

Chapter 59

Corinth

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I shall come to know fortunate Corinth
Poseidon's porch on the Isthmus
Glorious in its young men. (Pindar, *Olympian Ode xiii*)

Young women, hostesses to many, handmaidens
Of Attraction in wealthy Corinth
Who bum the golden tears of fresh frankincense,
Often you soar in your thoughts
To Aphrodite in the sky,
The mother of loves. (Pindar fr. 307)

The oldest settlement in the vicinity of Corinth dates to perhaps 4000 BC. This is probably closer to the place that Homer knew as Corinth, which he called Ephyra; its legendary kings were Sisyphus and Bellerophon, and it is also the place where the murderous sorceress Medea lived with her husband Jason, the Captain of the Argo, before she set about killing Corinthian nobility and family alike. Euripides wrote a tragedy about her that bears her name. Corinth was also the place where Oedipus grew up as the adopted son of King Polybus, before heading off to Thebes to fulfill the famous prophesy of the Oracle at Delphi about killing his father and wedding his mother. The later Greek and Roman Ancient Corinth is at the foot of the Acrocorinth, a high natural citadel, about 8 kilometers from Modern Corinth. It was settled by Dorian descendants of Heracles, the much-loved Greek hero, in the 8th century. The kings known as Bacchiads came from this race, and ruled Corinth until overthrown by Kypselis in c. 655 BC. Kypselis implemented the second longest tyranny in Greece, being succeeded by Periander and Kypselis II. The latter was overthrown by a popular movement. Tyrannies, as both Aristotle and the Oracle at Delphi (who predicted the overthrow of Kypselis II) observed, are always short-lived. Though not properly a philosopher, Periander is given a short chapter in Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Diogenes tells us that Aristotle considered him to be one of the Seven Sages of Ancient Greece, but that Plato did not.

At times Corinth rivalled Athens for commercial dominance in Greece, and initially sided with Sparta against Athens in the Peloponnesian War, helping to defeat her in the Sicilian Expedition. Later however, wary of Sparta's growing power, she sided with Athens, Argos, and Thebes against the Spartans. The decline of Corinth seems ultimately to be the result of being caught in the middle of political situations between Athens and Sparta, and inciting wars that she was incapable of winning. Destroyed by the Roman general Mummius in 146 BC, Corinth was re-established as a Roman Colony by Julius Caesar and became the capital of Roman Greece.

Above all, Corinth was famous for two things in the ancient world—wealth and prostitution. It is possible to overestimate Corinth's geographical position as a crossroads as the reason for her success in these areas. The expense of land carriage in ancient Greece makes it much more plausible to suggest that Corinth's access to sea trade with the west was more important, as is shown by the large amounts of Corinthian wares that were exported westward. Corinthian factories are famous for producing red figure vase pottery, metal works, textiles, woodwork, and statues. Corinthian craftsmen and architects were known to have contributed to the construction of several temples at Delphi, and many of the temple roofs there.

Periander's construction of a *diolkos*, or slipway, on which small ships could be transported across the Isthmus of Corinth on rollers may have helped with sea trade—the *diolkos* was in use until the 13th century; the canal which now allows for the passage of ships across the isthmus was first proposed by

Alexander the Great and later by the Roman emperor, Caligula, and first attempted by Nero, who struck the first blow with a golden pickaxe in 67 AD. (He committed suicide three months later.) 6000 Jewish slaves were left to complete the project, but it was abandoned due to a miscalculation of water levels—the Aegean Sea was thought to be higher than the Adriatic and hence likely to cause flooding. It was not until the 19th century that the work was completed by a French firm who started exactly where Nero had left off.

Unlike many other Greek city-states, in Corinth the citizenry partook of trade and manufacture to a very large extent. For example Corinth's rival in trade and sea power, Athens, left trade and manufacture to resident alien foreigners, metics, such as the wealthy arms merchant Cephalus of Plato's *Republic*, who gave up respect and citizenry in Syracuse in order to make money living as a foreigner in the Piraeus. It is more likely that a great deal of comparative political stability in Corinth arose from the fact that more citizens were involved in trade. As citizen merchants and traders were more keenly interested in their city's trade policies, the oligarchies that ruled Corinth were intelligent enough to make decisions that coincided with the majority opinion.

Corinth was famous for the abundance of prostitutes and lust for life shared by its citizenry. Symposium (drinking party) scenes are popular on Corinthian pottery, and the Acrocorinth was a popular symposium site. Some ancient sources claim that as many as 1000 prostitutes were dedicated to the Corinthian cult of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. The fact that Aphrodite's prostitutes were 'sacred' allowed them to escape reformist edicts against secular prostitution; this did nothing to help Corinth's reputation for licentiousness. Many ancient slang words involving prostitution or sexuality are associated with Corinth, most famously the use of the phrase 'Corinthian girl' for a prostitute. The comic playwright Aristophanes seems to use the verb *korinthiazomai* (I act the Corinthian) for 'procuring sex'. The Christian St. Paul, who lived and worked in Corinth as a tent maker in the year 51 AD, duly registered his dissatisfaction with the young Christian community there in his well-known *Letters to the Corinthians*.

Every student of classics learns the three principle architectural orders of building columns—the Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian. Corinthian columns are the most ornate of the three orders. Doric columns are plain, and shorter in height in relation to their diameter. Ionic columns have 'capitals' on top that consist of a scroll-like portion above a decorative shaft. The Ionians figured out that by employing entasis—swelling the center of the column out a bit, you can prevent the illusion of concavity. This technique is employed most famously in the Parthenon at Athens. Corinthian Columns also employ *entasis*, and their capitals have flowering, leaf-like structures that make them the most pleasing to the eye.

While her greatest athlete, Xenophon, won a victory in the *stadion* (foot race), and the pentathlon at the 464 Olympic Games, Corinth is also important as the host of the second most important ancient Greek games, the Isthmian Games, held in honor of Poseidon. The Corinthians believed that the founder of these games was their legendary king Sisyphus, one of the tortured prisoners Odysseus sees on his trip to Hades in the 11th book of Homer's *Odyssey*. His story is revisited by the French/Algerian existentialist writer, Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Sisyphus was condemned for all eternity with the task of rolling a heavy stone to the top of a hill only to have it roll back down again and be required to push it back up in perpetuity. Perhaps the Athenians had Sisyphus punished for falsely taking the credit of founding the games; according to them, their hero Theseus (son of Aegeus, namesake of the Aegean Sea) was responsible for founding them. The prize for winning the Isthmian games was often a wreath of pine, which apparently was not as popular as Olympia's olive wreaths or those of fresh celery given at Nemea, 20 kilometers SW of Corinth. Perhaps the most famous victor at the Isthmian games was the emperor Nero, who competed in musical composition in 66–67 AD—while he failed at the canal, he won at music, perhaps characteristic of the man who fiddled while Rome burned.

Corinth is the location of the legendary meeting between Alexander the Great and Diogenes the Cynic. Diogenes is from Sinope on the Black Sea Coast, but seems to have taken up residence in the Corinthian suburb of Craneum at about the time Alexander was rounding up troops in support of an invasion against Persia. Diogenes had something of a reputation in Corinth, and when he did not show at the meeting of Corinthians, Alexander sought him out, only to find him sunbathing. According to Plutarch, when asked by Alexander if he wanted anything, Diogenes replied to the great military leader

‘Stand out of my sunlight’. Alexander is reported to have said that if he could not be Alexander, he would like to be Diogenes. A more historically important meeting took place at Corinth in 337 BC, when Phillip II of Macedon summoned a number of states to the city seeking their allegiance. For the purpose of this meeting, a large *stoa* or porch was constructed. Known simply as the South Stoa, it is the largest secular building in Greece.

Of the site itself much that remains are merely foundations. Ancient Greek Corinth was destroyed in the Roman invasion and subsequent earthquakes in modern times (1858, 1921, 1928) have taken their toll on the Roman remains, and indeed on Modern Corinth to the north east of the ancient city. An exception is perhaps the supposed temple of Apollo that dates to the mid 6th century BC, making it one of the oldest surviving temples in Greece.

To the Northwest of the ancient city is the Roman Odeion (theatre) a few hundred metres from the North Stoa and North Market stalls. To the south of the Odeion is a collection of temples and the Glauke Fountain. East of the Odeion is a semicircular market. The old Lechaion Road, which runs straight to the port in the Gulf of Corinth, and would have been the main trading road, separates the market from public baths thought to have been donated by Eurykles of Sparta in the 1st century AD. These were praised by Pausanias, the author of Greece’s first guide book, as the finest baths in Corinth. Just below the baths is the *Peribolos* (walled enclosure) of Apollo’s Temple, probably of early construction, but later reconstructed by the Romans. Adjacent to the *peribolos* is the Peirene fountain named after a woman who cried so much that the gods turned her into a fountain. Corinth is in fact rich in natural springs, and the nearby town Loutraki is the source of one of Greece’s best bottled waters of the same name. Still strolling south on the Lechaion Road, one reaches the Roman Bema, a speaker’s platform for public gatherings. Straight ahead of the Bema is the south Stoa, the place of the meeting called by Phillip II. Behind this is the Bouleterion or voting house. The Bema is actually in between two sets of central shops to the east and the west. To the west of the western shops is an area containing Byzantine ruins (5th-8th centuries) and Frankish ruins from the 14th century.

References and Suggestions for Further Reading

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