

Seppuku

A History of Samurai Suicide



ANDREW RANKIN

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切腹 A History of Samurai Suicide
by Dr. Andrew Rankin

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CONTENTS

Introduction: Aesthetics of Seppuku

History of Seppuku to 1600

Ancient Texts
Minamoto no Tametomo
Medieval War Tales
Seppuku as Execution
Kaishaku
Nishina Morinobu
Shimizu Muneharu
Shibata Katsuei
Sen no Rikyū
Toyotomi Hidetsugu

The Seppuku Ritual

Seppuku Ritual Protocols
Types of Seppuku

History of Seppuku after 1600

Junshi Martyrdom
The Principal of Dual Blame

The Akō Incident
The 1700s: Urban Dandies and Paper Fans
The Kiso Anti-Flood Project
The 1800s: "Revere the Emperor, Expel the Barbarians!"
The Aizu White Tigers
Revolt of the League of the Divine Wind
Nogi Maresuke

**Paradigms
Glossary
Bibliography
Footnote**

Oct. 2018

This deeply researched book charts the history and practice of ritual samurai suicide from ancient times until the 20th century through primary sources, both literary and historical, many of them never before translated into English. The author has worked from documents such as medieval war tales, records of the samurai domains, and execution handbooks. The book benefits from an extensive introduction, footnotes, and bibliography, but is written also to appeal to the general reader. It is divided into four basic sections: "History to 1600" looks at cases of ritual suicide taken from historical texts from the 8th to the 17th century. "The Seppuku Ritual" draws on previously untranslated seppuku manuals from the 18th and 19th centuries to explain the correct procedure and etiquette, as well as the different stomach-cutting procedures, types of swords, attire, location, and even the refreshments served at the seppuku ceremony. "History after 1600" focuses on famed cases up to and including the 20th century, and "Paradigms" offers a selection of short quotations from authors and commentators down the centuries that sum up Japanese and non-Japanese attitudes to seppuku.

"As for when to die, make sure you are one step ahead of everyone else. Never pull back from the brink. But be aware that there are times when you should die, and times when you should not. Die at the right moment and you will be a hero. Die at the wrong moment, and you will die like a dog."

– Iizawa Nagahide, *The Warrior's Code*, 1725.



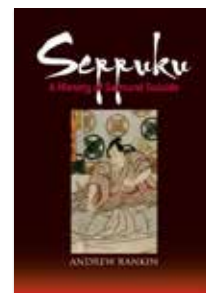
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Andrew Rankin is a British author and academic who specialises in the literature and cultural history of Japan. He earned a BA in Japanese from the University of London and was a graduate researcher at the University of Tokyo before earning a PhD in modern Japanese literature from the University of Cambridge. Based in Tokyo, he is a regular Visiting Scholar and guest lecturer at academic institutions around the world. Rankin's books also include *Snakelust*, a translation of short fiction by Kenji Nakagami, and his latest book is *Mishima, Aesthetic Terrorist: An Intellectual Portrait*, which examines the work of the controversial novelist and playwright Yukio Mishima. Rankin's articles include *21st-Century Yakuza: Recent Trends in Organized Crime in Japan (Part 1 and 2)*.

THIS BOOK WILL BE OF INTEREST TO...

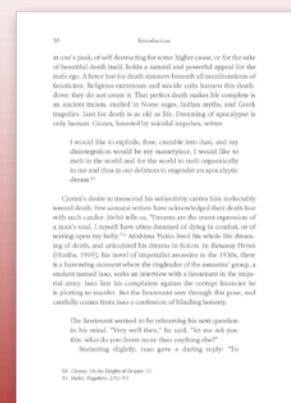
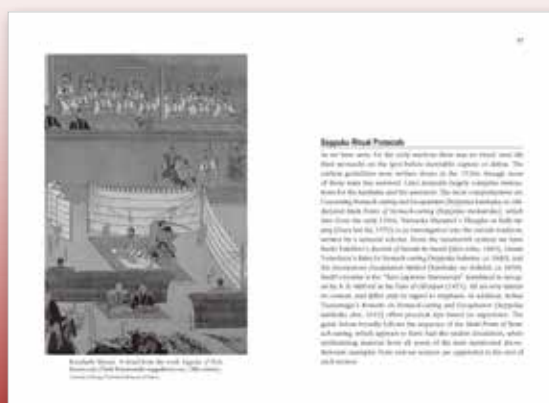
..the general reader who is interested in martial arts/bushido, Japanese history and culture, military history; academics, students, and Japanese scholars. It will also offer a new perspective to those studying and researching the psychology of suicide.

"A fascinating book well researched and extensively cited without being overly dry – it's an excellent read for anyone intrigued by the subject or by Japanese history in general." **Library Journal**

ANDREW RANKIN'S ANSWER TO A COMMON QUESTION

Q. You use the term "seppuku" rather than "hara-kiri," which is more familiar to Westerners. Is there a difference between the two and why did you choose to use "seppuku?"

A. As this is an issue that is sometimes confusing for Westerners, I have gone to some lengths to explain the differences between these words in the introduction to the book: "The word hara-kiri has seldom been used in Japan, where seppuku is preferred both in speech and in print. Hara-kiri could be translated as 'belly-cut' and seppuku as 'cutting the stomach,' though these are imperfect approximations. While hara-kiri is sometimes dismissed as a vulgarism, it would be more accurate to say that seppuku is a polite euphemism. By employing the Chinese readings of the two characters that form the word, it is a way of saying 'cut the stomach' without actually uttering the Japanese words for 'stomach' (hara) and 'cut' (kiri). Seppuku is the more recent term, making its first appearance early in the fifteenth century and has been standard terminology since around 1600 . . . By the nineteenth century, seppuku had become an all-embracing term for samurai suicide, which did not always involve disembowelment . . . The prevalence of the term hara-kiri is a result of its appearance in early accounts of Japan written by foreigners, to whom this word was more easily comprehensible than seppuku . . . Today the word *hara-kiri* is so exotic that some Japanese even assume it to be an import, a misreading by foreigners of the seppuku characters."



"Behold!" he roared from the castle tower, "I am Prince Morinaga, second son of the divine Emperor Go-Daigo, who traces his lineage through ninety-five generations to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. My men have run away. Now I shall destroy myself out of contempt for them – and you! Watch carefully and you will learn how to cut your bellies, for your day will surely come." He removed his armour and hurled it down from the tower. Now all his enemies could see that he was wearing a Prince's robes and cloak. As they looked on, he stabbed himself in the stomach, cut cleanly from left to right, and hurled a fistful of his guts against the wall. Dropping to his knees, he inserted the sword in his mouth until the tip of the blade touched his throat. Then he pushed himself forward, and died.