

A SCHOLION ON DIONYSIOS OF THRACE AND THE ORIGINS OF THE GREEK ALPHABET

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ABSTRACT The article deals with a *scholion* on Dionysios of Thrace (*Scholia in Dionysii Thracis artem grammaticam* 183.15–19, 183.27–29, 184.1–15 *Grammatici Graeci* 3 Hilgard) which summarizes the various traditions on the inventor of the alphabet. The passage is a noteworthy case-study which highlights the value of the analysis of texts which ancient historians might deem too recent. This article shows that the *scholion* is helpful for understanding the importance which the discussion on the origins of the alphabet had for the Greeks of the fifth century BCE. Finally, it will explain why the debate about the inventor of the letters orbited around two characters—Cadmus and Danaos—and, consequently, around two different regions, Phoenicia and Egypt. It will conclude that the choice of one version rather than another was strongly influenced by political and cultural motivations.

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Introduction

Ancient Greek historians, and writers more generally, have been fascinated by the origins of the alphabet, and discussion of the topic in Antiquity appears to have been rather fervid.¹ Herodotus 5.58, for example, wrote that the Greeks used to call the letters of the alphabet “Phoenicians” (Φοινικῆια), and he explained that they were brought from Phoenicia by Cadmus. Critias also wrote that the Phoenicians invented letters, “the rescuers of conversation” (ἀλειτουργῶν).² In contrast, Plato linked the invention of the alphabet to the Egyptians.³ Ephorus, however, connected the alphabet to the Phoenicians once again.⁴ Hecataeus of Abdera⁵ assigned the invention of the alphabet to Hermes, a god who was often identified with the Egyptian Thoth.⁶ Diodorus’ version is a bit more elaborate, but the link with Cadmus and Phoenicia is there.⁷ Pliny summarizes the different positions, Tacitus prefers an Egyptian origin, while Lucan buys the Phoenician hypothesis.⁸ Philo of Byblos tries to merge the two main versions and assigns both a Phoenician and an Egyptian origin to writing.⁹ Indeed, he writes that the Phoenician Taautos, whom the Egyptians call Thoyth and the Alexandrians call Thoth, invented it.¹⁰

This article will look at a passage belonging to a text which came to formation during the late antique and/or medieval period, a *scholion* on Dionysios of Thrace.¹¹ As we shall see, the text summarizes the various traditions

1 Cf. Piccaluga, “Processi di formazione dei miti greci,” 539–50, esp. 541.

2 DK 88 B 2.9. A list of abbreviations follows at the end of this article.

3 *Philebus*, 18b–c; and *Phaedrus*, 274c–75a.

4 *FGrHist* 70 F 105b–c.

5 *FGrHist* 264 F 25.

6 See, for example, Herodotus, 2.138.4; Diodorus, 1.16.2; and Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 3.22. On the relation and/or identification of Thoth with Hermes and vice versa, see Boylan, *Thoth, the Hermes of Egypt*, 99–101; and Fowden, *Egyptian Hermes*.

7 Diodorus, 3.67.1; 5.58.3. Cf. 5.74.1.

8 Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, 5.67 and 7.192–93; Tacitus, *Annales*, 11.14; Lucan, 3.220–21.

9 *FGrHist* 790 F 1.

10 Other interesting takes on the story include: Hyginus, 277, who involves several deities and links the origins to Egypt; Isidore of Seville (*Origines* 1.3.4–7), who assigns an important role to the Phoenicians but also includes Egypt in the story as well as other characters; and Photius (*Lexicon*, s.v. Φοινικῆια γράμματα), who mentions Phoenix as son of King Agenor of Tyre and brother of Cadmus.

11 *Scholia in Dionysii Thracis artem grammaticam*, 183.15–19, 183.27–29, 184.1–15 (*Grammatici Graeci* 3) Hilgard.

on the origins of the alphabet in a rather interesting way. Moreover, it is a noteworthy case study, especially in relation to the number of sources and the way in which they are cited, highlighting the importance of the analysis of texts which ancient historians might deem too recent. This article aims to show that such texts can be useful to the historical and literary discussion of themes that are dear to those who work on ancient history.¹² However, this article is not preoccupied with establishing the historicity of the myth or which version is the most historically accurate, but rather with analysing how two different versions have been used to send a political message. The interest of the medieval *scholion* might be summarized as twofold: the overall view of the *status quaestionis* which it offers, and the way in which the different versions of the myth are cited by the scholiast(s).

The Scholion

The *scholion* is an explanation of the part of the work entitled *Ars Grammatica* where it deals with the letters of the alphabet.¹³ However, the passage commented on by the *scholion* does not seem to mention the discussion about the origins of the alphabet, nor does it assign a specific paternity to the letters.¹⁴ The manuscript tradition attributes the *Ars Grammatica* (*Tekhnē Grammatikē*) to Dionysios of Thrace, a pupil of Aristarchus of Samothrace who lived between 170 and 90 BCE,¹⁵ although there were doubts about his authorship already in the medieval or Byzantine period.¹⁶ His authorship

12 On the relationship between medieval *scholia* and the ancient tradition, see Cufalo, “Scolii medievali,” 5–22; Pontani, “Scholarship in the Byzantine Empire,” 297–455.

13 The comment of the scholiast(s) is on *Ars Grammatica* 6 (7b) Uhlig.

14 Γράμματά ἐστιν εἰκοσιτέσσαρα ἀπὸ τοῦ α μέχρι τοῦ ω. γράμματα δὲ λέγεται διὰ τὸ γραμμαῖς καὶ ξυσμαῖς τυποῦσθαι· γράψαι γὰρ τὸ ξῦσαι παρὰ τοῖς παλαιοῖς, ὥς καὶ παρ’ Ὀμήρῳ «Νῦν δὲ μ’ ἐπιγράψας ταρσὸν ποδὸς εὐχεα αὐτως». Τὰ δὲ αὐτὰ καὶ στοιχεῖα καλεῖται διὰ τὸ ἔχειν στοιχόν τινα καὶ τάξιν. This is the passage as it appears in the 1883 edition by Uhlig. However, at page lxxvii Uhlig notes that in the sylloge by Moschopoulos there is an addition signalling the fact that someone (τινα) discovered the letters from the language of the Phoenicians.

15 On Dionysios Thrax and his work, see Uhlig, *Dionysii Thracis ars grammatica*; Pecorella, *Dionisio Trace*; Kemp, “*Tekhnē grammatikē* of Dionysius Thrax”; Kürschner, “Die Lehre des grammatikers Dionysios”; Lallot, *La grammaire de Denys le Thrace*; Swiggers and Wouters, *De Tekhnē grammatikē van Dionysius Thrax*; Bécares Botas, *Dionisio tracio, gramática*; Callipo, *Dionisio Trace e la tradizione grammaticale*.

16 The *scholia*, especially the oldest (whose manuscripts date back to the thirteenth century), referred to a debate on whether the *Ars Grammatica* was actually written by

has also been disputed by modern scholars on two main grounds:¹⁷ there is no mention of the *Ars Grammatica* in the papyri before the fifth century CE, while Apollonius Dyscolos mentions Dionysios Thrax only rarely, and in all cases the position which he attributes to Dionysios Thrax does not correspond to the assumptions we find in the *Ars Grammatica*.¹⁸ The manuscript tradition of the *scholia* is also complicated since they come from different manuscripts, the vast majority are written by anonymous authors, and not all of them mention the same details or comment on the same topics. Moreover, it seems that some manuscripts were written by different scholiasts; we are not always given their names, and it is difficult to discern who wrote a certain comment. This is not the place to discuss such issues: it will suffice to say that all *scholia* seem to come from the medieval or Byzantine period, which is the main point of interest for the scope of this article.¹⁹

The *scholion* we shall analyse gives a nice summary of the discussion about the inventor of the alphabet. This kind of *status quaestionis*, so to speak, is only found in one part of the manuscript tradition of the *scholia* (abbreviated with Σ), the *Scholia Vaticana* (abbreviated Σ^v), of which the main manuscript is the *Vaticanus graecus* 14 (thirteenth century), fols. 33v–127v. This manuscript is one of the oldest and, according to the *stemma codicum*, it could derive directly from the commentaries by Melampodos (sixth century), Stephanos (beginning of the seventh century), Porphyros (no date),

Dionysios of Thrace, and hypothesized the presence of two people called Dionysios, Dionysios of Thrace (the pupil of Aristarchus) and Dionysios the author of the *Ars Grammatica*. See *Scholia in Dionysii Thracis Artem grammaticam*, 160.24–161.8 (*Grammatici Graeci* 3) Hilgard.

17 In 1822, Karl Wilhelm Götting was the first to doubt the authorship of the *Ars Grammatica*, and he argued that the text belonged to an author writing in the Byzantine rather than the Hellenistic period (as was the case with Dionysios of Thrace): see Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship*, 272. More recently, doubts about its attribution to Dionysios have been sparked by Di Benedetto in a series of works (“Dionisio Trace e la *Techne* a lui attribuita”; “La *Techne* spuria”; “At the Origins of Greek Grammar”; “Afterword”; “Dionysius Thrax and the *Tékhne grammatiké*”; *Il richiamo del testo*, 381–461), and the hypothesis has been supported by de Jonge, *Between Grammar and Rhetoric*, 92. Cf. Pagani, “*Techne Grammatike* e la documentazione papiracea,” 205–17.

18 For a summary of the discussion on the authorship, see Lallot, *La grammaire de Denys le Thrace*, 20–25; and Callipo, *Dionisio Trace e la tradizione grammaticale*, 28–34.

19 On the characteristics of the different *scholia* and their manuscripts, see Uhlig, *Dionysii Thracis ars grammatica*, xxxiii–xlvi; Hilgard, *Scholia in Dionysii Thracis artem grammaticam*, v–xlix; and Lallot, *La grammaire de Denys le Thrace*, 31–37.

and Georgios (no date).²⁰ According to the *scholion*, the main streams of the debate regarding the inventor of the alphabet which the scholiast(s) registered were:²¹

Περὶ δὲ τῆς τῶν γραμμάτων εὐρέσεως διαφόρως οἱ ἱστορικοὶ ἰστόρησαν· οἱ μὲν γὰρ Προμηθεά λέγουσι τούτων εὐρετὴν, ἄλλοι δὲ Φοίνικα τὸν τοῦ Ἀχιλλέως παιδαγωγόν, ἄλλοι δὲ τὸν Μιλήσιον Κάδμον, ἄλλοι δὲ τὴν Ἀθηνᾶν, ἄλλοι δὲ ἐξ οὐρανοῦ ἐρρίφθαι τοῖς ἀνθρώποις πρὸς ὠφέλειαν. ... Τινὲς δὲ φοινίκεια ἐκάλεσαν τὰ γράμματα, (οἰονεὶ φωνίκεια,) παρὰ τὸ τῆς φωνῆς εἰκόνα εἶναι τὰ γράμματα... Τῶν στοιχείων εὐρετὴν ἄλλοι τε καὶ Ἐφορος ἐν δευτέρῳ Κάδμον φασίν· οἱ δὲ οὐχ εὐρετὴν, τῆς δὲ Φοινίκων εὐρέσεως πρὸς ἡμᾶς διάκτορον γεγενῆσθαι, ὥς καὶ Ἡρόδοτος ἐν ταῖς ἱστορίαις καὶ Ἀριστοτέλης ἱστορεῖ· φασὶ γὰρ ὅτι Φοινίκες μὲν εὗρον τὰ στοιχεῖα, Κάδμος δὲ ἤγαγεν αὐτὰ εἰς τὴν Ἑλλάδα. Πυθόδωρος δὲ [ὥς] ἐν τῷ Περὶ στοιχείων καὶ Φίλλης ὁ Δῆλιος ἐν τῷ Περὶ Χρόνων²² πρὸ Κάδμου Δαναὸν μετακομίσει αὐτὰ φασιν· ἐπιμαρτυροῦσι τούτοις καὶ οἱ Μιλησιακοὶ συγγραφεῖς Ἀναξίμανδρος καὶ Διονύσιος καὶ Ἐκαταῖος, οὓς καὶ Ἀπολλόδωρος ἐν Νεῶν καταλόγῳ παρατίθεται. ἔνιοι δὲ Μουσαῖον εὐρετὴν λέγουσι τὸν Μητίονος καὶ Στερόπης κατ' Ὁρφέα γενόμενον· Ἀντικλείδης δὲ ὁ Ἀθηναῖος Αἰγυπτίοις τὴν εὐρεσιν ἀνατίθησι· Δωσιάδης δὲ ἐν Κρήτῃ φησὶν εὐρεθῆναι αὐτὰ· Αἰσχύλος δὲ Προμηθεά φησὶν εὐρηκέναι ἐν τῷ ὁμωνύμῳ δράματι, Στησίχορος δὲ ἐν δευτέρῳ Ὀρεστείας καὶ Εὐριπίδης τὸν Παλαμήδην φησὶν εὐρηκέναι, Μνασέας δὲ Ἐρμῆν, ἄλλοι δὲ ἄλλον.

Historians are in disagreement about the discovery of the letters: indeed, some say that Prometheus was the discoverer, others (say that it was) Phoenix, pedagogue of Achilles, some others (say that it was) the Milesian Cadmus, others (say that it was) Athena, others (say that) they (=letters) were thrown from the sky to human beings for help ... Some called the letters *Phoinikeia* <as if they were *Phonikeia*,> because the letters are the image of the voice²³... others and in particular Ephorus²⁴ in Book 2 say that the inventor of the alphabet was Cadmus; but others say that he was not the inventor, but that he was a messenger to us of the invention of the Phoe-

20 See Uhlig, *Dionysii Thracis ars grammatica*, xxxiii–xxxvi; and Lallot, *La grammaire de Denys le Thrace*, 34–36.

21 *Scholia in Dionysii Thracis artem grammaticam*, 183.15–19, 183.27–29, 184.1–15 (*Grammatici Graeci* 3) Hilgard.

22 Περὶ χορῶν in *FHG*, 2:5b.

23 Here the scholiast (or whoever formulated this hypothesis) plays with the term the Greeks used for letters (φοινίκεια), which according to them might have been mistaken for or intended as φωνίκεια, a term which is close to the word φωνή (voice).

24 *FGrHist* 70 F 105.

nicians, as Herodotus in the *Histories* and Aristotle report:²⁵ indeed, they say that the Phoenicians invented the alphabet, while Cadmus brought it to Greece. Pythodoros in *On the Alphabet* and Phillis of Delos in *On Chronologies*²⁶ say that, instead of Cadmus, Danaos brought it.²⁷ The Milesian writers Anaximander,²⁸ Dionysius,²⁹ and Hecataeus³⁰ also support these writers in their testimony, whom (*scilicet* the Milesian writers) Apollodorus also adduces as proof in the *Catalogue of Ships*.³¹ Some say that the inventor was Mousaios, son of Metion and Sterope, who was a contemporary of Orpheus; Antikleides of Athens, on the contrary, attributes the invention to the Egyptians;³² whereas Dosiadas says that it was invented in Crete;³³ in the play bearing the same name of the assigned inventor, Aeschylus says that Prometheus invented it,³⁴ while Stesichorus, in the second book of the *Oresteia*,³⁵ and Euripides³⁶ say that Palamedes invented it, whereas Mnaseas says it was Hermes,³⁷ and others give a further inventor.³⁸

From the passage one might infer that the scholiast(s)—whether it was one or more than one—had at their disposal a great wealth of information on the topic. It is clear that the *scholion* cannot go into excessive detail, so in a certain way they tried to rationalize the information at their disposal and to offer a clear setting of the *status quaestionis*. Reading it raises a series of questions. First, one might reflect on what impression the scholiast(s) might have got while reading the sources at their disposal, and why the *scholion* mainly emphasizes two traditions. One could also reflect upon the fact that the scholiast almost seems to create the group of “the Milesian writers.” Hence, the main question might be related to what the scholiast had

²⁵ Herodotus, 5.58; Aristotle, F 501 Rose.

²⁶ FHG, 4.476.

²⁷ The expression πρὸ Κάδμου is not clear and could be interpreted in two ways: “instead of Cadmus” or “before Cadmus.”

²⁸ FGrHist 9 F 3.

²⁹ FGrHist 687 F 1.

³⁰ FGrHist 1 F 20.

³¹ FGrHist 244 F 165.

³² FGrHist 140 F 11b.

³³ FGrHist 458 F 6.

³⁴ *Prometheus Bound*, 460.

³⁵ PMGF, 213.

³⁶ F 578 Nauck.

³⁷ FHG, 3.156.

³⁸ On this *scholion*, see also Fowler, *Early Greek Mythography*, 2.246–48.

gleaned from the variety of sources they read. Finally, one might also consider the ways in which this particular text, considered a later source by scholars working on ancient history, could help and support the debate on the origins of the alphabet. The *scholion* might be helpful to understanding the importance this debate had for the Greeks of the fifth century BCE, and it might reveal itself to be useful in identifying a discussion which was perhaps crucial for the Greeks (in a mainly Athenocentric world) of that time.

Palamedes

As this passage highlights, apart from the hypotheses of an epichoric invention of the alphabet assigned to Palamedes, Prometheus, and Mousaios, the main points of the debate about the inventor of the alphabet orbited around two characters—Cadmus and Danaos—and, consequently, around two different regions, Phoenicia and Egypt. Before looking into the reasons why there were two different major traditions, one should reflect on that which saw Palamedes playing an important role as the *πρῶτος εὐρετής* of the letters, and how the hero's presence within the tradition could be justified. As stated by Lucio Bertelli in his commentary on fragment 6 of Dosiadas, a Cretan historian dated to the first half of the third century BCE, Palamedes as the inventor of letters was the “most popular version”³⁹: apart from Stesichorus and Euripides, mentioned in the *scholion*, Gorgias in his *Palamedes*⁴⁰ and Critias employed this story.⁴¹ Moreover, the letters of the alphabet were not Palamedes' only discovery, since he is reported as having invented counting, currency, weights, and measures.⁴²

In reality, all these discoveries or, to put it better, the spreading and diffusion of them⁴³ seem to be linked to a period when the Greek population began moving to other places, namely during the so-called “colonization” of the eighth century BCE, whose pioneers were indeed inhabitants from

39 Bertelli, “Dosiadas” (*BNJ* 458 F 6: commentary).

40 DK 76 B 11a.30.

41 Critias, B 2.9 West. See Kleingünter, *ΠΡΩΤΟΣ ΕΥΡΕΤΗΣ*, 79–84, and 143–47.

42 See Roscher, s.v.

43 Indeed, the origin of the Greek alphabet is situated before the eighth century BCE. See Woodard, “*Phoinikeia Grammata*,” 44–45; Fowler, *Early Greek Mythography*, 2.247–48; and Janko, “From Gabii and Gordion to Eretria and Methone,” 1–32. See also Astoreca, *Early Greek Alphabetic Writing*, 1–22; Luraghi, “Sounds, Signs, and Boundaries,” 32–57; and Woodard, “Contextualizing the Origin of the Greek Alphabet,” 74–103.

Euboea, the fatherland of Palamedes. In addition, it could not be by chance that one of the earliest attestations of a text written in the Greek language comes from Pithekoussai, an island facing Cuma in Campania and the first Euboean *apoikia* (foundation) in southern Italy. The text, inscribed on a *kotyle*, refers to the famous cup of Nestor (described in *Iliad* 11.632–37) and consists of three lines, the first written in iambic verse and the other two written in hexameters. It is in retrograde writing and dates back to the second half of the eighth century BCE.⁴⁴ From this piece of archaeological evidence, one can understand that movements around the Mediterranean and commercial routes might have played a crucial role in the diffusion of one of the most important technological discoveries, the alphabet. To better explain the connection between movements, economic operations, and the importance of writing, one might recall a widespread practice in the Middle Ages when a *clericus* used to be aboard every ship heading to foreign ports.⁴⁵ To return to the Greek world, it has been shown that economic exchanges and transactions were crucial to the spread of the alphabet, at least in the Archaic era.⁴⁶

Danaos and Cadmus

Nevertheless, if the social and economic aspects of the invention of the alphabet have been extensively discussed, the political reasons behind the choice of one version of the story rather than another have not been fully explored. In this respect, an analysis of the two other versions of the story (Danaos and Cadmus) is central, as those accounts seem to be the leading ones—with modern terminology, one might define them as the “mainstream versions”—or at least this was the impression that the compiler(s) of the *scholion* had when reading the sources at their disposal. The oldest version appears to be the account of the so-called Μιλησιακοὶ συγγραφεῖς (Milesian prose writers),⁴⁷ Hecataeus, Dionysius, and Anaximander, since

44 Νέστορος [εἰμί] εὖποτ[ον] ποτήριον / ὃς δ' ἂν τοῦδε π[ίησι] ποτηρί[ου] αὐτίκα κῆνον / ἔμερ[ος αἶρ]ήσῃ καλλιστ[εφάν]ου Ἀφροδίτης. See Buchner and Russo, “La coppa di Nestore,” 215–34.

45 See Nenci, *Erodoto*, 241.

46 See Carpenter, “Antiquity of the Greek Alphabet,” 8–29; Cardona, *Antropologia della scrittura*, 19–100; and Lombardo, “Marchands, transactions économiques, écritures,” 159–87.

47 It has also been argued that the Milesian writers mentioned Cadmus’ story as well: see, for example, *FGrHist* I a, *Kommentar*: 323–24; Guarducci, *Epigrafia greca*,

the historians named as supporters of the Cadmeian story are Herodotus⁴⁸ and Aristotle, who presented Cadmus as διάκτορον, “a transmitter,” and Ephorus, who saw him as the pure inventor.⁴⁹ At this point, it is important to understand the reason why the Μιλησιακοὶ συγγραφεῖς especially were dealing with Danaos’ version of the story and its consequent links with Egypt.⁵⁰ Firstly, one should examine the historical period when they lived and wrote their works. Hecataeus (*FGrHist* 1 T 1) and Dionysius (*FGrHist* 687 T 2) were near contemporaries and both from Miletus, as one can read in the Byzantine lexicon known as the *Suda* (ε 360):

Ἐκαταῖος Ἡγησάνδρου Μιλήσιος· γέγονε κατὰ τοὺς Δαρείου χρόνους τοῦ μετὰ Καμβύσην βασιλεύσαντος, ὅτε καὶ Διονύσιος ἦν ὁ Μιλήσιος, ἐπὶ τῆς ξῆ ὀλυμπιάδος.

Hecataeus, son of Hegesander, Milesian: he lived at the time of Darius, who ruled after Cambyses, as also did Dionysius of Miletus, in the sixty-fifth Olympiad (520–516 BCE).

Hence, they both lived between the end of the sixth and the beginning of the fifth century.⁵¹

Hecataeus appears to have been a powerful man in the Miletus of the Ionian Revolt, if we trust the testimony of Herodotus who described him giving wise advice to Aristagoras and the Milesians (*FGrHist* 1 TT 5–6).⁵² On Dionysius, the anonymous compiler of the *Suda* (δ 1180) reports that he

44–47. See contra Gomme, “Legend of Cadmus and the Logographi,” 62; and Moggi, “Autori greci di *Persikà*,” 453–57.

48 Herodotus, 5.57–61. Herodotus was slightly younger than Hecataeus, since he took part in the foundation of Thurii in 444/443, a city in *Magna Graecia* and whose sponsor was Pericles, whereas Hecataeus played a prominent role during the Ionian Revolt (499/494).

49 *FGrHist* 70 F 105. He lived in a period between 400 and 330 BCE. See Schwartz, “Die Zeit des Ephoros” and “Ephoros”; and Shrimpton, “Theban Supremacy,” 310–18. In contrast, there is almost no information on Phillis and Pythodoros, but it is reasonable to think that they are Hellenistic.

50 Nenci, *Erodoto*, 241, states that it is not surprising that the oldest supporters of an Egyptian origin of the alphabet were Milesian writers of the sixth century BCE, because they were geographers who had come to know Egypt and its writing system. On the relation between Egypt and alphabetic writing, see Haring, “Ancient Egypt and the Earliest Known Stages,” 53–67.

51 On Hecataeus, see Nicolai, “*Pater semper incertus*,” 143–64; Bertelli, “Hecataeus”; Fowler, “Herodotus and his Prose Predecessors”; and Fowler, *Early Greek Mythography*, 2.658–81.

52 Herodotus, 5.36.1–4, and 5.124.

wrote a work in five books on the events after the death of Darius, a *periegesis*, *Persika* in the Ionic dialect, and three books on the Trojan War, a work on myths, and a historical cycle in seven books.⁵³ The last Milesian listed, Anaximander, is probably not the very well-known philosopher from Miletus, but a historian whom the *Suda* (α 1987) says was younger than him. The son of Anaximander, he lived at the time of Artaxerxes II, who reigned between 404 and 358 BCE.⁵⁴ It is worth underlining that all these συγγραφείς lived in a significant period for the history of Miletus: in fact, Hecataeus and Dionysius lived at the time of the Ionian Revolt, whose leading city was Miletus, and especially at the time of the sack of Miletus in 494 BCE; Anaximander spent his life in an epoch particularly hard for the Persians, who might reasonably be considered Miletus' old enemies, and indeed, Artaxerxes II—apart from the Spartan campaigns in Asia at the beginning of the century—had to face various problems coming from Egypt, Cyprus, and some of his satraps.⁵⁵ Thus, there could have been various reasons why such historians preferred the version with Danaos as the discoverer of writing.

Firstly, not only was Miletus traditionally linked to Athens and opposed to the Persians, but it also founded Naucratis in Egypt, the one and only Greek “sort-of-colony” on Egyptian land at the time.⁵⁶ Moreover, the Milesians had supported and helped Egypt against the Assyrians even with auxiliary troops, since the earliest times.⁵⁷ Consequently, the success among

53 *FGrHist* 687 T 1: Διονύσιος Μιλήσιος· ἱστορικός. Τὰ μετὰ Δαρεῖον ἐν βιβλίοις ἑ· Περύγησιν οἰκουμένης· Περσικὰ Ἰάδι διαλέκτῳ· Τρωικῶν βιβλία γ· Μυθικὰ Κύκλον ἱστορικὸν ἐν βιβλίοις ζ. Fontana, “Cadmio di Mileto, primo storico dell’Occidente: i dati biografici,” n.37 summarizes well the scholarly debate on his chronology: Moggi, “Autori greci di *Persikà*,” 433–68, is crucial for the date and for previous bibliography, in particular 438–49 and footnotes; on the other hand, Fontana underlines that Jacoby’s remarks are puzzling: Jacoby, “Ueber die Entwicklung der griechischen Historiographie,” 90, dates Dionysius back to the Ionian Revolt, while in *FGrHist* 687 he makes the hypothesis of 460/30 BCE, even if he does not explain his reasons since this part of *die Fragmente* lacks the *Kommentar*.

54 *FGrHist* 9 T 1: Μιλήσιος, ὁ νεώτερος, ἱστορικός. γέγονε δὲ κατὰ τοὺς Ἀρταξέρξου χρόνους τοῦ Μνήμονος κληθέντος. Based on this testimony, Jacoby thinks of an Anaximander younger than the philosopher: see Anaximander Hist., *FGrHist* 9. See contra Hermann Diehls and Walther Kranz, who place the *scholion* on Dionysios Thrax among the dubious fragments of the philosopher: DK 2 F 31. See also Moggi, “Autori greci di *Persikà*,” 440. On the historian, see Schwartz, “Anaximandros von Milet,” 2085–86; and Fowler, *Early Greek Mythography*, 2.630–31.

55 See Briant, *Histoire de l’Empire perse*, 667–94.

56 Naucratis was technically an *emporion*.

57 See Fontana, “Cadmio di Mileto, primo storico dell’Occidente. L’opera,” 130–38.

the Milesian writers of the Egyptian tradition regarding the invention of the alphabet rests on two grounds: on the one hand, on the historical tradition and the ties with Egypt, and on the other hand, on the aversion to the Persians, who might have played a prominent part in the rival Cadmeian/Phoenician version, since the Phoenicians were generally considered allies and supporters of the Persians. Secondly, such historians were emphasizing Egypt's role just when this population took a stand against Persia.⁵⁸ In all likelihood, there had been some revolts under Darius and Xerxes between the end of the sixth and the beginning of the fifth century BCE; between 464 and 454 BCE the Egyptian/Libyan prince Inaros (who was also supported by the Athenians) rose up against Artaxerxes I; later, Artaxerxes II was facing Psammetichus (400–399 BCE); then, after another revolt, Artaxerxes III was able to regain possession of Egypt in 343 BCE.⁵⁹ Finally, the fact that, as a consequence of this version, Argos (whose king and “re-founder” was Danaos) “hit the headlines,” so to speak, might be explained by the position the Argives occupied at the time.⁶⁰ The Peloponnesian city had almost always been independent; even after 594 BCE, when Sparta won the battle of Sepeia, Argos did not join the Peloponnesian League; from 474 to 470 BCE it housed Themistocles when he was ostracized, and there the Athenian leader organized a league against Sparta;⁶¹ Argos was a supporter of Ephialtes and Pericles, and in 462 BCE the Argives signed a treaty with Athens;⁶² and again Athens joined the Argive League during the Peloponnesian War.⁶³ Thus, one could infer that it was preferable for historians from Miletus, a city closely linked to Athens, to draw attention to a version which highlighted the Egyptian/Argive role rather than the Phoenician/Theban tradition often connected to the Persians.⁶⁴

58 This could also be the reason why Antikleides of Athens (*FGrHist* 140 F 11a–b) assigned the role of inventors to the Egyptians: he lived at the time of Alexander the Great or shortly after (Plutarch, *Alexander*, 46), in a period when Egypt was gaining more and more importance. On the growing interest in Egypt during the Hellenistic times, see Roberto, “Atene colonia egizia,” 123–29.

59 See Briant, *Histoire de l'Empire perse*, 591–94; 653–54; and 701–5.

60 On Danaos' relation with Argos and his importance in the city's progress, see Brillante, “Eroi orientali nelle genealogie greche” 258–68.

61 Thucydides, 1.135.3.

62 Thucydides, 1.102.44.

63 Thucydides, 5.47–48.

64 The Athenians generally associated Cadmus and Thebes with the Persians: see Demand, *Thebes in the Fifth Century*, 53, and Blakely, “Conon” (*BNJ* 26 F 1). This could

The Influence of Herodotus and Acceptance of the Cadmeian Story

In the light of these reflections, we now move to the analysis of the other tradition and, above all, of why the Cadmeian story took the place of Danaos as a result of the influence of Herodotus. Once again, the point here is not to establish the most historical version, or to inquire into the meaning of the term φοινικία⁶⁵ used by Herodotus 5.58 and linked to the letters of the alphabet, but to understand the political reasons behind the choice of this version of the myth. First of all, it is necessary to underline that only a later author, Ephorus of Cyme, wrote that Cadmus had invented the alphabet,⁶⁶ whereas Herodotus and Aristotle presented him as the means of transmission (which also highlights the close relationship between Cadmus and the Phoenicians). In truth, this seems the most accurate and historical version of the transmission of the alphabet in Greece, since it is now well known that the Greeks imported their alphabet from the Phoenicians, then added the vowels which were missing from it.⁶⁷ In addition, Hemmerdinger has demonstrated that the name Cadmus comes from “Kidim-Marduk,” the name of a governor who in the fourteenth century BCE was sent to Thebes by Burrabuias, king of the Babylonians. Phoenicians from the city of Byblos, continues Hemmerdinger, introduced the alphabet and papyrus to Boeotia

also be the motivation which drove Phillis to support this version: he was from Delos, seat of the Delian League, founded by the Athenians after the Persian Wars to “protect” the Ionian cities against the Persians.

65 On this, see the recent discussion by Waal, “Deconstructing the Phoenician Myth,” 219–54.

66 There are also issues regarding the name Cadmus: the tradition is somewhat confusing and mentions the historian Cadmus from Miletus and another Cadmus. On this, see Fontana, “Cadmio di Mileto, primo storico dell’Occidente: i dati biografici,” 155–58 and 163–66; see also Fontana, “Kadmos of Miletos” (*Introduction/Biographical Essay*). Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, III b, 610–11, and Almagor, “Kadmos of Miletus” (*Biographical Essay*), are suspicious about the historian Cadmus and suggest that he is a later invention, but recently this view has been challenged. On the chronology of the historian and the recent discussion, see Fontana, “Cadmio di Mileto, primo storico dell’Occidente: i dati biografici,” 158–62, and Fontana, “Kadmos of Miletos” (*Introduction/Biographical Essay*).

67 See Klaffenbach, *Epigrafia greca*; Guarducci, *L’epigrafia greca dalle origini al tardo impero*; McCarter, *Antiquity of the Greek Alphabet*; Sass, *Alphabet at the Turn of the Millennium*, especially chap. 3; Willi, “Κάδμος ἀνέθηκε,” 162–71; Woodard, “Phoinikeia Grammata,” 25–46; Waal, “On the ‘Phoenician Letters,’” 83–125; and Lehmann, “Much ado about an implement!,” 69–90.

before the eighth century BCE.⁶⁸ And to Hemmerdinger's claims we might add that Herodotus employed the term βυβλίον, literally "papyrus-roll,"⁶⁹ to indicate the written letter (not the letter of the alphabet).⁷⁰ The word was nothing more than a transliteration of the name of the Phoenician city of Byblos, from where the papyrus was imported.⁷¹

Herodotus does not seem to be preoccupied with the fact that Cadmus might have been Egyptian.⁷² Indeed, he clearly refers to the Phoenicians who came with Cadmus (5.58.1: οἱ δὲ Φοίνικες οὗτοι οἱ σὺν Κάδμῳ ἀπικόμενοι) and introduced the Greeks to the letters of the alphabet. Hence, the key element here is not Cadmus' ethnicity but his closeness to the Phoenicians. Herodotus' intention was to explain why the Greeks called the letters of the alphabet Φοινικήα, or at least this is what he let us believe.⁷³ That might be the reason why he recalled the story of Cadmus.⁷⁴ Indeed, the account appears to have been elaborated by Herodotus himself in light of the historian's use of certain expressions.⁷⁵ There could, however, have been another

68 Hemmerdinger, "Trois notes," 698–703. On the etymology of Cadmus' name, see also Fowler, *Early Greek Mythography*, 2.39 with the bibliographical discussion in n. 141.

69 Ceccarelli, *Ancient Greek Letter Writing*, 15.

70 See, for example, 1.123.4, 124.1, 125.2; 3.40.1, 42.4, 43.1, 128.2–5; 5.14.2; 6.4.1; 7.128.1–3. See Powell, *Lexicon to Herodotus*, s.v.

71 See Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, s.v.

72 Cadmus was genealogically linked to Egypt and to Danaos: see Froidefond, *Le mirage égyptien*, 115–58; see also Fowler, *Early Greek Mythography*, 2.348.

73 According to Moggi, "Autori greci di *Persikà*," 457, Herodotus was openly polemicizing with his predecessors. Marincola, "Herodotean Narrative," 130n22 is hesitant about whether his intention was to refute or supplement Hecataeus' information.

74 On this passage, see among others Edwards and Edwards, "Red Letters and Phoenician Writing," 48–57; Brillante, "Cadmò fenicio e la Grecia micenea," 167–74; Rocchi, "Kadmos e i *phoinikeia grammata*," 529–33; van Effenterre, "Ultima temere dicta," 649–60; and Pelling, "Aristagoras," 199.

75 Moggi, "Autori greci di *Persikà*," 456–57 argues that Herodotus used sentences like ὥς δὲ ἐγὼ ἀναπυθάνομενος εὐρίσκω (5.57.1) and ὥς ἐμοὶ δοκέειν (5.58.1), but he also tried to prove his theory citing three epigraphic texts from the sanctuary of Ismenius Apollo at Thebes which he himself read: they were written in Καδμήια γράμματα and were, of course, forgeries. See also Guarducci, *Epigrafia greca*, 44, 47, and 489. Waal, "Deconstructing the Phoenician Myth," 221, on the contrary, believes that the expression ὥς ἐμοὶ δοκέειν underlines that "Herodotus was aware of the existence of contrasting views." On Herodotus' claims to correctness and truth in relation to the usage of the first person, see Thomas, *Herodotus in Context*, 235–48.

subtle motivation behind Herodotus drawing the reader's attention to this particular deed of Cadmus and, consequently, behind the relationship which he established between the act of writing and Thebes (or the Boeotians in general). All the more so as the Thebans enjoyed a reputation that was anything but good in Herodotus' work: they had medized, and in the battle of Plataea they fought together with the Persians.⁷⁶ To this one should add that the Greeks generally looked at the act of writing with suspicion.⁷⁷ The first example to come to mind is the explicit prohibition against inscribing the Spartan Μεγάλη Ρήτρα (*Great Rhetra*).⁷⁸ Moreover, in the fifth century BCE, the act of writing was connected with Eastern characters or with "orientalized" Greeks.⁷⁹ Indeed, it was a "barbarian" habit or a characteristic of tyrants (who were "friends of the Persians"),⁸⁰ as it was linked with secret messages. Those in charge of a personal government placed trust in the act of writing, whereas democracy championed freedom of speech and *parrhesia*.⁸¹ As a consequence, the link that Herodotus established between the Thebans and the alphabet might emerge as an anti-deed of Cadmus, who also had contacts with the "barbarian" Phoenicians.⁸²

76 Herodotus, 7.132.1; 9.31.5. On the dark depiction of the Thebans, see also 9.2.3 and 9.41.2–3.

77 See, for example, *Iliad*, 6.118, which Sarri, *Material Aspects of Letter Writing*, 6, regards as a reference that may have well influenced the negative representation of writing in the Greek world, since the letter contained instructions to kill its carrier. On the negative ideas linked to the act of writing, see Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 88; and Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions*, 61–97. See, also, Detienne, "L'espace de la publicité," 73–81; and Kirk, "Writing," 1553, who underlines that in Herodotus "writing enables trickery or deception."

78 On the *Rhetra*, see Detienne, "L'espace de la publicité," 56–64; and Ogden, "Crooked Speech," 85–102.

79 See, for example, Herodotus, 5.35, 7.239; Thucydides, 1.128, 1.136–37, 8.50–51; Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 3.1.5, 7.2.8; *Cyropedia*, 2.2.9–10, 4.5.26, 31 and 34, 5.5.1 and 4, 6.2.1, 7.2.16–17. See also Monti, *Alexander the Great*, 30–31, and 33–35.

80 See de Libero, *Die Archaische Tyrannis*, 414–17, who defines these figures as "die perserfreundlichen Tyrannen."

81 On this topic, see Stirewalt, *Studies in Ancient Greek Epistolography*, 6–8 and 11; Steiner, *Tyrant's Writ*, 107–27, 149–54, and 166–74; and Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions*, 24–35.

82 See contra Waal, "Deconstructing the Phoenician Myth," 245. Pace Waal, the Phoenicians do not seem to enjoy a good reputation in Herodotus, appearing as "untrustworthy traders" (Demetriou, "Phoenicians," 1123–24).

The Origin Stories of the Greek Alphabet: Concluding Thoughts

This article has focused on the political use of myth, and more specifically on the political use of two specific versions of the story regarding the invention of the alphabet. As we have seen, the version given by the Milesian writers does not respond to any negative agenda, coming as it does from historians writing within a Near Eastern milieu which is not suspicious of the function of writing. In contrast, the Herodotean version which speaks for the Athenians of the time (the fifth century BCE) is used in a negative way, as an instrument for highlighting the superiority of the (Athenian) democratic regime as opposed to the Persian way of ruling.⁸³ From analysis of the *scholion* it appears that, at the time of the scholiast(s), the sources at their disposal showed an overwhelming presence of two major versions of the story regarding the origins of the alphabet. Such versions and their usage in historical accounts had strong political and cultural connotations. Herodotus, who seems to have introduced the Cadmean version, aimed to put the pro-Persian Thebans in a bad light. On the contrary, the so-called Milesian writers intended to emphasize the role of Egypt, strictly connected with their fatherland, and to praise the deeds of the Egyptians, quite often in revolt against Persia. Moreover, it might not be a coincidence that the scholiast(s) grouped these writers based on their fatherland of Miletus, in calling them “the Milesian writers.” There must have been a connection between Miletus and the Egyptian tradition in the sources which we no longer have but which the scholiast(s) were still able to access from their readings. And one very last thought: paradoxically, as it is well known that the Danaï were a Greek tribe and, what is more, Herodotus explains that they were the Greeks in general,⁸⁴ Danaos could even have claimed, with good reason, the role of representative of all of Greece and not only of the Egyptians and Argives, *pace* Herodotus.

83 For one of the most famous criticisms of writing, see Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275a: “you provide your students with a vision of knowledge, but not with truth” (σοφίας δὲ τοῖς μαθηταῖς δόξαν, οὐκ ἀλήθειαν πορίζεις).

84 Cadmus was also linked genealogically to Egypt and to Danaos, as noted above (n. 72).

Abbreviations

- BNJ* *Jacoby Online: Brill's New Jacoby*.
- DK* *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. Edited by Hermann Diels. Revised by Walther Kranz. 3 vols. Berlin: Weidmann, 1951–52.
- FGrHist* *Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*. Edited by Felix Jacoby. Berlin: Weidmann, and Leiden: Brill, 1923–64.
- FHG* *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*. Edited by Carl Müller. 5 vols. Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1841–70.
- Hilgard Hilgard, Alfred. *Scholia in Dionysii Thracis artem grammaticam: Grammatici Graeci* 1, 3. Leipzig: Teubner, 1901.
- Nauck Nauck, August. *Euripidis Tragoediae superstites et deperditarum fragmenta*. Vol. 2. Leipzig: Teubner, 1854 (1876³).
- PMGF* *Poetarum Melicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*. Edited by Malcolm Davies. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Roscher Roscher, W. H., and K. Ziegler. *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*. Leipzig: Teubner, 1916–25.
- Rose Rose, Valentin. *Aristotelis qui ferebantur librorum fragmenta*. Leipzig: Teubner, 1886 (1967²).
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