Kenchreai, Corinth’s prosperous port on the Saronic Gulf (fig. 13.1), is best known for its religion during the Roman Empire. Paul visited Kenchreai, perhaps regularly, during his Corinthian sojourn in the middle 1st century, and he spent time there before his departure to Ephesos with Aquila and Prisca (Acts 18:18). He most likely founded a house church there, and the deacon Phoebe delivered his letter to the Romans (16:1–2). Apart from the Christian presence, Roman Kenchreai was the home of several traditional cults. Pausanias observed sites and images sacred to Aphrodite, Poseidon, Isis, and Asklepios during his tour in the second half of the 2nd century (2.2.3). Around the same time, Apuleius wrote arguably the most important ancient account of personal conversion. The concluding chapter of his novel, set at Kenchreai, narrates how Lucius undergoes a physical transformation from asinine back into human shape and is initiated into the mysteries of Isis (Met. 10.25–11.25). In addition to this literary testimony, the archaeological and epigraphic records have produced evidence for cults of Dionysos and Pan and for magical practice. Although disparate and tantalizingly brief, these sources together reveal a vibrant religious life in the port.
Fig. 13.1. The Isthmus of Corinth (contour interval 100 m). Courtesy of the Kenchreai Excavations.