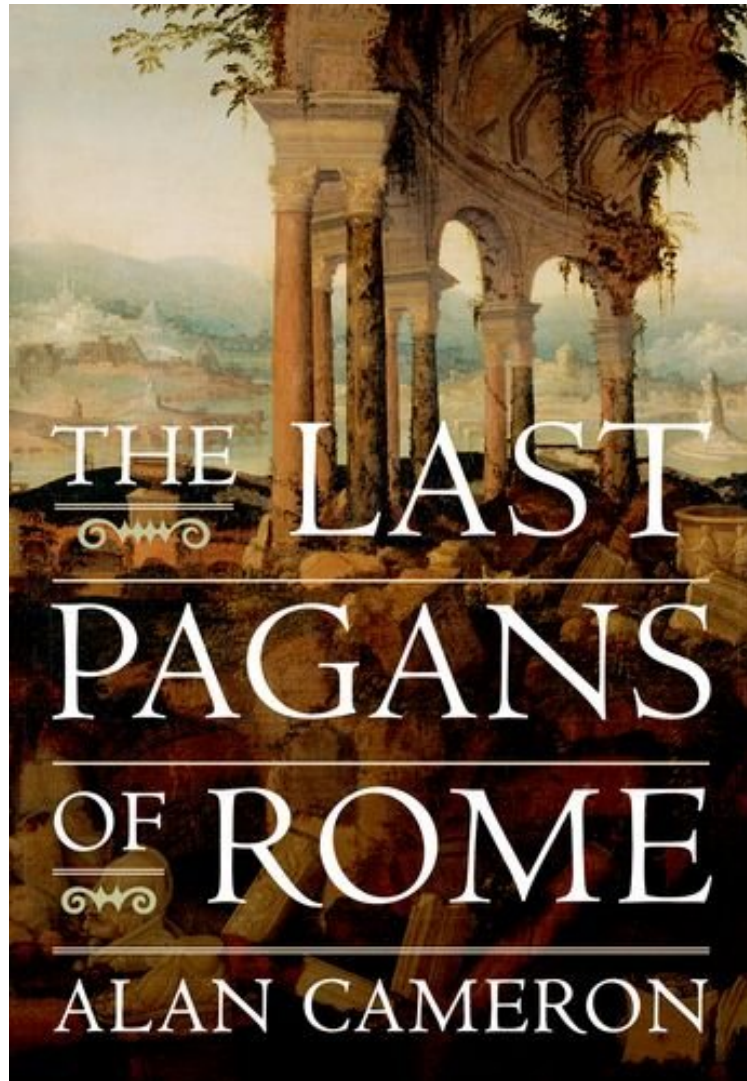


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The Last Pagans of Rome

Alan Cameron

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Alan Cameron : The Last Pagans of Rome before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Last Pagans of Rome:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A must have to add to history books By David L. Pease Great book for my research project. 73 of 73 people found the following review helpful. The master's magnum opus By SkookumPete First a warning to general readers. This is not an introduction or narrative along the lines of Pierre Chuvin's A Chronicle of the Last Pagans. Although the author writes with great clarity, and translates most of the Latin he quotes, this is a dense, scholarly, and highly argumentative book that presupposes considerable knowledge and interest on the part of the reader. Alan Cameron has for some decades been one of the great scholars of late

antiquity. His breadth of knowledge and ability to tease the truth out of fragmentary sources have enabled him to produce many influential articles and books. I was going to say "groundbreaking," but that would not be quite the right word: instead, Cameron has a talent for tearing apart the structures that others have built and erecting something more durable in their place. With his latest and biggest book Cameron takes on the question of the extent of any "pagan reaction" to the final triumph of Christianity in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, in particular among the Roman aristocracy. The book ranges widely in the author's quest to destroy the "romantic myth" that the last pagan senators were "fearless champions of senatorial privilege, literature lovers, and aficionados of classical...culture as well as the traditional cults." Along the way he shakes up many long-held assumptions. For instance, he makes the case that too much weight has been given to the famous laws in the Theodosian Code that have been taken as general prohibitions against pagan worship. I can't go along with his contention that because a law may have been prompted by particular circumstances in a particular place, it did not therefore have universal application; but his arguments are always stimulating. And his larger view, that the biggest factor in the collapse of the cults was their loss of public funding in 382, is persuasive. One of the book's principal theses is that there was never a pagan revival associated with the usurper Eugenius, who met his end at the Battle of the Frigidus in 394. Although in recent years scholars have downplayed the idea of renewed cult activity in these years, there are still those who assert it, such as Charles Hedrick in his *History and Silence*, which comes in for a pretty good smacking-down here, and Charles Freeman in *A.D. 381*. In any case we can be grateful that Cameron has brought so many of the sources under his powerful lens. For example, he devotes a lengthy chapter to the so-called *Carmen contra paganos*, an obscure diatribe directed at an unnamed dead pagan senator, traditionally (though not universally) taken to be Nicomachus Flavianus, who on this assumption is supposed to have sponsored pagan rites under Eugenius. Cameron demonstrates (beyond further debate, one would hope) that the senator is actually Praetextatus, who died in 384, before such rites were abolished. Interestingly, he further argues, largely on the basis of textual analysis, that the author of the verses was none other than Pope Damasus, "egged on" by his protege Jerome! A large part of the book is devoted to the dating and significance of Christian and supposedly pro-pagan works including Macrobius's *Saturnalia*, the *Historia Augusta*, Prudentius's refutation of Symmachus, the Vergilian cento of Proba, and the lost *Annals* of Nicomachus Flavianus. Much welcome light is shed on these rather dim corners of Latin literature. The author also dedicates no less than three chapters and 105 pages to the supposed emendation of classical texts by senatorial families, exhaustively scrutinizing all the subscriptions that have survived in the manuscript tradition. Few readers will want to more than skim this section, which is only tenuously linked to the overall theme: Cameron aims to dig the biggest possible hole to bury the idea that any of the pagan aristocracy were scholars reacting against Christianity by producing new recensions of the old literature. Indeed, another theme of the book is that classical learning was equally valued by Christians. Finally, Cameron looks at the artwork of the period and finds no evidence of a pagan revival. His analysis of the famous ivory diptychs is particularly interesting (and well illustrated). One can't help but be dazzled by his ability to assign an exact date to the races portrayed on a fragmentary piece, even if not all the links in his chain of reasoning are equally strong. Because many of the author's arguments are based on nice judgments about the credibility and interpretation of the sources, serious students of late antiquity are bound to find things to disagree with in this massive work. However, no one can fail to appreciate its scope, workmanship, and attention to detail. No other book presents a fuller or more carefully reasoned view of the literary world of Rome in the dying days of the old religion, and no future historian of the period will be able to ignore Cameron's conclusions. 41 of 41 people found the following review helpful. A Layman Reads "The Last Pagans of Rome" By Robin Friedman Alan Cameron's "The Last Pagans of Rome" is a large-scale, learned study of the relationship between Christians and pagans in the late Fourth Century A.D. of the Roman Empire. I was interested in this book because of the insight I thought it would offer on religion and change. I have read and learned from many authors who were deeply read in and influenced by ancient history. I have myself a working knowledge of ancient philosophy but, alas, little knowledge of ancient history. I am familiar with popular culture and the tendency in some people in a post-religious age to view Christianity unfavorably in comparison with the paganism it displaced. An example of this tendency, I think, is the recent movie, "Agora" which has a marginal relationship to the themes of this book. Cameron's book helped me a great deal with my questions and interests and did more. A leading and extensively published classical scholar, Cameron is Charles Anthon Professor Emeritus of Latin at Columbia University. With its detail, erudition, and consideration of many sources and competing points of view, the book will be difficult for generalists such as myself. The more a reader brings to the book in terms of prior knowledge of the period, the better will be the understanding. Yet, the book will reward the effort required to read it. I found a recent review of Cameron's book by Peter Brown, Professor of History at Princeton, titled "Paganism: What We Owe the Christians" helpful to my reading. Brown's review appears in the April 7, 2011, *New York Review of Books*, p.68. In 312 A.D., the Roman emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. The "last pagans of Rome" for Cameron, are the nobles of late fourth-century Rome. Cameron is much more concerned with scholarship than with popular culture familiar to most readers. In much scholarship, the last pagans of Rome are portrayed romantically as mounting a heroic, last-stand attack on the Christianity which would come to dominate the West. They spoke in favor of tolerance, resisted persecution, defended their beliefs with passion, and preserved Latin and Greek texts for posterity. Cameron makes a sustained analysis of

this view of the late pagans and of the historical record on which it rests. He concludes that this portrayal of the late pagans needs to be rejected almost in its entirety. In his Introduction, Cameron writes: "[t]he main focus of much modern scholarship has been on [the last pagans] supposedly stubborn resistance to Christianity. Rather surprisingly, they have been transformed from the arrogant, philistine land-grabbers most of them were into fearless champions of senatorial privilege, literature lovers, and aficionados of classical (especially Greek) culture as well as the traditional cults. The dismantling of this romantic myth is one of the main goals of this book." (p.3)The book has both a positive and a negative goal. Let us move from the Introduction to the final paragraph of Cameron's lengthy concluding chapter to get a better focus on the book. Cameron concludes:"It might seem that much of the argument of this book has been negative. There was no pagan revival in the West, no pagan party, no pagan literary circles, no pagan patronage of the classics, no pagan propaganda in art or literature, no pagans editing classical texts, above all, no pagan last stand. But all these apparent negatives actually add up to a resounding positive. So many of the activities, artifacts, and enthusiasms that have been identified as hallmarks of an elaborate, concerted campaign to combat Christianity turn out to have been central elements in the life of cultivated Christians. This is the one area in which paganism (defined as the Roman tradition, Rome's glorious past) continued to exercise real power and influence on men's minds. Despite the best attempts of Augustine and other rigorists, the Roman literary tradition played a vital and continuing role in shaping the thought-world of Christians, both at the time and in the centuries to come." (p. 801)In the long book between the introduction and the conclusion, Cameron examines various strands of the story of a pagan last stand. Only one, or perhaps two, chapters offer a chronological historical narrative. In chapter 2, Cameron examines the activities of the Roman Emperors between Constantinus and Theodosius to conclude that paganism was rapidly disappearing on its own and was effectively doomed when public subsidies of the state cults were withdrawn in 382 A.D. In chapter 3, Cameron examines the battle at the Frigidus river in 394 A.D. which some scholars have seen as a valiant military last stand of paganism. Cameron raises searching questions about this understanding of the battle. The lengthy remainder of the book examines literary and artistic productions, revivals of ancient learning, histories, texts, inscriptions by pagans and Christians in late fourth century Rome to determine the extent of a late pagan revival and of claimed resistance to Christianity. Cameron's analysis requires a meticulous knowledge and review of texts and of the work of many prior historians which will be unfamiliar to all but scholarly readers. Broadly speaking, Cameron finds no basis for a claim to a late pagan renaissance. In making his negative case, Cameron also teaches an important positive lesson. He points out that both pagans and Christians varied in the intensity of their beliefs from the "rigorists" -- mostly scholars and clerics-- to middle of the road believers both Christian and pagan. Most people on either side could meet, regardless of their religious differences, in a common culture which Cameron equates roughly with contemporary secularism. In other words, Christians could and did revere the Greek and Roman classics while rejecting the pagan religions, gods, cults, sacrifices that are recounted in these classics. Similarly, pagans could work towards the preservation of the invaluable, precious parts of Roman and Greek culture without necessarily committing themselves to paganism. Cameron argues that the heritage of ancient Greece and Rome was cultural rather than religious. It became the common property of both Christians and pagans in late antiquity and of posterity, for which we should all be grateful. It is this story of culture and the life of the mind that was passed from the ancient Greeks and Romans to the modern world by both pagans and Christians, part of both groups and yet independent of them. This cultural achievement of the ancient world was remarkable in itself and, in Cameron's account, I think, remains an ideal and model for a difficult, different modern world. Scholarly and detailed, this work will require effort by lay readers. But Cameron's book is a treasure of thought, history and scholarship. Lay readers who are interested and persevere will find this book rewarding. The book is published by Oxford University Press. Robin Friedman

Rufinus' vivid account of the battle between the Eastern Emperor Theodosius and the Western usurper Eugenius by the River Frigidus in 394 represents it as the final confrontation between paganism and Christianity. It is indeed widely believed that a largely pagan aristocracy remained a powerful and active force well into the fifth century, sponsoring pagan literary circles, patronage of the classics, and propaganda for the old cults in art and literature. The main focus of much modern scholarship on the end of paganism in the West has been on its supposed stubborn resistance to Christianity. The dismantling of this romantic myth is one of the main goals of Alan Cameron's book. Actually, the book argues, Western paganism petered out much earlier and more rapidly than hitherto assumed. The subject of this book is not the conversion of the last pagans but rather the duration, nature, and consequences of their survival. By re-examining the abundant textual evidence, both Christian (Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Paulinus, Prudentius) and "pagan" (Claudian, Macrobius, and Ammianus Marcellinus), as well as the visual evidence (ivory diptychs, illuminated manuscripts, silverware), Cameron shows that most of the activities and artifacts previously identified as hallmarks of a pagan revival were in fact just as important to the life of cultivated Christians. Far from being a subversive activity designed to rally pagans, the acceptance of classical literature, learning, and art by most elite Christians may actually have helped the last reluctant pagans to finally abandon the old cults and adopt Christianity. The culmination of decades of research, *The Last Pagans of Rome* overturns many long-held assumptions about pagan and Christian culture in the late antique West.

"The Last Pagans of Rome is a book of a generation. A model of erudition and integrity of argument, it is also a book that will be with us for many generations to come."--Peter Brown, *New York of Books*"As befits a scholar whose work in this area since 1964 includes countless articles and reviews and six books, the weighing of ancient evidence and modern scholarly opinion in *The Last Pagans of Rome* is meticulous. It is also controlled by the broader understanding of cultural processes and human motivations that makes a thinking senior scholar a scholar worth reading rather than a scholiast who has made it to old age."--Tom Palaima, *Times Higher Education*"This impressive book is a masterpiece, result of decades of research in the field of Late Antique Literature and History. Alan Cameron provides a sharp and stimulating reassessment of common assumptions about the confrontation between pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity. 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."--Bryn Mawr Classical "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. *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."--The Councilor: The Journal of the Illinois Councilor for the Social Studies"Alan Cameron's *Last Pagans of Rome* is one of the best and most important books ever published on the Later Roman Empire or Late Antiquity, and it has profound consequences for our understanding of the culture of the entire Greco-Roman world. It represents the summation of decades of original contributions by one whose best published work is the equal in quality and significance to that of any classical scholar living or dead."--Timothy Barnes, University of Edinburgh"A work of sheer brilliance that will endure for a long time in view of its definitive presentation of central issues in the story of Christianity and paganism in late antiquity. Cameron takes his reader on an exhilarating journey through debates on religion, literature, politics, art, and ancient antiquarian scholarship. Its cumulative power is immense, and all its chapters, with their vast arsenal of learning and bibliography, are beautifully interconnected. There is nothing like it, and there will not be for generations to come."--G. W. Bowersock, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton"Encyclopedic in its learning and relentless in its argument, Alan Cameron's *Last Pagans of Rome* is a landmark in late Roman studies...a breath-taking sortie across the cultural landscape of fourth- and early fifth-century Rome."--*Classical Journal*"[T]here should be no doubt of the importance of Cameron's conclusions...Alan Cameron's brilliant and persuasive account offers an alternative view of a cultured aristocracy whose interest in the classical tradition was shared by educated Christians across the Mediterranean world, and who posed no real threat to the Empire's new religion."--*The Times Literary Supplement*"...written in a highly detailed but remarkably readable manner with prose that is sometimes humorous other times blunt, but always engaging."--Dennis P. Quinn

About the Author Alan Cameron is Charles Anthon Professor Emeritus of Latin at Columbia University. His previous books include *Claudian: Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius*, *The Greek Anthology: From Meleager to Planudes*, *Callimachus and his Critics*, and *Greek Mythography in the Roman World*. He is the winner of the 2013 Kenyon Medal for Classical Studies and Archaeology of the British Academy.