

Article

Non-Verbal Communication in Ancient Rome: Eyebrow Gestures

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Abstract: This article analyses the communicative power of eyebrows in ancient Rome within the framework of broader research into gestures from the same period. Our research uses the corpus of Latin literature to describe evidence of gestures in said texts. It then identifies the expressions used by the authors to refer to them and describes how they were performed. Moreover, by analysing the context, it explains the meanings the authors attribute to them. Although the texts do not describe these gestures with the precision required by non-verbal communication research today, our analysis of the selected extracts has enabled us to identify four free eyebrow gestures—contracting, raising, relaxing, and lowering—and associate a meaning to them. In this regard, we have uncovered that Roman writers introduce eyebrow gestures in their work to communicate emotions such as arrogance and humility, and anger or seriousness, and even to identify certain characters. In turn, these gestures are also used to express disapproval and assent in place of speech.

Keywords: non-verbal communication; gestures; Latin; eyebrows; forehead; *supercilium*; *frons*



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1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the face harbours a wealth of communicative potential, and this is precisely what Latin authors perceived and reflected in their work. Latin literature therefore represents an important source for examining the meanings Romans attributed to facial gestures. This article concludes our study into different facial gestures in ancient Rome¹ by analysing eyebrow gestures, which Pliny the Elder (*Naturalis historia* 11, 138) defined as part of the soul: *in his [superciliis] pars animi*, “and in them [the eyebrows] a part of the soul is situated”.

After many years of neglect following the publication of Sittl’s canonical work in 1890, research into non-verbal communication in ancient Greece and Rome has undoubtedly seen an upward trend in recent years, with many articles being written across diverse fields such as anthropology, art, languages, etc.² Nevertheless, none of these studies aim to produce a repertory of gestures appearing in Latin literature. Certainly, although Sittl’s work is hugely important thanks to the wide-ranging information included, it inevitably contains errors and misunderstandings, and suffers from a lack of systematisation in line with current theoretical perspectives on non-verbal aspects of communication.

As already mentioned, the research we have been conducting aims to gather a repertory of gestures in Latin literature. This repertory specifies, on the one hand, the way in which each gesture is performed and, on the other hand, the basic meanings attributed to them by Romans.³ In this sense, we should point out that our research obviously follows the opposite path to gestural research today, which starts from the gestures themselves and then attempts to explain their meaning. Our approach requires us to first uncover evidence of gestures and then attempt to define and characterise them. This is not without its difficulties, since references to how the gesture is performed are often vague and imprecise, and meaning must be inferred from a context with a nuanced interpretation.

Before launching into the main subject of the article, we first need to define the term “gesture” as the basis for our analysis. We take gesture to mean any bodily or facial behaviour that takes on a communicative value in relation to a direct addressee or to a possible observer and that may be controlled by a sender.⁴ In this vein, gesture would include facial movements,⁵ i.e., those made with the mouth, chin, eyes, forehead, and eyebrows. As already stated, this article will specifically focus on eyebrows. It should also be noted that whilst we focus on eyebrow movement, this has repercussions on the forehead, which may wrinkle horizontally or vertically as a result. In this sense, Roman writers may refer to a certain gesture made with the eyebrows by mentioning, or omitting, its effect on the forehead, or even referring only to the wrinkles seen on the latter.

2. Materials and Methods

Our aim is to locate eyebrow gestures in Latin literature (3rd c. BC–5th c. AC), identify as best we can the often vague expressions the authors use to refer to them, and, by analysing the context, associate them with a meaning. In this sense, research into gestures in ancient Rome relies on written corpora and cannot aim to achieve the same highly detailed description used in current gesture research supported by direct observation of spontaneous or induced behaviour. Indeed, modern research can even specify the direction of wrinkles on the forehead or the speed of eyebrow movement, for example, whereas these aspects cannot be retrieved from our corpus alone. Indeed, many texts allude to the communicative power of eyebrows, particularly with regard to affairs of the heart.⁶ Although they do not include any description of gestures being performed, we are able to infer their presence in certain instances. In other works, gestures are mentioned by modifying the nouns *supercilium* or *frons* with an adjective referring to the meaning of the gesture, albeit without actually identifying it clearly. These include *triste*, *horridum*, *trux*, *grauae*, *seuerum*, *durum*, *priscum*, *ensorium*, *patricium*, *ingens*, and *grande* for *supercilium*, and *tristis*, *seuera*, *proterua*, *dura*, *pristina*, *serena*, *laeta*, *tranquilla*, *humana*, and *urbana* for *frons*.⁷ Indeed, our research does not consider these kinds of expressions. It only includes gestures whose performance is described, regardless of how vague and imprecise this may be.

When establishing the different eyebrow gestures Latin authors mention in their work, we first need to look at how Roman treatise writers considered them, especially Quintilian. The rhetorician not only supports what we have highlighted on the communicative power of eyebrows in *Institutio oratoria* 11, 3, 78–79 (*multum et superciliis agitur*) but also outlines different possible meanings for eyebrow gestures:

his [superciliis] contrahitur attollitur remittitur . . . ira enim contractis, tristitia deductis, hilaritas remissis ostenditur. Adnuendi quoque et renuendi ratione demittuntur aut adleuantur.⁸

Quintilian offers a basic initial description of eyebrow gestures made by Romans, looking at both performance and meaning. Thus, he distinguishes four free gestures⁹ made with the eyebrows: contracting (*contrahitur*), raising (*attollitur*), relaxing (*remittitur*), and lowering (*deductis*). We have found these same four gestures in Latin texts and, therefore, we will focus our analysis on them.

3. Results

3.1. Raised Eyebrows

Eyebrows are raised by contracting the epicranium muscle, which causes horizontal wrinkles on the forehead. Latin texts describe this gesture through verbs of vertical motion (bottom to top) that mean “raise” or “lift,” such as *adleuare*, *erigere*, *subducere*, *tollere*, and its compound form *adtollere*. All these verbs take the noun *supercilium* as a direct object, generally in the singular form. The adjective *arduus* (“raised” or “high”), qualifying the noun *supercilium*, can also be used to describe this gesture.

Latin authors use the gesture as an emblem for disapproval and as an affect display of anger and an arrogant attitude.

3.1.1. Disapproval

In the aforementioned passage (*Institutio oratoria* 11, 3, 78–79), Quintilian argues that whilst lowering one's eyebrows is a sign of approval, raising them expresses disapproval (*renuendi ratione . . . adleuantur*). Despite this, there is barely any instance of this gesture in the corpus. We have only found one example alluding to the gesture without actually describing it. In Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 6, 7, Jupiter agrees to a request from Venus by not performing the gesture for disapproval:

nec rennuit Iouis caeruleum supercilium¹⁰

The meaning of disapproval is probably tied to the usual Greek and Roman sign for disagreement: slightly raising one's head and arching the eyebrows.

3.1.2. Anger

Somewhat tied to disapproval, this gesture is also an affect display of anger that, at lower intensity levels, turns into irritation or displeasure.

Indeed, old treatises on physiognomy¹¹ define raising one's eyebrows as an inherent characteristic of an irascible temperament. Take, for example, *De physiognomonia* 22 (Förster 1893, vol. 2, p. 35):

qui autem cum stabilitate et pallore oculorum et supercilia erigunt et spiritum uiolentius contrahunt atque concipiunt, inconsulti, immites, maledici, iracundi sunt.¹²

It is therefore not surprising that raised eyebrows define a character like Barbarus in Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 9, 21, where, suspecting that his wife has been unfaithful, he walks the street angrily (*iratus*) with puffed cheeks (*uultu turgido*¹³) and arched eyebrows (*subductisque superciliis*¹⁴):

Barbarus uultu turgido subductisque superciliis incedit iratus¹⁵

Here, the adjective *iratus* clears up any doubt surrounding the gesture's meaning: the passage describes an angry man.

The gesture expresses a less intense affect display of anger in other texts, linked more to irritation or displeasure.¹⁶

Thus, in Catullus 67, 41–46, the poet develops the motif of *paraclausithyron*, even bringing an inanimate object—the *ianua* ("door")—to life. The door is given a voice to defend itself against the accusations of the *exclusus amator*, or rejected lover, locked outside his beloved's door. As witness to the lovers' behaviour, the door fears its smears could lead the anonymous character to react by raising their eyebrows, i.e., show irritation:

praeterea addebat quendam, quem dicere nolo
nomine, ne tollat rubra supercilia.¹⁷

The displeasure conveyed through this gesture¹⁸ can be found in Seneca's *De beneficiis* 1, 1, 5, in reference to good deeds. The philosopher argues it is a doer's intent that matters, rather than their actions or the outcome. Seneca criticises both those reluctant to fulfil a request or plea by depicting two gestures—frowning the forehead (*frontem adducere*) and turning the face away (*uultum auertere* (Fornés Pallicer and Puig Rodríguez-Escalona 2010))—and those who agree to a request but arch their eyebrows in displeasure (*subducere supercilia*):

quis non, cum aliquid a se peti suspicatus est, frontem adduxit, uultum auertit, occupationes simulauit, longis sermonibus et de industria non inuenientibus exitum occasionem petendi abstulit et uariis artibus necessitates properantes elusit, in angusto uero conprehensus aut distulit, id est timide negauit, aut promisit, sed difficulter, sed subductis superciliis, sed malignis et uix exeuntibus uerbis?¹⁹

3.1.3. Arrogance

The kinesic act of raising one's eyebrows is an affect display of arrogance. As Pliny states in *Naturalis historia* 11, 138, the eyebrows in particular express pride and arrogance that come from the heart, travel up to the eyebrows, and remain there:²⁰

[supercilia] haec maxime indicant fastum; superbia aliubi conceptaculum sed hic sedem habet; in corde nascitur, huc subit, hic pendet. nihil altius simul abruptiusque inuenit in corpore, ubi solitaria esset.²¹

Thus, according to ancient Romans, eyebrows were the home of arrogance, to such an extent that the noun *supercilium* took on the metonymic sense of "arrogance."²² In the same vein, the post-classical adjective *superciliosus* took on the meanings of two eyebrow gestures: on the one hand, "arrogant," and on the other, "stern," which, as we will see below, comes from the gesture for frowning.²³

The meaning of arrogance is commonly used in the specific context of describing philosophers. Indeed, philosophers portrayed in Greek and Roman texts are arrogant, proud, and deliberately distant characters when compared to their contemporaries. They outwardly demonstrate their intellectual superiority over their fellow citizens and determinedly act with laughable seriousness. This description often becomes a caricature, especially in Greek comedies and satires, where philosophers are depicted with raised eyebrows²⁴ and a wrinkled forehead. Indeed, a furrowed forehead was a defining characteristic for all stoics and philosophers in general from at least the 3rd century BC and indicated philosophers' work ethic and concentration—a highly positive value, although popular custom linked it to arrogance (López Cruces 2008; Grau Guijarro 2017).

In line with Greek stereotypes, raised eyebrows in ancient Rome characterised snobby arrogant philosophers who boast of their petty accomplishments. Seneca seems to have been the first to utilise the term in this sense and often makes use of it. Thus, he invents an absurd syllogism in *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* 48, 7 and nonsensically develops on it to end up wondering, "We arch our eyebrows for this? Is this what we grow our beards for?":

O pueriles ineptias! in hoc supercilia subduximus? in hoc barbam demisimus? hoc est quod tristes docemus et pallidi?²⁵

Raised eyebrows; a stern, pale face; and a beard were all typical of simple-living Cynic philosophers and characterised pedantic philosophers who spent their time on senseless trivialities.²⁶

The same caricature comes up in Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 4, 1, 1, to describe a highly conceited grammarian (*cum grammatico iactantiore*) who speaks with arched eyebrows, a tone of gravitas, and a stern look, as if he were the interpreter and arbiter for the Sibyl's oracles:

In uestibulo aedium Palatarum omnium fere ordinum multitudo opperientes salutationem Caesaris constiterant; atque ibi in circulo doctorum hominum Fauorino philosopho praesente ostentabat quispiam grammaticae rei ditior scholica quaedam nugalia de generibus et casibus uocabulorum disserens cum arduis superciliis uocisque et uultus grauitate composita tamquam interpret et arbiter Sibyllae oraculorum.²⁷

In addition to describing pretentious philosophers and grammarians, arched eyebrows are used as a sign of arrogance in other contexts.²⁸ In this sense, Ammianus Marcellinus refers to Emperor Constantius II in 16, 10, 12 as *elatus in arduum supercilium*,²⁹ "raising his eyebrows up high," in allusion to his distant and arrogant attitude towards his subjects. Indeed, throughout his reign he never once invited anybody into his vehicle or allowed a co-consul during his consulship, unlike deified princes:

Quod autem per omne tempus imperii, nec in consessum uehicoli quemquam suscepit, nec in trabea socium priuatum adsciuit, ut fecere principes consecrati, et similia multa elatus in arduum supercilium, tamquam leges aequissimas obseruauit, praetereo, memor ea me rettulisse cum incidissent.³⁰

Furthermore, Ammianus Marcellinus in 20, 1, 2 refers to Lupicinus's arrogance, stating he would raise his eyebrows like horns (*supercilia erigentem ut cornua*),³¹ also adding that he spoke pompously as if he were wearing the cothurnus of a tragic actor:

Ire igitur ad haec ratione uel ui componenda Lupicinum placuit ea tempestate magistrum armorum bellicosum sane et castrensis rei peritum, sed supercilia erigentem ut cornua et de tragico, quod aiunt, cothurno strepentem, super quo diu ambigebatur, auarus esset potius an crudelis.³²

Bishop Ambrose of Milan, a contemporary of Ammianus Marcellinus, describes the affect displays of arrogance in *De Noe* 15, 54 (CSEL 32/1, p. 451), including raised eyebrows (*erigentes supercilia*), restless eye movement (*oculorum micantes nutibus*), and walking with a puffed chest (*elato pectore*) and head held high (*alta se ceruice iactantes*):

Quales describit Esaias Iudeae filias oculorum micantes nutibus et al. ta se ceruice iactantes. Sunt enim huiusmodi erigentes supercilia, inflato corde, elato pectore, ceruice resupina, qui solum quidem pedum perstringant uestigiis, toto autem se librent corpore et inani suspendant examine, in priora gressu procedant in posteriora uerticem reclinantes, caelum spectent, terram autem fastidiant tamquam ceruicis dolore suffixi, ut eam inclinare non possint.³³

3.2. Lowered Eyebrows

The gesture for lowered eyebrows is generally expressed in Latin with verbs meaning "lower" or "dip," such as *demittere* or *deducere*, both formed with the prefix *de-* to indicate a vertical downwards movement.

In a previously remarked passage (*Institutio oratoria* 11, 3, 78–79), Quintilian states that lowered eyebrows may indicate *tristitia*—"sadness" or "seriousness"—or approval, and uses the two aforementioned verbs to respectively refer to the movement: *deducere* and *demittere*.

3.2.1. Approval

Quintilian uses the expression *supercilia demitti* to refer to the eyebrow movement for approval. One may surmise the gesture comprises lowering one's eyebrows and keeping the forehead wrinkle-free, in complete contrast to the raised eyebrow gesture with the opposite meaning of disapproval. This is the only text where we have found this sense attributed to lowered eyebrows. Nevertheless, it must surely be linked to the head nod gesture which, in line with current usage, was used in Antiquity to show agreement, understanding, or approval.³⁴

3.2.2. Humility

This same gesture can also be an affect display of humility as opposed to arrogance, which, as we have seen, is expressed through raising one's eyebrows. The eyebrow gesture must clearly be accompanied by an eye movement lowering the gaze alongside the brow and, in all probability, the head (itself an expression of humility, as highlighted by Quintilian).³⁵ Hence, the texts sometimes refer to the eyebrow gesture and, at other times, the eye or head movement, or both at the same time.³⁶

Ammianus Marcellinus alludes to the gesture in 27, 3, 15 with the words *humum spectantia*, "eyebrows pointing at the ground." Here, Ammianus criticises the sumptuous lifestyle enjoyed by Rome's bishops when they should really live like certain provincial bishops, who, in their inexpensive robes and eyebrows pointed at the ground, are always humble before God and the faithful:

Qui esse poterant beati re uera, si magnitudine urbis despecta, quam uitiiis opponunt, ad imitationem antistitum quorundam prouincialium uiuerent, quos tenuitas edendi potandique parcissime, uilitas etiam indumentorum, et supercilia humum spectantia, perpetuo numini, uerisque eius cultoribus, ut puros commendant, et uerecundos.³⁷

The gesture can be interpreted in a similar vein in Jerome, *Epistulae* 22, 27, 7 (CSEL 54, p. 184), where women are criticised for pretending to fast and faint, lowering their eyebrows to feign humility:³⁸

Sunt quippe nonnullae exterminantes facies suas, ut pareant hominibus ieiunare; quae, statim ut aliquem uiderint, ingemiscunt, demittunt supercilium et operata facie uix unum oculum, liberant ad uidendum.³⁹

3.2.3. Seriousness, Sadness

As we saw in the earlier passage from Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria* 11, 3, 78–79), the first meaning the rhetorician assigns to lowered eyebrows (*supercilia deducere*) is *tristitia*, a Latin noun signifying both sadness and seriousness. Quintilian does not describe the gesture but merely mentions lowered eyebrows. Nevertheless, we believe this may be similar to the oblique eyebrow gesture that current research links to expressing sorrow and discouragement.⁴⁰ This sloping comes from contracting certain muscles whose joint action tends to lower and contract eyebrows: The superciliary muscles draw both eyebrows together and the ends crease into a typical fold, causing particular wrinkles to appear on the forehead similar to a frown.

This is likely to be the gesture that appears in physiognomy treatises such as *De physiognomonica* 97 (Förster 1893, vol. 2, pp. 122–123) to characterise men with a sad or serious nature: wrinkled forehead, eyebrows turned inwards, and taut eyelids:

Tristis homo ita intelligitur: uultus tenuis, frons rugosa, supercilia introrsus conuersa, cilia intenta.⁴¹

The gesture is also found in Juvenal, where he alludes to it with the syntactic unit *fronte obducta*. The verb *obduco* means “to cover” and “to cast a shadow over,” although dictionaries also include the meaning “to contract,” “to frown,” and “to wrinkle” with the object *uultum* or *frontem*.⁴² This latter meaning is assigned to *obduco* in clear reference to the wrinkled forehead seen on despondent individuals, as we mentioned earlier.

The passage in Juvenal (9, 1–2) sees the poet address Naevolus, a prostitute who looks serious and despondent. Abandoned by his lover, Naevolus states he feels dejected. Juvenal asks him to explain why he seems so serious and miserable, and describes him with the adjective *tristis* and the syntactic unit *fronte obducta*:

Scire uelim quare totiens mihi, Naeuole, tristis
occurras fronte obducta⁴³

Although the expression *fronte obducta*, “gloomy face,” does not itself describe a gesture, a few verses further along (Juvenal 9, 8–9) refer to the wrinkles on Naevolus’s forehead: *unde repente/tot rugae?*⁴⁴ This sentence does indeed indicate a gesture being performed, likely lowered eyebrows, leading to wrinkles appearing on the forehead.⁴⁵

3.3. Frowning

Lowered eyebrows in a frown involve raising the far ends of one’s eyebrows whilst lowering and drawing the others towards the bridge of the nose, causing vertical furrows on the forehead. By simultaneously contracting the orbicularis oculi in the eyelids and the depressor and corrugator supercilii, the eyebrows drop and come together to form the common image of a scowl or frown.⁴⁶

It is expressed in Latin through verbs meaning “to bring together,” “to draw together,” and “to contract,” such as *contrahere*, *adtrahere*, or *adducere*, or verbs meaning “to twist” or “to turn,” such as *torquere* and its compound *contorquere*, where the affix *con-* stresses the action of coming together and takes on the meaning “to turn together” or “to bring together in a turn.” We find the noun *supercilium* used as a direct object in all instances, often in the plural. In turn, the syntactic units *contractio superciliorum* and *contractio frontis* are used, the latter referring to a forehead contraction due to eyebrow movement. It is also formulated with the verb *capero* or *caperro*, meaning “to wrinkle” or “to knit.” This verb is

seen in ancient or stylistically archaic authors, especially in its participle form (*caperratus*) used with *frons* and, to a lesser extent, *supercilium*.⁴⁷

Ancient physiognomy treatises considered frowns and wrinkled foreheads to be a sign of a tough, stern nature.⁴⁸ In this vein, the gesture is used to describe characters defined by seriousness, particularly rulers, whose frown is a sign of their serious nature, and confers authority and respectability. *Historia Augusta* (*Verus* 10, 6) contains a portrayal of Emperor Verus, referring to his furrowed eyebrows as inspiring respect and reverence. The gesture is described through the intensifying comparative adjective *adductior* (from the perfect participle of the verb *adduco*) qualifying the noun *frons*, and used alongside the complementing syntactic unit *in supercilia*, which could be translated as “with a forehead furrowed towards the eyebrows.” Thus, according to the text, the gesture grants him a venerable appearance (*uenerabilis*).

Fuit decorus corpore, uultu geniatus, barba prope barbarice demissa, procerus et fronte in supercilia adductiore uenerabilis.⁴⁹

A ruler’s seriousness and respectability also seem to be expressed by a frown in Cicero’s ironic description of Piso in his speech defending Publius Sestius (*Pro P. Sestio* 19). Cicero is surprised by Lucius Calpurnius Piso’s physical resemblance to the great men of Antiquity, emphasising his frown. Piso clearly and consciously adopts the gesture to resemble past illustrious figures, whose physiognomy instilled respect:

Nam quid ego de supercilio dicam, quod tum hominibus non supercilium, sed pignus rei publicae uidebatur? Tanta erat grauitas in oculo, tanta contractio frontis, ut illo supercilio annus ille niti tamquam <uade> uideretur.⁵⁰

The sternness or seriousness emanating from a frown could, in other texts, veer towards a short temper. In this sense, Plautus (*Rudens* 316–319) uses two syntactic units in his portrait of the pimp Labrax—*tortis superciliis* and *contracta fronte*—describing the gesture thus to highlight his bad temper and vile nature (Gallego Cebollada 2018, pp. 16–17).

TR. Ecquem
recaluom ac Silanum senem, statutum, uentriosum,
tortis superciliis, contracta fronte, fraudulentum,
deorum odium atque hominum, malum, mali uiti probrique plenum.⁵¹

Apuleius also uses frowning to reflect a serious, unpleasant nature expressed through the participle *caperratum* qualifying the noun *supercilium*, “furrowed eyebrows.” Thus, in *Metamorphoses* 9, 16, he describes a cowardly lover who is horrified by a frown, i.e., the sternness or perhaps even the tetchiness of the cheated husband, described as “nasty and vile” (*insuauis et odiosi*):

De isto quidem, mi erilis, tecum ipsa uideris, quem sine meo consilio pigrum et formidulosum familiarem istum sortita es, qui insuauis et odiosi mariti tui caperratum supercilium ignauiter perhorrescit.⁵²

Whilst frowning as a physical feature signals a permanent nature, as a gesture it may be an affect display of different states of mind: sternness, anger, and arrogance.

3.3.1. Sternness

As previously stated, furrowed eyebrows and a wrinkled forehead for physiognomic treatise authors represented a stern temperament. It is therefore not surprising that the gesture expresses sternness.

Thus, when using the expression *contractione frontis*, “with a frown,” in *Epistulae* 108, 20, Jerome is reflecting on Paula’s sternness and serious face (*tristitia uultus*) in setting her wayward daughter straight:

Si uidisset aliquam comptiorem, contractione frontis et uultus tristitia arguebat errantem.⁵³

In turn, and as we will see below, in certain instances the opposing gesture of relaxing one's eyebrows after contracting the forehead, leaving it soft and wrinkle-free, is synonymous with dropping a stern approach.

3.3.2. Anger

Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria* 11, 3, 78–79) uses the verb *contrahere* ([*superciliis*] *contrahitur*) to refer to frowning and links it to anger.⁵⁴ This gesture has several nuances in the texts, ranging from anger to irritation or displeasure, and, as Ekman and Friesen⁵⁵ state, it involves changes in three areas of the face: The eyebrows are lowered and come together, the eyelids become taut, and the lips may either tighten or part depending on the individual expressing the emotion.

Apuleius specifically mentions the gesture as a sign of anger in *Metamorphoses* 6, 13, using the verb *contorqueo* in the syntactic unit *contortis superciliis*. The fragment narrates Venus's irritation when Psyche succeeds in the second labour the goddess sets her. In extreme annoyance, Venus offers a bitter smile in an attempt to mask her anger. Nevertheless, her scowl or frown betrays her:⁵⁶

nec tamen apud dominam saltem secundi laboris periculum secundum testimonium meruit, sed contortis superciliis subridens amarum sic inquit.⁵⁷

In Jerome's *Epistulae* 54, 2, 1–2 (CSEL 54, p. 467), frowning combines a raised arm—and even fist—and puffed cheeks (*tumido ore*).⁵⁸ When urging Furia to remain a widow, Jerome presumes patricians would make these gestures, reacting angrily to his words. He includes a quote from Horace, where the participle *iratus* and the verb *desaeuio* ("to give in to anger") are combined to heighten the portrayal of the angry naysayers:

adducentur supercilia, extendetur brachium iratusque Chremes⁵⁹ tumido desaeuiet ore. Consurgunt proceres et aduersum epistulam meam turba patricia detonabit me magum, me seductorem clamitans et in terras ultimas asportandum.⁶⁰

In *Amphitruo* 52–53, Plautus uses frowning to express the feeling of anger, although here the eyebrow gesture is reflected through moving the forehead (*contrahere frontem*). The passage comes from Mercury's speech in the prologue. The God's words allude to the audience's gesture of annoyance when he announces a tragedy will be performed:

quid? contraxistis frontem, quia tragoediam dixi futuram hanc?⁶¹

Frowning is also an affect display for the weaker feeling of displeasure,⁶² although this is often not easy to distinguish from anger, as is seen in Cicero's *Pro A. Cluentio* 72. Here, in an attempt to trick Bulbus by offering him a false bribe in exchange for Opianicus's acquittal, Staienus expresses his annoyance, or anger even, by frowning (*contrahit frontem*) when Bulbus asks him about his money:

Hic ille planus improbissimus, quaestu iudiciario pastus, qui illi pecuniae quam condiderat spe iam atque animo incubaret, contrahit frontem –recordamini faciem atque illos eius fictos simulatosque uultus– et ... pulchre adseuerat sese ab Oppianico destitutum, atque hoc addit testimonii, sua illum sententia, cum palam omnes laturos essent, condemnatum iri.⁶³

The meaning of the gesture in the passage from Jerome's commentaries on the Book of Hosea (*Commentarii in Osee* 3, 11, 2, 52–57 CC SL 76, p. 121) falls between displeasure and disapproval. Jerome rebuts critics of his translation of the Gospels, whom he portrays as performing three gestures of displeasure, or rather refraining from doing them, when they realise they are wrong: frowning whilst wrinkling their foreheads (*rugare frontem*, *adducere supercilium*), crinkling their noses, and cracking their fingers. Moreover, Jerome often uses these gestures to satirise philosophers:

Ergo qui detrahunt nostrae interpretationi, dent scripturam, de qua euangelista hoc testimonium sumpserit et interpretatus sit in Domino Salvatore, quando de

Aegypto reductus est in terram Israel. Et cum inuenire non quiuerint, desinant rugare frontem, adducere supercilium, crispare nares, digitis concrepare.⁶⁴

3.3.3. Arrogance

As we have already stated, according to Pliny, eyebrows express and harbour arrogance and pride. In this sense, and similar to raising one's eyebrows, frowning is used in Latin literature as an affect display of arrogance. In turn, it is also used to describe and ridicule philosophers, albeit to a lesser extent.⁶⁵ Thus, although frowning is sometimes used to mock philosophers' arrogance, its origin likely lies in a positive depiction of their serious disposition and capacity for concentration, in a similar vein to what we have pointed out regarding raised eyebrows.

Seneca includes an example of this gesture to satirically depict philosophers' arrogance in *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* 113, 26. This text mocks Greek stoics who had formulated a series of paradoxes in the doctrine and spent their time on futile debates (Burnier 1907, p. 531):

Haec disputamus attractis superciliis, fronte rugosa?⁶⁶

Christian authors too, and particularly Jerome,⁶⁷ often used the gesture to mock their enemies by satirically caricaturing them as stereotypical philosophers with a constant frown, e.g., *Epistulae* 53, 7, 1 (CSEL 54, p. 453):

Alii adducto supercilio grandia uerba trutinantes inter mulierculas de sacris litteris philosophantur.⁶⁸

3.4. Relaxed Eyebrows and Smooth Forehead

Relaxing one's eyebrows involves loosening our facial expression. In Latin, this can be conveyed with the verb *remittere* and the noun *remissio*, where the *re-* prefix specifically expresses the notion of reverting a movement. Thus, in *De officiis* 1, 146, Cicero includes eyebrow contraction (*contractione*) and relaxation (*remissione*) as two expressive movements:

Ex oculorum obtutu, superciliorum aut remissione aut contractione, ex maestitia, ex hilaritate, ex risu, ex locutione, ex reticentia, ex contentione uocis, ex submissione, ex ceteris similibus facile iudicabimus, quid eorum apte fiat, quid ab officio naturaque discrepet.⁶⁹

Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria* 11, 3, 78–79) also mentions this reverting gesture (*remittitur*), where relaxed eyebrows (*remissis*) signify joy (*hilaritas*).

The verb *ponere* and its compound form *deponere*, used with *supercilium* as a direct object, express the same meaning of reverting one's eyebrows to their original position (i.e., in relaxation) after having lowered, contracted, or raised them. The imperative mood of this verb can be found in many texts. Thus, it is used to urge an individual to cease making an eyebrow gesture.

In the proverbial invitation for readers to approach the work with goodwill (*captatio beneuolentiae*),⁷⁰ in Martial 1, 4, 1–6, the Bilbilis native entreats Emperor Domitian to relax his eyebrows (*pone supercilium*) before reading the text. In other words, to revert his stern gesture and indulge the poet's humour just as he would condone the banter when celebrating victory. He further urges the emperor read his verses with the same "forehead" as when Thymeles and Latinus⁷¹ perform—two mimes he surely enjoyed in a calm state of mind. The allusion here refers to a relaxed, wrinkle-free forehead, i.e., not making any eyebrow gesture at all.

Contigeris nostros, Caesar, si forte libellos,
 terrarum dominum pone supercilium.
 Consueuere iocos uestri quoque ferre triumphum,
 materiam dictis nec pudet esse ducem
 qua Thymelen spectas derisoremque Latinum,
 illa fronte precor carmina nostra legas.⁷²

Authors often used the combination *pone supercilium* to indicate readers should not interpret their work as a serious literary genre. For instance, this can be seen in *Priapea* 1, 1–2, where the same expression as used in Martial appears, albeit this time addressing readers:

Carminis incompti lusus lecture procaces,
conueniens Latio pone supercilium.⁷³

Ausonius uses the same words⁷⁴ in *De Bissula* 3, 1–2. Addressing his readers, he states he renounces serious poetry for light-hearted romantic poetry; borrowing both the verses from *Priapea* and the reference to Thymele in Martial's poem:

Carminis incompti tenuem lecture libellum,
pone supercilium,
seria contractis expende poemata rugis:
nos Thymelen sequimur.⁷⁵

The poet reminds the reader that frowning (*supercilium*) and a wrinkled forehead (*contractis rugis*) suit "serious" poetry unlike his own, which he defines as "in the style of Thymele," a dancer and comic actress already mentioned by Martial.

In turn, the verb *explico* ("to lengthen/stretch") with the object *frontem* can also allude to relaxed eyebrows.⁷⁶ When inviting Maecenas to his villa and praising the pleasures of a simple, modest table for rich men too in *Carmina* 3, 29, 12–15, Horace states these very pleasures have often smoothed out the wrinkles on a worried forehead (*sollicitam frontem*). In this sense, relaxing one's eyebrows and having a wrinkle-free forehead expresses a calm, joyful state of mind:

Plerumque gratae diuitibus uices
mundaeque paruo sub lare pauperum
cenae sine aulaeis et ostro
sollicitam explicuere frontem.⁷⁷

The verb *porrigo* and its compound form *exporrigo* also mean "to lengthen" and can be found in the two quintessential Latin comedy writers, Plautus (*porrectiore fronte*) and Terence (*exporge frontem*).

Plautus uses the expression *porrectiore fronte*, where *porrectiore* is an intensifying comparative adjective formed from the perfect participle of the verb *porrigo*. In *Casina* 281–282, old Lysidamus orders his servant Chalinus to speak to him with a more relaxed forehead. He adds it is ridiculous to look serious (*tristem*) in front of someone in higher authority. Thus, he asks him to change the serious gesture reflected in his wrinkled forehead:

Lysidamus. Primum ego te porrectiore fronte uolo mecum loqui:
Stultitiast ei te esse tristem quous potestas plus potest.⁷⁸

In turn, Micio asks Demea to relax her forehead (*exporge frontem*) in Terence, *Adelphi* 837–842, making the gesture's meaning clear further on when he reiterates his request with the words, "at least look cheerful today" (*hodie modo hilarum fac te*):

Micio: tace:
non fiet. mitte iam istaec; da te hodie mihi:
exporge frontem. *Demea*: scilicet ita tempu' fert:
faciundumst. ceterum ego rus cras cum filio
cum primo luci ibo hinc. *Micio*: de nocte censeo:
hodie modo hilarum fac te.⁷⁹

Thus, in line with Quintilian's assertion, the relaxed eyebrows and a wrinkle-free forehead seen in the examples above would signify joy,⁸⁰ as long as the person in question ceases to perform the gesture for frowning—an affect display of sternness or seriousness. In this vein, the meaning of joy does not come from making a gesture, but rather from no longer making a different one.

Nevertheless, relaxed eyebrows and a smooth forehead in certain instances are more tied to no longer making the eyebrow gesture for arrogance. Indeed, the expression *ponere supercilium* in the future tense is seen in *Historia Augusta, Aurelianus* 27, 5 and has this very meaning. Here, we read the end of the letter that Zenobia, Queen of the East, sends to Emperor Aurelian in reply to his missive asking for her surrender with a promise to spare her life. Zenobia rejects any surrender in her letter, announces she is expecting aid from overseas, and states that upon the troops' arrival, the gesture made by Aurelian when demanding her surrender will change:

quid? si igitur illa uenerit manus, quae undique speratur, pones profecto supercilium, quo nunc mihi deditionem, quasi omnifariam uictor, imperas.⁸¹

Thus, the author refers to Aurelian's eyebrows to allude to his arrogance, and emphasises this attitude by using the verb *imperas* and the comparison *quasi omnifariam uictor*.

This gesture has the same meaning⁸² in Prudentius, *Psycommachia* 285–288 (Budé, p. 69). The allegorical poem depicts the struggle between vice and virtue in the human heart. Hope addresses a defeated Vice, urging him to leave his pride behind and learn to lower his eyebrows:

desine grande loqui; frangit deus omne superbum;
magna cadunt, inflata crepant, tumefacta premuntur.
disce supercilium deponere, disce cauere
ante pedes foueam, quisquis sublime minaris!⁸³

Therefore, the gesture of relaxing one's eyebrows in the corpus of Latin literature comes from no longer making an eyebrow gesture expressing either sternness or arrogance.⁸⁴

4. Discussion

To review, the corpus of Latin literature sets out four eyebrow movements, specifically, those mentioned by Quintilian in *Institutio oratoria* 11, 3, 78–79: raising, lowering, frowning, and relaxing. Although the texts do not describe these gestures with the precision required by non-verbal communication research today, our analysis of the selected extracts has not only enabled us to identify these but also associate a meaning to them, thus fulfilling the aim of this article. We have noted how raised and lowered eyebrows, respectively, serve as emblems for disapproval and approval. Therefore, these two opposite gestures have, in this sense, opposing meanings. There are, however, very few examples of their being used this way in Latin literature. In turn, there are many more instances of the four gestures used as affect displays. Thus, raised eyebrows transmit anger and arrogance, whilst lowered eyebrows indicate humility (the opposite of arrogance), seriousness, or sadness. These latter two emotions are closely linked in Latin and use either the same noun (*tristitia*) or adjective (*tristis*). Furthermore, frowning expresses sternness, anger, and arrogance, whilst relaxed eyebrows and a smooth forehead come from an individual no longer making an eyebrow gesture expressing either sternness or arrogance.

In this sense, eyebrow gestures in ancient Rome include synonymous gestures since both raising one's eyebrows and frowning express anger and arrogance.⁸⁵

In addition, Latin writers do not use gestures but rather eyebrow positions to describe the nature of certain characters. In this sense, they align themselves with authors of ancient physiognomy treatises who infer psychological traits on the basis of physical features. Hence, serious and stern characters are depicted with frowns, whereas irritable ones have raised eyebrows.

Thus, we have shown that Roman authors use eyebrow gestures as affect displays of a limited set of emotions: arrogance, sternness, seriousness or sadness, and humility. The first two emotions are seen much more frequently. Indeed, Roman authors closely tied eyebrows in particular to arrogance and sternness, as shown by the use of the noun *supercilium*, which metonymically takes on the meanings of "arrogance" and "sternness." Similarly, from the post-classical period onwards, the adjective *superciliosus* came to be associated with "arrogant" and "stern."

In this regard, we should highlight the higher general prevalence of eyebrow gestures in post-classical and later works, and particularly those by late Christian authors, which include many examples when compared to the scant references in ancient (Plautus, Terence) and classic (Cicero, Catullus) writers.⁸⁶ Moreover, post-classical and later authors mainly use these gestures to express arrogance and sternness.

In short, and as we stated above, although this research is based on a written corpus, our analysis has enabled us to uncover gestures and meanings used by Latin authors in their work. Moreover, we have outlined here the repeated use of eyebrow gestures. Nevertheless, the works show a more limited expressive range than one would expect in this regard, since the authors primarily and increasingly use these gestures to convey sternness and arrogance.

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Notes

- ¹ The following publications by the authors delve into different facial gestures: with the mouth, (Fornés Pallicer and Puig Rodríguez-Escalona 2005a); with the ears, (Fornés Pallicer and Puig Rodríguez-Escalona 2004); with the nose, (Puig Rodríguez-Escalona 2007); with the chin and lower jaw, (Fornés Pallicer and Puig Rodríguez-Escalona 2009); with the eyes, (Fornés Pallicer and Puig Rodríguez-Escalona 2008a, 2008b, 2010, 2011); and with the eyelids, (Fornés Pallicer and Puig Rodríguez-Escalona 2016).
- ² Examples from different fields include the following: Corbeill (2004) in anthropology; Brilliant (1963), Aldrete (1999), and Baggio (2004) in art; Lateiner (1995) in proxemics; and (Cairns 1993, 2005), Rizzini (1998), and (Ricottilli 2000, 2018) in philology.
- ³ The following publications should be added to those above in note 1 regarding facial gestures: (Fornés Pallicer and Puig Rodríguez-Escalona 2005b, 2005c, 2005d, 2006, 2008a, 2008b).
- ⁴ Our approach closely aligns with Ricottilli's definition (Ricottilli 2000, p. 16). The author also points out (Ricottilli 2000, p. 13) that scholars still need to frame gesture as a concept, since definitions are either extremely broad or far too limited. In turn, Baggio (2004, p. XIV) defines gesture as "il movimento di una o più parti del corpo (braccio, mano, capo) che compie un'azione oppure manifesta delle disposizioni interiori, siano essi sentimenti pensieri o intenzioni, comunicando un messaggio."
- ⁵ It is worthwhile recalling that Cicero (*Orator* 55) also sees facial and bodily gestures as intertwined: *dicerem etiam de gestu, cum quo iunctus est uultus*, "I would also talk about the gesture, with which the facial expression is linked." Cf. Baggio (2004, p. 4) and Ricottilli (2000, p. 17).
- ⁶ See, for instance, Horace *Carmina* 3, 1, 1–8, and for romantic contexts, Propertius 3, 8, 23–26; Ovid, *Amores* 1, 4, 17–20 and 2, 5, 13–18, *Epistulae (Heroides)* 17, 81–82, and *Ars Amatoria* 1, 499–500; and Martial 9, 3, 1–10.
- ⁷ In general, most syntagms with *supercilium* and an adjective externalise sternness or, to a lesser extent, anger. As already mentioned, although they do not describe the gesture performed, one can assume that they refer mainly to frowning. With regard to syntactic units with *frons*, they allude either to a furrowed forehead expressing sternness or anger (*trux, seuera*), or to a wrinkle-free forehead expressing calmness and composure (*serena, humana*).
- ⁸ "It is by means of the eyebrows that we contract, raise or relax . . . For they show anger by contraction, sadness by depression and joy by their relaxation. They are also lowered or raised to express approval or disapproval respectively."
- ⁹ We will not be looking into bound gestures, i.e., those where another body part is involved in addition to eyebrows. Our focus will be free gestures, i.e., those solely performed with the eyebrows, albeit affecting the forehead.
- ¹⁰ "Nor did Jupiter's cerulean brow nod nay." The expression echoes Zeus's response to Thetis in *Ilias* 1, 528.

- 11 Physiognomy treatises infer psychological traits based on observing physical features. Although these treatises concentrate on physical features rather than gestures, and are thus problematic sources from which to draw conclusions for our analysis, they do highlight the detailed nature of ancient Roman gestural analysis in using emotional facial expressions as a basis for many of their opinions on inherent character traits. Cf. (Fornés Pallicer and Puig Rodríguez-Escalona 2011).
- 12 “And those who, with fixed and pale eyes, both raise their eyebrows and rather violently draw in and inhale breath are imprudent, harsh, abusive and angry.”
- 13 See the expression *tumido ore* below. For puffed cheeks as an expression of fury, cf. also, Fornés Pallicer and Puig Rodríguez-Escalona (2009, pp. 137–63) and Dherin (2011, pp. 79–80, 425–26, 736).
- 14 The words Apuleius uses to describe Barbarus (*uultu turgido, subductis superciliis*) recall a fragment from Sextus Turpilius (Ribbeck II, p. 123, 167–168) that, lacking wider context, could also describe an angry character, since the work mentions a stern old man (*tristis . . . senes*) with a furious face (*turbido uultu*) and arched eyebrows (*subductis cum superciliis*).
- 15 “Barbarus walks angrily with puffed cheeks and arched eyebrows.”
- 16 The gesture’s meaning of irritation or anger clearly justifies the metaphorical sense seen in *Priapea* 49, 3–4: *non est / mentula subducti nostra supercilii*, “mine is not a penis with raised eyebrow.” In turn, the passage in Petronius 91, 7 is difficult to analyse given its fragmented nature; indeed, it has been intuited that there is a missing section after the gesture is referred to. Nevertheless, Giton’s gesture of raising his eyebrows high on learning Encolpius still loves him could be interpreted as an affect display of indignation. We cannot overlook, however, Petronius wanting to allude to surprise when mentioning the gesture.
- 17 “She added besides one whom I do not choose to mention by name, lest he should raise his red eyebrows.”
- 18 This gesture also appears in Greek literature to express displeasure. See Plutarch, *Moralia* 68d.
- 19 “Who, when he suspected that something was being sought from him, has not furrowed the forehead, turned away his face, pretended to be busy, by long-drawn conversation, which he purposely kept from ending, deprived another of the opportunity of making a request, and by various tricks baffled his pressing needs? Who, when actually caught in a corner, has not either deferred the favour, that is, been too cowardly to refuse it, or promised it with ungraciousness, with arching eyebrows, and with grudging words that were scarcely audible?”
- 20 See also Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 11, 3, 69: *nam et deiecto [capite] humilitas et supino adrogantia*, “for a [head] droop suggests humility, while if it be thrown back it seems to express arrogance.”
- 21 “They [the eyebrows] are our chief means of displaying contempt; pride has its place of generation elsewhere, but here is its abode: it is born in the heart, but it rises to the eyebrows and hangs suspended there.”
- 22 Cf., for example, Cicero, *De provinciis consularibus* 8; Ovid, *Amores* 3, 1, 45–48; Juvenal 5, 60–62; Martial 9, 79, 1–2; Petronius 113, 10; and Seneca, *Dialogi* 2 (*De constantia sapientis*), 14, 1. Christian writers, including Jerome, widely used the noun *supercilium* in the metaphorical sense of “arrogance.” See, for instance, *Epistulae* 46, 10, 3 (CSEL 54, p. 314), 73, 10, 1 (CSEL 55, p. 22), 129, 6, 1 (CSEL 56/1, p. 173), 130, 17, 1 (CSEL 56/1, p. 198), and 146, 2, 1 (CSEL 56/1, p. 311); *Commentarii in epistolam ad Philemonem* 1–3, 68–69 (CC SL 77C, p. 83); in *Hiezechielem* 11, 34, 182 (CC SL 75, p. 485), etc. The Greek word for eyebrow, ὀφρύς also took on the sense of “arrogance.”
- 23 Cf., for the sense of “arrogant,” Arnobius Afer, *Aduersus nationes* 1, 12, 1 and 5, 12, 6, and for “stern,” Seneca, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* 123, 11; Marcius Capella 8, 809; and Sidonius Apollinaris, *Epistulae* 8, 9, 2. In turn, the English adjective *supercilious* retains the meaning of “arrogant.”
- 24 Raised eyebrows characterising philosophers in general or a specific individual or school feature in Middle Comedy works by authors such as Amphis (fr. 13 K.-A.) and Baton (fr. 5, 13 K.-A.), as well as in works by Timon of Fliunte fr. 29 Di Marco (cf. Diogenes Laertius 2, 126); Hegesander of Delphi (fr. 2 Page); Plutarch, *Quaestiones coniuales* 3, 9 (657c); Lucian of Samosata, *Amores* 54, *Timon* 54, *Icaromenippus* 29 and *Dialogi mortuorum* 10, 8; and Alciphron, *Epistulae* 4, 7 (1, 34), 1.
- 25 “What childish nonsense! Do we arch our eyebrows over this sort of problem? Do we let our beards grow long for this reason? Is this the matter which we teach with sour and pale faces?”
- 26 Seneca also describes the wise man in *Dialogi* 2 (*De constantia sapientis*) 3, 1, as raising his eyebrows high when speaking: *sublato alte supercilio*. Moreover, in *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* 94, 9, Seneca uses the expression *ingens supercilium*, “enormous eyebrows,” which we could take to mean raised eyebrows, referring to the philosopher solemnly expounding platitudes: *ista quae ingenti supercilio philosophi iactant*, “such pronouncements philosophers make with raised eyebrows.” Later, we also see the link between raised eyebrows and pretentious philosophers from Arnobius Afer in *Aduersus nationes* 2, 50, 1.
- 27 “In the entrance hall of the palace on the Palatine a large number of men of almost all ranks had gathered together, waiting an opportunity to pay their respects to Caesar. And there in a group of scholars, in the presence of the philosopher Favorinus, a man who thought himself unusually rich in grammatical lore was airing trifles worthy of the schoolroom, discoursing on the genders and cases of nouns with arched eyebrows and an exaggerated gravity of voice and expression, as if he were the interpreter and sovereign lord of the Sibyl’s oracle.”
- 28 Cf. likewise Ammianus Marcellinus 16, 12, 4; Jerome, *Commentarii in Hiezechielem* 11, 37, 1049–1052 (CC SL 75, p. 512); Paulinus of Nola, *Carmina* 31, 518 (CSEL 30, p. 325); and Pelagius, *Epistola ad Demetriadem* 20 (PL 30, 31B). In addition to being used to caricature arrogant philosophers, Greek literature also used raised eyebrows to symbolise arrogance, e.g., Cratinus, fr. 348 K.-A.

(cf. Favi (2002) regarding the annotation in the epitome of *Praeparatio sophistica* by Phrynichus); Alexis, fr. 16 K.-A. and fr. 121, 6 K.-A., the comedy *Adespota* fr. *339 K.-A.; Menander fr. 37 K.-A. and fr. 349 K.-A. and *Comparatio Menandri et Philistionis* 1 298–302; Demosthenes 19 (*De falsa legatione*), 314; and Lucian of Samosata, *Bis accusatus* 28.

In 29, 2, 12, Ammianus Marcellinus used the expression *ardua imperii supercilia*, “the high eyebrows of power,” regarding Emperor Valens’ arrogance in asserting his power.

“Furthermore, that during the entire period of his he never once invite anybody into his vehicle, or during his consulship he never allowed any private individual as a co-consul, unlike deified princes, and many like habits which he, raising his eyebrows up high, observed as though they were most just laws, I pass by, remembering that I set them down when they occurred.”

The horn simile not only recalls the expression used by comic poet Amphis (fr. 13 K.-A.) to ridicule Plato—terms worth including in the aforementioned caricaturing of philosophers—but also the compound Greek adjective ὀφρυανασπασίδαι used by Hegesander of Delphi (fr. 2 Page) signifying “those who raise their eyebrows like horns.”

“Therefore, he decided that Lupicinus, who was at that time commander-in-chief, should be sent to settle the troubles either by argument or by force; he was indeed a warlike man and skilled in military affairs, but one who raised his eyebrows like horns and spoke pompously as if he were wearing the cothurnus of a tragic actor, and about whom men were long in doubt whether he was more covetous or more cruel.”

“These sorts of people Isaiah describes as the daughters of Judah, fluttering with their blinking eyes and casting themselves high with a lofty neck. For there are those who raise their eyebrows in this way, with an inflated heart, a puffed-up breast, a twisted neck, who graze the ground with the bottoms of their feet, but who balance themselves in their body and poise themselves as though hanging in the void by a needle, who make their way with their footsteps ahead of them while they lean their heads back behind them; they gaze upon heaven, yet they despise the earth, as though they are affected by a pain in their neck, so that they cannot bend it.”

See Sittl (1890, p. 92), where a nod can be limited to lowering one’s eyebrows to express approval. This is likely to be the movement Claudian alludes to rather than describes in *Carmina minora* 31, 57–58: *reditusque secundo/annue sidereo laeta supercilio*, “grant me a safe return as with a movement of your eyebrows you, a goddess, can do.”

Cf. note 21.

For instance, Persius refers to lowering one’s gaze and head as a sign of humility in *Saturae* 3, 5, 80: *obstipo capite et figentes lumine terram*, “with their heads bent, eyes fixed on the ground.” In turn, Virgil alludes to lowered eyebrows as an affect display in a similar sense in *Aeneis* 12, 220: *demisso lumine*, “with downcast eye.”

“These men might be truly happy, if they would disregard the greatness of the city behind which they hide their faults, and live after the manner of some provincial bishops, whose moderation in food and drink, plain apparel also, and eyebrows pointing at the ground, commend them to the Eternal Deity and to his true servants as pure and reverent men.”

Humility or modesty may well be what the gesture is meant to express in Ambrose, *De Tobia* 3, 10, 1 (CSEL 32/2, p. 523). Railing against usury, Ambrose describes the behaviour of the lender, who, when discussing the loan’s interest rate, smiles and lowers his eyebrows: *dejecto supercilio fenerator arridet*, “the lender smiles with downcast eyebrows.”

“Some women indeed actually disfigure themselves, so as to make it obvious that they have been fasting. As soon as they catch sight of anyone they lower their eyebrows and begin sobbing, covering up the face, all but a glimpse of one eye, which they just keep free to watch the effect they make.”

As described by Darwin (1872, p. 179) and Ekman and Friesen (1975, p. 117). See also García Fernández (1991, pp. 120–21).

“The sad man should be understood as follows: his face is thin, his brow wrinkly, his eyebrows turned inwards and his eyelids taut.”

Lewis and Short (1879), s. v. *obduco*.

“I should like to know, Naevolus, why your face is so often gloomy when I meet you.”

“Why have you suddenly developed those wrinkles?”

The expression *fronte obducta* must surely be related to phrases such as *deme supercilio nubem*, “take the cloud from your brow,” found in Horace, *Epistulae* 1, 18, 94–95. The image of a clouded frown could well allude to the gesture in question, reflecting seriousness and sadness. This is what Pomponius Porphyrio seems to say in his comment about the passage in Horace (*Commentum in Horati Epistulas* 1, 18, lemma 94): *Deme supercilio nubem. Ne te, inquit, tristem praebeas aut nimis seuerum. Nam propter haec multi odium contraxerunt*, “Take the cloud from your brow. Don’t get too sad or too serious, he says. Because for these reasons many have been hated.” The expression is also used in Greek literature, for instance, Pseudo-Aristotle, *Physiognomonica* 809b and 812a; Sophocles, *Antigona* 528; and Euripides, *Hippolitus* 173. It also persists in later authors such as Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* 3, 2, 52: “Will Caesar weep?/He has a cloud in’s face.”

(García Fernández 1991, p. 116). This work states that the gesture is part of an ancient reaction to protect one’s eyes from real or imaginary danger (García Fernández 1991, p. 215).

Cf. Nonius Marcellus, *De compendiosa doctrina* (Lindsay I, p. 13, 25–26): *caperrare est rugis frontem contrahere et asperare: tractum a caprorum frontibus crispis*, “caperrare is contracting and furrowing the forehead: the expression is taken from the rugged foreheads of goats.” See also Nonius Marcellus, *De compendiosa doctrina* (Lindsay I, p. 254, 7–8). It is not clear whether the verb has its root

in zoology, although ancient Romans did link them, believing the term originated in the comparison to the rugged forehead or horns of goats. Cf. [Ernout and Meillet \(1979\)](#), s. v. *caperrare*; [Mata Oroval \(2015\)](#), pp. 165–66).

Aristotle, *Historia animalium* 1, 9: αἱ δὲ πρὸς τὴν ῥίνα τὴν καμπυλότητ' ἔχουσαι στρυφνοῦ, “those which bend [their eyebrows] in towards the nose, [are] a sign of harshness”; *De physiognomonía* 18 ([Förster 1893](#), vol. 2, pp. 29–30): *Supercilia cum coeunt, tristem maxime hominem, sed et parum sapientem significant*, “when eyebrows meet, they signify a very sad man, but one who is also not very wise.”

“Verus had an attractive form and a kind expression; his beard was allowed to grow long, almost in the style of the barbarians; he was tall, and with a forehead furrowed towards the eyebrows, in a way that inspired respect.”

“And what I am to say of his eyebrow, which then did not seem to men to be a high brow, but a guarantee for the State? There was such a solemnity in his eye, there were such wrinkles in his forehead, that this eyebrow seemed to be sponsor for the year’s security.”

“Or have you seen an old Silenus with a bald forehead, a good-sized fellow with a fat belly, furrowed eyebrows and a wrinkled forehead, a detestable swindler that smells to heaven, curse him, chock-full of cursed vice and villainy. . . ?”

“Dame, you have chosen (notwithstanding my counsel) a young man to your lover, who, it seems to me, is dull, fearful, without any grace, and has a great horror of the furrowed eyebrows of your odious husband.”

“If she chanced to notice any sister too attentive to her dress, she reproved her for her error with a frown and serious face.”

Frowning also expresses anger or wrath in Greek literature; see, for example, Aristophanes, *Ranae* 822–825; Antiphanes 2, 2; Lucian of Samosata, *Vitarum Auctio* 7; and Alciphron, *Epistulae* 1, 13 (3, 3) 2. See also note 85.

[Ekman and Friesen \(1975\)](#), pp. 82–98) and, specifically with regard to eyebrows, p. 82: “The anger brow: The eyebrows are drawn down and together. . . The drawing together of the inner corners of the eyebrow usually produces vertical wrinkles between the eyebrows.” For anger expressed through mouth gestures, see [Fornés Pallicer and Puig Rodríguez-Escalona 2009](#).

Similarly, in *Ilias* 15, 101–104, Hera tries to hide her anger by smiling, but her eyebrows give her away.

“But, in her mistress’s eyes at least, the danger of her second labour earned her no favourable commendation. Venus knitted her eyebrows and said with a bitter smile.”

See note 13.

This is one of Terence’s characters in *Heautontimorumenos*. Cf. Horace, *Ars Poetica* 93–94. See, [Dherin \(2011\)](#), pp. 219, 240).

“Men will frown and raise their arms at me; with puffed cheeks will angry Chremes rave. Our great men will rise from their chairs and in answer to this letter of mine the patrician mob will thunder out: ‘Magician, seducer; transport him to the ends of the earth’.”

“What? Frowning because I said this was to be a tragedy?”

This gesture has the same meaning in Greek. For instance, Aristophanes, *Nubes* 581–583 or Pseudo-Lucian of Samosata, *Demosthenis encomium* 16.

“Then the profligate *flâneur*, who batted on what he could make out of the courts, although he had this money hidden away and was brooding over it with eager hopes, frowned—you know his face and the hypocritical expression he used to assume—and . . . he roundly asserted that Oppianicus had left him in the lurch, adding, to support his words, that his own vote, as they were all to vote openly, would be cast for conviction.”

“Therefore, let those who disparage our interpretation give the Scripture from which the Evangelist took this testimony and interpreted it about the Lord and Savior, when he was led out from Egypt into the land of Israel. And when they are not able to find it, let them cease wrinkling their foreheads and frowning and crinkling their noses and cracking their knuckles.”

This also expresses arrogance in Greece. See for instance, *Anthologia Palatina* 7, 440.

“Is this way we discuss with contracted brow and our wrinkled forehead?”

Cf. [Muñoz García de Iturrospe \(2020\)](#). See also Jerome, *Epistulae* 57, 3, 3 (CSEL 54, pp. 506–7) and 125, 18, 2 (CSEL 54, pp. 137–38); *Commentarii in Hiezequielem* 11, 34 (CSEL 75, p. 488); *Dialogus aduersus Pelagianos* 2, 14, 5–6 (CC SL 80, pp. 71–72); in *Epistolam ad Ephesios* 2, 4 (PL 26, 525C); *Contra Rufinum* 1, 13, 1–4 (CC SL 79, p. 12); and *Aduersus Iovinianum* 1, 34 (PL 23, 269B).

“Some with a frown and bombastic words, balanced one against the other philosophize concerning the sacred writings among weak women.”

“We observe others and from a glance of the eyes, from a contracting or relaxing of the eyebrows, from an air of sadness, from an outburst of joy, from a laugh, from speech, from silence, from a raising or lowering of the voice, and the like, we shall easily judge which of our actions is proper, and which is out of accord with duty and Nature.”

A further example of relaxed eyebrows and a smooth forehead can be found in Martial 14, 183, where the author uses the verb *soluere* with the accusative *frontem* to describe the gesture. Here, after reading the *Batrachomachia* (*Battle of the Frogs and Mice*)—a comic epic parodying the *Iliad* that Martial attributes to Homer—the poet urges the reader to learn to relax their forehead with his trifles: *Et frontem nugis soluere discis meis*, “learn to relax your brow at my trifles.”

Thymele and Latinus also appear in Juvenal 1, 35–36 and 8, 196–197.

- 72 “If perchance, Caesar, you shall come upon my books, relax your eyebrows that rule the world. Your triumphs too have been wont to endure jests, and no shame is it to a commander to be matter for wit. With the same forehead that views Thymele and the mime Latinus, therewith I pray you to read my verses.”
- 73 “You, who are ready to read the cheeky banter of these poems unpolished, relax your eyebrows which suit the ancient inhabitants of Latium.” The poem replaces Martial’s apposition *terrarum dominum* for *conueniens Lacio*, in allusion to the seriousness and gravitas inherent to the ancient inhabitants of Latium, who abhorred the banter and joy of *Priapea*.
- 74 The same combination and meaning appears at the start of the programmatic prologue in Sedulius’s *Carmen paschale* (CSEL 10, p. 14). The poet asks readers to relax their eyebrows (*pone supercilium*) and advises them to have no expectations of lavish paschal entertainment or high literature, but rather be prepared for a simple, humble work.
- 75 “You who propose to read this booklet of unpolished verse, relax your eyebrows. Weigh sober poems with a knitted brow: I follow Thymele.”
- 76 In *Saturae* 2, 2, 122–125, Horace also uses the verb *explico* in reference to the same gesture, albeit alongside different objects. In this example, wine relaxes a furrowed forehead and wipes away any concerns: *Ceres . . . / explicuit uino contractae seria frontis*, “Ceres . . . smoothed out with wine the worries of a wrinkled brow.” Wine also brings joy to those with raised eyebrows in Greek literature, cf. Diphilus 86 K.-A.
- 77 “Often a change is pleasant to the rich, and a simple meal beneath the poor man’s humble roof, without tapestries and purple, has smoothed out the wrinkles on a worried forehead.”
- 78 “*Lysidamus*: In the first place, I want to see a more relaxed forehead on your face while you talk with me; it’s absurd for you to be sulky with one who’s your superior in point of power.”
- 79 “*Micio*: Hush! They won’t. Forget all that. For today do me a favour and relax your forehead. *Demea*: That’s evidently what the occasion requires. I’ve no choice. But tomorrow I’m off to the farm with my son at the crack of dawn. *Micio*: Before dawn, if you want my advice. At least look cheerful today.”
- 80 The gesture also means joy in Greek literature, as we see through the expression ἀγανῶ ὀφρύϊ, “soft eyebrow” in Pindar, *Pythia* 9, 38–39.
- 81 “What more needs to be said? When those forces arrive which we are expecting from all directions, you will certainly relax that eyebrows with which you now command my surrender, as though victorious everywhere.”
- 82 Further examples where relaxing one’s eyebrows refers to overcoming an arrogant attitude can be found in Arnobius Afer, *Aduersus nationes* 2, 16, 3: *Vultis homines insitum typhum superciliumque deponere. . . ?*, “will you lay aside your habitual pride and relax your eyebrows?” and in Sidonius Apollinaris, *Carmina* 15, 189–190, where the expression *pone supercilia* is complemented with the adjective *Stoica*, alluding once again to philosophers’ arrogance: *ac nunc Stoica tandem / pone supercilia*, “and now at last relax your Stoic eyebrows.”
- 83 “An end to thy big talk! God breaks down all arrogance. Greatness falls; the bubble bursts; swollen pride is flattened. Learn to relax your eyebrows, learn to beware of the pit before your feet, all ye that are overweening.”
- 84 An example of relaxing one’s eyebrows by no longer making the gesture for irritation can be found in the corpus of Greek literature, specifically in Aristophanes, *Vespae* 655. In this sense, a scholium on the text (Elisius cp. schol. ad Arist. uesp. 655) points out that “irritated people typically raise their eyebrows.”
- 85 Regarding the polysemy and synonymy of eyebrow gestures in current research, see [Poggi \(2023\)](#), pp. 47, 102, 121–22).
- 86 Indeed, most of the texts referenced in this article are written by post-classical (Seneca, Quintilian, Martial, Juvenal, Pliny) and later authors. The later period includes Pagan authors such as Apuleius, Aulus Gellius, Ammianus Marcellinus, and the authors of *Historia Augusta*, although most references are found in Christian writers, including Arnobius, Paulinus, Ausonius, Claudianus, etc., and, particularly, Jerome, who commonly uses frowning and a wrinkled forehead to depict philosophers in a satirical fashion. See [Newbold \(1986\)](#) on the higher prevalence of oral communication in authors from late antiquity.

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