



The Origin of Prostitution: A Historical and Anthropological Analysis of Commercial Sexuality

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ABSTRACT

The origin of prostitution is difficult to identify with precision because commercial or transactional sexual relationships emerged in different societies under diverse economic, social, religious, and political conditions. Rather than representing a single institution with a clearly identifiable beginning, prostitution developed gradually alongside urbanization, social stratification, slavery, commerce, warfare, and systems of gender inequality. Some of the earliest written evidence for organized sexual commerce appears in ancient Mesopotamia, although interpretations of practices sometimes described as sacred prostitution remain controversial. Evidence from ancient Greece and Rome demonstrates more clearly established systems in which sexual services could be purchased and were regulated through economic and legal institutions. During the medieval and early modern periods, prostitution became increasingly connected with urban economies, migration, military communities, and state regulation. In the modern period, industrialization, colonialism, global migration, and changing gender relations transformed the organization of commercial sex. This study examines the historical origins and development of prostitution from ancient societies to the contemporary era. It argues that prostitution should not be explained by a single cause or attributed exclusively to individual morality. Instead, its historical development reflects interactions among economic necessity, gender and class inequality, labor markets, state regulation, cultural norms, and individual agency. Understanding these historical processes is essential for contemporary debates concerning prostitution, sex work, trafficking, public health and human rights.

Keywords: Prostitution; Sexual Relationships; Ancient Mesopotamia; Ancient Greece and Rome Demonstrates; Public Health and Human Rights

INTRODUCTION

Prostitution is among the oldest and most controversial forms of commercial sexual activity discussed in human history (**Figure.1**) (Lahav-Raz et al., 2026; Rusch et al., 2026; Valasco and Sanmartin, 2026). The frequently repeated statement that prostitution is the world's oldest profession is rhetorically powerful but historically problematic. It assumes that prostitution has a single origin and that commercial sex can be separated clearly from other forms of sexual, marital, economic, and social exchange. Historical evidence instead suggests that sexual relationships involving material compensation developed under different circumstances and were organized differently across societies. The study of prostitution is therefore not simply an investigation into sexuality (Kahalon and Klein, 2025; Mastrantonio et al., 2026). It is also an examination of economic organization, gender relations, slavery, migration, urbanization, law, religion, and political authority. The meaning of prostitution has changed considerably over time. Activities considered prostitution in one society could be understood elsewhere as concubinage, temporary marriage, religious service, entertainment, domestic labor, or another form of economic relationship. A major methodological difficulty is the scarcity and ambiguity of evidence concerning ordinary people's sexual lives. Historical records were frequently produced by governments, religious institutions, wealthy elites, or male authors. Consequently, the voices of people who actually performed sexual labor are often absent. Laws against prostitution, moralistic writings, and religious condemnations may reveal social attitudes more clearly than they reveal the actual



experiences of prostitutes. This study examines the historical emergence of prostitution and the major social conditions associated with its development. It focuses on ancient Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome before considering medieval, early modern and modern transformations. The central argument is that prostitution did not originate from a single event or institution. Rather, commercial sexuality emerged repeatedly when economic exchange, social inequality, gender relations, and sexual demand interacted within particular historical environments.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a historical-anthropological and comparative qualitative methodology to examine the origin and historical development of prostitution as a form of transactional sexuality. Rather than attempting to identify the “first prostitute,” the research investigates when and under what social, economic, political, and cultural conditions recognizable systems of commercial sexual exchange emerged. This approach avoids imposing contemporary concepts of sex work on societies whose institutions and understandings of sexuality differed substantially from those of the modern world. The study uses secondary historical and anthropological analysis of evidence from major periods and regions, including ancient Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, medieval societies, early modern colonial societies, and industrial and contemporary societies. Particular attention is given to written records, legal codes, religious texts, literary sources, economic records, historical scholarship, and anthropological interpretations. Because archaeological and textual evidence is uneven, sources are evaluated critically according to their historical context, terminology, authorship, purpose, and potential interpretive bias. A comparative framework is employed to identify recurring patterns across societies. The analysis focuses on six principal variables: (1) economic exchange and labor organization, (2) slavery and coercion, (3) gender and social inequality, (4) urbanization and commercial development, (5) state regulation and legal institutions, and (6) migration and transregional trade. The study also distinguishes between prostitution, concubinage, slavery, entertainment, and human trafficking where historical evidence permits. Finally, the methodology incorporates a diachronic perspective, examining how commercial sexuality changed alongside monetary economies, cities, states, colonialism, industrialization, globalization, and digital technologies. Particular caution is applied to contested concepts such as “sacred prostitution” in Mesopotamia and historical narratives of white slavery (Usman, 2026). By combining historical comparison with anthropological interpretation, the study seeks to explain prostitution as a changing social institution shaped by economic structures, power relations, gender norms, individual agency, and systems of legal regulation.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE ORIGIN OF PROSTITUTION

Before discussing origins, it is necessary to define the phenomenon. In its narrowest sense, prostitution refers to the exchange of sexual services for money or other material compensation. Contemporary scholarship sometimes uses the broader term “sex work,” which can include prostitution as well as pornography, erotic performance, online sexual services, and other forms of sexual labor. Applying modern categories to ancient societies can create serious historical problems. A woman receiving gifts from a powerful man, for example, might not have understood herself as a prostitute. Similarly, an enslaved person forced to provide sexual services cannot be considered equivalent to an independent contemporary sex worker. The distinction between voluntary and coercive sexual labor is particularly important. The historical origin of prostitution should therefore be understood as the emergence of recognizable systems of transactional sexual services, rather than as the discovery of a particular first prostitute. Human societies existed for thousands of years before the development of writing, money, and formal urban institutions. Consequently, the earliest evidence cannot establish when sexual exchanges first occurred.

MESOPOTAMIA AND THE EARLIEST WRITTEN EVIDENCE

Ancient Mesopotamia provides some of the earliest written evidence relevant to prostitution. Urban civilizations developed in the region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers during the fourth and third millennia BCE. The growth of cities, temples, markets, slavery, taxation, and specialized occupations created complex economic environments in which sexual services could become commercialized. Cuneiform documents reveal various categories of women associated with sexuality, entertainment, slavery, and service.



Some were independent, while others were enslaved or attached to households or institutions. However, scholars disagree about precisely how many of these categories correspond to what would now be called prostitution. One particularly persistent historical claim concerns “sacred prostitution,” the idea that women in Mesopotamian temples were required to provide sexual services as part of religious worship. Earlier scholars sometimes interpreted several ancient texts in this way. Modern scholarship, however, has challenged the generalization that temple prostitution was a widespread or systematic institution. Some ancient terms traditionally translated as “prostitute” have uncertain meanings, and evidence does not demonstrate a universal temple-based system of sexual commerce. This controversy illustrates an important principle in studying prostitution: ancient sexual practices cannot automatically be interpreted through modern assumptions. Nevertheless, Mesopotamia clearly demonstrates that by the time written urban civilizations emerged, societies possessed forms of sexual labor, slavery, concubinage, and economic exchange that could overlap with prostitution.

PROSTITUTION IN ANCIENT GREECE

Ancient Greece provides clearer evidence of organized prostitution. In classical Greek cities, particularly Athens, prostitution existed within a broader commercial economy. Prostitutes included enslaved women, foreign women, and some free individuals. The social position of these groups varied considerably. Greek society also distinguished between different categories of sexual and domestic relationships. Some women worked in establishments commonly associated with prostitution, while others were entertainers or courtesans. The famous hetairai, or courtesans, could occupy a socially distinctive position. Some were educated and participated in elite social environments, although their independence should not be romanticized. Prostitution was also connected with slavery. Enslaved women could be sexually exploited by owners or rented out for commercial purposes. This demonstrates that prostitution historically developed partly within systems of coercion and unequal property relations. Male prostitution also existed. This challenges the assumption that prostitution has always been exclusively a female occupation. However, gender strongly influenced the social and legal consequences of commercial sexuality. Ancient Greek societies constructed different expectations concerning male and female sexuality, citizenship, marriage, and honor. The Greek case demonstrates that prostitution could become integrated into urban commercial life without necessarily being regarded as completely outside society. At the same time, prostitutes often occupied an inferior social position and faced legal and cultural restrictions.

PROSTITUTION IN ANCIENT ROME

Roman society developed extensive institutions surrounding prostitution. As Rome expanded into a Mediterranean empire, urban populations grew and commercial networks connected distant regions. These conditions contributed to a large market for sexual services. Roman prostitution included enslaved persons, freed persons, foreigners, and free individuals. Prostitutes could work in brothels, taverns, entertainment establishments, or independently. Some enslaved people were forced into sexual exploitation, while other individuals entered commercial sex for economic reasons. The Roman state did not simply ignore prostitution. Instead, authorities sometimes regulated it through registration, taxation, zoning, and legal distinctions concerning social status. Prostitutes could be subject to forms of legal and social discrimination even when their activities were tolerated. Roman law also demonstrates how prostitution intersected with concepts of citizenship, marriage, slavery, and family honor. Sexual conduct was politically significant because Roman society placed substantial emphasis on legitimate marriage and inheritance. The sexual availability of certain socially marginalized groups could therefore coexist with strong restrictions on the sexuality of elite women. The Roman experience shows that prostitution can become institutionalized within a sophisticated state. It also demonstrates that tolerance and exploitation can exist simultaneously. Regulation does not necessarily mean social acceptance or protection of workers.

MEDIEVAL PROSTITUTION

The collapse of the Western Roman Empire did not eliminate prostitution. Commercial sex continued in European, Byzantine, Islamic, African, and Asian societies, although its organization differed significantly



among regions. Medieval European cities frequently contained prostitutes, taverns, bathhouses, and other establishments associated with sexual commerce. Religious authorities generally condemned prostitution morally while sometimes tolerating it as an unavoidable social phenomenon. In several cities, governments attempted to regulate prostitution through designated districts, licensing, clothing requirements, taxation, or restrictions on movement. The contradiction between condemnation and regulation is historically significant. Authorities could regard prostitution as sinful while simultaneously attempting to control it rather than abolish it. Some theologians even considered prostitution a social “necessary evil,” although this idea should not be generalized across all medieval societies. Military campaigns, pilgrimage, trade, and urban migration also contributed to commercial sexual networks. Large concentrations of unmarried men, travelers, soldiers, and merchants could create demand for sexual services. Outside Europe, different institutional patterns developed. Islamic societies generally condemned prostitution, but concubinage and slavery created other forms of legally or socially structured sexual relationships. In parts of Asia, entertainment districts, courtesans, and forms of sexual labor developed within distinctive cultural systems. Consequently, there was no single global medieval model of prostitution.

EARLY MODERNITY, COLONIALISM, AND THE EXPANSION OF SEXUAL MARKETS

From approximately the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, global commerce, maritime expansion, warfare, and colonialism transformed sexual economies. Port cities became particularly important centers of prostitution because sailors, merchants, soldiers, migrants, and transient workers generated substantial demand. Colonial systems also produced severe forms of sexual exploitation. Indigenous women, enslaved Africans, indentured laborers, and other marginalized populations could be subjected to sexual coercion. Colonial authorities frequently created racialized systems that shaped access to sexual labor and reinforced distinctions between colonizers and colonized populations. The Atlantic slave trade represents one of the most extreme historical examples of the relationship between economic exploitation and sexual exploitation. Enslaved women could be subjected to forced sexual relations, reproductive exploitation, and commercial sexual use. These practices demonstrate that prostitution cannot be separated from broader histories of slavery and gender-based violence. Meanwhile, some European cities developed increasingly formal systems of regulation. Authorities sought to control prostitution in order to protect public order, manage disease, and regulate sexuality. These policies laid foundations for later debates concerning criminalization, licensing, medical inspection, and public health.

INDUSTRIALIZATION AND MODERN PROSTITUTION

Industrialization dramatically altered prostitution during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Rapid urbanization brought large numbers of people from rural areas into cities. Women often had limited access to well-paid employment, and prostitution could become one available means of economic survival. Large industrial cities developed entertainment districts and commercial sex markets. Railways, shipping, military bases, and international migration facilitated the movement of both customers and sex workers. At the same time, governments increasingly focused on sexually transmitted infections. Regulationist systems attempted to control prostitution through registration and medical examination. Critics argued that these policies frequently placed disproportionate burdens on women while leaving male clients relatively unrestricted. The nineteenth century also witnessed campaigns against “white slavery,” an early term associated with fears about trafficking of women for prostitution. Some concerns reflected genuine exploitation, but historical scholarship has shown that sensational narratives sometimes confused consensual migration and prostitution with forced trafficking. This distinction remains important today.

CONTEMPORARY SEX WORK AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, prostitution has been transformed by globalization, migration, digital communication, and changing concepts of sexuality and labor. Contemporary commercial sex can occur in brothels, clubs, private apartments, streets, massage establishments, escort services, and online environments.



A crucial modern distinction is between consensual adult sex work and human trafficking for sexual exploitation. These phenomena can overlap but should not automatically be treated as identical. Trafficking involves coercion, deception, abuse of vulnerability, or other prohibited means, whereas some adults engage in sex work voluntarily. Digital technology has further transformed commercial sexuality. Online platforms can allow sex workers to communicate directly with customers and reduce reliance on intermediaries. At the same time, digital systems can facilitate exploitation, surveillance, trafficking, and financial control. Contemporary debates consequently involve competing approaches: criminalization, partial criminalization, decriminalization, legalization, and the so-called Nordic or equality model. Each approach reflects different assumptions about exploitation, public health, gender equality, labor rights, and state responsibility.

GENDER, ECONOMICS, AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

The historical persistence of prostitution cannot be adequately explained by sexual desire alone. Economic inequality has repeatedly influenced participation in commercial sex. Women and marginalized populations have historically faced restricted access to property, education, employment, and political rights, increasing vulnerability to sexual exploitation. However, economic explanations should not erase individual agency. Historical evidence indicates that people entered commercial sex for diverse reasons, including poverty, debt, migration, independence, family obligations, or perceived economic opportunity. The degree of choice varied enormously. Gender is equally important. Prostitution has frequently involved women serving male customers, reflecting broader patterns of gender inequality. Yet male prostitution and same-sex commercial sexuality also existed historically. Contemporary markets are more diverse, including services involving men, women, transgender people, and different sexual orientations. Thus, prostitution should be analyzed as a social institution shaped by the interaction of demand, labor supply, economic inequality, gender norms, and legal structures.

DISCUSSION

The historical evidence does not support the identification of one definitive “origin” of prostitution. Instead, commercial sexual practices appear repeatedly when certain social conditions converge. Urbanization creates concentrated populations and markets; economic inequality produces differential access to resources; slavery and coercion can generate sexual exploitation; migration connects workers and customers; and state institutions determine whether prostitution is tolerated, regulated, criminalized, or legalized. The expression “world’s oldest profession” therefore oversimplifies the historical record. It can also obscure the difference between voluntary sexual labor and coercive exploitation. A historically informed approach should recognize both continuity and transformation. Another important conclusion is that prostitution has never existed independently of political authority. From ancient taxation and Roman regulation to medieval municipal controls and modern criminal law, states have repeatedly attempted to define and manage commercial sexuality. These policies have sometimes sought to protect public health or vulnerable populations but have also produced stigma, surveillance, discrimination, and underground markets. The history of prostitution consequently offers broader lessons concerning the relationship between sexuality, economics, and power. It demonstrates that social institutions surrounding sex are historically constructed rather than biologically predetermined.

CONCLUSION

The historical and anthropological analysis of prostitution demonstrates that its origin cannot be attributed to a single society, individual, or historical event. Rather, commercial sexuality emerged gradually within changing systems of economic exchange, urbanization, social hierarchy, gender relations, slavery, migration, and political regulation. Because sexual exchanges existed long before writing, money, and formal institutions, the archaeological and historical record cannot identify the “first prostitute.” A more defensible approach is to examine when societies developed recognizable and recurring systems in which sexual services were exchanged for material compensation. Evidence from ancient Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome indicates that commercial sexuality became increasingly institutionalized as urban economies expanded. At the same time,



these cases demonstrate the difficulty of applying modern categories retrospectively. Ancient classifications of women, entertainers, slaves, concubines, and sexual workers do not always correspond neatly to the contemporary concept of prostitution. The debate surrounding alleged Mesopotamian “sacred prostitution” particularly illustrates the dangers of interpreting ambiguous historical evidence through modern assumptions. Greece and Rome provide clearer evidence of organized prostitution, while also demonstrating that commercial sex could coexist with slavery, social discrimination, and state regulation. The subsequent history of prostitution reveals considerable continuity alongside major transformations. Medieval authorities frequently condemned prostitution morally while regulating it pragmatically. Early modern trade, colonialism, slavery, and military expansion connected sexual commerce to global systems of economic and political power. Industrialization and urbanization subsequently expanded commercial sex markets while encouraging new regulatory approaches centered on public order and sexually transmitted diseases. These historical developments demonstrate that prostitution has never existed independently of wider economic and institutional structures. The modern distinction between consensual adult sex work and human trafficking is therefore essential. Treating all commercial sexual activity as trafficking risks obscuring individual agency whereas ignoring coercion can conceal serious exploitation and violence. Contemporary digital technologies have further transformed the organization of sexual labor, creating both opportunities for greater independence and new mechanisms of exploitation. Ultimately, prostitution should be understood neither simply as an inevitable consequence of human sexuality nor solely as a product of economic deprivation. Its historical persistence reflects the interaction of sexual demand, labor markets, gender inequality, social status, migration, coercion, and state institutions. A historically informed analysis must therefore recognize both agency and structural constraint. Understanding the origins and evolution of prostitution provides an important foundation for contemporary debates over criminalization, decriminalization, legalization, trafficking prevention, labor rights, public health, and gender equality. The history of prostitution is consequently not merely a history of sexual commerce; it is also a history of power, inequality, economic organization, and changing conceptions of human autonomy.

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(1) All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

(2) The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

(3) Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants involved in the study.

(4) This work does not include animals as subjects.

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Figure Captions



Figure.1 Examining two main interpretations of the Roman view of prostitution ([By Erin K. Fenton, Macalester College](#))