

SUICIDE IN BYZANTIUM

The evidence of the sources on suicide from the 4th to the 15th century in Byzantium is rather limited and the scarcity of information explains why the subject has not been investigated, save for the motif of taking one's own life in the Greek Novel from Antiquity to the Comnenian period.¹ In the Judaic and Christian traditions suicide was condemned as an act of impiety towards God who created man. The issue had been debated to some extent among the Greek thinkers because self-inflicted death was not regarded as «in accordance with nature». The Stoics supported some kinds of suicide (when the body becomes a burden to the soul, for instance), and the Platonic passage in *Phaedo* caused some ambiguity as to its final message with regard to Socrates' death, his closing words in particular that man is ethically bound to preserve his life. The Romans also were thought by and large to accept suicide. During the Christian persecutions some of the martyrs – devote women and virgins – chose self-destruction to escape rape, defilement and humiliation. Such incidents were known to Eusebius of Caesarea for he mentions women martyrs leaping from high places to their death, or drowning in a river or in the sea. In the face of dishonour and violation by pagans, self-destruction was preferred and was even praised. Ioannes Chrysostomos dedicated a homily to the three martyrs Bernike, Prosdoke, and Domnine, who chose to drown themselves in a river in the city of Hierapolis rather than to be humiliated (PG 50, 629-640). The Christian orator linked, in fact, their suicide in the river to a Christian baptism. Yet, the attitude towards the act of suicide was not uniform during the patristic period, as the writings of St. Augustine suggest. But again this aspect of suicide with regard to martyrdom constitutes a special case in itself, therefore it stands outside our terrain.

The sources which record acts of suicide or attempts made to that end, are primarily religious and secular discourses, in which suicidal acts are mentioned in general terms and, quite often, as impious deeds. In theological texts, biblical passages are often drawn from the Old and New Testament citing in particular the examples of Saul (I Chron. 10:3-5) Achitofel (II. Sam.

1. S. MacAlister, *Dreams and Suicides. The Greek Novel from Antiquity to the Byzantine Empire*, London - New York 1966.

17:23), Pontius Pilatus and Judas.² Quite interesting are the inferences found in Christian sermons about poor and wretched people who had been driven to suicide out of desperation - their economic plight being the cause of their self-destruction. Whether this is a mere topos or more properly a rhetorical overstatement, cannot be verified; and yet such inferences are found in various other sources as well. The cause of suicide and the reasons why men are driven to self-destruction are usually attributed to the evil powers that overtake those that are weak in faith. But in a theological treatise attributed to Saint Athanasius the answer as to what drives men to suicide is simply dismissed with the remark that these are matters known only to God - ὅτι μὲν ἄδηλα τὰ τοιαῦτα καὶ θεῷ μόνῳ γνωστά.³ But at this point a distinction should be made between the recorded incidents of suicide in the sources and the theoretical aspect of self-inflicted death, which is encountered primarily in philosophical and theological treatises. The latter, however, will not concern us here except for occasional references.

The suicide cases registered in the historical sources of the fourth and fifth century are related to the political upheavals of the period and the changes of fortune of certain members of the aristocracy. After suffering defeat in battle or accused of a public crime, military men or politicians invariably resorted to suicide to escape public disgrace, legal retribution or simply subjection to the mercy of their opponent. The Roman law until the third century AD punished suicides by confiscating the property of the perpetrators and excluding their heirs from their estates. The act was equated to murder and as such it was thought to be directed against society. Voluntary death before a sentence was believed to imply admission of guilt and this entailed the confiscation of the property of the perpetrator.⁴ In the third century, this ruling changed and punished with confiscation those who laid violent hands upon themselves only if their act was designed to evade the law. With Antoninus Pius, the matter centred on the question of motive and whether the action was prompted because of fear of a future sentence for the accused and upon

2. G. Podskalsky, «Der Tod des Judas Iskariot in der Byzantinischen Exegese», *Philomathestatos: Studies in Greek and Byzantine Texts Presented to Jacques Noret for his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* [Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta - 137], Leuven 2004, pp. 509-514. Cf. Euthymios Zigabenos, *Τὸ κατὰ Ματθαῖον Εὐαγγέλιον*, PG 129,705A-708A; Michael Glycas, Epist. 17, PG 158, 904A-908A; Theophylact of Achrid, *Ἐξηγήσεις εἰς τὰς Πράξεις*, PG 125, 521C-524C. Cf. also Apollinarius, *Περὶ τῆς τοῦ Ἰούδα ἀγχόνης*, J. Fr. Boissonade, *Anecdota Graeca*, II, Paris 1830, 464-465.

3. *Διδασκαλία πρὸς Ἀντίοχον δούκαν*, PG 28, 637D-640A.

4. P. Krüger (ed.), *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, II, *Corpus Justinianus*, IX,6,5, p. 373; A. Vandenbossche, «Recherches sur le suicide en droit romain», *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales et Slaves* [Παγκάρπεια: Mélanges Henri Grégoire] 12 (1952) 471-516.

proof of criminal intention on his part: ὁ φονεύων ἑαυτὸν κακῶ συνειδῶτι δημεύεται.⁵ Accordingly, if someone committed suicide while in prison or under investigation but proved innocent, his property was allotted to his heirs and this provision is attested in subsequent law collections.⁶ Moreover, if the accused was guilty of petty thefts and ended his life by hanging his property was not confiscated. The change in legislation no doubt reveals a tolerant attitude towards those who committed the act through weariness of life, or from mortification arising from indebtedness or from the inability to suffer illness. The leniency towards suicide is attributed to the influence of stoic philosophy on legislation. But the heart of the matter concerned the confiscation of property versus the legacy of the deceased, the claims of his innocence on the part of his family and what was at stake - a large or small estate that was the apple of discord. Nevertheless, hanging was considered a vulgar way to exit life and the law still punished those who raised «a hand against themselves without cause, reasoning that the man who has not spared himself will much less spare anyone else».⁷

The Church, on the other end of the pendulum, condemned suicide and deprived the dead of a Christian burial; provided the perpetrators were of a sound state of mind, for in that case they had like Judas surrendered voluntarily their souls to Satan. An exception was made only for the deranged – according to a ruling (apokrisis) issued by Timotheus, Patriarch of Alexandria (379-385). Consequently, those who ended their lives on account of distress, grief or lack of courage were not permitted a Christian burial (Rhalles-Potles, IV, 339-340).⁸ With regard to the denial of burial rites, it is worth considering a rather puzzling passage found in the commentary to Porphyry's Introduction to Aristotle by the sixth century Alexandrian Neoplatonist Elias. In a section devoted to death and the five

5. *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, II, IX,50,1-2, Krüger, p. 394; *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, I. *Digesta*, XLVIII,21,3 and 8. XLIX,14, 45, 2, Th. Mommsen (ed.), pp. 870-871, 883; *Basilicorum libri LX*, H. J. Scheltema and N. van der Wal (ed.), Groningen 1955-, XXXV, 3, 2, tit. III, 1569. LX,53,3, 3096-3097. LX,53,4, 3915.

6. *Prochiron auctum*, J. Zepos - P. Zepos (ed.), *JGR* VII, XXII,41, p. 152; Michael Attaleiates, *Πόνημα νομικὸν ἤτοι σύνοψις πραγματικῆ*, J. Zepos - P. Zepos (ed.), *JGR*, VII, 485 (229).

7. *Iuris Civilis*, I. *Digesta*, XLVIII,21,3 (6). Cf. also A. J. L. van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide. Self-killing in Classical Antiquity*, London - New York, 1990, pp. 69-70; A. Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages*, vol. II, Oxford 2000, pp. 174-176.

8. Matthaios Blastares, Rhalles-Potles, ch. 12,1. *Περὶ τῶν βιοθανῶν, ἤτοι τῶν ἑαυτοῖς ἀναφούντων*; D. A. Petrakakos, *Die Toten im Recht nach der Lehre und den Normen des orthodoxen morgenländischen Kirchenrechts und der Gesetzgebung Griechenlands*, Leipzig 1905, p. 52ff; K. M. Rhalles, *Ποινικὸν δίκαιον τῆς Ὀρθοδόξου Ἀνατολικῆς Ἐκκλησίας*, Athens 1907, pp. 196-202.

stoic ways of «withdrawal» from life (ἐξαγωγή), Elias discussed Plotinus' position «on rational withdrawal» and in that same context he referred to «the laws of the Romans [which] do not permit the bodies of those who kill themselves to be buried, before they are mutilated in their feet».⁹ In referring to the laws of the Romans, the commentator may have implied a legal regulation practiced earlier or in his days in Christian Egypt, but by the same token he may have had in mind a pagan practice that went back to the Romans. At any rate, indignities inflicted upon the suicide's body in the Christian East are not recorded to my knowledge. Be that as it may, one of the earliest sources that mentions the prohibition of a christian burial for those who took their own lives is the *Lausiatic History*, which was composed around 419. Palladius narrates the story of a young nun who drowned herself in a river because she had been falsely accused by one of her sisters of an illicit relationship with a tailor within the monastery precincts. After hearing of this nun's death, the sister who had slandered her felt responsible for the death, and unable to bear her remorse, went off and hanged herself. When the two incidents were recounted to the priest of the adjoining monastery, he ordered that neither of the two should be permitted a sanctified burial.¹⁰ Yet, in the course of time, the burial prohibition of Timotheus was modified to the effect that it was accorded also to those whose piety was not in doubt, while they were acting normally. The civil law, on the other hand, allowed the widow of a suicide to marry right away, exempting her from the mourning period she should have observed otherwise.¹¹ But it seems that the law did not prosecute those ethically responsible for bringing about self-destruction, as in the case of a young girl who was left pregnant by the husband to be of her sister. The suitor ignored her after her violation and went ahead and married the other sister, whereupon the seduced and abandoned girl hanged herself. The case is not recorded in civil law, but in the 25th canon of the Council of Ancyra (314), which punished the persons ethically responsible for acts of suicide by banning them from Communion for a period of ten years.¹² Interestingly enough this is the only council in the christian east that dealt with the matter of suicide. As for the bodies of those who commit suicides - the term applied is βιοθανῶν in Matthaëus Blastares

9. *Eliae in Porphyrii Isagogen... Commentarii, Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*, A. Busse (ed.), vol. 18, pt. I, Berlin 1900, pp. 16,3-4: δηλοῦσι δὲ καὶ οἱ Ῥωμαίων νόμοι, μὴ πρότερον ταφῆ παραδιδόντες τὰ τῶν ἐξαγαγόντων ἑαυτοῦς σώματα, πρὶν ἂν αἰκίσωνται κατὰ τῶν ποδῶν. See also Murray, *Suicide*, II, 493.

10. C. Butler, *The Lausiatic History of Palladius*, II, Cambridge 1904, 97,3-18.

11. *Synopsis Basilicorum*, Π XIII, 3, J. Zepos – P. Zepos (ed.), *JGR*, V, Athens 1931, p. 466. Cf. also *Digesta*, III,2,11(3).

12. Canon XXV, Rhalles-Potles, III, Athens 1853, pp. 68-69.

or βιοθανάτων in *Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai* – they were buried in the Kynegion, a place used for criminal executions and for the burial of those executed in Constantinople.¹³

Several incidents of suicide drawn from the annals of late antiquity perpetuate in a sense the military tradition of taking one's own life – that for a defeated leader there was no other choice but to kill himself, lest he suffer disgrace and humiliation at the hands of the victor. Since his political downfall could in turn ruin the lives of his own kinsmen and friends – and to prevent such a prospect – he or the ones close to him chose voluntary death. The list of such suicides is more or less familiar beginning with Maximianus Augustus (286-305) also known as Herculus, who after plotting to assassinate Constantinus in Gaul, committed suicide in the year 309 or 310. Ioannes Antiocheus and subsequent historians wrote that he hanged himself (Fragm. 167,2. Müller IV, 602. Georgios Monachos, de Boor, 481,18-19. Kedrenos, I, 472). Magnentius also committed suicide at Lugdunum (10 August 353) after he was defeated at the battle of Mursa by Constantinus, having first killed his own brother and mother.¹⁴ Another brother of his named Decentius followed suit shortly after (18 August 353) by hanging himself.¹⁵ Flavius Valentinianus (375-392), son of the elder Valentinian and Iustina, also committed suicide by hanging himself because he had no part in the exercise of power or on account of the usurpation of Eugenios.¹⁶ In this series of suicidal incidents, Andragathius, magister equitum (383-388), after the overthrow and death of the usurper Magnus Maximus threw himself into the river, and was drowned,¹⁷ and Arbogastes, after the defeat of Eugenios, whom he had previously proclaimed emperor, fled after a battle, in which he was defeated by the troops of Theodosius I (394 AD) and fell by his own hand rather than be captured by his opponents.¹⁸ More dramatic is the story of the usurper Gerontios, whose troops deserted him in the face of defeat before Constantius III's oncoming forces (411). Under the circumstances,

13. Rhalles-Potles, VI, ch. 12,1; *Constantinople in the early Eighth Century: The Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai*, A. Cameron – J. Herrin (ed.), Leiden 1984, 28, p. 201; *Suda*, Adler, K 2702.

14. *Sokrates Kirchengeschichte*, G. C. Hansen (ed.), 148,6-12; *Theodoros Anagnostes Kirchengeschichte*, ed. G.C. Hansen, § 89, 43,10-13.

15. *Sokrates Kirchengeschichte*, Hansen, 148,14-16; *Sozomenos Kirchengeschichte*, G. C. Hansen (ed.), IV,7; *PLRE*, I, 244-245.

16. *Philostorgius Kirchengeschichte*, J. Bidez – F. Winkelmann (ed.), 133,1-8. *PLRE*, I, 934-935.

17. *Sokrates Kirchengeschichte*, Hansen, 288,5-8; *Excerpta de Insidiis*, de Boor, 117,15-17; Ioannes Antiocheus, *FHG* IV, 186,3, Müller, 608; *PLRE*, I, 62-63.

18. *Sokrates Kirchengeschichte*, Hansen, 309,10-12; *Theodoros Anagnostes Kirchengeschichte*, Hansen, 85,10-11; Theophanes, de Boor, 73,27.

Gerontios was forced to barricade himself in a house with only a few soldiers. When it was put to flames, he did not try to escape, though he could have done so, because of his love for his wife Nunechia, who would not follow him. Loosing all hope Gerontios committed suicide, but after he killed first his faithful Alan aide, at that man's request, and then his wife, who was pressing herself with the sword. The details are provided by the ecclesiastical historian Sozomenos, who went out of his way to describe the event dramatically presenting Nunechia as a Christian martyr since she had opted death rather than suffer defilement at the hands of her captors.¹⁹ And yet the historian's encomium is somewhat puzzling considering the ecclesiastical sanctions including the denial of a Christian burial.

But Gerontios was, of course, a native of Britain and his suicide was «barbaric»²⁰ in the same way that Arbogastes's killing was considered barbaric, at least in the opinion of Ioannes Antiocheus: for in that action Arbogastes revealed the madness of the barbarian nature (= τὸ μανικὸν τῆς βαρβάρου φύσεως). As for Gerontios' killing his wife Nunechia, it brings to mind the bloodbath of Magnentius or some customs of barbarian women who regarded as their own the death of their husbands and therefore they hanged themselves.²¹ To the same tradition belong the suicides of two other foreigners, Ermanarius (*PLRE*, I, 283) and Firmus (*PLRE*, I, 340) who were defeated in battle and killed themselves out of honor. And yet this kind of conduct was not monopolized by foreigners. Ioannes, an ὑποστράτηγος of Basiliscus on the Vandal expedition of 468, chose death by drowning rather than surrender to the enemy and according to Procopius, when he «threw himself into the sea, he uttered this one word, that Ioannes would never come under the hands of dogs».²² The motives of the military aristocracy were more or less the same – honor, pride and dignity would not be jeopardized by cowardice in order to gain life in captivity and not even that, but public execution and at the least a dishonorable death. The death scene of Arsakes III, king of Armenia (350-364), who had been incarcerated in the Prison of Oblivion by Sapor II, illustrates this very point, as it is described by Procopius, but, of course, in loftier terms. Having enjoyed the company of his friends in a feast during which many speeches were made over the cups, the king knew that he would no longer endure life in prison, and so he

19. *Sozomenos Kirchengeschichte*, Hansen, 404,21-405,10; *PLRE*, II, 508, 788.

20. Ioannes Antiocheus, *FHG* IV, 187, Müller, 610: ὁ δὲ Ἀρβογάστης ἐν τούτῳ τε τὸ μανικὸν τῆς βαρβάρου φύσεως ἀποδείξας αὐτοχειρίᾳ διεφθάρη, τῷ σφετέρῳ περιπεσὼν ξίφει.

21. *Das Strategikon des Maurikios*, G. Dennis – E. Gamillscheg (ed.), 372,18-22.

22. *Procopii de bello vandalico*, I,6,22-24, J. Haury (ed.), 339,18-20.

dispatched himself with a knife he had stolen at the banquet.²³ This deed was a matter of honor in men's world. By the same token when the honor of women was at stake, they had to kill themselves because they could not endure living in disgrace. Such a situation is depicted in a letter of Libanios to Anatolios, the governor of Phoenice (*PLRE*, I, 60), in which he accused a certain Lucianus (*PLRE*, I, 516) of raping the wife of Eustathius (*PLRE*, I, 311) during his absence on official business. The victim afterwards wanted to kill herself and at the time the letter was written she was being closely watched lest she make this desperate move.²⁴

The incidents of voluntary death recorded in historical sources from the fourth century to the Justinianic period involve almost exclusively pagans. This should not be necessarily taken as a differential factor related to religious beliefs and custom vis-à-vis the Christians or as an indication that pagans were more disposed to such acts of violence. Besides, the pagan suicides by their definition were more or less politically motivated and as such constituted an act of protest. Libanios the Sophist, for instance, when he heard the news of the death of his friend Julian the Apostate attempted to take his own life by the sword, but he gave up the idea, deterred by the Platonic prohibition (*Phaedo* 62B).²⁵ To escape severe punishment in the hands of his Christian captors, a certain philosopher named Iamblichus, when he became involved in the pagan opposition in 371, took poison and died.²⁶ In the trials that ensued that year in Antiochia, Maximos of Ephesus, the friend and teacher of Julian, became also a political target. In the face of imminent death, he and his wife had made a suicide pact, but although his wife kept her word, the philosopher did not – (ὁ δὲ Μάξιμος ἔπιεν οὐδέ τι. Eunapius. *V. Soph.* VII 4.16-17). In the same period Adelpheios killed himself after being accused of magic. Libanios mentions that to save himself from torture he had confessed his crime, but felt ashamed for his weakness. He went to his home, bathed, dined, and then committed suicide before he was arrested.²⁷ Another pagan, who was forced to commit suicide (this time during the religious purges initiated by Justinian), was the patrician Phocas, the son of Krateros. As a man of high integrity, he had replaced as praefectus praetorio Ioannes Kappadokes during the Nika revolt (January 532), although he had been subjected to questioning on account of his paganism only

23. *Procopii de bello persico*, I.5,34-40, J. Haury (ed.), 26,4-27,2.

24. Epist. 636, *Libanii Opera*, R. Förster (ed.), vol. X, 583-586.

25. *Libanii Orationes*, R. Förster (ed.), Orat. I, vol. I, 148,5-10.

26. The incident is – as far as I know – reported only by Zonaras and his source of information remains unknown (XIII,16, III, 81,17-82,2); *PLRE*, I, 452.

27. *Libanii Orationes*, vol. I, 164,1-12.

three years earlier (529). But during the persecution of the pagans (545/546) Phokas was removed from office, and was forced to take his own life. Ioannes of Ephesus claims that Justinian ordered that his body be buried «like that of a donkey without psalms or prayers», implying a posthumous penalty for his suicide.²⁸ Another pagan who committed suicide in the same period was Asclepiodotos, who took poison and died (Malalas, Thurn, 377,18. Theophanes, de Boor, 180,14-15).²⁹ The suicidal series of the Justinianic epoch may close with the story of the banker Markellos, who had formed a plan with others to assassinate Justinian, while he was sitting in the triclinium. The plot was, however, betrayed and Markellos was seized in the palace. Thereupon, he drew his sword and gave himself three blows cutting his own throat: *καὶ ἀστοχήσας ... ἐαυτῷ παρεχρήσατο, ἐπαγαγὼν ἐαυτῷ πληγὰς τρεῖς μετὰ τοῦ αὐτοῦ βουγλίου ἀπέθανε λαρυγγοτομήσας ἐαυτόν.*³⁰ As an appendix to this list we may cite the story of the magistrate Eutokios who had his steward cruelly put to death after rats ate his silken tunic. The magistrate repented having killed the poor man for the sake of a garment and sought forgiveness with much weeping and prayers. But when he was robbed of all hope to find forgiveness, he threw himself from a high cliff and died a violent death.³¹

There are other stray items that complete the account of suicides in the first centuries. Apart from the love romances, suicide as a literary motive is encountered in poetry [(Paulus Silentiarius, *Anthologia Graeca*, 221 (220)] and even in the humorous stories told by *Philogelos*.³² But the more illustrative examples in literary texts are in the declamations of Libanios, his imaginary speeches (*meletai*), in which humorous character pieces are treated in self-denunciation speeches.³³ The litigant usually asks to be allowed to end

28. M. Nau, «L'Histoire ecclésiastique de Jean d'Asie», *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 2 (1897) 481-482. Cf. also Theophanes, de Boor, 180,16-17. *PLRE*, II, 881-882. Ioannes Lydus was an admirer of Phocas and even devoted to him one of the last sections of *de Magistratibus*, R. Wünsch (ed.), 164,17- 165,11. Cf. M. Maas, *John Lydus and the Roman Past: Antiquarianism and Politics in the Age of Justinian*, New York 1992, pp. 78-81. See also Murray, *Suicide*, II, 164.

29. *PLRE*, IIIA, 134.

30. Malalas, Thurn, 427,22*-26*; Theophanes, de Boor, 238,1-4. *PLRE*, IIIB, 816.

31. R. H. Charles, *The Chronicle of John, Bishop of Nikiu*, Oxford 1916, 102,1-8; *PLRE*, IIIA, 474.

32. Ἀβδηρίτης ἀπάγξασθαι βουλόμενος καὶ τοῦ σχοινίου διαρραγέντος τὴν κεφαλὴν ἐπλήγη. Λαβῶν οὖν ἔμπλαστρον παρὰ τοῦ ἱατροῦ καὶ θεῖς κατὰ τοῦ τραύματος ἀπελθὼν πάλιν ἀπήγγεστο. *Philogelos*, 111,1-3; B. Baldwin, «The *Philogelos*: an Ancient Jokebook», *Roman and Byzantine Papers*, Amsterdam 1989, CXI, 1-4.

33. R.-J. Loenertz, «Προσαγγέλλειν ἑαυτόν», *Byzantion* 29-30 (1959-1960) 1-6. Cf. also in the model letters of Theophylaktos Simokattes, Epist. 41, I. Zanetto (ed.), 25,11-12, in which a farmer contemplates the toils of living in the land against the turmoil of city life and at the end concludes that the only way out is death.

his life, as in the case of the morose man who pleads for poison to escape his talkative wife, or the miser who finds 500 drachmas, but has to pay the usual 1.000 tax for having found the 500, the miser in love and so forth.³⁴ A near suicide scene is found in a letter of Synecius of Cyrene to his brother Euoptius (Epist. 5, A. Garzya (ed.), 11-26), in which he described a sea voyage to Azarion and how they all risked death when their boat came to be capsized in storm. The pagans regard drowning in the sea as the worst possible death because there was no burial and the soul would perish along with their bodies. So in the face of death, as Synesius wrote to his brother, the soldiers who traveled with them prepared to take their lives with their own swords – lest they perish in the waves and their souls might also perish as in the story of Ajax (Ep. 5, 17,6-18,5). In sermons, of course, the faithful were reminded that the prime mover of «athymia» – despondency which paved the road to self-destruction – was no other than Satan himself and that the youth perish in their folly, being unfulfilled in their unlawful erotic passions, driven by them to death.³⁵

Soldiers and slaves seem to have been high risk groups with regard to suicide and as a result prompted the intervention of the law with some noteworthy provisions.³⁶ Legal sources rarely refer to the motives for taking one's own life, but in the case of a soldier's suicide the reasons were not ignored. In fact, the law-giver allowed the act on the condition it was caused by a prolonged illness or madness. In that case alone the law recognized the last will of the perpetrator with respect to the allotment of his property.³⁷ But it punished with death any attempted suicides that were not caused by suffering, disease, or grief of some kind.³⁸ A rescript issued by the emperor Hadrian and taken up in the *Digesta* and repeated in the *Basilica* states that «when a soldier has wounded himself in an attempt at suicide, an investigation should be made of the case, and he should not be punished, but dishonorably discharged, if he had preferred to die because he was unable to

34. *Libanii Opera*, R. Förster, vol. VI, nos. XXVI, XXVIII-XXX, (pp. 511-544, 573-658), vol. VII, nos. XXXI-XXXII (pp. 7-72); D. A. Russell, *Libanius: Imaginary Speeches*, London 1966, pp. 113-123, 135-157. To the same tradition, the self denunciation speeches, belongs also the discourse of Manuel II Palaeologos on the drunkard who prefers to take poison than give up his drink (*Μελέτη πρὸς μέθυσον*), in J. F. Boissonade, *Anecdota Graeca*, II, Paris 1830, pp. 274-307.

35. Ioannes Chrysostomos, *Υπόμνημα εἰς τὴν πρὸς Τύτον ἐπιστολήν*, PG 62, 693.

36. Cf. A. Wacke, «Der Selbstmord im römischen Recht und in der Rechtsentwicklung», *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte* 97 (1980) 26-77, esp. 65ff.

37. *Basilica*, XXXV,21,34 Scheltema, 1649.

38. *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, I. *Digesta*, XLVIII,19,38 (12); W. Ashburner, «The Byzantine Mutiny Act», *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 46 (1926) Nr. 26, p. 99; Nr. 52, p. 108; Murray, *Suicide*, II, 177-178.

bear pain, or was influenced by weariness of life or by disease... and if he did not allege any of these things as an excuse, that he should be punished with death». ³⁹ In comparison, the cases involving slaves are more numerous, for the loss of a slave meant understandably a financial damage to his master. It was for that reason, I suppose, – the value of the slave – that the Astrologer Hephaestio devoted a special chapter in his *Apotelesmatica* dealing specifically with run-away slaves and the constellation under which they were born so that a would-be master could know beforehand the kind of slave he was about to purchase. ⁴⁰

To begin with, if a master forced his slave to kill himself by hanging, leaping to his death, or taking poison, the master was punished for his cruelty, though the kind and extent of the punishment is not specified. ⁴¹ If a master, however, ended his life on his own volition and his slaves did not prevent him – though they could – their inaction carried also an unspecified punishment. ⁴² On the other hand, if a slave had been relinquished into the hands of a *strategos* or *agoranomos*, and while in their service, he committed suicide, the officials were not held responsible for his death. ⁴³ Yet, if in his attempt to put an end to his life, a slave failed – as it was the case with a slave in Beirut – he was liable to be punished as a murderer. In this particular instance, however, as it happened, the court verdict was challenged by Cyril, the author of an abbreviated version of the *Digest*, on the ground that the slave's attempt was unpremeditated. ⁴⁴ In his well known dialogue with the Greek fugitive in the court of Attila, Priscus of Panium had argued earlier that as a rule the Romans treated their slaves like their children even when they meted out a harsh punishment. ⁴⁵ But this was only a part of a theoretical argument that Priscus had raised in support of Roman superiority over the barbarian Huns, because other East Roman sources depict runaway slaves fleeing the harsh treatment of their owner. Exactly such an incident is recorded by Sokrates Scholastikos. Escaping from their cruel master some slaves found asylum at the altar of the Church of Hagia Sophia, where in the

39. *Digesta*, XLIX,16,6; *Basilica*, LVII,1,6.

40. *Hephaestio Thebanus Apotelesmatica*, D. Pingree, vol. I, 319,25. 325,17; Vol. II, 35,14. 64,18. 339,1. 343,3.

41. *Basilica*, LX, 59,1, Scheltema, 3114,1-11. Cf. also LX,12,36. *Synopsis Basilicorum*, Δ, V, 3, J. Zepos – P. Zepos (ed.), *JGR*, vol. V, 177-178. Cf. also Murray, *Suicide*, II, 179-180.

42. *Basilika*, LX, 35,16,1.

43. *Ibid.*, LX,3,29.

44. *Ibid.*, *Scholia*, Scheltema, XVIII,V,9,17. For Cyril, see P. Krüger, *Geschichte der Quellen und Literatur des römischen Rechts*, Leipzig 1912, p. 409; *PLRE*, IIIA, 372.

45. *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire*, II, R. C. Blockley (ed.), Liverpool 1983, pp. 272, 498-502.

end they were compelled to slay themselves rather than surrender. Sokrates described the incident with some indignation because they had entered the sanctuary with drawn swords disrupting the divine liturgy for several days, killing a priest and wounding another before they killed themselves.⁴⁶ And there is also the somewhat strange story told by Ioannes Moschos, in which an unfaithful slave planned to murder his mistress and her child in order to steal valuables from his master's house, but as he grabbed a kitchen knife he went blind, and panic-stricken, in the end he stabbed himself to death.⁴⁷

The notion of mercy killing seems to have been unknown in the Christian era, and suicide cases resulting from madness or melancholy are hardly mentioned in medical handbooks of the period. Suicidal thoughts were believed to be caused by an excess of one of the four bodily humors – the melancholic – resulting in delusions, avoidance of close friends and a desire for death.⁴⁸ Yet, from the material I have gathered so far I have discovered only one case in which a sick woman drowned herself in the sea in the middle of the night because she could not endure her suffering anymore. After that event, her husband had asked Theodoros Balsamon if he could become a priest.⁴⁹ The seriously ill sought their healing often in sanctuaries, and yet, when their suffering lingered, some thought of suicide as a way out of their suffering even in the sacred grounds of the church, always to be stopped by the patron saint at the crucial moment. For example, the Miracles of Saint Thecla, mention the rescue of a distressed Isaurian woman who was about to throw herself in a well, and that of a sophist suffering from a kidney ailment that made him contemplate death.⁵⁰ In another instance, a man from Cyprus cut his own throat while seeking a miracle in the church of the Holy Anargyroi, Kyros and Ioannes in Alexandria, because he had been followed by a demon in the form of a night-raven. Yet the Cypriot was miraculously saved by the healing power of the saint.⁵¹ However real or unreal the details of these stories are, their significance lies, I presume, more in the situations

46. *Sokrates Kirchengeschichte*, Hansen, 382,6-19. For the refuge given by the church, see E. Hermann, «Zum Asylrecht im byzantinischen Reich», *OrChrP* 1 (1935) 204-238.

47. Ioannes Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, PG 87/3, 2928A-C.

48. *Περὶ τῆς ἀπὸ μελαγχολικοῦ αἵματος γυνομένης μελαγχολίας*, in T. Puschmann, *Alexander von Tralles*, Vienna 1879, p. 605; *Anecdota Medica Graeca*, F. Z. Ermerins (ed.), Leiden 1840, p. 119; Paul of Aegina, I. L. Heiberg (ed.), III, 14, p. 156,19-20.

49. Theodoros Balsamon, *Rhalles-Potles*, IV, 496.

50. G. Dagron, *Vie et miracles de Sainte Thècle* [Subsidia Hagiographica, 62], Bruxelles 1978, 342,20-26. 396,5-7.

51. *Los Thaumata de Sofronio*, N. F. Marcos (ed.), Madrid 1975, 387,1-389,11. Cf. PG 87/3 3653C-3656B. Interestingly enough, the *Physiologos*, F. Sbordone (ed.), *Physiologos*, Milan 1936, 312,10-22, likens also the night-crow to the devil.

they depict from daily life and so in a sense we may regard them as not totally unthinkable.

In contrast to the paucity of sources in other categories, (i.e. historic, autobiographical and legal), in hagiographic and religious texts dating before the Age of Heraclius, examples of self-sacrifice and contempt for death – as if life accounted for little – are not a rarity. One must remember, of course, the type of literature from which the examples derive and the objectives that the authors strove for. For a woman in Edessa the choice between heresy and orthodoxy was a matter of life and death: thus she rushed to willful martyrdom – dragging along her little child – only to die together with the other faithful who had assembled in the church of Saint Thomas the Apostle in defiance of the orders of the heretic Valens (364-378).⁵² In hagiographic texts, pious women threaten suicide because they could not endure the consequence of sin and the anguish resulting from it. A nun in the *Lausiac History* who earnestly asked forgiveness from her spiritual father, after she had an affair with a cantor and was expecting a child from him, threatened to hang herself or jump from a cliff if she was not absolved of her sin (ed. C. Butler, 165,3-6). Later in the Life of Gregorios, bishop of Akragas, the wife of the impious Sabinos, who had turned against the Saint with false accusations, warned her husband to leave the house lest she kills herself.⁵³ In other stories, the ascetic, by subjecting his flesh to extreme forms of mortification, comes to the end of his powers only one step from his self-destruction. Death literally becomes an end to itself and the methods vary from self-starvation to falling prey to wild beasts. Some were unusually resourceful such as the hermit Paul who went to the wilderness of Aronan to find his salvation – his mule having trampled and killed a child years before. He would go into a lion's den to provoke an attack or even lie in the lion's path hoping to be devoured – until he realized in the end that God had forgiven his sin.⁵⁴ In a similar fashion another suicidal saint named Pachon in order to find deliverance from his carnal thoughts entered into a hyena's cave in the expectation that he would be attacked and at another occasion he applied an asp to his genitals seeking immediate death.⁵⁵ But suicide at that time was not exclusively associated with the spiritual war waged against the powers of evil

52. *Sokrates Kirchengeschichte*, Hansen, 246,11-247,11.

53. *Leontios Presbyteros von Rom, Das Leben des heiligen Gregorios von Agrigent*, A. Berger (ed.), Berlin 1995, 221,4-8.

54. Ioannes Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, PG 87/3, 2960BC.

55. Butler, *The Lausiac History of Palladius*, II, 74,21-77,11, esp. 76,21-77,2. Cf. also, N. Ševčenko, «The Hermit as Stranger in the Desert», *Strangers to themselves: The Byzantine Outsider*, Aldershot 2000, pp. 79-80.

by sacrificing the needs of the body. Doctrinal purity, as mentioned earlier, was a serious matter and dwelling in a heretic's cell could bring self-destruction since it was believed to be the habitat of unclean spirits. An Egyptian monk that occupied the cell of Evagrius, the heretic, despite the warnings of his brethren, was found strangled with a rope around his neck. Hanging was thus associated also with heresy.⁵⁶

In certain sources we encounter reports of mass suicides or of actions that amount to the same, since «suicide» may not be the correct word applied. Setting aside the problem of authenticity related to such incidents, collective suicides are reported to have taken place in late antiquity, for Priscus of Panium writes that at the time of Theodosius II many were forced to kill themselves by the noose because they did not have the means to pay the tribute which had to be sent to Attila.⁵⁷ On the other hand, Procopius maintains in his *Historia Arcana* that the Phrygian Montanists had decided to shut themselves in their places of worship and set them afire rather than obey the dictatorial command of Justinian to convert to orthodoxy (XI,21-23, Haury, 73,24-74,10), and the church historian Sokrates mentions the collective death of the Jews who flung themselves headlong to destruction from a promontory that overhung the sea somewhere in Crete, having credulously believed an impostor who pretended that he was Moses and that he would conduct them through the sea like the Prophet had preserved the Israelites by leading them through the Red Sea.⁵⁸ There are also reports about soldiers drowning in rivers en masse as they retreated before advancing enemy forces and of besieged inhabitants leaping from city walls to their death to escape enslavement.⁵⁹ Such incidents are encountered to the end of the empire, but one wonders if such scenes have not become somewhat standardized.

The exploitation of the poor, whether by the census or by the rich, led some to forced suicides – a theme despite all expectations encountered in only a few texts. But the sources refer mostly to the upper classes and not to the masses, hence the scarcity of evidence with regard to suicides caused by taxation or exaction. Referring to another victim of the Justinianic autocracy, Ioannes Lydos mentions a certain Proclus who was coerced by the notorious Maxilloplumbacius⁶⁰ to pay him twenty gold coins, though he did not have

56. Ioannes Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, PG 87,3: 3048AB.

57. *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire*, II, Blockley (ed.), 238,32-33: ὥστε πολλοὺς ἢ ἀποκατερήσαντας ἢ βρόχον ἀψαμένους τὸν βίον ἀπολιπεῖν.

58. *Sokrates Kirchengeschichte*, Hansen, 387,25-388,21.

59. *Ibid.*, 365,9-13; Theophanes, de Boor, 201,27-29; *Scriptor Incertus*, F. Iadevaia (ed.), 21,89-22,113.

60. *PLRE*, IIIA, 626.

them. While the guards were waiting outside his home to bring the amount, «Proclus fastened a rope to his neck, and was released from life.»⁶¹ The evidence in this category is admittedly scant, as noted above, and to supplement it with some pieces from the imaginary speeches (declamations) of Libanios⁶² – that is, his humorous speeches about misers and parasites that were driven to suicide – would only needlessly stretch the argument. More to the point is the episode transcribed later by Patriarch Nikephoros, who reports that on account of the drought during the reign of Konstantinos V Kopronymos in 766-767, the taxed people were forced to sell cheaply their produce and some farmers sold their entire crop for only one piece, while «others hanged themselves from trees,» a spectacle which the learned prelate had seen with his own eyes.⁶³ Suicides were occasioned, of course, by serious financial problems, and two incidents of this kind are found in hagiographic texts. The *Life* of Ioannes Eleemon tells the story of a financially ruined shipmaster who was driven to suicide – after his cargo went down a second time – had the Patriarch not intervened in time on his behalf.⁶⁴ Another desperate man who was about to hang himself because he could not pay his debts was saved at the last moment by a young orphan girl of Alexandria who gave him all she possessed.⁶⁵ And a young man also in debt who was about to hang himself outside the city of Alexandria was prevented by Abba Longinus and a shipmaster carrying gold.⁶⁶

The suicide cases so far gleaned from the sources of late antiquity seem to be more or less the outcome of extreme situations that made taking one's own life inevitable - pious men and women tested beyond the limit of their endurance, persecuted pagans, defeated army generals faced with dishonor or death. The pattern does not change radically in the subsequent centuries, although after the Age of Heraclius many aspects of daily life changed. Perhaps it is premature to make such a statement at this point since our evidence is so limited. Nevertheless, one could venture the supposition that a good number of the incidents mentioned above were typical of a violent society – barbarian and «roman» suicides, mass killings, persecutions and so forth. To be sure, there are certain changes to be observed in the subsequent centuries and even different kinds of suicide unknown in the grim lists we

61. A. C. Bandy, *Ioannes Lydus on Powers*, Philadelphia 1983, 226,14-26.

62. D. A. Russell, *Libanius: Imaginary Speeches*, London 1966, pp. 4-11, 113-123, 130-157.

63. *Antirrheticus Tertius*, PG 100, 513C-516A. Cf. also, *Nicephorus Patriarch of Constantinople Short History*, C. Mango (ed.), Washington D.C. 1990, p. 10.

64. *Vie de Jean de Chypre, dit l'Aumônier*, A. J. Festugière (ed.), 353,20-21.

65. Ioannes Moschos, *Pratum Spirituale*, PG 87/3, 3097CD, 3100C.

66. J. Wortley, «Two Unpublished Psychopelic Tales», *GRBS* 37 (1996) 283-285.

have already presented.

The main shift, however, is observed in the hagiographic literature, in which suicides are, as one would expect, attributed to daemonic powers, under the spell of which human reason and self-control were lost.⁶⁷ Not that this is entirely novel – the story of Judas, and the various theological commentaries written about his suicide in Matthew 27:3-10 and Acts 1:18 provide a precedent along with some early Lives of Saints. The Life of Saint Pachomius mentions that many ascetics hanged or stabbed themselves to death because they did not realize that they were possessed by unclean spirits.⁶⁸ Yet, most of the cases we know from hagiographic texts are about attempted or threatened suicides – which were as a rule intercepted by the timely intervention of the saint – and less about accomplished incidents. In the Life of Athanasios the Athonite an attempted suicide by a monk, who wanted to hang himself because he wet his bed at night and could not reveal his suffering to anyone out of shame – τὸ γὰρ οὔρον αὐτοῦ ὑπνοῦντος, ἀνεπαισθήτως ἐκενοῦτο – when he was asked by the saint, who prevented his action, he assigned his desperation – still hiding the real reason – simply to ἀθυμία καὶ λύπη δαιμονική – daemonic sorrow and despondency.⁶⁹ Being attacked by a demon or more accurately said by the dragon of carnal desire, Saint Ioannikios despaired almost to the point of killing himself (AASS, Nov. II.1, 343B). In another instance, Eustratios of Agauros stopped a man on his way to hang himself with the rope in his hand,⁷⁰ while Makarios of Pelekete prevented the death of a possessed man who was about to drown himself in the sea.⁷¹ A few other incidents are similar. The Life of Elias Spelaiotes mentions a person intent on killing himself who roamed the mountain cliffs (AASS Sept. III, 885,94); the Life of Saint Ioannikios describes the young daughter of a nun possessed by the demon of lust who threatened to kill herself (AASS Nov. II.1, 410B,22-24), and in the Life of Stephanos Sabaites, the would-be suicide contemplated the methods of destruction at his disposal – to use the knife or to fall from a cliff: ἐσκεπτόμην ἑμαυτὸν ὑψωθεὶν χαμαὶ κατὰ κορυφὴν ἀπορρίψαι, προηρούμην γὰρ φόνω τοῦ βίου κακῶς ὑπεξελεθεῖν ... ἀλλὰ καὶ μάχαιραν κατέχων, ἑμαυτὸν κατὰ γαστέρα

67. Cf. R. P. H. Greenfield, *Traditions of Belief in Late Byzantine Demonology*, Amsterdam 1988, pp. 61, 116-118.

68. F. Halkin, *Les Corpus Athénien de Saint Pachome* [Cahiers d'Orientalisme – II], Genève 1982, § 96, p. 47.

69. L. Petit, «Vie de S. Athanase l'Athonite», *AB* 25 (1906) 68,29-69,18.

70. A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, *Ἀνάλεκτα Τεροσολυμιτικῆς Σταχυολογίας*, IV, St. Petersburg 1897, 379,4-18.

71. J. van den Gheyn, «S. Macarii, monasterii Pelecetes hegumeni, Acta graeca», *AB* 16 (1897) 142-163, esp. 162,27ff.

ἐκκεντῆσαι (AASS Iul. III, 550, 118*,2-5). A similar story is narrated in the *Lausiaca History* of Palladius (Buttler, 65,11-13), in which a crippled man, again driven by a demon, sought also his self-destruction. Yet, even more interesting is the case of the abandoned lover who made a pact with the Devil (a precursor obviously of the Faust motive) to win back his beloved who was about to become a nun, with the result that the devil inflicted the pious virgin with such a seething passion for her former lover that she threatened to take her life unless she join him.⁷² A similar story is also told in the Life of St. Eirene abbess of Chrysobalanton.⁷³ The common denominator in all these incidents is the struggle of the individual against daemonic powers, under the spell of which one is easily led to self-destruction and, of course, the rescue of the tempted by the timely intervention of the saint.

Whatever the provisions of the Church and State were towards suicide, the deed in itself was held in contempt, and the relatives of the deceased seem to have faced grave consequences. I know only of one instance regarding the consequences for the living. In the city of Antisarchos, in Asia Minor, the inhabitants avoided the house of a man who hanged himself and had nothing to do with his wife, children and relatives. They avoided them to the point of refusing to borrow from them even a piece of bread: ἅπαντες ἀποτρέπονται τῆς οἰκίας αὐτοῦ, ἤγουν γυναικὸς καὶ τέκνων, μήτε ἀπτεσθαι μήτε θίγειν μέχρι καὶ μεταδόσεως ἄρτου δανεικοῦ. The details are drawn from a letter of Theodoros Studites to whom the incident was told by his associate Laurentios, who asked his advice on the matter.⁷⁴ As stringent as Theodoros Studites was on doctrinal and moral issues, he showed compassion for the relatives of the dead man, since they had no part in his deed, and considered unchristian the attitude of those who ostracized them. The relatives, he wrote to Laurentios, should not be burdened with *epitimia* save for a forty day abstinence from meat, yet they should attend the divine liturgy from the *katechumenion* and in addition they should distribute the property of the dead to the poor. As for the ill-doer, he should be denied burial rites and at the place of his suicide a Cross should be erected (Epist. 449, Fatouros, 635,47-636,60).

The act of suicide was associated with superstitious beliefs, found in dream books and astrological texts. A dream in which one ends his life by placing a rope around his neck signified oppression and distress: (cf.

72. Recounted in the Helladius' version of the *Vita Basilii*. L. Radermacher, *Griechische Quellen zur Faustsage*, Leipzig 1927, 130,11-132,5.

73. *The Life of St Irene Abbess of Chrysobalanton*, J.O. Rosenquist (ed.), Uppsala 1986, 52,22-54,11.

74. Epist. 449, G. Fatouros (ed.), 634-636, esp. 635,29-30.

Artemidoros, *Oneirokritikon*, II, ch. 50,1)⁷⁵, and in an astrological book written by Ioannes Kamateros, it is predicted that those born in the constellation of Pisces, if they should choose to kill themselves, would so by sword, poison or by leaping from a high cliff.⁷⁶ Moreover, the common people believed that the soul of the *biothanatos* was transformed into a demon.⁷⁷ The perpetrator left thus an evil legacy that burdened those behind him. In view of that, Akindynos' failure to comprehend the essence of hesychasm was attributed by Palamas to his faulty training – for one of his teachers had in fact hanged himself.⁷⁸ And to grasp the horror implicit in the act one has to read only the brave oath which Eudokia Makrembolitissa took when her husband Konstantinos X Doukas died; she had vowed that she would rather place a rope with her own hands around her neck than marry again.⁷⁹ But her oath, as we all know, lasted scarcely a year.

The chronicles of the middle Byzantine period refer to only a few cases of suicides and the decline in numbers, contrasted to the earlier period, makes one wonder if killing oneself had not been more widespread or socially more acceptable during the transition from paganism to Christianity. Another thought might be that such incidents were not as much publicized as before. Whatever the case might be, the few suicide incidents of this period are connected with plots and plans of revolution in the army. The *turmarch* Agallianos Kontoskelles jumped into the sea in full armor to escape imprisonment by Leo III, when he rebelled against him along with the thematic troops of Hellas (Theoph. 405,21-23), and the magister Eustathios Argyros took poison and died, when he was relieved of his command as *droungarios tes viglas*, on the grounds that he sought to overthrow Leon VI the Philosopher (Skylitzes, Thurn, 188,23-189,27. Theoph. Cont. 374,3-8). Also Konstantinos Diogenes, the father of the future emperor Romanos IV, leaped from the walls of Blachernai rather than implicate others, when he was caught in a plot designed to overthrow Romanos Argyros.⁸⁰ As for mass

75. Cf. also van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide*, pp. 159-160.

76. αὐτόχειρ ἔσται σώματος ἐκ ξίφους καὶ φαρμάκου ἢ κατακρημνισθήσεται. *Introductio in astronomiam*, in L. Weigl, Johannes Kamateros, *Εἰσαγωγή ἀστρονομίας*, Leipzig 1908, 1678-1681.

77. ... ψυχὰι τῶν βιοθανατούντων οὐ κατὰ τὴν τῶν πολλῶν δόξαν γίνονται δαίμονες. *Suda*, Ψ 167, Adler IV, 853,30-31.

78. Cf. Palamas' letter to Gabras, *Συγγράμματα*, II, G. Mantzarides - N. Matsoukas - B. Pseutongas (ed.), 439,4-5.

79. N. Oikonomidès, «Le serment d'impératrice Eudocie (1067)», *REB* 21 (1963) 107, 59-61: ... ὡς οὐκ ἐλεύσομαι εἰς ὁμίλιαν γαμικὴν δευτέρου ἀνδρός, κὰν εἴ τι γένηται, ἀλλ' ἐμαυτὴν ἀγξῶ πρότερον ταῖς ἰδίαις χερσίν ἢ ταύτην τὴν συμφορὰν ὑποστήσομαι.

80. Psellos, *Chronographia*, S. Impellizzeri (ed.), VII, b 10,1-5; Skylitzes, Thurn, 385, 46-49.

killings from the middle period two instances are reported. In the year 721/2, Leo III forced the Montanists and the Jews to accept baptism. The Jews obeyed the command and were baptized, but the Montanists entered the houses of their worship and burned themselves (Theophanes, de Boor, 401,21-27). Another mass suicide ensued when Nikephoros I in 809/810 ordered some of his subjects to be removed by force from the themata and to be settled in the Sklavinias. The migration was considered worse than captivity and as a result some hanged themselves to be delivered from such an evil (Theophanes, de Boor, 486,10-17). The last incident dates from the middle of the eleventh century and concerns the mass suicide of the inhabitants of Artze, an anatolian town near Theodosiopolis. The town was besieged for six days by the Turks and yet it resisted their attacks. Since the siege was not going according to plan, it was decided to be set on fire. When the inhabitants realized that they were vanquished, Skylitzes recounts, they killed their wives and children and then threw themselves into the flames (Thurn, 452,53-55).

On the other hand, soldiers implicated in acts of treason seem to have preferred self-inflicted death than the consequences of a military failure. After their defeat, the rebels of Leon Tornikios entered a church, and threatened to kill themselves with their own swords if they were to be deprived of asylum (Psellos, Impellizzeri (ed.), VI 122,8-11). Moreover, the Tauroscythians dreaded the thought to be killed in battle by the enemy, and therefore they inflicted death upon themselves with their own hands (Leo the Deacon, Hase, 151,22-152,4). Hanging seems to have been the most common method of suicide, followed by stabbing or drowning. Slicing the veins appears only once, but the case proved to be a deception. The perpetrator was the Iconoclast Patriarch Ioannes Grammatikos - called maliciously by his Orthodox adversaries Iannes, the name of the Egyptian magician and opponent of Moses - and the incident is mentioned by *Theophanes Continuatus* (IV, 2-3, 151,3-6), Genesisios (IV,3, Lesmüller-Werner and I. Thurn (ed.), 58,93-95ff) and the Chronicle of Pseudosymeon (648,8-23). The feigned attempt was uncovered, when an inspection of his wound was made and of the tools he had used.⁸¹ Leaping to one's death from the city walls during a

81. The attempt was made on the eve of the Patriarch's deposition by Theodora, the wife of the deceased Theophilos, while his case was deliberated in the Synod. The Patriarch sliced the veins in his abdomen to give the impression of a terrible suicide attempt, while running no serious danger - τὰς πληγὰς ἐκ προνοίας γενομένας καὶ τὰ τῆς τομῆς ὄργανα (φλεβοτόμα δὲ ἦν). Pseudosymeon, 648,1-23. Yet, the authenticity of the incident is far from certain as the sources transmit conflicting accounts. See also *Die Patriarchen der ikonoklastischen Zeit* [Berliner Byzantinistische Studien – 5], R.-J. Lilie (ed.), Frankfurt am Main 1999, pp. 177-178, 221-223.

siege becomes a stock item so that the references found in a series of sources⁸² and later in the historians of the last fall of the Empire⁸³ might not be as realistic as they purport. The case that seems authentic is the suicide of the Ottoman prince Orhan, brother of Murad II or grandson of Süleiman Çelebi, who threw himself from the walls of Constantinople when the city fell to the Turks (Kritoboulos, Reinsch, 73,27-74,4). He had lived there in honorable exile in order to be kept out of the succession to the Turkish throne, and Mehmet II had paid a subsidy for him in the amount of 300.000 silver coins to the Byzantine treasury (*PLP IX*, 21132). Be that as it may and with regard to the suicide of the Ottoman prince, the Quran taught that those who committed suicide would be punished for ever in Hell by repeatedly suffering their self-inflicted death.⁸⁴

Female suicides are not reported in historical documents from the middle period onwards save for a few threats made to that end. And whereas in the earlier period we encounter suicides to prevent violation of chastity which was dreaded even more than death, incidents of this kind are absent from later sources. Instead, it is the loss of a loved one and a sense of loyalty that makes life unbearable and prompts one to seek death. Mirosthlava, the daughter of Samuel, the Bulgarian ruler, threatened to kill herself unless she was married to her lover Asotios (Skylitzes, Thurn, 342,52-55); and the desperate wife of Alexios Axuch attempted to kill herself because her husband had been stripped of all his power by Manuel Komnenos and tonsured in a monastery of Mount Papykion, – in the end she became deranged and withered away (Nik. Choniates, van Dieten, 144,90-145,13). Another attempt made by a certain *komitissa* was prevented by a cleric, but it is not clarified as to her motives (Theodoros Stoudites, epist. 462, Fatouros, 661,60). Threats of suicide by women seeking a divorce are attested in the dossier of the synodal decisions of Demetrios Chomatenos, and, as it seems, the threats were not mere words. The women were low born, married or betrothed at an early age, some accused of adultery, but nevertheless determined at all costs to win their freedom from the husband they hated profoundly. The ecclesiastical court took into consideration their hatred and threats and set them free, as in the case of Eirene, the wife of the paroikos Ioannes who lived near Prilep. The woman had left her home and when she was forced to return

82. Kaminiates, Böhlig (ed.), 35,55-59; Skylitzes, Thurn, 298,4-5. 440,33-35; Kinnamos, 181,1-4; Eustathios of Thessalonica, S. Kyriakidis (ed.), 118,3-4; Pachymeres, VI,3, Failler, 649,4-6.

83. Sphrantzes, V. Grecu (ed.), 532,6-8; Kritoboulos, D.R. Reinsch (ed.), 73,19-25.

84. F. Rosenthal, «On Suicide in Islam», *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 66 (1946) 239-259.

jumped into the river Voda, but she was rescued from drowning by the local archon Gregorios Gabras. Determined to get her freedom or die, she declared that the next time she threw herself in the river no one would be around to save her (*Ponemata Diaphora*, G. Prinzing (ed.), ΚΓ', 92,1-93,46). In another instance, Chryse, the niece of Georgios Spathas, who could not endure her husband's cruelty any longer, decided to poison him and then commit suicide (*Ponemata Diaphora*, PKA', 389,1-27).⁸⁵ In another case, Maria, the wife of Nikolaos, accused her husband that he mistreated her sexually – τὰ τῶν ἀνδρομανούτων ἐν ταύτῃ διαπραττόμενον – and on account of it she filed for a divorce, which Chomatenos approved, adding that otherwise she had threatened to take her own life (*Ponemata Diaphora*, IZ', 69,1-70,18, 70,23-31). In another case, the wife of a certain Theodoros Chloropodes, named Eirene, daughter of Michael Bodeniates, deserted her husband and refused to return to him threatening to kill herself – she was reportedly in love with another man (*Ponemata Diaphora*, PMA', 417,13-33). In the last case, a married woman from Prespa named Anna, had deserted her husband Nikos, after several years of married life, because she hated him profoundly. If she were forced to go back to him she threatened to take her own life (PMΓ', 419,1-420,16).⁸⁶ Chomatenos supported the divorce petitions in these lawsuits, pointing out – among other reasons – the suicidal threats made by the women who wanted their freedom. Suicide was viewed as a crime and it was certainly more serious than a divorce. In his line of reasoning Chomatenos did not fail to mention the suicide options which the women could employ – the rope, the cliff, or drowning. It may be argued, of course, that the suicide threats were made by the applicants to obscure the accusation of adultery made against them, since they had abandoned married life.

At the end of the period we are left with only a few stories, since there are only general inferences found here and there in the sources, as for instance in Mazaris⁸⁷ and in the writings of Alexios Makrembolites, who, as proof of the approaching end of the world, singled out among the sins of his contem-

85. R. Macrides, «Killing, Asylum and the Law in Byzantium», *Speculum* 63 (1988) 522-523.

86. A. E. Laiou, *Mariage, amour et parenté à Byzance aux XIe-XIIIe siècles*, Paris 1992, pp. 85-86, 323; «Contribution à l'étude de l'institution familiale en Épire au XIIIème siècle», *Fontes Minores* VI, 302-312, 323; P. Karlin-Hayter, «Indissolubility and the greater evil. Three thirteenth-century Byzantine divorce cases», in *Church and People in Byzantium*, R. Morris (ed.), Birmingham 1986, pp. 100-105. Cf. also, A. Kiousopoulou, *Ο θεσμός της οικογένειας στην Ήπειρο κατά τον 13ο αιώνα*, Athens 1990, pp. 66-68, 124-126.

87. Mazaris' *Journey to Hades, Greek Text with Translation, Notes, Introduction and Index by Seminar Classics 609* [Arethusa Monographs, V], State University of New York at Buffalo, 1975, 22,23.

poraries the exploitation of the poor by the rich, which made their victims contemplate suicide.⁸⁸ In his letters Planudes refers to a goldsmith, a Chrysochoos, who received a down payment by Alexios Doukas Philanthropenos for the preparation of a gold icon case and suddenly disappeared, leaving Planudes to wonder if the goldsmith had not committed suicide out of fear for his theft.⁸⁹ Ioannes Ryndakenos Laskares wrote an epigram about someone who had been hanged (εἰς τινα κρεμασθέντα), though it is not clear if he was referring to a suicide or an execution.⁹⁰ But such inferences are rather insignificant. From the Palaeologan epoch, as a result, only a few cases are known – the suicide of Angelos, Ioannes Doukas, who had been blinded by the orders of Michael VIII Palaeologos and had no desire to live in misery,⁹¹ and that of Symeon Zenebeses, ruler of Dryinupolis.⁹² But what stands out in this depressive list of self-destruction is an unusual suicide described by Nikephoros Blemmydes in his Autobiography. Writing about the evil death of his enemies – in that respect he reminds us of Lactantius' *de Mortibus persecutorum* – and specifically, their manner of death, Blemmydes refers to the case of the dux of Thrakesion, Theodoros Hikanatos. Blemmydes says that his enemy had ended his life in a most strange way: he suffocated himself by wrapping around his head - covering his neck, face, nostrils and mouth – a thin membrane and in that terrible way he killed himself: ἐπίπλω γὰρ περιειλησάμενος ἑαυτὸν εἰς κεφαλὴν καὶ μυκτῆρας καὶ στόμα καὶ αὐχένα καὶ στέρνα ... οὕτως ἀπετινάξατο τὴν ζωὴν.⁹³ At the end, Blemmydes' enemy suffered divine punishment because he tried to harm a man of God.⁹⁴

88. I. Ševčenko, «Alexios Makrembolites and his Dialogue between the Rich and the Poor», *ZRVI* 6 (1960) 199, n. 73.

89. Epist. 103, P. A. M. Leone (ed.), *Maximi Monachi Planudis Epistulae*, Amsterdam 1991, 165,4-11.

90. Epigr. 78, A. Meschini, *Giano Lascaris Epigrammi* [Studi Byzantini e Neograeci, 9], Padova 1976, p. 89.

91. Pachymeres, VI,25, Failler, 623,4-12; *PLP*, I, No. 205.

92. Chronicle of Tocco, G. Schiro (ed.), 464,3288-3289; *PLP* III,91933.

93. *Nicephori Blemmydae Autobiographia*, J. A. Munitiz (ed.), Leuven 1984, I, 52, 28,10-12.

94. P. Agapetos, «Ο λογοτεχνικός θάνατος των εχθρών στην αυτοβιογραφία του Νικηφόρου Βλεμμύδη», *Hellenika* 48 (1998) 29-46, esp. 45-46. An analogous story – divine punishment of a sinner that ends in suicide – is told by Theophanes Confessor, de Boor, 62,30-32, with regard to the Syrian Church Father Afraates, who had castigated the emperor Valens for his impiety. The Saint's attack on the Emperor had infuriated a court eunuch to the point of insulting and threatening Afraates with his life. But, his insolence was divinely punished because while preparing the bath of the emperor, the eunuch lost his mind and threw himself into the hot water and perished. This is not exactly a voluntary suicidal act, but one that resulted from sheer madness. A similar story about a monk driven by a demon to his death in the heating chamber of a bath is told in the Vita of Saint Pachomius. F. Halkin, *Les Corpus Athénien de Saint Pachome*

Another suicide involving again a well-known person is that of Melitas, the deacon of Hagia Sophia and secretary of the patriarchal chancellery, whom Pachymeres described as an ambitious young man, who had entered the priesthood at an early age. Melitas was educated by Georgios Kyprios and had distinguished himself in the synodal court. His only fault was his philotimia: his desire and ambition to earn money and spend it in buildings and in a private church. But he could not afford the expenditures for his buildings and began to borrow money from others – γίνεται γοῦν ἀγύρτης φιλότιμος καὶ ποριστῆς ἀνελεύθερος (Pachymeres, XI,8, Failler, 423,4-5). In the end, he was not able to pay back his debts; and when a new loan was turned down from the patriarchate, he hanged himself in his house: καὶ μεσημβρινὸν ἐκείνῳ δαιμόνιον τι ἐπιπηδᾶ, ... καὶ ... ἐπ' οἰκίας ἀψάμενος βρόχον, διαπεφώνηκε (Pachymeres, XI,8, Failler, 423,24-26). Pachymeres, known for his piety, attributed Melitas' desperate action to «a noontime demon» that took possession of him.⁹⁵

The subject of suicide was not debated in philosophical discussions nor did it provoke the composing of any thorough treatises. The last contribution to this topic is a series of commentaries on Porphyry's *Isagoge* and on Plotinus' views of death as they were expounded in sixth-century Alexandria. Setting aside matters of authorship and authenticity as to their sources and relevance to Plotinus' ideas, the authors (Ammonios, Olympiodoros, Elias, David, Pseudo-Elias) discuss amongst other subjects voluntary death and whether the action could be reconciled with the Platonic precept found in *Phaedo* 62c, which does not endorse suicide.⁹⁶ The Aristotelian commentator Elias pointed out that Plotinus in his treatise on «rational withdrawal» of the soul from the body (εὐλογος ἐξαγωγή) rejected the five reasons given by the Stoics for suicide, arguing that God's all pervasive providence shines like the sun, but it is perceived only by those that can see the light. The philosopher should imitate the sun in the same manner and accordingly should not neglect the body because of his care to the soul for it is wrong to exit life prior to its destined time and before he who bound body and soul looses the bond.⁹⁷ Michael Psellos knew, of course, Plotinus' attitude to suicide and the

[Cahiers d'Orientalisme – II], Genève 1982, 15,2-6.

95. The designation «noon demon» goes back, of course, to Psalms 90,6 and I should point out that the Christian scholiasts of the biblical passage identify the «noon demon» with «ἀκηδία», the spiritual idleness or inactivity.

96. L. G. Westerink, «Elias und Plotin», *BZ* 57 (1964) 26-32.

97. *Eliae in Porphyrii Isagogen et Aristotelis Categorias Commentaria*, A. Busse (ed.), vol. XVIII, pt. I, Berlin 1900, 14,15-16,2; Westerink, «Elias und Plotin», 95-96. Cf. also J. Dillon, «Singing Without an Instrument: Plotinus on Suicide», *Illinois Classical Studies* 19 (1994) 231-238.

position he had taken on «rational withdrawal». The relevant excerpt is cited in his commentary on the Chaldaean Oracles: *μη ἐξάξῃς, ἵνα μη ἐξίῃ ἔχουσα τὸ* – do not take out (your soul), that it may not go out bringing something with it (sc. of earthly concerns).⁹⁸ Yet, on this matter the consul of the philosophers clearly followed the Platonic position alluded in *Phaedo* 62b, that man is placed here on guard by the gods, and without the permission of the divine is not free to exit life – a position that coincides with the Christian teaching (D. J. O’Meara (ed.), 129, 11-14). More revealing is the philosophical discussion held by Manuel Palaeologos with a few of his closest associates during his withdrawal in the island of Lesbos, after an unsuccessful attempt to defend Thessalonica against the Turks. The inhabitants of Thessalonica had been unwilling to undergo the hardships of the siege and had turned against him so that in the end he was expelled from the city. He and his followers found refuge in Lesbos, and there in consideration of the events in Thessalonica, Manuel discussed a series of ethical issues such as moral superiority and courage in confronting hardships and the like. When the discussion touched upon the acts of desperation that lead to suicide, Manuel was convinced that those who committed them lacked superiority of mind. A person who commits suicide, he believed, is filled with all sorts of passions. One does not slit his own throat because he is being slandered, but because his mind is blinded by a swarm of passions, and those who wish to be free of passions must be granted the virtue of endurance (*καρτερία*). Certainly, the idea of suicide must have crossed the mind of some of Manuel’s associates in view of their political failure and expulsion from Thessalonica, and this experience seems to have prompted the discussion, which the intellectual prince transcribed in his letter to Kabasilas.⁹⁹

By this time, however, a certain pessimism had infected the writings of the more intellectually inclined authors, a pessimism reflecting the common agony and fear in everyday life before the final fall. Incidents of suicide proper are not recounted in the face of danger, and yet references to self-inflicted death can be traced in a number of letters often employed as a literary motif in describing the plight of the empire, as is the case of the correspondence of Demetrios Kydones.¹⁰⁰ Is it a mere coincidence that the sole advocate of suicide throughout the Byzantine millennium lived in exile in Mistras having been expelled from Constantinople in 1410 on suspicion of

98. *Michaelis Pselli Philosophica Minora*, II, D. J. O’Meara (ed.), 1989, 128, 18-129, 16.

99. *The Letters of Manuel Palaeologus*, G. Dennis (ed.), Washington, DC. 1977, Epist. 67, 187-205, esp. 201, 286-203, 307.

100. Epist. 194, 220, 306, 421, R.-J. Loenertz (ed.), [Studi e Testi - 208], 67, 6ff; 226, 18ff, 376, 27ff.

heresy and paganism? Georgios Gemistos Plethon (ca. 1360-1452) amongst other had proposed a series of reforms to revive the Greek Despotate in the Morea and along with it also ancient Hellenism in the belief that Byzantium was already lost and the only hope for the Greeks could come from the noetic world of pagan Hellas. His ideas on suicide were expounded in a controversial treatise entitled the *Book of Laws*,¹⁰¹ which he wrote towards the end of his long life, and in two monodies for Kleope Malatesta (d. 1433),¹⁰² wife of the Despot of Mistras Theodoros II, and for Helena Dragas Palaiologina (d. 1450),¹⁰³ wife of the Emperor Manuel II, both delivered probably in Mistras on some special occasion commemorating the deceased noble women.¹⁰⁴ Plethon upheld the platonic notion of the immortality of the soul and that death is the way to a higher state of blissful existence. Consequently the separation it entails, painful as it may be, should not call for excessive grief. As to the specifics of his suicide doctrine they stem from the idea of the immortality of the soul and that man is endowed by the divine with a rational soul which sets him apart from all non-rational creatures. In fact, only man commits suicide – not the animals – and yet no one pursues his own destruction if it implies the loss of eternal life together with the loss of mortal existence. In essence, the suicide kills only that which is mortal through that which is immortal in him.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, when the body is unfit to minister to the soul, natural death steps in – otherwise the soul leaves it to those who are ready to kill themselves. In this manner, the soul becomes free from all the vicissitudes that can affect its well being¹⁰⁶ – i.e. the eudaimonia. The philosopher's return to idolatry and his proposed revival of Hellenism imagined on the other side of the Aegean failed to win support or adherents, for he stood alone in his philosophical ideas and particularly in his advocacy of the «rational withdrawal» of the soul from the body. Yet, one is tempted to see in these writings another kind of «withdrawal» – this one amounting to a conscious attempt to escape from the grim realities of the years immediate before the Fall.

101. *Pléthon. Traité des Lois*, C. Alexandre (ed.), Paris 1858, pp. 248-252.

102. Sp. Lambros, *Παλαιολόγεια καὶ Πελοποννησιακά*, vol. IV, Athens 1930, pp. 161-175. Cf. also W. Blum, *Georgios Gemistos Plethon, Politik, Philosophie und Rhetorik im spät-byzantinischen Reich (1355-1452)*, Stuttgart 1988, pp. 97-104.

103. Lambros, *Παλαιολόγεια καὶ Πελοποννησιακά*, vol. III, Athens 1926, pp. 266-280; Blum, *Georgios Gemistos Plethon*, 105-11.

104. A. Sideras, *Die byzantinischen Grabreden* [Wiener byzantinistische Studien – XIX], Wien 1994, pp. 321-329.

105. Lambros, *Παλαιολόγεια καὶ Πελοποννησιακά*, vol. III, 277,3-279,2, esp. 278,4-279,2.

106. *Ibid.*, vol. IV, 173,14-174,4; *Pléthon. Traité des Lois*, Alexandre, 248.

Conclusion

What can we say now about suicide in Byzantium by way of conclusion? By far the historical sources prove to be more instructive and informative, though the recorded instances are not as numerous as one may have expected. To be sure, the sources of the earlier period, that is from the fourth to the sixth century, have yielded more material than the later centuries. Most of the incidents I have recorded are actually connected to persons in high political or military positions, who committed suicide in anticipation of death and in the fear of cruel torture at the hands of their captors. The question that arises next is whether suicide was more widespread in the early than in the later centuries and whether the cases under consideration suggest a rule - or differently said, inflicting death on oneself was socially more acceptable during the period of transition from paganism to Christianity. In late antiquity, to inflict death on oneself seems to have been part of a code of honour or something of a moral duty in case of defeat and disgrace. Recording suicidal incidents, connected with well-known persons, defeated or otherwise disgraced, was considered «normal», whereas in later periods such incidents were perhaps held as taboo and may have been suppressed. The same seems to be the case with collective suicides either among heretics or among the suppressed populous – the phenomenon is confined in late antiquity up to the eighth century. The suicides recorded in historical sources by and large resulted from extreme situations – in the face of defeat and in fear of confinement and torture. On the other hand, the cases mentioned in the hagiographic texts are of a different kind. The individual struggled against daemonic powers and invisible forces that drove him to self-destruction, but in the end he was rescued by the timely intervention of an agent of the divine. Such stories, unreal as they might be, nevertheless indicate the way suicide was perceived and understood by a large segment of the society. A more sophisticated approach was inclined to interpret it, of course, as the product of a primitive mind, overburdened with passions, as Manuel Palaeologos theorized. We are left with female examples, that is with attempted suicides of women either in love or in distress. Nonetheless, judicial records attest to the fact that suicidal incidents of women under extreme stress were not uncommon, and for that court records provide us with concrete details of such cases. And what about humble suicides, the lower classes, soldiers and slaves? There are only general statements made about them in the sources - about the anonymous poor driven to suicide out of desperation; and in legal texts there are a few inferences regarding soldiers and slaves. The impact of a suicidal act within a community is described in

some detail only in one instance, which makes it clear that the act was socially condemned and had an affect on the relatives of the deceased. Yet, instances of indignities inflicted upon the suicide's body or ravages and arbitrary confiscation of his property – practices attested in western documents – are not witnessed in the Greek sources.

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