

# SAINTS & DISABILITY

Disability Action Research Kollektive



Featuring work by **EK McAlpine**

## **Introduction**

Content Warnings for Ableism, Human remains & Death. There is an assumption that in times before modern medicine, disabled people didn't survive or live for very long, and that their lives were a lot worse than today. It's true that before modern medicine, people had less effective treatment for conditions and injuries that people would probably survive today. But disabled people have still existed throughout human history.

We have lots of examples. The Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamun, who lived in 14th century BCE, had chronic pain and used a cane. In a Bronze Age burial found at Stonehenge the skeleton showed healed injuries that would have limited the person's movement. King Charles VI of France (1368-1422) and King George III of Britain (1738-1820) both had long-term mental health conditions. Lots of European royal courts, including those of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, employed 'fools', entertainers who usually had intellectual disabilities. Princess Joan of Scotland (c.1428-1493) was deaf and may have used sign language. Her burial place has a tomb sculpture depicting her and her husband, which may be the oldest surviving image of a named deaf person in history. Like today, it was not always easy to navigate the world as a disabled person. But like today, people still managed.

Ableism then, now, and in the centuries in-between has clouded the history of disabled people. Today scholars, disabled and non-disabled, are trying to uncover it. The history of Christianity and of Christian saints is useful for this, as it relates to people's beliefs about things such as disability and health, and about disabled people.

## **Disability vs Impairment**

Today when we think of disability, we often define it as something that makes the disabled person's life harder, that our inaccessible society has 'disabled' someone. But medieval people do not live in our society, and so the things that make life harder today don't always apply to the medieval world.

As a result, some historians argue that you can't apply the term 'disabled' to the medieval era. Some suggest we use the term 'impaired' instead, to refer specifically to the physical or biological realities of that person's condition.

However, the term disability can still be useful, when we are talking not just about the physical facts of an impairment, but how they were affected because of that impairment. We can then discuss the conditions in which disabled people lived, and consider what was, or was not, disabling them, and how.

### **The Medieval Church**

In medieval Europe, Christianity became the most common religion, and the church became involved in many aspects of life for Christians. For example, the calendar year had lots of religious festivals, people would be baptised into the Christian religion, and would be married and usually buried in churches. Religious figures like bishops were important political figures as well as spiritual leaders. People engaged with Christianity and Christian worship in lots of different ways, including the worship of saints.

In medieval Christianity, saints were individuals who were considered especially holy in their life, and were revered after their death. One of the most well known aspects of sainthood is their ability to perform miracles. Some performed miracles during their lifetime, however posthumous miracles (after they died) were more common. Miracles often related to healing disability or illness, which makes the study of saints very useful for historians studying disability. The miracles of saints were seen as evidence of God's divine power, and that the saint could 'intercede', or act as a go-between between yourself and God.

People venerated saints in various ways. People were often named for saints (which is why we have a lot of people called Mary, Margaret, James, and Edward!). People gave money to churches or monasteries dedicated to specific saints. They traveled to sites associated with

saints, sometimes travelling great distances - this was called pilgrimage. Some of the most popular sites were at Canterbury in Kent (dedicated to Thomas Beckett), Santiago de Compostela in Spain (dedicated to St James the Great), or to Whithorn in Scotland (dedicated to St Ninian).

Saints were adopted as 'patrons', not just by countries, but by merchant and trade guilds, occupations, and individuals. For example, St Andrew is considered the patron saint of Scotland, while St Margaret of Antioch is considered the patron saint of childbirth, and St Sebastian is the patron saint of archers. Often this associated was based on an element of their story. St Margaret of Antioch escaped from the belly of a dragon, and St Sebastian was shot with arrows before he died.

### **Canonisation**

Today, the Pope decides who becomes a saint. However, in the medieval period, this was not as strict, and sometimes figures would start to be considered saints before, or without ever, being officially canonised.

### **Cults and Relics**

This worship of a saint was known as their 'cult'. This cult could spread to a wide geographical area, like the Virgin Mary or St Thomas Beckett, who were worshipped across the Christian world, or it could very local like Æthelflæda of Romsey, who became the abbess of Romsey Abbey in Wiltshire and performed several small miracles. The cult often had physical sites that became 'shrines' - these were popular pilgrimage destinations. Most of the time, these shrines were at the tomb of that person. However, their bodily remains were sometimes divided up and made the focus of veneration, called 'relics'. These relics were usually bones, or sometimes hair, and there were also 'contact relics' which were items used or owned by that saint in their lifetime, like prayer books.

### **Hagiography**

Literature or writing to do with saints is known as 'hagiography'. There are two main types. One is a biography, written about a person that

emphasised how holy they were. The second type was a record of miracles that were associated with a saint. Both types were written as a way to popularise that person as a saint, usually to build a case for canonisation. These sources are very useful for disability history for several reasons. Firstly, it gives us examples of disabled people, showing that it's incorrect to think that disabled people didn't survive before the modern era. It also shows the attitudes that contemporaries had to disability and disabled people. And, even more unusually, it can show the attitudes that disabled people had towards themselves and their disability.

### **We Have Always Existed**

Disabled people have existed for all of human history, whether caused by disease, injury or a condition since birth. In a time before modern medicine, injuries had less chance of healing fully, and thus could lead to chronic pain or reduced mobility. Sometimes people assume that because of this, people who were disabled didn't live very long, but that isn't true. The sources about medieval saints have lots of examples of disability, both saints who were disabled, and disabled individuals.

St Cuthbert was born around 635CE in Northumbria. In 685 he became the bishop of Lindisfarne, but died living in a hermitage in 687. Around 720, a chronicler and monk named Bede wrote an account of Cuthbert's life, and in this account Bede mentions Cuthbert's health and disability.

He writes that Cuthbert had a "sudden pain" in his knee which "began to swell into a large tumor; the nerves of his thigh became contracted, and he was obliged to walk lamely, dragging after him his diseased leg, until at length the pain increased, and he was unable to walk at all." (McNabb, p. 194) Bede says that an angel appeared and instructed him to make a poultice and that this healed Cuthbert. But Bede also relates a time when Cuthbert caught a "pestilential disease". Although he was healed (which Bede says was due to the prayers of Cuthbert's fellow monks), Cuthbert still "felt a little pain in his inside all his life afterwards" (McNabb, p. 194). This suggests that Cuthbert experienced

chronic pain.

The medieval miracle accounts give examples of disability among regular people, whose lives are usually not recorded as prominently as wealthy or elite people. For example, in the miracles of St Margaret of Scotland, a woman called Acivia comes to Margaret's shrine at Dunfermline. Acivia had "lost her eyesight for the space of two years" and "had been badly afflicted by a weakness of the eyes. She wept incessantly because of the distress she suffered."

The miracles associated with William of Norwich include a woman named Matildis who had been disabled from childhood, and used a mobility aid. The account says that when Matildis "wished to go from one place to another she had to support her feeble limbs with a / stick and either succeeded in getting a little way, or, sometimes, was not able to do even this." (McNabb p. 177-8)

However, these texts must be scrutinised. The vita or biography is written to persuade readers of the holiness of the subject. These miracles are recorded because they worked - we don't find examples of those who were not granted a miracle. Moreover, the miracles we read only show disabled people who wanted to be 'cured' and stop being disabled. These texts are usually not written by the disabled person themselves, but by the monks who cared for the shrine, who wanted to encourage pilgrims to visit the site and therefore might have exaggerated.

### **Disability and Sin**

It might seem, because of the emphasis on healing, that disability was seen as a negative thing by medieval Europeans, and it is true that some saw a link between disability or ill health and sin. In Bede's writing about St Cuthbert, the bishop describes himself as "for my sins, held bound by this infirmity". A miracle by St Margaret of Scotland describes a woman "who was possessed by a wicked spirit on account of her sins, namely that she had either kept for herself the tithe [a type of compulsory donation] that is due to God or had given it very

unwillingly.”

The stories about St Margaret of Antioch relate that before her death, she encouraged people to pray to her, and that in return she would ensure their children were not disabled. This suggests that disability was something to be avoided, and that it could be prevented by being religious enough.

One miracle attributed to Thomas Beckett was the healing of a boy named Augustine who was significantly disabled. The text recording this miracle implies that Augustine was disabled because his father, who was a priest, had sinned, as in late medieval Europe priests were not supposed to have children.

But the belief that disability resulted from sin was not universal. In Bede’s text about Cuthbert, a man comes to visit the bishop asking for help with his wife who is described as “out of her senses” (suffering from mental illness). The man is worried that Cuthbert will think his wife’s illness resulted from her having “been a false servant of the Lord, and that her faith was not real”; he is worried that Cuthbert will see her illness and assume she has sinned. But Cuthbert reassures the man, saying; “not only the wicked but the innocent are sometimes permitted by God to be afflicted in body, and are even taken captive in spirit by the devil” (McNabb, p. 196-7).

These types of accounts can also show how disabled people were supported by their family or community. Bede writes about a young man coming to seek Cuthbert’s help, who was being carried in a bed by several women, and another man is “carried [to Cuthbert] weak and borne upon a cart”. In William of Norwich’s miracles, a blind woman called Gilliva was guided to the shrine of William by her nephew using a length of rope held in Gilliva’s hand (McNabb, p. 177).

In St Margaret of Scotland’s miracle collection, a woman with paralysis and impaired sight was carried around by companions. She could not point where she wished to go, and so instructed her carers verbally. But

it also states she “was a burden and a fright to all who saw her or heard her.” Just like today, disabled people faced lots of different attitudes and responses - some were supportive and others were discriminatory.

### **Self-Perception**

Writing about saints offers, in rare cases, evidence of how disabled people thought about themselves and their disability. One example of this is Hildegard of Bingen. Hildegard was an abbess and influential writer in the 12th century in Germany. She lived a varied life - she composed music, invented languages, and wrote medical texts. She was very religious and joined the church as a child. Hildegard experienced chronic health issues, with two major episodes of very severe poor health, and she recorded her thoughts about this in her writing.

Hildegard had health issues from a young age. She writes that as a child she stayed mostly indoors “because I had been so frequently ill from the time of my mother’s milk until now. My body was weakened by the illness and my strength had failed.” (Hildegard of Bingen, p. 191) She also experienced religious visions as a youth.

Hildegard interpreted her illness as the will of God, explaining that her ill health occurred because she had not written down or shared the visions she had experienced. These visions had told her to move her community of nuns to a different place, which she then did.

She writes that: “Why I suffered like this was because I did not make known the vision in which it was shown to me that I must move with my young women from the place where I had been offered to God, to another place. And so I endured these pains continually until I named the place where I am now.”

Hildegard writes that she is able to cope with these symptoms because she believed they were the will of God; “Indeed, so great was the pressure of pains in my flesh that if they were not from God, I could not have survived for long” (Wilson, p. 171).



Hildegard's medical writings were likely influenced by her own health crises, which means through her various texts, we can see a medieval woman dealing with disabling health issues, documenting her responses to these experiences, and those experiences influencing her later work.

### **Lidwina of Schiedam**

Hildegard is not the only saint who had a complicated relationship with their body and health. Lidwina of Schiedam was a Dutch woman who broke a rib while ice skating when she was fifteen. She developed an abscess, which led to paralysis and chronic pain for the rest of her life. She died in 1433 and around ten years later, a preacher named John Brugman wrote a biography about her. The text contains quotations from Lidwina, but it's not clear if she actually said those things, or if Brugman was writing what he thinks she would have said.

In the biography, Lidwina sometimes feels positive about her chronic pain. Like Hildegard, she sees it as a divine process, saying that without her pain she could not "bear the weight" of her mystical visions.

However, we can also see her frustration. When Lidwina hears other girls playing outside her window she becomes upset that she can't join them. Later, she complains: "Since I'm languishing here [in bed]... it's no wonder if I sometimes find myself drowning in dust, if I'm impeded in pursuing spiritual things, if I'm held back from the more sublime meditations" (Wilson, p. 51).

Lidwina's body and disability are at the forefront of the biography - she is even depicted naked in a copy printed in 1498. This is unusual for female saints, and perhaps shows how she was valued for her body and its ailments, rather than her as a person. Brugman's text talks about her body in a horrified way, saying that she moved "more like a monster than a human being". However, it's important to remember that, unlike Hildegard, Lidwina's words were written by someone else who may not have known her well.

Just like today, disabled people in the medieval era had different experiences. Disabled people existed in all walks of life, whether as kings, saints, writers, or common people. Some faced discrimination because of their disability while others were celebrated. Researching the history of disabled people often requires looking carefully at primary sources, and it is rare (but not impossible) to find out what disabled people felt about themselves. But while a lot has changed since the medieval era, it is absolutely certain that disabled people have always existed.

## Would you like to know more?

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