# Socrates

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Correcting the record on the death of Socrates.

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Contrary to popular belief, Socrates was not condemned by the Athenian council for the crime of corrupting the youth, nor did he die by drinking hemlock and the body buried in his grave was not his. The true facts will now be revealed.

Socrates was, indeed, condemned by the council, but not for the crime of corrupting the youth. His crime was his fatal addiction to the Socratic Method. This instrument of torture, is still much fancied by some of the more arrogant university professors, who derive immense pleasure from demonstrating to students that they, the professors, are infinitely more intelligent beings. The principal feature of the Socratic Method is that it requires that no question be answered directly. Instead every question must be answered by a series of skillfully framed questions that lead the questioner to discover the correct answer himself. This is thought to be good training in thinking. Perhaps so, but it invariably gets its practitioners thoroughly hated.

Socrates, inordinately proud of his baby, carried it to maddening extremes. For example, asked for the time, he would haul out his watch and say, â The little hand is on eleven and the big hand is on two. Now, letâ s work it out together; what time do you think it might be?â This drove people crazy. As it had been going on for a long time, the Athenians were fed up. Several times Socrates had been brought before the council and told to cease and desist. He was always contrite and genuinely repentant and refrained for a while. But abstinence never lasted; his disease was incurable.

After a particularly annoying episode the leader of the council told Socrates, â This nuisance must stop. Youâ ve had plenty of opportunities to deal with the problem. You always repent, we give you another chance and you always backslide. It seems that only exile or hemlock will solve the problem. Your choice. Think it over.â

â I understand, youâ re quite right. I donâ t have to think it over. Iâ ll take the hemlock.â There was no pleading, no begging for yet another chance; only calm acceptance. This surprised the leader a little. He had steeled himself to be firm and resist all entreaties, but none were forthcoming; Socrates had simply stoically accepted his fate. His choice, however, wasnâ t a complete surprise. Under Athenian law, exile meant that Socrates would have to take his wife Xanthippe with him. Given her well established reputation as a nag â mothers would send brides to her for nagging lessons â it was easy to understand why Soc would regard exile with her as a fate worse than death. Any sane man would.

â Ok. Sorry old man. You have two weeks to get your affairs in order.â

Two weeks was plenty of time for Socrates to do what he had to do. On the appointed day he showed up at the prison at midnight, right on time. The jailer, a cousin, led him to a cell at the back. A short time later Crito, Phaedo, Plato, Dorito and some other friends came in, carrying a long package wrapped in a rug. Socrates unwrapped the rug enough to see what was in it. â Perfect,â he said, â just what I wanted,â

Although Athens claimed to be a democracy, that term applied only to the citizens, who pretty much lazed around and talked. The work of the place was done by slaves from around the Mediterranean, who greatly outnumbered the citizens. With so many slaves, many grievously overworked, several died every week. The rug contained the body of a slave.

Socrates and the jailer hugged, then he and his friends left through the back door and hurried to a ship tied up at the quay. Socrates quickly boarded and the ship, which taking advantage of the ebbing tide and a favorable wind, left immediately. By dawn, the scheduled execution time, it was well on its way to Samos.

After a satisfying breakfast Xanthippe, with two slaves, went to the prison to collect the body. According to custom, there would be a twenty four hour wake and visitation at the house, usually with a viewing of the body. As the host was expected to provide plentiful wine and baklava, wakes were well attended. Xan intended to observe the social niceties, but as far as she was concerned, the hemlock had pulled an aching tooth. Sheâ d do what was expected and get it over with as soon as possible. Before taking the body, she looked inside the rug.

â This isnâ t Socrates,â she cried.

â Yes it is,â soothed the jailer. â Thatâ s how hemlock works, it shrivels the body and turns the hair white. Iâ ve seen it many times. Ask anybody whoâ s had experience with it. Theyâ ll tell you the same thing.â

â Maybe so,â said Xanthippe, â but I can tell you this. It wonâ t be open casket.â

Later that day, the council leader , as was customary, paid his respects to the family. Seeing the unusual closed casket, he asked Xanthippe about it.

â The hemlock,â she said, â shriveled him up and turned his hair white. I couldnâ t let people see him that way. What would they think?â

â Of course not,â said the leader, understanding completely what had happened. â Hemlock does that, Iâ ve been told.â Smiling inwardly he thought, â The old fox got away. Good for him.â

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