



DiGeSt

Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies

What are you reading?

Laes, C., Goodey, C.F., Rose, M.L. (2013). *Disabilities in Roman Antiquity: Disparate Bodies a Capite ad Calcem*. Leiden: Brill.

Review by Nina Van der Sype
PhD-candidate at Ghent University
nina.vandersype@ugent.be

DiGeSt Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies, Volume 10, Issue 2

<https://doi.org/10.21825/digest.90473>

Print ISSN: 2593-0273. Online ISSN: 2593-0281

Content is licensed under a Creative Commons BY

DiGeSt is hosted by Ghent University Website: <https://www.digest.ugent.be/>

Laes, C., Goodey, C.F., Rose, M.L. (Eds.) (2013). *Disabilities in Roman antiquity: Disparate bodies a Capite ad Calcem*. Leiden: Brill.

The volume *Disabilities in Roman Antiquity* brings together twelve contributions that are solely dedicated to the topic of physical and mental disability in the antique world. As there is already a wealth of research available on various aspects concerning the field of (critical) disability studies in contemporary culture, the editors actively contribute to expanding the area of investigation to pre-modern culture. Such explorations can shed light on particular aspects of disability, its individual experience and broader socio-cultural meanings which remain paramount within our modern culture, while at the same time developing the establishment of the subfield of ‘disability history’ within the period of Antiquity. The editors’ recognition of the – to a certain extent – universalist nature of both bodily and mental characteristics, leads to the rejection of a constructivist approach, a choice which they describe as being a ‘theoretical and practical disapproval based on the belief that we are all human beings, sharing certain corporal realities over different cultures and times’ (Laes et al., 2013, p. 6).

Despite the difficulty of defining the notion of disability in Antiquity, the volume strives to uncover the ways impairment was culturally viewed and assessed across the antique world by actively integrating the ‘tools of the new disability studies such as power, social class, religious discourse, etc.’ (p. 7). Indeed, the incorporation of current trends in body studies – an umbrella term under which we can, apart from disability studies, also qualify ageing studies, the main framework through which I aim to study older age in late antique Latin poetry – and the awareness of the dangers of retrospection are not mutually exclusive. The explicit rejection of anachronistic diagnosis of disabilities and the understanding that the ‘Cartesian divide between mind/intellect and body’ (p. 24) is a fundamentally modernist invention on the one hand, and recognition of the fact that disability and impairment are categories whose boundaries and parameters constantly shift over time and space on the other, establish a methodological approach which firmly focuses on ‘the reconstruction of the vocabulary of ancient assumptions, attitudes and beliefs about disparate people’ (p. 23).

Any study which therefore proposes to uncover aspects of cultural specificity in Antiquity, including my own, must in effect seek to acknowledge the temporally and sometimes geographically bound manners in which people perceived, thought about and reflected on these phenomena to be able to construe an honest image of the chosen subject, as phrased by Clark and Rose: ‘[t]he concept under investigation itself must be considered in its historical context’ (p. 50). In order to achieve this goal, *A Capite ad Calcem* has chosen to work primarily with the evidence found in written sources, ranging from evidence in poetry to statements found in philosophical and medical treatises, but does not shy away from the visual arts or archaeological materials. The collected chapters in this way cover disability in the antique world ‘from head to toe’ by investigating not only a wide range of physical and mental disabilities, but also considering them from various angles. Clark and Rose focus on the individual experience of mental illness or psychiatric disability by researching the ways in which the medical texts of the Greek and Roman physician Galen define these disorders and propose to treat them; Trentin in turn explores visual impairment as a result of injury or older age and the medical consequences of this disability for a Roman’s everyday social experience. Furthermore, we find in the chapter by Gevaert and Laes a discussion on the intersections between various meanings of the Latin word *monstrum* (‘monster’) and categorizations of disabled bodies as monstrous or other in the work of Pliny, the Elder, while Mitchell highlights the presence of disability in archaeology by surveying the role of grotesque figurines in representing – either truthfully or in exaggeration – physical deformities.

Since the analysis of poetry and literature on the category of older age is the backbone of my own current research project, the approaches to ancient textual testimonies used in the volume provide stimulating pathways to explore this topic and consider its

intersections with other categories. Especially inspirational is the methodological framework proposed by Laes, who uses the so-called ‘house of the history of mentalities’ developed by the French historian Vovelle to investigate disability, but this schema can be extrapolated to research similar socially and culturally defined features such as older age. The house of history consists of three floors: on the ground floor, one collects evidence on the topic you want to examine. The first floor exists of the ‘systemic analysis of Latin vocabulary to denote the disability under scrutiny’ (p. 146). This includes the reading of literature of a certain period which deals with, for example, older age or older people and that in this manner inform us about the popular attitudes and ways of thinking about this concept and these people. On the upper floor, one interprets the intellectual discourse constructed in theological, philosophical and medical literature.

Because of the diversity of perspectives on older age and older people – concerning their social status, but also positive and negative perceptions on their physical features and mental faculties – that are visible in Latin written sources throughout Antiquity, the approaches proposed in this volume for the study of antique literature help to uncover the culturally specific ways in which Romans themselves thought about older age. The focus of my own research project furthermore lies on the representation and role of male older age and sexuality in poetry of late Antiquity; both are categories impossible to investigate without taking into account intersections with disability and gender as well as the wider literary tradition on the subject. *A Capite ad Calcem* offers me in this respect an excellent starting point to consider the ways in which I can aim to bring together disparate views on aspects related to Roman male older age and analyse the sources at hand in a manner that respects the interpretation of older age in (late) Antiquity itself.

Nina Van der Sype

Nina Van der Sype is a PhD-candidate in Latin literature at Ghent University. Her current project (FWO grant number 1107123N) investigates the role and representation of older age in the elegiac poetry of the late Latin author Maximianus (sixth century AD) through a cross-disciplinary approach, combining literary analysis with the field of ageing studies. Her research aims to offer new insights in the ways in which authors portray the intersection of older age and categories of identity, class, gender and disability in late antique literature and poetry.