

**Girolamo Cardano (1501-1576), *Metoposcopia libris tredecim et octingentis faciei humanae eiconibus complexa* [Metoposcopy in Thirteen Books and Eighthundred Images of the Human Face], Paris 1658**

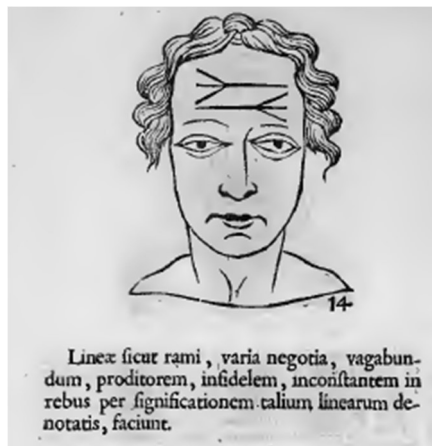
The Latin text is available [here](#)

## Introduction

In his book on the interpretation of dreams, the *Four Books on the Dreams of Synesius*, Cardano writes that “metoposcopy signifies servitude: indeed slaves and servants have to divine the desires of the masters from the appearance of the forehead”.<sup>1</sup> The forehead is for Cardano the most obvious place for a physiognomic inquiry: for a start, it can't easily be disguised (unlike the hands, which can be covered by gloves, or hid in the pockets), and is thus available to anyone who wants to, or indeed, like the servant, needs to, make a rapid judgment of another person's character and mood. Furthermore, the forehead is very susceptible to bearing marks because of its anatomical structure, consisting of a hard layer covered by a softer one. While Cardano wrote on a variety of different kinds of natural divination – including chiromancy, oneiromancy (the interpretation of



Fig. 1 Cardano, *Metoposcopia* (1658): the lines and the planets



Lineæ sicut rami, varia negotia, vagabundum, proditorem, infidelem, inconstantem in rebus per significationem talium linearum denotatis, faciunt.

**Linea in ramos expansa, in consilio mutabilem designat.**



Fig. 2 The sign of mutability in Cardano (left) and Hagecius (right).

dreams), and astrological readings – his treatise on metoposcopy plays a special role because he claims to have been the first to systematize this discipline. Cardano reminds his readers that metoposcopy had been known in Roman times – as testified by Suetonius – but had since been almost entirely forgotten. Cardano composed his *Metoposcopia* in the early 1540s, and revised it later on,

but he never saw it through publication. The treatise appeared posthumously both in Latin and in French in Paris in 1658. This published version comprises thirteen books: the first discusses the physiognomic principles that define the discipline, while the following twelve contain images of specific signs, divided according to the main lines, each of them linked to a particular astrological body [Fig. 1]. Book twelve is devoted to the signs on the female forehead. In *De vita propria*, he credits a Girolamo Visconti (or Cristoforo Visconti, in the 1562 version of *De libris propriis*), for providing him with the basic notions presented in book one. The relative simplicity of the theoretical groundwork in book one (a selection of which is provided in translation below) stands in contrast with the great array of details in the following books. It is very likely that his work was in turn the source of inspiration for the first treatise on

<sup>1</sup> *Somniorum Synesiorum libri quatuor*, ed. J.-Y. Boriaud (Florence 2008), vol. I, p. 296 (book 1, ch. 50).



metoposcopy to appear in print, Thaddeus Hagecius' *Aphorismorum metoposopicorum libellus unus* (1562) (→**Thaddaeus Hagecius**). Both Cardano and Hagecius consider metoposcopy akin to medicine: they are both disciplines that can help us make informed guesses, but can't foretell the future. And even the discussion of specific signs is strikingly similar: for instance, when the lines on the forehead look like branches, this indicates mutability of character [Fig. 2]. After Cardano, the idea of compiling a metoposcopic treatise consisting of a long series of images accompanied by short descriptions became popular, as testified by the works of Giovanni Antonio Magini (1555-1617) and Filippo Finella (1584-c. 1650) [Fig. 3].



Fig. 3 Filippo Finella, *Metoposopia* (Wellcome MS)

## Book one.

### On general rules, necessary for understanding metoposcopy more easily and successfully

#### Author's preface

All disciplines and arts that consider corruptible things, regard mainly those that happen more frequently, as for instance is the case with sailing and agricultural knowledge, and among others especially medicine, which despite being ingenious, does not always foretell future things. Therefore, one cannot have certainty about future events by examining the shape of the head or the lines on the forehead either. But like in the other disciplines, we foretell things which happen most commonly: those that are most manifest with reference to the powers of the soul; those that are most obscure with reference to the events, and those that are in the middle with regard to the results of actions<sup>2</sup>. Habit, the laws, the standard appearance, the genealogy, and education very much increase and decrease this knowledge. And this is why it is necessary to consider these things as well as age. By adding the shape of the lines, and the signs of the hands and the disposition of the stars to the things already mentioned, one will form a sufficiently certain judgment. It will be more useful to trust those signs, which are in themselves entirely evident.

Indeed it looks like this discipline does not allow the exercise of reason as much as other divinatory disciplines do. Since it surpasses human skill to consider many things that happen in life, so it seems that these do not apply at all to some people, like children, who nevertheless are used to experiencing even major events.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In the manuscript version contained in British Library ADD Ms 22687, c. 2r, we read instead "affectus, et mores" instead of "effectus". Quoted and discussed in: Giovanni Aquilecchia, 'La sconosciuta Metoposopia di G.B. Della Porta, di una differenziata del Cardano e di quella del Magini attribuita a Spontoni', *Filologia e critica*, X.2-3 (1985), pp. 307-324, here p. 308.

<sup>3</sup> The meaning of this passage is clearer in BL Add Ms 22687, c. 2r-v: "Videtur autem res haec non omnino, quam caeterae divinatoriae admittere rationem, cum tam multa, quae in vita accidunt paucissimis signis comprehendere non sit possibile tam minimas etiam differentias, quae in lineis frontis accidunt animadvertere plusquam humanae solertiae fuerit, tum vero etiam quibusdam non omnino inesse videntur, velut pueris, quibus tamen, et magna contingere solet [sic]" (Aquilecchia, 'La sconosciuta Metoposopia', p. 308). ["But it looks like this thing does not entirely allow the exercise of reason as much as other divinatory disciplines do. Since it is not possible to understand the many things that happen in life with the help of very few signs, as it surpasses human skill to consider the minute differences which occur in the lines of the forehead, then it seems that these do not apply at all to some people, like children, who nevertheless are used to experiencing even major events"].



Moreover, it is necessary to consider that the muscles of the forehead, spread under the skin, produce a necessary line when contracting. Indeed something hard, which is frequently tensed under something soft, leaves a mark. And yet the lines on the forehead are not always produced because of this, as only in that part do the muscles intersect diagonally, but because of the various ways in which the forehead corrugates.

Hence even if in children, for the most part, the tiniest signs are detected, if they have big signs, these will depend on the events that are typical of this age.

And yet there are few of these, which is why one should trust experience more, as in many other things. Indeed some recognized those who will die by the end of the year by the look of the forehead. And we read in Suetonius in the life of Titus, chapter 2, that an expert in metoposcopy affirmed that Britannicus, the son of the emperor Claudius, would not ascend to power, but said that Titus would, at the time a common citizen in his infancy.<sup>4</sup> When he took power, he placed a golden statue in the palace, and dedicated to him [i.e. the expert in metoposcopy] another, equestrian one, made of ivory, in the Circus. The painter Alexander represented people's faces so well, that experts in metoposcopy would conjecture on the basis of his paintings.

This indeed is a robust argument about the truthfulness of the discipline: there has never been an evil person who entirely lacked evil and constant signs, nor an honest person who has been stained by them.

### General Rules. First Chapter

1. The lines of the forehead are considered either generally or particularly.

By lines we understand not only the *creases* that extend horizontally, but also all the *marks* of all kinds, and various *characters*, such as *crosses*, *small circles*, *small lumps*, *limited areas with spots*, *little stars*, *squares*, *triangles*, *capillary lines*, and further marks of this kind.

2. Take care that *wrinkles* don't deceive you, and that they are not considered as lines.
3. On some foreheads, it is easier to count the lines; in other cases, it is most unproductive, that is to say that in some people the number of lines is not certain. Some indeed have more and others have less: in most cases, however, it is rare to find fewer than three.  
I observed a paucity of lines in young virgins, who certainly, besides this rarity, often conceal very delicate signs on the forehead, such that can very easily escape scrutiny.
4. Generally, we consider the quantities of the lines, the qualities, and the factors that impede a continuous quantity. Some lines are *big*, which signify major and notable events, other are *small*, which signify small and obscure events. *Continuous* lines are felicitous, those that are *broken* and *cut through* mark instances of adversity and deceit.
5. On account of their continuous quantity, *continuous lines* signify, besides a warm complexion, prosperity and strength in business, just as *shorter* lines prognosticate coldness both in the body and in business.

*Broad* lines reveal warmth mixed with humidity, and happy people, not subject to the fury of fate, and mentally not inept.

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<sup>4</sup> Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, tr. by J.C. Rolfe, (Cambridge, MA 1914), vol. 2, p. 307: "At that time, so they say, a physiognomist was brought in by Narcissus, the freedman of Claudius, to examine Britannicus and declared most positively that he would never become emperor; but that Titus, who was standing near by at the time, would surely rule."



*Thin* lines signify coldness mixed with humidity, and also a charming, lascivious, indolent, weak, and effeminate personality.

6. On account of their discrete, disconnected quantity, some lines are *numerous*, a feature attributed to those who are unhappily full of business and oppressed by a great variety of worries; *few* lines indicate unhappiness in minor affairs.
7. On account of their quality, the lines are distinguished between *clear* or *indistinct*, *simple* or *straight* and *moderately curved* or *branching out*.
8. *Clear* lines on the forehead foretell a clearer effect of the planet and of nature, *indistinct* and *more feeble* ones an indistinct and weaker effect.
9. The more the lines on the forehead are *subtle*, *straight*, *bright*, *not broken*, *not cut through*, *not thick*, nor *deep*, the more propitious is the influence of the planet they foretell.
10. *Straight* and *simple* lines denote a kind of simple and uniform warmth and therefore steadiness in action and moral rectitude.
11. *Twisted* lines denote excess of heat and of spirit. [...]

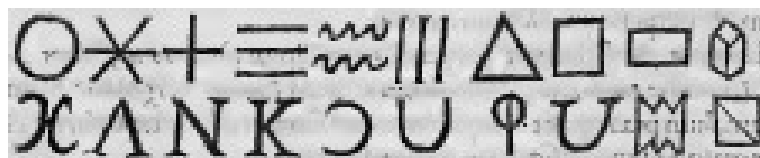
### Notable observations. Third and last chapter

[...] Sometimes certain notable figures and signs occur on the forehead, like *crosses*, *circles*, *stars*, *small lumps*, *moles* and *birthmarks*, *spots*, and various *marks* and similar things, which one must diligently note. These are indeed almost divine letters possessing great meaning, which describe human life.

Rare *signs*, generally speaking, and which appear very seldom, signify rare events, just as those that are more visible and that occur more frequently denote more frequent effects. Of these signs, some are bad because of the property, some because of the position. Those that are bad by their own nature, always announce bad things and these are the *characters of Saturn*, *the letter X*, *small gratings*, and *a sign that is completely irregular and badly formed*, and confused, such as *truncated circles*, *signs that are broken*, *not continuous* and *obstructed*. All of these never announce something good but always something bad. These are the following:



On the other hand, the good characters are those that possess a certain proportion, just as *little circles*, *stars*, *crosses*, *lines*, *parallels*, *triangles*, *squares*, *cubes*, and others of this kind.



Signs that are by their own nature bad, are worse if located on the left hand side rather than on the right. Good signs located on the left lose some of their goodness because of the *position* and have a different meaning depending on whether they are seen to appear more on one side than on the other. Indeed a *little circle*, or any other sign, means something else whether it is on the line of *Saturn*, or on the line of *Jove*, and so on.