

The Last Pagans of Rome

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Reviewed by Tom Palaima

The Last Pagans of Rome

By Alan Cameron. Oxford University Press. 896pp. £80.00. ISBN 97801997476. Published 24 June 2011

If you have a week of uninterrupted spare time, a knowledge of Roman imperial literature and history, however dormant, a passable command of Greek and Latin, and you have enjoyed reading classic histories of ancient culture by historians such as Edward Gibbon, or always wish you had, then treat your mind to Alan Cameron's *The Last Pagans of Rome*. Cameron here dissects and deconstructs more than 100 years of scholarship about the transition from what we call late Roman imperial pagan culture to what is known as the triumph of Christianity.

As befits a scholar whose work in this area since 1964 includes countless articles and reviews and six books, the weighing of ancient evidence and modern scholarly opinion in *The Last Pagans* is meticulous. It is also controlled by the broader understanding of cultural processes and human motivations that makes a thinking senior scholar a scholar worth reading rather than a scholiast who has made it to old age. *The Last Pagans* re-examines what religious beliefs and practices mean in the social and political context of the late fourth and early fifth centuries AD.

Each chapter requires that serious attention be paid to the subtle, interwoven threads of Cameron's own arguments. It is well worth the effort, but the book itself makes it harder for readers than necessary. Some Latin and Greek passages are accompanied by translations; others are not. Some cited texts are given in the footnotes; others are not. Non-specialist readers, like myself, are given no helpful chronological tables of key events and figures or authors and their works. Some readers will be thrown momentarily off track by simple errors of presentation. For example, in the chapter where Cameron treats the religious or secular meanings of major pieces of classical revival and pagan art (bronze medallions, silver plates, illuminated manuscripts, ivory diptychs), the middle figure on the Lampadiorum ivory panel is described as having a *mappa* (a kind of napkin that the suffect consul releases to mark the start of the games he is sponsoring) in his left hand and a sceptre in his right, when in fact the opposite is true.

Cameron opens his introduction with a quotation from Gibbon about the "ruin of paganism, in the age of Theodosius" as "a singular event in the history of the human mind". He grabs our attention by proclaiming that "the romantic myth" of a class of pagan aristocrats who in the 380s and the following decades were "fearless champions of senatorial privilege, literature lovers, and aficionados of classical (especially Greek) culture as well as traditional cults" must be dismantled.

He proceeds to do so by reconsidering how the history of the period was shaped, what effect the perspective of Christian writers had on creating the false constructs of a "pagan revival" and a "last pagan stand" spearheaded by an aristocracy who, in Cameron's view, were "arrogant, philistine land-grabbers, most of them". To be successful, members of the Roman elite also had to be shrewd, politically adept and pragmatic. This is hardly a pool that would contain many zealous champions of paganism, which, after all, was not even a formal religion. Cameron argues convincingly that few of those whom we now call "pagan aristocrats" self-identified as pagans. Nor did they rally around the usurper Eugenius for religious reasons. And there was no true pagan revolt.

Our age of ever-increasing wealth disparity gives us ample reason to support Cameron's incredulity at the prevailing notion of a senatorial aristocracy devoted to classical culture, literature and philosophy and to collecting and correcting manuscripts. Ironically, Christian leaders such as Jerome and Augustine were truly learned in what we call the Classics. They "could not resist to show off their classical culture when writing to members of the elite, whether pagan or Christian". By contrast, Ammianus Marcellinus, "the most important pagan writer of the age", pillories late 4th-century Roman aristocrats for "arrogance, ostentation, superstition, gluttony, and cruelty". He notes that former houses of what we would call literary patrons now shunned "men of learning and sobriety" and "their libraries are like tombs, permanently closed".

In demolishing the long-standing theory that the images on the bronze medallions known as *contorniates* were part of an active pro-pagan propaganda campaign in the late 4th century, Cameron stresses that "the 'conflict' over classical culture was entirely one-sided. While some Christians condemned it, there is no evidence that pagans 'promoted' it." On wall paintings, floor mosaics and precious objects such as the silver Mildenhall plate, "Dionysus is *not* portrayed as a saviour or redeemer" or as a rival of Christ. "His mission is simply to bring men and (especially) women joy in the form of wine.

"Nowadays," Cameron notes, "we place such culture heroes on postage stamps."

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