

# DISABLED GODS

Disability Action Research Kollective

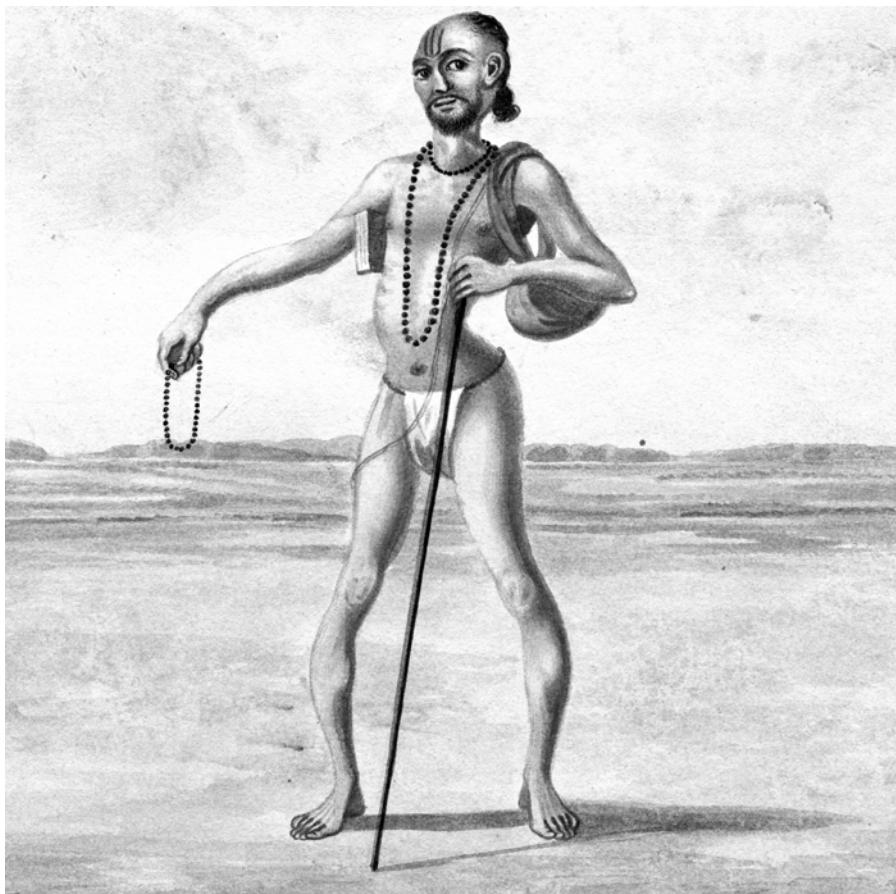


Disabled Gods offers a glimpse of how disability was thought of in the ancient past. This is not suitable for children, as it contains nudity, infanticide, human sacrifice, violence, murder, ableism, and infantilisation.

Even though rates of disability were likely much higher in the past, many of the stories about the gods were likely written by non-disabled people. In cultures like Egypt where disabled people were frequently part of everyday life, held important social positions and were integrated into society, the disability of the gods is incidental and not related to their narratives or personality. In societies where there was high amounts of inequality and exclusion, the disability of the gods was often a metaphor or a punishment or seen as negative. Many of the old stories about disability link to modern ones with many of the same tropes and perspectives. Some cultures viewed disability as a curse for wrongdoing, a divine punishment for the sin of the individual or their parents. Stories often feature disability as a metaphor for ignorance or death. Disability in this context is often healed through redemption. This links to the old prejudice of the physical body being a reflection of one's soul. Which was a foundational prejudice in the perpetuation of slavery of people with darker skin tones. Many folk narratives use disability as a plot device, often focusing on "fixing" the disability. This concept, known as "narrative prosthesis," is common in fairy tales and other folk stories.

Disability is sometimes linked to supernatural or magical elements in folklore or seen as a source of spiritual power. The Greek prophet Tiresias, for instance, was blinded but granted the gift of prophecy. This can be read through the modern idea of compensatory stereotypes where it is assumed that if an individual is disadvantaged in one way they will be gifted in another. As if there were a force of equalizing balance to all things. This can be seen in modern media via the "Magical minority" stereotype. In Japanese folk beliefs, there's also a tradition of viewing people with intellectual disabilities as "Fukuko" (fortunate child) or "Takako" (treasured child), suggesting a spiritual significance to their condition.

In a world where disability is often erased from histories, learning about disabled gods does at least remind us that disabled people have always existed and impacted the storytelling and culture in all the places they lived.



**Ashtavakra**, whose name means ‘eight physical deformities’ is a sage in the Hindu tradition and is the author of the Ashtavakra Gita. This text presents the idea that there is only one Supreme Reality (Brahman), and the entire universe is a manifestation of this oneness. Ashtavakra’s teachings emphasize that true freedom is not an end goal but an inherent state of being.

His father was once reciting the Vedas but made a mistake, and Ashtavakra, as a fetus still in his mother’s womb, spoke up to correct him. His father was so angry about being corrected that he cursed Ashtavakra to have the deformities. As a child he talked his way into the king’s court and defeated a sage in a debate. This freed his father, who was so grateful he then healed the deformities.



**Bes** was an Egyptian deity associated with music, dance, sexual pleasure, childbirth, fertility, and protection of pregnant women and infants. Bes was commonly shown as a bearded person with dwarfism, with his tongue sticking out, large ears, long hair, and bow-legged stance, often depicted holding a rattle or other symbolic items like a snake or sword.

Unlike other gods, images of Bes were kept in households, appearing at gates and bed headboards to ward off evil spirits and provide security by killing snakes and scorpions. Bes is often paired with Harpocrates in healing contexts; they are the only Egyptian gods to have feminine versions: Beset and Harpocratis.



**Daikokuten** is associated with fortune, wealth, prosperity, kitchens and the household. He is a prominent deity in Japanese mythology, known as one of the Seven Lucky Gods. He typically carries a golden mallet called Uchide no Kozuchi (Mallet of Fortune) and a large sack. He is frequently shown sitting on bales of rice and with rats or mice, symbolizing abundance.

In some portrayals, Daikokuten is described as having a form of intellectual disability or cognitive impairment, and this is often linked with ideas like friendliness, innocence, and lack of guile. He originated from Mahākāla, the Buddhist version of the Hindu deity Shiva, and was later conflated with the native Shinto god Ōkuninushi.



**Ebisu** is the reincarnated form of Hiruko, who was born disabled and murdered because of it. Ebisu is one of the Seven Lucky Gods in Japanese mythology, often depicted with a fishing rod, a physical disability, possibly cerebral palsy, a large head, a short torso and sitting in an unusual posture. He is associated with prosperity and good fortune. Ebisu is also said to be deaf or hard of hearing, for their festival a loud gong is played to notify them of the start of the festivities.

In the Edo period the image of Ebisu changed from a disabled figure to one of commerce. In modern day Japan Ebisu is no longer a signifier of infanticide but rather success at business, fishing and familial prosperity, and his figures are displayed in businesses and boats to bring good luck.



Èshù, from Yoruba folklore is depicted as a limping trickster gatekeeper god of the crossroads and thresholds. He is associated with travel, boundaries, misfortune, chaos, happiness, sorrow, fulfillment, ruin, life, death, fate and accident . Èshù appears as an old man or a child with a walking stick. His impairment is believed to give him access to multiple realities of both the natural world and that of the gods, providing integrated knowledge and insight. He is the messenger of the gods and likewise carries humanity's supplications to them.

Èshù is known to demand sacrifices, and offers favor to those who provide appropriate offerings. While originating in North West Africa, he has spread to Latin America and become incorporated into Santería and Voodoo, where he is known as Papa Legba .



The **Graeae** [Deino, Pemphredo, and Enyo] in Greek mythology were sisters/marine deities who shared one eye and tooth between them. Therefore at all times, only one sister could see, while the other two were blind. They were described by ancient writers as old, grey-haired women, who were “fair-cheeked,” or “swan shaped.”

The hero Perseus on his quest to kill Medusa, temporarily stole their eye in order to gain information needed to subdue her, leaving all of them temporarily blinded. Today, the Graeae Theatre company of d/Deaf, and disabled artists and actors takes inspiration from their name.



**Harpocrates** or “Horus the Child,” is an Egyptian god associated with childhood, silence, the embodiment of hope, and representative of the newborn sun. He is also associated with the protection of women, and children. He was depicted as being born prematurely, having a mobility impairment in his legs and having cerebral palsy.

Harpocrates is often depicted making the sign for silence by holding one finger pointed upwards to their lips. He is frequently paired with Bes in healing contexts: they are the only Egyptian gods to have feminine versions: Beset and Harpocratis.



**Hephaestus** the god of fire, blacksmiths, craftsmen and volcanoes from the Greek pantheon. Disability was common among blacksmiths because they often worked with arsenic, which caused nerve damage. Hephaestus had twisted legs and had difficulty walking, so he built himself a winged wheelchair that could fly and mechanical golden three-legged assistant robots.

He built all the thrones of the gods of Olympus and their equipment like the winged helmet and sandals of Hermes. His mother rejected him so he built a throne that trapped her in it. The other gods had to bargain with him to have her released from it. He also fought giants, killing one by throwing molten iron at him.



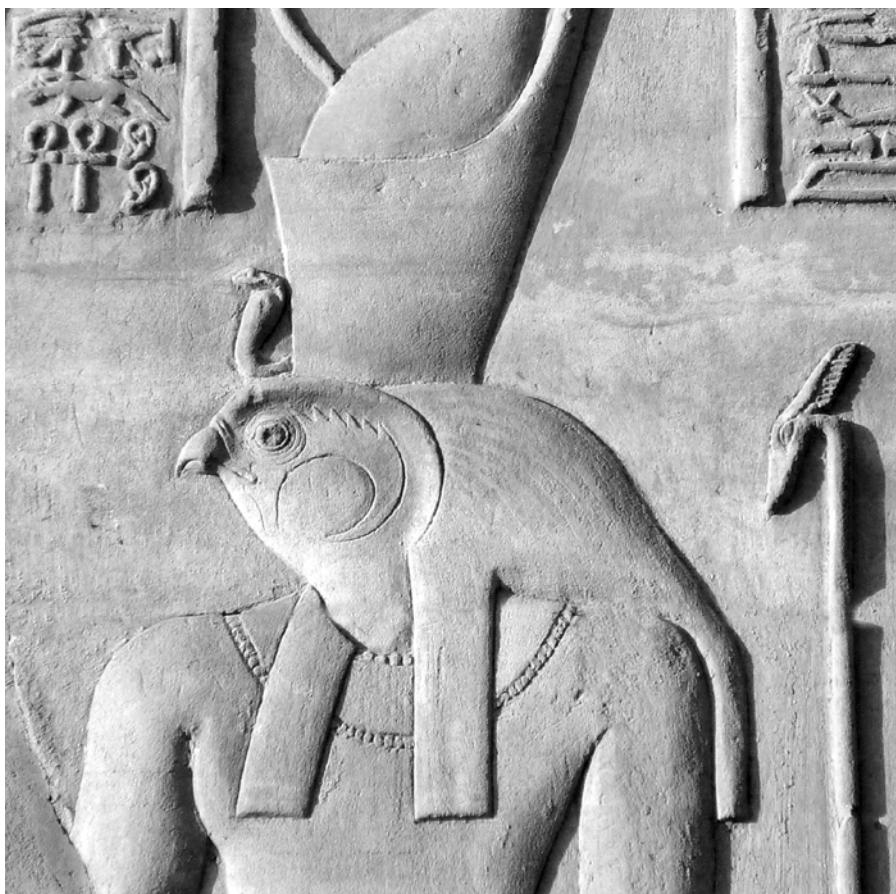
**Hiruko**, meaning “Leech Child” is a character from Shinto legend, who was the first documented example of somebody being murdered for their disability. According to the tale of Kojiki and Nihonshoki, the first child of the creation gods was born with a limited mobility, sometimes without bones or limbs, and was unable to stand by age three. This was seen as the mother’s fault for being the one to initiate lovemaking instead of the father.

The disability was seen as unfitting for a deity and as a consequence the baby was thrown into the ocean. Hiruko was later reincarnated as Ebisu, who was also disabled. It has been suggested that the myth of Hiruko has influenced the conception of disability and subsequently the mistreatment of disabled people in Japan in the modern day.



**Hodr** was the Norse god of darkness and winter. He was the congenitally blind son of Odin and Frigg who was tricked by the god Loki into killing his brother Baldur who was immune to everything except mistletoe. The other gods were having fun throwing objects at Baldur and having them bounce off of him.

Loki fashioned a spear of mistletoe and gave it to Hodr to throw. Hodr did so, and hit his target killing Baldur instantly. Hodr was killed in revenge the very next day by Váli, his half-brother, who was conceived by Odin and the giantess Rindr for the sole purpose of avenging Baldur's murder. In an alternate version of the tale, Hodr and Baldur fight over a woman named Nanna. Hodr kills him and is subsequently murdered by a god named Bous again a day later in retaliation.



**Horus** aka “Horus the Younger” was the Egyptian god of kingship, healing, protection, the sky, and the sun. He is one of the nine main gods of the Ennead, and is the son of Osiris and Isis. Horus’s evil uncle Set murdered Osiris, and took over the throne of Egypt.

Horus was raised in secret by Isis until he was old enough to challenge Set for the throne. During his fight with Set, depending upon the myth, he was blinded in either one or both eyes. His sight was later magically restored, but his blind eye became a udjat/wedjat/wadjet amulet used by the ancient Egyptians as a protective symbol.



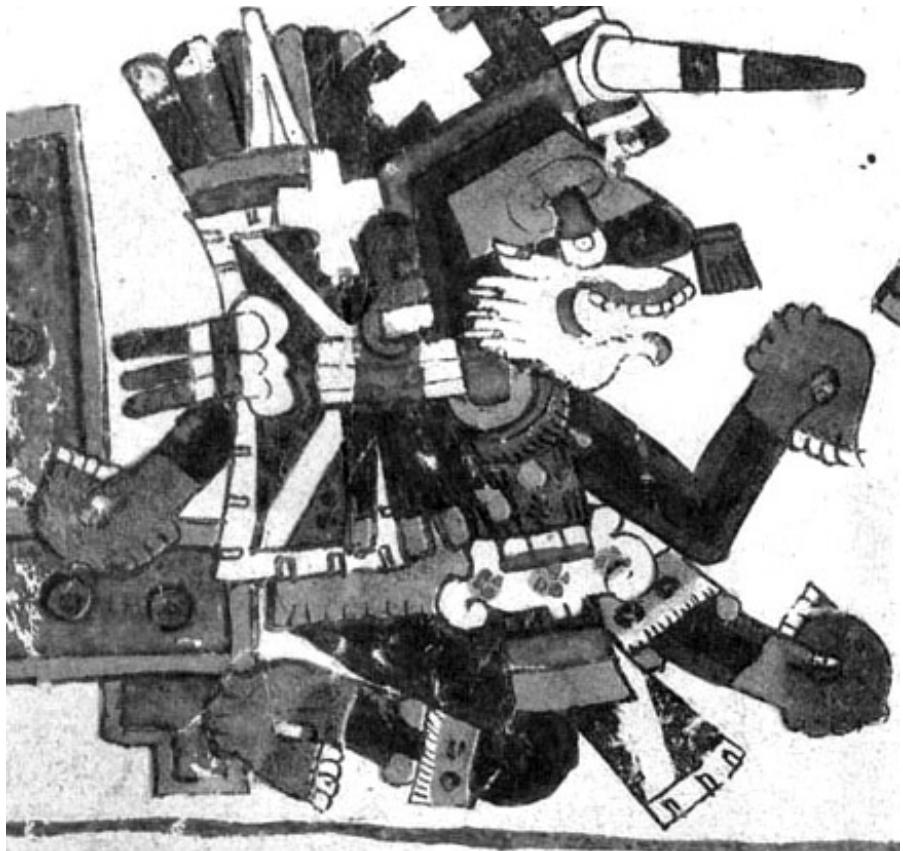
**Jehovah**, the God of the Christian Bible is not identified as having a disability, however, one of the descriptions does describe the use of a wheelchair in Daniel 7:9 “I watched as thrones were put in place and the Ancient One sat down to judge. His clothing was as white as snow, his hair like purest wool. He sat on a fiery throne with wheels of blazing fire”

While the word ‘throne’ is in most English translations, the original Hebrew is more accurately translated as ‘chariot’. Which was a common way to portray gods in areas that had Greek influence. Disability does however appear throughout the Bible, but often as divine punishment for sin or as metaphor for ignorance.



**Li Tieguai** is one of the Eight Immortals in the Taoist Pantheon in China. He walked with an unbreakable metal walking stick and had a bottle filled with special medicine which could transform into a home. He is associated with medicine and his duties were curing the sick and defending the poor and disabled from persecution. He often took the form of a clownish, eccentric and frequently ill-tempered old beggar with a dirty face and a messy beard.

While originally non-disabled and handsome, during a journey to heaven, his physical body was mistakenly cremated, forcing him to inhabit a recently deceased beggar instead. His powers include immortality flight, invisibility, shape-shifting, and astral projection.



**Nanahuatzin** was an Aztec deity characterized as the smallest, poorest, and most humble of the gods. His name means “full of sores,” and he is described as being ill and weak early in his life. However, at the time of the cycle of the fifth sun, he willingly sacrificed himself to become the sun by throwing himself into a sacrificial fire. At this point, he flew up high and glowed with such strength and brilliance that the world burned. Nanahuatzin’s courage and strength is contrasted with that of the god Tecciztecatl, who was considered to be a perfect god, but when faced with the actual act of throwing himself in the fire, was afraid and then hesitated. His cowardice made him burn less bright and so became the moon. Nanahuatzin’s sacrifice led to the creation of the winds and the concepts of night and day.



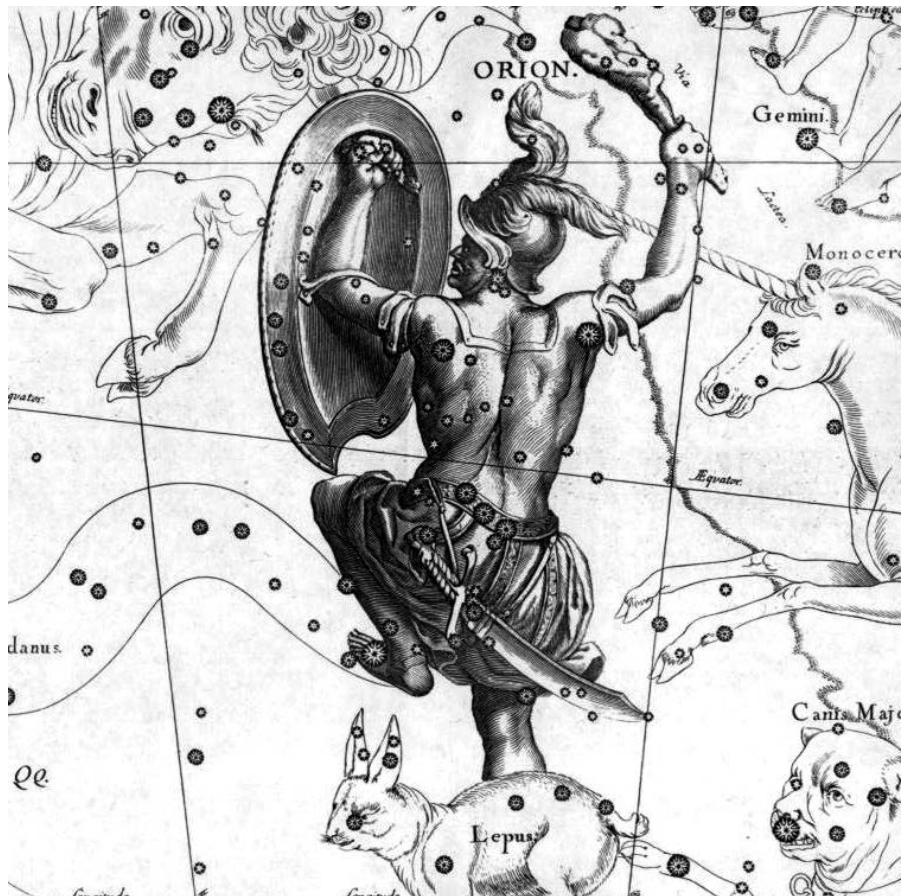
**Obatala** is the one of the oldest and most important gods in the Yoruba religion, and is associated with white, wisdom, purity, peace, equality, compassion, justice and growth. They are often depicted as an elderly figure, male or female, wearing white robes and carrying a staff. Obatala was tasked with creating the world but got drunk and did not finish the job.

According to one myth, Obatala became drunk on palm wine while creating humans, resulting in the creation of disabled people. When they saw what they had done, they swore to never drink again and to become the protector of disabled people. In worship, followers dance in white costumes, burn sandalwood incense and offer white foods like coconut, shea butter and yams.



**Odin** is a chief deity in Scandinavian pre-Christian belief. Chief of the Aesir, he rules Asgard as the God of war, battle and the warrior's afterlife in Valhalla. However he is also associated by modern Heathens with sacrifice, runes, poetry, magic and the pursuit of wisdom and, interestingly, he invokes many themes around the mind.

He sacrificed one eye (the physical) to Mimir's Well in order to gain knowledge (the mental/metaphysical) and hung on Yggdrasil (the World tree) to learn the runes. The names of his ravens, Huginn and Munin, translate to 'thought' and 'memory', further deepening this deity's association with the mind and its functions.



**Orion** was a hunter from Greek mythology who became blind but also regained his sight. He is often depicted in the night sky with his hunting dogs and weapons. He was a giant and a huntsman for a king but got drunk and made advances towards a princess and was blinded and exiled because of it. There are two versions of the tale of his death, one is that his lover was tricked into killing him with an arrow by a jealous rival.

The other is that he boasted that he was such a great hunter that he would kill all the animals on earth and so Gaia sent a giant scorpion to kill him. He was eventually immortalized as a constellation in the night sky, which is positioned so that when Scorpius rises in the east, Orion sets in the west, as if still fleeing from the scorpion.



**Pataikos** was a version of the Egyptian god Ptah who was a person with dwarfism. In some versions of the myths he is alternately considered a son of Ptah. He was a protective deity who was typically depicted in amulet form as a nude dwarf person in a bow legged stance with a scarab on his head.

He strangles various dangerous animals: snakes, scorpions, and stands on the backs of crocodiles: the amulets are meant to literally show him controlling chaos. Pataikos was frequently also depicted with the goddess of war, Sekhmet, and Nefertem, the god of the lotus. Pataikos was equated by the ancient Greeks to their god Hephaestus.



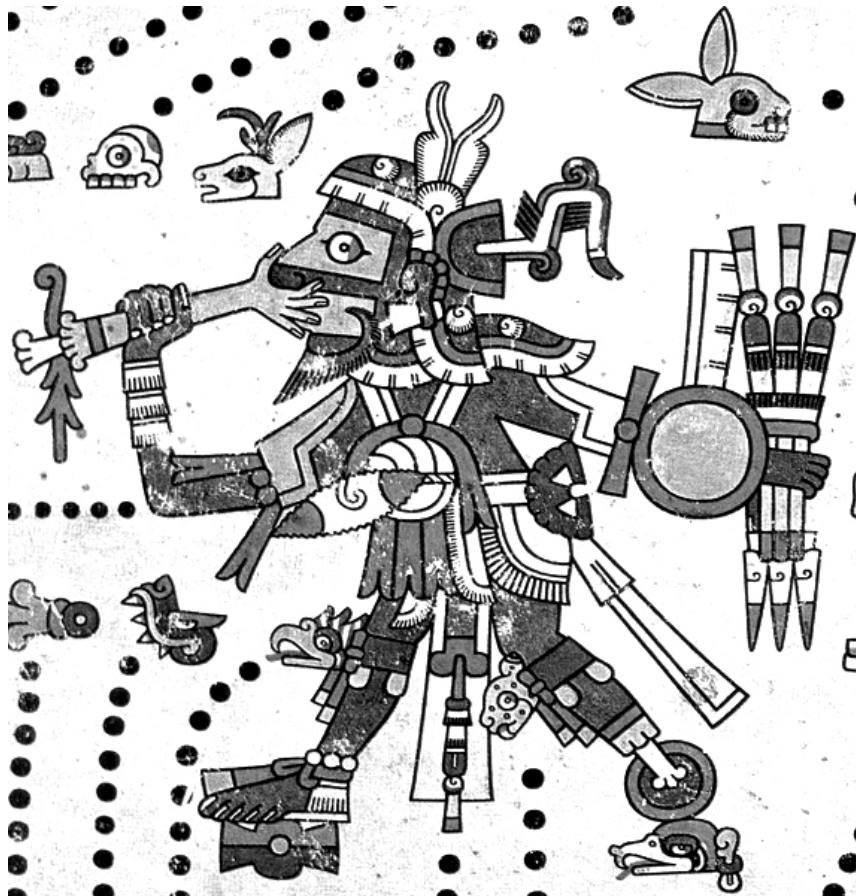
**Ptah** was an Egyptian primordial creator god and patron of craftsmen and architects who was a person with dwarfism. He was revered for his role in creating himself, crafting the world and giving life to all people and gods through the power of speech and the design of his heart. Ptah is said to have crafted the bodies of the gods for them to inhabit, similar to how human craftsmen would create statues of gods.

He is often portrayed with green skin, symbolizing rebirth, and was associated with symbols of power, life, and stability like the ‘was scepter’, the ankh, the ‘djed pillar’ and the ‘apis bull’. The name “Egypt” is partially derived from the name of his temple.



**Sedna** is an Inuit sea goddess known as the ‘Mother of the sea’. She is often portrayed as missing her fingers, hands, or even entire arms, depending on the version of the myth of which there are many.

In one she was born human but she angers her father by being so dissatisfied with men that she marries a dog instead. She is cast into the sea as a punishment. As she tries to climb back into the boat her father chops off her fingers and she sinks into the sea becoming the goddess of the underworld. In the depths she grows a fish tail and her disembodied fingers become the creatures of the sea. She is vengeful and can control animals, so if humans anger her she can stop animals from coming to hunting sites, causing famine.



**Tezcatlipoca** was a central god in the Aztec religion and the patron god of kings and warriors. He is associated with the night, sorcery, hurricanes, temptation, punishment and conflict. He lost his foot battling an earth monster and used an obsidian mirror as a prosthetic leg. He has the power to shapeshift, often transforming into the jaguar 'Mountainheart', with his spotted fur representing the stars in the sky.

Along with his brother Quetzalcoatl, he helped create the world from the body of a sea monster. He ruled the first world of the Sun before being overthrown by his brother. As part of his worship a young man would be selected to be his representative on earth and live in luxury for a year, at the end of which they would be sacrificed.



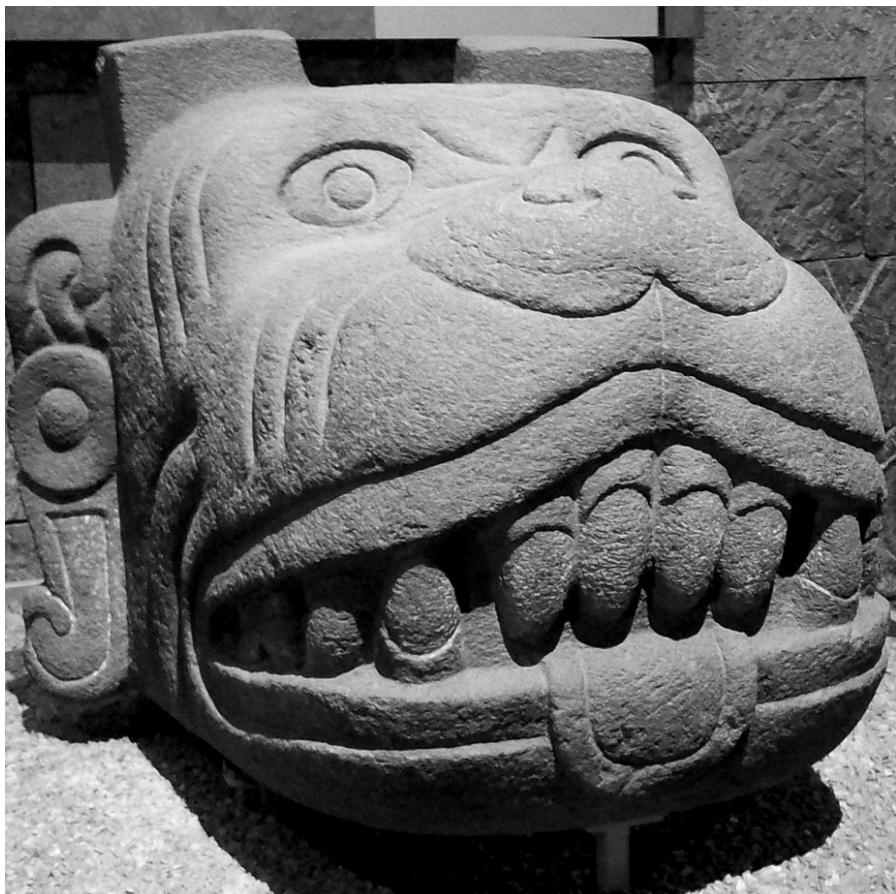
**Tyr**, known as the bravest of the gods, was associated with leadership, war, justice and self-sacrifice in Germanic mythology. He sacrificed his arm while wrestling the monstrous hound Fenrir. This allowed Tyr to bind the monster, preventing the destruction of the world. At one point the trickster god Loki mocks him at a feast saying “you can’t be the right hand of justice among the people”, referring to his limb loss. Tyr replies that he misses his hand, but Loki misses his child, Fenrir, who is now imprisoned and will remain that way until the end of time.

Scholars believe Tyr may have been a central god before the worship of Odin. Tyr's influence extends to the modern era as the day Tuesday (Týr's day) is named after him.



**Vamana**, which means “small in stature” is an incarnation of maha Vishnu in Hinduism. He is depicted as a person with dwarfism dressed as a monk. A demon ruled the universe, Vamana asked to have ownership over as much land as he could cover in three steps, when the demon agreed, Vamana grew into a giant, with one step he covered the earth, then the heaven and then his own head. Having conquered all existence, the cosmic order is thus restored and the demon banished to the underworld.

Other stories often have him defeating various other demons without shapeshifting into a giant form. Vamana represents humble beginnings and blessings from unexpected places.



**Xolotl** was the god of protecting humans, bad luck, death and the underworld in Aztec mythology. He is depicted with deformed limbs, a hunched back, and eyes that tended to be pulled out of their sockets or as a skeleton with the head of a dog. In a creation myth he travels to the underworld to fetch the bones of ancient dead humans, which are then used to create the current race of humans. After the creation of the Fifth Sun, it wouldn't move across the sky so the gods sacrificed themselves to fix it. Xolotl wept so much his eyes came out of his sockets, he didn't want to die so he hid by shapeshifting into various forms, eventually being caught and sacrificed. He guides the sun through the underworld at night and also leads the souls of the dead to their resting places.

# Would you like to know more?

## Articles

**Disabling imagery and the media.** An Exploration of the Principles for Media Representations of Disabled People by *Colin Barnes* (1992).

Semiotics of Otherness in Japanese Mythology by *Yoshiko Okuyama*.

A defence of identity for persons with disability: Reflections from religion and philosophy versus ancient African culture

by Patrick Ojok and Junior Musenze

Cerebral Palsy in Ancient Egypt by *Alexandra F. Morris*

## Books

“The Immortal Forgotten Other Gang: Dwarf Cedalion, Lame Hephaestus, and Blind Orion,” in Disability Studies and the Classical Body: The Forgotten Other by *Ellen Adams*.

Diagnosing Folklore: Perspectives on Disability, Health, and Trauma  
by *Trevor J. Blank & Andrea Kitta*.

Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability, and Making Space  
by *Amanda Leduc*

“And the Children Shall Lead: Harpocrates, Harpocratis and Cerebral Palsy,” in Disability in Ancient Egypt and Egyptology: All Our Yesterdays  
by *Alexandra F. Morris & Hannah Vogel*.

“Bes or the offense of physiognomy in Egyptology,” in Disability in Ancient Egypt and Egyptology: All Our Yesterdays  
by *Alexandra F. Morris & Hannah Vogel*.

The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability  
by *Nancy Eiesland*

The Cinema of Isolation: A History of physical disability in the movies  
by *Martin Norden*.

Monsters on the Couch: The Real Psychological Disorders Behind Your Favorite Horror Movies by *Brian Sharpless*

Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema  
by *Angela Smith*.



This zine is produced by the **Disability Action Research Kollective** (DARK), which is a disabled-led group working to make disability perspectives, history, and research more accessible to a general audience. We are always looking for disabled (and non-disabled) volunteers to help write, edit and share their perspectives. Be part of something bigger than yourself, join us in the DARK today!

This zine features work by  
**Richard Amm, Alexandra Morris,**  
**and Charlotte Rebbavarapu.**