

The Subaltern Sex Workers

Examining The Lives of Sex Workers in Ancient Rome

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Abstract:

This bachelor thesis concerns itself with the living and working conditions of sex workers, and sex worker slaves in ancient Rome. Combining historical, feminist, and postcolonial theories; this paper looks at the way the Roman upper classes expressed a certain 'Cultural Hegemony' over the 'subaltern' sex workers. This thesis considers several aspects of the lives and work of sex workers: their places of work, their pay, the laws that concern their profession, how they were identified and how they prevented and dealt with unwanted pregnancies. Of these aspects, this paper will consider how the upper classes could have had a negative impact on the lives and working conditions of Roman sex workers, both directly and indirectly.

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Introduction

Research Question

This thesis concerns the question: How were the poor working and living conditions of the Roman subaltern sex workers reinforced by the hegemonic upper classes in the Republican, and early Imperial Roman period?

To answer this question, I will be approaching vastly different aspects of the Roman sex industry to discover in which ways the lives of sex workers were negatively affected. This thesis will concern itself with a variety of subjects such as brothels, baths, the law, money, violence, clothing, hairstyles, contraceptive methods, and abortion.

Most of the available secondary sources present evidence from Pompeiian digs, archeological and so this research will be geographically concerned mostly with sex workers working on the Italian peninsula. I will however not limit myself to the Italian mainland only. If necessary information comes up from other regions in the Roman empire, I will take it into consideration.

I will mainly focus on the low-status sex workers that could be found in common brothels or *popinae*, and not on the elite courtesans of upper-class society. This is because courtesans sometimes enjoyed certain freedoms that the average 'brothel-bound' sex worker did not.

Historiography

Over the last thirty years, multiple branches of the history of sexuality have developed. It was Foucault's 'L'Histoire de la sexualité' (1976) that first set the ball rolling. His approach was to reach into the historic material in order to reconstruct how certain people, in a certain period, used to think about sex and sexuality. Histories about hetero- and homosexuality started around the 1980s.

In the mid-1990s, sexual histories started to be written about a wider variety of subjects. The approach remained relatively the same, but instead of looking only at time and place, research was done about institutions, people, non-European cultures, etcetera. Furthermore, new sexual perspectives were developed about topics like adultery, coitus interruptus, and venereal disease; topics this research is quite concerned with.

In the late 2000s comparative histories were written. Comparison between French and German sexuality for example. Now, even more crude topics were on the table such as sexual eugenics and infanticide.¹

The history of sex work started to boom in the late 1980s when historians saw within it a simple vessel to contain a multitude of different perspectives. The history of sex work could be concerned with crime, the status of women and homosexuals, economic developments, and gender relations for example. But where modern

¹ Dagmar Herzog, "Syncopated Sex: Transforming European Sexual Cultures," *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (December 2009): 1287–1308, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.114.5.1287>.

historians struggled to use the extensive collections of judicial and municipal records in archives; ancient historians returned to archeological and literary evidence.² This paper will build on past developments in the history of sexuality. Using archeological and literary evidence, I will assess topics such as sex work, abortion, and non-heterosexuality within the framework of Gramscian Marxism.

Framework

Gramsci argued that culture rules society like superstructure rules the base. The lower classes, which he describes as a 'subaltern', experience a 'false class consciousness' within the cultural confines of their society. He invented the term 'cultural hegemony' to describe this power dynamic. Cultural hegemony describes an institution employed by the upper classes to control the proletariat. This ruling class culture, Gramsci argues, is used by the capitalist or imperialist bourgeoisie and state to implant this false class consciousness. Once the status quo is rooted within society's culture, it justifies upper-class domination. The ideas of the ruling classes are accepted by the subaltern, reducing the need to use direct force or threat.³

This does not quite directly apply to our case study. Roman slaves, for example, were quite well aware of their status as lowest-rank Roman inhabitants. Their lack of freedom was not just created by hegemonic cultural implications; the fact that slaves were actual human property made that strictly clear. However, the 'hegemonic' ruling class definitely had a strong influence on Roman culture, which had a great effect on the sex industry and its workers.

In order to use Gramsci's Marxist theory of cultural hegemony in this paper, it needs to be expanded with feminist theory. With the Marxist boom in the 80s and the shift from 2nd wave to 3rd wave feminism, these two fields have become interwoven in many ways. There are two main lenses through which feminist theorists examine sex work.

The first lens is pro-sex feminism, which defends sex work as a form of economic empowerment and expressive freedom of the self. The idea is that "society demonizes sex workers because they demand more money than women should, for services that should be free."⁴ Whilst I agree with sex-positive feminism which concerns itself greatly with agency. Agency however is not something I can prove. Since there are no available sources from sex worker slaves that confidently show how workers had agency in the Roman sex industry. This of course does not necessarily mean these people did not have any agency, but it is impossible to prove without ego-documents or other inside perspectives. Even if these types of sources would have survived, medieval copyists have not favored writing down these

² Timothy J. Gilfoyle, "Prostitutes in the Archives: Problems and Possibilities in Documenting the History of Sexuality," *The American Archivist* 57, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 514–27.

³ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Reprinted (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2007), 25.

⁴ Elizabeth Bernstein, "What's Wrong with Prostitution? What's Right with Sex Work? Comparing Markets in Female Sexual Labor," *Hastings Women's L.J.* 10, no. 1 (January 1, 1999): 97.

historical narratives. Most other sources we have are archaeological, which present no insider point of view; or contemporary legislation and literature, which were all written by the male elite. Another explanation might be that information about Roman sex work was considered common knowledge, and thus never recorded. It is important to mention that further problems are suggested by postcolonial thinker Gayatri Spivak, who has suggested that “the subaltern cannot speak” at all.⁵

The second lens is a radical feminist critique of prostitution, which argues that the sexual contract is inherently patriarchal in its objectification of women. This is the most common mode of thinking found in Marxist-feminist articles. Malini Bhattacharya explains how in Marxist thought “the condition of the prostituted woman within the capitalist system is like that of a slave. It presupposes the alienation of the most intimate parts of her personality as well as a near-total lack of freedom to choose employers and to bargain about wages.”⁶

This is not a completely apt comparison considering that most of the Roman sex workers were actual slaves. Yet, this framework allows us to examine the intersectional ways in which the patriarchal, slave holding, anti-sex worker cultural hegemony negatively influenced the working lives of sex workers in ancient Rome.

I have also been thinking a while about the term, ‘sex work’. Coined by Carol Leigh in the 70s, ‘sex work’ has now become a de facto term for pro-sex feminists to refer to all manners of employment in the sex industry. Leigh, who was an optimistic sex-positive feminist wanted to “create an atmosphere of tolerance within and outside the women’s movement for women working in the sex industry”⁷, and thus created the term. ‘Sex work’ is a term with neutral connotations, unlike other defining terms which “contain the history of centuries of slurs”⁸.

I was also concerned that using the very modern term ‘sex worker’ might be anachronistic, but I do not believe the intentional use of non-derogatory language will damage my historical arguments. Sadly, most of my sources still use outdated terminology, which means some disparaging words will still make an appearance in my thesis. I will attempt to mitigate the damage as much as possible, but it cannot promise to avoid every instance of linguistic indignity.

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 295.

⁶ Malini Bhattacharya, “Neither ‘Free’ nor ‘Equal’ Work: A Marxist-Feminist Perspective on Prostitution,” *ANTYAJAA: Indian Journal of Women and Social Change* 1, no. 1 (June 2016): 82–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455632716637914>.

⁷ Carol Leigh, “Inventing Sex Work,” in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. Jill Nagle (New York: Routledge, 1997), 225–31.

⁸ Leigh, “Inventing Sex Work,” 226.

Methodology

When it comes to the history of the Roman sex industry, there is no denying Thomas A.J. McGinn as the prime historical authority on the subject. His two books: 'Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome' (1998) and 'The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World' (2004) stand out as ultimate compendiums of information. A significant number of other secondary sources that I will use, also reference McGinn. He has by far published the most works on Roman prostitution. However, his work is quite dense and is mostly focused on law and economics.

Craig A. Williams' 'Roman Sexuality' (1999) contains necessary information about male sex workers, which compared to their female counterparts have been heavily understudied.

Alan E. Astin and Rebecca Flemming have some further insights into the *regimen morum*; an aspect of Roman governance that McGinn does not always explain too well.

Rodney Stark and John M. Riddle elaborate deeply on different forms of Roman contraception, abortion, and infanticide. Information that at first sight might seem crude, but is very relevant for people working in the sex industry.

We will also be looking at The Epitaph of Allia Potestas. It was written somewhere between the 1st and the 4th century CE and was found in the city of Rome. It is a personal and intimate account of a freedwoman sex worker. It was originally written in Latin, of which I have two different transcriptions and translations. This source can help shed some light on the relationship between upper-class men and the female sex workers they visit.

I will be using '*Menaechmi*' by the famous Roman dramatist Titus Maccius Plautus as a source to argue that literature would have played a role in spreading the upper-class cultural hegemony. It is an online translation.

Suetonius' 'The Twelve Caesars' has several passages that concern pimps and the law. These are minor, but they do add to my secondary source research. Furthermore, I found a passage in which he presents details about Caligula's sex worker taxation. Suetonius is certainly not the most trustworthy author, but his twelve emperor biographies which are massively influential, as they include many passages concerning topics such as sex work and other gossip.

Through the use of these sources, I will attempt to answer how cultural hegemony has played a role in the Roman sex industry. However, I will be reversing the usual Gramscian approach somewhat. Normally, the upper-class hegemony is looked at in terms of the ways it institutionally and culturally justifies itself. Instead, I want to use these sources to look at the ways cultural hegemony maintains the societal binds that hold the sex industry down. Rather than considering how the subaltern is "tricked" into justifying the ruling class, I will look at the ways in which the upper classes maintain the low social status of members of the Roman sex industry.

Sites of the Sex Industry

Brothels

McGinn defines a brothel as “an establishment where two or more prostitutes can work simultaneously and whose activity forms the main, or at least a major, part of the business as a whole.”⁹ This definition is quite broad and up to interpretation, but it means that most taverns and inns which employed sex workers are included in the definition of brothel. McGinn’s definition does exclude baths because even if some of those businesses were to provide a place for sex work, the baths themselves would still be the “main or major” business.

Brothels appeared in many different ways, taking the shape of lodging houses, food establishments or restaurants which would sometimes offer sexual services as well. It is not very clear whether businesses that provided these services were also restricted by the same laws. The sale of certain food in inns and taverns was severely restricted for example, but whether these laws extended to brothels as well is not well described.¹⁰

Because the cultural hegemony disapproved of brothels and sex work. The Roman upper classes were prejudiced against the lower classes and saw taverns as a place of dishonor. Honorable Romans for instance could not be seen eating in public. *Popinae*, which were comparable to lower class wine bars were regarded as dissolute places for gambling and sex. These taverns were also negatively characterized by the elite as “greasy, dirty, damp, noisy, roach-infested, and smoky.”¹¹ These were places where people ate publically, where day drinking and violence were a common occurrence. In *Popinae*, upper-class Romans would generally feel physically uncomfortable.¹² So when high-class citizens were seen in those places, it would be a show of great dishonor.¹³ *Popinae* were held in such low esteem that it was written in the law that: if an arbitrator were to summon a litigant to a brothel or *popina*, refusing to obey would not incur punishment. It seems that the upper classes were adamant about making sure that brothels had a bad reputation, to avoid class mixing and adultery.

Bathhouses

Even though they are not contained within McGinn’s definition of a brothel, it is worth pointing out some of the evidence for bathhouses also taking part in the sex industry. In *Herculaneum*, multiple instances of graffiti next to a bathhouse refer to sexual activity being performed there. One of which stating:

⁹ Thomas A. J. McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World: A Study of Social History and the Brothel* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 9, <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.17679>.

¹⁰ Gustav Hermansen, *Ostia: Aspects of Roman City Life* (Edmonton, Alta: University of Alberta Press, 1982), 199–203.

¹¹ McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World*, 20.

¹² *Ibid*, 19–20.

¹³ Hermansen, *Ostia*, 196–97.

Apelles cubicularius cum Dextro Caesar(is) pranderunt hic iucundissime et future simul.

Translated: “Apelles, the bedroom attendant, with Dexter, (slave) of Caesar, ate lunch here most agreeably and also had sex.”¹⁴

We have to be careful with using graffiti as evidence, as these short notes do not give any information as to whether the sex was provided by the bathhouse itself. McGinn states that “even when a price is given, we should be alert to the possible status of these claims as boasts, wishes, or insults.”¹⁵ These kinds of falsehoods are still shared today, so it is not very difficult to imagine these inscriptions to be of the same nature.

Garratt Fagan also warns that “we must not overemphasize the prevalence of sex at the baths, and certainly not on the dubious testimony of bathroom wall graffiti”.¹⁶ According to him, the sources only present generalized impressions of non-bathing activities that would be available at such premises.

However, this inscription does suggest that it was not impossible for Romans to imagine sex happening at bathhouse premises. Perhaps for some visitors it was their reason for visiting. Especially because another potential pastime in the baths could have been drinking, as suggested by the famous epitaph: “bathing, wine and love make life worth living”.¹⁷ Since, as McGinn argues, alcohol aided in the creation of “sexually charged atmospheres” in baths, comparable to bars.¹⁸ If drinking was indeed possible at a bathhouse, it could be argued that sex workers too would be a welcome service in those establishments.

Regardless of the prevalence of sex in bathhouses, what is important to conclude is that these locations too possibly played a role in the Roman sex industry. McGinn writes that because “baths were highly sexualized places, [...] they [might have easily acquired] a reputation as centers of prostitution, especially if both sexes were present.”¹⁹

Alternative Locations

Sex workers were not always found in distinctly dedicated brothels. Wherever clients could be found, there would be sex workers available. Circuses and theaters were associated with the sex industry as well because these buildings contained busy arcades filled with vendors and all types of performers. Some spaces in these arcades seem to have been rented by pimps for the purposes of selling sex. This

¹⁴ Rebecca Benefiel, “AGP-EDR154185,” The Ancient Graffiti Project, August 9, 2017, <http://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/graffito/AGP-EDR154185>. <http://ancientgraffiti.org/Graffiti/graffito/AGP-EDR154185>.

¹⁵ McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World*, 17.

¹⁶ Garret G. Fagan, “Socializing at the Baths,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*, ed. Michael Peachin (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 10.

¹⁷ Brian K. Harvey, ed., *Daily Life in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook*, Focus Book (Indianapolis: Focus, an imprint of Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2016), 256.

¹⁸ McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World*, 208.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 210.

business would be particularly lucrative on days of performances, when large crowds would fill the building's space.²⁰

Sex workers would also attend dinner parties, in houses of the elite, decorated by erotic paintings, with dramatic entertainment. McGinn here again refers to the "sexually charged atmosphere", an argument he perhaps makes a little too often, but it does make sense that a party with sex workers would be erotic in nature.²¹

The business strategy of pimps was often to maximize the mobility of sex workers. Pimps would send sex workers to attend public events with large crowds, such as fairs, markets, and festivals. Sometimes even military encampments would receive a visit. Instead of having clients come to the brothel, the brothel could come to the client so to say.²²

Finally, the sex industry was thought to extend to religious places such as temples as well. At certain pagan temples, it was believed that dedicated men and women would offer their bodies sexually for physical rituals.²³ Christian writers would later write of the priests of Isis for example, and the temples' role as a place for romantic rendezvous.²⁴ The myth of the "sacred prostitute" has been disputed however. In a matter-of-fact style that seems to escape nearly all other historians, it is Budin who simply and convincingly concludes that there were none. There were no "sacred prostitutes".²⁵

²⁰ Ibid, 22–23.

²¹ Ibid, 27.

²² Ibid, 27–28.

²³ Stephanie Lynn Budin, *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity*. (Leiden: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 20–22.

²⁴ Stephen L. Dyson and Richard E. Prior, "Horace, Martial, and Rome: Two Poetic Outsiders Read the Ancient City," *Arethusa* 28, no. 2/3 (Spring and Fall 1995): 254.

²⁵ Budin, *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity*, 47.

The 'Work' of Sex Work

Recruitment and Management

Sex worker slaves came from all walks of life. Some were prisoners of war, some were sold by their parents, some were abandoned as a child, some were children of sex worker slaves themselves, etcetera. In nearly all cases, these girls and boys came into contact with pimps because they were bought by one.

There are recorded instances in which free women willingly joined the sex industry to avoid poverty, and gain security with a pimp.²⁶ Sex work could have been appealing for young Romans. It required no particular skill set and had a good income, when compared to weaving or wet-nursing. Young people were possibly also enticed by pimps promising gifts of clothing or other accessories.²⁷

The pimps were the ones that traded the slaves, and ran the brothels. The organization of sex work, and the training of these girls and boys, was most of the time the responsibility of slaves or freedmen who actually used to be sex workers themselves. The work was divided this way to prevent the slave trading pimp from losing his honorable status.²⁸

Roman brothels contained around four sex workers on average.²⁹ Slave prostitutes seem to have been fairly tightly controlled, and the sources often suggest an environment of coercion. This environment was achieved because pimps would provide food and lodging at the brothel and would seldomly permit the sex workers to leave. Non-slave sex workers sometimes went home to sleep when the brothel closed.³⁰

Prices and Wages

McGinn estimates that for lower-priced sex workers the daily income was between 7.5 and 10 *sestertii*. Higher-priced sex workers are estimated to have earned between 10 and 12.5 *sestertii* per day.³¹

These values are based on several assumptions that could have varied largely. These earnings are calculated based on workdays with 5 clients. However, the sources provide no real information as to the length of work days or the amount of sexual encounters sex workers would have in that time. Slave sex workers presumably would have worked longer days than free sex workers. Principally, the pricier the sex worker, the fewer clients they would receive on a day. However, it remains guesswork in many ways.

²⁶ Robert C Knapp, "Sex for Sale: Prostitutes," in *Invisible Romans* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2013), para. 3.

²⁷ Knapp, "Sex for Sale," 21.

²⁸ Leonhard Schumacher, "Slaves in Roman Society," in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*, ed. Michael Peachin (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8.

²⁹ McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World*, 173–74.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 37.

³¹ *Ibid*, 49.

It is certainly possible that even the cheapest sex workers would earn double or triple the amount of the average unskilled urban laborer.³² If these workers were slaves, then all their earnings would have gone to their master. If they were free, but in the employ of a pimp, then the pimp usually took a third of the cut. For freelance sex workers however, this could have meant they were able to live pretty comfortable lives.

In order to gain more control of their free sex workers, pimps would inflate the price of food, clothing, cosmetics, and personal items. This strategy went beyond trying to steal more money from the sex workers. As a matter of fact, the goal was to force their workers into a personal debt, which would heavily increase the workers' economic dependency on the pimp. This debt was also achieved by a huge increase in the rent. Through this form of exploitation, the pimp's free workers would necessarily assume a role similar to one of a slave sex worker, because they would have to give up more of their freedoms in order to work their way out of the debt.³³

Crime

It is easy to assume that the Roman sources, which paint these brothels or *popinae* in such a bad light, are merely speaking from a place of elitism. This is true in many ways. We know that people from the upper classes spoke out against class mixing, which was very common at brothels. These prejudices could have created a false image of how common crime at these places must have been. Alas, violent crime was incredibly common in brothels. McGinn lists "beatings, rape, murder, robbery, theft, and destruction of property" as crimes that happened in brothels and to sex workers in and outside the premises.³⁴

For female sex workers in brothels, the likelihood of getting raped was high. With all the noises, gambling, and brawling going on in brothels, pimps would have had a hard time preventing harm from coming to their workers. This type of violence can not continually be attributed to its surroundings, and it should be recognized as targeted violence against women.

Once again McGinn is slightly too quick to attribute many of these crimes to the influence of alcohol and the 'sexually charged atmosphere'. The fact of the matter is that sex workers had one of the lowest social statuses in the entirety of Rome. Together with the fact that these were women (who already experienced a certain second-rate citizenship) and most often slaves (the lowest class), a lot of men would not have considered raping these women as immoral. Moreover, because the sources do not make clear whether rapists would be considered liable for the rape of a sex worker, they might have gotten away with it too.³⁵

³² Ibid, 51.

³³ Ibid, 52–53.

³⁴ Ibid, 87.

³⁵ Thomas A. J. McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 326–27.

With crime rates in brothels being so high, and the threat of being raped or physically abused always lurking around the corner, I cannot imagine female sex workers must have felt at all comfortable in their working spaces. Of course, it was a natural fact of their profession that they had to make themselves physically uncomfortable for the pleasures of others, but being raped is a traumatic experience.

There were certain population groups that due to their low social status could not commit sexual assault cases to public courts, such as slaves and sex workers.³⁶ It could be argued that this is a culturally hegemonic act of violence on those groups, in order to subjugate these subaltern women, and reflects larger aspects of Roman society. The intersection of woman, slave, and sex worker, was after all the lowest possible social status one could reach. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these laws reflect a larger anti-woman ideology, rather than a clamp down on sex workers and slaves.

³⁶ Nghiem L. Nguyen, "Roman Rape: An Overview of Roman Rape Laws from the Republican Period to Justinian's Reign," *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law* 13, no. 1 (2006): 85–86.

Sex Workers and the Law

Civil Positioning

The authority of the censorship was unquestionable, and influenced the public and private lives of many Romans. Livy described how “the guidance of Roman *mores* (which we can translate to ‘manners’) and discipline was in [the hands of the censorship]. The distinction between honorable and dishonorable amongst the senators and the centuries of the equites was under the judgement of that magistracy.”³⁷ Consuls found this duty to keep the public morals intact vital for the proper functioning of Roman society. The duty was called *regimen morum*.³⁸ Censors concerned themselves with an enormous diversity of matters in order to maintain the *mores*. Astin states that the *regimen morum* was directed by “a complex of motives, some calculated, some springing from received assumptions.”³⁹ Ultimately the goal was to maintain Roman cultural identity, social values, and by extension the aristocracy. This heavily reflects Gramsci’s idea of cultural hegemony: an institution through which the ruling class is culturally legitimized.

The *regimen morum* did not discern between private and public matters, and thus extended into the Romans’ bedrooms. McGinn discusses how the consuls imposed many “civic disabilities” on lower-status Romans like sex workers and pimps.⁴⁰ Pimps and sex workers would be refused the ability to hold office, to lead a public life, and the right to join the army for example.⁴¹ Flemming correctly assesses that “it was their general place within society, [and] their powers of personal action [...], that were regulated as much as, if not more than, their particular profession[s].”⁴²

There was no chance for pimps and sex workers to enter the higher orders of society. They were “thoroughly despised”, and never enjoyed positions of higher status. Because of this, they also could never influence legislation, which meant that their status quo as low rank citizens was maintained.⁴³ To be in a higher social position was equated with being of higher moral standing. Even as newer panels were introduced in the courts, anyone whose *mores* were considered questionable was refused the position.⁴⁴ As good *mores* were required of every soldier, the same

³⁷ Titus Livius and Frank Gardner Moore, *Livy: in fourteen volumes. 8: Books XXVIII - XXX*, Reprinted, The Loeb classical library 381 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002), sec. 4. 8. 2.; Alan E. Astin, “Regimen Morum,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 78 (November 1988): 14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/301448>.

³⁸ Astin, “Regimen Morum,” 14.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 34.

⁴⁰ McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome*, 28.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 23–40.

⁴² Rebecca Flemming, “Quae Corpore Quaestum Facit: The Sexual Economy of Female Prostitution in the Roman Empire,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 89 (November 1999): 50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/300733>.

⁴³ McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome*, 34.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 32.

rule applied to the army.⁴⁵ For freeborn people it was also illegal to marry anyone who had worked in the sex industry or had been convicted of adultery.⁴⁶

Pimps and sex workers often received the same legal disabilities as actors, gladiators, gladiatorial trainers, criers, auctioneers, ushers, referees, and funeral directors. Practitioners of these professions were also excluded from municipal magistracies and council membership.⁴⁷

I should mention that all these restrictions were relevant for male sex workers who were not slaves. Even though some women would achieve high social status, they were not allowed to vote or hold office. By definition, slaves could not be citizens, meaning that no matter what their profession was, none of them were ever able to reach a high social status.

Women were not seen as independent individuals. Following the lines of the culturally hegemonic *regimen morum*: women had zero social or legal authority over men, when married they were subject to their husbands and had no sexual rights regarding access to their own body. For the state it was most important that they “controlled the institution of marriage to safeguard property transfer.”⁴⁸ I would argue that it is for that exact reason that sex workers were considered of the lowest social rank. Female sex workers were considered a threat to traditional family dynamics. Furthermore, free female sex workers would not only be considered bait for married men, but as non-married women they flouted Roman values, social norms, and gender expectations.

Adultery

The *regimen morum* regarded the crime of adultery as a very serious one. According to Kehoe, adultery “was defined as sexual relationships outside of marriage with a married woman.”⁴⁹ Since the goal of the censorship was to maintain their ‘community of honor’, it was necessary to classify men in accordance with their respectability. Men were expected to divorce their wives if they discovered them in adultery. After the divorce the men were requested to bring up criminal charges against their former spouses. Failure to comply with these laws could result in the men being charged with adultery as well.⁵⁰ The law offered men a lawful defense in case these discoveries ended up in them murdering the wife’s lover:

⁴⁵ Ibid, 40.

⁴⁶ Dennis P. Kehoe, “Law and Social Formation in the Roman Empire,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*, ed. Michael Peachin (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 6.

⁴⁷ McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome*, 32–33.

⁴⁸ Nguyen, “Roman Rape,” 77–78.

⁴⁹ Kehoe, “Law and Social Formation in the Roman Empire,” 8.

⁵⁰ Bruce W. Frier and Thomas A. J. McGinn, *A Casebook on Roman Family Law*, Classical Resources Series / American Philological Association, no. 5 (Oxford [England] ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 28.

Hac lege cavetur, ut liceat viro deprehensum domi suae in adulterio uxoris occidere eum.

Translated: For it is provided by this statute that a husband is permitted to kill a man whom he catches in adultery with his wife in his own house.⁵¹

These killings were only allowed if the murdered men were of despised professions such as sex workers and actors. So even though male sex workers could technically not be charged for the crime of adultery, these laws did present possible dangerous situations for sex workers, as shown in the Augustinian legislation.⁵²

Tax

Where on the one hand, the state had much to say about the social status of pimps and prostitutes, on the other hand it barely intervened in the sex industry itself. Junior magistrates would loosely oversee the local brothels, but would mostly leave these businesses alone. After all, sex workers were registered and taxed, and were thus profitable for the state.⁵³

Caligula was the first emperor to successfully tax the sex industry. McGinn calculates that in Pompeii alone, the daily tax income would have been over 50 *sestertii*. Sex workers were taxed an average of two *assēs*, the average price for one sexual service. The monetary amount was dependent on how much money the sex workers asked for their services. In the case of sex worker slaves, their respective pimps would pay the tax for them.

“[Caligula] never missed a chance of securing loot: setting aside a suite of Palace rooms, he decorated them worthily, opened a brothel, stocked it with married women and free-born boys, and then sent his pages around the squares and public halls, inviting all men, of whatever age, to come and enjoy themselves. Those who appeared were lent money at interest, and clerks openly wrote down their names under the heading ‘Contributors to the Imperial Revenue’.”⁵⁴

Suetonius points to an interesting distinction between the state’s disdain for sex workers, and the emperor’s enthusiasm to make money off the sex industry. What it looks like is that the advancement of this anti-sex worker cultural hegemony is supposed to make it appear as though the state is protecting traditional Roman family values, whereas they cannot destroy the industry all together because of economic reasons.

⁵¹ Alan Watson, “Book Two,” in *The Digest of Justinian, Volume 1*, REV-Revised (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), sec. 48.5.25, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fhn70.12>.

⁵² Kehoe, “Law and Social Formation in the Roman Empire,” 9.

⁵³ McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World*, 9–10.

⁵⁴ Gaius Suetonius, Robert Graves, and Michael Grant, *The Twelve Caesars*, Revised ed, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth ; New York [etc.]: Penguin, 1979), 174–75.

Identifying Sex Workers

Hair

For women, head hair was a very decisive factor in women's physical attractiveness. Fashionable hairstyles as always depended on the period, but it was the effort in maintaining the hair that was seen as attractive. Hair was dyed, bleached, or powdered to avoid a natural look. Bartman explains that Romans believed that natural hairstyles "[suggested] a lack of civilization and social control — a state close to beasts and barbarians".⁵⁵ To groom was to express female cultus.

Having blonde hair was often equated with being a sex worker. Greek hair bleaching culture had already reached Rome, but once Caesar brought back over a hundred thousand slaves from Gaul the connection became culturally known.⁵⁶ Many of these new slaves were blonde as they came from areas like Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany. Because new slaves also meant new kinds of people in the sex trade, eventually blonde hair became associated with the profession.⁵⁷

For women, body, facial, and pubic hair was presumably depilated, as Roman statues of women never depict any of it.⁵⁸ Hair removal was done by plucking with pincers, clipping, shaving, rubbing with pumice, or the application of unguent or pitch. Of all body hair, women were most expected to have smooth legs.⁵⁹ Men did not have to deal with any of this.

Roman men were advised to avoid excessive attention to their hair, for they might have risked appearing effeminate. However, for male sex workers this was not the case. Williams explains how there "was a tendency to dichotomize the publicly acceptable objects of male desire not into females and males generally but specifically into women and boys."⁶⁰ What this meant was that male sex workers were required to look youthful as long as possible. The attractiveness of boys was conventionally thought to fade with the arrival of body hair and the beard, so dealers in slave-boys were advised to halt the growth of armpit hair and beard hair through the application of different ointments. The most important body hair however, was butt hair, which needed to be removed. Sex with men was considered impossible if the man had hairy buttocks.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Elizabeth Bartman, "Hair and the Artifice of Roman Female Adornment," *American Journal of Archaeology* 105, no. 1 (January 2001): 6, <https://doi.org/10.2307/507324>.

⁵⁶ Josiah Osgood, "The Pen and the Sword: Writing and Conquest in Caesar's Gaul," *Classical Antiquity* 28, no. 2 (October 1, 2009): 332, <https://doi.org/10.1525/CA.2009.28.2.328>.

⁵⁷ Victoria Sherrow, *Encyclopedia of Hair: A Cultural History* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2006), 148–49.

⁵⁸ Bartman, "Hair and the Artifice of Roman Female Adornment," 5.

⁵⁹ Ortha L. Wilner, "Roman Beauty Culture," *The Classical Journal* 27, no. 1 (October 1931): 27.

⁶⁰ Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity*, Ideologies of Desire (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 72.

⁶¹ Williams, 26.

Dress

For the sex industry it was beneficial to have culturally coded signifiers in female sex workers clothing, to indicate to clientele that these women were part of the profession. However, as Berg explains: “the Roman sartorial code was not a systematically maintained univocal order.”⁶² Appearance is complex and nuanced, but there were ways these identities were harmonized.

The dress of women working in *cauponae* and *popinae* was characterized mainly by the tunic which was worn in two different ways. The women with a more prestigious status in the brothels wore long-sleeved tunics with a belt.⁶³ Whereas tunics that were tucked up to the belt, freeing the legs, were the main “uniform” of barmaids. Wearing the tunic that way signalled work, activity and movement, and showing the legs also brought in an erotic element to the outfit.

Additionally, these maids could wear a *mitra*, which was a decorated headband that was worn as a turban. The *mitra* was considered an attribute of female sex workers in Classical Greece, which for Romans added a sense of luxurious exoticism. The *patagium* was another ornamental accessory that took the form of a decorative band on the upper border of a woman’s tunic. These appurtenances would serve as material clues that the women who wore them were sex workers.⁶⁴ Gold body chains were another example of these material clues.⁶⁵

No proper information can be found on the clothing male sex workers would wear. Roman literature would signify effeminate male lovers by describing their loose, colorful, feminine clothing.⁶⁶ Descriptions however, do not refer to the type of man that would be an attractive sex worker. As I have stated earlier, it was not effeminacy, but youthfulness that attracted men to male sex workers. Their dress could have been slightly effeminate, or maybe just easy to remove. Sadly, the sources fail to present this detail, so it will remain guesswork.

These historically and symbolically nuanced outfits created an image that customers would easily be able to understand. Looking at these men and women, it would become immediately clear that they were sex workers. We could see it as a standard uniform you see in many professions. It simply denotes who works in the *popinae*, and who would be available to provide sexual services.

A most important detail however, which so far I have left unmentioned, is that most of the time these dress codes were not relevant. This is in view of the fact that brothels often just had their sex workers walk around in the nude.⁶⁷

⁶² Ria Berg, “Dress, Identity, Cultural Memory,” in *Gender, Memory, and Identity in the Roman World*, ed. Jussi Rantala, Social Worlds of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 205.

⁶³ Berg, “Dress, Identity, Cultural Memory,” 214–22.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 206–14.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 222–30.

⁶⁶ Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 129.

⁶⁷ McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World*, 82.

Finally, there was the case of the toga. A *Lex Iulia* insisted that sex workers who were convicted of adultery were forced to wear one. The togas were yellow or bright saffron in color and unusual in the sense that togas were traditionally a formal male garment. Strong explains how the toga “was the Roman equivalent of the modern Western man’s business suit: [...] necessary for official occasions but uncomfortable and avoided under circumstances where casual attire was appropriate.”⁶⁸ Because togas are public ceremonial garments, the female sex worker was thus publically shown as an outsider. Strong argues that women wearing togas marked them as queer and outside conventional gender norms; directly opposite the conventionally gendered Roman society.⁶⁹ Togas represented the subversion of gender roles, if not the ambiguation of them.⁷⁰ It is unclear whether wearing a toga made these women merely gender-ambiguous, or if the practice removed these sex workers from the standard gender categories.

This type of cultural institution is another direct method for the ruling class to maintain their cultural hegemony. This *Lex Iulia* intended to publically humiliate these women.⁷¹ The elite had no reason to drive the sex industry underground as it would be more difficult to tax pimps and sex workers that way. Economically it was not necessary to force this law, nor was there real political reason for it. Even if it fits within the narrative of maintaining proper Roman *mores*, the outfit would not actually help improve those in any way. What it did achieve however is the further dehumanization of the female sex worker by stripping away their womanhood.

The Roman dramatist Plautus pokes fun at this aspect of Roman society in his play ‘*Menaechmi*’. Which is the story of a man who dislikes his wife and often visits Erotium, a prostitute who lives next door. He then proceeds to steal his wives mantle so that he can trade it with Erotium for sex. There is a mix-up between him and his twin brother, and eventually he gets kicked out of her house for not giving her enough presents.⁷²

“The harlot's coaxing in the meantime, while she's looking out what to plunder ... to *Erotium* for if you really loved him, by this his nose ought to have been off with your teething him.”⁷³

In this play, female sex workers are portrayed as cold and greedy women. You could put this character directly opposite the stereotypical caring virtues of the ideal Roman family mother. Plautus too feeds into the belief that sex workers are low rank

⁶⁸ Anise K. Strong, *Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 22.

⁶⁹ Strong, *Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World*, 22.

⁷⁰ Caroline Vout, “The Myth of the Toga: Understanding the History of Roman Dress,” *Greece & Rome* 43, no. 2 (1996): 215–16.

⁷¹ McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome*, 216–19.

⁷² Nicholas R. Jannazo, “Girls, Girls, Girls The Prostitute in Roman New Comedy and the *Pro Caelio*” (Undergraduate, Xavier University, 2016), 9.

⁷³ Titus Maccius Plautus, *Menaechmi*, ed. Nicholas Moseley and Mason Hammond (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674435605>.

women. Cultural hegemonies need to be culturally backed, so those are the types of stories that the state would promote.

The Epitaph of Allia Potestas

In this section I wish to take a look at a primary source: the epitaph of Allia Potestas. We know that the epitaph was written somewhere around the end of the third century BCE. It was written by a man named Aulus Allius to mark Allia Potestas' resting place as a freedwoman. The epitaph is about 50 lines and written mostly in hexameters.⁷⁴ I want to show a couple segments from this text and investigate whether this text reveals anything about upper-class relationships with sex workers.

Candida, luminibus pulchris, aurata capillis, et nitor in facie permansit eburneus illae, qualem mortalem nullam habuisse ferunt; pectore et in niveo brevis illi forma papillae. Quid crura? Atalantes status illi comicus ipse. Anxia non mansit, sed corpore pulchra benigno levia membra tulit; pilus illi quaesitus ubique.

Translated: "White-skinned, with beautiful eyes, golden-haired, and an ivory glow always shone from her face – no mortal, they say, ever possessed a face like it. The curve of her breasts was dainty across her snow-white bosom. What about her legs? Such is the appearance of Atalanta as a comic actress. In her anxiety she never stayed still, but beautiful, with her generous body, moved her smooth limbs, and she sought out every hair."⁷⁵

This is the given physical description of Allia Potestas. It contains several interesting elements. Firstly, her golden hair is mentioned. We know that blonde hair was commonly associated with sex workers, so in that regard she fits the bill. Her whiteness is also mentioned several times, specifically her skin, bosom and glow. Wilner describes how a Roman woman used white chalk to whiten her skin. The reasons for this are not very well explored, but having chalk white skin, for some Romans, seemed to be a feature of beauty culture.⁷⁶ Her legs are smooth, meaning that she removed her leg hairs, which as I discussed earlier Romans found appealing. Finally, she is compared to Atalanta, a reference to the mythical character Atalanta, iconic for revealing the actress' legs in the theatrical production.⁷⁷ Not only is this another erotic comment on her smooth legs, but it also compares her to the likes of an actress, who had a negative social reputation similar to the ones sex workers experienced.⁷⁸

Because the Latin is translated in different ways, I will bring attention to a differently translated section that I found interesting:

⁷⁴ Ella Bourne, "The Epitaph of Allia Potestas," *The Classical Weekly* 9, no. 15 (1916): 114, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4387223>.

⁷⁵ Bourne, "The Epitaph of Allia Potestas," 114–15; Anise K. Strong, *Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 215–18.

⁷⁶ Ortha L. Wilner, "Roman Beauty Culture," *The Classical Journal* 27, no. 1 (October 1931): 35.

⁷⁷ John Boardman, "Atalanta," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 10 (1983): 3, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4104327>; Strong, *Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World*, 56.

⁷⁸ Strong, *Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World*, 56.

Nosse fuit nullum studium, sibi se satis esse putabat, mansit et infamis, quia nil admiserat umquam. Haec duo dum uixit iuvenes ita rexit amantes, exemplo ut fierent similes Pyladisque et Orestae: una domus capiebat eos unusque et spiritus illis.

Translated: “She did not worry about her [toilettries], but she had a beautiful body and she kept her limbs smooth. Her hands were hard, and perhaps you will count that a fault; but nothing pleased her except what she had done herself with her own hands.”⁷⁹

Epitaphs are always written in memory of people, so they were not supposed to say anything negative. This translated passage however sounds like a well disguised complaint, kind of similar to a backhanded compliment. I’m going to infer that “she did not worry about her toilettries” meant that she was too poor to afford cosmetics. He did not want to make it a big problem however because “she had a beautiful body and she kept her limbs smooth”, meaning she was naturally quite attractive and shaved her legs. “Her hands were hard, and perhaps you will count that a fault” is another disguised comment about how her hands were too callous for his liking.

Feminist theories on sex work suggest that sex work is a unique form a manual labor. Whereas dockworkers technically also sell their bodies in exchange for money, that is incidental in relation to their job. In other words, lumberjacks get paid for the lumber they produce, not for their physical exertion. Sex work on the other hand, necessarily requires the body of the sex worker.⁸⁰ Aulus Allius seems to have been quite infatuated with Allia Potestas in a way that is irreplaceable. However, reading between the words on the epitaph, Allia’s body still remains nothing more than a commodity. We only know of her because she died, and all we truly get to know is that she looked good for a poor woman.

⁷⁹ Bourne, “The Epitaph of Allia Potestas,” 114–15.

⁸⁰ Elizabeth Bernstein, “What’s Wrong with Prostitution? What’s Right with Sex Work? Comparing Markets in Female Sexual Labor,” *Hastings Women’s L.J.* 10, no. 1 (January 1, 1999): 96.

The Problem of Pregnancy

Contraceptive Methods

The job of a sex worker was, and still is, risky. Particularly before the invention of proper contraceptive methods, pregnancy always posed a problem. Romans did understand basic reproductive biology, and thus figured out different methods and techniques to prevent pregnancy. Sources imply that sex workers successfully strove not to reproduce.⁸¹ And for this they used several contraceptive methods.

Romans had invented a type of “condom” or sheath, which was made from unborn lamb stomachs or goat bladder. It effectively prevented semen from entering the vagina, but it was a luxury only affordable by the very richest of society.⁸² The condom only became widely used and affordable as a birth control device after 1844, when the vulcanization of rubber was discovered.⁸³

Moreover, there were several contraceptive devices and medicines that, when inserted into the vagina, would kill or block sperm from entering the uterus. Blocking the uterus was often done with pads of soft wool, or honey.⁸⁴

Coitus interruptus, also known as withdrawal, was a simple and common way for Romans to prevent pregnancy.⁸⁵ However my sources seem to disagree on how widespread the technique was. Stark confidently notes that the method of withdrawal was frequently used. However, Riddle and other scholars seem to agree that “evidence in Roman literature for *coitus interruptus* is virtually nonexistent”.⁸⁶ According to Riddle’s sources, knowledge of the technique was mostly confined to the educated elite until the late 1700s, and if it were more popular earlier, it would have had a serious effect on birth rates. Riddle struggles with the fact that there is little to no literary evidence of withdrawal having been a popular method in ancient times, when many other aspects of Roman sexual behavior have been recorded.

Riddle’s arguments do seem dubious. If Romans did indeed have a good understanding of the biology of reproduction, I find it hard to believe that *coitus interruptus* would be a technique that only the elite knew about. Moreover, this could be a subject like bathhouses, which were so commonly understood, that nobody bothered to write any of it down. In particular, I would imagine that a subject such as withdrawal, which is an aspect of life that is very private and intimate, would not be described in people’s most personal diaries.

⁸¹ Walter Scheidel, “Quantifying the Sources of Slaves in the Early Roman Empire,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 87 (November 1997): 156–69.

⁸² Rodney Stark, “The Role of Women in Christian Growth,” in *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 121.

⁸³ John M. Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*, First paperback edition (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994), 5.

⁸⁴ Stark, “The Role of Women in Christian Growth,” 121.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 121.

⁸⁶ Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion*, 4.

If not by *coitus interruptus*, other intercourse variations, such as oral, anal, and of course homosexual intercourse were also effective birth control methods.⁸⁷

There are some surviving Roman erotic paintings of oral intercourse, but the practice seems to have been less common. Hygiene in particular might have been an important factor for this.

Other erotic Roman and Greek art that has been recovered often depict images of anal sex. Heterosexual anal intercourse could very well have been the most convenient and effective form of contraception.⁸⁸ This was made easier by the readily available olive oil that would prove to be an effective lubricant as chapter 138 from the *Satyricon* illustrates:

Profert Oenothea scorteum fascinum, quod ut oleo et minuto pipere atque urticae trito circumdedit semine, paulatim coepit inserere ano meo.

Translated: “Oenothea, drawing out a leathern prick, dipped it in a medley of oil, small pepper, and the bruised seed of nettles, and proceeded by degrees to direct its passage through my hinder parts.”⁸⁹

For sex workers, excessive sex would often lead to vaginal and anal injury,⁹⁰ and lubricant would prove to be crucial in mitigating the damage. Anal intercourse in particular is difficult if not impossible for many people to achieve without necessary lubrication. By extension, if it were not for olive oil, anal intercourse could not have been as popular as an alternative method of birth control.

Abortion, exposure, and infanticide

When preventive measures failed, Romans had figured out different ways to do away with the problem of children. This was sometimes dangerous, and must have often been traumatic for the women involved. Three different solutions were presented: abortion, infant exposure or abandonment, and infanticide. We will look at these measures individually to examine what sex workers must have been subjugated to, in order to continue their duties at the brothels.

I do want to preface this section by saying that I do not equate abortion to infanticide; these measures however do share the same goal of, after having failed to prevent pregnancy, not having to deal with the birth of a child, or the care of one thereafter.

Both the Greeks and Romans had figured out how to perform abortions and employed several different techniques. The huge downside of these operations however, was that they had a very high mortality rate. One way to kill the fetus, was

⁸⁷ Ibid, 5.

⁸⁸ Stark, “The Role of Women in Christian Growth,” 122.

⁸⁹ Petronius, Michael Heseltine, and Eric Herbert Warmington, *The Satyricon*, Reprinted with corrections, The Loeb classical library 15 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997), 369.

⁹⁰ Robert C Knapp, “Sex for Sale: Prostitutes,” in *Invisible Romans* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2013), para. 4.

to give the women less than fatal doses of poison in order to try and force a miscarriage. Poisons did turn out to be unpredictable, and not every woman had the same tolerance, so in a lot of instances the women died as well. Poisons were also inserted into the uterus, but they too often killed the women. When the fetus died, it was immediately necessary to mechanically remove it from the uterus, but most physicians did not know how to do so properly. Also, because soap had not been invented with all these procedures, bacteria would prove to be a menace, and cause infections, which could sometimes be deadly as well.⁹¹

So, Greco-Roman medical literature cautioned against the dangers of abortion,⁹² but then the question remains of how the amount of abortion in ancient Rome remained so high? There were several motives for women to have abortions performed. Reasons included: attempting to hide their illicit sexual activities from their husbands, being too poor to afford taking care of a child, or because they did not want to split up their inheritance.⁹³ Roman law allowed male heads of family the right to decide whether to abort, and the same of course counts for slaveholders. The majority of instances of abortions were actually decided by men.

For sex workers, who most of the time were slaves and so had no choice in the matter, abortions allowed the women to continue working as soon as possible. Yet, I also believe that pregnant sex workers would be forced to have sex until they could perform an abortion, which could be painful in some cases due to their pregnant bodies. According to Plautus “abortion was a likely action for a pregnant sex worker to take”.⁹⁴ It is possible that some pimps would rather let their workers sit through their pregnancy and then get rid of the child in another way, in order to avoid losing their personnel to an abortion gone wrong. Nevertheless, the very hazardous abortions were still very commonplace in the sex industry, even when, according to the church at the time, “contraception and prostitution formed a couple that could only engender death.”⁹⁵

In 1988, archeologists discovered a large collection of bones in an early Byzantine sewer beneath a bathhouse in Ashkelon. Expert identification showed that the narrow range of variation in bone length found, suggests that all the bones belonged to infants of a similar age. Furthermore, the length and iron oxide level of tooth buds found in Ashkelon correspond approximately to other archeological samples of newborns. Emergency measures like ones in catastrophes, epidemics, or massacres have been presented as an explanation. Based on the medical data however, infanticide seems to be the most convincing explanation.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Stark, “The Role of Women in Christian Growth,” 119.

⁹² Riddle, *Contraception and Abortion*, 7; Stark, “The Role of Women in Christian Growth,” 120.

⁹³ Stark, “The Role of Women in Christian Growth,” 120.

⁹⁴ Claudine Dauphin, “Brothels, Baths and Babes Prostitution in the Byzantine Holy Land,” *Classics Ireland* 3 (1996): 68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25528291>.

⁹⁵ Dauphin, “Brothels, Baths, and Babes Prostitution in the Byzantine Holy Land,” 67.

⁹⁶ Patricia Smith and Gila Kahila, “Identification of Infanticide in Archaeological Sites: A Case Study from the Late Roman–Early Byzantine Periods at Ashkelon, Israel,” *Journal of Archaeological Science* 19, no. 6 (November 1992): 673–74.

It is important to note that McGinn believes that “we have no satisfactory epigraphic evidence, no erotic art, and no remains of rooms or beds that might have been used for sex to suggest the presence of prostitution” at the site in Ashkelon.⁹⁷ I am not suggesting that these were babies were necessarily the children of sex workers, but I am suggesting that infanticide of the type seen in the Ashkelon sewer site presents another alternative way in which sex workers could rid themselves off their offspring.

Infanticide played a main role in limiting the size of Greek and Roman societies. In all household cases, the father had the authority to decide whether newborn babies were permitted to live. Infanticide in these cases was not a crime. Female babies were more often killed than male ones. Mothers were frequently not consulted about this decision. Offspring from concubines and slaves were exterminated in almost all cases.⁹⁸ Since most sex workers were slaves, if their offspring was not killed by means of abortion, they would most likely be killed after their births.

The most cyclical solution to the problem seems to have been to commit the newborn to exposure. Exposure was not exactly the same as abandonment, and was also not a form of infanticide, even though the child would often die after being exposed. Grubbs defines exposure as “the rejection of a neonate in the first week of life, before it has been accepted into the family and undergone rituals of purification and naming”.⁹⁹

I call this solution cyclical, because the most likely fate of surviving *expositi* was to end up in slavery, often sex slavery.¹⁰⁰ Christians would later find this particularly problematic, as those children committed to exposure, who were almost destined to end up as sex workers, could end up accidentally having incestuous sex with their parents.¹⁰¹

To quickly summarize what has been discussed: most sex workers were slaves, and thus had no say about the course of action taken when they became pregnant. We know pregnancies were quite rare in the sex industry, as many different contraceptive techniques were effectively used. In the case of pregnancy, most pimps would force their sex workers to have abortions, even though they often killed the women too. If pimps did not want to take the risk of losing their workers, exposure or the more extreme infanticide were the ultimate solution to the problem.

⁹⁷ McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World*, 209.

⁹⁸ W. L. Langer, “Further Notes On the History of Infanticide,” *History of Childhood Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1974): 129.

⁹⁹ Judith Evans Grubbs, *Infant Exposure and Infanticide* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 1, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199781546.013.004>.

¹⁰⁰ Dauphin, “Brothels, Baths and Babes Prostitution in the Byzantine Holy Land,” 61.

¹⁰¹ Grubbs, *Infant Exposure and Infanticide*, 5–6.

Conclusion

In this paper I have shown many of the poor living and working conditions that Roman sex workers had to endure. Now I'll attempt to answer in what ways the Roman upper-class hegemony played a role in making the conditions so strenuous.

First, we have to understand two things about the average sex worker. Most of them were slaves, and most of them were women. These are key issues for this research because: how does one differentiate between three forms of discrimination at once? It is true that sex workers were not allowed to hold office by law, but most of the sex workers already could not do so due to them being a woman or a slave. How do you make a distinction between sexual violence against women, and sexual violence against female sex workers? In either case women get hurt. This is where intersectionality is a natural solution. All marginalised groups share a Venn diagram of hurt. Violence against female sex workers is per definition also violence against women. What this means is that we need to consider the cultural hegemony for sex workers, and women, and slaves.

Secondly, I did find some concrete examples of cultural hegemony playing a negative role for male and female sex worker slaves. The *regimen morum* is a direct perfect example of an institution of Cultural Hegemony. It is a state function that controls Roman values, protects the aristocracy, and hurts the lower classes with laws that bar them from public political engagement.

Another example is the *Lex Iulia* that declared that female adulterers had to wear a toga, rendering them both public and foreign. Humiliating them by stripping away their womanhood for a genderqueer alternative.

The final example I will mention here is the narrative literature from Plautus that portrays female sex workers as greedy and heartless; there to seduce men away from their traditional Roman families and to lead them into adultery.

So yes, the upper-class cultural hegemony definitely had an impact on the lives and working conditions of subaltern sex workers of Rome. It is not clear to what extent, since the barriers between woman, worker, and slave have gotten intertwined.

For future research I would advise taking a look at the intersectional distinctions between these three. Can they be separated or are they too interconnected in Roman society as all three are oppressed groups in the state? But also, can we speak of cultural hegemony in Rome, or are there better Marxist class distinctions for this? I cannot wait to read more about sex work, Marxism and feminism. It is too valuable not to study.

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