

Basil of Byzantium

Part 1:
Moms Just Don't Understand

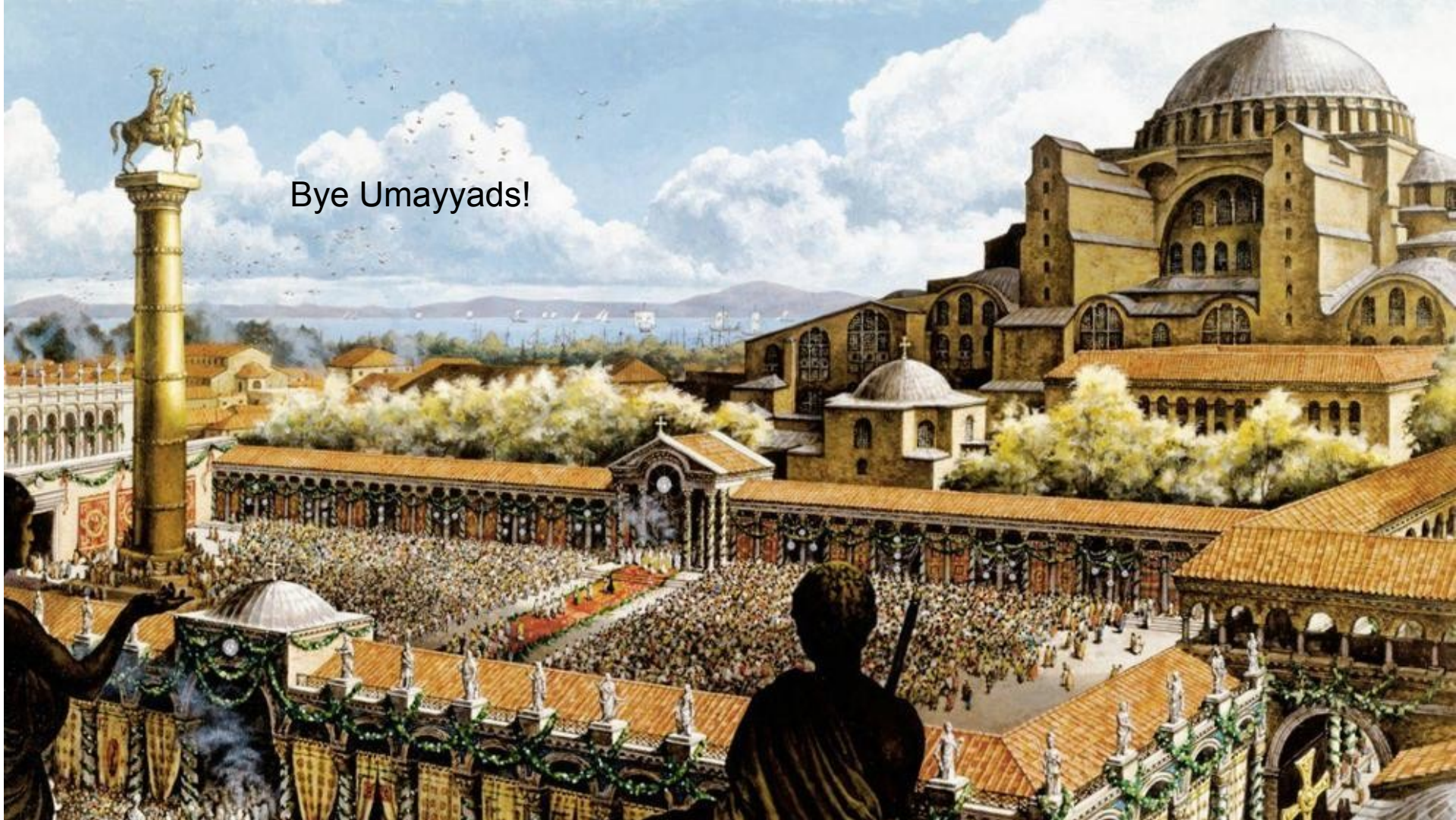
Byzantine Empire

early-9th century

• **Constantinople**
Byzantine capital
from 330 C.E.



Bye Umayyads!





Μιχαήλ “ὁ Μέθυστος”*

- Mikey 3 on the throne
- Youngest emperor to date, took power at age 2 when his dad (Θεόφιλος) died
- Surrounded since birth by courtiers trying to manipulate him and gain favor
- Everyone wants to tell this kid what to do!

(*We'll come back to his epithet later)



Sick gold coin ft. Mike



Theodora

Theodoesagreatjob

- Empire mostly controlled by Mike's mom Θεοδώρα, and her favorite eunuch, Θεόκτιστος
- Iconophile - this lady loves an icon!!!
- She's actually a great ruler!
Celebrated for being really really good at diplomacy and foreign policy
- Exiles her loser brother Βάρδας from Constantinople because he's a sneaky asshole and probably a misogynist, I'm guessing
- The Eastern Orthodox Church today venerates her as a saint

"...a woman of character, who was able to exclude her brother from power without difficulty, who was not afraid to speak her mind when necessary, and who was fully capable of governing the empire"



You Can't Tell Me What To Do, Mom!

- Mike is 15 and *hates* that his mom and her weird eunuch friend are in charge
- Mike wants to marry his sexy rebellious gf, Ευδοκία Ιγγερίνα, but mom won't let him because she's an iconoclast
- Mom forces him to marry this girl Ευδοκία Δεκαπολίτισσα just because she's an iconophile who comes from a good family 🙄



Ingerina, every teenage emperor's dream wife



Dekapolitissa, boring icon-loving wench

The Return of Bardas

- Mike is furious, and broods for a full year.
- Brings back Uncle Bardas from exile
- Bardas hates his sister and agrees to help Mike with his mom problem
- Mike makes Bardas *kaisar*, 2nd in charge
- Bardas asks if he can kill Theoktistos (the eunuch) and Mike says it's cool
- With Theoktistos gone, Mike forces his mom and sister to live in a remote monastery



The monastery is still around, but it's a mosque now

Mikey in Charge!

- Hell yeah!
- Emperor Mike is 17, no one can tell him what to do, and he's got a totally chill uncle to help him out
- Uhhh, yeah, the Byzantine Empire is about to get pretty awesome



Oops! Nevermind!

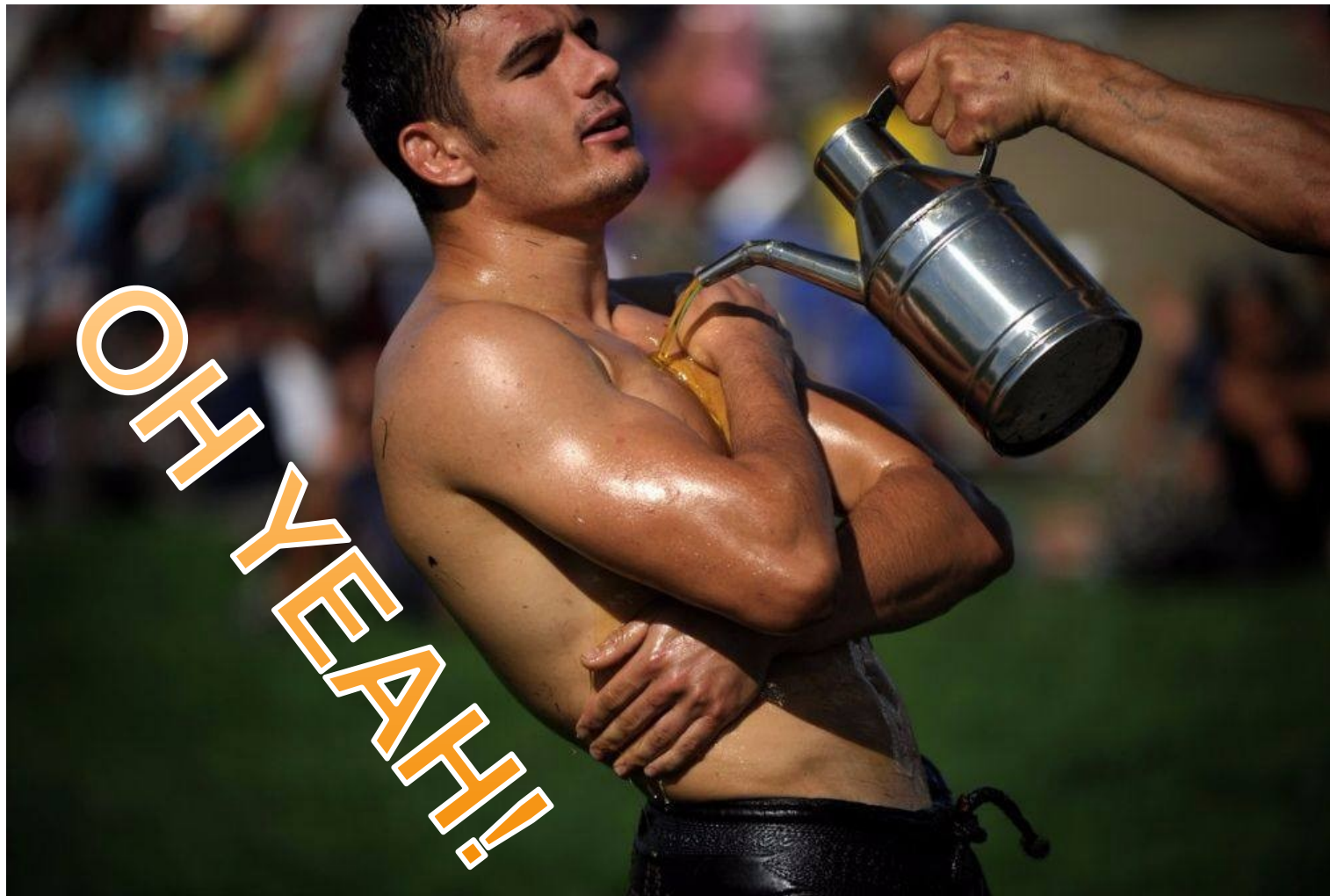
- Mike has no idea what he's doing, and is a terrible emperor.
- Oh yeah—Μιχαήλ ὁ Μέθυσος means “Michael the Drunk”
- Frat bro emperor
- Keeps getting involved in stupid wars, then losing horribly
- The Abbasids sink almost 400 Byzantine ships, attempts to conquer Bulgaria fail, and unpopular laws cause unrest
- Bardas has to step in and rule because Mikey doesn't actually care about running an empire
- If he's not interested ruling, what is he so interested in instead?



A photograph of two professional wrestlers in a physical struggle. The wrestler on the left is shirtless, wearing black wrestling trunks, and has his face covered with his hand, appearing to be in pain. The wrestler on the right is also shirtless, wearing black wrestling trunks, and is leaning forward, holding the other wrestler's head. The background is a blurred crowd of spectators. The text "SEXY OIL WRESTLING!!!" is overlaid in large, bold, orange letters with a white outline.

**SEXY OIL
WRESTLING!!!**

OH YEAH!!



HOT HOT HOT!!!



BYZANTINE BOYS GONE WILD



Is He... You Know... Unwilling to Produce an Heir?

- Mike spends pretty much all of his time watching naked oil wrestling and chariot races
- Also he refuses to sleep with his wife
- Like, he won't even share a bedroom with her
- And can't stop staring at men
- Huh
- Interesting
- I wonder why that is
- I guess we'll never know



Interlude:
Queer History, Primary Sources, and Symbolism

Turns Out Most Historians Are Homophobes...

- It's actually really hard to find information about this topic
- Historians have systematically removed references to queerness (doubly so in English translations!)
- What does survive is coded in symbolism, and requires a lot of creative interpretation and speculation
- Most of my research comes from the writings of Symeon the Logothete, a 10th c. Byzantine historian who made a *lot* of references to same-sex desire
- Unfortunately, it's been heavily censored over the last ~1000 years
- In particular, it's difficult to find *any* accurate information on Michael III and Basil I for reasons I will discuss later

Part 2: Fresh Basil

Meanwhile on the Streets of Constantinople...

- Meet Βασίλειος!
- He's a homeless guy in his mid-40s
- From Macedonia, at the time part of Bulgaria (which is at war)
- Probably Armenian, but no one is sure
- Very rough life, including being kidnapped and enslaved as a child. Has been homeless for about 20 years
- He's very sexy! Multiple primary sources mention this!

“... most outstanding in bodily form and heavy set; his eyebrows grew together, he had large eyes and a broad chest, and a rather downcast expression”

- Fun fact: His dad is also named Bardas, but unrelated to the other one



Looking For Discreet Man To Participate In Special Friendship Ritual ;)

- One day a church caretaker named Nicholas passes by Basil, who is sleeping outside the church gate
- He feels a “divine compulsion” to take Basil in for the night
- I’m not making this up; this is how Symeon describes it:

Trembling with purpose, Nicholas led him into the church. And on the next day, he took him to the baths, and performed a ritual of brotherhood together with Basil’s pouch and staff. He transformed him, and they rejoiced within one another.

- Like *come on*
- “Pouch and staff” OK
- “They rejoiced within one another”?
What a heterosexual thing to say



Mike's "Horses"

- Meanwhile, Mike's got a problem: he's got really strong "horses" that he can't handle on his own
- Most men aren't willing to help, and the ones who are willing "aren't man enough to cope with [his] horses"
- His wife *definitely* can't handle his "horses"
- Mike is getting increasingly frustrated that he can't find a strong, manly man to help him with his strong "horses"



The Doctor Makes a Housecall

- Basil is now living with Nicholas at the church
- I assume they are performing the “ritual of brotherhood” together pretty often at this point
- Nicholas’s brother, a doctor who works in Mike’s court, comes to visit, and is immediately struck by how hot Basil is
- Later, back at court, the doctor overhears a military advisor complaining about Mike’s “horse” problem
- The doctor is like, Oh wait I just met the perfect guy for this!



Love at First Fight

- Basil is brought to the palace and presented to the emperor
- Mike is like, Ok yeah he's hot and all, but how good is he at oil wrestling?
- Basil defeats the reigning champion. Several sources describe the fight as "deeply carnal"
- Mike falls for him *hard*

"Being ordered to hold the horse, Basil held the bridle with one hand and with the other he touched the horse's ear and so reduced it to the mildness of a lamb. At this the emperor was pleased and comforted..."

- Uh yeah, this guy definitely knows how to handle a man's "horse"



Meeting The Parents

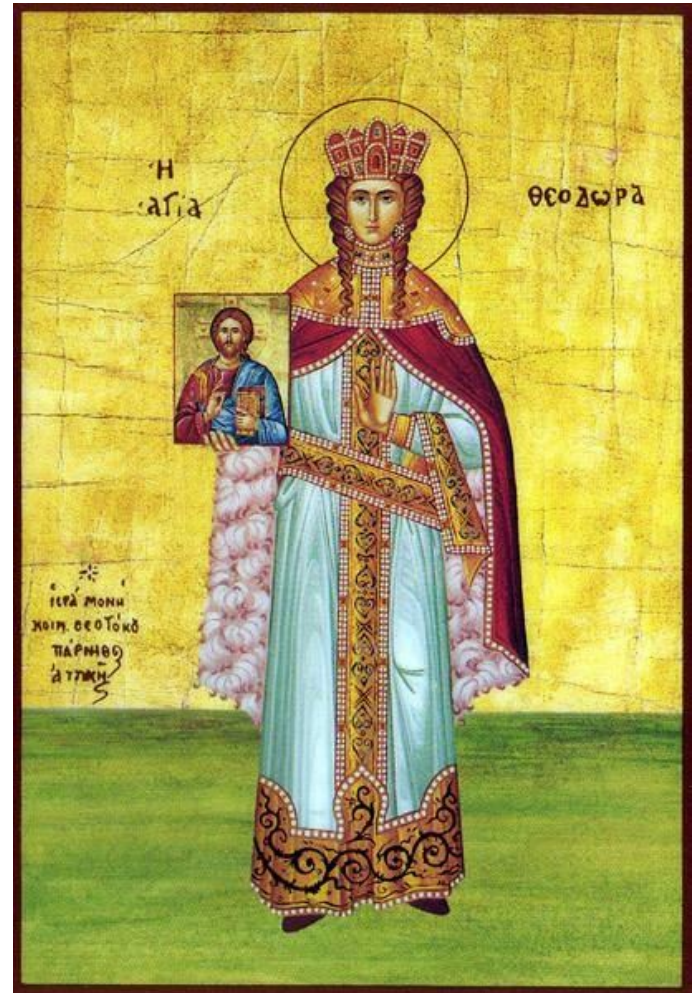
- Mike is so into Basil at this point that he takes him to see Theodora at the monastery
- She immediately hates him!
- This only makes Mike more obsessed with Basil

“The emperor introduced Basil to his mother and said joyously:

‘Look here mother, what a boy I have hired!’

But she came out, looked at Basil, and then turned away, saying to her son:

‘This, my child, is the man who will destroy our family.’”



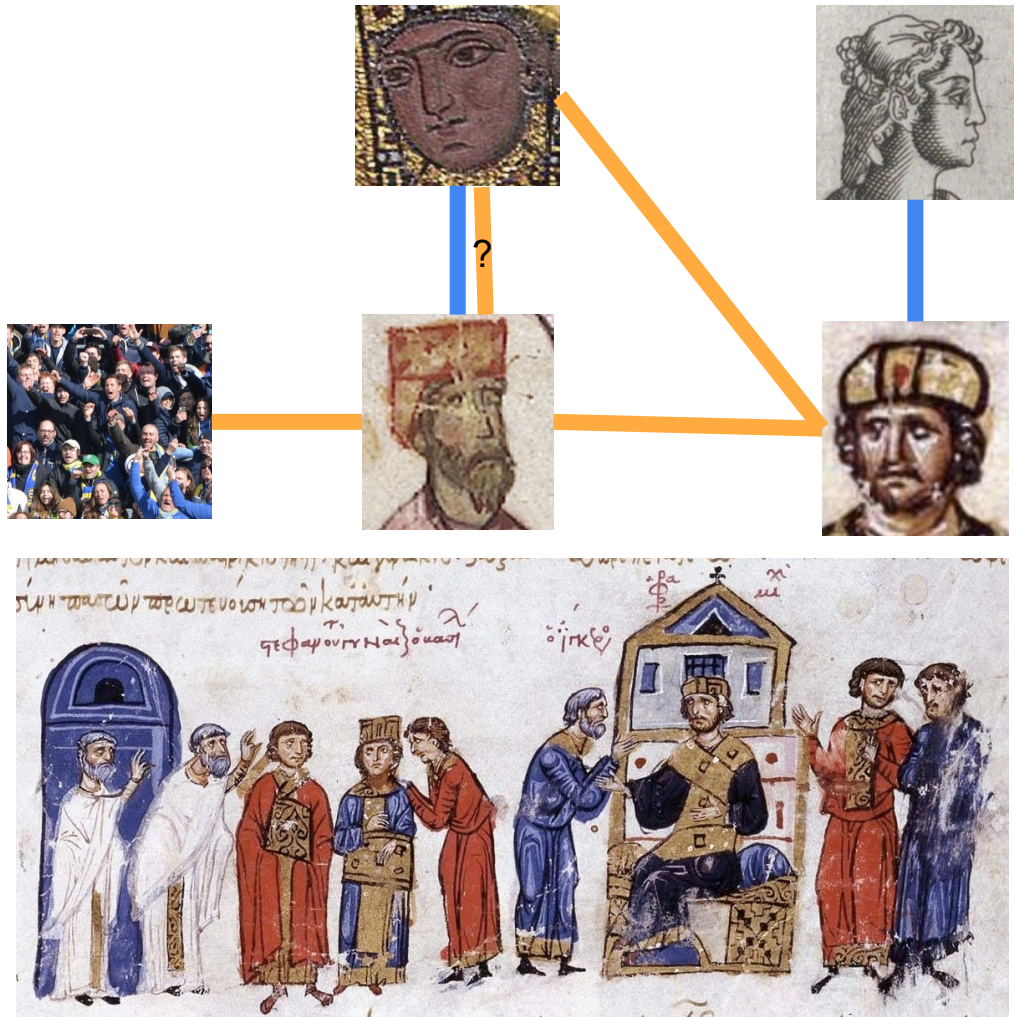
Sugar Mommy

- Things are going great for Basil
- Everyone at court loves him, and Mike is finally satisfied enough to start running the empire
- Nobles from all over are visiting to see this sexy guy who charmed the emperor
- Basil is allowed to sleep around, as long as he comes back home to Mike
- He meets Δανιηλῖς, basically the Byzantine Bezos
- They start hooking up, and she gifts him an estate and a bunch of treasure



Royal Polycule

- Basil and Mike are inseparable
- Mike names him παρακοιμώμενος, bodyguard and bed companion
- This is highly unusual! Normally only eunuchs are allowed
- Mike still kind of wants to marry Eudokia Ingerina (his teenage crush), but it would be a big scandal
- He asks Basil to marry Ingerina so he can continue hooking up with her
- It's complicated!



Bye, Bardas!

- Oh yeah, what about Uncle Bardas, who's been actually ruling the empire?
- He hates Basil and fears he's going to corrupt Mike
- Mike and Basil decide they're better off without Bardas, so they kill him
- The public is pretty unhappy. They see Mike as incompetent (correct) and debauched (also correct), and now the only guy actually doing anything is dead

“Justinian built the Great Church, and he had it decorated with gold and silver and precious marble, and nobody remembers him nowadays. And you, emperor, who have made a dung-deposit and a resting-place for horses, you think that you will be remembered by this?”



Call Me Daddy

- Mike doesn't really care though
- He really wants to marry Basil so they can be co-emperors
- The church is like, Um, it's the 9th century and homosexuality is punishable by death. You absolutely can't marry a man
- Instead, Mike adopts Basil as his son???
- Remember that Basil is 29 years older than Mike
- Everybody is very confused
- But this means Basil and Mike are officially co-emperors
- The public is MAD. Some people burn down cornfields and vineyards in protest



Leo Is Born

- Now that they're pseudo-married, the relationship starts to strain
- Mike gets Ingerina (now empress via her marriage to Basil) pregnant, and she gives birth to Λέων ὁ Σοφός
- Mike celebrates the birth with a huge chariot race
- During the race, Mike makes some snide comments to Basil, reminding him that he'll always be the *real* emperor



That Bitch, Basilikinos

- With Mike refusing to rule, Basil has to do all the work
- Basil spends all his time making political and administrative decisions
- This makes Mike super jealous
- Everyone is treating him like a kid again!
- To get back at Basil, he starts hardcore flirting this guy
Βασιλικῖνος
- They even have similar names!
Wow!



This Town Ain't Big Enough For Two Basils

- This goes on for about a year
- Mike and Basilikinos are not being subtle. They're wearing each other's clothes, sharing a bed, gossiping about Basil
- Mike announces that he's going to make Basilikinos the new co-emperor
- Basil has had enough!
- He throws a big party and makes sure Mike gets absolutely "sozzled" on wine
- Basil tells Mike to wait in the bedroom so they can have a foursome with Ingerina and Basilikinos ;)



La Grande Mort

- Mike and Basilikinos are passed out on the bed
- Basil clears everyone else out, locks the door, and breaks the key inside
- He stabs that bitch Basilikinos, killing him immediately
- Next, he cuts Mike's hands off
- ...but then changes his mind and kills him too
- Haha oops



Part 3:
Long Live the Macedonian!

So, What Now?

- Eventually the guards break in and witness the scene
- The emperor and his consort are dead, the royal lineage is broken, and Basil is standing over their still-warm corpses, covered in blood
- The empire now falls to Basil, an unqualified, illiterate wrestler
- Things are not looking good for the empire...

Oops! Nevermind!

- Turns out, everyone is cool with this!
- Basil has spent the last year learning how to effectively run an empire, and has the respect of the court
- The public likes him because he's a fair and pious leader who respects common people
- Even the church likes him because he is very religious and orthodox (you know, aside from the bisexuality and premarital sex)
- Instead of the royal mausoleum, Mike's remains are sent to the monastery where Theodora lives



A Golden Age

- Over the next 19 years, Basil is responsible for the golden age of the Byzantine Empire
- He completely overhauls the legal system, creating a new system called the Basilika, which remains in place for 500 years
- Both the aristocracy and the common people thrive under his rule
- Today, he's considered the greatest Byzantine emperor



...Until Leo Comes Along

- Hey, remember Leo? The kid Mike had with Basil's wife?
- Yeah he's grown up now!
- Officially, he's Basil's son
- But he's getting suspicious because he looks a lot like Mike and nothing like Basil
- Unlike hot and muscular Basil, Leo is a big nerd
- He's really into poetry and legal theory
- Leo completely idolizes Mike, even though he died when Leo was one year old



More Horses

- Leo and Basil *hate* each other
- Basil hates how weak and nerdy Leo is, and resents him for being Mike's son
- Leo hates how brutish and harsh Basil is, and blames him for Mike's death
- Leo keeps trying to assassinate Basil over and over, but he's really bad at it
- Basil throws him in jail for a few years, but is starting to get paranoid, suspecting everything is plot by Leo
- Basil punishes Leo by forcing his wife Zoe to remarry to insignificant official
- Basil threatens to blind Leo if he doesn't stop with the plots



Goddamnit Leo, are you trying to assassinate me *again*? On our father-son horse riding trip???

Oh Deer

- Basil goes on a hunting trip where his belt gets caught in a deer's antlers
- The deer drags him through the forest for 16 miles, breaking many of his bones
- A servant cuts him loose, but Basil sees the knife, assumes it's another Leo assassination plot, and kills the servant
- Oops
- Basil's wounds get infected, and he eventually dies from it



Epilogue: Stick to Poetry, Kid

Ugh, Leo...

- Yeah so, Leo becomes emperor after Basil dies
- He immediately reburies Mike's remains in the royal mausoleum and throws a big ceremony
- Like his dad, Leo is not a good emperor, but for completely different reasons
- He spends all his time at the library, inventing a new filing system
- Obsessed with legal theory, no interest in legal reality
- Thinks he's super smart, doesn't listen to advisors or the public, and undoes most of Basil's progress
- Oh yeah, that's why it's hard to find accurate information: Leo destroyed the official records from Mike and Basil's time, and re-wrote them to make Mike look super cool and Basil look bad



μου κροτηθεῖ μένος· τρέπονται ῥωμαῖοι καὶ πολὺ ἀνέτο φάρος·

ῥωμαῖοι

ῥωμαῖοι

