

***SERVI SENES:
THE ROLE OF OLD SLAVES AT ROME¹***

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It seems paradoxical that so little attention should have been paid by ancient historians to the question of how old people cared for themselves and were cared for in the Roman world, when a fifth of the population is now over retirement age in most industrialised societies, and predictions suggest that within two or three decades it will rise to twice that proportion in some countries such as Germany. Yet even initial studies are few and far between. Moses Finley's article in *Greece & Rome*, developed from a lecture he gave at Nottingham in 1981, is only 16 pages long, and Georges Minois' book is hardly to be taken as a serious academic study. Valuable and

¹ This paper was first given at the Catholic University, Leuven, Belgium, in March 1995, as part of a colloquium on "Oud zijn in de Oudheid". My thanks to the organiser, Prof. Emiel Eyben, and other participants at that colloquium for their comments, and to Prof. Jürgen Malitz of the Catholic University, Eichstätt, Germany, for bibliographical advice.

respected exceptions are the work of Emiel Eyben in the context of the "Interdisciplinary Centre for the Study of the Life-Cycle in Antiquity", of Christian Gnilka on early Christian attitudes to old age, and Wiclaw Sudor, mainly on medical attitudes towards ageing in antiquity².

But the comparative dearth of analyses of old age in antiquity cannot simply be ascribed to a lack of interest on the part of modern scholars: there is a remarkable shortage of primary evidence. This applies particularly to one numerically substantial group of old people in ancient society: old slaves. One possible explanation for this must be dismissed immediately. While the extent of manumission in the Roman world was exceptional, it was not the case that slaves had normally become freedpersons by the time they reached old age. There was certainly a feeling that slaves belonging to the urban *familia* deserved to be given their freedom, assuming that they had served their owners competently and faithfully; but Alföldy's attempt to show that the epigraphical evidence supports the view that actual practice corresponded to this ideal cannot be sustained, since inscriptions are so heavily slanted towards those whose manumission needed to be recorded, by themselves or their heirs. In any case - as Alföldy himself accepted - there is no evidence that manumission was the norm for the vast majority of rural slaves³.

With regard to the literary evidence, what little there is, as so

² M. I. Finley, "The Elderly in Classical Antiquity", *Greece & Rome* 28, 1981, 156-171; G. Minois, *Histoire de la Vieillesse*, Paris 1987; English translation, *History of Old Age*, Cambridge 1989; E. Eyben, "Old Age in Greco-Roman Antiquity and Early Christianity: an annotated select bibliography", T. M. Falkner & J. de Luce edd., *Old Age in Greek and Latin Literature*, New York 1989, 230-251; Ch. Gnilka, *Aetas Spiritualis*, Bonn 1972, and article on "Altersversorgung", *RAC* 12, 1983, 995ff.; cf. *RAC Suppl.* 1/2, 1985, 266ff.; W. Suder, *Geras. Old Age in Greco-Roman Antiquity. A Classified Bibliography*, Wrocław 1991.

³ G. Alföldy, "Die Freilassung von Sklaven und die Struktur der Sklaverei in der römischen Kaiserzeit", *Rivista Storica dell'Antichità* 2, 1972, 97-128 = *Die römische Gesellschaft*, Stuttgart 1986, 286-331, with addenda; T. E. J. Wiedemann, "The Regularity of Manumission at Rome", *Classical Quarterly* 35, 1985, 162-175, surveying the legal and literary material.

often in classical literature, survives precisely because it is atypical. A much-quoted example is Cato's notorious injunction that a landlord should get rid of old and sick slaves: "servum senem, servum morbosum, et siquid aliud supersit, vendat". As Alan Astin pointed out in his *Cato the Censor*, this is hardly to be taken seriously as economic advice. The context makes it clear that Cato is making a moral statement about the need for a property-owner to be parsimonious, and is making that statement in a consciously provocative way. It is obvious that Cato's comment can provide no answer to the question "What did the Romans do with old and sick slaves?", for if a slave-owner managed to sell such slaves, we are left with the question what the next owner then did with them. In any case, we have enough evidence to show that Cato's provocative view was not the standard one among the Roman elite. Plutarch was certainly prompted to express his horror at what Cato said; but we may choose to set that aside, on the ground that it represents Greek philosophical humanitarianism rather than Roman practical morality. We may find a more typical expression of that Roman morality in an epigram of Martial's, in which the satirist purports to be shocked that a slave-owner should have sold his catamites. Rather than that, Martial ironically suggests, he might have sold the slaves he had inherited from his father, or the old slaves in his household; they would be more likely to forgive him than the *delicati*:

vende senes servos - ignoscent - vende paternos;
ne pueros vendas, omnia vende miser.

The clear implication is that for a responsible master, selling old slaves was unthinkable - or at any rate a last resort⁴.

The absence of discussion of old and sick slaves in the Greek and Roman sources requires explanation. It cannot simply be that the incapacity resulting from old age and/or ill health was an unpleasant and uncomfortable subject (no doubt one of the reasons why it is

⁴ Cato, *De agricultura* 2. 7; A. Astin, *Cato the Censor*, Oxford 1978, Appendix 12; Plutarch, *Cato Maior* 5. 2; Martial 11, 70. 9f.

under-discussed in our own culture): classical writers had no hesitation in dealing with associated unpleasant and uncomfortable subjects, most obviously with dying, including suicide⁵. Dying was frequently described and discussed because it was, so to speak, a public act. Physical incapacity was not discussed, because only in exceptional circumstances was it perceived as impinging on the public arena. One instance was when a physical or mental infirmity affected a person's legal capacity, their rights and duties as a citizen, and in that respect we find not surprisingly that the jurists express their views⁶.

Ordering the world with reference to the rights and duties of citizenship, that peculiarity of the classical Greek and Roman world, may give us a clue to why so little discussion was thought necessary of sickness and old age, and *a fortiori* of sickness and old age with regard to slaves. I should like to take as my starting-point Hendrik Bolkestein's suggestion that there were major differences between the treatment of the needy, including the sick and the old, in the Ancient Near East on the one hand, and in classical (pre-Christian) Greece and Rome on the other⁷. While he may have explained this difference in terms of a distinction between the European and the Oriental mind which is unacceptable to modern scholarship, he also made some interesting observations about the differences between the literary source material produced by the respective cultures. In the Greek and Roman world, the writers were wealthy landowners who saw themselves as citizens of their communities; in the Near East they were the professional intellectuals associated with temples. Consequently Egyptian and especially Old Testament texts have a great deal to say about the practicalities of the redistribution of

⁵ A. J. L. van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide*, London 1990.

⁶ J. Gardner, *Being a Roman Citizen*, London 1993, ch. 6: "The Handicapped Citizen".

⁷ H. Bolkestein, *Wohltätigkeit und Armenpflege im vorchristlichen Altertum*, Utrecht 1939 (reprint Groningen 1967). The theme was taken up by, amongst others, W. Den Boer, *Private Morality in Greece and Rome. Some Historical Aspects*, Leyden 1978. A different view was taken by A. R. Hands, *Charities and Social Aid in Greece and Rome*, London 1968.

material goods by or through temples from the well-off (not of course the temple clergy so much as local worshippers and visiting pilgrims) to the needy, sometimes in the form of institutionalised begging. Bolkestein was prepared to believe that the Romans threw unproductive slaves out onto the streets to beg; but he noted that there was no actual evidence for this, and in particular that there was a striking absence of legislation on begging in classical Roman legal sources⁸. Such references do appear in the fourth-century AD, in legislation and in Christian texts⁹.

Latin texts do not approve of such begging. The rare earlier references place it in non- or marginally Roman contexts such as the cult of Isis, or Judaism. Juvenal associates begging with a multiply-marginal aged female Jewish interpreter of dreams:

*Cum dedit ille locum, cophino fenoque relicto
arcanam Iudaea tremens mendicat in aurem,
interpres legum Solymarum et magna sacerdos
arboris ac summi fida internuntia caeli.
implet et illa manum, sed parcius; aere minuto
qualiacumque voles Iudaei somnia vendunt*¹⁰.

Prose texts may not exclude the beggar from Roman normality in quite so striking a way, but we may note Aulus Gellius' report (XIV, 1.2) that Favorinus' attack on Chaldaean astrologers includes the accusation that they were "*homines aeruscatores et cibum quaestumque ex mendaciis captantes*". There was of course a long Roman tradition that certain kinds of soothsayers were not to be trusted, and that their position at Rome was that of tolerated outsiders: haruspices, drawn from that quintessentially marginal people, the

⁸ H. Bolkestein, *op. cit.*, 340, 379.

⁹ *Codex Theodosianus* 14, 18. 1 = *Codex Justinianus* 11, 26. 25 (AD 382); Ambrose, *De officiis Ministrorum* 2, 76f. ("*importunitas vociferantium*"). On beggars, see H. Kloft, "Gedanken zum Ptochos", I. Weiler ed., *Soziale Randgruppen und Aussenseiter im Altertum*, Graz 1988, 81ff.

¹⁰ Juvenal, *Satires* 6, 542-547.

Etruscans, were characteristic recipients of the suspicion that they were making money out of the (albeit authentic) religious needs of honest Romans.

It is therefore interesting that one of the few reported incidents which throw light on the treatment of sick or infirm slaves should indeed concern care provided in the context of a temple precinct, that of Aesculapius on the *isola Tiberina*. Both Suetonius and Cassius Dio report that Claudius intervened in favour of sick slaves who were not receiving proper treatment from their masters; the jurist Modestinus confirms the legal principle established by Claudius¹¹. In Dio's account, "since many people did not bother to give their slaves any treatment when they were sick, and even threw them out of the house, he decreed that any who survived after being treated in this way should be free". A number of conclusions follow. Claudius' disapproval - and its survival to be codified in the *Digest* - only makes sense if the assumption shared by Roman society at large was that slaves were indeed normally looked after at their masters' expense within the household. Of course, the incident also implies that there were occasions on which slave-owners considered themselves unable to fulfil this obligation (we may recall that many slave-owners were not wealthy, and indeed were themselves former slaves, and that it might not be lack of will, but a genuine lack of means that prevented them from providing for such sick members of their households). But a further conclusion is that the temple of Aesculapius provided an institutional framework within which some sick slaves could be looked after, and even receive effective care, similar to that provided by Near Eastern temples such as that at Jerusalem (and again it is worth noting that Aesculapius was perceived as "marginal" to Rome, imported from abroad¹²). The episode further suggests that such slaves - or

¹¹ Suetonius, *Claudius* 25. 2; Cassius Dio 60 (61), 29. 7; Modestinus, *Digest* 40, 8. 2.

¹² The cult of Aesculapius was said to have been imported to Rome in 293 BC: Livy 10, 47. 7; Valerius Maximus 1, 8. Vitruvius notes that the temple's position, surrounded by the running water of the Tiber, contributed to the recovery of those who took refuge there: 1, 2. 7.

following Claudius' decree, freedpersons - could survive independently in Rome if they were lucky enough to recover their health.

"Begging" is one of the categories used to come to terms with the transfer of material resources to the needy from those who have a surplus to distribute. But it is by no means a straightforward category. Not only do different cultures have different attitudes to the circumstances under which begging is tolerated (or even approved of), but definitions of what kinds of activities and relationships constitute "begging" are themselves culturally relative. In contemporary Britain, for example, attitudes towards requests from strangers in the street to hand over spare money ("change") for causes human or divine vary from considering it a crime ("demanding money with menaces": in some places, such as Bath, politicians made aggressive begging an election issue in the 1992 General Election) to acclaiming it as a highly approved elite activity, where the money is collected for charitable purposes. In many northern European cultures where begging is disapproved of in principle, it is tolerated in practice where the beggar claims to be selling something (flowers, matches etc.): "buskers", claiming to provide musical entertainment, are in a similar ambivalent category. In many European countries there are forms of begging which are unknown in Britain: for example, that associated (by those who do not like them) with Gypsy families, or that still permitted today to widows and orphans in Greece on condition that they hold a licence from their village priest.

The invisibility of begging in classical literature is a function of the fact that the needy play much less of a symbolic role in Graeco-Roman thought than they do in the temple-centred writings of Egypt or ancient Israel - or indeed in pre-Classical Greek thought and mythology, where beggars are given a recognised social role¹³. This tells us less about the actual place of begging and of how the needs of the poor and disabled were looked after than about political and social thinking: classical Greeks and Romans frequently used slaves as symbolising the polar opposite of the free (adult, male) citizen. One

¹³ Beggars in the *Odyssey*: 6. 207f., 14. 57f.

implication of the quite extraordinary emphasis on slavery in classical thought was its effect on the needy: the polarity between poor and rich was in general not needed as a mechanism for structuring ideas about society and morality. In first-century AD Palestine, a religious teacher could say that the poor would always be with us; in Graeco-Roman literature, they have no essential role to play¹⁴.

The old are more visible than the poor in Latin literature. There are similar injunctions about respecting the aged as there are in Egyptian and Jewish writing: Valerius Maximus II, 1. 9 is an interesting example, since it comes under the heading "de institutis antiquis": by implication, it was only in the distant past that young Romans behaved properly by standing up in the presence of their elders and so on. But because Greek and Latin literature was produced by people who saw themselves as landowners and citizens, not primarily as responsible for the functioning of temples, references to the ways in which old people were given practical support locate such support not within the context of temples, but that of the household on the one hand, and (exceptionally) of the citizen community on the other. That younger members of the household - children, wives, slaves - are the mechanisms for looking after incapacitated older members is taken for granted¹⁵. References to the community acting to support the needy are less rare for the Greek world than the

¹⁴ Matthew 26. 11, Mark 14. 7, John 12. 8: Jesus was quoting *Deuteronomy* 15. 11. The rich/poor polarity was of course used, and feared, in classical literature, particularly Greek philosophical thought - and drama: A. H. Sommerstein, "Aristophanes and the demon Poverty", *Classical Quarterly* 34, 1984, 314-333. But it is interesting that the category frequently occurs within the context of institutions whose importance is primary: the Greek *polis*, Roman *amicitia*. When Pliny advocates liberality towards the poor rather than the rich, it is poor rather than rich *amici* he has in mind: "*tribuere ... amicis, sed amicis dico pauperibus, non ut isti qui iis potissimum donant, qui donare maxime possunt*" (*Letters* 9, 31. 1).

¹⁵ Note for example Columella's reference to marriage as "*adiutoria senectutis, nec minus propugnacula*" (12, pr. 1: citing Cicero's translation of Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* 7, 19ff.): he means, of course, that a younger woman will look after an older man. Statius addresses an *alumnus* with the words "*tu domino requies portusque senectae*" (*Silvae* 2, 1. 69).

Roman: one thinks of the support given to invalids in fifth-century Athens, or the provision of buildings where elderly men might spend the day in many Hellenistic cities. Including the *annona* or the provision of land for veterans at Rome in the same category of help to the needy is more problematic¹⁶. But such provisions were seen rather as means to enhance the glory of the city than relieving the suffering of the needy¹⁷.

The principle according to which assistance is given is not need, but status. Many references in literature which at first appear to be to support for the weak and the elderly - for example, the obligation to visit old and sick *amici* - emerge on closer examination as the very opposite, symbolic tokens of respect for the wealthy and privileged. For example, Martial satirises someone for giving *substantial presents to old people and widows*, "*munera quod senibus viduisque ingentia mittis*"¹⁸. This turns out to be not charity, but legacy-hunting. The relationship between the old and terminally ill and the rest of Roman society is perceived not within the context of religious organisation (as charity or almsgiving), and very rarely that of the state, but of the relations associated with the household and the social links centered on it which the Romans called *amicitiae*, and which we would call patronage as often as friendship. And in that context there is no lack of discussion of the moral issues and ambiguities involved: discussions of the morality of begging may be lacking, but not of legacy-hunting¹⁹. And discussion of begging itself

¹⁶ Athens: Lysias 24; for buildings "*aetatis otio seniorum collegio*" such as the "*Croesi domus*" at Sardis: Vitruvius 2, 8.10; Pliny informs Trajan that at Amisus there was a collection "*ad sustinendam tenuiorum inopiam*" (*Letters* 10.93): the "*tenues*" would have been poor citizens, not any poor. The Roman corn-dole (*annona*) and distributions of money (*congiaria*), too, were privileges granted to all city-dwelling citizens, rather than just the needy.

¹⁷ Paulus, *Digest* 30, 122: "*hos amplium quod in alimenta infirmæ aetatis, puta senioribus vel pueris puellisque, relictum fuerit, ad honorem civitatis pertinere respondere*".

¹⁸ Martial, 4, 56. 1; cf. Pliny's remarks on giving presents to rich friends, n. 14 above.

¹⁹ See the discussion by E. Champlin, *Final Judgments*, Berkeley 1991, ch. 5.

may appear in the context of the obligations of patronage: Aulus Gellius tells of how "*Ad Herodem Atticum consularem virum ingenioque amoeno et Graeca facundia celebrem adiit nobis praesentibus palliatus quispiam et crinitus barbaque prope ad pubem usque porrecta ac petit aes sibi dari eis artous*"²⁰. The man was dismissed with money to buy food for thirty days - not because he was a beggar, but because Herodes' humanity required him to be friendly to philosophers.

Claudius's edict suggests that the care of old and sick slaves was expected to take place within this same domestic and family framework, and that is what is assumed by most of the sparse evidence that there is about the care of such slaves. Pliny boasts of his humanitarian concern for those of his slaves who fell ill, not all of them (he says) old²¹. Columella's injunction that a *vilica* should try to find out which slaves were ill, or claimed to be ill, and should ensure that the sick-room was ready even at times when there was no one who was ill, shows that such health-care applied to the rural as well as the urban *familia*. Since slaves are a valuable resource, the provision of such health-care should not surprise us; the larger slave estates in the West Indies and on the North American continent frequently had such hospitals²². We might add another relevant text to the sparse collection of what in German has been categorised as "*Hausväterliteratur*", namely the early medieval Latin monastic rules. Chapter 37 of the Rule of St Benedict gives us an idea of the ways in which old and infirm members of the household community might be given special care, for instance in the times and contents of the meals they received²³.

Freedmen and -women were not unconditionally the

²⁰ Aulus Gellius 10, 2. 1.

²¹ Pliny, *Letters* 8, 16.

²² Columella, 12, 3. 7; cf. also 11, 1. 19; 12, 1. 3. There is an illustration of such a slave hospital on the Worthy Park estate on Jamaica in M. Craton & J. Walvin, *A Jamaican Plantation*, London 1970, 103.

²³ I hope to examine some other respects in which the sixth-century *Regula Magistri* and the Benedictine rule represent the standard practices of a Roman household in a forthcoming study of the domestic *consilium*.

responsibility of their *domus* of origin; their relationship to that *domus* was similar to that of emancipated sons or daughters. Like emancipated children, they would be expected to develop resources of their own, financial and human - their own "family" in the legal sense (their biological family might well remain in slavery), and slaves and freedpersons of their own, possibly including an *alumnus*, a slave raised as a substitute child. At Rome, as in other slave societies, there might be a suspicion that some owners manumitted their slaves precisely so as to evade their responsibility to look after them in old age (Dionysius of Halicarnassus 4, 24.5 for Rome: such accusations were frequently made in the context of American slavery). Nevertheless, Claudius' edict was interpreted as imposing an obligation not just on slave-owners, but on patrons too to provide for their freedmen and women on pain of losing their patronal rights²⁴.

There is some evidence that selected ex-slaves were indeed provided for by their patrons, the most celebrated example being Pliny the Younger's nurse²⁵. Epigraphy, in the form of the *Testamentum Dasumii*, confirms that such things did happen in the real world; several of the testator's freed slaves are granted legacies (often including younger, productive slaves who would provide them with an income)²⁶. At the same time it is clear that the slaves and freedpersons involved - perhaps a dozen - can have been only a tiny proportion of all the slaves belonging to this particular household. Legal sources confirm that Pliny was perhaps not as exceptional as he would have wanted his readers to believe: cf. *Digest* 33, 2.33, referring to a provision in a will for a freedman to be allowed to continue living in his former owner's house and in the style to which he had been treated by that patron ("*quae vivus praestabam dari volo*"), after the patron's death.

²⁴ *Digest* 37, 14. 5. 1 (Ulpian): "*Imperatoris nostri scripto cavetur, ut si patronus libertum suum non aluerit, ius patroni perdat*".

²⁵ Pliny, *Letters* 6, 3: but note that, despite being given an estate worth HS 100,000, she remains anonymous.

²⁶ The *Testamentum Dasumii*: ILS 8379a = CIL 6.10229; English translation in Gardner & Wiedemann, *The Roman Household*, London 1991, 134ff.

So there is some evidence that old retainers were provided for in the real and not just in the ideal world. What were they expected to do in return? It seems anachronistic to talk of slaves having a retirement age, but the surviving evidence, admittedly minute, suggests just that. It also suggests that the primary motive was not the feeling that slaves deserved to end their days in well-earned ease, but that old slaves were a despised group who could not be entrusted with responsible work.

Consequently they were of considerably less value. Diocletian's price edict distinguishes slaves over 60 from those under 60: the former are lumped together with those under the age of 8. The maximum price for both groups is to be 15,000 *denarii* for males, 10,000 for females. The implication is that slaves over 60 are substantially less productive, like those under 8²⁷. Sixty was also the point at which a person became a "*senex*", at least on some schemata for dividing the ages of man (eg., that of Varro). Tax regulations imply that persons above a certain age, whether slave or free, were not expected to be productive. Ulpian notes that in Syria *tributum capitis* was only payable up to the age of 65²⁸. In one of his letters to Trajan, Pliny reports that in several Bithynian cities, including Nicaea and Nicomedia, he had found that persons who had been condemned to death or to a gladiatorial *ludus* had instead served, sometimes for many years, as municipal slaves; many were now old, "*plerosque etiam senes*", and instead of working were having to be provided for at public expense. In his reply, Trajan orders those of them who are "*vetustiores et senes*" to be forced back to work in low status jobs like cleaning the sewers and repairing roads (the rest are to be executed in accordance with the original judgement). "*Pasci*

²⁷ ZPE 34, 1979, 177. S. Corcoran, *The Empire of the Tetrarchs: Imperial pronouncements and government AD 284-324*, Oxford 1996, 228, notes how difficult it will have been to establish the exact age of slaves (from Augustus' time, citizens were registered at birth). On the period between 5 and 8 as the time when slaves began to have to perform physical work, see E. Herrmann-Otto, *Ex Ancilla Natus*, Wiesbaden 1994, 323-336.

²⁸ *Digest* 50, 15. 4 (5).

otiosos inutile" he says, implying that municipal slaves at least could expect to be "*otiosi*" above a certain age²⁹. In his article on the retirement of imperial slaves and freedmen, Chantraine³⁰ suggested that slaves of the *domus Caesaris* sometimes worked until they died; inscriptions refer to a *faber*, several procurators, and a *vilicus* who had been married for forty years - but it is not clear that any of these were still in post when they died, and in any case the age at death is rarely specified. (An exception, from Carthage, mentions two imperial slaves called Victor and Urbica who are said to have reached the ages of 102 and 80.) One who was still in post was an *aedituus*, a temple-custodian, whose epitaph claims that he was 90; but as we shall see, that type of post was a characteristic sinecure for "retired" slaves (Chantraine himself calls it "*Altersversorgung*")³¹. An inscription from Caieta refers to a *verna* of the imperial household who is said to have died at the age of 66 still looking after an imperial property³². The implication is that this was something unusual: a slave of that age would have been expected to have been relieved of his duties. Columella says that a *vilicus* ought to be between 35 and 65 years old: if he was older, he would be despised by those under him for his incapacity for physical labour - as the landowner himself would be, Columella fears, unless it was obvious that he was a competent farmer³³. Cicero accuses Piso of disgraceful behaviour in allowing

²⁹ Pliny, *Letters* 10. 31f.

³⁰ H. Chantraine, "Die Ausserdienststellung kaiserlicher Sklaven und Freigelassener". *Chiron* 3, 1973, 307-329.

³¹ H. Chantraine, *art. cit.*, 308: "Kaiserdienner, die ... bis zuletzt im aktiven Dienst standen": *CIL* 8 12915; 6. 9097; 10. 1740 = ILS 1488; 6. 8676. *Aedituus*: *CIL* 8. 12654 (H Chantraine, *art. cit.*, 311).

³² *ILS* 1583 = *CIL* 10 6093: "*Laeonae vern. disp. qui vixit ann. LXVI et est conversatus summa sollicitudine in diem quoad vixit circa tutelam praetori, Amazonicus Augg lib procurat. [p]atri piissimo cum [fr]atribus suis b.m.f.*".

³³ Columella 11. 1 3 "*servitia sic tirunculum contemnunt, ut senem: quoniam alter nondum novit opera ruris, alter exequi iam non potest, atque hunc adolescentia negligentem, senectus illum facit pigrum*"; 1, 8. 20: "*ut spernatur a servis*". Columella's only specific reference to tasks which can be assigned to slaves who are "infirmissimi" is as vine-dressers: 3, 10. 6.

himself to be attended by unattractive slaves, some of them even old - "*servi sordidi ministrant, nonnulli etiam senes*"³⁴. Again, the implication must be that elderly slaves were relieved of their duties - not as a favour, but because they were despised. Given how anxious Romans were to convince themselves that hard-working and loyal slaves deserved manumission, it is not surprising that slave-owners should have come to terms with the fact that the vast majority were not in fact freed by suspecting that they had not simply been unlucky, but had in some way failed to live up to their masters' expectations - that anyone who was still a slave when he or she reached old age was in fact to be despised³⁵.

It seems, then, that it was not thought appropriate to use slaves over 60 or 65 for productive tasks in agriculture or services. But according to Roman life-tables, a person who reached the age of 60 was expected to live for another five years³⁶. What these slaves, "liminal" in the sense that they were perceived as already preparing to leave the society of the living, could be used for was in positions that were similarly in some sense "liminal". The doorkeeper is the most obvious example. In *Letter* 12.3, Seneca describes a tour of inspection to one of his estates which he has not visited for some time: everything is old and decrepit, and this allows the philosopher to muse on the *topos* of his own mortality and decrepitude. Symbolic of these is the toothless doorkeeper, *ostiarius*, Felicio son of Philositus, who claims to have been a playmate of Seneca's when they were both children. Seneca's description of the old slave as "*iste decrepitus et merito ad ostium admotus*" is far from the respect for the aged called for by Valerius Maximus.

It was not just old slaves, but old people generally, who in the appropriate contexts are associated with a series of very negative

³⁴ Cicero, *In Pisonem* 67.

³⁵ I owe this point to Alan Sommerstein. On the discrepancy between the actual and the perceived frequency of manumission, see T. E. J. Wiedemann, "The Regularity of Manumission at Rome".

³⁶ Ulpian's "life-table": *Digest* 35, 2.68 pr. See B. Frier, "Roman Life Expectancy: Ulpian's Evidence", *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 86, 1982, 213-251.

qualities in Latin literature. The *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, s.v. "anus", lists physical decrepitude, alcoholism, garrulousness and a lack of honesty or reliability. In love poetry, we find these qualities instantiated in the old woman who guards access to the poet's beloved, either as doorkeeper or as chaperone³⁷. Doorkeepers were normally male: the idea of a female doorkeeper reinforces old age and servile status with a third level of marginality. A reference in Suetonius' *Lives of the Grammarians* suggests that it was thought, at any rate by an antiquarian like himself, that at some time in the past such doorkeepers had been chained. That had happened to Voltacilius Plotus, "*qui servisse dicitur et ostarius vetere more in catena fuisse*"³⁸. The image of the chained doorkeeper has been much-loved by illustrators of Roman scenes since the 19th century; such a practice might indeed have applied to slaves who were thought by their owners to be potential *fugitivi*. In any case it is an indication of the low status of the position of doorkeeper in the eyes of the literary elite. When Seneca wishes to illustrate the depths to which Fortune may degrade someone, he refers to young Roman officers of senatorial family captured in the Varus disaster: one became a shepherd, another the doorkeeper of a Germanic hut, "*pastorem, custodem casae*"³⁹. This is clearly not a man who is old, but all the more clearly a degraded man. The figure of the doorkeeper appears elsewhere in the same letter to illustrate one of the paradoxes of slavery as a system, that it allows someone regarded as a mere *instrumentum* to control the access of one slave-owner to another (in this case, Callistus as the emperor's doorkeeper excluded his former owner from the imperial presence: the theme is reminiscent of the *paraclausithyron* of love poetry).

For late antique Christians, too, the job of doorkeeper could

³⁷ F. O. Copley, *Exclusus Amator*, Madison 1956; E. H. Haight, *The Symbolism of the House Door in Classical Poetry*, New York, 1950; for material representations of the drunken old woman in Hellenistic art, P. Zanker, *Die trunkene Alte*, Frankfurt 1989.

³⁸ Suetonius, *Gramm.* 27. There are other rhetorical rather than realistic chained doorkeepers, eg. Columella 1, pr. 10 ("*catenato ianitore*") - a literary construct based on the imperial freedman Callistus who also appears in Seneca 47 (see next note).

³⁹ Seneca, *Letters* 47. 10.

be perceived as suitable for someone of low status, for instance a captive who had been bought back from barbarians⁴⁰. The prejudice is expressed in entirely classical terms in a sermon ascribed to St Augustine: "*non solum puella, sed ostiaria, vile abiectumque mancipium*". But by the fourth century AD, there was a complication. Christians had a problem in using the Latin word "ostiarius" to translate the New Testament Greek *thyrouros* in what were obviously low-status contexts. By that time the word had come to be used for a clerical grade (albeit the lowest), and consequently the Vulgate replaces the word "ostiarius" as used in the Itala with "*ianitor*"⁴¹.

The Christian usage of the word "ostiarius" suggests that real doorkeepers were not necessarily imbued with the low status of the doorkeeper encountered in literature. Doorkeepers as such were not subject to legal restrictions regarding access to manumission by the Augustan *lex Aelia Sentia*, and manumitted ex-doorkeepers are not said anywhere to suffer from *infamia* (unless, obviously, they had been chained up for some delict). If we may question whether all doorkeepers and watchmen were necessarily of the lowest status, we may also question whether they were necessarily or typically old. Common sense suggests that there were certain situations in which old slaves could suitably have been used as watchmen, *custodes*, and others where they could not. Columella explicitly warns against using old slaves to look after livestock, since they will not be able to cope with mountainous terrain⁴². On the other hand an old woman, especially if she has the help of some children, can look after farmyard fowl⁴³. Where the *custos* is only responsible for sounding the alarm or giving information to callers, an old man is entirely appropriate. We cannot tell whether the *custodes* Jerome refers to as

⁴⁰ Eg., Maurus in Eugippius, *Life of St Severinus* 10. 1.

⁴¹ Augustine, *Sermo* 79. 3. Cf. Leclerque, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, s. v. "portier".

⁴² Columella 1, 8. 3; cf. n. 33 above for Columella's reservations about *vilici* over 65.

⁴³ Varro 2, 10. 3.

looking after fields and orchards were old men or women⁴⁴. But one text which suggests that the job of doorkeeper was suitable as a sinecure for an old member of the household is the Rule of St Benedict. Chapter 66 advises selecting an old man, but a sober one, as the monastery's porter, with the interesting suggestion that if he suffers from loneliness, one of the young brothers should be assigned to him as a companion. A Christian writer can take it for granted that the keeper of a church building is an old man: in Eugippius' *Life of St Severinus*, the man described as "ecclesiae custos" at ch. 1.3 imperceptibly or at least unproblematically turns into a "senex" by section 5.

The presence of an old person as the guardian of a religious building was not just a Christian practice: we have already seen a 90-year-old imperial slave as an *aedituus* (note 31 above). Two other epitaphs from Rome specify the age at death of imperial freedmen who are likely to have died in post as *aeditui*: T. Flavius Liberalis, *aedituus* of the Temple of Mars Ultor, died at the age of 57, and Tiberius Claudius Acutus, *aedituus* of the Temple of Concord, at 96⁴⁵.

These inscriptions suggest that watchmen or doorkeepers might have a markedly lower status in Latin literature than in reality, and that this stereotype is associated with their perceived liminality. Old people could be associated with liminal categories other than just doors and animals. Paedagogi, child-minders, are notoriously old slaves⁴⁶. It is interesting that one inscription mentioning a freed slave as a temple-keeper says that he had previously been his *patrona*'s paedagogus: we may assume that looking after a temple was one way in which a faithful retainer could be provided with a sinecure in his old age⁴⁷.

One of our conclusions must be that we have to be careful not to take literary references to the jobs done by old slaves as descriptive

⁴⁴ Jerome, *Letter* 106. 51.

⁴⁵ *ILS* 4996; 4998.

⁴⁶ J. Vogt, *Sklaverei und Humanität*, Wiesbaden 1972², 74ff.

⁴⁷ C. Julius Hymettus and the Temple of Diana Planciana at Rome: *ILS* 4999.

rather than symbolic. When Seneca talks of a "*vetulus nomenclator*" who forgets the names of his master's visitors, then this is little more than an instance of the image of old age as decrepit - as well as of the fear of the power of slaves who ought simply to be well-functioning machines to facilitate access to their masters⁴⁸. It tells us nothing about how many *nomenclatores* were likely to be over 65. We should be equally sceptical about the value of apparently direct literary references to what old slaves might be doing. Ovid is one poet who is particularly keen to describe old people. Perhaps we can accept that an old male slave might chop up the house's firewood, and an old woman help bake the bread. But we are entitled to doubt the realism of descriptions of old men romantically looking after their peasant smallholdings⁴⁹. In a culture where the figure of the slave symbolises the lowest limit of human existence, the figure of the old slave primarily serves to reinforce that symbol.

Resumen / Abstract

There is remarkably little evidence about care for the elderly and infirm in classical Latin literature. The article argues that one reason for this is that in the classical city - unlike the temple-centred cultures of the Ancient Near East - the contrast between the well-off and the needy was not as important as a means of organising ideas about social relations as was the polarity between slave and free. By ascribing old age or infirmity to slaves, Latin writers are reinforcing their "marginality", their exclusion from the "norm" of the healthy adult male citizen. Consequently statements about old slaves should be seen as symbolic rather than as descriptions of social reality.

En la literatura clásica latina apenas encontramos datos acerca del cuidado recibido por enfermos y ancianos. Este artículo propone que una de las razones para ello es que la importancia dada en la ciudad clásica -a diferencias de las culturas

⁴⁸ Seneca, *Letter* 27. 5.

⁴⁹ Ovid, *Fasti* 2, 646; 3, 406 (bread: Anna Perenna); *Metamorphoses* 8, 629ff.; *Fasti* 5, 499.

centradas en torno a los templos, características del Próximo Oriente Antiguo- a la diferencia entre acomodados y necesitados no era tan importante como la que se daba a las relaciones sociales caracterizadas por la polaridad entre esclavos y libres. Al incluir a los enfermos y ancianos en sus referencias a los esclavos, los autores latinos refuerzan la marginalidad de los primeros, su exclusión de entre los ciudadanos adultos y sanos. En consecuencia, sus afirmaciones sobre los 'esclavos ancianos' deberían ser vistas como una referencia simbólica y no como descripciones de la realidad social.