A Roman jurist, Callistratus, wrote around about AD 200 that ‘Old age has always been revered in our state.’ But a philosopher whom we know only as Jambucus and of whose writings only a few fragments survive wrote slightly earlier in the course of the 2nd century that even to his friends and relatives an old man is ‘an oppressive, painful, grievous and decrepit spectacle in short, an Iliad of woes.’ That a range of views about old age and elderly people is held in the modern world does not surprise us; neither should we expect anything other than that a wide range of images, attitudes and ideas about ageing and older people survive from classical antiquity, arguably one of human history’s richest and more imaginative periods in terms of artistic and philosophical endeavour. The Greeks and Romans observed the realities of ageing and thought creatively about the position of older people within their societies, and the ideas and images they generated have had enormous influence in the Western world, for better or for worse, in the millennia that have followed.

The scholar Isidore of Seville summed up the variety of classical experiences and images thus: ‘Old age brings with it many things, some good, some bad. Good, since it frees us from the most violent of masters; it imposes a limit on pleasures, it softens the force of lust, it increases wisdom, and it grants wiser counsels. Bad, however, because advanced old age is most wretched in terms of both the disabilities it inflicts and the loathing it incurs.’ But even the notion that for everyone old age is good until it turns bad is of course heavily generalized. As Seneca the Younger observed in the 1st century AD, ‘There is not one type of old age for all people.’ Everyone experiences old age differently. The reality for individuals—and not just for philosophers—may also be inferred from inscriptions and documents, and again, variety of experience and of perception is evident. One man who died at the age of 50 years in the middle of the 3rd century AD in the province of Roman Mauretania (modern Algeria) had it recorded on his tombstone that he died ‘in the flower of youth’. On the other hand, an orphaned male minor and his guardian in Roman Egypt recorded in a petition against the boy’s paternal grandfather’s sister that she is already extremely old; apparently she has lived more than 60 years.\(^\text{16}\)
Experiences and attitudes vary; old age was a prospect awaited with mixed emotions. A tombstone inscription from Ravenna, dated palaeographically to the 1st century AD, expresses this well: 'Gaius Iulius Mygdonius, a Parthian by race, born a free man, captured in youth and given over into Roman territory. When I was made a Roman citizen, at fate's command I collected up a nest-egg for the day I should reach 50 years of age. I sought from puberty to achieve my old age; now receive me, rock, willingly, with you I shall be released from care.'

From the classical Mediterranean civilizations of the Greeks and Romans, many depictions of older people have survived, both in iconographic and written forms. While not infrequently old age was glorified or idealized, in some depictions no attempt was made to disguise aspects which might be regarded today as less appealing. In some periods of classical art, particularly in the later Roman republic, the wrinkles and rigours of old age were presented with pride and a marked lack of self-consciousness; in other times the depiction of aged individuals, particularly of women, may strike us as hideously cruel. It is even reported that the painter Parrhasius tortured and killed an aged slave as a model for a painting of Prometheus, whom Zeus as punishment had chained to a rock and had an eagle devour his liver each day.

Life is complex; attitudes to life are varied. Attempts to determine realities and attitudes from literature and art from a distance of two millennia (give or take 500 years) require much care and caution. As diverse as the views may be from Greece and Rome, it must always be remembered that we are heavily reliant on elite male perceptions.

Ideal and reality: Greek art of the classical period idealized the human body and created standardized types according to the nature of the man or woman being portrayed: the philosopher, the soldier, the mariner, and so on. In the Hellenistic and Roman periods this yielded to realism, a change particularly marked in the depiction of old people. Right: Homer, conforming to the stereotype of the venerable inspired poet (Roman copy of a Greek original). Opposite: the closely observed figure of an old shepherdless bears all the marks of age and hardship, yet she walks with dignity.
It is also worth noting from the outset that while in this first chapter we are dealing with a vast period of history (in literary terms, well over a millennium from the epics of Homer in Greece's early archaic history to the elegies of Alcaeus in the 6th century BC), we cannot map any meaningful chronological development in attitudes towards age or sex. It is not true, for example, that the Greeks cherished old age and the Romans detested it, as has sometimes been claimed. There is variety over both time and space (with the classical world we are also dealing with a huge geographical area: the Mediterranean basin and beyond, from Britain to Bactria), and marked differences between one time and place and another are as likely to be the result of the nature of the evidence, or its place of origin, as of any difference in reality.

With these caveats in mind, we can explore prevalent themes that emerge from the art and literature of the Greeks and Romans. But first we must consider how many old people there were in ancient times and, even more fundamentally, exactly what 'old age', or the Greek or Latin equivalents, actually meant.

The steady gaze of an elderly woman from Roman Egypt typifies the Hellenistic respect for truth. This is a funerary portrait and truth is what mattered. This woman's advanced age is indicated not only by the grey hair and prominent lines round the mouth and neck, but by a face full of character and personality.

Seneca was in his sixties when he died, a renowned philosopher and a strict moralist. In this highly expressionistic bust (1st century AD) the signs of ageing are not disguised, but neither is the independence of spirit that enabled him to die—committing suicide on Nero's orders with the assurance that he had always professed.
we were to believe the ancient testimonia, people lived a lot longer than they do today. Whole races of people, mostly far distant if not mythical, were credited with fantastic lifespans. Ages of 300 or 500 years feature in classical literature for pseudo-historical individuals, while lives of several centuries, if not of eternity, were attributed to mythical characters such as Tithonus, Teiresias and the Sibyls. From Homer comes the epitome of old age throughout classical times, the pagan equivalent of Methuselah: Nestor, king of Pylas, who outlived three generations—see as it came to be commonly understood, three lifetimes or centuries. From the Old Testament we are familiar enough with fabulous ages, up to 1,000 years, being attributed to individuals from the past. St. Augustine argued that despite the incredulity of many, the fabulous ages attributed to figures from the Old Testament were to be believed literally; he noted that in the days of Genesis people ‘lived such a long time that they did not think a man of one hundred years was old’.

Old age was conventionally associated with wisdom, from at least the time of Homer’s Nestor, and Homer himself was said to have lived to a ripe old age. In art elderly men were often depicted as suitably venerable and wise. The Seven Sages of Greece were credited with extended (and usually rounded) lifespans: Myron of Chios was 97 years old when he died, we are told, while Pittacus’ age is variously recorded as from 70 to 100 years; Cleobulus of Lindos was 70 years, Periander of Corinth 80 years, the Athenian Solon is usually credited with 90 years, though one source says 100, while Thales is variously recorded as dying at 78, 90 or 100. Likewise the somewhat nebulous figure of Pythagoras in the 6th century BC is usually credited with 80 or 90 years, though one ancient source records that he lived in fine fettle to his 117th year, thanks to a special potion made of vinegar of squill (sea onion). This confusion concerning ages at death is a common one, and it is clear that the longevity of someone long dead, especially someone notable, might be exaggerated as time passed and as circumstances suited.

Conventional images of a limited range of human types—the old man (left), the slave, the matron, etc.—were used in the Greek and Roman theatre, even though the characters themselves might be very subtly differentiated.
The wisdom of old age was personified for the Greeks in the figure of Nestor, King of Pylos. He was reputed to have lived through three generations, so presumably lived to 90 or 100. Here, on a Greek vase painting of the 4th century BC, he is seen with Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, who visited him after the Trojan War seeking information about his father.
The Athenian people represented themselves symbolically as a wise old man. On this stele, inscribed with a law safeguarding the rights of the people passed in 536 BC, he is being crowned by the figure of Democracy.

Nevertheless, on reaching more historical times, there is ample evidence of people surviving into their 90s and beyond, and often there are few obvious reasons to doubt the figures quoted. It is very important to realize that, despite the 'demographic transition' following the Industrial Revolution and despite the advances in medicine in the last century, people do not live significantly longer today than they did in the historical past. In classical times, dying when one was in one's 60s or beyond was regarded as natural; to die younger was usually seen as a harsh and unnatural fate, as both literary and epigraphic testimony bears witness. Indeed, for a parent to witness the death of an offspring was regarded as an ill-fated but not uncommon consequence of old age.

Herodotus has King Croesus memorably remark: 'In peace sons bury their fathers, in war fathers bury their sons,' but that brings in other considerations. The Greek satirist Lucian is much more cynical. In his work *On Grief* a son at his own funeral is imagined as responding to his aged father's grief, pointing out the positive features of dying young: he will not have to grow old, to look like his father (head bald, face wrinkled, back bent, knees trembling); by dying young, he will not be scorned in old age, nor will the sight of him offend the young.
The biblical 'three score years and ten' was held to be a general figure for a good age, not a particularly extended one. At the age of 62 Cicero, in dedicating his philosophical treatise *Cato the Elder; On Old Age* to his friend Atticus (aged 65 at the time), noted that old age was now 'pressing on or at least approaching' them both; by no means did they regard themselves as exceptionally old. Very high levels of infant mortality meant that life expectancy at birth was indeed low in the worlds of ancient Greece and Rome. But if you survived your first years, there was a good chance that you would go on to live to be at least 60. It emerges that in antiquity ideas about old age in purely chronological terms were not so different from our own today, while some poets might express horror at the emergence of grey hairs on their head when they were only 40 or so years old, most writers seem to have assumed that you were old once you were in your 60s. No stricter line of demarcation need be expected, especially as there were no general institutionalized schemes of retirement or pensions in ancient times.

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Concern for truth makes the Roman portrait bust virtually unique in the ancient world. Here we come face to face with a living person at the end of the 1st century BC. There are virtually no pretty young girls, but hundreds of interesting mature women, their character and age vividly conveyed with dignity and psychological insight.
Philosophers were almost by definition old men. A Roman mosaic (above), probably derived from a Greek painting, shows Plato’s ‘Academy’ in Athens. He sits in the centre under the tree and seems to be drawing a geometrical figure in the sand. In a box at his feet is a celestial sphere, and there is a sundial on the column behind.
Achilles’ tutor, according to Homer, was a wise man called Phoenix, represented (above) in a mosaic of the 2nd century AD in the familiar guise of a bearded elderly man.

Yet another common myth about the classical past is that older individuals enjoyed something of a golden age when they were treated with great respect and held primary authority over political, religious and social spheres. For some, to be sure, old age was not an unhappy or unaccomplished time. We know of many individuals in the ancient world—politicians, writers, priests, prophets and philosophers—who admired their active old age. Instances of successful older individuals, or generalized pictures of wise and active old age, need to be assessed in terms of degrees of idealization or reality, however. Literature provides a host of images, positive and negative. Philosophers attributed old age’s perceived negative features to people’s dissipated youth and stressed the boons of ageing, not least in the political sphere. Cicero’s treatise On Old Age is one very powerful statement to that effect, but Cicero’s insistence that old men make the best and wisest rulers needs to be read in the context of the time; it was written in a period when Cicero felt his own powerbase ebbing, and when the traditional republic itself was on the brink of collapse. He wrote his treatise in 44 BC, the same year as Julius Caesar’s assassination; it was also the year following his beloved daughter Tullia’s death. Nor is Cicero’s work the only ancient treatise on old age; dozens of other works are just as important to the overall picture. Not surprisingly, images of and opinions about older people cover a wide range, from cheerfully positive to bitterly negative.
This makes it all the more evident, in my opinion, that when it comes to political and social realities, old age did not automatically confer the respect and authority that some felt it deserved. Most power, and indeed most wealth, in the ancient world lay with younger generations. From the aristocracy down to the lower-class family and slaves, the realities of life for older people hinged predominantly on one factor: the individual's ability to remain a functioning member of his or her society, be it as a leading politician or as a childminder. In the absence of any form of state welfare or healthcare (as we shall see), responsibility for supporting older individuals rested with their immediate kin.

Classical literature abounds with statements about the respect and care owed by children to their parents, not least in the latter's old age. The picture is not straightforward, since for most aristocratic authors financial security in their later years was almost taken for granted. But ideals emerge. Clearly, from the time of Homer onwards it was seen as a duty for children to care for their parents in their time of need and dependence, basically in the form of repaying the debt of nurture. The duty in many classical societies was traditionally seen as a moral one, at times enforced or reinforced by law. In classical Athens of the 5th and 4th centuries BC, for example, children had a legal as well as a moral obligation to maintain their parents in their old age. The Athenian statute, attributed to Solon, stated that he who did not support

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(trephine) his parents was to be atimos, deprived of citizen rights—in Athens, it was sometimes felt, a sentence second only to death. Children accused of maltreatment of parents were liable under a charge which any third party could bring without risk of penalty, if they withdrew or lost the case. Furthermore, ‘Do you treat your parents well?’ was one of the questions asked of a candidate for public office. Athenians seem to have taken their duty seriously.

Nor was it simply a case of refraining from maltreating one’s parents; positive services were also expected, such as the provision of food and shelter, and the observation of due rites after death. Such a duty, we are told, was laid on all offspring. The only exceptions were those who had not been properly reared by their parents—the reciprocal nature of the arrangement was what mattered. Hence, those who had not been taught a trade by their fathers; those born as bastards and those hired out by their fathers as prostitutes were not regarded as legally bound to support their parents. With an eye to the future, therefore, there was a strong motivation for adults to have children or, failing that possibility, to adopt them. Certainly the child’s (moral) duty persisted, as the 2nd century AD Stoic philosopher Hierokles makes clear in his ethical fragments, discussing proper conduct towards parents: ‘For our parents, therefore, we should provide food freely, and such as is fitting for the weakness of old age; besides this, a bed, sleep, oil, a bath, and clothing—in short, general physical necessities, so that they should never lack any of these things; thus we imitate the care they took in rearing ourselves when we were infants.’ In another passage, he discusses the benefits of marriage, among which is the fact that it produces children who help us now while we are strong, and when we are worn out, crushed by old age, they will be fine allies.¹⁴

But there were potentially negative aspects to such a system as well as beneficial ones: older people could be seen to be totally dependent on the younger generation and lose their power when they no longer held the purse strings. Such, for example, is the situation described in Aristophanes’ *Wasps*, where the son, Idlykleon, is depicted as the master of the house and his aged father, Philokleon, is shown reduced to childlike dependency. Idlykleon promises support for his father, but there is a marked lack of any filial respect here: ‘I’ll support him, providing everything that’s suitable for an old man: gruel to lick up, a soft thick cloak, a goatskin mantle, a where to massage his prick and his loins.’ As Philokleon later complains, he is being treated like a child by his own son—a complete reversal of roles. ‘At the moment I’m not in control of my own property, because I’m young and I’m closely watched; my little son keeps his eye on me and he’s mean-tempered, and a cross-purine cumin-splitter into the bargain.’¹⁵
It was the duty of a son to care for his father. Aesop was in this respect a model son. His rescue of Anchises, carrying him on his back from burning Troy, was a favourite subject of classical art; a vase painting of about 510 BC.

This is of course a scene from a stage comedy, not a direct depiction of real life, but its sardonic humour surely draws on an underlying reality; that an aged father could be treated in this way by his own son. Philokleon’s complaint of being treated like a child is reminiscent (as an ancient scholiast also realized) of a common proverb, to be found not only in Attic comedy but in classical literature in general, that old age is a second childhood. The life course, in other words, has come full circle.

The logic behind such a metaphor, if indeed any underlying logic is to be expected, may be partly explained by the observation of the physical and mental decline experienced by many elderly individuals and the dependence on others brought about by this; it is, of course, a timeless image, still current today. In Athens, in economic terms at any rate, old people may have been seen as children for the very reason that they had lost their independence and, like Philokleon, felt themselves to be prisoners in their own (or rather their children’s) homes.

The prevailing attitude in ancient times—and it is one that is becoming ever more familiar again in Western societies—was that it was your own responsibility to ensure that you would be taken care of in your old age. Children were the primary line of defence. Failing that, it might be hoped that your spouse would be capable of providing aid, or at least companionship. Ultimately, you must look to your own resources.

While in Athenian society legislation existed to ensure that children typically looked after their parents, in Rome no such specific legislation is evident; at most, by the 2nd century AD, a judge may require a son or daughter, on the complaint of a parent, to ensure the latter’s livelihood if the young person is financially capable. In the Roman context we are usually talking about the oldest living male descendant, the father or paternal grandfather; the Roman paterfamilias, it may be supposed, could look forward to a secure old age, as property owner and ultimate authority in the family. But senile dementia might have altered this image. The physical disabilities of old age tend to be the focus of ancient literature, but an awareness of the mental drawbacks that might come with old age is also there. That the head of the Roman household retained legal control until his death is explicit in the ancient testimony, but this stranglehold on power might be tempered when the abilities of that person to run the family effectively were called into question. A Roman son could in effect circumvent the legal restrictions placed on him by acting as the curatrix of his own father. It seems plausible that in practice, to avoid such extremes, children were granted an independent role in the running of the house as the father grew older. The tacit agreement would have been that such independence would be repaid when the father and mother were themselves in a state of increasing dependency. Looking at it another way, this legal remedy might also be held to have had the potential effect of placing the parent in a position of childlike dependency.10
Modern demographic methods and tools may be utilized in a computer simulation to create an imaginary life-course history, to trace individuals within a defined age range as they age. Modeling a likely population for the Graeco-Roman world, based on high mortality and fertility constraints, it is striking how relatively rarely three generations of a family would have been coexistent (let alone living in the same house). For example, assuming a model in which average life expectancy at birth is 25 years and in which males marry at an average age of 30, females at 20, then it can be calculated that at birth only one in three individuals had their maternal grandfather or paternal grandmother still alive, only one in two had their maternal grandmother still alive and, even more striking, only one in six or seven individuals had at birth a living paternal grandfather. By the age of ten years, the average ancient individual had only a one-in-two chance of having any of his grandparents alive. Fewer than one in a hundred Greeks or Romans of the age of 20 would have had a surviving paternal grandfather.

Erected reunion with his son
Odysseus after twenty years is one of the most powerfully emotional scenes in Homer, confirming the Greeks' reverence for the father-son relationship: a detail of a terracotta relief of about 500 BC.
The difference in terms of paternal and maternal lines is fairly easy to explain, in view of the different average marriage ages of males and females. A woman might become a grandmother by her daughter when the latter was in her late teens, and hence when the grandmother herself was not yet 40 years of age. (Note the scene on the mid-5th century BC Athenian tombstone of Ampharet, with the inscription: 'Here I hold my daughter’s child, my darling, whom once I held on my knee when we were both alive and saw the light of the sun; now I am dead and hold her, dead too.') A man would not normally expect to become a paternal grandfather on the other hand, before the age of around 60. In short, at any particular moment in most people’s life courses, living ascendants on the maternal side of the family must have been more common, relatively speaking, than on the paternal side. On the other hand, it must be added, most adult Greeks or Romans would have had only shadowy memories of their grandparents, paternal or maternal. It is a fact that we encounter grandparents in the literary testimony from the ancient world surprisingly rarely, and most references are to the commemoration or listing of deceased ancestors. But even taking into account demographic considerations, grandparents feature more rarely as, for example, dedications on Latin commemorative tombstone inscriptions than we might otherwise have expected; the nuclear family was the focus of obligations and of affection in the classical world.
Merchants and tradesmen commemorated themselves as freely as emperors and noblemen. The elderly Amphilochus, who traded in corn in the 1st century AD, included his own shrewd features on his tomb between those of his wife and daughter.

Cato the Stoic was regarded as the ideal of old age, and is made the spokesman of Cicero's 'De Senectute', the best-known treatment of the subject in antiquity. He was a man of the strictest moral principles, maintaining a dominant presence until his death in 149 BC at the age of 85. The identification of this pair of busts, made as late as the 2nd century AD, is uncertain and may represent his equally famous great-grandson Cato the Younger and his daughter Porcia. An opponent of Julius Caesar, he was defeated in battle and committed suicide in 46 BC. Porcia was married to Brutus, another enemy of Caesar, and is said (though this is disputed) to have also taken her own life after Brutus's death.
The reality was not always quite that straightforward, however, at least in terms of an individual's entire life course. While the traditional image of the extended family as dominant in antiquity (and beyond) has been effectively quashed by recent historians of the family, it must still be realized that it would have been inevitable that, at some points in the lifecycle of a household, some more distant relatives (including grandparents, paternal and maternal, and grandchildren) often remained within the family home, especially among the lower classes and away from the city.²⁸ Multi-generational households, though rarely mentioned in the written sources, would not have been so very unusual. For example, from the extant sample of around 320 copies of Roman Egyptian census returns, we have nine examples of upwardly-extended families where a husband's or, less frequently, wife's mother or father resides with the younger family. They range in age from 50 to 73 years (in two of these cases the age is lost); on three occasions it is the older person who files the return.²⁹ The moral duty of caring for one's aged parents may have extended, therefore, to sharing one's roof with them – possibly the elderly relations could perform functions such as childminding, although the presence of slaves in the household may have both provided independent support for older family members and, conversely, made some of the traditional roles of grandparents in pre-industrial societies redundant in the ancient context.³² As a result of demographic realities, at any rate, any three-generational living arrangements would usually have been of a short-term nature anyway.

Outside of the home, what roles did older people play? In political terms, gerontocracy was neither widespread nor common in the ancient world. The ancient system in the conservative state of Sparta is cited with approval, by Cicero and by others, Greek and Roman, for the way that pre-eminence was given to the aged. Sparta’s gerontes, whose members were at least 60 years old, is as close as antiquity came to a gerontocracy, but even there the power of the gerontes was not absolute, and younger officials, the ephors, over time came to hold greater power. Furthermore, Aristotle for one noted the risks in giving power to men subject to the potential liabilities of old age. In democratic Athens age carried no obvious privilege, and in Rome monarchical authority—emperors (young or old) apart—tended to lie with senators in their 40s and 50s.

If the participation of the aged person in public affairs was at times debated, his or her role in religious practices was not, and this can itself be interpreted as a mark of marginalization: the religious role of elderly women in ancient societies is particularly relevant.³⁵ Prophets and seers in literature were often depicted as marginal members of society: women and aged men. Plato and Aristotle both remarked that in their ideal states religious duties would be reserved for those in old age.³¹ In the Roman state the paterfamilias, as the senior male member
of the household, had the duty to observe the customary religious rites, the worship of Lares and Penates (household gods) and ancestors. Priests at Rome need not be old, though the office normally lasted for life, and, in line with traditional ideas of respect for age, seniority would normally be expected to be given to the oldest member of the college, or at least to the individual who had belonged to the college the longest. The impression remains, however, here as elsewhere, that the continued activity of older people depended on their proven capability to perform the duties required. As marginal members of society any rights they held were far from automatic, but had to be won and maintained through continued performance. What may appear at first sight as privileges, such as a greater degree of freedom for women in later life (for example, in Athens, to attend funerals), in many cases should be more closely defined as representing a diminution of status and a lack of concern by other sectors of society.
While the image of wise old men (and the focus is very much male) is common in classical literature and some ancient art, corresponding negative stereotypes of old age and of elderly people – particularly of women – are widespread and powerful. As a rule classical literature tended to focus on upper-class males (young and old), but a great deal of ink was spent on stereotypical aged females, not uncommonly portrayed in the most virulent and obscene terms as sex crazed witches or alcoholics. Besides being unpleasant, this points to marginalization in terms of both age and gender. Past reproducing, older women might be dismissed as non-functioning members of society.

The bitterly negative, often extremely personal indictment of old age, especially in satirical and erotic poetry, had a long history which the Roman writers of the early empire adopted willingly and enthusiastically; the tradition in Latin literature extends in painful, clinical and – in my view – rather dreary detail to the six elegies on old age and love written in the 6th century AD by Maximianus.26
Inventive against old age, then, has a very long history. It may be traced back almost as far as Homer — and some claim to have found it in Homer too. The early 6th century Greek poet Minos (Mimnermus) in particular dwells, with heavy and sentimental self-pity, on the flight of time, the loss of youthful pleasures and the hatefulness of old age.

In Greek tragedy and comedy alike old people (especially women) regularly — though, of course, not invariably — come in for unflattering, if not harsh, treatment. On the Roman stage, particularly in the plays of Plautus, every conceivable negative quality associated with old age is highlighted, with special emphasis on the old man’s sexual, though impotent, proclivities. But other, more ‘serious’ portrayals may also be adduced.

In the pseudo-Platonic *Ariosteus* (traditionally said to date from the 1st century BC), for example, *consolation* is required for *Ariosteus* as he is on the point of death. As one of his arguments, Socrates states, quite conventionally, that death should not be feared but rather welcomed, since no age in life is exempt from pain and hence death is a blessed release. As part of this argument, he quotes from a discourse given (we are told) by the Sophist Pradikas, in which are described the effects of nature on the aged frame, a force which it is pointless to resist.
Little sympathy is evident for a deformed dwarf from Alexandria, 3rd-2nd century BC. The fact that he is also an old man doubtless made him seem farther.

Then, undetected, there steals over you old age, into which all things pernicious and deadly in nature flow together. And if you do not hasten to give up your life as a debt due, Nature, like a petty usurer, steps in and grabs her pledge—your sight, your hearing, often both. And if you hold out, she paralyses you, mutilates and tears asunder.]

Again it is the physical disabilities associated with old age that are stressed, though Socrates does go on to comment on afflictions of the mind as well, saying that old age is a second childhood (a theme we have already seen). In a similar vein but with added complaints, Xenophon has Socrates in his Apologia at the age of 70 years declare that his daimon or guiding spirit had not offered any sure defence against death for the simple reason that it was not in Socrates' interests to survive any further into old age because of all its negative attributes: loss of hearing and sight, no longer being able to learn but becoming forgetful, general discontent—"old age, on which all troubles, all privations of comfort, concur to fall... the most burdensome part of life."
Old age’s stereotyped negative repercussions were noted most clinically, perhaps, by Aristotle. The main factor stressed is the old person’s wary, pessimistic manner, having lived a long life and made many mistakes, he (and again the focus is on the male) is overly cautious, always using words like ‘perhaps’ or ‘maybe’—unlike the young man who has yet to learn life’s knocks and who therefore overdoes everything and lives to excess. This is in direct contrast to the traditional notion that a long life brings with it wisdom, unless one classifies such an attitude as embodying wisdom. Older people are, we are told by Aristotle, overly pessimistic, distrustful, malicious, suspicious and small-minded because they have been humbled by life and so their greatest hopes are raised to nothing more than staying alive. They lack generosity, are cowardly and always anticipating danger (old age paves the way for cowardice), and yet they also love life to excess, especially on their last day of life. As a character in a satire by Lucian remarked to an aged beggar half a millennium later, ‘men as old as you are such lovers of life, men who ought to be eager for death as a remedy for the evils of old age.’

The signs of old age do not diminish the dignity of this so-called ‘old fisherman’ (left, a Roman copy of a late 3rd-century BC original. The body is black marble; the hair and eyes are real. The drapery is alabaster. By contrast the little terracotta slave (right) appears pathetically vulnerable.
Aristotle's diatribe continues. Older people are too fond not just of life, but also of themselves, a symptom of their petty-mindedness. Always their concern is with what is useful rather than with what is fine or noble. Instead of being shy (as the young are), they are shameless, caring more for profit than for honor, and taking no heed of what people might think of them. Older people, Aristotle states, dwell on and live in the past, dependent on memory rather than hope — their past is long, their future short and uncertain. Thus they continually talk about the past, to the point of garrulity. They are also prone to fits of anger, but even in this they are unsuccessful — such fits are feeble, since all passions have either become enervated or have disappeared altogether. Older people lead their lives more by cold logic (linked to utility) than by moral feeling (linked to arête, moral excellence).

Pettiness is at the heart of the old man's actions and emotions. Both old and young are capable of feeling pity, but for different reasons: the young out of philia, the old out of weakness, since the aged man imagines that anything unfortunate that happens to another could easily happen to himself. Hence again older people's miserable pessimism: they are not witty or given to laughter or general pleasures — old age has taken away all such qualities.

The picture Aristotle presents here is a depressing one, unrelieved as it is by any mention of positive qualities inherent in older people. It is not that he is unaware of any such positive attributes, only that he is providing a generalized description, for rhetorical purposes, of three stages of life, and it is the negative characteristics that distinguish youth and old age from those at their prime, the ideal middle. If Aristotle was clinical, he would have one hundred lines of satire directed against those who pray for a long life remain most memorable, and focus particularly on the obvious ailments and inadequacies — lack of senses as well as of good sense — advancing age may bring. Pray not for a long life, he insists, but for a healthy mind in a healthy body: meoma soma in corpore sano. Such positive physical and mental attributes were not routinely associated with old age in ancient thought, medical or general.

While the afflictions old age may bring were well appreciated by the ancient writers, regarding causes the literature is less pragmatic. Medical writers attributed aspects of old age to bad habits in one's youth, but they realized that ageing is inevitable. The most common theory to be found in the extant ancient literature, both medical and philosophical, on the cause of ageing is that in time the body loses its innate heat and fluid, its life force or pneuma (like a lamp running out of oil). Hence the infant is warm and moist while the older person — like a corpse — is cold and dry. In other words, ageing is a cooling and drying process, and the desiccation of the heart and liver leads to death. Just as during an illness, in old age the balance of the four humours has been lost: blood and yellow bile are lacking, phlegm and black bile
(melancholy) are abundant. As heat dissipates, the body takes longer to recover from illness and injury, but for the same reason symptoms such as fever become less acute in older people, as does activity in general.2

Twice in the Hippocratic corpus there appears another theory, namely that the elderly person is cold, but humid or moist (rather than dry). This counter-theory is soundly and insistently refuted by the later medical writer Galen: the mistake is due, he remarks, to the external appearance of moisture about the old person—roughing, a runny nose and the like—but these are merely an abundance of external, phlegmatic secretions or residue of humidity and are not to be taken as an indication of the innate condition of the elderly individual.

A curious pathology is given in this Hellenistic sculpture (opposite) of the philosopher Chrysippos: curiously because he is said to have died, aged around 89, either from excessive wine-drinking or from laughing too much. He was a widely read apologist for Stoicism, but also gained a (possibly undeserved) reputation for eccentricity.

Another philosopher, Diogenes the Cynic (right), lived to be 96. The Cynics owed their name to their supposedly dog-like indifference to human concerns (note the dog by Diogenes' side). Such indifference, however, won him as much admiration as contempt. This figure is a Roman copy of a Greek original.
This idea that old age is cold often recurs in general literature also. As for its dryness, old age is regularly described as having been drained of the moist (and hot) humour of blood (note, for example, the image of the dry and shrunken Sibyl). What blood the ageing body does have is thin and icy-cold, an image Virgil well evokes in the person of Furtellus: ‘My blood is chilled and dulled by sluggish old age.’ Galen noted that the coldness of old age affects not only the body but also the mind: ‘So why do many people become demented when they reach extreme old age, a period which has been shown to be dry? This is not a result of dryness, but of coldness. For this clearly damages all the activities of the soul.’ Old age, it was concluded, destroys everything.

Furthermore, because ageing was conventionally seen as a process of desiccation, those who were by nature very humid were held to have the greatest chance of a long life. With similar logic it was stated that men, being warmer, age more slowly than women and hence live longer (the latter observation may well often have been accurate in the ancient world, though for other reasons). At any rate, physical exertion dries one out and so hard-working people age more quickly; for the same reason, we are told, excessive indulgence in sexual intercourse is deleterious to the ageing frame.

It was a literary commonplace, adopted by the Pythagoreans in a system of four ages which mirror the four humours, that old age is like winter, at least in its coldness. Part of the theory was that one felt best in the season appropriate or complementary, that is, opposite, to one’s age. So it was observed that summer and early autumn were the seasons in which older people might thrive, and winter was the season they should avoid as best they could.

To counter the dryness and coldness of old age, it is necessary to restore the balance of the humours, to give warmth and humidity to the body. Finding a means to warm and moisten the body was the chief aim of what geriatric medicine there was in the ancient world (‘the geronomic art,’ as Galen calls it). It was something of a commonplace in antiquity to state that old age was itself a disease; in fact, Seneca the Younger stated that old age was an incurable disease. In the 2nd century AD Galen for one disagreed, vigorously: while diseases are contrary to nature, old age is a natural process, just as to die of old age is natural. Therefore, Galen insists, old age, despite what some say, is not a disease... but, he goes on to note, it is also not complete health either. Rather old age has a state of health peculiar to itself and this may be maintained through a moderate lifestyle. Hence it was apparently common practice for physicians to recommend a particular regimen or ‘diet’ which older individuals should follow. Indeed, dietetics was one of the main traditional divisions of ancient medical therapy, the others being pharmacology and surgery.
provides abundant material on the subject, considerably more detailed than anything that precedes it and of considerable influence on treatments of the subject over the following centuries. Galen’s concern is with lifestyle, not just diet. His recommendations incorporate massage and gentle exercise—too much and too little, depending upon the constitution of the patient; if strong enough, the elderly patient should engage in horse-riding and ball-throwing, or travel on a ship or in a litter; if bedridden, reading aloud is highly beneficial. Galen recommends for the older patient the right amount of sleep (good for moistening and warming the body) and tepid baths (two or three times a month, but never if bedridden). Blood-letting, according to Galen, is good for stronger patients up to the age of 70, though it is not recommended for the very elderly, who, Galen adds, need every drop of blood that they have. As to diet, older people, we are told, need little food, which is just as well since most food items were not recommended or permitted. Some foods are beneficial (plums are good as laxatives for the older patient, according to Galen), but many others are dangerous (such as cheese, hard-boiled eggs, snails, lentils, mushrooms and many vegetables). Fish is generally good, as are some types of soft bread. Lean meat, especially young goat’s flesh, is useful, but not pork.
Herakles' encounter with Old Age (Geras) is depicted on a number of vases (below) but is nowhere described in the literature. Here on a vase from Cerveteri, 480 BC, Geras is shown as a thin, naked old man, and presumably the symbolism is that Herakles, by conquering him, does not grow old.

The old miser was a stock character in the New Comedy. This Greek vase of the mid-4th century BC shows 'Clarinus' being dragged off his money chest by two thieves, all wearing the conventional masks. Later Plautus borrowed the same plot for one of his Latin comedies.
What should the elderly person drink? Water was not recommended, nor was milk. Apparently the latter was believed to rot aged teeth and gums; for older individuals, however, Galen does specifically recommend human breast milk and warm donkey’s milk, or milk mixed with honey; he mentions that he himself met one farmer who survived beyond the century mark thanks to goat’s milk mixed with honey and wine. Wine, the gift of Dionysus, is particularly commended, and in the name of science Galen devoted much study to the question of which wines were best for medicinal purposes. Wine could have positively rejuvenating effects. Indeed, it was proverbial in antiquity that wine makes an old man dance, even against his will. Wine makes the body warm and, Galen adds, it also serves to counter the sadness and anxieties that long life may bring. Concrete examples of the benefits of wine-drinking may also be found: Augustus’ wife Livia attributed her long life (which lasted to be 86) to the wine of Pucinnum in northern Italy, and Romilius Pollio, an otherwise unknown centenarian from the time of Augustus, credited his aged vigour (as well as, perhaps, his succinct wit) to honeyed wine within and oil without (intus melos, foris oleo). 57 Certainly, for some old age had its pleasures.
This brings us back to Cicero. We saw at the beginning of this chapter Isidore's summation of the pros and cons of old age; in his On Old Age ... Cicero, via the aged interlocutor Cato the Elder, presented four aspects of old age with which people commonly found fault. Very briefly, they were that (i) old age slows you doing what you did when you were younger (what a blessing!), retorts Cato/Cicero; (ii) old age weakens the body (good— one can devote oneself more to one's mind); (iii) old age lacks pleasures (good—it is easier to be wise and virtuous then); and (iv) old age is not far from death. The sense of Cicero's reply to this last vituperatio is, in true Stoic fashion, 'Death, where is thy sting?' As Plato's Socrates had observed hundreds of years earlier, there is nothing to fear in death. 

The link between old age and death is an inevitable and ever-present one in ancient art and literature. In Greek and Roman mythology personified youth was worshipped or at least glorified. Old Age enjoyed no such prestige. In Hesiod's Theogony, 'Hateful Old Age' (Geras) is the offspring of Night, and has as siblings Doom, Fate, Death, Sleep, Blame, Nemesis and Deceit, among others. The references to Geras/Senectus in literature are several, and virtually identical. Old Age is one of a hideous troope, incorporating all the malevolent features of life: grief, misery, disease, hunger, discord, envy, fear, poverty, greed, war and the like, normally relegated to the Underworld but all too often unleashed on frail mortals. The contrast with desirable youth could not be more evident: old age is feared rather than worshipped. In art, one of Herakles' (Hercules') lesser-known labours was battling against personified old age, typically an emaciated figure with grotesquely swollen but flaccid genitals. Aside from this episode, Geras plays little role in classical myths. The exception proves the rule, itself not overly surprising, that old age as a personified concept to the Greeks and Romans merited not worship but awe, if not dread.

Old age, as the final stage of life rather than as a personality in its own right, does feature in the mythological depictions of mortal heroes and villains, but not of gods, who are held to be ageless and immortal, an honour on rare occasions also accorded to privileged mortals. Many grotesque figures from mythology, such as the Furies and the Fates, are old and haggard for the very reason, however, that this will invoke fear in the hearts of mortals; some of the most fearsome and loathsome creatures might in fact be classified as old spinsters (the Graeae, for example), a sign of their complete isolation or marginality from 'normal' society.

Overleaf:
Medusa preparing to rejuvenate
Pelias, a vase-painting of about 500 BC.
For the full story see p. 68.
Medea, the sorceress determined to avenge the injuries suffered by her lover Jason from King Pelias by offering to restore the aged king to his youth. To prove that she could do this she cut an old ram into pieces, boiled them in a cauldron and then restored it to life as a young lamb. This is the scene depicted on a vase from Vulci of 470 BC. Delighted by the experiment, Pelias's daughters happily did the same to their father, but Medea declined to complete the process and Pelias's bones remained in the cauldron. The possibility of rejuvenation seems to have haunted the Greek subconscious.

On the other hand attempts at rejuvenation and immortality by mortal men are frequently remarked upon, and both have been aspirations of humankind throughout history. Galen mentions the intriguing case of a contemporary Sophist who had, at the age of 40, published a book on how to avoid the effects of old age and remain perpetually young. By the time this fellow turned 80, however, age had indeed taken its toll, making him appear shrivelled and dried out, and earning him general mockery. He then revised his book and brought out a second edition, stressing that only some individuals may enjoy eternal youth and that it is necessary to prepare from the earliest years. This Sophist declares that, while he himself unfortunately started the process too late to save himself, he is prepared to undertake such a task for the benefit of the children of his fellow citizens — presumably for a substantial fee.
Even for the wealthy elite, with whom most of our surviving evidence is concerned, old age in antiquity tended to be a time to be endured rather than enjoyed. For the poorer classes old age must have been singularly unenviable: it was a common proverb that old age and poverty are both burdensome — in combination they are impossible to bear. In the case of the vast majority of the individuals we know of from ancient times, however, because of the elite bias of our sources, poverty was not a problem, and wealth, as well as the existence of slaves, must have helped to ease the problems for them. But if a person's failing health led to inability to be self-supporting, then, in the absence of effective medication, dependence may have been short-lived anyway.

The key was not how old, but how active or useful. Cicero's words are timeless, and speak across the millennia: 'Old age will only be respected if it fights for itself, maintains its rights, avoids dependence on anyone, and asserts control over its own to the last breath.'
2. The Ancient Greek and Roman Worlds

1. Digest of Roman Law 54-56 prep.
2. Ius saxarum, Ptolemaic, 50-285, W. 11. 1952-2, 2
4. Seneca the Younger, Consolatio ad Marcum 2.4: 'non uno hominum saevior esto.'
5. Corpus Inscriptionum Latinae Selectae (CIL) 8.9156 = Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae (ILS) 8505: 'dis inventum.'
8. Seneca the Elder, Consolationes 10.5: one defence suggested for this action is that the old slave was useless and was about to die anyway: 'senem inutilis, expiraturn se corrum, impetus, multa, non suis absolvit, sed insufficiens et iniquus expiratum mee una esset.'
9. Saint Augustine, City of God 1–16, utilizing Pliny the Elder's Natural History bk 2.
11. Herodotus, Histories 1.87.
12. Lucian, De Luctu 16-17.
17. See further Parkin, 'Out of Sight, Out of Mind and Old Age in the Roman World', ibid, 8, including for the notion that old age was a second childhood.
18. Such an exercise has been carried out by the Cambridge Population Group (CAMSS), and its methods utilized by Richard Saller in the Roman context, see especially R.P. Saller, Propriety, Property and Death (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
23. Tacitus, Dial. 28.4 has Merulus comment that in the 'good old days' an older relative would have had charge over the young children of the house, now slaves take control. Grandparents, where they survived, might have had a particular role to play within the household when a child's natural parent or parents were no longer on the scene. It is in such a situation that involving children who have lost their parent(s) that, we must commonly meet living grandparents in the ancient testimony.
24. Thomas Svedemann provided an excellent analysis of this theme in E. Adults and Children in the Roman Empire (London: Routledge, 1989), and it is worth quoting a few sentences (pp. 176–7): 'Clinical society relegated children, together with women, old men, and slaves, to the margins of community life. While that gave each of these groups an intermediate position between being fully human and being a beast, it might also give them a position intermediate between the human world and that of the gods... The relative physical weakness of the child, the old man, and the woman, meant that these three groups were thought to require, or deserve, particular support from the supernatural... It is because they are excluded from the political process or from social influence that they have no other way to express their concerns than by reference to powers outside the political community, controlled as it usually is by "rational" adult males... It was this phenomenon of the marginal group that fits the touch with the divine world that were adults usually...' The old are thought to be particularly numerous.
3 The Middle Ages and Renaissance


2. Shubert, Growing Old in the Middle Ages, "Winter Clothing 1x in Shadow and Pain", p. 28; Parkin, Old Age in the Roman World, pp. 15-35.


7. Shubert, Growing Old in the Middle Ages, pp. 18-19.


