

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Jane Draycott, ed.** *Prostheses in Antiquity*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2018. 214 pp.  
\$140.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4724-8809-1.

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**Published on** H-Disability (November, 2019)

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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