

JRGZ = *Jahrbuch des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums*

JEA = *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*

JHS = *Journal of Hellenic Studies*

MAAR = *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*

PBSR = *Papers of the British School at Rome*

Rev. Phil. = *Revue Philologique*

RhM = *Rheinisches Museum*

TAPA = *Transactions of the American Philological Association*

Other abbreviations can be found in the Bibliography.

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Introduction

In the city of the blind the blear-eyed man is king.
Schol. on Hom. *Il.* 24.192

Deformity is in the eye of the beholder. Who is deformed, who is not – that to some extent has always been a matter of opinion. In the eyes of Saddam Hussein's contemptible uncle, 'God made a mistake when he created Persians, Jews and flies.' Love can be equally selective. In the eyes of its own mother, the ugliest child on the face of the earth is beautiful, as Babrius unerringly observed (*Fab.* 56). Likewise lovers who are 'blind with desire' attribute to their beloved qualities which they do not possess, as Lucretius cynically pointed out (4.1153f.). Aristotle took a highly subjective and, in his case, thoroughly anthropocentric view of deformity by propounding the notion of a zoological hierarchy with men at the pinnacle and women one giant evolutionary step below – a step which, in his telling phrase, represented 'the first step along the road to deformity' (*GA* 4.767b 7f.). Other observations, such as 'Only in man are the natural parts in their natural position' (*PA* 2.656a 11f.) and 'All living creatures are dwarf-like compared with man' (4.686b 3), proceed from a reading of the phenomenal world which viewed the human male as the absolute standard of physical perfection in comparison with which all other animal life is at best deviant, at worst monstrous.¹ Aristotle was not alone among ancient thinkers in his prejudice, though he appears to have been the first to provide physical anthropocentrism, as this credo is called, with the status of presumed biological fact. For Pliny the Elder, too, man is the creature 'for whom Nature appears to have fashioned everything else' (*NH* 7.2), though in his case there was no attempt to justify the claim by appeal to scientific argument.

¹ Aristotle is here referring to the fact that in all other animals the trunk is larger than the lower limbs, whereas in man 'the size of trunk is in proportion with the lower parts' (4.686b 7). This leads him to the interesting conclusion that 'All children are dwarfs' (b 11).

The distinctiveness of social response

Attitudes towards the deformed and disabled reflect a particular social reality, notwithstanding the fact that the basic human responses to those exhibiting extreme physical abnormalities, such as fascination, contempt, loathing, pity and dread, are probably universal. In plain language, different cultures react differently to different anomalies and with differing degrees of emotional intensity, even though no culture will ignore them altogether.

In classical antiquity as in later times the social response to the handicapped was in part determined by religion, since beauty and wholeness were regarded as a mark of divine favour, whereas ugliness and deformity were interpreted as a sign of the opposite. It made a difference, too, whether a disability was congenital or acquired in later life through disease, accident, warfare or debauchery. Plutarch states approvingly that the Persian king Artaxerxes continued to love his wife and daughter when they became disfigured by disease (*Artax.* 23.4-5): evidently the enlightened despot did not interpret their condition as a form of divine punishment. Greek philosophers, too, acknowledged that physical disabilities should be treated with compassion when the responsibility for them does not lie at the sufferer's door. In Plato's *Protagoras*, for instance, Sokrates states (323d):

When people believe that others are experiencing misfortune by Nature or by luck, nobody gets angry or advises them or lectures them or punishes them in the hope of changing them. Instead they feel pity towards them. For who is so stupid as to try to do any of these things to the ugly, say, or the puny or the enfeebled? Everybody, I imagine, understands that it is by Nature or by luck that people acquire these characteristics, namely personal advantages and their opposite.

In similar vein Aristotle states that when the onset of blindness is due to factors beyond a person's control the condition evokes pity, whereas when it is brought on by drinking it is regarded as shameful (*EN* 3.1114a 25-8). However, the fact that our sources only rarely identify the cause of a disability generally prevents us from analysing differences in social response along the lines outlined here. Moreover, despite what Sokrates professes in the passage cited above about the general level of pity among the population as a whole, we can hardly assume that the disabled were as much its favoured recipients as other hard-luck groups.

Ideally an investigation into deformity should seek to integrate social history with individual and collective biological experience. It goes without saying that not all ancient communities would have exhibited the same attitude towards their deformed and furthermore that their attitudes will have changed, perhaps radically, from one era to the next. In New Guinea albinos are regarded as holy, while in Senegal they are

considered to be ominous. Whereas a Congolese tribe called the Bayaka reverence their blind but deride their deaf, the deaf members of an Amazonian tribe experience no social stigma because of the ability of the whole tribe to communicate in sign language. In our own society it is much more acceptable to make jokes about the deaf than about the blind.

It is tempting to assume that the Athenians would have treated their deformed and disabled with greater compassion and understanding than the Spartans did. The grounds for such a claim might be set forth as follows: newborn Athenian infants were not required to undergo a test of physical fitness as was the case in Sparta, Athenians were more appreciative of cultural diversity than the Spartans, and finally the Athenian state provided welfare for its disabled. But beyond making facile, and possibly wholly inaccurate, generalisations of this sort based on very partial evidence, we are in no position to trace differences in patterns of behaviour from one community to the next, or indeed from one era to the next. We might suspect that Athens' experience of the plague in the 420s would necessarily have altered in some way her relationship to those who were disfigured or disabled, since, as Thukydides states, many who survived the disease lost the use of their genitals, fingers and toes, as well as their sight (2.49.8). But what specific form, if any, this new relationship took is impossible to determine.

Both the Greeks and the Romans were themselves largely unconscious of social change, and even when they make passing reference to it their testimony is invariably ambivalent. The paucity of the surviving evidence thus limits us to an investigation of general structures rather than specific events. It is because it is impossible to conduct a sustained diachronic investigation that I have chosen to divide each chapter into a series of essentially discrete essays. The inclusion of both Greek and Roman material, moreover, is in no way intended to be suggestive of evolution, even though the difference between the two societies is at times striking. In general, it seems that the Greeks were far less hostile towards, and fearful of, major terata than the Romans. This is reflected in the contrasting attitudes of the two cultures towards intersexuals, whom the Romans treated as abhorrent and accursed, and the Greeks as an unusual but essentially routine part of nature.² Finally, I have chosen to relegate the discussion of ethnic monsters to the last chapter in the belief that the attitudes which they evoked do not shed much light upon the way the Greeks and Romans responded to clinically attested deformities.

² What may have fostered the more generous attitude on the part of the Greeks towards intersexuals, though it is unlikely to have produced it, was the existence of a Greek cult in honour of an eponymous half-god called Hermaphroditos. A similar range in attitude towards the phenomenon of intersexuality has been noted by anthropologists in the case of modern Americans, the Navaho Indians, and a Kenyan tribe known as the Pokot, who treat the condition respectively with horror, reverence, and as a simple error. See Geertz (1983, 81-3; citing Edgerton [1964, 1288-99]).

The problem of terminology

The terminology used to describe persons who are afflicted with physical abnormality is highly revealing of social attitude. Both the Greek '*teras*' and the Latin '*monstrum*', which commonly denote both humans and animals exhibiting gross malformations, also describe mythological monsters, such as the head of the Gorgon Medusa, 'the *teras* of aegis-bearing Zeus' (Hom. *Il.* 5.741). Even in Aristotle's *Generation of Animals*, which incidentally provides the most illuminating discussion of the classification and aetiology of congenital deformity to be undertaken before the middle of the seventeenth century, '*teras*' regularly denotes a morphological abnormality. Evidently the Greek language did not possess any other word which served Aristotle's scientific purposes equally well. Words for specific disabilities also carry a cultural load, as in the case of the Latin '*mutus*', an onomatopoeic word which perhaps reproduces the sound 'mu', as uttered by animals incapable of speech (Gourevitch 1991, 891). It may be compared with the English word 'dumb', which denotes someone who is either incapable of speech or stupid or a combination of both.

It is highly improbable that any attempt was ever made to devise a less pejorative vocabulary to describe the deformed and disabled, and nothing to indicate that such an exercise might have been deemed desirable. Pliny informs us that the Greeks applied the term '*ektrapelos*', which means literally 'turning from the common course, perverse, strange', to persons of exceptional stature and physical precocity (NH 7.76). '*Ektrapelos*' might have been marginally less offensive than '*teras*', but Pliny does not suggest that this was the case. His further observation that 'those whom we call hermaphrodites were formerly called androgynous' merely indicates that it was the Romans who first used the name of the deity Hermaphroditus to describe individuals exhibiting intersexual characteristics (7.34).

So what is new? Even in our supposedly enlightened era we still refer to monsters, freaks, mongols and spastics, notwithstanding the outrage and offence which such terms provoke. The politically correct 'physically challenged' and all its preposterous associates, such as 'vertically challenged' for dwarfs and 'follicularly challenged' for the bald, bring their own cultural load and dispose us to regard those whom they denote in a selective way – as rising, or failing to rise, to the challenge of the physical world.³ It is perhaps impossible to invent a terminology which does not either patronise or insult. The Greeks and Romans may perhaps be

³ Cf. Robert Hughes' fulminations in *The Culture of Complaint* (Oxford and New York 1993): 'We want to create a sort of linguistic Lourdes, where evil and misfortune are dispelled by a dip in the waters of euphemism. Does the cripple rise from his wheelchair, or feel better about being stuck in it, because someone in the days of the Carter administration decided that, for official purposes, he was "physically challenged"?'.

pardoned for failing to devise a less value-laden vocabulary than our own, though they were admittedly not burdened with the same moral scruples as we are and would hardly have comprehended the need for linguistic niceties of the type we are discussing. In their eyes, a *teras* or *monstrum* simply belonged to that category of phenomena which would today be described as 'sub-human'.

The search for definitions

Any definition of deformity is bound to be partial and subjective, since any judgement upon what constitutes a normal morphology is influenced by the salient physical characteristics and distinctive aesthetic viewpoint of the society seeking to establish the definition. It is the eye of the beholder, in other words, which determines the standard of presumed normality. The Cyclops Polyphemos may be monstrous to an Achaian Greek, but from the perspective of his own single eye it is Odysseus and his binocular companions who appear to be and *are* deformed. Among the Skythian Makrokephaloi, a tribe which equated long-headedness with nobility, a normal-sized cranium was a sign of social inferiority and evolutionary backwardness (Hipp. *Airs, etc.* 14). Likewise among a present-day African tribe whose members suffer from a condition known as lobster-claw syndrome the possession of five digits constitutes a malformation (Plate 64). Modern science has often served merely to reinforce our cultural presuppositions. In the late nineteenth century, for instance, it was commonplace for biological determinists to compare 'inferior' groups such as Africans, women and members of the lower classes with the children of white males; that is to say, to regard them as pre-adult in evolutionary development (Gould 1981, 113-22).

Even in our own language no absolute distinction exists between a deformity, which we may define as a deviation from normal appearance, and a disability, which, whether or not it is the result of a deformity, produces a malfunction. Take the example of a hunchback. Such a person is deformed, though whether he is also disabled will depend upon other variable physiological and psychological factors, unless one includes under the heading of disability the condition of being automatically debarred from certain occupations. But by that broad definition every human being is 'disabled' in some respect, as I myself am disabled from being a tightrope walker because of my fear of heights or a professional wrestler because of my unexceptional stature. A particularly intriguing case of definition involves the Cyclopes whose condition raises the question whether racial synophthalmia, the modern scientific term for their deformity, is also a disability. In view of the fact that, unlike actual sufferers from this disease, they have no evident problem in estimating visual depth, we have to conclude that it does not. There are other classificatory problems. Congenital blindness is conventionally inter-

puted as a deformity as well as a disability, whereas the onset of blindness in later life is usually regarded merely as a disability.

In addition, certain deformities may indirectly cause disabilities. A blemish of the skin, even when it has no functional importance, becomes a handicap if it produces a psychological impact. Intensity of psychological impact, however, is not necessarily consistent with depth of impairment. As a character in Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* observes, 'A one-eyed man is much more incomplete than a blind man. He knows what he lacks.' And, we might add, he has the capacity to perceive and be distressed by the reaction which his single eye provokes, which is less true in the case of someone who is completely blind, though the latter may be intuitively aware of that reaction. We may contrast, too, the psychological state of a woman suffering from hirsutism who proudly displays her beard in public, and for whom it is a source of income, with that of a woman who attempts to disguise all traces of her condition by shaving three times a day.

Social status has a profound bearing upon the psychological impact of deformity, particularly in the case of persons of high visibility. Julius Caesar is said to have been greatly distressed by 'the deformity of baldness', which he attempted to disguise by combing his scanty hair forward from the crown. Consequently, 'of all the honours that he received from the senate and the Roman people none did he receive or make use of more happily than the right to wear a laurel wreath at all times' (Suet. *JC* 45.2). The emperor Caligula is said to have been so touchy about his own baldness that he treated it as a capital offence if any of his subjects looked down upon his exposed pate from a superior height (Suet. *Calig.* 50.1). Domitian, who was similarly afflicted, took it personally if any other man was mocked for baldness in his presence, whether in earnestness or in jest (Suet. *Dom.* 18.2). The mild deformity, if that is an appropriate way to describe baldness, of these immensely powerful and visible individuals thus constituted for each a serious and inhibiting social handicap.⁴

The number of persons suffering from disability in the USA is currently put at about 43 million out of a total population of 255 million, i.e. one in six. Though this statistic tells us much about the physical and mental health of the world's pre-eminent democracy, it perhaps tells us more about its current definition of disability. In all probability the Greeks and Romans, had they been able to think statistically, would have estimated the incidence of disability in their own communities to be appreciably lower, in part because the survival rate among persons

⁴ It is not known whether there were expensive and worthless cures for baldness on the market in antiquity as there are today, but the possibility cannot be ruled out. Celsus recommended shaving the head and applying a resinous juice from *ladanum* mixed with oil for those who were losing their hair as a result of illness. As he further remarked, however, nothing can prevent men from becoming bald through old age (6.1).

suffering from serious impairments in the younger age groups was considerably less than it is today, and in part because their definition is likely to have excluded many who currently qualify by the USA's less exacting standards. Certainly the demands and rigours of life in the ancient world were such that no allowance could be made for those suffering from minor impairments, however acute and debilitating their discomfort.⁵

Even within the controlled context of a contemporary debate, the difficulties of arriving at a practical set of definitions and objective criteria by which to determine who is and who is not disabled are enormous. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that anthropologists have found it extremely difficult to assemble ethnographical data on the subject, since their judgement about which individuals constitute the handicapped may not necessarily conform to that of the society under investigation. We should also bear in mind that there is a reasonable likelihood that many ancient communities were more uniform in physiological appearance than their modern counterparts (cf. Dover 1975, 160). Their sense of what was 'normal' in physiological terms may therefore have been more limited, and, although this circumstance would not necessarily have influenced their definition, or rather their sense, of deformity, it may have had the consequence of increasing their intolerance.

The taxonomy of congenital deformity

Among major terata modern science acknowledges two principal categories of malformation, one of which involves a defective or excessive number of body parts. Defective number of body parts is found in the case of Cyclopiian malformation, otherwise known as synophthalmia, a rare pathological condition whereby a single or double median eye is enclosed in one orbit at a point corresponding to the root of the nose. Alternatively the orbital cavity lacks any eyeball at all. Synophthalmia is invariably accompanied by other severe deformities, including malformation of the brain, the skull, the extremities and the heart. There is no treatment for such individuals, who invariably die shortly after birth from a variety of associated anomalies. In other words, it is impossible that such a 'monster' should survive to adult life – far less that it should reproduce itself. A more common mutant is the sirenioid individual, who possesses only a single foot or else limbs that are joined throughout the length of his body with no separate feet. It is somewhat ironic, in view

⁵ The following is the definition of disability as the term is employed in the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990): 'a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities', where major life activities include 'performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning and working'.

of the fact that the medical terms 'cyclopean' and 'sirenoid' both derive from the *Odyssey*, that Homer does not provide us with any description of either a Cyclops or a Siren, even though in the former case the plot requires the audience to have his eponymous pathology in mind.

The other principal category of malformation involves partial or complete doubling of the body along one of its axes. In extreme cases this condition results in the joining of identical twins by a cartilaginous band through which the two circulatory systems communicate – conjoined or Siamese twins, in other words, so named from Chang and Eng Bunker, who were born of Chinese parents at Meklong, Siam, in 1811. It seems likely that Homer is alluding to a pair of Siamese twins in the *Iliad* when Nestor recalls how he was once beaten by the sons of Aktor, known as the Moliones, in a chariot race, 'one drove the chariot steadily, steadily he drove, while the other applied the whip' (23.641f.). Since the pair were competing in a solo event, the poet presumably intended his audience to think of them as physically inseparable. Further justification for this hypothesis is provided by a scholiast who states that Hesiod described the twins 'not ... like Castor and Pollux, but double-formed, having two bodies and joined to one another' (fr. 18 Merkelbach and West). Because conjoined twins are capable of leading well-adjusted and active lives, it is not inconceivable that an acrobatic feat of the kind which Nestor describes was performed by such an athletic pair.⁶ Given, moreover, the extreme rarity of the malformation, whose present-day incidence is estimated at 1: 50,000 births, it would hardly be surprising if their survival to adult years was widely reported. Only in the last forty or so years has the birth of Siamese twins ceased to make headline news in the media (Warkany 1977, 13).

Of lesser deformities, the most familiar is disproportion, as manifested in the case of a dwarf with a large-sized head, broad shoulders and undersized lower limbs. It is a matter for individual judgement as to whether less striking disproportions such as tiny ears or an oversized penis should be categorised as deformities at all.

Conclusions

The following are some of the constraints upon the sophistication and accuracy of what follows:

(1) The Graeco-Roman world has failed to bequeath a serviceable definition for determining what would have been identified as either a deformity or a disability.

⁶ Some scholars maintain that the curious overlapping double figures which occasionally appear on Geometric vases are intended to be representations of the Moliones (e.g. Coldstream 1977, 352-4; cf. Plate 2). An alternative theory is that the overlap is merely an artistic convention for two warriors standing alongside one another (e.g. Boardman 1983, 25f.).

(2) The terminology for pathological deformity in both the Greek and Latin languages is highly imprecise and frequently fails to provide us with an accurate picture as to the exact nature of the ailment under consideration.

(3) Ancient sources only occasionally permit us to differentiate between congenital and non-congenital deformities.

(4) The testimonies regarding the plight of the deformed and disabled are too disparate to enable us to locate social attitudes within a particular place or time and rarely even to distinguish between a generically Greek attitude and its Roman counterpart.

(5) Most of the authors upon whom we are reliant for our data appear to belong to what sociologists call the hegemonic group, that is to say, to the able-bodied majority; certainly no author ever identifies himself as disabled.

Survival of the Weakest

I tried not to think about the deformed baby but I could not prevent the images from invading the mind, images spawned by scraps of gossip, half-remembered and probably untrue in the first place, of human monsters, alive but hidden from public view in special hospitals and asylums, obscenities with the heads of rodents on scaly bodies, huge cyclopic heads on tiny trunks, malformations of hand and feet, a faceless head, a living bladder of lard with orifices only for breathing and eating. When I tried to tell myself that I was almost certainly exaggerating the affliction of my baby, that he was most likely only suffering from some minor disfiguration or handicap, I found that my mind swung away from more comfortable speculation to welcome back the nightmare images, because it dared not face the possibility that the reality might be worse than the imagined condition.

Vernon Scannell, *The Tiger and the Rose: an Autobiography* (1971, 189)

Life in the ancient world was nasty, brutish and short. The most privileged were those who happened to be freeborn, well-to-do males in perfect health. But the overwhelming majority did not, of course, belong to that ideal category. For those unable to fend for themselves, notably the poor, slaves, widows, spinsters, minors, and the chronically sick and disabled, life was fraught with lethal dangers. These dangers included proneness to accident, vulnerability to physical abuse, availability to benign or malign neglect, susceptibility to disease, and so forth.

It will be appropriate to begin this investigation by attempting to establish the prevalence of disability and deformity in classical antiquity, along with its causes and consequences. We are investigating a phenomenon which in the guise of congenital deformity would have been familiar to many through the traumatic experience of the birth of a defective infant, and which in the guise of chronic deformity would have been experienced first-hand by almost all those who survived to adult years.

The prevalence of congenital deformity

Palaeopathology, the branch of medical science which utilises human remains in order to study the prevalence of disease in antiquity, reveals little about congenital deformity in the Graeco-Roman world except for the fact that it occurred. Rare examples from the Greek mainland that have been identified in osteological data include two instances of clubfoot from the necropolis at Lerna in the Peloponnese, one example of congenital spinal malformation from Corinth, another of congenital hip dislocation from Argos, and a single case of spina bifida from Tiryns. Such discoveries, though they yield a fascinating insight into the plight of the individuals concerned, ultimately tell us little that we might not already have suspected, which is that congenital disorders of the type that are known in the modern world were also current in antiquity.

Rather more useful are the comparative data. Modern estimates put the present incidence of congenital abnormalities requiring medical attention at approximately 3 per cent of all newborn infants. In addition, approximately 1 per cent of all newborns suffer from a prenatally determined malformation which is potentially life-threatening, and almost half of all the children in hospital are there because of congenital defects (Kelnar and Harvey 1987, 160; Shepard 1989, xiii). In light of the high level of malnutrition and disease in antiquity, both major causes of birth defects, it is safe to assume that congenital deformity was at least as equally widespread. Social practice would have increased the prevalence of certain congenital defects. Achondroplasia, for instance, a type of dwarfism caused by interbreeding which is characterised by arrested development of the long bones, though it is barely attested in the archaeological record, would have been particularly prevalent in rural areas because of the tendency towards endogamy among members of remote villages. The presence of spinal deformity in five out of twelve Roman skeletons belonging to a group-burial at Cambridge is also likely to be due to interbreeding (cited by Morris 1992, 90). In conclusion, we cannot rule out the possibility that in many regions of the ancient world a substantial minority of the population suffered from hereditary deformities.¹

Although the incidence of congenital disability was probably considerably higher in antiquity than it is in modern society, a far smaller percentage of persons so afflicted would have survived infancy. This is partly because the Greeks and the Romans would have had little compunction about withholding the necessities of life from any infant whom they deemed incapable of growing up to lead a full, active and

¹ A striking modern parallel of a hereditary deformity is provided by the population of Martha's Vineyard off the coast of Massachusetts, which, for some 250 years after the arrival of the first deaf settlers in the 1690s, was afflicted with hereditary deafness caused by interbreeding.

independent existence. Nor would they have seen any virtue in promoting and prolonging a life which offered nothing but discomfort and pain for the owner, and financial hardship for his relatives. There is every reason, therefore, to assume that the overwhelming majority of infants exhibiting gross abnormalities, and many, too, afflicted with minor aberrations, were exposed immediately, while others spontaneously succumbed to their ailment shortly after birth for lack of basic medical treatment. Almost all infants afflicted with cleft palate, for instance, a relatively uncomplicated bone defect caused by the failure of the two halves of the palate to unite during foetal development, would have died in the first week because of their inability to suck at the breast (Manchester 1983, 31). Those of the congenitally deformed who did survive were at high risk throughout their lives, being extremely vulnerable to infection.

To kill or not to kill: the Greek world

As we shall see in Chapter 4, the birth of a deformed child was interpreted by the Greeks as a punishment inflicted upon its parents by the gods. It therefore follows that the pressure upon such parents to expose their offspring must have been considerable. The most celebrated cripple in Greek myth, Oedipus, possibly owes his name, which means 'Swollen foot' or 'Swell foot', to the fact that his ankles were pinned together in infancy. If this etymology is correct, this barbaric practice was presumably intended to eliminate the newborn's chances of survival altogether, by rendering the infant less attractive to a passer-by who might otherwise have been disposed to rescue him. Oedipus was exposed because he was destined to grow up to become a moral monster – a sociopath in modern terminology – but his fate might well have been the same had he merely been born a physical monster. Though the myth of Oedipus cannot tell us anything conclusive about social practice, it is not improbable that a more violent fate awaited deformed infants than other unwanted babies.

The pressure to eliminate a congenitally deformed infant was fuelled not only by religious but also by practical considerations, since the rearing of such a child is economically burdensome and unprofitable in the extreme. Though natural attrition and the practice of exposure accounted for the deaths of many congenitally disabled infants, however, some parents must have found themselves with problem cases on their hands, either because symptoms of abnormality did not manifest themselves at birth or because they were only acquired postnatally. The congenitally deaf and mute, for instance, would not have been identified as such until they reached an age when exposure was no longer an option. Likewise mental deficiency and growth disturbance are not evident at birth. Some of these problem cases may have been ejected

from their homes and left to fend for themselves when their defects became more evident or when their condition deteriorated, since there was little room for humanitarian considerations. There can be no doubt, however, that congenitally deformed infants were occasionally raised, albeit despised and neglected by their parents, as we know from the case of Kroisos' dumb son (see p. 96).

In Sparta, where racial homogeneity was highly prized and where the principles of eugenics were strictly upheld, the abandonment of deformed and sickly infants was actually a legal requirement. The statute which demanded their abandonment was judged to be of such importance that it was incorporated into the code attributed to the legendary Lykourgos. Plutarch (*Lyk.* 16.1-2) informs us that a newborn child, who in Sparta, unlike in most parts of the Greek world, was not the property of its father but the state, was presented for inspection before the 'elders of the tribes' immediately after birth. If the child was strong and lusty, the elders ordered the father to raise it; if, on the other hand, they determined that it was 'ill-born and ill-formed', he was required to expose it at a chasm-like place aptly called Apothetai or the Place of Exposure 'in the belief that the life which nature had not provided with health and strength was of no use either to itself or to the state'.²

Although the notion that an individual's life must serve a useful social function was not, to my knowledge, articulated elsewhere in precisely the same terms as in Sparta, it probably provided an implicit justification for the practice of exposure throughout the Greek world. The only criteria that have come down to us for determining what constituted defectiveness are provided by Soranos in the second century AD, though these may well reflect earlier practice. In a section of his *Gynaecology* entitled 'How to recognise a newborn child that is worth raising', Soranos declares that the child in question

should be perfect in all its parts, limbs and senses, and have passages that are not obstructed, including the ears, nose, throat, urethra and anus. Its natural movements should be neither slow nor feeble, its limbs should bend and stretch, its size and shape should be appropriate, and it should respond to external stimuli (2.6.5).³

² Lykourgos' fascination with the possibility of developing a master race anticipates the interest in eugenics which nineteenth- and twentieth-century legislators have also manifested. Cf. the notorious 'Law for the Prevention of Congenital Diseases Among the Rising Generation' (*Gesetz zur Verhütung Erbkranken Nachwuchses*), which was introduced by the Nazi government on 14 July 1933. At a conservative estimate, its hygienic vision of the world led to the systematic execution of approximately 100,000 physically and mentally disabled, in addition to the compulsory sterilisation of some 320,000 others (cf. Gütt, Rüdin and Ruttkie 1936).

³ The propriety, for want of a better word, of caring for a seriously defective infant is a central issue facing modern society, and one which is made all the more acute in light of the ability of new technology to diagnose congenital defects present in the fetus through

On *a priori* grounds the exposure of a deformed or disabled infant is more likely to be a legal requirement in societies which vigorously promote the ideal of racial purity and adhere to strict militaristic goals. Those, on the other hand, which do not see their purity threatened by outsiders will adopt a more informal policy.⁴ In most parts of the Greek world a somewhat unpredictable fate probably awaited less severely impaired infants. Certainly the Athenian state never passed any legislation relating to the exposure of infants, whether deformed or not. There are even some hints that her citizenry may have been somewhat indulgent towards congenital disorders. After all, the statesman Perikles survived, despite his squill-shaped skull. In Plato's *Theaitêtos* (161a) Sokrates advises his interlocutor to inspect his spiritual offspring from every angle in order to make sure that he is not deceived by 'a lifeless phantom not worth rearing'. He then adds, 'Or do you think your infant must be reared in any case and not exposed? Will you bear to see it examined and not be upset if it is taken away, even if it is your first-born?' Though Plato leaves the reader in no doubt that Sokrates regards the rearing of defective infants as an act of irresponsible folly, the latter's remark suggests that some Athenian parents might have been moved, and were evidently permitted by law, to spare such offspring.

The fact that Aristotle found it necessary to recommend that there should be a law 'to prevent the rearing of deformed children (*mêden pepêrômenon trephein*)' also demonstrates that some parents were inclined, albeit deplorably in his view, to rear them (*Pol.* 7.1335b 19-21). Aristotle's own desire to eliminate the deformed, like the Spartan lawcode, appears to have been founded primarily on a practical sense of what was in society's best interests, though it is also likely to have been fuelled by his awareness that certain congenital diseases can be transmitted by heredity (see p. 146). His cryptic observation that 'the customary practice' may prevent the exposure of such children further suggests that in certain Greek communities preference was given to quantity rather than to quality of offspring.

There is little evidence to indicate that the Greeks were susceptible to the type of thinking that was prevalent at the time of the Reformation when mentally handicapped children were regarded as changelings in

prenatal screening, notably amniocentesis. One proposed solution to the current dilemma that is strikingly similar to the principles outlined by Soranos is to postpone conferring human status upon the foetus or the newborn until it has been established whether the subject conforms to certain 'indicators of humanhood'. See further J. Fletcher, 'Indicators of humanhood: a tentative profile of man', pp. 1-4 in *Hastings Center Rep.* 2.5 (1972).

⁴ Geertz (1983, 83) notes that among an East African tribe known as the Pokot those suffering from congenital deformities are frequently killed 'in the offhand way one discards an ill-made pot ... but often they are allowed, in an equally offhand way, to live. The lives they live are miserable enough, but they are not pariahs - merely neglected, treated with indifference as though they were mere objects, and ill-made ones at that.' The same may well have been true of mildly deformed infants in antiquity.

whom, as Martin Luther put it, 'the Devil sits ... where the soul should have been'. On the contrary, so far as we can judge, the motives for exposure were based primarily on utilitarian and economic considerations. That is because, although a deformed infant signified a type of divine displeasure that had been originally incurred by its parents, it apparently did not embody that displeasure in a way which could imperil the community.

Finally, there is nothing to indicate that the parents of a congenitally deformed infant were themselves castigated or treated as social outcasts. It is true that in Aeschylus' *Choëphoroi* Orestes says to the Chorus in reference to a dream which his mother Klytāimnestra has had, 'It follows because she has nurtured this hideous monster (*ekpaglon teras*) that she must be cruelly murdered' (l. 548f.). Since Orestes is seeking justification for killing his mother, however, the remark merely provides proof of the extremity of his hatred. There is no evidence to suggest that the parents of a human monstrosity ever suffered such a fate in real life, though the obvious inference from all the foregoing must be that if they actually chose to raise their child, Greek society would have bestowed little by way of compassion, understanding or support.

To kill or not to kill: the Roman world

The information concerning the exposure of deformed infants in the Roman world is equally problematic. Dionysios of Halikarnassos writes (2.15.1-2):

Romulus ordered all the inhabitants of the city to bring up all their male offspring and the first-born of the girls and not to kill any child under three years of age, unless the child was deformed or monstrous (*paidion anapêron ê teras*). He did not prevent the parents from exposing such children on condition that they had first shown them to five neighbours and these had approved.

Dionysios' testimony is somewhat obscure, but the sense is fairly clear. The law which he ascribes to Romulus, far from demanding the exposure of deformed children, merely released parents from the otherwise binding obligation to raise them. By demanding that witnesses verify the depth of impairment before releasing the parents from that obligation, the alleged law seems to allude to a period in Rome's early history when the city faced a serious manpower shortage. Whether such a law ever existed is, however, highly questionable, since Dionysios' testimony is based on no known source, was written seven centuries after the event it describes, and is not supported by any other author.

Around the middle of the fifth century BC a Roman law was passed which, perhaps as the result of a dramatic increase in the population but possibly as well in part due to an accumulating dread of deformity itself,

insisted upon the killing of the deformed. Table IV of the lawcode known as the Twelve Tables, which probably dates to this period, instructs the *paterfamilias* or head of the family to 'Quickly kill ... a dreadfully deformed child' (cf. Cic. *Laws* 3.8, 19). It is an indication of the law's severity that the *paterfamilias* was apparently not required to obtain witnesses before carrying out the act. No law relating to the abandonment or killing of deformed infants survives from any later period, although numerous occurrences of abnormal human and animal births are recorded in the prodigy lists (below p. 67ff.).

We are not told what method the *paterfamilias* was to use to kill his child, but Seneca, writing half a millennium later than the Twelve Tables, suggests that the procedure for disposing of defective infants was substantially different from that pertaining to other unwanted babies. 'Their fathers,' he states (*Con.* 10.4.16), 'chuck them out instead of exposing them (*proiciunt magis quam exponunt*)'. Though Seneca does not provide any details as to what 'chucking out' entailed, elsewhere he tells us that it was the practice to drown children who are 'weak and monstrous (*debiles monstrosique*)' (*Anger* 1.15.2). It would seem that by the first century AD the elimination of such children had become an option, rather than a requirement of the law.

However, we never hear of the prosecution of parents who permitted a defective infant to live, and we know for a fact that some congenitally deficient infants were raised, as happened in the Greek world. Pliny, for instance, mentions a certain Quintus Pedius, who was congenitally dumb (*natura mutus*) and in whom considerable interest was taken (*NH* 35.21). The great orator Messala Corvinus recommended that Pedius should receive painting lessons, a suggestion which was approved by no less a personage than Octavian, who also took a personal interest in the case. The child, we are told, made great progress in this occupation, but died before he reached adulthood. Corvinus' recommendation reveals considerable insight and imagination, and although we do not hear of any similar instances of handicapped children receiving any attention of this kind, we cannot exclude the possibility that some well-meaning and concerned parents were preoccupied with their development and welfare. The future Emperor Claudius is another case in point. Even though Claudius was treated with disdain and contempt by his immediate relatives, the latter evidently did not deny him an education, as we know from the fact that he became a historian of some eminence (below p. 40). Much presumably depended on the disposition of the parents and the social group to which they belonged. Both Claudius and Quintus Pedius belonged to the topmost stratum of Roman society – Quintus Pedius was the grandson of a former consul of the same name whom Julius Caesar appointed to be his joint heir with Octavian – and the interest which was taken in their cases, if not unique, may well have been rather exceptional.

There are other indications of a somewhat sympathetic attitude towards deformed infants in the Roman Imperial period. In Justinian's *Digest* Paulus excludes from his definition of children 'those abnormally procreated in a shape different from human form (*contra formam humani generis*), for example, if a woman brings forth some kind of monster or prodigy'. But he includes 'any offspring which has more than the natural number of limbs used by man' (D. 1.5.14). Yet more striking is a ruling by Ulpian under the *lex Iulia et Papia* to the effect that parents should be entitled to claim privileges for childbearing even if their offspring happen to be grossly deformed. Ulpian's reasoning goes as follows (D. 50.16.135):

Someone will ask, if a woman has given birth to someone unnatural or weak or something which is in appearance or voice unprecedented, not of human appearance, but some other offspring of an animal rather than a man, whether she should benefit, since she gave birth. And it is better that even a case like this should benefit the parents; for there are no grounds for penalising them because they observed such statutes as they could, nor should loss be forced on the mother because things turned out ill (tr. A. Watson).

Rational and humane though this pronouncement was, we cannot know what impact it had upon child-rearing practices, nor upon the public perception of the deformed. What it does, however, conclusively demonstrate is that the parents of such offspring were no longer regarded, publicly at least, as the victims of divine wrath, as they had been in earlier periods of history.⁵

Postnatally acquired disabilities

In Pharaonic Egypt and pre-Columbian America, where human remains have an excellent chance of survival because of the extremely favourable soil conditions, palaeopathology has yielded plentiful data about the prevalence of postnatally acquired diseases. By contrast, in the Graeco-Roman world outside Egypt, where soil conditions are much less conducive to the preservation of skeletal remains and where the principles of physical anthropology have been much less consistently employed, the data is extremely meagre. It remains a depressing fact that skeletons frequently 'disappear' after excavation, 'while associated vases are published in meticulous detail' (Morris 1992, 101). This is particularly true

⁵ Grossly deformed infants of servile origin were occasionally raised, since these were regarded as status symbols by fashion-conscious Romans (below p. 46). We should note, too, that different parts of the Roman Empire probably adopted different attitudes towards their deformed. Pliny, for instance, makes it a matter for comment that in Egypt 'it was decided to rear a portent, a boy with two eyes at the back of his head, although he could not see with them' (NH 11.272).

of Classical Greece, about which very little is known of a palaeopathological nature.

There are, however, a handful of cemeteries which have been analysed by palaeopathologists, and these have produced some highly revealing statistics. A few fragmentary skeletons, which have been excavated in the Kerameikos Cemetery in Athens, have yielded information about wounds, bone tumours and dental calculus (Bisel 1990, 153f.). Of particular interest is a man's skull from the tomb of the Messenians, which has an iron nail protruding from it (Plate 5). The nail did not, however, cause the man's death and might easily have been extracted. Why this straightforward procedure was not carried out remains a mystery.

According to a recent calculation, 10 per cent of all known Greek skeletons exhibit at least one fracture. Four out of five of these occur on males (Grmek 1983, 59). Warfare and to a lesser degree all the physical occupations which men undertook outside the home were responsible for this imbalance. Though women's life expectancy was much lower than men's, men were far more likely to suffer injury. In the Roman world, too, men faced a considerably higher risk of injury than women. Among the inhabitants of Herculaneum who died in the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, for instance, the incidence of injury due to accidents is three times as high among males as among females. Evidence from the same site further indicates that women's diet was far less nutritious than that of men. Porotic hyperostosis, a condition which is caused by iron deficiency, occurs among 41 per cent of the women but only among 28 per cent of the men.⁶ Evocative proof of the wear and tear to which those leading a physically active life in Roman Britain were subject is provided by some unusually well-preserved skeletal remains in the fourth-century AD cemetery at Cirencester in Gloucester. From a sample of 299 adults, it is estimated that about 80 per cent of the population suffered from osteoarthritis, or osteoarthritis as it is otherwise called, a progressive disease which in its advanced stage involves debilitating pain, gross deformity and, ultimately, virtual paralysis. Osteoarthritis was by no means equally widespread throughout the Roman Empire. At Herculaneum, by contrast, the proportion of sufferers was only 42.3 per cent, though we should bear in mind that a large percentage of its population was cut off in its prime. Of 233 skeletons in a Greek cemetery at Pantanello near Metapontum in southern Italy, 131 (i.e. 56 per cent) exhibited bone pathologies due to fractures, metabolic disorders and systemic infections (Henneberg *et al.* 1992, 454-5). In light of what appears to have been a general decline in average lifespan in the ancient

⁶ Ian Morris points out to me that the iron deficiency in question may be due to malaria rather than to undernourishment. Even so, the discrepancy between the incidence of porotic hyperostosis between males and females is very striking.

world from the fifth century BC until the early centuries of the Christian era (cf. Grmek 1983, 104), it is quite possible that incapacitating and disfiguring diseases actually increased over time and became more rife in the Roman period, since life expectancy is an important indicator of the health of any population.

The following description by Pliny the Younger (*Letters* 8.18) of the incapacitation of a certain Domitius Tullus offers eloquent testimony to the consequences of this kind of paralysis for one wealthy sufferer, although we cannot know for certain the specific cause of his incapacitation:

Crippled and deformed in every limb, he could only enjoy his vast wealth by contemplating it and could not even turn in bed without assistance. He also had to have his teeth cleaned and brushed for him – a squalid and pitiful detail – and when complaining about the humiliations of his infirmity was often heard to say that every day he licked the fingers of his slaves (tr. B. Radice in *LCL*).

Domitius Tullus may be considered fortunate in having had slaves to attend to him in the final stages of his crippling disease, notwithstanding the fact that he found it humiliating to be spoon-fed by a slave. The majority of the population of Roman Cirencester, both Britons and Romans alike, would have perished long before paralysis set in.

In contrast to the relatively small number of congenitally deformed infants who survived the first weeks of their life, the incidence of persons suffering from postnatally acquired disabilities and deformities would have been extremely high. In the larger urban centres particularly, the combined difficulty of removing human waste and supplying uncontaminated water greatly facilitated the spread of cholera, typhus, and the plague bacillus, diseases which in any given year would have rendered a large percentage of the population either disabled or disfigured or both. Likewise a variety of viral diseases such as meningitis, measles, mumps, scarlet fever and smallpox afflicted many individuals from childhood upwards, producing deafness and blindness as frequent side-effects.⁷ It goes without saying that deafness and blindness, occurring more gradually, were also an inevitable consequence of ageing. In the absence of corrective lenses, hearing aids, hip operations and the like, very few Greeks or Romans can have looked forward to the 'sleek old age' for which Odysseus prays, if by that he means an old age free of disability (*Od.* 19.367f.). Other factors such as maltreatment, stress, exhaustion, accidents, war, failure in food distribution and environmental pollution

⁷ The situation was likely to have been somewhat similar to that in the UK in the first half of the twentieth century when the overwhelming majority of disabled persons were under 14 years of age. Humphries and Gordon (1992, 12) write: 'More than half a million boys and girls had rickets, polio, tuberculosis, cerebral palsy, seriously impaired vision, deafness or a host of other disabilities.'

also exacted a heavy toll upon persons in all age groups. In addition, the rigours of childbirth, unalleviated by surgical intervention except in very rare cases, would have left many women permanently incapacitated and debilitated to some degree, a condition that was possibly aggravated by the fact that the majority of them went into labour shortly after the onset of menstruation.

One of the chief causes of postnatally acquired disability was malnutrition, which in the modern world is responsible for one in five disabilities worldwide. The earliest allusion to starvation oedema, a common consequence of famine, is to be found in Hesiod, who urges the farmer to lay up plenty in store for the winter 'so that the irresistible cold of winter does not take you in poverty, causing you to rub a swollen foot with a shrunken hand' (*Works and Days* 496f.). Children were particularly likely to be deprived of adequate nourishment when food was in short supply, and the effects of malnutrition would have affected them physically for the rest of their lives. Soranos alludes to a rachitic deformity in children which caused them to become 'twisted in the region of the thighs' (2.20). Incorrectly ascribing this condition to the fact that they had been encouraged to walk before their legs were properly able to support them, he reports that this ailment was especially prevalent in Rome. Vitamin D deficiency, which impedes bone growth and composition, and leads to rickets in children and osteomalacia in adults, is likely to have been especially rife among girls, who, as Xenophon informs us, were fed less than boys in the Greek world, except in Sparta (*Lak. Pol.* 1.3).⁸ In the Roman Empire, too, the child-support which was provided to poor parents from the time of the Emperor Trajan onwards was substantially less in the case of girls. Osteological evidence in the form of dental defects further indicates that girls were subject to malnutrition in early childhood and adolescence.

Since only the well-to-do had the means to consult a physician, even a minor trauma, such as a broken arm or leg, fractured kneecap, or dislocated shoulder, was likely to result in permanent disability. As Celsus notes, a mere fracture to the femur, a very common injury, naturally results in a shortening of the bone which requires the injured person to walk upon the tips of his toes in order to compensate for the uneven length of his legs (8.10.5). Disorders of the leg and foot were commonplace among members of all social strata, as is indicated by the popularity of *ex-votos* in the form of legs and feet that have been found in healing sanctuaries all over the Mediterranean. The resulting reduction or loss in mobility would have been psychologically as well as physically traumatic, since in many cases it signalled the end of a person's working life.

⁸ The practice of giving girls less food than boys is implicitly defended on biological grounds by Aristotle, who claims that females actually require less food than males (*HA* 9.608b 15).

Slaves ran an enormously high risk of becoming crippled, bow-backed or in some other way deformed. Indeed a physical deformity, however mild, was their distinguishing hallmark, as Aristotle noted (*Pol.* 1.1254b 27-31). For want of attention or rest, the majority of slaves probably went into a rapid physical decline once their disability had rendered them unfit for manual work, though in the more prosperous households a few lucky ones may have graduated to lighter duties. 'There's another *paidagōgos* (child-minder),' Perikles is said to have commented upon observing a slave break his leg (Hieronymos of Rhodes ap. Stob. *Flor.* 31.121). The obvious point of his remark is that the slave would never again be fit for active work, although not every slave who suffered injury would have been given the opportunity to graduate to lighter duties. In the Roman era, some owners deliberately maimed their slaves for purely sadistic reasons (see below p. 51).

Many sporting injuries also resulted in permanent incapacitation. Contact sports such as boxing and pankration, the latter a particularly vicious, no-holds-barred type of wrestling, were potentially lethal and often resulted in mutilation. To judge from a famous Hellenistic bronze of an ageing pugilist, the hallmark of the Greek boxer was a broken nose, cauliflower ears and scarred cheeks. It was not only 'professionals' who practised such sports, however. At the end of the fifth century BC the expression 'young men with cauliflower ears' came to be used of Athenian aristocrats with oligarchic sympathies who aped Spartan manners, including their taste for boxing (*Pl. Gorg.* 515e 8; *Prot.* 342b 8). Whether the taunt reflects a contemporary reality or is merely a derogatory, anti-oligarchic joke at the expense of the despised 'Laconizers', it none the less speaks eloquently to the typical kinds of injuries that boxers sustained. The most dangerous sport of all was chariot racing. Charioteers tied the horses' reins around their bodies, so that if their chariot turned over or if they were pitched out they were dragged along in the dust. Since there was no barrier down the centre of a Greek hippodrome to separate the lane up from the lane down, head-on collisions of the type described in Sophokles' *Elektra* must have been common (ll. 724-30). With perhaps more than just a shade of poetic licence, Pindar tells us that in a single race at Delphi 'forty drivers were laid low' (*P.* 5.49f.).

Disabled war veterans

There is no way of estimating how large a percentage of the population became disabled in battle nor what proportion underwent amputation as a result of wounds received, but the style and tactics of ancient warfare were such that the battlefield must have produced a vast number of disfiguring and disabling injuries. Although there is no reference to veterans living out the rest of their lives paralysed in a chair or in bed, injuries to the brain or to the cervical vertebrae which cause

paralysis must have been widespread (Hanson 1989, 214). The Athenian general Miltiades, for instance, who sustained a wound to his leg when jumping off a wall, was brought into court on a couch and died soon after the trial ended (*Hdt.* 6.134.2). Julius Caesar mentions casually that in a single engagement during the Civil War four out of the six centurions in a single cohort were blinded (*BC* 3.53). Was this a statistical quirk or par for the course?

The ugly and deformed as scapegoats

At moments of crisis the ugly and deformed, like other marginal groups, including foreigners and ethnic minorities, tend to become liable to physical persecution which often results in their death. In Greek society the psychological need to personalise the dread evoked by some crisis was institutionalised by the practice of selecting a victim known as a *pharmakos* or 'scapegoat', upon whom the blame for the current evils that beset the community was then laid. The victim, who was often but not invariably ugly and deformed, underwent ritual expulsion or, much less commonly it seems, execution. The reason for selecting the ugly and deformed is partly that these were deemed to feel resentment towards Nature or the gods for singling them out as freaks, as well as towards society for subsequently denying them their full human status. By a circular argument their 'resentment' also served as a convenient justification for their marginalised status and ill-treatment in the first place.⁹

A vivid description of scapegoat ritual is provided by the twelfth-century AD Byzantine scholar and polymath Johannes Tzetzes. His testimony is based on the poems of Hipponax, who lived in Kolophon in the sixth century BC (*Chil.* 5.728-45 = Hipponax fr. 5 in *IEG*). Tzetzes writes as follows:

The *pharmakos* was in ancient times the expiatory offering as follows. If a misfortune afflicted a city as the result of divine wrath, whether famine or plague or some other catastrophe, they led out the ugliest person of all for sacrifice, to be the expiation and *pharmakos* of the suffering city. When they had arranged for the sacrifice to take place at a suitable spot, they placed cheese, barley meal and dried figs in the hands of the victim. After beating the victim seven times on the penis with squills and branches of wild fig and of other wild trees, they finally set light to him on a fire

⁹ Girard (1982, 15) writes: 'Ultimately, the persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society. The stereotypical accusation justifies and facilitates this belief by ostensibly acting the role of mediator.' For a parallel to the Greek rite, cf. the testimony of the Spanish missionary Father P. J. de Arriaga who observed towards the end of the sixteenth century that in a certain part of Peru when the cold became intense various human anomalies, including those who had been born feet first or who had a harelip, as well as twins, were required to confess their sins on the grounds that it was their wickedness which was responsible for causing the cold (Lévi-Strauss 1978, 25).

consisting of wild branches. Then they cast his ashes to the winds and to the sea, so that this should be an expiation for the suffering city ... Hipponax describes the whole custom best.

Grim though the final outcome of this ritual was for the victim, it is undeniable that there is a comic element in the beating of an ugly person 'seven times on the penis with squills and branches of fig', and it may well be that the mockery of the victim was an essential part of the rite (see further p. 79ff.). The emphasis upon the need for ritual purification to combat a potentially overwhelming danger is highly characteristic of Greek religion. Yet the passage raises serious problems, since nowhere in the surviving fragments of Hipponax's poetry, which Tzetzes quotes as the authority for his information, is there any description of the ritual itself (*Chil.* 5.745-58). Hipponax merely alludes to the *pharmakos* for purposes of comparison with an unidentified person or persons – his enemies, one assumes – who can look forward to a similarly ignominious end if they do not cease their attacks upon the poet. In one fragment he talks of 'pelting so-and-so in winter and beating him with twigs and squills like a *pharmakos*' (fr. 6 *IEG*); in another he says, 'And in the hand to provide dried figs, barley meal, and cheese, like *pharmakoi* eat' (fr. 8 *IEG*); and in a third, 'For a long time have they waited, gaping with twigs in their hands, like *pharmakoi*' (fr. 9 *IEG*). We cannot therefore entirely exclude the possibility that Tzetzes is reconstructing *pharmakos* ritual wholly on the basis of Hipponax's vague allusions to it and has no external evidence for its existence. To be sure, little of Tzetzes' description is accounted for in the extracts which he cites.

Most of our remaining evidence for scapegoat ritual in the Greek world relates to Athens and is equally problematic. A passage in Aristophanes' *Knights*, where the Chorus tell Demos (ll. 1135-40):

if deliberately you feed these men like public charges on the Pnyx and then when you happen to have no meat available, whichever of these is fat you sacrifice and have for dinner ...

was interpreted by one scholiast as a reference to scapegoat ritual. His comment reads as follows (on l. 1136a):

Aristophanes is referring to so-called *pharmakoi* who purify the cities by being sacrificed. For the Athenians fed those who were very lowborn and poor and useless, and in times of some misfortune overtaking the city, I mean a famine or some such occurrence, they sacrificed them for the sake of being purified from the pollution and their own evil, and to find a cure for the evil assailing them. They called them scapegoats.

It is noticeable that this passage contains no reference to the appearance

of the victims, although the fact that they are described as 'useless' certainly suggests that they might well have been disabled.

Other sources indicate that in the Classical era the Athenians employed human *pharmakoi* to rid their city of pollution. At the Thargelia festival, for instance, held in honour of Apollo, men chosen for their ugliness were draped with figs and led out of the city. [Lysias] refers to his enemy Andokides as 'a scapegoat and an abomination', whose expulsion would have the consequence of purifying their city (6.53). In similar vein [Demosthenes] describes Aristogeiton as 'the scapegoat, the plague, whom anyone would rather shun at sight as an evil omen than choose to accost' (25.80). There is, however, no evidence to suggest that the Athenians ritually slaughtered their scapegoats, as the scholiast would have us believe. It is far more likely that they performed an act of symbolic equivalence to killing which culminated in the expulsion of the *pharmakos* from the borders of Attica.

The only other evidence suggesting that the *pharmakos* had to be repulsive involves a Boiotian ritual in which a slave who personified Hunger or *Boulimos* was driven out of the city in order to prevent or expel famine (Plu. *Mor.* 693f). We need hardly doubt that the rite would have been judged more effective if the victim was himself appropriately emaciated. In conclusion, though the evidence for the victimisation of the ugly and deformed at moments of crisis is relatively slight, scapegoat ritual itself appears to have been fairly prevalent. In the Roman world, as we shall see in Chapter 4, persons exhibiting major abnormalities were ritually exposed at times of crisis, usually at birth.

Marginalised individuals also become victims of orchestrated yet random mob violence at moments of crisis, as happened to the Jews in the fourteenth century at the time of the Black Death. Philostratos provides a chilling example of this practice in antiquity in connection with a vicious and deadly assault upon a disabled man which took place in Ephesos in the first century AD. The incident tells us much about the universal tendency to heap blame upon the weak and defenceless in periods of acute tension as a way of re-directing frustration and fear. The assault was provoked by an outbreak of plague, which induced the Ephesians to enlist the services of the pagan mystic Apollonios of Tyana. Apollonios summoned the populace into the theatre, where the following event took place (VA 4.10):

There Apollonios espied an old beggar, craftily blinking, who carried a wallet with a crust of bread in it. He was dressed in rags and had an ugly countenance. Gathering the people around him, he said, 'Gather as many stones as you can and throw them at this enemy of the gods.' The Ephesians were amazed at his suggestion and thought it wrong to murder such a miserable stranger, one moreover who happened to be begging and asking for compassion. By exhortation, however, he managed to stir the Ephesians up so that they set to work vigorously. When a few started stoning

him, the supposedly blind beggar glanced at all of them, thereby revealing eyes which were full of fire. The Ephesians realised that he was an evil spirit (*daimôn*) and stoned him so comprehensively that they erected a heap of stones around him. After a brief interval Apollonios told them to take away the stones and to examine the wild beast which they had killed. Having stripped away the object which they thought they had been pelting with stones, they discovered that the man had disappeared and in his place, exposed to their gaze, was a hound resembling a Molossian dog in appearance but in size as large as the largest lion, pulverised by their stones and spitting forth foam like mad dogs do.

In terms of his effectiveness as a target of attack, it hardly matters whether 'the supposedly blind beggar' was a charlatan or not. With consummate insight Apollonios selects a victim whose credentials for the part are impeccable, since the latter is repulsive, defenceless and highly expendable. He then uses his powers of suggestion to divest the beggar, quite literally, of all human identity and to convert the audience, despite its initial reluctance, into a lynching party baying for blood. Viewed from a secular perspective, the beggar is merely an innocent and accidental victim of crowd hysteria, a purely symbolic representation of evil who has been arbitrarily chosen for the part. To the Ephesian mob, however, at the moment of his quasi-ritualistic killing, he becomes both the embodiment of that evil and its cause, a contaminating presence that must be eliminated from the community. The pagan saint, as Burkert (1979, 70) notes, was in his own modest way merely anticipating the ruthless application in our own century of this same strategy by such adept practitioners as Hitler and Stalin.

Conclusions

Since we are talking about a world in which the average lifespan for men and women respectively was probably never more than 44 and 37 years respectively, probably all but the most robust would have begun to exhibit the symptoms of advancing age from the beginning of the fourth decade onwards. Disability is likely to have been so prevalent among those of adult years that loss of mobility, coupled with deteriorating vision and hearing, afflicted virtually everyone sooner rather than later. As in any society, the average person became less and less competent to perform even moderately demanding physical tasks as he or she grew older, but, unlike in ours, incompetence began at a relatively early age. Social class would also have been an important factor in determining the incidence of disability within any community, since poverty is itself a major contributory factor.

The dangers, poor diet and overwork which conditioned the lives of the majority meant that the type of impairments to which ancient communities were subject were more typical of the so-called Third

World, where blindness and deafness are extremely prevalent, than of industrial societies, where ailments of the heart are more common.

restricted to the royal household. Though vase-paintings indicate that dwarfs may have been popular as slaves in Athens, mainly serving in a domestic capacity, there is little to suggest that they were made the target of derision, as appears to have been their habitual plight in the Roman world, although we cannot rule out the possibility that the deformed were treated with equal contempt in societies which have left no written or visual records.

The evidence upon which the argument of this chapter has been based is admittedly impressionistic and no doubt open to varied interpretation. There is no means of knowing what percentage of upper-class Roman homes retained deformed slaves nor how widespread was the phenomenon which we have been examining. Certain genres of Latin literature, notably imperial biography and satire, are uniquely suited to the revelation of domestic circumstances, much of it titillating in nature, and these have no counterpart in Greek literature. The Greeks never produced a Martial or a Petronius or a Lampridius to catalogue their vices in such colourful and raunchy detail. So we can ask questions about the Romans – and get answers to those questions – that we cannot ask about the Greeks.

And yet there are a number of reasons for suspecting that a difference in attitude did exist between the two societies. In the first place, the extreme militarism of Roman society disposed its citizens to take grave exception to persons who did not fit into the uniform mould of the majority. Secondly, the Roman disposition to interpret all types of irregular natural phenomena as signs of impending catastrophe made the citizenry highly suspicious of those whom they regarded as harbingers of evil. Finally, there is no escaping the fact that Roman culture in other spheres delighted in inflicting pain upon all manner of defenceless persons. Not that the Greeks were models of enlightened humanitarianism. Far from it. But the Romans relished witnessing the sufferings and humiliation of others with the same kind of intensity as other societies crave hallucinatory abandon. Generalisations of this sort, though instructive and illuminating, do not take us very far, however. We are hardly yet at the point of being able to analyse with any profundity the distinctive psychopathologies of the Greeks and Romans.

4

The Deformed and the Divine

There are several things that cause monsters. The first is the glory of God. The second, his wrath.

Ambroise Paré, *On Monsters and Marvels* (1573, ch. 1.1)

A society which has the capacity to explain a defective birth in terms of a genetic malfunction is likely to regard such an occurrence as a regrettable statistical inevitability, even though there may be some of its members who adhere to a less rational, more 'superstitious' explanation. By contrast, one which has no tradition of scientific inquiry or one in which that tradition operates at the outskirts of the popular consciousness will tend to view it as an example of the capacity of the divine to violate natural law. It follows that religious systems are highly influential in shaping a society's attitude towards its deformed. Lacking the elaborate mechanisms of, say, the Christian Church for enforcing their will, both Greek and Roman polytheism were more modestly equipped to elicit submission and subservience from either the devout or the recalcitrant. One obvious strategy was to point an accusatory finger at the deformed as anomalous creatures who signify the anger of the gods. It was a strategy which had the incidental benefit of providing a justification for treating such persons as outcasts.

In this chapter we will consider the extent to which the Greeks and Romans exploited the occurrence of deformity for religious ends and what consequences that exploitation had for the persons concerned. We will also investigate the relationship of the Olympian gods towards Hephaistos, the only major deity who was disabled. It is an interesting fact that Vulcan, who is identified with Hephaistos in Roman mythology, is not associated with any significant myths whatsoever.

'The sins of the parents'

Since the Greeks believed that the birth of a healthy and viable infant was dependent upon the goodwill of the gods, it followed that the birth

Works and Days warns his audience that only righteous parents produce 'children who resemble their parents' (l. 235), assuming that 'resemblance to one's parents' is here intended as a euphemism for 'whole-bodied', as is the case in later times. Foremost among the impieties which the gods statutorily punished by the birth of a deformed child was the breaking of an oath to which they had previously been summoned as witnesses.

Compelling evidence for the widespread acceptance of this belief is provided by the celebrated oath which the Athenians allegedly took before the battle of Plataiai in 479 BC and subsequently administered to their ephebes in the following century. It contained the following dread proviso (Tod, *GHI* II 204.39-45):

If I remain faithful to the inscribed oath, may women give birth to children who resemble their parents. If not, may they give birth to monsters (*terata*).

Since this oath constitutes part of a decree which was passed by the Athenian assembly, it is safe to conclude that even in this supposedly enlightened era a majority of citizens would have been deterred from breaking it for fear of generating a monster. Similar imprecations are found on Greek sepulchral monuments of Roman Imperial date from Asia Minor, where the formula is employed as a deterrent to potential tomb-robbers whose wives are threatened with giving birth 'not in accordance with Nature', another likely euphemism for congenital deformity (e.g. *SEG* XVIII.561.7).¹

Though a deformed child was therefore an innocent victim of its parents' sinfulness, it inevitably served as an unpleasant reminder of human wickedness. As such, it probably tended to be burdened with a certain odium, even if this odium was occasionally tempered by a humane pity for its innocence. Although there is no evidence to suggest that in either the Greek or Roman world the parents of a deformed infant were subjected to any form of civil punishment (above p. 16f.), it is quite possible that they would have been debarred, at least temporarily, from participating in civic and religious events for fear that their corrupting presence would offend the gods. Nor is there anything to indicate that they would have refrained from having another child for fear of inviting further reprisals from the gods. Given the overriding importance of childbearing in the ancient world, the horror of childlessness may well have outweighed any such scruples.

Racial as well as individual deformity was interpreted as a punish-

¹ The Greeks, of course, were by no means alone in viewing congenital deformity as a punishment for the iniquity of one's parents or forbears. In the Middle Ages freaks were popularly attributed to the union of mortal women, especially witches, with incubi or other kinds of demons.

ment for what might loosely be described as the pagan equivalent to the doctrine of Original Sin. Ailian, for instance, alleges that when the Lokrians ceased to submit maidens as tribute to the goddess Athena, their wives were afflicted with a disease which caused them to bear 'crippled and monstrous children' (fr. 47 T). Likewise Herodotos reports that a Skythian people known as the Enareës, who suffered from impotency, accounted for their debility by the fact that their ancestors had plundered the temple of Aphrodite Ourania at Askalon in Palestine (1.105). As punishment for this act of sacrilege both they and their descendants were afflicted with what Herodotos describes vaguely as 'the female sickness' (4.67).

In the mythological imagination a hybrid monster was the product of a union between a mortal woman and an animal, as in the famous story of Pasiphaë, the wife of Minos king of Crete, who became enamoured of a bull. In lovesick despair at her failure to achieve congress with the object of her passion, Pasiphaë sought the help of the famed craftsman Daidalos, who manufactured a marvellously lifelike heifer, inside which the queen then hid. The unholy coupling took place, in consequence of which Pasiphaë gave birth to the Minotaur, a monster half-man, half-bull, which passed its days in the dark recesses of the fabled labyrinth, hidden from public view like disturbing anatomical peculiarities in the real world. No surviving version of the myth explores what for us, perhaps, would be the most fascinating aspects of the bizarre story, namely Minos' reaction to his wife's scandalous affair and the parents' motives for rearing such a monster. It is conceivable that the myth of the Minotaur might have served in part as a stern warning against bestiality and the commingling of worlds which properly should remain distinct.

The cripple Hephaistos: an object lesson in divine prejudice

If it was an unenviable fate to be a handicapped human being in a society which placed such heavy emphasis upon physical perfection, hardly less unenviable was the fate of the crippled fire-god Hephaistos, a solitary misfit among an unageing population of divinely perfect deities. A variety of theories have been proposed to account for the god's lameness. One is that it is a consequence of his status as 'magician' in accordance with the principle whereby a special defect is redeemed or compensated for by a special gift or talent (see further Chapter 6). Hephaistos' lameness is thus compensated for by his magical power to infuse life into inanimate materials and forge armour of incomparable excellence (Delcourt 1957, 121-8). According to Detienne and Vernant (1974, 272), 'The peculiar shape of his feet is the visible symbol of his *mêtis*, his wise thoughts and his craftsman's intelligence', their argument being that

crookedness is a sign of craftiness. Yet another theory is that his twisted feet derive from the fact that the god was originally 'a dangerous fire-demon whose rapid approach or spread is controlled by deformation' (Faraone 1992, 134). Hephaistos is crippled, in other words, because fire itself has to be crippled or controlled in order to serve mankind. Though associative links of this kind cannot entirely be ruled out in trying to understand the reasons for Hephaistos' deformity, a more obvious explanation is that his crippled condition conforms to an authentic social reality, metal-working being one of the few professions available to the lame.

The circumstances surrounding Hephaistos' conception were thoroughly unpropitious. Hesiod tells us that his mother Hera bore him 'without having intercourse' in order to spite her husband Zeus (*Th.* 927). Her motive, it seems, was to revenge herself upon Zeus for having given birth to Athena without her assistance (*Hom. h. Pyth. Ap.* 323). No child of a natural union but a freakish aberration, he was thus the product of female rancour and spite. It is conceivable that the Hesiodic myth also contains an allusion to the belief that the mother's mental state at time of conception affects the appearance of her offspring (see below p. 151).

The great German scholar Wilamowitz suggested that the story of Hephaistos' birth was invented in order to avoid insulting Zeus by making him the father of a cripple (1931-2, I p. 332). This may well be true, but there are other motives to consider. Hephaistos' half-sister was Athena, for whom Zeus assumed the role of surrogate mother by providing his head as a makeshift womb. The strange circumstances of the cripple's birth thus paralleled to some extent those of Athena, with whom he is closely associated in cult. Perhaps, too, the god's deformity was intended to indicate that although Hera was capable of engendering without male subvention, the experiment was less than a total genetic success, thereby confirming – if confirmation was needed – the widely reported belief that the male sperm is the true fashioner of the foetus and takes procreative predominance over the female womb. The view is one which we encounter, for instance, in Apollo's notorious claim that 'the mother is not the begetter of that which is called the child, but only nurse of the newly-implemented seed' (*Aes. Eum.* 658-60).

It is possible that there was some disagreement as to whether Hephaistos' lameness was congenital or non-congenital, though the former view certainly predominated. In Book 1 of the *Iliad*, as an altercation is about to break out between Zeus and Hera, the cripple reminds the gods that when he took his mother's side during one of their previous tiffs he was punished by Zeus by being ejected from Olympus (ll. 590-4). He fell for nine days and eventually landed on the island of Lemnos. Conceivably his fall was responsible for his lameness. In *Iliad* 18, by contrast, when Thetis visits Hephaistos in order to request that he fashion a new set of armour for her son Achilles, the latter, who is

described as 'a monster who limped', recalls how she saved him 'when pain came upon me after I had fallen a long distance by the will of my dog-faced mother who wanted to conceal me because I am lame (*chôlos*)' (ll. 395-7). The author of the *Homeric Hymn to Pythian Apollo* also makes the god congenitally lame, as these words spoken by Hera in a tone of barely suppressed contempt indicate (ll. 316-18):

My son Hephaistos, whom I bore, was a weakling (*êpedanos*) among all the gods and had withered feet (*rhiknos podas*), and so I picked him up and hurled him into the great sea.

Hera's rejection of her son duplicates the response of a very average Greek mother to the discovery that she had given birth to a cripple. What gives the story a special twist, however, is the fact that the exposure of a divine infant can only be a temporary expedient. Hera might have hoped that she could solve her problem by ejecting her defective child from Olympus, but since he is immortal she is incapable of committing deicide. And the fact that Hephaistos cannot be killed means that the Olympians have no alternative but to receive him back into their fold – and indeed on more or less equal terms as themselves, despite his inferior status as an artisan.

Hephaistos' outsider status among the Olympian deities is further demonstrated by the fact that he is consistently presented as the butt of cheap humour. When he grew up, the cripple took revenge upon his mother by trapping her in a cunningly constructed throne which he alone knew how to unlock. Dionysos contrived to get him drunk and brought him back to Olympus riding on a mule – a light-hearted subject much beloved of black-figure artists (Alkman fr. 349 LP; Plate 19). His sexual relationships with women were frequently fraught with difficulty. On one occasion, when his half-sister came to visit him at his forge, he became aroused and attempted to rape her. He failed to achieve penetration, however, and ejaculated over her leg. His wife, according to Homer, was the beautiful Aphrodite, who deceived him by having an affair with Ares (see below p. 79). Later legend has it that Hephaistos was assisted at the forge by the monstrous Cyclopes – the halt, in other words, by the one-eyed (Kallim. *Hymn* 3.46-79). Their association seems to provide implicit acknowledgement of the natural kinship that exists between all disabled persons, irrespective of the precise nature of their disability.

Exclusion from the religious life of the community

Since they were themselves endowed with flawless beauty, the Olympian deities understandably took delight in its nearest mortal equivalent. Small wonder, therefore, that Athena, Hera and Aphrodite competed against each other in deadly earnest for the golden apple

inscribed with the words 'For the fairest woman'. Zeus, too, is fancifully credited by Babrius with awarding prizes to the most beautiful animal offspring (*Fab.* 56), and it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that beauty contests, conducted under the auspices of the gods, were held in some parts of the ancient world.

This penchant for physical perfection had important consequences for religious observances. Not only did the victims which were offered in sacrifice have to be without blemish, but priests, too, were required to be physically perfect. In fact for many priesthoods, absence of physical blemish was probably the sole qualification. The *Etymologicum Magnum* (s.v. *aphelês*) states that in Athens candidates both for the office of *archôn basileus*, the highest religious magistracy in the state, and for priesthoods, were required to undergo a physical examination or *dokimasia*. Likewise Plato in the *Laws*, a work which takes many of its recommendations from contemporary practice, laid it down that in his ideal state a priest should be 'whole in body and legitimate' (6.759c). There is also some evidence to indicate that preference tended to be given to those endowed with good looks. Pausanias, for instance, reports that in earlier times 'the boy who won the beauty contest' was appointed to the priesthood of Zeus at Aigion in Achaia (7.24.4). The incumbent held the post until he began to grow a beard, whereupon another good-looking boy was appointed in his stead. Likewise the priesthood of Ismenian Apollo in Boiotia invariably fell to a boy from a distinguished family, 'who was himself good-looking and strong' (9.10.4). It is also extremely dubious whether the disabled would have been permitted to stand as candidates for election by allotment to the executive offices of the Athenian state, since allotment was a way of handing the choice over to the gods.

It is likely that physiological perfection was also insisted upon in the Roman world from very early times. Dionysios of Halikarnassos tells us that Romulus enacted that priests should be without any bodily defect, and there is little reason to doubt the essential accuracy of his claim (2.21.3). The qualifications for becoming a Vestal Virgin included the requirement that the incumbent should 'not have a speech impediment or be partially deaf or have any other bodily defect' (Gell. *AN* 1.12.3). This interesting stipulation surely reflects the fact that the rituals which the Vestals, like other priestly officials, performed had to proceed without a hitch. A speech or hearing defect might have caused a Vestal to stutter or speak out of turn.

We do not know to what extent the deformed and disabled were denied access to Greek or Roman sanctuaries, as madmen were to churches in the Middle Ages, but it would hardly be surprising if the more distressing cases were excluded from participation in the processions and festivals which were such a prominent feature in the civic life of ancient communities in order not to offend the gods. The Romans even went so far as

to attribute their name for epilepsy, *morbus comitialis*, to the fact that an epileptic attack interrupted the day of the *comitia* or public assembly. Presumably an attack of this sort, if it occurred inside a sanctuary, would also have interrupted any religious observance.

In principle there is nothing to indicate that the gods, despite their insistence upon physiological wholeness in those who performed ritual acts on their behalf, would have been less mindful of the solicitations of the disabled. However, being for the most part economically constrained and therefore capable of making only modest sacrifices and offerings, the disabled may well have represented a low priority of concern from the point of view of the materialistically-minded Olympians.

Birth omens and pollution: Greek

Throughout the ancient world the interpretation of abnormal births constituted a method of divination which was used to foretell events of cataclysmic importance.² The prevalence of this method of divination makes it all the more remarkable that there is no evidence to indicate that any Greek community ever took official notice of abnormal births or felt obligated to expiate them in some way, a circumstance which suggests that occurrences of this kind aroused little fear or loathing. It would seem, therefore, that the wrath which such births exemplified was thought to be directed exclusively towards the parents and not to the community as a whole.

Greek historians, too, rarely allude to monstrous births, whether of the human or animal variety. The few exceptions are the following. Before Xerxes' ill-fated invasion of Greece in 480 BC Herodotos reports that 'a mighty portent' appeared in the form of a horse giving birth to a hare. This was interpreted to mean that the Persian king was destined to march against Greece with great pomp but would return home fleeing for his life (7.57). Simultaneously a mule was born which possessed both male and female organs. Although Herodotos castigates Xerxes for blindly ignoring the prognostic import of these occurrences, we cannot assume that the Greeks in general would necessarily have taken the same view. A further instance of an abnormal animal birth is reported by Plutarch, who alleges that when Dion was preparing to sail to Syracuse in 357 BC in order to liberate the city from tyranny, a sow gave birth to a litter of pigs which had no ears (*Dion* 24.4). Dion's seers

² As Sigerist (1951, I p. 459) notes, the analysis of birth omens by trained experts in the ancient world had an important heuristic value for medical prognosis in that it 'sharpened the eye of the diviner and greatly enriched anatomical terminology, since terms had to be coined to designate in great detail the various parts of the body and deviations from their normal appearance'. Belief in birth omens has persisted into the modern era. The king of Siam was of the opinion that the birth of the conjoined twins Chang and Eng Bunker in 1811 spelt ruin for his country and for this reason, with little regard for logic, plotted to have them killed.

concluded that this was a sign of imminent revolution, since it indicated that the Syracusans would no longer listen to the commands of their ruler Dionysios II. Plutarch also reports the birth of a lamb wearing a tiara with testicles on its head in the time of Alexander the Great, which the latter saw as a warning that he would be succeeded by 'a baseborn and impotent man' (*Alex.* 57.3). Alexander underwent purification by the Babylonians in a vain attempt to negate its implications. Abnormal animal births are also occasionally alluded to in a non-military context, as in the case of a one-horned ram which was born on Perikles' estate. The seer Lampon interpreted this as a sign that its owner would soon enjoy unrivalled political ascendancy in Athens (*Plu. Per.* 6).

It is noteworthy that all but the last of these examples are situated outside Greece proper and, moreover, that all involve animal monstrosities. The only reports of abnormal human births date to the period of the Roman occupation. Diodorus Siculus states that during the Social War an intersexual was burned alive in Athens (32.12.2). Since an identical fate awaited other intersexuals throughout the Roman world during this troubled period, however, we can safely assume that this ritual killing took place at the insistence of and under the direction of the Roman authorities.

This indifference on the part of the Greeks to the portentous implications of monstrous births is one of the most noticeable differences between their religious belief-system and that of the Romans. Although there are several references in Greek literature to a religious expert known as a *teratoskopos* or 'interpreter of *terata*' (e.g. *Pl. Laws* 11.933c), the fact that '*teras*' could be used of a variety of strange occurrences such as leaping snakes (*Pi. O.* 8.41) and talking oaks (*Aes. PV* 832) suggests that *teratoskopoi* were entrusted with the interpretation of all signs from the gods which were believed to presage the future and not exclusively, if at all, with birth-omens. There is nothing in the literary or epigraphical record to indicate that abnormal births constituted a distinctive category of divination for the Greeks. Indeed the evidence rather suggests the contrary. When, for instance, Prometheus exhaustively catalogues the various modes of prophecy which he bestowed upon mankind, he omits to include prodigies in his list (*Aes. PV* 484-99). Even when we might have expected a Greek writer to take some liberties with popular belief for the sake of dramatising a crisis, there appears to have been the same reluctance to interpret monstrosities as portents. At the beginning of Sophokles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* (ll. 25-7), when plague is ravaging Thebes because of the presence of a polluted murderer, barrenness rather than the production of monsters is the consequence for humans and animals alike. Likewise when Thukydides is enumerating the frequent reports of portents that occurred during the Peloponnesian War he mentions only earthquakes, eclipses of the sun, drought and plague (1.23.3).

Such lack of interest in abnormal births is all the more striking in view of the fact that the Greeks, like other ancient peoples, tirelessly scanned the natural world for messages from the gods. As Herodotos uncontroversially observes, 'The gods are accustomed to send a sign whenever great evils are about to befall a polis or a tribe' (6.27). Yet rarely, it seems, in the form of a congenital malformation.

Given their intense fear of pollution, we might still have expected the Greeks to regard a deformed infant as capable of defiling the community. Yet the evidence for a standardised ritual designed to eliminate the pollution arising from such a birth is also meagre in the extreme. In Euripides' *Andromachê* (l. 293f.) the Chorus express their regret that Hekabe did not throw the infant Paris over her head immediately after his birth in view of the fact that he was destined to cause the downfall of Troy. This remark has been somewhat fancifully interpreted as a reference to a purificatory ritual which was performed in the case of the monstrous newborn. However, we might just as well argue that the purpose of the throw was to break the child's neck or merely to effect its exclusion from the hearth by a kind of inverted rite of passage, just as the Amphidromia, a birth ritual whereby the newborn child was carried at a run around the hearth, signalled its formal inclusion. The only piece of evidence for a purificatory ritual in connection with portents that deserves serious consideration is provided by the Hellenistic poet Theokritos, who describes a ceremony for eliminating the polluting presence of two snakes which were strangled by the infant Herakles (*Idyll* 24. 88-100). The ceremony in question, which bears a striking resemblance to that performed by the Roman *haruspices* in connection with Siamese twins (see below), required the polluted object to be burned on a fire of wild wood and its ashes then thrown into a river. Even if we assume that the analogy is apt, however, we still have no means of knowing how widespread the practice might have been nor whether the level of pollution associated with such phenomena was of comparable intensity throughout the Greek world. Although the Spartans, as we have seen, prohibited the rearing of sickly and deformed infants, there is no evidence to suggest that they conducted any rite of purification intended to dispel the evil influence thought to be associated with deformity.

Birth omens and pollution: Roman

The extent to which the Romans interpreted birth omens as signs from the gods is demonstrated by the fact that '*monstrum*' is etymologically related to '*monere*' (to warn). Like earthquakes, rains of blood, sweating statues and meteors, all of which constituted violations of the normal workings of nature, monstrous births were a sign that the sacred *pax deorum* or 'covenant with the gods' had been broken. Prodigies of this kind were recorded on a yearly basis in the pontifical records and have

come down to us in the writings of Livy, who included them in his history of the years 249 to 12 BC. They are also reported in Julius Obsequens' *Book of Prodigies*, an epitomised version of the Livian material which was probably compiled in the fourth century AD. The following entry by Livy for the year 200 BC, which coincides with the outbreak of the Gallic Revolt, an event that sent shock waves through the Roman psyche, is typical of the genre (31.12.6-8):

Disgusting offspring of animals were reported in many places. Among the Sabine peoples one child was born of uncertain sex, and another sixteen-year old was discovered of indeterminate sex. At Frusino a lamb was born with a pig's head, at Sinuessa a pig with a man's head, and on common land at Lucania a colt with five feet. All these vile and monstrous creatures suggested that nature was confounding the species.³

Livy further tells us that 'the most abhorred of all portents' were the hermaphrodites, for whom distinctive rites of expiation were first introduced in 207 BC (27.11.4). The task of averting or expiating the evil omen which intersexuals and their like communicated principally devolved upon the Etruscan diviners known as *haruspices*, whom Cicero describes as 'most proficient in the interpretation of portents, including those which occur in the conception and birth of men and cattle' (*Div.* 1.93). Livy tells us that in the case of intersexuals the *haruspices* laid it down that these be 'banished from Roman territory, far from contact with her soil, and drowned in the sea' (27.37.6). The victims were placed alive in a sealed wooden box and cast into the sea. By decree of the pontiffs and under the supervision of the *decemviri*, ten officials invested with priestly authority, twenty-seven maidens then led a procession through Rome to the Aventine Hill singing a hymn to Juno Regina. The fact that intersexuals were exposed at sea and not outside the city walls, the customary dumping ground for more conventional human rejects, is a sure signal of the extremity of loathing which such disconcerting *Mischwesen* or boundary-crossers aroused. Of other major deformities, conjoined twins were usually cremated by the *haruspices* on the mainland before being cast into the sea, though different methods of disposal are also recorded (*Obseq.* 25). There is no evidence concerning the treatment of those who manifested lesser abnormalities, though their occurrence is also regularly recorded in the prodigy lists.

Not surprisingly, reports of monstrous births tended to proliferate at periods of intense social and political upheaval. The explanation for this,

³ It is important to note that in reporting such occurrences Livy does not necessarily commit himself to a belief that the 'religious' interpretation of such signs is valid. Rather he appears to reserve all judgement upon the matter. He gives attention to them primarily because they serve to articulate the public mood at the time of the events which he is describing.

as Cicero rightly detected, was the increased timidity and credulousness of the populace at such times. He writes (*Div.* 2.58):

Such phenomena, which in wartime appear to the fearful to be more numerous and greater, are hardly noted in peacetime. In addition, the reports are not only more readily believed in times of anxiety and danger, but also invented with greater impunity.

Even Livy, hardly the most penetrating of social analysts, observed, 'At the mention of one prodigy others were also reported, as usually happens' (27.37.2). It is revealing that some of the intersexuals were actually 'discovered' by the *haruspices*, perhaps as the result of an intensive search, as the passage from Livy concerning the fate of the sixteen-year-old Sabine indicates. The first report of an intersexual birth belongs to the dark years of the Second Punic War when Rome, having suffered a series of massive defeats, came within a hair's breadth of destruction at the hands of the Carthaginians. In the period from 209 to 92 BC some sixteen such births are recorded. By far the majority are dated to the years between 133-92 BC. The reports thus proliferate at the time of the Gracchan revolution, which witnessed civil violence in the capital on an unprecedented scale. They end just before the outbreak of the Social War, when the state once again came close to disintegration. It is tempting to conclude that the sexual disorderliness which intersexuals exemplified served as a particularly apt symbol for disorder in the body politic. This is certainly the impression we gain from Obsequens (65), who states that in 50 BC, the year before the outbreak of the Civil War, a foaling mule was reported to the authorities, signifying 'civil discord, the demise of decent folk, a change in the constitution, and Roman wives giving birth to monsters'.⁴

The ritual performed under the direction of the *haruspices* comes under the general heading of *procuratio prodigiorum*, being intended in the words of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*² (s.v.) to 'avert or expiate an evil omen by sacrifice'. Aversion is one thing, however. Expiation, quite another. Are we to suppose that the Romans regarded monstrosities as a sign that the gods, angry because of past offences, were now demanding ritual appeasement in order to avert reprisals? Or did they view them as portents of impending disaster which, because of their abhorrence, required expiation? They may have belatedly hoped to avert the catastrophe which the occurrence portended. Or perhaps they believed the monstrosity to be inherently evil and feared the contagion

⁴ The image of state and family divided against itself is also present in the interpretive symbolism associated with the birth of Siamese twins. Cf. Cic. *Div.* 1.121: 'If a girl is born with two heads (*biceps*), it portends sedition among the people and corruption and adultery in the home.' In other words, the monster's lack of physical differentiation symbolises the breakdown of social relations.

which it would bring in its wake. Or perhaps they simply 'confused' the monstrosity with the event which it portended. According to the differing perceptions of different social groups, prodigies might be interpreted as retrospective, i.e. pointing to a breakdown in the moral and natural order; prognostic, i.e. serving as a warning of what was to come; deterministic, i.e. containing the power to generate evil within the community; or symptomatic, i.e. being a concurrent part of the horrors which they demonstrate. Whatever the precise form which belief took, it is certain that the noting and eliminating of monstrous births at a moment of extreme danger performed the necessary social function of articulating and canalising public anxiety.

The decline in the use of human portents

After 92 BC Livy provides no further reports of intersexual births. At first sight this seems to suggest that they now ceased to perform their once vital public function, although their absence from the records may simply be due to the fact that the Roman state no longer saw its existence threatened with extinction (cf. 43.13.1). Diodorus Siculus, Livy's older contemporary, deplored the practice of burying intersexuals alive during the Social War in the early first century BC on the orders of the senate, describing them as people 'whose nature was the same as everyone else's and who are not monsters'. However, even he concurred with the traditional view that the birth of an intersexual is a portentous event, for he cites one such birth which occurred during the reign of Alexander Balas as portending the latter's death (32.10.2, 8). Half a century later, Pliny the Elder observed that 'hermaphrodites, who were formerly called *androgynoi* and regarded as portents, are now treated as pets' (NH 7.34).

Are we entitled to assume that the Roman people *en masse* ceased to regard hermaphroditic births as portents or merely that the latter were no longer being interpreted in this way by the Roman state? Leaving aside the vexed question of Pliny's reference group, it is tempting to take his testimony as evidence of a humane advance in social behaviour. Since the late Republican and early Imperial eras witnessed a dramatic decline in the use of all kinds of prodigies as portents, however, we can equally well argue that the Romans had merely found another inhumane, though less lethal, way to exploit this biologically interstitial group. In other words, this assimilation of intersexuals into the broad category of what was acceptably abnormal may have been part of a comprehensive change in religious attitude which was intended to reduce, if not eliminate altogether, the feeling of helplessness in the face of impending danger.⁵

⁵ A similar tendency is perhaps detectable in the Emperor Tiberius' refusal to interpret a disastrous flood in the Tiber as a prodigy, and his insistence instead that better flood control be imposed (Tac. *Ann.* 1.76).

Though we cannot know what motive prompted the change to which Pliny alludes, it may well have had the incidental consequence of generating a more humane outlook towards intersexuals. What appears incontestable, however, is that from the early Imperial period onwards abnormal births no longer served automatically as evidence of a breach in the *pax deorum*. Only exceptionally did they henceforth continue to perform their traditional function, as in AD 64 when, according to Tacitus, there occurred (*Ann.* 15.47):

a record number of lightning-flashes and a comet, which Nero invariably atoned for by the shedding of noble blood, and two-headed offspring, human or of other animals, which were thrown out in public or which came to light in sacrifices where it is the custom to burn pregnant victims.

Even as late as AD 112 Roman priests carried out the ritual killing of a dicephalic child whom they placed in a box and then threw into the River Tiber (Phlegon in *FGrH* 257 F36.25). Even so, the disposition to believe that human monstrosities were prodigies may well have persisted long after the compulsion to perform state-sponsored ceremonies had died out. Accordingly private acts of purification were probably conducted after the state had ceased to be officially involved.

Suggestive of the broad differences in attitude towards abnormal births which prevailed in the late first and early second century AD is Plutarch's account of a fictitious encounter between the tyrant Periander of Corinth, the philosopher Thales of Miletos, and a seer called Diokles (*Mor.* 149c-e). Greatly disturbed by a monstrous birth, Periander invited the two experts to inform him 'whether it was of no importance or whether it was a sign and portent (*teras*)'. The monstrosity in question, which was the offspring of a mare, possessed 'upper parts as far as the neck and the arms which were human in shape, although the rest of its body was that of a horse, while the sound of its crying was exactly like that of a newborn baby'. Thales, who in Plutarch's dialogue habitually mocks the pious Diokles, said to the seer, 'No doubt you are thinking of putting into effect some rite of purification and of giving work to the gods who avert evil in the belief that something terrible and mighty has taken place.' To which Diokles replied, 'Certainly. For this is a sign of civil discord and strife, and I fear that it may have consequences for marriage.' Whereupon Thales pronounced, 'You can do what Diokles urges in your own sweet time, Periander. My advice, however, is that either you should not employ young grooms or else you should provide them with wives.' In other words, Thales is suggesting that one of Periander's servants, for lack of any other sexual outlet, had impregnated his master's mare. Though the dramatic setting of the encounter is the sixth century BC, we need hardly doubt that the anecdote speaks to a contemporary audience who would be expected to identify with Thales' ration-

alistic explanation of monstrosity, notwithstanding the fact that it merely replaced one type of superstition with another.⁶

Conclusions

As was the case in relation to their respective attitudes towards congenitally deformed and disabled slaves, so in regard to the religious import which they attached to monstrous births, the Greeks and Romans differed profoundly. Whereas the Greeks tended to treat monstrous births as mere aberrations in the natural order, the Romans interpreted them as eminently suggestive of divine displeasure. Indeed few areas of human experience are more illustrative of the essential difference in religious outlook between the two cultures. Even in Roman society, however, we can detect a gradual diminution over time in the degree of alarm which monstrous births generated among the population, as is indicated by the declining interest which the religious authorities took to nullify their import.

It is probable that the religious odium attaching to the congenitally deformed among the Romans contributed significantly to the pain and discomfort of the latter's existence. It is unclear, however, whether minor afflictions of a congenital nature would have been attributed to the gods or whether only those exhibiting major terata would have been so stigmatised.

No ancient author sheds any light on the crucial question as to whether in Roman society the deformed were perceived to be evil in and of themselves or whether the evil which they testified to and in some sense symbolised was external to their deformity. It is clear that in the Greek world, however, which on the whole placed little credence in the doctrine of transmigration, congenitally deformed children would largely have been spared the additional humiliation and burden of being held responsible for their deformity, even though they may well have been encouraged to feel shame.⁷

⁶ It is doubtful whether much importance should be attached to statements in early Christian writers celebrating intersexuality as a spiritual ideal to which all those seeking salvation should aspire to attain. A striking example is Saying 22 of *The Gospel of St Thomas*, which states, 'When you make the male and the female one and the same ... then will you enter [the kingdom]' (Robinson 1978, 129). This evokes the prelapsarian world-picture so memorably described by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium* with its globular *androgynoi* (men-women) living in a state of paradisiacal bliss (see p. 173f.).

⁷ Cf. the following statement by a disabled English boy called David Smith (b. 1936), quoted by Humphries and Gordon (1992, 11): 'My grandma used to say that I'd been cursed and that I was being punished by God for what I'd done in a past life. That was why I was disabled she said, and when I'd served out the punishment everything would be all right.'

5

Deriding the Disabled

The first time an angel heard the Devil's laughter, he was horrified. It was in the middle of a feast with a lot of people around, and one after the other they joined in the Devil's laughter. It was terribly contagious. The angel was all too aware the laughter was aimed against God and the wonder of his works. He knew he had to act fast, but felt weak and defenceless. And unable to fabricate anything of his own, he simply turned his enemy's tactics against him. He opened his mouth and let out a wobbly, breathy sound in the upper reaches of his vocal register ... and endowed it with the opposite meaning ... There they stood, Devil and angel, face to face, mouths open, both making more or less the same sound, but each expressing himself in a unique timbre – absolute opposites ... People nowadays do not even realise that one and the same external phenomenon embraces two completely contradictory internal attitudes. There are two kinds of laughter, and we lack the words to distinguish them.

Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*
(Penguin Books 1981, 62)

The derision of the disabled is almost certainly a universal phenomenon, though likely to be more prominent in communities which lack a developed social conscience. In contemporary society, social conventions tend to prohibit, in public at least, all but the most inoffensive manifestations of what is commonly referred to as 'sick humour', though there can be little doubt that humour of this kind continues to operate below the surface, as the enduring popularity of jokes about 'spastics' demonstrates. The comic film actor and producer Mack Sennett once declared, 'The whacking of a fat lady's backside is the basis of all true comedy' (quoted by Morris 1993, 101). That statement may not be politically correct, but it contains a universal truth. The revolting monkey-woman who is identified as a common female type by the Archaic Greek poet Semonides, although she has no tempting backside to whack, being in the poet's phrase 'all legs', does none the less have a hideous face 'which invites laughter as she goes through the town' (7.73-6 *IEG*). Her appearance alone therefore makes her an object of derision. In the Old Testament, which is admittedly not a book to which one turns instinctively for comic relief, of the twenty-nine references to laughter, only two