

Zitierhinweis

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IHOR ŠEVČENKO, *Chronographiae quae Theophanis continuati nomine fertur liber quo Vita Basilii Imperatoris amplectitur*. Corpus fontium historiae Byzantinae, Berlin - Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2011, pp. xii + 570, ISBN 978-3-11-018477-8.

The late Harvard Byzantinist Ihor Ševčenko has bequeathed his edition of the *Life of Basil* as a posthumous boon to posterity. This work is at one and the same time a monument to the painstaking work of decades to establish the Greek text of the *Life*, which will remain authoritative for generations, and, thanks to the facing-page translation into English, an *entrée* into the thought and life of Byzantium accessible to professional scholar and unlettered amateur alike.

The introductory material is perforce the work of several authors. The introduction proper was written, according to Prof. Ševčenko's last wishes, by Cyril Mango and presents the *Life* in relation to the rest of the text of 'Theophanes Continuatus', contemporary authors like Genesisios, and the literary atelier of Constantine Porphyrogenitus, the ostensible author but more likely the patron of the *Life of Basil*. The brief but detailed description of the only manuscript of 'Theophanes Continuatus' which includes the *Life*, *Vaticanus graecus* 167 of the early eleventh century, was prepared on the basis of observations made by Ševčenko himself, but amended and verified by S. Serventi and L. Pierahi. Thomas Cerbu contributed a description of the surviving early modern apographs made from the manuscript, in the course of which he offers an intriguing narrative of the seventeenth-century interest in our text which culminated in the 1685 edition of François Combefis. The list of works consulted runs to nineteen pages and constitutes something of a bibliography on the reign of Basil I.

The text is based on the single manuscript, *Vat. gr.* 167, as well as contemporary treatments of the same themes, the apographs, previous editions, and Carl de Boor's unpublished draft of a new edition, brought to light at Ševčenko's prompting. The *apparatus criticus* does not merely present sources and comparanda, but defends Ševčenko's reading on the basis of Byzantine texts and classical works which would have been familiar to Byzantine writers. There are over five hundred differences, it is noted, between this edition and Bekker's Bonn edition of 1838. On the whole, Ševčenko's emendations are careful, judicious, and compelled by necessity rather than a desire to raise the received text to such a standard as some more willful editor might imagine he could have achieved.

The translation is both close to the Greek and lucid as English prose. Ševčenko himself testifies that this achievement presented a substantial challenge, largely because the canons of style in Byzantine Greek and modern English are often diametrically opposed. He notes in particular the Byzantine taste for “the elegant variation” which produced repetitions and elaborate redundancies. These are retained in the translation, in spite of their being shunned by the terse economy of Anglo-Saxon diction. The translation thus provides a *vade-mecum* through the difficulties of the text and offers some indication of the effect sought by the Greek original. Nor does the translation elide the gaps which occur where the text or – rather more rarely – the comprehension of the editor and translator fail us, but marks them as lacunose as a reminder of our tenuous grasp upon the text with which we are grappling. Ševčenko’s stated intention that the translation “serve as a temporary replacement for a commentary” is fulfilled inasmuch as it clarifies the rudiments of the editor’s understanding of the text, but it is to be regretted that it must remain as much of a continuous commentary by a great scholar on a text to which he devoted so much time and attention as we may ever expect to see.

It is not difficult to see why Ševčenko lavished so much effort on the *Life of Basil*; it is a fascinating and revealing text. It survives as part of ‘Theophanes Continuatus’, so called because the reigns covered in this compilation begin where the chronicle of Theophanes ends, with the accession of Leo the Armenian in 813. The *Life of Basil* was included in this collection to provide an account of the reign of Basil I (867-886), but it stands apart from the annalistic treatment of the other reigns from 813 to 961 by virtue of its much greater length and encomiastic tone. The *Life*, as Mango notes, has definite affinities with the *basilikos logos*, the formal praise of a ruler, as well as biography, and even hagiography, and may originally have been composed as something of a propaganda piece. Basil’s relation to the Arsacid royal house of Armenia is recounted along with a litany of the omens and prophecies which accompanied his ascent from humble station to the throne. This legitimizing material is perhaps necessary, since Basil was, after all, a parvenu and a usurper. More necessary still is the description of the dissolute and profligate lifestyle of Michael III, Basil’s predecessor and benefactor, whom Basil murdered – the *Life* does not dissemble on this point – after he had raised him to the purple. There is in this enough respect for the imperial office that most attention is paid to the wicked courtiers and hangers-on who surrounded Michael, especially Groullos, the emperor’s ‘patriarch of vice’. The *Life* then turns to the rather more substantial legitimation offered by the virtuous and effective deeds of Basil. The description of Basil’s concern for the poor and that they should be relieved of the oppression of the rich intimates something more than an awareness of Biblical injunctions in this regard, on the part of the author, at least, but rather a real sense of the

social and political strains created by economic disparity. The catalogue of Basil's military victories (varied with more or less forthright accounts of his defeats and reverses) has a timely ring about it. Basil was in the position, not unusual for a Byzantine emperor, of facing war on at least two fronts, but practically all of his enemies in the east and west, as well as the south, were Muslim powers. On his northern flank, with the Bulgars and Rhus, Basil is described as employing that tool of Byzantine diplomacy at least as effective as the army, and rather more effective in establishing the heritage of the Byzantine commonwealth, namely, the missionary efforts of the Orthodox Church. The darker side of the Church's proselytizing in alliance with the power of the state is also held up for praise in the report of Basil's, admittedly largely unavailing, efforts to convert the Jews by argument, compulsion, and enticement. The *Life* provides particularly full and detailed accounts of the building projects undertaken by Basil, both the churches he founded and restored and the additions he made to the imperial palace complex. These descriptions, a standard element in the praise of a king, are particularly valuable in light of the relative dearth of the Byzantine architectural legacy. The narrative near the end of the *Life* of the near tragic rift between Basil and his son and heir, Leo, highlights the encomiast's usual gloss on the bad decisions and policies of a good emperor: even the best of emperors might at times be prone to evil counsel.

The back matter, as might be expected in a CFHB volume, offers a rich set of tools for study and investigation. There is an index of proper names, of Byzantine and Christian usages (with definitions in Latin), of Greek constructions, of words, and of citations of other authors. Perhaps most remarkable are the maps. In addition to the usual charts of the city of Constantinople with its notable sites and the Empire from Italy to Armenia (here indicating the routes of campaigns in Basil's reign), there is a plan of the Great Palace, giving some idea of the relative placement of the churches, residences, and constructions described in detail in the text, and a map of Constantinople in its environs, which offers the student a rather rare impression of the City in its immediate surroundings.

This is a book that can be commended to all serious students of Byzantium and with its accompanying translation should be consulted often enough to justify purchase by even modest academic libraries. It is a worthy capstone to a remarkable career. *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice.*

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