

The Archaeology of Religious Hatred in the Roman and Early Medieval World

BY EBERHARD SAUER. PP. 192, B&W PLS. 77, COLOR PLS. 25. TEMPUS PUBLISHING, STROUD & CHARLESTON 2003. £17.99/\$29.99. ISBN 0-7524-2530-7 (PAPER).

The signature of religious hatred in the archaeological record is rarely explicitly transcribed. In this well-illustrated book aimed at a general audience, Eberhard Sauer uses archaeological data to explore the destruction and damage to pagan temples in the later Roman world, arguing that Christian intolerance can be detected in the way in which images of pagan gods were disfigured or destroyed. The author draws some passing parallels with more recent times, notably the 16th-century European Reformation and the Taliban destruction of the Bamiyan temples in 2001, but on the whole he sticks closely to his specific brief. There are two principal foci: the destruction of mithraea in the Rhineland and elsewhere, and the mutilation and modification of pagan temples in Egypt and selected loci in the Near East.

Changes in imperial policy in the fourth century, involving the official recognition of Christianity under Constantine and the later proscription of pagan rites by Theodosius, offer the crucial time frame within which this destruction may be viewed. The key debate is obviously not whether pro-Christian imperial policy existed but the extent to which it was effectively and widely enforced. However, the archaeological data are not simply testimony to its success; they also offer important insights into religious interactions at a much more human and emotional level.

Sauer freely recognizes that for later Christian writers and hagiographers the destruction of idols by monastic leaders and evangelizers had become a standard trope, referencing both the Old and New Testament and more contemporary directives, such as those of Augustine of Hippo. In effect, it was a performative way

of demonstrating the authority of the new Christian order. One of his more intriguing images is of a (now lost?) Christian catacomb painting in Rome (fig. 36:7), which seems to show the toppling of a pagan statue. Another practice, identified within and without the empire, involved overwriting; at Kilcolman in Kerry, text and Christian cross are imposed on a standing boulder, potentially a pagan marker of some kind (color pl. 2).

Drawing on his own extensive researches in the northwestern provinces, the author reconstructs the physical process of destruction at a number of pagan sites. The Mithras temples of Dieburg, Sarrebourg, and Koenigshoffen (among others) were subjected to intensive physical destruction; statues were broken into small pieces and iconographic panels smashed with metal tools. Sauer argues with some conviction that the motivation behind such focused mutilation can be explained best by religious intolerance.

The Egyptian evidence is a bit more complex. Chapter 7 discusses the disfigurement of statues and reliefs of gods in temple facades when the buildings came into Christian hands. Taking the Temple of Dendara as his main case study, he identifies the painstaking way in which the anthropomorphic figures of gods and goddesses were literally defaced and the surface of their bodies covered with systematic hacking. The overall iconographic scheme was left intact, however, and the hieroglyphic texts were usually undamaged. Although very extensive, the mutilation was not comprehensive.

What purpose did this activity serve? It is not certain whether the temple itself was

converted to a church, although there were churches nearby. Sauer's explanations center on the functional, arguing that the extent of mutilation is probably related to difficulty of access, and that nonhuman pagan representations were spared because they were viewed as "harmless" (97). He emphasizes the energy expended by the iconoclasts, but it could be argued, against this, that the mutilation is in every sense superficial and in the long term unsuccessful. The pagan monument remains standing and wholly recognizable to modern tourists as a shrine to the goddess Hathor. Farther up the Nile at Philae, small marigold crosses identical to those incised on the Irish Ogham stone mark the portals of the shrine of Isis, which has been similarly though less extensively defaced. This houses a Christian altar, but after the passage of more than 1,500 years the Christian presence again seems slight, and this is not simply because of colonial Egyptologists' traditional lack of interest in conserving Christian archaeology. The date of the mutilation program remains unknown, as does its duration, but it would clearly repay further study and perhaps a slightly less oppositional approach.

To a certain extent, Sauer has also used this book, especially the conclusions, as a platform to refute critics of the theses advanced in his earlier monograph, *The End of Paganism in the North-Western Provinces of the Roman Empire. The Example of the Mithras Cult* (Oxford 1996). This has resulted in a fixation on coins and chronology, understandable in the context of battles with peer historians but unfortunately detracting to some extent from the book's wider ap-

peal—although it is written in an engagingly discursive style, encouraging the reader to speculate (with the author) about probable interpretations of individual situations.

The writer avoids any abstract discussion of intolerance, alienation, and identity although there are many intermittent engagements with general narratives about the rise of Christianity, the origins and spread of the cults of Mithras and Isis, and the relationship of their belief systems to Christian tenets. In his conclusion, he strongly identifies with the general idea that Christian intolerance of other belief systems was crucial to its own success. In fact, he has assembled a range of evidence that testifies to the diversity of contexts for religious intolerance, for which empire-wide generalizations seem inappropriate.

The main strength of the book lies in the way the author takes a genuinely fresh look at how archaeological evidence can be viewed. The taphonomy of broken statues and smashed reliefs may be of no interest to the traditional academic custodians of monumental art, but it is a fruitful and thought-provoking use of the results of excavations conducted to modern standards of detailed recording. I am sure that many of the ideas in this work will be taken up elsewhere.

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