

# ‘Sunk in the...Gulf of Perdition’<sup>1</sup>: The ‘Heretical’ Paulician and Tondrakian Movements in the Periphery of the Medieval Byzantine Empire



Yianni Cartledge and Brenton Griffin  
Flinders University

*This article explores two ‘heretical’ movements, the Paulicians and Tondrakians, both of which originated in medieval Armenia and subsequently spread throughout the Byzantine Empire. These movements became the target of elites from both Armenian and Byzantine power structures and, as a result, acolytes were subject to excommunications, forced resettlements, and mass violence. This article investigates the ways in which church and imperial authorities represented and, by extension, marginalised these heretics, as both religious and political threats, which ultimately led to their persecution. This research further examines the way in which adherents of these peripheral heresies were perceived by ecclesiastical and political hierarchies throughout the Middle Ages, whether Byzantine, Armenian, or Islamic. How these heretics viewed themselves and their place within the universe will also be recreated from the historical literature. Although, this is somewhat difficult, as many of the scriptures, sermons, sacred sites, and religious artefacts of these heretical movements were consigned to the flame over centuries of hostilities. Through an examination of primary sources, predominantly from orthodox cleric-chroniclers hostile to the Paulician and Tondrakian movements, this article will explore the ways in which the marginalisation of these heretics led to their excommunication, dispossession, and death.*

In 684 CE, heresiarch and founder of the Paulician movement, Constantine-Silvanus, was arrested by Byzantine Emperor Constantine IV, and sentenced to death for

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter of Sicily, *History of the Paulicians* (AD 870) 3, in *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World c. 650–c. 1450*, ed. and trans. by Janet Hamilton and Bernard Hamilton, trans. by Yuri Stoyanov (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 66–7.

being 'led astray through ignorance'.<sup>2</sup> Constantine-Silvanus and his disciples were taken south of Koloneia, Cappadocia, and as Peter of Sicily wrote in his chronicle of the event in 870:

There he [Constantine IV] made the wretch [Constantine-Silvanus] stand with his disciples facing him, and ordered them to stone him. They picked up the stones, and dropping their hands as if to their girdles, they threw the stones behind them, so as not to hit their teacher, whom they believed had been sent to them by God...On the orders from the imperial official, Justus picked up a stone, hit him like a second Goliath and killed him...Because of the stones thrown there, the place is called *Soros* ('Heap') to this day.<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, Justus who cast the fatal stone was Constantine-Silvanus' adopted son.<sup>4</sup> In 690, following his execution, Silvanus' successor and the remainder of his disciples were ordered by Emperor Justinian II to be burnt in 'a great pyre' near *Soros*.<sup>5</sup> This kind of brutality was not an unusual occurrence, as throughout the Middle Ages, so-called 'heretics' in the Byzantine Empire found themselves persecuted by both imperial and ecclesiastical elites. As a result, thousands of individuals became the victims of imperial edicts, ecclesiastical anathematisation, targeted executions, forced removals, and armed conflicts.

This article examines two groups of marginalised 'heretics' from a particular

---

<sup>2</sup> Peter of Sicily, *History of the Paulicians* 103, p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> Peter of Sicily, *History of the Paulicians* 104, p. 78.

<sup>4</sup> Peter of Sicily, *History of the Paulicians* 104, p. 78. Note: This is perhaps a rhetorical flourish, inspired by Caesar.

<sup>5</sup> Peter of Sicily, *History of the Paulicians* 106, 111, pp. 79–80.

geographic and historic area: seventh to eleventh century Armenia. This is due to the unique geo-political phenomenon of Armenia being at the crossroads of multiple religious and ethnic groups. Whilst being a bastion of Monophysite Christianity on the Orthodox Byzantine Empire's periphery, Armenia also bordered imperial rivals such as the Sasanian Empire (seventh century) and Seljuk Turks (eleventh and twelfth centuries). Two Armenian heretical movements are at the centre of this study – the Paulicians and Tondrakians. This article focuses on how these 'heretics' were depicted and represented by both the Armenian Apostolic and Byzantine Orthodox Church, and how this led to their marginalisation by ecclesiastical and political elites. This article explores the fragmentary sources that these heretics and elites produced, in an effort to somewhat determine how they perceived themselves and how they were represented by orthodox cleric-chroniclers. It also briefly looks at the continuation of the persecution of these heresies in later forms, such as through the Bogomils and Cathars.

As a note, this article considers 'heretics' as those whose teachings, cosmologies, scriptures, or rites differed so greatly from the edicts of the centralised Church that they were 'anathematised', or excommunicated, by ecclesiastical councils. As shall be discussed, this anathematisation by Armenian and Byzantine ecclesiastical leaders would result in the marginalisation of a significant amount of the Armenian population, although not the majority. This vilification further led orthodox writers from across the Mediterranean and Middle East to condemn and distort the scriptures and theology of these heretical movements.

It is important to understand heresiological interpretations when discussing both heretics (and their self-perceptions) and those that 'categorised' others as heretics. Todd S. Berzon envisions heresiology as a form of ethnographic study and categorisation, stating that: 'For the heresiologists, heresy was a way of imagining and categorizing the world in overtly theological terms ... it set parameters not only for what constituted heresy but also for how to study it'.<sup>6</sup> This article uses these heresiological ideas as a foundational theoretical intervention when analysing the Armenian heretics.

Heresiology as 'categorisation', ties to the idea of 'otherness' when exploring marginalised groups. Benveniste and Gaganakis noted the importance of writing the 'other', stating that:

Silencing the 'others', voice legitimate claims that project to the past a coherence that has never existed outside a dominant ideology... 'others', 'minorities', or 'marginal groups' do not make history on their own, nor do they simply react to history imposed on them. The frontiers separating various mental constructions are very likely permeable, and cultural exchanges may play an important role in the formation of 'identities'.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Todd S. Berzon, *Classifying Christians: Ethnography, Heresiology, and the Limits of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), pp. 27–8. See also the following important studies: Averil Cameron, 'How to Read Heresiology', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 33 (2003), 471–92; *Religious Diversity in Late Antiquity*, ed. by David M. Gwynn and Susanne Bangert (Leiden: Brill, 2010); *Late Medieval Heresy: New Perspectives: Studies in Honor of Robert E. Lerner*, ed. by Michael D. Bailey and Sean L. Field (York: York Medieval Press, 2018); Paul A. Hartog, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christian Contexts: Reconsidering the Bauer Thesis* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co; Lutterworth Press, 2015); Lucy E. Bosworth, 'Perceptions of the Origins and Causes of Heresy in Medieval Heresiology' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Henreitte-Rike Benveniste and Costas Gaganakis, 'Heterodoxies: Construction of Identities and Otherness in Medieval and Early Modern Europe', *Historiein*, 2.7 (2001), 7–11 (pp. 7–8). See also: Anna Kolos, 'Imagining Otherness: The Pleasure of Curiosity in the Middle Ages', *Mirabilia*, 18 (2013), 137–

This is true when discussing both the Paulicians and Tondrakians, who existed in a space of segregation from mainstream Armenian and Byzantine society, while also being molded and influenced by the frontiers that they inhabited.

As Christianity spread from its geographical and historical birthplace of Roman-occupied Judaea during the first and second centuries, it synthesised with already existing local beliefs, rituals, and cosmologies.<sup>8</sup> As this occurred, councils of Christian ecclesiastical leaders, often representative of different geographical areas such as Rome, Byzantium, Antioch, Carthage, Alexandria, and Jerusalem, would debate and decide on nuanced theological aspects.<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, an eventual ‘centralised’ Christian ecclesiastic hierarchy grew in conjunction with increasingly varied, localised Christianity(s) that formed throughout the Mediterranean, Middle

---

50; *Other Middle Ages: Witnesses at the Margins of Medieval Society*, ed. by Michael Goodich (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); James T. Palmer, ‘The Otherness of Non-Christians in the Early Middle Ages’, *Studies in Church History*, 51 (2015), 33–52; Thomas A. Fudgé, *Medieval Religion and its Anxieties: History and Mystery in the Other Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> For discussion of the spread and localisation of religions, particularly early Christianity, see: Joseph E. Early, *A History of Christianity: An Introductory Survey* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015); *The Spread of Christianity in the First Four Centuries: Essays in Explanation*, ed. by William V. Harris (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Paul Kollman, ‘Understanding the World-Christian Turn in the History of Christianity and Theology’, *Theology Today*, 71 (2014), 164–77; Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); Roderic L. Mullen, *The Expansion of Christianity: A Gazetteer of its First Three Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); D. E. Mungello, ‘Historiographical Review: Reinterpreting the History of Christianity in China’, *The Historical Journal*, 55 (2012), 533–52; Peter N. Stearns, *Cultures in Motion: Mapping Key Contacts and Their Imprints in World History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 36–43; Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Francois Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, trans. by Edward Smither (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2009); William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); F. J. E. Boddens Hosang, *Establishing Borders: Christian-Jewish Relations in Early Council Texts and the Writings of Church Fathers* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Ramsay MacMullen, *Voting About God in Early Church Councils* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to World Christianity*, ed. by Lamin Sanneh & Michael J. McClymond (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

East, and Africa. One of the first major 'heresies' to confront the early Christian Churches was the expansion of Gnosticism. Thought by modern scholars to have first been conceived by first-century Christian-Jewish communities, Gnosticism emphasised the acquisition of knowledge (*gnosis*), obtainable through esoteric rituals or exegesis, as the ultimate human accomplishment.<sup>10</sup> Gnosticism posited that this world was created by a lesser-deity, the 'Demiurge', and that salvation could be attained through esoteric measures, revealed by Jesus Christ, to ensure the acquaintance of a higher, spiritual deity, called 'the Father'.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the rise of Christianity coincided with the growth of gnostic communities, and adherents to Gnosticism were found throughout the ancient world.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, as this centralised 'Christian Church' continued to expand, it came into conflict with both internal and external 'heretical' ideas.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476CE, it was heretical ideas outside of the urban centres of the centralised Church that caused the most concern

---

<sup>10</sup> For more nuanced discussion on the development of Gnosticism, particularly in conjunction and competition with Christianity, please see: Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); *'In Search of Truth': Augustine, Manichaeism, and Other Gnosticism: Studies for Johannes van Oort at Sixty*, ed. by Jacob Albert van den Berg and others (Leiden: Brill, 2011); *Histories of the Hidden God: Concealment and Revelation in Western Gnostic, Esoteric, and Mystical Traditions*, ed. by April D. DeConick and Grant Adamson (London: Routledge, 2013); Ismo Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism: Myth, Lifestyle, and Society in the School of Valentinus* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Mark Edwards, *Christians, Gnostics, and Philosophers in Late Antiquity*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2016); Nicola Denzey Lewis, *Introduction to 'Gnosticism': Ancient Voices, Christian Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports About Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); *The Gnostic World*, ed. by Garry W. Trompf, Gunner B. Mikkelsen and Joy Johnston (London: Routledge, 2019); Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking 'Gnosticism': An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 53–7.

<sup>12</sup> Simone Petrement, *A Separate God: The Origins and Teachings of Gnosticism*, trans. by Carol Harrison (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1984), pp. 271–4.

for imperial and ecclesiastical elites. By the sixth century, the focus transitioned away from the internal debates of Rome, Alexandria, Constantinople, and Antioch, and toward the peripheral regions of the Church and Empire.<sup>13</sup> As such, throughout the first millennium, numerous Church writers compared both the Paulicians and Tondrakians to earlier heretical movements, such as Marcionism, Arianism, and Manichaeism. These comparisons have been heavily debated by scholars, although the general consensus is that these various 'heresies' are just as distinct as they are similar.<sup>14</sup> Thus, although it is important to discuss the evolution of how the centralised Church reacted to heterodoxic doctrines and rites, it is just as important to critique the claim of ancient cleric-chroniclers who argue that these sects were the same continual heresy.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, the marginalisation of the Paulicians and Tondrakians from the seventh century is undoubtedly rooted in the reaction of the Christian Church to earlier 'heresies'. Furthermore, the way in which anathematisation, dispossession, and violence enacted by ecclesiastical and political authorities towards earlier heresies would influence later representation of the Paulician and Tondrakian movements. That destruction of property, mass displacements, and death were acceptable ways in which to maintain orthodox

---

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth L. Campbell, *Western Civilization: A Global and Comparative Approach*, Vol. 1: *To 1715* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 122.

<sup>14</sup> Seta B. Dadoyan, *The Fatimid Armenians: Cultural and Political Interaction in the Near East* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. xi–xii; Vrej Nersessian, *The Tondrakian Movement* (Guildford: Pickwick, 1987), pp. 47–8; Anna Linden Weller, 'Byzantophilia in the Letters of Grigor Magistros?', *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, 4 (2017), 167–81 (pp. 167–9).

<sup>15</sup> Krikor Halebian, 'Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Armenian Church', *Exchange*, 31 (2002), 51–80 (pp. 71–2); Seta B. Dadoyan, *The Armenians in the Medieval Islamic World: Paradigms of Interaction, Seventh to Fourteenth Centuries*, Vol. 1: *The Arab Period in Arminyah, Seventh to Eleventh Centuries* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 8–9.

doctrines and rituals would later play out in the lives of these medieval Armenian heretics.

As with many explorations of ancient and medieval peoples, there are limitations to this article that should be acknowledged. Firstly, neither author has the ability to translate classical Armenian or Byzantine texts; this article thus relies on English translations of fragmentary primary sources, reprinted throughout existent literature. As well as this, the actual primary sources are written almost exclusively by orthodox Armenian and Byzantine chronicler-clerics, who are immensely biased in their representation of peripheral heretics.

This issue is compounded by the fact that many of the scriptures, sacred sites, and artefacts of the Paulicians and Tondrakians were consigned to the flame over centuries of hostilities with Armenian and Byzantine elites. Subsequently, most available sources are written as distorted exegeses of Paulician and Tondrakian beliefs, and therefore embellish the beliefs and practices of these heretical groups in an overarching defence of 'Orthodox' theology.<sup>16</sup> It is thus difficult for modern researchers to recreate an accurate representation of the existence and beliefs of these Armenian heretics from their own perspective. Despite these inhibitions, this article explores the marginalisation and persecution of the Paulicians and Tondrakians by the centralised Church, and how this led to centuries of mass executions, destruction of property, military campaigns, and population deportations.

---

<sup>16</sup> Note: In this article, 'Orthodox' or 'Orthodoxy' are defined as the doctrine of the centralised Byzantine church. The term 'orthodox' (lowercase) refers to traditionally held beliefs and modes of practice of the indicated church/region/people groups.



## PAULICIANS

Unlike heresies that were born from the epicentres of the Christian Churches, the Paulicians were an Armenian heretical sect, whose resistance to orthodoxy eventuated into persecution, military campaigns, and population transfers.<sup>17</sup> There have been many studies of the sect in the context of the Byzantine Empire in the past, notably Rev. John T. Christian’s article ‘VII. The Paulician Churches’ in 1910, Nina G. Garsoïan’s 1967 *The Paulician Heresy* and Janet Hamilton and Bernard Hamilton’s 1998 *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, among others.<sup>18</sup>

All these studies have contributed greatly to the narrative of the Paulicians and have referred to some marginalisation within the Empire. However, there is a lack of literature that details the marginalisation of the Paulicians as both a geo-

---

<sup>17</sup> Peter Charanis, ‘The Transfer of Population as a Policy in the Byzantine Empire’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 3 (1961), 140–54 (pp. 145–6); Paul Stephenson, *Byzantium’s Balkan Frontier: A Political Study of the Northern Balkans, 900–1204* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 100–1.

<sup>18</sup> John T. Christian, ‘VII. The Paulician Churches’, *The Review and Expositor*, 7 (1910), 414–33; Nina G. Garsoïan, *The Paulician Heresy: A Study of the Origin and Development of Paulicianism in Armenia and the Eastern Provinces of the Byzantine Empire* (Paris: Mouton & Co., 1967); Hamilton and Hamilton, eds, *Christian Dualist Heresies*. See also: Mariyana Tsibranska-Kostova, ‘Paulicians between the Dogme and the Legend’, *Studia Ceranea*, 7 (2017), 229–63; James M. George, ‘The Dualistic-Gnostic Tradition in the Byzantine Commonwealth with Special Reference to the Paulician and Bogomil Movements’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Wayne State University, 1979); Paul Lemerle, *L’histoire des Pauliciens d’Asie Mineure d’après les sources grecques* (Paris: Centre de recherche d’histoire et civilisation de Byzance, 1973); Steven Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee: A Study of the Christian Dualist Heresy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Carl Dixon, ‘Between East Rome and Armenia: Paulician Ethnogenesis c. 780–850’, in *Transmitting and Circulating the Late Antique and Byzantine Worlds*, ed. by Mieral Ivanova and Hugh Jeffery (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 251–73; *Armenia between Byzantium and the Orient: Celebrating the Memory of Karen Yuzbashian (1927–2009)*, ed. by Bernard Outtier, Cornelia B. Horn, Basil Lourie and Alexey Ostrovsky (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Hrach Bartikian, *Quellen zum Studium der Geschichte der paulikianischen Bewegung* (in Armenian) (Yerevan, 1961); Karen N. Yuzbashyan, ‘L’administration byzantine en arménie aux Xe–XI<sup>e</sup> siècles’, *Revue des études arméniennes*, 10 (1973–74), 139–83. There has also been some scholarly work on the Paulicians and their interactions with the Islamic World. See: Abed el-Rahman Tayyara, ‘Muslim-Paulician Encounters and Early Islamic Anti-Christian Polemical Writings’, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 27 (2016), 471–89; Dadoyan, *The Armenians in the Medieval Islamic World*.

political and religious peripheral group. By extension, Krikor Haleblian concluded that Paulician doctrines, in the context of the Armenian Apostolic Church, were viewed as attacks 'on the very nature of church as understood by the Armenian ecclesiastical authorities'.<sup>19</sup> This interesting observation serves as a model for this article's exploration of the marginalisation and representation of the Paulicians by Orthodox writers.

It is speculated that the Paulicians originated in seventh-century Western Armenia, but gained a foothold throughout Anatolia, Syria, Byzantium and even the Balkans during the eighth to tenth centuries.<sup>20</sup> Their founder is thought to have been a man named Constantine-Silvanus, who migrated to Samosata, Armenia, where he supposedly learnt of Paulician doctrines from a Syrian deacon.<sup>21</sup> Silvanus was later forcibly stoned by his own disciples, as ordered by Constantine IV, and his followers burnt on a pyre.<sup>22</sup> However, some historians have acknowledged that Paulicianism may have an apostolic origin from the first century.<sup>23</sup> It is unclear whether they received the name 'Paulician' from St. Paul, or from the third-century Bishop Paul of Samosata, as both are important figures in Paulician theology. Paul of Samosata himself had been a divisive figure during his reign as Bishop of Antioch, during which a constituency of bishops turned to the pagan Emperor Aurelian to request

---

<sup>19</sup> Haleblian, 'Heresy and Orthodoxy', p. 70.

<sup>20</sup> Tsibranska-Kostova, 'Paulicians between the Dogme and the Legend', p. 230.

<sup>21</sup> Tayyara, 'Muslim-Paulician Encounters', p. 474; George, 'The Dualistic-Gnostic Tradition', p. 150; Garsoïan, *The Paulician Heresy*, pp. 116–7.

<sup>22</sup> Peter of Sicily, *History of the Paulicians* 104, 106, 111, pp. 78–80.

<sup>23</sup> Christian, 'VII. The Paulician Churches', p. 415; Hamilton and Hamilton, *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, pp. 10–2.

his removal.<sup>24</sup> However, what is clear is their status as 'heretical' was agreed upon by all surviving Byzantine writers who mentioned them.<sup>25</sup>

It is difficult to determine, however, whether the Paulicians can be considered traditionally 'Gnostic'. Haleblian noted that many scholars have termed Paulicians the same as Messalians, Marcionites or Manichaeans, despite the fact:

the Paulicians regarded themselves as true Christians and the only difference they saw between them and the rest of Christians, (whom they called Romans,) is that they considered God to have no power in this world but that He will in the next.<sup>26</sup>

However, the Paulicians, like Paul of Samosata, did believe in a Dualist tradition, similar to the early Marcionites.<sup>27</sup> Garsoïan emphasised that there are difficulties in reconstructing the exact doctrine of the Paulicians due to surviving documents being 'hostile Orthodox sources'; Garsoïan further noted major disparities between Armenian and Greek sources.<sup>28</sup> However, some conclusions can be drawn, such as the denial of the unity of God by distinguishing between the Creator God and the Lord of the Future; the denial of the *Theotokos* and the perpetual virginity; as well as denying the sacrament of communion, the symbol of the cross, the Old Testament

---

<sup>24</sup> Paul Stephenson, *Constantine: Unconquered Emperor, Christian Victor* (London: Quercus, 2011), p. 260.

<sup>25</sup> Tsibranska-Kostova, 'Paulicians between the Dogme and the Legend', pp. 235–6; George, 'The Dualistic-Gnostic Tradition', pp. 142–3; Tayyara, 'Muslim-Paulician Encounters', pp. 473–4.

<sup>26</sup> Haleblian, 'Heresy and Orthodoxy', p. 68.

<sup>27</sup> Christian, 'VII. The Paulician Churches', p. 415; Tayyara, 'Muslim-Paulician Encounters', p. 474.

<sup>28</sup> Garsoïan, *The Paulician Heresy*, p. 150.

prophets and Peter's epistles.<sup>29</sup>

The Paulicians may have been closest associated, however, with *adoptionism*, the belief that Jesus Christ became the adopted Son of God after his baptism.<sup>30</sup> In a surviving pseudo-historical document, *The Key of Truth*, which is ascribed to either the Paulicians or the later Tondrakians, the sect's adoptionist Christology is outlined:

First was our Lord Jesus Christ baptized by the command of the heavenly Father, when thirty years old...So then it was in the season of his maturity that he received baptism; then it was that he received authority, received the high-priesthood, received the kingdom and the office of chief shepherd...It was then he became chief of beings heavenly and earthly, then he became light of the world, then he became the way, the truth, and the life. Then he became the door of heaven, then he became the rock impregnable at the gate of hell; then he became the foundation of our faith; then he became Saviour of us sinners; then he was filled with the Godhead; then he was sealed, then anointed; then was he called by the voice, then he became the loved one, then he came to be guarded by angels, then to be the lamb without blemish.<sup>31</sup>

Although not likely an accurate reconstruction, the *Key of Truth* can give a sense of what may have been believed by sects.

Around 870, Peter of Sicily wrote a *History of the Paulicians* on an imperial

---

<sup>29</sup> Garsoïan, *The Paulician Heresy*, p. 169–71.

<sup>30</sup> Tayyara, 'Muslim-Paulician Encounters', p. 474; 'Adoptianism', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. by F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (3<sup>rd</sup> edn.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 19–20.

<sup>31</sup> *The Key of Truth: A Manual of the Paulician Church of Armenia*, ed. and trans. by Fred C. Conybeare (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), ch. II, pp. 74–5.

commission from Basil I. Peter aligned the Paulicians with the earlier Manichaean heretics, claiming that:

There are not two separate groups. The Paulicians are also Manichaeans, who have added the foul heresy they discovered to the heresy of their predecessors, and have sunk in the same gulf of perdition.<sup>32</sup>

Peter of Sicily, in a letter to the Archbishop of Bulgaria, further portrayed the Paulicians as 'like an octopus or a chameleon, they change both manner and appearance to suit the occasion' and that:

33. This filthy, darkened, divisive, foul and corrupting heresy of the Manichaeans is persecuted by all nations because it is poisonous and full of all kinds of filth, which they venerate and worship in the most profound silence ... A few years ago it gained force and was taught by the forces of rebellion, and confirmed under the errant guidance of Satan, the originator of evil; it conceived and gave birth to the apostasy which is his forerunner, revealing other incarnate demons together with their leader, the devil.

34. No one should doubt that they are demons: all those words and acts which demons do not dare to commit, they do and say against almighty God and all mankind, without shame or blushing. It is obvious that these corrupt hypocrites keep themselves from mixing with men because of their extremes of evil-doing, and live in lonely places as

---

<sup>32</sup> Peter of Sicily, *History of the Paulicians* 3, pp. 66–7.

demons do, and utter strange and exotic blasphemies, claiming that they have based them on the words of the holy gospel and the Apostle.<sup>33</sup>

Peter then conveyed his own perception of the Paulician doctrine, hinting at Dualism and the rejection of *Theotokos*, the perpetual virginity, the literal Eucharist, the symbol of the cross and the Old Testament:

36. The first mark of identification is that they confess two principles, an evil one and a good one; one who is the maker of this world and has power over it, the other has power over the world to come.

39. Second, the glorious ever-virgin mother of God is not even counted (in their hostility) among the bare number of good human beings. They say that the Lord was not born of her, but brought His body from heaven, and that after the birth of the Lord she had other children from Joseph.

40. Third, they refuse to accept the divine and awe-inspiring mystery of the body and blood of the Lord.

41. Fourth, they do not accept the image, power and operation of the precious life-giving cross, but heap it with a thousand insults.

42. Fifth, they do not accept any book of the Old Testament, calling the prophets cheats and brigands.<sup>34</sup>

Peter of Sicily's view of the sect as blatantly heretical and demonic was certainly shared by the imperial commissioner, Basil I, who conducted his own persecution of

---

<sup>33</sup> Peter of Sicily, *History of the Paulicians* 16, 33-4, pp. 68, 71.

<sup>34</sup> Peter of Sicily, *History of the Paulicians* 36-42, pp. 72-3.

the Paulicians.<sup>35</sup> Peter's description of the Paulicians is also somewhat reminiscent of the later Protestant movement, a connection that Walter F. Adeney and L. P. Brockett also acknowledge.<sup>36</sup> Leon Arpee even argued that resurgent nineteenth-century 'Paulicianism' developed into Protestantism, stating that, 'Khnus and Tchevirmé, those ancient strongholds of Armenian Paulicianism, were not the only places where Paulicianism became a feeder to modern Protestantism'.<sup>37</sup>

Along with theological opposition, the Paulicians were also as a militaristic threat that dwelt on the peripheral borderlands between the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires (until the end of the seventh century), as well as the later Caliphates.<sup>38</sup> Garsoïan noted that the Paulicians endured earlier imperial edicts, but under the persecution of Emperor Michael I in the early-ninth century, they began an open rebellion.<sup>39</sup> Michael I, in reaction to the increased power of the Paulicians, started to forcibly remove them from Asia Minor and resettle large numbers in the Balkans, a practice that became common in dealing with the sect.<sup>40</sup> By the mid-ninth century, under Empress Theodora and Michael III, another mass persecution of the Paulicians began. It is estimated that 100,000 Paulicians were massacred during the co-

---

<sup>35</sup> Charanis, 'The Transfer of Population', p. 146.

<sup>36</sup> Walter F. Adeney, *The Greek and Eastern Churches*, (Charleston: BiblioLife, 2014), p. 219; L.P. Brockett, 'Were the Paulician and Bogomil churches Baptist Churches?', in *Bogomils of Bulgaria and Bosnia: The Early Protestants of the East: An Attempt to Restore Some Lost Leaves of Protestant History* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1879), appendix II.

<sup>37</sup> Leon Arpee, 'Armenian Paulicianism and the Key of Truth', *The American Journal of Theology*, 10 (1906), 267–85 (p. 274).

<sup>38</sup> George, 'The Dualistic-Gnostic', p. 122.

<sup>39</sup> Garsoïan, *The Paulician Heresy*, p. 125.

<sup>40</sup> Charanis, 'The Transfer of Population', p. 145.

regency.<sup>41</sup> Zonaras, who chronicled the event, recognised the maltreatment:

In the East there was a large number of Manichaeans, who were called Paulicians in ignorance by the common people, who give them a name made up from Paul and John ... So then the empress [Theodora] intended to convert them from heresy to orthodoxy, and sent some men from the nobility to achieve this. They handled their commission clumsily and to no avail, and not merely wasted their labour but drove the entire people (who number many thousands) to apostasize. Joining the Ishmaelites [Muslims], they fought with them against the Romans and became the cause of many disasters for them.<sup>42</sup>

To escape the extreme persecution and separate from the central power in Constantinople, the Paulicians formed their own free state at Tephrike, and openly cooperated with the Islamic enemies of Byzantium.<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, the Caliphates became the most consistent ally of the Paulicians, and Tephrike fell under Islamic protection during the ninth century. Tayyara noted that early Islamic scholars depicted the Paulicians as a military and political group in addition to a religious movement, and used distinctive phrases to define these two aspects.<sup>44</sup> By the 870s, Michael III's successor, Basil I, continued the persecution; he defeated the Paulician army at Tephrike, razed their strongholds and dispersed them across the Empire.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Christian, 'VII. The Paulician Churches', p. 421.

<sup>42</sup> Zonaras, *Epitome Historiarum*, in *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, ed. by Hamilton and Hamilton, pp. 62–3.

<sup>43</sup> Garsoïan, *The Paulician Heresy*, p. 125; Charanis, 'The Transfer of Population', pp. 145–6; Christian, 'VII. The Paulician Churches', p. 421.

<sup>44</sup> Tayyara, 'Muslim-Paulician Encounters', p. 475.

<sup>45</sup> Charanis, 'The Transfer of Population', p. 146.



These radical measures testify to the very real threat the Paulicians posed to imperial and religious interests, as well as the continued resistance that spanned generations.

By 970 the Paulicians were again forcibly removed by Emperor John I Tzimiskes, who, as a solution to their peripheral threat in the East, resettled the Paulicians in Thrace and granted them religious liberty.<sup>46</sup> Dmitri Obolensky noted that emperors Diocletian, Heraclius, Constantine V and Leo IV had all previously used Thrace to resettle Eastern heretics, such as Syrian Monophysites and Syrian Jacobites.<sup>47</sup> John I Tzimiskes' resettlement of the Paulicians was further chronicled by Zonaras in the twelfth century:

When [John Tzimisces] had been proclaimed in this way, since Antioch the Great was without an archbishop, he approached a certain monk Theodore, who had prophesied to him that he would be emperor, and that he should not be hasty nor snatch at it, but wait to be offered it by God. When he received the archbishopric, he made a request to John to remove the Manichaeans [Paulicians] from the East to the West, as they were destroying many with their foul heresy. The emperor fulfilled this request, transferring the race of the Manichaeans to Philippopolis.<sup>48</sup>

Through the removal of the Paulicians to Thrace, John did away with a recurrent political threat in the East, as well as appeased the new Archbishop of Antioch, to

---

<sup>46</sup> Christian, 'VII. The Paulician Churches', p. 422; Hamilton and Hamilton, *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, p. 23.

<sup>47</sup> Dmitri Obolensky, *The Bogomils: A Study in Balkan Neo-Manicheism* (Twickenham: Anthony C. Hall, 1948), pp. 60–1.

<sup>48</sup> Zonaras, *Epitome Historiarum* 17:1, ed. by L. Dindorf, (Lepizig: Teubner), pp. 92.26–93.4, in *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, p. 114.

manufacture a type of self-serving 'peace' throughout the remainder of his reign.

The 'peace' caused by the Thracian resettlement may have lasted until the late-eleventh century, when the Paulicians again cooperated with Byzantine's enemies. Allied with the nomadic Pechenegs against Emperor Alexios I Komnenos, the Paulicians allowed them military access to Byzantine lands.<sup>49</sup> The Paulicians and Pechenegs, both marginalised on the peripheries of the Empire, shared common interests and identity. The Pechenegs themselves had been forcibly settled in northern Bulgaria from their semi-nomadic life in the South Russian Steppes, where they had been acting as Byzantine police, by Constantine IX in the mid-eleventh century.<sup>50</sup> A Paulician leader, Traulos, even married the daughter of a Pecheneg chieftain to maintain their alliance, symbolising a shared status on the Byzantine periphery.<sup>51</sup> Together, the Pechenegs and Paulicians led a revolt against Alexios, and seized the fortress of Belyatovo.<sup>52</sup> John Scylitzes chronicled the event: 'A certain Lacas, one of the Paulicians of Philippopolis, set out from Epigambria and deserted to the Patzinaks (Pechenegs), and plotting with them, seriously threatened the Roman state'.<sup>53</sup>

Not much is said of the Paulicians after the eleventh century, with only a mention of them during the Fourth Crusade in the thirteenth century, where

---

<sup>49</sup> Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, pp. 100–1.

<sup>50</sup> Hamilton and Hamilton, eds, *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, pp. 23–4; Michael Angold, *The Byzantine Empire, 1025–1204: A Political History*, 2nd edn. (London: Longman, 1997), pp. 37–40.

<sup>51</sup> Stephenson, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, p. 101.

<sup>52</sup> Hamilton and Hamilton, eds, *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, p. 24.

<sup>53</sup> John Scylitzes, *Synopsis Historiarum*, in *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, ed. by Hamilton and Hamilton, pp. 164–5.

Hamilton and Hamilton noted that they 'were as politically active as they had been in the time of the [K]omneni'.<sup>54</sup> A community of 'Paulians', who adhered to a similar doctrine, was also discovered in 1580, spread between seventeen villages from Philippopolis, Thrace to Nicopolis on the Danube.<sup>55</sup> Some, like Arpee, even argue that the Paulicians continued to exist on the Anatolian and Armenian border as a scattered remnant until the nineteenth century.<sup>56</sup> However, the mass maltreatment by Eastern Orthodoxy and the Byzantine Empire during the Middle Ages illustrates that marginalised heretical groups such as the Paulicians were represented and treated as both a spiritual and geo-political threat that was met with violence, forced removal, and condemnation.

## TONDRAKIANS

By 840, a new heretical movement, born in the peripheral but autonomous Byzantine colonies of central Armenia, began to increase in popularity, much to the concern of elites within Armenia, Byzantium, and the Islamic Caliphates. Compared to Paulicianism by contemporary and later historians, but not of identical beliefs and practices, this Dualist sect was named by its enemies the Tondrakians (*T'ondrakec'is* in Armenian), after the town of T'ondrak in the Apahunik' District, from which it

---

<sup>54</sup> Hamilton and Hamilton, eds, *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, pp. 259–60.

<sup>55</sup> Hamilton and Hamilton, eds, *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, p. 24.

<sup>56</sup> Arpee, 'Armenian Paulicianism and the Key of Truth', pp. 269–70.

apparently originated.<sup>57</sup> The movement was supposedly started by Smbat Zarehawanc'i, who came into conflict with the ninth-century Armenian Apostolic Church hierarchy due to his rejection of Orthodox doctrines.<sup>58</sup> Smbat was said to have had a similar cosmology to other heretics, and condemned the materialist nature of the Armenian Church, as well as that of the universe at large. Due to this belief, the Tondrakians rejected the theology, sacred sites, and religious rituals of the centralised Armenian and Byzantine Churches.<sup>59</sup> Grigor Magistros Pahlavuni, a local Armenian elite who was endorsed by the Byzantine State to put an end to the Tondrakians in the mid-eleventh century, wrote of their beliefs:

[they] are not worshippers of matter but of God; [they] reckon the Cross and the Church and the Priestly Robes and the Sacrifices of the mass all for nothing, and only lay stress on their inner sense, and so forth.<sup>60</sup>

However, it was not just the Orthodox Churches that were concerned by the existence of a radical new religion, as in 835 Smbat was executed by the Qaysid Amir Abu l-Ward.<sup>61</sup> This was somewhat ironic, as later Church writers, such as Grigor of Narek, an Armenian cleric-chronicler born over a century after the death of Smbat,

---

<sup>57</sup> Aristakes Lastivertc'i, *History Regarding the Sufferings Occasioned by Foreign Peoples Living Around Us*, trans. by Robert Bedrosian (New York: Sources of the Armenian Tradition, 1985), p. 149.

<sup>58</sup> Weller, 'Byzantophilia in the Letters of Grigor Magistros?', p. 180.

<sup>59</sup> Haleblian, 'Heresy and Orthodoxy', p. 71.

<sup>60</sup> As quoted in Haleblian, 'Heresy and Orthodoxy', pp. 71–2.

<sup>61</sup> Dadoyan, *The Armenians in the Medieval Islamic World*, p. 90.

would claim that the Tondrakians had adopted 'Persian customs' and Islamic beliefs.<sup>62</sup>

The first known treatise of the Tondrakians came from Ananias of Narek, Grigor's uncle, around 943-965.<sup>63</sup> Paul of Taron, another tenth-century Armenian cleric-chronicler, claimed that the Tondrakians 'declared cross and Church to be alien to the Godhead' as well as claimed that Tondrakians 'destroyed [the Cross] wherever they saw it, claiming that they were not worshippers of matter, but of God'.<sup>64</sup> Despite the fact that Tondrakians likely considered themselves Christians, Church writers resolutely rejected this for over two hundred years. As Grigor Magistros claimed:

This sect drew not on two or three sources only, but embraced all that was ever heretical – soothsaying, palmistry, incantations and magical arts, infidelities, wicked poisons...they consented to that enemy of God...that diabolical madman, Smbat, giving them their laws.<sup>65</sup>

Whether or not the Tondrakians were in fact open to other ideas of spirituality that they encountered, or whether this was just the fears of the Church writers is unknown. However, it does seem as though the Tondrakians did have staunch beliefs that stood in opposition to the Orthodox Armenian and Byzantine Churches.

---

<sup>62</sup> Dadoyan, *The Armenians in the Medieval Islamic World*, p. 92.

<sup>63</sup> Hamilton and Hamilton, eds, *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, p. 293.

<sup>64</sup> Nersessian, *The Tondrakian Movement*, p. 58.

<sup>65</sup> Nersessian, *The Tondrakian Movement*, p. 41.

Although not an unbiased source, in his tenth-century *Letter to the Abbot of Kčaw*, Grigor of Narek outlined the main heretical teachings of this Armenian-Christian sect:

The observances which we know to have been repudiated by them as neither apostolic nor divine:

1. Ordination, which the Apostles received from Christ.
2. The communion of His Body...before which we tremble, Smbat calls a common meal.
3. The birth through spiritual throes, of the water and spirit...he had taught them to be nothing but mere bath water.
4. And the blessed Lord's day, on which God the Word created the first light and perfected thereon the light of His rising (Resurrection)...he hath taught them as being on a level with other days.
5. Genuflexion in mysterious prayer, which Jesus Christ, Creator of all things, himself humbly observed.
6. The fount is denied by them, in which Christ himself was baptised.
7. The Communion of immortality, which the Lord of all things Himself tasted.
8. The filthy habit of lecherous promiscuity, where the Lord forbade so much as a look.
9. They deny the venerated sign (i.e. the Cross), which God, made man, raised and carried on his shoulder as his own glory and authority.
10. Their self-conferred contemptible priesthood, which is a likening of themselves to Satan.
11. Their deprecation of the sacrament of marriage...This they condemn and reckon the mere fact of union in love with one another to be perfect love, and from God and pleasing

to Christ; saying that God is love and desired the love union alone, and not the sacrament of marriage.

12. Their railing and cavilling at the first fruits, which Abel and Noah and Abraham and David and Solomon and Elias appointed to conciliate the Divine wrath.

13. We know how they dare to call the head of the abominable sect a Christ; of who Christ testified beforehand, saying 'There shall arise false prophets' and this is the meaning of the prophet's saying: 'The fool said in his heart, there is no God'.<sup>66</sup>

This list perhaps says more of the Armenian and Byzantine Churches' fear of heretics rather than explores the theology of this expansive religious movement. It is nonetheless the general consensus of current historical literature that this is a somewhat accurate, although embellished, summary of Tondrakian beliefs.<sup>67</sup>

Of further concern to the Byzantine and Armenian elites was the belief that the Tondrakian movement was a continuation of the earlier Paulician heresy.<sup>68</sup> Vrej Nersessian argues that although certainly historically, theologically, and geographically linked to the militant Paulicians of Western Armenia, the Tondrakian movement actually developed independently within central Armenia.<sup>69</sup> Twentieth-century Armenian-American historian Simon Payaslian further argued that the two movements may have joined after the military-colonies of the Paulicians

---

<sup>66</sup> Nersessian, *The Tondrakian Movement*, pp. 57–8.

<sup>67</sup> Halebian, 'Heresy and Orthodoxy', p. 72; Nersessian, *The Tondrakian Movement*, pp. 59–60; Weller, 'Byzantophilia in the Letters of Grigor Magistros?', p. 179.

<sup>68</sup> Dadoyan, *The Fatimid Armenians: Cultural and Political Interaction in the Near East* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), p. 58.

<sup>69</sup> Nersessian, *The Tondrakian Movement*, p. 52.

were defeated by Byzantium in 872.<sup>70</sup> Thus, whilst the Tondrakians began as an independent movement, it is conceivable that it absorbed large amounts of Paulician adherents. If so, the Tondrakian movement would have likely adopted several Paulician socio-political ideologies that had developed in conjunction with its theology for over two centuries. For example, the eleventh-century Armenian Apostolic Church historian Aristakes Lastivertc'i wrote about a rebellious region of Armenia, 'Apahunik' District, that residence of Satan, the assemblage of atheists, that lair of the beasts called T'ondrak', that had rebelled against the yoke of feudal hierarchies.<sup>71</sup>

Orthodox cleric-chroniclers further wrote at length about a significant socio-religious apprehension amongst the ruling elite: the apparent sexual improprieties of the Tondrakians. Aristakes cited the activities of a 'certain adulterous monk named Kuncik', whom he compared to Satan, as Kuncik had apparently seduced multiple men and women into sexual relations outside of the bonds of matrimony. This was an affront to the Orthodox Sacrament of Marriage, for which Grigor of Narek claimed Smbat Zarehawanc'i and the Tondrakians had no regard: '[that] evil beast of prey, this bloodthirsty, sodomitic, whoring, lustful, frenzied, loathsome Smbat'.<sup>72</sup> Even later historians, such as twentieth-century Armenian author Vahan M. Kurkjian, in his book *A History of Armenia*, accused the Tondrakians of 'detestable

---

<sup>70</sup> Simon Payaslian, *The History of Armenia: From the Origins to the Present* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), p. 80.

<sup>71</sup> Lastivertc'i, *History Regarding the Sufferings*, p. 149.

<sup>72</sup> Nersessian, *The Tondrakian Movement*, p. 61.



practices, such as devil-worship, evil nocturnal rites, and pagan customs'.<sup>73</sup> Kurkjian further quoted Grigor Magistros who called the town of T'ondrak 'Shnavank, "Monestary of Dogs", "where men dressed in clerical garb lived in company with a multitude of prostitutes".<sup>74</sup> Whether or not these claims are true is difficult to determine, as it was common for Church apologist writers to exaggerate the sexual activities of their theological enemies.

However, as well as sexual impropriety, another threat of the Tondrakian movement was the radical idea of gender equality:

These are the crimes of these malefactors. No fasts are theirs, except out of fear; no differences do they observe between men and women, not even as regards the family, though they do not venture openly on this. They respect nothing, either of things divine, or of things created; but laugh all to scorn, the old law as well as the new.<sup>75</sup>

Although impossible to resolutely determine what the rituals and beliefs of the Tondrakians were, it is important to not outrightly believe the records of apologist cleric-chroniclers. This lewdness attributed to the sect is likely embellished, yet these medieval Christian writers reveal the fears that the Centralised Byzantine and Armenian Churches felt towards the radical Tondrakian ideas and activities. As well

---

<sup>73</sup> Vahan M. Kurkjian, *A History of Armenia* (New York: The Armenian General Benevolent Union of America, 1958), p. 346.

<sup>74</sup> Kurkjian, *A History of Armenia*, pp. 346–7.

<sup>75</sup> Nersessian, *The Tondrakian Movement*, p. 63.

as this, it reveals the way in which the Tondrakians were marginalised by orthodox cleric-chroniclers throughout medieval Armenia.

The Tondrakian movement especially terrified existent power structures as it was born during the exploitation of the majority the Armenian population by feudal Armenian, Byzantine, and Muslim elites. Interestingly, several Armenian Church authors acknowledged the growth of this new religious movement as a resistance to the corruption and oppression meted out by Armenian rulers.<sup>76</sup> Aristakes, for example, argued that God had sent famine, death, and destruction as divine punishment due to the apostasy of the Armenian population.<sup>77</sup> For instance, in response to the Seljuk Turks' loot and destruction of the City of Ani in central Armenia, Aristakes wrote:

Because of the excess of injustice which took place in it, a mighty and beautiful palace was burned down and all of its buildings were reduced to a heap of earth, and the licentiousness and evil which had occurred in it came to an end. This is the lot of unjust cities which are built on the blood of others and which grow rich at the expense of the homeless, of those who toil in the sweat of their brow; they build their houses on luxury and the infringement of rights, they seek for themselves pleasure and profit having no pity in their soul for the poor and the homeless, withdraw not from evil deeds, because they are possessed by their passions.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> Lastivertc'i, *History Regarding the Sufferings*, p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> Lastivertc'i, *History Regarding the Sufferings*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>78</sup> Nersessian, *The Tondrakian Movement*, p. 35.

Thus, even Church apologists believed that the exploitation of the lower classes during feudal Armenia had been punished through God's use of Turks, Arabs, and heretics.

Although difficult to determine how much influence the cosmological and socio-political ideas championed by the movement influenced uprisings in medieval Armenia, Church writers readily conflated the socio-political resistance of certain Armenians with the anathematised ideals of the Tondrakians. This is not to suggest, however, that all peasant uprisings within ninth-eleventh century Armenia were motivated by a Tondrakian cosmology. Nor is it to say that these rebellions were universal across Armenia or are evidence of a conscious class struggle.<sup>79</sup> This is particularly as Tondrakianism was not solely the realm of the laity and lower classes, as members of the Armenian clergy and aristocracy also converted.<sup>80</sup> However, there is evidence to suggest that there were Tondrakian elements and motivations within *some* peasant revolts,<sup>81</sup> Armenia in conjunction with the violence of serf rebellions.<sup>82</sup> As Nersessian stated, the Tondrakians 'rejection of matter as evil was but an expression of the heretics' hatred of worldly good and of the power of those who possessed them'.<sup>83</sup> Thus, the Tondrakian movement was not merely a religious one, but a socio-political and economic one; as such, like the Paulicians, the Tondrakians

---

<sup>79</sup> Nersessian, *The Tondrakian Movement*, p. 78.

<sup>80</sup> Lastivertc'i, *History Regarding the Sufferings*, p. 142; Weller, 'Byzantophilia in the Letters of Grigor Magistros?', p. 179.

<sup>81</sup> Lastivertc'i, *History Regarding the Sufferings*, pp. 143–6.

<sup>82</sup> Lastivertc'i, *History Regarding the Sufferings*, pp. 143–6.

<sup>83</sup> Nersessian, *The Tondrakian Movement*, p. 78.

became a concern to the many elites that squabbled for land, wealth and power in medieval Armenia.

Due to Tondrakianism's rise in popularity, there were severe reprisals from both ecclesiastical and imperial elites. For example, Kurkjian wrote of a Bishop Hacob of Hark, who was brought before an Armenian Apostolic Church council due to his sympathy with the movement:

After two trials and acquittals before the ecclesiastical court, [he was] degraded by the Katholikos Sarkis. At Kashi, a mob identified with the T'ondrakians destroyed the great cross of the village. The perpetrators of the sacrilege were severely punished and even tortured. In circumstances such as these, the Armenians followed the example of the Greeks in their harsh chastisement of fanatical sectarians.<sup>84</sup>

By the mid-eleventh century, the Tondrakian sect had all but been eradicated from the Armenian plateau. To end the Tondrakians, in 1053, the Byzantine State endorsed a campaign headed by Grigor Magistros Pahlavuni. Magistros, in his *Letter to the Tulaili*, stated that the:

Holy Ghost and the prayer of my ancestor and progenitor, St. Grigor, led me forth And I came to Mesopotamia and encountered the deadly, stormy, muddy flood which, flowing forth from the cursed T'ondrakec'i Smbat, rolled death along its waves.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> Kurkjian, *A History of Armenia*, p. 348.

<sup>85</sup> Nersessian, *The Tondrakian Movement*, p. 62.

Magistros razed towns occupied by the Tondrakians and left them in ruins. He suggests that he did not put the people to the sword, although that had been the fate of countless other heretics throughout Christian history. Instead Magistros claimed that he allowed the Tondrakian adherents to recant their devotion and be re-baptised in the Armenian Apostolic Church.<sup>86</sup> Haleblian cites Grigor Magistros who suggested that over one thousand men and women renounced their heterodoxic cosmology, and swore fealty to the Armenian, and by extension Byzantine, Church and State.<sup>87</sup> After Magistros' campaigns, there were brief, albeit altered, resurgences of the movement, and a number of scholars suggest underground Tondrakian communities continued to exist in Armenian society until the nineteenth century.<sup>88</sup>

## IN THE TWILIGHT OF THE UNITED CHURCH

Although arguably dispersed by imperial measures, the legacy of the Paulicians and Tondrakians materialised in new heretical groups that arose throughout the Byzantine Empire. For example, in the late-ninth or early-tenth century, followers of the Bulgarian priest Bogomil were seen as the heretical successors to the Paulicians, whose last stronghold in Thrace bordered modern-day Bulgaria.<sup>89</sup> Whether or not they were the successors or viewed themselves as such is both uncertain and

---

<sup>86</sup> Haleblian, 'Heresy and Orthodoxy', p. 73.

<sup>87</sup> Haleblian, 'Heresy and Orthodoxy', p. 73.

<sup>88</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. 3, ed. by Alexander P. Kazhdan and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 2093; Haleblian, 'Heresy and Orthodoxy', pp. 76–80; Nersessian, *The Tondrakian Movement*, pp. 90–6.

<sup>89</sup> Zdenko Zatar, 'Bogomils and Cathars', in *The Gnostic World*, ed. by Garry W. Trompf, Gunner B. Mikkelsen and Jay Johnston (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 383.

debatable. Like the Tondrakians, Hussey suggested the Bogomils' ideas 'appealed mainly to the lower classes, the poor and oppressed peasantry'.<sup>90</sup> Many scholars trace the Bogomils rise as directly related to the resettlement of the Paulicians in Thrace. Numerous scholars suggest that Peter of Sicily's tenth-century work *History of the Paulicians* was also in reaction to the appearance of the Bogomils in Bulgaria.<sup>91</sup> As with the Paulicians, and many other gnostic and marginal Christian sects, the Bogomils held to a Dualist theology; furthermore, they rejected the Old Testament, literal Eucharist, *Theotokos*, and the cross.<sup>92</sup> As with the Paulicians and Tondrakians, the Bogomils' rejection of mainstream religious symbols reverberated as a point of contention and marginalisation. In an anonymous thirteenth-century Orthodox sermon manuscript held at Mount Athos, which was intended to be read on the third Sunday of Lent, the author suggested, 'Three kinds of people hate the cross: Hagarenes, Bogomils, and Jews'.<sup>93</sup> The Bogomils, however, also differed with the Paulicians, and believed in a 'Docetic Christology', the belief that Christ had a 'phantom' body. Furthermore, the Bogomils practiced Marcionite-styled asceticism,

---

<sup>90</sup> J. M. Hussey, *The Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 158.

<sup>91</sup> Hamilton and Hamilton, eds, *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, p. 25; 'Bogomils', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, pp. 219–20; John V. A. Fine Jr., 'The Size and Significance of the Bulgarian Bogomil Movement', *East European Quarterly*, 11 (1977), 385–412 (pp. 385–6); R. J. Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 17–9.

<sup>92</sup> Fine, 'The Size and Significance', pp. 385–6, 113; 'Bogomils', in *Encyclopedia of World Religions*, ed. by Michael Frassetto and Wendy Doniger (Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 2006), p. 136; 'Bogomils', in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 220; Jan Mikolaj Wolski, 'Autoproscopae, Bogomils and Messalians in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century Bulgaria', *Studia Ceranea*, 4 (2014), 233–41 (p. 234).

<sup>93</sup> Marc De Groote, 'An Anonymous Sermon against the Hagarenes, the Bogomils, and the Jews', *Harvard Theological Review*, 97 (2004), 329–51 (p. 336).

avoided sexual intercourse, and forbade the consumption of meat and wine.<sup>94</sup>

Like previous heretics, the Bogomils suffered systemic persecution. In a tenth-century letter to Tsar Peter I of Bulgaria, Patriarch Theophylact Lecapenus condemned the Bogomils: 'For this impiety is a mixture of Manichaeism and Paulianism. So for this reason their priesthood is to be set aside'.<sup>95</sup> Theophylact similarly called for the state to intervene:

Let the leaders and teachers of this ancient heresy which has newly reappeared be anathema...for the apostle says, 'After one or two admonitions, denounce a heretic in the knowledge that such a man is perverse and sinful; he is self-condemned' – or to the legal punishment of the state.<sup>96</sup>

Just as the Nestorian Schism after Ephesus and Chalcedon emphasised the centralised Church's vehement stance toward heretics, the Great Schism (1054) between the Eastern and Western Churches solidified the East's non-tolerance of heretics.<sup>97</sup> During the eleventh and twelfth century, clauses about Bogomils were added to the *Synodikon of Orthodoxy*, which was read annually on the first Sunday of Lent. These clauses anathematised the Bogomil leaders by name and condemned

---

<sup>94</sup> Hamilton and Hamilton, eds, *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, p. 28.

<sup>95</sup> Theophylact Lecapenus, *To Peter, King of Bulgaria, from Theophylact the Patriarch, composed by John, Chartophylax of the Great Church (AD 933–56)*, in *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, ed. by Hamilton and Hamilton, pp. 98–9.

<sup>96</sup> Theophylact Lecapenus, *To Peter, King of Bulgaria*, pp. 101–2.

<sup>97</sup> For more on the effects of the Schism see: Brett Whalen, 'Rethinking the Schism of 1054: Authority, Heresy, and the Latin Rite', *Traditio*, 62 (2007), 1–24.

their Christological and ascetic doctrines.<sup>98</sup> The inclusion of these clauses in the *Synodikon* would have annually reminded the Orthodox population of the heresy, further marginalising the Bogomils and garnering detest towards them.

The eleventh-century Patriarch Cosmas of Jerusalem, writing to the Metropolitan of Larissa, Thessaly, demanded that the community and clergy not tolerate the Bogomils:

Let all who are like this be anathematized in this way. Do not yourselves be slack in your treatment of this matter ... Know that whoever is careless concerning such most salutary correction of the brethren, or has regard to appearance, or allows himself to be corrupted by bribes, incurs God's curse and ours. Farewell.<sup>99</sup>

Cosmas' warnings about the Bogomils echoed an anxiety of a threat to the centralised imperial power structures, which had been seen with both the Paulicians and Tondrakians. Ironically, a later Patriarch also named Cosmas was deposed for favouring the Bogomil monk Niphon, exemplifying the lack of tolerance for lapses in the priesthood.<sup>100</sup>

The anathematisation of the Bogomils, driven by the clergy's focus on heretics eventually transitioned into targeted executions of key believers by the Empire. In a

---

<sup>98</sup> *Synodikon of Orthodoxy*, in *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, ed. by Hamilton and Hamilton, pp. 134–9.

<sup>99</sup> Cosmas of Jerusalem, *Letter of Cosmas, our most Holy Lord and Ecumenical Patriarch, to the Metropolitan of Larissa, most beloved of God, concerning the atheist heretics (1075–81)*, in *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, ed. by Hamilton and Hamilton, pp. 165–6.

<sup>100</sup> Hamilton and Hamilton, eds, *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, p. 222.



recount by Anna Komnena, the eleventh-century Bogomil monk Basil was imprisoned by Alexius I and executed on a fiery pyre for being, 'a heresiarch and completely unrepentant'.<sup>101</sup> The crowd attempted to throw his followers onto the pyre as well; however, this was stopped by Alexius, who imprisoned the unapologetic heretics instead, where they eventually died.<sup>102</sup> The punishment of death by fire for Bogomilism was echoed again by twelfth-century Patriarch Michael II who ordered the execution of its adherents.<sup>103</sup> Even the canonist Theodore Balsamon was shocked at the brutality and methods used, stating:

I am still surprised that the synod enjoined a punishment of this kind, for we have been told to cut heretics off from the body of Christ, but we have not learnt to punish them, but rather to hand them over to the civil power if they are unrepentant, and that sentence against them be given by the magistrates.<sup>104</sup>

Heresies and gnostic ideas continued to spread outside of Byzantium's jurisdiction. In the West, Gnostic and heretical ideas with roots in the Paulicians, Tondrakians, and Bogomils spread via the Cathars in the thirteenth century, became prominent in the south of France and northern Italy.<sup>105</sup> In the East, heretical sects were exported via the interconnected Silk Road, where some ideas and institutions made it as far as

---

<sup>101</sup> Anna Comnena, *Alexiad* (1098), in *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, ed. by Hamilton and Hamilton, pp. 179–80.

<sup>102</sup> Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, pp. 175–80.

<sup>103</sup> Theodore Balsamon, *Scholia in Nomocanon Photii Patriarchae IX*, in *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World*, ed. by Hamilton and Hamilton, p. 215.

<sup>104</sup> Theodore Balsamon, *Scholia in Nomocanon*, p. 215.

<sup>105</sup> Zatar, 'Bogomils and Cathars', pp. 388–90.

China, where persecution continued.<sup>106</sup> It is theorised by scholars that various heretics even found their way into South and South East Asia, as far as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia, with possible exports of Persian Nestorians and Armenian Monophysites via the sea trade out of Persia.<sup>107</sup>

Johnson and Johnson acknowledged that via the Silk Road's exponential spread of ideas, Nestorianism was embraced by nomadic groups in Central Asia, with an enemy in Byzantium being their commonality.<sup>108</sup> Lieu noted that the Nestorian Church was well established on the South China Coast by the time Marco Polo visited in 1292, and that 'Kublai Khan himself was the son of a Nestorian princess'; the sect could have first come to China by seventh-century Islamic invaders.<sup>109</sup> However, the Nestorians were all but extinct by the end of the tenth century, yet made a resurgence within the Mongol ruling elite **between** the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>110</sup> A heavily Sinicised Manichaeism was further established in thirteenth-century China, having originated with seventh-century Sogdian priests. In Central Asia, a Uighur leader, and ally of the Tang dynasty,

---

<sup>106</sup> Garry W. Trompf, 'The Gnostic World: A History of Scholarship (Until 2000)', in *The Gnostic World*, p. 27; Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 60–2.

<sup>107</sup> Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 308.

<sup>108</sup> Donald James Johnson and Jean Elliott Johnson, 'The spread of religious beliefs: just as silk, porcelain, spices, gold, and silver moved along the Silk Road, so, too, did ideas. In fact, religious values and practices were among the most important ideas that spread along these routes', *Calliope*, 12 (2002), 11.

<sup>109</sup> Samuel N. C. Lieu, 'Nestorians and Manichaeans on the South China Coast', *Vigilae Christianae*, 34 (1980), 71–88 (pp. 71–2); S. Wells Williams, 'The Nestorians in China', *The Open Court*, 23 (1909), 45–8 (p. 46).

<sup>110</sup> Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, pp. 284–9.

converted to Manichaeism, and established the movement in the region.<sup>111</sup> Some Gnostics even tried to blend Christianity, Buddhism and Daoism into a 'hybrid gospel', to seem 'consistent with what the local population already believed' and avoid marginalisation.<sup>112</sup> Similarly to the Byzantine case, the peripheral heretics became a threat to the establishments of East Asia. Gillman and Klimkeit, who quoted Muslim writer Abu-Zaid, noted that Christians, along with Muslims, Jews and Parsis, were directly targeted as part of a massacre of over 100,000 foreigners in the late-ninth century by the Chinese rebel Huang Chao in Guangzhou.<sup>113</sup> An edict was even issued by the Tang Emperor Wuzong calling for 'more than 2,000 men of the Nestorian and Mazdean religions to return to lay life and to cease polluting the customs of China'.<sup>114</sup> Christian and Dualist heresies, therefore, appeared to have continued to both flourish and threaten their new homes as they spread abroad.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout the Middle Ages, 'heretical' beliefs remained a basis for marginalisation from both the centralised Church and various imperial authorities. After the Fall of

---

<sup>111</sup> Lieu, 'Nestorians and Manichaeans on the South China Coast', p. 74; Sam Lieu, 'Gnosis on the Silk Road, Gnostic Parables, Hymns and Prayers from Central Asia. By H. J. Klimkeit' (book review), *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 11 (2001), 305–8.

<sup>112</sup> Frankopan, *The Silk Roads*, pp. 59–60; Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 17–21.

<sup>113</sup> Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, p. 283. See also: Williams, 'The Nestorians in China', p. 46; Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), p. 27.

<sup>114</sup> 'Emperor Wuzong's Edict on the Suppression of Buddhism' (AD 845), in *Sources of Chinese Tradition, Vol. 1: From Earliest Times to 1600*, ed. by William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 585–6; Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, pp. 17–21.

Rome in 476, there was a pivot away from early heresies in urban centres, such as the Marcionites, Arians and Nestorians, towards peripheral heretical movements. In relation to the Paulicians and Tondrakians, the unique geographic location of Armenia established these movements as both political and spiritual threats to Church and imperial structures. That Armenia was a crossroads of local, Byzantine, and Islamic interests ensured it was the perfect place for these heretical movements to develop and flourish. The marginalisation of the Paulicians and Tondrakians was further perpetuated by representations of these heretical groups from both the Armenian Apostolic and Byzantine Orthodox Churches. Although difficult to determine the actual beliefs of these heterodox movements and communities, it is evident that their rejection of the doctrines and institutions of the centralised Churches inspired ecclesiastical condemnation. Unfortunately, it is a challenge for modern researchers to establish how these heretical groups viewed themselves, since many of their scriptures, sacred spaces, and artefacts were destroyed over centuries of hostility. However, evidence suggests that the Paulicians and Tondrakians perceived their 'heresies' as a return to true religious knowledge that had been lost from orthodox Christianity due to centuries of entrenched materialism, corruption, and ecclesiastical debate. Nevertheless, the condemnation of the Paulician and Tondrakian movements can be found in an array of sources from both Armenian and Byzantine cleric-chroniclers. This condemnation and marginalisation further led to centuries of political destabilisation, destruction of property, population transfers, and military campaigns enacted against these heretical movements.

Moreover, both the Paulicians and Tondrakians, likely in reaction to imperial and ecclesiastical persecution, mobilised as militant and political groups at the crossroads of empires. This solidified these movements as more than just religious heresies, but also as territorial threats. Thus, the scale of persecution of Paulicians and Tondrakians developed from the anathematisation and executions of key leaders, to forced removals, resettlements, and massacres. However, despite centuries of persecution and official attempts to eradicate these heresies, there is evidence to suggest the underground continuation of these movements in altered forms until the nineteenth century.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

Any images contained within this article that are reproduced with permission are specifically excluded from the Creative Commons License. They may not be reproduced under any circumstances without the express written permission of the copyright holders.