TEMPLES IN THE EAST
LATE PAGANISM AND CHRISTIANISATION IN GREECE

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Abstract

In Greece, late antique paganism is archaeologically attested at various sites, mainly through inscriptions, coins and pottery. Some of the aspects of late paganism examined here include evidence of early conversion to Christianity, the tenacity of paganism in Athens thanks to the Neoplatonic philosophers, and the preservation of Athens’ temples as a consequence of the strength of the city’s cultural traditions and the respect for its venerable past. Other manifestations of late paganism are attested: in the international pagan centre of Eleusis, that attracted members of the upper class; in the taurobolium, performed until late in a suburb of Athens; in cults at caves, fountains, wells and in private residences; and at the site of destroyed temples. The paper also examines conversion of temples into churches, the destruction of pagan statuary or its preservation for aesthetic reasons, and the incorporation of pagan cultic symbols in churches.

Introduction

In Greece, the persistence of paganism has been explained by a number of factors: by the strength of the philosophical schools;1 by the secondary place the region occupied in the empire’s economic and political life, in contrast to the more central provinces of the East; and by the absence of monasticism (except at Thessalonica).2 In Greece, the establishment of Christianity and the final years of paganism are evident mainly in the archaeological record. Frequently, however, this evidence is uncertain as regards date and, because of the circumstances in which the transition to Christianity took place, it means that an array of interpretations has arisen. Literary sources, which

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