

Regionalisation and the Integration of the Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity

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Abstracts

Danuta Shanzer, The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign: Localizing the Universal-Universalizing the Local: The Problem of the Ordeal by Oath on Relics.

This paper explores an important theological moment in the Later Roman West, which has been identified as the birth of the Christian ordeal by oath or *purgatio canonica*. The divisive and distressing episode, (documented in Augustine *Epp.* 77 and 78) lends itself to treatment as a case history. It forms part of a broader story of, it is argued, the late antique and Christian origins of a variety of medieval ordeals (e.g. fire, *Probebissen*). The larger argument aims to trace the ordeal's continuity (even if at times it is shadowy) from antiquity through the early Middle Ages. In line with the topic of the conference, however, I will set the scene with some highly regional pagan examples of ordeal by oath before moving on to the Christian case history in Augustine's letters.

I will outline the episode's pre-history in Milan and mysterious sequel in Nola. This case history shows *in nuce* how "something that happened" can trigger "something that was done." Drawing the lines between "something that was done" and "something that was regularly done or legally prescribed" proves problematic in this case, for Augustine, great theological opinion-maker that he was, did not explicitly theorize the outcome of his experiment. I argue that he stealthily retracted it, but that we may still detect some of the fallout in his subsequent pronouncements on oaths.

Augustine's silence however permitted the practice to become popular. Fortunately for Christian ordeal by oath, its first attestation was (problematically) bi-lateral, thereby setting the bar too high. Most historically attested oath-ordeals were unilateral—and therefore usually successful. To hagiography belong sinister accounts of ordeals by oath that failed. Ordeal by oath was linked to relics and the development of their cult. However locally relics begin, their divisibility and portability must have turned ordeal by oath into a universally possible script and practice. A tipping point was reached. In these events we can see the very local and human way in which diverse and provincial practices in Late Antiquity coalesced under Christian influence into something that eventually would be universally accepted.

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