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Roman Society and Disability: How Disabled Roman's Lives Were Affected by the
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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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Name Eira Smith

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2. This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA Ancient History

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3. This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated.

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Abstract

Roman Society and Disability: How Disabled Roman's Lives were Affected by the Society They Lived in explores the ways in which Roman Society would have affected their daily lives through different aspects of society such as religion and through the laws of Rome. Section 1 of this dissertation concerns disability theory and will cover the history of the models of disability. I will argue that the biopsychosocial model is the best model to use for this dissertation as it covers many aspects of disability and is flexible enough to work in ancient Rome. Section 2 of the dissertation covers aspects of society and the effects they would have had on disabled Romans. The first of these aspects covered is Religion which I will argue contributed towards discriminatory attitudes towards disabled Romans as its idea of a perfect body being required for the role of priest excluded disabled people and implied that that were morally bad. The second aspect is secular culture in this part of the section I conclude that secular culture in Rome influenced by religion was overall negative towards disabled people. The third aspect is the laws of Rome which were influenced by and influenced the previous two aspects and were discriminatory towards disabled people. The final aspect was the medical which offered a different perspective in disability in Rome and help to understand more sides of Roman society. Section 3 covers individual lives of disabled people in Rome using mainly sources that write about them rather than their own words however there are exceptions I will infer from this section that the ideas discussed in section 2 had a tangible negative impact on disabled Romans lives however how much of an impact depended on severity of disability and status in society. Section 4 covers an influential figure who shaped discourse in Rome Cicero. Cicero is used in this section to show how the elite of society would have seen disabled people in Rome. The overall conclusion to this dissertation will be that disabled people in Rome faced discrimination in daily life and faced many barriers. Wealth and status could help in certain aspects however discrimination still would have been faced.

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Introduction

The Roman state, both as the republic and empire, is one of if not the most studied areas in ancient history. The study of disability in Rome is not new, having been studied for a few decades but it is a rapidly growing subject¹². This dissertation will study the societal views of Rome towards disabled people and the individual lives of disabled people in order to understand how Roman society's views affected their lives.

In modern times, the general understanding of disability has come under scrutiny. Scholars have critiqued medical and social models, and have analysed definitions of disability, ableism and impairment. The discourse has developed significantly over the last few decades in trying to come to an understanding of what it means to be disabled³. In recent years, the ways to analyse disability in historical settings have improved, with models such as the biopsychosocial model becoming more prevalent. This model has

¹ Emily Lamond, 'Disability and the Ancient Roman Familia' (unpublished Thesis, University of Michigan, 2023), p. 1, doi:10.7302/7495.

² Christian Laes, C. F. Goodey, and M. Lynn Rose, 'Approaching Disabilities a Capite Ad Calcem: Hidden Themes in Roman Antiquity', in *Disabilities in Roman Antiquity: Disparate Bodies A Capite Ad Calcem* (Brill, 2013), p. 4, doi:10.1163/9789004251250_002.

³ Mason J. Shrader, 'Moving Beyond the Medical Model: Assessing the Bioarchaeology of Disability in the Roman Empire' (unpublished Thesis, Texas Tech University, 2023), pp. 11–13 <<https://hdl.handle.net/2346/96865>> [accessed 14 July 2025].

been used effectively by Kyle West to analyse attitudes towards disability in Rome through the works of Cicero⁴.

What was the lived experience of disabled people in Ancient Rome

How was Disability understood in Roman Society

How did ideas of disability relate to Roman ideals of the body

Romans did not have a concept of disability as we think of it in the modern sense. That is not to say that there were no words for impairments, there were many, but they did not have a word that put people with various impairments in one group⁵. People with impairments, both mental and physical, would have faced similar challenges to disabled people in the modern world. Roman society viewed disability as a moral failing and would have seen it as an individual's problem⁶. Whilst, for the most part, disability was seen in a negative light, there were cases such as Sergius Silas, whose disabilities were valorised. This was because he had acquired his disabilities in combat⁷. The idea of the perfect body was very important in Greece this can be seen in their statues, which depict people and gods as muscular and flawless. This idea was later adopted by the Romans. This idea meant that certain disabilities were seen as moral failings⁸. The lived experience of disability depended greatly on the type and severity of disability a person had, as well as the access to wealth someone had. For example, a patrician who had mobility issues could afford to be carried around the city in a litter, while a plebeian most likely would not⁹.

Methodology

The primary sources used in this dissertation include Pliny the Elder's *The Natural History* and Suetonius' *The Twelve Caesars* the primary sources are all books. The primary sources were sourced from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David online library as well as from physical copies I personally own. These were used in the dissertation for developing an understanding of various aspects of Roman culture that affected disabled people and for analysing the lives of individual Romans to give a greater picture of what life was like for disabled Romans in general. The secondary

⁴ Kyle William West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero' (unpublished Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2023) <<https://repository.upenn.edu/entities/publication/5d48754c-366b-4bc8-a137-9af76128cff4>> [accessed 10 October 2026].

⁵ Christian Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World: A Social and Cultural History* (Davidfonds Uitgeverij, 2014; repr., Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 1–4, doi:10.1017/9781316678480.

⁶ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 7–12.

⁷ Josef Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', in *Marginalised Groups in Antiquity*, ed. by Josef Fischer and Rainer Feldbacher, Studien Zur Geschichtsforschung Des Altertums (Hamburg, 2021), xLIV, p. 204 <https://www.academia.edu/128047525/Disability_and_Society_in_classical_Antiquity>.

⁸ Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', pp. 202–03.

⁹ Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', pp. 192–95.

sources used in this dissertation include *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World: A Social and Cultural History* by Christian Laes and the *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, which was edited by Nick Watson, Alan Roulstone and Carol Thomas. The secondary sources are books, dissertations, academic articles, and conference proceedings. The secondary sources help to further flesh out the Roman attitudes towards disabled people and help to ground the dissertation in disability theory.

Literature review

The way a society thinks about disability changes overtime and therefore modern frameworks of disability are unlikely to fit well in an ancient context. The literature on critical disability theory explores and critiques the different perspectives and will allow the identification of a Roman framework for disability through an analysis of the social and cultural contexts of the Roman world. A key work that provides the overarching framework of critical disability theory for this dissertation is the work of Margrit Shildrick (2019).

The Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies is an extremely useful book for this dissertation, offering a range of chapters by various academics in the field of disability studies that help shape the theory on which it is built. As this book is so important, several chapters shall be reviewed in light of their contribution to this dissertation.

Understanding the Social Model of Disability: Past, Present and Future is the second chapter of this book, written by Colin Barnes. Barnes notes that prior to the industrial revolution, people with impairments were integrated for the most part into society however, despite this, oppression and discrimination were widespread. Barnes states that the social model is a form of social oppression similar to those faced by women, Ethnic Minorities and LGBTQIA+ people. Barnes states that the social model differentiates between impairment and disability, with impairment being the physical or mental issue affecting the individual, whilst disability is the result of societal organisation not taking into account people with impairments, causing restrictions on what they can do in society. Barnes gives an account of the origins and history of the social model in this chapter. Overall, this chapter will be very useful for the dissertation as it explains the social model of disability and contrasts it with the older medical model. Barnes. C. 2019 *Understanding the Social Model of Disability: Past, Present and Future*. Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies: Past, Present and Future.

Critical Disability Studies: Rethinking the Conventions for the Age of Postmodernity is a chapter by Margrit Shildrick. Critical disability studies (CDS) builds upon the social model, taking some of its ideas and expanding upon them. CDS uses both postmodernism and postconventional theory to critique existing assumptions about disability (both modern and historical) within disability studies and beyond. Shildrick states that CDS looks at why disabled people are discriminated against, not how. This will be useful in this dissertation as it will help to further understand disability theory and how to apply it to Roman society. Shildrick. M. 2019 *Critical Disability Studies: Rethinking the Conventions for the Age of Postmodernity* Routledge Handbook of Disabilities Studies: Rethinking Conventions for the age of post modernity.

Disability in the world of Cicero by Kyle West is a thesis that posits another model of disability called the biopsychosocial model which covers more aspects of disability than other models mentioned. This thesis also sheds light on how elite able-bodied people could affect disabled people's lives through their own beliefs it does this by analysing the works of Cicero. Overall, this source will be very useful as the biopsychosocial model will help to get a better understanding of disability theory and it will help to understand the lives of disabled people in Rome. The focus on Cicero will give an elite perspective if he views Romans society had about disabled people

West. K. 2023 *Disability in the world of Cicero* University of Pennsylvania

Whilst there is a scarcity of accounts from the Roman world of the experience of disability, several writers have gathered information on the topic in their research. Scholars who have researched the lived experience in ancient Rome include Jane Draycott (2015), Christian Leas (2018) and Josef Fischer (2021).

Reconstructing the lived experience of disability in Antiquity: A case study from Roman Egypt, written by Jane Draycott, explores the lives of disabled people in the Roman Empire, specifically in Egypt. The article focuses on three individuals, those being Sergius Silas, a Roman military commander who became disabled due to war, Domitius Tullus, a Roman senator who became disabled later in life and Gaius Gemellus Horigenes a wealthy person who may have become a Roman citizen later in life who complained to the authorities in Egypt about discriminatory treatment that he was facing on multiple occasions. The major focus in this article is Roman Egypt, particularly how disabled people were treated there. For example, they would have been granted financial relief in the form of tax exemptions. Although this was not always followed properly by tax collectors, as shown by a complaint made by Ulpia Herois. There are many records of disabled people in Roman Egypt that have been discovered on papyri with the most detailed being Fischer also discusses the restrictions that Roman law put on disabled people, these include what occupations they would be allowed to have, as they were excluded from priesthoods as well as from being undertakers. Also, in the case of deaf people, they were not allowed to make

applications to magistrates or wills. With a carer being required who would have responsibility over their finances. This will be useful in this dissertation as it contains a detailed account of the only detailed source we have from a disabled Roman. Draycott. J. 2015 *Reconstructing the Lived Experience of Disability in Antiquity: A Case Study from Roman Egypt* is Roman Egypt. Greece and Rome.

Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity is a book section by Josef Fischer covering various sources for disabled individuals and disability in general in Rome. These include an account from Dionysius of Halicarnassus that Romulus, the mythical founder of Rome, who, according to Dionysius, decreed that a father could leave a disabled infant to die of exposure if the disability was confirmed by his neighbours. Fischer states that it is unclear whether this was an ancient practice in Rome or rather a newer invention that was being justified with a mythologised backstory. This section covers various factors of disability including religion which covered both representation of disability in mythology and the impact that religion had on disabled people's lives another aspect covered is the difficulty that a disabled person would have in getting a job if their conditions were bad. This source is going to be very useful in this dissertation as it covers a lot of aspects of disability in society. Fischer. J. 2021 *Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity*, Marginalised Groups in Antiquity.

Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World: A Social and Cultural History, by Christian Laes, is a key scholarly work for this dissertation and includes many important chapters. These chapters cover a range of topics, from models of disability that are used to study disability in history to how physicians in the ancient world treated disabilities. The vast range of topics this book covers makes it exceedingly useful in multiple sections of this dissertation. In the Roman world, Laes argues for the use of the social-stress model to research mental disabilities, as it combines the best parts of the other models of mental disability. The social-stress model acknowledges the medical foundations of many mental and intellectual disabilities whilst at the same time recognising that the social landscape in which a person may find themselves will have a significant impact on their impairment. This allows for a consideration of such things as situation and social position within society, such as gender or whether a person is a slave or a citizen and how that may have an impact on the experience of disability.

Disability and the Ancient Roman Familia is a thesis by Emily Lamond covers many aspects of disability within the Roman family from how it would affect marriage to how disability would have affected childhood in the Roman world. Lamond shows how the differences in circumstances from wealth to severity of disability effected outcomes. This source is very useful as it focuses on the familial aspect of disability which will be useful in giving another perspective on the lives of disabled people in Roman Society.

Section 1

To understand Roman ways of thinking about disability, we must first understand what a model of disability is. A model of disability is a framework through which society views disability and, therefore, how a society treats disabled people¹⁰. They are a useful device to help understand how societies, both past and present, viewed and treated disabled people. As well as models of disability, disability theory in general must be factored into the dissertation in order to better contextualise the examples of disability in ancient Rome. A discussion of modern terms of disability as well as ancient terms found in the texts will be useful, as the modern, more generalised terms make it easier to discuss disability in ancient Rome as a whole rather than using individual terms for the different impairments throughout the text. The ancient terms used in Rome help to understand Roman attitude towards disabled people through the language used for them¹¹.

The modern terms used for disability developed in the mid to late twentieth century. These terms were created by disability activists in the midst of developing the social model of disability, much like the model they were made by disabled people for disabled people rather than imposed upon them¹². Two of the main terms created at

¹⁰ Shrader, 'Moving Beyond the Medical Model', pp. 11–13.

¹¹ Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', p. 179.

¹² Colin Barnes, 'Understanding the Social Model of Disability', in *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies: Past, Present and Future*, ed. by Nick Watson and Simo Vehmas (Taylor & Francis Group, 2019),

this time were disability and impairment. The words, of course, already existed, but they were given new meaning that better fit the needs of disabled people and the social model of disability¹³.

Ancient Roman terms did not include a word for disability as a whole, as this was not, at the time, a concept, being a much more modern term used to group various people with impairments. The Romans did, however, have terms for various types of impairments. These terms include *ostentum* and *teras*. These terms refer to impairments in ways that equate them to monstrosity¹⁴. This way of referring to impairments would have reinforced discriminatory feelings among people in the wider populace that would have contributed towards the disabling of people with impairments in Roman society and would also have negatively affected the mental well-being of disabled people in Roman society due to the constant comparison to monsters that they would have faced¹⁵¹⁶. There were also terms used that did not equate disabled people to monsters such as *Caecus* which means blind and *surdus* which means deaf Fischer says that it was very common to refer to disabled people as monsters¹⁷

Disability, as seen through the lens of the social model, is understood as the barriers put up by society that stop people who do not fit the able-bodied norms from being able to fully participate in society. These barriers range from physical barriers such as a lack of drop curbs for wheelchair users or a lack of support through other means that would help disabled people to have full access to society and live independently¹⁸. This term will be useful in this dissertation as it helps to group various conditions, both mental and physical, that would have hindered participation in ancient Roman society.

Impairment is used in the social model of disability to mean the cause of the disabling of the person. This term covers a wide range of conditions, and of course it does not matter how the condition came about. Separating the impairment itself from the concept of disability in general is useful for helping to determine when society is discriminating against disabled people in general, as it helps to emphasise society's failure to accommodate disabled people regardless of impairment¹⁹. It will help to use it in the historical context to differentiate between talking about the condition itself and the wider impacts of ableism in Roman society.

pp. 38–66 (p. 41) <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=5963840>> [accessed 3 February 2026].

¹³ Barnes, 'Understanding the Social Model of Disability', p. 41.

¹⁴ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 7–8.

¹⁵ West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero', pp. 40–41.

¹⁶ Jane Draycott, 'RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY: A CASE STUDY FROM ROMAN EGYPT', *Greece & Rome*, 62.2 (2015), pp. 189–205 (pp. 15–16), doi:10.1017/S0017383515000066.

¹⁷ Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', p. 179.

¹⁸ Barnes, 'Understanding the Social Model of Disability', pp. 41–42.

¹⁹ Barnes, 'Understanding the Social Model of Disability', pp. 41–42.

Inspiration porn is a way in which able-bodied people objectify disabled people, using them for their own benefit²⁰. An example of this would be an image of a disabled person playing a sport with the caption “What is your excuse?” written on it²¹. Whilst this is just one example of what inspiration porn can be, it gets across the basic premise that disabled people are used as props to shame and inspire able-bodied people, with no thought actually given to the personhood of the disabled individual. This is why Inspiration porn is inherently ableist²². Was anything similar to inspiration porn present in Roman society? If so, what were the similarities and differences? Having a working idea of inspiration porn in the modern day will help to analyse ancient Roman sources and look for signs of inspiration porn.

The medical model of disability emerged during the Industrial Revolution. This model frames disability as a purely medical phenomenon. This model advocates both medicalising disability and institutionalising disabled people. The medical model was a creation of able-bodied people that was forced onto disabled people²³. This model may have some similarities with how Romans viewed disability, as the Romans would have seen some disabilities as a medical issue. However, institutionalisation of disabled people did not occur in Roman society. This is not to say that Rome treated disabled people well, they were still excluded from certain roles in society. However, institutionalisation was not a thing²⁴.

The social model of disability was created in the 1960’s by disabled people advocating for their rights and scholars. This model emphasises that impairment and disability should be separated, as in this model, impairment refers to the physical or mental issue, and disability refers to the barriers put in place by society that make it more difficult or prevent people with impairments from fully participating in society²⁵. The people who subscribe to this model advocate for these societal barriers to be torn down by making buildings and streets more accessible and by ridding society of ableism. The emergence of this model coincided with a growing sense of shared identity amongst disabled people²⁶. This model is useful for figuring out what barriers there would have been in ancient Rome for disabled people that would have prevented them from fully participating in their society however, the social model cannot be completely applied

²⁰ Ryan Thorneycroft, ‘Pornographication: Exploring the “Porn” in “Inspiration Porn”’, *Porn Studies*, 12.2 (2023), pp. 330–35.

²¹ Thorneycroft, ‘Pornographication: Exploring the “Porn” in “Inspiration Porn”’, pp. 330–35.

²² Dan Bernard, ‘Benevolent Ableism Is Still Ableism: Objectification and “Inspiration Porn”’, *Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology*, 67.3 (2024), p. 276.

²³ Shrader, ‘Moving Beyond the Medical Model’, pp. 11–12.

²⁴ Barnes, ‘Understanding the Social Model of Disability’, pp. 39–39.

²⁵ Barnes, ‘Understanding the Social Model of Disability’, pp. 39–41.

²⁶ Barnes, ‘Understanding the Social Model of Disability’, pp. 39–41.

when looking at ancient Roman society, as there was not a shared identity amongst disabled Romans as there is in the modern day²⁷.

The biopsychosocial Model of disability is a multifactorial approach to disability, unlike the medical model, whose focus is entirely on the body, ignoring societal discrimination and the views of disabled people themselves, the biopsychosocial model acknowledges that impairment does have a factor in the lives of disabled people, viewing it through a critical realist lens, however, it does not only use the body, viewing it as only one facet of disability as a whole²⁸. The biopsychosocial model also critiques the social model for focusing too much on the societal aspect of disability and minimising or ignoring other aspects of disability²⁹.

Whilst the biopsychosocial model acknowledges that societal oppression is a large aspect of disability, it argues that the social aspect is not the only important one. Other aspects include the biological aspect, studied through a critical realist lens³⁰ and also an aspect not particularly touched on by the other two models of disability the psychological aspect emphasises how the society that a disabled person finds themselves in can affect their own outlook on their lives a negative perception of their condition can make their own outlook worse³¹.

The final aspect touched upon within this model is the socio-political aspect of disability. This covers economic status for example, a wealthy Roman would have an easier time navigating the world with a disability than a poorer Roman would³². It also covers political effects on disability a good example of this would be the Labour government in the United Kingdom's attempt to exclude more disabled people from personal independence payments, a disability benefit which, if removed, would impact their lives for the worse³³. The model recognises that modern concepts of disability and what disability looked like in different societies across time would all be different this makes it very useful for viewing disability in ancient Rome³⁴.

Shildrick explains how views on disability are shaped by the cultural context of the time and place.

Historians have shown that impairment, like disability, is socially created. It cannot be removed from the material conditions and social and economic structures that produce and contain it, nor cannot it be separated from race, class, gender, religion, sexuality and other markers of identity. Among other things,

²⁷ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 2–6.

²⁸ West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero', pp. 37–39.

²⁹ West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero', pp. 39–41.

³⁰ West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero', pp. 39–41.

³¹ West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero', p. 40.

³² West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero', pp. 40–41.

³³ West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero', pp. 39–42.

³⁴ West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero', pp. 40–42.

this more nuanced way of thinking about impairment makes it impossible to think of it as existing outside of politics or history.³⁵

The disabled identity is determined by its unique position in time and space and can be inferred through an examination of attitudes, practices, traditions and conventions. Disability is inherently intersectional, as shown by the evidence from Rome itself. For example, we know little about disabled women in Rome despite the fact that disabled women obviously existed.

The three models of disability analysed above have very different ways of viewing disability. The medical model, whilst useful for understanding the creation of the subsequent models, is itself a very reductive way of viewing disability and not particularly useful for studying disability in ancient Rome³⁶. The social model is more useful than the medical model both as a general model of disability and also as one to use in a historical basis however, when it comes to being a model for analysing disability in ancient Rome, it has its flaws. Its focus on the social aspect only, to the detriment of other aspects of disability, limits its use³⁷. The biopsychosocial model takes a multifactorial approach, which allows the flexibility to apply this model easily to historical societies such as Rome. Its multifactorial approach towards disability also helps to analyse sources in greater detail, getting more out of them than otherwise³⁸. For these reasons, this dissertation will mostly follow a biopsychosocial approach towards disability in ancient Rome.

Similarly to disability as a whole, there are models specifically for mental and intellectual disabilities. These specific models are used to help identify mental and intellectual disabilities in history, the models focus on different ways of thinking about mental and intellectual disabilities as well as different techniques for researching them in history. Some of these models can be used together, whilst others are opposed and would be difficult to use at the same time without modification³⁹.

The medical model treats intellectual and mental disabilities the same as physical disabilities, believing that they must have a purely physiological cause. Scholars who subscribe to the medical model look for physical evidence of these disabilities on the

³⁵ Margrit Shildrick, 'Critical Disability Studies: Rethinking the Conventions for the Age of Postmodernity', in *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, ed. by Nick Watson and Simo Vehmas (Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), pp. 67–87 <<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=5963840>> [accessed 3 February 2026].

³⁶ Shrader, 'Moving Beyond the Medical Model', pp. 11–12.

³⁷ Shrader, 'Moving Beyond the Medical Model', pp. 11–13.

³⁸ West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero', pp. 39–41.

³⁹ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 43–46.

body for example, evidence of Down's Syndrome can be detected in the skeleton⁴⁰. Whilst the medical model is useful for looking at mental and physical disabilities that leave behind physical evidence, it has its limitations. This model is over-reliant on physical evidence of intellectual and mental disability and, as such, is not particularly useful for studying disabilities that do not leave physical evidence⁴¹. The medical model doesn't take account of how different societies view disability what is disabling in one place may not be seen as disabling in another. Its focus on physiological causes is to the detriment of other causes such as trauma⁴².

The psychological model assumes that the cause and effect of certain actions are transcultural and transtemporal, meaning that no matter what society and what time that society existed in, actions such as abuse will invariably lead to psychological trauma. This model also argues that strong impulses in the brain and intellectual factors will lead to certain psychological reactions, an example being low dopamine leading towards depression⁴³. The psychological model is useful for helping to interpret ancient descriptions of mental disabilities and helping to narrow down what may have caused symptoms, whilst it does have its merits, it, much like the medical model, fails to consider a society's impact on mental disabilities. Exclusively using this model excludes physical evidence, making this model limited in its use, much like the medical model is limited by its use of physical evidence only.

The anti-psychiatric model is based mainly on the works of Foucault and opposes the previous two models. Those who follow the anti-psychiatric model view mental and intellectual disabilities as well as mental illness as social constructions, psychiatry and the labelling of people as mad are viewed by the model as an imposition of a common pattern of thinking through the power of a society and what counts as mad differs between societies⁴⁴. It argues that people who would have been considered mad in Roman society are not comparable to people who would be considered mentally ill or mentally disabled in modern western society⁴⁵. The anti-psychiatric model, unlike the previous two models, focuses on society and its impacts upon the psyche, what society deems sane and insane and how that changes through time and between different societies. However, as it rejects both the medical model and the psychological model completely, it does not necessarily give a full picture of mental disability in ancient Rome⁴⁶.

⁴⁰ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, p. 44.

⁴¹ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, p. 44.

⁴² Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 44–45.

⁴³ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 44–45.

⁴⁴ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, p. 45.

⁴⁵ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, p. 45.

⁴⁶ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, p. 45.

The social-stress model uses a psychosocial approach to mental disability, and instead of rejecting the other models of mental and intellectual disability outright, it takes the best parts of them and incorporates them into this model⁴⁷. This model acknowledges the influence of society on mental disabilities, such as how they are perceived by a society and how societal structures affect the impairments, whilst maintaining that there have always been people with what we would understand today as depression, hyperactive disorders and many other impairments⁴⁸.

The main model for intellectual and mental disabilities that will be used in this dissertation is the social-stress model. This is because, unlike the other models, it is not limited by subscribing to one idea but instead tries to incorporate them all smoothly so that a full picture of disability in history can be achieved. This makes it the most useful model for this dissertation, as it will be able to be used for any evidence of intellectual and mental disability and help to gain a better understanding of what life was like for disabled Romans.

Critical disability theory asserts that disability is culturally and institutionally constructed. Building on this basis, it seeks to understand disability in historical and societal contexts. CDT aims to apply to any society. This mouldability makes CDT very useful in a range of disability studies, including the history of disability⁴⁹.

CDT emerges as part of the critical theory tradition. According to Hosking CDT has the agenda of identifying oppressive constructs that marginalise disabled people and seeks to emancipate them from societal oppression⁵⁰.

Disability studies is an inherently intersectional field ranging from sociology through to history. The study of disability in history began in the 1980's. The aim of this field is to understand what it was like for disabled people in the past. The study of disability in ancient Rome is still a fairly small but growing field^{51,52}.

Understanding the various models of disability and choosing one main model to ground the dissertation in will help to keep the dissertation consistent. The biopsychosocial

⁴⁷ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, p. 45.

⁴⁸ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, p. 45.

⁴⁹ Shildrick, 'Critical Disability Studies: Rethinking the Conventions for the Age of Postmodernity', pp. 67–69.

⁵⁰ David L. Hosking, 'Critical Disability Theory', *4th Biennial Disability Studies Conference*, 2 September 2008, pp. 1–17 (p. 3)

<https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/events/disabilityconference_archive/2008/papers/hosking2008.pdf>

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⁵¹ Shildrick, 'Critical Disability Studies: Rethinking the Conventions for the Age of Postmodernity', pp. 67–69.

⁵² Shrader, 'Moving Beyond the Medical Model', p. 1.

model of disability covers many aspects of disability and is best suited for historical disability studies and will be useful in this dissertation. For mental and intellectual disabilities, a more specific model helps in studying them throughout historical periods the social-stress model of disability will be the most useful for this dissertation, as it has taken the best from all the other models and combined them into a flexible model that studies the full breadth of mental and intellectual disabilities in ancient Rome. The models are important for this dissertation, but so is knowledge of both modern and ancient terms for disability and impairment, as well as critical disability theory and a working definition of disability porn. Overall, the theories, models and definitions stated above will help this dissertation achieve its goals.

Section 2

Analysing aspects of Roman religion and secular culture can help to understand Roman views on disability, such as whether there were their restrictions on how disabled people could participate in Roman religious practices and whether Roman religious thought viewed disability as punishment coming from the gods. How much did Roman religious views on disability influence societal views of disability in general? Excluding religion, how else were disabled people viewed in Roman society? The examples of religion and culture in ancient Rome, whilst not extensive, will show various ways in which disabled Romans were viewed and treated; these will further develop understanding of the lived experiences of disabled Romans.

The laws of the Roman state varied throughout its existence and would be difficult, if not impossible, to fully cover in this dissertation however, it will be possible to take examples of Roman laws that affected disabled people, whether positive or negative, and analyse what these laws would have meant for the daily life of a disabled person in Roman society. Were they restrictive in what disabled people could do for themselves, making it difficult to navigate society?

Another cultural lens to view Roman society's views of people with disabilities through is a medicinal one. This can show aspects that the others don't, such as how disabilities were treated in the ancient world, where there were prosthetics for limbs, for example. It can also give an insight into how disabilities were thought to come about. It will also be useful to note how connected they were, i.e. were mental and physical impairments thought of in the same way. Understanding the Roman medical view of disability will help to gain a better understanding of Roman society as a whole's views.

Looking at Roman society through these three lenses will help to gain a much fuller picture of the way in which disabled people were treated and will help to understand

how much, if any, variety there was in how disabled people were treated in Rome depending on factors such as how they became disabled and what their disabilities were.

In Roman religion, priests were expected to have unimpaired bodies to be able to do their jobs. This was because, according to Fischer, ancient Roman society viewed impairments as punishments from the gods, making people with disabilities, in their view, unsuitable for the priesthoods of Rome⁵³. This belief that disabled people were not favoured by the gods ultimately restricted what disabled Romans could do in society, not only by directly preventing them from being involved in religious roles but also by essentially banning them from politics, as a lot of roles in Roman politics also involved presiding over religious events, as the two were intertwined in ancient Rome⁵⁴. These combined shut disabled people on the whole out of the levers of power however, exceptions were made to these rules at times. There were various reasons for these exemptions from the norms of Roman society, ranging from being a war hero to being the only person left for the job of emperor. This shows that whilst it was sometimes possible for disabled people to rise in politics in Rome, it was never easy and almost always faced with hostility from some sectors of society⁵⁵⁶.

Another reason given for excluding disabled individuals from the priesthoods of Rome was their ability to recite prayers correctly in order to not disrespect the gods. This would prevent people with speech impediments from serving in the priesthoods. This shows that the idea of bodily perfection was not just physical but could include other factors⁵⁷.

Most disabilities in some sections of Roman society were considered to be punishments from the gods for moral failings. This attitude led to a lot of negative feelings towards disabled people from the members of Roman society who believed this to be true because they perceived disability as the individual's own failing, whilst most impairments were seen this way, blindness could be seen as a sign that the gods had granted an individual with a gift⁵⁸. On average, most disabled people would have been viewed negatively and discriminated against by the people who subscribed to this view of disability. Blind people in ancient Rome would have had trouble getting around on their own and would have needed guides⁵⁹.

The Roman idea of the perfect body, a concept the Romans seem to have adopted from the Greeks, further reinforced the negative views towards disability in Roman society,

⁵³ Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', pp. 202–04.

⁵⁴ Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', pp. 203–05.

⁵⁵ Lamond, 'Disability and the Ancient Roman Familia', pp. 121–22.

⁵⁶ Draycott, 'RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY', p. 4.

⁵⁷ Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', p. 203.

⁵⁸ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 81–87.

⁵⁹ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 99–100.

having a perfect, unimpaired body was required for certain jobs, including in the priesthoods of Rome⁶⁰. Having a perfect body was seen as a sign of good moral character this idea that an unimpaired body equalled being a good person means that it makes sense that the opposite was also true in their minds. Overall, the idea of a perfect body further reinforces the discriminatory attitudes towards disabled people that were present in ancient Roman society⁶¹.

Some examples of disability playing a factor in Roman mythology include the god Vulcan, who, upon being conflated with the Greek god Hephaestus, took on many of his traits such as smithing and also his disability, which he acquired after his father Jupiter threw him down a mountain, making one of his legs weaker than the other one. One of the main gods of the Roman pantheon being disabled shows that disability was acknowledged and not hidden for the gods, at least⁶².

Overall, the impact that religious views on disability would have had on disabled people in Rome would have been significant, as religion in ancient Rome was very pervasive throughout society, being intertwined with politics. The discriminatory opinions towards disabled people from a religious perspective led to them having fewer chances to climb higher in society by working in religious jobs such as priests and Vestal Virgins, which was also a major reason preventing disabled people from getting far in politics, as they needed to participate in religious activities⁶³. Despite their prejudice against disabled people, some who were disabled in a way seen as better than others or who were rich and connected enough could get past these rules, but not without heavy opposition⁶⁴.

Roman names consisted of a praenomen, a first name such as Marcus or Gnaeus, a nomen, a family name like Tullius or Julius, and a cognomen mainly originating as nicknames or given to honour an individual such as Scipio Africanus, who was given his cognomen after defeating Hannibal. Cognomina were used to help differentiate between similarly named people. It was quite common to have patricians with the same name due to the small pool of praenomen and nomen that were used⁶⁵.

⁶⁰ Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', pp. 202–03.

⁶¹ Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', pp. 202–03.

⁶² Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', pp. 180–81.

⁶³ Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', pp. 202–04.

⁶⁴ Mary Beagon, 'Beyond Comparison: M. Sergius, Fortunae Victor', in *Philosophy and Power in the Greco-Roman World: Essays in Honour of Miriam Griffin*, ed. by Gillian Clark and Tessa Rajak (2002), pp. 113–15.

⁶⁵ Beagon, 'Beyond Comparison: M. Sergius, Fortunae Victor', pp. 113–14.

⁶⁶ Lamond, 'Disability and the Ancient Roman Familia', pp. 121–22.

⁶⁷ Jeremy Armstrong, 'Roman Naming Conventions', in *Children of Mars: The Origins of Rome's Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2025), pp. 229–30.

Plutarch, a Greek philosopher and biographer born in Boeotia around 50 CE who would later in life become a Roman citizen⁶⁸, comments on the use of cognomina that refer to disabilities

Translation: “Moreover, from bodily features they not only bestow such surnames as Sulla, Niger, and Rufus, but also such as Caecus and Claudius. And they do well thus to accustom men to regard neither blindness nor any other bodily misfortune as a reproach or a disgrace, but to answer to such names as though their own.”

Plut. Vit. Coriol. 11

This is an interesting insight into how disability was viewed in Roman times. Plutarch shows there is a sensitivity around disability and views cognomina based on impairments as a way to normalise them. Plutarch refers to people negatively viewing disabled people using words such as “reproach” and “disgrace”. This hints at a shared exclusion of disabled people from Roman society⁶⁹. Plutarch states that some cognomina were based on disabilities that the original bearer would have had, such as Caecus, which means “blind”. In the Roman world, there are a number of examples of cognomina that reference disability⁷⁰.

Publius Furius Crassipes was Adile and during his tenure he minted coins that depicted a foot in reference to his Cognomen which translates to fat foot The example of P. Furius Crassipes shows that not everyone in Roman society necessarily viewed disability, or at the very least being named for a disability, negatively, with some such as himself not shying away from it⁷¹. This shows that whilst there may be general trends in Roman society towards viewing people with disabilities in a negative light, it was not an opinion shared by everyone, as societies are not monoliths, with people such as Crassipes going against the majority opinion.

Disabled people have, throughout history, been used for entertainment purposes by the able-bodied majority an example of this would be disabled people being made to dance for entertainment in ancient Greece and Rome⁷². It goes without saying that these were exploitative and ableist practices. Aside from dancing how else were disabled people used for the entertainment of able-bodied people in ancient Rome?

“Certain men who were lame in their feet and others who could not walk, he dressed up as giants, encasing their legs from the knee down in wrappings and bandages to

⁶⁸ Robin Waterfield, ‘Roman Lives, General Introduction’, in *Roman Lives* (1999; 21st edn, Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. ix–x.

⁶⁹ Plutarch, *Lives Volume IV: Alcibides and Coriolinus. Lysander and Sulla*, trans. by Bernadotte Perrin (Harvard University Press, 1916), pp. 143–45.

⁷⁰ Plutarch, *Lives Volume IV: Alcibides and Coriolinus. Lysander and Sulla*, pp. 143–45.

⁷¹ Fischer, ‘Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity’, p. 207.

⁷² Fischer, ‘Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity’, pp. 211–12.

make them look like serpents, and then dispatched them with his arrows.” *His. Aug. Cotheir*, 7

“He displayed two misshapen hunchbacks on a silver platter after smearing them with mustard, and then straightway advanced and enriched them.” *Hist. Aug., Comm.* 11, 2.

The Historia Augusta, whilst considered to be not reliable as a historical source, was written centuries after the events it records and despite misattributing or faking sources, it can still be useful in so much as it offers an insight into the cultural feelings on disabled people through the way they are represented in the book⁷³. The book asserts that the emperor Commodus used disabled people for his personal entertainment, sometimes harming them and sometimes rewarding them, but always through humiliating means⁷⁴. This is meant to reflect badly on him, as this unnecessary cruelty is meant to show his own madness. The book uses disabled people to attack emperor Commodus. Whilst the *Historia Augustus* is dubious at best it is also one of the best sources for the period it covers and it is known that disabled people were used for entertainment at the time⁷⁵.

Vitium was a Roman term for an impairment which directly translated to an error or defect. This term covered a wide range of areas including infertility, stammering and physical impairments⁷⁶. In Rome, if a slave was found to have been vitiosus before being purchased, the buyer could send the slave back and have their money returned. There was debate about this rule however an example Laes gives of this debate comes from Trebatius who argues that if a slave was naturally infertile the buyer would not be compensated however if it had come about through disease they would be however others disagreed and considered all infertile people both morbosus and vitiosus⁷⁷.

Morbus was a Roman term for disease, specifically referring to a disease that reduced a slave’s capacity to work these could be more temporary diseases that could be recovered from, such as influenza and broken bones or more permanent ones, including deafness and losing use of a limb⁷⁸.

These two terms are intertwined, as if a person was considered morbus, they would also be considered vitiosus, whether the morbus was temporary or permanent. This interconnection did not fully go both ways, however, as not all Vitium were considered morbus. Some, such as stammering, would not have been seen as a disease but still

⁷³ *Historia Augusta Volume 1*, trans. by David Magie (Harvard University Press, 2022), pp. xiii–xvi.

⁷⁴ ‘Commodus Antoninus’, in *Historia Augusta Volume 1*, trans. by David Magie (Harvard University Press, 2022), p. 273.

⁷⁵ Fischer, ‘Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity’, pp. 211–14.

⁷⁶ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 9–10.

⁷⁷ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 9–10.

⁷⁸ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 9–10.

considered a vitium. This shows that the concept of vitium was especially varied, covering an even wider range of impairments than Morbus⁷⁹.

These two terms show that Romans believed that impairments could come from diseases or that a person could just have them. They show that Romans considered disabled slaves to be less valuable than able-bodied slaves in general⁸⁰. The meaning of vitium shows quite a negative attitude towards impairment itself, calling them defects or errors⁸¹. Whilst not the most egregious examples of negative depictions of disability through wording that can be found in Rome, they contribute to the overall picture of Roman attitudes towards the disabled.

The parts of Roman culture explored here in this section cover a wide range of subjects, from Roman naming conventions, which show a more positive aspect of Romans' views on disability, to far more negative aspects such as terms specifically used for slaves with disabilities. If slaves were labelled with these, then the people who bought them could be refunded. Another rather negative aspect of life for disabled people in Roman society that is explored is the use of disabled people for entertainment by the wealthy classes. These show that attitudes were varied however, they leaned heavily negative, especially for slaves and those who would be made to be entertainment.

The legal system in Rome was deliberately hostile towards deaf people, stripping them of their autonomy by requiring them to have a guardian who would have power over their lives, taking away a lot of their financial and legal rights. Their capacity to work was reduced because they were barred from certain careers⁸²⁸³. Looking at some of the laws that specifically affected deaf people in Rome will help shed light on just how restricted they were by the legal system.

The Digest of Justinian is a compilation of Roman law created in the 530's CE. By Justinian. This digest compiled, organised and revised Roman laws on things from slavery to disability. This digest will be useful to analyse as the laws that were implemented against disabled people⁸⁴⁸⁵.

These are just some examples of Roman laws that restricted the autonomy of deaf people. This shows that Rome was hostile towards deaf people, not treating them as full

⁷⁹ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 9–10.

⁸⁰ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 9–10.

⁸¹ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 9–10.

⁸² Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', p. 199.

⁸³ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 124–27.

⁸⁴ Deborah Baumgold, 'Slavery Discourse Before the Restoration: The Barbary Coast, Justinians Digest And Hobbes's Political Theory', *History of European Ideas*, 36.4 (2010), pp. 415–16.

⁸⁵ Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', p. 199.

members of society. Not able to advocate for themselves legally due to the laws restricting their control over their own affairs⁸⁶.

Laes states that ancient authors would try to understand impairment, specifically impairment at birth, through the concept of ostentum which means monster. Laes uses the works of Ulpian, a Roman jurist, to define ostentum and to explain what effect this concept had on laws⁸⁷. Laes finds that ostentum referred to impairments acquired at birth but might also be a status one could acquire through becoming impaired later in life. The impairments that could lead to someone being labelled ostentum were generally physical and disfiguring⁸⁸.

There was debate in Rome as to whether laws introduced by Augustus granting privileges to parents of three children should count children who were deemed ostentum towards the three. According to Laes, Ulpian argued that because neither the mother nor father were at fault for the child's disability, the child should count towards the three, whilst others like Paulus argued that children deemed ostentum should not count except for those who had polydactyly⁸⁹.

Seneca says that Roman children born with impairments were routinely subject to infanticide. According to Seneca, this was based on laws dating from the founding of Rome by Romulus⁹⁰. Whether or not this practice was really as widespread as Seneca indicated, it certainly shows a very negative attitude towards disabled people, viewing them as not even worth raising. This attitude, if Seneca is to be believed, is as old as Rome itself and shows a particularly callous side to Roman society's discrimination towards disabled people⁹¹. Even if this practice was widespread, it was not universal, as many disabled Romans made it through their childhood. If this law that Seneca claimed was being enforced actually was in his time, it was out of use by the third century CE and, in fact, replaced with a law requiring families to take care of their disabled children⁹². Whilst in general Roman society was discriminatory towards disabled people, this change in the law shows that the level of discrimination varied over time.

The law in Rome was generally discriminatory towards disabled people in many aspects, some of these being infanticide being legal and others that restricted the freedom of people with certain disabilities. These laws are ultimately founded in the discriminatory attitudes present in Roman culture and would have had a direct impact on the lives of disabled Romans. These laws were not set in stone and would change over time, sometimes getting better and sometimes getting worse. The laws were

⁸⁶ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 124–27.

⁸⁷ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 7–8.

⁸⁸ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 7–8.

⁸⁹ Laes, *Disabilities and the Disabled in the Roman World*, pp. 7–9.

⁹⁰ Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', pp. 188–89.

⁹¹ Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', pp. 188–89.

⁹² Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', p. 189.

affected by the culture and societal attitudes towards disabled people but would also themselves affect the attitudes in Roman society towards disabled people and even be used to justify them in retrospect.

Ancient Roman medicine's basic tenets were based off of ancient Greek medical thought but further refined by Graeco-Roman physician Galen of Pergamum, whose views would come to be the mainstream thought of Western medicine for over one thousand years⁹³. He lived between 129 and 216 CE, serving as physician for several emperors during his life⁹⁴. Galen was a prolific writer, penning philosophical works as well as treatises on many different areas of medicine. Galen believed that philosophy and medicine should be intertwined, and this general idea is present throughout his works⁹⁵.

Galen's theories of medicine are based on a few different concepts. The first one of these concepts is the humours these were thought to be four different liquids in the body that needed to exist in balance for the body to be healthy. These liquids were blood, black bile, yellow bile and Phlegm in the Hippocratic model, which was used in Galenic medical practice⁹⁶. Imbalances in the humours were thought to be the cause of many diseases, both physical and psychological an example of this is that having an excess of black bile was thought to lead to depression or, in ancient terms, melancholia⁹⁷.

Other concepts championed by Galen include the idea of prognosis, which was using the symptoms that a person has to determine what is wrong with them and if it will get worse or better and how long it will go on for⁹⁸. The third concept that Galen promoted that is relevant to the Roman medical outlook on impairment is the connection between the mind and the body. This was controversial at the time, as there was another major theory that saw the body and the mind as entirely separate. The concept of prognosis is useful for defining illnesses and how they will affect a person. The connection being made between the mind and the body helps to better understand how the body works and the effects that different parts of the body can have on each other⁹⁹. Knowing these basic tenets of Galen's work will help to understand more specific parts about disability.

⁹³ Jacques Jouanna, *Greek Medicine From Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*, ed. by Phillip Van Der Eijk, trans. by Neil Allie, *Studies in Ancient Medicine* (BRILL, 2012), xL, pp. 313–16.

⁹⁴ Jouanna, *Greek Medicine From Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*, xL, p. 318.

⁹⁵ Jouanna, *Greek Medicine From Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*, xL, pp. 313–37.

⁹⁶ Jouanna, *Greek Medicine From Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*, xL, pp. 313–14.

⁹⁷ Jouanna, *Greek Medicine From Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*, xL; Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', pp. 313–14.

⁹⁸ Glen. M. Cooper, 'Numbers, Prognosis and Healing: Galen on Medical Theory', *Washington Academy of Sciences*, 90.2 (2004), pp. 45–47.

⁹⁹ Nikolaos Angelou, 'Cures of the Body and Cures of the Soul: From Hippocrates to the Early Christian Fathers' (University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2012), pp. 12–14.

Galen believed that most physical and psychological disabilities originated in an imbalance of the humours¹⁰⁰. This shows that not all of Roman society necessarily believed that disability was a punishment from the gods however, it still shows just how little understanding there was of the underlying causes of disabilities, which are numerous and certainly not caused by humours being unbalanced.

Overall, the medical side of disability as understood in the Roman context provides an alternative understanding of disability from an ancient Roman perspective compared to the perspective based in religion and moralism¹⁰¹. This shows that whilst Roman society was generally discriminatory towards disabled people, there were differing opinions, however, just because they might not believe the religious aspect does not mean that they would not have been discriminatory towards disabled Romans. Through understanding how they thought diseases were caused and the debate they had in Rome around various aspects of medicine, the understanding of disability in ancient Rome is increased. These aspects together further the overall picture of the lives of disabled people in ancient Rome.

Overall, these different parts of Roman society show how various parts of society can have different ways of viewing things. The medical and religious views of disability in Rome should contrast starkly, yet that does not necessarily mean that both cannot be discriminatory nor that both cannot be believed at the same time. Furthermore, the general discriminatory feelings the idea of the perfect body created towards disabled people in Rome contributed to their general treatment in the law and culture. The law, affected by the general feeling in society, further reinforces existing prejudices against the disabled populace in Rome, though variation exists with laws softening at times or not being enforced. The secular culture of Rome also reinforces the discrimination against disabled people, also being informed by religion and law. These all influence and prop up the ideas of the other aspects of society.

Section 3

This section of the dissertation focuses on primary sources of disability in ancient Rome. Ranging from anecdotes about disabled Romans from able-bodied individuals to the rarer first-hand account of life as a disabled person in Rome from a disabled Roman. Covering a range of situations from emperors and senators to soldiers and farmers. This will be useful as it will give insight from primary sources into Roman

¹⁰⁰ Jouanna, *Greek Medicine From Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*, XL, pp. 335–38.

¹⁰¹ Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', pp. 202–05.

cultural attitudes towards disabled people and the thoughts and feelings of disabled Romans themselves about their lives.

The specific cases studied in this section of the dissertation are split into two general groups, the first being outside perspectives on disability and disabled people in Rome. These outside perspectives can give an insight into how disabled people would have lived in Rome however, they are biased mostly against disabled people, or, in some cases, they portray the disabled person as brave in spite of their disability. Usually, this is the case for people the writer likes or agrees with¹⁰²¹⁰³. Either portrayal does not capture the lived experiences of the disabled people of Rome, but it does help to understand how society at large viewed disabled Romans. The other subset of sources that will be explored in this section of the dissertation are the views of disabled Romans themselves that have survived to the present day. These are unfortunately sparse and most of the time have little content compared to the sources that survive from able-bodied people¹⁰⁴ however, those that do survive are extremely useful in helping to understand the lives of disabled Romans through their own eyes. Both of these types of sources will be useful in determining what life was like for disabled Romans, as well as how ancient Roman society viewed them and why.

The purpose of this section is to determine how people with disabilities lived within Roman society. Was there a difference in how they were treated depending on how and when they acquired their disability? For example, would an individual who became disabled in battle be treated better than one who was disabled from birth? How much of a factor would wealth and influence have been in determining the treatment of a disabled person in ancient Rome?

Marcus Sergius was a Roman soldier and later politician who fought in the Second Punic War. In his career in the Roman army, he became disabled but would go on to become Praetor, a role below Consul that covered a range of areas of governance, as well as having a role in the military depending on what specific office of praetorship it was, which involved partaking in rituals usually reserved for able-bodied Romans¹⁰⁵. Pliny's *Natural Histories*, where he writes about Marcus Sergius, may shed some light on whether the way in which Marcus Sergius acquired his disability played a role in how he was treated compared to other disabled Romans and specifically how his colleagues treated him.

¹⁰² Lamond, 'Disability and the Ancient Roman Familia', pp. 49–50.

¹⁰³ Draycott, 'RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY', p. 5.

¹⁰⁴ Draycott, 'RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY', p. 3.

¹⁰⁵ Draycott, 'RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY', pp. 4–5.

“No person living, in my opinion at least, ever excelled M. Sergius, although his great-grandson, Catiline, tarnished the honours of his name. In his second campaign, he lost his right hand; and in two campaigns he was wounded three and twenty times; so much so, that he could scarcely use either his hands or his feet; still, attended by a single slave, he afterwards served in many campaigns, though but an invalided soldier. He was twice taken prisoner by Hannibal, (for it was with no ordinary enemy that he would engage,) and twice did he escape from his captivity, after having been kept, without a single day’s intermission, in chains and fetters for twenty months. On four occasions he fought with his left hand alone, two horses being slain under him. He had a right hand made of iron, and attached to the stump, after which he fought a battle, and raised the siege of Cremona, defended Placentia, and took twelve of the enemy’s camps in Gaul. All this we learn from an oration of his, which he delivered when, in his prætorship, his colleagues attempted to exclude him from the sacred rites, on the ground of his infirmities.” Plin. Nat. 7.104f.

Pliny’s writings on Marcus Sergius show a deep admiration for him. Pliny’s assertion that no one living at the time was better than Marcus Sergius certainly shows how much Pliny respected him however, the ways this admiration is shown are similar to the modern concept of inspiration porn¹⁰⁶¹⁰⁷, putting emphasis on how much he achieved despite his disability and framing Marcus Sergius as an exception who managed to overcome his disabilities, rising to offices that should have been barred to him. This shows that, in Roman society, disability was seen as something to overcome¹⁰⁸. Pliny goes into great detail about Marcus Sergius’ exploits, such as escaping from Hannibal’s camp twice and fighting in many campaigns. These great deeds, done despite his disability, are what set Marcus Sergius apart from other disabled people in Pliny’s view¹⁰⁹. Roman society might have viewed his disability as more socially acceptable this is implied through Marcus Sergius using his military record to defend himself. The fact that Marcus Sergius had to defend his position and fight to be allowed to partake in sacred rites shows that even if he was seen in a better light, he still faced discrimination¹¹⁰.

Claudius was a member of the Julio-Claudian dynasty and became the fourth emperor of the dynasty. His reign lasted from 41 CE to 54 CE. Claudius was Disabled and had

¹⁰⁶ Thorneycroft, ‘Pornographication: Exploring the “Porn” in “Inspiration Porn”’, pp. 330–35.

¹⁰⁷ Bernard, ‘Benevolent Ableism Is Still Ableism: Objectification and “Inspiration Porn”’, p. 276.

¹⁰⁸ Draycott, ‘RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY’, pp. 15–17.

¹⁰⁹ Fischer, ‘Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity’, p. 197.

¹¹⁰ Draycott, ‘RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY’, p. 4.

been since childhood¹¹¹. Being a member of the ruling dynasty, he might have had an easier time navigating the Roman world whilst being disabled, especially after becoming emperor¹¹². Suetonius wrote about Claudius in his book *The Twelve Caesars* he covers his childhood growing up disabled and also how disability affected Claudius in adulthood and how Claudius' family treated him.

Suetonius was a historian who wrote *The Twelve Caesars* during the reign of Hadrian in 121 CE the book covers the lives of Julius Caesar and the first eleven emperors. It is the most complete work of Suetonius that still survives¹¹³. Suetonius seems to have had a low opinion of Claudius, depicting him as easily led by others and cruel. He also minimised any achievements that Claudius made, including incorporating the British provinces into the empire¹¹⁴.

“Nearly the whole of his childhood and youth was so troubled by various diseases that he grew dull-witted and had little physical strength; and on reaching the age at which he should have won a magistracy or chosen a private career he was considered by his family incapable of doing either. Even after coming of age he remained under the supervision of a tutor about whom he later wrote ‘The man was a barbarian, an ex-transport officer who had been assigned the task of punishing me savagely whatever I might do.’ Claudius’ weak health also accounted for his being muffled in a mantle – an unprecedented sight – while presiding at the gladiatorial games given by Germanicus and himself to honour their father’s memory; on assuming the toga of adulthood he was taken up the capitol in a litter, about midnight, without the customary solemn procession. [...] His mother Antonia often called him ‘a monster: a man whom Nature had begun to work upon but then flung aside’; and if she ever accused anyone of stupidity she would exclaim ‘He is a bigger fool even than my son Claudius!’ Livia Augusta, his grandmother, never failed to treat him with the deepest scorn, and seldom addressed him personally her reproofs brief bitter letters or oral messages. When his sister Livilla heard someone predict that he would one day hold power, she prayed aloud that the roman people be spared so cruel and undeserved a misfortune.” Suet. Cl 2.6-3.13

Claudius’ family, according to Suetonius, treated him terribly because of his disability. Claudius’ mother and sister would insult him and use being like him to insult others, even as he became emperor, his sister said about Claudius that his being emperor was an insult to Rome. and his grandmother rarely spoke to him because of his

¹¹¹ Lamond, ‘Disability and the Ancient Roman Familia’, pp. 121–25.

¹¹² Lamond, ‘Disability and the Ancient Roman Familia’, pp. 121–26.

¹¹³ J. B. Rives, ‘The Twelve Caesars, Introduction’, in *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. by Robert Graves (1957; 35th edn, Penguin Group, 2007), pp. xx–xxi.

¹¹⁴ Daniel. J. Kershaw, ‘Dis/Ableism in the “Problem of Claudius”: The Reception of Claudius’s Disabilities in the Ancient Sources’, *Illinois Classical Studies*, 47.1 (2022), p. 133.

disabilities¹¹⁵. This insight into the bullying and abuse from his family that he experienced because of his disabilities might not be dissimilar to the experiences of other disabled Romans due to the social stigma and bigotry faced by disabled people in Roman society¹¹⁶.

Claudius was known to use a litter. Rich Romans could afford to travel around by litter. This kind of travel would certainly help with mobility issues, making the city much more accessible for richer disabled Romans than poorer ones¹¹⁷. This shows that the wealth divide would have had an effect on the experiences of disabled people in Rome, with wealthy disabled Romans having an easier time navigating the society around them both mobility-wise and in other ways, as wealthier people could afford slaves to perform tasks that they either could not do or would struggle with¹¹⁸.

Claudius' family hired a pedagogue for him who was to put it in Claudius' would come to hate who, according to Suetonius, was chosen to give harsh punishments to Claudius. Claudius would be under his direction into his early adulthood as for a time, even whilst an adult, he was not seen fit to manage his own affairs or able to serve in public office¹¹⁹. This would, however, change later in his life. The fact that Claudius' family deliberately chose a cruel pedagogue for him further reinforces their negative views of him. Not being given the rights and autonomy of an able-bodied Roman citizen until later in his adulthood because of his disabilities is a clear sign of the discrimination that was present throughout Roman society towards disabled people¹²⁰.

Despite Claudius' treatment by his family, he would become an accomplished author, writing works on various subjects, including an autobiography, which unfortunately does not survive. In fact, the only complete work of his that survived to the modern day is a copy of a speech he made to the Senate regarding Gallic nobility. In spite of his achievements in the field of literature, Claudius' family still refused to let him attain office or be seen at major public events with them, as they feared his disabilities would be used by the public to mock the imperial family as a whole. This shows how even if someone with disabilities proved themselves capable, they would still face stigma and barriers to their independence.

Sergius is one example of Romans bending their rules around the impairment and certain roles in society, but are there others? Looking at Pliny the Elder's *Natural Histories*, there are examples such as Pontifex Metellus.

¹¹⁵ Lamond, 'Disability and the Ancient Roman Familia', pp. 123–24.

¹¹⁶ Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', pp. 205–07.

¹¹⁷ Lamond, 'Disability and the Ancient Roman Familia', pp. 119–21.

¹¹⁸ Draycott, 'RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY', pp. 4–5.

¹¹⁹ Lamond, 'Disability and the Ancient Roman Familia', p. 126.

¹²⁰ Lamond, 'Disability and the Ancient Roman Familia', pp. 126–28.

“We find in recorded that High Priest Metellus was so tongue-tied that he is believed to have suffered torture for many months while practicing the formula to be spoken in dedicating the Temple of Wealth” Plin. HN 11, 174.

Metellus, Pliny the Elder states, was a pontifex in Rome who had a stammer, which could have been a problem in the context of his job, as according to Roman religious rules pontiffs had to be able to recite their prayers to the gods clearly and without mistake¹²¹. Pontifex Metellus is another example of Romans framing disability as something to be overcome to fit within an ableist society.

Gnaeus Domitius Tullus was a very wealthy Roman patrician who later in life became disabled. Pliny the Younger, nephew and later adopted son of Pliny the Elder, was a Roman author and politician whose main works that survive are an oration praising the emperor Trajan and *The Epistulae*, which is a collection of two hundred and seventy-four letters that he had written throughout his life, including letters concerning the eruption of Vesuvius¹²². Pliny the Younger wrote about Tullus in a letter. The letter covers his will and his later years with his wife.

In [his will] Tullus acknowledges his obligations to all his relatives in return for their services to him, as he does to the excellent wife who had borne with him so long ... It was thought most unsuitable that a woman of her high birth and blameless character, who was no longer young, had borne children in the past and had long been widowed, should marry a wealthy old man and a hopeless invalid, whom even a wife who had known him when young and healthy might have found an object of disgust. Crippled and deformed in every limb, he could only enjoy his vast wealth by contemplating it and could not even turn in bed without assistance. He also had to have his teeth cleaned and brushed for him – a squalid and pitiful detail – and when complaining about the humiliations of his infirmity was often heard to say that every day, he licked the fingers of his slaves. Yet he went on living, and kept his will to live, helped chiefly by his wife, whose devoted care turned the former criticism of her marriage into a tribute of admiration. Pliny the Younger Epistles 8.18.7-10

Pliny the Younger states that Tullus’ marriage to his wife was initially seen in a negative light, as it was in the Roman elite’s minds unseemly for a woman of her standing to marry someone as old as he was at the time of their marriage and especially as he was disabled¹²³. According to Pliny the Younger, later on in their marriage, this negative view would change, as Tullus’ wife was admired for her constant care of Tullus, which is

¹²¹ Fischer, ‘Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity’, p. 203.

¹²² Roy. K. Gibson, *Man of High Empire: The Life of Pliny the Younger* (Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. xv–xvi.

¹²³ Lamond, ‘Disability and the Ancient Roman Familia’, pp. 49–51.

thought to have helped him live longer¹²⁴. The admiration that his wife received for helping him cope with his disability throughout their marriage shows, in its own way, the negative feelings present towards disabled people in Roman society, focusing on his wife helping him, admiring her helping him, portraying it as rare whilst reacting negatively to the marriage at first because he was disabled¹²⁵.

Pliny the Younger also mentions Tullus' disabilities and the effects they had on his life, stating that his limbs were impaired and that he could not even turn in his bed by himself and could not brush his own teeth. This, as could be expected, drastically affected his quality of life however, being wealthy, Tullus could afford slaves to help perform the tasks he could no longer perform by himself. Tullus's life shows the advantages that wealth could have for a disabled Roman, as Romans who could not afford slaves in his condition would fare significantly worse, likely relying on family to help them, who may not always have been available¹²⁶.

The ways in which Pliny the Younger describes Tullus show how deep discrimination against disabled people ran in Roman society. He refers to Tullus as hopeless and says that even if he was married when he was younger and able-bodied, his wife might have viewed him as disgusting¹²⁷. Both of these comments show that disability was viewed in a bad light and was seen to have a negative impact on people who lived with disabled people, in Pliny the Younger's view. He did not just focus on how he thought it would impact a hypothetical wife married to Tullus earlier than his actual wife but also covered Tullus' own thoughts on his condition. Pliny the Younger states that Tullus talked about how he needed slaves to clean his teeth, and Pliny the Younger suggests that this is pitiful¹²⁸. This shows another aspect of the societal discrimination against disabled people in Rome, a more patronising form of discrimination than some other ways of discrimination.

There are a number of papyri that have been studied that refer to an individual called Gaius Gemellus Horigenes who lived in Karanis, Roman Egypt, between 171 CE and around 214 CE¹²⁹. The papyri reveal a series of appeals to authorities for redress after facing discrimination based on his disability. Horigenes was blind, and the papyri give a

¹²⁴ Lamond, 'Disability and the Ancient Roman Familia', pp. 49–51.

¹²⁵ Lamond, 'Disability and the Ancient Roman Familia', pp. 49–51.

¹²⁶ Lamond, 'Disability and the Ancient Roman Familia', pp. 50–55.

¹²⁷ Draycott, 'RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY', p. 5.

¹²⁸ Lamond, 'Disability and the Ancient Roman Familia', pp. 50–53.

¹²⁹ Draycott, 'RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY', pp. 6–7.

rare insight into the lived experience of a disabled Roman managing his affairs in a hostile environment¹³⁰.

Horigenes was possibly not a Roman citizen from birth, as his mother was not a citizen, he did, however, claim citizenship later in life. He inherited many properties and land in various villages, becoming head of the household upon his father's death. Horigenes was unmarried throughout his life¹³¹. The wealth generated from the land and properties made his family relatively rich. Whilst Horigenes and his family were relatively wealthy, they were not patricians, so whilst still having the privilege of more wealth than the average Roman, there were still significant differences between them and patricians, whilst they had influence locally that did not extend further than their immediate villages, let alone the upper echelons of power¹³². Whilst not showing how poorer Romans would have navigated life with a disability, it still gives a different perspective from most sources and, more importantly, this source offers a rare perspective in surviving ancient sources from the disabled persons themselves rather than an able-bodied author writing about them.

Horigenes complained on a number of occasions over many years to the Roman government in Egypt about discrimination he faced from members of his community¹³³. The first complaint is about two neighbours who tried to ruin his harvest he directly says they did this because he was blind. This complaint shows just some of the discrimination that disabled people would face in their daily lives in Roman society¹³⁴. Another of the complaints made by Horigenes related to the elders in his village trying to force him to do public service, which he was exempt from due to his disability it can be inferred that the elders were being discriminatory towards him¹³⁵¹³⁶. Both of these complaints that Horigenes made show how badly ableism could affect a disabled person in Roman society.

Marcus Sergius managed to climb up in politics after his military career and even participate in rituals normally barred to disabled people, though not without opposition from his peers. He is written about with great respect, and his becoming disabled in battle and being a war hero is emphasised heavily. Contrast how he is treated with how Gnaeus Tullus is treated. Tullus, who became disabled later in life and not in battle, was treated in the text, at least, in a far more negative way than Sergius¹³⁷. The way that

¹³⁰ Draycott, 'RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY', p. 8.

¹³¹ Draycott, 'RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY', p. 7.

¹³² Draycott, 'RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY', pp. 7–8.

¹³³ Draycott, 'RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY', p. 8.

¹³⁴ Draycott, 'RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY', pp. 9–10.

¹³⁵ Draycott, 'RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY', pp. 12–14.

¹³⁶ Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', p. 190.

¹³⁷ Draycott, 'RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY', pp. 4–5.

Tullus' disability is written about in a much more mocking tone than Sergius' disability is. Whilst their disabilities may have been written about in different ways, they both were clearly still discriminated against. Roman society may have held disabled people who acquired their disability through battle better than those who did not, but that did not change the fact that they still faced barriers to what they could do in public life as well as discrimination in general.

Claudius' family treated him terribly because of his disabilities, despite their cruelty towards him throughout his childhood and into his adulthood. He would not be allowed to hold office until later in adulthood because of his family's fear that his disability would embarrass them. Though he would eventually go on to become emperor, the discrimination towards him from his family shows that even being a member of the imperial family was not enough to prevent discrimination against him for his disability¹³⁸. Whilst there is not much information on how Horigenes' family treated him, it is known that he became head of the household without much trouble however, unlike Claudius, who was protected from those outside of the imperial family to an extent, Horigenes was not and suffered discrimination from others in his community¹³⁹¹⁴⁰. These examples show that whilst privilege and wealth could help to a certain extent, there was always a good chance of a disabled Roman facing discrimination.

Section 4

This section aims to gain further insight into Roman attitudes towards disabled people by analysing the work and opinions of a very influential Roman citizen. There are many Roman writers and orators that would make good candidates to analyse. Cicero makes a good candidate for this as he is considered highly influential on Roman society and would have been in tune with Roman society's general views of disabled people¹⁴¹. Cicero has a range of surviving works that will be useful in helping to understand his own views and what they can say about Roman society as a whole.

Marcus Tullius Cicero was a Roman politician, orator, writer and lawyer who lived during the late republican era. He was a very influential individual in Roman society, being a senator and consul. In his consulship, he helped put down the Catilinarian conspiracy, which helped to cement his influence as he became a saviour of Rome from chaos though this would help a rival of his Clodius to force him into exile¹⁴². Cicero would be considered an optimate, a member of the more conservative faction of Roman politics.

¹³⁸ Lamond, 'Disability and the Ancient Roman Familia', pp. 120–27.

¹³⁹ Lamond, 'Disability and the Ancient Roman Familia', pp. 120–25.

¹⁴⁰ Draycott, 'RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY', pp. 6–8.

¹⁴¹ West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero', pp. 54–54.

¹⁴² Jonathan Powell and Niall Rudd, 'The Republic and The Laws, Introduction', in *The Republic and The Laws* (1998; 22nd edn, Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. xii–xiii.

He spent his political career attempting to preserve the republic and its values¹⁴³. In his attacks against other politicians such as Clodius and Mark Anthony, Cicero would use disability, real or imagined, to attack their character¹⁴⁴.

Cicero began practising law, fighting his first cases in his twenties. His speeches whilst defending or prosecuting were well received, Cicero is considered one of the greatest orators in Roman History who's influence and own brand of rhetoric can still be felt to this day¹⁴⁵. He made use of a style of rhetoric he was taught in Athens for most of his career. His speeches in court often involved jabs at his opponents' physicality and moral virtue, usually connecting the two where he could¹⁴⁶¹⁴⁷.

Many of Cicero's writings survive to this day, including works on politics, philosophy and a number of private letters. made extensive reference to disability in both his private letters and orations, usually in his public works, using impairment to indicate an individual as lacking good morals and character. That being said, sometimes, if a disabled individual was admired by him, he would treat their disability as a way they have shown their better qualities through enduring it¹⁴⁸. Cicero's rhetoric and court speeches are the main source for his more negative views of disability, whilst his private letters show him using physical disability as a metaphor for his anguish.

Rhetoric is the study and practice of persuading an audience through words spoken or written. Roman rhetoric built upon the foundations of Greek rhetoric¹⁴⁹. Cicero was a major contributor to a uniquely Roman rhetoric, which makes his use of shaming disability more likely to have been a widespread tactic in Roman rhetoric¹⁵⁰. Rhetoric was utilised in many facets of Roman society, including law and politics, making it highly influential in the upper echelons of Rome. As rhetoric was widespread amongst the upper classes, its idea of mocking disabilities and tying them to bad character would have spread¹⁵¹¹⁵².

Publius Vatinius was a Roman politician allied to the first triumvirate who was a witness against Publius Sestius in a case Cicero was defending. The speech Cicero made

¹⁴³ Michael Grant, 'Cicero: Selected Works, Introduction', in *Cicero: Selected Works* (1960; 61st edn, Penguin Group, 1971), pp. 7–9.

¹⁴⁴ West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero', pp. 132–33.

¹⁴⁵ Grant, 'Cicero: Selected Works, Introduction', pp. 20–22.

¹⁴⁶ Grant, 'Cicero: Selected Works, Introduction', pp. 16–17.

¹⁴⁷ Powell and Rudd, 'The Republic and The Laws, Introduction', pp. xii–xiii.

¹⁴⁸ West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero', pp. 135–38.

¹⁴⁹ William Dominik and Jon Hall, 'Confronting Roman Rhetoric', in *A Companion to Roman Rhetoric*, ed. by William Dominik and Jon Hall, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World, 1st edn (Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), pp. 3–5.

¹⁵⁰ West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero', pp. 71–75.

¹⁵¹ West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero', pp. 71–75.

¹⁵² Dominik and Hall, 'Confronting Roman Rhetoric', pp. 3–5.

against the character of Vatinius survives to this day and is called *In Vatinius*¹⁵³. In this speech, Cicero conflates Vatinius' bad deeds and poor temper with his physical disability this piece of rhetoric was meant to shame Vatinius and make the audience laugh¹⁵⁴. Some examples from the text of the language used by Cicero to describe Vatinius' disability include comparing him to a snake because of his swollen neck, mentioning his tumours, and saying they would burst if he tried to justify himself¹⁵⁵. Cicero's attacks based on Vatinius' appearance and his expected reaction from the audience show how cruel Roman society could be to people for differences from the bodily norm this was likely connected to their concept of the ideal body and the good moral character connected to it¹⁵⁶.

Other examples of Cicero using disability to insult his opponents through the medium of rhetoric are his speeches he made against Publius Clodius Pulcher, a rival of Cicero and eventual ally of the First Triumvirate, who Cicero claimed was blind and mad¹⁵⁷. These two impairments Cicero claims are linked, whilst Clodius was more than likely not blind, Cicero nevertheless used it as an attack on him, as disability used to show someone's negative traits was common in Roman rhetoric¹⁵⁸. Clodius was eventually killed by Titus Annius Milo, whose virtues Cicero extolled, praising both his good moral character and describing him as healthy, once again showing how prevalent the idea of the ideal body was throughout Roman society¹⁵⁹.

Cicero's importance in Roman society and his innovations in rhetoric that influenced rhetoricians in Rome long after his death show he had a lasting impact on Roman culture, and through his rhetoric he influenced Roman attitudes towards disability both at the time and in the future¹⁶⁰. Through the cases of Publius Vatinius and Publius Clodius Pulcher, we see that he would generally use someone's disability against them in his rhetoric, leaning on the majority opinion in Roman society that disability was a sign of poor moral character. His letters show a different way that disability was used in Rome, that being as a metaphor, such as when he was grieving his daughter Tullia and would compare the great sadness that he felt to being disabled¹⁶¹. Cicero throughout his

¹⁵³ R. Gardner, 'V.III. P. Vitinius', in *Pro Sestio. In Vatinius.*, trans. by R. Gardner (Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 329–329 <https://www-loebclassics-com.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/display/marcus_tullius_cicero-in_vatinium/1958/pb_LCL309.253.xml> [accessed 10 October 2026].

¹⁵⁴ West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero'.

¹⁵⁵ Cicero, 'In Vatinius', in *Pro Sestio. In Vatinius.*, trans. by R. Gardner (Harvard University Press, 1958) <https://www-loebclassics-com.uwtsd.idm.oclc.org/display/marcus_tullius_cicero-in_vatinium/1958/pb_LCL309.253.xml> [accessed 10 October 2026].

¹⁵⁶ Draycott, 'RECONSTRUCTING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY IN ANTIQUITY', pp. 16–17.

¹⁵⁷ West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero', pp. 105–08.

¹⁵⁸ West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero', pp. 104–06.

¹⁵⁹ West, 'Disability in the World of Cicero', pp. 109–10.

¹⁶⁰ Grant, 'Cicero: Selected Works, Introduction', pp. 24–27.

¹⁶¹ Cicero, *Cicero: Selected Works*, trans. by Michael Grant (1960; 61st edn, Penguin Group, 1971), pp. 86–87.

career encouraged other rhetoricians to include the mockery of disabled people in speeches¹⁶².

Conclusion

The biopsychosocial and social-stress models of disability helped to ground the dissertation in disability theory and to know what to look for in the sources used in this dissertation. Roman society did not conceive of people with impairments as belonging to one group. The Romans did not have a singular word for disability, let alone have a theory or model of disability. This is why having modern theories and models that can be applied to Rome is extraordinarily useful. Roman words for impairments such as ... framed impairments as monstrous. This framing of disability through the words used for impairments implies that the people who have them are monstrous, which would more than likely have affected their self-image and confidence.

Roman society, due to influence from both religion and the ideal of the perfect body, viewed disability on the whole as a moral failing and the disabled person's own problem to deal with. These discriminatory views that flourished throughout Roman society affected the jobs they could hold as well as their ability to live independent lives through discriminatory laws. Whilst this discriminatory attitude can be seen in the depictions of Tullius and Cicero's attacks on Varinius and Clodius. Cicero, due to his influence on rhetoric and Roman society, was a good case study in how the average elite Roman viewed disabled people and the effects these views could have on both disabled and able-bodied people they were used against. There were exceptions to this rule, such as the description of Sergius Silas, who was praised because he had acquired his disabilities in battle. Whilst he managed to break barriers put in place for disabled people, he was not met without opposition. Whilst the way he is described is far less

¹⁶² Fischer, 'Disability and Society in Classical Antiquity', p. 211.

negative than most disabled Romans, his description did have similarities to inspiration porn.

The lives of disabled people were greatly affected by the views of Roman society at large, limiting the jobs they could do as well as their ability to advocate for themselves. They also faced discrimination in their daily lives from their fellow Romans, as seen in the case of Horigenes, who made multiple complaints about the discrimination against him in his local community due to his blindness. Wealth was a major factor in what life would have been like for a disabled Roman, as wealthier Romans could afford slaves to look after them when they could not and would be able to afford litters to carry them around if they had mobility issues, whilst poorer Romans would not. That does not mean they were safe from discrimination Claudius, for example, faced it from his own family. Severity of disability would also affect the lives of disabled Romans, as Sergius Silas disability, whilst severe and greatly affecting his life, did not leave him bed bound unlike Tullus. Overall, disabled romans lives were negatively affected by the society they lived in. There were differences in the degree to which they were affected depending on how a disability was acquired, the severity of it and the wealth of the individual however, they all faced discrimination, which would put them at risk, limit their freedom and affect them psychologically.

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