Disability & Deafness in North East Africa

Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia

Introduction and Bibliography, mainly non–medical, with historical material and some annotation

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For a list of abbreviations used in this document, consult the glossary.

North East Africa: History (Antiquity–1600)

Based on Arabic dissertation, Univ. Cairo

Abbott Philemon in the second half of the Fourteenth century reportedly cured "un muet" (dumb, probably deaf) who went to the saint's tomb. After he had knocked at Philemon's sepulchre (or on the tomb – "il eut frappé à son sépulture") he found himself able to speak – the question of hearing is not mentioned; nor is there any expulsion of evil spirits in this account or the subsequent healing of a paralysed person (p. 58).

Based on archaeological evidence from before the Hellenistic period.

Analyses lesions in nearly 800 skeletons from archaeological sites in the very hot, dry Wadi Halfa area of Lower Nubia, Sudan, dated between 7000 BC and 1300 CE. Disabling impairments are suggested by fractured limbs and crania, indications of arthritis, and child's skull indicating hydrocephalus.

Study of the teaching of Didymus, the fourth century blind theologian at Alexandria, prefaced by a review of his life (pp.1–15).

pp. 183–87 cover some pathological cases, starting with two hydrocephalic skulls, which are described in some detail (183–86).

The Preface (p. vii) states that the work here translated was composed by Mar Palladius (365–425), Bishop of Helenopolis, in Bythinia. Several of the monks whose lives are recounted had disabilities, e.g. Didymus the Blind (pp. 136–138); Paul the Simple (183–189); James the Lame (265–273, though nothing is said about his lameness); the sage who allowed other monks to think he was mad, while in fact he was taking care to remove evil from his mind (388–390).

These items from antiquity depict scenes from the life of Christ, with healing of people having severe disabilities. Capps locates them in the iconographic context of Coptic and Alexandrian schools of art, and dates them to the early sixth century CE.

Though links from Ancient Egypt to the Levantine Arab world seem distant, Dasen notes (p. 273–4) realistic terracotta depictions of pathological defects, from Asia Minor cities with medical schools; those of "people affected by hypothyroidism are relatively numerous. The majority come from Egypt and Asia Minor."

Revised D.Phil. thesis, heavily referenced, based on iconography and medical and archaeological evidence. Concludes (pp. 246–8) that positive attitudes towards dwarfs in Egypt during c. 3000 years, and a much shorter period in Classical Greece, were followed by adverse views and behaviour in Hellenistic and Roman periods. Influences on attitudes towards dwarfs, deformity and disability in lands ‘between’ Egypt and Greece may be guessed at, but are not here treated.

Differentiates members of normally short–statured ethnic groups from people with exceptionally short stature and/or physical abnormalities. Discusses mainly the physiology and roles of the latter, with 52 figures.


Comprehensive, scholarly work, extensively referenced. Dols reviews madness from medical, magical/religious, social and legal viewpoints, across the early Islamic world. See index entries, e.g. Abbasiya; Abu Kaf; Africa, North; Ahmad (holy fool); Alexandria; Cairo; Coptic; Egypt; Ethiopia; Mansuri hospital; Nubia; nun; Somaliland; Sudan; Zar; (and further).


GARDINER A.H. (1911, reprint 1964) *Egyptian Hieratic Texts, transcribed, translated and annotated. Series I: Literary Texts of the New Kingdom*. Hildesheim: Georg Olms. An early suggestion of sign or gestural language appears in a series of Egyptian magisterial admonitions to an idle schoolboy or clerk: "Thou art one who is deaf and does not hear, to whom men make (signs) with the hand," in the Papyrus Koller, "dated approximately to the end of the Nineteenth Dynasty" or around 1200 BC (pp. 35–39, 84–86;)


The convoluted career, in many language versions, of a legend on how Moses got a
speech impediment. As an infant he was shown to Pharaoh. Sat on the monarch's lap, he pulled his crown off and threw it down (or maybe pulled Pharaoh's beard). Courtiers, aghast, debated this ominous act. A test was proposed. The babe was shown two basins. One held a glowing coal, the other a jewel. He reached for the jewel, but an angel guided his hand to the hot coal, which stuck to his hand. Putting his hand to his mouth for comfort, lips and tongue were also burnt; hence the speech impediment.


c. 1100 BC. Ch. 2:1 "Beware of robbing a wretch, of attacking a cripple." Ch. 25:8–12 "Do not laugh at a blind man, nor tease a dwarf, Nor cause hardship for the lame. Don't tease a man who is in the hand of the god (i.e. ill or insane)..." (See PRITCHARD, below, p. 424a)

Exorcism of jinns by a traditional healer at Nablus.

Brief and suitably cautious review of evidence on social responses to disability and disabled persons in the social and religious context of Egyptian antiquity, for which archaeological sources are "plentiful but often ambivalent."

Many entries have some disability relevance, e.g. Dwarfism, Ears, Epilepsy, Hemiplegia, Talipes (etc.), with references to papyri.

See MANNICHE below.

Passes briefly across ground given in much greater detail in V. DASEN's book, q.v., which Kozma acknowledges as "a comprehensive review of the subject". (Cites some additional work.)

In Fourth century Alexandria, Didymus lost his sight when 4 years old. Later he is said to have "learned the first letters of the alphabet through his sense of touch upon their shapes
which were engraved in depth on planks of wood." He became a renowned theologian, teacher and writer.

Includes some discussion of the depiction of harpers at various dates in Egypt, and the practice of representing them as blind people, pp. 187–188.

*LIFE of Takla Háymânót, The. III. The Book of the Miracles of our Father, the Holy Man Takla Háymânót, which was compiled by Abba Peter.* Transl. E.A. Wallis Budge. London. Privately printed for Lady Meux. 1906. 2 Vols.
Illustrated hagiography of the revered Takla Háymânót (c. 1215 – c. 1313), the major religious figure of Ethiopia. Includes many reports of healing by T.H. In the section specifically on "miracles," pp. 278–79 concern "Healing of the man with crooked legs." It tells of "a certain man who was unable to walk with his legs, and he could only move about upon his hands." He prayed to T.H., believed he would be healed, and raised himself up. T.H. appeared to him, and said "Depart thou, standing upright on thy feet as thou wast formerly" — he was healed immediately and departed on his feet.
Much historical material exists in Amharic, in which diseases are described with sufficient detail to encourage diagnostic guesswork. In the present example, the man with crooked legs could have had poliomyelitis, or a spinal injury, or various other conditions. If there were evidence that he lived in an area where lathyrus sativus was prominent in the diet, the description might suggest lathyrism. The scientific mind is usually uncomfortable with "miracle" reports; yet there is no reason to doubt that some Ethiopians in the Thirteenth century could observe and make accurate descriptions of a variety of disabling conditions (see STRELCYN, below).


With some discussion of historiographical approaches, Malti–Douglas suggests "the identification of the principal roles of blindness and the blind in Mamluk mentalities," based on as–Safadi's biographical dictionary of some 313 distinguished blind Arabs. The identified roles are compared favourably with some of the roles of blind people in modern 'western' countries.

Various references to blind musicians (94–95; full chapter 97–107), also some wearing a blindfold (89–90).


SABRA, Adam Abdelhamid (2000) Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam: Mamluk Egypt, 1250–1517. Cambridge UP. Useful background study on poverty and charity. Mentions disabled people only incidentally (e.g. blind, lame, crippled, lepers etc., pp. 47–49, 60–61, 74–78, 85), but they were there among ‘the poor’ for whatever benefits were provided.

Some of the ‘holy fools’ described by Safi d–Din in Thirteenth century Egypt and elsewhere were more holy than foolish, others perhaps the reverse.


SCHODDE, George H. (1885) The Apostolic Canons, translated from the Ethiopic. *J. Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis* 5 (1/2) pp. 61–72. The "Apostolic Canons" had a chequered career, being first formulated perhaps in the Second century, and varying in number in different regions of the Church. The Ethiopic version has 57 canons, and "like nearly all the Church literature of the Abyssinian Church, is a translation, and in this case from the Coptic." (The Coptic version may have been translated from the Latin in the Fifth or Sixth century). Schodde remarks of these Canons that "In the Church of Ethiopia they have had, and theoretically still have, canonical authority." Canon 37, after prohibiting junior clergy from reviling their seniors, adds that "if one of the priests ridicules a person that is deaf or lame or blind or deformed at his feet, let him be expelled; and thus also in the case of a layman, if he does this." In Canon 46, a layman who forces a virgin and has cohabited with her, is expelled; "And he shall not marry another, but he shall abide with her whom he has forced, even if she is poor and deformed." In Canon 52, after various rules for bishops,

- He who is one–eyed or lame in his foot and is worthy of episcopal honour, shall be ordained. For a defect of the body does not corrupt him, but a defect of the soul [does]. A deaf and a blind man, however, shall not be ordained as a bishop, not as being unclean, but less [lest?] the property of the church be scattered. He who is possessed of a devil shall not be ordained, and he shall not pray with the believers. And if he is purified, they shall admit him; and if he be worthy, he may be ordained as one of the clergy.

- Impairment and disability are a small, incidental part; yet the principle that an impairment of body did not represent a defect of soul, nor rendered one unfit for ordination, was thus enshrined in Ethiopian church law; while even one who was 'possessed' (perhaps suffering a serious mental illness) could recover and might become an ordinand. Even while excluding the deaf or blind man from the possibility of becoming a bishop, the rules give pragmatism as a reason rather than attributing unworthiness.


Strelcyn's translation (to French) of this Arabic–Ethiopian medical lexicon shows a considerable range of terms for physical, mental and sensory impairments and disabilities, among them being: amputé, aveugle, qui balbutie, bêgue, boiteux, borgne, bossu, débile, élephantiasis, instable d'esprit, estropié, fou, goutte, hallucinations, idiot, infirme, insensé, intelligence limitée, défaut de la langue, lépreux, muet, nyctalope, oeil fermé, paralytique, paraplégique, possédé par un démon, rhumatisme, sot, sourd, sourd–muet, stupéfait, stupide, vitiligo, vue faible.


Partial English translation at: http://www.vitae-patrum.org.uk

Among the Vitae of the Desert Saints, in Egypt, Palestine and Syria of the early centuries of Christianity, there are stories of people with disabilities being healed or cared for. The framework is often modelled on stories where Jesus healed disabled people by expelling demons; yet the hagiographies have some sharply observed and unexpected features in dialogue and interplay between characters. In Book 1(d), No. 17, the young saint Euphrasia's humility, fasting, battles with the devil, and devotion to serving her religious companions, are standard fare. In Ch. XXV–XVI, families brought sick or disabled children to the monastery for prayer and healing. At the Abbess's command Euphrasia received one boy of eight years, brought by his mother, paralysed, deaf and dumb. Euphrasia prayed while carrying him to the Abbess, and the boy was healed and started shouting for his mother. Euphrasia dropped him in surprise, and he ran back to the gate.

Later, the Abbess sent Euphrasia to feed a "devil–possessed" sister, who had violent fits and was locked up. This one often assaulted whoever brought the food, and she began shrieking and threatening Euphrasia. The latter commanded her to be quiet or she would get the Abbess's cane and give her a terrible thrashing! This subdued the madwoman, so Euphrasia asked her pleasantly to sit down and eat her food and be calm, which she did.

After further spiritual conflict, the woman was healed (Ch. XXVII–XIX).

Another tale is told in two versions (in Book 7, Ch. 19, "Tending the sick," and Book 8, Ch. 26, "Eulogius and the Cripple"). The scholar Eulogius of Alexandria entered the holy life with a promise to care for a severely disabled man whom he saw in the marketplace. That man was happy to be taken up, fed, washed and maintained in the saint's cell. Yet after 15 years the cripple got tired of this life, and denounced Eulogius as a crafty hypocrite and criminal who was just using him for his own spiritual ego–trip. The cripple demanded to be taken back to the marketplace, where he could see some ordinary scenes of life and meet some normal people, and maybe get some decent food! After ineffectual attempts to sort out the quarrel, Eulogius and the cripple went for mediation to St. Anthony. The holy old monk banged their heads together and told them to go home and live together in peace and harmony.


Summarises anatomical knowledge on basis of detailed studies of terms. Lexicon and
glossary, pp. 263–79, tabulates terms with their hieroglyphic, meanings and notes, including terms of body parts liable to various disabling impairment.

Complexities of possible meanings, around speech, hearing and deafness, are shown as Ward compared roots of words in several regional languages and suggested a different meaning in the passage (in Papyrus Koller) supposedly addressed to an idle student or clerk, "Thou art one who is deaf and does not hear, to whom men make (signs) with the hand."


Extended review, with Index (512–514) of the role of dwarves in ancient Egyptian religious practices.

Sayings ascribed to Ptahhotep (fl. 2450 BC) Transl. from Egyptian hieroglyphs to French. Includes an eloquent lament over bodily decay and impairments of sight and hearing with old age (pp. 69–70). (See PRITCHARD, above, p. 412, for an English Transl.)

Life of the Sixteenth century blind physician Da'ud ibn `Omar al–Antaki.

ZAKI PACHA, Ahmad (1911) *Étude sur la contribution des Arabes à l'invention de l'écriture en relief spécialement destinée à l'usage des aveugles*. Le Caire.
[Not found. Listed among the publications of Ahmed Zaki Pacha, in an obituary notice by Ahmed Issa Bey (1935) *Bulletin de l'Institut d'Egypte* XVII: vii–xix. (Cf. FATTAH, above). MALTI–DOUGLAS (1988, p. 62) footnotes that the suggestion by Zaki Pacha in his Dictionnaire biographique, 66–71, that ‘Braille’ (i.e. a tactile system for blind readers) was invented by a medieval Arab had been discredited (ibid., p. 72), but was still in circulation. (See also LASCARATOS & MARKETOS, above, on the tactile system of Didymus the Blind, theologian of Alexandria).]