

DIETRICH BOSCHUNG, ALAN SHAPIRO  
AND FRANK WASCHECK (EDS.)

# **BODIES IN TRANSITION**

Dissolving the Boundaries  
of Embodied Knowledge

---



MORPHOMATA

---

This volume engages from the perspective of the ancient Mediterranean world with current debates in the field of cultural studies revolving around the idea of embodied knowledge. In particular, it deals with the dissolution of the concept of the ideal body as a repository of knowledge through instances of deformation or hybridization.

The starting point comprises a series of case studies of less than perfect bodies: bodies that are misshapen, stigmatized, fragmented, as well as hybrid human/animal creatures, transgendered persons, and bodies on the cultural periphery of the classical world. All of these examples represent deviations from the 'normal' order of things and evoke familiar feelings of alienation. The ordered knowledge that has shaped the body is subverted and falls into disorder.

One strategy for dealing with this is to canonize transgression in visual form. Fluid bodies are captured in the image and domesticated, creating a visual order in disorder. The body-as-ruin is a fixed figure of fluidity and thus especially receptive to attributions of meaning, which helps explain its persistence as a cultural trope. It allows for the observation of cultural change.

BOSCHUNG, SHAPIRO, WASCHECK (EDS.)–  
BODIES IN TRANSITION



**MORPHOMATA**

EDITED BY GÜNTER BLAMBERGER  
AND DIETRICH BOSCHUNG  
VOLUME 23

EDITED BY DIETRICH BOSCHUNG, ALAN SHAPIRO  
AND FRANK WASCHECK

# **BODIES IN TRANSITION**

## Dissolving the Boundaries of Embodied Knowledge

---

WILHELM FINK

GEFÖRDERT VOM



Bundesministerium  
für Bildung  
und Forschung

unter dem Förderkennzeichen 01UK0905. Die Verantwortung für den Inhalt der Veröffentlichung liegt bei den Autoren.

Bibliografische Informationen der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek: Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte Daten sind im Internet über [www.dnb.d-nb.de](http://www.dnb.d-nb.de) abrufbar.

Alle Rechte, auch die des auszugsweisen Nachdrucks, der fotomechanischen Wiedergabe und der Übersetzung vorbehalten. Dies betrifft auch die Vervielfältigung und Übertragung einzelner Textabschnitte, Zeichnungen oder Bilder durch alle Verfahren wie Speicherung und Übertragung auf Papier, Transparente, Filme, Bänder, Platten und andere Medien, soweit es nicht § 53 und 54 UrhG ausdrücklich gestatten.

© 2015 Wilhelm Fink, Paderborn

Wilhelm Fink GmbH & Co. Verlags-KG, Jühenplatz 1, D-33098 Paderborn  
Internet: [www.fink.de](http://www.fink.de)

Lektorat: Torsten Zimmer, Alan Shapiro, Thierry Greub

Gestaltung und Satz: Kathrin Roussel, Sichtvermerk

Printed in Germany

Herstellung: Ferdinand Schöningh GmbH & Co. KG, Paderborn

ISBN 978-3-7705-5808-7

---

## CONTENT

Preface	7
Introduction by Alan Shapiro	9
FRANÇOIS LISSARRAGUE Corps à corps: épisèmes anthropomorphiques dans la céramique attique	11
ERIC R. VARNER Fluidity and Fluctuation: the Shifting Dynamics of Condemnation in Roman Imperial Portraits	33
DESPOINA TSIAFAKIS Thracian Tattoos	89
HANS BERNSDORFF Schmerz und Bestrafung in der hellenistischen ,Tätowierelegie‘	119
JAN N. BREMMER Stigmata: From Tattoos to Saints’ Marks	137
VÉRONIQUE DASEN Body Marks—Birthmarks. Body Divination in Ancient Literature and Iconography	153
MARCELLO BARBANERA The Lamé God: Ambiguities of Hephaistos in the Greek Mythical Realm	177
LLOYD LLEWELLYN-JONES “That My Body is Strong”: The Physique and Appearance of Achaemenid Monarchy	211

HELEN KING	
Between Male and Female in Ancient Medicine	249
JAN N. BREMMER	
A Transsexual in Archaic Greece: The Case of Kaineus	265
ALAN SHAPIRO	
Alkibiades' Effeminacy and the Androgyny of Dionysos	287
ANNETTA ALEXANDRIDIS	
Zῶα: Bilder des Körpers zwischen Mensch und Tier im Mythos von Aktaion	313
Contributors	350
Plates	355

---

VÉRONIQUE DASEN

## **BODY MARKS—BIRTHMARKS**

# Body Divination in Ancient Literature and Iconography<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*A very popular form of ancient divination relies on reading the signs delivered by the human body, such as quivering or skin irregularities. A treatise attributed to Melampous, Περί ἐλαιῶν τοῦ σώματος, lists predictions and psychological interpretations drawn from the observation of cutaneous defects. Physiognomic omens are well evidenced in ancient Babylonia, as well as in later Arabic and Jewish traditions. This practice did exert a marked influence in Graeco-Roman Antiquity. It appealed to all, the elite as well as the plebe, to men and women. Several texts allude to professionals, men and women, who read the future from facial features. Allusions to elaioscopy may be found in iconography, and the treatise of pseudo-Melampous could offer a key for interpreting the presence of moles on portraits, mostly of the Roman Republican period.*

The range of omens used in ancient divination comprised signs delivered by the human body. Predictions drawn specifically from the observation of skin irregularities are listed in a little known treatise, *Περί ἐλαιῶν τοῦ σώματος*, allegedly written by Melampous, ἱερογραμματεὺς. Two versions are known. Version A was published by Camillus Peruscius in 1545 and

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the study of the treatises of pseudo-Melampous in collaboration with Christian Zubler who is editing the text with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation. The english translation is by Irby-Massie and Keyser 2002.

by Fridericus Sylburg in 1587.<sup>2</sup> It was edited for the last time by Johann Georg Friedrich Franz in his *Scriptores Physiognomoniae Veteres* in 1780 with a latin translation and commentaries.<sup>3</sup> It is composed of twenty-six statements dealing with the interpretation of ἐλαία on the human body, differentiating for each case between men and women, though not systematically. Version B, first edited by Armand Delatte in 1927, provides two distinct lists of eleven cases, one for men, the other for women.<sup>4</sup>

Ἐλαία is a generic term designating olive-shaped cutaneous lesions, moles, warts or benign skin tumours, such as neurofibromatosis. Birthmarks may be meant as well; they are normally called σημεῖον in Greek writings, but ἐλαία is used by Johannes Malalas, a sixth century author, describing the congenital sign of the Pelopides on the shoulder of Orestes.<sup>5</sup> The extant, and much abridged, versions of this divinatory treatise may have suppressed earlier distinctions kept, for example, in the Arabic tradition.<sup>6</sup> For convenience, I will use here the translation ‘mole’, aware that it comprises various possible types of skin anomalies, sometimes designated by an epithet, such as ‘tawny’, πυρρά (A§2 and 3), probably detailed in lost variants of the text.

The dating of the treatise is difficult. The opening dedication to King Ptolemaios refers to a Hellenistic context, but this is most likely an invention, as is common in this kind of literature. Melampous, the author’s name, is fictional too; his name was probably intended to provide the treatise with the authority of the famous mythical seer and healer of Thessaly.

The study of the vocabulary points towards a Late Antiquity work (5th–7th cent.),<sup>7</sup> which does not imply that the content is recent. A second treatise attributed to Melampous, *Περὶ παλμῶν μαντική*, on predictions

---

**2** Peruscius 1545: it includes also the first edition of the treatise of palmomantic attributed to Melampous; Sylburg 1587.

**3** Franz 1780, 451–500. See the italian translation (with G. Cardano’s *Metoposcopia*) by Arecchi 1994, and the english translation by Irby-Massie and Keyser 2002, 343–44, commented on 538–39.

**4** Delatte 1927, 627–28.

**5** On *elaia*, see Skoda 1988, 229–230. Malalas, *Chronicle*, 5.64 (139) (transl. E. Jeffreys *et al.*, Canberra, Melbourne 1986; ed. J. Thurn and M. Meier, Stuttgart, 2009, 107, l. 20). See also its use in astrological texts (*semeion* and *elaia*): Delatte 1924, 102, 8, and in later period greek texts: Kriaras 1977, 401.

**6** See Fahd 1966 and below.

**7** See the forthcoming edition by V. Dasen and Ch. Zubler.

based on the observation of παλμός, twitching or quivering,<sup>8</sup> is preserved on papyri going back to the second century A.D.<sup>9</sup>

Artemidorus mentions a manual *Περὶ τεράτων καὶ σημείων*, *On Prodigies and Signs*, attributed to Melampous that may have included these two treatises as well as a fragmentary *lunarium Περὶ τῶν τῆς Σελήνης προγνώσεων*.<sup>10</sup> However, apart from Artemidorus, no ancient author refers to Melampous' work.

#### THE DIVINATORY MEANING OF ELAIA

In pseudo-Melampous' elaioscopy,<sup>11</sup> the close inspection of a mole provides a prophetic as well as a psychological meaning, reflecting the contiguity of this expertise with physiognomy. Physiognomy could also have a predictive dimension; in the anonymous latin treatise *De physiognomonía*, one reads that "Polemon and Loxus advance this discipline to such an extent that they affirm it can predict some things in the future."<sup>12</sup>

The treatise on moles' interpretation follows the structure of divinatory tradition. First, the record of the sign on the body proceeds from head to heels, a *capite ad calcem*. Second, it follows a binary system; the location of the sign on the left or on the right side of the body induces its value, usually negative on the left side, and positive on the right one, but not systematically: "Therefore observe in regard to men and women. If there be a mole on the right parts, they will be rich and altogether virtuous. If on the left side, they will be sickly and poor." (A26) Third, the list is composed of conditional sentences with *protasis* and *apodosis*: "If ..., then ...", relating the position of the mole with an individual prediction. This formula conforms to an inference system already used in Mesopotamian divination. In the more elaborate versions of the *Peri palmôn mantike*, a general prognostic is followed by a second one, varying

**8** Diels 1908, 1–42. Variants attribute this treatise to the Sybil (Suda, *sigma* 355) or Hermes Trismegistos (Diels 1908, 39–42, version H).

**9** Costanza 2009.

**10** Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica* 3.42.

**11** The term ἐλαιοσκοπία is the title of the treatise the cod. Florentinus 28.14 (14th cent.); Delatte 1927, 627.

**12** Anonymus latinus, *Book of Physiognomy* 133 (transl. I. Repath in Swain 2007). See also below Pliny, *Natural History* 35.88 on Apelles.

according to different social categories, such as slaves, widows, soldiers, and ending with a possible invocation to a deity, suggesting that the final result is suspended (Hekate, Demeter, Helios ...).

In the extant versions of the *Περὶ ελαιῶν*, the enumeration only differentiates between man, *ἀνὴρ*, and woman, *γυνή*, but the interpretations are often similar for both sexes. Some statements do not make the distinction. Social status and activities are not specified, as in the *Περὶ παλμῶν μαντική*.

The simplified phraseology is part of the genre: it standardized and eased the learning and transmission of a mostly oral knowledge, as did the Hippocratic aphorisms.<sup>13</sup> Repetitions could be associated with memorisation techniques.

The logic conducting the statements is often not explicit. For Auguste Bouché-Leclercq, it was useless to try exploring it because body divination was just a simplified form of physiognomy, a 'degenerescence' deprived of subtlety.<sup>14</sup> Despite the abridged form of the extant text, it is however possible to uncover the logic of some interpretations rooted in popular lore. As in Artemidorus and other divinatory treatises, they refer to cultural knowledge and beliefs drawn from heterogeneous sources that reflect the long history of this practice. Deconstructing this amalgam is a long and challenging venture.

Some predictions are prompted by anatomy. Most statements concern the head, and more specifically the forehead, possibly because it is traditionally associated with power. Thus a mole on the forehead of a man means that he will be the master of many good men, likewise for a woman (A1). On the opposite, placed at the back of the head of a man, in the neck, a mole foretells a dramatic reversal of fortune: he will be beheaded (A10). A mole on the loins (A11) suggests bending under a weight; it means poverty and being a burden for both men and women.

In some cases, the mole intensifies anatomical functions. Behaviors are betrayed, such as gluttony when the mole is on the lips or the belly (A6; 17), or sexual voracity when it is in a 'hidden place', *krypton* (A20). Explicitly on the sex, *physikon*, however, it is associated with procreation and announces the birth of several children, boys to a man, girls to a woman (A21).

---

<sup>13</sup> On the similarities between prognosis and divination, see Langholf 1990, 232–254.

<sup>14</sup> Bouché-Leclercq 1879, 175 (reedited 2003, 139).

A few interpretations refer to beliefs related to medical knowledge; a mole above the spleen is thus associated with sickness for both man and woman (A18). A mole above the *kardia* of a man displays that he is wicked (A16); the term *kardia* may not designate the heart but the upper part of the stomach, at the esophageal orifice, which was viewed as the seat of uncontrolled emotions, usually negative ones;<sup>15</sup> in Latin literature, the adjective *stomachosus* denotes a bad tempered person, a meaning probably reflected by the *Περὶ ἐλαιῶν*.<sup>16</sup> For a woman, however, a bad temper is revealed by a mole on her breast, *mastos* (A16).

Other statements belong to widely shared mantic beliefs. Thus movements of eyelids and eyebrows occur often as predictive signs in Greek literature. Twitches of the eyebrow are of good omen in Theocritus and mean seeing a beloved one: “Lo there! a twitch o’ my right eye. Shall I be seeing her?”<sup>17</sup> In elaioscopy, a mole above or upon the eyebrow (A2) is similarly related with love and successful marriage. Above a man’s eyebrow, it indicates that he will marry a good and beautiful wife. The meaning is similar for women, but it depends of the ‘tawny’ color of the mole. But if the *elaia* is upon a man’s eyebrows, he should not marry; the matrimonial meaning is amplified: the man could have five wives, likewise the woman.

Another widespread belief concerns hearing. Thus Pliny reports that: “a notion is universally received, that absent persons have warning that others are speaking of them, by the tingling of the ears”.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, we read in pseudo-Melampous that a mole on the ear means that he or she will be wealthy and of good repute (A8).

Correspondences occur too with Hellenistic melothesia. The *Περὶ ἐλαιῶν* thus states that a tawny mole on the nose or near the eye (A3) implies that he or she will be insatiable in intercourse, with a subtle distinction between the sexes: the man will have insatiable sexual appetites, “the woman too will be unfaithful”.<sup>19</sup> Did the author mean that sexual greed implied adultery for women only, or was it just a variation, lust being necessarily associated with extramarital relations? The connection

<sup>15</sup> Skoda 1988, 90.

<sup>16</sup> Gourevitch 1977, 56–74.

<sup>17</sup> Theocritus, *Idyll* 3.37. Cf. Plautius, *Pseudolus* 106. Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica* 1.5.

<sup>18</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* 18.4.

<sup>19</sup> This variant occurs in the Berlin manuscript, Phill. 1576, fol. 23v; see the forthcoming commentary by V. Dasen and Ch. Zubler.

between nose and sex occurs in Vettius Valens who associates the nose with Venus.<sup>20</sup> In the latin *Book of Physiognomy*, only snub-noses, *simoi*, designate lustful persons.<sup>21</sup>

Dreambooks share other common beliefs, such as the association of hands with procreation found in pseudo-Melampous: “If the mole is on the hand, the man will have many children. Likewise for the woman.” (A14) This connection occurs also in Artemidorus, where dreaming of having many hands means having goods and more children, but also implies more broadly wealth.<sup>22</sup> It is repeated with the meaning of wealth in Byzantium dreambooks: “Scratching your hand indicates that you will get your hands on gold”<sup>23</sup>

Other associations belong to foreign traditions. In pseudo-Melampous having a mole on the foot (A25), implies that man and woman will beget many children. The relation of feet and procreation is well known in Hebrew; it goes back to the metaphoric use of feet for the sexual organs in the Old Testament.<sup>24</sup>

Some unexpected body parts, such as the tongue with a mole (A5), may reflect the ambition to be comprehensive. Divinatory treatises belong to a highly stereotyped genre. All constituents of the human body had to be included in the enumeration, even beyond realism, especially the tongue that belongs to the conventional targets of magicians, and could not be missed.<sup>25</sup>

The extant versions of the *Περὶ ελαιῶν* makes no reference to astrology, planets or to gods, but zodiologia associate the presence of *elaia* or *semeion* on the human body with zodiacal signs.<sup>26</sup> Elements of melothesia appear in the *Περὶ παλμῶν μαντική* on twitching, a treatise which is longer and more detailed. As in chiromancy, a planet and a god govern each finger of the hand. The thumb is associated with Aphrodite (§ 94); thus, a vibration in the right thumb (§ 83) predicts good luck, for the slave a

---

**20** Vettius Valens 1.1.

**21** Anonymus latinus, *Book of Physiognomy* 51.

**22** Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica* 1.42.

**23** The *Oneirocriticon of Daniel* Letter xsi, § 383; Oberhelman 2008, 104.

**24** Carmichael 1977, 321–336, esp. 329.

**25** On anatomical curses, see Versnel 1998.

**26** Zodiologia are collected in the *Catalogus codicum astrologorum Graecorum* in twelve volumes. On *elaia* or *semeion*, that do not provide omens, see e.g. Delatte 1924, 101–121 (cod. Ath. B.P. 127), 228–243 (cod. Ath. Bibl. Soc. Hist. 211).

delight, for the unmarried girl a marriage (as does a vibration in the big toe), but spoliation for the widow. The little finger belongs to Hermes and is associated with trust (§ 90). The ring finger is governed by Helios and means becoming wealthy (§ 91). The middle finger is associated with Kronos and means insults and jealousies (§ 92). The index finger means punishment of an insult because this is the finger of Ares (§ 93).

#### ELAIA IN DAILY LIFE

At first, Melampous' treatise appears as a surprise, because Greek and Latin texts usually refer to skin anomalies as imperfections to suppress. A satire of Lucilius thus enumerates the blemishes of a girl: "a wart, *uerruca*, a mole, *naeuus*".<sup>27</sup> In ancient physiognomy, skin anomalies also have negative connotations. They indicate morally dubious persons: "Those who have variegated color, as if sprinkled with lentils, *tamquam lente aspersum*, which the Greeks call *phakodeis*, lead a disgraceful life and perform disgraceful deeds (*uitam turpem*), women as much as men."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in Artemidorus' *Dreambook* a spotty forehead means shame and damage.<sup>29</sup>

Rulers, such as Hadrian, concealed skin blemishes. Hadrian let his beard grow in order to hide a congenital mark, as the author of his life in the *Historia Augusta* reports: "He wore a full beard to cover up the natural blemishes on his face, *ut uulnera quae in facie naturalia erant*".<sup>30</sup> He may have concealed them because any physical defect could create unease in the body of an emperor.<sup>31</sup>

Similar negative views are found in ancient medicine. Celsus asserts that: "To treat pimples and spots and freckles is almost a waste of time, yet women cannot be torn away from caring to their looks. But of these just mentioned, pimples and spots are commonly known, although that species of spot is more rare which is called by the Greeks *semeion*, since

---

<sup>27</sup> Lucilius, *Satire* 17.2.

<sup>28</sup> Anonymus latinus, *Book of Physiognomy* 85.

<sup>29</sup> Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica* 1.23.

<sup>30</sup> *Historia Augusta* 26.1.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Corbeill 1996, esp. 14–15 on physical peculiarities, and 57–98 on names and *cognomina*. On the ambiguous value of scars, see e.g. Baroin 2002.

it is rather red and irregular. Freckles are in fact ignored by most; they are nothing more than a roughened and indurated discoloration.”<sup>32</sup>

Pliny the Elder offers many medico-magical recipes in order to get rid of various kinds of skin blemishes, including warts and pimples, the most weird and exotic ingredients being the most efficient. Crocodile’s intestines, “filled with fragrant stuff called *crocodilea*, which with leek juice makes a very useful salve for affections of the eyes, and to treat cataract or films. Applied also with Cyprus oil *crocodilea* removes blotches appearing on the face, and it also clears the complexion. It removes freckles, pimples, and all spots.”<sup>33</sup>

### AN EXOTIC PRACTICE?

Is elaioscopy a foreign import? Body divination is well attested in ancient Mesopotamia. Cuneiform handbooks on physiognomic omens, called *Alamdimmû*, are found in the first millennium libraries of Nineveh and other cities, such as Uruk. These handbooks, newly edited by Barbara Böck,<sup>34</sup> were probably compiled by the end of the second millennium and derive from older traditions. Twenty-seven tablets provide individual prophetic interpretations based on somatic signs (hair, skin, body marks) or behavior (speech, movements ...), reviewed from top to toe. The series *Šumma liptu* (“If the mole”) lists various cutaneous irregularities, distinguishing between different types of spots, possibly warts, moles and birthmarks, characterized by distinct colors (black, red, discolored ...), and their meaning on men (eight tablets) or women (one tablet).<sup>35</sup> Post-antique Arabic elaioscopy has kept two different manuals, one on warts, the other on moles, that may derive from Babylonian distinctions.<sup>36</sup> In *Alamdimmû*, the signs are regarded as divine messages left, or written, by gods on the body, especially on the forehead where marks are sometimes compared with cuneiform signs.<sup>37</sup> The influence of zodiacal signs on the

<sup>32</sup> Celsus, *On Medicine* 6.5.1.

<sup>33</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* 28.109.

<sup>34</sup> Böck 2000; 2010. On these omnia, including twitching muscles, as in Melampous, see also Bottéro 1974; Maul 2003.

<sup>35</sup> Akkadian names refer to individuals characterized by skin anomalies; see Stamm 1939, 264–7. I thank Pascal Attinger for this reference.

<sup>36</sup> Fahd 1966, esp. 390–393 (on *naeui*), and 397–402 (on palmoscopy).

<sup>37</sup> Böck 2000, 92–95 (*Alamdimmû* III: 76–121). See Popovic 2007, 68–118 comparing Babylonian, Graeco-Roman and Hebrew physiognomic principles.

appearance of the human body is also evidenced in the tablets, though not for skin irregularities.<sup>38</sup>

The eastern origin of this expertise is recorded by Velleius Paterculus (10 B.C.–A.D. 30) who explains that Sulla met a Parthian embassy when he was praetor in Cilicia in 92 B.C.: “There came to him ambassadors of the Parthians—he was the first of the Romans to be so honored—and among them some wise men (*magi*) who, from the marks on his body (*ex notis corporis*), foretold that his life and his fame would be worthy of a god.”<sup>39</sup>

Plutarch offers a variant where a Chaldaean this time provides predictive physiognomy: “A certain man in the retinue of Oriobazus, a Chaldaean, after looking Sulla intently in the face, and studying carefully the movements of his mind and body, and investigating his nature according to the principles of his peculiar art, declared that this man must of necessity become the greatest in the world.”<sup>40</sup>

Velleius Paterculus does not describe the nature of these *nota*, signs, but the word occurs later in Suetonius’ report of Augustus’ congenital skin anomalies that again foretold his prestigious destiny: “It is said that his body was covered with spots and that he had birthmarks scattered over his breast and belly, corresponding in form, order and number with the stars of the Bear in the heavens.”<sup>41</sup> Suetonius does not precise if it was the *Ursa major* or *minor*, both composed of seven stars. In any case, the constellation designated the child as a future *kosmokrator*, inscribing his fate into the cosmic order. It justified his rise to power, unusual physical marks also demonstrating the singular status of the emperor.<sup>42</sup>

Julius Africanus (1st cent. A.D.) confirms that skin defects could be interpreted as mantic signs: “Concerning tumors, warts and acrocordons. Irritating warts are outgrowths of the body resembling rough studs; they occur in many places. They call the condition *myrmekiai*, which many superstitious persons also regard as signs of something which is going to happen to them.”<sup>43</sup>

---

**38** On the connections of physiognomy with astrology in the Dead Sea scrolls and Babylonian tablets, see Popovic 2007.

**39** Velleius Paterculus, *Roman History* 2.24.3.

**40** Plutarch, *Sulla* 5.5–6

**41** Suetonius, *Augustus* 80.

**42** On birthmarks as divine legitimation, see Dasen 2009 and 2015.

**43** Julius Africanus, *Cestes* 3.17 (transl. F.C.R. Thee, *Julius Africanus and the Early Christian View of Magic*, Tübingen, 1984).

The continuing importance of the practice in Mesopotamia in the Roman period is suggested by the coinage of Parthian kings. A series may show the depiction of a benign tumour on the forehead of King Mithridates II (125–88 B.C.) and his successors over several generations. Beyond the possible inherited pathology, the growth appears as the distinctive sign of a dynasty, providing the legitimacy of a royal origin.<sup>44</sup>

A closer look at ancient sources shows that this science did exert a marked influence in Graeco-Roman Antiquity and appealed to all, the elite as well as the plebe, to men and women. Several texts allude to professionals, men and women, who read the future from facial features and provided services very similar to physiognomists. In *The Braggart Soldier* by Plautus (c. 205 B.C.), the expert is a woman.<sup>45</sup> The author presents a full list of female experts, all hired by a woman too: an old man, Periplectomenus, explains to Pleisicles the burden of having a wife and enumerates the expenses of a superstitious woman for gifts to diviners, all female, possibly as a joke:<sup>46</sup> “Husband mine, give me some money for a present for mother at the matrons’ Festival; give me some money to make preserves; give me some money to give to the sorceress (spell caster (*praecantrix*), at the festival of Minerva, and to the dream interpreter (*coniectrix*), and the diviner (*hariola*), and the interpreter of prodigies (*haruspica*) [...]. It’s a shame if I don’t send something to that woman that tells you fortune to your eyebrows (*quae supercilio spicit*)”.

The term *metoposcopoi* occurs first in Pliny’s description of specialists.<sup>47</sup> The practice must have enjoyed the same vogue as physiognomy: “[Apelles] also painted portraits so absolutely lifelike that, incredible as it sounds, the grammarian Apio has left it on record that one of those persons called ‘metoposcopists’ who prophesy people’s future by their countenance, pronounced from their portraits either the year of the subjects’ deaths hereafter or the number of years they had already lived.” The term *morphoscopoi* is found in Artemidorus who lists them among diviners of ill repute, deceitful charlatans, unlike astrologists and oniroticists.<sup>48</sup>

---

44 Hart 1966 and Todman 2008 trace it on rulers’ coins from Mithridates II (125–88 B.C.) down to Artabanus V (213–227 A.D.); Dasen 2007, 28, fig. 7a–c.

45 Plautus, *Miles gloriosus* 692–694.

46 Traill 2004. See also Montero 1993, 77–82.

47 Pliny, *Natural History* 35.88. For other evidence of the term, see e.g. Clemens of Alexandria, *Paedagogue* 3.3.

48 Artemidorus, *Oneirocritica* 2.69.

The clientele of diviners, however, was not exclusively composed of women. The male elite often had recourse to specialists who could contribute to providing ruling legitimacy. Thus, according to Suetonius, Narcissus, the freedman of Claudius, brought in a *metoposcopos* who asserted that Britannicus would never become emperor: “At that time, so that they say, a physiognomist was brought in by Narcissus, the freedman of Claudius, to examine Britannicus and declared most positively that he would never become emperor; but that Titus, who was standing near by at time, would surely rule.”<sup>49</sup>

Many anecdotes refer to the possible divinatory dimension of these marks, sometimes forecasting death. Suetonius records in his life of Domitian that: “The day before he was killed [...] while he was vigorously scratching a festered wart on his forehead, and had drawn blood, he said: ‘May this be all’”.<sup>50</sup>

#### ELAIOSCOPY AND ICONOGRAPHY

Allusions to elaioscopy may be found in iconography. The treatise of pseudo-Melampous could offer a key for interpreting the presence of moles on portraits, mostly sculpture of the Republican period. Skin anomalies are usually explained by verism and the concern to be identifiable in a society marked by political competition.<sup>51</sup> In this logic, moles had to be shown, because they characterise an individual.

The question of identity appears very strongly on official documents from Graeco-Roman Egypt detailing the particulars of individuals as in our modern passeports. They provide the age, the size, the shape of the face, nose and ears, the color of the eyes, the pilosity (baldness or beard) and distinctive signs, such as a scar, *oule*, a wart or mole, *phakos*.<sup>52</sup> The description must allow the identification of the individual without ambiguity.

Marks, however, do not make a person unique. They can be hereditary, and thus specific to a family, as in the Parthian dynasty. Pliny states: “some marks (*signa*) moles (*naevi*) and even scars reappear in the

---

<sup>49</sup> Suetonius, *Titus* 2.1.

<sup>50</sup> Suetonius, *Domitian* 16. Cf. Pliny, *Natural History* 30.16 on Nero’s freckles.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Giuliani 1986.

<sup>52</sup> Hübsch 1968; Rivière 2002; Cordier 2004.

offspring.”<sup>53</sup> Bodily marks can thus construct a family identity, as show the names relating to them: Naevius, Gnaeus, Verrucius ... that may have originally designated a specific individual and then denoted a whole family. The most famous example concerns Cicero who had no skin blemish, but one of his ancestors.<sup>54</sup>

Could portraits with moles also relate to mantic? They cannot be used to illustrate pseudo-Melampous, and their possible prophetic meaning is uncertain, but they belong to a cultural context where these signs were observed and regarded as meaningful. These portraits may thus reflect the influence of this type of divination in Roman society.

A circular growth is thus depicted on the ‘Green head’ of a priest with shaven head from Ptolemaic Egypt (c. 220–180 B.C.), on the left cheek, below the eye.<sup>55</sup> Other examples on various material and media come from Rome and the Vesuvian cities. The marble portrait of the so-called Postumius Albinus thus exhibits a wart on the right part of the chin (fig. 1).<sup>56</sup> Freedmen imitate the style. Another portrait, with a round irregularity under the left eye, was listed in 1622–1624 by Nicolaas Rockox as the bust of Q. Fabius Maximus, whose cognomen was *uerrucosus* (fig. 2).<sup>57</sup> The study of the piece conducted by Dietrich Boschung shows that it probably comes from a freedman’s funerary monument. A marble funerary relief (1st cent. A.D.) depicts the freedman P. Aiedius Amphio and his young wife, Aiedia Fausta Melior. The man exhibits a wart on the forehead, above the left eyebrow (fig. 3).<sup>58</sup> The detail occurs too on portraits of the Antonine period.<sup>59</sup>

**53** Pliny, *Natural History* 7.50; Plutarch, *Moralia* 563a. See also Aristotle, *History of Animals* 9.6.29; *Generation of Animals* 4.3.769a and 1.16.721b.

**54** Plutarch, *Cicero* 1.3–6.

**55** Boston, MFA 04.1749; Dasen 2007, 24, fig. 3.

**56** Amelung 1903, cat. no. 60, pl. 8; Flavian copy of the beginning of the first century B.C. original. See also the bronze portrait from the house of Lucius Caecilius Jucundus in Pompei, individualised by a prominent fibrome at the bottom of the left cheek; Naples, MAN 110663; Dasen 2007, 24, fig. 4 and the bronze statue of a togatus, M. Calatorius Quarto from Pompei, with a distinct wart below the right eye; Naples, MAN 5597; Dasen 2008, 230, fig. 3a–b.

**57** Boschung 2005, 17, fig. 8 (right), 26–27, no. C. Plutarch, *Fabius Maximus* 1.3. I thank D. Boschung for this new evidence.

**58** Kockel 1993, 149–150, pl. 56d and 62a; Dasen 2007, fig. 5.

**59** See two busts of men from Spain, Dasen 2008, 230, fig. 4 and 5 (Merida, Archaeological museum, no inv. no. Italica, Sevilla, Archaeological Museum



**1** Rome, Musei Vaticani, Braccio Nuovo, 2261. Flavian copy of a first century B.C. original. Marble (h. 75,5 cm)

---

coll. Lebrija), and the portrait of a woman from Rome; Wellington Classics Museum, Victoria University, VUW Classics 2003.2; Dasen 2008, 230, fig. 6 a-b.



2 Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, Sk 75. Marble (h. 50 cm)



3 Berlin, Staatliche Museen SK 840. Funerary relief.  
Marble (h. 64 cm; length 99 cm)



4 London, British Museum Walters 1190.  
Chalcedony (1,5 cm × 1,4 cm)

This singularity is also found on gems. A few portraits carved on seals depict warts. The best example is a chalcedony (75–50 B.C.) showing a middle-aged man with a wart on his right chin (fig. 4).<sup>60</sup> Two are found on mummy portraits, one in tempera on wood in Florence (ca. A.D. 138–161) shows a woman with a mole on the forehead (plate 4),<sup>61</sup> the other in encaustic on limewood, from Antinopolis, with a mole on the side of the nose.<sup>62</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In pseudo-Melampous treatises, the body produces signs with a prophetic, sometimes also psychological meaning, which can express divine will, relating each part of the body to cosmic order, as in astrological melothesia or chiromantics. In its abridged form, the extant version reduces to a generic term, *elaia*, a much larger range of skin anomalies well evidenced in related traditions, such as Mesopotamian and Arabic manuals. In Jewish tradition, the practice is associated with zodiacal physiognomy.<sup>63</sup>

Ancient morphoscopy may have included the interpretation of other facial features. In the mid-16th century, Girolamo Cardano, a famous Milanese scientist and occultist (1501–1576), wrote a treatise of *Metoposcopia*, on the divinatory reading of the face, which was published posthumously in 1658 as a French translation by Claude Martin de Laurendière, with 800 illustrations. Twelve chapters are dedicated to the language of wrinkles, associated with planets, from the Moon to Saturn; the last chapter lists the position of moles or warts, with 151 figures (fig. 5 and 6), also with astrological connections. G. Cardano does not mention his sources, but an appendix presents the treatise of pseudo-Melampous *Περὶ ελαιῶν μαντική* in Greek with a French translation by C.M. de Laurendière.<sup>64</sup>

Does the divinatory reading of wrinkles by Girolamo Cardano, rely on an ancient source now lost, either because it was never standardized and remained oral, or got lost, as did ancient chiromantic treatises which left almost no written trace from Antiquity?<sup>65</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Dasen 2007, 24, fig. 6.

<sup>61</sup> Doxiadis 1995, pl. I, 220 (the so-called Zenobia, bought in Egypt in 1829 by I. Rosellini).

<sup>62</sup> New York MMA Rogers Fund, 1909 09.181.2; Doxiadis 1995, 155, fig. 97.

<sup>63</sup> Popovic 2007.

<sup>64</sup> On the reception of Cardano, see Rizzardini 2005.

<sup>65</sup> Chr. Zubler, in press.

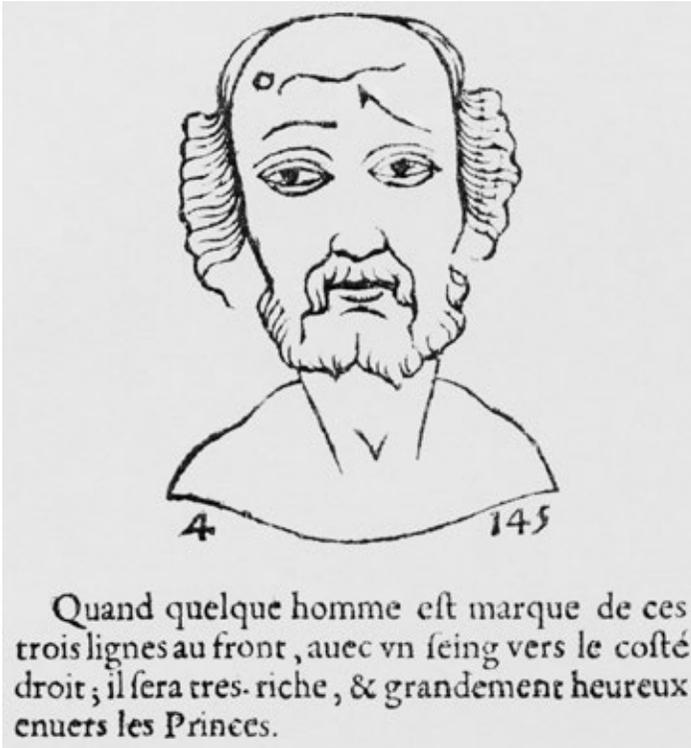


5 After Cardan 1990, fig. on 182

It is difficult to refrain from questioning the variety and oddity of some wrinkles on Republican portraits. Their shapes may express age and experience, *gravitas* and *seueritas*, and hence the competences of a magistrate, but the disposition is sometimes very complex with asymmetries.

Could these wrinkles be signs as are cutaneous lesions? In chiromantics, future is pronosticated by reading in the hands lines that are called wrinkles, in Greek *rhytis*, in Latin *ruga*. A passage in Juvenal suggests that the wrinkles of the face could be read like the wrinkles of the hand: “If the woman be of a humble rank, she will promenade between the turning-posts of the circus; she will have the fortune told, and will present her brow and her hand to the seer who asks for many an approving smack.”<sup>66</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Juvenal, *Satires* 6.582–4.



6 After Cardan 1990, no. 145

Like chiromancy, this divinatory method perhaps remained oral until the Renaissance. Metoposcopy was explicitly practiced in parallel with chiromancies. Men were believed to bear printed on the head or the hand the sign or signature of his or her destiny. Planets were then associated with the marks.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>67</sup> In the Renaissance, chiromancy often composed with physiognomy and metoposcopy a common divination manual: “*Naturalis coniecturae tres sunt partes: Metoposcopia ex fronte, Chiromantia ex manibus, ex toto autem Physiognomia*”. Cf. Alexander Achillinus Bononiensis, *De Chiromantiae principiis et physiognomiae*, Bologna, 1503; Barthelemy Cocles, *Physiognomiae et chiromantiae Compendium*, Strasbourg, (1533). See Courtine and Haroche 1988 and the bibliography by P. Gerlach, *Bibliographie von Texten zur Physiognomik*, 400 v. Chr.–1999, <http://www.peter-gerlach.eu/pdf/Bibliographie/Alphabetisch.pdf>.



7 Munich, Staatliche Sammlung Ägyptischer Kunst ÄS 22. Black stone (h. 42 cm)

This hypothesis could explain the unusual grouping of wrinkles forming an enigmatic circle on the forehead of an Egyptian priest in black stone with a back pillar (fig. 7).<sup>68</sup> Was it the mark of a god, proving the legitimacy of the religious position of the priest? We know that in ancient Egypt sacred animals had to exhibit special physical marks, such the Apis bull, the manifestation of the god Ptah. Aelian explains that twenty-nine marks (*semeion*) must be clearly seen on the Apis bull, and that each mark symbolises a specific star: “and they say further that the marks indicate when the Nile will rise and the shape of the universe (*schema tou kosmou*) explain the shape of the crescent moon.”<sup>69</sup>

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Arecchi, A. (ed. et transl.) 1994** *Girolamo Cardano, Manuale per la lettura della fronte. Metoposcopia*. Milano.

**Baroin, C. 2002** “Les cicatrices ou la mémoire du corps.” In *Corps romains*, edited by Ph. Moreau, 27–44. Grenoble.

**Böck, B. 2000** *Die babylonisch-assyrische Morphoskopie*. Archiv für Orientforschung Beiheft 27. Wien.

**Böck, B. 2010** “Physiognomy in Ancient Mesopotamia and Beyond: from Practice to Handbook.” In *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World*, edited by A. Annus, 199–224. Chicago.

**Borg, B. 1998** “Der zierlichste Anblick der Welt ...” *Ägyptische Porträtmumien*. Mainz.

**Boschung, D. 2005** “Die Sammlung antiker Skulpturen des Nicolaas Rockox in Antwerpen.” *MüJb* 56: 7–39.

**Bottéro, J. 1974** “Symptômes, signes, écritures.” In *Divination et rationalité*, edited by J.-P. Vernant, 70–197. Paris.

**Bouché-Leclercq, A. 1879** *Histoire de la divination dans l'Antiquité*. Vol. 1. Paris (Reedition 2003, Grenoble).

**Boudon-Millot, V. 2003** “Médecine et esthétique: nature de la beauté et beauté de la nature chez Galien.” *BAssBudé*: 77–91.

---

<sup>68</sup> Dasen 2008, 230, fig. 1.

<sup>69</sup> Aelian, *History of Animals* 11.10. See also Herodotus 3.28.

- Boys-Stones, G. 2007** "Physiognomy and Ancient Psychological Theory." In *Seeing the Face, Seeing the Soul, Polemon's Physiognomy from Classical Antiquity to Medieval Islam*, edited by S. Swain, 19–124. Oxford.
- Cardan, J. 1990** *Jérôme Cardan (1501–1576). La métoposcopie*, Paris.
- Carmichael Calum, M. 1977** "A Ceremonial Crux: Removing a Man's Sandal as a Female Gesture of Contempt." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96: 321–36.
- Cordier, P. 2004** "Remarques sur les inscriptions corporelles dans le monde romain." *Pallas* 65: 189–98.
- Costanza, S. 2009** *Corpus palmomanticum Graecum*. Papyrologica Florentina 39. Firenze.
- Courtine, J.-J. and C. Haroche 1988** *Histoire du visage. Exprimer et taire ses émotions* (XVIe – début XIXe siècle). Paris.
- Dasen, V. 2007** "Autour du portrait romain: marques identitaires et anomalies physiques." In: *Le portrait. La représentation de l'individu*, edited by A. Paravicini Bagliani, J.-M. Spieser, J. Wirth, 17–33. *Micrologus* 17. Firenze.
- Dasen, V. 2008** "Le langage divinatoire du corps." In *Langages et métaphores du corps*, edited by V. Dasen and J. Wilgaux, 223–42. Cahiers d'histoire du corps antique 3. Rennes.
- Dasen, V. 2009** "Empreintes maternelles." In *La madre / The Mother*, 35–54. *Micrologus* XVII. Firenze.
- Dasen, V. 2015** *Le sourire d'Omphale. Maternité et petite enfance dans l'Antiquité*, Rennes.
- Dasen, V. and J. Wilgaux 2013** "De la palmomantique à l'éternuement, lectures divinatoires des mouvements du corps." In *Manteia. Pratiques et imaginaire de la divination grecque antique. XIIIe Colloque international du C.I.E.R.G.A., Paris 2011, Kernos*. 26, 111–122.
- Delatte, A. 1924** *Codices Atheniensis*. Catalogus codicum astrologorum Graecorum X. Bruxelles.
- Delatte, A. 1927** *Anecdota Atheniensia, I, Textes grecs inédits relatifs à l'histoire des religions*. Liège, Paris.
- Diels, H. 1908** "Beiträge zur Zuckungsliteratur des Okzidents und Orients, I, Die griechischen Zuckungsbücher (Melampus περι παλμών)." *Abhandlungen der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften aus dem Jahre 1907, Phil.-Hist. Klasse, Abh. 4*: 1–42. Berlin.
- Doxiadis, E. 1995** *Portraits du Fayoum: visages de l'Égypte ancienne*. Paris.
- Fahd, T. 1966** *La divination arabe. Etudes religieuses, sociologiques et folkloriques sur le milieu natif de l'Islam*. Leiden.
- Franz, J.G.F. 1780** *Scriptores Physiognomoniae Veteres*, Altenburg.

- Giuliani, L. 1986** *Bildnis und Botschaft. Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Bildniskunst der römischen Republik*. Frankfurt am Main.
- Gourevitch, D. 1977** "Stomachus et l'humeur," *RPhil* 51: 56–74.
- Hart, G.D. 1966** "Trichoepithelioma and the Kings of Ancient Parthia," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 94: 547–9.
- Hübsch, G. 1968** *Die Personalangaben als Identifizierungsvermerke im Recht der gräko-ägyptischen Papyri*. Berlin.
- Irby-Massie, G.L. and P.T. Keyser 2002** *Greek Science of the Hellenistic Era: a Sourcebook*. London, New York.
- Kockel, V. 1993** *Porträtreiefs stadtrömischer Grabbauten. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und zum Verständnis des spätrepublikanisch-frühkaiserzeitlichen Privatporträts*. Mainz am Rhein.
- Kriaras, E. 1977** *Lexicon of Medieval Greek Demotic Literature 1100–1669*, vol. 5. Thessaloniki.
- Langholf, V. 1990** *Medical Theories in Hippocrates. Early Texts and the 'Epidemics'*. Berlin, New York.
- Maul, S. 2003** *RLA* 10: 66–8, s.v. "Physiognomische omina und Verhaltensomina".
- Montero, S. 1993** "Plauto, *Mil.* 694 y los primeros metoposcopi latinos." *Dioniso* 63: 77–82.
- Oberhelman, S.M. 2008** *Dreambooks in Byzantium. Six Oneirocritica in Translation, with Commentary and Introduction*. Aldershot.
- Peruscius, C. 1545** *Aeliani uariae Historiae libri XIII: Ex Heraclide de rebus publicis Commentarium. Polemonis Physionomia. Adamantii Physionomia. Melampodis ex Palpitationibus diuinatio. De Neuis*, Rome.
- Popovic, M. 2007** *Reading the Human body. Physiognomics and Astrology in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Hellenistic-Early Roman Period Judaism*. Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah 67. Leiden, Boston.
- Rivière, Y. 2002** "Recherche et identification des esclaves fugitifs dans l'empire romain." In *L'information et la mer dans le monde antique*, edited by J. Andreau and C. Virlouvet, 115–96. Rome.
- Rizzardini, M. 2005** "La 'Lettura della pelle'. Introduzione alla metoposcopia di Girolamo Cardano." In *La pelle umana / The Human Skin*, 605–636. *Micrologus* 13. Firenze.
- Skoda, F. 1988** *Médecine ancienne et métaphore. Le vocabulaire de l'anatomie et de la pathologie en grec ancien*. Paris.
- Stamm, J.J. 1939** *Die akkadische Namengebung*. Leipzig.
- Sylburg, F. 1587** *Aristotelis Opera Quae Extant*. Francfort.

**Todman, D. 2008** “Warts and the Kings of Parthia: an Ancient Representation of Hereditary Neurofibromatosis Depicted in Coins.” *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* 17: 141–6.

**Trails, A. 2004** “A Haruspicy Joke in Plautus.” *CIQ* 54: 117–27.

**Versnel, H.S. 1998** “Καὶ εἴ τι λ[οιπὸν] τῶν μερ[ῶ]ν [ἔσ]ται τοῦ σώματος ὅλ[ο]υ [... ‘and any other part of the entire body there may be ...’]. An essay on anatomical curses.” In *Ansichten griechischer Rituale. Geburtstags-Symposium für Walter Burkert*, edited by F. Graf, 216–67. Stuttgart, Leipzig.

**Zubler, Chr. (forthcoming)** “Traduction d’un fragment de chiromancie grecque”.

---

## CREDITS

- 1 Photo DAI Rome 43.438.
- 2 After Boschung 2005, fig. 8.
- 3 Berlin, Staatliche Museen SK 840. Photo museum.
- 4 Trustees of the British Museum.
- 5 After Cardan 1990, fig. on p. 182.
- 6 After Cardan 1990, no. 145.
- 7 Munich, Staatliche Sammlung Ägyptischer Kunst ÄS 22. Photo museum.

## PLATES

- 4 After Borg 1998, 8, fig. 7.



4 Florence, Museo Archaeologico inv. 2411. Tempera on wood  
(32,5 cm × 20,5 cm)

INTERNATIONALES  
KOLLEG  
GEHESE DYNAMIK UND MEDIALITÄT  
KULTURELLEN FIGUREN  
MORPHOMATA

---

WILHELM FINK

ISBN 978-3-7705-5808-7



9 783701 580871