

The Roman Empire And The Act Of Suicide

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Roman Attitudes Toward Suicide and Honourable Death

Back in the ancient times and Middle Ages, the Roman Empire had an accepting attitude towards suicide. It was a very common activity among people. In today's world suicide is considered to be an ungodly act of cowardice, however, the Roman civilization considered suicide as an honorable death as compared to a death by execution (Luttwak).

However, significant Greek philosophers such as Pythagoras and Aristotle did not believe in suicide. Aristotle outlines that with suicide, a member of society is lost, while on the other hand, Socrates points out that our human bodies essentially belong to God, which is why ending our own life is against the divine law. A number of monotheistic religions believe in the same philosophy as Socrates.

Some Asian states, such as Japan, had similar pragmatic views on suicide. Officials with higher ranks would prefer to commit suicide if they were accused of a crime or made a big mistake, while in Victorian England, people who committed suicide were not even given a proper burial ceremony as it was considered a sinful crime.

Status, Reputation, and the Social Motives for Suicide

The three main reasons for suicide could be classified as to save themselves from certain consequences after death, fame, and, most importantly, honor. Roman nobility gave courage, strength, and dignity a lot of importance. Death by execution was one of the most disgraceful or dishonorable ways to die, which is why many Romans considered taking their own life a better way out. They believed that once honor was lost, there was nothing else to live for. Demographically speaking, suicide was prevalent in people of various age groups, young as well as old. Famous as well as local people were accepting of suicide as an actual practice.

Acceptance of people committing suicide was so common that there was a certain procedure involved as well. People who wished to commit suicide were supposed to apply to the Senate. Their plea would be heard, and if their case was considered successful, they were free to take their own life, which ultimately meant that they were honoring themselves or their image. The people who were officially allowed to commit suicide by the Senate were provided with poisonous plants as a way of completing

the process.

Common methods of committing suicide were stabbing oneself with a dagger in the throat or the chest, starving to death, slitting of wrists and ankles, falling or running into a sword, and, of course, poison (Peter Garnsey). These methods highlight how determined these people were to end their own lives. Some of these methods cause slow and painful deaths, but they were still very popularly used.

Class, Slavery, and Unequal Rights Over Life and Death

Soldiers and slaves were not given the privilege of attempting suicide because their economic value was too high in comparison to a normal Roman citizen. The main concept of taking their life was a degree of moral correction or rectifying their misdeeds. For example, if someone's reputation or personal image had been stained, then suicide was a popular method of restoring it.

Another popular reason behind suicide in Rome was the fact that people who were found guilty at trial were not able to provide their families or heirs with anything as their property was seized by the state, which is why those who committed suicide and their families were able to inherit whatever they owned under their name. Also, a master could get a full refund on their purchase if the slave killed themselves in a period of less than half a year.

Those accused of capital crimes were forbidden to commit suicide because the state would not be able to claim their property. Even though they were forbidden, many prisoners did commit suicide so that their family could own their property instead of the state. Soldiers who committed suicide were looked down upon because then they were given the label of a deserter or a traitor to Rome. The bodies of such soldiers were hanged as a form of public disgrace.

Military Honour and Suicide as a Patriotic Act

A very important aspect is suicide in terms of military endeavors. It was considered a patriotic act if soldiers killed themselves before being captured or killed by the enemy. This way, they protected state secrets and their own honor. For example, a number of Jews committed mass suicide in order to avoid being enslaved by the Romans at the Fortress of Masada. Similarly, women would commit suicide if their men were defeated at war in order to stop themselves from being raped by the winning army. For example, in 146 BC, Roman forces captured Carthage in the Third Punic War. The city was burned and destroyed, and while a number of people took their own lives, the remaining inhabitants were enslaved by the Roman soldiers.

An account to consider in light of suicide in the Roman Empire is that of Mark Antony and Cleopatra. Even though Mark Antony was a loyal supporter of Julius Caesar, after his death, he did his best to

avenge his murderers. However, soon after their defeat, he begins having an affair with Cleopatra, who also has three children with him (Anderson). This upset Octavian, the brother of Mark Antony's wife Octavia, which led him to flee the country with Cleopatra and commit suicide. However, his attempt at suicide was not seen in a favorable light because his suicide was for love, not honor.

This highlights the point that the type of suicide that was considered acceptable was something that was completely in the name of honor or social rectification, not for something selfish such as love. Emile Durkheim, a famous name in Sociology outlines that there different types of suicides, two of those types are altruistic and egoistic. Mark Antony's suicide can be considered as an egoistic suicide because he did it in order to remain with Cleopatra eternally.

Julius Caesar, Political Death, and the Question of Honour

Julius Caesar was murdered by the members of the Senate in the name of liberty. The question remains if he would have been considered more honorable if he had committed suicide instead of being stabbed to death. It also draws a great parallel between the way Julius Caesar died and the way Mark Antony committed a 'selfish' suicide because of his affair with Cleopatra. However, before Mark Antony killed himself, Brutus was defeated in the Liberators' civil war which led him to retreat to the hills, he later ran into his own sword as a mean of taking his own life. This highlights how he chose to end his life himself rather than die a dishonorable death at the hands of his defeaters.

One must also shed light on the times of the Roman Empire and how the social situation of that point in time played a role in the well-being of people. Perhaps there was a lack of justice or representation for common people, who felt the need to kill themselves rather than be tried in court with the hopes of being found not guilty. The leaders, on the other hand, gave a lot of importance to the way people thought of them. Shame and dishonor came easily in that day and age, which is why the number of suicides was so high. One cannot alter this particular situation in today's reality because of the massive differences in society and social welfare.

Works Cited

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