

Primary and Secondary Sources Activity

Crusades and Culture in the Middle Ages

The Inquisition

Background

The Inquisition was a Catholic Church court established in the thirteenth century to find and punish heretics in Europe. Some historians divide it into three stages: the Medieval, Spanish, and Roman Inquisitions. The first stage was launched to suppress reformist sects who spoke against what they saw as corrupt Church practices. The Spanish Inquisition, which began in the late fifteenth century, targeted Jews and Muslims in Europe, particularly those whom the Catholic Church believed had falsely converted to Christianity. Beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, the Roman Inquisition attempted to stem the growing influence of Protestant religions, especially in Italy. The Inquisition was suppressed at various stages and finally abolished in the nineteenth century.

In the thirteenth century, Pope Innocent III began a spiritual campaign to deal with Catholic reformists, who he saw as a threat to the beliefs of the Catholic Church and social stability. He ultimately held a meeting of the Church hierarchy in part to establish a tribunal, or court, to excommunicate heretics.

In 1233 Pope Gregory IX issued orders for the first Inquisition. The process—governed by complex rules and led by inquisitors, mostly from the Franciscan and Dominican orders—was followed precisely, but the tactics used and the fairness of decisions remain controversial. Suspected heretics were often subjected to hideous tortures to gain confessions. Family members and acquaintances were coerced into testifying, sometimes falsely, against a suspect, and questionable restrictions were placed on those who defended suspects.

Convicted heretics had only one choice: repentance. Punishments ranged from acts of penance, public floggings, or confiscation of property to life imprisonment in a dungeon. Many heretics who refused to repent were burned at the stake.

Directions: Read the selections. Then answer the questions.

Use against heretics the spiritual sword of excommunication, and if this does not prove effective, use the material sword. The civil laws decree banishment and confiscation; see that they are carried out.

The civil law punishes traitors with confiscation of their property and death; . . . All the more then should we excommunicate and confiscate the property of those who are traitors to the faith of Jesus Christ; for it is an infinitely greater sin to offend the divine majesty than to attack the majesty of the sovereign.

— Innocent III, from letters sent to Church and secular authorities in France, 1198–1204

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. . . though the inquisitor might give him an advocate [lawyer] he would give him no one good but a fellow who would do only what the inquisitor wanted, and if by chance he asked for an advocate or solicitor not of the Inquisition, they would not serve, for if they went contrary to the inquisitor's wishes he would get up some charge of false belief or want of respect and cast them into prison.

—Henry Charles Lea, paraphrasing remarks of a prisoner of the Spanish Inquisition to his cellmate, 1559

1. **Analyzing Secondary Sources** Use what you know to explain how the spiritual revival and emergence of reformist sects in the twelfth century threatened the power of the Catholic Church.

2. **Explaining** According to Innocent III, what actions were French authorities to take against heretics? What reason did he give for taking these actions?

3. **Making Inferences** Some Church authorities later quoted Innocent III to justify some extreme measures, including torture and the death penalty, in order to obtain confessions. Explain how his reasoning led them to defend such extreme measures.

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4. **Drawing Conclusions** According to the prisoner in the second selection, what restrictions were imposed on advocates who defended suspected heretics? What would have been the implications of such restrictions?

5. **Constructing Arguments** What arguments would you present to defend the Church's pursuit of the Inquisition? What arguments would you present to criticize it?
