

DUMBARTON OAKS
BYZANTINE STUDIES COLLOQUIUM

DISABILITY IN MIDDLE AND LATE BYZANTIUM



November 15, 2024

Image: Kosovo, Monastery of Dečani, Christ Healing a Man with a Withered Hand (fourteenth century). Courtesy of BLAGO Fund, USA/Serbia, www.srpksoblago.org (Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License)

DUMBARTON OAKS

ART • NATURE • SCHOLARSHIP

Disability in Middle and Late Byzantium Byzantine Studies Colloquium November 15, 2024 Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC

Georgios Makris and Maroula Perisanidi, Colloquiarchs

Disability is central to Byzantine history. From emperors like Alexios I Komnenos (r. 1081–1118), who spoke with a stutter and scholars like Gregorios Antiochos, whose chronic illness left him with a weakened body, to all who were punished with mutilation and blindness, disabled people were present and visible across Byzantine society. Impaired bodies feature prominently in Byzantine accounts of miraculous cures performed by holy figures in both saints' lives and visual art. Indeed, a careful examination of literary, artistic, and medical evidence reveals the Byzantines' notable openness to explore the disabled body as a subject in creative media and a topic of scientific study. Yet, within broader studies of disability in ancient and medieval societies, historical surveys either ignore Byzantium altogether or express the view that east Roman society and law marginalized and even punished disability.

By bringing together scholars from history, art history, material culture, and literature, this colloquium aims to take the first decisive step toward a more nuanced and complex understanding of Byzantine disability as a social construct. To do so, we will examine how literary, physical, and visual representations of disability—including restricted mobility, blindness, and leprosy—were constructed, based on their intersection with such identity markers as gender, social rank, and religious status of the individuals involved. In drawing attention to this much neglected, yet urgent, topic the colloquium will illustrate that integrating disability as an analytical category and a system of representation can deepen and challenge our understanding of Byzantine history.

DUMBARTON OAKS

ART • NATURE • SCHOLARSHIP

Disability in Middle and Late Byzantium Byzantine Studies Colloquium November 15, 2024 Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 15

- 8:30 a.m. Registration, Fellowship House Lobby
Coffee, Oak Room
- 9:00–9:20 a.m. Welcome: Thomas B.F. Cummins and Nikos D. Kontogiannis,
Dumbarton Oaks
- Introduction: Maroula Perisanidi, *University of Leeds* and
Georgios Makris, *University of British Columbia*

Living with Visual Impairment

Chair: Claudia Rapp, *University of Vienna*

- 9:20–9:50 a.m. “Life after Sight: Being Blind in Byzantium”
Jake Ransohoff, *Bowdoin College*
- 9:50–10:20 a.m. “Disability in Byzantine Medicine: Visual Impairment”
Isabel Grimm-Stadelmann, *Ludwig-Maximilians-University,
Munich*
- 10:20–10:50 a.m. Discussion
- 10:50–11:00 a.m. Coffee and Tea

Holy Speech through Disabled Bodies

Chair: Dimitar Angelov, *Harvard University*

- 11:00–11:30 a.m. “The Stammering Prophet: Moses and the Empowerment of
Disabled Speakers in Byzantium”
Maroula Perisanidi, *University of Leeds*
- 11:30 a.m.–12:00 p.m. “Narrative Prosthesis: Disability in the Byzantine Greek Lives of
Holy Fools”
Stavroula Constantinou, *University of Cyprus*
- 12:00–12:30 p.m. Discussion
- 12:30–2:00 p.m. Lunch and Speakers’ Photo, *Guest House*

DUMBARTON OAKS

ART • NATURE • SCHOLARSHIP

Disabled Experience through Space and Objects

Chair: Stratis Papaioannou, National Hellenic Research Foundation

- 2:00–2:30 p.m. “Disability and the Byzantine Church: Stories, Spaces, and Landscapes”
Georgios Makris, University of British Columbia
- 2:30–3:00 p.m. “Caring for the Marginalized: Insights from a Leprosarium in Late Antique Thebes”
Fotini Kondyli, University of Virginia
- 3:00–3:30 p.m. Discussion
- 3:30–3:45 p.m. Coffee and Tea

Absences and Presences: Finding the Disabled Body

Chair: George Demacopoulos, Fordham University

- 3:45–4:15 p.m. “‘Large Numbers of Romans Were Injured’: Identity and Representation of Disabled War Veterans in Byzantium”
Adam Goldwyn, North Dakota State University
- 4:15–4:45 p.m. “Picturing Disability in Late Byzantine Art”
Maria Alessia Rossi, Princeton University
- 4:45–5:15 p.m. Discussion

Concluding Remarks

Chair: Christina Maranci, Harvard University

- 5:15–5:30 p.m. Response and Reflections: Worlds in Conversation
Jonathan Hsy, The George Washington University
- 5:30–6:30 p.m. Reception, Garden Room

Disability in Middle and Late Byzantium
Byzantine Studies Colloquium
November 15, 2024
Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC

ABSTRACTS

“Narrative Prosthesis: Disability in the Byzantine Greek Lives of Holy Fools”

Stravoula Constantinou, University of Cyprus

Drawing on David Mitchell’s and Sharon Snyder’s concept of narrative prosthesis as developed in their work *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (2000), this paper will approach mental illness as disability in Byzantine hagiography by focusing on Leontios of Neapolis’ *Life of Symeon the Holy Fool* (seventh century) and the anonymous *Life of Andrew the Holy Fool* (tenth century). As will be shown, mental illness in the examined texts serves three important functions: it is the kernel around which the narrative develops; it determines the two heroes’ characterization and holiness; and it is a metaphorical device reflecting religious and social ideologies.

“Large Numbers of Romans Were Injured’: Identity and Representation of Disabled War Veterans in Byzantium”

Adam Goldwyn, North Dakota State University

Byzantine historiography reveals a world of brutal physical combat; the exploits of soldiers on the field of battle and their physical suffering are often narrated at length, but what happened to those wounded soldiers after their service in the military? This paper examines the representation of disabled veterans in Byzantium to better understand how medieval Greek writers wrote about their economic and social conditions, interior lives, and physical bodies. This examination rests at the intersection of disability studies and veterans’ studies, two areas of critical inquiry that arose in response to contemporary identity and rights movements. Byzantium, however, had no identity categories or civil rights movements for either disabled or veteran as understood in the modern context from which these discourses arose. This paper thus further discusses the complexities of applying contemporary models to medieval contexts, arguing that the relative invisibility and decentering of what we would now call disabled veterans in Byzantine literature reflect differing political and cultural attitudes about disabled and veteran identities. Nevertheless, this recuperative project is possible, and glimpses of disabled veterans can be seen in fragmentary ways across the Byzantine archive in works such as Niketas Choniates’ *History*, Byzantine accounts of the Trojan War (e.g., John Tzetzes’ *Allegories*), and in hagiography.

“Disability in Byzantine Medicine: Visual Impairment”

Isabel Grimm-Stadelmann, Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich

The medical literature of the Byzantine era (c. sixth to fifteenth centuries) describes in detail a number of physical and mental illnesses that can be associated with today's understanding of disability. Terminologically, however, the sources neither differentiate between “illness,” “disease,” “impairment,” and “disability” nor between “congenital” and “acquired” disabilities. Particular attention was paid to the rich variety of diseases of the sensory organs, for example, visual impairments. Their different causes, professional terminologies used to specify their symptoms, the nosologies connected, as well as their precise diagnosis requiring appropriate therapeutic approaches, were the subject of detailed scientific discussions mirrored in the medical sources. Since Middle Byzantine times (ninth to tenth centuries), their clinical focus increased and the professional medical literature not only dealt with adapting and reworking the already known phenomena of visual impairment, but also discussed new observations and diagnostic changes, and emphasized innovative therapeutic approaches and concepts. Related to the increase of transcultural cooperations settled in Byzantine hospital environments (*xenōnes*), various ophthalmic therapies from Arabic and Jewish sources (for example, a corpus of eye remedies ascribed to a certain Benjamin) were explored and discussed. The relevant manuscripts (*xenōnika biblia*) provide numerous references from everyday clinical practice, often annotated in margins with lively and controversial discussions of previous statements. This paper discusses how Byzantine medicine dealt with different approaches to the phenomenon of visual impairment based on selected examples from the relevant medical sources.

“Caring for the Marginalized: Insights from a Leprosarium in Late Antique Thebes”

Fotini Kondyli, University of Virginia

A recent excavation at Thebes, Greece, uncovered a Late Antique cemetery used from the fifth to seventh century, located outside the city walls. Bioarcheological analysis of the skeletons shows that all the individuals were afflicted with leprosy, and many had other chronic illnesses. These findings indicate the presence of a leprosarium in the area, likely associated with the cult of Saint Luke and his healing powers. It would have been run by a philanthropic institution and provided housing and treatment for the leper community.

Inspired by new discussions on the social dimensions of Medieval illness and disability, this paper explores the experiences of this leper community, focusing on its interactions with caregivers and relationship with the broader city population. I examine the burials to understand societal perceptions of leprosy and how the physical and spiritual needs of those afflicted were addressed in life and death. Additionally, I analyze the social dynamics within the leper community and how these conditions altered existing and introduced new social norms. Finally, I discuss a revised view of the city's layout that considers the lepers' presence, including issues of movement, access, infrastructure, and resources.

“Disability and the Byzantine Church: Stories, Spaces, and Landscapes”

Georgios Makris, University of British Columbia

How can we recognize disabled persons in the Byzantine space? How did individuals with mobility impairments achieve access to public buildings? Did the built environment accommodate their disability? These questions form the departure point of my paper, whose principal aim is to explore the connections between disability and Byzantine church architecture. Historians of modern architecture and disability remind us that monuments of a certain architectural and cultural gravitas often serve as representations of a past without disabled individuals. Byzantinists are well acquainted with hagiographic descriptions of “paralytic” individuals finding miraculous cures at the tombs of famous saints. Yet, as the impairments themselves disappear when the individual is healed, we tend to shift our attention to the outcome (the healing) and the continuation of the narrative, neglecting to ask how did disabled persons access the said church in the first place. Recognizing the dearth of previous scholarship on the subject within the Byzantine context, my study deploys hagiographical accounts to understand the terms in medieval Greek associated with mobility impairment. In examining some of the many fleeting references to physical disability in hagiography, I emphasize the need to reconceptualize Byzantine pilgrimage sites as public spaces with a strong presence of disabled visitors. To reinforce this idea, and to trace the imprint of disabled bodies, I discuss a few surviving churches in cities and the countryside with a documented history of pilgrimage during the middle and late Byzantine period in relation to the surrounding landscape. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate that disability can provide a fresh and powerful lens through which we can transform our view of monumental churches in Byzantium.

“The Stammering Prophet: Moses and the Empowerment of Disabled Speakers in Byzantium”

Maroula Perisanidi, University of Leeds

Throughout history, Moses has been a focal point for discussions on leadership and communication, with much ink spilled over how he is described in the Bible as **ισχνόφωνος** (weak voiced) and **βραδύγλωσσος** (slow of speech). Why did God choose Moses to be his spokesperson, despite or because of his speech difference? Explanations have included denials of Moses’ disability and an emphasis on its metaphorical meaning rather than its materiality. For instance, the fourth century Church Father Basil of Caesarea understood Moses’ **βραδυγλωσσία** to refer to only a relative slowness that could be perceived in the presence of God, but which did not characterize his voice when he spoke with the people. In the twelfth century, the bishop Michael Choniates focused on Moses’ **ισχνοφωνία** and explained it as a reference to his **λεπτολεκτεῖν**—his ability to explain things in detail. Other Byzantine authors, however, took Moses’ speech difference seriously and discussed it as a physical reality, with powerful symbolic meanings, which challenges the imperative of compulsory fluency. This paper will focus on two such cases from the twelfth century, exploring Moses’ empowering example in the writings of Eustathios of Thessalonike and Georgios Tornikes.

“Life after Sight: Being Blind in Byzantium”

Jake Ransohoff, Bowdoin College

The Byzantines are famous for their “judicial savagery.” Criminal codes list the mutilations a judge could impose on the bodies of the condemned: for thieves, loss of a hand; for adulterers, loss of the nose; for perjurers, loss of the tongue; and so on. This is where the story told by most historians ends—with the lists of punishments themselves. But what became of the condemned after their punishment? How, and for how long, did victims of judicial mutilation typically survive? What kinds of communities and interpersonal networks surrounded them? Did Byzantine society draw distinctions between individuals born with physical impairments, those who acquired them through illness or accident, and those whose impairments resulted from a legal sentence? Above all, what can a study of punitive mutilation tell us about changing concepts of disability in Byzantium?

This paper explores these questions by focusing on one illustrative penalty: blinding. For centuries, blinding served as the main punishment for crimes of high treason, rebellion, and sedition in the empire; hundreds of failed rebels and fallen rulers were blinded by judicial order. This paper begins by showing how different techniques of blinding impacted the survival rates of its victims. It then considers evidence for the lives of the blinded, including the spaces they occupied (monasteries, hospitals, prisons) and the possibilities open to them for attaining social prominence, especially as intellectuals and holy persons. Finally, it calls attention to a major shift beginning in the late twelfth century, when a series of men, blinded by the emperor, returned to positions of state power—leading diplomatic missions, occupying key administrative posts, and even commanding armies in the field. Disability, as theorists teach us, is not a somatic but a social phenomenon. Drawing on this insight, this paper asks what the elevation of blind men to positions of power reveals about the structure and evolution of late Byzantine society.

“Picturing Disability in Late Byzantine Art”

Maria Alessia Rossi, Princeton University

Understanding the depiction of disability in late Byzantium involves examining the perception of the infirm body, the artist’s role in translating it into images, and society’s reaction to its visualization. This paper explores these issues through two examples: early Palaiologan depictions of Christ’s miracles and representations of contemporaneous healings associated with the cult of the spring of the Zoodochos Pege. Especially revealing are the tensions underlying the visualization of disability: the simultaneous need to show the body in its disabled form while providing hope and salvation to the beholder, and the balance between painting the physicality of the impairment while maintaining aesthetic appeal. Finally, this paper addresses how and to what extent the historical and societal implications of disability were translated into images.

DUMBARTON OAKS

ART • NATURE • SCHOLARSHIP

NOTES: