"Fear is the basis of the whole - fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death. Fear is the parent of cruelty, and therefore it is no wonder if cruelty and religion have gone hand-in-hand." - Bertrand Russell

Medieval Torture Devices

Reaching its peak in the 12th century, torture was used in capital cases as well as against suspected heretics. From the mid-14th century to the end of the 18th century, torture was a common and sanctioned part of the legal proceedings of most European countries which was approved by the inquisition in cases of heresy. The most common means of torture included burning, beating and suffocating, however the techniques below are some of the more extravagant and depraved methods used and allowed by the Roman Catholic Church.
The Rack was an instrument of torture often used in the Middle Ages, and a popular means of extricating confession. The victim was tied across a board by their ankles and wrists, rollers at either end of the board were turned by pulling the body in opposite directions until dislocation of every joint occurred. According to Puigblanch, quoted in Mason's History of the Inquisition, "in this attitude he experienced eight strong contortions in his limbs, namely, two of the fleshy parts of the arms above the elbows, and two below; one on each thigh, and also on the legs." Bound, the heretic, could then be subjected to other forms of torture for the exaltation of their faith.

Other forms included the detainee being fastened in a groove upon a table on his or her back. Suspended above was a gigantic pendulum, the ball of which had a sharp edge on the lower section, and the pendulum lengthen with every stroke. The victim sees this engine of destruction swinging to and fro only a short distance from ones eyes. Momentarily the keen edge comes nearer, and at length cuts the skin, and gradually cuts deeper and deeper, until their life has fully expired.
With their feet in the stocks, two pieces of timber clamped together, over and under, both across each leg above the ankles. The soles of their feet then having been greased with lard, a blazing brazier was applied to them, and they were first blistered and then fried. At intervals a board was interposed between the fire and their feet and removed once they disobeyed the command to confess themselves of guilt for which they had been charged.

Being more painful, but less fatal than racking, this was the torture most in vogue when the subject chanced to be of the female sex. It was also favored in cases where children were to be persuaded to testify against their parents. Slighter tortures consisted of binding a piece of iron to a limb and putting a twister mark to force it inwards, as was pressing the fingers with rods between them, or removing a nail from fingers or toes, which were all highly practiced upon persons of not sufficient strength to support the pulley, rack, or fire.

The victim's nostrils were pinched shut, and eight quarts of fluid were poured down the victim's throat through a funnel. Other techniques included forcing a cloth down the throat, while pouring water, which made a swallowing reflex pushing it further down into the stomach producing all the agonies of suffocation by drowning until the victim lost consciousness. Instead of water, the torture was sometimes conducted with boiling water or vinegar. Death occurs from distention or rupturing of the stomach. One of the many cases recorded by the Inquisition, was in 1598 concerning a captured man, who was accused of being a werewolf and "possessed by a demon" while in prison. The official report states only that he had such a thirst that he drank a large tubful of water so that his belly was "distended and hard", and then later died.
The Heretics Fork

This instrument consisted of two little forks one set against the other, with the four prongs plunged into the flesh, under the chin and above the chest, with hands secured firmly behind their backs. A small collar supported the instrument in such a manner that the victims were usually forced to hold their head erect, thus preventing any movement. The forks did not penetrate any vital points, and thus suffering was prolonged and death was always nearly avoided. The pointed prongs on each end to crane the persons head made speech or movement near impossible. The Heretics Fork was very common during the height of the Spanish Inquisition.

The Pear

The pear was a torture device used on females. This device was inserted into the vagina, or mouth of the victim and then expanded by force of the screw to the maximum aperture setting of the victims cavity. The antrum would then irremediably become lacerated, nearly always fatally, ripping the tissue, flesh and membranes. This item became extensively applied throughout the Spanish Inquisition to force confessions from those accused of Witchcraft. The pointed prongs at the end of the segments serve better to rip into the throat, the intestines or the cervix. Many paid dearly when the Pear was their fate.

The Branks

The Branks, also sometimes called Dame's Bridle, or Scold's Bridle comprised of a metal facial mask and spiked mouth depressor that was implemented on housewives up until the early 19th century. Many clergymen sustained in this husband's right to handle his wife, and to use "salutary restraints in every case of misbehavior" without the intervention of what some court records of 1824 referred to as "vexatious prosecutions." Generally a husband would need only to accuse his wife of disagreeing with his decisions, at which the Branks could be applied. The subject would then be paraded through the streets, or chained to the market cross where she was exposed to public ridicule.
The Wheel

The wheel was one of the most popular and insidious methods of torture and execution practiced. The giant spiked wheel was able to break bodies as it rolled forward, causing the most agonizing and drawn-out death. Other forms include the "braided" wheel, where the victim would be tied to the execution dock or platform. Their limbs were spread and tied to stakes or iron rings on the ground. Slices of wood were placed under the main joints, wrists, ankles, knees, hips, and elbows. The executioner would then smash every joint with the iron-tyred edge of the wheel--however the executioner would avoid fatal blows to give the victim a painful death. According to a German chronicler, the victim was transformed into a huge screaming puppet writhing in their own blood. It looked like a sea monster with four tentacles, and raw slimy shapeless flesh, mixed with splinters of bone. After the smashing had taken place the victim would literally be "braided" into the wheel and hung horizontally at the top of the pole.

The Breast Ripper

The name of this device speaks for itself. Women condemned of heresy, blasphemy, adultery, and witchcraft often felt the wrath of this device as it violently tore a breast from their torso. This device was highly put into service during the massacre of the Danes.

Hanging cages

These cages were usually hung around the outsides of town halls and ducal palaces, they were also near the town's hall of justice and surprisingly cathedrals. The victim, naked and exposed, would slowly wither from hunger and thirst. The weather would second the victims death by heat stroke and sunburn in the summer and cold in the winter. The victims and corpses were usually previously mutilated before being put in the cages to make a more edifying example of the punishment. The cadavers were left in the cages until the bones literally fell apart.
The Garotte

Originally, the garotte was simply hanging by another name. However, during Medieval times, executioners began to refine the use of rope until it became as feared and as vile as any serious punishments. Executioners first used the garotte to end the suffering of heretics broken on the wheel, but by the turn of the 18th century the seed of an idea involving slow strangulation was planted in the minds of lawmakers. At first, garottes were nothing more than an upright post with a hole bored through. The victim would stand or sit on a seat in front of the post and chanting crowd, and a rope was looped around his or her neck. The ends of the cords were fed through the hole in the post. The executioner would then pull on both ends of the cord, or twist them tourniquet-styled, slowly strangling the victim. Later modifications included a spike fixed into the wood frame at the back of the victim’s neck, parting the vertebrae as the rope tighten.

The Head Crusher

With the victim’s chin placed on the lower bar, a screw then forces the cap down on the victims cranium. The recipients teeth are crushed and forced into the sockets to smash the surrounding bone. The eyes are compressed from their sockets and brain from the fractured skull. This device, although not a form of capital punishment, is still used for interrogational purposes. It was to inflict extreme agony and shock and leave the victim in its grasp for hours. Other methods included the head screw (below) which was placed around the forehead and tighten. The accused became so frantic by the extreme panic of having their head crushed that they confessed to anything.

Burnt at the Stake

If the Inquisitor wanted to be sure no relics were left behind by an accused and convicted heretic, he would select death by burning at the stake as the preferred method of execution. With few exceptions, death came from being burned alive. Frequently, burning a victim at the stake was cause for a crowd. Not content to merely learn about the spectacle after it was over, the masses wanted to be entertained. Reflecting on those facts, and understanding such events occurred “under the law,” one can clearly understand how Thomas Hobbes (this is a contemporary biography) came to the conclusions he did about man in a state of nature. If man is capable of such violence and inhumanity in a state of civilization, of what is he capable when there are no laws and there is no society? (Carole D. Bos)
The Iron Maiden or Virgin of Nuremberg was a tomb-sized container with folding doors. The object was to inflict punishment, then death. Upon the inside of the door were vicious spikes. As the prisoner was shut inside he or she would be pierced along the length of their body. The talons were not designed to kill outright. The pinioned prisoner was left to slowly perish in the utmost pain. Some models included two spikes that were driven into the eyes causing blindness. One of these diabolical machines was exhibited in 1892.

The Strappado

One of the most common torture techniques. All one needed to set up a strappado was a sturdy rafter and a rope. The victim's wrists were bound behind their back, and the rope would be tossed over the beam. The victim was repeatedly dropped from a height, so that their arms and shoulders would dislocate. This was a punishment of the Secret Tribunal until 1820.

The Boots

Also known as the bootikens. The legs of the patient were usually placed between two planks of wood, which they binded with cords and wedges. The torturer used a large, heavy hammer to pound the wedges, driving them closer together. Forceful blows were used to squeeze the legs to jelly, lacerating flesh, protruding the shins, and crushing the bones; sometimes so that marrow gushed out. Once unloosed the bones fall to pieces, rendering the legs useless. This torture was most overwhelming, as one can imagine.
**Judas Cradle**

The victim was stripped, hoisted and hung over this pointed pyramid with iron belts. Their legs were stretched out frontwards, or their ankles pulled down by weights. The tormentor would then drop the accused onto the pyramid penetrating both orifices. With their muscles contracted, they were usually unable to relax and fall asleep. As mentioned by Anne Barstowe, the torturers took high advantage of positions of authority to indulge in the most pornographic sessions of sexual control over heretics.

**The Guillotine**

The Guillotine became the official instrument of execution in France in 1792, during the French Revolution. The device was named for Joseph Ignace Guillotin (1738-1814), a member of the Revolutionary assembly. He regarded the device as a quick and merciful type of execution. A guillotine had two posts joined by a crossbeam at the top. A heavy steel knife with a slanting edge fit in grooves in the posts. A cord held the knife in place. When the executioner cut the cord, the knife dropped and cut off the victim's head. It was not until 1981, that France abolished capital punishment, and that the use of the guillotine ended. The Guillotine family were later forced to change their surname’s as a direct result of this invention.