

Christian Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World: A Social and Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2018. Hardcover. \$99.99. Pp. xi, 238 ISBN: 9781107162907.

Christian Laes sets himself the task of producing ‘no more and no less than the first synthesis for a domain in which ancient history has long lagged behind’ (p. viii). It is certainly true that ancient historians have been slow to investigate the disabled and/or impaired, something that Laes has been at the forefront of rectifying, and this book is an important addition to a growing area of scholarship. Technically, it is the second synthetic overview of Roman disabilities, since it presents Anglophone readers with a translation of Laes’ Dutch monograph *Beperkt? Gehandicapt in het Romeinse Rijk* (Davidsfonds Uitgeverij, 2014). Apart from a handful of references to subsequent work, including chapters in his own impressive edited collection *Disability in Antiquity* (Routledge, 2017), the book appears to present a more-or-less direct translation, rather than an updated text. Nevertheless, this rich survey of the textual evidence for socio-cultural attitudes towards people with impairments will be of value to anyone interested in ancient disability.

Having set out the book’s origins (Preface), Laes uses the Introduction to spotlight the difficulties inherent in studying ancient disability, not least problems of definition and terminology. He observes, here and elsewhere, that it is simply not possible to apply modern categories to Roman evidence, even if these provide a practical starting point. He lays out his methodology, which involves mining databases of textual sources for passages that allow him to ‘sketch the contours of the lives of disabled people and how they were regarded by their fellow humans’ (p. 21). Although Laes acknowledges the value of material, osteological, and anthropological sources, examples of which appear at intervals in later chapters, it becomes clear that his study is driven by close reading of texts that range from Homer to the New Testament, especially Roman legal writing. Most chapters open with a biography of a well-known individual connected with the disability under discussion. That all but one of these belongs to the Greek world is revealing, and for comparable Roman evidence Laes necessarily has to explore off the beaten track. Inevitably, despite his careful attention to context and conscious decision to include within each chapter a separate section on Christian contexts, the seamless weaving together of earlier Greek and Roman examples does sometimes elide important chronological and cultural differences. It also disguises the fact that the majority of his evidence derives from the second and third centuries CE, with textual sources unavoidably in limited supply for all periods (and places).

Chapter 1 briefly discusses infant mortality and the dangers faced by a child born with a detectable impairment, neatly using this demographic context to stress that it can only ever be the survivors who become available for study. Recent bioarchaeological research also has much to contribute here, but Laes has chosen not to engage directly with debates surrounding infanticide and exposure. Chapter 2

deals with what Laes refers to as ‘mental and intellectual disabilities’ and as with all subsequent chapters is contextualised with reference to the contemporary definitions of the World Health Organisation. Here legal sources offer ‘concrete situations’ (p. 45) from which conclusions are most easily drawn, and Laes uses these effectively in his deconstruction of prevailing arguments which present intellectual disabilities as important only in the assertion of cultural and social power, that is, as something useful for ranking people. Laes asserts instead that Romans were aware of differences between philosophical ‘foolishness’ and ‘medical afflictions’ that jeopardised a person’s ‘ability to function socially’ (pp. 53–54). A strength of this chapter is the juxtaposition of examples from a wide range of genres, which highlight very starkly how difficult it is to talk in straightforward ways about this topic. The historian is hampered not only by the absence of consistent terminology (past and present), but also by inconsistent Roman understandings of ‘typical’ or ‘normal’ behaviour.

Chapter 3 finds Laes mining his sources for ‘side remarks’ (p. 93) which expand what can be gleaned from medical texts about the type of impairment mentioned most frequently by ancient writers: blindness and visual impairment. As he notes, ‘we are grateful for any piece of the puzzle’ (p. 113), and it is here that his methodology of reading between the lines is most effective. Laes is eager to locate evidence for everyday life, producing thought-provoking observations about the direct correlation between its ease and access to wealth, as well as noting that blindness was not regarded as a ‘special case’ in Roman legal situations. Further sensory impairments feature in Chapter 4, which investigates the deaf, mute, and deaf-mute. This, and Chapter 5 on ‘speech defects’, draws heavily on Laes’ previous work on these topics. He leads the reader through a range of sources, noting the difficulties of drawing any firm conclusions, whilst successfully demonstrating that it is possible to understand something of the attitudes these conditions prompted. His decision to include early Christian evidence also proves particularly profitable here, allowing him to observe that an apparent rise in the frequency of deafness over time is likely to have been a consequence of Christian concerns for the oral communication of faith rather than a real surge in impairment.

In Chapter 6 on mobility impairments Laes pays greater attention to osteological and archaeological evidence, although this is not his comfort zone, and the remarks he makes remain restricted to the identification of deformities and likely attitudes towards them. The capacity of mobility impaired individuals to participate in labour is emphasised, with Laes using this to consider the variety of ways in which mobility impairments might be more or less socially disabling. However, it is not always made sufficiently clear to the reader that some of the interpretations that he presents belong to other scholars (e.g. the author of this review is cited merely as the source of the ‘medical and archaeological details’ Laes uses on p. 154 and not the analysis subsequently summarised on p. 155).

From a substantial Conclusion crucial points emerge: evidence indicates that ‘the involvement of people with disabilities [in Roman life] was perfectly normal’ (p. 173)

and, although shame may have shaped aristocratic concepts of disability, it is very difficult to identify typical attitudes towards ordinary people with impairments and functional disabilities. These observations are not insignificant given that those with impairments are often assumed to have been almost unquestioningly marginalised and stigmatised. Laes convincingly proves otherwise and suggests that future comparative studies can nuance this picture still further, especially for late antiquity.

Laes' overall approach focuses on understanding how Roman society responded to bodies and minds that were 'different', rather than how people experienced impairments. This is not a critique of the project, since so little of the available material was written by those with personal experiences of impairment, but as ancient disability studies continue to develop it seems increasingly important that Laes' perspective is combined with attempts to identify the agency of people with impairments within the social discourse he describes. Indeed, discussion of terminology aside, the book engages in only limited ways with contemporary Disability Studies scholarship and theory concerned with exactly this question. Moreover, it features some rather jarring statements about how Romans 'were confronted with these people' (p. vii), about individuals 'suffering from a handicap' (p. 16, 'suffering' also occurs on p. 18), about how Roman society ultimately 'coped with' impairments (p. 87), and some which appear to deny disabled people agency by discussing how 'we can live with people with disabilities and how we can allow them to develop their full potential' (p. 174). This, and the decision to repeatedly employ the term 'handicap', will certainly make some readers uncomfortable. It is surprising, given how far ancient disability studies have progressed since 2014, that this problematic wording was not addressed more proactively by the author or press. The reader is therefore cautioned to note that significant parts of the book belong to a pre-2014 scholarly world. These points aside, anyone working on any ancient disability topic will find this book immensely useful. As with all studies of this nature it should nevertheless be approached critically, and even Laes himself acknowledges that it is 'anything but the final word' (p. 189).

EMMA-JAYNE GRAHAM
DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICAL STUDIES
THE OPEN UNIVERSITY