DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY

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The study of disability in the ancient Mediterranean world is relatively new: while work on specific diagnoses, conditions or impairments may date back to the nineteenth century (if not earlier), the beginning of more mainstream scholarly attempts to understand the ancient history of disability as a concept or experience dates only to 1983, with H.-J. Stiker's classic *Corps infirmes et sociétés*, translated into English in 1999 as *A History of Disability*.[1] Stiker discussed disability in successive periods and contexts, including Graeco-Roman antiquity, and successfully demonstrated that disability is both culturally contingent and historically variable. In 1995 R. Garland's *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* was wholly dedicated to the topic in ancient Greece and Rome.[2] Garland made use of an impressive range of evidence, and the book is valuable as a kind of sourcebook; unfortunately, its analysis of disability is atheoretical, relying heavily on modern ableist paradigms, and is thus limited in what it contributes to our understanding of ancient disability. M.L. Rose's *The Staff of Oedipus: Transforming Disability in Ancient Greece* (2003) inaugurated work on the subject that explicitly engaged with Disability Studies and provided a strong foundation for the work that has followed.[3] Since Rose's book, interest in disability has increased exponentially and is reflected in broad overviews, but also in specialist, interdisciplinary and cross-cultural studies.

Ethical work in this field depends heavily on scholarship produced in Disability Studies and especially on critical disability theory.[4] Moving beyond the simple (and disputed) binary of the medical model versus the social model, newer approaches – or, rather, methodologies – understand disability as a 'cultural, historical, relative, social, and political phenomenon'. Critical disability theory moves beyond materialist critiques of disabling

[1]For an engaging overview of the study of disability in the field of history broadly, see C.J. Kudlick, 'Disability History: Why We Need Another "Other"', *The American Historical Review* 108 (2003), 763–93.

[2]R. Garland, *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World* (1995). The second edition, published in 2010, provides only an updated preface with no alteration to the main body of the text.

[3]M.L. Rose, *The Staff of Oedipus: Transforming Disability in Ancient Greece* (2003). The book is based on the Ph.D. dissertation of Rose (then called 'Edwards'): M.L. Edwards, 'Physical Disability in the Ancient Greek World' (Diss., University of Minnesota, 1995).

[4]An introduction to Disability Studies and critical disability studies, as well as a discussion of their relative development and the tensions between them and an exploration of interdisciplinary approaches to critical disability theory, are productively provided in the entry by M.C. Hall on 'Critical Disability Theory' in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2019), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/disability-critical/.

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structures (the bailiwick of social model theorists) and focuses instead on the roles of culture, history and embodiment while engaging a broad range of other critical theories, including critical race theory, queer theory, feminist theory and poststructuralism.[5] The prevailing emphasis is on 'modes of analysis rather than its objects of study', and the work involves scrutinising not just 'bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations'.[6] Accordingly, impairment, disability and ability are not natural but produced and, as such, can take an indefinite number of forms based on myriad culturally and temporally specific factors.[7] The goals of this work are not simply to discuss disability as a lived experience or to identify it as a feature of representation; rather, disability becomes a vector of analysis, a way of thinking about or approaching the ancient world that is fundamentally different.

Importantly, newer approaches within critical disability studies are intersectional and committed to fomenting 'ethical relationships between disability scholarship, disability activism, and communities of disabled people'.[8] Like other critical approaches, this work has emancipatory aims and works to critique and, eventually, to dismantle the structures of power that marginalise disabled people. These principles are not adjuncts to the work, but foundational to it, and are increasingly being taken seriously by historians and others who study disability in the past.

DEFINING DISABILITY

A central issue to ancient disability history is one of definition.[9] The fact that disability is grounded in the body, mind or *bodymind* of individuals and simultaneously culturally

[5]R.P. Shuttleworth and H. Meekosha, 'Accommodating Critical Disability Studies in Bioarchaeology', in: J.F. Byrnes and J.L. Muller (edd.), *Bioarchaeology of Impairment and Disability: Theoretical, Ethnohistorical, and Methodological Perspectives* (2017), pp. 39–55, at p. 25.

[6]M.A. Minich, 'Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now', *Emergent Critical Analytics for Alternative Humanities* 5.1 (2016).

[7]R. Garland-Thomson, 'Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept', *Hypatia* 26 (2011), 591–609.

[8]Minich (n. 6). See also C. Bell, 'Introducing White Disability Studies: A Modest Proposal', in: L. Davis (ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader* (2nd ed. 2006), pp. 275–82.

[9]Important for this work, as for any work, is terminology. I. Zola, 'The Language of Disability: Problems of Politics and Practice', *Australian Disability Review* 1 (1988), 13–21, discusses the power of naming disability. With reference to the ancient world terminology tends to be imprecise. The ancient Greek lexicon of disability focuses more on the consequences of conditions than on their diagnosis; see, e.g., H. Silverblank, 'Forging the Anti-Lexicon with Hephaestus', in: M. Umachandran and M. Ward (edd.), *Critical Ancient World Studies: The Case for Forgetting Classics* (2023), pp. 107–20, and E. Samama, 'The Greek Vocabulary of Disabilities', in: C. Laes (ed.), *Disability in Antiquity* (2017), pp. 121–38, and, for Latin, W.J. Turner, *Care and Custody of the Mentally Ill, Incompetent, and Disabled in Medieval England* (2013). For a starting guide for the use of disability terminology in ancient world studies, see A. Morris and D. Sneed, 'Blog: A Brief Guide to Disability Terminology and Theory in Ancient World Studies', *Society for Classical Studies* (August 30, 2020), https://www.classicalstudies.org/scs-blog/alexandra-morris/blog-brief-guide-disability-terminology-and-theory-ancient-world-studies.

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contingent makes it difficult to define and thus to identify in ancient contexts.[10] Most complicated, perhaps, are historiographical problems and the issue of retrospective diagnosis. Today, disability is largely – and problematically – under the purview of the medical profession and diagnosed according to modern medical theories and practices, even if the disability in question requires no medical intervention. Studies like V. Dasen's *Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt and Greece* (2013) have applied modern diagnostic criteria directly to the ancient world.[11] Similarly, M.D. Grmek and D. Gourevitch sought to identify illnesses and disabilities, as characterised by modern medicine, in various ancient visual media.[12] It is not the case, however, that disability has always been a medical concern, nor that ancient peoples recognised the same impairments, had access to the same diagnostic tools or categorised people in the same ways as we do. As disability activist Mary Johnson has argued, what constitutes 'disabled' is, in the end, 'a political or a moral judgment, based not on anything about the individual in question so much as the viewer's own perception and attitudes about the way society should function'.[13] The struggles to identify the plague described by Thucydides – whose explicit goal was diagnostic specificity for the purposes of identification – by mapping his list of symptoms onto modern understandings of pathogens and epidemics illustrate the problem well. C.F. Goodey and M.L. Rose and O. Rees have presented useful discussions of the problems inherent in identifying specific (modern) disabilities in the past.[14] We may never resolve the issue of definition, and, ultimately, scholars must embrace the challenge and accept that 'its very ambiguity and changing meanings open up uncharted areas of research and modes of analysis, which in turn will bring about a greater understanding of disability and its repercussions'.[15] In the end, the issue is not one of disability itself, but of the epistemological leverage of disability for our understanding of the ancient Mediterranean world.

SCHOLARSHIP ON ANCIENT DISABILITY

Much recent work on disability in the ancient Mediterranean has taken the form of edited volumes that attempt to address the topic from a cross-cultural perspective. C. Laes's collection of essays entitled *A Cultural History of Disability in Antiquity* (2020), for example, has chapters that address physical, mental, intellectual and sensory disabilities in ancient Greek, Roman, late antique and Near Eastern contexts.[16] Another volume, also edited by Laes, is divided by geographical region, with chapters on the ancient Near East (including the Hittites, Mesopotamia, Persia, Egypt, India and China), Greece,

[10]For the concept of the *bodymind*, see M. Price, 'The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain', *Hypatia* 30 (2015), 268–84; see also a brief discussion in C.F. Goodey and M.L. Rose, 'Disability History and Greco-Roman Antiquity', in: M. Rembis, C. Kudlick and K.E. Nielsen (edd.), *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History* (2018), pp. 41–54.

[11]V. Dasen, *Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt and Greece* (2013).

[12]M.D. Grmek and D. Gourevitch, *Les maladies dans l'art antique* (1998).

[13]M. Johnson, *Make Them Go Away: Clint Eastwood, Christopher Reeve, and the Case against Disability Rights* (2003), p. 46.

[14]Goodey and Rose (n. 10); O. Rees, 'Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: An Ancient Greek Case Study in Retrospective Diagnosis', in: O. Rees, K. Hurlock and J. Crowley (edd.), *Combat Stress in Pre-modern Europe* (2022), pp. 15–35.

[15]Kudlick (n. 1), p. 767.

[16]C. Laes (ed.), *A Cultural History of Disability in Antiquity* (2020).

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Rome and late antiquity.[17] R. Breitweiser edited a volume on *Behinderungen und Beeinträchtigungen/Disability and Impairment in Antiquity* (2012) that is similarly wide-ranging and even enters into the early Medieval world.[18] E. Adams's edited *Disability Studies and the Classical Body: The Forgotten Other* (2021) is broad in scope, but introduces the idea that this work must engage with theoretical work in Disability Studies in order to be successful.[19]

Because of the nature of these volumes, authors represented within them tend not to be specialists in ancient disability. As such, authentic engagement with relevant theoretical approaches is uneven. Nevertheless, the volumes represent the beginnings of what promises to be an exciting future for work in the ancient world. In what follows, we provide brief overviews of scholarship dedicated to three cultural contexts: Egypt, Greece and Rome. The amount of scholarship that could be discussed is astounding: Laes maintains an online bibliography, 'Disability History and the Ancient World (ca. 3000 BCE – ca. 700 CE)' that, as of 2024, extends to 89 pages. Most of the following studies remain focused on one culture and (to their credit) have not attempted to develop a universalising narrative of disability in the ancient world. Realistically, the histories of the disciplines that study these ancient societies have all progressed differently and with necessarily different implications for the broader study of disability in the ancient past and deserve to be addressed individually.

DISABILITY IN ANCIENT EGYPT

In 1911 Marc Armand Ruffer – an experimental pathologist whose mutilation of ancient Egyptian mummified remains laid the bedrock for palaeopathology – published 'On Dwarfs and Other Deformed Persons in Ancient Egypt'.[20] In it Ruffer expressed, quite bluntly, bemusement that past societies, including Egypt, Greece and Rome, were so fascinated by the 'deformed'. In the process he identified artistic examples depicting individuals whom he and other Egyptologists, including Gaston Maspero, Henry Breasted and Flinders Petrie, diagnosed as having conditions we recognise today under the category of disability.

Ruffer's article epitomises scholarship in Egyptology that attempts to address questions of the racial, ethnic, gendered or disabled 'Other'. His speculation about a person with dwarfism's 'cunning' or 'idiocy', for example, featured alongside his attempt to determine whether a particular royal face was more 'Bushman' or 'Semitic' in character. Such contributions of pseudoscientific ideas of race and eugenics in the twentieth century have been well documented by modern scholars, but its effects on Egyptological studies of the body and disability are so far under-appreciated.[21] This legacy is traceable in, among other

[17]Laes (n. 9).

[18]R. Breitwieser (ed.), *Behinderungen und Beeinträchtigungen/Disability and Impairment in Antiquity* (2012).

[19]E. Adams (ed.), *Disability Studies and the Classical Body: The Forgotten Other* (2021).

[20]M.A. Ruffer, 'On Dwarfs and Other Deformed Persons in Ancient Egypt', *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique d'Alexandrie* 13 (1911), 1–17.

[21]K.L. Sheppard, 'Flinders Petrie and Eugenics at UCL', *Bulletin of the History of Archaeology* 20 (2010), 16–29; E.S. Meltzer, 'Egyptologists, Nazism and Racial "Science"', *Journal of Egyptian History* 5 (2012), 1–11; D. Challis, *The Archaeology of Race: The Eugenic Ideas of Francis Galton and Flinders Petrie* (2014); U. Matić, *Ethnic Identities in the Land of the Pharaohs: Past and Present Approaches in Egyptology* (2020).

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things, the language that continues to be used to refer to physical impairment and disability.[22]

Studies dedicated to disability in ancient Egypt have been relatively limited in recent years, despite the array of bioarchaeological, literary and artistic evidence. Recent publications have provided important beginnings for a theoretically engaged approach to disability in ancient Egypt. A volume edited by A.F. Morris and H. Vogel entitled *Disability in Ancient Egypt and Egyptology: All Our Yesterdays* (2024), for example, brings Egyptologists, archaeologists, museum professionals and teachers into dialogue with work done in critical disability studies.[23] Morris's monograph, *Disability in Ptolemaic Egypt and the Hellenistic World: Plato's Stepchildren* (2025), surveys literary and artistic evidence and analyses it through lenses of both disability theory and the author's own lived experience of disability. Focusing on Egyptian museums, N.N. Zakaria has recently argued that exhibits dedicated to disability histories in Egyptian museums can promote greater inclusion of disabled people in contemporary (Egyptian) society.[24]

DISABILITY IN ANCIENT GREECE

In the first decade or so of the twenty-first century more scholars began to study disability in ancient Greece, although engagement with disability theory and even the use of the word was uneven if not entirely absent. With notable exceptions, including Rose's book (discussed above) and several of her articles, it was only after about 2015 that theoretically engaged scholarship on disability in ancient Greece took hold. The work may appear scattershot in that there are few trends that can be picked out from among the following items, but each has contributed uniquely to the broader understanding of disability in ancient Greece. E. Adams has addressed ancient and modern attitudes towards disability and the function and meaning of anatomical votives as well as the psychology of prostheses.[25] J. Draycott integrated disability studies into her work on prostheses and assistive technology in the ancient Mediterranean broadly, including in Greece.[26] M. Dillon, W. Penrose, J. Fisher, M. Rose and J. Biggi have all considered the legal status of disabled people in ancient Athens with reference to a now well-known speech by Lysias regarding a

[22]A critical and effective historiography of this can be found in H. Vogel and R.K. Power, 'Recognising Inequality: Ableism in Egyptological Approaches to Disability and Bodily Differences', *World Archaeology* 54 (2022), 502–15.

[23]A.F. Morris and H. Vogel (edd.), *Disability in Ancient Egypt and Egyptology: All Our Yesterdays* (2024).

[24]N.N. Zakaria, 'Unveiling Hidden Histories: Disability in Ancient Egypt and its Impact on Today's Society – How Can Disability Representation in Museums Challenge Societal Prejudice?', *Social Sciences* 13, 647 (2024); N.N. Zakaria, 'Museums for Equality: Combating Prejudice, Promoting Human Rights and Practices of Social Inclusion in Egypt's Museums', in: A. Eardley and V. Jones (edd.), *The Museum Accessibility Spectrum: Reimagining Access and Inclusion* (2025), pp. 240–59.

[25]E. Adams, 'Fragmentation and the Body's Boundaries', in: J. Draycott and E.-J. Graham (edd.), *Bodies of Evidence: Ancient Anatomical Votives Past, Present and Future* (2017), pp. 193–213; E. Adams, 'The Psychology of Prostheses: Substitution Strategies and Notions of Normality', in: J. Draycott (ed.), *Prostheses in Antiquity* (2019), pp. 180–208.

[26]J. Draycott (ed.), *Prostheses in Antiquity* (2019); J. Draycott, *Prosthetics and Assistive Technology in Ancient Greece and Rome* (2023).

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pension available for them.[27] In one article D. Sneed confronted the question of disabled infanticide in ancient Greece and in another argued that ancient Greek healing sanctuaries were built with accessibility for mobility impaired pilgrims in mind.[28] E. Samama and H. Silverblank have each presented perspectives on the ancient Greek language of disability.[29] H. Silverblank and M. Ward discussed the relationship between monstrosity and disability in the works of Aristotle and Homer.[30]

DISABILITY IN ANCIENT ROME

The study of disability in ancient Rome has evolved along similar lines as that of ancient Greece. An earlier contribution to the study on disability in ancient Roman contexts was a volume edited by C. Laes, C.F. Goodey and M.L. Rose, *Disabilities in Roman Antiquity: Disparate Bodies A Capite ad Calcem* (2013).[31] More recent work has shown an impressive chronological, geographical and thematic range. Draycott has considered the lived experience of an individual disabled person, Gaius Gemellus Horigines, through his family's archive in Roman Egypt.[32] Sneed recently highlighted the prevalence of disability among ancient Roman (and some Greek) authors who identified themselves or could be identified as disabled, including Pliny the Elder, Seneca the Younger and Demosthenes, demonstrating the relevance of disability to the literary canon of the ancient world. S.R. Holman, C.L. de Wet and J.L. Zecher's edited volume, *Disability, Medicine, and Healing Discourse in Early Christianity* (2024) comprehensively addressed the situation of disability in early Christian contexts, from Jesus to Late Antiquity, from both literary and historical angles.[33] This follows on the tail of other studies dedicated to disability and the Hebrew Bible, including S.J. Melcher's *Prophetic Disability: Divine Sovereignty and Human Bodies in the Hebrew Bible* (2022) and S.M. Olyan's *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*

[27]M. Dillon, 'Payments to the Disabled at Athens: Social Justice or Fear of Aristocratic Patronage?', *Ancient Society* 26 (1995), 27–57; W. Penrose, 'The Discourse of Disability in Ancient Greece', *Classical World* 108 (2015), 499–523; J. Fisher, 'Behinderung und Gesellschaft im klassischen Athen. Bemerkungen zur 24. Rede des Lysias', in: Breitwieser (n. 18), pp. 41–5; M. Dillon, 'Legal (and Customary?) Approaches to the Disabled in Ancient Greece', in Laes (n. 9), pp. 167–81; M.L. Rose, 'Ability and Disability in Classical Athenian Oratory', in Laes (n. 9), pp. 139–53; J.L. Biggi, 'Judging the Body: Disability, Class and Citizen Identity – A Case Study from an Ancient Greek Lawcourt', *Journal of Gender, Ethnic and Cross-Cultural Studies* 2 (2023).

[28]D. Sneed, 'Disability and Infanticide in Ancient Greece', *Hesperia* 90 (2021), 747–72; D. Sneed, 'The Architecture of Access: Ramps at Ancient Greek Healing Sanctuaries', *Antiquity* 94 (2020), 1015–29.

[29]E. Samama, 'The Greek Vocabulary of Disabilities', in Laes (n. 9), pp. 121–32; Silverblank (n. 9).

[30]H. Silverblank and M. Ward, 'Monsters and Disability: The Violence of Interpreting Bodies in Aristotle and Homer', in: D. Felton (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Monsters in Classical Myth* (2024), pp. 399–413.

[31]C. Laes, C.F. Goodey and M.L. Rose (edd.), *Disabilities in Roman Antiquity: Disparate Bodies A Capite ad Calcem* (2013).

[32]J. Draycott, 'Reconstructing the Lived Experience of Disability in Antiquity: A Case Study from Roman Egypt', *Greece & Rome* 62 (2015), 189–205.

[33]S.R. Holman, C.L. De Wet and J.L. Zecher (edd.), *Disability, Medicine, and Healing Discourse in Early Christianity: New Conversations for Health Humanities* (2024).

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(2008).[34] I. Soon's monograph, *A Disabled Apostle: Impairment and Disability in the Letters of Paul* (2023), continues the impressive embrace of disability theory by Biblical scholars.[35] In *Disability in Antiquity* edited by Laes (2017) chapters in the section on 'The late ancient world' address the role of disability in Islam, Coptic and Ethiopian traditions, North Africa and Judaism.[36]

THE FUTURE OF ANCIENT DISABILITY STUDIES

The study of disability in the ancient Mediterranean is in its infancy, with work largely focused on disability itself and concerned with identifying disabled figures, the language of disability, and potential frameworks or models for understanding disability in very different contexts. Much work is, at present, being done by graduate students and underfunded researchers and published in edited volumes, but we are on the cusp of this work entering the mainstream of scholarship on the ancient world. Moving forward, we hope that scholars begin to question not just disability, but constructions like normativity and the normate, as well as to consider disability not so much as a singular concept, but as a relationship between a body and/or mind and the physical, social, sensory, legal and political environments a person enters.

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[35]I.T. Soon, *A Disabled Apostle: Impairment and Disability in the Letters of Paul* (2023).

[36]C. Downer, 'The Coptic and Ethiopian Traditions', in: Laes (n. 9), pp. 357–75; M.A. Gaumer, 'What Difference did Islam Make? Disease and Disability in Early Medieval North Africa', in: Laes (n. 9), pp. 403–20; H. Benkheira, 'Impotent Husbands, Eunuchs and Flawed Women in Early Islamic law', in: Laes (n. 9), pp. 421–33; J.W. Belser and L. Lehmhaus, 'Disability in Rabbinic Judaism', in: Laes (n. 9), pp. 434–51.

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