

Data availability

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Declaration of interest

None.

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Psychiatry in sacred texts

Divinities of suicide in ancient mythologies

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Suicide has been a profound and complex subject across various cultures, often intertwined with mythology and religion. Ixtab, also known as 'Rope Woman' or 'Hangwoman,' was the Mayan goddess associated with suicide by hanging. She is depicted as a woman with a rope around her neck, hanging from a celestial bar. Ixtab played the role of a psychopomp, guiding the souls of those who ended their own lives to heaven. This belief was documented by the Spanish inquisitor Diego de Landa (1524–1579), who noted that the Maya believed those who hanged themselves would be led by Ixtab to a peaceful afterlife. This belief led some individuals to choose suicide as a means to escape earthly suffering and attain eternal rest. The veneration of Ixtab reflects a compassionate understanding of suicide, providing solace and a hopeful vision of the afterlife for those who took their own lives. In Japanese folklore, Shinsegumi no Onna is a spirit associated with the tragic deaths of lovers. In the late Edo period (mid-19th century), this spirit is believed to embody the sorrow and despair of women who, due to unrequited love or societal pressures, chose to end their lives. Shinsegumi no Onna has a significant presence in regional folklore and ghost stories. These tales often reflect the intense emotions and social constraints that drove individuals to suicide, with the spirit serving as a reminder of the consequences of such despair.

Interestingly, deities specifically associated with suicide are rare in other mythologies, including Greco-Roman traditions. In Greek mythology, while there are numerous tragic figures who end their own lives, there is no specific deity overseeing this act. The warrior Ajax, for instance, fell on his sword after being driven to madness by dishonour, while Phaedra took her own life due to shame and unrequited love for her stepson. Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus, hanged herself after defying the edict not to bury her brother; her act of suicide is a symbol of loyalty and resistance against unjust laws. Similarly, in Roman tradition, figures such as Lucretia, who took her own life after being raped, highlight the theme of honour and personal integrity. The absence of a deity associated with suicide in Greco-Roman mythology might reflect how self-inflicted death is perceived and contextualised. In these cultures, suicide was often viewed through the lens of honour and shame, rather than as an act necessitating divine intervention or guidance.

In conclusion, the concept of suicide and its divine associations varies significantly across cultures and centuries. Ixtab and Shinsegumi no Onna represent different cultural understandings and mythological interpretations of self-inflicted death. From Ixtab's role as a compassionate guide to the afterlife to Shinsegumi no Onna's embodiment of romantic despair, these figures provide a glimpse into how ancient societies grappled with the profound and often tragic act of ending one's own life. The absence of similar deities in other mythologies highlights the diverse ways in which human cultures interpret and respond to the act of suicide.

Declaration of interest

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