Witchcraft Narratives in Germany: Rothenburg, 1561-1652

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Given the widespread belief in witchcraft and the existence of laws against such practices, why did witch-trials fail to gain momentum and escalate into ‘witch-crazes’ in certain parts of early modern Europe? This book answers this question by examining the rich legal records of the German city of Rothenburg ob der Tauber, a city that experienced a very restrained pattern of witch-trials and just one execution for witchcraft between 1561 and 1652. The book explores the factors that explain the absence of a ‘witch-craze’ in Rothenburg, placing particular emphasis on the interaction of elite and popular priorities in the pursuit (and non-pursuit) of alleged witches at law. By making the witchcraft narratives told by the peasants and townspeople of Rothenburg central to its analysis, the book also explores the social and psychological conflicts that lay behind the making of accusations and confessions of witchcraft. Furthermore, it challenges the existing explanations for the gender-bias of witch-trials, and also offers insights into other areas of early modern life, such as experiences of and beliefs about communal conflict, magic, motherhood, childhood and illness. Written in a narrative style, the study invites a wide readership to share in the drama of early modern witch trials.

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The Würzburg witch trial, which took place in Germany in 1626–1631, is one of the biggest mass-trials and mass-executions seen in Europe during the Thirty Years War: 157 men, women and children in the city of Würzburg are confirmed to have been burned at the stake, mostly after first being beheaded; 219 are estimated to have been executed in the city proper, and an estimated 900 were killed in the entire Prince-Bishopric. The Würzburg witch trial is among the largest Witch trials in the Early Modern period: it was one of the four largest witch trials in Germany alongside the Trier witch trial...