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*An Emperor's Journey with Trauma:
Basil II of Byzantium (b. 958, r. 976-1025)*

ABSTRACT: *This article evaluates the Byzantine emperor Basil II's (b. 958, r. 976-1025) experience following the Bulgarian ambush at Trajan's Gate in 986. On the basis of contemporary chronicles and manuals of strategy, as well as modern psychological research, the author draws parallels between eleventh-century evaluations of Basil's character and modern conceptions of psychological processes, evaluates the trauma Basil endured, and deciphers the potential long-term effects of that trauma. The apparent influence of trauma on Basil serves as an example of the positive effects of adversity on the overall functioning of an individual.*

KEYWORDS: *medieval history; tenth century; Byzantium; Basil II; Battle of Trajan's Gate (986); chronicles; military manuals; trauma; posttraumatic stress disorder; posttraumatic growth*

Introduction

The Byzantine emperor Basil II (b. 958, r. 976-1025) experienced a change of character during his late twenties.¹ This change is visible in the contrast between his early life and his actions later as an established emperor.² The eleventh-century chronicler Michael Psellus recognized this change of character, labeled it a "mind-change," and bolstered his claim by referring to Basil's contemporaries and their paralleling conclusions.³ Modern psychology offers explanations for similar processes of transformation, rooted in trauma's ability to both shatter and shape perspectives.⁴ When identifying Basil II's defeat at the Battle of Trajan's Gate (986) as traumatic—he was ambushed by Bulgarian forces under Samuel of the Cometopuli dynasty—the possibility arises that Basil experienced *posttraumatic growth*. This psychological phenomenon is characterized by the experience of trauma leading to the development of coping strategies that result in higher levels of functioning following the traumatic incident.⁵ By identifying

¹ On Basil II, see especially Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 519; Paul Magdalino, *Byzantium in the Year 1000, The Medieval Mediterranean 45* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 255-263; Catherine Holmes, *Basil II and the Governance of the Empire (976-1025)*, *Oxford Studies in Byzantium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3-31.

² This contrast is also visible in the public image he put forward in his Psalter, his 996 Novel, the various wartime atrocities he committed, and the actions he chose not to pursue (such as marriage and the propagation of his family line). Treadgold, *History*, 524-525; Magdalino, *Byzantium*, x-xi, 263; Holmes, *Basil II*, 5-22.

³ Michael Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers: The Chronographia of Michael Psellus*, trans. Edgar R. A. Sewter (London: Penguin Books, 1996; first published 1953, revised 1966), 29.

⁴ Stephen Joseph, *What Doesn't Kill Us: The New Psychology of Posttraumatic Growth* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 68.

⁵ As for Basil's experience with trauma, this article evaluates his ability to rule as an emperor, his effectiveness as a commander in the field, and his diplomatic maneuvers.

the mechanism of Basil's change, this article attempts to further illuminate the historical realities that shaped Basil II and his reign, granting a fuller picture of the emperor and his influence on the empire.

This study recognizes that a theoretical framework focusing on trauma gives little attention to other potential explanations of Basil's midlife transformation. Yet, while other psychological processes may have played a role in Basil's shift in character, this article rejects conventional explanations. First, the notion that Basil was simply growing into himself seems unlikely given his age of twenty-seven at the beginning of his proposed "mind-change." At twenty-seven, Basil would have been in or at least entering middle age (considering the life-expectancy of contemporary Byzantines). Secondly, suggesting that Michael Psellus's "mind-change" was exaggerated propaganda would fail to account for the stark contrast between the two lives Basil lived, namely a first one of courtly passivity and a second one that is a testament to will power. Finally, while other occurrences—both intrinsic and extrinsic—may have contributed to Basil's character shift, their potential existence does not detract from this article's central argument with regard to trauma's impact on the emperor. This is especially true when considering trauma's co-occurring nature; many who experience trauma also experience a multitude of interrelated and tangential symptoms. To the point, this article has two central topics: Basil and trauma. Given that Basil's reign is the longest in Byzantine history, the challenge of addressing every aspect of his life that potentially contributed to his "mind-change" belongs to a much longer biographical work. Despite the fact that this article does not explicitly address all facets of Basil's reign, the behaviors and actions discussed here are consistent and reflect larger modes of functioning throughout Basil's life.

Basil's fifty-year reign has received substantial scholarly attention, despite the limited historical record that addresses Basil's life. The works of just two medieval chroniclers, Michael Psellus and John Skylitzes, provide the bulk of the Greek evidence for Basil's reign.⁶ Neither chronicler was a true contemporary.⁷

Undeterred by such sparse evidence, historians from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century pieced together coherent narratives reconstructing Basil's reign and times. A common thread runs through these traditional narratives: the assessment of Basil's reign as the golden age, or apogee, of the Byzantine state.⁸ There is tangible evidence for such a conclusion: by the time

⁶ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter; John Skylitzes, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811-1057*, trans. John Wortley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁷ Michael Psellus was still a child when Basil died in December 1025, and John Skylitzes composed his chronicle nearly a century after Basil's reign. Paul Stephenson, *The Legend of Basil the Bulgar-Slayer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3; Holmes, *Basil II*, 29-35.

⁸ Gustave Schlumberger, *L'Épopée byzantine à la fin du dixième siècle, Seconde partie: Basile II le tueur de Bulgares* (Paris: Hachette & Compagnie, 1900), 603-636; George Ostrogorsky and Peter Charanis, *History of the Byzantine State*, trans. Joan Hussey (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1957-1958), 298-299, 315; Alexander Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire, 324-1453*,

Basil died, Byzantium's borders were more extensive than they had been in centuries, the state's gold reserves were immense, and the landed elite had been checked into submission.⁹ The lauding of Basil's rule in these traditional narratives is an echo of the primary sources from which their authors worked, which celebrate the centralization of authority that took place under Basil.¹⁰

Historians publishing in the mid-to-late twentieth century produced studies that were more critical of Basil's reign. Their works highlight the subjectivity of Byzantine success by arguing against an overemphasis on political and military history.¹¹ Scholars now claimed that Basil's military expansion left the empire overextended, and that his Novel of 996 crippled Byzantium's elite power base.¹² One historian even questioned Basil's lack of foresight regarding the succession of his family's dynasty.¹³ Although scholars of this era were more critical of Basil than their predecessors, their works were still largely shaped by the rhetoric of the original Greek chroniclers who had written about Basil.¹⁴

Byzantinists publishing on Basil during the last three decades have taken the critical view of his reign to new extents, deconstructing the primary sources that address his life in terms of context, bias, and chronological fallacies. This study pays close attention to modern works produced in this vein of analysis as they utilize the traditional narratives but view them through a new analytical lens and often introduce archaeological evidence into the discussion. Paul Stephenson's *The Legend of Basil the Bulgar-Slayer* (2003), Paul Magdalino's *Byzantium in the Year 1000* (2003), and Catherine Holmes's *Basil II and the Governance of the Empire (976-1025)* (2005) represent some of the key interpretations that deserve attention.¹⁵

Stephenson's study rejects the characterization of Basil as a conqueror by demonstrating that he spent less time campaigning in the Balkans than primary

Vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1952), 303-330; Steven Runciman, *Byzantine Civilization* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1956; first published 1933), 48-49.

⁹ John Skylitzes, trans. Wortley, 298. See Treadgold, *History*, 532.

¹⁰ Magdalino, *Byzantium*, x.

¹¹ Cyril Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), 256-260; Alexander Kazhdan, "Approaches to the History of Byzantine Civilization: From Krause to Beck and Mango," in *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* ed. Alexander Kazhdan and Simon Franklin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1-22, here 1; Warren Treadgold, *Why Write a New History of Byzantium?* (Toronto: Canadian Institute of Balkan Studies, 1997), 3-22.

¹² Jonathan Shepard, "Byzantium Expanding, 944-1025," in *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick and Timothy Reuter, Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 586-604; Michael Angold, *The Byzantine Empire, 1025-1204: A Political History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1997), 24-34.

¹³ Treadgold, *History*, 532-533.

¹⁴ Holmes, *Basil II*, 10-15.

¹⁵ Stephenson, *Legend*, xi-11; Magdalino, *Byzantium*, ix-xiv; Holmes, *Basil II*, v-14.

sources and past historians have suggested.¹⁶ Ultimately, Stephenson attempts to highlight Basil's glorification over time, culminating in his claim that Basil's epithet of "Bulgar-Slayer" came centuries after his death and largely reflects nineteenth-century Greek efforts toward nation building.¹⁷

Although Holmes's study agrees with Stephenson's on multiple levels—Basil's limited time in the Balkans and his glorification in past historiography—her work's main goal is to analyze the political, literary, and historical context that shaped the works of the medieval chroniclers who wrote about Basil.¹⁸ Holmes concludes that Basil's reign was not as harsh and repressive as once thought. This article's analysis of Basil's shifting character challenges Holmes's critical view of the "shifting sands of personality" and their role in history.¹⁹

Finally, Magdalino's work utilizes eschatology—a branch of theology that deals with the final events of mankind and the end of days—by examining apocalyptic trends in Byzantine literature and culture around the year 1000.²⁰ In his analysis, Magdalino speculates on the psychological state of Byzantine culture during the years of Basil's reign, suggesting that Basil's actions were influenced by his possible belief that the "End" was very near.²¹ While Magdalino's focus on eschatology differs from this article's emphasis on trauma, both studies agree on the importance of understanding the psychological state of historical subjects, especially when considering their motives.

By attempting to identify the mechanism and specific qualities of Basil's midlife transformation, this article is a continuation of the current historiographic pattern of primary-source deconstruction.²² It also attempts to fill a gap in the historiography by paying more attention to the Battle of Trajan's Gate (986) and its impact on Basil. At its core, this study aims to increase our understanding of Basil "the emperor" by producing a more accurate portrayal of Basil "the man" and the adversity that shaped him.

¹⁶ Paul Stephenson, "The Legend of Basil the Bulgar-Slayer," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 24, no. 1 (2000): 102-132, here 102-104; Stephenson, *Legend*, 22. Stephenson claims that a liminal peace between Basil and Samuel, not mentioned in the historical record, lasted from 1005 until 1014.

¹⁷ Stephenson, *Legend*, 9.

¹⁸ Holmes, *Basil II*, 4-30.

¹⁹ Holmes, *Basil II*, 31-32.

²⁰ Prior to applying eschatology to Byzantium during the first Christian millennium, Magdalino establishes a historiography of precedential eschatological studies: Magdalino, *Byzantium*, 234. See also Mango, *Byzantium*, 211-212; Richard Landes, "The Fear of an Apocalyptic Year 1000: Augustinian Historiography, Medieval and Modern," *Speculum* 75, no. 1 (2003): 97-145.

²¹ Magdalino, *Byzantium*, 263-265.

²² Anthony Kaldellis, *The Argument of Psellos' Chronographia*, *Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters* 68 (Leiden: Brill 1999), 22-24. Kaldellis's work is a comprehensive attempt to deconstruct *The Chronographia* and identify its philosophical merits.

In an effort to analyze Basil and his reign from a fresh perspective, this article adopts the methodological approach proposed by Donald Brown in his essay “Human Nature and History,” published in the journal *History and Theory* in 1999.²³ Brown addresses the crossroads between science and history, arguing for a symbiotic relationship between the two fields where their lines blur. Brown’s concept of “Human Nature” encompasses the complex theory of evolutionary psychology, which attempts to identify inherent motivators of human behavior that have shaped human existence. To Brown, attempting to evaluate the realities of history without taking into consideration the biological and psychological factors that explain their existence would be doing a disservice to the writing of an accurate history. Therefore, Brown’s theoretical perspective offers an additional lens that can be used to scrutinize the limited historical record of Basil’s reign, namely modern psychology.²⁴

In pursuit of this vein of historical investigation, this article employs a combination of diverse sources. The historical record for Basil’s life and reign has its basis in medieval Byzantine chronicles. The first of these is *The History of Leo the Deacon*, which offers contemporary insight into a specific aspect of Basil’s life, as Leo personally served Basil during the 986 campaign that saw the Battle of Trajan’s Gate.²⁵ Leo’s writing on Basil is, however, limited, as his history concludes soon after this eyewitness account. The second is Michael Psellus’s *Chronographia* which covers the reigns of fourteen Byzantine rulers from Basil II to Isaac I Comnenus (r. 1057-1059).²⁶ Although Michael Psellus’s life hardly overlapped with Basil’s—he lived from 1018 to 1096 and moved in Byzantium’s highest intellectual circles as a philosopher, historian, and, at one point, chief minister to the emperor—his use of earlier eyewitness testimonies bolsters the accuracy of his history.²⁷

The third chronicle utilized in this article is John Skylitzes’s *Synopsis of Byzantine History 811-1057*, composed during the reign of Emperor Alexius I Comnenus (r. 1081-1118).²⁸ Even though John Skylitzes created his *Synopsis* well after Basil’s life, his work synthesizes multiple histories, many of which are no longer available, which adds to its value as one of the few surviving accounts from the period. It should be noted that although these chronicles—especially the latter two—represent the most complete Greek historical record surviving today,

²³ Donald E. Brown, “Human Nature and History,” *History and Theory* 38, no. 4 (December 1999): 138-157.

²⁴ Brown, “Human Nature and History,” 153.

²⁵ Leo the Deacon, *The History of Leo the Deacon: Byzantine Military Expansion in the Tenth Century*, trans. Alice-Mary Talbot and Denis F. Sullivan (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 2005), 214-215.

²⁶ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter.

²⁷ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 15.

²⁸ John Skylitzes, trans. Wortley.

their chronologies consistently disagree with one another.²⁹ Beyond these chronological limitations, there is distinct personal bias in all three works. While Leo's writing is littered with astrological events that reveal his belief in the approach of the Apocalypse, Michael Psellus's and John Skylitzes's histories betray the courtly context in which they were composed.³⁰

In addition to these chronicles, an anonymously authored Byzantine manual of strategy – taking the form of military treatises dating to the tenth century – offers further insight.³¹ Specifically, “Skirmishing” translated by George T. Dennis, details skirmish style warfare techniques common in the tenth century.³² Its use aids in our understanding of the combat to which Basil was exposed.

The Byzantine Empire's internal state and external relations in the tenth and early eleventh century provide the temporal and political context for this study. Prior to Basil's rule, tenth-century Byzantium experienced considerable internal instability.³³ A brief overview detailing the dynastic equation leading to Basil's eventual position of power clarifies the political complexities of his early life.

Basil II was born in 958 to Emperor Romanus II and his wife Theophano. In 963, five years after Basil's birth, his father died of a mysterious illness.³⁴ That same year, the Byzantine general Nicephorus Phocas (r. 963-969) marched on Constantinople, took the throne, married Theophano, and ruled with Romanus II's sons (Basil II and Constantine VIII) as his co-emperors.³⁵ Six years later, in 969, an assassination squad led by the Byzantine general John Tzimiskes (r. 969-976) and harbored by Theophano slipped into the palace and murdered Nicephorus in his sleep.³⁶ In the aftermath of the assassination, Theophano was exiled and John Tzimiskes was proclaimed emperor, with Basil and Constantine as his co-emperors.³⁷ When John died of natural causes in 976, Basil and Constantine retained their status as co-emperors, now with their bastard eunuch great-uncle Basil Lecapenus³⁸ controlling the government through his position as chief minister.³⁹ In the same year of John Tzimiskes's death and Basil Lecapenus's rise to power – 976 – yet another Byzantine general, Bardas Sclerus,

²⁹ Holmes, *Basil II*, 7.

³⁰ Magdalino, *Byzantium*, x-xi.

³¹ George T. Dennis, trans., *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1985), 137.

³² Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, 140-141.

³³ Vasiliev, *History*, 300-351; Holmes, *Basil II*, 450.

³⁴ Treadgold, *History*, 498; Holmes, *Basil II*, 449-449.

³⁵ Treadgold, *History*, 499; Holmes, *Basil II*, 449.

³⁶ Treadgold, *History*, 505; Holmes, *Basil II*, 449.

³⁷ Treadgold, *History*, 506-507; Holmes, *Basil II*, 449.

³⁸ An illegitimate son of Romanus I Lecapenus (r. 920-944), castrated to subvert dynastic goals.

³⁹ Treadgold, *History*, 513; Holmes, *Basil II*, 450.

revolted with his sights set on the throne.⁴⁰ It took three years for Lecapenus to quell Sclerus's rebellion, which split the empire in half until 979.⁴¹ Lecapenus's hold over the Byzantine government lasted for seven more years after Sclerus's failed rebellion. Finally, in 986, at the age of twenty-seven, Basil II moved to consolidate his power through the removal of his uncle from office – eventually exiling him completely – and the launching of his first military campaign.⁴²

Rampant internal instability in the empire did not diminish the importance of foreign relations throughout this period. The sheer size of the empire, coupled with its central location in and around Asia Minor, impacted Byzantium's relationship with its neighbors. Two geographic and diplomatic neighbors deserve attention here. First, there is Bulgaria and its Balkan mountain range, where Basil was originally ambushed and would later spend the majority of his military campaigns.⁴³ Consequently, Bulgaria's ruler, Samuel of the Cometopuli dynasty, is of considerable relevance. Secondly, there is the Kievan Rus' and its ruler Vladimir. Through the strategic marriage of Basil's sister Anna Porphyrogenita to Vladimir in 988, Basil expanded his political and social support network after the 986 ambush at Trajan's Gate.⁴⁴ Due to internal conflict between Muslim rulers, Basil saw relatively little hostility from the East.⁴⁵ This lack of political and military pressure from the East influenced Basil to focus on other matters.⁴⁶

I. An Imperial "Mind-Change"

This study is not the first to examine Basil's midlife transformation.⁴⁷ The latter has been a topic of conversation among historians for a thousand years.⁴⁸ In his *Chronographia*, the eleventh-century chronicler Michael Psellus draws attention to this profound character shift early on in his discussion of Basil's reign:

[I]f I am to believe the historians of that period who wrote about him, he was not at all like that when his reign began. A change took place in his character after he acceded to the throne, and instead of leading his former dissolute, voluptuous sort of life, he became a man of great energy. The complete metamorphosis was brought about by the pressure of events.

⁴⁰ Treadgold, *History*, 514-515; Holmes, *Basil II*, 450.

⁴¹ Treadgold, *History*, 515; Holmes, *Basil II*, 450-451.

⁴² Treadgold, *History*, 517; Holmes, *Basil II*, 458.

⁴³ Paul Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier: A Political Study of the Northern Balkans, 900-1204* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003; first published 2000), 47-80.

⁴⁴ Magdalino, *Byzantium*, 3-12; Holmes, *Basil II*, 460; Stephenson, *Legend*, 33.

⁴⁵ Stephenson, *Legend*, 32.

⁴⁶ Stephenson, *Legend*, 33.

⁴⁷ Holmes, *Basil II*, 6-7.

⁴⁸ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 28-29.

His character stiffened, so to speak. Feebleness gave way to strength and the old slackness disappeared before a new fixity of purpose.⁴⁹

Although Psellus's evaluation of Basil's "metamorphosis" (the Greek original actually uses variants of the verb *μεταβάλλω*, i.e., "to change [one's mind]") is highly detailed, his explanation as to why the transformation occurred is not. Despite pointing to a culminating "pressure of events," Psellus fails to convey the specifics of the "pressure" and the "events" that led to it.⁵⁰ Although most Byzantine emperors experienced pressures related to ruling, few – if any – were granted historical assessments describing a complete transformation.⁵¹

So, what was Psellus attempting to describe? With the intent of answering this question, and in line with Brown's methodology, this investigation now turns to psychological research for clarification.

Clinical psychologist Stephen Joseph has focused much of his work on tracking the transformations individuals are capable of following adversity, and the pressures that accompany them.⁵² In *What Doesn't Kill Us: The New Psychology of Posttraumatic Growth* (2011), Joseph challenges contemporary expectations regarding trauma's debilitating potential. He argues that some individuals can eventually harness the change wrought by trauma's perspective-shattering effects.⁵³ A comparison of Joseph's description of this process of transformation with Psellus's proposed "mind-change" reveals strong parallels:

There is a group of people who [...] grow following adversity. They remain emotionally affected, but their sense of self, views on life, priorities, goals for the future, and their behaviors have been reconfigured in positive ways in light of the experience. It is to these changes that the term *posttraumatic growth* refers.⁵⁴

As Basil's "character stiffened," his sense of self reoriented. In deciding to leave his "former dissolute, voluptuous sort of life" behind, Basil's life views and priorities progressed. In discovering "a new fixity of purpose," Basil ultimately set new, long-term goals for the future which were more compatible with his new perspective on life. Psellus's and Joseph's works find agreement on the relationship between adversity and the potential for growth.

Before further discussing the potential psychological mechanism of Basil's transformation, the "mind-change" ascribed to him by Psellus deserves more

⁴⁹ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 29. For the Greek text, see *The History of Psellus*, ed. Constantine Sathas (London: Methuen & Co., 1899), 3 (book 1, chapter 4). In the New Testament (Acts 28:6), the form *μεταβαλόμενοι* is used in the sense of "having changed their minds." Michael Psellus would have been familiar with this reference and the term's Biblical usage.

⁵⁰ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 29.

⁵¹ Justinian I's experience during the Nika Revolt (532) and its immediate aftermath deserves its own investigation into potential trauma. See Treadgold, *History*, 181-182.

⁵² Joseph, *What Doesn't Kill Us*, xi.

⁵³ Joseph, *What Doesn't Kill Us*, 99.

⁵⁴ Joseph, *What Doesn't Kill Us*, 68. Italics added.

attention.⁵⁵ Juxtaposing some of the ultimate successes tied to Basil's reign – seen in the discussion of his historiography – against an examination of his early life grants a fuller picture of his transformation.

II. Basil's Changes

From the age of five to the age of eighteen, Basil existed as a mere symbol of dynastic continuity, serving as co-emperor to two usurping Byzantine generals.⁵⁶ For nearly a decade and a half, neither usurper saw the need to remove young Basil from the dynastic equation, which casts doubt on Basil exhibiting any strong aspirations toward rule during this time.⁵⁷ In 976, the second usurping general died, leaving the title of emperor to Basil and his younger brother Constantine.⁵⁸ Despite being at an age at which several previous emperors had taken the reins of rule – namely eighteen – Basil continued to exhibit a lack of ambition.⁵⁹ Rather than seizing the opportunity to rule unimpeded, Basil allowed the government to be controlled by the grand chamberlain Basil Lecapenus.⁶⁰

The medieval chronicler John Skylitzes offers a commentary on the beginning of Basil's rule in his *Synopsis of Byzantine History*. Skylitzes paints a harsh picture:

But they [Basil and Constantine] only became emperors in appearance and name, for the administration of the affairs of the state was undertaken by Basil [Lecapenus] the president on account of the youth of the emperors, their immaturity and their as yet developed aptitude. As soon as the right to rule had passed to the sons of Romanus [II], [the president] sent messengers speeding to bring their mother back from exile and into the palace.⁶¹

Skylitzes reveals that, beyond immaturity and the absence of aptitude, Basil had failed to save his mother from the fate of exile, despite his title of emperor. Instead, Theophano's return to Constantinople had been motivated by the grand chamberlain's strategy of projecting dynastic continuity. Basil Lecapenus had dominated Byzantine government for a decade following his rise to the position of chief minister in 976.⁶² Ten years later, in 986, at the age of twenty-seven, Basil removed his great-uncle Basil Lecapenus from office, took control of the government, and launched his first military campaign.⁶³

⁵⁵ While Michael Psellus addresses other instances of character change in his work, he does not equate them to transformations. Kaldellis, *Argument of Psellos' Chronographia*, 23-24.

⁵⁶ Holmes, *Basil II*, 3.

⁵⁷ There is evidence of Basil at least observing the mechanisms of government during his stint as co-emperor to Nicephorus II Phocas. Henry Mayr-Harting, "Liutprand of Cremona's Account of his Legation to Constantinople (968) and Ottonian Imperial Strategy," *The English Historical Review* 116, no. 467 (2001): 539-556, here 539-540.

⁵⁸ Treadgold, *History*, 513; Holmes, *Basil II*, 450.

⁵⁹ Treadgold, *History*, 513-514.

⁶⁰ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 27-28. See Holmes, *Basil II*, 469.

⁶¹ John Skylitzes, trans. Wortley, 298.

⁶² Treadgold, *History*, 513-514; Holmes, *Basil II*, 457.

⁶³ Treadgold, *History*, 517; Holmes, *Basil II*, 458.

This break in courtly passivity pre-dating Basil's traumatic ambush could potentially be confused as the beginning of his "mind-change." Here it is key to acknowledge that the sudden performance of a few new actions is not synonymous with a complete shift in character. This is especially true in the case of Basil's first attempts at power consolidation, which were encouraged by rumors of a palace coup orchestrated by Basil Lecapenus.⁶⁴ The manner in which Basil pursued this new course of action is hardly representative of his later modes of functioning as an established emperor. A primary example of this is that Basil Lecapenus's removal from power did not include the violent reprisal Basil consistently turned to later in life in the face of perceived betrayal.

Discussion of Basil's existence as a passive background figure after his father's death focuses more on what Basil *was not* than what he *was*. Predicting that his immaturity and underdeveloped aptitude would eventually give way to a reign unparalleled by any previous Byzantine ruler in terms of longevity, territorial consolidation, wealth accumulation, and centralization of authority would have been nearly impossible.⁶⁵ Basil's hollow title and façade status early in life raises the question: How did he spend his time between the ages of five and twenty-seven? A return to Psellus's character commentary illuminates Basil's early lifestyle. The *Chronographia* reports:

In his early days he used to feast quite openly and frequently indulged in the pleasures of love; his main concern was with his banqueting and a life spent in the gay, indolent atmosphere of the court. The combination of youth and unlimited power gave him opportunities for self-indulgence, and he enjoyed them to the full.⁶⁶

The Basil whom Psellus goes on to characterize in his later years is almost unrecognizable from this pleasure-loving, free-spirited, court-residing youth.⁶⁷

Basil replaced his fondness for courtly life with a soldier's life, as he lived amongst his troops during the many military campaigns he waged.⁶⁸ The bachelor side of Basil, who had once been involved in multiple love affairs, also vanished. He never took a wife or produced an heir, despite social and cultural pressures to do so.⁶⁹ According to Psellus, Basil's personality was eventually stripped of all "self-indulgence," to the extent that Basil not only disdained ornamental jewelry but even refused to shroud himself in imperial purple cloaks, choosing instead to wear drab clothing.⁷⁰ While the full spectrum of Basil's transformation may be lost to history, the contrast between his two lifestyles demonstrates the extent of his "mind-change."

⁶⁴ Holmes, *Basil II*, 457.

⁶⁵ John Skylitzes, trans. Wortley, 298. See Treadgold, *History*, 532.

⁶⁶ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 29.

⁶⁷ Treadgold, *History*, 513.

⁶⁸ Stephenson, *Legend*, 15-20; Treadgold, *History*, 515-520.

⁶⁹ Treadgold, *History*, 532-533; Magdalino, *Byzantium*, 263.

⁷⁰ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 39.

III. Basil's Ambush: Confronting Mortality

In 986, at the age of twenty-seven, Basil was not yet the cautious conqueror he would eventually become.⁷¹ If trauma is indeed the catalyst for his eventual shift in character, the question must be addressed: What happened to Basil? A return to the historical record unearths an isolated traumatic incident. On the homeward march from his first campaign, Basil suffered the first, last, and only ambush of his long reign at the 986 Battle of Trajan's Gate (in Bulgaria).⁷²

This ambush took place just months after Basil had exiled Lecapenus. With Lecapenus gone, Basil sought to validate his position of authority through control of the military.⁷³ He set his sights on the rebellious and recently expanding Bulgarians, led by Samuel of the Cometopuli dynasty. This campaign ended in tragic failure due to Basil's secretive planning that excluded his most effective military commanders, his use of inexperienced Western regiments when battle-tested Eastern troops were available, and his mismanagement of supplies during the campaign.⁷⁴ These factors provide further support for the argument that his sudden attempt at power consolidation was not his eventual dramatic shift in character, as he bypassed multiple campaign behaviors and habits that would later define both him and his successes.

When returning to Byzantium following this poorly managed expedition, Samuel and his Bulgarian forces caught up with Basil and his army in the Balkan mountain pass of Trajan's Gate. *The History of Leo the Deacon* includes an valuable eyewitness account of the event. Further bolstering the potency of Leo's testimony is his status as Basil's attendant:⁷⁵

Here the Mysians⁷⁶ attacked the Romans, killing huge numbers of the men and seizing the imperial headquarters and riches, and plundering all the army's baggage. I myself, who tell this sad tale, was present at that time, to my misfortune, attending the emperor and performing the service of deacon. And my steps had well-nigh slipped and I would have fallen victim to a Scythian sword [...]. The remains of the army, going through [nearly] impassable mountains, barely escaped the Mysian attack, losing almost all their horses and the baggage.⁷⁷

Not only does Leo describe a devastating defeat—characterized by the slaughter of “huge numbers” of soldiers and a humiliating loss of imperial regalia—he also reveals that he almost fell victim to the ambush himself while attending Basil.⁷⁸

⁷¹ Treadgold, *History*, 532.

⁷² Treadgold, *History*, 517; Holmes, *Basil II*, 492.

⁷³ Stephenson, *Legend*, 14-15.

⁷⁴ Treadgold, *History*, 517; Holmes, *Basil II*, 424-427.

⁷⁵ Leo the Deacon, trans. Talbot and Sullivan, 214.

⁷⁶ “Mysians” refers to Bulgarians and the space they occupied at the time of Leo's writing.

⁷⁷ Leo the Deacon, trans. Talbot and Sullivan, 214-215.

⁷⁸ There is a potential relationship between Basil's loss of imperial status symbols and his eventual rejection of imperial regalia.

In combination, Leo's claims of attending the emperor and being only a few steps away from death reveal, to an extent, Basil's own proximity to the ambush. Basil's exposure to the ambush is further corroborated by Leo's assertion that Basil's headquarters, which often served as living quarters during campaigns, also fell victim to the Bulgarian ambush.⁷⁹

Primary-source evidence addressing the ambush at Trajan's Gate is sparse. John Skylitzes's *Synopsis* offers further detail. While Leo's work attributes Basil's retreat to the complete mismanagement of the campaign and to a general sense of strategic inexperience, Skylitzes suggests that rumors of betrayal spurred the withdrawal.⁸⁰ After detailing the night-shrouded encounter where Basil was told of possible intrigue, Skylitzes discusses the ambush:

The emperor was frightened [...] and signaled immediately for camp to be struck. Now Samuel suspected that their disorderly withdrawal was a retreat (as well he might), so he attacked in full force with yelling and shouting, thoroughly scared the Romans and forced them to run for their lives. He captured the camp and took possession of all their baggage, even the emperor's tent and the imperial insignia. The emperor was just only able to get through the passes and find safety in Philippoupolis.⁸¹

Whereas Leo took center stage in his own account, Skylitzes's assessment grants more insight into Basil's reality during the ambush. Not only does Skylitzes reference the emperor's mental state, he also confirms what could only be inferred from Leo's testimony: Basil was both present during the attack and nearly became one of its casualties. The historical record is consistent on three counts: the ambush resulted in heavy Byzantine casualties, there were material losses, yet Basil escaped physical harm. However, not all wounds are physical.

Today, military researchers utilize animal models that attempt to isolate and identify variables of trauma related to combat exposure in a lab setting.⁸² By analyzing the Battle of Trajan's Gate in accordance with the conclusions drawn from animal models, the trauma Basil experienced can be better understood. The use of these models is justified beyond the reasoning that military historians can and should use the same studies the actual military employs. Coalescing animal

⁷⁹ Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, 259-263. See Michael J. Decker, *The Byzantine Art of War* (Yardley: Westholme Publishing, 2013), 48.

⁸⁰ John Skylitzes, trans. Wortley, 313. See Holmes, *Basil II*, 224-227.

⁸¹ John Skylitzes, trans. Wortley, 314.

⁸² Rianne Stam, "PTSD and Stress Sensitisation: A Tale of Brain and Body Part 2: Animal Models," *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* 31, no. 4 (2008): 558-584, here 561; Hagit Cohen, Nitsan Kozlovsky, Cramer Alona, Michael A. Matar, and Zohar Joseph, "Animal Model for PTSD: From Clinical Concept to Translational Research," *Neuropharmacology* 62, no. 2 (2012): 715-724, here 715-716; Nikolas Daskalakis and Rachel Yehuda, "Principles for Developing Animal Models of Military PTSD," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 5, no. 23825 (August 2014): 1-8, here 2; Phillip R. Zoladz, Colin R. Park, Monika Fleshner, and David M. Diamond, "Psychosocial Predator-Based Animal Model of PTSD Produces Physiological and Behavioral Sequelae and a Traumatic Memory Four Months Following Stress Onset," *Physiology and Behavior* 147 (2015): 183-192, here 184.

models and a deconstructive approach to primary sources is congruent with this article's theoretical anchor of evolutionary psychology, where human development is echoed in other species. Furthermore, the limitations of animal models relating to trauma parallel the limitations of historical case studies of trauma: direct insight into the subjects' mental processing and dreams are unobtainable. Just as researchers using animal models look to patterns of behavior in their subjects, so too do historians dealing with trauma.

The application of these animal models reveals that Basil was exposed to at least three types of traumatic stimuli during the ambush: *predator stress*—which relates to a hostile entity threatening one's life, *social defeat stress*—where the psychological impacts of defeat are compounded by the negative social ramifications that follow it, and *witnessed social defeat stress*—which refers to the vicarious psychological impacts of watching a friend or ally endure trauma.⁸³

Basil's presence at the ambush—witnessing the massacre of his soldiers—may have been just as psychologically influential as the experience of physically fighting during the ambush.⁸⁴ Although neither medieval chronicler cited previously commented on Basil's role during the battle, his presence alone dictates his exposure to traumatic stimuli. Moreover, while Basil witnessed physical defeat, his defeat, too, was witnessed. Instead of his first campaign serving as the desired status-solidifying endeavor, it resulted in failure witnessed by his contemporaries (namely both the Byzantines and their enemies).⁸⁵

Beyond animal models, a more comprehensive understanding of the experience of the Battle of Trajan's Gate is gained through an examination of Byzantine military manuals. Specifically, the text on "Skirmishing," produced by a high-ranking military commander who attributes his military education to Bardas Phocas, proves useful in further understanding tenth-century mountain pass ambushes.⁸⁶ Although its author references the struggle between Byzantium and its Eastern Muslim neighbors, he insists that his work is applicable in both the East and the West, qualifying this assertion with personal experience in both

⁸³ Stam, "PTSD and Stress Sensitisation," 561-562; Daskalakis and Yehuda, "Principles for Developing Animal Models of Military PTSD," 5-6; Zoladz (et al.), "Psychosocial Predator-based Animal Model," 184.

⁸⁴ Leo the Deacon, trans. Talbot and Sullivan, 214-215. See Albert Bandura, Dorothea Ross, and Sheila Ross, "Vicarious Reinforcement and Imitative Learning," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 67, no. 6 (1963): 601-607; Michael Christopher, "A Broader View of Trauma: A Biopsychosocial Evolutionary View of the Role of the Traumatic Stress Response in the Emergence of Pathology and/or Growth," *Clinical Psychology Review* 24, no.1 (December 2003): 75-98, here 75-76.

⁸⁵ Holmes, *Basil II*, 458; Stephenson, *Legend*, 15-16; Nicholas A. Troop, and Syd Hiskey, "Social Defeat and PTSD Symptoms Following Trauma," *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* 52, no. 4 (2013): 365-379, here 65-368.

⁸⁶ Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, 139, 147.

theaters.⁸⁷ The geography agrees.⁸⁸ In detailing the intricacies of mountain pass ambushes, the manual's author asserts that, when properly conducted, ambushes are intended to be traumatizing: they aim to instill a lasting state of fear and terror in the survivors, with the intent of deterring future incursions.⁸⁹

In sum, Basil's first campaign ended in failure. His first homebound march ended in ambush. He personally witnessed the slaughter of many of his troops, along with the theft of his army's baggage, his headquarters, and his imperial insignia. He narrowly escaped, but it is doubtful he would forget these events.

IV. What Is a "Mind-Change?" Understanding Trauma

The psychological impacts of war on combatants have been documented for centuries.⁹⁰ The social recognition of combat trauma follows an ominous pattern: after major military conflicts, societies often introduce differing contemporary diagnoses for the many veterans who suffer from non-physical wounds.⁹¹ In deciphering this trend, "military history suggests that these disorders, which coexist in the civilian population, reflect popular health fears and emerged in gaps left by the advance of medicine."⁹² Each society that has conceptually confronted trauma has done so through its own lens and with its own medical language. Today's cultural recognition of trauma is known as *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*.⁹³ PTSD was introduced into the American Psychiatric Association's third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)* in 1980 following the United States' withdrawal from a bloody conflict in Vietnam.⁹⁴ The DSM's most recent edition defines PTSD's symptoms as re-experiencing phenomena, avoidance behaviors, and over-arousal symptoms, all of which are experienced to an extreme.⁹⁵

While these diagnostic criteria prove useful in identifying some of the debilitating effects of trauma, they are not without flaws. Despite being

⁸⁷ Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, 140, 149.

⁸⁸ Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, 138. The Taurus mountain range that separated Byzantium from its eastern and southern neighbors was the equivalent of the rugged Balkan mountain range that separated Byzantium from western neighbors like Bulgaria.

⁸⁹ Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, 209-211.

⁹⁰ Edgar Jones, "Historical Approaches to Post-combat Disorders," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 361, no. 1468 (2006): 533-542, here 533.

⁹¹ Joseph, *What Doesn't Kill Us*, 28-31.

⁹² Edgar Jones and Wessely Simon, *Shell Shock to PTSD: Military Psychiatry from 1900 to the Gulf War* (Hove, East Sussex, and New York: Psychology Press/Taylor and Francis, 2005), 113-114; Jones, "Historical Approaches," 533.

⁹³ Joseph, *What Doesn't Kill Us*, 23, 32; *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Pub., 2013), 271.

⁹⁴ Ronald J. Glasser, *Broken Bodies, Shattered Minds: A Medical Odyssey from Vietnam to Afghanistan* (Palisades: History Publishing Company, 2011), 110.

⁹⁵ *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, 271.

contemporary Western culture's standard for psychological health practices, the DSM's cultural limitations have been thoroughly scrutinized.⁹⁶ Diagnoses do not escape the bias of the cultures that produce them.

Historians identifying past conceptions of trauma make room for cultural variability in their interpretations of symptoms. Scholars working with Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets, dating back to 3200 BCE, conceptually link the haunting actions of "roaming ghosts" to the flashbacks and psychosomatic qualities of PTSD recognized today.⁹⁷ Combat trauma's existence is also visible in the Greek historian Herodotus's description of the Athenian soldier Epizelus and his sudden blindness after witnessing a "phantom" at the battle of Marathon in 490 BCE.⁹⁸ Past conceptions of trauma are imbedded in literary works, too.⁹⁹ Historian Jonathan Shay's work parallel the soldiers in Homer's *Iliad* with Vietnam War veterans suffering from PTSD.¹⁰⁰ Scholars studying the Hebrew Bible and early Christianity point to traumatic incidents that served to unite and galvanize people groups and their belief systems.¹⁰¹ Just one century ago, during WWI, combat's psychological impacts were linked to exploding artillery shells—"shell shock."¹⁰² While humanity's understanding of trauma continues to morph and evolve, its historical existence is consistent.¹⁰³

Today, culture continues to change how trauma is interpreted.¹⁰⁴ New developments in the sub-field of positive psychology have resulted in conclusions that challenge the notion of trauma as an entirely adverse

⁹⁶ Gary Greenberg, "The Trouble with the DSM," *Popular Science*, May 7, 2013, accessed May 14, 2019.

⁹⁷ Walid Khalid Abdul-Hanid and Jamie Hacker Hughes, "Nothing New under the Sun: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the Ancient World," *Early Science and Medicine* 19 (2014): 549-557, here 550-551.

⁹⁸ Yulia Ustinova and Etzel Cardena, "Combat Stress Disorders and Their Treatment in Ancient Greece," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy* 6, no. 6 (2014): 739-748, here 746.

⁹⁹ Richard Warshak, "Batman's Traumatic Origins," *The Atlantic*, May 6, 2014, accessed May 14, 2019.

¹⁰⁰ Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 5-10.

¹⁰¹ Aiton Birnbaum, "Collective Trauma and Post-traumatic Symptoms in the Biblical Narrative of Ancient Israel," *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* 11, no. 5 (May 2008): 533-546; David Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette, eds., *Bible through the Lens of Trauma* (Williston, VT: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2016).

¹⁰² Glasser, *Broken Bodies, Shattered Minds*, 110-112.

¹⁰³ Chris Cantor, *Evolution and Posttraumatic Stress: Disorders of Vigilance and Defense* (Hove, East Sussex: Brunner-Routledge, 2005), 2-5.

¹⁰⁴ Carolyn Smith-Morris, "The Cultural Context of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," *Philosophy, Psychiatry and Psychology* 16, no. 3 (2009): 235-236, here 235.

phenomenon.¹⁰⁵ Clinical research produced in this vein argues that trauma can actually result in higher levels of overall psychological well-being.¹⁰⁶ The relationship between trauma and personal development is so intertwined that psychologists conclude that levels of increased functioning correlate directly to the degree of trauma to which an individual is exposed.¹⁰⁷ Research argues that symptoms of *PTSD*—such as intrusive re-experiencing phenomena and avoidance behavior—reflect the psychological process of “working through” an adverse event, and can eventually result in a healthier understanding of the event and how that event affects one’s perception of the world.¹⁰⁸ Thus *PTSD* is now argued to be a potential engine of *posttraumatic growth*.¹⁰⁹

Culture’s role goes beyond its shaping of trauma diagnoses. It also greatly affects each individual’s experience and perception of trauma.¹¹⁰ Military historians have substantiated the variability of cultural views regarding violence, courage, and warfare.¹¹¹ Thus, Basil’s experience of trauma cannot be fully understood without accounting for his culture. In attempting to do so, this study focuses on Basil’s social status as emperor, which was inherently attached to his relationship with religion, and personally tied to beliefs of authority derived from military success.¹¹²

The context of Basil’s ambush illuminates the influence of his cultural status as emperor on his experience of trauma. The Battle of Trajan’s Gate punctuated Basil’s first attempt to cement his status. While military might was an avenue to authority, military defeat could be damning. Contemporary poetry reveals cultural concern regarding Basil’s reign at this time.¹¹³ Basil’s defeat at Trajan’s

¹⁰⁵ Joseph, *What Doesn’t Kill Us*, 73; Christopher, “Broader View of Trauma,” 76.

¹⁰⁶ Stephen Joseph, David Murphy, and Stephen Regel, “An Affective-Cognitive Processing Model of Post-Traumatic Growth,” *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy* 19, no. 4 (2012): 316-325, here 316-317.

¹⁰⁷ Joseph, *What Doesn’t Kill Us*, 69; Joseph, Murphy, and Regel, “Affective-Cognitive Processing Model,” 316.

¹⁰⁸ Joseph, Murphy, and Regel, “Affective-Cognitive Processing Model,” 318-319.

¹⁰⁹ Joseph, *What Doesn’t Kill Us*, 85; Joseph, Murphy, and Regel, “Affective-Cognitive Processing Model,” 315, 319.

¹¹⁰ Smith-Morris, “Cultural Context of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” 230.

¹¹¹ Inga Clendinnen, “The Cost of Courage in Aztec Society,” *Past & Present* 107, no. 1 (May 1985): 44-89; John Keegan and Richard Holmes, *Soldiers: A History of Men in Battle* (New York: Elisabeth Sifton Books, 1986); Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, 3rd ed. (New York: Little, Brown, & Co., 2009), 5.

¹¹² See Basil’s epitaph for the clearest evidence of this three-part relationship. Stephenson, *Legend*, 49.

¹¹³ Marc Lauxtermann, “John Geonetes: Poet and Soldier,” *Byzantion* 68, no. 2 (1998): 356-380; Magdalino, *Byzantium*, 234-235; Holmes, *Basil II*, 60-61.

Gate—complete with the loss of his imperial insignia—threatened more than his life: it jeopardized his very dynastic purpose.¹¹⁴

V. Avoidance Behavior and Over-Arousal

The psychological impact of Basil's experience at the Battle of Trajan's gate cannot be assessed with absolute certainty. However, some of his actions and tendencies later in life echo today's criteria for *PTSD*.¹¹⁵ In terms of limitations, self-reported aspects of combat trauma, such as night terrors or vivid flashbacks, elude us here.¹¹⁶ In an effort to promote accuracy, this study focuses on broader aspects of Basil's behavior that he likely presented on more than one occasion.

The caution with which Basil approached his military endeavors is revealing. No sweeping victories or brilliant tactics are attached to his military credentials.¹¹⁷ Instead, his campaign style was characterized by a patient cautiousness, manifesting itself in slow and steady military movements that disregarded traditional temporal constraints.¹¹⁸ Basil's caution also extended to his military commanders whom he kept on short leashes.¹¹⁹ Even though Basil lived amongst his men during arduous forays into hostile territory, he preferred to keep his distance once combat actually ensued, dictating troop movements from afar.¹²⁰ While Basil did not explicitly avoid activities related to his original ambush, the hypervigilance he practiced did spare him from any other ambush—despite campaigning for years in unfamiliar mountain territory.

Further insight into Basil's avoidance behavior—taking the form of hypervigilance—is found in Michael Psellus's *Chronographia*.¹²¹ Psellus articulates that Basil's symptoms played a role in his interaction with others:

The careful inspections he made before battle used to aggravate the soldiers and they abused him openly, but the emperor met their scorn with common sense. He would listen quietly, and then with a gay smile point out that if he neglected these precautions, their battles would go on forever.¹²²

Psellus reveals the monotony produced by Basil's meticulous inspections which were so drawn out that they aggravated soldiers to the point of verbally abusing their commander. The scrupulous nature of these inspections demonstrates the extent of Basil's hypervigilance. The fact that Basil performed these inspections

¹¹⁴ Holmes, *Basil II*, 287.

¹¹⁵ Stephen Regel and Stephen Joseph, *Post-Traumatic Stress* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

¹¹⁶ Regel and Joseph, *Post-Traumatic Stress*, 5-7.

¹¹⁷ Treadgold, *History*, 532.

¹¹⁸ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 45-46.

¹¹⁹ Treadgold, *History*, 532-533.

¹²⁰ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 46.

¹²¹ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 11, 30, 37.

¹²² Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 47.

himself, as well as his prediction of perpetual war should he fail to do so, is of dual importance. He seemingly believed that victory was dependent on *his* scrutiny; at the same time, he hoped to avoid future battles through this very same scrutiny.

Even more visible in the historical record than Basil's avoidance and hypervigilance is his tendency toward over-arousal. In the face of betrayal, Basil consistently responded with calculated viciousness and public displays of brutality.¹²³ The various impalings, crucifixions, beheadings, and blindings he performed served as a type of propaganda, promoting his authority through the rhetoric of fear.¹²⁴ While brutality was not Basil's preferred means of foreign policy, such acts occurred with enough regularity for John Skylitzes to structure his history around the theme of Basil's retribution,¹²⁵ and Michael Psellus's character commentaries further illuminate this side of Basil:

Outburst of wrath he controlled, and like the proverbial 'fire under the ashes' kept anger hidden in his heart, but, if his orders were disobeyed in war [...] [t]errible then was the vengeance he took on the miscreant.¹²⁶

While Basil was, in large part, in control of his emotions, instances of military vulnerability resulted in outpourings of rage. Basil was seen in his most aroused state when his authority, either through disobedience or perceived betrayal, was challenged. These instances of vulnerability parallel the jeopardy Basil's reign experienced following his ambush at Trajan's Gate.¹²⁷

A defining example of Basil's hyperarousal—taking the form of brutal retribution—took place later in his life, near the age of fifty-six. Following years of bitter campaigning in Bulgaria, Basil and his forces engaged Samuel and his barricaded army at the Balkan mountain pass of Clidium in the summer of 1014.¹²⁸ While Basil attacked Samuel's fortified position, a Byzantine commander under him performed a flanking maneuver that resulted in a Bulgarian defeat complete with fifteen thousand prisoners and a slew of casualties.¹²⁹ Following this victory, Basil sent the duke of Thessalonica, Theophylact Botaneiates, to disrupt and burn the fortifications left behind by the Bulgarian rout, as Basil's campaign moved forward.¹³⁰

While performing their duties, Botaneiates and his forces were ambushed and slaughtered by a Bulgarian army.¹³¹ Enraged by the news and intent on revenge,

¹²³ Stephenson, *Legend*, 33; Holmes, *Basil II*, 5.

¹²⁴ Holmes, *Basil II*, 5.

¹²⁵ Holmes, *Basil II*, 106-107.

¹²⁶ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 47.

¹²⁷ Holmes, *Basil II*, 287.

¹²⁸ Treadgold, *History*, 520-526.

¹²⁹ John Skylitzes, trans. Wortley, 331. See Treadgold, *History*, 526.

¹³⁰ Treadgold, *History*, 526.

¹³¹ Treadgold, *History*, 526.

Basil had nearly all of his fifteen thousand Bulgarian prisoners blinded, leaving one in every hundred with sight in one eye to serve as a guide to lead his maimed comrades back to Samuel.¹³² Here, Basil's over-arousal, triggered by yet another Bulgarian mountain pass ambush, contributed to an act of calculated and extreme brutality, leading to his eventual epithet, "the Bulgar Slayer."¹³³ Although some of Basil's behavioral tendencies show trauma-related cues, the successes attached to his reign indicate his ability to function effectively as an emperor.

VI. Basil's Growth

"What does not kill me makes me stronger."¹³⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche's dictum resonates with the psychological concept of *posttraumatic growth*. Adversity can lead to learning. Humanity often finds meaning in tribulation. The experience of trauma can be devastating. Working to understand that trauma and its impacts can lead to new insight and ways of functioning. This is *posttraumatic growth* in its rawest conceptual form.

Posttraumatic growth is a broad psychological construct, and the understanding of its intricacies remains a developing field. Its literature thus far focuses on three main aspects of development: changes in perception of self; changes in relationships with others; and changes in philosophy of life.¹³⁵ Personal development is associated with both positive features – such as a sense of increased self-worth and strength – as well as a recognition of one's own limitations.¹³⁶ Relationship growth is characterized by an intensified valuing of friends and family, as well as an increased reliance on support networks.¹³⁷ Finally, changes in philosophy of life can effectively be summarized as a "re-evaluating of understanding what really matters in life."¹³⁸

Emblematic of the concept of *posttraumatic growth*, Basil's confrontation with mortality at Trajan's Gate forced him to reassess his world and ultimately changed the ways he chose to interact with it.¹³⁹ These changes are visible in his handling of the events following the Battle of Trajan's Gate. Here, Basil's actions provide compelling evidence of his growth.

¹³² John Skylitzes, trans. Wortley, 331. See Treadgold, *History*, 526.

¹³³ John Skylitzes, trans. Wortley, 245.

¹³⁴ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998; first published in German 1889), 6.

¹³⁵ Joseph, Murphy, and Regel, "Affective-Cognitive Processing Model," 318.

¹³⁶ Joseph, Murphy, and Regel, "Affective-Cognitive Processing Model," 317-318.

¹³⁷ Joseph, *What Doesn't Kill Us*, 122.

¹³⁸ Joseph, Murphy, and Regel, "Affective-Cognitive Processing Model," 317-318.

¹³⁹ Joseph, *What Doesn't Kill Us*, 99-102; Joseph, Murphy, and Regel, "Affective-Cognitive Processing Model," 324.

Upon news of Basil's defeat by the Bulgarians, Bardas Sclerus initiated his second revolt in the winter of 986.¹⁴⁰ In a dramatic contrast to his secretive planning of the Bulgarian campaign, Basil, recognizing his own tactical limitations (and in no hurry to return to combat after the ambush), tasked the Byzantine general Bardas Phocas with subduing Sclerus's rebellion.¹⁴¹ However, in the summer of 987, Phocas proclaimed himself emperor and offered Sclerus domains in Byzantine Syria and Mesopotamia in return for joining forces.¹⁴²

Phocas's abrupt uprising, taking Byzantium's Eastern armies along with him, left Basil's reign in an extremely precarious position, as the Western forces at his disposal had been greatly diminished by their defeat in Bulgaria.¹⁴³ In a second effort to address his strategic limitations, Basil turned to the expansion of his support network. Unprecedentedly, Basil offered his sister's hand to the pagan prince Vladimir of Kiev, extending both his familial relations and his military allegiances in one broad stroke.¹⁴⁴ In return, Basil's new kinsman performed mass baptisms of his Russian nobles and sent Basil six thousand troops.¹⁴⁵ These Russian auxiliary forces eventually became Basil's personal bodyguards and the famed Varangian Guard of future emperors, alluding to the value Basil personally placed on the growth of his support network at this time.¹⁴⁶

Utilizing his Russian auxiliary forces, Basil attained his first military victory in 989 by launching a surprise attack across the Bosphorus on the rebel forces at Chrysopolis.¹⁴⁷ Shortly after, in the spring of the same year, Basil's army met Phocas's forces at Abydus where they faced off for several days.¹⁴⁸ Upon charging Basil's position, Phocas fell from his horse, dead, untouched.¹⁴⁹ Sclerus's official pardon by Basil in the fall of 989 signaled the final consolidation of Basil's status as emperor of Byzantium.¹⁵⁰

Basil's development can be detected at several instances in his dealings with Sclerus's and Phocas's revolts. Both his original promotion of Phocas and his eventual turn to Vladimir represent his personal growth, as he recognized his own limitations.¹⁵¹ Rather than planning secretly and relying on

¹⁴⁰ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 33; John Skylitzes, trans. Wortley, 316. See Treadgold, *History*, 517.

¹⁴¹ Treadgold, *History*, 517.

¹⁴² John Skylitzes, trans. Wortley, 318. See Treadgold, *History*, 517-518.

¹⁴³ Holmes, *Basil II*, 460.

¹⁴⁴ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 34; John Skylitzes, trans. Wortley, 319.

¹⁴⁵ Treadgold, *History*, 518.

¹⁴⁶ John Skylitzes, trans. Wortley, 319. See Treadgold, *History*, 518-519.

¹⁴⁷ Treadgold, *History*, 518.

¹⁴⁸ Treadgold, *History*, 518.

¹⁴⁹ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 35.

¹⁵⁰ Treadgold, *History*, 519.

¹⁵¹ Joseph, Murphy, and Regel, "Affective-Cognitive Processing Model," 318.

inexperienced commanders (as seen in his previous Bulgarian campaign), Basil turned to his most experienced general in Phocas for aid, and he identified a formidable ally in the Rus', Byzantium's longtime adversary.¹⁵² Basil's relationship growth is seen in his extension of familial and military ties to Vladimir, which aided in his eventual victory. Finally, Basil's change in life-philosophy is visible in his commitment to leadership through control of the army. This last assertion gains merit when considering that four years before the end of these revolts Basil had still been leading his indulgent courtly life while the grand chamberlain had been running the affairs of the government.¹⁵³

Michael Psellus's *Chronographia* reveals further potential instances of Basil's experience of *posttraumatic growth*. Specifically, Psellus offers examples of Basil's development in the later years of his life, validating the notion of trauma's long-term effects. Pertaining to Basil's formation of relationships and support networks, Psellus comments on Basil's quality as a military commander:

[T]he emperor, being personally conversant with the character and combat duties of each individual, knowing to what each man was fitted either by temperament or by training, used him in the capacity and made him serve there.¹⁵⁴

By emphasizing Basil's ability to accurately assign the soldiers under his command to their proper roles, Psellus reveals the intimate relationships Basil formed with his men. Not only was he personally conversant with each soldier, he was also knowledgeable of each soldier's character, temperament, and training. When evaluating this excerpt alongside instances of Basil meeting his soldiers' verbal abuse during meticulous inspections with a smile and a patient explanation, it becomes evident that Basil's relationship with his soldiers transcended surface-level interaction.¹⁵⁵ Clearly, Basil invested in his relationship with his soldiers in order to solidify his support network.¹⁵⁶

Michael Psellus's evaluation of Basil's personal development is far more direct than his allusion to Basil's preferred form of relationship formation:

Basil did not follow the customary procedure of other emperors, setting out at the middle of spring and returning home at the end of summer. For him the time to return was when the task in hand was accomplished. He endured the rigors of winter and the heat of summer with equal indifference. He disciplined himself against thirst. In fact, all his natural desires were kept under stern control, and the man was as hard as steel.¹⁵⁷

Basil's rejection of customary procedure reflects a strong sense of self. He did not conform to previous emperors' behavior. Moreover, Basil's development of an unrelenting drive, obtained through the denial of worldly comforts, highlights

¹⁵² Decker, *Byzantine Art of War*, 30; Holmes, *Basil II*, 510, 513.

¹⁵³ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 29; John Skylitzes, trans. Wortley, 298.

¹⁵⁴ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 46.

¹⁵⁵ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 47.

¹⁵⁶ Joseph, *What Doesn't Kill Us*, 122.

¹⁵⁷ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 45-46.

his finding meaning in new life goals, replacing his old courtly habits.¹⁵⁸ Michael Psellus's description of Basil's transformation remains consistent with today's understanding of *posttraumatic growth*. Fittingly, Psellus's "steel" simile captures the intense forging process that Basil's character had undergone as he had moved from one lifestyle to the next.

Finally, Basil's change of life-philosophy is evident in his conceptual melding of his status as emperor and his role as leader of Byzantium's military might. The association between domestic control and military prowess was made clear to Basil upon witnessing two generals—Nicephorus Phocas and John Tzimiskes—succeed in grabbing power, followed by two more revolts led by Byzantium's military elite after his first campaign's failure.¹⁵⁹ Basil's incessant campaigning—he was even planning an expedition against the Arabs in Sicily at the time of his death—reflects the desired military prestige he hoped to display to the world.¹⁶⁰

Basil's life-philosophy of imperial status validated by military command is clear in the *Psalter* he commissioned (and which is now preserved in Venice).¹⁶¹ On its front, Basil is found decked in military garb, spear in hand, crowned by Christ, flanked by military saints, and being paid tribute by those beneath him.¹⁶² Basil's *Psalter* grants an optimal view into the image he hoped to project, characterizing himself and his reign through the power derived from his military ability. The epitaph on Basil's tomb is congruent with his *Psalter's* message:

Other past emperors previously designated for themselves other burial places. But I Basil, born in the purple chamber, place my tomb on the site of the Hebdomon and take Sabbath's rest from the endless toils which I fulfilled in wars and which I endured. For nobody saw my spear at rest, from when the Emperor of Heaven called me to the rulership of this great empire on earth, but I kept vigilant through the whole span of my life.¹⁶³

The words Basil chose to guard his grave define him by his military action which he had vigilantly endured. Further, they reveal that, in the final days before his death, he changed his burial location from a tomb located at the elaborate Mausoleum of Constantine, found at the Church of the Holy Apostles, to a location close to the imperial parade grounds, the Hebdomon.¹⁶⁴ Even in death, Basil continued to keep watch over his troops.¹⁶⁵

¹⁵⁸ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 29.

¹⁵⁹ Treadgold, *History*, 502-503.

¹⁶⁰ Treadgold, *History*, 530.

¹⁶¹ Treadgold, *History*, 524-525.

¹⁶² Holmes, *Basil II*, 528.

¹⁶³ Stephenson, *Legend*, 49. While the physical epitaph was destroyed during the Fourth Crusade, it is mentioned in textual sources and ascribed to Michael Psellus.

¹⁶⁴ Holmes, *Basil II*, 524-525.

¹⁶⁵ Holmes, *Basil II*, 525.

Conclusion

Evaluating historical agents through modern conceptions of psychological processes is by no means an exact science, given the limitation of direct insight into past individuals, the relativity of individual susceptibility, and the subjectivity of contemporary cultural concerns. What can be said with certainty is this: Basil II experienced a change in character and mode of life in his late twenties.¹⁶⁶ Modern scholarship in the field of psychology focusing on the human experience of trauma has recorded similar processes of transformation, as well as the evolutionary mechanisms that encourage them and validate their historical presence.¹⁶⁷ According to primary-source evidence, the traumatic ambush Basil suffered coincided with the beginning of his shift in lifestyle.¹⁶⁸ Taken together, these facts suggest that trauma and its psychological repercussions played a role in defining Basil and his reign.

The evaluation of Basil offered above differs from precedential historical works studying combat trauma for three primary reasons. First, Basil's status as an emperor differs from the subject matter of other works that focus on the common soldiers' experience with trauma. Second, this article has evaluated the long-term impact of trauma on Basil's development, compared to previous studies that examine immediate repercussions of trauma on combatants. The biographical style of this study is justified by the more complete narratives of an individual's life that history offers. Finally, this is the first investigation to apply the concept of *posttraumatic growth* to the historiography of combat trauma.

At the very least, the "mind-change" ascribed to Basil by Michael Psellus represents an eleventh-century Byzantine recognition of a psychological process still being conceptually explored today. In drawing attention to Basil's shifting character, Michael Psellus highlights a real example of someone who experienced trauma but did not succumb to its debilitating potential. Contemporary understanding of trauma stands to benefit from historical examples such as this, given the role culture plays in diagnosing and alleviating trauma. By challenging today's assumptions regarding trauma with historical case studies that provide differing interpretations of the human experience, the complexities of trauma are further revealed.

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¹⁶⁶ Michael Psellus, trans. Sewter, 29-30.

¹⁶⁷ Joseph, *What Doesn't Kill Us*, 68.

¹⁶⁸ Leo the Deacon, trans. Talbot and Sullivan, 214-215; John Skylitzes, trans. Wortley, 314.