



## **The Last Pagan: Julian the Apostate and the Death of the Ancient World**

*Adrian Murdoch*

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Since his death on a Persian battlefield in A.D. 363, the violent end of the Emperor Julian has become synonymous with the death of paganism. But how did a young philosopher-warrior, who ruled for only eighteen months, come to be seen as one of the most potent threats to Christianity?

Driven by a burning hatred of the Church, rooted in the brutal murder of his family and the treachery of his Christian predecessor Emperor Constantius II, Julian dedicated his brief reign to the eradication of this new and dangerous cult. He vowed to rid the Roman Empire of heresy and restore paganism to the hearts and minds of its citizens.

Although vilified throughout history as the 'Apostate', Julian was an inspirational and visionary leader. He made appointments on merit rather than influence or money, cut down on bureaucracy and had an economic policy geared to avoid corruption and waste. His experiment with paganism may have ultimately failed, but Julian has long been a hero of secular humanists and critics of Christianity's historical record.

Drawing on Julian's own writings, and using extensive new archaeological and literary research, Adrian Murdoch explores the vivid, engaging and complex character of this controversial emperor. *The Last Pagan* will fascinate anyone with an interest in ancient history or the history of Christianity.

## **The Last Pagan: Julian the Apostate and the Death of the Ancient World Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Last Pagan: Julian the Apostate and the Death of the Ancient World for online ebook**

### **C.G. Griffin says**

I first learned about Julian in a rabbinic school history class many years ago. Julian, thanks to his offer of permission and support for the Roman Jewish community to rebuild the Temple, has rather a glowing reputation in Jewish history. The story stuck in my mind, and I wanted to learn a little more.

Julian's life is certainly interesting enough, mostly because of his renunciation of Christianity and embrace of traditional Greco-Roman paganism. Murdoch does a fairly good job of outlining the political and social ramifications of Julian's personal religious life and public policies on religion. I also really enjoyed his treatment of the various versions of Julian's death, as Murdoch delves into the timelines of who said what when, and also the political ramifications of each successive version of events.

As for the rest, you have to be far more interested in military campaigns in fourth-century Iraq than I am to get really excited about Julian's last months. And while this isn't really fair to the author--it's not a novel after all--a love interest would have improved the literary quality of Julian's life no end.

Irrational pet peeves: the chapter quotes and chapter titles taken from nineteenth century English poetry that have no apparent connection to Julian or the fourth century. Added to this is the occasional howler from Murdoch--the suggestion that ten-year-old Julian and his teenage half-brother might not have much in common, not only because of the age gap, and because they had not grown up together, but because they had different hair colors left me giggling.

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### **Matt says**

This is a fairly competent biography of the Emperor Julian, accessible (seemingly designed for) those unfamiliar with the late Roman Empire.

Murdoch takes the reader from Julian's birth to his death invading Persia, giving plenty of background to place his life and actions in the context of his tumultuous times. He examines the possible motives surrounding decisions made by actors in the story, which the sources are often misleading about, when they aren't completely left for the reader to surmise. Though at times he seems to accept too readily what the sources say. Murdoch is also fond of drawing comparisons between events in the story and ones with which the reader is probably more familiar. Some of these work quite well, such as Murdoch's comparison of Christians singing psalms to protest Julian's relocation of a Saint's body as the "fourth-century equivalent of protest songs" (125). Others are relatively pointless and confusing, but most worked well-enough in my opinion. Finally, Murdoch spends significant time on how Julian has been remembered over the ages, from being demonized in medieval polemics to being championed as an opponent of the Church (and popery!) by English Protestants and everything in between. At times he seems to have included every single appearance that Julian makes in all media up until the 21st century (and he might have: Julian is not the most well-known Emperor), which made reading the Epilogue somewhat tedious.

Regarding the title, the Ancient World can only be said to have truly died during the events described if it is entirely conflated with paganism in the Empire. It seems that Julian's death was probably when the long death of paganism crossed the event horizon and became unable to be meaningfully reversed in the Roman Empire.

This is good history; it does (most) of what it set out to do, it's well written, and decently entertaining. 4 stars.

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### **Sara says**

I must say this book reminded me why I always so disliked Roman history--nothing but military campaigns and political intrigue all the time. I don't know what I expected here, however, I didn't get it. This was a competent rehash of the history of the period, leaning heavily on Julian's own writings. It also focused on the treatment of Julian as an historical and literary figure through the ages. Despite so much of Julian's writing surviving, it was still hard to know or grasp the origin and fervency of his religious beliefs. And he was emperor for such a short period of time that I seriously doubt he made inroads at all into the march to dominance of Christianity. I suppose if he weren't technically the last pagan emperor of Rome, he'd be mostly overlooked. I feel like Gore Vidal did a better job, even though it was fictional, of helping me understand this complex person.

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### **Denise says**

It is the time period of the late Roman empire and the capital is Constantinople--named after the Emperor Constantine--who made Christianity the official state religion in order to consolidate his power. Two Emperors now hold power--one in the East and one in the West. This was created to keep absolute power out of the hands of just one man and also to more efficiently run such an enormous empire.

Julian was originally indoctrinated into the early Christian religion as a child. But in his teens he renounced this religion and returned to the pagan gods of earlier Rome. He had to keep this secret, however, as he was the nephew of Constantine.

This young man was a voracious scholar who read every book he could get his hands on. He studied rhetoric, law, religions of other cultures, history, philosophy and more. Reading was his way of coping with a troubled childhood as he was shunted from location to location to prevent him from becoming involved in power plays by political factions. His father was murdered and his cousins fought for the Emperor's throne. Civil war was the result and he had to keep his head down and his opinions to himself just to stay alive. He was sent into the Roman army fighting rebellious tribes in Gaul by his surviving cousin (and the new Emperor). With any luck he would be killed in battle and the Emperor would have had one more potential rival "silenced". But Julian became an expert in military strategy and quelled the tribes' raids. His legions grew to love this slim bookworm. And thus his power grew until he could challenge the Emperor's power.

While studying his books, he immersed himself in eastern religious cults such as the military man's favorite, the worship of the pagan god Mithra. He also embraced the old Roman gods and sacrificed frequently to them. When this became known (after he became Emperor) he faced a backlash from Christian leaders. They called him Julian the Apostate and he is known by this name even today. But his innovative changes to

government improved tax collections, justice in Roman courts and peace with former enemies. He reigned for only eighteen months and died while on campaign against the Parthians. If he had lived longer, his changes to the empire may have extended Roman civilization for much longer and forestalled the empire's fall.

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### **Jonathan Levy says**

Adrian Murdoch writes quite well and is engaging throughout *The Last Pagan*. I am grateful for the book, especially since it is hard to find writings devoted specifically to Julian, who was a pagan with the intent of ushering in a new age of paganism in the Roman Empire. The Introduction is where a capsulized version of the book's story is presented. The chapters which follow present significant details of Julian's life, including: an interesting biographical sketch which shows how scholarly Julian was; a discussion of what Julian did as emperor; his military travails in Persia & premature death; and, how Julian has been looked upon in the centuries following his death.

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### **Julie Davis says**

Let's be honest, I'd never have picked up a book about such a specific topic if not chosen by our special guest for an upcoming Good Story is Hard to Find podcast. Having figured out the requisite number of pages to read daily (12) in order to finish in time, I viewed it mostly as an assignment.

Now I can say that this book should simply be considered fascinating, never as an "assignment." The author somehow manages to invest the story with the immediacy that makes me interested in Julian's next steps, understand the military campaigns from both the soldierly and strategic points of view, and always read more than my allotted 12 pages.

It's really interesting to read about someone who sounds as if he had Augustine's intelligence but went from Christian to pagan (albeit about 100 years before Augustine took the reverse course). Of course, being intelligent is far from being an honest truth-seeker, so there is that.

Having finished the book I can say that Julian is the sort of enemy one could admire. His strategy to defeat Christians was really clever and had he lived he might have been able to organize the pagans to put up a good fight. I can see why he is still considered interesting despite his short reign.

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### **Elizabeth Sulzby says**

Dumb, dumb title. The "Ancient World" didn't die. I put this one aside and read Gore Vidal's Julian first. That let me come back to Murdoch to compare and widen my knowledge.

Getting the background from Vidal's version was helpful. I returned to Murdoch's book and found it very informative. I found myself commenting on it in comparative reviews and in discussions of religion on

Facebooks. Julian was important by bringing the Romans, esp. the army, back to Greek and Roman gods rather than the syncretism with early Christian religious ideas and, esp. structures. Of course, we know the early Christian church and its structure fit better with the emperor's and military leaders' desire for greater power and hierarchical organization in forcing that power.

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### **Sonia Wilson says**

This is a good, brief account of Julian's life (with an overblown subtitle). The interplay between paganism and Christianity in the late Roman Empire is beyond the scope of this book, so very little space is devoted to placing Julian's actions in that context (so there was no need for the subtitle). It does, however, shed some fairly unbiased (as we are likely to get) light on Julian's character. It also includes a short survey of Julian's afterlife in art and literature, which is a nice conclusion to the work. I read this to brush up on Julian before reading the famous Gore Vidal novel, and I definitely recommend it to others looking for a concise but well-written version of the emperor's life.

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### **Joseph F. says**

Adrian Murdoch gives us a very comprehensive history of this emperor and his very short reign. Starting from before his birth and ending with how he was perceived through history after his death, he shows us how this complex intellectual ruler was scorned by many, but seen as a hero to others. What I particularly liked was how the author gives us a neutral portrait. Here, Julian is presented to us warts and all. He was, despite his flaws, a deep thinker, philosopher, fairly competent administrator, shrewd politician and of course, a pagan. Despite his disastrous war in Persia, he was a brilliant tactician, and his victories against the Germanic tribes are sometimes forgotten. I also like the quotes that are given from Julian as well as other writers. Hearing these voices from long ago gave the book a warm touch of humanity. In the end, Murdoch tries to give us reasons why Julian is still so appealing, being that he left behind so little, and that his measures for rejuvenating paganism died with him.

The only thing that nagged me a little is the way the author sometimes wrote. His writing is engaging, but at times the way he wrote certain things made me pause. Frequently!

It was like I had to read certain passages a few times to get it. Also, his fancy vocabulary got me too: I know what cashiered and decimate mean, But in the context of how soldiers were treated if they were found to be less than stellar in their performance, I wasn't sure. I'm not complaining, a good author needs a fine vocabulary, but at the same time, the flow of the narrative kept breaking.

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### **Nicole says**

Julian the Apostate is one of my favorite historical figures, and this biography does a good job of presenting what is known about him and setting up the world in which he lived. Ultimately, Julian was a person who found himself in a very different role than he envisioned for himself, and did his best at his job while also staying true to himself and what he was good at. I think just about anyone who finds themselves grappling with the work/life balance question can sympathize with him!

I will say that I think reading *Julian* by Gore Vidal helped to flesh things out - obviously Vidal's work was

fiction, but Julian's "voice" felt very similar to me across both of these works, and I believe they make good companion pieces. I didn't love the random poetry excerpts that started each chapter, and I think the "death of the ancient world" subtitle of the book is unnecessary and misleading, but minus those fluffy-stuff critiques, I'm glad I read this.

*2016 reading challenge: a biography*

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### **Wade Macmorrough says**

Emperor Julian was--and is!--my hero!

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### **Irwan says**

When I visited Rome and the Vatican City, I quite suddenly got interested in paganism and something pagan. Is anything wrong with me? Hehehe...

The book is a fair reading. A bit technical in some parts as it is indeed a popular history book. A glimpse about the conflict of paganism, but it doesn't really engage the conflict that Julian experienced. Didn't really inform me about paganism more than just some pointers to look further. A vague understanding of paganism such as it is polytheistic, originated from Greece (Hellenism?), sacrifice as mode of ritual, etc.

Julian's portrayed as a philosopher-emperor-warrior whose tragic death is considered as the end of paganism in the classic era.

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### **Colin says**

A fairly unbiased biography of a very controversial figure, Julian "the Apostate," the Roman emperor who tried to turn the empire back to paganism after Constantine began the empire down the path of Christianity as its state cult. Considering the passion this subject has inspired, even in the primary sources, doing any kind of fair treatment of Julian is an impressive achievement in and of itself. My only complaint is how short this work was, although this may be as much a function of how few good sources we have for the life of Julian. Definitely worth reading for anyone with an interest in late Rome, late antiquity, or the history of the interplay between Greco-Roman paganism and Christianity.

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### **Kyla Squires says**

I had a hard time deciding whether to give this book 3 or 2 stars. If you are particularly interested in Julian the Apostate, then I would say this book was quite well done and I would recommend it. It was certainly written well, even humorous, however I'm not really inspired to go read a bunch of other books on Julian or others mentioned in this book, which is what tipped the balance to a 2 instead of a 3.

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## Jen says

At a certain level, I'm just glad this book is done. Given that it's only 222 pages, it should have been done long ago. The problem is not it's boring or it's long winded. It's that the book is dense.

Every sentence contains enough information for a chapter (okay not really, but you see my point). There are few extraneous words here. In fact, the only extraneous ones seem to belong to Julian himself. The book quotes Julian a lot--which is a good thing. Julian's own writing provides a window to his character, and helps breath life into "another book about an emperor."

Julian, if he hadn't gotten on the Zeus-train, would have been a footnote emperor at best. Maybe not even that. "...followed by Julian, who was succeeded by..." Instead, he's been reviled in art, idolized by humanists, and built up as a symbol of tolerance (though he wasn't actually that tolerant).

Beyond this fact, you have an unwilling general, who turned out to be quite good at it, and an okay emperor, who might have been good or bad, you just have no way to judge.

This book is a thorough study into Julian, incredibly dense, readable, and filled with everything you need to know about the guy.

As a fun side note, this book is also good for reading aloud to your eight-year-old when you want her to get to sleep. Works like a charm.

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