

## **Cadmus (with apologies to Moschus, Ovid, Euripides, Homer, Ps-Apollodorus and Pindar)**

As Herodotus, the Father of History writes, Cadmus, the first King of Thebes, was the son of Agenor who was King of Tyre in Phoenicia (modern Lebanon); his mother was called Telephassa; his brothers were Cilix (the father of the Cilicians of Turkey) and Phoinix (who gave his name to the Phoenicians), or (according to other versions) Thasos, Syros, Kepheus and/or Phineus. His sisters were Europe (a free-spirited girl with long hair, a plump bottom and really rather lovely breasts who eventually gave her name to a continent, a Union, a currency and a rather lucrative field of legal practice), Electra, Eidothea and/or Isaie or Melia. (Genealogy is hard: all those different traditions, and no way to make them fit!) Little is known of Cadmus' childhood and youth: presumably he went to school and studied like the other little Phoenicians, learning to scrawl the famous Phoenician letters from right to left across his wax tablet and to perform the complicated art of calculating fractions, multiplying, and dividing on an abacus; perhaps he even learned to play a few Chopin preludes on the lyre. He danced in choruses and led the bull to the altar when his father performed his yearly sacrifice to the great god Baal. His mother, we can be sure, loved him, and his father the king brought him up as a prince of royal blood. He was, we may assume, an accomplished swordsman and the sort of manly man you would want to have on your side in a tavern brawl, a cavalry charge, or if you went to sack a city. He drove up and down in his chariot and skippered his father's flagship. When ambassadors came from Egypt, Assyria or the mysterious Ethiopians further south bringing pots of myrrh, ivory tusks, and phoenix eggs in exchange for Lebanese cedar wood, he told dirty jokes and drank them all under the table. As a prince, he grew strong and tall and when he walked through the city of Tyre in his armour with his helmet plume nodding in the wind, all the maidens' hearts went thump.

But Cadmus was not to marry one of the maidens of Tyre: no, his destiny lay elsewhere, far away on another continent. One fine morning, Europa went for a walk with her maiden friends by the seaside. (The poets say rather a lot about the clothes and jewels she was wearing, but it hardly matters; it goes without saying that she always wore Chanel no. 5). They danced and played in the flowery spring meadow, some picking the narcissus, others hyacinth, others violets. They were not to enjoy these innocent pleasures long. For great Zeus saw her, and the arrows of Desire, the only weapon that can conquer even that mightiest of gods, thudded straight into his ribs. He conceived a violent passion for Europa: fearing the anger of his wife Hera, who of course knew everything as soon as it happened, he transformed himself into a muscular white bull (gods, after all, can do anything, no matter how hard) and was suddenly there, strolling bowlegged across the dewy field. The wind fell; silence reigned; not even the seagulls could be heard as the creature approached the Tyrian maidens. Little lamplets of desire flashed in his dewy brown eyes; cute little silvery horns rose up like the pointed tips of the crescent moon; his well-toned bull body breathed a heavenly and divine perfume of lust. (The recipe has unfortunately since been lost). He gave out sweet little euphonic bellows of mooing. The girls felt no fear; indeed all any of them wanted was to approach the creature and caress it; to smell that divine scent and hear the beautiful sighing. The bull stopped in front of Europa and threw itself at her feet. The poets say that he raised his head and licked her neck; far from horrified at this boldness, she said to herself that the creature was really rather sweet for a big beefy bull; she wiped away the frothy bull-slobber from its lips with her dainty hands and planted a kiss on the god's wet nose. This only made him moo

more seductively; not even the sound of Arabian oboes in the torrid desert night could equal the god's soft music then. He raised his head and looked meaningfully at the girl ('what a strange creature', she thought; 'how intelligent it seems' — wrong again of course: the ruler of earth and heaven and father of gods and men isn't actually all that sharp, he just knows what he wants and, like Berlusconi, has the infinite power he needs to get it — or *her* — every time with monotonous regularity), and then gestured with his nose toward the broad white back speckled with little black spots. 'Sit up there', he seemed to say, and Europa decided that is just what she would do. 'Let's sit on the bull and enjoy ourselves', she told her playmates (the Greek is ambiguous); 'he's big enough for us all and very sweet and nice; not at all like most bulls; he seems to think like a man and indeed, lacks only speech'. Smiling, she put her arms around the creature's neck and lifted herself into the saddle. Zeus, when he felt the thighs of his beloved gripping his ribs (yes, dear reader, the innuendo is almost at an end) heaved himself up and took off at top speed for the waiting sea. Europa panicked: she looked back at her playmates and held her arms out in useless supplication. They could not help her: her girlish cries were swallowed by the sudden shrieking of the seagulls and the howling of the wind. The bull cantered across the wave-tops like a racing dolphin, crashing through the spray with dry hoofs. Poseidon, Zeus' brother, always ready to help out when a girl is involved, smoothed the sea into a broad and smooth Mycenaean autobahn.

As her homeland's shore vanished below the horizon, and there was nothing to be heard or seen for miles around except keening seagulls, the sea leviathans which rose to gambol and play at the god's feet, the chorus of Nereids who rose wet and naked from their undersea caverns to serenade his passing, the horde of scaly blue-haired Tritons trumpeting an orgiastic Ode to Joy through conch-shells, and the hideous salty spray that lapped against her feet and made her shiver through her dress, Europa recalled the strange dream that had come to her only the previous night, just before dawn, when sleep holds the eyelids most tightly in his soft bonds, and the people of Dreams wanders freely over the pastures of the mind. She thought she saw two great women, one in foreign, the other in local dress, were fighting over her. The one said that she had given birth to her, the other with her mighty hands pulled her over to her side, and said that it was fated that Europa should be hers, by the power of Zeus. She had leapt worried from her bed and remonstrated with herself that only fools believe in dreams; now, however, she realised that it was all coming true. She gripped the bull's hard horn (no, dear reader: no innuendo here!) with her hand (the warm breeze blew her dress open like the sail of a ship) and she peered around in dismay. Her fluttering garments streamed behind her in the wind. She asked the mysterious bull where it was taking her, but he, having no more use for musical moos, was strangely silent until they reached Zeus' own native island of Crete, where he, stripping off his disguise and revealing himself to her, fathered on her two mighty sons, Minos and Rhadamanthys. Whether she enjoyed it is not recorded. Indeed, nothing was ever heard of her in Tyre again, or indeed anywhere else. People were angry about it for a while, but they forgot until the next girl was abducted — in the end, of course, Europe and Asia were fated to become enemies and clash in a great battle.

While Zeus was having his way with Europa among the fragrant wild orchids of the Cretan White Mountains, a search was under way for her back at Tyre. Agenor was stalking through the palace, hoarse from shouting and chainsmoking Gitanes. The army had combed the mountain forests and the shore for three days. Hundreds had been arrested, and three radar operators shot for incompetence. The Home Secretary,

after announcing that the Government would not, of course, negotiate with terrorists bovine or human, had afterwards been forced to reconsider this principled position. But there was no one to negotiate with, and since all witnesses clearly stated that, when its position was last plotted, the white bull had been heading for international waters in the general direction of Cyprus, the King finally called a meeting of his Secret Council to discuss the sending of a naval Task Force. All his ministers and sons gathered in a bunker hidden far beneath the palace. Cadmus staggered in late, reeking of sex and alcohol, the sleep still in his eyes (he'd been painting the town red again). Agenor, at the head of the table under the picture of his father Baal II the Great ('Der alte Blitz') and surrounded by his generals, was in the middle of a rant (all too common), screaming like Bruno Ganz in *Downfall*. He had a loud voice for an overweight vegetarian Phoenician. 'Shitheads! Cretins! Useless mushrooms!', Cadmus heard through the door, 'why do I employ you? You say you can defend this city against all threats, but when I order a charge, the chariots don't work; the enemy's archers shoot better and their bows last longer; you always blame everything on the mud and the weather; every week there's another building society to bail out and when that damned floozy of a daughter brings shame on the whole royal house of Baal, you stand there like dumb swine and do nothing: you can't even find me a body....!' At this point, Cadmus opened the door from the hallway: but as he pulled himself up to his full height and tried to swagger into the room, his head intersected with the concrete lintel, and his rapier somehow became entangled with his spurs. 'Ouch!' he shouted, and fell flat on his face, his ears ringing. All eyes turned toward him, some angry, some pitying. Dread silence fell, a silence so deep that you could hear the ash fall from the tip of Agenor's cigar. His cold grey eyes fell on the young man, who was slowly staggering to his feet, his left arm entangled with the lanyard of his pistol, and his right still throbbing where his elbow had intersected with the floor. He watched Cadmus for a long time, allowing the rage to build until it became a gigantic hot-air balloon in his squat broad chest (he loved that feeling), and when the balloon was ready to burst, he heaved himself toward the boy, bending over him at the waist, and spat three times into his face. 'Cadmus! So this is the respect you show your father! This, O great Baal, is why one should have sons, so that they stand beside you in your hour of need. This is how you pay back everything I invested in your education. I should have you shot. I should have your eyes put out. I *will* have you shot!' And as Cadmus' tears, fat salty drops of mingled misery, pain and blank incomprehension began to fall, and as he began to mumble useless excuses, the little man pulled himself up to his full height, opened his mouth again, and began to howl. He banished his son from Tyre on pain of death, giving him a fast navy cruiser and a crew: he must leave immediately and speak to no one, returning only when he had found his sister Europa dead or alive.

Cadmus was a refugee: rejected by his father and all who loved him. A guard of Royal Marines frogmarched him to the boat and his waiting crew: Phoenicians all who, it seems, were under the same sentence of banishment simply by association with him. (This is how things work in countries unblessed by the liberal and happy freedoms we enjoy). Some say his mother also went with him. The boat cast off, and exited the harbour without a sound. Cadmus did not look back: he was too busy vomiting over the side. When the captain came and asked him for a course-setting, he simply stared across the grey expanse of sea. Finally, one word passed his lips: 'West'. The boat wandered for many weeks across the sea, round Cyprus to Crete, and on to Thera and the islands of the Aegean. But no one had seen or even heard of Europa; indeed, they did not even know that she had given her name to the continent where

they lived. Cadmus had many adventures: he visited the Thracians, founded the Mysteries of Samothrace, brought writing to the peasants of Greece, and even saved Zeus from a multiheaded monster, Typhon, who threatened to destroy the entire Big Cosmic Society of the Olympian gods by putting him to sleep with his flute-playing. But then the food and water ran out, the crew mutinied and some of them had to be put ashore to found cities all over the Aegean; finally, Cadmus and ten men, half-dead from starvation and scurvy, drifted ashore in the country of Boeotia, where the Euripus runs thundering between the fertile fields of Orchomenos and the horse-pastures of fair Euboea. The castaways managed to get a short way inland, when they were arrested by the Gla Home Guard, imprisoned in a detention centre, held for months without a hearing, and brutally interrogated with the latest Assyrian police methods. There was some dispute about Cadmus' credentials. His story, for one thing, didn't really stack up: this business about girls and bulls and tyrannical fathers sounded rather too much like a folktale, and anyway, wasn't there a rumour going around that a certain young man had been banished from Tyre for killing his brother Linus in cold blood? And yet it was all true; but it's hard to get to the bottom of anything in mythology.

To make a long story short, Cadmus wasn't arrested at all: the plains of Boeotia, Ares' favourite stomping-ground, were then as empty as the Antarctic — there were no people for Cadmus to meet. He and his men marched slowly inland, building up their strength and living on wild berries and honey and whatever they could shoot. One night, as he lay sleeping, Cadmus too saw a dream... No, no dream — he and his men, marching south west in easy stages, came finally to Delphi, where the great oracle lay at the belly-button of the Earth. Apollo had not yet been born, and there was no Pythian priestess: you walked to the edge of a great chasm, and spoke your question, and the voice of the Earth Mother answered it directly. And when Cadmus spoke his question 'How shall I find Europa', the Earth answered:

*Forbear to seek what you will never find.*

Cadmus was thunderstruck. 'But then I will never be able to go home! What do you want me to do?' The Earth Mother told him that when he left the oracle, he would see a herd of cattle; a white one would begin to walk away on its own; he should follow the white cow, and where it lay down to rest, there he must find his great city. To be honest, the exercise pleased Cadmus not a bit; and his men were even less happy at the prospect of wandering aimlessly in pursuit of a cow, but it is not for mortals to dispute the expressed will of the gods, and in any case things happened as the oracle had said: when they left the oracle, the cow was there, and it looked at them, moored impatiently, and moved off, gesturing them to follow. It led them back to Boeotia (which, after all, means 'Cowistan'), and walked and walked until it reached a broad plateau that rose up sharply from the surrounding plain. There the cow rested, near a spring sacred to Ares which was called Dirce. (No one knows why it was then called Dirce, or indeed who called it that since no one was there before Cadmus, but it was called Dirce, and that is all). One by one, Cadmus sent his men to the spring to fetch water so that he could sacrifice the white cow to Athene. But no one returned, for by the spring of Dirce lived a huge serpent, almost as old as the world and with considerably more teeth, that hurled itself hissing upon Cadmus' men and killed them one by one. Finally, with most of his men gone, Cadmus put his armour on and went to investigate, and there by the spring he found the terrifying snakes, surrounded by the bodies of his sailors. It towered reeking above him, but he put up his shield as he'd been taught in the Basic Dragon-Killing Techniques for Heroes course at Tyre military academy, and plunged his sword straight into the heart of the beast.

The dragon was dead and the town's water-supply secure, but Cadmus was on his own. One cannot found a city with three men and a cow. Cadmus was in despair; but Athena saw his good intentions and came to his aid. 'Why, Cadmus, do you stand and gaze on the dragon you have slain? You too shall be a serpent for men to gaze upon'. He must, she said, must plough the field of the plateau near the spring, and cutting out the dragon's teeth, he must sow them like seeds in the furrows. When he did this, at first nothing happened, but then a strange harvest began to spring out of the ground, first the tip of a spear here, a helmet there (that was at six AM): when the sun rose to the highest point of his heavenly journey, a great crop of grim mailed warriors stood in the field, like an orchard of bronze trees. Great fear seized Cadmus as their eyes turned towards him all at once. He turned to run and threw a pebble into the crowd: all at once, the Sown Warriors began to move. They turned on one another and slew each other with their long spears and sharp swords, every man for himself; there was a great clatter of iron on bronze; but they did so silently, like machines, never uttering a word or even a cry of pain or pity. In the end, only five remained alive, leaning exhausted but proud on their spears. They addressed him, and together with Cadmus, they founded the city of Thebes, whose sons are still as hard and inflexible as the warriors who sprang from the Dragon's teeth.

Cadmus lived to old age as the King of the city of Sown Men that he founded. The plateau was filled with houses and temples and became the Kadmeia, the sacred acropolis of Thebes. Cadmus had to go and spend eight years penal servitude for having killed the dragon, who was the son of Ares the War-god, but when he returned Athene made him king, and Zeus gave him Harmonia, the immortal daughter of Ares and Aphrodite as his wife. The Muses and Apollo sang the wedding song, and the gods were all present at the wedding-feast: the last time but one that they mixed in this way with mortals. Cadmus became the happiest of men. He led the folk to war and conquered many cities. He and Harmonia had four daughters: Ino, Semele, Agave and Autonoe; some say they also had a son. And it was through his children that great sadness entered Cadmus' life. Semele, his favourite daughter, was raped by Zeus and gave birth to a great god, Dionysus; but when she asked the god to show himself to her in his real glory, she was consumed in the brilliance, died, and became a crown of stars. The fate of the other daughters was also bound up with Dionysus: all died horribly, having slain their own children; Ino became the White Goddess who saves men from death at sea. Today in Thebes, the maenads or mad women who worship Dionysus trace their lineage from the daughters of Cadmus. But when the god, expelled from Thebes, returned to claim his birthright, Cadmus and Harmonia, already very old, were exiled from the city once again; they wandered through the hills to Illyria, where they were welcomed, and ruled again as kings until, transformed into snakes, they died. They say that Cadmus had a son there, Illyrius, after whom the Illyrians are named. He and Harmonia after death came with the help of Zeus or Ares to the Elysian Fields, and live there still among the heroes of those ancient days. Some poets say his story tells us that mortal happiness is never long-lasting. No man should be accounted happy until he is dead and buried. But others say that it tells us we should hope for better things even at the lowest point of our sufferings. All human anguish is eventually straightened out by the gods.

In the end, then, all we have is platitudes. Is there a meaning to this tale? There are as many, I think, as there are places and ways in which it has been told.