



BASILIIUS OF CAESAREA

BASILIIUS of **CAESAREA** or Basiliius the Great (ca. a.d. 330-79), bishop in Caesarea in Cappadocia from 370, after Eusebius. Basiliius was born in Caesarea into a distinguished family in the history of the early church. He, his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus are the famous “three Cappadokian Fathers.” In Caesarea he began to study rhetoric and philosophy, and later proceeded to Constantinople (ca. 346) and Athens, where Gregory of Nazianzus was his fellow student. In the history of the Christian church he is particularly known as an ardent antagonist of Arianism (the fundamental tenet of which was that the Son of God is a creature, although of an extraordinary kind, and with the adherents of which Basiliius did not accept communion) and the founder of organized monasticism.

Among Basiliius’s numerous works only his *Letters*, numbering 365, partly written to himself, are of importance for Iranian studies. Letter XL (Loeb ed., I, pp. 232-33), a letter from the emperor Julian (the Apostate) to Basiliius, mentions the empire of Persia and the Sasanian Šāhpūr (Sapor), “that descendant of Dareios,” but this letter is unanimously and rightly regarded as spurious and was so regarded even in Byzantine times. Of greater value is Letter CCLVIII (Loeb ed., IV, pp. 34ff.), written in 377 to Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis in Cyprus. At the end of this letter Basiliius is dealing with the Magusaeans (*magousaioi*; cf. Syriac *magušāyā* “magician,” e.g., in the Syriac Acts of Martyrs and Ephraem Syrus), identified in the same letter with the Magi (*magoi*), “colonists having long ago been introduced to our country [i.e., Cappadokia] from Babylon.” Basiliius mentions inter alia the importance they



ascribe to oral tradition, their rejection of the slaying of animals, their unlawful marriages (i.e., next-of-kin marriages, *xwēdōdah*), and their belief in fire as God (i.e., the usual theme also in Oriental Christian anti-Zoroastrian polemics; cf. *moxrapašt* “worshipping ashes” in Armenian texts). The last lines of Basiliius’s letter, however, reflect unusual, but probably genuine, Zurvanite traditions: “But regarding their descent from Abraham, no one of the Magi has up to the present told us any myths (*emythológēsen*) about that, but they ascribe to themselves a certain Zarnouas (*Zar[n]jouán tina*) as the beginning of the (human) race (the microcosm),” i.e., Zurvān/Time as macrocosm is the source of man. Also, according to Šahrestānī (tr. T. Haarbrücker, pt. 1, Halle, 1850, p. 276) “the Great Zurvān” (or, in the opinion of others, Gayōmart) was the first origin of man, as the Armenian Moses of Khorene has it, although confusing three distinct myths. The role of Abraham hinted at in Basiliius’s letter is seen again in the *Farhang-e jahāngīrī*, where Zurvān is identified with Abraham.

Among the numerous lost works of Basiliius is his *Against the Manicheans* (attested by Iulian of Aeclanum [in Augustine]).

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