

Introduction: Investigating Life Cycles

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Across the globe, demographic change is reshaping contemporary societies in profound ways. Declining fertility rates, increasing life expectancy, shifting family configurations, and economic and political transformations — together with processes of migration and displacement — are altering individual life courses, intergenerational relations, and the organization of welfare and care systems. The rapid increase in aging populations in many regions brings questions of later life, dependency, and longevity into sharper focus. As a result, age and aging have assumed growing prominence not only in public debate and policy, but also across academic disciplines.

Yet these developments do more than draw attention to aging as a demographic phenomenon: they also invite renewed scrutiny of how the human life course itself is conceptualized. Rather than unfolding as a stable and universally shared sequence of stages, human life increasingly appears as a series of transitions — moments at which social roles, bodily capacities, and cultural expectations are redefined. These moments, which this volume characterizes as biographical thresholds, make age legible in historically specific ways. While much contemporary scholarship is oriented toward present and future challenges, historical perspectives remain indispensable. They allow us to trace how such thresholds have been identified, structured, and contested over time, and to understand how earlier models of life stages continue to inform, constrain, or complicate modern assumptions about aging.

This special issue, *Investigating Life Cycles*, spread across [issues 9](#) and [10](#) of *Age, Culture, Humanities*, seeks to engage with these questions by examining how the human life course has been understood, organized, and experienced across diverse contexts, with a particular emphasis on later life. While its primary focus is on the premodern period — especially the late Middle Ages — the

contributions remain consistently oriented toward the present, whether explicitly or implicitly, through the present-day analytical perspectives applied to their historical sources. In this sense, the volume places historical models of life stages in productive dialog with contemporary age scholarship, highlighting the value of historical depth while contributing to ongoing efforts to rethink the conceptual foundations of age studies. Central to this approach is the concept of biographical thresholds, developed further below.

Originating in a conference held on 28–29 March 2023 and co-organized by the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History and the Norwegian Institute in Rome, the issue brings together scholars working across disciplines and chronological boundaries. The conference was conceived around the question of how transitions within the human life course are identified, represented, and experienced in the premodern period. This focus continues to shape the contributions gathered here. Rather than approaching the life course solely in terms of clearly bounded stages, the volume foregrounds the moments, processes, and markers through which movement between these stages was articulated and made meaningful. These thresholds make age legible in different ways; while they may at times be linked to bodily transformations, they are just as often shaped by social, legal, and cultural practices, including withdrawal from public life, the onset of dependency, or changes in familial and institutional roles.

Crucially, such biographical thresholds were neither fixed nor universally defined. They could be gradual, reversible, or contested, shaped by factors such as gender, status, occupation, and individual circumstance. In some contexts, chronological age functioned as a key organizing principle, particularly within legal or administrative frameworks; in others, it remained secondary to more qualitative assessments of bodily capacity, social function, or moral authority. Multiple thresholds could coexist or overlap, producing complex and sometimes contradictory experiences of aging. By foregrounding these dynamics, the volume shifts attention from age as a stable category to aging as a process structured through transitions that are at once embodied, socially mediated, and culturally constructed. In this sense, biographical thresholds

offer a central conceptual lens through which the volume can be read, highlighting key moments of transition while also inviting reflection on the broader structures that shape the life course. At the same time, the essays recognize that aging is not experienced solely in discrete stages; by attending to more extended and diffuse processes of later life, the volume situates thresholds within a wider continuum, illuminating the interplay between marked transitions and the ongoing rhythms of human experience.

Closely intertwined with thresholds is a recurring attention to gender, which shapes much of the analysis. In nearly all contributions, gender mediates how aging, authority, and social roles were experienced and interpreted. By foregrounding gender alongside other axes of difference — class, status, institutional affiliation — the articles reveal how expectations, responsibilities, and opportunities in later life were deeply mediated by social constructions of masculinity and femininity. In this way, gender both shapes and is shaped by the biographical thresholds through which life stages were experienced.

Historiography on aging, older age, and the life course in the medieval and early modern periods has developed inconsistently and undergone significant transformation since the late twentieth century. Foundational studies on the life course (Sears; Burrow; Goodich; Dubois; Goldberg) are primarily concerned with intellectual traditions, focusing on the transmission and adaptation of classical and patristic models of the “ages of man.” These models are typically approached as symbolic and didactic frameworks, reproduced across a wide range of media, including art, theology, and encyclopedic writing. In these works, older age appears above all as the final stage in a predetermined and often moralized sequence, associated simultaneously with bodily decline, accumulated wisdom, and increasing proximity to death. Importantly, these models largely reflect male experience, emphasizing ideals of masculinity, public authority, and moral responsibility, while women’s aging remains generally implicit. While this body of scholarship is crucial in establishing both the persistence and the cultural authority of age-related models, its emphasis on representation and continuity also entail certain limitations. In privileging normative frameworks, it leaves relatively unexplored the relationship between

prescriptive models and lived experience, as well as the extent to which such models are reshaped in specific social and cultural contexts. It is precisely these questions that subsequent scholarship has sought to address.

At the same time, pioneering syntheses on the history of older age (Minois; Bois) played a key role in establishing later life as a legitimate subject of historical inquiry. It is also important to acknowledge the early contribution of David Herlihy's "Vieillir à Florence au Quattrocento" (1969), which anticipated many later scholarly developments through its attention to age as a central category of social organization.

From the 1990s onward, historians begin to broaden both the scope and methodological approaches of the history of older age in the premodern period. This shift is reflected in the emergence of general studies adopting a more explicitly social-historical perspective and offering more nuanced engagement with cultural context (Rosenthal; Shahar; Homet; Youngs; Hergemöller; Porck), as well as in interdisciplinary edited volumes (Sheehan; Classen; Vavra; Heiser & Meyer; Krötzl & Mustakallio; Cochelin & Smyth 2013; Wiener; Neumann), all of which have significantly shaped this scholarship's development. This expanding line of inquiry has been further enriched by individual contributions from **social history** (Autrand; Mulder-Bakker and Nip; Signori; Andrade Cernadas, "Aproximación a la Historia"; Andrade Cernadas, "Voz de los ancianos"; Andrade Cernadas, "Asilos monásticos"; Laumonier; Comas Via; Dubourg), **financial history** (Zuijderduijn, "Ages of Women and Men"; Zuijderduijn, "Seeking Pieter Bruegel"; Zuijderduijn and Overlaet; Van Bochove and Zuijderduijn; Svensson and Zuijderduijn), **cultural history** (Lorcin 1987a, 1987b; Lallouette, "Autorité des hommes âgés"; Lallouette, "Vieillesse dans le Pèlerinage"), and the **history of medicine** (Lorcin, "Gérontologie et gériatrie"; Lorcin, "Rides et cheveux gris"; Demaitre; Botelho; Schäfer, "Alternde Frau"; Schäfer, *Old Age and Disease*; McClive; Toulalan; Bolissian). In addition, research in **oste archaeology** and **bioarchaeology** has introduced new forms of evidence for reconstructing health, morbidity, and longevity (i.e. Jonker; Appleby; Gilchrist), thereby further diversifying both the sources and methodologies of the field.

Gender has received uneven attention across disciplines, shaping both the questions asked and the sources analyzed. Literary scholars generally engage more directly with representations of women's older age, particularly the negative stereotypes associated with it, highlighting the persistent anxieties surrounding female aging (Paupert-Bouchiez; Bettella; Ziolkowski; Mieszkowski; Pratt; Scarborough; Doležalová). By contrast, studies of older women within broader medieval cultural history remain relatively limited (Agrimi and Crisciani; Urso; Cayrol-Bernardo, "Perceptions of Menopause"). Research on aging masculinities is even sparser, though growing attention signals an emerging interest in the ways male experience is socially constructed and culturally regulated (Brouzes).

Art historical scholarship adds important insights into representations of older age, though it remains constrained in chronological and geographical scope (Hülsen-Esch, "Alte Frauen"; Hülsen-Esch, "Falten, Sehnen, Knochen"; Hülsen-Esch, "Three Ages of Man"; Janssen). Much of this work focuses on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, where visual depictions of aging women have been extensively examined (Botelho; Schuster-Cordone; Campbell; Warlick; Filipczak; Kromm; Crenshaw; Wolfthal). By contrast, earlier periods — particularly the medieval and early Renaissance — remain significantly underexplored, and a gendered approach to age is almost entirely absent for these centuries (Muller; Helas; Hülsen-Esch, "Zeitlichkeit"; Cayrol-Bernardo, "Ageing Women").

More recent works on the medieval life course emphasize the variability of aging experiences across genders, adding nuance to earlier assumptions of linear progression. Central to this shift is a growing interest in the life course as a dynamic and culturally-mediated process rather than a fixed sequence of stages (Porck and Soper; Adler and Strohm). For the early modern period, historians have built on these insights while placing greater emphasis on individual lived experience, particularly the interplay between bodily change, emotional life, and cultural norms (Read and Newton). Taken together, this body of work reflects a clear move away from viewing older age as the fixed endpoint of a universal sequence, and instead emphasizes its contingency within multiple,

overlapping, and sometimes competing models of the life course. Across this work, gender is not merely an analytic add-on; it is a central lens through which the social meanings of aging are experienced and understood.

Despite these advances, important areas remain open for further exploration. Research on older age continues to occupy a somewhat peripheral position within broader life-course analyses, which often focus on earlier stages such as childhood, youth, or adulthood. Similarly, scholarship on aging has not always fully engaged with the conceptual and methodological insights offered by life-course studies. As a result, the field — while rich and diverse — offers opportunities for greater integration. A framework that brings these perspectives into sustained dialog could be particularly valuable, one that attends simultaneously to normative models, lived experience, and the transitional processes connecting them. There is also potential for expanding the geographical scope of research, more systematically integrating different methodological approaches, and deepening engagement with the theoretical frameworks developed in age studies. Premodern materials, in particular, could benefit from being situated within longer-term, conceptually-explicit analyses of aging as a historical and cultural process. It is precisely these gaps that *Investigating Life Cycles* seeks to address, bringing the premodern sources examined here into sustained dialog with the theoretical questions raised above.

The division of human life into distinct stages is a feature shared by many cultures, and ideas about these phases are closely tied to prevailing representations of older age. Such representations are not static: they evolve in response to demographic realities, changing disease patterns, and broader social transformations, including developments in family organization, systems of value, forms of labor, medical knowledge, and opportunities for civic participation. These contexts shape how aging is imagined and discussed, and they help determine the roles and expectations attached to those perceived as ‘old.’ A wide range of historical sources — including works of art, medical and

philosophical writings, literary texts, legal materials, and administrative documents — attest to the ways societies have interpreted the later stages of life. These sources reveal both enduring stereotypes and the tensions surrounding them, while also demonstrating that cultural assumptions about aging could be contested, reshaped, or expanded.

Approaching aging from a historical perspective thus makes it possible to trace both the formation and the transformation of ideas about the life course over time. Many of the conceptual categories that structure modern understandings of aging have deep historical roots, yet their meanings have shifted across different contexts and periods. The contributions gathered here explore how age-related change has been represented, interpreted, and negotiated — both within premodern sources and in their later reception — with particular attention to the identification and meaning of biographical thresholds within specific cultural and social settings.

Several guiding questions structure this inquiry. How are systems of age classification shaped by everyday temporal rhythms or by broader conceptions of time? To what extent are changes in these classifications linked to specific intellectual traditions or textual transmissions? Which attributes and expectations are associated with different phases of life, and how are these differentiated along lines of gender, status, or occupation? How are biographical thresholds identified, interpreted, or contested? And how do discourses emerging from theological, medical, legal, political, and ethical contexts contribute to defining the later stages of the life course?

A central aim of the volume is to bridge disciplinary and temporal divides that have long structured the study of aging. By bringing premodern sources into dialog with contemporary theoretical frameworks, the issue advances a more integrated understanding of how life cycles are constructed, experienced, and interpreted. Across the contributions, particular attention is given to the interplay between prescriptive models of the life course and lived experience, as well as to the ways in which biographical thresholds mediate between these two dimensions. Medieval and early modern texts often articulate life as a sequence of clearly defined stages, yet these models coexist with more fluid,

contingent, and individualized experiences of aging. A wide range of terms is used to describe different phases of life, shaped by cultural context, the nature of the source, and specific circumstances. Life stages thus emerge not simply as descriptive categories, but as frameworks that both shape and are reshaped by social norms, cultural expectations, and personal trajectories.

The essays collected here explore these dynamics through diverse sources and methodological approaches. Presenting the earliest historical material in this issue, [Svetlana Luchitskaya](#)'s contribution offers a detailed examination of medieval perceptions of old age through the treatise *Les .IIII. tenz d'aage d'ome* by the Crusader knight Philip of Novara. Written in the mid-thirteenth century, this text articulates a fourfold division of the human life course — childhood, youth, maturity, and old age — each associated with specific virtues, behaviors, and social expectations. Older age, defined broadly as spanning from approximately ages sixty to eighty, is presented as a period marked by physical frailty and cognitive decline, but also by heightened moral responsibility and spiritual urgency. Philippe emphasizes the necessity of humility, moderation, and repentance, warning older men in particular against the dangers of pride, lust, and inappropriate conduct. At the same time, he acknowledges the potential authority of older individuals as counselors and mentors, thus framing aging masculinity as both diminished and potentially elevated. Drawing on chivalric ideals, biblical models, and legal traditions, Luchitskaya demonstrates that the treatise operates on multiple levels; while clearly rhetorical and didactic in intent, it also provides insight into experiences and expectations of aging, revealing older age as a category shaped simultaneously by moral discourse, social function, and embodied reality.

A complementary yet methodologically distinct perspective is provided by [Andrea von Hülsen-Esch](#), whose article investigates the role of diagrammatic thinking in medieval knowledge production. Focusing on the work of Francesco da Barberino — jurist, poet, and intellectual active in early

fourteenth-century Italy — the study explores how visual representations of the life course functioned as tools for organizing and communicating complex ideas about human existence. In Barberino's *Officiolo* (c. 1306), diagrams are not merely illustrative but epistemological: they structure relationships between the body, the cosmos, moral order, and legal frameworks. Particularly significant is the inclusion of what appears to be the first known diagram of a female life cycle, which both reflects and reshapes contemporary assumptions about gender and age. Von Hülsen-Esch situates these visual strategies within the vibrant intellectual context of Padua, highlighting intersections between juridical reasoning, theological thought, and artistic practice. Her analysis underscores that diagrams should be understood as active participants in knowledge production, shaping how late medieval viewers conceptualized aging and the progression of life. In doing so, the article expands our understanding of how the life course could be visualized as well as narrated, and how different media contributed to the formation of age-related knowledge.

Questions of power, embodiment, and decline are central to Christian Alexander Neumann's contribution, which examines the final years of King Edward III of England through a "gero-medievalist" lens. By bringing modern gerontological concepts into dialog with medieval narrative and administrative sources, Neumann reconstructs the complex interplay between aging, kingship, and political authority. The study traces how Edward's later life was increasingly shaped by illness, physical weakness, and the cumulative effects of personal loss, including the deaths of close relatives and long-standing political allies. As the king gradually withdrew from active governance—particularly after his fiftieth year—his capacity to rule became a matter of growing concern, and contemporaries began to interpret his actions through the lens of age-related decline. His controversial relationship with the much younger Alice Perrers, for example, attracted significant criticism, reflecting broader anxieties about appropriate conduct in older age. At the same time, new and existing political mechanisms were mobilized to compensate for his diminishing authority. Neumann's analysis demonstrates that while chronological age was not the sole determinant of status or capability, life-stage thresholds nonetheless gained

increasing significance in the fourteenth century. More broadly, the article illustrates how medieval sources can both benefit from and complicate modern theoretical frameworks, offering a nuanced account of how aging intersects with masculinity, authority, and governance.

The subjective and relational dimensions of aging are explored in depth in Laura Cayrol-Bernardo's study of the Florentine patrician woman Alessandra Macinghi negli Strozzi (1408–1471). Drawing on a corpus of seventy-three surviving letters written between 1447 and 1470 to her sons Filippo, Lorenzo, and Matteo, the essay provides a rare window into the lived experience of aging in a late medieval urban context. Alessandra's correspondence is notable for its sustained engagement with questions of age: she reflects on her own physical and emotional condition, comments on the ages and behaviors of others, and uses age as a framework for interpreting social interactions. Cayrol-Bernardo shows that these reflections are deeply embedded in the dynamics of family life, particularly in the shifting relationships between mother and sons as both generations age. The letters reveal how maternal authority was renegotiated over time, shaped by expectations of gender, status, and familial obligation. At the same time, they illuminate the ways in which aging was experienced as both an individual and relational process, mediated through communication, memory, and affect. By situating Alessandra's writings within their broader social and cultural context, the study highlights the importance of epistolary sources for understanding how aging was perceived, articulated, and lived.

Jaco Zuiderduijn's contribution, "[Living la Vita Apostolica: Longevity of Nuns in Late-Medieval Holland](#)," already published in issue 9 of *Age, Culture, Humanities*, examines a necrological record from a female monastic community in late-medieval Holland, documenting the vital events of nuns from their entry into the convent through death. This source allows for a detailed reconstruction of longevity, life expectancy, and mortality patterns, providing a structured and continuous view of the life course within an institutional setting. By systematically analyzing the necrology, Zuiderduijn identifies patterns of lifespan, age at death, and communal belonging, offering rare demographic insights into the realities of religious life for women. The study combines

quantitative methods with careful contextual interpretation, demonstrating how statistical patterns intersect with personal trajectories and the regulatory frameworks of monastic discipline, which organizes time and social relations. In this sense, the necrology functions not merely as a record of death but as a document of life, revealing the rhythms and structures that shape experiences of aging within the convent. The article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how life stages were experienced, recorded, and conceptualized in a specific institutional context, illuminating the lives of women who are otherwise largely invisible in the historical record.

Taken together, the contributions highlight the diversity of approaches and sources that can be brought to bear on the study of aging. They address themes including gender and embodiment, intergenerational relations, authority and dependency, health and longevity, and the multiplicity of temporal frameworks — bodily, social, natural, cosmological — through which life stages were understood. The sources examined — ranging from diagrams and visual culture to letters, moral treatises, legal records, and necrological data — can be understood as distinct yet interconnected epistemic technologies of life staging, each contributing to the production and transmission of knowledge about age and aging.

A recurring insight across the volume is that life stages function simultaneously as prescriptive frameworks and as sites of lived negotiation. Rather than forming a fixed and universal sequence, the life course appears as historically contingent, culturally mediated, and internally variable. Premodern sources reveal a conceptual landscape in which clearly articulated stages coexist with flexible and situational thresholds, allowing human life to be understood as both structured and open-ended. In this respect, the dialog between premodern materials and contemporary age studies proves particularly productive. Concepts central to current scholarship — such as the non-linearity of life courses, the importance of embodiment, and the intersectional nature of aging — find important resonances in earlier sources. At the same time, these sources challenge modern assumptions by offering alternative ways of conceptualizing temporality, development, and decline.

Published in *Age, Culture, Humanities*, a journal committed to interdisciplinary approaches to aging, this special issue deliberately positions premodern history within a field of age studies that has so far focused largely on modern and contemporary contexts. By incorporating premodern perspectives, it extends the chronological scope of this area of inquiry while also contributing to its conceptual and methodological development. In particular, the contributions featured here both resonate with and complement the approach presented in the recent double special issue, *Transitional and Relational Aging* (Barry & Skagen).

Ultimately, *Investigating Life Cycles* challenges the assumption that human life can be adequately understood as a linear progression through clearly-defined stages. Instead, it presents aging as a dynamic and historically-situated process, shaped by cultural, social, and embodied experience. By emphasizing variability, multiplicity, and contingency — and by attending closely to the biographical thresholds through which such change is lived and understood, the contributions collected here invite readers to reconsider what it means to move through time — and what it means to grow old.

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