

# THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CRUCIFIXION

Gunnar Samuelsson

Department of Religious Studies and Theology  
Box 200, SE-405 30 Göteborg, Sweden

## *Abstract*

A common assumption about crucifixions is that they were generally carried out in approximately the same way as the crucifixion of Jesus, i.e., that the condemned was attached to some kind of vertical construction in order to be executed. In the search of historical knowledge about this punishment, ancient Greek texts containing the verb *anastauroun* or *anaskolopizein* are often referred to. The present paper suggests that the conclusions drawn from these texts may be unsatisfactory. This suggestion is based on the fact that the majority of the texts do not specify what kind of suspension they refer to. In order to create a firm textual basis for the study of crucifixion we need to take into account a broader terminology, and to find more intra- and extra-textual indications about the nature of the punishment. The result of this critical view is that it significantly reduces the number of relevant texts and takes some new texts into consideration.

## *Introduction*

What do we know about crucifixion in the ancient Mediterranean literature? The subject of the present paper is some problems connected to the study of crucifixion in the ancient Greek literature. Often when scholars write about the crucifixion of Jesus, or sometimes about the theology of the cross, they generally spend one or a few pages on the pre-Christian texts which contain references to crucifixions. The method of execution was assumed to closely resemble the crucifixion of Jesus, known to us through the Gospels, and in these latter days, also through the cinema. That is, the condemned was nailed (or tied) to some kind of vertical construction in order to be executed. As defined by H.-W. Kuhn.

Unter Kreuzstrafe im eigentlichen Sinn ist eine durch Aufhängen vollziehende Hinrichtung an einen Pfahl (weithin wohl mit einem Querbalken) oder Ähnlichem zu verstehen, für die das Andauern der

Todesqual im Gegensatz zur Aufspießung oder zum Erhängen durch Strangulation wesentlich ist; der Gekreuzigte stirbt einen qualvollen Erstickungstod.<sup>1</sup>

Another common assumption is that the Persians invented this punishment or at least, that it is strongly connected to them.<sup>2</sup>

The primary sources for knowledge of execution by crucifixion in the pre-Christian era are texts from the Greco-Roman world, such as the Greek authors Herodotus, Thucydides, Ctesias, Xenophon, Polybius and the Latin authors Cicero and Tacitus. Those authors are well cited in specialized articles such as Martin Hengel's *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*; Heinz-Wolfgang Kuhn's "Die Kreuzstrafe während der frühen Kaiserzeit. Ihre Wirklichkeit und Wertung in der Umwelt des Urchristentums" in *ANRW* and Gerald O'Collin's "Crucifixion" in *ABD*.<sup>3</sup> However, on what basis do we determine that an ancient text refers to an execution by crucifixion?

The Greek texts which are referred to in investigations, such as those mentioned, usually contain the verb ἀνασταυροῦν or ἀνασκολοπιζειν. The plain form of the former verb, σταυροῦν, is the one used in the New Testament. But the question raised in the present paper is whether that method is sufficient. My suggested answer to that question is negative. One reason for this postulation is that several of the texts in focus obviously contain references to impaling or various *post mortem* suspensions. The main reason, nevertheless, is that in many cases it is not possible to determine the *kind* of suspension to which

---

<sup>1</sup> KUHN, HEINZ-WOLFGANG, "Kreuz II. Neues Testament und frühe Kirche (bis von Justin)," *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 19, 713-14 (edited by G. Krause, G. Müller, S. S. Hartman, G. Wingren, F. Schumann, and M. Wolter. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> E.g., BLINZLER, JOSEF, *Der Prozess Jesu*. 4. erneut rev. Aufl. (Regensburg, 1969) 357; SCHNEIDER, JOHANNES, "σταυρός, κτλ." *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 7.573 (edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976); HEID, STEFAN, *Kreuz, Jerusalem, Kosmos: Aspekte Frühchristlicher Staurologie, Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum. Ergänzungsband*; 31. (Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2001) 7 (Heid also mentions the Medes as an alternative).

<sup>3</sup> HENGEL, MARTIN, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*. (Philadelphia, Pa: Fortress Press, 1977); KUHN, H.-W., "Die Kreuzstrafe während der frühen Kaiserzeit. Ihre Wirklichkeit und Wertung in der Umwelt des Urchristentums." *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II.25.1.648-793 (Part 2, *Principat*, 25.1. Edited by H. Temporini and W. Haase. New York: de Gruyter, 1982); O'COLLINS, GERALD, "Crucifixion." *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1.1207-10 (edited by D. N. Freedman. 1st ed. New York: Doubleday, 1992).

the texts refer. I will exemplify this with some texts from the Greek historian Herodotus of Halicarnassus.

### *Crucifixion in the Texts of Herodotus*

Herodotus uses both ἀνασταυροῦν and ἀνασκολοπίζειν in his texts. As a rule he uses ἀνασταυροῦν to describe the suspension of a dead person and ἀνασκολοπίζειν to describe that of a living.<sup>4</sup> An example of this is the suspension of the corpse of the Samian tyrant Polycrates in 3.125.2.

Having killed [Polycrates] in a way not fit to be told Oroetes suspended (ἀνεσταύρωσε) [him].<sup>5</sup>

The tendency is the same in Hdt. 3.125.2; 6.30.1; 7.194.1; (9.78.3); the suspended objects are corpses. Thus, the texts in which Herodotus uses ἀνασταυροῦν are of less importance if we are looking for texts which refer to *executions* by crucifixion. On the other hand, if we are looking for suspensions in general they are still relevant.

The verb ἀνασκολοπίζειν refers to executions by suspension almost consequently. An example of Herodotus' use of the verb is 3.132.2.

When the Egyptian physicians, who earlier had treated the king, were about to be suspended (ἀνασκολοπιεῖσθαι) for being less skilful than a Greek physician, [Democedes] rescued them by interceding with the king.<sup>6</sup>

The tendency is the same in Hdt. 1.128.2; 3.132.2; 3.159.1; 4.43.2, 6; 4.202.1; the verb is used in connection to executions by suspension. However, an exception from this rule may be the proposed impaling of Mardonius, described in Hdt. 9.78.3 and the following section.

“When Leonidas was killed at Thermopylae, Mardonius and Xerxes cut off his head and impaled (ἀνεσταύρωσαν) it. Pay him back the same way and you will receive praise foremost from all Spartans, and then from all other Greeks. If you suspend (ἀνασκολοπίσας) Mardonius, you will be avenged for your uncle Leonidas.” This is what [Lampon]

---

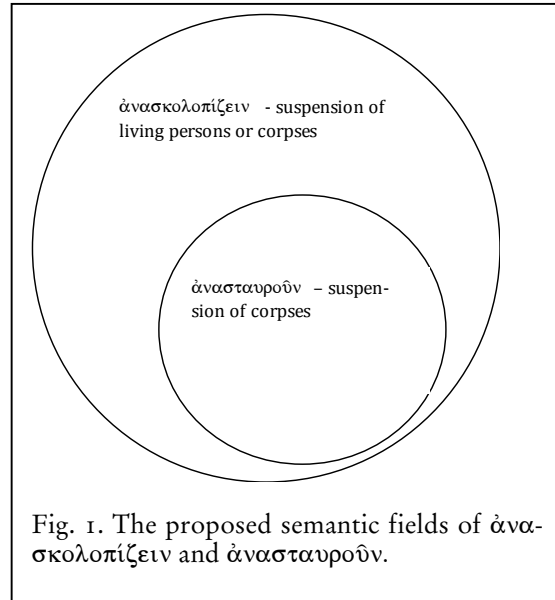
<sup>4</sup> As noticed by, e.g., HENGEL, O'COLLINS and CHAPMAN, DAVID W., “Perceptions of Crucifixion among Jews and Christians in the Ancient World” (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Hdt. 3.125.2. ἀποκτείνας δέ μιν οὐκ ἀξίως ἀπηγήσιος Ὀροίτης ἀνεσταύρωσε·

<sup>6</sup> Hdt. 3.132.2. καὶ τοῦτο μὲν τοὺς Αἰγυπτίους ἰητρούς, οἱ βασιλέα πρότερον ἰῶντο, μέλλοντας ἀνασκολοπιεῖσθαι ὅτι ὑπὸ Ἑλλήνος ἰητροῦ ἐσώθησαν, τούτους βασιλέα παραιτησάμενος ἐρρύσατο.

said with the intention to please [Pausanias]. But [Pausanias] answered this: “Oh, [my] Aeginetan friend, I am admired of your friendliness and forethought, but you have missed the mark of good judgment. [First,] you have lifted me, my fatherland and my deeds up to the skies, then you cast me down to [mere] nothingness when you advise me to maltreat a dead, and say that I shall be better spoken of if I do so.”<sup>7</sup>

It looks as if Herodotus uses ἀνασκολοπίζειν when he refers to the suspension of a dead person, or at least to a recommendation to suspend, in that text. So while it does not seem possible to maintain a solid distinction between ἀνασταυροῦν and ἀνασκολοπίζειν, it is safe to say that the verb ἀνασταυροῦν has a narrower semantic field than ἀνασκολοπίζειν; in the texts of Herodotus it refers only to suspensions of corpses, not to execution by suspension (see fig. 1). If this assumption is correct some literary references to *executions* by crucifixion are problematic.<sup>8</sup>



An even greater problem is the uncertainty regarding *what kind* of suspension the texts refer to. The majority of texts in Herodotus refer to a series of undefined suspensions, using both ἀνασταυροῦν and ἀνασκολοπίζειν.<sup>9</sup> The suspensions mentioned are probably crucifixion or impaling, but it is not possible to determine which one.

Thus, in order to determine if a text refers to a crucifixion we need something more than a verb. We need an indication beyond the basic terminology. This indication exists in a few texts within *corpus Herodoteum*. The first text deals with the fate of the Persian general Sandoces.

<sup>7</sup> Hdt. 9.78.3-79.1 “Λεωνίδεω γὰρ ἀποθανόντος ἐν Θερμοπύλῃσι Μαρδόνιος τε καὶ Ξέρξης ἀποταμόντες τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀνεσταύρωσαν· τῷ σὺ τὴν ὁμοίην ἀποδιδούς ἔπαινον ἔξεις πρῶτα μὲν ὑπὸ πάντων Σπαρτιητέων, αὐτίς δὲ καὶ πρὸς τῶν ἄλλων Ἑλλήνων· Μαρδόνιον γὰρ ἀνασκολοπίσας τετιμωρήσεται ἐς πάτρων τὸν σὸν Λεωνίδην.” Ὁ μὲν δοκέων χαρίζεσθαι ἔλεγε τάδε, ὃ δ’ ἀνταμείβετο τοῖσδε· “ᾠ ξεῖνε Αἰγινήτα, τὸ μὲν εὐνοέειν τε καὶ προορᾶν ἄγαμαί σευ, γνώμης μέντοι ἡμάρτηκας χρηστῆς· ἔξαείρας γάρ με ὑποῦ καὶ τὴν πάτρην καὶ τὸ ἔργον, ἐς τὸ μηδὲν κατέβαλες παραινέων νεκρῷ λυμαίνεσθαι, καὶ ἦν ταῦτα ποιῶ, φὰς ἄμεινόν με ἀκούσεσθαι.” Cf. Paus. 3.4.10.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., O’COLLINS, *ABD* 1.1207.

<sup>9</sup> With ἀνασκολοπίζειν: Hdt., 1.128.2; 3.159.1; 4.43.2, 6 and 4.202.1. With ἀνασταυροῦν: 3.125.2 and 6.30.1.

[Sandoces], one of the royal judges, had some time before been seized and crucified (ἀνεσταύρωσε) by king Dareios, according to the following accusation: Sandoces had given an unjust judgment for a bribe. When he had been hung [on the cross (?)], Dareios found on consideration that the good deeds done to the royal house by him outnumbered the offences. Dareios perceived this and understood that he acted with more haste than wisdom, and set [Sandoces] free. Thus, in this way [Sandoces] escaped destruction at the hands of king Dareios and was still alive.<sup>10</sup>

Based on the supposition that it is almost impossible to survive a impaling, the punishment in this text seems to be a crucifixion, referred to with the verb ἀνασταυροῦν.<sup>11</sup> The verb ἀνακρεμαννύναι is also worth notice in the text, as it occurs in next text of importance.

The next text deals with the fate of the Persian Artayctes. It seems as if Herodotus refers to this event in three separate texts: 7.33.1; 9.120.4; 9.122.1. The first text anticipates an event that will occur on the spot of the ongoing story.

Thereafter, not long afterwards, the Athenians, when Ariphton's son Xanthippus was their general, took Artayctes, a Persian man and governor of Sestus, and nailed him (διεπασσάλευσαν) alive to a board (σανίδα). [Artayctes] used to bring women into the temple of Proteus at Elaeus and do impious deeds [there].<sup>12</sup>

The event itself occurs in the closing chapters of the last book of Herodotus.

They carried away [Artayctes] to the headland where Xerxes had bridged the strait, or, according to others, to the hill above the town of Madytus, and hanged him nailed to boards (πρὸς σανίδας προσπασ-

---

<sup>10</sup> Hdt. 7.194.1-3. τὸν δὴ πρότερον τούτων βασιλεὺς Δαρεῖος ἐπ' αἰτίῃ τοιῆδε λαβὼν ἀνεσταύρωσε, ἔοντα τῶν βασιλῆων δικαστέων· ὁ Σανδόκης ἐπὶ χρήμασι ἄδικον δίκην ἐδίκασε. ἀνακρεμασθέντος ὦν αὐτοῦ, λογιζόμενος ὁ Δαρεῖος εὐρέ οἱ πλέω ἀγαθὰ τῶν ἀμαρτημάτων πεποιημένα ἐς οἶκον τὸν βασιλῆιον· εὐρῶν δὲ τοῦτο ὁ Δαρεῖος καὶ γνοὺς ὡς ταχύτερα αὐτὸς ἢ σοφότερα ἐργασμένος εἶη, ἔλυσε. βασιλέα μὲν δὴ Δαρεῖον οὕτω διαφυγὼν μὴ ἀπολέσθαι περιῆν.

<sup>11</sup> The internal injuries the abdomen suffers in impaling make the chances to survive almost nonexistent, while it is theoretically possible to survive a crucifixion due to the fact that no vital organs are damaged (it happens annually in the Filipino Easter rites).

<sup>12</sup> Hdt. 7.33.1. ἔνθα μετὰ ταῦτα, χρόνῳ ὕστερον οὐ πολλῶ, ἐπὶ Ξανθίππου τοῦ Ἀρίφρονος στρατηγῶν Ἀθηναῖοι Ἀρταύκτην ἄνδρα Πέρσην λαβόντες Σηστοῦ ὑπαρχὸν ζῶντα πρὸς σανίδα διεπασσάλευσαν, ὃς καὶ ἐς τοῦ Πρωτεσίλεω τὸ ἶρον ἐς Ἐλαιῶντα ἀγινεόμενος γυναικῆς ἀθέμιστα ἔρδεσκε.

σαλεύσαντες ἀνεκρέμασαν). And they stoned his son before Artaÿctes' eyes.<sup>13</sup>

The execution of Artaÿctes is referred to once again in 9.122.1, this time with the verb ἀνακρεμαννύναι: “this Artaÿctes who was hanged...”<sup>14</sup> These latter texts describe one of only two events that with some degree of certainty could be classified as a kind of crucifixion, and they contain some surprises: the author uses neither the expected verbs, ἀνασταυροῦν or ἀνασκολοπίζειν, nor the nouns, σταυρός or σκόλοψ. Instead the act of crucifixion is described by the verbs προσπασσαλεύειν and διαπασσαλεύειν (and referred to by ἀνακρεμαννύναι) and the crucifixion tool is σανίς.<sup>15</sup> The fact that 7.33.1 adds “ζῶοντα”, which rules out the possibility that the text refers to the elevation of a corpse, and that the verbs προσπασσαλεύειν and διαπασσαλεύειν occur in both texts, are indications on the etymological level that the method of execution indeed was a kind crucifixion.<sup>16</sup>

The description of the act of execution in these texts, i.e., nailing a victim to an execution tool, bears the closest resemblance to crucifixion in the texts of Herodotus. Another intriguing feature is the fact that the person executed was a Persian and the executioners Greek. Thus, it seems that the *Greeks* carried out one of the first apparent crucifixions in the pre-Christian Greek literature, and the person crucified was a *Persian*, not vice versa, as one might expect having read the common literature on the topic.

Thus, the only texts that with some degree of certainty could be said to contain records of crucifixions are the texts that describe the fate of Artaÿctes and the aborted execution of Sandoces. The only *execution* through crucifixion is that of Artaÿctes. The other text deals with an aborted execution. In this text Herodotus uses the verb ἀνασταυροῦν. This is the only instance where there exists an evident connection between one of the prime verbs, ἀνασταυροῦν or ἀνασκολοπίζειν, and crucifixion within *corpus Herodoteum*.

---

<sup>13</sup> Hdt. 9.120.4. ἀπαγαγόντες δὲ αὐτὸν ἐς τὴν ἀκτὴν ἐς τὴν Ξέρξης ἔξευξε τὸν πόρον, οἱ δὲ λέγουσι ἐπὶ τὸν κολωνὸν τὸν ὑπὲρ Μαδύτου πόλιος, πρὸς σανίδας προσπασσαλεύσαντες ἀνεκρέμασαν. τὸν δὲ παῖδα ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖσι τοῦ Ἀρταΰκτεω κατέλευσαν. It is not known where Herodotus refers to with the words: “οἱ δὲ λέγουσι”. The exact scene of the execution seems to be in dispute.

<sup>14</sup> Hdt. 9.122.1. Τούτου δὲ τοῦ Ἀρταΰκτεω τοῦ ἀνακρεμασθέντος (...). For Herodotus use of ἀνακρεμαννύναι in connection to alleged crucifixions, see 3.125.4; 7.194.2. However, cf., 5.114.1, a text that appears to be distant from an alleged crucifixion. It describes the elevation of the head of Onesilus, the leader in the Cyprian revolt against Darius.

<sup>15</sup> Cf., HENGEL, *Crucifixion*, 24-25.

<sup>16</sup> The verbs are coined from the prepositions πρὸς or διὰ and the noun πάσσαλος, “peg”.

Regarding crucifixion in the texts of Herodotus the following conclusions can be drawn. First, Artajctes was the only victim of an apparent execution by crucifixion in the texts of Herodotus. In addition to this event there is a report of the aborted execution of Sandoces. He was probably crucified, but the execution was interrupted before the victim died. Thus, by definition, it was not an *execution* by crucifixion. Second, the only victim of an execution by crucifixion was a Persian, and he was executed by the Athenians. The attempted execution by crucifixion of Sandoces was carried out by the Persian king. Third, Artajctes was nailed alive to a board; Sandoces was attached alive to some undefined execution tool.

It is, however, not possible to draw the conclusion that the other texts containing ἀνασταυροῦν and ἀνασκολοπίζειν do not refer to crucifixions at all. The rejected texts *may* refer to crucifixions, but it is not possible to determine to what extent they are actually relevant references, due to the lack of additional internal or external textual indications of the nature of the punishment. The critical view of the texts, which is presented in the present paper, is intended to distinguish a firm textual base for the study of crucifixion in ancient Greek literature. The only conclusion that could be drawn from the remaining texts is that they refer to some kind of suspension, *what kind* of suspension, i.e., impaling, crucifixion or other suspensions, is, however, wrapped in shadows.

### *The “Critical View” Applied on other Pre-Hellenistic Texts*

If this critical view of the source material is applied to the corpus of pre-Christian Greek literature accessible on the TLG-E CD-ROM the number of relevant texts decreases. The texts from the Archaic Period seem to lack references to crucifixions. The texts of the historians from the Classical Period, besides Herodotus, show the same tendency as the texts of Herodotus. Some of the texts mentioned in the reference literature describe punishments that seem to be various forms of impaling.

Thucydides, for instance, has one text of interest, in which he describes the fate of the Libyan king Inaros. The text itself does not reveal what kind of punishment it describes.

Inaros, the Libyan king, who caused everything concerning the Egyptian [revolt], was captured through a betrayal and suspended/impaled.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Thuc. 1.110.3. Ἰνάρωσ δὲ ὁ Λιβύων βασιλεύς, ὃς τὰ πάντα ἔπραξε περὶ τῆς Αἰγύπτου, προδοσίᾳ ληφθεὶς ἀνεσταυρώθη.

The execution method is unknown due to the uncertainty regarding Thucydides' use of the verb. This is the only time Thucydides uses the verb ἀνασταυροῦν; he never uses ἀνασκολοπίζειν. However, elsewhere Thucydides uses verbs related to ἀνασταυροῦν in connection with the construction of palisades, where pointed poles were often used, which could make the interpretation of ἀνασταυροῦν lean towards impalement.<sup>18</sup> When Thucydides describes the Syracusan defense of the harbor under an Athenian assault, he mentions the hazardous pointed poles in the water outside the old dockyard.<sup>19</sup> This defense line prevented the Athenians from ramming the Syracusan ships. Anyone who approached the stockade carelessly was in immediate danger of having his ship "impaled" (ἔσταύρωσαν). These observations are nothing but circumstantial evidence and do not close the case regarding Thucydides' use of ἀνασταυροῦν, but they indicate that impaling is a more plausible reading of the verb than crucifixion.<sup>20</sup>

Ctesias, the Greek itinerant history writer, has six texts of interest. His texts are unfortunately lost and only known as fragments, preserved in the works of other authors. The Ctesian texts of interest for this investigation occur in the writings of Diodorus Siculus, Plutarch and Photius.<sup>21</sup> The four texts from Photius all use the verb ἀνασταυρίζειν, a verb that evolved later, which may be an indication of their late date.<sup>22</sup> The texts are similar to the previously mentioned texts, and do not reveal the nature of the punishments on the terminological level. However, one of the texts, which describes the same event that Thucydides referred to above, indicates that the punishment being used is an impaling.

[Amestris] impaled [Inarus] on three stakes.<sup>23</sup>

In this text Ctesias uses the verb ἀνασταυροῦν in connection with an impaling; it is difficult to imagine that Inarus was crucified on three crucifixion tools simultaneously. Thus, if the Ctesian texts, preserved in Photius, lean in any direction, it ought to be towards impaling. This

---

<sup>18</sup> E.g., περισταυροῦν in 2.75.1; προσταυροῦν in 4.9.1; διασταυροῦν in 6.97.2 and maybe the first known occurrence in the Greek literature of the plain verb, σταυροῦν, in 6.100.1 (cf., 7.25.7).

<sup>19</sup> Thuc. 7.25.5-8.

<sup>20</sup> Cf., Ctesias' description of Inaros' fate below (*FGrH* 3c, 688 F 14.39), which points in the same direction.

<sup>21</sup> Photius was a Greek scholar of the Byzantine Period, Patriarch of Constantinople 857-867 and 871-886 C.E.

<sup>22</sup> Ctesias, *FGrH* 3c, 688 F 9.6; 14.39; 14.45 and 16.66.

<sup>23</sup> Ctesias, *FGrH* 3c, 688 F 14.39. καὶ ἀνεσταύρισεν μὲν ἐπὶ τρισὶ σταυροῖς. Cf., *FGrH* 3c, 688 F 26.7 (Plut. *Artax.* 17.5), a text which also mentions an impaling upon three stakes.



is also the case with the Ctesian text preserved in Plutarch, which describes a punishment similar to that described in the text above.<sup>24</sup> Another Ctesian text shows the same tendency. The text describes the fate of a Persian eunuch.

He was stripped of his skin and suspended by Parysatis.<sup>25</sup>

The text itself does not indicate what kind of suspension it refers to, but according to a Ctesian parallel text, preserved in Plutarch, the eunuch was impaled diagonally on three stakes (σῶμα πλάγιον διὰ τριῶν σταυρῶν ἀναπήξαι).<sup>26</sup>

Of the Ctesian texts preserved in Diodorus Siculus, the first deals with an undefined suspension.<sup>27</sup> The second text describes a threat of punishment.

He threatened to nail her to a cross/pole (σταυρῶ προσηλώσειν) after he had defeated her.<sup>28</sup>

The use of the verb προσηλοῦν, which lay semantically close to προσπασσαλεύειν, indicates on an etymological level that the punishment implied in the threat was a crucifixion.<sup>29</sup> It is not possible to determine if the noun σταυρός in this text refers to a cross or simply a pole, due to the fact that Diodorus uses the word in both ways (e.g., it refers to a pole in 17.71.6. and probably to a cross in 25.5.2). But, σταυρός in connection with προσηλοῦν points towards crucifixion.

Thus, the texts from Ctesias preserved in Photius and Plutarch deal with punishments connected to the Persians. Both intra-textual and extra-textual indications suggest that Ctesias refers to impaling in these texts when he uses the verb ἀνασταυροῦν.<sup>30</sup> Only one of the Ctesian texts, the preserved in Diodorus Siculus, may refer to a threat of a crucifixion.

Xenophon also uses the verb ἀνασταυροῦν when he refers to an impaling. The text describes the aftermath of the death of Cyrus II.

---

<sup>24</sup> Ctesias, *FGrH* 3c, 688 F 26.17.7 (Plut. *Artax.* 17.5). σῶμα πλάγιον διὰ τριῶν σταυρῶν ἀναπήξαι.

<sup>25</sup> Ctesias, *FGrH* 3c, 688 F 16.66. καὶ ὄν τρόπον τὸ δέρμα περιαιρεθεὶς ἀνεσταυρίσθη ὑπὸ Παρυσάτιος.

<sup>26</sup> Ctesias, *FGrH* 3c, 688 F 26.17.7 (Plut. *Artax.*, 17.5).

<sup>27</sup> Ctesias, *FGrH* 3c, 688 F 1b.10 (Diod. Sic. 2.1.10). The text just states that the victim was suspended (ἀνεσταυρώθη) without further information.

<sup>28</sup> Ctesias, *FGrH* 3c, 688 F 1.18.1 (Diod. Sic., 2.18.1). ἠπέλει καταπολημῆσας αὐτὴν σταυρῶ προσηλώσειν.

<sup>29</sup> The verb is coined from the preposition πρὸς and the noun ἦλος, “nail”.

<sup>30</sup> The remaining text with ἀνασταυροῦν does not affect this assumption (Ctesias, *FGrH* 3c, 688 F 1b.10 [Diod. Sic. 2.1.10]).

According to the seemingly Persian custom of treating slain rebels, the head and right hand of Cyrus were cut off and brought to King Artaxerxes II. The speech by Xenophon refers to this defiling of Cyrus' corpse.

Who, even in the case of his full brother, when he already was dead, cut off his head and hand and impaled them.<sup>31</sup>

It is obvious that the impaling occurred *post mortem*. The most logical conclusion is that Cyrus' head and hand were impaled. The tendency of the texts to provide poor information about the nature of the suspensions is the same when we look at the philosophical and poetical texts from the Classical period. I want to illustrate this through some examples from known authors.

Plato uses the verb ἀνασταυροῦν in the dialogue of *Gorgias* and the rare verb ἀνασχινδυλεύειν in his well-known text about the fate of the “just man” in his *Republic*.<sup>32</sup> Both texts lack information about what kind of suspension they describe, although the latter is closer to impaling than crucifixion on an etymological level.<sup>33</sup>

Euripides has a group of references to different suspensions, most likely various forms of impaling, which should be mentioned briefly. The first of these comes from the play *Bacchae* where, towards the end of the song, the “second messenger” sings about the fate of Pentheus,

---

<sup>31</sup> Xen. *An.* 3.1.17. ὃς καὶ τοῦ ὁμομητρίου ἀδελφοῦ καὶ τεθηκότος ἦδη ἀποτεμῶν τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ τὴν χεῖρα ἀνεσταύρωσεν. Ctesias refers to the same event but he does not mention the impaling (*FGrH* 3c, 688 F 16.66. Cf., Xen. *An.* 1.10.1).

<sup>32</sup> Pl. *Grg.* 473c; *Resp.* 362a.

<sup>33</sup> The verb ἀνασχινδυλεύειν (Attic form of -σκιנדυλεύειν). In Liddell & Scott's *A Greek-English Lexicon* (edited by H. G. Liddell, P. G. W. Glare, A. A. Thompson, H. S. Jones, R. McKenzie, and R. Scott. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996) the verb, with the alternative form -σκινδαλεύειν, is described as a synonym of ἀνασκολοπίζειν (*s.v.* LSJ. Cf., *s.v.* Hsch. [ἀνασκιנדυλεύεσθαι: ἀνασκολοπισθῆναι]; Tim., *Lex.* [ἀνασκιנדυλευθῆναι: ἀνασκολοπισθῆναι, ἀνασταυρωθῆναι]; *Etym. Magn.*). There is no instance of the simple form of the verb, σκιנדυλεύειν, but Photius of Constantinople labels σκινδαλεύειν as a synonym of ἀνασταυροῦν in his *Lexicon* (*s.v.* Phot., *Lex.*). The etymology of the verb indicates a connection with both the noun σκινδάλαμος, “splinter”, and the verb ἀνασχίζειν, “rip up”, and could thus indicate an imagery connection between ἀνασχινδυλεύειν and impalement. (For the translations, see the words in LSJ. Herodotus uses the verb ἀνασχίζειν when he describes how Harpagus rips open the belly of a hare and uses it as an envelope for his message to Cyrus (λαγὸν μηχανησάμενος καὶ ἀνασχίσας τούτου τὴν γαστέρα καὶ οὐδὲν ἀποτίλας, ὡς δὲ εἶχε, οὕτω ἐσέθηκε βυβλίον, γράψας τὰ οἱ ἐδόκεε [Hdt., 1.123.4]). This is a rather vague indication of what could be an interesting denotation of the verb. Note, that when the author of the Christian text *Acta et Martyrium Apollonii* related to the fate of the just man, he used ἀνασκολοπίζειν (*Act. Mar. Ap.*, 40).

who hid himself in a tree in order to witness secretly the orgies of the Bacchanals. He was discovered by them and taken for a wild beast, and torn into pieces in Bacchic frenzy by his own mother and his two sisters. His mother took his head and fixed it on the top of a thyrsos [πήξασ' ἐπ' ἄκρον θύρσον] and carried it away.<sup>34</sup> The next text comes from the play *Electra* where Oroestes declares:

I bring him who is dead to you,  
who you, if you desire, should expose as a prey for wild animals,  
fix (πήξασ') [the body and] press it down on a pole,  
or as spoil for birds, the children of the air.<sup>35</sup>

Euripides' words point towards an impaling by the request of placing the body on a, probably sharpened, pole and pressing it down. In a text from the play *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, the Taurian king Thoas urges his people to seize the Hellenes so that "we may throw [them] from the hard rock or fix (πήξωμεν) their bodies on the stake".<sup>36</sup> This text seems to refer to an impaling and not a crucifixion.<sup>37</sup> I base my conclusion on the fact that Euripides never used the word σκόλοψ to designate the execution tool in crucifixion.<sup>38</sup> The previous text is an example of this. The fact that he uses the same terminology (i.e., πηγνύναι and σκόλοψ) in both texts indicates that both texts give examples of impaling. Plutarch, who starts the fragment "Whether Vice be Sufficient to Cause Unhappiness" in his *Moralia* by quoting Euripides, uses the same terminology in an interesting parallel. In his lecture Plutarch asked: "But will you nail him to a cross or impale him on a pole?"<sup>39</sup> When Plutarch uses the verb καθηλοῦν in connection with σταῦρος, he seems to refer to crucifixion and through the use of

---

<sup>34</sup> Eur. *Bacch.* 1141 (for a similar use of πηγνύναι see Eur. *Cyc.* 302-303). A thyrsos is a rod wreathed in ivy and vine-leaves with a pinecone at the top, used in the worship of Dionysus.

<sup>35</sup> Eur. *El.* 895-99. αὐτὸν τὸν θανόντα σοι φέρω, | ὃν εἴτε χρήξεις θηρσὶν ἀρπαγὴν πρόθεσ, | ἢ σκόλον οἰωνοῖσιν, αἰθέρος τέκνοις, | πήξασ' ἔρεισον σκόλοπι.

<sup>36</sup> Eur. *IT* 1429-30. κατὰ στύφλου πέτρας | ρίψωμεν ἢ σκόλοπι πήξωμεν δέμας.

<sup>37</sup> E.g., O'COLLINS refers to this text as an example of crucifixion, which seems to be erroneous (O'COLLINS, *ABD* 1.1207). Hengel noticed that the punishment in the text might be a impaling, though he is ambiguous by labeling the text as a reference to crucifixion in the main text (HENGEL, *Crucifixion*, 22-23 and n. 6).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Eur. *Frag.* 878; *El.* 895-99; *Rhes.* 116; *Bacch.* 983. In *Bacch.* 983 σκόλοψ seems to refer to a "tree" in the broad sense. King Pentheus was searching for the wild Bacchanals from a cliff or a tree (ἀπὸ πέτρας ἢ σκόλοπος ὄψεται) and probably not from a pole. It looks like there is a parallelism between πέτρα and σκόλοψ in both *Bacch.* 983 and *IT* 1430.

<sup>39</sup> Plut. *An vit.* 499D. ἀλλ' εἰς σταυρὸν καθηλώσεις ἢ σκόλοπι πήξεις;

πηγνύναι in connection with σκόλωψ, he seems to refer to impalement. This indicates that Plutarch, who probably was familiar with Euripides' terminology, understood πηγνύναι and σκόλωψ as a reference to impalement, not to crucifixion. This may also indicate the nature of the punishment in the text. This brief survey of Euripides suggests that he does not refer to any crucifixions in his texts.<sup>40</sup>

This tendency is the same in later Greek texts. The notion that Polybius has references to assumed crucifixions in his *Histories* is well-known.<sup>41</sup> However, all texts from Polybius refer to undefined suspensions.<sup>42</sup> One of the texts distinguishes itself slightly from the other on the terminological level. The next text deals with the suspensions of Spendius, in the company of ten of his mercenary leaders, and Hannibal II.<sup>43</sup>

After this they took the captives around Spendius to the walls and suspended them openly. And those around Mathos having noticed that Hannibal behaved with negligence and overconfidence, attacked [Hannibal's] palisade and killed many of the Carthaginians, and drove every one out of the encampment. All baggage came under their dominion, and they seized the general Hannibal alive. They led him at once to Spendius' cross/pole and harshly took revenge. They took down [Spendius' corpse] and then placed [Hannibal] still living [on Spendius' cross/pole] and slaughtered thirty of the Carthaginians of highest rank around the corpse of Spendius. Thus Fortune purposely gave both sides alternately an opportunity of outdoing the other in mutual vengeance.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> The last text comes from the probably pseudo-Euripidean play *Rhesus*. Rhesus mentions to his dialogue partner a punishment which is of interest. "No man of good courage would lower himself to secretly | kill the foe, but to meet him face to face. | This one who sits, you say, in a thievish ambush | and prepares [his plot], I will take alive | and at the outlet of the gates impale through the spine | and set up as a feast for winged vultures. | Being a robber and plunderer of gods' temples |, he ought to die through this fate." (Eur. *Rhes.* 510-517. οὐδείς ἀνὴρ εὐψυχὸς ἀξιοῖ λάθρᾳ | κτεῖναι τὸν ἐχθρόν, ἀλλ' ἰὼν κατὰ στόμα. | τοῦτον δ' ὄν ἴζειν φῆς σὺ κλωπικὰς ἔδρας | καὶ μηχανᾶσθαι, ζῶντα συλλαβὼν ἐγὼ | πυλῶν ἐπ' ἐξόδοισιν ἀμπεύρας ῥάχιν | στήσω πετεινοῖς γυψὶ θοινατήριον. | ληστήν γὰρ ὄντα καὶ θεῶν ἀνάκτορα | συλῶντα δεῖ νιν τῷδε κατθανεῖν μόρω.) The combination of ἀναπέριρειν and ῥάχιν points toward an impalement.

<sup>41</sup> E.g., SCHNEIDER, *TDNT* 7.573; O'COLLINS, *ABD* 1.1207

<sup>42</sup> Polyb. 1.11.5; 24.6; 79.4; 86.4-7; 5.54.7; 8.21.3; 10.33.8.

<sup>43</sup> Hannibal II was the son of the Carthagian general Hannibal I, and grandson of Gisco, a Carthaginian general during the first Punic war.

<sup>44</sup> Polyb. 1.86.4-7. μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα προσαγαγόντες πρὸς τὰ τείχη τοὺς περὶ τὸν Σπένδιον αἰχμαλώτους ἐσταύρωσαν ἐπιφανῶς. οἱ δὲ περὶ τὸν Μάθω κατανοήσαντες τὸν Ἀννίβαν ῥαθύμως καὶ κατατεθαρρηκότως ἀναστρεφόμενον, ἐπιθέμενοι τῷ χάρακι πολλοὺς μὲν τῶν Καρχηδονίων ἀπέκτειναν, πάντας δ' ἐξέβαλον ἐκ τῆς στρατοπεδείας, ἐκυρίευσαν δὲ καὶ τῆς ἀποσκευῆς ἀπάσης, ἔλαβον δὲ καὶ τὸν στρατηγὸν Ἀννίβαν ζωγρία. τοῦτον μὲν οὖν παραχρῆμα πρὸς

Both the suspensions and the suspension tools in the text are undefined. This is the only time Polybius uses the plain verb σταυροῦν and the noun σταυρός. The question is if this is enough to determine whether the text refers to crucifixion. It is uncertain to what he refers with σταυρός. He uses a related verb, ἀποσταυροῦν, when he refers to palisades, i.e., a fortification made of standing and sometimes pointed poles. Could this be a vague indication that points away from crucifixion and towards impaling?<sup>45</sup> Another feature worth noting is the usage of the, in connection to crucifixion, odd verb ἀνατιθέναι (“to lay upon”). I have not found any text which uses this verb in connection with crucifixion. These indications do not show that the described punishments are examples of impaling; at most they indicate that it is possible to interpret this text as a reference to impaling.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, the result of the study of the crucifixion in Polybius is meager. Not one single text could with any degree of certainty be judged to contain a reference to crucifixion. All texts refer to undefined suspensions. One text contains some vague indications, which may point towards impaling instead of crucifixion.<sup>47</sup>

Again, it is not possible to draw the conclusion that the other texts containing ἀνασταυροῦν and ἀνασκολοπίζειν do not refer to crucifixions at all. The rejected texts *may* refer to crucifixions, but it is not possible to determine to what extent they actually are relevant references due to their lack of additional internal or external textual evidence. Thus, *what kind* of suspension these texts refer to, i.e., impaling, crucifixion or something similar is unknown.

### *The “Critical View” Applied on the Reference Literature*

So far, so good. The last pages of this paper will be spent on some problems regarding “critical reading”. First, this method will certainly sort out texts, which describe punishments within the narrow definition mentioned at the beginning of the paper, but which lack the intra-

---

τὸν τοῦ Σπενδίου σταυρὸν ἀγαγόντες καὶ τιμωρησάμενοι πικρῶς ἐκείνον μὲν καθείλον, τοῦτον δ’ ἀνέθεσαν ζῶντα καὶ περικατέσφαξαν τριάκοντα τῶν Καρχηδονίων τοὺς ἐπιφανεστάτους περὶ τὸ τοῦ Σπενδίου σῶμα, τῆς τύχης ὡς περ ἐπίτηδες ἐκ παραθέσεως ἀμφοτέροις ἐναλλάξ διδούσης ἀφορμὰς εἰς ὑπερβολὴν τῆς κατ’ ἀλλήλων τιμωρίας.

<sup>45</sup> S.v., LSJ. See also II.3. where the verb is understood as “set up and leave in a place”, in this case a cross according to LSJ, with a reference to Polyb. I.86.6. Polybius also uses the verb in 4.24.2, 49.1; 6.35.8, 40.3; 23.2.6, 7.4, in various meanings. Polyb. 4.49.1 may strengthen the interpretation of the verb in II.3.

<sup>46</sup> Diod Sic. 25.5.2 may contradict this assumption. Diodorus uses the verb προσηλοῦν instead of ἀνατιθέναι when he gives his description of the fate of Hannibal II, which may indicate that he understood the text as a reference to crucifixion.

<sup>47</sup> Polyb. I.86.4-7.

textual or extra-textual indications exemplified in this paper. Second, if we regard this critical approach to the source texts as plausible, or maybe even preferable, and apply it to the reference literature, the methodological dichotomy will be clear. I will exemplify this by referring to some well-known titles from the reference literature used in the study of the New Testament.

### A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament

For instance, the *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG) has a paragraph on “ἀνασταυρόω”.<sup>48</sup> The lexicon says that the verb always means simply *crucify*, i.e., not *crucify again* as the verb mainly is understood in Heb. 6.6. In order to show that this is the case, the lexicon refers to a series of texts. It is correct that these texts do not indicate any meaning in the direction of “*crucify again*”, but are these texts references to crucifixions at all? The following texts are mentioned:

- Plato, *Gorgias*, 473c
- Hellen. Oxy. 15.5
- Polybius, 1.11.4-7; 1.24.3-7
- Diodorus Siculus 2.1.8-10; 2.44.1-3; 13.111.3-6; 14.53.1-5
- Plutarch, *Fabius Maximus*, 6.1-6; *Cleomenes*, 39.1-4.
- Chariton, *De Chaerea et Callirhoe*, 4.2.4-9
- Aesop, *Fab.* 152 P. [264 H.] (I have not found this text on either the PHI 6 or the *The Duke Databank of Documentary Papyri*)
- POxy 842
- Josephus, *Ant.* 2.70-73; 11.244-47; *Bell.* 2.305-308; 5.446-5; *Vita* 419-21

There are some problems with these references. With exception of the texts I have not found (Aesopos, *Fab.* 152 P.; 264 H), or one text that occur twice (Hellen. Oxy. 15.5 and POxy 842 are identical), only three texts remain after a critical reading; Chariton, *De Chaerea et Callirhoe*, 4.2.4-9; Josephus, *Bell.* 2.305-308 and *Vita*, 419-21.<sup>49</sup> The text from Chariton mentions that each one of the condemned would

---

<sup>48</sup> S.v., Bauer, Walter, and Frederick W. Danker. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3. ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>49</sup> I have searched all the text from Oxyrhynchus and Aesop for ἀνασταυροῦν (i.e., the stem “σταυρ” with double wildcards) without success. For the relation between Hellen. Oxy. 15.5 and POxy 842, see Pesely, George E., “How many copies of the *Hellenika Oxyrhynchia* have been found?” *The Ancient History Bulletin*, 8/2 (1994), 38-44.

have had to carry his own cross (καὶ ἕκαστος αὐτῶν τὸν σταυρὸν ἔφερε), which is a vague indication of the nature of the punishment. Beside the references in the Gospels, Plutarch and Artemidorus mention this custom in connection to assumed crucifixions.<sup>50</sup> The text from Josephus *Jewish War* mentions that the victim was flogged and then nailed to a cross or a pole (οὗς μάστιξιν προαικισάμενος ἀνεσταύρωσεν [...] ἀνδρας ἰππικοῦ τάγματος μαστιγῶσαί τε πρὸ τοῦ βήματος καὶ σταυρῶ προσηλῶσαι).<sup>51</sup> Both the flogging and the nailing (προσηλοῦν) point toward crucifixion. The text from Josephus' *Life* mentions that one of the suspended survived the attempted execution. As mentioned above, the probability of surviving an impaling ought to be nonexistent.

Thus, with the “critical view” applied to the paragraph on “ἀνασταυρώω” in BDAG, thirteen of sixteen texts are ruled out (Aesopos, *Fab.* 152 P.; 264 H. and POxy 842 are not included).

### Anchor Bible Dictionary

The next example from the reference literature comes from the article “Crucifixion” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary (ABD)*, by Gerald G. O’Collins. If the proposal postulated in the present paper is correct, some contradictions to the method used in this article will surface.

As I mentioned before, it may be problematic to say that “the Persians practiced crucifixion as a form of execution” with references to Herodotus 1.128.2; 3.125.3; 3.132.2; 3.159.1.<sup>52</sup> It is not possible to determine what kind of suspension Herodotus refers to in 1.128.2; 3.132.2; 3.159.1; the texts could just as well refer to impaling. If the texts refer to an impaling they do not match O’Collins’ definition of crucifixion.

The act of nailing or binding a living victim or sometimes a dead person to a cross or stake (*stauros* or *skolops*) or a tree (*xylon*).<sup>53</sup>

One of the texts, 3.125.3, refers to a suspension of a corpse (within O’Collins’ definition). There are, however, as mentioned earlier, texts in Herodotus’ writings that could be useful in the study of execution by crucifixion: Hdt. 7.194.1-3; 7.33.1; 9.120.4 and 9.122.1. These texts, which O’Collins mentions later in his article, contain more likely descriptions of executions by crucifixion, a proposal based on the method described in the present paper.

---

<sup>50</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 554A; Artem. *Oneir.* 2.56. I have not found any texts where the victim was forced to carry his execution tool prior to an impaling.

<sup>51</sup> Jos. *Bell.* 2.306-8.

<sup>52</sup> O’COLLINS, *ABD* 1.1207.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

O'Collins mentions other ancient sources, which speak of crucifixion among many groups of peoples. He correctly points out that the sources "are not necessary reliable", as far as their value as historical sources is concerned.<sup>54</sup> But, if we use the "critical view" presented in this paper, the *method* often used to find the sources is not necessarily reliable either. Several of the texts, which are supposed to connect the use of crucifixion with a number of peoples, do not determine what kind of suspension they describe.<sup>55</sup> Some of the texts refer to impaling.<sup>56</sup> Thus, also in the case of the article "Crucifixion" in *ABD* the number of relevant texts decreases significantly.

### *Summary and Conclusion*

This critical approach, applied to the search for texts containing descriptions of crucifixion in the pre-Christian Greek literature, matched with the narrow definition of crucifixion mentioned in the beginning of the present paper, leads to a meager result. Many texts previously mentioned in various studies of crucifixion are ruled out. Maybe the method offered in the present paper is too minimalistic in the end. One problem is that a critical approach like this comes to a different, and sometimes contradictory, conclusion than some of the well-known exegetical lexica. It seems not to harmonize with the methods used, e.g., in the mentioned reference literature. Nevertheless, what remains is a text corpus which forms a firm textual basis for the study of crucifixion in the pre-Christian Greek literature.

The connection to Persia seems to be weak, due to the fact that most of the texts that constitute the connection describe an undefined suspension. It seems at most that "die Perser hatten eine Vorliebe für die Hinrichtung" but not necessary "am Kreuz", as Ethelbert Stauffer puts it.<sup>57</sup> We do not have reliable knowledge about how the Persians

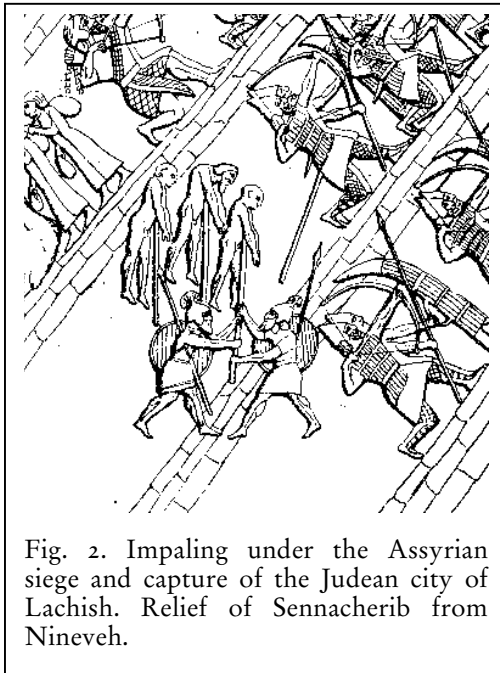


Fig. 2. Impaling under the Assyrian siege and capture of the Judean city of Lachish. Relief of Sennacherib from Nineveh.

---

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> E.g., Polyb. 1.11.5; 24.6; 79.4-5; Diod. Sic. 2.1.10; 2.44.2; 5.32.6; 25.10.2; 26.23.1; 33/35.12.1.

<sup>56</sup> E.g., Eur. *IT*, 1429-30; Diod. Sic. 33.15.1.

<sup>57</sup> STAUFFER, *Jerusalem und Rom im Zeitalter Jesu Christi*, 123.



suspended their condemned.<sup>58</sup> The only real evidence we have from the east shows that, in this case the Assyrians, executed captured enemies through impaling (see fig. 2).

The present paper ends with a two-level proposal. First, we need to reconsider our definition of crucifixion. Second, we need to reconsider our methods when we search for ancient texts that deal with crucifixions.

*The definition.* There exists today a distinct definition of crucifixion, evolved from the crucifixion of Jesus, which seems to have been non-existent in the pre-Christian era. The punishments of impaling, crucifixion and post mortem suspension seem not to be distinct entities. Usually, the ancient authors do not make a clear distinction between the punishments; whether the victims were impaled or crucified, or whether they were dead or alive when suspended. The important feature seems to be the suspension itself; the condemned, defeated, captured or executed person was displayed in humiliation. Thus, if we still want to single out the crucifixion as a separate entity to be studied, we need to revise our methods in the search for source material.

*The Method.* The “critical view” applied reduces significantly the number of relevant texts in the reference literature. The method presented in this paper calls for a broader analysis of the source material in the study of crucifixion. In order to determine if a text contains a reference to an execution by crucifixion, something more is needed than the verb ἀνασταυροῦν or ἀνασκολοπίζειν.

What do we know then about crucifixion in the ancient Mediterranean literature? Maybe not as much as we are tempted to think.

---

<sup>58</sup> The texts in Ezra 6.11; Esther, 2.23, 5.14, 6.4, 7.10, 8.7, 9.25, refer also to undefined suspensions.