

The Long Shadow of Constantine

KATE COOPER

- A. CAMERON, *THE LAST PAGANS OF ROME*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. x + 878, 18 illus. ISBN 9780199747276. £80.00.
- P. BROWN, *THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE: WEALTH, THE FALL OF ROME, AND THE MAKING OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE WEST, 350–550 AD*. Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012. Pp. xxx + 759, 16 pls, illus. ISBN 9780691152905. £27.95/US \$39.95.

The fifth-century Christian writer Sozomen of Constantinople preserves a story told by certain pagans about the philosopher Sopater of Apamea, whom the emperor Constantine put to death in A.D. 333 on the advice of the Christian Flavius Ablabius, then Praetorian Prefect of the East. Constantine had consulted the philosopher — so the story goes — in an attempt to redress his guilt at having ordered the murder of some of his nearest relations, among them his son Crispus. But Sopater replied that such moral defilement could admit of no purification. Afterwards, on meeting some Christian bishops, Constantine was delighted to learn that the sins of those who truly repented could be washed away in Christian baptism. It was this that led him to adopt the faith, and to encourage his subjects to do the same.

The story was almost certainly invented well after the fact. The death of Crispus took place in A.D. 326, while diverse sources including the *Theodosian Code* remember Constantine as implementing pro-Christian measures from as early as A.D. 313, and indeed as sponsoring the controversial Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. The Christian writers Eusebius and Lactantius had another explanation for his friendliness to the Christians. They attributed it to his vision before the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in A.D. 312, while others gave credit to the piety of his mother Helena. But if ancient historians disagreed on the time, place and motive of Constantine's conversion to Christianity, historians ever since have been disagreeing about its repercussions.¹

This is nowhere more true than in two long-awaited blockbuster histories of the post-Constantinian period, Peter Brown's *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* and Alan Cameron's *The Last Pagans of Rome*. Each study notionally begins shortly after the death of Constantine in A.D. 337, tracing debates about religion in the Western Empire (in Cameron's case, specifically in Rome), and each takes it as read that in both religion and politics Constantine cast a long shadow. But the two studies offer contrasting ideas of what *kind* of shadow was cast by the first Christian emperor.

Each writer holds a distinctive if largely unspoken view of what was actually involved in Constantine's embrace of Christianity. As might be expected of one who has spent a long and brilliant career musing over the fate of fourth-century paganism, Cameron sees in Constantine a kind of Henry VIII *avant la lettre* — a soldier-prince with a taste for asset-stripping, who looks to malleable Christian bishops to aid him in rewarding the loyal and intimidating the rest. While Cameron side-steps the character assassination remembered by Sozomen, he calls attention nonetheless to the greedy eye which Constantine cast on the wealth of the pagan temples, much of which he confiscated in his financial reforms.

¹ For a well-informed recent discussion of major studies, see Flower 2012.

Cameron's Constantine is an effective orchestrator of allegiances. He stages a swift change in the religious affiliation of the Senate — even if a precise tipping point remains elusive. Cameron has little time for the idea that after A.D. 330 the Roman Senate was composed largely of pagans and the newer Senate of Constantinople largely of Christians. Instead, he takes his cue from Timothy Barnes, who has argued that decisive progress had already been made before Constantine's death in A.D. 337,² rejecting the more traditional view, given force by Von Haehling, that the balance did not tip until the death of the emperor Gratian in A.D. 383.³ Brown, by contrast, is in Von Haehling's camp: not until the 360s does the Christianization of the Senate pick up speed. It goes without saying that the picture of the period after A.D. 350 — the focus of both books — acquires a markedly different colour depending on the starting point.

Cameron's view of how contemporaries perceived the emperor's *fides* draws on his considerable gift for seeing things as a fourth-century pagan might. As he reminds us, to Constantine's contemporaries a general's ability to lead an army and his ability to win favour with the powers of heaven were virtually indistinguishable. The point may be illustrated by the collection of military rings inscribed with the legend *FIDEM CONSTANTINO* borrowed from across Europe to grace the 2007 exhibition held in Trier.⁴

This is a view which requires a certain amount of brush-clearing in order to be visible. Early in the book, Cameron squares his aim at one of the luminaries of late ancient studies, Andreas Alföldi, who saw the mid-fourth-century Senate as a bastion of hostility to Christianity. Cameron's wry account of his own acquaintance, as a young scholar, with the 'learned, lively, brilliant, and colorful' (8) Alföldi does much to soften what is in fact a far-reaching assault on the elder scholar's account of the principled resistance of literate élites after the Constantinian revolution.

It is a bold and, in many ways, disturbing challenge, given the mid-century totalitarian backdrop informing Alföldi's interest in resistance movements, which lent moral weight to the influential studies which he published after leaving Hungary for Princeton. A similar mid-century resonance is palpable in the work of another of Cameron's targets, the distinguished epigrapher Herbert Bloch. His experiences as a German Jew in Mussolini's Italy left their imprint on his view of what he called the 'pagan revival' of the 380s, in studies published from the safe haven of Harvard first in 1945⁵ and later in the collection, *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* edited by Arnaldo Momigliano.⁶

Bloch's commitment to the idea of the pagan resistance was both ethical and emotional. Well into old age, he would speak movingly of the hero of his story, Vettius Agorius Praetextatus (Praetorian Prefect and consul designate in A.D. 384, the year of his death), and his like-minded wife Fabia Aconia Paulina. Paulina's poem to her husband forms the centrepiece of the funerary altar dedicated to them both — and in many ways has served as the emotional centrepiece of the idea of the Pagan Revival. Building on the idea that Paulina's central poem was originally composed to mark the couple's fortieth wedding anniversary, Cameron offers an analysis of the altar's cycle of inscriptions which would in all likelihood have delighted Bloch (302–3).

² Barnes 1995, discussed in Cameron, 177–85.

³ Von Haehling 1978.

⁴ Demandt and Engemann 2007. The rings are nos 1.7.24–32 in the DVD catalogue published with the volume.

⁵ Bloch 1945. Recent work by Douglas Boin has undermined the archaeological basis for Bloch's argument. See Boin 2010 and now Boin 2013: 133–9.

⁶ Momigliano 1963. In a later essay, Momigliano himself offered a profound analysis of the consequences of Constantine's monotheism (Momigliano 1986).

Yet Cameron's vision of the Prefect is decidedly unromantic. *The Last Pagans of Rome* claims for Praetextatus the dubious honour of having been the target of the anonymous *Carmen Contra Paganos*, a scurrilous anti-pagan verse tract which Cameron suggests may have been dashed off by Pope Damasus (316). An example of Cameron's ingenious yet amiably disrespectful commentary occurs as he considers why the *Carmen* characterizes its anonymous target's movement as 'rapid' or 'agitated' (*concitus*). 'There is another possibility. It was widely believed that exercise (walking and even running) was good for dropsy. Perhaps the poet is making malicious fun of the fact that the dropsical prefect had been spotted *jogging!*' (287).

Meanwhile, two other central figures of the so-called pagan revival receive new profiles, Virius Nicomachus Flavianus and Quintus Aurelius Symmachus. Cameron sees Symmachus as a studious bipartisan, happy to work with both pagans and Christians in protecting the cause of the Senate. Flavian fares rather less well. Praetorian Prefect during the revolt of the usurper Flavius Eugenius (A.D. 392–4), he was, Cameron notes, 'the one and only pagan supporter of Eugenius we can actually name' (6), which rather demotes him from having been the ringleader of a religiously motivated military coup. Equally, his claim as the author of an 'important and influential' (627) pagan history to rival that of Ammianus is decisively narrowed by Cameron's painstaking consideration of the evidence. Fundamentally, Cameron suggests, Flavian's reputation rests on having been called *historicus disertissimus* in an inscription set up by his grandson-in-law Memmius Symmachus. And 'sensible people' should not be fooled by 'extravagant claims by family members on funerary monuments in private houses' (629).

Cameron's revisionist view, then, is of a Senate which was almost certainly less heroic than has been believed, though perhaps better suited to the circumstances of its own historical period. The bland willingness of senators to stand in faith with the emperor, and to co-operate across party lines was, he suggests, the product neither of religious zeal nor of craven pragmatism. Rather, it reflected their understanding of *fides* not as a matter of 'belief' but as a bond of fidelity and due obedience.

Admittedly, one comes away from *The Last Pagans of Rome* feeling that for an inspiring model of principled resistance to totalitarianism, the Senate of fourth-century Rome would not be the first place to look. But notwithstanding his light tone, Cameron makes a difficult and valuable point in this connection. The idea of *fides* itself — and indeed of what we now call 'religion' — was changing quite dramatically in the fourth century.

Across the period from the reign of Constantine (d. 337) to that of Honorius (d. 423), certain Christian monks and bishops were arguing for sharp lines of distinction among the rival Christian confessions, and equally across the pagan/Christian divide. But there is no evidence that the Christian laity had any wish to support this kind of posturing by religious radicals. In fact there is quite a bit of evidence — some of it assembled in a still-valuable article by a younger Peter Brown in the pages of this journal⁷ — to suggest that the senatorial laity pursued a policy of placid cohabitation with pagan friends and family members into the fifth century.

It is a mistake to imagine that Christians were universally pleased to see theological debates put to use as a battleground for political dominance. Part of the reason this point has been missed, Cameron suggests, is that the term 'pagan' did not mean quite what we think it meant. The learned and electrifying first chapter of *The Last Pagans of Rome* reviews the vexed origin of the term *paganus*. The word had no real meaning for those to whom it applied: 'A pagan anxious to discover whether the person he was speaking to was a fellow pagan would get a more illuminating response by asking him whether he was a Christian!' (27). *Paganus* was not a badge of identity; it was a term for 'outsiders' used by the increasingly powerful Christians.

⁷ Brown 1961.

But what *kind* of term was it? Building on the work of Christine Mohrmann a half-century ago,⁸ Cameron notes that *paganus* normally denoted a civilian or village-dweller, and makes the surprising proposal that it did not carry a pejorative connotation when used by Christians to describe those who were neither Jewish nor Christian. Rather, ‘by 350, I suggest, Christians had become a sufficiently central and self-confident part of Roman society as a whole for a need to be felt for a *less* overtly polemical term’ (20) to refer to those excluded by the faith. The salient aspect was the fact of non-commitment. It was a term that became popular in mid century, at a time when privileges and immunities were being distributed on the basis of allegiance to the emperor’s faith.

Elsewhere Cameron is similarly bold in dismissing ‘the currently fashionable “polytheist” in place of “pagan”’ (25). He dismisses as misguided the recent attempts of Garth Fowden and others to get round the fact that ‘paganism’ was a figment of the Christian imagination. Its real usefulness, Cameron argues, was administrative. In the eyes of a Christian theocratic state, ‘those who refused to acknowledge the one true god, whatever the differences between them, were for all practical purposes indistinguishable’ (27). As a result, an immediately recognizable term for those who did not enjoy the privileges of the faithful was becoming increasingly necessary. But grandstanding was by no means always advantageous. Indeed, ‘occasional flashpoints like the altar of Victory conflict may actually have slowed down the steady drift of middle-of-the-road pagans into middle-of-the-road Christianity, making it harder for pagans on the brink of conversion to accept a faith that apparently repudiated Victory’ (185).

Understood in this light, *paganus* seems to have conveyed something of the tone of a twentieth-century Russian trying to refer in polite terms to a non-member of the Communist Party. Cameron goes even further: ‘it may be precisely because it was *not*, in itself, an overly pejorative term that *paganus* caught on when and as rapidly as it did’ (25). Few writers can command the erudition and doggedness to defend such a counter-intuitive hypothesis, but across a dozen densely-argued pages, Cameron nails his case.

Cameron’s Rome was a harsh place in the fourth century, and religion was a mechanism by which those who wished to steer the actions of others could claim the right to do so. But alongside this somewhat bleak idea of religious belonging, Cameron sees the fondness for classical literature shared by pagan and Christian alike as a comparatively humane element in a bleak landscape. Gregory of Nazianzus, we are reminded, rejected the attempt of his friend from student days, the emperor Julian, to claim Hellenism as the cultural patrimony of pagans (70). If monks and bishops sometimes claimed to prefer Christian to secular literary culture, lay Christians felt no need to make such protestations, and there is ‘no evidence that they saw it as *pagan* culture’ (7). Across the period from A.D. 330 to 390, pagan and Christian literati could lay claim, for the most part amiably, to what Cameron calls a shared ‘secular culture’. Already in 1977, Cameron was laying the groundwork for this view, with a contribution to the *Entretiens* of the Fondation Hardt suggesting that it was Christians, not pagans, who were the primary custodians of literary and philosophical culture in late fourth-century Rome.⁹

It is one of the real merits of Cameron’s study that it sheds new light on the vexed question of whether ‘secular’ culture can be said to have existed in the decades before Augustine of Hippo gave a name to the idea. At one level, the answer is no: the sacred was an embedded aspect of ancient society, and though writers under the Hellenistic and Roman empires were aware that different cultures had different names and practices for engaging with the sacred, they had no conceptual framework for setting aside the sacred as an aspect of reality which could be withheld from consideration when it was prudent to do so.

⁸ Mohrmann 1952.

⁹ Cameron 1977.

Across the period from A.D. 330 to 390, Cameron suggests, men who shared a literary education and cultural commitments tended to see the ‘pagan content’ of the literary tradition as charming and pleasantly remote. Like the good villagers of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, sensible people in fourth-century Rome were bound, Cameron suggests, by a common education and a common aversion to enthusiasm. It was this shared aversion — rather than any theory of a cultural space untroubled by the presence of the sacred — that allowed them to get along with one another. The important opposition here is not between pagans and Christians but between reasonable men and the rest.

Then as now, non-fanatics could find they had more in common with counterparts in rival groups than with the shrill radicals of their own confession. Here Cameron moves on to the territory of another brilliant mid-century emigré, Robert Markus, whose magisterial *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine* explored Augustine’s invention of ‘the secular’ as a theological concept.¹⁰ When Augustine spoke of ‘secular’ government, Markus argued, he was redefining an old word to express a radically new idea.

To most late fourth-century Christians, *saecularis* simply meant ‘worldly’. But by the time Augustine began writing the *City of God* between A.D. 412 and 413, the increasingly invasive legislation on religious conformity had led him to feel that some limit should be imposed on the claims of theocracy. In the present stage of history (the *saeculum*), he argued, any human institution can only be provisional, since none can be perfectly aligned to the Divine will. This is true for both the earthly Church and the Empire itself, and thus genuine theocracy is impossible. As a result, the theocratic impulse should not be accommodated uncritically, and certain aspects of society may appropriately be marked off as intrinsically ‘this-worldly’, neither sacred nor profane, and thus insulated from the reach of theocratic meddling. Markus saw Augustine as proposing a far-reaching — if ultimately unsuccessful — critique of the new demand for confessional conformity. In later studies Markus would trace the progress, in the Latin West, of what he called ‘the eclipse of the “secular” dimension’ as Christian emperors and their barbarian successors discovered how easy it was to dismiss the idea that their authority was provisional. Not coincidentally, Christian bishops increasingly chose to support — or failed to control — a take-over of Christianity by the proponents of radical theocracy.¹¹

Where Cameron disagrees with Markus is in the timing. For Markus, the theocratic impulse which Augustine tried to check had its roots in a Christian back-lash a half-century earlier, in the reign of Julian the Apostate. The ‘perceptible hardening of attitude among Western Christians’¹² Markus pointed to was a reaction to the pagans’ ‘fiercely self-conscious vindication of their claim to sole rightful possession of classical culture’¹³ under Julian (A.D. 361–3). The eventual result would be the ‘pagan revolt’ and the Battle of the Frigidus in A.D. 394. By the last decade of the fourth century, ‘Classical education had become linked with pagan religion in a new way. The link was forged in the heat of battle’ (7). It is this suggestion that Cameron calls into question. By patiently dismantling the evidence for the so-called pagan revival, Cameron reveals a gap in Markus’ explanation for the late fourth-century hardening of boundaries.

Why, then, did religious conformity become important in the way that it did during the last quarter of the fourth century? On the surviving evidence, the central turning-point was the accession of the pro-Nicene party to power in A.D. 379, with Theodosius the

¹⁰ Markus 1970. A summary of his work on Augustine, with discussion of Markus’ own experience as a refugee in Britain in the War years, can be found in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* s.v. ‘Markus, Robert Austin (1924–2010)’ [<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/103000>].

¹¹ Markus 1990: 17.

¹² The phrase is from Markus 1974: 131, quoted by Cameron at 7.

¹³ *ibid.*

Great (d. 395). Of course, the new visibility of religious legislation may be partly because our main source for the ever stricter heresy laws is the *Theodosian Code*, which gives pride of place to the laws of Theodosius and his sons (and preserves only limited religious legislation by the non-Nicene emperors who preceded him). But the ascendancy of a Nicaea-friendly emperor caused religious networks to be mobilized in a new way, and may have given new value to confessional criteria as a tool for side-lining rivals. Pagan observers were of course baffled by these developments. Yet Cameron notes that in his assessment of Theodosius, the pagan Eunapius of Sardis was more disturbed by what he saw as excess and the corruption of power than by the emperor's Christianity *per se*. In any case, if Cameron is right to dismiss the pagan revival as a historiographical mirage, then the sharp emphasis on religious conformity in the Theodosian legislation must have its roots elsewhere, in intra-Christian rivalry rather than in pagan-Christian conflict.

It remains an open question whether Markus would have accepted Cameron's use of the term 'secular' to describe a literary culture common to pagans and Christians in the decades before Augustine proposed his strategy of bracketing the sacred. Cameron does not in fact suggest that late fourth-century aristocrats were consciously establishing 'the secular sphere' as a neutral zone: what he means, fundamentally, is that within the governing class, relations across religious lines were cordial. Still Cameron's literati were secular in the more traditional sense, since they were drawn, both pagan and Christian, from precisely that class of 'worldly' men whom shrill extremists could only envy and despise.

Cameron's main aim, however, is to capture the delight in poetry and antiquarian musing of a patron-collector class. He takes great care to make it clear that the pagan senators of Rome were, for the most part, readers rather than writers, and that their intellectual commitments had more to do with connoisseurship than with the more productive pursuits of the less leisured classes. (Perhaps only an English don who has spent decades in New York can judge the place of poetry and scholarship in the lives of Rome's most powerful 'players'.) One comes to feel, reading Cameron's study, that in the late fourth century *otium* was to the Roman senator what 'family time' is to a modern politician. The tone here is not without irony, but there is a serious point being made. By undermining the romantic idea of the senator as poet-scholar Cameron is carrying away an important plank of the idea of the pagan revival.

The view finds support from Peter Brown, who suggested some years ago that it was habits of 'wise and salutary neglect' that had allowed the Romans to govern a multi-cultural empire so successfully for so many centuries.¹⁴ Attention must be paid, he proposed, to 'the retarding effect, in an age of change, of attitudes and ways of getting things done that came from a pre-Christian past'.¹⁵ 'Among the upper classes, a combination of browbeating and cajolery was the stuff of late Roman politics. Such styles were transferred, without a moment's hesitation, to the new governmental effort to achieve religious conformity.'¹⁶ The late fourth-century heresy laws would offer myriad and novel opportunities for bullying.

Brown's *Through the Eye of a Needle* brings to fulfilment a long-standing project of assessing not how the Empire fell, but how it stood for so long, and how its communicative structure morphed, toward the end, into something almost unrecognizable — the process 'by which a universal Christian Church insensibly came to

¹⁴ The phrase is borrowed from Edmund Burke's *Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies of 1775* by Peter Garnsey (1984). Brown cites Garnsey as crediting Rome's leaders with 'nothing more grandiose than an appreciation of the distinctness of the different peoples who made up their empire, combined with an implicit recognition of ... the unwisdom of rousing local passions' (Garnsey 1984: 12 at Brown 1995: 31).

¹⁵ Brown 1995: 45.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

replace a universal empire'.¹⁷ The book's massive achievement is that of giving retrospective order and shape to the stream of publications which, cumulatively, have altered our understanding of how 'first the Roman empire, then the Christian Church came to stand for a reassuringly immovable horizon beyond which privileged and settled persons ... were frankly disinclined to look'.¹⁸

It is the 'privileged and settled persons' of the Western provinces, not the senators of Rome, who take the stage in *Through the Eye of a Needle*. Principally, Brown sees it as his task to reconstruct 'the imaginative content of religious giving' (xxv) – to show how, for the 'silent majority' (xxvi) of influential provincials who drifted into Christianity in the fourth century, the coupling of provincial wealth with Christian purpose meant something other than the fall of Christianity into 'compromise'. The settled and respectable regional landlords of the fourth century, Brown suggests, had not simply failed to embrace the ideal of renunciation championed by Christianity's ascetic heroes. Rather, they had set their sights beyond the narrow aims of the ascetic movement. Moving within an alternative imaginative landscape centred on a cycle of gift-giving, they found that 'the flow of wealth from earth to heaven' (xiv) could bind together property, the poor and the Christian Eucharist tightly and meaningfully.

If *Through the Eye of the Needle* has heroes, however, they are not the laity themselves, but the Christian bishops who discovered a way to enroll prosperous Christians in a new polity. Like Cameron, Brown is led by the nature of the sources: he explains eloquently how his sources cluster around individual figures, and they are mostly bishops. It is 'poignantly easy', he tells us, to imagine how the accidents of survival have skewed our evidence (xxiii). But he makes a virtue of the situation, focusing on how each of his protagonists engages with his own 'small world', as well as how those worlds were linked by Christian communicative networks.

Chronologically, the 'watershed' for *Through the Eye of a Needle* is the siege and sack of Rome by Gothic armies in A.D. 408–10. Like the First World War, the events of this period changed the horizon of a generation, altering the balance of power in the Western provinces, disrupting the annual arrival (in the *annona*) of African wheat to feed the Roman *populus* and entrenching the imperial court's preference for the more defensible Ravenna over Rome.

After A.D. 410, Rome itself was a city whose habits of accountability and social order had changed irretrievably. 'It was not an entirely ruined city. But it was a city whose nerve had been shattered' (372). Brown notes, following Zosimus, that in A.D. 409 'crowds of slaves streamed out of Rome' to join Alaric's army, and raises the chilling possibility that they did so because their owners had refused to feed them (297). The observation sheds unpleasant light on the grand gesture of Melania the Younger, who manumitted 8,000 slaves at a stroke in the Roman *suburbium* around the same time. 'Through renunciation, absentee landlords became something worse than absent. They vanished, leaving an entire region at a loss as to what would happen next' (296).

In Africa, by contrast, the events of A.D. 408–10 resulted in the arrival rather than the disappearance of landlords, as members of the Roman aristocracy took refuge on their African estates. This led to an unprecedented encounter between the senatorial nobility and the African bishops. Augustine's own home-town of Thagaste in eastern Numidia became a flash-point when the impossibly wealthy Melania and her husband Valerius Pinianus arrived on their estate in the town's hinterland, and began to make gifts to the local church in a way that made its bishop (and Augustine's old friend) Alypius the envy of other bishops in the region.

¹⁷ Brown 1995: 53.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

Yet there was a down-side to this kind of extravagance. Magnificent gestures by the super-rich could disrupt the fragile ecosystem of a regional Christianity. Since the time of Cyprian, the African bishops had built up a tradition of broad participation in almsgiving, which allowed them to organize wide-scale poor relief without becoming dependent on individual donors. So the arrival of the *glitterati* was not entirely welcome. In their urgent preaching about the need for all levels of society to give alms in order to ask forgiveness for their sins, the African bishops were laying open their need to protect their independence from the whims of celebrities.

Through the Eye of a Needle's title evokes the well-known saying from the Gospel of Matthew — 'it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God' (Matthew 19:24). Yet the phrase also resonates with the anguish of a dream described by Melania the Younger in her old age. In the dream, remembered from around the time of their ascetic conversion, she and her husband Pinianus were trying to inch their way forward through a panic-inducingly narrow crevice, only to experience relief and unspeakable joy when they reached the far end and came out into the light. As Melania told it, the dream was a way of illuminating and making her own the idea of the 'eye of the needle'. For Brown, the image also captures the narrow escape which the African bishops made, in those years, from being crushed and swallowed up by the power of the super-rich (291–2).

But the book is not only about dreams and visions. Brown has made his name as an interpreter of imaginative landscapes, but he returns here to an early interest in the material reality of wealth and power.¹⁹ Material pressures give rise to acts of the imagination, which in turn come to have their own influence. His story has its roots not in Constantine's conversion to Christianity, but in that emperor's commitment to a monetary policy based on the gold solidus. This created an economic environment within which 'They [the very rich] drove a primitive system of taxation and markets to its limits in order to perform, each year, the magic by which mere natural produce ... reached them as revenue, in the form of golden *solidi*' (15). And again: 'It is perhaps more than a coincidence that Christian preaching on *treasure in heaven* should have taken on such a strong imaginative resonance in the cities of the Mediterranean and on the estates of Christian landowners at this time' (15).

While Brown sees the senatorial aristocracy as comparative late-comers to Christianity, his real interest lies elsewhere, with the race to capture the hearts and minds of the 'little big men' of the Western provinces. These are the 'vivid and resilient figures' like Vitalis of Turissa whose good fortune was intimately bound up with that of their cities (21). Building on Lesley Dossey's work on the rise of a culture of Latin preaching in fourth-century Africa,²⁰ Brown finds in the creation of this culture — with its emphasis on the accountability of the rich to the poor — nothing less than a heroic achievement of the late Roman imagination.

Among the provincial bishops who are Brown's main protagonists it is unsurprisingly Augustine of Hippo who looms above the others, and it is a privilege to return with Brown to re-visit him. Brown has written memorably elsewhere of how his view of Augustine has changed over the years.²¹ Here he gently but firmly re-asserts the vision of earlier work, offering only silence to challenges such as that by James J. O'Donnell, whose *Augustine: A New Biography*²² offered a view of the Bishop of Hippo as only too willing to work the seams of connections in high places with a view to promoting his own Caecilianist faction within the African Church ahead of the majority Donatist

¹⁹ Brown 1967. Central to Brown's more recent thought on this subject is Banaji 2001.

²⁰ Dossey 2010.

²¹ Brown 1997 and 2000.

²² O'Donnell 2005 does not appear in Brown's notes or bibliography.

party. Brown knows as well as anyone that it was the rivalry between the two factions that caused the landscape of Roman Africa to be ‘covered with a white robe of churches’ (334), but he holds firm to his own idea of the rivalry’s moods and motivations, knitting it into a framework carried across from his work on the rôle of bishops in the Eastern Empire²³ and in the early Middle Ages.²⁴

Perhaps most significantly, the view of Augustine in *Through the Eye of the Needle* is a reply to that put forward a quarter-century ago by Robert Markus in *The End of Ancient Christianity*, which was dedicated to Brown.²⁵ In a chapter wryly entitled ‘Augustine: a Defence of Christian Mediocrity’, Markus proposed that the moral core of Augustine’s pastoral thought was a firm refusal of any idea of spiritual elitism. Brown takes this insight further, suggesting that Augustine’s rejection of elitism worked simultaneously at a number of different levels. To begin with, it was the suggestion that the rich should see the poor as their brethren rather than as mere objects of exploitation. But it was also the suggestion that people of good will should not be despised for occupying positions of power which, after all, it was in the interest of the poor to have them occupy. Finally, it was the idea that in the matter of giving, the splashy great gestures of the very rich are no more valuable than the steady contributions of the merely prosperous and even of those with little to spare. ‘All could give because all were equally sinners’ (365). Where the classical tradition had tied up the love of one’s city with the pursuit of outstanding reputation, the new ethics of Christian charity gave pride of place to fellow-feeling and the virtues of crowd-sourcing. A warm sense of esteem for *mediocritas* — as championed by Markus and by Augustine himself — runs like a bright thread through Brown’s narrative and forms a fitting memorial to two old friends.

Brown’s insight into the changing landscape of the West is by no means limited, however, to Augustine’s Africa. Take the indignant Annianus, whose fourth-century lead tablet inscribed to Minerva Sulis records the theft of six silver pieces. (It is now on display at the Roman Baths Museum in Somerset.) The curse Annianus chose to channel his resentment invited the goddess to rain down justice on the thief, asking her to punish him ‘whether a gentile or a Christian, whomsoever’ (34). The lead tablets deposited in the waters of the goddess’s spring attributed the full force of economic justice to Dea Sulis and reveal the position of Christianity as one among many sources of support ‘in a landscape still crowded with other gods’ (34). Yet decades later in fifth-century Gaul, the lay pamphleteer Salvian could, from the comparative safety of Marseilles, address an admonition to Salonius, the Bishop of Geneva, a city ‘on the edge of a region wide open to the barbarian world’ (436). *De praesenti iudicio* (‘Judgement in the Here and Now’) captured ‘a terrible sense of the transparency of the justice of God in punishing an empire for Christian breaches of his law’ (441–2). The idea of the coming judgement was made more vivid by that of the coming barbarians, the earthly instruments of God’s justice.

Cameron and Brown begin from different starting-points, and their studies capture contrasting approaches to the study of later antiquity. Brown follows the medievalist’s training and takes surviving archives as the starting-point for concentrating pools of illumination on social relationships and the interior landscapes that gave rise to social action. Cameron’s method, fundamentally, is that of commentary: a poem, inscription or sculpture is revealed, through deft pursuit of latent and contested meanings, to capture the moment in time when its creator and his patrons brought it into being.

²³ Notably in two earlier studies: Brown 2002 and 1992.

²⁴ Brown 1981 and 2003.

²⁵ Brown 1999 and 2001.

Where the two writers differ most of all is in their attitude to Christianity. For Cameron, adopting the emperor's religion was simply what those lower down the hierarchy needed to do. It might be a sign of moral weakness if viewed in a certain light, but not necessarily anything that should be held against them. For Brown, the Christian faith was a moral legacy belonging to the 'middling sort', and it was both their right and their duty to defend it against more powerful predators.

Some years ago, Brown proposed that the central problem of later Roman religious history was 'to explain why men came to act out their inner life through suddenly coagulating into new groups, and why they needed to find a new focus in the solidarities and sharp boundaries of the sect, the monastery, the orthodox Empire'.²⁶ This emphasis on 'inner life' was in part a reaction to the francophone scholarship of the 1950s. With an eye on the French troubles in Algeria, for example, J. P. Brisson had seen Constantine as exploiting the trustful obedience of Christians to their bishops for the purposes of 'a universal and parasitic empire'.²⁷ But for Brown, the important point was that Constantine failed, in the Western provinces, to establish the sought-after marriage of Church and State. 'It would be wrong', he pronounced in his response to Brisson, 'to ignore the extent of this failure and the spiritual revolution which made such a failure inevitable.'²⁸ This 'spiritual revolution' was fuelled by the effort to keep Christianity from being re-invented as a tool of the powerful and as a result gave rise to the 'solidarities and sharp boundaries' of the fourth century.

It can be observed that Peter Brown and Alan Cameron have in common a fundamental sympathy for protagonists who found themselves on the wrong side of fourth-century developments. But their different sensibilities pick up different signals. Brown's focus is on the impulse of the 'middling sort' to break free from the thrall of the rich and powerful, while Cameron captures the disquiet felt by the rich and powerful (and their literate dependents) as they looked out on the efforts of their inferiors to break free. Their fear and distaste was not directed at Christian ideas in and of themselves, but at the rising tide of religious extremism, and at the atmosphere of righteous anger which the Christian leadership seemed to tolerate and even encourage. Here is characteristic Cameron on Eunapius of Sardis: 'Like so many non-Christians down the ages, it was not so much Christians he despised as what Christians did in the name of Christianity' (658). The most sombre aspect of Constantine's long shadow was the new place that came to be accorded to shrill and even destructive expressions of religious indignation.

If *Through the Eye of a Needle* and *The Last Pagans of Rome* offer diverging accounts of the legacy of Constantine's revolution, what they share most deeply is a sense of promise fulfilled. As twenty-somethings a half-century ago, each writer captured the attention of colleagues with a chain of show-stopping articles (many of them in this journal), and each took the plunge, not long afterward, of carrying his Oxford training to the United States, where both have matured into something very like living national treasures. For both, the task of producing, in retirement, anything like a meaningful summary of prodigious achievements has strained not so much the resources of the scholar as the medium of the codex.

Both books are beautifully written, so their size is by no means unwelcome. Yet both are so complex — and correspondingly digressive — that the reader can feel lost in the trees even when the writer clearly knows where he is in the forest. Part of the thrill of both studies is in intertextualities, and the palpable diachronic layering as each writer revisits

²⁶ Brown 1972a: 13.

²⁷ The phrase is Brown's, describing Brisson 1958 (Brown 1972b: 255). I am indebted to the thoughtful treatment of this essay in Murray 1983.

²⁸ Brown 1972b: 257.

his own earlier views along with those of old friends (and occasionally foes). The linear argument is often only part of the story.

Brown's long engagement with the *sermo humilis* of Christian bishops leaves him better prepared to be merciful with his reader's limitations, and as a result his narrative sails forward smoothly even when the reader is grappling with complexities and tangents. Cameron, by contrast, takes no prisoners. If the underlying structure is secure, the chance to lead the reader along dizzying lines of inquiry is clearly a source of pleasure to the writer. A case in point is Cameron's handling of the tangled efforts of the fourth-century commentator Servius, and the anonymous seventh-century redactor remembered as Danielis-Servius, to make sense of a seeming sticking-point in Vergil's antiquarian detail. After weaving deftly backward and forward across the history of scholarship from the founding of Rome to the present, Cameron resolves the matter by demonstrating that Servius wrongly thought Vergil knew more than he actually did about early Roman ritual. 'If we did not know better', he concludes, 'we might have been tempted to accept this confidently presented solution to a pseudo-problem' (600).

Still, if the ramifying quality of Cameron's approach does not quite fit the codex format, one is left feeling that the problem may be with the codex rather than with Cameron. The book will stand for years to come as a compendium, but it is tempting to imagine that it may have a second life in an alternative format. A digital hypertext publication would be the obvious starting-point, but it could easily be re-invented as a graphic novel or a gaming environment. Fittingly, Cameron's own palpable fluency with the intimate history of the codex is one of the most remarkable aspects of his study. In two luminous chapters (421–97) he offers an overview of the surviving evidence for how ancient texts were copied and corrected, including a memorable vignette, from Augustine's *Contra Academicos*, of the future bishop with his son Adeodatus and two pupils working carefully through the text of *Aeneid* 1, with one reading carefully aloud while his listeners checked other copies against what they heard (463–4).

A half-century ago, a younger Cameron deprived us of what we thought was Macrobius' *Saturnalia* by arguing that the dialogue was not an authentic relic of late fourth-century paganism, but rather a set-piece composed by one of the supposed participants' Christian grandchildren.²⁹ And yet the memory of that gathering reverberates through *The Last Pagans of Rome*. In part this is because Cameron revisits the *Saturnalia* more than once to develop his arguments. But it is also because the tone of the book captures something of Cameron's own on-going conversation with ancient and modern scholars about the poems and histories, inscriptions and artifacts, and above all the *people* of late fourth-century Rome.

Perhaps fittingly, with *The Last Pagans of Rome* Cameron invokes and complicates the memory of another imagined conversation, that among the lecturers at the Warburg Institute in 1958 and 1959, whose contributions were collected in Arnaldo Momigliano's influential volume, *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (cited above). It is in fact a conversation that never exactly happened — the lectures were given sequentially in a periodic seminar rather than at a single academic conference. But the voices captured in Momigliano's elegant volume conjured the image of a *Saturnalia* of post-War luminaries and did much to anchor the idea of the pagan revival for subsequent scholarship.

Peter Brown and Alan Cameron were still students at the time of the Warburg Lectures, and now they are among the ever smaller number of witnesses to the tone and nuance of those post-War voices.³⁰ Indeed, both were contributors to the fiftieth anniversary

²⁹ Cameron 1966.

³⁰ Ian Wood gives an account of the often intersecting work of Brown and Markus in the context of early Medieval studies (Wood 2013: 305–12).

conference commemorating the Warburg Lectures, held at the North Italian monastery of Bose not far from Augustine's Cassiciacum.³¹ Fifty years from now, the questions to which Brown and Cameron have dedicated their considerable energies over the years will remain: the conflict and collaboration between pagans and Christians, and the problem of how, in the Western provinces at least, the Christian churches came to usurp the rôle of the Roman Empire as the 'reassuringly immovable horizon' of a society. *The Last Pagans of Rome* and *Through the Eye of the Needle* will remain, too, as massive and reassuringly immovable landmarks in the horizon of our understanding.

University of Manchester
kate.cooper@manchester.ac.uk

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Banaji, J. 2001: *Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity: Gold, Labour, and Aristocratic Dominance*, Oxford
- Barnes, T. D. 1995: 'Statistics and the conversion of the Roman aristocracy', *JRS* 85, 135–47
- Bloch, H. 1945: 'A new document of the last pagan revival in the West', *Harvard Theological Review* 38, 199–244
- Boin, D. R. 2010: 'A hall for Hercules at Ostia and a farewell to the late antique "pagan revival"', *American Journal of Archaeology* 114, 253–66
- Boin, D. R. 2013: *Ostia in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge
- Brisson, J. P. 1958: *Autonomisme et Christianisme dans l'Afrique romaine de Septime Sévère à l'invasion vandale*, Paris
- Brown, P. R. L. 1961: 'Aspects of the Christianization of the Roman aristocracy', *JRS* 51, 1–11
- Brown, P. R. L. 1967: 'The Later Roman Empire', *Economic History Review* 56, 327–43
- Brown, P. 1972a: 'Religion and society in the age of Saint Augustine' [preface], in P. Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine*, London, 9–21
- Brown, P. 1972b: 'Religious dissent in the Later Roman Empire: the case of North Africa', in P. Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine*, London, 237–59 = *History* 46 (1961), 83–101
- Brown, P. 1981: *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Chicago
- Brown, P. 1992: *Power and Persuasion: Towards a Christian Empire*, Madison
- Brown, P. 1995: *Authority and the Sacred: Aspects of the Christianisation of the Roman World*, Cambridge
- Brown, P. 1997: 'Report', *Symbolae Osloenses* 72, 5–30
- Brown, P. 1999: 'Gloriosus obitus: the end of the ancient other world', in W. E. Klingshirn and M. Vessey (eds), *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays in Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R. A. Markus*, Ann Arbor, 289–314
- Brown, P. 2000: 'Epilogue', in P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (2nd edn), Berkeley and Los Angeles, 411–520
- Brown, P. 2001: 'Introducing Robert Markus', *Augustinian Studies* 32, 181–7
- Brown, P. 2002: *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, Hanover
- Brown, P. 2003: *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000* (2nd edn), Oxford
- Brown, P., and Lizzi, R. (eds) 2011: *Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, Zurich
- Cameron, A. 1966: 'The date and identity of Macrobius', *JRS* 56, 25–38
- Cameron, A. 1977: 'Paganism and literature in fourth century Rome', in *Christianisme et formes littéraires de l'antiquité tardive en occident*, Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique 23, Geneva, 1–30
- Demandt, A., and Engemann, J. (eds) 2007: *Konstantin der Große*, Mainz
- Dossey, L. 2010: *Peasant and Empire in Christian North Africa*, Berkeley and Los Angeles
- Flower, R. 2012: 'Visions of Constantine', *JRS* 102, 287–305

³¹ The contributions are collected in Brown and Lizzi 2011.

- Garnsey, P. 1984: 'Religious toleration in Classical antiquity', in W. J. Shiels (ed.), *Persecution and Toleration*, Studies in Church History 21, Oxford, 1–27
- Markus, R. A. 1970: *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine*, Cambridge
- Markus, R. A. 1974: *Christianity in the Roman World*, London
- Markus, R. A. 1990: *The End of Ancient Christianity*, Cambridge
- Mohrmann, C. 1952: 'Encore une fois: *paganus*', *Vigiliae Christianae* 6, 109–21
- Momigliano, A. (ed.) 1963: *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, Oxford
- Momigliano, A. 1986: 'The disadvantages of monotheism for a universal state', *Classical Philology* 81, 285–97
- Murray, A. 1983: 'Peter Brown and the shadow of Constantine', *JRS* 73, 191–203
- O'Donnell, J. J. 2005: *Augustine: A New Biography*, New York
- Von Haehling, R. 1978: *Die Religionzugehörigkeit der hohen Amtsträger des römischen Reiches*, Bonn
- Wood, I. 2013: *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages*, Oxford