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Theses for doctoral (PhD) dissertation

CORINTHIAN CAPITALS IN SYRIA

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I. Introduction

To understand the history of any ancient civilization and its various aspects of life, one needs to study its remains. The political borders of the Syrian Arab Republic, referred to as “Syria” in this dissertation, are rich in heritage from different periods of time. Although many traces of the civilizations in this region have disappeared, some remnants still exist, and one of these is the architectural elements, which includes the Corinthian capital.

The Corinthian capital is considered one of the most important features in art history. It appeared in ancient Greece in the 5th century BC and became a very prominent decorative element of Greco-Roman architecture. Its use continued and spread across different cultures, influencing architecture until the present day. This is due to the great aesthetic it provides. Although the reason for inventing this type of capital is still under debate, and it is not certain whether it held a symbolic meaning, it is clear that it was later used to express magnificence and beauty, which are provided by the various motifs it contains.

The Corinthian capitals exhibit diverse designs across different locations. While keeping their general form and elements, they display significant variation due to changes in the details of their composition. In many cases, these differences in individual components led to the emergence of distinct styles in various regions.

In Syria, various forms of Corinthian capitals have been found, made from local stones such as limestone and basalt, as well as many others carved from marble, even though there are no marble quarries in Syria or the surrounding regions.

These capitals consist of two types of elements: the essential ones, which are considered fundamental to their form, and the additional ones. Some of the additional elements served purely decorative purposes without symbolic meaning, while others reflect different cultural influences.

Therefore, the Corinthian capitals found in Syria, with all their components, provide valuable information about the structures that once existed, trade networks, workshops and their achievements, as well as the cultural, religious, economic, and political conditions, along with other aspects of life.

II. Objective

The objectives of this research are to collect and document Corinthian capitals from across the Syrian Arab Republic, which was an important part of the eastern Mediterranean provinces during the Roman and Byzantine eras from the 1st century BC to the early 7th century AD. It studies these capitals whether they remain in situ, are housed in museums, reused as spolia, or located in public spaces. The study aims to develop a comprehensive typology of these capitals by analyzing the presence and absence of what is known as the essential elements of Corinthian capitals. It seeks to examine the design and

structure of the capitals in detail, breaking them down into their constituent elements and interpreting them from both stylistic and historical perspectives. Another key objective is to establish a chronological framework for the capitals, particularly those lacking archaeological context, by identifying dating clues within their forms and elements. The research will also investigate the state of the Corinthian capitals, the type of stone, and their manufacturing stage. These factors are essential to gain insights into their production, importation, and local finishing. Additionally, the study will explore the influence of local craftsmen and workshops on the design and evolution of Corinthian capitals in Syria, including simplified versions and two-piece forms. Ultimately, the project aims to compile the most extensive and detailed database of Corinthian capitals in the region, contributing to their preservation and enhancing academic understanding of their historical and artistic significance.

III. Methodology

This study begins with a geographical and historical overview of the research area. It provides a general geographical and geological description of the region and outlines the most significant historical events. Major references for this section include *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces* by Arnold Hugh Martin Jones, and *Roman Syria and the Near East* by Kevin Butcher.

This overview is followed by an examination of the types of stone used in sculpture, their characteristics, and the tools employed during

the Greek and Roman periods. It also discusses the suitability of these tools for working with various types of stone. These insights are drawn primarily from the works of Peter Rockwell and his colleagues, particularly *The Art of Stoneworking: A Reference Guide*.

Subsequently, the dissertation presents a study of the Corinthian capital and its components, introducing the various terms used to describe these elements. It became evident that there is considerable diversity and overlap in the terminology used across different languages to describe the Corinthian capital and its parts. This variation necessitated clarification and standardization of terminology for the purposes of the dissertation, drawing on numerous references, particularly *Dictionnaire méthodique de l'architecture grecque et romaine*, the work of René Ginouvès.

This section also explores hypotheses about the origin of the Corinthian capital proposed by various researchers since 1905 and outlines the steps of its manufacture. These topics are discussed in works such as *The Stages of Workmanship of the Corinthian Capital in Proconnesus and Its Export Form* by Nusin Asgari; *Designing the Roman Corinthian Capital* by Mark Wilson Jones; and *Carving a Corinthian Capital: New Technical Aspects Regarding the Carving Process* by Natalia Toma.

The methods and procedures for collecting and analyzing data involved gathering Corinthian capitals from a variety of sources, including archaeological sites, museums, gardens, villages, and other locations, as well as reviewing relevant literature. One of the main

challenges encountered during this work was limited access to several areas due to the ongoing conflict. While the Aleppo City Museum in northern Syria was accessible, reaching the surrounding countryside and the Idlib region was impossible. As a result, the study relied mainly on the collections of the Aleppo and Hama Museums, as well as on published sources to fill this gap, including the works of George Tchalenko, such as *Villages antiques de la Syrie du Nord: le massif du Bélus à l'époque romaine*. Access issues also affected the southern provinces of Daraa and As-Suwayda.

Data collection about these capitals and their characteristics involved visiting all available sites and museums, photographing the capitals, taking measurements, and reviewing museum records. One of the problems faced the research was the unknown origins of many capitals in Syrian museums, which were often acquired through donations or confiscations, with many even lacking museum numbers. Some of these were discovered during construction works, but had no associated archaeological context that could give them an approximate origin. For capitals obtained from literature, the study relied on the available data, even though the descriptions were sometimes brief.

After collecting the capitals and related information, the analysis began with a detailed description and examination of their elements. The data were recorded in comprehensive tables, which are included as appendices in the dissertation. The study developed a typology of capitals, categorizing them based on the presence or absence of

essential elements. This analysis was complemented by an examination of the historical context of these features, relying on the works of scholars such as Edmund Weigand, including *Baalbek und Rom: Die römische Reichskunst in ihrer Entwicklung und Differenzierung* and *Das Theodosioskloster in Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, as well as Daniel Schlumberger's *Les formes anciennes du chapiteau corinthien en Syrie, en Palestine et en Arabie*.

The study also investigated the so-called “additional elements,” exploring their importance, decorative roles, and symbolic meanings, with reference to works like *Antike Figuralkapitelle* by Eugen von Mercklin, *Antique Figured Capitals from Lebanon* by Hany Kahwagi-Janho, *Figured Capitals in Roman Palestine: Marble Imports and Local Stone. Some Aspects of “Imperial” and “Provincial” Art* by Mosche Fischer, and *the Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae (LIMC)*.

Finally, the study examined the types of stones used in Corinthian capitals, shedding light on the import process for marble, which is not locally available. It also explored historical factors and influences that affected the importation process over different periods and provided insights into the workshops involved in the production process. This discussion relied on many studies, including *Marmi d'importazione, pietre locali e committenza nella decorazione architettonica di età severiana in alcuni centri delle province Syria et Palestina e Arabia* by Partizio Pensabene, *Marble Production and Marble Trade along the Mediterranean Coast in the Early Byzantine Age (5th–6th*

centuries): *Data from Quarries, Shipwrecks, and Monuments* by Elena Flavia Castagnino Berlinghieri, and *Marble Trade in the Roman Mediterranean: A Quantitative and Diachronic Study* by Devi Taelman. The study also addressed several important aspects of Corinthian capitals, including simplifications observed in certain types. This was accompanied by a historical investigation aimed at understanding the reasons for these transformations and their impacts. In conclusion, the work ends with the results obtained in the dissertation.

The dissertation includes appendices with the tables of the data of the Corinthian capitals, with each table related to one of the elements of the Corinthian capitals. These tables efficiently structure important data, serving as an alternative to traditional catalogues, and containing all relevant details about each capital, including general information about its current and original locations, dimensions, type, elements and their relationships, comparable capitals, and the estimated date of the capital, along with the factors used for dating. The use of tables is considered a more effective solution for managing the information about the high number of Corinthian capitals examined, ensuring comprehensive and organized presentation of this information.

IV. Results

- Corinthian capitals in Syria underwent significant stylistic transformations from the end of the 1st century BC to the

beginning of the 7th century AD. This provides a chronological framework for understanding the development of the styles of this architectural element and helps contextualize it across different historical periods.

- Political transitions had a direct influence on the design of Corinthian capitals. These changes show how political power shaped artistic expression and allow architectural elements to be used as indicators of historical context.
- Many Corinthian capitals lack known provenance, but detailed analysis of all components made it possible to assign approximate dates. This methodological approach enhances the ability to date pieces that lack both provenance and clear historical context.
- Canonical capitals were most prominent in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD but declined in later centuries, while Non-Canonical forms emerged and increased in frequency from the 4th century onward, like the Lyre, Four-Acanthus, and Bell-Shaped forms. This trend offers insights into cultural influences and architectural diversity.
- Local workshops, particularly in Byzantine northern Syria, introduced distinctive stylistic innovations such as recessed abaci and caulicoles shaped like bands, along with advanced carving techniques like lace drilling. These developments reflect the creativity of local artisans and help identify regional styles.

- Additional elements such as acanthus leaves, tongues, crosses, garlands, and grapevines played a key role in defining the cultural and temporal character of the capitals. These elements assist in categorizing and dating architectural fragments based on visual analysis.
- Stone materials used in capital production varied by location, with limestone and basalt commonly used inland and marble more prevalent in coastal regions due to practical constraints. This variation reveals economic factors and local resource availability that influenced building practices.
- Most marble capitals were carved from Proconnesus marble, with others coming from Aphrodisias, Docimium, and Mylasa, though many remain untraced. This highlights the extent of trade networks and the need for advanced techniques to improve marble provenance analysis.
- Simplification of Corinthian capital designs during the Byzantine era was driven by the increased demand for church construction. This adaptation demonstrates how practicality and needs influenced architectural design.
- There was a persistence in the use of two-piece capitals beyond previously accepted periods. These findings challenge earlier assumptions and reflect both continuity in construction techniques.

- The study documents many relocated or endangered Corinthian capitals in Syria and provides stylistic and contextual analysis despite their lack of provenance. This work contributes to cultural heritage preservation and supports the identification of these artifacts in museum collections.
- A comprehensive database was developed to record all information related to the Corinthian capitals in Syria, including the type of the capital, its material, and the characteristics of each element. This database serves as a valuable tool for dating and analyzing unprovenanced pieces and supports further research in architectural history.

V. List of Publications

- “Classical Column Capitals in Tartous Museum,” *Journal of Ancient History and Archaeology* 11 (2024): 2, pp.129-137.
- “Christian Iconography Adorning Corinthian Capitals in Syria,” *Studies in Ancient Art and Civilization* 28 (2024): 159-178.
- “Figural Corinthian Capitals in Syria During Roman Period,” *Peristil, Scholarly Journal of Art History* 67 (2024)
- “Additional Elements on Canonical Corinthian Capitals in Syria,” *Journal of Ancient History and Archaeology* 10 (2023): 4, pp.125-132.