

CORINTH (Κόρινθος, *Korinthos*). An influential Graeco-Roman city in the Peloponnesus region where Paul spent 18 months on his second missionary journey. The church at **Corinth** was the recipient of the **First** and **Second Letter to the Corinthians**. Archaeological and literary evidence about **Corinth** paints a rich picture of the city that Paul knew and provides an indispensable backdrop for understanding his writings to the Corinthians. More than many other New Testament locations, “the various sociological, economic, and religious factors that make up the environment of the city of **Corinth** have a profound influence on one’s understanding of Paul’s letters to the church there” (Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 1).

Overview

Corinth was the third-largest

city of the **Roman Empire**. During Paul’s stay there during his second missionary journey, he worked as a tentmaker with **Priscilla** and **Aquila** (**Acts 18:3**), most likely in the city marketplace (**Acts 18:3**). He may have spent time there on his third missionary journey, as well (**Acts 20:2–3**).

First-century **Corinth** was a city rich in both history and wealth due to its geographic advantages. It was a city of cultural diversity, a hub of Roman paganism, and a hotbed for immorality. It also hosted the biannual Isthmian games, which drew throngs from across Greece. As an astute missionary, Paul likely chose **Corinth** for its importance as a busy center of culture and commerce and its ability to receive large crowds, which would serve as audience to the gospel before returning to their

diverse homelands (see [Aelius Aristides, Orations, 46.24](#)). Thus, [Corinth](#) became a city of Christian witness, and the study of [Corinth](#) in its historical-cultural setting provides a vital background for New Testament interpretation.

Biblical references to [Corinth](#) occur in [Acts 18:1; 19:1; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1, 23; and 2 Tim 4:20](#). Other ancient sources making mention of [Corinth](#) are numerous, notably Pausanias and Strabo. Archaeological excavation began shortly after the ancient city of [Corinth](#) was destroyed by an earthquake in 1858. Modern [Corinth](#) was rebuilt on a new site approximately three miles northeast of its former location, thus providing opportunity for archaeologists to study the original site. This began with the German Archaeological Institute in 1886, but the primary excava-

tions were undertaken by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, beginning in 1896 and continuing to the present ([Corinth, Results of Excavations](#); Wiseman, [Corinth and Rome](#)).

[Corinth](#) was renowned across the Mediterranean world for the quality of its bronze, and excavators have discovered some of its production facilities (Wiseman, [Corinth and Rome](#), 512). Pliny indicated that Corinthian bronze was valued “before silver and almost even before gold” ([Pliny, Hist. 34:1](#)) and sought with “a wonderful mania” ([Pliny, Hist. 34.6](#)).

Vitruvius mentioned Corinthian bronze in connection with theatrical acoustics ([Vitruvius, Architecture, 5:5.1, 7–8](#)). Paul may have had this in mind in [1 Cor 13:1](#) (Murphy-O’Connor, [St. Paul’s Corinth](#), 206).

Excavations to the southwest of the central marketplace revealed the villa of Anaploga, a richly tiled home that may have been representative of a house-church setting, such as the one hosted by Gaius in [Rom 16:23](#) (Wiseman, [Corinth and Rome](#), 528). Many temples and shrines have been excavated, including the Temple of Asclepius, in which excavators found numerous terra-cotta body parts that were presented to Asclepius in cultic healing rites (Murphy-O'Connor, [The Corinth that Saint Paul Saw](#), 156; Blevins, [Introduction](#), 317). Paul may have implied a contrast to these as he wrote about the living unity of the body of Christ ([1 Cor 12:11-31](#)). Excavations have also shown that [Corinth](#) and its surrounding area were home to dozens of temples and shrines dedicated to such diverse deities as Apol-

lo, Athena, Aphrodite, Demeter and Kore, Palaimon, and Sisyphus, as well as the Egyptian deities Isis and Sarapis. The Isthmian games focused their attention on a temple dedicated to Poseidon.

History

Excavators have discovered ample evidence of human settlement in [Corinth](#) dating to the sixth millennium BC (Salmon, [Wealthy Corinth](#), 10). The Bacchiadae Dynasty ruled [Corinth](#) from the mid-seventh to mid-ninth century BC, during the Dorian reign of the Peloponnesus from 1000-655 BC (Murphy-O'Connor, [St Paul's Corinth](#), 33). [Corinth](#) then underwent a period of fluctuating relations with [Athens](#) and [Sparta](#) (see Salmon, [Wealthy Corinth](#)). In the second century BC, it was a leading city of the Achaean League, and in 146 BC

it was crushed by Roman forces under the leadership of general Lucius Mummius for its opposition to Rome. The city was sacked, its structures demolished, and its population sold into slavery. It remained virtually abandoned for just over a century (see [Strabo, Geography, 8.6.23](#); [10.5.4](#); [Pausanias, Description, 2.1.2](#); Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 14–16). In 44 BC, the ancient city was resettled by [Julius Caesar](#) as a Roman state, initially populated by freedmen, military veterans, and laborers (Thiselton, *Corinthians*, 3).

It is possible that Jews were among the earliest inhabitants of the resettled city; they clearly had a strong presence early in its resettlement as evidenced by the discovery of a broken lintel inscribed with “[Syna]goge Hebr[aion]” (synagogue of the Hebrew; see Murphy-

O’Connor, *The Corinth that Paul Saw*, 153). While the Jewish community was obviously established, Gallio’s dismissive response to their complaint against Paul ([1 Cor 16:14–16](#)) may indicate that the Jews, with their strict monotheism, were looked upon with some degree of disdain at the time Paul brought the gospel to the *agora*.

While the precise chronology of Paul’s ministry is difficult to recover, it is likely that Paul’s ministry in *Corinth* took place sometime between AD 50 and 52. This timeframe is “one of the few certain dates in the New Testament, and the one from which most Pauline dates are ultimately derived” (Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 4n12). The reason for this degree of certainty is that Gallio’s time as proconsul (ἀνθύπατος, *anthypatos*) of *Corinth* can be fixed with rela-

tive precision due to Claudius' Delphic Letters, which mention Gallio (see Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth*, 161–69). This puts the most likely date of Gallio's proconsulate at AD 51–52 (Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 29–30). Thus the scene depicted in *1 Cor 16:12–18* in which Paul stood before Gallio at the tribunal or bema (βῆμα, *bēma*) would have happened in the summer of AD 51, and he would probably have left that September, placing his arrival in *Corinth* in early to mid-AD 50 (Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 18). The First Letter to the Corinthians was written from *Ephesus* probably around AD 53 to 55 shortly before *Pentecost* (*1 Cor 16:8*; see Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 31–32).

Geography

Corinth's isthmus location made it the “master of two

harbors” and gateway to the Peloponnesian lands. The north—south land route came down from *Macedonia* and branched out from *Corinth* toward all other areas of Peloponnesus. Its east—west axis linked it to the Aegean Sea on the East and the Adriatic Sea on the West. This position enabled it to levy taxes on both land and sea trade routes, contributing to its wealth (*Strabo, Geography, 8.6.20*).

The wide-walled Lechaean Road led 1.5 miles directly north of the city in a walled corridor one mile wide to the port of Lechaean on the Gulf of *Corinth*. Lechaean's harbor offered access to the Ionian Sea, and was among the largest in the Empire (Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 12). To the east lay Cenchreae, with its much smaller harbor, and access to the Saronic Gulf and the

Aegean Sea (Murphy-O'Connor, *The Corinth that Paul Saw*, 158). It was in Cenchreae, Acts records, that Phoebe lived and ministered as a deacon or servant of the church (Rom 16:1) and that Paul shaved his head to fulfill a vow before sailing to Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19).

The Corinthian Isthmus was not quite five miles across at its narrowest point, and a paved road called the *diolkos* was constructed by Periander in the sixth century BC (Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth*, 61), enabling the portage of goods and small boats from one shore to the other, thus avoiding the much longer and often dangerous sea voyage (compare Strabo, *Geography*, 8.6.20). The *diolkos* was as much as 20 feet wide in places and had parallel grooves spaced 5 feet apart for the wheeled *holkos*, a wooden platform for moving goods (see

Wiseman, *Corinth and Rome*, 441). The *diolkos* was in use until the ninth century AD. A canal across the isthmus was not completed until 1893.

As Paul entered Corinth from the northeast, he could not have failed to notice the rugged outline of Acrocorinth dominating the city's southern backdrop. The path up its 1886 feet flank rose past many shrines and smaller temples, and on its summit was the temple of Aphrodite. At the foot of the mountain to the north lay Corinth. The original city walls, destroyed in 146 BC, were never repaired. Their rubble served as a quarry for the settlers of 44 BC.

The city had water supplies sufficient for numerous baths and fountains (Pausanias, *Description*, 2.3.5; see also Wiseman, *Corinth and Rome*, 510-12). One of the primary water

sources was the spring fed Fountain of Peirene, which flowed at a rate of over 600 cubic feet per hour, providing by itself water sufficient for the entire city (Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 10). Additionally, the coastal plain just north of the city was “among the most productive regions of Roman Greece,” despite low precipitation (Salmon, *Wealthy Corinth*, 7). Excavations there uncovered a wine press and a tank for olive oil, indicating that the lack of rainfall did not prevent agricultural prosperity (Engels, *Roman Corinth*, 11). The city proper was unusually spacious, offering ample room for trade, housing, entertainment, temples, and public baths. It also encompassed a theater that could seat 14,000, to which Paul may have alluded in [1 Cor 4:9](#) when he wrote about being a spectacle to the world (Mur-

phy-O’Connor, *The Corinth that Paul Saw*, 155).

Culture

Corinth’s population has been variously estimated anywhere from 150,000 to over 300,000, “plus 460,000 slaves” (McRay, *Corinth*, 228). The city was recolonized primarily “by those belonging to the freedmen class” who proceeded to make their initial living by robbing ancient graves and selling their finds (see [Strabo, Geography, 8.6.23c](#)). The resettlement provided a fresh beginning in a land rich with potential. Murphy-O’Connor likened the great population influx to San Francisco in the gold rush era (Murphy-O’Connor, *The Corinth that Paul Saw*, 147). By the time Paul arrived, *Corinth* had a reputation for its banking industry and was known as a wealthy region (Plutarch, *De Vitando*,

831a). Its inhabitants represented every tier of society—Alciphron mentions the “nauseating behavior of the rich and the misery of the poor” (Alciphron, *Letters*, 3:60). Paul addressed this disparity in [1 Cor 11:17–34](#). He then reminds the church of the importance of generosity, and compares their apparent procrastination to the eager liberality of the relatively impoverished Macedonian Churches ([1 Cor 16:1–2](#); [2 Cor 6:10](#); [8:1–2](#), [9](#); [9:9](#)).

The resettled city was culturally Roman and was “established to foster the majesty of Roman culture, religion, and values” (Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 3). As such, it was a cultic center for the worship of Roman deities. Paul addressed the resulting social and ethical ramifications of eating meat in a city which had little meat available other than what came

from animals slaughtered in cultic sacrifice ([1 Cor 8:1–13](#)).

Corinth had also developed a reputation for sexual license—a reputation that was fueled primarily by Athenian propaganda (Murphy-O’Connor, *The Corinth that Paul Saw*, 152, 56). Strabo’s oft-cited report that **Corinth** was home to 1,000 cult prostitutes is unrealistic, and has been thoroughly disproven ([Strabo, Geography, 8.6.20c](#); Murphy-O’Connor, *The Corinth that Paul Saw*, 152; compare Conzelmann, *Korinth und die Madchen*). Nevertheless, sexual immorality was at least as much of a problem in **Corinth** as it was in any other part of the Mediterranean as indicated by ancient sources and Paul’s numerous references to sexual immorality, [prostitution](#), and incest ([1 Cor 5:1](#), [9](#), [11](#); [6:9](#), [13](#), [15–16](#), [18](#); [7:2](#); [10:8](#); [2 Cor 12:21](#)).

Corinth was host to the biannual Isthmian Games. One of the city's important civic positions, the superintendent of the games, was named primarily for that limited aspect of the role's broader responsibilities (Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 11). In Paul's day, the crown of victory was made of plant material, a detail that corresponds with the "perishable crown" Paul mentions in [1 Cor 9:25](#)