

In ancient times, there was no waterway for sailors to easily reach Athens if they were traveling to and from Greece's Ionian coast. A piece of land, called the Isthmus of Corinth, was "in the way."

Without a "shortcut," across the Isthmus, ships would have to sail from the Ionian Sea to the Aegean Sea by rounding the Peloponnesian Peninsula. Not only was that a long sail, it was a dangerous one. Gale-force winds often trouble sailors at Cape Matapan and Cape Maleas (with its treacherous shoreline).

So ... the ancients invented a way to help boats cross the Isthmus on land. They made a road - known as "The Diolkos" - which served as an overland passage between the relatively quiet waters of the Gulf of Corinth and the Saronic Gulf.

This image depicts what is left of the Diolkos (which today lies next to the Corinth Canal). We're not exactly sure when it was first created, but ancient writers referred to it.

Those writings reach-back to Aristophanes (at least) who lived between 446 BC and c. 386 BC. Scholars believe that his phrase "as fast as a Corinthian" referred to the Diolkos (and a Corinthian's ability to swiftly move from Corinth to Athens via the overland passage).

Ships carrying goods, or ships bound for war, could cross the Isthmus via the Diolkos. It measured somewhere between 3.7 to 5.3 miles (6 to 8.5 km) and likely remained in use from circa 600 BC to the middle of the first century AD.

To see how the system worked, we can watch a video animation. Although the narrator is speaking Greek, the images speak for themselves.

Today, the Diolkos - one of the world's archeological wonders - shows us how ancient people worked-out a major transportation problem. They may not have had today's technology - used to create the very narrow Corinthian Canal which now crosses the Isthmus of Corinth - but they certainly had ingenuity.

Click on the image for a much-better view.

Credits:

Image of the Diolkos online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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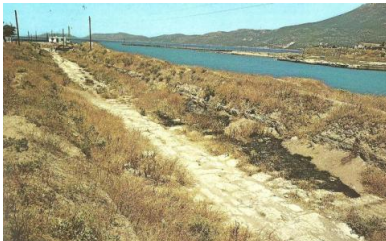
Corinth Canal on Opening Day

Image depicting the Corinth Canal Inauguration, an 1863 painting by Konstantinos Volanakis; online via Wikimedia Commons.

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Ancient Greece - Moving Ships Over Land

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