

## The Representation of Prostitutes in Ancient Greek Vase-painting

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### Abstract

Ancient Greeks in the Classical Period (ca. 480-323 BCE) did not shy away from eroticism in their production of artwork. Yet elite Greek women were never shown in sexual situations in art, because blatant sexual expression was reserved only for men and the objects of their lust, such as prostitutes. Surviving examples of classical vase-painting from Athens blatantly and subtly represent prostitution. In the past, scholars have used this art predominantly to theorize about male societal values and their politics. Prostitution in antiquity is often examined in the context of male relations, not as a study of women. This perpetuates the societal failure to humanize sex workers, interpreting them as serving only a single, specific role in which males exploit them. Focusing on a kylix by the Pedieus Painter (ca. 475 BCE) and an Athenian red-figure cup by the Euaion Painter (ca. 425 BCE), this paper compares and contrasts prostitutes in Greek art to those in real Greek life, employs gender theory, and explores ingrained patriarchal systems that are still relevant to modern feminism. The goal is not only to investigate what the imagery of prostitution informs about ancient Greek society, but also to give a perspective on the harsh realities that were trivialized in erotic art created for male enjoyment during the festivities of the *symposium*. Ancient Greek prostitution and the art associated with it are arguably about men and for men. Women are forced into these positions to satisfy the male citizen's "democratic right" to access brothels but they are then overlooked by society.

**Keywords:** Ancient Athens, Prostitution, Vase-painting

### 1. Prostitution in Ancient Athens: *Hetairai* and *Pornai*

Ancient Greeks in the Classical Period (ca. 480 - 323 BCE) did not shy away from eroticism in their production of artwork. In an assessment of Athenian society and the iconography used in their vase-painting, it becomes clear that virtuous Athenian maidens and wives of elite citizens are never the subjects of sexual scenarios in art. The spectacle of sexual expression was reserved only for men and the commoditized objects of their lust, such as prostitutes. Many of these scenes depict intercourse with women at banquets, or *symposia*; historically the only females who participated in these events were prostitutes. The iconography associated with the women in these paintings, like short, messy hair and headscarves, also denotes the low status of these women.<sup>1</sup> The status of a woman with cropped hair is remarked upon in Euripides' play, *Electra* (ca. 410 BCE). The character Orestes notices the enslaved young woman, Electra, and says:

But now that I see this maidservant, bearing a weight of water on her shorn head, let us sit down, and inquire of this slave girl. (Eur. El. 110)<sup>2</sup>

A variety of ancient vase-paintings from Athens clearly and also subtly represent scenes of men employing female prostitutes. This paper will discuss what these scenes conveyed to the contemporaneous viewers and what they reveal

about the ancient society. By examining the sex trade of ancient Greece we are given insight into their economy and culture as well as their attitudes towards gender and sex. I contribute a different perspective on ancient Greek society regarding sex and prostitutes by analyzing a variety of representations of the sex trade that were made for male indulgence. Art depicting sex work communicates the ancient Greek demand for the representation and enactment of male authority by means of demeaning and dominating women. It is important, though, to clearly distinguish between the roles of the prostitutes in art as opposed to their actual situations. Therefore, my research focuses on a conversation between the reality lived by sex workers of ancient Athens with the different scenarios painters then chose to celebrate in art. Artistic renderings of prostitution made for male consumption do not give factual evidence, but instead offer visual insight into male perceptions of power relations in sexuality and gender. Before proceeding with art historical research, the role of prostitution in ancient Greek history as a whole must first be understood.

In ancient Greece, there were two main types of prostitute: the *hetaira* and the *porne*. *Hetaira* translates in English as “female companion.” These women played more the role of a courtesan and entertainer to the men during wine drinking parties called *symposia*. Unlike a brothel prostitute, *hetairai* were allowed the right to eventually deny sex to their clients without consequence, for sex was not necessarily part of the service.<sup>3</sup> They were not enslaved but served more as private escorts and they did not work in brothels. These women, despite being lower class, were often educated and offered other skills besides sexual services.<sup>4</sup> This heightened the group in the hierarchy of sex work and distinguished them as showgirls and escorts rather than just street prostitutes. The other type of prostitute in ancient Greece was the *porne*, a term referring specifically to an enslaved brothel maid. *Pornai* lived and worked in brothels and would solicit clients on the streets. *Pornai* were not meant to enjoy foreplay or personal pleasure and they had no control in their sexual encounters.<sup>5</sup> Due to ingrained Western demoralization of sex work, prostitutes have been less explored in academia. *Pornai*, like any ancient Greek slaves, have retained their negative reputation as socially subordinate and thus did not merit much historical study.<sup>6</sup> I also believe that these women’s existence is often dehumanized and reduced to a mere economic cog of ancient Athens.

Prostitution was flourishing in ancient Greece as early as the Archaic Period, eventually becoming ubiquitous in classical Athens.<sup>7</sup> Men had the option of hiring a *hetaira* as an escort or quickly stopping by a brothel so intimate company certainly was not hard to find in the ancient world. But Andrew Stewart insists the classification of female sex workers was a male construct that used “opposite ways of describing the same phenomenon, [when] in reality the boundary between them [*hetairai* and *pornai*] was fuzzy indeed.”<sup>8</sup> The actual distinction between *hetairai* and *pornai* in reality is debated among scholars, which is largely due to “inconsistency on part of ancient writers.”<sup>9</sup> James Davidson states that though there are historical references to both types of prostitute, the lived distinction between them is highly debated because they were all ultimately considered lowly adulterers. The hierarchy in art and literature is likely more dramatized than in reality. Perhaps creating labels and a conceptual hierarchy aided men in rationalizing their commodification of women.

Prostitution in Athens maintained a very crucial but sometimes contradictory role. The institution of brothels was encouraged and subsidized by the government.<sup>10</sup> Male sexual exploration and domination were constructed to be crucial rights of an Athenian citizen. By using prostitutes, all men could sate their desires while preserving the sacred sexual integrity of Athenian maidens. Sex workers were seen as an “easy outlet for lusts that might otherwise become adultery.”<sup>11</sup> Because female chastity was so highly guarded, prostitution was a safer means of expressing sexuality than engaging in illicit affairs with wholesome Athenian women.

Sarah Pomeroy explores how males outnumbered females in Athens, leaving many men single with no other option for sexual experience besides paying a prostitute. Pomeroy, citing birth rates from J. Lawrence Angel’s *Ecology and Population*, explains that the development of social constructs in the Classical Period contributed to quite a problematic disproportion in gender ratios, especially in the Hellenistic Period. Pomeroy states that the unnatural ratio of Athenian bachelors to maidens can be attributed to sex-selective infanticide/infant abandonment. Due to various social expectations such as the requirement of a dowry, female babies were often considered undesirable and would be abandoned. Deserted infant girls that had been rescued were given the legal status of a slave and many of these girls found residence in brothels.<sup>12</sup>

Men were left to connect only with brothel maids after social constructs developed by the patriarchy led to a lack of eligible brides. Instead of reforming the true root of this disparity, the government encouraged a proliferation of brothels to serve men and further keep women at a disadvantage. Note as well that citizens could not marry prostitutes as legitimate Athenian brides. Prostitutes were not considered morally or lawfully worthy of sacred Athenian citizenship, marriage, or public ceremony. Statesman Demosthenes documented judicial speeches from ancient Athens, one of which informs the legal status of prostitutes. The trial, dating ca. 340 - 350 BCE, was against the famous free prostitute Neaera.<sup>13</sup> In the prosecution’s argumentation, the inferior legal status of *hetairai* and *pornai* is revealed:

...a woman of her [Neaera's] character, who has done what she has done, ought not only to have kept aloof from these sacred rites...but that she should have been excluded also from all other religious ceremonials in Athens... For a woman who has been taken in adultery is not permitted to attend any of the public sacrifices. (Dem. 59.85)<sup>14</sup>

It was seen as a Greek citizen's "democratic right" to express authority by penetrating someone else and so cheap, tax-funded brothels were opened to make sure any man could express his carnal sexuality, all for the perceived betterment of society. Scholar Leslie Kurke even likens prostitutes to coins.<sup>15</sup> The widespread circulation and symbolic uniformity of prostitutes, like coins, equalized the status of all men with universal availability. But does this political demand for prostitution mean that the Greek society respected the laborers themselves? The idea of sex work as a whole socioeconomic factor was revered as an "intrinsic constituent of democracy", but the individual women were then withheld certain civil rights and were often abused.<sup>16</sup> My ensuing analysis of artistic representations of prostitutes juxtaposed with the realities of ancient bordellos will grant further insight into ancient Athens's treatment of such low class women.

## 2. Pedieus Painter Kylix

An Attic red-figure kylix for *symposia* dating to ca. 475 BCE and attributed to the Pedieus Painter displays an explicit idea of ancient Greek prostitution [Figure 1].<sup>17</sup> In the Pedieus Painter's scene, a group of presumably elite, young men are performing a variety of sex acts with a handful of older female prostitutes. Group sex, fellatio, and abuse are some of the activities transpiring in the wildly dynamic and erotic scene.<sup>18</sup> The distinctive cropped hair, as previously discussed, and participation in demeaning sex acts identifies the women specifically as prostitutes. The women are plain, heavier set, and their large breasts sag. The bodies of the female figures are crudely drawn and hardly detailed; more attention was put into the faces, musculature, and exaggerated penises of the male figures. The enthusiastic men dominate the entire scene of group sex. The women are passive and their arms lie limply at their sides while the men are active, grabbing and forcing the prostitutes into various contorted positions.

There are telling details within the vase-painting that illustrate the disregard for the dignity of sex workers. A man standing behind a *porne* holds a sandal and she is grasping her ribs indicating that he is beating her with the shoe. It can also be noted in almost all ancient Greek scenes depicting sexual intercourse that the heads of the male figures are always shown at a higher level than the females'. Even if a man is shown reclining in an erotic scene, the woman's eyes will always be on a lower level than the man's as a signifier of female inferiority. The men in the *Orgy* painting all maintain a visual connection with each other, which suggests that the group enjoyment and/or abuse of prostitutes brought men together in some twisted camaraderie.<sup>19</sup>

The women in the Pedieus Painter's scene are also shown in animal-like poses such as kneeling on the hands and knees or a squatting, bent over position. The latter pose in particular is a signifier of a prostitute because it was an uncomfortable, defenseless sex position only degenerate women performed. It is being performed by the figure on the left in Figure 2. Also, brothel maids learned to bounce up and down in this "leapfrog" pose after sex in an attempt to prevent conception.<sup>20</sup> This shoddy method of contraception was in fact suggested by classical physician Hippocrates as a feasible way for a promiscuous woman to expel unwanted semen or embryo from the body:

I told her to jump up and down, touching her buttocks with her heels at each leap. After she had done this no more than seven times, there was a noise, the seed fell out on the ground. (Hippoc. *Nat. puer.* 341.13)<sup>21</sup>

<http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetailsLarge.asp?recordCount=10&id={95FB4360-E3A6-47CF-BDEC-F7C7A1D94E5C}&returnPage=&start=0>

Figure 1. Attic red-figure kylix attributed to the Pedieus Painter, ca. 475 BCE. *Orgy*. Paris, Louvre. (copy and paste links to images)

<http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetailsLarge.asp?recordCount=10&id={95FB4360-E3A6-47CF-BDEC-F7C7A1D94E5C}&fileName=IMAGES200%2FF28%2FCVA%2EF28%2E1274%2E3%2F&returnPage=&start=0>

Figure 2. Detail. Attic red-figure cup attributed to the Pedieus Painter, ca. 475 BCE. *Orgy*. Paris, Louvre.

### 3. Euaion Painter Cup

A subtler representation of prostitution in vase-paintings is exemplified by the Euaion Painter's Athenian red-figure cup dating to ca. 425 BCE [Figure 3].<sup>22</sup> On the Euaion Painter's cup, viewers are presented a veiled, subtly erotic vase-painting. The vase was made for male audiences at the *symposium*. Art historians initially interpreted the image as men trying to woo single ladies with gifts. This theory is hard to verify though because such intimate meetings between men and maidens were prohibited. Instead, it is argued that this scene is a brothel and the exchange of objects symbolizes the transaction of money for sex. Andrew Stewart argues that the archaeological discovery of this vessel at Building Z, believed to be a brothel in the late fourth century BCE, suggests that the scene alludes to sex work.<sup>23</sup>

In the scene, one woman is seated frontally in the center holding tools for weaving. Two elite men give gifts, like a vase and a stool, to the lower class women.<sup>24</sup> The motif of a gifted vase is seen again in another erotically themed vase-painting: the Athenian red-figure skyphos attributed to the Penthesilea Painter, dating to ca. 425-460 BCE [Figure 4].<sup>25</sup> An elite, bearded man in a toga and crown courts a head-wrapped woman.<sup>26</sup> He offers her a moneybag, an icon of prostitution noted by art historians to symbolize not just transactional sex, but a man's economic supremacy as well.<sup>27</sup> A vase floats between them, suggesting the bestowal of a present. Through the façade of courtship, vases can be signifiers of prostitution in art. Male superiority was not only expressed through sexuality or abuse in these paintings, but also through the display of material wealth.

In the Euaion Painter's scene the women are not even painted nude let alone shown in an act of fornication. But the suggestive transparency of the seated woman's gown reveals her breasts beneath the fabric. This suggestion of nudity and the exchange of gifts give an overall sexual undertone to the scene.

The men in the painting are depicted as young and elite but the women retain the indicators of their lowly status such as cropped hair and headscarves. The quintessential image of a slave girl is from the gravestone of Hegeso (ca. 400 BCE). She wears the same headscarf that the women wear in the Euaion Painter scene, indicating these are servile women.<sup>28</sup> The woman in the center holds a spindle and stares at the viewer with a fully frontal gaze. Davidson notes that this frontal perspective is unusual and was used in Greek art as an attention grabber. Perhaps since no men are interacting with her, this foreshadows a prostitute's dismal retirement to spinning in her old age.<sup>29</sup> The most probable interpretation is that by including weaving imagery with erotic gift exchange, it symbolizes the transition to the night shift and the setting aside of one labor for the next. It is known that brothels not only provided full service sex work, but also functioned as textile factories to help support up to dozens of prostitutes. The industrialized sale of sex as well as of fabrics explains why one of the Greek terms for a brothel was *ergasterion*, which translates in English as "factory/workshop."<sup>30</sup>

<http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetailsLarge.asp?recordCount=4&id={89953C37-79C0-4267-AB03-6C84983636B3}&fileName=IMAGES200%2FGER21%2FCVA%2EGER21%2E1027%2E1%2F&returnPage=&start=0>

Figure 3. Athenian red-figure cup attributed to the Euaion Painter, ca. 425 BCE. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Antikensammlung.

<http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetailsLarge.asp?recordCount=1&id={4F817111-21F2-43CB-A6E9-7FEE9F50DEAC}&returnPage=&start=0>

Figure 4. Athenian red-figure skyphos attributed to the Penthesilea Painter, ca. 425-460 BCE. St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum.

### 4. Art and Reality

While this art gives some of the best documentation, both the Pedieus and the Euaion vessels are unrealistic representations in their own ways, emphasizing or concealing selective aspects of the encounters. Erotica viewed at *symposia* was produced for elite men to laugh at and delight in as fantasy. These vase-painting scenes should not be read as photographic representations of classical Athenian prostitution. These paintings were not made to immortalize these women out of regard for their societal import, nor to specifically commemorate or encourage violence against them. Rather these images, whether flagrant or coded, are about communicating male dominance and prestige through the sexual commodification of women.

Unlike the presentation conveyed in the Euaion Painter's pot, *pornai* were displayed like products in brothels, naked or barely covered. As documented by Athenaeus, the comic Xenarchus lightheartedly discussed the exhibition of brothel maids in his ca. 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE work, *The Pentathlum*:

Here there are very pretty lasses in the brothels, whom the boys may see basking in the sun, their breasts uncovered, stripped for action and posed for battle-line. (Athen. *Deipn.* 13.568-9)<sup>31</sup>

Other ancient writers conjure more morose ideas of brothels. Davidson explores the likening of Athenian brothels to spaces of death, like mortuaries and tombs.<sup>32</sup> Brothels were seen as a “common place”—men were certain in life to enter both a tomb and a brothel. The putrid smells and rotting away of many viable spermatozoon was said to have given these brothels the scent and aura of death. Davidson cites 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE Greek writer Artemidorus whose spiritual work on dream interpretation reflected upon ancient brothels.

For the place is called ‘open to all’, as is that place which receives dead people, and the destruction of much male seed also takes place there. And so this place logically resembles death. (Artem. *Oneir.* 1.78)<sup>33</sup>

In addition to abject living conditions, *pornai* were completely at the disposal of their clients: physically and sexually. As illustrated in Figure 5, abuse and coercion of prostitutes was depicted on vase-paintings like the Attic red-figure cup from Vulci attributed to the Thalia Painter dating to ca. 425 BCE.<sup>34</sup> The vessel is significantly fragmented, but the naked men and head-wrapped women are intelligible enough to determine that this is a scene of men eagerly pursuing resistant prostitutes.<sup>35</sup> A bearded man can be seen grabbing a fleeing woman and overpowering her. She is carrying a cup that mimics the shape of the painted vessel itself, which may suggest a *symposium* setting. The man grasps the female figure's arm; her hand appears to be pulled towards his genitals. Her body is facing away as she runs but she turns her head back as he grabs her. His accentuated penis is signaling the sexual dominance and satisfaction he seeks.

Most Athenians considered the life of a prostitute—violated by different men everyday, facing frequent assault, and withering away into an old, lonely spinster—to be a fate worse than death.<sup>36</sup> Women were often forced into commercial sex by means outside their control; they were demanded to appease the male citizen's mandate for available sex, but the humans supplying the services were then neglected and exploited by society.

<http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetailsLarge.asp?recordCount=1&id={843D3909-5EEB-49EB-8D1C-A24A5366CD71}&fileName=IMAGES200%2FGER21%2FCVA%2EGER21%2E987%2E4%2F&returnPage=&st art=0>

Figure 5. Detail, Attic red-figure cup from Vulci, attributed to the Thalia Painter, ca. 425 BCE. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Antikensammlung.

## 5. Conclusion

The goal of this research was not to brand the entire sex work industry of ancient Greece as violent and perverted. The scenes celebrated in ancient vase-paintings can be violent and explicit because they were meant to convey male dominance in that way; they are not necessarily literal representations of how all prostitutes were treated all of the time. Though somewhat unavoidable in such a business, women in the ancient Greek sex industry did not always suffer. I believe that becoming a courtesan or a brothel maid allowed many girls who would have died or become homeless to attain self-sufficiency.<sup>37</sup> Brothels provided food, shelter, and community for a group of women who had been rejected from their society or captured as spoils of war. *Hetairai* and higher-class prostitutes often enjoyed education, independence, and even great wealth. Sex workers were the only women in ancient Greece allowed to handle any substantial amount of money.<sup>38</sup>

What I aim to underscore with this research is that men consumed the representation of sex with prostitutes as a means of entertainment as well as upholding patriarchal ideals of male supremacy. The discussion of violence against prostitutes in art is not to say that all prostitutes were always raped and beaten, but instead this representation highlights how the mistreatment of women was nonetheless a celebratory signifier to ancient Greek men of sexual fantasy and male dominance.

The pleasure of hiring a prostitute was highly valued in Greek society and as with most of their other values, it is a frequent subject of their evidential artwork. There are dozens of other artworks depicting prostitution and they all vary. Some are tender and romantic, some are aggressive, and some are quite pornographic. They all individually call attention to different aspects of the Athenian sex trade as a whole. The Pedieus Painter's kylix and Thalia Painter's cup, for example, highlight the assertive dominance of man and the relentless expression of his sexuality. The Euaion Painter's cup takes a more highbrow approach with subtle nudity and coded gift exchange while still historically documenting brothels' textile production. While art historians deduce that ancient Greek vase-paintings are not to be read as snapshots of everyday life, these brothel scenes are some of the best primary evidence we have for insight into the way the ancient Athenians regarded sexuality and certain women.

## 6. Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations follow the Oxford Classical Dictionary and the American Journal of Archaeology

## 7. References

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9. Davidson, *Courtesans*, 74.
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12. Pomeroy, *Goddesses*, 140.
13. Bonnie MacLachlan, *Women in Ancient Greece: A Sourcebook* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 104-113.
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16. *Ibid.*, 211.
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18. CVA Louvre G13, plates 1272-74; ARV<sup>2</sup> 86a.
19. Kurke, *Coins*, 210-11.
20. Eva Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 174-9.
21. Hippoc. *Nat. puer.* 342.13 (Translation by I.M. Lonie, 1981).
22. Stewart, *Classical Greece*, 178.

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23. *Ibid.*, 178-81. The location, multi-roomed blueprint, imagery of Aphrodite and Eros, and discovery of a plentitude of loom weights led excavators to believe that Building Z served as a brothel in the late fourth century BCE.

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26. ARV<sup>2</sup> 889.166; Leningrad inv. 4224.

27. Keuls, *Reign*, 180.

28. Stewart, *Classical Greece*, 161, 189-90.

29. Davidson, *Courtesans*, 89.

30. *Ibid.*, 84-89.

31. Athen. *Deipn.* 13.569 (Translation by C.B. Gulick, 1927).

32. Davidson, *Courtesans*, 83.

33. Artem. *Oneir.* 1.78 (Translation by D.E. Harris-McCoy, 2012).

34. Stewart, *Art, Desire, and the Body*, 166.

35. CVA Antiquarium 3, 3251, plate 1051; ARV<sup>2</sup> 113.7.

36. Davidson, *Courtesans*, 84-89.

37. Pomeroy, *Goddesses*, 89.

38. *Ibid.*