

The Physical Appearance of Egyptian Jews according to the Greek Papyri

I.F. Fikhman

For well-known reasons we do not have portraits or sculptures of Egyptian Jews, in contrast to members of other ethnic groups living in Egypt in the Graeco-Roman period. The only information that can be extracted from documentary papyri is the physical descriptions of individuals mentioned in some documents.¹ These descriptions, schematic and all more or less stereotyped, served a purely practical purpose: they were a means of legal identification of the individuals concerned and in no case can they be compared with literary portraits. In analyzing this material we must take into consideration the fact that in spite of their relatively great number, these descriptions concern only a very small section of the individuals mentioned in the documentary papyri. In many cases we have no indication of the individual character of their appearance. In some

¹ On these descriptions see O. Gradenwitz, *Einführung in die Papyruskunde I, Erklärung ausgewählter Texte nebst Conträr-Index*, Leipzig 1900, 126-30; J. Hasebroek, *Das Signalement in den Papyrusurkunden* (Papyrusinstitut Heidelberg, Schrift 3) Berlin-Leipzig 1921; A. Caldara, *L'indicazione dei connotati nei documenti papiracei dell'Egitto greco-romano* (Studi della Scuola Papirologica 4.2), Milan 1924; F. Smolka, 'De ratione personarum describendarum in papyrorum actis adhibitibus', *Eos* 27, 1924, 72-8; J. Hasebroek, 'Zum antiken Signalement', *Hermes* 60, 1925, 369-71; S. Avogadro, 'I connotati personali nei documenti dell'Egitto greco-romano secondo gli ultimi ritrovamenti', in *Atti del Congresso Internazionale per gli studi della popolazione I*, Rome 1933, 429-38; C. Gini, 'La pigmentazione degli abitanti dell'Egitto nell'età greco-romana', *ibid.*, 439-88; P. Collomp, 'L'ethnographie égyptienne d'après les signalements contenus dans les papyrus', *Bulletin de l'Association G. Budé* 49, 1935, 52-8; K. Jax, 'Zur literarischen und amtlichen Personenbeschreibung', *Klio* 29, 1936, 151-63; G. Hübsch, *Die Personalangaben als Identifizierungsvermerke in Recht der gräko-ägyptischen Papyri* (Berliner Juristische Abhandlungen 20), Berlin [1968]; H.-J. Wolff, *Das Recht der griechischen Papyri Ägyptens in der Zeit der Ptolemäer und des Prinzipats*, II, *Organisation und Kontrolle des privaten Rechtsverkehrs* (Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft X.5.2), Munich [1978], 88-90; *P. Petrie*² I, 49-55 (ed. W. Clarysse); *C.P.R. XVIII*, 13-15 (ed. B. Kramer); S. Daris, 'Il lessico fisionomico nei papiri greci', *Lingue tecniche del greco e del latino*, Trieste 1993, 99-104.

cases, because of the condition of the papyri, the descriptions that they contained are lost or have survived only in part. Besides, as was established long ago, only the descriptions available in the Ptolemaic papyri can provide more or less full information. The detailed descriptions typical of the beginning of the period gradually become more succinct and in the Roman period they are reduced until they provide little more than indications of age and scars (οὐλαί).

The editors of the *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* had at their disposal only a small number of physical descriptions of Egyptian Jews. There are two more or less full descriptions of two undoubted Jews (in the text they are defined as Ἰουδαῖοι τῆς ἐπιγονῆς)² in *C.P.Jud.* I 23, lines 33-36 (Krokodilopolis, 182 BCE), and two descriptions, incomplete but undoubtedly of the 'abridged' type, in *C.P.Jud.* II 417, lines 24-25 (Babylon, Heliopolite nome, 59 CE).³ We may add, with V.A. Tcherikover, the descriptions of an individual in *C.P.Jud.* I 26, lines 19-21 (Fayûm, 172-171 BCE) who possibly was a Jew,⁴ and of two slaves sent by Toubias as a present to Apollonios, the finance minister of Ptolemy II Philadelphos, in whose descriptions there occurs the indication 'circumcised' (περιτετημένος, see *C.P.Jud.* I 4, lines 13 and 14; Transjordan, 257 BCE).⁵ So we can understand the disappointment of Tcherikover, who wrote that 'the material remains insufficient, and there is no possibility of forming a clear idea of what the Egyptian Jews looked like in the Hellenistic-Roman period' (*C.P.Jud.* I 23, lines, 33-36 note).

It would be an exaggeration to think that the papyri published after the appearance of the *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* which include physical descriptions of Egyptian Jews have radically changed the situation. In any case such papyri are not very numerous. Nevertheless, these documents, and especially the four papyri published in *C.P.R.* XVIII, enrich our knowledge considerably and deserve special attention.

² On this expression see C.A. Lada, 'Who were "those of the Epigone"', *Akten des 21. Internationalen Papyrologenkongresses, Berlin, 10.-19.8.1995* (APF Bh. 3), Stuttgart-Leipzig 1997, 563-9, esp. 56-66.

³ In the text three Ἰουδαῖοι Πέρσαι τῆς ἐπιγονῆς are mentioned but the signalments of only two of them are preserved.

⁴ See Tcherikover's introduction to the text.

⁵ On the re-editions and translations of this famous text see I.F. Fikhman, 'Liste des rééditions et traductions des textes publiés dans le *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* Vols. I-III', *Scripta Classica Israelica* 17, 1998, 184-85, 205 (Addendum). There are signalments of four slaves but only two were circumcised. The ethnicity of the slaves is not indicated, and the onomastic aspect is not conclusive; see Tcherikover's note *ad loc.*; P.Scholl, *Sklaverei in den Zenonpapyri. Eine Untersuchung zu den Sklaventermini, zum Sklavenerwerb und zur Sklavenflucht* (Trierer historische Forschungen 4), Trier 1983, 103-05; *C.Ptol. Sklav.* I, p. 189.

First of all, there is the papyrus published by Jorma Kaimio as *C.P.R.* VII 2 (*Oxyrhynchos*, first century CE).⁶ This text, the character of which is not wholly clear, mentions seven individuals with their signalments, apparently members of two families. Their names, either Jewish or Greek and Egyptian adopted by Jews (with the exceptions of Tapeteus and Sembes), make it reasonable to think that they were Jews. Since the document belongs to the Roman period the descriptions are of the 'abridged' type. The form of the face (στρογγυλοπρόσωπος – round-faced) and the scars are noted in four cases (lines 4, 5, 6, 10), in the other three only the scars are noted.

More complete information can be extracted from four documents published by Bärbel Kramer in *C.P.R.* XVIII in 1991, which were recovered from mummy cartonnage. Kramer managed to reconstitute two scrolls, one complete (*P.Vindob.G.40618A*) and the second fragmentary (*P.Vindob.G.40618B*), and to publish magisterial editions of them.⁷ The texts concerning Jews are in the first scroll and have the ordinal numbers 7, 8, 9, 11. This scroll, entitled χρηματισμὸς συναλλαγμάτων (1, lines, 2-3), has some peculiarities that augment its importance. The contracts in it were drawn up during a very short period, and the entire scroll was written by a single scribe, most probably in the *grapheion* of Theogenis (Fayûm). In consequence it is characterized by a certain unity: internal, chronological and in a larger sense topographical: the transactions concern the inhabitants of several villages⁸ belonging to the same region, rather limited in extent. This first scroll contains detailed summaries of the transactions. The parties and the *syngraphophylakes* are indicated with their signalments, as usual at that time of the 'detailed' type. These descriptions, in most cases, are without any great lacunae. The parties belong to different ethnic groups and social categories,⁹ with the exception of Egyptians, who are not mentioned at all. The word αἰγύπτιος appears only in three cases (twice in the first scroll, once in the second) and then it indicates an Egyptian month. In other words, the register is a document illustrating the situation in the non-Egyptian milieu of the population, of the society of the 'colonisers', Greek (in the broad sense of the word) or hellenised. That the Jews belong to this milieu is

⁶ H. Zilliacus, J. Frösén, P. Hohti and J. Kaimio, *Corpus Papyrorum Raineri Archeducis Austriae VII*, Griechische Texte IV, Vienna, 1979.

⁷ B. Kramer, *Das Vertragsregister von Theogenis (P.Vindob.G.40618)*, *Corpus Papyrorum Raineri Archeducis Austriae XVIII*, Griechische Texte XIII, Vienna 1991. See reviews of this publication by A. Jördens, *Chronique d'Égypte* 68, 1992, 341-58; O. Montevecchi, in *Aegyptus*, 75, 1995, 323-5; H.-A. Rupprecht, in *ZSS RA*, 112, 1995, 462-8; J.C. Winnicki, in *BASP* 32, 1995, 209-12; and H.-A. Rupprecht, 'Sechs-Zeugenurkunde und Registrierung', *Aegyptus* 75, 1995, 37-53, esp. 37-9.

⁸ On these villages see B. Kramer, *C.P.R.* XVIII, pp. 96-116, and map on p. 118.

⁹ See *ibid.*, pp. 63-81.

confirmed by their almost entirely Greek onomastics¹⁰ and by the fact that even the matrimonial transactions were drawn up in Greek and registered at the Greek *graphēia*.

In all we possess (including the documents of the second scroll, which, as noted, is very fragmentary) the physical descriptions of 103 individuals: these include 13 Macedonians, 12 Jews,¹¹ and 11 Thracians, with other ethnic and social groups being represented by much smaller numbers of individuals. All the Jews, ten men and two women, were inhabitants of Samareia, a village known as one of the centres of Jewish settlement in Egypt. It is possible even to reconstitute the family relationships between some of the Jews mentioned in our scroll. All this enables us to compare the physical descriptions of the Jews with the descriptions of other individuals mentioned in the scrolls and the descriptions of Jews who were members of the same family.

In the descriptions the individual characteristics follow more or less the same order: age, height, skin colour, shape of the face, often the form of the nose, position and form of the eyes, the quality of the vision, etc, and the location of the scars (οὐαί) and spots (φακοί). The data of these four documents mentioning the peculiarities of the physical descriptions of the Jews are grouped in Table 1.

The table shows that ten of the twelve Jews were of medium height (μέσος) and only two were tall (εὐμεγέθης); eleven were light-skinned (μελίχρωσ) and only one dark-skinned (μελάγχρωσ) (no one was of pale complexion – λευκόχρωσ); five of them were long-faced (μακροπρόσωπος), two were round-faced (στρογγυλοπρόσωπος), and only one was flat-faced (πλατυπρόσωπος). There are few data concerning the form of the nose: two are recorded as having a flat nose (ἔνσιμος), one with a straight nose (εὐθύρριν). There are also three individuals with bold foreheads (ἀναφάλαντος), two with hollow eyes (κοιλόφθαλμος), one with light blue eyes (γλαυκός, a very rare mention in the papyri¹²), and one with a thin beard (σπανοπώγων), also a rare occurrence in the

¹⁰ See I.F. Fikhman, 'La papyrologie et les collections de papyrus en Israël', in *Proceedings of the 20th International Congress of Papyrology, Copenhagen, 23-29 August 1992*, Copenhagen 1994, 549; *idem*, 'Onomastics of Greek and Roman Egypt', in *Classical Studies in Honor of David Sohlberg*, Ramat Gan [1996], 413-4. The only Jewish family where we find Jewish onomastics is that of Jonathas son of Jonathas (*C.P.R.* XVIII 7, lines 125-126), but we do not know the name of his mother, of his wife, or of his children. If Menestratos son of Jonathas (*C.P.R.* XVIII 9, line 177 and 11, line 213) was his brother, then even in that family the names were mixed.

¹¹ The number of Jews in these documents was certainly greater. The daughter of the Jewess Philoumene, who was also the former wife of the Jew Menestratos, was undoubtedly also a Jewess; and the parents of the individuals indicated as Jews were very probably also Jews.

¹² See B. Kramer, *C.P.R.* XVIII 8, line 172 note *ad loc.*

papyri.¹³ It should be noted that these data correspond to the data published in the Corpus; the data of *C.P.R.* VII No. 2 alone modify the statistical correlation concerning the shape of the face; as noted above, four individuals were round-faced. Nevertheless, the predominance of the long faces is maintained.

The texts published in *C.P.R.* XVIII are important for another reason. Despite the fragmentary character of the second scroll, they permit us to try to compare the data concerning Jews (12 individuals in all) with the data concerning non-Jews (a total of 91 individuals), among whom, as noted, there were no Egyptians. These data are grouped in Table 2.

I took account for this purpose of 24 different components, but here I shall discuss only those which are more commonly encountered. Thus 21 tall individuals among the non-Jews (21%) correspond to 2 among the Jews (17%); 45 non-Jews of medium height (49%) to 10 (83%) Jews; 10 dark-skinned non-Jews (11%) to 1 Jew (8%); 46 light-skinned non-Jews (56%) to 11 Jews (92%); 30 long-faced non-Jews (33%) to 5 Jews (42%); 26 round-faced non-Jews (29%) to 2 Jews (17%); 11 non-Jews with bold foreheads (12%) to 3 Jews (25%). As to other characteristics, we should note the absence among the Jews of individuals with pale complexions, whereas among the non-Jews there were 9 (10%), the absence among the Jews of people with a hooked nose (ἐπίγρυπος) and a sharp nose (ὀξύρριν), whereas among the non-Jews there were 6 (7%) and 1 (1%) respectively with these characteristics. Only among the Jews do we find a single individual with light blue eyes (8%), 2 hollow-eyed people (17%), 1 short-sighted individual (8%) and 1 with a scanty beard (8%).

It should be interesting to compare the physical descriptions of members of the same family. In *C.P.Jud.* II 47 the debtors were three Jews, a father and his two sons, but we possess only a short description of the father and of one of the two sons, and it does not enable us to compare the data. On the other hand, in *C.P.R.* XVIII 9 and 11 we have the signalments of Pythoklês son of Dioklês and of his sister Philoumenê. With the exception of the colour of the skin the signalments do not coincide. If it is possible to explain the difference in the height (the brother was εὐμεγέθης), it remains difficult to account for the difference in the shape of the face. But if we accept the hypothesis that Jonathas son of Jonathas (*C.P.R.* XVIII 7) and Menestratos son of Jonathas (*C.P.R.* XVIII 9 and 11) were brothers, then their signalments coincide as far as concerns their height, the colour of their skin and perhaps in other characteristics too (l. 146 is illegible).

Did the Jews of Graeco-Roman Egypt differ from other ethnic groups living in Egypt? Shaye J.D. Cohen studied this question on a larger scale in an important article, published very recently: 'Those who say they are Jews and are

¹³ See *ibid.* May we suppose that these two characteristics were noted because of their rarity, especially among Jews?

not: How do you know a Jew in antiquity when you see one?'.¹⁴ In his opinion, with the exception of circumcision which is normally not visible, 'not a single ancient author says that Jews were distinctive because of their looks, clothing, speech, names and occupations'.¹⁵ Undoubtedly, the appearance of the Jews, especially of the hellenized Jews, did not differ radically from that of their neighbours. In any case, the anti-Jewish feelings of the ancient world, despite their intensity, did not create that negative image of the Jew which came into being in the Middle Ages and later. This can be explained by the fact that the population of Egypt in antiquity consisted of southern ethnic groups with shared physical characteristics. There is little doubt that the Jews may have been individually recognizable in antiquity, but, as we have noted, the signalments did not describe *ethnic* characteristics of individuals in the documents but served only to provide an assured legal identification of individuals. The signalments considered here, despite their small number, do perhaps permit us to say that Egyptian Jews were generally of medium height, light-skinned and long-faced; but such a result is not too impressive. Moreover, additional information, from a larger number of such sources, would probably not change the picture very much, given what we have seen of the nature and function of these documents.

The Hebrew University, Jerusalem

Notes to Table 1 (see next page)

- ¹ The signalments coincide in both papyri.
- ² προκέφαλος is mentioned only in 11, l. 231.
- ³ The term indicating height is not preserved but the space (five letters) permits us to suggest μέσος.
- ⁴ ἔνσιμος is mentioned only in 11, l. 227, but it was written probably also in 9, l. 186 (see ed. princ. note ad loc.).

¹⁴ S.J.D. Cohen and E.S. Frerichs, ed., *Diasporas in Antiquity* (Brown Judaica Series 288), Atlanta 1993, 2-45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3; cf. 4: 'Not a single ancient author comments on the distinctive size, looks or coiffure of the Jews'.

TABLE ONE: The Physical Description of the Jews mentioned in CPR XVIII, 7, 8, 9, 11

	εὐμεγέθης	μέσος	μελάγχρωος	μελίχρωος	μακροπρόσωπος	πλατυπρόσωπος	στρογγυλοπρόσωπος	ἔνιστος	εὐθύρριυ	κοιλόφθαλμος	γλαυκός	ὑπόσκιφος	σπιανοπύγων	προκέφαλος	ἀναφάλατος	οὐλή	φακός	Other peculiarities
1. Ἀπολλώνιος Φιλίππου (7, ll. 147-8)		+		+												?	?	?
2. Διαγόρας Διοκλέους (8, ll. 165-6)		+		+			+	+				+				-	-	-
3. Δωσίθεος Θεογένους (8, ll. 169-70)		+		+	+										+	-	-	-
4. Δωσίθεος Θεοφίλου (8, ll. 171-2)		+		+							+		+		+	-	-	-
5. Θεόδωρος Θεοδώρου (11, ll. 234-5)		+		+					+	+						-	-	-
6. Ἰωναθᾶς Ἰωναθοῦ (7, ll. 145-6)		+		+												?	?	?
7. Μενέσραπος Ἰωναθοῦ (9, ll. 190-1; 11, ll. 232-3) ¹		+		+	+												+	-
8. Νικοπόλη Θεοδότου (8, ll. 167-8)		+		+		+												+
9. Πυθοκλῆς Διοκλέους (9, ll. 188-9; 11, ll. 229-31) ²	+		+		+					+						-	+	-
10. Φιλιστίων Νέωνος (9, ll. 192-3)	+			+	+									+		+	-	-
11. Φιλόπατρος Τηροῦς (7, ll. 149-50) ³		+?		+	+										+	+	?	-
12. Φιλουμένη Διοκλέους (9, ll. 185-7; 11, ll. 226-8) ⁴				+			+	+									+	
TOTAL	2	9	1	11	5	1	2	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	3			

TABLE 2
Comparison of Jews and Non-Jews in C.P.R. XVIII

	Non-Jews (91)		Jews (12)	
		%		%
βραχύς	2	2.19	-	-
εὐμεγέθης	21	23.07	2	16.66
μέσος	45	49.45	10	83.33
λευκόχρως	9	9.89	-	-
μελάγχρως	10	10.98	1	8.33
μελίχρως	46	56.54	11	91.66
πυρράκης	1	1.09	-	-
μακροπρόσωπος	30	32.86	5	41.66
πλατυπρόσωπος	26	28.57	2	16.66
στρογγυλοπρόσωπος	26	28.57	2	16.66
ἔνσιμος	3	3.28	2	16.66
ἐπίγυρτος	6	6.56	-	-
εὐθύρριν	4	4.37	1	8.33
ὀξύρριν	1	1.09	-	-
ὑπόγυρτος	1	1.06	-	-
γλαυκός	-	-	1	8.33
κοιλόφθαλμος	-	-	2	16.66
ὑπόσκιφος	-	-	1	8.33
ἀδύνατος τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς	1	1.09	-	-
κλαστόθριξ	2	2.19	-	-
ἀναφάλαντος	11	12.08	3	25.00
σπαινοπάγων	-	-	1	8.33
προκέφαλος	3	3.29	1	8.33
ἐπισκάζων	1	1.09	-	-