

# The Portrayal of Paul's Outer Appearance in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Re-Considering the Correspondence between Body and Personality in Ancient Literature

**Heike Omerzu**

Evangelisch-Theologische Fakultät, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz,  
55099 Mainz, Germany

Guest lecturer, Department of New Testament and Early Christian Studies, University of  
South Africa, P. O. Box 392, 0003 UNISA, Republic of South Africa

omerzu@uni-mainz.de

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## Abstract

This essay claims that Paul's description in *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3, if read against the background of Graeco-Roman physiognomics, i.e., the belief in the coherence between outer appearance and inner qualities of a person, is not derogative as assumed in older research but agreeable. The positive interpretation of Paul's outer appearance is corroborated by an analysis of the reactions he evokes in followers (Onesiphorus, Thecla) as well as opponents (Theoclia, Thamyras). It is demonstrated that Paul's physiognomy corresponds to his apostolic identity.

## Keywords

Acts of Paul, Paul, Thecla, physiognomy, body, iconography

## 1. Introduction: The Depiction of Paul in *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3

The apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (*Acts Paul Thecl.*), probably originating in Asia Minor during the latter part of the second century C.E.,<sup>1</sup> reflect an astonishing physiognomic consciousness. Right at the beginning of the narrative Paul is depicted as 'a man small in size, with a bald head and crooked legs; in good health; with eyebrows meeting, a rather prominent nose and full of grace.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. James K. Elliott, ed., *The Apocryphal New Testament. A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 350–7. The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* forms part of the (longer) *Acts of Paul* but was also handed down separately. Numerous ancient translations attest their widespread popularity.

<sup>2</sup> *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3: εἶδεν δὲ τὸν Παῦλον ἐρχόμενον, ἄνδρα μικρὸν τῷ μεγέθει, ψιλὸν τῇ κεφαλῇ, ἀγκύλον ταῖς κνήμαϊς, εὐεκτικόν, σύνοφρον, μικρῶς ἐπίρρινον, χάριτος πλήρη· ποτὲ

This description is remarkable for several reasons. First of all, it is outstanding because nowhere else in early Christian literature, including Paul's own writings and the Lukan *Acts of the Apostles*, we find any comment on the outward appearance of the apostle (nor of any other character!) although these physical details 'were common in ancient biographies and in descriptions of so-called divine men.'<sup>3</sup> The depictive imagery of *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3 has probably equally influenced the literary tradition<sup>4</sup> as well as early Christian artistic representations

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μὲν γὰρ ἐφαίνετο ὡς ἄνθρωπος, ποτὲ δὲ ἀγγέλου πρόσωπον εἶχεν. Here and in the following, the English translations of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* are depending on Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*; the Greek text is quoted after Richard Adelbert Lipsius, ed., *Acta Petri – Acta Pauli – Acta Petri et Pauli – Acta Pauli et Theclae – Acta Thaddaei* (vol. 1 of *Acta Apostolorum Apocrypha*; eds. Richard Adelbert Lipsius and Maximilian Bonnet; Leipzig: Mendelssohn, 1891; repr., Hildesheim: Olms, 1990), 235–72, here: 237.

<sup>3</sup> Abraham J. Malherbe, 'A Physical Description of Paul,' *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (1986), 172.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Giuseppe Ricciotti, *Der Apostel Paulus. Lebensbild mit kritischer Einführung* (trans. Hildebrand Pfiffner; Basel: Thomas Morus Verlag, 1950), §§ 188–9. See esp. the sixth century description by John Malalas, *Chronographia* X.37 (ed. Ioannes Thurn; Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae, Serie Berolinensis 35; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2000, 194 = PG 97:257): ὑπῆρχεν δὲ ὁ Παῦλος ἔτι περιῶν τῇ ἡλικίᾳ κονδοειδῆς, φαλακρός, μιξοπόλιος τὴν κάραν καὶ τὸ γένειον, εὐρινος, ὑπόγλαυκος, σύνοφρος, λευκόχρους, ἀνθηροπρόσωπος, εὐπῶγων, ὑπογελῶντα ἔχων τὸν χαρακτῆρα, φρόνιμος, ἠθικός, εὐόμιλος, γλυκός, ὑπὸ πνεύματος ἁγίου ἐνθουσιαζόμενος καὶ ἰόμενος. 'While he was still alive Paul was short in stature, bald, with both hair and beard greying, a good nose, greyish eyes, eyebrows that met, white skin, a florid face, a good beard, and a cheerful appearance; he was sensible, moral, well-spoken and agreeable; he was inspired by the Holy Spirit and worked cures.' (trans. Elizabeth Jeffreys, Michael Jeffreys, and Roger Scott, *The Chronicle of John Malalas. A Translation* [Byzantina Australiensia 4; Melbourne: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1986], 136) There are obvious correspondences with Paul's portrait in *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3 but unfortunately the exact sources of Malalas are not known; cf. Maciej Kokoszko, *Descriptions of Personal Appearance in John Malalas' Chronicle* (Byzantina Lodziensia 2; Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1998), 155–61; Elizabeth Jeffreys, 'Malalas' Sources,' in *Studies in John Malalas* (eds. Elizabeth Jeffreys, Brian Croke, and Roger Scott; Byzantina Australiensia 6; Sydney: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1990), 182. See also Elizabeth Jeffreys and Michael Jeffreys, 'Portraits,' in Jeffreys, Croke, and Scott, *Studies in John Malalas*, 243: 'Confirmation of the extent to which the iconistic type of verbal portraiture had permeated literary genres is provided by the curious collection of descriptions made by a certain Elpius (= Ulpius?) the Roman, probably in the tenth century (...). Apparently designed to aid ecclesiastical painters, Elpius' text gives synopses of the physical appearance of the Old Testament prophets, Christ, the apostles, the early fathers of the church and some recent patriarchs. Amongst the sources on which he draws is Malalas, for the descriptions of Peter and Paul.' Kokoszko emphasises that unlike the partly unflattering description of Peter given earlier in *Chronicle* X.256, John Malalas's portrait of Paul is 'devoid of physiognomically negative physical features, and contains only positive or indifferent ones. The good impression is enhanced by the fact that the characterization of Paul's psyche contains exclusively favourable traits' (*Descriptions*, 156). The positive traits are the short stature (conveying energy), the good nose (LSJ, 729: 'keen-scented'), the blue eyes, the meeting eyebrows, the

of the apostle which are to be witnessed as early as in the Roman catacombs<sup>5</sup> and can be traced throughout art history until today.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, it is striking that the portrayal in *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3 does not match with our own ideal of masculinity – at least pertaining to the features of the

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white and florid complexion, the good beard and the cheerful appearance. Indifferent features are the baldness and the grey beard and hair; cf. Kokoszko, *Descriptions*, 160 n. 8–9.

See also (Pseudo-)Lucian (probably dating to the 10th century; cf. Ernst von Dobschütz, 'Philopatris,' *RE*<sup>3</sup> [1904], 363–5), *Philopatris* 12: ἠνίκα δέ μοι Γαλιλαῖος ἐνέτυχεν, ἀναφαλαντίας, ἐπίρρινος, ἐς τρίτον οὐρανὸν ἀεροβατήσας καὶ τὰ κάλλιστα ἐκμεμαθηκώς. 'when I was met by a Galilean with receding hair and a long nose, who had walked on air into the third heaven and acquired the most glorious knowledge' (ed. and trans. MacLeod, LCL). This very short description of Paul is in accordance with *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3 as regards the bald forehead and long nose. Von Dobschütz, 'Philopatris,' 365 recognises this as indication of the use of the Apocryphal Acts.

Nicephorus Callistus Xanthopoulos (14th century), *Historia Ecclesiastica* II.37/196 (PG 145:853–4): Ὁ δέ γε θεσπέσιος Παῦλος μικρὸς ἦν καὶ συνεσταλμένος τὸ τοῦ σώματος μέγεθος, καὶ ὡσπερ ἀγκύλον αὐτὸ κεκτημένος, σμικρὸν καὶ κεκυφὸς τὴν ὄψιν λευκὸς, καὶ τὸ πρόσωπον προφερῆς· ψιλὸς τὴν κεφαλὴν· χαροποὶ δὲ αὐτῷ ἦσαν οἱ ὀφθαλμοί· κάτω δὲ καὶ τὰς ὀφρῦς εἶχε νεουόσας· εὐκαμπὴ καὶ ῥέπουοσαν ὅλα τῷ προσώπῳ περιφέρων τὴν ῥίνα. Τὴν ὑπήνην δασεῖαν καὶ καθειμένην ἀρκούντως ἔχων· ῥαινομένην δὲ ταύτην καὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν ὑπὸ πολλαῖς ταῖς θριξίν. Paulus autem corpore erat parvo et contracto, et quasi incurvo, atque paululum inflexo, facie candida, annosque plures prae se ferente, et capite calvo; oculis multa inerat gratia, supercilia deorsum versus vergebant; nasus pulchre inflexus, idemque longior; barba densior, et satis promissa: eaque non minus quam capitis coma, canis etiam respersa erat. 'Paulus war an Körpergröße klein und schwächig und sah wie eine leicht gebogene Kurve drein; sein Gesicht war weiß, seine Gestalt trug Zeichen frühen Alters, sein Haupt war der Haare beraubt, sein Blick voll Anmut, seine Augenbrauen nach unten gebogen; seine Nase war von schöner Kurve und beherrschte das ganze Gesicht, der Bart dicht, eher spitzig und wie das Haupt leicht ergraut' (trans. Ricciotti, *Der Apostel Paulus*, 169). According to Ricciotti all these literary descriptions of Paul's outer appearance basically resemble that of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*: 'Paulus wird von dieser Überlieferung stilisiert zum kleingewachsenen, kahlen Manne mit dichtem Bart, ausgeprägter Nase, ineinander verwachsenen Augenbrauen, leicht gekrümmten Beinen, im ganzen aber ein würdiger Anblick' (Ricciotti, *Der Apostel Paulus*, 168).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Joseph Wilpert, *Die Malereien der Katakomben Roms* (3 vols.; Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1903), 1:106, 112–4 [cited 12 September 2008]. Online: <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/wilpert1903a>; Ricciotti, *Der Apostel Paulus*, §§ 192–5. Prominent early examples are, e.g., the frescoes from the Catacomb of Domitilla, one of them dating to the first half of the fourth century and depicting Paul (facing Peter) with black hair, which is sparse on the top, and a with a goatee beard (see for an image Wilpert, *Malereien*, 2: plate 154, details on plate 179 [cited 12 September]. Online: <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/wilpert1903>). Another fresco dating from 348 C.E. with Paul as the only preserved figure shows him in a similar manner with a huge head, scanty black hair and pointed beard (see for an image Wilpert, *Malereien*, 2: plate 181, details on plate 182 [cited 12 September]. Online: <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/wilpert1903>). Very similar to this iconography is an icon dated to the fourth or fifth century (cf. Ricciotti, *Der Apostel Paulus*, 171 with plate 11). Another painting from the Catacomb of St. Peter and Marcellinus dating back to the third or fourth century shows Paul with more hair, also having a pointed beard, but protruding ears (see for an image Wilpert, *Malereien*, 2: plate 252, details on plate 254; see also Appendix, fig. 1). The oldest preserved

small stature, the hooked nose and the crooked legs as well as the eyebrows that meet. Consequently, modern interpreters regarded Paul's portrait for instance as plain (Theodor Zahn) and unflattering (Sir William Ramsay), as unheroic (Ernst Dassmann) or representing a numinous ugliness (Hans Dieter Betz).<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the history of interpretation of the short sequence in *Acts Paul Theol.* 3 illustrates some shift of exegetical interests and hermeneutical impacts in biblical studies, i.e., away from source criticism and the question of historicity towards an understanding of early Christian literature as social discourse and as a complex process of establishing meaning and identity in the context of Graeco-Roman antiquity.<sup>8</sup> About a century ago among those who accounted

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mosaic portraying Paul deriving from the close of the fourth century originates from Santa Pudenziana. The apostle is shown with dense, black hair and a roundish dark beard (see for an image Appendix, fig. 2). Another mosaic from a baptistery in Ravenna dates into the middle of the fourth century and depicts Paul with a square and slightly bald head and a short black beard (cf. Ricciotti, *Der Apostel Paulus*, 171; see for an image Appendix, fig. 3). Besides, there are golden glasses dating into the fourth century which depict Paul (alone or together with Peter) as bald-headed and with a goatee beard (see for an image Ricciotti, *Der Apostel Paulus*, 171 with plates 21–22 and Appendix, fig. 4). As regards sculptures, the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus from the second half of the fourth century, today in the Vatican grottoes, is a very prominent example (see for an image Appendix, fig. 5). Paul is perhaps once depicted at the top in the middle (next to Christ with Peter on his other side) as a young man with full and curly hair and a round beard (see for an image Friedrich Gerke, *Der Sarkophag des Iunius Bassus* [Bilderhefte antiker Kunst 4; Berlin: Mann, 1936], plate 5 and Appendix, fig. 5a. But cf. against this identification Joseph Wilpert, *Sarcophagi Cristiani Antichi. Testo I* [Monumenti di Antichità Cristiana I,1,1; Roma: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 1929], 37 [cited 12 September 2008]. Online: <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/wilpert1929/0053>). More certainly he is represented at the right bottom at the moment of his capture, here bald-headed and with a short curly beard (see for an image Gerke, *Sarkophag*, plate 9, details on plate 25; Wilpert, *Sarcophagi*, plate 13 [cited 12 September 2008]. Online: <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/wilpert1929a/0027>; as well as Appendix, fig. 5b). A marble relief from the fourth or fifth century, now in the museum of Aquileia, depicts Paul on the right side (facing Peter) bald-headed but with a full round beard (see for an image Ricciotti, *Der Apostel Paulus*, 172 with plate 20 and Appendix, fig. 6). From the sixth century on, Paul is also depicted on ivory (see for an image Appendix, fig. 7).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. for the further development Ernst von Dobschütz, *Der Apostel Paulus II: Seine Stellung in der Kunst* (Halle [Saale]: Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1928).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Sir William Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire Before A.D. 170* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1897), 32: 'unflattering'; Theodor Zahn, 'Paulus der Apostel,' *RE*<sup>3</sup> XV (1904), 70: 'unansehnlich'; Ernst Dassmann, *Der Stachel im Fleisch. Paulus in der frühchristlichen Literatur bis Irenäus* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 1979), 279: 'unheroisch'; Hans Dieter Betz, *Der Apostel Paulus und die sokratische Tradition* (Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 5; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1972), 54: 'ein Mann von numinoser Hässlichkeit'; cf. for further assessments Malherbe, 'A Physical Description of Paul,' 170–1.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Gerhard van den Heever, 'Redescribing Graeco-Roman Antiquity: On Religion and History of Religion,' *Religion & Theology* 12, no. 3–4 (2005), 216: 'religion, far from being a *sui generis* phenomenon, is deeply implicated and embedded in, and, in fact, is a social discourse.' See also in general Tim Murphy, 'Discourse,' in *Guide to the Study of Religion* (eds. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon; London/New York: Cassell, 2000), 396–408, and for the Apocryphal

for a certain grade of historical reliability of the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, the portrayal of Paul's features was reckoned as old and historically accurate in its core.<sup>9</sup> The description was then consequently understood as an unflattering characterisation of the apostle,<sup>10</sup> hence corroborating 2 Cor 10:10<sup>11</sup> and other texts such as 2 Cor 12:7–12 or Gal 4:13–16 which may suggest that Paul was physically unattractive and weak.<sup>12</sup> Although during the past decades very different conclusions have been drawn from Paul's portrayal in *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3 – as will be discussed in the following – they have in common that the section is no longer taken as a historical reminiscence of Paul's

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Acts as social discourse, e.g., Judith Perkins, 'Animal Voices,' *Religion & Theology* 12, no. 3–4 (2005): 385–96; Johannes N. Vorster, 'Construction of Culture Through the Construction of Person: The Construction of Thecla in the *Acts of Thecla*,' in *A Feminist Companion to New Testament Apocrypha* (eds. Amy-Jill Levine with Maria Mayo Robbins; *Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings* 11; London: T&T International, 2006), 98–117.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. e.g., Ramsay, *Church*, 32: 'This plain and unflattering account of the Apostle's personal appearance seems to embody a very early tradition.' Zahn, 'Paulus,' 70: 'Von seiner Erscheinung geben die Paulusakten (Acta Thecla 3) folgendes, schwerlich rein erfundenes Bild.' Cf. with respect to iconographic representations Ricciotti, *Der Apostel Paulus*, 172–3: 'Man darf zweifellos nicht an fast photographisch getreue Abbildung der Gesichter auf diesen Kunstwerken denken; was wir höchstens erwarten dürfen, ist die Beharrlichkeit in der Wiedergabe eines bestimmten "Typus", dessen wesentliche Züge sehr alt sein mögen und irgendwie auf des Apostels Züge zurückgehen, sei es durch ältere, heute verlorene Abbildungen, sei es durch Beschreibungen, die von Personen seines Bekanntenkreises stammten. All dies bietet theoretisch keine Schwierigkeiten. Auf dem Felde der Tatsachen (sic!) finden wir, daß wirklich aus der Großzahl dieser Darstellungen ein gemeinsamer "Typus" heraussticht (...): Ein fast kahler Paulus mit schwarzem, wie ein Kegel spitz auslaufendem Bart, hohem Hals, mager, so daß das Gesicht die Form einer umgekehrten Birne zeigt.' Cf. similarly Wilpert, *Malereien*, 1:113 [cited 12 September 2008]. Online: <http://digi.uib.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/wilpert1903a>, who assumes 'dass den (...) Darstellungen der beiden Apostel (scil. Peter and Paul; H.O.), wenn nicht ein wirkliches Portrait, so doch eine mehr oder minder genaue Kenntnis von ihrer leiblichen Erscheinung zu Grunde liegt, und dass diese Kenntnis bei den Christen Roms wenigstens seit dem 3. Jahrhundert weit verbreitet war.' But cf. already Ernst von Dobschütz, 'Das Paulusbild in der Kunst,' *Forschungen und Fortschritte* 7 (1931), 456: 'Es darf jetzt als sichergestellt gelten, daß ein historisch treues Portrait nicht existiert, daß sich aus dem allgemeinen Apostelschema erst im 4. Jahrhundert ein individueller Paulustyp entwickelt.' See also Mikeal C. Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts. The Subversion of Physiognomy in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006), 52.

<sup>10</sup> See above with n. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Ἡ δὲ παρουσία τοῦ σώματος ἀσθενής. 'his bodily presence is weak' (NRSV).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Zahn, 'Paulus,' 70: 'Die körperliche Erscheinung des P. muß ziemlich unansehnlich gewesen sein. (...) Im Gegensatz zu seinen gewaltigen Briefen sagten seine Gegner in Korinth von ihm ἡ παρουσία τοῦ σώματος ἀσθενής καὶ ὁ λόγος ἐξουθενημένος 2 Ko 10,10. Dazu mag jene chronische Krankheit und Kränklichkeit beigetragen haben, auf welche sich 2 Ko 12,7–12; Ga 4,13ff., wohl auch 2 Ko 4,7–18 bezieht.' Johannes Geffcken, *Christliche Apokryphen* (Religionsgeschichtliche Volksbücher I; Reihe 1: Religion des Neuen Testaments 15; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1908), 27: 'man sieht, der Autor malt den Apostel noch nach dem alten hässlichen und geringen Bilde von Christus' äußerer Erscheinung.'

‘real’ physical traits. Instead, the depiction of the apostle is interpreted as representing his character and personality and therefore having been intentionally created by the author.

## 2. Paul’s Portrait in *Acts Paul Thecl. 3* in the Context of Physiognomics

The background for this assessment is the recognition that in antiquity (and throughout history actually, even though today perhaps less consciously)<sup>13</sup> outer appearance and inner qualities were associated. The study of this phenomenon was known as physiognomics (*physiognomia*).<sup>14</sup> The physiognomic consciousness in Graeco-Roman culture is well documented in ‘theory’ (e.g., in physiognomic and rhetorical handbooks)<sup>15</sup> and in ‘practice’ (e.g., in epic, biography,<sup>16</sup> history, drama, art) as was thoroughly investigated first by the classicist Elizabeth C. Evans<sup>17</sup> whose ideas are today – after initial scepticism –

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Parsons, *Body*, 11–15.

<sup>14</sup> Aulus Gellius defines in *Noctes Atticae* 1.9.2 (Rolfe, LCL) the meaning of the word ἐρυστογνωμόνει as follows: Id verbum significat mores naturasque hominum coniectatione quadam de oris et vultus ingenio deque totius corporis filo atque habitu sciscitari. ‘That word means to inquire into the character and disposition of men by an inference drawn from their facial appearance and expression, and from the form and bearing of their whole body.’ See also Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul. An Archaeology of Ancient Personality* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 108.

<sup>15</sup> The four most important extant physiognomic manuals are the following: Pseudo-Aristotle, *Physiognomonica* (3rd century B.C.E.), Polemo of Laodicea, *De Physiognomonica* (2nd century C.E.), Adamantius, *Physiognomonica* (4th century C.E.), and an anonymous Latin opus *De physiognomonica* (4th century C.E.). These treatises were first collected in the edition by Richard Foerster, *Scriptores Physiognomonici Graeci et Latini* (Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana; 2 vols.; Leipzig: Teubner, 1893). See for the most recent and thorough presentation of the texts and English translations of all (!) of the four works mentioned above Simon Swain, ed., *Seeing the Face, Seeing the Soul. Polemon’s Physiognomy from Classical Antiquity to Medieval Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 329–661. All respective quotations in the following are taken from this volume. Cf. for a survey of the theorists also Elizabeth C. Evans, ‘Physiognomics in the Ancient World,’ *Transactions of the American Philological Society*, N.S. 59/5 (1969), 1–17.

<sup>16</sup> Suetonius is supposed to be ‘the first biographer to connect the physical and moral portraits’ (Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* [The Transformation of the Classical Heritage V; Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1983], 14), thereby relying on Pseudo-Aristotle’s *Physiognomy*.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Elizabeth C. Evans, ‘Roman Descriptions of Personal Appearance in History and Biography,’ *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 46 (1935): 43–84; idem, ‘The Study of Physiognomy in the Second Century A.D.,’ *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 72 (1941): 96–108; idem, ‘Galen the Physician as Physiognomist,’ *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 76 (1945): 287–98; idem, ‘Literary Portraiture in Ancient Epic: A Study of the Descriptions of Physical Appearance in Classical Epic,’

widely accepted.<sup>18</sup> Pseudo-Aristotle maintains in his physiognomic treatise the premise that '[S]oul and body seem to me to affect each other sympathetically. A change in the state of the soul alters the appearance of the body, and conversely, when the appearance of the body changes, it changes the state of the soul as well.'<sup>19</sup> As regards the practice behind this theory Evans rightly states: 'The methods used in this handbook are purely empirical, and there is an imprecise mixture of deduction and induction.'<sup>20</sup> However, Pseudo-Aristotle is aware that

[i]t will be found, moreover, in every selection of signs that some signs are better adapted than others to indicate the mental character behind them. The clearest indications are given by signs in certain particularly suitable parts of the body. The most suitable part of all is the region of the eyes and forehead, head and face; next to it comes the region of the chest and shoulders, and next again, that of the legs and feet; whilst the belly and neighbouring parts are of least service. In a word, the clearest signs are derived from those parts in which intelligence is most manifest.<sup>21</sup>

Basically drawing on Evans's work, Robert M. Grant<sup>22</sup> was – as far as I know – the first to apply physiognomic considerations to the study of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. He points at the similarities between Paul's portrait in *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3 and that of a general described in a fragment of the poet Archilochus dating to the eighth or seventh century B.C.E. (Frg. 58 Bergk<sup>4</sup>):<sup>23</sup> 'I love not

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*Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 58 (1948): 189–217; idem, 'A Stoic Aspect of Senecan Drama: Portraiture,' *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 81 (1950): 169–84; idem, 'Physiognomics in the Ancient World.' Cf. also Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity*; Maud W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Parsons, *Body*, 17–18 n. 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Physiognomonica*, 808b: Δοκεῖ δέ μοι ἡ ψυχὴ καὶ τὸ σῶμα συμπαθεῖν ἀλλήλοις· καὶ ἡ τῆς ψυχῆς ἕξις ἀλλοιουμένη συναλλοιοῖ τὴν τοῦ σώματος μορφήν, πάλιν τε ἡ τοῦ σώματος μορφή ἀλλοιουμένη συναλλοιοῖ τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς ἕξιν (trans. and ed. Swain, *Seeing the Face*).

<sup>20</sup> Evans, 'Physiognomics in the Ancient World,' 8. See also J. Albert Harrill, 'Investive against Paul (2 Cor 10:10). The Physiognomics of the Ancient Slave Body, and the Greco-Roman Rhetoric of Manhood,' in *Antiquity and Humanity. Essays on Ancient Religion and Philosophy*, FS Hans Dieter Betz (eds. Adela Yarbro Collins and Margaret M. Mitchell; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 2001), 192 calling physiognomics a 'pseudoscience'.

<sup>21</sup> Pseudo-Aristotle, *Physiognomonica*, 814a–b: Ἐν ἀπάσῃ δὲ τῇ τῶν σημείων ἐκλογῇ ἕτερα ἑτέρων σημεῖα μᾶλλον δηλοῦσιν ἐναργῶς τὸ ὑποκείμενον. ἐναργέστερα δὲ τὰ ἐν ἐπικαιροτάτοις τόποις ἐγγινόμενα. ἐπικαιρότατος δὲ τόπος ὁ περὶ τὰ ὄμματα τε καὶ τὸ μέτωπον καὶ κεφαλὴν καὶ πρόσωπον, δεύτερος δὲ ὁ περὶ τὰ στήθη καὶ ὦμους, ἔπειτα περὶ τὰ σκέλη τε καὶ πόδας· τὰ δὲ περὶ τὴν κοιλίαν ἥκιστα. ὅλως δὲ εἰπεῖν οὗτοι οἱ τόποι ἐναργέστατα σημεῖα παρέχονται, ἐφ' ὧν καὶ φρονήσεως πλείστης ἐπιπρέπεια γίνεται (trans. and ed. Swain, *Seeing the Face*).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Robert M. Grant, 'The Description of Paul in the Acts of Paul and Thecla,' *Vigiliae Christianae* 36 (1982): 1–4.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Grant, 'Description,' 1.

a tall general nor a straddling one, nor one proud of his hair nor one part-shaven; for me a man should be short and bowlegged to behold, set firm on his feet, full of heart.<sup>24</sup> Grant assumes that this passage was quite popular in the second and third century C.E. as similar descriptions appear for instance in the writings of Erotian, Dio Chrysostom, Galen, in a scholion on Theocritus, as well as in the works of Herodes Atticus and Philostratus.<sup>25</sup> Thus, it might have also been known to early Christians ‘at least in anthological or derivative form.’<sup>26</sup> On this basis Grant argues that Paul is voluntarily depicted in *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3 as a typical military figure, namely as a ‘general of God.’<sup>27</sup> Yet, this hypothesis is neither well-grounded nor further developed with respect to the implications for the overall interpretation of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.<sup>28</sup>

While Grant’s reading is mainly based on the similarity between Paul’s description in *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3 and that of Archilochus’s ideal general as regards their respective shortness and bowleggedness, Abraham J. Malherbe highlights alongside with the small size two other features of Paul in *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3 as being emblematic. He suggests that Paul is by his small stature, the hooked nose and the meeting eyebrows rather shown as a Greek, Heracles-like hero.<sup>29</sup> This is corroborated by parallels not indebted to Archilochus’s account, for instance Suetonius’s description of Augustus, but especially by traits attributed to Heracles by various authors.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, meeting eyebrows are

<sup>24</sup> Οὐ φιλέω μέγαν στρατηγὸν οὐδὲ διαπεπλιγμένον οὐδὲ βοστρύχοισι γαῦρον οὐδ’ ὑπεξυρημένον, ἀλλὰ μοι μικρὸς τις εἴη καὶ περὶ κνήμας ἰδεῖν ροϊκός, ἀσφαλεῶς βεβηκῶς ποσσί, καρδίας πλέως (text and trans. Gerber, LCL).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. for details Malherbe, ‘A Physical Description of Paul,’ 172–3 n. 20 who provides a more detailed bibliographical reference than Grant.

<sup>26</sup> Grant, ‘Description,’ 2.

<sup>27</sup> Grant, ‘Description,’ 3.

<sup>28</sup> Insofar Monika Betz is right who has recently rejected Grant’s interpretation because it is not based on the image of Paul in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* but rather on that in the Pastorals and the *Martyrdom of Paul*. Cf. esp. 2 Tim 2:3–4; and *Mart. Paul* 4 (Lipsius, *Acta Apocryphorum Apostolorum*, 1:114) which are both referred to by Grant, ‘Description,’ 3. See Monika Betz, ‘Die betörenden Worte des fremden Mannes: Zur Funktion der Paulusbeschreibung in den Theklaakten,’ *New Testament Studies* 53 (2007), 132–3.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Malherbe, ‘A Physical Description of Paul,’ 173–5.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Suetonius, *Augustus* 79.2 (Rolfe, LCL): dentes raros et exiguos et scabros; capillum leviter inflexum et subflavum; supercilia coniuncta; mediocres aures; nasum et a summo eminentiorem et ab imo deductiorem; colorem inter aquilum candidumque; staturam brevem (...), sed quae commoditate et aequitate membrorum occuleretur, ut non nisi ex comparatione astantis alicuius procerioris intellegi posset. ‘His teeth were wide apart, small, and ill-kept; his hair was slightly curly and inclining to golden; his eyebrows met. His ears were of moderate size, and his nose projected a little at the top and then bent slightly inward. His complexion was between dark and fair. He was short of stature (...), but this was concealed by the fine proportion and symmetry of his figure, and was noticeable only by comparison with some taller person standing



assumed to have been a sign of beauty,<sup>31</sup> a hooked nose either one of royalty<sup>32</sup> or of nobility,<sup>33</sup> and a good proportion shall have been regarded more important than tallness.<sup>34</sup> Malherbe thus concludes:<sup>35</sup>

beside him.’ Cf. for further references for the features of ideal political leaders Malherbe, ‘A Physical Description of Paul,’ 173 n. 22–27. See for the Heracles imagery also Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* II.30.7 (Butterworth, LCL): ‘Ἡρακλέα οὖν καὶ αὐτὸς Ὅμηρος θνητὸν οἶδεν ἄνθρωπον, Ἐρώνυμος δὲ ὁ φιλόσοφος καὶ τὴν σχῆσιν αὐτοῦ ὑφηγεῖται τοῦ σώματος, μικρὸν, φριζότριχα, ῥωστικόν· Δικαίαρχος δὲ σχιζίαν, νευράδην, μέλανα, γρυπὸν, ὑποχαροπὸν, τετανότριχα. Οὗτος οὖν ὁ Ἡρακλῆς δύο πρὸς τοῖς πενήκοντα ἔτη βεβιωκῶς κατέστρεψε τὸν βίον διὰ τῆς ἐν Οἴτῃ πυρᾶς κεκηδευμένος. ‘Heracles then, is known to be mortal man even by Homer. Hieronymus the philosopher sketches his bodily characteristics also, – small stature, bristling hair, great strength. Dicaearchus adds that he was slim, sinewy, dark, with hooked nose, bright gleaming eyes and long, straight hair’; Philostratus, *Vitae sophistarum* 552.22–29 (Wright, LCL): κομᾶν τε ζυμμέτρως καὶ τῶν ὀφρύων λασιῶς ἔχειν, ἅς καὶ ζυμβάλλειν ἀλλήλαις οἶον μίαν, χαροπὴν τε ἀκτίνα ἐκ τῶν ὀμμάτων ἐκδίδοσθαι παρεχομένην τι ὀρμῆς ἦθος καὶ γρυπὸν εἶναι καὶ εὐτραφῶς ἔχοντα τοῦ αὐχένος, τουτὶ δὲ ἐκ πόνων ἦκειν αὐτῷ μᾶλλον ἢ σίτου. εἶναι δὲ αὐτῷ καὶ στέρνα εὐπαγῆ καὶ ζῦν ὄρα κατεσκληκότα, καὶ κνήμην μικρὸν ἐς τὰ ἔξω κυρτουμένην καὶ παρέχουσαν τῇ βάσει τὸ εὐ βεβηκέναι. ‘He says that his [Heracles’s; H.O.] hair grew evenly on his head, his eyebrows were bushy and they met as though they were but one, and his eyes gave out a brilliant gleam which betrayed his impulsive temperament; he was hooked-nosed, and had a solidly built neck, which was due rather to work than to diet. His chest, too, was well formed and beautifully slim, and his legs were slightly bowed outwards, which made it easy for him to stand firmly planted.’

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Philostratus, *Heroicus* 33, 39 (Andreas Beschoner, *Helden und Heroen, Homer und Caracalla, Übersetzung, Kommentar und Interpretationen zum Heroikos des Flavios Philostratos* [Pinakes 5; Bari: Levante, 1999], 46, 130): κάλλος δὲ Ἀχιλλεῖ τε ἀμιλλᾶσθαι καὶ Ἀντιλόχῳ καὶ ἑαυτῷ φησιν ὁ Πρωτεσίλεως καὶ Εὐφώρβῳ τῷ Τροί (..) τὴν κόμην δὲ ἐν χρῶ εἶναι, τὰς δὲ ὀφρῦς ἔλευθέρας τε καὶ ὀρθὰς καὶ ζυμβαλλούσας πρὸς τὴν ρίνα τετράγωνόν τε οὖσαν καὶ εὐ βεβηκυῖαν. ‘An Schönheit habe er mit Achilleus, Antilochus und, so sagt Protesilaos, mit ihm selbst sowie mit dem trojanischen Euphorbos gewetteifert, denn (...) das Haar habe er bis auf die Haut geschoren getragen, die Augenbrauen seien frei und gerade gewesen und bei der kantigen und kräftigen Nase zusammengestoßen.’

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Plato, *Republic* 5.474D (Shorey, LCL): ὁ μὲν, ὅτι σιμός, ἐπίχαρις κληθεὶς ἐπαινεθήσεται ὑφ’ ὑμῶν, τοῦ δὲ τὸ γρυπὸν βασιλικὸν φατε εἶναι, τὸν δὲ διὰ μέσου τούτων ἐμμετρώατα ἔχειν. ‘One, because his nose is tip-tilted, you will praise as piquant, the beak of another you pronounce right-royal, the intermediate type you say strikes the harmonious mean’; Pollux, *Onomasticon* II.73 (Foerster, BSGRT, 2:281): ῥινόδες δὲ σχήματα γρυπός, ἐπίγρυπος, ὃν βασιλικὸν οἶονται, σιμός, ὃν εὐχαριν νομίζουσιν.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Pseudo-Aristotle, *Physiognomonica* 811a.36–37: οἱ δὲ γρυπὴν ἔχοντες καὶ τοῦ μετώπου διηθρωμένην μεγαλόψυχοι· ἀναφέρεται ἐπὶ τοὺς ἀετούς, ‘but when it [i.e. the nose; H.O.] is strongly aquiline and demarcated from the forehead by a well-defined articulation, it indicates a proud soul, as in the eagle.’ Anonymous, *De Physiognomonica* 51: Curuae nares, quas Graeci γρυπάς uocant, magnanimis attributeae sunt, humilioues, quas Graeci σιμάς dicunt, libidinosus. ‘Hooked noses, which the Greeks call γρυποί, are associated with those who are magnanimous; flatter ones, which the Greek call σιμοί, with those who are lustful.’

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Malherbe, ‘A Physical Description of Paul,’ 173 n. 27 with reference to Evans, ‘Physiognomics in the Ancient World,’ 10, 53, cf. Pseudo-Aristotle, *Physiognomonica* 814a.

<sup>35</sup> ‘A Physical Description of Paul,’ 174–5.

Paul's hooked nose, bowed legs, and meeting eyebrows were not unflattering features in the context in which the *Acts* was written. Furthermore, Heracles and traditions associated with him were used extensively in early Christianity, and I suggest that the author of the *Acts* derived his description of Paul from these sources.

However, this interpretation also raises questions as Malherbe himself acknowledges. Neither Paul's small stature nor his baldness is in accordance with regular features of Heracles. As regards the bald-headedness, Malherbe's attempt to relate it to the apostle's Nazarene vow reported in *Acts* 18:18, 21:24 is little convincing. Besides, if his assumption is correct that in *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3 Paul is 'represented as a hero among the Greeks,'<sup>36</sup> this had to be substantiated by an overall interpretation of the story.

Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey also draw on the conventions reflected in the physiognomic manuals, like Malherbe.<sup>37</sup> Yet, they suppose that Paul's traits are consistent with those of an 'ideal male,' thereby modifying Grant's thesis of a military portrait of Paul.<sup>38</sup> Malina and Neyrey summarise their results as follows:

His benevolent eyes are fixed to goodness;<sup>39</sup> his voice, with a conversational tone, evokes sincerity, kindness and truthfulness.<sup>40</sup> His stature, although short, is that of an active person who accomplishes much; he has 'balanced' humors, a sign of excellence. His shaved head denotes piety to God. His crooked legs, although ideal to a military figure, suggest a fearless person who stands on his ground. Paul's body is in good shape and healthy, which may suggest a relatively high status associated with gymnastic training. His meeting eyebrows suggest manliness and beauty; his longish nose, virtuousness and handsomeness. Being full of grace indicates a favored person suitable for a public role. His physical features, then, indicate the person he is (sic!): masculine, fearless, pious, virtuous, truthful, benevolent, but above all,

<sup>36</sup> Malherbe, 'A Physical Description of Paul,' 175.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Malina and Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul*, esp. 108–27.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Malina and Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul*, 146: 'the portrait of Paul, while consonant with a general or military figure, is first and foremost that of a noble or ideal male.'

<sup>39</sup> This is related to *Acts Paul Thecl.* 1 (Lipsius, *Acta Apocryphorum Apostolorum*, 1:235): ὁ δὲ Παῦλος ἀποβλέπων εἰς μόνην τὴν ἀγαθοσύνην τοῦ Χριστοῦ. 'Paul, looking only to the goodness of Christ'; cf. Malina and Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul*, 135.

<sup>40</sup> This refers to *Acts Paul Thecl.* 1 (Lipsius, *Acta Apocryphorum Apostolorum*, 1:236): ὥστε πάντα τὰ λόγια κυρίου [καὶ τῆς διδασκαλίας καὶ τῆς ἐρμηνείας τοῦ εὐαγγελίου] καὶ τῆς γεννήσεως καὶ τῆς ἀναστάσεως τοῦ ἡγαπημένου ἐγλύκαινε αὐτούς, καὶ τὰ μεγαλεῖα τοῦ Χριστοῦ, πῶς ἀπεκαλύφθη αὐτῷ, κατὰ ῥῆμα διηγείτο αὐτοῖς. 'he made sweet to them all the words of the Lord and [the teaching and the interpretation of the gospel] concerning the birth and resurrection of the Beloved; and he gave them an account, word for word, of the great deeds of Christ; see also *Acts Paul Thecl.* 17 (Lipsius, *Acta Apocryphorum Apostolorum*, 1:246): καὶ ἤρεν τὴν φωνὴν αὐτοῦ ὁ Παῦλος λέγων. 'And Paul, lifting up his voice, said'; cf. Malina and Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul*, 135–7.

fit for public life. This information may be intended to flesh out the claims made in the Acts of the Apostles that Paul was a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37; 22:25–28).<sup>41</sup>

This quotation is somewhat representative of the hypothesising and psychologising character of Malina's and Neyrey's argumentation. Regarding, for example, the idea that Paul's outward appearance in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* corresponds to the Roman citizenship attributed to the apostle by Luke, this also needed to be confirmed by an analysis of the whole narrative. Therefore it is especially noteworthy that it is only at the end of the *Acts of Paul*, in *Mart. Paul 3*, that a fairly dependable (but still indirect!) reference to Paul's Roman identity can be found when it is said that Nero 'commanded all the prisoners to be burned with fire, but Paul to be beheaded according to the law of the Romans.'<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, a favourable interpretation of Paul's physiognomic features is not undisputed in current research. J. Albert Harrill interprets 2 Cor 10:30 as such that 'Paul's enemies use the physiognomics of the slave body to question the legitimacy of his body and *logos*,'<sup>43</sup> and he at least suggests that *Acts Paul Thecl. 3* can also be understood against this particular background.<sup>44</sup> János Bollók directly rejects the thesis that *Acts Paul Thecl. 3* represents a flattering physical description of Paul by referring to papyrological evidence containing criteria for the identification of given persons as well as to the works of the physiognomists.<sup>45</sup> It is intriguing that Paul's identification is exactly the text-immanent purpose of his description in *Acts Paul Thecl. 3* which is addressed to Onesiphorus – an aspect to which I will return later. Although I do not fully agree with the line of argumentation presented by Harrill and Bollók, their studies illustrate at least that physiognomy is neither unequivocal nor unmistakable, but ambiguous. One important reason for this ambiguity is that a physiognomic portrait is not necessarily based on profound knowledge about a certain character, but rather the opposite. Physiognomy 'was a ubiquitous reflex in response to uncertainty,' as Maud W. Gleason states. That means the ancients made 'inferences from human surfaces to the human depths.'<sup>46</sup> This deductive process also implies the risk of being deceived by persons who want to improve their physiognomic disposition – and the ancient writers were well aware of this possibility which at the same time

<sup>41</sup> Malina and Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul*, 148.

<sup>42</sup> *Mart. Paul 3* (Lipsius, *Acta Apocryphorum Apostolorum*, 1:112): ὁ Καίσαρ ἐκέλευσεν πάντας τοὺς δεδεμένους πυρὶ κατακαῆναι, τὸν δὲ Παῦλον τραχηλοκοπηθῆναι τῷ νόμῳ τῶν Ῥωμαίων.

<sup>43</sup> Harrill, 'Invective against Paul,' 212.

<sup>44</sup> See Harrill, 'Invective against Paul,' 190.

<sup>45</sup> See Bollók, 'Description,' 3–5, 6–9.

<sup>46</sup> Both quotations from Gleason, *Making Men*, 55.

reflects the 'latent agonistic element in physiognomy.'<sup>47</sup> Likewise, exegetes have to be careful that certain presuppositions about Paul's personality – informed for instance by his letters or by the canonical *Acts of the Apostles* – are not superimposed on their readings of the literary representation of the apostle's body in *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3, as is to be seen with the interpretations by Harrill, Bollók, Malina and Neyrey. Of course, the ancient readers of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* also had certain preconceptions of Paul's physical disposition, yet we should not assert a priori what it looked like but beware of circular arguments by paying attention to the internal narrative signals and the structure of the text. Apart from this caveat, previous investigations of the correspondence between body and personality in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* were also too often preoccupied with the question which sources the author might have used (cf. esp. Grant; Malherbe). This issue is certainly important as regards the plausibility of an interpretation, but it can and must not replace a proper text analysis. Although it has also been demonstrated that physiognomy is no 'exact science' but can lead to ambiguous or even contradicting assessments, it seems more probable that – contrary to modern aesthetic criteria – the portrait of Paul in *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3 is to be understood rather in a positive than a negative sense (against Harrill and Bollók). Yet, to answer the question which purpose it serves it has to be related to the rest of the narrative

### 3. *Paul's Portrait in the Acts of Paul and Thecla in its Literary Context*

In a recent study, Monika Betz has interpreted *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3 against the background of ancient erotic fiction and romantic novels.<sup>48</sup> This comparison appears to Betz not only as key to the understanding of the relationship between Paul and Thecla, but emerges to be even more important for her story than for his.<sup>49</sup> I will take up some of her stimulating observations but draw

<sup>47</sup> Gleason, *Making Men*, 77; see also in general on this topic Gleason, *Making Men*, 76–80. Cf. also Malina and Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul*, 133: 'The outward, external features of anything observed normally serve as reliable clues for judging a person or thing. But when dealing with a liar or hypocrite, the externals fall short and prove unreliable (...). Yet, in normal situations, "character" should prove trustworthy.' This raises the question, of course, how 'normal' situations can be distinguished from 'abnormal' ones.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Betz, 'Worte,' pace.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Betz, 'Worte,' 131–2: 'Die *AThe* spielen mit dem Kontrast zwischen den Normen der antiken Gesellschaft und einer christlichen Wirklichkeitswahrnehmung. Für die Umwelt der Thekla erscheint der in seiner Menschlichkeit deutlich vor Augen tretende Apostel als erotischer Verführer, während aus christlicher Perspektive die apostolische Attraktivität auf den in Paulus transparent werdenden Christus zurückzuführen ist.'

different conclusions as I do not share her presupposition of a paradox between Paul's inner and outer character.<sup>50</sup>

First of all, it is important to account for the fact that the description of Paul's physical traits is not presented at the beginning of the *Acts of Paul* (the content and order of which can at least partly be reconstructed on the basis of the Papyri Heidelberg and Hamburg),<sup>51</sup> but only after the narration of his conversion and the subsequent journeys to Damascus, Jerusalem and Antioch, namely when he is expected to visit Iconium. As this scene forms the very beginning of what is transmitted as the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* it is probable but not compulsory to assume a relationship with this specific storyline (as Betz does).<sup>52</sup> However, it is primarily connected to Onesiphorus, not to Thecla who is only later introduced into the story (cf. *Acts Paul Thecl.* 7).

Apart from this question it is, secondly, significant that the portrait of Paul is not given from the point of view of an unbiased, distanced auctorial narrator, but from the internal perspective of followers of the apostle:

And a certain man, by name Onesiphorus, hearing that Paul was to come to Iconium, went out to meet him with his children Simmias and Zeno and his wife Lectra, in order that he might entertain him. Titus had informed him what Paul looked like, for he had not seen him in the flesh, but only in the spirit. And he went along the royal road to Lystra and kept looking at the passers-by according to the description of Titus. And he saw Paul coming (...).<sup>53</sup>

Titus is here probably to be identified with the otherwise known co-worker of Paul<sup>54</sup> because he is neither here nor earlier in the narrative introduced into the story – at least not in the extant fragments of the *Acts of Paul*. Yet, the reader is not informed about the details of Titus's description, but only gets

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Betz, 'Worte,' 136: 'Das Äußere des Paulus wird also in den *API* zumindest ambivalent, wenn nicht tatsächlich negativ gekennzeichnet. Demgegenüber steht die schon fast epiphane Qualität seiner Person.'

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Elliot, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 355.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Betz, 'Worte,' 131: 'Im Folgenden soll gezeigt werden, dass die Platzierung dieser Beschreibung intratextuell mit der eigentümlichen Beziehung von Paulus und Thekla zusammenhängt, die wiederum von der Erzählstrategie der *AThe* her zu verstehen ist.'

<sup>53</sup> *Acts Paul Thecl.* 2–3 (Lipsius, *Acta Apocryphorum Apostolorum*, 1:236–7): Καὶ τις ἀνὴρ ὀνόματι Ὀνησιφόρος ἀκούσας τὸν Παῦλον παραγεγόμενον εἰς Ἰκόνιον, ἐξῆλθεν σὺν τοῖς τέκνοις αὐτοῦ Σιμμία καὶ Ζήνωνι καὶ τῇ γυναικὶ αὐτοῦ Λέκτρα εἰς συνάντησιν Παύλου, ἵνα αὐτὸν ὑποδέξῃται· διηγήσατο γὰρ αὐτῷ Τίτος ποταπὸς ἐστὶν τῇ εἰδέᾳ ὁ Παῦλος· οὐ γὰρ εἶδεν αὐτὸν σαρκὶ ἀλλὰ μόνον πνεύματι. Καὶ ἐπορεύετο κατὰ τὴν βασιλικὴν ὁδὸν τὴν ἐπὶ Λύστραν, καὶ εἰστήκει ἀπεκδυόμενος αὐτόν, καὶ τοὺς ἐρχομένους ἐθεώρει κατὰ τὴν μὴνυσιν Τίτου. εἶδεν δὲ τὸν Παῦλον ἐρχόμενον (...).

<sup>54</sup> Cf. 2 Cor 2:13; 7:6, 13–14; 8:6, 16–17, 23; 12:18; Gal 2:1, 3; 2 Tim 4:10; Tit 1:4.

familiar with the physiognomy of Paul by Onesiphorus's focalisation.<sup>55</sup> That means we 'see' Paul through the latter's eyes and thereby implicitly adopt his perspective. The plot suggests that Titus's description must have been distinctive as well as amply detailed because otherwise Onesiphorus had not been able to recognise Paul. However, we neither learn to what extent his perception differs from Titus's account nor whether or how it matches the 'ideal' physiognomic expectation. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that Onesiphorus's impression of Paul's outward appearance evokes thoroughly positive connotations as can be corroborated in a twofold way.

On the one hand, this is accentuated by the authorial comment in *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3 that Paul 'sometimes seemed like a man, and sometimes he had the face of an angel.'<sup>56</sup> This characterisation corresponds to *Acts Paul Thecl.* 21 where Thecla is about to be burned because of her loyalty to Paul: 'And having looked into the crowd she saw the Lord sitting in the likeness of Paul and said, "As if I were unable to endure, Paul has come to look after me." And she gazed upon him with great earnestness, but he went up into heaven.'<sup>57</sup> For Thecla, Paul and the Lord merge as much into a single person<sup>58</sup> that she does not even recognise her christophany which is only revealed to the reader by an auctorial comment. On the other hand, Onesiphorus's positive notion of Paul is illustrated by the contrasting description of the apostle's fellow-travellers Demas and Hermogenes. Though – counter to the reader – Onesiphorus is not familiar with their earlier characterisation as 'full of hypocrisy and flattering Paul as if they loved him',<sup>59</sup> he immediately recognises their falseness:

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Gérard Genette, *Die Erzählung* (2d ed.; trans. A. Knop; ed. J. Vogt; Munich: Fink, 1998), 134–8, 241–4; Shlomit Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction. Contemporary Poetics* (2d ed.; London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 72–86; Mieke Bal, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (2d ed.; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 142–61.

<sup>56</sup> *Acts Paul Thecl.* 2–3 (Lipsius, *Acta Apocryphorum Apostolorum*, 1:237): ποτὲ μὲν γὰρ ἐφαινετο ὡς ἄνθρωπος, ποτὲ δὲ ἀγγέλου πρόσωπον εἶχεν.

<sup>57</sup> *Acts Paul Thecl.* 21 (Lipsius, *Acta Apocryphorum Apostolorum*, 1:250): καὶ ἐμβλέψασα εἰς τὸν ὄχλον εἶδεν τὸν κύριον καθήμενον ὡς Παῦλον, καὶ εἶπεν Ὡς ἀνυπομονήτου μου οὔσης ἦλθεν Παῦλος θεάσασθαι με. Καὶ προσεῖχεν αὐτῷ ἀτενίζουσα· ὁ δὲ εἰς οὐρανοὺς ἀπείει.

<sup>58</sup> On a Thecla-painting in the Exodus-Chapel of El Bagawak this vision is represented by the figure of the good shepherd; cf. Claudia Nauerth and Rüdiger Warns, *Thekla. Ihre Bilder in der frühchristlichen Kunst* (Göttinger Orientforschungen, II. Reihe: Studien zur spätantiken und frühchristlichen Kunst 3; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1981), 16–17 with plate IV no. 5 and 6: 'Weil der "Paulus", den Thekla sah, in Wirklichkeit Christus selbst war, kann er hier in unserem Bild als der Gute Hirt erscheinen, nach dem Thekla sich wie ein Lamm umschaute' (Nauerth and Warns, *Thekla*, 16). Cf. H. Stern, 'Les peintures du Mausolée de l'exode à El-Bagawat,' *Cahiers Archéologiques* 11 (1960), 98, 104 fig. 8.

<sup>59</sup> *Acts Paul Thecl.* 1 (Lipsius, *Acta Apocryphorum Apostolorum*, 1:235): ὑποκρίσεως γέμοντες, καὶ ἐξελιπάρουν τὸν Παῦλον ὡς ἀγαπῶντες αὐτόν.

And Paul, seeing Onesiphorus, smiled; and Onesiphorus said, ‘Hail, O servant of the blessed God.’ And he said, ‘Grace be with you and your house.’ And Demas and Hermogenes were jealous and showed greater hypocrisy, so that Demas said, ‘Are we not of the blessed God that you have not thus saluted us?’ And Onesiphorus said, ‘I do not see in you the fruit of righteousness, but if such you be, come also into my house and refresh yourselves.’<sup>60</sup>

Interestingly, both men are referred to in 2 Timothy as having ‘deserted’ Paul (cf. 2 Tim 1:15: ἀπεστράφησάν με πάντες οἱ ἐν τῇ Ἀσίᾳ, ὃν ἐστὶν Φύγελος καὶ Ἑρμογένης; 4:10: Δημᾶς γάρ με ἐγκατέλιπεν), thus also bearing a negative characterisation.

Thirdly, though Betz is correct (and this is no new observation, of course) in interpreting Paul’s narrative role as that of an opponent of Thecla’s fiancé Thamyris, I do not agree with her further assumption that the former’s outer appearance marks a paradoxical contrast to his inner self.<sup>61</sup> The deep concern of Thecla’s mother, Theoclia, and of her groom, Thamyris, presuppose instead that they recognise Paul as a veritable risk for the relationship of Thecla and Thamyris in every respect (cf. *Acts Paul Thecl.* 8–20). Even though they acknowledge that Thecla is ‘devoted to a foreigner teaching deceitful and artful discourses’ (*Acts Paul Thecl.* 8), there is a strong visual element in his appeal.<sup>62</sup> As Betz rightly remarks it is not surprising that Thecla’s relatives interpret her magnetised gaze at Paul in erotic categories<sup>63</sup> while his proclamation appears to them as mere means to the end of captivating her.<sup>64</sup> Thus, it seems adequate to assume that Paul’s description in *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3 evokes at least certain traits of an ‘ideal male’ which make him physically (i.e., also ‘embodying’ his status!) attractive in the eyes of non-Christian characters, as represented by Theoclia and Thamyris. The ongoing story has therefore to disclose – as already announced by the initial characterisation – his specific

<sup>60</sup> *Acts Paul Thecl.* 4 (Lipsius, *Acta Apocryphorum Apostolorum*, 1:238): Καὶ ἰδὼν ὁ Παῦλος τὸν Ὀνησιφόρον ἐμεῖδισεν, καὶ εἶπεν ὁ Ὀνησιφόρος Χαίρε, ὑπὲρτα τοῦ εὐλογημένου θεοῦ· κάκεινος εἶπεν Ἡ χάρις μετὰ σοῦ καὶ τοῦ οἴκου σου. Δημᾶς δὲ καὶ Ἑρμογένης ἐξήλωσαν καὶ πλείονα τὴν ὑπόκρισιν ἐκίνησαν, ὡς εἰπεῖν τὸν Δημᾶν Ἡμεῖς οὐκ ἐσμὲν τοῦ εὐλογημένου, ὅτι ἡμᾶς οὐκ ἠσπάσω οὕτως; καὶ εἶπεν ὁ Ὀνησιφόρος Οὐχ ὀρῶ ἐν ὑμῖν καρπὸν δικαιοσύνης· εἰ δὲ ἔστε τινές, δεῦτε καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς τὸν οἶκόν μου καὶ ἀναπαύσασθε.

<sup>61</sup> See above note 50.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. the verb ἀτενίζω in *Acts Paul Thecl.* 8 (Lipsius, *Acta Apocryphorum Apostolorum*, 1:241): ἀλλὰ ἀτενίζουσα ὡς πρὸς εὐφρασίαν, οὕτως πρόσκειται ἀνδρὶ ξένῳ; *Acts Paul Thecl.* 9 (Lipsius, *Acta Apocryphorum Apostolorum*, 1:242): ἀτενίζει γὰρ τοῖς λεγομένοις ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐάλωται ἢ παρθένος; *Acts Paul Thecl.* 10 (Lipsius, *Acta Apocryphorum Apostolorum*, 1:243): καὶ τοῦτων οὕτως γινομένων Θέκλα οὐκ ἀπεστράφη, ἀλλ’ ἦν ἀτενίζουσα τῷ λόγῳ Παύλου.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Betz, ‘Worte,’ 143.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Betz, ‘Worte,’ 140.

‘religious’ quality. The Christian readers know that Thecla is not attracted by Paul’s body or his gender identity, but in contrast by his ‘discourse of virginity’ (cf. *Acts Paul Thecl.* 7).<sup>65</sup> She obviously becomes a believer on account of his proclamation of chastity.<sup>66</sup> Most remarkable for the issue at stake is that Thecla gets attracted by Paul without ever having seen him before:

And while Paul was speaking in the midst of the church in the house of Onesiphorus a certain virgin named Thecla (...) was sitting at the window close by and listened day and night to the discourse of virginity, as proclaimed by Paul. And she did not look away from the window,<sup>67</sup> but was led on by faith, rejoicing exceedingly. And when she saw many women and virgins going in to Paul she also had an eager desire to be deemed worthy to stand in Paul’s presence and hear the word of Christ. For she had not yet seen Paul in person, but only heard his word.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Vorster, ‘Construction of Culture.’

<sup>66</sup> Cf. *Acts Paul Thecl.* 6 (Lipsius, *Acta Apocryphorum Apostolorum*, 1:240): μακάρια τὰ σώματα τῶν παρθένων, ὅτι αὐτὰ εὐαρεστήσουσιν τῷ θεῷ καὶ οὐκ ἀπολέσουσιν τὸν μισθὸν τῆς ἀγνείας αὐτῶν. ‘blessed are the bodies of the virgins, for they shall be well pleasing to God and shall not lose the reward of their chastity’.

<sup>67</sup> Thecla standing at the window and listening to Paul’s words is a theme in early Christian art, as well. Cf. e.g., an ivory plate depicting on the left side Thecla on the top of a fortified building with a tower on the side and a half opened portal at the bottom. At the right half of the scene, Paul is depicted as a bald-headed man sitting on a stone and reading a scroll. Though Thecla’s body is bent towards the apostle and obviously listening to him, they do not look at each other. Probably, the scene is a conflation of Thecla’s listening to Paul while sitting at the window in her mother’s house and him being imprisoned in Iconium (cf. *Acts Paul Thecl.* 7–10, 17–20); cf. Nauwerth and Warns, *Thekla*, 1–5 for details of the images. While the window is lacking here this attribute can be found on similar illustrations, e.g. on a capital from the fifth century that is now in the Arkeoloji Müzesi of Adana but probably derives from the city of Seleucia, the former pilgrimage site of Saint Thecla. A marble antependium in the cathedral of Tarragona from the beginning of the thirteenth century contains in the upper left part two panels with scenes located in Iconium. The left one presents the inside of Thecla’s home, with her mother standing near the door and four persons next to her all pointing with their fingers at Thecla who is depicted at the left part of the right panel looking out of a window. She is listening to Paul who is portrayed teaching at the right part of the scene. Again, Thecla does not look at Paul, but his pointing with a finger at her illustrates that she is affected by his words. According to Nauwerth and Warns, *Thekla*, 86 this imagery is derived from several book illustrations that have been conflated into one picture in this relief. Interestingly the interpretation of the central panel of the antependium is disputed. It shows Thecla kneeling in front of a bearded man with a nimbus who is sitting on a folding chair. The enthroned man can either be interpreted as God who rules the world or as Paul who teaches Thecla. See for images Nauwerth and Warns, *Thekla*, plate 1 no. 2 and plate XVI no. 31, as well as Appendix, fig. 8a–c.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. *Acts Paul Thecl.* 7 (Lipsius, *Acta Apocryphorum Apostolorum*, 1:240–1): Καὶ ταῦτα τοῦ Παύλου λέγοντος ἐν μέσῳ τῆς ἐκκλησίας ἐν τῷ Ὀνησιφόρου οἴκῳ, Θέκλα τις παρθένος (...) καθεσθεῖσα ἐπὶ τῆς σύνεγγυς θυρίδος τοῦ οἴκου ἦκουεν νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας τὸν περὶ ἀγνείας λόγον λεγόμενον ὑπὸ τοῦ Παύλου· καὶ οὐκ ἀπένευεν ἀπὸ τῆς θυρίδος, ἀλλὰ τῇ πίστει ἐπήγουτο ὑπερευφραϊνομένη. ἔτι δὲ καὶ βλέπουσα πολλὰς γυναῖκας καὶ παρθένους εἰσπορευομένας πρὸς τὸν Παῦλον, ἐπεπόθει καὶ αὐτὴ καταξιοθῆναι κατὰ πρόσωπον στήναι Παύλου καὶ



This is a striking parallel to Onesiphorus who also comes to faith without having seen Paul before yet it does not imply any implicit criticism as regards the apostle's outward appearance.

#### 4. *Concluding Remarks*

It has been shown that though differing in their specific conclusions, more recent exegetical studies agree that Paul's physical description in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* must not be read against the background of modern aesthetic perception but is rather to be understood in the light of Graeco-Roman physiognomics, i.e., the belief in the coherence between outer appearance and inner qualities. The consideration of physiognomy demonstrates that aesthetic criteria are not stable but might change and that traits which we account for as unflattering did not necessarily and predominantly evolve unfavourable repercussions within the ancient readers.

With regard to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* ancient physiognomic ideals as well as the broader story line suggest that Paul's description in *Acts Paul Thecl.* 3 is not derogatory but rather favourable. The narrative illustrates the correspondence between his (almost) 'ideal' physical appearance and his 'ideal' apostolic qualities on various levels. The positive connotation of Paul's physical appearance in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is illustrated by the way followers (Onesiphorus, Thecla) as well as opponents (Theoclia, Thamyrus) react to him. The topos of the romantic novel is employed to stress that Thecla is not attracted by the man but by the apostle Paul which emphasises the significance of his proclamation.

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ἀκούειν τὸν τοῦ Χριστοῦ λόγον· οὐδέπω γὰρ τὸν χαρακτήρα Παύλου ἐωράκει, ἀλλὰ τοῦ λόγου ἤκουεν μόνον.

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**Appendix**

Fig. 1: St. Peter and Marcellinus Catacomb (third/fourth century)  
<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/43/ChristPeterPaul.jpg>  
 (Cited 12 September 2008)



Fig. 2: Santa Pudenziana, Apsis (fourth century)  
[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/56/Apsis\\_mosaic%2C\\_Santa\\_Pudenziana%2C\\_Rome\\_photo\\_Sixtus\\_enhanced\\_TTaylor.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/56/Apsis_mosaic%2C_Santa_Pudenziana%2C_Rome_photo_Sixtus_enhanced_TTaylor.jpg)  
 (Cited 12 September 2008)



Fig. 3: Baptistery of Ravenna (fifth century)

[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/92/Neon\\_Bapistry\\_Ceiling\\_Mosaic.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/92/Neon_Bapistry_Ceiling_Mosaic.jpg) (Cited 12 September 2008)



Fig. 4: Golden Glass (Vatican; fourth century)

<http://campus.belmont.edu/honors/EarlyChristianArt/GiltGlassPeterPaul.jpg>

(Cited 12 September 2008)



Fig. 5: Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (fourth century)

[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/29/1053\\_-\\_Roma%2C\\_Museo\\_d.\\_civilt%C3%A0\\_Romana\\_-\\_Calco\\_sarcofago\\_Giunio\\_Basso\\_-\\_Foto\\_Giovanni\\_Dall%27Orto%2C\\_12-Apr-2008.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/29/1053_-_Roma%2C_Museo_d._civilt%C3%A0_Romana_-_Calco_sarcofago_Giunio_Basso_-_Foto_Giovanni_Dall%27Orto%2C_12-Apr-2008.jpg) (Cited 12 September 2008)



Details:

a) disputed scene of *traditio legis*

[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/71/1058\\_-\\_Roma%2C](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/71/1058_-_Roma%2C)





b) Paul before his beheading

[http://www.homolaicus.com/storia/antica/cristianesimo\\_primitivo/vittoria.htm](http://www.homolaicus.com/storia/antica/cristianesimo_primitivo/vittoria.htm)

(Cited 12 September 2008)



Fig. 6: Peter and Paul. Marble Relief from Aquileia (Museo Paleocristiano Nazionale, Aquileia, fourth century)

Online: [http://www.museoarcheo-aquileia.it/museo\\_paleo/intro.htm](http://www.museoarcheo-aquileia.it/museo_paleo/intro.htm)  
(Cited 12 September 2008) (Primo Piano)



Fig. 7: Ivory plate (Musee National du Moyen-Age, Cluny; sixth/seventh century)  
<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e2/Saint-Paul.JPG>; detail:  
<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Saint-Paul2.JPG>  
(Cited 12 September 2008)



a)



b) Iconium



c) (central panel)

Fig. 8: Antependium in the Cathedral of Tarragona (thirteenth century; photographs: H. Omerzu)