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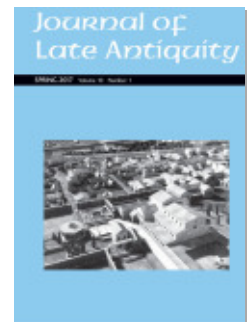
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*Wandering Poets and Other Essays on Late Greek Poetry and  
Philosophy* by Alan Cameron (review)

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Journal of Late Antiquity, Volume 10, Number 1, Spring 2017, pp. 270-277  
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jla.2017.0009>



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## Reviews

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### ***Wandering Poets and Other Essays on Late Greek Poetry and Philosophy***

ALAN CAMERON

Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xi + 359. ISBN 9780190268947.

Reviewed by Kevin W. Wilkinson  
(University of Toronto)

*Wandering Poets* is in some ways a companion to Alan Cameron's monumental opus, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (2011). The latter has inspired some long and hostile reviews and even an entire collection of essays devoted to critical engagement. This is a testament to the importance of his *Last Pagans*. *Wandering Poets* can be seen as a companion because it assembles a few of Cameron's classic articles on the Greek side (mostly) that deal with issues of prominence addressed on the Latin side in his *Last Pagans*. Chief among these is his conviction that modern scholars have fundamentally misunderstood the Christian intellectual class of Late Antiquity, inventing implausible tales of sudden conversion or sham Christianity, when the truth of the matter is that many Christians of the period saw no conflict between reading classical literature and writing classicizing literature on

the one hand and their personal religious convictions on the other. Cameron has assembled in this volume ten classic articles, originally composed between 1965 and 2013, along with two new essays. However, in the case of the republished articles, he has updated or rewritten them to account for subsequent scholarship and to reflect his current views. This muddles the bibliographical record (why not a postscript to each original article instead?) but this is a small price to pay for access to his most recent thoughts.

Chapter 1 ("Wandering Poets") was an instant classic in 1965, but that was a very long time ago and Cameron has updated it with more evidence to bolster some of its central points about a class of poet, mainly from Egypt but with reputations established all over the late Roman world. He continues to maintain, against the intervening argument of Laura Miguélez-Cavero, that Egypt was in fact exceptional for its poets in this period and that this is not an illusion of our surviving evidence. He is also now much less convinced of the "pagan" credentials of many of these characters. For example, Cameron accepts the argument of Francis Vian that Nonnus of Panopolis composed his *Paraphrasis* of the Gospel of John first and his *Dionysiaca* second. The only conclusion, then, is that Nonnus was a lifelong Christian who simply had no difficulty reconciling his religious beliefs with the mythological tradition that was the common inheritance of all educated people. This emphasis on the compatibility of Christian elite culture and "secular" classical culture is prominent throughout the book, such as in chapters 2 ("The Empress and the Poet") on Eudocia and Cyrus and 7 ("Poets and Pagans in Byzantine Egypt"), in part on the credulity of modern scholars when it

comes to hagiographical claims of exposing vile pagan practices.

Chapter 3 (“The Poet, the Bishop, and the Harlot”) reaffirms his acceptance of Vian’s case for the order of Nonnus’ *Paraphrasis* and *Dionysiaca*, and it has been updated in entertaining fashion to answer Enrico Livrea. Among other points of amusement, Cameron doubts that appreciation of female beauty is a rare trait in men and admits that Satan is possibly a biased witness. In the end, he insists that Nonnus the poet is not to be identified with Nonnus the bishop, whoever the latter might have been.

Chapters 5 (“Claudian”) and 6 (“Claudian Revisited”) are, respectively, an early essay that encapsulates the basic thesis of Cameron’s 1970 book on the topic and a much later reconsideration. The second is interesting for its autobiographical reflections on Cameron’s development as a scholar and for the admission, against intervening attacks, of youthful *naïveté*. He claims that his mature self would write the book differently, but this essay is primarily an answer to some critics (chiefly Christian Gnllka and Siegmur Döpp) and a defense of the thesis that he developed in the 1960s: that Claudian was both a good poet and a political propagandist for Stilicho. Most were already convinced of this thesis, in either weak or strong form, long ago.

Chapter 8 (“Poetry and Literary Culture in Late Antiquity”) is a breathtaking and erudite survey of developments in poetic tastes and practices, documenting the remarkable *expansion* of classicizing poetry in Late Antiquity as well as some evolutionary features. It is required reading for anyone with a professional interest in the topic and is highly recommended as a primer for anyone else who wants an overview.

Chapter 9 (“Hypatia: Life, Death, and Works”) is an expanded version of a very recent essay. Here Cameron takes obvious delight in cataloguing and debunking the various myths that have grown up around Hypatia. He notes the curious fact that our only pagan source (the *Life of Isidore* by Damascius, last scholar of the Academy in Athens) is contemptuous of Hypatia, on the grounds both of her sex and of her intellectual deficiencies, while the most glowing account is from the ecclesiastical historian Socrates. Both authors had their own axes to grind. The hostility of Damascius is easier to understand when one realizes that Synesius—the student, friend, and admirer of Hypatia (and incidentally also a Christian bishop)—wrote on his one trip to Athens in contemptuous terms about the low quality of the intellectual culture there. He may have been right, but this (like Damascius’s later snobbery) simply reflects squabbling among different intellectual traditions and has nothing to do with religious affiliation at all. With his characteristic command of the sources, Cameron tells quite a different story from the ones popularly believed. The fact that it is sober, detailed, and on the whole convincing is not likely to appease Hypatia’s many fans.

In chapter 10 (“The Last Days of the Academy at Athens”), the longest in the book at 41 pages plus 249 endnotes, Cameron defends himself against criticism (mainly continental) of the original article from 1969. The topic is the fate of the Athenian Neoplatonic school after Justinian’s famous but poorly documented edict of 529 supposedly closing it. What was the nature of the edict? What was its purpose? What happened next in Athens? When did the Neoplatonic sages journey to the Persian court?

Why? Why did they leave the Persian court and when? Where did they go next? What was the source of Agathias' information? What did it all mean for the future of pagan Neoplatonism? This reviewer is convinced by virtually all of Cameron's answers in this essay or, on some points, that he has provided at least the best case that can be made. But the issues are extremely complex and readers will be grateful for this current roadmap.

For a brief but perfect encapsulation of Cameron's mind and method, the reader should turn to chapter 11 ("Oracles and Earthquakes: A Note on the Theodosian Sibyl"). He begins with a text that is seldom read, even by specialists, and expands on the brilliant insights of its editor (Paul Alexander). The essay is impossible to summarize, but it ranges over, among other things, twelfth-century chronicles and the sermons of Augustine, dives deep into *apparatus critici*, and discusses rare poetic vocabulary. The result is a window onto a bold prophecy of Constantinople's destruction and the week in 395 or 396 when the people of the city thought that it was to be fulfilled. For all of its rigor and ingenuity, the essay also contains another of Cameron's hallmarks: acute and sympathetic insight into the late antique mind.

Chapter 12 ("Paganism in Sixth-Century Byzantium") is a new essay that challenges the provocative view of Anthony Kaldellis, as expressed in several publications over the past two decades, that virtually every intellectual in sixth-century Constantinople was secretly pagan. Cameron considers serially some leading figures of the age, documenting the evidence for their Christianity and exposing the mental gymnastics required to maintain that no thinking person was a *real* Christian. The truth of the matter

is that not all Christians of Late Antiquity (indeed, probably very few) were foaming-mad zealots who could think of nothing other than The Cross and the spilling of pagan blood. What then of Justinian's "persecution of pagans"? Something as trivial as enthusiasm for mythological literature or consultation of a horoscope might offer the opening for a political opponent to launch an accusation. As Cameron notes, there were charges and counter-charges of paganism among the bishops of the period! The real issue among them was the intense struggle over Christology; not a single one was *actually* pagan. The same was undoubtedly true among the educated political elite in mid-sixth-century Constantinople, not a single one of whom can be shown to have been an *actual* pagan and many of whom can be shown to have been Christians who appreciated classical culture. After all, accusations of nefarious and secret practices, when the real issue at stake was money, influence, or ideology, had a long history (one thinks of the prominent individuals convicted of "magic" under much earlier emperors). And as for those few remaining intellectuals in the sixth century—mainly Neoplatonic philosophers outside of Constantinople—who genuinely did long for the old religion? They naturally resented that it was now the topic of antiquarian interest rather than living practice, but they were usually left alone to nurse their sense of loss.

No review of *Wandering Poets* could do justice to the rich and varied output, over about 50 years, of such an original and prolific scholar. The book is much more than a collection of old essays. It is a fresh retrospective on an extraordinary career. In this reviewer's opinion, no single scholar has done more to illuminate

and enliven Late Antiquity than Alan Cameron.

The one essay in the book that does not convince is chapter 4 (“Palladas: New Poems, New Date?”). For the benefit of readers who have not been following the debate, Palladas’s birth was traditionally placed c. 360, on the authority of a handful of lemmata in the tenth-century Palatine Anthology. Shortly after the middle of the twentieth century, several scholars exposed the lemmata to Palladas’s epigrams as nothing more than Byzantine guesswork and a new consensus was established, locating his birth c. 320. Cameron himself was instrumental in establishing this consensus. More recently, beginning in *Journal of Roman Studies* 99 (2009): 36–60, I have been arguing on the basis of old and new evidence that Palladas was in fact born c. 260 and was already an old man when he composed several surviving epigrams during the final years of Constantine’s reign (324–337). In chapter 4 of *Wandering Poets*, Cameron is now proposing an entirely new thesis: that Palladas might have been born c. 290. This effectively splits the difference between what he had earlier maintained and what I have argued. I cannot respond in this venue to all of Cameron’s objections, but here are some brief reactions in the spirit of debate.

#### *Palladas on divorce*

Cameron accepts (92) that the concluding reference of *AP* 11.378 is to Constantine’s law of 331 severely restricting unilateral divorce (*CTh* 3.16.1). He accepts, therefore, that the epigram was composed between 331 and the reign of Julian (361–363), who annulled the restrictions, and these were not resurrected for a long time thereafter. However, Cameron suggests that the epigram “might

have been written nearer 363 than 331, when [Palladas] was in (say) his thirties” (93). By “in (say) his thirties,” he seems to mean in fact about forty, for on the very same page he assumes “for the sake of argument” that Palladas “began writing twenty years earlier than hitherto assumed, say around 290.” 290 is in fact *at least fifty* years earlier than Cameron had hitherto assumed that Palladas began writing, but it appears that he intended to suggest that his *birth* might have been around 290. If so, then Palladas was forty-one (plus or minus) when Constantine issued his divorce law in 331. But not only is the arithmetic dubious, there is also no argument.

Moreover, Cameron seems to ignore two relevant considerations. First, *AP* 11.378 belongs to a group of epigrams in which Palladas indicates that he had recently left his lifelong job as a grammarian; in one of the others (*AP* 10.97), he claims to be seventy-two years of age. One might doubt, if one is so inclined, whether this refers to a real event in Palladas’s life (although the poems would be very strange if it does not), or whether he was precisely seventy-two at the time, but this group of epigrams has always been taken to be a product of his old age, including by Cameron, who formerly believed that they were composed c. 391 and that Palladas was therefore born c. 319. On this logic, if *AP* 11.378 was in fact composed between 331 and 363, then Palladas was born between 259 and 291.

Second, as for the claim that *AP* 11.378 “might have been written nearer 363 than 331,” it is improbable that a skilled satirist would consider a thirty-year-old law to offer a suitable punch line to an epigram. By way of comparison, Martial has a few epigrams in Book 6 that deal in playful ways with Domitian’s

renewal of the *lex Julia de adulteriis coercendis*, one of which (6.7) contains the statement that it had been no more than thirty *days* since the legislation was issued. It is universally accepted that these epigrams are contemporary with Domitian's law. Indeed, they would be very lame if Martial were referring to legislation that was five years old (never mind thirty). Similarly, Palladas's playful reference to Constantine's divorce law of 331 is probably contemporary with it. In other words, within the window for Palladas's birth of 259–291, Cameron's arbitrary choice of “around 290” is probably thirty years too late.

### *Tyche the tavern-keeper*

In *Journal of Roman Studies* 100 (2010): 179–194, I treated (among other things) four related epigrams that deal with Tyche, who had recently ceased to be a goddess and had become instead a tavern-keeper (*AP* 9.180–183). I followed the traditional view that these epigrams were a reaction to the recent conversion of a Tychaion into a tavern, merely arguing that they are better situated in Constantinople (as some have thought) than in Alexandria (as others have thought) and that they are not incompatible with what we know about the capital under Constantine. The primary reason for situating them in Constantinople is John Lydus' report (*Mens.* 4.132) of a Tyche monument in the city and his attendant remark: “the place later became a tavern” (in context, “later” means after Pompey).

What I failed to recognize, along with everyone before me, is that these four epigrams pertain to a repurposed *cult statue* of Tyche, not a repurposed *Tychaion*, and that the Lydus passage holds a good deal more significance. It was Noel Lenski who, in 2011, drew my attention to what

I had overlooked.<sup>1</sup> Lydus claims that the Tyche monument was erected by Pompey to commemorate his victory over Mithridates, in which the Goths (!) had played a role. And he provides a translation of the Latin inscription on its base (which fortuitously survives in Istanbul along with its pillar, although the statue of Tyche that surmounted this does not survive of course): *Fortunae reduci ob devictos Gothos* (*CIL* 3: 733 = *ILS* 820). This is followed by his claim that the place later became a tavern. Lydus obviously knew nothing about the history of the monument or the tavern; rather, he invented a fanciful story to account for what he was able to observe and read in the sixth century. As the Goths did not arrive on the scene until the third century AD, the monument clearly had nothing to do with Pompey. But, just as clearly, it was in fact commissioned by a late Roman emperor to commemorate a victory over the Goths, for the vanquished people are named in the dedicatory inscription. As Mommsen saw (for historical reasons that cannot be discussed here), it was Constantine who commissioned it to commemorate his victory over the Goths in 332. On the evidence of both Lydus and Palladas, then, there was a tavern in the vicinity of this Tyche monument. And, on the evidence of Palladas, it originally included a cult statue of the goddess that Constantine had confiscated from a

<sup>1</sup> He shared with me a draft of a chapter on Constantinople that was intended for his *Constantine and the Cities: Imperial Authority and Civic Politics* (Philadelphia, 2016); he later decided to reserve this material for a different publication. I have left it to Lenski to expound his important insight, but a short statement is necessary here (these are my words, not his).

temple and used for his own propagandistic purposes. This aligns exactly with Constantine's known practices in the creation of his capital, including in the case of other confiscated statues of Tyche that he erected around the city. Lenski has supplied another strong argument for a Constantinian date and, indeed, for Palladas's presence in Constantinople in the early 330s. I missed this entirely in 2010, but it now provides compelling independent support for the larger case.

Cameron betrays (101–107) either intuition or knowledge of Lenski's insight and has attempted to counter it before its full statement even appears. He objects (104) that since Palladas was writing about a temple and Lydus about a monument, the two sources are unrelated (ignore the tavern). But as Lenski assumed, and as Peter Bing has now demonstrated beyond all doubt in a paper delivered orally in multiple venues, Palladas's four epigrams are in fact about a *statue* of Tyche that had been *removed* from her temple and erected near a tavern, *not* about a transformation of her temple into a tavern. Both Palladas and Lydus were looking at the same Constantinian monument, although only the former saw it in its original condition and knew its true genesis. But Cameron has a second objection: he suspects that the report about the tavern in the Lydus passage was interpolated by later Byzantines who had read their Palladas!

### *The converted Olympians*

AP 9.528 deals with statues of the Olympian gods that had converted to Christianity, thereby avoiding the melting-pot and conversion into a *follis*, that is, a bag of bronze coins. To be comprehensible at all, this epigram requires a historical context in which pagan statues had been

confiscated and faced at least two potential fates: preservation (through conversion to Christianity, whatever Palladas might mean by that) and conversion into coin. Cameron disagrees (94), suggesting that coins have nothing to do with it; Palladas was only interested in the act of melting. Why the poet would introduce the conspicuous *φόλλις* into the epigram, if coins were irrelevant, is perplexing. But Cameron must defend this *aporia*, and besmirch Palladas's competence, for the sake of eluding an inconvenient fact: only under *Constantine* did confiscated cult statues face the two fates contemplated by Palladas, namely, preservation and conversion into coin. It is perhaps worth saying again that the pagan statues captured by the Christian populace of Alexandria in 391 were neither preserved nor converted into coin (nor could they have been, for only the imperial government could mint coins).

Cameron goes on to argue that AP 9.528 does not fit Constantine's reign because, while he did convert gold and silver cult statues into coin, *bronzes* did not suffer the same fate; they were preserved and erected in Constantinople (95). This is entirely consistent with the fact that Palladas's Olympian bronzes in AP 9.528 were *preserved* and were *not* converted into coin. However, it is scarcely credible that *all* of the bronzes confiscated by Constantine were preserved in this manner. What happened to those statues that were of inferior craftsmanship or otherwise unsuitable for public display? Presumably, they were treated as scrap. It would not be surprising if some of the rejects were, in fact, converted into bronze coin. But Eusebius hints at another fate in LC 9.6: "Which of the heroes ever divined the smelting through fire and conversion of the lifeless from useless statues

into everyday uses (ἀναγκαίως χρήσεις)?” This certainly gives the impression of *bronze* statues that were recycled as trivial implements. Compare Palladas’s ephrasis of a bronze Eros that was converted—fittingly enough, he notes, but perhaps with a touch of irony—into a frying pan (*AP* 9.773).

In another attempt to argue that *AP* 9.528 cannot be Constantinian in date, Cameron now suggests (101) that these fortunate Olympian converts to Christianity belonged to a Christian’s private museum collection, and since there were not yet “millionaire collectors” in Constantinople under Constantine, the epigram must have been composed no earlier than the second half of the fourth century. Of course, Constantine himself was a “millionaire collector.” It is an intriguing thought that Palladas might have had his palace in mind. However, Cameron’s suggestion for the precise *physical* context in which some statues of the gods found both Christianity and safety is only a guess. He formerly believed that the precise *physical* context was an Alexandrian church (*Classical Quarterly* 15: 223)—another guess. Beyond restating my opinion that the *historical* context is Constantine’s spoliation of the temples, the melting down of most confiscated statuary, some of it for coin, and the preservation of some high-quality bronzes in Constantinople, I would not venture anything else. As Cameron himself seems to concede (100), whether these particular Olympians even existed is irrelevant to Palladas’s point.

### *Prytanis*

In addition to chapter 4 in *Wandering Poets*, Cameron subsequently published a note (*Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 198 [(2016): 49–52] in which

he continued to voice objections. On the important “Four-time Sarmatian” epigram from the Yale papyrus codex, he concedes that my analysis makes sense of some features, but he declares that it cannot be correct because it requires an “unacceptable” meaning of πρύτανις and cognates. In my defense, I plead for a careful reading of *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 196 (2015): 88–93, and stress that, contrary to Cameron’s claim, πρυτανεύειν does *not* need to be a synonym of στρατεύειν for the analysis to be viable. This erroneous claim appears to have its origin in a translator’s choice that I can see now was a mistake (*mea culpa*). It is a difficult epigram to translate into English, because Palladas uses words that can be taken in multiple ways, deliberately fashioning a surface narrative that is absurd and hilarious (a Sarmatian who had sailed to India was a two-time πρύτανις in Egypt and the heir of a two-time πρύτανις) but providing the interpretive key at the end (these four Egyptian πρυτανεῖται did not make him a “Four-time Sarmatian” = *Sarmaticus IV*, a tetrarchic victory title). With the benefit of hindsight, I suggest the following translational rubric for this epigram: πρύτανις = “commander”; πρυτανεύειν = “to command”; πρυτανεία = “command.” If this is not among the possibilities for this word-group in ancient Greek, then these words were also misunderstood, for example, by Herodotus, who uses πρύτανις of a military commander-in-chief (6.110). Cameron knows very well that misdirection, followed by a conclusion in which the poet reveals his game, is a staple of the genre. And yet, he has fallen victim here to the poet’s game (which cannot be captured in a single English translation) by thinking that this Sarmatian sailor to India was also a two-time city council



president in Egypt! Long ago, in a series of lecture notes that Palladas seems to have known and that is still valuable for understanding ancient poetry, Aristotle (*Poet.* 1461a-b) criticized readers who fixated on one connotation of a word, to the exclusion of all others, and then absurdly blamed the poet when they failed to understand the point.

Cameron claims to have no idea what the “Four-time Sarmatian” epigram is about. However, he is quite certain that the *nine* identifiable tetrarchic allusions, and the two or three correspondences with the opinions of Lactantius (who similarly once refers to tetrarchic emperors with the mocking noun *Sarmatae* rather than the technically precise adjective *Sarmatici*), which together form a fully coherent critique of the emperor Galerius, are the result of miraculous coincidence.

### Conclusion

It is true that eventually, after years of investigation, I was compelled by the evidence, some of it new, to reject some aspects of Cameron’s early work on Palladas. But only *some* aspects. If I have not already made this clear, let me say now that his articles on this topic from the 1960s are brilliant and remain fundamental. My own work would have been much more difficult and would have taken much longer without them. In fact, it might not have been possible at all without them, and it certainly would have been inferior.

Why, then, has Cameron so strongly resisted the evidence that Palladas was active roughly between the Tetrarchs and the end of Constantine’s reign, accepting what he can while still trying to preserve a post-Constantinian date? There is an important issue of historical interpretation at stake here. If it is determined that

Palladas’s latest epigrams were composed during Constantine’s reign over the eastern provinces, then one must come to grips with the fact that they give an impression very much like the contemporary impression given by Eusebius. This is bound to be troubling to some. At least, it is bound to be troubling to those who would casually dismiss our best source for the years 324–337 whenever he is inconvenient, and then also rely on him whenever he is convenient. Palladas’s vindication of Eusebius might be even more difficult for a few to accept after T. D. Barnes made some trenchant statements in 2011. Personally, while I find Barnes’s account of Constantine to be convincing in most respects, I might demur at a few points. But this is a different conversation, and one’s views on the general character of Constantine’s reign must not be allowed to interfere with an impartial assessment of the date of Palladas.

[As this review was in press, the sad news broke of Alan Cameron’s death, an immeasurable loss.]

*Porphyrios: Gegen die Christen  
(Contra Christianos). Fragmente,  
Testimonien und dubia mit  
Einleitung, Übersetzung und  
Anmerkungen*

MATTHIAS BECKER

Texte und Kommentare 52.

Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 2015.

Pp. x + 667. ISBN 9783110432152.

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A mountain of scholarship on Porphyry’s famous third-century polemic against Christianity has, from the nineteenth century to the present, continued to grow: the last seven years alone have seen at least four books dedicated to Porphyry’s