

Andrew Marsham (University of Edinburgh), “Attitudes to Public Execution with fire in Late Antiquity and Early Islam”

Although immolation and the destruction of bodies by fire were generally considered unacceptable in classical Islamic law, these methods of execution have been used quite widely throughout Islamic history. This paper examines accounts of executions using fire in the first two centuries of Islam in order to understand what they can tell us about pre-classical attitudes to this practice. It argues that executions should be viewed as rituals (i.e. as occasions of symbolic communication) and that, as such, accounts are often unreliable as straightforward evidence of “what really happened” but do provide insight into the highly-contested meaning of public executions. Further, this early Islamic discourse about executions using fire is best understood as a development of an existing discourse in the late antique Middle East.