a person, draw conclusions about that person’s inner character. In fact, this way of scrutinizing someone else is an action that we regularly perform, till today, albeit often in an unconscious way. We look at someone and we immediately make an assessment of that person’s inner self, his soul, his character, of what he may mean to us. Popular wisdoms such as ‘the first impression is also the last impression’ are based on this way of looking at the other. Apart from its use in daily life, where it is an obvious survival strategy of the physiognomist, the more formal use of physiognomy in pre-modern times was in the slave trade and in the social intercourse with those in power. Either of these involves a consideration of security, the former in as far as the safety of the house and family is concerned (in which one invites an unknown person), whereas the latter provides a sense of security to all those whose life or work brings them in contact with rulers, princes and all those who are placed above us. In modern times physiognomy is still very much in use in human resources departments in corporations and organizations, but as a discipline it has become less formally organized than it used to be.

Physiognomy, though traditionally placed in the natural sciences, is not, anymore, a scientific endeavor for the simple reason that, although physiognomists can sometimes have surprisingly deep insights in the character of another person, they are not able to describe their procedures in an objective way that would enable another physiognomist to repeat them with an identical outcome. In that modern sense of the word it is not an exact science since objective validation is not possible. In the modern world there is still a science related to physiognomy which gives us information about someone’s character: graphology. It is assumed to tell us about someone’s inner self by an analysis of that person’s handwriting. Till recently the ‘science’ of graphology was of great importance in the context of corporate human resources. It would be interesting to find out whether precursors of graphology have existed in Classical Antiquity and the World of Islam. Like physiognomy, graphology can give surprising results and it has developed impressive methods of work, but at the end of the day its experiments cannot be repeated, and therefore it is not a science in the modern sense of the word. Such pseudo-sciences are, like astrology, alchemy and the divinatory sciences, nevertheless worthy of our attention since they show the early attempts of pre-scientific man to obtain a fuller understanding of the worlds around him.

If physiognomy tells us about the relationship between outward form and inner content, it must also provide a theory about that inner self. Much of what is said in connection to the divinatory process that is involved in physiognomy has a relevance to the science of the soul, psychology. Yet this theoretical approach is not the modus operandi of the one figure that stands out as the great physiognomist of Hellenistic times, and whose work is at the centre of the book here under review, the Greek rhetorician and sophist Marcus Antonius Polemon (c. 88-144 CE) of Laodicæa, in present-day Anatolia.

Polemon was in no way the only physiognomist of Classical Antiquity, nor the first one. Before him Aristotle had studied it and cursorily treated it in his writings. The Physiognomonika ascribed to Aristotle has survived as the only classical text on physiognomy earlier than Polemon. Classical Greek and Latin authors, Plato and others, have written many passages of physiognomical relevance (see Richard
the form of Afl (d. 1286 CE). In the Arabic context the author’s name takes
the Arabic version. A translation from Greek into Syriac is
(3rd century CE or later), and that can be complemented with
content lives on in an abridgment by Adamantius the Sophist
Greek text is not entirely lost, though, as part of its original
overview of all issues of physiognomy. Polemon’s original
great number of anecdotes Polemon gives his readers a full
and at the same time an experienced storyteller. Reading
Especially in the longer chapters a wealth of anecdotes is
other topics connected with foretelling someone’s destiny.
36-40 on the colours of the parts of the body, chapters 41-48
on the movements of the body, chapters 51-66 on several
other topics connected with foretelling someone’s destiny.
 Especially in the longer chapters a wealth of anecdotes is
given, which show that Polemon is an excellent observer,
and at the same time an experienced storyteller. Reading
Polemon’s text gives literary pleasure.

It is the merit of the remarkable book here under review,
that the different transitions of the work of Polemon from the
Greek world into Syriac, Arabic and Latin forms are brought
together, both in their original languages and in an English
translation, and excellently documented at that. This was
done by an interdisciplinary team of classical and Arabist
philologists and historians of medicine, with Simon Swain as
the general editor to the volume. It has become the book to
do away with its predecessors, in other words the one-stop
work about more than a millennium of the history of the
reception of Polemon’s physiognomy in the Middle East and
Europe.

Approximately half of Seeing the Face is taken up by
essays, the other half by editions and translations. The basic
division of the book is into three parts, two of which can be
considered as monographs in themselves, whereas the third
part contains the editions and translations of Polemon’s texts
on physiognomy. The volume opens with Simon Swain’s
general introduction to the volume (pp. 1-16). The first part
contains essays on physiognomy in Classical Antiquity (pp.
19-224): George Boys-Stones (pp. 19-124) treats ‘Physiogn-
omy and Ancient Psychological Theory’. This is followed
by ‘Polemon’s Physiognomy’ by Simon Swain (pp. 125-201)
and by ‘Physiognomics: Art and Text’, by Jas Elnser (pp.
203-224). The second, islamological, part (pp. 227-325)
equally contributes. Robert Hoyland treats
‘The Islamic Background to Polemon’s Treatises’ (pp. 227-
280). This is followed by ‘The Semiotic Paradigm: Physiog-
nomy and Medicine in Islamic Culture’, by Antonella Ghers-
setti (pp. 281-308), and ‘Polemon’s Physiognomy in the
Arabic Tradition’, by Antonella Ghersetti together with
Simon Swain (pp. 309-325).

The third part contains the primary sources: critical edi-
tions, together with translations into English, of the two Arab-
wegian versions of Polemon’s physiognomy (pp. 329-463: Rob-
Hoyland’s edition and translation of the Leiden Polemon;
p. 465-485: Antonella Ghersetti’s edition and translation of
the Istanbul Polemon), the Greek abridgment of Adamantius
in Greek and English (pp. 487-547, by Ian Repath), and
the anonymous compilation in Latin, also with translation (pp.
549-635, also by Ian Repath) follow suit. This third part
closes with an appendix containing the Physiognomy of
pseudo-Aristoteles (pp. 637-661, in an edition and translation
presented by Simon Swain). Thereby almost all relevant
physiognomical primary sources which are directly related to
Polemon have been made available in both their original lan-
guages and in modern translations. The volume closes
with an extensive bibliography, in which strangely enough the dif-
f erent versions of the work by Polemon are not mentioned,
and with a general index, which is disagreeably incomplete for
a work containing so much practical information. If phi-
loogy in its wider sense is reconstructing a text within,
and with reference to, its cultural context which is thereby evo-
cated, we have here at hand, with this excellent work of
encycopedic dimension on Polemon’s physiognomy, an
example of what philology can be at its very best. However,
this review cannot only contain praise, and after the initial
admiration for the project as a whole, there are details, at
second thought, which deserve doubt and criticism. I men-
tion a few of the most conspicuous points hereunder.

Robert Hoyland’s edition of the Leiden manuscript of the
Arabic Polemon is not the first edition of the text. George
Hoffmann had already produced an edition of the Leiden
Polemon (in Foerster, Scriptores physiognomonici (1893),
vol. I, pp. 93-294). There are differences between the two
editions of the same text, even if they are based on the same, only known, manuscript. Comparing the two editions shows us a shift of ideas in editing that has taken place in the century between the two editions, from ideas how a text should be to how a text actually is. Hoffmann has made a more or less ‘correct’ Arabic text, but it is a normalized version of Arabic which he presents to his readership. Any researcher who is confronted with anomalies in manuscripts, orthographical or other, may have some appreciation for this, but the question is rather whether the deviations from the grammatical norm in the Leiden text of the Arabic Polemon can be considered as of merely orthographic nature. I think they cannot. It is, from its first page onwards, obvious that the Arabic of the Leiden Polemon is not an example of al-‘arabiyya al-fushá, the normatively organized written Arabic language. Hoyland tends to treat the deviations in the Leiden manuscript from the norm as mere colloquialisms, but here he is, I think, mistaken. The overall impression we gain of the text in the Leiden manuscript of Polemon is one of Middle Arabic showing aspirations to attaining the level of the literary language, but never quite succeeding in doing so. Hoffmann would, according to Hoyland, have produced ‘what he thought the Arabic text should have looked like’ (Seeing the Face, p. 329). This is not entirely the case as Hoffmann did certainly not correct all grammatical errors, and often ‘obeys’ the manuscript, even where this is obviously wrong according to the norms of classical grammar.

A case in point is in the very beginning of the text: MS Leiden Or. 198, f. 1b, line 3, has yashāmtīl ʿālā sabʿīn bābān, and both Hoffmann and Hoyland have sabʿūn, which is incorrect Arabic. Yet they agree that it cannot be ignored as that is how it is unambiguously written in the manuscript. That the language of the Leiden manuscript is ‘in general […] written in reasonably good classical Arabic (non-literary style, but that is to be expected of a scientific treatise)’ as Hoyland has it (Seeing the Face, p. 330) cannot be a serious proposition. It is evident from the Arabic text of the Leiden Polemon that the translation from Greek into Arabic was not made by someone with a profound knowledge of the requirements of classical Arabic grammar. If the text in the Leiden manuscript nevertheless shows relatively few variants (Hoyland’s physiognomy)...

One mere detail: Hoyland (Seeing the face, pp. 462-463), without further ado, glues the colophon at the end of the Leiden manuscript (f. 76a, after a divinatory text ascribed to al-Gāhīz and a short treatise ascribed to Hippocrates in the Arabic translation by Hunayn b. Ishāq) to his edition of the first text in that volume, Polemon’s Physiognomy. This is somewhat disconcerting, to say the least, as that colophon, relevant though it may be, is in no way part of the text of Polemon’s Physiognomy.

In contrast to the richness in content of this book, its visual dimension is decidedly poor. Jaś Elsner’s contribution is illustrated with images of Alexander the Great and of the Roman emperor Hadrian, a contemporary of Polemon, but none of the other contributions to the volume is illustrated. Including images of busts of Hadrian makes sense. It is known that Polemon stood in high regard with this emperor, and one might even speculate, in an idle moment of diversion, whether Marguerite Yourcenar, in her Mémoires d’Hadrien, may have preserved some of Polemon’s observations, and if so, through which chain of secondary sources that can have taken place. Unfortunately no illustrations from manuscripts at all are given in this collective volume containing editions of texts based on manuscript sources. A few images of the manuscripts used for the edition of each text in the volume would not have been a superfluous luxury. Editors can say what they wish about the texts they bring out in print, but for the reader the proof of their pudding is by looking at the images of the original source material. This is really a missed opportunity.

There exists yet another treatise in Greek which is connected to Polemon. Several manuscripts are preserved and it was published in Rome in as early as 1545. It seems to be a much later, Byzantine compilation, however. Unfortunately that later work, spurious as it may be, has not been included in the present collection of Swain c.s. Its text was published in 1893 by Richard Foerster (Scriptores Physiognomonicorum, vol. 1, pp. 298-426), where the author is referred to as pseudo-Polemon. Ian Repath (Seeing the Face, pp. 490-491) explains the relationship between Adamantius and this pseudo-Polemon. The first is an ‘old’ author of at least ‘after the third century AD’ (ibid., p. 487), whereas behind this pseudo-Polemon stands in fact a late Byzantine author. The latter’s work can only serve as a help in the edition of Adamantius’ physiognomy, hence its inferior place under Adamantius’ text in Foerster (Scriptores Physiognomonicorum, vol. 1, pp. 298-426). It is regrettable that the authors of the present collective work did not go the extra mile and decided to ignore this text. They did not take into account that for centuries it was ascribed to Polemon and that it has been a witness for the reception of Polemon in the Middle-Ages and...
the Renaissance. Apart from the casual remark by Repath (Seeing the face, pp. 490-491), this is not made clear. The textual transmission of Polemon’s Physiognomy is quite complex, to say the least. It would have helped the reader of the work here under review, if the editor had provided a schematical representation of the textual history. A simple overview in the form of a tree or a time-line, could have achieved this, and I see the absence of such an aid as a flaw in the didactics of the present book.

However, all this petty criticism is not given in order to belittle the enormous achievement of Simon Swain and his authors. Their book is many steps forward in the research on physiognomy in Classical Antiquity and the European and Islamic Middle Ages. From a number of different disciplines they have brought together, in one impressive volume, a great number of primary sources about Polemon’s work on physiognomy. They have excellently edited and translated these sources and they have evaluated them in a number of most enlightening essays. That is the first, and also the last, impression of the present reviewer.

Leiden, November 28, 2011

Jan Just WITKAM