

THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE:
THE DEATH OF BASIL II AND THE BEGINNING OF BYZANTINE DECLINE

Jason Freewalt
Late Antiquity and Byzantium - HIST533 B001 Sum 15
Dr. Michael Ng
American Military University
August 30, 2015

Basil II Porphyrogenitus “The Bulgar-Slayer” ruled for about sixty-five years, from infancy in 960 until his death in 1025. Nicephorus II Phocas (r. 963-969) and John I Tzimisce (r. 969-976) managed the Empire as regents until John died in 976. At the time of his accession to sole rule, Basil inherited a tradition of military conquests in Syria and Bulgaria, as well as an empire stabilized by the preceding rulers of the Macedonian dynasty. Very quickly, he demonstrated his own superior military and administrative capabilities, restoring many formerly Byzantine lands and filling the imperial treasury to a point not seen in hundreds of years. He also introduced legislation to limit the power of aristocratic warlords, favoring instead the smaller landholders who served as citizen-soldiers under the theme system of administrative divisions. Upon his death in 1025, the Empire was at a zenith that it would never again reach. A few of his mistakes and the multitudinous mistakes of his successors erased many of his gains, pitted the Empire against formidable adversaries, and embarked the Empire on a spectacular decline that was arguably the beginning of its inevitable fall. Despite notable rebounds under Alexius I Comnenus (r. 1081-1118), Manuel I Comnenus (r. 1143-1180), and Michael VIII Palaeologus (r. 1259-1282), the Empire never fully recovered from the irreparable harm done in the first several decades following Basil II’s death. Thus, the death of Basil II and the mismanagement of the Empire that followed under his successors served as a turning point of no return for the Byzantine Empire.

Choosing any one event or time period as “the” point at which a civilization began to fall is a challenge. Several key events in Byzantine history could very well serve as the key historical point of decline, so the choice of Basil II’s death and succession is somewhat arbitrary. For example, Heraclius (r. 610-641) defeated the Sassanid Persians, unwittingly paving the way for Muslim armies to capitalize on Persian weakness and Byzantine exhaustion to march to the walls

of Constantinople. The Byzantines and Muslims remained adversaries until Muslim Turks captured Constantinople in 1453, ending the Byzantine Empire. A great “dark age” followed and the Byzantines endured numerous Muslim attacks, yet Constantinople endured and rebounded under the Macedonian dynasty (867-1056). The Macedonians reclaimed much of what was lost. By the time of his accession, Basil II enjoyed a lull in hostilities with the Muslims and a generally stable and prosperous Empire. The Byzantine Empire continued for over 800 years following Heraclius, an amount of time far too long to consider it a period of decline. Thus, Heraclius’s conquest of the Sassanids was probably not “the” turning point that led to inevitable Byzantine decline.

The sack of Constantinople in 1204 by the Fourth Crusade was another cataclysmic event for the Empire, deserving consideration as the key turning point that led to the Empire’s inevitable fall. Following the sack, Latin rulers such as Baldwin of Flanders (r. 1204-1205) ruled Constantinople, and the Byzantines ruled from exile until Michael VIII Palaeologus (r. 1259-1282) reclaimed the beleaguered city for the Byzantines. The Empire was in pieces, the city of Constantinople was a mere shell of its former greatness, and neither the Empire nor the city fully recovered before the fall of 1453 to the Turks. However, the sack of 1204 may actually have been a manifestation of the decline that began with the death of Basil II and the failure of his successors to maintain the integrity of the Empire. They dismantled the theme system, mismanaged relations with the Muslims, and failed to properly deal with the Catholic Church, the Normans, and other Western powers. Thus, the Crusader sack of 1204 was probably not “the” point of Byzantine decline, but rather a sign of the decline already underway.

Any effort to blame Basil II or his successors for the demise of the Byzantine Empire is as challenging, and perhaps as arbitrary, as choosing “the” key point of no return for the Empire.

Nevertheless, particular components of Basil's reign and particular choices made by his successors indicate a pattern of mistakes that clearly damaged the integrity of the Empire, perhaps irreversibly. Basil II set a very high standard during his reign, a standard his successors did not match. He pacified the Bulgars, forged a treaty with the Fatimids over Syria, and introduced legislation to thwart warlord aristocrats. He was a brilliant soldier, diplomat, and administrator. However, Steven Runciman points out that he was "badly distracted" by civil war and the war in the Balkans. As a result, he could do little more than simply maintain the conquests of the Levant begun by John I Tzimisces.¹ Perhaps the implication is that settling on a truce with the Fatimids over Syria in 1001 rather than taking a more dominant position shows that he neglected eastern affairs in favor of northern and western affairs. However, his actions did create a lull in hostilities between the Byzantine Empire and its long-time adversary, the Muslims. Therefore, such criticism of his treaty may be unfair, given Basil's desire for peace on the eastern frontier. However, Basil's peace between the Byzantines and Fatimids inadvertently, and this is perhaps Runciman's point, encouraged pilgrimages to the Holy Land. Westerners felt safe to travel to the region, and their numbers increased over time. When the Seljuk Turks later threatened these pilgrimages, the Crusades followed.

Admittedly, it is quite a stretch (perhaps too great a stretch) to link Basil's truce with the Fatimids in 1001 to the collapse of the Byzantine Empire. Nevertheless, the truce was one of the contributing factors of the Crusades, and the Crusades badly damaged the Byzantine state. In addition to Basil's treaty, later treaties made by Basil's successors also increased the flow of pilgrims to the Holy Land and helped set the stage for the Crusades as well. Runciman cites treaties in 1027 and 1036, which strengthened the Empire's position in Jerusalem and led to the

¹ Steven Runciman, *The First Crusade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 11.

rebuilding of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.² Once rebuilt, the church drew additional pilgrims from Europe. As the number of Western pilgrims increased and ecclesiastical tensions between Roman Catholics and Byzantine Orthodox erupted in the Great Schism of 1054, one of Basil's successors limited pilgrimages to the church in 1056, perhaps in collusion with local Muslims.³ This action alarmed European Christians, almost certainly contributing to the call for a Crusade.

The Great Schism between the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church exemplifies the failed approach of Basil's successors to properly deal with the West. The "weak character" of Constantine IX allowed Michael Cerularius to maximize his power as the Patriarch.⁴ Cerularius wanted the patriarchate of Constantinople to have primacy over the papacy of Rome, and he hoped to sever ties of loyalty between the Emperor and the Pope to achieve his goal.⁵ Eventually, conditions eroded between Rome and Constantinople to the point that mutual excommunications led to the Great Schism of 1054. Thus, fewer than thirty years after Basil's death, his successors witnessed the Great Schism, made treaties with the Muslims that encouraged pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and then limited those pilgrimages to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. All of these actions helped set the stage for the Crusades and the sacking of Constantinople in 1204.

Before continuing to examine the numerous failures of Basil's successors, it is important to investigate the method of succession that led to such poor leadership. Basil never married and never had children. In addition, he did not allow the daughters of his co-emperor, his brother Constantine VIII Porphyrogenitus (r. 962-1028), to marry. The reason for this is unclear, but he

² Ibid., 12.

³ Ibid., 21-22.

⁴ Steven Runciman, *The Byzantine Theocracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 105.

⁵ Ibid., 106.

may simply have focused too much on the military and political aspects of his office, neglecting family matters. Another possibility is that he feared that his nieces' spouses would rival him for the throne. Whatever the reason, Basil's failure to plan a successful succession placed sole rule of the Empire into the hands of his aged brother Constantine VIII. Constantine was accustomed to the life of a co-emperor, focusing on the distractions of court life and the races at the hippodrome, leaving the hard work of imperial rule to Basil. When Basil died, Constantine continued to leave governance in the hands of others rather than assume the responsibilities himself. According to George Ostrogorsky, Constantine lacked character and a sense of responsibility.⁶ Basil possessed these qualities in great abundance.

Constantine lived only three years after his brother's death. Like Basil, he failed to plan for successful succession. His three daughters remained unmarried until just before Constantine's death, indicating that Constantine may have shared his brother's fear of rivalry. On his deathbed, he finally arranged for Zoe to marry Romanus III Argyrus (r. 1028-1034), a ruler completely lacking in the ability to successfully rule the Empire.⁷ Zoe despised Romanus, so she conspired with John the Orphanotrophus to assassinate Romanus and secure the accession of John's brother Michael IV (r. 1034-1041). When Michael died after just a few years on the throne, Zoe married Constantine IX, the emperor who reigned while the Great Schism developed right under his nose. Sadly, this pattern of mistakes and destructive intrigue continued for decades, causing great harm to the Empire and ending any hope of return to the zenith of success under Basil II. Perhaps it is unfair to blame Basil for the ineptitude of Zoe, her husbands, and the several subpar emperors that followed. However, Basil's failure to cultivate strong rulers to succeed him allowed the

⁶ George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 321.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 322.

accession of numerous weak emperors and a Pandora's Box of missteps that damaged the Empire.

While the errors of Basil's successors were many, perhaps the most egregious was the dismantling of the theme system. Heraclius engineered the theme administrative system to organize the Empire for defense. Military officials, who answered to Constantinople, governed the themes and could raise local militias to repel invaders or to supplement the larger imperial army when necessary. With this system, free peasant villages occupied the land and supplied citizen-soldiers.⁸ During the prosperity of the Macedonian dynasty, landed aristocracy, particularly in Anatolia, began to absorb the free villages into massive estates. These aristocrats grew into warlords who threatened the Emperor. In fact, Basil II repelled two such attacks during his reign. In response, some of the emperors of the Macedonian dynasty, including Basil II, introduced legislation meant to curb the power of these aristocratic warlords and protect the citizen-soldiers. Within a decade of Basil's death, however, Zoe's first husband Romanus III kowtowed to the warlords and began repealing the legislation. Successive emperors continued repealing the legislation, effectively destroying the theme system's ability to generate citizen-soldiers and forcing the Empire to hire mercenaries. This had dramatic long-term consequences for the Empire, as it weakened defensive capabilities established by Heraclius and created the need for huge expenditures that drained the treasury. The disastrous effects of this grave mistake became painfully evident when the Empire found itself involved in a two-front confrontation with the Normans and the Turks.

By 1071, the Byzantine Empire was dramatically weaker than it had been fifty years earlier under Basil II. A steady flow of pilgrims to the Holy Land laid the foundation for the

⁸ Runciman, *The First Crusade*, 24.

Crusades, and tensions with Rome ensured that the Crusaders would not be kind to Constantinople on their way to fight in Holy Land. The theme system of Heraclius was dismantled, making warfare dramatically more expensive and reliant on mercenaries without a personal connection to the wellbeing of the Empire. Byzantine weakness prompted Robert Guiscard and the Normans to conquer the portions of Southern Italy Basil II had restored to Byzantine control just a few decades before. The dramatic Byzantine failure at the Battle of Mantzikert, likely a result of the destruction of the theme system, gave the Turks a clear path toward Constantinople and prompted the Byzantines to invite Western Crusaders into the Empire in the desperate hope of protection from Muslim domination. Thus, the Byzantine Empire had enemies on all sides, particularly Roman Catholic Crusaders on the western border and Muslim Turks on the eastern border. Unfortunately, the Empire no longer had the framework to provide for its own defense. As funds dwindled, mercenaries became unaffordable and Byzantine defenses degrade precipitously. As Ostrogorsky points out, “the very foundations on which Byzantium had built ever since its revival in the seventh century were swept away.”⁹ Therefore, the failure of Basil’s successors was catastrophic and had permanent ramifications.

The reign of Basil II was the apogee of Middle Byzantine greatness, but his death and the reigns of his largely inept successors damaged the Empire beyond repair. As the Byzantine position deteriorated, the Empire sought help from the Catholic West. The help that arrived in the form of successive Crusades proved to be as destructive as the perceived threat from the Muslims. Eventually, the Western powers picked the Empire’s holdings apart and depleted its resources. The weakened state of the Empire, if indeed it was still an empire, could not stop the Ottoman Turks from conquering Constantinople in 1453 and ending the Byzantine Empire. The

⁹ Ostrogorsky, 323.

death of Basil II and the aftermath of the disappointing successors who followed created a chain reaction of missteps that may indeed have been “the” beginning of the inevitable decline of the Byzantine Empire.

Bibliography

Ostrogorsky, George. *History of the Byzantine State*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969.

Steven Runciman. *The Byzantine Theocracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

_____. *The First Crusade*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951.