

Zeitschrift: Schaffhauser Beiträge zur Geschichte
Herausgeber: Historischer Verein des Kantons Schaffhausen
Band: 86 (2012)
Heft: [2]: Schaffhausen seven walks through history : old town & Rhine falls

Artikel: Hangmen, witches, prostitutes
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-841557>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 05.07.2025

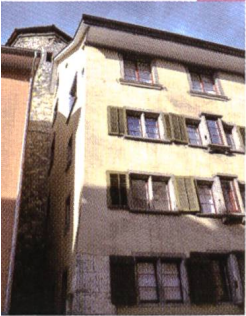
ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

The marginalised population of Schaffhausen

When people talk about the Middle Ages, we see in our mind's eye proud castles and royal palaces, cathedrals and abbeys, markets and cities, peopled by nobles and knights, bishops and monks, prosperous craftsmen and rich merchants. And we forget on the one hand that about 90 per cent of the population in the Middle Ages eked out a poverty-stricken existence in agriculture, mainly as unfree peasants, and on the other, that there was an underclass, partly in the countryside but above all in the cities, whose members were more or less excluded from participating in economic, social and cultural life: marginal social groups which included beggars, prostitutes, hangmen, knackers, emptiers of latrines, and strolling actors and acrobats. Then there were those suffering from incurable diseases, those who were physically deformed or mentally disabled, plus people stigmatised and persecuted as witches and wizards, and so on. The position of the Jews in mediaeval cities is a special case. For the rest of society they, too, were a different, special group, subject to constraints and exclusion, and sometimes the targets of bloody persecution. What most of these groups have in common is that they were despised and at the same time needed; they were necessary to perform unpleasant tasks, they provided entertainment and pleasure, but they were treated with contempt. In the mediaeval city the dishonourable jobs included the executioner and his assistants, the knacker, who skinned animals and

assisted the tanners, those who emptied latrines and others whose work involved dirt and smell, blood and death, refuse and decay. They not only existed on the margins of society, but also had their homes at the edge of the city. These houses were built close up against the city walls and were often in danger of being torn down. As is still true in similar cases today, the most unpleasant and heaviest jobs were those that were the worst paid and punished with social disdain. The "dishonourable people" in the city also included the prostitutes. The attitude of mediaeval society towards them is characterised by the same kind of dichotomy as the attitude to sexuality in general: on the one hand, the "wenches", "whores" or "pretty women" were seamlessly integrated into city life. It was not uncommon for them to be sent to greet important visitors. At the Council of Constance (1414–1418) there are said to have been 1500 prostitutes in the city, while at the Council of Basel (1431) there were 1800. But all the afore-mentioned groups had to fight for their existence in the mediaeval city. Only very few managed to escape their status. Most were condemned to a life on the margins of society by the very fact of their birth, while others found themselves in this position either through their own fault or as the result of undeserved misfortune. They were as much part of the picture of the mediaeval city as the clergy, craftsmen and traders, even if they left no evidence in stone of their existence, as the others did with their churches, town houses and offices.

14



The starting point for this tour is the Untere Diebsturm (Lower Thief's Tower), which dates from 1295. It is in a narrow gap between the houses at *11 and 13 Neustadt* ("Gemsberg" and "Schleifstein"), which were built later right up against the tower and the city walls (see Walk 6).

Until the beginning of the 18th century the construction and maintenance of **jails** did not require any great expenditure by the city. For minor offences the authorities applied humiliating penalties: offenders would be put in the pillory and chained by an iron collar, while "sharp-tongued women" would have a "shrew's fiddle" put round their necks or have to carry the "stone of shame". Whipping was also used liberally. Thieves faced summary justice: they were sentenced to death. The last execution was a beheading by the sword in 1847. People were held for investigation and served short sentences in the towers built into Schaffhausen's city walls, which formed part of its fortifications. That is how two of the towers got their names. The Obere Diebsturm, or Upper Thief's Tower, at 33 Neustadt, a round tower projecting out of the walls (demolished in 1858), and the Untere Diebsturm (Lower Thief's Tower) at 13 Neustadt. From here offenders were brought in chains to the city hall or to the torture chambers of the hospital.

The Untere Diebsturm is first documented - as the "nieder diepthurm" – as part of the city wall in 1414. You would get to the tower from the „Zum Schleifstein“ house via the sentries' walk that led through a pointed Gothic archway. The walk along the battlements went through the attics of the houses built up against the city wall. The house owners were compensated for the inconvenience. The best view of the tower at its full height of 20.7 metres is to be had from the Grabenstrasse. The street got its name because it runs along the route of the former city ditch, which is what "Graben" means. The round tower was built of limestone on firm bedrock. The thickness of the wall varies between two metres at ground level and 1.25 metres towards the top. The windowless tower with its narrow loopholes rises high above the houses of the Neustadt. The top ends in a symmetrical octagon. Above it is the 1.9 metre high tented roof, renovated in 1820. Since the Diebsturm is practically inaccessible from the outside, it cannot be used. The only stairway is a series of step irons hammered into the unrendered walls. In 1942, during the Second World War, an air-raid shelter was built into the tower. The tower has not been used since the end of the war; only birds nest there.

Another tower, the Finsterwaldturm (Dark Forest Tower; see Walk 6), built into the city wall close to the Schwabentor (Swabian Gate), where now the Bahnhofstrasse meets the Adlerstrasse, was the

dungeon for adulterers, who had to practise abstinence in a wretched hole on a diet of bread and water.

15



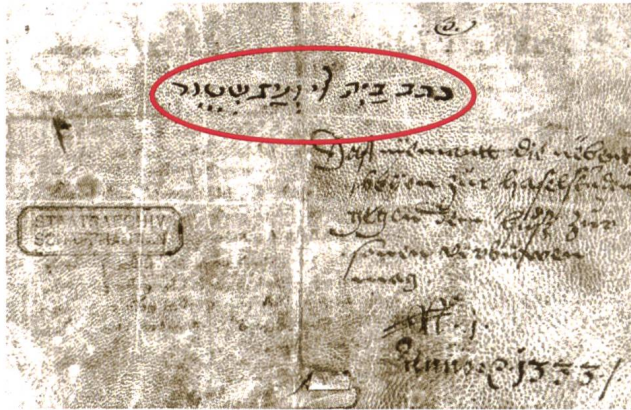
We now walk about 100 metres down the street until we get to numbers 39, 41 and 43. This is where the so-called "Stadthof" stands. This spot was previously known as the "Jewish school", since it was the location of the spiritual centre of the Jewish community that was resident here in the 14th century. Sources dated 1299 mention the first Schaffhausen Jews as the owners of three houses, one of which is described as built of stone; this is the house called "Zur Haselstaude" (formerly 5 Oberstadt).

When **Jews** were accepted into the city, special contracts were drawn up, often of limited duration. The Jews paid the city a special tax, were assured of legal protection, but were excluded from all political and military activity, including sentry service. They were barred from joining a guild. On the other hand, they had the privilege of being allowed to lend money to the citizens. Thanks to their many connections beyond the region, the Jews were often in a position to invigorate a city's commerce. The places of origin of Schaffhausen's Jews - Zurich, Constance, Überlingen, Ravensburg, Basel and Frankfurt - point to such a conclusion. The wealth of the Jews was a source of envy and resentment, and the fact that they were involved in pawnbroking on a large scale and demanded very high interest even on

very small loans made them a particular object of hatred among the lower strata of the population. When there was an outbreak of plague in 1348 rumours spread that the Jews had poisoned the wells. People wanted vengeance and in countless towns throughout Europe Jews were burnt. The Jews of Schaffhausen suffered this fate at the beginning of 1349. The details of exactly what happened are not known, but documents survive about the liquidation of the Jewish assets. The local ruler, Duke Albrecht of Austria, had tried in vain to save the Jews. But after the calamity had happened, he laid claim to a large proportion of their assets for himself. All debts owed to the Jews by the people of Schaffhausen were to be wiped out; the remaining promissory notes were to be handed over to the Austrian governor. In a document of 1349, the knight Peter von Hewen acknowledges receiving from the city of Schaffhausen promissory notes from the estate of the Jews burnt at the stake amounting to 30 silver marks, 220 guilders, 10 pounds and 12 shillings. It was another 20 years before Jews moved back into the city and were given citizens' rights. The Jews were obliged to wear special signs to identify themselves: a cone-shaped hat and a badge in the shape of a yellow ring or scrap of red cloth, so that "people can recognise them and see that they are Jews". A specific time was reserved for the Jews in the public baths. At the end of the 14th century the Jewish community in Schaffhausen had about 40 members. A new Jewish quarter emerged in the upper Neustadt.

Several families lived in the "Stadthof"; the synagogue, which was also used as a Jewish school, was nearby. The house constructed later on the spot where the synagogue had been was given the name "Zur Judenschule" (The Jewish School).

The oldest evidence of the Yiddish language in the Lake Constance region: a note added by Jakob bar Salomon to a document concerning his house, "Zur Haselstaude", in Schaffhausen in 1333



Dangerous signs of renewed tension between Jews and Christians are documented in about 1400. After a murder, 30 Schaffhausen Jews, probably the entire community, were burnt at the stake in early 1401. The relaxation and final abolition of the church's ban on interest radically altered the money-lending business: the Jews lost their monopoly. In 1472 a decree was promulgated depriving all Jews of the right to remain in the city after November. They were given time to sell their possessions; the last sale took place in 1475. This is where Schaffhausen's files on the Jews end. They remained forbidden to take up residence until 1535. It was not until then that a Jewish family (the family of David the Jew) was again accepted into the city. David was involved in financial dealings, but was also a doctor. Although his services were in demand, he nevertheless had to fight against constant

mistrust and prejudice, which were expressed in unjustified arrests. He died in 1560 and his family was expelled in 1562. After that, Schaffhausen refused to allow Jews to take up residence in the city until the 19th century. Jewish inhabitants are not mentioned again in the sources until 1852.

We follow the street northwards for a short way, then turn right into the *Ackergässchen*. We soon enter the *Herrenacker* (see also Walk 4). Behind the casino, we turn right into the *Frauengasse*. About 120 metres down the street is house number 9. The street got its name – meaning “women’s street” – from the city brothel, the “Frauenhaus”.

16



It seems strange to us today that the people of Schaffhausen were forbidden to gamble, swear and dance, but that the **brothel** was tolerated as a matter of course. The city of Schaffhausen owned the establishment, which it leased to a brothel keeper, who could be a man or a woman. This was a position of special trust in the city. The sources mention a brothel keeper called Els von Mellingen in 1452. She ran the brothel until 1461, pledging to pay the city a yearly rent of 24 pounds. In 1480 a special ordinance was issued regarding the brothel keeper, chiefly to protect the women. Like all city officials, he (or she) had to take an oath of obedience and loyalty and swear to report any crimes he might hear about. The

order laid down that the lessee might not beat the women, or force them to have sex. He had to give them meals, consisting of soup, meat and vegetables, at a set price. He was to let the women – and their customers! – have wine at cost price, and was not allowed to force the women to spin. The women were not permitted to play dice, and as long as they had paid their board and the weekly fee, they were free to leave the house at any time. The prostitutes based in Schaffhausen did not come from the town; like the brothel keepers, they were from outside. Lists mention Constance, Würzburg, Kempten and Nördlingen. In 1502 a certain Adelhaid von Wissenburg was appointed brothel keeper.

The church had no great problem with the situation. And it is recorded that in 1498 the Schaffhausen brothel paid over money to the abbot of the Allerheiligen monastery and the canons of St Johann. With the appearance of syphilis, brought to the city by mercenaries in 1499, the trade began to decline. In the Reformation period prostitution was gradually abolished in Schaffhausen. The city bailiff had the duty of keeping an eye on priests and monks, and to confiscate their clothes if they were discovered in the brothel. In 1526 the city ordered the clergy to dismiss their mistresses. After further tightening up on the house rules the brothel on the Frauengasse was closed and the house sold. The women were ordered to leave the city within eight days. Anyone who continued to ply her trade would be arrested, whipped and officially expelled.

We go south down the *Frauengasse* towards the *Rheinstrasse* (see Walk 2) and at the next street turn left into the *Rosengasse*. On the right, about 140 metres further down, is number 16. This is where the executioner lived.

17



There are a number of small hills in canton Schaffhausen that bear the name "Gallenbuck", or "Gallows hill". Schaffhausen was a "Reichsstadt", an imperial free city, meaning it was directly subject to the Holy Roman Emperor. He granted it the privilege of being allowed to arrest and to try **criminals** within a radius of "two miles". Offenders would be sentenced to the gallows for very petty crimes against property. In 1550 a tramp was hanged for stealing turnips, and not long afterwards three Jews met the same fate for embezzling a small sum of money. In about 1558 a torture chamber was installed in the "Oberhaus" (23 Oberstadt) by the Obertor. Offenders were exiled over the border or taken speedily to the gallows. A Schaffhausen chronicle reports for 1605: "The old gallows was dismantled with great pomp at the beginning of this year and replaced with a new one. A foreign murderer was pinched with glowing pincers, taken to the gallows, hanged, and finally burned". Originally Schaffhausen did not have its own executioner, but fetched one when needed from Zurich or Constance.

It is not until the 16th century that Schaffhausen can be shown to have had resident executioners. One of the first was Christoph Käser, who built himself a large house at 16 Rosengasse ("Zur Weissen Rose") in 1575. He was a wealthy man, since he also performed the lucrative jobs of treating wounds and cupping patients. From the 17th century, the office of executioner was in the hands of the Volmar family. Its members carried out their office of hanging and beheading in Winterthur and Baden as well, charging 100 guilders, and in Schaffhausen were given all kinds of unpleasant jobs, such as emptying cess-pits.



The thief Babtist Wild was the last person to go to the gallows in Schaffhausen

The executioner was also usually the official torturer. The hangman and the executioner followed a "dishonourable trade" and were excluded from membership of guilds and corporations. This sometimes had consequences for individuals: in March 1671 the commune of Wilchingen laid a complaint against one of its citizens who wanted to marry the daughter of the Schaffhausen executioner, which the commune regarded as a disgrace. The authorities found in favour of the commune.

As late as 1763 a woman from Schaffhausen lost her citizenship rights because she had a relationship with the hangman's son. She was forbidden to bring her cloth for sale at market. Throughout the whole period Schaffhausen's executions were carried out at the Bohnenberg near Neuhausen which was where the huge gallows stood. As late as the 19th century eleven death sentences were passed and implemented. The last execution on the gallows took place on 18 February 1822.

We walk north along the *Rosengasse*, go a short way along the *Herrenacker*, then turn right into the *Beckenstube*. We continue straight on past the minster and turn left into the *Goldsteinstrasse*. When we get to the end we turn left again and go along the *Vordergasse*. After about 40 metres, on our left we come to 21 *Vordergasse*. This house "Zur goldenen Schale" (now the Reber confectionary shop) was the home of the ostracised protagonist of a piece of literary history: Maria Meyer, immortalised in a cycle of poems by the German Romantic writer Eduard Mörike as his "Peregrina".



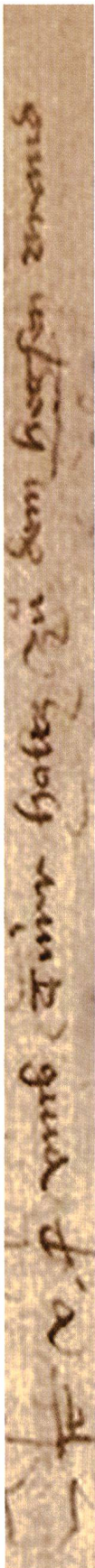
"Der Spiegel dieser treuen, braunen Augen
ist wie von innerm Gold ein Widerschein..."
("The mirror of these loyal brown eyes is
like a reflection of inner gold") – the first
two lines of "Peregrina".

When Maria Meyer (1802–1855) was born in the house “Zur goldenen Schale” in November 1802, her life was anything but “golden”. She was born out of wedlock, her mother a well-known prostitute in the city, and her father probably a journeyman from Dresden or Darmstadt. Not much is known about her childhood and youth, other than that she was not very happy. When a court decided to send her mother to the workhouse, Maria was given to relatives to look after. But even at the age of 15 Maria had a bad reputation: she was said to have “a tendency to steal and to conduct herself badly”. In the summer of 1817 the Livonian noblewoman Madame von Krüdener turned up in Schaffhausen as she travelled around Europe preaching a mystic doctrine of salvation; Maria attached herself to her. When von Krüdener was expelled from the city, Maria left too. When she suddenly reappeared in Schaffhausen, she was sent to the workhouse, as her mother had been. She did not manage to get out until 1819. She immediately went on her travels again, taking a job as a servant in Rheinfelden. She fell in love with the son of the house, who introduced her to the writings of Goethe and the German Romantic Jean Paul. A woman of mysterious beauty, she was working in a tavern in Ludwigsburg in Baden-Württemberg when she met Eduard Mörike and his friend Rudolf Lohbauer, both of whom fell in love with her. Mörike saw in Maria feminine purity and virtue forced to abase itself. He had to return to Tübingen, and the two embarked on a lively correspondence.

However, since Maria's lifestyle left much to be desired, Mörike broke off relations with her. Nevertheless, he raised a poetic monument to her, using her as the figure of Elisabeth / Peregrina (the pilgrim, the mysterious stranger) in "Maler Nolten" (The Painter Nolten). Peregrina is associated with what was certainly the most dramatic love story in Mörike's life. His relationship with Maria Meyer was both a fairy tale and a disaster. Mörike found himself torn between his morally and socially ordered world and his passion for this vagabond. Maria tried several times to get Mörike back as a lover, but never succeeded. In 1824 she decided to settle down, and learnt the craft of hatmaking in Schaffhausen. Her path kept crossing Mörike's, but he remained intransigent. Finally, she married a joiner and lived in great seclusion in Wilen (canton Thurgau) until her death in 1865.

The first mention of the word "Hex" (Witch)

The city of Schaffhausen was caught up in the upsurge in the persecution of witches which began in the 15th century. At the end of the 14th century the word "Hexe", or "witch", was a common term of abuse in Schaffhausen, as the sources show. The first trial in which the word "Hexe" (Hegse, Högse) was used is documented in the Schaffhausen city accounts for 1402/03. They contain an entry for the expenses incurred for the execution of one or more witches.



Unfortunately, the entries say nothing about the number or sex of those sentenced, but it is clear from the sources that they came from the nearby village of Beringen. They were arrested by city officials and held prisoner in Schaffhausen, and forced to confess in the city hall. That the trial went badly for these people is clear from the entry "5 Schilling umb túr holtz zu dem hegen Brand" (five schillings' worth of dry wood to burn the witches). Nothing is said about the charges against them. But this entry is the earliest evidence yet found in any German-speaking area of one or more people being sentenced to death by a secular court.

One person burnt at the stake as a witch who is known by name is Margreth Stöckli, who belonged to a family with a certain amount of social influence. She probably died after being reported by her own daughter and son-in-law in 1482. She was accused of influencing the weather and casting evil spells. She was also said to have consorted with the Devil.