

THE
MEDIEVAL MEDITERRANEAN

PEOPLES, ECONOMIES AND CULTURES, 400-1500

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VOLUME 45



K-5,-348

BYZANTIUM IN THE YEAR 1000

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BRILL
LEIDEN · BOSTON
2003

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PREFACE

This volume grew out of the Byzantine session of the 19th Congress of Historical Sciences at Oslo. With the Congress scheduled for August 2000, it did not require much effort of imagination to find a theme. The subject of Byzantium at the end of the first millennium A.D. would have suggested itself even if the date had been completely devoid of historical significance. In fact, the choice was far from being purely arbitrary or symbolic. The year 1000 A.D. marks the middle of a century which saw the medieval Byzantine Empire at the height of its military and political power. Between 950 and 1050, the empire of New Rome reconquered the islands of Crete and Cyprus, and went on to regain a substantial amount of continental territory in Syria, Northern Mesopotamia, the Balkans and Southern Italy, which it had lost in the seventh and eighth centuries, as well as annexing more of Armenia than had ever been ruled by the ancient Roman Empire. Its political and cultural influence extended beyond its frontiers, not only to the principalities and tribes which were its immediate neighbours, and to the ancient centres of the Christian world, Rome and Jerusalem, which remained tantalisingly beyond its military grasp; with the conversion of Rus, symbolised by the baptism of Prince Vladimir of Kiev in 989, its magnetism reached far to the north of the Black Sea, into what for the Romans had been the dark wastes of Scythia. The decades before and after the year 1000 also tend to be seen as the high point of Byzantine imperial absolutism, the period when centuries of administrative, economic and ideological centralisation came to fruition, and the Byzantine emperor controlled the resources, the lives and the beliefs of his subjects as never before or since.

The emperor in the year 1000 and the generations on either side of it was Basil II (976–1025), whose name is emblematic of the greatness of the medieval Byzantine state. It is not just that Basil's reign came chronologically at the end of a series of interrelated developments which characterise the political and cultural 'renaissance' of Byzantium in the ninth and tenth centuries: a long succession of strong and effective emperors, all more or less closely identified with the dynasty founded by Basil II's great-great grandfather, Basil I the