

# Section 6 – Devolution of the Goddess

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## Temple Life

There are sparse details about temple life before 3000 BCE. However, by 2350 BCE, the temples had grown into large, well-organised operations with 1000 or more permanent staff.<sup>1</sup> These included the priestesses, but also many men, who worked as labourers and animal herders. There were even slave women.<sup>2</sup>

Overseeing the temple was the entu (originally en) or High Priestess. She had the ear of the deity. In the private Holy of Holies, that part of the temple reserved for the deity and her servants, the priestesses could serve and confer with her. In the earliest temples, this was a real garden and even in much later representations foliage is often part of the decoration of such spaces. The idea was adopted into Hebrew Scripture as a source for the Garden of Eden, where Jahweh liked to walk and talk to the humans. This close relationship with the deity gave the priestesses political power.

The outer part of the temple was a busy place. In addition to the priestesses and worshippers, there would have been traders, business people and political leaders, all seeking the blessing of the deity through the intercession of the High Priestess. To those with whom she sympathised would come financial and political reward and success; but for those who were rejected, only the bitter ash of failure. It would be naive to imagine that the priestesses did not appreciate the gifts that might buy their support.

At the same time, the Temple of Inanna was a place where the priestesses indulged in sex, in public. We have drawings of specially- designed couches that allowed the woman to recline in comfort while the man, standing, penetrated her. This practice has often been pejoratively called ‘Temple Prostitution’. What was really going on?

Many pleasures were available in the Temple. Beer, for example, was much loved by the Sumerians and by 3400 BCE they had already established the cultivation of opium, which they called Hul Gil, or ‘the joy plant’.<sup>3</sup> The air would have been fragrant with perfume and incense,

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<sup>1</sup> Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy, Volume 1*. Oxford University Press. 1986.

<sup>2</sup> It is possible that the Temple ‘slaves’ were women who through misfortune had become destitute and had turned to the Temple for shelter and help. In the later period, when war became endemic, there may have been many women whose husbands had been killed in combat and who had to turn to this solution.

<sup>3</sup> Booth, Martin. *Opium: A History*. Simon & Schuster. 1996; also Latimer, Dean, and Goldberg, Jeff. *Flowers in the Blood: The Story of Opium*. Franklin Watts, 1981.

and there would have been music. This was a holy place, and while human pleasures were certainly indulged in and enjoyed, these would have been under the eye of the senior priestesses, who would have maintained order and decorum. Most of all, this was a place of women, where their sexuality was celebrated and not under the control of any man.

The Eanna Temple or House of Heaven was a place in the living world where women could savour all of the pleasures of life in the company of the great goddess Inanna, personified by her priestesses. It was run by women for women, but men could and did enjoy the pleasures it offered.

Temple sex was probably a lingering echo of a time, a thousand years before and more, when women really were in control of all aspects of their lives and reproductive sex was seen as a holy act of worship. The Temple harked back to a time when women had been free, in the matriarchal groups that were at the centre of earlier cultures. There they could enjoy the company of other women, in the presence of the Goddess, and if they felt like it, enjoy sex with a stranger who caught their eye. Perhaps it was where women would go to meet their lovers, knowing that jealous husbands could not intervene, and where they were supported by a matriarchal sisterhood of women, led by the High Priestess.

Sumerian women had already been disempowered by the middle of the third millennium BCE. They remained, for all of their lives, the property of their fathers but were held on long-term lease by the men to whom they were married.<sup>4</sup> In the main, these were arranged marriages, which were probably negotiated on their behalf without their permission and, as is the case today, settled on the grounds of the mutual benefit of the men involved. And so what does a woman, married to a man for whom she has no sexual desire but still has the needs of any woman, do? She goes to the Temple and sips some potent liquor, smokes some narcotics and there, in the perfumed anonymity of the sisterhood of the Goddess, she enjoys carefree, blameless sex with a handsome stranger whom she will never see again.

The women having sex in the Temple of the Goddess in Sumer – which were equally houses of all sorts of mortal pleasure – were not doing this to make money or because they were coerced, but because they wanted to. Women in Sumer were proud of their beauty, fertility and seductiveness, and they chose to have sex in the Temple because it was legal, while having adulterous sex with a neighbour was not.

Most women were virginal, sexually intact until their marriage as teenagers, and baby-factories after that. They had no choice in this. In the Temple, they could relax, be beautiful, watch as men

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<sup>4</sup> This arrangement may reflect a limitation of a husband's rights over his wife, since she could appeal to her father in the case of abuse.

surveyed them, perhaps meeting and physically enjoying men to whom they were far more attracted than the husbands chosen for them. In this place, they knew that they were desired and knew that this gave them power. And here they were protected by the Goddess herself.

This freedom, maintained for thousands of years in defiance of an increasingly controlling and misogynistic patriarchy, represented the last bastion of women's power. Until Roman times and beyond, the right of a woman to control her own sexuality was a central plank of Goddess culture, and one reason why the Goddess was so hated by the male priests who eventually came to power, and the patriarchy that supported them.

Goddess culture is not, as monotheist apologists have so often ranted, about the 'pleasures of the flesh', usually stated in such a way as to imply that there might be something wrong in that. There is no moral dimension in sex; that is an invention of the patriarchy. Goddess culture teaches that our purpose should be to have a full and complete life here on Earth while we are alive. It implies a concern for the living, for the people around us and the world in which we live, indeed the planet itself. Amongst them and in this place must our happiness be found, for there is no other place or time that it can be. Goddess culture does not trade off the slavery of mindless 'obedience' to a distant and harsh god, through his cadre of priests, against the unproven and unprovable promise of happiness after death. Instead, it implies a desire for balance and moderation, protection and nurture here and now.