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[https://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2016/1/miettinen\\_lectio\\_on\\_suicides.pdf](https://thanatosjournal.files.wordpress.com/2016/1/miettinen_lectio_on_suicides.pdf)**Lectio Praecursoria November 7, 2015:  
On Suicides Today and in Seventeenth-Century Sweden and Finland****Riikka Miettinen**

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The doctoral defence of Riikka Miettinen and her dissertation in the field of history, *Suicide in Seventeenth-Century Sweden: The Crime and Legal Praxis in the Lower Courts*, took place at the University of Tampere on November 7, 2015. The opponent was Professor Jonas Liliequist (Umeå University) and Professor Mervi Kaarninen (University of Tampere) acted as the Custos.

Suicide is considered not only an individual tragedy but also a serious public health problem in the modern world. Globally, more people kill themselves each year than are killed by any other type of violence, including in all wars, terrorist acts and homicides – yet, the latter are given significantly larger attention. For example, in 2010 self-harm took more lives than war, murder and natural disasters combined. Also, as well known, suicide is considered a relatively significant cause of death among Finns, and especially Finnish young men. Although suicide rates appear to have gone down significantly during the past 25 years in Finland, most Finns have still been bereaved or at least somehow affected by suicide. Self-killing, like death in general has a history – the ways people die have changed profoundly over the centuries, as have the beliefs and customs related to death. Empirical studies on the history of suicide suggest that killing oneself was altogether significantly less common in premodern times. Nevertheless, suicide and self-destructive behaviour appears to be something inherent in humans, and known and reported throughout history and in almost all cultures.

Still, suicide is considered an exceptional act – and research topic. Taking into consideration the importance, prevalence and significant effects of the phenomenon, one can say that suicide, and research on suicide, is viewed as a marginal topic and field quite unfoundedly. The discussion of the topic both in the scientific field but also in general in our society is characterized by marginalization, and even silence.

This conflicting silence was one of the reasons I started to examine the history of suicide. We know fairly little about suicides in Sweden and Finland before the modern times. Also, early on I discovered that studying the legal, social and cultural history of suicides offered interesting perspectives into early modern Sweden and Finland, and was a fruitful

way to understand the culture, society and mentalities of the era. As Émile Durkheim showed in his classic work in sociology, suicide is tied to various social and cultural forces and structures; studying its occurrence and forms as well as attitudes towards it is a useful instrument to examine many macroprocesses and paradigms, like secularization, medicalization and other changes connected to 'modernization'.

It must be taken into consideration that, in practice, the only sources available describing suicides that took place in seventeenth-century Sweden and Finland are different types of judicial documents – the only reason we know about past suicides is that killing oneself was considered a punishable crime. The Church or other institutions were not interested and did not document suicides, at least before the state ordered pastors to compile demographic data, including information on causes of death in the *Tabellverket* since the mid-1700s. However, long before that, suicides were felonies that were investigated and sentenced in the secular courts and crimes of which the sentenced's corpse or remains were punished. Though first criminalized relatively late in the Swedish Realm compared to most other European regions, in the King Christopher's Law of 1442, self-killing remained as a crime quite long in the north, until the late nineteenth century. Suicide was no longer mentioned in the Swedish Penal Law of 1864 while in Finland it was decriminalized when the Criminal Code of 1889, still largely in use today, came into effect.

Thus, the best way to study early modern suicides is to turn to the documents generated by the secular courts of law. Reading the typically long and detailed lower court records about the investigations of people's deaths and the suspects' possible motives, past and more recent behaviour and mental states reveals a great deal of information not only about the past ideas on human behaviour and agency and the world views but also about the everyday life in general. Continuously, as the local office-holders and witnesses discuss the backgrounds and evidence of suspicious deaths and attempt to classify the death and the deceased's sanity or insanity postmortem, the lower court record texts manifest, or mirror, stereotypes and what was considered ideal, normal or expected, for example in one's behaviour.

As a modern reader of early modern lower court records, I was initially puzzled by why people who had killed themselves were sentenced and their corpses punished after death. It is obviously foreign to us that how and why can someone still be affected by law when one is dead – and why suicide in particular was considered criminal. However, the concepts of one's liability and responsibilities were different in the medieval and early modern views: a grave sin that breached God's commandments, like suicide, required an atonement and punishment, and its effects continued even after the corporal death. Shameful disposals and burials outside the church grounds excluded the sinner from the Christian community and from the bodily resurrection.

In the present research I studied not only suicide in seventeenth-century Sweden and Finland but also, by examining the lower court proceedings involving suicide cases, the legal culture and judicial practices during this interesting century. The lower court activities and the investigations on suspected suicides showed that 'the judicial revolution' was certainly on-going but far from complete by the end of the century, at least in the sense that the actions and interests of the local communities rather than the state and professional elites continued to have the most significant influence in the trials and the classifications were still negotiated mostly by the laymen in the local scene. The judicature and state officials pivoted on the participation and cooperation of the bereaved and other locals not only in the indictment but at all stages of the investigation. If the letter of the law did not seem suited, it could be interpreted flexibly and in a way best suited in the situation. The judicature was not blind or 'objective' as the social reputation and status of the suspect or accused was central for the portrayal, explanations, classifications and treatment of the case in the lower courts.

Moreover, reading the typically quite complex negotiations about the nature and causes of the death, motives for suicide and the mental state of the accused, showed how culture-specific, context-dependent and situational 'suicide', or sanity and insanity, as categories, are. The categorization in seventeenth-century Sweden did not entirely correspond with the modern concept of suicide. In practice, there were a variety of acts and deaths called and labelled under the umbrella term 'suicide' – some of which were acts we would not see as suicide today.

This research on the history of suicides has made me question what is a 'suicide' and can we even talk about it as a monolithic category. Although the definition of suicide as the deliberate destruction of one's own life has remained much the same for thousands of years, it is far less simple to identify or classify a death as a suicide. The classification of a death as a suicide was – and is – a complex social event; it is arrived at after interpreting various circumstances surrounding the death and the background of the deceased in light of prevailing definitions and attitudes towards suicide as well as theories or assumptions about the personal history, states of mind and motives of people who kill themselves. In seventeenth-century Sweden and Finland, not only the assumptions of 'causes' to kill oneself but in general, the deceased's reputation or image and the quality of his or her local social ties influenced the classifications.

In part, the same applies even today. In making sense of sudden, obscure deaths we attempt to track down clues from the personal history of the deceased; like in 17<sup>th</sup>-century, we have stereotypes on what kind of persons, and especially, in what types of situations people kill themselves. Like the early modern officials and lower courts searched for clues of insanity, past sins and misfortunes and bad character of the accused, the modern investigators tend to track down signs of depression and substance use. It is often thought that most people who kill themselves leave a suicide note – and in general that 'suicides' are easily recognizable. This is certainly not the case. The influences of our cultural imagery of suicide can be seen, for example, in the recent media and internet discussions on several missing persons in Finland. Also, the gender, age and other social positions of the deceased influence the death classifications as well as how a particular suicide is explained. For example, like in early modern Sweden and Finland, suicides by women are more often interpreted to be driven by 'emotional' or relationship issues.

Historical research on suicides can challenge the current assumptions, beliefs, attitudes and practices concerning suicide and the suicidal. Also, learning about the historical background helps us understand how much our own attitudes and responses to suicide, as well as views of suicide as a 'bad' death, are the results of deep-rooted customs and of the long-lasting religious and judicial hostility towards self-killing.

Although times have changed, and killing oneself is no longer a crime – nor in most circles considered a sin – the historical and cultural forces have heavily influenced modern discussions on suicide and euthanasia. The historical burden of suicide as a shameful, stigmatizing act as well as the grief of the bereaved make suicide a tricky subject and topic. Like the endless debate on the legalization of euthanasia shows, suicide is still not considered an acceptable way to die. Like all research on suicide, historical research breaks the silence surrounding suicide, and perhaps helps us to understand and challenge our cultural views.