

Dorothy Watts, *Religion in Late Roman Britain: Forces of Change*, Routledge, London, 1998, 211 p.

Dorothy Watts convinces the reader to question some of his notions of history by also choosing as title for her book: religion in the late Roman Britain: forces of change. The strength in the title frees itself throughout the book. The author's stated intention is that of provoking further comment and debate and thus, through new finds in the historical and archeological evidence, to advance knowledge in the Romano-Britain studies.

The theme of the book is given a round shape by which every important piece of information is re-used in another chapter to prove another idea or to introduce another argument to an already approached issue. Therefore, the reader falls with no chance to escape, in the well defined structure of the book. The great achievement of *Religion in Late Roman Britain: Forces of Change* is that every evidence given by the authoress, supported by an abundance of archeological and ancient writings, restates the architecture of the unity of chapters. Meaning that the intention of examining the changes occurred in Britain in the late fourth century, the forces that contributed to them and the assessment of the state of religion at the time of the withdrawn of the official Roman presence by A. D. 410 is evident from the first chapter. The theme is made accessible to the reader by firstly placing the historical background with the reign of Diocletian, Constantine and Theodosius who had a strong impact on the British religion. The three emperors have as a common feature their reaction upon Christianity, that was to become the official religion of the Roman Empire and of its colonies. Diocletian is the one who divides the Empire into East and West, and his actions of persecuting the Christians are opposed by Constantine, by the Edict of Milan and by his intention of creating a peaceful religious environment with Christianity in its center.

By the observance of the development of Christianity within the empire and then in its colony, Britain, Dorothy Watts creates one half of her future opposition, i.e. the battle between the Christian influence and the British pagan tradition. This creates a direct path towards the climax of the book that finds itself in the last two chapters in which the idea of syncretism is questioned and the second is concentrated in an antagonism between the power of change and the strength of the tradition.

The authoress sees the phenomenon of religious syncretism with reluctance, by stating that although there are elements of Roman religion combined with British ones as seen from the gods worshipped, the temples built, the burial practices and artistic representations of gods, the Romano-British society which lasted for 350 years, seems to have evidenced a more superficial Roman influence. Through the chapter, the emphasis on a local influence of the Romans suggests that besides the Roman army, the upper British social classes, and the city dwellers, the majority of Britons were less affected by the changes that occurred since the Roman occupation. This idea is enforced by the fact that the practice of making dedications to gods was never widely adopted by native Britons during the Roman period and by the archeological truth wisely chosen by the authoress, that of the tablets where the dedications mostly refer to Sulis, Solis-Minerva, Minerva-Solis, but never to Minerva alone. Furthermore, another sign of resistance or rather indifference to the Roman practices can be seen in the decapitated burials, a Celtic influence that seems to have increased in the late period of the Roman Britain.

Dorothy Watts uses a clear-defined structure for the presentation of the developing of religion in the Roman Britain which she gradually fills with a large quantity of information. In this sense, religion is seen in a relation of cause and effect, for that each phenomenon that affects the entirety is preceded or followed by the context that induced the change. This

adopted structure can be observed throughout the entire book, surrounding the main as well as the secondary aspects discussed. The first chapter has the purpose of placing the reader in the middle of the social and political reality on which the following changes will take place. However, the writer does not get lost from her purpose, due to the well-defined aim of the study. Moreover, the approached period of time is adjusted to the strictness of the desired impression upon the reader, the aim being that of making the reader devour the book and not letting him fall in the abyss of time. Therefore, Watts chooses not to start from the beginning of the Roman Britain and directly places the reader at the beginning of the 3rd century, in a situation of great changes in the empire which affect more or less the province. Her strong-developed sense of selecting the main sources of the spring of history reveal themselves, at the beginning, in defining a background influenced by the two main factors of the state of religion in the empire and provinces: Diocletian and Constantin. The two being symbols of the political doctrines and beliefs upon religion, in the case of Diocletian we have a period characterized by Christian persecution, whereas in the empire of Constantin, the Christian religion is officially accepted.

Another stop in the evolution of religion in Britannia is considered the strong measures taken by Julian concerning paganism. The revival of paganism was one greatly influenced by the Greek and oriental religions, having as its center major gods of Greece, Egypt, Asia and Persia, seen as manifestations of a supreme sun god. Julian's complex attitudes towards a certain context for the development of the religious phenomenon are characterized by measures like: an organization of paganism upon features borrowed from Christianity, followed by a proclamation of religious freedom in the empire.

Religion in the late Roman Britain: forces of change is a well organised study, concentrated on a continuous opposition between forces that are for and against the expansion and acceptance of Christianity, those that cling on the remains of their traditions, their religious cults. The authoress gives many examples of periods of the revival of paganism and the acceptance and the denunciation of Christianity. This is made by analyzing the policies of emperors towards paganism like those of Diocletian, Constantin, Julian, Jovian. So as to argument for the revival of paganism in the 4th century Roman Britain, Watts uses archeological records examined in the light of historical events and concludes that the phenomenon was most probably stipulated by the reign of Julian and continued for decades after his death. One of the evidences used to support this idea is seen in the rural areas of Roman Britain. For instance, coins and other votives were still offered to the goddess at Coventina's Well, although the altars and stones were now no longer visible. The revival of paganism is also evidenced by native-type cults rather than Roman: Apollo Cunomaglus at Nettleton, Sulis-Minerva at Bath, Nodens at Lydney, Mercury (or Mars or Silvanus) at Uley, Coventina at Carrawburgh and Faunus (with Celtic epithets) at Thetford. The authoress emphasises the fact that Christianity had as its first place of appearance the urban society, reflecting the conservatism of the people living in rural areas.

Another aspect of the study is the view on religion as a result of economical situation. In this manner, Watts considers that religious constructions are poor due to the economical crisis that took hold on the empire. Furthermore, poor burials such as those without coffins or in tree trunks can be observed at Butt Road Christian cemetery in Colchester. In addition, at Poundbury, of the forty-three burials considered to be 'late', only four were coffined, while the others were without coffin and/or had stones as grave liner or lid. A similar situation can be observed at Lankhills pagan cemetery. This economical aspect is considered to be the force which contributed to the decline of the religious cults in the Roman Britain. Added to this, some of other forces of change are considered to be the Christian or pagan emperors, imperial (and, implicitly, army) patronage, political upheavals and usurpations that either contributed to

the advance or the decline of several religious cults. Roman influence in Britain can be seen in the phallic amulets in the Roman-British burials, in coins found in cremations and burials throughout Britain, the earliest being with burials which were almost certainly connected with the army. Dorothy Watts concludes that the coming of Rome to Britain had more influence on some aspects of religion than others and that it had a considerable impact on the religious art of the native inhabitants. Dorothy Watts has also an admirable sophisticated technique of not letting the reader miss the important historical ideas on which the book is based, and therefore, with great talent, she uses the last chapter to summarize the main plan of her work. In this sense, she uses the information from the first chapter, in a logical sequence up to the last, to highlight the fact that although Christianity was introduced into the Roman Britain through many means, the Britons would not let go to their pagan cults, and in this sense she considers they were helped by the reign of Julian. Other reasons for the maintenance of paganism in Roman Britain are skilfully presented to the reader in facts like the lack of an organised Christian church and the most important of all, meaning the withdrawal of the Roman army, an important force in the process of Romanization, and of the Roman administration while Christianity was not yet fully established are seen as the most important factors that made the Roman impact less sturdy. The authoress uses the classical sources to ratiocinate for the good conservation of paganism and the main role in this sense is undertaken by the Druids, who were the custodians of Celtic tradition, religion, history and philosophy. As a concluding idea, Dorothy Watts asserts that the forces of change in the Roman Britain seem to have been less strong as those of tradition, using as argument the survival of many aspects of the Celtic religion even after the conquerors had departed.

Taking the role of the critic, the authoress analyzes her study and reaches the conclusion that it can be improved in studies of Romano-British cemeteries as well as developing her work within the Anglo-Saxon period. Such a feature of this work, characterizes the writer as being aware of the most important trait of history, that is its power to reveal new aspects of the past, continually changing the view on the present.

As an overall impression, *Religion in Late Roman Britain: Forces of Change* is greatly accessible to the simple reader by the well organized approach of the subject and by giving a short background to every new information presented in the evolution of the book. The language used in the work also sustains this idea, approaching history with simple, but consistent words, that are charged with all the desired content, making the book important for those who throw themselves in the abyss of history. Dorothy Watts makes her study also important to a specialized reader, by using an amplitude of archeological evidence referring to different historical sources to support the theme of her work.

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