

Corinth: Geography, History, and Archaeology

Corinth is located about 40 miles west of Athens. It lies across a narrow isthmus connecting the mainland of Greece to the Peloponnese, the large land mass to the south that made up most of the Roman province called Achaia, and which is now southern Greece.

The Isthmus of Corinth has been of strategic importance throughout the history of Greece, since it connects the Aegean Sea to the east with the Ionian and Adriatic Seas to the west. Two important ports were situated on the isthmus in ancient times: Lechaion on the Gulf of Corinth in the west and Cenchrea on the Saronic Gulf to the east.

Paul made three trips to Corinth, and spent more than a year and a half there during his second missionary journey.

History

The city of Corinth has enjoyed a long and important history. The first settlement dates to about 4000 BC. This settlement eventually disappeared, but archaeological excavations have turned up evidence of eight distinct settlements from before 2000 BC. Because it was a good location for habitation, with plenty of water and good land for farming, there was a continual presence in the area.

About 1000 BC, Dorians from northern Greece settled in Corinth. By this time, the city had become an important stop on the trade route between northern and southern Greece, as well as a major port city for seafaring merchants and other travelers.

This strategic position and wealthy economy aided Corinth in becoming a key player in many political alliances. It was one of three major powers in Greece by the fifth century, and was an important member of the political leagues of Greek city-states that dominated Greece before the rise of the Romans in the second century BC. Their leadership in these leagues proved to be their downfall; the city was destroyed in 146 BC after the league resisted the spread of Roman dominance.

Although the city remained largely uninhabited for about a hundred years, Corinth was located in too prime a location to be desolate for long. In 44 BC, the city was rebuilt by the Romans and made the capital of Achaia. The population was comprised mostly of slaves and freedmen (former slaves); estimates vary, but there were as many as 400,000 inhabitants.

The Corinthians were best-known for a particular type of bronze they produced; they used it to manufacture items of a lovely pink-gold shade that was known as Corinthian bronze. The formula was a highly guarded secret at the time, and has since been lost to posterity. The Corinthians were also famed for their terra-cotta pottery. Other products included dyes, woolen materials, architecture, paintings, and sculptures.

Since many slaves were skilled in business affairs, they did well in a place so full of commercial opportunities, and Corinth once again became a city of wealth and leisure. The city was known for luxury, pleasure, and especially immorality—a concern Paul wrote about in his letters to the Corinthians.

The Diolkos and the Corinth Canal

Both economically and strategically, the Isthmus of Corinth has played a very important role in the history of Greece. It is the only land bridge connecting northern and southern Greece, so throughout history, people, armies, and commodities have all had to pass over it.

The ancient Greeks also realized that it would be the ideal place to move goods between east and west, if they could only find a way to get ships from one side of the isthmus to the other. Early in their history, the Greeks conceived of a canal across the isthmus that would make sailing around the southern end of the Peloponnese unnecessary, a sea journey that was fraught with perils. If ships could somehow cross the isthmus from the Saronic Gulf to the Corinthian Gulf on the other side, goods could be safely transported back and forth to the markets of Italy in the west and Asia Minor in the east.

A canal, however, proved beyond the engineering abilities of both Greeks and Romans, though Nero attempted it in AD 67. It wasn't until 1893 that a canal was completed, more than two millennia after it was first proposed.

However, the Greeks had another idea that they were able to execute. In the late seventh or early sixth century BC, they built a roadway called the *Diolkos* (the Slipway) across the narrowest part of the isthmus.

This engineering marvel was paved with stone and began at the very edge of the sea. Ships were taken right up to the land, placed upon wooden cylinders, and dragged onto shore. They were then loaded onto a specially-built wheeled vehicle, which was pulled the three and a half miles or so across the isthmus to the other side. There, the ships were brought back down into the water where they resumed their

journeys. The *Diolkos* remained in use until the days of Caesar Augustus (27 BC—AD 14), when larger ships finally ended its practicality.

Features of the City

The ancient city of Corinth is one of the best-excavated cities of the biblical world. The American School of Classical Studies in Athens began excavations in 1896, and, except for short interruptions, has continued through the present time. Most of the excavations of Corinth have revealed ruins from the Roman period; little of the Greek city has survived.

In the center of the city was the *agora*, the marketplace. It was adorned with colonnades and monuments, and the entryways to small shops faced into a large central square. There were more shops east and northwest.

Also northwest of the agora, archaeologists have found the remains of the Fountain of Peirene, an impressive structure built over a natural spring. Many of the central shops were supplied by water from this fountain. Beyond this lie the ruins of the Odeion, or music hall, and a large Roman theater, which could seat 14,000 people in Paul's day.

One of the most interesting discoveries for students of the Bible was found near the theater. A first-century inscription set in the paved area reads, "Erastus in return for his aedileship [the post of a chief city official] laid [this pavement] at his own expense."¹⁶ This is likely the same Erastus mentioned by Paul in Romans 16:23.

East of the *agora*, the starting line for a racecourse has been uncovered, with places for 16 runners. The Isthmian games—a contest of athletic games similar to the Olympics—were held every two years. Paul was in Corinth around this time, and may have been influenced to use the athletic metaphors in his writings, knowing his Greek audience would have been familiar with such contests.

One last connection to Paul must be mentioned. In the center of the row of shops in the *agora*, the remains of a large platform can be found. This platform has been called by various names: the bema, the rostrum, the judgment seat. The bema was used for public speaking and provided a place where civic officials could judge cases. Although open to the sky, it was an imposing structure and was once faced with white marble slabs and other decoration. Elaborate marble alcoves would have held benches on either side.

Paul appeared before Gallio, proconsul of Achaia, at the bema in Corinth (Acts 18:12-17). That experience may have been on his mind when he wrote to the Corinthian church, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may

receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10).

The Acrocorinth and the Temples

The most imposing feature of the ancient landscape around Corinth is a huge citadel of rock rising 1,886 feet above sea level just south of the city. This steep, rocky mountain is known as the Acrocorinth (which can be loosely translated "the high place of Corinth"). It was fortified in ancient times, and a small town was built on the summit.

The great temple of Aphrodite dominated the city from its place high on the eastern peak of this mountain. The temple no longer remains; however, the massive fortifications and walls still stand. It is a hard, two-hour climb to the top of the mountain. The ancient

traveler would have passed a number of temples to various Greek gods as well as sanctuaries for the mystery cults.

Ruins of many ancient temples have been uncovered in the city below as well, including six small temples near the agora. The most prominent temple to be seen today is the Temple of Apollo, which was built about 550 BC and is one of the few remaining Greek buildings among the ruins. Its seven remaining columns dominate the west side of the city.

The temple was originally rectangular in shape, and had 38 Doric columns surrounding its two rooms. Each of these columns consisted of a single stone about 24 feet high and 6 feet in diameter. An earlier temple, perhaps 100 years older, existed on this same spot.

Conclusion

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the features that once comprised the city of Corinth. The tourist can spend many hours at the archaeological park and the museum nearby. In addition, one can also explore the ruins of the Acrocorinth. Still, it is clear that Corinth was once a large, prosperous city with a thriving and cosmopolitan population. It is little wonder that the ancient Corinthians had so much to learn about what it meant to be Christians in that pagan environment!

*C. Fant and M. Reddish, *A Guide to Biblical Sites in Greece and Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 59.

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