

# ANCIENT GREECE & DISABILITY



Disability Action Research Kollektive  
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## **Content warning: murder, incest, rape, mutilation & nudity.**

Ancient Greek society engaged with disability in complex and often surprising ways. Disabled people were present across all levels of society, from soldiers, labourers, poets, seers, and even kings. While Greek culture often is thought of for celebrating idealised bodies, it also made space for individuals with physical disability and bodily difference, who could hold positions of authority, influence, and respect. Blind seers, injured war veterans, physically disabled rulers, and others appear in myth, history, and art.

Disability in ancient Greece could be linked to the divine through punishment, gifts, or transformation. Blindness, for example, was often associated with prophetic insight, while physical impairments could signify divine favour, or an experienced war veteran. These interpretations reflect a broader Greek worldview. Disabled bodies were often used to explore fundamental questions about fate, justice, and power, and did not always exist as outsiders from society.

There is evidence for a wide range of impairments in ancient Greece, including blindness, mobility impairments, limb differences, dwarfism, and conditions resulting from war or illness, as well as mental illness. War in particular produced a class of disabled veterans, whose injuries could become markers of experience and authority, especially in Hellenistic contexts.

Our evidence has limitations. The surviving evidence is uneven, meaning elite men are more visible in the historical record. Physical impairments are also more frequently represented than cognitive or other disabilities. As with all ancient history, dates are approximate and reflect the most likely period of the material discussed.

Disabled people have always been part of human societies. While modern assumptions often frame the ancient world as uniformly exclusionary, ancient Greece reveals a far more varied picture. Disability was valued, interpreted, sometimes stigmatised, and also could be integrated into larger systems of power.

**Agesilaus II** (445-360 BCE) was king of Sparta when it dominated in Greece. Agesilaus was born either lame or with a clubbed foot, and was not killed at birth, making us question the myths of Spartan infanticide. Furthermore, he became king over his nephew who was disqualified for potentially being a bastard, meaning that family lineage was seen as more disqualifying than having a physical disability. He was the younger lover of the Spartan aristocrat and general Lysander for over 30 years, and married Kleora the daughter of an influential Spartan noble. Agesilaus II died at age 84 in Libya on his way home from providing military aid as the head of a mercenary force to King Nectanebo I of Egypt. "If all men were just there would be no need of valor."

**Demosthenes** (384-322 BCE) was an Athenian orator and politician who tried to rally Athens against both Philip II and Alexander the Great. He remained an antagonist of both for the duration of his life. Demosthenes is reported to have had a speech impediment as a young boy, which he worked to overcome, eventually becoming a famous orator and politician. He is also reported to have been sickly and weak as a child, earning him the nickname Batalus (a reference to an effeminate flute player, who had been publicly ridiculed at that time). One story is that Demosthenes practiced speaking with rocks in his mouth in what turned into a successful attempt to correct his speech. "The easiest thing in the world is self-deceit; for every man believes what he wishes, though the reality is often different."

**Antigonus I Monophthalmus** (382-301 BCE) was one of the successors of Alexander the Great who controlled Greece, Asia Minor, Syria, Phoenicia, and northern Mesopotamia. He lost an eye in battle, and took the throne name Antigonus I Monophthalmus, which means Antigonus the One-Eyed, which suggests that he viewed it with some honour as a badge of war. However he chose to conceal it in his official painting, with the Roman historian Pliny the Elder writing that the painter Apelles "devised an original method of concealing the defect, for he did the likeness in "three-quarter," so that the feature that was lacking in the subject might be thought instead to be absent in the picture, and he only showed the part of the face which he was able to display as unmutilated."



**Alexander the Great** (356-323 BCE) conquered much of the known world before dying mysteriously at age 32. He may have had different disabling conditions, including skeletal neck malformations and chronic traumatic encephalopathy. He was wounded numerous times in battle, some of them disabling him for months, he viewed his war injuries as badges of honour, rather than ugly disfigurements. He had a physically disabled treasurer, and granted autonomy to a group of disabled war wounded men he encountered in Persia, which was the first time in history a group of disabled people were granted autonomy. He created a new elite political social class of disabled men by founding settlements composed of war wounded and impaired men from his army, who were essential at keeping the peace in his invasion strategy of the ancient Near East.

**Philip II** (359-317 BCE) conquered and united Greece and was the father of Alexander the Great. He was born with congenital hypoplasia, also sustained battle injuries to an eye, arm and leg resulting in permanent loss of functioning. We know from the ancient textual sources that Philip II was not comfortable with his disability, and would become enraged at the mere mention of his missing eye. He had a custom set of greaves made to accommodate his impaired leg, and switched to fighting exclusively on horseback as part of the cavalry, as opposed to fighting on foot with the infantry after his leg injury. This too can be seen as societal accommodation for his impairments. "There is no wall that is high enough to stop a horse with a cart filled with gold."

**Philip III Arrhidaeus** (357-317 BCE) was a Macedonian king, and older half brother of Alexander the Great. He became co-regent of Alexander's empire with Alexander's unborn infant son after Alexander's death in 323 BCE, ruling for 7 years. He married his niece Euridyce II, who spent her life trying to increase his political power. She and Arrhidaeus were assassinated by Alexander the Great's mother Olympias who saw them as political threats. Arrhidaeus is described in ancient sources as having an unspecified mental impairment that emerged in early childhood. Modern historians have mostly ignored him in historical research as a result of his disability. However, the ancient sources seem to suggest that his family and the places he ruled granted him agency throughout his life. He was depicted on coinage, and portraiture throughout the empire, with an inscription on a temple in Egypt stating that he restored an older temple of the pharaoh Thutmose III.

**Prusias I Cholos** (243-182 BCE) was King of Bithynia, located in ancient northern Anatolia. According to the ancient historian Memnon in battle against the city of Cierus: "while climbing a ladder Prusias was hit by a stone which was thrown from the battlements. He broke his leg, and because of this injury the siege was lifted. The stricken king was carried away by the Bithynians in a litter, not without difficulty, and he returned to his own country, where he lived on for a few years before he died, being named (because of his injury) "the lame." Prusias incorporated the injury into his throne name. Cholos means "lame," and on coin portraiture he emphasizes his military victories, perhaps suggesting that he viewed his impairment as a badge of war, rather than as something negative. 5

**Neokleides** was a well-known and very vocal speaker in the Athenian Assembly who had a sight impairment. He is known from two references in plays of Aristophanes (Wealth and Assembly Women). Although Aristophanes primarily evokes Neokleides in order to mock him, these jests provide crucial evidence about this individual's life and activities. Crucially, his sight impairment did not preclude him from serving on the assembly.

**Arignotus** of Sphettus was an older blind man mentioned in the speech "Against Timarchus" by the orator and statesman Aeschines who was an ambassador of Philip II of Macedon. In it, Arignotus is mentioned as being an older uncle of Timarchus who was subsequently robbed of his pension and estate when Timarchus came of age. This claim may have been exaggerated by Aeschines in order to paint Timarchus in a worse light, but this speech does show that there were pensions for old age in ancient Greece.

**Damonides** and **Dorian** - A story told by the historian Plutarch, which may be anecdotal mentions a Spartan actor named Damonides, who had the sandals designed for his misshapen (clubbed) feet stolen, and is reported to have responded by wishing that they fit the thief. This story is later repeated in Aristodemus who has changed the name, ethnicity, profession, and venue of the incident. In his version, the musician named Dorian from Delphi had his sandal that was designed for his clubfoot stolen while he was at a symposium. While possibly anecdotal, this story attests to other disabled Spartans (and possibly other Greeks) besides Agesilaus II, shows that they were also employed in society, had accommodations made to help navigate their disability (custom sandals), and allowed into societal events.

**Evenius** appears in the historian Herodotus's Histories as a man entrusted with guarding sacred sheep. After wolves killed the animals while he slept, his community punished him by blinding him. Subsequently, the gods granted Evenius the gift of prophecy, recognising the injustice of his punishment. He became a respected seer, and his descendants were also associated with prophetic roles.

**Kleomenes I** was a king of Sparta who reigned from around 520 BCE to about 490 BCE. He strengthened Sparta's dominance in the Peloponnese through military and diplomatic ventures, including intervening in Athenian politics and defeating Argos at Sepeia. Kleomenes played a significant role in shaping the early Peloponnesian League and attempted to check Persian influence in Greek affairs. His career, however, ended in turmoil: after political setbacks and a disputed campaign against Aegina, he was overtaken by a bout of insanity and eventual suicide while in captivity. His daughter Gorgo later became the wife of his successor, Leonidas I, maintaining his family's role in Spartan history.

**Epizelus** was an Athenian soldier who fought at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE. According to the historian Herodotus, he suddenly lost his sight during battle despite suffering no physical wound. The blindness reportedly occurred after he saw a terrifying apparition, possibly a supernatural figure. Epizelus remained blind for the rest of his life. His blindness, likely psychosomatic, represents one of the earliest recorded accounts of trauma-induced impairment.

**Stesichorus** was a lyric poet of the sixth century BCE, known for composing narrative poetry on mythological themes. According to later tradition, he was struck blind after composing a poem that maligned Helen of Troy. He subsequently composed a "palinode" retracting his earlier account, after which his sight was restored. His work influenced later Greek literature, though only fragments survive.

**Eurytus** was a Spartan hoplite and one of the famed 300 who fought at the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE defending against the second Persian invasion of Greece. Shortly before the climactic final engagement, Eurytus and his comrade Aristodemus were afflicted with an eye disease that left them unable to fight and led King Leonidas to order them to withdraw from the battlefield. When Eurytus learned that the Persians were encircling the pass, he donned his armour despite his impaired vision and, guided by his helot (slave) attendant, marched back into the fight. He was slain in the ensuing combat while effectively blind.

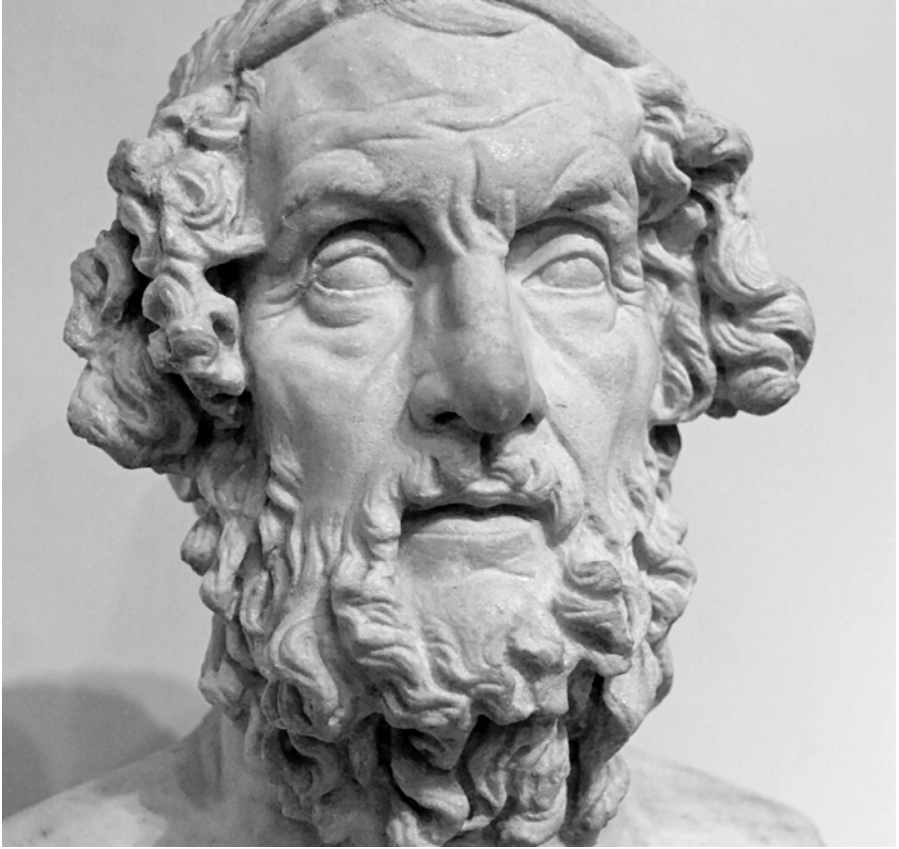
**Autism** - There is an ancient source describing what can be interpreted as autistic like traits. Aelian in the *Veria Historia*, writes: “Thrasyllos from the deme Aiksône endured an incredible and novel madness. For he left the city and went to the Peiraia and stayed there. He believed that all the ships that sailed in were his and he wrote down their names, checked the list when they left and rejoiced when they returned safely to the harbor again. He spent many years living with this sickness. When his brother returned from Sicily, he took him to a doctor for treatment and he freed him from that sickness. But he often remembered the avocation of his sickness and used to say that he was never as happy as when he took pleasure at the sight of ships that weren’t his returning safely.”

**The Athenian Disability Pension** - Athenian law recognized a category of citizens called οἱ ἀδυνάτοι (hoi adynatoi, “the incapable”), defined not just by physical impairment but by the inability to earn a living due to that impairment. Such individuals, if they owned less than a certain amount of property and could not work, could undergo a public examination and, if approved, receive a daily state pension. This early form of welfare demonstrates some institutional support for disabled citizens, especially war invalids and the poor. Our evidence for this most famously comes from the legal speech of Lysias 24 in which an unnamed defendant appears for a disability benefits review as he has been accused of faking his impairment: “The accuser has brought forward evidence to bolster his accusations: that the defender is not disabled, as he is capable of riding horses; that he is not poor, as he owns a workshop and seems to be practicing a trade; and, finally, that the nature of his character is duplicitous and immoral, as is that of the people with whom he chooses to associate himself” This quote is by the defendant: “For it seems clear to me, members of the jury, that whoever finds themselves in this situation, seeks to live in the easiest way possible, and with the least pain. So I have been [borrowing a horse] as a way to be able to make longer journeys more easily. [. . .] When [the accuser] sees me using two crutches, even though others use only one, he does not suddenly decide I am able-bodied. Then why, as soon as he sees me riding a horse, does he decide I am no longer disabled? I need the one just as much as I need the other.”



**Greek temples** and healing sanctuaries, especially those of the Greek healing god Asclepius, functioned as spaces that both accommodated and reimagined disability. At sites such as Sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidaurus, architectural features including ramps, terraces, and wide stoas facilitated access for people with mobility impairments.

Visitors participated in healing rituals like incubation and dedicated votive offerings representing affected body parts. These sanctuaries integrated disabled individuals into communal and religious life, whereas the expectation of treatment and a cure for certain conditions shows that the Greeks believed some impairments could and should be treated medicinally.



**Homer** is the author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, foundational epics of ancient Greek literature. Thought to have lived in the eighth century BCE, he is traditionally depicted as a blind bard, though his historical existence remains uncertain. His works, composed in dactylic hexameter, shaped Greek education, identity, and storytelling for centuries, and continue to inform modern retellings and adaptations.

Both stories also themselves feature disabled characters, most notably in figures such as Hephaestus, the physically impaired god of craftsmanship, and the blind prophet Tiresias. Whether exploring lived realities or cultural attitudes, such depictions offer valuable insight into how disability was understood and represented in the ancient world.

**Spartan Infanticide** - It is widely believed in society today that in ancient Greece, particularly in ancient Sparta, disability constituted automatic grounds for the routine killing or exposure of disabled infants. This however has been disproven by the research of Debby Sneed. The often cited ancient Greek literary passages of Plato, Aristotle, and Plutarch, which allude to this practice do not realistically depict ancient Greek life, but instead were either representations of an “ideal” society based in philosophical theorems or were an account of the mythical Spartan lawgiver Lykourgos, which was written 700 years after he supposedly lived. Archaeological evidence for the practice is nonexistent, and as Sneed states, archaeological evidence of feeding bottles suggest that ancient Greeks actually crafted specific vessels to feed infants with disabilities that caused difficulty with breastfeeding. These feeding bottles suggest an ancient society actively invested in the societal care of disabled children who would grow up to be disabled adults.

Additionally, even Sparta itself had kings such as Agesilaus II who were born with a physical impairment, and whose physical impairment was seen as less disqualifying to becoming king than his nephew who was disqualified for potentially being a bastard. This myth of ancient infanticide rooted in eugenics becomes dangerous in today’s society as it allows modern eugenics movements to justify themselves, both stating that it is a fundamental acceptable point of human nature and point to an “origin” in the ancient past. It also allows for a historical narrative that perpetuates the survival and inclusion of disabled people in society as a modern invention, only possible because of modern medicine and modern economic conditions, which allows for disabled people to be reframed economically as “burdens” on society.

Disabled people are expected to be grateful for being allowed to live because the past was supposedly significantly more brutal, but in fact many ancient societies were extremely inclusive of disabled people. These inclusive societies ranged from prehistoric hunter gatherer societies to advanced civilisations like ancient Egypt that lasted for thousands of years



**Acr. 683** is an Archaic Greek marble kore (young woman statue) dedicated on the Athenian Acropolis around c. 510 BCE. It stands about 85 cm tall and was carved from Parian marble. Unlike many korai of the period, her proportions are distinct: she has a disproportionately large head, short legs, and long arms, features scholars interpret as a realistic representation of a young woman with dwarfism rather than an idealised type. The sculpture's articulated details such as the anatomy of her face, eyes, ears, and limbs suggest that the artist deliberately captured her individual physical characteristics in a statue that was made typical for korai of the period. She wears a sewn chiton dress and distinctive pointed shoes, known as the "Red Slippers." She challenges assumptions about standardised body forms in Archaic Greek art by commemorating bodily difference within a religious dedication.

**Mutiliation** - In the aftermath of the Persian Wars, a group of Greek captives had been severely mutilated, losing hands, feet, ears, or noses during their enslavement by the Persians. When Alexander the Great arrived at Persepolis, c. 330 BCE, he encountered around eight hundred of these maimed men and arranged for their return home with provisions. The captives, however, held a debate over whether to return to Greece, where their families might be shocked by their disfigurements, or remain together in Persia with land and support. They ultimately elected to stay in Persia. As stated by historian M. Miles, this is the first recorded instance of history of disabled people being given agency and specifically asked for their opinion on things having to do with them. This episode illustrates how physical impairment shaped both personal and collective decision-making in the ancient world. It also highlights the tension between community, autonomy, and social perception, offering a glimpse into how disabled individuals navigated agency and status in the Classical world.

**Disabled veterans** - In the Hellenistic world, especially Ptolemaic Egypt, disabled people were actively integrated into the highest tiers of political and religious power. This practice can be traced to military reforms under Philip II and Alexander the Great, which kept war-wounded veterans healthy and influential, forming an elite class of disabled soldiers. Greek administrators adopted Egyptian traditions like mummification and the ethical principle of Ma'at (cosmic order), reinforcing moral and cultural obligations to include disabled individuals. Artistic depictions from the period show them as active societal participants. Ptolemaic Egypt allowed strategically placed disabled individuals to wield real authority, creating a uniquely non-stigmatising model of social, military, and political integration.

**Labda** is discussed by the ancient historian Herodotus in Book 5 of his Histories. She was a daughter of Amphion of Corinth, and a member of the elite oligarchical Bacchiad family of ancient Corinth. She was married to Eetion after she was rejected by the Bacchiad elite because of her physical disability. When Eetion inquired about his potential heirs they found out from the Oracle of Delphi that "Eetion, yet high honour is thine, though honour'd thou art not. Labda conceiveth anon; and a

rolling rock she shall bear thee, Fated on princes to fall, and execute justice at Corinth..." especially stating that their future child would overthrow Corinth. This came true when Labda became the mother of Cypselus, her son, who overthrew her family and became the first tyrant of Corinth. Labda is said to have either been lame or born with her feet turned outwards resembling the Greek letter Λ.

**Son of Croesus** - The nonverbal son of Croesus is mentioned by the historian Herodotus in the Histories. He is described as being unable to speak from birth, however when Croesus is captured, he suddenly cries out to stop a Persian soldier from killing his father, breaking his silence in an act of protection. He is said to then continue to be able to speak afterwards having saved his father.

## Mythological

**Demodocus** is the blind bard of the Phaeacian court in the Odyssey. Favoured by the Muses, he is deprived of sight but given extraordinary musical and poetic ability. He performs songs about the Trojan War and the gods, entertaining both the court and Odysseus, who is moved to tears by his performances. Demodocus is treated with honour and respect, occupying an important cultural role within the palace. His blindness is directly linked to his identity as a divinely inspired poet.

**Daphnis** is a Sicilian pastoral figure often credited with founding bucolic poetry. In many versions of his myth, he is blinded either by a nymph or as punishment for breaking a vow of fidelity. Following his blinding, he continues to sing and compose songs connected to the natural landscape. His story became influential in later pastoral traditions, particularly in Hellenistic poetry.

**Erymanthus** appears in myth as a son of Apollo. In some versions of his story, he is blinded after witnessing a goddess bathing or as punishment for spying on the goddess Aphrodite after she lain with her lover Adonis. Apollo later kills Adonis in revenge for his son's blinding. Erymanthus's myth survives only in fragmentary form, and details vary between sources.



**The Graeae** [Deino, Pempredo, and Enyo] in Greek mythology were sisters/marine deities who shared one eye and tooth between them. Therefore at all times, only one sister could see, while the other two were blind. They were described by ancient writers as old, grey-haired women, who were “fair-cheeked,” or “swan shaped.”

The hero Perseus on his quest to kill Medusa, temporarily stole their eye in order to gain information needed to subdue her, leaving all of them temporarily blinded. Today, the Graeae Theatre company of d/Deaf, and disabled artists and actors takes inspiration from their name.



**Hephaestus** the god of fire, blacksmiths, craftsmen and volcanoes from the Greek pantheon. Disability was common among blacksmiths because they often worked with arsenic, which caused nerve damage. Hephaestus had twisted legs and had difficulty walking, so he built himself a winged wheelchair that could fly and mechanical golden three-legged assistant robots.

He built all the thrones of the gods of Olympus and their equipment like the winged helmet and sandals of Hermes. His mother rejected him so he built a throne that trapped her in it. The other gods had to bargain with him to have her released from it. He also fought giants, killing one by throwing molten iron at him.

## Hymn to Hephaestus

Your hammer and pincers master every art,  
Molten bronze and gold flow from your workshop.  
Volcanoes, lava, flame from earth. Pure clean light of the shining sun,  
That is all we see of you, you are the heat and strength of fire.  
Father of tribes, builder of shelter, inventor of cities we honor you.  
Our strong bodies your handiwork. Breathe upon us an even flame.  
(Taylor, "The Hymns of Orpheus" 1908)

### Alternate translation of Hymn to Hephaestus:

Strong-spirited Íphaistos, mighty, inexhaustible fire,  
Gleaming flaming sunlight, light-bringing divinity,  
Torch-bearing, strong-handed, eternal, mighty craftsman,  
Workman, portion of the Kózmos, perfect foundation,  
All-devouring, all-subduing, highest of all, all-consuming, Aithír,  
sun, stars, moon, unblemished light,  
For these are the limbs of Íphaistos which manifest to mortals.  
The dwellings of all belong to you, all cities, all peoples,  
You dwell in our mortal bodies, blessing us, mighty one. Hear,  
happy one, we invite you to this holy libation,  
Come to us always, gentle one, and make work joyful. Cease  
the raging madness of your tireless flame  
For it is your fire which burns in Nature within our bodies.

**Metope**, daughter of King Echetus, appears in Greek myth as a victim of severe punishment. Her father discovers she has a lover and mutilates her lover, and blinds her by piercing her eyes with bronze needles. He then imprisons her in a tower and gives her grains of bronze, promising that she would regain her sight when she grinds these grains into flour.

**Palaimonius** was an Argonaut and son of Hephaestus, mentioned in Apollonius Rhodius's *Argonautika*. Like his father he is described as having a physical lower limb impairment. Palaimonius joined Jason and the other Argonauts on their expedition to fetch the Golden Fleece, participating in the perils and challenges that characterised the voyage. His story shows him as a valued companion in the heroic band rather than a marginalised figure.



**The Kabeiri** are a group of chthonic deities worshipped in Samothrace, Lemnos, and other regions of ancient Greece, who are also frequently linked with Hephaestus. They are often described as having dwarfism or being of short stature.

Associated with mystery cults, fertility, protection of sailors, and metalworking, the Kabeiri were central to rites promising safety, prosperity, and knowledge of hidden forces. Initiates underwent secret ceremonies in caves and sanctuaries, emphasising the transformative and liminal nature of these deities.



**Oedipus** whose name means “swollen foot,” was a central figure in Greek mythology who is best known from the play *Oedipus Rex*. Initially exposed as an infant with pierced and bound ankles due to a prophecy that said he would kill his father and marry his mother, he grew up to become king of Thebes. As king, he embodied intellectual authority and problem-solving prowess, challenging modern assumptions that bodily difference precludes leadership. Due to the societal stigma of unknowingly killing his father and marrying and having children with his mother, Oedipus later self-inflicts blindness by gouging out his eyes. Both this and his earlier disability are acquired ones. His story shows that disability in ancient Greece was an experience that was socially constructed and shaped by societal interpretation as well as impairment.



**Philoctetes** was a Greek hero and skilled archer, famed for possessing the bow and arrows of Heracles, which were crucial for the fall of Troy. As mentioned in the play *Philoctetes* by Sophocles, he fought in the Trojan War but was abandoned on the island of Lemnos after suffering a festering unpleasant smelling wound on his foot or leg that made him unable to travel with the army.

This injury, a long-lasting disability, caused both physical pain and social isolation. Despite his abandonment, Philoctetes remained self-reliant, surviving on Lemnos for many years. Eventually, the Greeks returned to retrieve him, knowing that the success of the war depended on his bow.



**Thersites** was a Greek soldier who fought in the Trojan War, most famously described in Homer's *Iliad*. He was depicted with a curvature of the spine, bow-legged, and with a swollen head, distinguishing him from the other warriors. Beyond his bodily appearance, Thersites was known for his sharp tongue and outspoken criticism of the Greek leaders, particularly Agamemnon, challenging authority and mocking his peers.

His verbal boldness made him a complex symbol of dissent within the army. As described in the *Iliad*, he was ultimately struck down by Achilles for his insolence, highlighting the tension between social hierarchy and freedom of speech in Greek martial culture.

**Orion** was a hunter from Greek mythology who became blind but also regained his sight. He is often depicted in the night sky with his hunting dogs and weapons. He was a giant and a huntsman for a king but got drunk and made advances towards a princess and was blinded and exiled because of it. There are two versions of the tale of his death, one is that his lover was tricked into killing him with an arrow by a jealous rival. The other is that he boasted that he was such a great hunter that he would kill all the animals on earth and so Gaia sent a giant scorpion to kill him. He was eventually immortalized as a constellation in the night sky, which is positioned so that when Scorpius rises in the east, Orion sets in the west, as if still fleeing from the scorpion.

**Ophioneus** was a Messenian seer mentioned by the historian Pausanias in his Description of Greece. He was blind from birth and practised divination by gathering and interpreting information about public and private events in order to predict outcomes. He served as an advisor during the reign of Aristodemus, alongside another seer, Epebolus, and played a role in political decisions, including the contested succession to the Messenian throne. During a critical moment in the war, Ophioneus miraculously gained his sight following a sudden illness, an event interpreted as a significant omen. However, he later lost his sight again just as suddenly, returning to his original state of blindness.

**Plexippus** and **Pandion** were the sons of King Phineus of Thrace and his first wife Cleopatra, daughter of Boreas. In most traditions, their stepmother Ideaea falsely accused them of rape, leading Phineus to punish them severely. He either orders them to be blinded or allows Ideaea to have them blinded, and in some accounts also imprisoned them along with their mother. Certain versions describe the brothers being confined in a vault or trench, where they were subjected to ongoing torture. When the Argonauts later arrived in Thrace, they encountered the brothers and heard their plea for rescue, learning of the false accusations that had led to their suffering. As punishment for this unjustness the gods later blinded King Phineus too and sent Harpies to continuously hound him.

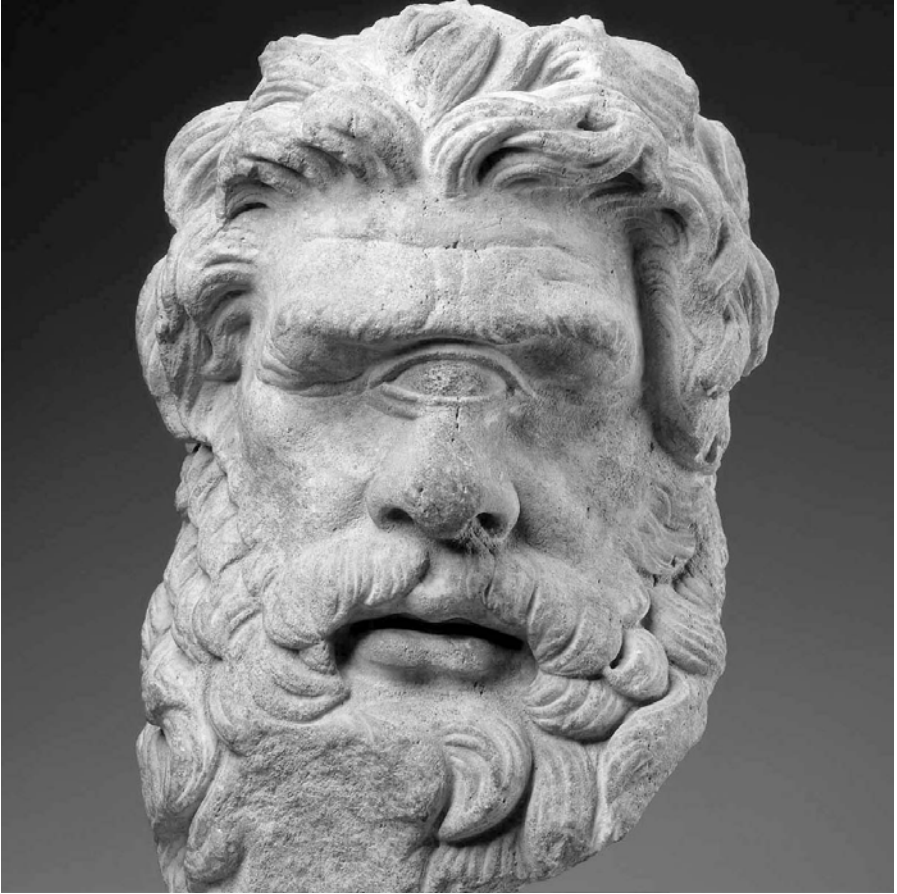
**Plutus** is the god of wealth and prosperity. In Greek tradition, he is often depicted as blind, distributing wealth without regard to merit. In *Plutus*, the play by the poet Aristophanes, a poor man named Chremylus tries to restore his sight as he believes this is why wealth is unevenly distributed among humans. Plutus's sight is eventually restored, altering how wealth is allocated, but this has the unintended effect of destabilizing Athenian society as the balance between rich and poor collapses, and Chremylus quickly realises his error.

**Polymestor** was a king of Thrace who appears in the play *Hecuba* by Euripides. Entrusted with the Trojan prince Polydorus and a quantity of gold, he betrayed this trust by killing the boy after the fall of Troy. In revenge, Hecuba lures him into a trap, where he is blinded and his sons are killed. His blinding marks his downfall and loss of power.

**Phoenix** is a figure in the *Iliad*, where he serves as a mentor and companion to Achilles. According to myth, he was blinded by his father Amyntor after a family dispute involving accusations and deception. His sight was later restored, and he became a trusted advisor. He plays a key role in attempting to persuade Achilles to return to battle during the Trojan War.

**Thamyris** was a Thracian bard who boasted that he could surpass the Muses in song. As punishment for this challenge, the Muses deprived him of his musical ability and blinded him. He appears in early Greek epic tradition, including references in the *Iliad*. His loss of both sight and artistic skill marked the end of his career as a musician.

**Triptolemus** was a legendary ancient Greek hero who is said to be inventor and patron of agriculture. He is credited with being the first person to sow seeds for cultivation after being taught how by the goddess Demeter, and is also credited with using oxen and the plow. He was considered one of the main gods worshipped in the Eleusinian Mysteries. He is usually shown as a young man, wearing a diadem, sitting in a winged chariot adorned by serpents. The chariot often bears a striking resemblance to a more modern looking wheelchair.



**Polyphemus** is a Cyclops, the son of the sea god Poseidon, who appears in the *Odyssey* as well as had a separate play written about him by Euripides called *Cyclops*, and a poem by Philoxenus that was performed live. His name means abounding in songs and legends. He is a giant with a single eye in the centre of his forehead. When Odysseus and his men become trapped in his cave, they blind him to escape.

After being blinded, Polyphemus calls upon his father Poseidon to curse Odysseus's journey home. Interestingly, some of the text from *Cyclops* by Philoxenus was also reused verbatim by Aristophanes in his play about *Plutus*.



**Tiresias** is a renowned Theban seer who appears in multiple Greek myths and tragedies, including *Oedipus Rex*. He was blinded by a goddess, usually Athena or Hera, after an encounter that revealed divine secrets. In compensation, he was granted prophetic insight and long life.

Tiresias is also notable for having lived as both a man and a woman for a period, after striking mating snakes. He advised figures such as Oedipus, Creon, and Odysseus, and even appears in the underworld in the *Odyssey*. His blindness is consistently linked with his role as a seer, and he remains one of the most authoritative prophetic figures in Greek mythology.



**Tyche** was the Greek goddess of luck, chance, and fortune. She was variously described as the daughter of Oceanus and Tethys, or of Zeus or Aphrodite in different sources. Tyche presided over the unpredictable turns of human and civic life, determining both prosperity and misfortune beyond individual control.

By the Hellenistic period, she became one of the most widely venerated deities, with major cities establishing cults and iconic personifications of their own fortune. Ancient writers and artists sometimes depicted her as blind or blindfolded to emphasise the impartial and unforeseen nature of fate. Her symbols include the mural crown, rudder, and cornucopia, signifying her role in guiding and bestowing abundance.

# Would you like to know more?

## Videos

The Partial Historians: Disability in Ancient Greece <https://partialhistorians.com/2021/04/08/special-episode-disability-in-ancient-greece/>

Youtube: Golden Maidens and Wheeled Chairs: Assistive Technology in Ancient Greece <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ItORsfDN7ak>

## Books

Ellen Adams. *Disability Studies and the Classical Body: The Forgotten Other*. Routledge, 2021.

Jane Draycott. *Prosthetics and Assistive Technology in Ancient Greece and Rome*. Cambridge University Press, 2022.

Hannah Vogel, Cecily Bateman, Mar A. Rodda, Karl Mercer, and Alexandra F. Morris. *Disability Activism in and out of the Academy: Classical Studies, Pedagogy and Practice*. Routledge, 2026.

## Articles

Justin L. Biggi. "Judging the Body: Disability, Class and Citizen Identity—A Case Study from an Ancient Greek Law Court." *Journal of Gender, Ethnic, and Cross-Cultural Studies* 2.1 (2023): Article 3.

M. Miles. "Segregated We Stand? The Mutilated Greeks' Debate at Persepolis, 330 BC." *Disability & Society* 18.7 (2003): 865–879

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Debby Sneed. "Beautiful Hephaistos: A Re-Presentation of a Kalos-Inscription," *Greece & Rome* 73.1 (2026): 106-122.

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