

The Noble Death

By R.L. Porter

In the late Republic the Romans were given some prime examples of just what the noble death could be. Defeated by the forces of Julius Caesar, three of the leaders of the lost republican cause chose to die violently by their own hands rather than live on ignominiously under Caesar's famous mercy (clementia). As mentioned in an earlier Labyrinth article (September 1988), to make these suicides valid you had to kill yourself in a manly, gruesome fashion -- disembowelment. Marcus Cato, Brutus and Cassius all became republican martyrs in this fashion, and were symbols of anti-autocratic resistance long after their deaths.

However, as the Empire settled into more civilized ways, prominent men who still wished to determine their own moments of exit from this life fell into somewhat softer ways. Roman steel swords gave way to the warm, scented bath and the razor's light touch as the preferred method of self-extinction. Let the readers draw their own conclusions on this change!

In part, the widescale adoption of Epicureanism and especially Stoicism by the upper classes gave support to suicide as acceptable behaviour. The idea was that when life became intolerable for health or other reasons (eg. Imperial disfavour), a man was quite free to seek a noble end, approved by all. For instance, should a senator be charged with treason (maiestas), suicide provided an admirable alternative to a long trial certain to end in a guilty verdict. After such a verdict the senator would have his property confiscated by the state, be brutally executed by Imperial goons and possibly even be denied burial. Why not kill yourself as pleasantly as possible, and hope that your will would be probated (a generous bequest and thanks to the emperor putting you to death would help matters)? Thus it was that dozens of senators left this life between Tiberius' (14-37 A.D.) and Nero's (54-68 A.D.) reigns. (You may want to consult Tacitus, Annals, Book VI, 29, for the benefits derived from killing yourself before the state did it for you.)

Of all these suicides the most notable was the death of Nero's chief adviser, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, in 65 A.D. (Tacitus, Annals 15:60-64). Found guilty without trial by Nero as a co-conspirator in a plot led by Piso in 65 A.D., Seneca was ordered by Nero's agents to kill

himself (considered as a polite gesture on Nero's part). Seneca was forbidden the right to make revisions to his will. Mrs. Seneca (Paulina, a fine Roman matrona) elected to join her husband in death and with one dagger cut they slit their wrists together. Not being able to bear the sight of his dying wife, Seneca had her carried from his death chamber and then, bleeding rather slowly, he cut more veins in his knees and legs. Even this wasn't working well and so the now pathetic figure ordered a cup of poison hemlock so that he could die like Socrates, the Athenian sage. Pathos deepened and the depleted old stoic was unable to die even after the deadly potion. At last he expired in a hot steam room and an enervating bath, a sad figure as far from old Cato as could be imagined. Yet in the end the lesson was the same -- people could still show courage and dignity in the face of tyranny. Nero, strangely enough, had his doctors patch up the innocent Mrs. Seneca and the melodrama was complete. However, it should be noted that when the Empire became Christian in the fourth century A.D., suicide was no longer countenanced.