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Edward J. Watts, *The Final Pagan Generation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015) 344 pp., 29 B&W photographs, map. $34.95 (hardcover, ebook).

At the beginning of the fourth century CE, the Mediterranean world—the Roman empire—"was full of gods. Their temples, statues, and images filled its cities, downs, farms, and wildernesses… Traditional divinities also dominated the spiritual space of the empire as figures whose presences could not be sensed but whose actions many felt they might discern." So writes Edward J. Watts at the beginning *The Final Pagan Generation*. By the century's end, he notes, "The cities of the empire remained nearly as full of the sights, sounds, and smells of the traditional gods in the 390s as they had been in the 310s."

Yet much had changed. After Julian's attempt in the 360s to sustain Pagan temples and education with imperial favor and financing—as those had sustained them in the past—the pendulum swung back, and it swung hard. Emperors such as Gratian (r. 367–83) in the West and Theodosius I (r. 379–95) in the East sought to cut the financial aqueducts that sustained large temples and celebrations. In those times, subsidy was not merely a matter of line items in the imperial budget, but a cut could mean handing over agricultural estates whose profits had sustained a temple to new owners. With sacrifice already banned, Theodosius by the 390s was punishing judges who set foot in Pagan temples and also forbidding private household rites. That these edicts were not always enforced is not the issue; the point is that Nicene Christianity enjoyed imperial favor while traditional religion no longer did.

From the days of Edward Gibbon (1737–1794), who essentially blamed the "fall of Rome" (the Western Empire, at least) on its embrace of Christianity, the question has been asked: "What changed?" The question also obsesses some contemporary Pagans (and not just members of the Julian Society), who ask, "Why did our ancestors abandon the old gods? Were they bribed, coerced, or tricked?" In the case of the four upper-class men on whose lives Watt concentrates, we can only use Gibbon's favorite adverb, *insensibly*. Gibbon writes, for instance, that "the active and successful zeal of the Christians had insensibly diffused them through every

province and almost every city of the empire" (*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 1, chapter 16). Likewise, these men are presented as insensible to the structural changes that occurred while they rose to the pinnacle of their careers.

Three of four were rhetors and philosophers who left extensive writings behind: Libanius (314–c.393), a high-profile teacher of rhetoric, something like a tenured professor today; Themistius (317–390), another rhetorician, statesman, philosopher, and counselor to several emperors; and Ausonius (310–395), poet, teacher of rhetoric in the imperial household of Valentinian I, later a consul and praetorian prefect variously of Gaul, Italy, and Africa, also the only Christian of the four, converting late in life. The fourth was Vettius Agorius Praetextatus (315–384), a wealthy aristocrat, holder of various Roman priesthoods, and praetorian prefect of Rome, a post that might be compared to a cabinet ministry. As prefect of Rome, he oversaw the reconstruction of major temples, sponsored public rituals, and reinforced the city's Pagan identity as against that of Milan, seat of the now-Christian Western emperors of the late fourth century.

Watts describes these men's careers against the changing political landscape of the century, including Julian's short reign. The last Pagan emperor, he writes, had a different, more Christian upbringing than Watts' four exemplars: "Unlike those older man, Julian understood that Constantius' [who preceded him] initiatives pointed toward a world in which traditional religious practices were suppressed and temples replaced by churches"

Lacking Julian's imperial authority, Libanius, for one, fought a long rear-guard action against the erasure of traditional religion, denouncing how "the black-robed tribe [of monks], who eat more than elephants … hasten to attack the temples with sticks and stones and bars of iron, and in some cases, disdaining these, with hands and feet." His methods were speeches, letters (perhaps the equivalent of an op-ed in the *New York Times* today), and appeals to the current emperor's vanity, arguing that letting extralegal Christian power structures develop would harm the emperor's authority and prestige. These stratagems worked for a time, but as each of the "final Pagan generation" passed away from their worlds of senates, classrooms, and dinners with important people—becoming truly insensible—the imperial world, which might still have looked, sounded, and smelled much as it did in their childhoods, was irrevocably altered.

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