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220A - New Directions in the History of Premodern Disability

MATERIAL HISTORY OF PREMODERN DISABILITY

An Interdisciplinary History
of Mobility Aids in the Medieval Period

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“Disability is everywhere in history, once you begin looking for it, but conspicuously absent in the histories we write”.

Douglas C. Baynton,

"Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, eds. Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 33-57, p. 52.

Medieval Disability History

- Disability is a synchronic and a diachronic notion (Metzler, 2006).
- Disability encompasses economic, social, political, cultural, religious, legal, philosophical, artistic, moral and medical definitions (Kudlick, 2003).
- Disability is a cultural construct. Its precise meaning changes depending on:
 - *the area and temporal era (Garland-Thompson, 1995, 2011),*
 - *the more immediate social or environmental context (Turner & Pearman, 2010).*

I. METZLER, *Disability in Medieval Europe*, Routledge, 2006.

C. J. KUDLICK, "Disability History: Why We Need Another 'Other'", *The American Historical Review*, 108-3 (2003), pp. 763-793.

R. GARLAND-THOMSON, *The Eye of the Beholder: Deformity and Disability in the Graeco-Roman World*, Cornell University Press, 1995.

R. GARLAND-THOMSON, "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept", *HYPATIA Hypatia*, 26-3 (2011), pp. 591-609.

W. TURNER and T. PEARMAN (eds.), *The Treatment of Disabled Persons in Medieval Europe: Examining Disability in the Historical, Legal, Literary, Medical, and Religious Discourses of the Middle Ages*, Edwin Mellen Press, 2010.

Medieval Disability History

Recently, historians have to:

- Understand the endogenous categorization of disabled people in a given period and society.
- Seek for intersectionnality (social status, gender, age,...).
- **Uncover Lived Experiences.**

J. KUULIALA, *Childhood Disability and Social Integration in the Middle Ages*, Brepols, 2016.

I. METZLER, *Fools and Idiots? Intellectual Disability in the Middle Ages*, Manchester University Press, 2016.

J. KUULIALA, *Saints, Infirmary, and Community in the Late Middle Ages*, Amsterdam University Press, 2020.

N. DUBOURG, *Disabled Clerics in the Late Middle Ages*, Amsterdam University Press, 2023.

Future direction(s) – Material History

- **Material culture** is the study of the social reality that “things” afford.
- “Material turn” emerged in the 1980s and 90s.
- Allows historians to enrich their toolkit.
- **Contemporary disability history** take interest in material culture, either in:
 - *theory (Ott, 2018),*
 - *more literally (Ott et al, 2002, 2014; Viridi 2020).*

K. OTT, D. SERLIN and S. MIHM (eds), *Artificial Parts and Practical Lives: Modern Histories of Prosthetics*, NYUP, 2002.

K. OTT, “Disability Things: Material Culture and American Disability History, 1700–2010,” in S. BURCH and M. REMBIS (eds), *Disability Histories*, University of Illinois Press, 2014, pp. 119-135.

K. OTT, “Material Culture, Technology and the Body in Disability History”, in M. REMBIS, C. KUDLICK and K. E. NIELSEN (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Disability History*, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 125-139.

J. VIRDI, *Hearing Happiness Deafness Cures in History*, Chicago University Press, 2020.

Future direction(s) – Medieval Material History

- Medieval period only for basic context.

DD. WEBLING and M. FAHRER, “M. Early bent knee prostheses: ancestors of K9”, *British Medical Journal (Clinical research ed.)*, 293-6562 (1986), pp. 1636-7.

D. OHNEMUS and A. OTTE, “Medizinhistorische Fundstücke aus der (Neuro-)Prothetik: eine Online-Analyse”, *Arch Kriminol*, 234-5/6 (2014), pp. 201-208.

- Brief inventory of a small number of relevant without historical analysis.

P. HERNIGOU, “Crutch art painting in the middle age as orthopaedic heritage (part I: the lepers, the poliomyelitis, the cripples); (part II: the peg leg, the bent-knee peg and the beggar)”, *International Orthopaedics*, 38-6/7 (2014), pp. 1329-35/pp. 1535-42.

P. HERNIGOU, M. HUYS, J. PARIAT and S. JAMMAL, “History of clubfoot treatment, part I: From manipulation in antiquity to splint and plaster in Renaissance before tenotomy”, *International Orthopaedics*, 41-8 (2017), pp. 1693-1704.

- General groundwork for more specialized, comprehensive research.

S. KAHLOW, “Prothesen im Mittelalter-ein Überblick aus archäologischer Sicht”, in C. NOLTE (ed), *Homo Debilis. Behinderte-Kranke-Versehrte in der Gesellschaft des Mittelalters*, Didymos Verlag, 2009, pp. 203-224.

C. HÄHN, “Mobility Limitations and Assistive Aids in the Merovingian Burial Record”, in S. KÜNZEL and E. CONNELLY (eds), *New Approaches to Disease, Disability, and Medicine in Medieval Europe*, Archaeopress, 2018, pp. 31-42.

V. DELATTRE and R. SALLEM, *Prothèses*, Les défis de civilisation, 2021.

Apostolic Penitentiary, *Registrum Matrimonium et diversorum*, Vol. 41, fol. 187v-188r.

February 12, 1492. Diocese of Toul.

Professed brother Jean Fanigonoset de Rabbonne, cleric in the diocese of Toul, Estivagio [Saint Pierre d'Estival] monastery of the Premonstratensians order in the aforesaid diocese, who, out of great fervor of devotion, desired to become cleric and was promoted to all the sacred orders and the priesthood[. A]fter he has been promoted, he minister in the ministry of the altar and engage himself with great piety in the perpetual divine service in the said monastery.

But while he was away from the monastery to devote himself to this [task], a certain illness (*infirmitas*) occurred in his right tibia, as a result of which, with the consent of the doctors, and because of the state of his body, he had the tibia amputated up to the knee; and then, with God's permission, he was freed from this illness and recovered his health.

And he has artificially made a kind of wooden instrument with which he can travel well on his other joints, and can leave the monastery insofar as his tibia does not have such a great defect or deformity that can generate scandal among the people, or an impediment that prevents him from making Mass.

He therefore humbly begs Your Holiness to kindly dispense with him by a special and express grace, to the extent that he may remain a cleric in spite of the defects and deformities mentioned, and retain his promotion to all sacred orders and to the priesthood, having been promoted previously, and that he may freely and lawfully minister in the ministry of the altar or be a canon.

Made especially and expressly provided that he can rest his shin on the piece of wood when ministering at the altar.

1. Incapacity to stand

- *Defectus corporis* (bodily defects) in Canon Law.
- Chancery's goal was to define whether or not the clerics could accomplish their duty:
 - *spiritual matters for the souls of the ecclesiastical benefices,*
 - *goods of the ecclesiastical benefices were well managed.*
- Incapacity is therefore linked to the nature of the acts to be performed.
- Possibility to compete with those physical standards.
- **Mobility aid allows “crip time” itself to become perceptible.**

ALT-TXT: One one-legged man walking with a stick and with a wooden prosthetic.
Tapestries from the History of Saint-Etienne (1500-1509), Musée de Cluny (Paris), my photography.



2. Social marginalisation

- Cleric's representation to the faithful matters.
- Physical imperfection could tarnish reputation, undermine social peace, and lead to scandal.
- Mobility aids:
 - *render the disability visible to physical and social environments,*
 - *are the material manifestation of its user's "deviation" from physical "norms",*
 - *characterize unambiguously the pictured individuals for viewers,*
 - *function as identity markers.*

ALT-TXT: Saint Martin dividing his mantle to cover a beggar.
Heures à l'usage de Langres (1475-1500), [Langres, BM 0004](#) (0030), fol. 149.



Robert Reboule li conseilla que il se feist couper le pié et fere une eschace de fust, si que il peust miex estre curé et estre entre les genz a gaaignier son pain. Et donques ledit Guillot ala au charpentier et li raconta que il entendoit a fere.

Robert Reboule advised him to have his foot cut off and to make an axe, so that he could better be cared for and be among the people to earn his bread. And so the said Guillot went to the carpenter and told him what he intended to do.

Guillaume de St Pathus' *Miracles de saint Louis* [around 1310, VII-68]
(in G. de SAINT-PATHUS, *Les Miracles de Saint-Louis*, ed. by P. B. FAY,
Honoré Champion, 1932, p. 24).

Conclusions

- Practical texts can reveal what mobility aids were, then usefully standing in for the physical objects themselves.
- Potential for such “things” to shape an individual’s personal and social relation to disability.
- **Help with the restoration of disability heritage.**
- Cultural institutions too often centre the representation on dominant groups in exhibitions.

ALT-TXT: canes from St. Anne’s Hospital (13-16 c.), city of Magdeburg (Germany).
Photography courtesy of Dr Simone Kahlow.





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THANK YOU!



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