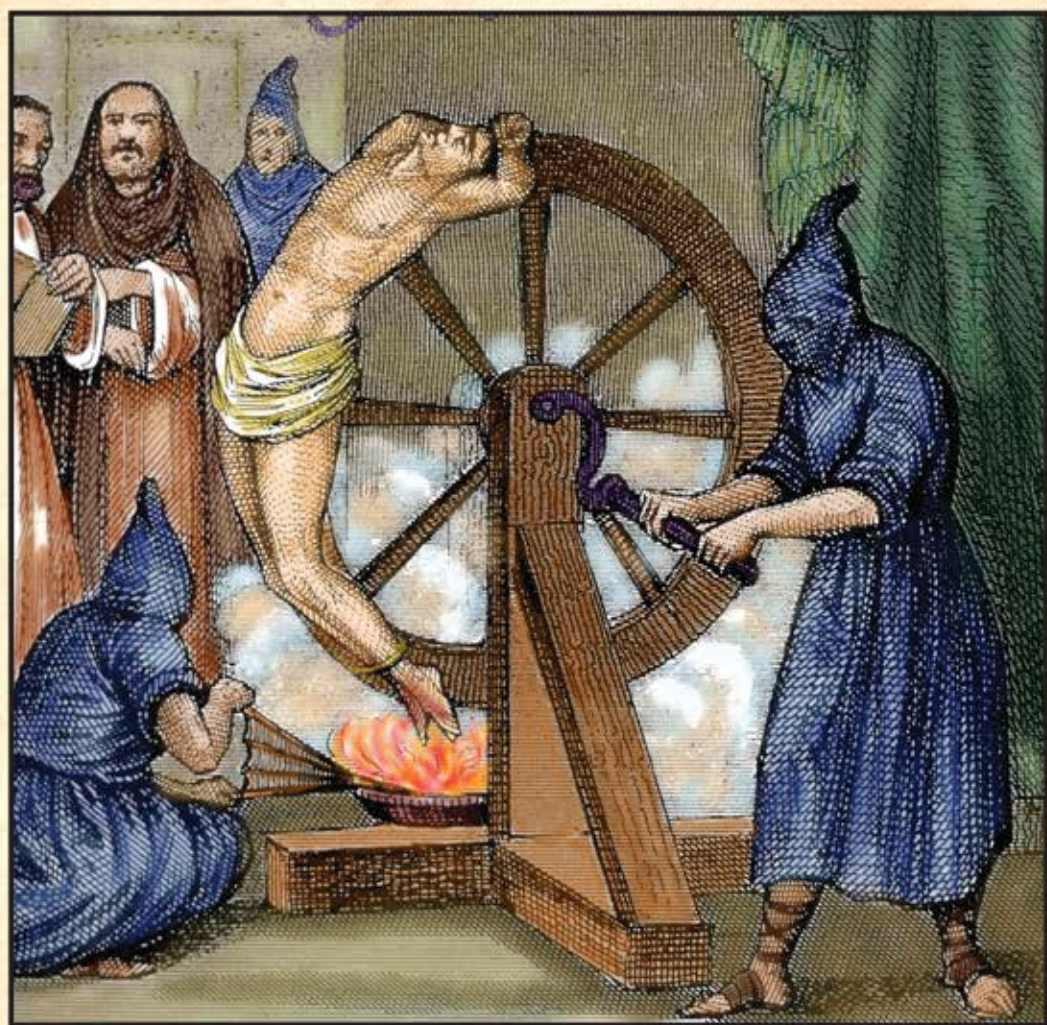


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# Medieval Punishment and Torture



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# IMPORTANT EVENTS OF MEDIEVAL TIMES



**800**

In Rome, Pope Leo III crowns Charlemagne emperor; his Carolingian dynasty rules western Europe until 987.

**1000**

A century of invention in farming begins; devices such as the heavy plow increase agricultural productivity and help double Europe's population.

**632**

The Prophet Muhammad dies as Islam begins to expand both east and west of the Arabian Peninsula.

**ca. 950**

Europe's first medical school opens in Salerno, Italy.

**1099**

The First Crusade ends Muslim rule in Jerusalem until 1187, when the Muslims under Saladin recapture Jerusalem from the Crusaders.

400

600

800

1000

1200

**476**

Romulus Augustulus, the last Roman emperor in the West, is dethroned.

**1066**

William of Normandy defeats the last Anglo-Saxon king at the Battle of Hastings, establishing Norman rule in England.

**1200**

The rise of universities begins to promote a revival of learning throughout the West.

**1130**

Church authorities in France ban tournaments; the ban on these popular festivals, which provide knights with opportunities to gain prestige and financial reward, is later reversed.

**1184**

Church officials meeting in Verona, Italy, approve burning at the stake as a punishment for anyone found guilty of heresy.







## INTRODUCTION

# The Middle Ages and Torture

In 1307 a group of knights known as the Templars caught the attention of Philip IV the Fair, king of France. Jealous of the Templars' power and wealth, Philip decided to use his influence to destroy the group altogether. Accordingly, Philip accused the Templars—individually and as a group—of a long list of trumped-up crimes that included sorcery, devil worship, and much more. When the Templars dismissed the allegations as completely untrue—which they were—Philip was prepared. Joining forces with Pope Clement V, he had the knights arrested and brutally tortured over a period of several weeks.

The tortures were grim indeed. The torturers beat the knights unmercifully, fracturing bones and damaging joints. They stretched the Templars' bodies on diabolical machines that dislocated shoulders and arms. They knocked out the knights' teeth and refused them food. At last, broken in both body and spirit, the men began admitting to the charges. Among those who confessed was the group's leader, Jacques DeMolay. Eager for the tortures to come to an end, DeMolay admitted that he and his fellow knights had denied the divinity of Jesus and had mocked the cross and other important symbols of Christianity. "And [DeMolay] would have confessed that he had slain God Himself," wrote an author who lived at the time, "if they had asked him that."<sup>1</sup>

Given the abuse to which DeMolay and his fellow knights were subjected, it is hard to blame them for admitting to crimes

they did not commit. Indeed, after days of appalling violence, it would have taken an exceptionally strong person to continue to hold out when a confession, genuine or not, would have brought the torture to a close. Regardless of why DeMolay and the others had agreed to admit wrongdoing, Philip and Clement were delighted with the confessions. They had successfully discredited and dismantled the Templars and gained power at their expense.

The story was not over, however. With the tortures having run their course, DeMolay thought better of his confession. In 1309 he recanted his testimony—that is, he admitted that he had not told the truth. Furious, Philip sentenced DeMolay and many of his followers to death by burning—an especially horrifying method of capital punishment in which victims were tied to a post and forced to stand as their bodies were consumed by flames. In 1314 the sentence was carried out on DeMolay. It was a dreadful end for a man who had never committed any sort of crime whatsoever.

WORDS IN CONTEXT

**recant:** Take back testimony.

## “The Stuff of Nightmares”

The experiences of DeMolay and his fellow Templars, though, were hardly unusual for medieval Europeans. Throughout the Middle Ages, which stretched from the 400s to the 1300s and perhaps beyond, many tens of thousands of people lost their lives through grim and terrible measures, often for crimes they had never committed. Millions more, in turn, were brutally tortured, their bodies twisted and torn in grotesque ways which as often as not resulted in permanent damage. Once again, many of the people thus victimized were completely innocent, and even those who were guilty had often committed a crime no more serious than petty theft.

Though overshadowed by the classical era, which preceded it, and the Renaissance, which followed it, medieval Europe has long been known for creativity in architecture, literature, music, and other important aspects of culture. Unfortunately, the creativity that medieval Europeans poured into art, poetry, and technology was accompanied by



## Medieval Europe, Circa 1250



another—and much more appalling—form of inventiveness: torture and punishment. Many medieval punishments were designed to cause the maximum possible pain, and the Europeans of the time had ample opportunity to practice their craft on living, breathing human beings. The torture devices of the Middle Ages, writes a modern historian, were “the stuff of nightmares.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, compassion was not a much-admired virtue during the Middle Ages in dealing with prisoners and criminals. To be sure, a few medieval voices urged those in power to err on the side of mercy. In 1162, for instance, Pope Alexander III noted that it was “better to pardon the guilty than to take the lives of the innocent”<sup>3</sup>—a guiding principle that



## FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

### Books

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Warren C. Brown, *Violence in Medieval Europe*. London: Routledge, 2010.

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Fordham University, "Ordeal of Boiling Water," Medieval Sourcebook. [www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/water-ordeal.html](http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/water-ordeal.html). A primary source regarding the medieval ordeal by water.

Guy Geltner, "Medieval Prisons," Academia.edu. [www.academia.edu/707904/Medieval\\_Prisons\\_Between\\_Myth\\_and\\_Reality\\_Hell\\_and\\_Purgatory](http://www.academia.edu/707904/Medieval_Prisons_Between_Myth_and_Reality_Hell_and_Purgatory). An article about prisons and prison life in the Middle Ages, especially in the later medieval era.

Historical Torture Museum, "Instruments Gallery." [www.torturamuseum.com/instruments.html](http://www.torturamuseum.com/instruments.html). Part of the website of a traveling museum exhibit on torture. Includes pictures and text about various torture methods and the role of torture in medieval society.



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