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**Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies**

**Title**

The Waldensian Dissent: Persecution and Survival c. 1170-1570 (review)

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3pm3n1zv>

**Journal**

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 31(1)

**ISSN**

0069-6412

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**Publication Date**

2000-10-01

Peer reviewed

## REVIEWS

Gabriel Audisio, *The Waldensian Dissent: Persecution and Survival c. 1170–c. 1570* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999) 280 pp.

In his most recent book, *The Waldensian Dissent: Persecution and Survival c. 1170–c. 1570*, Gabriel Audisio attempts to show the nuanced relationship between the Protestantism which emerged in the sixteenth century and the Waldensians, a group established 400 years earlier, initially known as the Poor of Lyons.<sup>1</sup> By tracing the origins and development of the Waldensian movement, Audisio shows how it is both similar and dissimilar in practice and belief with Protestantism and demonstrates how modern Waldensians have evolved from their roots. He illustrates the ongoing tension between the survival and integrity of the movement.

Audisio aims his book at the “inquiring but generally non-specialist reader” (xi) and therefore keeps the critical apparatus to a minimum. Consequently the book suffers from insufficient explanation of the complex political, religious, and social context of the period. More maps with greater detail would have filled in some necessary historical undercurrents, and a chart of key figures would have enabled the reader to track the movement’s leaders more carefully.

The book proceeds in chronological order for the first four chapters and continues this chronology in two final chapters. The fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters examine the impact of historical circumstances on the movement’s development. These middle chapters are Audisio’s most provocative, offering a psychosocial analysis of the movement. The greatest strength of the chronological overview is Audisio’s use and examination of the primary sources for the movement. At several points, particularly at the beginning of chapter three, he describes the problems and special insights offered by the primary sources.

The first two chapters trace the beginnings of the movement as it shifted from an urban movement in Lyons, rooted in the New Testament and emphasizing poverty and good works, to a dispersed, rural movement, struggling with issues of organization. Rejection by the official church hierarchy not only led to this change but also had the effect of turning clandestine a movement known for its preaching. Here Audisio proffers an interesting question, probing the distinction between a heretic and one who merely disobeys authority.

Chapter 3 addresses the core of Waldensian identity and struggles with the differences among theology and doctrine and religious sensibility. In the eyes of the Inquisition, Waldensian became synonymous with heretic, making identification of specific Waldensian beliefs and practices complicated. Waldensians rejected the use of falsehood and oaths as well as the doctrine of purgatory. They also did not participate in confession. These were essential, constant

<sup>1</sup>Audisio distinguishes between the name the group gave themselves, Poor of Lyons, and the epithet Waldensians, that has been associated with the movement historically, but he uses both names. Audisio also lumps Protestants together generally for the most part, making little distinction between theological differences. Ultimately, I am not certain whether the lack of distinctions furthers his argument. I will use the name Waldensians for convenience.

elements of the movement. Present to varying degrees in different times and places were rejection of the death penalty, as well as variations in eucharistic practices and in the role of the clergy and saints. This chapter is crucial to Audisio's argument later in the book, as it forms the template to measure later movements claiming to be Waldensians.

In chapters 2 and 3 Audisio bases his argument about the changes in the Waldensian movement on social scientific theory, both geographical and psychological. Though the shift from an urban to a rural context is certainly important to ponder, Audisio offers a too-simple analysis, sounding judgmental rather than descriptive. The psychology of persecution and hiding are also useful concepts to further the historical analysis, but, because the evidence is scant and requires much interpretation, the analysis runs the risks of anachronism and assumption.

The problem with a concealed movement, Audisio argues in chapter 4, is that it creates the impression of being undesirable, which in turn causes its followers to disperse. A breakdown in unity then inevitably occurs. Concurrently, repression led the Waldensians to emigrate, and emigration allowed for expansion. This chapter, focusing on the fifteenth century, traces the expansion of the movement. Audisio also demonstrates his talents as a paleographer in this chapter, which contains insightful discussions of both the problems of language (Latin vs. "vernacular," use of word *vaudois*) and sources (burning of records with heretics, dating of documents related to Hus).

With chapter 5, Audisio interrupts his chronological approach and begins to take an apologetic tone. He examines the structure of the movement and how that structure evolved in response to the hidden nature of the movement. Audisio contends that it is not possible to hide one's identity and still maintain it, especially for a group like the Waldensians, who held that they were the only true Christians. The author uses Waldensian wills and other documents to show how the Waldensians came to look outwardly like the Roman Catholics around them in all except subtle ways.

Chapter 6 begins with the key question of the book, "Should they maintain the intensity of their movement or aim to survive?" (110) Issues of membership and the training and selection of preachers and *barbes*<sup>2</sup> is described in great detail. His discussion of the division resulting from the divide between Romance and Germanic languages is quite useful. Chapter 7 continues to demonstrate Audisio's paleographic leanings and offers extensive details on available manuscripts. He clearly is interested in correcting the perception that the leaders of the Waldensian movement were illiterate, though he points out that the *barbes* could read and write in the vernacular but not in Latin.

In chapters 8 and 9, Audisio explores the links with the emerging Protestant movement. However, he ultimately emphasizes that the Waldensians were not forerunners to the Protestant Reformation, despite sharing the values of *sola Scriptura* and the priesthood of all believers. He argues that the Waldensians became increasingly Protestant in their confessions in an effort to become less clandestine. However, the links with the Protestants also required the elimination of the *barbes* and an end to the virtue of poverty. Chapter 9 contains a

<sup>2</sup>*Barbes* is the term used for preachers by the Waldensians in Romance speaking areas.

description of the bloody repression of the Waldensians and their resistance. The book's epilogue takes the movement into the present day, though Audisio argues that today's members are not true Waldensians.

The paleographic insights of this book are both fascinating and useful. They offer systematic lessons for all historians about the careful use of written sources. However, a novice would find this book somewhat daunting in its lack of contextualization. Audisio dismisses other interesting issues which seem to have been integral to the initial movement, such as gender equality and the role of women as preachers, as being "anachronistic and thus destined to failure" (113) without further explanation. This dismissal is surprising in light of Audisio's interest in what truly constitutes the heart of the movement.

Audisio's book raises some fundamental questions applicable to all religious movements throughout history. Without directly saying so, the author seems to offer an apologetic for the Waldensians' and perhaps by extension all such movements' fluctuations in response to changing political, religious, and social climates. Perhaps he is doing so to clarify who the Waldensians truly were, not who history has remembered them to be.

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