

Why Socrates Died - Dispelling the Myths by Robin Waterfield.  
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The trial of the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, and the manner of his death, is something of which many educated people are aware without, I would aver, being necessarily apprised of the precise nature and content of the trial and its ins and outs. Many are aware that Socrates drank hemlock, but few know why he was sentenced to death or what his crimes really were.

It is to answer these and other questions that Robin Waterfield has written this informative and highly readable book, and it should be of interest to those fascinated by history in general and ancient history in particular, as well as anyone puzzled by the little they know about a seminal event in the distant past and desirous of finding out more.

Waterfield divides his book into four parts: The Trial of Socrates, The War Years, Crisis and Conflict and The Condemnation of Socrates. Each section has several sub-sections, so that the mechanics of the trial may be understood against the background of the Athenian legal system (which comes across as a somewhat arbitrary blunt instrument), Socrates the man against the background of Greek high society, and especially his relationship with the charismatic and chimerical Alcibiades, the issues of the trial against the background of the intellectual atmosphere and spirit of change in Athens, and the actual condemnation against the background of Socrates' political ideas.

Robin Waterfield writes with great authority, simplifying tumultuous events and ideas while never patronising his reader and leaving us with the impression that Socrates was a victim of circumstance and certainly not the dangerous corrupter of the young that he was caricatured as being. He also still holds a candle for Xenophon, whose life and reputation he had done so much to enhance in his previous book Xenophon's Retreat.

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