

Fribourg Colloquium 2025
Medieval Institute, University of Fribourg
3rd – 5th September 2025

Disability, poverty and work in the Middle Ages

Concept

For the medieval period, disability studies really emerged at the turn of our century. They are now well represented, both in the historical sciences and in philology and literature, especially in the English-speaking world, but also to a lesser extent in Germany and elsewhere, and to a very limited extent in the French-speaking academic world.

However, persons with disabilities had featured in earlier academic research: in studies on poverty. Indeed, the major studies from the 1960s to the 1990s, such as those of Michel Mollat and Bronislaw Geremek, often readily assumed that disability and poverty were inextricably linked: *infirmi* were unable to work because of old age or disability, and this inability to work inevitably led to poverty. At the same time, studies of poverty in the Middle Ages present disabled persons as the 'good poor' *par excellence*, those who could legitimately claim charity, by contrast with the *mendicants validi* who took advantage of society through laziness or vice. So, despite some more nuanced research, a strong image of the disabled person as a beggar took hold, and has not been challenged since.

It is true that medieval iconography invites such shortcuts, since the most convenient way of graphically presenting a poor person at the time, apart from dressing him in rags and making him stretch out his hand, was visible disability and the objects associated with it: crutches or wooden legs. Moreover, the most abundant historical sources--hagiography on the one hand; practice records from urban governments on the other, and documents inherited from charitable institutions-- seem to associate disability and poverty almost automatically.

From 3 to 5 September 2025, the Medieval Institute at the University of Fribourg will host an international and interdisciplinary colloquium on the subject of "Disability, poverty and work in the Middle Ages", in order to re-examine these automatic associations. Indeed, the categories linked here are problematic, since the category of 'disability' did not exist in the Middle Ages, while 'poverty' and even 'work' were highly polysemous and also need to be historicised.

The aim will therefore be to draw on a range of disciplines – history, art history, legal history, literature in different languages, theology, philosophy and archaeology – to reflect on the links between 'disability', poverty and work, using a variety of sources and materials (literary, iconographic, normative and practical sources). The conference will provide an opportunity to reflect together on issues such as the presence in sources of disabled people who appear to be neither poor nor inactive, the social acceptance of their inactivity, and the different experiences of work or the lack of it depending on the social status and gender of the disabled person.