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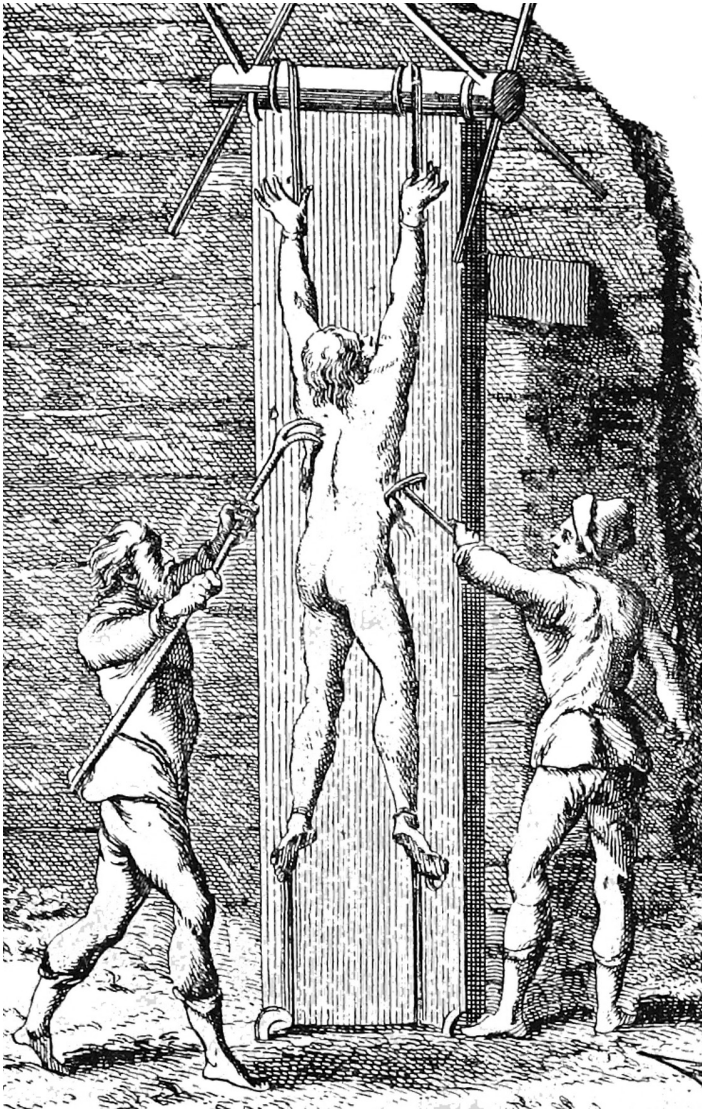


The Ancient World

c.1000 BC to AD 500

KING SHOU OF SHANG

THE LAST OF the Shang Dynasty of Chinese kings, Shou ruled between 1075 and 1046 BC. From his splendid capital city of Yin, Shou's immorality and cruelty knew no limits. He wholly ignored matters of state, with the exception of setting extremely high taxes to fund his debauched lifestyle. Drunken orgies were commonplace at court. One of Shou's most infamous follies was constructing a large pool filled with wine and overhanging with branches of roasted meat. Shou and his companions could then float on the pool in canoes, reaching down to drink and up to eat. His favourite concubine was Daji, for whom he built pleasure gardens filled with rare and exotic creatures – all at the expense of his downtrodden subjects.



Depiction of a man being flayed alive

THE END OF A DYNASTY

Punishments for anyone who dared speak against Shou were profoundly cruel. One court official was flayed alive, while another was carved into strips and hung out like dried meat. Shou's own uncle was put to death by having his heart plucked out. A favourite form of execution was to warm a metal cylinder until red-hot and force the condemned to embrace it.

The reign of terror came to an end when an army supporting the rebel leader Wu of the Zhou Dynasty defeated Shou's army at the battle of Muye. Knowing that the end of his regime was inevitable, Shou retreated to his burning palace and committed suicide. The new king, Wu, placed Shou's head on a stake outside Yin's gates for all to see.

KING ASHURBANIPAL OF ASSYRIA

Ashurbanipal, who reigned from 668 to 627 BC, was the last great king of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, which spread across the Middle East and into parts of North Africa and Anatolia. Although famed for building a vast library at Nineveh, Ashurbanipal's cruelty was more renowned. His armies laid waste to the lands of his enemies, destroying towns, smashing dams, and setting crops alight. He was brutal to captives, severing their hands, noses, ears and fingers. When one of his cities rebelled, he slaughtered its people and piled the corpses in front of the main gate. Rebellious nobles were flayed and their skins hung over the city walls.