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1

The Byzantine Ideal of Beauty: Definitions and Perceptions

The sight of him inspired admiration [...] his stature was such that he towered almost a full cubit over the tallest men. He was slender of waist and flanks, with broad shoulders and chest [...] he was neither taper of form nor heavily built and fleshy, but perfectly proportioned – one might say that he conformed to the Polyclitean ideal. [...] The skin all over his body was very white, except for his face which was both white and red. His hair was lightish-brown [...] Whether his beard was red or of any other colour I cannot say, for the razor had attacked it, leaving his chin smoother than any marble. However, it appeared to be red. His eyes were light-blue and gave some hint of the man's spirit and dignity.

Anna Komnene, *Alexiad*, tr. E.R.A. Sewter,
*The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*¹

It is with these words that Anna Komnene describes the Western warrior Bohemond, one of the Emperor Alexios I Komnenos's foremost adversaries, in what is one of the lengthiest physical descriptions of characters to be found in the *Alexiad*, Anna's account of her father's reign. The vivid pen-portrait, written years after Anna Komnene had first set eyes upon Bohemond in her father's court, appears, at least at first glance, to offer a rare insight into a woman's account of a beautiful male body through an elaborate description indulging the reader's imagination. Bohemond's beautiful body is discussed in detail; its individual features, from the figure's height, build and physique to the particulars of his blondish hair (*komi ypoxanthos*), ruddy beard (*geneion pyrson*) and blue eyes, are vividly described.

Set within the context of the *Alexiad*, which was mostly composed after 1143, Anna's account of Bohemond forms a part of a narrative filled with

physical accounts of the numerous key characters, both men and women, protagonists or anti-heroes, who feature in Anna's account of her father's reign. The imperial couple, Alexios Komnenos and his wife Eirene; the *basilissa* Maria of Alania; Anna's husband Nikephoros Bryennios; the military commander Michael Doukas, related to Anna on her mother's side; and the young Constantine Doukas, who died prematurely, are in fact not only described but also lauded for their good looks. So too are enemies of the state: figures such as Nikephoros Diogenes or Robert Guiscard. Far from unique in the *Alexiad*, the eloquent description of Bohemond's good looks is thus matched by those of other beautiful men and women in Anna Komnene's writing, characters praised for their beauty (variously termed *kallos*, *kallonen* and *oreotis*), their grace (*charis*) and the wonderment they brought upon onlookers (*thambos*). Anna's accounts thus underline a particular importance attached to physical beauty, which is discussed, exalted and described in varying degrees of elaboration, suggesting a fascination with physical beauty in the *Alexiad*.²

A Byzantine ideal of beauty

The way in which Anna goes about describing the beauty of such characters is evocative in itself. Anna notes that Emperor Alexios, though not tall, was well proportioned and symmetrical in body, radiant in countenance and blessed with a brilliant gaze. His cheeks were red, his shoulders broad, his build mighty. Empress Eirene was similarly well proportioned, with a face that gleamed like the moon, skin both white and rosy, and joyful eyes. Of Maria of Alania, readers are told that she was slender like a cypress tree, white skinned like the snow but also ruddy like a rose, with luminous eyes and arching golden brows. As for the foreign Robert Guiscard, he too is described as tall and of a height surpassing other men. He was rosy skinned, blond haired and broad shouldered, with eyes that shone like fire and a perfectly harmonious body.³ The beauty of the seven-year-old Constantine Doukas is similarly described despite his young age: his hair was blond, his skin white, his cheeks rosy and his eyes brilliant. As her descriptions record the details of the appearance of her characters almost from head to toe, the image of physical beauty that emerges from Anna's writing is that of a list of specific, beautiful features, which were ascribed to beautiful bodies. Features such as considerable height, a good, sturdy build, well-proportioned limbs, a white and rosy complexion, radiant skin, brilliant eyes with arching brows and blond or ruddy hair appear to constitute a concrete image of physical beauty in Anna's history.

The evidence of Byzantine writing suggests that this view of physical beauty that appears in the *Alexiad* fitted in with contemporary attitudes: from historical writing to fiction, from real characters to imaginary heroes, the 'beautiful' appear to possess a set of identifiable, easily recognizable characteristics many of which match those identified in Anna's writing. In the twelfth-century romance of *Drosilla and Chariclis* (c.1157?), as Niketas Eugenianos creates the characters of the two young lovers, the protagonists of the narrative, he bestows upon them exceptional beauty. Chariclis, whose beauty and glowing countenance, we are told, surpasses the stars, sports golden hair, a ruddy complexion and a broad chest. He has blond, curly hair which reaches down to his back and fine slender hands with white fingers. Drosilla too has golden-blond curls, fine beautifully shaped fingers and a complexion resembling a rose but also the whiteness of the snow. She has beautiful black eyes, perfect arching brows, a cypress-like posture and pearl-like teeth.⁴ In the 'proto-romance' of *Digenis Akritis*, written in the late eleventh or early twelfth century, and telling of the exploits of the great warrior Digenis, the noble guard of the border lands, the hero is described as a beautiful young man.⁵ He has 'a graceful appearance, with fair curly hair, large eyes, a white and rosy face, deep black eyebrows and he had a chest like crystal, a fathom broad'.⁶ The object of Digenis's affection, the unnamed Girl, possesses a luminous countenance, beautiful eyes, 'deep black eyebrows, the black undiluted', fair curly hair and a face white like snow 'with a tint at the centre like the choice purple which emperors honour'.⁷

In Michael Psellos's (1018–c.1078) eleventh-century historical text, the *Chronographia*, the handsome young Michael IV is described as having a well-proportioned body, a blossoming complexion, bright eyes and truly red cheeks that became ever more ravishing when he blushed.⁸ The beauty of Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos, praised as rivaling that of Achilles and Nireas, also receives an elaborate description: Psellos describes the symmetry of the emperor's body, his perfect analogies, his ruddy hair which shone like rays of sunlight, his white body which appeared like clear and translucent crystal.⁹

In this light, the description of Bohemond in the *Alexiad*, despite its length and detail, rather than evoking a highly personalized 'female' viewpoint, appears unexceptional both in what it identifies as a 'beautiful body', and in the way this beauty is described to the reader. The Western warrior is praised by Anna for possessing many of the same, familiar features equally found in other descriptions of beautiful bodies: the well-proportioned figure, the white and rosy complexion, the light-coloured

hair. This juxtaposition of accounts of physical beauty seems to encapsulate a definition of the beautiful body in Byzantium that was based on this ideal image. What this underlines is a key aspect of the Byzantine perception of beauty as a notion: physical beauty appears to have been regarded not an abstract, indescribable quality, as 'a certain something in one's air', but as something concrete and tangible which could be read on the body of the bearer through a series of visual signs; as a list of identifiable, often-repeated, even stereotypical physical features.

By complying with the stereotypical image of the ideal of beauty, beautiful people in Byzantium appear to stand together, as a class apart from the rest of the world. In Theodore Prodromos's twelfth-century romance of *Rodanthe and Dosiklis*, where the hero and heroine are, unsurprisingly, blond haired, white and rosy skinned, black browed and brilliant eyed, with well-shaped bodies and, in the case of Dosiklis also a manly broad chest, their beauty, in fact, appears to align them in the eyes of onlookers.¹⁰ Prodromos tells his audience that, abducted by evil pirates, the young lovers introduce themselves as brother and sister to their captors. This lie then leads the enamoured pirate Govryas to approach Dosiklis and ask for the hand of Rodanthe in marriage. Prodromos clearly states that it is the beauty of the characters that causes the confusion; Govryas claims to recognise in the beauty of Dosiklis's face proof that he is Rodanthe's brother, 'as those who look alike in beauty and have the same features, also have common lineage'. In the world of Prodromos's romance, it seems that beautiful people looked alike, the universality of their ideal beauty serving to visually align them in the eyes of onlookers who read in their ideal, beautiful features this common ground between beautiful people.

This seemingly conventional language of physical beauty in itself, however, is suggestive. If, as Liz James has noted, clichés in themselves evoke underlying truths about a given culture, then the stereotypical discourse of the ideal of beauty as it is formulated in Byzantine writing (Anna's description of Bohemond included) may be evocative of fundamental attitudes towards the beautiful body in Byzantium.¹¹ Reading through the lines of the ideal, stereotyped accounts of physical beauty can help formulate an understanding of Byzantine perceptions and definitions of what constituted the beautiful body.

Ideal bodies; Stereotyped words

Set against the pen-portraits in Psellos's *Chronographia*, Anna's physical descriptions of individuals are also read against the context of a Byzantine literary tradition. It has been suggested that the pen-portraits

in the *Alexiad* were written in a manner that evoked two erudite influences: on the one hand the general principles of Byzantine *eikonismos*, a written system of physical description that focused on the identification of individuals through physical features, and on the other the particular style of the *Chronographia*, which despite its profound characterizations of individuals used, at least according to Ljubarskij, 'rather ordinary and in any case traditional methods of describing their appearance'.¹² The result, Ljubarskij argues, was the creation of pen-portraits which, 'conventional and stereotyped', evoked not the particulars of an individual's appearance but rather appeared overall to comply with the dictates of an established ideal.¹³

Byzantine *eikonismos*, seen as a formative influence in Anna's pen-portraits in the *Alexiad*, was a written description of an individual's physique that attempted to evoke the 'likeness' of a person by means of a meticulous description of facial and physical characteristics. Handed down from classical antiquity where it had served many purposes, not least that of aiding in the identification of criminals, the *eikonismos* broke down the face and body of the person described into a list of individual features. Its pervasive logic can be traced in various aspects of Byzantine thinking: Dagron has linked it to the logic of Byzantine icons and their meticulous rendering of saints' portrait-likeness.¹⁴ Its principles are also aligned to the Byzantine fascination with the study of physiognomics, a 'science' that concentrated on the decoding of facial features and their reading as outward signs of a figure's personality.¹⁵ Psellos's *Chronographia* makes subtle reference to the logic of physiognomics, noting, for instance, that the eyes of Basil II were neither too deeply set denoting wickedness and violence, nor too protruding denoting sluggishness, but rather shone with a manly glow.¹⁶ In the description of Michael Doukas, the emperor's facial features are equally isolated and examined as bearers of meaning on his character; his forehead was neither arrogant, nor sunken towards his eyes, but maintained instead an expression of honesty and propriety that gave him the appearance of a thoughtful schoolmaster.¹⁷ Like the *eikonismos*, physiognomics worked by breaking down a face into individual characteristics, which were then treated as signs in need of deciphering.

The survival of such principles of physical description in the pen-portraits of individuals in Byzantine writing, which equally break down the human body into a list of physical features, is evocative. It speaks not of the inability of authors such as Anna Komene or Michael Psellos to describe the physical appearance of individuals in a 'better' way, but rather suggests that this manner of physical description (rather than

being merely 'conventional and stereotyped' as Ljubarskij suggested) was perhaps seen as sufficient to serve its purpose of creating a written record of an individual's appearance. The fact that the Byzantine ideal of beauty appears as a list of individual beautiful features that together constitute a beautiful whole, equally suggests, not that the Byzantines were incapable of describing beauty in different terms, but rather that this manner of writing was expressive (and is thus also potentially informative) of their attitudes towards beauty as a physical quality ascribed to the human body. Just as bodies were described as a list consisting of specific features, beautiful bodies were spoken of as a list of beautiful parts that together constituted a beautiful whole.

That such attitudes towards beauty were deeply ingrained in Byzantine thinking is suggested by Michael Psellos's *Chronographia*, where a similar logic is applied to the description not only of physical beauty but also of beauty in architecture. In a passage describing the splendid church of St George at Muggana, Psellos notes that the edifice was of unsurpassable beauty; its loveliness could be seen in all the parts of the grand building so that it seemed to shine into the rest of the structure. It was both excessively beautiful in the whole, he adds, since it was made up of beautiful parts, but each of its details in itself was worthy of admiration to the point that one could not decide which aspect of the church was most beguiling. From golden-speckled domes and stone revetments to fine-looking fountains, in Psellos's account the beauty of the church as a whole, like a human body, consists of beautiful parts.

Bodies made of perfect parts

In a world where a beautiful face is made up of (beautiful) parts, individual beautiful features can serve as a saving grace, improving the overall appearance of a figure. This is noted in the *Chronographia* in Psellos's description of the Alanian princess held in the court of Emperor Constantine Monomachos. The young girl was no exceptional beauty, Psellos notes, but possessed two physical blessings, which were enough to dazzle the emperor. Blessed with white skin and beautiful, luminous eyes the princess won over the emperor's affections, to the point that Monomachos abandoned all his other love affairs for this otherwise unexceptional girl.¹⁸

In the structured world of the Byzantine ideal of beauty, individual flaws can also condemn an otherwise beautiful whole, as is the case in the fourteenth-century romance of *Velthandros and Chrysandza*.¹⁹ In the romance both Velthandros and Chrysandza are built as paradigms of the ideal of beauty. Handsome and well built, Velthandros is described

as having a head of blond and curly hair (*xanthos kai sgourokephalos*), beautiful eyes (*euophthalmos*) and a chest bestowed with the whiteness of cold marble. The heroine too is supremely beautiful. Her body is perfectly crafted, and she possesses blond, golden hair (*chrysaphota*) which is rich like grass from heaven, eyes that steal a man's soul, black eyebrows artfully shaped to resemble bridges, a nose fashioned by the Graces. She has a graceful mouth, teeth that resemble pearls, cheeks that are red like roses, lips that are red as if painted.²⁰ The contour of her face is rounded and she is blessed with white hands, a sculpted neck, an artfully slender waist – a body overall exceptionally put together.

But the perfection of Velthandros and Chrysandza, with its close adherence to the dictates of the ideal, is all the more pronounced by being compared to the physical imperfections of others. This becomes apparent in the story when the travelling hero Velthandros comes across the Castle of Love and is commanded by its ruler, King Eros, to serve as judge in a contest between forty beautiful and noble maidens. This beauty contest, instrumental to the unravelling of the story as it marks the first meeting between Velthandros and Chrysandza, is also evocative of how physical beauty is perceived and measured. It presents the hero assessing the beauty of numerous candidates and dismissing them through a process of elimination, with the aim of bestowing a prize to the 'fairest of all'.

In his role as judge, Velthandros evaluates the beauty of the maidens by proceeding to affront the (otherwise beautiful) contestants by remarking on the single physical shortcoming that damns the whole, marring the beauty of the girl in question. Beauty emerges here as the opposite of everything dismissed by Velthandros's critique: it is the perfection encapsulated by Chrysandza who possesses none of the other girls' physical faults and is blessed instead by an ideal beauty identified by her finely proportioned body, blonde tresses and white and rosy skin. In his critique of the bodies of the various contestants, Velthandros presents an image of beauty checked against a predetermined image of perfection; the beauty of Chrysandza that condemns the lesser beauty of her rivals.

A similar logic is found in Eustathios Makrembolites's twelfth-century *Hysmini and Hysminias*. In the romance it is the physical perfection of the heroine which notably echoes the Byzantine ideal of beauty: Hysmini's luminous face, black eyebrows and red-lipped mouth, that appeared to have drawn the colour of a rose, establish the absolute standard against which beauty must be judged. Before this embodiment of ideal, physical perfection, the rival beauty of Rodopi, daughter of Sostratos and proposed bride to Hysminias, is dismissed by the hero for appearing (by comparison) as an ape before Aphrodite, a gnat before an elephant and a star

before the sun. In *Velthandros and Chryсандza* and *Hysmini and Hysminias* alike, not only is the body broken down into features, but beauty is perceived as made up of individual, beautiful characteristics and the whole is then judged by being measured against a preconceived ideal.²¹

This seems a remarkably consistent view: beauty can be traced on the countenance and figure of the bearer, as a list of individual features which set together constitute the (beautiful) whole even when the dictates of what constitutes the beautiful body change. In a spirit similar to that of the beauty contest in *Velthandros and Chryсандza* though in a rather different milieu, the bride show described in the ninth-century *Life of St Philaretos the Almsgiver* (c.821–822) also presents female beauty judged against an ideal. Judges, set with the task of preselecting suitable candidates for an imperial bride show from which the future wife of Constantine VI may emerge, cross the territories of Byzantium, assessing various beauties in accordance with the strict instructions laid down by the emperor's mother. The three granddaughters of St Philaretos, Maria, Myranthia and Euanthia, are included in this examination and closely inspected by the judges. They are put through three tests and examined literally from head to toe: their height is measured by being set against an ideal standard, their faces are judged against a model portrait and finally the size of their feet is examined by being compared to a perfect shoe size.²² The judges' criteria highlight an interest in features, such as small feet, which are not part of the ideal of beauty as it appears in later centuries. Yet what the story underlines is the principle of physical beauty examined and measured on the basis of individual, physical features, to be finally assessed by being compared to the stipulations of an ideal.

In a world where physical beauty is perceived as made up of individual, beautiful characteristics, and the ideal of beauty is often stereotypically worded, Anna's description of the wondrous beauty of Bohemond can be seen in a different light. When breaking down his body into individual features and commenting on his ideal physique, was Anna merely playing to the dictates of the Byzantine ideal of beauty? In her writing, where does the balance lie between the 'truth' of Bohemond's appearance, of what he really looked like, and the image of a man formulated as an ideal of physical perfection?

The real and the ideal: Beauty between fact and fiction

Where the fictive worlds of the romances are dominated by the imaginary beauty of their fictional protagonists, the *Alexiad* is filled with characters that were real-life, historical personae. Anna's account of their

physical appearance, such as her discussion of the beauty of Bohemond or Alexios Komnenos, thus inevitably brings up the issue of reality versus idealization and the balance between fact and fabrication: the extent to which accounts of proclaimed physical perfection corresponded to reality, and if not, the purpose presumably served by the divergence from the 'truth'.

Set against the description of Bohemond, Anna Komnene's account of her father's physical appearance is suggestive in this respect. Anna presents the reader with two references to Alexios's handsome looks. One is an elaborate, detailed account which paints the emperor's portrait as he sits upon his throne. 'He reminded one of a fiery whirlwind, so overwhelming was the radiance that emanated from his countenance and his whole presence. His dark eyebrows were curved and beneath them the gaze of his eyes was both terrible and kind. A quick glance, the brightness of his face, the noble cheeks suffused with red combined to inspire in the beholder both dread and confidence. His broad shoulders, mighty arms and deep chest, all on a heroic scale, invariably commanded the wonder and delight of the people. The man's person indeed radiated beauty and grace and dignity and an unapproachable majesty.'²³ Anna's other physical description of Alexios is very short and creates a somewhat different image of the emperor. Caught in the midst of battle Alexios loses his helmet, which causes his loose locks, described as ruddy and sunny (*pyrsi kai iliosa komi*), to fall into his eyes: 'he was dusty and bloodstained, bareheaded, with his bright red hair straggling in front of his eyes and annoying him (for his horse frightened and impatient of the bit, was jumping about wildly and making the curls fall over his face).'²⁴

Scholars have looked at both statements with regard to what they can tell us about what Alexios Komnenos really looked like. Baldwin, writing on the physical appearance of Byzantine emperors, interprets Anna's comment as an evocation of her personal taste that appears in her writing 'to the detriment of truth', suggesting that Anna's admiration of reddish hair influences the objectivity of her account.²⁵ Head, on the other hand, attempts to give a rational explanation for the discrepancy in Anna's account of Alexios's appearance, by suggesting Alexios had black hair with reddish-brown overtones which would have been more noticeable when seen in the light of the sun.²⁶

However, we may note that Anna's account of Alexios's appearance actually echoes the familiar traits of ideal beauty in the bodily symmetry, the arching brows, the brilliant eyes and ruddy complexion of the figure. The choice of red hair would indeed fit in well with this list

of ideal features; *pyrsos* (ruddy) alongside *xanthos* (blond) was a prized feature of physical beauty in Byzantium, with reddish locks often singled out for particular praise. Baldwin's statement that Anna idealizes the image of her father's physical appearance to the 'detriment of truth', by questioning the truthfulness of Anna's account, highlights our awareness that the author may have manipulated the reality of the character's physical appearance to serve an agenda. If Anna Komnene was prepared to lie about Alexios's hair colour, was this in order to make the literary likeness of her father comply with the prevailing ideal of beauty, and why would this be necessary?

The way in which Anna's descriptions of physical beauty fit into the narrative flow of her writing seems to explain matters. Laiou has noted a fixation on physical beauty in the *Alexiad*, with Anna ascribing exceptional beauty to a number of her characters, particularly those who are members of her own kin, and in doing so presenting 'to posterity a quasi perfect group of aristocratic men and women'.²⁷ By claiming that beauty is part of the uniqueness of her class, a natural, physical distinction that can be visually manifested upon the bodies of the members of that class, the author uses beauty as a tool to express her own agenda, that of the (natural) uniqueness of the rank to which she herself had been born, making beauty in the *Alexiad* as much about identity, class, politics and privilege, as it is about the physical appearance of the human body. In fact, it appears that Anna uses physical beauty as an essential component of the ideal persona of these characters, with the elaborate pen-portraits that describe the astounding beauty of her protagonists, closely followed by discussions of their fine personality traits: the wisdom of Bryennios, the eloquence and military valour of Emperor Alexios, the religiosity of her grandmother Anna Dalassene.

The description of Alexios's beauty fits into this context. In Anna's account of the ideal physique of her imperial father and mother, the beauty of the characters is both painstakingly described and hailed as a part of their ideal image: the image of the perfect imperial couple. This in itself would explain both the need to praise Alexios's beauty and make his appearance comply with the dictates of the ideal: his physical perfection being both a visual manifestation of this excellence, and an embodiment of it.

The role played by the account of Bohemond's beauty within the narrative is somewhat different. In telling the story of Alexios's exploits, Anna's history throughout presents the struggle between great adversaries, from which Alexios emerges triumphant, vanquishing men who match his strengths in every way, exceptional beauty included.²⁸ When

Anna sets Alexios against the rebel Nikephoros Bryennios, she notes that they were perfectly weighed against one another, not only in strength, but also in physique: they were both beautiful of body and brave of soul.²⁹ Bohemond's role as Alexios's foremost adversary, as a man who could be vanquished by Alexios alone, necessitates a description of his beauty that works in a similar manner, creating an image of Alexios's great rival that is matched to the emperor in every way; in cunning, military valour and (notably) physique. As Anna builds up her image of Bohemond, she elaborates her account with a detailed description of the physical beauty of her ideal anti-hero, who, being vanquished, can only aggrandize the image of the emperor.

As to the balance between fact and fiction, it seems that in the case of Alexios as much as in that of Bohemond, reality is idealized to echo the prescribes of the Byzantine ideal of beauty, and yet concessions are also made to include actual fact. Alexios's beauty is eulogized, his physical attributes manipulated to evoke an image of perfection, yet, if Anna is liberal with the truth regarding Alexios's hair colour, she also admits to his short build, a feature which diverges from the tall stature admired by the Byzantines. This acquiescence to fact, however, is mitigated by her suggestion that, though unremarkable in height, Alexios possessed a broad chest and a well-proportioned body. If he did not dazzle onlookers when standing, she adds, when seated upon the imperial throne he appeared like thunder to all that came before him.

The perfection of Bohemond, too, is mitigated by reality. Though overall 'a miracle for the eyes to behold', Anna acknowledges that he was slightly stooped due to a defect from birth, a feature noticeable to those who would examine his appearance closely, but which presumably did not ruin the effect of the whole. Throughout the *Alexiad*, Anna's physical descriptions of beauty seem to tilt the balance between reality and idealization towards the latter, but the author does not go as far as to entirely disregard what her contemporaries would have known to be the truth. Her protagonists may resemble the sun and the stars, possess canonical bodies that dazzle onlookers with their perfection, be praised for features that echo the Byzantine ideal of beauty; reality, however, can also be read between the lines.

It remains unclear, however, whether Anna and her contemporaries would necessarily interpret elements of her pen-portraits as a clear-cut manipulation of the truth or whether other, more subtle, messages could also be read into her record of the appearance of various individuals. When describing the young Constantine Doukas, Anna Komnene notes that he was blond and possessed skin that was white like milk,

rosy cheeks like a fresh rose that had just blossomed, hawk-like brilliant eyes that shone under the golden arches of his brows.³⁰ A detail from another passage in the *Alexiad*, which also speaks of the young Constantine, adds a telling Homeric reference to this image. Anna describes how Maria of Alania, Constantine's imperial mother, worried about her son's safety during the Komnenian coup, by noting that she feared 'for her blond Menelaos' (*xantho Menelao*).³¹ The importance of this reference lies beyond what it tells us about Constantine's appearance: it lies in what it evokes of the connotations attached to *xanthos* among Anna's contemporaries.

In her erudite reference to Constantine Doukas as Homer's blond Menelaos, Anna goes beyond simply describing the boy as possessing what was considered to be a praised physical trait in Byzantium. Her choice of wording underlines her awareness that the Byzantine fascination with blond hair had its precedents in the classical past. It acknowledges what both Anna and her learned readers would have known: that in the ancient world blond tresses were the attribute of kings and heroes. By being described as *xanthos*, Constantine Doukas is singled out for special praise for possessing a valued physical feature; he is also aligned, however, with that special class of people who are set apart from the ordinary world.

The exact meaning of the term *xanthos* for the Byzantines underlines this possibility for other, symbolic connotations attached to the notion of 'blondness'. Liz James's study of the Byzantine perception of colours has shown the multiple meanings of colour words in Byzantium. James notes with reference to *xanthos* the multiplicity of uses, synonyms and definitions available in Byzantine writing where *xanthos* is used in relation to hair but also has other connotations: used to signify fire, good, *chloros* and yellow.³² What these associations underline is that, as Byzantine colour words often allude to 'not a hue as such, but a quality', the term *xanthos* may be used to signify, beyond colour, notions of texture, luminosity, even radiance and light, with all their symbolic associations.³³ A passage from the *Life of St Andrew the Fool*, describing St Epiphaneios's vision of an angel appearing as a handsome youth, illustrates this point. The author describes the youth as *xanthokomos* (that is, as possessing blond tresses), and adds that his hair had the appearance of gold.³⁴ In this context *xanthos* alludes to blondness, but also to the sheen and metallic brilliance of gold, to a quality of light highly valued in a culture that delighted in the glitter of mosaics and lustre of precious metal vessels: a quality in this case bestowed by the author of the *Life* to the hair of a heavenly, spiritual being.

Given the multiplicity of meanings attached to Byzantine colour terms, it may well be that the words used to describe ruddy hair also had similar connotations. A telling example of the many connotations attached to the colour red that may have implications in the reading of hair colour terms is found in the story of the miraculous icon of Christ known as the *Antiphonetes* as told in Psellos's *Chronographia*. When Psellos speaks of the shifting colour of the *Antiphonetes*, which was read by Empress Zoe as prophesizing the future, he uses the terms *ochros* and *pyrros* to refer to the icon's two different states: the former, *ochros*, signalled a negative message and the latter, *pyrros*, a positive one. Liz James has noted that "the two words are not simply used in the context of "yellow" and "red" but rather "pale" and "fiery"', each linked at the same time with other, symbolic nuances.³⁵ In Anna Komnene's *Alexiad* (whose debt to Psellos's *Chronographia* has been noted) the reference to Alexios's tresses as *pyrsi kai iliosa komi* may have similar connotations.

Pyrrros stands for 'fiery' in Psellos, and the term *pyrsos* used by Anna could have held similar implications since it is also the term for 'torch'. References to the fiery Alexios are also found elsewhere in the *Alexiad* and appear to bestow almost superhuman qualities upon the emperor: riding into battle against satrap Monolykos Alexios is described as being like a tower, or a column of fire (*stylos pyrros*), or some other divine and heavenly vision.³⁶ What this suggests is the possibility that, in describing her father's head as graced with fiery, gleaming locks, Anna Komnene chooses her words with less concern about its actual colour or hue and more about what the choice of term tells the reader about Alexios as hero, standing radiant in the midst of battle. In the image of Alexios projected by his daughter, as reality battles with idealization, words and features appear chosen to denote the emperor's unique majesty and the quasi-divine status that sets him apart from the realm of ordinary men.

Painted beauty: The portrait and the ideal (Self-)image

This question of reality versus idealization in the physical representation of individuals in Byzantine writing has particularly troubled scholars in the juxtaposition of literary portraits of historical personalities against their pictorial likenesses in visual imagery. When Spatharakis set the mosaic image of Constantine Monomachos depicted in St Sophia against Psellos's literary description of the emperor's appearance, he noted, for instance, that image and text present discrepancies in their likeness of the emperor (Figure 6). In terms of the figure's hair colour, described by Psellos as ruddy and as shining like rays of sunlight (*iliosa kai pyrsi kefali*), Spatharakis argued that the visual evidence of the imperial panel

‘makes us question the accuracy of Psellos in describing the hair of both Zoe and Constantine as blond’.³⁷

As suggested above, one could begin by questioning the translation of *iliosa* (sunny) and *pyrsi kefali* (ruddy head) with the term ‘blond’. That aside, however, Spatharakis’s approach is problematic in itself, in its reading of Psellos’s statement as ‘a rhetorical liberty’ taken by Psellos in his description of the emperor who gave him a distinguished position in court – a description that Spatharakis argues runs ‘contrary’ to the visual representation.³⁸ Spatharakis appears to claim that the visual image of the emperor is an objective record of Monomachos’s appearance, while Psellos’s account is subjective and presents an idealized (even beautified) image of the emperor that matches Psellos’s generally encomiastic account of Monomachos’s reign. Problematic as this logic is, the remark nonetheless highlights the obvious: the juxtaposition between word and image underlines the inherent ambiguities in reading between the lines of Byzantine writing, through idealized physical descriptions and symbolic words. The opposite too, however, must be acknowledged; pictorial portraits of individuals in themselves are susceptible to idealization and manipulation, equally problematic with regard to the balance between ‘true’ likeness and the dictates of the ideal of beauty.

That physical appearance, whether in real life or in a pictorial representation, was susceptible to manipulation and could be improved upon or otherwise altered is noted in Byzantine writing. When Nikeitas Choniates (c.1155–1215/16) praises Manuel Komnenos’s German wife Bertha-Eirene in his *Historia* for her contempt of the powders and rouges used by other women as a means of beautification, his words do not merely point to the use of cosmetics in Byzantium.³⁹ They attest to the fact that the social perception of beauty, the fascination for instance with white-and-rosy complexions, affected the way real-life bodies were perceived and handled. That the physical appearance of both men and women could be altered and made compliant to the dictates of the ideal of beauty is noted by the evidence of a medical manuscript written in the eleventh or twelfth century, which outlined a series of concoctions for the use of both sexes, including formulas for bleaching hair, preventing hair loss or achieving depilation.⁴⁰ These artificial means secured that the dictates of taste and the prevailing aesthetics of the human body, the fascination with light hair colour, depilated smooth skin and thick tresses, could be imprinted upon one’s physical appearance.

Just as real bodies could be manipulated to be tuned in with the dictates of the ideal, the Byzantines recognized that visual images of bodies were also subject to manipulation, portrait-likenesses beautified or made

ugly at will. Nikephoros Gregoras's *Romaiki Historia* (c.1293–1358/61), in an admonition towards those engaged in the art of writing, advises authors to learn from the painter's trade, praising the artful painters for correcting the natural faults in a figure's likeness so as not to present the sitter at a disadvantage for posterity.⁴¹ The opposite was also possible. Niketas Choniates notes that the villainous Emperor Andronikos I 'ordered that the paintings of empress Xene, Emperor Alexios's mother, whom he had ordered strangled, be done over, so that she appeared as a shrivelled-up old woman because he was suspicious of the pity elicited by these radiant and very beautiful portrayals worthy of the admiration of the passers-by'.⁴² Added or eliminated, beauty could play a part of the preordained agenda served by a visual representation, just as it could serve the aims of a literary description; it could be used to propagate a message, whether visual or literary.

In the *Enkleistra*, or cave-monastery of St Neophytos in Paphos (c.1182/3), the portrait-image of the founder of the monastic community, St Neophytos the Recluse, seems to make this point; it appears as an image of a holy man which uses physical features to create a sophisticated self-propagatory message. Prominently depicted in the sanctuary of the *Enkleistra* in a large scene painted on the wall opposite the altar, St Neophytos is seen in full length, his hands crossed on his chest, his gaze directed at the viewer, ascending to Heaven (Figure 7). He is supported by the flanking figures of the archangels Michael and Gabriel, depicted with large outstretched wings, who appear to hold him from the shoulders.⁴³ The inscription written over the scene, which was intended to be read in conjunction with the image, suggests that the recognition of the figure of the monk held up by the angels as Neophytos was essential to unlocking the image's meaning. Written on behalf of Neophytos and in the first person, the inscription asks: 'may I join the community of these two angels by virtue of my "angelic" habit', thus taking the form of a prayer entreating for Neophytos's reward in the afterlife.⁴⁴ Executed during Neophytos's own lifetime, the painted scene appears to serve, as Robin Cormack has noted, as a visual fulfilment of this verbal prayer: by presenting Neophytos carried up to Heaven in the midst of the angels the prayer appears to 'materialize' before the viewer's eyes.

In order for the scene to serve its purpose as a visual fulfilment of the inscribed prayer, the representation of Neophytos had to be recognized by viewers as a portrait-likeness of the holy man; unless one could read, it was essential to identify the aged monk as *Neophytos*, in order to witness his sanctification, his inclusion among the angels. The importance of likeness in the image must also have been strengthened

by the fact that, albeit for a limited period, the painted image of the founder was probably juxtaposed with the actual face of Neophytos, peering into the church from the opening in the wall via the shaft that led to his new cell overhead – a physical presence which Robin Cormack has noted may have achieved an (intentional) iconification of the Recluse.⁴⁵ As Neophytos made his bid for self-sanctification, he appears to have created a prototype holy portrait of himself executed by the hands of Theodore Apsoudes – a holy portrait being by definition a true likeness of a saint that enables prayer to travel via the image to the actual holy figure depicted in it.⁴⁶ It is, however, possible that Neophytos's image, despite being intended as an exact portrait-likeness of the figure, also served other agendas through its choice of individual physical features and the manner in which these are represented by the hand of Apsoudes.

A juxtaposition of Neophytos's likeness to the holy portraits of the other contemporary figures of monastic saints in the *Enkleistra*, depicted on the walls of the sanctuary in the lower register of the decoration (c.1182/3), underlines that Neophytos's image both resembles those of the other monastic figures and is significantly differentiated from them.⁴⁷ On the one hand, his likeness encompasses all the recognizable features that signal a life of asceticism: the monastic habit, the motionless, two-dimensional body, the white hair, long beard and sunken cheeks, all of which align Neophytos to the figures of the other holy monks.⁴⁸ On the other hand, however, a juxtaposition of Neophytos's portrait-likeness to those of the other monastic saints painted in the sanctuary, such as Sts Kyriakos and Stephen the Younger, suggests that Neophytos has been depicted with larger eyes than his counterparts (Figure 8). His eyes, moreover, are crowned by beautifully arching brows, whereas the other holy monks have nondescript eyebrows that hang low over their eyes; in the case of Sts Kyriakos and Stephen the Younger, they are even shaped as crooked, undulating lines.

More strikingly perhaps, Neophytos is also presented with flawless, wrinkle-free skin, while the other monastic figures have foreheads and faces furrowed by wrinkles. Figures like St Ilarion display a dark v-shaped wrinkle between their eyebrows, but also pointedly sunken cheeks, marked by v-shaped lines (Figure 9). In other figures, such as that of St Ephraim the Syrian, sunken cheeks are denoted with heavy, angular shading (Figure 8). The contrast with the smooth, conspicuously flawless skin of Neophytos, noted both in his likeness in the sanctuary and in his other portrait-image depicted on the wall of his cell, where he is portrayed kneeling before Christ, is pointed. No wrinkle, no dark line mars his complexion, while the

discrete shadowing of his cheeks is distinguished by its soft handling. His beard and hair, moreover, appear, unlike the schematic, linear beards of the other monastic saints, to have an almost silky quality, carefully modelled with grey tones to denote a softness of texture.

That the attention lavished upon these features may have entailed an element of manipulation, allowing the image to propagate an ideal, beautified self-image of Neophytos, is suggested by the presence of ideal features in his likeness such as the perfectly arching brows, large eyes and silky hair, and, above all, the figure's flawless skin. Neophytos is depicted with the youthful appearance so praised in Byzantium, not least by authors of the calibre of Psellos and Choniates: the *Chronographia* lauds the youthfulness of Empress Zoe, portrayed as possessing wrinkle-free skin despite being over 70, while Choniates's *Historia* similarly describes how the villain Andronikos Komnenos retained his youthful appearance despite his advanced years.⁴⁹ It is striking that in these images of Neophytos there is no wrinkle to betray his age (he would have been 50 in 1182/3), or for that matter the hardship of his rural existence, or the harshness of monastic life.⁵⁰ Ptochoprodromos's twelfth-century poetry explicitly notes how hunger, in his case due to poverty rather than rigorous fasting, destroys one's cheeks and makes them appear shrivelled with wrinkles.⁵¹ It is unlikely that Neophytos truly possessed such a flawless complexion; and if wrinkles were consciously eliminated from his likeness this can only be explained as an attempt at beautification, and one which may have been picked up by a Byzantine audience.

Manganeios Prodromos's writing on the occasion of a visit to Constantinople by Louis of France and Conrad of Germany underlines this point when it presents the city of Constantinople hailing the Emperor Manuel I as her great benefactor, for improving her physical appearance in view of the upcoming festivities.⁵² Constantinople praises Manuel, exclaiming that: 'by means of my enemies you have made me powerful and lusty: you have smoothed away my old age, you have hidden my wrinkles, you have renewed me once more by adorning me and by making me blush as with cosmetics through the slaughter of Germans, and by their blood you make me gleam as with rouge.'⁵³ The wiping away of wrinkles is thus aligned with the rouging of cheeks as part of the beautification process that makes the city resplendent. In the image of Neophytos projected by his portrait likeness, flawless skin seems to have been similarly intended.

Judging from the self-propagatory feel of the visual representation, it seems that these images evoked something of how Neophytos saw himself and wished to be seen by others. The facial features with which

he is represented seem thus to reflect something of the Recluse's ideal self-image. The evidence in Byzantine writing is eloquent in this respect, claiming that monks were not above making such visual statements in painted images of their likeness: Niketas Choniates criticized the vain-glory of monks who inside churches 'even when dead, desired to depict themselves as crowned in victory and with cheerful and bright countenances'.⁵⁴ What the case of Neophytos appears to suggest is that, in determining the appearance of his 'likeness' in the *Enkleistra*, the Recluse uses elements from the vocabulary of physical beauty to create his ideal portrait-likeness; physical beautification is added to the ideal self-image propagated by the portrait with which Neophytos makes his bid for self-sanctification, reflecting the perceived importance of this quality.

Gender, the image and the mask of beauty

The painted portraits of donors depicted in the context of Byzantine church schemes are evocative in their own right regarding the balance of beauty, 'reality' and idealization in the rendering of an individual's likeness. In the case of the triple donor portrait in the twelfth-century church of Sts Anargyroi in Kastoria, Theodore Lemniotes, his wife Anna Radene and his son John are depicted in the presence of the Virgin. Each figure is identified by an inscription, and in each case the rendering of facial features appears to serve a distinct agenda (Figure 10).⁵⁵

Set close together, the figures of Theodore and John are similarly posed. They face in the same direction and are depicted gazing sideways; the overall similarity in their physical appearance is noticeable despite their difference in age. Lacking the wrinkles evident on Theodore's forehead, John appears as a younger version of his father. Both are oval faced, depicted with circles of red upon their cheeks and with brown wavy hair, which, shoulder length in the case of the father and shorter in that of the son, is similarly rendered: it appears voluminous on the right side of the face, painted with an undulating contour. Both figures are also depicted with a slightly hooked, elongated nose, with broad nostrils carefully accentuated with dabs of black. Even the beard which marks the age difference between the two is similar in treatment. Theodore's fully grown beard appears to start directly under his lower lip and culminates in a distinctive point under his chin, while his thin moustache thickens at the sides of the mouth. John sports an abbreviated version of his father's facial hair: a hint of hair is visible around the corners of his mouth and just under his lower lip, while something reminiscent of Theodore's beard grows into the same pointed shape below his chin.

The physical similarity between Theodore Lemniotes and his son would have sent a clear message to the Byzantine viewer. Byzantine authors suggest that lineage, legitimacy and other such claims of family ties could be made through the evidence of physical features shared between parents and their offspring, as much in real life as in painted likenesses. Michael Psellos notes in the *Chronographia* that the two sons of Emperor Constantine Doukas were perfect likenesses of the emperor, both in character and physical appearance.⁵⁶ One of Anna Komnene's boldest statements of lineage and legitimacy in the *Alexiad* is her claim of physical resemblance in childhood to her imperial father.⁵⁷ Margaret Mullet has noted the use of portrait imagery as proof of lineage by the heirs of Alexios Komnenos.⁵⁸ In this context, the physical resemblance between Theodore and John could have been read as a statement about their relationship as father and son, a visual propagation of the point made in the inscription overhead. What served to align the two generations of Lemniotes males in this record for posterity is the similar handling of their facial features.

In this respect, the pictorial handling of the figure of Anna Radene appears notably different to the images of Theodore and John. Unlike the two of them, who are set close together and in echoing poses, Anna is depicted standing to the left of the Virgin, physically separated from the father-and-son pair. Notably, she also gazes in the exact opposite direction from Theodore and John, adding psychological to physical distance. This visual juxtaposition to the two male figures is, moreover, underlined by the treatment of her facial features.

Anna Radene's face is strikingly rounded, rather than oval. A rigidly straight, elongated nose divides it symmetrically in two. Perfectly arched eyebrows are set over her eyes. Her small red mouth appears schematic and somewhat decorative while her lips as two red lines. The most striking feature, however, is the handling of her hair which is long, blond and arranged geometrically to frame her face. The artist creates two pyramid-shaped formations out of rows of distinct, rounded curls that are arranged horizontally, with extra curls added progressively on each row. Unlike Theodore's wrinkly forehead and flaring nostrils or John's distinctive facial hair, Anna's face appears to lack distinguishing characteristics, displaying instead a more schematic, stylized arrangement of facial features. Devoid of individualizing characteristics, her face is distinguished by its geometric handling; it appears more of a mask than a likeness. Where the facial features of the male bodies of Theodore and John propagate agendas of lineage and legitimacy, Anna's features convey a generalized image of ideal beauty: arching brows, red lips, rosy cheeks, blond

curly hair, the overall geometry of her face, from its shape, the almost perfect circle, to the pyramidal arrangement of her spherical curls.

In the nearby, contemporary church of St Nicholas of Kasnitzi in Kastoria, the pair of donors identified by an inscription as Nikephoros Kasnitzi and his wife Anna make a similar point (Figure 11). The head of Nikephoros, which is given a slightly odd eight-shaped form, is marked by its distinctive bone structure, strong cheekbones, sunken, heavily shaded cheeks and protruding mouth. His bony nose, which is long in proportion to the rest of his face, appears to stand out at a sharp angle and culminates at a pointed tip. His small eyes are framed by wrinkles at the corners, while lines also mark his brow and cheeks. Unlike Nikephoros's likeness, that of Anna's presents a rounded face with smooth contours, regular features and flawless skin. Her arching eyebrows crown her large eyes, her mouth is highlighted by the colour on her carefully rendered lips. The male, physical individuality of Nikephoros is set against the female, featureless beauty of his wife.

The evidence of imperial imagery appears to make a similar point. In the twelfth-century mosaic image in St Sophia, Constantinople, Emperor John II Komnenos is represented alongside his wife Eirene and his son Alexios (Figure 12). Both John and Alexios are depicted with a face in the shape of an elongated oval, thick black, perfectly arching eyebrows over their dark eyes, and longish, dark, wavy hair which reaches well below the ears and appears as the distinguishing mark of both father and son. Standing between these two figures is the Empress Eirene. Depicted with rich plaits of blond hair that symmetrically frame her rounded face, she is painted with a thin, linear nose which divides her visage in two neat halves, while her cheeks are marked by faultless red circles. With the geometrically arranged perfection of her features which in themselves appear to echo the Byzantine ideal of beauty, Eirene appears as a stylized, beautiful mask. John and Alexios, with the individualizing facial characteristics which mark them as father and son, are juxtaposed to the generalized beauty of the empress.

In the mosaic image of Constantine Monomachos and his wife Zoe in St Sophia (1042–1050), the complex history of the image is reflected in the figures' likenesses and appears also to reflect attitudes towards male and female beauty (Figure 6).⁵⁹ Originally representing Empress Zoe and her first husband, Romanos III Argyros, offering a donation to the church of St Sophia, the mosaic was later altered to reflect a second donation – this time by Zoe and her new husband Constantine Monomachos. In the revised image, the inscription identifying the emperor was altered so as to mention Monomachos by name, while the heads of the emperor and empress were also replaced, as seen in the missing tesserae visible near the ornamented necklines of their imperial

garb. The need to replace the emperor's likeness is self-evident, as the image was required to depict the face of Monomachos in place of that of Romanos Argyros, who was thus replaced visually as well as symbolically.⁶⁰ Yet the rationale behind the alteration to Zoe's existing likeness and its replacement with a new image is more complex to account for.

Monomachos's face, though echoing the ideal of beauty in the rosy circles on his cheeks and the blond highlights in his hair and beard created with the use of light-coloured tesserae, displays some individualized features. On his forehead, two bold, arching lines that evoke the bone structure of his brow appear as a distinctive physical feature. The face of the empress on the other hand appears as the perfect mask of beauty: not only are her facial features, such as her delicate nose and large, almond-shaped eyes, so perfect and regular that they hardly appear distinctive, but Zoe is also depicted with the flawless, wrinkle-free skin of a young girl despite being in her late sixties when this image of her was created.⁶¹

In the *Chronographia* we read that Empress Zoe had large eyes set under heavy eyebrows, blond hair and a body that seemed to glow with the whiteness of her skin; she maintained an appearance of youthfulness into her old age, her skin remaining smooth and unfurrowed.⁶² A woman susceptible to exaggerated compliments by flatterers (a known trick was to pretend to fall over as if thunderstruck upon seeing her), the aged Zoe is, moreover, described by Psellos obsessively concocting perfumes and unguents in cauldrons in her royal apartments. In this light, it is unsurprising to find the St Sophia mosaic depicting her with an appearance of remarkable youthfulness. The original image created as a companion to Romanos Argyros may even have been altered to accommodate a more extreme image of Zoe's physical perfection. The ideal mask of beauty portrayed in the mosaic is one in which the empress does not age, but remains flawless and unspoilt.⁶³

Set against each other these male and female portraits suggest a distinction between male and female portrait-likenesses. In depicting the likenesses of men their portraits conveyed a semblance of physical presence – at least the impression of representing actual individuals. Elements of idealization are visible, from the case of Neophytos to those of Monomachos and John Komnenos; wrinkles may be softened and cheeks rouged, likenesses made to conform to the ideal of the beautiful body, yet artists also used the visual vocabulary of facial features to bestow upon their figures a sense of personality or even to proclaim lineage, visually aligning the likeness of father and son. In the case of the women, on the other hand, facial features evoke more a generalized image of physical beauty that complies with the dictates of the ideal, than a sense of individuality. Geometrically

applied, this generalized beauty appears almost mask like. If portraits of individuals were created to represent them in an ideal light before the gaze of the world, it may be that the ideal persona of these women *necessitated* a display of beauty even at the expense of individuality.

In Theodore Prodromos's story of *Rodanthe and Dosiklis* the physical descriptions of the hero and heroine underline this point. What is striking in Prodromos's account of the two figures' physique is that, unlike those of Dosiklis, the girl's features are described through a wealth of geometric analogies. Prodromos's description, in fact, structures the heroine's face as an arrangement of circles: two white circles make up her cheeks, two red circles within the white ones light her face. As for her eyebrows, these are 'shaped by nature's good geometry' into perfect semicircles. Introducing the description of his heroine the author in fact describes her beauty as unnatural and resembling a statue, while elsewhere in the text, Dosiklis remarks that Nature, skilled in geometry, has beautifully fashioned the young maiden.⁶⁴

Eustathios Makrembolites's contemporary romance of *Hysmini and Hysminias*, which equally presents numerous physical descriptions of characters built on the Byzantine ideal of beauty, also limits the geometric parallels to the description of the female beauty of the heroine.⁶⁵ Hysmini's face, overall, is like a well-shaped circle with the nose set within the very centre of this perfect circle. Her beautiful, black eyebrows have the arched shape of the rainbow or the crescent moon. Her teeth, locked within shapely lips, form a perfectly aligned row, while even colour on her cheeks appears neatly structured; they are very white except in the centre, where they appear red. It is Hysmini's black, lively and playful eyes, however, that are portrayed in most curiously geometric terms. We are told that the circle of her eye culminated in an acute angle, so that her eyes were shaped like cones, rather than being round.⁶⁶

The persistent geometry of these descriptions is echoed in other Byzantine writing that describes the beauty of maidens as so great and also so schematic that it appears to have been rendered by the painter's hand. In the world of *Digenis Akritis* the hero's unnamed beloved is described as so beautiful that she was 'truly as if painted in a picture'.⁶⁷ In Eugenianos's *Drosilla and Chariclis* the author not only dwells (twice) on the perfect circles of Drosilla's eyebrows but adds that Nature, like a painter, had mixed milk with roses in her complexion, giving her truly white-and-rosy skin. Like Rodanthe, Drosilla too appears to resemble more 'a work of art, not a flesh and blood girl'.⁶⁸

The parallel to Byzantine imagery, such as the image of Anna Radene with her perfectly geometric facial features and her pyramidal

arrangement of curls, is pointed. The 'mask of beauty' that graces the figure, much like the texts, builds the impression that in images of women it is often a generalized notion of perfection that is advertised, at the expense of any hint of characterization bestowed upon a male face by a hooked nose or a thick set of unruly eyebrows.

On the beauty of men

In Byzantine eleventh- and twelfth-century writing, a further gender distinction appears to be made in the way beauty is discussed as an attribute of male and female characters. Women are more often summed up by reference to their ideal, beautiful looks whereas the beauty of men appears at times to be described in a more complex context. In the *Chronographia*, female characters, whether they play a key part in the development of the story or receive only brief mention in the narrative, are often spoken of with regard to their beauty, or the lack of it. All we are told of Constantine Doukas's two wives is that they were of noble birth and of outstanding beauty.⁶⁹ The Skleraina, mistress of Constantine Monomachos, is introduced into the narrative with summary account that describes her as 'beautiful and, otherwise, sensible'.⁷⁰ When Psellos first presents the daughters of Constantine VIII in his story, he offers a comparative account of their beauty in his brief characterization of the three sisters. Marred by disease, Eudokia is not particularly beautiful, Zoe is of brilliant beauty and the last, Theodora, is less beautiful than her comely sister.

The more elaborate references to physical beauty in the *Chronographia* are, however, devoted to the beauty of male characters. This is most notable in the description of the beauty of Constantine Monomachos, which is one of the most elaborate and detailed in the *Chronographia* and includes an in-depth account of the emperor's ideal features that follows the rhetorical practices of an encomium, set within Psellos's eulogy of the emperor. Throughout the text, Psellos's references to male beauty, in fact, appear to have a 'logical' place within the narrative, either, as in the case with the description of Monomachos, serving the author's rhetorical ends, or portraying male beauty as a significant factor in the development of events. Beauty, for instance, appears as an important factor in Zoe's quest for a third husband. Besides the description of the fine looks of Constantine Monomachos, Zoe's eventual choice, Psellos devotes attention to the comeliness of each perspective candidate in turn: the reader is told that Constantine Dalassenos was 'an extraordinarily handsome man', and also that the beauty of Constantine Artoklinis was so impressive that he had charmed the empress already when secretary to Romanos III, even to the

point that she had been accused of having illicit relations with him.⁷¹ In a different context, the beauty of the young Constantine Doukas is described as so great that it could not be disguised by the simplicity of his dress, but rather shone brightly from beneath it.⁷² By praising Constantine's comeliness Psellos suggests indirectly that it was this feature (rather than Psellos's own influence) that helped to ensure his succession to the throne, his beauty making everyone acclaim him as the most suitable candidate.⁷³

Michael Attaleiates's (c.1020/30–1085?) *Historia* seems to draw a similar picture. Attaleiates's history presents the reader with only two lengthy descriptions of physical beauty, both, significantly, describing male characters: the emperors Nikephoros Botaneiates and Romanos Diogenes. The beauty of women, like their deeds as historical figures, is largely ignored by Attaleiates. The author even dismisses female beauty as irrelevant to his history, noting, in the case of Eudokia Makrembolitissa, that he will not speak of the blossoming youth of the Augusta, as there are other matters of greater importance to be recounted.⁷⁴

The cases of Botaneiates and Diogenes are suggestive in that the beauty of both, which is discussed in considerable detail, appears to be justified by the flow of Attaleiates's narrative and of its rhetorical needs.⁷⁵ The account of Botaneiates's beauty forms a part of Attaleiates's encomium to the emperor and was in keeping with the rules of rhetoric, which specified that physical description and an account of the beauty of the eulogized constituted a part of this genre. Pleasurable in appearance, Botaneiates is described as a second sun upon the earth. He is impressive in stature, of glowing complexion, ruddy in colouring, with black, beautiful eyes, arching eyebrows and a forehead that beamed with light.⁷⁶

The description of the beauty of Romanos Diogenes is equally important in terms of the development of the narrative, and is in fact presented as playing a crucial role in the unravelling of the story. Exiled because of an attempt at the throne, Diogenes is brought before the empress who is seized by pity and moved to tears at the sight of his beautiful, youthful physique.⁷⁷ Tall, broad shouldered, with the appearance of a king, with a ruddy complexion and comely eyes, the handsome Diogenes presents a sight that stirs not only the empress but also the attending nobles, swaying their hearts to granting him pardon and eventually leading Diogenes, through marriage, to the imperial throne.⁷⁸

In the *Epitome* of John Kinnamos (1180–1182) beauty is presented as a key feature of a number of the female characters discussed in the narrative. The exceptional beauty of Maria, daughter of Isaac Komnenos, is praised twice within the text; the comeliness of Maria, daughter of Manuel and Bertha-Eirene, is also lauded as is that of the

daughters of Raymond of Antioch.⁷⁹ In the case of Raymond's daughters, female beauty is also judged comparatively, with Marie deemed the most beautiful by Basil Kamateros, the imperial envoy, and selected as suited consort for Emperor Manuel.⁸⁰ In his account of the beauty of men, however, Kinnamos links good looks to the flow of the narrative. The western Raymond of Poitou, he notes, was so handsome that he attracted the attention of a custodian at the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which eventually led to a marriage alliance that made Raymond prince of Antioch.⁸¹ In Kinnamos's writing the beauty of men is ascribed such importance that it is described as triggering an imperial response, particularly when beauty is ruined by calamity: when the handsome son of *sebastocrator* Andronikos loses an eye in a joust he is compensated with the title of *protosebastos*. When the handsome Manuel, son of John Kantakouzenos, is imprisoned for treason and then blinded against the emperor's wishes, Kinnamos speaks of the emperor's anger against the wrongdoers.

In the *Alexiad*, which presents elaborate accounts of both male and female beauty, Anna Komnene devotes her longest account of physical beauty to the description of a male character: the handsome, infamous Bohemond. The images of beautiful men painted through the lines of her history, moreover, by far outnumber those of beautiful women. Overall, what the above suggests is that though the beauty of women was often seen as important enough to have women measured with regard to their comeliness in Byzantine writing, at times it was the beauty of men that received the most numerous or lengthy descriptions; even when these were legitimized by being a crucial factor in a historical sequence of events or by serving the rhetorical ends of an encomium. In descriptions of physical beauty an underlying gender distinction was noted: addressed as an essential part of a woman's image, sometimes beauty was praised in greater detail or given a greater validity when ascribed to the bodies of men.

The question of what constitutes the beautiful body in Byzantium appears to be answered by the emergence of an Ideal of Beauty, echoed in visual imagery and identified in writing where it is made up of a long list of easily identifiable, even repetitively acclaimed physical features. Blond, curly locks, white-and-rosy skin, gleaming, bright eyes set under perfectly arching brows, a glowing complexion and a beautifully fashioned physique feature consistently in descriptions of 'beautiful bodies'. Yet these rigid formulations of the ideal that present themselves as the 'natural' way of speaking about beauty in Byzantium, determining what constitutes the beautiful body and underlining how beauty is perceived and identified on the body of the bearer, are not without their ambiguities. In

imagery and writing, individual physical features may idealize the bearer, make concessions to 'reality' or have symbolic connotations depending on the agendas of authors, painters, patrons and audiences. The claim on the universality of beauty is challenged by the distinction between the geometricized idealization of female beauty and the greater individuality ascribed to the beauty of men. Byzantine writing may sum up women by reference to their beauty and simultaneously devote its attentions to describing the beauty of men, as if to assign greater validity to the latter.

What the dominant presence of the ideal also underlines is the existence of a profound preoccupation with beauty as an attribute of the human body in Byzantium; its repetitive presence indicates that the Byzantines were more concerned with physical beauty than scholarship has so far allowed for. Overall, one could argue that the ideal constitutes a discourse on beauty in Byzantium between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries; the challenge is to penetrate what it professes to tell us about what beauty is and how it can be read on the human body.

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