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## BASIL I'S PATH TO POWER ACCORDING TO THE *VITA BASILII* AS A HEROIC MYTH

**Abstract.** This paper aims to illustrate how the tradition of Basil I's rise to power in the *Vita Basilii* includes elements typical of heroic myths, according to Joseph Campbell's monomyth scheme. The study presented here will examine how the narrative contains features such as a call to adventure, a series of trials and a motive for return. Moreover, the study seeks to investigate how these universal elements of hero stories have been mythicised by literary devices such as the topoi, text composition, intertextual references or symbolic content coherent with the perception of the ideological role of the Byzantine rulers. Within this framework, the study will aim to explore the morphology of these narratives and reconsider some historical questions with the help of Mircea Eliade's theory of myth. It will focus on the identity and legitimising functions of the story for Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus and assess its impact on the position of the Macedonian dynasty in the social order and the sphere of political activity.

**Keywords:** Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, Basil I, myth, Joseph Campbell, dynastic identity, *Vita Basilii*, Macedonian dynasty, dynastic ideology

*Vita Basilii*, a panegyric work devoted to Basil I the Macedonian (811–886), is one of the many pieces produced at the court of his grandson, Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (905–959)<sup>1</sup>. The source, finished around 948 by the emperor and his writers, is the fifth part of an extensive, six-volume collection of biographies compiled at the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup> century into one corpus entitled *Theophanes Continuatus*<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Chronographiae quae Theophanis Continuati nomine fertur liber quo Vita Basilii imperatoris amplectitur*, ed. et trans. I. ŠEVČENKO, Berlin–Boston 2011 [= *CFHB.SBr*, 42] (cetera: *Vita Basilii*); on the emperor's literary activities cf. for instance: P. LEMERLE, *Le premier humanisme byzantin. Notes et remarques sur enseignement et culture à Byzance des origines au X<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris 1971, p. 267–300; A. TOYNBEE, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus and his World*, New York–Toronto 1973, p. 575–598; A. KAZHDAN, *A History of Byzantine Literature (850–1000)*, Athens 2006, p. 133–185; O. JUREWICZ, *Historia literatury bizantyńskiej*, Wrocław 2007, p. 151–157.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Vita Basilii*, introduction by C. MANGO, p. 8\*–13\*; W. TREADGOLD, *The Middle Byzantine Historians*, New York 2013, p. 165–180.

According to the introduction, *The Life of Basil* was intended to be a part of a large-scale literary programme that included biographies of all emperors from Constantine the Great to the time of the Macedonian dynasty. However, Porphyrogenitus's weak health made this task impossible, forcing the emperor to focus on just one figure. Therefore, he decided to choose his grandfather Basil.

*Causa scribendi* of the source, according to panegyric genre requirements, was to create a model of virtues (ἀνδριὰς) and a figure worthy of imitation (μιμήσως)<sup>3</sup>, which by his reign (867–886) ended a period of imperial decline in the state<sup>4</sup>. In the light of the *Vita*, Basil was to embody the ideal ruler – a New David, Alexander, Constantine or Justinian<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, the choice of the narrative figure was not accidental since Basil, the hero-founder of the Macedonian dynasty, was important for the identity and legitimacy of his descendants<sup>6</sup>. This issue needs to be explored in more depth so that it will return in the last section of the paper.

One of the points of Constantine VII's narrative was the description of Basil I's rise to power. This illustrates how the protagonist, "step by step" from a poor man, succeeded in becoming a Byzantine emperor<sup>7</sup>. The purpose of this part of the story was to illustrate the protagonist's journey and portray the character's reasons and qualities for becoming ruler of Byzantium. The origins of this pro-Macedonian tradition, in addition to *The Funeral Oration* composed by Leo VI in 888<sup>8</sup>,

<sup>3</sup> *Vita Basilii*, I, 17–18, p. 10; S. TOUGHER, *After Iconoclasm (850–886)*, [in:] *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire, c. 500–1492*, ed. J. SHEPARD, Cambridge 2018, p. 294.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Iosephi Genesisii regum libri quattuor*, proem., ed. A. LESMÜLLER-WERNER, I. THUM, Berolini 1978 [= *CFHB*, 14] (cetera: GENESIOS), p. 3; latest translation and commentary: GENESIOS, *On the Reigns of the Emperors*, proem., trans. et comm. A. KALDELLIS, Leiden–Boston 2017 [= *BAus*, 11], p. 4; cf. *Chronographiae quae Theophanis Continuati nomine fertur libri I–IV*, proem., ed. et trans. M. FEATHERSTONE, J. SIGNES CODOÑER, Berlin–Boston 2015 [= *CFHB.SBr*, 53] (cetera: *Theophanes Continuatus*), p. 10–13.

<sup>5</sup> H. BUCHTHAL, *The Exaltation of David*, *JWCI* 37, 1974, p. 300–333; A. MARKOPOULOS, *An Anonymous Laudatory Poem in Honor of Basil I*, *DOP* 46, 1992, p. 225–232; L. BRUBAKER, *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium. Image as Exegesis in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus*, Cambridge 1992, p. 173–193; G. DAGRON, *Emperor and Priest. The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, Cambridge 2007, p. 48–51, 192–201; J. SHEPARD, *The Ruler as Instructor, Pastor and Wise: Leo VI of Byzantium and Symeon of Bulgaria*, [in:] *Alfred the Great. Papers from the Eleventh-century Conferences*, ed. T. REUTER, London–New York 2003, p. 343–346; C. RAPP, *Old Testament Models for Emperors in Early Byzantium*, [in:] *The Old Testament in Byzantium*, ed. P. MAGDALINO, R. NELSON, Washington D.C. 2010 [= *DOBSC*, 2], p. 175–198; A. MARKOPOULOS, *Constantine VII and the Macedonian Dynasty in Contemporary Historiography. Appendix: Three Letters from R.J.H. Jenkins to G. Moravcsik*, [in:] *Center, Province and Periphery in the Age of Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos*, ed. N. GAUL, V. MENZE, C. BÁLINT, Weisbaden 2018, p. 159–163; M. RIEDEL, *Leo VI and the Transformation of Byzantine Christian Identity. Writings of an Unexpected Emperor*, Cambridge 2018, p. 154–167.

<sup>6</sup> On contrary: W. TREADGOLD, *The Middle...*, p. 166.

<sup>7</sup> *Vita Basilii*, VIII, 1–3, p. 30: Ἐπεὶ δὲ κυριωτέραν ἔδει τὴν θείαν γενέσθαι βουλὴν καὶ τοῦτον πρὸς ὅπερ ἀφώριστο κατὰ μικρὸν ὁδῶ βαδίζοντα ἀνελθεῖν.

<sup>8</sup> *Oraison funèbre de Basile I<sup>er</sup> par son fils Léon VI le Sage*, ed. et trans. G. VENANCE, A. VOGT, I. HAUSHER, Rome 1932 (cetera: LEO VI).

the lost *Secret History* of the Nicetas the Paphlagonian argued for by W. Treadgold<sup>9</sup>, or a very hypothetical encomium, are almost impossible to grasp since the *Vita* is only the first source we know of that so accurately recounts the subsequent events of Macedonian's life<sup>10</sup>. A clue for understanding this lack of information may be the words of Porphyrogenitus, who complained in his work about the lack of sufficient materials to compose the piece, or by Joseph Genesisios. The second author, working under the patronage of Porphyrogenitus and using the same sources as *Vita*, points to many oral histories illustrating Basil's path to the throne<sup>11</sup>. Some scholars, such as C. Mango, have rejected the possibility of the presence of such a tradition nearly a century after the reign of Basil. In my opinion, its existence should not be denied<sup>12</sup>. These histories did not have to originate exclusively in Basil's time. They could have been formed much later, as collected and transformed by Constantine VII, later by Genesisios, or by hostile towards the Macedonians Simeon the Logothete<sup>13</sup>.

It is also important to note that these stories were not an oral tradition but a semi-oral one. The Byzantine elites in whose circles these stories may have spread did not function in the same way as oral societies. Instead, they were circles in which oral stories circulated. However, their content was still embedded in the intellectual endowment of an elite in which extensive literary education was a fundamental factor<sup>14</sup>. This type of tradition was perceived in terms of socio-cultural

<sup>9</sup> W. TREADGOLD, *The Lost Secret History of Nicetas the Paphlagonian*, [in:] *The Steppe Lands and the World beyond them. Studies in Honor of Victor Spinei on his 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday*, ed. F. CURTA, B.-P. MALEON, Iași 2013, p. 645–676.

<sup>10</sup> For comprehensive study on Basil cf.: N. TOBIAS, *Basil I (867–886), the Founder of the Macedonian Dynasty. A Study of the Political and Military History of the Byzantine Empire in the Ninth century* (doctoral thesis, Rutgers University 1969; published: Lewiston 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. for instance GENESIOS, proem., 8–20, p. 3; 4, 28, 47–49, p. 79; cf. *Vita Basilii*, XLVII, 13–17, p. 168.

<sup>12</sup> *Vita Basilii*, introduction by C. MANGO, p. 10\*.

<sup>13</sup> For complicated discussion on the relationship between *Vita* and Genesisios cf. for instance: *Vita Basilii*, introduction by C. MANGO, p. 8\*–13; GENESIOS, *On the Reigns of the Emperors*, introduction by A. KALDELLIS, p. IX–XXIII; P. VARONA CODESO, *Contribución al problema de la cronología y las fuentes de la Vita Basilii*, BZ 102.2, 2009, p. 739–755. In addition to Genesisios, who completed his work probably after the composition of *The Life of Basil*, the existence of the account of Symeon the Logothete is also worth mentioning (*Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae Chronicon*, ed. S. WAHLGREN, Berlin 2006 [= CFHB, 41], cetera: SYMEON). Due to its panegyric and often unrealistic narrative of the latter is deprived of detail, which can be explained by several arguments. Firstly, the author of his Chronicle was independent of the court of Porphyrogenitus and, therefore, could have used other source material. Secondly, this historian was critical of the Macedonian dynasty, which may have caused the author to omit some of the lineage traditions favourable to the Macedonians. Furthermore, it is not unlikely that the nature of the narrative was determined by genre reasons, which did not allow much space for a close-up of the protagonist's profile.

<sup>14</sup> On the reflection of orality in written texts: C. MESSIS, S. PAPAIOANNOU, *Orality and Textuality (with an Appendix on the Byzantine Conceptions)*, [in:] *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Literature*, ed. S. PAPAIOANNOU, Oxford 2021, p. 247–248.

facts that were organised according to the cultural and literary codes of the group of recipients and the temporal experiences and needs of the societies where the stories functioned<sup>15</sup>.

Due to the narrative's panegyric and often unrealistic nature, Basil's path to power has been repeatedly called myths or legends<sup>16</sup>. For instance, N. Adontz, investigating the chronology of Basil's biography, in his approach rejected the *légendes populaires et d'inventions plus ou moins tendancieuses* and *les éléments décoratifs or toutes sortes de fables complètement inutiles à l'histoire*<sup>17</sup>. Analogous terms for these stories were formulated by G. Moravcsik in his classic work entitled *Sagen und Legenden*<sup>18</sup> or by S. Tougher, who summarised this tradition as 'developed mythology'<sup>19</sup>. Despite these and many similar claims, little space has been devoted to analysing this story with particular reference to the morphology and theory of dynastic myths, *i.e.* stories which explain the beginnings of dynasty rule in the state. This study aims to propose a complement to this problem by offering an interdisciplinary perspective in the analysis. The proposed methodology draws on the comprehensive tradition of studying medieval dynastic traditions through holistic approaches, as exemplified by the works of J. Banaszkiwicz and his followers in Polish historiography<sup>20</sup>.

The paper will illustrate how the dynastic myth of Macedonians adopts selected elements of the universal structure of heroic stories (according to Joseph

<sup>15</sup> Cf. A. PLESZCZYŃSKI, J. SOBESIAK, K. SZEJGIEC, M. TOMASZEK, P. TYSZKA, *Historia Communitatem Facit. Struktura narracji tworzących tożsamości grupowe w średniowieczu*, Wrocław 2016, p. 247–248, 255.

<sup>16</sup> On genre patterns in *Vita cf.*: P.J. ALEXANDER, *Secular Biography at Byzantium*, S 15.2, 1940, p. 197–205; R.J.H. JENKINS, *The Classical Background of the Scriptorum Post Theophanem*, DOP 8, 1954, p. 13–30; L. VAN HOOFF, *Among Christian Emperors. The Vita Basilii by Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus*, JEaCS 54, 2002, p. 166–179; A. MARKOPOULOS, *From Narrative Historiography to Historical Biography. New Trends in Byzantine Historical Writing in the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> centuries*, BZ 102.2, 2005, p. 697–715; P. VARONA CODESO, *In Search of a Byzantine Narrative Canon: the Vita Basilii as an Uncanonical Work*, BMGS 39.2, 2015, p. 173–190.

<sup>17</sup> N. ADONTZ, *L'âge et l'origine de l'empereur Basile I (867–886)*, B 8, 1933, p. 477–486; cf. M. MASTERSON, *Between Byzantine Men. Desire, Homosexuality, and Brotherhood in the Medieval Empire*, London–New York 2022, p. 69: *These early years have fantastical details that build the legend of the founder of the Macedonian dynasty.*

<sup>18</sup> G. MORAVCSIK, *Sagen und Legenden über Kaiser Basileios I*, DOP 15, 1961, p. 59–126.

<sup>19</sup> S. TOUGHER, *The Reign of Leo VI (886–912). Politics and People*, Leiden–New York–Köln 1997 [= MMe, 15], p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> J. BANASZKIWICZ, *Podanie o Piaście i Popielu. Studium porównawcze nad wczesnośredniowiecznymi tradycjami dynastycznymi*, Warszawa 2010; for methodology cf. *ibidem*, p. 16–50; A. GRABOWSKI, *The Construction of Ottonian Kingship. Narratives and Myth in Tenth-Century Germany*, Amsterdam 2018 (for criticism of this approach cf. reviews: L. ROACH, [rec.:] *Antoni Grabowski, The Construction of Ottonian Kingship...*, S 95.4, 2020, p. 1175–1176; S. GREER, [rec.:] *The Construction of Ottonian Kingship...*, EME 29.2, 2021, p. 268–271); R. KASPERSKI, *Model trójdzielny Dumézila, problem legitymizacji sukcesji oraz Getica Jordanesa*, RAH 11, 2018, p. 159–172.

Campbell's monomyth structure). Moreover, this paper will investigate how this structure of narration has been stereotyped according to narrative solutions specific to the collective imaginations associated with the ideology of power in the Byzantine Empire, *i.e.* a set of beliefs, values, and perspectives on the political, social, and cultural role of the Byzantine emperor<sup>21</sup>. By approaching this story through the lens of myth, it will be possible to draw attention to two historical issues. They will examine how the content of the myth relates to the imperial and dynastic ideology of Constantine Porphyrogenitus and how the story reinforces the emperor's ideological position and that of his lineage<sup>22</sup>.

### Methodological basis

In approaching *Vita* from the perspective of myth, I would like to use M. Eliade's conceptions of this notion. Myths passed down orally or in writing recount events, which establish models to follow and lay at the origin of the functioning of the community (*in illo tempore*)<sup>23</sup>. According to a Romanian scholar, the importance of myths stems from their significance in legitimising the world's existence and elements within it. In the context of medieval dynastic myths, such accounts illustrated the origins of dynasty power in the state. These traditions performed legitimising functions by situating the history of their family's rule within the socio-cultural realities of the state, as well as embedding it in the social hierarchy and sphere of political activity<sup>24</sup>.

Eliade argued that the legitimising function of myths stemmed from the presence of elements of the *sacrum*, which were mixed with the perception of everyday

<sup>21</sup> R. CHARTIER, *Le monde comme représentation*, A.H 44.6, 1989, p. 1505–1520.

<sup>22</sup> Dynastic ideology is a coherent system of worldview of the place of the ruling family in a given social-cultural and political system. The ideology is the core value for dynastic identity, which is manifested through narrative – in this case, through myth. The category of dynastic identity is lacking in research on identities in the Byzantine world. This can be observed in several recent works on the subject: *Identities. Proceedings of the 7<sup>th</sup> International Symposium "Days of Justinian I", Skopje, 15–16 November 2019*, ed. M.B. PANOV, Skopje 2020; *The Routledge Handbook on Identity in Byzantium*, ed. M.E. STEWART, D.A. PARNELL, C. WHATELEY, London–New York 2022; *Identities and Ideologies in the Medieval East Roman World*, ed. Y. STOURAITIS, Edinburgh 2022 [= EBS]; on non-emotional understanding of the 'ideology' category: C. GEERTZ, *Interpretacje kultur. Wybrane eseje*, Kraków 2005, p. 259–262.

<sup>23</sup> M. ELIADE, *Sacrum a profanum. O istocie sfery religijnej*, Warszawa 2022, p. 97–98.

<sup>24</sup> R. MICHAŁOWSKI, *Restauratio Poloniae w ideologii dynastycznej Galla Anonima*, PH 76.3, 1985, p. 457–480; G. STEINSLAND, *Introduction. Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages: Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faeroes*, [in:] *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages. Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faeroes*, ed. IDEM, G. STEINSLAND, J.V. SIGURDSSON, J.E. REKDAL, I.B. BEUERMANN, Leiden–Boston 2011 [= NW, 52], p. 8–9; cf. also: T. BIERNAT, *Mit polityczny*, Warszawa 1989, p. 11, 39–50; J. TOPOLSKI, *Historiografia jako tworzenie mitów i walka z nimi*, [in:] *Ideologie, poglądy mity w dziejach Polski i Europy XIX i XX wieku*, ed. J. TOPOLSKI, W. MOLIK, K. MAKOWSKI, Poznań 1991, p. 240–244.

life (*profanum*)<sup>25</sup>. This has also been decisive in Byzantine culture, where the *sacrum*, constituting the structure of the ideology of Byzantine imperial power, significantly impacted the collective imaginations of Byzantine society, explaining rulers' political, social, and cultural position<sup>26</sup>. Consequently, based on Christian and Greco-Roman literary and cultural traditions, this system of perceptions was projected onto representations of reality in narrations<sup>27</sup>. This was reflected in the dimension of literary conventions, where the narrative form drew on motifs enjoying the cultural credence of the Byzantine intellectual elite. Thus, it organised the whole 'symbolic universe' of narrations of Byzantine historiography<sup>28</sup>. It consisted of many repetitive motifs like views, attitudes, narrative compositions, topoi, symbols, and intertextual references deeply rooted in the intellectual background of the group of source recipients, which authors used to form precise *communicatio* of the work<sup>29</sup>. In Eliade's terms, these phenomena were examples of the mythification/stereotyping of history – a process by which the memory of historical events was stereotyped and inscribed within the framework of narrative solutions specific to members of a given cultural circle<sup>30</sup>.

The basis for further analysis is the scheme of heroic stories proposed by Joseph Campbell<sup>31</sup>. This researcher, by collecting a variety of stories of Indo-European societies, wished to prove that in cultures, irrespective of the place and time of occurrence, there are specific common, metaphorical, symbolic, and archetypal patterns of construction of heroic myths (monomyth)<sup>32</sup>. The American scholar noted that many such stories, stereotyped according to the society's culture, include repetitive patterns. What is worth noting is that Campbell's theory does not assume that all the stages the researcher listed (and there are as many as 17) appear in every myth. Their intensity and sequence can be arbitrary – what remains unchanged is the

<sup>25</sup> M. ELIADE, *Sacrum, mit, historia. Wybór esejów*, Warszawa 1970, p. 89–125; IDEM, *Sacrum a profanum...*, p. 102–107; cf. also Ł. TRZCIŃSKI, *Mit bohaterski w perspektywie antropologii filozoficznej i kulturowej*, Kraków 2006, p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. J.-P. ROUX, *Król. Mity i symbole*, Warszawa 1998, p. 114–115.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. J. LE GOFF, *Święty Ludwik*, Kraków 2001, p. 677.

<sup>28</sup> J. HALDON, Y. STOURAITIS, *Introduction. The Ideology of Identities and the Identity of Ideologies*, [in:] *Identities and Ideologies...*, p. 2–13, esp. p. 8–9.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. for instance: T. PEŁECH, *Obraz „obcego” w Aleksjademie Anny Komneny. Przypadek Normanów*, Wrocław 2016; more on the narrative structures in Byzantine historiography: J. LJUBARSKIJ, *SO Debate: Quellenforschung And/Or Literary Criticism. Narrative Structures in Byzantine Historical Writings*, SO 73.1, 1998, p. 5–22; cf. also A. PLESZCZYŃSKI, J. SOBESIAK, K. SZEJGIEC, M. TOMASZEK, P. TYSZKA, *Historia...*, p. 7–13.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. W. WRZOSEK, *Historia – kultura – metafora. O myśleniu historycznym*, Wrocław 2022, p. 38.

<sup>31</sup> J. CAMPBELL, *Bohater o tysiącu twarzy*, Kraków 2013 [first English edition = *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton 1949].

<sup>32</sup> Campbell's approach to explaining myth formation in psychological terms (drawn from the thought of C.G. Jung) was too reductionist. An overview of approaches to understanding mythical thinking in 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship: E. MIELETINSKI, *Poetyka mitu*, Warszawa 1981; I. STRENSKY, *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth century History*, Iowa City 1987.

core of these heroic tales, which is based on three fundamental phases: a setting out, a series of trials, and a return.

The first phase of the sequence of events begins with a call to adventure, where a mythical figure from his daily life is called upon to set out. The protagonist initially refuses the challenge but decides to go on the journey with the help of supernatural beings. As a result, he sets out and crosses the first threshold, symbolising the transition from his previous life to a world of new challenges. In the second phase of heroic stories, the protagonist faces a series of challenges that appear on his path – to prove his abilities, he is supposed to overcome them. The task is not simple, but it became possible due to the hero's talents and the help of supernatural beings, friends or mentors. The toughest of these tasks is the last one – persevering through this trial guarantees the protagonist's victory and the achievement of the quest's goal, which ends his journey. In the third and final phase, the victorious protagonist of the tale can return to his previous daily life or choose to stay. The second decision results in a symbolic separation of the protagonist from the world from which he came, which may project a change in his position in the social hierarchy and his relations with the environment.

The above schema projects the further structure of the paper. The following sections will be devoted to the presence above elements in *Vita* and how those parts have been mythicised according to literary devices coherent with the ideology of imperial power in Byzantium. After this part, our attention will return to Eliade's theory of myth to summarise its functions for Constantine Porphyrogenitus.

## Setting out

According to the *Vita*, Basil's departure took place when a boy (παῖς) has been excellent educated<sup>33</sup> and entered adolescence (ἀνδρικοτέρως)<sup>34</sup>. The protagonist, in an unspecified, mythical time, after the death of his father, continued his existence in the ordinary world<sup>35</sup>. He recognised that using his talents (ἀρετῆς) on his

<sup>33</sup> *Vita Basilii*, VI, p. 26–28; according to Xenophon, excellent education, alongside origins, was the reason for the ability to rule over people: XENOPHON, *Cyropaedia*, vol. I, *Books I–IV*, I, 1, 6, trans. W. MILLER, Cambridge–London 1983 [= LCL, 51], p. 8–9.

<sup>34</sup> *Vita Basilii*, VII, 1–4, p. 28; on interpretations of the word ἀνδρικός cf.: *The Cambridge Greek Lexicon*, vol. I–II, ed. J. DIGGLE, B.L. FRASER, P. JAMES, O.B. SIMKIM, A.A. THOMPSON, S.J. WESTRIPP, Cambridge 2021, p. 118. After education and preparation by his father, the hero gained features worthy of a man. The hero's initiation into the pages of the story was his encounter with the Bulgar khan Omurtag during the war against the Bulgarians (*Vita Basilii*, IV, 29–39, p. 22). It was then that the hero was to be born, who, in accordance with the Campbellian model, faced a mortal threat shortly after his birth. About those events see for instance N. TOBIAS, *Basil I...*, p. 76–79; G. MORAVCSIK, *Sagen...*, p. 70–86; E. KISLINGER, *Der junge Basileios I. und die Bulgaren*, JÖB 30, 1981, p. 137–150; on universal narrative patterns to describe the hero's youth: J. BANASZKIEWICZ, *Młodzieńcze gesta Bolesława Krzywoustego, czyli jak się zostaje prawdziwym rycerzem i władcą*, [in:] *Takie sobie średnio-wieczne bajeczki*, ed. IDEM, Kraków 2013, p. 563–585.

<sup>35</sup> *Vita Basilii*, VII, 10–15, p. 28; J. CAMPBELL, *Bohater...*, p. 43–50.

parents' farm was a waste of time. This motivated him to travel to Constantinople – the Campbellian “hub of the world”, where he could succeed<sup>36</sup>. However, Basil chose not to embark on the expedition, thus manifesting the classical motive of heroic stories of resistance to the call<sup>37</sup>. The hero abstained from the journey for the sake of his mother. As the ideal protagonist, he could not abandon an elderly widow, which would have been incompatible with his excellent character<sup>38</sup>. At this point, supernatural forces intervened<sup>39</sup>. His refusal to embark on the journey was met with a response from God, who sent two dreams to his mother. In the first of these:

The mother fancied in a dream that a huge plant sprouted forth from her – just as the mother of Cyrus had seen the vine. That plant, then, stood by her house in full bloom and heavy with fruit; the large trunk that rose from the ground was of gold, while its branches and leaves were gold like [...] <sup>40</sup>.

The above vision was taken from the writings of Herodotus and refers to the universal metaphor of the tree of life – a symbol of an eternal monarchy<sup>41</sup>. As Genesios mentions, it foreshadowed a bright future for Basil and his successors, which indicates that this tale may have been created during the reign of Basil's successors<sup>42</sup>. Following this event, the hero's mother was haunted by another vision in which the prophet Elijah foretold her son's future. The saint's presence in the narrative is not accidental, as it has a historical connection to the ideology of emperor Basil. According to research into using Old Testament models in the ruler's ideological policy, the emperor was particularly close to Tishbite. He made him the patron of the dynasty, which was reflected in the visual programme of the family<sup>43</sup>. The intervention of Elijah, representative of the *sacrum*, convinced the mother, and as a result, she prevailed upon her son to set out on the journey. The protagonist, initially reluctant, was now confident, and as a consequence, nothing stood in the way of him setting out for the Byzantine centre of the world – Constantinople<sup>44</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> J. CAMPBELL, *Bohater...*, p. 35–40.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 50–57.

<sup>38</sup> *Vita Basilii*, VII, 10–11, p. 28.

<sup>39</sup> N. TOBIAS, *Basil I...*, p. 89–92; R.J. LILIE, *Reality and Invention: Reflections on Byzantine Historiography*, DOP 68, 2014, p. 193–197.

<sup>40</sup> All translations by I. Ševčenko, *Vita Basilii*, VIII, 7–10, p. 30.

<sup>41</sup> HERODOTUS, I, 108, ed. et trans. A.D. GODLEY, London–New York 1920 [= LCL, 4], p. 138–140; J.-P. ROUX, *Król...*, p. 43–44; B. SZCZEPANOWICZ, *Święte drzewa w Biblii, kulturze, legendzie i sztuce*, Poznań 2020, p. 8–12.

<sup>42</sup> GENESIOS, 4, 24, 61–85, p. 76–77.

<sup>43</sup> P. MAGDALINO, *Basil I, Leo VI, and the Feast of the Prophet Elijah*, JÖB 38, 1988, p. 193–196; L. BRUBAKER, *Vision...*, p. 173–193; G. DAGRON, *Emperor...*, p. 193–196; J. CHURCHILL, *Depictions of Power in the Imperial Art of the Early Macedonian Emperors. Basil I, Leo VI and Alexander* (doctoral thesis, University of Sussex 2016), p. 111.

<sup>44</sup> On ideological role of Constantinople cf. for instance: H. AHRWEILER, *L'idéologie politique de l'Empire byzantin*, Paris 1975, p. 65–66; B. FLUSIN, *Construire une Nouvelle Jérusalem: Constantinople et*



Basil went to the Byzantine capital hoping to find Campbell's 'sage' – the person through whom he could cross the first threshold of adventure<sup>45</sup>. As the source indicates: *he wished to approach [someone – Ł.K.] powerful and prominent and to have himself enlisted and appointed as one of his [assistant or servant]*<sup>46</sup>. Subsequently, after entering the Golden Gate, the hero stayed near the monastery of Saint Diomedes, where he intended to rest for the night. There, he waited for an opportunity to cross the threshold that presented itself as a result of divine intervention. It affected the monastery's abbot, who received visions calling him to go beyond the building and summon a man named Basil<sup>47</sup>. Despite his initial opposition, the abbot eventually did what God commanded him to do after receiving a third vision<sup>48</sup>. As a result, the Macedonian was taken inside, where he was cared for. Basil promised to reward this help when he became emperor. As later accounts of Basil's reign show, the hero had ties to the place he restored and endowed with large estates<sup>49</sup>.

After Basil arrived at the monastery, there was a meeting between the hero and the Theophilus Paideuomenos – as Genesios mentions, a person related to the emperor Michael and ceasar Bardas (? – 866)<sup>50</sup>. Theophilus, who assumes the Campbellian function of 'sage', appointed Basil to the position of his *protostrator* (πρωτοστράτωρ) due to his exceptional character and bodily qualities (σωματικὴν ἀλκὴν καὶ ψυχικὴν ἀνδρείαν)<sup>51</sup>.

In this way, the first part of Basil's mythical expedition had ended<sup>52</sup>. The hero left his ordinary life on the farm to embark on an adventure that changed his destiny and status. This was emphasised by the descriptions of the Macedonian's appearance. On arriving at the monastery, the protagonist was initially dirty, dishevelled and

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*les reliques*, [in:] *L'Orient dans l'histoire religieuse de l'Europe. L'invention des origines*, ed. A. MOEZZI, J. SCHEID, Paris 2000, p. 51–70; M. KAPLAN, *Konstantynopol a gospodarka miejska*, [in:] *Świat Bizancjum*, vol. II, *Cesarstwo Bizantyńskie 641–1204*, ed. J.-P. CHEYNET, Kraków 2011, p. 292–293; M.C. CARILE, *The Vision of the Palace of the Byzantine Emperors as a Heavenly Jerusalem*, Spoleto 2012; M. SAVAGE, *Building Heavenly Jerusalem: Thoughts on Imperial and Aristocratic Construction in Constantinople in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries*, [in:] *Byzantium in Dialogue with the Mediterranean. History and Heritage*, ed. D. SLOOTJES, M. VERHOEVEN, Leiden–Boston 2019 [= MMe, 116], p. 67–90; cf. J. BANASZKIEWICZ, *Kolorowe włócznie Wizygotów Euryka (Hydatius c. 243)*, KH 94.2, 1987, p. 5; M. ELIADE, *Sacrum a profanum...*, p. 34–50.

<sup>45</sup> J. CAMPBELL, *Bohater...*, p. 57–74.

<sup>46</sup> *Vita Basilii*, IX, 2–4, p. 34: τῶν δυνατῶν τινὲ καὶ περιφανῶν προσμῖξαι βουλόμενος καὶ εἰς θεραπείαν καὶ δουλείαν αὐτοῦ ἑαυτὸν ἀποτάξαι καὶ καταστήσαι.

<sup>47</sup> At Basil's times, the monastery was a public church administrated by custodian. When *Vita Basilii* and other contemporary sources were created, this monastery's former status was forgotten: SYMEON, 131, 13, 108–117, p. 237; *Vita Basilii*, introduction by C. MANGO, p. 11\*, n. 18.

<sup>48</sup> N. ADONTZ, *L'age...*, p. 486; G. MORAVCSIK, *Sagen...*, p. 94–95.

<sup>49</sup> *Vita Basilii*, LXXIII, p. 250–252.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. also *Vita Basilii*, XII, 9–10, p. 46–48.

<sup>51</sup> GENESIOS, 4, 26, 9–16, p. 77–78.

<sup>52</sup> *Vita Basilii*, IX, 51–53, p. 38; J.B. BURY, *The Imperial Administrative System of the Ninth century – with a Revised Text of the Kletorologion of Philotheos*, Oxford 1911, p. 117–118.

sunburned, but it changed after the entrance to the building<sup>53</sup>. The hero received care from the abbot and later from the Theophilus. By introducing the coming of Paideuomenos, the narrator emphasised his predilection for people endowed with the best virtues of spirit and body – qualities that belonged to the aristocracy – people who were wearing silken (σηρικαῖς) robes. Joining Paideuomenos' entourage, *Basil was enlisted among these*, which indicated his social advancement and virtues, which he owned despite his lack of noble origins<sup>54</sup>.

### The Path of the trials

With the help of God and his envoys, Basil managed to cross the adventure's threshold. The hero now awaited a series of trials to demonstrate his worth and chart a path to promotion to the next court circles and his imperial destiny. In the first challenge, he had to travel with Theophilus to the Peloponnese to carry out unspecified tasks related to public affairs (τινας τοῦ δημοσίου)<sup>55</sup>. Basil *accompanied his master and assisted him in performing the duties assigned to him*<sup>56</sup>. On that narrative background, the travelling pair visited St. Andrew's church at Patras in Achaia. The appearance of the church of this patron saint is no coincidence. Basil had already, during his reign, restored the church of this name in Constantinople and ordered the transfer of the skull of this saint from Constantinople to the church in the Peloponnese<sup>57</sup>.

As the narrator of *Vita* emphasises, Theophilus' entrance into the church evoked no reaction from the monk inside the temple. This behaviour contrasted with his response upon seeing Basil, who recognised the future ruler and welcomed him with an acclamation offered to Byzantine emperors<sup>58</sup>. This information reached the wealthy widow Danielis, who had been living there<sup>59</sup>. She was outraged that the monk saw in an ordinary man a future sovereign, thus undermining her dignity in the area<sup>60</sup>. The monk replied to her that *I both rose and*

<sup>53</sup> *Vita Basilii*, IX, 30–32, p. 36: καὶ ἰδὼν ῥυπῶντά τε καὶ αὐχμῶντα καὶ πολὺν ἐπὶ τοῦ προσώπου τὸν ἥλιον φέροντα.

<sup>54</sup> *Vita Basilii*, IX, 49–51, p. 38: οὐς εὐθὺς ἦν ὁρᾶν σηρικαῖς τε κοσμουμένους ἐσθῆσι καὶ τῇ ἄλλῃ καταστολῇ διαπρέποντας. τούτοις καταλεγέντα τὸν νέμλυν νεανίαν Βασιλείου; for the same motive cf. also *Vita Basilii*, III, 1–12, p. 16; on the role of clothing in shaping the social differentiation in the medieval world: J.M.H. SMITH, *Europa po Rzymie. Historia kulturowa lat 500–1000. Nowe ujęcie*, Kraków 2005, p. 111–112.

<sup>55</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XI, 1–4, p. 40; for term δημοσίος cf. *The Cambridge Greek Lexicon...*, p. 338; J. CAMPBELL, *Bohater...*, p. 65–73.

<sup>56</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XI, 3–5, p. 40–41.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. *Vita Basilii*, LXXXI, p. 268–270.

<sup>58</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XI, 15–17, p. 40.

<sup>59</sup> On Danielis and her possible relations with Basil cf. for instance B. KOUTAVA-DELIVORIA, *Qui était Daniélis?*, B 71.1, 2001, p. 98–109.

<sup>60</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XI, 20–30, p. 42.

acclaimed him because I saw him as a great emperor of the Romans anointed by Christ. Those who are honoured by God ought surely to be by men as well<sup>61</sup>. These words affected the widow. Some time later, when Basil I, due to his illness, stayed in Peloponnesse, Danielis visited him and lavished the Macedonian with gifts like the biblical Queen of Sheba<sup>62</sup>. Basil, therefore, promised the woman that he would make her sovereign of the local areas<sup>63</sup>.

The story, set in the context of a public task involving the hero, illustrates the vital moment for Basil's social position. The hero was initially reluctant to accept presents due to his low status, but after Danielis words, he changed his mind<sup>64</sup>. Consequently, Basil too, became wealthy, both in virtues (ἀρεταῖς) and in the land (κτῆμασι) and money (χρήμασι). In this form, the narration presented further Basil's social advancement – from then on, Macedonian no longer flaunted his humble origins, as he had become wealthy thanks to his gifts. This social and economic advancement was highlighted by his profligacy on his return journey through Macedonia, where the hero had purchased a large amount of land (κτῆματα μεγάλα)<sup>65</sup>.

After returning from a mission in Peloponnesse, Basil faced another Campbellian challenge – a wrestling match. It occurred during a feast organised by the caesar Bardas<sup>66</sup>. Many prominent members of the aristocracy, senators, and Bulgarians attended the meeting<sup>67</sup>. As the feast progressed and the guests became inebriated, the Bulgarian visitors came to the fore:

<sup>61</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XI, 31–33, p. 42.

<sup>62</sup> 1 Kgs 10; A. KALDELLIS, *The Study of Women and Children: Methodological Challenges and New Directions*, [in:] *The Byzantine World*, ed. P. STEPHENSON, London 2010, p. 61–71.

<sup>63</sup> *Vita Basilii*, LXXIII, p. 250–252.

<sup>64</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XI, 45–54; N. TOBIAS, *Basil I...*, p. 112–114.

<sup>65</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XI, 60–65, p. 46; cf. L. ADONTZ, *L'âge...*, p. 488.

<sup>66</sup> Genesios' account presents a slightly modified version. Genesios uses specialistic terminology for Basil's wrestling hold, he also mentions nothing about the presence of the Bulgarians and presents a different, elaborate version of hero's story after the feast, writing that immediately after the events Basil was spotted by Michael: G. MORAVCSIK, *Sagen...*, p. 96–99.

<sup>67</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XII, 7, p. 46; cf. CONSTANTINUS PORPHYROGENITUS, *De Cerimoniis Aulae Byzantinae Libri Duo*, 740, 2–3; 742, 2–3; 743, 2–3, ed. J.J. REISKE, Bonn 1929 [= CSHB], p. 740–743. In *De cerimoniis* Bulgarians invited to feasts are also called 'friends' (φίλοι). I agree with the translational interpretation of *Vita* by I. Ševčenko, who took the word 'friends' in inverted commas, suggesting a pejorative reading of the word used to describe Bardas. Such an interpretation of the word is appropriate given the author's attitude to caesar's character and toward the Bulgarians, who are portrayed as barbarians. It is also worth pointing out that *De cerimoniis*, as a handbook of court ceremonial and court protocol, must have maintained an existing practice according to which personal convictions were irrelevant. On this issue cf. M.J. LESZKA, *Wizerunek władców bułgarskich u Konstantyna Porfirogenety, Genesiosa i Kontynuatora Teofanesa*, SA 41, 2000, p. 11–12; P. KOMATINA, *Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De administrando imperio and the Byzantine Historiography of the mid-10<sup>th</sup> century*, 3PBI 56, 2019, p. 40–42.

Since the Bulgarians, who are almost invariably vainglorious braggarts, happened at that time to have with them a Bulgarian who prided himself on the prowess of his body and was an outstanding wrestler (until then, practically no one who had wrestled with him had been able to throw him in a match), they appeared presumptuous past all endurance on account of their man and boasted about him beyond measure<sup>68</sup>.

The Bulgarians were portrayed in the stereotypical, barbaric manner as ‘vain-glorious braggarts’ and ‘presumptuous’ (οἰηματῖαι καὶ καυχηματῖαι)<sup>69</sup>. These characteristics, as opposed to the values God rewards, *i.e.* modesty and temperance, heralded the downfall of self-confident visitors<sup>70</sup>. The reason for their pride was an undefeated wrestler. Theophilus, who represented the pride of Byzantines, could not accept that the Bulgarian was invincible, as it was touching the dignity of the Byzantine state. It caused that he called Basil to the duel, where the honour was at stake<sup>71</sup>.

Placing the story in the specifics of wrestling duel casts light on perceptions of the sport in culture. According to many universal usages of this motive, it is possible to conclude that wrestling was perceived as a competition that allows the hero to show his strength and dominance over the enemy<sup>72</sup>. To these perceptions, the tradition of combat present in accounts of *Genesios* and *Vita* was mythicised<sup>73</sup>. According to the *Porphyrogenitus* account, after dusting the mat with sand, the two wrestlers faced off: *Basil grappled with the Bulgarian; he squeezed him in a stranglehold, lifted him above the table, and threw him down on it with the ease with which one throws a bundle of hay, weightless and inanimate, or a tuft of wool, light and dry*<sup>74</sup>.

<sup>68</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XII, 13–18, p. 48.

<sup>69</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XII, 12–13, p. 48; cf. for example C. MESSIS, *Du topos de la barbarie à l'émergence de la curiosité ethnographique: les Bulgares dans les textes byzantins (XI<sup>e</sup>–XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, [in:] *Laudator temporis acti. Studia in memoriam Ioannis A. Božilov*, ed. I.A. BILARSKY, Sofia 2018, p. 260–281; methodological remarks on the perception of ‘other’ and stereotypes: T. PELECH, *Obraz „obcego”...*, p. 43–48, 51–53.

<sup>70</sup> The Bible indicates that people who exalt themselves, characterised by arrogance and pride, go against religious morality and therefore face punishment: 1 Sam 16: 5; Isa 13: 11; Mk 7: 20–23; 2 Cor 12: 20; 2 Tim 3: 2.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. *Leonis Diaconi Caloensis Historiae*, 4, 5, ed. C.B. HASE, Bonnae 1828, p. 61–62.

<sup>72</sup> B. POLIAKOFF, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World. Competition, Violence, and Culture*, New Haven–London 1987; A. PENJAK, K. HRVOJE, *Sport and Literature: an Overview of the Wrestling Combats in the Early Literary Texts*, *IJHSS* 5.3, 2013, p. 49–55.

<sup>73</sup> Reading this story, it is not difficult to make associations with the biblical scenes of David fighting Goliath (1 Sam 17). Basil, like David, had a humble background, was destined to become a ruler, fought a strong and invincible opponent and together with his enemy were the representatives of his nation: A. MARKOPOULOS, *Constantine VII...*, p. 162–163; G. MORAVCSIK, *Sagen...*, p. 68–70; ruler, even this future one, should dominate his rivals in strength: R.J. LILIE, *Reality and Invention...*, p. 172–174; on *semper victor* cf. J. DUDEK, *Pęknięte zwierciadło – kryzys i odbudowa wizerunku władcy bizantyńskiego od 1056 roku do ok. 1095 roku*, Zielona Góra 2009, p. 13–14.

<sup>74</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XII, 29–34, p. 50.

The referenced passage leaves no doubt about Macedonian's strength at his disposal. This interpretation was inscribed in the reaction of all the present elite, including Bulgarians, who were taken aback when they saw Basil's potency: *The Bulgarians were also awestruck by this superior skill (εὐχερείας) and power (δυνάμειος) and remained dumbfounded*<sup>75</sup>. The future sovereign defeated the opponent, taking after Biblical David, Samson or mythical Heracles<sup>76</sup>. In this way, narration showed that Macedonian and his descendants could defend the honour and safety of his countrymen. In light of this, the legitimising function of this narrative, in the eyes of the audience, was not questionable<sup>77</sup>.

The events surrounding the duel between Basil and the Bulgarian are presented by an outline of the events that determined the protagonist's subsequent promotion to the emperor's entourage. Moreover, this challenge gave the winner great glory throughout the city and made everyone adore him: *Basil's fame began to spread ever wider all over the city, his name was on everyone's lips, and he was the object of everyone's admiring gaze*<sup>78</sup>. The protagonist, who had previously acquired a vast fortune, now gained respect among the city's population and guests at the feast.

The outcome of this duel and the opponent itself is not surprising. As M.J. Leszka pointed out, in the mid of 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Bulgarians were still seen as a threat despite their peaceful relations with Byzantium. The experience of the wars with Simeon and the question of the titularity of the Bulgarian rulers was a blow to the circle of the court elite<sup>79</sup>. In this context, Basil's victory over the Bulgarian suggests the civilisational superiority of the Byzantines over the barbaric neighbours, which is a reference to the Byzantine idea of τάξις denoting a hierarchy of Byzantium over its neighbours<sup>80</sup>. Confirmation of this interpretation of narration can be found

<sup>75</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XII, 35–37, p. 50.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. *Vita Basilii*, XV, 26, p. 58; cf. C. HEAD, *Physical Descriptions of the Emperors in Byzantine Historical Writing*, B 50.1, 1980, p. 226–240; M. WHITBY, *George of Pisidia's Presentation of the Emperor Heraclius and his Campaigns*, [in:] *The Reign of Heraclius (610–641). Crisis and Confrontation*, ed. G.J. REININK, B.H. STOLTE, Leuven 2003, p. 157–173; on Heracles in wrestling fight: R. GRAVES, *Mity greckie*, Kraków 2020, p. 454–455.

<sup>77</sup> On the functions of comparisons to Heracles or Alexander the Great in the Byzantine literature cf. for instance: T. PEŁECH, *Kreacja bohatera w Aleksjadzcie. Zmagania Aleksego I Komnena z żupanem Raszki Wukanem w latach 1093–1094*, PZH 17.2, 2016, p. 59–70.

<sup>78</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XII, 37–39, p. 50; cf. *Vita Basilii*, IV, 31–40, p. 22; T. PEŁECH, *Obraz „obcego”...*, p. 87–95 and n. 380.

<sup>79</sup> M.J. LESZKA, *Wizerunek...*, p. 22.

<sup>80</sup> Z.A. BRZOZOWSKA, M.J. LESZKA, K. MARINOW, *Piotr I Święty, Car Bułgarski (ok. 912–969). Maria Lekapena, Caryca Bułgarska (ok. 912–963)*, Kraków 2018, p. 238, 243–244; K. MARINOW, *Dziki pęd wszczepiony w piękne drzewo oliwne Nowego Izraela. Bizantyńskie poglądy na miejsce Bułgarów w chrześcijańskiej ekumenie w świetle mowy „Na pokój z Bułgarami”*, [in:] *Bałkany – Bizancjum – Bliższy Wschód. Studia z dziejów kultury wieków średnich*, ed. A. PAROŃ, Wrocław 2022, p. 77–90; for this motive in *Vita* cf. also *Vita Basilii*, IV, 29–34, p. 22.

in a similar narrative by Genesios, who mentioned that Basil, while already a ruler, defeated another representative of the Bulgarians – this time, a direct envoy of the Bulgarian ruler himself<sup>81</sup>. Another addition to this plot interpretation may be the scene in which Basil, being still a child, on his way out of Bulgaria, met the khagan Omurtag, who was delighted with the boy and therefore gave him an apple – a symbol of power over entire *oikumene*<sup>82</sup>. The meaning of this object was explained several centuries earlier by Procopius of Caesarea:

The orb [...] signifies that the whole earth and sea are subject to [emperor], yet he has neither sword nor spear nor any other weapon, but a cross stands upon the globe which he carries, the emblem by which alone he has obtained both his Empire and his victory in war<sup>83</sup>.

Let's return to Basil's adventures in the *Vita* after the wrestling fight. The two subsequent trials were set around similar themes, the background of which is a story about a hunting expedition<sup>84</sup>. In the first of these, the emperor Michael, wanting to kill a hare, which he ultimately failed to do, got off his rebellious and undisciplined horse, which began to run away<sup>85</sup>. A whole crowd of participants pursued the mount but could not do so. It infuriated the *basileus*, who therefore wanted to kill the animal. Basil, who was in the emperor's entourage with his master Theophilus, reacted to Michael's plans. The hero offered to tame this horse, which he finally achieved. In this challenge, Basil, as Genesios explains, was reminiscent of Alexander the Great, who tamed Bucephalus' horse<sup>86</sup>. The protagonist thus again reproduced mythical patterns ingrained in literature and culture, demonstrating important features worthy rulers such as courage (*ἀνδρείας*), cleverness (*εὐφροσύνη*) and wisdom (*σύνεσις*)<sup>87</sup>, for which he received a reward and was promoted to the office of *strator* and later to the office of imperial *protostrator*<sup>88</sup>.

The interpretation of this scene could be linked to the next challenge, which is placed again in the hunting context. In the following chapter, a hunting party

<sup>81</sup> GENESIOS, 4, 40, 3–16, p. 90.

<sup>82</sup> *Vita Basilii*, IV, 29–39, p. 22.

<sup>83</sup> PROCOPIUS, vol. VII, *On Buildings*, 2, 1, 11, trans. H.B. DEWING, London–New York 1940 [= LCL, 343], p. 34–35.

<sup>84</sup> In Genesios account author did not mention hunting accidents – he described only accident with horse but presented it in different way: GENESIOS, 4, 26, 24–5, p. 78–79.

<sup>85</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XIII, 1–9, p. 50.

<sup>86</sup> *Plutarch's Lives*, Alexander, 6, ed. et trans. B. PERRIN, London–Cambridge 1919 [= LCL, 99], p. 236–239; for radical, possible sexual-meaning interpretation of this narration cf.: C. MESSIS, *Est-elle possible une lecture subversive de la Vie de Basile? Stratégies narratives et objectifs politiques à la cour de Constantin VII Porphyrogénète*, [in:] *Storytelling in Byzantium. Narratological Approaches to Byzantine Texts and Images*, ed. C. MESSIS, M. MULLEN, I. NILSSON, Uppsala 2018, p. 212–215.

<sup>87</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XIII, 23–24, p. 52.

<sup>88</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XIII, 27–29, p. 52.

occurred during which an enormous wolf jumped out at the participants. According to the literary scheme, the Macedonian was the only person – as befits a great hero – who was not frightened of this animal<sup>89</sup>. Consequently, the protagonist, who was riding his horse ahead of the emperor, using a *bardoukion* – the imperial mace – cut the wolf in half, demonstrating his extraordinary strength<sup>90</sup>. This provoked a lively reaction from his entourage, most notably Bardas, who, seeing Basil as a very ambitious man, received this explanation from the sage Leon: *This one happens to be very man whom I said would become the successor to you all*<sup>91</sup>.

The interpretation of the referenced scenes goes deeper than just a demonstration of strength or cleverness, which indicates the imperial destiny of Basil. Hunting themes were part of the common repertoire of literary treatments in medieval literature, as they were an opportunity to illustrate desirable qualities in military commanders and rulers<sup>92</sup>. This was equally significant in Byzantine culture, where hunting was perceived as similar to war victories and was an essential part of army training<sup>93</sup>. In this context, Macedonian's actions demonstrated his strength as an excellent hunter comparing him biblical Nimrod – legendary hunter and king of Mesopotamia<sup>94</sup>. It also proved that he could lead and defend the state. It was symbolically manifested by his defence of the participants in the hunting party against the wolf. The animal that Basil killed is likewise not coincidental. The wolf in medieval culture was one of the most terrifying creatures, symbolising barbarism, evil, or the devil<sup>95</sup>. The adjective with which the animal is described also acquires additional value – the wolf was described in the superlative form of the adverb “πάμμεγας” as the most “enormous” (πάμμεγεθέστατος<sup>96</sup>). All that helps us to understand also the previous scene in which Michael failed to kill the hare. As A. Kotołowska has shown, in Greek literature, the hare was an animal that often escaped the hunters<sup>97</sup>. Moreover, this hunt outcome is significant in the scene analysed here, showing that Basil could tame and kill animals, including such

<sup>89</sup> Romanus was also described as the only person who was not scared of lion: LIUTPRANDO, *Antapodosis*, 3, 25, 1–47, ed. et trans. P. CHIESA, Milano 2015, p. 196–200; on Romanus Lecapenus and his family reign: S. RUNCIMAN, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus and his Reign. A Study of Tenth-Century Byzantium*, Cambridge 1929.

<sup>90</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XIV, 8–10, p. 54.

<sup>91</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XIV, 22–23, p. 56–57.

<sup>92</sup> J. PYSIAK, *Król i bestia. Cudowne i tajemnicze spotkania królów ze zwierzętami*, PH 91.4, 2000, p. 505–518.

<sup>93</sup> E. PATLAGEAN, *De la Chasse et du Souverain*, DOP 46, 1992, p. 257–263.

<sup>94</sup> Gen. 9: 9–10; *Vita Basilii*, XV, 24–27, p. 58–59.

<sup>95</sup> S. KOBIELUS, *Bestiarium chrześcijańskie. Zwierzęta w symbolice i interpretacji. Starożytność i średniowiecze*, Warszawa 2002, p. 334–339; W. KOPALIŃSKI, *Słownik symboli*, Warszawa 2006, p. 467–470.

<sup>96</sup> A. KOTŁOWSKA, *Zwierzęta w kulturze literackiej Bizantyńczyków – ‘Αναβλέψατε εἰς τὰ πετεινὰ...’*, Poznań 2013, p. 46–47.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 42–43.

fearsome ones as the giant wolf, symbolising his readiness to save the state from the most challenging threats. In comparison to the backdrop of the Amorian, the Macedonian, by his challenge, displayed radically different features, indicating his vocation as an emperor and consummate commander<sup>98</sup>.

Having been promoted into the circle of the closest imperial entourage, the narrator outlined the character's rapid advancement. Basil was promoted to the office of chamberlain in place of Slav Damianos; he was honoured with the rank of patrician and married *a woman who surpassed almost all the noble ladies in shapeliness of body, beauty, and modesty*<sup>99</sup>. The manuscript, due to a lacuna in the text, did not mention the woman's name. Still, according to the following information and other sources, we can assume it was the "daughter of Inger"<sup>100</sup> – Eudokia Ingerina<sup>101</sup>. This period of Basil's advancement was interspersed with the reprehensible behaviour of Bardas. The caesar, who had given no sign of ill intentions moments earlier, turned into an ambitious man, plotting first against the Damianos to depose him and, following, against Basil and the emperor<sup>102</sup>. This became the catalyst for his assassination, in which, according to *Vita*, Basil played only a secondary role. In Porphyrogenitus' account, his grandfather did participate in the murder of Bardas, but only on Michael's orders.

The *basileus* could not stand caesar's behaviour, who made no secret of his ambitions and was open about his desire to depose the sovereign. As a result, Michael plotted his assassination during preparations for an expedition against the Muslim Crete in 867. The task was assigned to a group led by Symbatios, but the plan could have failed due to their fear. In light of this, Michael gave Basil responsibility for the situation. In the face of anxiety for the emperor's life, the Macedonian carried out the next Campbellian task – he faced and persuaded conspirators to assassinate Bardas<sup>103</sup>. This was the last of a series of challenges the protagonist had to overcome. As a result of manifesting his talents and thanks to God's protection, he had advancement in the position of caesar. Now, a most challenging task awaited him – Basil had made his way to the Campbellian's inner-most cave.

<sup>98</sup> On contrast between Michael and Basil's behaviour later cf. for instance: *Vita Basilii*, XIX, 22–34, p. 76.

<sup>99</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XVI, 23–24, p. 62–63.

<sup>100</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XVI, 25–26, p. 62.

<sup>101</sup> Cf. LEO VI, 16–21, p. 52; in the Logothete account, Eudokia supposed to be Michael's favourite mistress: SYMEON, 131, 32, 286–292, p. 248. This issue is discussed for instance in: S. TOUGHER, *Leo VI...*, p. 42–67; parts 1–15 in *Vita* have different rhythm of narration than following chapters: T. KAMPIANAKI, *Vita Basilii: The Power of Rhythm in Constructing the Narrative Landscape of Imperial Propaganda*, [in:] *Landscapes of Power. Selected Papers from the XV Oxford University Byzantine Society International Conference*, ed. M. LAU et al., Oxford 2014, p. 182–185.

<sup>102</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XV–XVI, p. 56–62; cf. N. TOBIAS, *Basil I...*, p. 130–140.

<sup>103</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XVII, p. 62–70.



### Approaching the inner-most cave

The death of Bardas caused a change in the narrative's tone. Since Basil had become the main threat to emperor Michael with his promotion to the office of caesar, the *basileus'* behaviour changed dramatically<sup>104</sup>. Such a narrative turn has an explanation in biblical representations – with the advancement of the Macedonian, the spirit of God left the Byzantine emperor who, like King Saul, immediately started to behave unworthy of the dignity of his office<sup>105</sup>. Further chapters of the text were mainly devoted to the portrait of Michael III, which sidelined the figure of Basil. Such a decision was intended to justify the emperor's death and show that Basil's assumption of the throne resulted from the Will of God<sup>106</sup>.

Basil faced his final challenge in this situation – according to Campbell's scheme – the most difficult one. The hero should put up with Michael's attitude because, according to divine destiny, the Macedonian's patience and humility will ensure that he receives his reward – the imperial crown<sup>107</sup>. The task was not straightforward, as Michael, in the opinion of the narrator of *Vita: dishonoured the gravity of imperial majesty and spent his days in carousing, drinking, wanton lust and shameful tales, and with charioteers, horses and chariots, falling into the madness and frenzy of mind that comes from such pursuits*<sup>108</sup>.

The portrait of the tyrant has been shaped through a series of literary descriptions used to criticise the emperor's actions (*Kaiserkritik*)<sup>109</sup>. The sovereign was portrayed as the antithesis of the benevolent ruler who lost control over the state.

<sup>104</sup> For the long debate over this relation cf.: E. KISLINGER, *Michael III. – Image und Realität*, E 75, 1987, p. 389–400; N.J. LJUBARSKIJ, *Der Kaiser als Mime. Zum Problem der Gestalt des byzantinischen Kaisers Michael III.*, JÖB 37, 1987, p. 39–50; A. KAZHDAN, *A History...*, p. 140–141; S. TOUGHER, *Michael III, and Basil the Macedonian: Just Good Friends?*, [in:] *Desire and Denial in Byzantium. Papers from the Thirty-first Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton, March 1997*, ed. L. JAMES, London–New York 2016, p. 149–159; M. GALLINA, *La diffamazione del potere: l'invettiva contro Michele III nella Vita Basilii di Costantino VII*, BISIME 112, 2010, p. 57–90; P. VARONA CODESO, *Miguel III (842–867). Construcción histórica y literaria de un reinado*, Madrid 2010; C. MESSIS, *Est-elle possible une lecture...*; for latest interpretation of Basil's path to power in context of same-sex relations: M. MASTERSON, *Between Byzantine Men...*, p. 67–108; cf. also A. PLESZCZYŃSKI, J. SOBESIAK, K. SZEJGIEC, M. TOMASZEK, P. TYSZKA, *Historia...*, p. 225–228.

<sup>105</sup> 1 Sm 16: 14; cf. *Vita Basilii*, XVIII, 11–15, p. 70; Porphyrogenitus compared Michael III to Saul to emphasise the contrast between the Macedonian and Amorian dynasties: A. MARKOPOULOS, *An Anonymous...*, p. 228.

<sup>106</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XX, p. 80–82; cf. *Theophanes Continuatus*, IV, 30–45, p. 275–300; S. TOUGHER, *The Reign of Leo VI...*, p. 28–29.

<sup>107</sup> J. CAMPBELL, *Bohater...*, p. 292–296.

<sup>108</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XX, 14–21, p. 80–81.

<sup>109</sup> F. TINNEFELD, *Kategorien der Kaiserkritik in der byzantinischen Historiographie. Von Prokop bis Niketas Chonates*, Munich 1971; A. CAMERON, *Early Byzantine Kaiserkritik: Two Case Histories*, BMGS 3, 1977, p. 11–17, esp. 15–17; P. MAGDALINO, *Aspects of Twelfth-Century Byzantine Kaiserkritik*, S 58.2, 1983, p. 326–346.

It corresponds with a view that the head of state's behaviour brings about state decline. This illustrated that the social system had been subverted in favour of a so-called 'carnival order', *i.e.* the condition where social roles and functioning of the community were turned around; in this case, emphasising the tragic and undesirable situation of the state's functioning<sup>110</sup>. As the narrator underlines it: *Michael [...] stray from his duties, so frantically did he indulge in all kinds of lawless deeds, so totally did he debase things divine and so insolently break the laws of both society (πολιτείας) and nature (φύσεως νόμου)*<sup>111</sup>.

Particular attention has been paid to the irreverent attitude of the *basileus* and his entourage towards religion. According to the *Vita*, Michael made a jester named Groullos the new patriarch, equipping him with the garments and insignia of patriarchal authority<sup>112</sup>. The new patriarch's behaviour desecrated the status of the office and thus struck at the dignity of God. An example of this attitude is the scene of the procession that Patriarch Ignatius organised. As we read, the anti-patriarch Groullos led a rival parade and marched on a donkey with his group of people who wore the insignia of metropolitans. The group, equipped with lutes, started to indecently and mockingly sing profane songs. Given this, it is not surprising to see the reaction of Ignatius, who, in response to this provocation, pleaded with God to exact justice on the infidels:

The high priest of God asked who they were and by whom, and what purpose they had been gathered. When he learned the answer, he groaned loudly, mourned for their chief who had been at the root of all this, made a tearful entreaty that God put an end to such blasphemy and outrage and scatter the impious at the grave's mouth, so that things holy not be profaned, nor things secret and revered disparaged<sup>113</sup>.

On another occasion, there was one more provocation in which Groullos impersonated Patriarch Ignatius. The victim of this crime was Emperor Michael's mother, Theodora, who, unaware of anything, had come to receive a blessing as an ideal and pious woman<sup>114</sup>. Mocked, she had discovered the trickery of Michael's entourage and groaned loudly: *Behold evil child (κακὸν τέκνον), God has withdrawn His hand from thee and a reprobate mind was given to thee to do those things which are not convenient*<sup>115</sup>.

Basil attempted to influence the emperor to deal with an issue ruining the sovereign's image and the dignity of religion, but it was pointless. Despite repeated persuasion, the ruler remained unmoved. The head of the state was unconcerned

<sup>110</sup> J. BANASZKIEWICZ, *Polskie dzieje bajeczne Mistrza Wincentego Kadłubka*, Wrocław 2002, p. 219–233.

<sup>111</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XX, 11–14, p. 80.

<sup>112</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XXI, 15–18, p. 84.

<sup>113</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XXII, 16–22, p. 86.

<sup>114</sup> About portrait of an ideal Byzantine woman: T. PEŁECH, *Obraz...*, p. 176–182.

<sup>115</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XXIII, 28–30, p. 90; cf. 1 Rom 1: 28.

about the outrage of the people and God himself. The *basileus* demonstrated another trait of the anti-emperor – despite persisting in error, he refused to listen to the good advisers. Michael's insanity led him to attempt to eliminate his sidekick – he had endeavoured to organise an assassination attempt on Basil, but the assassin's horse stumbled<sup>116</sup>. On another occasion, the sovereign, who was compared to Nero (ὥς ὁ Νέρων)<sup>117</sup>, had attempted to replace Basil with a Basilinikos, a brother of eparch Constantine Kapnogenes<sup>118</sup>. Michael put on his new favourite imperial vestments and proclaimed him in Basil's place, but this decision met outrage from the senators<sup>119</sup>.

Michael's drunkenness, sacrilegious attitude, and the associated loss of control over governance in the state caused his death. The carnival order of state's functioning was becoming unbearable *that even David, the meekest of men, would have condoned the drunken conduct of this reprobate. In such circumstances, mercy is not reckoned as long-suffering, but as folly and insensibility*<sup>120</sup>. This situation led to divine punishment and the murder of the emperor *who had lived thus, shamefully and ruinously for himself and affairs of the state, met such an end, worthy of his previous life*<sup>121</sup>. The narrator did not mention the involvement of Basil, demonstrating that the Macedonian family founder gained power without resorting to murdering the Amorian; instead of that, the *Vita* placed the responsibility of assassination on some magistrates and unknown members of the senate<sup>122</sup>.

### Journey's goal and return

Following Michael's death, his immediate successor, Basil, ascended to the throne. This was done legally – power was assumed by the *basileus'* adopted son, whose accession to the throne occurred with the approval of the entire populace<sup>123</sup>. It was the end of the Macedonian's series of trials, and he could now perform the function God called him. Despite Michael's bad behaviour, the story's protagonist did not commit his murder. Instead, he humbly waited for the moment of his exaltation and, in the end, reached a Campbellian journey's goal<sup>124</sup>: *Basil, who up to that*

<sup>116</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XXIV, p. 90–96.

<sup>117</sup> On *comparatio* and its functions: T. PEŁECH, *Hannibal ante portas. Interpretacja fabuły z 21 rozdziału II księgi Kroniki polskiej Anonima tzw. Galla*, M.DLK 1.4, 2016, p. 6 and literature therein.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. *Theophanes Continuatus*, IV, 44, p. 296–298.

<sup>119</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XXV, p. 96–98; R.J.H. JENKINS, *Constantine VII's Portrait of Michael III*, [in:] IDEM, *Studies on Byzantine History of 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries*, pars I, London 1970, p. 75; L. JAMES, *Michael III...*, p. 152–153.

<sup>120</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XXVI, 36–39, p. 102.

<sup>121</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XXVII, 47–50, p. 108.

<sup>122</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XXVII, 39–41, p. 108.

<sup>123</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XXVIII, 1–4, p. 108–110.

<sup>124</sup> J. CAMPBELL, *Bohater...*, p. 126–146.

*time had been second in command, was forthwith promoted to supreme rule and was proclaimed sole emperor [...]*<sup>125</sup>.

According to Campbell's model, the hero of the mythical journey could return to his previous ordinary life or remain where he had come from. Basil, according to the aim of this part of the narration, devoted to illustrate mainly the hero's path to the throne<sup>126</sup>, remained in the position to which God's Providence had led him<sup>127</sup>. This signals that the hero of the myth has broken with his previous life by rising to the rank of emperor<sup>128</sup>. By becoming a head of the state, Basil separated himself from his last environment; he was now elevated to the heights of the social hierarchy. Despite this change, the new emperor became sensitive to the needs of his humble background, from which he set out on the Campbellian journey. This was emphasised by a narrator who recounted Isaac's prophecy, which heralded Basil's ascension to the throne:

This idea was welcomed by high officials, the entire populace of the capital, the army and by the strategoi, and by all the subjects throughout the entire countryside and in all the cities of the empire. For all wished that the direction of public affairs be entrusted to a man who knew from experience what it meant to occupy a lower station of life; how maltreated the poor were by the rich, how unjustly despoiled by them, and how the lowly were made to "rise up and move" so to speak, and were enslaved by people of their own kin<sup>129</sup>.

## Conclusions – the functions of myth

The above analysis has illustrated that the dynastic myth of the Macedonians, as depicted in the *Vita Basilii*, includes many elements common to the Campbellian universal schema of heroic stories (monomyth). The structure of this tradition was mythicised by the Byzantine system of ideas about imperial power and associated with it narrative solutions derived from the Christian and classical literature. They were used to illustrate Basil's predestination to become emperor and create a model of virtues worthy of following – the New David, Heracles, Alexander or Nimrod. The following pages will focus on functions of the analysed myth for Constantine Porphyrogenitus using selected points of Mircea Eliade's myth theory<sup>130</sup>. Particular attention will be devoted to the role of the *sacrum* and *profanum* factors in narration,

<sup>125</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XXVIII, 1–2, p. 109.

<sup>126</sup> Cf. P. ΑΓΑΠΗΤΟΣ, *Η εικόνα του αυτοκράτορα Βασιλείου Α' στη φιλομακεδονική γραμματεία, 867–959*, ΗΛΛ 40, 1989, p. 309–310.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 126–146, 296–299.

<sup>128</sup> Similar patterns we may find in hagiographical narrations: R. KOSIŃSKI, *Rola czasu w późno-antycznej hagiografii*, [in:] *Człowiek wobec miar i czasu w przeszłości*, ed. P. GUZOWSKI, M. LIEDKE, Kraków 2007, p. 28–31.

<sup>129</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XIX, 40–48, p. 78–79.

<sup>130</sup> M. ELIADE, *Sacrum a profanum...*, p. 97–121.

the myth's function for Macedonian's identity, and its role in explaining Porphyrogenitus's socio-cultural and political position.

The story of Basil's journey to the throne contains many motifs indicating the presence of the *sacrum* in the Macedonian's path to power<sup>131</sup>. This can be summarised by looking at the number of mentions of Divine Providence (πρόνοια) in the analysed material. The narrator mentioned this factor nine times to describe the hero's history before he became ruler<sup>132</sup>. The frequency of the expression in the text is notably lower as it only appears four times, compared to more than twice as many sections that describe Macedonian's reign<sup>133</sup>. This illustrates the belief that divine legitimacy was essential in dynastic myths, thus arguing for the hero's successive extraordinary ascendancy in the social hierarchy and proving exceptional protection from the *sacrum*<sup>134</sup>. This reflects the Byzantine idea that only God's intercession proves the complete legitimacy of the usurpers' assumption of power<sup>135</sup>, who, as emperor, was regarded as his representative on Earth, ruling over a mirror of the Kingdom of Heaven<sup>136</sup>.

The analysed narrative is a coherent heroic myth understood in terms of real events<sup>137</sup>. Their veracity defies the modern concept of 'historical facts' because they are socio-cultural facts constructed by society in its historical and cultural context<sup>138</sup>. Thus, Basil's adventures gained credibility among the audience through the morphology of this "historical narration" (ιστορική δὴγησις)<sup>139</sup>. The aspect

<sup>131</sup> Cf. P. VARONA CODESO, *In Search of...*, p. 183–184.

<sup>132</sup> *Vita Basilii*, II, 30, p. 14; V, 25, p. 24; VII, 10, p. 28; VIII, 30, p. 32; XVI, 16, p. 60; XVIII, 1 and 31, p. 70–72; XXX, 1, p. 116; XXXII, 3, p. 124.

<sup>133</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XLI, 7, p. 148; LXXII, 33 and 53, p. 250; XCIX, 51, p. 324.

<sup>134</sup> For medieval Christians, the miraculous religious world (*sacrum*) and the real world (*profanum*) interpenetrated each other: M. BŁOCH, *Królowie cudotwórcy. Studium na temat nadprzyrodzonego charakteru przypisywanego władzy królewskiej zwłaszcza we Francji i w Anglii*, Warszawa 1998, p. 94; N. TOBIAS, *Basil I...*, p. 76–77.

<sup>135</sup> J.-P. CHEYNET, *Pouvoirs et Contestations à Byzance, 963–1210*, Paris 1990, p. 177–190; M.J. LESZKA, *Uzurpacje w Cesarstwie Bizantyńskim od połowy IV do XI wieku*, Łódź 1999, p. 17–56.

<sup>136</sup> For this motive in the source cf.: *Vita Basilii*, LXXII, 49–55, p. 250; on the occurrence of these motifs in Byzantium cf. for instance: G. OSTROGORSKY, *The Byzantine Emperor, and Hierarchical World Order*, SEER 35, 1956, p. 1–14; F. DVORNIK, *Early Christian and Byzantine Political Philosophy*, vol. I–II, Washington D.C. 1966; A.P. KAZHDAN, "Constantin imaginaire". *Byzantine Legends of the Ninth century about Constantine the Great*, B 57.1, 1987, p. 196–250; S. ESHEL, *The Concept of the Elect Nation in Byzantium*, Leiden–Boston 2018 [= Mme, 113], p. 59–138.

<sup>137</sup> On contrary cf. P. MAGDALINO, *Knowledge in Authority an Authorised History: the Imperial Intellectual Programme of Leo VI and Constantine VII*, [in:] *Authority in Byzantium*, ed. P. ARMSTRONG, New York–London 2013, p. 209: *it was the emperor who decided what was useful and what was true, and he made little real distinction between the documentation and the invention of historical facts.*

<sup>138</sup> Cf. L. VAN HOOFF, *Among Christian Emperors...*, p. 181; G. DAGRON, *Emperor...*, p. 193; P. VARONA CODESO, *In Search of...*, p. 179–180; E. KISLINGER, *Der junge Basileios...*, p. 144.

<sup>139</sup> *Vita Basilii*, titulus, p. 8. For John Skylitzes, for example, all the events presenting Basil's path to power were plausible – this is why he included them in his *Synopsis*: K. BIAŁY, *Krytycyzm literacki Jana Skylitzesa w proimionie do „Zarysu historii”*, PH 106.1, 2015, p. 203–207.

of the convention is also relevant here, as the form of the story determines its truthfulness by legitimising the tale with the tradition established within the genre; to be considered believable by the *Vita* audience, the heroic story had to be stereotyped through literary representations that were rooted in Byzantine culture<sup>140</sup>. These mythical and literary patterns were translated into tradition about Basil. They indicate how the narrative choices, *topoi*, views, and intertextual references embedded in the culture of elites projected the perception of history, including the story of Basil ordered according to the universal principles of heroic stories like setting out, the path of trials or return. The narrations, like, for instance, the challenge of Basil fighting in a wrestling match or taming Michael's horse, were based on classical patterns rooted in the intellectual background of Byzantine elite circles. According to M. Eliade's understanding of myth, it brought mythical moments up to date by signalling that the conduct of contemporary individuals did not deviate from past models. In this way, the legitimising function of these comparisons indicated that contemporary figures behaved similarly to mythical predecessors who were regarded as behaviour models<sup>141</sup>. Evidence of a similar perception of those figures by Porphyrogenitus can be seen in the expression of emperor Michael, who used these words to reassure his mother, Theodora, against losing power to Basil: *You have it all wrong, mother; this man is a artless simpleton; all he has is valour, as did Samson of old, and he is nothing more than some Enoch or Nimrod who has reappeared (ἀναφανείς) in our own day*<sup>142</sup>.

Finally, the analysed myth depicts events that occurred at the start of the Macedonian dynasty (*in illo tempore*). The story – part of a tradition common to the Macedonian's circle – is the subject of a set of beliefs that justify the existence and activity of lineage in power. In the medieval world, histories of this type were created, transformed and cultivated by dynastic circles according to the demand arising from the historical context and related political objectives<sup>143</sup>. In my opinion, it suggests that the dynastic myth's part in *Vita Basilii* may have been formed before or during the early period of the independent reign of Constantine VII (945–959), when the power of the 'purple-borned' emperor may have been in most need of legitimacy<sup>144</sup>; the *basileus*, setting forth beliefs in the predestination and

<sup>140</sup> Cf. J. BANASZKIEWICZ, *Podanie o Piaście...*, p. 17–35; cf. also N. TOBIAS, *Basil I...*, p. 62–68; L. VAN HOOF, *Among Christian Emperors...*, p. 166.

<sup>141</sup> P. VARONA CODESO, *In Search of...*, p. 183–184; cf. also A. GURIEWICZ, *Kategorie kultury średniowiecznej*, Warszawa 1976, p. 99–100.

<sup>142</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XV, 24–27, p. 58–59.

<sup>143</sup> For Ottonian context cf.: G. ALTHOFF, *Ottonowie. Władza królewska bez państwa*, Warszawa 2009, p. 23.

<sup>144</sup> For this statement, cf., for instance: L. VAN HOOF, *Among Christian Emperors...*, p. 180–183; cf. C. HOLMES, *Byzantine Political Culture and Compilation Literature in the Tenth and Eleventh centuries: Some Preliminary Inquiries*, DOP 64, 2010, p. 64–68; P. PRASAD, *Splendour, Vigour, and Legitimacy: the Prefaces of the Book of Ceremonies (De ceremoniis) and Byzantine Imperial Theory*, [in:] *The*

perfection of his lineage, was manifesting his identity and was drawing boundaries between his dynasty and other lineages, especially the Lecapenus family<sup>145</sup>. This was exemplified in the scene concerning Michael's death. In the perception of *Vita's* author, eliminating this incompetent emperor was not erroneous behaviour. As the source mentions, his death or removal from the throne reflected the nature of his rule, which may be interpreted as parallel to Constantine's own views on Romanus and his son's reign<sup>146</sup>.

These perceptions should not be only reduced to contemporary terms of political propaganda and manipulative activity but can also be interpreted as the result of the beliefs of Constantine VII. Porphyrogenitus, as a result of his 'birth in the purple', awareness of being the heir to the throne after his father Leo VI, through education and the observation of reality during the time of his political marginalisation, acquired knowledge of the history of his lineage, formed consciousness of his political role and thus developed a sense of his own dynastic identity<sup>147</sup>. The building of *Nea Ekklesia*, or initiating works on a collection of laws called *Basilika*, a panegyric tradition on the Basil passed down, for instance, by Constantine's father Leo VI, proved that Basil's might have been perceived by Porphyrogenitus a few decades later as a time of Byzantine revival, when the state was ruled – as patriarch Photius indicated – by the new Constantine the Great<sup>148</sup>. Porphyrogenitus's perceptions of his hero-grandfather had a decisive influence on his choice of narrative form. As the founder of the family and the person who introduced the family to the throne, he became central to the dynastic identity of his subsequent descendants<sup>149</sup>. The memory of the hero-founder was thus mythicised, but at the

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*Emperor in the Byzantine World. Papers from the Forty-Seventh Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies*, ed. S. TOUGHER, London–New York 2019 [= SPBSP, 21], p. 241–245.

<sup>145</sup> Cf. W.J. BURSZTA, *Antropologia kultury*, Poznań 1998, p. 139.

<sup>146</sup> *Vita Basilii*, XXVII, 47–50.

<sup>147</sup> Cf. F. ZNANIECKI, *Socjologia wychowania*, vol. I, *Wychowujące społeczeństwo*, Warszawa 2001, p. 70–123; W.J. BURSZTA, *Antropologia...*, p. 85; *Vita Basilii*, I, p. 10–12; cf. A. MARKOPOULOS, *Constantine VII...*, p. 168–170; cf. also R. MICHAŁOWSKI, *Restauratio Poloniae...*, p. 463, 472; M. ELIADE, *Sacrum, mit...*, p. 89–125; IDEM, *Sacrum a profanum...*, p. 102–107; M. PROPP, *Nie tylko Bajka*, Warszawa 2000, p. 19; on the role of mimeticism in strengthening identity: C. WULF, *Antropologia. Historia – kultura – filozofia*, Warszawa 2016, p. 24–26; on the role of ancestors in the formation of identity: A. KALDELLIS, *Romanland. Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2019, p. 47; N. LEIDHOLM, *Elite Byzantine Kinship, ca. 950–1204. Blood, Reputation, and the Genos*, Leeds 2019 [= BME], p. 28–35; D. ZUPKA, *Medieval Dynasties in Medieval Studies: A Historiographic Contribution*, FHIS 13.2, 2019, p. 91–92.

<sup>148</sup> *The Homilies of Photius Patriarch of Constantinople*, Homily 10, trans. et comm. C. MANGO, Washington D.C. 1958 [= DOS, 3], p. 189.

<sup>149</sup> It is worth mentioning that the dynastic memory of Basil survived – it was likely in honour of this ruler that his name was given to emperor Basil II (958–1025). On naming children in Byzantium cf. for instance: O.-M. COJOCARU, *Byzantine Childhood. Representations and Experiences of Children in Middle Byzantine Society*, London–New York 2022, p. 78–81.

same time formed the basis of his family's functioning in the social sphere. Therefore, the panegyric genre, which glorifies the person and their merits, could ideally reflect the perception of Basil's rule – his virtues and contribution to the state.

The myth in *Vita* explained that Porphyrogenitus was descended from an eminent family founded by an excellent hero who was a model of virtues worthy of emulation<sup>150</sup>. Basil's behaviour, in the eyes of his grandson, was reminiscent of the warriors and great conquerors of Heracles or Alexander the Great. These comparisons sent a clear *communicatio* to the recipients that only Basil and his descendants could withstand external threats and extend the size of the empire<sup>151</sup> – this is why Porphyrogenitus used comparisons to Heracles, Nimrod or Alexander the Great and emphasised the physical power of the protagonist<sup>152</sup>. This origin of Constantine Porphyrogenitus contrasted very strongly with the 'purple-borned' emperor opinion of Romanus I, whom he faulted for his lack of 'imperial and noble descent' (γένουα Βασιλείου καὶ εὐγενοῦα) and consequent lack of ability to govern the state<sup>153</sup>. The *Vita* expresses the view that only those with an excellent background and upbringing could effectively rule the empire<sup>154</sup>:

The lord Romanus, the emperor, was a common, illiterate fellow and not from among those who have been bred up in the palace and have followed the Roman National customs from the beginning, nor was he of imperial and noble stock, and for this reason, in most actions, he was too arrogant and despotic [...]<sup>155</sup>.

In conclusion, as the analysis of dynastic myth in *Vita Basilii* proposed, this poorly documented tradition could undergo the universalisation of narration according to the proposed Campbell monomyth scheme. In this regard, the study showed *Vita* that the tradition of Basil contained some motifs that Campbell mentioned: the setting out on an expedition combined with the defiance of a challenge, a series of adventures, including approaching the inner-most cave, in which the hero proved his worth for which he finally received the desired reward; and, finally, the motif of return, in which the protagonist, having achieved his position, did not set out to return, which marked his social advancement. Significantly, however, this process was consistent with the cultural codes of the society where the tales circulated. In the case of *Vita*, these perceptions adapted to narration requirements

<sup>150</sup> *Vita Basilii*, I, 17–18, p. 10.

<sup>151</sup> Cf. conclusions: T. GREENWOOD, *Basil I, Constantine VII and Armenian Literary Tradition in Byzantium*, [in:] *Reading in the Byzantine Empire and Beyond*, ed. T. SHAWCROSS, I. TOTH, Cambridge 2018, p. 456–466.

<sup>152</sup> Cf. T. PEŁECH, *Kreacja bohatera...*

<sup>153</sup> CONSTANTINE PORPHYROGENITUS, *De administrando imperio*, 152, 52, ed. G. MORAVCSIK, trans. R.J.H. JENKINS, <sup>2</sup>Washington D.C. 1967 [= *CFHB*, 1; *DOT*, 1] (cetera: CONSTANTINE PORPHYROGENITUS), p. 72.

<sup>154</sup> On the relationship between γένουα and εὐγένεια: N. LEIDHOLM, *Elite Byzantine Kinship...*, p. 13–14.

<sup>155</sup> CONSTANTINE PORPHYROGENITUS, 13, 149–156, p. 72–73.



were deeply connected with ideological perceptions about the role and position of Byzantine emperors, proving the predestination of Basil to become ruler.

At the same time, the analysed part of Macedonian's dynastic myth provides an insight into the dynastic identity system of Constantine Porphyrogenitus: the associated perceptions and significance of his dynasty's past, as well as the resulting legitimacy for his social, cultural and political position in the state. Moreover, it proves confidence in legitimising the 'purple-borned' emperor and his grandfather's rule. The *Vita* manifested a perception of Porphyrogenitus superiority over the other rulers and Byzantine elites, especially the Lecapenus family. The heroic tale of the dynasty's founder served the Macedonians to demonstrate their conviction that only their family was capable of facing Byzantium's internal challenges and extending the frontier of the state and that their authority – established by providence in Basil's time – was inviolable and accepted by the transcendent authority of God.

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