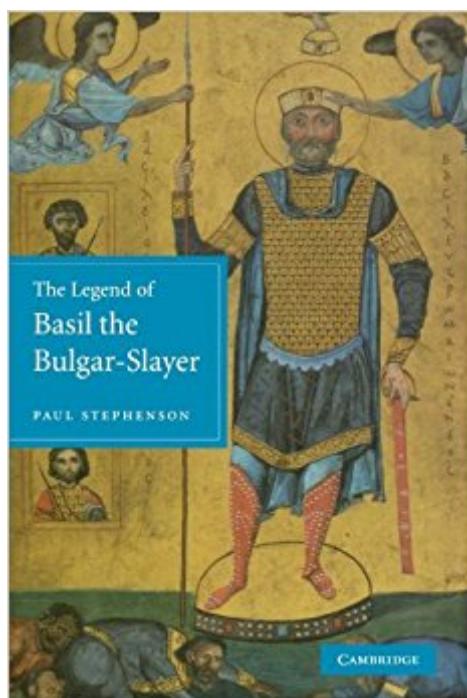


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The Legend Of Basil The Bulgar-Slayer



Synopsis

The long reign of the Byzantine emperor Basil II (976-1025) has been considered a "golden age", in which his greatest achievement was the annexation of Bulgaria after a long and bloody war. Paul Stephenson reveals that the legend of the "Bulgar-slayer" was actually created long after his death. His reputation was exploited by contemporary scholars and politicians to help galvanize support for the Greek wars against Bulgarians in Macedonia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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Customer Reviews

"The book serves as an excellent model of exploring one under-documented event and discarding the traditionally accepted decree that it is fiction; and instead explores how the decree became "given." "Comitatus" In bridging the divide between the popular and the historical, Paul Stephenson has furnished an excellent account of myth writing and how over the course of time a questionable historical event received added attention to satisfy the needs of the moment." - Walter K. Hanak, Shepherd University

The long reign of the Byzantine emperor Basil II (976 1025) has long been considered as a 'golden age', in which his greatest achievement was the annexation of Bulgaria after a long and bloody war. Paul Stephenson establishes that the legend of the 'Bulgar-slayer' was in fact created long after his death, and that his reputation was seized upon by scholars and politicians in the modern period, and used to help galvanize support for Greek wars against Bulgarians in Macedonia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

I bought this book thinking it might be a history of Basil II's reign. Well, it did provide some information about that period. However, its main purpose was to explain when and how Basil received the sobriquet of "Bulgar-Slayer", and how that legend about Basil has been used. Interesting as far as that goes, but it doesn't go all that far. For someone fairly knowledgeable about that period in Byzantine history, as I think I am, it was not too difficult to get through. For someone just beginning to learn about Basil II and Byzantine history, it would be impenetrable. There were a few things I noticed in the book that looked wrong. For example, the author stated once that Basil II was the great-great-grandson of Leo VI; he was the great-grandson of Leo. He also stated that Basil II was the great-great-great-grandson of Basil I, when he was the great-great-grandson. There was also at least one footnote that seemed to have no connection to the sentence being footnoted. I expect these were due to sloppy editing. Academic Byzantine historians have done a wonderful job of taking the remains of that civilization - whether old books, coins, lead seals, artwork, etc. - and writing about it. However, almost none of their writings is easily accessible by the general public. That is a terrible shame because the Byzantines had a remarkable run through world history and deserve better.

What a waste of time and money! I love to read but this fluff was such an obvious piece of propaganda that it will offend your intellect. Unlike this "author" (and I use the word in its most loosest form!) I won't waste your time with a lot of fluff about this "book" other than to say, as someone who's read actual experts on this subject, I'M GOING TO SAVE YOU MONEY and give you a list of ACTUAL experts on the subject based on actual academically researched accounts of the Byzantine era by actual historians, researchers and scholars. I recommend you start off with: Michael Psellus - Fourteen Byzantine Rulers, W. R. Lethaby Harold Swainson - The Church of Sancta Sophia, Constantinople, A.A. Vasiliev - History of the Byzantine Empire Vol 1 and 2, Anna Komnene -The Alexiad, Elizabeth M. Jeffreys - Byzantine Style, Religion and Civilization, Timothy E. Gregory - A History of Byzantium, and George Ostrogorsky - History of the Byzantine State. All of these books are really fun to read because you know they are based on fact. You will find any of the above authors books SO MUCH better than Mr. Stephenson fluff. The best remedy against books like this, which are filled with half-truths, opinions and very obvious Anti-Christian, Anti-Hellenic hate-filled contempt is to shed light on it and expose it for what it is...propaganda.

This is a relatively short (slightly less than 140 pages of text) but excellent book from Paul

Stephenson, written a couple of years after the publication of his rather superb PhD thesis on the Northern Balkans from 900 to 1204. The author focuses on the legend of Basil the Bulgar-Slayer, allegedly one of the "great Emperor soldiers" and the one who had the longest reign of all (effectively reigned from 976 to 1025). This excellent book has a dual purpose. One is to restore historical events, inasmuch as they can be reconstructed, present the wars of the Emperor against the Tsars of Bulgaria, and show how these culminated and ended in 1018 with the demise of the First Bulgarian Kingdom and its annexation to the Byzantine Empire. Another is to show how and why Basil II received the epithet of "Bulgar-Slayer" more than a century after his death. It is also to show how his legend was built over the centuries and evolved, with this Emperor's "revised" deeds becoming a key part of Komnenian propaganda in the 12th century and of Greek nationalism (and propaganda) in the 19th and 20th century. The first part of the book, roughly the first 50 pages or so, are about the historical figure of the Emperor, the context of his reign and his achievements. It shows to what extent the struggle against the First Bulgarian Kingdom might have been distorted, with the battle of Kleidion, in particular, being abusively portrayed as the climax that broke the back of the Bulgarian Kingdom and caused the Bulgarian Tsar to die of shock and grief. He exposes these interpretations as the fallacies they are. The Tsar died in fact some months after the battle had taken place and the war continued for another four years. In addition, the sheer numbers of prisoners that the Byzantine Basileus allegedly blinded (some 15000) are simply incredible, with such a number representing, at best, the maximum total forces that the Bulgarian warlords could have put in the field. A related, and very interesting, section is the author's analysis of the nature of the wars that the Empire fought against Samuel, his warlords and Bulgaria. Rather than set piece battles, which were anyhow rather the exceptions throughout the Middle Ages, including in the Byzantine Wars, this was more a war of attrition, of raids and counter-raids, and of sieges during which, little by little, the Bulgarian Tsar was pushed back and contained into the mountains. The suggestion that this is what Basil II's war objectives might have really been, rather than the outright conquest of all of Bulgaria and re-establishing the Danube frontier as it had been in the early 7th century, is a very plausible one. It is quite possible that, at least initially, the Emperor did not intend and so little value in conquering the whole of the Bulgarian Kingdom and would have settled for transforming it into a vassal state, such as had been done at the other end of the Empire with the Emirate of Aleppo or with the various Christian states in the Caucasus. This would fit perfectly well with what we know of Byzantium's strategy under his reign and it would also make perfect military and economic sense. There was little benefit and significant costs in waging a "total war" to conquer mountainous provinces as opposed to hemming in their lords and transforming them into vassals.

Based on this analysis, Stephenson even goes as far as to suggest that there might have been a period of (relative) peace between 1005 and 1014, rather than the continuous warfare that is traditionally assumed to have taken place since 986 up to 1018. It is, however, difficult to demonstrate through facts if only because the Emperor could never explicitly renounce to territory that had once belonged to the Empire, regardless of how long these territories had been lost for. The second part of the book includes two components. One is about the origins of the legend of the "Bulgar-Slayer". This legend started to be built at the end of the 11th and in the 12th century by the Komnenian Emperors, starting with Alexios I and John Scylitzes who wrote during his reign, and who were eager to compare Alexios' renewed control of the Balkans after having repulsed the Normans and the Cumans and largely destroyed the Petchenege invaders. It is interesting to note that the founder of the Komnenian revival and his successors chose to compare themselves with Basil II, because he was a legitimate Emperor born in the purple (while Alexios had seized power through a military coup) rather than with the two other military Emperors of the 10th century (Nicephoros II Phokas and John I Tzimiskes) although their military achievements may have been greater. This was simply because both these generals, unlike Basil II, had been usurpers just like the first of the Komnenes. The last part of the book deals with what the author has called "Basil II aprÃ"s Byzance", and how the image of the Emperor became the hostage of national aspirations and propaganda: a ferocious hero of Greek national identity for Greeks or a cruel butcher for Bulgarians. The historical character was neither, of course, and Greek national identity - a 19th century concept - simply did not exist in the Byzantine Empire. Although he certainly was an autocrat and a powerful and a resourceful Emperor, he was not all powerful and was even cautious and tried, not always successfully, to avoid from overstretching the Empire's limited resources. Neither was he a butcher that committed the atrocity of blinding 15000 Bulgarians at one time because this was simply impossible to achieve. He certainly did blind opponents; especially that seeking to dethrone and replace him as Emperor, but then this is what had been happening in Byzantium for centuries (and would happen for a few more centuries). It was deemed more "Christian" than to execute them and quite sufficient to bar them from any claim to the imperial throne. Unfortunately, echoes of these distorted images of Basil II, influenced by modern nationalisms in the Balkans, can still be found today, including in some reviews on , but this is NOT history, but propaganda, as the author shows so well...For those wanting to learn more about Basil II and his achievements in the Balkans, I can recommend two superb and relatively recent books (although there are also some other ones):- One is Paul Stephenson's excellent study on "Byzantium's Balkan Frontier - A Political Study of the Northern Balkans, 900-1204, and- Catherine

Holmes' book on "Basil II and the Governance of Empire (976-1025) which provides us, at last, with an excellent, historical and unbiased study of the long reign of this Emperor.

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