Nearly 3% of all live born infants in developed Western countries today present an obvious major congenital anomaly or birth defect. Other congenital anomalies are detected at some time after birth, resulting in an overall incidence of about 8% in 5-year-olds. Some of these are lethal, but many are treatable by modern biomedicine. The modern scientific field of human congenital anomalies is known as teratology. Many of the anomalies are still branded with taboos, fears and intimations of ‘the unspeakable’. Going back in time, one wonders about the existence and interpretation of such congenital anomalies in the past. In this context, I will focus on the issue as it relates to the ancient Greek and Roman world. Sadly, our knowledge of so-called ‘monstrous’ births in antiquity is still very limited. In the Graeco-Roman context most of them had no medical connotation, simply because medicine could not provide treatment options. It was not very interested in most congenital anomalies, to judge by the few written sources from this time. Luckily, there is a specific period of Roman history in which monstrous births were given a religious interpretation; consequently, a series of so-called ‘prodigies’ has been passed down to us. Several recent researchers have developed many new insights about these. However, few of them are grounded in medicine. Despite the constant urge to interpret these prodigies in accordance with modern teratological terminology, i.e. to carry out a retrospective medical diagnosis, every diagnostic researcher should beware of the lurking pitfalls. The chief aim of this paper is to elucidate this problem. Uncertain or equivocal sex differentiation is a particularly instructive example, and

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* I am very grateful to Christian Laes and Patty Baker for their kind invitation to present this paper, thanks to Chris Goodey for improving my English. Of course, for all remaining errors I alone am responsible.
I will therefore focus on this specific disorder, namely the relatively rare phenomenon of the ‘hermaphrodite’. The two hypotheses to be tested are as follows. Is there something like a continuous story, an anthropological constant, concerning hermaphrodites? And is it possible to equate the ancient hermaphrodite with modern, biomedically defined disorders of sex differentiation? Of course, this is a wide-ranging issue and can only be touched on in this paper. By way of preliminary orientation, intersex states in human beings are estimated today to occur in only 1 in 5,000 live births.

2. Two Important Preliminaries

Christian Laes has argued that in order to get as close as possible to the contextual meaning of any historical topic, one has to collect all available clues and sources. A focus on medical texts alone is too narrow, and obscures the fact that even these ancient medical texts—if indeed we hold them to be true medical texts in the strict sense—have their contextual elements, which must be respected. People undertaking medical activities in antiquity had their own specific ancient contexts. Conversely, the same must be true of any ancient non-medical writer using strictly medical terms.

Before going into more detail, let us look briefly at one famous case of a supposed individual hermaphrodite: the eunuch and philosopher Favorinus of Arelate (ca. 80–160 CE). The *Suda*, the ancient Byzantine lexicon, reports him as having been a hermaphrodite from birth. The biographer Flavius Philostratus describes him as ἀνδρόθηλος and beardless even in old age; the satirist Lucian of Samosata describes him as being without a beard (πώγωνα) and without testicles (ἔρχεις), an academic eunuch (‘Ἀκαδημαϊκὸς εὐνοῦχος’). Philostratus’ biography of Favorinus reports no descendants, thereby making him appear infertile. These features led Mason in 1978 to make a retrospective diagnosis of Reifenstein’s syndrome, thus turning Favorinus into a famous case of hermaphroditism for classicists. But the descriptions are not that

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3 Sax (2002).
6 Suda phi 4: γεγονὼς δὲ τὴν τοῦ σώματος ἔξιν ἀνδρόγυνος [ἐν φασιν ἐρμαφρόδιτον] (androgynos [or so-called hermaphroditos] from birth).
7 Philostratus, *Vitae Sophistarum* 489.
8 Lucian, *Demonax* 13.
10 Mason (1978).