You’re Dead to Me – Ancient Disability

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Greg Jenner Hello and welcome to You’re Dead to Me, a comedy podcast that takes history seriously. My name is Greg Jenner. I'm a public historian, author, and broadcaster, and I'm the chief nerd on the funny kids TV show Horrible Histories. And today we are adventuring back thousands of years. Well, about 2000 years give or take, to learn all about disability in the ancient world. And to help me do that, I am joined by two very special guests. In history corner, she's a lecturer in classics at the University of Glasgow and is an expert in disability in antiquity, as well as the history and archaeology of medicine, science and technology. More importantly, she's writing a fascinating new book called Prosthetics and Assistive Technology in Ancient Greece and Rome. It's Dr Jane Draycott! Hello, Jane! Welcome to the show.

Jane Draycott Hello, everyone!
**Greg Jenner** And in Comedy Corner, we are very excited. She is a comedian, a writer, a TV presenter and actor. You may have seen her hilarious stand up shows or caught her on many, many panel shows. Maybe you've read her children's book, *The Amazing Edie Eckhart*, about a young girl with cerebral palsy. She co-hosts the podcast *Daddy Look at Me* and she presents the channel four series *Trip Hazard: My Great British Adventure*. Plus, she reported from the Paralympics for *The Last Leg*. What a CV, it's Rosie Jones. Welcome, Rosie!

**Rosie Jones** Hello, Greg. Oh my God! I can't tell you how happy I am to be here because I am such a fan of the podcast.

**Greg Jenner** Oh, I bet you say that to all the boys.

**Rosie Jones** I do but this time I actually mean it.

**Greg Jenner** Rosie, we know your brainy, but do you like history? Did you enjoy it at school?

**Rosie Jones** Yeah, I really did. But you know what? It annoyed me because we only studied modern history – like, I spent two years learning about bloody Hitler and bloody Stalin. And you know what it was like, can we stop banging on about morons with moustaches? And can we at least delve into the thousands of years that went before those pair of idiots?

**Greg Jenner** Well, hopefully by the end of this, you will be a very much enjoying the ancient world, and we've got a brilliant professor to teach you. Did you ever do any disability history, any history of disabled people? Is there ever been, you know, something you've read about in your free time?
Rosie Jones Oh yeah, you know what no I haven’t. And I'll say that's because I think I'm the only disabled person worth knowing about. I am leader of the disabled - self-appointed – but you know what, there needs to be a leader! And it was Stephen Hawking, but he's dead now. So now it's the brain of the great Rosie Jones.

[GREG LAUGHING]

Greg Jenner voice-over So, waddaya know?

[TRUMPET FANFARE]

Greg Jenner Lovely. Well, that leads us onto the first segment of the pod, this is the “So, what do you know?” where I guess what listeners at home might know about today's subject and you're all familiar with disability, of course. There are at least 14 million people in the UK living with one or more disabilities, and you'll probably know a bunch of historical people who had disabilities, such as the genius physicist Stephen Hawking, who had ALS diagnosed in his twenties, or the American President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who used mobility aids after childhood polio. Then, of course, there's the famous artist Frida Kahlo, who had polio as well, and then a very serious accident that nearly cost her her life. And then, of course, there's arguably the greatest of all the composers Beethoven with his progressive hearing loss, and you'll have almost certainly heard of the disability rights activist Helen Keller, who was deaf and blind. And then, of course, there's Harriet Tubman and Lord Byron, both of whom have featured on our episodes - Byron with the clubfoot and Tubman with the chronic seizures. So, lots of different people from history. But what about disability in the ancient world? Well, thanks to films like 300, you probably think that the ancient world had no space for disabled people. They weren't welcomed. But was that the case? Let's find out, shall we? So, Jane, this is a huge topic we're talking about. So, what do we mean by “ancient world” and do we know how prevalent or how common disability was in the ancient world?
Jane Draycott Well, for me personally, I work on classical antiquity, so that is ancient Greece. That is the ancient Roman Republic and Empire and the neighbouring ancient civilizations such as Egypt. But when you work on ancient disability, you can find that there are lots of very interesting comparisons that you can make with other ancient civilizations and peoples in places such as India, China and even Central and South America. It's fair to say that most people in antiquity would have been what we would today consider disabled, whether the condition that they were born or a condition that they develop during life, perhaps the result of malnutrition, trauma, disease or even just years of very hard physical labour. So, if you were a disabled person in classical antiquity, you would have just been one among many and you would have been perceived as such. You wouldn't necessarily have been considered special or out of the ordinary or different.

Greg Jenner Rosie, does that surprise you?

Rosie Jones Yeah, I quite like the majority of people were disabled. Most of my life I'm in spaces where I'm the only disabled person. And when I went to the Paralympics for the first time, everyone was disabled, and it was really... awful! I mean, they queue for the disabled toilet...

[GREG AND ROSIE LAUGHING]

Rosie Jones It was a bloody nightmare!

[GREG LAUGHING]

Greg Jenner So, disability in the ancient world, if we say Rome, Greece, maybe Egypt, we're saying it's common, it's prevalent, it's ordinary. Of course, there are invisible disabilities. I think today we're going to focus more on the ones we can
know about which we were written about or can be seen in the record, so more on the visible disabilities, I think, today. The other question I wanted to ask Jane is, was there a concept of disability?

**Jane Draycott** Not as we would recognise it today. There wasn't an official category with badges or benefits or any kind of umbrella term that incorporates many different types of impairments. Although, we do hear about some communities of people who had very particular impairments living together in isolation, such as physically disfigured military veterans who didn't want to return home, or people with infectious conditions such as lepers. For our purposes today, it would actually be more appropriate to follow the World Health Organization's differentiation between the terms “impairment” and “disability”, where impairment designates the condition and disability designates the consequences for the individual. Assuming that there actually were any. Someone in classical antiquity might well have had an impairment, but depending on their situation in life and what was expected of them, they weren't necessarily disabled by that impairment. As you might imagine, they were very different expectations placed on men and women, for example, or rich and poor, and so on.

**Greg Jenner** Right. So, it's slightly contingent on who you are in society.

**Jane Draycott** So, we've got a really good example from Pliny the Elders *Natural History*. And he writes about a young man named Quintus Pedius, who was a member of a senatorial family with very close ties to the imperial family. And he was expected to embark on a political and military career. But he was born without speech, and he may well have also been deaf, so he couldn't have a traditional senatorial career which relied upon public speaking, persuasion, that kind of thing. So, a family friend, the famous orator Messala Corvinus suggested that he might be taught to paint instead. And since this wasn't normally an acceptable career for somebody from that level of society, the Emperor Augustus had to give his special
permission for this. And apparently Quintus Pedius showed a lot of promise, although unfortunately he died while he was still quite young, so he didn't get to realise his full potential. By contrast, a member of a peasant family who was expected to be a manual labourer born without speech or hard of hearing, wouldn't have struggled in the same way. For them, a physical impairment such as a damaged or lost limb would have been much more disabling.

Rosie Jones A farmer who couldn't hear or speak is actually a bloody good farmer because you can crack on with the work without going “Hello Bob, how's your sheep today?” Stop doing the yabbering and do some bloody farming!

[GREG LAUGHING]

Greg Jenner We have an example there of Quintus Pedius, who explored a new career, a painting, I suppose for a senator back then, a painter is not a proper job. It's a servant's job, almost. And the farmer in question, do we have like actual examples? Do we know names?

Jane Draycott In some cases, yes. So, there's an epigram that tells of a farmer named Mindon, who was cutting down an olive tree on his property when he was bitten on the foot by a spider lurking in the undergrowth and the bite turned gangrenous and his leg had to be amputated. And so he turned the wood from the tree into a prosthetic leg.

Greg Jenner That's cool!

Jane Draycott Yeah. Well, I think you have to bear in mind that since ancient doctors didn't like to try and attempt to treat chronic or incurable health problems because it was bad for their reputations and their businesses, people who had those were left to take care of themselves.
Greg Jenner He lost his leg in a tree accident and he turned the tree into the leg. There's a poetic irony there.

Jane Draycott The ultimate revenge, really.

Rosie Jones How many legs did he make with the tree? Because if I was him, I would make seven wooden legs and I myself would become the spider.

[GREG AND ROSIE LAUGHING]

Greg Jenner Spider-man would be a very different movie, wouldn't it?

Rosie Jones Yeah, yeah!

Greg Jenner We've already touched on wealth and status. The senator has money. The farmer doesn't. And if I'm reading my notes right, I now have to honk my Problematic Enslavement Klaxon. Jane, in the ancient world enslavement, as the phrase we like to use now, it is part of the economics. It is part of daily life. So, although I'm honking my enslavement klaxon, can you talk us through how it was part of this story?

Jane Draycott So we know the most about the ancient Greek and Roman social elite, and we know that they were virtually never alone or what we would consider to be in any way self-sufficient, whether they were disabled or not. Given that we're mostly talking about cultures that were built on enslavement, if a wealthy person had a disability impacting upon their physical capabilities, this would be offset to some degree by enslaved people carrying out tasks for them. Under normal circumstances, enslaved people read and wrote for their enslavers. They bathed and
dressed and groomed them. They carried them around in litters and sedan chairs. They serve them their food and drink.

**Greg Jenner** But it's for the rich regardless if they were people of disabilities or not, I suppose.

**Jane Draycott** Yes, absolutely. So, so that's happening all the time with everybody anyway. And then we do have some very specific, quite interesting examples of disabled people as well. So, we hear about one wealthy man named Domitius Tullus. He was bedridden with gout, and he complained to his friends about having to lick his slave's fingers when they fed him. There was another wealthy man who lost both of his feet to frostbite, and then he needed his slaves to carry him around from place to place. And a young man called Atticus Bradua, who was the son of the famous philosopher and orator Herodes Atticus. He had trouble learning to read, so his father, super rich, purchased enough slaves to give them each a name, beginning with a different letter of the alphabet so he could associate the slaves with the letters and thus find it easier to memorise the alphabet.

**Rosie Jones** I mean, what a dickhead!

**Greg Jenner** We do have enslavement as part of the story, and I am honking my klaxon. But we also, of course, have volunteer carers, people who love family members, friends. There is generosity. There is kindness. There is community, as there is today, of course. So, let's get on to mobility aids, assistive technology. Rosie, what do you think the Romans and Greeks and Egyptians had to help them get around?

**Rosie Jones** So, are we moving away from slavery? Because actually if you're going to use them as the alphabet, you might as well use them to ride on as well.
Jane Draycott There's a series of stories about a visually impaired man and physically impaired man, and the visually impaired man gave the physically impaired man a piggyback so he could direct him where they needed to go. So, the pair of them worked together. One set of eyes and one set of legs.

Rosie Jones That is a bloody disaster. It’s like my friend Martin is visually impaired and one time he asked for my arm. Not a good idea. I tripped over and he fell into a door. Talking about the blind leading the blind. But I argue the blind leading the cerebral palsy is even worse.

[Greg and Rosie Laughing]

Greg Jenner Health and safety nightmare. All right. Ok, Jane, do we have any other assistive technology that exists 2,000 years ago?

Jane Draycott We've got lots of literary evidence and depictions in art of crutches, walking sticks, staffs and actually some skeletal remains have been excavated that show wear on the bones from regular crutches, we've got corrective footwear for congenital conditions such as clubfoot. Shoes have been excavated from the Roman fort of Vindolanda on Hadrian's Wall that show evidence of gait correction as well. And we even have accessible architecture. So recently, Dr. Debby Sneed, has made a compelling argument that ancient healing sanctuaries like the Temple of Asclepius at Epidaurus had ramps to make the buildings more accessible to people with mobility impairments.

Rosie Jones When I go out in 2021 on a Friday night and I can't get into my local nightclub, it's like, what you bloody doing? They had it sorted in Greek times! They probably had a lovely ramp into the nightclub, a lovely ramp in the kebab shop. Like, I wish I lived in ancient Greek times. I think I would have had a more accessible Friday night out!
**Jane Draycott** As long as you were spending it at the temple, yeah.

**Rosie Jones** Am I allowed to drink alcohol and eat a kebab at the temple?

**Jane Draycott** Absolutely. You have to if you're going to have an incubation ritual and commune with the god.

[GREG LAUGHING]

**Rosie Jones** Great. I would eat a kebab with a god any day of the week.

[GREG LAUGHING]

**Greg Jenner** Sticking with mobility technologies, I'm aware, Jane, of ancient wheelchairs or wheeled mobility devices in the very late period what we'd call Late Antiquity about fifteen hundred years ago. Is that fair? Or am I slightly misremembering from my history?

**Jane Draycott** I've found literary references and artistic depictions of children using wheeled walking frames. So, a little bit like our modern zimmer frame, but no evidence of adults doing likewise at that time. I mean, perhaps it wasn't considered appropriate if these were particularly associated with children. Perhaps it didn't need to if they had physical assistance that we've already discussed and we have decided to sort of honk and move away from. So, no wheelchairs in ancient Greece and Rome, but maybe later periods of history. We also don't have the wheelbarrow in classical antiquity for the same reason that it's just not necessary when you've got labour.
**Greg Jenner** Rosie, when you went to the Paralympics, I was watching the last leg and you discovered lovely Maureen. I wanted to ask why Maureen as a name?

**Rosie Jones** So I have cerebral palsy and I've had it since birth. But when I was four years old I learned to walk. And I loved that feeling. And I wobble around, but I can get everywhere. I probably get more tired than able bodied people and a lot of times I'm in pain with my back, but actually I do have really big boobies so the back pain could also be like part palsy, part big titties.

[GREG LAUGHING]

I just always walk because as a child a lot of doctors said, “Oh, do you want a chair or a stick or a walker?” and I always saw mobility aids as something that would make me more disabled. And now in adulthood I recognise that as internalised ableism, but in Tokyo at the Paralympics we were walking round so much my producer said to me “How would you feel about getting a wheelchair?” and I thought “Actually, it’s boiling hot, we’re working fifteen hours a day, I’d bloody love a sit down – go on then.” And I got an electric scooter and I loved it. And I called her Maureen – I didn’t want my colleagues to say “Oh, shall we get your chair” – it sounded quirky and fun to go “Shall we get Maureen”, cos Maureen could easily just be a hot woman I’m shagging at the moment.

[GREG LAUGHING]

**Rosie Jones** So, yeah, for three weeks I sat down and had a good ride on Maureen…

[GREG AND ROSIE LAUGHING]

**Rosie Jones** And it just allowed me to do my job better, I wasn’t tired, I wasn’t in pain and it just made me realise that walking aids are not the enemy. If anything, they can
make me more independent and more able to be myself. So, I left Maureen in Tokyo, but I have brought back to the UK a love and a wanting to fully embrace walking aids.

**Greg Jenner** Wonderful. Thank you for sharing that story. And I love the name Maureen. My aunt is called Maureen and she's lovely.

**Rosie Jones** Is she's single?

[GREG LAUGHING]

**Greg Jenner** She is! I could introduce you!

**Rosie Jones** Hook me up!

[GREG LAUGHING]

**Greg Jenner** Alright, let's talk about other types of assistance. Ancient Very Good Boys. Can we talk about guide dogs?

**Jane Draycott** We can suggest that it was a possibility. We know that people had pets and that they lavished care and attention upon them, even burying them in a manner similar to children, in some cases, in one cemetery recently discovered in Egypt. We know that lots of beggars had dogs for companions, and we also hear about a lot of visually impaired beggars as well. So, there is a fresco from the house of Julia Felix at Pompeii that could show a man with a guide dog.

**Greg Jenner** Rosie. We're going to show you the fresco from Pompeii. It's actually quite hard to make out. So here is the fresco.
Rosie Jones: I can’t see a lot. It’s very brown and yellow. I think I can make out a lovely little person. And I can see a little belly. So, it’s either a pregnant woman or an utter lad who loves a beer or four. And I think he’s got a cane and a lovely little dog.

Greg Jenner: So, that’s the original fresco. It’s quite hard to see make out, and we do have, actually, a more reconstructed image.

Jane Draycott: Yes, this is a reconstruction that my friend Dr. Richard Marshall drew for me.

Greg Jenner: Lovely. All right. Well, let’s have a look at it, and let’s see if Rosie was on the money with her guess.

Rosie Jones: See, I told you! Exactly what I described!

Greg Jenner: It’s a gentleman rather than a lady. But yeah, you were spot on with the cane, with the dog.

Rosie Jones: Do you know what I mean about the belly?

Jane Draycott: It’s just terrible ancient styling.

Greg Jenner: Yeah, I think it’s a cloak or a bag, maybe.

Rosie Jones: No, Greg, it’s absolutely a little tum tum.

Greg Jenner: He’s been at the kebabs. He’s been to the temple, he’s been out with you on a Friday night.

Rosie Jones: Oh yeah!
Greg Jenner So, this is a possible depiction of a visually impaired person with a guide dog. But we're not sure. Rosie, any other animals that you think would be fun assistance animals.

Rosie Jones I would love a guide the elephant.

Greg Jenner Nice!

Rosie Jones How great would that be? Like, you get to the Co-Op and the guard says “Sorry, no elephants in here” and you go “Actually mate, it’s my guide elephant” and then he can't say anything! You go in the Co-Op with your elephant, you get your favourite yoghurts and off you go.

[GREG LAUGHING]

Greg Jenner Ok, let's talk now about communication and, Jane, was there such a thing as ancient sign language?

Jane Draycott Yes, we've got references to hand signals being used by soldiers on campaign and some people using physical gestures to make themselves understood. But there certainly wasn't a universal sign language taught to all deaf people. So, what probably happened was that every deaf individual and their family and friends figured out their own personalised version, and then it's probable that two deaf people from different places would have struggled to communicate. People who lost their ability to hear or speak later in life, if they were literate, then they could make good use of wax tablets, and they could probably work out a fair bit of lip reading as well.
**Greg Jenner** You're a specialist on prosthesis, on prosthetics. And here we move away from the maybes and possiblies and perhaps, when it comes to the archaeology of prosthesis, we have some prosthesis. We have actual stuff we can look at and measure and examine.

**Jane Draycott** Well, we've got lots of literary and documentary evidence for people using prostheses. Today, I've found one hundred and seven references spread across all genres of ancient literature, and I'm sure there are more just waiting to be uncovered. The earliest ancient literary reference to a prosthesis isn't actually from ancient Greece or Rome, it's actually from ancient India. And this is from an ancient Indian collection of Vedic Sanskrit hymns called the Rigveda that dates to around fifteen hundred and twelve hundred BCE. And this reference is to a female warrior called Vishpala, who had an iron leg.

**Rosie Jones** She sounds hot. Like, so many things I’m hearing. Warrior. Iron Leg. Like, you want her on your side.

**Greg Jenner** Yeah, absolutely.

**Rosie Jones** Big fan of her.

**Greg Jenner** So that's Vishpala. Is that a literary reference or a historical reference? So, is she a fictional character or is she a woman who is alleged to have lived?

**Jane Draycott** That I think we could say is in the realm of myth.

[DESPAIRING SOUND FROM ROSIE]

[GREG AND JANE LAUGHING]
Greg Jenner Sorry, Rosie. She's not on. Tinder. Certainly, a story like that may have come from somewhere, but we're talking three and a half thousand years ago in ancient India. So hard to prove this stuff, but in Greek literature in Greek myth, there are other obvious characters there's Pelops, with the ivory shoulder?

Jane Draycott That is right, yes, he was killed and cut up and cooked in a stew. This stew was offered to the gods, the goddess Demeter, because she was distracted because her daughter had recently been abducted. She ate the shoulder portion. And so when the gods found out what had happened and they resurrected Pelops, his shoulder was missing and they had to provide him with an ivory prosthesis.

Greg Jenner Wow.

Jane Draycott That is probably also mythical!

Greg Jenner Probably, probably.

[RGREG AND JANE LAUGHING]

Rosie Jones Wait a minute, so he still had an arm, he just didn’t have a shoulder. You know what, I’m putting myself out on a limb here, I’m going to say, I don’t think that’s true.

Greg Jenner Oh, you cynic Rosie!

Jane Draycott Well, you’d probably have the same problem with Pythagoras then, because he apparently had a thigh that was gold, but the rest of his leg seems to have been human leg.
**Rosie Jones** Pythagoras! Carry on with your theorem. That's great. But why are you absolutely lying about your thigh? You know what, he's a bullshitter.  

[GREG LAUGHING]

**Jane Draycott** We can pinpoint our first historical person. Herodotus’ histories, he tells us of Hegesistratus of Elis, who was a Spartan prisoner, and he actually cut off part of his own foot to get his leg out of irons and escape from captivity. Then, once his foot was healed, he started using a wooden prosthetic foot to get around so that he could continue to be a thorn in the Spartan side.

**Greg Jenner** That's hardcore. Cut your own foot off so you can escape and then go back to war. Blimey, that's like the guy who got trapped in the Mount… What's that movie where he gets trapped in the mountain?

**Jane Draycott** 127 hours?

**Greg Jenner** 127 hours. Thank you. And we also have other prosthesis that are even older, and we’re been talking here almost, almost late Stone Age, Jane. But we have eyes.

**Jane Draycott** We do have a surprising amount of archaeology for prosthesis dating from the very earliest human history. So, there are prosthetic eyes from Spain and Iran dating back seven thousand and five thousand years each. But we also have Egyptian prosthetic feet made from wood and cartonnage, Etruscan golden dental appliances and teeth, Roman prosthetic legs and even elaborate hairpieces and wigs.

**Greg Jenner** And are these bespoke, crafted for the individual? Are they made in a factory in one size fits all?
Jane Draycott They seem to range from very rudimentary peg legs that you could carve yourself with a minimal knowledge of carpentry from a piece of wood that you found lying around through to very elaborate, technologically advanced combinations of metal and wood and leather that would have required a number of skilled artisans to be working together. And they very much reflected the wearer's situation, their social status, their wealth, their personality. They were bespoke, they were very personal. They were specially designed and commissioned and manufactured for people who had that need.

Rosie Jones You never hear about disabled people in history and I know it’s my job to be a comedian but if I’m going to be serious I think a lot of that rings true nowadays in that even now if you’re disabled if you got money your life can be made easier, whereas probably if you’re not that wealthy you get left behind a lot more. So, it’s really sad to know that happened then and it still happens now.

Greg Jenner Yeah, absolutely. At the beginning of the program, Jane, you pointed out that there are lots of things that could influence how someone's disability was caused. One of the most obvious I suppose in the ancient world would be warfare impairment caused in battle or serious injury caused in a working accident. In terms of ancient civilizations, the one that stands out quite often as being the most fascistically obsessed with warfare and also supposedly the most cruel to anyone with disabilities would be the Spartans. Is that reputation unfair or were they really are just a bunch of bastards.

Jane Draycott The source is for Sparta are quite problematic because they are written by observers, often at quite a distance in time and location, and people were fetishizing Sparta in antiquity just as they fetishize them now. So we do have some accounts of infanticide and exposure of babies which presented with congenital conditions. The most famous of these is is probably Plutarch, but he was writing
centuries after the Spartan heyday in the classical period. So we should be quite cautious in this, and we do also have independent historical evidence that King Agesilaus was born with an impaired leg and that did not stop him from becoming one of the Spartan Kings.

**Greg Jenner** It does suggest that actually Spartan society found a place for people with disabilities. Perhaps there are some scholars who have suggested that Emperor Claudius, the Roman emperor, was perhaps someone who had been born with cerebral palsy.

**Jane Draycott** So, we know that Claudius had physical impairments. Various different ancient authors talk about this. So, Suetonius in his *Life of Claudius* and his *Life of the Caesars*, Tacitus in his annals, Seneca the Younger’s *Apocolocyntosis* which is a comedy play. After Claudius death, he tries to ascend into the heavens and join the gods, and they are less than pleased to have him. So, his impairments are a matter of historical record. But how we interpret the descriptions that these ancient writers give of him, that’s open to theorising. But whatever the impediments that he had and that may well have been cerebral palsy, it certainly didn't stop him becoming Emperor, conquering Britain and adding Britain to the Roman Empire.

**Greg Jenner** Absolutely. Rosie?

**Rosie Jones** I am so excited because I know that cerebral palsy is the best disability of them all so I’m very that happy that in Team Cerebral Palsy we a Roman Emperor – so welcome to the club, Claudius baby!

[GREG AND ROSIE LAUGHING]
**Greg Jenner** I mean, I'm now thinking, what kind of emperor would you have been, Rosie? On the one hand, you seem very nice, on the other hand, I can imagine a ruthless tyrant.

**Rosie Jones** Is that even a question? I would have been the greatest emperor of all time, but if anybody ever crossed me I would kill 'em. By that I don’t mean I would get one of my guards to kill them. Oh no. I would go around with my own little dagger just stabbing the shit out of people.

[**GREG AND ROSIE LAUGHING**]

**Jane Draycott** You would have fit in very well in the Imperial Court in ancient Rome.

**Greg Jenner** You sound like several Roman emperors, but I'm not sure we should give you that power because it's gone to your head very quickly.

**Rosie Jones** Greg, you made me a Roman Emperor for about 40 seconds, and I've already killed about five thousand people with a little dagger.

[**GREG LAUGHING**]

**Greg Jenner** You're so smiley, and yet you're actually stabbing the air as you speak. It's such an incongruous image!

**Jane Draycott** Better the dagger than the assistance elephant, you know?

**Greg Jenner** Yeah, exactly.

**Rosie Jones** Oh no, that's when I get really angry.
Jane Draycott Slight digression, but Claudius did actually have an elephant that he brought to Britain with him when he invaded.

[JANE LAUGHING]

Rosie Jones Oh my god! Honestly. Tell me honestly. Am I Claudius? I think I am.

[GREG, JANE AND ROSIE LAUGHING]

Greg Jenner Ok, Jane, let's get away from emperors. Let's talk about ordinary people again, because I know this is an area of your research. Gaius Gemellus Horigenes from Karanis in the Fayum, which is a wonderful sentence. Do you want to tell us who this is and what makes him interesting?

Jane Draycott Right. So, he was a member of a moderately wealthy family with connections to the Roman Army and Roman citizenship living in Roman Egypt in the late 2nd century CE. And we know that he lost one eye and then he subsequently developed a cataract in his remaining eye. And this left him, as you can imagine, with a very serious visual impairment. So, documents from his family's archives have survived on papyrus that have been excavated from Egypt, and so we know quite a lot about his life and his business dealings. We know that several of his neighbours, two brothers named Julius and Sotas, and one of the wives came onto his land, stole his crops and cast spells on him to prevent him from intervening to stop them. And he specifically stated the reason that they did this was because they held him in contempt because of his visual impairment.

Greg Jenner Absolute pricks. There's no other word for it. They're just horrible, horrible people. And what did he do about it? Can he turn somewhere and say “help”?
Jane Draycott Yes. Well, the entire reason that we know about this ordinary man's ordinary life and these unpleasant experiences is because he exercised his legal rights as a Roman citizen and he campaigned for redress. He petitioned the prefect of Egypt at the time, Quintus Aemilius Saturninus, and other members of the Roman Imperial Administration in Egypt as well, asking them to intervene on his behalf. He tells us that he was subsequently mistreated and victimised by the local tax collector, who was called Kastor, who broke down the doors of his house with an axe. And he tells us how frightened he was that he couldn't protect his elderly and vulnerable mother. It tells us that disabled people had legal protections in ancient Roman society, and they weren't automatically marginalised or excluded because after all, why would he take the time to write all of these petitions to all of these officials if he didn't expect them to actually take his side and sort the situation out?

Rosie Jones Before I did this episode I was so excited but part of me was like “Oh bloody hell, is it just gonna be a series of depressing stories about how disabled people were mistreated over time?” And then so glad that it hasn’t been but at the same time we need to recognise that some people were mistreated because of their ability or their impairment but yeah what we need to focus on is that he was like “Absolutely not! I’m not gonna let the pricks get away with it” and it’s why disabled people even today are standing up when we’re abused or mistreated and we just have to go “you know what, you can't get away with that – be better. Treat us as equal people.” He absolutely sounds like a bloody babe.

Greg Jenner So legal redress is available to people with disabilities. I wondered, Jane, is there a benefit system?

Jane Draycott Well, there seems to have been something like that in classical Athens. There was a pension for individuals with disabilities, and we know about this because we have a speech recorded by the orator Lysias in which a man who had a disability, he used two sticks for walking, he was challenged on whether he was
actually disabled enough to receive this pension. So, he was arguing that actually, yes, I am disabled enough to receive this pension. This idea of having to justify yourself to other people is not too dissimilar to the Department of Work and Pensions and their, their infamous fitness assessments today. As far as benefits are concerned, it seems that people with disabilities more often were exempted from impositions like taxes or community service, rather than they were given benefits by the state.

**Rosie Jones** It sounds like they treated disabled people better than our current government, so take me back to those times!

**Greg Jenner** We'll pop you in the time machine and we'll get you a kebab on the way. You'll be great.

**Rosie Jones** Give me a kebab and the elephant and I'll be ready.

**Greg Jenner** People of Rome - your new emperor!

[GREG LAUGHING]

**Greg Jenner** Jane, so far, we've talked mostly about men. Is there a natural bias in the sources towards blokes because of warfare and heavy manual labour? Or do we know a fair bit about disability in terms of women's lives?

**Jane Draycott** We know less about women with disabilities than men, because in the main it is men who are doing the writing. But when women are mentioned, it seems that attention is paid to facial difference, hair loss, tooth loss, their physical appearances and thus their sexual attractiveness to men. But this could be bias and the sources. It's true, but at the same time, it is supported by the archaeological evidence of prosthetic hair and teeth, which generally come from women's graves.
and tombs. And it's also something to bear in mind is that infertility was considered a disability and the blame fell on women for that.

**Greg Jenner** Rosie, you're shaking your head and covering your eyes with despair.

**Rosie Jones** I'm absolutely bloody fuming, Greg. The fact that a being disabled former woman was about looking good for men. Give me a bloody break. Like, what is wrong with people? I mean, I am proud to be disabled and a lady. And also, a gay lady so actually women, straight or gay, don't care what men bloody think of them so yeah absolutely fuming, Greg. We need more stories of brilliant disabled women and actually that is why I do what I do in the media to go “Hello! We're here and we're not bloody going away”. So, I know why we don’t have any like documentation of disabled women, but they were out there. They were living. They were bustling their own lives, so let me big up all the disabled women in history that we should know about but unfortunately, we don’t.

**Greg Jenner** Beautifully said. Thank you.

**Greg Jenner voice-over** The Nuance Window!

[TRUMPET FANFARE AND A SMASHED WINDOW]

**Greg Jenner** It's time for the nuance window. This is the section where we allow our expert, Dr. Jane, to tell us something that we need to know about the subject, and Rosie and I have a little break. Jane, what are you going to be talking about today?

**Jane Draycott** I am going to be talking about the connection between disability and the arts in classical antiquity.
Greg Jenner Oh, marvellous. Without much further ado, then nuance window, please.

Jane Draycott There seems to have been a strong connection between impairment and technology and technology and impairment in the minds of the Greeks and Romans. The Greek god of metalwork Hephaestus is the only Olympian with a physical impairment. This affects his legs and feet, and he's not actually the only example of a god of craft who is physically impaired in world mythology. In Norse mythology, for example, the blacksmith's Brokkr and Eitri also known as Sindri, are people with dwarfism while another has impaired mobility. However, it's possible that Hephaestus was depicted as impaired because impaired individuals actually did have a tendency to undertake trades. According to the ancient Greek medical writer Hippocrates, the Amazons deliberately dislocated the joints of their male offspring and set them to work as artisans, forcing them into sedentary lifestyles and supportive roles, and thus ensuring the continuation of Amazonian female superiority. And this was a course of action that was, of course, abhorrent to the ancient Greeks. It was believed that those who undertook trades like smithing, carpentry, shoe making, pottery, etc. would become impaired as the combination of the sedentary nature of the occupation and the repetitive physical activity it required would change the body. And this would certainly lead to disproportionate muscle development and build-up of calluses that would look very different from a body that had been honed in the gymnasium, such as the elites had. Additionally, due to the dangerous conditions found in ancient workshops, it's likely that individuals who worked in them were frequently scarred and may also have been poisoned due to high concentrations of arsenic in the metal being smelted and worked. Whether impaired individuals were likely to undertake trades or those undertaking trades were likely to become impaired. We do need to consider the possibility that physically impaired artisans utilised their experiences of being physically impaired to help inspire and inform their work, whether in relation to the creation of pieces of assistive technology for themselves or for others. Likewise, a
lot of individuals with congenital impairments, such as people with dwarfism, spinal curvatures, visual impairments worked as entertainers such as poets, bards, musicians, dancers, and acrobats. And this continues to this day with comedians like Rosie.

**Greg Jenner** Thank you, Jane. Rosie, what do you think to that nuance window?

**Rosie Jones** Really good! And yeah, I think it's so important to recognise a whole range of disabilities. And this whole episode brought me so much joy because we got to recognise that it was hard for disabled people, but we still have stories of disabled people succeeding and thriving as they do in 2021!

**Greg Jenner voice-over** So Waddaya Know Now?

[TRUMPET FANFARE]

**Greg Jenner** This is the quiz for our comedian, Rosie, to see how much she can remember.

**Rosie Jones** Oh my god.

**Greg Jenner** Are you feeling confident?

**Rosie Jones** Yeah, you know what I love quizzes, but I get so competitive that actually I’m really nervous, Greg.

[GREG LAUGHING]

**Greg Jenner** Oh, don't be nervous.
**Rosie Jones** Ok. Come on, Greg. Hit me.

**Greg Jenner** Okay! Question one: how common was disability in the ancient world?

**Rosie Jones** Really common! Every bugger had something!

**Greg Jenner** Correct. Question two: in Greek mythology, Pelops had a shoulder made from what?

**Rosie Jones** Ivory! But arguably, he didn’t.

[GREG LAUGHING]

**Greg Jenner** Question three: Vishpala, a female warrior with an iron leg, is the earliest literary reference to a prosthesis. From which part of the world was she from?

**Rosie Jones** India!

**Greg Jenner** It was India. Question four: Quintus Pedius was born probably mute and deaf and instead of going into the family business of being a senator, do you remember what career he studied instead?

**Rosie Jones** He was a painter, but we don't know how good he was. I like to think he did it, he enjoyed it, but in reality, he was a little bit shit.

[GREG LAUGHING]

**Greg Jenner** Okay. Question five: dating to around 7,000 years ago from a grave in Spain. Which body part is the earliest surviving prosthetic?
Rosie Jones Was it the eye?

Greg Jenner It was! Yes, very well remembered. Question six: King Agesilaus was born with an impaired leg and commanded which famously hard-core army in ancient Greece?

Rosie Jones Spartan!

Greg Jenner It is Sparta. Question seven: Gaius Gemellus Horigenes was a visually impaired Roman Egyptian. What did he do when his horrible neighbours abused him in his fields?

Rosie Jones He complained about the pricks and that's how we know about the legend.

Greg Jenner Absolutely. Question eight: a fresco at the ancient Roman site of Pompeii might show what type of animal friend?

Rosie Jones Oh, a little doggie!

Greg Jenner Absolutely. Question nine: ancient Greek healing temples dedicated to the God Asclepius had which accessibility feature at their front door?

Rosie Jones It had a little ramp!

Greg Jenner It's a lovely little ramp. Absolutely. And this for a perfect score. Rosie, according to some historians, which Roman Emperor may have had cerebral palsy?

Rosie Jones Can I have one or two answers?
Greg Jenner Sure!

Rosie Jones Because I would argue that Emperor Rosie is now a valid answer so either Emperor Rosie or Emperor Claudius.

[GREG LAUGHING]

Greg Jenner Ten out of ten. Very well done, Rosie Jones!

[DELIGHTED SQUEAL FROM ROSIE]

Rosie Jones Greg, you have no idea how many episodes of this I've listened to hoping that you'd invite me on the show but then getting so nervous that in the quiz I wouldn't get ten out of ten. So, this is the absolute dream. I am so happy.

Greg Jenner We're delighted to have had you on. All hail Emperor Rosie. Listeners, of course, if you want to learn more about the history of health care, you can check out our episode on the ancient Greek and Roman Medicine. And of course, you can also listen to our episode on the ancient Greek Olympics. And remember, if you've had a laugh, if you've learned some stuff, please do share this podcast with your friends. Leave a review online and make sure to subscribe to You’re Dead to Me on BBC sounds so you never miss an episode. All that's left really for me is to say a huge thank you to our guests. We've had in history corner the magnificent Dr Jane Draycott from the University of Glasgow. Thank you, Jane.

Jane Draycott Thank you for having me. Goodbye, everybody.

Greg Jenner And in comedy corner, we've had the incomparable and frankly, imperial, Rosie Jones. Thank you, Rosie.
**Rosie Jones** Thank you so much, bring me my elephant.

[GREG LAUGHING]

**Greg Jenner** And to you, lovely listener. Join me next time as we pal around through the past with a brand-new pair of clever, funny people. But for now, I'm not the go and petition Hollywood to make Iron Woman: the Vishpala story. Bye!

You're Dead to Me was a production by The Athletic for BBC Radio four. The research was by Kierri Price. The script was by Emma Nagouse and me. The project manager with Siefe Miyo and the edit producer was Cornelius Mendez.