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Lessons from the Ancient Greeks: Reimagining Disability

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A review of *An Archaeology of Disability*, an exhibition at the Canellopoulos Museum, Athens, Greece, curated by David Gissen, Jennifer Stager, and Mantha Zarmakoupi, 28 June–30 October 2023. This innovative museum exhibit used the ancient Greek past to reimagine a future for disability and accessibility in the public sphere.

Keywords: disability; museum; sensory studies; accessibility



As the only deaf/hard of hearing participant in my summer travel program, I again found myself amid a group of people whose hearing abilities and ways of being differed drastically from mine. During my first trip to the Athenian Acropolis, we journeyed up the endless marble stairs. We faced each other and the strangers around us with shared exhaustion. At last, we reached the top, where a scholar of antiquity was prepared to share his knowledge with us. We were surrounded by boisterous crowds, and my fellow program participants struggled to hear the speaker, some admitting they heard none of what was said. I, however, did not have the same experience: my interpreter stood close to the speaker, while I stood at a distance and relied only on my eyes to receive the information. Helpless, some of my fellow participants interestingly attempted to lipread my interpreter. Situations like this can lay bare the realities of “ability” and likewise highlight how we collectively rely on one another as we struggle and attempt to adapt to adverse circumstances.

The ancient Greeks were familiar with these same realities and experiences, and they did something that, if we can understand it, could change how we imagine disability today. In the 5th century BCE, ancient Greeks built a ramp that provided access to the summit of the Athenian Acropolis for everyone. By building this ramp, they conveyed the salient message that they aimed to accommodate not just a disabled few but all. This message is what David Gissen, Jennifer Stager, and Mantha Zarmakoupi chose to highlight in their exhibit *An Archaeology of Disability*. This ramp operated as a symbol that blurred the lines between disability and ability, uniting all in a shared, collective experience. With their exhibit, the creators showed us how the relationship between ancient accessibility and modern accommodations can help us work toward a more progressive future while at the same time opening new doors to the past.

In *The Rejected Body*, Susan Wendell notes that: “disability in a given situation is often created by the inability or unwillingness of others to adapt themselves or the environment to the physical and psychological reality of the person designated as ‘disabled’” (1996: 30), revealing an approach to disability that informs the structure and experience of our world today and that is important to the message of this exhibit. Societies, she says, are physically and culturally constructed with the assumption that everyone is “healthy, non-disabled, young but adult, shaped according to cultural ideals and, often, male” (39). Our public world is built for this paradigm citizen, who is likewise understood to be physically strong, hearing, seeing, and able to move without pain or illness. These assumptions create a binary opposition not only between disabled and nondisabled but also between private and public worlds, as we relegate the disabled, the sick, the old, and sometimes even (nondisabled) women and children to the private world, while the public world remains that “of strength, the positive (valued) body,

performance and production, the non-disabled, and young adults” (Wendell 1996: 40). What remains private, taboo even, are weak, ailing, pained, and crippled—and thus devalued—bodies.

Wendell challenges us to consider what a world where these binaries no longer hold sway might look like, and *An Archaeology of Disability* is the first exhibit that I have seen that takes up this challenge, that prompts us to consider how disability can operate in public and to question the idea of design that caters to the paradigm (nondisabled) citizen. The exhibit demonstrates how disability was integrated into everyday life in the ancient world while simultaneously incorporating the same effect into the modern museum visitor’s experience.

An Archaeology of Disability was originally created by Gissen, Stager, and Zarmakoupi for the Venice Biennale of Architecture in 2021. From there, the exhibit moved to La Gipsoteca di Arte Antica in Pisa, Italy, and finally to Athens, Greece, where I saw it at the Paul and Alexandra Canellopoulos Museum. The exhibit was designed as “an experiment in historically reconstructing the Acropolis in Athens,” an attempt to “recover ideas about bodies and impairment at one of the most canonical, influential, and notoriously inaccessible historic architectural sites” (Gissen, Stager, and Zarmakoupi 2021). It was meant to be an alternative to the accessible heritage movement because it moved beyond merely offering technological fixes and treated disability as “a form of historical inquiry, archaeology, and reconstruction, informed by the experience of collective human difference across space and time” (Gissen, Stager, and Zarmakoupi 2021).

In modern Athens, most people ascend the Acropolis, with more or less difficulty, by means of steep, worn, slippery marble steps, which were installed in the Roman period, while some disabled, elderly, and/or pregnant visitors travel to the top by means of a glass elevator, if it’s operating, which is an obvious visual disruption of the ancient walls of the Acropolis. The ramp that existed in classical Athens, however, as well as stone seats along the way—which are also imagined as part of the exhibit—made universal access ordinary. The ramp and stone seats were not a spectacle; they were simply part of the architecture of the ascent for everyone. Likewise, in *An Archaeology of Disability*, access is integrated and unquestioned. Information is conveyed by means of American Sign Language, Greek Sign Language, both English- and Greek-language captions and text, a screenreader-friendly website, and Braille (**Figure 1**). A tactile model of the ancient Acropolis ramp vibrates to communicate something of the movement of crowds on it (**Figure 2**). Stone seats that provided rest are reimaged and recreated (**Figure 3**). There is no signage highlighting the accessibility of the exhibit: accessibility simply exists. The exhibit successfully educates visitors about ancient conceptions of accessibility while simultaneously modeling what such access could look like today.



Figure 1: Two TV screens with Greek Sign Language and American Sign Language films, cube-shaped seats, a braille didactic plaque, and a tactile model of the ancient Acropolis ramp. Photo by Debby Sneed, 2023.



Figure 2: Detail of the model reconstructing the Acropolis ramp that translates the aesthetics of crowds and movement into vibrotactile signals. Photo by Samantha Martin, 2023.

Contemporary scholarship in disability and sensory studies similarly emphasize the need to revolutionize approaches to accessibility. For example, while measures taken to accommodate blind people auditorily and deaf people visually are often juxtaposed, a more recent trend looks for ways for multiple sensorial disabilities to meet and share in a collective, accessible space. Operating in terms of juxtaposition downplays continuities between and multiplicities of sensory capabilities. How, though, do we move beyond a contrast between the eye and the ear and instead rethink relationships entirely? The creators of *An Archaeology of Disability* present a model for this, with the tactile, vibrating model of the Acropolis ramp. Michele Friedner and Stefan Helmreich (2015: 76) have discussed vibration as “a zone in the frequency



Figure 3: Three different tactile reconstructions of the stone seats that sat atop the ancient Acropolis. Photo by Debby Sneed, 2023.

spectrum where hearing and deaf scholars have recently been meeting in order to unsettle the ear-centrism of Sound studies and the visually centered epistemology of much Deaf studies.” For Shelly Trower “vibration appears to cross distances between things, between people, between self and environment, between the senses and society, promising (or threatening) to shrink or break down such distances” (2008: 133). Vibration offers a way to move away from focusing on sensory differences that divide groups and instead emphasize uniting multiple disabled groups and even nondisabled groups.

The integration of vibration into the *An Archaeology of Disability* exhibit crossed several sensory boundaries, but vibration is not the only way to challenge the various centrism in sensory studies.

Aromas, for example, are another such way. To help visitors engage more deeply with an exhibit on naval stores, the North Carolina Maritime Museum in Southport provided visitors with squeezable aroma bottles that emitted scents of pine, tar, pitch, and turpentine. In Athens, the Athenian Agora museum offers another model for questioning centrism, as it is located inside the reconstructed Stoa of Attalos, a 2nd century BCE building along the east side of the Agora, and is thus integrated into the site and parts of the architecture of the original Stoa of Attalos. In addition to being able to see original portions of walls or floors, visitors can see indications of where the original divisions of space within the Stoa were located. Visitors can touch and feel the ancient designs in the reconstruction, feel and see the original internal organization, and experience the ways that light, sound, and temperature fluctuate in different areas of the space.

Not all museums and exhibits can provide such sensorial experiences, but by seeking to revolutionize how we think of our senses and the ways we use different modalities, we can begin to create a world that unites everyone, bridges disabilities, and eradicates the line between disabled and nondisabled.

Wendell reminds us that none of us are fully abled. Clinging to an ideal of nondisability denies humans the opportunity to recognize and embrace their true reality and to imagine a different future. *An Archaeology of Disability* represents important first steps to using the past to imagine a future where disability is integral, especially in the public sphere, and where accessibility is not an afterthought but the original conception.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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