On August 12, 1597 the hangman in Ulm brought a bound prisoner named Rosina Schemerin to the town’s pillory for sentencing. As he delivered Schemerin from the tower prison to the pillory, the bells atop the adjacent town hall (Rathaus) tolled, drawing a crowd of onlookers to witness her punishment. The local magistrates, members of the town council (Ulmer Rat), reached their verdicts behind the closed doors of their council chambers and before punishing convicts they were careful to stage a formal sentencing ceremony where the town scribe read out a description of the convict’s heinous offenses and unrepentant nature. In Schemerin’s case the scribe related a long narrative of crime and defiance in order to elicit the support of the townsfolk for the verdict. Schemerin, the daughter of a local burgher, had first run afoul of the Ulmer authorities in March 1588, when she was arrested for “breaking into a saddler’s house in broad daylight, during the morning sermon, and stealing several pieces of cloth.” While theft was a capital offense in Ulm, the local authorities rarely hanged first-time offenders. Schemerin’s punishment was severe, however, and the magistrates had banished her from the territory, compelling her to “swear an oath that she would leave the city and the territory (Herrschaft), and stay two miles away from its borders, and that unless she was granted mercy she would never return again.” Expelled from her native city, Schemerin was stripped of citizenship (Bürgerrecht), and joined the masses of disenfranchised vagrants struggling to survive on Germany’s roads. Consequently, it did not take long for her to end up in the tower again, and in July 1589 she was jailed for theft. This time the magistrates strengthened their case against her by writing to authorities in nearby towns regarding her criminal activities outside the territory. The town council’s minutes from 1589 record that since her expulsion from Ulm the previous year, Schemerin had been charged with theft and whipped out of Kaufbeuren and had been expelled from Memmingen after having her ears cut off as
a reminder not to return. The Ulmer authorities proved more reluctant
to use violence than the magistrates in Kaufbeuren and Memmingen
and simply re-banished Schemerin, ordering her to “swear that she will
go across the Rhine, without staying another night in the territory, and
that she will not cross it again for the rest of her life, unless granted a
full pardon.” Before expelling her, the authorities warned her that if
she returned again she would risk “life and limb.”

Schemerin disregarded even this dire warning, however, landing
her at the pillory again eight years later, in August 1597, charged
with several petty thefts. According to the official sentence read out
by the council’s scribe, this time—at the very least her fifth arrest in
nine years—the frustrated Ulmer authorities used force in an attempt
to impel her to heed their verdicts. Before her sentencing, Schemerin
was forced to renew her oath to remain across the Rhine for life and
ordered to depart that very day (this time the authorities dropped the
formulaic clause regarding the possibility of a pardon). Furthermore,
the council decreed that, “after the sounding of the customary bells,
the executioner is to bind the prisoner in the tower and bring her
to the town hall for sentencing.” As Schemerin stood below, exposed at
the pillory in the town’s busy marketplace, the council’s scribe read out
the official verdict from the town hall’s balcony and detailed her crimes
and her unrepentant nature for the crowd. After the proclamation of
her sentence was complete, the executioner carried out the council’s
sentence, subjecting her to the humiliating public punishment ritual
known as “ußhauen”. After slicing off what remained of her ears, he
whipped her through Ulm’s winding streets as his assistant struck a pair
of cymbals to call the attention of the local populace. Using a bundle
of birch rods, the hangman drove Schemerin at a run through the
winding streets of the town and out the Frauenthor gate on the northern
outskirts of town, reminding her never to return to the territory or else
she would suffer an even worse fate. These grisly events are depicted in
a sketch in the marginalia of the council’s verdict. The image presents
Schemerin, stripped to the waist and crying, being beaten through the
streets of the city by the executioner (Figure 1).¹

¹ This account is based upon Schemerin’s record in the Urgichtbuch: See StAU A [6389] Urgichtbuch, fol. 44–5 (Friday, 12 August 1597). This record appears in a slightly different form in the Ratsprotokolle, StAU A [3530] Ratsprotokolle, Nr. 47, fol. 342 (same date). Schemerin is also mentioned in StAU A [3530] Ratsprotokolle, Nr. 40, fol. 19b (Monday, 6 March 1588), StAU A [3530] Ratsprotokolle, Nr. 40, fol. 560, 563, 564b