CHAPTER 3
The Image of the City

“Landscape tells—or rather is—a story. It enfolds the lives and times of predecessors who, over the generations, have moved around in it and played their part in its formation.” (T. Ingold)

“Farther on, the pines still grew by the shore at the time of my visit, and there was an altar of Melicertes. At this place, they say, the boy was brought ashore by a dolphin; Sisyphus found him lying and gave him burial on the Isthmus, establishing the Isthmian games in his honour” (Pausanias, 2nd c. AD)

“At the Isthmus the sea cast up a miserable carcass” (Eusebius of Caesarea (4th c. AD), quoting Clement of Alexandria (2nd c. AD))

Landscapes tell the stories of regions, territories, and cities. But ‘stories,’ in the more literal sense of the word, also articulate what is significant about landscapes. The stories about the Corinthia by the time of Pausanias consolidated myths, anecdotes, and conceptions stretching back to the time of the city’s foundations. This narrative was by no means determined or unchanging but it did take recognizable forms, consolidating around significant people, events, and especially places, structuring the ways in which individuals thought about, perceived, and understood the city of Corinth. If Roman interest in Corinthian territory centered on the Isthmus and seas, even this eastern landscape was a highly articulated one, with prominent nodes and concentrating points at Kenchreai, Lechaion, and the Isthmus proper. These were obviously not the only places existing in the city’s eastern territory, but they were certainly the most famous, mentioned repeatedly.

This chapter examines common conceptions of Corinth’s eastern landscape over the course of the entire Roman period. It explores two principal issues in Corinthian history. First (3.1), it highlights the kind of literary image and conceptual map of the Isthmus that
existed throughout the Roman period, and makes suggestions for how a ‘landscape of famous places’ was tied to and reinforced Corinth’s history, identity, and place as a city connected to travel and commerce. The chapter discusses the places on the Isthmus that were deemed meaningful in the high empire, as well as the parts of the territory glossed over as undifferentiated travelscapes lying between larger, more significant points. Secondly, the chapter examines (3.2) how and when this landscape of famous places changed as the world of the later Roman Empire was dramatically, albeit gradually, redefined. It highlights ways that a ‘classical landscape’ ended,¹ despite the material continuity of habitation and place (Ch. 4-6) and the concomitant creation of new landscapes, narratives, and histories of the city.

¹ When I use the word “classical” in lower case, I use it synonymously with “Greco-Roman” and “Ancient.” I use the upper case “Classical” when I refer specifically to the Classical Period (5th-4th Centuries BC).
3.1. A Landscape of Famous Places

Around the mid-second century AD, the periegete and traveler Pausanias passed through the Corinthia and described the major sites of the region. His account mentions the famous town of Crommyon and a tepid spring called Helen’s bath, and discusses at length the Isthmus (i.e., Isthmia), harbors, and urban center, detailing their rich histories and mythologies. His description is thick with imagery, but is also highly selective. It includes little mention of the various settlements, the villas, rural sanctuaries, crossroads, or the numerous tombs and graves throughout the Isthmus. In fact, his description of the territory between Isthmia and the town is summed up by a brief comment that there were various monuments on the way up to Corinth, leaving the reader wondering what and where these monuments were.² While reading Pausanias might superficially suggest a largely empty countryside save a few important sites, the author actually provides a highly learned and literary map of the Isthmus, displaying places both significant to his account and the world of his day.

Although the title of Pausanias’ Periegesis is routinely translated as the Description of Greece, scholars have well demonstrated that it is not in any sense a systematic or complete description of Greece of the second century AD. Archaeologists have criticized Pausanias’ incompleteness, biases, and perception, while other recent studies have underscored the various rationales and logic that guided his interpretation of the significant monuments of the world of his day.³ A collection of recent essays (Alcock et al. 2001), for instance, underscores the different ways that the account was tied to an imaginative geography of the second sophistic.⁴ William Hutton’s recent analysis places

² Paus. 2.2.4, with discussion by Wiseman 1978, 69.


Pausanias into his second century intellectual context and presents the ancient traveler as a sophisticated, highly literate and educated commentator on Greece in the second century.

And yet, if Pausanias records the Corinthia (and landscapes of Greece, generally) according to his own organizational schema, his account is also embedded in a tradition of perceiving the ancient landscape in a particular way for the basic ingredients of his account (the places) are consistent with those mentioned by earlier writers. Strabo’s geography, for example, although written fewer than two centuries earlier and for different purposes, mentions most of the same places recorded in Pausanias’ account. And in fact, most surviving literature from the Roman period that alludes to the city’s eastern territory indicates that there were little more to the territory than urban center, harbors, and Isthmian sanctuary. For visitors to this region in antiquity, Corinth, Kenchreai, and Isthmia, were, in conceptual terms, the only real places that mattered or were worth mentioning.

The following discussion highlights the places of significance and interest in the Corinthia of the second century AD and the diversity and range of meanings they had acquired by that time. The discussion suggests that the myths and stories, passed on through the Roman period, reinforced an historic image of the city tied to its eastern landscape and the role of the territory as a Mediterranean crossroads. This ancient configuration of important places undergirded a traditional narrative and storyline of the city developed from the Archaic period and maintained even into Late Antiquity. The end of this conceptual landscape involved not the material discontinuity in places on the Isthmus (for indeed, many places had vibrant late Roman lives) but the end of ancient ways of thinking about the landscape, which were themselves embedded in an antique literary tradition. A tradition of conceptualizing and discussing the Corinthian landscape was redefined as classicism itself developed and changed in the later Roman Empire.
3.1.1. The Isthmus

As Fowler and Stillwell pointed out in the early twentieth century, the “isthmus” (Fig. 3.1) was itself a multivariate term that was used in three principal ways in antiquity: 1) the general landscape between the Scironian Rocks and the city of Corinth; 2) the narrowest land between two seas where lay the diolkos and the canal trenches; and 3) the specific site most sacred to Poseidon and home of the site of Isthmia. The latter two uses of the word will be discussed in sections 3.1.2 and 3.1.3 below.

Figure 3.1. Corinth on the Isthmus, with modern and ancient place names

The “isthmus,” in the broadest sense of the word, was used in a general way to refer to the landform itself, physically focused in the narrow bottleneck that tied Greece to the Peloponnese, and where seas were separated by only five kilometers (e.g., “Corinth on

---

Fowler and Stillwell 1932, 49-50; Wiseman 1978.
the Isthmus”, the “isthmus of Greece”). Even in this sense, however, the Isthmus was not well-bounded and ancients understood its borders in different ways. Most authors in the Roman period conceived the western boundaries of the Isthmus at Corinth town and Lechaion probably because the urban center and northern harbor formed a natural, topographical, and visual breaking point, and the acropolis afforded a view back to the east. The heart of the Isthmus was the site of Isthmia, the *diolkos*, and Kenchreai, but ancient authors were less clear about the Isthmus’ eastern border, which became associated and confused with other borders—that of Corinthia / Megara (or Attica), the Peloponnese and Ionia, and Achaia / Hellas. Sources, for instance, tell of the famous stele once existing in mythical times that signaled to the traveler he was entering (or departing) the Peloponnese / Ionia. Strabo’s account places the ancient sign somewhere near Krommyon on the Isthmus but also at the boundary of Attic-Megarian and Corinthian-Peloponnesian territory. But later discussions in the Roman period suggest that the start of the Isthmus was well west of the traditional boundary between Megara and the Corinthia, placing the sites associated with the mythical adventures of Theseus (e.g., towns of Crommyon and Sidous; the altar of Melicertes) within Corinthian territory but beyond the Isthmus. Certainly the monumental Roman arch at Isthmia, which funneled all major traffic from the north and east through that entrance, may have been built to articulate the entrance to the Isthmus or even the Peloponnese in the imperial

---

6 E.g., In some historical accounts of the city, Aletes was said to have founded Corinth on the Isthmus over the former site of Ephyra, the key to the land of Pelops. See Velleius Paterculus *History of Rome* 1.3.3.

7 Pomponius Mela 47-48; Pliny *NH* 4.18; Paus. *NH* 2.1.5. Kenchreai was a natural southeastern border to the Isthmus.


9 The account is preserved in Plut. *Thes.* 25.3-5; Strabo 3.5.5; 9.1; Fowler and Stillwell 1932, 49-50; Wiseman 1978, 17. See also Pliny *NH* 4.5 (12) and 4.7 (23) for definitions of the Isthmus.

10 Strabo 8.6.22; 9.1.1.6.

11 Paus. 1.44.6-10; Paus. 2.1.3; Ps-Scylax *Periplus* 55. Wiseman 1978, 17-18, 38 note 14 argued (on the basis of Ps-Scylax) that Crommyon was certainly not within the bounds of the Isthmus.
era. But Pausanias placed the beginning of the Isthmus nearby at the place where the evildoer Sinis used to kill travelers by violently stretching them between pine trees, indeed the place where Sinis himself was eventually done in by Theseus.

Given the generally vague or various knowledge that travelers in the Roman period possessed about the places they visited, it may be best to imagine a fluid eastern boundary to the Isthmus that might be placed differently according to differing education and knowledge of ancient literature; it might conceptually terminate at the entrance to the sanctuary of Poseidon or be extended to even the Scironian Rocks. As importantly, the famous places east of the *diolkos* became in the Roman period firmly embedded with narratives of travel along the Athens-Corinth coastal road. We meet places associated with Sciron the villain who tossed travelers from the rocks into the sea; the wretched Sinis who quartered his victims; Theseus who cleared the road of villains; the spot where Melicertes was brought to shore by the dolphin; and boundary markers as signals for the travelers. The beginning of the Isthmus provided a good indication of the character of the eastern Corinthian landscape and its city to the west, known to travelers coming down the east-west road.

### 3.1.2. The Diolkos and Canal

Approaching by the main road from Athens and points further east, the traveler arrived at the narrowest point of the Isthmus where seas were separated by less than six kilometers. Across this stretch of land, a narrow paved road (the so-called *diolkos*) was laid in the Archaic period to facilitate the transporting of merchant ships, or at least cargo. It is also the place where the emperor Nero (and others) attempted to canal the Isthmus, still visible even to the nineteenth century by trenches and earthen mounds at the Saronic and Corinthian Gulfs. The ship-road and canal were two lines across the narrow

---

12 Gregory and Mills 1984.

13 Paus. 2.1.4.

14 Paus. 2.1.3; Wiseman 1978, 17.
isthmus along much the same path and together formed another physical marker of the Isthmus itself, indicating to the traveler the center of the land bridge connecting the territory to the broader world.  

As James Wiseman and others have pointed out, the obvious advantages of providing an alternate short cut to sailing around cape Malea and the southern tip of Greece must have occurred to the Corinthians rather early in their history. The twin seas encroach on the land so closely on both sides that simple practical and economic considerations encouraged attempts to facilitate sea-born traffic between east and west, the Adriatic and the Aegean. As Strabo suggested, following the Thucydidean account, the communication of the Isthmus between seas and lands contributed a steady income of taxes and levies that turned Corinth into a wealthy city. The physical road and the canal cuttings formed tangible reminders of the importance of the Isthmus to Mediterranean trade and transport networks. The ship-road was the reality for which the canal was an unrealized ideal.

On the other hand, the two physical monuments that symbolized the role of the Corinthian isthmus as a transport zone between twin gulfs were remembered disproportional to their actual economic function in antiquity. The ship-road, which was constructed as early as the reign of Periander (late 7th century BC) and remained a consistent structure in the Corinthian economy through the Roman period (see below),

---


16 Wiseman 1978, 45.

17 Thuc. 1.13.5; Strabo 8.6.20.
was rarely mentioned in antiquity. The building of the canal, which was never close to being completed in antiquity and had no history before the Roman period, was mentioned frequently in Roman descriptions of the territory. Relatively speaking, the canal came to assume a much more significant place in the literary culture of the Roman era despite being less economically significant for the city and less physically consistent in the territory than the *diolkos*. In literary accounts, the canal had much greater place value than the simple ship-road, tied more immediately to the personalities of emperors, kings, and wealthy men.

The typical use of the word *diolkos* to refer to the ship-road itself is also a bit of a misnomer, for the word never acquired this specific connotation in ancient literature and referred more generally to the narrowest part of the Isthmus. Strabo states explicitly that the *diolkos* was the narrow part of the Isthmus, formed between the concave shores of the Corinthian Gulf and the Saronic Gulf at Schoenus and Isthmia. This narrow area was, of course the place where the “ships are hauled overland”, but the use of the word denoted the narrow itself and not the road *per se*. Hesychius defines the *diolkos* as the place (*topos*) from Lechaion to Kenchreai, and calls the *holkos* the roadway and the hauling machines. Besides Strabo and Hesychius, there are no other references to a *diolkos* (as a place or road), although there are numerous early references to individuals dragging ships across the Isthmus.

The reason for quibbling over words is that when modern archaeologists and historians use the word *diolkos*, they give the road itself a quality of place that it never

---


19 Strabo 8.6.4; 8.6.22.

20 Strabo 8.2.1.

21 Wiseman 1978, 74, note 9, states that in this definition of *holkos*, Hesychius is confusing the *holkos* with the *diolkos*. But the latter word never referred to the roadway specifically. Hesychius is certainly reading Strabo in the right sense.

22 E.g., Polybius 4.19.7; 5.101.4; Thuc. 8.8.3; Ar. *Them.* 647-54; Pliny *NH* 4.10; Dio 51.5.
possessed in antiquity. Certainly the ancients knew of a road across the Isthmus, since Ps-Seylax at least referred to one running 40 stades from sea to sea. Excavations in the 1960s also revealed the narrow track of a road at the Lechaion Gulf near the modern canal.\textsuperscript{23} It is, of course, not unlikely that the two features, the physical road and the narrowest part of the Isthmus, were conflated by some in antiquity into a single identity called the \textit{diolkos}. The point that I wish to make is that the \textit{diolkos} per se had much less place-fame in the Roman period than it possesses in modern scholarship. Strabo and others refer to the unloading of goods and their transport across the Isthmus on trolleys (or the ships on trolleys),\textsuperscript{24} but the process was rarely given the specificity of place nor was it an important theme in literature in the Roman period—and this despite the obvious significance of the road for the economy of the Corinthia.

Although modern scholars have commonly discussed the \textit{diolkos} as though it referred to a physical entity (the ship-road),\textsuperscript{25} this is not an assumption evident in the ancient sources. The fact that the \textit{diolkos} is not mentioned frequently in the Roman period cannot be taken as evidence that it was abandoned at this time, as has sometimes been suggested.\textsuperscript{26} Given the importance of commerce for the Corinthian economy and the continuing place of Corinth in Mediterranean trade networks, it seems altogether improbable that there did not exist a paved road (or several such roads) used to convey

\textsuperscript{23} Wiseman 1978, 45-47; Ps-Seylax \textit{Periplus} 40.

\textsuperscript{24} Strabo 8.6.20; Pliny \textit{NH} 4.9-11.

\textsuperscript{25} Scholars have admitted that most sources refer to the dragging of ships across the isthmus rather than the ship-road \textit{per se}: Wiseman 1978, 45; MacDonald 1986, 192, FN6; Cook 1979, 152, FN7. However, they have generally assumed (incorrectly) that other sources refer to the \textit{diolkos} as the physical road. Hence, Cook 1979, 152: “Not much attention is given to the \textit{diolkos} across the Isthmus of Corinth, nor is much known about it. There are a dozen or so explicit or probable references to it in ancient literature, one relevant inscription and some remains of its track.” But the references and inscription he alludes to do not refer to the road.

\textsuperscript{26} Cook 1979, 152-53 (especially FN 7 and 8), for instance, posits that the dearth of testimony about the \textit{diolkos} indicates that it was only a modestly (but not highly) successful endeavor for the city in the Classical period. He also speculates that the \textit{diolkos} (by which he means the ship-road) fell out of use in 67 BC [sic], evident in the construction of Nero’s canal through its western end, and that it was unlikely used in later Byzantine times. This reading is unnecessarily skeptical, however, and is based on the misunderstanding that the literary evidence refers to the \textit{diolkos} as the physical road (which it does not).
cargo across the narrowest part of the Isthmus through the late Roman period (see Section 3.2.1, below).\textsuperscript{27} That our literary sources did not mention it says more about their own interests than about the importance of the road in daily life. Discussion of another entity, the canal, can demonstrate through contrast the ship-road’s poor imageability.

The construction of the Corinthian canal never came close to completion in antiquity but it achieved (in contrast to the ship-road) a remarkable place in the literature of the period. It may seem obvious today that a society centered on the Mediterranean might wish to canal the Isthmus of Greece but there is no good evidence that anyone seriously planned for or initiated the project before the Hellenistic era. Historians often refer to Diogenes Laertius’ comment that the tyrant Periander considered canal constructing, but there was no popular tradition for this and the silence of others (such as Herodotus) regarding the tyrant’s conception is itself cause for skepticism about an earlier Greek tradition. It is easier to see the assertion itself as a product of the Roman period—a desire to connect a major personality of Corinthian history with conceiving a feat connected with kings and emperors.\textsuperscript{28}

It is in the early Roman period that the canal enters the repertoire of common themes in literary discussion, at a time when the maritime character of the (refounded) city was itself a common topic. Strabo gives the earliest evidence for canal constructing in Demetrius Poliorcetes’ plans to ease the passage of his naval squadrons.\textsuperscript{29} Pliny the Elder connects canal construction attempts directly to the narrowness of the Isthmus and the eagerness to facilitate naval traffic in the early Roman period.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{27} Without solid archaeological evidence, it is difficult to determine the later history of the ship-road. That

\textsuperscript{28} Diogenes Laertius 1.99. There is no other evidence that Periander conceived this endeavor, despite the frequency of stories about him in the Roman period. Wiseman 1978, 48, and J.B. Salmon, Wealthy Corinth: A History of the City to 338 B.C., Oxford 1984, 134, 202, accept the possibility.

\textsuperscript{29} Strabo 1.3.11.

\textsuperscript{30} Pliny NH 4.9-11.
The circuit of the Morea is a long and dangerous voyage for vessels prohibited by their size from being carried across the Isthmus on trolleys, and consequently successive attempts were made...to dig a ship-canal through the narrow part.

A value of canal construction for Strabo and others is that it would create a sophisticated upgrade to the old trolley road at the diolkos, allowing sizable ships to cross the Isthmus. In Pseudo-Lucian’s early third century imaginary dialogue between Musonius and Menecrates, Musonius suggests that Nero’s intentions for the canal were “to save seafarers the voyage round the Peloponnese past Cape Malea.”\textsuperscript{31} Pseudo-Lucian has Nero reason that canalling the Isthmus would contribute to the commerce of the entire region, coastal and inland sites included. In this respect, stories about constructing the canal reinforced the rationale for and function of the diolkos—creating a direct path between two seas to facilitate travel and commerce—reminding Romans of the importance of this stretch of land for Corinth, for Greece, and for broader Mediterranean networks of transport and commerce.

On the other hand, stories of canal constructing were more potent and tangible than mere descriptions of dragging the boats across the Isthmus. The limitations of a pre-industrial society, depending on slave labor over machinery, made canalling the Isthmus a task so great that even the expressed desire or plan to dig demonstrated an ambition fit for only a king or emperor wanting to leave a signature in the physical landscape. The lists of canal constructors varied in antiquity, and the act of listing is itself a Roman phenomenon. Nero is typically connected with a major canal construction, but there was uncertainty about who else expressed interest and actually made attempts. Strabo provides an early testimony that Demetrius Poliorketes planned such an attempt.\textsuperscript{33} Pliny’s list of canal diggers includes Demetrius Poliorketes, Julius Caesar, Caligula, and Nero.\textsuperscript{34} Suetonius names the latter three, but says that only Nero actually initiated work

\textsuperscript{31} [Lucian] \textit{Nero}. This dialogue is in some traditions ascribed to Lucian, but was probably written by the first Philostratus. See the Loeb introduction to the Pseudo-Lucian volume.

\textsuperscript{32} Strabo 8.2.1; 8.6.22.

\textsuperscript{33} Strabo 1.3.11.

\textsuperscript{34} Pliny \textit{NH} 4.9-11.
with a dramatic groundbreaking ceremony following his performance in the Isthmian Games. Pausanias himself does not name Nero specifically in connection to the canal construction, but only refers to the one “who tried to make the Peloponnese an island.”

Canal constructing and the desire to dig became in the Roman period a kind of signature mark of ambitious personalities of kings and emperors who desired to accomplish by force an unattainable goal. Suetonius remarks that Caligula’s greatest unaccomplished plan was to canal the Isthmus, greater even than his plans to rebuild and finish temples in Ephesus and Samos. Plutarch numbers the expedition to dig through the Corinthian isthmus as one of Caesar’s numerous impassioned lusts for glory. Pseudo-Lucian’s early third century account of Nero’s attempts has the emperor overcome in a kind of drunken passion to canal the Isthmus at the moment he noticed the character of the landscape:

It was only when he had seen what the place was like that he fell in love with a grandiose scheme, when he thought of the king who once led the Achaeans against Troy and how he severed Euboea from Boeotia by digging the Euripus at Chalcis, and when moreover he thought how Darius had bridged the Bosporus to attack the Scythians. Perhaps even before either of these he had thought of the feat of Xerxes, the mightiest of all mighty works, and how moreover by giving men a short route of access to each other he would make it possible for foreigners to enjoy the glorious hospitality of Greece. For tyrannical natures, though intoxicated, yet somehow thirst to hear praises of this sort.

Philostratus links Nero’s attempts to some of the greatest ambition hunters of ancient history that included Agamemnon, Darius, and Xerxes. Ascribing connections between such personalities of history did not typically signify positive character marks, but hubris and sacrilege. Pausanias’ description is explicit that undertaking “to make the

---

35 Suetonius Julius 44; Gaius 21; Nero 19, 37. See also Josephus Jewish War 3.540, who states that Vespasian sent 6,000 Jewish prisoners to Nero to help with the canal.

36 Paus. 2.1.5. Although it is possible that Pausanias deliberately refuses to name Nero (or anyone else), it may also suggest a confusion already by the second century about who had dug the canal pits then visible.

37 Suetonius Gaius 21.

38 Plutarch Vita Caesar 58.

Peloponnesus an island” signified a violent effort to alter a landscape designed by the gods, and brought to his mind other failed ancient isthmus excavations in Asia Minor, such as Alexander’s attempts at Mimas (4th c. BC) and the Cnidian efforts to canal their territory (6th c. BC). Pliny’s account even relates the demise of the various canal cutters to their sacrilegious acts! The emperors themselves were not deterred as successive failed attempts to canal only provided a momentum for later personalities seeking to win eternal glory.

The close connections between the greatest ambitions of ancient history and the passion to alter permanently the Greek landscape is summed up in a story told by Philostratus about Herodes Atticus. The passage is colorful and can be quoted in full:

Though he had achieved such great works, he held that he had done nothing important because he had not cut through the Isthmus. For he regarded it as a really brilliant achievement to cut away the mainland to join two seas, and to contract lengths of sea into a voyage of twenty-six stades. This he longed to do, but he never had the courage to ask the Emperor to grant him permission, lest he should be accused of grasping at an ambitious plan to which not even Nero had proved himself equal. But in conversation he did let out that ambition in the following way. [552] For as I have been told by Ctesidemus the Athenian, Herodes was driving to Corinth with Ctesidemus sitting by his side, and when he arrived at the Isthmus Herodes cried: ‘Poseidon, I aspire to do it, but no one will let me!’ Ctesidemus was surprised at what he had said and asked him why he made the remark. Whereupon Herodes replied: ‘For a long time I have been striving to bequeath to men that come after me some proof of an ambition that reveals me for the man I am, and I consider that I have not yet attained to this reputation.’ Then Ctesidemus recited praises of his speeches and his deeds which no other man could surpass. But Herodes replied: ‘All this that you speak of must decay and yield to the hand of time, and others will plunder my speeches and criticize now this, now that. But the cutting of the Isthmus is a deathless achievement and more than one could credit to human powers, for in my opinion to cleave through the Isthmus calls for Poseidon rather than a mere man.’

This account ties together so many different associations of the Corinthian landscape. Herodes traveling (to Corinth) by land from Athens approaches the place sacred to Poseidon where so many before had planned or attempted to facilitate Greece’s sea traffic but failed. The aristocrat pronounces his desperate desire, thereby placing himself among the greatest, most ambitious persons of history while simultaneously emphasizing

---

40 Flav. Philostratus, VS 2.551-2.552.
his lower status relative to kings, emperors, and gods. To alter the earth signaled nothing less than a deathless achievement fit for Poseidon, or for a god-like emperor or noble.

In this final respect, the stories of canal constructing and the physical evidence of that construction on the Isthmus reminded the traveler that he had reached the domain of Poseidon, the center of the Isthmus and place most sacred to him. In Pausanias’ account, discussion of failed canal construction at the Isthmus led him naturally to think of the city’s mythological structure as it related to Corinthian territory, divided between Poseidon and Helius. Canal cutting was an impiety against Poseidon because his domain centered on the Isthmus and the sanctuary lying less than a kilometer beyond the canal. In Dio’s account of Nero’s endeavors, at the moment of excavation, blood gushed from the earth, phantoms appeared, and groans and loud noises were heard throughout the land—terrifying phenomena that the tyrant simply ignored!41

Cutting the Corinthian canal was never accomplished in antiquity but the very attempts became a principal *topos* in the literature of the Roman era. The succession of failures reinforced both the sacrilegious character and physical impossibility of making the Peloponnese an island, while also underscoring the centrality of Greek geography for the wider world and the important place of Corinth within that geography. The canal became a place linked in literature with some of the most ambitious men of the Roman period and formed a popular topic of discussion of the physical world (e.g., would a hypothetical canal flood Aegina?) or a setting to place discussions of philosophers like Musonius and Demetrius.42

The literary medium, moreover, also structured and affected how individuals read the physical landscape in the Roman period. On the way to Corinth one would encounter at roughly the same location both the ship-road and the physical evidence of canal construction. The canal excavations could be recognized in the physical features at the

41 Dio Cassius 44.5; 62.16-17. For another brief account of the actual episode of digging, cf. Suet. Nero 19.

42 e.g., Philostratus, *VA* 5.19.
junction of the coastal roads with the *diolkos*, the narrowest point of the Isthmus.\(^{43}\) The *diolkos* itself, represented by the more consistent physical line of a ship-road between two seas at the narrowest point, would have been highly visible to the traveler. The person who traveled along the ship-road from one sea to the other would have seen the canal cuts and earth moles on both ends, as well as the relief of (probably) Heracles in the rock of the canal wall presumably commemorating the attempt.

How the traveler read such features depended on which places he thought were significant and wanted to see, as well as how informed he was by ancient literature. Pausanias saw the remains of the canal attempt near Isthmia in the second century AD,\(^{44}\) but does not specify who cut the canal; he also makes no mention of the *diolkos* (as either the narrow part of the Isthmus or as a specific ship-road) although it would have been visible to him. Walking across the Isthmus along the ship-road, the better educated Roman traveler seeing the Heracles relief might have recalled the Herculean attempts to cut the divinely shaped land and perhaps the succession of failures of that enterprise. His path across the *diolkos* may have ultimately reminded him of the physical distinctiveness of the land bridge of Greece and its constancy and permanence, despite man’s desires to alter it.

The ancient traveler of the Roman era need not have known all the stories and associations connected with these places to make some sense of it, and even Pausanias does not name Nero (or any persons specifically) as responsible for the trenches. The uneducated traveler might only have noticed the ship-road and the canal trenches and recognized the central place of the Isthmus for the geography of Corinth, Greece, and the Mediterranean world. A more educated traveler would have read and known some of the

\(^{43}\) A study by B. Gerster has highlighted the archaeological evidence for the excavated ancient canal. B. Gerster, “L’Isthme de Corinthe,” *BCH* 8 (1884), 225-32.

\(^{44}\) Pausanias 2.1.5-2.1.6 claims to have seen the site where the excavation occurred and even remarked that the digging failed to penetrate the rock, an observation confirming his belief that the act was sacrilege as well as his probable location on the eastern Saronic side, near the site of Isthmia. For discussion, see J. Murphy-O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Corinth: Texts and Archaeology*, Collegeville, MN, 1983, 9-10.
anecdotes about the important personalities of recent history who tried to pierce the Isthmus and connect the seas of the wider world beyond. He might have read the ship-road and canal cuts as the physical axis of the Isthmus of Corinth and Greece, recalling the stories of the city’s relationship to the broader world and the sacred character of a landscape refusing to become an island.

3.1.3. Isthmia

The conceptual center of the Isthmus occurred where the land narrowed to the bottleneck and was marked by the ship-road, canal trenches, a number of regular roads, and especially the sanctuary and sites sacred to Poseidon. This area, often referred to as the Isthmus (proper) or Isthmia, was the major place of the eastern territory discussed in ancient literature. Its location near the intersection of numerous roads from all directions, made the area one of the important nodes in the Corinthian landscape, and its connection to the Isthmian games invited pilgrims and tourists from all over Greece. Much of the site of Isthmia has been excavated over the last half century and the results published in the Isthmia series volumes of The American School of Classical Studies at Athens. These volumes detail the material history of the site from pre-history to post-antiquity, so my brief overview here will simply highlight the meanings and conceptions of the place of Isthmia in the literature of the Roman period.45

The sacred poles of the Corinthia in the Roman period were Acrocorinth and Corinth town on the one end, and Isthmia (and by connection, the entire isthmus generally) on the other. The entire Corinthian landscape was, of course, sacred to a multiplicity of deities, and Pausanias’ account highlights the variety of sanctuaries and shrines that existed in the eastern territory. But a principal myth that circulated about Corinth reinforced the sacred split of the two most distinct features of Corinth’s eastern territory—Acrocorinth and the Isthmus. In the end, Helios gained control of Acrocorinth, and Poseidon the Isthmus and the sea. This latter god’s domain was centered in the sanctuary at Isthmia, a little more

than a kilometer from the sea; here, at Poseidón’s sanctuary, Greeks came from all across the Mediterranean every other year to celebrate the games in honor of another important deity connected with the sea, Palaemon/Melicertes.

The story of Palaemon is a sad one. Melicertes was the son of Ino, who was plunged into the sea with his mother when she (along with her husband pursuing) was driven mad by the Furies sent by Hera (that’s another story). The boy drowned but was brought ashore at the Isthmus on the back of a dolphin where, at least according to a predominant tradition, Sisyphus found him and established the Isthmian games near the Sanctuary of Poseidón in the honor of Melicertes. Poseidón and the boy were themselves closely linked, for it was the sea-god who transformed the drowned Melicertes into Palaemon, and their sacred homes touched in a single place, Isthmia. As Aelius Aristides would say, Poseidón made Palaemon and his mother partners in his empire, and Poseidón, Amphitrite, Palaemon, and Leucothea were the principal deities honored at the sanctuary.

There were, however, numerous other aquatic and divine figures connected with the Isthmus and the sea, and the site itself (and Corinth, by connection) became bound closely to imagery of the sea. In the mid-second century, Pausanias saw numerous statues and reliefs of gods at Isthmia, nearly all associated with the sea: there was Poseidón, Amphitrite, Sea and Calm, Tritons, Palaemon on the dolphin, Ino, Leucothea, a

---

46 “Palaemon” is the name of the transformed and deified Melicertes.


48 Ael. Arist. Or. 46.15, 31. One is also reminded of Pseudo-Lucian’s description of Nero canalling the Isthmus, which began with the emperor hymning Amphitrite and Poseidón and singing to Melicertes and Leucothea. Cf. [Lucian] Nero 3
whale-like horse, young Aphrodite, Bellerophon, Nereids, and the sons of Tyndareus.49 Such concentration of sea-residing beings in one place could explain how some versions of the story of Arion and the dolphin told of his landing at Corinth, rather than Taenarum where most others placed him.50 Ampelius, in his brief discussion of the wonders of the world,51 noted that near the sea at Corinth, there was a whale bone so large that a person could not embrace it, as well as a sanctuary of Aphrodite with a marble vase of Lais; it has been suggested that Ampelius is referring to the site of Isthmia.52 Even the sea creatures (Triton and Icthyocentaur, Nereids, Eros, dolphins, and fishes) depicted in the mosaic floor of the second-century bath at Isthmia remind the visitor of the broader seascape connected with this sacred site.53

Those who have visited the modern site of Isthmia, located in the quiet village of Kyras Vrysi, can quickly forget that the area must have been thronging with travelers.54 The volume of actual travel is hard to measure but certainly pilgrimage, the games, and simple transit through the Isthmus made the site a veritable travel node. Our sources are direct, if colorful, about the numerous travelers and pilgrims. Strabo notes that the Isthmian games drew large crowds of people that had contributed to the wealth of the

---

49 Paus. 2.1.7-2.2.1. Ael. Arist. Or. 46.40-41, also mentions several of these images.

50 The canonical version of the story (Hdt. 1.24) is as follows: Arion the lyre player lived in Corinth at the time of Periander and sailed to the cities of Sicily and Italy to play his lyre; there he amassed a great wealth. One day the sailors, eager for his wealth, attempted to kill him, but as a final request before plunging into the sea, Arion played his lyre, which in turn summoned a dolphin that carried him ashore at Taenarum; there was, supposedly, a monument of Arion on the dolphin there in antiquity. The version told by the Latin author Hyginus (Fabulae 194 (Arion)), however, has Arion come ashore at Corinth rather than Taenarum. This need not imply that Hyginus ‘got it wrong’, but that myths were reworked in different ways in antiquity.

51 Ampelius, Liber Memoriales 8.8: Corintho ballenae costa est magna secundum mare, quam homo complecti non potest; eodem in loco fanum est Veneris, in quo uas marmoreum Laidos.

52 See Marie-Pierre Arnaud-Lindet (Trans.), Liber Memoriales (L. Ampelius), Paris 1993, with commentary on p. 62, Note 12. Arnaud-Lindet suggests that the marble vase could refer to a perirrhanterion, now at the Corinth museum but found at the entrance of the sanctuary of Isthmia and dedicated to Poseidon. It may be that Ampelius’ brief description of Corinth is itself a conflation of different places.


54 Cf., for instance, the quiet image of the site of Isthmia in its landscape: Nikos Paphatzis, p. 40.
former city, and Livy describes (see below) the gathering effect in some detail, remarking also on the marketplace at the site.\textsuperscript{55} In a colorful and well-known account, Dio Chrysostom places the Cynic philosopher Diogenes in the midst of this environment:\textsuperscript{56}

When the Isthmian games were in progress, Diogenes, who probably was sojourning at Corinth, went down to the Isthmus. He did not attend the great public gatherings, however, with the same motives as the majority, who wished to see the athletes and to gormandize. No, I warrant he came as an observer of mankind and of men’s folly. He knew that men show their real character most clearly at public festivals and large gatherings.

Dio Chrysostom has visitors arrive from Asia Minor, Sicily and Italy; Libya, Massilia, and the Black Sea, crowding around Diogenes and listening to him as a kind of local attraction, a person whom the locals, accustomed to his babbling in the Craneion district, found less amusing. Isthmia was the perfect chronotope for a philosopher like Diogenes to find numerous crowds; and it was possibly a contributing factor in St. Paul’s use of Corinth as a base for his mission.\textsuperscript{57}

There were other reasons to visit the site beyond the games. The presence of the ship-road nearby—the most direct route across the Isthmus—and the convergence of other important roads from Athens, Corinth, and the Lechaion Gulf positioned Isthmia at one of the most important crossroads in the eastern Corinthia and made the site highly visible even during the off-years. Pausanias’ brief description of the Isthmus proper, for example, focuses not on the games \textit{per se} but on the interesting sacred facets of the site, including the temples of Poseidon and Palaemon and the sculpted images of the gods.\textsuperscript{58} The most interesting facets of Isthmia for the periegete were the exquisite images highlighting Corinth’s famous deities, as mentioned above. Pausanias’ description highlights another way that the Isthmus attracted visitors and pilgrims through the Roman

\textsuperscript{55} Strabo 8.6.20; Livy 33.32.

\textsuperscript{56} Dio Chrys. \textit{Or.} 9.4ff. Loeb translation. See also the comments of Murphy O-Connor 1984, 96-98, that this scene reflects the “personal experience” of Dio Chrysostom in the late first century AD.


\textsuperscript{58} Paus. 2.1.7-2.2.2.
period, even apart from the games. The use of the area as a crossroads and marketplace is also well-attested in the literature.\textsuperscript{59}

For all of these reasons, Isthmia became another conceptual focal point of the Isthmus and achieved remarkable place-fame during the Roman period. It was a place, much like the canal discussed above, that fascinated individuals and possessed an imageability that warranted its frequent discussion in literary accounts. It also possessed a rich history, often connected with freedom and pan-Hellenic unity. Here at Isthmia, as everyone knew, Philip II of Macedon and then Alexander his son held conferences in 338 and 336 BC to prepare the Greeks for a united campaign against the Persians. And in 196 BC the Roman commander Flamininus chose Isthmia and the games as the place and time to proclaim the liberation of the Greeks from Macedon.\textsuperscript{60}

The appointed time of the Isthmian Games was at hand, a spectacle always, even on other occasions, attended by crowds, on account of the fondness, native to the race, for exhibitions in which there were trials of skill in every variety of art as well as of strength and swiftness of foot; moreover, they came because, on account of the favourable situation of the place, lying between two opposite seas and furnishing mankind with abundance of all wares, the market was a meeting place for Asia and Greece. But at this time they had assembled from all quarters not only for the usual purposes, but especially because they were consumed with wonder what thenceforth the state of Greece would be, and what their own conditions…

Even the emperor Nero stepped into this long line of notables, and, having initiated the construction of the canal nearby, entered a tragic contest in the theater there (he had his opponent’s throat slashed with writing tablets).\textsuperscript{61} Suetonius remarks that Nero’s final act in Greece was the mock pronouncement of freedom to the whole province during the Isthmian Games,\textsuperscript{62} an act that situated him in the historical pedigree of other notables establishing or proclaiming freedom (Theseus, Philip II, and Flaminus) at a place associated with pan-Hellenic endeavors (the Hellenic League, resistance to Persian Wars, resistance to Persian Wars,

\textsuperscript{59} E.g., Livy 33.32.

\textsuperscript{60} Livy 33.32. See also Polybius’ account of this event, Polybius 18.44-46.

\textsuperscript{61} [Lucian] \textit{Nero} 8-9.

\textsuperscript{62} Suet. \textit{Nero} 24.
initiation of campaign against Persia (338 BC), and the Games). Isthmia was a place where famous individuals of the Roman period could step into the historical narrative, blow their trumpets and shout, or at least, a place where later narrators felt these people belonged. It was significant in the early empire not only because of its importance for the games, but the fact of its antiquity, its associations with pan-Hellenism, and a series of famous historical persons and events, contributed to its fame.

The place of the site in the imagination of authors of the high empire can be summed up in the panegyric delivered by Aelius Aristides in AD 156 for the celebration of the festival. The famous Isthmian Oration (Or. 46) is dedicated to Poseidon and begins by praising the role of the god in his dominion over the seas, showing humans how the land and sea could be united to create a medium connecting societies and producing commerce. His speech comes to a climax centered on the place of Poseidon at the Isthmus:

Nothing is so dear, beloved, and honored by him as this isthmus and this region here. And I call this Poseidon’s chancellery, palace, court—just as Homer spoke of the ‘court of Zeus’, and the headquarters of his kingdom. I base my judgment, among other reasons, on the fact that he centered the whole sea on every side around this point after he had set gates on either side of it and had spread the land which is called the Isthmus equally to the east and west of it, and at the same time had closed it off so that the seas might not join, not with a great expanse of land, but, as it were, with a narrow pipe, and had legislated and had ordained for the seas, that each preserve its own boundaries, and again had spread them all open and had given to each a somewhat wide expanse in the distance, so that—and this is the strangest and at the same time most pleasant of all spectacles on the earth—people on each side sail in and sail out at the same instant with favorable breezes and men put out to sea and into port with the same winds in this land and sea alone of all, and everything from everywhere comes here both by land and sea, and this is the reason why the land even from earliest times was praised as ‘rich’ by the poets, both because of the multitude of the advantages which are at hand and the felicity which is embodied in it. For it is, as it were, a kind of market place, and at that common

---


64 See C.A. Behr (Tr.), P. Aelius Aristides, The Complete Work, for translation, with commentary at pp. 422-24.

65 Or. 46.20-23. Translation is C.A. Behr.
to all the Greeks, and a national festival, not like this present one which the Greek race celebrates here every two years, but one which is celebrated every year and daily.

Aelius Aristides goes on to explain that Isthmia was a daily festival of exchange between cities, a passage for every traveler and the common metropolis of all Greece, pleasant, beautiful, and charming to the visitor, an obvious offspring of Aphrodite herself. Even the appearance of Corinth showed the favor of Aphrodite and Nymphs, its greatness demonstrated by its continuous habitation extending to all the seas, as though the city were a merchant ship surrounded by the sea of its own goods. The historical pedigree of the city included a variety of notable heroes, gods, and persons who were, by some association, linked to the Isthmus. In this final excerpt, Aelius Aristides brings together in a single image the numerous stories, associations, deities, and personalities connected with Corinthian history, as well as the central myth of Corinth married to its eastern territory. The Isthmus was no less than the heart of the city, a crossroads linked by its seas to the wider world. This is good solid panegyric, but it consolidates numerous strands of Corinthian myth and stories under the conceptual banner of the city on the Isthmus centered in Poseidon’s chancellery and the marketplace of all mankind.

3.1.4. The Twin Harbors

Although Corinth had at least four harbors in use in the Roman era—Lechaion, Kenchreai, and the two small ports marking the end of the diolkos (Schoenus and modern Poseidonia: see 3.1.6 below)—only the first two were substantial or particularly famous. Lechaion and Kenchreai were the twin harbors of the city, best known as geographic points of reference in a broader narrative of travel and sailing. They were

---

66 Or. 46.26-27.


68 For brief discussions of the literary evidence for these harbors, cf. Wiseman 1978, 52-53; 87-88; Murphy-O’Connor 1983, 17-21, 104-5; Rothaus 1995, and further references in Section 3.2.1 below. For some non-specific mentions of these harbors in the Roman period, see Strabo 8.6.4; Acts 18.18; Galen, De propriorum animi 5.18.12; Lucian Hist. Conscr. 29; Lucian Nav. 32.2; Paus. 7.6.7; Polyena. Statag. 6.5.1; Ps-Scymnus Geogr. Ad. Nicom. Regem 508; Ptolem. 3.14.34; Phil. VA 4.24-25; Pliny NH 4.12.3; Paus. 8.1.2; Ael. Aris. Or. 1.290.
called harbors (*epineion*) and only occasionally given more specific definition. In the first century BC, for example, Strabo refers to Kenchreai as a harbor (*limen*) and village (*kome*), but it clearly became the major extra-urban town on the Isthmus in the early empire, as Apuleius says, “the most noble town” of Corinth. The northern harbor, Lechaion, was close enough to Corinth town that it lacked the distinct status of town, and was, as Rothaus has noted, probably a dependent suburb of the city. Lechaion was referred to as Corinth’s northern port, and Strabo remarks that there were few houses there. Like so many other places in the Corinthian landscape, Lechaion and Kenchreai were remembered and named in vague terms.

Yet, the twin harbors also had a reputation that preceded them, representing nothing less than the economic arms of the commercial city. It was because of these harbors, observed Diogenes the Cynic (and Dio Chrysostom), that large crowds gathered at Corinth. Strabo adds that the two harbors, together with the Isthmus, facilitated exchange and made the city wealthy. Although the distance between Corinth town and its larger northern harbor, Lechaion, was significantly less than between Corinth and Kenchreai, ancient authors conceived the two as a pair of outlets to equally important twin gulfs. Pausanias claims the two harbors were given their names by Leches and

---

69 *Epineion*: Ptolem. 3.14.27.2; 3.14.34; Aelius Herod., *De prosodia catholica* 3.1.284.32; Harpocr. *Lex.* 193.3.

70 Strabo 8.6.22.

71 Pomponius Mela 2.48.6 and Apul. 10.35 both use the term *oppidum* to describe Kenchreai.

72 Rothaus 1995, 300.

73 E.g., Livy 32.23; Pliny *NH* 4.12.3. See Wiseman 1978, 87-88 for an overview.

74 Strabo 8.6.22. This comment, made immediately after the first Roman refoundation of the city, need not mean that the area was uninhabited in the course of the Roman era. Only full investigations would reveal the character of habitation.

75 Dio Chrys. *Discourses* 8.5-10.

76 Strabo 8.6.20.

77 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. On the unequal size of the two harbors: Ovid *Met.* 5.407.
Cenchrias, the two children of Poseidon and Peirene, and were thereby positioned at the heart of civic mythology.\textsuperscript{78} The harbors in fact were conceptual and actual focal points for Corinth’s identity and landscape.

The centrality of the two harbors can be recognized in how some individuals understood their role in structuring the entire Corinthian landscape. Beyond simply noticing their economic importance, Strabo remarks that the harbors formed the conceptual starting point for the seaboard on both sides.\textsuperscript{79} Pausanias neatly describes the Isthmus of Corinth as stretching from the sea at Kenchreai to the sea at Lechaion, as though the seas were physically centered in their harbors.\textsuperscript{80} The view of such a landscape from Acrocorinth was particularly compelling. Pliny explains:\textsuperscript{81}

The narrow neck of land from which it 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 on either side have been eaten away so as to leave a space between them of only five miles…In the middle of this neck of land which we have called the Isthmus is the colony of Corinth, the former name of which was Ephyra; its habitations cling to the side of a hill, 7-1/2 miles [60 stades] 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.

A description of this sort creates a powerful image of Corinth in the mind, centered equidistant from the two harbors by sixty stades, as though the seas proportionally framed the urban center. In this conception, the gulfs, centered in their harbors, also framed and defined the Isthmus with Corinth town in the middle. The parallel shores of the Isthmus shores could also be designated by the names of their harbors.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{78} Paus. 2.2.3.
\textsuperscript{79} Strabo 8.6.22.
\textsuperscript{80} Strabo 2.1.5.
\textsuperscript{81} Pliny \textit{NH} 4.9-11. Loeb translation.
\textsuperscript{82} Paus. 8.1.2: “On the Lechaion side”; Or consider Strabo 8.6.22: “The beginning of the seaboard on the two sides is, on the one hand, Lechaenum, and on the other, Kenchreai, a village and a harbour distant about 70 stadia from Corinth.” (Loeb)
The harbors were also the most recognizable symbols of connection between Corinth and the world, the nodes of contacts between a cityscape and the rest of the Mediterranean. The harbors were linked to seas running in two directions, the one to Asia, the other to Italy; Corinth in the middle grew wealthy as a result. Lucian decries a pathetic historian of Corinth who never undertook a journey further than a walk from Craneion to Lerna—both within the walls of Corinth! He never “set a foot outside Corinth nor even left home for Kenchreai; he had certainly not seen Syria or Armenia.”

The early third century “Corinthian Oration” praises Corinth as the promenade (peripatos) of Greece, its very “prow and stern”, the place where the innumerable traders, pilgrims, travelers, and passersby annually land at Kenchreai, injecting prosperity and wealth in the famous city. Apuleius has Lucius the ass quickly gallop the distance to Kenchreai to participate in the rites of Isis. In stories like these, the twin harbors act as traveler nodes that reinforce a basic historical identity of Corinth on the Isthmus, connected to a wider world and the half-way house to many a wandering voyager.

Although poorly discussed, the two harbors were occasionally given sacred, historic, and mythological significance in ancient literature. Pausanias briefly records a sanctuary and image of Poseidon at Lechaion, and, at Kenchreai, a temple and image of Aphrodite, a Poseidon statue, and sanctuaries of Asclepius and Isis. Plutarch likewise places the famous Dinner of the Seven Wise Men (7th century BC) near the shrine of Aphrodite in the area of Lechaion; walking through throngs of travelers to the harbor, Periander and

---

83 Strabo 8.6.20.
84 Lucian Hist. Conscr. 29.
85 Favorinus, The Corinthian Oration 7-8, 36.
86 See J. Murphy-O’Connor 1983, 21, for skepticism about the size of the town.
87 Paus. 2.2.3.
the others arrive at the shore and visit the racetrack, gymnasium, and the beautiful park. Apollonius, standing at the Isthmus, with the sea roaring around Lechaion, uttered the prediction of Nero’s canal cutting which takes place at Lechaion (even though the actual trenches were far east of the harbor, at the *diolkos*). Near the climax of Apuleius’ *Metamorphosis*, the donkey skips to Kenchreai, which is the most famous town of all the Corinthians, bordering upon the seas called Aegean and Saronic. There is a great and mighty haven frequented with the ships of many a sundry nation, and there because I would avoid the multitude of people, I went to a secret place of the sea-coast, hard by the sprinklings of the waves, where I laid me down upon the bosom of the sand to ease and refresh myself; for now the day was past and the chariot of the sun gone down, and I lying in this sort on the ground did fall in a sweet and sound sleep.

The following day, in the parade of the goddess, Apuleius is transformed back into his human state. Corinth’s famous harbors, although rarely given descriptive detail, formed important conceptual nodes in a broader landscape of travel and trade, and, on occasion, formed the scenery for the historic and fictional actors of Corinthian history.

### 3.1.5. The Trans-Isthmian Wall

The walls of the Isthmus had a role in ancient literature longer-lasting than many other places on the Isthmus. The topographic and defensive potential of the Isthmus has been well-discussed through the studies of Wiseman, Stroud, and most recently, Caraher and Gregory. Gregory’s study of the trans-Isthmian wall documented both the extant

---

88 [Plut.] *Mor. (Septem Sapientium Convivium* 2&3) 146D-E, 148B; see Wiseman 1978, 87; Murphy-O’Connor 1983, 104-5; Rothaus 1995, 302-3. The description surely describes the Lechaion of the early Roman period.

89 Phil. *VA* 4.24.

90 Apuleius 10.35, Loeb translation, S. Gaselee edition. J. Murphy-O’Connor 1983, 21, is skeptical about the size of the harbor (probably from reading Scranton’s comments) based on excavated remains, but Kenchreai would have included a broader area than simply the buildings on the moles. R. Rothaus, *Corinth, the First City of Greece: an Urban History of Late Antique Cult and Religion*, Leiden 2000, 64-83, addresses this issue directly.

91 Cf. also Statius *Theb.* 1.334: The son of Oedipus, crossing the Isthmus heard two shores in mid land.

literary testimony for walling the Isthmus and the chronological and material character of the construction. What has received somewhat less direct discussion is how the wall and episodes of walling the Isthmus were embedded in the history of the city, communicating a variety of meanings about the place of the landscape for both the city and all of southern Greece.

Beyond the important immediate function of walling off the Isthmus to prevent invasions into the Peloponnese, it is important to recognize the historical prestige and fame that the Isthmus gained in later periods due to Herodotus’ well-known account of the walling episode. The fifth century BC historian tells the story of Xerxes’ Persian invasion and the moment of decision that came immediately after the Persian break through Thermopylae. The Peloponnesians gathered in conference at the Isthmus and voted to take their stand there by hastily constructing the wall while the Athenians decided to meet the enemy by sea.

Since their number was myriads and since every man worked the task proceeded well. They brought in stones and bricks and wood and baskets filled with sand and those who were helping never ceased work during the night or the day.

Herodotus wagers his own opinion that if the Persians had gained control of the sea, the wall across the Isthmus would have done the Peloponnesians little good. And yet, the walling of the Isthmus was nonetheless significant to Herodotus for its pivotal place in the story of the Greek cities fighting against invading barbarians—the Peloponnesians yoked the Isthmus as a line of final defense, perhaps a Greek parallel matching Xerxes’ bridging of the Hellespont and cutting of the isthmian canal near Athos.


94 Hdt. 8.71.

95 Hdt. 7.139.

96 T.E. Gregory has suggested that the symbolism of this episode is the “yoking” of the Isthmus. See below.
The effect of this earlier incident on later narratives is, of course, difficult to measure as later episodes of walling the Isthmus were also tied to a very practical concern to keep invaders out of the Peloponnese. But the most obvious impact is that the Herodotean account preserved the memory of the event as it was recounted in later historical accounts of Greece and the world, even given new details and nuance. Diodorus, for example, adds that the walling extended over a distance of 40 stades, a common assessment of the length of the Isthmus, and placed the wall specifically between the harbors of Lechaion and Kenchreai. This was also the distance and course that the same author ascribed to the wall built in advance of the march of Epamenondas in 369/368 BC; and it was, like the previous walling, built hastily. Pausanias relates another episode in 279 BC that the advance of the Gauls did not concern the Peloponnesians because of the potential protection afforded by the Isthmus.

The march to Thermopylae against the army of the Gauls was left alone by all the Peloponnesians alike; for, as the barbarians had no ships, the Peloponnesians anticipated no danger from the Gauls, if only they walled off the Corinthian Isthmus from the sea at Lechaeum to the other sea at Kenchreai. This was the policy of all the Peloponnesians at this time.

One can perhaps hear in the reasoning of the Peloponnesians the inverse of the observation made by Herodotus that a trans-Isthmian wall would be ineffective if the barbarians controlled the seas; here, because the barbarians did not control the seas, the Peloponnesians could trust in their Isthmus.

The stories of fortifying of the Isthmus reinforced the perception of its significance as a land bridge between southern and northern Greece and the role of Corinth as the strategic “key” to the Peloponnese. They also underscored how central the Isthmus

---

97 Diod. Sic. 11.16.3.
98 Diod. Sic. 15.68.2-5: “From Kenchreai to Lechaem they fenced off the area with palisades and deep trenches, and since the task was quickly completed...they had every spot fortified before the Boeotians arrived.” Loeb translation.
99 Paus. 7.6.8. Loeb translation.
100 Hdt. 7.139.
101 See Strabo 8.1.3 for discussions of the Isthmus and Greece.
was to the geography of Greece, at the very point of entry by land to the Peloponnese and central-northern Greece. In ancient narrative, it was known as the “fetters” or “shackles” of Greece and even the key to the Peloponnese.\textsuperscript{102} Stories of walling the Isthmus again reinforced the importance of the territory as a travelscape; the walls allowed a general, state, or cities to control that travel. Although stories of walling the Isthmus fade in contemporary importance during the early Roman period, they gain a new vitality in the events of the later Roman and Byzantine history.

\textbf{3.1.6. Other Famous Places}

The only other famous Corinthian place in the literature of the Roman period was Corinth town itself, including especially the Craneion district, the Peirene fountain, and Acrocorinth.\textsuperscript{103} The city center of Corinth itself was conceptually uneven. Although centuriation divided the city along east-west and north-south axes, which extended to its countryside, only certain places in the city center acquired a reputation and fame that evoked frequent response. In reading Pausanias, we can see the movement of someone interested in religious monuments embedded in the city’s deeper history. Corinth’s eastern suburb, the Craneion, also became one of the most famous places of the city, linked to Diogenes the Cynic, Menippus the Cynic, Alexander the Great, and the prostitute Lais.\textsuperscript{104} Other imagined places within the city center existed, but not in abundance.\textsuperscript{105} It is beyond this study to discuss the different ways that individuals

\textsuperscript{102} Plut. \textit{Apothegmata Laconia} 221F; Strabo 9.4.15.5; Velleius Paterculus \textit{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 he advised him to lay hold of both these cities if he coveted the Peloponnesus, ‘for if you hold both horns,’ he said, ‘you will hold down the cow,’ meaning by ‘horns’ Ithome and Acrocorinthus, and by ‘cow’ the Peloponnesus.” Loeb translation.


\textsuperscript{104} Plut. \textit{Alex.} 14.3.1; Dio Chrys. \textit{Or.} 9.4; \textit{Or.} 14.12; Athen. \textit{Deipn} 13.54.3 [588c-589c]; Lucian \textit{Hist. Conscr.} 3, 29; Lucian \textit{Philops.} 30-31; Lucian \textit{D Mort.} 1.1; Diog. Laer. \textit{Vit.} 6.77-79.

\textsuperscript{105} E.g., We learn from \textit{Acts of the Apostles} that St. Paul’s trial occurred on the bema, the most central and immediate symbol of public declaration, linked to the seat of the provincial governor and Roman authority. Others will also highlight the city’s connection as the provincial capital.
imaged and conceptualized the urban center itself, but it is worth emphasizing that the urban center was perceived and read in much the same way as the eastern territory. Although the city was physically well-structured, its discussion in the literature of the Roman period was highly differentiated and uneven—read in terms of the historical associations and meanings of a more ancient history.

There were also a number of other less significant places in the Corinthia mentioned in literature of this period, but they are exceptional and poorly imagined and are usually named because they have some connection to the history of the city, however trivial that connection is, or because of their proximity to a more important site like Isthmia and Kenchreae. This second tier of famous places would have been most meaningful for those well-read in ancient history and who knew to look for them. They were also generally sites “on the road”, so to speak, visible and in easy access for the visitor.

There are not many such surviving places. Strabo, Pliny, and others knew of a small port (*limin*) called Schoenus at the Saronic Gulf termination of the *diolkos*, which was mainly significant as a coastal marker in ancient geographies; the termination of the *diolkos* at the modern site of Poseidonia on the Corinthian Gulf apparently had no or little place-fame in antiquity since there is no extant evidence for its name. Although “Kromna” has now become embedded in maps of the eastern Corinthia, there is little evidence that it ever existed in the Classical or Roman period (see chapter 5). Pausanias in his own day, reading the Archaic poet Eumelus, speaks (hypothetically) of the graves of Sisyphus, the ancient Corinthian king, and Neleus, Pylus’ father, but recommends not

---

106 The port is probably to be connected with the modern village of Kalamaki at the canal. See Fowler and Stillwell 1932, 49; Wiseman 1978, 46, 74 note 12-13. Strabo 8.6.4; Pomponius Mela 2.48; Claudius Ptolem. Math. 3.14.34; Pliny *NH* 4.18. There is a surviving tradition, preserved in a scholion on Pindar *Isthm. Argum.* that the dolphin dumped Melicertes on shore at Schoinountia, a name that Wiseman would like to connect to the same harbor Schoeus. Certainly others, however, like Pausanias (2.1.3) did not connect Melicertes specifically with the place-name Schoenus, but simply an altar in an area of pinewoods along the shore.
looking for them! He also mentions a temple of Artemis on the road between Kenchreai and Isthmia, and the warm salty spring known as Helen’s Bath near Kenchreai, places unknown elsewhere in ancient literature. And in a surprising but passing explanation for a burnt temple on the road to Sicyon, Pausanias admits that there were, of course, extra-urban houses and temples in the Corinthia that had themselves been burnt down through the wars in the region! Such places largely lacked significant pedigrees and had relatively little appeal for most travelers passing through a landscape so rich in important famous places. They do remind us, however, that travelers better-read in ancient history might have observed more in the physical landscape than the ordinary sailor, merchant, and passerby.

3.1.7. Non-Place Space in the Corinthia

The discussion above has highlighted the famous places of the eastern Corinthia, as well as the stories that circulated about them in the Roman period. It was an uneven landscape, defined by only a handful of traveler’s nodes, including the town and acropolis, the two harbors and seas, and the Isthmus centered at the sanctuary of Poseidon. Despite its non-specificity, these nodes supported a perception of Corinth as a maritime city at the crossroad of the world. We might ask, as a kind of concluding discussion for this section, what can be said about the remainder of the eastern Corinthia outside of, beyond, and between these significant places?

107 Paus. 2.2.2; Pausanias remarks that even in Eumelus’ own day (i.e., a thousand years earlier), these were difficult to find. Wiseman 1978, 74.

108 Paus. 2.2.3. Wiseman 1978, 52-53. Regarding the site of “Kromna”, often mentioned as a significant place in the Corinthia, cf. chapter five, which argues that there was no town of that name.

109 Paus. 2.5.5. These “houses” outside the wall, of course, will be the subject of discussion in chapters 4-6.

110 See, for instance, Pomponius Mela 2.48.6, who sums up the Isthmus as a neck of land, on which are 1) the town of Kenchreai; 2) the sanctuary of Poseidon (associated with the Isthmian Games); and 3) the famous wealthy city of Corinth, now known as a Roman colony; and the 4) famous Acrocorinth that gives a view to both seas.
Generally speaking, the rest of the landscape of Corinth in the Roman era was, in literary conception, empty space sitting between more important sites like the canal, the Isthmus, the harbors, and the urban center. This space was unplaced insofar as it was never specifically discussed or given distinct form, existing only as imagined liminal space between the major nodes of the Corinthia. But even the very process of mentioning passage and voyage between points like Kenchreai and Isthmia, Corinth town and Kenchreai, Corinth town and the Isthmus reinforced the central myth of the city as a travelscape at the crossroads of Greece. As later chapters (4-6) will discuss at length, the entire eastern territory was hardly empty in antiquity but was rich in places—villas and houses, rural buildings, tombs, quarries, agricultural installations, walls, and the like—that would have been immediately visible to the ancient traveler. Why, then, did the ancients not mention any of these?

First, this is a general source problem to the study of regional environments. On the one hand, there is little doubt that in the Roman period, there were numerous documents in circulation that concerned daily life, detailing social and economic transactions, agricultural productivity, and facets of the rural world. The papyri sources from Egypt, for instance, are well preserved, thereby providing a more precise representation of rural life and allowing a comprehensive historical treatment of social and economic history.111 Elsewhere, though, the ordinary documents of daily life are exceptional, and scholars have to rely on random passing references in ancient literature. Forms of rural settlement, the organization of agricultural labor, and patterns of land use typically lacked the color and story potential per se to enter consistently the kind of literature that was preserved from most provinces of the Roman world. Ordinary rural activities and places were, relatively speaking, uninteresting, and fascination with the environment for its own sake had little appeal. To be sure, rural places appear in idyllic poems about rural life,

---

ancient novels, and late Roman monastic accounts.\textsuperscript{112} But places and features in the land that did not achieve extraordinary significance are rarely discussed in antiquity. The eastern Corinthia had plenty of “ordinary places” beyond the famous sites discussed in this chapter, but they belonged to the profane realm of the everyday, the world of agriculture, industry, and daily labor. This is a common problem to attempting local history for the ancient world at all.\textsuperscript{113}

Second, there is arguably something about the structure of Corinthian territory itself that may have encouraged stories of voyage. As discussed in the previous chapter, Acrocorinth overshadowed the Isthmus, signaling the city center and drawing the traveler, while the Isthmus demarcated by its twin seas and visible from Acrocorinth are the other fascinating physical features of the landscape. Such physically unique and contrasting features in the territory highlighted topographic and cultural nodes, making the points in-between inconsequential. The ordinary places along the way were not worth discussing or even mentioning when the important travelers’ nodes (the Isthmus proper, Corinth town, and the harbors) were within several hours walking distance and always in visible sight. The distances between these places were short enough that travel would end as quickly as it began, and the significance for most lay not in the journey but the destination, at the end of the road. Such geography formed the structure by which the city and country were known and experienced.

Third, setting aside the literary image discussed in this chapter, the eastern Corinthia was in fact a travelscape, the city’s connective territory and primary point of contact with the world. What we know about this landscape from ancient literature is based almost entirely on the experiences, speeches, and stories of outsiders, travelers, and visitors to the region. Their visions of the landscape were defined by their encounters with the

\textsuperscript{112} See, for instance, how ordinary places can gain color when gangs of robbers, romantic couples, and thinking asses are injected into the scenes. Cf. Apuleius, \textit{Metamorphosis} throughout.

principal travel nodes (the harbors and isthmus) and their interest in pilgrim sites (the Isthmus, the canal, Isthmia, the lavish city center, and the acropolis). They were less fascinated by the kinds of buildings, settlements, and cultural features that were familiar to them from their own homelands.

Finally, and most importantly, as this chapter has argued, a particular tradition and structure of perception of the Corinthia existed already by the Classical period which emphasized the region’s network of most famous places, reinforcing the city’s identity and role as a travelscape, the “promenade” and crossroads of Greece. The landscape was already linked in the Greek period to travel and transience, and Corinth was known as the place on the road. Individuals in the Roman period knew most of the significant places of the region because these places were already famous and important in the surviving traditions for the history of the Greek city. By the time that Pausanias came through in the second century AD, the Corinthian landscape was historicized and replete with ancient memories and associations from the Archaic-Hellenistic era, more than 600 years previous, augmented by the famous people of the first and second centuries who had themselves stepped into that narrative. His was a script of famous characters written centuries before and widely known in his day.

Taken together, these factors mean that the literary map of the Corinthian landscape was hardly an accurate one, at least in so far as it represented the range of places that existed in the territory. The famous places in the traveler’s landscape were only the larger nodes around which stories of the Corinthia centered in the Roman period and supported a traditional vision of the territory. By consequence, the land between the centers was largely un-placed, whose significance lay in the fact that it was space on the way to a place worthy of discussion. The world in-between was a corridor pointing elsewhere, a crossroads that led to Isthmia, Corinth, Kenchreai, Lechaion, and the seas beyond. To be sure, this ancient tradition of reading the landscape only in terms of its

114 An immediate piece of evidence for this is that the proverb, “It is not for every man to sail to Corinth,” dates back at least to the Classical period.
most famous ancient places is not in any way unique to the Corinthia, and was common to other regions and in ancient travel literature generally. But for the Corinthia, especially, where travel figured so prominently in the canonical definitions of the city, and where the physical topography was so well-articulated, such conceptions further reinforced the associations of the territory with voyage and going. The Isthmus, in a more general sense, formed the broad scene for travel in a way that other places of the ancient world did not. Some additional examples can demonstrate this.

As discussed in the previous chapter, going or sailing to Corinth was a frequent literary motif in the Roman era, and there are even a few descriptions of actual and fictional travel within the Corinthia. Propertius, for instance, opines to Cynthia that he will leave her and Rome and sail off to Athens.

So be it, I leave for wise Athens, the great and long voyage will diminish the pangs of love. Farewell you towers of Rome. The Adriatic will take me; its waves will become familiar and I must implore the favour of its gods. Having traversed the Ionian Sea, the tired vessel will furl its sails in the calm waters of Lechaeum, and I shall continue on foot. In haste, despite my fatigue, I shall cross the Isthmus which separates the two seas. Once in Piraeus I shall go up by the route of Theseus between the arms of the Long Walls.

The proposed voyage would take him into the northern harbor, where he would tiredly walk across the Isthmus, presumably to Kenchreai, before going on to Piraeus. A similarly vague journey is suggested by Philo’s account of Flaccus’ humiliating travel to the little island of Gyara: “And crossing the Isthmus from Lechaeum to the opposite coast and coming down to Kenchreai, the port of Corinth,” he proceeded onward to Attica, not even stopping to rest. Galen records an actual itinerary of traveling with a friend

---

115 The stories of going to Corinth are frequent, but best summed up in the proverb “not for every man to sail to Corinth” recorded frequently throughout antiquity. See, for example, Aristophanes frg. 902 a K.; Strabo 8.6.20; Diogenianus Gramm. Paroemiae 7.16.1; Paus. Attic.; Zenobius Sophista [Paroem] Epitome collectionum Lucilli Tarrhaei et Didymi 5.37.1-2; Aulus Gellius Attic Nights 1.8.3-4; Ael. Arist., Or. 29.17; Horace Ep. 1.17.36; Lucian Herm 27-29, 45.

116 See J. Murphy-O’Connor pp. 76-77.

117 Philo, In Flaccum 151-56. J. Murphy O’Connor 83-84.
from Rome to Athens.  When they arrived at Corinth [i.e., Lechaion], his friend sent his servants ahead with his luggage from Kenchreai via ship while he and Galen traveled by hired carriage through Megara and Eleusis to Thriasion; there they reunited with his friend’s servants. The passage is no more specific about particular places on the Isthmus but reminds us that both land and sea travel to and from Corinth were common in antiquity; the anecdote cited above about Herodes Atticus traveling by carriage via the coastal road is another case in point. Finally, Philostratus tells the story of Apollonius’ travel from Smyrna to Italy: landing at Corinth [i.e., Kenchreai], he worshipped the Sun [Acrocorinth] at midday, before embarking [from Lechaion] for Sicily and Italy in the evening.

There are a few other examples of individuals (real or mythical) traveling to and from Corinth, or across the Isthmus, but they are no more specific. The passages above indicate that the placing of these episodes rarely occurs in specific space but simply between principal nodes in the eastern territory. Sometimes these nodes—Lechaeum, Kenchreai, and the Isthmus—are named, but just as often, the phrase “arriving at Corinth” was short-hand for “reaching the harbors”. The passing between nodes or across the Isthmus is described as quick and easy, but very tiring, and the journey between Athens and Corinth could and did occur via both ship and chariot, coastal road and sea. All of these examples, however, underscore the general insignificance of places in the landscape beyond the most significant nodes (Kenchreai, Lechaeum, Corinth town, and the Isthmus) and defined Corinth as the promenade and crossroad of the Mediterranean. Many travelers would know and experience Corinth

118 Galen, De propriorum animi (“The Affections and Errors of the Soul”) 5.18-19.
119 Flavius Philostratus, VS 2.552.
120 Flav. Philostratus VA 7.10. See J. Murphy O’Connor, pp. 131-32.
121 Cf., for instance, Xen. Scr. Erot. Ephesiaca 5.1.8; Apul. Met. 10.35; Polybius 16.16.
122 See Apuleius Met. 10.35, where Lucius runs with all his might from Corinth to the town of Kenchreai, reaching it in a short time. For another instance of traveling to Athens by the coastal road, see Dio Chrysostom Orationes 10.1.
from a distance, in the harbors and in the bypass, as a simple stopover point to somewhere else.¹²³ Pausanias was generous to provide so many useful details.

It is perhaps the liminal character of the territory outside of the nodes that contributed to several stories about phantoms and “vampires” appearing on the Isthmus. As we noted above, Nero’s excavations caused the Isthmus to gush blood, ghosts to appear, and strange groans and noises to be heard through the land. Philostratus tells a marvellous story about how Menippus of Lycia (a Cynic philosopher and student of Demetrius and Apollonius) was nearly devoured by a vampire (lamia) in Corinth,¹²⁴

For as he walking all alone along the road towards Kenchreai, he met with an apparition, and it was a woman who clasped his hand and declared that she had been long in love with him, and that she was a Phoenician woman and lived in a suburb of Corinth.

The road towards Kenchreai is the one running from Craneion and the eastern gate onto the Isthmus.¹²⁵ The vampire, disguised as a Phoenician woman, wines and dines Menippus at her home in the Craneion in order to fatten him up to devour him on their wedding night. Fortunately, Apollonius shows up at the wedding and forces the demon to admit to her connivances. Philostratus concludes the account by remarking that many people were aware of the story about Apollonius and Menippus and that it occurred in the

¹²³ Modern scholars often assume that most ancient travelers crossing the Isthmus would have passed through Corinth town, but doing so would have added a couple of kilometers to their trip as well as time to walk through the town. For the hurried traveler, there were presumably quicker routes, including, for instance, traveling directly east-southeast from Lechaion to Kenchreai, via Kromna. The quickest route, of course, would have been to follow the ship-road and embark at the opposite shore, but there is no literary evidence for how Corinth’s smaller ports (such as those at the terminus of the ship-road) functioned. We can only guess that travelers might have embarked on ships at the diolkos. We cannot assume that crossing the Isthmus normally involved a stop at the urban center.

¹²⁴ Philostratus V.A 4.25.

¹²⁵ Phil. V.A 4.25. Paus. 2.2.4 and Diog. Laertius Vit. 6.77-79 state that Diogenes’ tomb was by the gate on the road leading to the Isthmus, not far from the area/district/neighborhood known as the Craneion; Pausanias adds that Lais’ grave was in Craneion. How the Craneion, cemetery, and wall relate is not clear from the texts—and indeed, our sources for Craneion suggest different things about the place—but these areas do appear to be on the outskirts of the built urban area, toward the edge of the city. When Philostratus places the scene of the first encounter with the vampire on “the road towards Kenchreai,” he presumably has in mind somewhere on the Isthmus. While it is certainly possible that he is referring to the area of Craneion and the cemeteries (which are beyond the built-up area of Corinth town but within the city wall), it probably makes more sense to read the scene as taking place outside the city walls on the Isthmus itself.
center of Hellas, but had a very vague idea of the details. The scene of the crime—the Isthmus and the road to Kenchreai—were just the kind of area where one might expect to run into vampires, ghosts, or random travelers. Although not mentioned in antiquity, certain physical features of the territory—the sanctuary of Poseidon, the numerous graves on the Isthmus, the limestone quarries and the hollows and crags, and the sacred crossroads—may even have contributed to these kinds of stories in the ancient imagination. And yet, it is also ironic that such a territory could become associated with ghosts, since habitation on the Isthmus was so consistent and the traffic throughout must have been frequent, constant, and substantial. All of these stories, nonetheless, reinforced the travel nodes and underscore the highly selective readings of the Corinthian landscape.

3.1.8. The Narrative of a Landscape

This section has discussed the major places of the eastern Corinthia that were famous during the early Roman period. It has examined the various meanings and histories associated with places and the parts of the landscape that lacked significance, or that gained significance only in respect to the more significant places. The narrative through which ancient travelers read the physical territory was powerful enough that it guided them past insignificant sites to the main attractions of the Isthmus. As suggested earlier, what I have argued above for the Corinthia might apply for ancient travel and pilgrimage

126 See M. Given, “From Density Counts to Ideational Landscapes: Intensive Survey, Phenomenology, and the Sydney Cyprus Survey Project,” in E.F. Athanassopoulos and L. Wandsnider (eds.), Mediterranean Archaeological Landscapes: Current Issues, Philadelphia 2004, 179-80, for the discussion of the ‘wilderness’ zone in pre-modern landscapes. Of course, a more ordinary kind of encounter is the one that Dio Chrysostom relates about Diogenes running into an acquaintance on the road from Corinth to Athens. Dio Chrysostom Orationes 10.1-10.2: “Once when Diogenes was leaving Corinth for Athens, he met an acquaintance on the road and asked whither he was going; not, however, as most persons ask such questions and thereby make a show of interest in their friends’ affairs, yet have no sooner heart than off they go…And the latter replied, ‘I am on my way to Delphi, Diogenes, to make use of the oracle, but when I was about to pass through Boeotia, my slave, who was with me, ran away, and so I am now bound for Corinth, for perhaps I may find the boy there.”

127 See also Lucian Philops 30-31, who discusses another Corinthian ghost story in connection with the old uninhabited house of Eubatides near the Craneion.
generally and would certainly be relevant to most other regions of the Aegean. In the case of Corinth, however, the territory was geographically central to the currents of travel in the Roman era and consequently reinforced the myth and definition of the city as a maritime capital in a frequented travelscape. The physical structure of the territory, and the manner of reading the important places in the landscape, sharpened that mythology.

The tradition of reading the city through its landscape reinforced a definition of the city in its connection to travel, trade, and the broader world. Corinth was the kind of city where one could meet a vampire disguised as a Phoenician woman, a man turned into a donkey, an Assyrian fortune teller predicting the best time to travel, an Apostle making tents, a wandering Cynic (Diogenes) or a nameless sojourner abiding in the city. It was a city that one could stop at to enjoy its pleasures, or pass through or by on the way to some other place. As Favorinus says in The Corinthian Oration, Corinth was nothing less than the “promenade” (peripatos) of Hellas, the crossroads, where many put in each year as traders, pilgrims, envoys, and passersby. It was, “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.” Corinth in its landscape was the prototype of a maritime city.

This particular narrative of Corinthian history was also embedded in physical places in the Isthmus itself, such as the ship-road, the canal trenches, the Isthmia, and the harbors. These places marked by physical remains reminded the visitor of the city’s pasts and identity as the crossroads of Greece and the world. The rich literary tradition guided

---

128 E.g., Apuleius’ Metamorphosis 2.12; Apollonius Phil. Ep. 37: for “sojourners”

129 Athen. Deipn. 13.21.33 (567b-c).

130 Diod. Sic. 32.27.1: Following the city’s destruction, no traveler passed by without weeping. See also discussion above; Hegesippus Scr. Eccl. Fragmenta 217.2-4.

131 Favorinus, The Corinthian Oration 7-8, Jerome Murphy O’Connor, 101-102

132 Favorinus, The Corinthian Oration 36
and structured how travelers to Corinth understood and read them, but there were always a range of readings and multiple scripts in the Roman era. A well-read traveler like Pausanias might see the marks of gods, demi-gods, and famous personages like Theseus, Sciron and Periander in the city’s deep past, as well as the more recent figures like Julius Caesar, Nero, and Hadrian who had joined the historical narrative by sheer force of personality and will. An even better-informed student of ancient history might have seen in the landscape even more historical nuances, taking the effort and paying a local guide to go and look for the less impressive physical symbols of the Corinthian past. Even the numerous ordinary physical sites *not mentioned* in ancient literature, like farms, villas, and rural markets, could reinforce the conception of the city as a commercial center of the Mediterranean (see Chapters 4 and 5).

In the end, then, “Corinth on the Isthmus” denoted both the town and its connective eastern landscape. Town and countryside together were a fundamental part of the city’s identity and historical importance, forming a traveler’s crossroads and commercial cosmopolis. This story of ancient Corinth in its landscape, which had been created long before in the Classical era, received new life and imagery following the city’s refoundation, with the events of the Roman era; these new associations were to fit into a narrative hundreds of years old. The Roman Corinth that most travelers and visitors knew was articulated in the conceptual and material forms of its eastern landscape.

In Late Antiquity, this entire mythologized landscape—conceptually structured and differentiated according to the histories of the city—came to an end. The rich polysemic context, connected to the most significant people and events of local history, and bedecked with places and supporting the traditional image of the city, was gradually redefined between the fourth to seventh centuries AD.
3.2. The End of a Classical Landscape

To talk about the “end of a classical landscape” of Corinth is in some ways an unwieldy task. It requires that we wrestle with an elusive or at least slippery concept, the myth of a city, and attempt to measure its end. In the process it presents an interesting source problem: if the perception of the city in the early Roman period was embedded in a classicizing literary tradition, does our lack of knowledge about Corinth’s famous places in Late Antiquity mean that these places ceased to be important in the Late Antique imagination, or only that the written medium had disappeared?

These interpretive difficulties will leave us with some uncertainties, but should not create insurmountable problems for an analysis, especially if we are explicit about what we are attempting to measure. The imagined landscape was fundamentally intertwined in antiquity with the medium of classical literature creating and maintaining it, and the end of a conceptual landscape was tied closely to the end of the medium itself. Traditions of perceiving the landscape in a particular way survived wherever classical literature was important for social and cultural identity, and intellectual activity; and there are enough sources discussing the Corinthian landscape in Late Antiquity that we can make some meaningful observations about its end. This section will discuss both the fragmentation and end of the traditional image of the city in its landscape in light of the changing cultural milieu of the Mediterranean, the decline of classical culture, and the backdrop of physical discontinuity and redefinition of the sites of the Isthmus. It will make suggestions for how the imagined textual landscape outlined above became fragmented in Late Antiquity, continuing in some respects but forgotten in others, contested and redefined, and abandoned altogether for new conceptions.

The section offers three brief case studies illustrating the processes of Late Antique fragmentation: an examination of famous places generally (3.2.1), a narrower study of the site of Isthmia (3.2.2), and the traditions about Corinth as traveler’s city, situated on the Isthmus and at the world’s crossroads (3.2.3). The issues raised here will be discussed in
the remainder of this study, and my future research on Christianization. A brief
concluding section (3.3) will discuss the implications for understanding LA Corinth.

3.2.1. What Became of the Famous Places?

To examine the perceptions of the Corinthian landscape in Late Antiquity is to step
into a very different storyline than the one described in section 3.1 above. It is not simply
that most of the sites that dot a typical map of the eastern Corinthia—Crommyon, the
diolkos, canal, Isthmia, and the harbors—had very little literary life in Late Antiquity, but
that even when these places are mentioned, they rarely possess the same power,
substance, and content as they had in the early Roman period. Even the very image of
Corinth, the famous traveler’s city at the center of Greece and the crossroads of the
Mediterranean, grows dim in the literature of the later Roman empire. The Late Antique
story of the Corinthian landscape is incomplete, fragmentary, and simply different.

There is, on the one hand, very little to say about most places of the Corinthian
isthmus on the basis of the source tradition of the third to seventh centuries AD. The
diolkos has no later history save a phrase of Hesychius that names it as a place (topos)
from Lechaion to Kenchreai; even the later reference that the Byzantine general
Nicetas Ooryphas dragged ships across the Isthmus in AD 886 refers to the process rather
than a place per se. The digging of the canal has no later history beyond Philostratus’
Nero in the third century AD, and one wonders whether it would have remained a local
attraction much beyond this date. Hesychius names Oneion as a mountain in Corinth, but
gives no other details; and the mention, in any case, is derived from Thucydides. The

133 Hesychius, s.v., diolkos.

134 Fowler and Stillwell 1932, 50 FN1; Wiseman 1978, 46, both citing Georgius Phrantzes i.33, Corp.
Script. Hist. Byz. XX, ed. Bekker, pp. 96-97. Fowler and Stillwell rightly point out that the reference only
alludes to the dragging of ships across the Isthmus. See the overly critical comments of Cook 1979, 152,
FN7, about later Byzantine use of this road.

135 Hesychius, s.v., Oneion. “a mountain in Corinth” (Thuc. 4.44.4).
only extant discussion of Crommyon in Late Antiquity is Stephanus, who defines it as a village (kome) of Corinth connected with the story of the Crommyonian boar.\(^{136}\)

Even Corinth’s famous harbors become conceptually cloudy in the literature of the post-antique world. Chroniclers of the early and middle Byzantine periods preserve the name Lechaion and Kenchreai as Corinthian harbors (epineion), but provide few additional details and are regurgitating earlier sources.\(^{137}\) Several sources do refer to the harbors as important places on the maps of their day. Procopius notes that Lechaion on the Crisaean Gulf marked the start of the Corinthian isthmus stretching forty stades across, a remark that must demonstrate an awareness of traditional literary descriptions of the Isthmus.\(^{138}\) The northern harbor was also apparently rebuilt by the provincial governor Flavius Hermogenes in the mid-fourth century AD.\(^{139}\) The use of Kenchreai for preparing an imperial fleet is attested in an extant letter of the emperor Julian to Maximinus probably in the early 360s AD,\(^{140}\) and the poet Claudian has the exiled Palaemon return with his mother to that harbor after Stilicho’s late victory over the Goths in AD 397:\(^{141}\)

\[
\text{Thou biddest Stilicho after restoring peace in Gaul save Greece from ruin. Vessels cover the Ionian sea; scarce can the wind fill out so many sails. Neptune with favouring currents attends the fleet that is to save Corinth, and young Palaemon, so long an exile from the shores of his isthmus, returns in safety with his mother to the harbour. The blood of barbarians washes their chariots; the ranks of skin-clad warriors are mowed down, some by disease, some by the sword...Let Ephyre}
\]

\(^{136}\) Steph. Byz., s.v., Kremmyon.

\(^{137}\) Hesychius, s.v., Lechaion; s.v., diolkos; Photius, s.v., Lechaion; Suda, s.v., Lechaion. Hesychius adds curiously for Lechaion that household slaves run away to these places: Λέχαιον ἐπίνειον Κορινθίους ἐξ τούτων τοὺς τόπους ἀπεδιδότακτον οἱ κόμεται. Steph. Byz., s.v., Kenchreai, names Kenchreai as the city (polis) and harbor (epineion) of Corinth but appears to be deriving from earlier lexicons. Several centuries later, Photius knew of Kenchreai only as a place in Athens. Photius, s.v., Kenchreai.

\(^{138}\) Procopius Bell. 5.15.17-18. On the width of the Isthmus as forty stades, see Diod. Sic. 11.16.3 (in his discussion of the walling of the episode in 480 BC); Strabo 8.1.3; 8.2.1; Agathemerus Geog. Info. 24.6.

\(^{139}\) Kent, Corinth VIII.iii, #503. See Rothaus 1995, 303.

\(^{140}\) Julian Ep. 73, Letter to Maximinus.

\(^{141}\) Claudian, Or. 8 (On the Fourth Consulship of the Emperor Honorius) 459-73, dating to the late 390s. Loeb Translation. Conceivably, the harbor might also refer to Lechaion, although the eastern harbor has a more direct connection to the god. I thank Amelia Brown for this reference.
rise from her ashes while Spartan and Arcadian tread under foot the heaps of slain; let Greece’s sufferings be made good and her weary land be allowed to breath once more.

A century later, a young ascetic by the name of Cyriac is said to have gone to Kenchreae after hearing the Gospel read in church in Corinth, sailing away to the holy land where he became a famous anchorite.142 Moreover, the two harbors gain in Late Antiquity new Christian associations with St. Paul, Phoebe the deaconess, and other early Christian saints.143

The scantiness of the literary testimony, however, does not of course mean that the actual facilities of roads and harbors ceased to be important in the Corinthian landscape. To be sure, the ship-road is not mentioned during this period, but nor is it mentioned in earlier periods, and it seems probable that the paved road was maintained with occasional episodes of refurbishing, as in earlier periods.144 Even if we speculate that the ship-road were abandoned sometime in the Roman period,145 it is difficult to imagine that the entire diolkos (by which I mean the narrowest part of the isthmus where ships were dragged across) ceased to be used as a connecting land bridge between twin gulfs.146 In light of Corinth’s continuing importance in Mediterranean trade networks into the sixth century,147 we can infer that the city’s inhabitants exploited the commercial potential of

142 Cyril Scythopolis, *Vita Cyriaci* 224.8. Cyril is writing about the monk in the mid-sixth century AD, presumably reflecting on the importance of Kenchreae in his own day as well.

143 The importance of Kenchreae in the texts of the New Testament (*Acts of the Apostles, Romans* 16) mean that references to this harbor are common in Late Antiquity. See, for example, John Chrysostom, *Comm. Acts of the Apostles* Hom. 40; *Comm. Romans* Hom. 30; Jerome Ep. 75, Ch. 9 (337); Augustine Ep. 82.8 (351-52); *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* Book 7, Ch. 46; Theodoret Scr. Eccl. *Commentary on St. Paul* 82.41. I will be developing these ideas in future research.

144 Wiseman 1978, 45-46, for discussion of evidence of earlier episodes of repair.

145 Cook 1979, 152, FN 7. What does an “abandoned” paved road look like, in any case?

146 Even without a paved road, earthen roads could still have provided an efficient means of transporting lighter cargo directly across the narrow isthmus. For discussion of such lower-quality roads, see Wiseman 1978, 45.

147 For evidence for trade in Corinth in Late Antiquity, see K. Slane, “East-West trade in fine wares and commodities. The view from Corinth,” in *Rei Cretariae Romanae Fautorum acta*. 36 (2000), 299-312; Slane and Sanders 2005. See Chapter 4 of this study.
their territory. As for the two harbors, although both possessed buildings that suffered earthquake damage in the late fourth century, there were also new constructions.\textsuperscript{148} Lavish and ornate Early Christian basilicas were built at both sites as late as the early sixth century AD,\textsuperscript{149} demonstrating an importance to those places despite the dearth of literary evidence. And although Lechaion remains mainly uninvestigated,\textsuperscript{150} recent archaeological investigations at Kenchreai have revealed the remains of villas, houses, and other buildings, confirming the continuity of habitation in the area.\textsuperscript{151}

Nonetheless, the picture of the Late Antique Corinthia that appears from the limited source tradition is significantly murkier than that of the early Roman era, and the places in the territory that were famous at an earlier period lost their conceptual clarity and energy in Late Antiquity and simply disappeared from the map---so far as we can measure it. This is of course partly a product of poorly extant literature, but even the


\textsuperscript{149} For Kenchreai, Rothaus 2000, 76-79; for Lechaion, see recent discussions in Sanders 2005.

\textsuperscript{150} Wiseman 1978, 87-88, summarizing the excavation work to date, noted the early Christian basilica, Late Roman nymphaeum, some residential structures, Roman walls, and pottery of the early Roman period. Rothaus 1995, 295, noted extensive Late Roman and Byzantine coarseware pottery and suggested (299) that the presumably residential structures and bath south of the Lechaion basilica were of Late Roman date. Without survey or excavation in the area, it is difficult to determine the character of habitation at the harbor, but given the density of settlement elsewhere on the Isthmus, it is best not to conclude their absence on the basis of negative evidence.

\textsuperscript{151} Currently unpublished finds from the Eastern Korinthia Survey confirm broad areas of habitation and land use in the area west and northwest of the harbor. See Chapters 4 and 5 of this study. The Kenchreai Cemetery Project, directed by Joseph Rife and investigating the area north of the harbor, will potentially illuminate the later history of the town. For recent discussion of results, see J.L. Rife, A. Barbet, M.M. Morison, R. Dunn, and D. H. Ubelaker, “Life and death at a Roman port in Greece: the Kenchreai Cemetery Project 2002-2005.” Paper presented at the Archaeological Institute of America meetings, Montreal 2006.
sources that exist are usually vague and disinterested. The Isthmus, canal, Mt. Oneion, Crommyon, the *diolkos*, and Melicertes possessed a relatively smaller place in the literature of the period. The kind of fascinating narrative that existed in an earlier period, where pilgrims stepped into the landscape which they had read about in books, dims considerably in Late Antiquity. This is a point we will return to in the conclusion. A closer look at two important places, Isthmia and Corinth itself, can provide different insights into understanding certain facets in the end of the ancient landscape.

### 3.2.2. Isthmia

The Late Antique history of the religious and civic buildings at Isthmia is now familiar through several decades of archaeological investigation and recent attention to the later history of the site. The traditional use of the site for public games and the rites associated with them appear to have come to an end in the course of the third century AD, and the public buildings, including the theater, temple of Poseidon, and the sizable Roman bath, were derelict by AD 400. Within two decades, the famous trans-Isthmian (Hexamilion) wall was constructed which reused much of the building material in its meander across the Isthmus (see discussion below). A fortress was also built at Isthmia in the fifth century AD that incorporated the preexisting monumental archway. The site in the fifth and sixth centuries was a motley place, with mostly stripped areas (the Temple of Poseidon), abandoned but still-standing structures (the Roman Bath), new monumental constructions (the Isthmian wall and fortress), and numerous domestic structures.

---

These excavations establish a backdrop of the site’s material discontinuity as a sanctuary by the fourth century AD, and its new uses in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. It would be interesting to consider what the archaeological evidence, including the collapse of the sanctuary and baths, the construction of a new Byzantine fortress, the monumentalization of the gate, the distribution of graves, and the EKAS survey data, suggests about the continuity and redefinition of this place in Late Antiquity. This issue has been recently raised by the studies of T.E. Gregory, P.N. Kardulias, J. Rife, R. Rothaus, and J. Frey. This particular query is, in any case, beyond the scope of this current chapter. The narrower question that I want to focus on here is what became of the place of the Isthmus in Late Antique literature? How did the traditions of discussing Isthmia survive in contemporary conception?

The history of Isthmia in the literature of Late Antiquity is in some ways not particularly surprising, mirroring both the end of the sanctuary and cultural currents in the broader Roman world, entailing an increasing marginalization of Isthmia in its contemporary world, redefinition, and even outright hostility. And yet, despite the physical discontinuity of the site, Isthmia did have a strong “after-life” in classicizing literature of the fourth to seventh centuries.

There are few surviving “contemporary” statements about the status of Isthmia and its games in Late Antiquity and what does survive is ambiguous. Libanius relates that Aristophanes’ father Menander (early fourth century) had been an important citizen of Corinth and a friend of Poseidon, having participated in the mysteries at the Isthmus, and that Aristophanes (mid-fourth century) himself had fulfilled his obligations to Poseidon, presumably also at the Isthmus; these must have occurred in the first half of the fourth century. Themistius writes despairingly about the changing place of philosophers in

153 See above for these references. Jon Frey, Reading Spolia in Late Antique Greece, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 2006.
154 For discussion about the end of the games and the rites of Isthmia, see Rothaus 2000, 84-92; and Rife, Forthcoming.
155 Libanius Or. 14.5-7. See Rothaus 2000; and Rife, Forthcoming, for discussion.
public life, decrying their uninvolvement at the traditional crowd-gathering festivals such as Olympia, the Isthmus, Aegina, and Eleusis. His golden age was a time when philosophers impacted crowds, not hiding away in their secluded corners, as they did now;\textsuperscript{156} indeed, his cause of rueful reflection may be rooted in reading passages like Dio Chryostom’s discussion of Diogenes the Cynic at the Isthmian games (quoted above). How these sources relate to the status of Isthmia in the fourth century is unclear but they do seem to provide limited support for a perceived decline in the traditional use of the site of Isthmia. What is more striking is that they form nearly the only statements about Isthmia between the third and seventh centuries that could be considered “contemporary” accounts. Isthmia, like the other famous sites of the Isthmus, is largely shrouded in darkness during this period—in great contrast to the earlier Roman period.

This is certainly related in part to the Christianization of the Roman Empire which would ultimately lead to imperial proscriptions against the rites of the games. But long before legal proscriptions, the Isthmian games, and by consequence, the very idea and place of Isthmia, became problematic in popular conception. Open hostility to the sacred rites of the games dates to the second century in accounts like Clement of Alexandria’s \textit{Exhortation Against the Greeks},\textsuperscript{157} but attacks undoubtedly became both more frequent and more vocalized in the course of the fourth century. Eusebius, for example, in his \textit{Praeparatio Evangelica} directly quotes Clement’s invective:\textsuperscript{158}

\begin{quote}
\text{156} Translation by Robert J. Penella, \textit{The Private Orations of Themistius}, Berkeley 2000: Oration 28, \textit{The Disquisition on Speaking} 342: Regarding philosophers, “in our day they have vanished and become nonentities—understandably and deserving so. For they are fearful (I known not why) and wary of public assemblies, where the poet says men become famous, and they cannot bear to look away from their couches and secluded corners. They have completely forgotten that their forbears used to speak to crowds of people in workshops, porticoes, baths, and theaters. Consequently, these forebears not only used to win over and secure the allegiance of the people who came to their schools; they would also draw the cobbler away from his leather, the money lender away from his counter, and the fornicator away from his brothel. Urged on by the warm feelings they had for their fellow men, they would go to Olympia and the Isthmus, to Aegina and to Eleusis. They themselves, along with the gods [of those places], came to be reckoned <among those most well known> to the masses. But since that time the descendants of Socrates, as if they were thieves and robbers, have been avoiding hubs of activity.”
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\text{157} Clement of Alexandria, \textit{Exhortation Against the Greeks} 180 (Ch. 2).
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\text{158} Eusebius \textit{Praep. Evangelica} 2.6.10. The translation is the text in public domain.
\end{quote}
Come then, let us also briefly make the round of your games, and put an end to these great sepulchral festivals, the Isthmian, Nemean, and Pythian, and besides these the Olympian. At Pytho the Pythian dragon is worshipped, and the festival of the serpent is proclaimed as the Pythia. At the Isthmus the sea cast up a miserable carcass, and the Isthmian games are a lamentation for Melicertes: at Nemea another child Archemorus is buried, and the boy's funeral games are called Nemea. Pisa is the tomb in your midst, O Panhellenes, of a Phrygian charioteer, and the Zeus of Phidias claims as his own the Olympian games, which are the funeral libations of Pelops.

The account is a negative reassessment of the traditional stories about the origins of the games, problematizing the place of Isthmia / the Isthmus on account of its association with myths, deities, and especially the lamenting rites. It is difficult to assess the impact of this kind of invective on common conceptions of famous Corinthian places, but we can probably assume that attacks of this sort must have been fairly common in the fourth century. In the final chapter of Epiphanius’ *Panarion*, dedicated to an exposition of the orthodox faith, the heresy hunter ponders:

And how many mysteries and rites do the Greeks have? For example, the women who go to the megaras, and those who celebrate the Thesmophoria, are different from each other. And there are as many others: the Eleusinian mysteries of Demeter and Persephone at Eleusis, and the shocking goings-on in the sanctuaries there—the unclothing of women, to put it politely, drums and cakes, the bull-roarer and the basket, the worked wool, the cymbal, and the potion prepared in the beaker. And just as many others. The mysteries in Pythi and others on the Isthmus, those of Athamas and Melicertes the child of Ino. And all the men who turn the phallus over, and the women who celebrate the obscene acts, and the men who serve Rhea by castrating male children and living their lives without male organs, certainly unable to be men any longer, but without having become women….

The Isthmus with its rites of Athamas and Melicertes, is spiritually blacklisted with the other detestable rites of Greece (and all over the world). Early Christian sources commonly attacked the historical deities and demi-gods associated with the Corinthia, like Poseidon, Theseus, and Aphrodite, and cult itself formed a primary target of Christian rhetoric and action. Obviously not all early Christian literature referring to

159 Compare with Paus. 2.1.3, for instance.


161 The evidence is ubiquitous. To name a few: Clementine Homilies 5.15, 23 (260-261); Tertullian, *Ad Nationes* Book 2, Ch. 14 (144); Athanasius *Against the Heathen*. Or consider the opening of Epiphanius’
Isthmian games and figures of Corinthian history were necessarily negative, but the negative stories do form one dramatic break from an otherwise previously optimistic tradition about Isthmia.

All of this invective, however, appears to have been short-lived, occurring at a time when the religious buildings at Isthmia were still standing and when cult itself was both legal and active. The source tradition for Isthmia from the fourth century and afterwards indicates that the Isthmus, in its connection to Poseidon, also survived in the imagery and stories of a Late Antique classicism. References to Poseidon, the Isthmian deities, and the games, are plentiful in the fourth to sixth centuries, but they appear in the literary form of myths of the city rather than contemporary accounts of the place. The fifth-century *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus of Panopolis, for instance, refers to the Isthmian Corinth (Panarion), *De Fide* 1.1: “We have discussed the various, multiform, and much divided teachings of the crooked counsels of our opponents, have distinguished them by species and genus, and, by God’s power have exposed them as stale and worthless. We have sailed across the shoreless sea of the blasphemies of each section, with great difficulty crossed the ocean of their shameful, repulsive mysteries, given the solutions to their hosts of problems, and passed their wickedness by. And we have approached the calm lands of the truth, after negotiating every rough place, enduring every squall, foaming, and tossing of billows, and, as it were, seeing the swell of the sea, and its whirlpools, its shallows none too small, and its places full of dangerous beasts, and experiencing them through words.” The translation is F. Williams (Trans.), *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, Two Volumes, Leiden 1987-1994.

---

162 See Clement *Stromata* 1.21 (331), who could also refer to the establishment of the games as a known point in an historical narrative. Mythical and historical characters associated with the Corinthia, such as Sisyphus, Theseus and others, could provide anecdotal and moralistic material for making arguments. *Clementine Homilies*, 1.4; 5.6, 22; Basil *Ep.* 134; Jerome, *Against Jovianus*, Book I, Ch. 41 (380).

163 E.g., Libanius, *Or.* 11.66-67, lambastes Corinth and Athens for their embarrassing foundation myths, pitting one god against another (e.g., Poseidon vs. Helios); the Antiochenes, by contrast, have no warfare of the gods, and if they did, they would not talk about it!: “Now, those who sing the praises of Athens and Corinth invent battles of the gods around the cities; for Corinth there was the battle of the Sun against the ruler of the sea, for Attica there was that of Athena against the same god. They almost dissolve the harmony of the universe in their impudent tales of battles of the gods with their irreligious praises of their cities. In thus insulting the divine, they do the favours of devotion, but they do not realize that by this one falsehood they destroy the credit of the rest of their eulogies. We [i.e., the Antiochenes] are the darlings of the gods, and without any warfare between them, either,—nor is it right to say so. Thus those cities of Greece and we both have our claims to fame, but in their case it would have been better left unsaid; here no one would have dared to say it.” Translation is A.F. Norman (Tr.), *Antioch as a Centre of Hellenic Culture as Observed by Libanius*, Translated Texts for Historians Vol. 34, Liverpool 2000: Liverpool University Press.
throughout his mythical narrative, even making Poseidon ring out at one point about the mythical battle for Corinth:

‘This is no contest with Lycurgos, no little Arabian fight, but your adversary is the sea so mighty. Heaven still trembles at my spear of the deep, Heaven knows what a battle with the sea is like. Champion Phaetho too in his celestial course felt the point of my trident, when the deep waged formidable war in that starry battle for Corinth. The sea rose to the sky, the thirsty wain bathed in the Ocean, Maira’s dog found salt water at hand to bathe in and cooled his hot chin; the deep bottom of the waters was uplifted in towering waves, the dolphin of the sea met the dolphin of the sky amid the lashing surges!’

As he spoke, he shook with his trident the secret places of the sea, roaring surf and swelling flood flogged the sky with booming torrents of water. The army of the brine took up their wet shields. Under the water beside the brinesoaked manger of Cronion, Melicertes shook the spear of the deep, and yoked the Isthmian team; he slung to the side of the seaborne car the spear of the seafaring king, and scored the back of the water with its triple prong—he yoked the Isthmian team, and the roar of the Indian lions resounded along with the neighing of the horses.

The Latin poet Claudian has Palaemon and Leucothea return home after their exile during Alaric’s invasion. Traditional imagery of Poseidon and the Corinthian isthmus is frequent in other high-status philosophical literature, speeches, and commentaries, and occurs concomitantly with a late use of a wide variety of other common themes and topoi from Corinthian history, including Diogenes the Cynic, the Corinthian hetaerae, Periander and Arion, and voyaging to Corinth. The nymphs take as great a delight in Daphne, writes Libanius, as does Apollo at Delphi, Zeus at Pisa, and Poseidon at the Isthmus; at Antioch (like these other places), the gods reigned like emperors. Libanius himself ties several of these themes together in a clever conclusion to his declamation, Against the Recall of Lais, an imaginary speech opposing (antilogia) the imagined recall of the prostitute Lais to the city in the fourth century BC.

---

164 E.g., Nonnus, Dionys. 37.131-153: “If he has grown up to live in sea-girdled Corinth, he knows the Isthmian contest of our Palaemon.” (Loeb)

165 Nonn. Dion. 43.172-202.

166 Claudian, Or. 8.459-85.

167 See, for instance, Himerius Or. 47.83; Lib. Or. 61.5; Steph. Byz., s.v., Isthmos; s.v., Korinthos.

168 Liban. Or. 11.240-241 (The Antiochikos). AD 356.

My final point is this. You have now to choose between immorality and honour. If you vote against me, you will be held to despite chastity. If you honour your ancestors and hold fast to their virtue, you will cut away the licence of those who dare to talk like this. Whichever way the vote goes, we shall not be unobserved. Many travelers come here by sea. This city is the common market-place of Greece. Many come here to share our religious observances, when we hold the Isthmian festival in honour of Poseidon. How can it be consistent with our piety towards the gods to honour with such distinction a woman who gladly prostitutes her body to any purchaser?

The imagined response to the recall of Lais was that the city was pristine and uncorrupted before the arrival of Lais, a city at the crossroads of the world, pious in its honor to Poseidon. The response, which reflects an awareness of classical sources, is a recasting of the more typical conception that tied Corinthian wealth directly to its numerous prostitutes; here Libanius, in the voice of the opponent to the recall, imagines a time before Lais and the hetaerae corrupted a good decent city. Throughout Late Antiquity, the myths of the city continued to provide an ample corpus for rhetorical and literary play.

By the sixth century AD, the god Poseidon, in his connection to the place of the Isthmus, had entered the body of imagery and myth of the ancient city. Stephanus of Byzantium connected the “isthmus” with Isthmian Poseidon. A century later, the festival for Melicertes at Isthmia is even mentioned as a point in a chronology of the ancient world. Poseidon at the Isthmus joined the famous anecdotes and associations of Corinthian history—Diogenes and Lais, the prostitutes, Sciron, Crommyon, Arion, even Corinthian vases—to form the mythology and ancient history of the city. They were remembered as they were embedded in literature that continued to be read in a post-antique world, but their future was tied to that medium.

---

170 Steph. Byz., s.v., isthmos: Ἰσθμός, ἡ Ἀλικαρνασσός, τῆς Καρίας πόλις. ὁ πολίτης Ἰσθμός. ἔστι καὶ Κορίνθου Ἰσθμός, ἐν ᾗ Ἰσθμός ὁ Ποσειδών. καὶ νίκη Ἰσθμίας καὶ Ἰσθμιάδες σπονδαί.

171 Joannes Antiochenus Frag. 1.79

172 See, for instance, Olympiodorus’ Commentary on Plato’s Gorgias, relating about the existence of conflicting stories of Sciron: “And furthermore they say that Sciron was found on the Isthmus in rocky places, which the philosopher Ammonius said he had investigated, and ordered passers-by to wash his feet and trampled on them and killed them. But others say that he was most law-abiding and just, so that these matters are disputed, being myths, and we must not put our trust in those who dispute about them.”
Two points stand out in this discussion. One is that the famous place called Isthmia, perhaps the principal symbol of the Isthmus, ended antiquity disembodied from its physical landscape, surviving only in an imagined literary conception of the Corinthia. The process by which physical and conceptual landscapes became segmented in Late Antiquity is the inverse of what occurred in the Christianization of the Corinthian landscape, where a literary landscape defined by early Christian texts gained a monumental and elaborate material expression that would match its literary fame. The classical landscape of famous places of the Roman period was quite the opposite: it began its life with a material counterpart and ended antiquity only in the stories of the ancient city, wherever they were still read and told. The second point is even more interesting. One of the principal myths of the city, which had wedded the city of Corinth to its sacred Isthmus is, for the first time in its history, openly problematized, attacked, and relegated to the cultural margins of the world. The Isthmus as a conceptual place would survive through the medium of Late Antique classicism, lexicography, and mythography, but its place of importance for the history of the city was lost as the image of the city itself was remade.

3.2.3. Corinth on the Isthmus

If the famous places of an ancient landscape were marginalized, forgotten, or redefined, what can be said about the principal myth of the city itself, *Corinth on the Isthmus*, and its associations with a broader world of commerce and travel? It is also one of the longest-lasting images in antiquity, which again became bound to the increasingly problematic medium of classical literature.

The image of Corinth on the Isthmus remained strong because it pervaded so many previous Greek and Roman accounts of the city that continued to be read in Late

---

translation is from R. Jackson, K. Lycos, and H. Tarrant (tr.), *Olympiodorus Commentary on Plato’s Gorgias*. 

131
Antiquity. The identity of Corinth as the maritime and traveler’s city passed on through stories and proverbs of the city. The proverb that it was not for every man to sail to Corinth survived in Late Antique literature, reinforcing both the city in a landscape and its connections to famous prostitutes like Lais. Hesychius, citing Aristophanes as the source of the proverb, suggested its meaning had to do with the Corinthian hetaerae who cheated the sailors out of their money. But Themistius uses the phrase in a more positive sense to mean that not everyone has the resources to undertake every given situation; only the most dedicated steersman can weather the storm. Other stories associated with the commerce city, such as Herodotus’ story of Arion the lyre-player from Corinth, survived in this period.

Even Late Antique authors detailing Corinth’s contemporary history and affairs embed their accounts in a traditional landscape of Isthmus and two seas. Libanius concludes his plea for the return of Aristophenes by entreating that he be allowed to return to the land of Pelops, rejoicing: “In the heart of the Peloponnese let him glorify your virtues.” Claudian in the late fourth / early fifth century refers, poetically, to Alaric’s burning Corinth by alluding to the smoking twin seas.

Even more common are references to the trans-Isthmian wall, wall construction, and the defensive character of the Isthmus, reflecting the military uncertainty of the day but

---

173 E.g., Themist. Or. 15.195, “To Theodosius”; Themistius, Oration 21 [257], “The Examiner”; Olympiodorus Phil., Commentary on Plato’s Alcibiades 166.9; Hesycius, s.v. ou pantos andros.

174 Hesycius, s.v., ou) panto)j a hdro)j e) K of i qo n e â q’ o(p l ou)j citing Ar. Fr. 902a.

175 Themist. Or. 15.195, “To Theodosius”; Themistius, Oration 21 [257], “The Examiner.”

176 Lib. Prog. 2.29.1.2-6; Severus Soph. Narrationes et ethopoeia Di. 4.3; Choricus Rhet. et Soph. 27.1.4-6

177 Lib. Or. 14.68-70, Loeb translation. This appears to be a reference to Corinth.

178 Claudian In Rufinum 2.186-191: non mare fumasset geminum flagrante Corintho. See Amelia Brown’s discussion of the parallels of this account with early Latin silver-age literature. See also Jerome, Ep. 55.16 (129-30) (Letter to Heliodorus), for a vague reference to the barbarians at Corinth, one of the great, famous, and historic cities of Greece, a sign that the Roman world was falling.
also referencing texts and traditions of perception of ancient historians like Herodotus. The poet Claudian, for example, laments the unblocked advance of Alaric and the Goths through the narrow gate of Thermopylae (which, he notes, had once withstood the Persians), the Scironian cliffs, and even the Isthmian wall stretching from sea to sea! The sixth-century historian Zosimus, probably following Eunapius, relates Alaric’s conquest of the Peloponnesian cities (including Corinth, Argos, and Sparta) to the abandonment of the defense at the Isthmus from which these cities had derived their security. Procopius names the Isthmus whenever he mentions Corinth, relating the emperor Justinian’s grand scheme to wall off the Peloponnese to defend the famous cities as a group. The historian Agathias similarly notes that the Cotrigurs in the mid-sixth century achieved little worthy of mention in Greece, neither attacking the Isthmus nor getting past Thermopylae. Beyond the fundamentally practical purpose of keeping the barbarians out of Greece, the walling of the Isthmus in Late Antiquity also positioned later emperors within both the long-term historical narrative of ancient Greece and a place traditionally understood as the very key to the Peloponnese. Late authors who structured their accounts in terms established by ancient historians like Herodotus displayed their knowledge of classical literature and simultaneously renewed the myth of


180 Claudian *Or.* 26.166-93.

181 Zosimus 5.6-7. Zosimus (1.29.3) has the Isthmus fortified in the time of Valerianus.

182 Procopius *Aed.* 4.2.1-12: “Beyond the whole of Epirus and Aetolia and Acarnania, as one skirts the coast, one comes to the Crisiaean Gulf and the Isthmus and Corinth and the other parts of Greece. These regions made demands upon his very utmost wisdom.” (Loeb) And Procopius *Aed.* 4.2.23-28: “When the Emperor Justinian, after he had accomplished all this, learned that all the cities of the Peloponnesus were unwalled, he reasoned that obviously a long time would be consumed if he attended to them one by one, and so he walled the whole Isthmus securely, because much of the old wall had already fallen down. And he built fortresses there and established garrisons. In this manner he made all the towns in the Peloponnesus inaccessible to the enemy, even if somehow they should force the defences at Thermopylae.” (Loeb translation) Cf. also Procopius *Bell.* 5.15.17-18, for a definition of Corinth’s Isthmus.

183 Agathias, *Historiae* 5.23.5-6.
Corinth on the Isthmus. The continuity of both the physical and imagined walling of the Isthmus in Late Antique society is one way in which ancient conceptions of the Corinthian landscape lived on in Late Antiquity.

The classical image of Corinth was also reinforced by the numerous anecdotes and historical facts circulating about the ancient city—its travel, commerce, and wealth (e.g., Corinthian bronze); important events (Corinthian colonization; Roman refoundation); hetaerae (Lais; the Corinthian girls); historical role as a naval power (outbreak of the Peloponnesian War); famous but migrant philosophers (Diogenes); and historical and mythical personalities (Sciron, Arion, Poseidon, Adeimantus, Ameinocles, Aphrodite)—that remained themes in the intellectual culture of Late Antiquity, reinforcing the city’s identity as a maritime or commercial city, centered at a crossroads and oriented toward the world. Stories of Lais and the hetaerae were linked directly to the reputation of the city as a commerce and traveler’s city, which was in turn tied to its geographic position; Libanius’ clever subversion of these connections was noted above. The Thucydidean account of Corinth’s role in the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War was a most frequent

---

184 Cypselus and / or Periander: Augustine, *City of God*, 18.25 (374); Lib. *Decl.* 2.1.9.8; Euseb. *Praep. Evang.* 5.35.1.2; Theodoret Scr. Eccl. *Graecarum affectionum cur.* 5.63.3; Timeaus Sophista Gramm., *Lexicon Platonicum* kappa.993b.19, 25; Hermias Phil., *In Platonis Phaedrum scholia*. 45.6-7; Joannes Stobaeus *Anth.* 3.1.172; Choricus Rhet. et Soph. 27.1.5; Corinthian bronze: Justinius *Dig.* 32.1.100.3; Joannes Laurentius Lydus *Mag.* 32.10; Aphrodite: Nonnus, *Dion.* 41.90-100; Joannes Laurentius Lydus *Mens* 4.65.12. Lais and Corinthian Hetaerae: Greg. Naz. *De vita sua* 935; Themistius, *Or.* 20 (238); Theodoret Scr. Eccl. *Graecarum affectionum cur.* 12.50.2; Dionys. Soph. *Ep.* 39.4; Joannes Stobaeus *Anth.* 3.9.54.42; Choricus Rhet. et Soph. 12.2.54. Colonies of Corinth: Joannes Laurentius Lydus *Mag.* 204.14; Steph. Byz., *s.v., Akarnania* (citing Thuc.); Steph. Byz., *s.v., Epidanum*; Destruction of Corinth: Philogelos, *Facetiae* 78.2; Eutropius Hist. *Brevarium ab urbe condita* 4.14.1.7; Roman Refoundation of City: Joannes Laurentius Lydus *Mag.* 64.1. Medea: Euseb. *Contra Marc.* 1.3.2.7-9; Lib. *Decl.* 4.2.25.7; *Or.* 11.1.14; 11.1.7.3; 12.20.1.2; Marcellus Theol. *Fragmenta* 125.17-18; Choricus Rhet. et Soph. 12.2.54; Arion: Lib. *Prog.* 2.29.1.2-6; Severus Soph. *Narrationes et ethopoia* Di. 4.3; Choricus Rhet. et Soph. 27.1.4-6; Diogenes the Cynic: Joannes Stobaeus *Anth.* 3.3.52; 3.40.9.126-128; Start of Peloponnesian War: Lib. *Or.* 18.57; *Or.* 59.38.10; *Or.* 64.23; Ulianus Gramm. et Rhet. *Prologomena in Demosthenis*; Aphetionis Rhet. 10.24.8; Syrianus Phil., *Comm. in Hermog. librum*; Joannes Stobaeus *Anth.* 4.5.49.1; 4.9.8.1; 4.9.12.1; 4.13.24.1; Fall of Tyrant Dionysios: Joannes Stobaeus *Anth.* 4.47.13.3; Battle between Helios and Poseidon: Libanius, *Or.* 11.66.2-3; Nonnus, *Dionys.* 43.172-202; Aletes: Hesychius, *s.v., Deketaikailibw*.

---

185 Libanius *Decl.* 25. See also the account by Oribasius Med., *Collectiones medicæ* 6.38.25-30, which in detailing the nature of sexual desire, relates a story about a young Milesian who had just arrived from Corinth having had a bad sexual experience (presumably with a prostitute).
theme in speech writing and reinforced the city’s place as an historic naval power; Libanius devoted an entire declamation to the affair. The emperor Julian relates that Diogenes the Cynic was sent by the gods to the Corinthians to offer a healthful remedy to their problem with wealth; certainly others like Themistius (discussed above) would have also connected Diogenes to the large crowds associated with the games. These stories reinforced a particular way of perceiving the city in this period that further consolidated the city in a landscape.

The historic image of Corinth on the Isthmus, the traveler’s city at a major crossroads, was perhaps the most prominent image of the city in Late Antiquity that emerged in the Archaic period and lasted through Late Antiquity, despite the starts, stops, and pauses in the city’s long history. In the sixth century AD, Stephanus of Byzantium will begin his brief description of Corinth simply as “the city on the Isthmus of the Peloponnese.” Late anthologists, encyclopaedists, and lexicographers preserve in their accounts the classical depiction of the city, and points in Corinthian history and mythology (e.g., the kings of the Corinthians) would be absorbed into the frameworks of Medieval chronicles.

186 Libanius Dec. 13. See 13.9.12: “Even if we have the Isthmus of the Peloponnese, they likewise have that of Pallene” See also scattered references in Syriani, Sopatri Et Marcell. Scholia ad Hermogenis librum. Corinth as a naval power as also tied to Thucydides’ account of Ameinocles of Corinth, the first to build triremes. e.g., Themistius Oration 26 [315], “Consider the sea. Didn't raft-builders first prove to mankind that it is navigable? Then, when the builder Harmonides or someone before him came along, didn't merchant ships and trading vessels appear? Later still, the Corinthians built triremes at the Isthmus, and the Corinthian shipbuilder Ameinocles went to the Samians.” Translation by Penella 2000. Themistius is referring to Thucydides 1.13 who mentions Ameinocles.

187 Julian Oration 7, To the Cynic Heracleios

188 Themistius, Oration 28, The Disquisition on Speaking 342.

189 Steph. Byz., s.v., Kořinqoj, po/lij eÅw tou=ς qmou=ς th=j Peloponnhsou. E.g., Joannes Malalas Chron. Book 4 (“The Time of the Empire in the Land of the Argives”): “After Eli, the prophet of the Jews, the first to reign over the Jews was Saul, the son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who reigned for 20 years in the city of Gabaon. After the Lakedaimonains, Aletes reigned then over the Corinthians for 35 years, and 11 other emperors reigned for 277 years. Afterwards Automenes ruled for one year. The empire of the Corinthians lasted for 313 years” Translation by E. Jeffreys, M. Jeffreys, and R. Scott (translators), The chronicle of John Malalas, Byzantina Australiensia 4, Melbourne 1986. Other examples include Cyril. Theol. Contra Julian 1.13.16-21; Eustathius Scr. Eccl. Commentarius in hexaemeron 708; John Antiochene Frag. 1.79; Augustine, City of God, 18.25 (374).
Two features stand out, however, in the Late Antique depictions of Corinth, the Isthmus, and the region’s famous places. There is no periegetic literature describing the material correlates of the famous ancient Corinthian places known from literature. This must relate in part to the poor survival of documents, but this can only be half the explanation. We can see, for example, in the renowned orator Libanius an interest in the city of Corinth that appears to us as conflicted. On the one hand, in his epistles, orations, and declamations, he alludes constantly to the ingredients of Corinthian history: Lais and the prostitutes; the city’s commerce and wealth; the famous land between Corinth and Sicyon; and the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. He knows and writes letters to several Corinthians of his own day, and expresses awareness of contemporary affairs in their city.\(^{191}\) But in his own autobiography, he explicitly denies interest in the city of his day, associated as it was with the law courts of the governor, litigation, and the philosopher’s court case:\(^{192}\)

\[\text{But to return to my point—from all those disasters I was preserved by Fortune, and so I saw Corinth neither as defendant nor as plaintiff, but only once when I passed through on my way to attend the festival of the Whippings at Sparta, and again when I went to Argos to be initiated in the local mysteries.}\]

In the several years that Libanius spent in Athens, he only claims to have visited Corinth twice, and that in passing to Sparta and Argos. This is as close as we come in Late Antiquity to a contemporary experience of the city, even if it is the perspective of a high-minded (and certainly not typical) rhetorician.\(^ {193}\) The Corinth that had the most prominent place for this Late Antique author was the literary one known from reading past historical accounts, which possessed greater potency in the form of story than

\(^{191}\) Libanius \textit{Ep.} 822 (to Parnasios); \textit{Ep.} 1123; \textit{Ep.} 1214.


\(^{193}\) In another story illustrating the degeneration of oratory in his day, Libanius tells about the character Heliodorus, a fish-pickle hawker, who went to Corinth for business and in the process picked up the skills of oratory at the law court. Lib. \textit{Or.} 62.46.
physical place.\textsuperscript{194} What is limited in the literature of Late Antiquity (and especially the fifth and sixth centuries) is the kind of obsessive fascination with the famous places of the Corinthia that we see in the early empire, where the historical actor, whether Nero, Herodes Atticus, or Pausanias, step into the landscape they knew from literature and joined the narrative. This need not mean that Late Antique accounts are ‘derivative’ or unimportant but that many places in the previous landscape seem to disappear in this period. In addition to the harbors, the major exception to this pattern is the surviving importance of the trans-Isthmian wall (discussed above).

As importantly, the texts that preserve a traditional conception of the city of Corinth unsurprisingly belong to the Late Antique traditions of classical culture, learning and literature. Discussions of Corinth on the Isthmus in the fifth and sixth century are almost wholly preserved in Hellenic (i.e., “pagan”) anthologists, lexicographers, mythographers, historians, and philosophers like Joannes Stobaeus, Nonnus of Panopolis, Hermias (the disciple of Proclus), the Neoplatonist Syrianus, the historian Zosimus, Agathias, Hesychius of Alexandria, and Olympiodorus; or “Christian” rhetoricians, historians, and writers (e.g., Procopius of Caesarea, Choricius of Gaza) well-read in and sympathetic to the classical tradition. While Byzantine authors of the fifth to seventh centuries occasionally refer to the history of the city (for examples, see above), the most vibrant continuity in traditional conceptions of the city is among authors who spent their time reading Herodotus and Thucydid, Plato and Aristotle, the Greek philosophical tradition, and their counterparts in early Roman literature, carriers of the traditional myth of the city.

\textsuperscript{194} This is not at all to say that Libanius regarded Corinth as an insignificant city. See Liban. \textit{Or.} 14.27-28: In his appeal for Aristophanes, he claims that Aristophanes’ famous homeland, Corinth, should bring him some respect. The city’s most notable claim, he writes to Julian, is that the emperor had claimed the Corinthians were his benefactor, and that the city was the place where Julian’s father found repose. In making this point, however, he also alludes to the city’s historic reputation in a praeteritio: “Even if Aristophanes had been a Megarian, Melian or Lemnian, he would have had this considerable advantage: in fact, however, his city’s name inspires even more respect, for he is from Corinth. In my argument I shall make no appeal to legend, nor dilate upon the contest between Helios and Poseidon, nor upon the epitaphs of the dead buried there after naval battles, nor upon the city’s fair dealing and consistent support of the victims of aggression. This is not to imply that this has little bearing on the renown of its possessors, but that there is a more notable claim that can be adduced…” (Loeb translation)
We can end with a unique example that bridges a gap between classical and Christian culture of Late Antiquity. John Chrysostom, the famous fourth century preacher of Antioch and Constantinople, is alone among Christian authors in commenting extensively on Corinth’s historical reputation. His homilies on the text of 1 Corinthians begin by placing the text into its web of historical associations:195

As Corinth is now the first city of Greece, so of old it prided itself on many temporal advantages, and more than all the rest, on excess of wealth. And on this account one of the heathen writers entitled the place ‘the rich.’ For it lies on the Isthmus of the Peloponnesus, and had great facilities for traffic. The city was also full of numerous orators, and philosophers, and one, I think, of the seven called wise men, was of this city. Now these things we have mentioned, not for ostentation’s sake, nor to make, a display of great learning: (for indeed what is there in knowing these things?) but they are of use to us in the argument of the Epistle….

…The devil, therefore, seeing that a great and populous city had laid hold of the truth, a city admired for wealth and wisdom, and the head of Greece; (for Athens and Lacedaemon were then and since in a miserable state, the dominion having long ago fallen away from them;) and seeing that with great readiness they had received the word of God; what doth he? He divides the men. For he knew that even the strongest kingdom of all, divided against itself, shall not stand. He had a vantage ground too, for this device in the wealth, the wisdom of the inhabitants.

In one of the few “historical introductions” to a New Testament text existing from antiquity, Chrysostom appropriates the traditional associations of the image of the city to set the scene for the problems that his homilies will address. The Corinthian community, he argues, had problems because of its philosophical leanings, glorification of learning, fame, and especially its wealth and pride, a product of the city’s favorable and historic position on the Isthmus and consequent traffic. Chrysostom even remarks that it was in Corinth that the magicians burned all their books and scrolls, misplacing (intentionally?) the episode of Ephesus reported in the Acts of the Apostles.196 But for all of this, Chrysostom shows no awareness of the sexual reputation of the city, which would have well advanced his later discussion of the Corinthian community’s sexual deviance, and he even refers to Homer as “one of the heathen writers” who entitled Corinth “the wealthy”!

---


Chrysostom shows himself relatively well-learned about the image of this famous city, but also, in the display of his learning, denigrates the hypothetical erudite (or the process itself) that might name the knowledge “for ostentation’s sake”, even as “a display of great learning.” The preacher simultaneously sums up the essential image of ancient Corinth while dismissing the medium of literature and learning that carried that image—and all through a clever classical rhetorical technique (*praeteritio*).

In the end, however, this passage of John Chrysostom is exceptional among patristic commentators. Christian writers and Biblical commentators rarely refer to the traditional images and identity of the city (embedded in classical literature) when they spoke about the city. Indeed, they were reading entirely different texts with different points of reference. Images of “Corinth on the Isthmus” survived the end of antiquity, but they became, relatively speaking, less important than new conceptions formed through the Christianization of the empire, which instilled old places and city itself with different kinds of significance.
3.3. Conclusion

This chapter has been about the story and identity of ancient Corinth. It has suggested that stories formed a kind of narrative of the landscape that undergirded and reinforced the principal myth of the ancient city—Corinth on the Isthmus, centered at the travelers’ crossroads of land and sea, from which the city’s identity and reputations were derived. This image of the city was a consistent one, stretching from the Archaic age (8th-6th centuries BC) to the end of antiquity, and even surviving in part in Byzantine compilations and histories. The myths and anecdotes surrounding the city already existed in classical literature (Homer, Herodotus, Hesiod, Thucydides, and the tragic and comic writers) that circulated widely in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, while a variety of Greek and Latin authors of the Roman empire added to and reinforced these stories through creative retellings or new accounts of their own day. Stories were also passed on by simple word of mouth and oral accounts; one thinks of the local informants Pausanias met in his travels. And of course, the material world, including physical sites, images, and material culture, made concrete the places otherwise known only through the imagination. These different kinds of texts reinforced a “classical” or “ancient” landscape in so far that they reinforced traditional ways of perceiving a physical territory like the Isthmus, especially in its importance for the city Corinth.

This chapter, however, has specifically examined the stories preserved in literary testimony that circulated in the Roman and late Roman periods to show some of the range of meanings that became linked to Corinth’s eastern landscape, the Isthmus, by the second century of the common era. The chapter has focused on literary testimony not because they form the only kind of “textual” evidence—even material culture is textual in so far as it must be read and interpreted—but because they are a particularly potent kind of evidence that has overwhelming influenced many modern images of Corinth in the Roman period; and when that evidence becomes confusing, as it does in Late Antiquity, the modern historical depictions have likewise been severely muddled. Moreover, although physical sites in the territory of the Isthmus could incarnate the places known through the tales of literature, and literature could structure the paths of tourists, the
conceptual and physical landscapes did not stand in a directly dependent relationship. The landscape of famous places known through literature was firstly a conceptual and imagined one; and the physical locating of those places could and did vary considerably. Educated travelers like Pausanias remembered the landscape in a manner consistent with their interests and backgrounds and saw selectively; others no doubt imagined and read the physical landscape very differently, while still others, for whom fortune had not granted “to sail to Corinth,” imagined the Isthmus entirely severed from its physical territory. There are grounds, therefore, for discussing a conceptual landscape independently of a physical one.

The conceptual map of the eastern Corinthia, the “landscape of famous places”, was not a solid or unchanging one, but was intertextual, formed largely through reading earlier authors. Strabo read Thucydides; Diodorus Siculus read Herodotus; Libanius likely read all of them; Procopius knew the geographers; and others read summations, anthologies, and school textbooks. The kind of conception, then, that the elite of the Roman period had of the Corinthia was particular to their educational background, but the range of significant places did not vary significantly. It is not, for instance, the kind of landscape that we would know more about with more surviving literary documents; these would likely only reinforce the images and myths of the city already well known. The only kind of evidence that might help us unpack the myth is that qualitatively different kind—artifact scatters in the countryside, buildings excavated at extra-urban sites, inscriptions of a private nature, and papyri recording everyday life. We will discuss some of this evidence in later chapters.

For all the diversity in the accounts of the Corinthia from the Roman era, then, there were a “canon” of typical places that mattered, that were worth discussing and even visiting. Besides Acrocorinth and Corinth town, the most famous of these was the Isthmus itself, centered geographically at the diolkos and the canal cuts, and conceptually married to the sites sacred to Poseidon, Palaemon, and their associates. The two harbors, Kenchreai and Lechaion had a weaker, but still relatively robust, literary and conceptual
life. The trans-Isthmian wall (and the episodes of walling) was also an important part of this imagined landscape. A variety of second-tier sites—for example, various graves of important individuals, a few scattered temples, and sites connected with the founding of the games or the feats of Theseus—was embedded in literature and consequently imaged in antiquity.

This ancient configuration of important places (and even non-placed space) undergirded the traditional storyline of the city developed from the Archaic period and maintained into Late Antiquity. That story of Corinth, which focused on the consequences of its geographic position and its identity as a traveler’s city, was powerfully reinforced by traditions of perception and also the physical structure of the territory that divided neatly into two intervisible poles, the acropolis (and city) and the Isthmus (and eastern territory). The storyline itself constituted a veritable structure of the ancient city, a defining tradition that was authoritative because it was ancient, and which had existed even at times when there was no material counterpart (as, for instance, Isthmia “existed” during the period of the city’s abandonment and after the sanctuary’s destruction in the fourth century). The story of ancient Corinth and the structure of the landscape were in other words joined closely to their intellectual medium.

The end of this ancient landscape entailed not simply discontinuity in the physical sites of the territory of the Isthmus (although that did occur at some sites, like Isthmia) but, more importantly, the fragmentation of a traditional paradigm for conceiving and imagining this landscape, that is, the decline of reading the landscape through the lenses of classical culture and literature. The late Roman history of the city has often been seen as a confused one, but this is mainly a product of the complexity of the source tradition. Late Antique philosophers, historians, rhetoricians, lexicographers, and mythographers who continued to read and write through the medium of classical literature preserved the old stories and conceptual map of the Corinthian landscape. But new cultural forces like the Christianization of the empire also made certain places (like the sanctuary at Isthmia) unacceptable in a new Christian geography, and Late Antiquity was the first period that
the significant ancient places of the Corinthia became inherently problematic. In the long run, though, the most detrimental force to this imagined landscape was the development of entirely different conceptual lenses (early Christian literature), which, with its different reference points, imagined the city apart from its territory. Christian literature of the fourth to seventh centuries hardly mentions the places of the ancient Corinthia (and sometimes explicitly denigrates them and the medium of classical literature!), even though it does constantly make mention of Corinth.

What about the daily reality behind the changing image in Late Antiquity – did Corinth cease to be a traveler’s city at the crossroads of land and sea? The following chapters will make specific cases against this conclusion and argue from the material record that the city and territory remained firmly linked to Mediterranean markets and were visited by numerous travelers and passersby. On the other hand, we can be sure that at least one principal facet of travel to Corinth, pilgrimage and tourism associated with the city’s important sites, must have dropped drastically in Late Antiquity. Even as early as the fourth century, Libanius claims that during his four years as a student in Athens, he had only been to Corinth twice, and that in passing on the way to Sparta and Argos; he seems to have had a low opinion of the city due to its connection with the law courts and trials of young philosophers. The Isthmian Games in their traditional public form ceased in the third century and the Roman Bath was derelict by AD 400. We can imagine the Games suffering, then, by the third and definitely the fourth century, and losing their former prestige.

The decline of Corinth’s principal tourist industry, the athletic contests at the Isthmus, also corresponded with a shift in cultural interest to the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire, politically centered in Constantinople, intellectually focused in Alexandria, Antioch, and Constantinople, and religiously directed to the sacred places of Palestine. In the long term, the centrality of the east marginalized (relatively speaking) a city like Corinth to the cultural peripheries of Byzantium; and Corinth was an important, but distant, satellite of the west, under the jurisdiction of the Roman church. If western
pilgrims passed through Corinth on the way to Palestine, the territory was no longer the primary cultural scene that it had been at an earlier date. A later study will show how Corinth nonetheless sprouted new Christian sacred places, which were less important than Rome or the Holy Land but nonetheless had attractive force.

For most cities of the ancient Mediterranean, literary testimony almost always represent the perspectives of outsiders; it is perhaps this observation that has discouraged many from pursuing “local history” using primarily literary sources. If the stories about Corinth dried up in Late Antiquity, it is not, I would argue, because individuals stopped going there but rather, that travelers of a certain type, the pilgrims and tourists and those interested enough to write up an account, became less frequent. Traditional historical depictions of Corinth in Late Antiquity are far too dramatic: the landscape of famous places did not end dramatically and permanently in the late fourth century, at the hands of earthquake, Goths, or Christianizing emperor (e.g., Theodosius I), but rather faded in cultural significance. Material discontinuity of the important sites of the Isthmus contributed to such a process but also important was the cultural downgrading of the cosmopolis to metropolitan status.

We can end by summing up the principal source problems for understanding the history of the Corinthia in both the Roman and Late Roman periods. First, our sources for Corinth in the Roman period largely present an image of the city and territory already highly mythologized, enlivened by stories, anecdotes, and associations that conflate different points in Corinth’s past; the conceptual map of the Corinthia even in the Roman period was consequently never very precise or accurate and focused on several important places that were tied to the city’s identity. And second, the Late Antique image is especially confounding because the literary medium that had previously preserved the myth of the city fragmented in this period. Our knowledge of the city is consequently

---

197 For a strongly negative (and perhaps overly critical) assessment of the decline of pilgrimage to Late Antique and Byzantine Greece, see R. Eisner, Travelers to an Antique Land. The History and Literature of Travel to Greece. Ann Arbor 1991: University of Michigan Press, 33-34.
less clear in the later Roman period. Understanding the city’s history in both periods must consequently turn to sources of a qualitatively different kind than literature.

The following three chapters present the material evidence for extra-urban habitation and structures on the Isthmus in the Roman and late Roman periods. I will argue that while the city and landscape lost much of its accompanying reputation, fame, and image in Late Antiquity, the material structures of the territory (the villas and agricultural installations, the crossroads, marketplaces and harbors) remained steady, constant, and important for the local and regional economy. In the end, this contrast will demonstrate the complexities of Late Antique local history: how a landscape became partially demythologized while simultaneously remaining economically and materially vital to both the life of the city and broader regional and Mediterranean networks. A later study (post-dissertation) will show how new conceptions of the city were formed that eventually came to be embedded in physical locations on the Isthmus, narrating Corinth’s new identity and image.