Introduction: Disability, Poverty, and Work in the Middle Ages – A Relationship to Reconsider

Prof. Dr. Olivier Richard (University of Fribourg)

It is necessary to move beyond contemporary categories such as *handicap, disabilità, disability, Behinderung* in order to better understand the social and cultural realities of the Middle Ages. In medieval times, people we would today describe as disabled were instead considered part of broader categories such as *infirmi* or *pauperes*, and their situation was understood within a religious, moral, and social framework very different from our own.

The notion of poverty itself is ambivalent: it is valorized when voluntary (as with monks or mendicant orders), but becomes suspect when involuntary, especially in urban contexts of the late Middle Ages. Work, meanwhile, oscillates between condemnation (as divine punishment) and valorization (as a path of humility and salvation). This complexity makes the articulation between the three notions difficult.

Historians of poverty from the 1960s–1970s, such as Michel Mollat and Bronislaw Geremek, considered that disabled individuals were exempt from work and integrated into charitable structures as "deserving poor". According to them, begging thus became almost a profession for the infirm, with specific confraternities (such as the blind beggars' confraternity founded in Strasbourg in 1411). The repression of "sturdy beggars" implicitly highlights the social acceptance of begging for disabled individuals, while also provoking practices of simulation denounced in legal, literary, and iconographic sources.

Disability historians have recognized that this perspective is too narrow, but over the past ten years at least, they have shifted their focus to other topics (e.g., emotions or material culture).

Therefore, this view deserves to be nuanced: historians of poverty drew these conclusions based on biased sources – textual (hagiographies, farces, laws reglementing begging) or iconographic – that, because of their own agenda, overwhelmingly depict disabled individuals as poor because. Yet another reading of these sources is possible, and it is worthwhile to focus on the less frequent sources that do show disabled individuals who are wealthy or working. Examples from miracle accounts show that disabled people wanted to work and sometimes did: Jeanne de Sarris, paralyzed, spun wool to finance her pilgrimage to the tomb of saint Louis, according to the Miracles of this French king. Pragmatic sources also support this view: in 1457, Else Pröpstlin, amputated at the Antonine hospital in Basel, lamented no longer being able to work. These testimonies suggest that work was also an ideal for disabled individuals.

Moreover, historical figures such as Enrico Dandolo, Doge of Venice (†1205), or Conrad Pauman, master musician from Nuremberg (†1473), show that disability did not necessarily prevent the exercise of power or professional work. These cases, though rare in the sources, invite us to reconsider the automatic link between disability and poverty.

In fact, serial sources (hagiography or iconographic data bases), which are the easiest for historians to use, tend to systematically associate disability with poverty, thus shaping our perception. We need to move beyond this.

This is why an interdisciplinary approach, which draws on other sources and reads them differently, is necessary to reexamine this complex relationship between disability, poverty, and work. Our conference strives to do just that by bringing together varied perspectives (literature, theater, legal history, general history) and covers the entire medieval period, with particular attention to gender and the *agency* of disabled individuals.