

## INTRODUCTION

Pompeii's "purpose-built" brothel (VII.12.18–20; see Fig. 1), reopened to the public with great fanfare after restorations in 2006,<sup>1</sup> is an internationally celebrated tourist attraction. Indeed, it is one of the most visited sites (if not *the* most visited site) in ancient Pompeii, with up to 455 tourists visiting it each hour.<sup>2</sup> Excavated in 1862, the small two-story structure in the neighborhood between Pompeii's forum and its main north–south business thoroughfare (see Fig. 2) has fascinated generations of scholars and tourists alike. More importantly, as the only structure that fulfills all scholarly criteria for an ancient Roman brothel (see more on the criteria below), Pompeii's purpose-built brothel has become the scholarly touchstone against which all other possible brothels from the Roman (and often Greek) world are compared.<sup>3</sup> In addition, it plays a central role in discussions of ancient prostitution, gender and sexuality, moral zoning, and erotic art.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this importance, there has yet to be a systematic treatment of the structure, and some categories of evidence, such as the objects found during excavation, remain virtually unknown. This book fills that void by examining all of the purpose-built brothel's material evidence (architecture, archaeological objects, graffiti, and frescoes, including the upper floor) in Part I, and then exploring the physical, social, and emotional experiences of those who patronized and worked in the establishment (male clients, female prostitutes, and male prostitutes) in Part II.



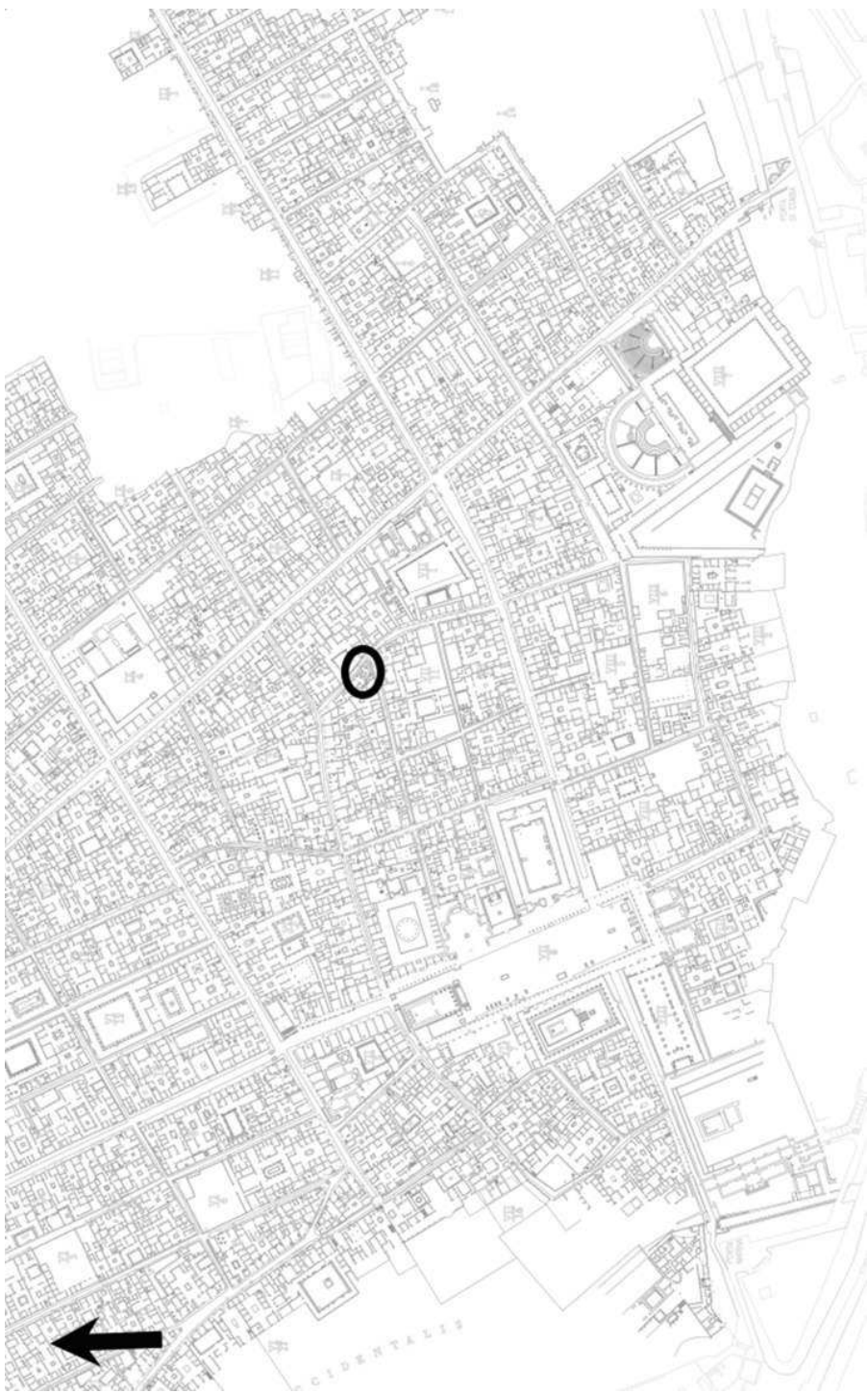
1. Purpose-built brothel, facing northwest. To the right is the Vicolo del Lupanare, and to the left is the Vicolo del Balcone Pensile. The wooden gate on the Vicolo del Balcone Pensile is modern, controlling the flow of tourists into and out of the building. Photograph by author, su concessione del Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo – Soprintendenza speciale per i Beni archeologici di Napoli e Pompei.

## ROMAN PROSTITUTION AND BROTHELS

Scholarship over the past few decades has greatly expanded our understanding of ancient Roman prostitution.<sup>5</sup> Most important for the study at hand, this scholarship has illuminated the legal contours of Roman prostitution, its central role in defining – via contrast – Roman honor, and its essential role in Roman society and ubiquity in the urban landscape.<sup>6</sup> For those who are new to the study of Roman prostitution, it is fundamental to know that the enterprise was legal (and even taxed at certain times),<sup>7</sup> and that Roman men patronized both female and (usually young) male prostitutes, many of whom were probably enslaved individuals.<sup>8</sup> While numerous civic, legal, and social privileges were denied to pimps and prostitutes on account of their lack of honor,<sup>9</sup> clients suffered no legal (and rarely social) repercussions: shame might result if a Roman man was perceived to spend too much time or money on the services of prostitutes, although this represents a larger concern for fiscal responsibility and the ideals of moderation than for prostitution.<sup>10</sup>

An evocative example of the role that brothels were thought to fill comes from a passage of the Augustan-age (late first century BCE through early first century CE) poet Horace, who claims that the notoriously conservative politician and moralist Cato the Elder once said to a young man exiting a brothel, “Well done, sir; for as soon as foul lust swells the veins, it is right for young men to come here, and not to grind away at other men’s wives.”<sup>11</sup> Prostitution, then, was thought to direct male sexual energy away from freeborn women (thus preserving men’s sexual rights over their wives and their control of paternity) and toward sexual objects with no honor to be sullied.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps because of this essential function, prostitution was common in the urban landscape. From the tombs lining the roads leading into Roman cities, to the shadows of the city walls, to the bars, taverns, and inns within cities, to the main entertainment and civic centers, literary and archaeological evidence suggests that sex could be bought nearly anywhere.<sup>13</sup> Even in the symbolic heart of Rome itself, the Roman Forum, male prostitutes were said to sell



2. Map of the southwestern regions of Pompeii. The purpose-built brothel (VII.12.18-20), indicated with a heavy circle, is located at the intersection of Vicolo del Lupanare (running north-south) and the Vicolo del Balcone Pensile (running east-west). Three blocks to the west is the forum, and one block to the east is Pompeii's major north-south arterial, the Via Stabia. Underlying map Dobbins and Foss 2007, used with permission of the authors.

themselves on the Vicus Tuscus.<sup>14</sup> At Pompeii, at least, establishments where sex was sold clustered in certain areas of town; this, plus the lack of honor associated with those who sold sex, has led scholars to examine the potential for ancient equivalents of moral zoning. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill argues that Roman magistrates known as aediles zoned dishonorable activities away from Pompeii's main civic and religious areas in order to preserve the honor and purity of those areas;<sup>15</sup> Ray Laurence suggests that an informal system of coercion encouraged establishments that hosted "deviant" activities to be located out of elite women's and children's view.<sup>16</sup> Thomas McGinn raises serious concerns about each argument, offering in his turn – convincingly, in my opinion – that the clustering of establishments where sex was sold was due to economic considerations, namely, proximity to high-traffic areas and thus customers.<sup>17</sup>

It is within the context of the pervasiveness of prostitution that the search for Roman brothels – especially at Pompeii, whose unsurpassed state of preservation is owed to the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in the year 79 CE – must be understood. Identifying Roman brothels in the archaeological record has never been an exact science. Even now debate continues about (1) how we should *define* an ancient Roman brothel, (2) how we can then *identify* those structures among excavated ruins, and (3) whether we should even focus on brothels at all, given the diversity of places where prostitution took place in the Roman world.<sup>18</sup>

The clearest articulation of criteria for identifying places of prostitution (at Pompeii, specifically) comes from Wallace-Hadrill's influential 1995 article, though as McGinn's historiography of the topic demonstrates, Wallace-Hadrill certainly was not the first to identify brothels at Pompeii, nor are his criteria universally accepted (they are quite popular, however).<sup>19</sup> Wallace-Hadrill proposes the following three criteria as markers of a structure where sex was sold:<sup>20</sup>

1. masonry bed in a small room easily accessible to the public
2. sexually explicit frescoes
3. cluster of sexually explicit graffiti

Applying these criteria results in different types of structures where sex may have been sold at Pompeii, including suites at the back of bars or taverns and single rooms opening onto the street.<sup>21</sup> McGinn proposes two additional criteria for identifying a brothel proper. First, he states that to qualify as a brothel, a major source of income should come from prostitution;<sup>22</sup> this then might exclude suites of rooms at the back of bars from the strict definition of a brothel (since presumably the sale of sex was secondary to the sale of food/drink). Next, he notes that a brothel should be able to host more than one prostitute at a time; this in turn excludes the single rooms.<sup>23</sup> What's left are structures that can host multiple prostitutes at the same time and have the

majority of their income from sex. This describes exactly *one* agreed-on structure from the Roman world, the structure to which McGinn gives the name “purpose-built brothel” (VII.12.18–20).<sup>24</sup>

Brothels proper thus seem to have been the exception rather than the rule. This raises several questions: why invest in, or patronize, a purpose-built brothel if sex could be bought and sold in so many places? On the other hand, why weren’t *more* brothels built? Moreover, if the purpose-built brothel is unique, to what extent can the information gathered from studying it apply *outside* the confines of the structure?

I offer answers to these questions throughout the book and address them directly in the Conclusion, but in short, I suggest that Pompeii’s purpose-built brothel was meant to offer not just a quick tumble with a streetwalker, but a sexual experience with drinking, socializing, and the fiction of emotional relationships. The “business model” (to the extent that we can use that modern phrase) of a purpose-built brothel, however, may not have been economically sustainable or flexible enough, and thus prostitution may have reverted back to places that did not require a purpose-built setup (bars and taverns, for example). Finally, I suggest that these findings have wider implications for our understanding of Roman prostitution, urban space, and social hierarchy.

#### APPROACHING THE PURPOSE-BUILT BROTHEL

Giuseppe Fiorelli, Pompeii’s Inspector of Excavations when the purpose-built brothel was excavated, described the structure for his 1875 *Descrizione di Pompei* thus: “One came then to a brothel, which if not having other clues could be recognizable from the gloomy and narrow space in which it was confined.”<sup>25</sup> The other clues to identifying the structure as a brothel – frescoes with “obscene representations” and erotic graffiti that he “abstain[ed] from referencing” – make Fiorelli a predecessor for two of the three criteria Wallace-Hadrill posited for determining places that sold sex (as above).<sup>26</sup> Fiorelli can be seen as a predecessor of modern scholars in another way, too: namely, in approaching the purpose-built brothel through the lens of Roman literature about brothels.

Fiorelli’s description of the “gloomy and narrow space” of the brothel is purposefully meant to recall Petronius’s representation of a brothel in the *Satyricon*, a text written in the reign of Nero (less than a generation before the eruption of Vesuvius) and set in the Bay of Naples.<sup>27</sup> When our narrator, Encolpius, has lost his way in a town he is visiting, he relates:

I approached a little old lady selling farm produce. “Tell me, mother,” I said, “have you any idea where I hang out?” She was tickled by such asinine wit, and replied: “Yes; no problem.” She then got up and began to lead the way. I thought she had second sight, and followed after her.



Then, when we reached some hole-in-the-corner place [*in locum secretiorem*], the witty old creature drew back a patchwork curtain, and said: “This must be where you stay.” I was just remarking that I did not recognize the lodging when my eyes fell on some men furtively pacing among the price-tags and naked prostitutes. It slowly dawned on me all too late that I’d been brought to a brothel.<sup>28</sup>

Not only is the fictional brothel presented as hidden (*in locum secretiorem*), but the section which follows clarifies that it was entered *per amfractus . . . obscurissimos*, “through the darkest twisty alleys.”<sup>29</sup> These passages are inevitably brought up in discussions of moral zoning to bolster claims that the purpose-built brothel was likewise “hidden away on the narrow back streets.”<sup>30</sup>

Other literary depictions also draw attention to the spectacle of naked prostitutes and prowling clients, while adding the sordidness of the atmosphere. In a passage meant to insult the former Roman emperor Claudius by representing his wife Messalina as a prostitute, Juvenal (a writer of satirical poems in the late first and early second centuries CE) paints a picture of Messalina out-whoring whores:

Listen to what Claudius put up with. When his wife realised her husband was asleep, she would leave, with no more than a single maid as her escort. Preferring a mat to her bedroom in the Palace, she had the nerve to put on a nighttime hood, the whore-empress. Like that, with a blonde wig hiding her black hair, she went inside a brothel reeking of ancient blankets to an empty cubicle – her very own. Then she stood there, naked and for sale, with her nipples gilded, under the trade name of “She-Wolf,” putting on display the belly you came from, noble-born Britannicus. She welcomed customers seductively as they came in and asked for their money. Later, when the pimp was already dismissing his girls, she left reluctantly, waiting till the last possible moment to shut her cubicle, still burning with her clitoris inflamed and stiff. She went away, exhausted by the men but not yet satisfied, and, a disgusting creature, with her cheeks filthy, dirty from the smoke of the lamp, she took back to the emperor’s couch the stench of the brothel.<sup>31</sup>

These are the best-known passages featuring Roman brothels – although one could point to others<sup>32</sup> – and collectively they form part of Rome’s cultural imaginary about brothels, and from there, the *modern* scholarly imaginary about ancient Roman brothels. It is hard *not* to think of these passages when approaching Pompeii’s purpose-built brothel, but, as McGinn points out, literary representations of brothels “are impossibly vague – they are not really intended as full or accurate descriptions of brothels – and laden with clichés. They betray an upper-class sensibility about how dirty, smoky, and smelly brothels were, in other words, how low-class, rather than impart much information that is useful to us.”<sup>33</sup>

It is time, then, to examine the purpose-built brothel on its own terms. In Part I, I approach the purpose-built brothel with standard methodologies for each type of material evidence, having assembled all of the archival documentation related to the excavation and subsequent restorations of the structure (much of it unpublished). This project thus contributes to a current trend in prostitution studies to conduct careful and rigorous examination of the material culture of prostitution, and like that body of work, shows that archaeological evidence is well positioned to provide supplements and correctives to information derived from literary sources.<sup>34</sup>

In exploring the experiences of the purpose-built brothel's prostitutes and clients in Part II, the project draws inspiration from recent scholarship in Classics and other fields that has sought to recenter the lives of marginalized groups such as slaves, prostitutes, and the working class.<sup>35</sup> Rebecca Flemming in 1999 already called for new approaches to ancient Roman prostitution, observing: "there has not been any serious effort to take the perspective of the prostitutes themselves into account, which is one of the most emphatic developments in the new historiography of prostitution emerging elsewhere."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, recent scholarship on modern prostitution, especially in the United States, has provided a major source of inspiration for this project. There are numerous areas in which ancient Roman prostitution and modern prostitution in the United States differ, especially in the legality of selling and buying sex, and the entanglement of slavery and prostitution in antiquity. I do not intend to argue that direct comparisons are warranted; however, new directions in the *study* of modern prostitution can provide provocative lines of questioning and new interpretative lenses for exploring ancient prostitution.<sup>37</sup>

For example, Ronald Weitzer and others have noted that victimization, exploitation, and agency interact in more complex ways than modern scholarly dichotomies of prostitutes as *either* victimized sexual objects *or* agents recognize.<sup>38</sup> The key, Weitzer suggests, is to listen to "the ways in which sex workers themselves experience and describe their work."<sup>39</sup> David Henry Sterry and R. J. Martin's 2009 edited volume, *Hos, Hookers, Call Girls, and Rent Boys: Professionals Writing on Life, Love, Money, and Sex*, allows us to do just that. Sterry writes of his motivation, "I want to put a face to people who are glamorized and vilified, worshipped and hated, sexualized and arrested; to celebrate, illuminate, and humanize humans who have lived in this ancient . . . industry."<sup>40</sup> One of the contributors to the volume, the well-known activist and prostitute Annie Sprinkle, reminds us that prostitutes can be humorous, playful, tough, creative, daring, caring, sexy, talented, and interesting, while also suffering from high levels of violence, shame, stigma, and exploitation.<sup>41</sup> Motivated by these approaches, I attempt to investigate how the purpose-built brothel's prostitutes actively framed themselves and others with words, space, and imagery; I ask questions about prostitutes'

sense of themselves and their interactions – both positive and negative – with other prostitutes, clients, their families and friends, and with broader society.

Another facet of modern prostitution that has received scholarly attention is the emotional labor carried out by prostitutes and sex workers.<sup>42</sup> In a review of scholarship on the modern sex industry, particularly in the United States, Barbara Brents and Kathryn Hausbeck note, “service workers [including prostitutes] are daily faced with performing prescribed emotions, and evoking these in customers.”<sup>43</sup> A study of prostitutes in the United Kingdom found that they anticipate clients’ emotional needs as part of their “business strategy,” in the process crafting elaborate personas to fit with clients’ fantasies and performing certain emotional responses, such as sexual arousal.<sup>44</sup> Sex workers in contemporary Vietnam who were able to evoke feelings of emotional intimacy in their clients were able to negotiate higher fees (or other types of remuneration), while in some cases, sex workers helped bolster clients’ claims to masculinity in front of other clients.<sup>45</sup> This scholarship has encouraged me to be attuned to the possibility that emotional labor might be expected along with sexual labor in the purpose-built brothel, and that it could serve multiple roles in the interactions between prostitutes and clients.

Indeed, scholars of antiquity have often used comparative examples from later (better documented) time periods to prompt new questions to ask of the existing evidence or to interpret this evidence in new ways. Keith Bradley, for example, in attempting to recover slave resistance in ancient Rome, notes, “it is here, also, if only for imaginative purposes, that comparative material from New World slave societies proves useful, particularly accounts of flight produced by men and women who had once themselves been slaves.”<sup>46</sup> C. W. Marshall, too, shows how contemporary sex slavery in Southeast Asia can open up new interpretive angles for the study of New Comedy, and from there, ancient slavery.<sup>47</sup> McGinn uses historical contexts as diverse as medieval Germany, nineteenth-century Paris, and contemporary Nevada as comparanda to better explore Roman laws and practices regarding prostitution,<sup>48</sup> and Flemming turns to examples including nineteenth-century England and modern-day Oslo for the same.<sup>49</sup>

Feminist methodologies also inform my approach in Part II, in which I sometimes read the same evidence in multiple ways (for example, exploring different possible authors of the same set of graffiti, or different users of the same item). While “rereading” and “reading through” classical literature to gain access to the experiences of marginalized groups are well known by now, doing so for non-literary sources is less common.<sup>50</sup> Jennifer Baird, however, notably recommends “acknowledging the ambiguities in our [archaeological] evidence, and the multiple narratives that may be drawn from them.”<sup>51</sup> This in turn “encourages more reflexive and reflective interpretation, enabling the challenging of, rather than replication of, power structures both within our discipline and in the Roman world.”<sup>52</sup>



## INTRODUCTION

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## SYNOPSIS

I begin the reexamination of the purpose-built brothel with the architecture of the ground floor (Chapter 1). The brothel's set of simple rooms and masonry platforms, when compared with similar layouts and furnishings, are found to be appropriate not only for sex but also for sleeping and drinking, among other activities. Sight lines into, and within, the structure were carefully arranged, offering views of the interior to passersby while for the most part allowing privacy to those within the small rooms themselves.

The objects found during excavation of the ground floor are the subject of Chapter 2, and they point to a range of activities: clients were probably offered drinks and possibly shaves; prostitutes may have been given gifts by clients; and some of the prostitutes may have lived in the very rooms where they worked. Chapter 3 turns to the ground floor's graffiti, constituting one of the largest clusters of graffiti at Pompeii with close to 150 texts and images. Above all, these graffiti demonstrate an interest in proclaiming names and personas, while the inclusion of personal details embedded the brothel's prostitutes and clients within the wider community. Greetings, death notices, and statements of local town rivalries even suggest that the brothel functioned as a type of community message board.

Chapter 4 investigates the erotic frescoes that line the ground floor's main hallway. The lack both of problematic sexual acts and of graphic versions of sexual poses, combined with figures of ambiguous status, would have encouraged clients of all statuses to envision themselves as participants in the brothel's sexual scenes. Moreover, the objects depicted in the frescoes – basins, footstools, and a lampstand with a lit lamp (among other objects) – are suggestive of the real items and activities within the brothel.

Part I concludes with the upper floor of the structure (Chapter 5). Despite the common assumption that prostitution also took place on the upper floor, none of the existing material evidence can be tied to prostitution (nor, however, can prostitution be ruled out). The architecture and decoration indicate that the upper floor was designed to function separately from the ground floor, and based on similarities with other rental properties, it seems most likely that the upper floor consisted of one or more rental units.

Part II opens with the brothel's clients (Chapter 6), showing how clients of all statuses were offered experiences that may have been restricted to free men outside the brothel. They were set on a privileged visual axis with views of the erotic frescoes and the structure's prostitutes; they could drink reclining like free men; and they had the opportunity to proclaim their penetrative masculinity on the structure's walls. At the same time, we find glimpses of clients seeking longer-term relationships with some of the structure's prostitutes.

Female prostitutes, the focus of Chapter 7, had to perform emotional labor (e.g., praising clients for their sexual prowess) in addition to sexual labor. Through this work, however, they could foster relationships with clients who might be able to better their living conditions. Some prostitutes proclaimed themselves as sexual subjects and agents in graffiti (encountering pushback in the process), and others turned *clients* into objects of ridicule or scorn. When alone, prostitutes could practice self-care and reclaim their humanity.

Last but certainly not least, Chapter 8 teases out the ways in which the experiences of male prostitutes coincided with and diverged from those of female prostitutes. Like female prostitutes, male prostitutes performed their personas in complex ways – including, perhaps, proclaiming sexual agency – and attempted to form emotional bonds with clients out of necessity or to mitigate their vulnerability. This vulnerability was increased by the prospect of “aging out” of sexual desirability in young adulthood. Male prostitutes did have unique avenues for resistance, however, in that they could bodily penetrate clients (or threaten to do so); for this reason, the brothel’s fresco of Priapus may have resonated with male prostitutes in its ability to punish wrongdoers with phallic penetration.

Though the purpose-built brothel is unique architecturally, the exploitation experienced by the prostitutes, and the avenues for agency among both prostitutes and clients, certainly was not. I hope this book will encourage the continued examination of the commodification of emotions,<sup>53</sup> the numerous ways in which power and exploitation operated on individual and societal levels, and the arenas for resistance, agency, and community that individuals carved out for themselves in the face of dire circumstances.<sup>54</sup>