

LEAVING LAS VEGAS

In speaking of the locality of the houses of ill-repute in the great city, it would be more difficult to state where they are not, than where they are.

—George Ellington, *apud* Gilfoyle
City of Eros (1992) 53.

The result of this study, which has venues for commercial sex scattered throughout the Roman city and located in a variety of social and commercial contexts, suggests some directions that future enquiry into the problem of Roman brothels might take. The first step should almost certainly be to make a detailed examination of the physical remains in what remains our one best source for archaeological information, Pompeii. That procedure might help eliminate some of the more doubtful candidates or at least isolate the possible operation of a brothel both in spatial and chronological terms, the latter standing as a further refinement of the post-62 problem treated in chapter 6.

What might be expected to result from such a project is a more nuanced treatment of the central subject of this book. One possible direction to take is to look more closely at the three subtypes for brothels identified in this study, purpose-built, tavern (*caupona/popina*) with rooms in back and/or upstairs, and the catch-all type associated with lower-class lodgings, as well as the two subtypes for cribs, namely, a single room off the street and single room in back of a bar.¹ It is worth noting here that while these types do find equivalents in

1. For the crib subtypes, see chap. 7; for the brothel subtypes, see appendix 1.

other cultures they are far from universal, let alone inevitable. In medieval Germany, for example, the fundamental distinction scholars draw between brothel types is that between the municipal institution of the *Frauenhaus* and illegal (but often informally tolerated) venues.²

I am not very optimistic that we will be able to elaborate a typology of brothels beyond the tripartite scheme I have described above. We can imagine in theory a list of known or suspected brothels that could be analyzed to generate a set of necessary and sufficient conditions to identify brothels. There would have to be some core characteristics that function as the sine qua non of a Roman brothel, ideally based on a combination of written and material evidence. That this exercise in empirical method cannot without difficulty lead to a typology that is superior to the one we have is suggested first by the disjuncture between literary and archaeological evidence. It is more accurate perhaps to say that these two types of evidence are not so much discordant as mutually inadequate. It is naive to place too much faith in the ability of archaeologists to furnish definitive answers to all of our questions.³ They are in no position to deliver more evidence than the sites preserve. What can we reasonably expect to turn up from establishments that have been more or less fully excavated? Graffiti, art, or masonry beds are hardly going to be found in sufficient numbers (indeed, one may question if any are going to be found at all) to allay our doubts about most possible brothel venues. More hope accrues to sites that have not been fully excavated, such as the one identified as no. 40 in the catalog (9.11.2–3). There are not many of these sites among the places already known to us, however.

Nevertheless, it must be said that if social historians want to know much of value about Roman brothels they would be better advised to invest more time in investigating the material remains than in parsing the likes of Petronius and Juvenal, where the harvest is bound to be very lean indeed. Further obstacles to developing a satisfactory typology are the flaws indicated earlier in the criteria for identification, and the fact that Roman brothels, like those in other cultures, are often difficult to distinguish from lower-class housing stock in general. In this sense the present study confirms a point of central importance raised at the outset that the fit between social history and archaeology should be assumed to be neither easy nor straightforward.

One way perhaps to allay somewhat this pessimism about the further elab-

2. See Schuster, *Frauenhaus* (1992) 31–32.

3. On difficulties with the archaeological typology of Roman houses as viewed in light of the legal evidence, see Kunst, “Dach” (2000) 294.

oration of a typology of brothels is to examine what I would describe as “the problem of luxury.” Decades ago James Packer’s studies of what he termed “middle and lower class housing” in Pompeii and Herculaneum and Pompeian inns yielded the important result that some of these places sported relatively luxurious features such as “*oeci*, *tablina*, *triclinia*, *alae*, *viridaria* or light-well courts” as well as wall paintings, at times of very high quality.⁴ Rosanne Gulino found that over one-half of the taverns in her study-sample from *Regio 1* had wall paintings.⁵ In other words, the taverns shared certain decorative aspects with the aristocratic *domus*. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, building on the work of Packer and Paul Zanker, advanced our knowledge by showing how Romans living in some relatively modest houses at Pompeii attempted to emulate the material lifestyle of the upper classes.⁶ More recently, Mark Grahame has examined the houses in *Regio 6* from the perspective of the courtyard, concluding that this was an elite architectural form, its size and numbers suggestive of power and status.⁷

These results help confirm the argument made in chapter 8 that the presence of high-quality painting and similar “luxurious” appointments in an establishment do not mean that it was not a hotel or brothel. To be clear, the evidence suggests that while the social prejudice against members of the elite setting foot in brothels was not adequate to prevent this from ever occurring, it seems unlikely that this happened often enough to influence the choice of decor.⁸ Even a very modest locale such as the Purpose-Built Brothel might feature touches of luxury, there seen in the erotic wall paintings, as a means of appealing to a lower-status clientele. It seems possible then to look for the presence of such criteria, including the content and quality of the wall paintings, as a means of ranking brothels, not in the vain and self-contradictory search for an upper-class brothel, but as a means of advancing our understanding of what appealed to the sub-elite, particularly

4. The first four items on the list can be described as various kinds of reception areas (*triclinia* have a particular function as dining rooms), while *viridaria* are interior gardens: Packer, “Middle and Lower Class Housing” (1975) 141–42; Packer, “Inns at Pompeii” (1978) 44–49.

5. Gulino, *Implications* (1987) 95.

6. Wallace-Hadrill, *Houses and Society* (1994) esp. 169–74, a book that draws upon Wallace-Hadrill’s own published work in the form of articles.

7. Grahame, “Material Culture” (1998) esp. 171.

8. The same point holds for *popinae* and, in a certain sense, for hotels as well. Baths are perhaps a different case; suffice it to say that whatever the numbers of elite visitors, commercial success must have depended on the decor’s appeal to a broader public: see Scarano Ussani, “*Lenocinium*” (2000) 259 n. 40, 260 (261) n. 75.

as travelers.⁹ *Luxuria popinalis* was an oxymoron for members of the upper classes, but part of the lived experience of many of those lower down on the social scale.¹⁰

One criterion to advance toward this end of enhancing our typology of brothels is the garden. Wilhelmina Jashemski documents the presence of gardens, often found with courtyards, in a number of places identified as possible brothels in the catalog provided in appendix 1. These gardens differ from each other of course in their size, number, and appointments. I include this information in the hope that it might prove useful, along with other evidence of “luxury,” in elaborating a typology of brothels.¹¹ Worth noting is that in the *Copa* attributed to Vergil, the tavern, which evidently is also a brothel, sports a garden along with other refinements the pretensions of which are mocked from the perspective of the (we may assume) upper-class author.¹²

Another kind of evidence concerns not just the typology of brothels, but the question of identification itself. If, as seems likely, brothels and related businesses tend to cluster together,¹³ it might be possible to elevate location to the status of a criterion for identifying brothels. Location would not have to be a necessary or sufficient condition of brothel-identification, but simply a leading indicator.¹⁴ In a pioneering and sadly neglected study of taverns in *Regio 1*, Rosanne Gulino found that a primary factor in their location was “nearness to a major thoroughfare”: the majority of those found on side streets were at street corners.¹⁵ Like brothels (which some of them might have been in fact), they tended to cluster together but were also located next door to a variety of public and private buildings.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, from an economic perspec-

9. The essays in Adams and Laurence, *Travel and Geography* (2001) suggest members of this broad sector of society did a great deal more traveling than was previously thought.

10. See Apul. *Met.* 8.1.

11. Painting may help differentiate some establishments, especially those that lack gardens, though in most cases we would expect the criteria to coincide with each other. Grahame, “Material Culture” (1998) 171, finds that the noncourtyard houses in *Regio 6* show a layout that is “almost random.” The same is true of many brothels.

12. See Goodyear, “*Copa*” (1977) 119–20, 124, 125, 127 (brothel); Franzoi, *Copa* (1988) 64, 67, 71, 72, 90; Rosivach, “Sociology” (1996) 608–12.

13. In the same way shops are concentrated in certain areas: Gassner, *Kaufläden* (1986) 84, 88.

14. For informal clustering of brothels in modern Nevada, see Symanski, “Prostitution in Nevada” (1974) 365.

15. Gulino, *Implications* (1987) 89–90, 147 (a doctoral dissertation, which accounts presumably for its neglect). See also the rationale offered by Gassner, *Kaufläden* (1986) 52, for the location of different types of shops on side and main streets.

16. Gulino, *Implications* (1987) 90–93, 147.

tive, larger restaurants (over four rooms each) were more likely to be on side streets and smaller ones, on the main streets.¹⁷ It might be feasible to employ information of this kind to locate, again in Pompeii, miniversions of the “Eros Center” surrounding the Purpose-Built Brothel in *Regio* 7 and its evident rivals in *Regio* 1 stretching from the *Porta Stabiana* to the *Insula del Menandro*,¹⁸ and in *Regio* 7 at *Insula* 13. These were districts capable of catering to a variety of needs and desires associated with the sale of sex.

A further welcome step would be the refinement of knowledge about the way in which brothels were linked to private houses. We already know that many *domus* in Pompeii were surrounded by businesses that appear to have been owned by the proprietors of these houses.¹⁹ No evidence exists that these proprietors were concerned that the presence of brothels would lower property values, a familiar refrain from modern contexts.²⁰ If anything, the reverse was true. A brothel might add value to an aristocratic *domus*, at least for some members of the elite.

How many of the businesses flanking the *domus* were brothels? Were commercial interests in the urban context typically geographically contiguous, or were they in important ways dispersed, as was the case for agricultural properties in the countryside?²¹ What can we say about the status of the proprietor, even if his or her identity remains unknown? Was a brothel owner likely to be a big fish or small fry among the elite?²²

17. Gulino, *Implications* (1987) 135, 142. See also the distribution of the space between doorways as illustrated by Laurence, *Roman Pompeii* (1994) 92–93. Gulino finds in her sample that erotic graffiti, as well as other graffiti of a personal nature, are more likely to appear in the larger establishments on side streets (138, 140), a fact that may, unfortunately, be ascribed to less careful excavation along the main streets (141).

18. For a similar suggestion regarding the latter, see Evans, *War* (1991) 135. “Eros Center” is not meant here in the precise sense of the present-day model found in Germany, whose like is difficult in fact to locate in historical contexts: Schuster, *Frauenhaus* (1992) 71. We might attempt to determine whether such pockets of prostitution were simply a feature of impoverished neighborhoods or stood apart as elements of a district or districts devoted to the leisure economy and entertainment. For these two models, see Gilfoyle, *City of Eros* (1992) 119–20. Both might have been present in Pompeii, perhaps in different areas of the city.

19. Kleberg, *Hôtels* (1957) 78–80; Raper, “Analysis of the Urban Structure” (1977) 193, 196, 202, 204, 207 (a sign of urban pathology!); Gassner, *Kaufläden* (1986) 12–13, 51, 61, 73, 74, 84, 96; Jongman, *Economy* (1988) 178–79, 214, 271; Parkins, “Consumer City” (1997) 102–7. On the economic role of the Roman house, see now Kunst, “Dach” (2000).

20. See Best, *Controlling Vice* (1998) 93.

21. On the latter, see the discussion of Mediterranean “latifundism” in Horden and Purcell, *Corrupting Sea* (2000) 282–83.

22. In the course of the Bacchanalia scandal in 186 B.C., the prostitute and star witness Faecenia Hispala was given refuge in a *cenaculum* located above the house of the mother-in-law of the consul Sp. Postumius. This only occurred, however, after the separate street entrance was blocked and a new one created that went through the house itself: Liv. 39.14.2–3. Security concerns

Whatever the final answers to these questions, a few tentative conclusions may be offered here. Considerations of profit dictated the number and location of brothels in Pompeii and in other Roman cities, so that we would expect any patterns that emerge to exemplify the results of a loose and informal practice of “commercial zoning” rather than of a top-down, officially imposed “moral geography.”²³ The loose and informal aspect of this zoning must be stressed. Before the McDonald’s corporation and others raised the practice of business-location to a demographic science, the selection of retail venues in the twentieth-century United States tended to be more passive than active in nature.²⁴ This is not, however, to exaggerate the usefulness of geography in defining communities of deviance.²⁵

In light of the broad definition of public policy adopted in chapter 5, it is clear that this commercial zoning qualifies as an example of a public policy, though there is no evidence that it was ever formally enacted as such.²⁶ The truth of a basic premise held by those who have advocated a theory of zoning has been vindicated, namely that “markets for prostitution in any political jurisdiction are shaped by the super-structure of laws and enforcement.”²⁷ From a constructionist perspective, I point out that such a policy was hardly inevitable. What is disturbing to a feminist is the reflection that this policy is likely to have been on its own terms successful.

Here the “fit” between elite perceptions and official policy was chillingly close from a modern perspective. For the Romans, prostitution, like marriage, but unlike adultery, was a form of licit sexuality. The prospects for outright repression, or even stringent regulation, of commercial sex are therefore not very good for Rome. Though no unitary policy existed on the subject, we can identify at least two important trends in play, tolerance and degradation.²⁸ The absence of a program of moral zoning served both ends by helping to ensure the ready accessibility and the open humiliation of prostitutes. Ideology is at the root of both trends in policy in the sense that they reconcile a

appear paramount in this context, but might there have been a sensitivity over propriety as well? I thank Anise Strong for calling this evidence to my attention. The questions raised in this paragraph are important for more than just the business of venal sex: see Mouritsen, “Roman Freedmen” (2001) 11.

23. Cf. the conclusions of Pirson, *Mietwohnungen* (1999) 164, over the distribution of *tabernae* in Pompeii.

24. See Heyl, *Madam* (1979) 91.

25. See Prus and Irini, *Hookers* (1980) 259.

26. We may compare this with the vote by the Tombstone (Ariz. Territory) city council in 1882 to abolish all restrictions on the location of brothels in that town, a measure motivated by a desire to promote economic development: Butler, *Daughters of Joy* (1985) 78.

27. Reynolds, *Economics of Prostitution* (1986) 7.

28. See McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law* (1998) chap. 10.

strongly entrenched sense of social and moral hierarchy with the implications of the fact, that on a very basic level, for the Romans the business of prostitution was indeed business. In order to accomplish these twin goals, the Romans did not shrink from eroticizing—actually or at least potentially—the atmospherics of the Roman city.²⁹

Roman ideas about articulating and enforcing a public morality must seem strange to us, though they need not be unintelligible or conceived of as a straightforward reflection of our own concerns. Social policy allowed, if it did not outright encourage, prostitutes to participate in the popular cultural tradition of public exhibitionism.³⁰ The sum of their weird marginality was to stand as outcasts openly for all to see in the urban center. In a similar way, the various legal rules designed for them, especially the civic and legal disabilities inflicted upon free prostitutes, had the paradoxical effect of binding them to the category of the most debased Romans while integrating them into the deep structure of the polity.

The point just made about public policy is of great importance, because it reveals something fundamental about the Roman practice of prostitution, and that is precisely its deeply exploitative nature. It is not that prostitution cannot, or should not, be regarded as inherently exploitative, but that the variant of it practiced by the Romans was extremely so,³¹ a fact which helps establish its significance in historical and cultural terms. The connection recently established between explicit representations of lovemaking and venues of prostitution helps underscore this point. It suggests that the radical feminists are right, after all, in equating pornography with prostitution, and that this equation has a long history in fact if not also in theory.³² The popularity of such representations among the Romans stands as an index of how comfortable they were with such a high level of exploitation. Prostitution, or at any rate the idea of it, was never far to seek in the ancient Roman city.

29. See the valuable observations of Kellum, "Spectacle" (1999) 292.

30. See Kellum, "Spectacle" (1999) 287.

31. No author to my mind brings out this aspect of Roman prostitution as effectively as Flemming, "*Quae Corpore*" (1999). See also Scarano Ussani, "Alle terme" (2001/2002).

32. See Jeffreys, *Idea of Prostitution* (1997) 231–36, esp. (at 232): "Pornography and prostitution are indivisible too, because pornography is the representation of prostitution"; Sullivan, *Politics of Sex* (1997) 4, 133. For a valuable sociological perspective, see Prus and Irini, *Hookers* (1980) 94. Still essential is Kappeler, *Pornography of Representation* (1986) esp. 153–58. Classicists will be as sensitive as Kappeler is to the etymology of "pornography" in this context above all. It is worth asking to what extent the identification of the representation of commercial sex with its practice encouraged in the popular mind an identification of actresses with prostitutes: cf. Edwards, "Unspeakable Professions" (1997).

The conclusion is not of course that venal sex was universal at Pompeii or in any other Roman city. A closer look at ownership patterns may help refine the picture, showing how, for example, a certain moral delicacy, or its absence, on the part of real-estate holders may have motivated them to choose to make money from prostitution or to refrain from doing so. I can only speculate that such reluctance, such *verecundia*, if it existed, was anything, to steal a phrase from Augustine, but *naturalis*.³³

In the end, any choice made in the analysis of ancient motives between the economic and the moral must ring false. Each can only be studied and understood in the context of the other.³⁴ The balance will shift from time to time, from culture to culture, from individual to individual, as will often the very definition of “economics” and of “morality.”³⁵

What especially characterizes Roman prostitution, as a system of exploitation, is the degree of autonomy left to the exploiters. As with profiting from slaves, then, so with the use of urban property.³⁶ The decision to prostitute a slave or to establish a brothel was left to the individual property owner. By the same token no one, including the authorities, was in a position to prevent such exploitation. If anything, the discretion allowed to owners in profiting from the “prostitution” of real estate was greater than that permitted in the prostitution of slaves.³⁷ The moral geography of the Roman city is no more than the sum of these individual choices.

33. See the discussion of the evidence of Augustine in chap. 3.

34. See Best, *Controlling Vice* (1998) 139.

35. We may usefully compare the factors said to help determine where a legal brothel should be located within a Nevada county: Reynolds, *Economics of Prostitution* (1986) 103.

36. See Best, *Controlling Vice* (1998) 139.

37. It is interesting to note that in the case of real estate there is no trace of the type of restrictive covenant on sale that was intended to discourage subsequent owners from prostituting slaves: see McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law* (1998) chap. 8.