

## The Suicide of Socrates, 399 BC

**O**n a day in 399 BC the philosopher Socrates stood before a jury of 500 of his fellow Athenians accused of "refusing to recognize the gods recognized by the state" and of "corrupting the youth." If found guilty; his penalty could be death. The trial took place in the heart of the city, the jurors seated on wooden benches surrounded by a crowd of spectators. Socrates' accusers (three Athenian citizens) were allotted three hours to present their case, after which, the philosopher would have three hours to defend himself.

Socrates was 70 years old and familiar to most Athenians. His anti-democratic views had turned many in the city against him. Two of his students, Alcibiades and Critias, had twice briefly overthrown the democratic government of the city, instituting a reign of terror in which thousands of citizens were deprived of their property and either banished from the city or executed.

After hearing the arguments of both Socrates and his accusers, the jury was asked to vote on his guilt. Under Athenian law the jurors did not deliberate the point. Instead, each juror registered his judgment by placing a small disk into an urn marked either "guilty" or "not guilty." Socrates was found guilty by a vote of 280 to 220.

The jurors were next asked to determine Socrates' penalty. His accusers argued for the death penalty. Socrates was given the opportunity to suggest his own punishment and could probably have avoided death by recommending exile. Instead, the philosopher initially offered the sarcastic recommendation that he be rewarded for his actions. When pressed for a realistic punishment, he proposed that he be fined a modest sum of money. Faced with the two choices, the jury selected death for Socrates.

The philosopher was taken to the near-by jail where his sentence would be carried out. Athenian law prescribed death by drinking a cup of poison hemlock. Socrates would be his own executioner.

### **"What must I do?"**

*Plato was Socrates' most famous student. Although he was not present at his mentor's death, he did know those who were there. Plato describes the scene through the narrative voice of the fictional character Phaedo.*

"When Crito heard, he signaled to the slave who was standing by. The boy went out, and returned after a few moments with the man who was to administer the poison which he brought ready mixed in a cup. When Socrates saw him, he said, 'Now, good sir, you understand these things. What must I do?'

'Just drink it and walk around until your legs begin to feel heavy, then lie down. It will soon act.' With that he offered Socrates the cup.

The latter took it quite cheerfully without a tremor, with no change of color or expression. He just gave the man his stolid look, and asked, 'How say you,

Hemlock produces a slow death by gradually paralyzing the central nervous system.

is it permissible to pledge this drink to anyone? May I?'

The answer came, 'We allow reasonable time in which to drink it.'

'I understand', he said, 'we can and must pray to the gods that our sojourn on earth will continue happy beyond the grave. This is my prayer, and may it come to pass.' With these words, he stoically drank the potion, quite readily and cheerfully. Up till this moment most of us were able with some decency to hold back our tears, but when we saw him drinking the poison to the last drop, we could restrain ourselves no longer. In spite of myself, the tears came in floods, so that I covered my face and wept - not for him, but at my own misfortune at losing such a man as my friend. Crito, even before me, rose and went out when he could check his tears no longer.

Apollodorus was already steadily weeping, and by drying his eyes, crying again and sobbing, he affected everyone present except for Socrates himself.

He said, 'You are strange fellows; what is wrong with you? I sent the women away for this very purpose, to stop their creating such a scene. I have heard that one should die in silence. So please be quiet and keep control of yourselves.' These words made us ashamed, and we stopped crying.

Socrates walked around until he said that his legs were becoming heavy, when he lay on his back, as the attendant instructed. This fellow felt him, and then a moment later examined his feet and legs again. Squeezing a foot hard, he asked him if he felt anything. Socrates said that he did not. He did the same to his calves and, going higher, showed us that he was becoming cold and stiff. Then he felt him a last time and said that when the poison reached the heart he would be gone.

As the chill sensation got to his waist, Socrates uncovered his head (he had put something over it) and said his last words: 'Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius. Do pay it. Don't forget.'

'Of course', said Crito. 'Do you want to say anything else?'

'There was no reply to this question, but after a while he gave a slight stir, and the attendant uncovered him and examined his eyes. Then Crito saw that he was dead, he closed his mouth and eyelids.

This was the end of our friend, the best, wisest and most upright man of any that I have ever known"

#### **References:**

Plato's description appears in: Tredennick, Hugh (translator) *The last days of Socrates : Euthyphro, The apology, Crito, Phaedo / Plato* (1959); Freeman, Charles, *The Greek Achievement* (1999); Stone, I.F., *The Trial of Socrates* (1988).

How To Cite This Article:

"The Suicide of Socrates, 399 BC," EyeWitness to History, [www.eyewitnesstohistory.com](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com) (2003).