Bruno Lemesle has written a very elegant short introduction to the practice and end of trial by ordeal in the Middle Ages. The small book is also very pleasingly produced, with one nicely chosen and reproduced picture. A large proportion of the examples are from French materials, but the book does not feel limited by this choice. There are no footnotes or other forms of citation, which will occasionally frustrate scholars seeking to follow up the interesting examples but will matter less to the volume’s probable intended audience.

The section headings give a sense of the contents: »A Christian proof«; »In what circumstances was an ordeal decided? How ordeals proceed?«; »Ordeals to limit perjuries«, a section that contains a particularly useful discussion of compurgation, that is, the swearing of oaths with oath-helpers; »Why did ordeal end?«. The last of these is indeed by far the longest section; in contrast there is, for example, no systematic examination of the appearance of ordeal in law books or in legislation. In terms of explaining the end of ordeal, Lemesle suggests that there may have been an initial turning against ordeal around 1130; the evidence of this is limited and the suggestion merits further and more extended discussion elsewhere. He rejects lay pressure as a cause of the end of ordeal. Again, further exploration would be worthwhile; curiously Lemesle starts the book with literary instances of ordeal but thereafter literary evidence disappears from consideration. Nor does he examine the mass use of ordeals in England in the later 12th century, something that might at least temper his emphasis on the developing importance of inquest. Instead his emphasis is on the Church. Whilst noting that theologians and churchmen were not united in their views on ordeal, Lemesle stresses increasing papal control of Church and clergy as the crucial factor underlying ordeal’s demise. Whereas supernatural proofs – as God’s judgments – did not allow appeal to the Pope, inquisitorial procedure did. The end of ordeal therefore fits into a pattern of increased papal control and supervision of justice.

The rest of the book shares the ecclesiastical focus of the discussion of the end of ordeal. Examination of procedure concentrates on liturgy rather than on secular administration, and there is only limited exploration of how ordeal might have functioned within dispute-processing more broadly. The reader might like to have known more about the judging of the outcome of ordeal, and then its relationship to the final sentence or settlement; or on the process of offering and then withdrawing of ordeal; or indeed suggestions on the pattern of outcomes. In addition, the author’s focus is the
unilateral ordeals, in particular those by hot iron or by hot or cold water, rather than the bilateral ordeal of battle. The latter raises further questions, and in particular its development in relation to other forms of proof may have been driven more by lay attitudes.

The discussion of lay attitudes and their effect on the decline of the ordeal is indeed very short, only about two and a half pages. And there is no attempt to uncover popular lay attitudes to ordeal. Evidence for such attitudes can be found. For example, a miracle story from England in the 1170s tells us of an accused man that »because he was regenerated [i. e. baptized] as a small child on Whitsun eve, he could not, according to popular opinion, go under in the water or be burned by the fire if he had to undergo either ordeal«. Those who wished him to be found guilty therefore ensured that he undergo trial by water, by which he was certain to be convicted, not trial by hot iron, in which he would certainly be cleared. The limited space devoted to lay attitudes is also manifested in the sole strange omission from the bibliography, of Paul Hyams' piece, »Trial by ordeal: the key to proof in the early common law«. Yet all such points and limitations really just reflect the limited amount of the space available to the author. He is above all to be congratulated for producing so stimulating and readable a work in such a compressed space.