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THE FRONTIER EXISTENCE OF THE PAULICIAN HERETICS

Zaroui Pogossian

The Paulician movement—a dualist heresy—spread in the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire and the western regions of Armenia, and was most active between the seventh and the ninth centuries. Its important centres were positioned around the frontier between two hostile states, Byzantium and the Arab Khalifat, and the members of the group appeared on different sides of the shifting border.¹ This article outlines the perception of political and economic circumstances of the period by the Paulicians in order to demonstrate that the border existence provided them with favourable conditions, particularly for maintaining their independence and withstanding the military and religious pressure of the Byzantine state. Despite their followers being mainly Armenian and Greek, the Paulicians as a group were geographically mobile, able to act on the basis of their own economic or political needs, changing loyalties and crossing frontiers, regardless of the language, culture, or religion of their allies.

I also intend to review some of the earlier interpretations of Paulician history, according to which their allegiance was sometimes dictated by their ethnic loyalty. For example, it has been proposed that the reason why the Paulicians participated in the revolt of the Armenian nobles was the presence of a large number of Armenians in their ranks.² On the other hand, we know that the most powerful Paulician leader, Sergios-Tychikos, disapproved of his co-religionists killing the orthodox Greek population. His attitude has been explained by his Greek origin.³ Armenian scholars have ascribed to the Paulicians the character of a “national liberation” movement.

¹ These were the regions of Mananlis, Episparis in the Pontus area, Kibossa in Colonea and, during the peak of the Paulician military power, the cities of Argaoun (Argaous), Melitene, and Tefrike—the capital of the Paulician state. While the heresy spread all the way to Constantinople, and there were Paulicians in the inner parts of the Empire, such as Mopsuestia of Cilicia, Antiochia of Pisidia, and Neocaesarea, the Paulicians remained concentrated on the Arab-Byzantine border. For the most important works on the Paulicians, see Nina Garsoian, *The Paulician Heresy: A Study of the Origin and Development of Paulicianism in Armenia and the Eastern Provinces of the Byzantine Empire* (The Hague: Mouton Press, 1967); and Paul Lemerle, “L’histoire des Pauliciens d’Asie Mineure d’après les sources grecques,” *Travaux et Mémoire* 5 (Paris: Editions E. de Boccard, 1973): 1–144.

² See Bartikian, *Istočniki dlja izučenija pavlikianskogo dviženija* (Sources for the study of the Paulician movement) (Yerevan: Armenian SSR Academy of Sciences Press, 1961), 46–49; Aram Ter–Levondyan, *Armenija i Arabskij Xalifat* (Armenia and the Arabic Khalifat) (Yerevan: Armenian SSR Academy of Sciences Press, 1977), 213–215.

³ In Lemerle, “L’histoire des Pauliciens,” 122: “Ce Grec désapprouvait les raids lancés contre des Grecs, comme sans doute toute action guerrière.”

However, for the Paulicians themselves, their identity as a distinct religious group overshadowed any linguistic or cultural affinities with the orthodox population of the Byzantine Empire. A simple overview of the Paulicians' alliances with Arab Emirs, the Byzantine state, and rebellious Armenian nobles may demonstrate this point.

One of the earliest and most important sources mentioning the Paulicians is the *Sermon against the Paulicians* by the Armenian Catholicos John of Ojun, written around 718–720.⁴ He mentions that the Paulicians “became the allies of Antichrist, the circumcised tyrant.”⁵ He could only mean the Arabs, in the eyes of an Armenian Catholicos the arch-enemy of Christ and of the Armenian nation. Similarly, Michael the Syrian mentions in his chronicle that, when persecuted by Emperor Phillipicus (711–713), Armenians found refuge in Melitene, and became allies of the Arabs.⁶ In these years, when Armenia was under Arab domination, a time fraught with constant conflicts and revolts, this alliance of the Armenian Paulicians with the Arabs could hardly be seen as an act of “national liberation” and, naturally, John of Ojun condemns them.

The alliance becomes logical in the light of contemporary events in the Byzantine Empire. Emperors Justinian II and Phillipicus persecuted the Paulicians as heretics, and they, acting from their own considerations, stayed loyal to no homeland, be it Greek or Armenian. The Muslim Arabs were the least of evil at this time, and the Paulicians preferred them to Greeks or Armenians with whom they may have had linguistic or cultural affinities. If Armenia or the Byzantine Empire suffered from their seeming disloyalty, that was not their concern. Rather, their actions were based on their own particular interests which at that point happened to coincide with those of the Arabs.

However, in the year 748 the Paulicians participated in a revolt against the Arabs organised by the Armenian nobleman Grigor Mamikonian, which is attested by the eighth-century historian Levond. He describes a general discontent after a population census in 725 and the imposition of new, heavier taxes.⁷ This census must have affected the Paulician population negatively as well, and they turned against their former allies, the Arabs, and came to join Grigor Mamikonian, crossing the border to Pontus. We have information about the secret flight of the Paulician leaders Joseph-Aphronetus and Zacharias from Mananlis (in Arab territory) to Episcaris (in

⁴ John of Ojun, *Yovhannu Imastasiri Awjnec'woy Matenagrut'iwnk'* (Collected works of John of Ojun, the Philosopher) (Venice: St. Lazzaro Press, 1953), 46–60. (Translations from Armenian are by the author).

⁵ John of Ojun, *Matenagrut'iwnk'*, 46.

⁶ Quoted in Hrachia Bartikian, *Sources*, 34. Bartikian identifies these Armenians with the Paulicians mentioned by John of Ojun.

⁷ Levond, *Levondeay meci vardapeti hayoc' patmut'iwn* (History of the Armenians by the Great Doctor Levond) (St. Petersburg: 1887), 94–5, 123.

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Byzantine territory) from Petrus Siculus, a Greek monk who lived in the Paulician capital Tefrike for nine months.⁸ Siculus tells us that the Paulicians were persecuted by a local archont—Krikoraxes—who was in this region with his army at the time.⁹

Let us survey two examples of how this event has been interpreted on the basis of the “ethnic element.” On the one hand, Armenian historians who had access to Armenian primary sources, for instance Levond in his *History of the Armenians*, added chronological and geographical precision to the information supplied by Greek sources, especially Petrus Siculus. But on the basis of the evidence that Paulicians had fought against the Arabs, they characterized them as a “national liberation” movement.¹⁰ This opinion was opposed to the view that Paulicianism was a largely a *religious* phenomenon.¹¹ On the other hand, if one does not consult the Armenian sources and neglects the importance of the economic circumstances of the period which are detailed in them, one would not get a convincing explanation of the flight of the Paulician leaders from Arab territory. For instance, it has been proposed that Arab border guards became wary of the Paulicians because they constituted a large group of Greeks living suspiciously close to the border.¹² This explanation would not hold if we consider that in previous and future alliances with the Arabs, the issue of the ethnic composition of the Paulicians did not seem to be of importance to any of the parties.

Thus, about thirty years after John of Ojun castigated the Paulicians for cooperating with the Arabs, they were fighting against their old allies. Now, most probably due to economic motives, this population on the borderline had changed their loyalties, turned against the Arabs, and joined the Christian Armenians, who were supported by the Byzantine Empire. In the end, the revolt did not take place, because of a discord among the Armenian nobles.

⁸ Pierre de Sicile [Petrus Siculus], “Du même Pierre de Sicile. Histoire utile, réfutation et renversement de la creuse et vaine hérésie des Manichéens qu'on appelle aussi Pauliciens, en forme [de discours] adressé à l'archevêque de Bulgarie,” in *Les sources grecques pour l'histoire des Pauliciens d'Asie Mineure*, ed. Charles Astruc, et al., *Travaux et Mémoire* 4 (Paris: Editions E. De Boccard, 1970): 1-67.

⁹ Pierre de Sicile “Histoire des Pauliciens”, 50-51. H. Bartikian thinks that Krikoraxes is the distorted version of the name Grigor Mamikonian: the name Grigor in Western Armenian, pronounced as *Krikor*, plus the diminutive *ik* (ak), plus the Greek suffix *es*. See, Bartikian, *Sources*, 48-9.

¹⁰ This interpretation was first proposed by Bartikian in *Sources*, then widely accepted and quoted by other scholars in Armenia. It is included in a general textbook on Armenian history used by higher educational institutions *Hay žolovrdi patmut'yun* (History of the Armenian people) (Yerevan: Armenian SSR Academy of Sciences Press, 1984), vol. 2, 389-415.

¹¹ Barseł Sargisyan, *Usunnasirut'ewmner manikea-l'ondrakec'inerou atandin ev Grigor Narekac'wo t'ult'e* (A study of Manichaean-Tondrakite heresy and the letter of Grigor Narekac'i) (Venice: Mxitarists Press, 1893); Garsoian, *The Paulician Heresy*; and Lemerle, “L'histoire.”

¹² Paul Lemerle, “L'histoire,” 77. Lemerle and Nina Garsoian reject the explanation of this flight based on economic reasons, proposed by Bartikian and supported by Milan Loos. See, Garsoian, *The Paulician Heresy*; Milan Loos “Le Mouvement Paulicien à Byzance,” *Byzantinoslavica* 24 (1963): 258-286.

But the Paulician “alliance” with the Byzantine emperors persisted for a few more years. In 752 the Emperor Constantine V recaptured the cities of Melitene and Theodosiopolis from the Arab Khalifat with the help of the local population. After the occupation, the population of the cities, wary of Arab retaliation, asked the Emperor to move them to a territory within the Empire. Their request was granted, they were moved to Thrace and given land there. This was useful for the Empire from a demographic point of view, since after the bubonic plague of 748, according to Theophanes Continuator, Thrace was empty of people. Talking about this move, Theophanes tells us that the population which was transferred spread the heresy of the Paulicians in Thrace. This implies that there were Paulicians among the allies of Constantine V.¹³

But the Byzantine-Arab frontier was to be crossed by the Paulicians yet again. When the Emperors Michael Rhangabe and Leo the Armenian imposed a death penalty on those accused of Paulicianism, the latter entered the so-called military stage of the movement. They again moved to Melitene, some time around 830, under the protection of the Amr b. Abdallah al-Aqta, and their military units were continuously ravaging the Byzantine territory. They were given the cities of Argaoun and Amida by the Emir of Melitene and cooperated with him in military affairs.

Their frontier position eventually gave rise to a semi-independent Paulician state. The first Paulician military leader, Karbeas, originally a soldier in the Byzantine army, allied himself with the Arabs until his death and raided the Empire from Tefrike, the capital of the Paulician state. His successor, Chrisocheir, continued the hostile policy against the Empire, although he tended to remain more independent of Arab support, until his ultimate defeat under the Emperor Basil I.

This brief overview shows the advantages that their frontier position offered to this religious group which crossed and re-crossed the borderline whenever necessary. The border between two antagonistic states, the Byzantine Empire and the Arab Khalifat, always prone to attacks and aggression from either side, was not necessarily a dangerous place for the Paulicians. Rather, it afforded them a certain freedom of movement and allowed them to maintain their identity as a distinct group, a group independent of the linguistic or ethnic background of its members. Their identity as Paulicians, as a religious entity with its own particular interests, went beyond the traditional frontiers imposed by cultural and linguistic heritage, whether Greek or Armenian.

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¹³ *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World, c. 650-1405*, ed. Janet Hamilton and Bernard Hamilton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 57–8.