

Death Before Dishonour!

Suicide of Christian Victims of Rape

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Abstract

Despite the veneration accorded to Lucretia, the young Roman aristocrat who committed suicide after she had been raped by the son of the last king of Rome, pagan women were not inclined to emulate her death. Evidence is lacking, also for an expectation on the part of their families or their wider society that the victim's death was an appropriate response to this crime.

It was, paradoxically, some Christian leaders who exhorted women to kill themselves after they had been raped, or, better still, to commit suicide rather than submit to rape. This is despite the fact that the same leaders forbade suicide for other reasons. Pagan society, on the other hand, regarded the decision to kill oneself as one that only the individual concerned was able to make. Neither suicide nor attempted suicide infringed Roman law.

St. Augustine was the first to develop a Christian theory of suicide and it was only with Augustine that the full implication of Christian morality on the topic became clear. He was sufficiently troubled by the expectation that a raped woman should commit suicide that he begins his argument against suicide with an admonition that rape victims who did not kill themselves should not be censured. He was opposed to suicide under almost all circumstances, but his view was by no means general amongst Christians at the time, although it was to prevail.

Keywords

Lucretia
rape
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pagan
Christian
St. Augustine