

DEATH AND RESURRECTION.¹

BY THE EDITOR.

LESSING proved, in his ingenious booklet, *How the Ancients Represented Death*, that the Greek artists did not represent death as a skeleton, but as the brother of sleep, the picture being that of a genius with an inverted torch. In the meantime skeletons have been discovered among the relics of ancient art; but Lessing's contention has for that reason not been refuted. On the contrary,



GREEK SKELETON DANCE. SILVER CUP FOUND AT BOSCOREALE.

it found thereby further corroboration, for the skeleton is not intended to represent death.

It is well known that in Egypt the figure of a mummy was passed around on festive occasions, with the words, "eat and drink and be merry, for soon you will be like this." The mummy represented to them the transiency of life, and far from inciting the revelers to ponder over the problem of death, it was interpreted in

¹ This article is in the nature of a supplement to the series of articles on "Death in Religious Art" which appeared in *The Open Court*, Vol. XI., No. 12, and Vol. XII., Nos. 1 and 2.

the sense of Omar Khayyam as a lesson to enjoy life, and to drain the cup of pleasure to the lees.

The skeleton among the Greeks had the same significance as the Egyptian mummy at carousals. Far from making men serious, it was intended to dispel all gloomy thoughts. This interpretation appears most plainly in the silver cup found at Boscoreale among other silverware, the pieces of which show a simple and pure taste, but may belong to a later age of classical antiquity.

The skeletons represented on this cup are not genii of death, but represent certain sages and poets who have now passed away, and whose present condition would admonish the merry revelers to pluck the rose while it is in bloom, and to enjoy life while it lasts. It is a classical analogue to the Christian Death Dances; in fact, it is a death-dance; but how different is the tendency in the two cases!

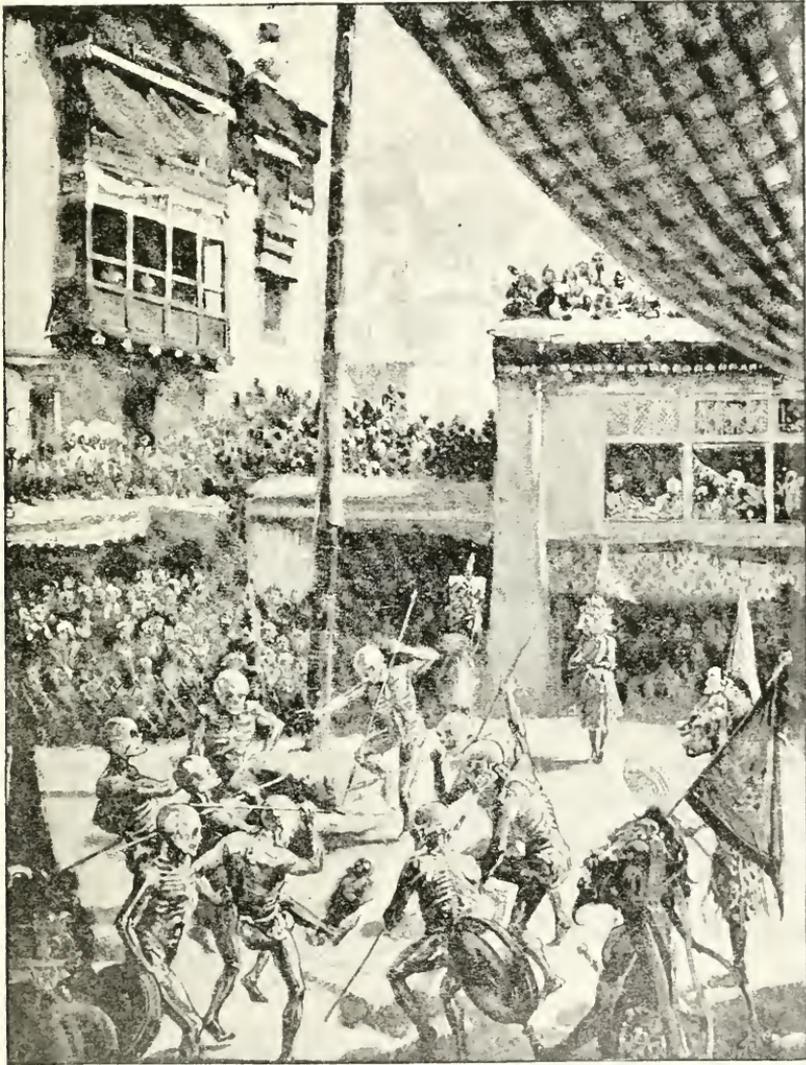
There can be no doubt concerning the interpretation of the figures, since the names are inscribed over the skeletons, who represent the philosophers Epicurus and Zeno, and the poets Anacreon, Sophocles, Moschus, Euripides, and Menander.

Very strange performances are the death-dances of the Tibetan mystery-plays, one of which is performed on the last three days of the year and is called "the ceremony of the sacrificial body of the dead year." The effigy of a man made out of dough as life-like as possible and having inside a distinct heart and all the entrails filled with a red fluid, is placed by four cemetery ghouls in sight of the numerous spectators in the center of the yard, and at once bands of skeleton-ghosts rush upon the corpse to attack it. This is the time to display the necromantic power of Lamaism over the evil spirits. Monks and lamas come forth and go through a series of ceremonies, the magic effect of which keeps the fiends away. But a more formidable devil with great horns and possessed of superior powers makes his appearance and takes the field. Whereupon a saint or an incarnation of Buddha himself comes to the rescue, sprays flour on the enemy, makes mystic signs and utters incantations. The skeleton-ghosts and the big fiend grovel before him and implore mercy. He graciously yields to their supplications and allows them to partake of a sacramental meal. While they kneel before him he gives to each one of them a little flour to eat and a drink out of a vessel of holy water.

This concludes the day's performance.

The corpse, however, is not destined to be preserved. On the next day the fight is renewed, and after a cannonade with blessed

mustard-seed and other exorcisms, an awful demon appears whose title is "the holy king of religion." He wears the head of a bull, a dagger in the right and the effigy of a human heart in the left



TIBETAN SKELETON-DANCE.¹

hand. This strange figure seems to represent the main deity of the ancient Tibetans, when they were still in the habit of offering human sacrifices, not in effigy but in reality. The demon god has

¹ Reproduced from E. F. Knight's *Where Three Empires Meet*. London, 1893.

been converted by Buddha and become a protector of Buddhism. He is now satisfied with human sacrifices in effigy, and the man made of dough, being supposed to be an enemy of Tibet, is surrendered to him. He dances round the figure of the man on the ground, stabs him, binds his feet in a snare, and at last cuts off his limbs, slits open his breast, takes out his bleeding heart, lungs, and other intestines. At this moment a horde of monsters falls upon the remnants of the dismembered dough-man and scatters them in all directions. The pieces are collected again in a silver basin and the Holy King of Religion, eating a morsel, throws them up in the air. This is the signal for the *finale*: the pieces are caught and fought for by the demons, and at last the crowd of spectators joins the general scramble for pieces of dough, representing human flesh, which they either eat or treasure up as talismans.

Similar ceremonies are executed by different sects in different ways, but all of them indicate survivals of practices which antedate the institutions of Buddhism.



KING DEATH. Gnostic Stone.²

Another interesting relic of skeleton-representation is preserved by Gori¹ in a crude inscription which no longer belongs to classical antiquity but dates from the first Christian centuries. It is scratched on a magnet stone, and represents Death as a skeleton,

according to some such conception as is represented in the Gospel of Nicodemus, where Death in communion with Satan is said to have power over the world, as the great monarch to whom everything that lives is subject. The picture shows Death riding on a chariot drawn by lions; at least this is the interpretation which Bishop Münter³ gives of the strangely-shaped and ill-drawn animals, which gallop over another skeleton while a third skeleton to the right contemplates the scene.

The illustration is accompanied by unintelligible inscriptions similar in character to the Ephesian letters so frequently found on Abraxas gems. The probability is that this strange device, which unequivocally belongs to the period of Gnostic thought, was used as an emblem by some secret religious society, and represented an

¹*Gemmae Astriferæ*, II., p. 248.

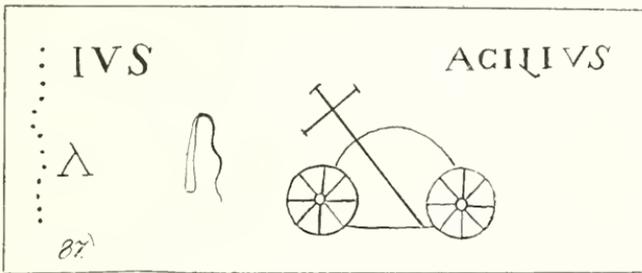
²After Münter's reproduction (I., 86) from Gori's *Gemmae Astriferæ*, II., p. 248.

³*Sinnbilder und Kunstvorstellungen*, p. 110.

idea that was communicated to the members in "mysteries." The absence of any Christian emblem would lead us to conclude that it is pagan-Gnostic.

Death as a rule is not represented in the Christian catacombs, except perhaps by palms and wreaths, or allegories of rest. Boldetti¹ found in the cemetery of Calixtus and Praetextatus a crudely-wrought slab representing a wagon, the tongue of which is carved in the shape of a cross, and is turned backward, as a sign of its no longer being used. The driver and horses are not seen, but the whip appears by the side of the wagon. The inscription is mutilated beyond recognition, but the name of the man buried, Agilius, is legible.

While death itself is not represented by the early Christians, the thought of death was not foreign to them; and the main thing on which their interest is concentrated is the hope of resurrection.



DEATH AS THE END OF A JOURNEY.

Tombstone in the cemetery of Calixtus and Praetextatus.¹

The idea of immortality among the early Christians was not a preservation of the soul, but a resurrection of the body; and this is one reason why they preferred burial to cremation. Prudentius says (*Cathemeron Hymn*):

"There will soon come a time when genial warmth shall revisit these bones, and the soul will resume its former tabernacle, animated with living blood. The inert corpses, long since corrupted in the tomb, shall be borne through the ether [*auras*], in company with the souls. For this reason is such care bestowed upon the sepulchre: such honor paid to the motionless limbs—such luxury displayed in funerals. We spread the linen cloth of spotless white—myrrh and frankincense embalm the body. What do these excavated rocks signify? What these fair monuments? What, but that the object intrusted to them is sleeping, and not dead. . . . But now death itself is blessed, since through its pangs a path is thrown open to the just, a way from sorrow to the stars. . . . We will adorn the hidden bones with violets and many a bough; and on the epitaph and the cold stones we will sprinkle liquid odours." (*The Church in the Catacombs*, by C. Maitland, pp. 45-46.)

¹ *Osservazioni*, p. 349.

² Reproduced from Münter after Boldetti, p. 349.

The immortality of the soul, such as it was taught by Plato, whose Socrates scorned to identify himself with the corpse that would form his bodily remains, would not have satisfied these simple-minded people, and so the doctrine was officially adopted by the Church and incorporated into the Apostolic Confession of Faith, where it reads: "I believe in a resurrection of the flesh." The fear of death therefore is repelled by the thought of resurrection, which is interpreted literally and in a materialistic sense, and thus we find a great number of bas reliefs and pictures directly or indirectly representing the idea of a reawakening to life.

The Christians of later centuries clung tenaciously to the belief in resurrection from the grave, the reanimation of the dust, the revival of the body—or howsoever the doctrine was expressed; only of late this crude and materialistic conception begins to give way to a more spiritual belief in the immortality of the soul. The most favorite German funeral hymn begins with the words:¹

"Auferstehn, ja auferstehn
Sollst du mein Staub nach kurzer Ruh."

The hymns of the English-speaking world give expression to the same hope. American Christians sing:

"Thus shall they guard my sleeping dust
And as the Saviour rose
The grave again shall yield her trust
And end my deep repose."

Robert Pollok, a Scottish religious poet of great fervor and a faithful believer in Calvinism,² describes in detail how every atom of the body will be raised on the day of judgment. He says:

"The doors of death were opened, and in the dark
And loathsome vault and silent charnel-house

¹This song is probably kept alive through its beautiful tune. It is a sign of the times that one of the verses of *Jesus meine Zuversicht*, which emphasises bodily resurrection, has recently been dropped from the *Württembergische Gesangbuch*. The verse reads:

"Dann wird eben diese Haut
Mich umgeben wie ich gläube.
Gott wird werden angeschaut,
Dann von mir in diesem Leibe
Und in diesem Fleisch werd ich
Jesus sehen ewiglich."

It is obvious that the ideas of the resuscitation of "this skin of ours, these eyes, this body this flesh" have become objectionable to the ever increasing intelligent portion of Christianity.

²Robert Pollok was born at Moorhouse, Renfrewshire, Scotland, in 1798, and died at Southampton, Sept. 17, 1827. His chief work was *The Course of Time*, a poem which has passed through many editions, and is still a favorite in serious households in Scotland. The poem treats of the spiritual life and destiny of man. It was published March, 1827, and at once became popular. It is written in blank verse in ten books, in the poetic diction of the eighteenth century, but with abundance of enthusiasm, impassioned elevation of feeling, and copious force of words and images. See *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Vol., XIX., p. 403.

Moving were heard the mould'ring bones that sought
 Their proper place. Instinctive every soul
 Flew to its clayey part: from grass-grown mold
 The nameless spirit took its ashes up. . . .
 Wherever slept one grain of human dust—
 Essential organ of a human soul,
 Wherever tossed—obedient to the call
 Of God's omnipotence, it hurried on
 To meet its fellow-particles, revived,
 Rebuilt, in union indestructible.
 No atom of his spoils remained to death.¹

A new and higher conception of life appears when the immortality of the soul is insisted upon without reference to a revival of the dust. Still mythological but less offensive are the lines

“There is no death in heaven;
 But when the Christian dies,
 The angels wait his parted soul
 And waft it to the skies.”

Theodore Parker boldly cuts himself loose from the traditional belief in the resurrection of the flesh and objects to the immortality of “risen dust,” saying:

“In the creed of many churches it is still written, ‘I believe in the resurrection of the flesh.’ Many doubted this in early times, but the Council of Nice declared all men accursed who dared to doubt it. . . . This doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh seems to me impossible and absurd. . . . When the stiffened *body* goes down into the tomb, . . . I feel that there is no death for the *man*. That clod which yonder dust shall cover is not my brother. The dust goes to its place, the man to his. It is then that I feel my immortality. I look thro' the grave into Heaven. I ask no miracle, no proof, no reasoning. I ask no risen dust to teach me immortality. I am conscious of eternal life.”¹

As to the early Christians, we shall easily pardon the crudeness of their conception of immortality when we consider the crudeness of their philosophical knowledge and general education. To them religion was still a kind of magic. Thus Jesus is in the most ancient pictures of Christian art commonly represented after the fashion of a magician, wand in hand, to indicate his power of working miracles. The belief in miracles simply served in those times, as it does to-day, to feed the yearning for a resurrection of the dead. If miracles are possible, why cannot a corpse be resurrected to life? No doubt, in the bas-reliefs on sarcophagi where Jesus is represented as multiplying the loaves and fishes, the artist thought of

¹ Quoted from an unpublished book, *Faiths of Famous Men*, by the Rev. John K. Kilbourn Philadelphia, Pa.

him in the sense in which Christ is regarded in the Fourth Gospel, as being the bread of life. Further Christ is represented as Orpheus with the lyre that moved the heart of the pitiless king of death; as Jonas who was hidden in the interior of the whale; and especially as the master over life and death, which power he proved in the resurrection of Lazarus.

The crudeness of the old conception of immortality need not blind us to the germs of truth which are contained in it. We no longer believe in a reawakening to life of the corpse, but we know that there is a preservation of the soul.

Our life is in our thoughts, our sentiments, and in our endeavors, and they are spiritual, not material. The material particles which do the work while we think are discarded in the process as waste-products, and are replaced by new material of the same kind. Our thoughts are preserved as memory by a *preservation of form*. The form remains in the metabolism of our physical system and preserves the continuity of our spiritual life. In the same way as the waste products of the process of thinking are not our thoughts, the corpses of the dead are the remains of those who have consummated their lives, not the men themselves, not their aspirations, their thoughts, their deeds. The body dies and is doomed to disintegration; but the significance of a man, his life-work, his soul, the new formations which he has called into being, are not annihilated in death; they remain a living factor with the living and a real presence the bliss of which continues in its individual and personal significance according to the worth of each individual soul.

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May I be allowed to add a suggestion:

Our funerals still show traces of the old belief in the resurrection of the body and are not yet free from the superstition of corpse-worship. The dead are often addressed by funeral orators as though they were the men themselves who have passed from us. The grave is called their resting-place and is visited and decked with flowers in honor of the deceased. The very ritual suggests these thoughts; and the reverence with which we naturally deal with human remains naturally corroborates a materialistic conception of immortality. We should replace the funeral ceremony by a memorial festival. The funeral should be arranged in the simplest possible manner, not with a showy parade of flowers and music, but let it simply be a disposing of the remains, perhaps in the presence of a few witnesses, but not as the last official occasion at which the

sympathy of friends should be revealed. This, now so prominent a feature of funerals, should be reserved for a memorial which might be celebrated on the first birthday of the deceased after his death, or on memorial day, or on some other appropriate occasion, and it should not be a day of wailing over the deceased's death, but a day of thanks for his life and the good he has accomplished, in a word, not a lugubrious day of lamentation, but a memorial day, a thanksgiving, a harvest festival. If there are tears, let them be tears of gladness in remembrance of the blessings which the survivors enjoyed while he lived among them and which in part they still enjoy after his bodily form has been taken away.