



*Old Age in the Roman World. A Cultural and Social History*, Tim G. Parkin. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.  
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Reviewed by Anastasios D. Nikolopoulos  
University of Patras and the University of the Peloponnese  
[adnikolo@uop.gr](mailto:adnikolo@uop.gr)

This is the kind of book everyone would like to have not only in their library but also in their curriculum vitae: a work of original and meticulous research, presented with clarity and acumen, and printed elegantly by a prestigious publisher. Academic honesty reigns: at every turn the reader is informed both about the book's contents but also what (s)he should not expect to find. The representation of older persons in Roman art is signaled as one of the lacunae left by this essay in "cultural and social history", according to the book's typological subtitle. Rightly, since the author does not feel qualified, as he honestly admits in the Introduction. In anticipation of a monograph on the subject, an informative overview of the basic facts and useful bibliography can be found in Hartwin Brandt, *Wird auch silbern mein Haar: eine Geschichte des Alters in der Antike*, Munich 2002, a book which appeared after Parkin's book went to press.

The Introduction is followed by nine chapters, organized in four parts: "Uncovering Aging Romans", "Old Age in Public Life", "Old Age in Private Life", and "Putting Older People in their Place". The brief Final Remarks are situated little after the middle of a book with 495 pages. Appendices, copious Endnotes, extensive bibliography, and a general index take up 220 pages. Obviously, no space was left for the Index Locorum, which is, however, available online at <http://www.clas.canterbury.ac.nz/oldancients.html>.

The title of the first part suggests that older persons in the Roman world were swept under the carpet or tried to pass for something else. In fact, the first three chapters deal with definitions, the demography, and depictions of old age in written evidence from the Roman world. Discussion of the Roman terms for older people is not only an obvious starting point but also necessary, in order to prevent the reader from assuming a numerical definition of old age. *Senectus* seems to have been characterized largely by the physical state of the individual and the age of sixty is often a convenient terminus a quo. Yet, as Parkin rightly underlines, reference to old age may be made with a view to imposing authority, showing respect or even challenging and insulting. It is also asserted that people did NOT get older more quickly than they do now, that it is NOT valid to assume that two different (formal vs. informal) systems of age-reckoning existed, that we can NOT assume that every numerical indication of age in Roman sources is inclusive or exclusive. Such negative statements are also a constant and laudable feature of Parkin's exposition, just as attention to possible exceptions from general rules, resulting from the social organization of the Roman state, i.e. the special status of women and slaves. It is sadly true, however, that "as a result of the testimony, it is not practical to devote a chapter of this book to the particular status and role of the older female" (p. 11).

Having defined "the elderly", Parkin moves on to the next question: what proportion of the population of the Roman world represented older people? (ch. 2) The best source of demographic information is the Roman Egyptian census, but even that is of limited helpfulness in answering this question. The results achieved with the aid of modern demography and model life tables can be found in tabular form in Appendix A. The first section concludes with a structured sketch of prevalent attitudes towards old age in Roman literary texts as a background picture to the detailed description of social reality, the book's pièce de résistance. Parkin distinguishes between a serious and a popular strand in literary images of old age, the former being mainly positive and consolatory while the latter largely negative and coldly analytical. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Horace, Plutarch, Seneca, and Pliny are contrasted with Juvenal and Maximianus. To illustrate the view that, at least in the popular literary tradition, the emphasis is on the corporeal features, Parkin offers us a rich collection of parallels on Juvenal 10.191-98.

The next three chapters deal with the rules of old age, and to some extent age in general, in the Roman world. Despite the presence of

a powerful senate, republican Rome was no gerontocracy. Parkin and Brandt agree on this, although the latter admits that it would not be unfair to speak of domination (as opposed to rule) of the elderly whereas the former admits that this is probably correct in terms of Roman ideology, not reality. At any rate, it is fair to conclude, with Parkin, that advanced "old age in itself did not grant automatic priority or superiority" (p. 111). The chapter closes with the evidence on exemption or immunity from public duties because of old age. The Roman system of *munera* is clearly explained, so that even readers with a predominantly literary background can follow easily, which is a virtue of the book as a whole.

Reading endnote 19 (p. 375) to the next (fifth) chapter, we find out that "in this chapter the term *munera* will generally be avoided, for the simple reason that the document we are dealing with are in Greek and not in Latin." This is the only occasion of a misplaced piece of information in the book, since the anglicized Greek term "liturgies" already occurs in the first sentence of this chapter, which concentrates on Roman Egypt. Dedicating a whole chapter to this particular province is possible thanks to the relevant abundance of reliable evidence on papyri, which permits a closer examination of the rules of public life relating to old age. However, as Parkin remarks again and again, (a) a single province, and Egypt in particular, "cannot be taken automatically as being generally representative" of the whole empire, and (b) "the papyrological evidence does not provide a complete or necessarily cohesive picture" (p. 139, repeated in p. 145 and 153). It is further noticeable, that the evidence from the census slips relates only to the male population, and that most of our papyri come from two (out of a total 42-60!) nomes, both in Lower Egypt. This means that any theory based on this evidence can only be tentatively set out, like Parkin does when he concludes that following the annexation of Egypt "the age limit may have stood at 60 years but very shortly thereafter it had been raised to 62 years" (p. 162). By contrast, his suggestion (p. 166) that the phrase "...hos eton", found in papyri, is used in the sense "allegedly" rather than "approximately" is clearly right.

Chapter six addresses two questions whether archival material could be used to determine an individual's age and whether there is evidence for such use. Again, Parkin has to admit that existing evidence is insufficient to establish whether the registration of birth was compulsory and effective throughout the empire at any time. Census, on the other hand, was probably obligatory, but probably only for adult male citizens. The paucity of evidence does not prevent Parkin from making

the most of it and making clear where he stands with regard to interpretation of crucial linguistic details (see p. 176-7), even though it on p. 176 that I found the most obvious mistake in Greek (hyperetaí instead of hypereteís) in the main text –there is another one in n.94 (p. 346): douleusi instead of douleuousi and a minor one on p.254 bexodeis instead of bexodeis.

The third section on the private life of the Roman elderly comprises two chapters, which are shorter than the more technical ones of the previous section on public life. Chapter seven covers the evidence on marriage and sexuality in old age, concluding that, on the whole, the elderly were not considered part of the sexually active population, which meant that the aged persons who did not fit this perceived opinion became the object of ridicule and disgust. Chapter eight broadens the view, dealing with the relation between elderly persons and their families. At a time, when there was no organized public welfare, it was of the outmost importance that aged persons, especially the poor, should have someone, most commonly their children, to take care of them, providing food, shelter and ultimately a proper burial. A potential source of problems between aged parents and their children was mental illness, a subject of great interest, on which ancient sources offer extremely little of substance.

The final section contains a single chapter entitled "The Marginality of Old Age". Even though it does not have the internal cohesion of previous chapters, it offers a concise overview of the evidence regarding Old Age and Medicine, and Old Age in Myth and Religion, concluding with a gripping and lucid discussion of the proverbial phrase *sexagenarios de ponte*. My main objection is not with the diversity of the issues raised, for they all relevant to establishing the social status of the Roman elderly (as opposed to the civic status covered in the Part II), but with the mixing up the domains of ideology (myth) and social reality (medicine, cult), which have been so scrupulously kept separate in the book so far. With regard to Parkin's argument itself that Romans of old age, and women in particular, were more or less marginalized despite a relative improvement of their social status, neither Brandt nor the reviewer would have substantial objections.

To sum up, Parkin has offered us a work of solid and up-to-date scholarship with clear views, abundant details and colorful touches on a subject of particular interest to modern postindustrial societies, in which senior citizens constitute an increasingly large proportion of the total population.

