Maritime Trade: Sailors, Prostitutes, and the Cult(s) of Aphrodite/Astarte in Ancient Corinth

Walter Penrose

***

“The voyage to Corinth is not for every man’. For there too on account of the plentitude of courtesans, who were sacred to Aphrodite, many a foreigner came to take holiday in that place. The merchants and soldiers who went there spent all of their money, so much so that this proverb about them became famous.”

So wrote the geographer Strabo (12.3.36, ed. Lassere). Although the existence of “sacred prostitution” has been questioned by a number of scholars, it remains plausible that there was at least some relationship among the spheres of prostitution, the divine, and maritime trade in ancient Corinth. Archaeological and textual evidence suggest that prostitutes and their clients, sailors, came together in worship of Aphrodite/Astarte, an important sea deity, to gain her assistance in fair voyage. Literary evidence relates that courtesans engaged in prayer and ritual offerings to Aphrodite to fulfill vows of or otherwise assist the well being of their clients, and thus performed religious functions. That Corinthian prostitution occurred in conjunction with the cult of the goddess in the fifth-century BCE is strongly suggested by a primary source, a scholion or drinking song of Pindar, preserved by Athenaeus (13.573f-574b, ed. Kaibel). Athenaeus asserts that an athlete by the name of Xenophon vowed to lead courtesans to the “Mistress of Cyprus,” an offering in return for the goddess’ favor. Similarly, Athenaeus (13.573c-d) relates that “It is an ancient custom in Corinth, as Chamaeleon of Herakleia records in his About Pindar, that whenever the city prayed to Aphrodite concerning important matters, to invite as many courtesans as possible to the supplication, and they pray to the goddess and are later present at the sacred rites. And when the Persian army attacked Greece, as Theopompus writes and Timaeus records in his seventh book, the Corinthian courtesans went into the temple of Aphrodite and prayed for the deliverance of the Greeks.” That deliverance came, ultimately, not on land but on the sea at the Battle of Salmis in 480 BCE.

Archaeological and comparative evidence further suggests that the main venues of prostitution were taverns/brothels in the agora and possibly the surrounding areas of smaller shrines dedicated to Aphrodite/Astarte in the potter’s quarters near the city wall and gate, as opposed to the temple of Aphrodite on the Acrocorinth. A plate inscribed with the name of the goddess Astarte serves as evidence of what may have been a cross-cultural worship of Astarte/Aphrodite by sailors at Corinth. Caches of figurines found at the so-called “Taven of Aphrodite”, thought to be a brothel by Morgan, further evince that the worship of Aphrodite by prostitutes at Corinth was influenced by the worship of Phoenician sailors and shipping merchants. In this paper, I will tentatively argue that the relationship of prostitution to the cult of Aphrodite at Corinth was a result of the importance of Aphrodite as both a maritime and sex goddess, and hence as a patroness of

both sailors and courtesans who conceivably came together in her worship. Aphrodite’s relationship with the sea as the goddess Euploia is an aspect of her divinity that has not received enough scholarly attention, particularly at Corinth. At the same time, I will discuss the limitations of the evidence, noting the lateness of many of the literary sources, the uncertainties surrounding the extant archaeological evidence, as well as the riskiness of using comparative evidence derived from other ancient Greek sites, where the maritime importance of Aphrodite Euploia is better documented.