

Imperial Christianization in Corinth: 300-600 AD

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by

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## **Introduction:**

Despite Greece's longstanding traditions of paganism in late antiquity, the city of Corinth seems to have experienced a top-down process of Christianization—where the government led the process of transition from paganism to Christianity, basically converting this coastal town. Although it is evident that practice of paganism continued in Corinth, this paper suggests a new form of Christianization—that of “imperial Christianization” which pressured citizens to convert to Christianity based on the faith of the Emperor, imperial edicts, economic funding and building projects. The archaeological findings in Corinth explain that this idea of imperial Christianization prevented the pagans present in Corinth to rebuild the classical and Roman temples following earthquakes which ruined them in the early 400s, therefore removing the authoritarian pagan presence at the temples (in priests and local leaders) and pushing imperial Christianity.

In order to understand these processes of conversion we must first explore the pagan temple and basic pagan practices. Only then can a pagan conversion be discussed and the changes and adaptations pagans made to continue their forms of worship. This first section will present the areas of a pagan temple. It will briefly explain the meaning of an altar and sacrifice to the deity, who the guards and temple priests were and then discuss the cult statue and the meaning of its removal or destruction. As a comparison, temple destruction and violence appeared in Syria quite constantly through late antiquity, and although anti-pagan violence seems to not have occurred much in Greece, we will discuss the implications of these events. For the purposes of this paper, Christianity is that of the imperial Catholic or

orthodox belief, which was practiced by the majority of emperors following Constantine and declared the state religion by Theodosius. On the other hand, paganism will simply refer to the polytheistic ritual practices of many Greco-Roman cults, including that of the Imperial cult, the worship of previous emperors. Since cult ritual practices were vibrantly different depending on the specific deity and location, this discussion will not focus on the particulars, but instead the transition from a performance of these cult practices to that of Christianity.

Of course the historical context and literary evidence the next section reviews the Theodosian Code, which might too allow a greater understanding of the political climate of the times and presents the reader with a history leading up to the Christianization of Corinth. While many of these edicts were not concerned with cities in Greece but other parts of the empire, they suggest the transition of the government from toleration of Christianity to professing it as the only true faith of the Empire. Indeed too, once the Theodosian Code was pulled together in the 430s there can be some sort of accountability held to the government, since at this point they were widely circulated as law through the entire Empire.

Also, the modern scholars and historians who have published research on this topic should be mentioned, as much of their research and theories lead up to my idea of imperial Christianization, as will be discussed in greater detail in a later paragraph. Peter Brown first suggests an idea of syncretism between traditional pagan beliefs and Christianity. His model speaks to the importance of the holy man in Syria and the great affect this ascetic presence had on conversion in individual towns. Following after Brown's model, David Frankfurter explores the role of this

holy man in Egypt along the same lines of syncretism but with his revised definition of syncretism as an acceptance of paganism in many ways. Ramsay MacMullen on the other hand demonstrates a model of Christianity spreading through socioeconomic groups, from the rich and elite to the poor. He outlines three periods of conversion, all discussed in greater detail in a following section, but suggests probably most similar to my theory that the Christian leadership in the fourth century confronts and forces the Empire into conversion. I use MacMullen's model to explain some changes in Corinth while also adding my own model of imperial Christianization.

This paper uses a new model of Christianization to evaluate the archaeology of late antique Corinth by exploring the temples of the Imperial Cult and the Asklepieion outside the Roman forum. However, when evidence in Corinth is scant we must then turn to a comparative study of contemporary towns, mainly in Syria and Egypt to understand what may have been happening. Indeed, it seems that the Corinthian region exhibits a truly bold example of imperial Christianization, in that the city exemplified a strong religious conversion not by their general public, but instead saw a transition of state funding and legal power from pagan to Christian, thus institutionalizing Christianity's triumph over pagan ritual. Christianization truly was a product of the imperial church in that it was the legal religion of the Empire, it was funded by the Empire and pushed Christian initiatives like basilica building projects and abolishing pagan practices. Imperial Christianization, as I hope to explain, was evident by the systematic take over of an area in which all

aspects of life—the political leaders, laws, taxes, building projects and state religion forced Christianity.

Specifically, this project will explore the transformations of religious sites during the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries in Greece. I chose to focus my research in a case study of Ancient Corinth with discussions of comparisons to contemporary situations in Athens, Egypt, Syria and Constantinople. Corinth had a strong tradition in the Roman Empire as imperial posts and urban center and at the same time was a noted religious center for pagan ritual, while still standing on the periphery of religious institutions and seeing a conversion later than most areas in the empire. In Corinth I will discuss the entire landscape of the city, and especially the architectural transitions of religious spaces. This discussion will evaluate the surviving literary record, which is limited mainly to Libanius and Ammianus Marcellinus both of whom wrote about Corinth, as well as the archaeological evidence.

### **Hellenistic religion and Temples:**

Until the Roman devastation of Athens in 86 BC, Athenian state religion remained, at least in its outward form, much what it had been at the end of the Classical period. The same is true for many of the old, mainland cities of Greece, such as Corinth and Sparta.<sup>1</sup> Until the reign of Constantine, family religious cults and practices no doubt remained virtually the same as in classical times, and the calendar of state festivals and sacrifices was little changed.<sup>2</sup> After 86 BC, Hellenistic

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<sup>1</sup> Mikalson (2005) p. 200

<sup>2</sup> Mikalson (2005) p. 205

cult practices continued in Greece far into the seventh century AD with the addition of the imperial cults of Rome, starting with Augustus and continuing until Constantine in 312 AD. This project will not quite discuss the theology of any cult, but instead the material culture left by its temples and practices. In Corinth we will look at the destruction of Temple E, most likely thought to be an imperial cult temple by archaeologists and an Asklepieion for the Greek god Asclepius. The physician-god Asclepius became a major figure of cult worship throughout much of the Greek world in the late Hellenistic period as a god who showed paternal concerns for his worshipers and he was largely free, unlike the various Zeuses and Athenas, from the military, political and nationalistic concerns of the individual city-states.<sup>3</sup>

As for the landscape of a temple itself, the land which is cut off from a city and dedicated to a god or hero is known by the ancient term *temenos*. This area is set apart for sacred work, namely sacrifice; but the most essential element—more so than the cult stone, tree, and spring is the altar, where the fire is kindled. Usually the altar is made from large stone blocks or made of bricks and white-washed. The sides are decorated with volutes and in between lies a metal tablet on which the fire burns. In larger temples, the altars might have steps built to one side, which the priest can stand to lay the consecrated portions on the fire and to pour libations.<sup>4</sup> In his book on Greek religion, Burkert suggests that the suppliant did go up to the image to pray, as was the main objective for entering a temple. The

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<sup>3</sup> Mikalson (2005) p. 202

<sup>4</sup> Burkert (1985) p. 87

entrance to the temple was usually a high doorway facing east or a colonnade, usually with a porch allowing for the rising sun to hit the cult statue and glorify its presence. During the Hellenistic and Roman periods the image was probably a bronze, or in grand temples a large scale marble sculpture. This cult statue was placed in the *naos* on a pedestal in the center of the temple. It was surrounded by a table of offerings, incense stands and sometimes an ever-burning lamp. A suppliant would participate in sacrifice or give offerings only after properly cleansing and following tradition of the cult deity as Burkert explains:

During the sacred work of sacrifice at the altar the temple is at the back of the participants; they look towards the east and pray to the sky, just as the temple opens out to the east. So the pious man stands as it were beneath the eyes of the deity but it is not the inner space of the temple which draws him in, withdrawing him from the world. The festival is enacted in the open air around the altar and temple; built as a façade, the temple which can be circled in the shade of the column-borne entablature, provides the magnificent background; it stands giving strength behind the man who looks out on the world; it dismisses him as it welcomed him.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, at major cultic festivals and events, there must have been someone who assumed the leadership to start prayers and lead in sacrifice and libations. Burkert says, "Prerequisite for this role is a certain authority and economic power. The sacrificer is the head of the house, family, or village, the president of the council, the elected chief magistrate of the city – known as the archon in Athens – or the army general... To ensure that everything is done in proper order, a responsible official is required – the priest, *hiereus*, or the priestess,

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<sup>5</sup> Burkert (1985) p. 92

*hierieia*. Priesthood is not a general status, but service of one specific god in one particular sanctuary.”<sup>6</sup> So, some authority was necessary for large sacrifices and festivals, yet Greek religion was not selective of its followers, as anyone could join various cults at their leisure. However, Greek religion could almost be considered a religion without priests; since among the Greek people sacrifice could be performed by anyone who possessed the desire and means—including women and slaves in later periods. Since the temple and its design and priests have been described, the next step to understanding this process of Christianization is the set of laws which transferred support from pagan beliefs to Christianity, the Theodosian Code.

### **The Theodosian Code:**

So as to understand the theories of Christianization and thus the imperial process I suggest; one must understand the changing political climate of the late antique Mediterranean. Traditionally, this period is looked upon as the end to the glorified Roman Empire... and yet it holds a much more complex schematic as the political and religious history of the world changes from this point forth. The Theodosian Code gives a context to understanding this political transition, since these edicts were not only given in their original context by individual emperors, but pulled together and issued empire-wide by 435 by Theodosius.

Historically, Christians faced numerous violent persecutions before the conversion of Constantine and the policies of toleration and acceptance that soon followed. Although his actual conversion and baptism did not occur until 337 AD

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<sup>6</sup> Burkert (1985) p. 95



just before his death in Constantinople, during his reign he instituted toleration of both Christians and Jews and allowed for the faith to grow throughout the empire.

In his book *Early Christianity: A brief History*, Joseph Lynch notes:

Because [emperors] held great political power and controlled tremendous wealth, their patronage had important consequences. For instance, they used their wealth to change the architectural and artistic settings in which Christian worship took place. In comparison with the publically supported pagan temples, the Christian churches of the later third and early fourth centuries, often nothing more than reconfigured houses, must have seemed shabby. The emperors and empresses had the resources to bestow impressive building on their favored religion. For instance, Constantine built large, ornate churches at site that had importance for Christians, including the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the Holy Sepulcher (Christ's Tomb) in Jerusalem, and the churches at Rome over the burial places of Peter and Paul.<sup>7</sup>

Already in 321 Constantine had declared that domestic sacrifices were specifically prohibited in an edict to Maximus about seeking soothsayer's opinions about buildings struck by lightning.<sup>8</sup> Constantine's sons followed his example, and continued the established toleration for Christians. Again in 341 another edict about sacrifice went out, saying: "Superstition shall cease; the madness of sacrifices shall be abolished. For if any man in Violation of the law of the sainted Emperor, Our Father, and in violation of this command of Our Clemency, should dare to perform

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<sup>7</sup> Lynch (2010) p. 132

<sup>8</sup> CT 16.10.1

sacrifice, he shall suffer the infliction of a suitable punishment and the effect of an immediate sentence.”<sup>9</sup>

Only Julian the Apostate challenged this trend of Christian emperors in 361 as he led a pagan revival. He reversed the direction of imperial favor, restoring sacrifice to the traditional pagan gods, paying for exuberant public religious ceremonies and stripping Christian churches and clergy of their economic and legal privileges.<sup>10</sup> But following his death, paganism again fell out of favor. And there was no organized pagan church to present a united front against the then deeply entrenched, well-organized and aggressive Christian church. In 380 Christianity became the official legal faith of the Roman Empire in an edict given to Constantinople: “We shall believe in the single Deity of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, under the concept of equal majesty and of the Holy Trinity.”<sup>11</sup> From this point on, the empire remained Christian, issuing many laws to establish and support the church and clergy. Although the laws on sacrifice continued into the ninth century, it is clear because they were reissued so often that sacrifice was indeed continuing in the empire until much later.

Yet as firm as these laws were, the rules on temple closure, destruction and exorcisms varied in both their nature and enactment. In 342 Constantius decreed that the temples should remain untouched and uninjured since public entertainments derived their origin from pagan structures.<sup>12</sup> Just a month later, all temples were closed in all towns and cities, and all access was forbidden to citizens

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<sup>9</sup> CT 16.10.2

<sup>10</sup> Lynch (2010) p. 135

<sup>11</sup> CT 16.1.2

<sup>12</sup> CT 16.10.3

so as to prevent any sort of sin.<sup>13</sup> Over the next forty years the emperors issued laws again condemning sacrifice and closing more temples, but it was not until 396 that all pagan holy men were condemned by the law and stripped of their legal and economic privileges.<sup>14</sup> And three years later an edict addressing temple destruction was circulated in 399: "If there should be any temples in the country districts they shall be torn down without disturbance or tumult. For when they are torn down and removed, the material basis for all superstition will be destroyed."<sup>15</sup> Following edicts on this subject go back and forth about whether temple destruction was or was not permitted, perhaps in an attempt to limit temple looting and unnecessary destruction, but this probably allowed the local officials to make the decisions about pagan architecture in any one place unless a specific imperial decree said otherwise. Sometime during this period, Libanius probably composed his oration to Emperor Theodosius for the temples. He begged Theodosius to understand the pagan ways and provided a history for the Emperor of their struggles, while hoping for policies of toleration.<sup>16</sup>

While reviewing the Theodosian Code provides a context for the political climate of the time and a specific emperor's attitudes toward Christianity and how staunchly he tried to extinguish paganism, it also had extremely limited enforcement. Roman law was reactive, not by any means proactive, as is demonstrated by the numerous re-edicts about sacrifice. Plus, it depended upon regional enforcement, which in turn depended upon Roman citizens actually

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<sup>13</sup> CT 16.10.4

<sup>14</sup> CT 16.10.14

<sup>15</sup> CT 16.10.16

<sup>16</sup> Libanius, English translation by A. F. Norman (1969) p. 91-153

knowing the laws and requiring some kind of punishment for anyone whom broke them. Since the enforcement is mostly unknown except in a few literary cases, the most important edicts against paganism involve the economic impacts which removed state funding for pagan practices. The harshest edict's effects were to remove temple funds, which provided incomes for the priests and also for festivals and sacrifice practices. In 407 these income taxes were taken away from the temples and given to assist "Our most devoted soldiers," thus removing the livelihood of a temple.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, as the Christian priests were exempt from paying taxes and funded by the state, the pagan priests, ministers, prefects or hierophants of the sacred mysteries saw their legal status and privileges abolished by 396 and were then condemned by law for their profession.<sup>18</sup> Basically, the emperors did not need to close temples for their religious practices to become defunct—they just removed funding and the authoritarian holy men whom protected the temple, and left a building without much ceremony to it. Indeed Franz notes: "Against this background of relations between pagans and Christian the defiance of the Edict of Theodosius is understandable, particularly since enforcement of the order was entrusted to the magistrates. In this case, as good Athenians, they would have had no great enthusiasm for performing their duties."<sup>19</sup> These decrees must thus be considered in their context, not as an isolated law, but as one of a long series of edicts in dealing with the outward aspects of the transition from paganism to Christianity.

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<sup>17</sup> CT 16.10.19

<sup>18</sup> CT 16.10.14

<sup>19</sup> Franz (1965) p. 200

## **Christianization:**

The movement for which these edicts took hold was that of Christianization. Scholars define Christianization as the historical phenomenon when individuals, towns, cities and states were converted from paganism to Christianity. More specifically, historians and archaeologists refer to the Christianization as a collective conversion of the empire and as this essay will address, these scholars are speaking of the local religious practices, governmental programs and especially the religious landscape, or pagan architecture. This religious transition most clearly occurred in late antiquity, following the conversion of Constantine in 312 AD until about the seventh century when the Empire can be identified as predominantly Christian.

But Christianization as a whole must be discussed in a theoretical and historical context before we can explore its connotations in one specific area. Many scholars debate the specific notions of Christianization: whether it should be a discussion of history or that of theology,<sup>20</sup> whether literary or archaeological evidence substantiates the theory itself<sup>21</sup> and should modern parallels be used in the place of lacking evidence in social and religious history.<sup>22</sup> It is important to note the previous scholarship on the subject, since so much research has been published about the Mediterranean in late antique times. As will be discussed, these scholars bring the problems of approach into their theories and suggest how the grand process of Christianization occurred.

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<sup>20</sup> MacMullen (1984)

<sup>21</sup> Frankfurter (2003)

<sup>22</sup> Brown (1972)

One of the first scholars to use the term Christianization was Peter Brown in his book *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*. Brown suggests that holy men play the greatest role in Christianization, as leaders and sharers of the faith on an individual basis. However, most of his scholarship focuses on Syria and Egypt: “It was in Egypt that the theory and practice of the ascetic life reached its highest pitch of articulateness and sophistication. Yet the holy men who minted the ideal of the saint in society came from Syria, and later from Asia Minor and Palestine—not from Egypt.”<sup>23</sup> He explains how the social roles of these men (both ascetics and saints) were instrumental to their religious authority and sacred powers to towns and cities without a large Christian presence. As Frankfurter notes about Brown’s Holy Man: “In their functions as ‘charismatic ombudsmen’ the hermits provided regional authority where it was needed; they resolved issues of health and adversity, both supernatural and human; they offered a sense of center and collectivity identity to communities disoriented in the later Roman world.”<sup>24</sup> In a later article Brown takes a slightly modified view, in that he evaluates the governmental side of this transformation, and the pressures presented by the state, in his discussion of Saint Augustine of Hippo. He uses the term “imperial Christianization” to evaluate the slow, but meticulous conversion throughout the empire by the emperor and legal code of late antiquity and early Byzantium.<sup>25</sup> Although his use of the term “imperial Christianization” agrees with much of my theory, Brown’s model rests too much on a monastic presence to be considered in

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<sup>23</sup> Brown (1982) p. 109

<sup>24</sup> Frankfurter (2003) p. 347

<sup>25</sup> Brown (1972) 9-13

Greece until the eighth or ninth century. Since his idea of the holy man is not present in late antiquity, Brown's model falls short in areas where independent holy men are lacking.

David Frankfurter advances the model set up by Brown in Egypt in his article entitled "Syncretism and the Holy Man." Here, instead of just simply portraying the Holy Man as a teacher and example for non-Christians, Frankfurter suggests that these men went further by synchronizing Egyptian pagan belief and Christianity, in his rectified definition of syncretism. He examines "How Egyptian Christian holy men could engage older Egyptian religious traditions (gestures, perspectives, spirits) at the same time as they opposed—even demonized—Egyptian religion from the standpoint of Christian ideology."<sup>26</sup> He notes that as a modern student we must reject the modern model of conversion which is based in Protestant theology and creates any kind of "rebirth" instead of simply adjusting religious alliance. To Frankfurter, the syncretism which took place in the Christianization of Egypt is thus: "a multidimensional term, recognizing cultures' often simultaneous tactics of embracing and eschewing modern religious idioms, inventing 'authentic traditions' and appropriating new ideas to sanction old ones, all with manifest political and economic implications."<sup>27</sup> Thus his theory involves a process of interpretation, localization and indigenization by the strong monastic and ascetic presence in an area. He explains too "In moving to 'regional prophet' to describe Christian charismatic figures in late antique Egypt we are able to extend

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<sup>26</sup> Frankfurter (2003) p. 339

<sup>27</sup> Frankfurter (2003) p. 343

Brown's work on the social context of the holy man, focusing on the agency of religious transformation and the remapping of sacred authority."<sup>28</sup> So the holy man stands as the center of this model, providing a localized and sometimes synchronized version of Christianity in late antique Egypt.

In a different scope, Ramsay MacMullen discusses the growth of Christianization through its acceptance by socioeconomic groups in his book *Christianizing the Roman Empire*. Similar to Brown and Frankfurter, holy men indeed play a role in his model, but instead he focuses on Constantine's conversion and the opportunity that a new faith presented to lower classes. This idea that Christianity took root after 312, he says, allowed a discussion of evangelism, reaching across barriers between Christians and non-Christians. He notes that following Constantine's edicts of toleration, Christianity could be practiced publically, thus attracting more adherents: "Where once they had driven devils only from poor souls possessed, now they can march into the holiest shrines and, with spectacular effect before large crowds, expel the devils from their very homes. And accounts of their triumphs can circulate freely, too."<sup>29</sup> Thus the idea of ecclesial, authoritarian or monastic presence plays only a small part in his theory, and instead he suggests that as wealth and power transferred to the church, it became more popular for elites to also convert to continue their status, and even more so for lower classes to advance in society. However, quite apart from Brown and Frankfurter, MacMullen discusses the advantages gained by conversion: "As

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<sup>28</sup> Frankfurter (2003) p. 349

<sup>29</sup> MacMullen (1984) p. 113



worldly advantages accrued to the church, however, people joined for nonreligious or mixed reasons—people from whom religion of any stripe was not at the center of life or for whom the rewards of ritual and membership in conflicting traditions made even that conflict preferable to a sharp choice.”<sup>30</sup> He pinpoints three steps to Christianization in the first through fifth centuries that in the first period before 312 the Church gained purely religious membership in so much as dearly devoted catechumens due to persecutions of previous emperors. The second step, once Christianity was legalized, gained members for various reasons; social status, wealth and other advantageous opportunities. Finally, the last period represents the remainder of conversion, constituting a majority of the empire’s total population, which the Christian leadership confronts and forces into conversion. Similarly to my theory in Corinth, he suggests that the government forced Christianity, explaining: “Emperors or ecclesiastical officials controlling the distribution of material benefits waved them in front of non-Christians obviously in the hope of charging their allegiance, or they handed out money and food (and advertized the fact) at the instant of change, or threatened to take money or food away from the already converted if they would not abide in their allegiance. From all of which actions they conclusion seems certain: people were joining the church partly to get rich, or at least less poor.”<sup>31</sup>

This theory, of openness after Constantine’s acceptance seems sound and indeed legalizing a practice allows much more growth within a population. Too,

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<sup>30</sup> MacMullen (1984) p. 118

<sup>31</sup> MacMullen (1984) p. 114

MacMullen's theory that conversions probably took into account much more than religious belief also stands reasonable. This theory of advancement probably was not the main cause of mass conversion; but definitely part of the growth of Christianity between the fourth and sixth centuries, just as Brown and Frankfurter explain, anything that helped a person, whether it was a holy man or extra financial support, played a role in the process of Christianization. MacMullen tries to understand the psychology of the spiritual communities in which Christianization takes place and Christianity's development within the byzantine world.<sup>32</sup> But he specifically warns of historians and anthropologists adding parallels to modern ideas and cultures, which in truth have nothing to do with the conversion of the Roman Empire. He instead urges both the scholar and student to look only at the ancient evidence, and not to "color" the church's establishment as an institution.

There are many other discussions of Christianity and the process of Christianization which could be discussed, but these three authors present the most over-arching discussion and models for their respective regions. But most notable once we discuss Corinth is the absence of this "holy man" in Greek society, and specifically lacking within the Corinthian city. Monks, martyrs and saints took quite a bit longer to appear in the Greek landscape than they did in Egypt, Syria and the Eastern provinces. Perhaps as both Brown and Frankfurter note, in Egypt and Syria the landscape provided a harsh lifestyle, with less than 1.1 inches of rain annually—giving the monastic movement much more of a sensation than would

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<sup>32</sup> MacMullen (1984) p. 2-8

have been possible in the “lush” hills of Greece. Therefore, Brown’s and Frankfurter’s models cannot evaluate Corinth since there was not a presence of holy men guiding pagans to accept Christianity. In the case of Corinth, MacMullen’s argument most aptly fits into my idea of imperial Christianization. While most of his ideas focus on the growth of Christianity based strictly on economic factors, I believe political factors played a role as well, especially when it came to taxes and imperial funding for building projects. Imperial Christianization as will be demonstrated in Corinth as the city exemplified a strong religious conversion not by their monks or church leaders in an evangelical sense, but instead saw a transition of state funding (as MacMullen suggests) and legal power from pagan to Christian, thus institutionalizing Christianity’s triumph over pagan ritual. But this too will be discussed in more detail in a following section, as first we must discuss the conversion of Corinth.

### **Corinth: a display of Imperial Christianization**

The city of Corinth was quite well-known in ancient times, laying along the isthmus splitting Attica from the Peloponnese and was known as an urban center for travelers and traders coming from the Corinthian Gulf at the port of Lechaion and similarly from the Saronic Gulf at the port of Kenchreai. The city controlled the main overland trade route from Argos and the rest of the Peloponnese into central Greece. In Roman times, Corinth was an important stop for St. Paul to visit and speak to the Jewish and gentile populations as illustrated in Acts and the Corinthian epistles. We know from the reorganization of Diocletian in the third century that Corinth was the capital of Achaia and part of the Illyrian prefecture.

After Constantine's reign, the city shifted to the diocese of Macedonia, with the governor of the province actually living within Corinth. Later in the fourth century it became subject to the praetorian prefect of Italy, and eventually became its own diocese with its own praetorian prefect in the early fifth century. And as Christianity grew through out late antiquity, Corinth continued to be the capital and home of a Metropolitan bishop through most of the Byzantine Empire.<sup>33</sup> Thus, leading up to this period of Christianization and indeed until the Middle Ages, Corinth remained a significant city in Greece as it had been in classical times.

The archaeological record in Corinth presents scholars with a perfect opportunity to see the ripple effect of the Christianization of the Roman Empire within the compact environment of a Greek city in late antiquity. Corinth bustled in ancient times, but it also continued to be an important city far into the late antique period and Byzantine Empire. This continuity is the reason I looked for a religious transformation in Corinth in particular versus the many other cities which I could have evaluated. Unlike the intensely populated Athens, Corinth presents a much more rural city with less peculiar situations and a bit less special treatment than the religious space in Athena's namesake. Here, archaeologists can see the processes of Christianization without the special treatment provided for Athens, because it was only one of many cities in the empire with the similar situation of changing times. Corinth was home to important ritual with the archaic Temple of Apollo and probably the Imperial Cult during Roman rule. It also played a

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<sup>33</sup> Rothaus, 2000, p. 12

significant role with Isthmian games only a few kilometers away, pulling together many of the religious aspects of classical life.

Yet to truly understand the archaeology of the Corinthian plain and its eventual Christianization, we must note that constant seismic activity layers the archaeological evidence and presents a timeline for when the imperial cult and pagan rituals lost support and Christian basilicas took prominence. The literary evidence points to numerous earthquakes in the late fourth century, quite similar in timing to the attacks of Alaric in Athens. The late antique historian, Ammianus Marcellinus, tells of an earthquake and tsunami which struck the eastern Mediterranean on 21 July 365. He says that the immensity of the wave carried a ship more than two miles inland in Methone and caused great ruin.<sup>34</sup> Two other ancient sources make similar claims. Libanios writes in his funeral oration for Julian that shortly after the Emperor's death in 363 all of Greece was devastated by an earthquake "except one city."<sup>35</sup> Quite similar to his language is the historian Zosimos' account (4.18), which states that after the death of Valentinian I in 375 an earthquake struck all of Greece, except Athens. This probably aligns somehow with Libanios, or perhaps there were two major earthquakes. But these events indicate that some natural disaster ravaged Corinth, leaving most of the temples and forum in disrepair sometime around 375 AD.

As Richard Rothaus notes in his book, *Corinth: The First City of Greece*:  
"These destructive episodes are, ironically, a boon to the historian and

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<sup>34</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus 26:10.17-18

<sup>35</sup> Libanios, *Funeral Oration on Julian*

archaeologist. The severe damage, while not literally destroying the town, served to ‘wipe the slate clean.’ The subsequent repairs reveal what monuments were considered important, and new construction schemes illuminate the immediate interests of those concerned.”<sup>36</sup> In theory, since the disrepair of most buildings was evident after these calamities, we can clearly see where the efforts of restoration were and were not. So, if the temples fell into disrepair, and were fixed and renovated then we would know there was still an imperial focus on pagan sites after 400 AD, and thus paganism was still an important practice to Corinth, but also to the Empire as a whole. The archaeological record indicates that the main spring of fresh water in Corinth, the Fountain of Peirene, was also greatly damaged in the earth quakes and large scale repairs were made up until the late fifth century, while the temples were forgotten.<sup>37</sup> This support would have to come from wealthy Corinthians, who would have been the *boule*, financing these architectural projects, but some financial support would also come from the empire following imperial direction. Yet, we know in the fourth century the decrees of Theodosius had already dictated that the Catholic faith was the imperial religion<sup>38</sup>, the temples were closed to the public<sup>39</sup> and any sort of sacrifice was prohibited<sup>40</sup>. So, there would have been no state funding or even popular support available to Corinth to rebuild anything for polytheistic ritual or the worship of pagan gods. And because there is no evidence to contradict these claims, we must understand that an imperial

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<sup>36</sup> Rothaus (2000) p. 16

<sup>37</sup> Rothaus (2000) p. 60

<sup>38</sup> CT 16:2.1

<sup>39</sup> CT 16:10.4

<sup>40</sup> CT 16:10.1-2

Christian trend had taken place to focus new architecture projects on building churches and basilicas instead of keeping up the old temples.

In many other areas however, temples remained in the landscape as they would be eventually converted to churches. Occasionally they came to a violent end and were destroyed by rebellious Christian groups, but many times the sites' architectural resources were reused, making the temples and sanctuaries effectively a stone quarry.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Rothaus notes: "In Corinth there is no indication of Christian reuse or even admiration of the temples. Rather, the reactions seem to have been entirely negative."<sup>42</sup> Unlike the Parthenon, a grand architectural feat from temple to church, nothing remotely pagan in Corinth was converted into a Christian building. The idea of syncretism, which Frankfurter uses as a way of examining religious continuities in late antique Egyptian Christianity, seems to be completely absent in Corinth, presenting a strange problem which I will discuss later. His article successfully examines how Egyptian Christian holy men engaged older Egyptian religious traditions (gestures, perspectives, spirits) at the same time as they opposed—even demonized—Egyptian religion from the perspective of Christian ideology and uses this as a model for the empire.<sup>43</sup> He identifies two areas where this religious mixture most definitely occurs: "in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean, where priests, intellectuals, artists, and prophets creatively assimilated deities of different heritages through iconography and new languages of invocation; and in the Christianization of the Roman empire during

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<sup>41</sup> Lynch (2010) p. 133

<sup>42</sup> Rothaus (2000) p. 37

<sup>43</sup> Frankfurter (2001) p. 340

late antiquity and the early middle ages, where new, 'Christian' ritual, iconographic, and spatial forms often involved a creative negotiation between local and ecclesiastical discourses of authority."<sup>44</sup> Yet there is no evidence that his theory holds true in Corinth, where there seems to be a strange divide between paganism and Christianity, without any evidence for the combination of the two religions.

This idea that Corinthians distanced themselves from paganism might be better understood if we look at areas where syncretism took place and where pagan temples were converted to Christian basilicas or churches. In Athens this occurred with the Parthenon, in a conversion from a temple to Athena to that of the Holy Mother. Architecturally, many modifications were necessary to transform the temple into a church. In the most basic sense, the conversion entailed the reorientation of the building as Kaldellis notes: "One entered from the west, on a line from the Propylaia, while the former main entrance, in the east, was widened and then sealed off by an apse, the original version of which did not quite reach as far as the inner columns of the east porch."<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the Christian congregation stood on the very spot where the cult statue of Athena stood, facing the same direction for their liturgy. Archaeological evidence is lacking regarding the interior decoration of the earliest church, since only a few pieces of sculpted marble panels with crosses have been found.<sup>46</sup> According to this theory, Christian modes of worship were molded to fit their closest pagan counterparts and as Kaldellis suggests "it was only natural for Athena Parthenos to be replaced by the Parthenon

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<sup>44</sup> Frankfurter (2001) p. 341

<sup>45</sup> Kaldellis (2009) p. 27

<sup>46</sup> Korres (1987) p. 38



Theotokos, or the chief goddess of the Athenian pantheon by the most important woman in the Christian assembly of holy figures.”<sup>47</sup> However, in Corinth there is no evidence that any syncretism took place, because the temples were all torn down and demolished without any adjustments to use them as places of Christian worship.

Instead the sites of the main Corinthian temples became those of quarries, nothing more than the recycling of architectural resources. Although the Doric temple, assumed to be the temple of Apollo still remains today with seven columns standing, it was probably the only temple left untouched by the Christianization process in Corinth. Temple E, a temple structure in the Roman forum which is thought to be the home of the Imperial Cult, has some evidence of restoration in the late Roman period, functioning as a temple to the emperors at least until the fourth century. However, toward the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth century, the superstructure collapsed, with evidence of large architectural pieces either having fallen and broken or been smashed by larger pieces falling upon them. According to the excavation guide, “Fragments of an Apollo seated on the omphalos and of a female divinity standing beside him, both closely echoing a style contemporary with that of the Parthenon, are the only remnants of the pedimental sculpture.”<sup>48</sup> Because some of the pediment remains intact, it suggests that the rest of the sculpture was robbed out after the collapse of the roof around the end of the fourth century. In Rothaus’ evaluation of the site he suggests: “An abundance of

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<sup>47</sup> Kaldellis (2009) p. 35

<sup>48</sup> Ancient Corinth, a guide to the excavations (1954) p. 63

coins from the end of the fourth century found in the demolition debris may be an indication of the process of selling architectural pieces and stone blocks.”<sup>49</sup> The Corinth Notebook also notes that archaeologists found evidence of lime kilns, to burn the stone down to lime to make cement. Similarly, many cutting tools were found in the debris, suggesting that this temple was indeed the victim of quarrying. The archaeologists also discovered the surrounding area became a popular Christian burial site in following centuries. Curiously, the cemetery never encroached upon the actual temple foundations, but remained outside the once constructed walls. I will discuss the cemeteries of Corinth and the implications of their location in a later section.

The temple and sanctuary of Asklepios presents a similar archaeological record, and according to Rothaus: “[these buildings] are the best understood of all those in Corinth, in part because their location was not heavily reused in subsequent periods, and in part because of the care taken in documenting the excavations.”<sup>50</sup> By the mid fifth century the Asklepieion was completely razed to its foundation and the building stones were completely removed, probably reworked on the site as suggested by the debris dumps and lime kilns found surrounding the sanctuary site. In agreement with the Corinth Notebooks, Rothaus summarizes the archaeological evidence of this stratigraphy:

Over the foundations of the eastern portion of the temple and to the south and east of this area there were a series of ash layers 0.50-0.70m above the bedrock. These six or seven ash layers do not

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<sup>49</sup> Rothaus (2000) p. 41

<sup>50</sup> Rothaus (2000) p. 42

represent one act of burning, or even one occurrence, but rather a series of events. The ash layers are so thin and intermixed, however, they must be treated as one stratigraphic unit. In these ash layers six coins were found, the latest a coin of Valentinian II (375-391). Six lamps were found in or just above these ash layers, all dating from the late fourth to the early fifth century. The ash layers also contained a large quantity of marble revetment, some of it showing traces of burning. The presence of these marble fragments probably indicates that the ash is the result of burning marble for lime. Some fragments of sculpture were also found in the ash layers.<sup>51</sup>

The mixed stratigraphy of these layers indicates that the blocks of the temple and surrounding structures were removed at roughly the same time. These coins suggest that burning, or actual destruction of the temple probably occurred after the late third century and before the fifth century since the lamps which are layered closer to the surface date to the late fourth and early fifth century. Again, Rothaus believes that “the quantity of stone chips found in the area indicate not only the general work of demolition but also that the blocks were being reworked on the spot, most likely being cut down for easier transport.”<sup>52</sup> These constant layers in the archaeological record throughout the city at pagan sites imply there was little or no conflict in deconstructing the temples because it happened on such a wide scale in a short period. This also alludes to the fact that deconstruction must have been a city-wide project, that groups were contracted to pull apart the architecture and sell the resources or divert them to newer projects. Thus, by the mid fifth century, all the

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<sup>51</sup> Rothaus (2000) p. 43

<sup>52</sup> Rothaus (2000) p. 44

temples of Corinth had been deconstructed and quarried for their stone, leaving no standing pagan sites available for ritual practice.

Interestingly, quarrying temples for their stone and resources was later outlawed in the empire by an edict in 399 saying: “No man shall attempt to destroy temples which are empty of illicit things.”<sup>53</sup> In most cases, quarrying was looked down upon because of the superstitions that the daimones were still demonizing the temple’s building materials. In a case in Gaza at the side of the Marneion a church was built atop the place of a previous temple as Helen Saradi explains, “After the ashes and all the filth had been removed from the temple’s site, the remaining marble slabs from the temple’s *cella*, where women were not allowed to enter, were used to pave the *plateia*, the avenue or forecourt of the church. Thus in the future the sacred pagan stones would be permanently desecrated since men, women, dogs, pigs and other animals would step on them. This was the bishop’s personal order; a highly provocative decision.”<sup>54</sup> Thus the intensified quarry process in Corinth must not have concerned itself with the superstitions which had taken hold in Gaza, and also in much of Syria and Egypt, where bishops and monks destroyed temples by violent means to expel the pagan demons. According to Marcellus’ *Life*, bishops in Egypt were so intent upon destroying all parts of the temples that they innovated a new process of destruction in which workers would dig out each of the temple’s columns, stuff them with piles of olive-tree wood and set them on fire. The intended outcome was that the fire would turn all the marble

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<sup>53</sup> CT 16.10.18

<sup>54</sup> Saradi (2005) p. 121

into lime, thus causing the collapse of the columns.<sup>55</sup> So, in many ways Corinth was separated from the very superstitious, Christian fear that demons inhabited all parts of the temple. No concern for this was apparent in the quarrying process, as there was only evidence of quick mass destruction throughout the entire Corinthian plain.

But pagan cults were not so quick to die out. Just because the walls and altars were gone, it did not necessarily mean the cults themselves had been abolished. In fact, Corinth presents evidence to the contrary, suggesting that pagan cults were active in Corinth until at least the sixth century. Archaeologists found a small section of pavement on the east side of the Asklepieion, which would have been where the entrance once stood. Attached to the pebble and cement mixture was a column shaft, probably contemporary with the pavement. Below the pavement were coins of Constantius II (337-361), thus indicating that this pavement must have been placed at the site sometime after the mid fourth century.<sup>56</sup> This cylindrical monolithic piece was possibly an altar, since there is no reason for this area to have flooring constructed with a table following the destruction of the temple. Due to its central location in front of the temple in the temenos, it probably was an altar rebuilt for the cult of Asklepios. Rothaus says: "The placement of the round altar demonstrates that even after the collapse and perhaps removal of the structures, the physical site of the temple was the focus of the cult. Enough interest remained to replace the altar, albeit in a less than grandiose way."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Saradi (2008) p. 117

<sup>56</sup> DeWaele (1940) p. 155

<sup>57</sup> Rothaus (2000) p. 47

So, the altar implies that a cult continued at the site of the temple, without an actual structure. Apparently though, it was not unusual for cult activity to remain even at a decrepit temple site. Pausanias wrote about a similar situation in Nemea, saying: "The temple of Nemean Zeus at this place is worth seeing, except the roof has collapsed and the cult statue no longer remains... Yet the Argives burn offerings to Zeus even as Nemea still..."<sup>58</sup> So apparently a superstructure was not necessary for cult activity to remain, and Corinth was no different. Cult activity after the destruction of the temple is well evidenced by a collection of votive lamps found upon the foundation and within the debris of the temple destruction. These lamps date from the late fourth century until the middle of the sixth, implying that cult activity continued for some time after the destruction. Archaeologists established that the area was never considered a dumping ground since the condition of the lamps was so pristine and due to the lack of other trashed materials. Most of the lamps remained unbroken even today, and since they were left there undisturbed, were probably votive offerings left at the temple for healing purposes. There is indeed also evidence of a votive pit in the fill of the courtyard of the dining room, a hole dug 0.5-1.0m deep, containing animal remains, burned stones and lamps from the fifth to mid sixth centuries.<sup>59</sup> We can assume as well that this pit was not trash dump because good quality lamps would not be tossed out like this, but instead they probably represent votive objects and sacrifice from a continuing cult. The style of

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<sup>58</sup> Pausanias 2.15.2-3

<sup>59</sup> Rothaus (2000) p. 48

the lamps and occasional coins in the pit suggest that cult ritual continued at the Asklepieion until at least the mid sixth century.

Along with all the temples in Corinth, Temple E and the Asklepieion were razed by the mid-400s, allowing their land to be used for other purposes. Unlike the temples of Corinth which were systematically demolished in the fourth century and those in Syria and Egypt which were converted to churches or demolished so churches could be built on the land; Athens faced a much later time line for the demolition of its temples. For example, the temples atop the Acropolis were left in peace, probably even updated and restored until the mid fifth century, and left open until the late fifth century. Perhaps too, Athens in particular held to its pagan ties probably longer though than most cities due to the entrenched paganism at the core of everyday life, and mostly because it was home to the philosophical schools which were ever more skeptical of Christianity. While the city continued to be a place of education, the dominant intellectuals of the time were predominantly probably pagan Platonists, who encouraged the continued pagan cults at least until the sixth century. Thus, imperial Christianization reached Athens later than it did Corinth, and the process took a different turn in the actual conversion of the archaic Parthenon instead of demolition and the reuse of the Asklepieion foundations for later churches. Comparatively, this process was much slower in Athens, for quite similar temples. By the middle of the fifth century, growing imperial concern for enforcing the decrees of Christianity had shaken the complacency of pagan Athenians enough to advise caution. It seems that no new pagan Athenian building projects took place in the second half of the fifth century,

but the existing pagan buildings were kept in repair and continued to be used by various cults. Among these prominent buildings were the Asklepieion, and the Parthenon which both remained open to the public until the fifth century. Thus something different happened in Corinth than in Athens, since there was no apparent support by the upper classes to keep up the temples. Corinth saw a quick and peaceful process of removal of all outward pagan buildings while in other areas experienced violence to remove them, or in Athens, they were simply left open for the public.

Yet in Corinth there appears to be a situation which does not appear in most Christian cities but gives light to the fact that Christians in Corinth must have had some suspicions about pagan sanctuary. In Corinth, Christian burials were placed inside the city walls as was definitely taboo in Roman society. In the areas surrounding both temples (Temple E and the Asklepieion) archaeologists found Christian graves, more than 300 neighboring the Asklepieion and some 200 around Temple E. These graves seem to be mostly Christian, with east-west orientation and Christian crosses etched into the few grave goods found there. Christian tombstones have also been recovered from the cemetery, with Christian imagery, mainly crosses dating in the fifth and sixth centuries.<sup>60</sup> But the location of these graves is particularly interesting, since they were all places to the north and northwest of the temple which had been removed approximately one hundred years before most of these graves were dug. But the area of the actual temple foundations remained unused. While areas bordering the place of the once-standing temple were

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<sup>60</sup> Roebuck (1951) p. 165-167



acceptable, the area of the temple itself was unsatisfactory. Rothaus concludes that at the minimum, the site of the temple was still viewed with suspicion, even after a generation had passed since the superstructure of the temple existed.<sup>61</sup>

When the Asklepieion was a pile of debris and clutter, this Christian cemetery was probably well kept and an often visited site of devotion by surviving relatives and fellow Christians. Right outside the pagan *temenos*, these graves declared that Christianity continued to live and prosper while paganism of the past was indeed dying. Plus, these graves presented a definite threat to the cult, since corpses were unclean and not allowed inside sanctuary sites, or many times even within city walls.<sup>62</sup> But because we have evidence that a cult was still practicing at their reconstructed altar, these pagans would have had to approach the temple remains while passing through a cemetery, which would have been considered by a pagan as defilement. Thus, the devotee could not commune with the god; since he was unclean and had no ability to cleanse before presenting sacrifice without being surrounded by corpses. According to Rothaus, this would have effectively severed any link with a deity worshiped at the temple remains.<sup>63</sup> Thus to bury in a sanctuary was to deconsecrate it, yet these Christians specifically left the inner chambers of the temple free of all burial, only constructing a cemetery on three sides of the Asklepieion. Although we cannot analyze exactly why these Christians practiced a bit of restraint against the pagans, there were two groups co-existing at least until the mid-sixth century in Corinth.

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<sup>61</sup> Rothaus (2000) p. 52

<sup>62</sup> Rothaus (2000) p. 53

<sup>63</sup> Rothaus (2000) p. 53

[Christians] chose to make a direct and strong, even threatening public challenge at the Asklepieion and Temple E. An element of restraint was involved in their action, however, and such restraint can perhaps best be explained by the presence of a not insignificant non-Christian population in Corinth. That begrudging respect for active cult sites continued through the sixth century indicated that a portion of the population continued to practice open ritual at the temple site<sup>64</sup>.

Since both these groups were using relatively close areas, it is unavoidable that they would have witnessed each other's practices or been followers of both religions. For presumably when pagans were offering devotions to Asklepios at their altar, Christians would have also been praying and leaving votives at the graves. This co-existence is only discussed by a few scholars, since many believed there was a proliferation of time between the temples closing and the further Christianization of many towns. Allison Franz in particular supports this idea time lapse between the transition from pagan to Christian in her assessment of Athens, which until recently was widely accepted. However, with more recent archaeological excavations, it is becoming more evident that Christians and pagans lived somewhat peacefully together for some time before paganism died out. In fact, there is no physical evidence of Christian activity in the city before the fifth century. But following this date archaeologists have found remains of a building program that quickly built many grandiose basilicas surrounding the town.

Indeed, the Christianization of the empire opened the door for extravagant Christian architecture and building projects. One of the first Christian buildings was that of the Lechaion basilica. It was perhaps the largest in Corinth and probably the

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<sup>64</sup> Rothaus (2000) p. 54

largest known in the empire at the time of its construction, dating to the late fifth or early sixth century. It was a three-aisled basilica with a tripartite transept, exonarthex, exonarthex and atrium located along the Corinthian Gulf at the harbor of Lechaion.<sup>65</sup> Two more basilicas lie south of Lechaion, the Skoutelas and the Kodratos basilicas, both are a bit simpler and located in Christian cemeteries dating to the early sixth century. Similar in magnificence to the Lechaion basilica, Kraneion basilica was built in the same time period along just outside the city walls toward the port of Kenchreai. Interestingly, each of these building was placed where travelers to Corinth would most notice them: From the sea at the two ports, as they stood majestically above the beaches, and too on main roads announcing their grander to all travelers along the Isthmus. Why there are so many great and intricate basilicas were built in Corinth between the late fifth and early sixth centuries is unknown. They might have been imperial propaganda, beautifying the capital city of Achaia as sponsored displays, or perhaps this denotes the growing power of the bishops and clergy and their growing abilities to influence local building programs.<sup>66</sup> Yet even with the destruction of all the pagan temples, all these basilicas were placed in the periphery of the city, most of them outside the late Roman walls. As discussed above, the city itself remained functioning until the late seventh century and beyond, so there is little evidence for a shift in the city or population shifts. Some scholars believe the exterior placement of these basilicas is not unique to Corinth, like in Athens, where it reflected pagan and Christian spheres of influence.

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<sup>65</sup> Krautheimer (1986) p.131-134

<sup>66</sup> Rothaus (2000) p. 95-99

It was common belief that pagans controlled the city centers and Christians the periphery until after the end of the fifth century, when paganism seemed to lose its final bits of support.<sup>67</sup> Perhaps though, the placement of these very extravagant basilicas on the fringe of the city wall represents a process of sacralizing the landscape and institutionalizing Christianity. It truly seems like a process of imperial Christianization of the landscape. And even though there is not literary evidence to support this theory, it is evident in the not only the destruction of temples throughout Corinth, but also location chosen for this basilica building project in the next century.

**Conclusion:**

As are many discussions of material culture, this negative argument for imperial Christianization is based largely on evidence that we do not have. Corinth has almost no surviving literary sources, and the archaeological material while abundant only tells us portions of history. Still, this model of Christianization emphasizes the imperial structure to the conversion of the empire, in that the citizens were not so much converted to Christianity through evangelical movements but economic factors, imperial pressure through laws and taxes and especially the closure of temples and lacking support for pagan practices.

In conclusion, imperial Christianization pushed Corinth to structurally accept the new religion of the empire through the demonstration of laws, support of Christianity economically and mainly through the transformation of local religious architecture. And even with the archaeological record missing many pieces, and a

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<sup>67</sup> Rothaus (2000) p. 99-104

lacking literary record—it is clear that based largely on the compilation of imperial edicts leading to the Theodosian Code and pressure from following emperors, Corinth was required to structurally change from places of rich paganism to an institutionalized version of Christianity. All the while though, keeping with many pagan traditions for centuries after these changes took place. It is almost less an argument about theology, and more of a systematic persecution of the pagans, not necessarily by violence, but instead by imperial edicts, governmental economic programs and empire-wide Christian building projects.

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