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978-0-521-87832-6 - The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages

Robert Bartlett

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IN THE MIDDLE AGES

How did people of the mediaeval period explain physical phenomena, such as eclipses or the distribution of land and water on the globe? What creatures did they think they might encounter: angels, devils, witches, dog-headed people? This fascinating book explores the ways in which mediaeval people categorized the world, concentrating on the division between the natural and the supernatural and showing how the idea of the supernatural came to be invented in the Middle Ages. Robert Bartlett examines how theologians and others sought to draw lines between the natural, the miraculous, the marvelous, and the monstrous and the many conceptual problems they encountered as they did so. The final chapter explores the extraordinary thought-world of Roger Bacon as a case study exemplifying these issues. By recovering the mentalities of mediaeval writers and thinkers, the book raises the critical question of how we deal with beliefs we no longer share.

Robert Bartlett is Bishop Wardlaw Professor of Mediaeval History at the University of St. Andrews. His previous publications include *The Making of Europe* (1993), *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings* (2000), and *The Hanged Man* (2004).

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SUPERNATURAL IN THE  
MIDDLE AGES

*The Wiles Lectures given at the Queen's  
University of Belfast, 2006*

ROBERT BARTLETT

*University of St. Andrews*



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## Preface

It is a great honour to be invited to give the Wiles lectures. They were founded by the late Janet Boyd of County Down in memory of her father, Thomas S. Wiles, and, over the last fifty years, Mrs Boyd's imaginative generosity has encouraged numerous historians to produce, first in the lecture hall and then usually in print, reflections on the historical concerns that were preoccupying them. For a Wiles lecturer-elect, it is indeed a somewhat daunting experience to come to realize how many classics of history in fact had their origins in these lectures. Amongst the previous lecturers, I would like to make a special mention of the late Rees Davies, whose 1988 lectures appeared in print, with Rees' customary promptitude, in 1990 as *Domination and Conquest: The Experience of Ireland, Scotland and Wales 1100–1300*.<sup>1</sup> Rees was a much-loved man as well as a deeply respected scholar, and his death in 2005 at a relatively young age was a loss to humanity as well as to scholarship.

The strenuous four days at Queen's were enlivened by the comments and companionship of a group of distinguished visitors, many staff members of Queen's, and others who attended the lectures and discussions. I am very appreciative of this.

<sup>1</sup> R. R. Davies, *Domination and Conquest: The Experience of Ireland, Scotland and Wales 1100–1300* (Cambridge, 1990).

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PREFACE

Professor David Hayton, Head of the School of History and Anthropology, and Trevor Boyd, the son of the benefactress, and his wife watched over us with grace and courtesy.

A special debt is owed to Nora Bartlett, who provided a valuable preliminary sounding board for these lectures.

My title is fairly grandiose, and clearly these lectures do not aim at comprehensiveness but, I hope, at illuminating examples and general considerations.