Crucifixion in the Ancient Mediterranean World

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See Also: *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World* (WUNT 327, Tübingen, 2014).

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The origins of crucifixion are clouded in the ambiguities of ancient history. Impalement was practiced by some civilizations in the ancient Near East, but crucifixion, which implies an extended death by suspension, is different from the impalements depicted, for example, on the Balawat bronze gates of Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.E.; cf. Cook 2014a, 312–313). In the reliefs on the gates, victims are shown with stakes piercing the soft flesh between their legs. Greek and Roman authors do, however, believe that the Persians practiced crucifixion or something similar (Herodotus, *Histories* 7.194, Fronto, *On the Parthian War* 6). The Greeks apparently executed individuals in some cases by nailing them to boards. In 479 according to Herodotus (*Histories* 9.120), Xanthippus (the father of Pericles) nailed Artaÿktes (who was the Persian governor of a town named Sestus) to boards and suspended him. There are two sites in Greece where skeletons were found that had been attached to boards with fetters or nails (Phalerum [VII B.C.E.] and Delos [II–I B.C.E.] respectively; cf. Cook 2014a, 14–15). *Apotumpanismos* (ἀποτυμπανισμός; Cook 2014a, 13–15) may be the term the Greeks used to describe this form of execution. More apposite historically is the use in ancient Greece of a form of execution that Monique Halm-Tisserant calls "exposure" (Halm-Tisserant 158–188). Although individuals executed by that form of torture stand on the ground, they are attached to stakes in various ways and left to die. A bronze *cista* (box; first half of III B.C.E.) from Palestrina includes an image of Andromeda attached to a *patibulum* (horizontal bar) supported by two vertical stakes (Figure one).



Figure 1: Andromeda exposed on a patibulum (Lafaye 1574)

Halm-Tisserant (168-169, 188) believes, with some justification, that Roman crucifixion was a transformation of the exposure used by the ancient Greeks, which is depicted on many vases and other objects of art. It is possible that the Carthaginians practiced crucifixion before the Romans, since the earliest historical accounts of Roman crucifixion date to the Second Punic War (218–201 B.C.E.) between Rome and Carthage. Crucifixion plays a large role in the plays of Plautus who wrote during the period of that war. Latin and Greek authors certainly believed that crucifixion was used in Carthage (e.g., Livy, *Periochae* 17, Polybius, *Histories* 1.24.6).

The vocabulary used for crucifixion is of some interest due to a recent skeptical attack (Samuelsson 2013, passim; cf. Cook 2014b) on the entries in the various Greek lexicons. Several results, however, are clear. The Romans could use *crux* to refer to a cross or to the vertical beam used in crucifixion. It does not refer to any penalty other than crucifixion with the exception of a few metaphorical usages (Pliny, *Natural History* 14.12 [the vine producing a very dry wine justly hangs on a "high cross"], Statius, *Woods* 4.3.27-31 [a cruciform shaped pole used in a two-wheeled wagon]). A rare usage is that of Sextus Propertius, *Elegies* 3.22.37 where "cross-trees" (*arboreasque cruces* "torture trees") refers to a legendary punishment in Greece in which a bandit executed victims by attaching them in some fashion to trees. This, however, is the one exception to the rule that I am aware of in which *crux* is used for a punishment different from crucifixion. *Patibulum* refers either to the horizontal beam used in crucifixion, and in a less precise usage, it can refer to the horizontal and vertical beam used in crucifixion.

The Greek words most often use to refer to crucifixions include the noun *stauros* (σταυρός; vertical beam, cross, and [in a usage called "whole for part"] horizontal beam) and the verbs *stauroō* (σταυρόω; generally "crucify") and *anastauroō* (ἀνασταυρόω; generally "crucify"). With regard to the verbs, however, there are complications, and Samuelsson has been correct to point them out. The verb *anastauroō* can mean "impale" in some texts that describe the treatment of disembodied heads (Herodotus, *Histories* 4.103). That usage, however, is quite similar to crucifixion in that the heads are "attached" to poles in some manner. There are apparently no texts that describe the explicit impalement of a living person with the verb, however. By "explicit impalement" I mean texts with additional semantic features that clearly imply the vertical or horizontal

penetration of a living individual by a stake. One may contrast this fact with the many texts using the verb that include semantic features such as the victims' seeing others – features that clearly imply that the victims were crucified and not impaled. An example is Alexander Jannaeus's execution in 88 B.C.E. of 800 of the Pharisees' supporters: "While he feasted with his concubines in a conspicuous place, he ordered some eight hundred of the Jews to be crucified (*anastaurōsai*), and slaughtered their children and wives before the eyes of the still living wretches" (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 13.380; cf. Cook 2014a, 9). Impalement produces an extremely quick death, and the context ("semantic features") demonstrates that the men were crucified and not impaled. The verb primarily used in the New Testament for crucifixion is *stauroō*. The poet Lucillius, for example, who wrote during the reign of Nero, uses it to describe a Diophon who became quite envious of another man's cross that was better than his: "Envious Diophon, seeing another man near him crucified (*stauroumenon*) on a higher cross than himself, fell into a decline" (Greek Anthology 11.192; cf. Cook 2014a, 10). Crucifixion was generally a protracted and agonizing death according to Augustine (*Tractate on the Gospel of John* 36.4; cf. Cook 2014a, 190).

In the surviving evidence there are only two explicit mentions of impalement in Latin texts (Seneca, *Dialogues* [*To Marcia in Consolation*] 6.20.3 and *Epistles* 14.5), however in both texts Seneca uses the word "stake" (*stipes*) and not cross/pole (*crux*) to describe the vertical penetration of an individual (the stake was inserted in the soft tissue between the victim's legs and emerged through his or her mouth).[1] Consequently, one may conclude that impalement was rarely used by Roman authorities. A British queen named Boudicca, in a revolt (60/61 C.E.), did use impalement to execute some Roman matrons (Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 62.7.2). I know of no other reports of explicit impalements before Constantine. Romans did not practice hanging in either the Republic or the empire (cf. Cook 2014a, 3–4 for references). There are many Latin texts with semantic features that indicate crucifixion is the penalty being described (and not, e.g., impalement). In one rhetorical exercise, for example, a father and son both sought the same command. The son, who was appointed general, was captured by the enemy and ambassadors were sent to ransom him. On the way they met the father who was in possession of some gold and who told them it was too late, because his son had been crucified. The ambassadors find the son on the cross (*crucifixum*) who tells them to "Beware betrayal." The father was accused of betrayal (the Elder Seneca, *Controversies* 7.7.pr.). Clearly the son is dying on the cross and consequently has not been impaled by a stake that "could not possibly avoid fatally damaging vital organs and/or nicking the descending aorta or inferior vena cava, which would have caused a victim to bleed to death immediately" (Cook 2014a, 3).

A very interesting law from Puteoli that probably dates to the Augustan era concerned the lease of funeral and execution services to a contractor (Cook 2014a, 370-387). The relevant section on crucifixion comprises two sections – one (A) which regulated the crucifixion of slaves at the behest of their owners and the other (B) which regulated the

[1] In the first text Seneca does classify *stipes* as a form of *crux*, however, but in the second text he explicitly distinguishes *crux* from *stipes*.

crucifixion of foreigners and perhaps even lower class citizens. "(A) Whoever will want to exact punishment on a male slave or female slave at private expense, as he [the owner] who wants the [punishment] to be inflicted, he [the contractor] exacts the punishment in this manner: if he [the owner] wants [him] to lead the patibulated individual [individual carrying a *patibulum*] to the cross [vertical beam, in this case], the contractor will have to provide wooden posts, chains, and cords for the floggers and the floggers themselves. And anyone who will want to exact punishment will have to give four sesterces for each of the workers who bring the *patibulum* and for the floggers and also for the executioner. (B) Whenever a magistrate exacts punishment at public expense, so shall he decree; and whenever it will have been ordered to be ready to carry out the punishment, the contractor will have gratis to set up crosses (*cruces*), and will have gratis to provide nails, pitch, wax, candles, and those things which are essential for such matters. Also if he will be commanded to drag [the cadaver] out with a hook, he must drag the cadaver itself out, his workers dressed in red, with a bell ringing, to a place where many cadavers will be." This use of the *patibulum* (horizontal bar) corresponds to a text in Plautus's *Charcoal Comedy* (*Carbonaria* frag. 2): "Let him carry the *patibulum* through the city, then let him be nailed (or fastened) to a *crux* (vertical beam)." The tortures mentioned in the Puteolan law include flogging in the case of slaves (in "private" crucifixions). When the magistrate ("public" crucifixions) has to execute an individual by crucifixion the law mentions pitch and wax, which were used to torture the victims with fire. In classical Latin texts, incidentally, the individual to be crucified *never* carried a *crux* (vertical beam or entire cross) but only the *patibulum* (horizontal piece). When a criminal carried the *patibulum*, the *crux* (vertical beam, in this case) was already set in place. That implies that in John 19:17 Jesus only carried the horizontal member of the cross to Golgotha, since Pilate would have followed Roman procedure.

In the same town (Puteoli) in 1959 eight *tabernae* (inns/shops) were found. In one of them (*taberna* 5) there are a number of fascinating graffiti (words and drawings). At this time the *taberna* contains the most ancient Roman depiction of crucifixion (figure two). The cross is 40 cm high, the *patibulum* is 26 cm long and the height of the victim is 35 cm (Cook 2014a, 203). The graffito dates to the Trajanic-Hadrianic period. Immediately above the crucified person's left shoulder is a woman's name, "Alkimila." The graffiti artist (perhaps the same who drew the cross) clearly intended the name to go with the crucifixion scene. The figure is nude (as is the exposed Andromeda in figure one above). The shape of the cross is the Greek Tau (T), which is the same shape of the cross in the much more famous Palatine graffito (figure three), which may date to around 200 C.E. The placement of Alkimilla on her cross is the same as that of Jehohanan ben Hagkol, whose right calcaneum was found pierced by a nail (see figures four and five) in an ossuary in a tomb near Jerusalem in 1968 (Cook 2014a, 189–190). He probably was executed in the disturbances in first century Palestine.

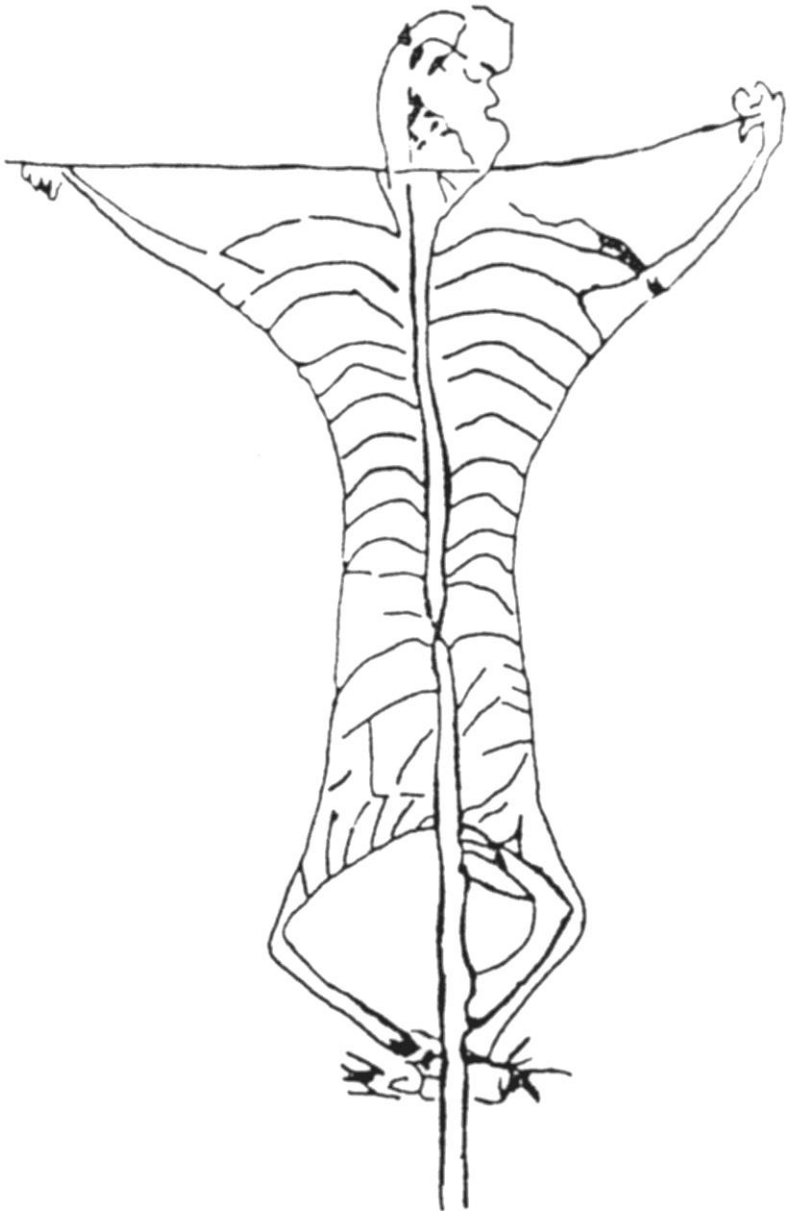


Figure 2: The Crucified Alkimilla. Trajanic-Hadrianic era. Puteoli: Via Pergolesi 146, Taberna 5. West Wall. Drawing by Professor Antonio Lombatti, used by permission.

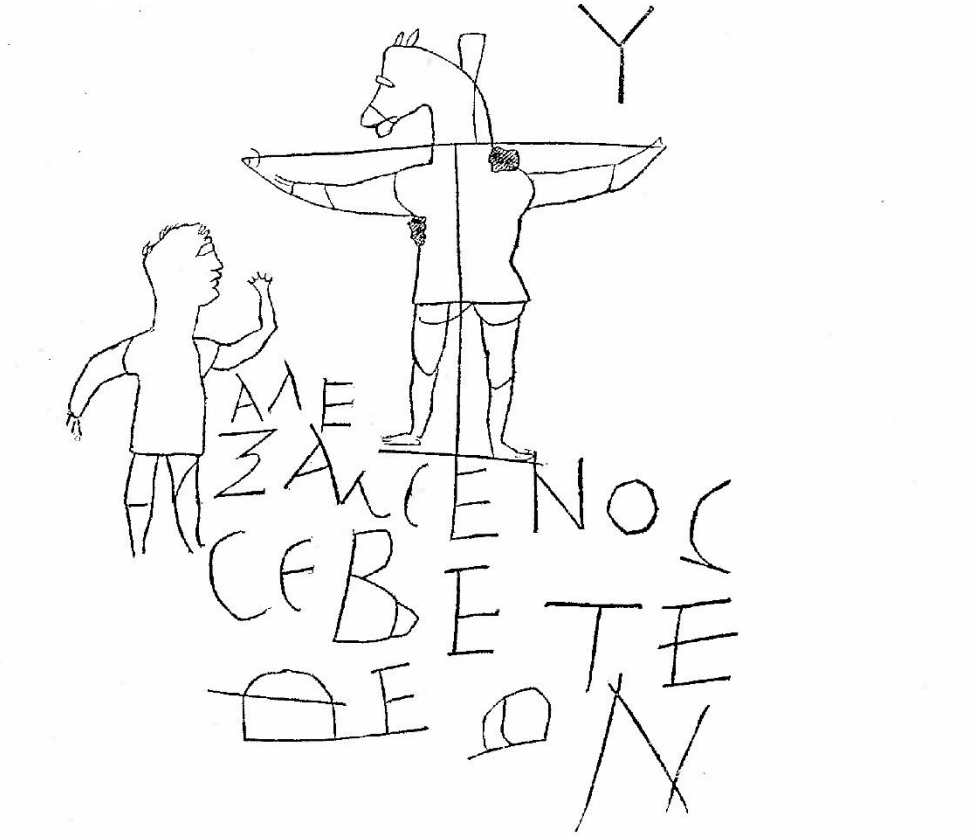


Figure 3: Palatine graffito found in the imperial paedagogium. Museo Palatino, Inv. No. 381403. height 38 cm, width 33 cm. Drawing by R. Garrucci, Un graffito blasfemo nel palazzo dei Cesari, Civiltà cattolica anno VII, ser. III, 4 (1856), 529–545, esp. 531.

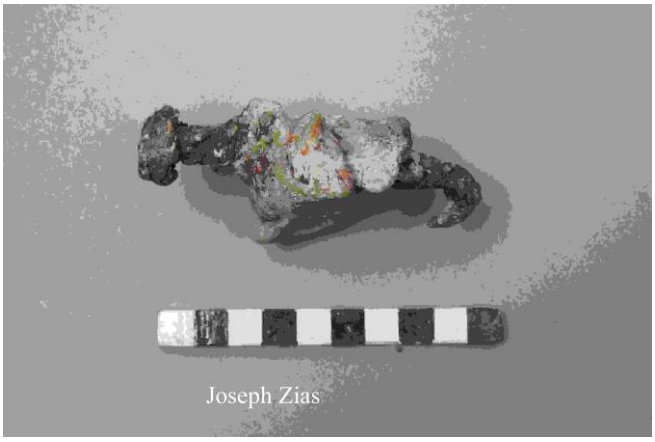


Figure 4: Right calcaneum of Jehohanan ben Hagkol pierced by a nail. Photograph courtesy of Mr. Joseph Zias, used by permission.

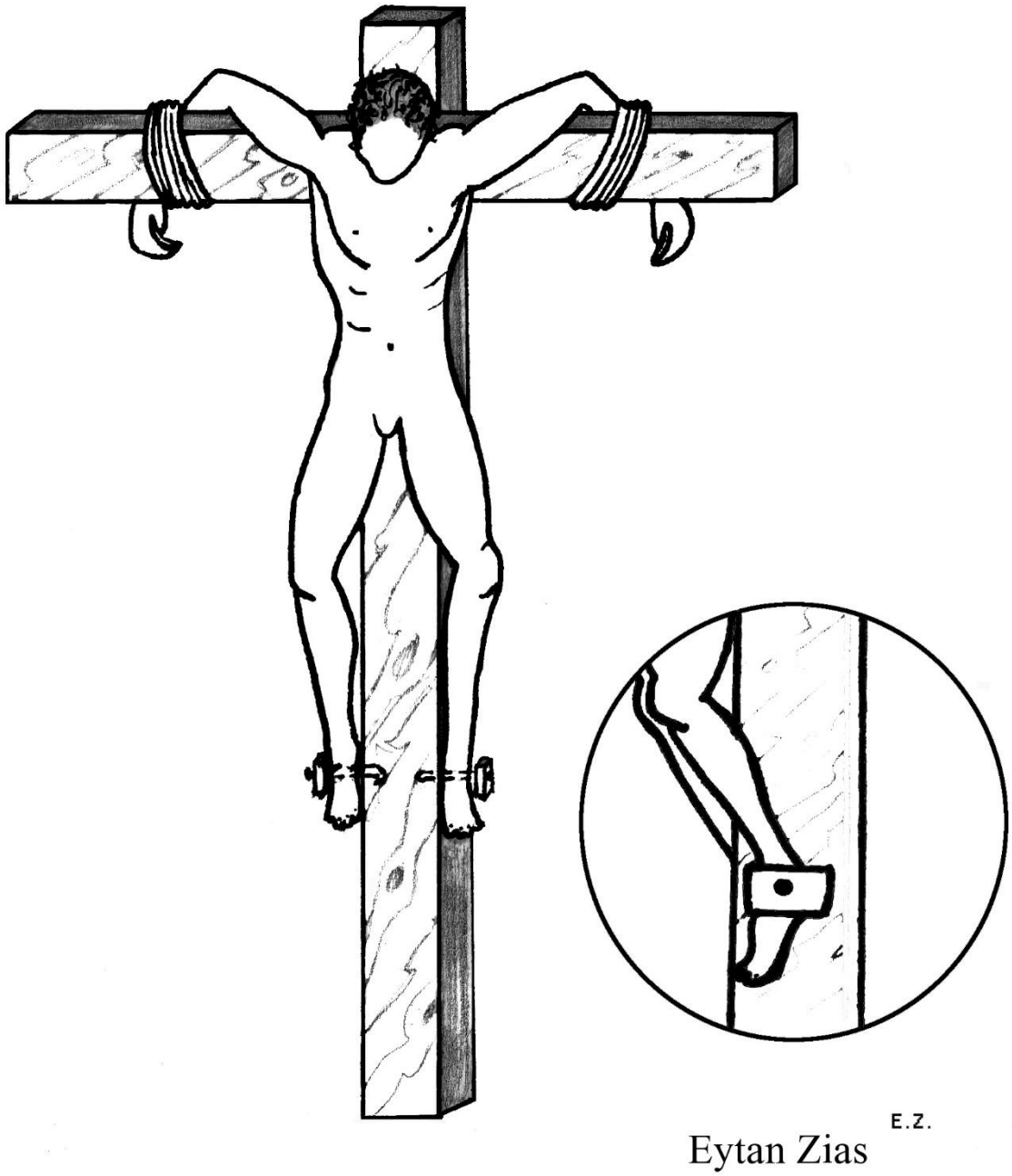


Figure 5: Proposed drawing of the crucified man by Mr. Eytan Zias, used by permission.

Research on Roman crucifixion serves as a cautious reminder that the empire had some profoundly disturbing undercurrents. This material also illuminates the New Testament's portrayal of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth and provides fundamental material for understanding the scandal of the cross (Gal 5:11).

Annotated Bibliography of Research on Crucifixion

Chapman, D. W., *Ancient Jewish and Christian Perceptions of Crucifixion*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/244, Tübingen 2008.
Chapman, in this study, surveys primarily the Jewish attitudes toward crucifixion in antiquity. He has collected a large quantity of data and sifted through it to produce a seminal piece of research.

Cook, J. G., *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World*, WUNT 327, Tübingen 2014[a].
This monograph surveys the vocabulary associated with crucifixion, crucifixion in Latin and in Greek texts, crucifixion and suspension in Hebrew/Aramaic texts, crucifixion in Roman law and its final abolition in Byzantium, and a chapter in which some of the material gleaned from the previous pages is used to illuminate crucifixion in the New Testament. Images relevant to ancient crucifixion including graffiti, the crucifixion bone in a calcaneum, the oldest depiction of the crucified Jesus on a magic gem, etc. are included.

Halm-Tisserant, M., *Réalités et imaginaires des supplices en Grèce ancienne*, Collection d'études anciennes 125, Paris 1998.
Halm-Tisserant collects a large number of images from ancient Greek vases and other sources and surveys a panoply of punishments in ancient Greece, one which closely resembles Roman crucifixion (i.e., exposition). She also relates certain punishments to the anthropological concept of impurity, which must be cleansed by expelling individuals from the community (often by capital punishment).

Harley, F. *Images of the Crucifixion in Late Antiquity. The Testimony of Engraved Gems*, PhD Diss., U. of Adelaide 2001 (part of this is forthcoming as *Crucifixion: The Creation of an Image in Late Antiquity*).
Harley, F. "55. Magical Amulet with Crucifixion [co-authored with J. Spier]," "56. Engraved Gem with the Crucifixion," "57. Ivory Plaques with the Passion and Resurrection of Christ (the 'Maskell Ivories')" in: *Picturing the Bible. The Earliest Christian Art*, ed. J. Spier, New Haven 2007, 227-232.
Harley-McGowan, F. "The Constanza Carnelian and the Development of Crucifixion Iconography in Late Antiquity," in: *"Gems of Heaven." Recent Research on Gemstones in Late Antiquity*, AD 200-600, ed. N. Adams/C. Entwistle, London 2011, 214-220.
Felicity Harley-McGowan has done some of the most profound research concerning the oldest images of the crucifixion of Jesus.

Hengel, M., *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, Philadelphia 1977.
Hengel, in his short book, collected a large quantity of data on ancient crucifixion and organized it into a very readable survey.

H.-W. Kuhn, "Die Kreuzesstrafe während der frühen Kaiserzeit. Ihre Wirklichkeit und Wertung in der Umwelt des Urchristentums," *ANRW* II/25.1 (1982) 648-793.
Whereas Hengel sought to include the maximum amount of material in his book, Heinz-Wolfgang Kuhn with a high degree of philological expertise surveyed Roman crucifixions during the first 150 years of the Common Era (including that of Jesus).

Lafaye, G., "*Crux*," *Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines* [1887] I/2, 1573–1575 (http://dagr.univ-tlse2.fr/sdx/dagr/index.xsp).
Georges LaFaye, in his brief article, which uses images from Greek and Roman culture, provides a reader with a wealth of useful information.

Samuelsson, G., *Crucifixion in Antiquity. An Inquiry into the Background of the New Testament Terminology of Crucifixion*, WUNT 2/310, Tübingen 2013 (second edition).
Gunnar Samuelsson, in a very able study of the problem of crucifixion in the era before the New Testament, comes to many skeptical conclusions that must be addressed by any subsequent scholar in the field. See, e.g., J. G. Cook, review of Samuelsson, *Crucifixion* in: *Review of Biblical Literature* 04/2014[b] (http://www.bookreviews.org).