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Елия Маринова  
(Elia Marinova)

## Palamedes: The Victim and the Hero of Letters

*Abstract.* The ancient interpretations of Palamedes' life and death convey an old intuition that letters may be a dangerous gift, a destructive power which may cause damage or death to the inventor, or even create confrontation with the community. The mythical figure of Palamedes, a hero absent in the Iliad, attracted the attention of several genres and époques because of his important inventions and his tragic death. This paper is a kind of diachronic portrait of the *πρῶτος εὐρετής*, recognized subsequently as a victim or a hero of the letters.

*Key Words:* Palamedes, Greek myths about the origins of the alphabet, Function of letters, Cyclic poems, Attic tragedy, Sophistics.

The idea of the huge importance of alphabetic literacy is present in many ancient myths proclaiming the sacred origin of letters. In Babylon, the gods were constantly recording reality; in Egypt, Thoth was a god-scribe who had a magic power over the human fate. In contrast, it was exclusively mortal men in the Greek mythological tradition who were said to be inventors of the letters or keepers of written records. Amongst the Olympic gods normally indifferent to writing, after his identification with Thoth, Hermes was the only deity to whom invention of the letters and scriptural practices has been attributed. In the following paper, we shall try to find out the features of the mortal *πρῶτος εὐρετής* and to reflect upon the particular mythopoietic function of letters and literacy in the Greek tradition.

The ambivalent notion of the origin or the place of adaptation of the Greek alphabet has been reflected in the controversial literary tradition surrounding the personality of the alphabet-bearer.<sup>1</sup> The story of the invention of the letters by the Phoenician Cadmus is to be explained by the memory of the Greeks of the geographical origin of the alphabet. This legendary account is familiar to us through Herodotus' report on the Phoenician Gephyraeans, who came with Cadmus and brought to

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<sup>1</sup> The adapter, according to the suggestion of B. Powell, *Homer and the Origin of the Greek Alphabet*, Cambridge 1991, 12.

Hellas the alphabet, which had been unknown to the Greeks.<sup>2</sup> Other ancient authors – Pythodor, Anaximander and Hecataeus<sup>3</sup> – presented both Cadmus and Danaus as rivals in the invention of letters. The last Greek epos of the antiquity – *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus of Panopolis credited explicitly Cadmus with bringing the gift of letters from Egypt to Argos. In a comparative portrait of the heroes Cadmus and Danaus and their achievements for mankind the poet wrote that Greece benefited more from Cadmus' invention: "But he, bringing gifts of voice and thought for all Greece, made tools that echoed the tongue, mingling vowels and consonants in a row of integrated harmony. He rounded off a graven model of speaking silence, having learned the ancestral mysteries of the divine art, the Egyptian wisdom..."<sup>4</sup>

There is another figure who is mentioned in the Greek tradition as the *πρῶτος εὐρετής* of the alphabet.<sup>5</sup> It is Palamedes, son of Nauplius, the king of Euboea, and grandson of Poseidon and the Danaid Amythaon. He is said to have been born in Euboea, the birthplace of Greek literacy.<sup>6</sup> Stories about Palamedes were in wide circulation in antiquity, reaching at least as far back as the date of the cyclic poem *Kypria* (seventh century BC), which traced the origin of the Trojan War down to the point where

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<sup>2</sup> Hdt. 5.58–61.

<sup>3</sup> *Scholia in Dionysii Thracis artem grammaticam* 183.1–9 Hilgard. Hecataeus (FGH IF20) champions the view that Danaus brought writing from Egypt.

<sup>4</sup> P. Chuvin (ed.), *Nonnos de Panopolis, Les Dionysiaques*, t. II, Paris 1976. 4.259–265:

...αὐτὰρ ὁ πᾶσι  
Ἑλλάδι φωνήεντα καὶ ἔμφρονα δῶρα κομίζων  
γλώσσης ὄργανα τεύξεν ὁμόθροα, συμφύεος δὲ  
ἁρμονίης στοιχηδὸν ἐς ἄλυσγα σύζυγα μείξας  
γραπτὸν ἀσιγήτοιο τύπον τορνῶσατο σιγῆς,  
πάτρια θεσπεσίης δεδαημένος ὄργια τέχνης,  
Αἰγυπτίης σοφίης...

<sup>5</sup> The following studies treat more or less directly the subject of Palamedes' invention: L. G. Koniaris, "Alexander, Palamedes, Troades, Sisyphus: a Connected Tetralogy?", *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 77, 1973, 85–124; J. A. Clua, "El mite de Palamedes a la Grècia antiga: aspectes canviants d'un interrogant cultural i historic", *Faventia*, 7:2, 1985, 69–93; M. Detienne, *The Writing of Orpheus: Greek Myth in Cultural Context*, transl. by J. Lloyd, The John Hopkins UP 2003, 125–131.

<sup>6</sup> Eudox. 321 Blass; Greg. Naz. Or. 4.107.

Iliad begins. According to this poem, in order to avoid going to Troy, Odysseus had pretended that he was mad. But Palamedes, by placing the infant Telemachus in front of his father's plow, exposed Odysseus as a liar and so forced him to enlist.<sup>7</sup> On several occasions it was Palamedes who saved the Greeks by organizing the distribution of rations and the disposition of the army, or by predicting a famine, and so he aroused the jealousy and hatred of Odysseus and Diomedes, who killed him during a fishing expedition.<sup>8</sup> But *Kypria*, as far as we know, makes no mention of the invention of letters. This fact makes it difficult to explain the following mention in Stesichorus' *Oresteia*, unless we presume that the great sixth-century remodeller of myths enriched the original tale with the letters motif: Στησίχορος δὲ ἐν δευτέρῳ Ὀρεστεΐας... τὸν Παλαμήδην φησὶν εὕρηκέναι τὰ στοιχεῖα.<sup>9</sup>

In the Homeric corpus, the absence of the great hero and benefactor of the Achaean army raised a lot of questions already in the antiquity. Strabo believed that Palamedes is a fictional character created by later authors. Flavius Philostratus explained the "silence" of Homer with the possible discrediting of Odysseus. The Byzantine lexicon Suda explicitly connected Palamedes with Homer, saying that Palamedes was an epic poet and that Homer envied him for his poetic powers.

Palamedes' absence in the Iliad is not so extraordinary, if we examine the topos of the πρῶτος εὐρετής as a post-Homeric development of sixth- and fifth-century rationalism and historical research. Beginning with the sixth century several genres recorded the story of Palamedes and his exploits. The most popular version of the myth which appeared at the time referred to the story of his tragic death. It is preserved in fab. 105 of the first-century author Hyginus which reproduces the content of a lost Euripidean tragedy. We have no papyrus fragments from this play but only quotations found in Greek authors and a parody of an event in the play mentioned in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*, 770ff. According

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<sup>7</sup> *Procl. Chr.* = Allen, *Hom. Op.* 5.103.

<sup>8</sup> This version of the myth is recorded in Pausanias 10.31.1 Παλαμήδην δὲ ἀποπνιγῆναι προελθόντα ἐπὶ ἰχθύων θήραν, Διομήδην δὲ τὸν ἀποκτείναντα εἶναι καὶ Ὀδυσσεά.

<sup>9</sup> Stesichoros fr. 34 B (= PMG 213 Page).

to Hyginus, Odysseus looking forward for revenge falsely accused Palamedes of betraying the Greek cause and of having become a spy for the Trojans. For that purpose he gave a Phrygian captive a forged letter describing the bribery of Palamedes by Priam. The letter was conveniently discovered on the murdered Phrygian, and innocent Palamedes was brought to trial. The prosecutor, Odysseus, asked for the death penalty, which was eventually carried out after Palamedes' apology failed to undermine the falsified evidence against him.

The scholium of the *Thesmophoriazusae*, giving the details of Aristophanes' parody, says that Euripides made Palamedes' brother Oeax carve the story of his death on ships, and likewise upon oars, which he cast into the sea in the hope that their father, Nauplius, might learn from them how Palamedes had met his end. In order to get revenge on the Greeks for his son's unjust execution, Nauplius caused, through deceptive fire-signals, the destruction of a large part of the Greek fleet among the cliffs of the promontory Caphereus in the southeast coast of Euboea.

The false accusation, trial, and condemnation of Palamedes in the last year of the Trojan War represented a favorite topic of Attic tragedy: in addition to Euripides, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Astydamas the Younger are each known to have composed a *Palamedes*, while we know of four different tragedies that staged the revenge of Palamedes' father Nauplius. A staple of these plays appears to have been Palamedes' cataloguing of his beneficial inventions as part of his self-defense.

What is noteworthy about these plays is that they explicitly connect Palamedes with writing. In the preserved fragments of Attic tragedy the emphasis is put on the cultural mission of Palamedes, a reception normal for the time when the great institutions in Athens started to depend more and more on literacy as an instrument of memory and guardian of justice. It was in this context that writing acquired a crucial measure of autonomy: the idea of *isonomia* took the shape of equality before the written law. The subject of Palamedes, varying in detail, was extensively treated by tragedians not only because he devised a way to write down Greek speech or made changes to a preexisting writing,<sup>10</sup> but because he was said to have invented numbers and to have recorded laws.

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<sup>10</sup> Judging from most evidences in Greek and Latin texts, we may take the tradition to

This could explain why Euripides saw the achievement of the hero not in the invention of letters but in putting them in order, in the synthesis of the elements, so that they could serve as a mnemonic device: “It was me, who unassisted created remedy for the oblivion, making syllables out of consonants and vowels, I taught men how to write...”<sup>11</sup> This is completely in line with the notion of the mythological figure as a Promethean type of hero – a founder of a rational model of cosmos, a bearer of new cultural and social norms, who established a new classifying system in which each element, στοιχεῖον, is connected to the others. The same idea is present in his name, a derivative from the Indo-European *medh-*, which means “reflecting, foreseeing”, as well as “measuring, setting of standards”, and *παλα-*, usually linked to *παλάμη*, the word for the inventive hand that takes hold of and makes things, which conveys an idea of the hero’s skill. The lost play of Aeschylus, *Palamedes*, must also have presented the hero as the one who taught writing to the Greeks or established the order of the letters. In the preserved fragment 470, Palamedes, as he lists his inventions, speaks not just as a benefactor, but as a cultural hero who considers his work to be a borderline between civilization and barbarians, a modeling of the world through the number and the letter: “I invented for them the number, that most eminent of discoveries, as well as the synthesis of letters, the memory that stores everything, the mother of the Muses”.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, the treatment of Palamedes’ subject in Attic

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mean that Palamedes invented Greek writing by making changes to the Phoenician system. According to Hyginus, *Fab.* 277, he added eleven new letters to a preexisting seven invented by the Moirai; that is, apparently, Palamedes added consonants to the seven vowels Α Ε Η Ι Ο Υ Ω. Similar reports (Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 7.56.192) say that Palamedes added four letters to the sixteen invented by Kadmos.

<sup>11</sup> Eurip. frg. 578. A. Nauck (ed.), *Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta*, Lipsiae 1926, 542:

τὰ τῆς γε λήθης φάρμακ' ὀρθώσας μόνος,  
ἄφωνα φωνήεντα συλλαβὰς τιθεῖς  
ἐξηῦρον ἀνθρώποισι γράμματ' εἰδέναι.

<sup>12</sup> Aesch. frg. 470. Nauck, 59–60: “Versus tres qui in Prometheo leguntur (459–461) καὶ μὴν ἀριθμὸν ἔξοχον σοφισμάτων/ ἐξηῦρον αὐτοῖς γραμμάτων τε συνθέσεις,/ μνήμην ἀπάντων, μουσομήτορ' ἐργάνην... in Palamede primitus extitisse coni. Kiehl. ad eandem fabulam adesp. fr. 470 rettulit C. Wachsmuth.”

tragedy led one to reflect upon the mental capacities unleashed by the invention of the Greek alphabet and the potentialities of writing in general. The earliest text which records the motif of the written forgery which constitutes evidence against the innocent Palamedes is Euripides' tragedy *Orestes*.<sup>13</sup> By the time letters appear in Euripides, we may assume that writing and reading had become familiar enough concepts in everyday urban life. The epistolary genre figured at the heart of the speech in praise of writing that Palamedes made before a court where he appeared, charged with high treason: "Anyone who is away and has crossed the expanse of the seas can know exactly what is happening far away, in his own house".<sup>14</sup> He was referring to the missive-letter, a mute thing that could make its voice heard as far away as was desired. Another product of letter writing was the will, known as a disposition, and particularly the unilateral will, a sealed, written text, as was commonly used in the fifth century, and which could remain secret until it took effect after the writer's death: "A dying man can let his sons know, in writing, how he is dividing up his fortune, and each heir knows what he is receiving".<sup>15</sup> Finally Palamedes foretold the peace-making omnipotence of writing: "The misfortunes provoked by quarrels and disputes can be ended by a tablet, a tablet that rules out lies".<sup>16</sup>

But the man who thus professed his absolute faith in the truth of letters and writing was to die a victim of false writing. Euripides took up the challenge of staging the paradoxical nature of the letter, which could – in the complex ethical context of tragic drama – disseminate mis-

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<sup>13</sup> *Schol. Orest. Eurip.* 432 mentions γραφὲν πινάκιον... Φρυγίοις γράμμασι. Cf. E. Schwartz (ed.), *Scholia in Euripidem*, vol. I, Berolini 1887, 148. However, a variant of the myth involving a letter as an actual agent of the events must have been popular by that time. A post-Homeric version of the mission of Odysseus and Menelaus to Troy to get back Helen through persuasion places Palamedes in their company as a carrier of a letter from Clytaemnestra to Helen (Tzetz. *Proleg. Alleg. Il.* 405).

<sup>14</sup> Eurip. *Palamedes* frg. 578: ὥστ' οὐ παρόντα ποντίας ὑπὲρ πλακὸς  
τάκεϊ κατ' οἴκους πάντ' ἐπίστασθαι καλῶς...

<sup>15</sup> *ibidem*: παισίν τ' ἀποθνήσκοντα χρημάτων μέτρον  
γράφαντας εἰπεῖν, τὸν λαβόντα δ' εἰδέναι.

<sup>16</sup> *ibidem*: ἃ δ' εἰς ἔριν πίπτουσιν ἀνθρώποις κακὰ  
δέλτος διαῖρεϊ, κοῦκ' ἐᾷ ψευδῇ λέγειν.

information as readily as information. At the same time as Odysseus uses the medium of a letter to dishonor Palamedes, the hero's brother in desperation writes a plea for help on oar-blades which he then tosses out to sea. But in its intention to punish the betrayers, this aroused all the violence (the crash of the Greek fleet near Euboea) that accompanies any form of deception, including writing that lies. And, if the irony is a stranger to the mythopoietic conscience, the literary versions of Palamedes' story produce irony almost unwillingly. The key point in the reception of the image of Palamedes – the inventor of letters – is exactly the deceptive (false or misrepresenting) nature of the written word. The persuasiveness of Odysseus' blame shows clearly enough that letters do not always rule out lies. Ironically, the inventor of the letters could not cope with the consequences of literacy, being destroyed physically and morally by a forged letter and becoming a victim of his own creation. So the Attic tragedy became the genre which transformed the variety of local legends about Palamedes into one literary myth about the sharing of the knowledge and its inherent tragic ambiguity.

As of the fourth century BC the fate of the hero provided a common subject in rhetorical schools. The sophists saw in Palamedes' story merely a juridical case and paid attention not so much to the huge potential of the word – true or false – as to the ethical aspect of the defense of Palamedes. Gorgias, in his speech set in defense of Palamedes, has the hero claim to be a great benefactor of the Greeks and all mankind because of his many inventions – the weights and measures, the number, the signals, and *pessoi* as a harmless pastime for leisure: "Who else could have made human life resourceful from resourceless and ornamented from unadorned, by inventing written laws as guardians of justice, and writing as instrument of memory...?"<sup>17</sup> In the catalogue of Palamedes' inventions each one represents a symbolic signifying system – written laws structure the customs of the city, weights, measures, and number regulate material property, fire signals communicate messages over long distances, and finally, there is a kind of civic symbolism inherent in the

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<sup>17</sup> Gorgias frg. B 11a30 DK: τίς γὰρ ἂν ἐποίησε τὸν ἀνθρώπειον βίον πόριμον ἐξ ἀπόρου καὶ κεκοσμημένον ἐξ ἀκόσμου,... εὐρῶν νόμους τε γραπτῶν φύλακας τοῦ δικαίου, γράμματά τε μνήμης ὄργανον...



structure of the games of order (*pessoi*). As Gorgias' rhetoric makes it clear, all these inventions have a positive moral value and clearly show a connection to the order of the Greek polis. So, all inventions of Palamedes seem to have represented the egalitarian tradition supporting the newly emergent polis as its source of authority. In this way, Palamedes reborn in the sophistic would illustrate the civic appropriation of the Trojan War story and the attempt to remodel the concept of the hero.

One might notice, however, that Palamedes "the Sophist" in the speeches of Gorgias and Pseudo-Antidamas marked as much the climax in the vindication of the hero, legally speaking, as the fading away of the original message of the myth. By the end of the second century, Palamedes had assumed the features of a universal culture hero. Euhemeristic interpretations like *De excidio Troiae* of Dares the Phrygian presented Palamedes as a commander-in-chief of the Achaean army in a clumsy attempt to revise the story of the *Iliad* and to undo the evil caused to the hero. And yet, not all late antique reconstructions of the forgotten myth followed the trivial way of the historic interpretation. For a last time, Palamedes was reborn in a new mystical context in the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* and the *Heroicus* of Flavius Philostratus.<sup>18</sup> The author credited Palamedes with a greater importance than any other hero of the Trojan War, but what is more important, he rather took an interest in the sacred character of his invention, the letters, than in the ethical and legal aspect of Palamedes' fate. One of the most striking episodes in the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* is the story of how Palamedes was brought back to life: Apollonius with his pupils found the forgotten tomb of Palamedes on the Mysian coast of Asia Minor opposite Lesbos and dug out his statue. They recovered the sanctuary of the hero, put the statue to face the passing ships and let the inscription ΘΕΙΩΙ ΠΑΛΑΜΗΔΕΙ, "Dedicated to the Holy Palamedes", be carved into its base. Then, Apollonius spoke his prayer at the grave of the hero who has forgotten the wrath that he once felt toward the Achaeans. The exact way of how he addressed Palamedes

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<sup>18</sup> *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana* is certainly a work of Philostratus the Athenian (170–247), while the *Heroicus* has been more commonly attributed to his nephew, Philostratus the Lemnian.

conveys the image of a more spiritual, more exalted Martyr of the Truth as the Second Sophistics would like to see it: "Palamedes, who made words, who made the Muses, who made me!"<sup>19</sup> There are apparent reasons why the personality of the unduly ignored hero attracted the interest of the aretology. The development of this idea has been anticipated already in the famous phrase "I pity you, o Truth, who died before me!" (according to Euripides (*Schol. Or.* 432) and quoted by Socrates as a jibe at Athenian democratic justice (*Pl. Apol.* 41b)). But it was not the martyrdom and the posthumous vindication of Palamedes which came to the fore in late antique texts. According to the Greeks, writing was not only invented but also inventive. This fascination about the inventiveness of letters and the autonomy of writing is clearly reflected in a story occurring in *Heroicus*. Odysseus, being jealous because of the reputation of wisdom which Palamedes enjoyed in the Greek camp, blamed him for stealing the invention of letters from the migrating cranes. The answer of Palamedes suggests the idea that he had been chosen to be a mediator of the heavenly gift, and that he had been given the power to understand the alphabetic secret represented by the cranes' flight: "I did not invent the letters, rather, they found me; in times gone they have dwelt at the home of the Muses, waiting for a man like me; indeed, gods reveal such things with the help of wise men".<sup>20</sup> The idea of "the chosen mediator" passes over to the next reincarnations of the hero as a constant part of his character. In the *Life of Apollonius* Iarches pointed to a stripling of about twenty years of age, who excelled everyone in his natural aptitude for philosophy, and yet in spite of all these advantages detested philosophy. In fact, he must have been once Palamedes of Troy, who did not meet with any praise from Homer, and was outwitted by Odysseus in spite of his innocence, so that he developed an aversion to the wisdom, which was of no use to him. And yet, in spite of his ill-luck

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<sup>19</sup> Flavius Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, vol. I, London, 1948. *Vita Ap.* 4.13 ναὶ Παλάμηδες, δι' ὃν λόγοι, δι' ὃν Μοῦσαι, δι' ὃν ἐγώ.

<sup>20</sup> *Heroicus*, ed. L. de Lannoy, Teubner 1977, 42: "ἐγὼ γράμματα οὐχ εὔρον" εἶπεν, "ἀλλ' ὑπ' αὐτῶν εὐρέθην· πάλαι γὰρ ταῦτα ἐν Μουσῶν οἴκῳ κείμενα ἐδεῖτο ἀνδρὸς τοιοῦτου, θεοὶ δὲ τὰ τοιαῦτα δι' ἀνδρῶν σοφῶν ἀναφαίνουσι."

this estranged boy was still “Palamedes, for indeed he can write without having learnt the letters”.<sup>21</sup>

In order to explain the unique place of Palamedes among many other inventors – mythological and historical figures like Prometheus, Linus, Musaeus, Symonides from Keos, we should go through the catalogues of Palamedes’ characteristics and contributions in the ancient sources.<sup>22</sup> One way of approaching Palamedes’ personality is to set letters and literacy in the context of other inventories of his, which seem to have enjoyed a peculiar popularity in the fifth and fourth centuries. He was the first to plan the positions of the army beneath the wall of Troy and to organize the night watch, he introduced the troops to Phoenician letters and used them to organize the distribution of rations, he invented the games of draughts, an early form of backgammon and the first dice, played with cubes inscribed with letters, and ingenious numbering. The common thread that unites all elements in this complex image is the theme of putting things in order, often by means of careful measurement, and reducing them to their essential elements. In this way, the common factor behind an alphabet, counters, and series of numbers lies not only in Palamedes’ active intelligence but also in certain deep affinities that, for the Greeks, linked objects which seem to belong to different categories. The “atomic” character of the alphabetic signs as reflected by the Latin word *elementa* and the Greek word στοιχεῖα, explains why Palamedes, to whom early epic attributed discoveries of the most diverse nature, was recognised by the tragedians of the fifth century and by the sophists as the πρῶτος εὐρετής and founder of the legal regulations. The betrayed ally of the Achaeans could, like Prometheus, claim to have imposed order upon an existence till then confused and out of hand.

At the same time, the myth of Palamedes shows this hero of inventive intelligence too normative, too reflective and tragic when set in contrast to his rival in cleverness, Odysseus. Till the end of the antiquity the interpretations of his story retain a memory of the very old intuition that

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<sup>21</sup> *Vita Ap.* 3.22 ἐστι δὲ οὗτος Παλαμήδης, ὃς καὶ γράφει μὴ μαθὼν γράμματα.

<sup>22</sup> A comprehensive description of Palamedes’ inventions in W. H. Roscher, *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, Leipzig 1898, Bd. III, Abt. 1, 1264–1273.

*Елиа Маринова (Elia Marinova)*

letters may be a dangerous gift, a destructive power which may cause damages and death to his inventor/bearer or even may place him in opposition to the community. It is not by coincidence that in many myths the motif of the letter/letters is matched by the motif of the isolation of the hero from his usual surrounding. Letters, like other “dangerous gifts” in Greek mythology, endow the mortal man with a new mental flexibility, but endanger his place in the human world as well. They may serve as means of integration, and of isolation, according to circumstances. This explains why the interest in Palamedes’ fate fluctuated in different époques depending on what his invention seemed to represent – an elitist or an egalitarian tradition.

In the story of the first inventor two notions of the magical function of letters meet: they may be a foundation of a rational model of the cosmos, but they may be exploited for their potential of miscommunication as well. An investigation along these lines might shed some light on the specific features of the figures whom the Greeks regarded as inventors of writing. It would bring us nearer to the understanding of the meaning of letters beyond their formal, material aspect – as an element of the mythopoietic system and a magic technology which exceeds the human control.

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