

BOOK REVIEW

Prostheses in Antiquity. Edited by JANE DRAYCOTT. London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2019. Pp. xviii + 213. Hardback, \$140.00. ISBN: 978-1-4724-8809-1.

When one thinks of a prosthesis, images of modern devices and their contemporary users are immediately called to mind. Although it is tempting to ascribe our present understanding of prostheses to the ancient world, the evidence suggests that prostheses functioned in a markedly different way in the past. Anything but mass produced, prostheses were rare and individualized, and bear the potential to shed light on their users as well as the broader cultures in which they were made. This volume, the first to explore prostheses in the ancient Mediterranean world, focuses on prostheses as material culture, and pays special attention not only to how they were used, but also to who used them.

The volume consists of an introduction and eight essays. The Introduction, written by the editor, briefly describes the context—cultural, historiographical and theoretical—of the subject and summarizes the content of the subsequent chapters. Chapter 1, “The Complex Aspects of Experimental Archaeology: The Design of Working Models of Two Ancient Egyptian Great Toe Prostheses” (Jacky Finch), details the author’s reconstruction of the functionality of two great toe prostheses from Egypt. Since the great toe is not necessary for locomotion, questions of why prosthetic ones were used, and who used them, were raised. To answer these queries, replicas were produced, amputee volunteers were enlisted and observations made—in particular, the author concludes that great toe prosthetics were expensive items and wearing them seemed to prevent further damage to the amputated area, create a more symmetrical walking pattern and aid with plantar pressure distribution. Furthermore, the identity of the owner of one of the prosthetics was known. Her name was Tabaketenmut (ca. 950–710 BCE), daughter of a priest named Bakamon. The author raises the possibility that her prosthetic might have served a religious function as well, since it is plausible that the daughter of a priest might also participate in temple rituals, and those rituals might have required her to be bodily “whole” rather than “incomplete.”

The next two chapters are concerned with teeth and hair, which presumably were relatively common prostheses. Chapter 2, “A Very Distinctive Smile: Etruscan Dental Appliances” (Jean MacIntosh Turfa and Marshall Joseph Becker), catalogues all known examples of Etruscan and Italic dental appliances. The authors conclude that dental appliances from the Italian peninsula were worn by elite individuals, women in particular, and were fashioned not to replace teeth, but rather in place of them. For reasons unknown, it seems that wearers had their teeth intentionally removed and bridged with gold prostheses. Chapter 3, “Prosthetic Hair in Ancient Rome” (Jane Draycott), explores the dichotomous attitudes towards wigs. Wigs were crafted using the hair of lower class individuals, such as foreign slaves or prisoners of war. Although wigs were viewed as status and beauty symbols, they were also considered to be deceitful and immoral at the same time.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on amputees. Chapter 4, “An Amputee may go out with his Wooden Aid on Shabbat’: Dynamics of Prosthetic Discourse in Talmudic Traditions” (Lennart Lehmhaus), investigates the role of prostheses in Late Antique Jewish society through the lens of Talmudic literature. These sources reveal that prosthetics were viewed as tools that users could be prohibited from wearing at certain times. Chapter 5, “Evidence of a Late Antique Amputation in a Skeleton from Hemmaberg” (Josef Eitler and Michaela Binder), describes a unique burial from a pilgrimage site of a man whose left foot was amputated. His burial context suggests that the man belonged to the upper echelons of Frankish society, and that he was a horseman before his amputation. His left foot was fitted with a prosthesis that would have provided his leg with some stability, but was not suitable for walking, which suggests that he would have only been able to walk with the aid of a crutch.

The final three chapters move beyond the materiality of prostheses. Chapter 6, “Living Prostheses” (Katherine D. van Schaik), focuses on the caregivers who tend to the needs of those who were paralyzed or blind, thereby broadening the definition of prosthesis to recognize the contribution of those who provide care. Chapter 7, “‘Prosthetic Imagination’ in Greek Literature” (Anne-Sophie Noel), considers the ways in which the Greeks conceived of prostheses and their use while exploring the agency of prosthetic devices in literary sources. The concluding essay, Chapter 8, “The Psychology of Prostheses: Substitution Strategies and Notions of Normality” (Ellen Adams), advocates for the application of disability

studies theory in order to understand ancient prosthetic use while recognizing that all notions of prostheses and related aids are cultural-specific.

This book, with its diachronic examples, will undoubtedly serve as a useful resource for scholars with a special interest in the social role(s) of ancient prostheses, as well as those who study broader issues concerning disability studies, bioarchaeology, fragmentation, personhood and identity. Furthermore, the case studies presented here will contribute substantially to our understanding of prostheses and their usage in the ancient Mediterranean.

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