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PLATONIC FOUNDATIONS OF THE PORTRAIT OF EMPEROR BASIL II IN THE *CHRONOGRAPHIA* BY MICHAEL PSELLOS

The character of the emperor was the following. His outward appearance justified his noble status. His eyes were blue and bright, his eyebrows were neither protruding nor menacing, nor did they create a straight line in a womanish fashion, but were well arched and expressed the pride of their possessor. His eyes were neither excessively deeply set – which is a sign of knavery and harshness, nor bulging – which gives away vanity, but they were shining in a manly manner.

The entire stature, from the middle of his body, started to create a regular circle due to his shapely and a little elongated neck, which harmonised with the shoulders. His chest was neither protuberant nor concave, nor narrow, but it enjoyed the right measure. The rest of the parts of his body were in harmony with it [...] ¹ (trans. M. Kokoszko)

The description is devoted to emperor Basil II (976–1025) and was composed by Michael Psellos. It constitutes a part of his *Chronographia* which covers the period from 976 to 1077.

Emperor Basil II was one of the most important Byzantine rulers. He was a son of emperor Romanos II (959–963) and his wife, empress Theophano. Basil was born in the year 958 and crowned two years later (the year 960). However, it was after the death of emperor John Tzimiskes (969–976) that young Basil had a chance to seize real power. During the period 976–985 the reins of the empire were firmly held, on behalf of the sons of Romanos II, by the *parakoimomenos* Basil. It was the fall of the *parakoimomenos* (the year 985) and the final victory over the rebellion of Bardas Phokas and Bardas Skleros (the year 989) that paved the way for the emperor Basil II to act independently as a ruler.

¹ M. Psellos, *Chronographie ou histoire d'un siècle de Byzance (976–1077)*, t. 1, texte établi et traduit par É. Renaud, Paris 1926, 1, 35, p. 22, later – *Chronographia*.

The emperor had to wage wars at numerous fronts throughout his whole life. His conflict with Vladimir of Kiev ended after forming an alliance with the duke and sending him „born in the purple” Anna (the year 989).

Almost ceaseless fights at the Arabic front, battled to protect Aleppo and Antioch, were carried out (with only short breaks) throughout the 90s and contributed to the strengthening of the Byzantine position in the territory. In the year 1001 the emperor Basil II concluded a peace treaty with the rulers of Egypt, which additionally protected Byzantium from attacks of the Muslims.

The emperor's relationship with Otto III (who wanted to marry a Byzantine princess), first exemplary, deteriorated when the monk Philagathos became the pope, since the new bishop of Rome represented a party hostile to Otto III. The situation was further aggravated when the new pope turned for protection to emperor Basil.

During the last years of his reign, emperor Basil II fought battles at the Caucasian front, in the area of Georgia and Abchazja (years 1021–1022).

Basil II, however, is best known as a relentless enemy of Bulgaria and its czar Samuel. The first encounter with the Bulgarian troops resulted in a defeat of the Byzantine army (the year 986). The next period of the conflict (the years 991–995) did not bring the fighting to a conclusion, either. In the year 996, an prominent general, Nikephoros Uranos won an important victory over Bulgarian soldiers and took approximately 12 thousand captives. The conclusion of the war took place in the year 1014, when Byzantine troops destroyed the Bulgarians and took 15 thousand captives. It was after the battle, when the emperor Basil committed the famous cruelty of having the captives blinded and sent them back to czar Samuel. This act earned the Byzantine emperor the name „Bulgaroktonos”. Ultimately, Bulgaria was subjugated and incorporated in the year 1018².

The author of the above presented description of emperor Basil II was born in the year of the final defeat and incorporation of Bulgaria. He was christened Constantine. The other name, which is more popular, Michael, was adopted by Psellos during his stay in the monastery (the year 1054).

At the age of 16 he took up his first job in the judicature of the province Thrace – Macedonia. His career was given a powerful boost, when Psellos became a secretary of emperor Constantine IX Monomachos (1042–1055). The ruler appreciated his eloquence and knowledge (after the year 1045 Psellos was granted the title *hypatos ton philosophon*). In the year 1054 Michael Psellos had to leave the court and spent almost a year in

² The role of the emperor Basil II cf. M. Angold, *Cesarstwo bizantyńskie 1025–1204. Historia polityczna*, tłum. W. Brodzki, Wrocław 1993, pp. 7–19.

the monastery. In the subsequent year 1055 he was summoned to the court by empress Theodora.

After her death, during the reign of the emperor Michael VI (1056–1057) seemingly as a partisan of this ruler, Psellos shifted his support onto Michael's foe, the future emperor Izaak I Komnenos (1057–1059). He was rewarded for the service with high rank court offices. Subsequently, Psellos once again transmitted his support and started to play the role of an advocate of the rule of Constantine Doukas, who ultimately became emperor (1059–1067). After his demise, during the regency of the empress widow Eudokia, Michael Psellos held the reins of the empire.

The next emperor, Romanos IV Diogenes, did not trust the courtier, but the disastrous defeat in the battle at Mantzikert (August 1071) and then captivity and death of emperor Romanos IV, helped Psellos to rise to the very peak of his influence. Emperor Michael VII Doukas (1071–1078), who mounted the throne of Byzantium, was Psello's pupil. The savant now became Michael's first minister. The power, however, did not last for a long time. Fairly soon intrigues at the court forced Michael Psellos to retire from the palace.

We do not know the exact date of the death of Michael Psellos, but he must have passed away between the years 1078 and 1096³.

Michael Psellos, amongst other functions, was granted the privilege of educating imperial of springs⁴. He was a real master in the area letters and fine usage of high-brow Atticising Greek as well as the vernacular⁵.

Subjects of his works cover numerous areas of science. He tackled theology, demonology, historiography, grammar, ethymology, law, medicine, omoplatoscopy and many other sciences and pseudo-sciences. Psellos, however, appears to be an excellent expert in the field of philosophy. He acquired extensive knowledge of the entire *Corpus Aristotelicum* and he did not even avoid criticising Aristotle⁶. He was especially appreciated as

³ The life of Michael Psellos cf. H. Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, Erster Band, München 1978, p. 372–378; O. Jurewicz, *Przedmowa*, [in:] M. Psellos, *Kronika, czyli historia jednego stulecia Bizancjum (976–1077)*, z języka greckiego przełożył, wstępem i komentarzem opatrzył O. Jurewicz, Wrocław 1985, p. VI. The date of his death – G. Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica*, Bd. 1, Berlin 1958, p. 437; D. J. Polemis, *When Did Psellos Die?*, „Byzantinische Zeitschrift” 1965, 58, pp. 73–75.

⁴ Michael Psellos as a pedagogique – S. Hammer, *Michał Psellos jako pedagog*, „Przegląd Klasyczny” 1939, 5, pp. 505–543.

⁵ Linguistic valours of his writing – G. Böhling, *Untersuchungen zum rhetorischen Sprachgebrauch der Byzantiner mit besondere Berücksichtigung der Schriften des Michael Psellos*, mit einem Geleitwort von F. Dölger, Berlin 1956, *passim*; H. Hunger, *op. cit.*, pp. 380–381.

⁶ Cf. L. Benakis, *Michael Psellos' Kritik an Aristoteles und seine eigene Lehre zur „Physik” – und „Materie-Form” – Problematik*, „Byzantinische Zeitschrift” 1963, 56, pp. 213–227; H. Hunger, *op. cit.*, pp. 32–34.

a competent researcher of Plato's heritage. The Byzantine even called this philosopher „my Plato”, which nicely illustrates his attitude to the teaching of Plato and the famous Athenian himself⁷. Psellos' knowledge of philosophy was also characterised by his eminent familiarity with the work of the Neoplatonic school⁸.

The above presented portrait of emperor Basil II can be included into the group of „Somato-Psychogramme”⁹, whose place in Greek and Roman historiography had enjoyed a deep-rooted tradition¹⁰.

This iconistic¹¹ depiction of Basil II originated from physiognomonica and the physiognomical¹² way of creating descriptions, which consisted in characterising the personage described by sketching the physis and emphasising certain traits in the outward appearance.

It is easily discernible that Psellos tries to interpret physical traits of emperor Basil in the above-mentioned fashion. Firstly, the author underlines the fact that the entire body gives away nobility of its imperial possessor, which in fact presumes the existence of a link between the physical and the mental side of the person. Secondly, Psellos points at the meaning of specific physical traits and deciphers them from the point of view of a character-reader. So, as he maintains, the eyebrows of Basil, which are neither turned down, nor make him look angry and sullen¹³, nor create a straight line¹⁴ (which is characteristic of females¹⁵), but are visibly

⁷ Cf. H. Hunger, *op. cit.*, pp. 20–21; C. Mango, *Bizantium. The Empire of New Rome*, London 1980, pp. 143–145.

⁸ H. Hunger, *op. cit.*, pp. 20–21.

⁹ H. Hunger, *op. cit.*, p. 379.

¹⁰ E. Evans, *Physiognomics in The Ancient World*, „Transactions of the American Philosophical Society” 1969, 59, pp. 46–58, later – *Physiognomics*.

¹¹ Portrait of this kind, iconistic descriptions, are characterised by quite detailed depiction of the person in interest – B. Misener, *Iconistic Portraits*, „Classical Philology” 1924, 19, p. 97.

¹² The most important papers concerning the subject – A. Assmus, *Vergessene Physiognomonika*, „Philologus” 1906, 65, pp. 410–421; E. Evans, *Roman Descriptions of Personal Appearance in History and Biography*, „Harvard Studies in Classical Philology” 1935, 46, pp. 47–51; R. Foerster, *Prolegomena*, [in:] R. Foerster, *Scriptores physiognomonici graeci et latini*, vol. 1, Lipsiae 1893, pp. VII–CLXXXIX, later – *Prolegomena*; R. Mešov, *Antike, Physiognomielehre*, „Das Altertum” 1963, 9, pp. 213–221.

¹³ M. Psellos, *Chronographia* 1, 35, p. 22. The interpretation of the feature – *Adamantii Physiognomonica* 1, 16, [in:] R. Foerster, *Scriptores physiognomonici...*, vol. 1, p. 334, later – *Adamantios; Adamantios* 1, 18, p. 338.

¹⁴ M. Psellos, *Chronographia* 1, 35, p. 22. The interpretation – *Anonymi physiognomonica* 18; [in:] R. Foerster, *Scriptores physiognomonici...*, vol. 2, p. 29, later – *Anonymus*.

¹⁵ The female sex is considered by physiognomists to be inferior and representing rather vices than virtues. Cf. *Pseudoaristotelis physiognomonica* 10, [in:] R. Foerster, *Scriptores physiognomonici...*, vol. 1, p. 22, later – *Ps.Aristotle; Anonymus* 4, p. 7; G. E. R. Lloyd, *Magic, Reason and Experience. Studies in the Origin and Development of Greek Science*, Cambridge–London–New York–Melbourne 1979, p. 215.

arched¹⁶ (which, in turn, is characteristic of males) denote the pride (natural, we can guess, for the male and the kingly) the ruler possessed. The eyes of the emperor are neither too deeply set (which, as Psellos claims, might denote knavery or harshness¹⁷) nor protruberant (which, in turn, could give away conceit characteristic of their owner¹⁸) „but they shine in a (really) manly manner¹⁹”. Then, the entire body of the emperor Basil is well-proportionate, while his chest²⁰ (neither protruding nor concave²¹) harmonises with the rest.

The demonstrated characteristic of emperor Basil II is in favour of the Byzantine ruler; Psellos' interpretation points at the fact that the emperor embodied manliness, modesty and energy, the features which should characterise the real king. The logic behind the description evidently shows that physiognomonía was not foreign to Psellos.

The question concerning sources of Psellos' knowledge of the physiological science calls for one's paying attention to three possible channels of infiltration of physiognomonía into Psellos' writings. Firstly, the physiological knowledge might have been acquired by the Byzantine by means of physiological treatises, which have been partly preserved²². These might have been one of possible founts of his familiarity with the interpretation of physical traits. Secondly, the famous Byzantine savant might have encountered physiognomonía during his rhetorical studies. It is worth recollecting that Polemo, who was an author of one of the most influential works in the field, was, at the same time, a celebrity and a cult representative of the Second Sophistics²³. Thirdly, and this issue will be tackled in the

¹⁶ Neatly drawn eyebrows are an attribute of the king of animals and a representation of the male sex, the lion. Cf. *Ps.Aristotle* 41, p. 50.

¹⁷ Also mean tendencies – *Ps.Aristotle* 63, p. 71.

¹⁸ Also stupidity – *Ps.Aristotle* 63, p. 70.

¹⁹ Clear and shining eyes are a sign of manliness. Cf. *Ps.Aristotle* 13, p. 26. They are also amongst traits of the lion, which symbolises male virtues – *Ps.Aristotle* 41, p. 48. The opinion is shared by the treatise of *Anonymus* 21, p. 32.

²⁰ A broad chest was a sign of courage – *Ps.Aristotle* 13, p. 26; 55, p. 60.

²¹ A little curved stature was a sign of the shameless and the ruthless – *Ps.Aristotle* 17, p. 30.

²² R. Foerster, *Prolegomena*, pp. XIX–CLXXXV. It is worth adding that, although there is no direct evidence pointing at Psellos' acquaintance with physiological treatises, we are informed that one of manuals on physiognomonía was written by John Mauropos, who was the teacher and the intellectual guide of Psellos. Cf. R. Foerster, *Prolegomena*, pp. CLXXXII–CXXXV. Consequently, there is a certain probability that it was his teacher who familiarised the future courtier and specialist in the area of omoplatoscopy with the problem of reading character on the basis of one's appearance.

²³ R. Foerster, *Prolegomena*, pp. LXXV–XCIX. Cf. E. Evans, *The Study of Physiognomy in the Second Century A. D.*, „Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association” 1941, 72, pp. 96–108, especially pp. 97–98; J. Couissin, *Suétone physiogoniste dans „Les vies des XII Césars”*, „Revue des Etudes Latines” 1953, 31, pp. 238–239. Polemo

paper, the author of the *Chronographia* could not avoid becoming acquainted with physiognomonica whilst carrying out his philosophical studies on Plato, who appeared to be one of precursors and an expert at physiognomonica²⁴. Consequently, it would be interesting to establish what stage of development of the physiognomical study Psellos could meet in writings of the philosopher.

Physiognomonica was deeply rooted in philosophical works, and names of eminent thinkers who dealt with it, additionally justified its (fairly high) status. This factor entitles us to venture the opinion that physiognomonica had its firm foundations and the ability to perpetuate its existence in Greek and Latin culture.

Physiognomonica, was basically a manner of interpreting physical features of men²⁵ and animals²⁶. It claimed that there exists mutual interaction (so-called *sympatheia*) between physique and mentality in living creatures²⁷. Ultimately, the science could be reduced to the matching of certain physical and mental traits.

The science also worked out a system of explanations concerning the observed relationship between body and soul. These explanatory theories were based on the theory of four humors²⁸ supported by some knowledge concerning the influence of the geographical environment upon character, and, then, supplemented by basic ethnographical observations²⁹.

The inventor of the science was, according to one version, Pythagoras himself³⁰. It was developed by the Hippocratic school to reach its peak in the fourth century B. C.

Plato included in his works information referring to all basic branches of the physiognomical science, namely its physiological, zoological and ethmological theories. He also gave examples of physiognomically influenced description, similar to the manner of portraying employed by Michael Psellos in the depiction of emperor Basil II.

Plato – especially offendealt with this part of physiognomonica, which can be called „scientific physiognomonica”, which tried to explain physiog-

must have been still read in Byzantium in the time of Psellos, since, later than the author of the *Chronographia*, Anna Komnena (1083 – ca. 1153/1154) devotes to Polemo two favourable notes – *Annae Komnenae Porphyrogenitae Alexias ex recensione A. Reifferscheidii*, vol. 1, 10, 2, p. 58; 14, 7, p. 253.

²⁴ E. Evans, *Physiognomics*, pp. 20–22.

²⁵ *Ps.Aristotle* 1, pp. 4, 6.

²⁶ *Ps.Aristotle* 7, p. 16.

²⁷ *Ps.Aristotle* 35, pp. 40, 42.

²⁸ Cf. E. Evans, *Galen the Physician as Physiognomist*, „Harvard Studies in Classical Philology” 1945, 76, pp. 287–298; C. Singer, *Medicine*, [in:] *The Legacy of Greece*, ed. R. W. Livingstone, Oxford 1921, pp. 201–248, especially pp. 208–219.

²⁹ *Ps.Aristotle* 2, p. 8.

³⁰ *The Attic Nights of Aulus Gellius with an English Translation by J. C. Rolfe. In Three Volumes*, vol. 1, Cambridge (Mass.)–London 1961, 1, 91, pp. 44, 46.

nomical phenomena on the basis of rational thinking and scientific knowledge of the Greeks. This „scientific physiognomonia” dealt with the abovementioned theory of four humors and ethnography.

The physiology of physiognomonia was based on four humors³¹. This concept took as its subject (similarly to physiognomonia) the relationship between the physical part of men and their character. The humors – phlegm, blood, yellow bile and black bile – are liquids, which in ideal circumstances, are blended in the right proportion and keep the state of balance in the body (the so-called *eukrasia*)”. If one or more of the liquids gains the upper hand over the rest, specific human types are created, such as the sanguine (if blood prevails), phlegmatic (provided black bile predominates) and so forth. The humors are characterised by four basic qualities – heat, cold, wetness and dryness³². Accordingly, blood is hot and wet, phlegm is cold and wet; black bile is cold and dry, yellow bile, in turn, is hot and dry. Additional elements of the theory are four substances, of which every body consists – earth, air, fire and water. They, blended in the right proportion, have a strong impact upon the physicality and the mentality of men.

Foundations of the interaction between body and soul are explainable, according to Plato, in the following way. The healthy state of these elements depends upon the correct mixture of the four substances³³. Upsetting the balance must result in somatic symptoms³⁴. Ailments of the body are closely connected to sufferings of the soul³⁵. The same scheme of dependence refers to humors; lack of balance evokes foul moods, melancholy, excessive harshness or pusillanimity, but also damages one’s memory and leads to intellectual sluggishness³⁶.

The *Symposium* draws to the fore the issue of four qualities characterising four humors. If they stay in the state of love, Plato maintains, they produce health and wealth to people, animals and plants³⁷.

Another passage in the heritage of Plato introduces us into the domain of ethnographical physiognomonia, which tried to separate characteristic traits of specific tribes, and then to explain the relationship between their characters and the geographical environment. The ethnographical branch is

³¹ J. van Wagenigen, *De quattuor temperamentis*, „Mnemosyne” 1918, 46, pp. 374–382.

³² G. E. R. Lloyd, *Hot and Cold, Dry and Wet in Greek Philosophy*, „Journal of Hellenic Studies” 1964, 84, pp. 92–106.

³³ Plato, *Timaeus* 73b–c, [in:] *Plato with an English Translation by R. G. Bury*, vol. 7, *Timaeus. Critias. Cleithophon. Menexenus. Epistles*, Cambridge (Mass.)–London 1961, pp. 190, 192, later – *Timaeus*.

³⁴ *Timaeus* 82a–b, pp. 218, 220.

³⁵ *Timaeus* 86a, p. 232; 86e, p. 234.

³⁶ *Timaeus* 87a, pp. 234, 236.

³⁷ Plato, *Symposium* 188a, [in:] *Plato with an English Translation by W. R. M. Lamb*, vol. 5, *Lysis. Symposium. Gorgias*, Cambridge (Mass.)–London 1961, pp. 128, 130.

related to the physiological branch of physiognomonía, as the above-mentioned four qualities characterising four humors and the four substances that build up bodies are analogous to basic elements of the geographical environment. In the *Laws* the philosopher remarks that legislation should allow for geographical differences. It is commonly known, he says, that fierce winds and unique qualities of crops which are yielded by the soil have either favourable or negative influence not only upon bodies of the people who inhabit this region, but also on their souls (characters)³⁸. In this statement he also corroborates the existence of the basic rule of physiognomonía, notably, *sympatheia* between soul and body.

The same fashion of thinking appears once again in the *Laws*, when the philosopher analyses the influence of the marine climate. The sea, though its neighbourhood mildens the air, at the same time, results in negative consequences as far as characters of the inhabitants of the coastal areas are concerned. They usually deal in commerce, their typical qualities are exceptional shiftiness and perfidy, seen not only in their relationship towards foreigners, but also towards compatriots³⁹.

Plato, further stepping the same track, represents the view that certain tribes, because of the area they live in, are endowed with a uniform set of traits. Then, when he further discusses the issue, the philosopher enumerates tribes and specific features that match them. The Thracians and the Sythians are characterised by the quality of passion, which is a trait typical for the people who live north of the Greeks. A love of knowledge is generally a trait of the Hellens, but it particularly applies to the Athenians⁴⁰. Goddess Athena chose the place to settle there, since she noticed that the vicinity of Athens, due to the exceptionally good location and balance of elements, would bear wise people and courageous warriors⁴¹. The Egyptians and Phoenicians (who represent the tribes inhabiting regions south of the Greeks), in turn, are greedy⁴².

Apart from this, *sit venia verbo*, scientific physiognomonía, Plato dealt also with the zoological theory, namely, the branch of physiognomonía which tried to explain analogies between appearance and behaviour of humans and animals. This theory helped a physiognomist to classify specific men's types⁴³. This branch is represented in Plato's *Phaedo*. Socrates is the

³⁸ Plato, *Laws with an English Translation by R. G. Bury. In Two Volumes*, vol. 1, Cambridge (Mass.)-London 1961, 5, 747d-e, p. 388, later - *Laws*.

³⁹ *Laws* 4, 705a, p. 256.

⁴⁰ Plato, *The Republic with an English Translation by P. Shorey. In two Volumes*, vol. 1, Books 1-5, Cambridge (Mass.)-London 1953, 4, 11, 435e, p. 380, later - *Republic*.

⁴¹ *Timaeus* 24c, p. 38.

⁴² *Republic* 4, 11, 435e, p. 31.

⁴³ *Ps.Aristotle* 2, pp. 6, 8.

character, who utters a statement which fits into the category of zoological physiognomonica. During the conversation on what happens to souls after death, Socrates states that the immortal parts of men will embody themselves into animals whose very nature matches the fashion of life led by a given human before the death. Consequently, the statement clearly shows Plato's idea that animals personify certain human traits, and that is why he figuratively underlined the existence of analogies of character between the world of humans and the kingdom animal. Thus, souls of the ones who indulged in gluttony, wantonness and drunkenness, Socrates claimed, would find another life in bodies of donkeys and other animals of this kind. Then, souls of those who as humans were unjust and tyrannical will pass into wolves, hawks and kites⁴⁴.

Plato did not draw out a systematically compiled list of physical features and corresponding mental traits, which is so characteristic of the physiognomical manuals. The Platonic physiology in the *Timaeus*, however, gives few general guiding principles. Thus, the build should be harmonious and symmetrical, since it promotes the best blending of substances and humors in the body⁴⁵. The *Republic* adds some more details. Here Plato seems to draw on common knowledge that had already existed long before the time he wrote the *Republic*. He says the upturned noses are considered as a trait associated with physical beauty. Aquiline noses, in turn, denote the kingly. The best, however, are the ones that are neither excessively upturned nor too hooked. The dark complexion, Plato continues, is thought to be a sign of manliness, whilst fair skin is a feature of the "children of gods". The skin of the colour of honey is characteristic of young boys and appreciated by their lovers⁴⁶. The *Timaeus* completes the list with yet another trait; too flashy a face denoted want of feelings (or perception)⁴⁷.

As far as physiognomical descriptions are concerned, Plato does not compose them in abundance. Nevertheless, there is one, which clearly points to the mastery of the philosopher in creating portraits for the purpose of characterisation. This is a depiction of horses which represent respectively, one virtues, the other vices. The right-hand side horse harnessed to the chariot is upright and cleanly made, its neck is lofty and the animal has an aquiline nose; it is white and has black eyes. This creature loves honour, but with modesty and temperance; it also follows true opinions; there is no point in whipping it, since it is obedient to the words of admonition. The other is crooked and lumbering, not neatly built, but as if put together

⁴⁴ Plato, *Phaedo* 81e–82a, [in:] *Plato with an English Translation by H. N. Fowler*, vol. 1, *Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo. Phaedrus*, Cambridge (Mass.)–London 1960, p. 284.

⁴⁵ *Timaeus* 87c–d, pp. 236, 238. The feature is emphasised in the portrait of the emperor Basil.

⁴⁶ *Republic* 5, 19, 47d–e, p. 512.

⁴⁷ *Timaeus* 75e, pp. 198, 200.

carelessly; it has a short, thick neck and is characterised by a flat face; it is grey; it has bluish eyes; its complexion is red or hot-blooded; it is insolent and excessively proud; its ears are shaggy and deaf; it does not tend to give in to the whip or the spur⁴⁸.

The interpretation of the description points to the author's aims which seem to have been much more complex than a mere picture of horses harnessed to the chariot. The underlined beauty and proportionate build of the right-hand side horse show the superiority of the creature over the other twisted and ill-proportioned animal. The upright stature and proportionate build of the first denotes its courage and power of its soul⁴⁹, while the lack of physical beauty of the other suggests its shamelessness⁵⁰. The upright, towering neck of the white horse can be a sign of conceit and arrogance⁵¹, but it can also be interpreted as a positive trait⁵². The aquiline nose denotes royal virtues (as it has already been mentioned) and characterises the great-souled persons. The black eyes of the first horse are commonly thought to be a sign of pusillanimity, but when they have a touch of yellow they can be ascribed to the courageous⁵³. The skin of the other one, which is reddish, gives away its hot, unharnessed temper. Its fleshiness is a sign of insensitivity⁵⁴, while its short neck points to treacherousness⁵⁵. The flat face of the left-hand side horse denotes his excessive lust⁵⁶, while the black skin⁵⁷, its fair eyes⁵⁸ and shaggy ears⁵⁹ unveil cowardice of the possessor. In this way, a seemingly plain description of a pair of horses has turned out to have an additional meaning and – in fact – becomes a description of virtues in disguise.

It is easy to spot a number of analogies and differences between the physiognomical awareness of Psellos and Plato. The Athenian philosopher was visibly interested in explaining the phenomenon of the interaction between body and soul. That is why he resorts to the theory of four

⁴⁸ Plato, *Phaedrus* 253c–e, [in:] *Plato with an English translation by H. N. Fowler*, vol. 1, *Euthyphro. Apology. Crito. Phaedo. Phaedrus*, Cambridge (Mass.)–London 1960, p. 494.

⁴⁹ *Ps.Aristotle* 23, p. 32.

⁵⁰ *Ps.Aristotle* 17, p. 30. Generally, the same rule governs the description of the emperor Basil II. Harmony of his build was also clearly emphasised there. That is also why Plato underlines the difference in the stature of the two horses.

⁵¹ *Adamantios* 2, 40, p. 400.

⁵² The upright stature powerful neck are a feature of the brave – *Ps.Aristotle* 13, p. 26.

⁵³ *Ps.Aristotle* 68, p. 76.

⁵⁴ *Ps.Aristotle* 16, p. 30.

⁵⁵ *Ps.Aristotle* 59, p. 64.

⁵⁶ *Ps.Aristotle* 61, p. 66.

⁵⁷ *Ps.Aristotle* 67, p. 72.

⁵⁸ *Ps.Aristotle* 68, p. 76.

⁵⁹ Hairiness was considered to be as a sign of lewdness – *Ps.Aristotle* 69, p. 78.

humors and seeks for rules governing the influence of the environment upon the character of the mortals. Psellos, in his portrait of the emperor Basil II, did not even try to tackle these scientific issues, since he made use of the already existing physiognomical schemes. He employed them intentionally to emphasize certain aspects of Basil's physique and psyche.

The fact that Michael Psellos was an eminent expert at the Platonic heritage lets us presume that he had acquired a substantial lot of knowledge of the Athenian philosopher, which becomes even more probable when we have a closer look at apparent analogies in descriptions. Psellos used physiognomonía to create the encomiastic portrait of the emperor (which was designed to get across to his contemporary reader), Psellos must have presumed that he would have been understood correctly. This casts some light upon the problem of perpetuation of physiognomical awareness (resulting from a knowledge that was worked out long before the eleventh century) amongst the Byzantines and, at the same time, upon continuity between Greek antiquity and Greek Byzantium.