
PLANET OF THE WISE

Tending Disabilities during Prehistory

In our contemporary imagination, prehistoric man is often likened to primitive peoples. Stereotypes such as this appeared in the 19th century, popularized in Rosny Aîné's novels about prehistory, such as *Quest for Fire*. They rely largely on false and preconceived notions that, even today, are widely accepted by the general public. Luckily, modern archaeological discoveries have given us other ideas about our distant ancestors. One of the main pieces of received wisdom that needs demolishing is the perception of disability in prehistory.

During prehistory in Europe and beyond, it seems that healthy individuals took care of the elderly, the malformed, the wounded, and invalids, who, contrary to another widespread cliché, were neither excluded nor rejected from the social group. On the contrary, given the nomadism or semi-nomadism of the time, the movement of invalids would be taken care of by the community. For by keeping the wounded, the invalids, and the malformed alive, the group's capacity for reproduction increased, and its survival was ensured *because of their numbers*: deafness or a missing femur has never prevented procreation. The other way of ensuring the group's survival consisted of keeping the ancients with it—survival *by intelligence*, for the ancients were the repositories of wisdom that was important for the whole group. Individual competition did not exist at the time; only the survival of the group was paramount.

Archaeology provides us with greater insight into this human solidarity. For example, some completely toothless human crania have been found. They belonged to elderly people, and careful examination shows that the tooth loss had completely healed—proof that the loss of the teeth had occurred well before death. But without their teeth, these individuals could not have survived, and would eventually have died of hunger. Their survival can be explained by the preparation of food in the form of mush or gruel by the rest of the community. As for a wounded individual, he was taken care of by the rest of the community while immobile and while the wounds were being stabilized and tended. Cases of serious trauma have been found, such as the Mesolithic woman (9000 BC) discovered in Columnata (Morocco), whose fractured pelvis led to the complete paralysis of both her legs; the medical study of this case shows that she survived long after her accident, which would have been impossible without the solidarity of the clan. The same is true for individuals with genetic anomalies or malformations, which may have been a fairly widespread problem during prehistory, given the relatively restricted and inevitably endogamous human groups, even though such a diagnosis is more difficult to make than the previous ones. When a skeleton is examined, there can be some telltale signs on the bones—these could have produced serious exterior anomalies.

On the other hand, though archaeology has brought to light a reasonable number of cases of care within the clan, there is nothing to exclude the possibility that individuals with genetic anomalies or disabilities were sacrificed. But it was clearly an infrequent eventuality. On this point, let us mention the existence of an archaeological case found in Harsova, Romania, dating to the Neolithic (4000–3000 BC). Remains of two sacrificed children, feet and hands tied, were found in a pit under some dwellings. These two children were malformed or crippled. For the community, it was probably a case of sacrificing two individuals who were incompatible with useful physical activity and at the same time maintaining a religious custom (of human sacrifice for the foundation of a new building).

Generally, looking after “invalids” was accepted within the clan, and the care given them allowed the prolonged survival of such individuals. These early cases of “social security” go back to the origins of man, some

600,000 years ago, and are attested at least until the Neolithic, in France at least. Cases of care of individuals by the group have been found outside Europe too. For example, a *Homo erectus* skeleton was found on the island of Java, Indonesia, with a completely healed femur. This individual survived the injury thanks to the solidarity of his kin.

At that time, life was rare and precious. Survival of the group relied in part on the mutual support of the weakest—a concept largely forgotten in our so-called “modern” societies. In prehistoric times, unity was power, and so were numbers.¹

Note

1. See P. Charlier, “Existait-il une prise en charge des individus infirmes préhistoriques?,” *Medicina nei Secoli*, 18/2, 2006, pp. 399–420.