THE ETERNAL CHILDREN: EFFORTS TOWARDS THE "ABBASIDIZATION" OF THE MACEDONIAN DYNASTY AND THE IMPERIAL RESPONSE (912-1025)

João Vicente de Medeiros Publio Dias
Fellow of the Postdoctoral Fellowship Program of the UNAM at the Institute of Philological Research (IIFL) in Mexico City, with Dr. José Ricardo Francisco Martínez Lacy as advisor.

Abstract: This article is a comparative study on the political developments in the Byzantine Empire between 912 and 1025. In this period, the members of the Macedonian dynasty (867-1056) were politically neutralized because power was seized and shared either by eunuch-ministers or military officers, acclaimed co-emperors under the pretext of protecting the interest of the dynastic emperors. Although regencies for minor emperors were a recurrent power-sharing arrangement in Byzantine history, the regencies of this period differed, for they maintained the dynastic emperor in an everlasting status of minor until late adulthood. Therefore, this article analyses the so far exceptional degree of dynastic legitimacy achieved by the Macedonian emperors, which ended up creating the ideal conditions for their political neutralization. It also emphasizes the unusual position of emperor-protector. In addition, the discursive strategies that tried to legitimate the political neutralization of the dynastic emperors and the movements made by the political actors of the time to enforce it were analysed, along with how Basil II (976-1025) finally put an end to it by emancipating himself from the extended minority forced upon him, reinforcing his right as emperor to rule by himself. Finally, a comparison with the political developments simultaneously taking place in Baghdad, the centre of the Abbasid Caliphate, which share several similarities with what was happening in the Byzantine Empire, will be made as to understand why the political neutralization of the caliph was finally achieved while that of the Byzantine emperor failed.

Keywords: Macedonian dynasty - Abbasids - political history - Byzantine Empire - comparative history

LOS NIÑOS ETERNOS: ESFUERZOS PARA LA "ABASISACIÓN" DE LA DINASTÍA MACEDONIA Y LA REACCIÓN IMPERIAL (912-1025)

Resumen: Este artículo es un estudio comparativo sobre la evolución política del Imperio bizantino entre los años 912 y 1025. En este periodo, los miembros de la Dinastía Macedonia (867-1056) fueron neutralizados políticamente, ya que el poder fue tomado y repartido por ministros eunucos o por oficiales militares aclamados coemperadores con el pretexto de proteger los intereses de los emperadores dinásticos. Aunque las regencias para los emperadores menores era un arreglo de reparto de poder recurrente en la historia bizantina, las de este periodo diferían, ya que mantenían al emperador dinástico en un estatus prolongado de menor hasta la edad adulta. Por lo tanto, este artículo analiza el hasta ahora excepcional grado de legitimidad dinástica alcanzado por los emperadores macedonios, que acabó creando las condiciones ideales para su neutralización política. También hace énfasis en la inusual posición de emperador-protector. Además, se analizaron las estrategias discursivas que intentaron legitimar la neutralización política de los emperadores dinásticos y los movimientos realizados por los actores políticos de la época para imponerla, así como la forma en que Basilio II (976-1025) acabó finalmente con ella, emancipándose de la minoría de edad extendida a la que se vio sometido y reforzando su derecho como emperador a gobernar por sí mismo. Por último, se hará una comparación con los acontecimientos políticos que se estaban produciendo simultáneamente en Bagdad que tienen muchas similitudes con lo que ocurría en el Imperio Bizantino, para entender por qué se logró finalmente la neutralización política del califa mientras que la del emperador bizantino fracasó.

Palabras claves: Dinastía macedonia - Abasíes - Historia política - Imperio Bizantino - historia comparada

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Correspondencia: João Vicente de Medeiros Publio Dias
E-Mail: joaov.dias@daad-alumni.de
Seminário de Hermeneutica - Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas
Circuito Mario de la Cueva, Ciudad Universitaria
Alcaldía de Coyoacán, 04510 México, CDMX
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2846-0143

1. Introduction

The Macedonian dynasty (867-1056) was one of the longest lasting dynasties Byzantium has ever known. Curiously, for a good part of this period the dynastic emperors and empresses did not in fact rule the Empire, having regents or co-emperors as their colleagues who ruled in their name. There were two reasons for that: initially, the status of minor of the dynastic member demanded a regency, and later the fact that the last representatives of

the dynasty were women. The Byzantine political culture was not accustomed to women exercising power, and some resented it.[1]

This article will focus on the former phenomenon. Through the 10th century, the peak of political power for Byzantium due to military victories and the consequent territorial expansion, the Macedonian emperors ruled the least. Constantine VII (913-959) was forced to share the throne with Romanos I Lakapenos (920-944). Romanos II's (959-963) administration was in the hands of the *parakoimomenos* Joseph Bringas and the military forces of the Phokades. During the first part of the reign of Basil II (976-1025) and Constantine VIII (1025-1028), they shared the throne first with Nikephoros II Phokas (963-969) and then with John I Tzimiskes (969-976). Afterwards, the emperors were under the *parakoimomenos* Basil Lakapenos' tutelage until 986.[2] In total, the emperors of the dynasty did not directly rule the Byzantine Empire for 51 years. Between 920 and 986, the norm was that Macedonian emperors did not rule the Empire. Only with Basil II's assertiveness there was once again a dynastic successor who indeed ruled, albeit almost failing at his goal.

These events resemble simultaneous developments taking place in the Abbasid Caliphate. Nevertheless, the caliphs definitively lost real power to generals and courtiers, turning into ceremonial monarchs, religious leaders, and sources of legitimate rule. Here I analyse whether a similar process was happening in 10th-century Byzantium, which was aborted by Basil II, and propose that his autocratic and micro-managing ruling style was a reaction to trends and forces intending to turn the members of the Macedonian dynasty into ceremonial monarchs as well. Gilbert Dagron has already studied the discursive mechanics of this process which he calls "divorce between legitimacy and real power".[3] This article will look for the causes of this "divorce", the strategies used for its implementation, and the response of the dynastic emperors.[4]

This is not an attempt to revive the Ostrogorskian interpretation model of powerful versus state, but rather a follow-up of more recent readings that

1 Garland (1999): 1-7.

2 *Parakoimomenos* was the highest position that a eunuch could achieve. His original function was to guard the emperor's sleep (*parakoimomenos* means literally "he who sleeps besides"), but such function gave its holders great proximity to the emperor and, therefore, great influence over him. Many of its holders became very powerful becoming the intermediary between the emperor and the administration and even the head of the administration itself, see Beck (1955); Guilland (1967): I, 198-215.

3 Dagron (2003): 35

4 Rosemary Morris has already touched on the subject in a chapter about the rivalry between Skleroi and Phokades after Nikephoros II's murder, as well as its reflections on the historiography, Morris (1994): 199-214.

understand the political fights during the second half of the 10th century as struggles for state control.[5] The hypothesis of this work is that these disputes went beyond the political ambitions of specific individuals, lineages, or factions, being in fact a clash of conceptions of how the Empire should be ruled and the Macedonian emperor's role within the Medieval Roman polity. Accordingly, the first topic to be discussed is the problems concerning the term "dynasty" in Byzantium and the existence of a "Macedonian Dynasty". Then, a short summary of the political developments at the heart of the Abbasid Caliphate, Iraq and its capital Baghdad, will be presented. After establishing the Abbasid context as an interpretative model, we will put forward a detailed analysis of the power struggles from the death of Leo VI (886-912) until the reign of Basil II to understand the process of political neutralization suffered by the dynastic emperors and the response to it by the emperor Basil. To conclude, the Abbasid and the Byzantine contexts will be compared.

2. "Macedonian Dynasty" and the problems with the terminology.

Since the "Macedonian Dynasty" will be the focus of the study, the problems with the term "dynasty" in the Byzantine context, as well as those related to the existence of one "Macedonian Dynasty", must be acknowledged. Although the scholarly works accept the existence of dynasties in Byzantium, the lack of a proper discussion may create the assumption that they resembled the dynasties of the Western monarchies. The idea of a dynasty in Byzantium never reached the level of corporeal unity observed in the West, where the Crown became an immortal institutional entity different from the person who holds the office. As the guardian of this corporeal Crown, the dynasty similarly became an institutionalized "corporation by succession" whose members were the successive kings.[6] Byzantium, in turn, had very complex successions. Successions did not follow fixed rules, there were many ways to become emperor, and even violent usurpations in which the emperor was mutilated or murdered could be legitimated if the usurper was politically smart, capable, and lucky. These characteristics created difficulties to the rise of dynasties but did not obstruct them.

The charisma, popularity and sheer force of the individual rulers were the bedrock of the imperial power. At the same time, the loss of them could be used to justify usurpations. Even though with time the Roman emperors became less shy of assuming the autocratic nature of their power, one important aspect remained:

5 On Ostrogorsky's view, Ostrogorsky (1965): 225-331 and (1975): 1-32. For the most recent approaches, Morris (1994): 199-214; Sifonas (1994); 118-133; Cheynet (1996): 321-336; Holmes (2003); Holmes (2005); Shepard (2008): 493-536; Kaldellis (2017): 21-152.

6 Kantorowicz (2016): 338, 380.

the emperorship was in a ideological sense a concession from the body politic (*res publica*/*politeia*), which rewarded merit and achievements (military conquest and good rule) and punished ineffectiveness. Meritocracy was, at least in theory, one of the main foundations of the imperial order: the emperor, beginning with Augustus (23 BC–14 AD), was the best among men (*optimus vir*) with heroic, almost divine aspects.[7] In a practical sense, the emperor could only rule if he had the backing from powerful factions within the state apparatus, especially the army. So, the imperial sphere of action was constrained by their interests, which had to be considered and safeguarded.

Although the Roman polity had the theoretical sovereignty to grant the imperial office to the most apt candidate, it does not mean that the emperors did not try to control their own succession. According to Hans-Georg Beck, the concept of political power in Ancient Rome was deeply rooted in the structures of the *patrocinium* in which the aristocratic *patronus* commanded a network of clients, which was ideally hereditary.[8] This had already existed in the so-called Republican period and became an important fundament of the imperial power until the Byzantine period. This created what Dagron called "patrimonial legitimacy", which existed at the side of the charismatic legitimacy described above.[9] As a result, the emperors − embedded in this patrimonial concept − tried to transfer their power to the next generation, mainly by choosing their favourite candidates during their lifetime, granting them imperial titles, letting them be acclaimed, and crowning them.[10] Although Roman emperors tried to control their succession since the early days of the Principate, there was no established rule. Diocletian (284–305) tried to organize it with the Tetrarchy when he created a collegial form of succession: main emperors chose and crowned other minor co-emperors, who would ideally be their successor. Even though system failed in creating a stable sharing and transfer of power, the collegial concept of imperial succession he inaugurated took root, becoming very important until the last days of the Byzantine Empire, especially for the events analysed below.[11]

These characteristics resulted in periods in which the imperial office was consistently transmitted in the same lineage from one generation to another. The

7 Beck (1994): 34-37; Dagron (2003): 13-124; Kaldellis (2015): 32-61. On the political discourses and practices that legitimated opposition and usurpation, Stouraitis (2010): 149–172; Dias (2020): 64-85.

8 Beck (1994): 35, 67.

9 Dagron (2003): 24-25;

10 Dagron (2003): 13-53; Lilie (2017): 21–41.

11 Sandberg (2008): 199-213; Pfeilschifter (2013): 14–18; Kaldellis (2020): 231–233.

scholarly works tend to call this stable transmission of power "dynasty", but the term is used for convenience to refer to Byzantium. The Byzantines themselves did not use it in that context.[12] They were aware of genealogy, either real or mythological. They had a concept of *genos*, which could describe either national origin or ancestry of an individual person. From the 10th century onward, the rise of steady transfer of surnames from one generation to another gave rise to the practice of praising or smearing a person for being part of a particular *genos*. The term *eugenos* or *eugeneia* turned into an important part of the rhetorical apparatus to praise aristocrats and emperors. Moreover, the Byzantines also believed that ancestry granted the descendants with status, prestige, and privilege, certainly not *de jure*, but rather *de facto*.[13]

Although no Byzantine source names Basil I and his descendants as belonging to a "Macedonian Dynasty"[14], they clearly connect the members of this dynasty with its founder, Basil, the Macedonian. They also do not forget that Basil I seized power by murdering his predecessor and patron, Michael III (842-867), but this crime does not affect his legitimacy, or the positive memory attached to him. This is evident in Michael Psellos' *Chronographia*: he not only reminds the reader that the imperial *genos* started with Basil the Macedonian[15], but also that this dynasty was loved by God, being unparalleled in greatness and beauty, although its beginning was stained by blood and murder.[16] Another evidence that the connection between the founder of the dynasty and his descendent was never lost in the eyes of the Byzantines is that Constantine VII, Basil I's grandson, was named "the Macedonian" in the report on the seizure of power by Nikephoros II in 963, inserted in the De Cerimoniis, probably by Basil Lakapenos.[17] This suggests that the emperors of this lineage might have carried the epithet "Macedonian", at least informally.

12 Cheynet (1996): 251-252.

13 On *genos*, Magdalino (1989): 183-218; Leidholm (2019): 13-35; Kaldellis (2019): 64-67.

14 Tougher (2021): 358.

15 Michaelis Pselli Chronographia, III, 1, p. 31: ἐπειδὴ ἐς τὸν πενθερὸν Κωνσταντῖνον τὸ βασίλειον γένος ἀπετελεύτησεν ἐκ Βασιλείου τοῦ Μακεδόνος ἠργμένον.

16 Michaelis Pselli Chronographia, VI, 1: οὐ γὰρ οἶδα εἴ τι ἕτερον γένος, ὡς τὸ περὶ ἐκείνας, ἠγάπηται τῷ Θεῷ. καὶ θαυμάζω κατανοῶν, ὅτι μὴ ἐννόμως αὐταῖς τῆς ῥίζης παγείσης καὶ φυτευθείσης· ἀλλὰ φόνοις καὶ αἵμασιν, οὕτω τὸ φυτευθὲν ἐξηνθήκει· καὶ τοσαύτας προυβάλετο βλάστας, καὶ ἑκάστην μετὰ τοῦ βασιλείου 10 καρποῦ, ὡς μὴ ἔχειν ἑτέρας ἀντισυγκρίναι ταύταις, οὔτε πρὸς κάλλος· οὔτε πρὸς μέγεθος.

17 Τελευτήσαντος Ῥωμανοῦ βασιλέως τοῦ νέου, υἱοῦ Κωνσταντίνου τοῦ μεγάλου καὶ πορφυρογεννήτου βασιλέως Ῥωμαίων τοῦ Μακεδόνος), De Cerimoniis, 455. On this insertion, attributed to Basil Lakapenos, Featherstone (2014), 353-372.

In sum, the Macedonian Dynasty saw themselves, and were seen by others, as an imperial *genos*, a lineage whose right to imperial acclamation was unofficially but widely acknowledged. Although such dynastic acknowledgement was also observed in following dynasties, such as the Komnenian and the Palaiologian, this was an innovation considering the Byzantine history up to that point. There had been other imperial lineages or dynasties before, some of which drafted some form of dynastic discourse, but none with the complexity and success of the Macedonians.[18]

3. The rise of the *amir al-umara* and the transformation of the Abbasid caliph into a ceremonial monarch

In the first two centuries of the Islamic history, the caliphal forces were based on tribal connections, but those were inadequate to form an army that fulfilled the demands of what was by that point – considering the Umayyad and the Abbasid Caliphates – an empire.[19] Moreover, the religious stipulation that forbids Muslims of waging war against each other made things even more complicated. The caliph Al-Mutasim (833−842) solved this problem by massively buying slaves – mostly young boys − from outside the Muslim world, mainly from Turkish groups, and training them. Afterwards, they were converted to Islam and formally recruited into the army ranks. Although these Turkish soldiers – known in the sources by various names: *ghilmān*, *fatā*, *kül* or *mamlūk* – were legally slaves, they enjoyed special rights that differentiated them from other slaves as they were allowed to carry weapons and enjoyed high social status. Their commanders, also of Turkish origin, were not slaves, but rather came from the aristocracy. Both groups, *ghilmān* and commanders, would have a particularly important political role in the years to come.[20]

The presence of these soldiers in Baghdad, a sophisticated and cosmopolitan metropolis, caused tension. Al-Mutasim's solution was to move his court to Samarra, a city 110 kilometres from Baghdad. Simultaneous to the change of the capital to Samarra, the social and ceremonial organization of the caliphal court was becoming increasingly influenced by the Persian and Central-Asiatic models, which witnessed an increase of the ruler's isolation and a formalization of the monarchical institution. From then on, the court and the interaction with the ruler

18 The Isaurian Dynasty (717-802) sketched some of the characteristics deepened later by the Macedonian dynasty, such an idea of verticality connecting the founder to the current dynastic emperor. This was clearly expressed by the coinage of the Isaurian emperors, Dagron (1996): 31-33; Brubaker & Haldon (2011): 146-147, 226-227.

19 Burbank & Cooper (2010): 70-80.

20 Cruz (2017): 50-53; El-Hibri (2021): 131-132; Marsham & Hanne & Steenbergen (2021): 237

was regulated by a very elaborate protocol.[21]

Increasingly isolated from the caliph through ceremonial and bureaucracy, the soldiers sought leadership in their commanders, creating ideal conditions for political instability. The murder of the caliph Al-Mutawakkil (847−861) by his son inaugurated a period of political troubles known as "Anarchy at Samarra", which was marked by factional strife and continuous depositions of caliphs. It lasted until 870, when, upon taking power, the caliph al-Mutamid (870–892) was forced to concede the leadership of the military forces to his brother, Abu Ahmad, who – similarly to the caliphs – also gained an epithet: al-Muwaffaq. This is the first time that the military power was officially disassociated from the caliph. This arrangement created some sort of stability until al-Mutamid got sick of his brother's tutelage and tried to flee to Egypt in 886, by that time controlled by another dynasty officially under Abbasid authority, but in fact autonomous: the Tulunids.[22] During the civil strife in Iraq, the Abbasid Empire became increasingly fragmented, with former provinces, like Egypt, turning politically autonomous. Even though many local dynasties sought in the Abbasid caliph some sort of legitimacy, others broke off entirely from the Abbasid caliphate, as the Umayyads in the Iberian Peninsula.[23]

The political instability continued to intensify in Samarra and Baghdad, with several parties trying to put a caliph on the throne who would only be a figurehead to officialise their rule. The real powerholders were his vizirs or military commanders. This situation became official with the creation of the title "amir al-umara" which means "commander of the commanders" or "chief emir". It seems to have appeared for the first time in 928 when the caliph Al-Muqtadir granted it to the commander Hārūn ibn Ḡarīb, thereby outranking his most important adversary at court: the powerful Munis.[24] The caliph al-Radi (934-940) grudgingly granted the same title to Muhammad ibn Raiq, the governor of Baghdad, Basra, and Wasit in 936.[25] Although it sounds like a military office, *amir al-umara* was more an honorific title which officialised the position of its holders as the de facto ruler of the territories that were still under direct caliphal administration. Thereby, the caliph lost all aspects of a real political power, becoming a ceremonial monarch, a moral leader of the Sunni Muslims, and a source of authority. The process ended with the ascension of the Buyid dynasty as the hegemons of Iraq in 945, when the

21 El-Hibri (2021): 132-135.

22 Bonner (2011): 308-323; Hitchcock (2014): 67; El-Hibri (2021): 142-163.

23 Bonner (2011): 339-348.

24 Canard (1951): 360.

25 Bonner (2011): 354; El-Hibri (2021): 176.

caliph al-Mustakfi invited Ahmad ibn Buya to enter Baghdad as his protector.[26]

The Buyids were of Daylamite origin, a group that was considered along with the Turkish tribes the most barbaric peoples within the Arab-Persian world. Moreover, the Buyid rulers supported Shia groups. The Abbasids made the new hegemonic position of the Buyids official by granting them court titles and associating them with the caliphs in public representations, such as coinage, acclamations, and ceremonies. This decision also helped the Buyids to ingratiate themselves among the Sunni majority whom they ruled over, despite their Shia sympathies.[27] The arrangement between the Buyids and the Abbasids served as a model for the new powers that came after, such as the Seljuks in the 11th century.[28]

4. The precedence created by Romanos I

In Byzantium, similar events were taking place at the same time. In 912 the Byzantine emperor Leo VI (886-902) passed away, leaving the power to his younger brother, Alexander (912-913). However, he ruled alone less than two years and then died, leaving the only son of Leo VI, Constantine VII (944-959), on the throne. He was only 7 years old and, therefore, needed a regency. The regency was supposed to be a collegial arrangement in which its members would share power, but its head was disputed between the empress Zoe and the patriarch Nicholaos Mystikos. At this point, the events followed a well-known pattern. The empress was expected to be the head of the regency until the crowned emperor reached adulthood. Although expected, regencies did not warrant peace or stability, and all tended to descend into usurpations and/or violence.[29]

Constantine VII's regency was not very different. It was a turbulent period in which the two more important members, the Patriarch and the Empress, were constantly fighting against each other, while the Empire was facing Bulgar aggression. It was no surprise that, following two humiliating defeats before the Bulgars in 917, the *droungarios* of the fleet Romanos Lakapenos assumed power, dissolving the regency college. After removing all of Constantine VII's most important supporters from the palace, including his mother, and allying himself with the Patriarch, Romanos took office as head of the imperial *hetaireia*.

26 Bosworth & Savory (1996): 969-971.

27 El-Hibri (2021): 177-185; Marsham & Hanne & Steenbergen (2021): on the seizure of power by the Buyids, 241-243, on the traditional methods of power legitimation in the Medieval Islamic world, which included "giving oaths of loyalty (bayʿa); using honorific titles (s. laqab/pl. alqab); bestowing robes of honour (khilʿa); granting the right to be named on the coinage (sikka); and having one's name recited in the Friday prayer (khutba)", 344.

28 Beihammer (2017): 70-74.

29 Kazhdan (1991): 3, 1778-1779; Cheynet (2008): 62.

Then he assumed the title of *basileopator* after marrying his daughter, Helena, to Constantine VII. Sometime afterwards, Romanos was appointed *kaisar*. Finally, he assumed the imperial power together with Constantine. This step-by-step usurpation happened between March 919 and December 920. In the following years, Romanos I also crowned his sons and destined one of them, Theophylact, to be the Patriarch of Constantinople.[30]

Two points draw attention in Romanos I's actions: the decision to preserve Constantine VII's imperial status by keeping the young emperor in his shadows, and his efforts to build a parallel dynasty. As Otto Kresten and Andreas Müller point out, there are analogies between Romanos I's dynastic policy and that of Basil I: both crowned all their sons and chose one of them to be the Patriarch.[31] The main difference was that Basil I mercilessly killed his predecessor, Michael III, while Romanos I refused to do so. Steven Runciman, as well as Kresten and Müller, attributes this decision to Romanos' personal integrity.[32] There is probably more to it than that. The murder of Michael III by Basil I was a stain in his biography, which his successors, mainly Constantine VII, took great pains to clean.[33] Yet an emperor could survive that: Irene blinded her own son, Constantine IV, in 797 to keep ruling until her deposition in 802; John I Tzimiskes also murdered Nikephoros II Phokas, his relative, in 969 and was quite popular; Michael VII Doukas ordered the blinding of Romanos IV in 1072 after promising his integrity, and he ruled until his death in 1078.[34] Several other examples could be named, but it is enough to show that murder of emperors as a form of usurpation could be justified. Moreover, none of the mentioned actions seriously compromised the legitimacy of their perpetrators, or even hindered long reigns, with the Church sometimes demanding some sort of public penitence.[35] Accordingly, we should look for explanations for Romanos I's actions beyond his personal virtues.

The young emperor seems to have commanded strong loyalty in different

30 Runciman (1929): 54-61; Kresten & Müller (1995):6-22; PmbZ, Romanos I. Lakapenos, 26833; Dölger (2003): p. 48.

31 Kresten & Müller (1995): 17.

32 Runciman (1929): 238-245; Kresten & Müller (1995): 77.

33 Stouraitis (2021): 219-246

34 Lilie (2017): 34

35 Gilbert Dagron has already pointed out the function of repentance and penitence for the recovery of lost legitimacy according to models taken from the Israelite Monarchy transmitted in the Old Testament. Dagron states that the nature of the Byzantine imperial power – taken and preserved through violence and transmitted hereditarily through sex – desacralized it, yet the Church was there so the emperor could kneel, repent, and recover his lost legitimacy, Dagron (2003): 114-124.

factions within the palace, in Constantinople and in the army.[36] Kresten and Müller suggest that the respect directed to the young Constantine was due to the existence of a "legitimist party" in the court. This would explain why Romanos I decided to make Constantine crown his older son, Christopher, instead of doing it himself, and to keep Constantine's position as the second emperor in front of his own sons, except for the period between 927 and 932, in which Christopher took the second place in the imperial college and Constantine was shifted into the third position.[37]

The events at the end of the Lakapenos regime provide more evidence for the existence of a pro-Macedonian faction.[38] Romanos I was finally removed from power in 944 by a conspiracy between both of his last surviving sons, Steven and Constantine (Lakapenos). According to Liutprand of Cremona, after this coup, the rumour that Constantine VII was murdered started to spread, and a mob assembled in the front of the Great Palace demanding to see him as a proof of life. The crowd just dispersed when it saw the emperor with his head uncovered.[39] These events inaugurated a short joint rule with Constantine VII, Steven, and Constantine Lakapenos. Fearing that his colleagues would do to him as they did to their father, Constantine VII took the initiative of ordering the arrest and the tonsure of Steven and Constantine probably around 945.[40] Liutprand of Cremona reports that Constantine VII used "Macedonians" to act against his colleagues, by hiding them in the palace. Liutprand describes these Macedonians as "cum tibi [Constantine VII] devotos, tum bello duros".[41] Liutprand's text makes it clear that these were soldiers, not a pro-Macedonian palace faction, but could they be a pro-Macedonian faction within the army?

Leo the Deacon gives a similar account of the rebellion by Bardas Phokas

36 Runciman (1929): 43 says that "some inexplicable sentiment surrounded the Porphyrogennetus, a sentiment that his personal attributes never can have caused, that gave to him and his dynasty a loyalty unknown in Byzantine history".

37 Kresten & Müller (1995): 14-15, 34, 40 n. 110.

38 At the end of his life, Romanos I supposedly drafted a will in which he determined that Constantine VII should be the senior emperor and ruler after his death, and that anyone who tried to conspire against him should lose their imperial status, in a clear warning for his own sons. Yet this report is too convenient considering the events that followed, hence the account might be a later insertion by authors committed to Constantine, cf. Theophanis continuatus, VI, 435, trans. Sullivan (2018): 7; Georgius monachus continuatus [Bekker] 752, transl. Sullivan (2018): 111, On the possibility that the last will is a later inclusion, Müller (1999): 68-73

39 Antapodosis, V, 22, trans. Squatrini (2007): 185.

40 Theophanis continuatus, VI, 437, trans. Sullivan (2018): 8; Symeonis Magistri et logothetae chronicon, 137, iv, p. 341, trans. Wahlgren (2019): 252.

41 Antapodosis, V, 22, trans. Squatrini (2007): 186-187.

in the year following the assassination of his uncle, Nikephoros II Phokas, by John I Tzimiskes in 969. The author reports that Phokas sent the bishop of Abydos, who "promised money and honours to the Macedonians, urging them to receive him when he left the island and to join and cooperate with him in the removal of the emperor John from the palace."[42] The translators – following Kresten[43]– affirm Leo is talking about the Macedonian *tagma*, which participated under the command of Marianos in the resistance to the seizure of power by Nikephoros II. This is likely, but there are two details that should be taken into account: first, Leo the Deacon does not state directly that he is talking about soldiers or a specific unit; and second, after the rebellion, John I married Theodora, one of Constantine VII's daughters previously sent to a nunnery by her brother Romanos II, which, according to Skylitzes, "pleased the citizens greatly for it kept the imperial power within the family [of Basil I]".[44] This action, which took place in November 970, suggests that John I felt he needed to reinforce his connection with the descendants of Basil I. The fact that he did not marry Theodora just after taking power in 969 but in the following year, after putting down Bardas Phokas' rebellion, indicates that his adversary might have sought support from the supporters of the Macedonian emperors. For this reason, none of the passages (Liutprand of Cremonas' and Leo the Deacon's) should be dismissed as a simple mention of the participation of the soldiers from the Macedonian *thema* or *tagma* without any relation to loyalties to the Macedonian emperors. Furthermore, it must be taken into account is that Constantine was no soldier-emperor. He was the very opposite: never in his life had he led a military campaign and until this point he had spent most of his life in the shadow of his father-in-law with almost no contact with soldiers, which raises the question as to why Constantine could have such loyal support from a group of soldiers. It is not far-fetched to assume this group that helped Constantine VII to plot the expulsion of the Lakapenoi brothers from the palace formed a pro-Macedonian faction in the army, as there was one in the palace and in the populace of Constantinople, which were known or even called themselves "Macedonians". They were bound to Constantine not because of a sense of duty towards their commander. Instead, their devotion to him was based on a nebulous legitimist position that made them loyal to Basil I's descendent.

42 Leonis diaconi Caloënsis historiae, 114: ὁ τοῦ Βάρδα τοκεὺς, ἐς μὲν τὴν νῆσον Λέσβον φρουρούμενος, διὰ Στεφάνου δὲ, τοῦ ἐπισκόπου Ἀβύδου, τοῖς Μακεδόσι χρήματα καὶ τιμὰς ὑπισχνούμενος, καὶ δέχεσθαι αὐτὸν ἐκ τῆς νήσου ἀναγόμενον προτρεπόμενος, καὶ συνεπιτίθεσθαι, καὶ συνεργάζεσθαι αὐτῷ τὴν τοῦ Ἰωάννου τῶν ἀνακτορίων καθαίρεσιν, trans. Talbot & Sullivan (2005): 163.

43 Kresten (2000): 485.

44 Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis, 294; trans. Wortley (2010): 281; Leonis diaconi Caloënsis historiae, 127, trans. Talbot & Sullivan (2005): 174.

As discussed above, despite the problematic character of the term "Macedonian Dynasty", Byzantine sources connect the emperors of this lineage with Basil I, the Macedonian, in a very clear way. Furthermore, those rulers might have informally born the epithet "Macedonian". Despite being a westerner, Liutprand of Cremona is not different. In his *Antapodosis*, he gives a very positive account of Constantine VII and how his ancestors came to power. Consequently, Basil I's history is reported, and he is described as a Macedonian.[45] As a Westerner whose conception of origin and lineage is stronger than that of a Byzantine, I see no objection in Liutprand calling a group of soldiers loyal not only to Constantine VII himself, but also to his family as "Macedonians".

The presence of pro-Macedonian factions helps us explain the caution with which Romanos I moved when promoting his own family and his decision to leave Constantine VII untouched. In sum, the rule of Romanos I creates a precedence for three phenomena that can be observed during following decades: (1) the keeping of the dynastic emperor in a state of "eternal minority", for Constantine VII's "minority" lasted 31 years, and he was in his forties by the time of his political emancipation; consequently, (2) the need of an "emperor-protector" elevated to this position from a high office in the military hierarchy; and (3) the existence of parallel dynasties: the Macedonian and that of the emperor-protector. Although none of Romanos I's successors in the role of emperor-protectors were able – due to the short length of their reigns – to crown a member of their own lineage as co-emperors and likely successor, as did Romanos I, they brought their close relatives to positions of power, appointing them to key-offices in the military and administration.

5. The fall of the Lakapenoi and the rise of Constantine VII

After years living in the shadow of his father-in-law, Constantine VII was finally the sole ruler of the Empire. Up to this moment, evidence of the considerable support enjoyed by Constantine among the population of Constantinople and groups in the palace personal and army were presented, which kept him alive and as an emperor during the Lakapenos regime. This support cannot have originated from his leadership or his charisma, since Constantine was just a child when his father died. He was kept with no real power, only being publicly displayed as a prop every time the Lakapenoi needed legitimacy and support for their actions. As a sole ruler, Constantine initiated a project to turn the diffuse support that his family enjoyed into an unprecedented and very successful dynastic discourse.

This positive image of Basil's descent, conventionally called "dynasty", which is so glorious that the crime from which it originates gets erased, is the result of an extensive work of legitimacy-building by the first three Macedonian emperors: Basil I, Leo VI, and Constantine VII. Basil initiated legal reforms and

45 Antapodosis, I, 8, trans. Squatrini (2007): 48; III, 32, trans. Squatrini (2007): 125.

Leo finished them, they developed construction projects and efforts to appease members and supporters of the Amorians, the previous dynasty, through marriage alliances and demonstrations of due respect to Michael III.[46] Leo VI's main concern in his reign was to produce a legitimate heir, which brought him to marry Zoe Karbonopsina, his mistress, with whom he was finally able to conceive a son, Constantine VII. It was his fourth marriage, which was illegal in the Orthodox Church. His insistence to legitimize the marriage and, consequently, his son eroded his relationship with the Church, resulting in the Tetragamy crisis. In the end, Leo VI managed to achieve what he struggled for: the legitimation of his son by the Church and his coronation as emperor.[47]

The dynastic project was brought to a wider scale with Constantine VII, who with his literary project and reorganization of the ceremony projected the Macedonians as the renovators of the Empire. They supposedly recovered it from the decay into which the Iconoclast emperors threw it, bringing it back to the glory of the time of Constantine I.[48] According to Averil Cameron, Constantine VII codified with his *De Cerimoniis* the innovations in the palace ceremonial created by his father and grandfather to legitimize their contested position. He thus created a static image of harmony between the emperor and the elite, and between the emperor and the Church.[49] Moreover, his emphasis on the title *porphyrogennetos* is also an important aspect. This title was initially an epithet given to those who were born – or conceived (?) – during the emperor's rule. According to Dagron, the *porphyrogennesis* meant that the divine unction given to the ruler was transferred to the next generation. Yet this did not grant the prince automatic legitimacy as demonstrated by the many rituals that he needed to go through to safeguard his connections with many different groups (soldiers, clergy, palace personal) and his eventual coronation as co-emperor by his father. The title *porphyrogennetos*, by this time more an epithet, had existed at least since the reign of Constantine V (741-775), when his son Leo IV (775-780) is named "*porfilogenito*" in a Neapolitan contract from the year 750, but until then it did not have an official status. Leo VI insisted on calling his only son *porphyrogennetos*, a likely defensive strategy to oppose those who questioned the legality of his marriage with Zoe and, therefore, the legitimacy of his son. It was Constantine VII who started to use it more extensively as part of his own self-representation. It

46 Tougher (1997): 23-67; Dagron (2003):192-219; PmbZ, Basileios I., 20837, Leon VI., 24311. On the legal reforms, Chitwood (2017): 16-44.

47 Tougher (1997): 133-163.

48 Magdalino (2012): 227; Krallis (2017): 604-605; PmbZ, Konstantinos VII., 23734.

49 Cameron (1987):106-136.

became an official title on the reign of Basil II and Constantine VIII.[50]

While the Macedonian emperors were creating these discourses of dynastic legitimacy to reinforce their authority, as well as to keep the imperial office within their family, the control of the army and the military policy of the Empire gradually slipped away to the hands of the Phokas family in the second half of the 10th century. As already mentioned, Romanos I created a precedence not only in keeping the dynastic successor in an eternal minority to justify his role as protector, but also in using a high military office to achieve this position. In his case, it was the office of *droungarios* – or admiral – of the fleet, but his successors would be *domestikos* of the *scholai*. Initially, he was the head of one of the palace guards, named *scholai*. In the 10th century, the holder of this office turned into the commander-in-chief of the Byzantine armies when the emperor was not present on the battlefield, which became the rule after the death of Basil I.[51] According to Shaun Tougher, Leo VI created a government model in which the emperor ruled in Constantinople with the aid of eunuchs, while the generals fought the wars of the Empire. The loyalty of the latter was warranted by a personal relationship to the emperor. This dichotomic model was held until the reign of Nikephoros II, when Basil II decided to conduct military campaigns himself, thus irritating the generals.[52] It is not difficult to see how the emperor could be easily made irrelevant in such an arrangement, being pushed to the background, which did not happen with Leo VI, but with his son, grandson, and great-grandsons.

The first *domestikos* to claim the position of protector of the dynastic successor was Leo Phokas. He was appointed to this office in 917.[53] After the defeat in Acheloos before the Bulgars, he began to aspire to a co-emperorship together with Constantine VII, believing he had the support of the empress Zoe, by then the head of the regency. Instead, he was dismissed from this office and exiled to his home. When Romanos I assumed power under the pretext of protecting Constantine VII in 919, Leo openly rebelled with the support of the *parakoimomenos* Constantine, his brother-in-law, in Constantinople and some officers of the *tagmata*. Romanos supressed this rebellion, firstly by introducing spies in Leo's encampments in Anatolia, resulting in the desertion of some officers. Then, when Leo was in Chrysopolis just on the other side of the Bosporus, Romanos issued a chrysobull in the name of the young emperor which was read to the soldiers in Leo Phokas' camp. In the chrysobull, Leo was declared a conspirator and usurper. As a result, his army was dissolved, and Leo was arrested and blinded. Though this

50 Dagron (2003): 31-54; Dagron (2012): 445-486.

51 On the office of *domestikos* of *scholai*, Guilland (1967): 427-449; Kühn (1991): 73-92, 123-157.

52 Tougher (1997): 218.

53 Kühn (1991): 79; Cheynet (2008): 480-481; PmbZ, Leon Phokas, 24408.

edict accuses Leo Phokas of conspiring to depose Constantine VII, its emphasis on Constantine's "choice" of Romanos Lakapenos as his protector and surrogate father makes it clear that Leo was claiming a similar position.[54]

The family Phokas had a special relationship with the Macedonian emperors.[55] The first known member of this family was Nikephoros "the Elder", the father of Leo Phokas. He was *manglabites*, bodyguard, and *oikeios*, member of the retinue of Basil I. Later, Leo VI made him *domestikos* of the *scholai*. In his military manual *Taktika*, this emperor calls Nikephoros "our general" several times, which underlines the very close relationship Leo had with him.[56] Despite the personal relationship with the Macedonian emperors, the Phokades were until that point only one of the families who were gradually monopolizing the higher offices of the army, as the Argyroi, Doukai, and Maleinoi. Being adversaries of Romanos I, the Phokades fell out of imperial favour when seized power. They were not considered for higher offices in the army until Constantine VII deposed the Lakapenoi, initiating his sole rule. By this time, they returned as leaders of the army. In 945, Bardas Phokas, Leo Phokas' son, helped Constantine VII to depose the Lakapenoi. As a reward for this support, he was appointed *domestikos* of the *scholai.* His sons Nikephoros, Leo, and Constantine were appointed, respectively, the *strategoi* of Anatolics, Cappadocia and Seleucia, which were the most important military offices at that time.[57]

The reign of Constantine VII was the culmination of two political developments initiated during the reign of his grandfather: the very successful enforcement of several dynastic discourses, which entrenched Basil I's lineage on the throne, and the control of the military, the most powerful branch of the Byzantine state, by a few families with a strong tradition in the officialdom, among which the Phokades was the most important. These two trends are seemingly contradicting, but they are not. It was rather a division of tasks: the emperors waived the military leadership on the battlefield to the officials, while the emperors still controlled the military policy. The generals' loyalty was safeguarded by a personal relationship with the emperors, as Basil I had with Nikephoros Phokas, the Elder; Leo VI had with the same Nikephoros and his son, Leo; and Constantine VII had with Bardas Phokas. This arrangement would suffer serious changes in the

54 Theophanis continuatus, VI, 395-396, Symeonis Magistri et logothetae chronicon, 136, vi, p. 311-112, trans. Wahlgren (2019): 230-231; Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis, 210, trans. Wortley (2010): 203-204; Dölger (2003): Reg. 584, p. 47.

55 Shepard (2008): 504.

56 Kühn (1991): 77-78; Cheynet (2008): 477-480; PmbZ, Nikephoros Phokas ("der Ältere"), 25545.

57 Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis, 238, trans. Wortley (2010): 230; Kühn (1991): 83; Cheynet (2008): 481-483; PmbZ, Bardas Phokas (der Ältere), 20769.

reign of Constantine VII's successors.

6. Romanos II as a neutral ruler

When Constantine VII died in 959 leaving his son, Romanos II (959-963), as sole emperor, a change took place in the partnership between the emperor and the family Phokas. Although the loyalty of the latter was upheld, keeping their position of emperor deputies, the Phokades were promoted from imperial representatives on the battlefield to military policymakers. This is clear with the division of the office of *domestikos* of the *scholai* in two, one for the West and the other for the East. Hans-Joachin Kühn believes it to be part of an ample military reform put into practice by Nikephoros Phokas during the reign of Romanos II, who substituted his father, Bardas Phokas, in the position of *domestikos*, still under Constantine VII.[58] Under Romanos II, the conquest of Crete led by Nikephoros Phokas took place in 960/1. As Nikephoros was involved with the preparations, Saif al-Daula invaded the Eastern frontier and the Hungarians the Western frontier. To lead the response, his brother and by then *strategos* of the Anatolics, Leo Phokas, was nominated *domestikos* of the *scholai* of the West, while Nikephoros was the *domestikos* of the East. This division was an answer to the Byzantine military needs of that time, but it demonstrates the absolute control of the military enjoyed by the Phokades during the reign of Romanos II, as the army command was reorganized to ensure that the Byzantine forces were under their unquestioned leadership. This change may also have been a way to accommodate the ambitions of both brothers.

While the military was controlled by the Phokades, the administration was in the hands of Joseph Bringas by the order of Constantine VII, who appointed him to this position to ease Romanos II into his functions as emperor. Bringas was a eunuch, whose career was promoted by Romanos I and Constantine VII. Romanos II appointed him *parakoimomenos* and *paradynasteion*.[59] Initially, Bringas and Nikephoros Phokas seemed to work well together. Even though the sources state that the conquest of Crete was a mission assigned to Phokas by the emperor and, in his panegyrical epic about the conquest, Theodosios, the Deacon, attributes to the emperor a spiritual leadership of the campaign[60], it seems that the conquest was Nikephoros' personal project. For it deserved all his attention and gave him eternal glory. Moreover, as the preparations were being made, Romanos II and the senators were worried about the costs and were apprehensive because of the rumour that the conqueror of Crete would aspire to the imperial diadem. Bringas soothed the emperor reminding him of the importance of the undertaking and dismissing any

58 Kühn (1991): 123-158.

59 Markopoulos (2004): Art. IV, 1−27; PmbZ, Ioseph Bringas, 23529.

60 Theodosii diaconi de Creta capta, 1-39, trans. Sullivan (2018): 124-191.

suspicion against the *domestikos*.[61] The collaboration between the heads of the two branches of the Medieval Roman state – the army and the administration – quickly worsened after the successful accomplishment of the mission. According to Skylitzes, Nikephoros wanted to stay in Crete to complete the pacification of the island, but Bringas convinced Romanos II to summon Nikephoros to return. Bringas seems to also have become apprehensive that Phokas' military success would spark imperial ambitions in him. Moreover, despite the fact that Skylitzes affirms Nikephoros was not granted a triumph, Athanasios Markopoulos demonstrates other sources attest that it did take place, however in a smaller scale.[62] Their relationship continued to worsen to the point of open enmity. When Romanos II passed away at a young age in 963, Nikephoros was acclaimed by his troops and marched towards Constantinople so he could be received by the city. Bringas organized a fierce, but failed resistance, resulting in his exile.[63]

According to the government model established by Leo VI, the emperor ruled in Constantinople with the aid of eunuchs while his generals fought the wars of the Empire. The emperor kept an oversight and controlled policymaking, warranting the generals' loyalty by means of a personal relationship with him. Although officers maintained their formal loyalty to the emperor, Romanos II was very young by his ascension to power and so belonged to a different generation from that of his leading generals. Hence, he could not nurture a personal relationship with them as his ancestors did, which eventually lead to him losing control over the military and policymaking. Romanos II's agency in Constantinople was also seemingly curbed by Joseph Bringas. His influence over the senatorial elite and the palace made him the most powerful political actor in the capital. The sources demonstrate that Bringas, as the head of the administration, collaborated seamlessly with Nikephoros Phokas, the head of the military, at the beginning, but mutual suspicions soured the partnership, resulting in an enmity that would mark the interregnum after Romanos II's death. His sons and successors, Basil II and Constantine VIII, were even younger than his father when they ascended to the throne. Accordingly, the political neutralization of the dynastic successor would continue for another generation.

7. Romanos II as a childish emperor.

The emperor Romanos II remains a blurry figure in the sources. He is portrayed as a good-natured and even talented person, but as a ruler uninterested in the details of government, which were left in the hands of Joseph Bringas.

61 Theophanis continuatus, VI, 474-475, trans. Sullivan (2018): 69.

62 Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis, 252, trans. Wortley (2010): 243; Markopoulos (2004): Art. IV, 14-15.

63 Markopoulos (2004): Art. IV, 16-25.

Sources describe him as a man-child, a "*paidion*", more interested in mundane pleasures than in ruling the Empire.[64] There is a pattern in play here: whenever an emperor needs to be politically neutralized, either by an overbearing protector or to avoid conflict with the older brother, who was the ruler, he is reported as someone uninterested in state business and dedicated to mundane pleasures. It happened also with Alexander, Constantine VII, and Constantine VIII.[65] These characterizations might have been inspired by the representation of Michael III, who is presented in exactly those terms in the work known as *Vita Basilii*, composed under the sponsorship of Constantine VII, which, in turn, is inspired by the portrayal of Nero taken from a work by Antonius.[66] It is plausible that those representations could also have corresponded to the historical reality: the above-mentioned emperors were for the most part of their lives removed from any real power, participating only in ceremonies and other public events. Therefore, it is no surprise that, living in a gilded cage, these young, rich, and privileged men would spend most of their time in leisure activities and, at times, be prone to excesses.[67]

The same applies for young and recently inaugurated dynastic emperors, such as Romanos II. Emperors in such positions were vulnerable, for they depended much on their deceased father's collaborators, needing at times regencies.[68] Accordingly, Romanos II had to deal with two domineering "protectors", the *parakoimomenos* Joseph Bringas and the *domestikos* of the *scholai* Nikephoros Phokas. Moreover, it is possible that he had to face a possible opinion trend in some parts of the elite according to which the dynastic successor should not rule, but rather lend its legitimacy to others who would do it for him. There is no source providing a manifest program for such arrangement. Yet it was implicit when observing that palace personnel, controlled by individuals such as Joseph Bringas and Basil Lakapenos, with whom we are going to deal in the lines below, and leading military officers were against attempts by the dynastic emperors to take the reins of power autonomously. Consequently, the emperors had their status of minor extended into late adulthood. The characterization of Romanos II as childish and his supposed licentious behaviour due to bad influences, like that of his father, may be considered a reflection of a power-sharing idea according to

64 Michaelis Pselli Historia Syntomos, 94-97; Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis, 254, trans. Wortley (2010): 245; Ljubarskij (1993): 248.

65 On the historiographical appraisal of Alexander, Karlin-Hayter (1969): 585–596; Kazhdan (1991): I, 56-57; PmbZ, Alexandros, 20228. On Constantine VII's, PmbZ, Konstantinos VII., 23734; On Constantine VIII's, Todt (2000): 93-105; Lilie (2017): 211-222; PmbZ, Konstantinos VIII., 23735.

66 Tinnefeld (1971):100-101.

67 Lilie (2017): 35-37.

68 Lilie (2017): 34.

which the Macedonians should have their imperial dignity acknowledged because of their ancestry, but they should not rule because of their ineptitude and child-like personalities. These characterizations served to present Michael III a tyrant, which, in turn, legitimated his murder and the usurpation by Basil I. Now it was used to characterize them as eternal children, justifying the neutralization of the dynastic successor's political power, but his preservation as a source of authority as the member of a sacralised imperial lineage.

For his own misfortune and that of his legacy, Romanos II died young and reigned shortly, for less than four years, before he could find a way to emancipate himself from the constraints his "protectors" set for him. His sons, Basil II, and Constantine VIII, faced the exact same problem and only managed to rule by themselves when they were well into adulthood. It must be reminded that Psellos describes the early years of Basil II's life also as dedicated to pleasures and excesses.[69] Today, there is a lot of scepticism about the historicity of Psellos' early reports about Basil's reign, but this account is plausible based on what is known about the life of co-emperors and young dynastic emperors.[70] Maybe, if he had died young, the hegemonic characterization of Basil II would have been very similar to that of Romanos II. However, this did not happen. Basil matured and started to claim the power and authority corresponding to his office, facing a staunch resistance unparalleled in Byzantine political history.

8. Nikephoros II Phokas and John I Tzimiskes as emperor-protectors

During the reign of Nikephoros II Phokas and John I Tzimiskes, the members of the Macedonian Dynasty almost disappear from the sources. After the death of Romanos II, Leo the Deacon reports that a power-sharing arrangement between the senators, led by Joseph Bringas, and Nikephoros Phokas was suggested by the patriarch Polyeuktos. The senators would warrant the sons of Romanos their "ancestral honour (εἰς τὴν προγονικὴν τιμὴν συντηρεῖν)" and proclaim them emperors. Nikephoros would swear he would not plan anything against their government and that he would take care of their military education, and the senators that they would not remove or promote any military officer without Nikephoros' consent and would manage the public business with his advice.[71] The agreement, however, was not implemented because Nikephoros and Joseph Bringas clashed: Bringas removed some of Phokas' relatives from their offices and exiled them. Next, he started to plot against Nikephoros with some military officers. He tried to recruit John Tzimiskes, Nikephoros' nephew,

69 Michaelis Pselli Chronographia, I, 4, p. 3-4:

70 Holmes (2005): 1-16; Lilie (2017): 35-37.

71 Leonis diaconi Caloënsis historiae, 33-34; Talbot, & Sullivan (2005): 86.

promising him the office of *domestikos*, but John remained loyal to his relative. In the end, Bringas' plans failed. Basil Lakapenos gathered a mob that, according to Leo the Deacon, amounted to 3,000 people, aimed at supporting Nikephoros and attacking Bringas' house.[72]

Basil Lakapenos was an illegitimate son of Romanos I with a slave and was castrated at an early age. Because he was a eunuch and due to the fact that he was favoured by his sister, Helena, the empress and wife of Constantine VII, he was spared from the purge of 945 that removed all male Lakapenoi from the palace. Later, he was appointed *parakoimomenos* by Constantine, but he must have fallen out of imperial favour, for Constantine preferred Bringas for the role of manager of state affairs and helper of Romanos II after his death. Therefore, the decisive support Basil Lakapenos gave to Nikephoros Phokas in his rebellion presents us no surprise at all and was rewarded with his reinstatement as *parakoimomenos*.[73] With these developments, Bringas' regime crumbled and Nikephoros entered Constantinople easily. In order to officialise his role as emperor-protector, he connected himself with the imperial family by marrying Theophano, Basil II's and Constantine VIII's mother.[74] During his rule, the young emperors preserved their imperial status, although it seems that Nikephoros did not show them his due respect. In his second embassy to the Byzantine court, this time during the reign of Nikephoros II, Liutprand of Cremona gives an account on his audience with this emperor in which he reports that "there sat on the left, not aligned with him but far behind, two small emperors [Basil II and Constantine VIII], once his rulers, now subject to him."[75]

After Nikephoros II's murder in 969, Basil II and Constantine VIII were again instrumentalized. In that occasion, John Tzimiskes ordered a group of soldiers to run on the streets acclaiming him as emperor along with Basil and Constantine, escorted at a distance by Basil Lakapenos.[76] His participation in the murderous plot is unclear. According to the sources, Lakapenos was not present during the act, but was summoned shortly after by Tzimiskes. Both found an agreement very quickly. Lakapenos secured his position of *parakoimomenos* and John appointed him *proedros*, the president, of the Senate, a newly invented title.

72 Leonis diaconi Caloënsis historiae, 37-48, trans. Talbot, & Sullivan (2005): 88-97.

73 On Basil Lakapenos, PmbZ, Basileios Lakapenos, 20925; Brokkaar (1972): 199-234; Holmes (2005): 448-471; Featherstone (2014): 353−372; Magdalino (2016): 323-328.

74 PmbZ, Theophano, 28125; Morris (1994): 203-205.

75 Legatio, 3, trans. Squatrini (2007): 240-241.

76 Leonis diaconi Caloënsis historiae, 93-94, trans. Talbot, & Sullivan (2005): 143

Accordingly, he would become the most powerful person in government after the emperor.[77] After some penitence and blaming the empress for the murder, which resulted in her exile, John Tzimiskes was crowned emperor. Initially, he saw no need in connecting himself with the Macedonian dynasty through marriage, but, in the following year, he changed his mind and married Theodora, a daughter of Constantine VII, becoming thereby the uncle of Basil II and Constantine VIII. It was postulated previously that this happened soon after the repression of the rebellion by Bardas Phokas, also a nephew of Nikephoros II, who might have sought support from people connected with the Macedonian emperors. The marriage one year after his usurpation would be an attempt to reinforce his (tainted) legitimacy and satisfy the group of supporters of Basil and Constantine, which worked.

9. Basil II's struggle for emancipation

The death of John I in 976 left Basil II and Constantine VIII as the sole rulers of the Empire. Since they had reached adulthood, neither regency nor emperor-protector were necessary anymore. Nonetheless, their capacity of ruling by their own was limited by the influence their great-uncle, Basil Lakapenos, had in the administration and the tight grip the generals from lineages such as the Phokades and the Skleroi had on the military. Yet Basil II would gradually become more restless and more impatient to claim the power which was, in his opinion, rightly his. This would result in two major civil wars.

I will not enter in the minutiae here but deal only with the most important elements for the topic at hand.[78] The first civil war began with the acclamation of Bardas Skleros in 976. Due to the incapacity of the loyalist generals in dealing with the rebellion, Bardas Phokas was recalled from his exile and after solemn oaths that he would not aspire to the imperial office, he was appointed *domestikos* of the *scholai*, which means he was the army commander-in-chief. Phokas finally defeated Skleros in 979, who fled to Iraq, ending up arrested and brought to Baghdad. In 986, it was time for Phokas to rebel. Simultaneously, the Buyids, who ruled Baghdad, released Bardas Skleros, his family, and supporters, who were their prisoners and whose delivery to Constantinople was being negotiated with the Byzantines. Negotiations started between Skleros and Phokas in which a shared rule was discussed. However, when both met, Phokas arrested Skleros.

77 Leonis diaconi Caloënsis historiae, 93-94, trans. Talbot, & Sullivan (2005): 143; Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis, 284, trans. Wortley (2010): 271.

78 There is extensive literature about these rebellions. For more details and interpretations see, Forsyth (1977): 375-392, 424-443; Sifonas (1994): 124–129; Cheynet (1996): 27-34, 329-333; Cheynet (2003): chap. VIII, 5; Cheynet (2008): 58–60; Holmes (2003): 44–56; Holmes (2005): 240-298, 450-461; Kaldellis (2017), 83-102; Todt & Vest (2014), 194-195.

The former continued the rebellion, being finally defeated by loyalist forces in 989 in Chrysopolis. Skleros was then released, but only to negotiate good terms of surrender with the emperors.

After this overview of the rebellions Basil II faced, two questions relevant to our topic remain. First, what were both rebellions trying to achieve? The complete overthrow of Basil II and Constantine VIII or the reestablishment of the former *status quo* in which the Macedonian emperors reigned, but not ruled? Second, why did Basil II, or better Basil Lakapenos, appoint Bardas Phokas, a former rebel and nephew of a former emperor, to the office of *domestikos* of the *scholai*, thereby granting him the control of the imperial military forces?

Starting with the first questions. The sources are not clear on the intentions of the rebel leaders. They surely wanted to get hold of the imperial power, but whether it meant the removal of Basil II and Constantine VIII or their permanence on the throne is not clear. W. G. Brokkaar suggested that Skleros' first rebellion was directed against Basil Lakapenos and not against the emperors, and Bardas Skleros wished to take over his place as regent and protector of the emperors, once held by his brother-in-law, John I.[79] We will elaborate his hypothesis in the following lines.

The sparkle for Skleros' rebellion was his appointment as *doux* of Mesopotamia in 976. He was by that time *stratelates* of the East, so Skleros perceived this nomination as a demotion, which gave him the reason to rebel.[80] Next, Basil II and Basil Lakapenos sent an envoy to Skleros to convince him to abandon his illegal ambitions, to which the latter replied with an ultimatum: either they accepted him willingly as emperor or he would attempt to seize the throne against their will.[81] Skylitzes uses the verb "παραδέξονται", which means "receive", or even "allow" or "admit". Moreover, the prefix "παρα-" implies the act of accepting alongside. This may indicate that Skleros' ambition was to assume a position that Nikephoros II and John I previously had, when Basil II and Constantine VII lent them legitimacy to hold the actual power. Yet the lack of other reports to corroborate this hypothesis does not allow us to state firmly that this was the case. The same applies to the rebellion by Bardas Phokas between 987 and 989. There are multiple reports that Phokas and Bardas Skleros, recently freed from his captivity in Baghdad, negotiated a territorial power-sharing agreement whose terms and jurisdictions are not very clear, since the reports are not consistent. In the end, the agreement was not put forward, for, as mentioned, Phokas arrested

79 Brokkaar (1972): 225.

80 On Bardas Skleros, Seibt (1976): 32-33; PmbZ, Bardas Skleros, 20785. On the office of *stratelates*, Guilland (1967): 385-404; 447; Kazhdan (1994): 3, 1965.

81 Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis, 317, trans. Wortley (2010): 301-302; Dölger (2003): Reg. 758c, p. 162.

Skleros when they met.[82] The role of Basil II and Constantine VIII in this scheme is also not clear. Anyhow, the stakes for the Macedonian emperors were clearly higher during this rebellion, for Phokas, unlike Skleros, was not revolting against a government controlled by the imperial tutor, but by the emperor himself.

Between the end of Skleros' rebellion in 979 and the start of Phokas' in 987, Basil II managed to remove Basil Lakapenos from his position as powerholder, starting his sole rule. In order to assert his own authority, the emperor decided to lead the soldiers personally in a campaign against the Bulgars. It was the first time someone of his family did so since the days of Basil I, his great-great-grandfather. He also "demoted" Bardas Phokas from the office of the *domestikos* of the *scholai* to that of *doux* of Mesopotamia.[83] Phokas would still be responsible for a very important sector of the Eastern frontier, but, as it was previously mentioned, since the days of Romanos II, the *domestikos* was, in practical terms, the commander-in-chief of the Empire, being also responsible for military policy. Basil II's decision of removing this office from Phokas and going to war was clear move towards his political emancipation, indicating that the emperor would be the military policymaker from now on. Phokas must have resented this encroachment of his jurisdiction. Moreover, he must have interpreted this decision as if, after dealing with Lakapenos, Basil II would go after him. If it was really Basil's plan, he acted cautiously, for he decided not to campaign in the East, which was Phokas' territory, but in the West, against the Bulgars, who, after a period of relative peace with Byzantium, were again at war under the leadership of Samuel (986/987–1014).[84] Basil II was still an unexperienced commander, hence he suffered a humiliating defeat in Serdica in 986, which, together with his new appointment, gave Bardas Phokas and his supporters the reason to initiate a rebellion in the following year.

This rebellion was a direct confrontation between Phokas and the Macedonian emperors. No negotiations were made between them, so a situation in which Phokas would rule as nominal protector of the dynastic emperors would hardly be conceivable. Moreover, the forceful actions towards political emancipation by Basil II made it clear that he would never accept this arrangement. Negotiations with the emperor were only made after Phokas' death and Skleros' release, but the aim was to safeguard an honourable surrender and no punishments to the remaining rebels.

Now the second question: why appoint Bardas Phokas, a formal rebel and nephew of one emperor, Nikephoros II, and cousin of another, John I, to a position

82 On this agreement see the article, Dias (2023): 65-70.

83 PmbZ, Bardas Phokas (der Jüngere), 20784; Cheynet (2008): 489-497.

84 PmbZ, Samuel Kometopulos, 26983; Kazhdan (1991): 1838; Kaldellis (2017): 95. On the role of the Bulgarian campaigns to the everlasting image of Basil II, see Stephenson (2003), passim.

which gave him the command of the whole Byzantine forces? One obvious reason is that Bardas Phokas had already fought Bardas Skleros in 970, but, on that occasion, the roles were inverted: Bardas Phokas was the rebel and Bardas Skleros the head of the imperial response. Ultimately, Phokas was defeated, tonsured and sent to exile.[85] With all certainty, Basil Lakapenos planned to capitalize on the rivalry between them.[86] Yet was it worth the risks? There is evidence that Phokas was still aspiring to the throne. Ibn Sharan, who led a Buyid embassy to Basil II's court in 981 to negotiate the return of Bardas Skleros, reports that both Basil II and Basil Lakapenos were worried about rumours of Bardas Phokas' rebellious intentions.[87] This suggests that he started plotting almost immediately after his appointment as *domestikos*, for which he made most solemn oaths that he would be loyal to the emperor. Therefore, it is surprising that Phokas was put in a position which granted him the resources and opportunities to make himself a very dangerous threat to those who appointed him. This decision demonstrates very important developments resulting from decades of political neutralization of the dynastic emperors and the cession of the military command and policy to aristocratic generals beginning with Leo VI.

In her studies about the reign of Basil II, Catherine Holmes asserts that the main source of power and influence of the rebel leaders was deposited in the military offices they occupied, which brought them human, political, and financial resources.[88] Holmes is certainly correct in her assessment, for the role of private retinue and resources in those rebellions was indeed minimal, and rebellions only posed real threat once their leaders were in command of the imperial troops. Nonetheless, Holmes makes the following remark: "*If control of the army was so significant to the internal stability of the empire, then it did not greatly matter whether this key resource was controlled by long-established families such as the Phokades and Skleroi, or by a relative newcomer. Whoever controlled the army would always present a threat to the emperor*".[89]The author makes this statement to highlight that the defeat of Skleros and Phokas were not enough to supress the risks to Basil II's rule, which, in turn, explains why this emperor spent the rest of his life on campaign. However, if the office was the only source of power and influence, Basil Lakapenos could have appointed someone else, equally skilled

85 On Bardas Phokas, see footnote 83, on Bardas Skleros, Seibt (1976): 32-33; PmbZ, Bardas Skleros, 20785.

86 Morris (1994): 199-214.

87 Amedroz & Margoliouth (1921): 33; Brokkaar (1972): 30-31; Forsyth (1977): 405-406, Beihammer (2003): 42-43.

88 Holmes (2003): 53-54; Holmes (2005): 461-464.

89 Holmes (2003): 54.

but with a lesser pedigree and without a previous history of aspiring the imperial throne. Instead, the court kept appointing individuals famously ambitious and unreliable, such as Bardas Phokas, to high military offices. Why? Probably, these individuals were seen as natural leaders by the troops due to patronage network, as well as inherited and earned reputation. I acknowledge that it is almost an *argumentum ex silentio*, for the evidence for those factors barely appears in the sources and those individuals are only mentioned when appointed to military offices, which gives strength to Holmes' arguments.

Even though these offices were unquestionably a *sine qua non* condition for the launch of imperial bids, the reason for Bardas Phokas' appointment as *domestikos* during a moment in which the group in power was so fragile remains unclear. Basil Lakapenos and those around him must have been aware of the risk their decision entailed, but they did it anyway. The logical conclusion is that all direct connections between the Macedonian emperors and the field army were lost, forcing them to become completely dependent on a few individuals who became the natural leaders of the armed forces.

This situation is already noticeable two decades earlier. Leo Deacon reports that soon after the above-mentioned failed negotiations between Nikephoros Phokas and the senators, led by Joseph Bringas in 963, in which protection of Basil II's and Constantine VIII's imperial dignity was an important factor, John Tzimiskes and other generals loyal to Phokas acclaimed him emperor, for they "considered it a disgrace for a lowborn eunuch, together with infants still under the care of nurses, to lord it over bloodthirsty warriors."[90] Later on, Leo presents Nikephoros giving a speech to his soldiers to call them to arms and support his imperial bid. There, the young emperors were not mentioned at all, but the supposed treachery of Bringas.[91] Following Ancient Greek historiography, Byzantine authors put words in the mouth of historical personalities to characterize them, which means that direct speeches should not be taken at their face value. However, this speech could be the method Leo, the Deacon, found to convey, according to his view, the reasons Phokas used to convince his soldiers to support his rebellion. If it was so, the author is saying that the defence of the imperial honours of the Macedonian emperors clearly did not have the same importance for the soldiers and officers that it did for the senatorial elite, palace personnel and the Patriarch in Constantinople.

In overview, it is possible to say that Basil Lakapenos and Basil II's hands were tied. Because of the rivalry between the Phokades and the Skleroi and of the fact that the troops would not accept anyone else as their leaders except for Bardas

90 Leonis diaconi Caloënsis historiae, 40, trans. Talbot, & Sullivan (2005): 91.

91 Leonis diaconi Caloënsis historiae, 42-43, trans. Talbot, & Sullivan (2005): 93. On the methods of characterization used by Byzantine historians (including attributing words and sayings), see Lilie (2015): 157-210.

Skleros and Bardas Phokas, they had to appoint them as *domestikos* of the *scholai*. Previous events do not allow us to say that Basil Lakapenos had a natural alliance with any of the families to which those generals belonged: the *parakoimomenos* was a central actor in Nikephoros II's seizure of power in the same way that, even if he did not participate in the conspiracy to murder Nikephoros, he quickly entered into an agreement with his murderers hours after the act.

10. Basil II's rule

After suppressing Phokas' rebellion in 989, Basil II was finally master and sole ruler of the Empire, with his brother acting as ceremonial co-emperor. The nature of his regime is debated to this day. For a long time, Basil II was considered anti-aristocratic by the specialized literature. This assessment was mostly based on the account of Psellos, with the support of his legislation against the "powerful".[92] This conception is mostly contested nowadays, for this emperor might have repressed the family Phokas and Maleinos to an extent that they almost disappeared politically in the following years, but he spared the Skleroi and promoted other long-established families, such as Doukai and Argyroi, and others from the middle-range of aristocracy, such as the Dalassenoi, Komnenoi and Xifiai. They would be the most important lineages in the decades to come, some of them even becoming imperial dynasties.[93]

Not only the balance of forces within the military elite changed, but also its relationship with the emperor. As mentioned above, Psellos' account regarding the reign of Basil II and Constantine VIII is nowadays considered an essay of political philosophy as opposed to a historical report. Moreover, he receives the blame as original source of Basil being portrayed as an anti-aristocratic and autocratic emperor, a notion that was dominant in scholarly work for a long time. His *Chronographia* is indeed a work of political philosophy, but it is not only that: it is a personal memoir and an historiographical work as well. Although his facts might be not as accurate as the current scholars would like it, Psellos was a shrewd political analyst, so the historiographical aspect of *Chronographia* should not be dismissed, even in the early reports. An example of this can be found in one of the passages used to justify the argument that Basil repressed the aristocracy. Psellos says, "after taking down the main lineages and bringing into the same [position] as the others, he [the emperor] conducted the government with much ease".[94] This

92 See Holmes (2005): 16-29 for a summary of these debates and the relevant bibliography.

93 Sifonas (1994), 124-129; Cheynet (1996): 308-309, 335.

94 Michaelis Pselli Chronographia, I, 30, p. 18: ἀλλὰ τὰ προὔχοντα τῶν γενῶν καθελὼν· καὶ εἰς ἴσον τοῖς ἄλλοις καταστήσας, κατὰ πολλὴν εὐπέτειαν τὸ κράτος διακυβερνῶν ἐτύγχανε.

short passage is very meaningful. Psellos is not saying that Basil subjugated the aristocratic families, but rather removed a few of them from an elevated position and equalized them to the rest. Considering what was observed so far, that is, that a few lineages like the Phokades, Skleroi, Lakapenoi, and Maleinoi saw themselves as the real powerholders and the wardens of the Empire, either as *domestikos* of the *scholai* or as co-emperors, while the Macedonian emperors were kept in a ceremonial and powerless position, it is possible to interpret that Psellos is saying that Basil II consciously broke with this arrangement. The aristocratic dominance of the Byzantine armed forces through monopolization of the higher offices by members of the same lineages was a trend during the last hundred years that Basil could not and did not want to stop.[95] On the other hand, he would not allow himself to be left in a politically neutralized position, letting the state be controlled by a few of these military officers. He resisted to this trend, faced incredible opposition, and came out victorious: now the τὰ προὔχοντα τῶν γενῶν would still be appointed to important positions of power and influence, but they would do it under his direct command, depending solely on imperial grace. More importantly, they would lose the dominant position as wardens of the state.

11. On Basil II's bachelorhood (again)

Basil II's struggles to establish his own personal rule can also explain one of the main mysteries concerning his reign: why he did not marry and beget children, thus assuring the continuation of his dynasty. This fact attracted some attention in the scholarly works, for celibate emperors were rare. Explanations range from an almost monastic ascetism to homosexuality.[96] This seems to be a trivial question, but it might not be, for it may reflect larger issues concerning not only the power struggles during Basil's reign, but also those during the reigns of his predecessor.

While Basil II did not marry nor had children, either legitimate or illegitimate, his brother, Constantine VIII, did. He married Helena, the daughter of Alypios, in 976 and had three daughters: Eudokia, Zoe, and Theodora.[97] Until 1028, none of them were married to anyone, despite an attempt to marry Zoe with Otto III, the German emperor, between 1001 and 1002. The negotiations seem to have been successful, for Zoe even started her journey to be united with her husband to-be. She managed to arrive in Bari but had to return to Constantinople at the news of Otto III's death.[98] These events are clear evidence of Basil's lack of interest in assuring the continuity of his dynasty. Constantine VIII's union with Helena was

95 See the statistical study on the subject by Kazhdan & Ronchey (1997).

96 Arbagi (1975): 41-45; Masterson (2019): 52-82; Masterson (2022): 168-192.

97 Todt (2000): 96; PmbZ, Konstantinos VIII., 23735.

98 Todt (2000): 97-98.

early in Basil's and Constantine's reign, when they were still under the tutelage of John I or, if it was after his death, of Basil Lakapenos, thus it might have been arranged by one of them, thus reflecting their own political strategies. Moreover, the negotiated union between Zoe and Otto III was a diplomatic arrangement, not one to assure dynastic succession: their sons would not be accepted as successors to the Byzantine throne.

In sum, not only did Basil II not marry, but he also made sure no male candidate for succession existed, either by the generation of legitimate sons by himself or his family members or by adoption. This decision is as odd as, or even odder than, his decision to remain celibate. Yet it makes sense within the wider framework of the past events and recent trends in Byzantine high politics. This inaction might indicate that Basil II consciously wanted his lineage to disappear and, consequently, break forever the practice resulting from his predecessors' successful dynastic project. A sacralised dynasty opened the way to the political neutralization of its members; Basil II had his own biography and that of his ancestors to demonstrate this. Moreover, the Abbasid example was close enough to Byzantium to serve as cautionary tale.

The solution to preserve the political authority of the Byzantine imperial office and a safeguard against its "abbasidization" was to dissolve the dynasty. It would have been indeed a drastic measure, but one that did not contradict Byzantine political culture. As mentioned, the dynastic legitimacy was secondary for the Byzantines. Emperors often tried to control their succession, and many were successful at it, which resulted in succession within the same family for more than two generations. This is what is referred as "dynasty" in the scholarship, but this is done in hindsight and by convention. Still, the Macedonian emperors, unlike their predecessors, created, maybe for the first time, the concept of imperial office as family heritage and a draft of a family identity through the formation of a collective past in the works known today as *Theophanes Continuatus* and of self-representation in the palace ceremonial, systematized mainly by Constantine VII. This effort was, however, a victim of its own success, for it created the conditions for the existence of emperors who reigned but did not rule. Consequently, Basil II and Constantine VIII struggled in an unparalleled way to assert themselves fully as emperors, that is, to retake the power which by a century-old tradition belonged to them, as they believed.

It is possible that Basil II had seen in the arrangement described above something pernicious, something that must be destroyed in order to avoid the establishment of an imperial lineage that was merely ceremonial or religious, as it happened with the Abbasids. Thus, his voluntary celibacy, instead of being explained by monastic or homosexual orientations, would have been a policy to avoid this scenario, allowing the imperial office to be occupied by someone who was not simply the son of the former emperor, but also because this someone was

the best man, the *optimus*, which was probably how Basil II saw himself. Despite being Basil I's direct descendant and the *porphyrogennetos*, a title/epithet he never renounced[99], he fought like none of his ancestors for the emperorship, defeating the most important military leaders of his time on the battlefield, and spent his whole life on campaign. His burial place is symbolic of his view: the Church of Saint John, the Theologian, in Hebdomon. This district was the gathering point of troops when the emperor led them on campaign and where the soldiers acclaimed new emperors.[100] If his point was not clear enough, he ordered an inscription to be added in his tomb in which he highlighted the great efforts he made for the protection of his subjects and demanded acknowledgement from the visitor with prayers.[101]

His strategy may seem to us illogical and potentially harmful to the Empire, especially considering the civil wars that followed the end of the Macedonian Dynasty, which weakened the Byzantine state and enabled invasions.[102] Nonetheless, this is to see history in retrospect. Basil II could not have been aware of future historical developments. Moreover, the Empire was in its geopolitical apex and there was no external enemy presenting any existential danger to Byzantium. The succession within the family with Constantine VIII in 1025 could contradict the presented hypothesis, but it must be remembered that Constantine was also present with his brother during the struggle to retake imperial power, which means that if Basil II was indeed acting according to the logic described above, he would have probably believed that his brother deserved to rule as much as he did.

12. Conclusion

In his study on dynasties in different historical and geographical contexts, Jeroen Duindam exposes the clash between the unattainable and inconsistent standards that defined a "good rule" in monarchies and the realities in politics.[103] One possible solution that protected these elevated ideals of the monarchy and, consequently, the whole status quo that they legitimated was separating ruling from reigning, that is, removing the monarch from the daily routine of governing the state, which often did not correspond to the lofty ideals represented by him. The most famous example is Japan, where the monarchs left the task of ruling to shoguns (military hegemons) and assumed a religious-ceremonial role since

99 Stephenson (2003): 66-80.

100 Janin (1950): 408-411.

101 Lauxterman (2003): 236-237.

102 Michael Angold (1997): 24-34 blames Basil II for overexpanding the Empire and, consequently, weakening it.

103 Duindam, 2016: 53−57.

1185, except for the period between the Meiji restoration in 1868 and the end of the Second World War in 1945.[104] We saw developments in a similar direction taking place synchronically both in Byzantium and the Abbasid Caliphate. At the beginning of the 10th century there were young princes needing a regency in both places, so they fell into the hands of court factions or generals that wanted to control the state by controlling the dynastic successor. During the same century, they used their position as the guardians of the dynastic successors to legitimize their efforts to build parallel dynasties. In Byzantium this process happened earlier and less successfully. If we compare the situations in the Abbasid and Byzantine context, it is possible to understand the reasons why the political neutralization of the Macedonian emperors failed and that of the Abbasid caliphs was accomplished.

First, polygamy and the presence of concubines in the Abbasid court resulted in abundant caliphal male offspring, all of them apt to succeed to the office. Consequently, the powerholders in Baghdad had several Abbasid princes to set on the throne whenever the current caliph became a nuisance. Their counterparts in Constantinople did not have this option. Monogamy and the demand to produce (male) successors within a legitimate marriage – as demonstrated by Leo VI's efforts to seek ecclesiastical acknowledgement of his fourth marriage and legitimatize his son – reduced the available options for the wardens of the Empire. They were forced to work with the sole male representative of the Macedonian dynasty available.

Second, and perhaps partially due to the aspect just mentioned, the political situation in Baghdad was considerably more unstable than in Constantinople. In Baghdad and Samarra of the 10th century, caliphs, viziers, and emirs rose and fell in frenetic rhythm that is complicated to follow. At the same time, the massive empire ruled by the Abbasid caliphs, extending from Spain to the East of Iran, was fragmenting swiftly, as local focuses of power were rising. Some acknowledged the symbolic authority of the caliphs and others did not. Accordingly, the flow of resources that sustained Iraq, the centre of Abbasid power, diminished very quickly, thus deepening the political chaos. Byzantium, in turn, was facing the opposite situation: despite power struggles over the control of the dynastic emperor and some internal wars as consequence of this, Byzantium saw during that period solid leadership, which resulted in economic and territorial recovery (also at the cost of the Abbasid caliphate).

Yet the most important difference, which likely explains why the political neutralization of the Abbasid caliph worked and that of the emperors of the Macedonian dynasty did not, was the nature of both offices. The Abbasid caliph was not merely a head of state. As successor of the Prophet, he was the leader of the Islamic community, which, at least since the Abbasid revolution in 750, was not politically unified, turning into a commonwealth defined mainly by a shared

104 Op. cit., 55.

religion and cultural references (literature, language, law, etc.). Furthermore, the rise of the Abbasids, who came from the Khorasan, as did their followers, strengthened the Iranian influence in the heart of the Caliphate. The establishment of the capital in Baghdad, very near to the old Sassanian capital of Ctesiphon, is clear evidence of that. The adoption of Iranian kingship models distanced the caliph even further from the daily routines of government. These two developments explain the divorce between legitimacy and power in the Abbasid context. From the 10th century onward, the caliph was widely acknowledged as the leader of the Ummah, the Islamic community, now politically divided in different political entities, whose leaders sought in him legitimacy for the power they acquired mostly by force.[105]

Byzantium worked differently, for its emperorship was a political office. Naturally, the emperor also sought legitimacy in religious terms, seeing himself as the protector of the Church and of the Christian people. Hence, he constantly interfered with ecclesiastical issues and at times with debates regarding the orthodoxy of the faith. Nevertheless, the religious discourse that sacralised the imperial office, or even occasionally brought it to an almost priestly level, was subordinated to the role of the emperor as the leader of the Roman polity.[106] Despite the importance of orthodox Christianity in Byzantium, the Empire was primarily a political community, which could never be transformed into an Orthodox one, and the emperor into the leader of the orthodox Christians. There was already a wider sense of Christian ecumenism whose leaders were the patriarchs in Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria. Hence, it was unthinkable to do as the Buyids, their successors, or many local dynasties did, and acknowledge only his religious authority as the leader of the faithful.

In sum, the unexpected consequence of the Macedonian dynasty' success in enforcing a widely acknowledged right to succession, that is, the political neutralization of its members could not structurally alter the political practices in place for many centuries already. Yet, a special set of conditions allowed the dominant factions in Constantinople and the army in the 10th century to sentence the dynastic emperor to an extended minority, even after he was well into his adult age, including by promoting characterizations in which he was childish and, therefore, inept to rule. This arrangement was enabled by the self-replicating aspect

105 Marsham & Hanne & Steenbergen (2021): 342-343.

106 Dagron (2003): passim. Although I believe that Anthony Kaldellis (2015) goes too far when he states that the divinization of the imperial office was a mere self-defense strategy against the essential instability of the imperial system with little consequence in the concrete power struggles in Byzantium, I agree with him that the Republican conception of charismatic leadership and the "lay" assessment of the emperor's accomplishments were much more important for the political history of the Empire.

of the Byzantine imperial office.[107] Although there was a consensus in the period that there should always be a descendant of Basil I on the throne, other emperors not belonging to the dynasty could be appointed to assure good governance of the state and to defend the interest of the dynastic successor. However, this make-shift solution could only work as long as the emperor put in condition of eternal minority was amenable, which Constantine VII was for many years, and Romanos II was for his short reign, but Basil II was certainly not. Once he claimed his political emancipation, he could find support in a long tradition that clearly demonstrates that there should be only one adult emperor who should be the ruler. What his so-called protectors have done with his predecessors and were doing with him was a subversion of the nature of the imperial power. Despite the harsh resistance, he managed to put an end to this practice, and everything was again back to normal.

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107 It was the most important legacy of the tetrarchy created by Diocletian, see footnote 11.

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