Peopling the Past Video 1: Disability in Ancient Greece with Debby Sneed

Transcript

Video begins with instrumental music played over the title card which reads “Peopling the Past”

We hear Debby Sneed Speak: “Hi, my name is Debby Sneed I'm an archaeologist at California State University, Long Beach and welcome to Peopling the Past”

There is a woman with brown hair in a blue shirt facing the camera. She is sitting in front of a bookcase on the wall behind her. The main screen shows the Peopling the Past logo.

Sneed: "What topic are you talking about today?" Today I'm talking to you about my research on physical disability in ancient Greece.”

The slide now shows the Neumagen Relief, which is a late Roman tomb sculpture that shows a school scene with pupils and a teacher. The text reads “What topic are you talking about today?”

Sneed: “My research is primarily guided by three research questions. First, what evidence do we have for disabled people in ancient Greece? My base assumption here is that there definitely were disabled people in ancient Greece. Before they were anything ancient Greeks were humans and they had human bodies, and as such we can expect that they experienced illnesses, injuries, and disabilities just like we do. The specifics of those including their causes would have been different of course but I work first of all on finding the evidence that we have for the disabilities that they experienced. My second question is, how can we know whether disabled people were accepted in their communities and societies or not? So once we find disabled people in our evidence, I want to know whether disabled people met with prejudice as they do in our modern society or if they were perhaps accepted or something else entirely. Finally, I wonder how disabled people lived and worked in ancient Greek society. What was life like for

somebody with a mobility impairment for example, or for somebody with impaired vision?”

Slide shows a painted Greek vase scene with three men. The two men on the side are clothed, and stand next to a dwarf in the center who is naked. The text on the screen was read out by Sneed

Sneed: "What sources or data do you look at?" My research is interdisciplinary, meaning that I look at a lot of different kinds of evidence. It's important to remember that with different kinds of evidence. Each one will provide a different perspective on my research questions. That is, they will provide a different answer to my questions, and I need to make sure that I understand the context in which each piece of evidence was produced and used.”

The slide shows three images. On the left is a statue in stone of a seated scribe from ancient Egypt. In the center is a cuneiform clay tablet from Mesopotamia. On the right is a wall painting from Pompeii known as the Sappho Tondo. Though it does not depict the famous author, it shows the portrait of a well-dressed woman with a writing utensil poised to her lip. The text on the slide reads “What sources or data do you look at?”

Sneed: “The primary categories of evidence for my work include literature, art, ceramics, architecture, inscriptions, and human remains. Within literature, I look at almost every genre including the Homeric epics, The Iliad and The Odyssey, the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, the law court speeches of Lysias and Demosthenes, medical treatises by the Hippocratic physicians, and Athenian comedies and tragedies. In art, evidence for disability can be found in vase painting as well as in large– and small–scale sculpture from temple reliefs to terracotta figurines like this one in Geneva showing a man with both of his legs and one of his arms perhaps amputated. I look at ceramics, that is the specific shapes of vessels (pottery) and architecture to consider the possibility that ancient Greeks may have incorporated accessibility into the design of some of their objects or spaces. Inscriptions can provide information about things like laws that affected or governed people with disabilities, or inscriptions that may otherwise be for or about people with disabilities. And finally using human remains I can look not just at the kinds of physical disabilities that ancient Greeks had, but also look at things like how they were treated in their

burials, what kinds of gifts they were buried with, and so on. Altogether this evidence helps me reconstruct something of the lives of disabled ancient Greeks."

The slide shows the terracotta figurine described by Sneed, which is of a seated man with both legs and one of his arms perhaps amputated. All text on the screen was read out by Sneed.

Sneed: "A good way to explain how different kinds of evidence can come together is by way of example. One of my specific research questions is this: if we acknowledge that there were people who lived with mobility impairments in ancient Greece, how did they navigate their environments? We know of mobility aids like crutches and canes, you can see an old man here leaning on a staff that could have helped him as he walked, but do we have other evidence about accessibility or any other kinds of accommodations?"

Slide shows a black Greek vase with red figures of two men facing each other. The younger man on the right is shown with armor, while the older man on the left leans bent over a cane. The text on the screen reads: "How did disabled ancient Greeks navigate their environments?"

Sneed: "I decided that the best place to look was somewhere we know there were a lot of people with disabilities: the healing sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidaurus. Asclepius was the Greek god of medicine and healing and this was the most famous healing sanctuary in ancient Greece. You can see where it's located here on this map. People came here to ask the god for healing their illnesses, injuries, and disabilities. The sanctuary then attracted large numbers of people with impairments of all kinds including mobility impairments, and if there are going to be accessibility features anywhere, this is where we would expect to find them."

The slide shows a map of Greece and the Aegean Sea, highlighting the Sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidaurus. This is located northeast of Athens, which is also indicated on the map.

Sneed: "When I was looking at the organization of the sanctuary, I started to notice that there were a lot of buildings with ramps built on to them. I remembered ramps from my classes where I learned that they're a feature

of what's called "Doric" architecture and that actually they're pretty rare. A recent study of ramps on temple buildings showed that there are 18 temples with ramps in the Greek world. So that's not very many. Well, when I counted how many there were at this healing sanctuary there are 11 and they aren't just on temples, they're on a lot of different kinds of buildings. So I wondered okay if most sanctuaries have no ramps or just one ramp, why would this sanctuary have 11 ramps? The explanation has to be something that applies at other sanctuaries, because some non-healing sanctuaries do have ramps, but that applies especially so at this sanctuary. The answer that I came up with was disability. Unlike other sanctuaries this healing sanctuary was specifically built to attract people with disabilities. In this reconstruction, you can see the Temple of Asclepius (right) and the enigmatic round building called the "Tholos" (left) with their ramps out front. The next thing is I had to prove that people with mobility impairments specifically would have come here to this sanctuary and that the ramps would have helped them. Thankfully, there are a number of inscriptions from this site called "the iamata" that describe the people who came here. We learned for example about a woman named Sostrata who came to Epidaurus from her homeland in Thessaly. She was so impaired in her mobility, we're told, that she had to be carried to the sanctuary on a litter."

Slide shows a model reconstruction of the Sanctuary at Epidaurus, including a number of buildings and surrounding sculpture on pedestals. The two most prominent buildings include the circular Tholos building on the left, while in the center is the main temple. Both have columns and painted decoration, and both are shown with ramps leading up the front of the structures. Text on the screen says that there are "permanent stone ramps on 11 buildings at the Sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidaurus."

Sneed: "And we can see a representation of something similar to that on this stone relief. You can see a man lying on a litter that's being carried by other people. We know that they're on their way to a healing sanctuary because of this snake in the tree. Snakes are very associated with the healing god Asclepius and it's included in our modern medical imagery. You can see in the bottom right. That's sort of the logo for medicine in the modern period. So this man can't walk and he has to be carried on a litter as he tries to get access to healing from Asclepius."

The stone relief described in detail by Sneed shows four individuals carrying a reclining man on a litter next to a tree. There is a snake high in the branches. The text reads “Traveling to visit Asclepius carried on a litter.”

Sneed: “Further evidence that people came to healing sanctuaries for help with mobility impairments comes in the form of what we call anatomical votives. These are representations of body parts. They're usually made out of terracotta (clay) and people would dedicate them to Asclepius as they asked him to heal them. If you wanted Asclepius to heal your leg, for example, you dedicated a representation of a leg. Many of these anatomical votives are of legs and feet so we know that a large number of people came to these sanctuaries looking for help with their lower body and presumably at least some of them had impaired mobility in these limbs. So the combination of architectural evidence, that's the ramps themselves, the inscriptions describing the kinds of people who visited Epidaurus, artistic representations of people with impaired mobility traveling to a sanctuary of Asclepius, and votives that represent people asking for help with their legs and feet, it all comes together to help show that the preponderance of ramps at healing sanctuaries is because the ramps were intended to help people with mobility impairments get access to the buildings that they needed to enter in order to get healing from the god. Just like how sanctuaries that hosted athletic games and lots of athletes had stadiums and gymnasiums, the healing sanctuary of Asclepius hosted people with disabilities and had architectural features to help people with disabilities.”

The slide shows an image of the anatomical votives from the Sanctuary of Asclepius at the site of Corinth. These include a row of legs and feet, a number of arms, hands, breasts, ears, and genitals along the wall, and a shelf of heads and other body parts at the top of the display.

Sneed: "How does this topic or material tell us about real people in the past? This topic is great for understanding the people who lived in ancient Greece because we're not just talking about famous generals or philosophers. We're talking about people like a nameless man living in 4th century BCE Athens who tells us that he walked with the aid of two crutches, or our friend Sostrata who was carried to Epidaurus on a litter.

Slide shows four images. On the left is a Greek marble grave stele of a little girl holding a bird. To the right of this is a Greek vase painting scene that shows women weaving at a loom. To the right of that are model figures of bakers preparing and baking bread from ancient Egypt. On the right is a painted "mummy portrait" of a young man from the Fayum in Egypt. The text reads "How can this topic or material tell us about real people in the past?"

Sneed: "We tend to think about ancient Greeks looking like this line of Athenian women on this fragment of the Parthenon frieze, as if all ancient Greeks had these idealized forms. But actually ancient Greeks were humans. They had human bodies and their bodies were subject to many of the same things that ours are, including physical and mental disability. This kind of research can help us embody the ancient Greeks and think about them as real people not as idealizations. Thank you."

Slide image shows a stone relief of five women in thick drapery walking towards the left.

Instrumental music plays over the last slide, which shows the credits for this episode:

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