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The Final Pagan Generation by Edward J. Watts (Review)

James A. Francis

University of Kentucky, j.francis@uky.edu

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rich insights into Byzantine ideologies and selves. The book offers wonderful insight into the mind-boggling process of creating “performances of a *disordered* [Byzantine] self” (221). It takes the reader beautifully yet pedagogically through centuries of liturgical poetry and prose. Hopefully, this remarkable and marvelous monograph opens the gate to a new and fruitful field of hymnological studies.

Thomas Arentzen, University of Oslo

Edward J. Watts

The Final Pagan Generation

Oakland: University of California Press, 2015

Pp. xvi + 327. \$34.95.

The title of Edward Watts’s latest book may lead some to think of the issue concerning a fourth-century pagan revival, which Alan Cameron so skillfully settled in his *Last Pagans of Rome*. That is not the subject of this book. It focuses rather on the specific and intriguing topic of why the “final pagan generation,” defined as those born just prior to Constantine’s conversion, was unable to anticipate or resist the watershed changes in imperial religious policy which occurred during their lifetimes. These are not “the last pagans” but rather “the last group of elite Romans, both pagan and Christian, who were born into a world in which most people believed that the public pagan religious order of the past few millennia would continue indefinitely” (5). The book follows a chronological sequence in ten chapters, from the 310s to the 390s, using the lives of four contemporaries as case studies: Ausonius, Libanius, Praetextatus, and Themistius.

One of the most useful aspects of Watts’s treatment appears immediately in the first chapter: he lays out succinctly and effectively the religious, cultural, and social world this generation experienced and in which it participated for each succeeding decade. In doing so, he makes the book accessible to non-specialists and useful as an undergraduate text in courses covering late antiquity and early Christianity. In Chapter One he sets before his reader the ubiquitous presence of the gods in the everyday life of young children growing up in 310. From the very start the final generation learned to navigate the world of the gods, which shared the space of their own mundane world. In Chapter Two he argues against any real plan for the Christianization of the empire, either in the mind of Constantine or among the Christian body as a whole. The latter had, with short periods of notable exception, gotten along quietly in the empire and dreamed not of Christianizing but of replacing the empire with the reign of the Messiah upon his return. Subsequent chapters highlight the rigorous and separate character of late antique higher education, which removed the members of the last generation as young adults from the mundane world of politics and policy; the stability brought to the empire by Constantine and his sons; and the lack of enforcement of imperial pronouncements against pagan practice, all of which produced a sense of the permanence of the status quo up through the reign of Valentinian.

For Watts, real change begins with the “youth culture” of the up and coming generation in the 360s and 370s (Chapter Seven), when those who should have been among the stars of the next generation rejected the careers of their fathers and took up careers as bishops and ascetics. Elite Romans moving outside the traditional imperial *cursus* is not the only change that marks the new generation. Watts also posits a generation gap between these two generations. In the succeeding chapters, he notes that while not all the elite took up such alternative careers, those who did, such as Ambrose, were given greater heed by emperors such as Gratian and Theodosius, who were themselves members of the younger generation. Moreover, this new generation, both pagan and Christian, possessed what Peter Brown once termed “the courage of their disbeliefs”; they were both more militant and more violent than their fathers. When large-scale temple destruction starts to take place, it is carried out by bishops and monks operating outside the constraints of imperial policy, committing acts in which the emperor could only acquiesce. The traditional elite who operated within the imperial system were thus powerless to stop it. Watts fittingly and compellingly begins and ends his study by discussing the destruction of the Serapeum in Alexandria in 392, a watershed event that marks not only the eclipse of the final generation, but in many ways that of the old pagan order as a whole.

Watts has produced an absorbing, erudite, and highly useful book from which anyone studying late antiquity or early Christianity will profit.

James A. Francis, University of Kentucky