Nuremberg Town Records:
Select Entries Pertaining to the “Mad” and Intellectually Disabled¹ (1377–1492)

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Introduction

As German cities expanded in the later Middle Ages, town authorities were confronted with ever-growing issues of poverty, transience, and illness. In response to the pressures that different needy, marginal, and disruptive populations put on municipal coffers, city governments promulgated new policies and crafted new institutional responsibilities. For instance, over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, German city councils began running municipal brothels, hired and oversaw midwives as sworn town officials, and took over the administration of city hospitals. Such actions were done in the joint interest of public health and morality. They also increasingly allowed city officials to micromanage any aspect of urban life that intersected with the expanding scope of city councils and the ruling elites.

As secular authorities played ever-greater roles in dealing with issues like poverty, civic order, and crime, the lives of the sick and those with disabilities came to fall increasingly under the purview of municipal officials. City councils rarely crafted explicit policies regarding populations affected by disability, but interactions between city officials and persons with physical or intellectual disabilities were frequent. Authorities labeled such individuals by their disability or illness and often identified them in their own bookkeeping as simply “the fool,” the “blind man,” or “the mad woman.” It is only occasionally that a name, an occupation, or other specific identifying detail was included. This labeling suggests that a disability or illness became the most defining identity marker for a person, at least from the perspective of town authorities. It also draws attention to the fact that, with only few exceptions, the illness or disability itself was central to why and how the council intervened in the lives of these individuals.

We know of these interactions thanks to the survival of several types of documents created by the bureaucracy of city governments, namely council log books and city financial accounts. While Nuremberg’s records are the focus below, in part because these records are particularly rich and in part because late medieval Nuremberg was an especially vibrant city, such documents survive from cities as widespread as Munich and Frankfurt to Hildesheim and Lübeck. These civic records are not very “narrative” sources. Their authors did not intend to tell a story; they simply recorded the mundane, day-to-day business of running a town. Council minute books or logbooks produced by city scribes, for instance, merely recorded the decisions that the city mayors made as they presided over all aspects of town management. Even less narrative are the financial books kept by the scribes. These accounting records only note the incomes and expenditures of the city over the course of the year, but in doing so give us glimpses of interactions with the
sick and those with disabilities that involved a civic payout.

Yet despite their limitations, these records show us the reactions that municipal authorities had to those with illnesses and disabilities and they give us glimpses into how authorities understood madness and intellectual disability. Town leaders, and medieval people in general, understood the two conditions to be different; they were not often conflated or confused by onlookers. Nuremberg’s records distinguish between the “mad” (a general category covering those they called “mad,” “senseless,” “out-of-their-minds,” or “reasonless”) and the disabled (called “fools,” “natural idiots,” or simply “weak-minded”). But the management of the two populations were often parallel, and sometimes specifically overlapped. For instance, some towns built rooms or small structures to house the “mad” and the intellectually impaired alike, calling such spaces “fool’s huts” (in Nuremberg, Narrenheuslin, or in Hildesheim, Dorenkisten). These “huts,” moreover, had both juridical and charitable functions: they incarcerated but also cared for these vulnerable populations. Indeed, the management of such spaces often fell under the care of the city hospital.

Offered below is a selection of entries involving madness or intellectual disability that were entered into Nuremberg’s financial accounts between 1377 and 1492 and into their council books between 1450 and 1493. All told, the surviving books from these two bodies of records contain almost 250 entries that involve the “mad” or intellectually disabled. In a typical year, four or five cases could easily pass through the council’s docket, most of them during the summer months. (For perspective: Nuremberg’s population in the fifteenth century was about 20,000.) The persons labeled as “mad” or disabled in these records, moreover, were only a small subset of those who lived their lives in the city but never drew the council’s attention. Most of those who experienced rational impairment were cared for by their families and friends; only when more private methods of management failed—like when a woman with mental illness was not native to the city, when a man with a disability was accused of immodesty, or when a spouse was unwilling to accept responsibility—did public authorities step in. If we keep in mind this silent majority while analyzing the minority “problematic” individuals whose lives left traces in the records, we can begin to comprehend just how central such experiences of mental illness and disability were in the urban landscape.

The entries below reveal that persons experiencing intellectual disability or mental illness were largely at the mercy of the council, whose primary interest was to protect the order and wellbeing of the city. The council therefore responded to these individuals with a range of management techniques, from the helpful or benign to the stern or even persecutory. Expulsion and imprisonment feature prominently. Of particular note is the frequent mention of the town of Regensburg, which despite lying some sixty miles away, was the easiest place to access the Danube river. Nuremberg sent “mad” persons to Regensburg over two dozen times, sometimes as just a first stop before sending them further downriver to Passau, Vienna, and even Hungary. The council, however, also came up with more local solutions. Beatings were sometimes ordered, generally in cases where an impaired person committed a serious transgression. The claim of boisterous, unruly, or even lewd behavior was cited multiple times. Punishments even in these instances were still rare, not least because corporal punishment was forbidden by German law codes, which ruled that individuals who lacked sufficient reason could not be held fully accountable for their actions. In other rare cases, the council authorized “mad” individuals to beg. The city regulated municipal charity and public begging, and records show that at least by the 1470s multiple “mad” individuals, almost all women, were granted this right. Finally, we also find attempts made to house and care for those with mental illness within the city itself. By the end of the centu-
ry Nuremberg’s council had also created multiple spaces for housing the “mad” within its walls. The council also steadily enlisted the resources of the hospital in maintaining care, and they had entered into negotiations (not always pleasant) with families in attempts to get them to take responsibility for their own family members.

Bibliography


Selected Financial Book (Stadtrechnungen) Entries—German Original

1377 Item d[edimus] von einer Unsinigen xiii s. hl. daz man sie schikt gen Weizzenburg.¹

1378 Item d[edimus] xvi s. hlr. einer unsin-nigen umb einen pelz und umb zwen schuh und umb einen slayer.²

1378 Item d[edimus] lx hlr. zu kost von einer unsinnigen die in dem loch gevangen lag.³

1378 Item d[edimus] iii lb. und iii S. hl. von dem unsynigen Peter Kursner den man regensburg sant und furbaz gen Wein.⁴

1378 Item dedimus Meister Otten Wunt Arzt ix S. hl von einem Toreten⁵ den er erztneyt.⁶

1378 Item dedimus dem lochmeister i lb. hlr von einem Toroten der xiii tag gevangen lag.⁷

1378 Item dedimus dem H. Karrenman iii lb. und viii S. hl von einem Toroten zu füren gen Regensburg.⁸

1421 Item de[dimus] iii s. hlr die Cuntz Statknecht geben het einem unsin-ning pfaffen dem man die Stat verboten und von dannen geweist het.⁹

1431 Item de[dimus] i lb hl dem lochüter von einer töroten frawen die xii tag im loch lag und auch für ettlich notdurfft im loch.

1435 Item de[dimus] iii lb xvi s hl das ein törrot fraw gekost hat im loch und gen Regensburg zufüren.¹⁰

1439 Item de[dimus] x s arzgelts dem loch-hüter von zwaien narren die man in daz loch gelegt hette.¹¹

1458 Item xix s. dem lochüter und zuchtiger vom unsynigen Endlein mit gerten zu hawen und von hynnen zu schicken.¹²

Selected Financial Book (Stadtrechnungen) Entries—English Translation

1377 Item: We pay 8 silver heller to drive a mad woman to Weizzenburg.

1378 Item: We pay 16 silver heller to a mad woman for a fur, two shoes and a veil.¹³

1378 Item: We pay 60 silver heller for the cost of mad woman¹⁴ who lies imprisoned in the jail.¹⁵

1378 Item: We pay 3 pounds and 3 silver heller for mad Peter Kursner, who was sent to Regensburg and then further to Vienna.

1385 Item: We pay 3 pounds and 3 silver heller for driving a mad woman to Regensburg.

1386 Item: We pay the prison warden 1 pound heller for a mad man who was in the prison for 13 days.

1431 Item: We pay 1 pound heller to the prison warden for a mentally impaired woman who spent 12 days in jail and for various necessities in the prison.

1435 Item: We pay 3 pounds 16 silver heller that a rationally impaired woman cost [for her time in] the jail and to send her to Regensburg.

1439 Item: We give 10 silver [heller] as payment to the prison warden for two fools who were placed in the jail.

1458 Item: [We pay] 19 silver [heller] to the prison warden and the executioner¹⁶ for whipping mad Endlein¹⁷ and sending him away from here.¹⁸

heller the smallest coin of note in southern Germany, worth one-half of a penny (pfennig) executioner a city employee in charge of all corporal punishments meted out by the city, who, like the prison warden, was given a modest salary but who largely earned his keep through the payments for individual jobs
Selected Council Book (Ratsverlässe)
Entries—German Original

27 Mai 1449 Item den unsinnigen im loch ledig lassen auf urfee.23
6 Juli 1449 Item den torecrten von Rewt auf ein urf[ehd] ledig lassen.24
9 Juli 1449 Item die unsynnigen frawen austreiben und bestellen, nich mer hereynzulassen.25
5 Jan. 1471 Item der unsynigen vergont zu beteln.26
19 Juli 1475 Item den Narren Im loch ligend der die lewt geslagen hat, Im loch mit gerten hawen. und gein newnkirchen füren.27
24 Mai 1477 Item den Spitalpfleger ze biten ein gedult ze haben mit der frawen die unvernufftig gewesen und wider zu ir selbs komen ist, etlich zeit und nemlich biss die heissen tage verscheinen, in dem Spital zu geduld.28
31 Mai 1477 Item den Spiegler von den synnen komen ist, in ein hëwslin in Marstal zu bringen.29
20 Juni 1478 Item den Narren im loch ligend auss der Stat weisen und mit rẅten zestreichen vor der Stat der Statknechen ursachhalb den er ein frawen erschreckt hat dan ir zu einem kind mislungen ist.30
27 Aug. 1481 Item Jobsten Tetzels seligen gelassen witiben und Iren vormunden und freunden ist uff ir bete und anbringen vergonnt, desselben hern Jobs Tetzels seligen Sun, der nit bei vernufft sein sol, auff einem turn bei S. Katherin In einem Kemerlein zu enthalten und zu verwaren doch auff Iren Costen und so lang es eins Rats fug ist.31
11 Mai 1482 Item des Toretten manshalb, der yetz herkomen ist und das lewten vil schaden und unzucht beweist ,

Selected Council Book (Ratsverlässe)
Entries—English Translation

27 May 1449 Item: We set free the madman in the jail, on his oath.
6 July 1449 Item: We set free the mentally impaired man from Rewt on his oath.
9 July 1449 Item: We expel the mad woman and order that she never be let back in.
5 Jan. 1471 Item: We allow the mad woman to beg.
19 July 1475 Item: Regarding the fool lying in the jail who hit people, whip him in the jail and drive him to Neunkirchen.32
24 May 1477 Item: We ask the hospital warden to have patience with the woman who went mad and has come back to herself, and to allow her to remain in the hospital some time, that is, until warm weather comes.
31 May 1477 Item: The mirror craftsman who has gone mad is to be put into a small house in the city stables.
20 June 1478 Item: We order that the fool, lying in the jail, be beaten with whips in front of the city by bailiffs and thrown out of the city because he frightened a woman and she miscarried her child.
27 Aug. 1481 Item: In response to the request and application by the surviving widow of Jobst Tetzel, she and her legal guardians and friends are permitted to place Jobst Tetzel’s son, who does not have his reason, in a room in a tower by St. Katherine’s [where he will be] contained and kept safely at their cost so long as it is authorized by the Council.
11 May 1482 Item: Regarding the mad man who now has come here and demonstrated much harm and impropriety,
18 Mai 1485  Item die Selswester, die in der Ebner Selhuß von den Synnen komen ist. In der heußlein ayns bei dem Newen Spital oder im marstal ze nemen Ga.

3 Juni 1486  Item den Törehten Nagler umb sein ungestumikeit, auß der Stat zefüren und ine bedroen, wo er wider herkome. An. Tetzel.

9 Juli 1489  Item den Jungen Ratsmid der seiner synne geprechlich ist, Im einen Narrenheuslin bei dem Spital zu verwaren.

27 Okt. 1489  Item einen an der stat arbeit der einen unsynnigen bruder hat zu enthaltung desselben, ein kemerlein zu vergonnen uff sein Cost.

30 Dez. 1492  Item die diern, die ein spieglerin gestochen hat etlich tage in einer vancknuss zu enthalten, und uff merckung ze haben ob sie bei vernufft sei oder nit. Schopfen.

8 June 1485  Item: The souls-sister from the Ebner Soulhouse who has gone out of her senses is to be put in the small hut either by the New Hospital or in the stables. [Done by:] Ga[briel] Holtschuher

3 June 1486  Item: We order that the mentally impaired nail-maker, because of his unruliness be driven out of the city and threatened should he come back. [Done by:] An[thony] Tetzel

9 July 1489  Item: We order that the young brass-smith, whose mind is weak, be safely kept in a fool's hut by the hospital.

27 Oct. 1489  Item: A city worker who has a mad brother is permitted a small room to confine him, at his cost.

30 Dec. 1492  Item: We order the serving girl, who stabbed a mirror craftswoman, be held some days in a prison and to observe if she is sane or not. Court ordered.

**souls-sister** a kind of religious person found in southern Germany similar to Beguines
Endnotes

1 The following entries come from the Nuremberg Financial Accounts (Stadtrechnungen) held in the Nuremberg State Archives (Staatsarchiv Nürnberg, hereafter StA N): StA N, Rep. 52, No. 1–22, 177, 179–181 and the Nuremberg Council books (Ratsverlässe) held in the Nuremberg State Archives: StA N, Rep. 60a, Ratsverlässe, Nr. 1–285 (1450–1493). All transcriptions and translations provided by Anne M. Koenig, in consultation with Irene Stahl, ed., Die Nürnberger Ratsverlässe: Heft 1 1449–1450 (Verlag Degner, 1983) and Martin Scheiber, ed., Die Nürnberger Ratsverlässe: Heft 2 1452–1471 (Verlag Degner, 1995). Nuremberg's records used a variety of terms to denote different kinds of impairment; when it is unclear whether the individual in question was “mad” or intellectually disabled, the English is merely rendered as “mentally impaired.”

2 StA N, Rep. 52, No. 1, p. 83 (Books 1 and 2 of the Stadtrechnungen have been paginated).

3 StA N, Rep. 52, No. 2, p. 150.

4 StA N, Rep. 52, No. 2, p. 152.

5 StA N, Rep. 52, No. 177, f. 151r.

6 This term is particularly problematic. In different contexts it could refer to a person with an intellectual disability, with mental illness, or who was deaf. (Non-speaking deaf people were often falsely seen as being rationally impaired.) Variants of torot and torecht appear throughout Nuremberg's records and in the 1430s the Nuremberg city scribe used this term almost exclusively.

7 StA N, Rep. 52, No. 177, f. 178v–179r.

8 StA N, Rep. 52, No. 177, f. 199v.

9 StA N, Rep. 52, No. 177, f. 200r.

10 StA N, Rep. 52, No. 6 f. 32r and copied in No. 179, f. 112r.

11 StA N, Rep. 52, No. 180, f.165v.

12 StA N, Rep. 52, No. 180, f. 339v.

13 StA N, Rep. 52, No. 13, f. 84r.

14 This entry is authorizing payment for those items to be given to the woman, not buying them from her.

15 Likely the same woman from the previous entry.

16 “Jail” is perhaps too pleasant a term. The city lock-up was a subterranean prison known as the “loch” or “the hole” that lay directly under the city council building.

17 The entry before this one makes it clear that the man in question was in the jail.

18 H. Karrenman appears in several records. His last name, literally “Cart-man” designates him by trade to be a wagoner or driver.

19 Given the proximity in the accounts of this entry to the one regarding the man imprisoned for 13 days, it is likely the same man.

20 A last name.

21 Beating the those considered “mad” was exceptionally rare. Generally speaking, German law codes forbade the corporal punishment of those who lacked sufficient reason to be held fully accountable for their actions. We have no way of knowing why, in this case, the council chose to ignore the law.


23 Ibid, 166.


26 StAN Rep. 60a, No. 52, f.13r.

27 StAN Rep. 60a, No. 77, f. 12v.

28 StAN Rep. 60a, No. 77, f. 17r.

29 StAN Rep. 60a, No. 92, f. 2r.

30 StAN Rep. 60a, No. 134, f. 5v.

31 This correction was made by the scribe as he was recording the decision.

32 StAN Rep. 60a, No. 144, f. 3r.

33 StAN Rep. 60a, No. 184, f. 5r.

34 StAN Rep. 60a, No. 198, f. 3v.

35 ratsmid = Rotschmied (or red smith), which was a term used for the many workers of Nuremberg's famed brass crafts industry.

36 StAN Rep. 60a, No. 239, f. 9v.

37 StAN Rep. 60a, No. 243, f. 2r.

38 StAN Rep. 60a, No. 285, f. 6v.

39 Jobst Tetzel had been a member of one of the old, ruling families of Nuremberg and had himself been a member of the town council.

40 Many later decisions record the councilman or city official who was in some way responsible for the directed action.
41 Unmarried women, generally from poorer classes, who followed this vocation took on the duty of praying for the souls of the departed.
42 The Ebner Soulhouse was a modest house for up to 10 souls-sisters, founded in 1280 by the Ebners, one of the oldest ruling patrician families in Nuremberg.
43 The New Hospital (more formally, the Hospital of the Holy Ghost) was a large hospital in the center of town that had been founded in 1330 by a wealthy patrician. By 1400 the care and administration of the hospital were overseen by the city council.