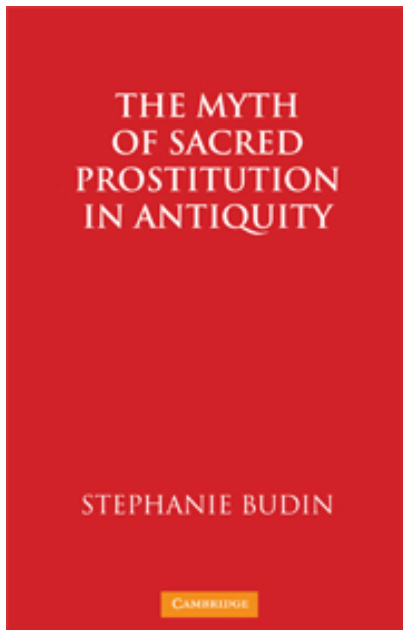


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Budin, Stephanie Lynn

The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. xi + 366. Cloth. \$90.00. ISBN 0521880904.

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This well-researched and often humorously written monograph deals with what the author calls the “myth of sacred prostitution.” The author uses the word “myth” to denote something that is widely believed but has no foundation in reality, along the line of the modern expression “urban myth.” She makes her point forcefully: although sacred prostitution is regarded in multiple scholarly books and dictionaries as an actual historical phenomenon, it never existed. Budin’s book investigates both the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean world. As such, it breaks new ground, as most previous similar studies have dealt exclusively with Mesopotamia.

Budin begins by defining sacred prostitution (3) “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.” Rituals related to a sacred marriage ceremony and the likes thus fall outside this category, as ritual sex does not equal ritual prostitution. Likewise, premarital sex, rape, promiscuity, and the like do not equal prostitution. Furthermore, prostitution can only be called “sacred” insofar as the income generated by the prostitution is devoted to a god/ goddess.

Budin's approach is by necessity philological as she deals with *texts*. She discusses the key texts that subsequent historians, both ancient and modern, have interpreted as referring to sacred prostitution. She maintains that the belief in sacred prostitution has influenced the translations of the given texts. She therefore defines the technical terminology used in these texts more exactly and provides her own translation of the relevant Greek and Latin texts. In the relatively few cases where a text seems to imply sacred prostitution, she then seeks to determine its overall reliability as to historical accuracy. In some of these cases, she will deem a text to be historically reliable in general, but, as its author in the specific case of sacred prostitution relied on historically inaccurate sources, the text cannot be used as supporting evidence of the existence of sacred prostitution. Needless to say, as the title of her book suggests, her verdict will always be negative.

Budin's first chapter provides a general introduction to her book and its content as well as a brief but poignant overview of the prevalence and the tenacity of the scholarly belief that sacred prostitution existed. This *belief* or *image* of sacred prostitution falls into three categories: (1) once-in-a-lifetime prostitution and/or sale of virginity in honor of a goddess; (2) women (and possibly also men) who are professional prostitutes employed by a deity or the deity's sanctuary; and (3) women (and possibly also men) who serve for a limited period, often prior to matrimony or only during certain rituals, as prostitutes.

The second chapter is devoted to the (lack of) Mesopotamian evidence. Budin investigates the Sumerian, Akkadian, Canaanite, and Hebrew vocabulary that, according to some scholars, denotes various cultic officials involved in sacred prostitution, and she demonstrates that most of these terms do not refer to prostitutes at all, let alone sacred ones. Furthermore, she shows that the idea (derived from Herodotus; see below) that all women once in their lifetime would have to perform sacred prostitution with a stranger lacks any foundation. Since a ritual of "sacred adultery" would necessarily have caused a whole class of bastards in the society, it would be reasonable to expect a whole body of laws regulating this practice. No such documentation has been found, which is a compelling argument from silence that this practice never existed. Finally, Budin discusses the specific biblical rhetoric that equates apostasy with whoring, and she argues convincingly that texts such as Hos 4:14 and Gen 38 do not support sacred prostitution. Prostitution, yes, priestesses, yes, but not sacred prostitution. Alongside most current Assyriologists, Budin thus concludes pithily that "there was no sacred prostitutes in the ancient Near East."

In the third chapter, Budin turns to the so-called textual evidences from the classical corpus, including Greek, Roman, and early Christian texts. She provides a comprehensive list of the texts that are commonly cited as evidence of sacred prostitution and quotes them in accessible English translations, partly in order to enforce her point about the

need to provide unbiased translations of the texts. These same texts are then reexamined in chapters 4–10.

The fourth chapter discusses what can be called the foundational text of the belief in sacred prostitution: Herodotus's *Histories* 1.199. Rather than rejecting his material about Babylon as incorrect, she argues that much found in his description of Babylon can be verified. However, in the specific case of sacred prostitution, rather than describing historic reality, he gave a symbolic description of the current conquered state of Babylon from a Greek perspective, stressing how Babylon is characterized by the inversion of Greek ethical and social ideals.

The fifth chapter examines Lucian's *De Dea Syria* 6 and the deuterocanonical Letter of Jeremiah (vv. 42–43). Budin argues that Lucian's description of sacred prostitution in Byblos is fictional and based on the prototype invented by Herodotus. It can therefore not be used as an independent textual evidence for the existence of sacred prostitution. Likewise, Budin argues that there are good reasons to assume that the author of the Letter of Jeremiah was familiar with Herodotus's description of sacred prostitution and that this author, consciously or unconsciously, incorporated this description into his own account.

The sixth chapter deals with Pindar Fragment 122 about young women in Corinth. Budin concludes that, although there certainly were plenty of prostitutes in Corinth and that the city was famous for its cult to Aphrodite, there is no reliable textual support for linking the two.

The seventh chapter examines Strabo's descriptions of sacred prostitution in Babylon and elsewhere and how it relates to the similar description by Herodotus. Again, Strabo's account of Babylon is clearly dependent upon Herodotus's work. At the same time, there are significant differences that might suggest that Strabo himself visited Babylon but saw no signs of sacred prostitution. Budin suggests that what Strabo is writing is an apology of Herodotus's account that seeks to explain the lack of visible facts supporting his details. Budin further argues that Strabo's other supposed references to sacred prostitution are not about sacred prostitution at all. Rather, subsequent writers have misunderstood Strabo's vocabulary.

Chapter 8 looks at the relevant texts of Klearkhos, Justinus, and Valerius Maximus; again, Budin argues that they do not contain any references to sacred prostitution. Instead, we are once again dealing with misunderstandings of their vocabulary. The one possible exception is Klearkhos's reference to Lydian women in frag. 6 *apud Athenaios* 12.515. However, when read in its wider context, it becomes clear that the text deals with issues of rape and vengeance.

In the ninth chapter Budin discusses the so-called archaeological and iconographic evidence. Budin points out that it is impossible to conclude, on the basis of artifacts alone, that we are dealing with *transactional* sex rather than with any other type of sex. It is also important to remember that depictions of sexual acts can have purposes other than portraying reality (e.g., propaganda and magic). She concludes that, although some depictions of erotic scenes have commonly been analyzed as portraying sacred prostitution, such identifications are based on the preconceived notion that sacred prostitution existed.

Chapter 10 examines the rhetoric of early Christian authors, and Budin emphasizes the polemical flavor of the few texts that mention something akin to sacred prostitution. Their aim is thus not to give an objective description of pagan rituals but to effectively convince the audience of the truth of Christianity up and against other competing religious claims. It is, in fact, uncertain whether these authors themselves believed in the existence of sacred prostitutions.

Finally, chapter 11 explores the ways in which the myth of sacred prostitution has taken on a life of its own as a literary feministic motif in the modern New Age movement. Even so, there is very little actual prostitution in this motif and much more sacred marriage and ritual deflorations.

Budin presents a coherent and convincing case, although, at times, her style is rather polemical and her verdict a foregone conclusion. In most of the cited cases, the open-minded reader will reach the same verdict as Budin. In a few cases, however, the situation may not be that clear-cut, and her translation is almost too careful and neutral (e.g., Justinus, *Trogi*, 18.5.4, p. 239). In other words, had there been supporting evidence of sacred prostitution coming from another source, these texts could hypothetically be translated and interpreting as referring to it. However, given the lack of supporting evidence, Budin's extreme caution in translation is probably to be considered a virtue. Despite these minor shortcomings, the book definitely is important, and I hope it will have the impact it deserves.