
Harsh And Cruel Corporal Punishments

The Dark Side of History: Torture Methods in Medieval Europe

Criminal punishment is a long-standing feature of social life. As early as the pre-modern period, various types of sanctions were already created to penalize acts that deviate from socially-accepted norms and laws. Accordingly, past societies had diverse ways of carrying out criminal punishments. In medieval Europe, torture was used as a legitimate way of punishing and deterring crimes.

The medieval period was commonly conceived to be a time when “harsh and often barbarous corporal punishments” (Classen & Scarborough, 2012, p. 1) were used. While this conception is true, medieval punishments were not given arbitrarily. Courts of justice existed to decide the punishment of serious crimes such as heresy and treason. But even with trial, the torture methods utilized for these crimes often placed the offender under great pain before his or her death. According to scholars Mark Easton, Maggy Saldais, and Richard Smith:

By modern standards, punishments for crimes handed down by most courts was severe. Confessions for such crimes were frequently obtained through torture (through the use of thumbscrews and other devices). People could be executed by being burnt or skinned alive. Traitors were frequently executed by being hanged, drawn, and quartered. This last punishment involved first hanging a person, cutting him down while still alive, then pulling out his intestines while he watched, and finally attaching each of his hand and legs to a horse and having the horses pull him apart. (2013, p. 147)

Given the stark difference between the punitive systems of the past and the present time, this essay will endeavor to look into four torture methods that are no longer utilized today but were popularly used in medieval Europe to address serious crimes. These methods will be listed down and described as they were used.

The Rack

The rack was a common torture method used for alleged heretics and Church offenders in order to extract confessions from them (Bennet, 2012, p. 3). A slightly-elevated rectangular rack consisting of rollers was used to break the limbs of alleged criminals. To do this, the offender's wrists and ankles were tied to the rollers and when the offender fails to give satisfactory answers to the inquisitor's questions, these rollers were rotated in opposite directions causing the limbs of the offender to dislocate or break due to intense tugging (Melville, 1905, p. 231). Along with the screams of pain of the torture victims, the popping sounds of breaking ligaments also added to the horror of the rack making guilty heretics confess in order to avoid torture (Bennet, 2012, p. 3).

The Judas Cradle

Similar to the rack, the Judas Cradle was also used to torture heretics. In this method, an offender would be placed on top of a pointed triangular seat thus stabbing the offender's private

parts (Bennet, 2012, p. 2). Depending on the answers of the offender, weights may be added to the offender's hands and feet to further weigh him or her down and mutilate his or her private parts. Similar devices such as the Spanish donkey were also used like the Judas cradle and often, these devices were not washed after use thus resulting to infections and even death to the victims of this torture method (historyrundown.com, 2013).

The Boot

This torture method was used in a variety of techniques all throughout medieval Europe. Accordingly, the method was referred to by many names such as the German Boot, the Spanish Boot, and the Scottish caspicaws or cashielaws (Melville, 1905, p. 238). While differing in name, these torture methods similarly utilized a wooden or iron boot that encased the leg of alleged traitors and witches while they were being questioned. Failure to confess their sins would result to the offender's leg impalement by wedges that would be hammered through the wooden leg encasement or in the case of an iron boot or caspicaws, this metal encasement would either be tightened to crush the offender's leg or heated until a confession is made (Melville, 1905, pp. 237-238). These torture methods were often used to the extreme resulting to the permanent disability of alleged criminals (Melville, 1905, p. 237).

The Rat

Rats were also used in medieval torture methods. The first technique involves the use of rats enclosed within a metal bucket that was placed on top of an offender's belly. In between questioning, this metal bucket would be heated thus increasingly prompting the rats to escape through gnawing the offender's belly. Other than this, rats were also used in a technique called the "Dungeon Among the Rats" where offenders were placed in a "cell so filled with rodents and insects that occupants frequently had the flesh eaten from their arms and legs while they slept" (Donnelly & Diehl, 2009, p. 93).

Looking at these torture methods, one common feature that encompasses all that was listed above is their ability to not only inflict severe physical pain but also mental and psychological trauma. This could be the very reason why medieval torture methods are often dubbed by many as the most brutal and cruel torture methods of history.