

Christian Alexander Neumann (ed.), Old Age before Modernity. Case Studies and Methodological Perspectives 500 BC–1700 AD, Heidelberg (Heidelberg University Publishing) 2023, 343 p. (Online-Schriften des DHI Rom. Neue Reihe, 8), ISBN 978-3-96822-174-8, DOI 10.17885/heiup.1086, EUR 65,00.

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This book is intended, as its title makes clear, to discuss old age before modernity, and includes a 2200-year time span of investigation. That is a very long time span indeed, and it can only be partially addressed, both in the years actually covered and the communities and populations discussed. Many of the chapters in the book are based on papers given at the »Gerontology and the Humanities – Perspectives for Historical Ageing Studies and Approaches to Gerontological Medievalistics« conference, which was held in Rome in November 2019 (p. 24). This helps to explain why the majority of the chapters address Italian or ancient Roman subjects, and why so many of the others are medieval in their focus.

Neumann states in the introduction that the conference served two purposes: it »opened up a forum for both specialists in gerontology and researchers from the humanities to discuss theories, methods and findings concerning a shared topic«, and that it brought together a »broad range of historically oriented humanistic disciplines« (p. 24). Unfortunately, the papers as they are presented in the final volume make little effort to reflect the conversations about those »theories, methods and findings« and there is not a lot of cross disciplinary discussion in most of the chapters.

The book is divided into three sections: »Representations«; »Social Interactions«; and »Corporeality«. At the beginning of each section, a gerontologist has provided a broad overview of how gerontology looks at, for example, representations of aging in today's society. Hans-Werner Wahl's chapter gives a brief overview of the field of gerontology, and moves on to consider the »three key longings« of eternal youth, immortality, and wisdom and how well the field of gerontology has performed in extending and fulfilling those longings. His assertions are true: »humankind has seen – in a relatively short historical timespan – an approximate doubling of its average life expectancy at birth, which might have been regarded as coming close to immortality, if this were told to someone in medieval times« (p. 57). But Wahl does not include even a paragraph about what insights that might give us about the way that ancient, medieval, or early modern people might have thought about those longings. And the other chapters in the section, while fine examples of comparative work looking at how



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old age is addressed over a number of related texts, similarly make no effort to incorporate any of the ideas of gerontology in their analysis.

In the second section, »Social Interactions«, many of the authors concentrate on the elderly in intergenerational relationships, and the gerontologist François Höpflinger points out in his introductory piece that »as individual ageing is immanently related to intergenerational relationships and intergenerational changes, cohort effects and family situation (child, parent or grandparent) are often just as important as other ageing affects«, but also goes on to note that »regarding socio-gerontological approaches to ageing, their use for historical research is limited, as those concepts are primarily valid for modern societies with organized retirement systems and a relatively long (healthy) life expectancy after retirement« (p. 164). The rest of the papers in the section for the most part address intergenerational relationships and the treatment of the elderly: Kathrin Liess looks at how old age is depicted in the Old Testament; Hartwin Brandt considers whether intergenerational conflict played an important role in the late Roman republic; José Miguel Andrade Cernades discusses the change in the care of the elderly in late medieval Spanish monastic communities by their younger brethren; the volume's editor Neumann compares two elderly rulers, one from Aragon and one from Venice; and Monica Ferrari uses the literary genre of mirrors for princes as a way of discussing youth's relationship to the elderly. All of these papers are interesting in their own right, and for the most part deal with old age in various places and times, but they do not connect in a significant way to gerontological research except in that they discuss an intergenerational relationship, and that, as Höpflinger points out, is just one aspect that would need to be addressed.

The third section of the book deals with corporeality. Following the gerontologist's introductory piece there is a very broad overview of the science of osteoarchaeology by Lidia Vitale, and while this field has much to offer the humanities, the offering here is too general, and there are no specifics about how osteoarchaeology might help with the investigation of old age. The other two chapters in the section address specific texts about the elderly in the Middle Ages, with concentrations on diet. Daniela Santoro, in her »The Treatment of Old Age at Court«, makes one of the more valiant efforts at connection in the book: »drawing on a variety of sources, ranging from medical treatises to figurative art, we aim to investigate more specifically the relationship between rulership and corporeality, illness, food and dietetics, and the therapeutic practices which were proposed by physicians, philosophers and cooks as well« (p. 330). These goals are interdisciplinary in a way that the rest of the volume aspires to, but mostly does not achieve.

All the contributions to the volume were the result of terrific research and I learned much about the field. However, there were definite issues besides the disconnect between the gerontologist's theoretical pieces and the following chapters in the section. It



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would have been nice, for instance, to see the chapter writers reference each other's work: in the case of Luciana Repici's and Mary Harlow's contributions, a repetition of Aristotle's definition of old age could have been avoided. It also would have been nice to have seen a broader selection of kinds of people discussed, as opposed to only the nobility – and here, Robin Fleming's historical work springs to mind, as she employs both archaeology and osteoarchaeology to investigate the lives of past peoples of all statuses. I also recognize that the volume grew out of conference proceedings, but surely Europeans and their texts are not the only sources to discuss old age in the premodern world? Many of the contributors made reference to the connections across the Mediterranean world, but none of the contributors dealt directly with, for example, Arabic sources or individuals from non-European locations who address old age. For a study as wide-ranging as this one, that would have been very welcome.



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