

Two Words about Disability in the Middle Ages

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the issue of the disability in the Middle Ages. Far from having the pretension of exhausting the subject, the following lines recognize the impossibility of doing so. The Middle Ages extended over more than one thousand years, which is a very long period of time. Due to the scarcity of sources, we know little about it – let alone when it comes to a specific topic like disability in medieval times.

Keywords: *Middle Ages, Christianity, disability, inclusion, integration*



*Cathedral of Cologne, in Germany, one of the most astonishing monument of the Middle Ages
(Photo taken by the Author)*

How much better would the world be if the same effort we make for the comfort and satisfaction of vanity were made to become good.¹

INTRODUCTION

We know little about the Middle Ages and this seems to be the only justification for the insistence of some authors in referring to this highly complex and heterogeneous period of over a millennium as “Dark Ages”. An example among many might be this: geology is the science that made the least progress in Europe

between the years 500 and 1500; on the other hand, “that same curiosity that generated superstitions about the earth’s minerals caused medieval men to roam Europe and the East, thus enriching geography”.² It should not be forgotten that, in many aspects, “medieval science presents itself under a disconcerting cover, so disconcerting that we fear to take it seriously”.³ The end of the Middle Ages is

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usually marked near 1500, when prophecies concerning the Last Days thrived in Europe – “something that tends to happen whenever a round number of years is reached”.⁴ It is also true that “when the world was five centuries younger, everything that happened in life was much sharper in outline than today”.⁵ Usually the historical sources of the Middle Ages are scarce, much more so when the issue to be investigated is disability. The history of disability is, before anything else, a history of absences; the disabled is this anonymous creature who, here and there, rises from anonymity under the name of Homer (9th century BC), Didymus of Alexandria (313-319), Ägidius (650-710), Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) or Stephen Hawking (1942-2018).

DIFFICULT, IF NOT IMPOSSIBLE

It is difficult, if not impossible, to have a “lived experience” of disability during the medieval millennium, as the expert Irina Metzler regrets on the first page of her most important essay on the subject.⁶ Whenever one deals with the Middle Ages – much more still when the issue addressed is disability –, new and unsuspected questions arise, which are destined to be left unanswered for years, decades, perhaps forever. In other words, Medievalists have always to make do with gathering more questions than answers. Consider leprosy, dreadful disease that often causes disabilities, notably mutilations of various levels.⁷ It is known that it spread in Western Europe in the late 11th century. Indeed, leprosy is “a bitter, disconcerting, and heavy legacy of the Crusades (the heroic King Baldwin IV of Jerusalem [1161-1185] was one of its victims), brought by the knights who returned from the Mediterranean East”.⁸ However, lack of knowledge and great fear concerning leprosy as a disease prevailed in medieval times: within the medieval *imago mundi*, people infected with leprosy were often “thought to be unclean, untrustworthy, and morally corrupt”.⁹ It was as if they conjured up the dark side or reality; to some extent, medieval lepers embodied the very “moral and metaphysical evil that appears in history”.¹⁰

Even more difficult than investigating leprosy in the Middle Ages, as far as historical data gathering is concerned, is the task of those who investigate intellectual deficiency in that period. It is a condition in which human essence itself seems to be compromised at its very foundations (consider Nazism), especially if we dwell on the literal interpretation of the Aristotelian

definition of man as *animal rationale*.¹¹ Besides this, intellectual disability is a field of study for which the investigator usually lacks the testimony of those who are concerned: how could a disabled person explain how he feels if his disability affects (as is the case), among many other natural human skills, that of explaining properly his feelings and thoughts? Ironically as it may seem, the key issue in this case is that, quite often, intellectually disabled people cannot be said to *suffer* as a result of the disability that concerns them. The very low intelligence that calls into question their being human protects them from the perception of the dramatic reality which is theirs. What is more, not only are intellectually handicapped people more protected than us against sadness, but they tend to have a degree of happiness higher than ours, given the fact that they demand much less from life than we usually do. Those who really suffer with intellectual disability are the family and the friends of the disabled ones and, in collective terms, the very human society as a whole.

PROVISIONAL CONCLUSION

Be that as it may, Medievalists – particularly, as we have already mentioned, those committed with the phenomenon of disability in the time span between the Roman Empire’s collapse and the Discovery of America –, are challenged by new questions that emerge out of each reliable answer they find in their research, just as it happens when one is presented with a set of Matryoshka dolls and decides to see what is inside it¹²; in other words, their situation is not very different from that of Sisyphus and his rock.¹³ Sir Winston Churchill’s famous statement made in 1939 concerning the role that might be played by Russia in the European War that broke out when both the Wehrmacht and the Red Army smashed Poland goes for the Middle Ages as a whole: *a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma*.¹⁴

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- António Manuel de Almeida Gonçalves), Lisbon, Europa-América, 1981, p. 159.
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- [5] Johan Huizinga. *O outono da Idade Média* (translation: Francis Petra Janssen), São Paulo, Cosac Naify, 2010, p. 11.
- [6] *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages*, New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 1.
- [7] “Leprosy, also known as Hansen’s disease (HD), is a long-term infection by the bacteria *Mycobacterium leprae* or *Mycobacterium lepromatosis*. Infection can lead to damage of the nerves, respiratory tract, skin, and eyes. This nerve damage may result in a lack of ability to feel pain, which can lead to the loss of parts of a person’s extremities from repeated injuries or infection due to unnoticed wounds. An infected person may also experience muscle weakness and poor eyesight. Leprosy symptoms may begin within one year, but for some people symptoms may take 20 years or more to occur” (S.M. Worobecetalii. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leprosy>).
- [8] Michele D’Innella et alii. *Francisco de Assis e a Úmbria*, Milan, Electa, 1984, pp. 27-28.
- [9] S.M. Worobecetalii. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leprosy>.
- [10] Michele D’Innella et alii. *Francisco de Assis e a Úmbria*, op.cit., p. 28.
- [11] Cf. Aristotle. *Topics*, 133a; see also R. C. Sheerenberger. *Historia del retraso mental*, San Sebastián (Spain), Servicio Internacional de Información sobre Subnormales, 1984, p. XIV et passim; and Robert N. Proctor. *Racial Hygiene: Medicine Under the Nazis*, London, Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 123, 171 et passim.
- [12] “A set of matryoshkas consists of a wooden figure, which separates at the middle, top from bottom, to reveal a smaller figure of the same sort inside, which has, in turn, another figure inside of it, and so on” (James H. Billington, et alii. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matryoshka_doll [2020]).
- [13] See, for instance, Chhavi Kumar. “What we can learn from Sisyphus and his rock”, in <https://blog.usejournal.com/takeaways-from-the-story-of-sisyphus-and-the-rock-81721c6e499> (2020).
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Citation: João Vicente Ganzarolli de Oliveira, “Two Words about Disability in the Middle Ages”, *Annals of Geographical Studies*, 3(2), 2020, pp. 16-18.

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