

David K. Pettegrew, *The Isthmus of Corinth: Crossroads of the Mediterranean World*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016. Pp. xiii+290. ISBN 978-0-472-11984-4 (Hardback). \$85, also available as an e-book.

This book is a history of a regional landscape. David Pettegrew's purpose is to argue that, contrary to the understanding of ancient sources passed down from 19th-century authors who viewed the ancient world in one piece, the importance of the Isthmus of Corinth varied between the 6th c. B.C. and the 5th c. A.D. He expands his argument, first made in detail in *AJA* 2011,¹ that ships were not regularly portaged across the isthmus and he also argues that Nero's infamous canal (or the infamous Nero's canal) had a serious purpose in line with contemporary engineering projects in Italy. The argument grows from a diachronic reading of ancient sources that highlight the Isthmus (broadly, Thucydides, Cicero and Strabo, and John Chrysostom) and an appreciation that each reflects the circumstances of his own time. It emphasizes that, while the topography of the Isthmus changed little over the period, the man-made landscape did, as did the social and commercial needs of Greek city-states, Hellenistic monarchs, and Rome. Its scope is much narrower than James Wiseman's *Land of the Ancient Corinthians* (1978), its organization is chronological rather than topographic, and it substitutes detail from archaeological survey for detailed archaeological description of sites.

The argument is presented in nine chapters that proceed in chronological order but investigate different themes. Some chapters are paired: a chapter critiquing ancient and 18th- to 19th-century sources is followed by one that surveys the archaeological evidence from excavation and from the Eastern Korinthia Archaeological Survey (EKAS, 1997–2003) of which Pettegrew was a part. In fact, an underlying purpose of this book is to place the survey data of the Archaic through Late Roman periods in an historical frame.² It thus represents a major expansion of his 2006 dissertation, which focused on the difficulties and pitfalls of interpreting the Late Roman survey data from the EKAS. But integration into such a large time-scale has the result that the survey data are disambiguated and difficult to critique.

The introduction (Chapter 1) is essential to using the book. Pettegrew argues that Strabo's use of *diolkos* signified only the narrowest width of the isthmus, rather than a road across it as the word is used by modern scholars, and that that modern view was shaped by a monolithic (Pettegrew says essentialist) reading of the sources in a period of ever expanding international trade. Basically "ancient" made all contemporary with each other. The last eight pages of the chapter set forth the

¹ D. K. Pettegrew, "The *Diolkos* of Corinth," *AJA* 115 (2011), pp. 549–574. This is one of nine articles (one with Bill Caraher) Pettegrew has published on the Corinthian isthmus, as well as his dissertation for Ohio State University in 2006.

² Readers should keep in mind that the area available for survey by EKAS was extremely limited although it included the area south of the sanctuary of Poseidon and of a major crossroads.

methods of collection and characterization of EKAS as well as the chronological terms it used and names of the survey units, “zones” and “areas” as he employs them throughout the rest of the book (Table 1.1, p. 24). Chapters 2 (The Isthmos) and 3 (The Gate) form the background for the rest of the book. Pettegrew argues that Greek authors writing earlier than 228 B.C. when Roman envoys first visited the isthmus used *isthmos* to refer only to the narrow strip of land focused on the Sanctuary of Poseidon (Strabo’s *diolkos*); neither the city of Corinth nor its harbors was included. The EKAS data increase from the Archaic into the Classical-Hellenistic period; they are widely distributed but there are concentrations south of the Sanctuary of Poseidon and south of Kromna, particularly in the late 4th c. B.C. He then discusses the manmade features of the Archaic-early Hellenistic landscape: the Sanctuary of Poseidon, the *diolkos* road excavated by Verdellis in the 1950s, the harbors at Lechaion and Kenchreai,³ the fortification walls of Acrocorinth, the long walls cutting the coastal plain on either side of Lechaion, a trans isthmian wall from the region of the harbor of modern Corinth across to Kenchreai that was identified by Wiseman, and finally a well-developed area near the ancient quarries south of the late Classical trans isthmian wall where several roads converged. Almost all of the features belong to the late Classical and early Hellenistic periods. A dirt track probably preceded the paved *diolkos* road, and at least some stretches of the latter may be quite late because Verdellis reported they contain reused Classical sculpture and architectural fragments. Pettegrew argues that the paving of the road originally reflected a need to supply the Sanctuary of Poseidon and the increasingly important, associated games. Perhaps, but the games were biannual, and this view underplays the commercial role of the isthmus. MacDonald, for instance, has used Archaic architecture and sculpture from Delphi and 4th c. building accounts from Epidauros and Eleusis to show that transport of island and Attic marble, Eleusinian black limestone, Corinthian poros, and timber was constant in the Archaic and Classical periods.⁴

Chapters 4 to 7 are the heart of the book, outlining the history of the isthmus from the first Roman presence in 228 B.C. into the middle of the 3rd century after Christ. Chapter 4 (The Fetter) includes the period of Macedonian control of Acrocorinth as well as the Mummian destruction in the area. In fact, it is focused primarily on Polybius’ account of the first half of the 2nd century and uses the contrast between Classical–Hellenistic artifact densities with Early Roman ones (Augustan to mid 3rd century A.D.) to define evidence of the Mummian destruction in the landscape.

Macedonian control in the 3rd c. B.C. emerges in Chapter 5 (The Portage), because the best evidence for portaging ships across the Isthmus of Corinth is Hellenistic

³ The latter may not have existed before the Classical period when a fortification wall was built (pp. 79–80), but Lechaion has an earlier history: for a cemetery to the east of the Roman harbor see C.W.J. Eliot and Mary Eliot, “The Lechaion Cemetery near Corinth,” *Hesperia* 37 (1968), pp. 345–367, 46 graves dating between 680 B.C. and the third quarter of the 4th c. B.C.

⁴ Brian R. MacDonald, “The Diolkos,” *JHS* 106 (1986), pp. 191–195 (cited by Pettegrew).

(Table 5.1, p. 117). Carried out once by the Peloponnesians in 412, three times under Philip V of Macedon (220, 217, about 207), and once by Marcus Antonius the orator (102 B.C.), these episodes are “dramatic strikes at opportune times that have nothing to do with a constant portaging operation” The Macedonian actions were for immediate military advantage to attack an enemy in the Corinthian Gulf, but the Peloponnesians and Marcus Antonius were aiming at opponents on the far side of the Aegean. Octavian’s portage is probably apocryphal. Subsequent to the founding of the Caesarian colony, the isthmus served as a bridge (Chapter 6) across which people and some goods passed between Italy and Asia Minor. Famous Roman travellers were Cicero and Octavian, Strabo and Hadrian but there must have been many more. This development started slowly and was accompanied by scattered agricultural developments and investments in the Lechaion and Kenchreai harbors, but the previously high-profile crossroads near the quarries has no ER artifacts (p. 110). By the 2nd century traffic was at its height.

This should surprise the reader because in A.D. 66–68 Nero’s canal project severed the old *diolkos* as well as whatever roads existed along the northeastern and northwestern shores of the isthmus (Chapter 7, *The Center*), and north-south traffic by land was subsequently confined to very few points. Pettegrew argues convincingly that the project was a well considered, if expensive, investment, first to facilitate the supply of eastern grain to Rome in a time when shortages were acute (under both Claudius and Nero) and secondly in preparation for a military expedition beyond the Black Sea. Massive investments in infrastructure, food and water supplies and housing for some 10,000 men were required. The physical evidence of Nero’s project comes from Béla Gerster, the engineer who built the modern canal, who traced and identified the work done on Nero’s canal and used essentially the same line for the 1881–1893 canal. Pettegrew points to Nero’s proposed canals from Lake Avernus to the Tiber and from Ostia to the Tiber as parallel projects. He is right to remind us that this was a great age of Roman engineering: Claudius’ harbor at Portus, tunnels and aqueducts in central Italy, and a series of coastal canals stretching from Ravenna north almost to Aquileia.⁵ Although the canal project was aborted at Nero’s death, the problem seems to have been expense and different priorities of the Flavian emperors.

⁵ For the last, not mentioned by Pettegrew, see R. Lawrence (*The Roads of Roman Italy*, Routledge, 1999, pp. 115–119) on the series of Augustan to early Flavian coastal canals stretching 120–200 miles along the Adriatic coast north from Ravenna and arguing that a canal from Puteoli to Rome (160 miles) was therefore “realistic” (although it was more cheaply accomplished by the *Via Domitiana*). The tunnel projects are also not mentioned by Pettegrew, although he argues that Nero’s engineers were exploring the possibility of tunneling under the highest point of the isthmus, which would have shortened the project by several years. In my opinion, it may also have contributed to the imperial decision to abandon the project: this is a very active seismic zone and the Corinthian marl is not very strong in places, leading to the collapse of the ceilings of Roman chamber tombs and to landslides that have blocked the modern canal in 1923 and 2010, for years and months respectively.

Furthermore, the isthmus flourished in the following century. There was probably a new centuriation under Vespasian that extended far inland, the Sanctuary of Poseidon received new stoas, the Palaimonion and a new sacrificial pit, its theater was refurbished and baths were built, the road from Corinth to Lechaion was paved (only within the city?), and the harbors at Lechaion and Kenchreai flourished. Aelius Aristides and Favorinus attest that the isthmus was a central meeting point for people from far and wide. I found it surprising to read that the ER artifacts from EKAS number 324 (p. 191, including 209 type fossils, p. 219) for the whole period from 44 B.C. through A.D. 250 (out of nearly 37,000, p. 21).

Chapter 8 (The District) deals with the Late Roman period, A.D. 250–700. There are 4th and early 5th c. literary sources (Libanius, Hesychius), but they are far fewer and more backward looking than in the previous period. From the point of view of archaeological evidence the choice to compress 450 years into a single period is a hindrance (p. 218): the 3rd-4th c. is barely visible (like the Hellenistic) and the 5th-6th c. is one of the most prominent in the landscape (total type fossils 362, p. 219). Recent scholarship has downplayed the effects of the Herulian invasion and even the incursion of Alaric's Goths (in favor of a late 3rd c. earthquake). Nevertheless, the Sanctuary of Poseidon seems not to have survived the mid 3rd c. although Corinth's elite may have continued to sacrifice there well into the 4th c. But the 4th c., thanks to imperial involvement, saw renewed construction at both Lechaion and Kenchreai as well as within the city of Corinth and at several villas on the isthmus, and Pettegrew sees a new role for the isthmus as a transition zone, with ties of both political and ecclesiastical administration to both Rome and the northern Aegean.

In summary, Pettegrew sees the role of the isthmus as changing from a central gathering point in the Archaic and Classical periods to an easily fortified control point in the Hellenistic period, to a bridge over which people and goods passed in the Early Roman period, to a frontier zone between east and west in the Late Roman period. All of these views are surely correct, but they were not necessarily consecutive rather than simultaneous. The gatherings that took place at the Panhellenic games for Poseidon hardly preclude transporting goods or people across the isthmus either in the Archaic period or the 2nd c. A.D. Does construction of trans isthmian walls in the late Classical period and 6th c. A.D. provide evidence of when north-south traffic across this land bridge was at its height? Why did the two walls follow different lines? Although Pettegrew's arguments will not convince everyone, the diachronic perspective highlights regional fluctuations in a useful way.

A brief conclusion (Chapter 9) is followed by an extensive bibliography, an index of ancient sources (only two inscriptions!), and a general index including rubrics for several modern authors whose work appears in the bibliography. An additional list of figures and tables would have been much appreciated, and the general index is incomplete. Finally, the small format of the book does no service to the EKAS maps, which are almost too small to be legible. Given Pettegrew's arguments about routes

across the isthmus, it is also a shame that they show topographic contours rather than roads.

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