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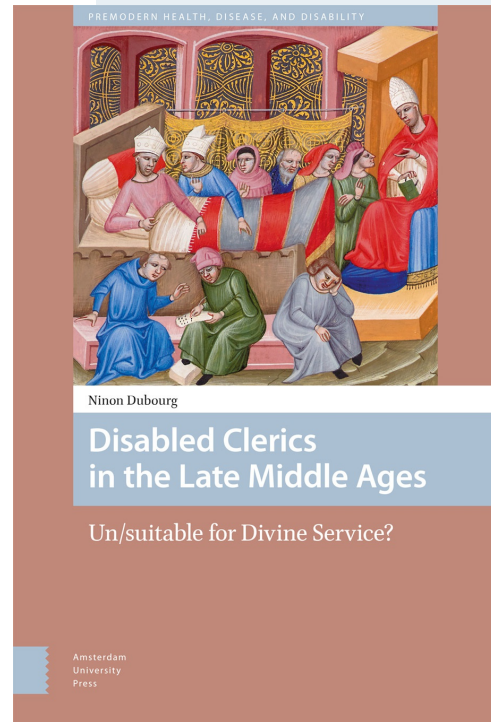
Disabled Clerics in the Late Middle Ages

Un/suitable for Divine Service?

The petitions received and the letters sent by the Papal Chancery during the Late Middle Ages attest to the recognition of disability at the highest levels of the medieval Church. These documents acknowledge the existence of physical and/or mental impairments, with the papacy issuing dispensations allowing some supplicants to adapt their clerical missions according to their abilities. A disease, impairment, or old age could prevent both secular and regular clerics from fulfilling the duties of their divine office. Such conditions can, thus, be understood as forms of disability. In these cases, the Papal Chancery bore the responsibility for determining if disabled people were suitable to serve as clerics, with all the rights and duties of divine services. Whilst some petitioners were allowed to enter the clergy, or – in the case of currently serving churchmen – to stay more or less active in their work, others were compelled to resign their position and leave the clergy entirely. Petitions and papal letters lie at intersection of authorized, institutional policy and practical sources chronicling the lived experiences of disabled people in the Middle Ages. As such, they constitute an excellent analytical laboratory in which to study medieval disability in its relation to the papacy as an institution, alongside the impact of official ecclesiastical judgments on disabled lives.

BIOGRAPHY

Ninon Dubourg is a doctor in Medieval History of the University of Paris Diderot, now a post-doctoral researcher at the Transitions Unit of the University of Liège (Belgium).



Premodern Health, Disease, and Disability
January 2023
294 pages, 3 Illustrations, black & white,
3 Illustrations, colour
Electronic book text
156.0 x 234.0 mm
€132.99 / £113.99 / \$152.99

ISBN 978 94 6372 156 1
e-ISBN 978 90 485 5432 4
BISAC HIS037010 / MED039000 / REL108020
BIC HBLC1 / HRCX8 / MBX

KEYWORDS

Disability, Clergy, Papacy, Papal Chancery, Work, Christianity

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