

Taken from Maxim (Volume 1, Number 3, 1999): “The 50 Worst Ways to Die”

The following are some ways people were executed in Europe during the time period we are studying. My intent here is not to “gross you out.” It is not even to shock you. The sad fact is that throughout history, especially in Europe, people have thought of incredibly cruel and barbaric ways to punish those who have committed crimes. This, unfortunately, is part of history.

As you are aware, we are currently studying the Renaissance and the continuing development of nation-states. During this time, some monarchs tried to unify their young nations through religion. In Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella imposed the Inquisition on the population. Established in 1479, the Inquisition was a national agency created to convert Spanish Muslims and Jews to Christianity. It was presided over by Tomas Taquemada. The Inquisition tortured suspected heretics and infidels without mercy. Many of the techniques described below were used, ironically enough, in the name of Christianity.

## 1. Cracked Open

Where: Scandinavia  
When: 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries  
Description: The victim’s chest was split open with an ax. After cracking the rib cage, the lungs were removed. Death came from massive blood loss.  
Where else: All over Europe during the same time period

## 2. Impaled on a Spike

Where: Rome and the Balkans  
When: 1<sup>st</sup> through 16<sup>th</sup> centuries  
Description: The victim was impaled through the pelvis. Gravity did the rest as the body slowly moved down the pole. On the way down, internal organs were pierced. Struggling only hastened death by wriggling the stake up toward the skull.  
Where else: Vlad the Impaler, the 14<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian warlord who inspired Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, got his tag by impaling the captured soldiers of armies he defeated.

### 3. Spun to Death

Where:	Europe
When:	the Middle Ages through the 1800s
Description:	The victim was staked out on his back. Then, his limbs were struck repeatedly with a mallet or other blunt instrument. Once the bones were crushed, the malleable appendages were braided through the spokes of a wheel raised horizontally on a post. Finally, the victim was spun around until death ensued.
Where else:	The Romans tied Christians to the edge of a giant wheel that would crush them when it was gently rolled down a hill.

### 4. The Iron Maiden

Where:	Sparta and in Spain during the Inquisition
When:	200 B.C. (Sparta) and the 15 <sup>th</sup> through 17 <sup>th</sup> centuries (Spain)
Description:	The victim was placed in a hollow statue laced with knives on the inside. The door was then shut. Death came slowly as the 20 or so blades went in an inch or two. Sometimes it would take days.
Where else:	In Britain, many prisoners were placed in a knife-lined trunk at the same time.

### 5. Burned at the Stake

Where:	Spain during the Inquisition
When:	15 <sup>th</sup> through 17 <sup>th</sup> centuries
Description:	Unlike the movies, the pyre of wood was actually built up to the victim's eye level. The lucky ones died quickly from asphyxiation, but Spanish Inquisitors were sometimes able to keep their victims alive for up to 30 minutes.
Where else:	4 <sup>th</sup> Century Roman emperor Diocletian was known for wrapping prisoners in oil- or pitch-soaked cloths and then lighting them on fire.

### 6. Boiled Alive

Where:	Europe
When:	13 <sup>th</sup> to 16 <sup>th</sup> centuries
Description:	If the victim was lucky, a cauldron of oil or water was boiled <i>before</i> they were placed inside. If the victim was not so lucky, he was placed inside the cauldron and allowed to simmer as the water or oil slowly reached its boiling point.
Where else:	Far East

## 7. Stuffed with Rodents

Where:	Rome and Germany
When:	1 <sup>st</sup> through 17 <sup>th</sup> centuries
Description:	The victim was strapped to a table with a pot of rats upended on his stomach. Then a fire was lit atop the cauldron. The rats had no choice but to burrow into the condemned's stomach.
Where else:	Central Africans put a tin box filled with fire ants on the victim's stomach and waited for them to eat their way out.

## 8. Pulled apart by Horses (“Drawn and Quartered”)

Where:	The Caribbean and Europe (of course!)
When:	15 <sup>th</sup> century
Description:	Each of the victim's appendages was tied to a different horse. Then, the horses were sent in four different directions. With inexact departures, the victim was usually just yanked around until the tormentors gave up and cut off his limbs.
Where else:	The Renaissance French and Spanish bent over two trees and tied one of the victim's legs to each.

## 9. Sawed in Half

Where:	China, the biblical Middle East, and Europe
When:	In some European locales, one could still see saws used right up until the 1840s
Description:	The victim was hung upside down and essentially sawed in half with a two-man saw. Sometimes the victim would remain alive until the executioners reached his heart.
Where else:	The Chinese cut from the head down.