



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

DIVISION FOR LATE MEDIEVAL
AND REFORMATION STUDIES

35th Annual Town and Gown Lecture

The Modern Origins of the Medieval Executioner



Joel F. Harrington
Centennial Professor of History
Vanderbilt University

Wednesday, March 2, 2022

7:00 – 9:00 PM MST | via Zoom

Register using the QR code below or follow the link:

[https://arizona.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZUlf--
vqjwvEt0a5FvQmY0d3RFty1Wacl3Z](https://arizona.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZUlf--vqjwvEt0a5FvQmY0d3RFty1Wacl3Z)



All of us are familiar with the sinister figure of the medieval executioner: a sadistic, hooded implementer of spectacularly cruel executions and other punishments before a cheering, bloodthirsty crowd of spectators. This image, however—like many of our contemporary ideas about the Middle Ages—is largely the product of nineteenth-century imaginations. In this lecture, the author of an acclaimed study of an actual sixteenth-century German executioner (based largely on a private journal covering his forty-five years of work in the profession), describes how later legal reformers and Gothic novelists methodically constructed a stereotype that served their respective purposes but grossly distorted historical reality in the process. In exploring the resulting gap between the European executioner of the distant past and his nineteenth-century incarnation, we learn much about not only the fears and hopes of those eras but also our own contemporary notions of justice and social progress.

Joel F. Harrington is a historian of Europe, specializing in the Reformation and early modern Germany, with research interests in various legal and religious aspects of social history. He has published seven books and many articles on pre-modern Germany, including *Dangerous Mystic: Meister Eckhart's Path to the God Within* (Penguin Press, 2018; German: Siedler Verlag, 2021), which was honored in 2020 with a Literature Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters; and *The Faithful Executioner: Life and Death, Honor and Shame in the Turbulent Sixteenth Century* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2013), which has been translated into thirteen languages and was named one of the Best Books of 2013 by *The Telegraph* and *History Today*. He has been awarded fellowships from — among others — the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, the Fulbright-Hayes Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), and the American Philosophical Society. He has lectured widely in North America and Europe, and he has resided as a visiting fellow at the American Academy in Berlin, Herzog August Bibliothek (Wolfenbüttel), Institut für Geschichte und Ethik der Medizin (University of Erlangen-Nuremberg), Huntington Library, and Clare College (Cambridge).



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