
SESSION Protection, Autonomy and Emancipation. The Counterpoint of Medieval Studies on Disability

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Résumé

As in several disciplines of humanities and social sciences, disability became of interest to historians during the 1980s, a time of great development in the disability rights movement(1). Historians joined activists and other academics to raise public awareness and influence government policies and started to study the living conditions of disabled people in the past to put into perspective contemporary institutions and attitudes(2). For some time, they focused more on modern and contemporary societies, times in which specialised institutions existed and whose sources contain more testimonies of disabled people(3). Studies on disability in the Middle Ages began to multiply during the 2000s. The work of many medievalists from different disciplines (history, art history, legal history, literature, and archaeology) explored various approaches and methods of analysis and participated in the progressive theorisation of medieval disability(4). Through the study of an increasing diversity of textual, iconographic, and material sources, social and cultural factors that contributed to the living experiences of medieval disabled people are gradually brought to light(5).

During this session, we would like to present several ways in which medievalists can appropriate the constructivist model of disability developed by Disability Studies to demonstrate how the lived experiences of disabled people evolve throughout history. We would also like to show how reflections and debates of our contemporary societies on the questions of autonomy, protection, and emancipation can influence the way we question our sources, whether we use these notions or others more appropriate for this time period, or the documentation we use. Those four communications would also be an opportunity to offer a nuanced vision of the living conditions of disabled people in the Middle Ages, in a society where their institution-alisation is still rare and where they are often thought of as systematically poor and excluded.

This session will defend the legitimacy and interest of medieval studies to highlight the variation of the dynamics between the forms of protection and the practices of autonomy and emancipation of disabled people throughout history (axe 2). The counterpoint of medieval studies allows us to dispassionately consider the terms of the contemporary debate on disability and to test their historicity. In this way, the decentering that we propose allows us to put contemporary concepts into perspective in order to better understand them. This session of medievalists is an opportunity to explore other ways of conceiving the dynamics

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between protection, autonomy, and emancipation.

This session will rely on a vast panel of medieval documentation: practical testimonies of institutional life and administrative practices, miracle stories, disabled people's art productions, and legislative documents from civil and ecclesiastical law. Each contribution will focus on one or several types of "disability" (physical impairments, leprosy, deafness, hand mutilation), understood as the social consequences of impairment. Individually, those talks will show that disabled people existed during medieval times, that they were globally protected but still were capable of agency in many (framed) ways in their society.

(1) Stiker H.-J., Ravaud J.-F. and Albrecht G. L., " L'émergence des disability studies: état des lieux et perspectives ", *Sciences sociales et santé*, 19-4 (2001), pp. 43-73.

(2) Dubourg N., "handicap", Menestrel (online), May 2020 ; Turner W. J., " Models of Disability : Connecting the Past to the Present ", *Zeitschrift für Disability Studies*, 1 (2022), pp. 1-18 (online).

(3) Nolte C. (ed.), *Homo debilis: Behinderte, Kranke, Versehrte in der Gesellschaft des Mittelalters*, Korb, 2009.

(4) Nolte C., Frohne B., Halle U. and Kerth S. (eds.), *Premodern Dis/ability History. A Companion*, Affalterbach, 2017, pp. 272-273.

(5) Hsy J., Pearman T. V., Eyler J. R. (eds.), *A Cultural History of Disability in the Middle Ages*, Bloomsbury, 2020.