

Danaos and Kadmos: Historical Reasons for Different Versions  
of the Origin of the Alphabet

Ancient authors seem to be quasi ‘obsessed’ by the origin of the alphabet, and the discussion of this topic appears to have been rather fervid (See, for example, Critias 88 B 2, 9-10 D.-K.; Pl., *Phlb.*, 18 b-c; *Phdr.*, 274 c-275 a; Ephor., *FGrHist* 70 F 105b-c; Diod., 3.66.5-67.1; 5.58.3; 74.1; Pl., *N.H.*, 5.67; 7.192-193; Tac., *Ann.*, 11.14; J., *Ap.*, 1.10-12; Ph.Bybl., *FGrHist* 790 F 1; Lucan., 3.220-221; Hyg., 277; Isid., *Orig.*, 1.3.5-6; Phot., s.v. Φοινικῆα γράμματα.) The famous *scholion* on Dionysios Thrax (*Scholia ad Dionysium Thracem (Grammatici Graeci* 3) 183.1 Hilgard) well reflects the discussion at that time: from this passage, it might be inferred that the principal debate about the inventor of the letters mostly orbited around two characters – Kadmos and Danaos – and, consequently, around two different regions, Phoenicia and Egypt.

In this paper, I will try to investigate the reasons why there were two different major traditions and to demonstrate that strong political and cultural motives led ancient authors to prefer one version to the other.

The oldest version appears to be Danaos’ story, an account given by the so-called Μιλησιακοὶ συγγραφεῖς (Hekataios, Dionysios and Anaximander), since the historians named as supporters of the Kadmos’ story are Herodotus and Aristotle, who presented Kadmos as the διάκτορον, “a transmitter”, and Ephorus, who saw him as the pure inventor.

Firstly, I shall try to understand the reason why the Μιλησιακοὶ συγγραφεῖς, in particular, were dealing with Danaos’ version of the story and its consequent links with Egypt. I shall examine the historical period when they lived and wrote their works, a meaningful period for the history of Miletus: in fact, Hekataios and Dionysios lived at the time of the Ionian revolt, while Anaximander spent his life in an epoch particularly hard for the Persians, who might reasonably

be considered Miletus' old enemies. Thus, there could have been various grounds for the version of Danaos' discovery of writing. Firstly, I shall stress not only that Miletus was traditionally linked with Athens and opposed to the Persians, but also that it founded Naucratis in Egypt, the one and only Greek "colony" (Naucratis was technically an *emporion*) in the Egyptian land at that time; in addition, the Milesians supported and helped Egypt against the Assyrians even with auxiliary troops since the oldest times (Fontana 2014). I will outline that the first motive behind the Egyptian tradition of the invention of the alphabet lies, on the one hand, on the historical tradition and on the ties with Egypt; on the other hand, on the aversion to the Persians, who might have played a preeminent role in the Cadmean/Phoenician version, as the Phoenicians were generally considered allies and supporters of the Persians. Secondly, these historians were emphasizing Egypt's role just when this population took a stand against Persia.

Finally, I will try to understand the other tradition and, above all, the reason why the Cadmean story has become the most famous, an account that appears to have been elaborated by Herodotus himself, because of the historian's use of certain expressions, as well underscored by Moggi 1972. I will show that Herodotus was hiding another motive behind his highlighting and drawing our attention to this particular deed of Kadmos and, consequently, behind his relating the writing to Thebes and the Boeotians in general. In addition, I shall underline that the relation which Herodotus had established between the Thebans and the alphabet emerged as an anti-deed of Kadmos, who also had contacts with the Barbarians (=Phoenicians).

I will conclude that Herodotus, who seems to be the first to have introduced the Cadmean version, probably aimed at putting the pro-Persian Thebans in a bad light, whereas the 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.

## Bibliography

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