



Suicidal behaviour in the ancient Greek and Roman world



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ABSTRACT

Objective: We attempt to present and analyze suicidal behaviour in the ancient Greek and Roman world. **Methods:** Drawing information from ancient Greek and Latin sources (History, Philosophy, Medicine, Literature, Visual Arts) we aim to point out psychological and social aspects of suicidal behaviour in antiquity.

Results: The shocking exposition of suicides reveals the zeitgeist of each era and illustrates the prevailing concepts. Social and legal reactions appear ambivalent, as they can oscillate from acceptance and interpretation of the act to punishment. In the history of these attitudes, we can observe continuities and breaches, reserving a special place in cases of mental disease. The delayed emergence of a generally accepted term for the voluntary exit from life (the term *suicidium* established during the 17th century), is connected to reactions triggered by the act of suicide than to the frequency and the extent of the phenomenon.

Conclusions: The social environment of the person, who voluntary ends his life usually dictates the behaviour and historical evidence confirms the phenomenon.

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1. Introduction

Suicide in antiquity remains a complex issue. Ancient sources avoid referring to psychological or social aspects and do not mention the experiences, the mental state, or the way of living of the subject. They just mention attitudes and beliefs of that time and, in most cases, the only known information is the motive that urges somebody to voluntary self-killing (Van Hooff, 1990). The main reported reason for suicide is offended honour and shame, that there is an increased individual sensitivity to the expectations of the society (Dodds, 1950). A person exiled from his homeland as a “*miasma*”, without religious and social identity, he either becomes a suppliant in other altars or commits a suicide (Lester, 1997). In antiquity, the suffocating integration in the group and the identification of each person with the group was the rule and deviations lead to serious consequences. Despite the lack of quantitative analyses, researchers (Petropoulos, 2006), estimate that suicide must have been a common phenomenon. In the Greek and the Roman world, suicide is equally frequent, but the motives are different and the methods used also differ (Rosen, 1971).

2. Suicides in Greek antiquity

Mental disease and dishonour or desperate love, constitute the main reasons, which led famous personalities in ancient Greece to suicide.

The historian Herodotus (Macauley, 1890) provides a detailed description of a suicide: Kleomenes, son of the king of Sparta, suffered the disease of mania and getting a knife, started amputating himself. He tore his flesh in strips moving from his thighs, his hips, his loins up to his abdomen before his death.

Neovouli, decided to end her life, because her ex-fiancé, the poet Archilochus, mocked her in his satirical poems (Gerber, 1976).

The death of the famous poet Sappho became a legendary myth: she fell from the top of the high cape Lefkatas, in the Sea of Lefkas Island, because of her fiery love for Phaon, who scorned her. Sappho came from an aristocratic family of the Island of Lesbos. She was the leader of an educational artistic school and her close relation with her female students permitted the legend of homosexual tendencies in her environment (Nagy, 1973).

Heroic suicides such as the winner of Salamis, Themistocles (who drank bull's blood so that he would not fight against his country), the orator Demosthenes' (who drank poison), and the philosopher Empedocles' (who attempted a fatal jump in the volcano of Aetna), confirm that voluntary death is not always an act of cowardice. They are different from the cases of imposed suicide: Socrates refused to escape, when given the chance, and insisted on

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drinking hemlock, according to the conviction of the Athenian State. They are not self-sacrifice: the last, rather legendary king of Athens, Kodros, killed himself in order to save his city. They finally differ from facing the certainty of imminent death, as in the case of Leonidas, at Thermopylae, who knew that there was no salvation for himself and his Three Hundred soldiers.

3. Philosophical schools and suicide in ancient Greece

Some philosophical schools in Ancient Greece, such as the devotees of Orpheus and Pythagoras condemned suicide. According to their theory, the body is the prison of the soul (gods' present) and by releasing it from its bond by suicide, man goes against the will of gods. Plato also condemns suicide: *man must not kill himself before God shapes the conditions for such a need* and cites also his teacher Socrates' saying that *men are in some kind of prison and none should free oneself nor should escape* (Jowett, 1999). He revisits the same subject: *one condemns suicide, if not imposed by law, without the pressure of some painful ordeal and without the burden of an insufferable shame, with the sole excuse of cowardice and indolence*. Since suicide is disrespectful towards god and a crime against the city, Plato charges posthumous punishments and suggests measures for the prevention of suicide: the graves of the suicides should be at a great distance from others. The suicides should be buried without honours, in desolate and uninhabited areas. There must be no epitaph with their name on their tomb (Bury, 1926). A just person endures: *even if he is poor or sick or in any supposedly bad state, as finally thinks, they will turn to benefit during his life or when he is dead* (Burnet, 1913).

Aristotle openly condemns suicide as an act of cowardice rather than bravery, saying: as it is lack of energy for someone to avoid hardships, the most foolish of men, unable to cope with difficulties, prefer to commit suicide (Browne, 1853). Aristotle concludes that suicide does not destroy himself alone, but also harms his homeland because he tears its social network apart. Both Plato and Aristotle accept suicide in the case of a painful disease or insufferable distress caused by shame¹¹. However, most philosophers condemn cowardice as a motive for suicide (Vasmatzidis, 2008).

Later the cynic philosophers openly recommended that everybody could decide between two choices: either to acquire wisdom and prudence or to put a bight around his neck (Goodwin, 1878). Diogenes Laertius cited *love stops by hunger, or else by time. If these fail, then a bight will do it* (Hicks, 1925). The Stoics taught that anyone could abandon life when it became insufferable (Rist, 1969). It seemed appropriate for a stoic philosopher to terminate his life violently, for dire necessity, tyrannical regime, great hunger, alcoholism, and severe disease. Epictetus summarizes that: *the exit door is always open; the voluntary exit has its time* (Vasmatzidis, 2008). Hegesias, known as "Peisithanatos" ("Death persuader"), taught that death is better than life (Rist, 1969). After a great number of suicide acts, considered as dangerous for the society, the governor, Ptolemy I Lagos banished him from Alexandria, whilst banning the propagation of his ideas. Similar phenomena survived to our days and we do witness group suicides of followers of some philosophical or religious cult (Vasmatzidis, 2008).

4. Theories of ancient Greek physicians

Medical science, seeking for better understanding of ennui, depression and pessimism, created the term "melancholy". Meaning the excess of black bile, it also denoted the acceptance of the theory of the four body humours (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, black bile), which originated from Pythagoras' teaching but was expressed and defined with precision in the Hippocratic Collection.

Hippocrates connected melancholy with the negative perception of the world (Jones, 1923). He supported that melancholy may degenerate into a series of bodily and psychological symptoms: aversion to food, insomnia, nervousness, agitation, gloom, anxiety, moral discouragement, suicidal tendency (Jones, 1931; Potter, 1988). Similarly, Galen insists on the psychosomatic nature of melancholy assuming that intense thinking and deep sorrow cause body reactions. Therefore, early medicine documented the exact clinical symptoms of depression and identified the extreme cases leading to suicidal behaviour (Edelstein, 1967).

5. Suicide in the Roman era: motives and methods

In ancient Rome the terminology of suicide included the term "voluntary death" (*voluntaria mors*) and "Roman Death", supports in our days the perception that it was frequent in the Roman world. The fact that historical evidence is limited imposes a careful examination of the facts in our disposition about the personal perceptions and experiences of Roman people (Minois, 2003). The Romans had classified motives for suicide in a diachronically valid manner:

- *Fury*: this was the category of insane patients.
- *Advanced age*: not always linked to illness and weakness, but connected with the decision to avoid the hardship of a difficult age (Grisé, 1983).
- *Physical pain*: suicide was the sole salvation (Gourevitch, 1969).
- *Devotion and faith*: common in the army, or in cases of conjugal loss (after Brutus's death Porcia swallows live coals).
- *Shame-dishonours*: linked to women's raping. Lucretia announced to her relatives that the son of king Tarquinius had dishonoured her and implemented her decision to commit suicide, gaining general respect (Langlands, 2006).
- *Sorrow*: connected to the loss of a loved one or psychological stress due to a unrequited love.

Each method of suicide (*modi moriendi*) common in ancient Rome maintained a specific symbolism. The way chosen to end one's life was of great importance and the ultimate goal was the dignity of Death. The most popular methods were

- *starvation*: which the Greeks called endurance (the Spartan legislator Lycurgus died thus).
- *use of arms*: considered as a "manly affair": Nero stabbed his neck with a dagger saying the famous "what an artist dies in me!" (*qualis artifex pereo!*). Gallantry dictated slitting one's veins after being defeated in battle.
- *poison*: often the person in question would simply ask for it from his healer, who was familiar with the substances that would allow an easy and painless death (Jones, 1978).
- *hanging and fall*: considered as degrading procedures of voluntary death. Tacitus characterizes them "repulsive end" (Kyriazi, 2006).

The legislators of Rome paid limited attention to the issue. Anyway, slaves that had attempted suicide automatically had a smaller market value (Garrison, 1883). The Romans supported suicide and, therefore, applauded women who did not want to live after the death of their husband and those committing suicide after rape. Lucretius (a suicide himself) cited *everyone seeks to escape his own self, obviously without being able to do so, remaining connected to himself, against his will and hating him* (Minois, 2003).

The philosopher Seneca was obliged to commit suicide by Nero's command. He had cited I consider someone a coward, if he dies out of fear he might suffer, and, a fool, if he lives to suffer (Burton, 1621). Although Seneca did not reach old age, he had

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