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Disability in the Medieval Nordic World: Foreword

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Content warning: Representations and terminology relating to disability in medieval Nordic language sources present certain challenges to modern scholars who wish to avoid perpetuating ableist thinking and causing unnecessary offense. Because these representations and terms often carry pejorative connotations, the use of outdated and often derogatory modern language or the reinforcement of damaging stereotypes is sometimes unavoidable. The contributors to this special issue have endeavoured to refrain from using such language or to reinforce such stereotypes when there is no need to emphasize the ableist, derogatory, and/or offensive aspects of their respective source materials. The overall intention is to avoid presenting the medieval Nordic world or certain aspects of it as any more or less accommodating of mental, physical, and sensory differences than it actually was as reflected in both the language medieval Nordic people used and the cultural ideas and images they produced.

The last two decades have seen growing scholarly interest in the complexities of how physical, mental, and sensory differences were variously experienced, communicated, represented, and interpreted during the Middle Ages. The ground-breaking work of Irina Metzler and that of a number of other scholars, including Alice Sheppard, Cordula Nolte, Joshua R. Eyler, Kristina Richardson, Edward Wheatley, and Tory V. Pearman, to name just a few, helped to establish the foundations for the now-flourishing field of medieval disability studies. By adopting a disability studies approach, scholars in this field have fundamentally challenged the idea that embodied differences must be viewed through a strictly or even predominantly biomedical lens informed by medieval as well as modern scientific knowledge; that is, as individual deficits requiring some kind of medical intervention and to which modern scholars can apply retrospective diagnoses based on modern medical knowledge. Simultaneously, scholars in this field do not take for granted the idea that cruelty and/or severe social exclusion were the only and inevitable responses to such differences in the Middle Ages. Thus, they challenge one of the more pervasive ways the modern period has sought to distinguish and elevate itself above the supposed ignorant, cruel, and miserable medieval past of the popular imagination by emphasizing the diversity of attitudes, experiences, representations, and interpretations of physical, mental, and sensory differences present during the Middle Ages.

Reverberations of this wider trend have affected the increasing scholarly focus on disability in the medieval Nordic world in recent years. However, it should be noted that the important and influential research conducted by Edna Edith Sayers (published and referenced as Lois Bragg throughout this special issue), as well as that of Annette Lassen, on disability in Old Norse-Icelandic literature and mythology largely predates the surge of interest in medieval disability referred to above.

Written sources of various kinds surviving from medieval Iceland, which were the basis of Sayers's work, have continued to play a predominant role in the study of disability in the medieval Nordic world due to their relative abundance, which is also reflected in this special issue. Yet, written sources from other areas have also proven valuable along with insights gained using archaeological evidence and material culture from across the Nordic region. Across the Middle Ages, religious beliefs, communities, and practices both broadly construed and localized played a prominent role in how embodied differences were experienced, communicated, represented, and interpreted. The same is true for the medieval Nordic world, but it remains crucial also to grasp the impact of secular cultural traditions and other structures of social organization, some perhaps distinctive to this area. These complementary concerns provide much of the framework for the investigations of disability in the medieval Nordic world that follow.

This special issue of *Mirator* consists of six peer-reviewed articles. Though sharing a general disability studies approach, the contributors do not necessarily share a particular conceptual model of disability in their research. Naturally, dealing with modern concepts, such as disability, for which there were no equivalent catch-all terms in medieval Nordic languages raises important questions of interpretation that each of the contributors addressed in their own ways in relation to their respective source materials. Of course, there remain significant and productive similarities and differences in the how the contributors responded to these questions in their research. Overall, rather than seeking to arrive at a single broadly applicable or comprehensive definition of disability, the special issue presents some aspects of the ways embodied differences were accepted, accommodated, ignored, marginalized, normalized, and/or stigmatized in different cultural and social contexts across the medieval Nordic world. This frequently includes the role played by authoritative power and politics in either erecting or dismantling disabling barriers for both individuals and groups. In addition, beyond the diverse and valuable insights they offer, the contributions in this special issue also indicate many fruitful avenues for future research on disability in the medieval Nordic world and across the Middle Ages more broadly.

The special issue begins with Sharon Choe's article on the god Hǫðr and the role of his blindness within Norse eschatology. Hǫðr's blindness is both a defining and an inconsistent feature of his depiction across the surviving written sources, which include eddic and skaldic poetry, the works of both the Icelandic historian, mythographer, poet, and politician Snorri Sturluson, and Danish theologian and author Saxo Grammaticus. Yet, rather than arbitrary inconsistency, the volatile treatment of Hǫðr's blindness across these sources represents the conflation, contradiction, and combination of Christianity and traditional beliefs in the post-conversion Nordic world. The changing religious landscape of the medieval Nordic world, similarly, features in Meg Morrow's article, which concerns the intersection of disability, masculinity, and Christianity in *Brennu-Njáls saga*. The titular Njáll Þorgeirsson's beardlessness frequently overshadows his preternatural legal and religious knowledge in the narrative, manifesting as a flaw that symbolizes his inability to look the part and perform certain kinds of actions that are inherently masculine in medieval saga society. This study also emphasizes the need to avoid teleological thinking when conceptualizing disability in the past when embodied differences that may not presently be thought of as disabilities would have resulted in the construction of genuine disabling barriers in certain sociocultural and historical

contexts.

The next two articles focus on physical injuries and/or impairments resulting from either violent conflict or judicial corporal punishment. Christine Ekholst analyzes legal provisions that enumerate various types of injuries and wounds in a variety of medieval Swedish law codes to gain insight toward views of impairment and disability in medieval Sweden. These laws depict a measurable and fragmented body, one that is divided into parts that all carried different meanings and also had specific values attached to them. Thus, legal texts provide a remarkable window into how medieval Swedish people thought about embodied differences and suggest an awareness that a person who had been impaired was restricted from participating in different aspects of normal life. Sean Lawing also refers to a variety of medieval Nordic law codes in conjunction with the medieval Icelandic *Sturlunga saga* to examine how permanent injuries may have disrupted ideas about bodily wholeness or integrity in this context. Close readings of two episodes from the saga spur the question of whether sensibilities in medieval Nordic society accord it better to die than to be maimed. The answer to this question is not a simple one and, it seems, depended not only upon personal perspective but also upon the rank and status of the victim.

The final two articles in the special issue attend to intellectual disabilities and mental illnesses. Judith Higman explores the language and representation of intellectual disabilities using case studies from various Old Norse-Icelandic sagas and shorter narrative episodes commonly referred to as *þættir*. Here, law codes also provide comparative material that reveal the similarities and differences between legal and narrative representations of intellectually impaired people and the basis on which they are identified as such by others. The limitations placed on intellectually impaired people are often clearly drawn, but narrative sources frequently also suggest that intellectual abilities can change over time and that intellectual impairment cannot be narrowed down to a single act of categorisation. Finally, Ármann Jakobsson and I investigate the representation of mental illnesses in the context of Norway's medieval royal court using the kings' saga *Morkinskinna*. The text naturally applies its own contemporaneous terminology that demands close scrutiny, but greater focus is placed upon the responses mental illnesses elicit in this context, which include curiosity, incomprehension, fear, hopelessness, sorrow, sensitivity, attentiveness, compassion, and successful or unsuccessful attempts at treatment. Overall, the narrative seems to invoke mental illnesses to advance certain of its broader interests concerning the roles, duties, and the relationship between medieval Norwegian kings and their subjects.

This special issue originates in the interdisciplinary research project 'Disability before disability' (Icel. *Fötlun fyrir tíma fötlunar*), which is situated at the University of Iceland's Centre for Disability Studies. The project was supported by the Icelandic Research Fund (Icel. *Rannsóknasjóður*), Grant of Excellence No. 173655–051 from 2017 to 2020. I wish to thank the project's principal investigator Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir and project manager Anna Wojtynska for their support and also to acknowledge Anna Katharina Heiniger's contributions at the planning stages of this special issue. My thanks are also due to *Mirator's* editor Jenni Kuuliala, Hee-Jung Serenity Joo and Sabrina Sethi, director and former assistant to the director at the University of Manitoba's Institute for the Humanities, respectively, and both the peer reviewers and the contributors to the special issue for sticking with the project through a very challenging year.