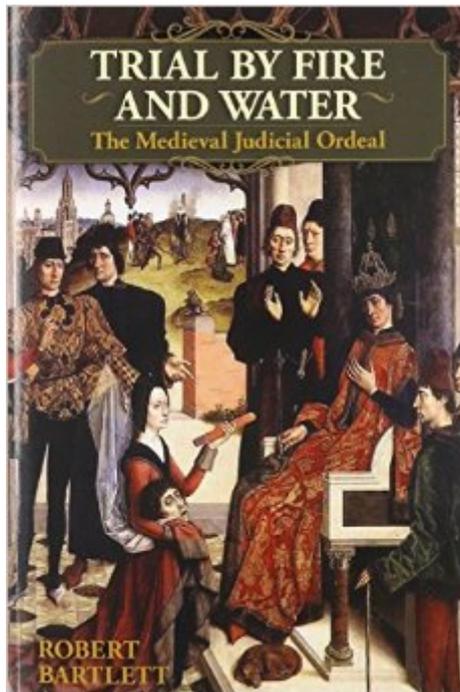# Trial By Fire And Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal

Synopsis

Although seemingly bizarre and barbaric in modern times, trial by ordeal-the subjection of the accused to undergo harsh tests such as walking over hot irons or being bound and cast into water-played an integral, and often staggeringly effective, role in justice systems for centuries. In Trial by Fire and Water, Robert Bartlett examines the workings of trial by ordeal from the time of its first appearance in the barbarian law codes, tracing its use by Christian societies down to its last days as a test for witchcraft in modern Europe and America. Bartlett presents a critique of recent theories about the operation and the decline of the practice, and he attempts to make sense of the ordeal as a working institution and to explain its disappearance. Finally, he considers some of the general historical problems of understanding a society in which religious beliefs were so fundamental. Robert Bartlett is Wardlaw Professor of Medieval History at the University of St. Andrews.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Robert Bartlett is truly an expert on the medieval experience. I first discovered his research through is fascinating documentary series "Inside the Medieval Mind" and was immediately captivated! I didn't buy this book right away due to its rarity, but a recent printing makes copies affordable and accessible!Bartlett takes the reader on a tour of the beginnings, evolution, and demise of the trial by ordeal process. He details a variety of ordeals and the ceremonies accompanying them. Trial by ordeal is rooted in the medieval superstition called "iudicium Dei" (aka the judgement of God), which states that God will save the innocent from being harmed in the ordeal. The whole process is

fascinating in its display of the power and possibilities of superstition as these processes were surprisingly effective. In many ways, trial by ordeal served justice (to God-fearing citizens only, of course) when it would have been otherwise impossible. I think it is especially interesting how Bartlett uses the demise of the ordeal as an indicator of social change and a fundamental alteration in belief systems.This tradition has played an enormous role in society, and a shadow of trial by ordeal lives on in the modern justice system with the practice of oath swearing. "Trial by Fire and Water" is an insightful and delightful read for anyone interested in medieval or judicial history. I highly recommend this book!

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