Ancient Corinth



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Ancient Corinth was already inhabited in Neolithic times (6500–3250 BC). The city, known since Mycenaean times, is referred to by Homer as «afneios» (= wealthy) (Iliad B 570), owing to its particularly fertile land. The large production of agricultural goods, from the early historical period onwards, favoured the development of intense commercial activity, chiefly towards the western Mediterranean, while in the 8th century BC Corinthian colonies were founded, such as Corcyra (Corfu) in the Ionian Sea and Syracuse in Sicily, with a significant role and contribution to the history of the ancient Mediterranean world. The city's economic prosperity reached its peak during the 7th and 6th centuries BC, under the rule of the tyrant Cypselus and his son Periander. Corinth's power was magnificently expressed in splendid buildings such as the Temple of Apollo (560 BC), while the elevation of the Isthmian Games — the contests held at the Corinthian Sanctuary of Poseidon and Amphitrite on the Isthmus — into Panhellenic Games (584 BC) further strengthened the city's fame and influence. From the late 6th century BC, however, the rise of Athens and its dominance in pottery production and Mediterranean trade gradually curtailed Corinthian influence, especially after the Persian Wars (490–479 BC), where, despite their strong participation, the Corinthians were obliged to accept Athenian primacy. In the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC) Corinth openly sided with Sparta, urging it from the outset to move militarily against the Athenians. Yet despite Athens' defeat, and despite taking part in a series of military campaigns — among them the so-called «Corinthian War» against Sparta (395–387 BC) — the city of Corinth never managed to regain its former power. The organisation of a Panhellenic congress at Corinth in 337 BC by King Philip II of Macedon, the new rising power of the Greek world, briefly returned it to prominence, yet it very soon submitted to the Macedonians. The shaking off of the Macedonian yoke in 243 BC by Aratus of Sicyon was followed by its accession to the Achaean League, a federation of city-states of southern Greece. However, the confrontation of the League with Rome led, in 146 BC, to the famous Battle of Leucopetra, in the region of the Isthmus, where the Greek forces were crushed by the Roman legions under Lucius Mummius. As Greek and Roman writers recount, the military defeat was followed by the utter destruction and desolation of the city (Cicero, De imperio Cn. Pompei ad Quirites oratio 11; Orationes de lege agraria 2.87; Strabo, Geographica 8.23; Pausanias 2.1.2).

About a hundred years later, in 44 BC, Rome's dictator in perpetuum, Julius Caesar, decided to re-found

Corinth as a Roman colony, recognising its particular geographical importance within his broader strategy for the eastern Mediterranean. His violent death that same year did not thwart his grand plan, as it was continued by his successor Octavian, the later Augustus. The new city was named Colonia Laus Iulia Corinthiensis — or Clara Laus Iulia Corinthus, or Iulia Corinthus Augusta — as a colony of the Julian family of Caesar and Augustus (Gens Iulia), and in 27 BC it was designated capital of the Roman Province of Achaea (Provincia Achaiae), which comprised a large part of mainland Greece, the Peloponnese and several islands. Owing to its desolation after the Battle of Leucopetra, the city was initially settled by Roman freedmen and veteran soldiers, who were soon joined by Greeks who exploited the particularly fertile land confiscated by Rome (ager publicus) and granted to new landless settlers. Rome's aim was, on the one hand, to create a stable Roman base in the turbulent East and, on the other, to speed the passage of the Roman fleet through the Diolkos — the unique overland, paved road for ships that crossed the Isthmus — as attested by a Latin inscription of 102 BC recording the passage of the fleet to confront pirates on its way to Side in the Asia Minor region of Pamphylia, under the orator Marcus Antonius, grandfather of Mark Antony, companion of Queen Cleopatra and mortal rival of Octavian in the war over the succession of Julius Caesar.

Very soon the city's population grew significantly, as agriculture, stock-raising and trade developed anew, with corresponding exports of wool, dyed woollen fabrics, olive oil and honey, as well as timber and metal objects. On the other hand, the needs and habits of the new city's Roman inhabitants, together with its international role, led to imports of goods from other parts of the Empire, such as wine and building materials (marble, granite) needed for the new, luxurious constructions.

According to researchers, the city was redesigned on a Hippodamian grid, that is with vertical and horizontal road axes (cardines and decumani) delimiting urban blocks (insulae). Around its Agora, splendid public buildings and private monuments of wealthy Romans and Greeks were erected by those who wished to declare emphatically their presence in the capital of the Province. Evidence for the construction of these buildings survives in many inscriptions, while depictions of them appear mainly on later local coins. The phrases of Horace, «non cuivis homini contingit adire Corinthum / non licet omnibus adire Corinthum» (Epistles 1.17.36), and of Strabo, «ου παντὸς ανδρὸς ες Κόρινθον εσθ' ο πλους» (Geographica 8.6.20), reflect the city's prosperity and the high cost that residence there demanded. Around the mid-1st century AD, when the Apostle Paul visited it, Corinth was by then a major Roman city of the Empire, governed by two local magistrates, the duoviri, modelled on the consuls of Rome — a miniature of the capital and a point of reference in Roman thought and travel towards the East.

Despite the destruction it suffered from the invasion of the Heruli (267 AD) and the catastrophic earthquake of around 375 AD, the city remained strong and was subsequently designated capital of the Helladic Theme of the Eastern Roman Empire. Following the fall of Constantinople to the Crusaders in 1204, it was captured by the Franks (1210); it also went through a short period of Venetian rule, which was again succeeded by Ottoman occupation, until liberation and the founding of the Greek State in 1830.

Limited excavation, in both extent and results, was carried out in 1892 and 1906 by A. Skias, funded by the Archaeological Society. Systematic excavations in the area, which continue to this day, began in 1896 by the American School of Classical Studies.

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