. Translation: "Leo Salibaras introduced the monk Theodoros, the archbishop of Euchaitos, who was sensible, performed miracles and foretold the future, to the patriarch Photios. Photios conveyed and introduced him to the emperor Basil. The emperor liked him (for he conducted himself in accordance with his wishes) and held him in high esteem. He deceived the emperor, who was disheartened by the death of his son Constantine because of the love he felt for him, and announced that he would display him alive, which he also did:" (my translation).

¹³³ SL, chapter 132, § 21. The Greek text of the quote reads: ἐκ τῶν Ἀπολλωνίου (my translation).

¹³⁴ ODB, pp. 137f.

telling Leo that Basil often was unable to find a knife when he had need of one and thus induced him to carry one on his body when he went to visit his father. Then he brought forward his accusations, persuaded the emperor to have Leo searched and when the knife was found prevailed upon Basil to accept it as conclusive evidence. According to the Logothete, Santabarenos had such influence over the emperor that Leo was not even allowed a chance to defend himself. Instead, Basil wanted to blind him, but was restrained from doing so by the entreaties of the patriarch Photios, and therefore acquiesced in merely confining him to one of the imperial residences, where he kept him imprisoned for three months before they were finally reconciled.¹³⁵ The Continuer's account of this episode is similar to the Logothete's in all vital respects, save for the minor detail that it is Santabarenos who wants to have Leo blinded and not Basil himself. The Continuer even mentions that Santabarenos commanded great affection and full confidence of Basil, even though he did not have a blameless reputation and was not held in high opinion by other people, which certainly serves to emphasise Basil's lack of judgement in this particular instance, even if that is probably not his intention.¹³⁶

As has been pointed out above the Continuer praises Basil for his wisdom in matters of soul, without providing a single example of how he displayed it, and for his sagacity in capturing Michael's horse, although it is difficult to provide an exact translation of the word *σύνεστις* and the episode only can be regarded as demonstrating this virtue in a very limited sense of the word. He is probably not trying to portray Basil as wise in the sense learned, he even mentions his lack of formal education once,¹³⁷ but he still seems determined to convey the impression that he did possess a certain mental prowess, perhaps in the form of intuitive common sense. In spite of this Basil appears to be quite easily manipulated in the account of Santabarenos' intrigues against Leo and his judgement in the episode regarding the deposition of the general Andrew must be regarded as less than praiseworthy, despite the Continuer's efforts to defend his actions. In the light of this apparent contradiction the Continuer relates another interesting piece of information. When recounting the worries of Michael's mother after she had seen Basil carrying the marks of their successor he writes that Michael calmed her with the following words:

¹³⁵ SL, chapter 132, §§ 23f.

¹³⁶ VB, § 100.

¹³⁷ VB, § 89.

κακῶς ὑπέλαβες [...] ὁ μῆτερ· ὁ γὰρ ἄνθρωπος οὗτος ἴδιώτης ἐστὶν καὶ πάνυ ἀφελής, ἀνδρείαν μόνην ἔχων, οἵαν ὁ πάλαι Σαμψών, καὶ οὐδὲν ἔτερον, ἀλλ’ ὡς τις Ἐνάκ η Νεβρὸδ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἡμῶν ἀναφανεῖς. ἐξ αὐτοῦ τοίνυν μηδένα φόβουν ἔχε, μηδὲ ὑπόνοιάν τινα κέκτησο πονηράν.¹³⁸

In the Continuer's account this is of course presented as a crucial mistake made by Michael, but if his narrative as a whole is taken into consideration the mistake might at least be regarded as understandable. And the Logothete might well have considered Michael's statement to be a fairly accurate description of Basil's mental faculties.

3.4 Marital issues

The chronicles agree that Basil was married to Eudokia Ingerina some time after he had been enrolled in Michael's service, but other than that their accounts of Basil's marriage have very little in common. The Continuer writes that Michael arranged the marriage in conjunction with Basil's promotion to *parakoimomenos*, which implies that it, like the promotion, to some extent could be considered a reward for his services. He also emphasises Eudokia's noble lineage and states that she surpassed almost all the noble ladies in beauty and modesty.¹³⁹ Thereafter the Continuer is silent on the matter, implying that there was nothing unremarkable about the marriage, which on this particular subject probably was considered synonymous with stating that all was well.

The Logothete on the other hand has more to say and, while he does not contradict the notion of Eudokia's beauty, he hardly portrays her as a paragon of modesty. According to him Basil had previously been married to a woman named Maria, but Michael forced him to divorce her and instead married him to Eudokia, who was his own mistress and continued to be so while he was alive. Basil was compensated by being assigned a mistress of his own, the emperor's sister Thecla. Regarding their children the Logothete states that Constantine's parentage was uncertain, that Michael was the father of Leo and the Alexander was Basil's legitimate child, which also implies that Stephen had been sired by Michael as well.¹⁴⁰ In either case, Basil apparently decided to stay married to her when he became emperor, perhaps to avoid making the scandal worse. So far both Eudokia and Basil could to some extent be regarded as involuntary participants in Michael's immoral schemes, but the notion of Eudokia's virtue is further tarnished by the Logothete's claim that she was involved in the

¹³⁸ *VB*, § 15. Translation: "You have it all wrong, mother; this man is an artless simpleton; all he has is valor, as did Samson of old, and he is nothing more than some Enoch or Nimrod who has reappeared in our own day. Have no fears on his account, and harbor no suspicion of evil." (editor's translation).

¹³⁹ *VB*, § 16.

¹⁴⁰ *SL*, chapter 131, §§ 32, 45, chapter 132, §§ 6, 18.

murder of Michael and by another episode where he relates that a man called Niketas Xylinitos was accused of being “loved by the empress” and that Basil reacted by immediately having him tonsured, which clearly signifies that he had little trust in the faithfulness of his wife.¹⁴¹

The discrepancies between the two accounts clearly signifies that the issue of Eudokia’s virtues or lack thereof was considered to be an important one, but the chronicles do not give any specific clues as to why it was important. It seems unlikely that it was considered especially meaningful either to defend or revile Eudokia for her own sake, since none of the accounts portray her as exercising any political influence at all, but it appears entirely reasonable to assume that it would reflect poorly on Basil if his wife behaved immorally. Perhaps more importantly, the claim that Basil was not Leo’s father would definitely not please Constantine VII, since he in that case would have been the grandson of Michael III, who is thoroughly defamed in *Theophanes Continuatus*, which was commissioned or even written by Constantine himself.

3.5 A temper befitting an emperor

Another quality that the Continuer ascribes to Basil is his merciful disposition. He mentions three attempts to overthrow Basil and in each of these episodes the emperor demonstrates a remarkable clemency and a complete lack of vengefulness. The first of these was an outright rebellion, conceived when Michael was still alive, in resistance to Basil’s elevation to imperial status. It appears to have been fairly successful at first, but when the winter came the rebel army was decimated by desertion and as the ringleaders failed to keep their forces together they soon took to flight and could be apprehended without difficulty. The Continuer goes on to relate that Michael punished them with blinding and mutilation and had them exiled, but that Basil, when he had assumed sole power, recalled them from exile, gave them back their property and treated them kindly, without showing so much as a trace of resentment.¹⁴² Further on he mentions a plot to have Basil assassinated, but claims that God thwarted it by making one of the conspirators reveal their plans. He states that although the harshest penalty allowed by law was execution and confiscation of property, Basil’s *φιλανθρωπία* ‘clemency’ limited the punishment to the blinding of the ringleaders. In fact, he goes even further, writing that Basil would have shown even more moderation in his

¹⁴¹ SL, chapter 131, §§ 48f, chapter 132, § 13. The Greek text of the quote reads: *φιλουμένου παρὰ τῆς αὐγούστης* (my translation).

¹⁴² VB, § 19.

judgement, had he not known that such excessive clemency would have encouraged others to commit crimes.¹⁴³ The third attempt to overthrow Basil recounted by the Continuer was another scheme to have him killed, but once again the plan was betrayed by one of the plotters who revealed it to the emperor. The Continuer writes:

ἀλλὰ πάλιν ἡ τοῦ γενναίου βασιλέως φιλανθρωπία τὴν τῶν νόμων αὐστηρίαν παρέθρανεν || καὶ τὰς ποινὰς ἐμετρίαζεν διὸ τοῦ προεξάρχοντος ἐκκοπέντος τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς, οἱ λοιποὶ διὰ τῶν εἰς τὸ σῶμα πληγῶν καὶ τῆς ἀφαιρέσεως τῶν τριχῶν φιλανθρώπως ἐσωφρονίζουντο. καὶ οὗτοι μὲν οὕτως πατρικῶς μᾶλλον ἡ δεσποτικῶς πρὸς τὸ καθεστηκὸς ἐπανήγοντο.¹⁴⁴

Again, the Continuer refers to Basil's clemency in a direct statement and then reinforces it by relating how it expressed itself in his actions. The Continuer appears determined to stress that Basil indeed was in abundant possession of this particular virtue.

Another interesting feature in these accounts are the motives of the conspirators as the Continuer describes them. He writes that the rebellion was motivated by envy and insanity, the first attempt on Basil's life was orchestrated by despicable demons who use evil people in their plans to undo the well-being and flourishing of the universal state, while the ringleader of the other plot to assassinate the emperor was driven by his lust for tyranny. By claiming that these were the underlying reasons for the attempts to overthrow Basil the Continuer represents them in some extent as rebellions against the divine order ordained by God, most clearly in the second episode, but a desire to replace a God-fearing monarchical state with a self-serving tyranny would reasonably fall into the same category and any political action motivated by insanity must reasonably be regarded as an affront to the divine harmony. Consequently, when Basil fought the conspirators, he was not only defending his own position but also the divine order of all things and when the threats to this order had been neutralised there was no reason for Basil to feel any personal resentment, since the worst part of their crimes was not committed against him but against God, who would hold them accountable for their actions sooner or later. Thus, as long as the leniency of the punishments did not encourage others to wrongdoing, Basil chose to turn the other cheek.

There are however two instances where the Continuer mentions that Basil imposed punishments in anger. Firstly, in the episode where Santabarenos accuses Leo of attempting to

¹⁴³ *VB*, § 34.

¹⁴⁴ *VB*, § 45. Translation: "Again the clemency of the noble emperor blunted the severity of the laws and reduced the penalty; hence, while the ringleader had his eyes gouged out, the remaining (plotters) were brought back to their senses by humane means: they were subjected to corporal punishment and their beards were plucked out. Thus he brought these people back to reason in a way befitting a father rather than an absolute ruler." (editor's translation).

murder him,¹⁴⁵ although the punishment of imprisonment might be regarded as quite lenient, and secondly after the failed expedition to succour Syracuse, when Basil according to the Continuer had the commander Adrian severely punished, though not with death, as a sobering example to others. He also offers an explanation for this, stating that “the emperor, who in private matters was a man of moderation and self-control, did not moderate his anger when it came to public affairs”.¹⁴⁶ There is however another possible explanation as to why the Continuer would mention Basil’s anger in these episodes. Even if the Continuer tried to disassociate Basil with the appointment of Adrian, it was still he who dispatched the expedition and he could have replaced its commander if he had any doubts about his abilities and on account of this he could be considered to bear at least some of the blame for its failure. Since this makes the distribution of responsibility somewhat uncertain, the account of Basil’s almost boundless anger serves to identify him as one of the victims of the wrongdoing, rather than one of the perpetrators, which shifts the blame back towards Adrian. If he had been portrayed as being lenient and displaying clemency in this particular instance it might have appeared as if he was trying to cover up for his associate and thus he would indirectly have been implicated himself. Similarly, by stating that Basil was angered when he had been convinced that Leo had designs on his life it is possible that the Continuer tries to represent the sentence as more severe, since it in fact was significantly more lenient than the punishments imposed on others who had been condemned for same crime, even when Basil had stretched his clemency to its fullest. On the other hand, as regards the rebellion and the other plots the Continuer was free to emphasise Basil’s clemency without indirectly accusing him of favouritism, despite the fact that the crimes as such has to be considered significantly more severe than proving to be an incompetent military commander.

The Logothete provides a rather different account of Basil’s merciful disposition and disinclination to be angered. On one occasion he writes:

Θέκλας δὲ τῆς ἀδελφῆς τοῦ βασιλέως ἀποστειλάσης πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα δι’ ὑπόμυησιν τινὰ Μέτριον ὄντα αὐτῆς ἄνθρωπου ἡρώτησεν αὐτὸν ὁ βασιλεὺς, ὅτι τίς ἔχει τὴν κυρίαν σου; ὃ δὲ εἶπεν, ὅτι ὁ Νεατοκομήτης. παρευθὺ δὲ ὁ βασιλεὺς ἀποστείλας ἤγαγεν αὐτὸν καὶ τύφας ἀπέκειρε καὶ τὸ μοναχικὸν σχῆμα ἐνέδυσεν αὐτόν. ὡσαντως δὲ καὶ Προκόπιον τὸν πρωτοβεστιάριον αὐτοῦ ἀποστείλας ἔτυψε τὴν Θέκλαν· ὃς καὶ ἥρας πάντα τὰ χρήματα αὐτῆς εἰσεκόμισε τῷ βασιλεῖ.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ *VB*, § 100.

¹⁴⁶ *VB*, § 70. The Greek text reads: ἐν τοῖς ἰδίοις μέτριον ἔχων καὶ κεκολασμένον ὁ βασιλεὺς τὸν θυμόν, ἐν τοῖς κοινοῖς οὐ πάντα τι ἐμετρίαζεν (editor’s translation).

¹⁴⁷ *SL*, chapter 132, § 9. Translation: “Thekla, the emperor’s sister, sent a certain Metrios, who was her servant, to the emperor to submit an admonition and the emperor asked him: “Who has your mistress?” He replied: “Neatokomes.” The emperor immediately had him taken away, beaten, tonsured and dressed in a monk’s frock.

The exact meaning of this episode is uncertain. The emperor the Logothete refers to when stating that Thekla was the emperor's sister was probably Michael, meaning that she was the same Thekla who was Basil's mistress, at least up until he assumed sole power, as has been related above. The exact meaning of ἔχει is also obscure, but it is probably intended to imply some sort of sexual relationship, as the Logothete appears to use it in this sense elsewhere,¹⁴⁸ and if so Basil's anger would reasonably be motivated by jealousy. In either case it is certainly a personal matter and yet Basil shows no signs of moderating his anger, since he not only submits Thekla to corporal punishment and deprives her of her monetary assets, but also extends his vengefulness to Metrios, whose only crime appears to be that he failed to deliver news that were pleasing to the emperor. The Logothete also recounts that a man dressed as a monk vocally criticised the murder of Bardas when the army intended for the expedition against Crete was on its way back to Constantinople and claims that both Michael and Basil were so angered by this that they sent a man to kill the audacious monk.¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, one of the assassination attempts mentioned by the Continuer, the second one, is also related by the Logothete, who writes that after the plan had been foiled Basil had the conspirators led naked and tied up behind him in a procession to the forum where he publicly exiled them and confiscated their property.¹⁵⁰ Granted, he did abstain from having them executed, but exile still seems to be a rather harsh penalty, especially since it does not appear to be applied at all by Basil in the Continuer's account. The Logothete also writes about the rebellion in resistance to Basil's elevation to imperial status and his version is roughly compatible with the Continuer's, but he mentions nothing about Basil showing mercy to the ringleaders after Michael's death. In fact, save for the statement that Photios managed to convince him not to blind Leo, the Logothete does not recount or even imply any displays of clemency by Basil, who instead appears to have a rather volatile temper.

There is one more example of this in his narrative and it concerns the circumstances of Basil's death. The Continuer is uncharacteristically brief on the subject, focusing more on Basil's legacy and simply states that the emperor succumbed to a consumptive illness that originated from some hunting accident.¹⁵¹ The Logothete on the other hand offers more details:

In addition to this he dispatched his *protobestiarios* Prokopios and had Thekla beaten; he also took all her money and brought it in for the emperor.” (my translation).

¹⁴⁸ SL, chapter 131, § 32.

¹⁴⁹ SL, chapter 131, § 38.

¹⁵⁰ SL, chapter 132, § 26.

¹⁵¹ VB, § 102.

τοῦ δὲ βασιλέως ἐξελθόντος πρὸς τὸ κυνηγῆσαι, ἔλαφός ποθεν ἀναφανεὶς παμμεγέθης, ὡς αὐτὸν ὁ βασιλεὺς κατεδίωκεν, ἐπιστραφεὶς ἥρε τὸν βασιλέα ἐκ τῆς ζώνης ἀπὸ τοῦ ἵππου μετὰ τοῦ κέρατος. φθάσας δέ τις καὶ τὴν σπάθην γυμνώσας καὶ τὴν ζώνην ἐκκόψας τὸν βασιλέα ἐρρύσατο. μετὰ δὲ τὸ ὑποστραφῆναι ἐκέλευσεν τοῦ τὴν ζώνην αὐτοῦ ἀποτεμόντος ἀποτυπωθῆναι τὴν κεφαλὴν ὡς γυμνώσαντος τὸ ξίφος κατ' αὐτοῦ, πολλὰ ἀπολογουμένου, ὡς ὑπὲρ σοῦ τοῦτο πεποίηκα· ἀλλ' οὐδὲν ὠφέλησεν. ἐκ δὲ τοῦ σπαραγμοῦ τῆς ἐλάφου νοσηλευθεὶς Βασίλειος τελευτᾶ, καταλιπὼν Λέοντα αὐτοκράτορα καὶ Αλέξανδρον.¹⁵²

This is probably the most obvious example of Basil's vengeful disposition in the Logothete's narrative and could be seen as a last effort to emphasise the shortcomings of his moral character. The violent circumstances that caused his death and the notion that he died after demonstrating the same ruthlessness that was prominent in the accounts of the murders he committed could also be interpreted as implying that the emperor in the end was submitted to a divine punishment that was long overdue.

¹⁵² SL, chapter 132, § 27. Translation: "When the emperor had gone out on a hunt an enormous stag appeared and thus the emperor pursued it closely, but it turned around and lifted him in his belt off the horse with the antler. Someone came forward, drew his sword, cut off the belt and saved the emperor. But after having returned [Basil] ordered that the head of the man who had cut off the belt should be chopped off, because he had drawn his sword against him, and [that man] spoke exceedingly in his defence, saying: "I did this for your sake." But nothing availed. Basil was taken ill by the wounds from the deer and died, leaving behind Leo, as sole ruler, and Alexander." (my translation).

4. Conclusions

4.1 Basil according to the Continuer

Unsurprisingly, it must be concluded that the Continuer's account is very favourable disposed towards Basil and includes many narrative strategies whose only purpose appears to be to ensure that this favourable portrayal was properly conveyed to the reader.

The first and perhaps most striking of these is the emphasis the Continuer gives to the importance of divine providence in Basil's accession to the throne. In itself, this was probably not considered especially remarkable by his contemporaries, since the general belief at the time appears to have been that every emperor was chosen by God, good ones as well as bad ones. However, the Continuer's efforts to stress the issue might imply that this relationship between God and emperor was not regarded as being quite this simple, especially when he uses Michael's depravity as proof that it was God's will that Basil succeeded him. More importantly, it appears to serve another, less obvious, purpose. Since Basil's ascension to the pinnacle of the imperial hierarchy would not have been possible without the violent deaths of Bardas and Michael it is vital for the Continuer to demonstrate that Basil was no power-hungry usurper that was appointed by God to punish his subjects for their sins. His primary strategy for achieving this seems to be to portray Basil as utterly devoid of ambition, implying that he was merely a humble and pious man who graciously obeyed when God called him to take over the governance of the empire, and by continually emphasising that divine providence was the driving force behind Basil's career he indirectly stresses that ambition was not. If the will of God is ubiquitous throughout the narrative, the will of Basil appears irrelevant.

Along the same lines, he makes sure to distance Basil from the murders that enabled his accession as much as is possible. Concerning the murder of Bardas, Basil is left out of the narrative for as long as possible and only appears when he is suddenly faced with the ultimatum of either assisting in the murder of the Caesar or stand idly by when Bardas killed Michael instead. Consequently, his involvement becomes a necessity and his actions those of a faithful subject. As regards the murder of Michael the Continuer adopts another strategy. He describes Michael's wickedness at length and mentions his murder only briefly as an unremarkable consequence of his immoral way of life. If the uncharacteristic briefness and silence concerning the identity of the assassins is intended to protect Basil it must be regarded as a rather poor defence, since it must be considered quite obvious that if the Continuer had

good reasons to believe that Basil was innocent he would have said so directly, but perhaps contemporary circumstances made it the only feasible strategy of defence, certainly better than none at all.

If the Continuer is to be believed, God did of course have good reasons to choose Basil of all people to be emperor. The first of these can be found in his background. Basil's upbringing in a peasant family does not appear altogether fitting for a heroic emperor, but the Continuer is sure to make the most of it, stating that despite the humble circumstances in which he grew up he had several noteworthy ancestors, such as the Arsacid kings of Armenia, Constantine the Great and Alexander, and adds that his experience of living under simple circumstances made him able to understand and thus remedy the injustices committed against the poor.

As regards the personal qualities that allowed Basil to rise through the ranks of the imperial hierarchy the Continuer appears to be confronted by the problem that he does not possess enough accounts of his accomplishments during this period of his life. The achievements that he is aware of only portray Basil as physically strong and skilled at taking care of horses, hardly the most imperial of virtues. His strategy for solving this problem in his narrative, apart from constantly referring to divine providence, is to continuously mention and praise Basil's many virtues, which in the absence of episodes to reinforce most of these statements implies that it should be regarded as self-evident that his promotions were due to them. In effect, this conveys an ambiguous impression of his mental faculties that is surely unintended. The Continuer praises Basil for his wisdom and sagacity, but also manages to portray Basil's mental qualities in a less than flattering light in a few instances, namely when recounting the growing influence of Santabarenos, the deposition of Andrew and the failed conversion of the Jews.

The Continuer also demonstrates the divine favour enjoyed by Basil by portraying him as a successful military commander. He does this by his selection of information to relate, writing in general terms about his countless victories as well as recounting some specific military triumphs, and emphasises Basil's personal commitment, depicting him as sharing the hardships and danger of the campaigns with the soldiers under his command. He also makes sure to keep Basil's name unsullied by defeat. Instead of writing that Basil failed to capture Tephrike the Continuer claims that he merely tested the defence of the city, found that it was solidly fortified and thus prudently decided to withdraw with his army intact after a successful campaign. His failure to capture Adata is ascribed to a divine decree that it would be captured by his grandson Constantine VII and the blame for the fall of Syracuse and the defeat outside

of Tarsus is ascribed to the incompetence of the respective commanders, from whose appointments the Continuer accordingly attempts to distance Basil. Furthermore, the Continuer makes an effort to ensure that no other successful general was allowed to outshine the emperor. He does this partly by not leaving Basil out of the narrative, repeatedly stressing the importance of the relationship between God and emperor for victory, but most efficiently by employing a strategy that has been referred to as narrative framing, where he both begins and ends the account of the achievements of another commander by relating what part Basil played in the event, however unimportant it may seem, thus making the episode about what Basil did instead of what his subordinate commander did. These strategies are not employed throughout the entire narrative, and some generals are given full credit for their victories, but they are used enough to make sure that the emperor remains the dominant character of the story.

Moreover, the Continuer represents the main characteristics of Basil's policies in civil matters as compassion and justice, piety and clemency. The notions of his compassion and commitment to justice are closely interrelated, conveyed by direct statements and reinforced by episodes depicting Basil mainly as taking measures to ensure that the poor are not oppressed by the rich. The Continuer even relates an episode where Basil refrains from carrying out a tax reform that would increase the imperial revenues because he fears that some of his subjects might suffer at the hands of unreliable officials. However, he also makes clear that there was no contradiction between compassion for the poor and financial management, writing that because God was pleased with Basil's care for his subjects he saw to it that a substantial amount of money that had been hidden away was discovered, signifying that God provides for the needs of a righteous and compassionate ruler. Basil's piety is demonstrated through his efforts to spread Christianity, his reinstatement of the rightful patriarch and his extensive programme for building, restoring, beautifying churches, reinforcing the numerous direct references to it. The Continuer also praises Basil for his construction of other buildings for the benefit of the imperial family. The reasons for this appraisal is somewhat obscure, but in contrast to the episodes regarding the edification of churches, which appears to have been an activity where no expenses were considered excessive, the Continuer feels a need to justify the construction of some of these buildings by pointing out that their upkeep was not financed by tax revenues. As regards the clemency the Continuer recounts one rebellion against Basil and two attempts to assassinate him, claiming that the emperor demonstrated this virtue by treating the perpetrators better than they deserved and punishing them as humanely as he possibly could without encouraging others to wrongdoing. Basil is only portrayed as having

people punished severely or in anger when the Continuer wants to distance him from the perpetrator or make a lenient sentence appear harsher.

4.2 Basil according to the Logothete

The tendency of the Logothete towards Basil is less obvious, but in accordance with previous research it must be concluded that his account is significantly more critical than the Continuer's.

Concerning Basil's path to the throne the Logothete makes it quite clear that the personal qualities that made his rise through the ranks of the imperial hierarchy were his skills as a groom, his ability to curry the favour of Michael and his ruthless ambition. He was enrolled in imperial service because of his talent for taming and taking care of horses. After that no other virtues are mentioned, but the Logothete implies that Basil was unjustly favoured by Michael and since no other reasons can be found this should reasonably be interpreted as the only explanation for his successful career. The Logothete never mentions Basil's ambition in any direct statements, but it is evident enough in his accounts of the murders of Bardas and Michael. When Basil perceived Bardas to be a dangerous rival he did not hesitate to deceive the Caesar's son-in-law with false oaths, lie to the emperor and eventually kill Bardas by his own hand and when Michael begun to feel threatened and tried to circumvent his position of power he had no qualms about assassinating him as well. As soon as something got in the way of Basil's ambition, no moral principles deterred him from employing whatever means necessary to remove that obstacle. The Logothete also emphasises the morally despicable character of Basil indirectly by recounting the deaths of several of his accomplices and stating clearly that they were killed by God as punishment for the murder of Michael. Basil is not mentioned here, but since he not only took part in but also instigated the assassination the obvious conclusion would be that he deserved a punishment at least as severe as the one his henchmen were submitted to. Moreover, even though he doesn't criticise Basil directly himself the Logothete gives an account of how Basil is reviled and refused the Holy Communion by the patriarch Photios and he also mentions a devastating earthquake that could possibly be intended as a sign of divine disapproval. In light of this it is interesting that the Logothete also relates an episode where it is clearly signified that God did intend Basil to be emperor. This might appear contradictory, but it must be kept in mind that God was considered to occasionally appoint bad emperors as well as good ones and there was nothing that prevented Basil from having a morally despicable character and at the same time being the favoured tool of the divine providence. Still, if the Continuer can depict Basil more

favourably by stressing the importance of the divine will in his accession, it seems reasonable that if the Logothete's intention was to defame Basil, he could have portrayed him in an even more unfavourable light simply by omitting this episode, but instead he chose to include it.

Regarding Basil's military achievements the Logothete makes one remark about the casualties sustained during Basil's battles with the Arabs that is probable meant to be interpreted as criticism of his skills as a general and gives one account of a failed military campaign during which Basil nearly got captured by the enemy. This episode does however also serve the purpose of providing legitimacy for the accession of Romanos Lekapenos and it can consequently not be concluded that it was included with the intention of portraying Basil as a poor general. In addition to this the Logothete also mentions two successful campaigns conducted by Basil, which he could have refrained from doing if he wanted to convey a more unfavourable impression of the emperor. Taken together it seems unlikely that the Logothete had any explicit intention of depicting Basil as an incompetent general or depriving him of the credit for the military successes during his reign.

He does however appear to imply that Basil's judgement left a lot to be desired in many respects, again without stating it directly. In military matters his poor strategic judgement is demonstrated in the episodes concerning the deposition of Andrew and especially the fall of Syracuse to the Arabs, where the expedition to succour the besieged city was delayed because Basil had employed the sailors as construction workers, but there are more examples. In general, Basil appears exceedingly concerned with the edification of New Church and the Logothete possibly even implies that he was more enthusiastic about the personal glory it would bestow upon him than the glorification of God. This enthusiasm not only resulted in the fall of Syracuse, but also made Basil inclined to despoil other churches to acquire materials for construction and adornment of the new one. The Logothete appears to underline this lack of moral judgement by relating an episode where Basil is bitten by a snake and only barely recovers while appropriating material from churches and other buildings. Furthermore, the Logothete's account of Basil's efforts to baptise Jews probably serves to portray him as naïve and when he recounts the influence over Basil that the impostor Santabarenos had the emperor appears to be very easily manipulated. Taken together these episodes subtly serve to portray Basil's mental faculties in a far less than flattering light.

Moreover, in the Logothete's account there is no sign of the compassion, commitment to justice, piety and clemency that the Continuer identifies as the main tenets of Basil's policy. Instead of moderating his anger and displaying clemency Basil appears to have quite a volatile temper, on account of which he acts with exorbitant harshness on several occasions.

The Logothete also gives an interesting account of Basil's marriage to Eudokia Ingerina. He claims that Eudokia had been Michael's mistress and implies that Basil had reason to doubt her fidelity even after Michael's death. Even more interestingly, he is remarkably explicit in his assertion that Michael had sired at least Basil's principal heir Leo, despite the displeasure this would likely attract from the reigning emperor, Leo's son Constantine VII.

4.3 Summary

When comparing the chronicles the most striking feature is of course the differences between the accounts. The Logothete portrays Basil as an unscrupulous murderer who possessed no noteworthy abilities beside his skills as a groom and his talent for manipulating the drunkard emperor, but in spite of this managed to reach the pinnacle of the imperial hierarchy on account of his ruthlessness and ambition, while the Continuer depicts him as a humble man, without any ambitions besides doing what was right, who was appointed emperor by God because he was the most suitable person for the job due to his noble ancestry, many virtues and extraordinary ability in every field of activity he devoted himself to. The Continuer gives Basil credit for numerous construction projects, especially the restoration and beautification of many churches, whereas the Logothete only mentions the edification of the New Church and implies that Basil's fixation with this project led him to despoil other churches and neglect the defence of the empire. Moreover, the Continuer stresses Basil's countless military victories as well as his strategic prudence and commends his personal commitment to share the hardships and dangers of warfare with his troops. The Logothete on the other hand appears to be moderately interested in military affairs and his account of Basil's personal victories and defeats are worded in equally moderate terms, but his portrayal of the emperor's strategic judgement is of a markedly more negative nature. The same goes for Basil's judgement in ecclesiastical, moral and personal matters, which taken together conveys a less than flattering impression of his mental faculties, an impression that the Continuer at least attempts to contradict. Also, whereas the Continuer relates how Christianity is spread amongst the Slavs, Bulgars and Rus through the agency of Basil, the Logothete only mentions his futile attempts to convert Jews. Furthermore, the Continuer writes at length about Basil's piety, clemency, compassion and commitment to justice, while the Logothete's narrative is devoid of any such notions and Basil's personality characterised mainly by his choleric temper, besides the lack of judgement already mentioned. The Logothete also portrays Basil's marriage as a travesty to which he at least consented and claims that Leo, from whom all

subsequent Macedonian emperors descended, was really the son of Michael III, a notion that the Continuer clearly refuses to accept.

There are however also similarities between the chronicles. In many instances the chronicles give very similar accounts of the superficial events that constitute the episodes, even if their explanations of the underlying causes might be almost diametrical opposites. There are many similarities in their accounts of the murder of Bardas, they are equally vague concerning Basil's activities before he became emperor, they mention the same events regarding Basil's dealings with the patriarchs and they agree that the emperor conducted two successful military campaigns against Melitene and Syria respectively and that he returned from his campaign against the Paulicians without having captured Tephrike. They also agree on some potentially more controversial matters, such as the deposition of the general Andrew, the failed conversion of the Jews and the unseemly influence of Santabarenos. Moreover, they both recount episodes that clearly indicate that Basil was ordained emperor by divine providence, although this in all likelihood was considered somewhat self-evident by their contemporaries.

As regards the narrative strategies employed by the authors there are also clear differences between the two chronicles. The Continuer indicates his panegyric intentions as early as the very first paragraph and proceeds to praise Basil throughout his narrative. He uses many direct statements, asserting Basil's many virtues and talents, and continually reinforces them through his selection of information to relate. He emphasises some notions more than others, such as Basil's piety, his general adherence to Christian principles and perhaps most importantly the crucial part played by divine providence in his career and eventual accession to the throne. The Continuer also makes use of more subtle strategies, especially when he deprecates the military successes of Basil's subordinate commanders, but it can generally be concluded that when the Continuer has something positive to say about Basil he is not inclined to trust his readers to read between the lines and neither can any subtle criticism against Basil be discerned in the narrative. In those rare occasions that the Continuer recounts an episode that can be perceived as portraying Basil in any negative way he makes sure to supplement it with an explanation in Basil's defence. It is however interesting that the Continuer chose to include these episodes at all, since he just as easily could have omitted them, which seems like a more efficient way of defending Basil from criticism, and his explanations clearly indicates that he was aware of how they portrayed the emperor. Concerning the reasons for this it is only possible to speculate, but it is not unlikely that he simply desired to remain true to his sources.

The Logothete on the other hand conveys his criticism of Basil in a much more subtle way than the Continuer conveys his praise. He uses no direct statements to make assertions concerning Basil's character and on several occasions it is unclear exactly how his remarks should be interpreted, since they can be quite vague and not supplemented by any explanations. The tendency of the chronicle is conveyed solely through the Logothete's selection of information to relate, leaving the readers free to draw their own conclusions, even if this freedom in practise would be limited by the tendency of the accounts on which those conclusions would be based. The obvious explanation for the subtlety of the criticism is of course that it was markedly different from the official version, represented by *Theophanes Continuatus*, and that overt criticism therefore might attract not only imperial disapproval, but also repressive measures. But even if the Logothete conveys his tendency in a more subtle way than the Continuer it still seems unlikely that anyone would fail to recognise that he portrays Basil in a far less than flattering light. Subtler criticism might of course attract less attention, but it still seems like an insufficient, if not incorrect, explanation. To complicate matters further, if the Logothete made an effort to avoid insulting Constantine VII by making sure not to criticise his grandfather directly, why would he suddenly and bluntly make the apparently provocative statement that Michael was Leo's real father? Something in the Logothete's selection of narrative strategies seems somewhat inconsistent. It might also be called into question whether the Logothete had any consistent intention of defaming Basil. His account is certainly unfavourably disposed towards Basil, but still he chose to include several episodes that serve to make the overall portrayal of Basil more sympathetic, even though he just as easily could have omitted them. His brief comments about the successful military campaigns against Melitene and Syria should be regarded as such episodes, as should the account of how a divine voice urged the *prosmonarios* of St. Diomedes to bring Basil into the oratory and prophesised that he would be emperor, since even if it was commonly accepted that the emperor was appointed by God it would probably reflect well upon Basil if the matter was emphasised, and not doing so would at least draw more attention to his unscrupulous character and ambition. Whereas the Continuer's account must be regarded as uniformly favourable towards Basil, the Logothete supplements his unfavourable portrayal with at least a few nuances.

Bibliography

Corpus

- VB *Chronographiae quae Theophanis Continuati nomine fertur Liber quo Vita Basili Imperatoris amplectitur*, edited and translated by Ihor Ševčenko, Berlin – New York 2005.
- SL *Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae Chronicon*, edited by Staffan Wahlgren, Berlin – New York 2006

Other literature:

- Hirsch (1876) F. Hirsch, *Byzantinische Studien*, Leipzig 1876.
- Jenkins (1965) R. J. H. Jenkins, “The Chronological Accuracy of the “Logothete” for the Years A. D. 867-913, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol 19, 1965.
- Ljubarskij (1998) J. Ljubarskij, “Quellenforschung and/or Literary Criticism: Narrative Structures in Byzantine Historical Writings”, *Symbolae Osloenses*, vol 73, 1998.
- Mango (1980) C. Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome*, London 1980.
- ODB *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, ed. by A.P. Kazhdan, New York & Oxford 1991.
- Rosenqvist (2003) J. O. Rosenqvist, *Bysantinsk litteratur*, Malmö 2003.
- Shepard (2002) J. Shepard, “Spreading the Word: Byzantine Missions”, *The Oxford History of Byzantium*, ed. by Cyril Mango, Oxford 2002.
- Treadgold (1997) W. Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society*, Stanford 1997.
- Wahlgren (1996) S. Wahlgren, “Symeon Logothetens krönika: en presentation av ett utgivningsprojekt”, *Bysantinska Sällskapets Bulletin* 14, 1996
- Whittow (1996) M. Whittow, *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium, 600-1025*, Eastbourne 1996.