

## CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

SACRED PROSTITUTION NEVER EXISTED IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST or Mediterranean. This book presents the evidence that leads to that conclusion. It also reconsiders the various literary data that have given rise to the sacred prostitution myth and offers new interpretations of what these may have actually meant in their ancient contexts. I hope that this will end a debate that has been present in various fields of academia for about three decades now.

What is sacred prostitution, also known as cult, cultic, ritual, or temple prostitution? There are, as one might imagine of a topic that has been the object of study for centuries and the object of debate for decades, a number of different answers to that question. If we were to approach the topic from a classics perspective, we might come across the definition in the second edition of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, where sacred prostitution

existed in two main forms. (1) The defloration of virgins before marriage was originally a threshold rite, whereby the dangerous task of having intercourse with a virgin was delegated to a foreigner, since intercourse was in many, if not all, cases limited to strangers . . . (2) regular temple prostitution, generally of slaves, such as existed in Babylonia, in the cult of Ma at Comana Pontica, of Aphrodite at Corinth, and perhaps at Eryx, and in Egypt.<sup>1</sup>

If we were researching the roles of cult prostitutes of the Old Testament we would read in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* that

When speaking of cultic prostitution, scholars normally refer to religiously legitimated intercourse with strangers in or in the vicinity of

<sup>1</sup> *OCD*: 890.

## THE MYTH OF SACRED PROSTITUTION IN ANTIQUITY

the sanctuary. It had a ritual character and was organized or at least condoned by the priesthood, as a means to increase fecundity and fertility. There is, however, another, more restricted way in which one can speak of cultic prostitution. We may use the term to call attention to the fact that the money or the goods which the prostitutes received went to the temple funds.<sup>2</sup>

Looking more deeply into the possible Mesopotamian roots of this alleged practice, we might come across in the *Dictionary of the Ancient Near East* an entry on “Prostitution and Ritual Sex” that combines several different categories of sexual act. Extracting the material pertaining specifically to sacred prostitution, one reads,

Prostitutes are mentioned together with various groups of women engaged in more or less religious activities. Inana/Ishtar was a protective goddess of prostitutes. Possibly prostitution was organized like other female activities (such as midwifery or wet nursing) and manipulated through the temple organization.<sup>3</sup>

Turning to New Testament studies, we would find in S. M. Baugh’s article on “Cult Prostitution in New Testament Ephesus: A Reappraisal” a more focused description, identifying cult prostitution as

union with a prostitute (whether with a female or a male makes no difference) for exchange of money or goods, which was sanctioned by the wardens of a deity whether in temple precincts or elsewhere as a sacred act of worship. In such cases, the prostitute had semi-official status as a cult functionary, either on a permanent or temporary basis, and the sexual union is usually interpreted to have been part of a fertility ritual. More generally, cult prostitution could simply refer to acts of prostitution where the money or goods received went to a temple and to its administrators. In this latter case, the prostitutes would be slaves owned by the temple.<sup>4</sup>

Four different definitions have brought up several different, although not always conflicting, notions of what sacred prostitution was. It was some manner of prenuptial defloration ritual. It was the prostitution of slaves for the economic benefit of the temples. It was the prostitution of permanent or temporary priests and priestesses as an act of worship.

<sup>2</sup> *ABD*: 5, 510.

<sup>3</sup> Bienkowski and Millard (eds.) 2000: 236.

<sup>4</sup> Baugh 1999: 444.

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Stephanie Lynn Budin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

It was a fertility ritual. It was “women’s work” managed by the temple organization.

At least part of these vagaries and variations in definition comes from the different sources for sacred prostitution in antiquity.<sup>5</sup> As we shall see in the upcoming chapters, some of the sources seem to refer to a professional class of sacred prostitutes (e.g., the cuneiform tablets), whereas others seem to refer to the occasional prostitution of women who are otherwise not prostitutes (e.g., Herodotos).

For the sake of clarity, I offer my own definition of sacred prostitution here. Sacred prostitution is the sale of a person’s body for sexual purposes where some portion (if not all) of the money or goods received for this transaction belongs to a deity. In the Near East, this deity is usually understood as Ištar or Aštar; in Greece, it is usually Aphrodite. At least three separate types of sacred prostitution are recorded in the Classical sources. One is a once-in-a-lifetime prostitution and/or sale of virginity in honor of a goddess. So much is recorded in our earliest testimonial of such a practice, Herodotos 1.199. A second type of sacred prostitution involves women (and men?) who are professional prostitutes and who are owned by a deity or a deity’s sanctuary. Finally, there are references to a temporary type of sacred prostitution, where the women (and men?) are either prostitutes for a limited period of time before being married, or only prostitute themselves during certain rituals.<sup>6</sup> Each of these three subdivisions, of course, has its own subdivisions, but this will do for a start.

What is ultimately important to remember, though, is that sacred prostitution did not exist. As such, *all* definitions are innately abstract to begin with. What I offer here is not so much a definition of a ritual or institution or practice that took place in the ancient world, but rather a sketch of an artificial conglomeration of ideas that have been pulled together over the centuries into the *image* of a ritual or institution or practice. In creating this definition, then, I have attempted to keep to the absolute basics, offering only the information provided by the Near Eastern and Classical “sources,” while remaining cognizant that most of these “sources” had nothing to do either with sacred prostitution or with each other. I have eschewed the secondary interpretations that have emerged in the definitions and studies over the centuries, such as fertility ritual or rite of defloration, although, as seen above, these are quite prevalent in

<sup>5</sup> I use the term “antiquity” as a short form for the ancient Near East and Mediterranean.

<sup>6</sup> Budin 2006: 78–79.

## THE MYTH OF SACRED PROSTITUTION IN ANTIQUITY

the current literature. Furthermore, I have insisted on the aspect of economic exchange, the *sine qua non* of prostitution. As will become apparent throughout this book, several authors who write about sacred prostitution are willing to dismiss this economic aspect, thus confusing sacred prostitution with other categories of what might be termed sacred sex.

### ORGANIZATION

I have taken a mostly philological approach to the problem of sacred prostitution in antiquity. This is because sacred prostitution is ultimately a literary construct. Although various icons and archaeological remains have been drawn into the sacred prostitution debate, this is only because the idea of sacred prostitution already existed. For example, as we shall see in Chapter Nine, the remains of a series of rooms in Etruscan Pyrgi were identified as a sacred brothel based on written testimonia that associated the site with the cult of Phoenician Astarte and, independently, *scorta* (whores, or possibly leather bags; no one knows for sure). Erotic scenes in Mesopotamian art are commonly analyzed based on preconceived notions of sacred prostitution, inevitably misconstruing their meanings. Thus, to quote one of the primary scholars on the nonexistence of sacred prostitution in Mesopotamia,

Old Babylonian terracotta plaques with sexual scenes, according to current reasoning, depict sacred marriage, sacred prostitution, or just plain harlotry. They do not. Like thousands of other Old Babylonian terracotta plaques without sexual content, they are complex tools of domestic magic whose images are grounded in Sumerian folk traditions. . . . Women in Middle Assyrian lead erotica, occasionally in ménages à trois, must be female temple officiants offering themselves on altars in Ishtar's orgiastic cults.<sup>7</sup> Mistakenly assumed to have come from the Ishtar Temple at Assur, one erotic relief appeared as an illustration for "prostitution and ritual sex," an entry in a popularizing Mesopotamian dictionary. The truth is, such lead reliefs show foreign captives performing bizarre sexual acts for Assyrian viewers and thus carry strong political messages that equate sex and visual possession with territorial conquest.<sup>8</sup>

The archaeological and artistic "evidence" contribute to the myth of sacred prostitution by offering the illusion of confirmation in alternate

<sup>7</sup> Sarcasm definitely implied.

<sup>8</sup> Assante 2003: 15.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

media. But the understanding of these things as pertaining to sacred prostitution inevitably comes back to the literary sources. Thus, they do not so much provide confirmation as contribute to the vicious cycle that is sacred prostitution studies.

Although of differing genres, the written materials that pertain to sacred prostitution can be initially categorized into two main groups: implied references in the Near Eastern corpus and direct references in the Classical corpus. By “implied” I refer to the fact that many of the words identified as “sacred prostitute” in the ancient Near Eastern languages (Sumerian, Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Hebrew) are actually of uncertain definition. Thus, the study of sacred prostitution in these areas mainly boils down to a study of terminology. As the evidence presented in Chapter Two will show, there are no words for “sacred prostitute” in the ancient Near Eastern vocabularies, thus removing any indigenous evidence for this practice from the Near East.

By “direct” references in the Classical corpus I refer once again to the transparency of the vocabulary: The Greek and Roman texts that (supposedly) refer to sacred prostitution are understood to use more clearly defined words. There is no doubt that, in Greek, a *pornê* is a whore, whereas a *hetaira* might be understood as a more upper-class courtesan.<sup>9</sup> Likewise with the Roman *scortum* and *meretrix*, respectively.<sup>10</sup> *Porneuô* and its compounded forms refer to prostitution, as do the Latin *prostaré* and *prostituare*. Theoretically, there should be no cause of confusion based on terminology in the study of the Classical sources. Of course, if you have to qualify something with the word “theoretically,” you already know that this is not going to be the case.

Chapter Three provides a collection of the most commonly cited references to sacred prostitution in the Greco-Roman repertoire. These range in date from Pindar in the mid-fifth century BCE to Augustine in the fifth century CE. With two exceptions, the translations I have used in this chapter come from different Web sites or commonly consulted books.<sup>11</sup> The idea is to present to the reader the reasons that the myth of sacred prostitution appears as viable and prolific as it does – a quick perusal on the Web or in a local library presents multiple examples, all primary sources, of sacred prostitution throughout the ancient world.

<sup>9</sup> For more explicit definitions of these terms and how they relate to each other, see Davidson 1997: Chapter Three; Kurke 1999: Chapter Five; and Cohen 2006: *passim*.

<sup>10</sup> Adams 1983: *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> I offer my own translations in the relevant chapters of the book.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE MYTH OF SACRED PROSTITUTION IN ANTIQUITY

Chapters Four through Ten reexamine the texts in Greek and Latin that have given rise to the myth of sacred prostitution. Chapter Four analyzes what is in reality the oldest reference to sacred prostitution – Herodotos’ *Histories*, Book 1, Chapter 199. I place Herodotos here, slightly out of chronological sequence in relation to Pindar, for two reasons. Herodotos picks up where Chapter Two leaves off, looking for sacred prostitution in the ancient Near East. Secondly, as will become apparent, Pindar’s fragment 122, typically cited as a reference to sacred prostitution, actually has nothing to do with it. He is therefore reserved for study in Chapter Six.

Chapter Five looks at two narratives that some scholars claim derived directly from Herodotos – Lucian’s *De Dea Syria* §6 and the “Letter of Jeremiah” vv. 42–43. Once again, I subordinate chronology to cladistics, Lucian being one of the latest references to sacred prostitution in the repertoire and the dating of “Jeremiah” being still in debate. The close (or not) connections between these later two works and Herodotos will help to unravel to what extent the sacred prostitution myth might ultimately be brought back to the so-called “Father of History.”

Once both Herodotos (et al.) and Pindar have been examined, the study moves on to one of the most important names in the generation of the sacred prostitution myth: Strabo. Strabo has provided more “examples” of sacred prostitution than any other author, and in many ways he, far more than Herodotos, might be regarded as the “Father of Sacred Prostitution.” It is evident that Strabo made use of Herodotos in his *Geography*, and his *ethôn tôn para tois Assyriois* (customs among the Assyrians) is mostly based on the former’s Babylonian *logos*. As such, it is not surprising to find references to the Herodotean Babylonian rite of Mylitta here. Likewise, although Strabo was certainly familiar with Pindar, it is clear that one of Pindar’s later commentators – Khamailon of Heraklea – provided critical data for Strabo’s own understanding of the rites of Aphrodite in Corinth.

Beginning with Strabo’s Corinth and continuing throughout the rest of Chapter Seven (and really the rest of the book), the study changes perspective somewhat. As stated above, Herodotos wrote the first narrative of sacred prostitution. It is explicit, describing the process by which women come to the temple, receive payment in exchange for sex, and leave having discharged their duty to the goddess. Lucian, following Herodotos, is likewise unambiguous. Although, as will be seen, Strabo expresses some doubt concerning Herodotos’ Mylitta rite, he nevertheless passes on the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

account. In these cases, what is at issue is clearly sacred prostitution – the sale of a person’s body for sexual purposes where some portion of the money received belongs to a deity. Once we get to Corinth (Pindar’s and Strabo’s), this ceases to be the case. Starting partially with Pindar and definitely with Strabo, the “transparency” of the Classical vocabulary comes under consideration. For example, is a “hierodule” a sacred prostitute? Several modern authors insist that she (sometimes he) certainly is, and hierodules form the basis of many of Strabo’s perceived sacred prostitution accounts. What about the *hiera sômata* (“sacred bodies”); are they also sacred prostitutes, synonymous with the hierodules? What about a *hiera*, or a *pallakis*? Does the word *kataporneuô* inevitably refer to prostitution?

The answer to all of these questions is “no.” As it turns out, Strabo seldom refers to sacred prostitution; I highly doubt he even had a clear conception of this idea. In reality, Strabo only discusses sacred prostitution twice – once pertaining to Babylon (plagiarized from Herodotos), and once in regard to the cult of Anaitis in Armenia. Except that the latter narrative goes on to give a description of the rite that is clearly not sacred prostitution as here defined, and it seems that Strabo was at a loss to explain the (to him) unusual nature of Armenian courtship rituals. In all other instances – Egypt, Comana, Corinth, Eryx – Strabo is discussing institutions entirely distinct from sacred prostitution. We simply misunderstood his vocabulary.

Similar problems emerge for other authors. Chapter Eight looks at three authors – Klearkhos of Soli, Pompeius Trogus/Justinus,<sup>12</sup> and Valerius Maximus – and the four contributions they made to the sacred prostitution debate. Once again, in all but one instance, the narratives from these authors actually have nothing to do with sacred prostitution. Here the problems can be boiled down to bad scholarship and, once again, vocabulary. The presence of sacred prostitution in Justinus’ Cyprus or Valerius Maximus’ Sicca depends very much on the definition of the word *quaestus*. At its most basic, the word refers to profit. It can, under specific circumstances, refer to the “wages of a harlot,” insofar as prostitutes earn profits. The problem emerges when *quaestus* is automatically associated with prostitution merely because females are involved. In fact, most scholars working on the passages in question include the word “prostitution” in their translations in spite of the fact that all that is really presented is “profit.” As such, there is a specter of prostitution,

<sup>12</sup> Taken together here as “joint authors” of sorts.

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Stephanie Lynn Budin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE MYTH OF SACRED PROSTITUTION IN ANTIQUITY

understood as sacred prostitution, in passages that have little or nothing to do with this practice.

Klearkhos can only be taken as a source for sacred prostitution provided the reader only reads *one* sentence from Book Four of his *Lives* and completely disregards the rest of the text. Apparently, this has not proven to be too much of a problem, either in the ancient scholarship or in the modern. Justinus seems to have been this careless, for it would appear to be just this misreading that generated the one actual account of sacred prostitution mentioned in this chapter – the *votum* of Epizephyrian Lokris. This mistake, embellished with literary leitmotifs, furnished one of the very few direct and detailed references to sacred prostitution in antiquity.

Chapter Nine is the only chapter that is primarily archaeological in character, investigating references to sacred prostitution in Etruria and pre-Roman Italy. Once again, though, the debate comes back into the realms of the literary, as the archaeological and epigraphic identifications and interpretations are made through the lens of the written materials. Chapter Ten considers the use of the accusation of sacred prostitution in early Christian rhetoric. As with Chapters Six, Seven, Eight, and Nine, it will quickly become apparent that very few (two, actually) of the texts used to construct the myth of sacred prostitution actually have anything to do with it. Instead, later scholars, already well familiar with the myth, read it into just about any passage that somehow involved religious ritual and sexuality – once again, what might be termed “sacred sex.” Except that not even the “sacred sex” really existed, and all we are left with is a lot of hot air.

The final chapter – Last Myths – looks at what happened to the myth of sacred prostitution in modern times, by which I mean since the eighteenth century. A really good myth takes on a life of its own and, like most other life forms, is capable of reproduction. Sacred prostitution is no different, and this myth has generated a number of subordinate myths. Apart from the general myth that sacred prostitution existed, there are the myths that it was somehow implicated in ritual defloration or fertility. There is the myth that sacred prostitution, not being a historical reality, was invented by Herodotos, or possibly Sir James Frazer, or maybe the Victorians generally. Another myth suggests that sacred prostitution is a sign or a remnant of matriarchy; another that it induces mystic initiation and union with the Goddess. Divisions between “the academy,” “popular culture,” and “the New Age movement” break down here; almost all myths can be found in some guise in all of them.



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978-0-521-88090-9 - The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity

Stephanie Lynn Budin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

## DIVIDE AND CRUMBLE

One of the biggest problems in the study of ancient sacred prostitution is that it crosses disciplines. On the one hand are the Classicists with their *Histories* and *Geographies* telling them that sacred prostitution existed in Babylon, Egypt, Phoenicia, and the like. On the other hand are the Assyriologists, Egyptologists, and Biblical scholars, who do not necessarily find the same in their own sources. Which is, technically, odd, because their sources happen to come from Babylon, Egypt, and Phoenicia. And so a bit of a divide emerged in the study of sacred prostitution.<sup>13</sup> Originally the nascent Assyriologists of the nineteenth century were willing to accept the Classical data and translate different cult titles as, possibly, “sacred prostitute.”<sup>14</sup> But over time, especially in the late twentieth century, this came to be challenged, and there is, at best, extreme ambiguity in ancient Near Eastern studies over the existence of sacred prostitution, with many scholars now in the camp that believes it never existed. In other words, they looked at the new evidence (recently translated cuneiform texts) in the places where the old evidence (Greco-Roman sources) told them they would find sacred prostitutes, and they realized, eventually, that none were there.

Nothing comparable happened in Classical studies. The Greco-Roman sources said that there were sacred prostitutes “there,” and most Classicists were content to believe that “there” they were. If in doubt, they looked at the translations and studies from the earlier twentieth century,<sup>15</sup> or discussions of the ancient Near Eastern evidence as written by other Classicists,<sup>16</sup> and were reaffirmed in their belief in ancient Near Eastern sacred prostitution. Some Classicists were willing to entertain the notion

<sup>13</sup> There is rather little literature on sacred prostitution in Egyptology, just as the references to Egyptian sacred prostitution are sparse. At best, there is ambiguity. To give two typical examples, L. Manniche (1997: 12) notes that “In various places in the Middle East, in Greece and in India there was a particular arrangement intended for the pleasure of gods and men: temple prostitution. It is difficult to determine the extent to which this had a place in Egypt.” Likewise, Montserrat (1996: 125) claims that “Cultic prostitution or *hierodouleia* was not an Egyptian tradition, although it might have gone on at such places as the precinct of the foreign deity Astarte at Saqqara. However, textual references to specifically Egyptian cultic prostitutes are highly ambiguous.”

<sup>14</sup> See especially Chapter II on this development.

<sup>15</sup> The most common source used by Classicists that I have seen is J. Pritchard’s *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, published in 1950.

<sup>16</sup> The most commonly cited such text is E. Yamauchi’s 1973 publication “Cultic Prostitution: A Case Study in Cultural Diffusion.”

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88090-9 - The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity

Stephanie Lynn Budin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE MYTH OF SACRED PROSTITUTION IN ANTIQUITY

that, although Near Eastern sacred prostitution certainly did exist, it was never really adopted in the West, contrary to Pindar and Strabo.<sup>17</sup> A somewhat radical and definitely minority view is that sacred prostitution did exist in Greece, as per Pindar, but did not exist in Babylon; rather, this was a literary construct of Herodotos.<sup>18</sup> But very few Classical scholars actually doubt that sacred prostitution existed somewhere.

The clash between these two points of view became particularly vivid at a conference I attended in 2002. At the “Prostitution in the Ancient World” conference hosted by the University of Wisconsin, Madison, I delivered a paper entitled “Sacred Prostitution in the First Person” in which I tested some of Robert Oden’s theories on sacred prostitution as accusation (see below). The core point of my paper, however, was that sacred prostitution never existed anywhere in the ancient world. Or, to quote one of the conference participants, a Classicist, “You mean, that it never existed *at all?*” Apparently, to make such a sweeping statement was simply going too far. A vehement debate ensued. On the one side was the sole Assyriologist taking part in the conference (it is interesting to note that a conference that intended to look at the issues of prostitution in the “ancient world” generally featured one Assyriologist, one Biblical scholar, and a host of Classicists). On the other side were two of the most highly renowned Classicists to publish on ancient prostitution.<sup>19</sup> No resolution could be achieved.

The point is, sacred prostitution crosses traditional dividing lines in academia, and for all the current enthusiasm about studying the ancient world as a whole, East meets West, this is still barely in the incunabula phase. As a result, the Classical scholars are slow to consult primary texts and recent publications pertaining to the ancient Near East. Alternatively, ancient Near Eastern scholars do not necessarily understand the full intricacies of Classical literature. They may be able to determine that sacred prostitution *is* a myth, but not how it came into being and evolved.

## THE HYPOTHESIS OF ACCUSATION

It was just this divide between the Classical authors who invented the myth and the modern scholars who deny it that led to the most popular

<sup>17</sup> Pirenne-Delforge 1994: 125–126; Saffrey 1985: 368 and 373–374; Conzelmann 1967: *passim*.

<sup>18</sup> Kurke 1999: Chapter 6.

<sup>19</sup> Somehow, I got left out of the debate entirely.