



THE CORINTHIAN GODDESS: Aphrodite and Her *Hierodouloi*

*beautiful Aphrodite
is who I shall sing,
she who has
all the high locations of Cyprus,
the sea place.¹*

- The Second Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite

Aphrodite's presence as the major deity of Corinth reflects the unique spirit of the Corinthians, for no other mainland centre in ancient Greece embraced the cult of this goddess in the way the citizens of Corinth did. While the Cypriot centre of Paphos and the Sicilian port of Eryx also aligned themselves with Aphrodite and the practice of sacred prostitution, Corinth was the only Greek city to adopt these cult rites.² Consistent with the Corinthian psyche, the city demonstrated her independent identity by adopting Aphrodite as their goddess of the citadel.

Evidence for Aphrodite's Corinthian cult can be dated from the 7th Century up until the Roman period. By the classical period, Corinth had become well known for its devotion to the goddess, Aphrodite. Her sanctuaries were strategically placed throughout Corinth; the most famous being her sanctuary and temple on the Acrocorinth. Here, as Aphrodite 'Ourania', her cult image was possibly dressed in armour, a guardian and protectress to the Corinthians. Textual evidence for the sanctuary on the Acrocorinth is supplied by Pausanias and Strabo; however very few physical remains have been found to clearly describe the sanctuary or the temple that existed there from the 7th Century onward.³ Other sanctuaries were inside the later city wall at the east, in the grove of Kranion; at the south-west corner of the later forum; at Anaploga, on the western wall, and at

¹ *The Second Hymn to Aphrodite*, The Homeric Hymns, translated by Charles Boer, Spring, 1970.

3-7. Corinth, also a 'sea place' located Aphrodite's precinct on the high location of the Acrocorinth.

² Sacred prostitution may have also been practiced on the island of Cythera, the Aegean birthplace of Aphrodite as suggested by Hesiod in *Theogony*, lines 190ff.

³ C. Blegen et al., *Acrocorinth, Excavations in 1926 (Corinth 3:1)*, Cambridge MA, 1930, 3f.

Lechaion, the western harbour.⁴ While there is little archaeological evidence, it has been suggested that this harbour temple of Aphrodite was in use at the time of Periander.⁵ Temples of Aphrodite may have been situated at each of Corinth's ports throughout the course of her worship.

Archaeological evidence of Aphrodite's presence includes votives to the goddess, but the finds are not substantial.⁶ Remains from an earlier period link her to Astarte, her Phoenician counterpart. A 4th Century cup had a dedication to Aphrodite "scratched on the lip of a kantharos"⁷ while a small bronze bowl, dedicated to the goddess, inspired the name Aphrodite Deposit for the deposit found close to the Stelai Shrine A, in the Potters' Quarter, dated to the first quarter of the 5th Century.⁸ Another deposit north of the pentagonal building also contained figurines connected to the goddess: a "handmade dove", "kore with dove".⁹ A shard of "special interest" with a Corinthian inscription to Astarte was discovered in a general fill from the 5th Century near the Punic Amphora Building. Other remains have also linked Aphrodite of Corinth to Astarte. A 7th century figurine of Astarte has been recovered as well as a plaque from Perachora which depicts a "Grecized version of the bisexual Aphrodite of the Orient", probably dating from the second quarter of the 7th Century.¹⁰

Archaeological evidence for an earlier Aphrodite is not easily confirmed. While the goddess appeared frequently in myth, in early art, sculpture or painting, she is not always easily identifiable. In the 6th Century Corinth began minting coins which depicted a helmeted female head, generally accepted as Athena. However the Corinthian Aphrodite was also known as an armed goddess and their coins may equally have shown her.¹¹ The clearest picture of the goddess of Corinth does not emerge until the 5th Century,¹² at least two centuries after her introduction.

Given that the archaeological record connects the Corinthian goddess to Astarte, it is probable that she was imported from the East by the Phoenicians, who left their influence on the developing

⁴ A. Schachter, "Policy, Cult, and the Placing of Greek Sanctuaries" from *Le Sanctuaire Grec*, p.15.

⁵ C. K. Williams, II, "Corinth and the Cult of Aphrodite" from *Corinthiaca*, p.12. If this suggestion is correct this temple would have been in use from the late 7th Century as Periander spans the time frame from 627 - 585 BC. At this time the harbour was probably enlarged.

⁶ For an amplification on the lack of votive offerings found at cult sites in Corinth, see Elizabeth Pemberton "Wealthy Corinth: the Archaeological Evidence for Cult Investment" from *Religion in the Ancient World New Themes and Approaches*, edited by M. Dillon, Hakkert, Amsterdam, 1996.

⁷ C. K. Williams II, *Pre-Roman Cults in the Area of the Forum of Ancient Corinth*, p. 49.

⁸ Agnes N. Stillwell, *Corinth, Volume XV, Part 1 The Potter's Quarters*, p. 23

⁹ C. K. Williams, II, "Corinth, 1974: Forum Southwest" from *Hesperia 44 (1975)*, p.8 n.17. Doves were associated with Aphrodite.

¹⁰ C.K. Williams, II, "Corinth and the Cult of Aphrodite", p.14. Williams refers to H. Payne, *Perachora I, The Sanctuaries of Hera Akraia and Limenia* (Oxford, 1940) 231-2.

¹¹ For an interesting thesis on the speculation of Aphrodite on the Corinthian coins, see Peter E. Blomberg, *On Corinthian Iconography, The Bridled Winged Horse and the Helmeted Female Head in the Sixth Century BC*.

¹² Mary Ellen Carr Soles, *Aphrodite at Corinth: A Study of the Sculptural Types*, p.3. In her dissertation, Soles suggests: "The earliest representations which are identified as possible Aphrodites are in fact more likely to be Astarte or her Near Eastern counterparts."

port.¹³ During the 8th and 7th centuries, the Greek commercial and colonising traffic also mingled with Phoenician merchants throughout the Mediterranean, and Greeks in both Egypt and the Near East would have been exposed to the cult of Astarte, Aphrodite's double. Aphrodite Ourania in her precinct on the Acrocorinth served Corinth as an armed protectorate of the city. This role was similar to her eastern counterparts who had shrines elevated high above their settlements. Her hilltop sanctuary may have been established synchronous to the *synoikismos*, becoming a focal point for the emerging *polis*, a symbol of unification for the villages and a political focus that provided security for the community. Williams suggests it may have been a Bacchiad policy to borrow a goddess from an existing near Eastern or Cypriot cult to maintain continuity with an established society.¹⁴ Perhaps Corinth chose a Phoenician goddess, not only as a powerful protector, but to emulate the successful maritime skills of the Phoenicians. In keeping with her unique character Corinth also adopted Astarte's rituals of sacred prostitution which became a lucrative source of revenue for the city-state.

Textual evidence suggests that Aphrodite's cult practice of sacred prostitution was well established in Corinth by the late 6th Century. Simonides, a poet, was credited with a dedication to Aphrodite's prostitutes for their help in repelling the Persians. The temple prostitutes and priestesses were honoured for the potency of their prayers, empowered by Aphrodite, which the Greeks believed contributed to the defeat of the Persians. All of Greece revered this power of the temple prostitutes and gave thanks for the Corinthian custom to offer prayers of supplication to Aphrodite in times of crisis.

Shortly after, in 464 BC, a wealthy Corinthian, Xenophon was victorious at the Olympic Games and he fulfilled his vow to Aphrodite by donating 100 slaves to her temple. Pindar was also commissioned to compose an ode to be performed at his victory celebration in Corinth. The poet acknowledged these women, the *hierodouloi*, who would now serve Aphrodite Ourania as sacred prostitutes at Corinth. By the 2nd Century, Corinth was reputed to have 1000 temple prostitutes. Aphrodite is a multi-faceted goddess but what makes her cult so unique in ancient Corinth is this practice of prostitution procured within the sacred precinct of her temples, hence a sacred prostitution.

¹³ Sabatino Moscati, *The Phoenicians*, p.136 points out the historical debate over the invention of the *trireme*. Thucydides attributes the development to Corinth in the 8th C whereas others suggest the Phoenicians of Sidon were the inventors. He continues to state "there had been a Phoenician trading station in Corinth for many years and the Corinthians may well have taken their inspiration from the Phoenician ships." Aphrodite was a guardian for the Phoenician sailors and she may have well arrived in Corinth via the Phoenician trade routes.

¹⁴ C.K. Williams, II, "Corinth and the Cult of Aphrodite", p.19.

An old proverb “Not every man has the luck to sail to Corinth”¹⁵ suggested the desirability to visit Corinth for the pleasurable visits to the temple of Aphrodite. The proverb has also been translated as “Not for every man is the trip to Corinth”, a more direct reference to the high price of the Corinthian temple prostitutes. This accepted practice, not only gave Corinth a notable reputation in the ancient world, but possibly added to its affluence.¹⁶ Revenue collected by the sacred prostitutes was returned to the temple, adding to the wealth for which Corinth was noted. The lack of votives could suggest the money paid to the prostitutes was the actual dedication to the goddess. Aphrodite’s temple was a potential treasury for Corinth. However sacred prostitution may have also had a political motivation. It was “used as a mechanism for raising money in coastal sanctuaries, which were considered custodial places for huge quantities of riches; politicians frequently made use of these riches in exceptional circumstances, taking them over by public decree or simply by force.”¹⁷ The cult ritual perhaps served both the political and economic interests of the citizens of Corinth. Even their social concerns may have been served. In one way this was a socially progressive way of legalising and containing what was inevitable, especially in a seaport where sailors and migrants congregated.

The Corinthians adapted the eastern practice of temple prostitution in their own way. The Phoenician ritual to Astarte was centred on the dedication of virginity to the goddess and Herodotus suggests that the Babylonian custom conscripted every woman to serve in the temple compound as a prostitute at least once in her life. In Corinth, however, the prostitutes were slaves. The ritual was not practiced by the Corinthian free women or wives, but by slaves assigned to Aphrodite. The ritual was maintained but did not infiltrate into the established Corinthian mores.

J. G. O’Neill in *Ancient Corinth* suggests that temple prostitution developed in Corinth since the city was dependent on commerce and the prostitutes served the interests of a busy port.¹⁸ Strabo reports that ship captains lavishly spent money on them and foreigners noted Corinth as a special port. And it seems the Corinthians themselves took the practice seriously, as it allowed them to live more comfortably. This higher standard of living for the Corinthians may, in some part, have been related to the attraction generated by the temples of Aphrodite. Other historians disbelieve that a Greek state would permit such practices, yet prostitution was well known to exist in the other major centres throughout Greece. In Corinth, for the most part, it was under the jurisdiction of Aphrodite.

¹⁵ Keuls, Eva C. *The Reign of the Phallus*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1985. p.155.

¹⁶ Bonnie MacLachlan, “Sacred Prostitution and Aphrodite”, p.158. MacLachlan suggests this reputation “allowed them to live so comfortably”.

¹⁷ Sabatino Moscati, *The Phoenicians*, p.118.

¹⁸ J. G. O’Neill. *Ancient Corinth*, Baltimore, 1930. p. 101.

The visitors, probably mainly foreigners and seamen, would visit a temple to choose their partner. Payment was exchanged and the act took place outside the temple precinct, perhaps in the sacred prostitutes' own quarters, although there is no evidence to suggest this, however there seems to be much conjecture. While the Corinthian cult of Aphrodite is a fascinating glimpse into how unique and individualised the state of Corinth was, there is little physical evidence to draw a conclusive portrait of the rituals and practices. Most of the physical evidence is smaller figurines, possibly votives or souvenirs. From the textual evidence we do know the practice was infamous throughout the ancient world and perhaps even this notoriety brought affluence and trade to her shores. Aphrodite, as the sensual goddess of pleasure, found her home amidst the Corinthians who embraced a wealthy, perhaps even luxurious lifestyle. At least, the cult of Aphrodite reflected Corinth's progressive social attitudes and unique character amidst the other Greek.

*Young women, hostesses to many, handmaidens
Of Attraction in wealthy Corinth,
Who burn the golden tears of fresh frankincense,
Often you soar in your thoughts
To Aphrodite in the sky,
The mother of loves.¹⁹*

-Pindar's eulogy for Xenophon of Corinth

LEXICON

<i>hierodouloi</i>	the sacred prostitutes
<i>polis</i>	the city-state. However polis embraces both the spiritual and political ethos of a city and intimates the spirit and life force of a cooperative community.
<i>poleis</i>	the plural of polis
<i>synoikismos</i>	the amalgamation of villages and farms into a community

¹⁹ Fragment of an ode composed by Pindar for Xenophon's contribution of one hundred prostitutes to the temple of Aphrodite. See J.B. Salmon, *Wealthy Corinth*, p. 398 and Paul Friedrich, *The Meaning of Aphrodite*, p. 199.

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