

# Suicide Triggers Described by Herodotus

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**Objective:** The aim of this study was to better understand the triggers of suicide, particularly among the ancient Greek and Persian soldiers and commanders.

**Method:** 'Herodotus: The Histories' is a history of the rulers and soldiery who participated in the Greco-Persian wars (492-449 BCE). A new translation (2013) of this manuscript was studied. Accounts of suicide were collected and collated, with descriptions of circumstances, methods, and probable triggers.

**Results:** Nine accounts of suicide were identified. Eight of these were named individuals (4 Greeks and 4 Persians); of whom, seven were male. Only one (not the female) appeared to act in response to a mental disorder. Other triggers of suicide included guilt, avoidance of dishonour/punishment and altruism. Cutting/ stabbing was the most common method; others included hanging, jumping, poison, and burning (the single female).

**Conclusion:** While soldiers at a time of war do not reflect the general community, they are nevertheless members of their society. Thus, this evidence demonstrates that suicide triggered by burdensome circumstances (in addition to mental disorder) was known to the Greek and Persian people more than two millennia ago.

**Key words:** *Suicide, Suicide Prevention, Sociology*

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**B**rief though the span of human life may be, yet there is no man here – no, nor anywhere else either – to whom nature grants such happiness that he will not, and on more than one occasion too, wish for death rather than to continue living. So numerous are the misfortunes that befall us, and so terrible the diseases that afflict us, that life in all its brevity still seems long. Death, to a man whose existence is a burden, provides an escape very much worth choosing." Artabanus (1) (p. 446)

For more than half a century, medicine in the West has insisted that suicide is always (2) or almost always (3) the result of mental disorder. This has been based on the findings of psychological autopsies. In recent times, this narrow view has been challenged (4, 5).

Early psychological autopsy work in India (6) also found that mental disorder was the highest risk factor for suicide and suggested that, "risk factors for completed suicide are universal across countries and cultures." However, more recent work in India has found mental disorder in a much lower proportion (37%) of those who had completed suicide (7). The exact reasons why these lower rates of mental disorder among suicide completers are now being reported in India and other parts of Asia are unknown (8). However, greater consideration is now being given to social and cultural factors in India (9, 10) with a sociocultural autopsy method being recommended for

the elucidation of "local contexts and explanations of suicide" (11). The West has been slower to report the importance of social and cultural factors in suicide. Even when governments are made aware of the limitations of the medical model in explaining suicide, the money provided for prevention continues to be directed to medical services (12). Our group has examined ancient texts in the hope of demonstrating that even in the West, factors other than mental disorder are important in suicide (13).

While India and some Asian countries (14) strongly doubt the ubiquity of mental disorder in completed suicide, the West appears to strongly cling to the recent past thinking. Thus, is there evidence from Western history supporting the notion that suicide can be triggered by circumstances other than mental disorder? The aim of this paper was to examine 'Herodotus: The Histories' (1) to better understand the triggers of suicide. Herodotus was an ancient Greek who was designated 'The Father of History' by Cicero. His manuscript was completed circa 420s BCE and it is primarily concerned with the Greco-Persian Wars (492-449 BCE).

## Materials and Method

A new translation of 'Herodotus: The Histories' (1) was examined. Accounts of suicide were collated, with description of circumstances, methods, and probable triggers.

Results

Précis

Nine accounts of suicide were identified; of which, eight were named individuals (four Greeks and four Persians); of whom, seven were male. Only one (not the female) appeared to act in response to a mental disorder. Of the seven, for whom there was no evidence of mental disorder, the motives appeared to be guilt, avoidance of dishonour/punishment and altruism. The methods employed were hanging (1), jumping (1), poison (1), burning (the single female) and cutting/ stabbing (3). The psychotic male (Cleomenes) also died by cutting/ stabbing. See Table 1 for collated details.

The other (ninth) account concerns the deaths/ suicides of an unknown number of unnamed soldiers who starved on a long march. Lots were drawn and one in ten was cannibalized. The motives probably involved avoidance of starvation and altruism.

Text Extracts

1. Adrastus was a Phrygian prince exiled from his home after accidentally killing his brother. He was accepted into the home of Croesus (King of Lydia), and deployed as the bodyguard of Croesus' son, Atys. Adrastus accidentally killed Atys on a hunting expedition. Croesus forgave him, but when the mourners left the funeral, "in the firm belief that of all the men who had ever lived, there was no one more crushed by misfortune than himself" Adrastus "climbed the grave and slit his own throat." (p. 21)
2. Othrayades was the only Spartan to survive 'The Battle of Champions' fought between units from Argos and Sparta. (Two Argives survived.) Othrayades "felt such shame at the thought of returning to Sparta while all his comrades lay dead...that he killed himself there."(p. 42)
3. Spargapises was the leader of the Massagetae (a Persian nomadic people) forces. He was at war with Cyrus the Great, leader of the Achaemenid Empire (another Persian people).

Table1. Details of 7 accounts of suicide described by Herodotus

Account	Identity	Circumstances	Probable motive	Method	P.
1	Adrastus (m) [Gk]	Accidentally killed his brother and later, the son of his benefactor	Guilt/ regret	Cutting/ stabbing	21
2	Othrayades (m) [Gk]	Only Spartan to survive 'Battle of Champions'	Guilt/ dishonour	Probably cutting/ stabbing	42
3	Spargapises (m) [Pers]	Poor judgement and defeat in battle	Dishonour	Cutting/ stabbing	105
4	Nitocris (f) [Pers]	Killed the murderers of her brother	Avoid punishment	Burning	147
5	Psammenitus (m) [Pers]	Caught organizing rebellion	Avoid punishment	Poison	196
6	Prexaspes (m) [Pers]	Murdered on King's orders Defied the orders of other rulers	Guilt/ avoid punishment	Jumping	225
7	Pantites (m) [Gk]	Unable to reach battle before it ended (survived)	Dishonour	Hanging	531
8	Cleomenes (m) [Gk]	Behaving as if psychotic and placed in chains	Mental disorder	Cutting/ stabbing	416
9	Unnamed soldiers (m) [Pers]	Starving on campaign - cannibalized	Altruism/ avoid starvation	Presumably Cutting/ stabbing	201

Details of nine accounts of suicide described in 'Herodotus: The Histories'. (m) = male, (f) = female, [Gk] = Greek, [Pers] = Persians. The first seven involved named individuals for whom there is no evidence of mental disorder. The eighth account concerns a psychotic individual.

Cyrus tricked Spargapises and his soldiers into drinking, and when they were drunk, attacked and killed most of them, taking Spargapises prisoner.

Spargapises begged to be released from his chains, "but no sooner had he been freed, and given back the use of his hands, then he stabbed himself to death." (p. 105)

4. Nitocris was the sister of the King of Egypt. He was murdered and Nitocris (who was not involved in the killing) replaced him on the throne. Nitocris avenged her brother by inviting those she believed to have been involved to a feast in an underground chamber. She caused water to bust into this chamber and drown the feasters. "(T)he concern of Nitocris to evade vengeance herself: it is said she threw herself into a chamber of ashes." (p. 147) other accounts state she threw herself into a burning room.

5. Cambyes, King of Persia, defeated Psammenitus, King of Egypt. However, Psammenitus was allowed a good deal of freedom. He attempted to organize a rebellion, and this was made known to Cambyes. To avoid vengeance, "Psammenitus drank the blood of a bull, and promptly dropped down dead." (p. 196) There is a complication in that bull's blood is not poisonous to man. One theory is that bull's blood was a term used for a botanic poison.

6. Prexaspes was a servant of King Cambyes. The King shot and killed Prexaspes' son to prove that he was a good shot and sane (Extract 8). The King also arranged for Prexaspes to kill Smerdis (the king's brother). An intrigue followed the death of King Cambyes when another individual claimed to be Smerdis, and the right to the throne. Prexaspes was ordered by the incumbent authorities to address the people from a tower and support the pretender. Prexaspes mounted the tower, but told the truth about being ordered to kill Smerdis by Cambyes, and "then he threw himself down, head first, from the tower." (p. 225) The motives for his suicide may have included the desire for vengeance against Cambyes, his own guilt, and his knowledge that he would be killed for disobedience.

7. Pantites, a Spartan soldier, was ordered to the Battle of Thermopylae (against the Persians). He was one of the only two of his army to survive, and "so dishonoured was he on his return home to Sparta that he hanged himself." (p. 531) In fact, he had earlier been sent on a diplomatic mission to Thessaly, and it may not have been possible for him to get back to participate in the battle.

8. Cleomenes, a king of Sparta, conducted many military actions and intrigues in the Peloponnesus. Unexpectedly "what had been mild derangement was now full-blown madness." (p. 416) This included striking people across the face with his staff for no apparent reason, and led his relatives placing him in chains. He obtained a knife and started cutting strips of flesh off his legs, "on reaching the stomach, he cut that into ribbons as well – and so expired." (p. 416) some of his compatriots believed Cleomenes spent too much time "drinking neat wine" with foreigners, and that this "drove him mad." (p. 419)

9. Soldiers of King Cambyes (Persian) marched against Ethiopia. However, proper preparations had not been made and as they marched, the army began to starve. "(T)here

were some of them who did a truly terrible thing; they cast lots, and devoured every tenth man among them' (p. 201). This indicates willful actions, which could lead to death (suicide) and suggest the intention to avoid starvation and altruistic action.

## Discussion

A limitation of this study, for some, will be its genre. That is, it is not worthwhile because it is not prospective, does not involve a placebo group and does not depend on expert observers. We argue there are many (complimentary) routes to knowledge, and to refuse to take note of the lessons, which can be learned from history and cultural studies is to refuse to take advantage of a vast landscape of information. A frequent criticism of this type of study is that the observers (source authors) were not medically trained, and could not recognize the mental illness triggering the individual suicide. On the contrary, we argue that the source authors were highly intelligent and informed about the local culture, and had the advantage of not being biased by a medical training, which casts all suicide as the result of a mental disorder.

A limitation of this study, for some, will be the source author. Herodotus has some critics (15) but also supporters (16). It is beyond the scope of this paper (and expertise of its authors) to argue this point in depth. However, Herodotus is known to have collected information systematically and sought confirmatory accounts; he was working in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE and his masterpiece has been repeatedly translated on numerous occasions ever since.

Psychological autopsy based studies in both the West (2) and India (6) have been utilized to support the medical explanation of suicide. Recent studies from India (7, 9-11) have, however, challenged this explanation and re-focused attention on social and cultural factors as important triggers.

In the West, in spite of sociological (17) and historical (18) studies and the need to take a broader approach (5) to suicide triggers, the medical explanation continues to dominate, and prevention funds continue to be directed to mental health services (12).

This paper presents suicide triggers among a particular group – the rulers and soldiery involved in the Greco-Persian Wars (492-449 BCE). It could be argued that they were two groups (the Greeks from the West and the Persians from modern day Iran, Turkey and Egypt, along with others) who could be considered closer to the East.

The ancient Greek attitude to suicide had various faces. It was condemned by Plato and Aristotle, but supported by the Stoic philosophers (19).

This was a group of people familiar with arms and fighting; and thereby, at least to some extent inured to death. Armed groups develop a strong code of honour, "Death before Dishonour" being a popular

military slogan. In such settings, suicide as an escape from retribution (ungraceful death) is often practiced. Being a member of armed forces also increases the frequency of altruistic suicide (17); the individual is strongly integrated into the group and is expected to do his/ her duty for the benefit of the group and to the detriment of him/ herself. Thus, while the Greeks and Persians had distinct cultures in general, those described in 'Herodotus: The Histories' shared important attitudes. This contention gains some support from the fact that of the eight named people who completed suicide, four were Greeks and four were Persians.

This introduces the notion of shame, which is known to trigger suicide in India, Sri Lanka (20) and Singapore (21). The role of shame in this regard has been largely unreported in the Western academic literature, but papers are beginning to appear (22).

The methods used in antiquity are similar to those of today including cutting/ stabbing (most common), hanging, jumping and poison and burning. Cutting/ stabbing continues to be used, but has been replaced largely by shooting (using the available weapon of the times). Suicide by burning continues as a method of suicide (especially among females) in Iran (23) (a Persian homeland) and regions of India (24).

Using a significant historical document, we have demonstrated that during the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, suicide was frequently triggered by negative situations, guilt, avoidance of dishonour and certain death, and probably altruism among Greek and Persian rulers and soldiery. While the personnel of armed forces do not represent the general population, they are members of their general population. Thus, suicide as a response by the individual to an intolerable predicament has been known to some Western societies for over two millennia.

## Conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest

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