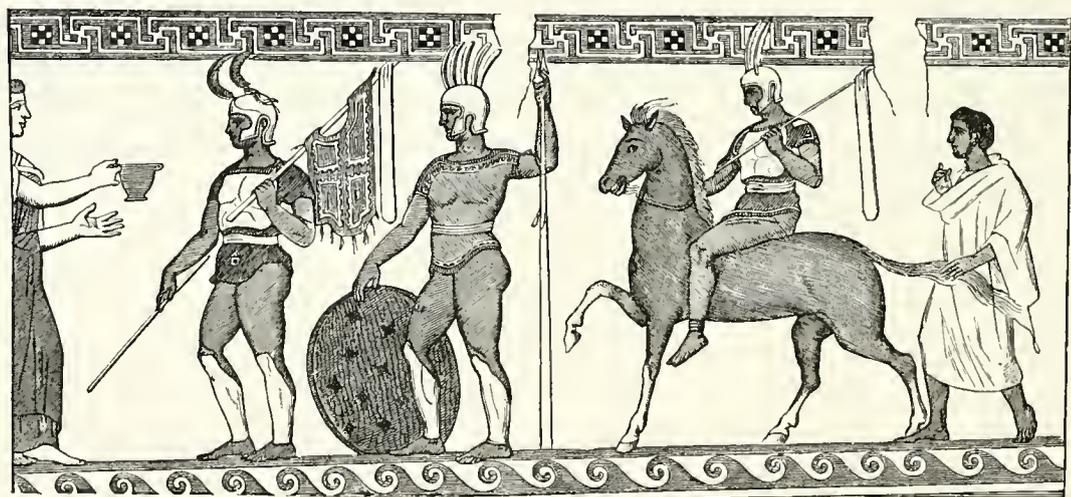


PLATO AND THE CROSS.

BY THE EDITOR.

CHRISTIANITY, the religion of the cross, although founded upon the scriptures of the Hebrews, developed upon the classical soil of ancient Greece and other provinces of the Roman Empire. In order to understand the character of the new religion that spread with wonderful rapidity over the big cities of Egypt,



THE CROSS ON GREEK STANDARDS.

Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy, we must be familiar with the dominant ideas that began to take hold of the masses of the people; and back of them, behind the highest culture of the age, lay the philosophy of Plato.

Plato will come to be recognised more and more as the fore runner of Christianity, as its prophet and as he who made the paths for it level and straight. His philosophy of the soul, his conception of God, his notions of Heaven and Hell, his theory of ideas (of which the Logos, as his disciples, the Neo-Platonists, concluded from Platonic premises, is the comprehensive unity)

foreshadow in metaphysical terms the doctrines of Christianity, the latter being in many respects simply a popular and religious expression of the abstract thoughts of Plato's philosophy. What has Plato to say of the cross?

The cross (*σκόλοψ* or *στανρός*) as the wooden instrument of the most cruel and degrading execution, is to Plato not yet identified with the figure of two intersecting lines, be it erect $+$ or standing on edge \times . The latter, the figure of two intersecting lines, is to him a symbol of deep significance, being the form of the soul, while the former, the instrument of a disgraceful death, is the extremity of suffering.

Plato mentions the X-cross in his story of the creation, where he tries to reconcile the astronomical and religious convictions, the result of which are theories which prepare the way for mysticism and the doctrines of the Kabala.

In *Timæus* (34-36) we read that God created the universe as a God, an animated cosmos, and he made him spherical without organs, feet or hands, for the God had no need of them. Plato continues :

“The movement suited to his spherical form was assigned to him, being of all the seven movements that which is most appropriate to mind and intelligence.”

And “in the centre he created the soul, which is diffused throughout the body, making the body also its exterior environment.”

“God did not make the soul after the body, although we are speaking of them in this order. . . . He made the soul in origin and excellence prior to and older than the body, to be its ruler and mistress.”

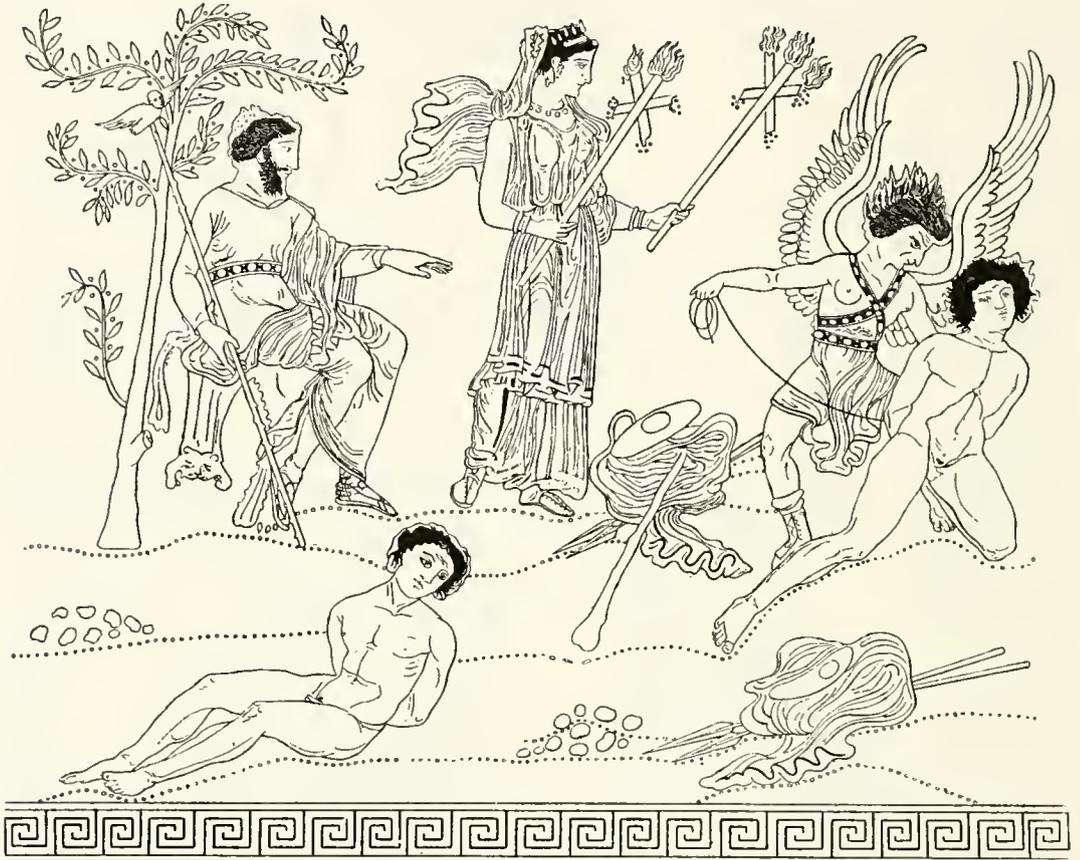
“And God made the soul out of the following elements and on this wise : Out of the indivisible and unchangeable, and also out of that which is divisible and has to do with material bodies, he compounded a third and intermediate kind of essence, partaking of the nature of the same and of the other, and this compound he placed accordingly in a mean between the indivisible, and the divisible and material. He took the three elements of the Same, the Other, and the Essence, and mingled them into one form, compressing by force the reluctant and unsociable nature of the Other into the Same.”

The proportions in which the three elements “Sameness, Otherness, and Essence” are mingled may be omitted here. Plato continues :

“This entire compound he divided lengthways into two parts, which he joined to one another at the centre like the letter X, and bent them into a circular form connecting them with themselves and each other at the point opposite to their original meeting-point; and, comprehending them in a uniform revolution upon the same axis, he made the one the outer and the other the inner circle. Now the motion of the outer circle he called the motion of the same, and the motion of the inner circle the motion of the other or diverse. The motion of the same he carried round by the side to the right, and the motion of the diverse diagonally to the left.

And he gave dominion to the motion of the same and like, for that he left single and undivided ; but the inner motion he divided in six places and made seven unequal circles having their intervals in ratios of two and three, three of each, and bade the orbits proceed in a direction opposite to one another ; and three [Sun, Mercury, Venus] he made to move with equal swiftness, and the remaining four [Moon, Saturn, Mars, Jupiter] to move with unequal swiftness to the three and to one another, but in due proportion."

Plato's doctrine of the two axles that cross each other in the shape of a \times must be understood in a mathematical, not a me-



PROSERPINE CARRYING TWO CROSS-TORCHES.

Theseus and Pirithous venturing down to Hades for the purpose of rescuing Proserpine, the daughter of Ceres, are made prisoners and bound by an Erinyes. Theseus is at last rescued by Hercules. Pluto holds in his hand a scepter on the top of which sits the dismal owl as an *avis funebris*.

(From an Etruscan Vase. Baumeister, *Denkmäler des class. Altertums*.)

chanical, sense ; for if they were solid axles they could not turn in the way described by Plato. His idea of the soul of the universe as being in the shape of the letter X, which is a cross on edge, is perhaps primarily due to the sacredness which ancient religious traditions attached to this symbol, but the thought took root in his mind and found its justification in geometrical and astronomical considerations.

In order to appreciate the importance of Plato's thought of the X, the cross on edge, we must bear in mind that his conception of



HADES, SHOWING PROSERPINE WITH THE CROSS TORCH, AND TRIPTOLEMUS AND RHADAMANTHUS WITH CROSS-RIBBONS.

(Greatly reduced from *Mon. Inst.*, VIII., 9.)

Picture of a vase found at Altamura, representing a period in which the fear of Hell had become greatly subdued and the belief in its terrors is offset by the legend of a return from the realm of the dead and the conquest of death.

[The upper center shows Pluto and Proserpine, the rulers of the Nether World, in their palace, the former with scepter and Cantharus, or sacred cup, the latter holding the cross-torch and a dish filled with fruits and flowers. Cantharus means both scarabæus-beetle, the Egyptian symbol of immortality, and the drinking vessel used in the mysteries, which probably derives its name from some unknown connexion with the scarabæus. Underneath we see Hercules taming the three-headed Cerberus in the moment of crossing the Acheron, which originates (see Homer, *Odyssey*, X, 513) in the conflux of Cocytus and Pyriphlegethon. Hermes points out the road leading back to the upper world. The Danaïdes with the water vessels on the right bear their punishment with placidity, while Sisyphus on the left seems to be more severely taxed. Dire Necessity (*Ἀνάγκη*) holds the whip in her right hand, but her left extends to the sufferer a laurel branch. (The branch is missing in many similar pictures. It is apparently not an apple branch, which was a symbol of Nemesis, as some archæologists suggest.)

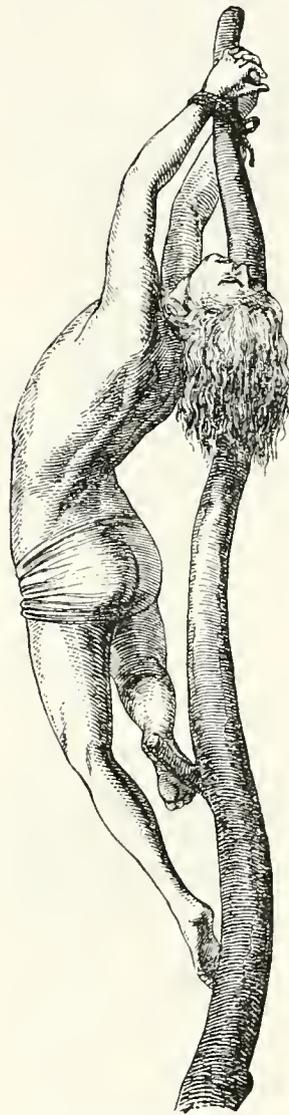
The upper scene on the right shows the ancestor of Hercules and Hippodamia, Pelops, in a Phrygian cap, conversing with Myrtilus who promises to remove the nail from a wheel of Enomaus's waggon in the race for Hippodamia, his bride, by which trick he remains victorious. Underneath are the judges of the dead, Triptolemus, Æacus, and Rhadamanthus, the latter in the attitude of pleading a case with great zeal.

The upper scene on the left represents Megæra and her sons, the Heraclides, innocent victims of a cruel fate in life, who are here comforted. Below this group we see Orpheus with lyre in hand, approaching the palace to ask Proserpine for the release of Eurydice. The Erinyes, or avenging demons (called *ΠΟΙΝΑΙ*) in the picture have lost their terrible appearance and suffer the singer to pass by unmolested.]

this God as the universe as a deity, as "the first-born of all creatures" and the created type of all other gods and beings, comes

close to the Christian conception of God the Son, in whom God the Father revealed himself. God the Father is eternity in its absolute significance; but God, the first-born and archetype of all existence is the revelation of eternity in time. Plato explains this thought as follows :

“When the father and creator saw the being that it moved and lived, and that it became the ideal image of the eternal gods, he rejoiced, and in his joy determined to make the paradigm still more like the original; and as this was eternal, he sought to make the universe eternal, so far as might be. Now the nature of the ideal being was everlasting, but to bestow this attribute in its fullness upon a creature was impossible. Wherefore he resolved to have a moving image of eternity, and when he set in order the heaven, he made this image eternal but moving according to number, while eternity itself rests in unity; and this image we call time.¹ For there were no days and nights and months and years before the heaven was created, but when he constructed the heaven he created them also. They are all parts of time, and the past and future are created species of time, which we unconsciously but wrongly transfer to the eternal essence; for we say that he ‘was,’ he ‘is,’ he ‘will be,’ but the truth is that ‘is’ alone is properly attributed to him, and that ‘was’ and ‘will be’ are only to be spoken of becoming in time, for they are motions, but that which is immovably the same cannot become older or younger by time, nor ever did or has become, or hereafter will be, older or younger, nor is subject at all to any of those states which affect moving and sensible things and of which generation is the cause. These are the forms of time, which imitates eternity and revolves according to a law of number. Moreover, when we say that what has become *is* become and what becomes *is* becoming, and that what will become *is* about to become and that the non-existent *is* non-existent,—all these are inaccurate modes of expression.”

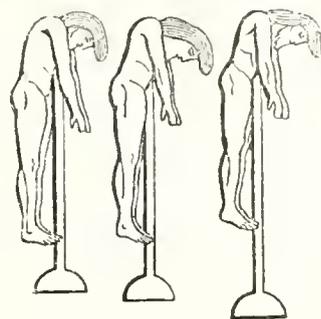


CRUCIFIXION ON A
SIMPLE POLE.

The slanting cross is a religious symbol in ancient Greece, the significance of which seems lost. We find the judges of courts and priests, as pictured on vases, dressed with ribbons crossing over their breast, and the cross-torch plays an important part in the Eleusinian mysteries as a symbol of resurrection, but we have no means now of finding out the reason or the peculiar use of this strange utensil. Proserpine, the wife of Hades and goddess of rejuvenated nature, holds it in her hands.

¹We understand Plato to say, that God is eternal in the sense of being above time, but the second God, the universe is eternal in the sense of infinite duration in time.

While the figure of two intersecting lines is a symbol of deep significance to Plato, the emblem of the God incarnate in the universe, he looks upon crucifixion, or death by impalement, as the utmost extreme of disgrace and suffering, and in speaking of the realisation of the ideal of justice which is to him the harmonised totality of all virtues in their perfection, he declares that the perfectly just man must be just, merely for the love of justice, and not on account of worldly blessings that might accrue from its practice. Therefore the perfectly just man will be tried, will suffer all kinds of ills on account of his justice and finally be crucified, yet with all that he will rather be than appear just. Plato says :

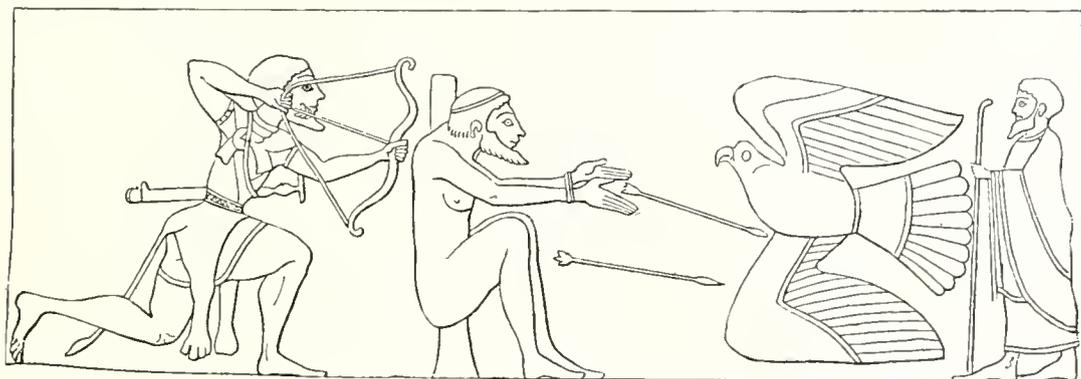


IMPALEMENT.
From Assyrian monuments. (After Layard.)

“They will tell you that the just man who is thought unjust will be scourged racked, bound—will have his eyes burnt out; and, at last, after suffering every kind of evil, he will be crucified.”¹

Plato apparently follows older traditions, for he quotes Æschylus in this connexion, contrasting the truly just man with the unjust man who in his injustice is so perfect as to acquire cunningly “the greatest reputation for justice.” Plato says :

“And at his side (at the side of this perfectly unjust man) let us place the just man in his nobleness and simplicity who wishes, as Æschylus says, *to be and not to seem good.*”



PROMETHEUS TIED BY ZEUS TO THE STAKE (OR CROSS) AND EXPOSED TO THE EAGLE; RESCUED BY HERCULES.

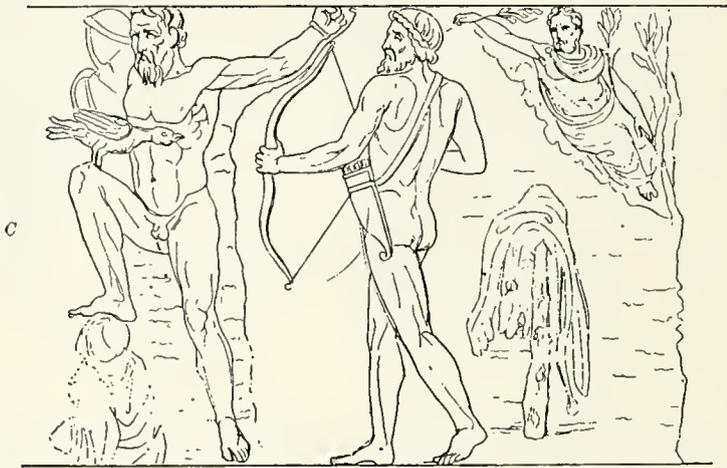
(A vase found at Chiusi, now in Berlin. Baumeister, *D. d. cl. A.*, p. 1410.)

Æschylus, the great tragedian, has dramatised the myth of Prometheus, the forethinker who takes compassion upon poor, miserable mankind, by bringing them the fire from heaven and teaching them its various uses. For punishment Prometheus is

crucified on Caucasus and exposed to the ravenous eagle of Zeus who daily feasts on the immortal Titan, until Hercules comes and shoots the eagle, whereupon Prometheus is taken from the cross.

The deep significance of this legend, illustrating the sufferings of the aspiring man who sacrifices his life for the progress of the race and improvement of the wretched has been well understood by both pagans and Christians, but the most remarkable fact is that all the old mythological illustrations of Prometheus the sufferer show him tied to the staurus, or cross, and Æschylus uses the word "to attach to the rood," *ἀνασλολοπιζειν*, which is a synonym of the New Testament term "to crucify" (*σταυρειν*).

Later authors and artists modify the tradition by having Prometheus, the Titan, chained to Mount Caucasus itself.



PROMETHEUS CRUCIFIED ON A ROCK AND DELIVERED BY HERCULES.
In the background the mountain-god Caucasus.

Plato, no doubt, had seen the Prometheus of Æschylus performed on the stage, he had read the tragedy and pondered it in his heart. In this way, most likely, in connexion with his experiences of the course of events in daily life, he elaborated his highest ideal of moral perfection as the man who is crucified for justice's sake.

A consideration of death by crucifixion as the ancient rite of a sacrifice to the sun-god may have played a part, too, in the formation of the Prometheus myth; but if it did, it is no longer mentioned by Plato.¹ There are, however, other legends, as for instance the Andromeda myth, which represent sacrificial death by exposure to the sun, the victim being tied to a tree or chained on a rock.

¹We remind our readers in this connexion of the previous article "Crucifixion as a Sacrifice" on pp. 151-154 of the *March Open Court*.

The influence of Plato's ideal of the just man as the crucified one was not lost, but it did not exercise upon the early Christians so direct an influence as we might expect. The early Christians we must remember did not belong to the cultured classes of society,



THE SACRIFICE OF ANDROMEDA.¹

Picture of an ancient Amphora in Naples. (From Baumeister, *D. d. cl. A.*, p. 1291.) The victim is here, probably for artistic reasons, represented as being tied to two trees.

but recruited themselves from the ranks of fishermen, artisans, of the poor in general, and even of slaves. Few of them were familiar with Plato, and the thoughts of Plato reached them only

¹Trendelenburg has discovered a passage commenting on this or a similar picture in Achilles Tatius, and explains it as follows: Andromeda, adorned as the bride of death with girdle, crown, and veil, is tied to two poles. Above her Cupid stands engaged with women in the preparation of a wedding. Andromeda's old nurse hands her a twig. Behind and above the nurse are guards with Phrygian caps and arms. On the left, Cassiopeia, Andromeda's mother, who exhibits the vanity, of which the legend accuses her, is seated, in conversation with her servants. Underneath Perseus fights the monster, which scene is witnessed by three Nereids, one riding on a sea-horse, one on a dolphin, and the third resembling the typical figure of Scylla.

through the medium of the Neo-Platonist Philo, but it reached them after all.

Plato's prophecy of the sufferings of the just man is alluded to in the documents of early Christianity only once ; viz., in the Acts of Apollonius where this Christian martyr pleads his case in these words :

" One of the Greek philosophers said : The just man shall be tortured, he shall be spat upon, and last of all he shall be crucified. Just as the Athenians passed an unjust sentence of death, and charged him falsely, because they yielded to the mob, so also our Saviour was at last sentenced to death by the lawless."

Plato's philosophy paved the way in Greece for a religion which exhibits the ideal of a morally perfect man, the incarnation of the Logos, who by a disgraceful death on the cross, proves that he would rather be, than merely seem, good.

The two ideas of the cross (1) as the instrument of torture as an emblem of the ignominious death of the perfectly righteous man, and (2) as the intersecting lines denoting the symbol of God incarnate, are both contained in Plato, but they are separate and unconnected like two streams which in the course of time are destined to mingle their waters.