

BOOK REVIEW

The Final Pagan Generation. By EDWARD J. WATTS. Transformation of the Classical Heritage series. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015. Pp. xviii + 334. Hardback; \$34.95. ISBN: 978-0-520-28370-1

Watts has chosen to analyze the careers of four well-documented luminaries of Late Antiquity (Ausonius, Libanius, Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, and Themistius) in this insightful analysis of the transition from a society populated by the statues of the traditional gods and their priests and worshippers to one in which temples were replaced by churches and imperial “suggestions” became laws. However, he argues that much remained unchanged in the religious landscapes of the empire.

The reader will find much that is fresh in Watts’ approach. He has utilized “network theory” to trace connections amongst influential personages, and he has drawn on recent demographic studies on childhood and old age to show life-cycle characteristics of not only his main characters but also of their age-cohort. Further, he has augmented his own research on education in Athens and Alexandria,¹ with evidence about life in Antioch through the letters and speeches of Libanius and in Constantinople by the speeches of Themistius. These in turn have been complemented by the studies by other scholars on Ausonius in Gaul and Praetextatus in Rome to construct and compare empire-wide changes in both politics and religion.

By the “final generation,” Watts means men born in the 310s who lived on into the 390s. He argues that one’s education as a youth provided the lens for processing change. This point is persuasive as one considers the way that growing up in the Great Depression or during the Vietnam War tends to shape modern viewpoints. He also makes the point that not all classes within the same generation had the same experiences, and that wealth, education, and opportunity altered experiences.

¹ *City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria*, University of California Press, 2006; *Riot in Alexandria: Tradition and Group Dynamics in Late Antique Pagan and Christian Communities*, University of California Press, 2010.

There are great strengths in this book. One aspect is that by devoting a chapter to each of the eight decades (see list below), Watts avoids the trap of over-generalization that has snared writers of “overviews.” Watts also very succinctly summarizes the political and religious milieu of each decade to show the realities of the environment in which these men worked. I found particularly effective his points about Julian’s actions in slowing the mandatory Christianization of the empire. His detailed portraits of the careers of “successful” pagans such as Libanius and Praetextatus support his argument that skilled administrators were valued by the emperors in managing tinder-box populations who could quickly turn against their rulers if mismanaged. I particularly admire his solution to the conflicting claims by both Libanius and John Chrysostom that each advocate was responsible for saving the populace of Antioch after the Riot of the Statues. I think Watts rightly points out that defusing this situation required the help of both men, and the emperor was willing to let each one take full credit.

One obvious complaint the reader could make is that no century can be totally understood through the lives of the elite, even those who rose to prominence by hard work, talent and education. However, the “limits of the possible” in the system can be understood by a study of such lives. Watts is very clear in delimiting his study and acknowledges this challenge. Watts has neatly explored the evidence that these prodigiously productive writers have left behind, drawn on such sources as Ammianus Marcellinus, Symmachus, John Chrysostom and the Theodosian Code, and utilized details of careers from inscriptions and other historians to reconstruct trends in each man’s career. But his clever juxtaposition with other events and the actions of the emperors led this reader to a real appreciation of the accomplishments of the author.

Watts demonstrates his mastery of both primary and modern sources by very detailed notes, many of which quote the actual Greek or Latin of the relevant text. The extensive bibliography will be of use to anyone working on the fourth century. The text is virtually flawless; I found only one typo in the whole book (two commas).

The outline of the book by decade can be seen by the chapter headings:

1. Growing Up in the Cities of the Gods
2. Education in an Age of Imagination
3. The System
4. Moving Up in an Age of Uncertainty
5. The Apogee

6. The New Pannonian Order
7. Christian Youth Culture in the 360s and 370s
8. Bishops, Bureaucrats, and Aristocrats under Gratian, Valentinian II, and Theodosius
9. Old Age in a Young Man's Empire
10. A Generation's Legacy

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