Corinth, Coins and the Cult of Aphrodite

Nestled among the features of Greece’s rocky, barren landscape, lie the remains of a once great city. In its day, it was the hub of commerce, the financial capital of the ancient world. Yet today, the site reflects little of the importance this metropolis once played in the lives of the ancients. The city referred to is the city of Corinth.

Ancient Corinth lay at the intersection of two worlds, Rome to the west, and Asia to the east. Its two large harbours facilitated the passage of sailors and merchants as they traveled the seas and moved their goods from place to place. Because of its prime location, Corinth became the stopping point for many commercial travelers in ancient times. As a result, the city became rich from the trade that occurred there. Despite being completely destroyed in 146 B.C, Corinth again rebounded to prominence as a commercial centre following its refounding by Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. Sometime in the third Century B.C. Corinth also became home to a coin mint. The striking of coins at Corinth continued for nearly five hundred years, eventually ceasing after the reign of Septimius Severus in 211 A.D.

Like many ancient Mediterranean cities, Corinth was also home to a number of significant temples. Several of these temples are depicted on Roman period coins produced at Corinth’s mint. In the heart of the city, dominating a prominent mound was the temple of Apollo with its thirty eight huge columns carved from single blocks of stone. On the outer reaches of the city was the ‘hospital like’ temple of Asklepios the god of healing. Other temples constructed throughout Corinth’s long history include those to Tyche and the imperial cult. In fact the writer Pausanias describes at least twenty six sacred placed devoted to worship in Corinth. However, there was one temple that left Corinth with an enduring reputation. It stood atop the 575m rock outcrop called Acrocorinth that loomed over the city. That temple was dedicated to Aphrodite the ‘goddess of love’. Aphrodite was significant among the deities worshipped at Corinth. Various depictions of the goddess feature prominently on coins struck at the Corinth mint during the early Greek period prior to 146 B.C.

Like most structures from ancient Corinth, only a remnant of this once popular temple can be seen today. In its heyday however, it seems the temple was the centre of much activity. The writer Strabo in his ‘geography’ states:

“The temple of Aphrodite was so rich that it owned more than a thousand temple slaves, courtesans, whom both men and women had dedicated to the goddess. And therefore it was also on account of these women that the city was crowded with people and grew rich; for instance, the ship captains freely squandered their money, and hence the proverb, “Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth.” Moreover, it is recorded that a certain courtesan said to the woman who reproached her with the charge that she did not like to work or touch wool: “Yet, such as I am, in this short time I have taken down three webs.”

Temple structures depicted on two Roman provincial coins minted at Corinth. Above a tetrastyle temple is depicted on the reverse of a coin of Nero. Below is a depiction of a hexastyle temple on a coin of Livia.

The Remains of the Temple of Apollo at Corinth

Acrocorinth as viewed from Ancient Corinth

Map of Delphi, Athens, Olympia, Corinth, and Sparta.
Whether there were ever one thousand courtesans or prostitutes working from the temple is a matter of much debate. Jerome Murphy O’Connor for instance argues that at no time in history was there a temple of Aphrodite in Corinth large enough to be home to one thousand prostitutes as Strabo would have his readers believe. However, Murphy O’Connor’s argument seems to imply that the prostitutes resided at the temple. This is not implicit from Strabo’s description. He simply states that there were one thousand prostitutes dedicated to the service of Aphrodite present in the city.

What does seem plausible however was that there was some sort of promiscuous activity linked to this temple that could not be overlooked. The fact that there were girls dedicated to Aphrodite and serving at her temple is hard to dispute. For instance, Pindar states that one Xenephon of Corinth vowed to dedicate 100 girls to the goddess if he won the Olympic crown in 464 B.C. It is quite possible that these girls could have served some courtesan function within the temple cult. Archaeologists have also discovered a seat in Corinth’s theatre that bear the inscription ‘of (or belonging to) the girls’. Some believe the seat was reserved for the shrine courtesans. Interestingly, one of Corinth’s courtesans is even remembered by name. She was Lais. Lais lived in Corinth in the fourth century B.C, and was reputed to be so expensive that even the orator Demosthenes refused her services. History records that Lais later became an alcoholic, and died in misery at Corinth. The writer Pausanias in a description of his travels from Chenchrea to Corinth describes her tomb as follows:

“As one goes up to Corinth are tombs, and by the gate is buried Diogenes of Sinope, whom the Greeks surname the Dog. Before the city is a grove of cypresses called Craneum. Here are a precinct of Bellerophon, a temple of Aphrodite Melaenis and the grave of Lais, upon which is set a lioness holding a ram in her fore-paws.”

A coin struck at the time of Hadrian depicts the tomb just as Pausanias describes – A columned capital ‘upon which is set a lioness holding a ram in her fore-paws.’

In its day, the Temple of Aphrodite likely contributed significantly to the wealth of Corinth. Burckhardt for instance comments that “Corinth was widely famed for its rapacious temple prostitutes, and in fact their trade was taxed as an important branch of industry.” This lewd behaviour resulted in the Greek period city gaining such a reputation for its sexual vices that at least two new words were spawned in the Greek language. The term ‘korrhiazomai’ or ‘I act like a Corinthian’ was used by Aristophanes (c. 448-380 B.C.) in reference to sexual immorality, while Plato (c. 429-347 B.C.) in his work titled “The Republic” used the term ‘korrhia kore’, translated ‘Corinthian girl’, to describe a prostitute. It appears no other Greek city entered the ancient public spotlight in such a blatant way.

However, despite the wealth of written evidence about the temple and its cult prior to Corinth’s destruction in 146 B.C, there seems to be an almost entire absence of written material about the city following its rebirth under the command of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. What then can be reconstructed concerning the Roman period temple and its cult?
One thing to consider here is the nature of the Roman city itself. As was the case during the Greek period, Roman Corinth quickly became a centre of commercial importance. It took only a few decades to surpass its former size, and to regain its status as a financial centre. Corinth again became wealthy from the vast numbers of merchants and travelers using her ports. By the middle of the first century A.D. some estimate the population of Corinth to have grown to several hundred thousand. Some say possibly as many as 600,000 people may have lived in the city, making it the third largest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria in Egypt. This scenario would provide an ideal environment for the cult to resurface and flourish.

It is also well known that the Romans embraced many of the Greek gods as part of their own pantheon. The god Apollo for instance became one of their chief deities. In fact, archaeologists have discovered that during the Roman period the temple of Apollo at Corinth was so significant it was not only restored but significantly enlarged. Likewise, the goddess Aphrodite was also incorporated among the Roman gods. Her Roman name ‘Venus’ is well attested in contemporary writing and inscriptions. As the Greek geographer Pausanius describes, there was in fact ‘a temple of Aphrodite Melaenis’ present within the Roman city itself when he visited there in the second century A.D. It is entirely possible therefore, given these Roman adoptions that the temple of Aphrodite atop Acrocorinth was also restored and re-commissioned during this period.

Several depictions on coins struck during the Roman period may also indicate that the temple was at least still present at that time. Among these, coins struck at Corinth’s mint during the reigns of Tiberius, Claudius and Marcus Aurelius depict a hexastyle temple atop a rock outcrop. Given the setting of the archaeological remains of the temple, it is almost certain that these depictions are of the temple of Aphrodite atop the rocky outcrop of Acrocorinth. The fact that the temple made it onto the coins of these emperors indicate that it still likely played a significant role in the lives of the Corinthian community.

Further evidence of the temple’s existence comes again from the Greek geographer Pausanius. In his writings penned in the second century A.D. he states:

“On the summit of the Acrocorinthus is a temple of Aphrodite. The images are Aphrodite armed, Helius, and Eros with a bow. The spring, which is behind the temple, they say was the gift of Asopus to Sisyphus.”

However here again, Pausanius leaves us with no description of the activities attributed to the temple or any reference to the cult.

One possible allusion to the restoration of the cult’s activities in Corinth may come from the writings of the Apostle Paul. In his first letter to the newly formed Church in Corinth penned in the mid 50s A.D, Paul sets out to address some of the issues that have arisen within this new community of believers. One of the issues seems to involve the interaction between members of the community and prostitutes. In chapter 6 of 1 Corinthians he writes: “

Bust of Aphrodite discovered in excavations at Corinth – Corinth Museum

Depictions of the temple of Aphrodite on the coins of Claudius (above) and Marcus Aurelius (centre and enlarged below)
Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, “The two will become one flesh.” But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.  

Several commentators on Paul’s letters to Corinth have made a connection between the situation Paul is addressing here and the cult of Aphrodite in Corinth. However, a number of recent scholars have played down the link due to the lack of concrete evidence that the cult was active during the Roman period. In fact, there are now moves by some to also downplay the earlier accounts of writers like Strabo. They state that these accounts are exaggerated, and that just like many other Greek sea ports, sexual sin would have been abundant in Corinth, but not necessarily linked to the Aphrodite cult. Jerome Murphy-O’connor quoting Conzelmann puts accounts like that of Strabo down to ‘the result of assiduous Athenian propaganda’.

Therefore, to what extent the Aphrodite cult played a role in the lives of the people of Corinth we may ultimately never know. There is no doubt that the goddess had at least two significant temples within proximity to the city. However, whether there were ever 100 prostitutes linked to these temples may forever remain a mystery. What does appear clear however is that the temple and its cult were a significant part of the Corinthian scene. It was significant enough for several ancient writers from different periods in history to make comment. It was significant enough that the link between Corinth and sexual depravity was introduced into the language itself. It was also significant enough that both Aphrodite and her temple were commemorated on coins from throughout Corinth’s history. Maybe it was simply propaganda. But perhaps behind the propaganda lay a kernel of truth.

References


The temple of Apollo was originally built in the mid 6th century B.C. Over time it was enlarged and modified. Today only seven of the temple’s original thirty eight columns remain. Each one is about 3.5 meters high and created from a single block of stone.

Pausanias, Description of Greece, 2.1.1-2.5.

Jerome Murphy O’Connor, St Paul’s Corinth: Texts and Archaeology (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990), p56.

Christopher Faraone. & Laura McClure (eds), Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), p 84-85.


The fee was reputedly 10,000 drachma. Upon being informed of the fee, Demosthenes is famously reported to have replied “I do not buy repentance for ten thousand drachmae.” Hugh P Jones, Dictionary of Foreign Phrases and Classical Quotations (UK: Barnes and Noble, 1970), p164.

Athenaeus in his work The Deipnosophists makes the following statement “As Epicrates says in his Anti-Lais; in which play he also uses the following expressions concerning the celebrated Lais:- But this fair Lais is both drunk and lazy, And cares for nothing, save what she may eat and drink all day.” Athenaeus, The Deipnosophists, 26.


Pausanias, Description of Greece, 2.2.4.


In his work “The Republic” penned in about 360 B.C, Plato discusses the merits of various activities on the performance of an athlete. In the work he states: “Nor, if a man is to be in condition, would you allow him to have a Corinthian girl (Korinthia Kore = Prostitute) as his fair friend? Certainly not.” Plato, The Republic, Book III.


Pausanias, Description of Greece, 2.2.4.

Pausanias, Description of Greece, 2.5.1.

1 Cor 6:15-17.


Murphy-O’Connor, St Paul’s Corinth, 57.