

## Cult Prostitution and Passage Rites in the Biblical World

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**SUMMARY:** Modern Bible translations often mention ‘cult prostitutes’, female or male, and relate them to a goddess called Asherah. Sacred prostitution is attested in the ancient Near East and in some Phoenician-Punic colonies in the West, but such cult practices are rarely distinguished in modern publications from passage rites with sexual connotations. Moreover, the biblical words *q<sup>e</sup>dēšāh* and *qādēš* are related to cult prostitution, while biblical authors simply use them in the disparaging sense ‘harlot’ or ‘priestling’ without paying attention to scientific etymology. Besides, the alleged divine name Asherah of the Bible results from a misinterpretation of the Semitic common noun ‘shrine’, attested in Akkadian, Phoenician, Aramaic, and Hebrew. It is confused in various publications with the theonyms Ashtoreth or Ashrath, as happens occasionally in the Syriac translation of Judges. The only passage of the Bible referring possibly to cult prostitution is 2 Kings 23:7, that refers to ‘women renting houses as a shrine’, but its text is often ‘corrected’ and mistranslated. These problems are also illustrated in the article by archaeological data.

**KEYWORDS:** Old Testament, cult prostitution, passage rites, words *q<sup>e</sup>dēšāh*, *qādēš*, *’āšērāh*, *miplešet*, sanctuaries of Eryx, Sicca Veneria, Pyrgi, Dura-Europos

**SŁOWA KLUCZE:** Stary Testament, nieład sakralny, obrzędy wieku przejściowego, wyrazy *q<sup>e</sup>dēšāh*, *qādēš*, *’āšērāh*, *miplešet*, sanktuaria Eryx, Sicca Veneria, Pyrgi, Dura-Europos

Modern Bible translations – English, French, German, Polish, etc. – mention ‘sacred prostitutes’ or ‘cult prostitutes’ where the Hebrew text refers to a *qādēš* or a *q<sup>e</sup>dēšāh*, in singular or plural<sup>1</sup>. The authors of two recent monographs have rightly reacted against such an understanding of some biblical passages and against similar interpretations of a few Greek and Latin accounts<sup>2</sup>. Both works show quite a good knowledge of ancient

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- 1 For instance, *Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu* (Częstochowa 2011) 394, 684, 752.
  - 2 Chr. Stark, ‘Kultprostitution’ im Alten Testament? *Die Qedeschen der hebräischen Bibel und das Motiv der Hurerei* (OBO 221; Fribourg-Göttingen 2006); S.L. Budin, *The Myth of Sacred Prostitution in Antiquity* (New York 2008). A review article on S.L. Budin’s book was written by E. Lipiński, ‘Passage Rites, God’s Wives, and Sacred Prostitution’, *The Polish Journal of Biblical Research* 8 (2009) 31-40. Both monographs are taken into account by J. Slawik, ‘Czy

sources related to the subject, but they also reveal a somewhat deficient general background, cultural as well as philosophical, which should contribute to the clarification of the ideas, even in historical matters. In the present case, the correct understanding of ancient sources requires not only a knowledge of their historical context, but also a clear distinction of basic notions as cult prostitution, passage rites, priestly functions of ‘god’s wives’, harlotry, possibly performed in the very precincts of a sanctuary, etc. As in other historical fields, it is also necessary to distinguish the literary records of ancient facts and their use of a certain vocabulary from real situations on the ground and from the original meaning of some characteristic terms. It is easier to make this plain by referring also to data which are closer to our times.

One should start by asking whether harlotry is called ‘sacred’ because members of the temple staff performed it on temple grounds, contributing eventually to the earnings of the sanctuary, or because sexual acts were regarded as part of the cult, as in the case of the so-called ‘sacred marriage’ in ancient Mesopotamia<sup>3</sup>. Up to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the shadowy interior of Strasbourg cathedral, in France, seems to have been a common place of resort for soliciting and the open activity of the numerous prostitutes. However, this was no ‘sacred prostitution’. In Antiquity, pilgrimages to holy places may have occasioned the establishment of brothels in their neighbourhood, possibly under the supervision of temple authorities. In mediaeval England, the most notorious ‘bordellos’ or ‘taverns’ occupied a row of buildings in Southwark borough, near London Bridge. According to John Noorthouck, they were originally licensed by the bishops of Winchester: for sure, such a licence would not justify the qualification ‘sacred’.

Of course, there is no ‘sacred prostitution’ when the brothels are organized by lay entrepreneurs. Some aberrant statements in these matters can be found in publications suggesting ‘that the advent of the secular brothel did not take place until the system that regulated prostitution in accordance with religious rites had broken down, while the demand for the prostitute’s services continued’<sup>4</sup>. Mesopotamian sources blandly contradict such assumptions. For instance, three tablets from the archive of the Egibi family, one of the wealthiest in the 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. Babylon, record the equipment

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w starożytnym Izraelu istniała prostytutka sakralna? *Q<sup>c</sup>dešā<sup>t</sup>* w Starym Testamencie”, *SBO* 3 (2011) 45-65. He rightly concludes that cult prostitution cannot serve as an explanation key of Old Testament texts mentioning the *q<sup>c</sup>dēšāh*. Since he quotes other interpretations of the texts in question, it is useless to do it again in the present article, even if a somewhat different view is expressed below concerning Hos. 4:14 and Deut. 23:18.

<sup>3</sup> J. Renger and J.S. Cooper, “Heilige Hochzeit”, *RLA* IV (Berlin 1972-75) 251-269.

<sup>4</sup> T.E. James, *Prostitution and the Law* (London 1951).

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provided to a female slave to operate a ‘tavern’<sup>5</sup>. In addition to utensils for preparing alcoholic beverages, she received four tables, some chairs, and nine beds, thus more beds than tables. Such a ‘tavern’ was obviously a prime venue for prostitution, but we do not know whether the landlady of the inn, called Ishunnatu, hired prostitutes or simply provided the venue. Other texts show that Babylonian owners of prostitute slaves could them procure clients and pocket themselves the fees for their sexual services<sup>6</sup>.

In short, prostitution may be termed ‘sacred’ if it appears to be a cultic act, accomplished under the aegis of a deity, usually a goddess, and paid by the male partner in order to obtain some favour, to be blessed, etc. These circumstances are usually not recorded in the sources and can only be assumed, considering the status and the workplace of the prostitutes or *hierodouloi*.

### I. Passage Rites

Despite external similitudes, the situation is very different when the sexual relation of a virgin with a stranger is the corollary of a superstitious fear in a given community that a man will be endangered by some peril attaching to the bride’s virginity. Causing her bleeding was probably regarded as a bad *omen*, hence the practice of recurring to a stranger or a priest in the service of a divinity, generally a goddess, to proceed to the *ruptura hymenis*. This is shown by ethnographic studies conducted in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, also among still existing aboriginal tribes, and the recorded practices serve to explain the rituals in question<sup>7</sup>. A ‘laicized’ form of this customary or religious duty is thought to have developed in mediaeval Europe into the *ius primae noctis* vested in the local lord or priest. This recognized custom gave them the right to sleep the first night with the bride of one of their dependents. However, the written evidence we have does not deal with the actual enforcement of the custom, but only with the redemption dues which were paid under various significant names (*cunnagium*, *cullage*, *ius cunni*, etc.) to avoid its enforcement. The weight of its evidence does nevertheless

5 F. Joannès, “Inventaire d’un cabaret”, *NABU* 1992, 48-50, No. 64, and 69, No. 89; cf. J. Cooper, “Prostitution”, *RLA XI* (Berlin 2006-2008) 12-21 (see p. 20).

6 M. Dandamaev, *Rabstvo v Vavilonii, VII-IV vv. do n.e.* (Moscow 1974) 84-86.

7 B. Spencer and F.J. Gillen, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (London 1904) 94 ff.; Th. Reik, *Probleme der Religionspsychologie* (Leipzig-Wien 1919); E. Crawley, *The Mystic Rose*, new ed. by Th. Besterman (London 1927), vol. I, 168 ff.; A. van Gennep, *Rites de passage* (reprint, Paris 1992) 48-49. A summary presentation is provided by G. van der Leeuw, *La religion dans son essence et ses manifestations* (Paris 1955) 225.

point to the existence of such a custom, at an early date, in parts of France and possibly also in a few centres in Italy and Germany.

The related Babylonian custom, as recorded by Herodotus, *History* I, 199, seems thus to correspond to a widespread practice described by ethnographers and, in particular, to an Old Babylonian rite. At Sippar, in the temple of (Ishtar-)Annunītum, the *rēdūtum* rite, literally ‘escort’ or the like, was performed only by women, and each performer appears only once in the available documents, as if the rite in question had to be executed only once in a lifetime<sup>8</sup>. The same seems to have been the case in the temple of Nanaia at Kish<sup>9</sup>. The texts record a few shekels of silver, barley, flour, bread or bear, defined in the next lines as rest of silver from the *rēdūtum* rite of the goddess Annunītum, which the head of the lamentation-priests had let such-and-such perform. The female performers are mostly identified by their relation to a man, mostly as ‘wife of’ (43 %). Considering that very young girls happened to be married and thus legally were wives, the sacrifice of virginity – if meant in these texts – could have been postponed until the time when they were supposed to have sexual relations with their husband. If this interpretation is correct, we have to do with a ‘passage rite’, not with ‘sacred prostitution’.

The Babylonian *rēdūtum* rite, apparently performed by women only once in their lifetime, seems to have given rise to the report of Herodotus I, 199<sup>10</sup>. The Babylonian custom, as recorded by the Greek historiographer, required every woman, rich or poor, to sit in the temple of Mylitta (Ninlil) and have intercourse with a stranger, who signified his choice by throwing a silver coin of no matter how small the value into her lap. The woman had then to accept the coin, that was becoming sacred, and she had intercourse with the stranger outside the temple, as the Sippar name ‘escort’ already seems to suggest. Once the rite had been observed, the woman was absolved from her obligation to the goddess<sup>11</sup> and then, according to Herodotus, money would in no case purchase her. The special head ornament that the Babylonian women wear in the Herodotus’ report may reflect the hairdo

<sup>8</sup> M. Tanret and K. Van Lerberghe, “Rituals and Profits in the Ur-Utu Archive”, *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* (ed. J. Quaegebeur; OLA 55; Leuven 1993) 435-449, in particular 438-443.

<sup>9</sup> N. Yoffee, “The Economics of Ritual at Late Old Babylonian Kish”, *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41 (1998) 312-343.

<sup>10</sup> Cooper, *RLA* XI, 19.

<sup>11</sup> Since the coin was becoming sacred and the woman was supposed to be absolved from her obligation to the goddess, that money certainly entered the coffers of the temple and was not serving to constitute the woman’s dot.

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of the Babylonian *kezrētu*—women performing the rite, since *kezēru* means ‘to curl the hair’<sup>12</sup>.

The existence of a similar practice in Phoenicia is attested by Lucian’s *Syrian Goddess* 6. The women ‘stand for a single day in readiness to expose their persons for hire. The place of hire is open to none but foreigners, and out of the proceeds of the traffic of these women a sacrifice to Aphrodite is paid’. The custom of submitting to a stranger in the service of a goddess clearly points at a ‘passage rite’, performed only once in a lifetime, not ‘for a single day’, as Lucian has misunderstood his informant. The passage rite performed at Byblos by Phoenician maidens with a foreigner before they joined their betrothed man is still recorded in the same region by the Byzantine historiographers Sozomen and Socrates, writing in the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.<sup>13</sup>

The prenuptial prostitution of Cypriot girls, as reported by Justinus’ *Epitome* XVIII, 5, 4, is another example of practices belonging to passage rites. Justinus’ summary report is interesting because it contains all the ethnographic elements characterizing authentic customs. The girls go to the sea-shore expecting the arrival of strangers, they offer Venus libations for the preservation of their virtue in the future, and they earn money for their dowry.

The customs in Acilisene, in Greater Armenia, seem to have followed a different course. According to Strabo, *Geography* XI, 14, 16, well-born maidens were dedicated to the goddess Anaitis as prostitutes for considerable periods<sup>14</sup>. Strabo obviously refers to a prenuptial ritual, preceded by a lengthy service in the temple of the goddess. That this service consisted in being prostituted for a long time is possibly an interpretation of Strabo or of his informant. If we believe Plutarch (*Artaxerxes* 27), Artaxerxes II dedicated the concubine Aspasia to ‘Artemis of Ecbatana, who is called Anaitis, to spend the rest of her life chastely’. This implies a quite different service of the goddess. Instead, Strabo’s report suggests a form of prenuptial passage rites.

In the mid-first century A.D., Pomponius Mela of Tanger (Morocco) refers in his *Chorography* I, 8 to a similar custom, obligatory before marriage in some tribes of Africa. A ‘laicized’ form of the custom was prevailing as late as the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century among the Ouled Naïl of Algeria: the maidens of this tribe would go to the larger towns (e.g. Biskra) as dancing girls and earn

<sup>12</sup> Cooper, *RLA* XI, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* V, 10, 7; Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* I, 18, 7.

<sup>14</sup> A Greek inscription from Susa, dating from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., mentions a woman who remained in the service of the goddess Nanaia (often identified with Anaitis) until she became thirty years old: F. Cumont, “Épigraphie grecque 4”, *Mémoires de la Délégation archéologique en Perse* XX (Paris 1928) 84-88; *SEG* VII, No. 15.

money by prostitution. The motive of earning a dowry had originally some religious purpose linked to a cultic activity, but the economic aspect prevailed in later times. The girls returned home thereafter and married, and the more money they had acquired, the more desirable they were considered as wives<sup>15</sup>.

The rites accompanying defloration of virgins may be paralleled by puberty rites concerning not only women, but men as well. Circumcision is certainly such a rite. An Old Egyptian painting depicts a boy being circumcised by a priest<sup>16</sup>. In a well-known Egyptian inscription a man reports that he was circumcised along with 120 others<sup>17</sup>. This suggests a group circumcised at the same time at a puberty ceremony. Such a group circumcision may be the ‘circumcision festival’ mentioned in a tomb at Saqqara, near the pyramids of Giza. In the Bible, Ishmael, Abraham’s son by his concubine Hagar, was circumcised at 13 years of age (Gen. 17:25). In Jewish tradition, the circumcision occurs when the boy is only eight days old (Gen. 17:12), and this usage was recorded by the Christian Feast of the Circumcision, observed on January the 1<sup>st</sup>. The passage rite still survives in the ecclesiastical rite of confirmation and in the Jewish *bar mitzvah* (*bat mitzvah*) ceremony that marks the passage of Jewish children from infancy to puberty at age 13 (and 12). Female circumcision, when performed at puberty, must have belonged to passage rites as well. It is possibly older than the rite of the *ruptura hymenis*.

## 2. *Qedešōt* and *qedešim*

The existence of ‘sacred prostitution’ in Canaan and ancient Israel was induced from the prophetic image of Israel ‘whoring under every spreading tree’ (Jer. 3:6) and from the biblical mentions of *qedešim* and *qedešōt*, especially in connection with *asherah*, as in 2 Kings 23:7. It thus becomes important to determine the meaning of these words in the biblical world, since they occur in Mesopotamia and in Syria-Palestine, at least from the second millennium B.C.

At Ugarit, in personnel lists datable around 1200 B.C., the *qdšm* are often mentioned with the *khn̄m*, ‘priests’<sup>18</sup>, and they are obviously cultic

15 M. Doutté, “Notes sur l’Islam maghrubin: les marabouts (fin)”, *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions* 41 (1900) 289-336 (see p. 314-315).

16 *ANEP*, No. 629.

17 *ANET* 326.

18 E. Lipiński, „The Socio-Economic Condition of the Clergy in the Kingdom of Ugarit”, *Society and Economy in the Eastern Mediterranean (c. 1500-1000 B.C.)* (eds. M. Heltzer and E. Lipiński; OLA 23; Leuven 1988) 125-150 (see p. 143-144).

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servants assisting the priests. One might translate *qdšm* by ‘clerics’ or ‘deacons’. There were also *qdšt*, who obviously had some relation to the cult and might appear as ‘oblates’ or ‘deaconesses’, but a personnel list and a will mention a certain *bn.qdšt*<sup>19</sup> and a witness ‘*Abdu-Pidar mār qadišti*<sup>20</sup>. There is no mention in these texts of the *qdšt*-women themselves, and no indication of their obligations or duties, but the fact that some men could be called ‘son of a *qdšt*-woman’ instead of being mentioned with their patronymic, indicates that at the very least those *qdšt* did not have a conventional family life. They were probably consecrated women who provided some ritual assistance, domestic help in sanctuary’s annexes, also musical entertainment, possibly sexual services. One class of Babylonian and Assyrian priestesses is also called *qadištu*, but there is no indication whatsoever that they were cult prostitutes. On the contrary, an Old Assyrian *qadištu* could be married<sup>21</sup>. Instead, the *kežrētu* of the temple personnel may have provided sexual services, since Neo-Assyrian sources refer sometimes to men called “son of a *kežrētu*-woman” instead of mentioning their patronymic<sup>22</sup>.

The Hebrew Bible never refers directly to female or male cult prostitutes and no information of the kind is available in Hebrew inscriptions. Modern Bible translations are simply misleading in this respect. True, a few biblical texts mention *qedeshot*-women, the plural of *qedeshah*, ‘consecrated’ maiden according to scholarly etymology. This appellation is related to the word *qodesh*, ‘sanctuary’, and goes back to the institution attested in the ancient Near East, in Mesopotamia and at Ugarit. Women could in fact be dedicated by their fathers or their masters to a deity, they could also devote themselves to the service of a god or a goddess in order to secure their living. This was done mainly by young widows without grown up children, by repudiated wives, female slaves sent away like Hagar in Gen. 20, lonely women, etc. These ‘consecrated’ persons performed various tasks in the sanctuary, remitting their occasional fees to the temple. Women on duty at the entrance of the sanctuary are mentioned also in Ex. 38:8 and 1 Sam. 2:22, but their tasks are not described. In any case, they are not called *qedeshot*, because this word meant ‘harlot’ in Biblical Hebrew, even ‘street harlot’

<sup>19</sup> *KTU* 4.69: V: 11.

<sup>20</sup> RS 17.36:14, in *Ugaritica* V, 11, No. 7. His name means ‘Servant of the Penis’, cf. E. Lipiński, “Burnt Offering of Head, Peder, and Kidneys”, *Birkat Shalom* (eds. Ch. Cohen, *et al.*; Winona Lake 2008), vol. I, 59-68 (see p. 63 with references).

<sup>21</sup> H. Hirsch, *Untersuchungen zur altassyrischen Religion* (Archiv für Orientforschung. Beiheft 13/14; Graz 1961) 58.

<sup>22</sup> Cooper, *RLA* XI, 19.

as appears from Gen. 38<sup>23</sup>. Scribes in biblical times did not bother about etymologies.

The meaning ‘harlots’ results from the perception of some women’s tasks in Canaanite temples, where ‘consecrated’ maidens could be employed as prostitutes in the frame of fertility cults, especially of the goddess Ash-toreth, and act as such in the immediate precincts of the sanctuary. This practice or the simple fact of serving a heathen deity led to the understanding of the word *qedeshah* by outsiders in the sense ‘harlot’ and to its use in Biblical Hebrew as a synonym of *zōnāh*, ‘prostitute’<sup>24</sup>. No other meaning of *qedeshah* occurs in the Hebrew Bible, except the possible use of a figurative sense.

The earliest attestations of the word are found in the tale of Judah and Tamar. Thus, in Gen. 38:21-22, Judah’s friend is searching for a woman he refers to as a *qedeshah*, although there is no cultic context implied. The men of the place tell him that there is no prostitute (*zōnāh*) in the area. The word *qedeshah* just may have been less derogatory than *zōnāh*, perhaps because it was rarely used.

There is apparently a reference to the cult in Deut. 23:18-19, that also concerns the *kelabim*, ‘dogs’, a designation of male prostitutes, occurring later in the Revelation of John 22:15. However, a closer analysis of the Deuteronomy passage shows that *qedeshah* just means ‘whore’ here. In fact, verse 18, written in the third person, is obviously a later addition to verse 19, formulated in the second person like the other prohibitive clauses in this section of Deut. 23. Verse 19 forbids bringing the proceeds of female or male prostitution into the Temple, even in fulfilment of a vow: ‘You shall not allow a harlot’s fee or the pay of a sodomite to be brought into the House of the Lord your God in fulfilment of any vow’. A later redactor noticed that not only the gains derived from prostitution should not be offered to God, but that any form of ‘prostitution’ is prohibited as well. He thus added: ‘There will be no *qedeshah* among the daughters of Israel. There will be no *qadesh* among the sons of Israel’. The word *qedeshah* is here a synonym of *zōnāh*, as in Gen. 38:21-22, while *qdš*, occurring in parallelism with *qdšh* and having a disparaging meaning in the Deuteronomistic tradition, is perhaps used here in the sense of ‘pimp’, possibly in 2 Kings 23:7 as well. Now, how did *qadesh* acquire such a disparaging connotation?

23 The *Testament of Judah* 12:2, attested at Qumran by a tiny fragment, compares Tamar’s behaviour to passage rites preceding marriage (cf. here above).

24 This semantic development can be compared to Latin *paganus*, ‘countryman’, used in the sense ‘heathen’.

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At Ugarit, in lists of temple personnel, referred to above, the *qdšm* are often mentioned with the *khn̄m* and seem to be cultic servants assisting the ‘priests’. There were *qdšm* also in the Kingdom of Judah, where they appear as officiating ministers in provincial shrines (1 Kings 14:24). Comparison of 1 Kings 14:24 with 2 Kings 23:5 shows that *qādēš* is a synonym of *komer*, ‘priest’, a word always used in the Bible in a disparaging sense. Allegedly expelled by kings Asa (1 Kings 15:12) and Jehoshaphat (1 Kings 22:47), the *qedeshim* are still active in the Temple of Jerusalem in the seventh century, until the reign of Josiah. The latter is said to ‘have pulled down the houses of the *qedeshim* in the House of the Lord, where women were renting cubicles as a shrine (*asherah*)’ (2 Kings 23:7). The usual translations of this verse cannot be accepted, because they render *’āšērāh* as if it were a divine name, while it designates a place, and they change Hebrew *battīm*, ‘houses’, in a word meaning ‘robes, tunics, garments’, to find a suitable grammatical object for *’rgwt*, supposedly ‘weaving’. Now, the participle plural *’rgwt* is a metathetic variant of *’grwt*, ‘renting’ in common Semitic<sup>25</sup>. This is no scribal mistake, but a dialectal form occurring also in Is. 38:12, where a hireling is referred to; it was later misunderstood. A similar metathesis of *r* occurs in the word ‘gate’, *š’r* in Hebrew, *tgr* in Ugaritic, but *tr* in Aramaic.

### 3. *’Āšērāh*

There is no evidence whatsoever that the *qedeshim* were male cult prostitutes at the time of the monarchy, but they are said to have been renting their houses in the precinct of the Temple to some women, possibly for the purpose of prostitution, and one might wonder whether they were also acting as pimps. The women using these cubicles are not called *qedeshoth*, because this Hebrew word simply meant ‘harlots’ and would have been inadequate. They are simply called *nāšīm*, like in Ex. 38:8 and 1 Sam. 2:22. A cultic context is suggested by the term *’āšērāh*, but the latter is not related *per se* to prostitution. It might also designate a place where magical rites were performed by women, like in the case of the witch of En-Dor (1 Sam. 28), or some other illicit practices. Even ‘prophets of the shrine’ are mentioned in 1 Kings 18:19, but these words appear as a later intrusion, since they were asterisked in Origen’s Hexapla, while the prophets in question do not occur in the subsequent story.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *agāru* in Akkadian, *gar* in Aramaic, *ağara* in Arabic.

Unfortunately, confusion between the Semitic common noun ‘shrine’ – *aširtu/ešertu* in Assyro-Babylonian<sup>26</sup>, *ʾšrt* in Phoenician<sup>27</sup>, *ʾtrt* in Aramaic<sup>28</sup>, *šrh/šyrh* in Hebrew – and the name of Ashtoreth or of the Ugaritian goddess *Rabbatu Atratu yamma*, ‘The Lady who Treads upon the Sea’, led modern mythographers to invent a goddess Asherah in the Bible. The Tell el-Amarna letters contain a name *Abdi-Ašratu*, which shows that the *i*-vowel of the theonym *ʾAt(i)ratu* is short and could be elided. It is based on the active participle *ʾātir*, ‘treading’. Instead, the word ‘shrine’ is formed from the passive participle *ʾatīr*, ‘trodden’, hence ‘place’ and in a technical religious sense ‘shrine’. Inadequate knowledge of language and grammar is a plague often affecting religio-historical studies. The biblical Asherah is one of its symptoms.

Modern Bible translators followed suit, ignoring apparently that *asherah* has a plural *šrym*<sup>29</sup>, sometimes *šrwṯ*<sup>30</sup>, that it is used with the article *ha-* (‘the shrine’)<sup>31</sup> and with the pronominal suffix (‘his shrine’)<sup>32</sup>, what shows that it

- 26 *AHw* I (Wiesbaden 1965) 80b, 253b-254a; *CAD*, A/2 (Chicago 1968) 436-439.
- 27 *KAI* 19, 4; Tell al-Fuḥḥar inscription 2 (cf. *ErIs* 29 [2009] 105a); Ekron jar inscription 2 (cf. S. Gitin, “Seventh Century B.C.E. Cultic Elements at Ekron”, *Biblical Archaeology Today*, 1990 [Jerusalem 1993] 248-258 [see p. 251, fig. 2]), where the spelling *qdš l’šrt*, ‘consecrated for the shrine’, shows that the inscription is written in a Phoenician dialect (final *t* in the absolute state), used by the Philistines.
- 28 *KAI* 222, B, 11 (ʾšrt); 260, 3 (ʾtrt), *CIS* II, 3917, 3 (ʾtrh); Bowl H, 12 (ʾšrt) in C.H. Gordon, “Aramaic and Mandaic Magical Bowls”, *Archiv Orientalní* 9 (1937) 84-96 with 13 plates (see p. 87), reedited by Ch.D. Isbell, *Corpus of the Aramaic Incantation Bowls* (SBL Dissertation Series 17; Missoula 1975) 120, No. 53, line 12: *ʾšrt mlk’ d-šydy*, ‘shrine of the king of demons’, where the spelling with *š* shows that the word was borrowed from Hebrew.
- 29 The masculine plural ending, corresponding to Phoenician singular *ʾšr*, ‘shrine’, occurs in Ex. 34:13; Deut. 7:5; 12:3; 1 Kings 14:15, 23; 16:33; 2 Kings 13:6; 17:10; 23:14; Is. 17:8; 27:9; Jer. 17:2; Micah 5:13; 2 Chron. 14:2; 17:6; 24:18; 31:1; 33:19; 34:4, 7.
- 30 The feminine plural ending is found only in Judg. 3:7, where it is a scribal error (cf. *OLP* 3 [1972] 114), then in 2 Chron. 19:3; 33:3; Temple Scroll 51:20; Mishnah, *ʾAbōdāh zārāh* 3:7; Tosefta, *ʾAbōdāh zārāh* 6:8. In Judg. 3:7, a few Hebrew manuscripts and the Vulgate, based on a manuscript from the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. or earlier, read Ashtoreth, like in the parallel passages of Judg. 10:6; 1 Sam. 7:4; 12:10. No corresponding Qumran text is preserved.
- 31 Judg. 6:25, 26, 28, 30; 1 Kings 18:19 (later addition; cf. *OLP* 3 [1972] 114), 2 Kings 18:4; 21:7; 23:6; Tosefta, *ʾAbōdāh zārāh* 6:9.
- 32 The pronominal suffix occurs in the well known Hebrew inscriptions from Khirbet el-Qōm (*yhwḥ w’šrth*, ‘Yahweh and his shrine’) and from Kuntillet Ajrud (*yhwḥ šmrn w’šrth*, ‘Yahweh of Samaria and his shrine’; *yhwḥ tmn w’šrth*, ‘Yahweh of the South and his shrine’). The Khirbet el-Qōm inscription was first published by G. Dever, “Iron Age Epigraphic Material from the Area of Khirbet el-Kōm”, *HUCA* 40-41 (1969-70) 139-189, pls. I-IX (see p. 151-156 with fig. 7 and pl. V), but its correct reading was provided by A. Lemaire, “Les inscriptions de Khirbet el-Qōm et l’ashérah de YHWH”, *RB* 84 (1977) 595-608, pl. XXXI. The Kuntillet Ajrud inscriptions were first made known by Z. Meshel, *Kuntillet ‘Ajrud. A Religious Centre from the Time of the Judaean Monarchy on the Border of Sinai* (Jerusalem 1978); idem, “The Israelite Religious Centre of Kuntillet ‘Ajrud”, *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 1982-83, 52-55; Sh. Aḥituv, E. Eshel, Z. Meshel, “The Inscriptions”, *Kuntillet ‘Ajrud*

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cannot be a proper name. Moreover, *asherah* could be ‘planted’ (Deut. 16:21; Temple Scroll 51:20), ‘uprooted’ (Micah 5:13), ‘cut down’ (Judg. 6:25; 2 Kings 18:4; 24:14), ‘hacked down’ (Deut. 7:5; 2 Chron. 14:2; 31:1), and ‘burnt with fire’ (Deut. 12:3; 2 Kings 23:15), but it could also be ‘built’ (1 Kings 14:23), ‘made’ (1 Kings 14:15; 16:33; 2 Kings 21:7), ‘set up’ (2 Kings 17:10), ‘restored’ (2 Chron. 33:19), also ‘demolished’ (2 Chron. 34:7), ‘broken’ (2 Chron. 34:4). It was certainly no deity, but eventually a small construction<sup>33</sup>. From a survey of all the passages in which the word *’āšērāh* is used it appears that it was a ‘shrine’, either a holy grove or a sacred tree, next to which an altar was built, or a chapel erected with a divine symbol, most likely a hewn stone. ‘Shrine’ perfectly corresponds to the meaning of the word also in Assyro-Babylonian, Phoenician, and Aramaic.

The Alexandrian translators of the Bible into Greek, working in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries B.C., usually rendered *’āšērāh* by ‘holy grove’ (ἅλσος), probably inspired by Deut. 16:21 and by the text of Judg. 6:26, where God is supposed to say to Gideon: ‘Take the bullock and offer it as a burnt-offering with the trees of the shrine which you cut down’. The shrine, dedicated to a heathen Baal, was obviously a grove. This understanding of the word was followed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Martin Luther in his German translation (‘Hain’) and by Jakub Wujek in his Polish translation of the Bible (‘gaj’). This rendering is compatible with many mentions of *’āšērāh*, but it is too strict.

In fact, *’āšērāh* could also be a chapel containing a divine symbol. According to 1 Kings 15:13 and 2 Chron. 15:16, queen mother Maaka had made a *miplešet* for the *’āšērāh* of Jerusalem. The noun *miplešet* derives from the root *blz / plz (blt / plt)*, ‘to protrude’, hence ‘to be cut in relief’, and must designate a sculptural ‘relief’<sup>34</sup>, possibly comparable to the stele from the 9<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., found at et-Tell in 1997<sup>35</sup>. It had to be placed

(Horvat Teman), an Iron Age II Religious Site on the Judah-Sinai Border (ed. Z. Meshel, Jerusalem 2012) 73-142.

- 33 Pertinent biblical texts are analyzed by E. Lipiński, “The Goddess Aṭirat in Ancient Arabia, in Babylon, and in Ugarit”, *OLP* 3 (1972) 101-119, and in a concise but up-dated way in the article “Athirat” of the *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, new ed. (Detroit 2005), vol. I, 589-592. It is useless listing the publications whose authors take *’āšērāh* for a goddess. Among the most recent ones, there is Sung Jin Park, “The Cultic Identity of Asherah in Deuteronomistic Ideology of Israel”, *ZAW* 123 (2011) 553-564, summarizing his conclusions as follows: ‘The Israelites considered Asherah as a consort of Baal’.
- 34 The Septuagint translation σύνδοχος, ‘coition’, and the Vulgate interpretations *simulacrum Priapi*, *simulacrum turpissimum*, refer to a phallic emblem or an ithyphallic idol. However, this is less likely in those times.
- 35 M. Bernett and O. Keel, *Mond, Stier un Kult am Stadttor: die Stele von Bethsaida (et-Tell)* (OBO 161; Fribourg-Göttingen 1998); idem, “Der Kult am Stadttor von Betsaida”, *Leben am See Genesaret* (eds. G. Fassbeck, S. Fortner, A. Rottloff, and J. Zangenberg; Mainz a/R 2003) 70-76. For similar reliefs from the Hauran area, see I. Skupińska-Løvset, “Kulty na et-Tell. Żródła

in the *'āšērāh*, either a sacred grove or a chapel, like in 2 Kings 21:7, where king Manasseh is said to have 'put the stele (*pesel*) of the shrine that he had made' in the Temple of the Lord<sup>36</sup>. The stele transferred from its shrine to the Temple obviously symbolized the presence of the Lord, but such hewn stones were prohibited by Ex. 20:4 and Deut. 5:8. A tree with a divine symbol and a large stone serving as altar could constitute a shrine as well, as indicated for instance in Jer. 17:2, condemning Judah's 'altars and shrines by a spreading tree'. In the light of such texts, the treatise *'Abōdāh zārāh* 3:7 of the Mishnah defined *'āšērāh* as 'any (oak) under which a foreign cult is performed'.

However, the Sages did not distinguish the shrines of heathen deities, like that of Judg. 6:25-30, from those of Yahweh, formally attested by the Hebrew inscriptions of Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qôm, which refer to 'Yahweh and His shrine'<sup>37</sup>, proving decisively that *'āšērāh* could be a Yahwistic cult place in the countryside. In the inscription from Khirbet el-Qôm, datable to the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., we read *brk 'ryhw l-yhwh w-l-'šrth*, 'Blessed be Uryahu by Yahweh and by His shrine'<sup>38</sup>. The two inscriptions on pottery vessels from Kuntillet Ajrud, datable to the second part of the 8<sup>th</sup> century<sup>39</sup>, contain two blessing formulas<sup>40</sup>: *brkt-'tkm l-yhwh šmrn w-l-'šrth*, 'I bless you by Yahweh of Samaria and by His shrine'; *brktk l-yhwh tmn w-l-'šrth*, 'I bless you by Yahweh of the South and by His shrine'. The *qedeshīm* were possibly deserving these sanctuaries. Such provincial shrines were prohibited after the centralization of the cult by Josiah in the seventh century B.C. (2 Kings 23), hence assimilated to heathen sanctuaries. This situation is reflected in Jer. 17:2.

In other texts, like Jer. 2:20 and 3:6-10, the metaphors of prostitution and adultery are used as poetical descriptions of Judah's infidelity to the Lord.

archeologiczne", *SBO* 3 (2011) 109-125 (see p. 112-115 and 119-120, fig. 1-2). The technique is improperly called 'sunk relief' ('relief wklęsty': p. 112); we deal in fact with 'bas-reliefs', the figures being projected from the ground, as suggested also by the name *miplešet*.

36 All along the article of S. Długoborski, "Wpływ imperialnej Asyrii na religię Judy", *SBO* 3 (2011) 143-156, 2 Kings 21:7 is misinterpreted, because the author forgets the relative clause *'āšer 'āsāh*, qualifying *hā-'āšērāh*. The relative clause is omitted in the Septuagint, because *'āšērāh* is translated there by ἄλσος.

37 Although the importance of the shrine in Yahwistic religion appears in the repeated biblical mentions of 'the place (*māqōm*) which Yahweh will chose', Deuteronomistic phraseology uses *māqōm* instead of *'āšērāh*. The paramount role of the Wailing Wall in Judaism, of the Holy Places in Christianity, of the Ka'ba in Islam expresses the same hope of being 'blessed by God and His shrine'.

38 See here above, n. 32.

39 E. Lipiński, *On the Skirts of Canaan in the Iron Age. Historical and Topographical Researches* (OLA 153; Leuven 2006) 373-378.

40 See here above, n. 32.

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The lack of any cultic reference does not justify the assumption that these passages allude to cult prostitution performed by young Judaeen women, although the existence of fertility cults in Canaan was certainly known. In any case, such texts show that rural sanctuaries did not disappear, and the treatise *ʿAbōdāh zārāh* 6:8 of the Tosefta still refers to Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar, who in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. mentions three *ʿāšērōt* sites in the Land of Israel: the evergreen carob-tree of Kfar Qasem (or Petem), the carob-tree of Kfar Pigsha, and the sycamore which is amidst the pines of the Carmel. Their exact locations are unknown.

It is suitable to refer also to the Syriac translations of the word *ʿāšērāh*, since the Peshitta version of the Pentateuch and of the Prophets goes back to the first and second centuries A.D. Its translation of *ʿāšērāh* is variegated<sup>41</sup>. In the Peshitta Pentateuch, which goes probably back to the first century A.D., the rendering of *ʿāšērāh* depends on the immediate context. In Deut. 7:5 and 12:3, where *ʿāšērāh* is governed by the verb *šābar*, ‘to break’, the translator regarded *ʿāšērāh* as a construction and used the noun *ḥeš<sup>e</sup>ltā*: ‘break their fabrics’, obviously some chapels, not ‘cast images’, since idols are mentioned further in the text. Deut. 16:21 prohibits ‘the planting of an *ʿāšērāh* of any kind of tree’, clearly suggesting the translation *šeltā*, ‘grove’, like in the Septuagint. No doubt, a sacred grove is intended. The translator of the Book of Judges confused *ʿāšērāh* (Judg. 6:25-30) with *ʿāštārōt* (Judg 2:13; 10:6) and rendered both words by *est<sup>r</sup>rā*, a dialectal form of the theonym *Ištar*, used in the general sense of ‘goddess’. Instead, *ʿāšērāh* appearing frequently in the Books of Kings is translated by *deḥ<sup>a</sup>ltā*, ‘worship’, a term used especially in *beyt deḥ<sup>a</sup>ltā*, ‘temple’. The word certainly designates a sacred place or object. In Is. 17:8 and 27:9, the Persian loanword *ptakrā*, ‘sculpture’, designates a divine figure, like *glīpā*, ‘graven image’, in Micah 5:13. Further renderings are found in the Chronicles, which have been translated later, probably in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D.: Greek *adriantā*, ‘statue’ (2 Chron. 14:2), *ḥugbā*, ‘idol’ (2 Chron. 33:19), *nemrā*, ‘leopard’ (2 Chron. 31:3; 33:3)<sup>42</sup>, and *šalmā*, ‘image’ (2 Chron. 24:18). In 2 Chron. 19:3, the translator confused *h<sup>r</sup>rw*t with Syriac *ʿšadt* and rendered the phrase by *dmā zakyā lā ʿšadt*, ‘you did not shed innocent blood’<sup>43</sup>. The translator of the

41 M.P. Weitzman, “Lexical Clues to the Composition of the Old Testament Peshitta”, *Studia Aramaica. New Sources and New Approaches* (eds. M.J. Geller, J.C. Greenfield, and M.P. Weitzman; Journal of Semitic Studies. Supplement 4; Oxford 1995) 217-246 (see p. 229).

42 Weitzman, “Lexical Clues” (n. 41) 229, n. 35, relates this translation to the worship of *bar nemrē* at Harran, attested in the 6<sup>th</sup> century by Jacob of Sarug: J.P.P. Martin, “Discours de Jacques de Saroug sur la chute des idoles”, *ZDMG* 29 (1875) 107-147 (see p. 110, line 54).

43 Weitzman, “Lexical Clues” (n. 41) 229.

Chronicles thus regarded *'āšērāh* as an idol, but never took it for the proper name of a deity.

#### 4. Cult Prostitution

If the cubicles rented by women according to 2 Kings 23:7 are no common brothels or witches' dens located in the precinct of the Temple, this would be the unique biblical text referring to cult prostitution. In fact, no relation to cult appears even in the poetical text of Hos. 4:14, where *zbh*, 'to butcher', does not mean 'to sacrifice', since there is no ritual context. Besides, *qedeshot* is used in synonymic parallelism with *zonot*, while the curtly styled 'butchering' refers to men's banqueting with harlots,<sup>44</sup> called *qedeshot* like in Deut. 23:18, dating from the Persian period. However, *qēdēšāh* in Deut. 23:18 may have an additional connotation, the same as its parallel *qādēš*. In fact, the specific appellations 'sons of Israel' and 'daughters of Israel' could indicate that the prohibition concerns religious 'prostitution', i.e. participation in illicit cult practices and rites of foreign origin: Canaanite, Persian, Hellenistic. The Alexandrian translators of the Septuagint, working in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C., interpreted the passage in this way, since they translated *qādēš* by *τελισκόμενος* and *qēdēšāh* by *τελεσφόρος*, i.e. 'initiates' into esoteric 'mystery' rites. In other words, the local Hellenistic conditions of Alexandria were taken into account in the translation of the Hebrew text, which was not referring to sodomites in the proper sense<sup>45</sup>. There is no prove before talmudic times that *qādēš* had such a meaning. Its use could just express contempt for men officiating in illicit local shrines. Instead, 'sodomite' was certainly the meaning of *qādēš* in Rabbinic literature. In the *Sifrei* to Deuteronomy §260, probably compiled in the fifth century A.D., and in the midrash *Esther Rabbah* to 1:9, dating from the same period, the *qedeshim* are regarded as sodomites. They are related to the story of Judg. 19:22-25, what shows that they are not considered to be male cult prostitutes.

Levantine cult practices, probably revealed by some references to the *qdšt* at Ugarit and to the *kezrētu* in Mesopotamia, have been exported by

44 The usual translations of this passage do not make sense. Slawik, "Czy w starożytnym Izraelu ...?" (n. 2) 54-57, translates 'with consecrated ones they offer meal sacrifices', thus implying the idea of banqueting, but in relation to cult.

45 Such an appellation is not found elsewhere. Male cult prostitutes, called 'dogs' (*klbm*), not *qdšm*, are apparently attested at that time by a Phoenician inscription (*CIS* I, 86) listing the ministers and other attendants attached to a temple of Ashtoreth at Larnaca (Cyprus).

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Phoenicians to the Western Mediterranean and appear in Phoenician and Carthaginian colonies. Cult prostitution is thus attested at Eryx and at Sicca Veneria (Le Kef), in Tunisia. Strabo records the cult prostitution practiced in the past at Eryx, at the western extremity of Sicily, where people worshipped Ashtoreth, identified by him with Aphrodite. We read in his *Geography* VI, 2, 6, written in the early first century A.D.: ‘Eryx, a lofty hill, is also inhabited. It has a temple of Aphrodite that is held in exceptional honour, and in early times was full of consecrated maidservants (*hierodouloi*), who had been dedicated in fulfilment of vows not only by the people of Sicily but also by many people from abroad; but at the present time, just as the settlement itself, so the temple is in want of men, and the multitude of consecrated maidservants has disappeared’.

One should stress that no Greek term designating prostitutes is used, neither *pornae*, nor *dicteriades*, name of Athenian harlots working in brothels, nor *hetaerae*, as independent courtesans were called. The women of the Eryx temple were ‘consecrated maidservants’ of the goddess. The same qualification *hierodouloi* is attributed to Levites in the Greek text of 1 Ezra 1:3; they were ‘Israel’s consecrated servants’.

Strabo’s information is confirmed by Diodorus of Sicily who has collected earlier testimonies in his *Library of History* IV, 83, 4. However, the value of such literary reports, based on unproven sources and written when the sanctuary in question no longer functioned, must be strengthened by first hand documents, provided by inscriptions dating from the time of the temple’s activity. Besides, Strabo’s terminology is confusing and imprecise, since he applies the term *hierodouloi* also to the harlots of Corinth (*Geography* VIII, 6, 20), although cult prostitution was unknown in Greece. True, Corinthian harlots apparently had a particular devotion to Aphrodite, what may have created some confusion in Strabo’s mind or in his sources. Fortunately, Punic inscriptions witness, among other, the presence of two generations of hierodules at Eryx, the mother and her daughter (*CIS* I, 3776). The fact that a ‘servant of Ashtoreth’ was known as a daughter of another ‘servant of Ashtoreth’ indicates that at the very least those women did not have a conventional family life.

Sicca Veneria was renown in Roman times for the sexual rites performed by ‘Punic women’ in the magnificent temple of Venus, as Ashtoreth was then called in Latin. This is recorded in the first century A.D. by Valerius Maximus in his *Memorable Doings and Sayings* II, 6, 15, and confirmed by Solinus in his *Collection of Memorable Things* XXVII, 8, by Aelian in his work *On the Characteristics of Animals* IV, 2, and more importantly by Latin inscriptions mentioning a manager, a priest, a maidservant of Venus,

*Ven(eris) ser(va)* (CIL VIII, 15946)<sup>46</sup>. The qualification *qdšt* does not occur so far in Punic inscriptions, but the epithet *Coddosa* follows the feminine name *Calpurnia* in a Latin inscription from Dougga (Tunisia)<sup>47</sup>. It provides a Punic, so far unique and slightly different vocalization of *qdsh*. It seems to be a transcription of *\*qaddōšat*, with vowel harmony and loss of final *t*. This form, going back to *\*qaddāšat*<sup>48</sup> with lengthened middle radical, probably provides an ancient Phoenician-Punic pronunciation of the title *qdšt*. Whether Calpurnia, dead at the age of 35 as recorded in the inscription, was involved in some cultic activity is unknown, but neither her parents nor a husband are mentioned in her epitaph. Dougga, where the inscription was found, is located 50 km. north-east of Sicca Veneria, thus no connection can be established between the two places, but Dougga had several temples, in particular those of Minerva, of Caelestis, and of Saturn, who continued the Punic sacral tradition of Baal-Hamon in Roman times.

Also archaeological excavations provide some evidence on cult prostitution and they may shed a light on the houses mentioned in 2 Kings 23:7. One can imagine that they formed a row of huts built along the wall of the Temple complex, like at Pyrgi and at Dura-Europos. Pyrgi, today Santa Severa, north of Rome, was the port of Caere (Cerveteri) in southern Etruria. During excavations conducted by the Istituto di Etruscologia of the University of Rome, remains of various ancient buildings have been uncovered at the site, among others the so-called Temple B, where a quasi-bilingual inscription in Etruscan and Phoenician on three gold lamina has been found. It can safely be dated around 500 B.C.<sup>49</sup> The inscription records the dedication by king Thefarie Velianas or Veliunas of a 'holy place' to the Etruscan goddess Uni (the Latin Juno), called Ashtoreth in the Phoenician version of the inscription. This 'holy place' must have been situated within Temple B, and it was assumed that it was the room where the *hieros gamos* or 'sacred marriage' was enacted by the king with a priestess personifying the goddess. This cannot be proved, but archaeological findings indicate that temple B was a site where 'sacred prostitution' was performed by devotees coming to the shrine to venerate the goddess.

In fact, archaeologists have uncovered a series of about 17 small rooms (3 x 2 m.) running along the temenos wall on the south side of Temple B

<sup>46</sup> A. Cadotte, *La romanisation des dieux. L'interpretatio romana en Afrique du Nord sous le Haut-Empire* (RGRW 158; Leiden 2007) 578-581.

<sup>47</sup> CIL VIII, 26763; cf. K. Jongeling, *North African Names from Latin Sources* (Leiden 1994) 37.

<sup>48</sup> This vocalization of *qdšt* corresponds exactly to the pattern *qattāl* of professional names.

<sup>49</sup> The inscription with a translation and a commentary can be found in J.C.L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions. Vol. 3. Phoenician Inscriptions* (Oxford 1982), No. 42.

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at Pyrgi, contemporary with the temple and thus dating to the very end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Already at the first onset, this has been interpreted by the excavator Giovanni Colonna as quarters where sacred prostitution was practiced<sup>50</sup>. These cells are rightly regarded as an archaeological evidence of Lucilius' *scorta Pyrgensia*, 'the Pyrgi harlots'<sup>51</sup>. Since they belong to the temple complex and are so small, one can without hesitation discard the interpretation regarding them as a hostel or 'motel'. A similar series of 9 small rooms from Roman times was discovered at Dura-Europos next to the shrines of Atargatis and of Adonis. These rooms were probably used also by hierodules, apparently serving the deity under the responsibility of a *desmophylax*, comparable to the Babylonia and Neo-Assyrian 'supervisor of the *kezrētu*-women'<sup>52</sup>.

Dura-Europos is an ancient city on the Euphrates, in Syria, the exact location of which was discovered accidentally in 1921 at al-Salihiye. The site has been extensively excavated by French and American expeditions in the years 1922–1936. The best preserved buildings, in particular the famous synagogue with its unique paintings, date from the Parthian and Roman periods, dating down to A.D. 256, when the city was conquered and destroyed by the Sassanids. Next to the synagogue, near to the western wall of the city, stood the temple dedicated to Adonis and to the Aramaic goddess Atargatis, whose Greek counterpart was Aphrodite. Flanking the temple proper, nine rooms ranked along the east side of the court display a striking uniformity<sup>53</sup>. They are square or rectangular chambers, 4.10 m. to 5.10 m. deep. With one exception (room 37), low benches, 0.20-0.25 m. high and about 1 to 1.20 m. wide, skirt the rooms on two or three sides. Two rooms are dated by inscribed lintels to A.D. 153 and A.D. 157/8<sup>54</sup>: they were dedicated respectively by eight men of seven different families and by a high priest<sup>55</sup>. The amphorae partially sunk in the floor and a jar-stand, uncovered in these rooms, show that these places were used for 'sacred meals', taken with wine by men re-

<sup>50</sup> G. Colonna, "Novità sui culti di Pyrgi", *Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia* 57 (1984–1985) 57-88; idem, *Santuari d'Etruria, regione toscana* (Milano 1985) 128.

<sup>51</sup> The phrase occurs in a fragment of Lucilius, a satirist of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., preserved in a Servius' scholion to *Aeneid*: Fr. Marx, *C. Lucilii Carminum reliquiae* (Leipzig 1904–1905), frg. 1271.

<sup>52</sup> Cooper, *RLA* XI, p. 19.

<sup>53</sup> These are rooms 4, 5, 37, 38, 43 ff. in the plan of fig. 42 in M.I. Rostovtzeff, F.E. Brown, and C.B. Welles (eds.), *The Excavations at Dura-Europos. Preliminary Report of the Seventh and Eighth Seasons of Work, 1933–1934 and 1934–1935* (New Haven 1939).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 140.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 187, 168-169.

clining on the benches<sup>56</sup>. In A.D. 181/2 two rooms have been added to these temple quarters: a peristyle and a cellar, showing the importance of wine in the para-ritual activities of the sanctuary. The dedication is made in the name of two temple officials: Solaios and Gornaïos, son of a high priest and *desmophylax*, ‘jailer’. The latter was certainly no gaoler of a prison, but very likely the overseer in charge of some temple inmates<sup>57</sup>, probably hierodules or women jailed for adultery, as suggested by the remains of a woman found in the precincts of the Apollo temple at Bulla Regia (Tunisia) with an iron collar bearing the Latin inscription: ‘Adulteress. Prostitute. Seize (me), because I fled from Bulla Regia’<sup>58</sup>. Women dwelling in the temple were most likely devoted, among other things, to some performances at the ‘sacred banquets’, like dancing and singing, what was possibly followed by sex services. This is suggested by the ‘taverns’ mentioned along a ‘garden of Adonis’ in a Greek inscription from Latakia, Syria<sup>59</sup>.

Such ‘taverns’ and the function of *desmophylax* are particular characteristics of temples of Adonis, whose name means in Phoenician ‘my Lord’ and was the surname of the main god of Byblos<sup>60</sup>. Annual festivals, called Adonia, were held in his honour at Byblos and also, from the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. onward, at different places in Greece and the Middle East. The central idea was his death and his resurrection after a mourning day<sup>61</sup>. The goddess played a key role here. Now, sacrifice of virginity belonged at Byblos to the ritual of the festival according to Lucian’s *Syrian Goddess* and a ‘sacred marriage’ with Aphrodite was taking place in the Alexandrian ritual, described in *Idyll 15* of Theocritus, thus in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. Its mythical aim was probably the ‘rebirth’ of Adonis.

\* \* \*

Summarizing, cult prostitution occurs when sexual acts are part of a religious ritual involving some connection with a deity. Instead, prostitution performed occasionally by members of the temple staff on temple grounds, thus contributing to the income of the sanctuary, does not deserve such a qualification. It is simply harlotry. Outsiders, not involved personally in

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 156-157.

<sup>57</sup> E. Lipiński, *Dieux et déesses de l’univers phénicien et punique* (OLA 64; Leuven 1995) 98-101, with references and further literature.

<sup>58</sup> *CIL* VIII, 25006.

<sup>59</sup> L. Jalabert, R. Mouterde, and Cl. Mondesert, *IGLS* IV (Paris 1955), No. 1260.

<sup>60</sup> E. Lipiński, “Adonis”, *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, new ed. (Detroit 2005), vol. I, 34-36.

<sup>61</sup> Lucian, *The Syrian Goddess* 6.

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ritual performances, may not have been able to distinguish these basically different things or simply could judge, for some reasons, that any distinction is here superfluous.

Cult prostitution existed in some parts of the Near East and in Phoenician colonies of the Western Mediterranean. It belonged to ritual practices in the Canaanite surrounding of ancient Israel and Judah, but its faint records in the Hebrew Bible serve as metaphoric allusions to Israel's infidelity to God or as synonyms of harlotry. Modern translations of the Hebrew Bible may unfortunately give another impression. There is a single passage in 2 Kings 23:7 that might contain an obscure reference to cult prostitution, since it mentions a shrine rented to women in the precinct of the Temple and destroyed by king Josiah. Cult prostitution should in any case be clearly distinguished from passage rites having a religious dimension and performed once in a lifetime, what some modern writers seem to overlook. Rites accompanying the sacrifice of virginity in a woman belong to this category of ritual practices, but they are not attested in the Bible and are rarely referred to in the Semitic world.

As conclusion, one can stress that Hebrew *qdšt* should be simply translated by 'harlot' or 'prostitute'. As for the masculine noun *qdš*, it could be rendered by 'priestling', except in Deut. 23:8 and possibly in 2 Kings 23:7, where 'pimps' might be an appropriate translation.

