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Trial by Fire and Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal

Robert Bartlett

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Robert Bartlett : Trial by Fire and Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Trial by Fire and Water: The Medieval Judicial Ordeal:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Fascinating look at the history of judgementBy Terry MacDonaldRobert 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!

In trial by ordeal the accused was subjected to some harsh test--holding hot iron, being cast into a pool of water--with guilt or innocence decided according to the outcome. To us a strange and alien custom, trial by ordeal has been an important legal procedure in many regions and periods. Bartlett examines the workings of trial by ordeal from its first appearance in the barbarian law codes, tracing its use by Christian societies to its last days as a test of witchcraft in Europe and America. He discusses recent theories about the operation and decline of the practice, shedding new light on both the ordeal as a working institution and the pressure for its abolition.