CHAPTER 2
Corinth in a Landscape

“Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth” (Strabo 8.6.20)

One of the most striking signs of arriving in Ancient Corinth every year is traveling by public transportation from Athens, along the steep coastal road, through the mountain range of Gerania, rounding the bend near Ayioi Theodorii, and seeing Acrocorinth, the most salient physical landmark of the city. That rock is the visual focal point of a trip coming from the Scironian pass and appears as the immediate end to the road from Athens. Even at a distance, it feels near and overshadowing, signaling to the traveler his arrival at Corinth as though the city were already reached in the view of the rock. This limestone rock must have made the ancient journey to Corinth pass more quickly.

From the apex of that rock, the visitor acquires a view of the entire structure of Corinthian topography: the western coastal plain that runs to Sicyon and climbs upwards to the hills beyond; the mountains rolling southward to the Argolid; and the fascinating eastern landscape delimited sharply by the two gulfs and constricting to the bottleneck formed at the narrow Isthmus. It is this eastern landscape that is most visually fascinating when viewed from above, giving the city its imageable character and topographic uniqueness among countless Greek poleis to emerge in the Aegean basin. Whether viewed from the peak looking eastward, or from the Isthmus looking westward, the city sits in one of the most visually compelling landscapes of Greece.
If the well-known book by J.B. Salmon detailing the history and resources of the Archaic and Classical polis of Corinth can begin by highlighting the importance of the rich agricultural plain to the north and west of the urban center,¹ a study of the city’s cultural landscape in (Late) Roman times must understandably emphasize the eastern territory. For in the Roman period especially, the Isthmus and eastern landscape pointed toward the broader world and constituted the most direct route outward. The eastern landscape created and supported the commercial town and colored the imagination about ancient Corinth as a secular and wealthy cosmopolis. Although Corinth’s total territory remained important for the resource base of the Roman city, the image of the city centered decidedly in the Isthmus.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce briefly some of the ways that the Roman city of Corinth was united to its eastern landscape and how the Isthmus was cemented to the city’s image, mythology and associations as a maritime and commercial city. It was

¹ J.B. Salmon, Wealthy Corinth: A History of the City to 338 B.C., Oxford 1984, 1.
not simply an urban center that was dramatically redefined at the end of antiquity, but an entire cultural context and set of relationships focused on the territory between two seas. This chapter will attempt to show how the place of the Isthmus mattered for the life of the Roman city, and why the end of that city must consider the end of its broader landscape.

The chapter shows how the structure of the topography of the eastern territory (2.1) binds the city to the Isthmus and the wider world, and, as importantly, affects the perception of the city in its territory; and, on the other hand (2.2), how individuals in the Roman period understood the influence and consequence of geographic structure on the city’s history, as relating directly to the city’s identity, wealth, and reputation. A final section (2.3) suggests that this structure of the landscape and its ancient interpretations need not mean geographic determinism for the city’s history, and that a study of this kind (i.e., this dissertation) is justified in its focus on the Isthmus. The chapter is designed to introduce the well-known features of the eastern Corinthian territory—as these will be the basis for discussion in the remainder of the dissertation.

2.1. The Physical Landscape

When many people today think about ancient Corinth, they think of the urban remains excavated by the American School of Classical Studies over the course of a hundred years. Corinth, however, existed in a broader physical and imagined landscape that gave the city its prestige and definition in antiquity. While Corinth’s urban center, harbors (Lechaion and Kenchreai) and gulfs, Isthmian sanctuary, graves, roads, quarries, and rural settlements are often studied in isolation, dissected separately by modern scholars (and groups of scholars), the ancient town and country together constituted a narrative of places relating the city’s histories, meanings, and significant identities and associations. Despite the conventional modern designation of “Corinth” as the urban center specifically, the name in Roman times could refer to a much broader spatial and conceptual sphere.
As the ancients put it, Corinth was the city on the Isthmus. To them, the most interesting thing about the city was its position and relation to the Isthmus, and how the Isthmus was connected physically and conceptually to ancient travel and the wider world. Corinth was a city linked in ancient minds to travel and passage to and from points elsewhere. So ran the most common proverb, “It is not for every man to go to Corinth.” That phrase, however differently interpreted, always retained its basic associations with going. This particular dominant image of ancient Corinth was formed from the geological and topographical structure of the city’s territory (2.1.1 and 2.1.2) mythologized and historicized (2.2) in ancient travel literature, historical accounts, and material investments and memorializing of particular places in the land.
2.1.1. Mountains, Seas, and Land

The landscape of the Corinthia is subdivided and differentiated by a number of topographic features, including most immediately the mountains. The highest range of Mount Oneion sets a rigid backdrop to the Corinthian plain, although it did not mark the southern border of the Corinthia in either the Classical or Roman period. The southern Corinthia is continuously hilly and mountainous terrain running to the Argolid and Epidauria, marginalized from the busier northern plain by the formidable physical barrier of the Oneion range. The mountain range of Gerania east of the Isthmus, constricting at the dangerous Scironian Road, marks the easternmost territorial boundary while the land north and west of the city is visually continuous to a rise of elevation well past the Corinthian-Sicyonian border; the territory’s traditional western border was one of the north-south rivers that run through and dissect the land. The gulfs form the visual termination of Corinthian territory to the north and east, although several small islands (e.g., Evraionisos) in the Saronic Gulf belonged to the city.

Figure 2.3. The Oneion Mountain Range, with the Perdhikaria Ridge in the foreground (facing south)
At the end of the Oneion mountain range lies Acrocorinth, the geological signpost of Corinth, one of the greatest symbols of the central Corinthia that was forged by the temperaments of seismic activity. The acropolis overshadows Corinth and reaches out in all directions toward its territory, and indeed, can be seen from afar from all parts of its territory. Ridges running east-west subdivide the Isthmus into several east-west corridors whose visual termini (from the east) are the giant limestone rock Acrocorinth.

The Isthmus is the visually dramatic feature of Corinthian territory when viewed from above as the seas from both sides appear to encroach on the land. The Isthmus is most visible from Acrocorinth (or the mountains of Oneion) but the twin seas can be perceived simultaneously from lower elevations, including even the Ayios Dimitrios Ridge. This luck of geography meant that the gulfs with outlets to Asia and Italy were close enough to encourage the use of overland transport of goods but far enough to hinder the completion of a canal in antiquity; that all land travel from the east would be funneled
through the Corinthian Isthmus; and that urban center and harbors would communicate and meet in the eastern territory. The proximity of the Isthmus to the urban center also meant that the Isthmus would be a natural point of defense against invasions from the north into the Corinthia and southern Greece,² a fact that further bound the city to its eastern landscape.

Figure 2.5. The Isthmus of Corinth, from Acrocorinth (facing east)

More important for this discussion, however, is that Corinth on the Isthmus was uniquely positioned at a Mediterranean crossroad, between the landed traffic of central and southern Greece, and the watery voyages of Asia to Italy, an interesting configuration noted constantly in the Roman period (see below). Corinth was “twin-sea” and “washed from both sides” and said to be wealthy because of its position, controlling the traffic everywhere surrounding it.

2.1.2. *The Structure of the Landscape*

However we interpret ancient testimony that describe the centrality of the Isthmus for Roman Corinth (see below), the geographic features discussed above must have seriously affected the ancient experience of the city. Three important consequences of this topography can be noted.

First, the physical features of the land form several major east-west corridors that in antiquity functioned as natural conduits for roads, routes, and travel. The Isthmus and Acrocorinth are the visual eastern and western poles of a corridor flanked by a formidable mountain range (Oneion) to the south and the Corinthian Gulf to the north; harbors exist at natural breaks in the coastline to the north and east and link the city to its seas. The east-west ridges of the Corinthia separate the coastal plain from the less fertile territory immediately north of Mt. Oneion; even the terracing of the slopes and the lay of the fields reinforce these east-west corridors and structure the terrain. As Wiseman well puts it (1978, 64),

Gigantic prehistoric seismic upheavals on the Isthmus not only created the prominent elevations that terminate the land-bridge on the south (Rachi, Ayios Dimitrios ridge, Mt Onium) and southwest (Acrocorinth, Penteskouphia), but also left the flat lands terraced in a series of long rifts that run more or less east-west. Erosion and further land-shifts created a few natural ascents along this great natural stairway and they are especially important for convenient passage in the central part of the Isthmus. They provide obvious routes for cart-roads and, although the escarpments themselves are not high enough in most places to hinder greatly the traveller on foot, it is the cart-road and not the foot-path, of course, that becomes the most travelled route.

The good connections of the primary and secondary roads made possible by the natural corridors turned the entire Isthmus into a veritable travelscape (Fig. 2.7) for both locals and visitors to the region.

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3 As David Romano’s analysis suggests, even the centuriated field divisions extending across the Isthmus reinforce this basic division. See D.G. Romano, “Post–146 B.C. Land Use in Corinth, and Planning of the Roman Colony of 44 B.C.,” in T.E. Gregory (ed.), *The Corinthia in the Roman Period*, JRA Suppl. 8, Ann Arbor, MI, 1993, 9–30; and recently, D.G. Romano, “City Planning, Centuriation, and Land Division in Roman Corinth: *Colonia Laus Iulia Corinthiensis* and *Colonia Iulia Flavia Augusta Corinthiensis*”, in Williams and Bookidis 2003, 279-301.
The resulting network of roads on the Isthmus has been often discussed by topographers and historians. James Wiseman suggested at least eight travel arteries on the Isthmus (Fig. 2.8), all within the natural corridors and generally following the routes of the modern roads (Fig. 2.7). Fowler and Stilwell also suggested many smaller secondary roads and paths in the plain of the Isthmus. The entire structure of the landscape, including the division of the agricultural plain into east-west zones, and even the territory’s deep north-south ravines, funneled constant traffic along several important routes, interconnected by a variety of smaller roads. The modern roads of the Isthmus and the probable paths of the ancient roads (after Wiseman 1978) can be seen in Figures 2.6-2.8 below, as well as the following images.

These land routes, together with the four harbors of Corinth—the large harbors Lechaion and Kenchreai as well as the two ports serving the ship-road—turned the Corinthia into a crossroads of land and sea. The roads of the Isthmus connected Corinth with the Argolid, the deep Peloponnese, Sicyonia, and Megara, while the harbors connected the city to the central and northern Greece, Attica and the Aegean, and the western and eastern Mediterranean. It is often assumed that visitors to the region would have had to pass through the city center on their way, but for the traveler on the go, the more direct routes across the Isthmus would have been easier. In any case, whatever the actual volume of commerce and travel in the Roman period, there is little doubt that the Isthmus was relatively speaking a “busy” territory.

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4 J. Wiseman, *The Land of the Ancient Corinthians*, Göteborg 1978; see also Fowler and Stillwell 1932, 106: When Corinth was a great and prosperous city, when Kenchreai and Lechaeum were busy ports, and when the Isthmian Games attracted crowds of visitors, there were without doubt many roads and paths in the comparatively flat region of the Isthmus and the plains that stretched along the shores of the Corinthian and the Saronic gulfs; but of these there are no vestiges remaining.

5 In Fig. 2.8, I have added the road that must have cut straight across the Isthmus, alongside the ship-road.


7 For Lechaion and connectivity, see Rothaus 1995, 294. For how the diolkos fit into travel systems of the Corinthia and the broader world, see R.M. Cook 1979, 152-53; MacDonald 1986, 192-93. See also Sanders and Whitebread 1990, *BSA* 85, 353-65.
Figure 2.6. Map of Isthmus, with Major Ancient Place Names

Figure 2.7. Map of Isthmus with modern roads: highway, well-paved roads, and tertiary roads
Second, the visibility of Acrocorinth from some twenty kilometers away creates a compelling visual focus for the traveler from all directions. When approaching Corinth from the east, even as far as the terminus of the Scironian rocks the peak is visible, becoming invisible only through changes in elevation and blockage by ridges. The entire topography is drawn to Acrocorinth, as though a gravitational pole. The mountains to the north (Perachora) and south (Oneion), the Corinthian Gulf, and even the east-west marine terraces and ridges (e.g., Ayios Dimitrios) reinforce the pull toward the city, signified by its rock. This topography even structures the journeying itself, for the traveler by foot has Corinth (in the form of its acropolis) in sight at least two to three hours before arriving at the urban center. The walking distances between Corinth, Isthmia, and the harbors were short enough that travel ended as quickly as it began, and the small sites seen along the way were forgotten or unmentioned in light of the principal nodes and destinations (Chapter 3).
Third, the Isthmus was no typical idyllic Greek countryside with strong borders separating it from its town, but was constantly connected to the town in innumerable ways. Besides the visual and conceptual links between town and the Isthmus (see above), the eastern territory was also physically linked to the urban center by its roads and traffic. A constant and steady flow of travel east and west, north and south, linked Corinth’s urban center with its sanctuaries, rural sites, harbors, and ultimately, the broader Mediterranean. Thousands of visitors per year passed to and from, between harbors and town, and town and Isthmus, continually, but also according to the patterns and seasons of agriculture, commerce, travel, and religious festival. Consequently, we can put out of our minds the picture of a quaint and rustic countryside with isolated farmsteads scattered like dots on a map. Rather, most places on the Isthmus lie along or close to major roads with significant traffic, and were thereby highly visible to travelers and passersby and constantly linked with each other and the urban center through daily activity. The cultural features of the Isthmus—the settlements, terraces, tombs, and walls—formed
only the gathering points, physical nodes, and visual markers in a well-traveled and connected territory. The experience of this landscape in the Roman period occurred both at the nodes (e.g., the sites of Kenchreai and Isthmia) as well as in the *journeying* between these points along the network of roads. City and country did not neatly separate from one another but were united constantly in this landscape through topography and travel.

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure 2.10. View northward from Stanatopi, with the harbor of Kenchreai in foreground and inlet of the Saronic Gulf to the Isthmus in background**

Ultimately, then, the Isthmus hardly fits a typical model of town and countryside. The constant points of connection between hinterland and urban center, rather, reinforce the impression of an extension of the city to the north and east. The experience of Corinth for both visitors and residents took place well outside the town, at the harbors, games, in the fields, or walking along the way. The concepts explored here will be discussed throughout the remainder of this study.
2.2. The Myth of a Landscape

How was the Corinthian landscape understood in the Roman period? The geographic structure of the region not only predicated a certain historical and economic prestige to the city, but was itself a constant literary *topos* of the early empire. The role of geography in affecting and even determining Corinth’s history, identity, and associations was by the first-second centuries AD among the most frequent myths circulating about the city. The ancient history, mythology, and conceptions surrounding ancient Corinth in the Roman periods were linked constantly to the city’s unique geography and role as a traveler’s city. This section will explore two interrelated themes about the city and landscape in Roman times: 1) in ancient conception, the city of Corinth was tightly bound to its eastern landscape, the Isthmus; and 2) Roman authors viewed the Isthmus as a crossroads that made the city a ‘traveler’s town’ and formed its reputations for wealth, loose living, and cosmopolitanism.
2.2.1. Corinth on the Isthmus

In Roman times, Corinth was linked to the Isthmus, and the Isthmus to the city. Corinth was the city on the Isthmus, and the Isthmus was significant and remarkable as both a land bridge and a crossroads. This conceptual tie, which had been articulated hundreds of years before during the period that the Greek city existed, was ascribed fully to the developing Roman city of the first two centuries AD. As numerous authors in this period noted, the favorable position of Corinth in its landscape made it the famous city that it was.

There were three key landscape features that became cemented to the image of the city by the early Roman period: 1) the peak of Acrocorinth that offered a view in all directions; 2) the twin seas that formed the northern and eastern borders of the city; and 3) the land known as the Isthmus stretching eastward from the urban center and constricting to a narrow band of land only 6 miles wide. These features, the most visually distinct facets of the territory (see above), formed the most (if not only) important points in Corinthian geography by which the city was read and identified, even before the Roman colony redeveloped into an important cosmopolis.

Although today we are accustomed to thinking about the social and economic importance of the total land and territory for the ancient Corinthians, the popular conception of the Roman city was tilted unevenly toward its eastern territory demarcated by twin seas. This is evident, for example, by examining two commentaries on Corinthian territory in the period: Strabo’s Geography 8.6.20-23, written in the late first century BC, immediately after the refoundation of the city, and Pausanias’ Description of Greece 2.1.1-2.5.5, written in the middle of the second century AD. Both accounts depict a landscape situated in the Isthmus. Strabo’s survey of the Corinthia begins with the Isthmus (and Isthmia), and proceeds to Acrocorinth, the Peirene spring, the urban center, and the places visible from the peak. Strabo’s account largely passes over the southern and western Corinthia—the exception is a brief discussion of the town of Tenea (8.6.22) and a vague passing reference to the “parts of Corinthia and Sicyonia which lie across the
gulf opposite to Phocis, that is, towards the west.”\textsuperscript{8} His discussion of the eastern territory, on the other hand, names Isthmia, the Scironian Rocks, Lechaion, Kenchreai, Schoenus, the Diolkos, the sanctuary of Acraean Hera, Crommyon, and the two gulfs. Pausanias, although lengthier in content, is hardly different in geographic focus. His discussion of Corinthian territory includes Crommyon, the Isthmus (and the sacred sites connected with it), Kenchreai and Lechaion, Helen’s Bath, Corinth, and Acrocorinth. His only mention of the south or west includes brief references to Tenea and the burnt temple on the road to Sicyon.

The western and southern territories of Corinth, in fact, are hardly mentioned in the Roman period. Strabo says that Corinth’s territory “was not very fertile, but rifted and rough; and from this fact all have called Corinth ‘beetling’…Corinth is both beetle-browed and full of hollows.”\textsuperscript{9} The geographer when speaking of Corinthian territory obviously has in mind the Isthmus, passing by the proverbial fertile western territory between Corinth and Sicyon.\textsuperscript{10} Generally speaking, the fertile western plain was hardly mentioned in the Roman period, despite the fact that modern commentators frequently cite the ancient proverb, “Fair is the land between Corinth and Sicyon.”\textsuperscript{11} Even Cicero, who is sometimes cited in this respect because he mentions the sale of the rich western land,\textsuperscript{12} connects the previous city’s wealth not to its land but to its advantaged location.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{8} Strabo 8.6.21, Loeb translation.

\textsuperscript{9} Strabo 8.6.23, Loeb Translation.

\textsuperscript{10} Wiseman 1978, 444 FN9, has Strabo’s text read, “Fair is the land between Corinth and Sicyon” but this appears to be a suggested restoration of an ellipsis in the Greek text.

\textsuperscript{11} Those who refer to that land are eruditely quoting the Delphic Oracle with no apparent allusion to contemporary use. See, for example, Ael. Arist. Or. 28.9; Diod. Sic. 8.21.3; Athenaeus, Deip. 219A; Diog. Gramm. Paroemiae 2.60.1; Zen. Soph. Epitome collectionum 3.57.1; Parke and Wormell, The Delphic Oracle, vol. II, no. 46. One exception from the late Hellenistic period includes Livy’s account describing the events of 208 BC (27.31.1), which apparently refers to real events of 208 BC, “Publius Sulpicius sailing from Naupactus put in with his fleet between Sicyon and Corinth and ravaged a region of the most noted fertility far and wide.”

\textsuperscript{12} Cicero refers (On the Agrarian Law 1.5; 2.51) to the sale of Corinth’s rich and fertile land but does not specifically place the territory.

\textsuperscript{13} Cicero Agr. Law 2.87.
For travelers, geographers, and pilgrims of the early Roman period, the western and southern territory of Corinth stood at the fringe of their interests. For all practical purposes, most people thought of the Isthmus as equivalent to Corinth’s territory, and the Corinthians as inhabitants of the Isthmus.\textsuperscript{14} The rest of the territory was, relatively speaking, uninteresting.

By contrast, the twin gulfs and the territory of the Isthmus between urban center and the Geranian mountain range were bound closely to the image of the city. One finds a fascinated preoccupation with this landscape throughout the literature of the Roman period, as is suggested by the ancient epithets: the “Corinthian Isthmus”, the “Isthmus of Corinth”, “Corinth of the twin seas” or “sea-girt Corinth.”\textsuperscript{15} The linking of these features of the city’s territory in part relate to the simple interrelated viewsheds discussed in the previous section. The geographer Pomponius Mela specifically refers to the view of the Isthmus and seas from Acrocorinth,\textsuperscript{16} as does Strabo, reflecting for both a first-hand visit to the area. Livy describes Aemilius Paulus’ trip to the city before its destruction in 167 BC.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} One of Lucian’s characters states as common knowledge that the Isthmus was equivalent to Corinthian territory. Luc. \textit{Pseudol.} 15.10. “Indeed, any old man, full of years, who is unacquainted with such expressions is not, I think, even aware that the city of Athens is in Attica, Corinth at the Isthmus, and Sparta in the Peloponnese.” Or consider Paus. 8.1.1: “The first people within the peninsula are the Corinthians, living on the Isthmus.” Both are Loeb translations.

\textsuperscript{15} Corinth at the Isthmus: Lucian \textit{Pseudol.} 15.10; Corinthian Isthmus: Agathemerus Geogr. 24.6; Sea-girt Corinth: Julius Pollux Gramm.\textit{Onom.} 9.18.1; Corinth of the twin-seas: Hor. \textit{Carm} 1.7.2; Terentianus Maurus 2101-2107.

\textsuperscript{16} “Megara’s territory runs up to the Isthmos, which gets its name because the Aegean Sea, being at a remove of four miles from the Ionian Sea, ties the Peloponnesos to Hellas by a narrow neck of land. On it is...Corinth, a city once famous for its wealth, better known later for its destruction, and now a Roman colony. Corinth has a view of both seas from a peak of the acropolis they call Acrocorinth.” Pomponius Mela \textit{Chor.} 2.48.5-6. Translation from F.E. Romer, \textit{Pomponius Mela’s Description of the World}, Ann Arbor MI 1998, University of Michigan Press.

\textsuperscript{17} Livy 45.28, Loeb translation. In a slightly different account, Polybius 30.10.3, Aemilius was most impressed with the city’s favorable position, controlling the districts both within and outside the Isthmus.
This city was at that time, before its destruction, a place of outstanding beauty; its citadel, within the walls, rising up to an immense height, abounding in springs of water, while the Isthmus separates by this narrow passage two neighbouring seas to the east and to the west.

And Pliny the Elder writes,18

The narrow neck of land from which it [the Peloponnese] projects is called the Isthmus. At this place the two seas that have been mentioned encroach on opposite sides from the north and east and swallow up all the breadth of the peninsula at this point, until in consequence of the inroad of such large bodies of water in opposite directions the coasts have been eaten away so as to leave a space between them of only five miles, with the result that the Morea is only attached to Greece by a narrow neck of land…. In the middle of this neck of land which we have called the Isthmus is the colony of Corinth…its habitations cling to the side of a hill, 7-1/2 miles from the coast on either side, and the top of its citadel, called Acrocorinth, on which is the spring of Peirene, commands views of the two seas in opposite directions.

Citadel, seas, and isthmus interlink and form defining points in the landscape that are reinforced by visual contrast. Even Acrocorinth overshadows the twin seas and landscape.19 The physical features of Corinth’s landscape that mattered to individuals in the Roman period stretched from the urban center eastward to its seas and land bridge.

Corinthian mythology and history circulating in the Roman period further reinforced connections between mountain, seas / harbors, and isthmus, infusing them with sacred and historical structure.20 Even before the first inhabitants settled in the land, the gods were said to have fought over and divided Corinth’s territory.21 Acrocorinth fell to Helios and Aphrodite, and became associated with the nymph Peirene, Bellerophon, and Pegasus; the Isthmus, seas, and harbors fell to Poseidon. The children of the spring Peirene were Cenchrias and Leches, who possessed the harbors. As a second century AD


19 Statius Theb. 7.106.

20 For a recent discussion of Corinthian myth in the Roman period, especially as it pertains to Acrocorinth and Peirene, see B.A. Robinson, *Fountains and the Culture of Water at Roman Corinth*, Unpublished Dissertation, History of Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia 2001, 185-203.

21 Menander Rhet.; Lucian *Salt*. 42.
orator summarizes the mythological structure of Corinthian territory in a panegyric address to the city.

But supposing my statue to be actually of the ancient craftsmanship of Dadalus, for what strange reasons would it have taken leave of your city, the city for which they say the two gods, Poseidon and Helius, vied with one another, the one being lord of fire, the other lord of water? And after the twain had striven and had entrusted the decision to a third god who was their elder. ‘Whose heads were man, many too his arms’ (Briareus), having, as I say, left to him the decision, they both have held this city and district ever since, surely no slight or obscure sign of its superiority over all other cities. For while the others are the portion and prosperity of the gods individually—Argos of Hera and Athens of Athena—and while, with reference to these very gods of whom I speak, Rhodes belongs to Helius and Onchestus to Poseidon, Corinth belongs to each of the two. You might imagine, since the myth suggests it, that the strip of land between two seas was an exceptional grant made by Helius because Poseidon wished it so.

The foundation of the games in honor of Melicertes, the boy washed up on the back of the dolphin, were also said to have been a double foundation of the gods. The inhabitants of new Roman City itself promoted these connections and landscape, as evident by coinage of the imperial period and investments in sites like Isthmia. There were in the second century AD local guides who could point out the particular places on the route to Corinth associated with these mythical events. This mythologized landscape formed a chronotope of space and time that created the scene for additional stories. Ovid has Hades, in his rape of Persephone, gallop through the place “where the Bacchiadae, a race sprung from Corinth between two seas, had built a city between two

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25 For example, Pausanias 1.44.7-8: “There are legends about the rocks, which rise especially at the narrow part of the road. As to the Molurian, it is said that from it Ino flung herself into the sea with Melicertes, the younger of her children. Learchus, the elder of them, had been killed by his father. One account is that Athamas did this in a fit of madness; another is that he vented on Ino and her children unbridled rage when he learned that the famine which befell the Orchomenians and the supposed death of Phrixus were not accidents from heaven, but that Ino, the step-mother, had intrigued for all these things. [1.44.8] Then it was that she fled to the sea and cast herself and her son from the Molurian Rock. The son, they say, was landed on the Corinthian Isthmus by a dolphin, and honours were offered to Melicertes, then renamed Palaemon, including the celebration of the Isthmian games.” Loeb translation.
harbours of unequal size.” Seneca’s *Medea* calls on the Sun to allow her to set ablaze Corinth between its twin gulfs and flood the Isthmus. The city’s territory was well articulated in respect to its mythological connections.

These important nodes in the landscape, the acropolis, Isthmus, and seas, could separately or together be used as a symbol for the city itself, or vice versa. Apuleius, for example, begins his Grecian tale by referring to the famous Isthmus as one of his boyhood tutors when he obviously has in mind Corinth town. Strabo, quoting Euripides, refers to Corinth as the acropolis washed by its seas, “I am come, having left Acrocorinthus that is washed on all sides, the sacred hill-city of Aphrodite.” “Corinth” was itself a shorthand for denoting Lechaion, Isthmia, and Kenchrea. As Aelius Aristides panegyrized (*Oration* 46), the city stretched outward to its twin seas, as though the entire eastern territory of the Isthmus constituted a thriving commercial city. Even the imagined experience of Corinth was linked to the natural features of the Isthmus and seas. The son of Oedipus “leaves Sciron’s ill-famed cliffs and Scylla’s fields where the purple ancient ruled and wealthy Corinth; and in mid land hears two shores.” Just as the Taygetus of Alpheus could refer to Sparta and Olympia, so too were Corinth’s famous geographic features the Isthmus, harbors, and seas. To experience the city was to experience these facets of the broader landscape, and vice versa.

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27 Seneca *Med.* 35.

28 Twin Seas: Ovid *Fast.* 4.501; Ovid *Met.* 5.407; Horace *Carm.* 1.7.2; Pomponius Porphyrio *Carm.* 1.7.2; Gaius Caesius Bassus *Metr.* 6.394.

29 Strabo 8.6.21. This is the Loeb translation by H.L. Jones. As Jones remarks (p. 195, FN1) Euripides clearly intended by “washed on all sides” the city washed by both the Corinthian and Saronic Gulfs (and not, as Strabo interprets it, flowing with springs). In a Late Antique context, Stephanus Byz., defines Acrocorinth as simply another name for Corinth: \[ \text{Akroko}r\text{ino}q\text{oj} \ldots l\ \epsilon\eta\text{getai} \ \delta\kappa\alpha\iota\iota\kappa\ \text{O}f\text{ino}q\text{oj} \ \alpha\varphi\lambda\nu\wz\]

30 Alciphron *Ep.* 4.2.1.3; Galen, *De propiorum animi* (“The Affections and Errors of the Soul”) 5.18-19; Flav. Philostratus *VA* 7.10.

31 Statius *Theb.* 1.334.

32 Seneca *Thyestes* 124 and 627-629.
The link between city and landscape was so compelling that the city’s fate was thought to be tied to its eastern territory. Although there is relatively little literary evidence describing the Roman sack of the territory, the epigrammatist Polystratus in the aftermath of the Greek city’s destruction described Lucius Mummius’ sack of Corinth with:33 “Lucius has smitten sore the great Achaean Acrocorinth, the star of Hellas, and the twin parallel shores of the Isthmus.” Certainly other passages describe the destruction of Roman Corinth in this way.34 Seneca has Medea curse the city by invoking Helios against the Isthmus,35 “Corinth, which blocks a pair of gulfs, must be consumed by flames and let the two seas converge…..Every outrage the Phasis or Pontus saw, the Isthmus will see.” We will see that in Late Antiquity too, descriptions of disasters such as the Gothic invasions will assume very similar forms.

2.2.2. The Consequences of Geography

According to ancient authors, Corinthian geography had two principal consequences on the city’s historical development. First, the narrowness of the land constricting at the Isthmus created a line of division between northern and southern Greece, which the city controlled by its position. Corinth stood at the point of access by land to the Peloponnese and central-northern Greece,36 and was for this reason known as both the gatekeeper and the key to the Peloponnese, and one of Greece’s “fetters” or “shackles.” The general or state that possessed Corinth had all of southern Greece in hand because he could control who entered or exited the Peloponnese.37 This facet of Corinthian history is well discussed in modern scholarship.

33 Greek Anthology 7.297, Loeb Translation.
34 Antipater of Sidon mentions the loss of the beauty, fortifications and towers, and wealth of the destroyed city. Only the Nereids, symbolic of the two seas, survive to weep for the city. Greek Anthology 9.151.
35 Seneca Medea 35, Loeb translation.
36 See Strabo 8.1.3 for discussions of the Isthmus and Greece.
37 Plut. Apothegmata Laconia 221F; Strabo 9.4.15.5; Velleius Paterculus History of Rome 1.3.3. And Strabo 8.4.8: “And so Demetrius of Pharos seems to have spoken aptly to Philip the son of Demetrius when
Second, the ancients recognized that the Isthmus facilitated travel and generated a great volume of traffic that contributed immensely to the city’s commerce, wealth, and reputation. The Romans considered the city the promenade (*peripatos*) of Greece, the gateway to the Peloponnese, and the town between two harbors.\(^{38}\) These harbors, Lechaion and Kenchreai, were the great havens of ships from around the world and attracted innumerable voyagers, travelers, and pilgrims.\(^{39}\) The connection of Corinth to this landscape of travel, journeying, and, by consequence, commerce, was one of the most common literary *topoi* of antiquity.

These “consequences” of Corinthian geography—both relating to the Isthmus and the concepts of passage and travel—together fostered a particular reputation and fame of the ancient city. Individuals of the Roman period, for example, recognized that the city’s “advantageous position” was essential to the wealth and power of both the destroyed Greek city and the emerging Roman city. Cicero, a contemporary to the Roman refoundation of Corinth, explained that,\(^{40}\)

> In the whole world there are only three cities capable of sustaining the name and dignity of empire, Carthage, Corinth, and Capua…Scarcely a trace remains of Corinth. Placed in the narrowest part of Greece, as in a pass, it held on the land side the keys of the country and on the other side almost united, so narrow was the space between them, two seas open to navigation in diametrically opposed senses.

In another text, Cicero proffers that the Roman destruction of Corinth regrettably occurred because of the city’s advantageous location, posing a potential Greek threat to

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38 Favorinus, *The Corinthian Oration* 7; Alciphron *Letters of Parasites*, n. 24 (3.60).


40 Cicero *Agr. Law* 2.87, Loeb.
rising Roman power.\textsuperscript{41} Strabo too posits (8.4.8) that the city’s position had made it an object of contention previously and also an attraction for Rome in refounding the city.

That favorable position was the cause of the city’s wealth in the Greek and Roman periods. In an often-cited passage, Strabo explains,\textsuperscript{42}

Corinth is called ‘wealthy’ because of its commerce, since it is situated on the Isthmus and is master of two harbours, of which the one leads straight to Asia, and the other to Italy; and it makes easy the exchange of merchandise from both countries that are so far distant from each other. And just as in early times the Strait of Sicily was not easy to navigate, so also the high seas, and particularly the sea beyond Maleae, on account of the contrary winds; and hence the proverb, “but when you double Maleae forget your home.” At any rate, to land their cargoes here was a welcome alternative to the voyage to Maleae for merchants from both Italy and Asia. And also the duties of what was exported by land from the Peloponnese as well as on what was imported into it belonged to those who held the keys. And to later times this remained ever so. But to the Corinthians of later times still greater advantages were added, for also the Isthmian games, which were celebrated there, were wont to draw crowds of people.

The Isthmus was said to have contributed to the Greek city’s commerce and tariffs, and the biennial Isthmian games to have increased that traffic, as did (allegedly) the great body of sacred prostitutes. In a second century AD account by Dio Chrysostom, the famous Hellenistic Cynic Diogenes allegedly moved to Corinth because “the city was situated as it were at the cross-roads of Greece.”\textsuperscript{43} Diogenes noticed that the harbors and the prostitutes attracted large crowds of people and subsequently settled down to offer his services “where the sick are most numerous.” Aelius Aristides (2\textsuperscript{nd} c. AD) praises the city for this attribute specifically: “The poets decided to call the city of Corinth ‘fortunate’ because it is located on the Isthmus and receives those journeying in either direction.”\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{41} Cicero \textit{De Officiis} 1.35.8, Loeb Translation: “Our forefathers actually admitted to full rights of citizenship the Tusculans, Aequians, Volscians, Sabines and Hernicians, but they razed Carthage and Numantia to the ground. I wish they had not destroyed Corinth; but I believe they had some special reason for what they did—its convenient situation, probably—and feared that its very location might some day furnish a temptation to renew the war. In my opinion, at least, we should always strive to secure a peace that shall not admit of guile.”

\textsuperscript{42} Strabo 8.6.20-23, Loeb Translation.

\textsuperscript{43} Dio Chrys. \textit{Discourses} 8.5, Loeb translation.

\textsuperscript{44} See Ael. Arist. \textit{Or. 27 (Panegyric on Cyzicus)} Behr’s Translation.
Although we might note that these early Roman conceptions are not observations about the contemporary Roman colony of Corinth but are describing the former Greek city’s historic wealth, such mythology and imagery about the Greek city was freely applied to the developing Roman city in common conception. In a text directed to Corinthians in the later second century AD, Favorinus is even explicit about the antiquity of such attributes:

For you accorded me this honour, not as to one of the many who each year put in at Kenchreai as traders or pilgrims or envoys or passing travellers, but as to a cherished friend, who at last, after a long absence, puts in an appearance….You are now, as the saying goes, both prow and stern of Hellas, having been called prosperous and wealthy and the like by poets and gods from olden days.

Favorinus interprets the contemporary city through the ancient imagery, as though there were seamless continuity, and enumerates the famous individuals visiting the city since ancient times. In a similar vein, the Early Roman efforts by figures such as the Emperor Nero to cut a canal through the Isthmus in order to facilitate travel constituted points in a continuum stretching back at least to the Hellenistic period. Pliny the Elder included Nero’s and Caligula’s failed attempts with those of Julius Caesar and the Hellenistic King Demetrius. The later Philostratus similarly has Apollonius predict Nero’s cutting the canal,

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45 See, for example, Thucydides 1.13, which is clearly a source for Strabo’s description: “Corinth, planted on its isthmus, had been from time immemorial an important mercantile centre, though in ancient days traffic had been by land rather than by sea. The communications between those who lived inside and those who lived outside the Peloponnese had to pass through Corinthian territory. So Corinth grew to power by her riches, as is shown by the adjective ‘wealthy’ which is given to her by the ancient poets. And when the Greeks began to take more to seafaring, the Corinthians acquired a fleet, put down piracy, and, being able to provide trading facilities on both the land and the sea routes, made their city powerful from the revenues which came to it by both these ways.” Translation is that by Rex Warner.

46 Favorinus, The Corinthian Oration 8 and 36, Loeb translation.


48 Nat. Hist. 4.9-11, Loeb translation.

49 Phil. VA 4.24, Loeb translation.
And he was at the Isthmus, when the sea was roaring around Lechaeum, and hearing it he said: ‘This neck of land shall be cut through, or rather it shall not be cut.’ And herein he uttered a prediction of the cutting of the Isthmus which was attempted soon afterwards, when Nero after seven years projected it.

There seems to have been little awkwardness in connecting the myths, stories, and descriptions of the Greek city to the character of the Roman city, or linking events of the cityscape in the Roman period to the city’s ‘ancient history.’ Despite the century-long episode of discontinuity (146 BC – 44BC) in fact, the panegyrics about the Roman city intentionally delved into a preexisting literary bank of images, associations, and information to create and explain its contemporary image. The ancient qualities were

The topoi surrounding the geography of the city, and especially the Isthmus, were an explanatory and conceptual bridge connecting two cities with very different identities and histories. Indeed, the revived interest in particular places on the Isthmus, including the harbors, the canal, and the sanctuary served to reconnect the new Roman colony with its Greek predecessor. The survival of place, and imagery and stories connected with places, created conceptual continuity between the two cities. Stories about landscape features like the canal served to reinforce basic perceptions of Corinthian geography and the importance of the Isthmus.50 Like Corinth’s mythology discussed above, such stories reinforced the importance of certain facets of the Corinthian landscape (the Isthmus, the sea, the harbors) as well as attributes and characteristic features of the city in its landscape (the city’s connections to travel and commerce especially). The ancient stories that circulated about famous Corinthians who had lived six hundred years earlier—the lyre-player Arion who amassed a fortune in his travels to Italy, Ameinocles the shipbuilder, and Demaratus the wealthy Bacchiad—further promoted the perception of the commercial character of the Roman city.51

50 Strabo 8.2.1, Loeb translation: “The width of the Isthmus at the ‘Diolcus,’ where the ships are hauled overland from one sea to the other, is forty stadia, as I have already said.”

51 Ameinocles: Thucydides 1.13; Pliny Nat. 7.207.4; Dion. Hal. Th. 19.31. Arion: Maurus Servius Honoratus, Ecl. 8.55.6; Favorinus, The Corinthian Oration 1-4; Hyginus, Fab. 194; Aulus Gellius Attic Nights, 16.19; Fronto, Arion. Demaratus: Dion. Hal. 3.46.3-5; Strabo Geog 5.2.2.
It was no doubt Corinth’s perceived geographic structure and commercial character that sustained its image as a beautiful and pleasant, luxury-loving city. In a passage quoted above, Livy describes the city of the early second century BC as a place made beautiful by its natural topography and cultural features (e.g., the city walls).\(^{52}\) The pleasantness of the Corinthian landscape during the summer was connected to another tradition of Diogenes, who was said to have come to Corinth in the summer time because of the breezes blowing off the seas.\(^{53}\) In the late second century AD, Alciphron found the city’s reputation for opulence and wealth a great disappointment.\(^{54}\)

I did not enter Corinth after all; for I learned in a short time the sordidness of the rich there and the misery of the poor…Such is the gateway to the Peloponnese, the town that lies betwixt two seas, a town charming indeed to look upon and abounding in luxuries, but inhabited by people ungracious and unblessed by Aphrodite.

Nor is the orator any kinder to the city in another letter where he describes the unpleasant time he spent among the Corinthian luxury-lovers.\(^{55}\) Even still, the passages highlight how the Roman city was also linked to luxury, pleasantness, and beauty, products of the Corinthian landscape. The city’s connection to this sensuousness is often noted in modern guidebooks about the ancient city.\(^{56}\)

In a negative twist on this theme, Corinth on the Isthmus also came to be seen as a depraved secular city, associated with sexual licentiousness, immorality or moral weakness, and bawdy tales. The city’s vices were already well established in the Greek period and were (again) related directly or indirectly to the topographic features of the

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\(^{52}\) Livy 45.28, Loeb translation.

\(^{53}\) Dio Chrys. *Discourses* 6.1-6. “In Corinth, on the other hand, the summer was breezy since currents of air always met there on account of the bays that dented the shore. Acrocorinth, too, overshadows it, and the city itself rather inclines towards Lechaeum and the north.”


\(^{55}\) Alciphron *Ep.* 3.15.1.4.

\(^{56}\) See, for example, Martin Garrett, *Greece: A Literary Companion*, London 1994, 53-57.
landscape.\textsuperscript{57} Juvenal, for instance, couples the “scented sons of Corinth” with the “unwarlike Rhodians,” two cities whose maritime character contributes to their excessive luxury such that youth perfume themselves and shave their own legs.\textsuperscript{58} Cicero directly articulates an explanation relating commerce and traffic at a city like Corinth to its immorality:\textsuperscript{59}

Maritime cities also suffer a certain corruption and degeneration of morals; for they receive a mixture of strange languages and customs, and import foreign ways as well as foreign merchandise, so that none of their ancestral institutions can possibly remain unchanged. Even their inhabitants do not cling to their dwelling places, but are constantly being tempted far from home by soaring hopes and dreams; and even when their bodies stay at home, their thoughts nevertheless fare abroad and go wandering. In fact, no other influence did more to bring about the final overthrow of Carthage and Corinth, though they had long been tottering, than this scattering and dispersion of their citizens, due to the fact that the lust for trafficking and sailing the seas had caused them to abandon agriculture and the pursuit of arms. Many things too that cause ruins to states as being incitements to luxury are supplied by the sea, entering either by capture or import; and even the mere delightfulfulness of such a site brings in its train many an allurement to pleasure through either extravagance or indolence.

Corinth is the prototype for Greek cities grown wealthy and immoral by their disposition to commerce, traffic, and sea faring—the city ultimately suffers destruction because of such a disposition. This description of a weak and immoral city is a twist on the typical panegyric praising the city as the promenade and crossroads of Hellas with the world’s traffic flowing into the Isthmus.

All the consequences of geography were summed up in antiquity by the proverbs “It is not for every man to sail to Corinth” and “Not every man may fare to Corinth town.” These famous sayings, quoted often by modern historians, city guides, and New Testament commentators, originated early in the Greek period,\textsuperscript{60} and had a variety of interpretations and explanations in Roman times. Certainly the most common understanding of the saying related it to Corinth’s reputations for both sexual

\begin{footnotes}
\item[57] Even Aristophanes in the fifth century BC notes that to be called Corinthian was to be called immoral.
\item[58] Juvenal \textit{Sat.} 8.112-16, Loeb translation, with Murphy-O’Connor’s commentary, pp. 110-11.
\item[59] Cic. \textit{On the Republic} 2.7-9, Loeb.
\item[60] See, for instance, Aristophanes frg. 902 a K.
\end{footnotes}
licentiousness and wealth. Strabo tells a fantastic story about the city’s thousand temple prostitutes who had served all pilgrims and travelers to the Temple of Aphrodite when the Greek city still existed. It was because of these prostitutes, Strabo notes, that the city was crowded with people and grew rich. For instance, the ship-captains freely squandered their money, and hence the proverb, “Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth.”

Others explained the proverb by relating it to Corinth’s hetaerae in general (and not necessarily sacred prostitutes, as Strabo says) who charged heavy fees for their services, leaving the foreigner penniless. In some anecdotes, it was the famous Corinthian prostitute Lais who charged so much for her embraces that she left many wealthy Greeks broke—Demosthenes himself was outraged by the demanded price! Who could afford to go to Corinth? The proverb could also imply that not everyone could stomach the trip to such an immoral secular city, a wicked city even, where the patron deities (e.g., Aphrodite) were the most deviant, and the most lucrative business was prostitution. In this light, Corinth was the prototypical secular and deviant city, the kind of place where a matron might sleep with a donkey, or a mother kill her children. Again, that many of these vices describe the Greek city did not keep Romans from applying them to the city

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62 Strabo 8.6.20, Loeb translation. See also Strabo 12.3.36.


64 Aulus Gellius Attic Nights, 1.8.3-4: “But no one was received who did not give what she demanded, and her demands were extravagant enough…. For in vain would any man go to Corinth to visit Lais who could not pay her price.”

in their own day. The sexual problems described in the letters of St. Paul to the church of 
Corinth have served to reinforce the city’s many basic vices and sexual associations.

There were less explicitly bawdy explanations for the proverb, as well as more 
general applications. Just as not every ordinary man got the opportunity to sail to a 
luxury capital like Corinth, so it was not for every man to get an education or to create 
laws. The fluidity and flexibility of interpretation in antiquity, however, is united in its 
theme that travelers worldwide were drawn to the great worldly city, the city on the 
Isthmus. Voyaging to Corinth was one of the great topoi associated with the city. In a 
small step away, Lucian’s *Hermotimus* must surely have in mind the popular conceptions 
and proverb about Corinth when he chose the city for his metaphorical example of 
traveling down the philosophical path:

But whether he has seen the one he should have seen (that in which you and I want to 
live) or whether, when he should have gone to Corinth, he has arrived at Babylon and 
thinks he has seen Corinth, I still do not know—certainly not everyone who has seen a 
city has seen Corinth, if Corinth is not the only city. What particularly makes me 
uncertain is this—my knowing that only one road can possibly be the right one. Only 
one road is the Corinth road, and the other roads lead anywhere except to Corinth.

Lycinus, in expressing his doubts about which philosophical school is the true one, 
chooses Corinth as the destination, as the metaphor for the true city, the true philosophy. 
In ancient conception, Corinth on the Isthmus was the paradigm for travel, voyage, and 
destination. Corinth denoted the secular city to visit or avoid, and brought to mind the 
passage itself. Traveling to Corinth was among the predominant and most common 
images of the city in the Roman period tied in different ways to the perceptions of the 
affects of a landscape on the ancient city.

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66 This is the implied meaning of Ael. Arist., *Or.* 29.17: “For who of you does not know that first of all 
such education is not within the capacity of the masses, no more than legislation and making proposals in 
the assembly? Or shall we believe that ‘not every man can sail to Corinth’, while every man will 
understand the journey throughout the whole of life and with what pursuits it must be made and while 
everyone will sit at these tillers and convey the youth here and there as it pleases him?” Translation is Behr. 
Cf. p. 389 footnote: “Corinth was famous for its luxury and vice, and only the rich could benefit from the 
trip.” In a similar vein, Horace *Ep.* 1.17.36 uses the phrase to imply that not everyone can gain virtue.

67 Lucian *Herm* 27-29, 45.
2.2.3. Conclusion: Corinth in the Mind

The modern idea of what Corinth was in antiquity is a conflation of different ‘pasts’ in the city’s long history based on what people recorded about the city in both the Greek and Roman periods, and supplemented by archaeological research of the last century. Although it is impossible to imagine a monolithic or coherent ‘identity’ of the city in antiquity, there are certainly broad thematic groupings that lay behind many of the city’s ancient associations and reputations. This section has argued that the city’s eastern landscape, the Isthmus, was one such grouping that became linked to the city’s reputations for travel, wealth, commerce, luxury, and lasciviousness. The most salient characteristics of the ancient city that have become canonical in modern guidebooks and overviews of the city relate to both the shape of the physical landscape and the ancient interpretive traditions about the consequences of that landscape on the character of the city. In other words, one of the prominent modern images of ancient Corinth—the city as a traveler’s paradise and pleasure-loving place—is a product of modern authors interpreting the city based on what classical authors thought were the effects of geography on the city’s character.

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68 See, for example, the overviews in S. Meletzis and Helen Papadakis, *Corinth, Mycenae, Tryns, Nauplio*, English Translation, Sixth Edition, Athens 1984, and at pp. 5 and 6: “Corinth, again, famous on accounts of its wealth and the number of its inhabitants—it was the most populous town in Greece in ancient times—, achieved its great renown not because of the altars and temples of its gods, but through commerce and trade: lying as it did at the foot of Acrocorinth it was master of two seas, the Saronic to the east and the Corinthian to the west…..Corinth, one of the oldest and most important cities in the whole of Greece, owed its foundation, wealth and development to its favourable situation: lying as it did on the Isthmus between the Peloponnese and mainland Greece, it not only had firm control of this landstrip in classical times but maintained its hold on it…” Or, consider Athena G. Kaloyeropoulou, *Corinthia, Old Corinth; Diolcos—Isthmia—Lechaeon*, Athens, M. Pechlivanides & Co., pp. 5-6: “Ancient Corinth….has not left in history the memory of intellectual struggle or of high ideals to which its citizens devoted their faith and energy, or for which they suffered. From early times it became a great commercial centre, it gained fabulous wealth and ceaselessly adorned itself; everywhere it was successful, and had incredible good fortune in being reborn from its ashes after each of the disasters that successively laid it low; each time it blossomed afresh and piled up more wealth. Its daily life was a whirl of pleasure… one thing about Corinth is certain: its geographical position played an enormously important role in its development. This was in every way privileged. But, after saying this, we should not omit to mention how greatly the successive inhabitants of this site exploited its unique advantages….the great flourishing city, so famous for its luxury and its atmosphere of gaiety….Corinth soon became a centre of trade between the cities of the Ionian and Aegean seas, whose influence stretched further to the west. Thus, with little difficulty, she became the centre of exchange between East and West, and held this position for a long time. Her wealth and prosperity was a natural consequence.”
Without even commenting on the material “realities” behind such images, it is fair to say that Corinth on the Isthmus—as a thoroughfare and crossroads—formed a historical thread linking ancient perceptions of the city from one end of antiquity to the other. Perceptions of the city’s landscape were carried along through ancient literature, stories, anecdotes, and proverbs, and these together helped to form the image and myth of the city that became common in the Greek period and passed into the Roman period. The links between the city and its landscape were, in fact, so powerful and consistent that it is easy to forget that they embellish, exaggerate, and inaccurately communicate much about the city and its territory. The person reading these sources too literally can be blinded to Corinth’s other resources, its agriculture, its quarries, and the world existing in between significant places. Nonetheless, these sources confirm strongly an ancient fascination with the harbors, isthmus, and seas, and the eminence of these features as symbols of the ancient city. They form an interpretive layer associated with the physical territory, the Isthmus, and a context for knowing and reading Corinth. The image of the city was cemented to the Isthmus in a mythologized landscape, richly imbued with meaning, history, and significance. The following chapters will document the nature of this landscape in the Roman and Late Roman periods.

2.3. Wealthy Corinth

Two decades ago, when J.B. Salmon published his *Wealthy Corinth*, one reviewer astutely reminded readers that Edouard Will had cautioned against geographic determinism in thinking about ancient Corinthian history. Salmon’s book had turned its back on the consequences of geography by arguing that the western coastal plain was the agricultural center, and consequently, the economic heart of the Archaic and Classical *polis* of Corinth, and had more economic influence on the developing city than even the connecting isthmus. As Salmon suggested in the first paragraph to his book, before Corinth could have ever benefited from commerce, its rich arable territory gave it the reputation of being “wealthy.” Commerce, while important to the Archaic-Classical city, was not nearly as significant as ancient sources from the Greek period would suggest.
Only six years after the publication of Salmon’s monograph, D. Engels published (1990) a book on Roman Corinth that argued that the Roman city could never have been an “agro-town” whose principal resource base was agriculture.69 According to Engels, Corinth was a “service city” whose principal economic resource was the constant influx of outsiders, travelers, pilgrims, and administrators. Critical reviews of this book centered on the nature of Corinth’s economy and the factors that gave rise to the city in Roman times. Did Corinth really depend principally upon service for its economic sustenance and how significant was commerce for its ancient economy? Certainly many ancient authors in the Roman period suggested that commerce made the city wealthy, as have modern scholars following them.70

In the end, the historiographic discussion surrounding both of these works demonstrate the complexity of Corinthian economic history, caution against simplistic and monolithic views of the city’s economic development, and encourage careful and critical interpretation of ancient literary sources. Both books also raise important questions that relate to the subject matter of this study: Does the focus on the Isthmus and the eastern territory revert to a geographically deterministic model for Corinthian history? Why focus on the city’s travelscapes and connectivity when other facets of the territory were also important for the Roman city? And why downplay and ignore the western and southern Corinthia, or other conventional territories of ancient Corinth? Two observations demonstrate the potential weaknesses of a model of Corinth’s economy that focuses only on its significant geographic position.


First is that J.B. Salmon’s general argument about the resources of arable land for the life of the Archaic and Classical-period city also applies to the Roman city.\textsuperscript{71} Salmon argued that long before the Greek city could have profited greatly from commerce due to its geographic position, it was known as “wealthy”; agricultural resources must always have constituted the city’s principal economic resource (supplemented, of course, by a variety of other resources). This observation should relate also to the city in the Roman period. Before the Roman city regained a reputation as a luxurious commercial town, the agricultural capacity of its rich western territory must have figured prominently in its local economy. The coastal plain to the north and west of Corinth is incredibly fertile territory; a couple of ancient sources noted above indicate that the Romans recognized the potential of this land in the refoundation of the city as a colony. Moreover, despite Strabo’s “beetle-browed” view of Corinthian territory, the Isthmus is relatively fertile today as it was in antiquity, with the capacity of producing a variety of crops, and even less arable land is useful for olives and vines.\textsuperscript{72}

Some of the most telling support for the importance of agriculture for the early history of the Roman colony is David Romano’s longstanding scholarship on centuriation: the land itself provides evidence for several parceling episodes of the Corinthian coastal plain and isthmus in the late Hellenistic and early Roman period. Moreover, as chapters four to six of this study will show, there is plentiful evidence for agricultural installations, farmsteads, and villas on the Isthmus itself.\textsuperscript{73} Despite the

\textsuperscript{71} Salmon 1984.

\textsuperscript{72} Cf. M. Sakellariou and N. Faraklas, \textit{Corinthia-Cleonaea}, Athens 1971, Appendix I for some comparative discussion of Corinthian territory: the central ekistic area including all of the coastal plain and most of the Isthmus has far more arable land, much larger populations, and greater numbers of livestock than all the other areas of the modern Corinthia, even when factoring in differences of scale’. See also discussion in Fowler and Stillwell 1932, 107-114, which is mainly a reprint of Carl W. Blegen, “Corinth in Prehistoric Times,” \textit{AJA} 24 (1920), 8-13; and Athenaeus V,219a; Schol. Aristophanes, \textit{Birds}, 969.

relative absence of literary sources from the Roman period and D. Engel’s unsuccessful attempts (1990) to minimize the importance of agriculture for the economy of the Roman city, there is no reason to doubt that the entire territory itself continued to form an important sector in the city’s society and economy.

Figure 2.12. Western Corinthian coastal plain, from Acrocorinth (facing west)
And second, beyond strictly agriculture, Corinthian territory has numerous other natural resources that played significantly in the local Roman economy. As Chris Hayward has shown, the limestone quarries were exploited in Roman times and used for both local and regional purposes. T. Gregory and V. Anderson-Stojanovic have discussed the importance of apiculture in the late Classical and Late Roman Corinthia, and Gregory has noted the possible exploitation of marine sources in the Roman period. Moreover, the production of Corinthian ceramic lamps resumed in the late Roman period and tapped local clay deposits. The production of bronze in Corinth was evidently an

74 There is very little reference to Corinthian quarrying although this must have formed an enormously important resource for the city. See C.L. Hayward 2003, and C.L. Hayward, Construction-Stone and Ancient Quarries of the Corinthia, In Preparation.

75 Gregory 1985; Virginia R. Anderson-Stojanovic, and J.E. Jones, “Ancient Beehives from Isthmia,” in Hesperia 71 (2002), 345-76. See also Paus. 10.37.3.5, for instance, notes that “Bulis lies on high ground, and it is passed by travellers crossing by sea from Anticyra to Lechaeum in Corinthian territory. More than half its inhabitants are fishers of the shell-fish that gives the purple dye.”

important industry, whatever “Corinthian bronze” actually refers to. Although the topic is underexplored in Corinthian studies, marginal lands were valuable for their supplies of timbers and wood, resin, and grazing land. The Corinthia, like most regions of the Mediterranean, had a variety of resources important for the local economy.

Given such observations, how does this historical study of the (Late) Roman landscape justify its neglect of the total Corinthian territory and the full variety of the resources of the territory in favor of a narrow study of the connective isthmus? The remainder of the dissertation will provide a variety of answers to this question, but the short response is that as the Roman colony of Corinth developed in the high empire, it played a different role in the world than the Greek city had in its own. Instead of a great polis whose citizens depended for their livelihood and political involvement upon their territorial allotments, Corinth redeveloped as a cosmopolitan, commercial, and administrative node in the broader world. It was that relation and connection to the broader world—as a provincial capital at an important Mediterranean crossroads—that served to imbue the city with so much significance and value. The specific territory of the Isthmus, serving as the relational bridge between urban center and the world, played a functionally distinct role when compared with other parts of the territory. Although the southern territory still connected Corinth to Argos, and the western territory to Sicyon and Patras, the landscape most encountered and known by the ancient traveler, merchant, and pilgrim was that one linked to its large harbors, gulfs, and the wider world. Despite their importance, the southern and western Corinthia lacked the same degree of traffic and connectiveness to Corinth’s urban center.

Production,” in C.K. Williams and N. Bookidis (eds.), Corinthis the Centenary, Princeton 2003, p. 5, cites Pliny NH 35.43.151-152, although the passage is not very detailed.


Additionally, this is not a study of the land but of the landscape, with a focus on the territory as it was known, imagined, and historicized in (Late) Roman times. From this perspective, the western and southern territory of the city simply did not achieve in the Roman period the fame and imagined link to the city as did the Isthmus. Although the western Corinthia no doubt continued to yield its fruit in season, the wealth of that land was hardly remembered after Strabo, save for diligent scholars and orators like Libanius. In the Roman period, when the political, social, and cultural centers of the Mediterranean lay elsewhere, the interior-looking territories of Corinth were culturally marginalized, unknown, or forgotten. The more important and fascinating land was the Isthmus, which became historicized and signified with important places throughout the Roman period. As discussed above, and as will be developed below (in chapter five), the conventional
divide between town and countryside is unhelpful for discussing this eastern landscape that was thick with habitation, as though forming an extension of the town to the east.\textsuperscript{79}

And finally, to argue that the eastern landscape was economically and socially significant to the city is not to state that it was the only important territorial component of the city.\textsuperscript{80} It is not necessary to measure or quantify the effects of this territory for the local economy to say that it was nonetheless important and played into the economy of the city. To privilege this facet of Roman Corinth’s identity also does not mean that travel and “service” were the only or main components of the city’s resources. Indeed, for a city as well resourced as Corinth, we must allow for the variety of economic resources available to the city. And yet, as this study will argue, a cultural analysis of a particular landscape is certainly justified by the nature of the evidence. This study is only one of many histories of the Late Antique city that might be written, and there are other facets of the ancient city that a historical study of the end of the city might be built on.\textsuperscript{81} But a cultural study of landscape must examine the territory that was known and mythologized, structured with meanings and embedded with places. The structure and significance of this landscape was rooted in and directed to its connectiveness, which was tied to the myth of the city as it developed in the second century AD, as it outstripped its status as a mere colony. The Eastern Corinthia both reflected and contributed to the image and reality of a cosmopolitan city. The material (archaeological) and conceptual (literary) bodies of evidence both speak, albeit differently, to this cultural context.

Landslapes tell, create, and structure stories and narratives. The Isthmian landscape of the second century AD represented a millennium of stories, narratives, and associations, embedded in ancient literature, historical memory, and places in the land,
and given new life in the early Principate. The literary narrative of this landscape was by no means concrete but it did contain canonical elements (e.g., the Isthmus and travel/commerce) and centered on a few important places in the territory mentioned time and again in myths and histories as, for instance, the twin harbors, Poseidon’s sanctuary at Isthmia, and the famous canal. Most physical features in the land, however, lacked a literary pedigree and constituted ordinary places such as rural farmsteads and villas, graves, and limestone quarries. The physical forms of this landscape, ignored by ancient travelers and represented today by only broken pottery scatters and a few cut limestone blocks, also (like the literary narrative) told the story of Corinth’s history and reinforced the place of the territory in the broader Mediterranean world. Taken together, this physical and cultural landscape was a principal local context in which the city was known, read, and perceived in the Roman era.

The rest of this dissertation is a study of the history of this local world, especially as it changed during the period of Late Antiquity. The remaining chapters elaborate on the themes developed in this chapter—connectivity, travel, trade, myth, rural places, and relationships to the world—as they relate to the continuity and redefinition of local society. The study posits that an appropriate measuring stick for analyzing the end of ancient Corinth is the shifting relationship of the city to the Isthmus, and the Isthmus to the world, that is, a point of measurement beyond the town itself. The chapters argue that Ancient Corinth “ended” when the Isthmus ceased to play into the physical and imaginative topography of the city, and the predominant ancient civic narratives written on the landscape lost their former significance and were drastically rewritten in light of broader trends. It ended, in short, when the predominant ancient myth of the city, its relationship to the Isthmus, was redefined, and its important extra-urban structures (e.g., settlements and harbors) came to an end. How this landscape so rich in antiquity—this world known to those dwelling therein—was transformed at the end of antiquity is a complex process. The remaining chapters will explore them in their messy detail.