

The First Suicide

[Note to reader: while the author, age 69, may be obsessed with death and is often depressed, he is not suicidal and there is no need to alert a suicide hotline!]

The other day—a bright sunny day—I saw an earthworm crawl out of the grass at the edge of my garden patio, leaving the rich loam moistened by the dawn’s dew and inching its invertebrate body up onto the warming tiles where it would inevitably fry into a little s-shaped black corpse. What made it do that? Was it trying to escape some parasitical fungus? Did it think that an earthworm utopia awaited if it could only cross those hot terra-cotta tiles? Had it encountered a fat old grandfather nightcrawler and asked it the meaning of life, and upon hearing a reply of “eat dirt, shit dirt, and die” decided to end it all by baking in the hot sun?

Given that the tiny brains of worms consist of a small cerebral ganglia with only a few neurons, it would certainly be a mistake to anthropomorphize them with any form of thinking, much less with suicidal thoughts upon contemplating the banality of their existence. And even though flatworms can be trained to traverse a rough surface in order to receive a treat (and, remarkably, when those planarians are decapitated and regrow new brains, they retain the memory of their trained behavior), we should probably not attribute any sort of intentionality to my apparently suicidal earthworm. Escaping parasitical fungi or just the simple random motion of earthworms is probably the best explanation.

So, are *homo sapiens* the only species that commits suicide?

Some animals will sacrifice their lives in order to protect their offspring. The female giant Pacific octopus will lay up to 100,000 eggs that she will jealously clean and guard without moving out of her den to feed herself, and when the eggs hatch after six months, the mother octopus often dies of starvation. A mother black lace weaver spider will allow her babies to eat her, and, when food is scarce, a mother pseudoscorpion will expose her joints and allow her babies to suck her dry. Such self-sacrifice can also be found in mammalian species: in 1996, Scarlett the cat became a viral hit when she was badly burned by repeatedly going into an abandoned burning building in Brooklyn to retrieve her kittens one by one.

But these instances of maternal sacrifice can be easily explained by a Darwinian survival of the species and are not the equivalent of the 132 suicides that are, on average, committed every day in the United States, white males accounting for seven out of ten of those self-murders.



So, self-sacrificing octopodes, spiders, and cats aside, it looks like *homo sapiens* can be defined as the only creature that commits *mors voluntaria*.

But this begs the question of *when* was the first suicide.

According to *The Ethics of Suicide Digital Archive* (a very helpful collection of historical sources on suicide edited by Margaret Pabst Battin and several others and maintained by the University of Utah's J. Willard Marriott Library), the oldest allusion to suicide is a fragmentary 12th Dynasty (ca. 1937—1759 BCE) Egyptian papyrus, *Dialogue of a Man with his Soul* (also known as “A Debate Between a Man Tired of Life and His Soul” or “A Dispute over Suicide”). In this often obscure Middle Kingdom text, a man plagued by misfortune seems to contemplate suicide by fire, something his soul (ba) objects to because, without mummification, there would be no place for the soul to go after the man died:

There is no competent person who deserts on the day of misfortune. Behold, my soul wrongs me, (but) I do not listen to it, dragging myself toward death before I come to it and casting (myself) upon the fire to burn myself up. . . . May it be near to me on the day of misfortune and wait on that side. . . . My soul is stupid to (try to) *win over* one wretched over life and *delay* me from death before I come to it. Make the West pleasant for me! Is that (so) bad? Life is a circumscribed period: (even) the trees must fall. Trample down wrongs—(yet) my wretchedness endures. Let Thoth, who propitiates the gods, judge me. Let Khonsu, the scribe in truth, defend me. Let Re, who *pilots* the sun barque, hear my speech. Let Isdes. . . defend me. My wretchedness is heavy. . . . Pleasant would be the defense of a god for the secrets of my body.”

There is a Babylonian cuneiform tablet, now designated as BAM 234, that records a condition that we would call depression. This text appears to be a first millennium BCE copy of a medical text dating to the first half of the second millennium BCE:

If an *awīlum* (or head of a household) has had a (long) spell of misfortune—and he does not know how it came upon him—so that he has continually suffered losses and deprivation (including) losses of barley and silver and losses of slaves and slave girls, and there have been cases of oxen, horses, sheep, dogs and pigs, and even others in his household, dying off altogether; if he has frequent nervous breakdowns, and from constantly giving orders with no (one) complying, calling with no (one) answering, and striving to achieve his desires while having (at the same time) to look after his household, he shakes with fear in his bedroom and his limbs have become weak to an extreme degree; if he is filled with anger against god and king; and if he is sometimes so frightened that he cannot sleep by day or night and

constantly sees disturbing dreams; if he is weak (from) not having enough food and drink; and if (in speech) he forgets the word which he is trying to say; then the anger of (his) god and goddess is upon him.

(Translation Reynolds and Kinnier Wilson, 2013)

In a series of overlapping articles that border on self-plagiarism, Edward H. Reynolds, Edith K. Ritter, and James V. Kinnier Wilson discuss this text, pointing out that these symptoms of depression—insomnia, anorexia, and impaired concentration and memory—are attributed to the anger of the *awīlum*'s personal god and that, as the text goes on to explain, the cure is a ritual wherein a priest sacrifices wax figurines to Shamash, the god of justice. Reynolds and Kinnier Wilson (2013) note that: “In the Babylonian language, there is a noun, *ašuštu*, with an associated verb, *ašašu*, which is generally understood to mean ‘distress’, which might perhaps include ‘depression’, but one cannot be certain about the exact meaning in a given instance.” Reynolds and Kinnier Wilson (2014) also note: “Some medical texts include the term, *zikurrudû*, a Sumerian loanword meaning literally ‘a cutting off (or shortening) of life’. This has been interpreted to mean ‘suicide’, ‘attempted suicide’ or ‘suicidal tendencies’, which, if correct, could imply ‘depression’ in some instances.”

Be that as it may, no cuneiform tablet containing a suicide note has ever been uncovered, nor are there any recorded instances of suicide in ancient Babylonia.

Attributing a reversal of one's fortune—the loss of barley, silver, and slave girls, and the death of livestock and relatives—to the acts of gods has a long tradition in Mesopotamia. An unusual composition, “The Death of Ur-Nammu and His Descent to the Netherworld,” laments the demise of the late third millennium BCE ruler Ur-Nammu, the founder of the Third Dynasty of Ur and builder of the famous Ziggurat of Ur who perished in battle at the height of his power. The poet-theologian who composed this presumably contemporaneous account attempted to understand why the gods would decree the death of such an illustrious, and presumably pious, ruler, suggesting that the goddess Inanna made amends for this wrong after Ur-Nammu's death. As Samuel Noah Kramer observes: “The poem, therefore, belongs to some extent to the ‘wisdom’ genre of literature, since it concerns the Job-like theme of man's effort to explain his seemingly unjustified victimization at the hands of inscrutable gods.”

And Job, of course, had every reason to want his life to end.

The *Book of Job* is perhaps the strangest section of the *Hebrew Bible*. With its exotic setting in the fictional, vaguely Mesopotamian, city of Uz and with its proliferation of non-Hebrew words not found in the rest of the *Bible*, the *Book of Job* was long thought to be a

foreign, perhaps Edomite, story that somehow made its way into the canonical Hebrew sacred text. Now, however, most scholars maintain that *Job* was composed by an Israelite around the sixth century BCE, its *hapax legomenon* language being added to heighten the exoticism of the story.

The exploration of divine justice in *Job* is certainly startling by beginning with God bragging to the Accuser (the Hebrew הַשָּׂטָן —*hasśātān*—is often mistranslated as Satan) about Job’s piety, and then accepting the Accuser’s wager that Job would cease to be pious if he lost all of the material blessings he enjoys. God allows the Accuser to take away Job’s wealth and kill his children, but Job refuses to curse God, saying instead "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." When the Accuser continues his torture by inflicting Job with suppurating boils, Job’s wife urges him to "curse God, and die," but Job answers: "Shall we receive good from God and shall we not receive evil?" Job does go as far as to curse the day he was born, adding:

Why is light given to him who is in misery,
And life to the bitter of soul,
Who long for death, but it does not *come*,
And search for it more than hidden treasures;
Who rejoice exceedingly,
And are glad when they can find the grave?
(*Job* 3:20—26, New Revised Standard Version)

[I will leave it up to the reader to decide whether the conclusion to *Job*, where God does not grant Job’s wish to die but restores him to health and wealth and gives him a new set of children, is psychologically satisfying or not.]

And Job is not the only Biblical character who, amid his suffering, yearns to die. Like Job, Jeremiah curses the day he was born and wishes “that his mother might be his grave” (20:14). Jonah (4:3) asks God “Please take my life for I would rather die than live.” The prophet Elijah (*1 Kings* 19:4) “went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: ‘It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.’” Even the Apostle Paul, apparently when imprisoned in Rome, wrote to the Christians in Philippi: “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. . . . My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you” (*Philippians* 1, 21—24).

That these Biblical characters chose not to act on their desire to die was not because there was an injunction against suicide in early Judaism or Christianity. There are, in fact, several Old Testament figures who did commit suicide. Abimelech, the ruthless ruler of Shechem who had killed his seventy brothers to claim the throne, was struck by a millstone thrown down by a woman from the tower of a city he was besieging, whereupon Abimelech asked his armor bearer to draw his sword and kill him lest people say that he had been killed by a woman (*Judges* 9:54). A shorn and blinded Samson famously pulled down the temple to Dagon in Gaza, killing both himself and a host of Philistines (*Judges* 16:30). King Saul, after he was wounded in battle and about to be captured by the Philistines, asked his armor-bearer to dispatch him with his sword, and when the armor-bearer refused Saul fell on his own sword, whereupon the armor-bearer followed suit (*I Samuel* 31:4–5). Ahitophel, counselor to King David, committed suicide by hanging himself after the nefarious plan he had concocted with David's son Absalom to kill the king fell apart (*II Samuel* 17:23). The sixth king of Israel, Zimri, who ruled for only seven days after he had assassinated his predecessor Elah, committed suicide by setting his palace on fire and dying in the flames when his city was besieged by an Israelite army that had refused to acknowledge his coup (*I Kings* 16:18). During the Maccabean Revolt (167–160 BCE), Razis, one of the elders of Jerusalem, committed suicide in a particularly gruesome way after the Seleucid governor had sent troops to kill him: when the troops were about to breach the tower to which he had fled, Razis fell upon his own sword; but in the heat of the struggle, Razis failed to give himself a fatal blow, so he jumped off the top of the tower; and when even this failed to kill him, the bleeding Razis then tore out his own entrails (*2 Maccabees* 14:37-46).

[We might parenthetically note that Flavius Josephus' account of the heroic mass suicide of the Jewish zealots at Masada during the First Jewish War (73–74 CE) has been called into question by scholars. Josephus, a Jewish rebel who had been captured and became a Roman citizen and chronicler of the war, maintains that as the Roman were about to breach the defenses of Masada, the surviving rebels drew lots and killed each other in turn, with only the last man being forced to commit suicide. However, given the inconsistencies between Josephus' account and the archaeological record of Masada, and given the fact that the Romans would scarcely have delayed their attack long enough for the long speeches and mass suicide Josephus records to have occurred, a general scholarly consensus is emerging that the Masada rebels had been killed by the Romans.]

The suicides of Samson, Saul, and Razis (and the perhaps apocryphal mass suicide at Masada)—committed in order to avoid falling into the hands of the unfaithful—can be considered as examples of *kiddush hashem*—a later term referring to the “sanctification of the Name” by leading a holy life, which can include a martyrdom. Paul’s acceptance that he should live and suffer in service to his religion falls into the same category, as do the sufferings of the many Christian martyrs who followed him. The suicides of Abimelech, Ahitophel, and Zimri, on the other hand, were different, being merely cowardly attempts to avoid a deserved fate.

There are Biblical passages that would seem to argue against the practice of suicide. In God’s covenant with Noah, the deity prohibits the shedding of human blood:

Whoever sheds the blood of a human,
by a human shall that person’s blood be shed;
for in his own image
God made humankind.

(*Genesis 9:6*, New Revised Standard Version)

It would seem that the sixth Commandment, “Thou shall not kill” (*Exodus 20:13*) would also prohibit self-murder. In the New Testament, Paul writes in his epistle to the Corinthians: “Surely you know that you are God’s temple, where the Spirit of God dwells. Anyone who destroys God’s temple will himself be destroyed by God, because the temple of God is holy; and you are that temple (*1 Corinthians 3: 16–17*, New Revised Standard Version). In spite of these passages, however, strict injunctions against suicide did not arise in Jewish and Christian theological thought until Post-Biblical times. The *Genesis Rabbah*—a midrash composed around 300–500 CE—provides a rabbinical interpretation of *Genesis 9:6* to conclude that suicide is a sacrilege. Augustine, in his early 5th-century *City of God* argues that suicide goes against the *Exodus* Commandment. By the Medieval period, suicide was both a civic and an ecclesiastical crime in Europe. Those who attempted suicide were excommunicated, and those who did commit suicide were buried in non-consecrated grounds and had their property confiscated.

[We might note that Hamlet, in Shakespeare’s play written around 1600, was apparently not concerned with theological interpretations of suicide when the Prince of Denmark contemplated “Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer/ The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune./ Or to take arms against a sea of troubles/ And by opposing end them” and whether he “. . . might his quietus make/ With a bare bodkin? . . .” In the end, in line with his habitual noncommittal attitude, Hamlet answers his “To be, or not to be” question by

not committing suicide, worried about “. . . the dread of something after death,/ The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn/ No traveller returns . . .” There was, however, a suicide in *Hamlet*—the unfortunate Ophelia, Hamlet’s rejected lover who drowned herself; Hamlet’s mother Queen Gertrude claimed that the death of the girl she had hoped would become her daughter-in-law had been an accident, that Ophelia had fallen into to a “glassy stream” while climbing a “willow aslant a brook” to pick some flowers:

There, on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke;
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element; but long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.

But we, like the Act V gravediggers who are amazed that Ophelia was allowed to be buried in the cemetery on consecrated grounds, are not taken in by Gertrude’s story, which, if true, poses the problem of why Gertrude or whoever had witnessed Ophelia’s fall had not intervened to save her while she was chanting those snatches of old lauds.



John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851–1852. Oil on canvas, 76.2 cm × 111.8 cm, Tate Britain.]

In the classical Greco-Roman world, suicide was problematic. On the one hand, suicide was an acceptable response to a loss of one's honor. The mythological hero Ajax the Great fell upon his sword when, after his heroic defense of the Achaeans in the Trojan war, the armor of the deceased Achilles was awarded instead to the loquacious Odysseus. (Ajax's suicide does not figure in the *Iliad*, but is recorded in a later Epic Cycle, and Sophocles gives another version in his mid-5th-century BCE play *Ajax*, where Ajax commits suicide out of embarrassment when he discovers that he has been tricked by Athena into slaughtering a herd of cattle instead of Agamemnon and Menelaus, who had awarded Achilles' armor to Odysseus.) The Roman noblewoman Lucretia committed suicide by stabbing herself after she had been raped by King Sextus Tarquinius, setting off the events that led to the downfall of the monarchy and the establishment of the Roman Republic in 509 BCE.

On the other hand, suicide was also condemned in the Greco-Roman world. In Euripides' play *Suppliant Women* (first performed in 423 BCE), Evadne, whose husband Capaneus had died in the "Seven Against Thebes" battle, commits suicide by throwing herself from a cliff onto his funeral pyre—an act that the Chorus calls a "dreadful deed" and that causes her aged father to declare that he would starve himself to death. Plato, in the *Phaedo*, accepts the Pythagorean argument that suicide is wrong because it releases our souls from our bodies—a bond that the gods had ordained and that should be endured no matter the circumstance. In the *Laws*, Plato suggests that suicides should be buried in unmarked graves, although he does recognize some cases where suicide is justified, including mental corruption, extreme personal misfortune, or the shame of having committed a grossly unjust act. Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, suggests that suicide is not unjust *per se* but that it harms the *polis* by removing a member of the community. Similarly, the Romans condemned some forms of suicide on economic grounds, being particularly keen on preventing the suicides of slaves, soldiers, and those accused of capital crimes who committed suicide to prevent the state from confiscating their property. Still, Romans did celebrate "patriotic" suicides such as that of Cato the Younger, who disemboweled himself in 46 BCE after Julius Caesar had defeated his pro-Pompey army, or the forced suicide of the Stoic Seneca, who slit his wrists in 65 CE when Nero ordered his death, even though Seneca probably had not been involved in the Pisonian plot to kill the emperor.

One of earliest recorded instance of a suicide is that of the Sicilian philosopher Empedocles, who reportedly threw himself into the Mount Etna volcano in 434 BCE, presumably motivated by his belief in the reincarnation of souls and his view that death was

merely a transformation. The Augustan poet Horace, however, thought Empedocles' suicide was simply a metaphor; the poet Lucan maintained that Empedocles actually had died in an eruption of Mount Etna.

Suicide, of course, is not confined to the Western tradition. In China, the poet/ statesman Qu Yuan, who had been exiled from the Chu court for urging King Huai not to antagonize the neighboring Qin kingdom and who was despondent when the Qin subsequently overran the Chu, committed suicide in 278 BCE by wading into the Miluo River while holding a rock. The verses at the end of Qu Yuan's poem "Embracing Sand" read like a suicide note:

The lives of all men on the earth have each their ordained lot.
Let my heart be calm and my mind at ease: why should I be afraid?
Yet still, in mounting sorrow and anguish, long I lament and sigh.
For the world is muddy-witted; none can know me; the heart of man cannot be told.
I know that death cannot be avoided, therefore I will not grudge its coming.
To noble men I here plainly declare that I will be numbered with such as you.
(Translation David Hawkes)

In Japan, samurai soldiers, to avoid capture and torture by their enemies or after the death of their feudal lord (*daimyō*), would practice *seppuku*—a ritual suicide also known as *harikiri*, "cutting of the stomach," (often mispronounced by Americans as *hari-kari*). The first recorded instance of *seppuku* was the self-disembowelment performed by Minamoto no Yorimasa during the Battle of Uji in 1180. Women belonging to families of samurai who committed *seppuku* were also known to commit suicide (incorrectly referred to by some Westerners as *jigai*), often by slicing the arteries of their necks after having tied their knees together so that they would be found in a dignified pose after they died.

In Hindu India, there was an equivalent type of female suicide, *sati*—the practice of widows throwing themselves onto the funeral pyres of their husbands. *Sati* is attested to as early as the *Rigveda* (composed around 1500–1000 BCE). *Sati* was banned by British colonial rulers in 1829, although isolated cases in the 20th century led the Indian government to Indian government to pass the Sati Prevention Act in 1987.

Suicide also existed in the pre-Columbian cultures of the Americas. In Aztec mythology, the gods Tecuciztecatl and Nanauatzin sacrificed themselves on a pyre to become the Sun and the Moon, with other gods sacrificing themselves to give motion to those heavenly orbs. In another Aztec myth, the feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl, after having been tricked by the god Tezcatlipoca into getting drunk and committing incest with his sister, immolated himself on a bonfire, his ashes rising up to become the morning star Venus. In a

similar myth as recorded in the Mayan *Popol Vuh*, the sacred twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque allowed themselves to be thrown into an oven in the underworld Xibalba, after which they were resurrected, defeated the underworld gods, and rose to become the Sun and the Moon.

In trying to assess how suicide was viewed in the indigenous cultures of the Americas, we have to confront the inherent bias of our sources. The earliest textual record for the belief systems of the Aztec, Mayan, and Incan peoples come from accounts by conquerors, missionaries, and explorers who, naturally, interpreted through a European lens what they saw and were told. A similar bias exists in later ethnographic accounts of the “old ways” of Native American peoples of North America that were recorded after these peoples had come into contact with Europeans.

There can be little doubt that Mesoamerican attitudes towards suicide were greatly different from those of Europeans. Given the Mesoamerican belief that the gods had sacrificed themselves for the benefit of humans and that the gods depended on human blood sacrifice such as the bloodletting rituals of the Mayan ruling elite, it is not unreasonable to assume that at least some of the Aztecs and Mayans sacrificed to the gods were willing victims. So too, the ritual funeral sacrifice among the Inca most likely included at least some who went to their death willingly; in describing the funeral of the great Inca emperor Huyana Capac, where more than a thousand people were put to death to be buried with their deceased god-king, the 16th-century Jesuit priest Joseph de Acosta wrote “. . . [T]hese that were appointed to death held themselves happy.” There are also accounts of captured Mesoamericans and Caribbean people who resorted to suicide—usually by hanging themselves—as a preferred alternative to submitting to slavery.

Given the multiplicity of Native American nations in North America, it is not surprising that there was a wide variety of attitudes towards suicide among these “tribes.” In many First Nations, a distinction was made between the voluntary death of a warrior who fearlessly charged into the ranks of his enemies and other forms of suicide, such as hanging oneself or ingesting poison. Many Native American nations held that the ghosts of those who had killed themselves were ostracized in the spirit world and not allowed to interact with those who died of natural causes.

Funerary suicide is attested to in several First Nations, such as the ritual strangling of the surviving spouse—male or female—of a deceased member of a ruling clan among the Natchez. Another, particularly Native American, attested form of suicide was self-senicide, or the self-killing by the elderly, which is reported among the Comanche and the Arapaho.

As the editors of *The Ethics of Suicide Digital Archive* note, there is, like with the Aztecs and Mayans, a connection between Native American myths about the creation of the world and attitudes towards suicide:

Some Navajo researchers have posited a strong relationship between certain religious customs and conceptions of suicide. Father Berard Haile's account (1942) of the Navajo "Upward Reaching Way" ceremony describes the myth on which it is based. The First Woman, who had originally led people out of the underworld, had died from a hemorrhage. First Woman's husband decides to follow her spirit into death, that is, he chooses to forgo life and join his wife in the Emergence place, where spirits of the dead congregate. The journey to the Emergence place is voluntary, and Haile reports that at least one informant saw this as accounting for later suicides.

But the *Ethics of Suicide Digital Archive* editors also warn:

As with all the indigenous cultures described here and in other parts of this volume, the identification of practices as "suicide" is itself subject to bias. Like most languages, Navajo has no true term for "suicide"; the closest term is a verb meaning to kill oneself, but there is no nominal expression to describe this behavior as a type or category of act. (Indeed, English had no such term until Walter Charleton pioneered the Latinate construction, *sui-* "self" + *-cide*, "kill," in 1651.)



So, was Samson, or Saul, or Ahitophel, or Lucretia, or Empedocles, or Qu Yuan the first to commit suicide? Or was the first suicide some unnamed Middle Kingdom Egyptian, or Early Dynastic Period Mesopotamian, or a Pre-Columbian Native American?

If, like me, you believe that human nature has not dramatically altered over the ages, it is difficult to imagine that no one before the 2nd millennium BCE was so depressed or filled with a sense of shame that they did not resort to self-murder to ease their pain. I suspect that suicide has been part of the human experience as long as there have been humans.

But this raises another question: *how* was the first suicide committed?

In the modern world, most suicide attempts do not succeed. In the United States for instance, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that, for the year 2019, there were 1.38 million suicide attempts, which resulted in only 47,511 deaths; and of those suicides, more than half were caused by a self-inflicted gun wound. [The fact that many of these firearm-related suicides, which outnumber firearm-related homicides, might

have been prevented had the person attempting suicide not had easy access to such a deadly weapon, is a strong argument for altering the insane lack of gun control in the US.]

It would seem that suicide is closely connected to technology. Many of the suicides in the historical record were caused by people stabbing themselves—or asking others to stab them—with metal knives or swords. But what about before the Iron Age or the Bronze Age? And what about before humans had ropes strong enough to bear the weight of their bodies dangling from trees? Or before humans had sufficient pharmacological skills to produce a lethal poison?

As anyone who has ever attempted to learn the ancient art of flintknapping and ended up with all their fingers covered in bandages knows, the flint and chert stone tools of our prehistoric ancestors could be razor-sharp, and perfectly adequate for slicing one's wrists or disemboweling oneself. And there was always the option of self-immolation, or walking into a river carrying a heavy stone. And life for our predecessors in the Paleolithic Period—when the first suicide no doubt occurred—was full of dangers that the despondent might have taken advantage of to end their lives.



The First Suicide: A Short Story

Part I. Thursday, 14 August, 2014.

It always happens that a major find is made on the last day of an excavation.

María was hot and tired, and couldn't wait for the day to end. For over a month now she had been patiently scraping away with a scalpel, dental pick, and small brush at a layer of bones that lay in a depression at the back of the cave. Day after day she would lie down on her stomach at the edge of the shallow pit and by the light of a harsh electric lantern pick at the whitish, rock-hard soil, brushing the dust off of petrified bone after petrified bone, picking away at each one until it was ready to be popped out of its matrix; then she would awkwardly pull herself up to her knees, update the drawing in her field notebook, put a little centimeter scale next to the newly exposed bone and photograph it before gently lifting it out, slipping a Tyvek label around it, and placing the bone into an acid-free box.

María could see that she was getting down to the last few bones at the bottom of the slight depression. Tonight would be the dig party—something that María was not looking forward to as she would have to spend the evening avoiding the advances of an increasingly inebriated Pedro! But tomorrow she would be at home celebrating with her mother and father and her two younger brothers *el Día de la Asunción*, her name-day and favorite holiday.



It had been a disappointing season, to say the least.

The campaign had begun with such high hopes. The year before had been the last season of work at *La Cueva del Pedernal*—a cave a few hundred meters above the Caudal River where the excavation leader, the Catedrático Don Francisco García y López, had made a name for himself by discovering painted red hand stencils partially covered by calcite deposits that had been U-Th dated to 66.5K BP, thus making them the oldest known cave paintings in Europe, ones that presumably were made by *homo neanderthalensis* and not *homo sapiens sapiens*. Perhaps more importantly, García y López’s team had dug a series of deep trenches in the deposits towards the front of the cave, revealing a complete stratigraphic profile with stone tools spanning the full range from the Mousterian down to the Acheulean, with the lowest levels containing Clactonian-style tools which suggested that the *Pedernal* cave had been seasonally occupied by *homo heidelbergensis* long before the Neanderthals had moved in and painted their hand stencils.

And last year, as the final GPS plots were being taken of the lowest level of flakes at the bottom of the excavation squares, Don Francisco decided to make a preliminary investigation of another cave just around the bend of the Caudal. (The Catedrático García y López, of course, did not climb through the narrow opening of this cave to explore it himself, being too much preoccupied with giving television and newspaper interviews and answering emails from foreign archaeologists; García y López instead sent Pedro, his wiry 27-year-old graduate student, to crawl through the moss-covered mouth of this new cave and report back what he had seen.) Pedro, who wore his hair in the latest style with closely shaved sides and a hair bun and who considered himself to be God’s gift to *las chicas*, dutifully squirmed his way through the narrow opening among the fallen rocks at the mouth of the new cave, armed with a small flashlight and his trusty WHS trowel, while the rest of the team waited outside,

enjoying an impromptu picnic. A few hours later, Pedro reemerged, shouting for everyone to come see what he had found. Pedro held up two objects. “I know that I probably should have left these *in situ*, but I just couldn’t risk some kids coming in here later and nabbing them. They were just poking out from the mud in the first side chamber on the right. I did take photos on my mobile.” Pedro gently placed the two objects on the towel that María had spread out on the ground. One was the upper part of a skull, with two massive canines protruding from the front; the other was a rather nondescript piece of black wood with a pointy end. D. García y López, who had just come up from the base camp, looked down. His eyes widened. “What you have here, my dear Pedro, is clearly the skull of the long extinct *Homotherium latidens*—the European saber-toothed cat. And this,” García y López pointed to the stick, “looks like the tip of a wooden spear, much like those found at Schöningen.” García y López raised his bushy white eyebrows. “This may well be the earliest evidence of hominids in Cantabria, if not in the entire Iberian peninsula. Next year, it’s on to *La Cueva del Tigre!*”



And so the 2014 campaign at the newly christened *La Cueva del Tigre* began. Don García y López, with his status at the Universidad de Oviedo and with his connections at the Banco Sabadell, had no problem in raising the funds to bring back his trench supervisors Pedro and María, together with a new crop of wide-eyed undergraduates.

And right from the start, *La Cueva del Tigre* proved not to be what the esteemed Catedrático had hoped it would be. A survey of the cave revealed not a single stone tool. In spite of the entire team getting down on hands and knees and sweeping back and forth across the cave floor, they found nary a lithic or even a flake. Nor were there any traces of fire pits like those that were found in every level of the *La Cueva del Pedernal*. And even though the entire team examined every centimeter of the walls of the cave with their brightest flashlights, there weren’t any signs of cave paintings or hand stencils.

Pedro, of course, had been assigned to dig in the side chamber where he had found the tiger skull and the wooden spear tip. Taking two of the cutest undergraduates as his assistants (*putas*, thought María), over the past month Pedro and his team carefully pulled out of the mud what appeared to be the complete skeleton of an adult *Homotherium latidens*, together with fragments of at least two juvenile saber-toothed cats.

María, meanwhile, dug at the stuffy back of the cave, in a little depression where the broken ends of a few bones could be seen to protrude. María, who preferred to work alone, had waved off the undergraduates assigned to her, sending them back to the group that was surveying the territory between the cave and the river. And day after day, María pulled up one bone of *Cervus elaphus* after another. A pit full of red deer bones! *La Cueva del Tigre*, being the southernmost place where *Homotherium latidens* have been discovered, would undoubtedly be of great interest to paleozoologists, and the little pit that María was digging, where apparently these saber-toothed cats consumed the red deer they had killed, would at least be of mild interest to them. But, for archaeologists, it looked like *el Tigre* cave was going to be a complete bust, that little tip of a wooden spear notwithstanding.

With such thoughts clouding up her head, María pulled out the next-to-last bone in her pit—another red deer leg bone!—and half turned her attention to the last little bit of bone peeking out of the rock-hard white matrix. After just a moment of scraping, however, María jerked to full attention, her heart starting to pound in her chest. This was no *Cervus elaphus*! The fossilized bone kept curving down. This was a skull cap! And as María continued to expose this skull—scraping, brushing, scraping, and brushing again—she encountered what seemed to be two puncture marks in the top of the skull. María finished exposing the skull cap, which had protruding eyebrow ridges and a rounded occipital bun at the back. She updated her field notebook drawing, took her photographs, and then, painfully, pulled her stiff back up to a full standing position and went over to the side chamber where Pedro and his *chicas* were lolling around, telling jokes and giggling. “Would one of you go get Don Francisco?” María asked in a voice caked with cave dust. “He’s got to come see what I’ve found.” One of the undergraduates looked over at Pedro, who just nodded a “yes, let’s humor her.” The undergraduate went out, passing through the enlarged cave opening that one now only had to bend halfway over to get through, and found D. García y López sitting with his computer in his lap under the tent erected near the cave entrance. The Catedrático was soon standing next to María at the back of the cave. “Okay, pop it out and let’s see what we’ve got here.” Carefully, María loosened the last bit of the matrix, lifted the skull cap out, and handed it to her professor. With eyes as wide as saucers, the Catedrático turned the skull over and over. “Yes, indeed! This is no doubt an adult male *homo heidelbergensis*.” And pointing to the two holes at the top of the skull, he added “And these really look like saber-toothed cat wounds. But how in the world did this end up in the back of our *Cueva del Tigre*?”

Part II. One TwoHands after the FirstMoon of the New SunCycle, Ten TwoHands SunCycles of NewTribe (i.e. Thursday, 14 August, 202,014 BCE).

It was time for NewTribe to move out of the Cave.

Gar rolled over onto his side. It felt like he could feel every small rock and pebble underneath the bed of dried grass and moss spread out beneath him on the cave floor. Gar groggily opened his eyes, expecting to see Ker-i and Ker lying there next to him.

He was alone.

The first rays of sunlight were just licking at the mouth of the Cave, still not strong enough to penetrate the smokey haze that hung above the now extinguished TwoHands of Hearthfires where the rest of NewTribe was also beginning to stir. Gar shook his head as a flood of horrible memories came racing in.

Had it really been nearly a Moon ago since that last Sun when he and Ker had gone out hunting?



The RedFish had stopped swimming up the river two Moons earlier. Back then, for Sun after Sun, Gar and the other NewTribe men had waded in and speared many TwoHands of the slippery fish, tossing each one up to Ker and the other NewTribe boys, who carried the still flopping fish up to Ker-i and the other NewTribe women and girls waiting by the fires and drying racks in the clearing in front of the cave. There would be fresh fish to eat for many Suns, and plenty of dried fishmeat to last the dry Moons of the waning SunCycle.

And now the herd of RedDeer was starting to head up the valley, leaving the drying grass in the plains below and heading up the hills to beyond the trees. There they would stay, out of easy spear-throw range, until the last Moon of the SunCycle. But now, for the next few Suns, it was time to hunt.

And the Long-tooths would soon follow.

Before the hunt began, Gar wanted to show Ker how to make a hunting spear. Gar walked up the hill with Ker to where the SourNutTrees grew, and, pulling his hand-axe out of his leather pouch, Gar neatly chopped down two tall saplings and stripped off their branches. As Ker bent over to pick up the saplings, Gar thought how much his son resembled the young trees. Over the past SunCycle, Ker had sprouted up, and was now nearly as tall as Gar. And

although the downy tufts of hair all over his body were beginning to coarsen and darken, Ker was still sapling-thin, not yet having put on any of the man-muscle his father had. Leaving the SourNutTrees, Gar led Ker over to a nearby stand of ItchyTrees, and taking his cutting-flake out of his pouch—being careful to hold it by the blunted side—Gar sliced off two long strands of bark, wrapped one of them in a small piece of leather, and stuffed both back in his pouch. Gar turned and headed back to the Cave, with Ker trailing behind carrying the saplings. On the way, Gar pointed up the river where it curved around a bend, and, putting his two forefingers up to his mouth to make the LongTooth sign, Gar vigorously shook his head; Ker was never to go in that direction, where the LongTooths made their lair when the RedDeer came. Gar went on and stopped at one of the fire pits in the clearing in front of the Cave. He pushed some of the still smoldering embers together with a stick and placed a small flat rock among them, gently placing the leather patch holding the strip of ItchyTree bark on top of the rock. Gar and Ker sat down nearby on two large flat stones. Gar pulled his notched scraper out of his pouch and, while Ker looked on, started to rub it up and down one of the SourNutTree saplings, peeling off the bark and smoothing out the bumps of the broken-off branches. When he was satisfied that the scrapped sapling was as smooth as he could make it, Gar handed his scraper to Ker, who started in on the other sapling. Gar got up and gingerly picked up the piece of leather off of the rock in the fire pit. Holding the slightly smoking piece of leather between his thumb and forefinger, Gar opened it up and shook out the fragments of the ItchyTree bark that had stained the inside of the leather with a dark brown oily substance. Gar rubbed the leather up and down his smoothed sapling, and when Ker had finished scraping his sapling, he took the leather from Gar and rubbed down his sapling. When Ker was done, Gar put the leather bit on the flat stone where he had been sitting and taking his cutting flake out, neatly incised a spiral into it, pulling the leather into one long strand. Gar sat that aside and picked up one of the saplings and with his cutting flake sawed down a finger-length slit in the top of the narrow end. Gar reached into his pouch and pulled out the other strip of ItchyTree bark, a broken-off end of a RedDeer antler, and a BlackStone spearpoint. Gar remembered that it was his last piece of BlackStone and that, when the NewTribe left the Cave for the dry Moons, with each Hearthfire splitting off to its own shelter along the coast, he would have to make a detour up the hills to the BlackStone outcrop. Making sure that Ker was still looking on, Gar sat down and put his last Blackstone spearpoint on the leather loincloth covering his lap; with the point of the antler Gar deftly retouched the spearpoint, pressure-flaking off several black glassy bits until the spearpoint

was as sharp as it could be. Gar then hafted the spearpoint into the slit he had made at the top of his sapling and tightly wound the strand of leather around to close up the slit. Gar picked up the other strip of ItchyTree bark and loosely wrapped it over the leather he had wound around the shaft. Then he walked back to the fire pit, poked the embers a bit, and placed the hafted part of the shaft on the reheated flat stone. When the ItchyTree bark began to smoke, Gar took the shaft out of the fire pit, knocked off the bark fragments and, holding his hand under the end of his leather loincloth, tightly squeezed the leather hafting. When Gar released his grip, he smiled to see the now blackened leather hafting tightly adhering to the wooden shaft. As he had no other spearpoint to use, Gar picked up the sapling Ker had smoothed and with his cutting flake whittled down the narrow end into a sharp point, repeatedly sticking it into the embers in the fire pit and scraping off the blackened parts.

One by one, Gar picked up each of the two spears and checked their balance, first jabbing with an upward motion and then holding the spear above his head making as if to throw it. Gar smiled his toothy grin and grunted “Good, good.” Gar then motioned to Ker that they should go back to the Cave and see what Ker-i had been cooking.

When Ker-i saw Gar and Ker at the mouth of the Cave, she quickly lifted two more rounded cooking stones from the Heathfire with her forked stick and added them to the thick leather cooking pouch mounted on a tripod of sturdy wooden legs next to the fire. By the time that Gar and Ker walked up to the Hearthfire, the stew was nice and warm. Ker-i ladled out a wooden bowlful for each. Ker sat down and immediately started slurping his down. Gar sniffed at his bowl, wrinkling up his short, wide, nose and grunted “Fish guts again?” Gar pointed at the new spears: “tomorrow we have fresh RedDeer meat.” Ker-i rolled her eyes under her deep-set brows and just smiled.

Gar scarcely got any sleep that night. Ker kept tossing and turning and mumbling in his sleep at his end of the sleeping grass, clearly excited about the next Sun’s hunt. Next to him, Ker-i seem intent on seeing how loudly she could snore. It seemed to Gar that he had just closed his eyes when he felt Ker poking at him and signaling that they should get going. The Sun was just peaking into the Cave and the men of the other Hearthfires were already up and heading out of the Cave with their hunting spears. Gar quickly got up, tied on his loincloth, grabbed his pouch and the spears, and signaled Ker to follow him. Rolling over on the sleeping grass, Ker-i looked up at Gar: “Take care of our son.”

Outside the Cave, a TwoHands of other men and a few other boys the same height as Ker were waiting for Gar and Ker to arrive. Everyone knew that Gar, as the best spear-

thrower of NewTribe, would circle around to the back of the approaching RedDeer herd and pick off any stragglers, setting off the remainder of the herd into a stampede up the valley where the rest of the NewTribe spears would be waiting to dispatch as many as they could.

With Ker following behind him, Gar quickly trotted down the path that led away from where he could hear the advancing herd moving up the valley. He motioned to Ker to be careful not to make a sound or step on any twigs as they moved off the path and started to approach the rear of the herd.

Gar held up his hand. There, in a clearing just ahead, a RedDeer doe was nudging two wobbly fawns, trying to push them along to keep up with the rest of the herd meandering ahead in the distance. Without thinking, Gar rushed on and with a practiced arm hurled his spear at the RedDeer. The spear traced a low arc and lodged deep in the back leg of the doe. The fawns bleated and ran towards the herd, which then started to stampede up the valley. Gar ran up, got out his hand-axe and, with one blow to the back of the doe's head, finished off the RedDeer. As Gar was struggling to pull out his spear, the Blackstone point of which seemed to be caught in the sinews of the RedDeer's leg, he heard Ker cry out "Gar-pah." Gar looked around to see a LongTooth rushing across the clearing right at him. Gar rolled over just as the cat pounced, and the claws of the LongTooth's right front paw just glanced off his throwing arm, drawing three thin lines of bright red blood. Gar desperately tried to back away as the LongTooth tensed to pounce again. Suddenly, the LongTooth growled and whirled around. There was Ker, jabbing his wooden spear into the cat's leg. The LongTooth swiped, breaking the spear and sending the boy flying across the ground. Just then, two younger LongTooths came bounding into the clearing and were soon all over Ker, who was screaming "Gar-pah, Gar-pah!" The older LongTooth growled again and turned back to Gar. Gar jumped to his feet and ran up and out of the clearing as Ker's "Gar-pahs" faded in the distance.

Gar walked past all of the NewTribe women and younger boys and girls who were preparing the fires and drying racks in front of the Cave and didn't even glance over at Ker-i as he made his way to his Hearthfire and lay down on the sleeping grass. Ker-i went into the Cave and knelt beside him. Seeing Gar's bleeding arm, Ker-i pulled out a dried BrownDust mushroom out of her medicine pouch and rubbed it over Gar's arm. Ker-i looked into Gar's eyes and asked "Ker?" Gar just made the LongTooth sign and shook his head. He then fell into a deep sleep, not even waking when a little while later the rest of the NewTribe men

came up to the Cave, carrying a OneHand of RedDeer carcasses and loudly singing the NewTribe victory song.



Gar scarcely remembered anything of the next TwoHands of Suns. When he had awakened from that deep sleep after he ran away while Ker was being killed by the LongTooths, his Hearthfire was out and Ker-i was gone. So too were all of Ker-i's pouches and the cooking pouch on its tripod legs. Once, maybe a Sun or two later, Kur—Ker-i's brother—had stopped by and dropped a lump of cooked RedDeer meat in front of Gar's sleeping grass. "Ker-i is with our Hearthfire now," Kur spat out before turning and walking away from Gar. Gar vaguely recalled that one or two other NewTribers had dropped off some meat or dried fish, and he figured that he must have gone outside of the Cave at least a few times to drink from the little trickle that still flowed from the drying-up spring, but he had no memory of having done so. Gar also guessed that he must have left the Cave on occasion to relieve himself, although the stench of his sleeping grass made him think that maybe he hadn't.

And now, this morning, all of NewTribe was stirring, each Hearthfire packing up and getting ready to head out to their respective shelters on the coast to wait out the dry Moons. As the rest of NewTribe filed out of the Cave, Gar could hear the excited banter: "Happy shellfish hunting!" "Some Sun come over to our shelter when you're tired of eating dried RedDeer meat. Ber-i makes the best WhiteClam stew!" "Be sure to bring back some of that yummy dried seaweed at next CaveReturn, Tur."

As their voices trailed off, Gar sat up. Now he was completely alone. For the first time in he didn't know how long, he stood up, tied on his loincloth, and walked out of the Cave. Rather than going down the valley where all the others had gone, Gar turned and went up, around the curve in the river. Soon he saw the LongTooth cave. Gar hoped that the LongTooths hadn't yet left, and was glad when he saw some fresh scat outside of the cave opening.

There were no LongTooths in the cave when Gar bent over and walked in. With the slanting rays of the morning Sun, Gar made his way to the back of the cave and knelt down, facing away from the mouth of the cave. Before long, he could feel hot breath above his head.



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