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Alan Cameron’s study *The Last Pagans of Rome* is a massively authoritative book, the product of a lifetime of study of fourth-century pagan and Christian literature. Cameron’s interests range over the Roman Empire, but his central preoccupation is with the aristocrats of Rome. The paganism that he observes waning and, by the century’s end, virtually disappearing is the civic paganism of Rome, with its aristocrat-led sacrifices and festivals.

Cameron’s book is a response to many scholars who argue that fourth-century Roman paganism was combatively durable in the face of Christian advance. According to these scholars, late in the century there was a pagan “revival” or “cultural offensive” that had numerous dimensions, three of which were the correction and transmission of earlier pagan texts; the writing of new texts with pagan themes, notably Macrobius’s *Saturnalia*; and the commissioning of works of visual art using pagan iconography. In this reading, a network of aristocrats associated with the Roman senator Symmachus lay at the heart of pagan resistance to Christianity. Because of his influence and widespread connections, Symmachus in 382 led a delegation to Emperor Gratian I to appeal for the restoration of the Altar of Victory, which had recently been removed from its customary position in the Senate House in Rome. In his speech to Gratian, Symmachus expressed an urbane, pliable perspective that was characteristic of the aristocrats’ approach to religion: “There must be more than one way to such a secret” (p. 37). The aristocrats’ resistance reached a climax when the usurper Eugenius revolted against the Christian emperor Theodosius I, who in 394 defeated Eugenius at the Battle of the Frigidus and used force to implement recent legislation. In this view Roman paganism ended suddenly, with a bang.

In Cameron’s view, this combatively durable paganism is a romantic myth. He devotes his book to a careful, leisurely study of the alleged components of the so-called pagan revival, and he finds repeatedly that these components lead to different conclusions. For example, he devotes 75 pages to an examination of the “correctors and critics” of pagan texts and concludes that the late antique preoccupation with the accuracy of the written word had roots that were Christian, not pagan, and that most of the scholars involved in textual transmission were Christians.

How about the showcase text of the pagan “cultural offensive,” Macrobius’s *Saturnalia*? In Cameron’s view, it was not a fevered attempt in the 380s to advocate pagan practices; instead, it was a relaxed antiquarian discussion of former pagan rites that a Christian wrote in the 430s. And late-fourth-century art that draws on pagan myths? Cameron sees this not as part of a religiously driven pagan reaction but as an aesthetically motivated appropriation of traditional Roman themes by a nondogmatic aristocracy that was open to a “middle ground we now call secular” (p. 697). As to Symmachus and the other aristocratic pagans, in Cameron’s view they were not “last ditch champions of the old order” (p. 377). To be sure, they did hold pagan priesthoods, but that was not the heart of their identity; it was a part of their aristocratic lifestyle (along with estate management, socializing, and politicking). Their scholarship was unimpressive (Symmachus’s learning was...
grossly exaggerated by moderns), and they were not willing to be seriously inconvenienced for their beliefs. Cameron points out that in 385, after his unsuccessful appeal for the Altar of Victory, Symmachus gave up the struggle, retired from public life, and devoted himself to writing perfectly groomed, uncontroversial letters to prominent correspondents. So from Cameron’s perspective, in the 390s, when Theodosius defeated Eugenius, the battle was driven by personal ambition rather than religion (Eugenius was probably a Christian). Indeed, by the 390s Roman paganism had already lost the will to live. Most aristocrats gradually went over to Christianity, not because of coercion and not because of deep inner conviction, but because the church represented the future, and the only way they could maintain their position in society was by joining it. According to Cameron, Roman paganism petered out gradually, with a whiper.

Cameron’s case is formidable. His reading of the literary texts of the fourth century is expert and exhaustive; it represents three-fifths of his book’s almost 900 pages. Many of these pages are primarily of interest to students of the literature of late antiquity, but at significant points Cameron’s treatment addresses issues that interest missiologists and students of the history of Christian mission. I point to three of these issues.

First, the vulnerability of state-supported religion. As Cameron tells the story, the civic paganism of Rome was dependent on its symbiotic relationship with the urban and imperial power structures. So when imperial laws, beginning with the reign of Constantine I, ordered the desecration of temples and the banning of public animal sacrifices, these measures (whether or not they were always enforced) had a devastating effect on civic paganism and the inner certainties of its aristocratic priests. When Gratian in 382 prohibited the cults from receiving financial subsidies, it was “the blow from which they never recovered” (p. 245). Paganism, it seems, was vulnerable because it was a “state church.” Roman paganism was not rooted in the convictions of communities of people that gave it resources to survive when the state withdrew approval and subsidies. Indeed, its traditions prepared its elite leaders to adapt to the emperor’s new religion rather than to resist it. Christianity, in contrast, was shaped in opposition, had a martyr tradition, and could draw strength from the deep convictions of its socially diverse members, whose beliefs and practices were formed in catechesis. It is perhaps ironic, though Cameron did not note it as such, that by the late fourth century, Christian leaders were developing forms of symbiotic relationship between religion and imperial power that were new to Christianity and that in due course would make the church vulnerable to external pressure.

Second, the nature of conversion. Cameron traces the stories of aristocrats from pagan families who went over to Christianity. But he does not discuss the effects of these conversions on their lives or on the church. To become a Christian seems to have had a sociological cost: Cameron mentions Marinus Victorinus, who delayed his “coming out” as a Christian because his elite culture saw Christianity as socially disreputable. But were there other places at which Christian catechesis clashed with traditional aristocratic values? Cameron refers to Volusian, who almost two decades after the Battle of the Frigidus told Augustine that he hesitated to convert to Christianity because “baptism was incompatible with the demands of a public career” (p. 196), (e.g., the use of military violence). Augustine reassured Volusian. And this seems to have been the pattern: Christian leaders helped the church inculturate itself in the social milieu of the aristocrats so the aristocrats, in converting to Christianity, would not need to change. As Cameron puts it, “Short of participation in the old cults, most other aspects of the traditional aristocratic lifestyle had now been embraced by their Christian descendants” (p. 204). It is possible that to some extent this, as Michele Salzman has expressed it, “aristocratized” Christianity.1

Finally, the rapid spread and social breadth of Christianization. According to Cameron, the Roman population in the 390s was “overwhelmingly Christian” (p. 204), but he provides no evidence of this. If he had spent less time looking at the texts of the elite and given more attention to the archaeology and artifacts that betray the convictions of the Roman lower classes, he would find that there were plebeian “last pagans” centuries after the last aristocrats had submitted to baptism. As Ramsay MacMullen has pointed out,2 in festivals, gestures, apotropaic rituals, and tomb-side meals, paganism found a stubborn, subterranean life that aristocratic bishops, no doubt like their aristocratic pagan forbears, found it difficult to understand. If Cameron had focused on the common Romans as well as the elite, he would have given deeper meaning to “the last pagans.” He also would have written another book.

Notes
2. See Ramsay MacMullen, Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1997).
The five essays collected here treat readers to a vast array of anecdotes and conjectures about the private life of our forebears. — Roger Kimball, Wall Street Journal. A book which makes the reader think, teasing and encouraging with spicy details, long views, a capacity for the unexpected insight. Now for something completely different. — Jasper Griffin, London Review of Books. This is a long, demanding and very rewarding book. There was a problem filtering reviews right now. Please try again later. A Reader. 3.0 out of 5 stars Needed work. This is a fine collection of essays on the changing quality of family life as classical Rome shifted to medieval Rome. I found its accounts of early Christianity's impact on personal life particularly interesting. Sex In Pagan Rome. December 13, 2013. | 5:05 am. Rod Dreher. One of you readers sent me the other day this Peter Brown essay from the New York Review of Books, in which he remarks upon a new book out from Harvard University Press about sex in ancient Rome. Brown writes: Antiquity is always stranger than we think. Nowhere does it prove to be more strange than where we once assumed that it was most familiar to us. We always knew that the Romans had a lot of sex. Indeed, in the opinion of our elders, they probably had a lot more than was quite good for them. We also always knew that the early Chr