

History of death penalty



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Execution of criminals and political opponents has been used by nearly all societies. The practice of capital punishment is reserved for murder, espionage, treason or as part of military justice. In some countries sexual crimes such as rape, adultery, incest and sodomy and religious crimes such as apostasy often carry death penalty. Drug and human trafficking are also punished by death penalty. The use of formal execution extends to the beginning of recorded history. Most historical records and various primitive tribal practices indicate that the death penalty was a part of their justice system.

Communal punishment for wrongdoing generally included compensation by the wrongdoer, corporal, shunning, banishment and execution. Usually, compensation and shunning were enough as a form of justice. The response to crime committed by neighbouring tribes or communities included formal apology, compensation or blood feuds. Severe historical penalties include breaking wheel, boiling to death, flaying, slow slicing, disembowelment, crucifixion, impalement, crushing (including crushing by elephant), stoning, execution by burning, dismemberment, sawing, decapitation, scaphism, necklacing or blowing from a gun.

The breaking wheel is also known as the Catherine wheel, was a torture device used for capital punishment in the middle ages and early modern times for public execution by cudgeling to death. The wheel was typically a large wooden wagon wheel with many radial spokes, but a wheel was not always used. In some cases the condemned were lashed to the wheel and beaten with a club or iron cudgel, with the gaps in the wheel allowing the cudgel to break through.

Alternatively, the condemned were spreadeagled and broken on a St Andrew's cross consisting of two wooden beams nailed in an "X" shape, after which the victim's mangled body might be displayed on the wheel. During the execution of the parricide Franz Seuboldt in Nuremberg on 22 September 1589, a wheel was used as a cudgel: the executioner used wooden blocks to raise Seuboldt's limbs, then broke them by slamming a wagon wheel down onto the limbs. In France, the condemned were placed on a cartwheel with their limbs stretched out along the spokes over two sturdy wooden beams.

The wheel was made to revolve slowly, and a large hammer or an iron bar was then applied to the limb over the gap between the beams, breaking the bones. This process was repeated several times per limb. Sometimes it was 'mercifully' ordered that the executioner should strike the criminal on the chest and stomach, blows known as coups de grace (French: "blows of mercy"), which caused fatal injuries. Without those, the broken man could last hours and even days, before shock and dehydration caused death.

In France, a special grace, the *retentum*, could be granted, by which the condemned was strangled after the second or third blow, or in special cases, even before the breaking began. Afterwards, the condemned's shattered limbs were woven ('braided') through the spokes of the wheel, which was then hoisted onto a tall pole so that birds could eat the sometimes still-living individual. Death by boiling is a method of execution in which a person is killed by being immersed in a boiling liquid such as water or oil.

While not as common as other methods of execution, boiling to death has been used in many parts of Europe and Asia. Executions of this type were

often carried out using a large vessel such as a cauldron or a sealed kettle that was filled with a liquid such as water, oil, tar, tallow or even molten lead. Depending on the intended cruelty, the victim was either immersed before the liquid was heated or plunged, usually head first, into a boiling liquid. In some cases, the executioner could control the speed of demise by raising or lowering the victim by means of a hook and pulley system.

An alternative method was to use a large shallow receptacle that contained oil, tallow or pitch. The victim, who was then partially immersed in the liquid, was fried to death. Death in these cases was by severe scalding caused by the hot liquids (water or oil). Immersion burns would form on the arms, torso and legs. Prolonged scalding would result in fifth-degree burns of the skin. The epidermis and the dermis are destroyed leading to the complete breakdown of subcutaneous fat. Eventually the heat would expose muscle leading to breaches in major arteries and veins.

Other than that, disembowelment is a method used as death penalty at earlier centuries. Disembowelment is the removing of some or all of the vital organs, usually from the abdomen. If performed on a living creature, it is fatal in all cases. It has historically been used as a severe form of capital punishment. The last organs to be removed were, invariably, the heart and lungs, so as to keep the condemned alive and in pain as long as possible. In England, the punishment of being hanged, drawn and quartered was typically used for men convicted of high treason.

This referred to the practice of drawing a man by a hurdle (similar to a fence) through the streets, removing him from the hurdle and hanging him from the neck disemboweling him slowly on a wooden block by slitting open his

abdomen, removing his entrails and his other organs, and then decapitating him and dividing the body into four pieces. The man's head and quarters would often be part boiled and displayed as a warning to others. As part of the disemboweling, the man was also typically castrated and his genitals and entrails would be burned.

Women who were accused of high treason were, for modesty's sake, instead burned alive. Death by crushing is a method of execution for capital punishment that has a history during which the techniques used varied greatly from place to place. A common method of death throughout South and South-East Asia was crushing by elephants. Elephants can be trained to execute prisoners in a variety of ways, and can be taught to prolong the agony of the victim by inflicting a slow death by torture or quickly killing the condemned by stepping on the head.

Death of burning is death brought about by combustion. As a form of capital punishment, burning has a long history as a method in crimes such as treason, heresy, and witchcraft. If the fire was large (for instance, when a large number of prisoners were executed at the same time), death often came from carbon monoxide poison before flames actually caused harm to the body. If the fire was small, however, the convict would burn for some time until death from heat, shock, the loss of blood and the thermal decomposing of vital body parts.

When this method of execution was applied with skill, the condemned's body would burn progressively in the following sequence: calves, thighs and hands, torso and forearms, breasts, upper chest, face and then finally death. On other occasions, people died from suffocation with only their calves on

fire. Several records report that victims took over 2 hours to die. In many burnings a rope was attached to the convict's neck passing through a ring on the stake and they were simultaneously strangled and burnt.

In later years in England some burnings only took place after the convict had already hanged for half an hour. In many areas in England the condemned woman was seated astride a small seat called the saddle which was fixed half way up a permanently positioned iron stake. The stake was about 4 metres high and had chains hanging from it to hold the condemned woman still during her punishment. Having been taken to the place of execution in a cart with her hands firmly tied in front of her she was lifted over the executioner's shoulder and carried up a ladder against the stake to be sat astride the saddle.

The chains were then fastened and sometimes she was painted with pitch which was supposed to help the fire to burn her quicker. Blowing from a gun is a method of death penalty execution in which the victim is tied to the mouth of a cannon and the cannon is fired. At the turn of the 20th century, in Persia, blowing from a gun was considered a benefit for the convicted as the alternative existing methods of execution would involve long tormentous dying.