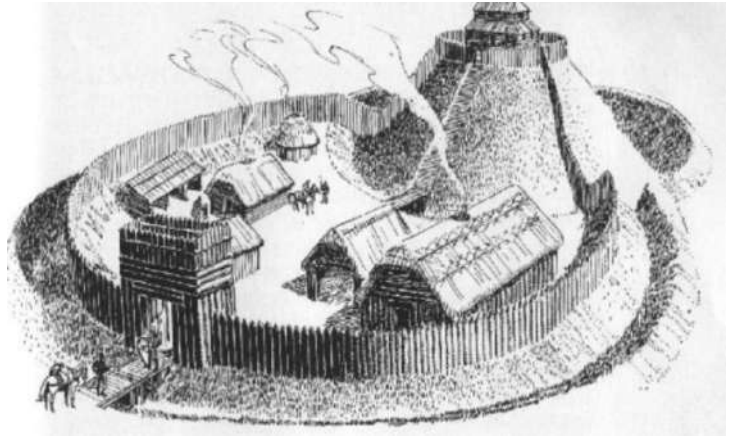


# Crime and Punishment - Medieval World Fact Sheet

Learn about crimes, laws, trials and punishments in Medieval times, between AD1066 and AD 1485.

Medieval castles had a built-in prison, known as a **dungeon**. People were normally locked there if they had committed **treason** (betrayed the king) but there were many other gruesome punishments for criminals and traitors, and many took place in public to scare potential criminals.



**Abbeys** also had prisons for unruly monks. Reading Abbey's prison was at the Compter Gate, by Saint Lawrence's church. Monks could be imprisoned for insubordination (being rude and disobedient) towards a senior monk.

## Prisoners and Outlaws

In Anglo-Saxon and Medieval times people became **outlaws** for serious crimes or even just debt. Wealthy men who murdered rivals were also outlawed. Some outlaws came together as gangs to steal from travellers.

**Robin Hood** is a legendary Medieval outlaw whose heroic adventures have become famous throughout the centuries. According to the stories he fought the Sheriff of Nottingham, stole from the rich and gave to the poor. On the right is a **Huntley and Palmer's** Robin Hood tin from the 1950s.



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## Hard to believe!

In the Middle Ages religious and magic believers often dictated judgements and punishments. Suspected murderers were tested through **Cruentation** also called 'Ordeal of the Bier': it was the belief of the time that corpses would ooze blood when the murderer was close by. The church did not approve of other religions and **heretics** (people who practised banned religions) were persecuted and even executed for their beliefs. People feared **witches**, men or women they thought had evil magic powers. Many people were accused of being a witch, but few were ever tried: finding proofs of their guilt wasn't easy!



## The Law Man

The **Shire Reeve** (county sheriff) was the local law man. They investigated serious crimes and raised a "Posse Comitatus" to track down outlaws or to deal with rioting. The **Posse** was a group of local men over 15 years old, and they were not always happy to join. Unfortunately, sheriffs weren't always honest. The **Domesday book** of 1086 shows that some of them used their position of power to steal land.

## Medieval crime stoppers

There was no police in the Middle Ages. When crimes occurred villagers would raise the '**hue and cry**'. People had the duty to answer the alarm: they stopped whatever they were doing and chased after the culprit. Villagers were grouped into 'tithings' (10 households), members of a tithing arrested each other if they committed a crime. From 1190 County **Coroners** investigated suspicious or violent deaths. As levels of crime increased, villagers needed support. From 1250 villages appointed among their members unpaid **constables** who led the 'hue and cry' for a year. In 1285 'householders' (men with houses) became parish **watchmen** who patrolled the neighbourhood during the summer.

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## On trial

In 1215 Trial by Ordeal ended. Court cases were now decided through **Trial by Jury**, where a group of twelve men decided who was guilty and told the **Justice** (who we now call a judge). The Justice then had the guilty person punished. This was called '**Common Law**'. If a child over seven committed a crime they were sent to court and punished exactly the same as adults were. Children between seven and twelve were not always punished, but their parents were often blamed for their poor behaviour!



## Medieval Trials

Men could also be challenged to **Trial by Combat** to settle criminal cases and insults. This was very dangerous and they could die. They used armour and weapons (like the two men above) if they were could afford them. The result was legally binding, whoever won had told the truth. In 1163 **Robert de Montfort** and **Henry de Essex** had a trial by combat in Reading after Robert said Henry was a coward. Henry lost, after seeing ghosts of two people he had treated badly. The monks from **Reading Abbey** thought Henry was dead, but he recovered and became a monk at Reading Abbey.