

REVIEW

REVIEWING *THE LAST PAGANS OF ROME*

Rita Lizzi Testa, ed., *The Strange Death of Pagan Rome*. Giornale Italiano di Filologia, Bibliotheca 16. Turnhout: Brepols, 2013. Pp. 198. Paperback, £75.00. ISBN 978-2-503-54942-2.

The discipline of Late Antiquity, like many other fields of scholarship, is extremely conscious of its own history. Within Anglophone scholarship in particular, figures such as Edward Gibbon, A. H. M. Jones and Peter Brown loom large in any narrative of the development of the field, and have themselves often been the subject of edited volumes exploring their approach and contribution to research.¹ In some ways, *The Strange Death of Pagan Rome* resembles these retrospectives, since its twelve chapters (by eleven Italian scholars and one Swiss) are all devoted to a single book. Unlike the subjects of these other volumes, however, this is a very recent work: Alan Cameron's monumental *The Last Pagans of Rome*, published in 2011. Each contributor has been assigned a chapter (or chapters) from Cameron's work to consider and judge, resulting in a multi-authored book review that spans almost two hundred pages. Most of the scholars structure their chapters by summarising and weighing up an aspect of Cameron's argument, analysing his treatment of material and then either offering alternative interpretations of parts of it or presenting supplementary items that bolster or question his conclusions. Given the nature of this volume, I find myself faced with the rather unusual task of reviewing a review. For this reason, I will not describe each chapter in detail, but shall instead confine myself to some more general remarks about the volume's approach and utility.

It is notable that, in a number of chapters, the contributors find themselves largely in agreement with the main thrust of Cameron's arguments. For example, Franca Ela Consolino (85–107) mostly endorses Cameron's conclusions about Macrobius' *Saturnalia* and the identification of Damasus of Rome as the author of the *Carmen contra paganos*, but does suggest a few minor amendments to his treatment of these issues. Similarly, Alessandra Bravi (171–87) finds much to like in Cameron's interpretation of late Roman art, while Giovanni Alberto Cecconi (151–64) largely agrees with Cameron's as-

¹ See, for example, R. McKitterick and R. Quinault, edd., *Edward Gibbon and Empire* (Cambridge, 1996); D. M. Gwynn, ed., *A. H. M. Jones and the Later Roman Empire* (Leiden, 2007); J. Howard-Johnston and P. A. Hayward, edd., *The Cult of the Saints in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown* (Oxford, 1999).

assessment of Nicomachus Flavianus and his lost *Annales*. Cecconi's discussion of this important figure does, however, become rather speculative at times by trying to explore the workings of Flavianus' mind in the period leading up to his death during the usurpation of Eugenius, with statements such as 'my deep belief is that ... something traumatic happened in the consciousness of Flavianus: he envisioned an irreparable and rapid loss that led him to an existential choice of no return' (157).

Elsewhere in the volume, many of the criticisms of Cameron concern his perceived certainty on a range of topics. Rita Lizzi Testa (31–51) questions his view of the contentious issue of the origins and evolution of the term *paganus*, as well as reiterating her argument that Gratian only removed funding from the Vestal Virgins, rather than from all Roman cults.² Lellia Cracco Ruggini, in a chapter on late-antique editors of classical texts (109–21), agrees with Lizzi Testa in arguing for a more gradual decline of paganism, while also challenging the suggestion that the 'last pagans' were largely self-serving and disengaged (or 'arrogant, philistine land-grabbers', as Cameron termed them on the first page of his book). Guido Clemente makes the same point in his introduction (13–29), as well as arguing that aristocrats such as Symmachus were not fierce, angry pagans, but rather defenders of a traditional Roman attitude, in which 'religion' was an integral part of civic life. For Clemente, therefore, Cameron is right to challenge the widespread view that the revolt of Eugenius was a 'pagan reaction', but this does not mean that no tensions existed between non-Christian supporters of the usurpation and members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In fact, in his account of disputes in Rome between the urban prefect, Praetextatus, and the bishop, Damasus, as well as his description of Ambrose forcing Theodosius I to perform penance, Clemente offers not a conflict between Christianity and paganism, but a traditional narrative of Church versus state.

The question of self-identification, particularly for 'pagans', is a frequent concern within this volume, picking up Cameron's attack on 'the mistaken idea that pagans *as a class* possessed unity of purpose and organization, at least in the face of the threat posed by Christianity'.³ Lizzi Testa (40–2) challenges Cameron's reading of Symmachus' famous *Relatio* 3 and the correspondence between Augustine and Longinianus, arguing instead that these texts offer some glimpses of a pagan 'religious identity', although recent critiques of this concept have certainly not been limited to Cameron.⁴ Silvia Orlandi (71–84) agrees with Cameron in not wanting to see 'pagans' and 'Chris-

² On this issue, see R. Lizzi Testa, 'Christian Emperor, Vestal Virgins, and Priestly Colleges: Reconsidering the End of Roman Paganism', *Antiquité Tardive* 15 (2007): 251–62.

³ A. Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford, 2011) 31.

⁴ On this issue more broadly, see the excellent discussion in I. Sandwell, *Religious Identity in Late Antiquity: Greeks, Jews and Christians in Antioch* (Cambridge, 2007).

tians' as two neat, opposing camps, but also seeks to employ epigraphic material to bring out some examples of 'conflict'. While some of the inscriptions used here could be read in other ways, it seems perfectly reasonable to state that there were individual moments when disagreement or violence flared up. Gianfranco Agosti, in a discussion of literature (123–40), and Bravi, in her chapter on art, make some of the most perceptive remarks in the whole volume. Although they welcome Cameron's important challenge to the old paradigm of classifying any material as 'pagan' if it contained references to non-Christian gods or myths, they also caution against letting the pendulum swing too far in the opposite direction. Both scholars suggest that not all 'pagan' elements should be neatly reclassified as merely 'classical', 'secular' or 'cultural', with Agosti in particular drawing attention to the possibility that there may have been a variety of interpretations of these motifs amongst ancient readers. Isabella Gualandri (141–9) does, however, seem to go too far in stating that 'it seems clear to me that the *Aeneid* might be considered by pagans in the same way as the Bible by Christians' (147). In contrast, Gian Luca Grassigli's brief piece on 'pagan' art (165–9) takes Cameron to task for being too wedded to the 'pagan'/'Christian' dichotomy in his interpretation of art and literature. There are some reasonable points here, especially about the problems of categorising all late-antique individuals using these terms, but the thrust of the argument seems not to do justice to Cameron's attempt to remove assumptions about religious identity from discussions of 'classical' art in Late Antiquity.

The whole volume is written in English, with the exception of François Paschoud's chapter on the *Historia Augusta* (189–98), which complains about the dismissive tone of Cameron's description of the last 120 years of scholarship on this text, before offering a number of suggestions for literary allusions in the *Historia Augusta* and proposing a reconstruction of its date and circumstances of composition. If one of the aims of the volume is to bring its contents to an Anglophone audience (as is suggested by the fact that the title appears to be a play on the famous work of political history, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*), it seems slightly strange that the only chapter by a non-Italian scholar is also the only chapter written in Italian, especially since this is an abridged version of another piece by Paschoud, published in English.⁵ Elsewhere in the volume, there are frequent problems with the readability of the English prose. Sometimes these are merely small typos, such as 'faithless and sacrilegious men attacked a man rusting in the Lord' (65), 'the philo-Aryan emperor Constance II' (114) or 'the crash by the river Frigidus' (142). More generally, many parts of this book are not written in a fluent and idiomatic way. One small example will suffice: in describing the volume's ad-

⁵ F. Paschoud, 'On a Recent Book by Alan Cameron: *The Last Pagans of Rome*', *Antiquité Tardive* 20 (2012): 359–88.

vantages over other reviews of Cameron's book that had already been published, Cracco Ruggini states that 'the present collective critical account ... still maintains its physiognomy and thus conserves all its validity' (110). In a number of places, terms seem to have become confused in translation, such as when Bravi repeatedly refers to the panels of the Nicomachorum-Symmachorum diptych as 'valves', probably as an attempt to translate the Italian word *valve*. It is a pity that such problems pervade this book, as they could have been remedied relatively easily through the use of a copy editor who was fluent in English. Leaving these concerns aside, this volume will certainly be of interest to those who have read Cameron's *magnum opus* and wish to consider new and alternative approaches to many of his arguments.

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