

## THE RECORDING OF AGE ON EPITAPHS

LAURENCE (R.), TRIFILÒ (F.) *Mediterranean Timescapes. Chronological Age and Cultural Practice in the Roman Empire*. Pp. xvi+253, figs, ill., b/w & colour maps. London and New York: Routledge, 2023. Cased, £120, US\$160. ISBN: 978-1-138-28875-1. doi:10.1017/S0009840X23002822

*Mediterranean Timescapes* examines Roman ideas on time via Latin epitaphs recording age at death. The book takes a qualitative and digital approach, considering a corpus of 23,227 epitaphs drawn from the ‘Epigraphik-Datenbank Claus/Slaby’ (EDCS). These originate from all provinces bordering the Western Mediterranean, excluding the city of Rome. The authors present the recording of years lived as a technology that can reflect how Romans conceptualised the life course, and they take a particular interest in variations in usage. By comparing patterns across provinces and cities, they effectively argue that the inclusion of age at death in epitaphs was driven by cultural (rather than demographic) factors, which varied according to the diversity of ways in which Romans adopted the epigraphic habit. Although a series of issues – some beyond the authors’ control – lessen its impact, the book provides insights that will be of interest to many Roman historians, especially those working on epigraphy, funerary practices and the Roman family in Italy and the African provinces. It also records a certain type of digital humanities project, which as the authors admit, might already be somewhat outdated, but even so remains a valuable indicator of how the field has developed and where it might go in the future.

The book is divided into three parts of four short chapters each, preceded by an introduction and followed by a brief afterword. The first part argues against the use of age at death to reconstruct demography. The authors contend that recorded ages do not require accuracy to be meaningful, with chapters exploring a range of topics including (but not limited to) the commonality of age rounding to five and ten, the use of age at death in the Latin West as opposed to the Greek East, regional differences in abbreviations of the common formula *vixit annis/annos*, the Roman finger-counting system, the relative usefulness of Arabic and Roman numerals in mathematics, and the importance of studying epitaphs that claim lifespans over 100 years to understand ancient conceptions of time. In the second part they begin to establish the distinction that will form a core argument of the book: that age-at-death recording happened differently in Italy and in the African provinces. Namely, average recorded ages were younger in Italy and older in Africa. Once again, the brief chapters each explore a variety of points, considering patterns of gender and age in Italy and Africa, how life course can determine who commemorates the dead, whether freedmen followed their own practices in recording age at death (the authors determine they did not), and why some cities in Africa had very high rates of recording age at death, a pattern that the authors associate with the presence of the military. Emphasis on the military continues in the third part, which brings together the book’s key arguments. Among other topics, these chapters question how the military structured lifespans, debate how collection and curatorial patterns might affect datasets derived from museums, and contend that recording age at death for very young children correlated directly with higher levels of urbanisation. This section includes the most impactful chapter of the book, ‘Age and Culture in Numidia’: it traces localised patterns in the commemoration of the elderly and connects the emphasis on old age in epitaphs to the importance of elders in Numidian culture. The authors’ treatment of Africa is especially

strong, abandoning Eurocentric debates over Romanisation to set Africa alongside Italy instead and to explore patterns of commemoration in each location.

The project grew out of a collaboration between the authors that began in 2009, before Trifilò left academia and Laurence's attention was drawn away by administrative duties. Given the circumstances, the authors (chiefly Laurence, who undertook the writing) should be commended for bringing the data to publication in any form. Nevertheless, its extended genesis is evident in the book's weaknesses. Organisation is a particular problem; not only is the progression of chapters difficult to follow, but also the many topics covered within chapters can seem disconnected, and important points are easily lost. The chapter 'Explaining Variation in the Use of Chronological Age across the Western Mediterranean', for example, begins by analysing patterns in the rare epitaphs including hours lived, then turns to how a life course approach can explain why individuals dying at certain ages are more or less likely to be commemorated by certain relatives, before ending with the argument that port cities stand between Italian and African patterns in recording years lived, with average years somewhat higher than Italy and somewhat lower than Africa. Any direct connections between the subjects remain unexplained, and all three can be found in other chapters as well. Typos, furthermore, are common enough to affect understanding throughout, and the book provides almost no chronological context. This last point was probably a necessity of the methodology, given both the difficulty of dating many epitaphs and the small numbers for comparison that would result from applying a finer chronological lens. Nevertheless, the reader is left questioning whether any of the perceived patterns might relate to the earlier dates, in general, of Italian epitaphs and the later dates of African examples.

The most essential question that the book leaves unexplored is what new insights this 'big data' approach has provided. At several points, the authors emphasise that digital methodologies promise to move the field of epigraphy beyond anecdotal examinations of a small number of inscriptions. While their digitally rendered maps and graphs are well presented and provide good support for their arguments, the authors' chief conclusions have been made in the past by scholars working in the anecdotal tradition they allege to leave behind. Drawing together over 20,000 inscriptions shows clearly that inclusion of age at death was not a demographic indicator and instead reflected varying adoptions of the epigraphic habit, but that point was made long ago by R. MacMullen (*AJP* 103 [1982], 233–46) and K. Hopkins (in: F. Hinard [ed.], *La mort, les morts* [1987], pp. 113–26). Likewise, the book indicates differences in use of age at death by military populations, a group whose distinct epitaphs have been well explored by scholars such as S. Tuck (in: J. Bodet and N. Dimitrova [edd.], *Ancient Documents* [2015], pp. 212–29) and B. Shaw (*Opus* 2 [1983], 133–59). M. Carroll has recently studied the high rates of children's commemoration in Italy (*Infancy and Earliest Childhood* [2018]), and the recording of extreme old age in Africa has factored into insightful work by Shaw (*Museum Africum* 2 [1973], 3–10) and J. Gascou (*Antiquités Africaines* 34 [1998], 93–102). The authors do not hide these connections; in fact, the thorough and up-to-date bibliography is one of the book's strengths. Readers are left wondering, therefore, what exactly the digital approach has added, beyond confirmation of longstanding ideas. Surely digital humanities can introduce new questions and invite new interpretations of the past, but this book might have drawn together its themes even without the dataset at its core.

These criticisms should not undermine the authors' achievement in publishing their project. Research that stretches on for so long can become nearly impossible to conclude, especially once investigators have been pulled away by other priorities. Sharing the data and their thoughts on it, even without polishing the work to perfection, was the ethical

and appropriate choice. The afterword provides additional value by contextualising the study as an early attempt to bring digital techniques to epigraphic questions, pointing towards potential future directions. Equally valuable are the many threads of ideas on identity and the life course that are introduced, but often left unexplored throughout the chapters. These might invite new questions that could be pursued via traditional or novel methodologies, or even through innovative combinations of the two.

Tulane University

ALLISON EMMERSON  
[aemmerso@tulane.edu](mailto:aemmerso@tulane.edu)

## THE ROLE OF BIRDS IN ANCIENT ROME

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What is a modern approach to a history of birds in ancient cultures? Is it a history of scientific views concerning the subject; a cumulative compilation of different sources that mention birds in philosophy, literature, poems etc.; a history of ideas or metaphors concerning birds; or a study of archaeological objects and documents? In addition: what kind of outline is necessary and useful? Previous approaches sometimes preferred a glossary such as D.W. Thompson's *Glossary of Greek Birds* (1936). Newer studies try an interdisciplinary outline such as J. Pollard's *Birds in Greek Life and Myth* (1977). It is difficult to manage the heterogeneous material in a few chapters.

Prima facie G. focuses on the Roman period of 100 BCE to 100 CE and offers 'Global Perspectives on Ancient Mediterranean Archaeology' as indicated by the series title. But the volume contains more manageable chapters, as the contents list shows: augural birds, farming and aviculture, fowling and bird-catching, and last but not least 'pets and pleasure'. These chapters lead from myth to emotions. G. works with a praxeological approach and starts in the midst of Roman society within different fields of interaction with birds. Thus, the volume is not a history of ideas, of science or of literature mentioning birds. But all the chapters integrate these aspects and take different perspectives into account. For instance, the book includes new studies in 'archeo-ornithology' to reconstruct beliefs and values as well as the problem of 'ornithomorphism' – using birds in everyday life and language as symbols and metaphors. The study of J. Mynott, *Birds in the Ancient World* (2018) was influential. 'This Roman ornithomorphism is explored throughout this book, in order to understand how birds were used to communicate ideas, values, and social differences' (p. 3).

G. is acquainted with the various problems of a 'multidisciplinary approach' (p. 4) by means of sources in literature and art, in zooarchaeology and in scientific ornithology. One problem is to identify the birds in Roman literature precisely, another problem is not to generalise an 'elite perspective' (p. 5) as representative of an everyday life with birds. Thus, a critical view is necessary on classical sources such as Aristotle, Pliny the Elder and Aelian concerning common bird knowledge, or on Cato, Varro and Columella concerning birds in agriculture. But why should we focus on this particular period? Firstly, it may be answered that it fills a gap in the literature. Secondly, it can be asserted that there is a 'dramatic