# 10 HISTORICAL CASES OF FORCED TATTOOING

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## 1. PUNJAB POLICE [INDIA]

As much as we'd like to believe involuntary tattooing is a thing of the past, it has happened more recently than you'd think. In 1993, four women were detained by the Punjab Police in Amritsar, India. They were accused of involvement with a bootlegging operation that had attacked police during a raid. During the week they were in custody, policemen tattooed each woman on the forehead with the words jeb katri, meaning "pickpocket."

Unlike most of the stories in this list, this one actually ends with justice for the tattooed. In 1994, the Punjab government arranged plastic surgery to remove the tattoos and paid each woman 50,000 rupees. In 2016, a special Indian court found the officers guilty and sentenced each of them to jail time, terming their crime "inhuman." Maybe we have made progress after all.

## 2. AUSTRALIAN CONVICTS

During the 19th century, the British government tattooed and branded inmates to enforce the idea that the state was "all-knowing" and had total control over them. Many inmates sent to the Australian penal colony showed up already marked as criminals. However, some of them flipped this around by accessorizing their tattoos. One man named Aaron Page turned the "D" on his chest (marking him as a deserter) into a Union Jack. This was clever because it concealed a symbol of treason with one of patriotism.

British authorities in Australia soon grew wise to this practice and ordered that convicts never be tattooed at night, as that gave them free time to pick at the fresh scab and change the tattoo.

## 3. CHINA

An important rule of Confucianism is avoiding damage to the body, as it is a gift received from one's parents. Permanently marking the skin is shameful not just to an individual but to their whole family. This made tattooing a serious punishment in historical China.

Penal codes from the Song and Yuan dynasties list the crimes that could result in tattooing. If someone committed a crime punishable by banishment, they were given a square shape behind the ear. If flogging was in order, the shape was round. When a criminal had already been flogged three times, the tattoo was put on the face.

The Chinese were no strangers to the old "spell out the crime" gimmick, either. Cheating couples caught more than once were facially tattooed with the phrase "committed licentious acts two times" before being exiled. That might seem like a lot to fit on a face until you remember that each word was just one character. Either way, it wasn't fun.

## 4. ANCIENT GREECE [ATHENS]

Slaves who misbehaved in ancient Greece were often tattooed with the name of their crime. This was used instead of branding because a more wordy crime like "theft and aggravated assault" would take a long time to brand and could put the victim's life at risk. As slaves were only valuable to their owners alive, tattooing provided a happy (if still upsetting) medium. Similar tattoos were given to free citizens found guilty of crimes.

When the island of Samos was at war with Athens, each side tattooed its prisoners of war to mark them as conquered. Athenians marked Samian prisoners with owls, a symbol of the city's patron goddess Athena. Samians retaliated by marking their Athenian prisoners with a samaina, a kind of Samian ship. The forehead was an especially dehumanizing place to tattoo a captive because of the increased pain and the fact that it was hard to cover up. (Sweatbands weren't too common back in the day.)