

Armenian Traditions in Ninth- and Tenth-Century Byzantium:

Basil I, Constantine VII and the *Vita Basilii*

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The relationship between Byzantium and Armenia in the second half of the ninth century has traditionally been plotted along two axes. It has been projected in terms of gradual Byzantine re-engagement with the leading princely houses of historic Armenia after an extended period of exclusion and separation. This formed part of a wider Byzantine strategy of consolidation and then expansion along the eastern frontier that achieved its fullest expression in the following century.² At the same time, the relationship has also been studied in terms of the presence of Armenians throughout the institutions of the Byzantine state, with identification usually made on the basis of name or ancestry.³ This essay proposes that the standard chronology stands in need of revision and that the relationship also featured literary and intellectual exchanges whose significance has not been fully appreciated hitherto.

The contention that Byzantium had to revive its ties with the local elites in

² M. Whittow, *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium, 600–1025*, (London, 1996), 310-57; J. Shepard, 'Constantine VII, Caucasian openings and the road to Aleppo', in A. Eastmond, ed., *Eastern Approaches to Byzantium*, (Aldershot, 2001), 19-40; T. W. Greenwood, 'Patterns of contact and communication: Constantinople and Armenia, 860–976', in R. G. Hovannisian and S. Payaslian, eds., *Armenian Constantinople*, (Costa Mesa, Calif., 2010), 73-100.

³ I. Brousselle, 'L'intégration des Arméniens dans l'aristocratie byzantine au IX^e siècle', in *L'Arménie et Byzance: Histoire et culture*, Byzantina Sorbonensia 12 (Paris, 1996), 43-54; N. Garsoïan, 'The problem of Armenian integration into the Byzantine Empire', in H. Ahrweiler and A. E. Laiou, eds., *Studies on the Internal Diaspora of the Byzantine Empire*, (Washington, D.C., 1998), 53-124.

historic Armenia in the second half of the ninth century after a long hiatus depends largely on the absence of evidence to the contrary.⁴ Certainly the impression obtained from the Armenian historical tradition is that Byzantium and Armenia were out of contact with one another for long periods across the eighth and ninth centuries, a state of affairs punctuated by occasional raids. It is, however, worth reflecting that the four major Armenian writers whose histories cover this period—Lewond, Thomas Arcruni, John Catholicos and Stephen of Tarōn—were all clerics, that one was a Catholicos of Armenia and that another was sponsored by the Catholicos of his day.⁵ The operation of Byzantine influence did not sit comfortably with their wider ecclesiastical and literary purposes and it may well be the case that it was deliberately downplayed or ignored by the author. Three of the writers promoted notions of independent action and direction by Armenian Christians, under the headship of the Catholicos, without recourse to, or direction from, either imperial or patriarchal authorities in Constantinople. The only exception is provided by Thomas Arcruni, whose *History of the House of Arcrunik*⁶ is focused more narrowly upon the deeds of one princely family across several generations.⁶ Significantly, it is only through his composition that we can begin to trace Byzantine involvement and attempted

⁴ Most recently, B. Martin-Hisard, ‘Domination arabe et libertés arméniennes (VII^e–IX^e siècle)’, in G. Dédéyan, ed., *Histoire du peuple arménien*, (Paris, 2008), 213–41. For example, at 231: ‘Tant que Mélitène, Téphriké et Karin ne seraient pas prises, l’accès au territoire arménien échapperait aux Byzantins.’

⁵ John Catholicos (Yovhannēs V Drasxanakertc‘i) held office between 897/8 and 924/5 while Stephen of Tarōn (Step‘anos Tarōnec‘i) was commissioned by Catholicos Sargis I (992/3–1019).

⁶ Thomas Arcruni, *Patmut‘iwn tann Arcrunec‘i*, ed. K‘. Patkanean, (St Petersburg, 1887; repr. Delmar N.Y., 1991); trans. R. W. Thomson, *Thomas Artsruni: History of the House of the Artsrunik*, (Detroit, 1985).

intervention in Armenian affairs on a more consistent basis. Unfortunately this is limited to the period after 851 CE, when Bughā's devastating campaigns across Armenia began.⁷ The two centuries prior to that date are skated over in barely two pages of Patkanean's edition, comprising a bare list of caliphs without reference to Armenian affairs or interests.⁸ This suggests a complete loss of family records and collective memory, although disquiet about Arcruni activities in that period cannot be entirely excluded.⁹

We therefore learn little about Byzantine initiatives across historic Armenia before 851 CE, at least from an Armenian perspective. The value of the isolated references that do survive has not always been appreciated. For example, Stephen of Taron records that the first Armenian prince to be accorded an imperial title while remaining in his own district was Ašot Bagratuni, prince of Sper, at some point during the reign of the emperor Theophilos (829–42).¹⁰ Since this very remote and mountainous district bordered directly onto Byzantine-held territory—specifically the theme of Chaldia—the choice of the prince of Sper as the earliest recipient of imperial largesse is unsurprising. Stephen of Tarōn also reports campaigns undertaken across Armenian districts during the same emperor's reign. By combining

⁷ Bughā al-Kabīr: see, most recently, P. B. Golden, 'Khazar Turkic Ghulāms in caliphal service', *Journal Asiatique*, (2004), 301-2 and n. 10.

⁸ Thomas Arcruni, 104-6; Thomson, *History*, 170-3.

⁹ For discussion of the re-imagining of the Armenian past – and the deliberate downplaying of Byzantine involvement – see T. W. Greenwood, 'A Reassessment of the *History* of Lewond', *Le Muséon* 125 1-2 (2012), 138-40.

¹⁰ Stephen of Tarōn, *Step'anos Tarōnec 'woy Patmut' iwn Tiezerakan*, ed. S. Malxazeanc', (St Petersburg, 1885), 144; trans. by E. Dulaurier, *Histoire universelle par Etienne Açogh'ig de Daron: Première partie*, (Paris, 1883), 171.

Stephen of Tarōn's record with other, later sources, Laurent proposed that Theophilos undertook a very complicated sequence of actions across Armenia in 837 CE and this analysis has been accepted by most commentators.¹¹ In fact, it seems far more likely that the campaigns undertaken in Basean, in Xaltik', against Theodosiopolis and in Vanand should be spread across several years rather than condensed into one.¹² Conceivably they were intended to exploit, and perhaps even complement, the twenty-year rebellion of Bābak in north-western Iran. After all, Khurramite survivors fled to Byzantine territory after the final defeat of Bābak in 838 and were incorporated into imperial forces under the command of Theophobos, himself a Khurramite leader who had sought refuge with a large body of supporters four years previously.¹³

This study, however, is more directly concerned with the reformulation of the second axis. Armenians operating within the Byzantine Empire have generally been identified on the basis of anthroponymy. They have been detected holding senior military commands – and hence participating in the political process – from the middle of the sixth century.¹⁴ By way of illustration, in 778, four of the five *strategoi* who participated in an expedition against Germanikeia in Cilicia have been identified

¹¹ J. Laurent, *L'Arménie entre Byzance et l'Islam depuis la conquête arabe jusqu'en 886 (Nouvelle édition revue et mise à jour par M. Canard)*, (Lisbon, 1980), 249-52.

¹² J. Signes Codoñer *The Emperor Theophilos and the East 829-842: Court and Frontier in Byzantium during the Last Phase of Iconoclasm* (Aldershot, Forthcoming, 2013), 4.2 and 4.3 advances the same argument. .

¹³ M. Rekaya, 'Mise au point sur Théophobe et l'alliance de Bābek avec Théophile (833/4–839/40)', *BZ*, 44 (1974), 43-67; J.-C. Cheynet, 'Théophile, Théophobe et les Perses', in S. Lampakes, ed., *E Byzantine Mikra Asia, 60s–120s ai.*, (Byzantine Asia Minor 6th–12th centuries), (Athens, 1998), 39-50. Theophobos: *PmbZ* 8237; *PBE* Theophobos 1.

¹⁴ See, for example, Justinian's commander Narses: *PLRE* IIIB Narses 1.

as Armenian: Artabasdos (Artavazd) of the Anatolikoi; Tatzates (Tačat) of the Boukellarioi; Karisterotzes (Varaztiroc‘) of the Armeniakoi; and Gregory, son of Mousoulakios (Mušel) of the Opsikion.¹⁵ This pattern, of *strategoi* with apparently strong Armenian affiliations, is repeated throughout the eighth and ninth centuries.

Rather than imposing a modern definition, what exactly did contemporaries understand by the term ‘Armenian’? The passage in Theophanes’ *Chronographia* recording the four *strategoi* above specifically describes Artabasdos as ‘Armenian’. Lewond’s *History* records a campaign against Bišan (surely Bahasnā, east of Germanikeia) in the reign of Leo IV in which Artavazd Mamikonean and Tačat Anjewac‘i participated as *zōravars* (commanders).¹⁶ This is clearly the same campaign. Unlike Theophanes, Lewond identified the noble families from which the two commanders came.¹⁷ The specific designation of Artavazd as ‘Armenian’ in Theophanes’ *Chronographia* is atypical and may have been used because Artavazd had only recently arrived from historic Armenia. Lewond’s *History* records that he had been forced to seek refuge in Byzantium after an abortive rebellion and the murder of a tax-collector in the Armenian district of Širak, probably in 771.¹⁸ On the other hand, following this line of argument, the epithet ‘Armenian’ should also have

¹⁵ Theophanes, *Theophanis Chronographia*, ed. C. de Boor, 2 vols., (Leipzig, 1883–5), vol. I, 451; trans. C. Mango and R. Scott, *The Chronicle of Theophanes Confessor*, (Oxford, 1997), 623. Artabasdos: *PmbZ* 640; Tatzates: *PmbZ* 7241; Varaztiroc‘: *PmbZ* 8568; Gregorios: *PmbZ* 2406.

¹⁶ Lewond, *Patmut‘iwn Lewondeay Meci Vardapeti Hayoc‘*, ed. K. Ezean, (St Petersburg, 1883), 155-6; trans. Z. Arzoumanian, *History of Lewond the Eminent Vardapet of the Armenians*, (Wynnewood, Penn., 1982), 140-1.

¹⁷ In a subsequent passage, we also learn that Tačat’s father was named Grigor: Lewond, *Patmut‘iwn*, 158; Arzoumanian, *History of Lewond*, 142.

¹⁸ Lewond, *Patmut‘iwn*, 138; Arzoumanian, *History of Lewond*, 129-30.

been applied to Tačat Anjewac‘i, since he too had originally come from historic Armenia. According to Lewond, Tačat enjoyed a career of twenty-two years in the Byzantine army down to 782, and so it could be that his ‘Armenian’ origin had been quietly forgotten by this time.¹⁹ Since neither Varaztiroc‘ nor Gregory son of Mušel were identified as ‘Armenian’ by Theophanes, the evidence from this passage seems far from clear.

It is worth remembering that during these centuries, the districts of historic ‘Greater Armenia’ all lay beyond the frontiers of the Byzantine Empire. By contrast substantial parts of what had comprised Roman Armenia in Late Antiquity remained under continuous imperial hegemony, if not control.²⁰ Much of what had been the Justinianic province of Armenia I and almost all of Armenia II came to be incorporated within the theme of the Armeniakoi. These territories were then transferred into the new themes of Chaldia and Koloneia, probably in the reign of Theophilos.²¹ Although the provincial designation may have been abandoned, it is highly likely that these regions continued to reflect Armenian cultural traditions, not least in terms of naming practices. Nor were these the only regions of the empire to contain sizeable Armenian populations. Armenians had been settled in the Balkans at

¹⁹ Lewond states that Tačat held the rank of *zōravar*, commanding 60,000 men, for twenty-two years: Lewond, *Patmut‘iwn*, 159; Arzoumanian, *History of Lewond*, 142. He cannot have held the rank of *strategos* of the Boukellarioi for that period, however, because this theme was only created in 766/7: Theophanes, *Chronographia*, 440; trans. Mango and Scott, *Theophanes*, 608 and n. 15.

²⁰ For a discussion of the Roman provinces of Armenia and their refashioning over time, see R. H. Hewsen, *The Geography of Ananias of Širak*, (Wiesbaden, 1992), 17-27.

²¹ N. Oikonomides, *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IX^e et X^e siècles*, (Paris, 1972), 349; E. McGeer, J. Nesbitt and N. Oikonomides, eds., *Catalogue of Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and the Fogg Museum of Art*, 5 vols., (Washington, D.C., 1991–2005), vol. IV, 85 (Chaldia) and 125 (Koloneia).

the end of the sixth century by the emperor Maurice and these communities were supplemented periodically thereafter.²² Moreover, we can assume that Constantinople had its own Armenian community, even if they are hidden from view; the lack of an Armenian quarter may in fact illustrate the ubiquity of Armenians in the capital.

Straightaway, therefore, a distinction may be drawn between newly arrived Armenians moving westwards into the empire from outside, indigenous Armenians who continued to live in what had previously been Roman Armenia, and transplanted Armenians settled in communities scattered across the empire, notably in Thrace and Macedonia. Members from all three groups could claim to be, or could be defined as, ‘Armenian’. An Armenian-sounding name in isolation reveals little about the origins of that individual. We should not assume that it denotes recent migration or settlement. Indeed an Armenian name may not always have served as an indicator of ethnicity, reflecting contemporary fashions or aspirations instead. The name of Bardanes Tourkos, the *strategos* of the Anatolikoi who rebelled against Nikephoros I in 803, highlights his Turkic, perhaps Khazar, ethnicity, but in combination with a typically Armenian name.²³ Garsoïan has suggested that by the end of the tenth century, the name Bardas (Vard) had become too common to be taken as a secure indicator of Armenian ancestry; it may have become fashionable long before then.²⁴

²² Initial transfer by Maurice: Sebeos, *Patmut' iwn Sebēosi*, ed. G. V. Abgaryan, (Erevan, 1979), 86-7 and 90-2; trans. R. W. Thomson and J. D. Howard-Johnston, *The History Attributed to Sebeos*, 2 vols., (Liverpool, 1999), vol. I, 31 and 36-8. Subsequent transfer by Constantine V: Theophanes, *Chronographia*, 427 and 429; Mango and Scott, *Theophanes*, 590 and 593, dated to 754/5.

²³ M.-F. Auzépy, ‘State of Emergency (700–850)’, in J. Shepard, ed., *Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire c. 500–1492*, (Cambridge, 2008), 272; Bardanes: *PmbZ* 766.

²⁴ Garsoïan, ‘Armenian integration’, 96-9 and n. 170.

Although the political consequences of Armenian migration and settlement within the empire have been studied in some detail, its social and cultural impact has not been given as much attention.²⁵ Those who arrived from outside the empire will have brought their own languages and cultural traditions with them but the prevailing view has been that these prominent signs of ‘otherness’ were quickly shelved in the race to assimilate. Of course, it is highly likely that some who migrated will have wanted to leave behind their old identities and conform to Byzantine norms as quickly as possible. Yet there will have been others who sought to preserve their old traditions despite their new surroundings. And between these two poles of complete rejection and faithful retention of one’s cultural inheritance, there will have been all manner of positions in between, with individuals preserving some traditions and discarding others.

Furthermore, instead of simply envisaging old identities being compromised or subsumed, it may be more appropriate to envisage not merely the survival of these cultural memories within the Byzantine Empire but also their potential impact upon contemporary Byzantine culture, whose uniformity and immutability tends to be assumed rather than proved. After all, in 732 Leo III married his eldest son, the future Constantine V, to a Khazar princess, and she is thought to have been responsible for the introduction to the imperial court of the *tsitzakion*, a Khazar-style robe,

²⁵ For a recent study, and helpful bibliography, see J.-C. Cheynet and G. Dédéyan, ‘Vocation impériale ou fatalité diasporique: Les Arméniens à Byzance (IV^e–XI^e siècle)’, in G. Dédéyan, ed., *Histoire du peuple arménien*, (Paris, 2008), 297-326. Cheynet and Dédéyan usefully address both Armenian artistic influence, at 307-8, and religious and cultural influences, at 320-3. The classic study for artistic and intellectual exchange remains S. Der Nersessian, *Armenia and the Byzantine Empire*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1945).

suggesting that imperial fashion at least was not unchanging.²⁶ Instead of thinking solely in terms of a loss of Armenian identity, we need to consider the possible influence of Armenian tradition upon Byzantine culture and society, a process of cultural fusion rather than simply displacement.

This general proposition needs to be qualified by one final observation. We should be wary of taking for granted that there was a single Armenian identity or cultural tradition. If the number of recognised Armenian dialects in the eighth century is anything to go by – and the eighth-century biblical commentator Stephen of Siwnik²⁷ proposed seven, all associated with remote, mountainous districts – it may be more helpful to envisage a range of different regional and local traditions and practices.²⁷ In other words, the cultural inheritance remembered and cherished by one migrant may have been particular and we need to be aware of, and sensitive to, such differentiation.

Bearing these introductory observations in mind, let us now turn to a specific case study exploring the operation of Armenian tradition within a Byzantine context. The origins and ancestry of Basil I continue to be controversial.²⁸ Although the best-

²⁶ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, 409-10; Mango and Scott, *Theophanes*, 567-8 and n. 1; Whittow, *Orthodox Byzantium*, 225-6.

²⁷ Stephen of Siwnik²⁷, *Meknut 'iwn k'erakanin*, in N. Adontz, ed., *Denys de Thrace et les commentateurs arméniens*, (Louvain, 1970), 187. For Armenian diversity and differentiation, see T. W. Greenwood, 'Armenian neighbours 600–1045', in Shepard, *Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire*, 333-6.

²⁸ N. Adontz, 'L'âge et l'origine de l'empereur Basile I (867–886)', *Byz*, 8 (1933), 475-500, and *Byz*, 9 (1934), 223-60, reprinted and repaginated in *Etudes armeno-byzantines*, (Lisbon, 1985), 47-109; G. Moravcsik, 'Sagen und Legenden über Kaiser Basileios I', *DOP*, 15 (1961), 59-126; A. Markopoulos, 'Constantine the Great in Macedonian historiography: Models and approaches', in P. Magdalino, ed., *New Constantines: The Rhythm of Imperial Renewal in Byzantium, 4th–13th Centuries*, (Aldershot, 1994), 159-70; A. Schminck, 'The beginnings and origins of the "Macedonian" dynasty', in J. Burke

known source, the *Vita Basilii*, supplies the most developed account of Basil's Armenian ancestry and early career, it is also separated from the events it records by over a century.²⁹ Therefore, rather than starting with the *Vita Basilii*, let us work through those sources advertising an Armenian ancestry for Basil I in chronological order.

The earliest assertion of an Arsacid connection appears in the funeral oration delivered by Leo VI for his father in 888. Basil was descended from the Arsacids 'but as to what they are it is not a subject for us to discuss, for our purpose is not to compose a history but a eulogy ... nevertheless they themselves came from imperial offspring, for the source of their royal blood was Artaxerxes, who for a very long time was a great king and he subdued countless peoples and he was accorded the remarkable surname "Longhand"'.³⁰ Leo then maintained that this described the extent of his authority rather than the length of his hand. There is no further discussion of the meaning of Arsacid or Artaxerxes, nor precisely how the Arsacids were related back to the Achaemenid Artaxerxes. This suggests that these claims held meaning for contemporaries without further explanation, supporting the contention that they were current during the lifetime of Basil I. The puzzling feature is why Leo

and R. Scott, eds., *Byzantine Macedonia: Identity, Image and History*, ByzAus 13, (Melbourne, 2000), 61-8; N. Tobias, *Basil I: Founder of the Macedonian Dynasty*, (Lewiston, N.Y., 2007), 1-41. See also M. E. Shirinean, 'Armenian elites in Constantinople: Emperor Basil and Patriarch Photius', in R. G. Hovannisian and S. Payaslian, eds., *Armenian Constantinople* (Costa Mesa, Calif., 2010), 53-72.

²⁹ Theophanes Continuatus, *Chronographiae quae Theophanis Continuati nomine fertur Liber quo Vita Basilii Imperatoris amplectitur*, ed. I. Ševčenko, *CFHB* 42, (Berlin and Boston, 2011)

³⁰ Leo VI, *Funeral Oration*, ed. and trans. A. Vogt and I. Hausherr, 'Oraison funèbre de Basil I par son fils Léon le sage', *OC* 26 (1932), 44-6; author's translation.

VI should wish to establish descent from either the Arsacids or Artaxerxes in the first place.³¹

The second relevant source is the *Vita Ignatii* composed by Niketas David the Paphlagonian.³² The dating of this text remains contentious. Tamarkina has recently proposed that it was composed during the late ninth-century polemical debate between two factions of supporters of Ignatios, and more precisely between late 886 and 901/2, when one of the factions was reconciled to the Church.³³ If Tamarkina is correct in challenging the conventional date of 906 suggested previously by Jenkins, the composition of the *Vita Ignatii* becomes more closely associated with attitudes and beliefs circulating at the end of the reign of Basil I and gains in importance for this study.³⁴

The evident hostility towards Photios expressed in this text is well-known.³⁵ One of the many criticisms advanced by Niketas David is that Photios was guilty of using the past to justify the present by inventing an ancestry for Basil I from

³¹ This essay explores only the Armenian ancestry of Basil I but the claim to Persian descent also merits serious consideration. It is possible to advance parallel arguments to those outlined below, with 'Persian' being equated, or perhaps conflated, in the ninth century with 'Khurramite'. The settlement of large numbers of Khurramites within the empire in the reign of Theophilos and their subsequent military service afforded them a political influence, one that may be reflected in the roles of Apelates and Eulogios, both 'Persians', in the conspiracy to murder Michael III. Adontz, 'L'âge et l'origine', 231, proposed a Persarmenian origin, but this term no longer held any meaning in the ninth century, either in Byzantium or Armenia, and so Adontz's suggestion should be rejected.

³² *Vita Ignatii*, PG 105, cols. 487-573.

³³ I. Tamarkina, 'The date of the life of the Patriarch Ignatius reconsidered', *BZ*, 99/2 (2006), 616-30.

³⁴ R. J. H. Jenkins, 'A note on Nicetas David Paphlago and the *Vita Ignatii*', *DOP*, 19 (1965), 241-7.

³⁵ See, for example, H. Ahrweiler, 'Sur la carrière de Photius avant son patriarcat', *BZ*, 58/2 (1965), 348-63; Jenkins, 'Note', 247; Tamarkina, 'Ignatius reconsidered', 616-17 and 622; Shirinean, 'Armenian elites', 65-7.

‘Tiridates, the great Armenian king at the time of the holy martyr Gregorios’.³⁶ While these details were not lifted from Leo VI’s oration, their inclusion in the *Vita Ignatii* strongly suggests that Basil’s Armenian ancestry was promoted during his own lifetime. Of particular significance for this study is the central role accorded by Nicetas to Photios in devising this Armenian ancestry because it appears that Photios also deployed his knowledge of Armenian historical tradition when negotiating with the Armenian Church.³⁷ If a letter preserved in Armenian from Photios to Zak‘aria the Catholicos of Armenia is treated as genuine – and there are several separate arguments that collectively support this proposition – the accusations levelled by Niketas David against Photios, of historical invention and creativity, are found to have an ecclesiastical corollary, for the letter contains similar features.³⁸ A separate text, describing the role of Photios in the alleged discovery of the relics of Gregory the Illuminator in a tomb in Constantinople also fits this general pattern, of the exploitation and further development of Armenian tradition for contemporary political or polemical purposes.³⁹

³⁶ *Vita Ignatii*, PG 105, col. 565D 8-10.

³⁷ See I. Dorfmann-Lazarev, *Arméniens et byzantins à l’époque de Photios: Deux débats théologiques après le triomphe de l’orthodoxie*, CSCO Vol. 609, t. 117 (Louvain, 2004); for a different interpretation, see T. W. Greenwood, ‘Failure of a mission? Photios and the Armenian Church’, *Le Muséon*, 119 (2006), 115-59.

³⁸ For the text of this letter, see N. Akinean and P. Tēr-Pōlosean, *T’ult’ P’otay patriark’i ar’ Zak‘aria kat’olikos hayoc’ mecac’*, *Handēs Amsōreay*, 82 (1968), 65-100 and 129-156. Arguments in favour of its authenticity: see Greenwood, ‘Failure of a mission’, 134-42. Adontz, ‘L’âge et l’origine’, 233-4, argues forcefully that while the accusation of genealogical invention made by Nicetas against Photios may have been merited, the description of that invention made by Nicetas is a ‘*fiction puérile*’ and that Photios was not so devoid of imagination as to be incapable of coming up with anything other than BEKLAS!

³⁹ Edited text: see L. M. Ališan, *Hayapatum*, vol. II, *Patmut’iwnk’ Hayoc’*, (Venice, 1901), 263-5, and Anon., ‘Patmut’iwn jałags giwti nšxarac’ srboyn Grigori Hayoc’ Mecac’ Lusaworč’i’, *Ararat*, 35

A third source provides a different perspective. Although considerable sections of the *Vita Euthymii* have not been preserved, this text, composed between 920 and 925, nevertheless supplies an important new insight into the ancestry of Basil I.⁴⁰ It records that Basil left the following instruction: ‘But it was Stylianos called Zaoutzes in the Armenian language, because he was a Macedonian of Armenian descent like himself, whom he left in charge, committing to him the direction of all matters, ecclesiastical and political.’⁴¹ This is the first indication that Basil was of Armenian descent and that he came originally from Macedonia; in other words, he was a Balkan Armenian. The passage also implies that Basil placed such trust in Stylianos precisely because he had the same background.

The longest and best-known source for the ancestry of Basil I is the *Vita Basilii*, which comprises Book V of Theophanes Continuatus. It was almost certainly commissioned, rather than composed, by Basil’s grandson, the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, soon after 948.⁴² It asserts that Basil came from the land of Macedonia and was by race Armenian, from the line of the Arsacids, the Armenian

(1902), 1178-83. Translation and commentary: T. W. Greenwood, ‘The discovery of the relics of St Grigor and the development of Armenian tradition in ninth-century Byzantium’, in E. Jeffreys, ed., *Byzantine Style, Religion and Civilization: In Honour of Sir Steven Runciman*, (Cambridge, 2006), 177-91.

⁴⁰ *Vita Euthymii Patriarchae CP*, ed. and trans. P. Karlin-Hayter, (Brussels, 1970), 5 and 10.

⁴¹ *Vita Euthymii*, 5.23-7.

⁴² For arguments against composition by Constantine VII, see I. Ševčenko, ‘Re-reading Constantine Porphyrogenitus’, in J. Shepard and S. Franklin, eds., *Byzantine Diplomacy*, (Aldershot, 1992), 184; for the date, see I. Ševčenko, ‘La biographie de l’empereur Basile I^{er}’, in *Corsi di Studi dell’Università di Bari II*, (Bari, 1978), 91-127. In his introduction to Ševčenko’s new edition of the text, Mango approved Ševčenko’s contention that the real author was a ghost writer, one of the literati who gathered at Constantine’s court and preferred a date of c. 950 for its composition: Theophanes Continuatus, *Vita Basilii*, ed. Ševčenko, 3*-11*.

royal house.⁴³ It confirms that Arsakes himself was of Parthian origin and renowned for his bravery.⁴⁴ Thereafter it supplies an outline of family history, highlighting key figures and episodes.⁴⁵ At the demise of that dynasty, two members of the Arsacid line, named Artabanos and Kleines, fled to Constantinople, where they were welcomed by Leo I and settled in Nikaia in Macedonia in spite of pressure from the king of Persia to return them. Nor was this an end to demands for their restoration. In the time of Heraclius, a request from the caliph was similarly rejected. Heraclius took the added precaution of moving them to Philippopolis, deemed to be even more remote, and hence secure. Subsequently they moved to Adrianople. In the reign of Constantine VI and Irene, Basil's grandfather Maiktes visited Constantinople where he met another Armenian called Leo and married his daughter.⁴⁶ Their son, who curiously is never named, in turn married the daughter of a widow from Adrianople, 'a noble and attractive lady who had led a chaste life of widowhood since the death of her husband and about whom reports, not quite unreliable, circulated that she traced her ancestry back to Constantine the Great'.⁴⁷ The genealogical study concludes by noting that 'this imperial root Basil flourished' from the lineages of both his parents, for while his father was from the line of Arsakes, his mother was descended from Constantine the Great and Alexander the Great as well.⁴⁸

⁴³ Theophanes Continuatus, *Vita Basilii*, ed. Ševčenko, 2.1-3

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.4-5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.8-3.31.

⁴⁶ Adontz, 'L'âge et l'origine', 242: Maiktes for either Maikes or Maiakes, the Armenian Hmayak.

⁴⁷ Theophanes Continuatus, *Vita Basilii*, ed. Ševčenko, 3.16-20..

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.23-27.

How should we approach this mass of genealogical detail? As Brubaker has observed, Basil I was an emperor without an imperial past; it should also be noted that he lacked a noble background.⁴⁹ Clearly the elaborate ancestry developed in the *Vita Basilii* was intended to address this perceived lack of legitimacy, providing Basil I and his successors with a long and glorious descent from the Armenian royal family as well as Constantine and Alexander. Instead of simply tracing Basil's ancestry from a single individual, the *Vita Basilii* supplies an outline family history, describing how his ancestors had interacted with famous emperors of the past including Leo the Great and Heraclius. These multiple imperial connections gave Basil's house an historic pedigree, just as the mass of portents and signs involving the young Basil all predicted his imperial future.⁵⁰ Basil therefore had a royal and imperial ancestry, his family had been protected by the greatest emperors of the past and there were numerous proofs pointing to his extraordinary rise to the imperial office.

There can be little doubt that at one level, this detail is highly problematic. For Jenkins, the first section of the *Vita Basilii*, including Basil's descent, the portents that attended his childhood and his arrival in Constantinople are 'historically quite worthless' and, aside from his Armenian stock and his, or his father's, imprisonment in Bulgaria, 'a fairy tale'.⁵¹ It cannot be denied that there is an epic quality to the account. Attempting to sift the account for genuine information about his family

⁴⁹ L. Brubaker, 'To legitimize an emperor: Constantine and visual authority in the eighth and ninth centuries', in Magdalino, ed., *New Constantines*, 139-58, at 151.

⁵⁰ For a complete study, see Moravcsik, 'Sagen und Legenden'; for an analysis of one vision, namely Elijah's appearance to Basil's mother, see P. Magdalino, 'Basil I, Leo VI and the feast of the prophet Elijah', *JÖB*, 38 (1988), 193-6.

⁵¹ R. J. H. Jenkins, 'The classical background of the *Scriptores post Theophanem*', *DOP*, 8 (1954), 27.

history is unlikely to get very far. Indeed it is unclear why Jenkins should have picked out his Armenian background and the temporary imprisonment in Bulgaria as ‘certainly true’; without independent corroboration, these are no more likely to be ‘true’ than any other detail. If, however, the family history provided in the *Vita Basilii* is treated as a reflection of, and response to, attitudes, issues and concerns from the middle of the tenth century, then it can be read in a very different way and gains in historical significance.⁵²

Several features of Basil’s family history respond well to this approach. As noted above, the *Vita Basilii* established a long, and carefully constructed, tradition of engagement between Basil’s ancestors and prominent, legitimate emperors. When Artabanos and Kleines arrived in Constantinople, seeking refuge from the Persian king, they were received by Leo the Great. He protected and rewarded them, despite pressure being applied by the Persian king to return them. Likewise, when the caliph invited their descendants to return, it was the emperor Heraclius who intervened and transferred them to Philippopolis. The Byzantine Empire emerges as a place of refuge and security for members of the Armenian elite compelled to flee from their ancestral lands. Leo I and Heraclius are both portrayed as resisting all attempts to negotiate an Arsacid return. Their actions are consistent with those of an emperor protecting his loyal servants, something that Constantine VII would have been keen to promote, given the contested circumstances of his own accession to sole rule in January 945.

⁵² Brubaker makes a similar observation in the final paragraph of her study, ‘Constantine and visual authority’, 158, without further elaboration.

There is also the distinct sense of self-interest as well, that the Arsacids had something to offer which was of benefit to Roman emperors, Persian kings and Arab caliphs alike. What was it?

One could argue that the Arsacids brought with them their military experience, and conceivably their own troops as well, and that this was what was being eagerly sought.⁵³ Certainly it is telling that Arsakes' principal virtue to be highlighted in the text was his bravery. But this is to look for a plausible historical explanation within what is evidently an elegantly constructed fiction. Buried in the account is what seems to be the actual reason, the unequivocal statement that the Armenian people – a term deliberately undefined – were devoted to the Arsacids and would not hesitate to follow them.⁵⁴ In other words, the text asserts that the Arsacid royal line still retained political relevance and meaning for Armenians. Their significance was rooted in Armenian cultural memory, as the enduring popularity and successive reformulation of the so-called Vision of Sahak attests.⁵⁵ This text confidently predicted the revival of the Armenian kingdom by a member of the Arsacid family and the restoration of

⁵³ See P. Charanis, *The Armenian in the Byzantine Empire*, (Lisbon, 1963), 16-21 and 32-4; Garsoïan, 'Armenian integration', 61-6. For one remarkable late ninth-century career, see G. Dédéyan, 'Mleh le Grand stratège du Lykandos', *REArm*, 15 (1981), 72-102.

⁵⁴ Theophanes Continuatus, *Vita Basilii*, ed. Ševčenko, 2.43-45.

⁵⁵ For a study of this intriguing but elusive text, see Adontz, 'L'âge et l'origine', 246-59; G. Garitte, 'La vision de S. Sahak en grec', *Le Muséon*, 71 (1958), 225-78. A version of this text is preserved in the early sixth-century *History* of Łazar P'arpec'i but this may be a later interpolation; see Łazar P'arpec'i, *Patmut' iwn Hayoc'*, ed. G. Tēr Mkrtč'ean and S. Malxasean, (Tiflis, 1904; repr. Delmar, N.Y., 1985), 29-37; English translation by R. W. Thomson, *The History of Łazar P'arpec'i*, Occasional Papers and Proceedings 4, (Atlanta, GA, 1991), 65-72. It seems to have been in circulation by the seventh century.

the Armenian Church by someone descended from the line of Saint Gregory.⁵⁶ Indeed the *Vita Basilii* refers specifically to the fulfilment of this prophecy at the accession of Basil I.⁵⁷ Just as Basil's ancestors were projected as giving political leadership to Armenians within the Byzantine Empire in the past, by implication Basil's grandson Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus could offer the same leadership. The ancestry of Basil I enabled Constantine to present himself as the direct heir to the Arsacid kings of Armenia and thereby claim the Arsacid political legacy as king of all Armenians. He was in a position to appeal to all who thought of themselves as Armenian, irrespective of which district they came from, when they had arrived within the empire, which family they claimed descent from or what confessional position they espoused. Advertising an Arsacid ancestry therefore had a particular potency.

If one accepts the above, the question of motivation remains. Why did Constantine Porphyrogenitus make these claims to Arsacid ancestry in this manner at this time? Not only did he repeat the Arsacid connection advanced in the two sources discussed above; he developed and amplified that connection. By contrast, the claims to descent from Constantine or Alexander are not promoted. Two possible solutions present themselves, one 'eastern' and the other 'Balkan'.

The first sets this composition in the context of Constantine's wider ambitions along the eastern frontier. These can be deduced from the four so-called 'Armenian

⁵⁶ The Arsacid (or Aršakuni) house was the Armenian royal line until the deposition of the last king in 428 CE. Gregory the Illuminator was the founder of the Armenian Church in the early fourth-century. Sahak was the last direct relative of Gregory to occupy the office of Catholicos and he died in 438 CE.

⁵⁷ Theophanes Continuatus, *Vita Basilii*, ed. Ševčenko, 19.35-40; see Adontz, 'L'âge et l'origine', 255, who argues that the Vision was composed in Constantinople, conceivably by Photios himself, to prove Basil's Arsacid ancestry. This remains highly speculative.

chapters' of the *De administrando imperio*, the diplomatic handbook compiled by Constantine for his young son, the future Romanos II, in 952.⁵⁸ Although the individual details found in each chapter have been examined and discussed many times, the underlying intent has been overlooked.⁵⁹ One of the most striking features to emerge from these chapters is that Constantine was at pains to project the emperor resident in Constantinople as retaining personal responsibility for the conduct of diplomacy. Successive emperors are shown negotiating with Armenian princes through envoys and correspondence and in person; they are also portrayed concluding treaties, interpreting earlier agreements, even deciding upon the exact location of a boundary.⁶⁰ It seems that Constantine was trying to emphasize to his young heir the need to maintain direct control along this sector of the frontier, specifically in relation to contacts with Armenian princes. This would ensure that the emperor was not sidelined or excluded through the incorporation of the Armenian elite in local networks of power and authority centred upon the great magnate families of the eastern empire.

There is no evidence, from within the *De administrando imperio* or elsewhere, to suggest that Constantine advertised his Arsacid ancestry in order to attract

⁵⁸ Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, ed. G. Moravscik, trans. R. J. H. Jenkins, 2nd edition, (Washington, D.C., 1967), chapters 43-46.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Shepard, 'Constantine VII', 22-9; J. D. Howard-Johnston, 'The *De Administrando Imperio*: A re-examination of the text and a re-evaluation of its evidence about the Rus', in M. Kazanski, A. Nercessian and C. Zuckerman, eds., *Les centres proto-urbains russes entre Scandinavie, Byzance et Orient*, (Paris, 2000), 301-36, at 317-18 and 326-7; and Greenwood, 'Patterns of contact and communication', 84-95 and 97-9.

⁶⁰ *De administrando* chapter 45 analyses the actions and agreements of Leo VI, Romanos I Lecapenos and Constantine VII in respect of the Iberian princes with interests around Theodosiopolis; for the boundary decision, see 46.156-75.

Armenians from outside the empire into imperial service. However, one of the strategies advocated by Constantine in that text involved securing rights over Armenian lands that could be realised in the future. These ‘Armenian futures’ contemplated a simple exchange, of ancestral territories for security and status within the empire. It is in this context, of recent and ongoing Armenian migration into the empire, that the assertion of an Arsacid ancestry obtains meaning and justification. Accordingly, Constantine stressed his Armenian background and Arsacid credentials in order to attract and secure the loyalty of newly arrived Armenians.

Arguably, this ideological dimension reflects the wider strategy for the eastern frontier in the middle of the tenth century. The creation of a network of small so-called ‘Armenian themes’ along this frontier at this time expresses the same strategy, albeit in administrative terms. It too implies intent on the part of the emperor and the central administration to retain direct control over military appointments in the East. This offered another means of counterbalancing the regional networks of power and authority then being constructed by the great magnate families of the eastern empire.⁶¹ One can speculate that these families also stressed and promoted their noble ancestry and their heroic achievements through a variety of media, including family history. None of these have been preserved, but we do know that Manuel’s biography of John Kourkouas ran to eight books and covered his family background and his

⁶¹ See Oikonomides, *Les listes*, 345-6, arguing that this process can be observed in the 940s and 950s, and 355-63. A novel of Nikephoros II Phokas refers specifically to Armenian themes and Armenian *stratiotai*: N. Svonoros, *Les nouvelles des empereurs macédoniens concernant la terre et les stratiotes*, (Athens, 1994), 162-73; trans. E. McGeer, *The Land Legislation of the Macedonian Emperors*, (Toronto, 2000), 86-9. See also Greenwood, ‘Armenian neighbours’, 352 and 361.

own achievements, as well as containing portents pointing to his future greatness.⁶² Arguably Constantine advertised his Arsacid origins in the context of rival claims to glorious ancestries and great deeds.

The second solution also has an internal political perspective but is focused more particularly upon the Balkan context to Basil's ancestry supplied by the *Vita Basilii*. Throughout the text, the Arsacid house is associated consistently with the Balkans. This may simply be because Basil I did indeed come from the Balkans, as the *Vita Euthymii* indicates and the strong evidence for substantial Armenian settlement in the Balkans has been noted previously.⁶³ The *Vita Basilii* contains no hint of any desire on the part of the Arsacid house or the emperor to return to historic Armenia. Such a possibility is articulated only by the Persian king and the caliph and, unsurprisingly, is rejected out of hand.

Accepting the contention that the Arsacid connection is an elaborate fiction, it follows that the sites in the Balkans associated with Arsacid settlement were chosen deliberately and so deserve particular attention. The text records that Leo the Great settled Artabanos and Kleines in Nikaia in Macedonia; that Heraclius arranged for their transfer to Philippopolis in Macedonia; and that they subsequently moved to Adrianople. While Maiktes married the daughter of an Armenian called Leo from Constantinople, Basil's father married the daughter of a widow from Adrianople,

⁶² Theophanes Continuatus, *Chronographia*, ed. I. Bekker (Bonn, 1838), VI, 426.1-428.2.

⁶³ See above, n. 21.

thereby reinforcing the Adrianople connection.⁶⁴ What was the recent history of each location?

In the middle of the tenth century, Adrianople was firmly under Byzantine rule. Nevertheless it remained uncomfortably close to the frontier. It had twice been captured by Symeon of Bulgaria, in 914 and 922, but on both occasions it had been quickly recovered.⁶⁵ In 914 it had been redeemed by the payment of a cash subsidy under a negotiated settlement, while in 922 it had been abandoned by the Bulgars after rumours that a Byzantine relief force was close at hand. The fact that Adrianople changed hands four times in quick succession indicates that it was of great strategic importance to both sides. The particular circumstances of the first episode repay further scrutiny. In 914, Adrianople had been betrayed by its commander, one Pankratoukas, who is described as being of Armenian descent. This may seem incidental, but we find a parallel episode from the end of the tenth century. Skylitzes refers to several *illustrioi* from Adrianople who held the rank of *strategos*, including one Batatzes, who were suspected of treachery and who fled to Samuel Kometopoulos, the Bulgar emperor, who was himself of Armenian origin.⁶⁶ In both

⁶⁴ Theophanes Continuatus, *Vita Basilii*, ed. Ševčenko, 2.33-4 (Nikaia), 2.45-6 (Philippopolis), 2.47-9 and 3.16-17 (Adrianople). The link with Constantinople, at 3.3-7, appears incidental but has the virtue of providing Basil with kinship ties among the Armenian elite in the capital.

⁶⁵ The 914 campaign: Theophanes Continuatus, *Chronographia*, ed. I. Bekker (Bonn, 1838), VI, 387.14-388.4; Georgius Monachus Continuatus, ed. I. Bekker, (Bonn, 1838), 880.5-9 <AU: It is not clear to me what the title of this work is, but it may be known to scholars. Is the citation fine as is?>. The latter contains a much-abridged version of the former, echoing its first and last sentences. The 922 campaign: Theophanes Continuatus VI, 404.18-405.10; Georgius Monachus Continuatus, 897.3-16. These accounts are closely related to one another.

⁶⁶ Skylitzes, *Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis historiarum*, ed. I. Thurn, *CFHB 5*, (Berlin and New York, 1973), 343; trans. and comm. B. Flusin and J.-C. Cheynet, *Jean Skylitzès Empereurs de Constantinople*, (Paris, 2003), 287.

instances, therefore, it seems that local notables of Armenian descent were induced to switch from Byzantine to Bulgar service. Conceivably, it was to address this problem and shore up support for Byzantium that Constantine associated the Arsacid house so closely with Adrianople, in the hope that advertising a royal Armenian ancestry might convince the local elite to remain loyal.

The tenth-century history of Nikaia in Macedonia, south-east of Adrianople, is obscure. Given its proximity to Adrianople, and its location firmly within the boundaries of the Byzantine Empire, its inclusion is likely to have been on the same grounds as Adrianople. Philippopolis, on the other hand, upstream from Adrianople on the river Maritza, was not in Byzantine possession during the sole rule of Constantine Porphyrogenitus. Leo the Deacon confirms that Philippopolis was under Bulgar control when it was captured by the Rus leader Sviatoslav in late 969.⁶⁷ After John Tzμισes had ejected Sviatoslav from Bulgaria in 971, the emperor installed a group of Paulicians around Philippopolis, confirming its recent acquisition.⁶⁸ It seems very likely that Philippopolis had been captured by Symeon in 914 and retained thereafter.

Why did Constantine connect the Arsacids to Philippopolis? One possibility is that this fortified centre too had a longstanding Armenian community to whom the *Vita Basilii* was appealing. It is, however, difficult to envisage the circumstances

⁶⁷ Leo the Deacon, *History*, in *Historiae libri decem*, ed. C. B. Hase, *CSHB* 11, (Bonn, 1828), 105; trans. A.-M. Talbot and D. F. Sullivan, *The History of Leo the Deacon: Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century*, *DOSt* 41, (Washington, D.C., 2005), 155 and n. 92.

⁶⁸ Skylitzes, *Synopsis*, 286; Flusin and Cheynet, *Jean Skylitzès*, 241 and n. 17.

under which they could have encountered the text, unless they had relatives within the empire. In the alternative, by establishing a longstanding Armenian association with a site in Bulgar control, Constantine may have been laying the groundwork for the future annexation of Philippopolis by introducing the notion that it would be a recovery or restoration of Armenian as much as imperial territory. In other words, Constantine was establishing through the *Vita Basilii* a legitimate claim to territory then outside the empire, a claim that was based on an historic link. Significantly this pattern of behaviour on the part of Constantine can also be traced in the *De administrando imperio* in respect of districts beyond the eastern frontier then under Armenian and Iberian control.⁶⁹

If one accepts this contention, it follows that Constantine VII had ambitions along the Bulgarian as well as the eastern frontier towards the start of his rule as sole emperor.⁷⁰ Two other passages in the *Vita Basilii* offer some support. The first describes how the young Basil and his family were carried off into captivity by the Bulgar leader Krum after the fall of Adrianople in 813.⁷¹ Previously this passage has been used in the longstanding debate over the year in which Basil was born. The actions of Manuel bishop of Adrianople and his clerical colleagues have therefore been overlooked. According to the text, Manuel and his team undertook missionary

⁶⁹ Greenwood, 'Patterns of contact and communication', 90-2 and 97-9. See also Theophanes Continuatus VI, 387.21-388.1, where Philippopolis is defined as three days' travel from Adrianople and separated by mountains and rivers. The stress on isolation is consistent with the above proposition.

⁷⁰ This runs against the view of Stephenson '[T]he political absorption of Bulgaria ... cannot have been contemplated by Constantine VII and his son Romanos II': see P. Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier: A Political Study of the Northern Balkans 900-1204*, (Cambridge, 2000), 46.

⁷¹ Theophanes Continuatus, *Vita Basilii*, ed. Ševčenko, 4.1-11.

activities among the Bulgars, for which they were martyred under Krum's successor, Mutragon.⁷² This might seem incidental if it were not for the familiar, and securely attested, subsequent history of the spread of Christianity in Bulgaria and the emergence of an effectively autonomous Bulgar church.⁷³ The rivalry between Latin and Byzantine missions in Bulgaria in the early 860s is well-known, as is the baptism of the Bulgar leader Boris in 865.⁷⁴ Boris became the godson of the emperor Michael III and took his baptismal name. The *Vita Basilii* undermines this tradition by positing that a bishop of Adrianople was actively preaching and teaching in Bulgaria long before the reign of Michael III. The text is constructed in such a way that Basil I is associated with this earlier conversion attempt. It reveals that Basil's own relatives were among those to suffer martyrdom, enabling Basil to share in the honour therefrom.⁷⁵ At the same time, the role of Michael III in the conversion process is diminished. Furthermore, by stating that Manuel was martyred at the hands of a pagan Bulgar leader, Constantine was able to tarnish the character and Christian pedigree of the current Bulgar leader, Peter. When analysed in these terms, this passage emerges, rather unexpectedly, as an important source for Constantine's view of Bulgaria.

⁷² Ibid., 4.8-24. Mutragon is a corruption of Omurtag (814/5–c. 831).

⁷³ J. Shepard, 'Slavs and Bulgars', in *NCMH* II, 239-46; Whittow, *Orthodox Byzantium*, 280-5.

⁷⁴ F. Dvornik, *The Photian Schism: History and Legend*, (Cambridge, 1948 ; repr. 1970) <AU : Do these details seem correct ?>; G. Dagron, 'L'église et l'état (milieu IX^e – fin X^e siècle)', in G. Dagron, P. Riché and A. Vauchez, eds., *Evêques, moines et empereurs (610–1054), Histoire du Christianisme*, 13 vols., (Paris, 1993), IV, 169-83, and see also 921-36 for Bulgaria; L. Simeonova, *Diplomacy of the Letter and the Cross: Photios, Bulgaria and the Papacy 860s–880s*, (Amsterdam, 1998).

⁷⁵ Theophanes Continuatus, *Vita Basilii*, ed. Ševčenko, 4.22-24

The second passage lends itself to a similar interpretation. It records how Basil challenged and overcame a previously undefeated Bulgar wrestler, pinning his shoulders to a table.⁷⁶ Although this story has traditionally been understood as a simple proof of Basil's physical strength, the basis for his rapid advancement, it may also be read metaphorically as a portent, that Byzantium, in the person of one of Basil's descendents, would eventually challenge and overcome Bulgaria. As such, it takes its place alongside a mass of portents – an eagle hovering over the infant Basil, the gift of the apple, his mother's dreams, of the golden vine and then Elijah's prophecy, the untamed horse ridden by Basil – all predicting an imperial future for the young Basil.⁷⁷ Several of these employ images and motifs familiar from classical literature and from the Old Testament. This particular episode, however, of single combat with an enemy champion, is found repeatedly in Armenian historical literature and ultimately in Persian epic tradition. For example, in the seventh-century *History* attributed to Sebēos, the Armenian Smbat Bagratuni is described engaging the king of the K'ushans in single combat between the battle lines, 'both men of gigantic strength and fully covered in armour'.⁷⁸ Although incapable of proof, it is possible that this story was intended to appeal to, and resonate with, those aware of equivalent Armenian traditions. Once again, therefore, this passage reflects the mid-tenth-century aspirations of Constantine VII far more closely than any mid-ninth-century historical event. In predicting victory over the Bulgars, Constantine was once

⁷⁶ Ibid., 12.13-35.

⁷⁷ Moravcsik, 'Sagen und Legenden', 84-9.

⁷⁸ Sebeos 102-3; trans. Thomson and Howard-Johnston, *History*, 52.

more revealing his own ambitions in that theatre, if not for himself, then for his immediate successors. We should not be surprised that Nikephoros II Phokas reopened hostilities against Bulgaria as early as 966 and thereby set the tone for relations between Byzantium and Bulgaria for the next fifty years, decades that were characterised by armed conflict. The *Vita Basilii* suggests that Constantine VII cherished similar dreams.

Having proposed that the *Vita Basilii* reflects the attitudes and concerns of Constantine VII in the middle of the tenth century, let us return finally to assess the background and formative years of Basil I. On the basis of the *Vita Euthymii*, it seems most probable that Basil did indeed come from Macedonia and that he was of Armenian descent. As for his actual background, an anonymous poem composed between 867 and 872 states that Basil came from simple pious parents and compares him with the Old Testament figure of David who also enjoyed a meteoric rise, from obscurity as a shepherd boy to divinely ordained king of Israel.⁷⁹ It seems clear, therefore, that Basil had humble origins. The sequence of patrons recorded in the *Vita Basilii* was therefore a necessary part in his biography, as Tougher has rightly observed.⁸⁰ Why was such a claim advanced? There would appear to be little point in claiming a royal Armenian ancestry for Basil unless there was a significant constituency within the political elite who understood the symbolic meaning of this claim and responded to it. In other words, the assertion of an Arsacid ancestry was

⁷⁹ A. Markopoulos, 'An anonymous laudatory poem in honor of Basil I,' *DOP*, 46 (1992), 225-32.

⁸⁰ S. Tougher, 'After iconoclasm (850–886)', in Shepard, *Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire*, 294.

designed to appeal to those members of the powerful elite <AU: OK?> in ninth-century Byzantium who were themselves of Armenian descent and who retained sufficient knowledge of their own cultural and historical traditions to be able to understand the significance of this claim. If there was no such constituency, there would seem to be little point in advancing such a claim. Although identifying members of the Armenian elite in ninth-century Byzantium – and the shadowy networks of power, patronage and kinship that Basil exploited – lie outside the remit of this paper, it is striking that the two leading figures at the death of Basil I on 29 August 886, Stylianos and Photios, both had strong Armenian connections.⁸¹

In conclusion, claiming a royal Arsacid ancestry held political significance in the ninth century and continued to do so in the middle of the tenth century. Although the evidence is not extensive, it is sufficient to demonstrate that Basil I claimed an Arsacid descent during his lifetime. Whether he did so in the terms outlined by Nicetas is impossible to say but it seems very improbable. Yet the very fact that Nicetas chose to ridicule Photios through his forged genealogy of Basil I reflects a wider social and political reality: that Armenian connections and traditions held particular significance and meaning at this time.

Basil's Armenian ancestry was retained and developed in the *Vita Basilii* under the oversight of his grandson, Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. Once again, it was intended to resonate with Armenians living and working within the empire, both

⁸¹ Photios: see M. E. Shirinean, 'Armenian elites', 62-5; Stylianos Zaoutzes: see Karlin-Hayter, *Vita Euthymii*, 149-52.

securing the loyalties of newly arrived Armenians and reconnecting with those Balkan Armenians whose drift towards the great rival of Byzantium in the Balkans, the Bulgar state, needed to be checked. Indeed there are strong grounds for arguing that the *Vita Basilii* anticipated future confrontation with, and eventual victory over, the Bulgars. When viewed in the context of the future strategy for expansion eastwards into historic Armenia, as outlined in the *De administrando imperio* and discussed above, it looks very much as though plans for territorial acquisition and recovery in both the east and the west were never far away from the mind of Constantine VII. It was, however, his grandson Basil II who realised those ambitions.⁸²

⁸² Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, 47-79; see also P. Stephenson, *The Legend of Basil the Bulgar-Slayer*, (Cambridge, 2003), 1-48; C. Holmes, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire (976-1025)*, (Oxford, 2005), 394-428 and 487-502.

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