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# Ceremonial Sexual Sacrifice to Commercial Prostitution: The History of Prostitution and the Social, Economic, and Religious Progress That Revolved Around the Profession

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Ceremonial Sexual Sacrifice to Commercial Prostitution:  
The History of Prostitution and the Social, Economic, and Religious Progress That Revolved  
Around the Profession

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## Abstract

From its believed origin in Ancient Mesopotamia, prostitution has not only survived but is a profession that has continued to play a culturally defining role through the centuries. While its initial emergence was through an act of religious ritual and sacrifice, it transformed into a commercial profession. Prostitution, despite it becoming a representation of sexual deviance, not only persevered but thrived across vast regions, cultures, and time periods. The profession's social 'taboo' and the forbiddenness of being associated with the institution has carried forward through time and across varying societal constructs, the attempts to hide or extinguish prostitution has never universally been successful. Patriarchal principles, economic realities, and religious and geographical standards provided the cementation of prostitution as a prosperous commercial landmark throughout history.

My study of the historical and societal importance of prostitution spans large periods of time and vast differences in cultures to highlight its evolution and provide insights into how it defines prostitution today. Through a detailed analysis of Ancient Mesopotamia, Ancient India, and Medieval Mediterranean Port Cities, the historical commonalities paint a clear picture of our current perceptions of prostitution. While the studies that have been conducted on such topics and places can draw a variety of conclusions I highlight descriptions that include details and specifics. I used the common denominators found within my research to give the best scope of all periods of analysis and used these commonalities to draw answers about prostitution and the topics surrounding it.

## Introduction

By viewing prostitution as a unit of analysis to study world history, a unique perspective is gained on social norms, economic structures, and power dynamics. Prostitution and its developments within societies evolve alongside cultural shifts, economic growth, the shifting of gender roles, as well as the prominence of religion within communities. The women employed by sex work have been seen and continue to be seen as unrespectable, even though prostitution has historically been a highly sought-after commodity. Focusing on the power of sex workers in relation to the oppression of women in history shows the strengthening of patriarchy and its connection to the growth of prostitution.

By understanding the impacts of prostitution we can gain a better comprehension of women in history and foster a deeper understanding of the world and the social issues, including patriarchy and hierarchical unbalances. Despite the different forms prostitution takes when found in different time periods and societies, the profession is affected by the same overarching principles time and time again; the limitations set on sexual activity, including the strengthening of patriarchy and monogamous relationships, and the role of economic values they play within a society.

### One of the Believed Origins of Prostitution: Ancient Mesopotamia

Friedrich Engels' theory and analysis of J.J Bachofen and Lewis Henry Morgan explains Hetaerism as a form of group marriage, where women would engage in ceremonies to gain control over their sexual relations to secure the right of monogamy, celibacy, and polyamory.<sup>1</sup> Engels touches on the impact of religious beliefs and their effects on sexual histories, as well as changes in their economy are reflected through the institutionalization of prostitution and sex-related slavery. To understand the development of prostitution it is important to recognize the relationships between sexual regulation and the enslavement of females. Simplistically summarized, Engels believed that the rise of monogamous marriage came with the emergence of prostitution within Mesopotamia.<sup>2</sup>

Mesopotamia was the birthplace of many things, a bustling society transformed and supported by its geographical location on the fertile crescent. Mesopotamia's location between

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), pp. 129-30, 138-39.

<sup>2</sup> Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*.

two great rivers, the Euphrates and Tigris, allowed for the flourishing of agriculture and the construction of the first complex civilization.<sup>3</sup> Mesopotamia was home to the Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians who are known for their plethora of technological and social advancements by historians and students alike. During the 3,000 years in which Mesopotamia thrived, its strong civilization and cultural significance, and similarities united the Mesopotamia region even though all the cities didn't share the same political policies. Mesopotamia's prosperous societies allowed for the creation and advancements in all categories, the earliest known script was created, known as cuneiform, as well as developing vast amounts of mathematical and astronomical breakthroughs.<sup>4</sup> As stability and knowledge expanded social change was forced to evolve with it, demonstrated by the creation of immense amounts of historically respected art pieces and literary works.

Ancient Mesopotamia as a society shows some of the earliest examples of patriarchal societies/oppressive social norms inflicted on women. In some senses, male-dominated societies can stem back to the hunter-gatherer era, where gender norms can be said to have been established. The men hunted while the women stayed at 'home' tending the fire. While women's role in society was clearly trivialized throughout history, many respected historians believe that women created the approach to modern agriculture. The result of this enhanced harvest capability was the fuel that created the world's earliest-developed civilization.

While Gerda Lerner's "*The Creation of Patriarchy*" has been found to be outdated in a multitude of senses, there is one thing modern historians can agree with Lerner on: Mesopotamia societies (Sumeria, Babylonia, and Akkadia) were all patriarchal.<sup>5</sup> Lerner's most respected work is centered on Mesopotamian societies and her research strongly claims Ancient Mesopotamia as the origin of patriarchy. Patriarchy emerged and was supported by a multitude of things within Mesopotamian Society such as the rise of the military, agricultural reliance, and the formation of cities, religions, and governments. But patriarchy also is believed to have stemmed from the men's dominance; sexually and politically—through the display of men in places of power such

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<sup>3</sup> Illinois.edu. "Ancient Mesopotamia: 'the Land between Two Rivers', Permanent Exhibits, Exhibits, Spurlock Museum, U of I," 2019. <https://www.spurlock.illinois.edu/exhibits/permanent/mso/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Mesopotamia: Civilization Begins," Getty Museum, 2021. <https://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/mesopotamia/>.

<sup>5</sup> Omvedt, Gail. Review of *The Origin of Patriarchy*, by Gerda Lerner. *Economic and Political Weekly* 22, no. 44 (1987): WS70–72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4377665>.

as kings, priests and being the head of the household.<sup>6</sup> Even when women maintained positions of respect within temples and occupations, these positions were unable to be held or kept successful or powerful without the relations of a man.

Most occupations allowed to women at the time surrounded the acceptance from the prominent male figure or aided in supporting men financially, whether that be a woman's husband, father, or brother. A variety of professions for women have been documented, especially those of the lower class, such as weavers, flour grinders, boat towers, gardeners, and all jobs that could be executed by a slave. The best-known profession above all for women though was prostitution. Laws suggested their existence as well as literary phrases which placed these women outside the city walls on some occasions. Outside the city of Susa, an excavation site has been concluded to be a brothel due to the walls being decorated with depictions of naked women.<sup>7</sup> But, prostitution in the commercial sense was not where the occupation is believed to have originated. Historians first found inquiries on topics similar to the definition of what we know as prostitution or sexual slavery within the temples as religious sexual offerings.

Within Mesopotamia religious prostitution was largely relevant, practiced within fertility cults and goddess worship which would lead to the second form of prostitution: commercial. Religious prostitution has an extensive history that has been thought to date back to the Neolithic age and to the cult of the Mother Goddess, even if the evidence might not completely fit the definition of prostitution.<sup>8</sup> Sacred Marriage and its ritualistic beliefs thought that the fertility of people and land depended on the worship and sacrifices given to the fertility goddess; these beliefs originated in 3000 BC in a Sumerian city named Uruk.<sup>9</sup> The act of Sacred Marriage and the celebration that goes along with it is primitive to understanding communities within the time period, while also being largely mythically significant. Similar sexual traditions like sacred marriage were also popular in places like classical Greece and pre-Christian Rome.

Using linguistic, literary, pictorial, and legal evidence historians have confidently been able to identify and confirm the worship practices of goddesses within Mesopotamia and in the

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<sup>6</sup> Reneejg.net. "The Creation of Patriarchy: How Did It Happen? - Writing by Renee," December 25, 2018. <https://renejg.net/2018/12/creation-of-patriarchy/#:~:text=In%20Mesopotamia%2C%20patriarchy%20become%20embedded.>

<sup>7</sup> Stol, M. "Women in Mesopotamia." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 38, no. 2 (1995): 123–144. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/3632512.](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3632512)

<sup>8</sup> Lerner, Gerda. "The Origin of Prostitution in Ancient Mesopotamia." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 11, no. 2 (1986): 236–254. doi:10.1086/494218.

<sup>9</sup> Lerner. "The Origin of Prostitution," 236–254.

Neo-Babylonian period. Within the Babylonian Empire gods were praised and treated like kings within temples; being waited on hand and foot, and, if you found fertility highly sacred, this included offering sexual services as sacrifices within the temple. Roles within the temple took forms of what seems to be the empowerment of women, featuring powerful goddesses. Priestesses and women in these roles were allowed high pay.<sup>10</sup>

*Naditum* were Mesopotamia women/priestesses who were dedicated to particular gods, such as the God Shamash and God Marduk.<sup>11</sup> *Naditum* were not allowed to have children, but certain circumstances allowed them to marry. The Codex Hammurabi provided the solution, the husband was given a low-ranking temple servant, known as a *sugitum*, as a concubine or second wife to produce children for the couple. *Naditum*, with in CH 110, stated that a highly respected priestess was not to come in contact with places like brothels, and if they did it was punishable by death.<sup>12</sup> Being associated with these places would only diminish the reputation of the *Naditum*, a woman who defined what society considered the most respectable form of a woman, and to interact with prostitution was unrespectable for women.

Two accounts surrounding Babloyian temples have largely inspired historians today and their thoughts on the creation of prostitution. In the 5th century a Greek historian, Herodotus, claimed that religious prostitution happened within the temple of the Goddess Mylitta in Mesopotamia.<sup>13</sup> The other occurrence was written about by Strabo, a Roman traveler 400 years afterward, whose writing worked to confirm Herodotus. Within these temples, Herodotus claimed that “A woman who has once taken her seat is not allowed to return home until one of the strangers throws a silver coin into her lap and takes her with him beyond the holy ground”.<sup>14</sup> He describes that all women could go to the temple and wait until a man pays them, in coins, to go home with them and cannot leave until they believed a goddess was satisfied. Herodotus believed that all women were supposed to offer themselves up for prostitution at some point in their life, in particular the woman in Babylon. While these claims should not be completely dismissed, due to a legend similar within the Old Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic containing descriptions of the *rite de passage* Herodotus described, Herodotus has been marked for his

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<sup>10</sup> Lerner. “The Origin of Prostitution,” 236–254.

<sup>11</sup> Seri, Andrea. “Nadītum.” *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*. Hoboken, NJ, USA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2012. doi:10.1002/9781444338386.wbeah24153.

<sup>12</sup> Lerner. “The Origin of Prostitution,” 236–254.

<sup>13</sup> Lerner. “The Origin of Prostitution,” 236–254.

<sup>14</sup> Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus*, trans. George Rawlinson (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent, 1910), 1:102.

misinterpretations of events and his falsehoods within his writing can not reliably confirm events.<sup>15</sup>

Even though the legitimacy of these stories is questioned and interpreted differently, historians wonder if this is evidence of forms of corruption within the temple and forms of commercial prostitution where sexual intercourse was rewarded with a temple donation. The corruption led to temple servants stealing some of the donated goods offered to the gods for themselves. Priests might have even incentivized slave women and temple workers to indulge in commercial prostitution to turn their profit into enrichment for the temple. There was also the class of *harimtu* who engaged in prostitution (though this term does not seem to be limited to temple prostitutes).<sup>16</sup> Even though the whole of the existence is unclear it is theorized that they were slave women owned by priests and priestesses and their earnings would be turned over to their owner who would likely give the money to the temple, as mentioned above.

Old Babylonian Sipper speaks of depicted religious affiliation between prostitutes with a “cult” as well as evidence from Kiš texts which depicted low-ranking women who would have been involved in said cult. Later knowledge identified within these texts would identify that the prostitutes served the god Ishtar of Uruk.<sup>17</sup> Within a text from Nuzi it depicts a prostitute's vow to Ishtar, Aramaic and Assyria including descriptions of seven prostitutes who were ‘given’ to Ishtar in his favor. One of the earliest references written on a clay tablet connects Ishtar with descriptions of taverns that connected ritual and commercial prostitution.<sup>18</sup>

Within the first millennium BC, there were two types of prostitution active: women who were engaged and carried out religious rituals and commercial prostitution. Linguistic evidence sheds light on the start of prostitution in 2400 BC when *kar kid* (prostitution) appeared on the list of some of the world's earliest occupations.<sup>19</sup> Even though widely looked over, this is likely a link between temple and commercial prostitution.

The origin of commercial prostitution likely grew from the enslavement of women as well as the creation of a social structure that divided people into classes. In the third millennium BC, military conquest led to sexual enslavement and the cementation of sexual slavery

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<sup>15</sup> Stol. “Women in Mesopotamia.” 123-144.

<sup>16</sup> Halton, Charles, and Saana Svärd, eds. “Mesopotamian Women.” Chapter. In *Women's Writing of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Anthology of the Earliest Female Authors*, 3–15. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Stol. “Women in Mesopotamia.” 123-144.

<sup>18</sup> The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (Chicago:Oriental Institute, 1968), 6:101-2

<sup>19</sup> Lerner. “The Origin of Prostitution,” 236–254.



institutionally.<sup>20</sup> These slave owners would rent their female slaves out for sexual favors while other slave owners would set up whole brothels, staffed fully by slaves, laying the foundations for commercial prostitution. Kings and chiefs largely supported these commercial prostitution outlets as they saw the use of women as a way to display wealth. Historically, the owning of sexual servants would be seen as a source of power by aristocrats, bureaucrats, and all higher-up wealthy men. Another source of prostitution was farmers and their growing dependence on loans which, when went unpaid, would lead to debt-based slavery. The responsibility of the family's well-being fell to female family members, whether it meant supporting their parents or husbands. By the second millennium, prostitution had become an inescapable profession for poor women.<sup>21</sup>

The Codex of Hammurabi established a strictly patriarchal society where women's worth was based on their husbands and other men. If women were to disobey the social order regarding sexuality, they were punished worse than a man would have been for the same crime. The authority of the state had a large impact on the structure of a household. For example, during the time of Hammurabi's power, men maintained household authority through obligations. This changed with the promulgation of Middle Assyrian Laws, the power of men within the household bestowed to them by the state. MAL 40 had taken control of sexuality from the male heads of the house and made it a government matter. The law controlled ethics surrounding lust, sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and marriage.<sup>22</sup> The formation of these laws would cause Mesopotamia to develop into a patriarchal state.

The rise of prostitution and the uptick of women being employed by sex work brought societal questions of what distinguished a woman as respectable, and how to keep men from engaging with unrespectable women. The enactment of the Middle Assyrian Law would answer all these questions. The only difficulty that came from giving credit to MAL 40 was that its origin, the Assyrians, was a more militaristic society, the example's fault is when compared to other Mesopotamian societies the Assyrian society was drastically different and more harsh, such as Babylonia which is known to not have these same strict laws. Despite the contrast, this law, MAL 40, displayed the first concrete evidence of the restriction of sexuality through the wearing of head and facial coverings.

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<sup>20</sup> Lerner. "The Origin of Prostitution," 236–254.

<sup>21</sup> Lerner. "The Origin of Prostitution," 236–254.

<sup>22</sup> Jastrow, Morris. "An Assyrian Law Code." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 41 (1921): 1–59. <https://doi.org/10.2307/593702>.

Through the enacted law of veiling when in public, a visual divide was created between respectable women and the women who behaved in an ‘unrespectable’ way sexually. While women who sexually served one man were told to wear head coverings, which became a symbol of respectability, women who had no husband and had no sexual reservations were told they must be unveiled, since they were for the public. The punishments for wearing a veil when you weren't supposed to have grave consequences, amplifying the power of what the veil signified and divided. The only relief the harlots would receive is a lesser punishment than slaves for wearing a veil, which assumes harlots as socially higher than the slaves.<sup>23</sup>

Historians Driver and Miles established that the law, MAI 40, was implemented to distinguish the difference between respectable women from prostitutes and enslaved girls, who were seen as unrespectable. State authority had taken a social discussion about what was respectable and turned it into an issue the government saw they had to deal with.<sup>24</sup> The law also created a social hierarchy of women, putting married women and their daughters at the top and unmarried temple and commercial prostitutes at the bottom. This hierarchy implied that the law could have been to discourage public interactions between slave women and sex workers. These regulations manufactured a socio-economic divide between the man and the prostitute. Mal 40 represents the laws that would continue to be passed historically. This pattern of enforced visible discrimination recurs throughout time in the countless number of regulations that would place "disreputable women " in certain districts or certain houses marked with clearly identifiable signs, or that would force them to register with the authorities and carry identification cards.<sup>25</sup>

Even though the formation of prostitution is not certain and is still debated, it is agreed that the profession is embedded in female worship and temple prostitution. Prostitution and its success were supported by the new social standards that implemented monogamous marriage. From the middle of 2000 BC on, the regulation of sexuality had become an essential characteristic of patriarchal power, the formulation of classes, and the foundation of states where prostitution prospered.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Lerner. "The Origin of Prostitution," 236–254.

<sup>24</sup> Driver and Miles, *Assyrian Laws*, p. 13G. R. Driver and John C. Miles, *The Babylonian Laws*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1952).

<sup>25</sup> Lerner. "The Origin of Prostitution," 236–254.

<sup>26</sup> Lerner. "The Origin of Prostitution," 236–254.

## The Rise of Wealth Along Side Disparity; the Life of a Sex Worker in Ancient India

Within India's oldest book, the *Rigveda*, there were mentions of gifting in exchange for sexual services, which, in a time with no established currency would have been a form of payment, the context cementing the possibility of these commercial prostitutes in ancient India.<sup>27</sup> With appearances in literature in years following the creation of *Vedas*, the 12th and 9th centuries BC, there seems to be little doubt that prostitution was not an uncommon occupation within ancient India and had been around for years, being traced back to the Vedic age (1500 BC-600 BC).<sup>28</sup> The growing amount of literature that mentions prostitutes confirms their prominence in the 8th and 15th BC as well.<sup>29</sup>

The narratives contained within the land of Ancient India were able to be crafted due to the great geographical diversity. The ecological zones are tightly packed into one geographical location spanning from the northern Himalayas where the alpine tundra lays at its bottom and reaches southeast to subtropical rainforests.<sup>30</sup> The Himalayan Mountains provided much aid to India's ancient civilizations, providing the Indus River Valley with fresh water through springs around the mountains and from snowmelt. The Himalayas also served as a natural barrier/ shield for Indian people, protecting them from interactions with a variety of different societies including the people of China and Mongolia.<sup>31</sup> The fired brick constructed cities laid on fertile soil which allowed for the successful production of agricultural yields and aided in the production of other precious goods India would later use in maritime trade.

The Indus River valley contained a plethora of highly urban cultural sites which included some of the most well-known cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, which were assumed to have been surrounded by villages and small cities. These urban civilizations allowed for advancements in religion (Buddhism) and spirituality as well as a number of great material accomplishments and mathematical inquiries. Ancient India's success in trade was due to their fight for goods which included, "cotton textiles, pearls, high-quality steel, and traded these goods from East Africa, Persian Gulf region, to Southeast Asia (Thailand and Vietnam), and China".<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Bhattacharji, Sukumari. "Prostitution in Ancient India." *Social Scientist* 15, no. 2 (1987): 32–61. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3520437>.

<sup>28</sup> Bhattacharji, "Prostitution in Ancient India." 32–61.

<sup>29</sup> Bhattacharji, "Prostitution in Ancient India." 32–61.

<sup>30</sup> Purdue University. "Lecture 11 - ANCIENT INDIA," n.d. <https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~rauhn/ancindia.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> Nature. "The Himalayas ~ Himalayas Facts | Nature | PBS." February 11, 2011. <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/the-himalayas-himalayas-facts/6341/#:~:text=The%20range%20affects%20air%20>

<sup>32</sup> Dillon, Matthew. "Lecture 11 - ANCIENT INDIA." Purdue University, n.d. <https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~rauhn/indiatext.htm>.

Their knowledge-based advancements stemmed from medicine and mathematics. Indian mathematicians invented the number zero, the ten number system, calculated square roots, computed the value of pi as well as invented negative numbers.<sup>33</sup>

Throughout the history of ancient India, women's roles and respectability have changed through the ages. With the start of the women in the Rigvedic age who “enjoyed high status” and “their condition [of life] was good”.<sup>34</sup> But with the turn of the age, the Later-Vedic age marked the start of women being discriminated against within society, epics and Puranas (a primary religious text holding Hindu beliefs) regarded women as property and the conditions continued to worsen further into the Gupta period. This caused women to depend on their primary male figure financially throughout life and into old age. Ancient India turned into a place where women were made to serve their husbands and were not allowed education of any kind. These restrictions confined wives to household chores that would bore their educated husbands. The only chances for dependence were “apart from child marriage and sati, prostitution and Devadasi system became widespread”.<sup>35</sup>

Though how prostitution arose in India isn't confirmed, it has been assumed that it was instituted with the application of stricter marital rules. Going hand and hand with this was the involvement of monandry and the ownership men felt over women. With the rise of prostitution came the evolution of petty principles, the disappearance of tribal societies, and the rise of domination over women within families. Within agriculture-based communities, women lost the right to society's freedoms, becoming prisoners to the men in their lives. Women were seen as objects for men to own and enjoy.

Brothels became places where men would go to engage with women who had a sense of culture. With the decline of the regular women's status in the Later-Vedic age came the flourishing of brothels and the power and status of the *ganika*, their education and talents upped their worth in the eyes of wealthy men, allowing them to charge high fees for their services.<sup>36</sup> With the diminishing of the position women held in society, losing power and educational rights, allowed for the *ganikas* to thrive while the common prostitutes were sought for heavily but were held with low esteem.

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<sup>33</sup> Purdue University. “Lecture 11 - ANCIENT INDIA,” n.d. <https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~rauhn/ancindia.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> Rout, Naresh. “Role of Women in Ancient India.” *Odisha Review*, January 2016. JKVK Govt. College. <https://magazines.odisha.gov.in/Orissareview/2016/Jan/engpdf/43-48.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> Rout. “Role of Women,” 43-48.

<sup>36</sup> Bhattacharji, “Prostitution in Ancient India.” 32–61.

There were two types of courtesans, one called *ganika* who was accomplished in the arts with higher social ranking, and *rupajive*, who were courtesans whose only ‘talent’ was charm and beauty.<sup>37</sup> There was a whirlwind of fees surrounding *repajive*. They owed the government two days worth of income monthly and if raped, the man would be fined 12 *panas*. During the time of calamity, courtesans were relinquished of half their monthly pay.<sup>38</sup> There were also women known as *ganikadasi*, who were owned by a *ganika* who held the power to open up her own establishment.

Due to a variety of circumstances, including unhappy marriages, widowhood, and the loss of their virtue due to trauma or gifting circumstances, women were forced into the profession of prostitution. What truly segregated sex workers from other women was the fact that they lived off their own income and had no male keeper. This allowed them to become starkly independent, going against the norms for women at the time. There were four main ways for women to become prostitutes. You were either a prostitute’s daughter, a woman who had previously been purchased, a woman captured in war, or a woman who had been punished for adultery.

Using Buddhist texts, historians can see explicit mentionings of prostitution as a profession.<sup>39</sup> Through myths and legends, we can see the way prostitution appeared in different parts of India such as abductions, the teachings of erotics and seduction so they could make a profit, and mothers gifting their daughters to men repeatedly. It was said in these early pieces of evidence of prostitution that if a woman had been used and discarded by a man she had no other choice but to employ herself in prostitution. There were also men in ancient India who would live off their harlot wife's income, which was viewed as disgraceful. Women could also be given as gifts for religious and secular circumstances, including being a sacrificial offering for rituals. Commonly the virginity of a young girl was also gifted to priests, brahmins, guests, and son-in-laws.<sup>40</sup>

Priests would receive the gifts of cattle, horses, gold, and women of all statuses in life and relationships. Some of these women would end up his wife, and some he would have intercourse with before sweeping aside others whom the priest would make maidservants. Many

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<sup>37</sup> Bhattacharji, “Prostitution in Ancient India.” 32–61.

<sup>38</sup> Bhattacharji, “Prostitution in Ancient India.” 32–61.

<sup>39</sup> Bhattacharji, “Prostitution in Ancient India.” 32–61.

<sup>40</sup> Bhattacharji, “Prostitution in Ancient India.” 32–61.

of these women, after a forced exit from the temple, would either have to employ themselves in brothels or other unrespected fields- their lives forever altered.

These circumstances were similar to what the kings called for, women flooding his palace whom he would enjoy and then easily dismiss. When dismissed from the palace, similarly to the temple, these women were no longer considered respectable women who could marry, which was largely important in a time when men owned all women and all property. When a woman was deemed unrespectable, the only chance at livelihood was through prostitution.

Within temple prostitution, which young girls were gifted or recruited into, they had little to no control over their lives, leaving them helpless when they were released from their church at an older age. The temple isolated a woman from her family and society, and after a long life of being a temple dancer and the priest's concubine, the state owed her nothing and she was left with no income. Within temple prostitution, prostitutes were taught to shower themselves with jewelry and, when walking the streets, should not be fully visible. This was to show that these temple-owned women were commodities, something that could be bought and used. These temple prostitutes had a long list of societal expectations thrust upon them, and lists of things that they were told they should and should not do. Temple prostitution within India is a phenomenon that continued into the 1900s.<sup>41</sup>

In the 16th century BC, cities and townships were fashioned around trade routes throughout Northern India.<sup>42</sup> During a time when trade was booming, maritime and internal centers produced prostitutes who were able to gain higher income clients such as travelers, merchants, soldiers, and traders who had been attracted to the city's prosperities. Some rare batches of prostitutes with high-end clientele were even able to build themselves a fortune in an economy with a growing amount of wealthy and bored men.

Ancient Indian civilization stunted women by not allowing them access to education and forcing them under strict rule and service of their husbands. Women were turned to objects by men for sexual pleasure, and when bearing children and caring for the house strained on the wife, she no longer was good enough for her husband. In comparison, courtesans had sacrificed all honorable titles to become what they were but held little respect among the population. They

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<sup>41</sup> Bhattacharji, "Prostitution in Ancient India." 32-61.

<sup>42</sup> Bhattacharji, "Prostitution in Ancient India." 32-61.

were regarded for their contributions to the performing arts, as those skills were no longer taught within society.

The talents and intellect presented by courtesans had drawn in the academic man who would no longer be satisfied with his wife, someone who couldn't engage in intellectual conversation. The charm displayed within a prostitute were all characteristics that were not allowed in wives. While the housewife was expected to be obedient, hard-working, and devoted, these weren't qualities that kept husbands entertained. "In a society where women became a personal possession, a woman who could not be possessed individually provoked this ambivalence".<sup>43</sup>

Some of the girls who were trained for highly intellectual and talented clients had to be skilled in a plethora of art forms as well as were trained to be knowledgeable in a vast amount of academic fields such as literature. *Ganika*, due to their higher societal ranking, would be taught a variety of entertainment and educational teachings under government funding, being considered "maintenance from the state".<sup>44</sup> The amount of skills they were trained in created an exhaustively long list including instruments, writing, chess, singing, arts, dice, arithmetic, poetry, science and perfume making, and ethics. They were also knowledgeable about animals, jewelry, cooking, gem positions, architecture, camps, and fighting.<sup>45</sup> Over 27 skills were taught and mastered by courtesans. These levels of accomplishment were unlike any other women in the early centuries which was enticing to men.<sup>46</sup>

The royal court largely endorsed the hiring of these talented singers and dancers, using them to please himself and his men known as *ganika*. The court also employed these women as spies, whose goal was to seduce political information out of important men and report back to state officials.<sup>47</sup> Prostitutes would also be employed during victory celebrations and other events to present musical performances.

While regular prostitutes were owned by brothel keepers and were rarely called on by the king, *ganika* were the property of the king or wealthy men, while performing musically in a variety of venues and situations. But despite this access to luxuries and opportunities, *ganika* were likely to go unpaid for performances, so in the end, they were still courtesans, still

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<sup>43</sup> Bhattacharji, "Prostitution in Ancient India." 32–61.

<sup>44</sup> R. Shamasastri (ed.): *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, Mysore, 1st edn., 1915, 6th edn. 1960.

<sup>45</sup> Shamasastri, *Kautilya's Arthashastra*

<sup>46</sup> Bhattacharji, "Prostitution in Ancient India." 32–61.

<sup>47</sup> Shamasastri, *Kautilya's Arthashastra*.

prostitutes, who were undervalued for the services they provided. In regular brothels, prostitutes were expected to perform extravagant acts when maintaining their services but were paid for all acts of performance.

*Ganika's* social standing was revealed through how much her services could be bought for by men, which has been estimated to be around 24,000 *panos*.<sup>48</sup> A common prostitute was not allowed the luxury of fixed fees for her services, if she tried to overcharge in any respect she could be reported to the state. If these common prostitutes refused any work they were fined the rate they charged and double if they had been previously paid.

This inability to refuse customers framed common prostitutes as inhuman and they were seen as material objects to be bought and enjoyed. Temple prostitutes were paid by temple higher-ups with a fixed sum, commonly paid in the form of grain as a reminder of their employment. The *ganika*, in comparison to the common prostitute, who could turn down no jobs, was able to carefully select her clients, taught to only pick the ones who could provide and benefit her the most. The only person the *ganika* couldn't refuse was the king, due to the pain of the great punishment the women would face if she did so. When the royals were involved a prostitute had no say over the use of her own body and her biggest concern was satisfying the royals.<sup>49</sup>

In later ancient Indian books of law and religion it is believed that a crime, even one as drastic as murder against a prostitute, was not a crime at all. Manu villainized prostitution, convincing the people of India that sex workers were criminals. Stories during this period were spread about the swindles the prostitutes would enact and showcased them to be evil, untrustworthy, and heartless. Despite the amount of harm buyers of sexual services inflicted on prostitutes, society always seemed to be on the side of the buyer.

Despite their sunken reputation, prostitutes engaged in countless acts of public welfare. Courtesans during a famine provided food, property, and land, and donated to the Buddhist cause. Within their community, they helped provide necessities that would improve quality of life such as wells, bridges, and gardens, as well as giving gifts to the unfortunate and continuously providing works of public unity.

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<sup>48</sup> Bhattacharji, "Prostitution in Ancient India." 32–61.

<sup>49</sup> Kautilya. *Arthashastra*. Translated by Rudrapatnam Shamasastri. Vol. 2. Bangalore: Government Place, 1915. [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Arthashastra/Book\\_II](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Arthashastra/Book_II).



Prostitutes started with connections to the fertility goddess, prostitutes representing the success of lands and births. During later periods of India, during the presence of *ganika* and common prostitutes, sex workers were commonly looked down upon.<sup>50</sup> The once honored were now forced out of the center of cities and communities, segregating sex workers to the south. Prostitutes grew to be classified by society as unrefined and unrespectable in many aspects.

#### The Medieval Mediterranean Port Cities and the Social Impacts of Prostitution.

Medieval Mediterranean culture was something curated and unlike any other culture at that time. The patriarchal way historians have tended to look at history has neglected the historical significance of women, including prostitutes. Women have been overlooked for the spread of information and cultural ideas. The transportation of women and the potency of the shared knowledge base is hard to ignore when looking at the port cities of the Mediterranean and the diffusion of cultures and information. Within these transnational prostitution communities, it is important to look at the commodity their services were, their interactions within port city communities, outside of the brothels, and the ways they affected economics and the judicial system. But despite the usefulness of the prostitute and the hidden popularity of prostitutes within the Mediterranean cities, starting in the late fourteenth century, prostitutes' social level of respect was comparable to slaves.<sup>51</sup>

The island of Mallorca displayed prostitution during the Aragonses period, a time during the medieval ages. Along with the start of Mallorcan prostitution in 1230 AD came the legend that “the Bishop of Barcelona sent forty of the most famous prostitutes to the island, allegedly from his own supply”.<sup>52</sup> These harlots were rumored to have encouraged the soldiers to finish their conquest of Mallorca. But, after the use of these prostitutes, Jaume I banned prostitutes from inhabiting certain areas of the city. But, in June of 1247 AD, the people of Mallorca had done nothing to implement said expulsion from areas around the convent in Santo Domingo, which displayed high prostitution and crime rates.<sup>53</sup> Porto Pi and Sant Antoni were also noted to have high concentrations of prostitutes. As the century went on the intensity of

<sup>50</sup> Bhattacharji, “Prostitution in Ancient India.” 32–61.

<sup>51</sup> Mummey, Kevin D. "Women, Slavery, and Community on the Island of Mallorca, Ca. 1360-1390." Order No. 10186035, (University of Minnesota, 2013), 180-188.  
<https://stats.lib.pdx.edu/proxy.php?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/women-slavery-community-on-island-mallorca-ca/docview/1883844631/se-2>.

<sup>52</sup> Mummey, "Women, Slavery, and Community." 180-188.

<sup>53</sup> Mummey, "Women, Slavery, and Community," 180-188.

prostitution became a prominent civic concern, with prostitutes being condemned to brothels and were no longer allowed to live or conduct work outside of them. Despite the efforts to contain these women prostitution created a large impact on the cultural landscape, serving not just the local population but also supporting the foreign commercial sector. The popularity of these women was large, and this was just the beginning of sex work in the medieval age, the late medieval age brought intensity to the popularity and impact of these female workers.

During the medieval period, we can see the praise historians and the people of that time cast upon linguistically, religiously, and culturally multifaceted knowledge, focusing on sailors and merchants who traveled in the Mediterranean. This ignores and dismisses the large impact and geographical movements of women during this time period, with prostitutes appearing as one of the highest populations seen within ports. Scholars noted that most prostitutes were foreigners within the communities likely due to family networks and shame that made it unlikely for sex workers to fulfill their trade within their city of origin. Mobility was hardwired into the profession of prostitution.

By looking through the wills of women in various port towns through the 14th and 15th centuries, one can see the way prostitution was linked and interwoven into port cities' foundations during the medieval time period.<sup>54</sup> Towns such as Barcelona, Genoa, Marseille, Valencia, and Palermo, using a variety of different types of documents, help piece together an understanding of the legal, economic, and social impacts prostitution had in the medieval Mediterranean. Looking at the movement of female sex workers across bodies of water, when prostitutes went and worked within many brothels, the probability of them sharing information about other port cities and how they functioned is likely. Prostitutes could be seen as “knowledge brokers”, and whether this information was spread in public or in private, it was part of the cumulative ideas exchanged within Mediterranean port cities.<sup>55</sup> Their value in spreading information contradicted their low social ranking.<sup>56</sup>

In 1497 AD Palermo, we saw the ousting of prostitutes out of areas by authorities due to the ‘respected’ communities not wanting them to live there.<sup>57</sup> It was likely that the majority of women who engaged in sex work in Palermo hailed from the Liberian Peninsula, all coming to

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<sup>54</sup> McDonough, Susan. “Moving Beyond Sex: Prostitutes, Migration and Knowledge in Late-Medieval Mediterranean Port Cities.” *Gender & History* 34, no. 2 (2022): 401–419. doi:10.1111/1468-0424.12574.

<sup>55</sup> McDonough, “Moving Beyond Sex: Prostitutes, 401–419.

<sup>56</sup> McDonough, “Moving Beyond Sex: Prostitutes, 401–419.

<sup>57</sup> McDonough, “Moving Beyond Sex: Prostitutes, 401–419.

Palermo to sell themselves to sailors and merchants sailing to other Mediterranean ports under the rule of the Crown of Aragon. The surnames that these women had could be traced to even outside of the Mediterranean region, evidence of this being seen in prostitutes in Marseille, Barcelona, and Valencia.

In Sluis, a port city near Bruges, there was evidence of surnames stemming from places such as Germany, England, and Scotland.<sup>58</sup> Some argue that the abundance of foreign names could have occurred to increase exoticism. Within the framework of Medieval Mediterranean port cities, this theory doesn't quite work. The only reason these women would have for any sort of name change would have been to break all familial connections and to run away from their husbands or parents.

The prostitutes, despite their freedom of movement across Mediterranean port cities, were forced out of living areas where 'good and honest' people lived when arriving at their destination due to "concerns about civic and moral hygiene".<sup>59</sup> Their movements within cities were constrained by the status they were given. Whether this act of discrimination be enacted by the king or city council, it was maintained strictly. There were restricted areas where prostitutes were permitted to congregate whether that be in a stand-alone brothel or a redlight district.

There were a multitude of examples of prostitutes being segregated, such as the control of brothel/prostitutes' location within central and southern France. Jacques Rossiaud recorded how prostitutes had been shunned in congregation with Jewish people and lepers. But from these conditions in the 1300s and 1400s came *prostibuli publici* (brothels) in which residences would be placed near marketplaces and brothels lived out outside the city walls.<sup>60</sup> This control of real estate was a way to control prostitution and was an attempt to maintain the industry.

Despite the women's migrations to new places with different vernacular structures than their birthplace, it seems clear that all members of the brothel/prostitute community were able to communicate using a common tongue. The harlots also shared this vernacular with their clients, the common clientele being sailors and merchants, especially when the ports were within walking distance of the brothels.

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<sup>58</sup> Spindler, Erik. "Were Medieval Prostitutes Marginals? Evidence from Sluis, 1387-1440." *Revue Belge de Philologie et D'histoire* 87, no. 2 (2009): 239-72. <https://doi.org/10.3406/rbph.2009.7673>.

<sup>59</sup> Mummy, "Women, Slavery, and Community." 180-188.

<sup>60</sup> Mummy, "Women, Slavery, and Community." 180-188.

Due to a nonexistent language barrier within a variety of port cities, it is easy to assume that the merchants and sailors would ingest or disperse information about port cities. Prostitutes created a flow of information through port cities. For example, when a merchant client would inform a prostitute about their cargo or employment needs the worker carried the information to her other clients and people within the community. This network of information made knowledge public and brothels, and the women within them, were taught how different cities worked, gaining an abundance of information on experiences with the law, in other towns and their own.

When looking at court documents within port cities, in particular late medieval Marseille, it is largely questioned why 20 percent of court cases revolved around prostitutes when prostitution wasn't illegal.<sup>61</sup> What historians can tell from official records is that prostitutes were highly charged for the contamination of off-limit spaces within cities, but it can also provide insight on how women used civics to favor themselves. When prostitutes engaged in court cases it was putting themselves in the commercial center of the city which they previously were not allowed to go in since they weren't considered honest people. By going into the populated port city center they were able to advertise their amenities to a wealthier and, overall, grander population. Prostitutes were recognized in Marseille by their mandated striped garments to showcase their status. This was seen as a way of marketing themselves in places they were not allowed to, all by manipulating the judicial system.

It was also theorized that prostitutes might insert themselves into the court to gain a sense of honor. Honor for peasants didn't just mean social standing and following social norms, it was also important to how they were viewed as individuals within the community, based on their actions and behaviors. By airing out their grievances publicly they had the chance to share their personalities publicly, fighting for their reputation and property, which they held to be highly important.

When the prostitutes had learned how to manipulate and use the court for their benefit they would share this with their customers, spreading the information about the judicial system to merchants and sailors. By engaging in the legal system, prostitutes were able to gain information about local law and legal players and shared it with the seaman who might not have access to this information if they were not residents and had not experienced these judicial courts. Prostitutes not only provide sexual services in the medieval Mediterranean, “The

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<sup>61</sup> McDonough, “Moving Beyond Sex: Prostitutes, 401–419.

women's knowledge of the port city's workings, rhythms and culture was invaluable, and perhaps as useful to the men as their bodies had been".<sup>62</sup>

A female *hostelera* (hotelier) known as Marí Fernández knew how to work the law within late-medieval Valencia and in October 1377 she gathered a plethora of *hosteleras* and *hostelers* and showed up to a place of law where Fernández paid eleven *sous* fine to be able to keep her establishment open during the night hours, despite legislations that went against her.<sup>63</sup> In 1381 Fernández appeared again, but this time she no longer hid her connections with prostitutes, calling herself a *fembra publica*, a public woman, declaring her institution to be in relation to prostitutes, which caused her to pay an even steeper fine of sixteen *sous* and six *dinars*. In 1383 Marí Fernández is documented to appear at this same register again but this time she is not there for herself, she accompanies a woman who goes by the name La Chica who was a *fembra peccadriu*/sinful woman.<sup>64</sup> La Chica has lived under the roof of Fernández and was being fined for illegally living with another person in the hostel, which is what had gained Fernández the steep fine with her last encounter. After two more fines Marí Fernández paid, one fee of five *sous* and six *dinars* for hitting a Elvira Gallega, a *afembra del bordell*/brothel woman, with a rock and the other charge finally identified her as a brothel woman. Her title of *hostelera* and the whole of her character point to her being a brothel keeper as well as a sex worker and concubine. No matter the place, we can see the way sexual acts before marriage earned a response from city and royal officials.

The striped hood, previously mentioned, brings up the popularity within Medieval Europe of the enforcement of symbols prostitutes would wear to identify them as sex workers.<sup>65</sup> This was the same mentality within Europe that would lead to marking Jewish citizens with pinned stars and armbands. These markings were not instated to benefit the sex workers, it was so citizens could keep their distance from the harlot's deviances. The identifiers in Berene were red caps, in Bristol it was striped hoods, and in Marseilles they wore striped tunics. In other European countries prostitutes sported yellow scarves. In the 1330s prostitutes were forced to

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<sup>62</sup> McDonough, "Moving Beyond Sex: Prostitutes, 401–19.

<sup>63</sup> McDonough, Susan, and Michelle Armstrong-Partida. "Amigas and Amichs: Prostitute-Concubines, Strategic Coupling, and Laboring-Class Masculinity in Late Medieval Valencia and the Mediterranean." *Speculum* 98, no. 1 (2023): 49–85. doi:10.1086/722710.

<sup>64</sup> McDonough, and Armstrong-Partida, "Amigas and Amichs," 49–85.

<sup>65</sup> Combing, Beach. "Prostitutes' Symbols." Beachcombing's Bizarre History Blog, October 8, 2016. <https://www.strangehistory.net/2016/10/09/prostitute-symbols/>.

wear blue-colored cloaks in Mallorca.<sup>66</sup> Venice and Vienna prostitutes wore marks and colors on their sleeves. Belts, bells, caps, cloaks, and patches were also worn throughout Europe.<sup>67</sup> In London 1516 AD prostitutes were forced to wear yellow hats with the letter H on them to distinguish them as harlots.<sup>68</sup> Yellow and stripes were typically seen as symbols of being godless, demeaning the prostitutes through visual means.

After the black death in Venice, prostitution was legalized in an attempt to rehabilitate the city's economy by enticing foreign merchants to their port city. This showed the importance and impact of prostitution within a city's economy. When sailors and merchants went to brothels, conversation and information seemed to also be for sales; sharing how to get around town effectively, about real estate, and about all the best places to dine, drink, and play dice within port cities. Harlots would frequent taverns to either find customers or be accompanied by a customer. Female sex workers trafficked their clients into supporting local businesses and their for supported the city's local economy.

In the 14th and 15th centuries, Bruges experienced a noticeable uptick of the prostitute population in this city, which at this time was a large trading hub.<sup>69</sup> The rise in prostitution seemed to coincide with the economic expansion within the city. With more being imported into Bruges, the more foreign merchants sought accompaniment, which led more prostitutes to congregate. In towns with less economic strength, like Bruges in earlier periods, we can see the population of prostitutes within these cities shrink, there being less documentation legally in these weak patches.<sup>70</sup>

Within Venice, brothels have records of extensions of credits and rental agreements, entangling former, current, and owners of prostitutes into the city's credit and debt system as well as connecting them to merchants and other business relationships. Susan McDonough states that “The business of prostitution was one avenue for Venetian women to become involved in the world of financial exchange, to weave themselves into the city’s credit networks and thus be in a position to share that expertise with other prostitutes or with clients”.

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<sup>66</sup> Mummey, "Women, Slavery, and Community." 180-188.

<sup>67</sup> Combing, “Prostitutes’ Symbols”.

<sup>68</sup> Combing, “Prostitutes’ Symbols”.

<sup>69</sup> Murray, James. *Bruges: Cradle of Capitalism*, 1280-1390 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 336-337.

<sup>70</sup> Murray, *Bruges: Cradle of Capitalism*, 336-337.

## Conclusion

While examining prostitution, we can see the changes in the description of the profession and the impacts it has on civilizations, revealing patterns and connections between societal norms, government control over laws and courts, the rise and fall of a city's economy, and the strengthening of patriarchy. We can see the way sex work has affected the laws that have constricted women throughout history, beginning with the veiling and marking of women, and the way the government supported and enforced the dominance of men within societies. These laws leading to the feeling of ownership men felt over women, forcing women into domestic roles.

Prostitution was a job that women turned to in desperation and not without shame, only a selected few being culturally elevated by a higher power, such as kings and high priests, in older historical contexts. Despite the evidence of the glorification of certain prostitution in society, all prostitutes were providing the same service with little respect, whether that be within a temple or within a brothel. The social stigma surrounding sex work as an unrespectable profession flows through all paths of history, its continued presence and popularity as a commodity shining through, despite the disgust felt toward these women and their profession.

Through Srijana Gupta's study of prostitution in ancient India she asked herself how this profession could survive for so many years, even spanning to modern times, with the trivial attitude many societies direct at sex work. Gupta uses her vast knowledge of India and other ancient cities to draw a conclusion about the survival of prostitution, her answers not being one with time constraints. Gupta explains that "prostitution not only remained a medium of survival for a section of women, it also played a great role in building the state's economy" and continues to talk about how society will use the population's opinions on prostitutes to influence institutions and aid in the strengthening of patriarchy.<sup>71</sup> Prostitution continues to reflect the same values and principles throughout time, affecting societies nationally and periodically.

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<sup>71</sup> Gupta, Srijana. "Prostitution in Ancient India."

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