

Introductory Remarks

Disability History

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ABSTRACT: This introduction lays out the theoretical background underlying this special issue of *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies*, as well as introducing the following articles. This special issue is the direct result of a session entitled “Medieval disability studies: challenges and commonalities,” which was organized by co-editor Yoav Tirosh and Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir at the sixteenth research conference of the Nordic Network on Disability Research held in Reykjavík, Iceland, in May 2023. We hope that this contribution to the study of disability history will add interesting approaches and case studies to this ever-widening field.

RÉSUMÉ: Cette introduction présente le contexte théorique qui sous-tend ce numéro spécial d'*Études scandinaves au Canada/Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* et introduit les articles qui y sont publiés. Ce numéro spécial est le résultat direct d'une session intitulée « Études médiévales sur le handicap : défis et points communs », organisée par les coéditeurs Yoav Tirosh et Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir lors de la seizième conférence de recherche du Réseau nordique de recherche sur le handicap (Nordic Network on Disability Research), qui s'est tenue à Reykjavík en Islande en mai 2023. Nous espérons que cette contribution à l'étude de l'histoire du handicap apportera des approches et des études de cas intéressantes à ce domaine en constante expansion.

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his special issue arose from a session entitled “Medieval disability studies: challenges and commonalities” organised by co-editor Yoav Tirosh and Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir at the sixteenth research conference of the Nordic Network on Disability Research (NNDR) held in Reykjavík, Iceland, in May 2023. The session was one of many on disability in history and culture, which saw researchers from a range of disciplines presenting on lived experiences and cultural representations of disability and impairment found in sources originating from the medieval times to the present day. We were excited to have the opportunity to continue to develop this conversation through the publication of this special edition. We are particularly appreciative of the guidance and support lent to us throughout this process by outgoing journal editor Natalie Van Deusen.

Some of the authors of this special edition presented alongside us at NNDR in Reykjavík, while others answered a call for papers and individual invitations. Among the presenters at NNDR 2023 were a number of scholars and graduate students—the present editors included—who had been involved with the interdisciplinary project “Disability before Disability,” funded by the Icelandic Research Fund and led by Dr. Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir at the University of Iceland from 2017 to 2020. “Disability before Disability” brought together researchers from Disability Studies, History, Archaeology, Medieval Icelandic literature, Folklore and Ethnology, Museum Studies, and Archival Science to explore constructions of disability in Iceland before the establishment of disability as a modern legal, bureaucratic, and administrative concept (Crocker et al.). Among the results of this project was the book *Understanding Disability Throughout History: Interdisciplinary Perspectives in Iceland from Settlement to 1936*, edited by Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir and James Gordon Rice. The Centre for Disability Studies at the University of Iceland continues promoting interdisciplinary work between students of Humanities and Social Sciences, for example through Stefan Celine Hardonk and Yoav Tirosh’s ongoing project on the history of deafness in Iceland (Hardonk and Tirosh). We, the editors of this special issue, are indebted to Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir and James Gordon Rice for the valuable experience that they have given us as participants in “Disability before Disability.” We were delighted when they agreed to write a foreword to this volume.

In their foreword, Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir and James Gordon Rice highlight that disability is an integral part of the human condition. Disability studies and disability history’s relevance to all of society is an important quality of this research. In 1989, Irving K. Zola encouraged a societal perception of the needs and abilities of people as constantly changing (410). A model of personhood which presumes that people be normative, able-bodied, non-dependent wage earners is something that describes only a portion of the normal human life cycle at best, as Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp would later

argue (198). Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell touch upon the universal importance of challenging the devaluation of disabled bodies, writing that it places in jeopardy “all bodies that exist within proximity to ‘deviance,’” qualifying that, ultimately, no body escapes this relation (2006, 18). A recognition of the near universality of disability should, Zola wrote, be accompanied by an acknowledgement that all of its dimensions, including the biomedical, are part of the social process by which the meanings of disability are negotiated (420). Building on an understanding of disability as a social process of universal relevance, Lennard Davis describes it as:

not a minor issue that relates to a relatively small number of unfortunate people; it is part of a historically constructed discourse, an ideology of thinking about the body under certain historical circumstances. Disability is not an object—a woman with a cane—but a social process that intimately involves everyone who has a body and lives in the world of the senses. (2)

The role played by historical circumstances that Davis touches upon here is something of particular significance to this special issue. The articles published will show that ideas about disability, as well as lived experiences of disability and impairment, can be subject to environmental, cultural, and historical variation. As Snyder and Mitchell point out, bodies, too, change over time, both individually and historically (2013, 230). Inquiry into historical experiences of disability is important, as it can destabilize our dominant ways of knowing disability (Snyder and Mitchell 2006, 17). From the outset, the academic field of disability studies has greatly enriched research across many disciplines on historical accounts of disability and impairment. It is important—emphasized by Joshua Eyler in the introduction to the edited volume *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations*—that any new theoretical framework for understanding medieval disabilities should be built from the roots of modern disability studies (4). From its inception, academics within disability studies have widened understandings of the cultural and social factors which influence experiences and conceptions of disability. As Simi Linton (2) writes, the field has reframed disability as a designation having primarily social and political significance.

The early work of UK disability studies academics initially built upon an understanding of disability with roots in disability activism of the 1970s and 1980s. This model of understanding disability—known as the social creationist model, the British social model, or the “strong social model”—distinguished itself from the medical and biological understandings of disability that had been influential in academia, medicine, and social care. Inspired by the work of activist groups such as The Union of the Physically Impaired Against

Segregation (UPIAS), early proponents of the British social model of disability drew a distinction between “disability” and “impairment.” In 1975, UPIAS had described disability as “something imposed on top of our impairments, by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society” (cited in Shakespeare 2013, 215). Oliver (11) writes that whereas previous definitions of disability were “ultimately reducible to the individual and attributable to biological pathology,” the distinction made between disability and impairment as it is set out by UPIAS “locates the causes of disability squarely within society and social organisation.” Tom Shakespeare (2013, 215) notes that other understandings of disability were nevertheless present in the early movement, but would not be as impactful in academic and activist spheres. As he summarises, the British social model of disability has been influential within academia, opening up new lines of enquiry such as discrimination, the relationship between disability and industrial capitalism, and cultural representations (Shakespeare 2014, 13, 49). It enabled the focus to be widened from studying individuals to exposing broader social and cultural processes. While the British model both preceded and influenced the US “cultural model,” the latter would go further in developing analysis of cultural imagery and language. Proponents of the US “cultural model,” such as Snyder and Mitchell (2006), have chosen to use the term “disability” in a different way from the proponents of the British social model. Drawing on earlier scholarship by Sally French and Linton, they describe disability as a “site of phenomenological value that is not purely synonymous with the processes of social disablement” (Snyder and Mitchell 2006, 20). They write that such an emphasis “does not hide the degree to which social obstacles and biological capacities may impinge upon our lives, but rather suggests that the result of those differences comes to bear significantly on the ways disabled people experience their environments and their bodies.” The definition of disability, they write, “must incorporate both the outer and inner reaches of culture and experience as a combination of profoundly social and biological sources.”

Historical investigations of disability have the potential not only to challenge our ways of knowing disability, but also our perceptions of the past (Metzler 2006, 9; Crocker, Tirosh and Jakobsson 12). Disability history, as Daniel Blackie and Alexia Moncrieff write, goes beyond simply lending intellectual support to the disability rights movement or “uncovering the hidden history of disabled people.” It also seeks to promote “a thorough reappraisal of history more generally—one that recognises the central role changing perceptions and experiences of bodily and cognitive difference have played in shaping all our shared pasts” (5).

In recent decades, especially since the 1980s and 1990s, researchers across diverse fields have drawn increasing attention to experiences of disability in the past, and the role it played in historical cultures and contexts (see e.g., Stiker;

Longmore). In the US in particular, early research on disability in history was connected to the disability civil rights and social justice movements of the preceding two decades (Kudlick 542–43). Although the early years of anglophone disability history research saw a focus on nineteenth- and twentieth-century America, scholars have since shown an increasing interest in embodied difference before 1800, and in other regions of the world (Blackie and Moncrieff 11). This can be seen in the context of a wider—and much welcome—development within disability studies whereby the field has spread beyond the UK, North America, and the Nordic countries (Ingstad and Whyte; Connell; Grech and Soldatic; Abay and Soldatic). The varied cross-cultural understandings that are being made available as a result of this expansion of the field provided some inspiration for the aforementioned “Disability before Disability” project (Sigurjónsdóttir and Rice 2022b, 2).

Within medieval studies, early work on disability includes Irina Metzler’s research on what she terms “physical impairment” in medieval Europe (2006; 2013) and Edward Wheatley’s research on blindness in medieval England and France (2005; 2010). Also noteworthy is Brendan Gleeson’s 1998 geographic study of disability, which includes analysis of the experience of disabled peasants in rural England during the Middle Ages. Metzler’s research in particular sought to disrupt the image of the European Middle Ages as the so-called “Dark Ages.” Responding to disability histories’ glancing over the period, she offered a robust selection of case studies and contemporary attitudes towards disability that did not play along with the stereotypical notion of long-lasting societal oppression. Metzler thus set the tone to what came later, although her adoption of the limiting social model has since been deprioritized. Applying concepts which have been conceived in a modern setting to historical material will always bring challenges, and this has been acknowledged by disability historians (Eyler 6; Turner 17). How scholars working with material from diverse historical societies apply ideas from modern disability studies is subject to much variation. Blackie and Moncrieff (3) posit that a broad commitment to a socio-cultural approach to bodily and cognitive non-normativity—rather than a strict adherence to any particular model—has underpinned disability history from its foundation. Some scholars dealing with medieval sources on disability, such as Metzler (2006) and Gleeson (20), have found it useful to retain the distinction between disability and impairment emphasized by disability scholars associated with the British social model, which has the benefits that it does not automatically assume that all medieval impaired people were treated as disabled by their contemporaries, and that it allows for a distinction between physical impairment and illness (Metzler 2006, 1). Eyler (8), meanwhile, has proposed removing the term “impairment” from the discussion and thinking instead of disability in the Middle Ages as something that is constructed by both embodied difference and social

perception. Also noteworthy is that there was no proper Old Norse word that could be translated as “disability,” with the word *ómagi*, for example, indicating a temporary or permanent inability to provide for oneself, in a manner that might include non-disabled widows who have not remarried but exclude blind heads of households (Crocker, Tirosh, and Ármann Jakobsson; Patzuk-Russell and Tirosh; Crocker).

In recent years, investigations into disability and impairment in sources from various historical periods have increased considerably (Blackie and Moncrieff). The past decade has seen the launch of book series on historical disability including the University of Illinois Press’ “Disability Histories,” Manchester University Press’ “Disability History,” and Bloomsbury’s series “A Cultural History of Disability.” As a bibliography compiled by Christopher Crocker demonstrates, the subject area of medieval Icelandic literature—which bears relevance to all the articles in this edition—has seen much fruitful discussion on the subject of disability over the past three decades.¹ Research on disability in medieval Icelandic literature from a disability studies perspective was initiated by Knut Brynhildsvoll (1993), Annette Lassen (2001; 2003), and notably Edna Edith Sayers (1994; 2001; 2004). Among recent publications on disability in the medieval North—with roots in the “Disability before Disability” project—is a 2021 special edition of the journal *Mirator*, edited by Christopher Crocker and including articles by Sharon Choe, Meg Morrow, Christine Ekholst, Sean Lawing, Judith Higman, and Crocker and Ármann Jakobsson. Further research has since been published on disability in religious medieval Icelandic texts (Patzuk-Russell and Tirosh; Van Deusen). Discussions about disability in historical sources are in a constant state of development, and we are aware that the articles published in the current special issue represent a part of a much wider discussion. As this issue was being compiled, we had the pleasure to be introduced to the work of researchers working with historical sources on disability across diverse disciplines and cultural contexts—some of whom presented their research at the History thematic stream of NNDR’s seventeenth research conference in Helsinki in May 2025. We express our gratitude to those who presented their work, and to Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir and Stefan Celine Hardonk for coordinating the stream with us.

This special issue contains six peer-reviewed articles, in which researchers present material from a diverse range of sources to shine light on both lived experience of impairment and disability, and cultural attitudes towards bodies presented as non-conforming. Just as the subject matter varies, there is also diversity in the ways in which ideas from disability studies have informed these research articles. Although there is substantial variation in the nature of the source material analysed by the authors of this special issue, all of these analyses make use of material from medieval Iceland. They draw upon sources such as human remains from archaeological excavations, Eddic poetry,

Icelandic family sagas [*Íslendingasögur*], kings' sagas [*konungasögur*], romance sagas [*riðdarasögur*], and *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*, a contemporary saga [*samtíðarsaga*] with overt hagiographic overtones (Van Deusen, this issue). Some studies, meanwhile, concern the effects of medieval source material on later narrative and literary culture.

Cecilia Collins' article, "Hearth and Home in Medieval Iceland: Understanding Chronic Respiratory Infection, Environment and the Vulnerable Child," reflects upon the prevalence of otitis media and sinusitis at four medieval Icelandic archaeological sites in the context of understanding the extent of resulting hearing loss in past communities. In "Is There a Doctor on Vopnafjord? Disability, Health, and Embodied Difference in *Vápnfirðinga saga*," Yoav Tirosh's study of the Icelandic family saga *Vápnfirðinga saga* approaches disability, health, and embodied difference as an organizing theme for the entire narrative. Expanding upon his previous work with Crocker on health in the sagas, Tirosh offers an analysis of this somewhat neglected text through the fruitful prism of embodied difference. Meg Morrow's article "Blautr erum bergis fótar borr': Disabled Masculinity and Irregular Phalli in the *Íslendingasögur*," contextualizes and examines descriptions of irregular male genitalia found in Icelandic family sagas *Brennu-Njáls saga*, *Grettis saga*, and *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*. Natalie Van Deusen's analysis of a contemporary saga in "Mental Distress and Pseudo-Hagiography in *Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*" discusses the text as a source for an understanding of psychological disability in medieval Iceland and argues that the saga's presentation of mental difference is an aspect in which it may be characterized as pseudo-hagiographic in nature. In "Little Glory Will It Bring You to Break My Short Bones': *Dvergar* and Dwarfism in Icelandic Medieval Narrative," Alice Bower contemplates the connections made between supernatural *dvergar* and humans with dwarfism in Icelandic narratives, and how these links developed over the medieval period and into the age of folklore collection. Sharon Choe's article, "The Politics of Sacrifice: Liberation, Deformity, and Odin in The Book of Ahania," considers representations of the body in the illuminated books of the artist-engraver and poet William Blake, with consideration to the influence of the Edda in Blake's syncretic worldview and practice. In particular, the central sacrifice scene is re-contextualized within eighteenth-century Northern antiquarianism.

In addition to these research articles, this special issue also features both a foreword by Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir and James Gordon Rice and a piece that we requested from independent scholar Sebastian Thoma. We hope that these pieces can offer yet further levels of context to this special issue, with clear relevance to a contemporary readership. Drawing on his own experience, Thoma provides an overview of the challenges that people with hearing loss can face in an academic environment, and proceeds to discuss what can be done to make courses, conferences, and scholarly work more inclusive of Deaf and hard-

of-hearing people. We had asked Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir and James Gordon Rice, both of whom have had a profound influence on our personal careers and on the broader research of disability studies in Iceland, to author their foreword to highlight the need for further collaboration between the sometimes walled off fields of Social Sciences and the Humanities.

It is our hope that this special issue will add to the body of theoretical and case study observations available to those wishing to study disability in medieval times and medievalism. Moreover, we believe that scholarship on disability—in past as well as present contexts—can be a valuable contribution to societal discourse beyond academia. Critical disability studies, which has informed the research published in this issue, cannot be conceived as an academic exercise without political commitment (Goodley 192). Critical disability studies perspectives are relevant to our modern political climate, with recent research drawing attention to the impact of ableist ideas and language on political discourse, both in the US and further afield (Harnish; Goodley and Lawthom). As the medieval Norse world continues to play a role in right-wing extremist discourse (Kaplan; Höfig; Van Nahl), it is imperative that academic research on these sources continues to bring into focus the diversity of human experience to which they attest.

NOTES

1. The bibliography can be found at <https://cwecrocker.com/bibliography-of-disability-studies-and-the-medieval-icelandic-sagas/>.

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