The Archaeology of Late Antique 'Paganism'

Edited by

Luke Lavan and

Michael Mulryan
The Archaeology of Late Antique 'Paganism', Luke Lavan, Michael Mulryan, BRILL, 2011, 9004192379, 9789004192379, 642 pages. There is no agreement over how to name the 'pagan' cults of late antiquity. Clearly they were more diverse than this Christian label suggests, but also exhibited tendencies towards monotheism and internal changes which makes it difficult to describe them as 'traditional cults'. This volume, which includes two extensive bibliographic essays, considers the decline of urban temples alongside the varying evolution of other foci of cult practice and identity. The papers reveal great regional diversity in the development of late antique paganism, and suggest that the time has come to abandon a single compelling narrative of 'the end of the temples' based on legal sources and literary accounts. Although temple destructions are attested, in some regions the end of paganism was both gradual and untraumatic, with more co-existence with Christianity than one might have expected. Contributors are Javier Arce, Béatrice Caseau, Georgios Deligiannakis, Koen Demarsin, Jitse H.F. Dijkstra, Demetrios Eliopoulos, James Gerrard, Penelope J. Goodman, David Gwynn, Luke Lavan, Michael Mulryan, Helen G. Saradi, Eberhard W. Sauer, Gareth Sears, Peter Talloen, Peter Van Nuffelen and Lies Vercauteren..


From Temple to Church Destruction and Renewal of Local Cultic Topography in Late Antiquity, Johannes Hahn, Stephen Emmel, Ulrich Gotter, 2008, Religion, 378 pages. Destruction of temples and their transformation into churches are central symbols of change in religious environment, socio-political system, and public perception in late ....

Mary Magdalene, Iconographic Studies from the Middle Ages to the Baroque , , Nov 21, 2012, Religion, 490 pages. Mary Magdalene, Iconographic Studies from the Middle Ages to the Baroque examines the iconographic inventions in Magdalene imagery and the contextual factors that shaped her ....

Antiquite tardive , Glen Warren Bowersock, Peter Robert Lamont Brown, Oleg Grabar, 1999, History, 780 pages. A colorful tour of late antiquity covers late Roman, Byzantine, Sassanian, and early Islamic culture and discusses topics ranging from angels in Islam, concubinage, barbarians ....

There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire, Michael Gaddis, Oct 14, 2005, History, 410 pages. "There is no crime for those who have Christ," claimed a fifth-century zealot, neatly expressing the belief of religious extremists that righteous zeal for God trumps worldly ....

Religious Education in Pre-Modern Europe , , Sep 28, 2012, Religion, 270 pages. Although religious education is a crucial topic in present-day History of Religions, its study focuses on contemporary phenomena and is still undertheorised. The present volume ....

Romanising Oriental Gods Myth, Salvation, and Ethics in the Cults of Cybele, Isis, and Mithras, Jaime Alvar Ezquerra, 2008, Religion, 486 pages. The traditional grand narrative correlating the decline of Graeco-Roman religion with the rise of Christianity has been under pressure for three decades. This book argues that ....

The Religious History of the Roman Empire Pagans, Jews, and Christians, J. A. North, S. R. F. Price, May 26, 2011, History, 577 pages. A collection of previously published papers by leading scholars, dealing with the religious history of the Roman Empire. It covers Christianity and Judaism as well as the ....

Decline and Change in Late Antiquity Religion, Barbarians and Their Historiography, J. H. G. W. Liebeschuetz, 2006, History, 350 pages. The essays in this second collection of articles by Professor Liebeschuetz deal with several aspects of the history of Late Antiquity. One theme is the prehistory of Late ....

Lady E. S. Drower's Scholarly Correspondence An Intrepid English Autodidact in Iraq, Jorunn Buckley, Jan 5, 2012, Religion, 276 pages. An edition of the scholarly letters of the English Lady E.
Social and Political Life in Late Antiquity, Luke Lavan, 2006, History, 656 pages. This collection of papers, arising from the conference series Late Antique Archaeology, examines the social and political structures of the late antique period and the ways in ....

Housing in Late Antiquity From Palaces to Shops, Luke Lavan, Lale Özoğenel, Alexander Constantine Sarantis, 2007, Art, 538 pages. This collection of papers, arising from the conference series Late Antique Archaeology, examines the housing in the late antique period, through thematic and regional syntheses....

Religious Diversity in Late Antiquity, David Morton Gwynn, Susanne Bangert, 2010, Religion, 561 pages. This volume in the ongoing Late Antique Archaeology series draws on material and textual evidence to explore the diverse religious world of Late Antiquity. Subjects include....

Jews in Byzantium: Dialectics of Minority and Majority Cultures, Oct 14, 2011, Religion, 1060 pages. Byzantine Jews: Dialectics of Minority and Majority Cultures is the collective product of a three year research group convened under the auspices of Scholion: Interdisciplinary....

Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe Encounters, Notions, and Comparative Perspectives, Nov 25, 2011, Religion, 544 pages. The conference volume of the Bochumer Kolleg Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe outlines the thesis that religion is not a homogeneous cultural....

Technology in Transition: A.D. 300-650, Parts 300-650 A.D. 300-650, Luke Lavan, Enrico Zanini, Alexander Constantine Sarantis, 2007, History, 572 pages. This book is the first general work to be published on technology in Late Antiquity. It seeks to survey aspects of the technology of the period and to respond to questions....

There is no agreement over how to name the 'pagan' cults of late antiquity. Clearly they were more diverse than this Christian label suggests, but also exhibited tendencies towards monotheism and internal changes which makes it difficult to describe them as 'traditional cults'. This volume, which includes two extensive bibliographic essays, considers the decline of urban temples alongside the varying evolution of other focii of cult practice and identity. The papers reveal great regional diversity in the development of late antique paganism, and suggest that the time has come to abandon a single compelling narrative of 'the end of the temples' based on legal sources and literary accounts. Although temple destructions are attested, in some regions the end of paganism was both gradual and untraumatic, with more co-existence with Christianity than one might have expected.


Michael Mulryan is Associate Research Fellow of the Centre for Late Antique Archaeology, University of Kent. His doctorate (2008) considered The Religious Topography of Late Antique Rome (A.D. 312-440). His research interests focus on the late antique West where he is especially interested in ideas of urban sapce, particularly in relation to religion.
Based on a 2005 conference in Leuven, the papers in this collection include revisions and bibliography up to 2008. Lavan's introduction, a call for a "new narrative" (xv–lvi), sets a clear agenda of revisionist reexamination of the prevailing narrative of Late Antique religious conflict between "paganism" and Christianity, with special emphasis on the abandonment, closure, destruction, reuse, or conversion to churches of temples between the third and seventh centuries C.E. Eight core regional studies are preceded by two bibliographic essays and three studies of special topics and followed by two papers each on statuary and well or spring deposits, with a final paper on the decline of pagan iconography on domestic objects from Sagalassos. As directed by the introduction, the focus of most is very much on archaeological and material evidence for conversion to Christianity. The collection participates in the fast-moving debate that now includes Cameron's compendious critique of the theory of "pagan conflict" or "pagan reaction" against Christianity and Christian emperors; any "new narrative" on these topics must consider his The Last Pagans of Rome (Oxford 2011), more narrowly focused on the Roman aristocracy but also more radical and more detailed than most of these studies.

With Lavan's introductory historiography, the core of the collection is the set of eight regional studies of late temples, half in the West and half in the East, between the late third and the seventh centuries. Three of four studies on temples in the West are unillustrated regional surveys of the archaeological evidence for abandonment, destruction, and reuse or overbuilding of temples. Goodman on Gaul, Arce on Hispania, and Sears on North Africa all find their regions to be exceptions to the accepted narrative of late fourth- or fifth-century violent destruction and conversion to churches. Goodman finds the archaeology of third-century abandonments, at most 10 destructions ca. 400 C.E., and reuse of temple sites only long after (as cemeteries, or sites or spolia for various domestic, civic, defensive, or church buildings) does not accord with the Christian literature, especially Sulpicius Severus on the mission of St. Martin. For Arce, the lack of a similar Spanish hagiography means that the local literary tradition supports the archaeological absence of evidence for any Christian violence against pagan sites in Spain. Abandoned temples and civic buildings alike are adapted to domestic and commercial uses in the fourth through sixth centuries. The single church in an ex-temple (Tarraco) is attested only in the eighth. Sears argues the likelihood that evidence from Numidia, Africa, and possibly Cyrenaica would conform to a similar chronology if reexcavation of dateable late layers, mostly cleared without documentation, were possible. Mulryan represents Italy by a case study of a restored temple of Flora (or Venus) near the Circus Maximus in Rome, which should be corrected by reference to Cameron (esp. ch. 8).

Four studies for the East present similar evidence for the rarity of violent temple destruction, the uncertainty of its causes, whether military or Christian attack or natural disaster, and the even greater rarity and usually late date of direct conversion of temples into churches. Conversion of secular buildings to churches is more common and earlier than conversion of temples, while temples are more often reused for other purposes, including as spolia. Saradi and Eliopoulos on Greece include a survey of evidences for other late pagan religious practices, conventionally attributed to the Neoplatonic elite of Athens. Deligiannakis, on the Aegean Islands, and Talloen and Vercauteren, on Anatolia, emphasize the extremely local conditions (often not retrievable in detail) that may lead to the observed range of outcomes for particular temples. Dijkstra on Egypt synthesizes the most coherent "new narrative" of the material from the First Cataract nome.

As the temple studies include bibliographies, the "Bibliographic Essays" pertain more to the framing thematic studies (Demarsin) and regional archaeology and material culture studies (Mulryan) on Late Antique "paganism." Together, they afford newcomers access to the professional discourse, dominated as it is by problems posed by Christianization. Demarsin's concise summaries of the
main stages in scholarly interpretation of issues such as late history of particular cults and the secularization or Christianization of imperial cult or aristocratic culture favor traditional religious/cultural historical approaches over the more critical prosopographical analyses of scholars such as Barnes, von Haeling, Mathisen, and Cameron. His short account of burial at least contains a thread (Ferrua) that will lead a novice back to the long, continuous European tradition of scholarship on pagan-Christian shared cemeteries and tombs, which has apparently fallen out of current Anglo-American Late Antique studies. (It does not inspire confidence that Mulryan and his editors are apparently unaware that the Catacomb of Via Dino Compagni is the Via Latina Catacomb [76].)

Three thematic essays on the development of paganism in late antiquity begin with Van Nuffelen's defense of philosophical sources for Eusebius' characterization of paganism as a unitary un-Christianity based on concepts of one universal divine truth, accessible through mysteries. As such, it is a dialectical product of common Late Antique religious thought, not a deliberate Christian travesty. Caseau's account of pagan "adaptation under duress" (111â€“34) correlates putative transitions from civic/public to private to secret pagan practice to stages of imperial legislation against particular practices, mostly in the Theodosian Code. She notes without explaining them the occasional evidences of Late Antique revival of cult practices at extra-urban (but not necessarily secret) pagan sites, especially caves and springs, disused in the high empire. Sixth-century lamps deposited at Vari are treated as remains of pagan night (secret) offerings by a closed circle of Athenian Neoplatonists (131), rather than evidence of the ambiguity of religious identity (archaeologically and perhaps in historical fact) in a common practice of ritual (Lavan [xlii, lâ€”li]; Saradi and Eliopoulos [287â€“88, 304]). Gwynn rehashes some problems of the old case for late fourth-century classicism as evidence of "pagan revival" in Rome.

On statues, Lavan establishes an intermediate category of civic statuary (Victories, Tyches, founding heroes, emperors present and past, and possibly Minerva as a city goddess) that may have been considered a continuing requisite of state power and therefore handled differently from statues regarded as religiously challenging and statues treated as antiquarian art. Caseau summarily surveys destroyed, damaged, or preserved caches of "pagan" statuary and some problems of interpretation. Sauer suggests the discontinuities in Roman coin finds in (mostly German) springs reflect availability of coins more than changes in the religious meaning of springs, which might well continue unchanged into the Medieval period, to which the surviving texts pertain. Gerrard interprets the Drapers' Gardens well deposit as a closure ritual at the end of the Roman period in London. Finally, Talloen describes the persistence of Dionysiac imagery (mostly on wine vessels) into the mid fifth century C.E. in Sagalassos and its gradual supercession by Christian or neutral imagery in the century following, when Christian figurines of mounted warriors also appear.

The collection fulfills the mission of the series to represent the state of research and admits the reader to active participation in the evolving debates, even among the contributors, over the proper interpretation of material evidences of religious change. It will be important for scholars of early Christianity as much as of late "paganism."

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