

Disability in the Middle Ages: A History Four Times Incomplete

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Summary

This article provides continuity to another study related to the same subject, which was recently published [1]. The deeper we delve into the Middle Ages, the more aware we become of our ignorance about those more than one thousand years of history. The more we investigate about disability, the more conscious we become of the fragile nature of our own existences in this world, where everything goes by and may change even in the twinkling of an eye.

Yet I don't see myself as a person with a disability. And who would want to define themselves by a negative?

Fiona MacMillan [2].

The Disabled, An Invisible Being

Disabled people have always been largely invisible to the historian's eyes [3]. It is an invisibility intensified when it comes to the Middle Ages, a historic period whose sources are so often absent, incomplete or distorted. In many ways, however, the very literature concerning disability has always been that of an absence, or, as I myself have already called it some years ago, a *literature of silence* [4]. When it comes to the history of the disability in the Middle Ages, the approach reveals itself not only twice, but at least three times incomplete, due to the fact that history is far from being an exact science. The goal of this article is to provide an overview of the theme, giving especial emphasis to the role of Church as the main protector of the disabled during the Middle Ages [5]. Given the current tendency to neglect or even deny the importance of Christianity in the building of Western Civilization, I see no inconvenient in considering the history of disability in the Middle Ages as a history four times incomplete.

Consider Disability

It is fashionable to be in favor of "diversity", which is an abstraction, i.e., "a general idea rather than one relating to a particular object, person, or situation" [6]. Fashions come and go; the real issues emerge when one of us has to deal with non-abstract beings, which are the very particular objects, persons and situations encompassed within that general idea and make part of our own lives. As for diversity, it is a concept that encloses differences between individuals and groups, ranging from age, race and social status to religion, politics and physical abilities.

Consider disability, which is our main focus here. What really matters, when dealing with it, is whether or not we have time and patience to understand the differences that make part of the life of this or that disabled person who can be a resident of Tegucigalpa (a city where I never set foot, notwithstanding the attraction such

name exerts on me), my door neighbor, or even myself: Why not me? That is the question [7]. Being disabled involves countless situations which may converge to countless frustrations-which, by their turn, may have a cumulative effect. Disabled people, as has already been pointed out here, are usually considered invisible to the eyes of history. What is needed is that, being historians or not, we start to listen carefully to what inner bells are ringing, as well as to remove the beams that have been covering our own eyes (cf. Matt 7,3).

The invisibility at issue can be understood as follows: disability, by definition, limits the ability to act in the social body-a circumstance that is valid sometimes as a cause, sometimes as an effect of the stigmas and prejudices that affect the disabled, hindering their full acceptance as persons. The vicious circle is clear and almost unavoidable. Medieval Europeans devoted special attention to the disabled and vulnerable in general, and this was stemmed from Christianity. Christian compassion for the disabled and the underprivileged, however, had to live side by side with indifference, morbidity, derision, and cruelty. This explains why one of the great fears of the late Middle Ages was that of having deformed children [8]. Medieval Europe was a world of paradoxes. Indeed, "Hard and colourful, [medieval] life could tolerate the mixed odour of blood and roses. Men, child-headed giants, lived between hellish terrors and childish amusement, between cruel hardness and the most moving tenderness. It was a life of extremes, between complete renunciation of all worldly joy and the most delirious love of good and pleasurable, between dark hatred and laughing kindness [9].

Conclusion

Still plenty of questions will be left unanswered

Datheus, archbishop of Milan and contemporary of Charlemagne (742-814), excelled in founding asylums for disabled and abandoned children. The hospital tradition, in particular Benedictine, flourished in that period; think of the hospital facilities

attached to the monastery of St. Gallen (now in Swiss territory), which has existed since 719. As early as the seventh century (more precisely 685), St. John of Beverley published in the British Islands an essay on deafness of the deaf, which was a prelude to the writings of Rodolphus Agricola on the same subject [10].

In 1247, the Bethlem Royal Hospital was founded in London, which is in operation to this day. In 1212, the Castilian king Alfonso VIII granted protection and privileges to the combatants who returned blind from the Battle of Navas de Tolosa, which was "an important turning point in the Reconquista and in the medieval history of Spain. The Christian forces of King Alfonso VIII of Castile were joined by the armies of his rivals, Sancho VII of Navarre and Peter II of Aragon, in battle against the Almohad Muslim rulers of the southern half of the Iberian Peninsula" [11]. In 1260, it was the turn of Saint Louis, King of France, to found in his country the first institution for protection and treatment of the blind. In the Flemish Belgian city of Gheel, a hospital was established in the 13th century and it had a sector especially dedicated to the disabled. Particularly from the 11th century on, the repeated battles in defence of Christianity (most of them against Islam) caused the number of disabled people among Europeans to increase significantly. Consequently, the interest in helping them as well as the stimulus for the development of medicine and prosthetic technique also increased; by 1400 the first European mechanical hand was invented [12]. Gheel's origins date back to Saint Dimpna, daughter of a 7th century pagan Irish king. When the mother, who was a Christian, died, the father showed signs of mental insanity, as he tried to force Dimpna to marry him. Dimpna fled with the priest Gerebern to the region that would later be called Flanders. They took refuge in Gheel, next to a chapel dedicated to St Martin of Tours. The mad king ended up finding her on the outskirts of Gheel, where, in the face of a second refusal, he killed her and Gerebern. Both were canonized and Saint Dimpna became the patron of those suffering from mental illness; several miracle cures are attributed to her [13].



Figure 1: This drawing was made by me and reproduces roughly a picture painted with the mouth by the English artist Joy Clarke, member of the AMFPA.

The deeper we delve into the Middle Ages, the more aware we become of our ignorance about those more than one thousand years of history. The more we investigate about disability, the more conscious we become of the fragile nature of our own existences in this world, where everything goes by and everything change in the twinkling of an eye. The more we try to understand the situation of the medieval disabled, the more we come across new and unexpected questions, the majority of which are destined to remain unanswered.

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2. Fiona MacMillan lives in the present moment and has learnt to become an instant expert. A native Londoner, she is distracted by detail but would rather name than label. Fiona has learnt to live with the certainty of uncertainty, being blessed with the wisdom of solitude and is currently exploring her voice as a writer (cf. John M Hull et alii [2014]. *Disability. The Inclusive Church Resource*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, pp. 1-22).
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9. Id., p. 37.
10. Rodolphus Agricola (c. 1443-1485) was a pre-Erasman humanist of the Northern Low Countries, famous for his knowledge of Latin and Greek. He was an educator, musician, builder of church organs, a poet in Latin and the vernacular, a diplomat, a boxer and a Hebrew scholar towards the end of his life. Today, he is best known as the author of *De inventione dialectica*, the father of Northern European humanism and as a zealous anti-scholastic in the late fifteenth century" (David Hamilton et alii. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodolphus_Agricola).
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13. Cf. <https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dimpna>; and <https://aeon.co/essays/geel-where-the-mentally-ill-are-welcomed-home>.



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