

The BCE suicides

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Abstract

Background: Suicide is a topic of public and professional interest. We explored the earliest reports of suicide in the West, ceasing at 30 BCE, seeking a better understanding of suicide.

Conclusion: We found twelve accounts of suicide, extending over more than 1000 years. We found no evidence of mental disorder. All cases were associated with painful events. While many aspects of the world have changed over the millennia, the activating effects of human distress have persisted.

Key words: suicide; loss; shame; pain

Introduction

Suicide, a person killing themselves, is a topic which makes us uneasy. In the last century, in the West, there has been much thought and discussion about this topic – mostly focused on possible ways of decreasing the frequency of this behaviour. A fashion of the last century was the medically promoted idea that all suicide was the result of mental disorders – this carried the belief that if mental disorders could be eradicated, suicide would be eliminated. The World Health Organisation finally deemed the belief that all suicide was the result of mental disorder to be a myth [1].

In this paper we look at the suicide of twelve individuals which occurred before the birth of Christ. Not with the notion of preventing, but to have a better understanding of this human behaviour.

These events occurred thousands of years ago. Many are the within the province of mythology. Mythology changes with time to accommodate changes in culture – thus, while some mythical stories may be questionable in fact, they can give valuable information about the culture of different times. Culture includes customs, which are what we do, and the actions we take in particular circumstances. Myths tell us of the appropriate responses to circumstances at other times. Of course, many responses may remain unchanged across time.

We have examined the events around the suicide of famous people. The lives of non-famous people have not generally been reported/recorded in the same way.

We have not provided detailed references. Most of this material can be learned from good quality encyclopaedias and standard reference material – we are looking not for secrets but common behaviour.

These stories begin perhaps 4000 years ago and are arranged sequentially - the most recent occurring a little over 2000 years ago.

1 & 2 Pyramus and Thisbe

Pyramus (male) and Thisbe (female) is a mythological story. They are believed to have lived in conjoined houses in Babylon which was built at the lower end of the Euphrates River. Babylon was founded about 2300 BCE and destroyed in 689 BCE.

Pyramus and Thisbe are two young lovers from feuding families whose fathers had forbidden their love, so they plan to run away to be together. Thisbe arrives to their meeting place and is startled by a lioness, so she runs to safety, but left her cloak behind. The lioness chewed the veil, leaving traces of blood.

When Pyramus arrives and finds the blood-stained veil he assumes Thisbe had been killed and eaten by a wild animal. He blames himself for being late – "...my spirit is guilty. I killed you he uttered" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, line 110). He fatally stabbed himself with his sword.

Thisbe returns, and realises what had happened, she blames herself and longs for reunion – "...nor can you be torn away by death" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, line 153). She fatally stabs herself with Pyramus' sword.

This account suggests that in the setting of the loss of a loved individual, suicide may be performed to either eradicate the pain of the loss or enable reconnection in another world.

The story of Pyramus and Thisbe greatly influenced Shakespeare's plays, 'Romeo and Juliet' and 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' as well as romantic stories by many others.

3. Ajax

Ajax the Great was a mythical Greek hero. He was a leading figure in the Trojan War – which involved the Greeks attacking the city of Troy (now Hisarlik in Turkey). Ajax died about the end of the Trojan War, which occurred about 1184 BCE.

Ajax was known for his courage. He carried a huge shield made of seven cow hides and a layer of bronze, and a larger than normal spear.

He had two hand to hand fights with Hector, a Trojan prince. One of these lasted most of a day - Zeus announced it a draw and called on the combatants to exchange gifts. Hector gave Ajax a sword.

Odysseus (also known as Ulysses) was a Greek king involved in the Trojan War. It was his idea to deceive the Trojans with the giant wooden horse.

Achilles was one of the most important Greek soldiers who fought in the Trojan War. He wore armour made by Hephaestus, the Olympian God of Fire. When he was killed, both Ajax and Odysseus claimed Achilles' armour.

A debate was organized, the claimants had to state the reasons they deserved the armour. Odysseus with assistance from the Goddess Athena won the debate and was awarded the armour. Ajax was disappointed and died by suicide – throwing himself on his sword. A more complex account came from the *Little Iliad* (a lost piece of Greek literature) which stated that

Ajax was extremely angry and killed many Greek cattle – later he was overcome with shame and killed himself with the sword given to him by Hector.

Ajax is said to have killed himself to avoid disappointment and/or shame – both are unpleasant life experiences.

4. Samson

Samson was a biblical character – probably born in the 11th century BCE. He lived at a time when the Israelites were oppressed by the Philistines. His parents were unable to conceive. However, the Angel of the Lord visited Samson's mother and stated that she would have a son with potential for enormous strength, who could liberate the Israelites from the Philistines. The Angel advised that the offspring must never cut his hair.

Samson was born very strong – as a young man he was attacked by a lion – he tore it apart with his bare hands. On another occasion he killed 1000 Philistines with the jawbone of an ass.

Samson begins a relationship with Delilah. Eventually, he revealed the secret of his strength to her – that he must never cut his hair. While he was asleep, Delilah orders a servant to cut his hair. While he was in this weakened state, she handed him over to the Philistines. They gouged out his eyes, beat him and put him to work grinding corn.

One day the Philistines took Samson to a temple – they intended to torture him and display their dominance over him to the public. However, by this time his hair has regrown somewhat. The temple was packed with 3000 people – some even watching from the roof. Samson prayed to God for his strength to be returned – “that I may be avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes” (Judges 16:28). His wish was granted, his strength was returned - he pushed down the columns which supported the roof of the temple - the roof and walls of the temple collapsed and Samson and all his tormentors died.

At the hands of the Philistines, Samson suffered imprisonment, rough treatment and blindness. Suicide allowed him to escape these distressing experiences and take revenge on those who had treated him so badly.

5. Aegeus

In Greek mythology, Aegeus was the son of Pandion II, king of Athens – Aegeus succeeded his father on the throne.

Aegeus married twice but remained childless. He visited Pittheus, the king of Troezen, a town in the northeastern Peloponnese. He met Pittheus' s daughter, Aethra, and she became pregnant.

Aegeus decided to return to Athens. He buried his sandal, shield and sword under a huge rock. He told Aethra, when their son was born, he would retrieve those belongings and bring them to him. By this method he would recognize his son. Theseus (the son) grew up in Troezen, possibly in the 8th or 9th century BCE.

On the island of Crete lived “the Minotaur” - a monster with the head of a bull. The only way to pacify the Minotaur was to give it young people as sacrifices. Theseus agreed to attempt to kill the Minotaur.

Theseus visited his father in Athens and told him of his plan to fight the Minotaur. Aegeus told Theseus that if he was successful, when he returned from Crete, he was to dress his ship in white sails.

Theseus succeeded in killing the Minotaur but forgot to change his sails from black to white. When Aegeus saw the black sails, he assumed his son was dead and threw himself from the Acropolis into the sea (which later became the Aegean) and drowned.

Aegeus completed suicide as a means of escaping the pain of the loss of his son.

6. Queen Cordelia

Cordelia was a legendary Queen of Britain – the following events are believed to have occurred in the 8th century BCE.

King Leir was one of the first monarchs of Britain. He had three daughters, Goneril (first born), Regan and Cordelia (last born). Late in his life he wanted to distribute his riches between his daughters. He asked each to express their attitude/feelings toward him – his plan was to distribute his riches to each daughter according to their responses. Goneril and Regan professed great affection and were given great riches and married off to Dukes.

Cordelia refused to participate in this process and was disinherited and largely abandoned. Nevertheless, she was pursued by, and married and went to live with Aganippus, King of the Franks (in Gaul).

Leir's sons-in-law stole his assets and power. He fled across the Channel to Cordelia. She raised an army, returned to Britain and restored her father to his throne.

When Leir died, Cordelia (Aganippus had died earlier) returned to Britain and ruled peacefully for five years. However, her nephews then raised armies and rebelled. Cordelia was active in the fighting - she was captured and imprisoned. She was grief stricken and suicided (means unknown).

Cordelia had been her father's favourite but was rejected by him. Her father and husband died. She was deposed and imprisoned by her nephews. In this setting of many losses, she ended her own life. It is possible she experienced *taedium vitae* (Latin, see [2]) – tired of the struggles of life.

Cordelia's story has been told (although not accurately) in many forms, including Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.

7. Lucretia

Lucretia was a Roman noblewoman, married to Collatinus. One night in 509 BCE, Sextus Tarquinius, son of the last king of Rome was given hospitality at the Collatinus' home. Late at night he went to Lucretia's bedroom, threatened her with his sword, and demanded sexual intercourse. Lucretia showed herself to be unafraid of death and refused. Sextus then threatened to kill her and a servant and leave their naked bodies together, which would suggest adultery with a social inferior and bring disgrace on the family. She submitted.

Next morning Lucretia called for her husband and father to come to her bedroom, asking both bring a trusted friend (one of these was Brutus, her uncle). She told them that she had lost her honour and asked them to avenge her loss. They told her that her honour was still intact, but she could not be dissuaded, she took out a knife from her bedding and killed herself - for “punishment” for losing her honour.

Brutus took an oath against the king. He carried Lucretia’s body into the streets and urged citizens to take up arms against the king. Revolution followed and the monarchy was replaced by the Roman Republic.

Lucretia attributed her suicide to her shame and need for punishment. Also, she wanted her family to avenge her loss of honour, suggesting her suicide was also a part of the retaliation process.

8. Hannibal

Hannibal was born in 247 BCE in Carthage, a major city in North Africa (in what is now Tunisia). His father was a military general in the Carthaginian army, who fought in Spain for many years. As a boy, Hannibal was taken to his father in Spain. When his father was assassinated, Hannibal at only 26 years of age, was chosen to command Carthaginian territories in Spain.

Hannibal commenced an invasion of Italy. He assembled a massive army (90 000 infantry, 12 000 cavalry and 40 elephants) and took them 1,600 kilometres across the Pyrenees, the Rhone River and the Alps, in one of the most famous campaigns in history. They reached Italy, and experienced military successes, but Hannibal declined to attack Rome.

The Romans attacked Carthaginian territory in Spain (203 BCE), which forced Hannibal to withdraw from southern Italy. The Romans then attacked Carthage and Hannibal had to seek peace.

After his military life, Hannibal was appointed a civil magistrate in Carthage. His decisions were not approved by his countrymen. They were about to denounce him to the Romans, so he fled to Syria. He moved several more times (including to Crete). In 183 BCE, in northern Turkey, he was unable to avoid the Romans any longer so he poisoned himself.

Hannibal was a famous, successful general. He was about to be captured by life-long enemies. He would have been humiliated and imprisoned, possibly tortured and killed. To avoid such suffering, he preferred to end his own life.

9. Cato the Younger

Marcus Porcius Cato (95-46 BCE) was known as Cato the Younger, to distinguish him from his grandfather of the same name. He was born and died in Utica (now Tunisia, Africa). He was an influential conservative Roman senator during the late Roman Republic and student of Stoic philosophy.

He displayed devotion to the principles of the early Republic – he had a reputation for honesty and incorruptibility. Consistent with Stoic thinking he lived simply, endured cold with minimum clothes, ate only when necessary and preferred to walk rather than to ride a horse.

He was a strong political and personal opponent of Julius Caesar. When Pompey left Rome to raise an army against Caesar, Cato accompanied him. Caesar comprehensively defeated his opponents at the battle of Pharsalus (48 BCE). Cato fled to continue his resistance from Utica.

Caesar crushed the last of his opponents (led by Scipio) at the battle of Thapsus in 46 BCE.

On hearing this news, unwilling to live in a world led by Caesar and unwilling to be pardoned by him, Cato stabbed himself with his sword. His friends found him covered in blood and partially disembowelled. A physician was called. Plutarch wrote that Cato “thrust away the physician, plucked out his own bowels, and tearing open the wound, immediately expired” [3].

Cato killed himself on principal, he was not prepared to live in a world he deemed corrupt. He would also, have expected eventual retaliation.

10. Brutus

Marcus Junius Brutus (85-42 BCE) was born into a well-connected Roman family and made a fortune as a money lender. He became a senator, and one of the assassins of Julius Caesar.

Caesar behaved dishonestly, evaded accountability and lost the support of the Roman elite and the senate. Brutus had supported Caesar, but came to oppose him and sided with Pompey, when he moved against Caesar in civil war (49-45 BCE). Pompey was defeated. Brutus surrendered, and Caesar granted him amnesty.

After the war, Caesar continued to behave in an autocratic, irresponsible manner – several senators planned an assassination – Brutus joined and participated in the killing. Initially, the assassins were granted amnesty. However, Brutus was required to leave Rome. Octavian (Caesar’s adoptive son) became the Consul of the Senate and worked with others to have a law passed which identified Brutus and the other assassins as murderers. This led to a second civil war – Octavian and his supporters defeated Brutus and his supporters in two battles at Philippi. To avoid capture, Brutus threw himself on his sword and died.

A case can be made that Brutus behaved, most of the time, in a morally defensible manner. However, opinion swung against him, he found himself in a hopeless situation, and chose suicide to avoid his unpleasant circumstances.

11. Anthony

Marcus Antonius, commonly known as Mark Antony and Anthony (83-30 BCE) was a commander and administrator in the Roman army, and strong supporter, of Julius Caesar. When Caesar was assassinated (44 BCE) Anthony joined forces with Octavian (who replaced him) and was awarded control of Egypt.

Anthony summoned Cleopatra (41 BCE) the Queen of Egypt, to ensure Egypt would continue to supply Rome with grain and money. To secure Cleopatra's status and power, Anthony had her sister, Arsinoe IV, killed. Although Anthony was married (his wife remained in Rome), he and Cleopatra became lovers – they had twins the following year. Military and political machinations saw Anthony return to Rome, divorce his wife and marry Octavian’s sister. In 37 BCE Anthony returned to Egypt and Cleopatra – their third child was

born the following year. Anthony fell from favour in Rome. He divorced Octavian's sister and Octavian declared war on Egypt.

In the battle of Actium (31 BCE) the naval forces of Anthony and Cleopatra were decisively beaten by those of Octavian. A year later, with Octavian's forces approaching Alexandria, Anthony (believing Cleopatra had already suicided) killed himself by falling on his sword.

Anthony had been defeated in battle; thus, his security was in doubt, and he believed his lover had completed suicide. He chose suicide as a means of dealing with multiple unpleasant circumstances.

12. Cleopatra

Cleopatra was born (69 BCE) and died (30 BCE) in Alexandria, then the capital of Egypt. She was a descendent of Alexander the Great. She inherited the throne of Egypt at 17 years of age - three years later she was dethroned and exiled but regained her position with the assistance of Julius Caesar.

Cleopatra met Ceasar while she was in exile. He was in Alexandria. She was too afraid to enter the city – she had herself rolled up in an oriental rug, which was delivered to him. When the rug was unrolled, they were introduced. They became lovers that night and the parents of a son the following year.

Caesar returned to Rome, leaving Roman soldiers in Egypt for her protection. In 46 BCE Cleopatra went to Rome and lived in Caesars' villa for two years. He showered her with gifts and titles and conducted a scandalous extramarital affair. When Caesar was assassinated (44 BCE), she was in danger and fled back to Egypt.

Cleopatra met Anthony after the assassination, and the Roman Empire was divided between Octavian and Anthony (who controlled Egypt).

Eventually, Octavian declared war on Egypt (thus, Anthony and Cleopatra), and captured Alexandria. Believing Cleopatra intended to suicide, he kept her under close guard. She ordered a basket of figs to be delivered to her quarters. This was searched for dangerous objects – none were found. She sent a letter to Octavius asking to be buried in Anthony's tomb. She was found dead, presumably bitten by a snake which she had arranged to be hidden in the bag of figs.

Cleopatra was a captive of Octavius – restoration to her throne was impossible and her lover and father of some of her children had killed himself. She avoided her distress by ending her life.

Table 1. Summary of the BCE suicides

1	Pyramus	2300-689 BCE	Stop the pain of loss of a loved one
2	Thisbe	2300-689 BCE	Stop the pain of loss of a loved one
3	Ajax	Circa 1184 BCE	Stop dejection and shame
4	Samson	Circa 11 th century BCE	Stop his suffering and take revenge

5	Aegeus	8 th or 9 th century BCE	Stop the pain of the loss of child
6	Cordelia	8 th century BCE	Stop a life of numerous struggles
7	Lucretia	509 BCE	Stop shame and exact revenge
8	Hannibal	Born, 247 BCE	Avoid capture and revenge of enemies
9	Cato the Younger	95-46 BCE	Avoid corrupt regime – and retribution
10	Brutus	85-42 BCE	Avoid capture and punishment
11	Anthony	83-30 BCE	Avoid capture and punishment
12	Cleopatra	69-30 BCE	Avoid prison and loss of lover

Discussion/Conclusion

A summary of the cases of suicide is presented in Table 1. The modern world is different to the world described above (circa 2300-30 BCE). Some human values may have drifted — but human emotions have not perceptibly evolved.

From the 1000-2000 years covered in this paper, 12 stories are presented of people who found suicide to be preferable to loss (of a loved one, status or freedom). In the current world it is not uncommon for once wealthy people to prefer suicide to a life of poverty (post loss of a fortune).

From the early story of Ajax came the notion that shame could prompt suicide. Three thousand years later, Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803-73), writer and politician voiced the same idea: “Come, Death, and snatch me from disgrace”.

Those described above are/were famous people. Their fame is what caused their stories to be recorded and remembered. In the same period a larger number of people who were not famous would also have completed suicide to avoid distress similar to that mentioned above — but also that of failing health and immobility.

While people with mental disorders may attempt suicide, the presence of a mental disorder is by no means necessary for suicide to be chosen. None of the 12 cases we reported showed any evidence of mental disorder.

Suicide is not a new phenomenon. These cases illustrate it has long been a (regrettable) feature of human behaviour.

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