REVIEW


‘Although we would like to know whether paganism went out with a bang, or died with a whimper, I doubt whether even the best archaeological work will ever be able to tell us’ (p. 1). It is on this unpromising note—a quotation from a recent essay by Bryan Ward-Perkins—that Anna Leone’s important book on the archaeology of the end of paganism in North Africa begins. Unfortunately, The End of the Pagan City only serves to vindicate Ward-Perkins’s judicious pessimism. Leone’s prudent analysis cannot but highlight the limitations of the fragmentary and often decontextualized material evidence for pagan cults in the African provinces in late antiquity.

After an introductory chapter on paganism and Christianity in late-antique North Africa (ch. 1), the book is divided into four main sections on temples (ch. 2), the imperial cult (ch. 3), statues (ch. 4), and the use of spolia in Byzantine churches (ch. 5). In each section, Leone first summarizes the historiography and the legal evidence before turning to analysis of the archaeological material. The book covers the period between Constantine and Justinian: regrettably, no account is supplied of what this ‘pagan city’ looked like before its late Roman end.

Leone sets out a robustly minimalist view of the decisions made by what she characterizes as secular communities (e.g. at p. 236). Material evidence provides little to corroborate the scenes of violent destruction of temples and statues offered by some contemporary Christian texts. Instead, it points to a variety of other possible outcomes, ranging from neglect and abandonment, to preservation (whether as a cult site or an urban monument), to various new uses. Temples became production sites (p. 65), meeting places for collegia (pp. 64–5), or churches (pp. 65–76); statues were recut (pp. 116, 122), transferred into bath complexes (pp. 153–4, 159–68), or stored for later reinstallation (esp. pp. 144–51); architectural ornament became part of the monumentality of Byzantine churches (pp. 206–34). Leone stresses economic and practical motivations for individual outcomes: cities wanted to maintain their urban fabric, but there were simply too many temples, statues, and columns lying around (pp. 61, 81,
the use of spolia in churches was conditioned less by triumphalism than the difficulty of otherwise procuring high-quality marble (e.g. pp. 217–18, 232–3). Central to her view is a sense that, whatever their religious affiliations, pagans and Christians alike appreciated the intrinsic aesthetic value of these monuments as part of the classical urban landscape.

This pragmatic position chimes with recent attempts to undermine the notion of a grand conflict between Christianity and paganism in the fourth century, and most notably the work of Alan Cameron (whose Last Pagans of Rome is repeatedly invoked). Just as Cameron has sought to eradicate holdovers from assumptions made by earlier text-centred historians, so Leone offers useful ripostes to such pagan survivals in the archaeological scholarship. Most notably, the plausible suggestion that some of the caches of statuary found by early twentieth-century excavators were the result of planned storage is a helpful corrective to racier narratives: pagans hiding their gods or Christians defacing and burying demonic sculptures (e.g. pp. 144–68, 176–8). At the same time, it is not clear how this pre-scientific archaeological evidence, when properly handled, could ever offer a window on religious motivations. Given the absence of stratigraphy, contexts, and even find-spots, there is rarely a concrete sense of when, where, and how statues or temples were abandoned, destroyed, defaced, preserved, or spoliated—never mind why.

As a result, any sense of what Christianity and paganism contributed to this process has to come from contemporary texts. Here, the book is on less solid ground. Leone’s principal methodology is to compare the material evidence to the provisions of late Roman laws (pp. 40–6, 55–61, 87–91, 125–6), implying a more straightforward implementation of legislation and a greater efficacy of government in the later Roman empire than most would now countenance. (The frequent recourse to ‘state planning’ or ‘control’ as an explanatory factor [pp. 127, 132, 144, 151, 181, 182, 186, 236–7] and references to the crucial agency of individuals allusively described as ‘city’ or ‘town governors’ [curiales?] are similarly problematic.) An obvious alternative would have been to consider in more depth the many letters and sermons of Augustine of Hippo which discuss paganism (briefly treated at pp. 7–14). The complex social and political dynamics and the diverse attitudes towards the ‘pagan’ monumentality of the province’s urban centres which can be seen within the episodes he describes would have complemented her picture of untidy practical outcomes.

In lieu of such engagement, the book’s ‘socio-historical framework’ (p. 23) comes mediated through recent secondary literature.
This is not a problem in itself, except that Leone preserves a studied neutrality in historiographical debates where she really needed to take sides. Leone is surely right that part of what some Christians described as paganism became a neutral secular culture, ‘less connected to the religious sphere and related instead to culturally necessary actions and behaviours’ (pp. 118–19); but this process was much more difficult and controversial than her account would let on. The problems this narrative of seamless transition poses are evident in formulations such as her statement that ‘the wealthy members of society... were, at least in the 4th century, pagan in habit if not in faith’ (p. 178). On this, as on a number of issues, Leone needed to confront the uncertainties and contradictions head on, rather than relegating them to even-handed footnotes.

All in all, The End of the Pagan City offers a useful alternative perspective on the Christianization of the later Roman empire rooted in the broader transformation of the city in late antiquity. Scholars seeking considered treatment of the material evidence for temples, statues, and spolia in late Roman, Vandal, and Byzantine Africa will find a sensible account of the status quaestionis. Alas, the impression they will glean is one of how little the archaeological evidence can reliably add to accounts of paganism or Christianity in fourth- and fifth-century North Africa; at least, in lieu of the new excavations for which Leone repeatedly—and rightly—signals a pressing need (pp. 234, 243).

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