

# The Final Pagan Generation

Edward J. Watts



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# The Final Pagan Generation

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*To my parents, Dan and Karen Watts*

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Symmachus—no small feat.

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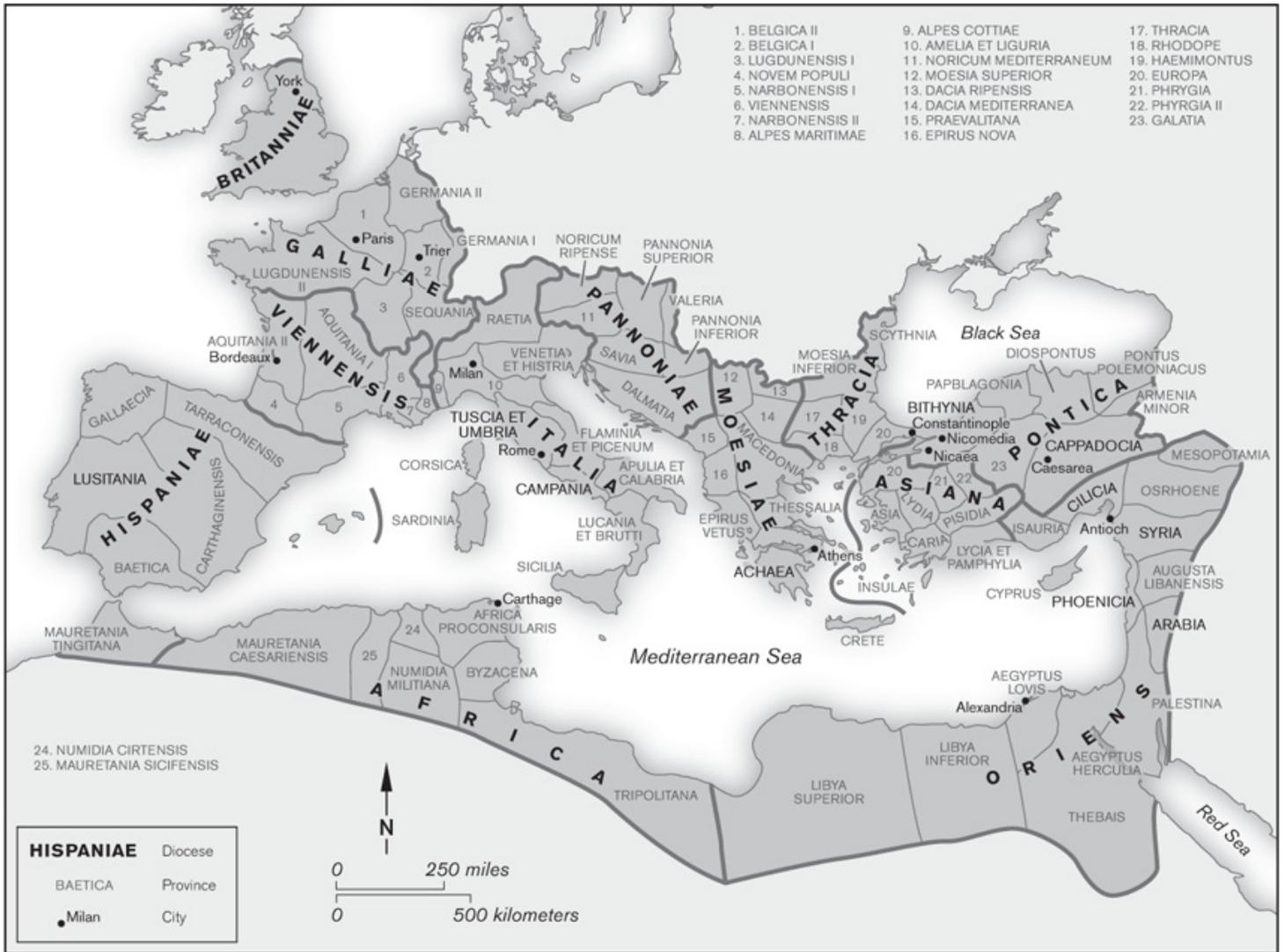
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This book is dedicated to my parents, Dan and Karen Watts. They afforded m  
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the freedom to develop that passion. And they instilled in me the confidence t  
believe that I could achieve any possible task while also recognizing those task  
that were impossible. I hope that my children will be as lucky as I have been.

*Carlsbad, California*  
*October 7, 201*



MAP 1. The Roman world of the final pagan generation. Prepared by Bart Wright.

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# Introduction

In 392, Theophilus, the bishop of Alexandria, requested and received imperial permission to convert into a church an old imperial basilica that had been abandoned and left to decay for most of the past quarter century. When the renovation began, workmen found a network of man-made underground caverns and religious artifacts hidden within them.<sup>1</sup> Theophilus took possession of these objects, organized a procession of them through the city, and mocked them publicly. This provocative act caused pagans to riot.<sup>2</sup> Enraged, they marched into the streets and began brawling with Christians. At first there were small skirmishes, but the conflicts soon degenerated into what a contemporary called “open warfare.”<sup>3</sup> After these initial street battles, the pagan crowd retreated to the Serapeum, a large temple of the god Serapis well fortified on a hill high above Alexandria (see fig. 1). Under the leadership of the philosopher Olympus and other teachers, like the grammarians Helladius and Ammonius, the pagans launched multiple attacks on the city’s Christians. Their actions belied the stereotype of intellectual restraint. According to Christian sources, the people captured by these men and their students were “forced to sacrifice at burning altars.”<sup>4</sup> If they refused, the Serapeum garrison tortured them by breaking their shins, attaching them to pitchforks, and throwing them into caves once used to store the blood that dripped from the temple’s altars.<sup>5</sup> The Serapeum site proved

too difficult for either Alexandria's Christian leadership or its civilian and military authorities to storm. It took a letter from the emperor offering a full pardon to the pagan garrison to clear the temple of its defenders.



FIGURE 1. The site of the Serapeum, Alexandria. Photo by Manasi Watts.

After the pagan fighters left their stronghold, a crowd of Christian Alexandrians and soldiers swarmed the hill. One of them took an axe and with all his strength struck the jaw of the monumental statue of Serapis (see fig. 2).<sup>6</sup> The crowd then hacked the rest of the statue into pieces and dragged the fragments off to each of the city's regions to be burned. They took the torso (presumably the largest fragment) down the hill and burned it in the amphitheater. This spectacle set off a further round of destruction. Within Alexandria, "the busts of Serapis, which were on the walls, in the entryways, on the doorposts, and even in the windows of every single house, were completely torn down and scraped away" so that there no longer remained any trace of the god.<sup>7</sup>

The destruction of the Serapeum was a momentous event, second perhaps only to the Gothic sack of Rome in 410 for the amount of attention it received from contemporary sources.<sup>8</sup> In the same way that the sack of Rome shocked a

empire unaccustomed to questioning its military superiority, the disappearance of Serapis's temple in Alexandria highlighted the vulnerability of large centers of traditional religion that had once seemed a permanent fixture of Roman life. However, like the sack of Rome, the destruction of the Serapeum was both a singular event and the culmination of a longer process. In retrospect, many events clearly prefigured the Goths' capture of Rome under their king Alaric: the Gothic migration across the Danube, the Roman defeat at Adrianople, the emperor Theodosius's peace treaty with the Goths, Gothic anger following the battle at the Frigidus, and Alaric's years of aggression in Greece and Dalmatia. Alaric's attack emerged from a set of historical trends that had been developing for nearly four centuries. Romans knew that these things were happening, but no one imagined that they could actually result in the capture of the city of Rome. In fact, before Alaric few imagined that Rome could ever again be sacked. When Alaric actually breached the city's walls, however, he fundamentally altered assumptions about what was possible in the Roman world.<sup>9</sup> He revealed to all the existence of a new world in which barbarians truly threatened the very existence of Roman imperial power.



FIGURE 2. Coin of Antoninus Pius (A.D. 148/9) showing Serapis enthroned in temple (Emmett 1668). Courtesy of the author. Photo by Zoe Watts.

The destruction of the Serapeum similarly capped a period of increasing severe threats to the temples and synagogues of the Roman Empire's traditional religious communities. In the 380s, emperors cut funding for traditional cults in Italy and denied an appeal to restore the Altar of Victory in the Roman senate house; administrators in the East attempted to cut the sacred grove at Daphne outside of Antioch and led a sustained campaign against rural shrines in Mesopotamia, Syria, and Egypt.<sup>10</sup> The same social and religious trends that propelled these anti-pagan actions also led to the events at the Serapeum. The Alexandrian event, however, seems to have fundamentally changed many people's awareness of the threat to traditional religious institutions. For the first time, pagans understood that Christian attacks could reach the most permanent and impressive elements of the urban religious infrastructure. Christians now saw temple destructions, both within and outside of cities, as a realistic way to remake the religious topography of the empire.

Everyone appreciated the significance of these actions against traditional religion, but people reacted to them differently depending on their age. Younger individuals saw the potential for these events to reshape the world and responded vigorously to them. Older men, however, were less alarmed and more measured both in their assessment of these developments and in their response to them. These differences in imagination grew out of a profound generation gap.

Though it has not before been acknowledged, the pagan and Christian perpetrators of the violence of the 380s and early 390s, the imperial officials in charge of controlling it, and the emperor who presided during it were almost exclusively young and middle-aged men. The attitudes and actions of these men, most of whom belonged to the generation born following the death of the first Christian emperor, Constantine, sometimes contrast markedly with those of the pagan and Christian elites born in the 310s and early 320s. These younger pagan and Christian religious warriors were born into a world in which Christianity was clearly ascendant. They anticipated its destructive and transformative power, and as they matured, they came increasingly to understand that the dawning new religious order threatened the very existence of traditional Roman cults. Men like Rufinus and Olympius saw the conflict between a rising Christianity and traditional religion as the defining struggle of the fourth century, and they fought hard to advance the interests of the religious community with which they identified.

Older men did not see the world in this way. They generally shared neither their juniors' interest in creating sharply defined religious identities nor the tendency toward violent religious confrontation. The temple destructions and Christian provocations of the 380s and early 390s dismayed these older men, but unlike some younger men of similar social and economic station, they did not violently resist these acts. They reacted instead as if they could not imagine a world in which traditional religious practices did not have a part. They had good reason to think this way. This generation was born during or immediately following a time of Christian persecution when the old gods had ruled, without interruption, for thousands of years. They were raised in the politically functional and economically prosperous environment created following the third-century stabilization of the Roman Empire by the tetrarchy. The empire of the fourth century depended on an administrative system in which locally prominent men could play important administrative roles. It nurtured a social system based on shared cultural values that bound elites across the empire. It created an economy in which the introduction of a stable new gold coinage greatly increased the

wealth of the upper class.<sup>11</sup> The great wealth and opportunities that the Roman system provided to those who were willing to play by its rules steadily shaped these men into loyal and cooperative superintendents of imperial stability. Romans born in the first quarter of the fourth century consequently showed little inclination to challenge this prosperous imperial order. And yet it was this generation's faith in the foundations of the imperial system and their craving for political stability that enabled Christian emperors to mount increasingly powerful challenges to established religious life in the later fourth century.

At first glance, it is puzzling that this generation proved unable to anticipate the degree to which the Roman world would change as imperially sponsored Christianity took hold. Their stories are, after all, usually told alongside those of younger contemporaries who were very much aware that the world was changing around them. These were men like Ambrose, Gregory Nazianzen, Basil of Caesarea, and John Chrysostom, who abandoned legal, administrative, and teaching positions in the system their fathers perpetuated so that they could instead pursue careers in the church or lives as ascetics. Others, like the emperor Julian and the pagan sophist Eunapius, threatened the system's cohesion by aggressively asserting what they understood to be traditional religious identities. These younger men made these choices while occupying the same positions of authority that once restrained their elders. The Alexandrian events that culminated in the Serapeum's destruction reflect the confessional interests and confrontational tendencies of this younger generation.

The first children of the Christian Roman Empire drove the events with which this study concludes, but this book focuses on their parents, the "final pagan generation." By that phrase, I do not mean the last Roman pagans. Pagan communities continued to thrive in the Roman world into the seventh century and beyond.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, there is a good argument to be made that, in many parts of the fourth-century Roman Empire, some form of paganism long outlasted Roman political control.<sup>13</sup> In using the phrase "final pagan generation," I also do not mean men and women who were exclusively pagans. In fact, a number of the figures on whom this discussion will focus were Christians.

The "final pagan generation" I will speak about is made up of the last group of elite Romans, both pagan and Christian, who were born into a world in which most people believed that the pagan public religious order of the past few millennia would continue indefinitely. They were the last Romans to grow up in

world that simply could not imagine a Roman world dominated by a Christian majority.<sup>14</sup> This critical failure of imagination is completely understandable. At the beginning of the second decade of the fourth century there had never been a Christian emperor, and the childhood and early adolescence of members of the generation living in the East coincided with moments when the resources of the Roman state were devoted to the suppression of Christianity.<sup>15</sup> The longest-lived of this group died in an empire that would never again see a non-Christian sovereign, and that no longer financially supported the public sacrifices, temples, and festivals that had dominated Roman life in their youth. They lived through a time of dramatic change that they could neither anticipate nor fully understand as it was unfolding.<sup>16</sup> This generation represents the last cohort of Roman children to grow up believing that religious practice would continue in the way that it always had. They also represent the first generation of adults forced to respond to the significant political and demographic changes that Christianity's rise had produced.

Both ancient and modern accounts of the fourth century see as inevitable an ending that no one could possibly have anticipated when the final pagan generation was born. With the exception of two short treatments of fourth-century events, no history written by a member of the final pagan generation survives intact.<sup>17</sup> The major accounts of this period were written by members of the generations to which either the parents or the children of the final pagan generation belonged.<sup>18</sup> These are valuable texts, but they reflect the distinct concerns of older and younger men. The Christian members of the final pagan generation were too young to share Eusebius's thrill when Constantine's victories removed the looming threat of religious persecution. And its non-Christian members were mostly too old to experience the steady tightening of restrictions on traditional religious practice in the early fifth century. All of them died too soon to appreciate that these fifth-century policies grew out of fourth-century trends. Their fourth century was instead a time when a relatively stable imperial system provided elite men and women across the empire with unprecedented opportunities for wealth and power. These men expressed concerns to friends about the empire's evolving religious environment throughout their lives, but that was only one concern among a great many that shifted as these men aged. Indeed, most members of this generation pursued their personal and professional interests and advocated for those of their friends much more frequently and with

much greater vigor than they fought for their God or gods.

This history of the final pagan generation attempts to restore to them the unique generational perspective that we have long overlooked. The work of scholars such as Glen Elder has shown that, in the modern world, social and economic conditions experienced during childhood shape people's behaviors for the rest of their lives.<sup>19</sup> People who grew up at different times and under different conditions often do not understand the same event in the same way because their life experiences have conditioned them to react to certain stimuli and ignore others. Their different worldviews are not shaped by any one dramatic day. They instead reflect the slow process of learning to live in the world in which they were born. We know intuitively that older and younger people now share neither the same concerns nor the same reactions to events, but we often forget that this generation gap existed in antiquity as well. Obscuring or ignoring generational differences, then, prevents us from seeing the full implication of historical events.

One can see the importance of recovering this picture by looking at how another revolutionary period is sometimes remembered. When young people today think of the 1960s in the United States, their minds turn to a set of iconic images now recycled endlessly by the media. On one side are happy images like Burk Uzzle's couple embracing at Woodstock. On the other are more troubling photos like Eddie Adams's photo of Nguyen Van Lem's execution or Charles Moore's pictures of Birmingham civil rights marchers being sprayed by fire hoses. These images greatly simplify the chaotic and sometimes frightening experience of living through the 1960s in the United States, but they fit neatly into the narratives that now comfortably sanitize the 1960s for nostalgic baby boomers, Generation Xers, and millennials. These images capture moments that really happened, but the media story into which they have been placed is a later creation that relates only somewhat to the actual decade it purports to describe.

There are different, more mundane stories of everyday life that make for much less powerful photography but that better capture the concerns and experiences of most people alive in the 1960s. To take just one example, Uzzle's iconic 1967 Woodstock photo of the unmarried couple Nick Ercoline and Bobbi Kell embracing as Jefferson Airplane serenaded the morning sun seems a poignant symbol of the dramatic loosening of societal conventions in the late 1960s.<sup>20</sup> And yet, as always, the reality is much more complicated. The poor sound quality of Max Yasgur's farm meant that many of the five hundred thousand people

assembled could not even hear Grace Slick sing that morning. An uncropped version of Uzzle's photograph also reveals that the three people nearest to the embracing couple were asleep, as was at least half of the crowd in the background. The cropped image may have brilliantly captured the Aquarian spirit that younger people now associate with Woodstock, but it failed to capture the actual damp and sometimes dreary experience of most of those attending.

In the same way that Uzzle's photograph of Woodstock does not capture the experiences of many of those who attended the festival, the festival itself poorly reflected the life of most Americans in August 1969. The five hundred thousand people at Woodstock represented less than one-quarter of 1 percent of the U.S. population. Though Woodstock has become emblematic of the baby-boomer generation, at most six-tenths of 1 percent of baby boomers attended. Far more boomers likely spent that weekend washing their cars than straining to hear music in upstate New York. Indeed, four weeks later the number of boomers attending the opening games of the college football season dwarfed the Woodstock crowd.<sup>21</sup> And while artists like Jefferson Airplane, Janis Joplin, and Jimi Hendrix have come to define the music scene of late 1969, only one act that played Woodstock topped the *Billboard* chart that year.<sup>22</sup> Acts like Elvis and Henry Mancini as well as semiforgotten ones like the Archies all sold more records than the icons of Woodstock that year.<sup>23</sup> Even Jefferson Airplane's "Somebody to Love," the soundtrack to Uzzle's photo, was only the twenty-second best-selling single of 1967, finishing below such artists as The Box Tops, Frankie Valli, and The Monkees.<sup>24</sup> Listening to Grace Slick's "morning maniac music" on August 17, 1969, may have later become symbolic of the baby boomer experience, but it was in fact shared by relatively few members of that generation. Whatever Woodstock's nostalgic resonance forty-five years later, it neither defined the nation nor reflected the interests that many Americans had on that day. Most of the baby boom generation (and the vast majority of the rest of the country) had different things on their minds that morning. That mundane reality is important for historians to remember even if twenty-first-century popular culture has decided to forget it.

Rufinus's portrait of the Serapeum destruction, like Uzzle's Woodstock photograph, is cropped so as to preserve his own evocative artistic representation of a specific historical moment that mattered greatly to people his age. It fit into a prepackaged narrative that idealized an event but made no attempt to describe

the experiences or attitudes of most Romans alive in 392. And while everyone remotely familiar with the history of the United States knows that Uzzle's photograph tells nothing about the experiences and attitudes of the parents of the baby boomers in August 1969, we seldom recognize that Rufinus's account similarly fails to capture the perspective of an older generation. It says nothing about how his elders imagined the future when they were younger, or how their (ultimately inaccurate) imagination of this future influenced their reactions to events throughout their lives. A teenaged member of the final pagan generation was as likely to imagine the destruction of the Serapeum in the 320s as a young Laura Ingalls Wilder was to imagine Woodstock, but, despite their failure of imagination, these generations of older people created the conditions that permitted the youth-driven events of 392 and 1969.<sup>25</sup> This book is, in a sense, the history of the people who spent the fourth century doing the equivalent of going to work, washing their cars, and mowing the lawn while their children participated in the unfolding of a revolutionary age. These men and women were the mid-fourth century's silent majority. Their story deserves to be recognized as both distinct from that of their children and worthy of reconstruction on its own terms.

It is easy for a historian to distill the events of a man's entire lifetime into a short lecture, but it is often hard for us to remember that this person about whom we speak lived in real time. A year lasted just as long in the fourth century as it does now. This fact demands that we slow our narrative of the period down to account for the steady rhythms of life as it was lived. In order to do so, this book proceeds chronologically. Each chapter balances a discussion of the issues that concerned members of the final pagan generation at each stage of their lives with a discussion of the imperial political and religious dynamics that prevailed at that moment in time. This will give a contemporary perspective to these imperial developments while permitting us to understand how this generation's priorities shifted as they aged.

It is important to clarify at the outset which members of this generation will be the focus of this book. The vast majority of the perhaps twenty million Romans born in the 310s have disappeared completely from the historical record. This is particularly true of peasants, farmers, and much of the urban underclass of the empire, but it is also the case for many members of the Roman elite. A smaller (but still substantial) number of people are known only through funerary inscriptions or brief mentions in literary and legal texts. Nevertheless, four

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