

Mediterranean Timescapes: Chronological Age and Cultural Practice in the Roman Empire, by Ray Laurence & Francesco Trifilò. New York: Routledge, 2023, Pp. 304. £125 (hardback); £35,99 (ebook).

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Scholarship within the field of ancient (social) history has for a long time relied on the interpretation of epigraphic data, and particularly on references to the deceased person's age, in its attempt to reconstruct the demographics of the Roman population. Controversy persists, however, concerning the use of this data as evidence of our interference on what scholars perceive as reliable information about the socio-demographic realities in Antiquity. Ray Laurence and Francesco Trifilò, in their volume *Mediterranean Timescapes: Chronological Age and Cultural Practice in the Roman Empire*, inscribe themselves within this tradition by focusing on the inscriptions of age-at-death in funerary epitaphs, but not without acknowledging that indeed, “the age recorded on tombstones was not objective but a cultural indicator of the identity of the deceased within a framework of carving on stone” (26). In their co-written 2012 chapter, Laurence and Trifilò already had pointed out that “the use of inscriptions has increasingly been recognized as not an indicator of demography, but as having a value as evidence for age-related cultural values that reflect, in particular, ages associated with greater symbolic capital in specific cultural settings” (27).

The authors' main goals are therefore not of a demographic nature but instead concern the investigation of the various cultural meanings that are attributed to particular chronological ages as mentioned in epitaphs. This perspective finds its origins in Laurence's earlier collaborations with Mary Harlow, with whom he wrote one of the first comprehensive studies of age and aging in the Roman life course. In this book, different variables were taken into consideration to research age, such as its intersections with gender, social status, and role within the family. In *Mediterranean Timescapes*,

the authors again successfully make use of an intersectional approach, by including the aforementioned parameters and as well as the following: geographical variation—their in-depth exploration of North-African epigraphic evidence as seen in relation to Italic data is certainly a welcome and much-needed addition to existing scientific work—the role and influence of the military, and the status of enslaved people, in order to be able to establish meaningful patterns in their large data pool of around 23.000 epitaphs.

The volume is comprised of three main parts subdivided into chapters that respond to the main research questions as proposed in the introduction, which include but are not limited to “placing each epitaph into a wider context of the commemoration of age-at-death found in all epitaphs from antiquity” (2) and looking at “how the evidence of age-at-death in inscriptions map onto the stages of life as articulated by literary writers?” (6). Part I, “Age-at-Death in Epitaphs: Issues and Possibilities” focuses mostly on methodological considerations, amongst others the problem of age-rounding in Latin epigraphy. The authors give a succinct overview of research already done on this topic—the study by Duncan-Jones of 1977 remains a landmark in the field—but they do not take the state of the art much further and thus end up repeating established conclusions (cf. 20-26). Indeed, the three other chapters in this opening part give the impression of serving the primary function of presenting a *status quaestionis* to the reader instead of pointing to or explaining the innovative aspects in this area of research that the authors want to explore in their volume. This is felt most prominently in their discussion of the life course and usages of chronological age by Roman authors (32-45). Despite being without a doubt a thoroughly researched overview that provides the reader with a good sense of meanings Romans attributed to age, rather obvious statements at this stage of the book—“Age on epitaphs expresses the identity of the deceased as a person of a certain age” (40) or “Ages recorded across the human lifespan varied considerably from province to province and from city to city” (45)—prevent this

chapter from delving deeper in what concerns the connections between literary theory and cultural practice.

Part II, by contrast, “Age and Society,” differs greatly in its approach and offers a valuable contribution to the lines of research laid out in Part I, as Laurence and Trifilò zoom in on the aforementioned variables that gives their volume its distinctive interdisciplinary character. In particular, their investigation of the commemoration of formerly enslaved people in the Empire—with the important conclusion drawn for future research that “once freed, a freed slave would have become part of a community and shared ideas about commemorative practices of that community” (137)—and of soldiers in Roman Africa—“We may suggest that the presence of the military in the provinces, particularly at cities formed or associated with large fortresses, shaped the nature of commemoration with a greater value being given to those in midlife” (155)—shed light on previously understudied aspects.

The volume builds up to its most convincing arguments in the last part, “Mediterranean Timescapes,” which ingeniously brings together the authors’ readings of Northern-African epigraphical material and puts them in conversation with those of Italy. They firstly show how “the presence of the military across the Mediterranean was a factor in shaping how the timescapes of the region were constructed” (163) by comparing age-at-death on epitaphs in port-cities such as Ravenna and Misenum with evidence found in Africa. This illustrates amongst other things the typical ages of recruitment of young men into the Roman army and expected ages of discharge. Then, by building on previously well-established conclusions on the fact that in the African provinces there was a tendency to record the ages-at-death of older people, the case-study of Numidia is particularly illuminating for inferring the role and importance of older people in public life and society in this part of the Empire: “The result is that we can be fairly certain the elderly were not marginalized in Numidia and instead should be seen as central to decision making and governance in their communities” (182).

Especially one of the last chapters, “Explaining Variation in the Use of Chronological Age across the Western Mediterranean” showcases the authors’ research results most clearly. They stress the importance of time in the shaping of identity in Antiquity, which they derive from the epigraphical evidence, which shows how in North-Africa, the focus laid on knowing the age of the deceased in later life, and in Italy on the ages of children and younger adults (200-1): “Significantly, time joins the individual or private person to the public or communal and thus, we might suggest that time lay in the public realm to organize and mediate individuals into collective units” (201). The interconnections between local and broader trends in cultural practice when it comes to the carving of age-at-death on epitaphs are brought to the foreground by the way the authors highlight the role of the viewer, who is actively invited to participate in a relationship with the deceased via a comparison of their own age to that of the person whose epitaph they are seeing (209). Investigations into the epigraphic habit of recording age in Italy and Northern-Africa with a focus on contact between these two important regions of the Empire yield the following overarching conclusion: “These two maps if read together strongly suggest that age-at-death or years lived as an indicator of the deceased identity was not a function of Mediterranean connectivity, but a function of the connectivity of communities with institutions of the Roman state that depended on the identity of the age of individuals; notably the Roman military based at or visiting certain seaports: Ostia/Portus, Misenum/Puteoli, Carales, Carthage and Brindisium, as well as the contact between Legion III Augusta in Numidia” (228).

Mediterranean Timescapes undeniably enriches current scientific research on ancient epigraphy and social history by focusing on the intersections of selected aspects of human life that have hitherto been left understudied. Even though under-par editing and some illegible maps and figures—the one on page 144 is unfortunately but one example—make engagement with the text difficult at times, and the repeated bibliographical references

at the end of each chapter seem superfluous—one alphabetical bibliography for the whole volume would have been a more adequate way to complement the exhaustive index—this volume by Laurence and Trifilò is nevertheless a necessary read for everyone interested in the study of age and its meanings within the context of Roman Antiquity.

WORKS CITED

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