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The term, 'branding' means to put a mark on something or, in the case of human branding, someone. The mark may indicate ownership or it may be the mark of a criminal, branded in disgrace and stigmatized. The actual physical mark may be burned or frozen into the flesh or impregnated into the skin using needles and pigment, in other words, by tattoo. Tattoo, in fact, is the Latin word meaning 'stigma'.

Cain, described in Genesis 4:15, was the first trendsetting human to sport a brand or tattoo. Immediately prior to Cain's nomadic life in the Land of Nod, the Lord affixed his mark so that people who encountered him would spare his life.

The Ancient Romans (10th Century BC to 4th Century AD) branded their runaway slaves with the letters, 'FUG', an abbreviation of the word, 'fugitivus'. An entire profession of 'Fugitivarii' emerged pure for the purpose of finding the marked slaves and returning them to their owners. The Romans inflicted the mark of 'FUR' (for 'fure', meaning 'thief') or 'CV' (representing 'cave furem', 'beware the thief'). Similarly, the Ancient Greeks (9th Century BC to 6th Century AD) emblazoned their slaves with the letter 'Delta', mean dolous or slave.

Later civilizations would burn marks into the flesh of criminals as a means of both punishing and humiliating them. North American Puritans in the Seventeenth Century would tattoo the letter 'A' onto the chests of men and women who had committed adultery. Canadian military prisoners labelled deserters with the letter 'D' or troublemakers with, 'BC' (for 'bad character') prior to shipping them onward to penal colonies. A similar practice was employed in the American War Between the States (1861-1865).

Curiously, the French adopted the practice of identifying criminals by branding with the 'fleurs de lys'. This is curious because the symbol also marked the baton conferred upon the French field marshal in battle. Today, the fleur de lis adorns the battle headgear of the American Football Team, the New Orleans Saints.

Contemporary human branding techniques are less brutal and more likely to be worn by choice than as punishment. These are usually in the form of a tattoo and may be temporary as well as permanent.

It is not uncommon for soldiers on leave to return to their posts bearing tattoos of their wives, mothers, girlfriends, or a special mark identifying them with their regiment. In an episode of 'The West Wing,' an itinerant veteran, overcome by the icy elements of a Washington winter, was identified as having served in Korea by virtue of the tattoo that he bore on his arm. Tattoos form an important part of modern subcultures like the Twentieth Century Goth movement. Henna tattoos are also popular amongst religious groups and revellers at modern music festivals like 'Glastonbury' or 'T in the Park'.

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