

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.

CHRISTIAN LAES is Associate Professor of Ancient History and Latin at the University of Antwerp, Belgium, and Adjunct Professor at the University of Tampere, Finland. He specialises in the sociocultural history of the Roman and late antique worlds. His previous books include *Youth in the Roman Empire: The Young and the Restless Years?* (Cambridge, 2014) and *Children in the Roman Empire: Outsiders Within* (Cambridge, 2011).

DISABILITIES AND THE
DISABLED IN THE
ROMAN WORLD

A Social and Cultural History

CHRISTIAN LAES

University of Antwerp



University of Antwerp



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-316-61501-0 — Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World
 Christian Laes
 Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

CAMBRIDGE
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.
 It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of
 education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781316615010
 DOI: 10.1017/9781316678480

© Christian Laes 2018

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
 and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
 no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
 permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published as *Beperkt? Gehandicapt en in het Romeinse Rijk*, Davidsfonds Uitgeverij, Leuven, 2014.
 First published by Cambridge University Press, 2018
 First paperback edition 2021

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

NAMES: Laes, Christian, author.

TITLE: Disabilities and the disabled in the Roman world : a social and cultural history /
 Christian Laes, University of Antwerp, Belgium.

Other titles: Beperkt. English

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2018. |
 Translation of: *Beperkt ? Gehandicapt en in het Romeinse Rijk*. Davidsfonds Uitgeverij,

Leuven, 2014. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2017054439 | ISBN 9781107162907 (hardback) |

ISBN 9781316615010 (paperback)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Medicine, Greek and Roman—History. | People with mental
 disabilities—Rome—History. | People with disabilities—Rome—History.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC RI38.5 .L3413 2017 | DDC 610.938—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017054439>

ISBN 978-1-107-16290-7 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-316-61501-0 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or
 accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in
 this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is,
 or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	x
Introduction	I
A Problem of Terminology	I
Geographical and Chronological Parameters	12
Sources	14
A New Discipline?	20
1 Conception, Birth and the ‘Crucial’ First Days	23
Survivors? Handicapped Babies within a Regime of Massive Infant Mortality	23
Physicians and Parents in Search of Explanations	29
Biological Birth and Social Birth: A Crucial Interval?	31
2 Mental and Intellectual Disabilities: Sane or Insane?	37
The Madness of Emperor Caligula	37
Four Historical Approaches to ‘Mental Disorders’:	
A Way Out of the Impasse?	42
Roman Legal Thought: A ‘Practical’ File	46
In Search of Learning Disorders and Intellectual Disabilities	52
Anecdotal Evidence for ‘Mental Disorders’	61
Classifications by Ancient Physicians	66
Ancient ‘Psychotherapy’	72
Christians, Devils and Possession	76
3 Blindness, a ‘Fate Worse Than Death’?	80
Homer as ‘Symbolic Blind Man’	80
Material Conditions	85
Theory and Practice of Ancient Ophthalmology	88
Ancient Authors on the Causes of Blindness	93
Blind and Visually Impaired People in Everyday Life	99
Blind People in Opinion and Thought	107
Christianity: Signs of Change?	110

4	Deaf, Mute and Deaf-Mute: A Silent Story	114
	The Son of Croesus	114
	Deaf-Mute, Mute, Deaf?	117
	Medical and Demographic Explanations: Old and New	120
	Deaf-Mutes in Roman Law	124
	Echoes from Everyday Life	127
	The Venerable Bede and the Christian Vision	130
5	Speech Defects: Stammering History	133
	Demosthenes: The Symbolic Stutterer?	133
	Causes of Speech Defects: Antiquity and Now	135
	In Search of Cases	137
	The Emperor's Speech: Claudius as a Stutterer	140
	Ancient Speech Therapy	144
	Moses in the Jewish and Christian Traditions	147
6	Mobility Impairments: History of Pain and Toil	149
	Philip II of Macedonia and Other 'Crippled' Kings	149
	Mobility Impairments Then and Now: Osteology and Demography	151
	Ancient Physicians on Deformities, Fractures and Healing	155
	A Glimpse of Daily Life	160
	The Role of Christianity	165
	Conclusions	168
	Functioning and Labour	169
	Capabilities and the Happiness Index: Exclusion or Inclusion?	173
	The Happiness Index	175
	Monsters and Anti-Physiognomics: A Path to Identity Formation?	176
	Disabilities as Political Invective: Despised as a War Hero and Reviled as a Politician	179
	Basic Positions	182
	A History of Long Duration, but with Little Change?	187
	New Paths	189
	A Final Thought: The Emperor's New Clothes	190
	<i>Bibliography</i>	192
	<i>General Index</i>	215
	<i>Index of Impaired Persons</i>	220
	<i>Index Locorum</i>	224

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.

Preface

ix

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

xi

<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>