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### Priestesses and Power: The Potency and Privilege of Prostitution

#### Reflective Essay

Originally, I had a difficult time deciding a topic that would fit within the 12 page range. The topic had to relate in some way to women and power in the Ancient Near East, and I was clueless as to where to start. However, my professor Kara Cooney helped guide me in the right direction, encouraging me to always question the “how” and “why” behind a tradition, to research a topic which interests, surprises, and puzzles me all at once, and to try to “crack the system” by unearthing exactly what it is about the culture and ideology which shaped the custom in the particular region during the ancient times. This helped me narrow my interest down to veiling and sacred prostitution in the Levant, since both topics were only briefly mentioned in class, and both intrigued me: why were respectable women forced to wear veils in public, while lowly prostitutes forbidden to do so? How is prostitution considered to be “sacred” in ancient Mesopotamia?

Then, as I started researching my topic, I stumbled upon the UCLA “Road to Research Guide” online, which greatly helped me perform efficient keyword searches. The section on narrowing down the paper topic was informative as well, which I able to refer back to later on. I realized that I must first have a basic understanding veiling and sacred prostitution in the context of ancient Mesopotamia, so I searched for articles relevant to my topic using a keyword search. A number of these scholarly articles later became my secondary sources.

However, the paper required a minimum of four primary sources, and I found that I had no idea how to find primary sources or what primary sources to use. I looked through the course reserves on the library website first, and realized that none of the books were directly related to my topic. I then used the research guide compiled for Ancient Near East and Egypt on the library website as a starting point to find out more about my topic and narrow down the scope of my paper. The online guide was very extensive, covering everything from maps to images to text, but I still had trouble finding sources relevant to my topic. I decided it was time to ask for help in person. I first went to my TA Jody, and she recommended taking a look at The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, an online database of Sumerian myth texts and other writings, which I used in my paper. However, I needed more primary sources, so I made an appointment the library specialist David Hirsch, since he was the librarian specializing in the Ancient Near East and Egypt area. David was very helpful, and he suggested using ancient law codes pertaining to gender and sexuality as primary sources. Previously, I had never thought that I

could use legal codes, since they seemed to be unrelated to veiling or sacred prostitution, which pertain more to tradition and culture instead of the legal system in my mind. In addition to the wonderful tip, David even compiled a bibliographical list of sources I could start off with. Since it was only the third week of the quarter (and because David was relatively not as busy), David was kind enough to help me hunt for the specific books on the stacks in the Young Research Library, and went through the checkout process with me, after I admitted that I had not yet checked out books at UCLA.

Later, I browsed through the library catalog on my own, and found several other print sources (mostly Hammurabi, Babylonian, Eshnunna Law Codes), and placed holds on the books which weren't available at that time. I used the online database through the library website (mostly JSTOR: Complete Archive and Current Scholarship Collection) to find other scholarly articles written about the subject. It was when I started writing that I realized I had to narrow my topic down and that it would be impossible to cover both veiling and sacred prostitution in one paper. So I decided to write about the topic I was less familiar with, which was sacred prostitution. Everything else were just the logistics of writing and editing.

## 1. Introduction

Sacred prostitution occurred for centuries in ancient Mesopotamia, from the Neolithic Age to the Neo-Babylonian Era, arising from the ritualistic worship of the gods. The ancient Mesopotamians thought the gods and goddesses physically dwelled in the temples, thus the existence of a temple staff was established to care for the deities. In particular, temple women and priestesses offered their sexual services to the king in sacred marriage rites to honor the goddess of fertility. The emphasis of ideology in both the political sphere and daily life allowed the performance of cultic sexual rites by women to emerge and persist for several centuries as an annual tradition. Although priestesses involved in sacred prostitution seem to have limited sexual power and freedom, they actually had more ideological, sexual, legal, and economic power than women who were restricted to the domestic realm.

## 2. Ideological Power

Sacred prostitution in ancient Mesopotamia explicitly refers to the cultic sexual service offered by women in the sacred temples as a part of ritualistic practice to honor the deities. Priestesses celebrate the sexual power of fertility by representing the goddess Inana in consummating the sacred marriage with the King, an act mythically significant for the fertility of the land and the well-being of the community. This differs from the modern-day definition of prostitution, which refers to the act of offering the body to indiscriminate lewdness for hire (Westenholz 261). Thus, there is a fundamental difference between sacred prostitution and commercial prostitution, which may occur near sacred ground, since well-known temples served as centers for a wide range of commercial activities (Lerner 244). Temple women and priestesses involved in the sacred prostitution practice are not offering up their sexual services to every man

for an explicit amount of money; rather, they are performing a specific function of honoring the gods through their sexual services with the local rulers without formal payment. In fact, the general public “regarded the king and the priestess with reverence, and honored them for performing this ‘sacred’ service” (Lerner 240). With such glorified reputations, it is not surprising that priestesses would possess a great amount of ideological power.

Various religious texts, letters, and proverbs imply that priestesses participating in sacred marriage rituals had more ideological influence than women limited to running the household. Although the ancient Sumerian text “A šir-namursağa to Ninsiana for Iddin-Dagan” is a work of mythology, the myth most likely reflected the actual ritual which took place in the temple space, depicting the ideological power temple women receive through their fulfillment of sacred prostitution rites. Inana, the Sumerian goddess of sexual power and fertility, is praised amidst the description of sacred marriage ritual as “the divine king stays there with her. At the New Year, on the day of the rites, in order for her to determine the fate of all the countries, in order for the life of all the countries to be attended to” (“A šir-namursağa to Ninsiana”173-176). The ritual marriage of the goddess Inana with the god Dagan is represented by the sexual rites performed by temple women. In the above excerpt, the feminine pronoun refers to the priestess, suggesting that as she is taking on the role of the goddess Inana for the night, she possesses the goddess’s mythical powers as well. Her sexual service to the king has significant importance since she is responsible for the fate and future of the king’s land. The text implies that the quality of the priestess’s performance or even her willingness to perform the sexual rite impacts the prosperity of the country, the fertility of the land, and the well-being of the people.

Furthermore, the role an ancient Mesopotamian priestess plays and the duty with which she is entrusted—as the goddess Inana during the ritual—grants her the ability to extend her

ideological power and influence. Under her authority, “the faithful servants can be inspected...the divine powers can be perfected, a bed is set up for my lady. Esparto grass is purified with cedar perfume and arranged on that bed for my lady” (“A šir-namursağa to Ninsiana” 177-180). Through her ideological power, the priestess has the necessary authority and status needed to acquire “faithful servants” who follow her orders and tend to her materialistic needs. Thus, the priestess can obtain economic power, which provides her with the means to enjoy the luxury of a prepared bed swathed in soft grass and rich perfume. In this context, the sexual practice of the priestess is not perceived to be disgraceful but rather respectful, for the priestess is considered to be a “lady” as in the lady Inana, a proper woman of high social position.

Throughout the ritual in the text, the priestess is in an exalted position. After performing the sexual rites, “she shines like daylight on the great throne dais, the throne at one side, and makes the king position himself next to her like the sun” (“A šir-namursağa to Ninsiana” 199-202). The text suggests that the priestess is one with the goddess Inana, the bridge between the human and divine realms as a conduit for divine power. Her ideological power makes her presence so powerful, allowing her to position and order the king. The fact that the priestess is “on great throne dais” may symbolize possible political influence: the priestess who is metaphorically sitting on the throne is the central focus instead of the king, implying that her ideological status is as great if not greater than the ruler of the land. Being in close contact with the king under the guise of a goddess, the priestess may be in a position to guide the king’s decisions.

Additionally, excerpts from the ancient Sumerian myth “Inana and Enki” portray the ideological power priestesses occupy, as a divine right granted by the goddess Inana:

“Inana, you have brought with you the office of *en* priest, you have brought with you the office of *lagar* priest, you have brought with you divinity, you have brought with you the

great and good crown, you have brought with you the royal throne. You have brought with you the office of *egir-zid* priestess, you have brought with you the office of *nin-diġir* priestess” (“Inana and Enki” 1.3.1-5, 1.3.11-15).

As the superiority and capabilities of the goddess Inana is affirmed above, likewise, the power of priestesses playing the role of the goddess during their sexual duties are confirmed in the cataloguing of religious offices. The parallel listing of both the priest and priestess titles indicate relative equality in duty and status between the men and women serving in a temple setting. The priestess is not only a temple role but also a political office, as shown through the lists of titles, implying that the priestesses have the power to administer, delegate, and manage everyday affairs in the temple, which is ensuring the stable political rule of the king under his “great and good crown.” The text establishes the relationship between the ideological and political power inherent in the role of the priestess, connected to both the divinity and the throne (Jones 292).

In addition, an Akkadian letter, “The Advice of an Akkadian Father to His Son,” presents further evidence of the ideological power temple women involved in sacred prostitution possess.

In the letter, the father warns his son:

“Do not marry a prostitute, whose husbands are legion, an Ishtar-woman who is dedicated to a god, a *kulmashitu*-woman... When you have trouble, she will not support you, when you have a dispute she will be a mocker. There is no reverence or submissiveness in her. Even if she is powerful in the household, get rid of her, for she pricks up her ears for the footsteps of another.” (“Advice of an Akkadian Father”).

The father’s wary suspicion and harsh criticism of temple women suggest that many male Akkadians view priestesses as threats and potential hindrances in the domestic sphere because they have too much ideological power. The slandering portrayal of the priestess may be derived in part due to the father’s fear of the priestess’s actions resulting from her authority. Thus, a wise son in search of the proper wife is advised to “get rid of” the temple woman “even if she is powerful in the household,” since she would be difficult to control, lacking submissive meekness

and complete obedience to the male head of the family. The text implies that since most temple women are strong and assertive, they would not be supportive wives or mothers, reinforcing the significant amount of ideological power, influence and status they have.

In contrast, women in ancient Mesopotamia who were not priestesses participating in sacred temple rites had far less ideological power. Although women fulfilled religious roles by undertaking special vows, composing prayers as poets, singing and dancing at festivals and funerals, these ideological responsibilities did not translate into economic, sexual, or political authority. Their positions both in public and at home were subordinate to males, especially to the patriarchal head of the family—the father, brother, or the husband. Also, the consumption of certain sacrificial meals was confined to male priests; only women from priestly families could share sacral foods, solely due to their status as members of a priestly household, not due to their own power derived from ideological sources (Gruber 126-7). These non-priestess women all had limited influence, restricted even in domestic matters of food and sustenance, and any benefits they received were in direct connection with a male figure.

One proverb from Ki-en-gir in Sumer during 2000 BCE depicts the housewife and mother's lack of ideological power. As proverb ten relates: "Since my wife is at the outdoor shrine, and furthermore since my mother is at the river, I shall die of hunger, he says" (Ancient History Sourcebook 10). Since the wife is at the "outdoor shrine," the "river" probably refers to a place for prayer near running water where the mother prays in accordance with the need for ritual purity (Van der Toorn 194). The proverb suggests that women of the household are so extraneously pious and devoted that they neglect the necessary needs of the patriarchal figure to eat and drink. This further suggests that even though the worshipping of the deities plays a large role in everyday Mesopotamian society, women's responsibilities still lie in the domestic sphere



despite the numerous visits to the temples. No matter how often wives and mothers pray at the outdoor shrines and rivers, their connection to the gods are still not as strong as those of priestesses and temple women, for they do not have an ideological source of power which will render them superior. These women must still return home to cook meals, tend to their husbands or fathers, and remain submissive to the man's wishes. Overall, the myth texts suggest that the religious, political, and economic influence priestesses have in the temple space is comparable to the ideological power Inana possesses as a goddess, which is significantly greater than that of ordinary women, who must tend to domestic matters and serve the patriarchal figure of the household.

### 3. Legal and Economic Power

Moreover, legal and economic power accompanies the ideological power priestesses possess. Possibly, because the temple women involved in sacred sexual rites are often unmarried or prohibited to have children, they are able to retain more legal and economic rights. The unmarried status of the priestesses conveys that there is no need for the patriarchy to control the descent system and ensure proper inheritance, since priestesses are most likely without children or heirs. Also, because priestesses are performing a specialized duty for the wealth and fertility of the land, it is reasonable for them to have special privileges.

During the first dynasty of Babylon, the *naditum* "left fallow" priestesses of the Gods Shamash and Marduk were forbidden to bear children. However, *naditum* priestesses brought rich dowries upon entering the temple, which they could use as capital for business transactions and loans, able to sell their own land, slaves, and houses (Lerner 241). Even though the *naditum* temple women could not bear children themselves, they could still adopt children to care for them in their old age. They can also will their property to female heirs who were most likely

female family members serving as priestesses. According to Law 40 in the Code of Hammurabi, “a temple-woman, a merchant and a tenant with special duties may exchange their field, their orchard or their house for silver” (Richardson 55). Thus, the law shows that the temple women exist as a special, unique class of females who have the ability to own, trade, and sell their private property for money, the same powers a male is able to possess in a society where private property of all sorts is closely monitored and protected. Priestesses can support themselves as economic independents unlike common ancient Mesopotamian women.

Alongside the economic power and ability to own capital, priestesses are offered protection under the law. As stated in Law 127 of the Code of Hammurabi, “If a man has pointed his finger at a priestess but does not prove her guilty, they shall beat that man in front of the judges. In addition they may half-shave his hair” (Richardson 81). The fact that priestesses are singled out and explicitly named in the law implies that they are important and powerful enough to be specifically recognized. As women who serve the king and the gods in the annual fertility rites, priestesses cannot be disrespected or unjustly accused without due cause in their ideological superiority. The consequences for slandering a priestess are not fatal but still harsh, even if the accuser is male.

Additionally, temple women have more legal power in terms of separation and divorce as well. According Law 137 in the Code of Hammurabi,

“If a man who has fixed his ideas on leaving a priestess who has born him sons, or a temple-woman who provided him with sons, they shall give back her dowry to that woman...After she has brought up her sons they shall give her the same share as one son from whatever was given to her for her sons. She will choose a husband as she likes” (Richardson 85).

Although it is more uncommon for priestesses to marry, when they do, they are able to retain their dowry in the case of a divorce, and freely choose their next husband. Despite the fact that

priestesses must produce male heirs when married in order to inherit property, they still have a considerable amount of rights. The freedom to choose her next spouse is a particularly significant amount of legal power, especially in the times of ancient Mesopotamia, when women were treated as private property.

In comparison, daughters and wives with no affiliation with the temples and sacred sexual rites possess limited legal and economic power in areas of marriage, separation and divorce, and inheritance rights. These women are not deemed worthy to have economic and legal independence without male dominance and influence, unlike temple women and priestesses, as shown in an “Old Assyrian Marriage Contract” from the 19<sup>th</sup> century BCE:

“Laqipum has married Hatala, daughter of Enishsru. In the country Laqipum may not marry another woman—but in the city he may marry a hierodule “free citizen”. If within two years she does not provide him with offspring, she herself will purchase a slave woman, and later on, after she will have produced a child by him, he may then dispose of her by sale wheresoever he pleases. Should Laqipum choose to divorce her, he must pay her five minas of silver and should Hatala choose to divorce him, she must pay him five minas of silver. Witnesses: Masa, Ashuriskikal, Talia, Shupianika” (“Old Assyrian Marriage Contract” 1-25).

Ordinary women cannot choose whom to marry, unlike priestesses who are able to choose their preferred partner. Hatala has no official title of her own, and is mainly recognized as Laqipum’s husband and Enishsru’s daughter, valued only for her ability to produce children who can inherit. If she is unable to procreate, Hatala must invite another rival woman into her household whether she is willing or not, to please her husband and ensure the continuance of a future generation. Women are commoditized as reproductive machines, and the marriage and divorce proceedings are treated as economic transactions, often tailored to the benefit of the men. While Laqipum could find another wife immediately and produce offspring, Hatala would still remain subordinate as a daughter in her father’s household or to her next husband as a wife.

Likewise, Law 141 in the Code of Hammurabi outlines the procedures for separation and divorce between a wife who is not a priestess and her husband, portraying the minimal amount of legal power the wife has:

“If the wife of a man who has been living in the man’s house has made a plan to go away, and has dealt deviously, dissipated her household and belittled her husband, they shall prove her guilty. If her husband has said he will leave her, he shall leave her. Nothing at all shall be given her for her journey or her divorce claim” (Richardson 85).

The excerpt implies that the model wife is expected to remain obedient and faithful to her husband by not stepping outside her intended range of mobility within the domestic sphere. According to Richardson, “deviously” refers to the wife misappropriating household property, which implies that women have no power to claim any of the household property as their own, and that taking any items outside the home in an attempt to run away would be regarded as a capital crime (85). The possibility that a wife would even want to run away from her home is problematic, suggesting that because the wife has so little power and freedom, she would be willing to escape and live without a source of income, support, or security. Even if her husband is the root cause for the wife’s wish to depart, the husband is the one who has the right to divorce her. Being unable to own or inherit property, the wife is not allowed a share of any household possessions.

In addition, the Code of Hammurabi explains the right of inheritance married women have in Law 150, which is significantly less compared to the inheritance rights of the priestesses.

“If a man has bequeathed to his wife a field, an orchard, a house, or other property, he shall leave an official document in her possession. After the death of her husband her sons shall not dispute with her. The mother shall give her inheritance to her beloved son. She shall not give it to a stranger” (Richardson 89).

As presented in this law, although women are able to inherit property, it is only in the most dire of cases when the husband is about to die. The husband must be willing to legally bequeath the

property to his wife; his wife has limited influence on the matter. Even after the woman comes into possession of her deceased husband's property, she is not allowed to keep it for herself, nor does she have the freedom or right to give the property to whomever she wishes. She must pass down the bequeathed inheritance to one of her sons. Consequently, temple women possessed the legal and economic power to independently control their finances and participate in economic transactions under Mesopotamian law, while non-temple affiliated wives, mothers, and daughters were denied the rights to own property since they were treated as commodities themselves.

#### 4. Sexual Power

As well as ideological, economic, and legal power, priestesses were allowed a substantial amount of sexual power, given the promiscuous nature of the goddess roles they played in the sacred marriage rituals. A segment in the "Inana and Enki" myth describes quite explicitly what transpires:

"You have brought with you the standard, you have brought with you the quiver, you have brought with you sexual intercourse, you have brought with you kissing, you have brought with you prostitution" ("Inana and Enki" 1.3.35-40).

Contrary to the strict monitoring of sexuality, the excerpt above rejoices in the al power of temple women instead, suggesting that priestesses can take advantage of their feminine, seductive wiles amidst the sexual rites, with no damages made to their reputations as women. They do not have to fear crossing the threshold between what is societally considered acceptable and intolerable like most other women. Because the priestesses were functioning outside the realm of normal society and were often unmarried and without children, there was no need to control their sexuality to ensure the legitimacy of the descendant line. Thus, priestesses acting as the goddess Inana were allowed to express and flaunt their sexuality while enjoying the honor and status of their roles.

Furthermore, temple women are also shown to have sexual power in the “A šir-namursağa to Ninsiana for Iddin-Dagan:”

“The king goes to her holy thighs with head held high, he goes to the thighs of Inana with head held high. Ama-ucumgalana lies down beside her and caresses her holy thighs. After the lady has made him rejoice with her holy thighs on the bed, after holy Inana has made him rejoice with her holy thighs on the bed” (“A šir-namursağa to Ninsiana” 187-194).

Although the myth text refers to the goddess’ interaction with the king, Inana’s actions are represented by the sexual rites acted by actual priestesses in Mesopotamian temple spaces. The repetition of the priestess’s “holy thighs” associates her ideological power with her sexual attractiveness. She is worthy of being worshipped, since the king goes to her with “head held high,” suggesting that the king is revering and honoring her presence, possibly looking up at her with royal respect. Even without engaging in intended seduction with suggestive words or explicit gestures, the priestess can bring the king down to lie beside her just with her holy thighs.

However, the sexuality of Mesopotamian daughters, wives, and mothers are closely monitored, and the virtues of chastity and virginity are valued before marriage. The agricultural patriarchy which values private property in Mesopotamia invites the necessity of male guardianship to ensure the legitimacy of the family line through proper inheritance from father to son. Daughters and wives are treated as private property themselves, commodities that should be kept out of sight, especially if they have no outside source of power like priestesses and temple women. As shown in the “Code of the Assura,” dated 1750 BCE, “If the wives of a man, or the daughters of a man go out into the street, their heads are to be veiled” (“Code of the Assura” 16). This law depicts how the sexual freedom is strictly limited and prohibited from public view. As coveted “property” of the male figure of the family, the wife and daughter are not permitted to have the slightest chance to show off their sexuality or individuality. These women are not

allowed to walk in plain view without a physical barrier, let alone use their sexual powers to seduce or gain means of influence and authority.

Accordingly, monogamy controls the descent system. Under the system of patriliney, a man obtains sexual monopoly over his wife; adultery is strictly prohibited and punished with extreme consequences, as shown in the “Code of the Nesilim,” dated 1650-1500 BCE:

“If a man rape a woman in the mountain, it is the man’s wrong, he shall die. But if he rape her in the house, it is the woman’s fault, the woman shall die. If the husband find them and then kill them, there is no punishing the husband” (“Code of the Nesilim” 197).

Interestingly, the legal code makes a distinction between rape inside and outside the house, presumably on the assumption that if the woman is raped inside the house, she must have invited the male in herself. This excerpt presents the severity of punishment bestowed upon those women who do not conform to the accepted regulation of their chastity and sexuality. While a man can have multiple wives—especially if his first wife is barren—the woman is expected to remain faithful to her husband. She is the one to blame if she fails to do so. Either she purposely commits adultery as the wily seductresses, or she is too weak-willed to protect her virtue. Thus, the myth texts emphasize how priestesses are given more sexual freedom and independence because they are functioning outside the realm of general society, while the Mesopotamian laws reiterate how women in the domestic sphere lack the power to choose their sexual partners or express their sexuality.

## 5. Conclusion

Contrary to modern-day assumptions, priestesses performing sacred prostitution duties within the temple retain much more ideological, sexual, legal, and economic power compared to women working outside the domestic sphere. Priestesses were able to gain such power by utilizing their position and duties to obtain other sources of power outside the temple space. As a

result, priestesses were able to hold office, acquire wealth, and experience a greater amount of sexual freedom, unlike common women. The relevance of finding an independent source of influence through one's abilities and skills still applies to women today, even if ideology is no longer the basis of modern society. Modern-day women who are functioning outside the normal realm of social expectations still influence society through their unique roles, just like the ancient Mesopotamian temple women did generations ago.



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