

The basic problem in dealing with this topic is that the Romans really did not have much of a clue about the chemistry of toxins. Without the ability, for instance, to perform scientific autopsies on the deceased it was impossible for them to deduce whether someone had perished of a stroke or a pint of digitalis--not a fertile ground for the talents of a Roman Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple. Often paranoia deduced a poisoning where myocardial infarction was the cause of death, and vice-versa.

There are, of course, many ways to kill someone by putting strange substances in their bodies. Powdered glass is a lingering and gritty death; strychnine, digitalis and arsenic more straightforward; poison foods such as the mushroom, death angel, botulism and ptomaine are rather effective; and then there are a wondrous variety of animal venom to draw on. In most instances some culprit-assassin is using poison to kill an unwary victim but often it is one's instant passport to the hereafter should one's circumstances become unbearably bleak.

Suicide by Poison

1. A famous early example is that of Hannibal the Carthaginian, of Alps and Elephants fame, the scourge of Italy (218-203 B.C.). It is uncertain when Hannibal took to carrying poison with him, possibly after 195 when the Romans drove him from Carthage with a request for his (potentially fatal) extradition to Rome. After a misadventure with Antiochus, King of Syria, he took employment with the weak king of Bithynia, Prusias, whom he advised to pelt the Roman warships with jars of poisonous snakes (shades of chemical warfare!). When Prusias in defeat (183 B.C.) offered to give Hannibal up, the 64 year old warrior

poisoned himself because the Romans were too nervous to await the natural death of "a hated old man".

2. Mithridates VI Eupator of Pontus, another inveterate enemy of Rome, 126-63 B.C., (who, like Hannibal, was hounded by Rome to destruction) was also forced to take his life. The king was a spry 69 years old, another "hated old man" who had a guard stab him to death rather than fall into Roman hands. Our sources say that the poison option was closed to him because "he studied the properties of venomous plants to such good effect that by repeatedly taking very small doses he rendered himself immune from poison". This is not completely realistic since only some poisons like digitalis (a heart drug) and arsenic (found in apple seeds, etc.) may be taken this way. It is advisable not to try this with amanita (a deadly toadstool).

3. Poisoning oneself was not really a path of self-destruction open to noble Romans. This was in fact an option only open to lesser types: Carthaginians, Asiatics, possibly Greeks. In the Republic, Romans killed themselves the hard way with the sword, a kind of sepuku or hara kiri. It had to hurt to be accepted and worthy. In the Empire the swords had shrunk to razors which were used to open the veins of senators immersed in hot bath water. As buffered as this was it was considered braver than poison, a coward's path to oblivion.

It is interesting to note that the old notion of fortifying yourself against being poisoned by taking small toxic drafts on a regular basis was still alive in Nero's day. Nero, a thorough-going sneak, would have preferred to murder his mother with a

discrete poisoning but she had taken prophylactics (supposedly) against this eventuality, and in the end had to be hacked to death.

4. I close with a brief mention of the most famous suicide by poison perhaps in all of history, the death of Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, in 30 B.C. Preferring not to march in Octavian's victory parade she resolved upon suicide by placing at her breast

a viper called an asp (the hypodermic-like bite of this snake brings a quick and easy death). Because the cobra-like asp was a symbol of the sun god Ra, Cleopatra's probably was the most suitable and prestigious suicide by poison in antiquity. Needless to say, Cleopatra's Roman lover, Antony, stabbed himself and sufficiently botched the job to allow that he be brought to Cleopatra and die heroically in her arms.