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THE LEGEND OF BASIL THE BULGAR-SLAYER

The reign of Basil II (976–1025), the longest of any Byzantine emperor, has long been considered a “golden age,” in which Basil’s greatest achievement was the annexation of Bulgaria. This, we have been told, was achieved through a long and bloody war of attrition which won Basil the grisly epithet *Voulgartoktonos*, “the Bulgar-slayer.”

In this new study Paul Stephenson argues that neither of these beliefs is true. Instead, Basil fought far more sporadically in the Balkans and, like his predecessors, considered this area less prestigious than the East. Moreover, his reputation as “Bulgar-slayer” emerged only a century and a half later, the creation of a martial regime immersed in bellicose panegyric. Thereafter the “Bulgar-slayer” was periodically to play a galvanizing role for the Byzantines. Fading from view during the period of Ottoman rule, Basil returned to center stage as the Greeks struggled to establish a modern nation state. As Byzantium was embraced as the Greek past by scholars and politicians, the “Bulgar-slayer” became an icon in the struggle for Macedonia (1904–8) and the Balkan Wars (1912–13).

PAUL STEPHENSON was appointed to the newly endowed John W. and Jeanne M. Rowe Professorship of Byzantine History, University of Wisconsin-Madison, in 2001, and was awarded concurrently a Research Associateship at Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection (Harvard University), Washington, DC. His first book *Byzantium’s Balkan frontier: a political study of the northern Balkans, 900–1204* was published to critical acclaim by Cambridge University Press in 2000, and it has also appeared in Greek translation.

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*University of Wisconsin-Madison and
Dumbarton Oaks*



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*In memory of SWS, IPS, GHS, DHS,
and for my sisters*

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Μελετῶ ἄλλη ἐποχή, ἀρκετὰ γνωστή, τοῦ Ἀλεξίου Κομνηνοῦ,
κ' ἐδῶ ἡ φαντασία δὲν μπορεῖ πιά νὰ γεμίσει τὰ χάσματα, ὅπως
στὸν καιρὸ τοῦ Βουλγαροκτόνου ποὺ τόσο λίγο γνωρίζομε.

Penelope Delta to Kostis Palamas, February 1912

But Christian Spain badly needed some relics and a shrine to boost its campaign to drive out the Moors. That's how Saint James became the patron saint of Spain, and "*Santiago!*" the Spanish battle-cry. According to another legend, he appeared in person at the crucial battle of Clavijo in 834 to rally the wilting Christian army, and personally slew seventy thousand Moors. The archdiocese of Santiago had the face to lay a special tax on the rest of Spain as a thank you to St James, though in fact there is no evidence that the battle of Clavijo ever took place, with or without his intervention. In the churches along the Camino you see statues of "*Santiago Matamoros*", St James the Moor-slayer, depicting him as a warrior on horseback, wielding his sword and trampling the corpses of swarthy, thick-lipped infidels. They could become an embarrassment if Political Correctness ever gets a hold in Spain.

David Lodge, *Therapy*, London 1995

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Preface

The Greeks have often been accused of dwelling on the past, to the detriment of both the present and the future. Indeed, one critical philhellene coined the term *progonoplexia*, or “ancestoritis,” to describe this apparent obsession. But using history, recreating the past to comprehend and shape the present and future, is neither inherently wrong, nor is it uniquely Greek. Every generation must rewrite the past to give it meaning, and in doing so ask new questions of the evidence at hand. This was especially true in the nineteenth century, an era of nation formation, when many new materials were made available for study. Students of medieval history now rarely discover new sources, but constantly discover new questions to ask of those they have, revealing new levels of meaning pertinent to both past and present societies. Most historians, and even some politicians, now regret the “abuse” of the past for nationalist ends. This is especially true in Greece, where for more than twenty years critical historians have offered a counterbalance to nationalist rhetoric. But elsewhere, scholars continue to produce “history” in the service of the nation state. We should condemn this, especially when it leads to the manipulation and falsification of evidence, as it often does. But the fact remains that few educational systems emphasize any aspect of history over the history of the nation. The Greek passion for Byzantium, as a period of Greek cultural history, is and will remain of the greatest benefit to the vitality of Byzantine studies. Therefore, I offer this study to Greeks and philhellenes alike in all humility.

In researching and writing this book I have incurred many debts of gratitude. I am particularly grateful to my good friend Despina Christodoulou, who gave me a base in Athens for three summers, and took the opportunity to correct, encourage and facilitate my research at all stages. Also in Athens, in 2000, I was privileged to be invited by the late Lenos Mavrommatis to present the kernel of my ideas at the EIE conference, *Vyzantio kai Voulgaroi, 1018–1185*. I benefited then, as before, from broader discussions with Telemachos Lounghis, and also with Paschalis Kitromilides. At a late stage,

I presented a paper on the revival of interest in the Bulgar-slayer at the annual Monemvasia symposium, and for that opportunity I am grateful to Chryssa Maltezou and Haris Kalligas. J. C. Mazarakis-Aenian, secretary-general of the Historical and Ethnological Society of Greece, generously provided color transparencies of several images.

This project is not about Bulgaria, and it attempts to keep Bulgar-slaying to a minimum. To that end, I am grateful to two very lively Bulgarians, Dorotei Getov and Elka Bakalova, for their helpful comments and criticisms. I was also enlightened by visiting and speaking with members of the Macedonian community of Perth, Western Australia, and am grateful to John Melville-Jones for that opportunity. In addition, papers with variations on the name of this book were given by invitation at a number of institutions, including: The Queen's University, Belfast; The School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London; The University of Florida, Gainesville. I am grateful to Margaret Mullett, Wendy Bracewell, Alex Drace-Francis, Florin Curta, Will Hasty and Tom Gallant for the invitations and excellent critical feedback. At Cambridge University Press, William Davies has provided the same impeccable service and unstinting support that he did for my last effort. Byzantine historians owe him a great debt.

I will not mention every Byzantinist who has helped at various stages of the project, so that they may have a chance to review the book! They know who they are. However, I must express my gratitude to foundations and institutions that have supported my research since 1998. Initial forays were undertaken at the University of Oxford, and there I was guided in various directions by Averil Cameron, Peter Mackridge and Richard Clogg. Catherine Holmes generously read draft chapters, and offered copies of her papers prior to their publication. The Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung made it possible for me to enjoy two stints at the Seminar für Byzantinistik at the Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, where the idea to produce a short book was conceived. Under the diligent and kindly eye of Günter Prinzing I produced two preliminary papers. These were both published in *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, and I am grateful to the editor John Haldon for permission to reproduce much of the text, albeit substantially reorganized. Little research was undertaken, but much fun was had at University College Cork, Ireland, thanks to Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Jennifer O'Reilly, Damian Bracken, Dermot Keogh, Joe Lee and especially Gillian Smith. Bill Courtenay, David Morgan, Michael Chamberlain and Mike Clover were instrumental in bringing me from Cork to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where the Graduate School has

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generously sponsored two summers of research overseas. My second home, Dumbarton Oaks, has proved the perfect place to complete the project, while honing other necessary skills. I am immensely grateful to the Director, Edward Keenan, who glanced over a draft of the book; to the Director of the program in Byzantine Studies, Alice-Mary Talbot, for her guidance in matters philological; and to the Byzantine Librarian (retired), Irene Vaslef, without whom the library, the heart of an august institution, would be a lesser resource. Our senior and most erudite Research Associate, Irfan Shahîd, generously translated Arabic material where existing translations were unclear or inaccurate. Without the generosity of John and Jeanne Rowe, this project would not yet have reached an end, but more stout would have been taken.

Annotation and transliteration

I have attempted to cite all literature in the fullest form both in footnotes and bibliography. Since the manuscript was prepared for publication at Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, I have adopted the style employed in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*. This has required that I, somewhat more reluctantly, adopt American English spelling.

It was my original intention to use original alphabets whenever possible. However, after some reflection, I have chosen to employ Latin transliterations far more frequently. It seemed an excessive burden on the reader to present her with three alphabets – Latin, Greek and Cyrillic – on any given page. (Transliterated Arabic terms are far less frequent.) When transliterating from Cyrillic I have used a modified version of the Library of Congress system, omitting some diacritics. However, where a work has been published with a transliterated title, I have employed that for the sake of clarity. For example, I cite the work in Russian by V. R. Rozen according to the transliterated title offered by the editor of the reprinted edition: *Imperator Vasilij Bolgarobojca. Izvlečenija iz Letopisi Jaxi Antioxijskago* (St. Petersburg, 1908; repr. London, 1972). Similarly, I have not altered an author's preferred transliteration of his or her name, so I refer to I. Dujčev not Duichev, and V. Šandrovskaia not Shandrovskaia.

I have been deliberately inconsistent in my transliteration of Greek. Because so many Byzantine Greek terms will be familiar to the intended readership, to retain the Greek letters would be both awkward and pedantic. Moreover, the *ODB* now offers a model to follow, and in all cases I have sought to do so: hence Theophylaktos, not Theophylact of Ohrid, but John, not Ioannes or Ioannis Komnenos. The Byzantine Greek term for general, στρατηγός, is commonly transliterated as *strategos* (see *ODB*, III, 1964). However, if this were used in a Modern Greek context, I would prefer *stratigos*, to represent better the sound of the eta. For similar reasons,

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the reader will find references to Lambros, not Lampros, but *basileus* not *vasilefs*. This is not to suggest that the words would have been pronounced so differently, but merely to follow established conventions. The one notable exception is *Voulgaroktonos*, not *Boulgaroktonos*, which I have employed throughout.

Abbreviations

<i>ArtB</i>	<i>The Art Bulletin</i> , New York 1913–
<i>BCH</i>	<i>Bulletin de correspondance hellénique</i> , Athens and Paris 1877–
<i>BMGS</i>	<i>Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies</i> , Oxford 1975–83, Birmingham 1984–
<i>BSI</i>	<i>Byzantinoslavica</i> , Prague 1929–
<i>ByzF</i>	<i>Byzantinische Forschungen</i> , Amsterdam 1966–
<i>ByzSt</i>	<i>Byzantine Studies/Etudes byzantines</i> , Pittsburgh 1974–6, Phoenix, 1981–5, Bakersfield 1986, Shepherdstown 1996–
<i>BZ</i>	<i>Byzantinische Zeitschrift</i> , Leipzig and Munich 1892–
<i>CFHB</i>	<i>Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae</i> , Washington, DC et al. 1967–
<i>CSHB</i>	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae</i> , Bonn 1828–97
<i>DOP</i>	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Papers</i> , Cambridge, MA and Washington, DC, 1941–
<i>DOS</i>	<i>Dumbarton Oaks Studies</i> , Washington, DC
<i>EEBS</i>	Ἐπετηρίς Ἐταιρείας Βυζαντινῶν Σπουδῶν, Athens 1924–
<i>EHR</i>	<i>The English Historical Review</i> , London 1886–
<i>EO</i>	<i>Echos d'Orient</i> , Paris 1897–1932, Istanbul 1933–7, Bucharest 1938–42
<i>HUS</i>	<i>Harvard Ukrainian Studies</i> , Cambridge, MA 1977–
<i>JHS</i>	<i>The Journal of Hellenic Studies</i> , London 1880–
<i>JMGS</i>	<i>Journal of Modern Greek Studies</i> , Baltimore 1983–
<i>JÖB</i>	<i>Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik</i> , Vienna, Cologne and Graz 1969–
<i>MGH</i>	<i>Monumenta Germaniae Historica</i> , Hanover et al. 1824–1934
<i>Neos Ellin.</i>	Νέος Ἑλληνομνήμων, Athens 1904–27

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<i>ODB</i>	<i>The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium</i> , eds. A. Kazhdan, A.-M. Talbot, A. Cutler, T. E. Gregory and N. P. Ševčenko, 3 vols., Oxford and New York 1991
<i>PG</i>	<i>Patrologia Cursus Completus, series Graeco-Latina</i> , ed. J. P. Migne, Paris 1857–66, 1880–1903
<i>PL</i>	<i>Patrologia Cursus Completus, series Latina</i> , ed. J. P. Migne, Paris 1844–1974
<i>REB</i>	<i>Revue des études byzantines</i> , Bucharest and Paris 1944–
<i>REG</i>	<i>Revue des études grecques</i> , Paris 1888–
<i>RESEE</i>	<i>Revue des études sud-est européennes</i> , Bucharest 1963–
<i>SEER</i>	<i>The Slavonic and East European Review</i> , London 1922–
Skylitzes	<i>Ioannis Skylitzes Synopsis Historiarum</i> , ed. J. Thurn, CFHB 5, Berlin and New York 1973
<i>SüdostF</i>	<i>Südost-Forschungen</i> , Munich 1936–
<i>TM</i>	<i>Travaux et Mémoires. Centre de recherche d'histoire et civilisation byzantines</i> , Paris 1965–
<i>VV</i>	<i>Vizantiiskii vremennik</i> , St. Petersburg 1894–1927, Moscow 1947–
<i>ZRVI</i>	<i>Zbornik Radova Vizantološkog Instituta</i> , Belgrade 1952–