



The Witch Hunts: A History of the Witch Persecutions in Europe and North America

Robert Thurston

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Tens of thousands of people were persecuted and put to death as witches between 1400 and 1700 – the great age of witch hunts. Why did the witch hunts arise, flourish and decline during this period? What purpose did the persecutions serve? Who was accused, and what was the role of magic in the hunts? This important reassessment of witch panics and persecutions in Europe and colonial America both challenges and enhances existing interpretations of the phenomenon. Locating its origins 400 years earlier in the growing perception of threats to Western Christendom, Robert Thurston outlines the development of a ‘persecuting society’ in which campaigns against scapegoats such as heretics, Jews, lepers and homosexuals set the scene for the later witch hunts.

He examines the creation of the witch stereotype and looks at how the early trials and hunts evolved, with the shift from accusatory to inquisitorial court procedures and reliance upon confessions leading to the increasing use of torture.

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