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*Constantine VIII and Michael Psellos:
Rhetoric, Reality, and the
Decline of Byzantium, A.D. 1025-28*

In the seventh book of his *Χρονογραφία* and by way of elucidating the reign of the Emperor Isaak Komnenos (1057-59), Michael Psellos proffers a rhetorical exposition on the decline of the Roman Empire in his time.¹ The passage is a masterpiece of metaphor, simplistic and hyperbolic, and predicated upon an apparent diminution in the quality of imperial leadership. During a fifty-year reign (976-1025) the ascetic and militaristic Emperor Basil II Bulgaroktonos had raised the empire to the summit of wealth and power.² With his death, on 15 December 1025, Psellos detects a decisive break in Byzantine fortunes.³ Basil's successors were unworthy, and none more so than the first:

1. Michael Psellos, *Χρονογραφία*, ed. E. Renauld, 2 vols. (Paris: Société d'édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1926-28), VII, 52-57.

2. Basil II and Constantine VIII jointly assumed the throne as minors in 963, at first under the regency of their mother, Theophano (John Scylitzes, *Σύνοψις Ἱστοριῶν*, Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae, 5 [Berlin: De Gruyter, 1973], p. 254 = George Cedrenos, *Σύνοψις Ἱστοριῶν*, 2 vols., Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae [Bonn: E. Weber, 1838-39], II, 345; Leo Diaconos, *Ἱστορία*, CSHB [Bonn, 1828], p. 31), followed by the successive regencies of the military usurpers, Nikephoros Phokas (963-69) and John Tzimiskes (969-76) (Scylitzes, p. 255 = Cedrenos, p. 346; John Zonaras, *Χρονικόν*, 3 vols., CSHB [Bonn: 1841-97], III, 498; Liudprande, *Die Werke Liudprands von Cremona*, ed. J. Becker [Hanover: Hansche Buchhandlung, 1915], pp. 177, 181, 197-98, 203; Scylitzes, pp. 284, 312 = Cedrenos, pp. 397, 415; Zonaras, pp. 519, 537; Yahya ibn Sa'id of Antioch, *Histoire*, trans. I. Kratchkovsky and A. Vasiliev, *Patrologia Orientalis*, XXIII, fasc. 3 [Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1932], p. 371). From 976 to 985, when Basil began to assert personal power, the predominant influence on the brothers was their great uncle the *παρακοιμώμενος*, Basil Lekapenos (Scylitzes, p. 314 = Cedrenos, p. 416; Zonaras, p. 538). Basil's personal dominance between 985 and 1025 notwithstanding, coins were minted in the joint names of both brothers (P. Grierson, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection* [Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, 1966-], III, pt. 2, 599-633), and treaties with foreign states were issued under both names (K. E. Zachariä von Lingenthal, *Ius Graeco-romanum* [Athens, 1931-], I, 260-61; S. H. Cross and O. P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, eds. and trans., *The Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text* [Cambridge, Mass.: The Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953], pp. 89, 111-12).

3. Basil's age at death is given as seventy-two by Psellos (I.37) and Zonaras (p. 569) and as seventy by Scylitzes (p. 374 = Cedrenos, p. 480). He was buried in the monastery of St. John Evangelist in the Hebdomon at Constantinople (Yahya ibn Sa'id of Antioch, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, ed. J. B. Chabot, et al., *Scriptores Arabici*, series 3 [Beirut, 1909], VII, pt. 2, 248-49, and translated in J. H. Forsyth, "The Byzan-

his supposedly ineffective and incompetent brother and nominal co-emperor, Constantine VIII, who seemingly had been content for the entire duration of Basil's long reign to be an emperor in name only.⁴

Μετὰ τὸν θάνατον βασιλείου τοῦ πάνυ [ὁ Κωνσταντῖνος] . . . ἐπὶ δὲ τὸν ἀπολαυστικὸν ὥρμηκῶς βίον, σπαθᾶν πάντα καὶ ἀναλίσκειν διέγνωνκε, καὶ εἰ μὴ ταχὺ τοῦτον ὑπεξείλεν ὁ θάνατος, ἤρκεσεν ἂν ἀντὶ πάντων εἰς τὴν τοῦ κράτους διαφθοράν. Οὗτος μὲν δὴ πρῶτως τὸ σῶμα τῆς πολιτείας κακοῦν τε καὶ ἐξογκοῦν ἤρξατο, τὰ μὲν ἐνίους τῶν ὑπηκόων χρήμασι καταπιάνας πολλοῖς, τὰ δὲ ἀξιώμασι διογκῶσας καὶ ὕπουλον αὐτοῖς καὶ διεφθαρμένην τὴν ζωὴν καταστήσας.⁵

Constantine VIII is not alone singled out for criticism in the passage. Each emperor of the period between Basil and Isaak receives in his turn a more or less indignant thrust from Psellos' pen. But given his treatment elsewhere in the work, there can be little doubt that Constantine is the preeminent villain of Psellos' vision of decline. The first broadside against Constantine occurs scarcely ten lines from the beginning of the *Χρονογραφία*. After describing Constantine as apathetic and dedicated to a life of luxury, Psellos tenders him sarcastic praise for allowing Basil to take precedence during their years of joint rule, and this shortly before suggesting that in fact Basil forced Constantine into a life of inactivity.⁶ Moreover, Psellos' narrative of Constantine's three years of personal rule (December, 1025-November, 1028) is a veritable catalogue of vice. Constantine is described as effeminate, lazy, unambitious, cow-

tine-Arab Chronicle (938-1034) of Yahya B. Sa'id Al-Antaki," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of Michigan, 1977, p. 336; *Chronicon Venetum Quod Vulgo Dicunt Altinate*, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores* (Hanover: Hahn, 1826-), XIV, 66).

4. Constantine's age at death is given as seventy by Scylitzes (p. 374 = Cedrenos, p. 485) and Zonaras (p. 573), being by such measure sixty-seven when Basil died. This would place his birth ca. 958, roughly agreeing with Scylitzes (p. 314 = Cedrenos, p. 416) and Zonaras (p. 538) that Constantine was three years younger than the twenty-year old Basil at the death of John Tzimiskes in 976. Scylitzes also however (p. 248 = Cedrenos, p. 338) cites the birth of Constantine as occurring in the year following the accession of his father, Romanos II, or ca. 960-61. The *Annales Cavenses*, in *MGH, Script.*, III, 188, records for the year 960: *Romanus, filius eius, cum filio suo Basilio puerulo*, suggesting, by Constantine's omission, that Constantine may indeed not have been born when Romanos assumed power. Furthermore, Scylitzes (p. 284 = Cedrenos, p. 379) also cites Constantine as being five years old at the accession of John Tzimiskes, which indicates a birth date ca. 964. This date is of course doubtful, as Romanos II died in 963. Thus Constantine's date of birth is somewhat in doubt, and the problem important in so far as a greater age difference between Constantine and Basil could, as least initially, have played a part in Basil's predominant role.

5. Psellos, VII, 52-53.

6. *Ibid.*, I, 2: . . . βαθύμως τε τῆς ζωῆς ἔχων καὶ περὶ τὸν ἄβρὸν βίον ἐσπουδακῶς . . . Τοιοῦτων μὲν οὖν ἐγκωμίων ἐκ προοιμίων ἀξιούσθω ὁ Κωνσταντῖνος; I, 22.

ardly and cruel⁷; as a connoisseur of decadent pleasures: exotic foods, theater, horse-racing, hunting, and dice.⁸ His administration is characterized as irresponsible and inept, affairs of state being given over to a coterie of eunuch favorites while Constantine dallied in idle pursuits.⁹ Foreign enemies were wooed with bribes while the emperor's own subjects were attacked, victims of Constantine's fear of revolt.¹⁰ Constantine's eunuch cronies were enriched and the Byzantine aristocracy was ignored, the crucial matter of the succession being procrastinated until Constantine, "surprised by death" (. . . αὐτὸν τὸ κράτος διαπεπτεῦντα ὁ θάνατος κατελήρει . . .) was forced hurriedly to promote an ill-conceived marriage between his daughter Zoë and his "kinsman" (κηδεστῇ), the equally untalented Romanos Argyropoulos.¹¹ Thus Constantine's continuing culpability for the ills of the Byzantine state, for his own incompetence was thereby perpetuated in the persons of Zoë, her sister Theodora, and the various characters associated with them in the imperial office during the following three decades.¹²

7. *Ibid.*, II. 1-2.

8. *Ibid.*, II. 7-8.

9. *Ibid.*, II. 3. Basil also is said to have surrounded himself with lowborn, uneducated favorites (I. 30), but Psellos shows toward Basil little of the animosity which is directed at Constantine. Perhaps his distaste for Constantine's favorites is the more understandable: "For such a man as Psellos, who had no estates in Asia Minor or Europe, and who could rely only on a precarious professional career, imperial patronage was the only alternative to obscurity," (J. M. Hussey, *Church and Learning in the Byzantine Empire, 867-1185* [New York: Russell and Russell, 1963], p. 44). Considering that the Byzantine aristocracy seems to have given the two little except revolt and unrest, not to mention two regents, the preference of both for lowborn favorites is understandable.

10. Psellos, II. 2. Indeed, Constantine's one surviving *novella* is an edict anathematizing sedition (Zachariä von Lingenthal, I, 273-74).

11. Psellos, II. 9-10. Romanos was already married, and Constantine's supposed bad character is further illustrated by Psellos' description of the plot necessary to remove the wife. Scylitzes (p. 374 = Cedrenos, p. 485) suggests that the marriage was originally intended for Constantine's youngest daughter, Theodora, but that she refused either because of too close kinship to Romanos, or because his wife still lived. Zonaras (p. 573) repeats Theodora's objection to the disposition of Romanos' wife. Yahya's version is somewhat different: see a discussion by M. Canard, "Les sources arabes de l'histoire byzantine," *Revue des Etudes Byzantines*, 19 (1961), 304.

12. Psellos' anger at Constantine's supposed neglect of the succession is not entirely justified. Constantine may have had grander ideas than could have been fulfilled by a marriage alliance with the Byzantine aristocracy. Werner, Bishop of Strasbourg, and Count Manegold arrived in Constantinople in 1028 to negotiate a marriage alliance between Byzantium and the German Empire of Conrad II (*Bertholdi Narratio Quomodo Portio S. Crucis Werdeam Pervenerit*, in *MGH, scrip.*, XV, 767-70). The age discrepancy between Constantine's daughters and Conrad's young son probably doomed the negotiations from the start, but relations between the two empires were improved. In any event, Werner died at Constantinople in October, 1028, and Constantine died a month later. The seriousness of these negotiations is perhaps highlighted by precedents from Basil's reign: a marriage alliance with the Venetians (*Johannis Chronicon Venetum*, *MGH, Scrip.*,

With scant question and virtual unanimity modern scholars have endorsed Psellos' account; and on the weight of his testimony, the indistinct forms of an ill-documented period have been written large with axiomatic certainty.¹³ The circumstance is understandable, for Psellos cannot be lightly discounted. He was after all, as friend and advisor to a series of emperors, seemingly in a position to know the facts. No less impressive are his own claims to accuracy and impartiality:

. . . οὐ γὰρ ἂν ψευσαίμην τὴν ἱστορίαν, ἥς τὸ κράτιστον ἡ ἀλήθεια, τῆς τῶν πολλῶν ἕνεκα δυσημίας, εὐλαβούμενος μὴ με λοῖδορος γλώσσα αἰτιάσαιο, ὅτι εὐρημῶν δέον κατηγορῶ· ἀλλ' οὐ κατηγορία τοῦτο, οὐδέ γραφή, ἀλλ' ἀληθῶς ἱστορία.¹⁴

But the artful totality of Constantine's condemnation suggests the need for caution, for more is at stake than just Constantine's personal reputation. As the significance of Psellos' history has been magnified by the dearth of other

IX, 36), and an attempted marriage alliance with Otto III (*Historia Mediolanensis*, *MGH, Scrip.*, VIII, 55-56). The real root of Psellos' feelings is however perhaps revealed in a scene depicting the submission of Bardas Skleros to Basil (I. 28). Basil inquires of Skleros how best to hold on to his empire, and prominent in Skleros' reply is the admonition to admit no women to the palace. The role of Constantine's daughters in affairs of state was not to Psellos' liking; see particularly his condemnation of Zoë (VI. 7).

13. As examples of modern opinion: A. Vogt, in *The Cambridge Medieval History*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1927), IV, 96: "After Basil II's death a period of miserable decadence was to set in . . . The Emperor Constantine bore the worst possible reputation at Constantinople, and unfortunately with only too much reason"; R. J. H. Jenkins, *Byzantium, The Imperial Centuries, A.D. 610-1071*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p. 337: "The death of Basil II was a turning point in Byzantine history . . . Constantine VIII . . . was in every way his brother's opposite: voluptuary where Basil had been ascetic; idle where Basil had been energetic; weak where Basil had been strong." J. M. Hussey, "The Byzantine Empire in the Eleventh Century: Some Different Interpretations," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, series 4, 32 (1950), 71-85, has come close to breaking convention: "Misstatements and omissions [regarding Byzantine history during the eleventh century] continue . . ." Hussey illustrates new developments in monasticism, art, and liturgy which defy the usual picture of universal decadence and decline during the period, but she never takes such a step regarding political affairs; thus, *Church and Learning*, p. 17: "The last male of the Macedonian house, Basil's brother Constantine VIII (1025-28), was neither soldier nor statesman, but interested in theatres and horse-racing"; and also her chapter 5, "The Later Macedonians," *The Cambridge Medieval History*, IV, 2nd. ed. (Cambridge: at the Univ. Press, 1966), which dismisses Constantine after briefly reiterating his character as according to Psellos. G. L. Schlumberger, *L'épopée Byzantine à la fin du dixième siècle*, 3 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1896-1905), III, 1-60, is the exception to the rule, providing a comprehensive and thoughtful study of Constantine.

14. Psellos, VI, 26. The passage is part of a lengthy digression on why Psellos undertook the writing of history and how his methodology is superior to that of others.

quality sources for the period, so too the significance of the reign of Constantine VIII has been weighted by the need to explain the origin of the apparent decline of the Byzantine state during the eleventh century. If the accuracy of Psellos' portrayal of Constantine VIII should be brought to doubt, then doubt is cast as well upon the balance of Psellos' scenario of decline, and a substantial part of conventional theory concerning the Byzantine Empire in the eleventh century would be reopened to question.

With this in mind, some particular aspects of the *Χρονογραφία* must be noted. In the first place, Psellos was writing almost fifty years after Constantine's death, and he alludes to no other authority than tradition as the basis for his treatment of Constantine.¹⁵ Secondly, Psellos' descriptions of both Constantine and Basil are little more than character sketches which seemingly provide necessary continuity for the fuller accounts of succeeding emperors with whom Psellos was personally acquainted. This continuity is twofold in nature. On the one hand, beginning with Basil and Constantine allows Psellos to commence his history chronologically where the work of Leo Diakonos had ended, and is an historiographical continuity. On the other hand, such a beginning also provides the necessary stage-dressing for Psellos' discourse on decline, which may at one time have been the climactic and well-rounded finale to the work.¹⁶ Certainly the connection in Psellos' mind between Constantine VIII and what Psellos saw as the decline of the Roman Empire goes far to explain the special venom which Psellos seems to reserve for Constantine, and especially if that connection was an integral part of Psellos' plan of composition from the outset. But one crucial question must be met: does Psellos' theory of decline conform accurately to the reality of Constantine's life, or has Psellos, in some measure at least, tendentiously colored his account of Constantine in order to make the life conform more agreeably to the theory? The latter seems possible, for Psellos' presentation is suspicious on one further point: the hint of a literary model.

The course of events following the death of Basil II (as described by Michael Psellos) has in general at least one parallel in Roman history: an incompetent successor to a strong ruler so thoroughly diminishes the quality of the state that history slips inevitably, in the familiar metaphor of Cassius Dio, "from an empire of gold to an empire of iron and rust." Dio's metaphor is particularly apt, not only because he thus characterizes that parallel period (that following the death of Marcus Aurelius), but because the passage survives in the fragments of Dio as recorded by the elder contemporary, colleague, and friend of

15. *Ibid.*, II. 2: Τοῦτον τὸν ἄνδρα ὑπογράφω ὃ λόγος τοιούτων ἐκδίδωσι . . . ; elsewhere (III. 1) Psellos specifies that his accounts of Basil and Constantine are based on hearsay, as opposed to the remaining biographies, which are based on independent personal knowledge.

16. See E. Renaud's discussion of the *Χρονογραφία*'s composition in the introduction to the Budé edition, pp. XLIX-L.

Psellos, John Xiphilinos.¹⁷ Could an account of the last years of the Antonine dynasty have influenced Psellos' portrayal of the last years of the Macedonian dynasty? The supposition is at best extremely tenuous, but the suggestion may perhaps be excused, for the scale of coincidence is inordinately large. Furthermore, the fact that Psellos was not incapable of making such a quantum leap in space and time is amply illustrated by his suggestion that Romanos Argyropoulos attempted, however unsuccessfully, to model himself after Marcus Aurelius.¹⁸

A superficial resemblance between the lives of Marcus and Basil, coupled with a perception of decline, may have inspired Psellos to embellish his portrait of Constantine VIII with Commodian flourishes, an act not at all contrary to Psellos' own definition of the function of rhetoric:

... οὐδὲ τῷ πιθανῶ μόνον ψεύδει καὶ τῷ πρὸς τὰς ὑποθέσεις ἀμυρρεπεῖ ἐγκαλλωπίζεται, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῆς ἀκριβοῦς ἀπτεται μούσης, καὶ ταῖς μὲν ἐννοαῖς φιλοσοφεῖ, ἀνθεὶ δὲ τῇ καλλιπείᾳ τῶν λέξεων καὶ τὸν ἀκροατὴν διχόθεν ἐαντῆς ἐξαρτᾷ . . .¹⁹

In any event, the parallels between Psellos' Constantine and the Commodus of Dio, Herodian, *et al.* are several. Both forsook the military lifestyles of their predecessors, gave lenient peace to the barbarian enemy, and busied themselves with frivolous pursuits including horse racing and killing wild animals.²⁰ In the course of the latter, both displayed a remarkable dexterity with javelin and bow. Commodus, according to Dio, falsely bragged of having once saved Marcus' life.²¹ Constantine, according to Psellos, falsely bragged of having killed the rebel Bardas Phocas as he was attacking Basil at the Battle of Abydos in 989.²² Commodus and Constantine are both portrayed as being suspicious and fearful of the aristocracy, ready to listen to any rumor, and quick to kill or maim any suspected rival without recourse to reason or justice.²³ These parallels between Commodus and Constantine may of course truly represent nothing more than coincidence, but coincidence eventually becomes a strained answer. There is one more example: Commodus' predilection for taking part in gladiatorial bouts is well known²⁴; and among the

17. Cassius Dio, Epitome of Book LXXII, 36. 4 = Xiphilinos, 267.14. Citations of Dio and Xiphilinos are from the Loeb edition of Dio, vol. IX.

18. Psellos, III. 2.

19. *Ibid.*, VI. 197.

20. *Ibid.*, II. 2; Cassius Dio, Epitome of Book LXXIII, 2. 2; Herodian, I. 6, 10; Paianios (Greek translator of Eutropius) VIII. 15. Psellos, III. 8; Cassius Dio, LXXIII. 10, 2-3 = Xiphilinos, 273. 15-18; Herodian, I. 15, 1-6.

21. Cassius Dio, LXXIII. 4, 2-3.

22. Psellos, I. 16.

23. *Ibid.*, II. 2; Cassius Dio, LXXIII. 4, 1 = Xiphilinos, 269. 19; Herodian, I. 13, 8.

24. Cassius Dio, LXXIII. 17, 2-3; Herodian, I. 15, 7-9.

vices ascribed to Constantine by Psellos, is the outrageous charge that Constantine revived and personally and publicly took part in contests of single combat (*γυμνοποδίας*), and this immediately after describing the aged Constantine as arthritic and unable to walk.²⁵

If the suggestion that Psellos may have utilized a literary model in formulating his portrait of Constantine is not capable of definitive proof, neither is the suspicion convincingly dispelled by comparison of Psellos' tale with the few other surviving sources for the period. The Greek sources, despite the appearance of unanimous agreement with Psellos, have almost no claim to independent knowledge of the facts, with one possible exception: the *Σύνοψις Ἱστοριῶν* of Psellos' younger contemporary, John Skylitzes.

Skylitzes seems to echo Psellos' condemnation of Constantine. He is again portrayed as undisciplined and irresponsible, fit more for the hippodrome than for the palace.²⁶ The charge is repeated that Constantine promoted favorites into positions of power while ignoring those preferred by birth, excellence, and experience; likewise that he cruelly harassed his own subjects.²⁷ The death-bed decision on the succession and the subsequent marriage of Zoë to Romanos are also described by Skylitzes in terms very similar to those of Psellos.²⁸ But the accuracy of the *Χρονογραφία* is not entirely vindicated.

In the preface to his work Skylitzes specifically mentions Michael Psellos as being among his predecessors in the field of history. The citation is complimentary: a complaint that Psellos fails to provide adequate details.²⁹ But the details of Constantine's reign recorded by Skylitzes, with few exceptions, fail to escape the schemata of generalities provided by Psellos. Skylitzes, for example, merely provides specific examples of exalted favorites and persecuted aristocrats.³⁰ New information is sparse, but this new data seems rather more

25. Psellos, II. 8.

26. Skylitzes, p. 370 = Cedrenos, p. 480: ... αὐτὸς μὲν πράττων οὐδὲν ἢ βουλευόμενος τῶν δεόντων, ὑποδομιῶν δὲ χαίρων καὶ μύμοις καὶ γελωτοποιοῖς, καὶ κοττάβοις ἐννοκτερεύων ...

27. Skylitzes, pp. 370-71 = Cedrenos, pp. 480-81.

28. Skylitzes, p. 373 = Cedrenos, p. 484. Constantine Dalassenos is cited as the emperor's first choice for a son-in-law, Romanos being finally picked at the urging of the *drungarius vigiliae*, Simeon.

29. Skylitzes, p. 3 = Cedrenos, I, 4. However, there is at least a possibility that Skylitzes' comment may not have been directed at the *Χρονογραφία*. See K. Snipes, "A Newly Discovered Work of Michael Psellos," *Abstracts of Papers: Byzantine Studies Conference*, 1977, pp. 57-58.

30. APPOINTMENTS: (1) Nikolas, Domesticus of Schools, *παρικομώμενος* (Skylitzes p. 370 = Cedrenos, p. 480); *πρόεδρον* under Zoe (Skylitzes p. 422 = Cedrenos, p. 541); fighting against the rebel Cacicius under C. Monomachos (Skylitzes p. 436 = Cedrenos, p. 559); deposed (Skylitzes, p. 438 = Cedrenos, p. 560). (2) Nikephoros, *protovestiarius* (Skylitzes, p. 370 = Cedrenos, p. 480); becomes a monk to avoid death (Skylitzes, p. 398 = Cedrenos, p. 514). (3) Simeon, *drungarius vigiliae* (Skylitzes, p. 370 = Cedrenos, p. 480); Domesticus of Schools under Romanos III (Skylitzes, p. 382 = Cedrenos,

to enhance than to detract from the suspicion that Psellos' description of Constantine is not entirely factual, and that Skylitzes knew and was influenced by the Psellian thesis. For the account of Skylitzes, so long as it remains within the substantive bounds prepared by Psellos, is coherent and consistent. The new and more surely independent data, however, is confused and seems to contradict important aspects of Psellos' account of Constantine and of Skylitzes' own. There is mention of Constantine's harsh policy of tax collection,³¹ a policy which could be viewed to contradict Psellos' description of Constantine as a carefree spendthrift and the squanderer of Basil's fortune.³² There is also Skylitzes' suggestion that Constantine had planned before his death to repeal the *ἀλληλέγγυον*,³³ an action incongruent both with a burdensome tax policy and with Constantine's over-bearing and unreasonable attitude toward the aristocracy as otherwise described by both Psellos and Skylitzes. Moreover, this curious citation, inexplicable in terms of the Constantine portrayed by Psellos and otherwise by Skylitzes, is in fact one of the closest points of convergence between the Greek and the non-Greek sources for the reign of

p. 495). (4) Michael Spondulios, Prefect of Antioch (Skylitzes, p. 370 = Cedrenos, p. 481; Skylitzes, p. 377 = Cedrenos, p. 490); relieved of command (Skylitzes, p. 379 = Cedrenos, p. 491; Michael Glykas, *Βιβλος Χρονική*, CSHB [Bonn, 1836], p. 581). (5) Niketas, *Dux of Iberia* (Skylitzes, p. 370 = Cedrenos, p. 481). (6) Eustathios, *ἐταυρεῖαρχην* (Skylitzes, p. 370 = Cedrenos, p. 481).

ARISTOCRATS: (1) Constantine Burtzes, son of Michael Burtzes, blinded for *πρὸ τῆς αυτοκρατορίας αὐτοῦ προσκρούοντα* ... (Skylitzes, p. 371 = Cedrenos, p. 481). (2) Nikephoros Komnenos, *Dux* of Cappadocia and conqueror of Aspracania = Senacherim, *princeps* of Media (Skylitzes, pp. 352, 355 = Cedrenos, pp. 462, 464); recalled, tried for conspiring to rule and blinded (Skylitzes, p. 372 = Cedrenos, p. 482). (3) Bardas Phokas, son of Bardas Phokas, blinded (Skylitzes, p. 372 = Cedrenos, p. 482). (4) Basil Skleros, son of Romanos Skleros, blinded after attacking Prusianos, Prefect of Bucellarion (Skylitzes, p. 372 = Cedrenos, p. 483). (5) Romanos Kurkuas, blinded (Skylitzes, p. 372 = Cedrenos, p. 483). The various reasons (where any are indicated) cited by Skylitzes for these blindings seem hardly to justify Jenkin's statement, *Byzantium*, p. 337, that "the military aristocracy rose nearly as one man, which shows the strength of their resentment against Basil's land laws, and also the strength of Basil's arm in being able to suppress them." Usurpation and revolt had shadowed Constantine all his life, reason enough for suspicion. Even Basil, in his last years, had had to contend with revolt—by Nikephoros Phokas (Skylitzes, p. 366 = Cedrenos, p. 477).

31. Skylitzes, p. 373 = Cedrenos, pp. 483-84. A severe drought seems to have interfered significantly with the annual harvests, and Constantine supposedly compounded matters by rigorously collecting the tribute every year, and even demanded back payment for two years when Basil had not bothered to collect.

32. Psellos, II. 3.

33. Skylitzes, p. 375 = Cedrenos, p. 486: Ἐξέκοψε δὲ καὶ τέλος ἀπερρίξωσε τὸ ἀλληλέγγυον, ὅπερ ἐμελέτα μὲν ὁ Κωνσταντῖνος ποιῆσαι, οὐκ ἔφρασε δέ.

Constantine VIII, a convergence amplified in significance by the subordinate character of the remaining Greek sources.³⁴

In the twelfth century, Zonaras produced an account of Constantine VIII which is obviously compounded (at times even verbally) from the works of Psellos and Skylitzes.³⁵ He adds no new data whatsoever. However, Zonaras' wholesale use of the two preceding sources at least provides renewed confirmation of the meager and unilateral nature of the Greek tradition. The other and less significant chroniclers, Michael Glykas, Ephraem, Joel, and Constantine Manasses are equally lacking in new information.³⁶

But the strongest challenge both to the credibility of Psellos' account of Constantine and to the independent character of Psellos' Greek substantiators lies beyond the Greek language tradition. For eastern sources in Arabic, Armenian, and Syriac describe, with a uniformity equal to that of the Greek tradition, a Constantine who is scarcely recognizable in the Psellian buffoon; and the dichotomy is more clear-cut than a mere problem of "tone." That is, these sources do not merely disagree with the Greek tradition concerning the merit(s) of any particular act(s) of Constantine VIII, but portray at times a distinct and opposite scheme of events. The conflict between these two groups of sources in the case of Constantine VIII has been no secret at least since Schlumberger's work early in this century.³⁷ But little has been made of the

34. The abolition of the ἀλληλέγγυον, while contrary to Constantine's reputed attitude toward the aristocracy (as described by Psellos), would not however be an action out of character for a disinterested spendthrift (as Psellos also portrays Constantine). Thus this matter could provide some common ground between Psellos and Yahya.

35. Psellos, II. 2: ἄλκιμος δὲ ὦν περὶ σῶμα, δειλὸς ἦν τὴν ψυχὴν . . . καὶ τὸ μὲν πέρει βαρβαρικὸν ὑποκινούμενον καθ' ἡμῶν, ἀξιώμασιν ἀνείργει καὶ δωρεαῖς . . .

Zonaras, p. 570: ἦν δ' εὐμεγέθης μὲν τὸν ὄγκον τοῦ σώματος καὶ τὴν ἀλκὴν γενναϊότατος, δειλὸς δὲ τὴν ἔξω τὴν ψυχικὴν, ὅθεν οὐδὲ πολέμοις κατευνάξων ἔκρυνε τὰς τῶν βαρβάρων ὁρμὰς, δωρεαῖς δὲ μᾶλλον καὶ ἀξιώμασι.

Psellos, II. 7: Ἦττητο δὲ καὶ γαστρός καὶ ὑπροδισίων . . .

Zonaras, p. 569: Ἦττητο γὰρ γαστρός καὶ ὑπροδισίων καὶ ἐμεμήνει περὶ τοὺς κύβους τε καὶ τὰ θέατρα, ἀλλὰ μέντοι καὶ περὶ τὰ κυνηγέσια.

Scylitzes, p. 373 = Cedrenos, p. 483: Τούτῳ τῷ ἔτει καὶ Πατρίωνάκει εἰσβολὴν ἐποίησαντο κατὰ Βουλγαρίας . . . διὸ ὁ βασιλεὺς Κωνσταντῖνος τὸν Διογένην ἄρχοντα Σιρμίου . . . καὶ ἠνάγκασε περαιωθέντας τὸν Ἰστρον ἡσυχίαν ἄγειν.

Zonaras, p. 571: οἱ Πατρίωνάκει, Σκύραι δ' οὗτοι ὡς ἔμπροσθεν εἰρηται, διαβάντες τὸν Ἰστρον τῇ χώρᾳ τῆς Βουλγαρίας οὐ μικρῶς ἐλυμήναντο. ἀλλὰ τούτοις ἀντεπελθὼν Κωνσταντῖνος ὁ Διογένης δ' τοῦ Σιρμίου κρατῶν . . . καὶ ἡρεμῶν ἠνάγκασε τὸν Ἰστρον διαπεράσαντας.

36. The familiar charges are repeated, as Glykas, p. 579: ἀλλὰ καὶ πρὸς ἱπποδρομίας ὡς οὐδεὶς ἕτερος κεχηνῶς τὴν τοῦ κοινῶ φροντίδα ὡς οὐδὲν ἡγούμενος ἦν; Joel, perhaps revealing a knowledge of Skylitzes, also repeats the latter's comment on the ἀλληλέγγυον: ἐξέκοψε δὲ καὶ τὸ ἀλληλέγγυον, ὃ παρὰ Βασιλείου τυπωθὲν ἐμελέτα μὲν ὁ Κωνσταντῖνος ἐκκόψαι, οὐκ ἔφθασε δέ (p. 61).

37. Schlumberger, *L'Épopée Byzantine*, III, 1-60.

problem, and this neglect is not justified by the quality of the eastern sources, and especially in the case of the earliest of these, the *Chronicle* of Yahya ibn Sa'id of Antioch.³⁸

For both the period of joint rule with Basil and for the term of Constantine's single rule, the portrayal of Constantine presented by Yahya differs considerably from that of Psellos. During the years of the revolts of Bardas Phokas and Bardas Skleros, which early on threatened the reign of the brothers (intermittently from 976 to 989), Yahya grants Constantine a much more active and responsible role than does Psellos. Constantine's presence at the Battle of Abydos in 989 is reiterated, but whereas Psellos relegates Constantine to an unspecified and presumably subordinate place in the battle line, and ridicules him for falsely claiming to have slain Phokas, Yahya seems to imply that Constantine held a command position.³⁹ Constantine is also cited by Yahya as the major mediator between Basil and Bardas Skleros (a role not mentioned by Psellos); Constantine's diplomatic initiative resulting in Skleros' final submission and the restoration of peace.⁴⁰

Of even greater interest are Yahya's few comments on Constantine's three years of personal rule. In dramatic contrast to the accounts of Psellos and Skylitzes, which portray Constantine as a persecutor of the aristocracy, Yahya asserts that Constantine freed large numbers of political prisoners who had been incarcerated by Basil.⁴¹ Furthermore, Constantine is said to have cancelled all debts owed to the state for non-payment of taxes, and to have exempted from taxation all fallow or abandoned lands.⁴² This amounts of course to the virtual abolition of the ἀλληλέγγυον, and lends special interest to Skylitzes' comments on the subject of taxes. Finally, in contrast to Psellos' charge that Constantine not only made no attempt to add to his dominions militarily, but "did not even care to preserve his existing power" (οὔτε τὰ ὄντα διαφυλάττειν διανενόητο . . .),⁴³ Yahya both describes Constantine's use of military force to hold Basil's gains in Georgia, and implies by his silence that no serious violations of Byzantine territory occurred on the Arab frontier.⁴⁴

38. For an excellent and comprehensive study of Yahya, see John H. Forsyth's dissertation (above n. 3). My use of Yahya and the other eastern sources depends almost entirely upon French and English translations of the original texts.

39. Kratchkovsky and Vasiliev, *Histoire*, p. 425. The tone of the citation implies a certain equality between Basil and Constantine by mention of "their troops."

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 426-27.

41. See Schlumberger, III, 4, n. 1, for a French translation of Yahya's Arabic.

42. *Ibid.*, III, 20, n. 1. See above n. 34.

43. Psellos, VII. 52.

44. Schlumberger, III, 29. The officers of the queen regent supposedly convinced her to reclaim, in the name of her son Pakarat, some fortresses already ceded by the boy's father to Basil in 1022. Constantine is said to have sent an army under the παρακοιμώμενος Nikolaos into Georgia which burned villages, killed many, and took innumerable prisoners.

Yahya's account of Constantine VIII can neither be ignored nor can it be casually footnoted as an interesting aberration in barbarian historiography. Far from being merely an Arab chronicler of Byzantine affairs, Yahya may with some justice be regarded as a Byzantine chronicler writing in Arabic. He was an orthodox Christian of the Egyptian Melkite community who migrated to Antioch to escape religious persecution at a time when Antioch had been again a Byzantine city for nearly fifty years (ca. 1014). Furthermore, a recent, detailed study of his work by John H. Forsyth has demonstrated both that Yahya made use of Greek sources and that his history is, at least in general and especially for details concerning the eastern frontier, considerably more reliable than that of John Skylitzes.⁴⁵ Of no less importance, Yahya is the only historian whose works survive, who was in any real sense a contemporary of Constantine VIII, being in his forties and having lived within the Byzantine orb for over a decade when Basil II died in 1025 (at which time Michael Psellos was about eight years old.) Finally, aspects of Yahya's account can be substantiated from at least as many sources as can that of Psellos.

The Armenian historian Aristakes of Lastivert, a contemporary of Psellos and Skylitzes, describes Constantine as a "peaceful and generous man," but does not imply that Constantine's generosity should be equated to weakness or cowardise.⁴⁶ The military activity in Georgia is cited, as well as Constantine's suppression of a revolt by the *Dux* of Cappadocia, Nikephoros Komnenos. The blinding of Komnenos after his capture recalls Psellos' charges of cruelty, and Skylitzes in fact includes Komnenos in his list of persecuted aristocrats. But Aristakes' version clearly places Komnenos in the wrong, and describes Constantine as being so genuinely troubled by the necessity of punishing a man who had done great service to the state, that he took an entire year to investigate the facts of Komnenos' treachery before rendering punishment.⁴⁷

Furthermore, and ironically enough, Aristakes uses Constantine VIII as a sort of model Byzantine emperor, in contrast to one of supposedly lesser merit, Constantine IX Monomachos; this stemming presumably from Aristakes' anger at the annexation of Ani by Monomachos. In any event, Constantine VIII is represented as making a death-bed grant of autonomy to Armenia, an action usually considered to be apocryphal, but perhaps the suggestion alone is in some measure indicative of Constantine's character.⁴⁸ For Aristakes'

45. See above notes 3, 38.

46. Aristakes de Lastivert, *Récit des malheurs de la nation arménienne*, eds. and trans. M. Canard and H. Berberian (Bruxelles: Ed. de Byzantion, 1973), p. 26.

47. Canard and Berberian, p. 26.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 45. The passage is reminiscent of Psellos' criticism of Constantine for his supposed lack of concern for the bounds of his power. Aristakes' citation of Constantine's military activity would seem however to dim the significance of this parallel. Moreover, Aristakes' description of Constantine's judicious nature fits with Yahya's portrayal of his clemency, and contradicts the Psellian image of cruelty and hair-trigger temper.

regular use of Byzantine administrative terminology and his mention of specific personalities suggests a reasonably close familiarity with Byzantine affairs, and perhaps lessens the chances that he would pick a notorious profligate to flaunt as the patron of Armenian independence.

In the following generation, Matthew of Edessa (d. 1136) reconfirmed Constantine's favorable reputation. Matthew may well have known Aristakes' work, and certainly he too was an Armenian partisan; but his account of Constantine VIII is distinct from Aristakes', completely contrary to Psellos', and represents either an independent confirmation of one significant passage from Yahya's *Chronicle*, or perhaps indicates the use of Yahya as a source. Matthew describes Constantine as being lenient towards all criminals, and indicates that he released many prisoners.⁴⁹ Constantine is also said to have "ordered the prison of the condemned, which Basil had built and which he had indeed filled up with Greek magnates, to be burned to the ground."⁵⁰ And at the time of Constantine's death, the memory of his compassion and of his peaceful ways produced, according to Matthew, "a great sorrow in the country which had been deprived of such an emperor."⁵¹

The Syriac chronicles of Michael the Syrian, Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch, and of Bar Hebraeus carry the eastern tradition of Constantine VIII into the thirteenth century.⁵² Neither offers any truly new information concerning Constantine's life, but both describe him as gracious and magnanimous, and portray the relationship between Constantine and Basil as amiable and without jealousy. Likewise, both suggest that Constantine's health or lack of physical strength may have been the key factor in his seeming lack of activity during the years of joint rule with Basil.

There are thus three fronts upon which the accuracy of Michael Psellos' portrayal of Constantine VIII can be challenged: internal contradictions and possible fabrication of events based on a literary model; the seeming lack of any real and independent confirmation by the other Greek sources for the period; and the direct conflict with the unanimous judgment of the non-Greek sources. That is not to suggest that Constantine VIII should now suddenly be viewed as a good or even as a competent emperor. The matter is not so simple, for even if reasonable grounds exist to suspect that some rhetorical fabrication has been perpetrated, absolute detection in any particular case is impossible to guarantee. Furthermore, conviction of Psellos for inaccuracy speaks

49. A. Dostourian, "The Chronicle of Matthew of Edessa: Translated from the Original Armenian," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Rutgers University, 1972, pp. 65-66.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

51. *Ibid.*

52. J. B. Chabot, ed. and trans., *Chronique de Michel le Syrien . . .* (Bruxelles: Culture et Civilization, 1963), III, 132-33; E. A. W. Budge, ed., and trans., *The Chronography of Gregory Abū'l Faraj, the son of Aaron, the Hebrew Physician Commonly Known as Bar Hebraeus* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1932), pp. 191-94.

only to the problem of conflict between the Greek and the non-Greek sources, and that only imperfectly. Many more questions are raised, not the least of which concern Psellos' motives. Psellos' fictions may, in any event, cloak a reality which is no less inspiring, but only less interesting. And of course the characteristics of compassion and clemency ascribed to Constantine by the eastern sources no more insure, than cruelty and suspicion preclude competency.

This seeming impasse is not however without some value. For if Constantine's competency cannot be proven, his lack of the same is placed equally in question, suggesting that the roots of the Byzantine decline in the eleventh century are perhaps neither so simple nor so easily pin-pointed as Psellos would lead us to believe. In particular, a blurring of that stark contrast between Constantine and Basil which is so much a part of Psellos' rhetoric and consequently of modern theory, opens the way for investigation of the causes of the eleventh-century decline into the period preceding 1025. And an unbiased view of Constantine, not as Basil's moral and physical antithesis, but simply as his colleague, may, by the shedding of superlatives, ultimately result in a better understanding of both.

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NOTES

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*The Eleventh-Century Choir-Screen at Monte Cassino: A Reconstruction**

In his eyewitness account of the church built at Monte Cassino by Abbot Desiderius in the eleventh century, Leo of Ostia describes an elaborate screen which was erected at the front of the choir. Leo's description of the screen is detailed and two scholars have conjectured reconstructions of it. In 1904, Emile Bertaux interpreted Leo's account in the form of a description of an imaginary visit to the eleventh-century church,¹ and more recently K. J. Conant and H. M. Willard have produced a graphic reconstruction of the church interior which includes the screen (fig. 1).² These two reconstructions are by no means identical, and neither coincides exactly with Leo's account. The difficulties arise not in visualising the components of the screen but in putting them together in a logical and structurally sound way.

Leo's account of the screen is as follows:

Quem profecto nostrum confratrem imperator Romano nimis honorifice suscepit, et quandiu ibi mansit honeste cum suis omnibus reverenterque tractavit et quidquid operum inibi vellet efficere, imperialem et licentiam facultatemque concessit. Fecit itaque et cancellos quattuor fusiles ex aere ante altare scilicet hinc inde inter chorum et aditum statuendos, trabem quoque nichilominus fusilem ex aere, cum candelabris numero 50, in quibus utique totidem cerei per festivitates praecipuas ponerentur, lampadibus subter in aereis uncis ex eadem trabe 36 dependentibus. Quae videlicet aerea traves aereis aequae brachiis ac manibus sustentata, trabi lignae

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1. *L'art dans l'Italie méridionale* (Paris: A. Fontemoing, 1904), p. 161.

2. Elizabeth G. Holt, ed., *A Documentary History of Art*, 2nd ed. (1947; rpt. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), fig. 1. Hereafter Conant. To the best of my knowledge, there is no explanatory essay to accompany this drawing.