

About Face: Ancient Physiognomy and Conflict

The Greeks often attributed bestial qualities to their heroes and statesmen as the simplest type of illustrative comparison. This tradition can be traced back to Homer's *Iliad*, where similes occur in battle scenes and heroes are likened to dogs, lions and other wild beasts; all of which are formidable predators symbolizing strength, courage and aggression. These symbols are more than wholly stylistic and it is important to note that no comparisons or general allusion to animals are made for those not directly affiliated with a *basileus* or *anax*. In the 8th Century BCE, pedigree was already influencing what excellence “looked like”.

The 4th Century BCE pseudo-Aristotelian treatise on physiognomy, the "science" of interpreting the personality of an individual by reading their various physical characteristics echoes the previous sentiment, stating that in order to analyze permanent physical features they should be correlated with the unique attributes of animals. (*Phgn.* 1.806a 8-10). Cows have big, sleepy eyes and humans that look like cows are subsequently lazy. Lions have tawny, erect hair and humans with such are subsequently proud. With such a “straight forward” tradition, the 'reading' of physiognomy was certainly a subject known to the erudite citizenry of the time. Even the late Classical portraits of Alexander the Great by his court artist Lysippos (known for his unprecedented sculptural treatment of the Apoxyomenos and Herakles Farnese) illustrate a conscious decision to incorporate features into the King's representations to make him appear more 'leonine' and 'courageous'. (Kiilerich 1988) The study of physiognomy, though questioned, was further promulgated by Polemon of Laodicea, an Anatolian Greek from a family of Roman consular rank. His 2nd Century CE treatise on the subject remained so popular that it is preserved for us as a 14th Century Arabic translation suggesting a continued, multicultural and cross-chronological interest in the topic.

The aim of this paper is to look at artistic representations of the non-elite Other through a physiognomic lens in order to answer questions about intent and reception. The representations of those Greeks considered *barbaroi* are particularly relevant, since the idea of 'Greekness' itself was not based on geographic location or ethnicity but rather, according to Isocrates' *Panegyricus*, intellectualism and education (4.50). Are there visual *semeia* that extended outside clothing and iconography that identified "otherness" and if so, when read, what information do these physical characteristics divulge about the character of a "barbarian"? Were representations of the Other a sincere attempt at a legitimate visual record, or did their inclusion serve to highlight their role as passive agents in the larger visual repertoire? Did ceramic decoration, frescoes, and portraits, all of which were not totally accessibility to the general public, act to further marginalize the marginalized?

Bibliography

Kiilerich, B. 1988. "Physiognomics and the Iconography of Alexander," *SymbOslo* 63: 51-66.