

BOOK REVIEW

The Last Pagans of Rome. By Alan CAMERON. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xi + 878. 18 Illustrations. Hardcover, \$85.00/£55.00. ISBN 978-0-19-974727-9.

Encyclopedic in its learning and relentless in its argument, Alan Cameron's *Last Pagans of Rome* is a landmark in late Roman studies. Cameron's mission here is to topple once and for all the "myth" of a concerted resistance movement coordinated by a select group of late fourth-century pagan aristocrats to oppose Christianity's infiltration of state and society. For more than four decades Cameron's scholarship has been edging that romantic vision of the religious, literary, and social history of late fourth-century Rome to the brink of destruction. With the publication of this book the classic formulation of paganism's fourth-century "revival" lies well beyond reconstitution. Although other scholars, often indebted to Cameron's work on Macrobius, contorniate medalions, or manuscript subscriptions, have for some time been helping to dismantle the "conflict between paganism and Christianity" constructed by (among others) Andreas Alföldi and Herbert Bloch, Cameron's *Last Pagans* stands firm as a monumental summation of an academic lifetime of tough thinking about a moment in history crucial to the telling of Rome's story. Yet, while the political careers and literary endeavors of a relatively few "arrogant" Roman nobles provide Cameron's narrative thrust, *The Last Pagans* may do its finest service as a breath-taking sortie across the cultural landscape of fourth- and early fifth-century Rome. In fact, in the years ahead, Cameron's assessment of the troublesome *Carmen contra paganos*, his analysis of the *Saturnalia*, and his treatment of the classicizing turn in figural representation are but a few of the topics that will lure readers back to this meticulously documented study. *The Last Pagans*, in other words, is a book whose parts may be more revelatory than its whole.

The narrative line and interpretive payoff can be briefly rehearsed. Against a version of events that credits certain noble Romans of now familiar name—Q. Aurelius Symmachus, Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, Nicomachus Flavianus—with engineering a revival of pagan cult and culture whose aim was to thwart the advance of Christianity and its agents at court, in the senate, and in the ritual and

artistic life of Rome, Cameron offers a far more sober assessment of the qualities and agenda of the city's last pagans. From the early 380s, imperial policy did indeed target traditional civic religion at Rome. Gratian's withdrawal of state subsidies and Theodosius' legislation of the 390s spelled the end of Rome's long-standing public cults, denied the funds they needed to survive. But the new religion, Cameron argues, had made marked inroads among the Roman aristocracy well before Gratian severed the revenue stream. With the fade out of the priestly colleges (never more than political appointments anyway), the end of sacrifice, and the closing of the temples, the so-called champions of paganism were left to indulge their taste for literary archaism and play a game of politics wherein religious affiliation had seldom been a decisive factor in the quest for preferment. Revival of cult was simply not a pressing issue; political survival was. The Battle of the Frigidus River in 394, therefore, whatever else it may have been, was not paganism's heroic last stand; Roman civic cult exited history with a whimper and a sigh. Moreover, neither their literary dilettantism, their patronage of classicizing ivory diptychs, nor their alleged fondness for Livy and Vergil can be used to transform these philistine "last pagans" into militant propagandists for old-fashioned values or prescient conservators of the classical heritage. Christian aristocrats, it seems, were more often in the vanguard of the age's literary and artistic revivals—and were no less enamored of the epic hexameter and neo-classical realism than their non-Christian peers. In fact, it was not until the 430s that Macrobius, poorly informed about the real men whose literary ciphers populate his dialogue, put into the mouth of Rufius Albinus the oft-quoted "to be sure, we must always revere the days gone by (*vetustas*)" and created the genteel images of Praetextatus, Symmachus, and Flavianus so long revered by classical scholars. In any case, the *Saturnalia* served up for its readers (almost exclusively Christian now) merely the lukewarm paganism of Vergilian antiquarianism. There simply was no pagan cultural front in the 430s, as there had not been one in the 380s.

All that, of course, is heady stuff and a stiff challenge, but it rests on a series of interrogations, many "inescapably" detailed, that breach the walls of virtually every shred of evidence ever called upon to document the fourth-century pagan revival. Fortified by prosopography, epigraphy, codicology, and paleography, Cameron re-dates several anti-pagan poems, pins the *Carmen contra paganos* on Damasus (with Praetextatus as his target), dismisses the (lost) *Annales* of Nicomachus Flavianus as a "trivial epitome" (690), and writes off the author of the *Historia Augusta* as "a frivolous, ignorant person with no agenda worthy of the name" (781)—incapable even of conceiving his fiction as a plea for toleration.

With equal flair, he dissolves the “circle of Symmachus,” dislodges Macrobius from the only decades that matter, and construes the much touted “text editing” of Roman aristocrats (Christian as well as pagan) as nothing more than (very) occasional proof reading. Pagan scholarship fares no better; nor does patronage of the visual and minor arts. Neither in style nor in content do the miniatures of the Vatican Vergil or the panels of the Symmachorum/Nicomachorum diptych embody pagan sympathies; the former are “simply illustrations” (711) and the latter “nostalgic mementoes” (737). Above all other characters, however, it is Macrobius, author of the “relentlessly antiquarian” *Saturnalia* (255), who often represents for Cameron the “sentimental, literary paganism” (272) that was the best Rome’s last pagans could muster following the Frigidus, if not well before it. Indeed, Macrobius may be the only figure to challenge Symmachus for starring role in the *The Last Pagans*. In that light, Cameron’s suspicion (265) that Macrobius himself was unlikely to have been a pagan, and certainly not a committed one, would be ironic were it not in fact the telltale point.

There is, of course, little justice in summary and perhaps even less in short review of a book that weighs in with this much erudition and argument. *The Last Pagans* does entertain ambiguities and acknowledge tensions. Cameron denies paganism’s militancy but accepts its tenacity, not least among Christians, in multifarious form (783–97). Although he works so effectively to situate the *Saturnalia* in the more accommodating context of its composition rather than the moment of its dramatic setting a half-century prior, he concedes that some mid-fifth-century Christians “must have been horrified” at what others saw as only “harmless antiquarianism” (626). The veneration of classical literature, especially Vergil, was not the equivalent of paganism, but running too close to the grain could even then arouse suspicion. Certainly in its classic formulation the pagan revival has run its course. Nevertheless, the unresolved tensions that linger above all around Cameron’s Macrobius suggest the next and necessary stages of this project. *The Last Pagans* often wins its points by characterizing its losers as purveyors (and victims) of nostalgia, insipid sentimentality, and antiquarianism. Yet cultural conservatism can also be a signpost of identity and, sometimes, even a badge of resistance. One remaining task, then, is to continue hard pursuit of that “vital and continuing role” (801) played by the myriad manifestations of Roman tradition in this Christianizing world.

DENNIS TROUT

University of Missouri, TroutD@missouri.edu