
Seeing the Face, Seeing the Soul: Polemon's Physiognomy from Classical Antiquity to Medieval Islam edited by Simon Swain

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This is undoubtedly the most important volume produced on the subject of physiognomy—the science of assessing personal character through the observation of external physical features—since Foerster's *Scriptores physiognomici graeci et latini* [1893]. Two influential ancient Greek treatises on the subject are extant: one attributed falsely to Aristotle and the other written by the scholar and politician Polemon (ca AD 88–144). Polemon's work is lost in its original form, but survives in abridgments in different languages.

Seeing the Face, Seeing the Soul deals particularly with Polemon and his treatise. After Swain's helpful orientation to the sources and earlier scholarship in the introduction [ch. 1], the volume presents several detailed studies that situate physiognomy in the contexts of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, society, and visual culture, and in its important Arabic reception. The essays range far and wide enough to make physiognomy a relevant matter for many areas of intellectual and cultural history in which it is often not normally taken into account. They show that the extant treatises on physiognomy are important sources of information about the customs and manners of the societies in which they were produced and reproduced. Together these historical-contextual essays constitute two of the three sections of the work: 'Antiquity' and 'Islam'.

The third section, 'Texts and Translations', filling about half the volume, presents the most important primary sources for Polemon's work in Greek, Latin, and Arabic, along with facing English translations. The Greek and Latin texts are basically reprints of Foerster's texts with some new notes added, but none of them have been translated into English before. Although the more important

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of the two Arabic texts has also been printed before in the edition of Georg Hoffmann [in Foerster 1893, 1.93–294], Robert Hoyland's new edition here, based on a fresh consultation of the unique manuscript, is clearly superior for reasons to be explained below. All in all, this is a large amount of material to digest, with new contributions by six authors.

In the 'Antiquity' section there are three essays. The first [ch. 2], by George Boys-Stones, is a monograph-length search for the roots of physiognomy in the ancient philosophers' views on the relationship between the form of the soul and the form of the body. Boys-Stones' approach is rigorously philosophical and he aims his presentation at scholarly readers who know already about the texts which he discusses. The conclusion is not that physiognomy 'influenced' philosophers, but rather that physiognomy in certain instances was invoked to support a theory about the soul. Thus, the investigation into the ancient views on the relationship between bodily and psychic forms has less bearing on physiognomy than one may have guessed, but demonstrates the sort of discussions that formed a context for the genesis of physiognomy in the first place. As an essay, this chapter will be independently of interest to historians of ancient philosophy.

In chapter 3, Swain introduces Polemon and his *Physiognomy* by focusing on Polemon's historical context, the second-century Mediterranean society in which he lived and wrote. We find Polemon as one of a set of smart gentlemen seeking the patronage and largesse of Roman emperors, men who have to know just what to say at the right opportunity in order to acquire and maintain status and privilege. These men were subjected to intense personal scrutiny while delivering their orations, and Polemon's system of physiognomy makes sense when understood as an instrument of that sort of social scrutiny. Swain covers a lot of territory: patronage, the culture of politeness that characterized the elite society of the 'second sophistic', sex, gender, and family norms in the Roman Empire, and thinking about 'ethnic purity' among Greeks in this time. He contextualizes not only Polemon but also authors such as Fronto, Plutarch, and Bryson. Swain is to be congratulated as one of the few classical scholars to do something useful with Bryson, an author whose first-century work, surviving only in Arabic, was made available decades ago, but which classical scholars have largely overlooked. (Swain alerts the reader to another collaborative project of his, in preparation, focusing on

Bryson.) In the end, one takes the impression that Polemon's *Physiognomy* was the work of a nervous backbiter keen to use his claimed scientific expertise in the analysis of character types to make allies and to shame enemies.

Jaś Elsner's contribution [ch. 4] is the shortest. It asks whether physiognomical concerns influenced the visual representation of men and women in the Roman Empire, primarily in statuary but also in painting. The question is interesting, but unfortunately it proves to be too difficult to find definite correlations between the physiognomical treatises that survive and the material representations under consideration. The main problem is that the representation of persons in sculpture aimed to flatter, praise, and magnify, whereas physiognomical analysis tended to find fault. These different purposes entailed different sorts of attention to the human face. But Elsner does find a bit of evidence that Polemon wrote his physiognomy while having in mind certain examples of famous portraits, such as that of Alexander of Macedon. Also included is a brief discussion of Polemon's terminology for eye colors.

The first of two contributions by Robert Hoyland is 'The Islamic Background to Polemon's Treatise' [ch. 5]. This begins with a general introduction to the reception of Greek and other ancient works in Arabic translation, following Dimitri Gutas' standard monograph, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* [1998], very closely. Then Hoyland turns to Polemon in Arabic tradition. Given the testimonies of Arabic authors, the text must have been translated into Arabic by the middle of the ninth century. The name of Polemon was relatively little known and, when known, it was from his work in translation. The Arabic word used for physiognomy is *firāsa*, but Hoyland does not make a special inquiry into the meaning of the term—which refers fundamentally to discrimination through scrutiny—leaving the reader to infer the reason why this word in particular was adapted as the special name of the technique taught by Polemon. There is plenty of material here from which to make the inference: information about Polemon's physiognomy in Arabic tradition is relatively scanty (covered in three pages) when compared with the abundant collection of references to and excerpts about *firāsa* that Hoyland has assembled from Arabic texts (filling 70 pages). All this raises some important questions that are not asked or answered. To what degree is *firāsa* in Arabic really a continuation of ancient Greek physiognomy

as exemplified in Polemon's treatise? Or is it rather that Polemon's work was absorbed into a preexisting set of established practices, already called *firāsa*, which were thereby elevated to the rank of an ancient science? Where and when was Polemon's physiognomy identified with the proverbial divine *firāsa* of prophets and mystics, from whose authority *firāsa* became an 'Islamic science'? The rich survey of materials, obviously the result of very wide research, is, however, presented according to themes, and not chronologically, thereby obscuring the history of *firāsa* as such and hindering attempts to answer these questions. Above all it is the choice to see physiognomy in Arabic as a part of an implicitly uniform 'Islamic civilization', to which testimonies from hundreds of years and thousands of miles apart are all equally relevant, that prevents the potential of the data from being realized. This chapter, as a wide-ranging collection of thematically organized source information, will form the basis for a future historical study of *firāsa*.

Antonella Ghersetti's first contribution to the volume, 'The Semiotic Paradigm: Physiognomy and Medicine in Islamic Culture' [ch. 6], focuses on physiognomy and its relationship to medicine as it was understood in Arabic. We are informed that the majority of authors of Arabic treatises on physiognomy were physicians. Ghersetti points out that Avicenna (d. 1037), in his classification of the sciences, puts physiognomy together with medicine in the 'second rank' of natural sciences as he classified them. This proved to be influential with later Arabic authors who likewise saw medicine and physiognomy as sharing the same 'semiotic paradigm and inferential procedure' [286]—that is, the observation of signs in the body—therefore putting the two types of knowledge in the same class. The connection between medicine and physiognomy began much earlier than Avicenna. The *Physiognomy of Pseudo-Aristotle*, in its Arabic translation by Ḥunayn ibn Ishāq (d. 873), appears to have been more influential here than Polemon. Rhazes (d. 925 or 935) and Fakhr al-Dīn a-Rāzī (d. 1209), among others, are given as examples of authors who discussed the underlying theoretical bases of physiognomy and treated it as a part of medicine. Like the preceding chapter, this one presents a wealth of information about the occurrence of physiognomy in learned treatises of several types.

We return to Polemon in 'Polemon's Physiognomy in the Arabic Tradition' [ch. 7], also by Ghersetti, with a comparative chart

and further notes added by Swain. The body of the chapter is a very useful inventory of the manuscripts of the Arabic Polemon, of pseudo-Polemon, and of earlier printed editions. The manuscripts and texts are described in sufficient detail, leading to the conclusion that there are two types of the text surviving in Arabic, both based on the lost original Arabic translation of Polemon: that found uniquely in Leiden MS Or.198, which appears to represent the Greek original with relatively high fidelity but not without alterations, and the highly adapted and renovated 'TK' tradition (TK for the Topkapı Sarayı, where two of the manuscripts of this type are found; it is also called 'the Istanbul Polemon' in this volume). Quotations of the text in the TK type were made by al-Dimashqī (d. 1327), providing a *terminus ante quem* for the reworking. Pseudo-Polemon is the name chosen here to refer to manuscripts bearing Polemon's name but dealing with other material, which prove thus to be irrelevant for the rest of the study. As for the two recensions of Polemon in Arabic, the comparative charts of their contents here provide an essential tool for dealing with both of them and for relating them to the surviving Greek abridgment.

The third part of the volume provides the texts derived from Polemon in all these languages, along with English versions. A brief orientation is in order. Again, Polemon's work does not survive in its original Greek form. In Greek, we have only an abridgment of the work by the probably third-century Adamantius (as well as a later abridgment of that abridgment). There is an anonymous Latin work of physiognomy based explicitly on the earlier works of Loxus, (pseudo-)Aristotle, and Polemon, but apparently using Polemon the most. Then, there are the two Arabic recensions of the lost Arabic translation of Polemon's work, mentioned above. All of these Greek, Latin, and Arabic texts are witnesses to Polemon's original work; where they are in harmony, we can be fairly sure that we have arrived at true Polemonic material. The volume under review presents all of these texts individually with facing English translations.

Chapter 8 ('The Leiden Polemon'), that is, the text of Polemon as found in the Leiden manuscript, is edited by Hoyland with facing English translation. The previous edition by Georg Hoffman treated the text with a heavy hand, 'correcting' it, sometimes bizarrely, to conform with the known Greek and Latin abridgments, on the assumption that they were truer to Polemon's original. Hoyland clearly

shows that this assumption was often false (as Hoffman's readings in general sometimes were), and in doing so he provides dozens of improvements to the text. The Leiden text must be accepted as it is as a witness to Polemon's original work; and, in the end, it appears that this 'Leiden Polemon' is the single most important witness to the contents of Polemon's treatise. Hoyland accordingly reproduces the text of the manuscript with a minimum of editorial interference. In this he goes perhaps to another, albeit preferable, extreme, in retaining even non-classical, 'incorrect', forms in the Arabic text, contrary to normal editorial practice, and unnecessarily including trivial data about the manuscript pointing. Hoyland thoughtfully provides cross-references to each section of the Greek of Adamantius and to the corresponding folio and line numbers in the TK manuscripts, as well as to the excerpts of TK in al-Dimashqī. The latter cross-references would be more useful if we had an edition of TK in its entirety [see below], but the future editor of TK will appreciate the notes. Hoyland does break from his strict adherence to the Leiden MS when he interpolates a paragraph from TK where Leiden lacks it [340–341], because of evidence that this paragraph was in the original Arabic translation of Polemon's Greek; the insertion is clearly marked as extraneous to the manuscript.

Chapter 9 ('The Istanbul Polemon' or 'TK recension') is edited by Ghersetti only in part because the contributors 'did not think it worthwhile' to include the text in its entirety given that 'the extent of the rewriting... takes us away from Polemon'; instead we have only the lengthy introduction of TK 'as evidence of the importance of Polemon' in the Arabic tradition [5]. As Ghersetti explains [465], even this partial text is 'not a critical edition' because this recension has such a large number of textual variants between witnesses as to make such an edition impractical. What we have is a publication of the introduction of the text in MS Topkapı Ahmet 3.3207 as collated by Ghersetti with Topkapı Ahmet 3.3245. The text includes a legendary account of Polemon's encounter with, and physiognomical assessment of, Hippocrates. (This story is based on an ancient account originating in Phaedo of Elis' lost dialogue *Zopyrus*, where it is Zopyrus who physiognomizes Socrates [23, 282–285].) It also includes remarks on the theoretical basis of physiognomy, exemplifying Ghersetti's argument in chapter 6.

Chapter 10, Adamantius' Greek abridgment, is presented in Foerster's edition with the new English translation provided by Ian Repath on facing pages. In combination with the Arabic of the Leiden recension, this text brings us apparently quite close to Polemon's original, but it excludes much of Polemon's anecdotal material that is found in the Arabic. For what it is worth, the Arabic manuscript of Leiden, copied in Damascus in 1356, is slightly older than all the Greek manuscripts of Adamantius, which were copied in the 15th and 16th centuries.

In chapter 11, the Anonymous Latin *Physiognomia*, written perhaps near the end of the fourth century and based in part on Polemon's treatise, is presented also in Foerster's edition with the facing English translation of Ian Repath. Repath provides cross-references to Adamantius.

Finally, the volume includes an appendix presenting the Greek of pseudo-Aristotle's *Physiognomy*, again reprinted from Foerster's edition, with a facing English translation reprinted from Jonathan Barnes, [1984, 1.1237–50] (both text and translation with comments and modifications by Swain). The Arabic translation of this Greek text has been previously published by Gherseti [1999].

Only the Arabic texts here are truly new in the sense that they are not reprintings of earlier editions and are based entirely on the fresh inspection of manuscripts. Lacking new critical editions of the Greek and Latin texts, it is nevertheless useful to reprint Foerster's editions for those without access to the Teubner texts. The English translations of the Greek and Latin texts are good overall and will serve further research into this subject.

The collection of materials in this volume could easily facilitate further studies on Polemon's text. For example, there is room now for a more detailed attempt to reconstruct what can be known about the contents of Polemon's lost treatise from the main witnesses, based on Swain's chart on pages 322–325, which correlates the sections of Adamantius' abridgment with the two Arabic recensions. Comparison of Bar Hebraeus' Syriac excerpts of the lost Syriac translation of Polemon with the Greek and Arabic texts may also shed a little more light on Polemon's original wording. Similarly, a study of the Arabic renderings of Greek vocabulary, where the Arabic of the Leiden manuscript correlates closely with Adamantius' Greek, would be useful

for the ongoing efforts in Arabic lexicography; Swain acknowledges this but explains simply that such studies were not the aim of the volume [7].

I have only one quibble with the work as a whole, which I raise only because of the real possibility that this volume, in view of its successful execution, will become a model for future studies of texts and their histories in both Greek and Arabic, and for further collaborations between scholars in the two fields. Indeed the book poses itself as such a model on page 1. The problem is not with the collaboration, which is very much to be encouraged; it is rather with the use of 'Islam' as a blanket term for many societies, countries, and times, and as a category that can be set in parallel with 'Antiquity'. These mismatched terms are implicitly based on ill-founded and misleading but nevertheless all too common theories of determined civilizations. Even a division of the sources by language (Greek and Latin, Arabic) would be sounder, and certainly no more simplistic.

With any volume of this size and complexity certain typographical lapses are to be expected. Many of these problems clearly derive from the typesetters of Oxford University Press, who leave something to be desired when it comes to diacritics and non-Roman fonts. No fewer than four different Arabic typefaces are found, and even certain Greek letters are used inconsistently. These are only a few examples of the irregularities. Although such flaws in production are a disservice to the authors as well as the readers, fortunately they do not hide or diminish the quality of the scholarship presented.

All in all, this volume is bound to be one of the most important references on ancient Greek, Latin, and medieval Arabic physiognomy and its place in the societies that practiced it. One cannot summarize briefly the many areas of investigation that will benefit from this volume. In particular, though, it will be useful to Arabists for the presentation of the Arabic texts and the important collection of data on *firāsa*, and it should also bring the importance of the Arabic reception of Polemon, and other ancient Greek authors such as Bryson, more fully to the attention of classical scholars. Polemon is clearly an important source now to be taken fully into account in studies of 'the second sophistic'.

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