**BOOK REVIEW**

*Disability in Antiquity*. By Christian Laes, ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2017. Pp. xvi + 490. Hardcover, $240. ISBN 978-1-138-81485-1.

D

*isability in Antiquity* is a valuable contribution to the recent field of historical disability studies. As part of the *Rewriting Antiquity* series, it aims to “examine major themes of the ancient world in a broad, holistic and inclusive fashion” (ii). The editor of this volume, Dr. Christian Laes, under whom I did part of my student teaching, is the author of several articles and books on childhood and disability in classical Antiquity[[1]](#footnote-1). For this publication, he gathered an array of scholars from both sides of the Atlantic, including classicists, historians, and theologians, in order to explore perceptions of disability in ancient cultures in a comprehensive, comparative, and multidisciplinary manner. Using historical, linguistic, and sociological perspectives, the authors examine what constitutes disability and which vocabulary denotes disability, while also investigating perceived causes of disability. The articles survey how people cured, treated, or prevented disability, and conclude whether disabled people were generally integrated into or rejected by traditional society.

The book is organized both chronologically and geographically, starting with cultures in the Ancient (Near) East that predate classical civilisation and ending with an analysis of disability notions in the *longue durée*. Two prefatory chapters set the stage for the remainder of the book. In addition to outlining past research into the history of disability, the first chapter convincingly clarifies the book’s definition of disability while remaining alert to the pitfalls of applying this modern term to ancient cultures and the disparate perceptions of disability throughout time (Laes). The second chapter, through several case studies, elucidates the influence of environmental factors such as the plague and malaria on ancient populations and examines how these diseases yielded greater rates of disability (April Pudsey).

Part 1 explores the concept of disability in the Ancient (Near) East by examining sources from Hittite civilization (Richard Beal), Mesopotamia and Israel (Edgar Kellenberger), Persia (Omar Coloru), Egypt (Rosalie David), India (M. Miles), and China (Olivia Milburn). Physical disabilities and the incorporation of the disabled into society and religious rites occupy the bulk of this research, but also notable is the concept that disability was a mark of the gods’ anger or the result of a demonic possession. While some of these chapters provide an in-depth analysis and cogent interpretation, those that encounter a dearth of available evidence or difficulty accurately translating the original sources (e.g. Hittite oracular texts, Vedic texts) remain inconclusive. Nevertheless, this part of the book breaks new ground by including some cultures that had been largely overlooked in previous disability research.

Part 2 contains six chapters that focus on the ancient Greek world, with much of its attention devoted to the city of Athens and its unique stance towards the disabled, as evidenced by the daily allowance allotted to those who were unable to work. The first chapter provides an extensive summary of Greek terms denoting incapacity, including an English translation of each word, a brief description (often etymological), and a reference to the text in which it occurs (Evelyne Samama). From this, we learn that the ancient Greek concept of disability covered a wide range of conditions (including old age) and is at times hard to interpret—many terms did not clearly convey a specific condition or were applied in dissimilar situations. The remaining chapters survey how the concept of disability can be gleaned from Athenian oratory (Martha Lynn Rose), tragedy and comedy (Robert Garland), legal texts (Matthew Dillon), art (Alexandre Mitchell), and Plutarch’s philosophical works (Michiel Meeusen). Particularly enlightening for this reader was the discussion of artistic depictions of disabilities, which most likely served an apotropaic function. Equally intriguing is a suggestion made by several articles, namely that people with disabilities were mostly integrated into the community, serving in a wide variety of roles, though they were generally prevented from participating in religious rites.

Part 3 surveys different aspects of the ancient Roman world with regards to disability: Stoic philosophy (Bert Gevaert), satire (Sarah Bond & Gellar-Goad), visual arts (Lisa Trentin), sanctuaries (Emma-Jayne Graham), the works of Galen (Chiara Thumiger) and Caelius Aurelianus (Danielle Gourevitch), and the Roman legal system (Peter Toohey). A recurring question throughout several of these chapters is what the ancients perceived to be the cause of a disability, whether a humoral imbalance, a sinful soul, or an underlying mental condition. Similar to the section on ancient Greece, this part of the book confirms the ambiguous nature of precisely what constituted a disability and the apotropaic function of artistic representations, in addition to providing lists of Latin words that denote any form of infirmity.

Part 4, which deals with the late ancient world, is mainly focused on disability within a religious context: Christianity (Anna Rebecca Solevåg, Martin Claes & Anthony Dupont, Jenni Kuuliala, Carol Downer, John W. Martens, Stephanos Efthymiadis), Islam (Matthew Alan Gaumer, Hocine Benkheira), and Judaism (Julia Watts Belser & Lennart Lehmhaus). Women and fertility issues feature prominently in these chapters, as does religion’s role in creating more institutionalized care for the disabled. Though religions were instrumental in fostering more acceptance of disabled people, these articles also reveal that disability continued to be a barrier to participation in religious rites. Similar to other cultures and eras, disability remained a source of artistic inspiration, and people continued to perceive disability as a mark of character deficiency. Most revealing in this part of the book is the nexus of philosophies, religions, and medicinal practices of cultures which perhaps initially seem disparate.

The two closing chapters focus on the endurance of ancient notions of disability well past late Antiquity by looking at canon law’s stance towards disability among clergy (Irina Metzler) and the influence of the ancient Greek idea of physical perfection (and consequently also of disability) on Nazi ideology (Toon Van Houdt).

Each chapter of this carefully-edited book contains in-text citations and an extensive bibliography, facilitating further research. Notes are situated at the end of each chapter. A detailed index in the back of the book promotes easy navigation. The few typographical errors encountered are minor.

The strength of this book lies in its endeavor to be comprehensive and comparative: collating a wide range of materials from different eras and cultures provides the reader with a holistic understanding of the topic at hand. Yet this same strength could also be seen as a possible shortcoming: the fact that the book is not focused on a particular time, place, or genre, limits its ability to delve deeply into specific aspects of disability. Nevertheless, this book greatly advances our understanding as some of the chapters include research that was previously all but non-existent (e.g. disability in ancient Persia), while others propose new interpretations of formerly studied sources (e.g. oracular inquiries in Hittite culture). As a secondary school Latin teacher, I especially valued the vivid snapshots of daily life included in these chapters, as they present an ideal opportunity for students of any level to engage with the topic through primary sources. Overall, this book is an excellent addition to any scholarly library and a must-read for anyone interested in the history of disability. Readers are left not just with a thorough understanding of the topic but also an invitation for future research, as the authors put forth compelling and insightful questions to continue the conversation regarding disability in antiquity.

Heidi De Baerdemaeker-Poole

*The Waterford School*, heidipoole@waterfordschool.ord

1. See e.g. *Learning from Silence: Disabled Children in Roman Antiquity*, in Arctos 42 (2008) p. 85-122, *Raising a Disabled Child. A Life Course Approach*, in J. Evans-Grubbs, T. Parkin (ed.), Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Roman World (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013) p. 125-146, *Disabilities in Roman Antiquity. Disparate Bodies A Capite ad Calcem* (Leiden, Brill, 2013), *Children in the Roman Empire. Outsiders within* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)