

BYZANTINE CIVILIZATION

by STEVEN RUNCIMAN

Meridian Books

THE WORLD PUBLISHING COMPANY

1956

Cleveland and New York

Historical Outline 39

Under Basil I and his descendants, known usually if misleadingly as the Macedonian dynasty⁵ (867-1057), the Empire reached the zenith of its mediæval glory. The internal organisation of the Empire was strong enough for the Emperors to be able to indulge in a programme of expansion, while the more orderly condition of the whole Western world led to a growth of commerce from which Constantinople was quick to benefit. Basil I (867-886) was a capable general: under his command the tide of the Saracen wars at last turned in favour of the Empire, though the results at first were small. In the West the Arabs had recently overrun Sicily and South Italy. Basil left Sicily to its fate, but his general, Nicephorus Phocas, restored the Imperial power in South Italy to a height unknown for three centuries. Under his son⁶ Leo VI (886-912), surnamed the Wise, these military successes were not continued. There was an unsuccessful war against the Bulgarians; a greater disaster was the sack of Thessalonica, the second city of the Empire, by Arab pirates from Crete in 901. Both Basil and Leo followed the same internal policy, aimed at strengthening the royal prerogative and opposing the independent tendencies of the Patriarchs Photius and Nicholas Mysticus. To dissociate themselves from the hated Iconoclasts, Basil began and Leo completed a new codification of the laws, issuing a code, the *Basilica*, that remained in force till the end of the Empire. Leo raised trouble for himself by marrying twice as often as the re-

ligious law permitted in the quest of a male heir; it was only his fourth wife that gave him a son. Leo succeeded in establishing the boy's legitimacy, despite ecclesiastical opposition, but after his death his matrimonial prodigality was formally condemned.

Leo was followed on the throne by his brother Alexander (912-913), who had been co-Emperor since his youth, and now reigned jointly with Leo's young son Constantine VII, surnamed Porphyrogennetus, "Born in the Purple Chamber."⁷ On Alexander's death after a year's misrule, and a further year's misrule under a regency council dominated by the Patriarch Nicholas Mysticus, the government was taken over by Constantine's mother Zoe (914-919). Meanwhile the Bulgarians under their Tsar Symeon invaded the Empire. Zoe's vigorous attempts to defeat them met with disaster and caused her downfall. Her place was taken by her admiral, Romanus Lecapenus, who raised himself to the throne and soon took precedence over Constantine, whom he married to his daughter. Romanus I (919-944) ruled the Empire well. He made a satisfactory peace with the Bulgarians; and his general, John Curcuas, launched the Empire on the voyage of spectacular conquest in the East that marked the next hundred years. But Romanus's attempt to found a dynasty failed, though he crowned three of his sons. They in the end dethroned him, but within a month of his fall Constantine VII was in sole control of the Empire.

Under Constantine VII's rule (945-959) and that of his son Romanus II (959-963) the Eastern conquests continued. Crete was recovered and even Aleppo taken for a while by the general Nicephorus Phocas, grandson of Basil I's general. When Romanus II died leaving two young sons, Basil II (963-1025) and Constantine VIII⁸ (963-1028), his widow, the temporary regent Theophano, married Nicephorus Phocas, who assumed the crown. Nicephorus II's reign was made glorious by the recovery of Cilicia, Cyprus and the great city of Antioch, but in 969 he was murdered with his wife's connivance by his cousin John Tzimisces, who took his place. John I (969-976) was an equally able general, who conquered half Bulgaria, defeated a

Russian invasion, and marched his armies as far as the outskirts of Jerusalem and Baghdad. On his death Basil II was left supreme.

The Empire had been organised by the Isaurians as a defensive unit and consequently great powers had been given to the military. During the recent wars the army leaders were supplied by the landed aristocracy. Meanwhile the increased security of the Empire gave a new value to land as a source of wealth. The strength derived by the great families first as estate-owners and secondly as soldiers began to make them a menace to the central government. Both Romanus I and Constantine VII had foreseen this and had legislated, insufficiently, against the amassing of landed estates. Under John I the revolt of the Phocæ had shown the trouble that one great family could cause to the Emperor. During the first decade of Basil II's personal rule the intertwined rebellions of Bardas Phocas and Bardas Sclerus illustrated the danger still more clearly. Basil's eventual victory was largely caused by luck, but he took advantage of it to strike hard at the aristocracy. Thanks to his energy it was for a while crushed. After this victory Basil, though he indulged in a few campaigns to enlarge the Empire's boundaries on the east, spent the bulk of his career fighting in the Balkans. The Bulgarians had revived during the rebellions of the Bardæ, and their Tsar Samuel ruled from the unconquered Macedonian mountains an Empire that stretched again to the Black Sea. In 981 Basil had vainly attempted to check them. From 996 to 1018 he warred almost continuously against them, till at last they were utterly conquered; the whole peninsula from the Danube southward obeyed the Emperor once more, and his grateful subjects surnamed Basil *Bulgaroctonus*, the Bulgar-slayer. Meanwhile his passionate thrift and austerity filled the Imperial treasury, which had been somewhat depleted by the expensive wars of his predecessors. By the end of Basil's reign the Empire had never since the days of Heraclius been so far-flung, and had never been so prosperous.

On Basil's death the decline began. His brother Constantine VIII reigned ineffectively for three years (1025-1028), then