

# **“Egyptian Columns and Capitals”**

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in the Evolution of the Capitol

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## EGYPTIAN COLUMNS AND CAPITALS

The Lotus Flower Played an Important Part in the Evolution of the Capital

THE landscape of the valley of the Nile, with its long lines of fertile shores, its sweep of desert and cliffs of tawny red limestone, find a reflection in the flat-roofed temples with their many pillars and mighty gates. It was inevitable that Egyptian architecture should result in colossal masses of simple lines. The huge pillars represent a gradual evolution



The Lotus Bud or Papyrus Capital, representing a cluster of unopened buds of the lotus flower.

from the slender wooden porch pillars, tied round with the graceful lotus. They conventionalized in stone the fibre ropes that tied the plants to the posts and added later the stems and buds and even calyx of a full-blown flower. Other pillars represent the palm, or the cow-headed goddess Hathor.

Speaking generally, Egyptian capitals alone have no practical office, and this is in accord with their floral origin. Other capitals show an effort to strengthen the juncture of shaft and load. That is, they expand. The upper end of shaft is liberally enlarged and then the spare material cut away to smooth the passage from round shaft to angular mass above. This is most noticeable in the Saracenic, late Roman and thirteenth century Gothic. But in Egypt, in the bud-form of capital, the precaution is neglected or rejected. The block is square and as small as it can reasonably be, often only large enough to receive the

top of the lotus bud and sometimes smaller than the shaft itself. As we have already noted, the lotus lily of the Nile played a very important part in the life of the Egyptian. Speaking of its influence upon their Architecture, Mr. W. P. P. Longfellow, in his "The Column and the Arch," said: "It is all in accordance with what we know of the evolution of architecture among ancient peoples, Egyptians, Assyrians and Greeks alike, that when they came to develop monumental forms they should fix in solid material the semblance of these decorations." In the case of the Egyptians it was the lotus.

If we assume that previous to the dynasties of kings in Egypt there were many years of priestly rule, it is safe to conclude that many structures were erected as temples, or tombs, or memorials, by order of the priests. All of these have disappeared. The oldest pyramid is that at Sakkara, attributed to Tchoser of the Third Dynasty and consequently built about 4000 B.C.

The earliest example of Egyptian column is the De Morgan discovery, in 1894, at Abusir, near Cairo, of the tomb of Phtah Shepses, an official under Sahura, King of the Fifth Dynasty, about 3800 B.C. Connected with the pyramids was often a small temple. Near the pyramid of Kah-f-ra is a small temple containing a hall with two rows of plain



The Palm Capital, used as early as the Fifth Dynasty.



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Colonnaded Hall at Karnak with square pillars and columns with lotus-bud capitals.

square columns carrying plain lintels supporting the roof slabs. This dates about 3650 B.C. Another form of funeral architecture was the Mastaba or sepulture shrines of lesser men. Here we find the use of columns, both inside and out, and occasionally the simple forms of the Egyptian capital, the bud-form and the spreading.

Next in time to the Kah-f-ra pyramid we find the columns at Beni Hassam, ascribed to the Eleventh Dynasty, about 3000 B.C. The most significant feature is the treatment of the column, which has been cut into sixteen sides or facets. This is perhaps an evolution accomplished through the "desire to lighten the appearance of the square column by cutting off its angles and reducing it to an octagon" (see Statham, "History of Architecture," page 26). The hollowing of the sides naturally followed. These columns usually diminished from base to top. The capital is only a square slab. The large flat circular base stone is typical of the Egyptian column throughout its whole history.

Following this are certain columns found

at Bubastis, of the Twelfth Dynasty. Then after a period of fixity, came the great Pharaohs of the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties, with their great revival of building.

The early lotus buds were spread and made a crown about the base of the capital. The hanging stems enveloped the shaft in a sort of sheath. The grooves became shallower and then the shaft and capital grew round and smooth.

At Karnak or Meddinet Abu (about 1720 B.C.), in the hall of Thothmes III, we see the whole column as if it had been turned in a lathe, ready for the sculptor with his inscriptions and cartouches. They are larger at the top than at the bottom. Colors are everywhere plastered on, reds, yellows and blues mostly.

In the Hypostyle Hall, Karnak (about 1350 B.C.), is shown both styles of column; that with the spreading or bell-shaped capital and that with the elongated or bud-shaped. Some of these are 66 feet high and 12 feet in diameter. These two forms or orders



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Hypostyle at Karnak. The huge columns can be compared with the native in the middle foreground. Note the carving on the columns to the right and the bud-style capitals in the background.

of the Egyptian column remained essentially the same down to the rule of the Romans.

There developed, it is true, elaborate decorative details, among which may be included the placing of a human head below each face of the abacus, and the sculpturing of all kinds of inscriptions, designs and the like upon the surfaces. The liberal use of bright colors has already been noted. "This

profusion," declares Statham, "and total lack of reticence in the application of surface ornament is one among many other characteristics which compel us to class Egyptian architecture, in spite of the greatness of its scale and the impressiveness of its interior effects, as essentially a barbaric art."

The buildings of the early empire were constructed of materials quarried from the limestone hills that line the Nile from Cairo to Edfu.

The builders of the Twelfth Dynasty were more ambitious and used the red stone of Syene at the first cataract. The Ramessides who bordered the river from the first cataract to the Delta used the quarries above Edfu. They laid their shafts in drums or slices or built them in coursed masonry.

Just as there seems no reason to think of Egyptian architecture as being influenced by anything prior, so in Assyria, we can find nothing architecturally anterior.

There is an unique interest attaching to the buildings of Egypt and yet, because most of the characteristic forms have become obsolete, Egyptian architecture occupies no really important place in the story of modern architecture.

(photo caption) "Hypostyle at Karnak. The huge columns can be compared with the native in the middle foreground. Note the carving on the columns to the right and the bud-style capitals in the background. Ewing Galloway, N.Y."