THE ORIGIN OF THE CRESCENT AND THE STAR.

BY EDGAR J. BANKS.

No nation's flag is fairer to look upon than that which bears the crescent and the star. It is hated more than any other because it floats over a country whose history is one long story of corruption and massacre. It is loved more than any other because those who fight beneath it believe that if killed in battle, they may at once enter Paradise. No flag has witnessed more horrible, revolting deeds than the Turks have committed; none has ever floated over more brilliant pageants than were held in honor of the early sultans. The crescent and the star which appear upon both the civil red flag of Turkey, and on the sacred green flag of Mohammedanism, is not a symbol of the Turks, though many believe that it originated with them, nor is it a symbol of the earlier Greeks of Constantinople. It is as old as the civilization of man, for its origin may be found in the witchcraft or astrology of the Babylonians of more than 6000 years ago.

There is a legend which the historians relate to the effect that the crescent and the star is far older than the Turkish nation. It says that in the year 340 B.C., when Philip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great, was besieging Byzantium, as Constantinople was then called, and was about to assault the city by night, a light appeared in the sky as a warning to the inhabitants. The people, aroused by the miraculous light seized their arms and saved the city. Philip withdrew in despair to his own country, and the light which miraculously appeared in the sky was given the form of a crescent and star, adopted by the Byzantines, and placed upon their coins.

However, the same crescent and star were employed as a symbol in Babylonia more than 6000 years ago, when primitive man was first learning to write by scratching crude pictures upon clay
and stone. The wedge-shaped language of Babylonia was originally picture writing, and many of the several hundred groups of wedges of which the language is composed, may be traced back to the original pictures. A circle was the word for the sun; a picture of a flat roofed house was the word for house; a picture of a foot was the verb to walk, and another of these early hieroglyphs was a crescent and star just as it now appears upon the Turkish flag. The word was pronounced shiptu, and it represented an exorcism, or incantation, or any thing which would drive away the evil spirits, or protect one from evil.

The Orientals of every age have been superstitious, and the ancient belief in the evil eye still prevails among them. In the markets of all Turkish towns one may purchase blue glass beads which are supposed to keep evil from the man or woman or horse or donkey which may wear them. Most Orientals carry with them a little leather bag containing a magical word or verse from the sacred writings, as a charm. The Jews attach the mezuzoth or charms in metal or wooden cases to the door-posts that the evil may not pass into the house, just as the kings of ancient Nineveh and Babylon stationed at the entrances of their palaces huge images of bulls and lions to guard those within from all evil, and the poorer people suspended clay tablets over their doors, and employed a thousand other devices for the same purpose. In spite of all the blue glass beads, the mezuzoth, the bull deities and the other charms, the evil spirits did get possession of the bodies of the people, for whenever one shook with the malarial fever, or was tormented with the tooth ache or the pains of neuralgia or rheumatism, the Babylonian knew that an evil spirit had possessed him. The usual method of driving out the evil spirits was to repeat a formula or incantation which the Babylonians called shiptu, and which was represented by the crescent and the star. Recorded upon the clay tablets from Babylonia are hundreds of these magical sen-
tences. The exorcist repeated over the man whose body was quaking with fever, these words:

"The painful fever, the powerful fever, the fever which quits not a man, the evil fever, the unremovable 'fever, conjure, O spirit of heaven! conjure, O spirit of earth!"

The evil spirit was supposed not to be able to endure the sound of the words, and it immediately left the body. So in more modern times, Satan, it was thought, could not endure the sight of the cross.

Why did the ancient Babylonians use the crescent shaped moon to express the word for incantation? Like all primitive peoples, the Babylonians believed that the heavenly bodies were gods, and that the moon was the chief of them all. The moon never appears on two successive nights in just the same place; it constantly changes its form; sometimes it remains invisible, and the seasons of its appearance vary. The moon was therefore a god of importance, and each of its variations was significant. The early astronomers watched the moon to learn what its various positions, forms, and seasons of appearance meant, and what influence they had upon the welfare of man. They wrote to the king each day a little clay letter to inform him if the moon had been seen, and what it portended. Of the letters which still survive one to the king of Nineveh reads as follows:

"To the king my lord, from thy servant Ishtar-idin-apal, the chief of the astrologers of Arbela. May Nabu, Marduk and Ishtar of Arbela be gracious to the king my lord. On the 29th day we kept watch. The sky was so cloudy that we could not see the moon."

From their observations of the moon, the astronomers wrote down the omens as they learned them, and many of them may now be read upon the clay tablets from the ruins of the ancient cities.

"If the moon eclipse the sun, an enemy will devastate the land."

"If the moon appear out of season, the crops will be small."

The importance which the ancients attributed to the moon has survived in the Orient where the months are still lunar. The most joyous occasion in Central Arabia is when the new moon rises to end the long month of fasting. Then the shrill cries of joy of the women resound in every village. When the moon is eclipsed, the people are horrified. Even in our own country some farmers plant the potatoes in the full of the moon, and the mothers wean their babies according to the phases of the moon. The new moon, with a brilliant star or planet near it, may have impressed the early
Babylonian as a favorable sign, and thus the crescent and the star became the picture-word for incantations.

When Nineveh and Babylon passed away, and the portents of their astrologers were forgotten, the symbol still continued as a favorable sign, or a charm to avert the influences of evil. Babylon fell into the hands of the Persians, and the crescent and the star then became a frequent symbol on their coins. The Parthians succeeded the Persians, and they adopted the same old symbol upon their coins. Alexander the Great of Macedonia led his armies through Western Asia, and upon the later Macedonian coins appeared the crescent and the star. The Romans were the next to adopt the symbol, and upon the reverse of many of their coins which were struck for circulation in Asia, it appeared. The Byzantines adopted it, and to explain its origin as miraculous, the story of the appearance of the light in the heavens, to warn the people of the approach of the enemy, was related. When the Turks came to power and possessed Constantinople, there was no better or older symbol for their flag than the crescent and the star. Though the meaning of the symbol had long been forgotten, the Turks seem to have employed it as it was originally intended. It was a charm which was supposed to bring good luck. It is unquestionably the oldest charm in the world, for it has been employed ever since history began, or for more than 6000 years, by nearly every nation of the Orient.