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A MONTHLY MAGAZINE


Founded by Edward C. Hegele.

THE DIVINE BABE IN GREECE.
(See page 705.)

The Open Court Publishing Company

CHICAGO

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CONTENTS:

Frontispiece. The Mistletoe. **Virginie Demont-Breton.**

*The Divine Child in the Manger* (Illustrated). **Editor** ........................................... 705

*The Outskirts of Thought.* **Elia W. Peattie** .......................................................... 708

*Goethe’s Personality.* Characterized by Incidents from his Life (Illustrated). **Editor** .......... 720

*Songs of Japan.* **Arthur Lloyd** .......................................................... 747

*New Vistas of Immortality.* **Richard B. De Bary** ................................................. 753

*The Peace Idea.* **L. Michelangelo Billia** ......................................................... 757

*An Example of the Melikertes Motive in Modern Art* .................................................. 758

*Dies Irae.* **Eberhard Nestle** .................................................................................. 760

*Chinese Courtesy* ........................................................................................................ 760

*Japanese Abroad* ........................................................................................................ 761

*The Quack in Former Centuries* .................................................................................. 762

*Buddhist Societies in Europe* .................................................................................... 764

*Book Reviews and Notes* ............................................................................................ 765

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623-633 Wabash Avenue, Chicago
THE MISTLETOE.
From a painting by Virginie Demont-Breton.

Frontispiece to The Open Court.
THE DIVINE CHILD IN THE MANGER.

BY THE EDITOR.

THE celebration of Christmas, or a festival like it, is of very primitive origin. Among all the pre-Christian religions of the Mediterranean people the birth of the divine child was hailed with joy, and it is peculiar that its birth must have been unexpected, for it was cradled in the first thing at hand among the people who dealt with herds. The legend is repeated of almost all the gods, especially of Zeus, Hermes, Dionysos and Mithras. But we meet with it
also in the mysteries, and the popularity of this rite appears from the many representations of the scene which have come down to us.

In a former article we have published some examples (See *The Open Court*, Vol. XIII, p. 710 and Vol. XIV, p. 46), and we here reproduce some additional ones, two taken from a sarcophagus and another from a vase. The latter is not quite clear because we are not sure who the divine babe might be in this case. The scene takes place in Attica, and so we are assured that it is one act of the Eleusinian mysteries. Mother Earth (Gaia) rises from the ground and lifts up the babe to Athene recognizable by her lance. Demeter and Kora, also called Persephone or with its Latin term Proserpine, stand at the left side gazing at the infant. The figure at the right may be Diana as is indicated by the quiver over the right shoulder, but not having seen the original we cannot be positive. It might be a maenad, one of the raving dancers who accompanied Dionysos in his triumphal entry. On top of the Gaia we see Triptolemus, a typically Attic figure who after the invention of agriculture takes the grain of seed and ventures out on his mission to bring the bliss of civilization to the rest of mankind. The three remaining figures in the upper corners of our picture take an interest in this mission of Triptolemus. To the left sits Venus, to the right a priestess, temple key in hand, and an attendant with one foot resting on a box which may contain the paraphernalia for initiation.

Two bas reliefs on a sarcophagus show two men carrying out the divine babe in a fodder basket, presumably again Dionysos. The
younger of the two carries a torch, indicating that the birth took place in the night. A curtain veils the place of birth which is commonly a cave.

The term "cradled in a food measure" (in Greek liknites, from liknon, food measure) has become a common appellation of Dionysos or Bacchus. The food measure, in Latin vannus, was also used as a winnowing fan. But the main thing is that the divine child's cradle is a basket used for the food of the cattle, and we see at once that the Christian tradition that Christ was cradled in a manger is a recollection of a very ancient pre-Christian belief.

We know nothing of the birth festival of a saviour-god among the Teutons, but the return of the sun was celebrated at Yuletide in the same days of the year with much rejoicing and merrymaking. Many of the old pagan customs have survived paganism, and even to-day the sacred mistletoe is not missing in the Christian homes where Saxon influence is predominant.

In a former number of The Open Court (August, 1909), the frontispiece was a reproduction of a painting by the Russian artist I. A. Djényeffe representing the barbarous custom of laying the foundation stones of important buildings in human sacrifices. But the life of prehistoric man was not savage throughout; it had also its bright aspects. Mme. Virginie Demont-Breton, in a picture reproduced for the frontispiece of this number, has succeeded in bringing out the beautiful side of the life of our primitive ancestors. Her painting represents a priestess holding in her left hand a sickle and in her right a bunch of mistletoe, the plant which grows on holy oak trees from seeds supposed to have been dropped from heaven symbolizing the mysteries of the ancient faith. And since the mistletoe lasts into mid-winter it has become a symbol of the divine life which may die but reappears, of the sun which in northern lands seems to be vanquished by winter but returns and finally conquers the powers hostile to humanity.