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John Cabot University

Department of History

Bachelor of Arts in History

Stoicism in Ancient Rome: Philosophical Attitudes Toward Death and Mortality

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Abstract

This paper will explore the fascinating and complex relationship between Roman values and Stoic philosophy during the late Roman Republic, and how Stoicism emerged as a saving philosophy for those struggling in the new regime by providing a moral and intellectual complement to the traditional Roman ethos of *mos maiorum*. Although Roman society and education expanded through military strength and ambition, political unrest arose during the final years of the Republic and eventually eroded their Republican ideals, leading to the establishment of emperors. In response to the fall of the Roman Republic, Stoic morality and teachings began to appeal to those Roman elites and intellectuals who were forced to grapple with the fall of Rome and the deteriorating moral landscape surrounding them. This study traces the assimilation of Stoicism into Roman thought, particularly through the writings and lives of Cicero, Cato the Younger, and later imperial figures who were influenced by Stoicism. Stoic philosophy, echoing traditional Roman virtue, offered an ethical perspective through which Romans could confront civic collapse and mortality, and reshaped responses to death, fate, and personal responsibility during a period of intense political and spiritual transformation.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, whose encouragement led me to pursue the liberal arts and strive for higher education.

Acknowledgements

Thank you so very much, Professor Emily Hurt, for your guidance and the best advice I could have asked for throughout this thesis.

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1. Introduction

From its humble beginnings as an Iron Age village in the 8th century, Rome would evolve into an epicenter of global power, intellectual exchange, and civic discipline. Central to Roman identity was the concept of *mos maiorum*, or the customs of the ancestors, which gave the Roman population a moral framework fundamental to their civilization. This moral compass emphasized seriousness, discipline, and civic duty, which was expected towards the Roman state and people, and placed above personal interests and desires. This moral framework allowed the establishment of a successful nation-state through hard work and communal organization. As a byproduct, these values created a society and culture that was particularly receptive and interested in certain philosophical traditions that echoed its core principles. Introduced through the cultural and intellectual exchanges from Rome's conquest of the Greek East, Stoicism resonated with certain Roman politicians, philosophers, and intellectuals seeking clarity amidst the political instability of the last decades of the Roman Republic. The Stoic tradition offered a guiding moral framework against imperial Roman rule, echoing the fading traditions of *mos maiorum* and the lost Roman Republic. It promoted the idea of accepting your fate when unavoidable, and for moral conduct and emotional resilience to be shown in the face of death, suffering, and immorality.

This paper investigates the convergence of Roman ancestral customs and Stoic philosophy during the Republic's decline, focusing on how Stoicism provided both a continuation of and a response to the moral traditions known in ancient Rome. Stoic ethics promoted acceptance of one's fate, resilience in the face of mortality, and, in extreme cases, the philosophical justification of suicide as a rational and honorable response to oppression or moral

compromise. The scholarly research I focus on examines the relationship between Stoicism and Roman values in this period. Jane Chaplin and Joanna Kenty help frame *mos maiorum* in literary and rhetorical contexts, showing us how Roman authors used ancestral values to either anchor and critique contemporary politics. Scholar Jonathan Barlow explores figures like Scipio Aemilianus within a broader engagement with Greek ethical traditions, and A. W. Lintott and T. N. Mitchell assess how philosophical ideals responded to moral and political crises in the late Republic. The two-part study of Miriam Griffin, “Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide”, is a foundational text in my research for understanding how Stoic doctrine shaped elite Roman views on suicide, and how the noble suicide became a form of protest against tyranny and moral decay. At the same time, Willy Evenepoels’ analysis of Seneca’s moral reasoning around suicide additionally helps to understand how it became a form of philosophical and political resistance, and Sophie Botros’ explanation of Stoic metaphysics and determinism clarifies how accepting death could be rationalized as a virtuous act. This study will ultimately build upon these insights to explore how Stoicism and Stoic attitudes toward death, fate, and political virtue was able to preserve and transform Rome’s traditional moral identity in the of the Republic.

2. Stoicism in Ancient Rome: Morality, Death, and the Fall of the Republic

Ancient Rome was a beacon of global power, strategic innovation, and cultural and intellectual exchange. The Roman civilization was established and maintained through a series of prominent virtues which respected ancestors passed down for centuries. The custom of the ancestors in Rome was referred to as *mos maiorum*, and it centered on discipline, loyalty, and civic duty towards the Roman state and people.¹ This deep-seated respect for the customs of their ancestors created a cultural foundation receptive to philosophical ideas that reinforced similar moral frameworks. Stoicism, a philosophy that originated in Athens, would be introduced to Roman society during the early 2nd century BCE through Greco-Roman socio-cultural integration. The emergence of Roman Stoicism would coincide with the fall of the Republic in 31 BC, marking a turbulent and dangerous time in Roman history and a changing intellectual tradition that would emerge in full force under the empire. Stoicism would rise out of the chaos as a guiding philosophy, offering consolation to those seeking reason during shifting and declining dynamics of government, power, and values. Stoic values provided logical explanations and reasons to be morally resilient in an indifferent world and created an ethical framework for navigating the uncertainties of fate.

The fall of the Roman Republic coincided with the rise of a generation of Roman elites, including politicians, generals, and philosophers, who were generally influenced by an influx of Greek philosophies that emerged from Roman conquests in the Mediterranean. These conquests,

¹ Kenty, Joanna. "Congenital Virtue: *Mos Maiorum* in Cicero's Orations." pp. 429; Matyszak, Philip. "Chapter 8: Rome." *The Edinburgh Companion to the History of Democracy: From Pre-History to Future Possibilities*, pp. 109.

particularly after the collapse of one of the most important Greek colonies in southern Italy in 272 BC, Tarentum, would leave Rome deeply affected by Greek culture.² Over the next two centuries, military victories, further conquest of Greek territory, and the subsequent cultural exchange exposed Romans to Greek beliefs, philosophies, and intellectual tradition. Following battles where the Greeks were defeated, Roman soldiers captured thousands of Greek prisoners, including philosophers, who were subsequently brought to Rome, and introduced various elements of Greek culture to the Romans, furthering the relationship between the two ancient civilizations.³ Specific figures like Panaetius and Posidonius also helped introduce Stoicism to Rome. Still, it was an overall combination of cultural exchange through military expansion, which would fully immerse Roman society in rising philosophical movements such as Stoicism.

The Greek philosopher Zeno is credited with creating the philosophy of the Stoa in the 3rd century BCE. Still, it would not influence Roman society and political philosophies until around the 2nd century BCE. As traditional Roman education was based on *mos maiorum*, it aimed at producing a specific type of character based on *gravitas* more than evolving into intellectual achievement.⁴ The influx of Greek philosophy would change this dynamic, as it affected the upper elite class and began to influence political thought and education in Rome. With its emphasis on reason, virtue, and living by nature, Stoicism promoted truths that resonated with many Romans, especially during the social instability of the late Republic. Panaetius of Rhodes and Posidonius were key figures in promoting and teaching Stoicism in Rome. Panaetius, for example, was a Stoic philosopher from Greece, a member of the Scipionic Circle, and helped bridge Greek thought and Roman political life through promoting Stoicism in

² Wedeck, Harry E. "The Roman Attitude toward Foreign Influence, Particularly toward the Greek Influence during the Republic." pp. 195.

³ Griffin. "Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide: I." pp. 67.

⁴ Eyre, J. J. "Roman Education in the Late Republic and Early Empire." pp. 48.

political affairs and civic duty, ultimately greatly influencing Roman politicians in the second century BC.⁵ Stoicism would continue spreading among the Roman population during and after the fall of the Republic, reshaping and expanding perceptions of mortality and the significance of life and death. Greek philosophy, particularly Stoicism, tried to replace the fear of the afterlife with the belief that death is a natural event to be accepted rather than resisted. Stoicism appealed to Roman citizens because core Stoic values closely mirrored those of pre-imperial Rome, and the ancestors' customs were respected, including virtue, civic duty, and undying loyalty to the Roman state. “The Romans were, in many respects, an extraordinarily conservative people [and] had a deep pride in their past and reverence for the *mos maiorum*,” says historian T.N. Mitchell.

Livy, a Roman historian writing during the reign of Augustus, illustrates how *mos maiorum*—the ancestral customs and moral traditions of Rome—functioned as a guiding framework for Roman identity and civic life. Though not a Stoic philosopher himself, Livy’s works reflect the values that Stoicism would later echo, particularly the ideals of duty, discipline, and virtue.⁶ Through the use of *exempla*, which describes heroic narratives meant to serve as moral instruction, Livy idealizes figures such as Romulus, portraying him as a just and courageous founder who “laid the foundations of the city in such a way that it would endure for all time.” (Liv. 4). Rather than offering a strictly factual account, Livy’s emphasis on character and virtue reinforces the cultural importance of *mos maiorum*. These deeply ingrained Roman values would later resonate with Stoic philosophy as it was introduced and adapted into Roman society. Cicero, a prominent figure of the first century BC, was one of these Roman statesmen influenced by Panaetius’ efforts, as *De Officiis* would be directly inspired by his ideas. He belonged to an earlier generation shaped by the final years of the Republic and the growing

⁵ Griffin. pp. 196.

⁶ Stem, Rex. “The Exemplary Lessons of Livy’s Romulus.” pp. 435–71

influence of Greek philosophy. He played a central role in translating Stoic concepts into Latin which made them broadly accessible to the Roman population.⁷ His adaptation of Stoic ideas brought Greek philosophy into Roman political and intellectual life and aligned them with traditional Republican virtues, such as those emphasized by Livy. Cicero's writings helped frame Stoicism as a philosophy compatible with Roman ideals, further embedding it in the Roman educational system and public discourse.

Cicero actively engaged with Stoicism in his political rhetoric and used *mos maiorum* as the foundation of his defense of the Republic and advocacy for a Senate-led governance. Cicero argued for the preservation of the Roman Republic, traditional aristocratic governance, and the rule of law, and drew upon the ancient Roman values of *mos maiorum* to convince the general populace of the legitimacy of Senate-led rule and to rally support against perceived threats to Republican stability, such as the rise of autocratic leaders. "All nations can bear slavery [but] our city cannot," he wrote, "for no other reason than that those nations run from labor and pain, able to bear anything in order not to have them, while we have been raised and inured by our ancestors to connect all our plans and deeds to honor and to virtue. The recovery of freedom is so glorious that in reclaiming freedom, not even death should be evaded," (*Philippics*, 10.20). In this quote, Cicero touches on several key values within the idea of *mos maiorum*, including *pietas* (devotion to family, gods, and the state), *gravitas* (the sense of seriousness and responsibility), and *virtus* (courage and excellence), which were fundamental building blocks for the authority of the Senate and Republican values especially. Loyalty to the state and the traditions that had built it were basic beliefs shared by Republicans and naturally appealed to Roman identity.

⁷ Eyre, J. J. "Roman Education in the Late Republic and Early Empire." pp. 47–59; Thorsteinsson. pp. 13.

Joanna Kenty emphasizes this deep connection between personal sacrifice and the values of *mos maiorum* with the observation that Cicero presents honor and virtue as inherent traits passed down through Roman lineage. “Honor and virtue,” writes Kenty, “are said by Cicero to be encoded in the Romans’ cultural DNA,” collectively strengthened through Roman lineage and tradition. Kenty further explains how Cicero, a prime example of traditional Roman Republicanism, emphasizes within many of his writings the importance of upholding Rome’s ancient values during a time of political turmoil, and persuading the Roman peoples of his position through creating “a sense of belonging to a group,” and “a tribalist sense of Rome’s superior standing concerning the rest of the world.”⁸ While the intellectual elite had their motives for employing traditionalist sentiments on virtue, honor, and civic duty, we can recognize how Cicero employs *mos maiorum* in his arguments against dictatorship to uphold a sense of honorable and ethical leadership. This moral framework would be the foundation on which Stoicism took hold in the minds of Roman citizens who faced an increasing political crisis during the Roman Civil Wars.

The integration of Stoicism into Roman society not only reinforced traditional Roman virtues but also reinvented perspectives on mortality, ethics, and the role of the individual within the state. Stoicism would become “so well established in the city as early as the 1st century BCE, that by the turn of the century, it was the most favoured philosophical school in Rome.”⁹ Its moral framework gave both elites and ordinary citizens a sense of clarity and reassurance in uncertain times. In many ways, Stoic values echoed the spirit of *mos maiorum*, reintroducing traditional ideals through a new philosophical lens and serving as a moral guide during the Republic’s decline. With its focus on reason, virtue, and accepting one’s fate, Stoicism resonated

⁸ Kenty, Joanna. “Congenital Virtue: *Mos Maiorum* in Cicero’s Orations.” *The Classical Journal*, pp. 455.

⁹ Thorsteinsson, Runar. *Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism*. pp. 13.

and connected with Roman identity, influencing the actions and beliefs of some of Rome's most key leaders and intellectuals. While the philosophy aligned with key elements of *mos maiorum*, it also introduced broader, more universal ideals, such as the inherent dignity of the individual and personal responsibility, that both challenged and reinforced certain aspects of Rome's hierarchical structure.

The philosophical structure of Stoicism is mainly concerned with ethics (though Stoicism also contains the branches of metaphysics and logic), and raises the question: "What should be the character of human conduct in the face of the trials and torments that buffet one throughout life?"¹⁰ Early Roman Stoics were mainly concerned with the ethical branch of Stoicism, especially near the turn of the millennium, after the pillars of Roman Republicanism had already crumbled.¹¹ One major contributing factor to the Fall of the Republic was the "progressive moral decline" that took place in the social and political life in Rome, reflecting a general abandonment of moral tradition and *mos maiorum*, and a rising inclination towards corruption and self-interest.¹² This moral decay is what many ancient historians place as the cause of the collapse of Roman Republicanism.¹³ Interestingly, this would be the era when Stoicism rose in opposition to corruption, offering the reward of self-assurance to anyone willing to choose moral superiority over selfish motives.¹⁴

Stoicism was particularly intriguing to those Romans who remembered the Republic's traditional framework of virtues. Stoicism offered similar moral guidance that emphasized moral integrity and personal duty. Still, it also reflected traditional Roman values while providing a new, rational approach to the challenges of a changing society. However, it is essential to note

¹⁰ Sherman, Robert R. "Stoicism: The Education of Man." pp. 216.

¹¹ Thorsteinsson. pp. 15.

¹² Mitchell, T. N. "Cicero on the Moral Crisis of the Late Republic." pp. 25.

¹³ Lintott, A. W. "Imperial Expansion and Moral Decline in the Roman Republic." pp. 626–38.

¹⁴ Sherman. pp. 216.

that it was not just traditional Roman virtue aligning with Stoic ethics that made Stoicism a popular philosophy in Rome, but also its emphasis on the equality of man based on the idea that all men have reason.¹⁵ This egalitarian outlook would later influence imperial policies, as seen in the second-century legislation under emperors like Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius, which extended aid to the poor, the sick, infants, those affected by famine, and even enslaved people.¹⁶ While the disposition of each emperor often shaped the overall socio-political environment under their rule, the growing popularity of Stoicism reflected a deeper philosophical trend that existed within the Roman population. Its blend of traditional values with a universal message of justice and personal responsibility was felt deeply with a population that was increasingly disillusioned by political instability and moral decline. In addressing the inescapable realities of mortality, suffering, and ethical decay, Stoicism offered a philosophy of endurance and meaningful moral clarity.

Mortality and death were ever-present realities in the ancient world. Ancient Romans lived when life expectancy was often cut short by the hardships these civilizations had to contend with almost daily, such as disease, malnutrition, war, and violence. The prevalence of mortality forced ancient civilizations to confront the fragility of human existence. Historical and archeological research has revealed just how detrimental disease, war, and limited medical advancements were contributing to high mortality rates.¹⁷ The rates of ancient mortality would shape not only individual perspectives on death, but also broader cultural and philosophical attitudes toward the end of life that were evident in Roman culture, religion, and values. Often, adopting complex religious and philosophical belief structures was a common to soothing the mind concerning questions on the meaning of life and death. Typical Roman responses to death

¹⁵ Thorsteinsson. pp. 19

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Pilkington, Nathan. "Growing Up Roman: Infant Mortality and Reproductive Development." pp. 17-23

or uncertainty included religious rituals, such as offerings to the gods, altars and shrines, or rites for the dead. Traditionally, rituals and offerings were aimed at securing the god's favour and performed in the hope that they might provide mercy and assurance.¹⁸

Many Romans continued to uphold traditional religious practices, especially funerary customs, even as moral decay seen in Rome during the late Republic began to erode certain traditions, such as the ethical framework provided by the traditional *mos maiorum*. Stoicism's influence was also partially because it aligned with the Roman concept of *religio*, which prioritizes the relationship between what is best for the community and the correct performance of religious rituals.¹⁹ This connection emphasized *pietas*, or duty, a central principle in Stoicism. It also involved not just devotion to the gods but also maintaining correct social relationships with family and community, and scholars have often connected how *religio* and *pietas* shaped Roman public religious life and civic duty.²⁰ Additionally, specific philosophical ideas of the time, such as those offered by Stoicism or Epicureanism, began to influence the Roman population.²¹ Roman mythology and religious rituals served as symbolic figures and narratives, including heroic and local legends, as with Cato the Younger. Myths were widely disseminated in society via literature and especially visual arts, which helped establish a shared cultural understanding.²²

Despite the traditions and mythology that continued to be popular among many Romans at the time, it is evident that the introduction of Stoicism offered new perspectives on mortality through appeals to traditional Roman morality. Cicero observed this shift in his *Tusculan Disputations*, where he describes how the Roman elite and intellectual circles began to fear death

¹⁸ Petersen, Lauren Hackworth. "Introduction: People, Places, and Rituals In The Religions of Rome." pp. 3–11.

¹⁹ de Paiva Bondioli, Nelson. "Roman Religion in the Time of Augustus." pp. 50–60.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² de Paiva Bondioli, Nelson. "Roman Religion in the Time of Augustus." pp. 49–63

less than prior. He describes his as due to the rise in “the study of philosophy, and the mind, now freed from superstition, can embrace a rational understanding of the afterlife” (*Tusculan Disputations* 1.40). Cicero, an important influence in Roman Stoicism, argued that freeing the mind from superstition allowed a more virtuous response to mortality. Similarly, a later Roman philosopher, Pliny the Elder, praised death as nature’s “greatest gift” to man because it equates to freedom, or releasing of the soul from earthly pain, echoing the Stoic view of death as a release from suffering, free from fears of the “underworld” or divine judgment.²³ Stoicism's influence and its emphasis on reason were not only particular to the Roman elite. As one scholar notes, “it may be expected that Stoic influences reached lower classes as well, whether directly or indirectly, as Stoic teachers and spokesmen were found not only in the Roman court and public lecture rooms but also at street corners.”²⁴ Romans, like many ancient civilizations, “had an extraordinarily well-developed oral tradition,” which points to the idea that popular philosophies promoted by leading political figures of the time would have been spread quite quickly to the ordinary citizen by word of mouth.²⁵ Given that many prominent political figures in Rome openly endorsed Stoicism and echoed similar values, its principles likely spread rapidly among the ordinary citizens.

Stoicism provided a rational approach to death, as its rejection of superstitions and emphasis on acting through virtue reframed mortality as a natural part of the cosmic order. Its introduction, therefore, countered the general fear of death and the gods of the underworld through providing an individualistic response to death, and explaining how one controls one's fate and moral integrity even in the face of loss or death. Stoicism emphasized its followers to accept mortality as a fundamental aspect of human life and push away the fear of death through

²³ Griffin, Miriam. “Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide: II.” pp. 193.

²⁴ Thorsteinsson, Runar. “Chapter 1: Introduction to Roman Stoicism” pp. 13.

²⁵ Matyszak, Philip. “Rome.” pp. 110.

logical rationale. Prioritizing morality and the personal freedoms allowed to individuals allowed the Stoics to provide a moral framework in which people could deal with the chaos of life. The Stoic philosophy of compatibilism suggested that while fate was inevitable, how one responded to it remained within their control.²⁶ The Stoic philosopher Chrysippus, a follower of Zeno, is often quoted as saying that we must either accept fate or be dragged along by it, an idea that Cicero reiterates in *De Fato*. A similar notion appears in Epictetus' *Discourses* (2.5): "Things themselves (materials) are indifferent; but the use of them is not indifferent... Externals are not in my power: will is in my power." This idea follows the Stoic belief that while fate and everything else in the universe are out of human control, it remains that every individual has rational agency, and this should not be taken for granted as it provides the only natural allowance for personal autonomy.

The emphasis on personal agency and rational control also contributed to a new understanding of death as not something to be feared. Instead, it promoted the idea that reality had to be faced with dignity, courage, and resilience, as reflected in Roman writing from the first century BCE onwards. This revelation would ultimately shift individual and societal attitudes toward death in the late Roman Republic. A life of virtue and honor was therefore of principal importance. "Not for ourselves alone are we born; our country, our friends, have a share in us," reflecting the Stoic ideal "To achieve happiness man must live in harmony with nature characterized by reason and in accordance with his own human nature also characterized by reason; in other words, man must live according to reason." That living virtuously is not only an individual pursuit but also a duty to one's society and the greater good.²⁷ Therefore, the

²⁶ Bobzien, Susanne. "Stoic Conceptions of Freedom and Their Relation to Ethics." pp. 83; Botros, Sophie. "Freedom, Causality, Fatalism and Early Stoic Philosophy." pp. 274–304.

²⁷ Cicero. *On Duties*. Section 1.22.

fulfillment of a good life and the very purpose of existence must inevitably be framed by the certainty of death.

Ultimately, Stoicism would be extremely valuable as a political movement, as “in a Roman context, [belief] and politics cannot be separated from each other since they were inextricably linked in ancient Roman thought.”²⁸ The Stoic belief in the equality of all rational beings and the individual's moral autonomy influenced legal and social developments, particularly under later emperors. At the same time, the rejection of superstition coincided with a general decline in conservative republican Roman values, as morality was being challenged by corruption and the centralization of power during the fall of the Republic. The Stoic focus on reason reshaped how Romans thought about death. Rather than something to be feared, death came to be seen as a natural and inevitable part of life—and at times, even a principled choice in the face of corruption at the highest levels of power. Stoicism’s influence wasn’t limited to academic circles; its ideas gradually took root across Roman society, shaping cultural attitudes and everyday values. The fact that Stoic teachings continued to resonate in later philosophical traditions speaks to the deep and lasting mark they left on Rome’s intellectual and moral world, and the fundamental alignment between *mos maiorum* and Stoicism.

²⁸ Petersen. “Introduction: People, Places, and Rituals in the Religions of Rome.” pp. 9

3. Roman Stoicism, the Noble Suicide, and Virtue in the Face of Death

We established earlier how much Roman thought, tradition, and belief were deeply influenced by the Greeks. This legacy became stronger as Roman intellectuals adopted and promoted the works of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and other Hellenic philosophers during the late Republic. In contrast, early Roman society, particularly during the monarchy and early Republic, was more practical and conservative, emphasizing traditional Roman virtues and religious perspectives over abstract philosophies.²⁹ Greco-Roman society held a religious and conservative outlook, which led them to view suicide with suspicion by emphasizing the moral and spiritual consequences that could occur when death was premature. In primitive and early Roman cultures, religious fear led many to believe that taking one's own life would leave the soul restless and unable to find peace in the underworld, and could result in the denial of ordinary burial rights.³⁰ However, by the historical period, suicide was described to take place in Roman society, seen with acts such as *devotio* or those deaths ordered by the state. Toleration was provided through various ideologies which rose in popularity, such as in the case of Stoicism and other philosophies which challenged traditional fears and superstitions. Both Roman society and Greek philosophy gave reasoned alternatives or differentiating narratives to the issue and introduced a new perspective on suicide, especially in the case of maintain virtue and duty which were topics of great importance in the face of corruptions. The idea of 'dying in the name of

²⁹ Eyre, J. J. "Roman Education in the Late Republic and Early Empire." pp. 48.

³⁰ Griffin. "Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide: II". pp 192.

virtue' developed from this concept of the noble suicide, and became closely entwined with Roman Stoicism during the final years of the Republic.

For the Romans, suicide was a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon, with social, cultural, and religious implications. The decision was not uncommon and emerged as a severe course of action if the circumstances called for it. Instances of suicide by order of the state was seen in instances of dire situations, such as how the Greek historian Strabo described a practice of euthanasia in ancient Ceos, where at one point people over the age of 60 were ordered to end their lives to preserve the community's resources.³¹ The socio-cultural transmissions between the Ancient Romans and Greeks allowed such practices and civil philosophies to influence Roman thought, particularly regarding attitudes toward death and the individual's role within the community. If the action aligned with traditional values, suicide was generally acceptable, as historian Miriam Griffin describes how it "was already widely tolerated in Rome in the third and early second century BC, before the heyday of philosophical influence."³² The last part of this quote is essential because Stoicism would cement the noble suicide as a defining feature in Ancient Rome.

Rome traditionally emphasized order and loyalty to the state in many aspects of life, such as personal conduct, and certain traditions praised those citizens who died in the name of Rome. In certain instances, such as the act of *devotio*, loyalty to Rome and Roman values manifested through self-sacrifice, with death providing a means to sacrifice oneself for the greater good of Rome. *Devotio* was understood as either a direct personal sacrifice to the gods and often occurred in situations including battle, or as a dedication to the Roman state's greater good, such as maintaining moral integrity. This ritual typically involved a Roman citizen, usually a soldier

³¹ Griffin. "Philosophy, Cato, and Suicide I." pp. 192.

³² Griffin. "Philosophy, Cato, and Suicide: I." pp. 68.

or general, who would dedicate their life through self-sacrifice to appease the gods and ensure victory for Rome. While Livy records early instances of *devotio*, he also recounts other forms of noble suicide, such as the story of Lucretia. The legend of claims that Lucretia was a noblewoman renowned for her virtue until the son of the last Roman king, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, raped her. After being devastated by the assault, Lucretia summoned her father and husband, who swore oaths of vengeance against the Tarquins, before stabbing herself to death. Her death sparked a rebellion that led to the Roman monarchy's overthrow and the establishment of the Roman Republic.

While some essential suicides in Roman history were out of despair or anguish, there was a critical tradition called *devotio*, which was seen as a solemn ritual in which a general or citizen invokes the gods by deliberately sacrificing their life to uphold the dignity of the Roman state.³³ A true example of *devotio* is seen with the two Roman consuls named Decius Mus, who fulfilled their family legacy of willingly devoting their lives for the greater good of the Roman state. The act represented the ultimate expression of *pietas* (duty and devotion). It was deeply tied to Roman values, symbolizing a willingness to put the needs of the state above personal survival. Livy writes, “the Romans... freed from all religious fears, pressed forward as though the signal was then first given and commenced a great battle,” suggesting that the act of *devotio* seen through their leader gave them the courage to ultimately win the war by believing the gods were on their side.³⁴ In this way, the traditional Roman values of personal heroism and civic duty were expressed through the act of *devotio*, distinguishing it from a cowardly act of suicide. Instead, *devotio* was perceived as a noble form of self-sacrifice, a concept later developed through late Republican Stoicism and under Imperial Rome. The ideal of *devotio* also aligns with Stoic values

³³ Versnel. “Two Types of Roman Devotio.” pp. 365–410.

³⁴ Livy. *The History of Rome*. Book 8, Chapter 9.13.

seen in Rome, where death, whether voluntary or ordered, could be seen as a rational choice for the greater good or to maintain moral integrity and the well-being of the state.³⁵

By the late second century BCE, capital punishment in the form of suicide had become morally acceptable for upper-class, well-educated defendants, “to the extent of being preferred to execution.”³⁶ The noble Roman suicide often reflected a preference for avoiding the dishonor of public humiliation, political disgrace, or execution, while simultaneously sparing the state officials from the psychological burden of carrying out an execution, especially if the subject was a formal acquaintance.³⁷ This preference is seen in the case of Scipio Aemilianus, the celebrated general who oversaw the destruction of Carthage but whose mysterious death in 129 BCE was widely interpreted as a ‘noble’ suicide, to avoid political humiliation after his counter-populist reforms put him at odds with a growing faction in Roman politics. However, Scipio’s death must also be considered in the intellectual context of his time, as Roman Stoics sometimes had varying accounts on acceptable circumstances regarding suicide. Scipio was the center figure of the “Scipionic Circle,” a group of philosophers, poets, and statesmen deeply engaged with Greek thought and literature. This group, often mentioned in Cicero’s later philosophic dialogues, included the Stoic philosopher Panaetius, sometimes considered the “founder” of Roman Stoicism. Unlike later Roman Stoics, Panaetius was relatively cautious when endorsing suicide as a moral duty. He argued that suicide should only be considered under extreme circumstances and not as an impulsive decision from misfortune (Cicero, *De Officiis*, 1.90, 3.12). Whether Scipio’s death was genuinely voluntary or politically motivated remains debated, but it

³⁵ Griffin, Miriam. “Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide.” pp.192.

³⁶ Scullard. “Scipio Aemilianus and Roman Politics.” pp. 59–74

³⁷ Griffin. “Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide: II.” pp. 193.

showcases the differing perceptions of suicide within the Roman elite, as a means of self-preservation and as a response to political failure.³⁸

This evolving perception of suicide among Rome's elite did not develop in isolation but rather in contrast to other philosophical traditions that took a more restrictive stance on self-inflicted death. The Epicureans, Platonists, and Aristotelians were generally opposed to suicide, but it was acceptable under certain circumstances. Some Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle (d. 322 BCE), argued that "death [should not be] feared, for it is either a natural event or a voluntary act. If it is a natural event, it cannot be avoided; if it is a voluntary act, then it can be controlled by our reason."³⁹ However, Aristotle is less inclined to accept the idea of suicide, saying in *Nicomachean Ethics* that suicide is unjust when it harms the community or violates one's duties to others, that taking one's life without regard for these obligations can be an act of cowardice or selfishness rather than virtue. While he did not encourage fear of death, his philosophy emphasized a balanced and virtuous life where death should come at the right time, echoing the traditional Greco-Roman perspective on mortality.

Platonists shared a similar view, as Plato stated, "for a man to die at the right time is the most important thing, and the right time is when the soul is released from the body, free from the passions and fully in tune with reason." (Plato, *Phaedo*, 64c.) In the *Phaedo*, the Greek philosopher Socrates was sentenced to death by drinking hemlock due to his trial in Athens. He chose to accept the punishment rather than flee or kill himself beforehand, demonstrating his commitment to Athenian law and principles. Socrates ultimately argues "that while any man devoted to philosophy must wish to die to free the soul from the flesh, he ought not to kill himself and desert the earthly service to which god has assigned him - unless the god sends some

³⁸ Barlow, Jonathan. "Scipio Aemilianus and Greek Ethics." pp.

³⁹ Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Book III, Chapter 5.

necessity upon him,” and overall expressed the idea that suicide is unfavorable under most conditions.⁴⁰ Despite this, Socrates was a model of integrity and moral duty to many ancient inhabitants, as his story became known to the Greco-Roman people as facing death with dignity in the face of injustice and oppression by the state. Socrates’ acceptance of the state’s demands demonstrates his commitment to the philosophical principle that one must adhere to justice and fulfill social obligations, even at the cost of personal sacrifice.

Both the Stoics and the Cynics maintained that “life is neither good nor evil, but only a place for good and evil,” highlighting that the moral quality of one’s actions, rather than the duration of life, determines its value (Seneca, *Epistles* 70.4). Stoicism in general reflected the Socratic idea that reason is divine calling, and if life cannot exist according to reason, then suicide is acceptable.⁴¹ Cynics, “who put much emphasis on individual freedom,” shared a similar outlook as the Stoics and believed that “suicide [was] permitted in all cases where a reasonable life has become impossible.”⁴² Ancient Stoics also accepted suicide under certain circumstances when it was deemed necessary for the greater good, particularly in upholding virtue and honor. However, it must be said that the Stoics emphasized careful deliberation and warned against impulsive decisions driven by emotions, as “suicide for emotional reasons is prohibited.”⁴³ In this regard, Stoicism held a similar view to suicide as the general philosophical trends between Plato and the late Republic.

The Stoic emphasis on rational self-control, personal dignity, and accepting fate provided a framework for understanding the actions of individuals who choose death over suffering or dishonor, whether voluntarily or at the state’s command. Reasonableness is the overarching

⁴⁰ Griffin, Miriam. “Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide: I.” pp. 70.

⁴¹ Griffin, Miriam. “Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide: I.” pp. 72.

⁴² Evenepoel. “The Philosopher Seneca on Suicide.” pp. 220.

⁴³ Ibid.

virtue Stoic philosophers argue is the most critical to achieving the ‘good life’; overall happiness depends on one’s fear of death and therefore should not be feared. Stoics were not highly concerned with what happens after death but were more worried about what one can control when alive. The creator of Stoicism, Zeno, took his own life during old age after he fell and broke his toe, as it is assumed that he took the incident as a divine sign. However, as mentioned prior, the Stoics specified that self-killing was only permissible in certain cases, such as those “cases of giving one’s life for one’s country or friends, to avoid shameful actions under a tyrant, to escape severe illness or intolerable pain, or extreme poverty,” and strictly argued against suicide motivated by emotional distress.⁴⁴ Despite different perspectives on the issue, most often the traditional Greek schools of philosophy argue that suicide had to be an exception under certain circumstances, and not a norm.

One of the most famous Roman Stoics was Cato the Younger, who lived during the fall of the Republic, and took his own life in 46 BC to escape and defy the rule of Julius Caesar. Cato was a devoted Stoic, following Stoicism in his everyday life, as Plutarch and Lucan describe in commemoration of him. In the *Life of Cato the Younger*, Plutarch describes how Cato "showed himself superior to all those pleasures which overcome the masses, and even to many of those which conquer the few." (44.3) Lucan, an imperial Roman poet, describes how Cato proved himself to embody Stoic values by both separating himself from the regular vices of humanity, and setting an example for those who followed him. Cato was the ultimate Stoic martyr, who sacrificed his life out of unwavering devotion to the Republic. “Cato,” he writes, “now led his gasping soldiers on foot, carrying his javelin in his hand, issuing no orders, showing them how to endure hardship.”⁴⁵ Despite losing against Caesar, Lucan suggests Cato won in other ways, as he

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Lucan. *The Civil War*. Book IX:587-618.

says, “If true merit accrues great honour, and naked virtue is separate from success, whatever we praise regarding our ancestors, mere Fortune granted.”⁴⁶ Cato opposed living under Caesar’s rule, which went against the Stoic call against tyranny, and he saw the rising imperial state as morally corrupt and contrary to Roman Republican ideals.

Cato ultimately takes his life in the name of the Republic, and his death was not only politically defiant but also deeply philosophical. He was given an ultimatum by Caesar to bend the knee, but “ declared that he was unwilling to be pardoned by Caesar because that would imply legal recognition of Caesar's position as tyrant through which he had acquired the power to save.”⁴⁷ Before his death, Plutarch describes how Cato read Plato's *Phaedo* before dying, in an attempt to emulate the legendary death of Socrates, who was an inspiration for many philosophically motivated suicides seen in Rome. Stoicism, particularly as articulated by philosophers like Seneca and Epictetus, emphasizes the importance of living by nature and virtue, which means every action or decision a person makes should be taken according to reason. One of the fundamental Stoic beliefs is that individuals must act in ways that preserve their moral integrity, regardless of external circumstances. As a devout Stoic, Cato was unable to give Ceasar the power of justification that would be implied if he bent the knee and therefore chose death as his final act of free will.

For Stoics, tyranny, whether as an unjust ruler or oppressive rule, represents a distortion of nature and a violation of reason, which is the only aspect of humanity that distinguishes them from other creatures.⁴⁸ In this sense, Stoicism strongly opposes any form of tyranny, as it forces individuals to act contrary to their rational nature and moral duty. Under Caesar, Cato believed life to be unlivable according to Stoic virtue and the civic duty ingrained in Roman tradition. By

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷ Griffin, Miriam. “Philosophy, Cato, and Suicide II.” pp. 194.

⁴⁸ Sherman, Robert R. “Stoicism: The Education of Man.” pp. 215–23.

taking his own life, Cato preserved his moral integrity and became a Stoic martyr, demonstrating that virtue and wisdom held more significant value than life. Although his anger and lack of composure in his final moments may have strayed from Stoic ideals of rationality and equanimity, his ultimate motivation—to resist the domination of a tyrant—remains aligned with Stoic principles of moral integrity and resistance to injustice.⁴⁹

Suetonius, a historian during the early 2nd century CE, wrote that “Caesar was greatly distressed at the death of Cato, whose courage and principles he had always admired, though he opposed them politically.”⁵⁰ Caesar was particularly sensitive to Cato’s death as it represented a superior, moral challenge to his authority, which Caesar could not allow. He criticized the suicides that happened during his rise to power, and publicly portrayed them as gruesome, weak, and pathetic. Cato's unwavering commitment to his principles, to the extent of choosing death over submission, underscored the moral gap between Caesar’s pragmatic pursuit of power and Cato’s idealistic adherence to Republican virtue. Cato’s death was a blow to Julius Caesar’s power, as the situation favored the Stoic senators and highlighted the fragility of Caesar’s regime from a logical and democratic standpoint. Cato's death would influence how others viewed Caesar's consolidation of power, and emulations of the act would be seen through other notable noble suicides throughout imperial Rome.

Cicero praises Cato as the last true defender of the Republic and views his suicide as an act of supreme virtue: “Cato took flight from life as from a prison which was no longer his [and] he sought the liberty that could not exist under Caesar” (*Pro Cato*, 58). His words reflect that in his defeat; Cato gave up his life instead of allowing his beliefs to die with the Republic. When he saw this, Caesar responded with a rhetorical assault to discredit Cato’s message, summarized by

⁴⁹ Griffin, Miriam. “Philosophy, Cato, and Suicide II.” pp. 196.

⁵⁰ Suetonius. *The Twelve Caesars*, “Julius Caesar,” 82.

later authors such as Plutarch and Suetonius in the *Anti-Cato*. Still, he showcased Caesar's unease over how Cato's death had been enshrined as the heroic example of resistance to tyranny. Despite his attempts, Caesar lost power and was murdered, but he furthered Cato's message after the total collapse of the Republic. This countermove conversely fixed Cato's status as a martyr for liberty. It extended his legacy in the Roman socio-political sphere, inspiring later philosophers and political figures as Stoic icons, such as Seneca and Epictetus. As a result, Stoicism would immerse further into the moral philosophies of early imperial Romans regarding death, honor, and suicide, and many would adopt the idea of a virtue-coded, rationalistic perspective of traditional Rome after the fundamental changes that took place after the fall of the Republic and the rise of the Empire.

4. The Influence of the Stoic Noble Suicide in Early Imperial Rome

In Imperial Rome, Cato's suicide was seen by many as the ultimate act of Stoic virtue, and it inspired praise from those Roman elites who mourned the lost Republican values that had fallen under the weight of dictatorship. Certain influential statesmen under the Roman Empire viewed Cato's death as a defiant and virtuous stand against Caesar's rule, challenging the validity of emperors and their occasional immorality. Modelled after Cato's perceived heroism and legend that followed him, a philosophical movement began under the Roman Empire which prioritized the moral authority of choosing death over dishonor and, even more, resistance to tyranny. A Stoic philosophical overtone and political influence were common features of many Roman suicides.⁵¹ It was also interpreted as a powerful symbol of resistance to Caesar's authoritarian rule, which inspired many others who similarly wanted to approach death symbolically in the hope of challenging the justification of immorality and cruelty.

As many aspects of Roman identity, such as ideologies, social dynamics, and culture, still echoed the traditional moral framework of *mos maiorum*, many Romans saw Cato as a martyr for the cause of liberty and republicanism. This was true Cato's aim, as Plutarch describes how Cato died "in the most honorable manner possible, so that even in his death, he might serve as an example to his fellow citizens." (*Life of Cato the Younger*, 73.6). His suicide would inspire emulation from prominent Romans who lived under the empire, in the hopes of defying tyranny and oppression in the most definitive way they knew. According to Miriam Griffin, the noble

⁵¹ Griffin, Miriam. "Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide: 1." pp. 66.

suicide resonated deeply within the Roman imagination, influencing not only the political elite but also setting a cultural identity for those who believed that a life devoid of virtue and reason, as in Cato's case of literal and moral defeat, was no longer worth living.⁵² Roman Stoicism itself was a flexible philosophy in itself, and so it easily applied to many people who saw themselves as a martyr for a cause. While the Stoics could urge you to remember that virtue and living in accordance with nature was the true goal of life, they were open-minded about what that meant in actual practice, as the Stoics understood human frailty and acknowledged that the right course of action was not always obvious, especially under oppression or tyranny.⁵³ In this way, Stoic philosophers utilized *exempla* to guide individuals and set a standard of moral obligations. Tacitus, a Roman historian, employed similar tactics in his writing, although not a Stoic himself, to inspire individual action and responsibility to uphold morality in a declining society.

The noble suicide was therefore seen in Ancient Rome as a movement of free will within the confines of moral integrity, and the idea was further embedded in Roman thought through the deaths of other prominent Imperial Stoics who died in a fashion that echoed Cato. Under the Roman Empire, particularly during the reign of Nero in the first century CE, we see a wave of politically motivated suicides, many of which were not voluntary in the strictest sense. Nobles, senators, and former advisors, often seen as political threats or moral opponents to the emperor's authority, were regularly ordered to take their own lives. While this form of coerced suicide became an unofficial mode of capital punishment under certain emperors, many Stoics used these final moments to reclaim moral agency and transformed their state-imposed death into an expression of philosophical integrity and personal freedom. This dynamic helps us better understand figures like Cato, who, though not under a death sentence, chose to die rather than

⁵² Griffin, Miriam. "Philosophy, Cato, and Roman Suicide: II". Pp. 195.

⁵³ Turpin. "Tacitus, Stoic *Exempla*, and the *Praecipuum Munus Annalium*." pp. 360.

live under tyranny. His suicide set a model for turning death into a way of protest against injustice and moral decay.

Thrasea Paetus (d. 66 AD) was a senator and prominent Stoic under the reign of Nero, eventually becoming a memorable case of Stoic-inspired suicides, and is remembered for demonstrated remarkable moral strength and courage throughout his time in the Senate and in the face of death.⁵⁴ Thrasea was known for his unwavering faith in and adherence to Stoic principles, and was able to distinguish himself from his peers through his philosophical integrity. He led by noble example, and was one of the only senators under Nero who was willing to disagree the emperors' actions. Partially motivated by the increasingly oppressive nature of Nero's rule, Thrasea withdrew from public life, but his firm commitment to his ideals only served to aggravate the emperor's appetite for control and his hatred towards those who spoke up against him. This tension led to Nero eventually ordering Thrasea's execution but gave him the dignity of choosing his manner of death. Tacitus describes in his histories how Thrasea approached his death with calm, and stood strong in the acceptance of his fate. Tacitus emphasizes the tragic irony of his death as such a virtuous Stoic figure, as it was, in effect, "to murder Virtue herself."⁵⁵ Yet, even in the face of death, Thrasea welcomed it as a fitting conclusion to a life filled with purpose and integrity, and his refusal to compromise his principles, and his ultimate choice of suicide over dishonor, echoed the Stoic legacy of Cato the Younger. Thrasea's death, like Cato's, became an empowering statement of resistance against tyranny and moral decay alike.⁵⁶ His decision to end his life was ultimately not just a personal triumph of Stoic virtue but also a broader symbol of defiance, a rejection of a life devoid of honor, and a powerful testament to the enduring legacy of Stoic resistance in the face of political tyranny.

⁵⁴ Smith, William, ed. "Thra'sea Paetus". *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*.

⁵⁵ Tacitus. *Annals*. pp. 16.35.

⁵⁶ Turpin. "Tacitus, Stoic *Exempla*, and the *Praecipuum Munus Annalium*." pp. 380.

Another prominent Roman Stoic who died similarly was Lucius Anneus Seneca (d. 65 CE), a philosopher, teacher, and politician who also lived and died under the reign of Emperor Nero. Seneca argued that life's value is determined by its alignment with virtue and reason, not its duration, and believed, as most Stoics of the time, that Cato's death was an example of moral heroism. Seneca, exactly like Thrasea, was ultimately forced to commit suicide by Nero, except that he had a closer relationship to the emperor as his formal tutor and mentor during his youth. During his life and career in the empire, Seneca put "great emphasis on human liberty" and argued for a "philosophical approach to death and fear," as a true Roman Stoic following in the footsteps of his predecessors.⁵⁷ He also found it "supremely important to free oneself and his fellow man from the fear of death," and believed that one should hold control over their death if life becomes unreasonable, or if cruelty is inflicted through disease, violence, or moral distress.⁵⁸ Since dying was, for Seneca, the ultimate moment of philosophical trial, he believed that facing death with composure and courage demonstrated the true strength of a Stoic's virtue. The way one died was not about securing a place in the afterlife, but about proving one's mastery over fear, pain, and fate—elements outside our control.⁵⁹ Seneca believed that death was a natural part of life, as he writes, "just as I choose the ship in which I sail and the house I inhabit, so I will choose the death by which I leave life," (*Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, Letter 70). He believed that only by confronting death directly could one live freely and fully, without fear of it. Though the suicide was forced in the case of Seneca, he represents another example of a prominent Imperial Roman politician and philosopher who faced death with dignity and embraced his fate to face fate with a Stoic demeanor. For both Seneca and Cato, death was not an end to be feared

⁵⁷ Ibid. pp. 225.

⁵⁸ Ibid. pp. 220.

⁵⁹ Noyes, Russell. "Seneca on Death." pp. 223-5.

but a conscious act of defiance against tyranny, a final affirmation of freedom, and the ultimate expression of Stoic mastery over the self.

Building upon this legacy of Stoic endurance and resistance, Epictetus, who arrived in Rome a few years after Seneca's death, extended the conversation about freedom, virtue, and the philosophical approach to death. Epictetus was a Greek slave initially owned by one of Emperor Nero's secretaries but eventually gained freedom through his remarkable philosophical insight. He would become one of the most influential Stoic thinkers and a key source of information on Stoic belief in Rome. Surviving texts on Epictetus' wisdom offer significant contributions to Roman thought on suicide from the Stoic perspective and emphasized the autonomy of the will, the acceptance of fate, and the moral weight of dying well. Epictetus argues that a person's will can be stronger than 'the gods', in that no one can take away or challenge it since it is immaterial.⁶⁰ His appeals to reason and morality reflect a sense of righteousness that resonated with Roman values under the Empire. Reflecting on life and death, Epictetus says, "You are an actor in a play, which is as the playwright wants it to be: short if he wants it short, long if he wants it long. If he wants you to play a beggar, play even this role well. But if life is no longer tolerable to you, the door is open; you may leave when you choose" (*Discourses*, I.24.20). Through his passage, Epictetus reflects the Stoic notion that when an individual has lived a life aligned with reason and virtue, they may choose to leave it when it is no longer tolerable or aligned with their morals or philosophical understanding.

The concept of voluntary departure from life aligns closely with the final decision of the earlier Roman Stoics who chose to submit to death through force or personal decision, choosing to time the moment of one's death in harmony with reason and virtue. Epictetus, in his teachings, emphasizes that while life is a gift and a duty to endure as long as possible, the choice to end it

⁶⁰ R. J. Ryle. "Epictetus." pp. 131.

can also be an expression of philosophical integrity when one's life no longer aligns with the principles of Stoic thought. "When you are about to embark on some task, remind yourself what kind of task it is. If it concerns life, remind yourself that it is a task that concerns a human being, and that the life of a human being is in your control," he says (*Discourses*, IV.1.85). Like many thinkers influenced by Stoic principles, Epictetus emphasized that human life is governed by reason and self-control. Although life itself is to be valued and lived by virtue, an individual can decide to end life when it no longer aligns with reason or the principles of Stoic thought.

In the context of Roman politics and society, these acts of suicide and those among Stoic philosophers were rarely free choices in the conventional sense. Figures such as Seneca and Thrasea Paetus were ordered to die by the imperial regime, while Cato faced the loss of the Republic, he had spent his life defending. What remained within their control, however, was their *approach* to death. Conducted with composure and moral conviction, it was this conscious embrace of death that transformed their suicides into powerful political statements that resonated with the Roman populace who faced increasing loss of individual power within the society and politics of their government. These deaths were not merely private decisions but also served public performance of philosophical resistance. In each case, death became a vehicle for expressing defiance against tyranny, a refusal to live under a morally corrupt regime, and even in some cases, a final act of fidelity to the lost Republican ideals. The growing popularity of Stoicism in Rome offered a counter-narrative to the imperial consolidation seen in Roman after the Fall of the Republic and proposed a vision of individual liberty grounded in virtue and reason. The "noble suicide" thus served as both protest and moral exemplar; a commitment to liberty, free will, and ethical autonomy.

This legacy resonated especially with younger Romans and those who still clung to the memory of *mos maiorum* which included the ancestral customs and values eroded by the

imperial system. The Stoic idea of noble suicide became an extreme but influential way of resisting authoritarianism and oppression of free thought. By preserving personal integrity in a time when the Roman Republic was being eclipsed by imperial rule, as to the Stoics, death was not something to be feared but rather an extension of one's moral choices, and the decision to die in service to one's principles was the ultimate act of freedom and virtue. It would be hard to overestimate the impact of Stoicism on Roman attitudes toward suicide, particularly in the context of political resistance. Cato's death, as well as the deaths of other Stoic philosophers, became exemplary for future generations. Even in the later Empire, these figures were revered as moral exemplars: their suicides were studied and celebrated by later Stoics like Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, who cited their actions as models of virtue, courage, and autonomy. Under the Antonines, particularly Marcus Aurelius, Stoic philosophy reached new prominence as an ethical guide for rulers and citizens alike, with Cato often invoked as the ideal of the philosopher-statesman who chose virtue over submission.

The noble suicides also expressed the idea that the decision to end one's life could be an act of supreme moral clarity when a choice between dishonor and death was involved. Within an ancient world of rapidly destabilized political and social structures, Stoic suicides became more common within the Roman imagination of defiance against tyranny. Consequently, the tradition of noble suicide, as institutionalized through Stoic philosophy, provided a way in which Roman citizens made their way through the mess of moral confusion around them. It made death an event that could be managed and reasoned, at which time one could have taken one's life into one's hands and retain dignity when forces around them were overwhelming. Whether viewed as a political act, a moral statement, or a philosophical ideal, the Stoic approach to suicide and the teaching that moral integrity is greater than life itself, had a profound impact on Roman attitudes

toward death and virtue during the complex and chaotic period of the late Republic and early Empire.

5. Conclusions

During the Fall of the Republic, those Roman elites who believed that the institutions and virtues that had once defined Roman public life, such as duty, discipline, and civic responsibility, saw how these principles were under threat and sought to fight for this memory. For individuals like Cato, Stoicism offered a meaningful framework to understand and respond to this unraveling of the old order and morality that once defined Roman society and politics. Stoicisms' emphasis on personal virtue, rationality, and duty reflected the traditional ideals of *mos maiorum*, which was for a long time the ancestral customs and moral code long upheld as the backbone of Roman identity. Rather than representing a break from tradition, Stoicism actually allowed Roman thinkers to reaffirm these core values in a rapidly changing political environment and offered them the philosophical tools to endure instability while upholding moral integrity. Stoic figures during the late Republic, such as Cato the Younger in the Roman civil war, are prime examples of those who chose to die by noble suicide instead of diminishing their image as morally superior. These acts were seen as a defiant action against the tyranny of the Roman Empire, mainly as Rome was a Republic and the history of Rome had not been forgotten by many of its inhabitants, despite the passing years under dictatorship. The cult of personality and various cultural distractions created by the Roman Emperors did not always cover the corruption and cruelty that lay within, and Stoicism was often embraced as a response to the seemingly unstoppable evil that was inflicted upon those who disagreed with the emperor's decisions or the ways of society.

After the collapse of the Republic and Cato's heroic suicide to address his moral defeat, emulations of the Stoic suicide would be seen across the centuries under Imperial rule. Stoicism

in general would flourish under the Empire, and Rome would see an interesting parallel of more increased demands for moral retribution, and at the same time, the degradation of democratic principles. Stoic figures like Thrasea Paetus and Seneca furthered the narrative that dying for one's principles was better than living by corruption and instinct only for self-preservation. The Stoic tradition of noble suicide in ancient Rome emerged as a profoundly philosophical conviction and a form of political resistance, exemplified most powerfully by Cato the Younger and later echoed by figures like Thrasea Paetus, Seneca, and Epictetus. These acts were not expressions of despair but moral strength and unwavering commitment to virtue in the face of tyranny. Roman Stoics realized that the only way to claim liberty in their society, which was increasingly defined by autocratic rule and moral decline, was through decisive, impactful action. The Stoic noble suicides transcended the personal and were symbolic actions performed within Roman cultural and political imagination. Ultimately, Stoicism evolved to meet the reality many individuals living under imperial rule and provided a moral framework that allowed individuals to reclaim personal agency and their dignity by providing meaning in both life and death. The enduring impact of Stoic noble suicide thus lies in its dual role as a philosophical ideal and a political act, reinforcing the timeless Stoic belief that a life without virtue is no life at all.

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