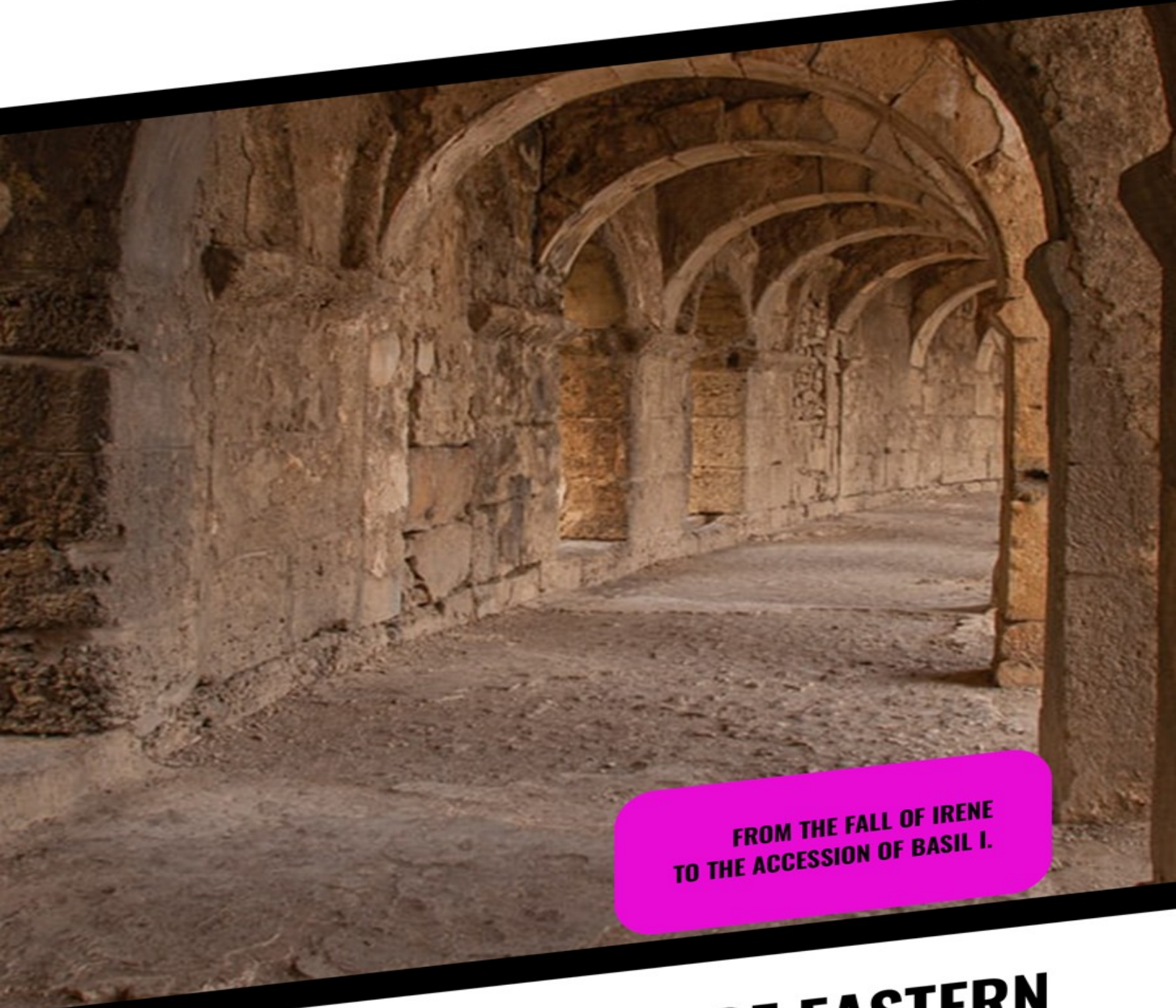




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J. B. BURY



FROM THE FALL OF IRENE
TO THE ACCESSION OF BASIL I.

THE HISTORY OF EASTERN ROMAN EMPIRE

J. B. Bury

The History of Eastern Roman Empire

From the Fall of Irene to the Accession of Basil I.

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Preface

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The history of Byzantine civilization, in which social elements of the West and the East are so curiously blended and fused into a unique culture, will not be written for many years to come. It cannot be written until each successive epoch has been exhaustively studied and its distinguishing characteristics clearly ascertained. The fallacious assumption, once accepted as a truism, that the Byzantine spirit knew no change or shadow of turning, that the social atmosphere of the Eastern Rome was always immutably the same, has indeed been discredited; but even in recent sketches of this civilization by competent hands we can see unconscious survivals of that belief. The curve of the whole development has still to be accurately traced, and this can only be done by defining each section by means of the evidence which applies to that section alone. No other method will enable us to discriminate the series of gradual changes which transformed the Byzantium of Justinian into that—so different in a thousand ways—of the last Constantine.

This consideration has guided me in writing the present volume, which continues, but on a larger scale, my History of the Later Roman Empire from Arcadius to Irene, published more than twenty years ago, and covers a period of two generations, which may be called for the sake of convenience the Amorion epoch. I think there has been a tendency to regard this period, occurring, as it does, between the revival under the Isaurian and the territorial expansion under the Basilian sovereigns, as no more than a passage from the one to the other; and I think there has been a certain failure to comprehend the significance of the Amorion dynasty. The period is not a mere epilogue, and it is

much more than a prologue. It has its own distinct, coordinate place in the series of development; and I hope that this volume may help to bring into relief the fact that the Amorion age meant a new phase in Byzantine culture.

In recent years various and valuable additions have been made to the material available to the historian. Arabic and Syriac sources important for the Eastern wars have been printed and translated. Some new Greek documents, buried in MSS., have been published. Perhaps the most unexpected accessions to our knowledge concern Bulgaria, and are due to archaeological research. Pliska, the palace of the early princes, has been excavated, and a number of interesting and difficult inscriptions have come to light there and in other parts of the country. This material, published and illustrated by MM. Uspenski and Shkorpil, who conducted the Pliska diggings, has furnished new facts of great importance.

A further advance has been made, since the days when Finlay wrote, by the application of modern methods of criticism to the chronicles on which the history of this period principally depends. The pioneer work of Hirsch (*Byzantinische Studien*), published in 1876, is still an indispensable guide; but since then the obscure questions connected with the chronographies of George and Simeon have been more or less illuminated by the researches of various scholars, especially by de Boor's edition of George and Sreznevski's publication of the Slavonic version of Simeon. But though it is desirable to determine the mutual relations among the Simeon documents, the historian of Theophilus and Michael III is more concerned to discover the character of the sources which Simeon used. My own studies have led me to the conclusion that his narrative of those reigns is chiefly based on a lost chronicle which was written before the end of the century and was not unfavourable to the Amorion dynasty.

Much, too, has been done to elucidate perplexing historical questions by the researches of A. A. Vasiliev (to whose book on the Saracen wars of the Amorians I am greatly indebted), E. W. Brooks, the late J. Pargoire, C. de Boor, and many others. The example of a period not specially favoured may serve to illustrate the general progress of Byzantine studies during the last generation.

When he has submitted his material to the requisite critical analysis, and reconstructed a narrative accordingly, the historian has done all that he can, and his responsibility ends. When he has had before him a number of independent reports of the same events, he may hope to have elicited an approximation to the truth by a process of comparison. But how when he has only one? There are several narratives in this volume which are mainly derived from a single independent source. The usual practice in such cases is, having eliminated any errors and inconsistencies that we may have means of detecting, and having made allowances for bias, to accept the story as substantially true and accurate. The single account is assumed to be veracious when there is no counter-evidence. But is this assumption valid? Take the account of the murder of Michael III. which has come down to us. If each of the several persons who were in various ways concerned in that transaction had written down soon or even immediately afterwards a detailed report of what happened, each endeavouring honestly to describe the events accurately, it is virtually certain that there would have been endless divergencies and contradictions between these reports. Is there, then, a serious probability that the one account which happens to have been handed down, whether written by the pen or derived from the lips of a narrator of whose mentality we have no knowledge,—is there a serious probability that this story presents to our minds images at all resembling those which would appear to us if the scenes had been preserved by a cinematographic process? I have followed

the usual practice—it is difficult to do otherwise; but I do not pretend to justify it. There are many portions of medieval and of ancient “recorded” history which will always remain more or less fables convenues, or for the accuracy of which, at least, no discreet person will be prepared to stand security even when scientific method has done for them all it can do.

It would not be just to the leading men who guided public affairs during this period, such as Theophilus and Bardas, to attempt to draw their portraits. The data are entirely insufficient. Even in the case of Photius, who has left a considerable literary legacy, while we can appreciate, perhaps duly, his historical significance, his personality is only half revealed; his character may be variously conceived; and the only safe course is to record his acts without presuming to know how far they were determined by personal motives.

J. B. BURY.

Rome, January 1912.



Chapter I

Nicephorus I., Stauracius, and Michael I..

(A.D. 802-813)

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§1. The Fall of Irene

The Isaurian or Syrian dynasty, which had not only discharged efficiently the task of defending the Roman Empire against the Saracens and Bulgarians, but had also infused new life into the administration and institutions, terminated ingloriously two years after the Imperial coronation of Charles the Great at Rome. Ambassadors of Charles were in Constantinople at the time of the revolution which hurled the Empress Irene from the throne. Their business at her court was to treat concerning a proposal of marriage from their master. It appears that the Empress entertained serious thoughts of an alliance which her advisers would hardly have suffered her to contract, and the danger may have precipitated a revolution which could not long be postponed. Few palace revolutions have been more completely justified by the exigencies of the common weal, and if personal ambitions had not sufficed to bring about the fall of Irene, public interest would have dictated the removal of a sovereign whose incapacity must soon have led to public disaster.

The career of Irene of Athens had been unusually brilliant. An obscure provincial, she was elevated by a stroke of fortune to be the consort of the heir to the greatest throne in Europe. Her husband died after a short reign, and as their son was a mere child she was left in possession of the supreme power. She was thus enabled to lead the

reaction against iconoclasm, and connect her name indissolubly with an Ecumenical Council. By this policy she covered herself with glory in the eyes of orthodox posterity; she received the eulogies of popes; and the monks, who basked in the light of her countenance, extolled her as a saint. We have no records that would enable us to draw a portrait of Irene's mind, but we know that she was the most worldly of women, and that love of power was a fundamental trait of her character. When her son Constantine was old enough to assume the reins of government, she was reluctant to retire into the background, and a struggle for power ensued, which ended ultimately in the victory of the mother. The son, deprived of his eyesight, was rendered incapable of reigning (a.d. 797), and Irene enjoyed for five years undivided sovran power, not as a regent, but in her own right.

Extreme measures of ambition which, if adopted by heretics, they would execrate as crimes, are easily pardoned or overlooked by monks. In the case of a monarch who believes rightly; But even in the narrative of the prejudiced monk, who is our informant, we can see that he himself disapproved of the behavior of the "most pious" Irene, and, what is more important, that the public sympathy was with her son. Her conduct of the government did not secure her the respect which her previous actions had forfeited. She was under the alternating influence of two favorite eunuchs, whose intrigues against each other divided the court. After the death of Stauracius, his rival Aetius enjoyed the supreme control of the Empress and the Empire. He may have been a capable man; but his position was precarious, his power was resented by the other ministers of state, and, in such circumstances, the policy of the Empire could not be efficiently carried on. He united in his own hands the commands of two of the Asiatic Themes, the Opsikian and the Anatolic, and he made his brother Leo strategos of both Macedonia and Thrace. By the control of the troops of these

provinces he hoped to compass his scheme of raising Leo to the Imperial throne.

We can hardly doubt that the political object of mitigating her unpopularity in the capital was the motive of certain measures of relief or favour which the Empress adopted in March 801. She remitted the "urban tribute", the principal tax paid by the inhabitants of Constantinople, but we are unable to say whether this indulgence was intended to be temporary or permanent. She lightened the custom dues which were collected in the Hellespont and the Bosphorus. We may question the need and suspect the wisdom of either of these measures; but a better case could probably be made out for the abolition of the duty on receipts. This tax, similar to the notorious Chrysargyron which Anastasius I did away with, was from the conditions of its collection especially liable to abuse, and it was difficult for the fisc to check the honesty of the excise officers who gathered it. We have a lurid picture of the hardships which it entailed. Tradesmen of every order were groaning under extravagant exactions. Sheep-dealers and pig-dealers, butchers, wine-merchants, weavers and shoemakers, fullers, bronzesmiths, goldsmiths, workers in wood, perfumers, architects are enumerated as sufferers. The high-roads and the sea-coasts were infested by fiscal officers demanding dues on the most insignificant articles. When a traveller came to some narrow defile, he would be startled by the sudden appearance of a tax-gatherer, sitting aloft like a thing uncanny. The fisherman who caught three fishes, barely enough to support him, was obliged to surrender one to the necessities of the treasury, or rather of its representative. Those who made their livelihood by catching or shooting birds were in the same predicament. It is needless to say that all the proceeds of these exactions did not flow into the fisc; there was unlimited opportunity for peculation and oppression on the part of the collectors.

We learn that Irene abolished this harsh and impolitic system from a congratulatory letter addressed to her on the occasion by Theodore, the abbot of Studion. We must remember that the writer was an ardent partisan of the Empress, whom he lauds in hyperbolic phrases, according to the manner of the age, and we may reasonably suspect that he has overdrawn the abuses which she remedied in order to exalt the merit of her reform.

The monks of Studion, driven from their cloister by her son, had been restored with high honor by Irene, and we may believe that they were the most devoted of her supporters. The letter which Theodore addressed to her on this occasion shows that in his eyes her offences against humanity counted as nothing, if set against her services to orthodoxy and canonical law. It is characteristic of medieval Christianity that one who made such high professions of respect for Christian ethics should extol the “virtue” of the woman who had blinded her son, and assert that her virtue has made her government popular and will preserve it unshaken.

Even if Irene’s capacity for ruling had equalled her appetite for power, and if the reverence which the monks entertained for her had been universal, her sex was a weak point in her position. Other women had governed—Pulcheria, for instance—in the name of an Emperor; but Irene was the first who had reigned alone, not as a regent, but as sole and supreme autocrat. This was an innovation against which no constitutional objection seems to have been urged or recognized as valid at Constantinople; though in Western Europe it was said that the Roman Empire could not devolve upon a woman, and this principle was alleged as an argument justifying the coronation of Charles the Great. But in the army there was undoubtedly a feeling of dissatisfaction that the sovereign was disqualified by her sex from leading her hosts in war; and as the spirit of iconoclasm was still prevalent in the army, especially in the

powerful Asiatic Themes, there was no inclination to waive this objection in the case of the restorer of image-worship.

The power exercised by the eunuch Aetius was intolerable to many of the magnates who held high offices of state, and they had good reason to argue that in the interests of the Empire, placed as it was between two formidable foes, a stronger government than that of a favourite who wielded authority at the caprice of a woman was imperatively required. The negotiations of the Empress with Charles the Great, and the arrival of ambassadors from him and the Pope, to discuss a marriage between the two monarchs which should restore in Eastern and Western Europe the political unity of the Roman Empire once more, were equally distasteful and alarming to Aetius and to his opponents. The overtures of Charles may well have impressed the patricians of New Rome with the danger of the existing situation and with the urgent need that the Empire should have a strong sovereign to maintain its rights and prestige against the pretensions of the Western barbarian who claimed to be a true Augustus. It might also be foreseen that Aetius would now move heaven and earth to secure the elevation of his brother to the throne as speedily as possible.

These circumstances may sufficiently explain the fact that the discontent of the leading officials with Irene's government culminated in October 802, while the Western ambassadors were still in Constantinople. The leader of the conspiracy was Nicephorus, who held the post of Logothete of the General Treasury, and he was recognized by his accomplices as the man who should succeed to the Imperial crown. His two chief supporters were Nicetas Triphyllios, the Domestic of the scholarian guards, and his brother Leo, who had formerly been strategos of Thrace. The cooperation of these men was highly important; for Aetius counted upon their loyalty, as Nicetas had espoused his part against his rival Stauracius. Leo, who held the high financial office of

Sakellarios, and the quaestor Theoktistos joined in the plot, and several other patricians.

On the night of October 31 the conspirators appeared before the Brazen Gate (Chalkê) of the Palace, and induced the guard to admit them, by a story which certainly bore little appearance of likelihood. They said that Aetius had been attempting to force the Empress to elevate his brother to the rank of Augustus, and that she, in order to obviate his importunities, had dispatched the patricians at this late hour to proclaim Nicephorus as Emperor. The authority of such important men could hardly be resisted by the guardians of the gate, and in obedience to the supposed command of their sovran they joined in proclaiming the usurper. It was not yet midnight. Slaves and others were sent to all quarters of the city to spread the news, and the Palace of Eleutherios, in which the Augusta was then staying, was surrounded by soldiers. This Palace, which she had built herself, was probably situated to the north of the harbour of Eleutherios, somewhere in the vicinity of the Forum which was known as Bous. In the morning she was removed to the Great Palace and detained in custody, while the ceremony of coronation was performed for Nicephorus by the Patriarch Tarasius, in the presence of a large multitude, who beheld the spectacle with various emotions.

The writer from whom we learn these events was a monk, violently hostile to the new Emperor, and devoted to the orthodox Irene, who had testified so brilliantly to the "true faith". We must not forget his bias when we read that all the spectators were imprecating curses on the Patriarch, and on the Emperor and his well-wishers. Some, he says, marvelled how Providence could permit such an event and see the pious Empress deserted by those courtiers who had professed to be most attached to her, like the brothers Triphyllios. Others, unable to believe the evidence of their eyes, thought they were dreaming. Those who took in the situation were contrasting in prophetic fancy the days that

were coming with the blessed condition of things which existed under Irene. This description represents the attitude of the monks and the large number of people who were under their influence. But we may well believe that the populace showed no enthusiasm at the revolution; Nicephorus can hardly have been a popular minister.

The new Emperor determined, as a matter of course, to send the deposed Empress into banishment, but she possessed a secret which it was important for him to discover. The economy of Leo III. and Constantine V. had accumulated a large treasure, which was stored away in some secret hiding-place, known only to the sovrän, and not communicated to the Sakellarios, who was head of the treasury. Nicephorus knew of its existence, and on the day after his coronation he had an interview with Irene in the Palace, and by promises and blandishments persuaded her to reveal where the store was hidden. Irene on this occasion made a dignified speech, explaining her fall as a punishment of her sins, and asking to be allowed to live in her own house of Eleutherios. Nicephorus, however, banished her first to Prince's Island in the Propontis, and afterwards to more distant Lesbos, where she died within a year. We cannot accept unhesitatingly the assertion of the Greek chronographer that Nicephorus broke his faith. There is some evidence, adequate at least to make us suspicious, that he kept his promise, and that Irene was not banished until she or her partisans organized a conspiracy against his life.

§2. Nicephorus I.

According to Oriental historians, Nicephorus was descended from an Arabian king, Jaballah of Ghassan, who in the reign of Heraclius became a Mohammadan, but soon, dissatisfied with the principle of equality which marked the early period

of the Caliphate, fled to Cappadocia and resumed the profession of Christianity along with allegiance to the Empire. Perhaps Jaballah or one of his descendants settled in Pisidia, for Nicephorus was born in Seleucia of that province. His fame has suffered, because he had neither a fair historian to do him justice, nor apologists to countervail the coloured statements of opponents. He is described as an unblushing hypocrite, avaricious, cruel, irreligious, unchaste, a perjured slave, a wicked revolutionary. His every act is painted as a crime or a weakness, or as prompted by a sinister motive. When we omit the adjectives and the comments and set down the facts, we come to a different conclusion. The history of his reign shows him a strong and masterful man, who was fully alive to the difficulties of the task of governing and was prepared to incur unpopularity in discharging his duty as guardian of the state. Like many other competent statesmen, he knew how to play upon the weaknesses of men and to conceal his own designs; he seems indeed to have been expert in dissimulation and the cognate arts of diplomacy. It was said that tears came with convenient readiness, enabling him to feign emotions which he was far from feeling and win a false reputation for having a good heart.

Most of the able Roman Emperors who were not born in the purple had been generals before they ascended the throne. Nicephorus, who had been a financial minister, was one of the most notable exceptions. It is probable that he had received a military training, for he led armies into the field. He was thoroughly in earnest about the defence of the Empire against its foes, whether beyond the Taurus or beyond the Haemus; but he had not the qualities of a skillful general and this deficiency led to the premature end of his reign. Yet his financial experience may have been of more solid value to the state than the military talent which might have achieved some brilliant successes. He was fully determined to be master in his own house. He intended that

the Empire, the Church as well as the State, should be completely under his control, and would brook no rival authorities, whether in the court or in the cloister. He severely criticized his predecessors, asserting that they had no idea of the true methods of government. If a sovrán, he used to say, wishes to rule efficiently, he must permit no one to be more powerful than himself,—a sound doctrine under the constitution of the Roman Empire. The principles of his ecclesiastical policy, which rendered him execrable in the eyes of many monks, were religious toleration and the supremacy of the State over the Church. Detested by the monks on this account, he has been represented by one of them, who is our principal informant, as a tyrannical oppressor who imposed intolerable burdens of taxation upon his subjects from purely avaricious motives. Some of his financial measures may have been severe, but our ignorance of the economic conditions of the time and our imperfect knowledge of the measures themselves render it difficult for us to criticize them.

In pursuance of his conception of the sovrán's duty, to take an active part in the administration himself and keep its various departments under his own control, Nicephorus resolved to exercise more constantly and regularly the supreme judicial functions which belonged to the Emperor. His immediate predecessors had probably seldom attended in person the Imperial Court of Appeal, over which the Prefect of the City presided in the Emperor's absence; but hitherto it had been only in the case of appeals, or in those trials of high functionaries which were reserved for his Court, that the sovrán intervened in the administration of justice. Nicephorus instituted a new court which sat in the Palace of Magnaura. Here he used to preside himself and judge cases which ordinarily came before the Prefect of the City or the Quaestor. It was his purpose, he alleged, to enable the poor to obtain justice speedily and easily. It is instructive to observe how this innovation was construed

and censured by his enemies. It was said that his motive was to insult and oppress the official classes, or that the encouragement of lawsuits was designed to divert the attention of his subjects from Imperial "impieties". The malevolence of these insinuations is manifest. Nicephorus was solicitous to protect his subjects against official oppression, and all Emperors who took an active personal part in the administration of justice were highly respected and praised by the public.

Not long after Nicephorus ascended the throne he was menaced by a serious insurrection. He had appointed an able general, Bardanes Turcus, to an exceptionally extensive command, embracing the Anatolic, the Armeniac, and the three other Asiatic Themes. The appointment was evidently made with the object of prosecuting vigorously the war against the Saracens, in which Bardanes had distinguished himself, and won popularity with the soldiers by his scrupulously fair division of booty, in which he showed himself no respecter of persons. He was, as his name shows, an Armenian by descent, but we are not told whence he derived the surname of "Turk". The large powers which were entrusted to him stirred his ambitions to seize the crown, and the fiscal rigour of the new Emperor excited sufficient discontent to secure followers for a usurper. The Armeniac troops refused to support him, but the regiments of the other four Themes which were under his command proclaimed him Emperor on Wednesday, July 19, 803.

This revolt of Bardanes has a dramatic interest beyond the immediate circumstances. It was the first act in a long and curious drama which was worked out in the course of twenty years. We shall see the various stages of its development in due order. The contemporaries of the actors grasped the dramatic aspect, and the interest was heightened by the belief that the events had been prophetically foreshadowed from the beginning. In the staff of Bardanes were three young men who enjoyed his

conspicuous favour. Leo was of Armenian origin, like the general himself, but had been reared at a small place called Pidra in the Anatolic Theme. Bardanes had selected him for his fierce look and brave temper to be a “spear-bearer and attendant” or, as we should say, an aide-de-camp. Michael, who was known as Traulos, on account of his lisp, was a native of Amorion. The third, Thomas, probably came of a Slavonic family settled in Pontus near Gaziura. All three were of humble origin, but Bardanes detected that they were marked out by nature for great things and advanced them at the very beginning of their careers. When he determined to raise the standard of rebellion against Nicephorus, he took these three chosen ones into his confidence, and they accompanied him when he rode one day to Philomelion for the purpose of consulting a hermit said to be endowed with the faculty of foreseeing things to come. Leaving his horse to the care of his squires, Bardanes entered the prophet’s cell, where he received a discouraging oracle. He was bidden to abandon his designs, which would surely lead to the loss of his property and of his eyes. He left the hermit’s dwelling moody and despondent, and he was mounting his horse when the holy man, who had followed to the door and espied his three companions, summoned him to return. Eagerly expecting a further communication Bardanes complied, and he heard a strange prophecy: “The first and the second of these men will possess the Empire, but thou shalt not. As for the third, he will be merely proclaimed, but will not prosper and will have a bad end”. The disappointed aspirant to the throne rushed from the hut, uttering maledictions against the prophet who refused to flatter his hopes, and jeeringly communicated to Leo, Michael, and Thomas the things which were said to be in store for them. Thus, according to the story, the destinies of the two Emperors Leo V. and Michael II. and of the great tyrant Thomas were shadowed forth at Philomelion long

before it could be guessed how such things were to come to pass.

The destiny of their patron Bardanes was to be decided far sooner. The insurgent army advanced along the road to Nicomedia, but it was soon discovered that the Emperor was prepared for the emergency and had forces at his disposition which rendered the cause of the tyrant hopeless. Thomas, the Slavonian, stood by his master; but Leo, the Armenian, and Michael, of Amorion, deserted to Nicephorus, who duly rewarded them. Michael was appointed a Count of the tent, Leo to be Count of the Federates, and each of them received the gift of a house in Constantinople. When Bardanes found it impracticable to establish on the Asiatic shore a basis of operations against the capital, of which the inhabitants showed no inclination to welcome him, he concluded that his wisest course would be to sue for grace while there was yet time, and he retired to Malagina. The Emperor readily sent him a written assurance of his personal safety, which was signed by the Patriarch Tarasius and all the patricians; and the promise was confirmed by the pledge of a little gold cross which the Emperor was in the habit of wearing. The tyranny had lasted about seven weeks, when Bardanes secretly left the camp at midnight (September 8) and travelling doubtless by the road which passes Nicaea and skirts the southern shores of Lake Ascanias, escaped to the monastery of Heraclius at Kios, the modern town of Geumlek. There he was tonsured and arrayed in the lowly garment of a monk. The Emperor's bark, which was in waiting at the shore, carried him to the island of Prote, where he had built a private monastery, which he was now permitted to select as his retreat. Under the name of Sabbas, he devoted himself to ascetic exercises. But Nicephorus, it would seem, did not yet feel assured that the ex-tyrant was innocuous; for we can hardly doubt the assertion of our sources that it was with the Emperor's knowledge that a band of Lycaonians landed on

the island by night and deprived the exiled monk of his eyesight. Nicephorus, however, professed to be sorely distressed at the occurrence; he shed the tears which were always at his disposal, and did not leave the Imperial bedchamber for seven days. He even threatened to put to death some Lycaonian nobles; and the Senate and the Patriarch could hardly venture to doubt the sincerity of his indignation. As for the rebellious army, it was punished by receiving no pay; several officers and landed owners were banished; the property of the chief insurgent was confiscated. Such was the fate of Bardanes Turcus and his revolt.

In February 808 a plot was formed to dethrone Nicephorus by a large number of discontented senators and ecclesiastical dignitaries. It is significant that the man who was designated by the conspirators to be the new Emperor was on this occasion also an Armenian. The patrician Arsaber held the office of Quaestor; and the chronicler, who regarded with favour any antagonist of Nicephorus, describes him as pious. The plot was detected; Arsaber was punished by stripes, made a monk and banished to Bithynia; the accomplices, not excepting the bishops, were beaten and exiled.

Nicephorus had two children, a daughter and a son. Procopia had married Michael Rangabé, who was created Curopalates; and one of their sons, Nicetas (destined hereafter to occupy the Patriarchal throne), was appointed, as a child, to be the Domestic or commander of the Hikanatoi, a new corps of guards which his grandfather had instituted. Stauracius was doubtless younger than Procopia, and was crowned Augustus in December 803, a year after his father's succession. Theophanes, perhaps malevolently, describes him as "physically and intellectually unfit for the position". His father took pains to choose a suitable wife for him. On December 20, 807, a company of young girls from all parts of the Empire was assembled in the Palace, to

select a consort for Stauracius. For a third time in the history of New Rome an Athenian lady was chosen to be the bride of a Roman Augustus. The choice of Nicephorus now fell on Theophano, even as Constantine V had selected Irene for his son Leo, and nearly four centuries before Pulcheria had discovered Athenais for her brother Theodosius. Theophano had two advantages: she was a kinswoman of the late Empress Irene; and she had already (report said) enjoyed the embraces of a man to whom she was betrothed. The second circumstance gave Nicephorus an opportunity of asserting the principle that the Emperor was not bound by the canonical laws which interdicted such a union.

If a statement of Theophanes is true, which we have no means of disproving and no reason to doubt, the beauty of the maidens who had presented themselves as possible brides for the son, tempted the desires of the father; and two, who were more lovely than the successful Athenian, were consoled for their disappointment by the gallantries of Nicephorus himself on the night of his son's marriage. The monk who records this scandal of the Imperial Palace makes no other comment than "the rascal was ridiculed by all".

The frontiers of the Empire were maintained intact in the reign of Nicephorus, but his campaigns were not crowned by military glory. The death of the Caliph Harun (809) delivered him from a persevering foe against whom he had been generally unsuccessful, and to whom he had been forced to make some humiliating concessions; but the Bulgarian war brought deeper disgrace upon Roman arms and was fatal to Nicephorus himself. In an expedition which, accompanied by his son and his son-in-law, he led across the Haemus, he suffered himself to be entrapped, and his life paid the penalty for his want of caution (July 26, a.d. 811).

§3. Stauracius

The young Emperor Stauracius had been severely wounded in the battle, but he succeeded in escaping to the shelter of Hadrianople. His sister's husband, Michael Rangabé, had come off unhurt; and two other high dignitaries, the magister Theoktistos, and Stephanos the Domestic of the Schools, reached the city of refuge along with the surviving Augustus. But although Stauracius was still living, it was a question whether he could live long. His spine had been seriously injured, and the nobles who stood at his bedside despaired of his life. They could hardly avoid considering the question whether it would be wise at such a crisis to leave the sole Imperial power in the hands of one who had never shown any marked ability and who was now incapacitated by a wound, seemingly at the door of death. On the other hand, it might be said that the unanimity and prompt action which the emergency demanded would be better secured by acknowledging the legitimate Emperor, however feeble he might be. So at least it seemed to the Domestic of the Schools, who lost no time in proclaiming Stauracius autocrator. Stauracius himself, notwithstanding his weak condition, appeared in the presence of the troops who had collected at Hadrianople after the disaster, and spoke to them. The soldiers had been disgusted by the unskillfulness of the late Emperor in the art of war, and it is said that the new Emperor sought to please them by indulging in criticisms on his father.

But the magister Theoktistos, although he was present on this occasion, would have preferred another in the place of Stauracius. And there was one who had a certain eventual claim to the crown, and might be supposed not unequal to its burdens, Michael Rangabé, the Curopalates and husband of the princess Procopia. It would not have been a violent measure if, in view of the precarious condition of her brother, Procopia's husband had been immediately invested with the insignia of empire. Such a course could have been abundantly justified by the

necessity of having an Emperor capable of meeting the dangers to be apprehended from the triumphant Bulgarian foe. Theoktistos and others pressed Michael to assume the diadem, and if he had been willing Stauracius would not have reigned a week. But Michael declined at this juncture, and the orthodox historian, who admires and lauds him, attributes his refusal to a regard for his oath of allegiance "to Nicephorus and Stauracius".

The wounded Emperor was removed in a litter from Hadrianople to Byzantium. The description of the consequence of his hurt shows that he must have suffered much physical agony and the chances of his recovery were diminished by his mental anxieties. He had no children, and the question was, who was to succeed him. On the one hand, his sister Procopia held that the Imperial power rightly devolved upon her husband and her children. On the other hand, there was another lady, perhaps even more ambitious than Procopia, and dearer to Stauracius. The Athenian Theophano might hope to play the part of her kinswoman Irene, and reign as sole mistress of the Roman Empire.

Concerning the intrigues which were spun round the bedside of the young Emperor in the autumn months (August and September) of 811, our contemporary chronicle gives only a slight indication. The influence of Theophano caused her husband to show marked displeasure to the ministers Stephanos and Theoktistos, and to his brother-in-law Michael, and also to regard with aversion his sister Procopia, whom he suspected of conspiring against his life. As his condition grew worse and he saw that his days were numbered, he wavered between two alternative plans for the future of the Empire. One of these was to devolve the succession on his wife Theophano.

The other alternative conceived by Stauracius is so strange that we hardly know what to make of it. The idea comes to us as a surprise in the pages of a ninth-century chronicle. It appears that this Emperor, as he felt death

approaching, formed the conception of changing the Imperial constitution into a democracy. It was the wild vision of a morbid brain, but we cannot help wondering how Stauracius would have proceeded in attempting to carry out such a scheme. Abstractly, indeed, so far as the constitutional aspect was concerned, it would have been simple enough. The Imperial constitution might be abolished and a democratic republic established, in theory, by a single measure. All that he had to do was to repeal a forgotten law, which had regulated the authority of the early Caesars, and thereby restore to the Roman people the powers which it had delegated to the Emperor more than seven hundred years before. Of the Lex de imperio Stauracius had probably never heard, nor is it likely that he had much knowledge of the early constitutional history of Rome. Perhaps it was from ancient Athens that he derived the political idea which, in the circumstances of his age, was a chimera; and to his wife, thirsty for power, he might have said, "Athens, your own city, has taught the world that democracy is the best and noblest form of government".

The intervention of the Patriarch Nicephorus at this juncture helped to determine and secure the progress of events. He was doubtless relieved at the death of his stark namesake, however much he may have been distressed at the calamity which brought it about; and we are told that, when Stauracius arrived at Constantinople, the Patriarch hastened to give him ghostly advice and exhort him to console those who had been pecuniarily wronged by his father, by making restitution. But like his sire, according to the partial chronicler, Stauracius was avaricious, and was unwilling to sacrifice more than three talents in this cause, although that sum was but a small fraction of the monies wrongfully appropriated by the late Emperor. The Patriarch failed in his errand at the bedside of the doomed monarch, but he hoped that a new Emperor, of no doubtful voice in matters of orthodoxy, would soon sit upon the throne. And it

appeared that it would be necessary to take instant measures for securing the succession to this legitimate and desirable candidate. The strange designs of Stauracius and the ambition of Theophano alarmed Nicephorus, and he determined to prevent all danger of a democracy or a sovran Augusta by anticipating the death of the Emperor and placing Michael on the throne. At the end of September he associated himself, for this purpose, with Stephanos and Theoktistos. The Emperor was already contemplating the cruelty of depriving his brother-in-law of eyesight, and on the first day of October he summoned the Domestic of the Schools to his presence and proposed to blind Michael that very night. It is clear that at this time Stauracius placed his entire trust in Stephanos, the man who had proclaimed him at Hadrianople, and he knew not that this officer had since then veered round to the view of Theoktistos. Stephanos pointed out that it was too late, and took care to encourage his master in a feeling of security. The next day had been fixed by the conspirators for the elevation of the Curopalates, and throughout the night troops were filing into the Hippodrome to shout for the new Emperor. In the early morning the senators arrived; and the constitutional formalities of election preliminary to the coronation were complied with (Oct. 2, A.D. 811). Michael Rangabé was proclaimed "Emperor of the Romans" by the Senate and the residential troops—that remnant of them which had escaped from the field of blood beyond the Haemus. Meanwhile the Emperor, who had been less lucky on that fatal day, escaping only to die after some months of pain, was sleeping or tossing in the Imperial bedchamber, unconscious of the scene which was being enacted not many yards away. But the message was soon conveyed to his ears, and he hastened to assume the visible signs of abdication by which deposed Emperors were wont to disarm the fears or jealousy of their successors. A monk, named Simeon, and a kinsman of his own, tonsured him and arrayed him in

monastic garb, and he prepared to spend the few days of life left to him in a lowlier place and a lowlier station. But before his removal from the Palace his sister Procopia, in company with her Imperial husband and the Patriarch Nicephorus, visited him. They endeavored to console him and to justify the step which had been taken; they repudiated the charge of a conspiracy, and explained their act as solely necessitated by his hopeless condition. Stauracius, notwithstanding their plausible arguments, felt bitter; he thought that the Patriarch had dealt doubly with him. "You will not find", he said to Nicephorus, "a better friend than me".

Nicephorus took the precaution of requiring from Michael, before he performed the ceremony of coronation, a written assurance of his orthodoxy and an undertaking to do no violence to ecclesiastics, secular or regular. The usual procession was formed; the Imperial train proceeded from the Palace to the Cathedral; and the act of coronation was duly accomplished in the presence of the people. The rejoicings, we are told, were universal, and we may believe that there was a widespread feeling of relief, that an Emperor sound in limb was again at the head of the state. The bounty of Michael gave cause, too, for satisfaction on the first day of his reign. He bestowed on the Patriarch, who had done so much in helping him to the throne, the sum of 50 lbs. of gold (\$ 952.140), and to the clergy of St. Sophia he gave half that amount.

The unfortunate Stauracius lived on for more than three months, but towards the end of that time the corruption of his wound became so horrible that no one could approach him for the stench. On the 11th of January 812 he died, and was buried in the new monastery of Braka. This was a handsome building, given to Theophano by the generosity of Procopia when she resolved, like her husband, to retire to a cloister.

§4. Reign and Policy of Michael I.

It is worthwhile to note how old traditions or prejudices, surviving from the past history of the Roman Empire, gradually disappeared. We might illustrate the change that had come over the "Romans" since the age of Justinian, by the fact that in the second year of the ninth century a man of Semitic stock ascends the throne, and is only prevented by chance from founding a dynasty, descended from the Ghassanids. He bears a name, too, which, though Greek and common at the time, was borne by no Emperor before him. His son's name is Greek too, but unique on the Imperial list. A hundred years before men who had names which sounded strange in collocation with Basileus and Augustus (such as Artemius and Apsimar) adopted new names which had an Imperial ring (such as Anastasius and Tiberius). It was instinctively felt then that a Bardanes was no fit person to occupy the throne of the Caesars, and therefore he became Philippicus. But this instinct was becoming weak in a city where strange names, strange faces, and strange tongues were growing every year more familiar. The time had come when men of Armenian, Slavonic, or even Semitic origin might aspire to the highest positions in Church and State, to the Patriarchate and the Empire. The time had come at last when it was no longer deemed strange that a successor of Constantine should be a Michael.

The first Michael belonged to the Rangabé family, of which we now hear for the first time. He was in the prime of manhood when he came to the throne; his hair was black and curling, he wore a black beard, and his face was round. He seems to have been a mild and good-humoured man, but totally unfit for the position to which chance had raised him. As a general he was incapable; as an administrator he was injudicious; as a financier he was extravagant. Throughout his short reign he was subject to the will of a woman and the guidance of a priest. It may have been the

ambition of Procopia that led him to undertake the duties of a sovran; and she shared largely in the administration. Ten days after her lord's coronation, Procopia—daughter and sister, now wife, of an Emperor—was crowned Augusta in the throne-room of Augusteus, in the Palace of Daphne, and she courted the favour of the Senators by bestowing on them many gifts. She distributed, moreover, five pounds of gold (\$ 95000) among the widows of the soldiers who had fallen with her father in Bulgaria. Nor did she forget her sister-in-law, who, if things had fallen out otherwise, might have been her sovran lady. Theophano had decided to end her life as a nun. Her triumphant rival enriched her, and, as has been already mentioned, gave her a noble house, which was converted into a cloister. Nor were the poor kinsfolk of Theophano neglected by the new Augusta. It was said at least that in the days of Nicephorus they had lived in pitiable penury, as that parsimonious Emperor would not allow his daughter-in-law to expend money in assisting them; but this may be only an ill-natured invention.

The following Christmas day was the occasion of another coronation and distribution of presents. Theophylactus, the eldest son of Michael, was crowned in the ambo of the Great Church. On this auspicious day the Emperor placed in the Sanctuary of St. Sophia a rich offering of golden vessels, inlaid with gems, and antique curtains for the ciborium, woven of gold and purple and embroidered with pictures of sacred subjects. It was a day of great rejoicing in the city, and people surely thought that the new sovran was beginning his reign well; he had made up his mind to ask for his son the hand of a daughter of the great Charles, the rival Emperor.

The note of Michael's policy was reaction, both against the ecclesiastical policy of Nicephorus, as we shall see, and also against the parsimony and careful book-keeping which had rendered that monarch highly unpopular. Procopia and Michael hastened to diminish the sums which Nicephorus

had hoarded, and much money was scattered abroad in alms. Churches and monasteries were enriched and endowed; hermits who spent useless lives in desert places were sought out to receive of the august bounty; religious hostelries and houses for the poor were not forgotten. The orphan and the widow had their wants supplied; and the fortunes of decayed gentle people were partially resuscitated. All this liberality made the new lord and lady highly popular; complimentary songs were composed by the demes and sung in public in their honor. The stinginess and avarice of Nicephorus were now blotted out, and amid the general jubilation few apprehended that the unpopular father-in-law was a far abler ruler than his bountiful successor.

It was naturally part of the reactionary policy to recall those whom Nicephorus had banished and reinstate those whom he had degraded. The most eminent of those who returned was Leo the Armenian, son of Bardas. We have met this man before. We saw how he took part in the revolt of Bardanes against Nicephorus, and then, along with his companion in arms, Michael the Amorian, left his rebellious commander in the lurch. We saw how Nicephorus rewarded him by making him Count of the Federates. He subsequently received a command in the Anatolic Theme, but for gross carelessness and neglect of his duties he was degraded from his post, whipped, and banished in disgrace. He was recalled by Michael, who appointed him General of the Anatolic Theme, with the dignity of Patrician—little guessing that he was arming one who would dethrone himself and deal ruthlessly with his children. Afterwards when the General of the Anatolics had become Emperor of the Romans, it was said that signs and predictions of the event were not wanting. Among the tales that were told was one of a little slave-girl of the Emperor, who was subject to visitations of “the spirit of Pytho”. On one occasion when she was thus seized she went down from the Palace to the