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**Ancient world**

Smeared in mustard, paraded naked - the curious and often cruel treatment of disabled people in Anci

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This summer’s special exhibition at the British Museum is an exploration of the life and achievements of the Roman Emperor Hadrian (he who did so much to boost the North England tourist industry). Although the exhibition doesn’t open until the end of July, I’ve already bought my ticket.

Since I was a child I’ve been fascinated by the ancient world. Indeed, spurred on by two evangelical Latin teachers, I decided to read Classics at university – and proceeded to spend numerous happy and fulfilling hours translating the rude and sexually explicit parts of Latin poetry. (I can say with total confidence that you’ll never hear Catullus’s poem 41 read out on Radio 4’s Poetry Please).

Many aspects of ancient Rome are familiar to us. Think of the Romans and we conjure up images of mosaics, baths, aqueducts, the Coliseum and Pompeii. But what do we know about disability in the Roman Empire? What role did disabled people play in Roman society? What were Roman attitudes towards disability?

It is difficult to say for certain how prevalent disability was in antiquity but it was probably far more common than today. Although fewer disabled babies would have survived infancy than in the 21st century, the proportion of adults with a disability would no doubt have been considerably higher. A combination of factors including malnutrition, disease, inbreeding, physical exhaustion, accidents, dangerous sports, warfare and child birth would have produced a large number of disabled people.

Five out of 12 Roman skeletons uncovered in a group burial site near Cambridge were found to have a spinal deformity. Meanwhile, an examination of 4th century AD skeletons at a Cirencester cemetery has revealed that 80 per cent suffered from osteoarthritis (a painful condition that can cause deformity and virtual paralysis). Julius Caesar mentions almost casually that in a single incident during the civil war, four out of the six centurions in one cohort were blinded.

We can tell a lot about a culture’s values by the language it uses. Neither the Greeks or the Romans had a word equivalent to ‘disabled’ but the term that they often use is ‘teras’ (for the Greeks) and ‘monstrum’ (for the Romans). These are the same words they use to describe mythological monsters, such as the Gorgon Medusa. The Latin ‘mutus’ referred to both somebody who couldn’t speak and someone who is stupid. No one could accuse the Roman of being too politically correct, as you can see.

The birth of a disabled child was regarded by the Romans as a great misfortune. A high percentage of disabled children were abandoned outdoors immediately after birth and left to die because many Romans felt it was pointless to prolong lives that could prove to be a practical and financial burden on the rest of the family. Dionysios of Halikarnassos wrote about the founder of Rome: “Romulus demanded that all the city’s residents should raise all their male children and the first born of the girls and not kill any child under three unless the child was disabled."

Roman religion also encouraged parents to ‘expose’ their offspring. Just as physical fitness and health were believed to be signs of the gods’ favour, so disability was a mark of the gods’ displeasure. For this reason, a disabled child was often seen as a form of divine punishment upon its parents. Romans tended to interpret unusual natural occurrences as signs of impending disaster and this increased their suspicion of disabled people. Abnormal births were an indication that a catastrophe might be around the corner. It’s revealing that the noun ‘monstrum’ is related to the verb ‘monere’ meaning ‘to warn’.

On the other hand, a ruling by Ulpian declared that parents should be entitled to claim the privileges of child bearing even if their child happened to be disabled. And the Romans didn’t go as far as the Spartans. In Sparta, children were the property of the state, not parents, and the abandonment of disabled babies was a legal requirement. According to Plutarch, every baby was inspected by the community’s elders straight after birth. If the child looked robust and healthy, the child was allowed to live. But if the child was “ill-born and ill-formed”, the father was ordered to expose it. This law of Lykourgos, the legendary Spartan leader, aimed to develop a master race. It is easy to see parallels between Spartan society, which was built upon ideals of racial purity and militarism, and the Nazis, who also acted to eliminate disabled people by forcibly sterilising those with impairments and by giving doctors the legal right to carry out forced abortions of disabled foetuses.

Although the majority of Roman disabled offspring died through abandonment or lack of medical treatment, there are a few examples of children with disabilities being nurtured and looked after. Pliny the Younger gives an account of Quintus Pedius, the grandson of a distinguished consul whom Julius Caesar had made his joint heir. Quintus Pedius had no speech ability. When the leading orator Messala Corvinus recommended that Quintus should be given painting lessons, the suggestion received the approval of Octavia, Emperor Augustus’s sister, who took great interest in the child’s progress. Similarly, the future Emperor Claudius, who may have had cerebral palsy, was given a high quality education and went on to become a respected historian. Both Quintus Pedius and Claudius, of course, benefited from belonging to the Roman upper classes.

In the Roman world, there were few job opportunities for disabled adults. Some disabled people gained employment as entertainers – indeed, dwarfs and hunchbacks were in high demand as singers, dancers, musicians, jugglers and clowns. The satirist Lukian describes a clown called Satyrion as “an ugly, shaven little fellow”. Freak shows were popular in Rome and physically impaired people could earn a small living by exhibiting themselves. Suetonius, the biographer of Roman emperors, records that Augustus frequently put on show anything noteworthy that came to his attention, such as a man called Lycius who was under two feet tall.

People with mobility impairments sometimes earned a living as potters, leather workers, teachers and metal workers (incidentally, the lame Greek god Hephaistos was a blacksmith). There are also a few examples of disabled people working as spies and informers. Tacitus reports that Vatinius was “one of the most horrid monstrosities of Nero’s court (and) acquired so much power that he could surpass any rascal in his level of influence”. Under the Emperor Domitian, a blind man called Catullus Messalinus became a very successful informer and is described by the satirist Juvenal as “a great and renowned monster”.

But these individuals were the exceptions. Most disabled people would have been forced to survive on a mixture of begging, petty crime, casual work and charity from their family. Athens was the only state in antiquity known to have made welfare payments to disabled people in need. Although Seneca mentions a Roman law giving a one-off payment to visually impaired people, and writes that the Roman state “comforts a man for his disability”, there is little evidence that disabled people received public money in the Roman world.

Inevitably, it was disabled slaves who suffered most. Slaves ran a high risk of disability because of the often strenuous and dangerous work they undertook. If a slave became unfit for heavy manual labour, a sympathetic master might transfer him to lighter duties. On noticing a slave break his leg, the famous Athenian leader Pericles is said to have remarked: “There goes another child minder”. But these slaves were the lucky ones. Suetonius says Claudius issued an edict that disabled slaves should be abandoned rather than killed – which seems to indicate that many disabled slaves were put to death. Some Romans even deliberately maimed their slaves for purely sadistic reasons.

Latin literature contains numerous references to disabled slaves. While some slaves were discarded as soon as they had developed an impairment and were no longer useful, others were regarded as a highly desirable status symbol. No fashionable household was complete, it seems, without a few hunchbacks, dwarfs and mute people in its midst. There was even a special market in Rome for buying disabled slaves.

It was commonly believed that a disabled slave acted as a good luck charm, averting evil away from its owner. During the reign of Augustus, Conopas, believed at the time to be the shortest man alive, served as the pet of the Emperor’s granddaughter, Julia. Seneca’s wife owned a dwarf named Harpaste.

Romans liked to collect human ‘freaks’ and were willing to pay exorbitant prices for interesting specimens. They were viewed in the same way as exotic animals, which were also popular. Quintilian goes as far as to declare that Romans were willing to pay more for disabled slaves than for physically perfect ones. According to Martial, one man paid a vast amount for a learning disabled slave, only to discover that he was actually very intelligent – the buyer subsequently demanded his money back.

Roman emperors were particularly fond of dwarfs, often giving them confidential positions at court (a practice that originated in Egypt). Tiberius, Claudius, Nero and Domitian are all known to have employed disabled slaves as close confidants. Suetonius tells us that Tiberius’s dwarf was permitted freedom of speech on sensitive issues. On one occasion, this slave enquired publicly during a banquet about the fate of a man who had been charged with treason. Tiberius responded by speeding up the man’s trial. Allegedly, the Emperor Elegabalus possessed so many human ‘curiosities’ that his successor feared their maintenance would drain the treasury if he did not dispose of the collection quickly.

It’s thought that disabled slaves may have enjoyed better living conditions than their non-disabled counterparts because of their value. But if this were indeed the case, they paid a high price for it. Disabled slaves were usually expected to earn their keep by providing amusement and entertainment at dinner parties and other gatherings. The Emperor Commodus, for example, liked to display two hunchbacks smeared in mustard on a silver platter at his banquets.

Disabled slaves were also ideal targets for sexual abuse. In some households they were expected to be constantly available to satisfy the sexual demands of their owners. Julia’s dwarf is referred to in texts as “deliciae”, suggesting he was required to have sexual intercourse with his mistress. Jokes about elite Roman women having sex with disabled slaves circulated widely. It’s apparent that any benefit disabled slaves might have accrued as a result of their impairment would have been cancelled out by suffering almost daily humiliation and loss of dignity.

Not all Roman disabled people suffered deprivation, however. Domitius Tullus, a paralysed man mentioned by Pliny the Younger, was rich enough to be able to afford slaves to assist him with daily living. But Pliny makes it clear that Domitius Tullus didn’t feel very fortunate. He vividly describes Domitius Tullus’s humiliation at being so dependent on his slaves for the most basic tasks: “Disabled in every limb, he could only enjoy his huge wealth by looking at it and could not turn in bed without help. He even needed to have his teeth cleaned for him, a pitiful thing.”

Just like us, the Romans also worried about who would care for them in their old age. A number of Greek states required children to provide their parents with food and accommodation as long as they lived, and a similar law was introduced into Rome in the second century AD. Driven by a fear of growing old, plenty of Romans chose to adopt adult sons to ensure they had support in their later years.

Life for most people in antiquity was harsh but for disabled people it was particularly nasty, brutal and short. Roman culture, just like the Greeks, placed high ideological importance on beauty and physical perfection so it seems likely that disabled people were looked down upon as second class citizens. Even the Emperor Claudius was treated with disdain and contempt by his mother Antonia who referred to him as “a monster of a man, not finished by nature but only half done”.

Nevertheless, a few individuals did overcome the barriers and stigma associated with their impairment. If someone was prepared to submit to ridicule or persuade others that their disability invested them with special powers or talents, there were opportunities for advancement. Perhaps the most striking case is that of the slave Clessipus who is described by Pliny as “an ugly hunchback”.

When a rich woman called Gegania decided to buy an expensive Corinthian chandelier for the enormous sum of 50,000 sesterces, the auctioneer threw in Clessipus as well so she purchased both as a job lot. Gegania exhibited him at parties, ordering him to parade naked for the enjoyment of her assembled guests. However, she also fell passionately in love with him and changed her will to his advantage. On her death, Clessipus inherited his mistress’s vast fortune.

Despite the existence of examples like Clessipus, it’s important to remember that most disabled people in the Roman world would have existed on the margins of society, condemned to lives of poverty and isolation. Greece and Rome are together regarded as the foundations of Western civilization. We quite rightly admire Roman art, literature, architecture and philosophy, which still influence us today. But it’s important not to forget the darker side of Roman culture.

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