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Review of "The Last Pagans of Rome"

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Review of *The Last Pagans of Rome*, Alan Cameron (Oxford University Press, 2011. 878 pp. \$85.00 ISBN 978-0-19-974727-6)

In his *Essays Civil and Moral* Francis Bacon suggests, "Between two types of men who seek to create inconsistent kinds of worlds I see no alternative but force; it seems that all societies rest upon the death of men." This view has been widely accepted in many historical narratives by placing two distinct groups in adversarial roles. Not only does this sell well (you saw the movie *300*), but it also provides an easy method of interpretation for public consumption. This is one of the errors that Alan Cameron corrects in his book *The Last Pagans of Rome* when he challenges a variety of misconceptions that have become accepted as standard interpretations over the last hundred years concerning the late Roman period and the growth of Christianity in the West.

Cameron's primary goal is to develop a new historical model in which the pagan elite of the fourth century did not stage a classical revival or attempt a coup in an effort to seize power from the Christian emperor who was their supposed oppressor. Instead Cameron shows that the divisions between pagan and Christian were far less rigid (and far less important) than the writings from the limited evidence of the fourth century might suggest.

The source materials for many of the established interpretations concern the political and military fight for control of the empire on September 4-5, 394 CE at the Frigidus River. This battle put the whole of the Roman Empire in the hands of a single man for the final time. Rufinus of Aquileia provided an account of the battle at the Frigidus River between the Christian emperor Theodosius and the pagan usurper Eugenius. The written narrative takes the fanatical paganism of Eugenius' followers as axiomatic. Theodosius' followers prepared for the battle with fasting and prayer while Eugenius' followers made sacrifices and augury with sheep entrails. Because Theodosius would ultimately prevail, the writers in late antiquity use the source material to develop a rigid division between those who supported Christianity and those who opposed it. In the minds of the Christian authors of the fourth and fifth century those who did not support Christianity must, by default and definition, oppose it. After all, didn't Christians receive persecution at the hands of pagan emperors? This rigid characterization became the accepted narrative for the conversion of Roman territory and the political elite.

Was this the culminating event in a pagan revival against the growing strength of Christianity in Rome? Cameron shows that it is difficult to find a religious motivation for a pagan revival when the most widely accepted pagan authors (Virgil, Terence, Cicero, Sallust) never fell out of use. There is a massive collection of evidence demonstrating that non-Christians of the first four centuries did not feel threatened by the growth of Christianity. Christian Romans had eagerly sought to convert both wealthy women and influential men to give the new religion a power that was out of proportion to its numerical inferiority, but to outsiders what was one more deity in the pantheon? Christians of later centuries would use the same methods of cultural incorporation to win many converts among the Germans, Scandinavians, and Irish. This process drew in many well-educated students of classical authors that inoculated the young religion against bias that might produce an anti-classical zeal.

The commonly accepted narrative is that Frigidus battle represented a pagan reaction to the increasingly Christian perspective of the Roman elite political circles. The most widely accepted myth has been that pagans and Christians must have had a relationship characterized by animosity due to the changing nature of the religious landscape in this period. Cameron points out that not only is this a myth,



but that it is a narrow and limited way of interpreting history during any period. Even the later aggressive posture of the Church toward other religious groups did not necessitate an oppositional paradigm (consider Boniface's interactions with the Franks.)

The relationship of Christianity to Western Europe has often been recognized as a beneficial one. The Christianization of the Vikings, the Carolingian link with the Church and the political legitimacy shared between the Capetians and the Vatican can be seen as analogous to the relationship between the Roman government, the Roman people and the Roman Catholic Church. Cameron avoids overstating the beneficial aspects of the Church/State relationship while dispelling the myth that Christianity operated as a militant faction within Roman culture by the fourth century. It was not the pagan culture of Western Europe that felt threatened, but instead it was the growing Christian Church itself. The Church triumphant that issued such paranoid sermons like that of Peter Chrysologus in 430 CE suggesting that the New Year's parade in Ravenna was "a 'procession of demons' (daemonum pompum) that included Saturn, Jupiter, Hercules, Diana and Vulcan." They reasoned that if the cultural practice was not overtly Christian then it must be pagan.

By referencing over one thousand authors, both historical and contemporary, with over one thousand and seven hundred documents, Alan Cameron provides students of historical inquiry with one of the finest examples of methodology in this magnum opus. He proves that he has few equals in the interpretation of the events surrounding the transition of Roman culture from predominantly pagan to predominantly Christian. Only Jaroslav Pelikan's series on the development of the Christian tradition can stand as an equal to this important work on the topic (*The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*.) The most striking similarity lies in each man's mastery of multiple languages.

The most significant task for his work is the reevaluation of primary sources whose earlier interpretations have gone unchallenged by historians who were simply not up to the task of translating the source material or placing it in the appropriate context. Cameron challenges these long-held assumptions by pointing out the lack of evidence supporting them and providing a fresh look at the origins of these ideas.

Cameron's book comprises 878 pages in hardback. It is difficult to imagine that anyone who actually reads all twenty chapters of *The Last Pagans of Rome* could get even halfway through this book without being convinced of this authoritative interpretation of the Frigidus narrative. To make his point, Cameron begins with a definition of terms.

Chapter 1 ("Pagans and Polytheists") begins by defining the terms that have been used in the discussion for centuries. The word "pagan" (pagani, paganos) is particularly problematic since the pagans did not recognize themselves as such and would not have seen each other as equals in their paganism. The term did not take on a standardized meaning until the fourth century. In the Greek east the word Hellenistic described those who embraced Classical learning, but the Greek word held no negative connotations unlike its western counterpart's pejorative meaning. At first it was simply used to identify those outside of Christianity, much like "gentile" was used by the Hebrews, but over time the ascendant Church began to use "pagan" as a derogatory term. Pagan became to Christianity what Barbarian had been to the Empire's citizens; outsiders who had no share of the rewards of membership.



For the Romans in late antiquity their self-image was derived more from social standing, political persuasion, education, wealth, lineage, rank, and geography than by their religious affiliations. To be pagan was simply to be a participant in the state cults or a college-administered religious group that were well established in the culture. Imagine it as rooting for a favorite college team. Each has their fanatics, but against the realities of sickness and the average workday the cults were simply loose affiliations of like-minded Romans. By contrast, the Christian perspective demanded a religious devotion that was unknown in the Western world outside Judaism. This new Christian perspective drew new lines that divided both people and historical interpretations in ways that did not evaluate people or events in a manner consistent with previous cultural standards. Christians in the later generations (third and fourth centuries) simply assumed that pagans must be as devoted to “paganism”, whatever the manifestation, as Christians were to the Church.

Cameron ends all periphrasis by developing an equitable manner of evaluating the changing meaning of words over time and avoids the misunderstandings that have so frequently characterized the study of late antiquity. Words like pagan, polytheistic, mythological, secular, classical, and Hellenistic are reconsidered for meaning, usage, and intent by both the original users and by modern authors. The baggage of these words in the modern context was not intended when used in primary sources.

Chapters 2 (“From Constantius to Theodosius”), 5 (“Pagan Converts”), 8 (“The Poem against the Pagans”) and 9 (“Other Christian Verse Invectives”) reconsider the validity of perspective in both the original sources and in the bias of their translators and interpreters. The unique perspective of Christian authors, as in Augustine’s *City of God*, provides us with both factual material and with the attitudes and preconceptions of the time period. We only get the full story when we understand how to interpret these documents through the lens of the author’s perspective in cooperation with many other unique perspectives. This becomes compelling when considering the most widely used documents used to create a belief in a Christian vs. Pagan late Roman narrative. Intent, translation and perspective all become relevant issues when utilizing the Poem against the Pagans to craft a single dimensional view of the Frigidus account. Once established in scholarship this story was simply repeated in the writings of Christian authors in the fourth century and beyond.

Just as our modern media skews contemporary perspective to a preconceived viewpoint, the late Roman period produced an abundance of writers who also wrote for viewpoint-specific audiences. All periods, it seems, have their Glenn Becks. When writing about people and institutions that do not share the authors’ perspective we find instances of misinformation that range from minor distortions to outright slander. Even some laws of this period were written in a shrill, hysterical tone, assuming that pagans (like boogymen) were just under the surface of Rome’s culture waiting to strike. Some of these distorted accounts have been given disproportional weight against the mass of available resources. This becomes particularly important when considering the issue of religious identity.

Religious identity is intrinsically tied to the discussion of the conversion of pagans to Christianity from the first through fifth century. The identity that has been given to late antiquity Romans by recent historians has not been well aligned with the identity that the Romans would have recognized. Many of these Romans often worshiped Christ in His churches on Sunday but also practiced pagan burial rituals and participated in sun god festivals. It seems that the animosity that has been used to portray this period



in an adversarial manner is better understood through Christianity's dichotomous allowance for pagan cultural practice alongside its rigid demand specific religious truths.

For their part, the arrogant well-bred aristocrats that have long been characterized as the leaders of the pagan revival against Christianity are clearly romanticized by historians who seek to interpret these events in an adversarial tone rather than the day-to-day shifts of inches that we experience in real life. As Cameron writes on the first page of his introduction, "The dismantling of this romantic myth is one of the main goals of this book."

Several chapters contain uncomfortable passages in which Cameron calls out specific historians and their works for inconsistencies, misinterpretations, and poor methodology. This exposure to criticism of his contemporaries is frank and based only on the facts. Neutrality is not one of this author's weaknesses. The overall tone is authoritative and provides a constant stream of evidence that overwhelms the previous interpretations.

The Last Pagans of Rome is an important work that will become a dog-eared necessity in the teaching of late antiquity. Few who manage to digest its contents will argue against the might and mastery of Cameron's conclusions. This is a book for the serious student of history and is destined to become required reading in any historiography of Christian History and the Fall of Rome.

While Braudelian peasants may have had little influence in creating any "type of world" in the Medieval period, all classes of Romans were able to stand astride two worlds in their application of both Pagan and Christian practices that allowed the transition from the Ancient to the Medieval period to take place without Bacon's gloomy prediction coming to fruition. Cameron shows us that both Pagan and Christian can be commended for that small blessing.

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