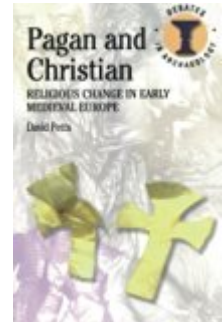


David Petts. *Pagan and Christian: Religious Change in Early Medieval Europe.* Debates in Archaeology Series. London: Bristol Classical Press, 2010. 144 pp. \$27.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7156-3754-8.



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Richard Fletcher begins the preface to *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* with the cynical observation that "professional historians today are expected to know more and more about less and less, and to communicate their findings to other professional historians in those weird gatherings known as academic conferences. In consequence, fewer and fewer people are going to listen to what they have to say." [1] I recalled Fletcher's gloomy summation of the historical profession while reading David Petts's *Pagan and Christian*. Petts, like Fletcher (whom Petts cites more than once), worries that scholars trained in different methodologies miss opportunities to talk and compare evidence. The occasional interdisciplinary conference cannot overcome our compartmentalization. In his short, 117-page monograph (not including bibliography and index), Petts charges that historians are text centered and overlook material evidence, and that early medieval archaeologists ignore the context-driven research of classical archaeologists and too often force the material evidence to line

up with preexisting interpretive frameworks, rather than letting the evidence talk for itself. For Petts, all of these charges are most evident among scholars studying the early church, scholars who are ironically reluctant "to engage with religion." Petts chalks this reluctance up to the difficulty of reconciling the study of material evidence with the perception of Christianity as "an essentially text-driven or logocentric religion" (p. 45). He attempts to bridge the chasm that exists between historians and archaeologists, and between archaeologists of different periods, and ventures solutions to these divides by offering a series of individual case studies. He advocates studying religious change in a more nuanced way, combining methodologies and types of sources in our scholarship, and recognizing the diversity and complexity of early medieval European paganism.

Pagan and Christian is the thirteenth book in the Debates in Archaeology series, released by the Bristol Classical Press. Petts contributes a stimulating critique to this series of how archaeologists and text-centered historians have approached the

study of religious change in the early Middle Ages. Most of the scholarship that he discusses focuses on Anglo-Saxon England, ranging from the sixth- to the ninth centuries, though his temporal and geographic boundaries are not rigidly fixed. He cites evidence from the first through the late fourteenth centuries, and alludes to scholarship on religious change in the Balkans, eastern Europe, and Scandinavia. Petts avers that, geographically, his discussion of religious change and the associated methodological problems is relevant to all areas at the edges of the medieval Christian world, wherever Christian communities butted heads with pagans. He argues that all areas on the periphery of the Roman Empire, those areas that lost Romanism or that never had it, suffer from a similar bias and carelessness in scholarship. Moreover, scholars studying these areas must grapple with the same phenomenon: religious change, from paganism to Christianity.

Petts organizes his critique into five chapters. In the first chapter, he attempts to put early medieval religion into context and discusses some of the critical problems encountered when studying pagan conversions. He observes that most written sources are skewed toward the Christian side, and were composed almost exclusively by literate, elite Christians. In his words, "there is no pagan Bede or Henry of Livonia engaging in written dialogue with the Christian scholars or producing counternarratives with which to contextualize the totalizing discourse of the Christian literati" (p. 18). The written record that exists reflects predominantly elite Christian notions and focuses on the conversion of kings, giving the impression of a top-down Christianization paradigm. According to this paradigm, once the ruler converts, Christianity pervades and transforms society; the religion of the prince becomes the religion of the people, so to speak. Most conversion narratives confine pagans to the role of passive subjects rather than agents in their own transformation. The lack of an unbiased written record is further complicated by historians' use of anthropological and ethno-

graphic methodologies that were developed within the context of nineteenth-century colonialism. Early anthropologists developed their methodologies to contrast Judeo-Christian religions against the "primitive" religions that colonists encountered in Africa, Southeast India, and elsewhere. Today, these methodologies continue to impress an imagined homogeneity on all medieval pagans. What emerges from this impression is a binary, an either/or, that borrows first from early Christian authors like Eusebius who imagine an absolutist Christian versus pagan world, and second from anthropological theories that envision a "world" versus "primitive" religion dichotomy. Archaeologists judge evidence according to this binary, insisting on labeling burial sites as either Christian or pagan, often based on a slim preponderance of evidence. Petts challenges this paradigm of "hegemonic conversion" and encourages historians and archaeologists alike to interpret material evidence in context, and to appreciate the variability and changeability of pagan religions. Pagans did not adopt Christian symbolism or belief in a single, unitary package. Rather, pagans appropriated Christian customs and ideas at different rates in different tracks. Religious identity was not a binary, much to the frustration of early Christian writers.

In the second chapter, Petts further elaborates on the problems posed by the use of traditional anthropology to study religious change. In drawing distinctions between "local" and "world" religion, nineteenth-century European anthropologists were juxtaposing their own Judeo-Christian religions against the "primitive" religions that they encountered in areas of colonization. Therefore, world religions are typified by characteristics that sound, not surprisingly, like modern Christianity. They tend to be uniform, international, structured, prescribed, and orthodox, with an emphasis on rationality and linear time and a sense of historicity. Conversely, "local" religion is defined as heterodox, local in scope, animistic, world embracing (rather than world rejecting),

and lacking a sense of progressive time. Petts argues that these definitions result in a bias against paganism: "Ultimately, local religions are defined in opposition to privileged 'world religions'; they become everything that world religions are not, rather than being explored as a subject in their own right" (p. 31). Frustratingly (for Petts), historians and anthropologists insist on shoe-horning medieval Christianity into the world religion category, superimposing the universal attributes of a "world religion" on all forms of Christianity, even when the evidence points to the opposite. Petts urges a move away from this universalizing tendency, and redefines Christianity, not according to a universal set of tenets, but to "what people who say they are Christians do" (p. 34). For both paganism and Christianity, historians and archaeologists must reconsider the available textual and material evidence, and devise a new model of religious change that fits both types of evidence.

In chapter 3, Petts takes text-centered historians to task for overstating the impact of the "unified package" of literacy that Christianity brought to formerly pagan regions of Europe. Petts finds many faults in this claim. First, while literacy is often considered Christianity's legacy to state-building administrations, in fact many regions already possessed "a sliding scale of literacy," including the use of ogha in Ireland and runic script in Scandinavia, both of which predated conversion (p. 52). Second, Christianization did not usher in a blanket and uniform literacy for the community. Rather, "different modes of literacy could be deployed at different times and in different ways" (p. 43). Pagan societies adopted elements of Christianity at an uneven rate, pragmatically appropriating the features that best assimilated to their own practices and beliefs, or that fulfilled specific political or social needs. Third, Petts reminds us that, for the majority of the population, "the experience of religious education and worship would have been entirely non-literate" (p. 57). Citing Peter Brown's now forty-year-old work on late antique holy men as social entrepreneurs and au-

thority figures, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (1982), Petts insists that text was never "the sole model of authority" (p. 55). (Brown's work features prominently in Petts's bibliography, even though little of it focuses on the peripheral areas of the Roman world that Petts discusses.) Petts argues that, while Christian belief may have exhibited logocentric tendencies, Christianity was also a lived religion, and historians and archaeologists must give ritual objects equal weight with texts as evidence of religious practice.

In the fourth chapter, Petts turns his attention to paganism and the approaches that historians have used to study medieval pagan religions. Again, Petts stresses the harm that biased nineteenth-century anthropological and ethnographic models have wrought on our understanding of medieval religions. According to these faulty models, pagan beliefs are homogeneously microcosmic in time and space and "the only release from a cosmological and historical stasis" is the arrival of Christianity. Petts observes that the religious change that occurred in nineteenth-century colonial societies "is going to be profoundly different to that of the early medieval world" (p. 96). The power dynamic, political relationship, and technology levels between medieval missionary and pagan differed from those between Christian colonizer and colonized. It should be noted that Petts's repudiation of the tendency to compare colonial and medieval societies ignores the work of Robert Bartlett (*The Hanged Man: A Story of Miracle, Memory, and Colonialism in the Middle Ages* [2005]) and other scholars of postconquest Wales and England who have brought postcolonial studies to bear quite fruitfully on their topics and have found a number of parallels between medieval and modern colonialism.[2] Still, the stereotyped perception of paganism implicit in the models of religious change that Petts describes risks missing the rich complexity and diversity of non-Christian religions.

Finally, in chapter 5, Petts implements his own recommendations to these methodological conundrums in select case studies. By examining Anglo-Saxon burial sites without the blinders of traditional hegemonic ideologies, Petts reveals that pagan conceptions of the world were anything but static. Pagan religions were not exclusively local; judging by proximal grave mounds, some sacred sites attracted international pilgrims. Pagans also had complex notions of time, alternately honoring corporate, genealogical, and individual memory in their burial patterns. In addition, Petts considers the utility of gender as an analytical category for interpreting burial sites (though ironically his index is rather thin on women, with a single allusion to a church dedicated to St. Brigit as the only reference to a named medieval female). With these case studies, Petts demonstrates the exciting new horizons that early medieval archaeology can traverse.

This slim tome offers a wealth of ideas on which to reflect. The message that resonated the most for me was the problematic divide that exists between text-centered historians and archaeologists. My work could undoubtedly benefit from the work of archaeologists who study early medieval material evidence, yet this literature rarely appears in the journals that I frequent, and I rarely prioritize archaeological literature in my searches. Moreover, the technical language used in this literature and in archival catalogues can be off-putting—an issue that Petts mentions in his discussion. It is laudable that Petts is trying to mend the methodological rent between the respective education of historians and archaeologists, though he does lean toward what he knows better: archaeology.

His bibliography suggests that, in his own research, he prioritizes material evidence and archaeological methods over the scholarship of text-centered historians. For example, he discusses the practices of reading, encouraging historians to identify a book's specific purpose, whether it was

intended for liturgical use, display, private devotion, public reading, or something else. Yet he cites none of the prodigious literature on book-making, reading culture, and book exchange. The scholarship on these topics spans the entire Middle Ages, with studies on late antiquity, the early Middle Ages, and the late Middle Ages.[3] This literature problematizes the sharp distinction that Petts draws between text and praxis. Medieval reading nearly always involved an element of performativity because most books were read aloud. Petts observes "a tension between private or silent reading ... and public reading to an audience or congregation," and notes that private readers could approach the text directly, without having to trust an intermediary or an interpretive voice (p. 68). Yet private, devotional reading, especially silent reading, was probably not the norm in medieval Europe.[4] In many ways, the voice served as an intermediary that allowed the medieval reader to ingest and "ruminate" on the words of the text.[5] Furthermore, intertextual corrections and marginalia testify that medieval readers were highly conscious of the unreliability of scribes, who were also necessary intermediaries between reader and text.[6] And, while in many cases it is possible to identify a book's likely function, determining a text's intended function can be complicated. Medieval authors often embedded multiple layers of meaning on a given text, and intended the text to be used differently by specific audiences. Thus, the general distinctions that Petts draws between "two classes of early textual material dealing with religious change," i.e., narratives that record the physical extension and consolidation of Christianity (chronicles, *vitae*) and narratives that record the consolidation and accommodation of Christianity within existing societies (penitentials, capitularies), may be too simplistic (pp. 19-20). Petts underestimates many of the nuances of textual history.

In some cases, Petts has also ignored the non-text-centered research that historians have done. For example, he asserts that "very little thought is

given to the way in which the social use of space within churches serves to mould the way in which the congregation sees itself and its relationship with ecclesiastical authorities" (p. 48). This claim ignores the work of Lisa Bitel, John Crook, Barbara Hanawalt, and others.[7] Perhaps Petts could limit his critique to Anglo-Saxonists with some justice, but medieval historians generally have been studying the social history of space for some time.

As a text-centered historian myself (though I prefer the term that historian Robin Fleming uses: "text-hugging"), I took issue with Petts's indictments. There is some truth in his critique that many historians privilege text over object and myopically ignore evidence related to ritual and praxis that can be gleaned from material evidence. Nevertheless, if he is going to make these accusations, then he needs to appreciate that text-centered historians have published additional research since the landmark achievements of Peter Brown.

Perhaps the most distracting problem with the book, however, is the atrocious proofreading. The text is riddled with typographical errors. In some cases, stylistic choices vary by chapter and the logic behind the citation scheme is a little difficult to decipher: some bibliographic references have page numbers, some do not, even within a single parenthetical citation. Undoubtedly, the book would have benefited from additional proofreading. Also disappointing is the absence of images. It would have been helpful to see the material objects that Petts discusses adjacent to the text. This, as well as the poor proofreading, probably owe to the budgetary constraints that universally plague academic presses.

A note on the cover describes the series, *Debates in Archaeology*, as a "series of short volumes ... designed to be accessible to students and serious scholars alike." *Pagan and Christian* has achieved this level of accessibility. The essays it contains provide a valuable introduction to some

of the critical methodological dilemmas faced by medievalists, and I believe that students will respond well to Petts's simple writing style and lack of jargon. Moreover, the book is accessible to those outside of the often-esoteric world of archaeology. As such, it will serve to reengage historians and archaeologists in a constructive dialogue. Obviously we have much to say to one another.

Notes

[1]. Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 9.

[2]. *The Hanged Man* has several essays that explore the tensions and resistance mentality created by the colonial situation in twelfth-century England and Wales.

[3]. On late antiquity reading practices, see Simon Goldhill, "Literary History without Literature: Reading Practices in the Ancient World," *SubStance* 28 no. 1 (1999): 57-89; and Brian Stock, "The Self and Literary Experience in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages," *New Literary History* 25, no. 4 (Autumn 1994): 839-852. For studies on early medieval reading practices, see Michelle P. Brown, *The Book and the Transformation of Britain, c. 550-1050* (London: British Library, 2011). Scholarship on later medieval readers is vast. See, for example, David N. Bell, *What Nuns Read: Books and Libraries in Medieval English Nunneries* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995); Michael Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066-1307* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1993); Mary Erler, *Women, Reading, and Piety in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Maidie Hilmo, eds., *The Medieval Professional Reader at Work: Evidence from Manuscripts of Chaucer, Langland, Kempe, and Gower* (Victoria: University of Victoria, English Literary Studies, 2001); and M. B. Parkes, *Scribes, Scripts and Readers: Studies in the Communication, Presentation and Dissemina-*

tion of *Medieval Texts* (London: Hambledon Press, 1991).

[4]. Paul Saenger, *Space between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[5]. See Asa Simon Mittman, *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[6]. See Michael Camille, *Images on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). Lupus of Ferrières (d. 862) provides an instructive example of an early medieval scholar involved in an international book exchange in an effort to edit authoritative copies of his favorite texts, in order to approach the text with as few "intermediaries" as possible. See Lupus of Ferrières, *The Letters of Lupus of Ferrières*, trans. Graydon W. Regenos (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966).

[7]. See, for example, Megan Cassidy-Welch, *Monastic Spaces and Their Meanings: Thirteenth-Century English Cistercian Monasteries* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001); Lisa M. Bitel, *Landscape with Two Saints: How Genovefa of Paris and Brigit of Kildare Built Christianity in Barbarian Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); John Crook, *The Architectural Setting of the Cult of Saints in the Early Christian West, c. 300-1200* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Barbara A. Hanawalt and Michael Kobialka eds., *Medieval Practices of Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Susan S. Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England: Private Piety and Public Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and Barbara Rosenwein, *Negotiating Space: Power, Restraint, and Privileges of Immunity in Early Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

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