The Macedonians

When Basil I became sole emperor in 867, he became the first of what would be a long line of Macedonian emperors. Between Basil I and Basil II, whose reign ended in 1025, the empire would once again extend its reach from the Danube to the Euphrates. This was a period in which emperors reconquered the lands they could, negotiating trade with the lands they could not and celebrating the classical heritage and restored prestige and prosperity of the empire through cultural expression centered at the imperial court. The latter is commonly referred to as the Macedonian Renaissance.

The first step in this process was reasserting Byzantine dominance in the West and halting Islamic advances into southern Italy—a plan Basil I began pursuing soon after he secured sole imperial rule. In order to do so, however, Basil I needed the cooperation of the Franks, the dominant military presence in Italy, and the papacy. The Frankish ruler, Charlemagne’s great-grandson Louis II, appeared willing to assist Basil I, especially after the latter sent a naval force to support Louis II’s attempt to reconquer Bari from Islamic forces. The two men seemed to have similar goals: shore up territories vulnerable to attack and assert their own authority. It was the second of these two goals that brought the two into conflict. Louis II’s great-grandfather, Charlemagne, had been crowned and anointed as Emperor of the Romans by Pope Leo III in 800. Charlemagne avoided direct confrontation with the east by downplaying the Roman part, preferring instead to stress the imperial title as it related to his rule to the Franks. Louis II took a different tactic. One of Louis II’s advisors composed the Chronicle of Salerno; a tract sent to Basil I in which the author claimed that Louis II was, in fact, the true Emperor of the Romans. He based this claim on a document called the Donation of Constantine, in which the Constantine the Great left his holdings in and around Rome to the safe keeping and administration of the office of the pope when he moved the capital of the empire to Constantinople in 327. The document, which would be discovered as a forgery in the fifteenth century, also claimed Constantine the Great granted the pope sole authority to crown and anoint the emperor of the Romans. Since Louis II received this honor, the author concluded that all should defer to him, including Basil I. Basil I responded to the claim and the tract by striking a deal with one of Louis II’s vassals, a disaffected Lombard duke, to capture Louis II. Louis II then retired to Ravenna and died four years later.

In the meantime, Basil I turned back to the east and built up the navy. He concentrated his efforts on reclaiming Greece, which the Slavs had taken, and started a long campaign to reclaim the areas taken over by the Bulgarians. He was able to secure southern Italy, but he lost Sicily. He also revised the law code for the empire, eliminating old laws and compiling a guide for the administration of the empire, both of which his successor completed, and sent missionaries to establish the Christian church in all reclaimed areas.
The renewed prestige of the campaigns of Basil I and those who succeeded him was reflected in a revival of learning and culture. During the reign of the Macedonian emperors, a lavish civil bureaucracy developed in Constantinople and was centered at the imperial court. Here, the educated elite who filled the ranks of the administration projected their classical heritage and learning by patronizing the arts. The emperor and members of this administration patronized scholars who wrote new commentaries on classical Greek texts. These writers also produced copies of Christian texts, including Psalters and commentaries on theology, employing artists to illustrate them with paintings and gilded backgrounds. These illuminated manuscripts combined classical reference points with Christian stories, a pattern also seen in larger paintings and mosaics of the period. This revival of learning and culture led by the civil bureaucracy, however, highlighted a growing distance between those in Constantinople and the military elite in the themes. The rivalry that developed between the two would have repercussions that came to the forefront beginning in 1025 with the death of Basil II.