Ancient views of noble death were very different from current ideas about death. Ostentatious forms of violent death were common in antiquity and often highly regarded, but they hardly fit in with modern views of life. Many people nowadays dislike self-cremations like the one by Jan Palache during the aftermath of the Russian repression of the peaceful revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1968 or those of Vietnamese Buddhist monks. Most people also loathe hunger strikes if they do not lead to success and one sees the pictures of the strikers’ emaciated bodies just before dying. Although these and other kinds of self-sacrifice may evoke sympathy and admiration, most people will consider them as extreme and regrettable ways of self-destruction. People dislike the images of these deaths and the devastating result on their bodies. These observations are also pertinent to the more recent phenomenon of suicide-bombers, which started in the Middle East and are now a grim reality on a global scale. Many people in the West dislike such spectacular acts of self-destruction, not least because they challenge contemporary attitudes to death and dying in society. In the Western world, modern ideas about death are very different from those in ancient Mediterranean societies, when forms of suicide like self-cremation were often seen as a glorious act. The Western urbane and technocratic society has banished death from the private and the public life. Many consider a quick and quiet death, free from suffering, a blessing. If there is a public and ceremonial dimension of death, it usually concerns the post-mortem phase of the cremation, burial or memorial ceremony.

Greek and Latin sources from antiquity, including Jewish and Christian passages, express very different views of death, especially of self-sacrifice in
a public setting. The Spanish Christian poet Prudentius served as a high civil servant at the court of the Emperor Theodosius I at Milan during the end of the fourth century AD. He composed a work consisting of fourteen hymns of praise of mainly Spanish and Italian martyrs. This work is called Liber Peristephanon (Crowns of Martyrdom) and dates from only a few years before the sack of Rome by Alaric’s Visigoths in 410 AD. It offers a marvellous synthesis of classical Latin poetical conventions and Christian devotion connected with the cult of the martyrs. Emeterius and Chelidonius were martyrs from Prudentius’ home town Calagurris in the northeast of Spain (modern day Calahorra). In the first hymn devoted to them as holy martyrs the Christian poet notes their honorary reward: their names were written in heaven, but by their heroic death they also brought honour to the land of Spain (Perist. 1.1–4; cf. lines 82–93). Building on the famous passage from Horace about self-sacrifice for one’s fatherland (dulce et decorum est pro patria mori, Od. 3.2.13), Prudentius characterizes the violent deaths of Emeterius and Chelidonius both decorum (“honourable”) and dulce (“sweet”, 1.25, 51).2 Elsewhere in his hymns, in which he systematically depicts the behaviour of the martyrs with great affection and admiration, he simply calls the death of martyrs a “noble death” (pulchra nex, 13.46) or a “splendid death” (superba mors, 12.6).

The difference between modern forms of public self-sacrifice mentioned above and Early Christian martyrdom is less great than one might expect. Martyrdom was a form of voluntary death in public: the martyrs could easily avoid torture and execution by giving in to the foreign authorities, for example by venerating an image of a god or a ruler, bringing a sacrifice, eating a piece of sacrificial meat, or swearing by the genius of the Emperor. The spectacular dimension of martyrdom, which is often disgusting to modern audiences, is prominent not only in Prudentius’ poems but also in many other ancient accounts of martyrdom. The second hymn of the Peristephanon is devoted to the Roman deacon Laurentius, who was executed during Decius’ persecution (249–251 AD). Laurentius gave his last gasp after an intercessory prayer for the city of Rome with the wish that the city would become Christian. In one passage Prudentius suggests that Laurentius said to his judge, after half his body had been burned on the gridiron: “This part of my body has been burned long enough; turn it round and try what your hot god of fire has done.” After Laurentius had been turned around, he said: “It is done ...