

Crucifixion: A History

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Death By Crucifixion in the Roman World

According to the Greek historian Herodotus (484 BC - 425 B.C.), crucifixion seems to have originated with the ancient Persians and dates back to at least 700 B.C. The Romans soon adopted and perfected this ancient death penalty.

In the Roman Empire, death was dictated by class. The upper class patricians and equestrians were allowed dignity in death. They were given poison, which they used in private. In complete contrast, the slaves were executed by public crucifixion.

In most circumstances, Roman law forbade crucifixion as a punishment for its average citizens. This punishment was reserved for their enemies, rebellious foreigners, citizens who committed treason, and, of course, slaves. In fact, slaves were crucified so frequently that crucifixion became known as the *servile supplicium* or *slaves' punishment*.

Constantine, Rome's first Christian emperor, banned crucifixion in 345 AD.

The Roman View On Crucifixion

The Romans did not view crucifixion as a “normal” death sentence. Crucifixion was considered humiliating, disgraceful, and obscene. The punishment was reserved for the lowest class of people and the most despicable crimes. Even under these circumstances, some Romans considered crucifixion uncivilized.

In the first century B.C., Roman philosopher and statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero called crucifixion “the most cruel and disgusting penalty”.

The Roman slave and gladiator Spartacus led a rebellion of 70,000 slaves. In 71 BC, when the rebellion was beaten, the victorious Roman general Crassus crucified 6,000 of those slaves.

The Cross

The first crucified victims are believed to have been nailed or tied to trees. A variety of methods followed. The Romans seem to have standardized the procedure with the use of the cross.

Several cross varieties were used for crucifixions. The tau, or Saint Anthony's cross, was made from a horizontal beam fixed at the very top of the vertical piece, forming a T. The second type of a traditional cross was the t-shape, called the Latin cross, in which the horizontal beam was fixed about one-quarter of the way down the vertical piece. Saint Andrew's cross consisted of two diagonal beams forming an X. The last type, consisting simply of a vertical wooden stake, was also used in some instances.

In AD 70, during the time that Roman General, and later Emperor, Titus was beating down the Jewish revolt and beginning the siege of Jerusalem, he was crucifying more than 500 Jews each day.
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Death's Sweet Release

Death did not often come quickly. A healthy person could survive as long as two days on the cross. The victim, always naked, would be taunted and ridiculed by the citizens. Insects would infest the victim's eyes, mouth, and open wounds. Death was slow, demoralizing, and agonizing.

Proper burials for crucifixion victims were not allowed during the Roman period. The victim would be left on the cross as food for birds of prey and any wild animals that could reach high enough to scavenge from the cross. At times the bodies would be removed from their crosses and simply tossed away as trash.

Crucifixion Today

Most of us in today's world do not live in fear of crucifixion. You would be forgiven for believing that the gruesome form of torture and execution is no longer practiced. However, you would be wrong.

Crucifixion has been used at various times in many countries from the time of its conception. Japan adopted the practice during the Age of Civil Wars (1138-1560), which is particularly astounding since they had gone the previous 350 years with no capital punishment at all. Crucifixion is believed to have been introduced to the Japanese along with Christianity. The Japanese also crucified its prisoners during World War II.

Today, both Iran and Sudan continue to use crucifixion as a death penalty punishment.