

*Old Age before Modernity. Case Studies and Methodological Perspectives, 500 BC – 1700 AD*, edited by Christian A. Neumann. Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2023. Pp. 343. €65 (paperback); Free (ebook).

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Based on a conference held in 2019 and sponsored by the German Historical Institute Rome, in one of whose series it is published, Christian A. Neumann's new volume brings together sixteen international contributions dedicated to older age across a large chronological arc. More than simply focusing on cultural history, the volume sets itself the goal of deepening interdisciplinary perspectives on older age and aging, engaging both history and gerontology. This is no small task, given the chronological focus of the historical contributions, which range from Greco-Roman antiquity to the western Middle Ages.

The volume is divided into three parts, which focus, respectively, on representations, social interactions, and corporeality. Each of the sections is headed by a piece written by an expert in gerontology proper, followed by contributions from history, showing that the juxtaposition of gerontology and history has been taken seriously. The three pieces on gerontology by Paul Higgs, Hans-Werner Wahl, and François Höpflinger display the diversity of the field, making clear that biomedical perspectives represent only one segment of the discipline, while social and cultural approaches are steadily becoming more established. Unsurprisingly, the latter two offer the most overlap with historical studies. The gerontology pieces provide an easily readable and informative overview of basic assumptions and trends, which is certainly useful to (medieval) historians who, as an implicit target audience, might be unfamiliar with them. Concerning this knowledge transfer, the volume is surely successful.

The breadth of gerontology is effectively highlighted, demonstrating that the topic of (older) age cuts across all aspects of life. At the same time, it might have been useful to further narrow down and more clearly identify points of

contact between gerontology and history. Due to the source constraints that historians of antiquity and the Middle Ages share, many of the historical contributions employ literary sources and thus base their analyses on text-based cultural notions of ‘old age’ from the past. This makes for a difficult connection between history and social gerontology, indebted to sociology, but the ties with cultural gerontology are much more organic. Aging Studies are mentioned in passing, but it might have been worthwhile to pay more attention to the field’s critique of ageism and how older age is socially constructed in the present, while providing further contextual analysis through historical scholarship.

The dialog between disciplines works best in the section on corporeality, in which essays on gerontology, archeology, the history of medicine, and the medical practices of medieval kings speak to each other in a more productive fashion. In addition, Wahl’s essay effectively juxtaposes hopes expressed in Roman and medieval literature and recent advancements in delaying cognitive decline: suggestions made in the first century BC by Cicero to reduce the elderly’s physical workload but increase their mental activities sit surprisingly well with the thrust of current programs on active and healthy aging.

Literary sources, dating as far back as the Old Testament, provide deep historical perspective, showing common themes through the millennia: the struggle for the postponement of older age or the desire to escape it altogether (and achieve immortality); the quest to turn years-long experience into knowledge and thus more effectively participate in society, and the balancing act to account for the worsening of health without fatalism. All of these still shape 21st-century discourses on demographic change and personal age but have been echoing through the centuries in the Bible, courtly poetry, or philosophy, as several of the essays in the collection show. Pre-modern authors also weighed in on the question of whether to treat older age as something natural or as a pathological deviation. Implicitly, they treated the issue of whether middle age, with its supposed combination of physical fitness and reason, should be seen as the normative reference category for all other ages. The editor’s introduction deserves a special mention since it gives a far-reaching overview of the literature on cultural history of medieval ‘old age,’ which will

be especially interesting to readers who desire to make inroads into German-language historiography on the matter.

Even recent trends regarding intergenerational housing, seen as a forum of exchange and learning between generations, have their historical counterpart: José Miguel Andrade Cernadas's essay outlines how medieval monastic communities lodged little children, so-called *oblati*, who had been sent to the houses to be initiated into religious life as early as possible, as well as older community members who had retired there for their last years. They were schools and retirement homes all at once. Using examples from Spain, the author spells out how socio-economic considerations, for example regarding maintenance, were compatible with the rhetoric of the monastery as a family and how age-differences at the same time stabilized and de-stabilized familial relations between its inhabitants.

The two pieces on older age and medieval kingship by Christian A. Neumann and Daniela Santoro might remind readers of current debates about the age of politicians. In times when the kingship of infants was accepted and term limits were unheard of, fitness for office nevertheless was still debated. The physical strength to sustain battle or duels was important for medieval kings, and with the latter slipping away when people became older or ill, power dynamics changed. Furthermore, it is curious that the use of older age and childlessness as political insults appear to not be an invention of our times. The tension between the rigors of political office and advanced age has a long history: it preoccupied Roman authors, such as Plutarch and Cicero, too, as Mary Harlow elaborates in her essay. Whereas the former feared a life of domesticity – which he considered adequate only for women –, the latter praised the political importance of older people's wisdom and judiciousness, just at a moment when in the turbulent last days of the Roman Republic a younger generation seemed poised to take control of government. Aristotle, following Luciana Repici's interpretation, was instead opposed to giving too much power to people of a more advanced age, abhorring particularly political offices for lifetime. Positions of power, according to the philosopher, ought to be held by

individuals in their middle age. A perfect legislator should even prohibit older men over seventy and women over fifty from reproducing.

The volume sets itself the ambitious goal to bring together the disciplines of (medieval) history and gerontology. Points of contact do emerge but are sometimes not very clearly fleshed out. Whereas gerontologists might remain reluctant, for medievalists seeking to broaden their disciplinary horizon and learn about gerontology, the volume makes an accessible offer. The various contributions certainly attest to the current interest in and the liveliness of the cultural history of older age as a field of study. They provide fascinating case studies which are rich in detail and vary in geography and chronology. Readers with an interest in (older) age in literary sources will especially not be disappointed.