

Basil the Bulgar-slayer: an introduction

The principal historians of the Byzantine empire writing in the first half of the twentieth century agreed that the reign of the emperor Basil II (976–1025) marked the apogee of the medieval Byzantine state, the culmination of a recovery initiated with the establishment on the throne of the Macedonian dynasty by his grandfather's grandfather, Basil I.¹ The fullest account of Basil II's life and deeds can be found in the grand narrative of the French Byzantinist Gustave Schlumberger.² In recent years serious critical historians have questioned Schlumberger's interpretation, although it still features in popular literature.³ This book does not offer a new account of Basil's reign, although it does suggest many revisions to the traditional narrative of his activities in Bulgaria. Rather it is a survey, from the time of his death to the present, of Basil's reputation as the "Bulgar-slayer," which challenges the notion that his reign was the culmination of a "golden age."⁴

¹ A. A. Vasiliev, *Histoire de l'empire byzantin*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1932), I, 397, originally published in Russian in 1917; C. Diehl, *Histoire de l'empire byzantin* (Paris, 1919), 90–1, 106–8; S. Runciman, *Byzantine civilisation* (London, 1933), 48–9; N. Iorga, *Histoire de la vie byzantine. Empire et civilisation, II. L'empire moyen de civilisation hellénique* (Bucharest, 1934), 201; G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine state*, tr. J. Hussey, 2nd English ed. (Oxford, 1968), 298–9, 315, originally published in German in 1940; L. Brehier, *Le monde byzantin, I. Vie et mort de Byzance* (Paris, 1948), 212–13, 238.

² G. Schlumberger, *L'épopée byzantine à la fin du dixième siècle, II. Basile II le tueur des Bulgares* (Paris, 1900).

³ In fact, the first notable dissenting voice was that of A. Toynbee, *The Place of mediaeval and modern Greece in history. Inaugural lecture of the Koraeas Chair of Modern Greek and Byzantine Language, Literature and History* (London, 1919), 22–3, who maintained that Basil's campaigns overstretched the empire. For a recent, and far fuller analysis in the same vein, see M. Angold, *The Byzantine empire, 1025–1204: a political history*, 2nd ed. (London, 1997), 24–34, on Basil's tainted legacy. A forceful endorsement of Basil's civilian successors was offered by P. Lemerle, *Cinq études sur le XI^e siècle byzantin* (Paris, 1977), 249–312, who questioned the correlation between military expansion and the notion of apogee. Similar sentiments are implicit in the analysis by A. Ducellier, *Byzance et le monde orthodoxe* (Paris, 1986), 140–50, esp. 148: "A la mort de Basile II il semblait que l'Empire eût atteint le sommet de sa puissance militaire et politique" (my italics).

⁴ For a fresh account of Basil's eastern policy, administration and principal historian (Skylitzes) see now C. J. Holmes, "Basil II and the government of empire (976–1025)," D.Phil. dissertation, University of Oxford (Oxford, 1999). I have published my first thoughts on Basil's Bulgarian campaigns

Basil II's reign, the longest of any medieval East Roman emperor, witnessed a number of episodes and events of enduring importance. The formal conversion in 988/9 to Orthodox Christianity of the ruler of the Rus' of Kiev, Vladimir Sviatoslavich, must be singled out, not least because its significance remains the subject of intense discussion.⁵ However, it is generally agreed that Basil's greatest achievement was the annexation of Bulgaria to the Byzantine empire, following a protracted and bloody war. Since the sixth century the Balkan peninsula had been occupied by Slavic-speaking peoples, who, following the arrival of the Turkic Bulgars in 680, had increasingly recognized the authority of the Bulgar khan. Attempts by Byzantine emperors to repeal Bulgar hegemony in the northern Balkans generally ended prematurely, in failure, or occasionally in disaster. On 26 July 811 a Byzantine army led by Emperor Nikephoros I was trapped in a mountain pass between wooden barricades erected by the troops of Khan Krum. The Bulgars fell on the Byzantine encampment, slaughtering many including the emperor.⁶ The story of this defeat would long haunt Byzantine emperors who engaged battle with the Bulgars. Its memory was expunged almost exactly 203 years later in the most notorious, although far from the last, act in Basil's Bulgarian war.

The battle of Kleidion ("the little key"), also called the battle of Belasica, took place on 29 July 1014. This has been singled out as the decisive moment in Basil's campaigns, and the reason for his receiving the epithet "Bulgar-slayer."⁷ The earliest extant account of the battle of Kleidion is contained in the *Synopsis historion* of John Skylitzes.

The emperor [Basil] did not relent, but every year he marched into Bulgaria and laid waste and ravaged all before him. [The Bulgarian ruler] Samuel was not able to resist openly, nor to face the emperor in open warfare, so, weakened from all sides, he came down from his lofty lair to fortify the entrance to Bulgaria with ditches and fences. Knowing that the emperor always made his incursions through so-called

in P. Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan frontier: a political study of the northern Balkans, 900–1204* (Cambridge, 2000), 58–79.

⁵ A. Poppe has addressed the issue on several occasions and at length: "The political background to the baptism of Rus'. Byzantine–Russian relations between 986–89," *DOP* 30 (1976), 195–244; "Two conceptions of the conversion of Rus' in Kievan writings," *HUS* 12/13 (1988/1989), 488–504 (a volume devoted to *Proceedings of the international congress commemorating the millennium of Christianity in Rus'-Ukraine*); "The Christianization and ecclesiastical structure of Kyivan Rus' to 1300," *HUS* 21 (1997), 311–92. Most recently, see J. Korpela, *Prince, saint and apostle. Prince Vladimir Sviatoslavich of Kiev, his posthumous life, and the religious legitimization of the Russian great power* (Wiesbaden, 2001).

⁶ See I. Dujčev, "La chronique byzantine de l'an 811," *TM* 1 (1965), 205–55; P. Niavis, *The reign of the Byzantine emperor Nicephorus I (AD 802–811)* (Athens, 1987), 221–53.

⁷ Vasiliev, *Histoire de l'empire byzantin*, 423; Diehl, *Histoire de l'empire byzantin*, 104; Runciman, *Byzantine civilisation*, 49; Iorga, *Histoire de la vie byzantine*, II, 200; Ostrogorsky, *Byzantine state*, 310.

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Excerpt

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“Kiava Longon”⁸ and [the pass known as] “Kleidion,” he undertook to fortify the difficult terrain to deny the emperor access. A wall was built across the whole width [of the pass] and worthy defenders were committed to it to stand against the emperor. When he arrived and made an attempt to enter [Bulgaria], the guards defended the wall manfully and bombarded and wounded the attackers from above. When the emperor had thus despaired of gaining passage, Nikephoros Xiphias, the *strategos* of Philippopolis, met with the emperor and urged him to stay put and continue to assault the wall, while, as he explained, he turned back with his men and, heading round to the south of Kleidion through rough and trackless country, crossed the very high mountain known as Belasica. On 29 July, in the twelfth indiction [1014, Xiphias and his men] descended suddenly on the Bulgarians, from behind and screaming battle cries. Panic-stricken by the sudden assault [the Bulgarians] turned to flee, while the emperor broke through the abandoned wall. Many [Bulgarians] fell and many more were captured; Samuel barely escaped from danger with the aid of his son, who fought nobly against his attackers, blinded him on a horse, and made for the fortress known as Prilep. The emperor placed the Bulgarian captives – around 15,000 they say – and he ordered every hundred to be led back to Samuel by a one-eyed man. And when [Samuel] saw the equal and ordered detachments returning he could not bear it manfully nor with courage, but was himself struck blind and fell in a faint to the ground. His companions revived him for a short time with water and smelling salts, and somewhat recovered he asked for a sip of cold water. Taking a gulp he had a heart attack and died two days later *on 6 October*.⁹

Skylitzes was writing most probably between 1079 and 1096, thus already up to eighty years after the battle. His synoptic history does not present a full record of events in Basil’s reign, but rather is characterized by elaborate set pieces, largely military encounters, conjoined by short summarizing sentences. It is, therefore, typical that Skylitzes should state that Basil invaded Bulgaria each year before 1014, but provide no further information to support this short sentence. And while he provides no details of any encounters between 1005 and 1014, Skylitzes’ testimony has been taken as

⁸ Various readings have been advanced by those seeking to identify this location. Thurn’s critical edition of Skylitzes offers «διὰ τοῦ λεγομένου Κίαβα Λόγγου», where Κίαβα is offered in recensions A, C, V and B. Four alternative readings are: Κίαμβα (E); Κίσβα (U); Κίμβα (M, N, H); Κίμβαλόγγου (D). The last two have often been favored and translated into Latin as “campus longus,” and English as “long field” or “long plain.” An alternative suggestion identifies in Κία(μ)βα the latinized Vlach word *kamba*, which allows for the translation “long rock,” or by extension “long, rocky defile.” A summary of suggestions is provided by N. Moutsopoulos, “Le tombeau du Tsar Samuil dans la Basilique de Saint Achille à Prespa,” *Etudes Balkaniques* 3 (1984), 114–26 at 117.

⁹ Skylitzes, 348–9. The date, in italics, is supplied in a gloss to one of the extant manuscripts of Skylitzes, U, attributed to a certain Michael of Devol. See J. Prokić, *Die Zusätze in der Handschrift des Johannes Skylitzes, codex Vindobonensis hist. graec. LXXIV. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des sogenannten westbulgarischen Reiches* (Munich, 1906), 30; J. Ferluga, “John Skylitzes and Michael of Devol,” *ZRVI* 10 (1967), 163–70.

proof that Basil fought an arduous and protracted war intending to conquer Bulgaria.

In his set piece description Skylitzes states that 15,000 Bulgarians were blinded: such a large number has to be questioned, although an independent source of the same period, Kekaumenos, provides some corroboration.¹⁰ We know that the Bulgarians fought on for four more years, so their forces cannot have been so depleted. Moreover, Skylitzes qualifies his own account with the aside “they say” (*phasi*), which is an indication that the huge figure was drawn from a popular story and was subject to scrutiny even by contemporaries. The figure also approximates the size of a field army, whereas Basil’s troops fell on a garrison guarding a pass, albeit one presently overseen by the tsar himself. It is conceivable then, that as news of Basil’s victory was circulated and entered the popular imagination, “army” replaced “garrison,” and an approximate figure, fourteen or fifteen thousand, was added for clarification.

It is likely, therefore, that Skylitzes was reporting a story which had remained in circulation since the episode, and which had been modified and exaggerated in the telling. So much is also suggested in the *Life of St. Nikon*, composed in southern Greece around 1050, which celebrated the life of a saint who lived much of his life in Sparta. Here Basil is considered “the most fortunate of all emperors . . . [whose] life was famous and time of his rule the longest, and his trophies over opponents quite numerous.” It is further noted that by his hand “the nation of the numberless Bulgarian phalanx was struck down and humbled, as the story about him shows in fuller detail.”¹¹ This must refer to the story of the blindings at Kleidion. The story echoed and inverted that of Krum’s victory in 811. Furthermore, the story recalled and inverted an equally familiar account of a battle fought in a northern Greek mountain pass some fifteen centuries earlier, in which Spartans took the lead. There are obvious parallels between the events at Kleidion and those at Thermopylae as recorded by Herodotus, in which Xerxes’ vast army of Persians – Herodotus estimated 2.3 million, although the Spartans later claimed to have fought 4 million – is unable to displace a far smaller body of Greek troops defending a wall across a mountain pass. The Persian ruler, therefore, secures a local guide to lead his forces across the mountain by a track, and falls on the Greeks from behind. Three hundred Greeks, Spartans and their Thespian allies stay to fight to the

¹⁰ *Cecaumeni Strategicon*, eds. B. Wassiliewsky and P. Jernstedt (St. Petersburg, 1896), 18; *Sovety i rassказы Kekavmena. Sochinenie vizantiiskogo polkovodca XI veka*, ed. G. G. Litavrin (Moscow, 1972), 152, provides the figure 14,000.

¹¹ D. F. Sullivan, ed. and tr., *The life of St. Nikon* (Brookline, 1987), 140–3, 148–51.

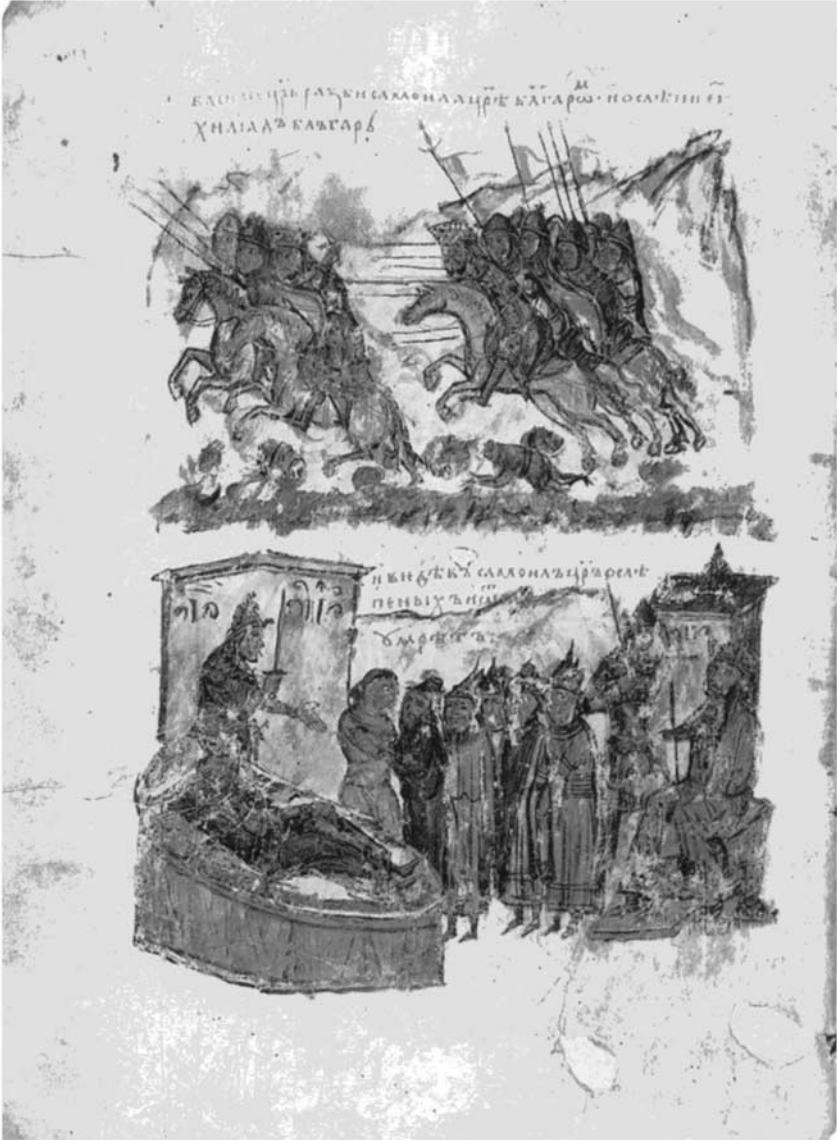


Figure 1 Two contiguous miniatures from an illustrated manuscript of the Slavic version of the Chronicle of Constantine Manasses: Cod. Vat. Slav. II, fol. 184 v. The battle of Kleidion, and the death of Tsar Samuel. Vatican Library.

death under their ruler Leonidas, unable to prevent a Persian invasion of lands to the south.¹² At Kleidion the roles are reversed: Byzantine troops confront the forces of Tsar Samuel; the Bulgarians do not fight to the death, but surrender and consequently are blinded; Samuel does not die with his men, but flees, yet later dies as a consequence of seeing his mutilated men. Skylitzes would certainly have been familiar with Herodotus' account, and makes allusions to this elsewhere in his text.¹³

The battle of Kleidion, we may conclude, although a significant Byzantine victory, was imbued with far greater significance after the fact. The story mirrored and inverted familiar stories of past defeats. Moreover, through time the story became the centerpiece of a broader revival and reworking of Basil II's reputation. That is, Basil's actions at Kleidion were linked to his receiving the nickname Bulgar-slayer, despite the fact that no mention is made of this in contemporary sources. We must wait until the early fourteenth century for this connection to be made explicitly, by the verse chronicler Ephraim.¹⁴ Yet the story and the epithet have become inextricably entwined in the historical imagination and record. The immediate and obvious flaw in associating the epithet Bulgar-slayer with events at Kleidion is that Basil did not slay, but blinded the captured Bulgarians. Blinding was considered a more humane punishment, which would eliminate a large number of enemy troops without taking a large number of Christian lives.¹⁵ This was not the first, nor would it be the last time that Basil blinded enemies. In 989 he had blinded the pretender Bardas Skleros, who was thus led before him no longer a threat: a blind man, like a eunuch, was incomplete, and rendered incapable of performing the imperial role.¹⁶ Shortly after Kleidion, in the aftermath of a Byzantine defeat, all Bulgarians captured in the vicinity of Pelagonia were blinded as a deterrent to further resistance or treachery.¹⁷ There are no similar reports of Basil slaying thousands of captives. One purpose of this book, therefore, is to restore Kleidion to the historical record as one in a series of confrontations and compromises between Basil and the Bulgarians. A second is to explore how and why the epithet Bulgar-slayer was first applied more than a century after Basil's death, and subsequently

¹² Herodotus, *Histories*, VII, 199–228; tr. A. de Selincourt (Harmondsworth, 1954), 484–94. Tom Gallant drew this to my attention.

¹³ See, for example, Skylitzes, 455, his own brief "Scythian excursus." See also E. Malamut, "L'image byzantine des Petchénègues," *BZ* 88 (1995), 105–47 at 121–2.

¹⁴ *Ephraem Aenii historia chronica*, ed. O. Lampsides, CFHB 27 (Athens, 1990), 109.

¹⁵ J. Herrin, "Blinding in Byzantium," in *ΠΟΛΥΠΛΕΥΡΟΣ ΝΟΥΣ* *Miscellanea für Peter Schreiner zu seinem 60. Geburtstag*, eds. C. Scholz and G. Makris (Leipzig, 2000), 56–68.

¹⁶ Skylitzes, 338–9; Herrin, "Blinding," 61. ¹⁷ Skylitzes, 353.

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was invoked in a number of martial scenarios in the twelfth to twentieth centuries.

The first chapters of this book will comprise an exploration of the history and medieval historiography of Basil's Bulgarian wars. I will suggest, in chapter two, that Basil was not committed to a thirty-year war of attrition against Samuel's Bulgaria, and was even willing to recognize an independent Bulgarian realm centered on Prespa and Ohrid. If, between 1005 and 1014, his large standing army was kept in the field, and its attention directed seasonally at Samuel's realm – neither being certain – Basil demonstrated no desire to conquer nor annex Bulgaria to the empire, which would at one stroke eliminate a most convenient “punching bag.” This changed with the death of Tsar Samuel in October 1014, which led to a competition between Samuel's son, his nephew and other magnates. The power struggle presented Basil with an unprecedented opportunity to gain territory and clients, while simultaneously presenting pretenders to Samuel's realm with a reason to demonstrate martial ability; in order, that is, to galvanize support for themselves. The period of intensified warfare, between 1014 and 1018, is presented in far greater detail by Skylitzes than the preceding decade. Skylitzes will, therefore, provide the framework for my account of these campaigns, augmented by occasional, but vital alternative readings from Latin and Arabic sources, and from the archaeological, numismatic, and sigillographic record. Moreover, we may be certain that earlier written accounts once existed, and that Skylitzes used them. It is likely, for example, that Basil employed writers to compose battle reports to convey the news to his subjects, and that these provided details employed in subsequent written and oral accounts. I will suggest, in chapter three, that Basil had a particular interest in circulating news of his “atrocities” to instill fear in his opponents, and to bolster the image he had chosen for himself, as a tireless warrior emperor, ever vigilant in the service of his subjects. This sentiment was recorded in Basil's own epitaph. It can also be seen clearly in the illustration Basil commissioned to adorn his personal psalter. This image, and others generally associated with Basil's victory in Bulgaria, will be considered in chapter four.

Unfortunately, no official battle reports or eyewitness accounts have survived from Basil's reign.¹⁸ If they had, this study may have taken a different tack. Georges Duby, in interpreting the significance of the battle

¹⁸ We have at least one such document and copious related panegyric compositions from the later twelfth century: *Nicetae Choniatae orationes et epistolae*, ed. J.-L. van Dieten, CFHB 3 (Berlin and New York, 1972), 6–12; Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan frontier*, 292.

of Bouvines (27 July 1214), was able to offer telling insights into the sociology of war in the thirteenth century. He could do so thanks to the survival of a contemporary, official account of the encounter produced by William the Breton, which Duby considered “a detailed, precise, clear account, not overcluttered with rhetoric or with attempts at pleasing or showing off the author’s classical erudition.”¹⁹ Moreover, between 1214 and 1300, thus in approximately the time that elapsed between the battle of Kleidion and the composition by Skylitzes of our first surviving account, ninety-two extant historical sources from across western Europe made mention of the battle of Bouvines. Thirty-three of these sources were produced in Francia, and most of these in or near Flanders, the location of the battle. Remarkably, the ninety-two sources account for only one-third of those available to Duby, meaning two-thirds of sources which may have mentioned the battle of Bouvines did not.²⁰ Quite how different the nature and volume of source material is for the historian of Basil’s confrontation with Samuel will become apparent in chapter five.²¹

Even allowing for the greater rates of survival of historical documents in western European contexts, we must surmise that Bouvines had a greater immediate political and historiographical impact than Kleidion. The two were also quite distinct in the medium term. Whereas after 1300 “the name ‘Bouvines’ becomes rapidly erased from memory . . . to remain almost invisible for a long time to come,”²² Kleidion emerges as the centerpiece of Basil’s reputation and legacy over a century after his death.²³ This emergence will be the subject of chapter six, where it will be related to changes during the twelfth century in the way Byzantines viewed Bulgarians, and in the way Byzantine emperors were portrayed and praised. From that time, we shall see, Basil was always known as the Bulgar-slayer. However, while fuller elaboration of Basil’s reputation suited the particular circumstances of the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it was of lesser importance afterwards, and particularly so following the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453.²⁴ Thereafter, I will argue in chapter seven, Basil

¹⁹ G. Duby, *The legend of Bouvines. War, religion and culture in the Middle Ages*, tr. C. Tihanyi (Cambridge, 1990), 9.

²⁰ Duby, *Legend of Bouvines*, 143–4.

²¹ The historian of the baptism of Vladimir of Kiev must similarly deal with a dearth of contemporary source material, and the nature of later interpretations: Korpela, *Prince, saint and apostle*, 35–46. The opposite is true for the legend of Charlemagne: R. Folz, *Le souvenir et la légende de Charlemagne dans l’empire germanique médiéval* (Paris, 1950).

²² Duby, *Legend of Bouvines*, 167.

²³ As we will see below, pp. 29–30, there is no justification in the claim that Kleidion, as Kliuch, is mentioned specifically in a Cyrillic inscription dated to 1015/16.

²⁴ This may usefully be contrasted with the image of Charlemagne, which was regularly recreated during the Middle Ages to suit changing circumstances: Folz, *Le souvenir et la légende de Charlemagne*, 563–9.

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had no role to play until the efforts to construct the modern Greek state began in the later eighteenth, and accelerated through the nineteenth century. At this time, although initially it had been scorned in favor of the classical past, Greek intellectuals, scholars and politicians began a systematic effort to recover the Byzantine past and insert it within a continuum of Greek ethnic and national history. In this, they were provoked or assisted by scholars in Germany, France and Britain, as well as notable Russians, who all contributed to the emergence of modern Byzantine studies.

In the later nineteenth century, scholars outside the nascent Greek state concurred that the Byzantine millennium was an important period in the cultural history of Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The prevailing view in Greece, however, following the definitive formulation by Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos, was to regard Byzantium primarily, if not solely, as the past of modern Greeks, and testament to the transformative power of Hellenism. For the first time it became clear to statesmen and school-children alike that the reign of Basil II, the Bulgar-slayer, was a crucial period in the narrative of Hellenic history. For at that time, it was held, an Hellenic empire achieved its greatest territorial extent for five centuries and Greek culture washed over a sea of Slavs in the wake of Basil's victories in the Balkans. And so, according to prevailing Greek sentiments, it should be again. This was particularly true in that region where Basil was believed to have fought the medieval Bulgarians to a bloody standstill, Macedonia.²⁵ Chapter eight, therefore, will comprise a study of the role played by the Bulgar-slayer in the struggle for Macedonia between Greek- and Slavic-speaking peoples and governments after 1870. Here I will present neither a comprehensive nor a balanced overview of the so-called "Macedonian Question," which, judging from the vastness and occasional vitriol of modern scholarship, cannot easily be achieved. Nor should the fact that in this chapter I focus on, and criticize, mainly Greek interpretations, be considered in any way partisan.

The subject of this final chapter, as of the others, is Basil II and his legend, and it is in the Greek-speaking milieu that Basil takes center stage. The chapter, indeed this book, could be expanded to consider more fully the image of Basil in Slavic literatures (although it is far less significant than in the Greek). Moreover, an equally interesting study could be written

²⁵ The Byzantine administrative district of Macedonia did not, during Basil II's reign, correspond to the geographical region known today, and in antiquity, as Macedonia. This has been pointed out by numerous scholars in a recent edited volume, where one might start with the erudite paper by J. Koder, "Macedonia and Macedonians in Byzantine spatial thinking," in J. Burke and R. Scott, eds., *Byzantine Macedonia. Identity, image and history*, Byzantina Australiensia 13 (Melbourne, 2000), 12–28.

on Tsar Samuel from at least two, possibly three Slavic perspectives, but that is not the task I have set myself, and indeed it is beyond my ability. An historian inclined to undertake such an endeavour may find, as did I, inspiration and instruction in Duby's study, for that Frenchman writes elegantly and critically of French approaches to a legend, particularly as it was taught to French school-children who grew up to fight in wars during the fifty years either side of 1900. This approach, so damaging before 1945 and quietly abandoned since, may be summed up in a single phrase, taken from C. Calvet's 1903 primer of French history for schools: "This was our first victory over the Germans."²⁶

²⁶ Duby, *Legend of Bouvines*, 173.