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History 101-001

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Medieval Torture: A Brief History and Common Methods

Torture did not become common practice during the Medieval or Middle Ages (500-1500 C.E) until the Medieval Inquisition. After that torture became a common place tool for punishment and confession. The Medieval Inquisition was not just one Inquisition but a series consisting of well known Inquisitions such as the Spanish and the Roman. The Inquisition was initially a response to heretics that were challenging the church, one of the most famous groups of Heretics from the Middle Ages are the Cathers from southern France. The church was feeling threatened and knew that immediate and harsh action was needed. After a few failed attempts at Inquisitions, Pope Innocent IV implemented a papal bull titled Ad extirpanda, allowing the use of torture in confession and punishment on those thought to be against the church (www.medieval-life-and-times.info).

Contrary to popular belief torture did have some guidelines. The accused was only supposed to be tortured once, often though people would be tortured second and third times and those sessions were considered just a continuum of the first. Also any tortures that resulted in death, childbirth or mutilation were considered illegal, although this law was not monitored at all and many torture devices were designed to do just those things (www.medieval-life-and-times.info).

Before any sort of torture could take place first there had to be an investigation followed by a trial. Inquisitors would arrive at the town to weed out those who seemed to be heretics. Attendance was not mandatory, but those who did not attend looked automatically suspicious, so anyone who wished to avoid

a trial and punishment attended. People would then have a chance to speak freely of their sins and denounce themselves, although punishment may have still been inflicted on those who confessed, it was better than the torture one received if accused of lying or withholding information. Those who confessed would sometimes be let go if they gave information about other heretics in the town to the Inquisitors. Even those not accused often took pride in informing the Inquisitors of heretics, as it made them look good and just. After all this information was gathered, and everyone was rounded up a trial would begin (Lea 86-90).

The trial process was very unfair for the accused and almost always favoured the Church's side. The only right the accused had was to name anyone in town who had a deep hatred against them. If this was found true often the accused were let go and the ones who had wrongly accused them were sentenced to life in prison. Either than naming someone who had a grudge against them, the best an accused could do was fully testify, often to the point of lying if they were innocent to avoid harsh punishment. Another unfair practice that made innocence nearly impossible was the acceptance of evidence from nearly anyone, including convicted criminals and known heretics could testify against the accused. The Inquisitors would go through any length to make sure there were plenty of guilty heretics, it was as if they enjoyed inflicting punishment and torture (Langbein 95-97).

Some of the most common methods of torture included the strappado, the donkey and the rack. Just to name a few. The strappado was a horrific form of punishment also known as reverses hanging. The victim's arms would be tied behind their back and then they would be lifted up by a rope or by a pulley. Usually the victim's shoulders would dislocate, and to intensify the pain weights would sometimes be strapped to the ankles (Lea 90). The donkey, or wooden horse, was a sharp angled triangle that was quite long in length, the victim would be forced to sit astride it and sometimes lay down. Weights would then be added to the hands and feet. A similar torture device, the Judas Chair, was shaped like a triangle with a very sharp point, the victim would be place on top of the triangle, even worse the point would be

stabbing the anus, vagina or scrotum. Like the other version weights were added, and many were left with severely injured, and often deformed private parts (listverse.com) .

The rack, perhaps the most well-known torture method of all time was very common for those proved heretics, or suspected of the worst offenses to the Church. The rack consisted of four or five rolling pillars inside a frame, and ropes that could tighten when the pillars were rolled in opposite directions. The victim would be tied to the rack by their wrists and ankles and the ropes would be slowly tightened. Eventually the arms and legs would dislocate, the ligaments would snap and bones would break. It was such an awful method that guilty heretics would be forced to watch others on the rack, making them confesses quicker. One of the worst aspects of the rack was the sounds, the popping and breaking of various tissues, bones and fibres mixed with the screams of agony was a nightmare. Often the victims would never fully recover as their tissues were over worked, losing all ability to contract again and to heal (Langbein 100).

Many other small methods were used as well, many though left just as much damage as the larger devices. The pear of anguish was a mutilating device that was inserted up the anus, vagina or down the throat. The pear of anguish consisted of four sharp blades that were clumped together in the shape of a pear, it would be inserted and then a button would release the blades, causing them to expand thus tearing the soft tissue of the orifices. Many died from the pear of anguish from bleeding to death or from not being able to breathe in the case of the oral version. Another small and painful device was the breast ripper, something that did exactly as it sounds, ripped off pieces of a woman's chest. A device reserved on for men, and only regicides, was the Crocodile Shears. It was a long tube with a hollow center, it was modeled after the Crocodile with a jaw like end with sharp teeth of metal. The device would be heated, and then placed over an erect penis, the jaw would clamp shut, burning, tearing and sometimes tearing the penis right off(listverse.com).

Most torture was done in secret underground dungeons or prisons, it was not a commonly well-known trend in Europe during the Inquisitions. There were other forms of torture, such as psychological torture,

or rape, the most common torture method used on women. In Europe torture continued to be used until the 1700's, and by then countless innocent victims had been mutilated, killed or mentally damaged by the Medieval Inquisitions and other endeavors (Langbein 97). Examining Torture in such a dark time in history show how naive people were and how willing they were to listen and abide by the churches rules. Luckily modern citizens of Europe can voice their opinions without worrying if they will be stretched on the rack or mutilated. The Medieval times certainly were the Dark Ages.

1. Trembinski, Donna. *Law and Punishment in the Middle Ages*. New York: Crabtree Publishing Company, 2006. Print.
2. Lea, Henry Charles. *Torture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1973. Print.
3. Langbein, John. H. "The Legal History of Torture." *Torture: A Collection*. Ed. Levinson, Sanford. New York: Oxford, 2006. Print.
4. <http://listverse.com/2009/07/20/top-10-gruesome-medieval-torture-devices/>
5. <http://www.medieval-life-and-times.info/medieval-torture-and-punishment/medieval-inquisition-torture.htm>