

THE STRUCTURE AND MANAGEMENT OF THE BASILEIAS ACCORDING TO HISTORICAL SOURCES¹

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Abstract: ZOZULÁK, Ján. *The Structure and Management of the Basileias According to Historical Sources*. The study analyses the structure and management of the Basileias, a shelter for the poor established in the 4th century by Basil the Great. The historian Sozomenos refers to this building complex as the Basileias, named after its founder, and testifies to the exceptional nature and grandeur of Basil's work. Although the Basileias played a significant role in its time, there is only a limited number of relevant scholarly articles and sources regarding that philanthropic institution. Therefore, the study will primarily rely on the writings of Basil the Great and his closest collaborators, through which we will clarify the organizational structure and governance of this shelter. By interpreting primary texts in Greek, we explain how charitable activities were perceived by Byzantine authors, who drew on biblical principles for helping those in need. Using Basil the Great's correspondence, we provide insights into this complex and demonstrate the practical forms of his philanthropic initiatives. Today, the search for inclusive approaches is a widely discussed topic, and the implementation of projects supporting help to those in need is a key and strategic priority for contemporary society. For this reason, we consider the subject of our research as highly relevant and necessary, particularly in terms of the long-term sustainability of philanthropic institutions that support marginalized social groups.

Keywords: *history, Byzantology, Basil the Great, the Basileias, Cappadocia, hospital, management, philanthropy*

Introduction

On the basis of Greek source literature, this study aims to present the institution of a shelter for the poor, founded by Basil the Great, Archbishop of Caesarea, in the 4th century. Basil, for his philanthropic institution, preferred the term *shelter for the poor* (πτωχοτροφείον) (Vasileios 1972d, 114) over *shelter for strangers* (ξενοδοχείον), which was the term commonly used in Antioch for similar establishments (Epifanios 1858, 504BC). A century later, the historian Sozomenos refers to this complex of buildings as *the Basileias* (Βασιλειάδα) (Sozomenos 1859, 1397A)², named after its founder, who used his great wealth to build this remarkable philanthropic institution in order to meet the needs of those in distress, thereby '*he followed the example of Christ*' (Χριστοῦ μίμησις) '*not in words, but in deeds*' (οὐ λόγῳ μὲν, ἔργῳ) (Teologos 1858, 580C); and by his own example he showed how it was necessary to care for those who suffer. In addition to his archiepiscopal duties, he found time to visit the sick in the shelter, helped them bear their suffering, tended to

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² "Προέστη δὲ καὶ Βασιλειάδος, ὃ πτωχῶν ἐστὶν ἐπισημότατον καταγῶγιον, ὑπὸ Βασιλείου τοῦ Καισαρείας ἐπισκόπου οἰκοδομηθέν, ἀφ' οὗ τὴν προσηγορίαν τὴν ἀρχὴν ἔλαβε καὶ εἰσέτι νῦν ἔχει."

their wounds, and probably also made use of his medical knowledge acquired during his studies in Athens, as his friend Gregory the Theologian testifies. (Teologos 1858, 528B).

Basil the Great not only founded the shelter for the poor, but also personally ‘oversaw’ (προέστη) (Sozomenos 1859, 1397A) and lived as an integral part of it, thus setting an example for both clergy and laity. He presents his acts as a practical application of the Gospel love of neighbor, following the call of Jesus Christ, who, through words and examples, demonstrated practical forms of mercy and urged care for the sick, when in one of his sermons, he reminded his listeners that God expects people to care for their brothers and to visit the sick: “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” (Mt 25: 34-36).

The Structure of the Basileias

The origins of the charitable activities on which Basil the Great drew appeared already in the early history of the Christian Church. The first Christians in Jerusalem emphasized that love is the principal virtue of the Christian faith; they relied on the words of Jesus Christ, who taught, that all the commandments of the Law and the Prophets in the Old Testament stem from God’s love and in love of neighbor (Mt 22: 37-40); consequently, they formed a community grounded in love, with each member working for the good of the others.

Basil the Great integrated theology, ascetic practice, and social care into a unified expression of faith, which is why the shelter for the poor he founded near Caesarea of Cappadocia, Asia Minor can be considered the largest institution of its time (Matoušek 2001, 88) where love of neighbor was realized in concrete actions, practically, yet with a spiritual intention. The Basileias was not merely a shelter for the poor but became the first organized complex of medical care and the most innovative social institution not only in the early Christian world, but in all of history. It had a reputation as a well-organized institution for helping those who suffered, and its fame endured long after Basil’s death (καὶ εἰσέτι νῦν ἔχει), as attested by the historian Sozomenos, and it became ‘the most renowned shelter for the poor’ (πτωχῶν ἐστὶν ἐπισημότατον καταγώγιον) (Sozomenos 1859, 1397A); it provided care for the poor, the sick, and pilgrims, including food, shelter, medical treatment, and spiritual service. There is evidence that it also included a home for the elderly, an orphanage, and craft schools where young people were taught various trades (Papadopoulos 1988, 354).

This great complex with a hospital was opened on September 5, 374 (Charonis 2002, 22). Gregory the Theologian, in his funeral oration in honor of his close friend, Basil the Great, refers to it as the ‘new city’ (καινὴν πόλιν) and ‘treasury of piety’ (εὐσεβείας ταμεῖον) (Teologos 1858, 577C). Although he avoids giving a detailed description of Basil’s shelter for the poor, he provides important information about this complex of buildings, which offered shelter to people with various needs. The complex included a hospital for lepers, and in the shelter, they found refuge, food, and care (Teologos 1858, 580C) as well as those suffering from contagious and incurable diseases, whom society rejected.

Gregory the Theologian provides the information that, besides the poor, the shelter accommodated the sick, who needed the specialized attention of professional caregivers. Basil the Great himself confirms this in letter 94 from the year 372, addressed to Elias, the provincial governor, in which he states that physicians (ιατρούοντας) and caregivers (νοσοκομοῦντας), worked in the shelter, taking charge of the care of the sick (Vasileios 1972h, 178). The assistance

offered to people in need, whether suffering from illness or traveling Basil defends before the opponents of his philanthropic activities and poses to them a rhetorical question: “*Whom do we wrong when we build shelters for strangers and pilgrims who come to us, and provide necessary services for those who need treatment for their illnesses—namely caregivers, physicians, draft animals, and guides?*” (Vasileios 1972h, 178).³

With these words, Basil responds to the criticism or misunderstanding of certain wealthy individuals who objected to the Church investing considerable resources in these services, making it clear that the establishment of hospitals and shelters harms no one. Basil also provides governor Elias with further detailed information about this complex, remarking that at its center stood a magnificent church for the celebration of liturgy (οἶκον εὐκτήριον μεγαλοπρεπῶς), next to it stood the house of the provost, who administered the institution as both physician and caregiver; buildings with rooms for priests, monks, and other workers employed in the institution; dwellings prepared for the reception of emperors and state officials; hostels for the lodging of strangers and passersby; as well as a hospital for the healing of the sick (Vasileios 1972h, 178). Physicians and nursing staff were employed in the hospital, and Basil also provided for them by having dwellings built for them as part of the complex.

At the same time, Basil defends the Church’s right to manage its affairs without interference from secular authorities. He argues that Emperor Valens granted him permission to freely carry out activities related to the establishment of the shelter for the poor: “*And the great emperor, seeing our diligence, permitted us to administer the ecclesiastical affairs on our own.*” (Vasileios 1972h, 178).⁴ Emperor Valens, during his stay in Caesarea, was moved by Basil’s activities and the people’s devotion to their shepherd; therefore, he reversed his initial decision to send him into exile and permitted him to carry out his philanthropic work. Thus, it represented an important authorization that the emperor personally gave Basil his approval to establish and manage the Basileias. In terms of legitimacy and support, this constitutes an exceptionally important aspect of Basil’s project.

The recipient of this letter is the high-ranking official Elias, the provincial governor, to whom Basil expresses his respect in the opening of the letter. At the same time, he defends himself against slander and provides a detailed account of his activities in connection with the establishment of the shelter for the poor. Basil begins with a humble acknowledgment that he had wished to visit the addressee in person, but was prevented from doing so by illness. This indicates the seriousness and respect with which he addressed public authorities, while at the same time pointing to his physical condition, which prevented a personal meeting. It may be assumed that, if Basil had not written this letter in response to slander, in which he describes the progress of the construction of the shelter for the poor, we would probably not know the details of the Basileias that he recorded in it.

In light of historical circumstances, it must be acknowledged that Basil the Great lived during a period of intense struggle for the purity of faith and persistently opposed the Arians. Heretics and opponents slandered him with the intent of defaming his reputation and also attempted to undermine his philanthropic activities. In spite of all difficulties, Basil decided to establish his shelter for the poor in the first half of 372, choosing a plot of land outside the city that was large enough for the purpose. Initially, it was essential to ‘*collect the materials*’ (τὰς ὕλας συμποριζόμενοι) (Vasileios

³ “Τίνα δὲ ἀδικοῦμεν καταγῶγια τοῖς ξένοις οἰκοδομοῦντες, οἷς ἂν κατὰ πάροδον ἐπιφοιτῶσι καὶ τοῖς θεραπέας τινὸς διὰ τὴν ἀσθένειαν δεόμενοι, καὶ τὴν ἀναγκαίαν τούτοις παραμυθίαν ἐγκαθιστῶντες, τοὺς νοσοκομοῦντας, τοὺς ἰατροῦντας, τὰ νωτοφόρα, τοὺς παραπέμποντας;”

⁴ “Καὶ Βασίλειος ὁ μέγας, τὴν πολυπραγμοσύνην ἡμῶν ταύτην καταμαθὼν, εἰδοὺς ἡμᾶς ἐφ’ ἑαυτῶν τὰς Ἐκκλησίας οἰκονομεῖν.”

1972h, 180),⁵ hence he tried to persuade wealthy individuals to contribute to the construction of this philanthropic complex. The interaction between the poor and the wealthy, often interpreted either as a tension of opposites or as a complementary connection in both literal and spiritual senses (Girardi 2014, 460), produced a significant social challenge that necessitated a response from Basil the Great. Christians viewed it as their obligation to put into practice love for God and neighbor; as a result, they initiated the organization of medical and social services, particularly in the 4th century, which some authors refer to as ‘*the golden age of the Greek-Orthodox tradition, life, culture, theology, and spirituality*’ (Agioreitis 2005, 108).

The Management of the Basileias

The establishment of the Basileias (Cassia 2004) marked a major turning point in philanthropic consciousness, as the Christian Church thereby institutionalized the Gospel commandment of love for one’s neighbor not only individually but also organizationally. The historian Sozomenos understood Basil’s shelter for the poor primarily as part of the ascetic movement in Cappadocia and Pontus (Sozomenos 1859, 1397A), which put into practice Christ’s commandment of love for one’s neighbor, hence it is understandable that the philanthropic complex near Caesarea of Cappadocia was managed by monks (Papadopoulos 1999, 117).

After a thorough examination of the surviving sources, it is highly probable that Basil’s shelter for the poor was an organized complex of buildings consisting of multiple philanthropic facilities with a clear organizational structure and management. At its head stood a provost (προεστώς), that is, Basil himself, who managed and supervised the operation of the entire complex. Reporting to him were the heads responsible for the individual departments (hospital, workshops, and supply), all directly subordinate to the provost. (Papadopoulos 1988, 356).

Running this large complex required thoughtful management of laypersons with specialized knowledge in property administration and the oversight of workshops and supply, who maintained the day-to-day operation of the Basileias, alongside numerous craftsmen (τέχνας). As Basil the Great explained (Vasileios 1972h, 178), each trade needed proper facilities to operate, so it was necessary to include buildings designated for this purpose. A large number of animals were used for transporting materials, which required the presence of additional laborers.

Basil also established craft schools where the poor Cappadocians were taught various crafts, as noted above. It can be assumed that in this ‘*new city*’ (καινὴν πόλιν) ‘*the largest manufacturing enterprise in Cappadocia*’ was established (Papadopoulos 1988, 354), which needed to be organized, since it provided financial resources for the operation of the Basileias.

Based on the information provided by Basil the Great and Gregory the Theologian it can be inferred that care for the sick was given particular emphasis, exceeding every other philanthropic activity carried out in the institution. It follows that, around 370, a hospital existed in Caesarea of Cappadocia. Although many scholars regard Basil’s shelter for the poor as the first hospital, recent studies have shown that it was a mixed-purpose shelter providing various forms of assistance, rather than concentrating exclusively on medical care. (Miller 1998, 113). The fact that Basil the Great’s shelter provided assistance to the poor, the elderly, and the disabled, as well as to those suffering from various illnesses, does not exclude the likelihood that it included a well-organized hospital staffed by physicians and healthcare personnel.

In the management of the Basileias, the devotion of Basil the Great becomes evident, who provided this shelter for the poor near Caesarea not only with financial support but above all with

⁵ “ἤδη γὰρ ἔσμεν ἐν τῷ ἔργῳ, τὰς ὕλας τέως συμποριζόμενοι.”

his personal commitment and active involvement. Without these virtues, it would not have been possible to manage and sustain such a variety of many different functions of this shelter for the poor. Christian selflessness is rooted in love of one's neighbor, which constitutes the fundamental principle of philanthropic work. This is exemplified in the care of the sick, as Eusebius of Caesarea, the Church historian, records when citing the text of Dionysius of Alexandria, which testifies to the immense love of Christians toward the terminally ill and to their spirit of self-sacrifice in the name of Jesus Christ: *"Many of our brethren overlook the danger into which they might fall, and, devoted to their neighbors out of profound love and fraternal affection, visit the sick without protection, minister to them with shining dedication, and care for them in Christ, joyfully dying with them after contracting their illness. When they are infected by their brethren, they knowingly take upon themselves their sufferings. Many of them tended and healed the sick, but themselves died, having taken upon themselves their death."* (Eusebios 1857, 688C-689A).

In addition to caring for those in need, Basil the Great took an interest in the problems of various people, as is evident from his letters, which provide information on his multifaceted activities and his concern for priests, widows, orphans, miners, and oppressed compatriots. He frequently wrote letters to the governors of his own region, and to those of other areas, requesting solutions to issues concerning taxes (Vasileios 1973b, 364-366; Vasileios 1972b, 238-240), for example, that priests be exempted from paying taxes (Vasileios 1973a, 334-336), and that the taxes of miners be reduced (Vasileios 1972c, 196-198). He interceded on behalf of his relatives (Vasileios 1972e, 198-200; Vasileios 1972f, 200) as well as for those in need (Vasileios 1972g, 232-236), for accused citizens (Vasileios 1973c, 412-414) and for widows (Vasileios 1972a, 240-242).

Conclusion

Based on the correspondence of Basil the Great and other relevant historical sources, we have clarified the structure, practical organization, and management of the Basileias, which became the first major philanthropic organized program for the care of the poor, the homeless, widows, orphans, pilgrims, and those suffering from various illnesses. It was grounded in the biblical principles of aiding people in need, as analyzed in his study by M. Girardi (Girardi 2014, 459-483).

Besides Basil the Great, other authors of this period also emphasized care for the poor and the sick. Gregory of Nyssa, for instance, emphasized the necessity of loving the poor and helping them (Nyssis 1858, 460A). Gregory the Theologian similarly stressed the importance of exercising mercy toward the sick (Teologos 1857, 864CD). All were guided by the words of Jesus Christ, who fostered a sense of mercy in the hearts of believers as an expression of love for their neighbors, although he did not specify how Christians should assist the poor.

The first Christians in Jerusalem followed Christ's commandment of love for one's neighbor and they observed the teachings of the Apostle Paul, who placed great emphasis on love: *"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."* (1Cor 13:13) They freely contributed their possessions and *"had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need."* (Acts 2:42-46). With the growth of Christian communities, there arose a need for a certain form of organization of philanthropic activities in order to meet the needs of the increasing number of people in distress. When Hellenistic Jews who had accepted the Christian faith began to dispute with the Hebraic Jews, who had also become Christians, regarding the provision for widows, the apostles appointed seven deacons to oversee the care of different groups in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:1-6).

The Christian communities that spread throughout the Roman Empire adopted the model of social institutions established in Jerusalem, as indicated by the text *Apostolic Constitutions*

(Diatagaí 1993, 206-208), which demonstrates that in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, bishops were obliged to care for sick believers, thus carrying out Christ's commandment of love. In collaboration with the deacons, they managed the charitable activities of the local Church and collected contributions from wealthy Christians, which they distributed to poor believers. In the early 2nd century, Polycarp of Smyrna regarded the care of those in distress as the principal responsibility of the Church (Polykarpos 1995, 184). In the 3rd century, Dionysius, the bishop of Alexandria, encouraged his community to heed Christ's commandment of love and to provide aid to the afflicted when Alexandria was struck by the plague (Miller 1998, 67-68).

The earliest Christian hospitals and social institutions within the Roman Empire represented a genuine demonstration of Christian philanthropy toward anyone in need. T. Miller in his book *The Birth of the Hospital in the Byzantine Empire* (Miller 1997), drawing on historical Byzantine medical manuscripts, argues that the emergence of the hospital did not occur in the 18th and 19th centuries AD in Western Europe, but already in the 4th century thanks to the great Fathers and Teachers of the Orthodox Church Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and John Chrysostom in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, known to Western historians as Byzantium. T. Miller claims that these three hierarchs influenced the Byzantine state, the Church, monastic communities, wealthy aristocrats, and major landowners in the eastern Roman Empire that they cooperated in founding philanthropic complexes of buildings. These included the shelters for the poor, orphanages, homes for the elderly, hospitals, and monasteries, which were entrusted with managing these institutions, securing their funding, caring for the sick and the poor, and burying the indigent. All of these services were offered gratuitously, in accordance with the principles of Christian love (agapé). After a thorough analysis of the patristic texts, he raises the question at the end of the book: "It is likely that hospitals had a very strong influence on Byzantine medicine. Did they not fundamentally reshape the entire perspective of medicine in the Eastern Roman Empire? It is intriguing, however, to consider the advances which the Clinical medicine of France, England, and Austria made during the 18th and early 19th centuries as a result of careful observations in the hospital wards. In a similar fashion, xenon practice may have enabled Byzantine doctors to expand their field of experience and to discover more effective therapies." (Miller 1998, 244).

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