
Among classicists and ancient historians there has always been considerable interest in the representation of old age. The first book-length study already appeared in the first half of the twentieth century. The majority of these studies are more interested in the literary construction of the theme of old age than they are in its social dimensions and the position of the elderly in ancient society. It took until 1981 before Moses Finley published the first sociological study of the subject. It has taken another twenty years for the first book-length study of old age in the Roman world to appear. As Parkin (hereafter P) points out (6), the most challenging task which he faced in writing this study was to offer something more than an anthology of sources without any historical value. In doing so, he also has to contest Finley’s observation that it is virtually impossible to write a social history of old age.


2 M. I. Finley, ‘The elderly in classical antiquity’ *G&R* 28 (1981), 156-71. Finley’s article has been reprinted a number of times in diverse publications, amongst which Falkner and de Luce, *Old Age* (as in n.1), 1-20.

3 The study of old age in the Roman world is of course not completely new. From the late 1970s and early 1980s onwards scholars such as W. Suder and Emiel Eyben have published extensively on the subject and there has always been an interest in the conceptualization of old age in one particular author. In the same year in which Parkin’s book appeared, Routledge published Karen Cokayne’s *Experiencing Old Age in Ancient Rome*. 
The major culprit, so Finley argues, is the nature of the ancient evidence, the lack of significant data and the inability of what survives to provide answers to questions that are inspired by contemporary concerns about old age (the economics of old age, housing, loneliness, mental illness, that is, the social integration of the elderly person; cf Finley ‘The elderly’ [as in n.2], 165). In other words, the ancient evidence is completely insufficient in quality and quantity to produce a sociologically informed account of old age. Interwoven with this rather negative assessment of the available evidence, Finley offers a number of perceptive observations which illustrate a series of essential differences between the position of the elderly in society and/or the perception of old age then and now. Finley argues that the ancient world had no culture of youth which forces the elderly of today to behave differently and to be treated differently (162), that in the ancient world the main concern was the continuity of the household, not the care of the elderly (167), and that there was no official age of retirement for the employed (168).

Finley’s article has been very influential in outlining how old age should be studied. One of its greatest assets is that it does so well what it sets out to do: to present a critical approach to the ancient sources and to formulate as clearly as possible the questions that really matter. In executing this process it ruthlessly exposes the limitations of doing research on a subject in the social history of the ancient world. However, Finley may have been a little bit too ambitious and he may have been too critical of the options available to the ancient historian. By identifying the absence of significant evidence as a problem specifically affecting the ancient historian, Finley implicitly contrasts ancient history to other types and other periods in history and thereby makes it more difficult to arrive at a useful synthesis. Finley seems to view the incompatibility of the ancient evidence and the questions which arise from studying the contemporary issue of old age as an inevitable dead-end street. I wonder what sort of evidence would be necessary to

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4 Finley ‘The elderly’ (as in n.2), 164, especially his comment: ‘Quotations are available to support almost any judgement.’
write a reliable and informed history of old age. Finley does not reveal what it is, nor have I found it in modern accounts of the subject. I am positive that no society in the past has produced enough testimony to enable researchers to write a history of old age. Surely, the main ingredient that is missing is a panorama of personal testimonies, but it is only now with the enhanced topicality of old age that researchers are starting to record the personal experiences of the elderly. The absence of personal experiences is as much a factor affecting early modern historians as it does provide a setback for ancient historians. P has decided to try a different approach, which consists of a mixture of the traditional and the new. While Finley engages in a series of critical remarks of the literary sources and has to conclude that they cannot deliver what he wants them to do, P takes each piece of literary evidence as a possible locus of valuable information.

P’s extensive knowledge of ancient demography gives this book a different foundation than it would have had, let’s say, twenty years ago.5 Thanks to this P can be much more accurate about the way age rules functioned in the ancient world and what their implications were. In general, P’s book is more optimistic about what can be said and what can be done with the existing material. In the end this leads to a more balanced evaluation of old age in Rome as an experience which for the majority of Romans, whether rich or poor, would have been unpleasant. Of course, the experience of old age is dependent on a number of important factors, including the kind of support one would be receiving from children and relatives. P has further taken the wise decision to define old age as more or less a constant throughout the period that he is working in. The lessons from the study of childhood have taught ancient historians that deciding upon a starting-point for a progressive improvement in the attitudes to and the treatment of children is not a very productive way of approaching the subject. The result is that any

point of departure irreparably turns out to be an insecure measuring point for change.6

The key area of misunderstanding in previous studies on old age has been the amount of respect that the elderly could insist on receiving. In view of the existence of the Roman Senate as the most powerful political body during the main part of its history, it is tempting to assume that respect for old age was ingrained in society, but previous discussions of old age have overemphasized the degree to which the elderly controlled society, ideologically, socially and financially.7 P does a very good job of examining how within the Roman Senate age and political power are not crucially linked. The reverence for old age, it should be concluded, is not a general phenomenon; it is localized and frequently conditional upon the physical and mental health of the old person. P remarks on the issue of individual behaviour that 'the prestige enjoyed, the part played, the actual status of an aged person in the Roman world depended more on the person than on the general fact that he or she was old' (240). I take this to mean that the integration of the elderly in Roman society was a function of the extent to which they were able to deny or overcome the physical process of decline.8

The evidence that has been consulted in the process of writing this book is not as useless as Finley imagined it to be. It ranges from


7 Here P responds to the overoptimistic conclusions drawn by Richardson in Old Age (as in n.1).

8 One of the epithets of Aphrodite was Ambologera ('delayer of old age'; Pausanias 3.18.1, referring to a statue of the goddess on the acropolis of Sparta), cf Johan Flemberg, ‘Aphrodite and old age’, in Brita Alroth (ed.), Opus mixtum: essays in ancient art and society (Jonsered, 1994), 47-52. There is no agreement as to which associated quality of the goddess it was that conveyed the epithet.
literary sources to papyri, inscriptions and legal texts. Even though the author claims that it was not his intention to write an exhaustive study of old age in the Roman world, there is a strong suggestion that he at least examined every snippet of material that has anything to say on it. Some of the material that has been included is decidedly exciting. Most readers, and the present reviewer is no exception, will be unfamiliar with the work of the second-century AD philosopher Juncus (excerpts of which survive in Stobaeus) who calls attention to the true miseries, degradations and helplessness of old age experienced by the less-privileged in society (68-9; 225-6). Juncus’ writings are a real eye-opener and it is highly unfortunate that we do not know anything more about his life, his writings, and his audience. We do not know why he decided to focus on the less-privileged in Roman society and why he was almost alone in doing this. Altogether, P puts the main emphasis on the literary sources, and there are competent discussions of the classic accounts of old age, such as can be found in Cicero, Cato, and Juvenal. He uses a fair amount of papyrological evidence for his discussion on age rules and the census, but more could have been done with legal texts and especially with inscriptions. It is moreover a pity

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9 Finley, ‘The elderly’ (as in n.2), is not aware of Juncus’ existence, but at 165 he draws attention to the fact that Cicero in his De senectute (3.8) observes that ‘old age cannot be easy in extreme poverty.’ Finley insists that Cicero has not the slightest interest in the situation of the poor. One wonders what it was that made Cicero include this observation.

10 For example, missing from the discussion on old age and public life is an interesting inscription from Vienna (Vienne, France) which lists two brothers who have served as quaestores and have been considered worthy of membership of the municipal council at the ripe old age of seventy-seven: ‘annum LXXVII agunt ab ordine decurionatu digni iudicati sunt quam dexteritatem decurionum munificentia remuneraverunt’. It is striking to note that the brothers have been awarded their seats on the council because of their mutual affection and their love for their relatives, cf CIL 12.5864; the two texts, one for each brother, have been republished, with clear photos, in F. Bertrandy and others, Inscriptions Latines de Narbonnaise, 51 (Vienne and Paris 2004), nr. 72 and Gerd Rupprecht, Untersuchungen zum Dekurionenstand in den nordwestlichen
that P has decided not to discuss how certain types of evidence promote a certain image of old age and the elderly.

It is understandable that P submits individual sources to a strict regime of historical questions and to have the discussion organized according to historical principles. The book is all the more coherent because of this. Underneath this presentation, however, there is still a lot about old age that needs to be clarified. P does not often feel tempted to examine the individual items that he needs for the construction of his main argument. This is a pity, because there are a lot of interpretative layers still needing to be unraveled which are hiding behind the sometimes simple text. For example, P mentions the case of Turannius Gracilis (71; 118-9), the first prefect of the grain-supply, who was dismissed from office by the emperor Caligula when he was in his nineties (Seneca *De brevitate vitae* 19.3); it is unknown whether age was a factor in the emperor’s decision.11 Upon his dismissal Turannius staged a mock-funeral in which his entire household mourned him as if he were dead. Caligula promptly reinstated him. In Seneca’s account Turannius stands for the pathetic ambition to cling on to public office even at a point when retirement should be the preferred exit. However, he uses that argument in defense of his involvement in a political struggle, the outcome of which was that Seneca’s father-in-law Pompeius Paulinus had to retire from the same office. The little that the anecdote has to reveal about old age is wrapped in the rhetoric of political expediency and suggestions of the desirability of *otium*.

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11 The passage in Seneca is discussed by P in the context of an investigation of the ages of imperial advisers. This is valid enough, but it is equally valid to enquire as to what the anecdote may tell us about old age. Does Seneca think that Turannius is senile or does he deliberately misinform us of the power of the staged funeral as a means to influence public opinion? Trimalchio certainly believed that engaging in one would enhance his popularity. It is possible that Turannius felt that his dismissal had somehow damaged his reputation and that he needed to make this clear to his environment in order to repair his shame.
Seneca’s position on the latter may have been somewhat different from that of other thinkers (72). In the end, is the anecdote perhaps nothing more than a condemnation of Caligula? His motives for reinstating Turannius will remain forever enigmatic.

There are items which one would have expected in a work of this scope. Although there is some attention to women in the course of this study, there is no detailed examination of their role, a topic for which there appears to be ample evidence. P attempts to offer his potential critics a very reasoned argument as to why he does not examine this area any further, but it has not convinced the present reviewer. Moreover, in view of the importance which has been attached to the visual evidence in furthering our understanding of childhood, it is surprising not to find a reference to the representation of the elderly in Roman art, or to the Roman attraction to verism.

Thanks to decades of research the study of childhood and the family has established a research agenda of its own, which is being constantly updated and modified. Old age still needs to establish such a research tradition. For the moment, there are no heated debates with schools of thought lining up in opposing camps; there are no discussions of methodologies or the exploration of largely untapped source-material. Owing to this, P’s book lacks the spark of a strong antagonist. Instead,

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12 At 11 the reason is quoted as residing in the ‘nature of the testimony.’ I have been unable to determine what P means by this. Matter of fact is that P does not appear to know Gabriele Heyse’s book on widows in the Roman world, *Mulier non debet abire nuda: das Erbrecht und die Versorgung der Witwe in Rom* (Bern and Frankfurt, 1994). He has consulted much of the literature on women in old age or women and old age, so why not integrate it more fully into his account?


14 This is mainly due to the efforts of Beryl Rawson who organized three major conferences on the subject.
P is forced to turn into real opponents the overly optimistic viewpoint of old age as an object of respect and deference, an idea which goes back to a book published in 1933, and the popular image that the past was more benevolent to the elderly than the modern age. This is however a minor concern, and needless to say P himself can hardly be held responsible for this situation. I have great admiration for the tone of P’s book. It is optimistic about what can be achieved and it is constructive in its criticism. Its approach to the discussion is open-ended rather than definitive. On a final note, what stands out in this work is the ease with which P moves in between traditional areas of research and more modern ones, from prosopography to demography. I have not often encountered a scholarly work in which the reader can take in a discussion of the prosopographical evidence for imperial amici and their ages (118-24), a listing and discussion of all the literary sources which refer to the expression sexagenarios de ponte (265-70), and a series of figures which aim to explicate statistical information concerning the age at which office-holders reached the apex of their careers (295-7). The diversity of research techniques is successfully employed to reach a variety of answers.

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