

A Colossal Zeus at Ancient Corinth?

According to the second-century traveler Pausanias, the center of ancient Corinth was flanked on both sides by some of the most venerable sites and shrines, to the east, the oldest fountain created by the winged horse Pegasus himself. West of the Forum, near the Theater and Odeum, Pausanias reported on the tomb of Medea's children, and a shrine for Athena Chalinitis, the Bridler, who had tamed Pegasus. In the same area, he reported on a temple of Zeus Capitolinus. Pausanias glossed this Roman epithet with a Greek one: Coryphaos, the leader.

A reassessment of the main road on which Pausanias would have traveled as he left Corinth heading for Sicyon suggests that this main north-south route would have been west of the Theater and Odeion, rather than to the east. East of the theater, a more minor road served as access to the public buildings. Tentatively relocating the road to Sicyon further west has suggested a possible location for the Athena Chalinitis sanctuary, based on Pausanias' report, and the discovery of a large Roman marble sculpture of Athena south of the Odeion. The Zeus Capitolinus/Coryphaeus temple would then also have been somewhere in this area. One big question is the date of these monuments. Were they old shrines discovered by the Romans who rebuilt the city in the first century B.C.E. and after ? Or were these sanctuaries new, Roman installations that drew on the venerable traditions of this important Greek city ?

Excavations in the precinct of Temple E, whose divine occupant has still not been identified, plus areas to the northwest have produced fragments from a colossal marble sculpture that just possibly could have belonged to an image of Zeus. One piece from the front of an enormous sandaled left foot was found during the exploration of Temple E (S 1664). In 1933, digging to the northwest, Sterling Dow found joining pieces of this foot, plus a right index finger over 0.34 m in height. Extended, it preserves the remains of a circular strut that may have helped support an attribute. In addition to other limb fragments, many pieces from the edge of a garment, of comparable size, adorned with a relief guilloche pattern, turned up in the Dow excavation. More

joining fragments have been recovered recently from marble piles at the site. Some preserve red paint and on one piece there are flecks of gold leaf.

In 1965, a team from the University of California at Berkeley dug for one summer northwest of the Temple E precinct, just west of the modern Shear House, and south of the modern east-west road running through the village of ancient Corinth. Among many sculpture fragments, the excavators uncovered the front of a right foot of the same scale and with working details very similar to the colossal fragmentary foot discovered in the 1920's and 30's. The foot found by the Berkeley team was catalogued but never photographed, and apparently, the excavators did not associate it with the enormous marble sculpture fragments found decades early by Dow. We now have the fronts of both feet belonging to a colossal Roman sculpture.

In terms of scale and composition the very fragmentary sculpture at ancient Corinth can be compared with the colossal Capitoline statue of the emperor Constantine. In 1486, marble head, arm, hand, foot and knee were discovered in Rome at the Basilica Nova. This work, considered to have been acrolithic, may have been recut from an earlier statue, possibly an imperial portrait. A modern reconstruction of the Constantine set up in Rome in 2022 provides an idea of the size, ca 13 meters high, and the appearance of this colossal portrait. Constantine seated wears a bronze mantle masking the joints between marble and wood beneath. Barefoot he holds a spear in his right hand and a globe in the left.

The Corinth colossus wear sandals. His right hand appears to have been differently posed, and the fragmentary garment, perhaps a mantle, is also marble, not a bronze veneer. Where was this figure set up at Corinth ? Would it have been seated like the Capitoline Constantine ? Perhaps this very fragmentary sculpture at Corinth can be associated with a temple of Zeus somewhere on the west side of the site, as Pausanias reported, drawing both on the old Greek character of ancient Corinth, and the tastes and conventions of the Roman conquerors.

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