

CARL DIXON, *The Paulicians. Heresy, Persecution and Warfare on the Byzantine Frontier, c. 750–880* (The Medieval Mediterranean 112). Leiden – Boston 2022. X, 366 S. – ISBN 978-90-04-51654-0.

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A historian of the Middle Ages is often presented with limited sources that may contradict each other. The book under review illustrates the problem. A central question explored in this adaptation of the author's PhD thesis is: who exactly were the Paulicians? While their religious movement evolved to incorporate a military dimension, at times fighting both against and alongside the Byzantines, their beliefs remain hard to define. DIXON offers the following initial characterisation: '...a distinctly Christian brand of dualism which credited the genesis of the cosmos not to God the Father, who ruled only the heavenly realm, but to a second, malevolent deity...' (p. 1). This definition confuses the issue and limits the usefulness of the book's first half.

In the introduction, DIXON identifies several challenges, including the difficulty of defining the Paulicians as a cohesive group, determining their connections to other forms of dualism, and establishing a precise chronology for their emergence. He argues that the Paulicians should be divided into two distinct groups: an earlier Armenian stream from the 6th to 8th centuries and a later movement, primarily based in Asia Minor, from the late 7th century onward. According to DIXON, the latter group was largely disconnected from the earlier Armenian tradition, which exempts him from discussing the Armenian sources in any detail. He contends that these texts present diverse and sometimes contradictory portrayals of Paulician beliefs, none of which align with his proposed definition of their creed (pp. 18–28).

Such a decision appears problematic, given that DIXON himself acknowledges similar inconsistencies in the Greek sources (p. 19). Furthermore, the Asia Minor branch maintained strong ties with Armenia, since many of its leaders from the late 7th to early 9th centuries either originated from this land or chose to reside there. This alone would warrant more substantial engagement with the Armenian sources, and DIXON's remark that an entire book could be dedicated to them does not justify their minimal treatment here. Inconsistencies across all sources and the absence of a clear

doctrinal definition suggest that the term ‘Paulician’ may have functioned as an umbrella label for various groups and beliefs, or even as a common derogatory term. Given this fluidity, it may be more accurate to think of the Paulicians not as a single group or even two distinct groups, as DIXON suggests, but rather as a loosely connected or fragmented movement.

A third section of the introduction (pp. 28–53) attempts to define Paulician heresy. It features a broad historical overview that primarily focuses on the 10th to 12th centuries, although this period is outside the book’s declared timeframe. This further underscores the difficulty of establishing a clear definition for the Paulicians in earlier times and challenges the notion of them as a single cohesive group. Additionally, it suggests that the book’s title may not accurately reflect its content, because the first two chapters primarily address a later period than 880 CE. This shifted focus is partly explained by DIXON’s remark that the main Greek texts examined in the first chapter were composed during the 10th century. He also states in the introduction that the book is more concerned with the Paulician-Byzantine relationship than with the Paulicians themselves, so that the first two chapters concentrate predominantly on Byzantine perspectives and Byzantine references to the Paulicians, rather than on the group’s internal dynamics or its attitude toward the empire.

Unfortunately, the book is in need of some key visual aids. The sole map, found at the end, is inadequate, covering only a limited number of sites. Similarly, the absence of tables or genealogical charts, whether for the succession of Byzantine emperors or Paulician leaders, makes the text rather inaccessible to someone unfamiliar with these figures. The lack of background information on the Manichaeans or of a comparison between them and the Paulicians would probably confuse many readers. Such a discussion would have been particularly useful, given that Byzantine sources frequently refer to Manichaeans, yet scholars, including DIXON, acknowledge that these references often actually denote Paulicians, even though the two groups were distinct.

While the introduction and first two chapters are rather off-topic, the following four chapters are aligned with the author’s timeframe and thematic focus. Moreover, they present a well-researched and rigorously analysed historical study that ultimately calls into question the reliability of the book’s first half (pp. 1–139). For example, in Chapter Three, which examines two key texts, the *Didaskalie* and the *Letters of Sargios*, as well as Paulician beliefs between 800 and 835, DIXON builds on the work of CLAUDIA LUD-

WIG, expanding upon her findings to emphasise that there is no evidence of dualist beliefs among the Paulicians during this period. This directly contradicts his earlier definition of the movement on p. 1 and throughout the first half of the book. Similarly, his work highlights broader challenges in defining small Christian sects of the time, as he notes that Leo ‘the Montanist’ was likely a Paulician, as Montanism primarily existed in the 2nd century (p. 154).

DIXON also effectively disproves claims that the Paulicians rejected the Hebrew bible (pp. 162–165). Most significantly, he revises his earlier characterization of Paulician organization, ultimately concluding that ‘...Paulician activity at this time is best characterized as a network of loosely connected nodes rather than a unified community...’ (p. 172). This assertion stands in direct contrast to his earlier portrayal of the movement, reinforcing the notion that the Paulicians were far less cohesive than initially presented.

Chapter Four shifts focus back to the 8th century, primarily examining its latter half. Here, DIXON argues that the Paulicians emerged as a naturally evolving form of Christianity within Armenia and Asia Minor, rather than as a distinct sect. The chapter refutes the claim that the Paulicians rose to power through an alliance with the iconoclasts, including Emperor Constantine V. Despite the significance of this topic, DIXON only provides a brief explanation of the beliefs of the iconoclasts on p. 199. Albeit, this issue warrants a more thorough discussion that should have been introduced much earlier in the book. DIXON further attributes the Paulicians’ rise to prominence to what he describes as ‘...the crystallisation of a shared socio-religious identity through dialectical interactions and labelling processes between many different actors in eastern Asia Minor and Armenia...’ (p. 201). This argument challenges the strict division between Armenian and Greek sources, as well as the earlier portrayal of the Paulicians as two entirely separate and disconnected movements.

Chapter Five continues the chronological narrative, focusing on the Paulicians in the first half of the 9th century. This chapter is well-researched but suffers from a similar defect as the earlier ones: lack of explanation as to why ‘Manichaeans’ in the primary sources should be definitively understood as referring to the Paulicians. Some clarification on this point would have helped readers and strengthened the author’s argument.

Chapter Six outlines Paulician history through the 9th century, culminating in their decline around 880 CE. The chapter is followed by an epilogue that

addresses the Paulicans' history following their military defeat in the late 870s. A solid concluding section that summarizing the book's arguments and highlighting its new insights would have been a preferable ending here. Finally, there are two appendices, one on the dating of *The History of the Paulicians* and another on the career of Sergios (one of the Paulician leaders as described in the previously mentioned text). Though informative, these are short and somewhat disjointed, making them less effective in this format. It would have been preferable to integrate them into the main body of the book.

Overall, this book is a missed opportunity, where the first half may eclipse the well researched second half.

Keywords

heresy; Paulicians