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Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xi, 878. ISBN 9780199747276. \$85.00.

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This impressive book is a masterpiece, result of decades of research in the field of Late Antique Literature and History.¹ Alan Cameron provides a sharp and stimulating reassessment of common assumptions about the confrontation between pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity. The book focuses on the members of the 'pagan' elite of Rome in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, most of them senators and/or belonging to old Roman families.

Primarily, the author aims at putting an end to what he calls 'the romantic myth of paganism' according to which the last pagans of Rome were arrogant aristocrats, passionate about classical literature, champions of old cults and fierce opponents of Christianity. It has long been claimed that a hard core of prominent Roman aristocrats, among them Symmachus, Praetextatus and Flavianus, was behind a cultural and religious pagan revival at the end of the 4th century. This protest movement would have started with the affair of the Altar of the Victory removed from the Senate by Emperor Gratian in 382, and the subsequent loss of public subsidies for the state cults. The pagan spurt would have culminated at the battle by the river Frigidus in 394, opposing the allegedly pro-pagan usurper Eugenius and the pious Theodosius. According to Cameron, none of these common assertions is true and this book aims at refuting each of them. The argumentation is strong and methodical, pulverizing all the long-held assumptions that originated the idea of a pagan revival, closely linked to the resistance against the spread of Christianity. The book is presented in twenty well-balanced chapters that cannot be summarized here due to their length and complexity. We will restrict ourselves to pointing out the major issues raised by the author as well as the main answers he brings forward.

First, Cameron disagrees with the view that paganism remained dominant until the end of the fifth century: paganism would have rapidly declined after Constantine's conversion and was already 'mortally dead' before Theodosius' victory at the Frigidus and before his anti-pagan laws. According to Cameron, the major shift from moderate pagans into moderate Christians would have occurred from the 340s onwards. If the lack of evidence does not enable him to identify the causes of conversion to Christianity, Cameron claims that traditional cults disappeared naturally and peacefully together with their last performers. According to him, the

failure of traditional cults may lie in the fact that aristocrats responded to the crisis of Roman state religion by experimenting with more and more cults, notably those labelled as 'oriental' by modern scholars, rather than providing the ordinary people with moral support and leadership. Furthermore, Cameron enjoins us to make a clear distinction between the ban of the public performance of pagan rituals and the subsequent attempts to eradicate all traces of religious practices and customs not demonstrably Christian. In this perspective, paganism lasted much longer for Christians than for pagans.

Second, when looking at the individuals of the Roman elite, Cameron shows that there was no pagan party willing to fight for the survival of the old cults and against the spread of Christianity. In this respect, he demonstrates that the so-called circle of Symmachus never existed other than in the literary fiction elaborated many years later by Macrobius. Cameron stresses that the words put in the mouth of the characters fictitiously gathered in 382 reflect Macrobius' own interests in paganism and classical culture. Actually, the interlocutors, who were all dead when the author published his work, were all (pagan) ancestors of influential (Christian) families contemporary to Macrobius. Nor does the correspondence of Symmachus allow us to assert the existence of such a political and cultural club: Cameron's close re-examination of the dossier shows that Symmachus made use of his (basic and second-hand) knowledge of classical literature only when the conventions of the epistolary genre required it. It is worthy of note that the author also flaunted classical references in the letters he addressed to cultivated Christians.

Third, Cameron devotes several chapters to the demonstration that most pagan aristocrats did not, as too often stated, spend their leisure in reading, copying and editing classical texts. On the contrary, many men of letters appeared to have been Christians. There is no real evidence, Cameron argues, that any specific pre-Christian text was valued or exploited by pagans for its religious content. As such, classical literature should be considered as a common secular culture without any correlation with the religious allegiance of the people who produced and/or used them. Moreover, in a purely private context the interest in the classics follows the stereotypical representation of the gentleman that goes back through Pliny to the age of the Republic. At any rate this social pattern shared by both pagan and Christian elite could be associated with a kind of political resistance of some Roman aristocrats to Christianity. On the one hand, pagans had no monopoly over secular literature; on the other hand, Christian elite members referred to classical works and used the social function of education in the same way.

In the course of this implacable demonstration, Cameron gives admirable lessons of criticism. He repeatedly recalls that ancient authors should not be used by historians for what they purported to tell but for what they revealed of the historical and cultural contexts in which they wrote. A huge amount of evidence — well-known authors, imperial legislation, neglected manuscripts, inscriptions, as well as, in the penultimate chapter, artefacts — are reinterpreted in a new perspective. Cameron disagrees almost always with the *communis opinio* and systematically discusses the authorship, the date of publication and the agenda of these works which appeared to be far less known than we might think.

The book is written in a sophisticated prose which might be uneasy reading for students and scholars who are unfamiliar with the characters and texts analysed and/or mentioned. There are very few misspellings, almost all in the bibliographical references. Forty-five pages of a 'selected' bibliography and a useful index close the book. We must hope that people will take the time to read right through this very dense and rich book, which will undoubtedly become essential reading in the field of Late Antique literature, religions and history.

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Notes:

1. A. Cameron's publications are listed in p. 815-817.

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