



Great Books
bite size
On Old Age

**Examine your
Humanity**

**Melbourne
Public
Humanities
Initiative**



**THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE**

An introduction from Professor Tim Parkin

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC) wrote this dialogue (although really it is more of a monologue, in the mouth of the venerable Cato the Elder) in 44 BC, probably just after the assassination of Julius Caesar; he wrote another short work on friendship at the same time, along with a much longer work on duties (*De Officiis*). The treatise on old age is a fine piece of Latin prose, beautifully crafted and generally informative and interesting, although Cato/Cicero does have a tendency to ramble a bit at points (especially about farming), as he himself admits.

It is a work that has stood the test of time well, and it has often been translated, as well as being cited and quoted by young and old alike. The work is often described as a eulogy of old age, which I would argue it is not, and sometimes as a defence of old age, which I would agree it is. But it is also a lot more. On the whole I think it is an optimistic as well as honest work, and I would also assert that it is a very personal work, one which reveals a great deal not just about Roman old age but also about Cicero himself (he was in his early sixties when it was first published) and about the times in which he is writing, as well as about Roman philosophical – and Cicero’s personal - views on death.



[Tim Parkin](#) joined the Classics and Archaeology department at the University of Melbourne in 2018 as the inaugural Elizabeth and James Tatoulis Chair in Classics. Before this he had spent over 11 years as Professor of Ancient History at the University of Manchester (UK). Tim is a New Zealander by birth who was awarded a D.Phil. at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar and who, since 1989 (and as a Professor since 1998), has worked in universities in New Zealand, Australia, and the United Kingdom, as well as spending over a year in Germany as an Alexander von Humboldt research fellow.

His main research is in Roman history, particularly social, cultural, legal, medical, and demographic history. Among his publications are *Demography and Roman Society* (1992), *Old Age in the Roman World: A Social and Cultural History* (2003), *Roman Social History: A Sourcebook* (2007; 2nd ed. in progress), *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World* (2014), and *Domestic Violence and Vulnerability in the Roman World* (2024).

Extra resources

[A Geriatrician Reviews Cicero's 'On Old Age'](#)

Jeffrey M. Levine, faculty member of the Department of Geriatrics and Palliative Medicine at the Icahn School of Medicine, reflects on Cicero's work.

[Geras, Theoi Greek Mythology](#)

Brush up on your Classical mythology with this summary of Geras, the Greek spirit, or daimon, of old age.

[Why we shouldn't fear old age, Pursuit, University of Melbourne](#)

As many of us look forward to living a healthy life for longer, Martha Nussbaum and Saul Levmore say it's time to think differently about ageing. Hosted by Professor Glyn Davis.

[Selected Older Individuals from Graeco-Roman Antiquity \(PDF\)](#)

Professor Parkin's handy compendium of ancient Greeks and Romans.



Allegorical scene from the Augustan Ara Pacis, 13 BCE

Discussion questions

- Does Cicero use the main speaker, Cato, to express his (Cicero's) own views on old age?
- If you were asked to respond to the four most common complaints (in Latin *vituperationes*) about old age in 21st century Melbourne, what do you envisage those complaints would be?
- Does reading this book make you look forward to old age, as at least one reader has asserted?

