

**Alan Cameron, *Wandering Poets and Other Essays on Late Greek Literature and Philosophy*.** Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xii + 359. ISBN 978-0-19-026894-7. (Hardback)

Despite the second half of the title, most of the chapters of this book (two new essays and ten papers previously published and subject to different degrees of revision) are “concerned less with poetry and philosophy than with poets and philosophers” (p. xi), with how their existence and activity cast light “on the social, cultural, and even political life of the later Empire” (2). Cameron’s objective has not been to “bring them up to date systematically”, but rather he claims to “have corrected or modified what I now consider mistaken or misleading in the earliest papers ... [confining] my additions to work that has a bearing on the arguments of the original articles” (xi).<sup>1</sup> Extensive reworking is particularly visible in chapters 1 (“Wandering poets”), 2 (“The Empress and the Poet”), and 10 (“The Last Days of the Academy at Athens”).

Chapter 1, “Wandering Poets: A Literary Movement in Byzantine Egypt”, is a thorough revision of a paper with the same title published in 1965 (*Historia* 14, 470–509). Cameron studies a group of late antique professional poets, for which he uses the term ‘school’ because they share a number of features. They originate from the Egyptian Thebaid, in particular from the area of Panopolis (Pamprepius, Cyrus, Nonnus and Triphiodorus came from Panopolis; Horapollon, from the village of Phenebith; Christodorus, from Coptus; Olympiodorus, from Thebes; Andronicus, from Hermopolis; he also considers the family of Aurelius Ammon – known from *P. Ammon* I and II – and Ptolemaeus). The second point in his 1965 paper had been their alleged paganism, but Cameron already corrected this view in “The Empress and the Poet” (chapter 2) and focuses now on “the force of pagan tradition in their writings, both form and content” (p. 7). Thirdly, they wrote on contemporary subjects, which explains the perishability of their poetry. Their most characteristic feature would be their mobility, both social and geographical, with a number of Egyptian poets making the trip to Constantinople. They were *poetae docti*, but Cameron is now less sure about their ability to read the Latin poets than he was in 1965. Finally, many took an active part in public life, explainable because men of letters were rewarded for their poems with posts in imperial administration and because poetry could fill a position somewhat analogous to that of the contemporary journalist.

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<sup>1</sup> Despite this selective approach, a few additional publications would have certainly enriched the book. In particular R. Shorrock (2011), *The Myth of Paganism*, on Nonnus’ religion and generally the Christian classicising intellectual; and T.M. Kristensen (2013), *Making and breaking the gods*, on Christian attitudes towards pagan statuary. Cameron cites E. J. Watts (2006), *City and School in late antique Athens and Alexandria*, and E.J. Watts (2010), *Riot in Alexandria*, but does not seem to have incorporated them fully into his own narrative. E.J. Watts (2015), *The Final Pagan Generation*, must have been published too late to be taken into account.

Chapter 2, “The Empress and the Poet”,<sup>2</sup> reconstructs the figures of Cyrus of Panopolis and Empress Eudocia, in the context of the court of Theodosius II. Cyrus was the prefect of Constantinople and the praetorian prefect of the East from 439, but in 441 he was stripped of all his offices and sent as a bishop to Cotyaeum, in Phrygia. He retired to Constantinople following Theodosius’ death in 450. Seven poems in the *Palatine Anthology* are ascribed to Cyrus, of which Cameron considers his 1.99 (on the pillar of St Daniel), 9.136 (Cyrus departing from Constantinople into exile, presumably a fragment),<sup>3</sup> 9.808 (on the house of Maximinus) and 15.9 (presumably a fragment from a panegyric on Theodosius). Cameron revisits the arguments in favour of Cyrus’ Christianity: he built the Church of the Theotokos in Constantinople; appointed as bishop in Cotyaeum, he presented himself as orthodox, calling Christ ‘God’ at the moment of the Incarnation in his first homily; he is ascribed with a *Passion of St Menas*, transferring an Egyptian saint to Cotyaeum; his relationship with St Daniel the Stylite. Cameron concludes that the accusations of paganism against Cyrus were the product of political, not religious, opposition to his figure.

As for Eudocia, Cameron cools down the tendency to see her behind any cultural movement of the age, and to assume that she was motivated by a deep admiration of classical culture and a sympathy for highly educated pagans, in opposition to the pious Pulcheria. Eudocia’s father seems to have been a sophist, not a philosopher, and not necessarily a pagan, and there is no need to identify sympathy for classical culture and sympathy for paganism, and to suppose a clash between Hellenic traditionalism and imperial piety. Indeed, the poems attributed to Eudocia, the hagiographical romance of St Cyprian and the Homeric centos, betray a long-standing Christian poetic interest, probably shared with her husband, Theodosius (he seems to have owned a copy of Proba’s *Cento*).

Chapter 3, “The Poet, the Bishop, and the Harlot”,<sup>4</sup> revisits the so-called ‘Nonnian question’, i.e. was it possible that the *Paraphrase of the Gospel of John* and the *Dionysiaca* were penned by Nonnus of Panopolis? Cameron incorporates bibliography produced from 1990s onwards to conclude that both poems were written by the same Christian author, first the *Paraphrase* and then the *Dionysiaca*. He criticises Enrico Livrea’s identification of Nonnus of Panopolis and Nonnus, bishop of Edessa from 449 to 451 and from 457 to 471, by way of an analysis of his main source, the *Life of St Pelagia the Harlot*.

Chapter 4, “Palladas: New Poems, New Date,” originates in a paper entitled “Palladas and Constantinople”, presented at the conference “Palladas and the New Papyrus” (September 2014, University College London). Kevin Wilkinson, the editor

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<sup>2</sup> Originally *YCLS* 27 (1982), 217-89.

<sup>3</sup> Note the typo in p. 41, section V: the poem described here is *Anth. Pal.* 9.136, not 9.36. Also, in p. 40, section IV, Cameron analyses *Anth. Pal.* 15.9, not 15.15.

<sup>4</sup> *GRBS* 41 (2000), 175-88.

of *P.CtYBR* inv. 4000, an anthology of epigrams including *Anth. Pal.* 9.379 (attributed to Palladas), suggested to move the date of Palladas to the age of Constantine and to make him a pagan witness to the foundation of Constantinople. After revising Wilkinson's arguments and all the available evidence, Cameron is "prepared to accept that the new codex *may*... have consisted of a collection of Palladas's epigrams, and (with less conviction) to concede that his floruit *may* have fallen somewhat earlier than hitherto assumed" (111), about 350 AD, but finds the connection with the foundation of Constantinople unsustainable.

Chapter 5, "Claudian"<sup>5</sup> describes the historical circumstances in which Claudian composed his poems and these as products of both the fourth-century Greek tradition of panegyric and historical epic and the classical Latin poets (esp. the poets of the Silver Age in Claudian's taste for hyperbole, the polished hexameter line and the extravagant use of personifications).<sup>6</sup>

Chapter 6, "Claudian Revisited", originally published in 2000,<sup>7</sup> was a revision of Cameron's landmark book *Claudian: Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius* (Oxford, 1970) thirty years after its publication. Cameron regrets having called Claudian Stilicho's official propagandist, and having claimed that his poetry illustrated how a late government justified its policies to its subjects year by year, because that implied that the poet was following instructions and that there was something similar to a ministry of propaganda. He now vouches a more nuanced analysis: as a member of Stilicho's inner council, Claudian would have taken unto himself a systematic (poetic) representation of Stilicho.

Chapter 7, "Poets and Pagans in Byzantine Egypt",<sup>8</sup> illustrates Cameron's scepticism about claims (especially by David Frankfurter) that there was a determined pagan resistance, in some areas of Egypt, on the contention that the evidence presented to back this either comes from triumphalist Christian texts or concerns very small groups (he refers mainly to Damascius' biography of Isidorus and Zacharias' *Life of Severus*). The second part of the paper is concerned with the misleading label 'pagan culture' to refer to writings featuring pagan deities: classicising poetry was an elite phenomenon and among educated people most of the time it held no religious connotations, whereas the non (classically) educated would

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<sup>5</sup> Slightly revised. Original in J.W. Binns (ed.) (1974), *Latin Literature of the Fourth Century*, London – Boston, 134-159.

<sup>6</sup> Despite Cameron's claim that "on the available evidence, personifications are not a notable feature of Greek contemporary poetry – or even in Nonnus for that matter" (127), personifications are common in late antique Greek hexametric poetry: for QS, see M. Baumbach – S. Bär (2007), *Quintus Smyrnaeus. Transforming Homer*, 211–240; for Triph., L. Miguélez-Cavero (2013), *Triphiodorus*, nn. to 230–4, 336–9, 448–53, 503–5, 559–72, 596–9; for Nonnus, see *GRBS* 53.2 (2013), 350–78 and K. Spanoudakis (2014), *Nonnus of Panopolis in Context*, 175–91.

<sup>7</sup> Slightly revised. Original in F.E. Consolino (2000), *Letteratura e propaganda nell'occidente latino da Augusto ai regni romanobarbarici*, Roma, 127–144

<sup>8</sup> Repr. with few changes from R. S. (ed.) (2007), *Egypt in the Byzantine World*, Cambridge, 21–46.

not decode the unholy mythological allusions and doubt that their authors were really Christians.

Chapter 8, “Poetry and Literary Culture in Late Antiquity”,<sup>9</sup> is a consistent summary of Cameron’s view on late antique poetry, both Greek and Latin, but parts of it would now be superseded by Chapter 1.

In Chapter 9, “Hypatia: Life, Death, and Works”,<sup>10</sup> Cameron goes beyond the modern presentations of Hypatia as a feminist and martyr to reconstruct the figure described in ancient sources. He dismisses her wearing of the white *tribon* as a Cynic pose, and notes that she did not die young and that she was assaulted while traveling in her carriage, hardly an image of a street philosopher. As for her work, she is the author of the extant edition of Ptolemy’s *Handy Tables*, and Cameron thinks that she edited books III–XI of the *Almagest* which his father then commented, and a commented (school) edition of Diophantus’ *Arithmetica*. As for her philosophical teachings, Synesius’ interest in the *Hermetica* and bird-divination would come from Hypatia, which suggests that her teaching was more esoteric than previously thought. Finally, her death would be a consequence of her choice of playing an active role in Alexandrian public life despite being a pagan and a woman.

Chapter 10, “The Last Days of the Academy at Athens”, is a thorough revision of *PCPhS* 15 (1969), 7–29, on Justinian’s supposed closing of the Academy at Athens in 529 AD and Agathias’ account of the seven philosophers who then left Athens for Persia and its new king Chosroes, and came back disillusioned by what they saw. Cameron concludes that Justinian’s edict in 529 did not suppose the immediate closure of the school of philosophy of Athens, that Simplicius’ journey to Persia was intended from the beginning as a sort of sabbatical while he waited for the turmoil to calm down and that he always meant to return to Athens. He dismisses the theory of the foundation of a new school of philosophy in the monastery of Harran.

Chapter 11, “Oracles and Earthquakes”,<sup>11</sup> links a prediction of the Tiburtine Sibyl warning the city of Byzantium about its future destruction in the year 390 (P.J. Alexander, *The Oracle of Baalbek: The Tiburtine Sibyl in Greek Dress*, Washington 1967, line 94) with an earthquake happening in 395/6.

Chapter 12, “Paganism in Sixth-Century Byzantium”, confronts the theories of Anthony Kaldellis,<sup>12</sup> who has argued that paganism remained strong in the deeply Christian empire of Justinian and that most secular writers of the age were pagans.

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<sup>9</sup> Repr. with few changes from S. Swain – M. Edwards (eds.), *Approaching Late Antiquity*, 327–354

<sup>10</sup> Amplified and revised from D. Lauritzen – M. Tardieu (eds.) (2013), *Le voyage des légendes*, 65–82. This was itself a revision of *GRBS* 31 (1990), 103–26.

<sup>11</sup> Slightly revised version of C. Sode – S. Takács (eds.), *Novum Millenium*, Aldershot 2001, 45–52.

<sup>12</sup> *Byzantion* 38 (1997), 206–252; *Phoenix* 57 (2003), 300–16; *Florilegium* 21 (2004), 1–17; *GRBS* 45 (2005), 381–403; *BMGS* 29 (2005), 1–16; *JLA* 6 (2014), 347–366; *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity*, Philadelphia 2004; *Prokopios: The Secret History, with Related Texts*, Indianapolis 2010.

Cameron analyses the figures of Stephanus of Byzantium, John Lydus, the Prefect Phocas, Hesychius of Miletus, Tribonian, the architects of Hagia Sophia (Anthemius and Isidorus), Agathias and the authors of his *Cycle* and concludes that they were all Christians. He finds fault with Kaldellis' presentation of pagans and Christians as polar opposites: it would seem that all Christians were well-informed zealots and all pagans, inspired by Neoplatonism, emphatically rejected Christianity, worshiped their gods in secret and were active members of movements of political dissidence.

This book presents Alan Cameron at his best in (re)constructing the narratives of late antique cultural life in the Western and Eastern halves of the Mediterranean. Few people equal him in his command of Latin and Greek ancient sources, and in his capacity to identify major and minor weak points in earlier and contemporary scholarly attempts to elucidate the lives and works of late antique poets and philosophers. *Wandering Poets* relieves scholars from the obligation of presenting an up to date revision of Cameron's old papers at the beginning of their own work, facilitates the access to articles published in disparate sources, and offers vivid portraits of the cultural life of the late empire. Chapters 1, 2, 4, 10 and 12 are of nearly compulsory citation for experts in the field. Chapters 5–8 work well as (partial) introductions to late antique literature for advanced students. Chapters 10 and 12 can be pointed out as models of methodological accuracy in the interpretation of ancient sources to those wanting to build a career in academia.

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