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
Table of Contents

Preface ................................................................................................................................................................... 3

Introduction .................................................................................................................................................................. 6

Chapter I:
The Creation of the Alexandrian Corinthian Capital in Context of Hellenistic Architecture ................. 24
Corinthian Capitals of the Hellenistic World (Excluding Egypt) ................................................................. 13
The Alexandrian Corinthian Capital: Typology and Analysis ........................................................................ 24
Corinthian, Corinthianized, and Blocked-Out Capsules from the Ptolemaic and Nabataean Kingdoms. 46

Chapter II:
Italo-Hellenistic, Late Republican, and Roman Imperial Corinthian Capsules ........................................... 62
Italo-Hellenistic and Roman Republican Corinthian Capsules – Examples from Rome and Italy ............ 52
Augustan Architecture and the Rise of the Canonical Roman Orthodox Corinthian Capital ............. 81
Alexandrian and Egyptian Corinthian Capsules between 1st Century BC and 1st Century AD ............... 86
Post-Augustan Corinthian Capsules until the 4th Century AD .................................................................... 101
Alexandrian and Egyptian Roman Corinthian Capsules ........................................................................... 117

Chapter III:
Late Antique Corinthian Capsules from Alexandria and the Byzantine World ....................................... 131
Corinthian, Corinthianized, and Corinthian-related Capsules in Late Antique Alexandria and Egypt .... 132
The Alexandrian Corinthian Capsules in Byzantine Architecture ............................................................. 152
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................................... 167

Bibliography ......................................................................................................................................................... 167

Appendices ........................................................................................................................................................ 171
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“What is now proved was once only imagined.”

— William Blake
List of Figures

Figure 1. A reconstruction of the Corinthian capital from the Temple of Bassae, Greece ................................................................. 18
Figure 2. A reconstruction of a Corinthian capital from the Monument of Lysicrates, Athens, Greece .......................................... 18
Figure 3. A reconstruction of a Corinthian capital from the Tholos of Delphi, Greece ................................................................. 19
Figure 4. A reconstruction of a Corinthian capital from the Tholos of Olymia, Greece ................................................................. 19
Figure 5. A reconstruction of a Corinthian capital from the Temple of Athena Alea, Tegea, Asia Minor .................................. 20
Figure 6. A reconstruction of a Corinthian capital from the Temple of Zeus at Nemea, Asia Minor ........................................... 20
Figure 7. A reconstruction of a Corinthian capital from the Tholos of Epidaurus, Greece .............................................................. 21
Figure 8. A reconstruction of a Corinthian capital from the Philippium, Macedonia, Greece ............................................................ 21
Figure 9. A sketch of the Corinthian capital of the Temple of Apollo Didyma .................................................................................. 25
Figure 10. A Corinthian capital from the temple of Zeus Olbius ........................................................................................................... 26
Figure 11. A sketch of the Corinthian capital of the Temple of Zeus Olympius .................................................................................. 26
Figure 12. A sketch of the Corinthian capital from the Hypostyle Hall in Ai-Khanoum ............................................................... 28
Figure 13. A Corinthian capital from the Propylon of Ai-Khanoum ................................................................................................. 28
Figure 14. A Corinthian capital from the Tomb at Belevi ................................................................................................................... 29
Figure 15. A sketch of the Corinthian capital from the Propylon at Miletus ..................................................................................... 29
Figure 16. A sketch of the Corinthian capital from the Monument of Laodike .................................................................................. 30
Figure 17. A sketch of the Corinthian capital of the Type I Alexandrian Corinthian capital .......................................................... 32
Figures 18-21. Type I Alexandrian Corinthian capitals from the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria (concave helices with cauliculi) .................................................................................................................................................. 34
Figure 22. The Type I Alexandrian Corinthian capital at the Khartoum Square in Alexandria .......................................................... 35
Figure 23. A Corinthian pilaster from the Mostafa Pasha Necropolis in Alexandria ........................................................................... 35
Figures 24-25. Type I Alexandrian Corinthian capital from the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria (concave helices without cauliculi) ........................................................................................................................................... 35
Figures 26-28. Type I Alexandrian Corinthian capital from the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria (convex helices with cauliculi) ......................................................................................................................................... 36
Figures 29-33. Free Type I Alexandrian Corinthian capitals/pilasters from the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria ......... 37
Figures 34. An Egyptianized Type I Alexandrian Corinthian capital from the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria ...... 38
Figure 35. A sketch of the Type II Alexandrian Corinthian capital .................................................................................................. 38
Figures 36-39. Type II Alexandrian Corinthian capitals from the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria ............................. 38
Figure 40. An Egyptianized Type II Alexandrian Corinthian capital from the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria ...... 39
Figure 41. A sketch of the Type III Alexandrian Corinthian capital .................................................................................................. 39
Figure 42. A double Type III Alexandrian Corinthian capital from the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria ................................. 40
Type 43. A mixed Type III Alexandrian Corinthian capital from the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria ................................. 41
Figure 44. A sketch of the Type IV Alexandrian Corinthian capital .................................................................................................. 41
Figure 45. A Type IV Alexandrian Corinthian capital from the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria .............................................. 42
Figure 46A-B. A Type IV Alexandrian Corinthian capital with a Gorgon head from the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria .............................. 42
Figure 47. Type IV Alexandrian Corinthian capital with miander collar from the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria ................. 43
Figure 48. A fragment of a Type IV Alexandrian Corinthian capital with a miander collar from the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria ........................................................................................................................................ 43
Figure 49. A reduced Type IV Alexandrian Corinthian capital with a miander collar from the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria ........................................................................................................................................ 43
Figure 50. A two-block Type I Alexandrian Corinthian capital from the site of the Alexandrian Sarapeion ........................................ 50
Figures 51-52. Two Type I Alexandrian Corinthian capitals from the construction site of Club Mohamed Ali, currently at the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria .......................................................................................................................... 44
Figures 53-54. Reconstructions of the lower and upper levels of the Thalamegos of Ptolemy IV with their Corinthian capitals ........................................................................................................................................ 45
Figure 55. A Type I Alexandrian Corinthian capital from the Ptolemaic Basilica at Hermopolis Magna, currently at the Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria ........................................................................................................................................ 46
Figure 56. A Type I Alexandrian Corinthian capital with convex helices from Edfu ........................................................................ 47
Figure 57. A Type II Alexandrian Corinthian capital fragment from Edfu ..................................................................................... 47
Figure 58. A Type IV Floral Corinthian capital fragment from Edfu .............................................................................................. 47
Figures 59 A-B. A double Type III Alexandrian Corinthian capital from Edfu ............................................................................. 48
Figure 60. A Type I.A Free Alexandrian Corinthian capital from the procession at the Temple of Dandara ........................................ 48
Figures 61-62. Two Type III Alexandrian Corinthian capitals from Dandara .................................................................................. 48
Figure 63. A Type III Alexandrian Corinthian capital from Kom Ombo .......................................................................................... 49
Figure 64. A Type I Alexandrian Corinthian capital with convex helices without caulciuli from the Palazzo delle Colonne in Ptolemais, Cyrenaica ........................................................................................................................................ 49
Figures 65-66. Two Type I Alexandrian Corinthian capitals from the Palazzo delle Colonne in Ptolemais, Cyrenaica ................. 50
Figure 67. A proto-Italo- Corinthian capital from the Palazzo delle Colonne in Ptolemais, Cyrenaica ............................................. 50
Figure 68. A reconstruction of the Type III Alexandrian Corinthian capital from the Palazzo delle Colonne in Ptolemais, Cyrenaica ........................................................................................................................................ 50
Figure 69. A Type II Alexandrian Corinthian capital from the Palazzo delle Colonne in Ptolemais, Cyrenaica ............................. 50
Figures 70-71. Reconstructions of the Rotunda of Arsinoe at the Sanctuary of the Gods, Samothrace .............................................. 51
Figure 72. A reconstruction of the Type I modified Alexandrian Corinthian capital from the Propylon of Ptolemy II at the Sanctuary of the Gods, Samothrace ........................................................................................................................................ 52
Figure 73. A reconstruction of the Type I Floral Corinthian capital from El-Khazneh at Petra ........................................ 53
Figure 74. A Type I Floral Corinthian capital from El-Khazneh at Petra ................................................................. 53
Figure 75. An upper capital fragment of a Type I.A Floral Corinthian capital from the Temple of Winged Lions, Petra .... 54
Figure 76. An upper capital fragment of a Type I.B Floral Corinthian capital from the Temple of Winged Lions, Petra .... 54
Figure 77. A Type III/Floral Alexandrian Corinthian capital from Petra .................................................................... 54
Figure 78. A reconstruction of the Type II Floral Corinthian capital ........................................................................... 55
Figure 79. A Type II Floral Corinthian capital from El-Khazneh, Petra .................................................................... 55
Figure 80. A sketch of the Type I Nabataean/Blocked-Out capital ............................................................................... 55
Figure 81. A sketch of the Type II Nabataean/Blocked-Out capital ............................................................................... 55
Figure 82. The upper level of El-Deir/The Monastery at Petra with its Type II Nabataean/Blocked-Out capitals .......... 55
Figure 83. A Type II Nabataean/Blocked-Out capital from a site near Wadi Mousa, Jordan ........................................ 56
Figure 84. Tomb B-6 at Hegra ...................................................................................................................................... 56
Figure 85. Tomb B-5 at Hegra ...................................................................................................................................... 56
Figure 86. Tomb B-7 at Hegra ...................................................................................................................................... 56
Figure 87. Tomb IGN 100 at Hegra ............................................................................................................................ 57
Figure 88. Tomb IGN 110 at Hegra ............................................................................................................................ 57
Figure 89. A sketch of the Type I Egyptian Composite capital ....................................................................................... 57
Figure 90. A sketch of the Type II Egyptian Composite capital ....................................................................................... 57
Figure 91. Helix-influenced Egyptian Composite capital from Alexandria ................................................................. 57
Figure 92. Egyptian Composite capitals from the Temple of Hathor ........................................................................... 58
Figure 93. Egyptian Composite capitals from the Pronaos at the Birth House in Philae .............................................. 59
Figure 94. Egyptian Composite capitals from the Second Eastern Colonnade at the Temple of Isis in Philae .......... 59
Figure 95. Egyptian Composite capitals from the Hypostyle Hall and Eastern Colonnade at the Temple of Horus in Edfu 60
Figure 96. An Egyptian Composite capital from the Outer Hypostyle Hall of the Temple of Horus, Edfu .................. 60
Figure 97. An Egyptian Composite capital from the Front Courtyard Hall of the Temple of Horus, Edfu .................... 60
Figure 98. Temple of Haroeis and Sobek at Kom Ombo .............................................................................................. 60
Figure 99. An Egyptian Composite capital from the Outer Hypostyle Hall of the Temple of Temple of Haroeis and Sobek at Kom Ombo ................................................................. 60
Figure 100. A reconstruction of the Corinthian capital from the Temple of Peace at Paestum .................................... 61
Figure 101. A reconstruction of the Italo-Corinthian capital from the Antiquarium at Solanto in Palermo ................ 65
Figure 102. An Italo-Corinthian capital fragment from Taranto ..................................................................................... 65
Figure 103. A reconstruction of an incomplete (probably an Italo-Corinthian capital) from Porta Nocera 65
Figure 104. An Italo-Corinthian capital from Ravenna 66
Figures 105-6. Two Italo-Corinthian capitals (one incomplete, the other finished and intake) from the House of Augustus at Rome 66
Figure 107. A reconstruction of an Italo-Corinthian capital from the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli 66
Figures 108-9. Two Itlao-Corinthian capitals from Rimini 67
Figure 110. An Italo-Corinthian capital from Bologna 67
Figure 111. An Italo-Corinthian capital from Verona 67
Figure 112. An Italo-Corinthian capital from Milan 67
Figure 113. An Italo-Corinthian capital from Aquileia 67
Figure 114. A reconstruction of an Italo-Corinthian capital from the Temple of Jupiter at Pompeii 68
Figure 115. A reconstruction of an Italo-Corinthian capital from the Basilica at Pompeii 68
Figure 116. An Italo-Corinthian capital from the Sanctuary of Apollo at Pompeii 69
Figure 117. A reconstruction of an Italo-Corinthian capital from the Sanctuary of Apollo at Pompeii 69
Figure 118. A reconstruction of an Italo-Corinthian capital from the House of the Faun at Pompeii 70
Figures 119-120. A reconstruction of two Italo-Corinthian capital from Boscoreale 70
Figure 121. A Second-Style Wall-Painting of a tholos with Corinthian capitals, Oecus 43, House of Labyrinth, Pompeii 71
Figure 122. A Second-Style Wall-Painting of a tholos with Corinthian capitals, Cubiculum 16, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii 71
Figure 123. A Second-Style Wall-Painting of a tholos with Corinthian capitals, Cubiculum M, Villa of Fannius Sinistor 72
Figures 124-125. Two Type IV Alexandrian Corinthian capital from Second-Style Wall-Painting styles at Pompeii 72
Figure 126. A set of Type IV Alexandrian/Proto-Composite capital from Second-Style Wall-Painting style at Boscoreale 72
Figure 127. A Late-Hellenistic Corinthian capital from the Round Temple by the Tiber, Rome 75
Figure 128. An Augustan Corinthian capital from the Round Temple by the Tiber, Rome 76
Figure 129. A lower drum of a Corinthian capital from Temple B, Largo Argentia, Rome 76
Figure 130. A reconstruction of a Corinthian capital from the Sanctuary of Fortuna Pirimigenia, Palestrina 76
Figure 131. A reconstruction of a Corinthian capital from the Temple of Castor and Pollux, Cori 77
Figure 132. Corinthian capitals from the Temple of Venus Genetrix, Rome 77
Figure 133. Denarius, 78 BC, Rome. RRC 385/1 79
Figure 134. Denarius, 43 BC, Rome. RRC 487/2b 79
Figure 135. Denarius, 43 BC, Rome. RRC 487/1 79
Figure 136. Denarius, AD 68–9, Gaul and Spain. RIC I second edition, Civil Wars 128a 79
Figure 137. A Palm-Leaf capital from the Tomb at Mylasa ................................................................................................................. 81
Figure 138. A reconstruction of a Palm-Leaf capital from the Tower of Winds, Athens ................................................................. 81
Figure 139. A reconstruction of a Corinthian capital from Porticus Metelli, Rome ................................................................. 82
Figure 140. A reconstruction of a Corinthian capital from the Temple of Apollo Palatinus, Rome ........................................ 83
Figure 141. Corinthian capitals from the Temple of Apollo Sosianus, Rome ................................................................. 83
Figure 142. A reconstruction of a Corinthian capital from the Temple of Mars Ultor, Rome ........................................ 84
Figure 143. A reconstruction of a Corinthian capital from the Temple of Castor, Rome ................................................................. 84
Figure 144. An Italo-Corinthian capital from the Monument of Obulaccus, Sarsina ............................................................. 85
Figure 145. An Italo-Corinthian capital from the Pian di Bezzo Necropolis, Sarsina ............................................................. 85
Figures 146-147. Two Italo-Corinthian capitals from Villa A Oplontis, Boscoreale ............................................................. 86
Figure 148-9. Two Italo-Corinthian capitals from the Temple of Venus, Pompeii ............................................................. 87
Figure 150. A Corinthian capital from the Maison Carrée, Nîmes, France ................................................................. 88
Figure 151. A reconstruction of a Floral Corinthian capital from the Temple of Diana, Nîmes, France ................................................................. 88
Figure 152. A Corinthian capital from the Temple of Diana, Ébora, Portugal ................................................................. 88
Figure 153. A reconstruction of a Corinthian capital from the Temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath, England ................................................................. 89
Figure 154. A Corinthian capital from Templo Romano, Cordoba, Spain ................................................................. 89
Figure 155. Corinthian capitals of the Arch at Rimini, Italy ................................................................. 90
Figure 156. Corinthian capitals of the Arch at Aosta, Turin, Italy ........................................................................... 90
Figure 157. Corinthian capitals of the Arch at Susa, Turin, Italy ........................................................................... 90
Figure 158. Corinthian capitals of the Arch at Sergii, Pula, Coratia ........................................................................... 90
Figure 159. Corinthian capitals of the Arch at Barà, Spain ........................................................................... 91
Figure 160. Monument of the Julii and the Arch, Glanum, Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, France ................................................................. 91
Figure 161. A Corinthian capital from the Odeion of Agrippa, Athens, Greece ................................................................. 92
Figure 162. A reconstruction of the Temple of Rome and Augustus at Ancyra, Asia Minor ................................................................. 92
Figure 163. A set of Corinthian capital from the Temple of Jupiter-Baal, Baalbek ................................................................. 93
Figure 164A-B. Two Corinthian capitals and a Corinthian pilaster from the Temple of Bel, Palmyra ................................................................. 94
Figure 165. A Floral capital from Villa Medici, Rome ........................................................................... 95
Figure 166. A Floral capital from the National Roman Museum ........................................................................... 95
Figure 167. A Floral capital from the Museum of Naples ........................................................................... 95
Figure 168. A capital from the Museum of Aquileia ........................................................................... 95
Figure 169. A Floral capital reused at the Basilica of St. Clemente, Rome ................................................................. 95
Figures 170-171. Two Floral capitals from the Roman Antiquarium................................................................. 95
Figures 172-174. Type III Floral/Alexandrian Corinthian capitals from Pompeii ...................................................... 95
Figure 175. A two-blocked Floral Corinthian capital from Seville, Spain ............................................................... 95
Figure 176. A Type IV Alexandrian capital from the Temple of Mars Ultor, Rome .................................................. 95
Figure 177. A Type IV Alexandrian/Floral Corinthian capital from Pompeii .......................................................... 95
Figure 178. A sketch of Type IV Alexandrian/Floral Corinthian capital from the Arch at Susa, Italy ......................... 95
Figures 179. A sketch of Type IV Alexandrian/Floral Corinthian capital from the Lateran Museum, Rome ............ 95
Figure 180. A sketch describing the design of helices used for Floral capitals in Rome .......................................... 97
Figures 181-184. Several Floral Corinthian capitals from the Augustan period .......................................................... 97
Figures 185-187. Type I Alexandrian Corinthian capitals from the Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria .................. 99
Figures 188-190. Type II Alexandrian Corinthian capitals from the Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria ............ 99
Figure 191. A Type III Alexandrian Corinthian capital from the Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria .................. 100
Figure 192. A Proto-Asiatic Corinthian capital from Hermopolis Magna ................................................................. 100
Figure 193. A two-block Blocked-Out capital from the Temple of Augustus, Philae .................................................... 101
Figure 193A. A Blocked-Out capital from the Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria .................................................. 101
Figure 194. A Type III Alexandrian Corinthian capital from Philae ................................................................. 101
Figure 194A. A sketch of a Type III Alexandrian Corinthian capital from Armant, Egypt ........................................ 101
Figure 195. A medallion with a representation of the Roman Capitolium with Corinthian capitals ............................. 103
Figure 196. A fragment of a Corinthian capital unearthed at the site of the Roman Capitolium ............................... 103
Figure 197. A relief of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius and the Roman Capitolium in the Background .......................... 103
Figures 198-199. A Corinthian capital and two Corinthian pilasters from the Colosseum, Rome ......................... 104
Figure 200. A Corinthian capital from the Temple of Deified Vespasion, Rome .................................................. 104
Figure 201. A Corinthian capital from the Forum of Nerva .................................................................................. 105
Figures 202-204. Two Corinthian capitals and a Corinthian pilaster from the Pantheon, Rome ............................. 105
Figure 205. Corinthian capitals from the Canopus representation at Hadrian’s Villa, Tivoli .................................... 107
Figure 206. A Corinthian capital from the Temple of Deified Hadrian, Rome ..................................................... 107
Figure 207. Temple of Faustina and Antoninus Pius, Rome ................................................................................. 107
Figure 208. An Asiatic Corinthian capital from the Forum of Ostia ....................................................................... 107
Figure 209. An Asiatic Corinthian capital from Brindisi, Italy ............................................................................ 107
Figure 210. A sketch of two Corinthian capitals from the Baths of Diocletian, Rome ......................................... 108
Figure 211. A spolia Corinthian capital from the Arch of Constantinople, Rome .................................................. 109
Figures 212-213. Corinthian pilasters and a Corinthian capital from the Palace of Diocletian at Split, Croatia .......................... 109
Figure 214. A Corinthian capital from the Library of Hadrian, Athens .................................................................................. 110
Figure 215. A Corinthian capital and a pilaster from the Gate of Hadrian, Athens ................................................................. 110
Figure 216. Corinthian capitals from the final version of the Olympieum, Athens ................................................................. 110
Figure 217. A reconstruction of a Corinthian capital from the monument of Philopappus, Athens ........................................... 111
Figure 218. Corinthian pilasters from the Nuphæum of Herodes Atticus, Olympia, Greece ....................................................... 111
Figure 219. Two Corinthian capitals from the Temple of Deified Trajan, Pergamon ............................................................... 111
Figure 220. A Corinthian capital and a pilaster from the Temple of Hadrian, Ephesus ............................................................ 111
Figure 221. A Corinthian capital from the Celsus Library, Ephesus ....................................................................................... 112
Figure 222. A Corinthian capital and a pilaster from the Gate of Hadrian, Ephesus ............................................................... 112
Figure 223. A Corinthian capital from Temple N1, Side, Asia Minor .................................................................................... 112
Figure 224. Corinthian capitals from the Imbriogon, Cilicia, Asia Minor ............................................................................. 113
Figure 225. Two Corinthian capitals and a pilaster from Temple Tomb 1, Cilicia, Asia Minor .................................................. 113
Figure 226. Corinthian capitals and a pilaster from the Temple of Baachus, Baalbek ............................................................. 113
Figures 227-229. Two Corinthian pilasters and a capital from the Temple of Bel, Palmyra ......................................................... 114
Figure 230. A Corinthian capital from the Sanctuary of Zeus, Jerash, Jordon ................................................................. 114
Figure 231. A Corinthian capital from the Sanctuary of Artemis, Jerash, Jordon ................................................................. 114
Figure 232. Corinthian semi-capitals from the Arch of Hadrian, Jerash, Jordon ................................................................. 114
Figure 233. A reconstruction of a Corinthian capital from Bostra ......................................................................................... 115
Figure 234. A Corinthian capital from the Thermal Basilica, Tyre, Lebanon ................................................................. 115
Figure 235. A Corinthian capital from the Byzantine Martyrium, Tyre, Lebanon ................................................................. 115
Figure 236. A Corinthian capital from the Temple of Venus, Baalbek .................................................................................. 115
Figures 237A-B. A Corinthian capital and a pilaster from the Arch of Septimius Severus, Lepcis Magna, Lybia ......................... 117
Figure 238. Two Corinthian capitals from the Basilica of Septimius Severus, Lepcis Magna, Lybia ........................................... 117
Figure 239. A Corinthian capital from the Severan Basilica, Lepcis Magna, Lybia ................................................................. 117
Figures 240-244. Reconstructions of Palm-Leaf capitals from Lepcis Magna (Lybia), Athens (Greece), Smyrna (Asia Minor), Pergamon and Tripolitania (Lybia) ................................................................................................................. 117
Figure 245. A reconstruction of the Type I.A Free Corinthian capital from Alexandria .......................................................... 119
Figures 246-248. Type I.A Free Corinthian capital from Alexandria, Dandara, and Edfu (Egypt) ............................................... 119
Figure 249. A reconstruction of the Type I.B Free Corinthian capital from Alexandria .......................................................... 119
Figures 250-251. Type I.B Free Corinthian capital from Hermopolis Magna and Alexandria (Egypt) .......................................... 119
Figure 252. A reconstruction of Type I.C Free Corinthian capital from Alexandria ................................................................. 120
Figures 253-254. Two Type I.C Free Corinthian capital from Luxor and Alexandria (Egypt) ......................................................... 120
Figures 255-256. Two Type III Alexandrian Corinthian capitals from Dandara and Philae .......................................................... 121
Figures 257-273. Several Asiatic Corinthian capitals of different designs from Alexandria ......................................................... 121-124
Figures 274-276. Roman coins with representations of the Roman phase of the Alexandrian Sarapeion ........................................ 125
Figure 277. A fragment of an acanthus leaf of a Corinthian capital from the site of the Alexandrian Sarapeion ................. 126
Figure 278. The capital of the Column of Diocletian (Pompey’s Pillar) at the site of the Alexandrian Sarapeion .......... 126
Figures 279-281. Several Asiatic Corinthian capitals from the Roman Baths at Kom El-Dekka, Alexandria ......................... 127
Figure 282. An Egyptianized Type III Alexandrian Corinthian capital at Kom El-Shuqaffah Necropolis, Alexandria ...... 127
Figure 283. Main monuments of the Roman version of the Forum of Hermopolis Magna, Egypt ................................................. 128
Figures 284A/B-285. Corinthian capitals from the Forum at Hermopolis Magna, Egypt ............................................................ 129
Figure 286. Type I Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital, Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria ....................................................... 134
Figure 287. Type I Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital, Coptic Museum, Cairo ............................................................................ 134
Figures 288. Type I Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital, Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria ....................................................... 135
Figure 289-290. Type I Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital, St. Mina/Abo Mina, Alexandria ............................................................ 135
Figures 291-292. Type II Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital, Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria ................................................. 135
Figure 293. Type II Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital, St. Mina/Abo Mina, Alexandria .............................................................. 135
Figure 294. Type II Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital, Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria ....................................................... 135
Figure 295. Type II Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital, St. Mina/Abo Mina, Alexandria .............................................................. 135
Figure 296. Type III Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital, St. Mina/Abo Mina, Alexandria .............................................................. 136
Figure 297. Type III Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital, Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria ....................................................... 136
Figure 298. Type III Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital, reused at the Mosque of El-Nasser ibn Qalawon, Cairo ................... 136
Figures 299-300. Type III Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital and lower fragment, St. Mina/Abo Mina, Alexandria ................ 136
Figure 301. Locally produced Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital from Fayoum, Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria .......... 137
Figure 302. Locally produced Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital from Bawit, Louvre Museum, Paris ............................... 137
Figures 303-305. Wide-Trapizoid Four-Leaf Capitals, Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria ....................................................... 138
Figure 306. Narrow-Trapizoid Four-Leaf Capital, Coptic Museum, Cairo .............................................................................. 139
Figure 307. Narrow-Trapizoid Four-Leaf Capital, Qalawon Complex, Cairo ................................................................. 139
Figure 308. Narrow-Trapizoid Four-Leaf Capital, Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria ....................................................... 139
Figures 309-310. Narrow-Trapizoid Four-Leaf Capitals, Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria .............................................. 139
Figure 311. Narrow-Trapizoid Four-Leaf Capital, Coptic Museum, Cairo ............................................................................. 139
Figures 312-313. Wide-Trapizoid Four-Leaf Capitals, Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria ................................................................. 140
Figure 314. Narrow-Trapizoid Four-Leaf Capital, Wadi Natrun, Fayoum .................................................................................... 140
Figures 315. Simplified Four-Leaf Capital from Bawit, Louvre Museum, Paris ........................................................................... 140
Figure 316. Simplified Four-Leaf Capital from Bawit, Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria .............................................................. 140
Figure 317. Simplified Four-Leaf Capital from Saqqara, Coptic Museum, Cairo ........................................................................ 140
Figure 318. Cylindrical-form Four-Leaf capital from Bawit, Coptic Museum, Cairo .................................................................. 140
Figure 319. Cylindrical-form Four-Leaf Capital, Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria ................................................................. 140
Figure 320. Cylindrical-form Four-Leaf Capital, Apa-Geremais Monastery, Saqqara ................................................................. 140
Figure 321. Cylindrical-form Four-Leaf Capital, Kom Obmo Basilica ....................................................................................... 141
Figure 322. Cylindrical-form Four-Leaf Capital, Apa-Geremais Monastery, Saqqara ................................................................. 141
Figure 323. Cylindrical-form Four-Leaf Capital, Temple of Hathor, Dandara ............................................................................ 141
Figures 324. Alexandrian-Influenced capital, Sultan Hassan Madrasa ...................................................................................... 142
Figures 325. Alexandrian-Influenced capital, Bawit .................................................................................................................. 142
Figures 326. Alexandrian-Influenced capital, Saqqara ............................................................................................................. 142
Figures 327-329. Alexandrian-Influenced capital, Graeco-Roman Museum ............................................................................... 142
Figure 330. Alexandrian-Influenced capital, Coptic Museum ................................................................................................. 142
Figures 331-334. All-Acanthus capitals from Hermopolis Magna ......................................................................................... 143
Figure 335. All-Acanthus capital, Coptic Museum, Cairo ........................................................................................................... 143
Figure 336. All-Acanthus capital from Bahnasa, Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria ................................................................. 143
Figures 337-339. All-Acanthus capitals, Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria ................................................................. 143
Figure 340. Impost block from Kom El-Dikka, Alexandria ......................................................................................................... 144
Figure 341. Impost capital from Mosque of El-Nasser ibn Qalawon, Cairo .................................................................................. 144
Figure 342. Impost capital, Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria ............................................................................................... 144
Figure 343. Impost capital, Coptic Museum, Cairo .................................................................................................................... 144
Figure 344. Basket capital, Louvre Museum, Paris ..................................................................................................................... 144
Figure 345. Melon capital, Coptic Museum, Cairo ....................................................................................................................... 144
Figure 346. Bizonal capital with Ram Heads, Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria ................................................................. 145
Figure 347. Bizonal capital with Ram Heads, Coptic Museum, Cairo ....................................................................................... 145
Figure 348. Bizonal capital with vegetal decorations, Coptic Museum, Cairo ........................................................................ 145
Figure 349. Bizonal capitals with two Eagles, Coptic Museum, Cairo ....................................................................................... 145
Figure 350. Bizonal capital with anthropomorphic representations (Green Man), Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria 145
Figure 351. Palm-Leaf capital with acanthus collar, Graeco-Roman Museum, Alexandria ........................................ 146
Figure 352. Simplified Palm-Leaf capital, Wadi Natrum .......................................................... 146
Figure 353. Palm-Leaf capital, Church of St. Sabas, Alexandria .................................................. 146
Figures 354-355. Wind-Blown capital, Coptic Museum, Cairo .................................................. 146
Figure 356. Interior of the White Monastery, Sohag ................................................................. 147
Figure 357. Stelae of Apa Shenoute, the Metropolitan Museum ........................................... 147
Figure 358. Upper niche on the interior of the White Monastery, Sohag ................................ 147
Figures 359-370. Capitals and pilasters from the interior of the Red Monastery, Sohag ........ 148-150
Figures 371-372. A Basket and a Melon capital from the Monastery of Apa Apollo in Bawit, Louvre Museum, Paris ........ 151
Figures 373-374. Two Basket capitals from the Monastery of Apa Jeremiah in Saqqara, Coptic Museum, Cairo ............ 151
Figures 375-376. Two Palm-Leaf capitals from the Monastery of Apa Jeremiah in Saqqara, Coptic Museum, Cairo ......... 152
Figures 377. An Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital from the garden of Hagia Sophia, Constantinople ......................... 155
Figure 378. A reconstruction of the Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital of the Column of Marcian, Constantinople ........... 155
Figure 379. The Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital of the Column of Aelia Eudoxia, Constantinople ................................. 155
Figure 380. An Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital from the Church of Theotokos Kyriotissa, Constantinople .................. 156
Figure 381. An Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital from Basilica A, Macedonia, Greece ...................... 156
Figure 382. An Asiatic-Based Corinthian capital from the so-called Sultan Cistern, Constantinople ......................... 156
Figure 383. Four-Leaf capital from the garden of Hagia Sophia, Constantinople ......................... 157
Figure 384. Four-Leaf capital from the Basilica Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy ......................... 157
Figure 385. Four-Leaf capital from the Basilica of St. Demetrius, Thessaloniki, Greece ......................... 157
Figure 386. A Wind-Blown capital from Antioch ........................................................................ 158
Figures 387-388. Two Wind-Blown capitals from Thessaloniki ................................................. 158
Figure 389. A Wind-Blown capital from Classe, Ravenna ................................................................ 158
Figure 390. An Impost capital from Alexandria ........................................................................... 159
Figure 391. An Impost capital from Ravenna ............................................................................. 159
Figures 392-394. Impost capitals and blocks from the Basilica of St. Vitale, Ravenna ..................... 159
Figures 395-396. Two Basket capitals from Hagia Sophia, Constantinople ................................ 160
Figure 397. A Basket capital from Basilica B, Philippi, Greece ................................................... 160
Figure 398-399. Two Melon capitals from Hagia Sophia, Constantinople ................................ 161
Figure 400. A Melon capital from the Church of Theotokos Kyriotissa, Constantinople ................ 161
Figure 401. A Melon capital from Little Hagia Sophia, Constantinople ........................................ 161
Figure 402. A Melon capital from the Basilica of St. Vitale, Ravenna ................................................................. 161
Figure 403. A reconstruction of a Four-Leaf capital from Suvodol, Serbia................................................................. 161
Figure 404. A reconstruction of a Four-Leaf capital from the Cruciform Church, Caricin Grad, Serbia ................. 161
Figure 405. A reconstruction of a Four-Leaf capital from the Domed Church in Konjukh, Republic of North Macedonia ... 161
Figure 406. A reconstruction of a Bizonal capital with bird figures from Hagia Sophia, Constantinople .............. 162
Figure 407. A reconstruction of a Bizonal capital with Pegasus figures, Hippodrome of Constantinople ............. 162
Figure 408. A Bizonal capital with anthropomorphic representations (Green Man), Istanbul Archaeology Museum ...... 162
Figure 409. A Bizonal capital with ram heads, Church of St. Demetrius, Thessaloniki ..................................................... 162
Figures 410-412. Three Bizonal capitals with eagle representations, Thessaloniki......................................................... 163
Figure 413. A Bizonal capital with Griffin representations at the Euphrasian Basilica in Poreč, Croatia ................. 163
Figure 414. A Type IV Alexandrian Corinthian pilaster from the Basilica of St. Vitale, Ravenna ......................... 163
Figure 415. A Type I Alexandrian Corinthian pilaster, Basilica A, Philippi, Greece ................................................. 163
Figure 416. Alexandrian-Based Corinthian pilaster, Myrelion Church, Constantinople ........................................ 163
Figures 417-419. Three Alexandrian-Based Corinthian pilasters, Basilica of Bishop Philip, Stobi, Republic of North Macedonia .......................................................................................................................................................................................... 164
Figure 420. A Palm-Leaf capital from the Basilica of St. Demetrius, Thessaloniki ..................................................... 164

Appendices: Maps..................................................................................................................................................https://doi.org/10.32028/9781803272399-maps

Appendices: Catalogue........................................................................................................................................https://doi.org/10.32028/9781803272399-catalogue
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 Tkaczw 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.


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.