

# H-Net Reviews

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**Jane Draycott, ed.** *Prostheses in Antiquity*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2018. 214 pp.  
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**Reviewed by** Jaipreet Virdi (University of Delaware)

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**Commissioned by** Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

A photograph of an Egyptian toe frequently circulates on social media and various online periodicals. It is not your usual toe. This one is made of wood, intricately engraved to include a toenail; is affixed to leather binding and dates from 1069 to 664 BCE; and is currently housed in the Cairo Museum. Found attached to a woman buried in a tomb near the ancient city of Thebes, archaeologists speculate that this toe is likely the oldest prosthesis ever found. The Cairo Toe reframes our conception of the history of prostheses, extending the time line of the invention of invention further back in antiquity, where stories of gods and gladiators were woven together with artisanal creations for everyday life.

In recent years, there has been an expansion of historical scholarship on disability in the ancient world.[1] These works have unraveled how ingrained disability was in ancient societies—there was no word or category for “disability” because kings, tradesmen, and gods alike all encountered disability and deformity. As Annie Sharples puts it, the ancients perceived disability not as an opposition to normality, but as a “part and parcel of human existence.”[2] Such perceptions of disability, deformity, and impairment are also covered, for instance, in the essays in Christian Laes’s edited volume, *Disability in Antiquity* (2016), as well as Laes’s cultural survey, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World* (2018). Surveys on the history of surgery, amputation, war injuries, and medical care in antiquity have also presented broader perspectives on social and cultural perceptions of disability. Similarly, scholarship on the history of prosthetics has expanded since Katherine Ott, David Serlin, and Stephen Mihm’s 2002 edited collection, *Artificial Parts, Practical Lives* as well as becoming deeply rooted

into museum studies.[3] Yet there is little intersection between histories of disability in antiquity and the lived lives of prosthetic users—how prostheses were designed to be used and how users in turn, designed and modified their prosthesis to better fit their bodies.

*Prostheses in Antiquity* sets out to fill that gap. Based on a conference hosted at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in 2015, this volume “focuses primarily on prostheses as material objects and considers their role (or roles) in the cultures and societies of classical antiquity” (p. 10). As Jane Draycott asserts in the editor’s introduction, prostheses were social objects with a complex set of meanings that impacted the daily lives of disabled people, including how these objects were navigated as nonmedical devices. After all, even though prostheses of classical antiquity were not considered therapeutic, nor do they appear in ancient medical literature, their materiality and artifact existence indicate how carefully and comprehensively makers were designing prostheses for proper usage. The eight chapters cover a broad range of prostheses, most frequently discussed in literary, documentary, archaeological, and bioarchaeological evidence: teeth, hair, toes, and limbs, as well as the broader cultural contexts and ideals of injury and impairment, including the ambiguity of prosthesis use.

Jacky Finch’s fascinating chapter brings together material culture, prostheses, and archaeology to reconstruct the Cairo Toe and another ancient Egyptian prosthetic toe, the Greville Chester Toe. Since “the rarity of these artefacts precluded their use in a laboratory trial,” Finch’s research team relied on volunteers to construct working models as design copies of the original (p. 35). Since the

toe is made of wood and research revealed the craftsman used chisels to retain the anatomy of the foot, a carving expert was recruited to the team—the 2007 British Bird Carving Champion, no less! Two volunteers with missing big toes wore the prosthesis and provided valuable insight into the functionality of the design and its usefulness. This intersection of making, replication, and experimentation is a fascinating way to approach the history of prostheses, for understanding prosthesis use certainly provides crucial insight to the lived experiences of disabled people in antiquity.

The chapters by Jean-MacIntosh Turfa and Marshall Joseph Becker on dental appliances, and by Jane Draycott on prosthetic hair, enable us to rethink the usage of seemingly cosmetic prostheses and their inception as representing class distinctions. Since the diet of Etruria was healthy and dental profiles of skeletons did not indicate regular loss of teeth, “it would appear that the lost front teeth of Etruscan women of the upper classes wearing ornamental appliances may reflect a deliberate phenomenon” (p. 62). Likewise, in considering the cultural and social importance of hair to ancient Romans, Draycott demonstrates how wigs and hairpieces were not always an indication of poor health or stigma of hair loss, but “another means for the Roman elite to demonstrate conspicuous consumption” (p. 79).

Lennart Lehmhaus’s chapter turns to the existence of prostheses in rabbinic discourse in the Talmudic corpus. Acknowledging that such sources are biased, and anonymous with a collective authorship, they nevertheless reflect how prevalent prostheses and disability were in the ancient socioreligious Jewish world; as a result, discussions around prostheses tend to be “confined to permission or prohibition of usage on certain occasions ... in a certain status ... or in different religious realms” (p. 113). Josef Eitler and Michaela Binder’s chapter also examines socioreligious contexts surrounding prostheses, this time by examining the archaeological evidence of burial grounds, focusing on the discovery of a sixth-century middle-aged man with an amputated foot replaced by a wooden prosthesis, discovered at the Hemmaberg excavation in Australia. Turning to the functional aspects of prostheses, Katherine van Schaik’s chapter reevaluates ancient descriptions of paralysis and blindness in order

to suggest how to (re)define prostheses in ancient and modern contexts.

On the “prosthetic imagination,” Anne-Sophie Noel explores whether the lived experiences of prostheses during the fifth century inspired Greek literary tragedies, including how objects became transformed into living things and whether they can be ascribed agency. Similarly, Ellen Adams broadens debate about the terminology used in discussions of prostheses to assess whether modern studies can be applied to antiquity. Drawing on scholarships from disability studies, psycho-prosthetics and sign language, Adams’s paper is an interesting contribution to existing scholarship on “normality.” However, the discussion of modern auditory aids, the Deaf community, and the cochlear implant are completely out of context given the focus of this book. I am wary of attempts to anchor modern discourse to antiquity. As Draycott asserts in the introduction, this volume is one of the few to tie disability history, material culture, and ancient history scholarship together, which presents for an exciting growth in the field. Recourse to metaphorical analysis, literary devices, and anachronistic summaries, unfortunately, diminishes the agenda. Nevertheless, *Prostheses in Antiquity* is an exciting collection that will appeal to a wide range of experts interested in the subject.

#### Notes

[1]. See the Disability History and the Ancient World website, accessed October 30, 2019, <https://www.disabilityhistory-ancientworld.com/>

[2]. Anne Sharples, “Survival of the Fittest? Experiencing Disability in Antiquity,” *Warwick Globalist*, November 11, 2015, <http://warwickglobalist.com/2015/11/11/survival-of-the-fittest-experiencing-disability-in-antiquity/>.

[3]. See “Case Study: Prosthetics in Museums,” Disability and Inclusion: Resources for Museum Studies Programs website, Art beyond Sight, accessed October 30, 2019, <http://www.artbeyondsight.org/dic/case-study-prosthetics-in-museums/>.

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