

# The Mask of Grace. On Body and Beauty of Soul between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages

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# Faces of Charisma

*Image, Text, Object in Byzantium and the  
Medieval West*

*Edited by*

Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak  
Martha Dana Rust



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# The Mask of Grace: On Body and Beauty of Soul between Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages

*Martino Rossi Monti*

## 1 The Gift of Grace

‘Charisma’ is a word with a peculiar history. Risen to prominence as a theological term in the 1st century AD thanks to the apostle Paul and gradually fallen in disuse in the West (at least as a word), it was reinvented as a sociological concept by Max Weber. In Weber, charisma denoted a form of *authority*, and was defined as a (real or imagined) extraordinary quality, thought to be supernatural or superhuman in nature, by virtue of which its possessor is treated – on the basis of *faith* rather than reason – as a leader.<sup>1</sup> After Weber, the word has enjoyed an increasing popularity and has been studied as a phenomenon or adopted as a guiding idea by a variety of disciplines stretching from anthropology to neuroscience. In popular usage, charisma has come to denote a mysterious quality or set of qualities that make an individual unique and irresistibly magnetic.

In Paul, however, the term was not specifically connected to authority or leadership, but could indicate the gift of redemption or, more particularly, a number of miraculous and ecstatic gifts (*charismata*), such as prophecy, healing, speaking in tongues, or miracle-working, assigned by God’s grace (*charis*)

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1 Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, trans. S.N. Eisenstadt (Chicago, 1968), p. 48. For the influence of church historian Rudolph Sohm’s analysis of theological charisma on Weber see David N. Smith, “Faith, Reason, and Charisma: Rudolf Sohm, Max Weber, and the Theology of Grace,” *Sociological Inquiry* 68 (1998), 32-60. On the reception of Weber’s concept of charisma in Germany and in the United States, see Joshua Derman, *Max Weber in Politics and Social Thought* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 176-215.

to individual Christians for the benefit of the community.<sup>2</sup> In the Greco-Roman world, supernatural talents of this kind were considered the privilege of *exceptional* individuals, and Paul, by adopting a new word for them, tried to disentangle them from their association with the realm of magic or with competing religious practices. He also did his best to domesticate them into a *communal* framework: some gifts, admittedly, were higher than others, but each member of the community was entitled to receive one. It is no mystery, however, that by stressing the superiority of the spirit over the law and of the “spiritual” man over the “psychic” one (1 Cor. 2), Paul also nurtured and personally cultivated, to a certain extent, the same aristocratic elitism that, elsewhere, he tried to contain. Even with the institutionalization of the church, the progressive decline of Pauline *charismata* and the replacement of prophets with bishops, this tension never disappeared. In fact, the cult of saints as superhuman individuals whose powers elevated them well *above* the community soon began to flourish: whether as martyrs, solitary ascetics, pastoral administrators or monks, these men and women were venerated as God’s special friends and were thought to possess supernatural powers. Gradually, their status was almost equated to that of Jesus as described in the *Epistle to the Hebrews* (7:26): “blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens.”<sup>3</sup>

It is precisely with the late antique and medieval representations of these ‘holy’ men that this essay will be concerned. Rather than attempting to trace back a Weberian conception of charisma in the texts of the past, I will focus on the Greek word from which the term charisma derives, namely *charis* (“grace”), and on its Latin counterpart, *gratia*. In particular, I will explore the role of *charis* and *gratia* in a number of literary portraits drawn from late antique and medieval biographies, panegyrics, and hagiographic texts. Out of the large amount of late antique and medieval physical descriptions available, I will focus on those in which the individual portrayed – whether a philosopher, a bishop, a monk, an abbot, a pope, or an emperor – is presented as utterly superior to the average human being. In all such descriptions, despite their different

2 1 Cor. 12:7-12; Rom. 12:6-8. A useful history of the idea of charisma from Paul to Weber and beyond is provided by John Potts, *A History of Charisma* (New York, 2009), who, however, overlooks the importance of charisma in medieval culture: on this, see Ayelet Even-Ezra, “The Conceptualization of Charisma in the Early Thirteenth Century,” *Viator* 44 (2013), 151-68, and the essay by Erik Gustafson in this volume. See also the texts collected in Giancarlo Andenna et al., eds., *Charisma und religiöse Gemeinschaften im Mittelalter* (Münster, 2005) and *Il carisma nel secolo XI. Genesi, forme e dinamiche istituzionali* (Negrarine di S. Pietro in Cariano, 2006). On the etymology and history of the word see Claude Moussy, *Gratia et sa famille* (Paris, 1966), pp. 456-59, and the entry in *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, ed. G.W.H. Lampe (Oxford, 1961), pp. 1518-19.

3 Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions* (Philadelphia, 1997), pp. 1-5.

epochs, styles and content, a *privileged* relationship between the individual and the deity is implied or explicitly stated, often also on the basis of the grandiose claims made by the individuals themselves. Exceptional beauty and grace are often (but by no means always) presented as evidence of this special relationship, and are understood as a special gift (*charisma*, or *donum*) from God and, depending on the context, as a sign of moral virtue, or nobility of birth or as an overflowing of spiritual beauty.

First of all, however, something must be said about the diversified meanings of grace (*charis*, *gratia*) in the ancient world, since this will help us to understand the late antique transformation undergone by this idea (or group of ideas). In Greek, *charis*<sup>4</sup> could designate: 1) the *outward* grace and charm of objects, human beings, or gods; 2) a favor or gift done or returned; 3) the kindness of the doer/giver or the gratitude of the receiver; 4) a sense of gratification, delight, or pleasure.<sup>5</sup> It is widely thought that this last meaning connected and explained all the others: in this sense, *charis* was something that brought joy or pleasure. I will focus on the aesthetic sense of the word, but it is important not to forget its connection with the others: the encounter with beauty was a source of pleasure (visual, psychological, or sexual), but physical beauty was also commonly seen as the mark of divine favor and as a key factor in *winning* the favor of the others.

In the Greeks' aristocratic, male-centered, and ethically-charged conception of human beauty,<sup>6</sup> *charis* was often associated with youthfulness, warlike strength, imposing size, and flourishing health. It was mostly a quality of *the body*, from which it emanated like a sort of splendor. It was very often the gods (the Graces, Athena, Aphrodite) who temporarily bestowed such special quality on humans, making them irresistible. This gift, however, did not come at random: Odysseus was no ordinary mortal and, after Athena's shedding of grace over him, appeared to Nausicaa as "radiant" with beauty and grace and god-like.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Pindar's prize-winning athletes stood out and glowed with divine *charis*. In the case of gods, heroes or kings, *charis* was often combined with a kind of awe-inspiring fearsomeness (*aidos*, *deinotes*), an association

4 On *charis* in the ancient world see Moussy, *Gratia*, pp. 409-73; Bonnie MacLachlan, *The Age of Grace* (Princeton, 1993). On the Greco-Roman benefaction context of *charis* and its influence on Paul's understanding of human and divine grace see James H. Harrison, *Paul's Language of Grace in its Graeco-Roman Context* (Tübingen, 2003).

5 *A Greek-English Lexicon*, eds. Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott (1843; rev. ed. Oxford, 1996), pp. 1978-79. Cf. Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étimologique de la langue grecque. Histoire des mots* (Paris, 1968-80; repr. Paris, 1999), pp. 1247-48.

6 Glenn W. Most, "Schöne (das)," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, 13 vols., eds. Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (Basel, 1971-2007), 8:1343-51.

7 Homer, *Odyssey* 6.232-43. Cf. Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica* 3.919-26, 443-44; Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.586-93; 4.150.

that, especially when referred to the gaze, was to enjoy great fortune in later encomiastic descriptions of emperors, holy philosophers, and saints.<sup>8</sup> In the context of both hetero- and homosexual love, *charis* could also denote the beauty radiating from the body or the eyes of the beloved (with the eyes *literally* emitting rays of light, according to the emissive theory of vision that dominated until modern times). *Charis*'s erotic and spellbinding charm could prove extremely dangerous, especially when feminine beauty was involved (as in the case of Pandora).<sup>9</sup> However, *charis* was also a property of speech, denoting its charm and pleasantness, and it is no wonder that, in the rhetorical tradition, *charis* came to denote the middle style, whose aim was to “delight.” The fine line dividing these ideas from the world of magic and ‘fascinations’ is hard to miss. Since grace of body and speech was thought to be so irresistible, it can be hardly coincidental that *charis*, by Greco-Roman times, had acquired the status of *vox magica* in the magical papyri and that *charitesion* had become a technical term designating “spells or devices that make the user beautiful or charismatic.”<sup>10</sup>

It was only during the early Roman imperial period that the Latin *gratia* (and its cognates *gratus* and *gratiosus*) began to acquire an aesthetic sense and to compete with the word *venustas* as a synonym for *charis*. The word quickly gained terrain also among Christian writers, who regularly used *gratia* to translate both theological and aesthetic *charis*.<sup>11</sup> It is also important to remember that the Greeks and the Romans used the word grace to denote feminine as well as *masculine* beauty.<sup>12</sup> In the overall, grace as a property often stood for something elusive and non-measurable, a ‘plus’ capable of rendering beauty irresistible. In a sense, grace could be seen not so much as a quality of the

8 For Odysseus, cf. Homer, *Odyssey* 8.22; for the goddess Demetra and the “eyes of kings,” cf. *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 214-15. For a late antique example, cf. Ammianus Marcellinus on Emperor Julian’s eyes and face in *Res Gestae* 15.8.12: “oculos cum venustate terribiles vultumque excitatus gratum.”

9 Hesiod, *Theogony* 585; cf. *Works and Days* 60-82.

10 Christopher A. Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), p. 25, 96-110. For the role of *charis* in the magical papyri see also Harrison, *Paul’s Language of Grace*, pp. 90-95.

11 See Moussy, *Gratia*, pp. 417-35. On the Hebrew word for “grace” and its Greek rendering see James A. Montgomery, “Hebrew Heseid and Greek Charis,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 32 (1939), 97-102. On the patristic meaning and use of *charis* see *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, 1514-18.

12 Cf. the contrast between *gratia virilis* and *femineum decus* in Statius, *Silvae* 2.6.41, or the “manly grace” of the emperor Aurelianus in *Historia Augusta: Aurelianus* 6.1: “Fuit decorus ac gratia viriliter speciosus.”



object but rather as a *projection* on the object of the emotions it aroused in the viewer<sup>13</sup> (a similar point could be made about the modern notions of charisma).

As we shall see, roughly in the age of Plotinus, the idea of grace as beauty underwent, especially among Platonists and in some Christian circles, a process of *spiritualization*, and came to denote not so much bodily beauty, but the outward reflection of *inward* beauty and of the divine power inhabiting it. This kind of luminous beautification from the inside was described by Plotinus and later developed by his followers in their biographic descriptions of the Neoplatonic philosophers. Adopting and adapting Platonic ideas, Christian theologians – in Alexandria and especially in Cappadocia – argued that through God's *charis* the soul could regain its godlike, luminous beauty, which had been obfuscated by the Fall: salvation was understood as a beautification of the soul.<sup>14</sup> The body could partially reflect this inner beauty already in this life, but was to radiate it fully only in the resurrected state. In this sense, the glow of *charis* on a saint's face was often seen as the outward reflection of the inner workings of God's grace.<sup>15</sup> These ideas seem to have reached the Latin West through multiple channels (one of them possibly being Ambrose and the Neoplatonic circle of Milan); in this process, as we will see, they gradually intertwined with ideas and traditions quite distant from the Platonic framework.

13 MacLachlan, *The Age of Grace*, p. 149; Valerio Neri, *La bellezza del corpo nella società tardoantica* (Bologna, 2004), pp. 63, 76.

14 Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, ed. Richard A. Norris Jr. (Atlanta, 2012), pp. 52-53 (PG 44:792): "When we were sinners and dark, God made us full of light and lovely by shining upon us with his grace (*charin*) ... so when the soul has been transposed from error to truth, the dark form of her life is transformed into radiant beauty (*charin*)." Cf. Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, PG 32:109. This imagery is echoed in Thomas Aquinas, *Super sententiis* 4 d. 18 q. 1 a. 2 qc. 1-2 and also in the *Catechismus ex decreto Concilii Tridentini ad parochos* (Lyon, 1567), pp. 180-81.

15 For the grace shining from Moses's face see Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, PG 44:325; for the God-given grace shining from the dead body of Macrina (Gregory's sister) see *Life of Macrina*, PG 46:992. See Patricia Cox Miller, "Dreaming the Body: An Aesthetics of Asceticism," in *Asceticism*, eds. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford, 1998), pp. 281-300, and cf. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York, 1988), pp. 293-94.

## 2 The Holy Philosophers

The religious and aristocratic turn of late antique philosophy has been often pointed out: by the 3rd century AD, philosophy was generally identified with a spiritual search for the supreme deity, and the philosopher was often seen as an all-wise and godlike figure, if not even as a god. The Platonic philosophers, especially after Plotinus, had done much to encourage their own divinization, since they regarded themselves as the one and only pure and “holy succession” of interpreters of Plato’s teachings. This attitude was part of a more general trend, which found expression particularly in the biographical literature dedicated to the so-called “holy men.”<sup>16</sup> In Porphyry’s and Iamblichus’s ‘sacred’ biographies of Pythagoras, or in the *Lives of the Philosophers and Sophists* of Eunapius (c.345-c.420), rigorous asceticism, magical knowledge, prophetic insight, and superior philosophical contemplation were seen as the distinctive marks of the divine philosopher and had formed an often confused but powerful mixture.<sup>17</sup> These texts had a clear propagandistic and proselytizing aim and must be put in the context of the rivalry between paganism and Christianity.

No wonder that, in this tradition, the physical description of Platonic philosophers took on a fully hagiographical tone. However serene in its classicism, Porphyry’s description of Plotinus in class already provides an example of an ‘illumination from within’ which draws from the same vocabulary that Plotinus had used to describe the supreme deity.<sup>18</sup> In Marinus’s description of Proclus (c.410-85), not only Proclus’s beautiful bodily symmetry corresponded to the harmony of his soul, but “the force of his soul, blooming in his body like a living light, produced an astonishing radiance which is scarcely possible to convey in words.” This radiance was particularly evident in Proclus’s face and eyes: “For his eyes seemed to be filled with a sort of brilliance, and the rest of his visage had a share of divine illumination (*ellampseos theias*).” We should be careful taking these statements simply as metaphors: during one of Proclus’s lectures, Marinus promptly reports, a certain Rufinus saw a “light” playing around the

16 On this, see Garth Fowden, “The Pagan Holy Man in Late Antique Society,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982), 33-59; Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1983). On ancient biography’s ambiguous position between reality and fiction see Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography* (1971; expanded ed. Cambridge, 1993), pp. 46-47, 99-104. On the interaction and coalescence between biography and panegyric in Late Antiquity see *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, eds. Tomas Hägg and Philip Rousseau (Berkeley, 2000).

17 Fowden, “The Pagan Holy Man,” pp. 36-37.

18 Porphyry, *The Life of Plotinus* 13. Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6.5; 5.5.12, ed. Arthur H. Armstrong, 7 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1966-88).

head of Proclus. Like Plotinus, Proclus was also kindly, but, unlike Plotinus, his gentleness was combined with a touch of fearsomeness. Marinus also specifies that when Proclus spoke he was “under divine inspiration (*theias epipnoias*)” and his words “fell like snow” from his mouth.<sup>19</sup>

Even more interestingly, Damascius (480-c.550) presented Isidore’s eyes as imbued with divine *charis* and wisdom, pointing once again to the outward appearance as a gateway to the inside. Isidore’s description, even if slightly more individualized than that of Proclus, appears vague: the style is encomiastic, and only Isidore’s old age and the divine shape of his face are alluded to. Arguably the most important aspect of this description is the fact that Isidore’s sparkling, *grace*-filled eyes were the “true images (*agalmata*) of his soul, and not of the soul alone, but of the divine emanation (*theias aporroes*) dwelling in it,” making him a sort of living manifestation of God.<sup>20</sup> In all these portraits, the ‘visibility’ of the soul also emphasizes the philosopher’s domination of and detachment from his body, from which his soul would have been fully freed only at the moment of death.

These ideas were deeply rooted in the Platonic tradition. At some point, Plato’s notion of the beauty of the soul<sup>21</sup> had been combined with the idea of an ‘irradiation’ of the soul’s beauty to the outside, a beauty that was described as luminous and divine in origin and, at the same time, as the result of a process of moral self-purification. When a “beautiful soul is embedded in a beautiful [male] body,” Maximus of Tyre wrote, it “shines out through what encloses it.”<sup>22</sup> This way, a form of mutual correspondence between the inside and the outside was established; this, however, was problematic, since the context was one of – Platonically speaking – ontological *disparity*, if not opposition, between body and soul. In any case, the trend continued with Plotinus, who argued that inward beauty could become outwardly visible – although by no means *entirely* visible – through the “splendor” of “grace” (*charis*).<sup>23</sup> For

19 Marinus, *The Life of Proclus* 3, 16, 23, trans. Mark Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints* (Liverpool 2000), pp. 62, 81–82, 94 (modified). For the Greek text see *Vita Procli*, ed. Jean F. Boissonade (Paris, 1850). On the passage see H.J. Blumenthal, “Marinus’ *Life of Proclus*: Neoplatonist Biography,” *Byzantium* 54 (1984), 483–84. For the simile of the snow cf. Homer, *Iliad*, 3, 222; on Proclus’s fearsomeness cf. also Suda, alphaiota 89=Damascius frg. 248 Zintzen.

20 Damascius, *The Life of Isidore* 13, ed. Polimnia Athanassiadi, *Damascius. The Philosophical History* (Athens, 1999), pp. 89–90, modified. Cf. p. 195 (=frg. 75F.3–5).

21 Plato, *Republic* 444d–e; *Symposium* 209b; *Phaedrus* 279b–c.

22 *Oration* 19, no. 2 (cf. 21.7) ed. M.B. Trapp, *The Philosophical Orations* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 170–71.

23 Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.7.22; cf. 2.9.17. Cf. Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus or the Simplicity of Vision*, trans. Michael Chase (Chicago, 1998), pp. 49–52; Lloyd P. Gerson, *Plotinus* (London, 1994),

Plotinus, the grace of a human face was not a material property, such as color or symmetry, but the spiritual light illuminating them. It was not, as in Homer or Pindar, the splendor of the body: it had become the *splendor of the soul*. This means that in order to ‘see’ true beauty one had to abandon normal vision and open one’s “inner eye.” Yet – and this tension is typical of the whole Platonic tradition – it was still *sensible* beauty that, however imperfectly, disclosed the reality of its divine source: it was the Good that “bestowed graces” (*charitas*) on each intelligible form, making it desirable, and a “trace” of such grace was still visible in the material instantiation of that form.<sup>24</sup> It was not a long step from here to see in the face of one’s revered master the luminous epiphany of the highest form of divinity. It seems difficult, in such descriptions, to keep the codified rhetorical strategy of the propagandist entirely distinct from the psychological experience – hardly confined to the ancient world – of the zealous follower.

### 3 The Christian Holy Men

Between the 4th and 7th centuries, new figures emerged across the – quite diversified – Christian world: the wandering ascetic, the solitary or coenobitic monk, and the holy bishop. They inspired a multiform devotional literature which, often competing with its pagan counterpart, typically exalted and idealized its protagonists and aimed at promoting their example and turning readers and listeners into disciples.<sup>25</sup> Unlike that of the pagan holy men, however, the divinity of the Christian holy man was (or at least was supposed to be) *derivative*: the powers he possessed and the miracles he performed were evidence of the power of God.<sup>26</sup> In both cases, however, their beauty and “grace” was exalted as evidence of their special relationship with the divine sphere.

During the first centuries of our era, the attitude of the church fathers toward physical beauty was mostly one of suspicion and contempt: in this context, the deliberate humiliation of one’s body (or beauty) through asceticism

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p. 184. The transparency of the beauty of soul through bodily *charis* appears to have been also a Stoic idea (see Plutarch, *Dialogue on love* 766e-f, who approves it).

24 Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.7.22; 1.6.2, 8.

25 On the ‘charismatic’ effects of this kind of literature see Stephen Jaeger’s essay in this volume.

26 Cf. Fowden, “The Pagan Holy Man,” p. 50. On the Christian holy men see Peter Brown, “The Saint as Exemplar in Late Antiquity,” *Representations* 2 (1983), 1-25; Claudia Rapp, “Saints and Holy Men,” in *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, eds. Augustine Casiday and Frederick W. Norris, 9 vols. (Cambridge, 2006-09), 2:548-52.

functioned as a way to emphasize inner purity. This trend never disappeared, but between the 5th and 6th centuries the mood changed considerably: literary portraits exalting the luminous beauty and grace of abbots, monks, and bishops became quite common, both in the East and the West. This was a beauty completely deprived of erotic allure and made transparent by its own purity; it was an anticipation of the perfection of the resurrected body, which was thought to display a full correspondence between inner and outer beauty.<sup>27</sup> In these descriptions, the attribute of grace (*charis, gratia*) was very often used to underline such correspondence. However, as pointed out by Ludwig Bieler in a classic study, already during Late Antiquity the word “grace” was a synonym for divine or angelic beauty (of personal appearance or speech) and in this sense was commonplace in biographical pagan sources; in Christian texts, however, the theological and aesthetic sense of the word had merged.<sup>28</sup> A good example of this trend is the *Life of Antony*, written by Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, shortly after the hermit’s death in 356 AD. This very influential work, a great literary success both in the East and the West,<sup>29</sup> is often seen as the starting point of Christian hagiography. Here, Athanasius provided a physical description of Antony:

His face had a great and wonderful grace (*charis*). This gift (*charisma*) also he had from the Savior. For if he were present in a great company of monks, and any one who did not know him previously, wished to see him, immediately coming forward he passed by the rest, and hurried to Antony, as though attracted by his appearance. Yet neither in height nor breadth was he conspicuous above others, but in the serenity of his manner and the purity of his soul. For as his soul was free from disturbances, his outward appearance was calm; so from the joy of his soul he possessed a cheerful countenance, and from his bodily movements could be perceived the condition of his soul. [...] Thus Antony was recognized, for

27 Neri, *La bellezza*, pp. 181-86.

28 Ludwig Bieler, *ΘΕΙΟΣ ΑΝΗΡ* (1935-36; repr. Darmstadt, 1967), 1:52-56; for more references see Hans P. L’Orange, *Apotheosis in Ancient Portraiture* (1947; repr. New Rochelle, 1982), pp. 29-30, 95-97. For a detailed 2nd-century physical description of Paul in which his *unattractive* features are beautified by the angelic “grace” of his face see *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 3 and see now Heike Omerzu, “The Portrayal of Paul’s Outer Appearance in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*,” *Religion & Theology* 15 (2008), 252-79. For the fullness of grace of the martyr Stephen and his angelic face see *Acts of the Apostles* 6:8, 15.

29 Cf. Augustine, *Confessions* 8.6.14-29.

he was never disturbed, for his soul was at peace; he was never downcast, for his mind was joyous.<sup>30</sup>

In his *Life of Pythagoras* (18) Porphyry had also insisted on the psychagogic effect of Pythagoras's *charis* of speech and manners. The harmony between the body and the soul of Antony, however, was clearly an anticipation of their awaited compenetration in the *resurrected* body, something that was utterly unacceptable for the average pagan philosopher.<sup>31</sup> The immutability of Antony's inner and outer condition must also be emphasized: the expression of his face is undisturbed by passions and appears locked in a mask of blessedness.<sup>32</sup> It is interesting to note that, in the Greek text, the magnetic *charis* appearing on the face of Antony is said to be a gift (*charisma*) of God. This provides further evidence of the intertwining between the two senses of the word *charis* typical of this age: in texts like this, the visible grace and beauty of some exceptional individuals are seen as a reflection of the invisible gift of God's grace. Antony's description was to exert an influence on the subsequent (Latin and Greek) developments of the literary portraits of saints and bishops that would be difficult to overestimate. The Latin version of the *Life of Antony* most widespread in the West was completed by Evagrius of Antioch, who took some significant liberties in the translation: to the grace of Antony's face he added that of his "holy mind," made visible "through the mirror of the body" (*per speculum corporis*).<sup>33</sup> This, however, was hardly stretching the text beyond its original meaning. In other texts, the quality of grace was associated with the presence of light: in the 3rd-century *Life of Cyprian*, for example, the onlookers

30 Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 67, trans. Philip Schaff, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: Second Series*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI, 1982-83), 4:214. For the Greek text: SC 400:312-14. On the passage, see David Brakke, *Athanasius and the Politics of Asceticism* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 243-44; Georgia Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes* (Berkeley, 2000), pp. 143-44. Cf. chapter 14 of the *Life* for Antony's "grace" of speech, another gift from God.

31 However, on the resistance, by many western and eastern early Christians, to accept the notion of the *carnality* of the resurrected body see Neri, *La bellezza*, pp. 269-81.

32 Cf. Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 14 for the correspondence between the stability and purity of Antony's soul (due to his being "guided by the Word") and the partial incorruptibility of his body (an anticipation of the resurrected condition).

33 For Evagrius's version see PG 26:940. There had been also an anonymous, more literal, but less widespread Latin translation (see the text ed. by G.J.M. Bartelink in *Vita di Antonio*, trans. Pietro Citati, Salvatore Villa, 7th ed., Rome, 2003 – here p. 132).

were overwhelmed by the “sanctity” and “grace” that “shone out” of Cyprian.<sup>34</sup> In 6th-century France, all these themes and imageries had already merged: in a letter addressed to the bishop of Metz, for example, a Provençal nobleman exalted the “grace” that “glowed” on the bishop’s face, this being the “mirror” of his heart, namely of the “splendor of charity” that shone within the recesses of his breast with a clarity of immense brilliance.<sup>35</sup>

In other cases, these ideas appeared in the context of much more detailed physical descriptions, whose authors often resorted to the style and language of ancient physiognomics. In a head-to-toe description of Epiphanius, bishop of Pavia, his successor Ennodius (474-521) insisted on the splendor of the bishop’s physical beauty as a sign (*index*) of the beauty of his soul.<sup>36</sup> The same connection between outer and inner beauty can be found in Ennodius’s panegyric description of Theodoricus. Given his role, the emperor appears stronger and more imposing than the bishop, but the parallel shows how indebted the representation of religious (particularly episcopal) power and authority were to the model of secular power: in both cases, physical beauty, as a sign of moral nobility or purity, seemed to work both as demonstration and a justification of their political and social role.<sup>37</sup>

Early medieval Italy provides further examples of this peculiar mixture of physiognomic language and spiritualization of physical beauty, a mixture in which the polysemy of the word *gratia* continued to play a fundamental role. In the terse literary portraits of the bishops of Ravenna sketched in his *Liber pontificalis ecclesiae Ravennatis* between 830 and 846, Agnellus of Ravenna focuses on the somatic traits that emphasize the venerability of old age and the effects of penitence; very often, also, he records the beauty and the

34 *Vita Cypriani* 6: “Tantum sanctitatis et gratiae ex eo relucebat, ut confunderet intuentium mentes.”

35 Dynamius, *Epistola* 2, CCL 117:435-36 (PL 80:25-26).

36 Ennodius, *Vita Epifani* 13-17, MGH Auct. ant. 7:86. On this, see Hilde Vogt, *Die Literarische Personenschilderung des Frühen Mittelalters* (Leipzig, 1934), pp. 31-32; Raffaele Passarella, “Fisiognomica ennodiana,” in *Debita dona*, eds. Paola F. Moretti et al. (Naples, 2009), pp. 401-10.

37 Passarella, “Fisiognomica,” pp. 402, 405. Ennodius’s detailed portrait of Epiphanius has an interesting eastern parallel in the 6th-century description of patriarch Eutychius of Constantinople by his disciple, the presbyter Eustratius, who appears to draw extensively from Athanasius’s description of Anthony. See Nicholas Maridines, “The Beautiful Bishop. Physiognomy and Holiness in the *Life of St. Eutychius of Constantinople*,” in *The Concept of Beauty in Patristic and Byzantine Theology*, ed. John A. McGuckin (New York, 2012), pp. 210-26. For the *charis* of Sisinnius, bishop of Constantinople (5th century) see Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.22.

harmonious proportions of the bishops and the “celestial grace” which “suffused” or “adorned” their body or face.<sup>38</sup>

#### 4 The Middle Ages

The texts quoted so far show the persistence of certain schemes and ideas that appear to have been transmitted – sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, and with significant variations depending on the historical and social context – from late antique to medieval authors. The idea that a graceful appearance was evidence of a soul in grace became widespread in the Middle Ages, especially in hagiographic and biographic literature.<sup>39</sup> As it has been repeatedly observed, the biographers of medieval saints and the biographers of late antique holy men often described and celebrated their heroes in very similar terms. Many medieval texts could be recalled to illustrate this point. I will limit myself to a few, starting with a description taken from an 11th-century monastic biography. The author is the monk Jotsaldus and the protagonist is Odilo, the fifth abbot of Cluny (962-1048), certainly one of the most influential and respected figures of his time. According to his biographer, there was “something great and divine” about Odilo, which, however, seemed to be accessible primarily through a kind of spiritual gaze. Something shone forth from Odilo’s manners and appearance that turned him into a revered object of imitation. His inner virtues became visible through what Jotsaldus defines as *gratia*, a quality that seemed very much connected – according to a model of sainthood typical of north-western Europe – to his aristocratic background. As in the case of Antony, this grace seemed to guarantee a perfect correspondence between the inward and the outward: “his inner nature was revealed on the outside by the grace that shone from him” (*qualis esset interius, relucens in eo gratia declarabat exterius*). Jotsaldus also provides a conventional and strongly idealized portrait of Odilo’s physical appearance:

He was of medium (*mediocris*) height. His face was full of authority and grace (*plenus auctoritatis et gratiae*). To gentle people he was cheerful

38 *Liber pontificalis ecclesiae Ravennatis*, MGH SS rer. Lang., 287: “Probus XIII, pinguis divina gratia et speciosus forma, decrepatus aetate, gravis corpore, ylaris vultu, caeleste perfusus gratia, roboratus Deum senper quaesivit”; cf. p. 325. On these portraits see Vogt, *Die Literarische Personenschilderung*, pp. 63-67; Paolo Squatriti, “Personal Appearance and Physiognomics in Early Medieval Italy,” *Journal of Medieval History* 14 (1988), 191-202.

39 On medieval biography see Walter Berschin, *Biographie und Epochenstil im lateinischen Mittelalter*, 5 vols. (Stuttgart, 1986-2004).



and good-natured, but to the proud so terrible that they could hardly bear his presence. In his emaciation he was strong, in his pallor ornate, in his greyness, beautiful. His eyes, radiating as it were some sort of splendor (*splendore fulgentes*) were for the beholder both a source of terror (*terrori*) and admiration; they were also accustomed to tears due to his frequent exercise of the virtue of repentance. From his movements, gestures and gait shone forth the beauty of authority, the weight of gravity and the mark of serenity ... His voice was virile, and at the same time full of beauty (*plena decoris*) ... His speech was full of sweetness and grace (*plenus suavitatis et gratiae*) ... There was nothing artificial or affected about him, and nature had made him admirably harmonious both in the structure of his body and in the conduct of his life. And even though, according to the blessed Ambrose, we do not consider the beauty of the body as the locus of virtue, we do not exclude gracefulness (*gratiam*) from it.<sup>40</sup>

According to C. Stephen Jaeger, the Cluniacs had appropriated the language and educational ideals of the cathedral schools (which had largely followed Cicero and Ambrose in their insistence on the cultivation of manners as an expression of inner virtue) and had “filled them with a specifically monastic-ascetic content.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Jotsaldus’s explicitly recalled source is Ambrose, who in his *De officiis ministrorum* had chosen to indicate with the word *gratia* precisely the outward expression of moral beauty (*honestum*) which for Cicero represented the essence of *decorum*.<sup>42</sup> Cicero’s ethical system, cut out for the Roman aristocrat and statesman, had been adapted by Ambrose to a different context, that of the priest and the bishop. The influence of Cassiodorus, who – in a kind of paradoxical harmonization with the classical ideals of serenity, decorum and *mediocritas* – had transfigured the bodily signs of the monk’s self-mortifications (emaciation, pallor) into an ideal of “monastic beauty,” is also detectable in the passage.<sup>43</sup> However, the connection between grace and

40 Jotsaldus, *Vita Odilonis*, MGH SS rer. Germ. 68:152-53 (PL 142:899-901). I relied in part on Stephen Jaeger’s trans.: *The Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe 950-1200* (Philadelphia, 1994), p. 109.

41 Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels*, pp. 109-10.

42 Ambrose, *De officiis ministrorum*, CCSL 15:31 (PL 16:52). Cf. Cicero, *De officiis* 1.126-31.

43 Edgar De Bruyne, *Études d’esthétique médiévale*, 2 vols. (1946; repr. Paris, 1998), 1:73. Cf. Cassiodorus, *De anima* 11-13, CCSL 96:556-65 (PL 70:1298-1301), where Cassiodorus also insists on external appearance as a “mirror” (*speculum*) or “sign” (*signum, indicium*) of the soul.

light, the overlapping between aesthetic and theological grace and the insistence on the splendor radiating from Odilo's eyes hardly point to Cicero as a source; rather, these elements seem indebted to a complex of ideas (already detectable in Ambrose)<sup>44</sup> where the Christian-Neoplatonic imagery of light, the theme of Christ's transfiguration, and the representations of the dazzling beauty and fearsomeness of the Roman emperors had formed a tangle that seems almost impossible to unravel.<sup>45</sup>

This complex soon developed into the idea that the inward gift of divine grace somehow overflowed on the outside, engulfing the face and the body of the saint with light and beautifying his expressions, body language, and even his flesh. In the biography of the Benedictine abbot, hermit, and wandering preacher Bernard of Tiron, completed by the monk Geoffrey Grossus around the middle of the 12th century, for example, it is written that such an "overflowing of grace" (*redundantia gratiae*) had united his mind with that of God that his face, "carrying an image (*formam*) of this union, manifested an angelic likeness"; as a result, his countenance "shone with a certain sweet brightness" (*cujusdam claritatis suavitate resplendebat*).<sup>46</sup> This theme became particularly widespread in the works of the Cistercians.<sup>47</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux had lyrically described the luminous overflowing of the beauty of the soul (*pulchritudo animae*) into the body, the gait, and the expressions of the saint.<sup>48</sup> One of his biographers, Geoffrey of Auxerre, adopted this language in his description of Bernard's physical appearance, where inward grace becomes visible in his flesh:

God had endowed this holy soul with an auxiliary (*adiutorium*) similar to it, and had adapted to it a body formed by means of a special blessing. In his flesh there was visible a certain grace (*gratia*), which was spiritual

44 Cf. for example Ambrose, *De bono mortis* 7.26-27 (CSEL 32:727-28).

45 This imagery had also a parallel in the literary portraits typical of medieval courtly literature. See Henrik Specht, "The Beautiful, the Handsome, and the Ugly: Some Aspects of the Art of Character Portrayal in Medieval Literature," *Studia Neophilologica* 56 (1984), 131-32; Thomas Dale, "Romanesque Sculpted Portraits: Convention, Vision, and Real Presence," *Gesta* 46 (2007), 105-06.

46 Geoffrey Grossus, *Vita beati Bernardi Tironiensis*, PL 172:1427-28. On this passage see Ellert Dahl, "Heavenly Images: The Statue of St. Foy of Conques and the Signification of the Medieval 'Cult-Image' in the West," *Acta ad archaeologiam et artium historiam pertinentia* 8 (1978), 175-91, at pp. 186-87 (I relied in part on his translation).

47 I have explored this tradition in my *Il cielo in terra* (Turin, 2008), pp. 25-94.

48 Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super Cantica Canticorum* 85.10-11, *Sancti Bernardi opera*, 8 vols. (Rome, 1957-77), 2:314 (PL 183:1193). Cf. Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels*, pp. 269-72.

rather than carnal. His face radiated celestial rather than earthly brightness (*claritas praeifulgebat*): in his eyes shone (*radiabat*) angelic purity and dove-like simplicity. So great was the beauty of the inner man (*interioris hominis pulchritudo*), that it must needs break forth outwardly (*foras erumperet*) with visible signs (*indiciis*), so that the outer man appeared suffused with the overabundance of inward purity and copious grace (*de cumulo internae puritatis et gratiae copiosae perfusus*).

This typically idealized portrait is followed by a description of Bernard's body, which, like that of Odilo, appears somewhat beautified by his penitential practices:

His body was rather fragile (*tenuissimum*) and not plump, his extremely thin skin turned moderately rosy on the cheeks. And whatever natural warmth he possessed, he expended in his continuous meditation and zeal for penance. The hair on his head was a mixture of white and blonde. His beard somewhat reddish, but toward the end of his life it was covered with a thin layer of greyness. His stature was a good average (*mediocritatis honestae*) and appeared tall rather than short.<sup>49</sup>

This description appears much more detailed and individualized than that of Odilo, but it is difficult to say how 'naturalistic' it really is: realistic traits are juxtaposed with idealized ones and the overall purpose, as in many other cases, seems to be to cast the individual as a *type* in accordance with his social role.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, a great deal of stress is put on the transparency of the beauty of the soul through the body, a body whose celestial radiance was also an anticipation of the glory of the resurrection. It has been persuasively argued that the penetrating eyes and dazzling brilliance of the many golden reliquary figures that continually appear from the late Carolingian period on were meant to convey a similar message. Examples of this are the reliquary of St. Foy in Conques (10th century) and that of St. Baudime in Saint-Nectaire (12th

49 Geoffrey of Auxerre, *Vita prima* 3.1, CCCM 89B:135 (PL 185:303). On this passage see Étienne Gilson, "La mystique de la grace dans la Queste del Saint Graal," *Romania* 51 (1925), 332-33; Dahl, "Heavenly Images," p. 187; Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels*, pp. 273-74; Adriaan H. Bredero, *Bernard de Clairvaux*, trans. Joseph Longton (Turnhout, 1993), p. 94; James France, *Medieval Images of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux* (Kalamazoo, 2007), pp. 1-11. On the *Vita prima*, cf. Jaeger's essay in this volume.

50 On this, see the excellent essay by Dale, "Romanesque Sculpted Portraits."

century).<sup>51</sup> Not surprisingly, the phenomenon described in the biography of Bernard was thought to have characterized eminently the body of Christ and the Virgin Mary, which received attention especially in the numerous Cistercian allegorical commentaries on the *Song of Songs*.<sup>52</sup>

The encomiastic portraits of medieval popes were often constructed in accordance with similar principles. In a propagandistic pamphlet completed around 1133 and enthusiastically disseminated throughout Europe by (among others) Bernard of Clairvaux, Arnulf, the future bishop of Lisieux, contrasted the physical beauty and sanctity of Pope Innocent II with the ugliness and depravity of his schismatic rivals, the papal legate Girard and Pope Anaclet II. Innocent II – the author writes – is of medium height (*staturae mediocris*), and the simplicity and shyness of his eyes and face are evidence of his soul's chastity; besides, his countenance “shines” (*resplendet*) with such dignity that it generates reverence in the viewer. As Antony and many others after him, Innocent is the recipient, among many other God-given “gifts” (*dona*), of a “special grace” (*specialem gratiam*) that makes him lovable in virtue of his appearance alone. Moreover, God's generosity has inspired his eyes with “something divine” (*divinum quiddam*) and “full of grace” (*plenum gratiae*) that is worthy of veneration. His voice is sweet, but also authoritative. He attracts onlookers all the more, Arnulf concludes, because his body appears to have already received a taste of the future blessedness.<sup>53</sup> More than a century later, we read in the epitaph of Pope Nicholas III, who died in 1248, that his inner nature “shone” (*foris elucebat*) on the outside and his physical appearance was the image (*imago*) of his inner virtue.<sup>54</sup>

By the time of Thomas Aquinas, the idea of a luminous overflowing (*redundantia*) of grace into the body of the saint had been incorporated into the

51 Dahl, “Heavenly Images”; Thomas E.A. Dale, “The Individual, the Resurrected Body, and Romanesque Portraiture: The Tomb of Rudolf von Schwaben in Merseburg,” *Speculum* 77 (2002), 707-43.

52 Cf. Gilbert of Hoyland, *Sermones in Canticum Salomonis* 6.5 (PL 184:41).

53 Arnulf of Lisieux, *Invectiva in Girardum Engolismensem Episcopum*, MGH Lib. lit. 3:96. For a discussion of this work see Brigitte M. Bedos-Rezak, *When Ego Was Imago* (Leiden, 2011), pp. 209-30. On medieval portrayals of ugliness see Jan Ziolkowski, “Avatars of Ugliness in Medieval Literature,” *The Modern Language Review* 79 (1984), 1-20.

54 Gerhart B. Ladner, *Die Papstbildnisse des Altertums und des Mittelalters*, 3 vols. (Vatican City, 1941-84), 2:216. On the medieval tradition of the physical beauty of the popes and the combination of idealization and realism in their descriptions see Heinrich Schmidinger, “Das Papstbild in der Geschichtsschreibung des späteren Mittelalters,” *Römische Historische Mitteilungen* 1 (1956-57), 106-29; Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, *Il corpo del papa* (Turin 1994), pp. 286-91.

scholastic theology of beatitude. For Thomas, the glory of the resurrection coincided with the consummation of grace, and through grace the soul recovered its original beauty lost because of original sin. The “brightness” of the resurrected body was “caused by the overflowing of the glory of the soul into the body”: the *spiritual* brightness of the soul was received as *corporeal* brightness in the body. The glorious bodies are compared to gold for their brightness and to glass for their translucence. Moreover, in the blessed condition, the image of God, which resided first and foremost in the spirit, overflowed into the body, which in turn, due to its proportionality with the soul, became in itself a “representation” of the *imago Dei*. Thomas believed that a partial and temporary anticipation of this state could be achieved on earth: as the soul enjoyed the vision of God, its spiritual brightness was transmitted also to the body.<sup>55</sup>

This valorization of the human body is certainly part of a more general trend typical of the 13th century, and Thomas, following Aristotle, had insisted on the unity and interdependence of body and soul. However, at least with respect to the image of the overflowing of inner grace on the outside, I cannot agree with Dominic Olariu’s emphatic remark that this valorization was “unprecedented” in the medieval West: as should have become clear by now, the idea of the body as an “external manifestation” of the soul’s “spiritual fulfillment” had been developed by Christian authors well before Thomas Aquinas.<sup>56</sup> Even the new phenomenon of the stigmata, which began to appear in the 1220s, seems to me a rather consequent development – a physiological one, so to speak – of this tradition.<sup>57</sup> With Francis’s stigmata, we are presented with an even more *tangible* sign of God’s grace than the one shining through the flesh of Bernard of Clairvaux, and it is no wonder that Thomas of Celano resorted to a repertoire of images similar to those employed by Bernard’s biographer to describe Francis’s stigmata.<sup>58</sup>

55 See, respectively, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1 q. 95 a. 1 arg. 6; *Super sententiis* 4 d. 18 q. 1 a. 2 qc. 1-2; d. 44 q. 2 a. 4 qc. 1; d. 49 q. 4 a. 5 qc. 2 co; *Contra Gentiles* 4 cap. 86 n. 2.

56 Dominic Olariu, “Thomas Aquinas’ Definition of the *imago Dei* and the Development of Lifelike Portraiture,” *Bulletin du centre d’études médiévales d’Auxerre* 17, no. 2 (2013), <<http://cem.revues.org/13251>>.

57 André Vauchez, *La santità nel Medioevo*, trans. Alfonso Prandi (Bologna, 1989), pp. 441-45.

58 As the dead body of Francis is uncovered at his funeral, the crowd can admire the radiant beauty of his flesh, his angelic face, and the “beauty” and “grace” of his wounds (Thomas of Celano, *Vita prima* 112-13; for a detailed physical description of Francis see *ibid.* 83).

## 5 The Mask of Grace

Qualities such as grace, comeliness, splendor, majesty, and inward beauty were also commonly attributed – with different meanings depending on the epoch and the context – to the Roman emperors both in encomiastic and biographical literature. Even after the Christian turn, when it became clear (especially by the 5th century) that the Christian emperor could be a saint, but not a god,<sup>59</sup> these qualities were often still seen as the visible manifestation of the emperor's special relationship with the deity.<sup>60</sup> The different developments of this theme in Byzantium and in the West cannot be explored here. A literary portrait of a Byzantine emperor, however, will suffice to give the sense of the persistence of certain schemes and ideas and of their ramifications outside the context of saints and holy men:

Alexius indeed was not especially tall but rather broad, and yet his breadth was well proportioned to his height. When standing he did not strike the onlookers with such admiration, but if when sitting on the imperial throne, he shot forth the fierce splendor of his eyes, he seemed to be a blaze of lightning, such irresistible radiance shone from his face, nay from his whole person. He had black arched eyebrows, from beneath which his eyes darted a glance at once terrible and tender, so that from the gleam of his eyes, the radiance of his face, the dignified curve of his cheeks and the ruddy colour that suffused them, both awe and confidence were awakened. His broad shoulders, muscular arms, mighty chest, in fact his generally heroic appearance, evoked in the multitude the greatest admiration and pleasure. From his whole person emanated beauty (*oran*) and grace (*charin*) and dignity, and an unapproachable majesty. And if he entered into conversation and let loose his tongue, you would have realized from his first words that fiery eloquence dwelt on his lips. For with a flood of argument he would carry the opinions of his hearers with him, for truly he could not be surpassed in discussion or action,

59 Arnaldo Momigliano, "How Roman Emperors Became Gods," *The American Scholar* 55 (1986), 181-93, at p. 193.

60 Cf. Elizabeth C. Evans, "Physiognomics in the Ancient World," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 59 (1969), 1-101 at pp. 44, 46-58; Neri, *La bellezza*, pp. 109-51. One of the best examples can be found in the encomium of Constantine's beauty by the 310 AD anonymous orator in *Panegyrici Latini* 6(7).17.

being as ready with his tongue as with his hand, the one for hurling the spear, the other for casting fresh spells.<sup>61</sup>

These words were written by the Byzantine princess Anna Comnena – a contemporary of St. Bernard – about the Emperor Alexius, her father. In this portrait, the majesty of the Roman emperor seems to have merged with the terrifying appearance of the Christ Pantocrator.

In the West, as is well known, an aura of sacredness surrounded kings and emperors, who were not seen as ordinary mortals and were thought to possess supernatural powers. The rituals of consecration and unction, which paralleled those in use for the bishops, mystically transfigured and elevated them by far above the crowd: for some, the kings, while remaining by nature individual men, became through such rituals ‘deified’ by the grace of God.<sup>62</sup> This tradition obviously had many roots and took different forms, but it is hardly surprising to find our familiar imagery of grace applied to the encomiastic descriptions of kings. In a messianic panegyric of Frederick II written by a certain Nicholas of Bari after 1235, for example, the face of the emperor is described as “angelic” and “full of graces” (*plena gratiarum*), and reference is made both to the beauty of king David and the episode of Christ’s transfiguration.<sup>63</sup> In a 14th-century encomiastic portrait, Edward III of England is said to have had an elegant body and a face similar to that of God, in which shone an extraordinary (and propitious) grace.<sup>64</sup>

Another important point should be stressed. Some scholars have presented the idea of the reflection of inner beauty on the body or countenance of the saint as somehow indirectly indebted to, or at least compatible with, the tenets of the ancient physiognomic tradition, whose founding texts were unknown in

61 Anna Comnena, *Alexiad* 3.3, ed. Elizabeth A. Dawes, *The Alexiad of the Princess Anna Comnena* (1928; repr. London, 2009), p. 76 (PG 131:268). For a discussion, see Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago, 1994), pp. 214-15. For the grace (*charis*) shining on the face of emperor Manuel I Comnenus see Niketas Choniates, *Historia*, PG 139:380-81.

62 Marc Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges* (1924; Paris, 1961); Herwig Wolfram, *Splendor imperii* (Graz, 1963); Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies* (1957; repr. Princeton, 1997), pp. 42-86; Sergio Bertelli, *The King's Body*, trans. R. Burr Litchfield (University Park, 2001).

63 For the Latin text of the panegyric and a discussion see now Fulvio Delle Donne, *Il potere e la sua legittimazione* (Arce, 2005), pp. 104, 118.

64 Adam of Murimuth, *Continuatio chronicarum*, ed. Thomas Hog (London, 1846), p. 226: “Corpore elegans, vultum habens Deo similem, quia tanta gratia in eo mirifice relucebat, ut si quis in eius faciem palam respexisset, vel nocte de illo somniasset, illo die indubie speravit sibi iucunda solatia et prospera evenire.”

the Western Middle Ages until their rediscovery between the 12th and 13th centuries.<sup>65</sup> In part, this is certainly true, but I believe this view fails to understand the intricacy of the historical process that led to the development of the tradition I have focused on.<sup>66</sup> This intricacy owes much to the intertwining and mutual exchange – typical of Late Antiquity – between the tradition of the physiognomic handbooks proper and the many other forms of “physiognomic consciousness” to be found in ancient literature. More particularly, this view neglects the fortune and the influence of the Platonic doctrine of the outward irradiation of the beauty of the soul and its Christian development. In fact, what emerges from the personal descriptions quoted so far is a peculiar *convergence*: the attention to the morphological, somatic, and behavioral details, typical of the physiognomic tradition and its heirs, combines with the celebration – typically Platonic and Christian – of much more *elusive* properties, such as inward beauty, grace, splendor, or purity, which take on metaphysical and spiritual meanings fundamentally *alien* to that tradition. Besides, the insistence on the outward manifestation of the beauty of the soul through grace points to a kind of nexus or ‘correspondence’ between body and soul that appears very different – because *hierarchical* and *dualistic* to a certain extent – from the psychosomatic “sympathy” presupposed by the ancient physiognomic manuals. No exalted celebration of the spiritual over the material is to be encountered in those manuals, and the idea of the transparency or overflowing of the beauty of the soul through the body is equally absent. In fact, rather than of a correspondence, we should speak of a *triumph* of the soul over the body, which appears engulfed from an inward splendor. Nonetheless, these traditions seem to have formed a somewhat inextricable tangle.<sup>67</sup> Yet, however

65 Squatriti, “Personal Appearance”; Dale, “Romanesque Sculpted Portraits.” On the medieval rediscovery of physiognomics (and on the problems it generated) see the essays repr. in Jole Agrimi, *Ingeniosa scientia nature* (Tavarnuzze-Impruneta, 2002). On the circulation, in north-western France around 1100, of the Latin Anonymous physiognomic handbook see Jaeger, *The Envy of Angels*, pp. 115-16. “Phisionimia” as an art of reading character from the face is also attributed to the archbishop of Trier Albero in the 12th-century *Gesta Alberonis* by Balderic of Florennes (MGH SS 8:257).

66 Much more aware of this intricacy (although no mention is made of the Platonic-Christian tradition of the beauty of the soul) is Joseph Ziegler, “The Biology of the Virtues in Medieval and Early Renaissance Theology and Physiognomy,” in *Im Korsett der Tugenden*, eds. Mariacarla Gadebusch Bondio and Andrea Bettels (Hildesheim, 2013), pp. 12-13.

67 I have dwelled more extensively on this issue in “Fisiognomica e grazia da Bernardo di Chiaravalle a Giovan Battista Della Porta,” *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 21 (2015), 331-45. On the different forms of physiognomic consciousness, see Evans, “Physiognomics,” p. 6;



'prevailing' the soul might be over the body, it is still *in* and *through* the body that the grace and purity of the saint became visible. The contradiction could not be solved, and it is no wonder that in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages the human body became the object of both a humiliation *and* a glorification. To deal with this kind of texts is to face that ambiguity and duplicity of the body and its "signs" which Marie-Christine Pouchelle has described in her essay on the *Golden Legend*.<sup>68</sup>

The protagonists of the texts discussed above were portrayed by their biographers and followers as endowed with exceptional qualities and special, divine powers. Often they were literally divinized. Sometimes they were said to inspire both love and fear with their (fatherly) combination of grace and fearfulness, sometimes only love and admiration with their supposedly angelic (and motherly) meekness. In all these cases, however, their magnetic power of attraction was skillfully described by their biographers. Such power was thought to manifest itself through, among other things, oratorical skills, physical presence, and miraculous powers. However, it is easy to realize that in these portraits, not only the body, but also the personal identity of the individual described often tends to rarify, if not almost to vanish. I think this is only partially due to the fact that these descriptions employed specific rhetorical devices and formulas which had formed part of the education of both pagan and Christian men for centuries.<sup>69</sup>

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David Rohrbacher, "Physiognomics in Imperial Latin Biography," *Classical Antiquity* 29 (2010), 92-93.

68 Marie-Christine Pouchelle, "Représentations du corps dans la *Légende dorée*," *Ethnologie française* 6 (1976), 293-308. Cf. Michel Sot, "Mépris du monde et résistance des corps au XI<sup>e</sup> et XII<sup>e</sup> siècles," *Médiévales* 8 (1985), 6-17; Jérôme Baschet, "Âme et corps dans l'Occident médiéval: une dualité dynamique, entre pluralité et dualism," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 112 (2000), 5-30; Peter Dinzelbacher, "Über die Körperlichkeit der mittelalterlichen Frömmigkeit," in Dinzelbacher, *Körper und Frömmigkeit in der mittelalterlichen Mentalitätsgeschichte* (Paderborn, 2007), pp. 10-49. On the ambivalence toward the body in the Platonic tradition see John M. Dillon, "Rejecting the Body, Refining the Body. Some Remarks on the Development of Platonist Asceticism," in *Asceticism*, eds. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (Oxford, 1998), pp. 80-87.

69 On the development of personal descriptions from antiquity to the Middle Ages see Geneva Misener, "Iconistic Portraits," *Classical Philology*, 19 (1924), 97-123; Vogt, *Die Literarische Personenschilderung*; Alice M. Colby, *The Portrait in Twelfth-Century French Literature* (Geneva, 1965); Evans, "Physiognomics"; Gilbert Dagron, "Holy Images and Likeness," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45 (1991), 23-33; Jakov N. Ljubarskij, "Man in Byzantine Historiography from John Malalas to Michael Psellos," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 46 (1992), 177-86.

The medieval mind – André Vauchez has argued – was inclined to connote as *sensible* what we would rather describe as *spiritual* realities. The saints appeared to the medieval men and women as “luminous beings”: the source and nature of this light was spiritual, but its manifestations and miraculous effects were no doubt conceived as *material*.<sup>70</sup> This, as we have seen, was not just a medieval phenomenon: ancient men lived their spiritual life *visually*, to a degree scarcely imaginable for us.<sup>71</sup> The material world was often proclaimed inessential, but, *at the same time*, invested with spiritual meaning. The physical appearance of the holy man deserved physiognomical attention, but tended to disappear, swallowed by an inward splendor. Hans P. L’Orange has argued that in the literary and artistic portraits of the rulers, the saints and the philosophers of Late Antiquity the “pneumatic idealization” of man resulted in an erosion of individual traits. Their “holy countenance” and visionary gaze indicated a complete detachment from this world and eventually crystallized into a “stereotyped mask of majesty.”<sup>72</sup> Similarly, the glowing faces of the desert fathers studied by Georgia Frank tended to become indistinguishable as they were assimilated to those of the biblical heroes: theirs was a “biblicized physiognomy.”<sup>73</sup> Despite L’Orange’s perhaps too uniform account of the development of late antique art, it remains true that the influence of this “spiritualizing trend” on the literary and artistic portraiture of both the Latin and Byzantine Middle Ages was remarkable.<sup>74</sup>

There is certainly a relationship between the near-complete disappearance of individual facial likeness in medieval art between the age of Charlemagne and the time of Dante<sup>75</sup> and the idea, typical of 12th-century religious texts, but

70 Vauchez, *La santità nel Medioevo*, p. 437; see pp. 434-41 on beauty (or ugliness) as a “sign” of sanctity (though no mention is made of physiognomics).

71 L’Orange, *Apotheosis*, p. 98.

72 Ibid., pp. 95-126. Cf. R.R.R. Smith, “Late Roman Philosopher Portraits from Aphrodisias,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 80 (1990), 127-55; Neri, *La bellezza*, pp. 13-14, 147-51.

73 Frank, *The Memory of the Eyes*, pp. 160-65.

74 Cf. Willibald Sauerländer, “The Fate of the Face in Medieval Art,” in *Set in Stone*, ed. Charles T. Little (New Haven, 2006), pp. 3-17.

75 Ibid., pp. 3-4; the author links the rediscovery of physiognomical texts with the growing naturalism of medieval art. On bodily and facial expressivity of late medieval imagery and its metaphysical character see Paul Binski, “The Angel Choir at Lincoln and the Poetics of the Gothic Smile,” *Art History* 20 (1997), 350-74, and cf. Jaeger, *The Emy of Angels*, pp. 331-48. On the much debated problem of the 12th-century “discovery of the individual” see at least Caroline Walker Bynum, “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?” (1980), repr. and revised in Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 82-109; Dale, “Romanesque Sculpted Portraits.” Bedos-Rezak (*When Ego Was Imago*, pp. 109-59) stresses the relationship between the technology and metaphors of sealing (with their logic of

in fact much older, that the true self does not coincide with one's unique personality, but with a human nature made in the image of God – “an *imago Dei* that is *the same* for all human beings.”<sup>76</sup> To *conform* to such image – despite the deformation it had undergone due to the Fall – was therefore the highest and the most desirable goal. This desire for sameness, so unfamiliar to us, is probably one of the reasons (together with didacticism and the tendency to meld individuals with their social roles) behind the conventionality, the repetitive-ness, and the abstraction of so many medieval literary and artistic representations of holy men: reality was aestheticized in order to match unchanging ideals.<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless, the very attempts, in late antique and medieval sacred biographies, at rendering the physical appearance of individuals remind us that a complete absorption of the individual into the type was probably never fully achieved or desired, and that some tension always remained.<sup>78</sup> It remains true, however, that, like the souls of the blessed in Dante's *Paradiso*, the faces of late antique and medieval holy men tended to blur under the everlasting splendor of God-given grace. This perhaps explains why, to most of us, the grace-less and tragically expressive figures of the damned, whether depicted in Dante's *Comedy* or on the walls of medieval churches, appear much more human.

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sameness and replication) and the understanding of medieval identity between the 11th and 12th centuries.

- 76 Bynum, “Did the Twelfth Century,” p. 87 (my emphasis). Cf. Bedos-Rezak, *When Ego Was Imago*, pp. 147-50.
- 77 Alexander Kazhdan, *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 194.
- 78 The widespread discussions and anxieties about the post-mortem fate of one's unique physical features are also evidence of this tension. Cf. Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (New York, 1995).

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