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## **Austrian Hospitals in the Early Modern Times. Inmates – Authorities – Organisational System**

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Pre-modern hospitals were places of privileged care for a very limited number of individuals. People who wanted to gain admission to a hospital had to write applications to the respective town council and the “Spitalmeister”, the manager of the hospital. These two authorities decided whether an applicant was granted access to the hospital or not. In many cases the hospital was not only the most important enterprise of the city, but also the civic bank and the largest urban haulage company. Due to its important status within a community, the hospital was observed and controlled by various urban authorities. Besides the “Spitalmeister”, who was elected by the town council, there were other authorities within the hospital, e.g. the majordomo and his wife (“Spitalmeier”), who was responsible for the financial management of the hospital, and a priest, who was responsible for the religious care of the inmates. In larger hospitals, staff such as male and female “nurses” was hired to care for the sick. Furthermore, “Siechenväter” and “Siechenmütter” were elected by the inmates of the hospital, in order to operate as spokespersons for specific groups of inmates. One can see quite clearly by the described situation that autonomy and heteronomy coexisted and mingled within the hospital.

The inmates of hospitals in the early modern times can be considered as a kind of “black box”, because one can find little information about them in the historical sources. For the historian, it is possible to obtain at least some insight into the life of the inmates with the help of account books of hospitals, applications for acceptance into a hospital and existing court records. However, at the normative level of instructions or house rules, information

about the organisational system of the hospital can be found. On the one hand, the inmates were directly or indirectly controlled by the town council, the (Catholic) church and the employees, but on the other hand they were also cared for by the previously mentioned authorities. The internal organisation of the hospital had to be continuously negotiated, as everyday life was influenced by this field of power ("Kräftefeld"). Due to the different instances of control, the inmates had the possibility to depose someone from his/her office. The "Spitalmeier" could be overruled by the "Spitalmeister", and the "Spitalmeister" could be overruled by the town council and priest of the hospital (as a factor of power from outside). There were indeed many different possibilities for intervention. It seemed quite difficult to keep the balance in this instable "Kräftefeld", which was influenced and controlled by the obligatory financial accounting and the duty to report. However, all the involved authorities had a high degree of interest in maintaining a harmonious situation, in order to avoid endless complaints to the town council. The plea for peace and tidiness, which can be read quite often in house rules, was meant as an appeal for the inmates as well as the authorities of the hospital. The specific house rules had to be obeyed not only by the inmates, but also by the staff. The inmates controlled the "loyalty" of the "Spitalmeister" and, in turn, the "Spitalmeister" controlled the behaviour and the "thankfulness" of the inmates, which was "visualised" by means of prayers. As a consequence, a flexible system developed, which was to react sensitively – according to the perception of the city councilmen – in detecting infidelity, misconduct and maladministration. For its contemporaries, the hospital represented an ecclesiastical as well as secular institution. This aspect opens up an additional facet to the interpretation of the behaviour of the employees and inmates.

### **(1) The level of the town council and the rule of the town council**

According to the general trend of European cities, the town councils in Austrian cities tried more and more to control all events within the towns (reinforcement of urban rule/*Verobrigkeitlichung*). The rule of the town councils became apparent by means of new buildings like the town halls, decoration of churches (like the impressive chairs of the town councils) but also by means of "graces" granted to the town's inhabitants. Many written or (even

more frequent) oral applications ("Supplikationen") were addressed to the town council by poor townfolk. These applications show not only the political power structure of town council and townspeople but also offer autobiographical declarations of old, poor and ill men and women in the Early Modern Age. Each city dweller was entitled to a petition, independent of age, family status, sex – the town hall served as the major centre in the process of deciding who was to be allowed to be taken into a town hospital and who was not. Town records in particular (mostly preserved from mid-16<sup>th</sup> century) show how the town council and the closely linked "Spitalmeister" (manager of the hospital) came to their decisions of acceptance and non-acceptance. Normally you will find the surname, the status (for example burgher or non-burgher, unmarried or married, widow etc.) and the petition (in a condensed version) written in the town records. "Obedient", beseeching, ceaseless requests for prebends in hospitals were reported to the town council. The "Spitalmeister" was obliged to give detailed information on the capacity of the town hospital and especially on the available capacity. Very often the petitioner seemed to have inside information (which shows the social control within a face-to-face-society) because applications often speak about an "even now released prebend". Burghers (who possessed citizenship) especially had the edge over non-burghers in the battle of released prebends. Domestic, on the contrary, often had to buy admission to the hospital, but the amount given would never cover the charges which were necessary to cover the hospital's operational costs. The petitioners often mentioned in their petitions "good conduct" ("always peaceful and pious") and stressed their "right confession" (Roman Catholic). Lots of applicants stated that they would live amicably and calmly according to the goals of the hospital – they promised to bear the constant prayers in the hospital patiently.

Different resources were granted by the town council to the petitioners: there were several types of accommodations in different, hierarchically organised institutions (for example burgher hospital, infirmaries). The town council responded variably and in a highly sensitive manner to the applications: some received only alms, other were given shelter in the hospital in exchange for rent, other obtained shelter without paying rent, some ob-

tained shelter with or without food, some had to work to receive shelter in the hospital and so on.

## **(2) The manager of the Hospital (“Spitalmeister”) – the person who controlled the hospital on behalf of the town council**

Access to the hospital meant a complete change in every-day routine for the new inmates; a loss of freedom and a system of punishments in the case of misbehaviour were the consequences. Normally the manager of the hospital was married and his wife was often responsible for the female domestics of the hospital and often for running the kitchen. Although the manager did not live in the hospital, he was the one who had to oversee current transactions in the hospital. According to the size of the hospital, the manager had to supervise the hospital’s chart recorder and further hospital employees (physician, accoucheuse, domestics, chaplain, etc.), inspect all the hospital buildings (bath, blacksmith) but also the hospital business (hospital mill, hospital blacksmith, brewery, bakery, fish breeding, sheep farm and so on). And last but not least, he had to make sure the house rules were accepted within the hospital. At the end of each year he had to present a bill, where the town council could see all the revenue and expenditures of the year concerning the hospital. Entering one of the town archives, the visitor normally becomes aware of walls of written bills concerning the town hospital which illustrate the rigid inspection on behalf of the town council. In order to monitor the manager, the town council enacted written hospital orders and instructions which aimed to arrange both the internal and external organisation of the hospitals. The area of operation and the area of monitoring both of the hospital manager and the domestics (cellarmaster, hospital butcher, buying agent, etc.) were increasingly set in writing in the Early Modern Age. Very often you will find the town physician also working as hospital physician. The nursing personal (“Siechenmeister”) – responsible for the sick people – received more and more written instructions in the early modern times. Besides the duty to obey, the inmates were obliged to wear special clothes (uniform) as well as the duty to pray and to behave in an orderly fashion. The fixed daily routine would not allow much freedom, and the inmates, on the other hand, were aware of the written arrangement of food that they were given. Early modern hospitals worked a bit like a

municipal bank: both the members of the town council and town dwellers had the possibility to borrow money at a fixed rate of interest; in turn, the manager of the hospital had to invest the hospital's money. Therefore, the manager had to bear great responsibility. In a written hospital arrangement of 1731, it was stated that the hospital manager served as a delegate of God: "everything has to start with God". The daily prayers and the frequent obligation to attend mass were above all else the most important parts of the hospital arrangements. The manager had to make sure every hospital inmate attended mass on Sundays and feasts.

### **(3) The majordomo of the hospital**

The majordomo and his wife were in charge of the management of the hospital and the surveillance of the inmates. Depending on the size of the hospital, male and female domestics were under the control of the majordomo, as were the hospital brewer, the hospital barber, hospital clerk, etc. As a rule, hospitals in early modern times were in a certain way profit-oriented companies which had to run their own establishment, the estate and the servants in order to care for the inmates in the best way possible. The "business hospital", sometimes even a small manorial system, comprised only a small staff. Its own establishment was to ensure the provision of the inmates and the staff: vineyards, forest, dairy cattle and vegetable garden (especially for cabbage and fruit) formed the basic equipment of hospitals. Mills, hospital bathrooms and brewery had to be kept under close control. Further income for the hospitals, or rather, the town councils, resulted from the right to run public bars or breweries, to own fish ponds and to sell salt. Some hospitals possessed the right to run a carrying company (coaches, heavy loads); other hospitals ran a manufactory for cloth. Some hospitals possessed their own court and gained income by this court.

Because the manager of the hospital ("Spitalmeister") didn't reside in the hospital, the majordomo and the inmates had great influence on the daily routine within the hospital. A house-rule dating from 1731 clearly states: "Since the hospital management cannot keep an eye on everything, there should be an election among the inmates. The most capable and the most intelligent have to supervise the other inmates and should pay attention to the house rules. This person should be a role model for the other inmates

and should announce trespassers of the house rules to the town council or, better still, the hospital manager.” There was a well-established system of face-to-face control among the hospital inmates, but also among the hospital staff themselves. Male and female domestics were obliged to supervise the inmates, while the inmates were to announce malpractice of the hospital staff to the majordomo or the hospital manager. The aim of this was to help to avoid maladministration but also disputes. Generally speaking, the main emphasis of the town council concerning the inmates was on religious obligations – one could call it the “work” of inmates. At the level of hospital staff, the main focus rested on virtues such as industriousness and orderliness, but also more and more on writing down what they did concerning administration. The chaplain’s field of activity was broad: he was responsible for saying mass, but he also supervised both staff and inmates. And the chaplain would not have been under the control of the town council, but of the local parish priest or the bishop; therefore the chaplain was autonomous.

It was a well-balanced field of powers that existed within the early modern hospitals. Checks and balances ensured the rule of the town council over the civic hospitals. On the one hand, the town councils tried to establish by means of the house rules an all-encompassing rule over the hospitals; on the other hand, the town councils confined the agendas of the staff more and more by means of instructions. Oaths, approbations, rules and instructions established a microstructure of subordination and superordination as well as calculating fields of activity and assignment of duties. The inmates were the feather that broke the balance in this subtle field of balanced control, because they could complain about everything to the town council, even though their position might not have been extremely strong.

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