

DISABLED LEADERS

Part One: 34,000 BC to 1185 AD



Disability Action Research Collective

Featuring work by Alexandra Morris, Richard
Amm, Maria Lightwood & Kyle Lewis Jordan

Disabled people have not always existed at the bottom of society. When the histories of people with power are recounted, disability is often excluded to avoid tarnishing their reputations. This widespread and harmful practice strips away the full humanity of these figures and reinforces disability as a stigmatising characteristic. Disability was a lot more widespread in the past but was likely significantly less stigmatising than it is under modern capitalism, where productive capacity is directly linked to individual personhood, belonging, inclusion, respect and value.

There are many historical examples of societies where disabled people were less stigmatised or excluded as they are today. There is good evidence of disability inclusion in hunter gatherer groups as well as empires that lasted for thousands of years like the Ancient Egyptians. One striking example is from 900 AD, translated from the Old Norse of stanza 71 of the *Hávamál*: “The lame can ride on horseback, the one-handed drive cattle; the deaf fight bravely: It is better to be blind than in a funeral pyre, dead men do no deeds”

Rulers are a relatively modern phenomenon. Humans have only been doing agriculture for the last 13,000 years, which was critical for the development of early states and the rise of hierarchical social systems. But humans lived as hunter gatherers for the last 300,000 years, and some still do. These societies can be very different in their leadership structures, but evidence suggests many are highly egalitarian and non-hierarchical most of the time. Some early urban societies, like the Indus, currently do not have clear archaeological evidence of inequality or hierarchy. Hierarchy is no more natural or innate to humanity than the lack of it.

This zine does not in any way condone the actions of leaders, or the systems they maintained. The hierarchical power structures that they led were often built and maintained through coercion, exploitation, violence and bloodshed. Even if a leader could be considered morally good, the system they maintained and which required rulers was likely morally unjustifiable. This zine also has a gender bias because of the sexist nature of many societies, and an eurocentric bias reflecting the expertise of our current membership and existing scholarship.

The Sungir burials (c. 34,000 BC) in Russia present us with the graves of two young children, 10 and 12 years old. They both had physical disabilities, one had bent and shortened thighbones which would have left them almost entirely bedridden, and yet they survived multiple years. The one boy's teeth show no wear indicating that somebody was feeding him exclusively on soft or pre-chewed foods, which indicated that he received long term care from those around him. The graves were lavishly adorned, including mammoth ivory beads, pierced fox teeth, armbands and spears. People with disabilities in this period are common in the burial record, with those who have developmental disabilities or physical abnormalities making up a third of all well-preserved burials.

The Bad Dürrenberg shaman (c. 7000 BC) was a woman found in a grave in modern day Germany whose unusual sensory experiences are thought to have made her a spiritual leader. Her bones show that she was 30 years old, was weaker than average for the time, and spent a lot of time kneeling. She had malformed vertebrae that would have caused a neurological condition involving abnormal sensations and uncoordinated movement. The grave is unusual because of the large number of grave goods including animal teeth necklaces, blades and axes. A deer antler headdress was buried near her 600 years later, indicating she was remembered long after her death.



Dhritarashtra the Blind King (c.3000 BC) was a legendary ruler from the Mahābhārata, born blind and denied the throne due to his disability. Instead, he ruled the Kuru kingdom during the epic's great war. He relied on his charioteer Sanjaya for battlefield vision.

His wife blindfolded herself for life in solidarity to experience his blindness with him and they had many children. He was often torn between being a King and a father, overlooking his son's misdeeds that drew them into warfare and led to their deaths. In his final years he withdrew to a forest to meditate and was killed in a forest fire. "Desire destroys the soul of the wise, as the moth rushes into the flame."



Seneb (ancient Egyptian for “Healthy”) (c.2520 BC) was a man with dwarfism who lived during the Old Kingdom period in ancient Egypt. His tomb stands in the Royal Necropolis of Giza close to the Pyramids, and while his body was lost and most contents looted long ago, the inscriptions from his false door and statue tell us a few things about his life.

He held many ceremonial titles such as Holder of the King’s Linen and Overseer of the Sacred Barque as well as serving as a Priest of Wadjet. He had three children with his wife Senitites, a Priestess of Hathor and Neith. His inscriptions tell us he participated in the funeral procession of the Pharaoh Khufu, and that he owned “several thousand herds of cattle”. He was undoubtedly a man of great importance.



Hatshepsut (c.1479 BC) is perhaps one of the best known female pharaohs of ancient Egypt. She ushered in an age of economic growth, peace, and prosperity for Egypt under her rule after originally ruling as a regent for her stepson Thutmose III when he was a child, before assuming the full title of pharaoh, she reigned for 22 years. She was typically depicted wearing male kingly regalia fitting of her position as pharaoh.

She is believed to have had bone cancer, diabetes, and arthritis at the time of her death, based on examinations of remains that Egyptologists think are hers. She was a prolific builder, overseeing numerous construction projects that still stand today. Egyptologists consider her to be “the first great woman in history of whom we are informed.”



King Tutankhamun (c.1341-1323 BC) whose name means “living image of Amun” is perhaps the most famous figure from ancient Egypt due to his tomb being almost intact when discovered. He ascended the throne at eight years old and ruled for nine years (1332-1323 BC). He likely had multiple disabilities, including a clubfoot and a cleft palate. He also had twisted hips and various issues which may have resulted from genetic issues due to inbreeding. He was buried with multiple canes, some of which had handles modeled on rival heads of state. He reversed many of his father’s changes during his reign, reestablishing the prominence of the god Amun, moving the capital back to Memphis and restoring traditional polytheistic worship. Like all other pharaohs, he was worshiped as a living god during his lifetime.



Moses (c.1290 BC) was a legendary figure in Abrahamic religions who was said to have led the Israelites out of Egypt to the promised land. In Exodus 4:10, his words “I am slow of speech and tongue.” have been interpreted as him having a speech impediment. Moses’s brother acted as an interpreter; “He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him.”

In the Midrashic tradition, Moses was said to have burned his tongue on hot coals as a child, during a test administered by the Pharaoh. After several plagues, the Israelites left Egypt and wandered through the desert for forty years. The Ten Commandments were given to Moses, and they formed the legal and moral basis of Israelite society and religion.



Prince Ramesses-Meryamun-Nebweben (c.1279-1213 BC) had a hunched back, a twisted spine and lived to be about 30. He spent most of his life in the harem palace of Merwer. He was the youngest son of Ramses II, but was not often mentioned in lists of his children. The only evidence came from inscriptions on his coffins.

His unusual shape meant he couldn't fit a standard coffin and so was buried in the unused outer coffin of when his great grandfather, Ramesses I, was a vizier. The name "Nebweben" translates to "lord of sunshine," which was more commonly used by high officials than the royal family.



Siptah (c.1191 BC) was a child pharaoh with a clubfoot who ruled for six years after ascending to the throne at age eleven (1193-1187 BC). His name means “Son of Ptah, Beloved of Ptah” and his throne name means “Beautiful for Re, Chosen by Re”. His left foot had contractions, which may have been due to poliomyelitis, but also possibly cerebral palsy.

He died young, around age sixteen. During his reign, Egypt was functionally in control of his stepmother Queen Twosret and Chancellor Bay also played a part in taking the throne. Siptah ruled at a politically complex time with many challenges.



Cambyses II (c.558-522 BC) was King of the Achemenid Empire, and the Persian conqueror of Ancient Egypt, bringing to an end thousands of years of Egyptian self-governance. He is described as being a cruel tyrant and a mad king. More specifically he is charged with looting temples, committing incest, defiling royal tombs, ridiculing ancient Egyptian gods, and killing the ancient Egyptians' sacred Apis bull.

There are claims that his behaviour was due to having epilepsy "the sacred disease." However it is unknown if this is negative propaganda by both the Egyptians and the Persian court who found him to be an unfavourable leader, or some semblance of the truth. Cambyses died under disputed circumstances in 522 BC when he left Egypt to put down a rebellion in Persia.



Triptolemus was a legendary ancient Greek hero who is said to be inventor and patron of agriculture. He is credited with being the first person to sow seeds for cultivation after being taught how by the goddess Demeter, and is also credited with using oxen and the plow.

He was considered one of the main gods worshipped in the Eleusinian Mysteries. He is usually shown as a young man, wearing a diadem, sitting in a winged chariot adorned by serpents. The chariot often bears a striking resemblance to a more modern looking wheelchair.



Gaius Mucius Scaevola (c.509 BC) was a Roman hero who became famous for his bravery. During a war with Clusium (the Etruscans), he was tasked by the Roman Senate with assassinating the Etruscan king Lars Porsena, but accidentally killed a scribe instead as they were dressed similarly to the king. He was captured and thrust his right hand into a sacred fire leaving it there until it had burned while not showing any pain stating, "Watch, so that you know how cheap the body is to men who have their eye on great glory". Shocked, the Etruscans let him go, and made peace with Rome. Through this act of bravery, Gaius earned himself the cognomen (last name) of Scaevola which means left-handed, in addition to being granted farming land on the bank of the Tiber river.

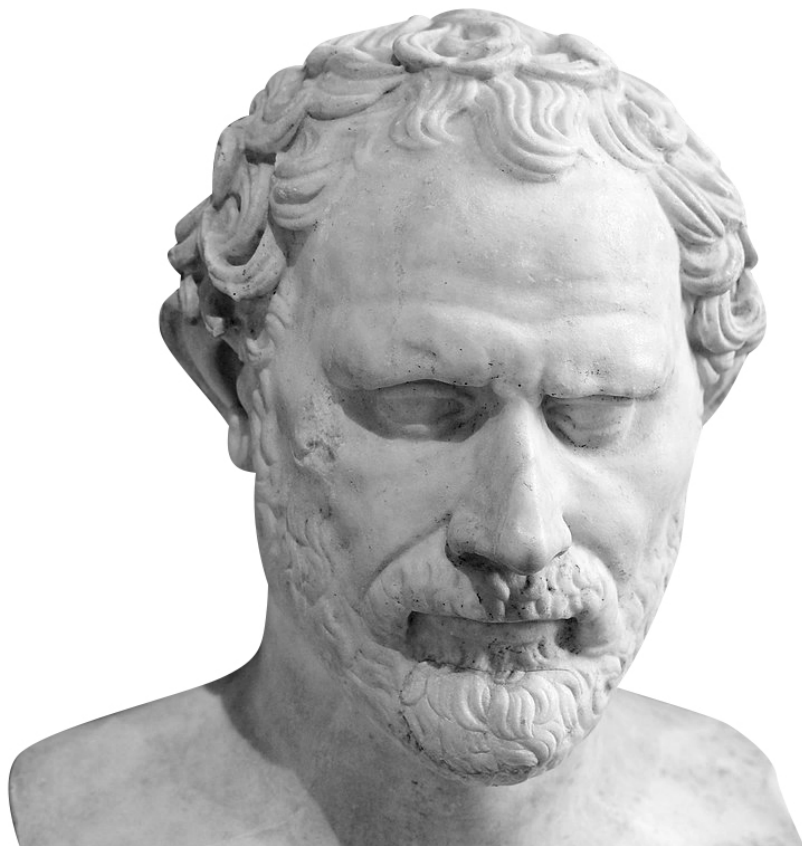


Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) conquered much of the known world before dying mysteriously at age 32. He may have had different disabling conditions, including skeletal neck malformations and chronic traumatic encephalopathy. He was wounded numerous times in battle, some of them disabling him for months, he viewed his war injuries as badges of honour, rather than ugly disfigurements. He had a physically disabled treasurer, and granted autonomy to a group of disabled war wounded men he encountered in Persia, which was the first time in history a group of disabled people were granted autonomy. He created a new elite political social class of disabled men by founding settlements composed of war wounded and impaired men from his army, who were essential at keeping the peace in his invasion strategy of the ancient Near East.



Agesilaus II (445-360 BC) was king of Sparta when it dominated in Greece. Agesilaus was born either lame or with a clubbed foot, and was not killed at birth, making us question the myths of Spartan infanticide. Furthermore, he became king over his nephew who was disqualified for potentially being a bastard, meaning that family lineage was seen as more disqualifying than having a physical disability.

He was the younger lover of the Spartan aristocrat and general Lysander for over 30 years, and married Kleora the daughter of an influential Spartan noble. Agesilaus II died at age 84 in Libya on his way home from providing military aid as the head of a mercenary force to King Nectanebo I of Egypt. "If all men were just there would be no need of valor."

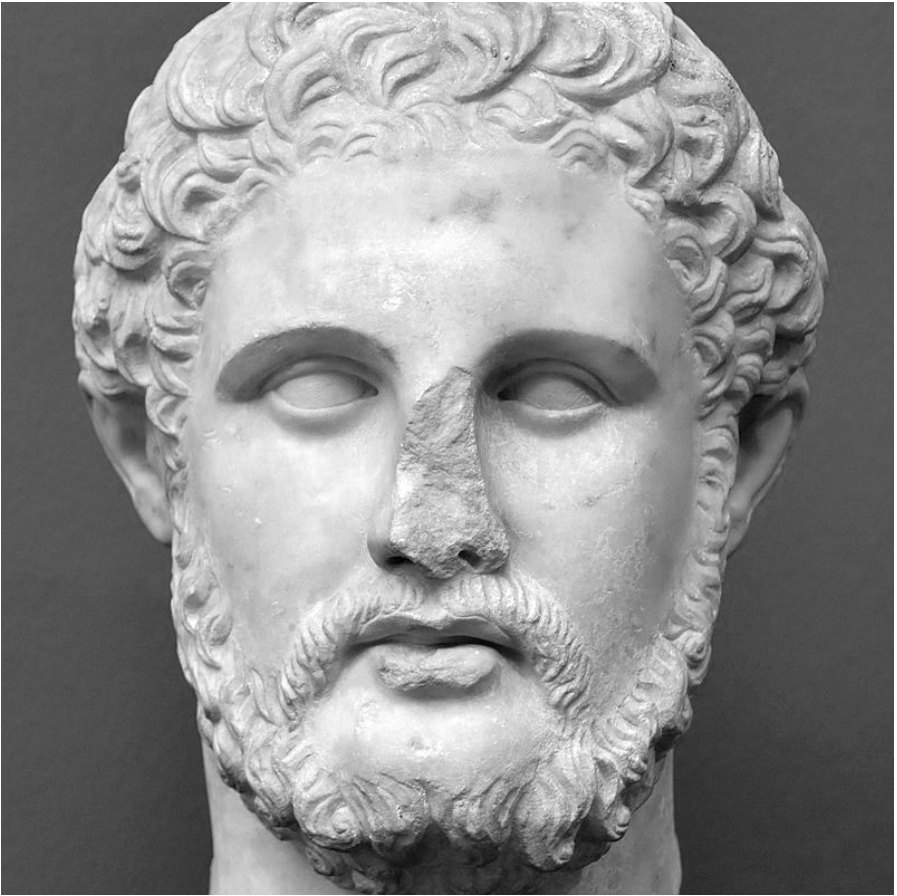


Demosthenes (384-322 BC) was an Athenian orator and politician who tried to rally Athens against both Philip II and Alexander the Great. He remained an antagonist of both for the duration of his life. Demosthenes is reported to have had a speech impediment as a young boy, which he worked to overcome, eventually becoming a famous orator and politician. He is also reported to have been sickly and weak as a child, earning him the nickname Batalus (a reference to an effeminate flute player, who had been publicly ridiculed at that time). One story is that Demosthenes practiced speaking with rocks in his mouth in what turned into a successful attempt to correct his speech. "The easiest thing in the world is self-deceit; for every man believes what he wishes, though the reality is often different."



Antigonos I Monophthalmos (382-301 BC) was one of the successors of Alexander the Great who controlled Greece, Asia Minor, Syria, Phoenicia, and northern Mesopotamia. He lost an eye in battle, and took the throne name Antigonos I Monophthalmus, which means Antigonos the One-Eyed, which suggests that he viewed it with some honour as a badge of war.

However he chose to conceal it in his official painting, with the Roman historian Pliny the Elder writing that the painter Apelles “devised an original method of concealing the defect, for he did the likeness in “three-quarter,” so that the feature that was lacking in the subject might be thought instead to be absent in the picture, and he only showed the part of the face which he was able to display as unmutated.”



Philip II (359-317 BC) conquered and united Greece and was the father of Alexander the Great. He was born with congenital hypoplasia, also sustained battle injuries to an eye, arm and leg resulting in permanent loss of functioning. We know from the ancient textual sources that Philip II was not comfortable with his disability, and would become enraged at the mere mention of his missing eye.

He had a custom set of greaves made to accommodate his impaired leg, and switched to fighting exclusively on horseback as part of the cavalry, as opposed to fighting on foot with the infantry after his leg injury. This too can be seen as societal accommodation for his impairments. “There is no wall that is high enough to stop a horse with a cart filled with gold.”



Philip III Arrhidaeus (357-317 BC) was a Macedonian king, and older half brother of Alexander the Great. He became co-regent of Alexander's empire with Alexander's infant son after Alexander's death in 323 BCE, ruling for 7 years. Arrhidaeus and his wife were assassinated by Alexander the Great's mother Olympias who saw them as political threats. Arrhidaeus is described in ancient sources as having an unspecified mental impairment that emerged in early childhood, with the ancient historian Plutarch suggesting that it was Olympias poisoning him that caused it. Modern historians have mostly ignored him in historical research as a result of his disability. However, the ancient sources seem to suggest that his family and the places he ruled granted him agency throughout his life, with him being depicted on coinage, and portraiture throughout the empire.

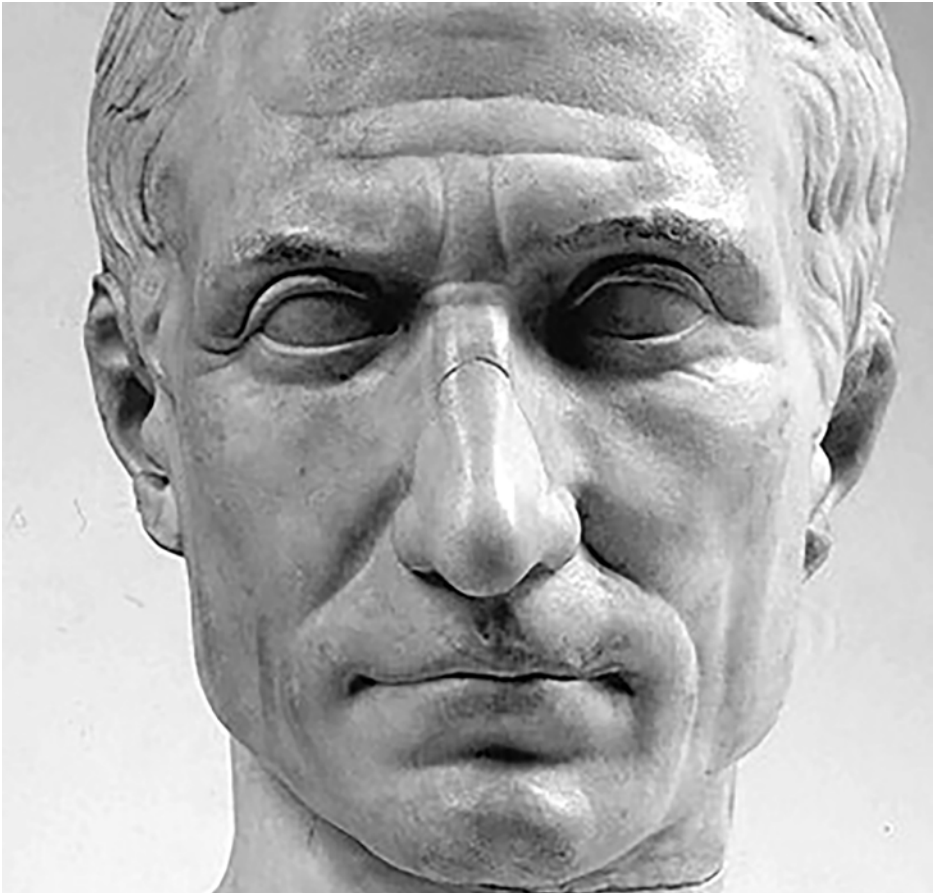


Prusias I Cholus (243-182 BC) was King of Bithynia, located in ancient northern Anatolia. According to the ancient historian Memnon in battle against the city of Cierus: “while climbing a ladder Prusias was hit by a stone which was thrown from the battlements. He broke his leg, and because of this injury the siege was lifted. The stricken king was carried away by the Bithynians in a litter, not without difficulty, and he returned to his own country, where he lived on for a few years before he died, being named (because of his injury) “the lame.”

Prusais incorporated the injury into his throne name. Cholus means “lame,” and on coin portraiture he emphasizes his military victories, perhaps suggesting that he viewed his impairment as a badge of war, rather than as something negative.



Marcus Sergius Silus (218-201 BC) was a Roman general who served during the Second Punic War. He lost his right hand in battle and had it replaced with an iron prosthetic that allowed him to hold his shield, making him the first textually documented prosthetic user in history. The Roman historian Pliny the Elder states, "Nobody - at least in my opinion - can rightly rank any man above Marcus Sergius...In his second campaign Sergius lost his right hand. In two campaigns he was wounded twenty-three times, with the result that he had no use in either hand or either foot: only his spirit remained intact. Although disabled, Sergius served in many subsequent campaigns...He fought four times with only his left hand, while two horses he was riding were stabbed beneath him...He had a right hand made of iron for him and, going into battle with this bound to his arm, raised the siege of Cremona, saved Placentia and captured twelve enemy camps in Gaul - all of which exploits were confirmed by the speech he made as praetor when his colleagues tried to debar him as infirm from the sacrifices."



Julius Caesar (100–44 BC) was a Roman general, statesman, and dictator, suspected of having epilepsy or mini-strokes as well as debilitating headaches. He conquered Gaul, which greatly expanded Roman territory. He started a civil war which he won, becoming Rome's most powerful ruler. He implemented many reforms, including debt relief and enlarging the senate. He revised the calendar to have 365 days and 12 months and a leap year, bringing it in line with the solar year. He was resented by many in the senate and so a group led by Brutus and Cassius assassinated Caesar by stabbing him. His assassination led to another civil war and the end of the Roman Republic. He once said "It is easier to find men who will volunteer to die, than to find those who are willing to endure pain with patience."



Amanirenas (60 BC-10 AD) was a Kushite queen who led her people into battle against the Romans multiple times, having lost her husband, and then her eye against them. Kush successfully captured two major Roman cities and defaced multiple statues of the Emperor Augustus. The Romans struck back, selling many of the Kushites into slavery, but Amanirenas and her people rallied, eventually securing permanent peace with Rome through a peace treaty. This treaty ceded land back to the Kushites, changed Rome's border, and exempted them from paying the Romans tribute. It remained in effect until the 3rd century AD. Ironically one of the best preserved statue heads of Augustus, the Meroë head, was buried in a Kushite temple designed to be under the feet of the ruler, to show Kush's superiority to Rome.



Claudius (10 BC-54 AD) was the first Roman Emperor to be born outside of Italy. He had cerebral palsy which impacted his mobility, hearing and speech. His impairments likely saved him from the purges under Tiberius and Caligula as he was not considered a threat. His early work as a historian damaged his reputation because of his penchant for the truth, which was interpreted as a lack of loyalty, making him unfit for public office.

His reign saw a restoration of the Empire after the excesses of Caligula, investing in infrastructure and a successful invasion of Britain. While his rule marked a time of relative stability between chaotic reigns, he was politically vulnerable during his tenure, was likely murdered by his wife, and subsequently succeeded by Emperor Nero.



Zhuge Liang (181–234 AD) was a Chinese strategist, statesman and inventor who served as Chancellor of Shu Han during the Three Kingdoms period. Frail from chronic illness, possibly tuberculosis, he outwitted stronger opponents with cunning tactics, including the famous “Empty Fort Strategy”.

As a statesman he purged corrupt officials, reduced taxes and restricted the aristocracy’s power over common people. He invented the “wooden ox and flowing horse”, a type of wheelbarrow. He once said “All the people under Heaven are people of the Han Empire. Now, the Han Empire isn’t revived yet and the people are still suffering from war. It will be my fault even if only one person dies due to war. I dare not accept compliments built on people’s miseries.”



King Baldwin IV of Jerusalem (1161-1185 AD), also known as the Leper King, was diagnosed with leprosy at age 9 and became king at age 13. He also had a stutter. At this time, leprosy was highly stigmatised and believed to be a punishment from God for committing sin, but he was beloved by his people and was not kept apart from them.

During the crusades he secured military victories from Salah-ad-Din, often leading the army from the front, even though he only had the use of one hand to steer the horse and hold a sword. Leprosy eventually made him blind and he lost the use of his hands and legs, so he decided to install a regent to rule on his behalf, who later fell to the armies of Salah-ad-Din.

Would you like to know more?

Callendar, Gae, “*The Cripple, the Queen, and the Man from the North*,” KMT 17.1 (2006): 46-61.

Carney, Elizabeth D. “*The Trouble with Philip Arrhidaeus*,” Ancient History Bulletin 15 (2001): 63–89.

Draycott, Jane. *Protheses in Antiquity*. London: Routledge, 2018.

Levick, Barbara. *Claudius*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990

Miles, M. “*Segregated We Stand? The Mutilated Greeks’ Debate at Persepolis, 330 BC*,” Disability & Society 18 (2003): 865–879.

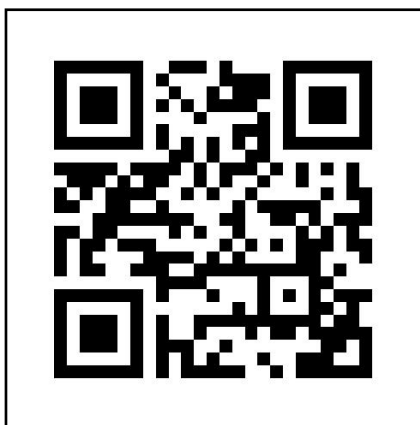
Morris, Alexandra F. *The Conscience of the King: Alexander the Great and the Ancient Disabled*.” In Kenneth Moore (editor). *Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Alexander the Great*. Leiden: Brill Publishing, 2018.

Morris, Alexandra F. *Disability in Ptolemaic Egypt and the Hellenistic World: Plato’s Stepchildren*. London and New York: Routledge, 2025.

Morris, Alexandra F. “*Patterns of Force: Receptions of Agesilaus II, Disability, and Greek Sexuality*,” In Kenneth Moore (editor). *The Routledge Companion to the Reception of Ancient Greek and Roman Gender and Sexuality*. Taylor & Francis, 2022.

York, George K., and David A. Steinberg. “*The sacred disease of Cambyses II*,” Archives of neurology 58, no. 10 (2001): 1702-1704.

This zine is produced by the **Disability Action Research Kollektive** (DARK), which is a disabled-led group working to make disability perspectives, history, and research more accessible to a general audience. We are always looking for disabled (and non-disabled) volunteers to help write, edit and share their perspectives. Choose to be part of something bigger than your self, join us in the DARK today!



FIND MORE HERE
linktr.ee/disabilityark

Our zines include a wide range of topics including **Disability History**: Ancient Greece, Ancient Egypt, Communists, Anarchists, Feminists, Radicals, Fascists, Leaders, Saints, Wheelchair History, Walking Stick History, Mythology, Disabled Gods... **Disability Media**: Film Analysis Tools, Horror, Marvel, Batman, Action, Video Games, Shakespeare, Star Trek, Fantasy... **Disability Education**: Disability Radical Reading Digest, Disabled Housing Cooperatives, Why the Gap?, Models of Disability, Sexism & Ableism, Racism & Ableism, Homophobia & Ableism...