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J. Cale Johnson, Alessandru Stavru (Eds.)

VISUALIZING THE INVISIBLE WITH THE HUMAN BODY

PHYSIOGNOMY AND EKPHRASIS IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

Before scientific anatomy or Freud, the only way of divining someone's character or fate was to observe their external features and behavior. This volume focuses on two paradigmatic approaches to describing observable features and what they can tell us: physiognomy and ekphrasis. The fifteen contributions present the latest research on these modes of description from the Eastern Mediterranean, Mesopotamia and India in antiquity.

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IN ANCIENT CULTURES

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Visualizing the invisible with the human body

Science, Technology, and Medicine in Ancient Cultures

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Volume 10

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Introduction to "Visualizing the invisible with the human body: Physiognomy and ekphrasis in the ancient world"

Prior to the establishment of humoral medicine or scientific anatomy, one of the primary methods for divining the characteristics of an individual, whether inborn or temporary, was to observe the patient's external characteristics and behaviour. Within the Mesopotamian tradition the linkage between external form and internal characteristics was only a small part of an encompassing approach to predicting future conditions on the basis of presently visible signs (omens). This volume focuses on two types of descriptive literature in Mesopotamia: physiognomic omens as well as other descriptive paradigms that one might speak of, in general terms, as ekphrastic descriptions. Both of these descriptive paradigms grow out of the distinctively Mesopotamian obsession with enumeration.

In addition to the standard physiognomic compendia of Mesopotamian tradition, ekphrastic descriptions of physiognomic features play a crucial role also in the Graeco-Roman world. Long before the first physiognomic treatises were published under the name of Aristotle, detailed physiognomic descriptions occur right from the start of Graeco-Roman tradition, i.e. within the Homeric poems. Here specific parts of the bodies of gods, heroes and men are described in order to highlight otherwise not visible features of them such as kingship, nobility, love, wrath, and wickedness. From the Classical Age onwards, ekphrastic constructions of physiognomic features are both literary and visual: in some cases, literary and visual iconic media even interact, as the representations of famous historical figures such as Pericles, Socrates or Augustus show. In the Socratic tradition and especially in the Peripatus, physiognomic discussions became intertwined with the typological construction of characters. Roman rhetoricians such as Cicero and Quintilian applied these studies to rhetorical theory, and in the Second Sophistic the interaction between physiognomic features and ekphrastic description reached its climax (Polemon, Lucian, the two Philostrati, and Callistratus).

The Syriac and Arabic compendial cultures that grew out of Hellenistic scientific pursuits absorbed and reformulated these different physiognomic and ekphrastic traditions. Not surprisingly, in the Arabic scientific tradition we find both the traditional Mesopotamian links between physiognomy and medicine and the links between physiognomy and characterological types that had emerged in the Hellenistic period. These materials were then included in different types of compilations and compendia, from the *malhama* materials of Bar Bahlul to the explicit linkage of physiognomy and humoral temperaments found in Hunayn's annotations on the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Physiognomonica*.

The construction, depiction, or the reception of an existing or non-existing visual entity, necessarily involves the sender or recipient in a system of norms or codifications. These norms of representation may (or may not) be explicitly formulated, but in their own context, even as they are instantiated in particular depictions, the norms themselves only rarely find expression, as explicit statements, in another time or place, as for example in a philosophical treatise. Ordinary descriptive paradigms – sets of rules for mapping observed entities into linguistically mediated descriptions – are already complex transubstantiations of the visual. In this volume we will look more closely at two of such paradigms, both of which postulate or imply realities which are not directly visible: the theophantic manifestations of deities and the interior states of demi-human and human beings. Though not visible, these realities are presented, thanks to the description of facial and bodily features, as visually discernable entities: hence the ekphrastic value of physiognomy. As we will briefly outline here, and as several of the contributions to this volume go into in great depth, these special types of descriptive work are not "natural" nor "obvious" nor "culturally-neutral". And particularly in domains like physiognomy and ekphrasis, we bear witness to clear developments in the way these practices were conceptualized and implemented, as we move from the earlier Mesopotamian precursors to similar practices in the Graeco-Roman world, as well as in later Semitic language traditions and India. The time is not yet ripe for a discipline transcending synthesis of these different forms of intermedial texts: but this volume seeks to build the scaffolding and even a few bridges between these written and visual genres and practices in the ancient world.

The macro-historical shifts, as we move between these major cultural and civilizational domains, are probably most evident – or at least most easily explained and exemplified – within the domain of physiognomy. The Mesopotamian physiognomic corpus, which reached a certain level of maturity with Böck's *Habilitationsschrift*,[1] differs in several crucial ways form the physiognomic materials of Graeco-Roman tradition. Primarily, what sets the Greek materials apart from the Mesopotamian materials is the emergence of zoomorphic, climatological and racial models which are ultimately rooted in the robust activity of "nature". In contrast, the Mesopotamian materials, written in Akkadian and first impressed in clay in the Old Babylonian period (ca. 1800–1600 BE), approximately a millennium before the Greek sources, emerged in a society that was, in at least certain respects, "before nature". The centrality of *physis* 'nature' in the Graeco-Roman sources is hard to overstate: it is the driving force behind nearly all of the innovations that we find in long pre-existing genres or practices such as physiognomy. Put somewhat differently, whenever we find a major divergence between Mesopotamian and the Graeco-Roman world in a practice like physiognomy, we can usually expect that the Graeco-Roman sources have moved in the direction of a relatively autonomous sphere of *physis*, as the driving

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1 Böck 2000.

focus in any underlying model. Rochberg's recent synthesis of the "Before Nature" problem in Mesopotamia goes to great lengths to demonstrate that certain kinds of objective, scientific description were part and parcel of Mesopotamian intellectual activity throughout its long history, but perhaps more importantly, that the different modalities of scientific description that we find in early Mesopotamia (including physiognomy and ekphrasis) grow, in an organic way, out of a wide-reaching, perhaps even comprehensive approach to the recording of ominous signs in writing rather than an autonomous domain of "natural" processes.[2]

If divination, generally speaking, is usually conceptualized as the queen of the Mesopotamian sciences, she was not a wise, old dowager, presiding over the reigns of sons and grandsons; she was a newly married bride. The earliest pieces of technical literature that we have from Mesopotamia – technical in that they have the form of recipes and do not consist primarily of incantations – are the handful of pharmaceutical prescriptions from mid-third millennium Ebla and the Ur III period at the end of the third millennium. None of these earlier recipes or prescriptions include diagnostic or prognostic signs, even if the use of the prescriptions must have been tied to an oral system of diagnosis. No, the earliest solid examples of diagnosis and prognosis emerge in the Old Babylonian period, directly alongside other collections of ominous signs. While Graeco-Roman physiognomic diagnoses typically discern characteristics or personality traits that might generally lead to predictable outcomes in the fullness of time,[3] the physiognomic omens that we know from Mesopotamia are happy and fully inclined to make predictions of future events that will affect the bearer of a physiognomic feature, even where no underlying invisible characteristic can be imagined. This fact alone places Mesopotamian physiognomy squarely in the center of the omen-driven sciences of early Mesopotamia.

As has now been made abundantly clear in both Stefan Maul's magisterial history of Mesopotamian divination[4] and in Ulla Koch's comprehensive handbook of the divinatory sciences,[5] Mesopotamians conceptualized omens as messages sent by the gods that are meant to inform knowledgeable human specialists about the realities of the present and eventualities in the future. Regardless, however, of where we stand on the cline of divestiture that has gradually removed the gods and replaced them by an anonymous "nature," it should be obvious that the gods were omnipresent in Mesopotamian thought, even when they were no longer wilful and unpredictable. Even the most law-like of physical causal chains in Mesopotamian thought would

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2 Rochberg 2015.

3 In fact, prognostic physiognomy is totally absent from the Pseudo-Aristotelian treatises dating back to the 4th-century BC. It occurs in Polemon (2nd cent. AD), where it has however a marginal role if compared to the characterological descriptions. For evidence of prognostic diagnoses in Polemon, see Anonymus Latinus 133 and Leiden 67–70.

4 Maul 2013.

5 Koch 2015.

have been tied back, in a theologically appropriate way, to one deity or another. Or, to put the matter more bluntly, the fact that knowledge of the world comes from a deity rather than impersonal nature does not, in Mesopotamia at least, disqualify it as non-empirical; on the contrary, the divine warrant is evidence of its truth and reliability.

Bearing the central role of the gods in Mesopotamia firmly in mind, it should come as no tremendous surprise that ekphrasis in the ancient Near East also involves a necessarily divine moment. In the earliest genre that regularly includes ekphrasis in Mesopotamian literature, viz. the Tigi and Adab hymns in Classical Sumerian, the invisible entity that the writer-of-the-ekphrasis wishes to represent in linguistic or poetic form is a votive object that is planned and commanded by the deity, even if it is crafted and materialized by a human ruler. The ekphrastic description, originally vouchsafed from god to king, eventually finds its way into a hymn that celebrates the presentation of the votive offering back to the deity who ordered it. Here, with ekphrasis as well, therefore, a distinctive modality of description is used to "bring before the eyes" an object that exists only, up to that point, in the imagination of a god and subsequently the dream of the human king who receives the divine command. This kind of deity-centered generative process makes traditional definitions of, say, 'notional ekphrasis', where the object to be described exists only in the imagination of the person (or deity) writing or conceptualizing the ekphrasis, somewhat problematic.[6] The models of well-defined crafted objects normally derive from the gods in Mesopotamia, so it is little wonder that any object worthy of ekphrasis first exists in the mind of the god who requests it. After the fact, in the Mesopotamian conceptualization, we might even abbreviate matters by speaking of the hymn as an ekphrastic description of a carefully crafted work of art, viz. the votive object that the ruler will be presenting back to the deity, but in this act of abbreviation we move decisively away from how these phenomena were conceptualized in Mesopotamia.

Theophantic descriptions, viz. point-by-point enumerations of the parts and features of a divine object, being or locale, are probably more important to the history of ekphrasis in the Graeco-Roman and Semitic traditions than we might initially assume. These descriptions do not differ substantially from descriptions of demi-humans or ordinary human beings, such as those featured from the Homeric poems onward: also here the focus is very often on parts rather than on the whole of what is described (i.e., on parts of the human body). That being said, if we turn to the Greek sources that explicitly define ekphrasis, the focus is not on the object that is described, but on the vividness and the involvement of the viewer in the description of the object[7]: the

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6 Of course 'notional ekphrasis' is already problematic as soon as we look into the history of the term *phantasia* in Greek philosophy. As Squire (2013, 104) emphasizes, Philostratus's *Imagines* represents an extended meditation of these questions.
7 Webb 2009 and Stavru 2017.

earliest definition of ekphrasis ("ekphrasis is descriptive speech which vividly brings what is shown before the eyes") goes back to the *Progymnasmata* of the Alexandrian rhetor Aelius Theon (1st cent. AD), who was then followed nearly *verbatim* by other authors of *Progymnasmata*, such as the rhetors Hermogenes of Tarsus (2nd cent.), Aphthonius of Antioch (4th cent.), and Nicolaus the Sophist (5th cent.).

This vividness can be found in the Mesopotamian and West Semitic examples of ekphrasis surveyed in this volume, in particular in acts of "presencing" the relationship between the speaker and what he or she is speaking of. In the Sumerian Tigi Hymns this "presencing" is brought about through a direct address to the votive object in combination with a description of the ritual procedure through which the votive object is repatriated, as it were, back to the deity who originally conceived of it. In the Semitic forms of ekphrasis that Crawford surveys, however, we find this same act of presencing brought about through meticulous descriptions of the temples and tabernacles in which the deity manifests itself. This is very much the same process of presencing that we find in the Mesopotamian Tigi Hymns, but inflected through a culture that favored aniconic mediations of deity and limited votives dramatically. If nothing else, it can probably be said that odes to mundane objects, which play such a huge role in present-day poetries, did not exist in Mesopotamian or other early Semitic literatures. Ekphrastic descriptions do not appear in the midst of proverbs concerned with a dormouse or a slave girl. The distinctive form and presencing of early Mesopotamian ekphrasis is linked to properties or features in a deity, divine local or soon-to-be-divinized object. Object and entities in this distinct ontic realm were regularly prefixed in cuneiform by a determinative for the divine and the divinized. But then again, perhaps we would do well to reconsider the earliest and most famous ekphrastic description in Greek literature: the shield of Achilles is the handiwork of a god even though it is inhabited by humans. The rhetorical background of ekphrastic descriptions has tended to overwhelm and preoccupy scholarly discussions, but what seems to be at the center of early Greek ekphraseis (such as, for example, the Homeric descriptions of gods, heroes, and humans) is the tension between the human (i.e. the 'visible') and the divine (i.e. the 'invisible'), rather than any rhetoric-centered form of fictionality.

We hope that the studies assembled here can also, however obliquely, move forward the more general desideratum of a (meta-)iconic theorization of iconism. That is to say, how can iconic sign forms, whether in pictorial representation or written textualities, cite and recontextualize prior iconic sign forms. This project has been at the center of Graeco-Roman ekphrasis for several generations before we arrive at the ekphrastic descriptions of the Second Sophistic, and it has also been a favorite theme of Assyriologists and Egyptologists in recent years, as they have sought to make sense of primarily logographic writing systems that eschew explicit, denotationally mediated commentary for more or all of their history.[8] One important problem that

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[8] Cancik-Kirschbaum 2012 and Johnson 2013.

immediately arises as we attempt to unfold chains of citations running from the visual or written iconic medium backward to the object ekphrastically described is that the Classical Sumerian Tigi Hymns are not built around literary citations but rather coordinated descriptions of a votive object in at least two media: the fashioning of the artifact itself as well as the hymn that celebrates the votive. As noted above, it is wrong to see the hymn as derivative from the crafted object or vice versa. Instead, these coordinated representations of the divine plan operated within their own separate encodings and do not, as a rule, cite the other modality. The only place where this type of second-order citational reinterpretation is clearly visible in the cuneiform record is in the reuse of the ekphrastic paradigm made available by the Tigi Hymn in the theophany of the Anzu(d)-bird in the Lugalbanda Epics, where we see the same type of meta-ekphrastic rhetoric in play that characterizes Graeco-Roman ekphrasis, more generally.

How then can we characterize the commonalities that exist between physiognomy and ekphrasis, broadly conceived as extending throughout the ancient world? In contrast to many different forms of objective or factual description, both physiognomy and ekphrasis make use of the tools of description in order to depict characteristics, entities or fates that are not visible at the moment of description. The future-oriented character of both practices fits perfectly into the omen-driven epistemological models that dominate early Mesopotamian thought. As we move away from this primordial context, however, we find the discussion shift increasingly to the representation of atemporal or at least unchanging characteristics and principles, whether a physiognomy like that of a lion representing "courage" or perhaps the supposedly Greek-speaking lips of the Persian queen Rhodogoune in Philostratus' *Imagines*. These prototypical links between a visible characteristic (lion-like appearance) and a non-visible characteristic (courage) play easily into Aristotelian models, but we should not lose sight of the fact that this kind of linkage between the observable and the non-observable can also be found in the omen-drenched milieu of the land between the two rivers.

The fifteen contributions in the volume present cutting-edge research from both experienced and younger researchers, and draws its exempla from the Eastern Mediterranean, Mesopotamia and India. More importantly, this volume situates the relatively well-known practice of physiognomy within a much broader set of structured descriptive paradigms, the first major element in the early scientific traditions that arose in Mesopotamia, Syro-Palestine and the Eastern Mediterranean in the 2nd and 1st millennium BCE. In fact, the connection between physiognomy and ekphrasis appears even more evident in the Graeco-Roman world: chapters of this volume investigate this connection from 700 BC to 500 AD, in a timeframe reaching from Homer to the Second Sophistic (including Aristotle, Polemon, Philostratus, Callistratus, the *Progymnasmata*, and Latin authors such as Cicero, Quintilian, and Svetonius). With the older materials from Mesopotamia and the Graeco-Roman world in place, this volume then turns to later traditions in India and the Arabic-speaking world, in

particular the way in which elements of older physiognomic traditions were incorporated into multifarious technical compendia for rulers, such as the *Sirr al-asrār*, and a reconstruction of a Greek text on physiognomy that can be reconstructed through the scattered fragments found in a 14th century Arabic manuscript from Muhammad al-Dimashqi. What these seemingly heterogeneous materials have in common is the centrality of compendial configuration and the labelling of authorities in the latter phases of this tradition. Whether the movement of the physiognomy section from a chapter on medicine to a distinct section on the administration of justice within the *Sirr al-asrār*, or the careful annotation of sources in the materials assembled by al-Dimashqi, these late compendial sources demonstrate the fundamental modularity of the physiognomic materials in the later tradition.

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