

# FOURTEEN

## BYZANTINE RULERS

The *Chronographia* of  
Michael Psellus

TRANSLATED,  
WITH AN INTRODUCTION, BY  
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PENGUIN BOOKS

## BASIL II

976-1025

The circumstances in which the Emperor John Tzimiskes met his death have already been described [in the history of Leo the Great]. Basil and Constantine, the sons of Romanus, were now the legitimate heirs to an Empire which through the efforts of their predecessor had won many triumphs and greatly increased its power.<sup>2</sup>

Had princes had seen the last of their boyhood days, but their interests lay far apart. Basil, the elder of the two, always gave an impression of alertness, intelligence, and thoughtfulness. Constantine appeared to be apathetic, lazy, and devoted to the life of luxury. It was natural that they should abandon the idea of joint rule. By mutual consent all real power was vested in Basil, and Constantine was associated with him as emperor in name only. They planned wisely, for the Empire's well-being depended on the elevation of the older and more experienced brother.

Constantine renounced most of his privileges on this occasion, and perhaps he deserves some commendation here. Because legally he was entitled to share his father's inheritance on equal terms – by 'inheritance' I mean the Empire. The sacrifice was all the more remarkable because he was at the time very young, just at the age, in fact, when just

<sup>1</sup> The book begins where Leo the Deacon finishes, at the death of John I Tzimiskes in 976. Leo (*Hist.* x, II, p. 177) describes the circumstances of the emperor's death; he may have been poisoned.

<sup>2</sup> The young men succeeded on 11 January 976. Basil was eighteen years old, his brother two years younger. They had been crowned during their father's reign and had been under the guardianship of their mother Theophano and John Tzimiskes.

for power is most readily kindled. One must remember, too, that Basil was by no means a full-grown man; he was still a mere stripling, 'growing his first beard', as they say. Yet Constantine allowed him to take precedence. It is only right, then, that I should pay this tribute to the younger brother at the outset of this history.

Once invested with supreme power over the Romans, Basil was unwilling to share his designs with anyone else; he refused advice on the conduct of public affairs. On the other hand, having had no previous experience of military matters or of good civil administration, he discovered that to rely on his own unaided judgement was impossible. He was compelled to turn for help to the *parakoimomenus* (Lord Chamberlain).<sup>1</sup> This man, called Basil, happened at that time to be the most remarkable person in the Roman Empire, outstanding in intellect, bodily stature, and regal appearance. Although he was born of the same father as the father of Basil and Constantine, on his mother's side he came of different stock. In early infancy he had suffered castration – a natural precaution against a concubine's offspring, for as a eunuch he could never hope to usurp the throne from a legitimate heir. Actually he was resigned to his fate and was genuinely attached to the imperial house – after all, it was his own family. He was particularly devoted to his nephew Basil, embracing the young man in the most affectionate manner and watching over his progress like some kindly foster-parent. One should not be surprised, then, that Basil placed on this man's shoulders the burden of Empire. The older man's serious nature, too, had its influence on the emperor's character. The *parakoimomenus*, in fact, was like an athlete competing at the games while Basil watched him as a spectator – not a spectator present merely to cheer on the victor, but rather one who trained himself in the running and took part in the contests himself,

1. Son of Romanus I Lecapenus, he was promoted by Nicephorus Phocas.

following in the other's footsteps and imitating his style. So the *parakoimomenus* had the whole world at his feet. It was to him that the civilian population looked, to him that the army turned, and he was responsible, indeed solely responsible, for the administration of public finance and the direction of government. In this task he was constantly assisted by the emperor, both in word and in deed, for Basil not only backed up his minister's measures, but confirmed them in writing.

To most men of our generation who saw the Emperor Basil he seemed austere and abrupt in manner, an irascible person who did not quickly change his mind, sober in his daily habits and averse to all effeminacy, but if I am to believe the historians of that period who wrote about him, he was not at all like that when his reign began. A change took place in his character after he acceded to the throne, and instead of leading his former dissolute, voluptuous sort of life, he became a man of great energy. The complete metamorphosis was brought about by the pressure of events. His character stiffened, so to speak. Feebleness gave way to strength and the old slackness disappeared before a new fixity of purpose. In his early days he used to feast quite openly and frequently indulged in the pleasures of love; his main concern was with his banqueting and a life spent in the gay, indolent atmosphere of the court. The combination of youth and unlimited power gave him opportunities for self-indulgence, and he enjoyed them to the full. The change in his mode of living dates from the attempted revolutions of the notorious Sclerus<sup>1</sup> and of Phocas.<sup>2</sup> Sclerus twice raised the standard of revolt, and there

1. Bardas Sclerus had been brother-in-law of John Tzimisce, who had married his sister Maria. He had expected to succeed John, for he had been promised the throne by the emperor on his deathbed.

2. The Phocas family came from Cappadocia and for several generations had enjoyed high repute as soldiers. The father of Bardas Phocas was that Leo who won military fame under Romanus II; his uncle was Nicephorus, himself an emperor, and husband of Theophano.

were other aspirants to the throne, with two parties in opposition to the emperor. From that time onward, Basil's carefree existence was forgotten and he wholeheartedly applied himself to serious objects. Once the first blow had been struck against those members of his family who had seized power, he set himself resolutely to compass their utter destruction.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE REBELLION OF SCLERUS

A policy so drastic, not unnaturally, stirred the nephews of Nicephorus Phocas to bitter revolt. The trouble began with Sclerus, a man who was not only a competent planner, but extremely clever in carrying out his schemes, possessed of vast wealth (no mean asset in one who aimed at a throne), with the prestige of royal blood and of success in great wars, with all the military caste at his side to help on his enterprise. Sclerus's attempted *coup d'état*, in fact, found considerable support. It was the first daring effort to depose Basil and the pretender was very confident of victory. He marched against the emperor in full force, with cavalry and foot-soldiers, thinking he had but to stretch forth his hand to seize the Empire. Actually, the heavy-armed infantry had rallied to Sclerus *en bloc*, and the emperor's advisers, knowing this, at first believed their cause to be hopeless. On second thoughts, however, they changed their minds and the whole affair took on a different aspect. Despair gave way to courage when in a certain Bardas they thought they had found a worthy opponent for the rebel. To them Bardas represented a safe anchorage, a shelter from the storm. He was, indeed, a man of noble birth and great valour, nephew of the Emperor

1. That Basil never carried out his intention of destroying the Phocas family is proved by the fact that as late as 1022 a son of Bardas, another Nicephorus, was in revolt and was actually crowned emperor in Cappadocia. Fortunately for Basil he was assassinated and the rebellion abortive.

Nicephorus. So they entrusted to this Bardas whatever forces still remained. He was made commander-in-chief and sent forth to do battle with the common enemy.

Their immediate difficulties were thus overcome, but their new general was no less formidable than Sclerus. He was descended from an emperor. In all probability he would never be content to occupy a subordinate position, so they stripped him of his citizen's robes and all insignia of royalty, and forced him to enter the Church. Then they bound him by the most fearful oaths never to be guilty of treason, never to transgress the promises he had made. Having taken these precautions against any ambitious schemes he might entertain in the future, they sent him off with the whole of the emperor's forces.

According to the historians, this man Bardas reminded people of his uncle, the Emperor Nicephorus, for he was always wrapped in gloom, and watchful, capable of foreseeing all eventualities, of comprehending everything at a glance. Far from being ignorant of warlike manoeuvres, he was thoroughly versed in every type of siege warfare, every trick of ambush, every tactic of pitched battle. In the matter of physical prowess, moreover, Bardas was more energetic and virile than Sclerus. Any man who received a blow from his hand was dead straightway, and whole armies trembled even when he shouted from afar. He now divided up his forces, arranging them in battalions, and more than once – indeed, on several occasions – put his opponents to flight, despite their numbers. In truth, Bardas seemed to surpass his enemies in skill and strategy and vigour, in inverse proportion to his own inferiority in numbers.

Each side was confident in face of its foes, and the two leaders by common consent decided to engage in single combat.<sup>1</sup> So, riding out to the space that divided the two lines, they spied one another and without more ado came to close quarters. The rebel Sclerus, unable to curb his natural

1. On 24 March 979 at Pancalia.

impetuosity, broke the rules of this kind of fighting, and as he approached Phocas struck him with all his might on the head. The blow gained additional power because it was delivered on the charge. Phocas, dumbfounded at the unexpectedness of this stroke, momentarily lost control of his reins, but collecting his wits again he returned the blow on the same part of his adversary's body. The latter thereupon lost interest in the combat and rode away in flight.

Both patriots and rebels were convinced that here was the decisive point in the war. Certainly no event contributed more to the emperor's victory, for Sclerus was completely embarrassed. He could no longer withstand Phocas in battle and he was too ashamed to beg terms from the emperor. In these circumstances he adopted a policy which was neither very wise nor very safe, transferring his whole army from Roman territories to Assyria. There he made himself known to the King Chosroes and roused his suspicions, for Chosroes feared the great numbers of his army and possibly he was nervous, too, in case the Romans planned some sudden attack on himself. The upshot of the matter was that all Sclerus's men were made prisoners and carried off to gaol.

#### THE REVOLT OF BARDAS PHOCAS

Meanwhile Bardas Phocas returned to the emperor. He was given the privilege of a triumph and took his place among the personal friends of his sovereign. So ended the first revolt. Apparently Basil was now freed from all his troubles, but this seeming collapse of the opposition proved to be only a prelude to the host of evils that were to come. Phocas, after receiving high honours when he first returned to Byzantium, later found himself neglected. His ambitions appeared to be once more slipping from his grasp. This kind of treatment, in his opinion, was undeserved. He had not betrayed the trust reposed in him; he had entered into an agreement, on

specific terms, and he had faithfully kept it. So, disgruntled, he broke away in revolt - a revolt more serious and more difficult to counter than the previous attempt of Sclerus - with the greater part of the army ranged beside him against Basil.<sup>1</sup> Having won over the leading and most powerful families, he decided to proclaim himself an open enemy of the régime. An army of Iberians was conscripted; fierce, proud warriors standing up to ten feet in height.<sup>2</sup> It was no longer in imagination, but in very truth, that he put on the imperial robes, with the emperor's crown and the royal insignia of purple.

I will describe what happened next. A foreign war surprised the Babylonian, that same King Chosroes to whom Sclerus and his men had fled and from whom they hoped for assistance. Those hopes, as I have said, had already been dashed. Well, this war proved to be a terrible strain on the king's resources and great numbers of armed men were involved in the struggle. It was impossible for Chosroes to feel any confidence in his own native forces without foreign aid. So he turned for help to the exiled Romans. They were at once released from their bonds, brought out of their prisons, strongly armed and set in battle-array against his enemies. They (Sclerus and his men) being virile and warlike soldiers, acquainted with the disposition of infantry in battle, arranged themselves in two groups, one on either flank. Then, charging on horseback in mass-formation and shouting their war-cry, they killed some of the enemy there on the spot and others they put to flight. The pursuit continued as far as the earth-works and the foe was completely annihilated.<sup>3</sup> On their way

1. This revolt came to a head on 15 August 987 when Bardas Phocas was proclaimed emperor at Chresianus. Sclerus had meanwhile escaped from Baghdad and made terms with him: Phocas was to have the capital and the European provinces, Sclerus Asia Minor. Barely a month later Phocas broke his word and on 14 September Sclerus was imprisoned by him at Tyropaeum and stripped of all insignia.

2. Very tall (a Byzantine saying).

3. This battle apparently took place late in 986.

back the Romans, as if inspired with one common idea, took to flight themselves. The reason for this was that they feared Chosroes. They expected little consideration from him and they believed that he would throw them back into prison. So they made off with all the speed they could muster, and they covered a great distance before the Assyrians noticed they had gone. (These operations took place in Assyria.) Chosroes, whose army had now reassembled, immediately issued an order that all soldiers of the Assyrian army who met these Romans were to join in pursuing them. A large group did indeed fall upon them from the rear, but they soon discovered how inferior they were to the Roman soldier, for the runaways suddenly wheeled about and defeated their pursuers. In fact, the enemy suffered such losses that they retreated fewer in numbers than the Romans, although they had vastly outnumbered them when the engagement started.

Here, Sclerus decided, was the opportunity to revive his struggle for power. The whole Empire, he thought, was ripe for the plucking, for Phocas had already gone away to Anatolia and all the enemy's forces were scattered. Having arrived at the Roman frontier, however, he learnt that Phocas had designs on the throne himself, and since he was in no position to take on both the emperor and his rival, he indulged in a fresh outburst of insolence at the expense of the former, while he presented himself to the latter in the guise of vassal. Phocas's hegemony was recognized and Sclerus agreed to serve under him. Thereupon their forces were divided in two and the rebel army was greatly strengthened. Full of confidence in their soldiers and military dispositions, they came down as far as the Propontis and strongpoints on the seaboard, made their entrenchments secure, and all but tried to leap over the sea itself.

The Emperor Basil was well aware of disloyalty among the Romans, but not long before this a picked band of Scythians

had come to help him from the Taurus.<sup>1</sup> These men, fine fighters, he had trained in a separate corps, combined with them another mercenary force, divided by companies, and sent them out to fight the rebels. They came upon them unexpectedly, when they were off their guard, seated at table and drinking, and after they had destroyed not a few of them, scattered the rest in all directions.<sup>2</sup> The remnants of the insurgents actually banded together and opposed Phocas himself, with considerable enthusiasm.

Basil personally took part in these operations with the Roman army. He had just grown a beard and was learning the art of war from experience in actual combat. Even his brother Constantine had a place in the battle-line, armed with breast-plate and long spear.

So the two faced one another: on the one side, by the sea, the emperor's forces; on the higher parts, the rebels, with a great space between. When Phocas discovered that Basil and Constantine were in the enemy's ranks, he no longer put off the battle.<sup>3</sup> That day, he determined, was to be the turning-point of the war, the day which was to decide the future of the Empire. So he committed his cause to fortune. It was contrary to the advice of the astrologers in his retinue, for they would have dissuaded him from fighting. Their sacrifices clearly showed the folly of it, but he gave rein to his horse and obstinately refused to listen. It is said that signs of ill-omen appeared to him, as well as to the astrologers, for no sooner had he mounted his horse than the charger slipped under him, and when he seated himself on a second, that also, a few paces farther on, suffered the same fate. His skin,

1. This Scythian force of 6,000 arrived at Constantinople in 988. Vladimir of Russia was persuaded to help. Basil gave him his sister Anna in marriage and Vladimir was baptized as a Christian. The Scythians (or Varangians) remained in Greece after Phocas had been defeated.

2. The Battle of Chrysopolis in the summer of 988.

3. The Battle of Abydos, 13 April 989.

moreover, changed colour, his heart was filled with foreboding, and his head was troubled with giddiness. Phocas, however, was not the man to give way once he had set himself to a task, so, riding at the head of his army, and being already somewhat near the emperor's forces, he gathered about him some foot-soldiers. The men I refer to were the finest fighters among the Iberians, all of them young men just growing their first beards, in the flower of their youth, tall men and men of equal height, as though they had been measured off with a ruler, armed on their right with swords, and irresistible when they charged. With these warriors about him, under one standard, Phocas moved forward to the attack in front of his army. Gathering speed he made straight for the emperor with a wild cry, sword uplifted in his right hand, as if he intended to kill Basil there and then.

While Phocas was so boldly charging towards him, Basil rode out in front of his army too. He took his stand there, sword in hand. In his left hand he clasped the image of the Saviour's Mother, thinking this ikon the surest protection again his opponent's terrific onslaught. Phocas swept on like a cloud driven by violent winds, whirling over the plain. Meanwhile those who were stationed on the flanks hurled javelins at him. Among others, slightly in front of the main army, was the Emperor Constantine, brandishing a long spear. After he had galloped forward some distance from his own men, Phocas suddenly slipped from his saddle and was thrown to the ground. At this point the accounts of different authors become contradictory. Some contend that he was hit by the javelin-throwers and fell mortally wounded. Others aver that he was overcome by a sudden faintness, the effect of a stomach disorder, and so fell down from his saddle. Whatever the true explanation may have been, Constantine arrogated to himself the proud distinction of having slain the rebel. The usual story, however, and the one considered to be most probable, is that the whole affair was the result of an

intrigue. Poison was mixed, Phocas drank it, and when he moved about the potion became suddenly effective, deprived him of his powers of reason, and caused the giddiness that led to his downfall. The original idea was Basil's, the ministering hand that of Phocas's cupbearer. For my own part, I prefer to express no opinion on the subject and ascribe all the glory to the Mother of the Word.

At all events, he fell, he who until then could neither be wounded nor taken alive, a piteous and mournful sight. As soon as the rival armies saw what had happened, the one was immediately split up and retreated, their close-packed ranks broken, their rout complete. The emperor's forces, on the other hand, after Phocas's collapse, at once leapt upon him, scattered his Iberian bodyguard, and chopped him in pieces with repeated sword-blows. His head was cut off and brought to Basil.<sup>1</sup>

The complete change in the emperor's character dates from that time. While he rejoiced at the death of his enemy, he was no less grieved by the sad condition of his own affairs. He became suspicious of everyone, a haughty and secretive man, ill-tempered, and irate with those who failed to carry out his orders.

#### THE FALL AND BANISHMENT OF THE PARAKOIMOMENUS BASIL<sup>2</sup>

Far from allowing the *parakoimomenus* Basil to continue in his general supervision of the government, the emperor from

1. With this defeat opposition to Basil faded away. All the leaders of Phocas's army were put to death except Leo Meissemus, his second-in-command, and Sclerus, who had been set free by Phocas's wife as soon as she heard of her husband's death, was soon reconciled to the emperor.  
2. Pellus seems to have misunderstood the chronology of Basil's reign, for the Lord Chamberlain was deposed in 985 and died in exile soon after. Cedrenus (699, p. 443) implies that his downfall coincided with the rise of Romanus, son of Sclerus.

now on decided to supervise everything himself. Further, he proceeded to pursue his minister with a relentless hatred, which he showed in all manner of ways, and refused to see him. Although the *parakoimomenus* was a relative, although the Emperor was greatly indebted to him and the minister had done good service, at no little inconvenience to himself, and despite the very high office that he held, Basil regarded him as an enemy. Nothing on earth would persuade him to change this attitude. The truth is, it offended his pride to think that he, the emperor and a full-grown man, should be given only a share in the government, as if he were an ordinary citizen. One would imagine he had never ascended the throne, but shared authority on equal terms with another man, or held inferior rank in the administration. He gave the subject much thought, and it was only after long vacillation that he finally made up his mind. Once the decision was taken, however, he dismissed the *parakoimomenus* and deposed him at one blow. What made it worse was the fact that this change in the latter's fortunes was not softened by any sign of respect. In fact, the emperor's action was incredibly cruel, for he shipped him off into exile.

Nor did this disgrace prove to be the end of Basil's troubles. Rather was it the prelude to further misfortunes, for the emperor next proceeded to review the events of the reign ever since he acceded to the throne and the *parakoimomenus* began to govern the Empire. He examined the various measures that had been taken during all that period. Whatever happened to contribute to his own (the emperor's) welfare, or to the good of the state, was allowed to remain on the statutes. All those decrees, on the other hand, which referred to the granting of favours or positions of dignity, were now rescinded. The former, the emperor contended, had been approved by himself; of the latter he knew nothing. In everything he strove to bring about the eunuch's downfall and disaster. For example, the *parakoimomenus* had built a

magnificent monastery in honour of Basil the Great, a monastery that bore his own name too. It had been constructed on a massive scale, at great cost of labour, and it combined different styles of architecture with beauty. Moreover, the greater part of the material used in its building had been obtained from generous and voluntary contributions. The emperor now wished to raze this edifice to the ground. However, since he was careful to avoid the charge of impiety, only certain parts of the monastery were removed, and not all those at once. Other parts he demolished, and the rest of the building, the movable furniture and the mosaics, he treated in much the same way. He never rested content until, to quote his own jesting words, 'he had made of this place of meditation a place of thought – the thought which those who dwell there would now have to take for the bare necessities of life!'

Naturally, the *parakoimomenus*, tortured like this day after day, was filled with despair. There was no relief for his suffering, no consolation whatever. Suddenly cast down, in one brief moment, from his great position of power, this high and mighty man, whose heart had once been filled with pride, now became unable to govern his own body. His limbs were paralysed and he a living corpse. Not long afterwards he died, in very truth a pillar of remembrance, his life a fine subject for story-tellers, or, shall I say, a proof of the fickleness of all worldly fortune. Basil the *parakoimomenus* had fulfilled his destiny.

Let us return to the emperor. Now that he observed the diverse character of his dominions, and saw that it was no easy matter to wield such tremendous power, Basil abjured all self-indulgence. He even went so far as to scorn bodily ornaments. His neck was unadorned by collars, his head by diadems. He refused to make himself conspicuous in purple-coloured cloaks, and he put away superfluous rings, even clothes of different colours. On the other hand, he took



great pains to ensure that the various departments of the government should be centred on himself, and that they should work without friction. He adopted a supercilious manner, not only in his dealings with other men, but even towards his brother. To Constantine he allotted a mere handful of guards, as though he grudged him protection of a more dignified or imposing nature. Having first straitened himself, so to speak, and having cheerfully stripped off the proud contraptions of monarchy in his own case, he now dealt with his brother and gradually decreased his authority too. He left him to enjoy the beauties of the country, the delights of bathing and hunting, his special hobbies, while he himself went out to the frontiers, where his armies were hard pressed. His ambition, in fact, was to purge the Empire completely of all the barbarians who encircle us and lay siege to our borders, both in the east and in the west.

#### THE SECOND REVOLT OF SCLERUS AFTER THE DEATH OF PHOCCAS<sup>1</sup>

This project, however, had to be postponed to the future, for Sclerus kept him occupied with a second revolt, and the intended expedition against the barbarians became impossible, at least for the moment. Phocas had died and the men who had been under his command before the alliance with Sclerus, being now foiled of the hopes they had placed in him, dispersed and completely disbanded. Sclerus and his soldiers, who had escaped with him from Assyria, returned home, but voluntarily re-formed their army again. They constituted what might be described as an independent corps, numerically

1. This revolt lasted only a few months; a reconciliation was effected in October 980. It seems likely that Sclerus was supported mainly by the Church and Bardas Phocas by the army. Sclerus died in retirement on 6 March 991, blinded and practically a prisoner of Basil. He had accepted the title of *anropalates*.

the equal of Phocas's army and in the eyes of the emperor just as menacing.

This man Sclerus, though apparently not to be compared with Phocas in physical prowess, was a greater exponent of military strategy and management. It was also said that he was more resourceful. When his quarrel with the emperor flared up a second time, he was careful not to come to grips or risk a battle. His idea was rather to build up his army with heavy reinforcements and harass the enemy by guerilla tactics without committing himself to open warfare. No attempt was made to overwhelm Basil's forces in actual operations, but his transports were invariably stopped in convoy, he was cut off from free use of the roads, all merchandise being conveyed to the capital from abroad was impounded – to the great benefit of Sclerus's own army. Moreover, by maintaining strict vigilance, orders transmitted through the state couriers were intercepted and never carried out.

The rebellion began in the summer and dragged on into the autumn. A whole year passed by and the intrigue was still not crushed, and, as a matter of fact, this evil troubled the State for many years to come. Once they had enrolled under Sclerus, his men were no longer divided in their loyalties; there were no secret desertions to the emperor. Sclerus inspired them with his own resolute determination and bound them into one coherent body. By favours he won their loyalty, by his kindness he earned their devotion; he reconciled their differences, ate at the same table, drank from the same cup, called them by name, and by his flattery ensured their allegiance.

The emperor tried all his wiles and tricks to frustrate him, but Sclerus easily evaded them. Like a good general, he answered his opponent's schemes and plans with stratagems of his own. Seeing that his enemy could never be caught, Basil sent an embassy to him proposing terms, if Sclerus would

abandon the revolt. Provided he accepted the conditions, he was to occupy rank second only to the emperor himself. At first Sclerus was rather slow to respond. However, he gave the matter deep thought, reviewed the events of the past, examined the present, and guessed what the future might be. He felt the burden of old age and accepted the terms. So he assembled the whole of his army, to support him at the reception of the imperial envoys, and made peace with Basil on the following conditions: he (Sclerus) was to resign his crown and give up wearing the purple, but he was to take precedence immediately after the emperor; the general and others who had revolted with him were to retain their present ranks, and to enjoy as long as they lived whatever privileges he had conferred upon them; they would be deprived neither of property formerly in their possession, nor of any other advantages which had fallen to their lot.

Agreement was reached, and the emperor set out from the capital to one of his most magnificent estates, there to receive the rebel and ratify the treaty.<sup>1</sup> Basil seated himself in the royal tent. Sclerus, some distance away, was introduced by the guards. They led him into the emperor's presence, without preliminaries, not riding on horseback, but escorted on foot. Sclerus was a very tall man, but he was also an aged man, and he came in supported by guards on either side. The emperor, seeing him approaching some way off, turned to the bystanders and made his celebrated remark (everyone knows the story): 'So this is the man I feared! A suppliant dotard, unable to walk by himself! As for Sclerus, whether because of his eagerness, or because in any case he had forgotten, he had kept on his feet the sandals of purple when he laid aside the other insignia of power, so that it seemed that he was arrogating some share in the royal prerogative. Anyway, he approached the emperor wearing the sandals. Basil saw all this from a distance and shut his eyes in annoyance,

1. At Didymotichus.

refusing to see him at all until he first clothed himself like an ordinary citizen in every detail. There and then Sclerus shook off his purple sandals at the door of the tent and so entered the emperor's presence.

As soon as he saw him enter, Basil rose and they embraced one another. Then they held converse, the one excusing his revolt and explaining the reason why he had plotted and carried it out, the other quietly accepting the apology and attributing to bad luck what had occurred. When they shared a common drinking-bowl, the emperor first put to his own lips the cup offered to Sclerus and took a moderate sip of its contents before handing it back to his guest. Thus he relieved him of any suspicion of poison, and at the same time proved the sanctity of their agreement. After this Basil questioned him, as a man accustomed to command, about his Empire. How could it be preserved free from dissension? Sclerus had an answer to this, although it was not the sort of advice one would expect from a general; in fact, it sounded more like a diabolical plot. 'Cut down the governors who become over-proud,' he said. 'Let no generals on campaign have too many resources. Exhaust them with unjust exactions, to keep them busied with their own affairs. Admit no woman to the imperial councils. Be accessible to no one. Share with few your most intimate plans.'

On this note their conversation came to an end. Sclerus went off to the country estate which had been apportioned him, and soon afterwards he died. We will leave him and return to the emperor. In his dealings with his subjects, Basil behaved with extraordinary circumspection. It is perfectly true that the great reputation he built up as a ruler was founded rather on terror than on loyalty, for as he grew older and became more experienced, he relied less on the judgment of men wiser than himself. He alone introduced new measures, he alone disposed his military forces. As for the civil administration, he governed, not in accordance with the

written laws, but following the unwritten dictates of his own intuition, which was most excellently equipped by nature for the purpose. Consequently he paid no attention to men of learning: on the contrary, he affected utter scorn – towards the learned folk, I mean. It seems to me a wonderful thing, therefore, that while the emperor so despised literary culture, no small crop of orators and philosophers sprang up in those times. One solution of the paradox, I fancy, is this: the men of those days did not devote themselves to the study of letters for any ulterior purpose – they cultivated literature for its own sake and as an end in itself, whereas the majority nowadays do not approach the subject of education in this spirit, but consider personal profit to be the first reason for study. Perhaps I should add that though gain is the object of their zeal for literature, if they do not immediately achieve this goal, then they desist from their studies at once. Shame on them!

However, we must return to the emperor. Having purged the Empire of the barbarians, he dealt with his own subjects and completely subjugated them too – I think 'subjugate' is the right word to describe it! He decided to abandon his former policy, and after the great families had been humiliated and put on an equal footing with the rest, Basil found himself playing the game of power-politics with considerable success. He surrounded himself with favourites who were neither remarkable for brilliance of intellect, nor of noble lineage, nor too learned. To them were entrusted the imperial rescripts, and with them he was accustomed to share the

1. Basil was determined to ensure that the great feudal families should never again be able to rebel. By the Novel of January 996, for example, it was enacted that land taken from the people by the rich landowners since the reign of Romanus Lecapenus was to be restored without compensation. The rich were further curbed by the famous *allogenyon*, by which men with money were required to pay taxes for those who were impoverished.

secrets of State. However, since at that time the emperor's comments on memoranda or requests for favours were never varied, but only plain, straightforward statements (for Basil, whether writing or speaking, eschewed all elegance of composition), he used to dictate to his secretaries just as the words came to his tongue, stringing them all together, one after the other. There was no subtlety, nothing superfluous in his speech.

By humbling the pride or jealousy of his people, Basil made his own road to power an easy one. He was careful, moreover, to close the exit-doors on the monies contributed to the treasury. So a huge sum was built up, partly by the exercise of strict economy, partly by fresh additions from abroad. Actually the sum accumulated in the imperial treasury reached the grand total of 200,000 talents. As for the rest of his gains, it would indeed be hard to find words adequately to describe them. All the treasures amassed in Iberia and Arabia, all the riches found among the Celts or contained in the land of the Scythians – in brief, all the wealth of the barbarians who surround our borders – all were gathered together in one place and deposited in the emperor's coffers. In addition to this, he carried off to his treasure-chambers, and sequestered there, all the money of those who rebelled against him and were afterwards subdued. And since the vaults of the buildings made for this purpose were not big enough, he had spiral galleries dug underground, after the Egyptian style, and there he kept safe a considerable proportion of his treasures. He himself took no pleasure in any of it; quite the reverse, indeed, for the majority of the precious stones, both the white ones (which we call pearls) and the coloured brilliants, far from being inlaid in diadems or collars, were hidden away in his underground vaults. Meanwhile Basil took part in his processions and gave audience to his governors clad merely in a robe of purple, not the very bright purple, but simply purple of a dark hue, with a handful

of gems as a mark of distinction. As he spent the greater part of his reign serving as a soldier on guard at our frontiers and keeping the barbarian marauders at bay, not only did he draw nothing from his reserves of wealth, but even multiplied his riches many times over.

On his expedition against the barbarians, Basil did not follow the customary procedure of other emperors, setting out at the middle of spring and returning home at the end of summer. For him the time to return was when the task in hand was accomplished. He endured the rigours of winter and the heat of summer with equal indifference. He disciplined himself against thirst. In fact, all his natural desires were kept under stern control, and the man was as hard as steel. He had an accurate knowledge of the details of army life, and by that I do not mean the general acquaintance with the composition of his army, the relative functions of individual units in the whole body, or the various groupings and deployments suited to the different formations. His experience of army matters went further than that: the duties of the *protostate*, the duties of the *hemilochites*,<sup>1</sup> the tasks proper to the rank immediately junior to them – all these were no mysteries to Basil, and the knowledge stood him in good stead in his wars. Accordingly, jobs appropriate to these ranks were not devolved on others, and the emperor, being personally conversant with the character and combat duties of each individual, knowing to what each man was fitted either by temperament or by training, used him in this capacity and made him serve there.

Moreover, he knew the various formations suited to his men. Some he had read of in books, others he devised himself during the operations of war, the result of his own intuition. He professed to conduct his wars and draw up the troops in line of battle, himself planning each campaign, but he preferred not to engage in combat personally. A sudden retreat

1. Military ranks, junior officers.

might otherwise prove embarrassing. Consequently, for the most part he kept his troops immobile. He would construct machines of war and skirmish at a distance, while the manoeuvring was left to the light-armed soldiers. Once he had made contact with the enemy, a regular military liaison was established between the different formations of the Roman army. The whole force was drawn up like a solid tower, headquarters being in touch with the cavalry squadrons, who were themselves kept in communication with the light infantry, and these again with the various units of heavy-armed foot. When all was ready, strict orders were given that no soldier should advance in front of the line or break rank under any circumstances. If these orders were obeyed, and if some of the most valiant or daring soldiers did ride out well in front of the rest, even in cases where they engaged the enemy successfully, they could expect no medals or rewards of valour when they returned. On the contrary, Basil promptly discharged them from the army, and they were punished on the same level as common criminals. The decisive factor in the achievement of victory was, in his opinion, the massing of troops in one coherent body, and for this reason alone he believed the Roman armies to be invincible. The careful inspections he made before battle used to aggravate the soldiers and they abused him openly, but the emperor met their scorn with common sense. He would listen quietly, and then with a gay smile point out that if he neglected these precautions, their battles would go on for ever.

Basil's character was two-fold, for he readily adapted himself no less to the crises of war than to the calm of peace. Really, if the truth be told, he was more of a villain in war-time, more of an emperor in time of peace. Outbursts of wrath he controlled, and like the proverbial 'fire under the ashes' kept anger hidden in his heart, but, if his orders were disobeyed in war, on returning to his palace he would kindle his wrath and reveal it. Terrible then was the vengeance he

took on the miscreant. Generally he persisted in his opinions, but there were occasions when he did change his mind. In many cases, too, he traced crimes back to their original causes, and the final links in the chain were exonerated. So most defaulters obtained forgiveness, either through his sympathetic understanding, or because he showed some other interest in their affairs. He was slow to adopt any course of action, but never would he willingly alter the decision once it was taken. Consequently his attitude to friends was unvaried, unless perchance he was compelled by necessity to revise his estimate of them. Similarly, where he had burst out in anger against someone, he did not quickly moderate his indignation. Whatever estimate he formed, indeed, was to him an irrevocable and divinely-inspired judgement.

#### BASIL'S PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

So much for his character. As for his personal appearance, it betrayed the natural nobility of the man, for his eyes were light-blue and fiery, the eyebrows not overhanging nor sullen, nor yet extended in one straight line, like a woman's, but well-arched and indicative of his pride. The eyes were neither deep-set (a sign of knavishness and cunning) nor yet too prominent (a sign of frivolity), but they shone with a brilliance that was manly. His whole face was rounded off, as if from the centre into a perfect circle, and joined to his shoulders by a neck that was firm and not too long. His chest was neither thrust out in front of him, nor hanging on him, so to speak, nor again was it concave and, as it were, cramped; rather was it the mean between two extremes, and the rest of his body was in harmony with it.

As for height, he was of less than normal stature, but it was proportionate to the separate parts of his body, and he held himself upright. If you met him on foot, you would find him much like some other men, but on horseback he afforded a

might that was altogether incomparable, for in the saddle he reminded one of the statues which the great sculptors carved, with their riders adopting a similar pose. When he gave rein to his horse and rode in the assault, he was erect and firm in the saddle, riding uphill and downhill alike, and when he checked his steed, reining it in, he would leap on high as though he had wings, and he mounted or dismounted alike with equal grace. In his old age the beard under his chin went bald, but the hair from his cheeks poured down, the growth on either side being thick and very profuse, so that wound round on both sides it was made into a perfect circle and he appeared to possess a full beard. It was a habit of his to roll it between his fingers, a gesture to which he was particularly prone when roused to anger or giving audience, or when he was engaged in deep thought. That was a frequent habit; another was to put his fingers on his hips, arms akimbo. He was not a fluent speaker. The phrases were not rounded off, nor were they lengthened into periods. In fact, he clipped his words, with little pauses between them, more like a peasant than a man of good education. He had a loud laugh, which convulsed the whole of his body.

The emperor seems to have lived a very long time, more than all the other sovereigns, for from birth up to his twentieth year he shared imperial power with his father and Phocas Nicephorus, and later with John Tzimisce, the latter's successor. During this period he occupied a subordinate position, but for the next fifty-two years he ruled supreme. He was therefore in his seventy-second year when he died.<sup>1</sup>

1. Basil died on 15 December 1025. According to Cedrenus he had reigned as sole monarch for fifty years. He was buried in the monastery of St John Evangelist in the Hebdomon at Constantinople.