

Labeling Thoughts

by

M. J. Geller

University College London
m.geller@ucl.ac.uk

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DOI: [10.33137/aestimatio.v4.43078](https://doi.org/10.33137/aestimatio.v4.43078)

Aestimatio ns 4 (2023) dsc01: 1–7

Abstract

A discussion of *Visualizing the Invisible with the Human Body, Physiognomy and Ekphrasis in the Ancient World*, edited by J. Cale Johnson and Alessandro Stavru, that focuses on what common ground the numerous ancient cultures that the book encompasses share and on how this bears on the study of Mesopotamian culture.

About the Author

M. J. GELLER received his first degree from Princeton University in 1970 and his doctorate from Brandeis University in 1974. In 1976, he was appointed to a lectureship at University College London, where he has been teaching ever since. He has held fellowships at the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung, the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies in Wassenaar, and the Institute for Advanced Study, Paris.

He was visiting professor at the Paris École Pratique des Hautes Études and has been a regular visiting fellow at the Max Planck Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte in Berlin. Between 2010 and 2018, he was on secondment from University College London as Professor für Wissensgeschichte at the Freie Universität, Berlin and was principal investigator of a European Research Council Advanced Grant BabMed on ancient Babylonian medicine.

He received honorary doctorates from the New Bulgarian University in 2009 and from Sofia University in 2019 and was given a Festschrift in 2018.

Keywords physiognomics, *ekphrasis*, omens, human body

The human body is an ideal medium for cross-cultural comparisons since everyone shares the same field of inquiry and much of the basic terminology for anatomical components is refreshingly unambiguous. Nevertheless, as with dreams, the basic data may be recognizable between cultures but interpretations can differ significantly, and this rule of thumb applies to analytical descriptions of human anatomy as well as to viewing human physiognomy as an indication of character or future prospects. *Visualizing the Invisible with the Human Body, Physiognomy and Ekphrasis in the Ancient World*, edited by J. Cale Johnson and Alessandro Stavru,¹ focuses on the topics of *ekphrasis* and physiognomic omens and signs in a broad selection of Mesopotamia's numerous languages (from the 3rd millennium BC to the Middle Ages) as well as in Graeco-Roman rhetoric, including in technical omen texts and historical and philosophical writings. The book is divided into three sections: Mesopotamia and India, classical Antiquity, and Semitic traditions, with the last section including Ugaritic, Hebrew, and Arabic.

The essential question is whether the book, *Visualizing the Invisible*, “works” and whether it is possible to identify common ground for so many different languages, epistemes, and curricula, crossing over between Occident and Orient. For starters, the category of *ekphrasis* is controversial. A definition is eventually offered on page 5, citing a first-century AD Greek definition from Aelius Theon of Alexandria: “descriptive speech which vividly brings what is known before the eyes” [4–5]. This epigrammatic phrase is expanded by Antti Lampinen, who says that “vividness” (ἐνάργεια) and “clarity” (σαφήνεια) were crucial qualities of *ekphrasis*, essentially “stereotype[s] of behavior, *ethnos*, or gender”.² Moreover, almost all the classical contributions in *Visualizing the Invisible* agree that there is a special connection between *ekphrasis*, physiognomics, and rhetoric, which Laetitia Marcucci defines as

¹ Science, Technology, and Medicine in Ancient Cultures 10. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2019. Pp. vi + 501. ISBN 978–3–11–061826–6/ISBN (PDF) 978–3–11–064269–8/ISBN (ePub) 978–3–11–064268–1. Open Access: <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783110642698/html>.

² Ch. 10: “Physiognomy, Ekphrasis, and the ‘Ethnographicising’ Register in the Second Sophistic”, 265.

“the art of persuasion”.³ The problem is whether any of this resonates with Mesopotamia.

One obstacle is the lack of any traditional teaching of rhetoric in Babylonia involving formal instruction in oratory and argument. Perhaps Akkadian prayers to convince the gods of the suppliant’s sincerity and innocence could be described as rhetoric, but Babylonian scribes would hardly have recognized this term. On the other hand, Greek labels can at times play a significant role in interpretation, such as in the example of Pythagorean calculations in Babylonian tablets: How would we recognize them without knowing Pythagoras? In this vein, Cale Johnson argues for *ekphrasis* in Sumerian literature “in the circumscribed context of the manifestation of the divine presence in a form visible in the mundane world”.⁴ This statement is reminiscent, however, of the idea of the “numinous” in Sumerian religion in relation to the gods, as argued in Thorkild Jacobsen’s classic redrafting of Rudolph Otto’s theory of the divine numinous as the “Wholly Other”, i.e., outside of human experience [Jacobsen 1976, 3]. In the case of *ekphrasis*, the more neutral term “description” might suffice for Mesopotamian literature, which also lacks abstract terms for “vividness” and “clarity”.

The question is whether nuances derived from later literature can be applied retrospectively. Cory Crawford applies *ekphrasis* to Akkadian, Ugaritic, and biblical texts, citing passages that intend to make “the invisible visible” and “their audience see”,⁵ referring to the Gilgamesh Epic with its exhortation to “see the wall” of Uruk [289]. However, “ekphrasis” was usually applied to physical features of a human subject, as was also true of physiognomics; alternately, as explained by Gian Franco Chai, the Greeks taught that “the face is said to be the mirror of the mind”.⁶ Stretching the meaning of “ekphrasis” to include descriptions of Baal’s tools in Ugaritic or of Solomon’s temple in the Bible dilutes the meaning of the term almost beyond recognition. The fact remains that there is no Akkadian terminology

³ Ch. 8: “Physiognomic Roots in the Rhetoric of Cicero and Quintilian: The Application and Transformation of Traditional Physiognomics”, 184.

⁴ Ch. 1: “Demarcating Ekphrasis in Mesopotamia”, 36.

⁵ Ch. 12: “The Question of Ekphrasis in Ancient Levantine Narrative”, 287.

⁶ Ch. 9: “Good Emperors, Bad Emperors: The Function of Physiognomic Representation in Suetonius: *De vita Caesarum* and Common Sense Physiognomics”, 215.

equivalent to Greek “ekphrasis”. Although similar concepts may be identified in Mesopotamia and elsewhere, no such topic was ever part of any non-Hellenized curriculum.

This same question applies to physiognomics, which began as technical literature in Mesopotamia but became popular in India⁷ and later in classical texts and Arabic literature (as treated in parts 2 and 3 of *Visualizing the Invisible*). Mladen Popovic previously noted the difference between Babylonian and Greek inferences from physiognomy:

Greco-Roman physiognomics was by and large concerned with the discernment of people’s characters, whereas the predictive function was minimal. [Popovic 2007, 71]

In this volume, chapters 3⁸ and 4⁹ provide ample evidence of Akkadian physiognomic omens as prognoses reflecting future prospects of the subject, either positive or negative: “His descendant will perish...all that he owns will perish...his work will prosper” [90]. This differs substantially from the pseudo-Aristotelian understanding of physiognomics, which, as explained by Marcucci, is divided into the three general concepts—“ethos”, “pathos”, and “logos”—that deal with the personality of the physiognomic omen in terms of its expression of the morality of the subject’s behavior, the emotional content of the subject’s speech, and the plausibility of the signs [193].

Alessandro Stavru focuses on pathos as the emotional component in both physiognomics and *ekphrasis* based on Greek notions of body and soul, which are not shared in Mesopotamia.¹⁰ This is not to say that Mesopotamian omens lacked pathos since omens always have an emotional component, whether (predominantly) negative or positive, as in examples supplied by Salin:

[If the lesion] is located on the top of his forehead, he will achieve what he wishes. [If the lesion] is located on the right of his forehead, hardship will affect him, belittling of a man. [65]

⁷ Ch. 2: Kenneth Zysk, “Mesopotamian and Indian Physiognomy”.

⁸ Silvia Salin, “*Umṣatu* in Omen and Medical Texts: An Overview”.

⁹ Eric Schmidtchen, “The Series *Šumma Ea liballiṭka* Revisited”.

¹⁰ Ch. 6, “Pathos, Physiognomy and Ekphrasis from Aristotle to the Second Sophistic”. See Geller 2023 on ch. 5: “Late Babylonian Astrological Physiognomy” by Marvin Schreiber.

Moreover, ethos can also be found in a collection of Akkadian omens edited in *Visualizing the Invisible* titled *Šumma Ea liballitka*, “If Ea (is present), may he heal you”. The aspect of ethos is apparent from the omens that comment on personal behavior rather than on physical characteristics, such as the following:

If he is angry against people, he will be belittled. If he rages (lit. gnashes) against people, the end of days. If calm, he will eat normal food. [91]

Other omens are based on what the client says, such as:

If (he says), “may Ishtar heal you: grief”; ...if (he says), “(my) stomach is burning me”, he is answerable to Sīn [lit. he has the moon-god over him]; if he says, “(my) foot is stinging me”, he is answerable to Shamash [lit. he has the sun-god over him]. [87]

Such omens based on the client’s own words rather than his physical features also form a separate “tablet”, or chapter, of physiognomic omens known as KA.TA.DU₁₁.GA [lit. “what is spoken from the mouth”: see Böck 2000, 130–145].

Finally, the category of *logos* can be found in Akkadian physiognomic omens in the form of animal analogies, in accordance with the pseudo-Aristotelian theory of relating physical characteristics to typical features of animals, as explained by Stavru [145–146]. Akkadian omens also highlight human anatomical characteristics that correspond to those of animals, e.g.:

If he has the face of a lion, he will act appropriately; if he has the face of a dog, he will be poor, his days will be short; if he has the face of a pig, he will experience evil [and] die in his prime. [101]

The basic logic is that singular traits are associated with animals that lack complex personalities, and hence any human traits resembling animals will reflect these dominant traits, almost like a caricature.

These somewhat imperfect but nonetheless intriguing parallels between Akkadian and Greek physiognomics do not constitute proof of borrowing since there is no evidence that pseudo-Aristotle or other classical authors were aware of Akkadian omen literature. Nevertheless, the widespread popularity and longevity of physiognomics is clear from these comparisons, which is also apparent from the final section of this book, which deals with physiognomics in Arabic. It may be of interest to mention Slavonic translations of physiognomic passages from Arabic and Hebrew of the *Secretum Secretorum* [Ryan and Taube 2019, 50]. Although most of the individual contributions to *Visualizing the Invisible* are orientated toward their own disciplines, the editors, Johnson and Stavru, have combined them into an imaginative interdisciplinary compendium, which indeed “works”. The

comparisons suggested here have only been possible because of the interdisciplinary framework of the book, which was conceived within Berlin's Topoi Excellence Cluster, a model project for all interdisciplinary work on antiquity.

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