



**TRUE  
CRIME**

# **EXECUTIONERS**

**MEN AND WOMEN WHO  
KILL FOR THE PEOPLE**

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KILL FOR THE PEOPLE**

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# **EXECUTIONERS**

## **MEN AND WOMEN WHO KILL FOR THE PEOPLE**



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Lethal Injection

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# Introduction

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To kill in the name of one's country is a glorious feat, one rewarded by medals. But to kill in the name of the law, that is a gruesome, horrible function, rewarded with scorn, contempt and loathing by the public. french executioner, henri anatole deibler

## CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

Our ancestors believed that death was an occupational hazard for anyone found guilty of murder or treason. In fact, according to the Bloody Code of 1795, even minor crimes such as theft or the malicious maiming of cattle were punishable by death in England. The British, like the Aztecs, Greeks, Romans and Turks meted out sentences that were, by modern standards, disproportionate with the crimes committed to control the population. These severe punishments did not have their desired effect unless they contained some element of gory entertainment or grand theatre.

## THE PERFORMANCE

Whatever the form of punishment – be it a simple beheading by axe, or a more elaborate death by burning, drowning or boiling in oil – there have always been people employed by the state to carry them out. Executioners are people with the technical expertise to design an execution from beginning to grisly end, demanding authority and respect while inflicting terrible pain and suffering, and simultaneously fulfilling the illusive 'entertainment factor' that makes a public execution an occasion – something people will travel for miles to witness.

Executioners are undoubtedly a rare breed and their varied responsibilities often sit uncomfortably on their shoulders. Talented technicians sometimes lack the star quality needed to turn an execution into an event, and often great performers lack the ability to kill cleanly and efficiently without unnecessary mess.

## AN ANCIENT SOLUTION

The death penalty has existed since the earliest civilisation, in fact execution is probably the oldest form of law enforcement, and therefore the job of executioner is as old as that of a prostitute or priest. Before written laws, before prisons, before courtrooms, juries and judges, the most obvious, the cheapest and often the most convenient punishment was death. During these times an execution would have been an informal affair, the death penalty would have been meted out by an angry mob, and the accused could expect to be stoned to death, or even torn apart by the bare hands of local people in their own communities. Of course, this form of execution still happens in some parts of the world, but today we tend to see that kind of vigilante justice as a crime in itself, and not a state-approved form of punishment.

## THE DRACONIAN CODE

In 621 bc, The Draconian Code of Athens declared that any crime, however minor, should be punishable by death. It's widely thought by historians that Dracon, the Athenian law giver responsible for the code, decided that the minor crimes deserved to be punished by execution, and he simply had no more severe punishments for those who had committed more serious crimes.

In ancient Greece, you could even be forced to become your own executioner. Most famously the philosopher Socrates was forced to drink hemlock by an Athenian jury after being found guilty of impiety. He was instructed to drink the poison and then to walk until his legs grew heavy. Hemlock causes numbness, paralysis and loss of speech followed by failure of the respiratory system and then death. Difficult as it may be to believe, he got off relatively lightly. This was a punishment given to someone from the upper echelons of society since, although death by hemlock is undoubtedly uncomfortable, it is also fairly dignified. Those from a less noble background would have suffered severe pain and humiliation, by either being stoned to death or being hurled from a high point behind the Acropolis into a pit of spikes and hooks.

### E<sub>M</sub>P<sub>H</sub>A<sub>S</sub>I<sub>S</sub> O<sub>N</sub> P<sub>A</sub>I<sub>N</sub>

The onus during these early forms of executions was most certainly on painful punishment, rather than painless euthanasia. The guilty were meant to suffer and only God could excuse them from their agonising fate. The executioner was employed to deliver the people's punishment, to vent the rage and grief of the victim and the victim's family upon the condemned in a manner that befitted the crime.

### M<sub>I</sub>S<sub>T</sub>A<sub>K</sub>E<sub>S</sub> D<sub>O</sub> H<sub>A</sub>P<sub>P</sub>E<sub>N</sub>

Today, we generally consider ourselves more refined, and less bloodthirsty than our ancestors, but perhaps this is a misconception. Execution by electric chair or lethal injection can be extremely painful and gruesome, and the technicians employed to carry it out have to be aware of this when they take the job. When the electric chair is the method of choice, it is not uncommon for the victim's skin to bubble and burn or even to catch fire while the victim is still breathing. This is one of the main reasons why so many people oppose it as a form of capital punishment.

### T<sub>H</sub>E L<sub>E</sub>G<sub>E</sub>N<sub>D</sub> O<sub>F</sub> Y<sub>E</sub>L<sub>L</sub>O<sub>W</sub> M<sub>A</sub>M<sub>A</sub>

On 22 June 1983, John Louis Evans, a convicted armed robber and murderer, was executed at Holman Prison near Atmore in Alabama. The chair used on this occasion was called Yellow Mama because of its coat of bright yellow paint. It had been built by an inmate in 1927. It was a very old device which hadn't been used since 1965 – in truth few rational people would happily use a hairdryer this old and decrepit – and yet Yellow Mama was still deemed suitable for executing a man.

At 8.30 p.m. the first jolt of 1,900 volts shot through Evans's body. Sparks and flames erupted from the electrode tied to Mr Evans's left leg and the electrode burst from the strap holding it in place. Then a large cloud of grey smoke and yellow sparks poured from under the hood covering Mr Evans's face, and the nauseating smell of burning flesh along with a sound like sizzling bacon, filled the room. He was still alive. A second jolt of electricity was administered – more smoke emanated from his leg



and head – but he was still breathing. At 8.40 p.m. a third and final jolt of electricity was passed through Mr Evans's body. At 8.44 p.m. doctors finally pronounced him dead. It had taken 14 minutes to perform the execution. Is that really our definition of a relatively painless, modern and ethical sound punishment? Opinion is fiercely divided.

## HANGMAN WANTED . . .

The job description of an executioner has evolved over centuries and varies widely depending on the society that employs them. In pre-Columbian cultures, an executioner was a shaman, a performer of a grand ritual, the representative of divine judgement on the earth – even a god. He was bestowed with the freedom of his community and would have certainly been revered (if not actually worshipped) by his followers.

In some Middle Eastern cultures, an executioner would have been a member of the victim's family – a brother or father of the wronged party who was granted the right to visit his rage upon the accused in the form of violent lashes administered using whips or chains. In some parts of Iran, the family of the victim, or the wronged party themselves, still have the opportunity of administering lashes to the accused.

In Ali Pasha's Turkey, the condemned were sometimes impaled on a stake and slowly roasted over a fire and the close family of the accused were forced to turn the spit – so a person could be made to act as executioner for his or her own kin.

## BILLY-NO-MATES

Professional executioners are often shunned by society. They are usually feared, hated and avoided by their peers, which is why so many of them opt for anonymity over notoriety. The Australian executioners, who had usually been transported to the colonies for committing a crime themselves and were living in communities of people from the same criminal background, did everything in their power to conceal their true identities – often wearing false humpbacks and thick black beards – this explains why they are all nicknamed 'blackbeard' in surviving historical records. In Britain, many executioners chose to operate under the moniker 'Jack Ketch'.

Some executioners have remained almost anonymous while others rose to celebrity status. The Pierrepoints of England are still celebrated as a famous family of hangmen, producing three generations of executioners for the crown. The business of execution in many parts of the world is largely the domain of various families. The children are indoctrinated into the profession early in life and employed as assistants to their more experienced fathers and grandfathers. Their responsibilities might involve setting up the guillotine or gallows, holding a prisoner's neck in place while the blade is hoisted, or simply cleaning up the mess afterwards. They will continue in such a role until they have learnt the trade well enough to take over as head executioner, hence you will often find that a family name reoccurs again and again during the course of this book.

## TODAY'S EXECUTIONERS

Today, most executions are conducted in private and therefore executioners are more like

technicians than entertainers. Their primary responsibility is to make sure the process is conducted with decorum and scientific precision. In the province of Yunnan in China, mobile execution teams travel in vans converted from 24 seat buses, administering lethal injections at all times of the day and night. The windowless execution chamber contains a stretcher where the prisoner is strapped down. When the needle is attached by a doctor, a police officer presses a button which releases an automatic syringe, administering the lethal drug into the prisoner's vein. The execution can be watched on a video monitor and can be recorded if necessary. When the procedure is complete, the van simply drives away with its newly deceased cargo. The prisoner will be quickly cremated or, it is often claimed, harvested for viable body parts. This sinister development in China's capital punishment programme has been called 'progress', but others regard the execution bus as the modern equivalent of the phantom coach and horses of popular legend, arriving as if out of nowhere to transport the unwitting passenger into the afterlife, for better or worse.

This book explores the incredible lives and careers of the men and women employed to kill on behalf of the state, as well as those leaders who were ultimately responsible for ordering torture and execution and dreaming up new and creative methods of punishment. We investigate various techniques and the people who championed them, as well as the lives of the victims who, through their own evil-doing or through sheer misfortune, endured the most terrible pain and suffering ever inflicted by man. What, if anything, did they do to deserve it? And what went through the executioner's mind as he delivered the fatal blow?

# Part One: Early Forms Of Execution

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# Crucifixion

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Crucifixion stands out as one of the most infamous punishments in our history. One that symbolises a religion and is best remembered for one specific act that took place upon a hill named Golgotha outside the walls of Jerusalem about 2,000 years ago: the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet this torturous penalty was a common practice long before the time of Jesus, dating back as far as Babylonian and Egyptian times almost 2,000 years earlier.

Indeed, it was carried out in huge numbers. The Persian emperor, Darius The Great, crucified 3,000 Babylonian captives in 519 bc. Alexander the Great continued the custom during his siege of Tyre in 332 bc executing 2,000 of his enemies. These mass crucifixions pale in comparison, however, with events following the end of the Third Servile War in 71 bc. Two years before, a band of rebel slaves led by ex-gladiator Spartacus, was successful in threatening the Roman Republic. In retaliation, the senate sent Commander Marcus Licinius Crassus to crush the revolt, resulting in the capture of approximately 6,000 rebels. Crassus ordered them to be executed by way of crucifixion along a 200 kilometre (124-mile) stretch of the Appian Way from Rome to Capua.

Rome, it is thought, acquired this capital punishment from the Carthaginians, who applied the penalty for relatively minor offences. In Carthage, nobody was exempt from the cross. Even their own generals would be nailed to wood following defeat on the battlefield. Rome, however, did not crucify its citizens unless they were convicted of high treason. The punishment was reserved for those most despised by the state. Slaves, rebels, traitors were fodder for the cross. So, too, were the Jews, who were severely persecuted under Roman rule.

Much of what we know about Roman crucifixion comes from the writings of one particular Jew, Josephus – a Judean diarist and historian who later defected to Rome around ad 71. He describes the punishment as, ‘the most wretched of deaths’ believing suicide to be a more preferable way to die. It was such a feared method that just the threat of crucifixion caused an entire garrison at Machabeus to surrender. Another account from the records of Josephus tells of the Roman siege of Jerusalem in ad 70 in which more than one million people died, the majority of them Jewish. The Romans surrounded the city walls and crucified around 500 Jews a day stopping only when they found they had no more wood for crosses.

Even animals were liable to fall foul of the cross. Pliny the Elder, in his work *Naturalis Historia* tells of the Battle of the Allia in around 387 bc when a Gallic army was able to invade via the Capitoline Hill due to the lack of warning from the guard dogs of Rome. The Romans were so furious that the dogs were crucified for their lack of vigilance and, from then on, mass canine crucifixions were held upon the hill every year in remembrance.

## PRELUDE TO THE CCROSS – THE BEGINNING OF THE END

The punishment did not begin with the crucifixion. Before the agony of the cross, the condemned were forced to carry the horizontal cross-beam or patibulum weighing approximately 45.3 kilograms (100 pounds) from the prison to beyond the city walls and the execution site. On this final journey past crowds that flocked to jeer the disgraced criminal on their way, the condemned were struck by the guards using whips with small pieces of metal or bone at the tips which ripped chunks of flesh from their bodies, causing heavy loss of blood and, in many cases, severe shock. This was called scourging.

and many died from this preliminary punishment before even reaching their destination.

On their arrival, the victims were stripped naked and their clothes divided among the unit soldiers that had led the procession carrying the titulus or small sign on a staff stating the felon crime. Nailed above the victim's head, this sign would join the condemned upon the cross for all to see.

Before the nailing, the victim would be offered a medicinal brew called 'the sopor' to numb the pain. Far from a miracle aid, its ingredients consisted purely of a cup of vinegar mixed with gall and myrrh. While this seems to conflict with the desire for prolonged suffering, it should be considered that such a potion providing anaesthetic qualities would have potentially forestalled premature death and therefore allowed the condemned to remain conscious during his sentence. This fits the common belief that torture played a large part in crucifixion. Far from just a death penalty, the plan was to subject the body to as much prolonged physical pain as possible.

## N<sub>AILED</sub>

The victim was then made to stretch out his arms which were then affixed to the cross-beam either by rope or nails. These nails were in fact tapered spikes of up to 18 centimetres (7 inches) in length. They were made of iron – an expensive material at this time – and so were often removed from the dead and re-used or sold as healing amulets.

There are several schools of thought regarding how these nails were applied. The usual depiction of those on the cross has the nails through the hands of the victim, but for this to be feasible there would need to be some method of support by ropes or the inclusion of a footrest or sedile; a small seat attached halfway down the vertical beam. Without this, the nails would simply rip through the hands as the weight of the body would be too great. Another belief is that the nails were entered through the wrists between the four carpal bones and two forearm bones as depicted in the Shroud of Turin. Another consideration combines the previous two suggesting the nails went in at the hand at a downward angle passing through the carpal tunnel and, from there, entered the olive post. Whatever the technique, the pain would have been excruciating. Adding insult to injury, it is a distinct possibility that even the victim's genitals were nailed to the sedile – far from an aid to support but purely to increase the agony and indeed the shame of the condemned.

## T<sub>HE</sub> C<sub>CROSS</sub>

The cross evolved from simple origins. Early crucifixions used trees to crucify their criminals and this was actually called 'fastening to a tree'. It is thought that the Gibeonites' tree-hanging of King Saul's seven children was an early form of crucifixion. It then developed into a single wooden stake planted in the ground, much as Jehovah's witnesses describe Christ's crucifixion. There then came the addition of the horizontal beam which was either fixed at the top of the vertical 'stipes' to form a T-shaped cross (known as the Tau or St Anthony's Cross) or attached slightly further down to create the more familiar Latin cross that became the symbol of Christianity.

In fact, crucifixes were constructed in many different shapes. In addition to the 'T', there existed both 'Y' and 'X'-shaped crosses. The positions in which a victim could be crucified seem to be limited only by the imaginations of the cruel and sadistic rulers of the time. If the usual method of crucifixion was not deemed torturous enough, Roman executioners later took to crucifying the

condemned upside down! This is known as the Cross of St Peter after the disciple who requested the amendment because he did not feel worthy enough to die in the same way as Jesus.

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## DEATH

Death on the cross was far from instantaneous. If the victim managed to survive the scourging along the journey to the execution site followed by the brutal penetration of the nails through extremities, he was in for hours or even days of unbearable suffering.

The cause of death has been a matter of debate. It is widely believed that death came from asphyxiation due to the hyper-expansion of the lungs. To assist breathing, the victim would endeavor to raise his body up by his arms or use the footrest to take the body's weight. This theory has since come under question after experiments apparently showed no inhalation problems while suspended by the arms.

There are accounts of those who survived the cross in the face of such immense pain. Josephus tells of two friends he saw being crucified and, using his sway with the state, managed to obtain the necessary reprieves. During the English Civil War, when crucifixion allegedly made an alarming return under Oliver Cromwell's government, a woman called Agnes Griffin was reported to have been nailed to a tree and forced to eat her own flesh and drink her own blood. Despite enduring such torment, she survived and was even given money by the justices.

However, these cases were few and far between. Crucifixion was intended to be a capital punishment and so death to the condemned was, for the most part, inevitable. The bodies would be allowed to decay upon the cross. This was the final insult. In ancient times, burial was an act assigning honour to the dead. To be left above the earth to endure the weather and mutilation from the circling vultures was deemed a great dishonour and, to a Jew, would mean the dead remained 'under God's curse'.

Crucifixion, then, was a comprehensive method of punishment intending not only to humiliate and inflict pain upon the condemned but with the public nature of the whole process. From carrying the crossbeam past the heckling crowds to the slow deaths beyond the city walls, it acted as a deterrent to all would-be dissenters and wrongdoers of the time. It also provided a lawful avenue for the savage degenerate to create imaginative methods of inducing the most amount of pain. This avenue was finally closed with the eventual abolition of crucifixion during the reign of Constantine I when, c.337 ad, Christianity became the state religion.

# Stoning

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*'He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone'*

John: 8.7

Born out of a need for community justice, stoning, or lapidation is the oldest form of capital punishment. It is at least as old as written language and the most common method of execution mentioned in the Bible. It is mentioned in Greek history as well as Christian, Jewish and Islamic texts.

## STONING IN JUDAISM

There is evidence to suggest that the Jews were the first people to practise stoning. The Torah, like the Koran, describes God-approved punishments for particular sins. The punishment known as 'sekila' (or stoning) is set aside in the Torah for serious sexual and religious crimes such as incest, bestiality, idolatry, sorcery and witchcraft. Lewis's *Origins of the Hebrews*, describes the following horrific execution from biblical times:

'When the offender came within four cubits of the place of execution he was stripped naked, on leaving a place before, and his hands being bound, he was led up to the fatal place, which was an eminence twice a man's height. The first executioners were the witnesses, who generally pulled off their clothes for the purpose: one of them threw him down with great violence upon his loins; if he rolled upon his breast, he was rolled upon his loins again, and if he died by the fall there was an end. But not if the other witnesses took a great stone, and dashed it upon his breast as he lay upon his back, and then if he was not dispatched, all the people who stood by threw stones at him until he was dead.'

Although Jewish religious law officially approves the use of sekila, no Rabbinical courts today administer sentences involving any form of capital punishment.

## STONING IN CHRISTIANITY

Christians have come in for (and have also been responsible for) some pretty brutal executions throughout history. St Stephen was the first Christian to die for his faith, he was tried by the Sanhedrin for blaspheming against Moses and God, and stoned to death by an angry mob outside the city walls. As a result, he is often depicted in art clutching three stones in his palm.

In seventeenth century Italy, Giovanni Pelanchion refused to convert to Papism, and as a result he was tied by one leg to the tail of a mule and dragged through the streets of Lucerne while being stoned by the townspeople. They believed that the devil possessed him and kept him alive using evil powers, so they took Giovanni to the riverside and chopped off his head, whereby the devil promptly gave him up. Giovanni died on the riverbank and was left there to rot, unburied.

## DEATH IN THE PILLORY

Although stoning has never been widely practised in Britain, sometimes an hour in the pillory amounted to the same thing. During the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, prisoners who were sentenced to a spell in the pillory had more to worry about than rotten tomatoes. Criminals convicted of attempted sodomy, seditious words, extortion, fraud and perjury were punished publicly in an attempt to discredit their reputations. Pillories were built in busy places such as Charing Cross in London, where crowds could easily gather. The prisoner was placed on a raised platform with his head and arms secured in a wooden structure.

The pillory was positioned so that crowds could gather on all sides of the platform and pelt the victim with various missiles including rotten vegetables and eggs, blood and guts from slaughterhouses, dead animals, mud, excrement and even bricks and stones. Many people died as a result. The highwaymen and murderers Egan and Salmon were subjected to the pillory on Park Lane in London in March 1756. This account is given in the Newgate Calendar:

Egan and Salmon were taken to Smithfield amidst a surprising concourse of people, who no soon saw the offenders exposed on the pillory, than they pelted them with stones, brickbats, potatoes, dead dogs and cats, oyster shells and other things. The constables now interposed but, being soon overpowered the offenders were left to the mercy of the enraged mob. The blows they received occasioned their heads to swell to an enormous size; and by the people hanging on to the skirts of their clothing they were near strangled. They had been on the pillory for about half an hour when a stone struck Egan on the head, and he immediately expired.

It is interesting to note that Salmon, Egan's partner in crime, was not much luckier than him. On that occasion the ordeal in the pillory halted with Egan's violent death, but Salmon died in squalor in Newgate Gaol soon afterwards.

## STONING: THE TECHNIQUE

Stoning is an unusual method of execution because it involves the community directly in the killing instead of a single executioner. For this reason it bears some similarities with the most contemporary form of execution: lethal injection.

## DEATH BY COLLECTIVE

Lethal injection involves as many as three technicians but only one of them actually administers the fatal dose – the other two carry dummy doses. None of the technicians will ever find out which one of them administered the poison. In the same way, the 'inclusive' nature of stoning means that none of the participants will ever know which stone struck the fatal blow. If a judge and jury can be said to deliver the 'people's' verdict, then death by stoning ensures that the people, rather than the court, the government or the prison warden, literally deliver the sentence. The problem with this is that it implicates the entire community – making murderers out of everybody, even if it does so with the approval of God himself.



The festival of Gotmar is staged the day after the Krishna Paksha 'amavasya', during the Hindu month of Bhadon. It is a festival 'celebrated' by the inhabitants of Savargaon and Pandhurna near the city of Chindwara, India. Gotmar literally translates as 'hitting with pellets', and the name describes exactly what happens during the festival. Over 5,000 people gather to throw stones at each other. The story behind the festival is an ancient and a fascinating one:

In olden times (the exact period is unknown), the ruler of Pandhurna got to hear about the beautiful daughter of the raja of the neighbouring town of Savagaon on the other side of the river Jam. He successfully crossed the river and abducted this lady from the palace of Savagaon. But the people of Savagaon became aware of this and chased the abductor, pelting him with rocks as he crossed the river. The people of Pandhurna were gathered on the riverside and, seeing their leader attacked with rocks, began retaliating. The raja of Pandhurna was successful in reaching the other side of the river and for this reason it is thought that he had the protection of the goddess Chandi.

The Gotmar festival is held each year to commemorate the incident. It is estimated that between 750 and 900 people are injured in the skirmishes every year and inevitably some are killed, the violence being fuelled with illegal alcohol. In recent years, attempts have been made to ban the festival, or at least to ensure that alcohol is not available to buy on the day, but still the people of Pandhurna and Savargaon insist on celebrating Gotmar. The injured go immediately to a local temple hoping to be miraculously healed by the goddess Chandi.

## WIDESPREAD CONDEMNATION

Many human rights organisations such as Amnesty International have long condemned the use of stoning as particularly barbaric, and the fact that it is most often employed as a punishment for so-called moral crimes (such as prostitution or adultery) rather than those most would consider to be serious crimes (such as murder, drug dealing or rape) makes this form of punishment even more controversial in the eyes of western governments. International pressure means that often in these cases a stoning sentence is passed, but later quashed or commuted to a lesser punishment such as lashes or a prison sentence.

There are no non-religious courts left in the world that legally recognise this form of punishment. The United Nations has concluded that treating adultery or consensual fornication as a criminal offence goes against international standards of human rights. However, it has been, and is to a lesser extent, still in use in areas of the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa where sharia law is practised.

## STONING IN SHARIA LAW

Sharia law literally translates as 'The Path to the Water Source' and it denotes a system of criminal justice, but it is actually meant as a code for living. Many Muslims believe that sharia law is a necessary factor in the life of a good Muslim. Under sharia there are a number of crimes known as Hadd offences. These are crimes which carry certain pre-ordained penalties such as stoning, lashes or amputation. These penalties have apparently been laid out in the Koran by the prophet Mohammed and they apply to crimes such as unlawful intercourse, false accusation of unlawful intercourse, the drinking of alcohol, theft and highway robbery. More women than men tend to be accused, tried and found guilty of unlawful intercourse and therefore they are more likely to fall victim to this mode

violent punishment.

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## STONING OR CRUSHING?

Some historical references to stoning actually pertain to the practise of crushing a victim to death using large, heavy stones. This technique was once used for torture in British prisons, but for the purpose of the book we have covered executions of this type in *Piene Forte Et Dure* on pages 274–83.

The most common stoning method puts the emphasis well and truly on a slow and painful death rather than quick and painless euthanasia. It is important that the prisoner does suffer. Typically the victim's hands are tied behind their back and they are wrapped head to toe in white cloth. Then they are partially buried in the ground in order to keep them still. A male prisoner is buried up to the waist and a female is usually buried up to her shoulders or her neck. Then a circle is drawn around the prisoner and the congregation are asked to select stones which are small enough that they could not cause death with a single blow, but big enough to inflict significant harm. The congregation take the positions on the outside of the circle, and the victim is then pelted with stones until they are obviously dead. Death is eventually caused either by excessive blood loss or serious head trauma. The process is extremely painful and it can take up to an hour for death to occur. Sometimes the victims' parents, their spouse and even their children are forced to witness the killing.

## IRAQ

Stoning was still in use in some parts of Iraq as recently as May 2007. 17-year-old Du'a Khawir Aswad had been born and brought up within a Kurdish religious group called Yezidi. She had the misfortune to meet and fall in love with a boy from a sunni-muslim background. As a result of this relationship, Du'a was condemned to death by male members of her family and hard-line religious leaders, in the belief that she had shamed them by failing to return home one night. Some reports suggested she had also converted to Islam in order to be closer to her boyfriend. Du'a sought shelter in the house of a Yezidi tribal leader in Bashika, a Kurdish town near the northern capital of Mosul. A large crowd gathered to watch as eight or nine men stormed the house and dragged the young woman out into the street. They pelted her with rocks for half an hour until she was killed. A month later a video of the execution appeared on the Internet.

## IRAN

Officially, the administration in Tehran called a moratorium on stoning in 2002, but Amnesty International and other human-rights groups claim that the practise continues to this day. In 2005, the organisation Women Against Fundamentalism in Iran, claimed that there had been ten stonings during the first six months of 2002, and a further twenty-six reported cases of stoning between 2002 and 2003 – seventeen of those victims were women and the majority were convicted of unlawful intercourse.

According to the Women Against Fundamentalism website, article 99 of the Islamic Punishment Act stipulates that:

Whenever the act of adultery is confirmed based on his or her own testimony, during the stoning

process, the religious judge should throw the first stone and the others follow. But if adultery confirmed based on the testimony of witnesses, first the witnesses throw stones and then the religious judge and subsequently the others.

The act stipulates that no less than three believers should be present while the sentence is carried out. Interestingly, it also states that, in the unlikely event that the prisoner manages to pull themselves out of the ditch, the stoning should be called off. In some countries if this happens the condemned is usually shot dead as they make their escape.

In October 2004, it was reported in the international press that thirteen-year-old Zhila Izadi from the north-western city of Marivan in Iran, had been condemned to death by stoning having been raped by her fifteen-year-old brother, Bakhtiar. She was found to be pregnant with his child, and her devoted father, believing that her daughter had brought shame on the family, turned her in to the local authorities. Campaigning by organisations such as Amnesty International and the International Committee Against Stoning saw her sentence reduced from death by stoning to fifty-five lashes matching her brother's sentence, though she received these while she was heavily pregnant. The young woman gave birth to her child days later while in prison.

## NIGERIA

Sharia law was introduced in some areas of Northern Nigeria in 2002. The most famous case involving stoning in Nigeria is that of Amina Lawal who was found guilty under sharia law of having committed unlawful sex when she conceived a child out of wedlock. The case was eventually quashed at appeal when it was established that Amina was already pregnant when the law came into force. Lawal's case became the focus of human-rights organisations all over the world. Despite the fact that Amina's freedom was actually secured on a technicality, rather than an ideological U-turn, Lawal's lawyers hailed the result as a victory for justice. There were some spectators at the trial who disagreed with the court's verdict. One man who had come to hear the ruling said: 'I would have preferred Amina to be stoned to death. She deserves it.'

# Human Sacrifice

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Today we see human sacrifice as the stuff of old-fashioned children's picture books. The enduring image of a safari-suit-clad explorer crouched, sweating and petrified in an oversized cauldron, has come to represent an anachronistic and bigoted western view of indigenous peoples and their customs.

In fact, human sacrifice has been practised by people in many parts of the world. It was not reserved for 'bloodthirsty primitives', but formed an important part of sophisticated belief systems within many societies, including those that have evolved to form our own.

It would not be outlandish to claim that any war motivated by religion also involves an element of human sacrifice because blood is inevitably spilled in order to strengthen a belief system or a way of life. The Crusades of the middle ages, the holocaust of World War II, the attacks of 11 September 2001 on the USA and the subsequent invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan all involved the sacrifice of human life. At least some of those who died in the wake of these terrible events believed that they would be rewarded in the afterlife, just as an Aztec slave whose heart was ripped from his body in a sacrificial ceremony believed he would bypass many phases of the Aztec purgatory and be transported directly to paradise.

In many cases, the line between execution for the sake of punishment and execution for ritual sacrifice has become blurred. Criminals and captives were often chosen for religious sacrifice simply because they were the members of any society most easily disposed of, as were (sadly) illegitimate children and unmarried men and women. On the other hand, many victims of punishment execution died purely because of their religious beliefs and refusal to deny their faith – even on pain of death. The Christian martyrs come under this category.

The following pages explore human sacrifice of various types. For the purpose of this book a human sacrifice is defined according to the motives of the executioner and the society or group that condoned the killing. In a human sacrifice, the executioner is almost always a religious leader, a highly respected member of the community rather than an employee of the government or prison system. He or she occupies a completely different position in the community from one who executed his victims according to the will of a judge and jury. Instead of a life of isolation and secrecy, the life of one of these religious leaders was often one of privilege and power and although the names of many of the priests and holy men have been erased over the centuries – their many brutal acts have become legendary.

There are three main types of human sacrifice evident in history. They are ritual, cannibalistic and retainer sacrifice.

## RITUAL HUMAN SACRIFICE

Ritual human sacrifice involves the killing of a human being in order that the victim's body and lifeblood can be offered to a supernatural force. Most participants believing that the strength and happiness of their gods, and consequently that of the people, depend upon human bloodshed. The Meso-Americans were prolific in their ritual sacrifice of captives and commoners to their vast pantheon of gods, and it was looked upon as an integral part of their worship. The ancient Chinese and the Celts believed likewise.

Cannibalistic human sacrifice involves killing a person in order to invoke the powers of the Gods or ancestors through the consumption of various body parts, or to punish an evil-doer. The reasons for consuming human organs are usually spiritual, but in societies where people rely on hunting for meat and do not keep livestock, human meat from sacrificial victims might form the main source of protein and animal fats for those privileged enough to receive it. The people of the Kombai who live in the jungles of Papua have been known to kill and cannibalise people they deem to be witches, or Khakhu Kumu. They believe that these people eat the souls of their victims, and the only way to punish them properly is to kill and eat them. As the soul is perceived to dwell in the brain and in the stomach, it is these body parts which must be eaten. There are men still living within the Kombai tribe who have killed and eaten male witches.

### TAKING ONE FOR THE TEAM

Retainer sacrifice involves killing important or useful members of the household belonging to a dead patriarch, king or nobleman in order that they might continue to serve him in the next world. This was perhaps the most widely practised form of human sacrifice – many cultures adopted this practise, including the Vikings, the Egyptians, the Romans and the Greeks. Servants, concubines, wives and employees considered it a great honour to accompany their lord and master into the afterlife, and were willing to die in order to continue serving him. Perhaps they were so willing because the alternative was often a future of slavery, extreme poverty and eventual death through malnutrition or disease.

### PROPAGANDA?

It is important to remember that stories of human sacrifice often come from invaders of the particular society. These people would have been keen to portray themselves as vastly more civilised and superior to the ‘primitive natives’ they had come to conquer. Therefore many historians are sceptical about the true role of human sacrifice within these ancient civilisations. In the years following their invasion of Britain, the Romans invested a lot of energy in accusing the Druids of incredible evil towards the Celts. Stories of enormous fires on which were thrown women and children for the appeasement of the pagan gods filtered back to Rome, in the same manner that Polish immigrants to Britain were occasionally accused of eating babies in the years following World War I. It is also worth noting that during a large-scale invasion, religious scriptures, ceremonial artefacts and other important cultural items were often wiped from the face of the earth. When the Spanish Conquistadors invaded South America they burnt as many sacred books as they could get their hands on, obliterating centuries of history because they believed them to be the work of Satan. The Romans destroyed or bastardised Pagan religious sites in order to introduce their religion of choice, Christianity. Therefore the real role played by human sacrifice within these long-dead civilisations can never be fully understood.

Hard evidence of these practises does exist in many places. One thing is for certain; the concept of human sacrifice is certainly ancient and has its roots in reality, even if the actual occurrences were in fact more rare than we’ve previously been led to believe.

# Ritual Human Sacrifice

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The earliest evidence of ritual human sacrifice dates from at least 5,000 years ago. Early Danish farmers sacrificed tools, food and human body parts, placing them in pots before throwing them in bogs.

The first recorded case of ritual sacrifice occurred at Sigerdal, near Copenhagen around 3500 BC. The bodies of two young girls were found there, one of whom still had a chord wrapped around her neck. The motive behind this sacrifice was probably to ensure the health of precious crops during the growing season.

There is an enduring belief that in order to get something from the gods, one must first offer the gods something. The life of a human being is generally counted among the most valuable gifts one can give. This is an idea that permeates almost every religion on Earth, including major religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

## THE BINDING OF ISAAC

All three abrahmic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) feature the story of the binding of Isaac. According to this story God (also called Yanweh or Allah, depending on the chosen version) ordered Abraham to slaughter his favourite son Isaac in the land of Moriah. Abraham and Isaac travelled for three days until they came to a hill. Their servant remained at the foot of the hill while Abraham and Isaac proceeded alone, Isaac carrying the wood upon which he was due to be sacrificed. During the journey Isaac repeatedly asked Abraham where the animal for the burnt offering was. Abraham then replied (somewhat ominously) that God would provide one. Just as Abraham was about to kill Isaac, he was stopped by an angel and given a ram which he sacrificed in place of his precious son. Thus it is said, 'On the mountain the Lord provides' (Genesis 22). As a reward for his obedience he received a promise of numerous seed and abundant prosperity. Many followers of the abrahmic religions consider it important that God stayed the hand of Abraham and did not actually require him to go ahead with Isaac's murder. For believers, this proves that theirs is a merciful and gentle God who does not harm his followers unnecessarily. However, the very fact that Abraham of the story was not utterly dumbfounded by God's demand for blood demonstrates that it was once a commonly held belief that the sacrifice of an eldest son or virgin daughter may place you firmly in the Lord's good books.

Perhaps the most important human sacrifice included in the Bible is that of Jesus himself, which Christians believe gave his life to ease the debt of human sin. Many believers would not consider this a true human sacrifice because Jesus was not human as such, but rather an incarnation of God in human form. Also, his tormentors were not of the conviction that God would be appeased by the death of his only son – so they were not consciously offering up his soul to a supernatural being, merely punishing him in the same manner as they punished common criminals. Nevertheless there was certainly an exchange of sorts taking place in the eyes of Christians. According to the Bible teachings Jesus went to his death at the hands of the Roman authorities so that God could forgive humankind of our sins against him (See 'Crucifixion' on pages 18–25).

The Christian ritual partaking of the holy communion, or eucharist, is a symbolic re-enactment of this momentous exchange. During communion, Christians eat of the body and drink of the blood

Christ in exchange for God's absolution, and as a reminder of his supreme sacrifice for our sins. The ritual could be interpreted as having roots in cannibalistic sacrifice because in consuming the body and blood of Christ, Christians expect to imbibe something of his spirit.

Of course, over the centuries many Christians, Jews and Muslims have sacrificed themselves and others in the name of religion – and some continue to do so to this day. How this differs fundamentally from the examples we are about to explore, or whether the latter-day al-Qaeda suicide bomber is really very different from a Medieval Catholic martyr or a Mayan sacrificial victim is a controversial subject more suitable for discussion in another book.

## THE CELTS

There is strong evidence that ritual human sacrifice took place in ancient Celtic society. It should be pointed out that much of the surviving written evidence comes from the Roman invaders, who would have had a political agenda. Nevertheless, writers such as Strabo and Diodorus Siculus maintained that a normal Celtic sacrifice involved striking a man who had been consecrated for sacrifice in the back with a sword, and making prophecies based on his death throes. These killings would not have been carried out unless a druid (a Celtic priest) was present to officiate, though it is unclear whether the druid himself would strike the death blow. According to Strabo other methods of sacrifice involved shooting with arrows, impalement, or the burning of humans on a huge fire of wood and straw, along with livestock and various wild animals.

It is certainly worth noting that no evidence for the Celtic use of bows and arrows has ever been found by archaeologists. The Celts were not keen archers and the Celtic words for bow and arrow were adopted from Latin and Norse, so it is likely that this was an invented rumour based in Roman political propaganda.

## THE WICKER MAN – FACT OR FICTION?

Julius Caesar personally accused the people of Gaul of building huge human effigies from wood, the limbs of which were filled up with living people and set alight. In *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (Commentary on the Gallic Wars) written between 58 and 45 bc, he claimed that those chosen for such a fate were usually thieves and petty criminals as these pleased the gods most, but when stocks of petty criminals ran low, innocents were sacrificed in the same manner. There is more actual evidence for this method of sacrifice than for Strabo's bow and arrow nonsense.

The notion of a 'wicker man' has become an enduring part of Celtic heritage – the image of a large god-like effigy turning up in blockbuster films, poetry, folk art and sculpture as well as neopagan festivals. This symbol of Celtic heritage has been enjoying something of a resurgence for some time now – leading many to believe that the wicker man is just a sensational invention by the Victorians to romanticise our shared past. In fact, a variation on the wicker man can be found in many places including Irish and

## WELSH LEGEND.

A story included in the second branch of the ancient Welsh book, *The Mabinogi*, describes a

unusually cruel form of punishment whereby the victims were enclosed in an iron chamber and given an abundance of alcohol. While the victims were getting drunk, the village blacksmiths gathered to build a huge charcoal fire around the chamber, gradually heating the iron chamber until it became white-hot – slowly roasting the unfortunate inhabitants.

Whether this method was ever actually employed is a matter for debate. One imagines that the building of an iron chamber large enough to house a human would be expensive and elaborate in the extreme, not to mention the effort involved in gathering enough local blacksmiths to build and feed the fire until it was hot enough to cook people alive! However, evidence for the existence of the Brazen Bull (see Phalaris on pages 65–69) suggests that similar contraptions were built and used by other cultures, so perhaps it is not beyond the realms of possibility.

## TERANIS: GOD OF THUNDER

The Celts worshipped three main gods and each required a different kind of sacrifice. According to ancient Celtic legend, Teranis, the god of thunder, required his sacrificial victims to be burnt alive in giant wicker cages. It is not a huge leap from giant wicker baskets to wicker ‘men’, built as a likeness of Teranis. This seems a more likely form of punishment than the iron chamber described in the Mabinogi.

## THE LINDOW BOGMAN

The strongest evidence that the Celts were exponents of ritual human sacrifice was discovered in 1983, when an English man named Andy Mould found the body of a man buried in Lindow bog during the first century AD. The body was so well preserved that it was possible to ascertain his last meal and the nature of his death. The Lindow bogman was struck three times on the head with a blunt object (probably an axe), strangled using a thin cord which closed the windpipe and broke two upper vertebrae, and had his throat cut in quick succession before being thrown into the bog. This pattern fits with the threefold method of human sacrifice often described in Celtic legend. The Celts believed, like Christians do, that the number three was a sacred number, coinciding with their three most powerful gods, Teranis, Esus and Teutates. Teranis required his victims to be burnt to death, but sometimes a weapon like an axe made a suitable substitute. Esus was the god of the underworld – his sacrificial victims were usually hung from trees, stabbed to death or strangled in some manner, Teutates was the god of the tribe and required his victim to be drowned. The manner of Lindow bogman’s death may have been planned as a sacrifice to all three gods at once. His throat was most likely cut immediately after death in order to drain the blood from his body – another sign that his death was carefully planned and executed for ritual purposes. The blood was probably collected in a vessel, whereby it was offered to the gods, or imbibed by the officiating druid.

## UNUSUAL FINDINGS

During the investigation into the case of the Lindow bogman scientists made a number of other interesting discoveries. Firstly, the Lindow man had worn a beard – facial hair is almost unheard of in other bog bodies. His hair had been cut a few days before his death, his fingernails were clean and



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