

# DID YOU KNOW? (6)

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Collected by **Jirair Tutunjian**, Toronto, December 2021

Their names were Phokas, Palaiologos, Porphyrogennetos, Lakapenos, Komnenos, and Tzimiskes but these Byzantine emperors were Armenian. Of the 100 or so Byzantine emperors about half were Armenian...they also reigned when Byzantium was at its height of power. But to a man, their foreign policy were detrimental to Armenia.

Of the 43 emperors between 582 and 1071, twenty were Armenian. Every emperor from the accession of Basil I to the death of Basil II (867-1025) was of Armenian descent.

Some of the Armenian emperors (Heracles, Mizizios, Basil I, Leo V, Ardabastos, etc.) descended from Armenian nobility ("nakharar" families). Heracles was Arsacid, Mizizios was from the Gnuni family, Leo V was Artsruni, Ardabastos descended from the Mamigonian family, and Basil I was reportedly Arsacid.

The first Armenian emperor was Maurice (582-602). He presented (591) a plan to the Persian king to split Armenia between Byzantium and Persia. In his letter to the king, he said: "They are a perverse ...race ...they cause trouble. Now come, I shall gather mine and send them to Thrace: you gather yours and order them to be taken to the east. If they die, our enemies die; if they kill, they kill our enemies, but we shall live in peace. For if they remain on their own land, we shall have no rest." Maurice exiled thousands of Armenians to today's Bulgaria, many to the city which is now named Plovdiv. It's believed Maurice also exiled Armenians to Cyprus, Crete, Sparta, Sicily, and North Africa.

In addition to emperors, Armenian soldiers and generals (Narses, navy commanders Philippikos and Romanos who became emperors) defended the empire against the Arabs and invaders from the north. Famous patriarchs such as Photius were Armenian and so were a number of scholars (John the Grammarian, Leo the Philosopher) while the palace guards, called scolari, were often Armenian. Armenians dominated the government and the bureaucracy. The last ten emperors (1354-1453) were members of the Armenian Palaiologos dynasty. Seven of them bore the name "John".

Armenians were the empire's largest non-Greek minority. Some non-Armenian historians have said the correct name of the empire should be Armeno-Byzantium.

Among the military cast, two Armenian families were particularly dominant as providers of outstanding military leaders. They were the Kekaumenos and Pekourimos. A general from the first family learned how to write so as to write his memoirs and provide his sons advice on military strategy.

Basil I, arguably the third most-successful emperor (after Constantine and Justinian) was an upstart although he descended from an Armenian nakharar family. He started his career as a horse tamer and boxer who endeared himself to a widow, one of the richest Byzantine landowners. He then gained the favor of the emperor by marrying the emperor's mistress. He then murdered the emperor and ruled for 19 years. His dynasty is called Macedonian because he was born in that Byzantine

The Macedonians ruled until 1056. During their reign Byzantium had its golden age. In addition to a flourishing of the arts, letters, and culture, the empire expanded, and gradually shifted from defending its borders to reconquering lost lands. The "golden age" bolstered by the rule of able emperors such as Basil I, Constantine VII, and Basil II, known as "Bulgar Slayer". All three were Armenian.

The longest-reigning emperor was the Armenian Basil II (976-1025). He incorporated Armenia, Georgia, and Bulgaria into the empire with unprecedented ruthlessness.

In the great iconography/iconoclasm conflict which split public and government opinion, Armenians often battled the iconoclasm faction.

## Comments



**Andrew Demirdjian** – 2022-01-04 00:50:01

Your "Did You Know" articles are very thought provoking. They not only inform you, but stir your imagination to ask questions and to see relationships better.