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Physical Descriptions, Biometrics, and Eikonographia in Graeco-Roman Papyri from Egypt

By

Ella Karev



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“Ammonius son of Achilles, Persian, aged about 35, medium height, honey-coloured (skin), wavy hair, long face, balding, a scar on his right temple, pierced right ear (Ἀμμώνιος Ἀχιλλέως Πέρσης ὡς (ἐτῶν) λε μέσος μελίχρως ὑποκλαστός μακροπρόσωπος ἀναφάλαντος) οὐλή κροτάφωι δεξιῶι ὦς δεξιὸν τετρημένος).”

– P. Grenf. 2.15 (139 BC)

Digital painting by Ella Karev (2024)

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Preface and Acknowledgements

This book was a happy accident. Any Greek papyrologist working with documentary texts of the Ptolemaic or Roman periods—myself included—has inevitably stumbled upon a physical description of an individual. When researching these descriptions, such a papyrologist would have had one reference work, written in German in 1968 and which did not, to my chagrin, collate all of the descriptions in one place. And so, I set out to do just that.

At first, the idea was that this was to be an article focusing on my own topic of interest, namely the descriptions of enslaved persons. But as the data set grew into the thousands, eccentricities abounded: I noted scars on teeth, inclusion of some traits alongside the exclusion of others, and bizarre patterns in geographical and chronological distribution. The question which troubled me most was why the majority of the Roman population of Egypt seemingly bore scars. I was also fascinated by how this all seemed to work as a system; I was able to track individuals across four-decade careers based on their physical descriptions alone. Suddenly, modern studies on population tracking and biometrics became relevant. I began writing, and this book was born.

As with any book, there are people and institutions to thank for their aid and encouragement. First of all, I must thank the University of Chicago's Humanities Teaching Fellows programme. As a postdoctoral fellow, the programme provided me with the time, resources, and financial support to continue the work on the data set and manuscript. Although I hadn't joined the Turin Humanities Programme at the time of writing, I am also grateful to Nino Luraghi for inviting me to join the programme and for his continued interest in the project. I would also like to thank Sandra Schloen and Miller Prosser at the University of Chicago, who imported the first draft of the data set into OCHRE. Although the data from this work will not eventually be housed in OCHRE, the process taught me a great deal about integrated databases and how my own needed to be formatted. Thanks are also due to the American Association of Historians and the Mommsen Society, who invited me to present the subject of this book in their inaugural lecture series; the organisers and participants added valuable commentary and feedback. A final thanks to the Sonia & Marco Nadler Institute of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University, where in 2024 I happily accepted the invitation to join their wonderful faculty.

I would not have been able to complete this project without the online papyrological databases papyri.info and trismegistos.org, and, of course, the people who run them. Trismegistos deserves a special mention, as the data from this work will both be available on the Trismegistos Corpus Data and also

integrated into the database itself. I particularly thank Yanne Broux for being so forthcoming and interested in the project, but also Mark Depauw for writing an excellent article in 2011 which launched my thoughts regarding the overarching administration of these descriptions. A sincere thank you to Brill Publications for including this monograph in their Harvard Egyptological Series, and particularly to Katelyn Chin for her faith in an early career scholar as well as this project (and for always promptly answering my emails).

On a more personal level, thanks are due to Ari Bryen for his insights on an early version of the dataset and discussion on wounds and violence in Roman Egypt. An enormous debt of gratitude is owed to Seth Richardson for the space I occupied in his office while this book was being written and edited, the ideas tossed back and forth, the reassurance to keep going, and the excitement at each new discovery. I would be remiss not to mention the support and encouragement I received from Alison Ruiz, Leah Packard Grams, Sofia Torallas Tovar, and of course my family: my parents Ori and Iris Karev, my brother Adam Karev and his wife Magdalena Gendelman, and even (though she cannot read and never will) my little dog Kookie.

Lastly, I want to thank my grandmother Ziva Kronzon, who first took me as a small child to see the Fayum portraits at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who taught me to paint tempera portraits of my own at her dining room table, and who always encouraged my endless questions by taking me by the hand and leafing through her vast library alongside me to find the answers. It is to her that this book is dedicated.

Ἑλλά Ὀρους μητρὸς Ἰριδος, Ἰουδαία, ἐτῶν λβ, βραχεῖα, λευκόχρως, μακρο-
πρόσωπος, ὑπόγρυπος, κλαστόθριξ, τριβέα, οὐλή ὑπὸ γόνατι δέξιον.

Ella daughter of Ori and Iris, Jewish, aged 32, short, white-skinned, long-
faced, hook-nosed, curly-haired, tattooed, *oulē* on the right knee.

Tel Aviv, December 2024

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Abbreviations

- CDD* Johnson, J., ed. *The Demotic Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*. Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2001.
- LSJ* H. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon. 9th Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940.
- TLA* *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* <<https://thesaurus-linguae-aegyptiae.de>>, Corpus issue 17, Web app version 2.01, 12/15/2022, ed. by Tonio Sebastian Richter & Daniel A. Werning by order of the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften and Hans-Werner Fischer-Elfert & Peter Dils by order of the Sächsische Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig.
- Wb* A. Erman and W. Grapow. *Wörterbuch der ägyptische Sprache*, 7 vols. Leipzig; J.C. Hinrichs Verlag, 1937.
- MMA* Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA.