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ASYMMETRIES IN SCULPTURED HEADS OF ANCIENT GREEK INTELLECTUALS

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ABSTRACT: Some sculptured heads of ancient Greek intellectuals, preserved today in Roman copies, are portrayed with asymmetries (dissimilarities between the two sides) and are of special interest. Dissimilarities usually involve the size, the shape, or the positioning of the eyes. Some slight deformation of the left side of the face is noticeable. These asymmetries occur in a small percentage of the Roman copies, and it is thought by the author that they are deliberate and intentional. They fall within a particular manner of rendering of the figures which runs through the centuries-long Greek tradition of portraiture from the Archaic period to the Byzantine era.

The sculptors of the Roman age produced copies of the original heads of distinguished ancient Greek intellectuals, differentiating their appearance slightly and designing them with calculated asymmetries. In this way they drew attention to the superiority of these figures to ordinary people, or a sense of awe felt towards these spiritual benefactors of mankind. Certain of the differences between the right and left side of the heads are possibly associated with *Dualism.*

KEY-WORDS: Asymmetries, Dualism, Ancient portraits, Roman copies, Icon-painting.

INTRODUCTION

In 2011, I decided to produce painted representations of a series of portraits of ancient Greeks, chiefly prominent intellectuals, based on ancient sculptures of them. This transformation of the sculptured image into a painting required a study of hundreds of sculptured portraits. The superb and authentic bronze statues of famous figures of antiquity were, unfortunately, melted down during the course of the centuries in order to be made into, mainly, weapons, coins, and vessels. However, many copies - chiefly of their heads - were preserved, the majority of them in marble. These were made to order for the Romans, to adorn their houses and public spaces. Some of these copies are exact reproductions of the original figures, the creations of outstanding Greek artists who, in parallel with their other important works, produced copies for a fee. The studios of Athens probably turned out the best copies of sculptured portraits of philosophers, the high-quality original statues of whom were still standing in the city. [1] The sculptured portraits of philosophers, and of intellectuals more generally, were of special interest to me, not only because they are shown with individual facial features, but also because the sculptors in the case of some of these had contrived to make the inner world of the intellect or spirit of the subject stand out in an inimitable fashion.

During the course of a study of hundreds of Roman copies of sculptures of the physiognomies of ancient intellectuals, I noticed that a small proportion of them are portrayed with slight dissimilarities between the two sides of the face or head. Such dissimilarities have been noted in the bibliography and are described as 'asymmetries'. Sheila Dillon, in describing similarities between the sculptured heads of Aristotle and an unknown philosopher, also draws attention to similarities in the "asymmetrical shaped eyes".[2] The term 'asymmetry' has been adopted in the present study.

In comparing the asymmetries which I have noticed in ancient heads with those portrayed by renowned sculptors of the Archaic period and the icon-painting of Byzantine art, I have observed certain similarities between them. The

[1] Smith (2009), pp 330, 334
[2] Dillon (2006), p 118

asymmetries usually involve the size, the shape, or the positioning of the eyes. Some slight deformation of the left side of the face is also noticeable.[3]

Is this a case of poor workmanship or of normal natural differences between the two sides of the head? Or are they intentionally designed and calculated? In the present text my observations on the differences between the two sides of the sculptured heads of ancient intellectuals are recorded, their asymmetries are compared with those depicted in the case of heads from other periods, and a first approach to interpretation is attempted.

2. DESCRIPTION OF ASYMMETRIES

2.1. Ancient intellectuals

The following are examples of asymmetries to be found in copies of original heads which depict philosophers and other intellectuals generally: A marble head of Aristotle from the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum[4]. In this depiction of Aristotle, the left eye is larger, and this copy is the best out of the total of 20 (fig 1).

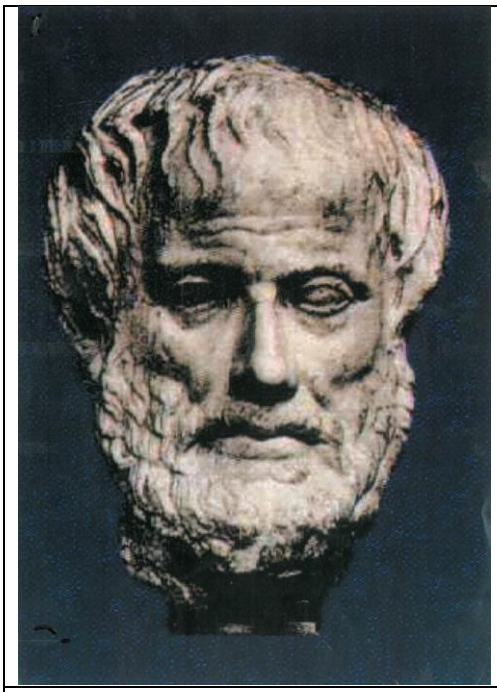


Fig 1. Portrait of Aristotle. Marble. Copy of an original, 4th cent. BC. Vienna

[3] Sarantea (2015), p. 229

[4] Pollitt (2006), p. 85 and Smith (2009), fig.27

Kunsthistorisches Museum inv. 179 (Smith, 2009, Fig. 27).

This is not a case of poor workmanship. The sculptor who created this outstanding copy of the original work of 330 BC was of top quality[5]. In another marble copy, very similar to the copy of Vienna, found in the Makriyianni area of Athens, the eyes are identical.[6] In fact, there is evidence that the philosopher's eyes were probably small.[7]

A marble head of Menander from the Museo delle Terme, Rome, has its left eye depicted as larger and higher than the other [8] (fig. 2).

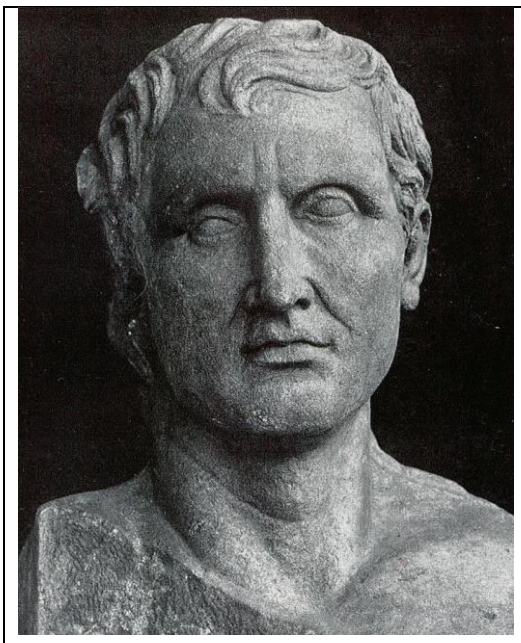


Fig. 2. Portrait of Menander. Marble. Copy of an original, possibly 3rd cent. BC. Museo delle Terme, Rome (Richter, 1965, Fig. 1548)

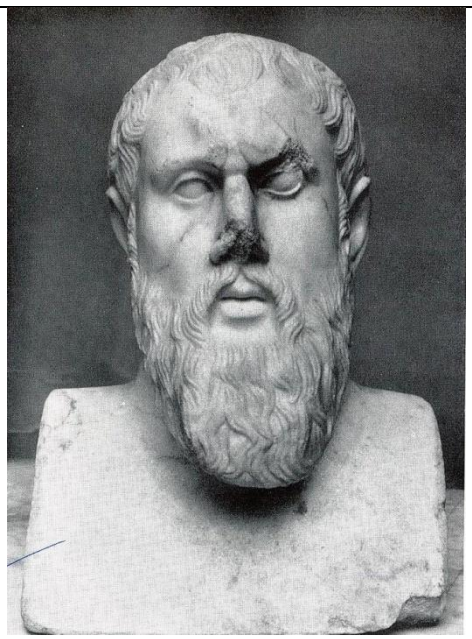


Fig. 3. Portrait of Zeno. Marble. Copy of an original, 3rd cent. BC. Lyons Museum (Richter, 1965, Fig. 1095)

Three marble heads of Zeno were sculptured with various asymmetries: a) In the Copenhagen Museum, the philosopher is shown with the eye and ear higher on the left than on the right. b). In the Lyons Museum, there is a slight deformation: the left eye is higher, with marked protrusion, the left ear is larger, and the mouth slopes to the left. c). In the Miss Martin Museum, the left eye is larger.[9] (fig. 3).

[5] Smith (2009), p. 48
[6] Horemis-Spetsieri, 2008, Fig. 2
[7] Zanker 1995, p. 75
[8] Richter 1965, Fig. 1548
[9] Richter (1965) figs 1092, 1095, 1098, respectively

Two marble heads, one of Pindar from the Capitoline Museums, Rome, and the other of Hesiod from the Vatican, Rome, have their right eye shown as higher compared to their.left. Pindar is shown with a larger left eye. Furthermore, in the case of the head of Hesiod, the right ear is positioned higher than the other. His eyes are depicted quite large. [10] (figs 4 and 5).

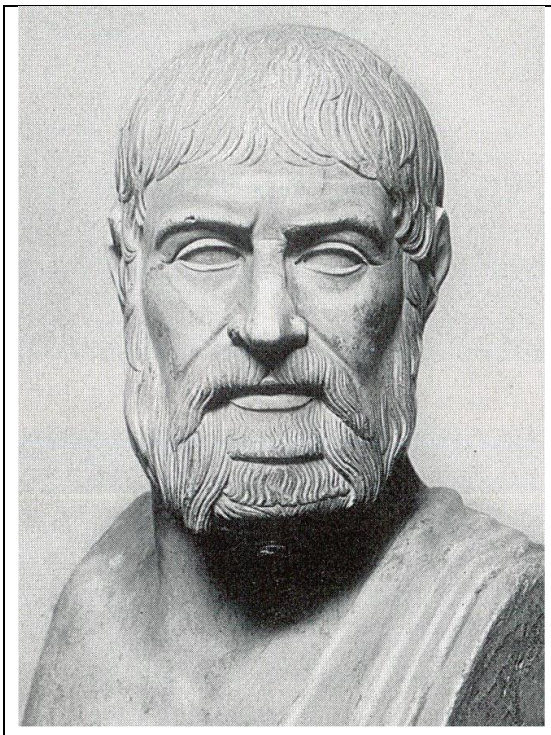


Fig.4. Portrait of Pindar. Marble. Copy of an original, 5th cent. BC. Capitoline Museum, Rome (Richter 1965, Fig 417)

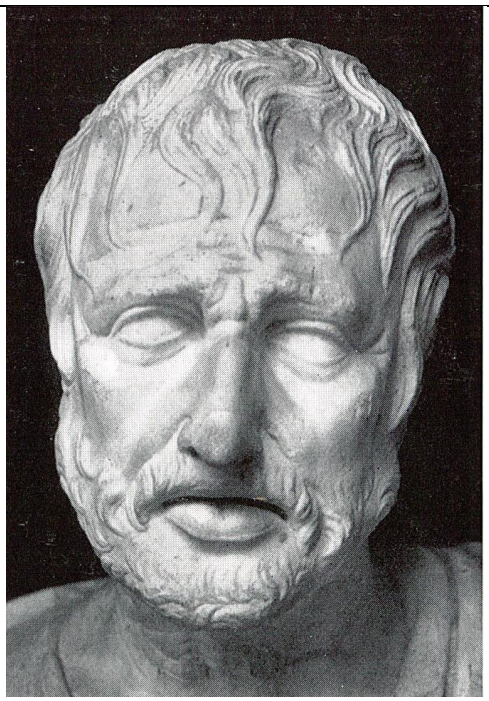


Fig. 5. Portrait of Hesiod. Marble. Copy of a contrived portrait possibly of Hesiod, 200 BC. Vatican, Rome (Richter 1965, Fig. 132)

A marble head from the Capitoline Museum[11] shows an unknown philosopher with slight deformation: a downward inclination of the whole of the left side of the head, swelling of the left eye, and the left-hand nostril higher than the other (figs 6. And 7).

[10] Richter (1965) figs 417, 132
[11] Dillon (2006) fig. 9 and p. 118

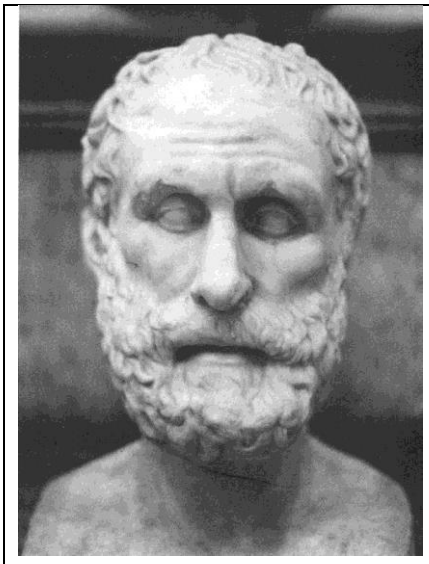


Fig. 6. Bust of an unknown philosopher. Marble. Copy of an original. Capitoline Museum, Rome, inv.523 (Dillon 2006, Fig.9)

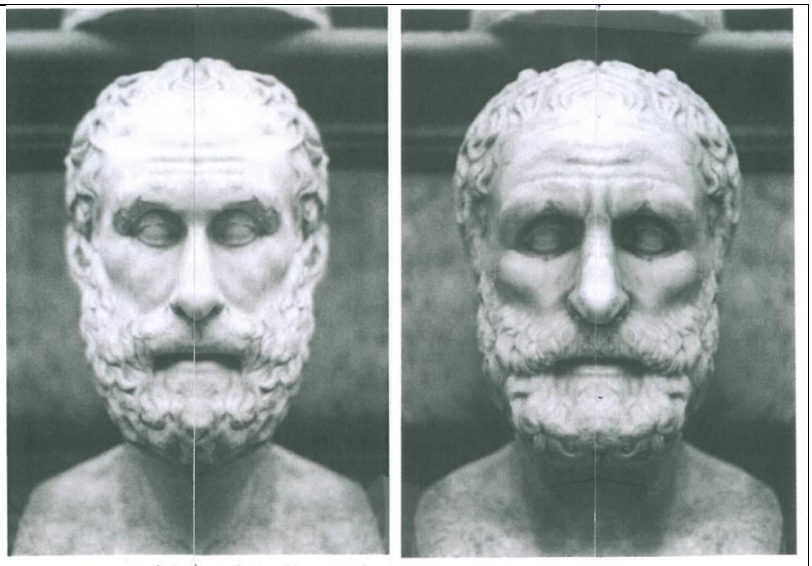


Fig. 7. The two different faces which make up the asymmetrical marble head of the unknown ancient Greek philosopher from fig. 6 (Adjusted for the purpose of this text by Evi Sarantea)

The same unknown philosopher is shown with a different asymmetry in another copy, from the Israel Antiquities Authority.[12] Here the small oblong eyes have the same slope downwards and to the left (fig. 8). Similar type of depiction of the eyes can also be seen in marble sculptures of Aphrodite of the school of Praxiteles: in a head in the Athens National Archaeological Museum [13] , and in a statue in the Museum of Ancient Messene (fig. 9).

[12] Dillon (2006), fig. 10
[13] Corso (2007, p. 123)

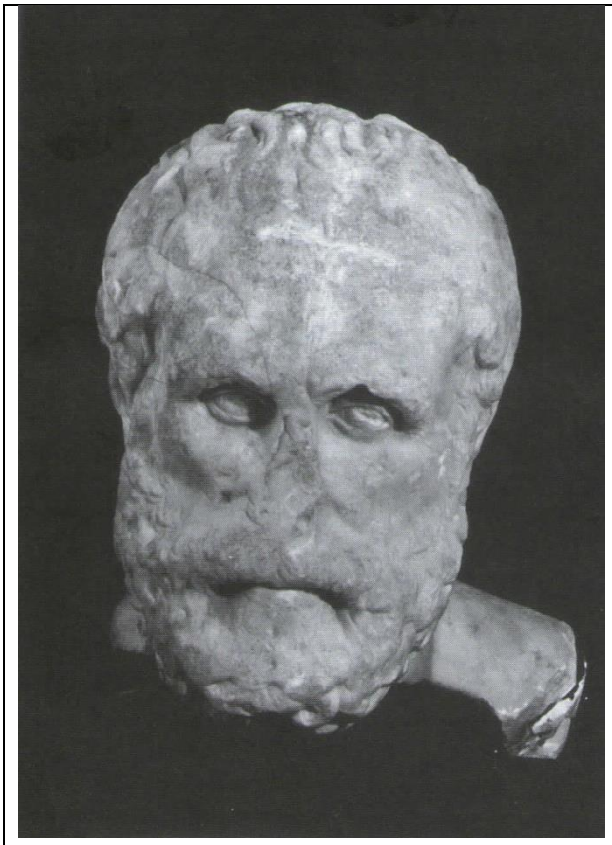


Fig. 8. Marble head of the unknown philosopfher of fig 6. Copy of an original. Israel Antiquities Authority (Dillon 2006, Fig. 10)

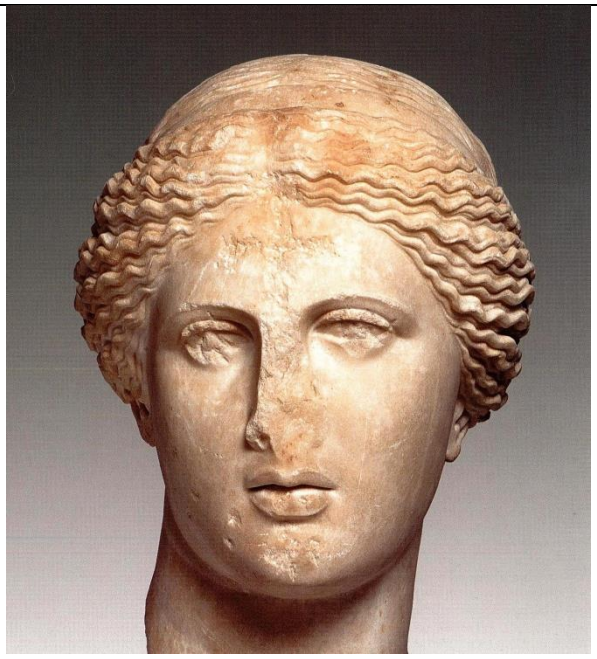


Fig. 9. Marble head, possibly of Aphrodite. Copy of an original sculpture of Praxiteles, 4th cent. BC. National Archaeological Museum of Athens inv. 1762 (Corso 2007, p. 123)

A large right eye is a feature of the Roman marble copy of Euripides from Napoli, of Aristophanes from Richmond's Wilton House and of Xenophon from Madrid [14] (fig. 10). The cases in which the right eye is larger than the left, are less.

[14] Richter, (1965) figs. 717, 795, 885 respectively

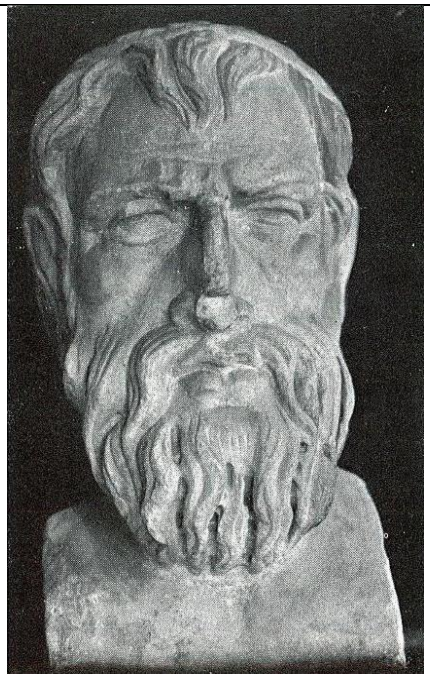


Fig. 10 Portrait of Aristophanes. Marble. Copy of an original. Wilton House, Richmont (Richter, 1965, Fig. 795)

An original marble head of an unknown man, fourth century BC, from a funerary monument in the Athens National Archaeological Museum[15], also shows slight deformation on the whole of the left-hand side. The hair on the left-hand side and the left ear were fashioned at a later date, probably in the second century BC. (fig. 11). An old man is also shown with deformation on the whole of the left-hand side in a funerary monument, fourth century BC, from Ramnounta, as it is exhibited in the Athens National Archaeological Museum (inv. 833).

[15] Dillon (2006) fig. 7

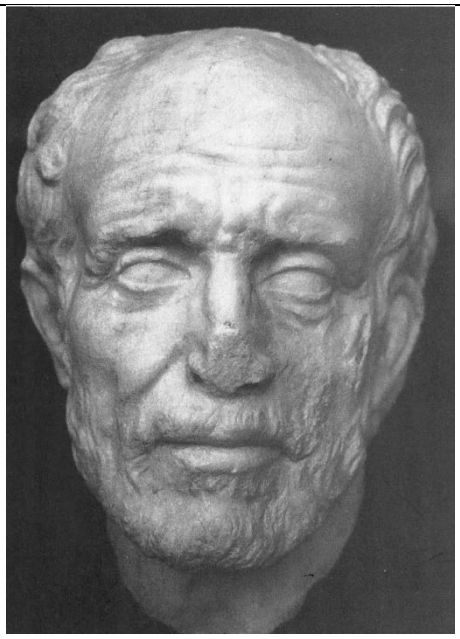


Fig. 11. Head from a late Classical marble grave monument. National Archaeological Museum of Athens, inv. 3483 (Dillon 2006, Fig. 7)

2.2. The 'Kore with the almond eyes'

Considerably earlier, about 500 BC, one of the finest marble, overpainted 'Kores', the 'Kore with the almond eyes', dedicated to the goddess Athena, was set up in the Parthenon of Athens (No. 674) [16] (fig. 12 a, b).

[16] Andronikos et al (1974) p.141; Pantermalis (2012 pp. 10, 48, 49

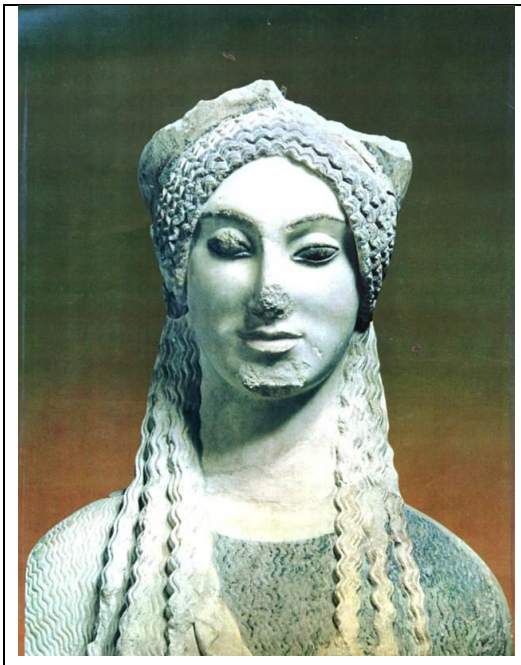


Fig. 12 a. 'Kore with the almond eyes'. Marble. Acropolis Museum, Athens. Ca. 500 BC (Andronicos et al. 1974, p. 141).



Fig. 12 b. Representation of the 'Kore with the almond eyes'. Acropolis Museum (drawing by Evi Sarantea).

As I studied her head, with a view to reproducing it in painted form, I noticed the following:

There are differences in her painted brown eyes: her right eye is in a higher position, has a larger iris and looks down, while the left looks ahead. There is slight exophthalmia. Her right ear is somewhat larger than the other. However, the complicated arrangement of the hair and diadem is mathematically calculated.[17]

[17] Karakasi (2003) pp. 269-272

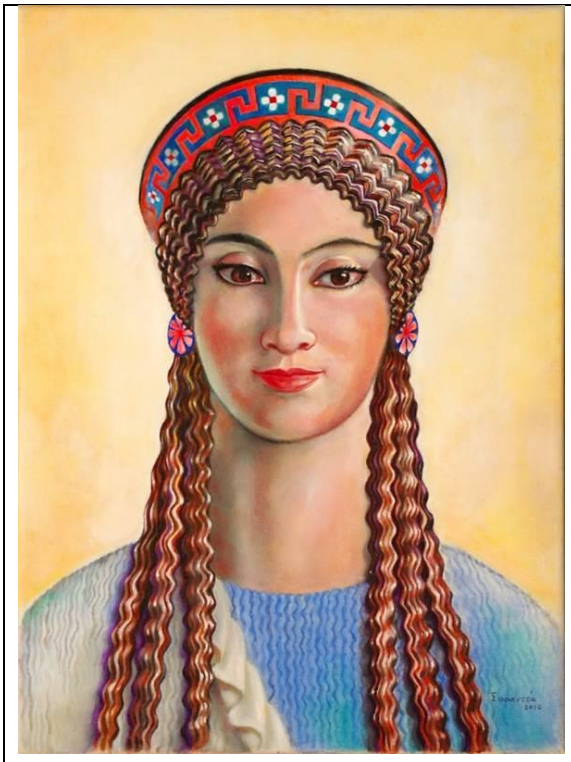


Fig. 13 a. Representation of the Kore with the almond eyes (painting by Evi Sarantea)

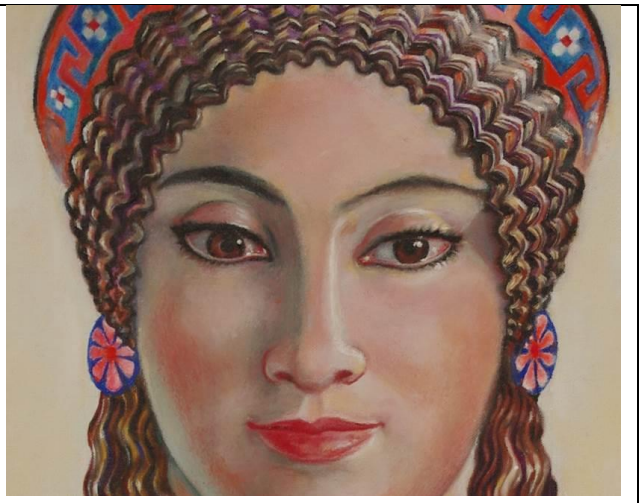


Fig. 13 b. Detail of fig. 13

The carving of the elaborate hairstyle is faultless and the rest of the face is symmetrical. The traces of the vertical lines of the diadem's key-pattern design, if notionally protracted, all pass through a point in the middle of her lips. A cascade of 12 parallel, identical, wavy strands of hair on the Kore's back, reaching to her waist, is impeccably designed, as are the folds in her garment. It seems, therefore, that the slight asymmetries and the exophthalmia observable on the head cannot have resulted from inattention or poor workmanship on the part of this highly-skilled sculptor (fig. 13 a, b).

Asymmetries and exophthalmia have been observed since the seventh century BC in sculptures of the 'Kouroi'.[18]

These dissimilarities may, therefore, be intended to mean a differentiation of the Kore depicted from ordinary people: she sees and perceives more things and situations. The asymmetries were intended as distinctive signs of great importance, indicating that she had exceptional gifts or capabilities.[19] Pierris, writing about

[18] Pierris, (2016) pp. 12, 18, 20, 21
[19] Sarantea, (2017) p. 119

Kouroi, notes: "The calculated minor asymmetries ... elevate the individual to a transcendental superiority".[20]

2.3. A Charismatic philosopher in a nimbus

An Opus Sestile, from about 395 AD, from the Archaeological Museum of Ostia, in Rome, shows an unknown Charismatic philosopher (a "holy man" *θείος ανήρ*, a divinely inspired wise man) in a nimbus. The eyes are depicted emphatically open and the eyebrows drawn up. Paul Zanker further discusses on similar expressions and postulates that "all these traits are probably meant to convey a readiness for the divine, in expectation of the mystic experience".[21] (Zanker, 1995, p. 318-319).

The face of this wise man is depicted with asymmetries between its sides, as its right side is slightly deformed. The right eye is in a lower position than the left, the nose is positioned out of its normal site and the line of the eyebrows slope downwards and to the right. The apparent asymmetry of the oval shape of the holy man's face, could be attributed to the perspective of the design (fig. 14).



Fig. 14.Opus Sestile with the portrait of a Charismatic philosopher in a nimbus. Archaeological Museum of Ostia, Rome. ca. 395 AD. (Zanker 1995, Fig. 172)

[20] Pierris (2016) p. 25
[21] Zanker (1995) pp. 318-319, fig.172

2.4. Byzantine icon-paintings

Asymmetries are to be found in Byzantine icon-paintings. By way of indication, these examples can be cited:

a) On Mount Sinai, in the encaustic icon of *Christ Pantocrator* (first half of the 6th century), the left eye is shown larger, with a larger iris and with the pupil depicted lower when compared with the right eye. The left ear and nostril are higher than the right. Both sides clearly differ in expression. K.A. Manafis describes the icon as "a work by a great artist" which gives expression to the "divine nature of Christ" and "the human nature of the divine and human person".[22] These differences not only reflect the human and the divine nature of Christ, his goodness, but also his severity, etc. (figs 15, 16).

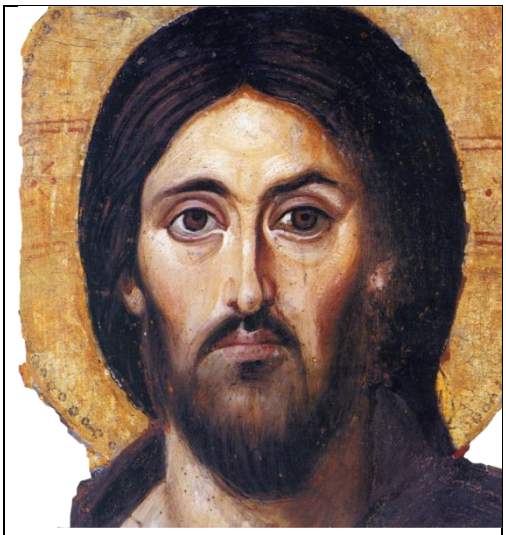


Fig. 15. The encaustic icon of Christ Pantocrator. Monastery of Sinai. First half of the 6th century.

[22] Manafis 1990, pp. 93, 191



Fig. 16. The two different faces which make up the asymmetrical head in the icon of Christ Pantokrator in the Monastery of Sinai. 6th cent. (Adjusted for the purpose of this text by Evi Sarantea)

b) In Hagia Sophia of Constantinople, in the large mosaic composition of the *Deesis* (ca. 1260 AD), a masterpiece on the southern gallery, the face of Christ, with its incomparable expression, is shown with his left eye larger than the right and of a different shape [23] (fig. 17). The right eye is looking straight ahead - at 'those things' - *ἐκεῖνα*, whereas the left sees, perhaps, further to the left, 'the things beyond' - *ἐπέκεινα* (Poulopoulos, Takis, Byzantine icon-painter and teacher - personal communication).

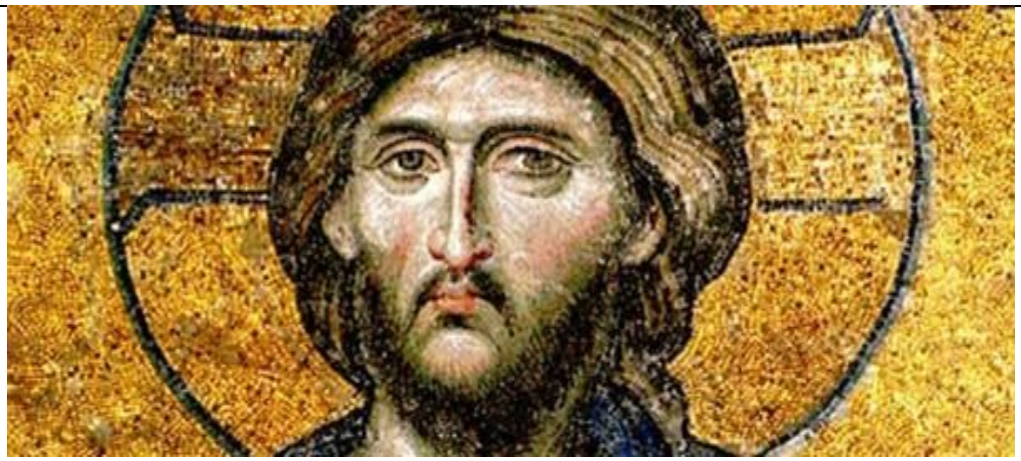


Fig. 17. Jesus Christ. Mosaic. Hagia Sofia, Constantinople. ca. 1260 AD.

Similar asymmetries of the eyes are to be found in other icons of Christ. A few can be mentioned briefly in the case of three icons of Christ:

[23] Mainstone (2002), p. 222

c) One icon belonging to the Chora Monastery in Constantinople,[24]

d) In the icon of *Christ the Fearful Judge* from the Byzantine Museum of Kastoria,

e) In the icon of Christ in the *Great Deesis* on Mount Sinai. [25]

3. AN APPROACH TO INTERPRETATION

Are these asymmetries and dissimilarities intentional?

In the case of the sculptured heads of ancient intellectuals which manifest asymmetries in Roman copies, we believe that these differences are intentional and are not due to poor workmanship or to the normal physical differences which are apparent on the human face. These deliberate asymmetries, which, as we have said, occur in a small percentage of sculptured portraits as a whole, belong within a particular manner of rendering figures which runs through the centuries-long Greek tradition of portraiture, from the Archaic period to the Byzantine era.

What are the possible interpretations of these asymmetries?

That asymmetries in sculptured heads of ancient Greek intellectuals are also to be found in Archaic sculptures and Byzantine icons is a fact. There must be a reason which explains the choice of the sculptor to portray his subject in such a way.

As to the different size of the eyes, one of the possible directions of interpretation which we might follow is that of the lines of thought concerning 'part - whole', 'perceptible - notional', 'material - spiritual', or possibly 'small - great' (Everything is small and great, to itself... πρὸς ἑαυτὸ δὲ ἑκαστόν ἐστί καὶ μέγα καὶ σμικρόν [(Anaxagoras, VS 59 B3). [26]

Moreover, a phrase in the comic poet Menander: "How can the little eye see so much?" Βαβαί, τὸ μικρὸν ὄμμα πῶς πολλὰ βλέπει;[27] suggests that he who has the big - the 'inner'- eye 'sees much'.

[24] Kilickaya p. 5
[25] Manafis (1990) p. 171
[26] Bogomolov (1995) p. 169
[27] Avtzis (1970) p. 83

One eye shown as higher probably indicates the sublime persona of the individual depicted.

The slight deformation of the left side of the face probably denotes that this is a prominent philosopher who examines, beyond what is usually accepted, 'the other', the 'opposite' (position - opposition, as movement?), 'the aweful', 'the undefined'. He examines the whole. It is also possible that by the severity of the person depicted an awe for him is suggested, and in some cases perhaps even mortality is signified. A combination of meanings or their blending, as the case may be, should not be ruled out. Usually is on the right side of faces that the 'good' or 'normal' appears. (The contrast between 'good' and 'evil' and its correspondence with 'right - left' are still present in Greece and the rest of the Balkans, and in the Arab world, as well as in superstitions such as that for 'good luck' one should enter a house with the right foot**.** The toddler has to get down from the bed with the right foot. The 'twitching' (flickering) of the right eye is a sign of good news.)

Plato in the *Timaeus* considers that the essence of everything that the world contains is a synthesis of *identity* and *difference* (35α1-36β6).

Differences of this kind can be related more to *Dualism*. The forms in which inequality, difference, and dissimilarity are present are connected more with the concept of the *dyad*, as, in the present instance, probably in the case of the Roman copies of sculptured heads of ancient intellectuals. (*Dualism* is the philosophical theory which holds that the cosmos or reality is based on the existence of two principles with a radical distinction and dissimilarity.)

Within the category of ’basic opposites’ are contrasts such as: *'defined - undefined'*, '*finite – infinite*', '*at rest – in motion*', '*light – darkness*', *'good – evil*', '*right – left* ', etc.[28]

4. CONCLUSION

The similarities found in asymmetries among Archaic heads, Roman copies of sculptured portraits and icons of the Byzantine era are obvious. In my opinion, the Roman sculptured portraits of distinguished Greek intellectuals (the period comes in

[28] Taylor (1995) pp. 20, 154, 248

between the Archaic and the Byzantine works) give expression to the human nature of their subjects and the awe felt in that era for these spiritual benefactors of humanity in the face of their superiority or virtually transcendental spiritual power. The sculptors of the Roman period, in creating the copies of the original heads, introduced slight differences in their form by means of calculated asymmetries, to convey, how exceptional was their intellect, how distinctive their perception was (hence the depiction with proportionally larger eyes and ears), how stunning and awe-inspiring their thought was, and, how eminent they were as entities. In all probability, the original authentic statues of the ancient thinkers did not manifest these asymmetries, and the rendering of some of these figures with these differentiations in the Roman period was a preference of the individuals who commissioned them. Further investigation of the matter is called for.

The tradition of deliberate disparities is long and the interpretation of each individual head portrait involves difficulties. In the case of deliberate asymmetries between the two parts of the head, it cannot be precluded that there is some synthesis or merging of concepts.

It is not certain that the differences in the sculptured heads of ancient philosophers, in Roman copies, express exactly the same ideas as those of the Archaic Kouroi or the icons of the Pantokrator. It is, however, certain that the asymmetries present in Byzantine icons are firmly rooted in ancient Greek art and philosophy.

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