

Torture as a Display



The intent of torture seems fairly simple: to elicit a confession using means of pain, shame, and the threat of harm; torture was also readily relatable to punishment—a victim that has committed a crime could be marked or scarred in either a physical or mental manner so that they will not perpetrate that particular crime ever again. Torture was used for a means to an end as far back as the Assyrians and the Egyptians. Ramses II (circa 1300 BC) was said to have tortured prisoners to learn more about enemy forces during the Hittite invasion of Egypt¹. Thucydites described how Demosthenos, an Athenian general during the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) was killed by the Corinthians and Syracusans because they assumed he'd reveal their traitorous dealings with the Athenians during torture from the Spartans².

However, the concept almost immediately became something akin to an artform, where the victims were displayed to the torturers as they suffered and died, possibly for the entertainment of those present.

¹ <https://warontherocks.com/2015/07/warchives-beating-the-spies-2/>

² <https://www.livius.org/sources/content/thucydides-historian/destruction-of-the-athenian-army/>

One of the first stories of torture where this peculiar need for graphic satisfaction is catered to is found in the biographies of the Greek tyrant, Phalaris, who ruled from 570 to 554 BCE. An inventor by the name of Perilaus approached Phalaris and offered to supply a hollow, metal bull, possibly of bronze, for punishments—the victim would be placed inside and a fire lit under the belly of the bull. The slowly roasting victim would cry out in torment and the sound would carry through the hollow bull and resonate out the nostrils with the smoke, creating a “lifelike” sound. Phalaris decided to test it out on Perilaus first, for whatever reason, and then drops the singed inventor over a cliff³. Both Cicero and Diodorus of Sicily tell this tale, although Diodorus slants the story to make it sound like Phalaris was just in punishing such an evil man with karmic retribution. Whether this event actually occurred is called into question, but the story was well-established before Cicero repeated it. According to the *Suda*, Phalaris was overthrown in a general uprising headed by Telemachus and burned in his own brazen bull⁴. There are reports of a brazen bull at Agrigentum said to have been later restored by Scipio the Elder circa 200 BC⁵.

Nabis, a king who ruled Sparta as a tyrant from 207 to 192 BC, is said to have developed an instrument of torture known as the Iron Apega, which was a simulacrum in the image of the king’s own wife. The replica was dressed in rich clothing with outstretched arms and, when hugged, triggered the arms to close. The device's arms, hands, and breasts were covered with iron nails, and the grip was capable of crushing a body. Nabis apparently controlled the device, causing pain until the victim agreed to pay money or be killed. This strange device is a predecessor to the “Iron Maiden” and likely attributed to the belief in the Iron Maiden being a medieval device (a real-life example did not exist until the 1800s)⁶.

From these humble beginnings 2000 years ago, a variety of methods of torture came about to be used on enemies of the state, the Church, and personal foes. Torture can be divided into two purposes: physical to bring pain and psychological to bring shame. Thus, for enemies of the Church and State, it was believed pain was certain to bring about confessions, and the damage was unrelenting, since the accused likely would be executed soon after. However, for many whose crimes were petty or insignificant, the torture was a method to publicly shame an individual while preserving their lives.

Public torture was popular, then, with the town square and spaces outside prison being used to entertain crowds with the death of thousands. There were also established torture chambers away from public eyes where such deeds took place, including cells, dungeons, and gatehouses, including that of Newgate Prison and Marshalsea Prison. Descriptions abound of “The Pit” found deep within the Tower of London⁷. It was said that Thomas Sherwood suffered “in the dungeon among the rats”, November of 1577 in the White Tower, found somewhere in the southwest

³ <http://imaginaryinstruments.org/bull-of-phalaris/>

⁴ Maas, Sander van. *Thresholds of Listening*. Fordham Univ Press, 2015

⁵ <https://www.ancientworldreview.com/2019/11/death-machines-the-brazen-bull.html>

⁶ <http://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2020/01/were-iron-maidens-ever-actually-used/>

⁷ <https://www.ncregister.com/blog/stephaniemann/prisoners-of-conscience-in-the-16th-and-21st-centuries>

corner⁸. Another torture chamber in the White Tower was “Little Ease”—a stone, alcove-like cell, four feet square and nine feet high.”⁹ Lancaster Castle was a well-known medieval fortress with a long history of imprisonment starting in 1196, and its dungeon basement can still be visited today.

So, torture was generally frowned upon by the more civilized societies of the medieval era, at least in print. However, in 1275 there came about a decree by Edward I: “The Punishment of Felons refusing Lawful Trial”. Specifically mentioned is the Prison forte et dure, or “hard and strong punishment”, which became widely used in prisons and included starvation, sleep deprivation, and tools like the rack or other movement-inhibiting tools and machines. Later, in 1406, the decree is altered to Peine Forte et Dure: “Severe and Hard Punishment”, and a traditional system of obtaining a written confession to place. First there was a warning, repeated twice to give the felon time to consider their actions, then, the “judgment of penance”, in which the person was tortured.

Non-damaging Torture

The Stock Acts of 1351, 1376, and 1405 stated that the absence of stocks would “downgrade” a village to a hamlet¹⁰. In 1503, Sir William Capell, Lord Mayor of London, stated every ward be equipped with stocks¹¹. Occasionally stocks were situated “inside the town’s gaol” (1528)¹². Bilboes or grillos were iron restraints normally placed on a person's ankles. They have commonly been used as leg shackles to restrain prisoners for different purposes until the modern ages.

The Ducking or Cucking Stool was mentioned as early as 1534 and was often used for women who became too obstinate or “out of control”¹³. This was a chair or stool attached to the end of a long pole which was manipulated by either a pivot or a number of villagers to lower a strapped victim into water, such as a pond or river. Often used on scolds or strumpets in England and Scotland, the repeated dunkings did cause death on at least one occasion.

The Scold’s Bridle

According to "Rack, Rope, and Red-Hot Pincers" by Geoffrey Abbot, The Scold's Bridle or “Branks” was first used in Scotland in the 16th century¹⁴. He states a "Statistical Account includes the report of a Montifieth woman who was convicted in February 1563 “of abuse and

⁸ Strickland, Agnes. *Lives of the Queens of England*. Lippincott, 1893. Volume 4, page 488

⁹ <https://www.thevintagenews.com/2018/04/21/little-ease/>

¹⁰ <http://www.medieval-life-and-times.info/medieval-torture-and-punishment/stocks.htm>

¹¹ Abbott, Geoffrey. *Rack, Rope, and Red-Hot Pincers*. Brockhampton Press, 1993. Page 150.

¹² Abbott, Geoffrey. *Rack, Rope, and Red-Hot Pincers*. Brockhampton Press, 1993. Page 151.

¹³ Innes, Brian. *The History of Torture* p. 137–140

¹⁴ Abbott, Geoffrey. *Rack, Rope, and Red-Hot Pincers*. Brockhampton Press, 1993. Page 167.

sentences to be "brankit, stockit, dukit, and banisit ye haile paris" (branked, placed in stocks, ducked, and banished from the parish)¹⁵.

In 1591, Agnes Sampson was accused of collaborating with John Fiennes in raising a storm that would have drowned King James on his way to Denmark. She was placed in a "Witches' Bridle", which apparently had prongs on the inside that pierced the cheeks as well as a tongue depressor of spikes.¹⁶

Creating the Scold's Bridle for Display Purposes

Most, if not all, of the scolds' bridles were made of iron. I had no metal to work with but realized I had leather and the patterning is similar that one can see how the pieces come together. My mask is sewn together using thread, is missing the optional tongue depressor (coronavirus) and has a lovely circular metal ring atop to allow the victim to be tied to churches.



¹⁵ Abbott, Geoffrey. Rack, Rope, and Red-Hot Pincers. Brockhampton Press, 1993. Page 167.

¹⁶ Abbott, Geoffrey. Rack, Rope, and Red-Hot Pincers. Brockhampton Press, 1993. Page 168.





Damaging and Lethal Torture

Unfortunately, much of the torture created by the judicial system of the medieval era was not in consideration of life. Death was a constant in earlier times and the state or Church did not consider the accused's wellbeing when it came to torture. By Elizabethan times, the state had announced publicly that no torture was to take place; however, the practice was nigh different. Elizabeth's Walsingham was noted for having suggested John Hurley's "feet should be roasted against the fire with hot boots."¹⁷

One of the earliest, widely accepted torture techniques in England was "pressing", which consisted of the person being staked out and stones or iron being piled onto the torso until death occurred¹⁸. Some well-known victims of pressing included Margaret Clitherow, saint and Martyr of York (1586)¹⁹ and Walter Calverley (1605)²⁰. The drawback to this style of torture was, of course, death. Although a handful survived and were even released, most succumbed to the weight.

The *caspicaws*²¹ (or *cashielawis*, meaning "warm hose") was a particularly notorious and devastating torture, found elsewhere as the "Spanish Boot". There were several versions of the boot and all caused excruciating agony. The earlier boot consisted of a frame around the lower leg and foot, similar to those that support young saplings. The Spanish Boot itself was an iron casing for the leg and foot that had a screw attachment for compressing the calf of the leg. Sometimes the leggings were applied to the leg and then heated or pre-heated before application. The advantage of the former method was questions could be asked before applying heat; otherwise, damages was so immediate there was little advantage to the interrogator. The threat of application of the Boot was perhaps one of the greatest persuaders for confession.

At times in France, high boots made of spongy leather²² were placed on the legs of the victim and then placed in front of a burning fire. Boiling water was poured into the boots penetrating the leather and subsequent shrinkage tore at the flesh. Another modification on the boot was to encase the victim's legs in crude stockings, made from parchment. Applied wet, the victims were placed next to a fire with and when the fabrics shrunk the ensuing pain was agonizing. The Irish customized the boot and modified the French practice by pouring melted resin into the boots.

*Brodequins*²³ described another type of torture where the victim was seated on a strong bench, and boards of suitable width and length were placed on the inside and outside of each leg, and

¹⁷ Keenan, Desmond. *The Real History of Ireland Warts and All*, Xlibris, 2015. page

¹⁸ <https://www.ranker.com/list/history-of-pressing/genevieve-carlton>

¹⁹ <https://weirdcatholic.com/2019/03/26/the-crushing-of-st-margaret-clitherow/>

²⁰ Pettifer, Ernest W. *Punishment of Former Days*. Waterside Press, 1992. Page 128.

²¹ Scott, George Ryley, *The History of Torture Throughout the Ages*, Routledge, 2013. Page 184

²² Lacroix, Paul. *A History of Manners, Customs, and Dress in the Middle Ages and Renaissance Period*. BoD, 2011, page 428

²³ <https://middleagetorture.weebly.com/brodequin-torture.html>

tightly bound in position with strong rope, the two legs in their casing being fixed together. Wedges of wood or metal were driven with a mallet between the center boards. Four wedges were used for ordinary torture and eight wedges in what was termed “extraordinary” torture. In many cases, the bones were fractured and the legs made useless.

Similarly, thumb²⁴ screws were made popular and called pyrowykes, pyrowinkes, pilnewinks, and penny-winks. The thumbscrews were designed to be survivable torture, since crushed fingers weren’t considered as important as other limbs and generally the person would still be able to confess.

The Rack

“The rack seldom stood idle in the latter part of Elizabeth’s reign”²⁵

Called the Chevalet Banc de Torture in France, the Escalero in Spain, Veglia in Italy and the Ladder in Germany, the concept of the rack stretches across a greater span of time than most torture devices, possibly having been in use from ancient Greece to modern times. An Athenian slave in Aristophanes’ *The Frogs* (406 BC)²⁶ is to be tortured by “Tying him to a ladder, by suspending him, by scourging him with a whip, by cudgeling him, by racking him, and further, by pouring vinegar in his nostrils, by heaping bricks on him, and every other way...”

Tiberius in 31 AD was said to have tortured a number of people, including the supposed racking of a friend²⁷. The tyrant Hieronymus, albeit a boy, was also said to have used the rack and scourging, possibly to elicit confessions from a saintly man named Theodorus^{28,29}. *The History of Torture* by Scott estimates that a royal warrant authorized the rack to be the preferred mode of torture for Templars and other histories agree.³⁰ As of 1420 the Duke of Exeter brought the rack to England while Constable of the Tower of London and the rack became known as the “Duke of Exeter’s daughter”.³¹

His version was an open, rectangular frame over six feet in length and raised three feet from the floor on four legs. Four people had to stand with two on each end and they used poles inserted into holes on the rope tighteners to tighten either side of the rack so the person in the middle became suspended by their arms and legs, then stretched until the joints became separated.³²

As time passed, a ratchet mechanism was developed which allowed a reduction of the operators to two, one at each end. Later a rack was invented with a central wooden roller that had a ratchet

²⁴ <http://www.medievality.com/thumbscrew.html>

²⁵ Veazie, W. *The Works of Henry Hallam*, Vol. 5, 1865. Henry Hallam was a Protestant historian and author of the *Constitutional History of England*, 1827.

²⁶ Bell, G. *The Comedies of Aristophanes: The frogs*, line 618. 1902. Page 92.

²⁷ Tacitus. *The Reign of Tiberius*. Walter Scott, 1890. Page 175.

²⁸ Polybius. *The Histories*, Volume 1. Macmillan, 1889, page 513

²⁹ Wanley, Nathaniel. *The Wonders of the Little World*. 1774. Page 303.

³⁰ Barber, Malcolm, *The Trial of the Templars*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, page 56.

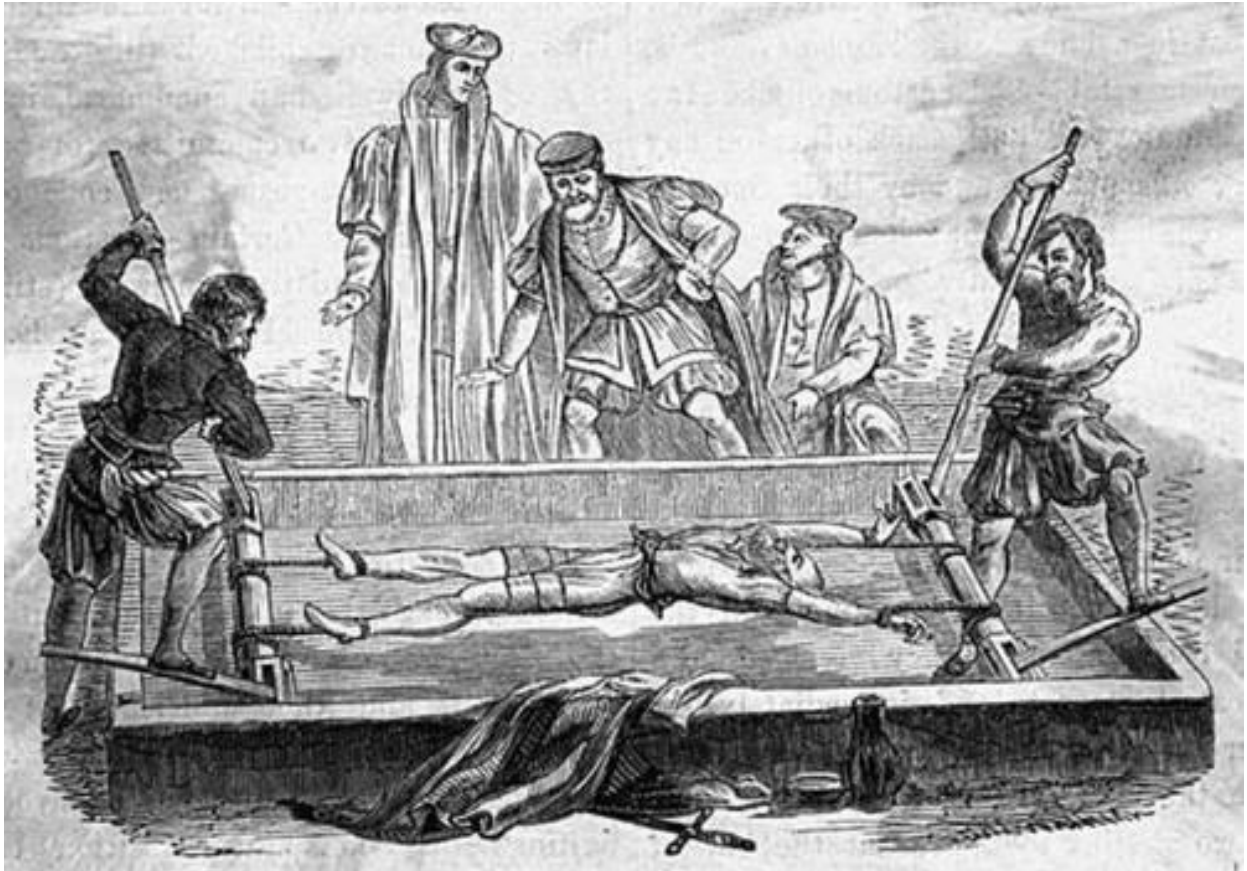
³¹ *Encyclopaedia Perthensis*. John Brown, 1816, page 573.

³² Abbot, Geoffrey. *Rack, Rope, and Red-Hot Pincers*. Brockhampton Press, 1993. Page 40.

at each end that was manipulated by a control bar, so only one man was required to tighten the ropes.

Miniature Project

The version created for this project is the one described above, using four “people” (in this case, hands) to operate. A picture on the next page shows this original design. My miniature consists of drilled pieces of wood with rollers made of pencils. The poles are substituted with steel “bars”, due to the miniature more likely having wooden poles snap under the tension. The “victim” is a cloth doll head and torso, with clay limbs sewn onto the torso with single pieces of thread to represent the joints.



Man being tortured on a rack, illustration from *The National and Domestic History of England* (1867) by William Hickman Smith Aubrey.