"Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth" (Strabo 8.6.20):

Sailors, Sex, and the Cult of Aphrodite/Venus in Roman Corinth

Barbette Spaeth

A close connection has long existed among sailors, ports, and prostitutes. Think of the famous "red light" district of Storyville in New Orleans or, more locally, Strait Street near the Great Harbour in Valetta, where at least from Crusader times sailors mingled with the local "ladies of the night." The connection was also clear in classical antiquity. The city of Corinth in Greece was well known for the services that its prostitutes provided to sailors passing between the eastern and western Mediterranean through the Isthmus. According to Strabo (8.6.20), "The city was frequented and enriched by the multitudes who resorted there on account of these women. Masters of ships freely squandered all their money, and thus the proverb, 'Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth.'"

Strabo, however, is apparently reflecting on a rather more uncommon feature of prostitution in Corinth. The passage begins, "The Sanctuary of Aphrodite at Corinth was so rich that it had possessed more than a thousand hierodules, courtesans, whom both men and women used to dedicate to the goddess." This passage has often been taken as referring to "sacred prostitution" and applied to elucidate such texts as Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The evidence for this practice, however, is problematic, and close examination suggests that if it existed at all in Greek Corinth, which itself is highly questionable, it had died out by the mid 1st century BCE, when Corinth became a Roman colony.

The putative literary evidence for sacred prostitution in the cult of Aphrodite/Venus in Corinth consists of three passages: two in the Geography of Strabo (8.6.20 and 12.3.36), dated to the early 1st c. CE, and one in the Deipnosophistae of Athenaeus (13.573c-574d), dated to the early 3rd c. CE. The latter includes quotations from 5th c. BCE poets Simonides and Pindar, a mention of an inscription dated to this period, and three citations from authors of the 4th-3rd c. BCE (Chamaeleon, Theopompos, and Timaeus). I will argue that all the references that postdate the establishment of the colony are missing at least one of the criteria for sacred prostitution, which I define as (1) payment (2) for sexual acts (3) conducted in a cultic context (in a sanctuary or a ritual dedicated to a deity conducted elsewhere).

Archaeological evidence for sacred prostitution is also missing from Roman Corinth. Representations of Aphrodite/Venus found in private dwellings or businesses, even brothels, simply signify her popularity as a patron deity, not necessarily a connection with cultic sexual acts. In addition, no evidence exists for the practice in the four known sanctuaries dedicated to Aphrodite/Venus in Roman Corinth: at the port of Cenchreae, in the Craneum district, on the west side of the Forum, and atop Acrocorinth. The two excavated sites that have been associated with the sanctuary at Cenchreae, the Brick Building near the north mole of the harbor and the structure on the ridge above, have not provided any evidence for sacred prostitution. Interestingly, according to Pausanias (2.2.4), the sanctuary of Aphrodite Melaenis in the district of Craneum just outside the city walls was located near the tomb of the famous courtesan Lais; however, this fact is hardly probative and the sanctuary itself has not been located. The other two sites consist only of small temples in very visible spaces and, I shall argue, are dedicated to Roman divinities associated with the imperial family, Venus Genetrix and Venus Victrix, and so highly unlikely to be connected with the practice. The premise that sacred prostitution was practiced in Roman Corinth must therefore be regarded at least as unproven, if not outright incorrect.