

Historical introduction to the falanga articles

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Falanga is one of most frequent reported torture methods.¹ Falanga has a long historical background, known as being used both for punishment and as torture.² In countries whose authorities wish to hide that torture has taken place, falanga is preferred by the torturers as a method with maximum pain, lasting consequences and minimum visible evidence.³

Falanga means beating of the soles of the feet with instruments of wood or metal, such as baseball bats, clubs, rods, sticks, rifle butts or other objects. The victim is usually fixed with the feet tied together in an upward position and torture is administered on the naked soles. The fixation prevents the victim from protecting himself, thus increasing the psychological effect of the beating. After the torture the victim may be forced to walk on salt, broken glass, sharp gravel, stand on a wet floor or he may be forced to jump whilst carrying heavy burdens or other things in order to enhance the pain and the after effect. The immediate after effects are pain,

extravasations and oedema on the feet and lower legs. The subsequent invisible sequels may be pain localised to the region, often described as cutting, burning and sometimes spreading to the calves. The symptoms may be constant, but usually intermittent and induced by walking, standing and heat. The gait may be changed, with restricted free movement.⁴

Falanga has been used at various times in past centuries in the Far East as well as in the Middle East. It was used throughout the Ottoman Empire and from this area spread to the Balkans and found during the Junta regime in Greece.⁵ Falanga is not the only word used for this kind of torture. Different words besides falanga can be found, such as falaqa, falaka, falanga or fallagas that shows its linguistic connections to various regions. Also bastinado, probably a word of Spanish origin which could be derived from *bas-tonada*, a blow with a cane (usually bamboo) that refers to torture of the soles of the feet and/or on the buttocks.

Different words and different methods, primitive remedies or the use of sophisticated equipment reflects that this kind of torture has been wielded throughout the centuries and across civilisations from ancient China to the mid 20th century dictatorships in South America and today is still in use at Turkish and Iraqi police stations. True masters of whipping the soles using

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bamboo canes, the Chinese developed it into a fine art. Persia favoured the bastinado, where the victim was almost gently and rhythmically beaten with a lightweight stick or bamboo on the soles of the feet, which continued for any length of time. In Turkey in the 18th century, for instance, the police would carry out surprise checks and arrest in particular bakers whose loaves were underweight. Offenders were taken to prison to be bastinadoed.⁶ The spread of torture and among these falanga has much to do with the western colonization and interests in Asia with the influence moving both ways. The colonial experiences have created new kinds of power relationships. Some traditional forms of local authorities were transformed by being placed in the service of colonial authorities as vice-versa new forms of power were received among the native peoples.⁷ And now taken up by dictatorships in the last half century, falanga can be followed worldwide.

As a torture method falanga has a tradition in judicial and domestic punishment. In Iran it is used legally and in most of the Middle East countries illegally as torture. Foot whipping used on school children and students was/is not considered as severe as the kind employed on adults, in that a long ruler was/is used to firmly slap the soles of the feet, delivering a less agonising blow but sufficient to cause pain. In that manner instead of other punishment forms considered inappropriate, it is employed in the Middle East on both male and female students.² However, in the context presented here, falanga will be discussed as a method of torture.

It is now unclear how far back in historical time we encounter falanga. It can be found probably before the 15th century in *The Arabian Nights*, a collection of stories and legends from Indian, Persian and Ara-

bian sources. Shakespeare, who drew on knowledge taken from stories and narratives from travellers, can be cited in his play "As you like it" where Touchstone threatens William with these words: "I will deal in poison with thee, or in Bastinado, or in steel; ... I will kill thee a hundred and fifty ways...". Falanga as commonly known can again be seen 150 years later in two Mozart operas created for Vienna. Thus in *The Abduction from the Serail*, where Osmin, overseer of the Turkish palace sings: "Off, off, off! Away with you or else you'll have the services of the bastinado". And even more illustrative is *The Magic Flute* where Sarastro, an Egyptian priest representing goodness, punishes his servant with these words: "Here! Give this worthy man at once no more than seventy-seven strokes on his soles". The explanation why Mozart or his librettists so freely referred to falanga – known as an Ottoman punishment – can be found almost 100 years earlier, in 1683, when the Turks advanced to the very walls of Vienna, thus threatening not only this city but the whole of Western civilization. The battles fought then were still vividly alive in the folk memory with the real fear that the Turks might return, as in fact happened in 1788. Examples of falanga/bastinado can later on sporadically be found in literature, travel books and documentary reports. It was prevalent by Fascist Blackshirts in Italy as well by the Nazis. A Danish torturer operating during the German occupation used falanga as an opening torture procedure.⁸ However, in recent time falanga has spread further and acquired global status.

But why are the feet such a favourite object for punishment and systematic torture? There may be several explanations. From ancient times we have often been told of ceremonial treatment of the feet. When Odysseus returned after many years of exile, the first thing to happen upon the hero's return

was the ointment of his feet. In The New Testament ointment of the feet is several times mentioned, illustrating a symbol for a mark of honour and respect. In Asia and the Middle East being barefoot represents among other religious traditions an act of devotion. In the Exodus, Moses took off his shoes before approaching the burning bush. Many religious traditions consider bare feet as a pious gesture of humility when visiting holy places. In the Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist religions, shoes are removed before entering mosques and temples. Going barefoot is in pilgrimage a common way to demonstrate penance or asceticism. Mahatma Gandhi is commemorated walking barefoot around his monument, Raj Ghat.

It may also be considered that the tradition to choosing to go barefoot benefits a sensation of one's feet to be in direct contact with the ground and thus confirms many perceived spiritual or natural health benefits one may experience. In cultural and social contexts, it may not be ignored that the feet as a tender part of the body with many sensitive trigger points has sensual importance and sometimes even is associated with erotic function.

Therefore, regarding the function of feet from a cultural and religious aspect, falanga becomes, besides all the induced pain and the subsequent problems, at the same time an obvious goal for the torturer to humiliate the victim and a practise which disrespects the feelings associated with religion and recognised as honourable behaviour.

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