

The Alexandrian Corinthian Capital and its Role in the Evolution of the Corinthian Order in Hellenistic, Roman, and Late Roman Architecture

**A Comparative Study
(3rd century BC - 7th century AD)**

Ahmed M. Bassioni

Access Archaeology





ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD
Summertown Pavilion
18-24 Middle Way
Summertown
Oxford OX2 7LG
www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978-1-80327-239-9
ISBN 978-1-80327-240-5 (e-Pdf)

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Acknowledgments

I dedicate this humble academic work to the memory of my grandfather; a historian with little luck but of great knowledge. Without him, I would have never been a fan of history or archaeology.

I am grateful to my professors, of both fields. To my supervisor, Prof. Mona Haggag, who believed in my work and challenged my capability of producing a dissertation like no other in the field of Classical archaeology and architecture. To Prof. Sahar Hamouda, Professor of English literature, who believed in me, and my persistence and hard work, for being a literature student who can excel in a totally different field.

I am also grateful for the works of Ronczweski, who was the first to discuss the Alexandrian Corinthian capitals one hundred years before the publication of my dissertation; B. Tkaczow and her marvelous work about the architecture of Kom El-Dikka; J. McKenzie and her masterpiece about Alexandrian architecture that inspired me to challenge the odds and over the same period on a much large scale of land; and finally Prof. P. Pensabene, whose book about Alexandrian architecture was the corner stone of my work and opened my eyes on a world of minute details that widened my perspective of the discussed subject.

“What is now proved was once only imagined.”

— William Blake

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Preface

The Corinthian capital design is one of the most decorative capitals in the history of architecture. Monuments spanning from the Classical period until modern day are decorated with these elegant capitals. They are still being used for both interior and exterior decorations, for public buildings and private residences. For more than a century, researchers were convinced – some of them still do – that since it was originated in Greece, it also evolved in Greece and spread into the Roman provinces.

The evolution of the Corinthian capital had taken many forms across the centuries. Each territory or kingdom had adapted certain models, which were suitable to their architectural taste. It is assumable that in the modern day, it is the canonical design from the early decades of the Roman Empire that is still being used worldwide.

The aims of this study are:

- Highlighting the Classical versions of the Corinthian capitals that were adapted in the Hellenistic period.
- Tracing the rise and evolution of the Corinthian capitals through Antiquity (the Classical, Hellenistic, Roman and Late Roman/Byzantine periods) in comparison to the Alexandrian versions of the Corinthian capital.
- How the Alexandrian capital, with its four Hellenistic types, played the prototypical role as a main influence; to be the base of the canonical Roman Orthodox capitals, and Late Roman/Byzantine capitals.
- The influence of the Alexandrian capitals on other Hellenistic territories.
- Raising the “Atiochean Question” about the origin of the Olympeion, its Hellenistic source of influence, and how it was mistakenly praised as the prototype for the capitals of the Roman Capitolium's third phase.
- Raising the “Regillian Question” and the relation between the Late Republican period (Sanctuary of the Great Gods), its conquests in the Eastern Mediterranean, and how Samothrace's Arsinoeion influenced the canonization of the Roman Orthodox Corinthian capital.
- The continuation of the usage of the Alexandrian models throughout Egypt during the Roman Imperial period, paralleling the Roman Orthodox and later Asiatic capital designs.
- The Early Byzantine period and how Alexandria (presented through the discoveries across Egypt) had an indirect influence in presenting several designs of the Corinthian and Corinthianized capitals across the Byzantine territories until the Arab Conquest and the fall of Egypt in AD 641.

This study will focus thoroughly on analyzing several examples of the Corinthian capitals at hand with a very accurate description of its motifs. Central helices, corner volutes, acanthus collars, fleuron, calyces, cauliculi and abacus will be the focus of this study. Each element will be analyzed regarding its proportions to the capital, design, origin of design and influences.

Ratios provided by Vitruvius and the analysis provided by Jones will be the cornerstone for basing the analysis and comparisons. Most capital at hand will be put on comparison with other examples and with the Vitruvian canon regarding the Corinthian capital. Also, studies provided by Pensabene in 1993, McKenzie in 2007 and Tkaczow in 2010 will efficiently support this comparative study, as references to the architectural discoveries in Alexandria and Egypt.

Previous Studies

The following references had discussed the Corinthian capital through different eras, locations/sites and aspects, each from their own perspective(s). However, each reference had tackled the Corinthian order partially. Almost all references had focused on the same Classical Corinthian capitals examples. Also, it

appears that most references had neglected the presence of a Hellenistic Alexandrian style. Mainland Greece and Asia Minor were the main focus for their examples regarding the Hellenistic architecture.

Sir Fletcher's *A History of Architecture* (1905) was among the very first to give examples; unfortunately, they were very basic. However, these examples were detailed in analyzing the capitals. Robertson's *A Handbook of Greek & Roman Architecture* (1929) had discussed examples of the Corinthian capitals in Greece, Asia Minor and Southern Italy, while focusing on the Athenian temple of Olympian Zeus. Fyfe's *Hellenistic Architecture* (1936) was probably the first to discuss Hellenistic monuments outside the Hellenic domain of Greece and Asia Minor. However, his focus was on Levantine coast. Dinsmoor's *Ancient Greece* (1950) had discussed examples similar to those already discussed by Robertson, with focus on the Athenian temple of Olympian Zeus. Lawrence's *Greek Architecture* (1996) was no different from Dinsmoor and Robertson regarding Hellenistic examples from Greece and Asia Minor.

As a result, the previous references had thoroughly given almost the same examples regarding the Classical Corinthian capital; however, very few details about the Hellenistic period, with focus on Mainland Greece and Asia Minor. The only common point of discussion is that these references had acknowledged the relation between the Athenian temple of Olympian Zeus and its effect on the architecture of the Roman temple of Jupiter Capitolinus as a Hellenistic element and its effect and spread through the Roman Imperial Period – a theory that was and still common among scholars, although Siwicki's *Architectural Restoration and Heritage in Imperial Rome* (2020) had refuted the theory entirely, which shall be discussed in details in Chapter II. Therefore, this is the first missing link between the Classical and Hellenistic Corinthian capitals in terms of Alexandria and its influence over the Athenian Temple of Olympian Zeus, which will lead to the second link regarding Roman architecture in the following chapters.

Winter's *Studies in Hellenistic Architecture* (2005), the 11th chapter 'From Greek Structure to Roman Ornament: The Columnar Order in Hellenistic Times' was the only proper reference that traced the evolution of the Classical Corinthian capitals to Hellenistic Corinthian capitals in regards to the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kingdoms, as well as mentioning the importance and influence of the Alexandrian architecture. However, Winter's study of Classical examples was just a surface-level study and was not detailed.

Judith McKenzie, through her two books, played one of the most important roles regarding the study of Alexandrian Hellenistic architecture. McKenzie's *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt* (2007) is probably the main of two references in this study, along with Pensabene's (1993). This book forms a link with the previous sources on Classical architecture and how it affected Alexandrian Hellenistic architecture. Although McKenzie discusses the Corinthian capital across the Hellenistic, Roman and Late Roman period, the connection is not very focused, with few examples regarding Late Roman capitals and fewer regarding Roman capitals. McKenzie's *Architecture of Petra* (1990) played the missing link between Nabataean and Pompeian architecture, with Alexandria as a source of Influence. Via this study, we could trace the influence of Alexandrian Hellenistic architectural presence in Pompeii prior to the Roman Annexation of Egypt.

The two books of Barbara Tkaczow: *The Topography of Ancient Alexandria* (1993) and *Architectural Styles of Ancient Alexandria: Elements of Architectural Decorations from Polish Excavations at Kom El-Dikka* (2010) will be base for examples regarding the three periods of Ancient Alexandria.

Roman architecture researchers seem to focus on Etruscan and Italo-Hellenistic architecture starting from the examples in Magna Graecia and jump directly to the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus as the new source of influence, without mentioning the evolution of the Hellenistic Corinthian capital. MacDonald's *The Architecture of the Roman Empire* (1982) focuses on the imperial architecture, mainly the Parthenon and Hadrian's contributions. Sear's *Roman Architecture* (1982) and its newly published second edition (2021) conclude the beginning of the Corinthian influence from the Late Republic period and onto the example of Jupiter Caitolinus with a hint referring back to the Athenian Temple of Olympian Zeus. Stamper's *The Architecture of Roman Temples* (2005) seems to be focusing more in Imperial Architecture and the rise of the Orthodox capital without a reference to the origin rather than a hint to the Olympian Zeus temple. Stamper's

article in *A Companion of Roman Architecture* traces and focuses on the rise of the Roman Orthodox Corinthian capital.

It seems that few researchers had studied the Italo-Hellenistic Corinthian capitals and its influence over Roman architecture, along that of the Capitoline/Olympian capital. Even when it comes to the latter example, they seem to use the Capitoline capital as a cornerstone without referring to its origins and evolution.

Coptic capital evidences from all over Egypt will be put to comparison. Gabra's *Coptic Monasteries* (2002) is a guideline study for Coptic churches and monasteries across Egypt. Meinardus, *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity* (2002) is another guideline mentioning some churches and capitals with reference to Corinthian capitals.

Jackson's *Byzantine & Romanesque Architecture*, Vol. 1 & 2 (1975) and McKenzie's *Architecture of Alexandria* (2007) show examples of capitals from Constantinople and various cities across Europe under Byzantine influence respectively. However, none traces the origins of the capitals, except for McKenzie and on a surface level – when it comes to Late Roman capitals.

As for the third chapter, the problem with Byzantine monuments is an artistic problem. Due to the nature of Christianity and its main impose over the Roman Empire, the focus shifted on Christian figures and iconography more than and rather than its architectural marvel. The importance of columnar orders – as a study – has reduced, although the artistic representations did not whither or reduce. Capitals had improved and new sub-orders emerged (i.e. basket and imposed). It is the problem of researchers that they neglected studying such architectural elements.

Also, one of the most important books is Pensabene's "Reportorio d'arte dell'Egitto Graeco-Romano." *Elementi architettonici di Alessandria e di altri siti egiziani*. Serie C: 3 (1993). Although being almost 30 years old to our date, this book and its catalogue hosts one of the largest numbers of architectural fragments unearthed in Alexandria and Egypt. It is considered essential to this study, where it would be very difficult to trace the Corinthian capital evolution in Egypt if not for it.