

IS ENDING A WRETCHED LIFE PARDONABLE?  
ATTITUDES TOWARD SUICIDE IN GREEK FUNERARY  
EPIGRAMS\*

by

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to present various acts of taking one's own life voluntarily and intentionally as presented in Greek funerary epigrams. In Greek ethics as well as in religious and philosophical thought one can easily notice a clear difference between noble and ignoble suicide. The chasm between these two kinds of self-slaughter is immense and is based on the motivation for the act. Different types of motivation are presented in the epigrams preserved in the seventh book of the *Greek Anthology*. In this paper I briefly analyse the literary and socio-historical backgrounds of all these epigrams, proving that all of them were never intended to be carved on stone. Moreover, I argue that although a few inscriptions indicate suicide as a cause of death, there is in fact no actual Greek *epitombion* that really mentions it. By presenting some Roman examples of inscriptional epigrams praising suicides, I also show the essential difference between Greek and Roman perceptions of suicide. Assuming that a strong taboo existed in the Greek world in relation to mentioning suicide on the funerary stele, I try to trace this in the preserved literature.

In recent literature concerning classical antiquity much has been said about attitudes towards suicide in the Greek and Roman worlds. Scholars dealing with the problem usually present a wide range of ancient testimonia, which combined are expected to give answers about attitudes towards suicide in the pre-Christian world<sup>1</sup>. All this documentary and literary evidence builds a picture of very complex phenomena concerning suicide and reveals the fact that it is almost

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<sup>1</sup> The fundamental studies on suicide in antiquity are: R. HIRZEL, *Der Selbstmord*, ARW XI 1908, pp. 75–104, 243–284, 417–476 (also reprinted in book form: Darmstadt 1966) and the works of A.J.L. VAN HOOFF, *From Autothanasia to Suicide: Self Killing in Classical Antiquity*, London 1990; *Suicide and Parasuicide in Ancient Personal Testimonies*, Crisis XIV 1993, pp. 76–82; *Icons of Ancient Suicide: Self-Killing in Classical Art*, Crisis XV 1994, pp. 179–186; also E.P. GARRISON, *Attitudes Toward Suicide in Ancient Greece*, TAPhA CXXI 1991, pp. 1–33; Y. GRISÉ, *Le suicide dans la Rome antique*, Montreal 1982; R. GARLAND, *The Greek Way of Death*, London–Ithaca 1985, pp. 95–99; and recently H. BRANDT, *Am Ende des Lebens. Alter, Tod und Suizid in der Antike*, München 2010 (Zetemata 136).