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Book Review

The Isthmus of Corinth: Crossroads of the Mediterranean World

By David K. Pettegrew. Pp. xiii + 290, figs. 47, tables 6. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2016. \$85. ISBN 978-0-472-11984-4 (cloth).

Reviewed by [Daniel Stewart](#)

For more than 2,000 years, the city of Corinth has been defined in literature by its isthmus. That thin spit of land, barely 5.7 km wide at its narrowest, has served to characterize the city and its landscape. From the heights of Acrocorinth, the acropolis peak overlooking the Isthmus and surrounding territory, the topographic contrasts of the city and its territory are stark: a lowland corridor of plains framed by gulfs, hills, and vistas that seem to encompass all the varied landscapes of Greece. For ancient authors such as Thucydides (1.13.5), Cicero (*Agr.* 2.87), Strabo (8.6.20–3), John Chrysostom (*Hom. In 1 Cor.*, pref. 1–2), and the cartographer of the Peutinger Table, Corinth was its land bridge: a landscape and a city rooted in connectivity. Modern travelers to the region also followed that essentialist definition, and from the relaxation of travel restrictions under the Ottomans in the 17th century until the early 2000s, Corinth was a byword for connectivity. The Isthmus was Corinth and Corinth was the Isthmus.

Pettegrew's 2016 monograph presents a much-needed corrective to that approach. Through a careful, if selective, presentation of literary, epigraphic, and archaeological material, Pettegrew constructs not only an alternative history of Corinth and its territory from the Archaic period up to late antiquity, he also lays bare the classical resonances in our broader construction of knowledge. It seems that most authors, from Thucydides to Broodbank (*The Making of the Middle Sea: A History of Mediterranean from the Beginning to the Emergence of the Classical World* [Oxford 2013]), can be read as proponents (if inconsistent ones) of geographic determinism. Pettegrew suggests instead that this was a historically and culturally contingent landscape, whose historical value ebbed and flowed over time.

Central to the book's approach is a deconstruction of what connectivity actually means to different authors in different times. The seven central chapters (framed by introductory and concluding sections) pick at the threads of connectivity in a roughly chronological order. Chapter 2 summarizes and problematizes ancient understandings of "isthmos" broadly, showing how the term and its attendant meanings evolved in ancient times and showing why the Corinthian isthmus was the most famous in antiquity. Chapter 3 begins the chronological survey, touching on archaic, classical, and Hellenistic Corinth, and the subsequent chapters highlight different phases in the city's Roman history, culminating in the fifth century C.E. Each chapter introduces a different thematic frame that Pettegrew feels characterizes attitudes toward the isthmus in that period (the gate, the fetter, the portage, the bridge, the center, the district).

These thematic frames serve at once as the book's greatest advantage and largest critical flaw. The bulk of data in each chapter comes from Pettegrew's involvement in the Eastern Korinthia Archaeological Survey (EKAS), and the results from that survey are the foundation for each chapter's discussion. This material may well be supplemented by other select pieces of evidence, such as the archaeological survey of the *diolkos* (ch. 3), or the history of canalization (ch. 7), but at its heart, this work is a synthesis of survey material supplemented by select readings of literary sources. The thematic frames provide access points for the reader in understanding Pettegrew's interpretation, but they cannot elide the selectivity, patchiness, and data collection issues that come with survey, and this leads to an unevenness in coverage between chapters.

The chapters are each individually worthwhile, especially if you view them as discrete studies focusing on an interpretation that presents a different way we might read the landscape. Invariably, however, they do not read as individual studies but as part of a larger whole, which gives the impression that Pettegrew has replaced a single monolithic interpretation tied to all periods with six smaller yet still separate interpretations tied to specific periods. In addition, connectivity is still the driving force of each of his interpretative models—what he emphasizes is that the extent and focus of that connectivity changes over time. So, for example, the isthmus in the Classical and Early Hellenistic periods is a gate, mediating contact between the Peloponnese and central Greece (ch. 3, esp. 47–8). In the later Hellenistic period, it is a fetter, emblematic of Macedonian control of southern Greece and the denial of local sovereignty (ch. 4, esp. 89–91). In the Roman period, it becomes a bridge, or rather a means of connection between East and West (ch. 6, esp. 136–48).

Yet each of these thematic frames could easily apply to periods other than those Pettegrew has selected. Acrocorinth was indeed one of the famous four fetters of Greece (Polyb. 18.11, 45) in the Hellenistic period, but it was always a means of controlling land access to and from the Peloponnese and a key target for regional hegemonies and Roman generals throughout history. The city was indeed an important economic, cultural, and religious bridge between East and West in the high empire, but this was true for the Archaic and Classical periods as well. Each period is necessarily reflective of both continuity and change, and of both internal and external renegotiation of status and influence. In effect, this book is less a rejection of “connective geography” as a determining factor in Corinth’s history than an argument in favor of nuanced applications of connectivity through time.

These criticisms should not detract from the value of *The Isthmus of Corinth*. Pettegrew has produced a work that highlights the diachronic complexity of the Corinthian landscape and that showcases the necessity of interpreting archaeological survey material in conjunction with literary, epigraphic, and other archaeological evidence. It is a rich work with much to reward the reader: this review has focused on the broad landscape elements, but the book will be of interest to anyone working on economic and social history, the intersection of text and material culture, or the history of archaeology. Like its subject, this book connects different approaches and lays bare the potential of altering your perspective.

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