



# CLASSICAL KINGDOMS

Welcome to the next step in your classical journey, where we explore the ancient Greek city-states of Delphi and Corinth. In the story of Western Civilization, few places offer such a fascinating contrast. One, Delphi, was a remote sanctuary high in the mountains, considered the spiritual center of the world. The other, Corinth, was a bustling hub of commerce and politics, built at a vital crossroads of land and sea. Though one was famous for its connection to the gods and the other for its connection to trade, their stories are deeply intertwined.

This chapter will explore how these two remarkable centers grew from their early beginnings in the Bronze Age to become pillars of the Greek world. We will see how myth and geography shaped their unique identities, how they rose to power through very different means, and how their famous athletic festivals brought all Greeks together. By studying the spiritual heart and the commercial engine of ancient Greece, we gain a richer understanding of the values, ambitions, and beliefs that shaped this foundational civilization.

## **Learning Objective 1: Compare the Mythic Origins and Early History of Delphi and Corinth**

To understand a Greek city-state, or *polis*, we must first understand its stories. The Greeks believed that myths were not just tales, but explanations for the world and charters for their way of life. The foundational myths of Delphi and Corinth reveal the core of their identities, one built on divine authority and the other on human ingenuity.

### **Delphi: The Voice of the Gods**

High on the slopes of Mount Parnassus lay Delphi, a place of breathtaking and rugged beauty. The Greeks believed this sacred site was the literal center of the world. According to myth, Zeus, king of the gods, released two eagles from opposite ends of the earth, and they met at Delphi. This spot was marked with a sacred stone called the *omphalos*, or "navel."

Before it was the sanctuary of Apollo, Delphi was known as Pytho. It was said to be the home of a monstrous serpent, the Python, a child of the earth goddess Gaea. The site's great founding myth tells of a dramatic battle: the young god Apollo, representing light, reason, and order, traveled to Pytho and slew the great serpent. This victory was more than just a monster hunt; it symbolized the triumph of the new Olympian gods over the ancient, chaotic forces of the earth. By conquering the Python, Apollo claimed the sanctuary as his own, establishing it as the home of his famous Oracle and the most important source of divine wisdom in the Greek world.

Archaeology tells us that Delphi was indeed an important place long before the Archaic Age, with a significant settlement there during the Mycenaean period (c. 1600–1100 BC). This suggests that Apollo's cult took over a place that was already considered sacred, inheriting its ancient power and prestige.

## **Corinth: The City of Cunning**

While Delphi's story is one of divine conquest, Corinth's myths are about human cleverness, negotiation, and ambition. The city's legendary founder was King Sisyphus, a man famous not for his piety, but for his sharp mind and his willingness to trick even the gods. His eternal punishment in the underworld—forever rolling a boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down—is one of the most famous tales from mythology, and it speaks to a culture that valued ambition and ingenuity, even when it bordered on defiance.

The land of Corinth itself was said to be the subject of a divine negotiation. The sea god Poseidon and the sun god Helios both claimed the territory. Rather than fighting, they allowed a hundred-handed giant to arbitrate. The giant awarded the Isthmus (the narrow strip of land) to Poseidon and the towering citadel of Acrocorinth to Helios. This myth perfectly captures the two sources of Corinth's power: its command of the sea and its unshakeable fortress.

Unlike Delphi, Corinth was a relatively minor town during the Mycenaean period. Its power was not an inheritance from a glorious past but something new, forged in the Archaic Age from its perfect location, its political innovations, and the ambition of its people.

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## **Learning Objective 2: Explain How Spiritual Authority and Commercial Power Shaped Two Great City-States**

As Greece emerged from its Dark Age, Delphi and Corinth rose to prominence, but for very different reasons. Delphi became the spiritual guide for the entire Hellenic world, its authority resting on the word of Apollo. Corinth became an economic superpower, its power flowing from its control of trade and its remarkable feats of engineering.

### **Delphi's Rise: The Power of Prophecy**

The heart of Delphi's influence was its Oracle. Here, a priestess known as the Pythia would enter a trance-like state and deliver prophecies from the god Apollo himself. Greeks from every walk of life, from humble farmers to powerful kings, made the pilgrimage to Delphi to ask for guidance. They asked about everything: marriage, harvests, business, and war.

Crucially, city-states would not dare to found a new colony without first consulting the Oracle. By giving its divine blessing, Delphi guided the expansion of the Greek world across the Mediterranean. This power was recognized far beyond Greece. King Croesus of Lydia, one of the wealthiest rulers in the ancient world, sent lavish gifts of gold and silver to the sanctuary to win the god's favor before going to war with the Persians. Delphi's power was not military, but spiritual. Its wealth came from the offerings of grateful (or hopeful) visitors, and its influence came from the belief that the voice of Apollo truly spoke there.

### **Corinth's Rise: The Master of the Crossroads**

Corinth's power was built on something you can see on a map. It sat on the narrow Isthmus of Corinth, the land bridge connecting the Peloponnesian peninsula to the rest of mainland Greece. This gave it total control over north-south land trade. With a harbor on each side of the Isthmus—Lechaeum on the Corinthian Gulf and Cenchreae on the Saronic Gulf—it also controlled the east-west sea trade. A ship sailing from Italy to Asia Minor could save itself a long and dangerous journey around the southern coast of Greece by stopping at Corinth.

This perfect location made Corinth incredibly wealthy. From the 8th century BC onward, its beautifully decorated pottery was exported all over the Mediterranean. The city was first ruled by a powerful aristocratic clan called the Bacchiadae, who oversaw its early growth. But as in many Greek cities, social tensions grew, leading to a new form of government: tyranny.

### Primary Source Spotlight

The 5th-century BC historian Thucydides, known for his practical and realistic analysis of history, saw Corinth's power in simple, economic terms:

*"Planted on an isthmus, Corinth had from time out of mind been a commercial emporium; as...[source](#) by the old poets on the place."*

This quote shows that ancient observers, like modern historians, understood that Corinth's geographic location was the key to its wealth and power, making it a natural center for trade long before other cities rose to prominence.

### The Age of Tyrants

Around 657 BC, a military leader named Cypselus seized power and became the first tyrant of Corinth. In ancient Greece, the word "tyrant" did not necessarily mean a cruel or unjust ruler; it simply meant someone who took power by force rather than by heredity. Cypselus and his son, Periander, were ambitious state-builders. They used

their power to fund new colonies, expand trade, and undertake massive public works projects that benefited the entire city.

### **Biography Brief: Periander of Corinth (Ruled c. 627–587 BC)**

Periander, the son of Cypselus, was the second tyrant of Corinth, and his reign is considered the city's golden age. He was known for his wisdom and was sometimes included among the Seven Sages of Greece. Periander was a shrewd and effective ruler who continued his father's work of strengthening Corinth's economy. He promoted trade, established a stable system of coinage, and founded new colonies to serve as markets for Corinthian goods. His most famous achievement was the construction of the *Diolkos*, a revolutionary piece of engineering that cemented Corinth's status as a commercial superpower. While some ancient writers portrayed him as a harsh ruler, his leadership undoubtedly made Corinth one of the most powerful and prosperous cities in all of Greece.

### **Technology & History: The Diolkos**

The most incredible symbol of Corinth's ingenuity was the *Diolkos*. This was a paved trackway, stretching for about 5 miles across the narrowest part of the Isthmus. Instead of sailing around the dangerous southern tip of the Peloponnese, ships could be hauled out of the water at one of Corinth's harbors and dragged overland along this road to the other side. The road was paved with limestone blocks, and in some sections, there were deep grooves cut into the stone to guide the wheels of the large wagons that carried the ships. This remarkable feat of engineering, likely built during Periander's reign, was a massive state-funded project that saved sailors time and protected them from treacherous waters. It was, in essence, the world's first railway, and it gave Corinth an enormous advantage in controlling Mediterranean trade.

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### **Learning Objective 3: Contrast the Character and Purpose of the Pythian and Isthmian Games**

One of the most important parts of Greek culture was the *agōn*, or contest. The Greeks loved competition, and the great Panhellenic Games, open to all Greeks, were a chance to win glory, honor the gods, and express a shared Hellenic identity. While the Olympic Games are the most famous today, other major games were held at Delphi and Corinth, each with its own unique character.

#### **The Pythian Games: Contests for Apollo**

The Pythian Games were held at Delphi every four years to celebrate Apollo's victory over the Python. Because Apollo was the god of music and the arts, these games were unique. They originally began as a purely musical competition, where poets and musicians would compete by singing hymns to the god.

Around 586 BC, after a conflict known as the First Sacred War secured Delphi's independence, the games were reorganized. Athletic contests like footraces and wrestling were added, making the festival second in importance only to the Olympics. Even so, the artistic contests remained a central and prestigious part of the event. The prize for a victor at the Pythian Games was not gold or silver, but a humble wreath woven from the leaves of the laurel tree, which was sacred to Apollo.

#### **The Isthmian Games: Contests for Poseidon**

Around 582 BC, Corinth established its own Panhellenic festival: the Isthmian Games. Held every two years at the sanctuary of Poseidon on the Isthmus, these games had a very different feel. Their origin myth was a tragic one. It was said that King Sisyphus founded the games as a funeral rite for his young nephew, Melicertes, whose body washed ashore on the Isthmus after his mother, Ino, leaped into the sea to escape her maddened husband. The boy was transformed into the sea-god Palaemon, a protector of sailors.

Dedicated to Poseidon, the god of the sea and horses, the Isthmian Games were famous for their thrilling equestrian events. The chariot races were the main attraction, drawing huge crowds and showcasing the wealth of the Greek aristocrats who could afford to raise and train horses. The prize was originally a wreath of wild celery, connected to its funereal origins, but was later changed to a wreath of pine, a tree sacred to Poseidon. Because of Corinth’s accessible location, the Isthmian Games were extremely popular and had a bustling, commercial atmosphere.

Feature	Pythian Games (Delphi)	Isthmian Games (Corinth)
Patron God	Apollo	Poseidon
Origin Myth	Apollo slays the Python	Sisyphus honors the dead hero Melicertes
Frequency	Every four years	Every two years
Key Events	Music, poetry, and athletics	Equestrian events and athletics
Prize	Laurel wreath	Pine or celery wreath
Character	Artistic and intellectual	Commercial and aristocratic

**Learning Objective 4: Analyze the Relationship Between Religion and Politics in Archaic Greece**

In ancient Greece, religion and politics were inseparable. The favor of the gods was seen as essential for the success of a city, and leaders often used religious acts to strengthen their own power and prestige. The interactions between commercial Corinth and spiritual Delphi provide a perfect case study of this dynamic.

**A Tyrant's Gift: The Corinthian Treasury at Delphi**

When Cypselus seized power in Corinth, he was a tyrant—a ruler without a traditional, hereditary claim to his throne. He needed to legitimize his rule in the eyes of the Greek

world. To do this, he turned to Delphi. Cypselus funded the construction of a treasury at Delphi, one of the very first such buildings in the sanctuary.

This was a brilliant political move. A treasury was a small, temple-like building used to store a city's precious offerings to the god. By building one, Cypselus achieved several goals at once. First, it was a public display of his piety, showing all of Greece that he was a god-fearing ruler. Second, it was an act of propaganda. The magnificent building, filled with treasures, was a permanent advertisement for the wealth and power of Corinth under its new leader. Finally, it was a way to secure an alliance with the most respected religious institution in Greece. Herodotus tells us that the Oracle had actually prophesied Cypselus's rise to power, and the treasury was a grand "thank you" gift that reinforced the idea that his rule was part of a divine plan.

### **Competitive Piety: The Treasuries of the Sacred Way**

Cypselus's treasury set a precedent that other city-states would follow for centuries. The Sacred Way at Delphi became lined with treasuries built by different cities, each trying to outdo the others in a display of "competitive piety." The Siphnian Treasury, for example, was famously lavish, covered in intricate sculptures and built by the island of Siphnos from the profits of its silver mines. The Athenian Treasury, built later, was a proud statement of Athenian democracy and military victory over the Persians. These buildings show that a gift to the gods was also a powerful political statement on the world stage.

### **Virtue and Leadership**

This blend of piety and politics raises questions about the character of these ancient leaders. When a tyrant like Periander invested the state's wealth in a project like the *Diolkos*, was he acting out of a desire for the common good, or simply to increase his own power and fame? The Greek philosopher Aristotle taught that true virtue lies in finding the "golden mean" between two extremes. For a ruler, the virtue of **prudence**, or practical wisdom, would be the mean between being wastefully reckless and being selfishly timid. A prudent leader would take bold, decisive action for the benefit of his city. By this measure, the Corinthian tyrants, for all their autocratic power, often



demonstrated a remarkable degree of prudence, using their authority to build a city whose prosperity and influence would last for generations.

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## **Conclusion: Two Paths to Greatness**

The stories of Delphi and Corinth show us that there was more than one way for a Greek polis to achieve greatness. Delphi chose the path of spiritual authority, becoming the revered moral and religious guide for the entire Hellenic world. Corinth chose the path of commerce and innovation, using its strategic location and engineering skill to become an economic titan.

Though their paths were different, their destinies were connected. The wealth of Corinth helped build the splendor of Delphi, and the authority of Delphi helped legitimize the rulers of Corinth. Together, they represent two essential pillars of Greek civilization: faith and reason on one hand, and pragmatism and enterprise on the other. The Panhellenic spirit fostered at their games created a sense of shared culture that united a politically divided world, while the economic networks pioneered by Corinth created a model of trade that would shape the Mediterranean for centuries. The legacies of the oracle and the isthmus are still with us, reminding us of the dynamic forces that propelled the Greek world into its classical golden age and laid the foundations of Western civilization.

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## **LEARNING RESOURCES**

### **Key Terms and People**

- **Polis:** The Greek word for a city-state, the main political unit in ancient Greece.
- **Oracle:** A person or agency considered to be a source of wise counsel or prophetic predictions inspired by a deity. The Oracle of Delphi was the most famous.
- **Pythia:** The title of the high priestess of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi who served as the oracle.

- **Omphalos:** A sacred stone at Delphi that the ancient Greeks believed marked the center, or "navel," of the world.
- **Tyrant:** In ancient Greece, a ruler who seized power by force rather than through hereditary right or constitutional means. The term was not initially negative.
- **Panhellenic:** Meaning "all-Greek," used to describe institutions and events that were shared by all Greek city-states, such as the Panhellenic Games.
- **Diolkos:** A paved trackway across the Isthmus of Corinth that enabled ships to be moved overland, built in the 6th century BC.
- **Treasury:** A small, temple-like building erected at a Panhellenic sanctuary by a city-state to house its votive offerings to the god.
- **Apollo:** The Greek god of music, arts, knowledge, prophecy, and light. His main sanctuary was at Delphi.
- **Poseidon:** The Greek god of the sea, earthquakes, and horses. The Isthmian Games were held in his honor.
- **Sisyphus:** The legendary founder and king of Corinth, famous for his cunning and his eternal punishment in the underworld.
- **Cypselus:** The first tyrant of Corinth, who overthrew the ruling Bacchiad clan around 657 BC.
- **Periander:** The son of Cypselus and second tyrant of Corinth, under whose rule the city reached its peak of wealth and power.

## Chapter Summary Chart

Learning Objective	Key Facts & Events	Key People
<b>1. Compare Mythic Origins</b>	Delphi's myth involves Apollo slaying the Python. Corinth's myth involves the cunning King Sisyphus.	Apollo, Python, Sisyphus, Poseidon, Helios
<b>2. Explain Rise to Power</b>	Delphi rose through the spiritual authority of its Oracle. Corinth rose through its strategic location, trade, and engineering projects like the Diolkos.	Cypselus, Periander

<b>3. Contrast the Games</b>	The Pythian Games at Delphi honored Apollo with music and athletics. The Isthmian Games at Corinth honored Poseidon with a focus on equestrian events.	Apollo, Poseidon, Sisyphus, Melicertes
<b>4. Analyze Religion &amp; Politics</b>	Rulers used religious acts for political gain. Cypselus built a treasury at Delphi to legitimize his rule, showing how piety and propaganda were linked.	Cypselus

## COMMAND QUESTIONS

### Factual Recall

1. What is the mythological origin of the Pythian Games at Delphi?
2. What was the *Diolkos*, and why was it so important for Corinth's economy?

### Critical Thinking

1. Compare and contrast the sources of power for Delphi and Corinth. Which do you think was more influential in the daily lives of ancient Greeks, and why?

### Favorite Applicable Virtue

1. The Corinthian tyrants, like Periander, were autocratic rulers but also oversaw great periods of prosperity and innovation. Considering the classical virtue of **Prudence** (practical wisdom), do you think Periander's decision to build the *Diolkos* was a virtuous act for his city? Explain how a leader's actions can be

judged by their outcomes versus their motivations.