Moving on from the subjects of physical marks and dress regulations to documentation brings us closer to familiar territory. An official document (made of paper, or more likely nowadays, of plastic), which has a registration number and some personal information, is required today practically everywhere: an ID card, driving licence, passport, visa, library permit, student card, membership card – you cannot leave home without one; or, in other words, these days you are assumed to be an impostor unless you have the papers to prove otherwise. Yet what we are experiencing today could very well be the last phase in the history of portable identification documents, as new technologies – DNA databases, biometrics, electronic identification by fingerprints or retinas – are, for better or for worse, making documents superfluous. The early modern centuries, on the other hand, were the first phase in this history.

Physiognomic observations, clothes and the marking of the body were mostly means to determine a person’s group identity: gender, race, nation, class, profession. To be identified as a specific individual, distinct from all others, and to prevent what we call nowadays “identity theft”, other means and methods were needed, some of which were invented with the dawn of civilization. The first step had been to give each individual a name, but quite early on these given names were found to be insufficient for the complexities of organized society: in matters pertaining to taxation or in legal transactions, for example, identifying a person by a single personal name was not enough.

When executing a contract or demanding repayment of a loan, how was one to tell, for example, one Demetrios from another in the Hellenic world? A papyrus, published in 1980 by William Brashear and dated by him to the
third century BCE, has a law which regulated the contents of legal contracts in Ptolemaic Egypt. Lines 4–12 of the document lay down the rules for identifying the contracting parties:

let the creditors and the debtors be recorded in the document. Let those stationed in the army record their city of origin, from which division they are and the *epiphora* they possess. And let the citizens record their fathers and their *demes*, and if they are also in the army their divisions and the *epiphora* they possess as well. Let everyone else record his father, his city of origin and in what *genos* he is.¹

Similar “identifiers” were to be used in all manner of legal documents for centuries to come: patronymics, place of origin, occupation. In addition, even prior to the introduction of surnames – a practice which began in different regions of Europe at different times from the eleventh century onwards – soubriquets and descriptive nicknames were given to every John, Thomas and William.

Later on descriptions of physical attributes would fulfil the function that photographs and personal details provide in modern-day ID documents: height, colour of hair and eyes, distinguishing marks. We find these verbal depictions in letters of credit, contracts and registrations of loans and deposits,² as well as on lists of residents, passengers or recruits. We saw in Chapter 6 how the Jews of Istanbul were described in minutest detail for a survey done between the years 1595–97 for fiscal purposes: 2604 persons (heads of households) were listed by given name and patronymic, address, occupation and place of work. The officials followed very precise instructions as to what details should be given to ensure identification and to avoid confusing persons who had the same name.³ The physical description – one of the most detailed list of features in the early modern period (“une véritable photo d’identité”, writes the modern historian in admiration) – included approximate height (tall, medium, small), hair colour, shape and colour of eyebrows, shape and colour of eyes, shape of nose, shape and colour of beard, and special marks such as scars, moles and so on. Similar detailed descriptions were given in the lists of rowers condemned to the galleys in Spain or of craftsmen enlisted to the Venetian galleys.⁴ In houses of correction, which were beginning to appear in some European cities from the middle of the sixteenth century, in order “to put a stop to counterfeiting” and deception by vagrants, records were kept with information about the personal history, family and appearance of each inmate. “Such interest in simple, straightforward identification in the court records”, writes Martine van Elk, “is of course a reflection of a larger obsession on the part of the authorities in general, as laws of carrying passports, badging, branding, and boring holes through ears of vagrants testify”.⁵

However, the idea that a picture could be worth a thousand words did occur to our ancestors long before the invention of photography – at least