

DISABILITIES AND THE DISABLED IN THE ROMAN WORLD

Almost 15 per cent of the world's population today experiences some form of mental or physical disability, and society tries to accommodate their needs. But what was the situation in the Roman world? Was there a concept of disability? How were the disabled treated? How did they manage in their daily lives? What answers did medical doctors, philosophers and patristic writers give for their problems? This, the first monograph on the subject in English, explores the medical and material contexts for disability in the ancient world and discusses the chances of survival for those who were born with a handicap. It covers the various sorts of disability: mental problems, blindness, deafness and deaf-muteness, speech impairment and mobility impairment, and includes discussions of famous instances of disability from the ancient world, such as the madness of Emperor Caligula, the stuttering of Emperor Claudius and the blindness of Homer.

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ROMAN WORLD

A Social and Cultural History

CHRISTIAN LAES

University of Antwerp



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Preface

'More than a billion people in the world today experience disability.' Expressed in figures – more than 1,000,000,000 people – it makes an even greater impression. The World Health Organization's first *World Report on Disability* from 2011 is clear: around 14.2 per cent of the current world population are confronted with disabilities. In the description, any reference to pain is carefully avoided: 'to experience a disability' is the preferred formulation, and not 'to suffer'. According to the report, cultural and environmental factors are crucial. Something that is a disability for a person in a given environment and in specific circumstances need not be a disability in other situations or surroundings.

With a land area of 6.5 million km², the Roman Empire covered about 4.36 per cent of the total land surface in the world. It was one of the largest empires in ancient times, in addition to being the most resistant and long lived. Millions of people from the Roman Empire must have experienced functional disabilities, and the Romans were confronted with these people – but where are these people with disabilities? In a recent and masterful overview of physical well-being in the Roman Empire, the term 'disability' is not mentioned even once.¹

In 2008, when I ventured into what was then a largely uncultivated domain of disability history, one thing became immediately clear. This is a delicate subject, and one that (at the very least) incites curiosity and often engaged reactions. Of all the questions that have been sent to me after lectures or publications, two have remained particularly on my mind: whether I 'regarded myself as experiencing a particular disability' (note the politically correct wording) and whether I had completed any medical training. My reply to both questions was negative. In both cases, however, the question was much more important than the answer. The subject calls on our human empathy, and anyone who feels involved will find it very difficult

¹ Scheidel (2012). See now also Pudsey (2017).

to maintain the proper distance. Even finding the right terminology with which to mention certain things is a difficult exercise in balancing.

Handicapped people or people with functional disabilities? Blind or visually impaired? The topic also assumes at least some medical background. Without the necessary 'hard' material facts on ecology, demography and the human body, such studies are likely to become mired in pedantic and/or purely constructionist approaches that appear to lack any connection with reality. But this book is obviously a historical study. It is not a medical-biological treatise seeking to retrace as many people with disabilities from the past as possible. Knowing that there were also blind people, deaf people or people with speech defects in the past does not require any historical work at all.

During my research, I made a wonderful discovery: a synthetic work on people with disabilities in the Roman world does not yet exist. This book aims to be no more and no less than the first synthesis for a domain in which ancient history has long lagged behind. It offers a thorough and much-needed methodological introduction, outlines the medical-material backdrops of the ancient world and searches for chances of survival and the difficult first days after birth. Thereafter, disabilities are approached in a conventional manner, from head to toe: mental and intellectual disabilities, blindness, hearing disorders, speech problems and mobility problems. Each chapter zooms in on a variety of facets: daily life, preconceptions and the theoretical thinking of philosophers and Church Fathers, physicians and jurists with regard to the disability in question. The conclusion goes in search of possible breaking points in a history that initially appears to be of particularly *longue durée*. For those wishing to discover 'remarkable life stories', an extensive catalogue of people with disabilities in ancient times has been included in the form of an index of persons. Throughout the book, stories receive a great deal of attention: each chapter opens with the biography of a person who could be regarded as the 'historic icon' for the disability being described. The footnotes, the indices and the bibliography are intended to make this book a convenient reference work.

The lack of an ancient concept of disability serves as a unifying theme throughout this work. I demonstrate how, in the absence of such a concept, people in ancient times were less likely to be placed into 'boxes' and were more likely to be involved in everyday community life. I am nevertheless not blind to the fundamental experience of 'being different' and the limitations that the body can impose upon us. In this respect, the lives of people with disabilities in antiquity involved a continual balance between integration and exclusion.

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It obviously becomes clear that the sources of our knowledge in this area are less limited than we often think – though ancient historians dealing with the subject of disabilities are indeed faced with some serious limitations involving the sources.

I would like to close this preface with an expression of gratitude. Thanks go to the anonymous referees of both Davidsfonds Uitgeverij and Cambridge University Press for many valuable suggestions. To Katrien De Vreese, Dirk Remmerie and the fabulous team from Davidsfonds for their concern for publishing academic work that can also appeal to a broad audience. I am particularly grateful to Dr Michael Sharp and the whole team of Cambridge University Press, not only for accepting this book but also for revising the English version which was kindly supplied by the Linguapolis team of the University of Antwerp. Both the University of Antwerp and the Universitaire Stichting generously funded costs involved in the translation of the English. Thanks also go to my Finnish colleagues from the Tampere research team ‘Religion and Childhood: Socialisation in Pre-Modern Europe from the Roman Empire to the Christian World’ and to the Institute of Advanced Social Research of the same university – the book took shape within this wonderful environment. To many colleagues in Belgium and abroad, and particularly the small group of specialists in disability history for the Graeco-Roman world, whom I was honoured to welcome to the University of Antwerp on 5 and 6 September 2011 for the conference ‘A Capite ad Calcem: Disparate Bodies in Ancient Rome’.

To my students, particularly to Dorien Meulenijzer and Bert Gevaert. To friends and family, who add colour to life every day: my brother and sister-in-law, nephew and niece. And obviously to my dear parents, without whom none of this would have been possible.

Abbreviations

The abbreviations of editions of sources are in line with the standard lists named below, in which the reader will find all bibliographical data of the editions used.

Greek inscriptions according to *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum. Consolidated index for volumes XXXVI–XLV (1986–1995)* (ed. J. H. M. Strubbe; Amsterdam, 1999), pp. 677–688, and the subsequent volumes of *SEG*.

Latin inscriptions according to *L'Année Épigraphique* (2004) (Paris, 2007), pp. 699–705, and the *Epigraphische Datenbank Frankfurt (EDCS)* (www.manfredclaus.de).

Papyri according to the *Checklist of editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic and Coptic papyri, ostraca and tablets* (ed. J. F. Oates et al.; Oakville, CT, 2001) (<http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/papyrus/texts/clist.html>).

For Greek and Latin authors, names and titles of works have been quoted in full. For most literary works, the most usual English title is used, while for most of the medical works from the Hippocratic corpus and by Galen, the standard title in Latin is given. Only in the case of Christian texts that are difficult to trace are the volume and page numbers of the edition in the *Patrologia Latina* (PL) or *Patrologia Graeca* (PG) stated.

Non-Literary Sources

<i>AE</i>	<i>L'Année épigraphique</i>
<i>BGU</i>	<i>Ägyptische Urkunden aus den Königlichen (later Staatlichen) Museen zu Berlin, Griechische Urkunden</i>
<i>CIL</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum</i>
<i>IGUR</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae Urbis Romae</i>
<i>ILS</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae</i>
<i>O. Claud.I</i>	<i>Mons Claudianus. Ostraca Graeca et Latina I</i> (J. Bingen, A. Bülow-Jacobsen, W. E. H. Cockle, H. Cuvigny, L. Rubinstein and W. Van Rengen)

List of Abbreviations

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<i>P. Aberdeen</i>	<i>Catalogue of Greek and Latin Papyri and Ostraca in the Possession of the University of Aberdeen</i> (E. G. Turner)
<i>P. Berl. Möller</i>	<i>Griechische Papyri aus dem Berliner Museum</i> (S. Möller)
<i>P. Leipzig</i>	<i>Die griechischen Papyri der Leipziger Universitätsbibliothek</i> (C. Wessely)
<i>P. Mich.</i>	<i>Michigan Papyri</i>
<i>P. Oxy.</i>	<i>The Oxyrhynchus Papyri</i>
<i>P. Ross. Georg.</i>	<i>Papyri russischer und georgischer Sammlungen</i>
<i>PSI</i>	<i>Papiri greci e latini</i>
<i>P. Tebt.</i>	<i>The Tebtunis Papyri</i>
<i>SB</i>	<i>Sammelbuch griechischer Urkunden aus Aegypten</i>
<i>SEG</i>	<i>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum</i>

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