

‘WANTED: R. MEIR!’¹

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One of the blessings of the *pax Romana* and of the Imperial administration was that the search for and apprehension of criminals became more efficient than it had been under the Republic, or in Greece. Governors searched for criminals, those who did not turn themselves in within a year had their properties confiscated, and those who fled to neighbouring provinces were extradited by their governors, at the demand of the governor of the criminal’s province.² All these advances were achieved, we are told, despite the fact that the authorities had not at their disposal ‘fingerprints, “wanted” photographs, and much more’.³

In Ptolemaic Egypt, contracts, as a rule, contained physical descriptions of the parties and witnesses.⁴ It is true that in Egypt these descriptions became quite brief under Roman rule, but Roman letters of extradition, too, may well have contained information concerning a criminal’s physical appearance: the law prescribed recording such details, including special marks, in the case of fugitive slaves, whose descriptions were to be made public.⁵ Indeed there were no photographs, but could portraits of wanted criminals be publicly displayed? Succour may be found in a source from a literary corpus largely neglected by classical scholars.

In the Babylonian Talmud, *Avoda Zara* (‘Idolatry’), 17b-18b a number of stories are told about R. Hanina (or Hanania) b. Teradion, who studied and taught the Torah despite the ban after the Bar-Kokhba rebellion: he and his wife were executed and his daughter was prostituted in a brothel. In one of these stories (18a-b), Bruriah, another daughter of R. Hanina and wife of the leading sage R. Meir, sends her husband to find out about her sister. When he discovers that under the pretext of being indisposed she refuses to have intercourse with prospective customers, he bribes the gaoler and frees his sister-in-law. Eventually the action of the gaoler is found out and ‘they carved the likeness of R. Meir on the gate of Rome and they said: whoever sees this face shall bring him in’ (18b).

The story, though obviously legendary, still possesses some real *Sitz im Leben*. Ignoring for the present what we can learn from the story about the attitude of some segments of the population of the Empire towards Roman rule and rulers, and indeed the judicial system, our immediate concern is with the portrait displayed ‘at the gate of Rome’. It

¹ This note has greatly benefited from the comments of this journal’s anonymous readers; remaining faults are to be debited to the author’s obstinacy rather than to the lack of good advice.

² J.-U. Krause, *Kriminalgeschichte der Antike* (München 2004), 51-2.

³ Ibid. 53: ‘Fingerabdrücke, Fahndungsfotos und vieles andere mehr’.

⁴ See bibliography in I.F. Fikhman, ‘The Physical Appearance of Egyptian Jews according to the Greek Papyri’, *SCI* 18 (1999), 131 n. 1.

⁵ D. 11.4.8. For a very detailed physical description of a fugitive slave from an earlier period see e.g. U. Wilcken, *Urkunden der Ptolemäerzeit (Ältere Funde)* I (Berlin und Leipzig 1927), no. 121, lines 5-9; also the special marks of recruits were noted, see R.O. Fink, *Roman Military Records on Papyrus* (APA Monograph 26, Cleveland 1971), no. 87, 352-4.

will not do to credit the inventors of the story — which may have grown in stages (while not inconceivably containing a kernel of truth) — with the fabrication of this detail, in particular because they belonged to a society that famously abhorred graven images. Would it be possible to produce a likeness of a person for such purposes? One cannot assume that all criminals had their portraits prepared in advance, nor would there be any foreknowledge of which criminals would escape or roam at large, so it will have to be presumed that a likeness could be produced by an artist from memory.

Indeed, we are told by Pliny the Elder (*HN* 35.140) that Ctesicles painted a disreputable picture (*iniuria*) of Queen Stratonice in a compromising situation with a fisher, with whom it was said that the queen was in love. The queen prohibited the removal of the picture, because of the wonderful similitude to both of them. The face of the fisher, at least, must have been painted from memory, though the likeness of the queen conceivably may have been reproduced from an existing portrait. Perhaps more historically, various sources⁶ transmit the story that the dying Agesilaus forbade to make a painted or sculpted image of himself. It must have been assumed that a portrait could be produced from memory⁷ and that the likeness would be recognized by contemporaries. It is not known whether Plato's statue by Silanion in the Academy had been erected in Plato's lifetime or after his death.⁸ In Roman times, Pomponius Atticus did not permit the Athenians to erect statues of himself, so they did so in his absence,⁹ the artist(s) no doubt working from memory. We are also in the possession of an inscription¹⁰ on a statue-base from Forum Sempronii in Umbria, of the Roman knight C. Hedius Verus, whose previous refusal of a statue induced the Council to erect one without his knowledge. Admittedly, all these examples refer to instances where the model must have been well known to the artist. The next instance will indeed show that acquaintance was deemed essential for a portrait with artistic claims. When Plotinus refused to have his portrait drawn, Carterius, the best painter among those active in his time, after attending a number of the Master's classes, drew him from memory; his sketch was then corrected by Ampelius, the originator of the idea.¹¹ Though I do not know of an explicit example, it stands to reason that even inferior painters could produce perhaps less faithful or artistically satisfying images of less exalted personages than those mentioned here, but such images would still be identifiable by those who knew the subject. True, in none of the above cases did the artist draw from a description rather than from memory, and thus we will have to postulate 'WANTED!' portraits only in those rare cases when there was both an artist available and he had seen the subject beforehand. Indeed, the availability of such an artist may well have contributed to the very idea of producing a portrait.

⁶ Cic. *Fam.* 5.12.7; Plut. *Ages.* 2.4; *Apophth. Reg.* 191D, *Ages.* 12; *Apophth. Lac.* 215A, *Ages.* 78; Favor. [apud Dionem Chr.], 37.43; Apul. *Apol.* 15.1.

⁷ Even in Rome the use of death-masks is an intensely debated question, while in Greece they were unknown: see P. Stewart, *Roman Art* (Greece & Rome, New Surveys in the Classics no. 34, Oxford 2004), 7-8.

⁸ Favor. in Diog. Laert. 3.25.

⁹ Nep. *Att.* 3.2.

¹⁰ *CIL* xi.6123.

¹¹ Porphy. *Vita Plot.* 1.

The Roman Empire being what it was, there is, of course, no need to postulate a general application of such measures. It may have depended, like so much else, on the willingness or initiative of the governor and on the available means (in this case the artist). That a governor of such an unruly province as Judaea, or Syria-Palaestina, would have special reasons to combat criminal activities and would go to some lengths to catch evil-doers, seems reasonable.¹² It is also perhaps not entirely far-fetched to imagine that a governor might have been especially willing to employ such a means in view of the well-known Biblical prohibition of graven images.¹³ Be this as it may, our story may be taken as providing evidence for the occasional public posting of portraits¹⁴ of wanted criminals.

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¹² B. Isaac, 'Bandits in Judaea and Arabia', *HSCP* 88 (1984), 171-2 refers to the execution of R. Hanina in connexion with the story about his son, who was killed by his fellow 'bandits' after betraying them. No doubt as far as a Roman governor was concerned the treatment of 'ordinary' and 'political' criminals would hardly make a difference. I do not think that there is a point in connecting the story with R. Meir's travels outside Palestine as narrated in Rabbinic sources.

¹³ But note the stories in Jos. *AJ* 14.149-155 on the Athenian *psephisma* to erect a bronze statue of Hyrcanus I in the Temple of the Demos and the Charites (albeit we are not told whether it was executed) and in *AJ* 15.25-27 of the pictures of Aristobulus and Mariamme sent to Antonius (*BJ* 1.439 mentions only Mariamme, who is accused of having herself sent her portrait). Presumably these Hasmonaean princes were not averse to sitting for an artist. Post-destruction Rabbinic Judaism may well have been stricter. One may also mention the statue erected to Josephus himself, according to Eus. *HE* 3.9.2.

¹⁴ I am of course aware of the difficulty posed by the verb 'carved', though I would not assign too great a significance to it.