

Physiognomy and Somatomancy

The Ways that Never Crossed

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The interrelation of magic and science is frequently discussed. Some argue that the history of science would be incomplete without an account of magic, whereas others say that science has absolutely nothing in common with magic: what was considered science in antiquity is still science, and the old superstitions maintain the same reputation as before.¹ Sometimes, the boundaries between the two were shaky – astronomy, for example, could not be neatly separated from astrology.² Yet the concepts of scientific astronomy and superstitious astrology was known only too well; after all, Ptolemy wrote his mostly astronomical *Almagest* and mostly astrological *Tetrabiblos* as two separate books.

Physiognomy, however, seems to be the trump ace against the argument of a concept's infinite consistency. It was conceived and

¹ For an account on the debate regarding this argument, see T. Barton, *Ancient Astrology* (London: Routledge, 1994), 5. See also G. Veltri ("On the Influence of 'Greek Wisdom': Theoretical and Empirical Sciences in Rabbinic Judaism," *JSQ* 5 [1998]: 300–317 at 308–12) for another facet of the same problem: the very concept of the empirical sciences was different in antiquity. This is especially noticeable in the fields of medicine and agriculture. Pliny, Columella, Dioscorides, and Marcellus Empiricus record "scientific" instructions that in modern times would be classified as sympathetic magic. Not the empirical and analytical basis of those instructions, but their purpose and usefulness, made them "scientific."

In general, a distinction between magic and science is a notorious problem that is far beyond the scope of the present paper. See, for example, a discussion in H. D. Betz, "Magic and Mystery in the Greek Magical Papyri," in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, ed. C. A. Faraone and D. Obbink, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 244–59; F. Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 96–117; and G. Veltri, "The Figure of the Magician in Rabbinical Judaism: From Empirical Science to Theology," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 26 (2002): 187–204.

² See Veltri, "On the Influence of Greek Wisdom," 313–16, who, quoting *y. Shabbat* 6:10, demonstrates that an astrologist (*'ystrologos*) could be also considered a scientist, although in the quoted passage his "astrological science" turned out to be unreliable.

practiced as a science of inquiring “into the character and dispositions of men by an inference drawn from their facial appearance and expression, and from the form and bearing of their whole body.”³ The seemingly empirical backbone of the discipline warranted its reliability; therefore, physiognomy remained in the realm of science until quite recently, until it was rid of superstition and prejudice, and merged with medical diagnosis. Booths of chiromancers now stand as scattered remnants of a once flourishing discipline.

In the present paper I shall attempt to demonstrate that this picture is partially false, and the label “physiognomy” must be applied with more caution and discrimination, since the modern chiromancer is an heir to quite an idiosyncratic inheritance that never has been a science, while the *science* of physiognomy had worked its many days out, yet never assimilated with magic. The longevity and distinctness of physiognomy were, in fact, the result of a certain presumption on account of one *fundamental dilemma*.

I

Tradition attributed the origin of physiognomy to Pythagoras,⁴ although it was Phaedo of Elis whose dialogue about the reputed physiognomist Zapyros is the earliest mention of the discipline. Once, business itinerary had brought Zapyros to Athens, where he was asked to apply his skills, and not just to anyone but to Socrates himself. Obviously, Zapyros did not know Pythia’s judgment on Socrates – proclaiming him the wisest among the living⁵ – therefore, the physiognomist, having scrutinized the philosopher, decided that he was a fool and a womanizer. Zapyros found himself in a mire – Alcibiades was laughing, but not Socrates: “That is who I am,” he said, “or rather, who I would have been if not for the practice of philosophy.”⁶ Socrates thus agrees that a person’s innate

³ Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 1.9: “Mores naturasque hominum coniectatione quadam de oris et vultus ingenio deque totius corporis filo atque habitu sciscitari.”

⁴ Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium* 1.2; Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 13.

⁵ Plato, *Apologia* 21a.

⁶ This is a paraphrase of the Socrates’ reply. See the text of Phaedo’s fragments 6, 8, 10, 11 in L. Rossetti, “Socratica in Fedone di Elide,” *Studi urbinati*, ser. B, 47 (1973): 364–81; and the discussion in G. Boys-Stones, “Phaedo of Elis and Plato on the Soul,” *Phronesis* 49 (2004): 1–23; and Boys-Stones, “Physiognomy and Ancient Psychological Theory,” in *Seeing the face, Seeing the Soul: Polemon’s Physiognomy from Classical Antiquity to Medieval Islam*, ed. S. Swain (Oxford: University Press, 2007), 22–33.

character determines desire and has bodily imprints, and that from these imprints it can be read. Although the independent faculty of reason is capable of defeating desire and controlling innate character, the bond between the innate character and the body cannot be dissolved, for these two are one; and so should it remain for life. How was this bond formed? Was it the quality of the soul that dictated the body accepting a certain appearance? Or did the shapes of the body also shape the qualities of the soul? Phaedo's solution of this *fundamental dilemma* is not preserved.

Antisthenes (446–466 BCE) was credited as the author of the first physiognomic treatise, *On Physiognomy of the Sophists* (Περὶ τῶν σοφιστῶν φυσιογνωμονικός);⁷ Aristotle discussed the theory of physiognomy in the *Prior Analytics* (2.27, 70b7–32)⁸ and in the *History of Animals* (1.6, 491a14–23; 1.8–11);⁹ then, two of his students produced the first manuals for physiognomic analysts, eventually united in one composition known as Pseudo-Aristotle's *Physiognomy* (Φυσιογνωμονικά).¹⁰ Two closely related principles govern Aristotelian theory: epiphenomenalism and teleology, the first meaning that the physical state of the body defines its mental state,¹¹ and the second

⁷ Listed in Diogenes Laertius 6.16.

⁸ See the translation and the discussion in Boys-Stones, “Physiognomy,” 66–75.

⁹ In 1.6, Aristotle identifies and discusses the differences between the body parts of animals and then of humans, and 1.8–11, including discussion of the human face.

¹⁰ See R. Foerster, *Scriptores physiognomonici Graeci et Latini*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: B. G. Teubneri, 1893); S. Vogt, ed., *Aristoteles, Physiognomonica: Übersetzt und kommentiert* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999). Boys-Stones (“Physiognomy,” 64–65) convincingly argues that *Physiognomy* exhibits the differences in style and methodology pointing to two authors, probably the students of Aristotle attending the same lectures. See also the discussion on this topic in V. Rose, *De Aristotelis librorum ordine et auctoritate commentatio* (Berolini: G. Reimeri, 1854); and R. Foerster, “De Aristotelis quae feruntur physiognomicorum indole ac condicione,” in *Philologische Abhandlungen Martin Hertz zum siebzigsten Geburtstag von ehemaligen Schülern dargebracht* (Berlin: W. Hertz, 1888), 283–303 at 285–90.

¹¹ Pseudo-Aristotle, *Physiognomonica* 805a1–3: Ὅτι αἱ διάνοιαι ἔπονται τοῖς σώμασι, καὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν αὐταὶ καθ' ἑαυτὰς ἀπαθεῖς οὐσαι τῶν τοῦ σώματος κινήσεων τοῦτο δὲ δῆλον πάνν γίνεται. “It indeed becomes clear ... that the mental faculties follow the body, and in themselves are not unaffected by the changes in the body.” Also 11–14: οὐδὲν γὰρ πώποτε ζῶον γεγένηται τοιοῦτον ὃ τὸ εἶδος ἔσχευ ἐτέρου ζῶου, τὴν δὲ διάνοιαν ἄλλου, ἀλλ' αἰ τοῦ αὐτοῦ τό τε σῶμα καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν, ὥστε ἀναγκαῖον ἔπεσθαι τῷ τοιῷδε σώματι τοιάνδε διάνοιαν. “For no living creature was ever so born that it would have had an appearance of one animal and the mental faculties of another, but always both body and soul of one and the same, because a certain disposition should follow a certain body.” The modern theory of epiphenomenalism would add: “... whereas the mental state has no effect upon physical events.” For the Aristotelian school (*Physiognomy* 808b11–15), however, the interaction of body and soul was to

meaning that specific functions, vital for the species' survival, define the physical state and appearance of the species. For example, both eyes of predators (e.g., a lion) are positioned in front of the face because they need to pursue their victims, while their victims (e.g., an antelope) have one eye on each side of their head because they need a broader range of sight to notice and evade predators. Consequently, the species with the "enface" eyes are courageous and aggressive, and those with the "side" eyes are timid and cautious. An important question then arises: what does define the appearance of an *individuum* within the species and make him unique? Why, for example, should the eyes of an *individuum* have a specific color – an attribute inexplicable by the eye's function?¹² The process of an *individuum*'s generation provides the answer: the father-form is responsible for shaping the body in accordance with its vital function – in the case of the lion, for putting its eyes in front – but the final product also depends upon the mother-matter providing the material for the shaping. That is why the lion's eyes are yellowish – only the yellow was available.¹³ Thus, the Peripatetic school not only has integrated the soul into the body, but also has made the soul of an *individuum* posterior to the predetermined bodily shape.¹⁴ It therefore gave *carte blanche* to the pursuance of the empirical science of physiognomy.

More physiognomic manuals ensued. The book of the physician Loxus (323–350 BCE) is not preserved;¹⁵ it was used, however, by an anonymous author of the fifth century in his own work on physiognomy. According to him, Loxus placed the soul's "seat" in the blood, which then provides the body with a certain form and color.¹⁶ Somewhat resembling

some extent *possible* (δοκεῖ δέ μοι, and so forth), since in a living body, not only the body may affect the soul, but also the soul may affect the body, that is, συμπαθεῖν ἀλλήλοις.

¹² See Aristotle, *De generatione animalium* 5.1, 778a30–35:

¹³ See a discussion in Boys-Stones, "Physiognomy," 51–52.

¹⁴ In this argument, Ockham's razor (imposed by the limitations of the current paper) shaves indeed too close. The meaning of the Aristotelian definition of the soul as "the form of a natural body having a potential for life" (*De anima* 2.1, 412a11–21) is intensively debated. In short, the primal soul (the form) is the first principle/actuality (ἐντελέχεια) without qualifications, and the starting point of changes that would eventually result (the form plus the matter) in the creation of the living body and the soul with qualifications. See V. Caston, "Epiphenomenalisms, Ancient and Modern," *Philosophical Review* 106 (1997): 309–54; and Boys-Stones, "Physiognomy," 47–53.

¹⁵ See G. Misener, "Loxus: Physician and Physiognomist," *Classical Philology* 18 (1923): 1–22.

¹⁶ Anon. Lat. 12: "... quod sanguis, in quo sedem Loxus animae esse constituit, si quidem multus sit, corpori quidem praebebat augmentum et ruborem."

the modern concept of the DNA, the soul is integrated into the material substance which in its turn is responsible for the bodily appearance. Whether the soul is “enslaved” by blood or, despite Aristotelian theories, appears to define its qualities, is not entirely clear.

Also unclear is the cause of the long lapse between the manual of Loxus and the next known book on physiognomy written more than four hundred years later by Polemon of Laodicea (88–144 CE).¹⁷ This work was translated into Syriac, and then, in the middle of the ninth century, from Syriac into Arabic, of which the original is lost; but two recensions from no later than the mid-tenth century have survived in a fourteenth-century manuscript.¹⁸ Additionally, a fourth-century author, Adamanthius, produced an abridged Greek version of Polemon’s *Physiognomy*,¹⁹ and in about the same period an anonymous author (Anonymus Latinus) combined it in his book with the *Physiognomies* of Loxus and Pseudo-Aristotle. A representative of the next generation following Polemon, Galen, advanced the theories of Aristotle and, as it seems, Loxus, regarding the location of the soul’s faculties in the blood, which in his works was replaced with the combination of four humors shaping and governing human body. The four humors then were the immediate source of impact on both the soul and the body, and a mediator between them. In their turn, however, the four humors were also subject to the external influence of the “temperament of the locality.”²⁰

¹⁷ See the biography of Polemon in Philostratus, *Vitae Sophistarum* 1.25 (237 CE); and Polemon’s *Physiognomy* (MS Leiden, ch. 1, A12; R. Hoyland, trans., “A New Edition and Translation of the Leiden Polemon,” in *Seeing the Face*, 329–464 at 361–65). The Istanbul manuscript of Polemon’s *Physiognomy* offers a legend of Polemon’s physiognomic analysis of Hippocrates, quite similar to the story of Phaedo and Socrates; here Polemon’s judgment is as follows (fol. 36r): “the signs of lust in you are manifest, and a desire for women dominates you. That you reject this by means of your intellect is possible” (A. Ghersetti, trans., “The Istanbul Polemon (TK Recension): Edition and Translation of the Introduction,” in *Seeing the Face*, 465–485 at 473). See also H. Jüttner, “De Polemonis rhetoric vita, operibus, arte,” *Breslauer philologische Abhandlungen* 8 (1898): 1–116; C. J. Cadoux, *Ancient Smyrna, a History of the City from the Earliest Times to 324 AD* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1938); G. W. Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), app. 2, 120–23; and S. Swain, “Polemon’s *Physiognomy*,” in *Seeing the Face*, 125–201 at 156–76.

¹⁸ MS Leiden, first published in Foerster’s *Scriptores physiognomonici*; for the manuscript tradition history, see Swain, “Polemon’s *Physiognomy*,” 176ff.

¹⁹ S. Foullet, “Adamantios” in *Dictionnaire des philosophes antiques*, ed. R. Goulet, 3 vols. (Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1989), 1:51–53.

²⁰ See Galen, *Quod animi mores* 15.12–15: “Aristotle too believes that the soul’s faculties depend upon the mixture of the mother’s blood from which, in his opinion, our blood derives” (Galen, *Scripta minora*, ed. Ioannes Marquardt et al., 3 vols. [Leipzig: Teubner, 1891], 2:32–79; Galen, *Selected Works: Translated with an Introduction and*

Knowledge of the locality was therefore important; and not only for a physician treating his patient but as well for a manager of an estate buying a slave. The Οἰκονομικός of Bryson seems to have given some advice on how to physiognomize slaves,²¹ and a whole section in the lost work of Masonius Rufus was dedicated to explaining the connection between the slaves' ethnicity and their appearance and character.²²

The general principle of the soul's dependence upon the body, which in its turn was shaped in accordance with certain conditions of the material world, paved the road for the standard patterns of reasoning in the science of physiognomy. Apart from the eyes' color, which *sometimes* remains an enigma, the appearance may be always associated with a stereotype – animal, ethnic, and gender.²³ A skilled physiognomist had to evaluate the person's resemblance to one or several animal forms, from elephant to ant.²⁴ Each of these animal species is ascribed dominant traits of character which become applicable to a person whose appearance,

Notes, trans. P. N. Singer [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997]). See R. J. Hankinson, "Galen's Anatomy of the Soul," *Phronesis* 36 (1991): 197–233; T. Tieleman, *Galen and Chrysippus on the Soul: Argument and Refutation in the De placitis, Books II–III* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); J. Barnes and J. Jouanna, eds., *Galien et la philosophie: huit exposés suivis de discussions* (Genève: Fondation Hardt, 2003). For external influence, see, e.g., Galen, *Quod animi mores* 64.19–65.9, a comment on Plato's *Timaeus* 24c: people "are helped or harmed where intelligence is concerned by the temperament of the locality, even when the body is not sick."

²¹ Bryson survived in the Arabic translation that only advises one to "have a good look at slaves" at the time of purchase, but does not specify where to look and what to seek. See M. Plessner, *Der OIKONOMIKOS des Neupythagoreers "Bryson" und sein Einfluss auf die islamische Wissenschaft* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1928). However, *Nasirean Ethics*, written in Persian by Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (d. 1274) under Bryson's influence, does feature actual physiognomic instructions with ethnic stereotyping in a section for the buyers of slaves. See G. M. Wickens, *The Nasirean Ethics by Nasir al-Din Tusi* (London: Allen & Unwin: 1964). See also *Economics of Bar Hebraeus*: M. Zonta, *Fonti greche e orientali dell'economia di Bar-Hebraeus nell'opera "la crema della scienza"* (Naples: Istituto orientale, 1992), 100–1.

²² Referred to by Rhazes. See M. Ullmann, *Die Medizin im Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 74.

²³ For two of these, see Polemon's methodology in *Physiognomy*, ch. 1, B2 (and MS Istanbul 3207 fols. 41r–42v): "When you look at a man, compare him and think about him: do you see that he is masculine or feminine? In addition to that, a similarity to which animal do you see dominant in him, and how do the colors, and the limbs, and their movement indicate that? Combine these signs with the signs of the eye and then judge according to what you see of this" (Hoyland, "New Edition," 383).

²⁴ See a list in MS Leiden, ch. 2 (and MS Istanbul 3207 fols. 42v–43v): "you will not find anyone who does not have a similarity to an animal, and a nature like one of these I once saw a man who was similar to a turtle" (trans. Hoyland, "New Edition," 385–391).

voice, and limb movements arguably resemble those species.²⁵ The authors of this theory, Aristotle and his students, also addressed its obvious logical flaw:²⁶ the lion does not have to be only brave – it could also be generous – and it certainly has more than one bodily trait, and these traits also appear in other animals with quite a different character. How should we know, then, that its big extremities, for example, are the signs of courage, and its broad forehead could be the sign of generosity? Or, if asses are indeed “known” for both sexual excitability and insolence, why then does their “bushy tail” come to signify the first and not the second? This problem was remedied by comparison between species: if the lion with big extremities and a broad forehead is both generous and courageous, and the panther with big extremities and a narrow forehead is courageous and treacherous, then, big extremities signify courage, a broad forehead signifies generosity, and a narrow forehead stands for treachery. Moreover, if it would be observed that greediness should inevitably accompany treachery, a narrow-foreheaded *individuum* would be judged both greedy and treacherous.²⁷

The animal stereotyping predetermines the gender one. Therefore the masculine-looking lion having “a large head, overhanging eyebrows, hollow and bluish-black eyes, a spacious jaw and mouth,”²⁸ and who is “courageous, mighty, irascible, patient, modest, generous, ambitious, and perfidious”²⁹ becomes the paragon of masculinity; whereas the feminine-looking leopard with “her” “small head ... thin neck, large buttocks, a sleek body, and soft hair,” and who is “impudent, immoral, spiteful,

²⁵ On the common moral and psychological traits characteristic for both humans and animals, see Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* 3.2, 1111b12; *Historia Animalium* 8.1, 588a16–26, 9.1, 609a11–17. See G. E. R. Lloyd, *Science, Folklore and Ideology: Studies in the Life Sciences of Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 24–26; and Boys-Stones, “Physiognomy,” 49.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Analytica Priora* 2.27, 70b7–32; for an example regarding a lion and its bravery, see 70b14–12.

²⁷ For this idea, see Pseudo-Aristotle, *Physiognomonica* 807a3–10. A far more serious problem, however, was neglected: the arbitrariness of judgment on account of the species’ appearance and “character.” This arbitrariness of judgment is criticized in the later period by Sextus Empiricus, yet with no implication for the theory of physiognomy: “They say that no criterion is common to mankind, but that common names are assigned to the objects. For all people call something white or sweet in common but in fact they do not have anything in common that is white or sweet” (*Adversus mathematicos* 7.195–96; for this translation and a discussion see V. Tsouna, “Doubts about Other Minds and the Science of Physiognomics,” *Classical Quarterly* 48 [1998]: 175–86).

²⁸ TK 3207 fols. 43v.2–44r.13 (Hoyland, “New Edition,” 395).

²⁹ TK 3207 fol. 42v.4ff. (Hoyland, “New Edition,” 385).

foolish, a lover of killing and coercion, peaceable to whoever makes peace with it, disdainful, haughty, neither tame nor tamed,” expresses the femininity.³⁰

The different climate zones brought about the different ethnic types with fixed physique responsible for their vices and virtues. This idea, first presented in the Hippocratic treatise *Airs, Waters, Places*, was given a nationalistic coloring in Aristotle’s *Politica* (1327b): the people from the cold countries are “full of spirit” but deficient in intelligence, therefore they can neither govern the others nor be governed; the people of the warm countries (Asia), on the other hand, are intelligent but cowards, which makes them a society of masters and slaves. The Greeks, fortunately, are in the middle, and therefore, they combine both courage and skill.³¹ The manuals of physiognomy adapt environmental determinism and advance it, frequently disagreeing with a simple division by Aristotle: “you can come across the corrupting sign,” wrote Polemon, “that has appeared among the nations and corrupted them, and ... the good sign, which ... made them good.”³² Generally speaking, the people of the North are tall, white, red-haired, and blue-eyed; they have thick ankles and large bellies bespeaking forgetfulness, sincerity, and bad-memory. The people of the South and the East have curly black hair, thin heels, and dusky eyes; on account of this, they are clever and tolerant, but also desirous, thieves, and liars. Some of the folks inhabiting North, East and South exhibit specific features: Slavs and, surprisingly, Egyptians do not have “the virtue of knowledge and understanding”; Phoenicians and Cilicians are “desirous of joy and well-being”; Scythians are “treacherous and immoral.”³³ Anonymus Latinus adds timidity to the list of Egyptian

³⁰ This, certainly, is only the tip of the iceberg of the gender prejudice masked by empiricism. Adamantius is much more explicit in condemning the “womanly” traits: “Masculine parts are better than female. Since for the most part what is masculine is “noble, without deceit, spirited,” and so forth; “what is female, on the other hand, is ignoble,” and so forth (I. Repath, trans., “The *Physiognomy* of Adamantius the Sophist,” in *Seeing the Face*, 519). A4: “Those ... are womanly in luxury and sex, but are daring and shameless and rejoice in villainy, treachery, and faithlessness; for these things also belong to women” (καὶ γὰρ ταῦτα γυναικεῖα; Repath, “*Physiognomy* of Adamantius,” 497). The Anonymus Latinus (§7, Repath, trans., “Anonymus Latinus, *Book of Physiognomy*,” in *Seeing the Face*, 560–61) adds, with no clear reason, that the body’s left part is feminine, and the right is masculine.

³¹ See a discussion in B. Isaac, “Proto-Racism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity,” *World Archaeology* 38 (2006): 32–47. See also Plato, *Respublica* 435c–436a: love of money is likely to be found in Phoenicians and Egyptians, “high spirit” in Thracians and Scythians, and the love of knowledge in Greeks.

³² Ch. 51, B31 (Hoyland, “New Edition,” 443).

³³ Ch. 34, B31; ch. 48, B37 (Hoyland, “New Edition,” 425, 437)

vices, and greediness as a vice of the Syrian (§14). Two rare types of hair are noted separately: white hair of Germans, which is “difficult to interpret” (§14), and “ugly red,” which is the worst – the hair of “pure animals.”³⁴ As to the West, the close neighbourhood sometimes defies the stereotyping. Therefore, Polemon only notices “a great difference among” the Western people, the best of whom are certainly the pureblood Greeks.³⁵ Their skin is white mixed with red, their hair is brown, “with some curliness and waviness”; they have pointed noses, and bluish-black eyes.

Thus, the task of the physiognomist is to locate signifiers characteristic of some species and ethnicity in a person’s appearance and then, perhaps, to check the manual for the meaning of these signifiers. Contrary to the common opinion, the physiognomist did not undertake to predict the future.³⁶ All stories told by Polemon in chapters 68–70 indicate a different skill. In Perge at Pamphilia (ch. 68), Polemon had met a woman “upon whom a sign of great evil *had just descended*” – her nostrils “had darkened and were troubled,” the eyes had become green and were wide-open. At this moment, someone approached that woman and informed her that her only daughter had fallen into the well and drowned. Another story is told of a man in Calydna (ch. 70), who just learned that his son had most likely drowned in a shipwreck. The man then broke down in tears, but Polemon was not persuaded: from the smoothness of the man’s skin and the calmness of his eyes Polemon learned that the man was in fact spared the disaster he was lamenting for. And indeed, after a short time the original report of the shipwreck was disproved. Clearly, Polemon was able to see the true state of affairs communicated to the involved persons before they perceived it, and even if they perceived it wrongly. His mysterious ability is explicable in view of the contemporary theories about the irrational faculties of the soul-mind and dreams. Denying the godsend divination, yet trying to explain the revelation in dreams, Democritus and Plato maintained the opinion that events in the physical world can be communicated to our “soul,” bypassing reason, which is most likely to happen when reason is

³⁴ Polemon, ch. 48, B37 (Hoyland, “New Edition,” 437); in Adamanthius, “unmixed (ἄκρατος) red.”

³⁵ Ch. 35, B32 (Hoyland, “New Edition,” 427).

³⁶ See e.g., S. Swain “Introduction,” in *Seeing the Face*, 11–12. This understandable confusion is rooted in ancient sources; Anon. Lat. §133: “Polemon and Loxus bring forth this doctrine to such an extent as to prove that it is capable of predicting some future events” (Usque adeo autem Polemon et Loxus doctrinam hanc proferunt, ut etiam futurorum quaedam praedicere eam conferment; Latin text in Repath, “Anonymus Latinus, *Book of Physiognomy*,” 634).

sleeping.³⁷ Democritus³⁸ argued that any physical object emits images of itself, which can travel at virtually unlimited distance, depending on the density of the air. That is how people, on a clear summer night, can see a ship in their dreams, which only tomorrow shall make port in their city. The technique of the revelation was a bit different for Plato. The ordinary vision is provided not by the light from an outside object, but by the inner, “pure fire” of the eyes flying all the way down to the external objects and back again. At night the “fire” is unable to leave, and therefore strikes inward, penetrating the irrational soul, which for physiognomist would be the innate nature, inseparable from the person’s appearance. Consequently, if the innate nature (despite the reason’s wakefulness and ignorance) “knows” the truth, then why would a skilled physiognomist not? We remain, therefore, in the realm of the rigid materialism of its time, all stemming from the Peripatetic concept of the body-bound soul.

In reference to the *fundamental dilemma* above, what did a different presumption produce? The concept of soul in Plato’s works is the subject of vehement discussions, and trying to harmonize this concept is far beyond the scope of the present paper. A few uncontroversial principles, however, can be stated. The embodied soul is tripartite, with reason as its integral³⁹ but autonomous (in terms of functioning) part.⁴⁰ Even the irrational part of the soul, planted “in the parts midway between the

³⁷ Although in *Charmides* and *Crito*, Plato speaks in favor of the divine origin of dreams, he offers the naturalistic explanation in *Timaeus* 71e ff. Aristotle denied any possibility of divination by dreams, except for self-fulfilling prophecy, coincidence, and the premonition of an illness (see his *De somno et vigilia*, *De insomniis*, *De divinatione per somnum*).

³⁸ Plutarch, *Quaestiones convivales* 8.10.2 [735a ff.]: φησιν Δημόκριτος ἐγκαταβυσσοῦσθαι τὰ εἶδωλα διὰ τῶν πόρων εἰς τὰ σώματα καὶ ποιεῖν τὰς κατὰ τὸν ὕπνον ὥσεις ἐπαναφερόμενα· φοιτᾶν δὲ ταῦτα πανταχόθεν ἀπιόντα καὶ σκευῶν καὶ ἱματίων καὶ φυτῶν, μάλιστα δὲ ζώων ὑπὸ σάλου πολλοῦ καὶ θερμότητος – “Democritus said that the images penetrate bodies through their pores and when they come up again cause people to see the likeness [of the images] in their sleep; they come from things of every kind, artifact, clothes, plants, but especially from animals, because of their quantity of motion and heat.”

³⁹ Plato, *Respublica* 435e ff. Here starts the long argument about the functioning of the tripartite soul: can the soul (mind) be subdivided into the independent faculties each governing specific activities? (See also Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* 1102a31).

⁴⁰ Plato, *Theaetetus* 185d–e: answering the question about the bodily organs through which the soul perceives the abstract ideas: μοι δοκεῖ [τὴν ἀρχὴν οὐδ’ εἶναι] τοιοῦτον οὐδὲν τοῦτοις ὄργανον ἴδιον ὥσπερ ἐκείνοις, ἀλλ’ αὐτὴ δι’ αὐτῆς ἡ ψυχὴ τὰ κοινὰ μοι φαίνεται περὶ πάντων ἐπισκοπεῖν – “It seems to me that there is no such separate organ for these [objects], as there is for those others, but it appears to me that the soul grasps by itself what all things have in common.”

midriff and the boundary at the navel [and] fashioning as it were a manger in all this region for the feeding of the body” (70e), possesses a certain degree of independence, thanks to the guarding function of the liver, which itself bears the imprint of the controlling intellect (71c ff.) and answers to its command. If not for this independence, the soul would perish with the body’s death just as the music stops when the lyre’s strings rupture.⁴¹ And in the terms of priority, as the World-Soul is the first principle – the “self-moving” originator of the universe⁴² – so the human soul is anterior to the body, yet impaired by it. In any case, if a person exhibits a likeness to an animal, it is because his soul was tainted with the vices of that animal, and therefore incarnated in its form.⁴³ For (Neo-)Platonists, the reverse dynamics would be unthinkable.

“Galen would say,” criticizes Proclus, “that the powers of the soul follow the composition of the body, and the soul is incogitant and fluctuating in this humorous, fluctuating, and ever-changing being, which then undertakes to establish the harmony, and substitutes reasoning. But how can we agree with it? For the soul, which is immortal and prior to the body, cannot be justly considered intelligent through the body.”⁴⁴

It follows that the Platonic ideas could neither provide support to the patterns of physiognomic reasoning, such as discussed above, nor produce an alternative consistent with principles of the empirical science.⁴⁵

It is, then, remarkable (and suspicious) that the Platonic premise – the *fully-formed and independent* soul has the shaping role, while the body is only the signifier of the soul’s qualities – did not bother Jewish “physiognomists.” How the soul was believed to accomplish its role

⁴¹ For this comparison, see Plato, *Phaedo* 86.

⁴² E.g., Plato, *Leges* 895e–896a: ὃ δὴ ψυχὴ τοῦνομα, τίς τούτου λόγος; ἔχομεν ἄλλον πλὴν τὸν νυνδὴ ῥηθέντα, τὴν δυναμένην αὐτὴν αὐτὴν κινεῖν κίνησιν – “What would then be the definition of the [object] named ‘soul?’ Anything other than what was said now – ‘the motion able to move itself?’”

⁴³ Plato, *Phaedo* 81e: ἐνδοῦνται δέ, ὥσπερ εἰκός, εἰς τοιαῦτα ἦθη ὅποῦ ἄττ’ ἂν καὶ μεμελετηκυῖαι τύχωσιν ἐν τῷ βίῳ – “And they [souls] are embodied, which is likely, into the natures of a sort corresponding to their behavior in the former life.” Then follows an explanation: drunkards and gluttons are likely to become asses.

⁴⁴ Proclus, *In Platonis Timaeum commentarii* 3.349.21–30: φαίη ἂν ὁ Γαληνός· ταῖς τοῦ σώματος κράσεσιν ἔπονται τῆς ψυχῆς αἱ δυνάμεις, καὶ ὕγρου μὲν ὄντος καὶ ἀστάτου καὶ παντοίως ῥέοντος ἄνους καὶ ἄστατος ἡ ψυχὴ, καθισταμένου δὲ εἰς συμμετρίαν κατευθύνεται καὶ ἔμφρων γίνεται. καὶ πῶς ταῦτα συγχωρήσομεν; τὴν γὰρ ἀθάνατον ψυχὴν καὶ πρὸ τοῦ σώματος οὔσαν οὐ θέμις διὰ τὸ σῶμα νοεράν ποιεῖν.

⁴⁵ That is, when phenomena of the material world are explained by other phenomena of the material world.

remains a topic to be looked into, but it is already clear that this “anti-scientific” approach had to produce peculiar results, making those who pretended to be observing nature to look, actually, beyond it, and to turn the science of physiognomy into the art of *somatomancy*.

II

The earliest fully preserved Jewish somatomantic instructions are found in *Zohar* 2:71a–78b, *Zohar Hadash* 35b–37c, and a roughly contemporaneous adaptation of the *Secretum Secretorum*;⁴⁶ all treatises of the preceding period are fragmentary. Namely, there are eight very short fragments among the Dead Sea Scrolls (4Q186),⁴⁷ a few published

⁴⁶ Gaster reports the four earliest manuscripts: Brit. Mus. Or. 2396 (year 1382; Margaliouth catalogue no. 867; here attributed to Aristotle), MSS Ox. 1436 and 2386, and Cod. Mun. 342. Edited in M. Gaster, “The Hebrew Version of the *Secretum Secretorum*, a Mediaeval Treatise Ascribed to Aristotle,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1907): 879–912. The English translation was published by Gaster in “The Hebrew Version of the “*Secretum Secretorum*,” a Mediaeval Treatise Ascribed to Aristotle, II: Translation,” *JRAS* (1908): 111–162; and Gaster, *Studies and Texts in Folklore, Magic, Medieval Romance, Hebrew Apocrypha and Samaritan Archaeology*, 3 vols. [London: Maggs Bross, 1925–1928], 2:743–827 (on physiognomy: book 11.80–106, pp. 799–803).

⁴⁷ Fragments 1.1–4; 2.1–2; 3; and 4; each from three to nine lines only (perhaps also 4Q561). See M. Popović, “4Q186: Zodiacal Physiognomy: A Full Edition,” in *The Mermaid and the Partridge: Essays from the Copenhagen Conference [June 2009]*, ed. G. J. Brooke and J. Hogenhaven (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 221–58; Popović, *Reading the Human Body: Physiognomics and Astrology in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Hellenistic–Early Roman Period Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007). Other texts from Qumran were also drawn into the discussion of Jewish physiognomy: 4Q434–438 (perhaps five different copies of the same text), and 4Q439 – benedictions mentioning the body parts associated with the pious qualities of God’s people (see G. J. Brooke, “Body Parts in *Barkhi Nafshi* and the Qualifications for Membership of the Worshipping Community,” in *Sapiential, Liturgical and Poetical Texts from Qumran: Proceedings of the Third Meeting of the International Organization for Qumran Studies, Oslo 1998*, ed. D. K. Falk et al. [Leiden: Brill, 2000], 79–94) and 4Q534 with only a few bodily signifiers preserved – all concerning the position and form of moles on the body of God’s protagonist, whose lengthy description then follows. See J. R. Davila, “4QMess ar (4Q534) and Merkavah Mysticism,” *DSD* 5 (1998): 367–81. Astrological aspect of these and other texts from Qumran is discussed by R. Leicht, *Astrologumena Judaica. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der astrologischen Literatur der Juden* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 17–28, esp. 24–28.

fragments from the Cairo Genizah (T.-S. K 21.95L,⁴⁸ T.-S. K 21:88 fols. 1r–2v,⁴⁹ Oxford 240 fols. 165r–166v,⁵⁰ T.-S. NS 252:2 fols. 3r–3v), and several manuscripts from elsewhere.⁵¹

The introductory part in T.-S. K 21.95L describes the process of the generation of humans, and validates, in its way, the instructions which follow. The treatise combines the plot of 3 Enoch with a somatomantic manual. Its title, *A Good Omen* (2r.1) indicates that the manual initially circulated as a separate work, and at some point was dressed up in the context of 3 Enoch.⁵² R. Yishmael, reaching the Seventh Palace, asks God to spare him from annihilation by angels and guardians (2r.2–8). God commands his Seraphim, Ophanim, and Cherubim to cover their faces and to comfort R. Yishmael (2r.9–13). Soon R. Yishmael was allowed to approach the “Abode of the Shekhina” (2r.17) and to see the souls that were not yet embodied (2r.20–2v.2). The passage from Genesis 5:1, “This is the book of the generation of men”⁵³ (2v.3) signals the beginning of a

⁴⁸ Published in P. Schäfer, “Ein neues Fragment zur Metoposkopie und Chiromantik,” in *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot Studien*, ed. Schäfer; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988), 84–95.

⁴⁹ Published in I. Gruenwald, “Further Jewish Physiognomic and Chiromantic Fragments” [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 40 (1970–1971): 301–19 at 306–17; see also Leicht, *Astrologumena Judaica*, 102–3.

⁵⁰ This somatomantic fragment, published in G. Scholem as *The Book of Chiromancy by an Indian Sage* (see “Physiognomy and Chiromancy,” in *Sepher Assaf* [*Festschrift for Simha Assaf*; Hebrew], ed. U. Cassuto [Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1953], 459–95) is partially parallel to T.-S. NS 252:2 (published in Gruenwald, “Further Jewish Physiognomic and Chiromantic Fragments,” 317–19) and to T.-S. K 1.84 fols. 1r–2v (forthcoming in the fourth volume of the *Magische Texte aus der Kairoer Geniza*).

⁵¹ Four manuscripts (including two thirteenth-century Geniza fragments) were used by Scholem for his edition and translation of *The Physiognomy of Rabbi Ishmael*: MS Roma Cat. (Biblioteca Casanatense) 3152 (thirteenth century; see G. Sacerdote, “Catalogo dei codici ebraici della Biblioteca Casanatense,” in *Cataloghi dei codici Orientali di alcune Biblioteche d’Italia* [Firenze: Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 1878], 475–665), JNUL 577.4.103 (thirteenth century; the best preserved of the four), MS Schoken 13161 (Kab. 14; sixteenth century), and MS Brit. Lib. 27052 (sixteenth century; G. Margoliouth, *Catalogue of the Hebrew & Samaritan Manuscripts in the British Museum*, [London: British Museum, 1905], no. 822). See G. Scholem, “Ein Fragment zur Physiognomik und Chiromantik aus der Tradition der spätantiken jüdischen Esoterik,” in *Liber Amicorum: Studies in Honour of Professor Dr. C.J. Bleeker* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 175–93.

⁵² See a discussion in Schäfer, “Ein neues Fragment zur Metoposkopie,” 87.

⁵³ The Hebrew word for “generation,” *toledot*, arguably means “nature” or “character” here; see Scholem, “Physiognomy and Chiromancy,” 477–79; Scholem, “Ein Fragment zur Physiognomik,” 180–81; and Schäfer, “Ein neues Fragment zur

section explaining the distribution of the souls among the bodies endowed or burdened with physical qualities corresponding to rightfulness or wickedness of the soul. In their heavenly state, the souls of the righteous are floating above the Throne of Glory; the souls of the average persons are waiting to be chastised and purified by Samchiel, while Zaphiel is expunging with fire the souls of the wicked (2v.4–11). All is clear in the Seventh Palace,⁵⁴ and no soul can conceal its qualities; but how can the wicked and the pious be distinguished in the physical world, where the human body obscures the soul's nature? "Like a father teaching his son the letters of the Torah" (2v.13) the minister of the presence Metatron shows R. Yishmael the signs of the Zodiac and instructs him how to read the character of men from their appearance (2v.15–22).

"(Concerning) a man," says Metatron, "born in the sign of Libra, on the first day (of the week, in the hour)⁵⁵ of Jupiter or Moon: if a child is born in these two hours, he must be born not otherwise than small (?) and yellowish."

Metatron then elaborates on the appearance of that man, and reveals its meaning: "And he belongs to the good ones." The section ends with predictions for the man's future, including an impending sickness and a prospect of recovery. Here the fragment breaks off; but T.-S. K 21:88, which either belongs to the lost part of the same composition or to the same type of the somatomantic texts, expands the prognosis to the duration of the man's life, the age when he is expected to start learning the Scripture, and the projects of his success in study, business, and marriage (2r.23–2v.4): "A man born in the sign of Leo, {in the hour} of Venus,⁵⁶ has an open face (*ben me'yarat panim*) and his lips like roses, his eyebrows are elevated (*e-'eynav gvuhot*), and he is very wise. Until (age

Metoposkopie," 91 n. 31. *Toledot*, in its current context, may also mean "the process of generation" from a specific soul to a specific body.

⁵⁴ Compare to Plato's *Gorgias*: the souls came naked to Rhadamanthys; therefore, their deeds are transparent.

⁵⁵ Since all somatomantic texts listed above mention one of the seven days (from one to seven) after the name of the Zodiac, these are, most likely, the days of the week. Each day was divided into the segments (diurnal – here, represented by Jupiter – and nocturnal – here, Moon) ruled by planets; see the translation of the relevant passage from Vettius Valens in R. Beck, *A Brief History of Ancient Astrology* (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 74ff., and chart on p. 85. On the qualities attached to planets, see also *Baraita de-mazzalot* (J. Wertheimer, ed., *Bate Midrashot: 'esrim va-hamishah midreshe Hazal 'al pikitve yad mi-genizat Yerushalayim u-Mizrayim*, 2 vols. [Jerusalem: Ketav va-sefer, 1979], 2:7–37).

⁵⁶ The text reads "or in the sign of Venus," which is a mistake.

X) he will not start studying.⁵⁷ At age seven, on the second or third (day of the week) he will fall from a ladder or a wall,⁵⁸ and will be completely broken, and he will remain a cripple until thirty years of age. Thirty years old, he will marry a woman whose name starts with Z. He will set off [...] to purchase some goods, and when he will arrive at one city, a rockslide shall come down, but he will not be (seriously) hurt. All the day of his life, he will walk, (although?) his [...] will be broken. He will be bald in the old age, and he will be appointed a task of royalties. And the days of his life are the light of years.”

Thus, the soul is demonstrably primal, descending into the body through the stars and planets.⁵⁹ Aristotelian inheritance, however, was not altogether abandoned. The *Physiognomies* of Pseudo-Aristotle and Polemon, most likely in the Arabic translation, were read and adapted by Jewish authors perpetuating their own standard of beauty and the most infectious part of the physiognomy – ethnic prejudice. Following below is the list of body parts with the signifiers and their meaning, as found in texts mentioned in the beginning of this section.

Hair

Of all treatises, *Zohar* pays the most scrupulous attention to the hair, listing its five kinds, all black.⁶⁰ Curly, long-descending hair is the best,⁶¹ promising to its owner the fearlessness and zeal for proper actions; yet smooth hair also points to a decent man, always successful in worldly affairs if his hair is glossy, and sometimes successful if it is not.⁶² Men with “curly and rising” hair, and those prematurely bald should be better

⁵⁷ Lit: He would not open his heart.

⁵⁸ Lit: ruins.

⁵⁹ I believe that the background concept of the astrological part in this fragment is not dissimilar to the idea of the Neoplatonists, expressed by Macrobius (*Sonm. Scip.* 1.12.13–14): “[From the planets the descending soul] acquires each of the attributes which it will exercise later. In the sphere of Saturn it obtains reason and understanding, called *logistikon* and *theoretikon*; in Jupiter’s sphere, the power to act, called *praktikon*; in Mars’ sphere a bold spirit or *thymikon*; in the sun’s sphere, sense-perception and imagination, *aisthetikon* and *phantastikon*; in Venus’ sphere, the impulse of passion, *epithymetikon*; in Mercury’s sphere, the ability to speak and interpret, *hermeneutikon*; and in the lunar sphere, the function of molding and increasing bodies, *phytikon*” (the translation is taken from Beck, *Brief History*, 82).

⁶⁰ At least, black is the only color mentioned.

⁶¹ According to Polemon’s manual, however, black curly hair signifies cowardice, desire, cunning, and deception (ch. 48, B37, [Hoyland, “New Edition,” 437]). Anonymus Latinus (§14) gives the same interpretation.

⁶² According to Anonymus Latinus (§14), a man with “black, smooth, and glossy hair” is “violent like a pig.”

avoided on account of their irritability and a natural predilection for deceit and gossiping. *Secretum Secretorum* considers the color of the hair rather than texture. Black hair (§88) bespeaks kindness and intelligence, while fair hair (§89) is a sign of foolishness and ire. Red hair is mentioned in MS Oxford 240 f. 166r and T.-S. K 1.84 f. 4v.6, being a sign of “impurity,” especially among women.

Forehead

Zohar uses two parameters and their combinations to describe the forehead: the size and the hairline. Large, broad and prominent forehead countered by a round hairline belongs to the best type of man – intelligent, friendly, and mostly successful. *Secretum Secretorum* maintains the same opinion, adding visible veins as another positive sign (§91). A man with narrow forehead is also wise, although a coward. If however, the hairline is angular, the man is doomed to be ignorant in the best case (narrow forehead), or utterly mad in the worst. The only Genizah fragment mentioning the forehead (T.S. K 21:88 fol. 2r.6) also considered the narrow forehead with the angular (square) hairline as a negative sign, if it is what a “bulrush head” means: that man shall lose his children and die by a sword.

Eyebrows and eyelashes

In general, Jewish somatomantic texts prefer black, symmetrical eyebrows that are not too thick (*Secretum* §89).⁶³ According to T.S. K 21:8, a man with fair (yellow) eyebrows and eyelashes is also intelligent, yet irritable (1v.7ff.), while *Tanna de-be 'Eliyahu* disparages that man as altogether evil and sinful.⁶⁴

Eyes

As also in the *Physiognomy* of Polemon, the presentation of eyes is the most complex. *Zohar* considers the iris as a mixture of green with either black (or dark) or white or yellow.⁶⁵ Bright eyes (green + white or

⁶³ According to Polemon, eyebrows that are too long and thick reveal the “nature of pigs” and much desire (ch. 48, B37 [Hoyland, “New Edition,” 437]).

⁶⁴ M. Friedmann, ed., *Seder 'Eliyahu rabbah ve-Seder 'Eliyahu zutta* (Vina: Hevrat Ahi'asaf, 1902), 162.

⁶⁵ The choice of green as the basic color is unexplainable in the light of the Polemon's *Physiognomy*, for “a green eye ... indicates stupidity” (ch. 1, A6 [Hoyland, “New Edition,” 345]).

yellow) are a bad sign;⁶⁶ such a man, depending on the exact combination of colors, is angry, cruel, mad, arrogant, weak, and desirous. Very black eyes do not promise any good either; in *Zohar*, their owner is inconsistent and overjoyed, and in the Scholem's four-manuscript edition (§33), he shall be poor and shall die prematurely.⁶⁷ A man with moderately dark/black eyes is the best; he is a "powerful master of secrets" in *Zohar*, "understanding and intelligent" in *Secretum Secretorum* (§84), and belongs to the "House of Light" in the Qumran text 4Q186.2.i ("black and speckled"). Watery eyes reveal a thief, according to T.-S. K 21:88, and red eyes, in Oxford 240 f. 166r.15–18 and T.-S. 1.84 f. 4r.10, signify an impious liar and fool.⁶⁸ Both sunken and protruding eyes are not auspicious, and the worst would be the blue protruding eyes, which signifies a man "envious and impudent" to the utmost (*Secretum* §83).⁶⁹

Ears

The sources disagree concerning the meaning of the size and form of the ears. In both *Zohar* and *Secretum Secretorum* (§84) large ears bespeak silliness; small ears, however, reveal a fool and a thief in the *Secretum*,⁷⁰ but a "wise-hearted" man in *Zohar*. The *Physiognomy of R. Yshmael* (in Scholem, §37)⁷¹ is more specific: if a man has ears which are broad above and narrow below, with a "doubled" big earlobe, he is "worthy of kingdom."

Nose

⁶⁶ According to Polemon, "exceptionally bright eyes," like those of Hadrian and Alexander are the best (ch. 1, A14, A16 [Hoyland, "New Edition," 367–68]).

⁶⁷ Scholem, "Ein Fragment zur Physiognomik," 185. See Polemon, ch. 1, A15 (Hoyland, "New Edition," 367): black eyes are clearly an unfavorable sign, the mark of cowardice and greed in Adamantius (A11 [Repath, "Physiognomy of Adamantius," 505]).

⁶⁸ Also the eyes of a Lydian, called "the Crab" in Polemon – a very evil man (ch. 1, A13 [Hoyland, "New Edition," 365]). Moist eyes, however, are a good sign: "moist eye indicates goodness, and a dry eye indicates stupidity" (ch1, A6, [Hoyland, "New Edition," 345]).

⁶⁹ The opinion of Greek and Latin *Physiognomies* is different, the best eyes are χαροποί – dark blue (Anon. Lat. §§81–89; Polemon, ch. 35, B32 [Hoyland, "New Edition," 427]).

⁷⁰ Also in Polemon, large ears indicate indifference and small ears are the sign of treachery (ch. 12, B12 [Hoyland, "New Edition," 403]).

⁷¹ Scholem, "Ein Fragment zur Physiognomik," 186.

All kinds of noses mentioned in Jewish somatomantic manuals have one feature in common – they are long. That which is also moderately wide and straight belongs to a wise man, according to T.-S. K 21:88 (1r.16) and the *Secretum* §90,⁷² while the nose with broad nostrils bespeaks violence in the *Secretum*, and belongs to a man who shall have no part in the World to Come, according to the *Physiognomy of R. Yshmael* (in Scholem, §§16, 34).

Lips

According to the *Physiognomy of R. Yishmael* §36 and T.-S. K 21:88 f.1v.23, the ideal lips should resemble a rose.⁷³ Such man would be very wise and “worthy of both worlds.” The lips that are too thick reveal a gossipier (*Zohar*) or a simpleton (*Secretum* §90), whereas lips that are too narrow belong to a thief, who seems like a nice guy, but in truth is “like a poison” (T.-S. K 21:88 f. 2r.21).⁷⁴

Teeth

Protruding teeth, naturally, convey a bad omen – a “House of Darkness” in the Qumran fragment (4Q186), and treachery with hardness of speech in the *Secretum* §90.

Beard

In 4Q186 fr. 2.i.1, the sparse beard signifies a man belonging to the “House of Light,” consistently with the general preference for a smooth and fair body in the Qumran fragments.⁷⁵ In *Zohar*, however, the beard “filled with hair” is a good sign, indicating **pudency** and success in business.

Fingers and fingernails

As a rule, slender and long fingers are a favorable mark, putting a man in the “House of Light” (4Q186 fr. 2.i.4–5),⁷⁶ and promising him cleverness

⁷² Also in Polemon: “A thick, long, round, strong nose indicates power, strength, great zeal” (ch. 26, B25 [Hoyland, “New Edition,” 417]).

⁷³ This certainly refers to the Song of Songs 5:13, but may also refer to the actual form of lips considered beautiful – small and puffy.

⁷⁴ Like a “man from Phoenicia” in Polemon, with slim and broad lips, “resembling the mouth of a snake” (ch. 1, A16 [Hoyland, “New Edition,” 369–70]).

⁷⁵ See Popović, “4Q186: Zodiacal Physiognomy,” e.g., 251.

⁷⁶ The same rule applies to toes. A “man of Lydia” – a killer and fornicator – has short fingers and toes (Polemon, ch. 1, A11 [Hoyland, “New Edition,” 353]).

and excellence (*Secretum Secretorum* §102). Correspondingly, thick and short fingers bespeak the “House of Darkness” (4Q186 fr. 1.iv), and short fingers with much flesh around their tips signify poverty, hard work, and trouble (Oxford 240 f. 165r; T.-S K 1.84 f. 1r.3–5). White spots on fingernails bring success (*Zohar*).

Legs, thighs, and ankles

Thick and hairy thighs indicate an evil man (4Q186), strong and arrogant (*Secretum Secretorum* §103).⁷⁷ A leg with broad calves and thin ankle is a sign of a “great and glorious” man,⁷⁸ but if the calves are protruding (“resembling a dog’s leg”), then it bespeaks poverty (T.S. NS 252:2 3r.2–6).⁷⁹

Sexual organs

The attention dedicated in T.-S. NS 252:2 fol. 3v to male sexual organs is unparalleled elsewhere in Greek and Latin physiognomic manuals.⁸⁰ This Geniza fragment considers the size and form of penis, glans, and testes, the thickness of scrotum, the texture of sperm, and even the smell.⁸¹

III

The above physiologic descriptions and their interpretation do point to a certain affinity between the Greek and Jewish manuals; primarily, to the

⁷⁷ Thick hips (not thighs, however) are bad, according to Adamantius (B9 [Repath, “*Physiognomy* of Adamantius,” 521]), since these are “womanly.”

⁷⁸ Compare to Polemon’s *Physiognomy*, who describes his deadly enemy Favorinus as one having thick ankles with much flesh on it – the signs of his greediness and “immorality beyond all description” (ch. 1, A20 [Hoyland, “New Edition,” 377]).

⁷⁹ As well a negative sign in Polemon: thick ankles and protruding calves bespeak folly, vehemence, love of women, and lack of modesty (ch. 7, B8 [Hoyland, “New Edition,” 399]).

⁸⁰ On account of the sexual organs, there are just two remarks in Anonymus Latinus: “those whose penis is small and dry (parvum est veretrum atque siccum) ... and is erected without arousal (non inteditur rectum) are devoted to women”; and “those who have large and hairy testicles are stupid (qui virilia habent magna laneaque, stolidi sunt)” (§85).

⁸¹ For the description of male sexual organs in the rabbinic literature (though less detailed than that in the physiognomic manuals), their anatomy and function, see J. Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*, trans. and ed. F. Rosner (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1978), 109–13. In one peculiar medico-legal case, the Talmud also mentions the texture of sperm as compared to egg-white (b. Bava Batra 4a; b. Gittin 57a).

ethnic bias characteristic of them all. The contrasting interpretations for the preferable color of eyes and hair is indicative. In Greek and Latin physiognomies, these bodily features are tried on the “typical” Egyptian, Phoenician, Cilician, and so forth; which adds a social and historical context to the ethnic prejudice. Jewish somatomancies are no exception to this rule. **The most auspicious is one portrait of a tall person** “similar to a lion” with a low voice, very bright and moist eyes, thick beard, and wide eyebrows.⁸² The resemblance of this image to the most flattering portrait of Hadrian in Polemon’s work (ch. 1, A16) is stunning, especially considering its interpretation. R. Ishmael’s portrait describes a great ruler too; yet in contrast to the presentation by Polemon, the beneficial intentions of Ishmael’s “Hadrian” are undermined by his evil servants, whose advice he, unfortunately, bends his ear to. As a result, that ruler becomes a sinner with a bad reputation, leading his people astray – a well-known stereotype of a good king failed by dishonest administrators and advisors. The Hebrew *Secretum Secretorum* extends its premonition against all “people of Ashkenaz”: “know that a clear white complexion with a tinge of blue and much sallowness betokens shamelessness, cunning, lust, and unfaithfulness. Behold the people of Ashkenaz, who have all these qualities and are foolish, unfaithful, and impudent. Therefore, beware of any man whose complexion is blue and sallow, ... [with a] large forehead, ... beardless; ...beware of him as thou beware of the poisonous snakes.”⁸³

Apart from these bits of xenophobia, and some shared concepts of the desirable beauty versus frightening deformity,⁸⁴ the somatomatic manuals ignore the principles of physiognomy, mentioning neither animal (except for the above “lion”) nor gender stereotyping. The main feature of difference, however, consists in the overwhelming attention dedicated by the somatomatic manuals to esoteric markers on human skin, sharply contrasted with the very poor naturalistic presentation of the body in these manuals. The meaning and interpretation of such markers sometimes is fairly obvious, as in the case of a mole on a finger, signifying a good scribe (T.-S. K 21.88 f. 2r.11–12); usually, however, even the sense of the marker’s description is obscure, relying on the

⁸² *The Physiognomy of R. Ishmael* §§2–3; Scholem, “Ein Fragment zur Physiognomik,” 182.

⁸³ §81; Gaster’s translation, *Studies and Texts in Folklore*, 799.

⁸⁴ E.g., *Secretum Secretorum* §86 (Gaster, *Studies and Texts in Folklore*, 800): “Beware of any man that is deformed as much as thou eschew an enemy.” On disqualifying the sick and deformed men, see the fragments from Qumran – 4Q434, 4Q436, 1QSa, 4Q394 8 iii, 4Q266 – and a discussion in Brooke, “Body Parts in *Barkhi Nafshi*.”

reader's associative and imaginative capability. The meaning of the "mirror-like" (T.-S. K 21.88 f. 1v.6) or "illuminated" face, "high eyes" (1v.23), "doggy" legs (T.S. NS 252:2 3r.2–6), and the "bulrush" head (2r.6) cannot be adequately explained even with help of the literary allusions pointed to by the editors.⁸⁵ Yet the real stumbling block for a potential user of the somatomantic manuals would be the fact that the esoteric markers, as a rule, were not supposed to be seen and understood just by anyone. An Aristotelian physiognomist would have been thoroughly confused by a curlicue of wrinkles frequently taking the shape of the Twelve Letters (e.g., *Physiognomy of R. Ishmael* §§4, 12) or a plant, such as acacia or myrrh (§10) and by an *essential* likeness of a person's face to one of the four faces (including human!) of Ezekiel's Tetramorph.⁸⁶

Two factors are responsible for this difference. First is the obvious negligence to imaging the human body in Jewish literature. In contrast to Greek and Roman authors, who regularly described their dramatis personae in order to advance and elaborate the plotline,⁸⁷ Jewish sources offer just dribs and drabs of their personages' description, and mostly when required by the essential events of the story. In the Bible, Esau was hairy (Gen 27:11) because this was essential for the scene of his failed recognition by Isaac, and Absalom was ascribed exceptionally thick hair (2 Sam 14:26; 18:19) in order to justify him being entrapped in the tree branches. The exegesis on these passages indeed goes a step further. Philo, in his discussion about the distinction between the body and the soul, compares the "natural power" of fingernails and hair to the most inferior, irrational natural power of plants (*Legum allegoriarum* 2.22). In an animal being, this irrational part – the cloths [here: hair, fur] – overshadow the rational part (58). Hence, the naked and smooth body is most susceptible for receiving the divine revelation; and that, in its turn, explains why the "hairy" Esau was inferior to the "smooth" Jacob, as Philo repeatedly argues in his works:

Jacob also was fond of the nakedness of the soul, for his smoothness is nakedness.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ See the commentaries in Gruenwald, "Further Jewish Physiognomic."

⁸⁶ The figure of the Mother in *Zohar* 2:74a.

⁸⁷ See the survey by E. C. Evans, "Physiognomics in the Ancient World," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 59 (1969): 1–101.

⁸⁸ Philo, *Legum allegoriarum*, 2.59.4ff.: καὶ Ἰακώβ γυμνότητος ἐρᾷ ψυχικῆς – ἡ γὰρ λειότης αὐτοῦ γύμνωσις ἐστίν.

On account of this, the prophets say that Jacob, who practiced virtue, was a smooth man, and that Esau, who practiced what is shameful, was a hairy or rough man.⁸⁹

And Josephus supports this argument with Hebrew etymology:

[Two brothers], the elder of whom, from his head to his feet, was exceedingly rough and hairy, while the younger was growing up [smooth] as his heels. Now the father loved the elder, who was called Esau, a name agreeable to his hairiness, for the Hebrews call such growth of hair *seyr*.⁹⁰

The hairiness did not exhaust the list of Esau's misfortunes, for he, as well as David (1 Sam 17), was also red-haired (*'admony*). Therefore, as *Genesis Rabbah* 63:8 explains, it was their unlucky fate to spill blood.⁹¹ Apart from the exemplar story of Esau and Jacob, the descriptions of the human body in Jewish literature are either poetic⁹² or limited to a brief notion of one's stature, complexion,⁹³ and, in a few cases, the hair.⁹⁴

This traditional negligence of details of personal description, both in art⁹⁵ and in literature,⁹⁶ is co-joined by the second factor, imminently

⁸⁹ Philo, *De migratione Abrahami*, 153–54: οὗ χάριν οἱ χρησιμοὶ τὸν μὲν ἀσκητὴν τῶν καλῶν Ἰακώβ λεῖον, τὸν δὲ τῶν αἰσχίστων Ἡσαῦ δασὺν εἰσάγουσι. See also Philo, *Alleg. Interp.* 3.2.8.

⁹⁰ Josephus, *Ant.* 1.258.2ff.: ὧν τὸ μὲν πρεσβύτερον ἀπὸ κεφαλῆς ἐπὶ τοὺς πόδας περισσῶς ἦν δασύ, τὸ δὲ νεώτερον εἶχετο προϊόντος αὐτοῦ κατὰ πτέρναν. ἡγάπα δὲ ὁ μὲν πατὴρ τὸν πρεσβύτερον Ἡσαῦ λεγόμενον κατ' ἐπωνυμίαν τῆς τριχώσεως. Ἑβραῖοι γὰρ τὸ ἥσαυρον τρίχωμα λέγουσιν. The word ἥσαυρον is an invention of Josephus; the argument probably makes sense in reference to the Hebrew spelling of Esau (עשׂו) and hair (שׂער).

⁹¹ R. Aba bar Kahana said: “[red-haired], as if he spills blood,” for since Samuel saw the red-haired David, as written, “he sent, they brought him, and he is red-haired,” [Samuel] was terrified and said, “And this one shall spill blood like Esau?!”

⁹² Most of them in the Song of Songs: “she is dark and beautiful” (1:5), eyes like doves (1:16), skin like “polished ivory” (5:19), lips like roses (5:13).

⁹³ E.g., Canaanites were taller than Jews (Num 13:32–33), Saul was tall (1 Sam 10:23), Goliath and his family were exceptionally tall (1 Sam 17:4; 2 Sam 21:15–22), Eglon was very fat (Judg 3:16–17, 21–22); also in Josephus: Absalom surpassed all men in “tallness of his body” (*Ant.* 7.189); charioteers from Lebanon were “eminent for their largeness, and far taller than other men” (*Ant.* 8.182); Eliab, Jesse's eldest son, was “tall and handsome” (*Ant.* 6.156), and so forth.

⁹⁴ Absalom had very long and thick hair (2 Sam 14:26; 18:19) and Elisha was bald (2 Kgs 2:23); in Philo, Moses says, defending female shepherds against their Arab offenders: “You are long-haired people, female flesh, and so forth” (*De vita Mosis* 1.54).

⁹⁵ The spectrum of the artistic expression was limited by the figure's costume and gesture. This well-known feature of the Jewish art is discussed by M. Avi-Yonah, “Oriental Elements in the Art of Palestine in the Roman and Byzantine Period,”

relevant for the somatomancy as different from the science of physiognomy – the priority of the soul over the body, invalidating the naturalistic explanations of the Peripatetic school. For if the cold climate does not impede intelligence, the leonine countenance does not guarantee justice, and the feminine complexion does not install treachery, then the imprint *of the soul in the body* does not have to comply with any empirical reasoning at all. Moreover, this imprint is likely to surface in a form of the immaterial world whence the soul came, perceptible only to those who can see the invisible and conclude about the inexpressible, like Pharaoh in the Philo’s passage,

... king ... who, perceiving from his [Joseph’s] appearance that he was a free-born and noble man (for there are some obvious characteristics on the bodies we see, which are not visible to all, but only those who have sharp-sighted eyes in their mind) ...⁹⁷

and who can “physiognomize” the nature with help of their inner vision:

Now is it not fitting that even blind men should become sharp-sighted in their minds to such and similar things, being furnished with eyes by the most sacred words, so as to be able to *physiognomize*, and not to be limited to the mere understanding of the speech?⁹⁸

The “visible” interaction between the soul and the body was also redefined. It still appeared as a kind of teleology, but the teleology “of a new generation,” referring to an essential (or, perhaps, universal) purpose of a limb, rather than to its mundane implementation. The form of lips, for example, has apparently no function for an Aristotelian scholar; yet for Philo, it does not need to exhibit the likeness to the form of an animal

*Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine*¹⁴ (1950): 49–80; and R. Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Diaspora* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 136ff., 391–94.

⁹⁶ In support of these observations, it can be noted that such medieval chronicles as *Family Chronicle of Ahima’az ben Paltiel* (see R. Bonfil, ed., *History and Folklore in a Medieval Jewish Chronicle* [Leiden: Brill, 2009]) and travel narratives by Benjamin of Tudela (M. N. Adler, ed., *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Travels in the Middle Ages* [London: Henry Frowde, 1993]) and Eldad ha-Dani, referring to countless representatives of different lands and cultures, fail to offer a single personal description of these representatives.

⁹⁷ Philo, *De Josepho* 106.1ff.: ὁ μὲν οὖν βασιλεὺς ... ὃς ἐκ τῆς ὄψεως τεκμηράμενος ἄνδρα ἐλεύθερον καὶ εὐγενῆ – χαρακτηρὲς γὰρ ἐπιφαίνονται τινες τῷ σώματι τῶν ὁρωμένων οὐχ ὁρατοὶ πᾶσιν, ἀλλ’ οἷς τὸ τῆς διανοίας ὄμμα ὁξυδορκεῖ.

⁹⁸ Philo, *De somniis* 1.164.1ff.: ἄρ’ οὐχὶ τούτοις καὶ τοῖς παραπλησίσις εἰκὸς ἦν καὶ τοὺς τυφλοὺς διάνοιαν ὁξυδορκήσιν, πρὸς τῶν ἱερωτάτων ἐνομματουμένους λογίων, ὡς φυσιογνωμονεῖν καὶ μὴ μόνον τοῖς ῥητοῖς ἐφορμεῖν; Note the expression coined by Philo for this kind of “inner vision”: διάνοιαν ὁξυδορκεῖω.

in order to be meaningful. Its significance comes from a different reason, since

the lips are the boundaries of the mouth, and are a sort of fence to the tongue, through which the stream of speech is produced, when it begins to be uttered.⁹⁹

And so is the significance of the sexual organs whose spacious description in the somatomantic manuals would now be accounted for: “[The man] is doubly equipped for the [process of] generation: the heart is generative of thoughts, and the generative organ itself [is productive] of living beings.”¹⁰⁰ Eventually, the very reference to the (dis)similarity with animals was put in service of the “new” teleology:

“Whereas God turned downwards the eyes of all other animals – for which reason they are bent to the ground – he, on the contrary, has raised the eyes of the man so that the man may behold the heaven, being not a terrestrial but a celestial plant as the old proverb is.”¹⁰¹

And the celestial plant must bear celestial markings – signifiers of the “plant’s” celestial birth and predestination defining its terrestrial destiny.

* * *

Towards the peak of its popularity, by the fifteenth century, physiognomy embraced astrology too,¹⁰² and even began predicting the future. This extension was, in fact, not surprising, considering the long-suggested connection between the stars and the specific parts of the body,¹⁰³ and a quite reasonable assumption that a “natural born thief” is likely, one day,

⁹⁹ Philo, *De confusione linguarum* 33–34: χείλη δὲ στόματος μὲν ἐστὶ πέρατα, φραγμὸς δὲ τὴν γλώττης, δι’ ὧν φέρεται τὸ τοῦ λόγου ῥεῦμα, ὅταν ἄρξηται κατέρχεσθαι.

¹⁰⁰ Philo, *De specialibus legibus* 1.5–6: πρὸς γὰρ γένεσιν ἅμφω παρεσκευάσται, τὸ μὲν ἐγκάρδιον πνεῦμα νοημάτων, τὸ δὲ γόνιμον ὄργανον ζώων.

¹⁰¹ Philo, *De plantatione* 17–18: τῶν μὲν γὰρ ἄλλων τὰς ὁψεις περιήγαγε κάτω κάμψας, διὸ νένευκε πρὸς χέρσον, ἀνθρώπου δὲ ἔμπαλιν ἀνώρθωσεν, ἵνα τὸν οὐρανὸν καταθεῖται, φυτὸν οὐκ ἐπίγειον ἀλλ’ οὐράνιον, ὡς ὁ παλαιὸς λόγος, ὑπάρχων.

¹⁰² The first astrological physiognomy in the Latin West is the work of Michael Scott (d. 1235), in the Arabic East, the work of the Syrian scientist ad-Dimashqi (d. 1327). See L. Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 8 vols. [New York: Macmillan, 1923–1958], 2:208. A. G. Clarke, “Metoposcopy: An Art to Find the Mind’s Construction in the Forehead,” in *Astrology, Science, and Society: Historical Essays*, ed., P. Curry (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1987), 171–95 at 174–75.

¹⁰³ See Ptolemaeus, *Tetrabiblos* 3.11, 13, and Firmicus Maternus, *Mathesis* 4.19.

to break his neck by falling from a rope-ladder.¹⁰⁴ Enjoying the contributions of Giambattista della Porta, Michele Savonarola, Montesquieu, and Johann Lavater,¹⁰⁵ physiognomy experienced a long period of flourishing but ultimately lost its empirical grounds and failed as science. But somatomancy, which never pretended to have empirical grounds (or at least never tried to explain them), survives.

¹⁰⁴ As Giovanni Antonio Magini (1555–1617) explains (with a different collection of gruesome deaths) in his work on the metoposcopy; MS Florence Bibl. Naz (f. Palatino; s. Targioni-Tozzetti) 80 (101) f.88r (translated and quoted in Clarke, “Metoposcopy,” 182): “If we find that someone will die a bad death, but we do not know exactly what kind, we must look at the circumstances and effects. If we find some indication that the individual may be a thief, then we may reasonably assume that his death will be by hanging; if a murderer, he will be beheaded.”

¹⁰⁵ See, e.g., C. Rivers, *Face Value: Physiognomical Thought and the Legible Body in Marivaux, Lavater, Balzac, Gautier, and Zola* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994); R. T. Gray, *About Face: German Physiognomic Thought from Lavater to Auschwitz* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004); Giovan Battista della Porta, *De ea naturalis physiognomoniae parte quae ad manuum lineas spectat libri duo: e in appendice Chirofisionomia*, ed. O. Trabucco (Napoli: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 2003).