

ARCTOS

ACTA PHILOLOGICA FENNICA

VOL. XLII

HELSINKI 2008

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LEARNING FROM SILENCE: DISABLED CHILDREN IN ROMAN ANTIQUITY

CHRISTIAN LAES

1. Introduction

Teaching ancient Greek to undergraduates, I used to lecture on Herodotus, one of my favourites being the through and through Greek story on the whereabouts and the harsh destiny of the Lydian king Croesus. During the years, I got puzzled by the faith of Croesus' second son, whose name is never mentioned. Herodotus' readers get to know that Croesus actually had two sons "one of whom was wholly undone, for he was deaf and dumb (κωφός)". The other was named Atys. He would ultimately die by a spear in a hunting accident, though his father had done everything in his power to avoid this cruel and since long predicted fate. When Croesus initially tries to dissuade Atys to take part in the hunting, he argues that Atys is in fact his only son: "for that other, since his hearing is lost to him (διεφθαρμένον τὴν ἀκοήν), I count no son of mine." While nowadays students get indignant at such statements, they are somewhat consoled by the following part of the story. Indeed, when the capital Sardes is finally taken, it is the very same lad who cries out to a Persian soldier approaching to kill the Lydian king: "Man, do not kill Croesus!" It was the first word he uttered and for the rest of his life, he had power of speech. By his unexpected utterance, the boy fulfilled an oracle which has stated that the first day he would hear his son speaking, would be a luckless day to Croesus. Attending the oracle was just one out of many things Croesus had done in earlier days to help his disabled son: "a likely youth enough save that he was dumb (ἄφωνος). Now in the past days of prosperity Croesus had done all that he could for his son."¹ The unfortunate son then disappears from Herodotus'

(*) This publication is part of the University of Tampere research project "Religion and Children. Socialisation in Pre-Modern Europe from the Roman Empire to the Christian

narrative, only to turn up later in Greek and Latin literature, sometimes as a proverbial paradigm.² Only the historian Nicolaus of Damascus (first century BC) dramatically elaborates upon the theme. When the boy approaches his father awaiting his death standing before the pyre, Croesus for the first time bursts out in tears. The lad emphatically begs his father to let him die together with him: "From the time I was born, I have always brought sorrow to you as well as to my self. I just couldn't be happy by the shame which was caused by my dumbness (ἄφρωνία) and by the disgrace. Only when misfortune began to fall on us, was I able to utter my first words. The gods have only rendered me articulate as to be able to mourn our fate." Eventually, only Croesus ascends the pyre. His son beseeches the gods to come to help and not make perish all human piety together with Croesus.³

I remember a vivid class room discussion which followed after the reading of the Croesus saga, where one student claimed not to be surprised at all at the – in our eyes somewhat ambiguous – attitude of Croesus towards his unnamed son. Travelling through Albania, he had come across villagers hiding their disabled child in the anonymity of their homes and thus covering their very existence with silence, while at the same time they took care of them, doing their outmost best to somehow secure their existence.

As a historian of ancient childhood, I retained the story of Croesus' son and the subsequent classroom discussion as a possible subject for further inquiry. The subject returned to my mind, when I was discussing my interest in history of disabilities with some colleagues at Hamilton, Canada. I was informed about a passage in Ammianus Marcellinus' *Res Gestae*. During his Persian campaign, in May of the year 363, the Emperor Julian sacked the town of Maozamalcha. "Then when the booty was divided (...) the emperor, being content with little, took only a dumb boy who was offered to him, who was

World.", directed by Katariina Mustakallio. I would like to thank the Latin section of the Catholic University of Leuven for research facilities during my stay as a replacement professor. I am also particularly grateful towards my Ph.D. student, Bert Gevaert, whose inspiring enthusiasm initiated me into the history of disabilities, as well as to my friend and colleague Christophe De Block (Faculty of Medicine, University of Antwerp) for information on congenital birth defects.

¹ Hdt. 1,34 (Croesus having two sons); 1,38 (Croesus dissuading Atys); 1,85 (the mute boy speaking for the first time). I have quoted from the Loeb-translation by A. D. Godley.

² Greek literature: X. *Cyr.* 7,2,20; *Paroemiographi Graeci* 2, 686; Luc. *Pr. Im.* 20. Latin literature: Gell. 5,9,1–4; Val. Max. 5,4,ext. 6; Cic. *div.* 1,53,121.

³ Nic. Dam. in *HGM* (ed. Dindorf) I, fr. 67 (p. 64–66).

acquainted with sign-language and explained many things in which he was skilled by most graceful gestures."⁴ Commentators have pointed to the fact that the dumb boy was in fact a highly skilled pantomime.⁵

For the third time, the subject was drawn to my attention, when I came across a story about the Alexandrian theologian Didymus the Blind (313–398). Though not congenitally blind, he had lost his sight when, as a child (according to the *Historia Lausiaca* at age four), he had just begun to learn reading and writing. As a youth, he wanted to become a member of the cultivated elite, imbued with culture and fine arts. He arrived at a high degree of knowledge, even mastering complicated mathematical theorems. It was said that this highly learned man had managed to acquire reading skill by fumbling letters, and afterwards syllables, engraved in wooden tablets. His remarkable memory combined with assiduous listening to his teachers were the factors which contributed to his unusual success. Quite some people came to Alexandria just to watch the prodigy.⁶

These three examples clearly demonstrate both the difficulties and the challenges of researching disabled children in Antiquity. Much of the material still has to be collected: there is simply no such thing as a collection of stock references to lean on as to draw an overall sketch. Though the focus of this article will be on Roman Antiquity, it is not advisable to dismiss ancient Greek sources⁷ (the story on Croesus' son obviously was generally known to the educated elite of the Roman Empire): because of the nature of the evidence, I am obliged to paint with extremely broad strokes. Furthermore, we are confronted with a subject in which cross-cultural comparison is almost inevitable. I must at least take into account what anthropologists have to say about the subject, whereas the well-studied subject of child abandonment in Europe since the late Middle Ages will be invoked from time to time. Moreover, one faces the difficulty that discussions on the matter tend to become either emotional or at least anachronistical, as we are entering debates on values and standards in which ancient society was quite different from ours. The issue

⁴ Amm. 24,4,26. I thank Noel Lenski (University of Colorado) for this reference.

⁵ den Boeft, Drijvers, den Hengst, Teitler (2002) 139–140, referring to an article by Mary (1993). The observation already occurs with Ferreri (1906) 378.

⁶ Sozomenus, *Hist. Eccl.* 3,15,1–3. However, according to Palladius, *Hist. Laus.* 4,1 he never learned to write, and never resorted to any teachers. All he had was his own conscience: he was so greatly endowed with the grace of spiritual knowledge that in him was literally fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet, "The Lord gives light to the blind" (Ps. 146, 8).

⁷ For studies on disabilities in Greek Antiquity, see Edwards (1995) and Lammens (1999).

of disabled persons' rights is after all a modern one, largely unknown to the ancients. Finally, the subject is an example of how ancient history catches up with other branches of history. Due to the lack of source material, a whole range of subjects is simply beyond our understanding. For example, we do not dispose of personal correspondence or other documents to study resistance and agency of the disabled in Antiquity. Neither do we know what compelled Didymus to embark on a career of schooling, or what drove his parents to do the effort of teaching their blind little child, whether they were frowned upon by their neighbours or following the example others had set for them. For both Croesus' son and the Maozamalcha boy, the education and the rest of their lives are shrouded in silence. It is perhaps this paucity of sources that has caused ancient history to be somewhat excluded from the prolific new branch of disability history studies.⁸

The aim of this article may thus be described as follows. It is an essay in social history, rather than an exposition on the history of ideas. As such, I will be concerned more with concrete stories about parents attending oracles to obtain healing for their disabled child, than with mythological digressions on the faith of the crippled god Hephaestus, or on Oidipous with the swollen ankels. Much has yet to be done: as Antiquity is concerned, disability history has hardly left its childhood behind. Therefore, I want to (1) gather the information on disabled children, from a wide range and variety of sources, much more than has been done before, both on actual facts and on people's attitudes towards such children (2) offer a status quaestionis of what we can possibly know about the surviving of disabled babies (a subject which has been shrouded in the almost cluttered literature on child exposure and child abandonment) (3) fully integrate the data as they are offered by osteology, archaeology and medicine (4) question the value of the concept 'disability' as a research tool for the issue of socialisation of children in the ancient world.

⁸ See Anderson – Carden-Coyne (2007) for an up-to-date introduction. Promising approaches for ancient history might e.g. be the study of the disabled body as a repository for social anxieties around issues of control, identity and vulnerability Anderson – Carden-Coyne (2007) 454.

2. The ancients had some words for it

Transferring the terms 'disability' or 'handicap' to Antiquity is problematic, though it has to be said that even nowadays the terms are not unambiguous. Indeed, we do dispose of legal or medical definitions⁹, not to mention our strive for politically correct usage, preferring the term 'disabled' to the somewhat denigrating word 'handicapped'. But at the same time, our definitions are so broad that, on the basis of these descriptions, one could include inconveniences as elephant ears, early baldness, blushing or fear of public speaking in the series of handicaps, while at the other hand the blind United Kingdom former Minister of Interior Relations, David Blunkett, preferred to refer to his disability as 'an inconvenience'.¹⁰ The World Health Organisation acknowledges that the concept of disabilities is partly culturally determined: "an umbrella term (...) a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives".¹¹ In addition, the line between deformity and disability is not a sharp one: a deformity as blemish of the skin may become a social or a psychological handicap. Robert Garland has pointed to the fact that, according to statistics, one in six of the population in the USA is considered suffering from disability. Greeks and Romans would in all probability have estimated this incidence in their own communities to be appreciably lower, because they are likely to have excluded many of the minor impairments which statistics include nowadays: Caesar trying to hide his early baldness by combing his hair forward and wearing the laurel crown, or the Emperor Hadrian hiding a blemish of the skin by his beard would in all probability not be considered as disabled in the ancient world.¹² Less handicaps thus in our modern world, if we approach the matter from the ancient standpoint. Paradoxically enough, the modern view towards the ancient world would lead to a quite different result. Due to injuries, infections and widespread disease, a time traveller projected to Antiquity would be likely to recognise a

⁹ See for example definitions of the term disability offered in online medical dictionaries: "any physical or mental defect, congenital or acquired, preventing or restricting a person from participating in normal life or limiting their capacity to work." or "A physical, mental, or emotional condition that interferes with one's normal functioning." [<http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/handicapped>].

¹⁰ de Libero (2002) 75.

¹¹ <http://www.who.int/topics/disabilities/en>.

¹² Garland (1995) 6–7. Suet. *Caes.* 45; *Hist. Aug. Hadr.* 26,1.

large amount of people in ancient streets which he would consider more or less severely disabled.¹³

In certain contexts, ancient writers seem to have come close to a concept of disability, though they mainly do so in the context of malformation or teratology. Roman legal sources tried to distinguish between illness and disability, but they never came to an established and accepted definition.¹⁴ During the reign of Augustus, the jurist Labeo discerned two sorts of prodigies (*ostenta*) or births *contra naturam*: minor handicaps as being born with three feet or three hands, and serious malformations which were called *phantasmata* in Greek.¹⁵ According to Ulpian, a disabled child (*portentosus, monstruosus* or *debilis*) should be taken into account when granting favours to parents who had at least three children.¹⁶ In connection with the same *ius trium liberorum* granted by the Augustan *lex Iulia* and *lex Papia*, the jurist Paul noticed that those children who did not have a human appearance should not be taken into account, though an exception might be made in cases of polydactyly.¹⁷

While there was no ancient term matching our words 'disability' or 'handicap', there are many Greek and Latin words denoting weakness, being maimed, ugliness, incompleteness or imperfection, being unable to perform. In medical treatises, terms as 'infirm', 'defective', 'malformed' or 'weak' are used to design babies which we would probably, though certainly not in all cases, consider disabled. Considering the vagueness in ancient concepts, organisation of the material into modern and easy recognisable categories seems to impose itself. Hence, I will consider as disabled those children who suffered from bodily handicaps, deafness and hearing impairments (sometimes connected with speech disorders), blindness and sight impairment, as well as those suffering from mental disorders.¹⁸ Ancient authors theorised about heredity and other factors causing congenital impairment,¹⁹ but in most of the cases it is impossible

¹³ Scheidel (2001) and (2003) are the best surveys on disease in the Roman world; Sallares (1991) deals with the Greek world.

¹⁴ See the extended discussions in *Dig.* 21,1 concerning the sale of slaves and possible restitution when the slave turns out to be ill or in some way disabled.

¹⁵ *Dig.* 50,16,38.

¹⁶ *Dig.* 50,16,135.

¹⁷ Paul. *sent.* 4,9,3. See also *Dig.* 1,5,14. See Gourevitch (1998) and Allély (2004) 90–95 on Roman law and disabled children.

¹⁸ A similar option was taken by Edwards (1995) 4–5, excluding however mental disorders.

¹⁹ E.g. Arist. *HA* 585 b – 586 a (handicaps being transferred by parents); *GA* 772 b – 773 a; *HA* 582 b (circumstances of gestation causing impairments); *GA* 775 a; ps.-Arist. *Probl.* 895

to discern whether the sources are talking about congenital handicaps or acquired trauma.²⁰ Out of practical reasons, I excluded well studied phenomena as epilepsy and dwarfism.²¹ Of course, all this is a practical, rather crude and somewhat anachronistical organisation of the available source material. One also needs to bear in mind that other cultures *might* have had other concepts on abnormal, ominous, monstrous or unwanted births: some have systematically exposed twins, and there are traces of the archaic principle of exposing twins in Roman literature, though not in historically attested times.²²

Greek and Latin obviously disposed of a rich vocabulary for specific physical disabilities as blindness, deafness, muteness, paralysis and all sorts of bodily deformities.²³ A thorny problem of vocabulary arises in the case of the mentally disabled. "Discriminant subtlety in mental diseases has been achieved only in recent decades and we cannot sift the confusion of ancient accounts".²⁴ Though the second-century lexicographer Pollux has provided us with a full list of Greek terms denoting folly and lack of senses, and though several studies have focussed on the concepts of madness, insanity, being of unsound mind, possessedness, or mental disability, the ancient vagueness in terms and the lack of distinctions remains a thorny problem for those scholars wishing to highlight the mentally disabled in Antiquity.²⁵

a (duration of gestation causing disabilities, pointing to the imperfection of seven-month children).

²⁰ In the case of children, we do not have to deal with war wounds, and only very exceptionally with mutilation or scars. See Salazar (2000) on war wounds, and Dasen (2007) on scars.

²¹ On dwarfism, see Dasen (1993) and (2006). There are no references to dwarf children, though dwarfs were often compared to children. On epilepsy, see the classic book by Temkin (1945). In the case of epilepsy, it is stated by Suet. *Cal.* 50 that Caligula's disorders may have been caused by his suffering from this illness from childhood on. See Benediktson (1991). Hp. *Morb. Sacr.* 8 (6, 376–377 Littré) mentions more attacks when epilepsy is present from childhood.

²² Sen. *contr.* 9,3; Plin. *nat.* 7,47 (on the name *Vopiscus*). See Harris (1994) 5 n. 35 for further anthropological references.

²³ See the useful glossary in Garland (1995) 183–185.

²⁴ Wells (1964) 129.

²⁵ See Poll. *onom.* 120–122. Studies include Audibert (1892), Lebigre (1967) on legal matters; Michel (1981), Godderis (1987), Pigeaud (1987), Stok (1996) on medical matters. Dully overlooked are two excellent older studies by Semelaigne (1869 – by far the best, to my knowledge) and Heiberg (1927).

3. Exposure and infanticide of disabled babies

Taking the life course approach, this inquiry begins with the problem of birth and possible getting rid off disabled children. A widespread *communis opinio* has it that disabled children did simply not have a chance of surviving in ancient Antiquity: they were either killed immediately after birth, either exposed to face an almost certain death soon after.²⁶ Scholarly literature on child exposure and infanticide in general is indeed extensive²⁷, and it has taken more than one extended study just to map the different scholarly positions on the subject.²⁸ As to the exposure of the disabled, two problems arise. Firstly, our evidence is mostly based on a small selection of 'classic' texts, which need to be interpreted in their specific utopian or ideological tradition, making extrapolation a hazardous undertaking. Secondly, much of ancient historians' work on the matter seems to have been concerned with apologetics, defending Greeks and Romans from the accusation of practicing eugenetics, an aspect of ancient thought which was particularly stressed by racist and Nazi ideologists.²⁹

From Antiquity till present days, Sparta has been associated with eugenetics and the killing of malformed babies. However, it has gained this reputation on the basis of one mere text by Plutarch (ca. 46 – ca. 120), who in his *Life of Lycurgus* mentions that the babies of full Spartan citizens were brought to a place called Lesche and inspected by the elders of the tribes. When the child turned out to be of low descent or malformed (ἄγεννες or ἄμορφον) it was sent to the Apothetai, a pit-like place in Mount Taygetus. Still according to Plutarch, Spartans had like a double check to prove babies' good health: women washed their little ones with wine, in order to sort out the epileptic or the sickly

²⁶ The statement that parents nowhere raise monsters, occurs in a fragment of the lost tragedy *Cretans* by Euripides in connection with the birth of the Minotaurus. However, the fragment is strongly restored: see *P. Oxy.* XXVII 2461, fr. 1 (and R. Cantarella, *Euripide: I Cretesi*, Milan 1963, pp. 19–20 (text)).

²⁷ Eyben (1980–81), Boswell (1988), Harris (1994), Corbier (2001) are the best surveys. However, the subject of disabled children only turns up aside in these studies, most explicitly in Harris (1994) 12. Only Schmidt (1983–84) and Edwards (1996) explicitly deal with exposure or killing of disabled children.

²⁸ Oldenziel (1987) and Vuolanto (forthcoming) are examples of such studies.

²⁹ Schmidt (1983–84) 133–134 on Hitler's referring to Spartan eugenetics and the appeal made to classics by the German doctor Werner Catel (1894–1981), who was in charge of the paediatric clinic Rothenburgsort in Hamburg and who practiced euthanasia on children which were considered 'unheilbar'. Catel was a well respected pediatrician after the Second World War. See Petersen – Zankel (2003) and (2007).

ones.³⁰ However, Plutarch wrote at least sixhundred years after the facts and the Taygetus exposure was certainly not the custom anymore when he lived. Athenian writers as Xenophon or Plato who wrote in the fourth century BC during the high days of Sparta do not mention the practice, there is no archaeological evidence of displaying bones of disabled babies at Mount Taygetus, and one king of Sparta, Agesilaos (ca. 443– 360), is known to have been crippled by birth.³¹ Moreover, Plutarch's text fits in a somewhat fantastic-utopian tradition, stating that the ideal state had the power to select its citizens.³² Undoubtedly, there must be some historical core in the Lycurgus story, going back to a tribal warrior society in which the elder, not yet the fathers, decided upon survival of babies – to Plutarch who certainly was not a modern anthropologist, it was the moral of the story which counted, not so much the historical truth. In his description of the ideal state, Plato favoured selection of the weaker: if babies of the good citizens (i.e. the guards) appeared to be disabled (ἀνόπηρον), they should be put away in an obscure and inaccessible place. Whether this really implied killing them, is most uncertain, since in his *Timaeus*, Plato leaves the possibility of letting them return if they proved to be worthy while growing up. However, we need to bear in mind that Plato was writing on the ideal state, not on actual social practice.³³ Aristotle unambiguously opposes the upbringing of infirm children (πεπηρωμένον), stating that a law should forbid such practice. Once again, we are dealing with considerations about an ideal state.³⁴ There is a tradition in Greek literature condemning child-exposure: Isocrates lists it among the horrendous crimes practised in other cities but not in Athens, Aristotle seems to imply that some Greek states forbade the practice when it was done on demographic or

³⁰ Plut. *Lyc.* 16.

³¹ Schmidt (1983–84) 134–135; Huys (1996) 52–57. On Agesilaos being partly lame from birth and very small of stature, see Plut. *Ages.* 2. See Garland (1995) 40 and Luther (2000).

³² Huys (1996) 63–74. Eugenic infanticide is ascribed to an Indian tribe led by king Sopeithes by the historian Onescritus in his description of Alexander's campaigns. See Diod. Sic. 17,91,4–6; Strab. 15,1,30; Curt. 9, 1, 24–25. Another fantastic-utopian account by Iambulus includes a character-test by having newborns fly on the wings of a giant bird: Diod. Sic. 2,58,5.

³³ Pl. *Pol.* 460 c (selection); *Ti.* 19 a (possible return). In *Pol.* 415 c Plato states that those guards who have unworthy offspring should bring them to the workmen or the farmers. Scholarship on these Plato-passages is vast, but Schmidt (1983–84) 142–144 provides an excellent overview of the different positions.

³⁴ Arist. *Pol.* 7, 1335 b. For scholarship on this passage, see Oldenziel (1987) 88–90; Schmidt (1983–84) 144–145.

economic grounds, and Aelian (second century AD) mentions an otherwise unknown Theban law punishing child-exposers with death sentence. However, these texts only reveal that the practice was somehow disapproved of, and there is no indication whatsoever on tough decisions concerning malformed children.³⁵

As for the Roman tradition, the first century BC Greek historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus mentions a law issued by Romulus prohibiting the killing of infants under the age of three, except in the case of a disabled child or a prodigy (παιδίον ἀνάπηρον ἢ τέρας), in which case the killing should take place right after birth (εὐθὺς ἀπὸ γονῆς).³⁶ Cicero refers to the killing or removing of deformed children (*insignis ad deformitatem puer*) as stipulated in the law of the Twelve Tables (449 BC).³⁷ A most explicit statement is found with Seneca Rhetor, though rhetorical exaggeration cannot be ruled out: "Many fathers are in the habit of exposing offspring who are no good. Some right from birth are damaged in some part of their bodies, weak and hopeless. Their parents throw them out, rather than expose them".³⁸ The philosopher Seneca clearly regarded the killing of malformed children as perfectly normal: "Unnatural prodigy we destroy; we drown even children who at birth are weakly and abnormal. Yet it is not anger, but reason that separates the harmful from the sound."³⁹ Scholars have somewhat artificially tried to 'rescue' Seneca's reputation, stressing the fact that he is merely thinking of Republican customs of killing prodigies in times of crises, and referring to other passages where Seneca clearly points to parental love and dilection for sick children, claiming that character and the inner self are far more important than outward appearance. Indeed, such passages can be found with Seneca, but they evidently deal with elder children, with whom affectional bounds were already formed,

³⁵ Isoc. *Panath.* 122; Arist. *Pol.* 1335 b 19–26; Ael. *VH.* 2,7. See Schmidt (1983–84) 141; Harris (1994) 4; Huys (1995–96) on Athens. The Hesiodus scholia mention a not datable law from Ephesus only allowing exposure when the infant showed clear signs of hunger-oedema at his feet: *Schol. Hes., Op.* 497. The Scholion may go back to Plutarch (*Mor.* fr. 69 Sandbach) or to Proclus. See Schmidt (1983–84) 155 n. 59.

³⁶ D.H., *Ant. Rom.* 2,15,2. The remark that infants could only be exposed after the agreement of five neighbours most probably does not refer to the disabled. The Romulian law is generally considered as a late Republic fiction. See Eyben (1980–81) 26 n. 77; Harris (1994) 5.

³⁷ Cic. *leg.* 3,8,19. The reading of the MSS *legatus* has been emended to *necatus* or *delatus*. See Eyben (1980–81) 27; Harris (1994) 5.

³⁸ Sen. *contr.* 10,4,16 (Loeb - trans. M. Winterbottom).

³⁹ Sen. *dial.* 3,15,2 (Loeb - trans. J. W. Basore).

suffering from bad health, and not necessarily with disabled or malformed offspring. To state that Seneca was not a defender of eugenetics, is indeed a truism, more revealing of a scholar's preoccupation than of ancient thought which was evidently not involved with racist or biological thinking.⁴⁰

As to Roman Antiquity, we dispose of lists of attested monstrous births, as they are reported in the historical sources, mainly Livy and Julius Obsequens. The examples may be classified as androgyns, malformed babies, precocious babies, monsters half human-half beast, and multiple births. Reports have it that most of these ominous infants were killed (hermaphrodites being drowned in Republican times but cherished as extravagant objects of luxury in imperial times), while those with supernumerary or deficient limbs may have survived.⁴¹

There seems to have existed a tradition of ancient thought pointing to the necessity of raising *all* children, often resorting to arguments on nature and animal life.⁴² Foreign people as Egyptians, Germans and Jews, have been said to rear all their children, a practice which was sometimes explicitly contrasted with Roman practice.⁴³ However, none of these texts mention disabled children, perhaps deliberately in the case of the nature-argument, since animals had been known to expose their offspring which was not worth the rearing.⁴⁴

Throughout Antiquity, the ancient medical tradition crystal-clearly mentions the selection of newborns, with a very reduced chance of surviving for infirm or malformed babies as a logical consequence. Hippocrates considered gynaecology as the art of finding out which newborns were worth the rearing, and so did Mustio, a late-antique Soranus' translator. Soranus himself describes how the midwife should examine the newborn's ability to cry and to move all its

⁴⁰ Schmidt (1983–84) 149–150 tries to 'rescue' Seneca. See Sen. *epist.* 6,3 and 66,4 (inner self and outward appearance); 66,25 (virtue also possible with the infirm or the disabled); 66,26 (love for both a sick and a healthy son).

⁴¹ Allély (2003) 132–134 (list); (2004) 75–76 (list); (2003) 149–155 and (2004) 79–90 (fate of these children).

⁴² Muson. *Frag.* 15 A & B (ed. Hense) on why should one raise *all* his children; Hierocles, in Stob. 4,24,14 (ed. Hense) mentioning the upbringing of *most* children; Epict. *Ench.* 1,23; Plut. *Mor.* 496 b–e; 497 e, the latter authors referring to animal life and/or nature.

⁴³ E.g. Strab. 17,824 (Egyptians); Tac. *hist.* 5,5 (Jews); *Germ.* 19 (Germans). See Harris (1994) 7. See Schwartz (2004) for a survey on the reality of child exposure with Jews.

⁴⁴ In Ambrosius *Hex.* 18,60 (PL 14, 231) we read about the eagle rejecting a particular eaglet which was in some way defective: "she rejects him therefore not because of a hard heart but a sound judgement; she does not abandon her own, but refuses her alien." (trans. J. Boswell) – note the similarity with Seneca's argument! It is further said that the rejected eaglet is then taken up by the mercy of another bird, the *fulica*. See Boswell (1988) 168.

limbs, as well as to inspect its bodily openings and the proportions of the parts of the bodies. Only after this inspection, the child is appropriate to be raised. The baby who failed to meet these requirements was not worth the rearing (ἀνατροφήν) though Soranus does not explicitly state which action should be taken (he passes the nasty subject pudiquement, as the Budé editors have aptly put it).⁴⁵ Unmentioned measures may have included drowning (see the Seneca passage), suffocating the infant, simply putting aside the newborn and/or denying nourishment, in which case death follows after some hours, or exposing in a public places. Medieval reports from fifteenth-century Tuscany mention parents simply momentarily leaving the house to let the baby die on its own – one may think of similar practices in Antiquity, though they are never explicitly mentioned.⁴⁶ It should be noted that this medical selection also struck the weak babies, obviously a very large category, ranging much further than obvious deformities. Only rarely, ancient authors point to the difficult choices which had to be made, and to issues which were most probably solved in silence. Thus Socrates warns not to act irrationally like the mother who became angry with the midwife who found a baby unable to survive and removed the infant secretly.⁴⁷

Concerning the issue of exposure or infanticide of malformed newborns, ancient historians are ultimately left with not too many sources and a lot of unanswered questions. It goes beyond saying that a considerable number of disabled escaped the first parents' or midwives' tests: in the case of blind or hear-impaired children, the disability is only detected after a certain period of time, and the same counts for certain forms of mental retardation.⁴⁸ The assertion that the ancients were crueller towards the mentally disabled, who would then have been exposed at a later age, does not come up in any ancient

⁴⁵ Hp. *Oct.* 10 (7, 452–455 Littré); Must. *Gyn.* 1, 76; Sor. *Gyn.* 2,10. The reference to the proportion of the parts of the body, may have caused children with hydrocephaly to be removed (2, 10). See Burguière, Gourevitch, Malinas vol. II (1990) 85.

⁴⁶ These possibilities, except form the one of leaving the house, are enumerated in Paulus' *Sententiae*, see Dig. 25,3,4. For medieval Tuscany, see Boswell (1988) 403.

⁴⁷ Pl. *Tht.* 151 a–e; 157 c–d.

⁴⁸ In pagan literature, we only have two unambiguous references to persons being blind from birth: Arist. *Ph.* 193 a; Paus. *Per.* 4,10,6 on the Messenian seer Ophioneus. See Just (1997) 124. Obviously, babies missing one eye may have been destroyed as monsters, but no text exists to confirm or deny this. Plut. *Mor.* 520 c; 1108 d mentions a monster market where people went to see the three-eyed. See Edwards (1995) 154.

source.⁴⁹ Exposure after some months is attested in the case of an unwanted child. Although the later Emperor Claudius had initially accepted the girl his wife Urgulanilla had with the freedman Boter, he later exposed the little infant Claudia naked before her mother's door, the mention of her nakedness clearly referring to his intention to have the child killed.⁵⁰ So the possibility cannot be entirely ruled out in the case of later discovery of a disability. However, from a cross-cultural point of view, the dismissing of children who have already been accepted in the family (designed with the German word *Pädizid*) is much more exceptional than the killing immediately after birth (*Infantizid*).⁵¹ Neither are we informed about different reactions in different social classes. While the destitute might perhaps get rid of their disabled children since they were simply not in the possibility of raising them, the well-to-do could have resorted to other solutions. We hear of at least some aristocrats who lived, although their defects were clear from birth,⁵² but as will become clear in the following paragraphs of this study, also malformed children of the less well-to-do are known to have lived. Medical writers explicitly acknowledge the surviving of children whose disability was clear from birth on: babies with a clubfoot or dispaired limbs.⁵³ Aristotle describes the birth of babies who appear bloodless and dead, but who are revived by skilled midwives: cases of brain damage at birth or cerebral palsy?⁵⁴ One can only guess at parents' motivations in these cases: perhaps they had been longing for a child for a long time, perhaps they did not want to lose their sole heir, perhaps they just could not bring themselves to getting rid of the baby. The investment may have been considered more worth making in the case

⁴⁹ Hence, the assertion by Harris (1994) 12 ("it is difficult to imagine that victims of congenital blindness were often allowed to survive") is uncalled-for and supposes that parents would kill their babies after some months. Eyben (1980–81) 15 supposes that parents would dispose of a mentally disturbed child when his disability was discovered (that is, even later than in the case of blind or deaf-mute children).

⁵⁰ Suet. *Claud.* 27,5.

⁵¹ Krausse (1998) 328.

⁵² Plin. *nat.* 7,69 (Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, born with the genital organs closed); *nat.* 7,50 (in the *Lepidi* family, several generations of children were born with their eyes covered by their skin). De Libero (2001) lists a whole series of disabled aristocrats performing duties, but there is no single instance in which congenital disability can be demonstrated.

⁵³ Hp. *Art.* 62 (4, 262–269 Littré) on clubfoot; *Art.* 55 (4, 238–243 Littré) on dispaired limbs.

⁵⁴ Arist. *HA* 587 a.

of a boy.⁵⁵ The very different ecological regime of the ancient world may have instilled attitudes with parents that were quite different from nowadays expectations. Firstly, conditions of all newborn were anyhow fragile in Antiquity. Secondly, due to sophisticated medical testing, everybody in the modern world expects to deliver a baby that conforms to somatic ideals. Thirdly, ancient people may have hoped that children would still grow out of their handicap, in cases in which modern medicine teaches us that this will not be the case.⁵⁶ Moreover, new research into child abandonment has revealed that babies were often disposed in the near environment. They were as it were 'hidden in plain sight', hoping to recognise them afterwards and seeing them cared for by people who lived in close proximity. The sources do not mention disabled children in this case, but the possibility cannot entirely be ruled out.⁵⁷ Finally, quite some emotional factors are simply beyond our apprehension. How would parents in Antiquity have reacted when a little girl was born with a cleft lip, with the almost certain prospect of never being able to marry her off? Though we would like to know, the ancient sources unfortunately never tell us, though they sometimes mention the problem of how to marry off ugly girls.⁵⁸

No ancient historian has denied the frequency of child-exposure and in Antiquity, though all have acknowledged that the phenomenon can never be translated into numerical form. Its possible impact on slave supply of the Roman Empire has been tentatively and somewhat speculatively calculated: according to an estimation one in thirty children from poor families would have to be exposed to be raised as possible slaves, while another assessment states

⁵⁵ Patterson (1985) 114. Compare Arist. *GA* 775 a, stating that more males than females are born deformed, with the shrewd remark by Edwards (1995) 25: "one wonders, though, if Aristotle came to this conclusion by observing *surviving* babies."

⁵⁶ Edwards (1995) 23–24. See e.g. the testimony Edelstein – Edelstein (1945) n. 423 (stele IX): a man with one eye socket empty came to the sanctuary... and was healed! (= *IG* IV² 1, 121 lines 71–78). On this case and possible remedies for blindness, though not for congenital blindness, see Edwards (1995) 137.

⁵⁷ Evans-Grubbs (forthcoming).

⁵⁸ Garland (1995) 42–43. The Greek historian Herodotus mentions the problem in a fictitious account of a girls' auctioning by the Babylonians (1,196,2–3), and the Ugly Duckling fairytale about a Spartan baby girl (6,61,3–5). In late Antiquity, ugly and disabled children were sent to monasteries, see *Ap. Patrum* J 749 and *Hier. epist.* 130,6,5. Boswell (1988) 298–299 offers a vivid picture of all sorts of disabled people gathering in eleventh and twelfth century monasteries.

that this is underestimating the number of exposed freeborn children.⁵⁹ Moreover, the Christian concept of right to life of the newborn was unknown to the Greeks and the Romans.⁶⁰ This implied that children were not considered full human beings before the moment of name-giving (*dies lustricus* on the eight or the ninth day for girls or boys). Children were thus born twice: once biologically, and once socially – a way of thinking which persisted even in the Salic law,⁶¹ as in other German practice and with Jews.⁶² Anthropologists have pointed to the existence of some societies where levels of infanticide as high as fifty percent of live births have been reported, though other anthropological research showed that infanticidal practices are often connected with parental care and concern as well as surviving strategies for kin or family.⁶³ In such context, one should not be amazed at the frequency of the phenomena of child exposure and/or possible infanticide in the case of disabled newborns. Critics on the exposure of newborns in ancient texts, and the reticence of the authors on getting rid of disabled infants obviously do not point to a widespread communis opinio against the practice. From a human point of view, decision making was hard and difficult, and we do not need to wonder at the fact that such decisions were covered in silence and scarcely ever mentioned. At the same time, this does not detract from the fact that there was, in Garland's words, a "survival of the weakest", that at least some disabled, be it congenitally or not (with injuries or impairments occurring in childhood), survived into adulthood.

⁵⁹ Scheidel (1997) versus Harris (1999). The discussion is aptly summarised by McKeown (2007) 124–140. Harris (1999) 74 states that if 20 % of the newborn would have been exposed, a third of whom became slaves, this would supply the Roman Empire with 157,933 new slaves per year.

⁶⁰ Amundsen – Ferngren (1988) 49–50; Bakke (2005) 110–139 for a survey on the Christian concept of right to life for every single child.

⁶¹ Corbier (2001) 58–60.

⁶² Phil. *Moses* 11 refers to the "general" belief that "a child who has not survived long enough to partake of a day's nourishment is not a person". See also Numbers 4: 15, 34 and 40 (counting male children only after one month). These general beliefs ran against the Jewish prescript of raising all children (see note 43): Boswell (1988) 149. For the Germanic habit of killing an infant before they had given it food, see Boswell (1988) 211.

⁶³ Dickeman (1975) 130 (fifty percent); Krausse (1998) 320–322; 331 on combination of parental love and infanticide.

4. Medical science, archaeology and demography

On-line research instruments as the World Atlas of Birth Defects, Eurocat or the omim (Online Mendelian Inheritance of Men) have enabled access to knowledge on birth defects even to the non-specialists, providing them with detailed lists of all possible defects, their symptoms, frequency in various parts of the world, as well as chances of survival. It is not difficult to draw a list of those defects which would have been noticed by ancient physicians or midwives, excluding instances as heart disorders, in which cases the weak infant would probably be eliminated if he did not look healthy or die after some weeks, while the doctors were not able to explain the cause of death.⁶⁴

Due to the *permanence biologique*, which connects people from Antiquity to us, the same symptoms and defects existed already in the ancient world, though their frequency may have been different due to obvious reasons as difference in climate, diet, air, habitation, etc.⁶⁵ In the case of blindness, it has been demonstrated that less than 1 % of the blind adults belong to the category of the congenitally blind. According to the World Health Organisation, the percentage is only slightly higher in the developing world. So we may safely assume that the rate of congenitally blind children was not much higher in Antiquity. In contrast, the number of adventitious blindness, even in the case of children, must have been more elevated, since there has been significant medical advances in treating diseases as infectious trachoma (commonly spread by flies) or river-blindness, not to mention better nutritional habits nowadays preventing for example xerophthalmia, resulting from a lack of vitamin A in the

⁶⁴ Eurocat [www.eurocat.ulster.ac.uk]; OMIM [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/entrez?db=omim]; World Atlas of Birth Defects [www.fgg.eur.nl/medbib/WHO_world_atlas_of_birth_defects.html]. The World Atlas of Birth Defects list includes anencephaly, anophthalmos, cleft lip with or without cleft palate, cleft palate without cleft lip, cystic kidney, diaphragmatic hernia, Down syndrome, gastroschisis, holoprosencephaly, hydrocephaly, hypospadias, indeterminate sex, limb reduction defects, microphthalmos, omphalocele, polydactyly, spina bifida, stenosis, trisomy 13 (Patau syndrome), trisomy 18 (Edwards syndrome). This list must be supplied with defects as congenital blindness, congenital deafness, dwarfism. A search through the index of medical terms in Gourevitch – Grmek (1998) 503–508 reveals the following congenital defects represented in ancient art: blindness, cleft lip/ cleft palate, deafness, diaphragmatic hernia, Down syndrome, dwarfism, hydrocephaly, indeterminate sex, limb reduction effects, microcephaly, polydactyly.

⁶⁵ Grmek (1983) 22–23. There is of course the possibility that ancient doctors did not recognise the existence of a congenital disease, as the Greek and Roman physicians never mention hemophilia: see Grmek (1983) 26, whereas Jewish sources recognised it due to fatalities when practicing circumcision.

diet.⁶⁶ As for deafness, one in thousand people in the world today are congenitally deaf.⁶⁷

Researchers have embarked on tracing disabilities, defects and injuries in ancient art.⁶⁸ There is no need to repeat the results of this detailed research here, but I will highlight some particularly interesting instances which may be revealing of childhood experiences. The Klippel-Feil syndrome, a congenital defect of the cervical vertebra column, causing some vertebrae to be absent or to grow together, is poignantly realistically depicted on a statuette from Smyrna. The face of the poor little man without neck is depicted in pain and agony. His chest is atrophic and he has a conspicuous fold of the skin in his neck, the pterygium colli. Patients suffering from this syndrome have often been known to be deaf, due to artesia of the auditory organs, as well as suffering from mental retardation.⁶⁹ Another clay figurine shows a man suffering from hydrocephalus, a defect which has been described by Galen.⁷⁰ On a clay head from Corinth (fourth century bc) a unilateral cleft lip with cleft palate are almost scientifically depicted, as well as the congenital facial malformation which was caused by this. One can imagine the difficulties the parents must have had to breastfeed him as a little baby, yet he survived into adulthood.⁷¹

As for palaeopathology, the assertion by Ian Morris that it "quickly degenerates into lists of club-footed pharaohs and giant gallstones, at best illustrating points which are self-evident ... at worst burying significant patterns in details" remains sadly accurate.⁷² Yet, osteological finds may reveal interesting results: a man and a woman (brother and sister?) in Roman Corinth suffered from severely deformed vertebra which must have caused chronic pains during all their life, spina bifida was found on the skeleton of a young woman from Tiryns, and several instances of clubfeet were excavated, a

⁶⁶ Just (1997) 25.

⁶⁷ Edwards (1995) 94.

⁶⁸ The French classicist and ancient historian Danielle Gourevitch and the Croatian physician and historian of medicine Mirko Grmek largely disposed of the required skills to start such a study. Their over five-hundred-page volume (1998) is a landmark study on all sorts of disabilities (including congenital disorders) and diseases one can find in ancient iconography.

⁶⁹ Grmek (1983) 110–111; Gourevitch – Grmek (1998) 209–210.

⁷⁰ Gourevitch – Grmek (1998) 228. See Galen, *Introductio seu medicus* (14, 782 K.); *Definitiones medicae* (19, 442 K.)

⁷¹ Grmek (1983) 111; Gourevitch – Grmek (1998) 234–235.

⁷² Morris (1992) 91.

disorder which is often described and commented upon by Hippocratic doctors.⁷³ Combined with a demographic approach, scientific research on congenital diseases can lead to intriguing questions. In actual Europe, with mothers being pregnant at a relatively later age, the occurrence of the Down's syndrome is about one in six-hundred, while the risk is just one in two-thousand for mothers below age thirty. The syndrome turns out to be statistically strongly underrepresented in osteological finds. Report has it that a nine-year old child found in the sixth-century burial place of Bredon-on-the-Hill would be the only attested instance for Britain. The excavators have linked their found with the nearby monastery, since Christianity would for the first time have secured the surviving of such children.⁷⁴ Excavations from Roman Germany have revealed a ten-year-old from Stettfeld suffering from microcephaly.⁷⁵ Recent results can add to our knowledge on ancient mentality, as the constatation that quite some mentally disabled seem to have been buried on children's places in cemeteries.⁷⁶ However, one needs to be extremely careful in drawing conclusions from the paucity of finds. Historical osteological research has nearly left its childhood behind, and new finds can easily change the statistics. Moreover, the absence of children with Down's syndrome does not need to point to infanticidal modes, but may be connected with increased mortality in childhood, due to the risk of for instance heart failure.⁷⁷ What may be inferred from archaeological finds, is that there were disabled persons who survived, who were being cared for and looked after by people in their social environment. In other words: paleopathology does sometimes provide evidence for compassion.⁷⁸

⁷³ Grmek (1983) 110–112. On clubfeet in ancient art, see Gourevitch – Grmek (1998) 151–152; 282–287. For Antiquity, Roberts – Manchester (1995) cite rare instances of achondroplasia (dwarfism), osteogenesis imperfecta, anencephaly, spina bifida, congenital dislocation of the hip, clubfoot, cleft palate, Down's syndrome, and hydrocephalus. See also note 53 on dispaired limbs.

⁷⁴ Krausse (1998) 338 dates to the sixth century, Roberts – Manchester (1995) to the ninth century.

⁷⁵ Krausse (1998) 338.

⁷⁶ Baker – Francis (2007).

⁷⁷ Roberts – Manchester (1995) 32.

⁷⁸ Dettwyler (1991), Scott (2000).

5. Literary evidence on daily life

It is at this point, that literary evidence may be called in, and I hope to demonstrate that it can reveal more about every day life than ancient historians so far have believed it could.

Descriptions of the gloomy faith of everyday life of the disabled are extremely rare in Antiquity. Scattered details may be found in very diverse sources. In these matters, early Christian lives of the saints and apocryphs do focus on such details. One needs of course understand this Christian emphasis in its proper context, referring to Jesus' healing miracles and elaborating upon the new rhetoric of poverty. This however does not detract from the fact that these Christian authors pointed to reality of life around them, so that their information may be used to sketch a picture of daily life.⁷⁹ As an example, one may cite the sailor's son who had been thrown out of the parental house because of his being severely and incurably disabled. Though the description of the poor man lying near the coast for fifty years, covered with ulcers and worms, may be rhetorically exaggerated, it gives a clue of the cruel fate such persons awaited.⁸⁰

It is obviously possible that a child was born healthy, but became disabled afterwards due to the educator's neglect. This is at least implied by a Soranus' remark, stating that in the cases of nurses who abuse of alcohol, babies may become languid or drowsy, in some cases even paralysed, shaking or spasmodic.⁸¹ Modern estimates have it that the daily, mainly vegetarian regime of the poor was marked by a chronic deficiency of proteins and calories. The consequences of undernourishment in early childhood for mental health are irreversible, and might lead to a diminished sense of sociability and increasing passivity.⁸²

How did people react when they discovered their little child being blind? They possibly found their way to oracles, sanctuaries, temples. The blind lad (παῖς ἀϊδής) Lyson from Hermione dreamt in Epidaurus about a dog licking his eyes and returned home healed, but it is not said in the inscription whether the

⁷⁹ On the use of Christian sources, see Finn (2006).

⁸⁰ Greg. Tur. *Andr.* 33.

⁸¹ Sor. *Gyn.* 2,19. Soranus uses the words νοθρά, καρώδη, ἔντρομα, ἀπόπληκτα, σπασμώδη.

⁸² Sippel (1987) on dietary deficiency; Garnsey (1999) 106–107 on the consequences of dietary deficiency with infants.

boy was actually congenitally blind.⁸³ Or parents just tried to make the best out of it. We cannot be sure whether it were actually Didymus' parents who decided for their young son to acquire reading skill (cf. *supra*). When they had learnt to walk, such children would have to be accompanied, as some adults have been known to have their own companion.⁸⁴ And like blind adults, they would have walked around with a stick.⁸⁵ They probably had difficulties in dressing and undressing.⁸⁶ Would blind people in one way or another connect to each other? Already Aristotle had observed that blind parents sometimes generate blind offspring.⁸⁷ There is one other suggestion in this direction, in the healing miracle by which Andreas cured a family of blinds. The fact that both the father and the mother as their son were blind, is considered a devil's work, and I strongly suppose that the reference to their being both mentally and physically blind, says more about their trailing behind as social outsiders than just about the fact they did not believe.⁸⁸ It seems likely that, surely in the lower classes, blindness would have been a much severer impairment than deafness. Yet, cross-cultural evidence shows how blind children manage to live in smaller communities. They benefit from small and easily recognisable space: the complicated and static topography of a Greek village makes excellent landmarks for a blind person. Further, the allure of independently traveling and personal independence is very much a modern one. In Antiquity, most people lived in interdependence in their communities, and most would stay in one area

⁸³ *IG* IV 951, lines 125–126 = *IG* IV² 1, 121, lines 125–126 = Herzog (1931) n. XX. For a Christian example, see the apocryphal Legend of Simon and Theonoe (Coptic, fourth century) R 103–104 on the philosopher Stephanus who brought his little blind child to the martyrion of the apostle: *Ecrits apocryphes chrétiens* I, p. 1550 (F. Morard).

⁸⁴ *Vict. Vit.* 2,17 (PL 58, 217): *excitat puerum qui ei solitus erat manum porrigere* (on the blind Felix who was cured by Eugenius).

⁸⁵ *Anth.Pal.* 298; *Sen. contr.* 10,4,2. According to *Ov. trist.* 5,6,31 people made place when they crossed a blind man on the streets. The assumption that blind people in the ancient world used dogs, is based on a faulty interpretation of *Mart.* 14,81. See Esser (1959) and De Libero (2001) 86 on the absence of such dogs.

⁸⁶ *Martyrium Philippi* V b (Armenian), about the governor's wife Niconora.

⁸⁷ *Arist. HA* 585 b (also stating that such features are few and in most cases the children of defective parents are completely sound).

⁸⁸ *Greg. Tur. Andr.* 32: *Vidit hominem caecum cum uxore et filio et ait: "vere diaboli hoc est opus. Ecce enim quos et mente caecavit et corpore."*

all of their lives.⁸⁹ Papyrological records mention blind people involved in agriculture, as cultivating the land.⁹⁰

We can only guess how popular-philosophical motifs on the impossibility for blind people to acquire real knowledge, might have impacted on daily life perceptions of blind children.⁹¹ Ancient people were obviously not involved with the question as to what happens when a person who has been blind from childhood suddenly sees, mostly a very long and difficult process to develop the mental and psychological abilities to process the new visual information. Though the person healed by Jesus in the Gospel of John is explicitly referred to as "a person blind since birth" (John 9:1; 9: 19–20), surely an adult (John 9: 23), no attention is paid to this part of his healing.⁹² Neither do inscriptions attesting the healing of a blind child bother about the fact whether the child was congenitally blind or not (see note 83).

Plato refers to the dumb or the speechless (ἔνεοί) making use of sign language with their hands, head and the rest of their bodies.⁹³ Education and schooling in Antiquity were largely an oral matter, based on drill, imitation and reading aloud. It is thus easy to imagine how such children lapsed into a situation which made them appear similar to the mentally retarded. Deaf-muteness was never recognised as such, and there was no Greek or Latin word to describe the phenomenon. Ancient doctors obviously did acknowledge the correlation between being deaf and not being able to acquire language skills⁹⁴, but they rather believed a physical obstruction in the tongue to cause the

⁸⁹ Edwards (1995) 144–145.

⁹⁰ E.g. *P. Oxy.* XII 1446, 1. Recently Rathbone (2006) 106 has pointed to the fact that many people who identified themselves as blind in, for instance, petitions were actually more concerned with escaping liturgies! *Hdt.* 4,2 and *Plut. Mor.* 440 a – b tell the story of the blinded Scyth slave milkers. Though the story is obviously a fantasy, the audience had to believe that it was possible for blind persons to perform this task.

⁹¹ Gassino (2002) deals with this theme in Lucian.

⁹² The blind man from the Gospel of Marc obviously was not blind since birth, since, after Jesus' first laying on hands, he declares to see "walking men, looking like trees" (Mark 8: 24). See Just (1997) 216 on Mark; 258–270 on John. The apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus mentions the man blind from birth from the gospels: *Ev. Nicodemi* 6, 2 in *Ecrits apocryphes chrétiens* II, p. 270 (R. Gounelle).

⁹³ *Pl. Crat.* 422 e.

⁹⁴ *Arist. HA* 536 b and *Plin. nat.* 10,192 explicitly acknowledge the relationship between congenital deafness and being dumb. Galen, *Hippocratis de medici officina liber et Galeni in eum commentarius* 9, 47 (18, 2, 750 K.) mentions that those people are called ἔνεοί by the Greeks who are deaf from birth and not able to utter articulate speech.

impossibility to speak.⁹⁵ Deaf-mute people have been considered as 'idiots' till far in the nineteenth century. The same counts for Roman legislation: emphasis was put on a person's muteness, rather than on his hearing impairment, the former implying being dumb in a society in which orality always was at stake. Contrary to the blind, deaf people were not supposed to take legal action according to Roman law.⁹⁶ It has been suggested that deaf-muteness was more a problem of the elite: lower class children would fairly easily have been able to perform manual tasks and agricultural labour in country villages, where they would at least have managed to establish some basic communication of gesture with their family members. Cross-cultural evidence proves that this is actually the case in many cultures, but at the same time, such children were equalled with the mentally retarded in the very same small communities.⁹⁷ Still, such people somehow made their way into society. Augustine at least theoretically takes into consideration that two deaf-mute people would marry each other. Even if their children would not be deaf, they still would learn to express themselves with gesture, particularly if the couple would live isolated.⁹⁸ An apocryphal story mentions the marriage of a mute girl. Magicians were said to have rendered the girl mute, though it is not said whether this happened in her childhood or just before her marriage.⁹⁹

Greek and Roman literature provides us with some case histories of congenitally deaf-mute children. In the case of Croesus' son, scholars have explained the boy's inability to speak as of a hysterical nature, albeit also congenital. However, the Herodotus text clearly points to the boy's hearing

⁹⁵ Hp. *Carn.* 18 (8, 608–609 Littré). Cels 7,12,4 describes the painful and risky surgery of making an incision below the tip of the with a forceps, risking to cut veins and causing excessive bleeding. Celsus adds that the operation is not always successful, as some did not gain the skill of speaking afterwards. See Ferreri (1906) 375–376; Gourevitch (1983) on Hippocratic theories on inability to speak.

⁹⁶ Küster (1991). See e.g. *Cod. Iust.* 6,22,10 pr. A same attitude in Jewish law puts deaf-mutes, imbeciles and minors in the same category. See Mishnah: Menahoth 9,8 (concerning sacrifice); Mishnah: Hullin 1,1 (on slaughter); Mishnah: Rosh Hashanah 3,8 (on representing the community). On these texts, see Cotter (1999).

⁹⁷ Edwards (1995) 94–98. Particularly instructive is the reference to communication with deaf-mutes in villages in nowadays Burundi: see Lane (1992) 151. On confusion between congenital deafness and stupidity even nowadays, see Lane (1992) 147.

⁹⁸ Aug. *quant. anim.* 18,32 (PL 32, 1052–1053) in a discussion on how children acquire language, and whether human beings grow up by nature or by instruction.

⁹⁹ *Vita Iesu Arabica*, 15 in *Ecrits apocryphes chrétiens* I, p. 217 (ed. Genequand). A deaf person by birth is presumably alluded to in apocryphal *Acta Pauli* VII, in *Ecrits apocryphes chrétiens* I, p. 1148 (Rordorf).

impairment. Later authors indeed focus on the boy's muteness, but we need to understand their emphasis in the context of the theory of the physical obstruction in the tongue.¹⁰⁰ In the first century AD, the senatorial boy Quintus Pedius was of distinguished rank and family tradition. His grandfather Quintus Pedius was a grandchild, though not by blood, of Julia, Julius Caesar's beloved sister. The man had reached the consular rank, celebrated a triumph and was made a coheir by Julius Caesar. When the boy Quintus Pedius was born deaf-mute (*natura mutus*), the orator Messala Corvinus persuaded to teach him the art of painting. Augustus agreed, the lad made a fine career and died at a young age as a celebrated painter.¹⁰¹ Throughout history up to nowadays, other deaf-mute persons have found their way as painters, as Hendrick Avercamp (1585–1634), one of the first Dutch landscape painters of the seventeenth century, who was deaf and mute and known as "de Stomme van Kampen" ("the Mute of Kampen") or the Castiglian Giovanni Ferdinando Navarrete (1526–1579), a disciple of Titian, who had become deaf by the age of three and who was surnamed El Mudo ("the Mute").¹⁰² Saint Augustine mentions the – in his words very famous – case of a handsome and elegant young man in Milan, who was deaf and mute (*mutum atque ita surdum*) who could only express himself through body language and gesture. He also remembers the case of a country man and his wife, both being able to speak, who had about four children (Augustine does not remember that well), girls and boys, who all turned out to be deaf-mute.¹⁰³ Both Gellius and Valerius Maximus mention the story of the Samian athlete Echeclus who had been mute, but found his voice, fired with indignation about an unfair casting of lots, or, in another version, being robbed of a title and prize he had won.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Poetscher (1974) explains the boy's inability to speak as of a hysterical nature, albeit also congenital. A case of hysterical blindness is mentioned in Hdt. 6,117 (the Athenian Epizelos being blinded after battle without having suffered any wound). Hdt. 1,38 clearly mentions the hearing impairment of Croesus' son. Gellius 5,9,2 does not mention deafness, but only obstruction of breath and the tongue (*spiritus vitium nodumque linguae rupit*). Val. Max. 5,4,ext.6 only mentions the boy's inability to speak.

¹⁰¹ Plin. *nat.* 35,21 (*puer magni profectus in ea arte obiit*). See Gourevitch (1991).

¹⁰² See the website DEAFinitely Famous People [<http://www.deafinx.com/DeafCommunity/fame.html>] for famous deaf people, in various branches of society.

¹⁰³ Aug. *quant. anim.* 18,31 (PL 32, 1052).

¹⁰⁴ Gell. 5,9,5–6 (*cum antea loquens non fuisset*; unfair lottery); Val. Max. 1,8, ext. 4 (*athleta mutus*; robbed of a title and prize).

Miracles attesting the curing of deaf or mutes confront us with real-life counterparts of Croesus' legendary son. A voiceless boy (ἄφωνος) came to the Epidaurus sanctuary. When the servant of Asclepius asked the mute boy's father to promise a thank-offering, the boy himself said "I promise", and repeated these words when his startled father asked him to do so.¹⁰⁵ A dumb girl (κόρα ἄφωνος) saw a snake coming from a tree: she screamed and ran to her parents, and consequently left the Epidaurus sanctuary in good health.¹⁰⁶ A Christian counterpart of suchlike stories is provided by Gregory of Tours. A girl from Tours was mute since birth (*ab utero matris suae muta processit*). When her mother took her to Saint Martin's grave, she asked the girl whether the incense smells nice and whether the water from the holy spring tasted well. When the girl answered twice "bonum", the lucky mother returned with her healed child.¹⁰⁷

There are references to children with deformed limbs, as the cases of the dried feet, causing them not to be able to walk.¹⁰⁸ Apart from crutches or staffs, there was not much aid for people with severe mobility impairments.¹⁰⁹ There is no evidence for wheelchairs in the ancient world, though we can suppose that the more well-off had themselves carried by slaves or other personnel in a litter or a cart.¹¹⁰ Donkeys may have proved their services. A Hippocratic writer describes young children with dislocated limbs, who crawl about on the sound leg, supporting themselves with the hand on the sound side on the ground.¹¹¹ Lame children would have to be constantly looked after and served.¹¹² There are some explicit references to lame persons having lame offspring. As with blind people, this may hint at the possibility of disabled people connecting with each other

¹⁰⁵ *IG IV* 951, lines 41–47 = *IG IV*², 1, 121, lines 41–48. See also Herzog (1931) n. V and Cotter (1999) 19.

¹⁰⁶ *IG IV*² 1, 123, lines 1–3. See also Herzog (1931) n. XLV.

¹⁰⁷ Greg. Tur. *Mart.* 2, 38 (MGH SS RR MM. I, p. 622).

¹⁰⁸ *Praed. Jacobi filli Zebedaei* 41 in *Ecrits apocryphes chrétiens* II, p. 948 (Pères – Piovanelli).

¹⁰⁹ See Edwards (1995) 62–67 on mobility impairment.

¹¹⁰ As Thersandrus, who suffered from consumption and was attending the Asclepiadic sanctuary at Epidaurus. He was carried around in a wagon: *IG IV*² 1, n. 121–122, stele II n. 33.

¹¹¹ Hp. *Art.* 52 (4, 228–233 Littré). See Edwards (1995) 62–67 on mobility impairment.

¹¹² Probably implied in Plut. *Mor.* 4 a: "if you live with a lame man, you will learn to limp" (ὑποσκάζέων). Acta Ioannis IV e 8 + 10 (Armenian): a lame man invites John to his house to have him serve him.

and founding families.¹¹³ Petronilla, the daughter of the apostle Peter was said to have been paralysed in one side of her body at age ten. Her disease is being explained as a protection against the crowds of men courting her near the women's baths. Though Peter could have miraculously healed her, he refuses to do so, since her disability would serve Petronilla's virginity the best. This needs to be understood of course in its theological context, but the story somehow reminds of the social reality of the paternal power of the father over his daughter before she married.¹¹⁴

Harsh treatment, not to say shock therapy, is attested in the case of mentally retarded, being treated with whips or with clubs.¹¹⁵ Surely in the case where possessedness by devils or evil spirits is mentioned, many problems of diagnostics turn up. The late antique lives of the saints and apostles are full of stories about such forms of insanity. Were such children epileptics, manic depressed bipolars, mentally disturbed? Of course, one can never know. A boy was possessed by a *spiritus immundus* and hung himself.¹¹⁶ The victims of evil spirits are sometimes graphically described as rattling their teeth, attacking people and frantically laughing.¹¹⁷ One boy lie spitting on the atrium floor, the sight was so pitiful that his master wished to be dead rather than having to watch the scene.¹¹⁸ Biting, beating and attacking people is mentioned in connection with such children, as well as wandering around at barren places or throwing stones at passers-by.¹¹⁹ Several instances testify to such children being chained at home.¹²⁰ When knocking at the door of a poor widow's house,

¹¹³ Arist. *HA* 585 b – 586 a (physically impaired children are born of physically impaired parents, for example lame parents produce lame offspring: *χολῶν χολοί*); Plin. *nat.* 7,50 (*trunco truncis*). See also Hp. *Morb. Sacr.* 2 (6, 364–365 Littré) on lameness as hereditary.

¹¹⁴ Acta Petri, in *Ecrits apocryphes* I, p. 1049–1052 (Poupon). Augustine refers to the scene in *c. Adim.* 17, 5 (PL 42, 161).

¹¹⁵ Aug. *c. Iulian. op. imperf.* 3, 161 (PL 45, 1314–1315).

¹¹⁶ Greg. Tur. *Andr.* 14.

¹¹⁷ A standard description in Greg. Tur. *Andr.* 29 on a house in which everybody had been possessed: *vidi alios pueros stridentes dentibus et in me impetum facientes et adridentes risos insanos*.

¹¹⁸ Greg. Tur. *Andr.* 34.

¹¹⁹ *Vita Iesu Arabica* 14, in *Ecrits apocryphes* I, p. 216–217 (Genequand): woman wandering around in cemeteries and naked in the desert, throwing stones and bringing shame to her family; *Passio Bartolomaei* 7, in *Ecrits apocryphes* II, p. 798 (Alibert, Besson, Brossard-Dondré, Mimouni): possessed young girl daughter of an Indian king, biting and attacking people.

¹²⁰ *Vita Iesu Arabica* 14, 2; *Passio Bartolomaei* 7 (see note 117).

almsgivers in Egypt found the girl daughter of a poor laundress strolling around naked in her mother's impoverished little house. This is a story from the *Apophthegmata Patrum*. In another Egyptian collection, the *Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*, we read about a child suffering from rabies, being tied up inside the house.¹²¹ The Acts of John, a second century apocryph written in Greek in Egyptian Alexandria, reveal a fascinating story about twins, who were possessed by evil spirits from their birth. They grew up as beautiful young men, apparently involved in public life, as going to the baths¹²², walking around, going out eating and even participating in the city council. However, their awful disease almost struck them daily in these public places, and when they had reached the age of thirty-four, their father, after having consulted a family council, decided to have them killed by poison, since they were being insulted and laughed upon almost daily.¹²³

Most difficult are borderline cases as Titus Manlius, son of the dictator Lucius Manlius, who had been expelled by his father from public life. Raised at the countryside, he lived in slave-labour and daily misery, as in a dungeon or a workhouse, just because he was not good at speaking and considered slow of mind. Livy rebukes the father for aggravating his son's situation by exposing him to uncultivated life amidst cattle. Once again, it is very difficult to discern what the real trouble with young Manlius actually was. In any case, one should hardly consider him a mentally retarded: in later life, he was three times a consul, three times a dictator, symbol of Roman pietas (defending his father against the charges of the tribune Pomponius), of virtus (killing and decapitating a giant Gaul and putting on his necklace, which gave him the cognomen Torquatus), of iustitia (having his own son killed, since he was disobedient to him in the military). Most likely, young Manlius' initial speech impediment caused his parents to somehow neglect him and put him aside, thinking he also was mentally disturbed. Somehow the young kid managed to improve himself and grew out one of the best known Romans of the fourth

¹²¹ *Ap. Patrum* N 263; *Hist. Mon. in Aeg.* 22,3.

¹²² *Greg. Tur. Andr.* 5 mentions the young son of Gratinus (the boy still attended the women's public baths) who was caught by a demon when he was in the baths.

¹²³ *Acta Joannis* 56.

century bc.¹²⁴ For the second century ce, there is the case of Herodes Atticus' and Regilla's son Bradua, born ca. 145. The child son did not prove to be pleasing to his father. As a child, Bradua could not learn to read: his father bought twenty-four slave boys to whom he gave names beginning with the letters of the alphabet to help his son. Despite his initial reading problem (was he what we would call a dyslectic?), Bradua became a consul ordinarius in 185 and was awarded a proconsularship.¹²⁵ The emperor Claudius is the most famous instance of a somehow congenitally disabled who made his way in Roman society. Nowadays physicians suppose him to have suffered from Little's disease, caused by cerebral lesion at birth, which would have made him appear normal when he was born, afterwards causing motorical defects, clinical spasticity and muscle weakness, slowness in speech, and the appearance of retardation. The reaction of his family is revealing: as soon as he did not turn out to be normal, his family entrusted him to a pedagogue, a former muleteer who acted as a brute. Antonia Minor and Drusus had many babies, only three of which survived (Germanicus, Livilla and Claudius). So they nevertheless decided to keep the young Claudius, though they held him in despise.¹²⁶ Antonia Minor considered her child "a monster of a man, not finished by Mother Nature but only half-done" and if she would accuse somebody of dullness, she used to say that he was even more stupid than her son Claudius. His grandmother Livia treated him with the utmost contempt and only admonished him through brief and hard notes or messengers. His sister Livilla is said to have prayed openly and loudly that the Roman people might be spared of the undeserved fortune of having him as an emperor. Only his great-uncle, the Emperor Augustus, recommended in a letter to work out a consistent strategy as to take into account his physical condition and mental capacity. At that time, young Claudius had turned twenty-two, and the imperial family had

¹²⁴ Liv. 7,4,4–7 (maltreatment by the father); 7,5,2–8 (defending his father); 7,10,1–14 (killing the giant Gaul); 8,7,13–22 (killing his own son). The Manlius Torquatus case is also mentioned by Val. Max. 5,4,3; 6,9,1; Sen. *benef.* 3,37,4; App. *Sam.* 3.

¹²⁵ On the twenty-four boys, see Philostr. *VS* 551. See Pomeroy (2007) 48–50 on Bradua. Problems in learning to read are also mentioned by Aug. *epist.* 166, 6, 17 (PL 33, 728) (= *De origine animae hominis liber*): *De ingeniorum vero diversitate, imo absurditate, quid dicam? quae quidem in parvulis latet, sed ab ipsis exordiis naturalibus ducta, apparet in grandibus, quorum nonnulli tam tardi et obliviosi sunt, ut ne prima quidem discere litterarum elementa potuerint.*

¹²⁶ Suet. *Claud.* 1,6 (many children), 2,2 (pedagogue). See Garland (1995) 40–42; Gourevitch (1998) 468–470 on the Claudius case and the Little disease.

to consider his possible public appearance and office holding. Before that, he had used to be covered by a cloak when he attended the gladiatorial games he and his brother had given in honour of their father, and his taking of the gown of manhood had been secretly celebrated about midnight without the usual ceremony.¹²⁷

Due to the lack of sources, a gendered approach of disabilities in Antiquity, focussing on the specific conditions of impaired girls and women, will for always remain a desideratum. I have referred to the problem of marrying such girls off. A few references suggest that they were sometimes married: the Herodotus passage on the Babylonian auctioning (see note 58), or the story by the same author on the lame Corinthian daughter Labda, none of the Bacchiadae would marry, who married into a rival clan instead. A passage in Plato suggests that at least some men married women with mental or physical defects.¹²⁸

6. Pity and Mockery, Dread and Fascination: literary evidence on attitudes

Attitudes and reactions towards the disabled and by extension to disabled children seem to have belonged very much to what one would call the *longue durée*, various attitudes moving up and down on the axis of pity, mockery, dread or fascination. Obviously, it is not always possible neither desirable to discern between the various reactions; again, one is forced to paint broad strokes combining aside remarks stemming from various periods, genres and social classes.

The birth of a deformed child was sometimes connected with evil omens: "some even throw out home-bred infant slaves, when they are born with an evil omen or are physically weak."¹²⁹ Certainly, the Greeks believed that physical handicaps might result from curses or the Evil Eye. They used defixiones formulae as "may he be deaf, speechless, mindless", and on Greek sepulchral monuments from Asia Minor in the Roman Imperial period, potential tomb-robbers are deterred with phrases that their wives would give birth "not in

¹²⁷ Suet. *Claud.* 3,2 (mother and Livilla mocking him); 4 (Augustus' letter); 2,2 (cloak and ceremony at night). See also Dupont (1998) on the nightly donning of the toga.

¹²⁸ Hdt. 5,92 (Labda); Pl. *Lg.* 925 e – 926 b.

¹²⁹ Sen. *contr.* 10,4,16.

accordance to nature".¹³⁰ The belief that the birth of a deformed child is somehow a consequence of the parents' moral fault, for example cheating the gods or breaking an oath, already occurs as early as with Hesiod.¹³¹ This view was still held to when Christianity had become an established religion. Bishop Fulgentius mentions how blind people, together with other disabled persons, were commonly held to be punished for their own or their parents' sins¹³² – though Augustine was eager to point out that a blind person is just a sinner as every human person. In the particular case of the blind one in the Gospel of John, his blindness was caused by God to make God's good works apparent in him.¹³³ Folkish belief, however, strongly lasted: the mother of the unfortunate deformed child who became a freak tearfully confessed that he had been conceived on a Sunday night (see note 146). Sermons also inveigh against making love on Sundays and the possible consequences of it.¹³⁴

With Aristotle, we hear the aristocratic voice, claiming that "we do not think a man happy of very ugly appearance or low birth."¹³⁵ For the lower classes, there is the testimony by John Chrysostom that, during labour, a woman suffers from fears that she might give birth to a malformed or crippled baby (or even that she would produce a girl rather than a boy).¹³⁶

The ancients' fascination with bizarre disabilities and deformities is well known: in monster markets, attested for Rome, and freak shows, most popular with the emperors, deformity was put on display. In the case of cretin slaves, the so-called *moriones* who were particularly popular, we are nowhere informed that they actually were children, but they may have been connected with them

¹³⁰ *SEG* XXVII 1115 (curse); *SEG* XVIII 561, 7 (grave-robbers). A whole series of curses appears in *SEG* XXXV 213–227 (curse tablets from the Athenian agora of about 250 AD). See Garland (1995) 60; Gager (1992) 21 on curses in the ancient world: blindness, dumbness, lameness and broken limbs being among the 'favourite' curses; Hardie (1981) 107 on the Evil Eye in nowadays Greece.

¹³¹ Implied by Hes. *Op.* 235. See Garland (1995) 59–61.

¹³² See the elaborate sermon by Fulg. Rusp. *serm.* 17 (PL 65, 880–882): *Tenebantur igitur universa sub peccato, sub duro supplicio? Caeci, claudi, surdi, lipposi, mortui tenebantur, inquam, sub custodia primi supplicii.*

¹³³ Aug. *in euang. Joh.* 44,9 (PL 35, 1713–1719), esp. 1713–1714 on the question of sin. Also Johannes Chrysostomus, *Hom. in Joh.* 56, 1 (PG 59, 306) is eager to point out that the congenital blindness of the young man was neither his nor his parents' fault.

¹³⁴ Caes. Arel. *serm.* 44,7. Other sermons linked deformities with having sex during menstruation. See Boswell (1988) 260.

¹³⁵ Arist. *EN.* 1099 a–b. See Edwards (1995) 71.

¹³⁶ Johannes Chrysostomus, *De virg.* 57,4 (PG 48, 579).

due to their garrulity and freedom of speech.¹³⁷ Augustine remembers that a dicephalic Siamese twin was born in the East: with two heads, two chest, four arms, one belly and two feet, the child was put on display and lived long enough that his fame attracted many spectators. Pliny the Elder himself had seen a remarkable child prodigy, though we are not sure whether this particular child had been put on display: Cornelius Tacitus, son of the procurator of Gallia Belgica, had grown three ells at just three years of age. The boy was slow in walking and retarded of mind. Another child prodigy was said to have showed off signs of puberty, including a masculine voice, at the same age of three.¹³⁸

Artemidorus mentions grief and pity, as well as disgust and fear at seeing someone with a deforming disease in dreams.¹³⁹ As to the darker side of pity, the sinister picture of Seneca Rhetor concerning children being maimed in order to evoke compassion, cannot simply be discarded as a rhetorical exaggeration. Three centuries later John Chrysostom mentions children being blinded by their parents in order to become beggars: maiming of children still occurs among the beggars of modern Taipei.¹⁴⁰ More appealing to modern ears, is the Church Father's statement that parents may feel desperate when faced with a sick child. In the case of disabled children, his comment on the Canaanite woman and her possessed child is relevant: "her very entrails, one might say, were renched apart and aching with concern for her daughter"¹⁴¹

Mockery and disdain were almost certainly part of the lives of the disabled. Jestng and joking at physical deformity or disability, even to the point of mocking or insulting, is a well known feature of ancient political invective and satire. Likewise, Cicero declared that laughter had its foundation in some kind of deformity, and stated that in deformity and bodily disfigurement there

¹³⁷ Plut. *Mor.* 520 c. On *moriones*, see Gevaert (2001). Garland (1995) 45–58 on the Roman Emperor and his monstrous world.

¹³⁸ Aug. *civ.* 16, 8; Plin. *nat.* 7,76.

¹³⁹ Artem. *On.* 3,47. He mentions scabies and elephantiasis.

¹⁴⁰ Sen. *contr.* 10,4; Johannes Chrysostomus, *Hom. in Ep. I ad Cor.* 21, 5 (PG 61, 176–179). On comparative evidence from other regions, see Parkin (2006) 71–72. In Sen. *contr.* 10,4,19 it is explicitly stated that these children receive alms because they are disabled.

¹⁴¹ Johannes Chrysostomus, *Hom. in Joh.* 35,2 (PG 59,201) on sick children; *Hom. in Genes.* 38,2 (PG 53,354) on the Canaanite woman. On these passages, see Leyerle (1999) 247–248. On pain and sorrow for a mentally retarded son, see also Aug. *pecc. mer.* 1,35,66 (PL 44, 148): *et si suum parvulum filium, a quo garriente talia pater laetus exspectat et provocat, talem praesciret futurum esse cum creverit, nullo modo dubitaret miserabilius lugendum esse quam mortuum.*

was good material for jokes, just as long as one knew the limits.¹⁴² At least in two instances, disabled children seem to have been involved. When the respectable consular M. Servilius Pulex Geminus was invited by the artist L. Mallius and saw his host's ugly or deformed sons (*filios deformes*), he remarked that Mallius' art of creating was not matched by his art of painting. At which Mallius jocularly replied: "I procreate in darkness, I paint in the light."¹⁴³ Also the Roman epigrammatist Martial was notorious for ridiculing his contemporaries, both the rich and the poor. His collection includes a wide range of harsh satirical invective, ranging from effeminate aristocrats, to those breathing foul smells or suffering from skin disease, the crippled and the lame, dwarfs or the extraordinarily proportioned, yes even a slave whose description closely matches with what doctors nowadays call the fragile-X-syndrome: a disability characterised by a long and narrow face, big ears, unusually developed testicles, fear of making eye contact and mental retardation.¹⁴⁴ The mocking attitude towards physical deformity also occurs in an every day life example in the apocryphal Acts of Philipppus. Nicoclidēs' daughter was being scoffed at because of a stroke or a scar on her eye: her compeer friends laughed at it, she felt ashamed and could not stand the insults anymore.¹⁴⁵ Deriding a child with severe birth defects is also attested with Gregory of Tours, mentioning a baby "viewed by most people with derision". The child was raised by his mother and then exhibited as a freak by traveling merchants.¹⁴⁶

Some passages point to the habit of throwing stones at people showing off signs of mental disability. Though scholars have pointed to the possible therapeutic meaning of this gesture, as well as its ritual signification, one needs to bear in mind the degrading effect this should have had on every victim of this treatment, children included. Moreover, it points to a crude way of dealing with such people in society,¹⁴⁷ an attitude which seems to have lasted well into Christian times. Indeed, a remarkable passage in Augustine mentions a mentally

¹⁴² Cic. *orat.* 2,236; 239. See Garland (1995) 73–86 for an excellent chapter on 'deriding the disabled'.

¹⁴³ Macr. *Sat.* 2,2,10.

¹⁴⁴ The boy is said to be the son of the cretin slave (*morio*) Cyrta. See Mart. 6,39,15–17. See Gevaert (2002) 103–104 on the boy suffering from fragile-X-syndrome. Gevaert (forthcoming) deals with the evidence on disabled people in Martial's epigrams.

¹⁴⁵ *Acta Philippi* 4, 4–6.

¹⁴⁶ Greg. Tur. *Mart.* 2,24 (MGH SS RR MM 1, p. 617).

¹⁴⁷ Throwing stones at mentally disabled: Ar. *Av.* 521–525; Plaut. *Poen.* 295. See Grassl (1988 b) 112 on therapeutics and ritual.

disabled Christian, who patiently stood up to the degrading and mocking treatment of his fellow citizens, but did not hesitate to throw stones, even at worthy gentlemen who dared to blaspheme against the name of Christ. I suggest we should consider the throwing of the stones as a reversal of the treatment the poor man himself had often endured.¹⁴⁸ In the same context, we read about ancient people spitting at the lame or at epileptics they came across on the streets, in order to avert contamination or bewitching.¹⁴⁹ Greek texts have also pointed to the custom of using the lame or the crippled as scapegoats, a symbolic act performed in times of crisis, which implied chasing these people out of the town, in extreme cases even killing them. In this context, no deformed children are mentioned.¹⁵⁰

7. Conclusion

In this study, I have tried to gather as much information as possible on the life and faith of disabled children in the Roman Empire. The use of various source evidence has pointed to a society in which a considerable amount of babies born with a disability would not have lived for many days, not only because of the widespread practice of child abandonment or infanticide, but also because the survival rate among persons suffering from serious impairments in childhood was considerably less than it is today (as for instance most of the infants with cleft palate would have died in their first week because of their inability to suck at the breast).¹⁵¹ At the same time, literary as well as epigraphical and papyrological evidence has showed how impaired children survived, and how different social classes tried to cope with the situation. In fact, this collection of sources has revealed a much wider collection concerning daily life situations than has been offered before.

Concluding this article but at the same time looking ahead to further research, I want to stress three particular points.

¹⁴⁸ Aug. *pecc. mer.* 1,22,32 (PL 44,127–128).

¹⁴⁹ Plin. *nat.* 28,3. See De Libero (2001) 90.

¹⁵⁰ See den Boer (1977) 129; Garland (1995) 23–26. Killing only in Philostr. *VA* 4,10.

¹⁵¹ Garland (1995) 6–7. An obvious example would be Edwards syndrome (trisomy 18), medium life span is nowadays between five and fifteen days, with 95 % of the babies dying in utero.

Firstly, the terms handicapped or disabled appear as inadequate but at the same time indispensable research terms for ancient Antiquity. Inadequate, because they essentially reflect modern concepts which are largely inapplicable to ancient thought (the same counts for a term as homosexuality). At the same time, handling other definitions as 'not able to meet basic social expectations' would result in defining infertile women in Antiquity as more 'disabled' than for instance deaf people who managed to till the soil and performed other agricultural activities. At the same time such broad and open definitions risk to include that many categories as to become unrecognisable as disabilities to modern readers and unmanageable to researchers.

Secondly, the cited examples throughout this article strongly suggest that a vast and yet unexploited goldmine for ancient disability history lies in Christian sources from late Antiquity up to the early Middle Ages.¹⁵² Those include fascinating statements which seem to be drawn directly from daily life, as the statement by Gregory of Tours who indicated, in the case of a Frankish mother having a severely deformed child, that it was inconceivable that mothers should kill even deformed children.¹⁵³ Obviously, the conclusion that Christianity was a significant factor of change for the fate of disabled children would require extensive further research. That would consist of reading through a significant corpus of hagiographic stories where healing miracles play a part (research which should take into account geographical as well as chronological factors and tendencies), through various edicts of canonical law in various regions, not to mention confessionaries or other regulations. Promising studies on the birth of the hospital and the institution of child welfare should be approached from the angle of disability history.¹⁵⁴

Finally, the issue of disabled children is a subject *par excellence* in which anthropological and cross-cultural comparison is badly needed, to the point of being indispensable. In the light of extending Antiquity till about the year 800 CE, information on concepts and treatment of disabled children in Judaism, Islam and Persian religion should at least be taken into account. Research should also be attentive to those things which are not said, but tacitly implied. If Claudius had not made it to emperor, we would perhaps never have heard about his disability. He would have showed up only by his name in honorary

¹⁵² Note that some demarcations of Antiquity tend to draw the line at circa 800 AD. See for instance Brown (1971).

¹⁵³ Greg. Tur. *Mart.* 2,23 (MGH SS RR MM. 1, p. 617). See Boswell (1988) 212.

¹⁵⁴ Miller (2003).

inscriptions or in an occasional literary reference, and would have found his way into aristocratic society. Or, on the lower scale of society, we should take into account the disabled who lived in the villages, but whose presence was somewhat hidden by their relatives who nevertheless looked after them. Certainly in the case of difficult decision making as getting rid of such children, researchers should take into account silence, as those were decisions which were preferably not discussed upon openly. So, in the case of ancient disability history, the *argumentum e silentio* by and then turns out to be a valid one.

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