First-Year Seminar: Death in Rome  
FRSEM-UA 629  
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Course Description:
There is a famous sentiment attributed to Benjamin Franklin: “In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.” While it becomes increasingly apparent that taxes certainly are not certain, there seems yet to exist a broad consensus that death really cannot be escaped. It is the sole absolutely unavoidable experience, which all humans undeniably have in common with one another – and, actually, with the non-human animal residents of this planet. This simple fact, with no further ado, makes the topic of death compelling for any and every thinking person.

That said, another plain fact confronts us: not all humans think the same things about their impending crossings into death. Indeed, the members of this seminar will almost certainly hold varied opinions about this issue. But, what happens if we look to the past, if we look to a world as foreign to ours as is ancient Rome (and, yes, the Roman world was NOT like ours), and if we then try to get a handle on the many and varied ramifications of death? That will be our goal in this class. We will attempt, from a number of different angles, to grasp death in the alien atmosphere of ancient Rome.

One thing, however, should perhaps be said right at the start. Since death is the ultimate limit of life, very much of the thinking and doing, which revolves around death, in one way or another implicates life. In short, the end often causes a human to reflect upon all that has preceded that liminal event. This fact will underlie much of our work this term.

Course Rationale:
This course will take several propositions for granted; some of these have been mentioned above.
(1) All human beings, whether they like it or not, will share the common experience of death.
(2) There is, however, no universally accepted approach to, or group of attitudes about, death.
(3) That said, there is one probable commonality among all humans with respect to the issues surrounding death, namely, that contemplative individuals, regardless of
when and/or where they live (or lived), will have given some thought to what death's implications for life might be.
(4) Moreover, since each person has only one shot at shaping the life she or he lives, it is probably a good idea to give a bit of thought to what we do with that opportunity – and it is probably best that we do so in advance of our ends.
(5) To the extent, then, that we (and now I mean all of us participating in this class) would like to think about our lives, and in particular, to do so in the context of our mortality, there surely can be no harm in undertaking this in a comparative fashion – i.e., by looking at others, and how they have grappled with the problems involved.
(6) To look at some group of people, whose ideas about death (and life) may be significantly different from one’s own, is very likely to be a richly eye-opening experience.
(7) Therefore, the investigation of death (and hence, life) among the ancient Romans, which we will undertake in this class, should be imagined against the background of this set of propositions. If this were a course in the natural sciences, then the Romans would be serving us as something akin to a control group.

Course Requirements:

1. Two Reaction Papers (30% of final grade)
Each of these papers should be 3 pages in length (with one inch margins, and 12pt. font, on 8 1/2 x 11 inch paper). Each of these papers will count as 15% of your final grade.

Reaction Paper 1 (Due February 16)
Having read Tolstoy and Porter, next listen to the song “The Pretender” by Jackson Browne [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQiXQUGbac0]. Using these three pieces of art as goads to thought, present your opinion as to what the purpose, or say, the goal of a human being’s life might be, can be, could be, should be. In other words, what are we (or, what are you) doing here, before death arrives?
The object with this paper is to start bringing ideas about life’s purpose into relief, so that when we come to think about the Roman world, we will have established already some parameters, or ideas, which can help to frame our discussion of Rome.

Reaction Paper 2 (Due March 2)
This paper is of an entirely different sort than was the first reaction paper. Now, do this. Pick one of the sections of William Harris’ article on child exposure, which particularly interests you (so: how common the practice was, or the reasons for exposing children, etc.). Then, analyze very carefully the way that Harris builds his argument in that section. What ancient source material can he use? How does he approach these ancient sources? How much reliable information can be got from these sources? How much speculation is involved? How does Harris handle the modern scholarship on the topic? How convincing are his arguments, in the end?
The object here is to understand, and then to describe briefly, how one of the best living historians of Roman antiquity goes about making a scholarly argument. For your own research papers, later in the semester, you should try to work like Harris does.
2. Two Research Papers (60 % of final grade)
Each of these papers should be about 7-8 pages in length (with one inch margins, and 12pt. font, on 8 1/2 x 11 inch paper). Each of these papers will count as 30% of your final grade.
For each of these papers, you should do the following. In consultation with me, you should select one of the topics, which you have read about in class. You should then read beyond what was assigned for class, and on the basis of this extra reading, you should write a research paper on the topic you have chosen. You may also, again, in consultation with me, pick some other topic to research and write on. In any case, you must discuss your paper with me before you begin working on it, so that we can be sure your topic is viable, and that you are approaching it correctly.
Research Paper 1 Due: Thursday, April 13
Research Paper 2 Due: Friday, May 12

3. Participation (10 % of final grade)
It is expected that you be in class every week, and that you participate actively in the class discussions. You should have done the assigned reading for each class, and you should come to class with some questions and/or comments about the reading. This will make the experience for everyone much richer.

Weekly Reading/Discussion Plan:

Jan. 26
Introduction
No reading assignment. On this day, we will discuss our topic in broad, general terms.

Feb. 2
Two Modern Deaths
We will discuss two modern fictional accounts of deaths, one from 19th century Russia, the other from mid-20th century America. The Russian protagonist is a man, the American a woman. Both grapple with the issues surrounding one’s own death, as it approaches and transpires. In particular, both characters look back, and question their own lives, when they are confronted with death. These two stories raise many of the issues, which will potentially concern us later in the course. Let’s start thinking about these issues now, by thinking about these two stories.
Read:
Leo Tolstoy, “The Death of Ivan Ilych” (1886)
Katherine Anne Porter, “The Jilting of Granny Weatherall” (1930)
https://docs.google.com/file/d/0Byq6h70zkproMWdoNmo3Z21YaUU/edit?pli=1

Feb. 9
Some Ancient (Philosophical) Attitudes Regarding Death
For some philosophers, sometimes, death has been a matter of inquiry. In particular, though, ancient Greek and Roman philosophers had ideas in this regard. We will attempt to get a sense of some of their attitudes about death. The ancient author, whom we will read, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, was a Roman aristocrat and senator who flourished in the mid-first century AD. He championed a school of philosophy called Stoic, and wrote a fair amount about the issue of death. He, in fact, would famously commit suicide.

Read:
Phillip Mitsis, “Philosophy and Its Classical Past” Daedalus. Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Spring 2016, pp. 59-67 (concentrate on pp. 63-65) [This is available electronically via Bobcat.]

Feb. 16 (Reaction Paper 1 Due)
What about Murder?
We will by now have seen that, at least among the ancient philosophers, there reigned a notion that death was not harmful, that it was nothing to be feared. But, how did the Roman ‘real world’ approach the matter? In particular, what if murder was not a crime? What if throwing away your newborn baby was, relatively speaking, a normal, or at least an acceptable, thing to do? What if a Roman father could put to death the members of his family, when he saw fit? In a world that tolerates, and even encourages, such behaviors, what shall we suppose that death meant to people? Is the philosophical attitude part and parcel of what we see here? That is, if death was so common (and so commonly accepted in contexts where we would not be at all so tolerant), was the overall Roman attitude that death just was of no particular consequence? There are, of course, social and political ramifications to all of this.

Read:
Judy E. Gaughan, Murder Was Not a Crime. Homicide and Power in the Roman Republic (Austin 2010) pp. 23-52 [This is available electronically via Bobcat.]
W.V. Harris, “Child-exposure in the Roman Empire,” Journal of Roman Studies 54 (1994) 1-22 [This is available on JSTOR.]

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1 For a good and recent overview, you may consult B. Bradley, F. Feldman, and J. Johansson, The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Death (Oxford 2013).
M. Golden, “Did the ancients care when their children died?” *Greece and Rome* 35 (1988) 152-163 [This is available on JSTOR.]

Feb. 23
And Suicide?
By now, we should be well into a world, which will be causing us to think hard about people’s relationships with death. So now, what if you (a Roman you) wanted to take your own life? What we find is that this was perfectly legitimate – assuming that the conditions and one’s intentions were ‘right.’ Where suicide is concerned, what we know best are the politicized self-inflicted deaths of numerous members of the aristocracy. We will concentrate on this particular aspect of Roman suicide.
Read:
Valerie M. Hope, *Roman Death. The Dying and the Dead in Ancient Rome* (London 2009) pp. 41-64 [See the Classes site for a copy of this.]
Catharine Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome* (New Haven & London 2007) pp. 113-143 [See the Classes site for a copy of this.]

March 2 (*Reaction Paper 2 due*)
Feeling Bad about Deaths
So, if a father could kill his children, even adult ones, and if parents, without restriction, might simply throw away their babies, if suicide was, under the right conditions, perfectly acceptable, what did such deaths mean to parents, relatives, friends, acquaintances, the overall community? In short, how much did death matter to those who had been close to the now-deceased person? This raises our next series of topics: grief, mourning, condolence.
Read:
Valerie M. Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome. A Sourcebook* (London & New York 2007) pp. 172-210 [This is available electronically via Bobcat.] There are not too many pages here; however, there is a great deal of food for thought in these various texts. So, read slowly, and carefully, thinking all the while.

March 9
The After Party
What happens to all the dead after they leave the world of the living? Are they just gone, forever, altogether? Or, what if there is an afterlife? What about ghosts? And then, there are all the wonderful things a living person can do with the dead, if the deceased only can be contacted, and brought back from the beyond. We will be dealing with topics nearly as scary as the spring break, for which you are about to depart.
Read:
March 16
No Class. Spring Break

March 23
Spectacular Deaths: Public Capital Punishments as Entertainment
We will start by seeing just how quickly and easily one might be condemned to
death in the Roman world (Pliny on the Christians). Next, we will see just how
unpleasant that death might be made, so as to keep the public happy and
entertained (The Martyrs of Lyons). And then, we look at the rationale(s) behind
punishment by death as fun.
Read:
The Martyrs of Lyons [See the Classes site for a copy of this.]
Kathleen Coleman, "Fatal Charades. Roman Executions Staged as Mythological
Enactments" *Journal of Roman Studies* 80 (1990) 44-73 [This is available on JSTOR]

March 30
Spectacular Deaths: Deathly Entertainment at Gladiatorial and Other Games
Then, there was the possibility of people meeting their deaths simply for the sake of
entertaining their fellows. These are not criminals, suffering punishment of any sort.
Those who die, in these cases, are simply and purely entertainers. Here, the
rationales were the aggrandizement of the sponsor, and fun and good cheer for the
audience. What shall we make of this? What made watching people killed so much
fun for the Romans?
Read:
Games* (Cambridge 2011) 230-286 [See the Classes site for a copy of this.]

April 6
Some other causes of death: sickness, hunger, crime, warfare, etc.
The ancient Roman world was, just generally speaking, a filthy and dangerous place.
Death lurked everywhere, always. This week, we will try to get some sense of that.
However, it is important to think about the everyday exposure to the threat of death
from multiple directions when we think altogether about an ancient population’s
reactions to these conditions.
Read:
Brent Shaw, “Seasons of Death. Aspects of Mortality in Imperial Rome” *Journal of
Roman Studies* 86 (1996) 100-138 [This is available on JSTOR.]
Walter Scheidel, “Germs for Rome.” In C. Edwards and G. Woolf, *Rome the Cosmopolis*
(Cambridge 2003) 158-176 [See the Classes site for a copy of this.]
Garrett Fagan, “Violence in Roman Social Relations.” In M. Peachin (ed.), *The Oxford
Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World* (Oxford 2011) 467-495 [This is
available electronically via Bobcat.]
Peter Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World. Responses to
Risk and Crisis* (Cambridge 1988) either Part I or Part II [This is available
electronically via Bobcat.]
April 13 *(Research Paper 1 Due)*
Preparation for death, and dying
One’s death in the Roman world was an important social event. First, it was necessary to prepare for the death by making numerous arrangements in one’s last will and testament. There was a whole culture of testament writing. We will consider this first. Then, the way that one died was extremely important. There were books written, whose subject was simply the ways in which various famous people had met their ends. The point is this: one’s death was considered to be a mirror of one’s life. A good death = a good life; and, vice versa.

Read:

April 20
The Funeral
After one’s death, especially for aristocrats, there was the funeral. Again, this was a momentous social occasion, with huge ramifications for the dead person, for that person’s family, and for the community as a whole. We will investigate Roman funerals this week.

Read:

April 27
Cemeteries
To have people die means that there will be corpses. They decompose. So, how was this natural phenomenon dealt with in ancient Rome? Where did the bodies of deceased Romans reside? This week, we will examine Roman cemeteries and burial practices.

We will, I hope, conduct class at a modern cemetery – the Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn. We will discuss the plans for this.

Read:

May 4
The normal person’s relationship with death – readings of some Roman epitaphs.

The Classics Department houses a collection of actual Roman burial monuments (tombstones). For the last day of class, we will get these out, read them, translate them, think about them. Moreover, in the Roman fashion of holding parties at the cemetery, so as to involve the deceased family members in family parties, we will have a party while reading these tombstones. Food and drink will be supplied. Thus, although the people, whose tombstones we will be reading, have been gone for about 2,000 years, perhaps they will notice our party, and join in, as best they can.
Research Paper 2 due by Friday, May 12.