Caroline: Welcome to the Disability History Association "podcast." My name is Caroline Lieffers, and it's my pleasure today to be sitting down with Greg Carrier, a recent MA grad in history from the University of Alberta. Greg, it's nice to be here with you today!

Greg: Likewise!

Caroline: I recently read your MA thesis on the history of deafness in medieval Europe, and it was truly fascinating. Tell me, what got you interested in the history of deafness?

Greg: Well, I'm deaf and legally blind myself, so I admit that's partly why I got interested in the topic. But what really did it for me was a conference I attended about fifteen years ago now. It was on deaf history, and a culturally Deaf presenter gave a lovely presentation on the history of deafness before the advent of American Sign Language (ASL) and Deaf culture. He passed over the medieval period in about twenty seconds, summing it up as "no one cared about the deaf back then, plus Augustine said the deaf were useless, and that attitude stuck to us for a thousand years." He called the medieval period a "millennium of silence." I asked him after the presentation why he said that about the medieval era, and he said "You're deaf! You should know this already - it's part of your history!" Rather than simply accept this view of deafness in medieval Europe as historical gospel, I wanted to see what Augustine actually said, given that I read Latin, and that turned out to be quite the adventure, really.

Caroline: Gosh, that's a good story! We'll get into that adventure in a moment, but first, were you always a medievalist? Or was that a new thing for you?

Greg: That's quite another story, actually. I started out in modern history and had wanted to focus - ironically - on deaf history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, so I had been reading up on people like Epée, Sicard, Le Clerc, Gallaudet, the "classic" names in Deaf history. But about halfway through my BA, a professor encouraged me to take up a course on Robin Hood in medieval England, and he permitted me to write a paper on marginalised people – including the disabled – working on building sites in medieval England. That made me realise that there was next to nothing about disability and marginalisation in medieval studies, and I've never regretted the switch.

Caroline: Super interesting! So you were already primed, so to speak, so address that speaker's question?

Greg: You could say that, yes. Even at that point, I was already noticing the striking distinction of how deaf history tends to be "before Epée" and "after Epée", with the latter period immensely better-represented in the scholarship.

Caroline: Interesting! So...you've explained how Augustine has been a bit of a straw man for medieval deaf history. Can you tell me more about the role of Augustine in the assumptions that scholars have made about disability and deafness in the medieval period?

Greg: Oh, I could write another thesis on this….

Deaf history tends to emphasise the role and importance of individuals in its history, an approach that makes sense given how ASL is a visual language. The language of deafness is intimately tied to the individual in a way that written language really isn't. So this tendency to use individuals as signposts, if you will, in deaf history is quite common. Since Augustine is typically seen as one of the links between classical thinking and the rise of medieval thought, the assumption is that Augustine's thought guided, directed medieval thought for the next thousand years. I should say that this emphasis…overemphasis, even, of Augustine isn't unique to deaf history.

Augustine also became the straw man because he had written about deafness in his commentary on *Romans* 10:17, which was more than most contemporaries had done. It also helped that given the size of Augustine's corpus, his references to deafness aren't easily hunted down in his works, so I think that's part of why this negative view of Augustine persisted for so long: no one had taken the time to hunt it down.

The reduction of Augustine's thought on deafness to a single comment on a single Bible verse also reveals one of the difficulties facing scholars of deafness prior to the nineteenth century and the advent of ASL: how would deaf people communicate? It was left to hearing people to communicate on their behalf, and they had to make assumptions, nor must it have been easy to develop what was essentially a one-sided conversation. We tend to focus on negative assumptions more than positive ones precisely because they provide such an easy way to define and polarise an issue, so for Augustine to apparently damn the deaf to a life of ignorance, it really didn't take much for the idea to be extended to all of his contemporaries and successors down to the Enlightenment, when the deaf became capable of communication as a matter of routine and were able to jump in on these kinds of conversations and provide their own perspectives.

Caroline: Can you tell me more about this commentary on *Romans* 10:17? In what way does he "damn them to a life of ignorance"?

Greg: Briefly, Augustine's commentary on *Romans* 10:17 was part of an extended conversation about the role of Original Sin with one of his adversaries, Julian. We tend to think of Christianity as having been a settled thing for 2000 years, but back in Augustine's day there were still many controversies about topics that would take decades or centuries to resolve into what we now know as orthodox Christianity. A word on Original Sin: in short, it's the idea that Adam and Eve, by disobeying God and eating the apple from the tree in the Garden of Eden, committed the first sin – Original Sin. God had created the world, the garden, Adam and Eve as perfect things and beings; Original Sin introduced corruption into this world, including disabilities.

As part of this debate on Original Sin, Augustine had cited *Romans* 10:17 which says "Faith comes from hearing the word of Christ." His opponent, Julian, was arguing that Original Sin didn't exist, and that anyone who had a disability must have committed a *personal* sin that damned him or her to a disabled body. Augustine notes that deafness is a hindrance to faith itself and quotes *Romans* 10:17 to support his point. Most scholars stopped here because this had the nice effect of making Augustine out to be ill-disposed towards the deaf.

The truth is that if we read Augustine's commentary in full, Augustine is in fact pointing out that it's common knowledge that children are born with congenital disabilities such as deafness and blindness, and that deafness certainly is a *hindrance* – not an absolute barrier – to hearing the word of God orally as per *Romans*. He brings this up in order to move into showing the absurdity of Julian's position: how can a newborn, who doesn't even know *what* sin is, have committed a sin in his or her mother's womb in order to be born congenitally disabled? Julian, interestingly, has no real answer for Augustine on this point. So for Augustine, disability is a *consequence* of Original Sin; it is not a *punishment* for sin, whether personal or corporate. And before I forget, I should note that Augustine discusses deafness in some detail in *De Magistro* [*On the Teacher*], and concludes that the gestures used by deaf people are capable of conveying information, just as the spoken and written word are; it's another mode of communication. Augustine stops short of calling these gestures a language, though, but it's still a startlingly positive view of deafness on his part.

Caroline: You're basically getting at one of the big interventions in your thesis - that you have a different reading of Augustine, one in which deafness is part of a larger statement about Original Sin. Can you summarize this for people, especially audience members who maybe don't have a background in theology?

Greg: Sure, I can try. Again, Original Sin refers to the first sin ever committed: the disobedience of Adam and Eve in eating from the tree in the Garden of Eden. This apparently negative linking of disability to sin – which is exactly Julian's point – has tempted many scholars to conclude that a religious view of disability automatically views disability as a punishment for sin. Augustine would *never* agree with this interpretation: he would say that the existence of disability in the world confirms the presence of sin in the world due to Original Sin, and that a disabled person has *not* done anything to "deserve" being disabled. In fact, Augustine would probably go so far as to argue that every human being is disabled due to Original Sin.

Caroline: That makes sense. So, are there other examples of Original Sin in Augustine's work that are not ... disability-related? Is disability just one of many manifestations of Original Sin in the world?

Greg: Absolutely, there are other instances of Original Sin, and they're not all linked to disability: the inability to know everything or to understand everything clearly – look at the labour required to acquire knowledge of any sort or the multiplicity of languages in the world, for instance.

Caroline: That makes sense. So these things that are a part of human experience, in a way, could all be understood as manifestations of the imperfection of our world?

Greg: In so many words, yes. Augustine would agree that the earthly world is imperfect.

Caroline: So, your dissertation not only re-reads Augustine, it also re-reads another scholastic from the medieval period, Thomas Aquinas. Through Aquinas, you present a different framework for thinking about medieval deafness. Tell me about it.

Greg: Aquinas was a theologian whose immense intellectual output in the thirteenth century greatly advanced the system of thought most associated with the medieval period, that of Scholasticism. His writings on philosophy and religion essentially synthesised classical and medieval thought into a unified system of thought that has gone on to become part of the intellectual patrimony of the Catholic Church.

For our purposes, Aquinas built upon Augustine by reaffirming Augustine's positive view of deafness and disability. Aquinas takes Augustine further by emphasising God's goodness: God can't be evil. Aquinas answers the questions "Why am I disabled?" and "Why is there disability in the world?" by pointing out that God can permit bad things to happen in order to bring us closer to our ultimate purpose, which is to reunite ourselves to God after Original Sin separated us from Him. Aquinas, like Augustine, does not make disability to be a moral category: disability is *not* evil. It is a "defect" in Aquinas' language because deafness, for instance, is due to the inability of the ears to function correctly in providing the sense of hearing. That does *not* make a disabled person "defective" in any way, though, and Aquinas is very careful to note this. For Aquinas, disability is not so much a question of degree as it is of corporate identity because the only disabling event worth discussing – perhaps even the *only* disabling event in all of human history – is Original Sin. For Aquinas, then, disability is a corporate entity as every person lives with the effects of Original Sin, most particularly in terms of our morality and spirituality. Aquinas would probably not consider physical and mental disabilities to be as important as our moral and spiritual disabilities – that is, our separation from God due to sin, and I suspect he would find our emphasis on disability as individuated experience centered around physical and mental issues to be odd.

Caroline: This is an issue that a find really interesting but really complicated. For any of us who are writing on a period where "disability" is not really a unified or clear category ... we don't want to talk about "disability" and yet we seem to always come back to that term. How do we talk about "disability" in a period without "disability," so to speak?

Greg: That's a really good question, and it's one that I struggle with in my work. In a way, historians of modern disability have an easier go of things since the framework and theory is already there, being a response to modern events and developments. The temptation to bring modern theories about disability into pre-modern history in order to understand it is always there, that's true. But this does pre-modern conceptions of disability a disservice by forcing them to conform to modern conceptions of disability, rather than allowing for the development of a dialogue about what disability meant across societies and the centuries.

I think part of the difficulty has to do with accessibility as well. Once you leave modern history, you really have to throw everything out the window and try to think like the people you're

studying, to try to get into their minds, their worldviews, to understand their cultures. Obviously language is another issue, whether that's learning a foreign language or dealing with "non-standard," relative to modernity, ways of defining and describing disabilities. But that's part of the fun, learning about how other people viewed disability and letting them speak on their own terms, and coming to see how their approaches to disability can both inform and enrich modern conceptions of disability.

Caroline: It's tricky, but I like your suggestion about paying close attention to context. In many cases, what we now understand as "disability" might in fact need to be parsed out to more specific bodily/cognitive/sensory experiences, and perhaps some experiences actually lump together with things that we *don't* consider disability today.

Greg: Absolutely. An example of this in my work would be the distinction between deafness and mutism. We typically think that it was us moderns who drew a distinction by saying that deaf people are only deaf and not both deaf and mute or dumb, but this distinction certainly existed in the medieval period.

One part of my work examined some medieval English legal cases involving deaf and mute people, and there was very much a careful distinction between the two.

Caroline: Interesting. This gets us into some of your legal historical work. Did they have different consequences in the legal sphere?

Greg: The Latin word for deafness, *surdus*, is distinct from the word for mutism, *mutus*. The former means the same thing as it does today: an inability to hear. The latter term, *mutus*, is more interesting, as the Latin word didn't have the sense of "dumb" like we think it does. It really meant being unintelligible, but without any pejorative connotations that we ascribe to it today.

So for my cases, what this meant was that if you were deaf, post-lingually deafened, really, you could still participate in legal proceedings by speaking, provided that you could make yourself *intelligibly* understood via articulate speech. If you couldn't be intelligibly understood through speech, you were a *mutus*, a mute, someone who couldn't be clearly understood through speech. That didn't mean that you had no rights, though, because it worked the other way too: if you were mute but were able to read and write, you could convey your wishes in writing and they'd be accepted by the court on the same level as spoken responses.

Caroline: At the risk of asking you questions that you won't be able to answer until you finish your PhD, do you think that "being understood" was more important in the legal context than "understanding"? Was it the responsibility of justice to do the understanding?

Greg: Yes, actually. It was more important to be understood, but here's the interesting thing. I have a legal case from the fourteenth century, I think it is, in which a hearing man apparently lost the ability to speak, but he somehow got a lawyer to agree to act on his behalf: there's no indication in the record if a conversation had occurred before the man lost his speech or if the man used writing or gestures to convey his wishes to the prospective lawyer. The court sent some men out to see this guy, and they came back to the judges saying, "He can't talk. We can't

understand anything he's saying." The court said, "Okay, we won't proceed with this case – it's thrown out." Most people would say that's an example of oppression, but I'd argue that the court was erring on the side of caution by giving this mute man the benefit of the doubt: until he could definitively prove that he wanted this lawyer to act for him, the court was going to assume that the lawyer was making it up and that the man hadn't actually said he wanted to go ahead with the lawsuit (and risk losing it!). The court even made this clear by noting that the case was put over *sine die* – "without day," or indefinitely. If the man regained his speech or otherwise found another acceptable means of making himself understood to the court's satisfaction in future, he could have the case reinstated. Whether this happened or not, I don't know.

Caroline: Interesting! do you think that this kind of protective spirit would also apply in a criminal case? So someone who couldn't intelligibly defend themselves should be presumed innocent? Or is that something you haven't yet encountered?

Greg: I have, actually. I've seen a number of cases where a person who committed murder was presumed to be innocent due to madness, and the court even went so far as to say that the case couldn't be tried because the mad person couldn't intelligibly defend him or herself.

I've also seen several notes in English medieval law books that note that if a person is pre-lingually deafened and incapable of communication, he or she can't be held responsible for their actions, nor can they be party to any legal proceedings. This makes sense if we think about intelligibility again, because even for hearing people, medieval courts were very insistent that all (hearing) parties demonstrate that they clearly understood what they were doing and consented to it. Since no one could be reasonably sure that a pre-lingually deafened person understood or consented to something, they couldn't participate in legal proceedings in order to maintain a benefit of the doubt favourable to the deaf person. That's not to say that pre-lingually deafened people couldn't benefit from the law, though – they could inherit property, for instance, but they couldn't dispose of it.

Caroline: That's really interesting! Are these all in the English context?

Greg: Yes, they all are, though I'd love to look into French and German cases eventually.

Caroline: That would be my next question, especially given that the "presumption of innocence," from my understanding, is an English common law concept.

Greg: Yeah. Most of these cases have been translated into English so non-specialists can look these up. I'm also hoping to see if this pragmatic approach to disability – at least legally – was unique to England, or if it extended to the Continent as well.

[NB. Non-specialists can find medieval cases in several series published by His/Her Majesty's Stationery Office [HMSO], known as "calendars." See in particular the *Calendars of Patent Rolls, Calendars of Close Rolls, Calendars of Fine Rolls, Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem,* and *Calendars of Liberate Rolls*. For transcriptions of the original Latin, see in particular the *Curia Regis Rolls*.]

Caroline: Let's go back to Augustine and Aquinas, because I want to push back a bit.

Greg: I have a good suspicion I know where you're going.

Caroline: We know that in the books of Isaiah and John, disability is seen as something associated with sin, with the absence or need for grace, and in the case of the New Testament in general, Jesus goes around curing sick and disabled people. So, could you argue that the persistent use of deafness, blindness, disability/"lameness" as metaphors of sin or imperfection or the need for grace actually reinforced, in the medieval mind, a negative view of disability? Could it have contributed to a culture of discrimination, if we can call it that?

Greg: Sure, it could have. To be fair, I should point out that the idea of "discrimination" as you use it here probably didn't exist in the same way in the medieval period, but that's another discussion.

There certainly was a distinction made between intellectual and more popular conceptions of disability in the medieval period. I'll give you two brief examples, both from the fifteenth century in England. The first is Margery Kempe, a mystic who wrote what is possibly the first (auto)biography in the English language, *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Early on in her *Book*, she writes about how she experienced her first bout of sickness or "madness" as a result of an unconfessed sin, and that her "madness" is a punishment for not having confessed this sin in due course. Another example would be John Audelay, a cleric who wrote some beautiful poetry lamenting how he lost his sight and, later, his hearing due to his sinful life. [See the volume of his work published under the title of *Poems and Carols: Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 302 (Middle English Texts)*.]

On the other hand, we have the intellectuals who tended to be more careful and precise in their description of disability, which we've already seen with Augustine and Aquinas. Another example would be Pope Innocent III who, in 1215, noted that some disabilities *might* – I repeat, *might*! – be a result of sin. Innocent's reluctance to give an absolute qualification, just as both Augustine and Aquinas were very careful in their language, shows that there was a tension between the intellectual and popular conceptions of disability.

Whether this tension resulted in "discrimination" against the disabled, however we define both "discrimination" and "disability," remains to be seen.

Caroline: That's a fair point, and it's so difficult and inefficient to try to unearth examples of various kinds of disability in the medieval period that it's hard to trace trends per se. But it's certainly true that a uniting feature of medieval culture was the role of the church. Do you get the sense that the interpretations of Aquinas and Augustine and Innocent III would have "trickled down" to the common people? Or is that impossible to say at this point?

Greg: I would like to think that they trickled down eventually, but you're right - it's impossible to say at this point. That's what makes this field so exciting in a way - there's been so little work done that really, there are far more unanswered questions than answered ones, and it will be

fascinating to see how a more refined encapsulation of the medieval conception of disability can in turn inform modern conceptions.

Caroline: Indeed! I love your positive attitude! It's possible that these things were determined on a parish-by-parish basis, depending on the training of the priest.

Greg: Could be, absolutely. This is why I think microhistories can be very useful and important to the field of disability history, and this is a direction that I very much hope to go into moving forward.

Caroline: So, how can medieval conceptions inform modern conceptions? You touch on this a little in your thesis when you talk about the value of considering the world from Thomas's perspective.

Greg: I think what I would suggest is that, in line with considering the historical context, we need to consider the importance that religion played in the medieval period. It's fashionable to treat religion as being the elephant in the (medieval) room nowadays, but this does the medieval period a disservice by reducing it to a secular perspective. I'd suggest that, based on my work so far, it seems that the medieval worldview, and its emphasis on religion, provided a far more complete and nuanced view of disability than has been previously conceded. This in turn makes me wonder just how much more religion and theology in the modern era can contribute to a more comprehensive view of disability, and I think understanding how medieval thinkers integrated religion into their view of disability can help modern thinkers do the same, rather than considering religious and theological responses to disability as something to be cordoned off from "mainstream" thought.

Caroline: I think that makes sense! You also said something in your thesis that I found interesting – that Thomas's reading allows us to look at medieval disability and "start from a positive premise." This was not necessarily an age of doom and gloom and oppression for deaf and disabled people!

Greg: Absolutely. In a way, medieval thinkers have a leg up on modern thinkers, in my opinion. My point here is that medieval thinkers had a purpose in mind: we know what God's plan for humanity is: for each and every one of us to return to Him, should we choose. How does the disabled person fit into this? How can we make them cognisant of their role in God's plan, and participate actively in it? In a way, medieval thinkers had an easier time of integrating the disabled person into their worldview precisely because their worldview considered disability to be a corporate idea, something that every person shared in. This stands in contrast to the modern notion that a physically or cognitively disabled person is (more) "broken" than an able-bodied person. Rather than put the disabled and non-disabled person in opposition to each other as modern society tends to do, medieval thinkers seem to have preferred to view such bodies as equals due to the effects of Original Sin. Aquinas even notes that a person with "defects" – again, his term, and this does not imply a moral judgment of any sort – does *not* have a greater share of Original Sin than someone free of "defects." The medieval view of disability, at least in terms of the intellectual tradition, seems to have focused more upon the dignity of the person

rather than his or her economic or social value. Again, this isn't getting into the nitty-gritty of what average folks thought and dealt with on a daily basis, obviously.

Caroline: I think many disability historians, myself included, do see a lot of positives in the pre-industrial world, when people were not just reduced to their value as laborers, especially laborers in a fairly inflexible environment, with clocks and machines and things that force certain patterns of work.

And I really like your reading of medieval theology as being inherently inclusive or accessible ... the idea that it makes space for all kinds of people. In the medieval period, getting to heaven is very real. It's everyone's concern, every day of their lives. So including people with disabilities in that is probably the most important social inclusion that anyone could think of.

Greg: That's a really good point. I'd agree with that, actually.

Caroline: But you don't just look at the world of theology – as we touched on, you also look at the legal world. How do you choose your sources? You've looked across countries, centuries, and secular/spiritual realms. Are you aiming for a comprehensive theory of medieval European disability? I'm teasing you a bit, but I think there's a fair question in there.

Greg: It's a fair question. Part of the admittedly scattershot approach of my thesis was driven by the sources themselves. Simply looking for deaf, blind, insane people and so on according to modern definitions and terminology won't do the job for you. For instance, it's common to see in my legal cases that people note that "the light is going out of their eyes" rather than saying "I'm blind." The language used around disability in medieval Europe, particularly legal cases, tends to be far more descriptive than what us moderns have been conditioned to use, particularly in a medical setting. Rather than relying upon the physician to legitimise their disability through his medical authority, these ordinary people preferred to describe disability in their own terms, narratives, stories. These tend to be messy compared to what we've been conditioned to use and expect in the modern era, but these stories and narratives have the potential to be a very rich source for understanding disability in the pre-modern era.

But as for a comprehensive theory, if that's what I end up with at the end of my career, splendid! At this point, I'm more interested in seeing what I can find and, if you like, hopefully developing a sort of "road map" because examining disability in the pre-modern era is very much like a foreign country: there are no maps or directions as of yet, so more than anything this has been a long slog in the archives, and always will be.

Caroline: As a person who works on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I do not envy you! I get annoyed when my sources don't use a typewriter!

Greg: Do yourself a favour - or don't - and Google the autographs of Aquinas' writings. They are infamous for being nothing more than chicken scratchings.

Caroline: No thanks! I assume you work with transcriptions?

Greg: Where possible, yes. But I have had to work with primary materials. That's still a good question, though, because for my legal cases, indices do exist in the series I used. The problem, though, is that these indices were developed according to modern definitions and conventions, so odds are a lot of examples of the disabled have been left out. In fact, I've found about 6,000 references to the disabled in my English legal records from actually reading through the cases themselves, rather than relying upon the indices.

Caroline: Oh my … have you looked at all those cases yet, or is that still to come?

Greg: That's still to come. I'm hoping to turn this into a searchable database of some sort eventually, particularly as the vast majority of these are in English translation so they would be a very good means for introducing current and prospective scholars to the study of disability in the pre-modern era.

Caroline: Yes! Amazing. I think accessibility (not in the disability sense, but just in the scholarly sense) is a huge barrier to medieval disability history. Language, handwriting … you name it.

Greg: It is! But again, the vast majority of these cases are in English translation with no recourse to the original text, at least not in the printed editions.

Caroline: Were the originals in Latin? Legal French?

Greg: Yes, the originals were mainly in legal Latin. The rolls themselves are archived at the national archives in Kew. We still have the rolls as far back as Henry II, I think. No, Henry I, so very beginning of the eleventh century.

Caroline: Wow! Are they only on parchment/vellum, or did someone microfilm them?

Greg: Yes, they're on vellum in general, and they're ... not in very good shape. So yes, I wish someone would transcribe them, because I don't trust English translations worth a hoot when it comes to understanding how ideas about disability were defined and used in the medieval period. Either that, or digitise them in their entirety – that'd be wonderful.

Caroline: Goodness yes, but that sounds like a problem only money can solve!

Greg: It is. Even if we could microfilm or digitise these manuscripts. It also doesn't help that medieval Latin is heavily, heavily abbreviated. A standard dictionary of medieval abbreviations has thousands of them: I read somewhere that there might be as many as 100,000 abbreviations floating around. And of course this is assuming you can read medieval Latin, which is *not* the same thing as classical Latin. Cicero would think most medieval Latin, if not all, is gobbledygook.

Caroline: We're really off course now, but is English medieval Latin really different from German medieval Latin, and French medieval Latin, for example?

Greg: In terms of script, sure, it could be, depending on the period and what scribal styles were in vogue then. In terms of language, not too bad. But again, Cicero wouldn't understand what medieval folks were going on about: for instance, *signum crucis* to Aquinas would mean "the sign of the cross," but to Cicero these same two words would mean "the banner or battle standard of the cross," so it's the same idea as how words in Shakespeare's time may not necessarily have the same meaning today.

Caroline: Here's a question about the elephant in the room: your thesis is about deafness, but we've been talking about disability more generally. Is this fair? Is there anything unique about deafness from your perspective that we should consider here?

Greg: I'd say that the distinguishing factor for deafness really has to do with communication. With blindness or physical impairments, even mental impairments to some extent, the person's still able to communicate usually through speech. For the deaf, if we're talking about the pre-lingually deafened, then we come up against an obvious issue: how do you ask such a person what it's like to be deaf, what their experience's been? I think this is part of why there's been so little written about deafness prior to the nineteenth century and the advent of ASL - we just say "oh, you can't do anything with deafness"; on the other hand, this is why there's been so much written about deafness after the nineteenth century: the deaf have been able to actively and consistently participate in the conversation ever since. This suggests that disability is a modern construct, at least in terms of deafness: it was a disability before Epée, Clerc, Gallaudet, and so on, and only stopped being a disability after the deaf acquired language through ASL. So the logical question to ask in terms of my work is: does this mean that medieval people considered deafness to be a disability and if they did, how did they understand it as being disabling?

Caroline: Is there any evidence of anything like Deaf culture prior to the advent of sign languages like ASL?

Greg: No. That's not to say there haven't been scholars who have tried very hard to "discover" or argue that this existed, even in the medieval period. The example that comes to mind is the use of monastic sign lexicons – not sign *language*! – in monasteries throughout Europe. Monks did use hand signs during periods of silence to communicate, but these systems had very few verbal forms in order to prevent against garrulous "speech on the hands" when the monks should have been observing silence. Some scholars have tried to argue that things like this mean that monasteries developed or otherwise incubated Deaf culture when they took in deaf students and taught them their hand signs. This attempt to push modern Deaf culture anachronistically into the pre-modern era is an attempt to reduce the historical period in which modernity considers deafness to have been a disability, I think.

Caroline: And there probably just weren't large enough and concentrated enough populations for Deaf culture, as we understand it today, to happen?

Greg: That's very true, and very likely. We have references to the deaf throughout premodern history, and they tend to be positive, but there's no suggestion that there were large populations of the deaf, though that's not to say they couldn't have existed. For instance, the Roman orator Quintilian strongly suggests that gestures are the natural language of the deaf; Augustine

mentions seeing a deaf man communicating with hearing people by means of gestures at Milan in addition to his extensive comments on gestures used by the deaf and whether or not they constitute a language in *De Magistro* [*On the Teacher*], as I mentioned earlier; Leonardo da Vinci wrote that if painters wanted to become expert at copying the various gestures possible with the hand, they should go and observe deaf people gesturing, as they were the absolute masters of gesture.

Research on Deaf communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has shown that communities tended to develop around schools for the deaf, though there were some notable exceptions due to isolated environments and genetics, one of the most famous being the prevalence of hereditary deafness on Martha's Vineyard in the US, from the eighteenth century to the early or mid-twentieth, I think.

Caroline: Absolutely, that's a great story, and it makes sense from a linguistic and practical perspective. What's next for you? PhD plans?

Greg: That's my hope! I'm in the process of applying to both Toronto and Notre Dame to take up a PhD in medieval history. My goal is to examine how medieval intellectuals examined, defined, and analysed deafness when they came up against the problem of being unable to communicate with the pre-lingually deafened. I'm curious as to what relationships these thinkers developed between deafness, language, and communication.

Caroline: That sounds promising and important! Was there anything else you wanted to mention for the interview that we didn't get a chance to talk about?

Greg: I guess we should include contact information since I assume the other folks in your podcast series allow for people to get in touch with them.

The best way to contact me would be via email at gcarrier@ualberta.net.

Caroline: Great, thank you very much for your time, Greg!

Greg: You're very welcome!