



CAPITALS

CAPITALS, in architectural terminology transitional elements between weight-bearing supports (see **COLUMNS**) and the roofs or vaults supported (*Wasmuths Lexikon*, p. 320). The development of the capital began in Assyria, when a tree trunk was inserted in the earth with another trunk or branch laid in the fork to carry the roof construction (**Figure 57a**). From this forked grip the transverse beam soon developed; in the course of time it came to be worked and richly decorated (**Figure 57b-c**). This ancient building technique is still widespread in rural construction in Iran; the trunks (columns) stand on stone bases, which are worked to a greater or lesser degree. From the Assyrian transverse beam there evolved the Achaemenid double-protome capital, the first artistic version of the simple transitional element between support and beam in Iranian architectural history. As a rule such capitals rested directly on smooth or fluted columns, with the animal heads (usually bulls but also eagles and lions) flanking the transverse beam at right angles. The Achaemenid double-protome capital can be viewed as an Iranian invention, though Mesopotamian influences in the representation of composite creatures are also recognizable (**Figure 57d-g**).

In Persepolis, at the tribute gate, at the door to the royal palace, and especially in the large audience hall (*apadāna*), the double-protome capital was supplemented by a second transitional element, articulated on each of its four sides by superimposed volutes and resting in turn on a double corolla of petals (**Figure 57d**), a form that had its forerunners in ancient Near Eastern art. Whether or not the volutes, like the fluting of the column shafts, reflected the



influence of Greek stonemasons is uncertain, but the floral form of the bell-shaped lowest element suggests an entirely indigenous feature, owing nothing to ancient Egyptian art, as has sometimes been suggested (Figure 58). The construction of the three-part double-protome capitals, measuring 8 m high on columns about 19 m high, was an entirely Persian development, limited to Persepolis and Susa (Schmidt, p. 3). In other capitals at Persepolis, however, Egyptian influence is clearly recognizable in the details of the lotus flowers (Figure 57e); perhaps they were even carved by Egyptian stonemasons. Nevertheless, the column shafts, with a

At the so-called “Median” stone tombs, which are now recognized as the burial places of late Achaemenid notables (Gall, 1966), there are scroll capitals somewhat resembling Ionic forms (e.g., those on the tomb of Qyzqapan; Gall, 1988, pp. 557ff.; see Figure 57h).

After the Achaemenid period the animal-protome capital lived on in the Hellenistic world, for example, at Sidon, on Delos and Thasos, and at Salamis (Ghirshman, 1964, pp. 351ff.). On the other hand, Hellenistic capitals in Iran include an acanthus capital from 3rd- or 2nd-century b.c. Eṣṭakr, now in the museum at Persepolis (Figure 57i; Ghirshman, 1962, p. 23, fig. 29), as well as a palmette capital on a strongly convex echinus molding (Figure 57j), also from Eṣṭakr (Herzfeld, 1948, p. 279, fig. 376). A third type comes from the area around Eṣṭakr: the capital of an engaged column, carved in the form of a corolla of everted leaves (Figure 57k; Herzfeld, 1948, p. 277, fig. 375). Achaemenid architectural features also had a strong impact on the Maurya architecture of India, especially during the reign of Aśoka (r. ca. 274-37 b.c.). Iranian influence is particularly reflected in the lion sculptures on bell-shaped capitals from Sarnath and the volute capitals from Pataliputra (Rowland, pp. 68, fig. 20, 72 fig. 23).

In the Parthian period (3rd century b.c.-a.d. 3rd century) Greek and Roman influence on the volute forms of Persian capitals is unmistakable. It can be seen in the red-sandstone capitals from Bard-e Nešānda (q.v.) in the museum at Susa (Figure 58a), the capitals from the Parthian palace precinct of Qaḷ'a-ye Žoḥḥāk (Figure 58b; Kleiss, 1973, p. 177, fig. 14), and the capitals from the Parthian columned hall (palace) at Korha (village 12 miles north of Maḥallāt; Figure 58c; Kleiss, 1973, pp. 173-74, figs. 9-10, pp. 181-82, figs. 18-19).

The published capitals from the Sasanian period (a.d. 224-641) can be divided into four groups.



Whether decorated or not, all belong to the “basket capital” type, but the transition from the basket form to the quadratic upper surface—the presence or absence of a molding and the form of the molding—permits classification in the following groups: those from Kermānšāh, both the city and Qal‘a-ye Kohna (Figure 58d); those from Bīsotūn (Tāq-e Bostān)/Ĥājjīābād and Sar(-e) Pol-e Šāh (Figure 58e); those from Vondānī (Vendernī; Figure 58f); and those from Isfahan and the museum in Tehran (Figure 58g). From Bīšāpūr and Nūrābād two large capitals in a style related to the Corinthian have also been published as from the Sasanian period; they probably crowned commemorative columns (Figure 58h-i) and, on the grounds of their stylistic parallels, can be dated between the mid-3rd and mid-5th centuries (Huff, 1975, pp. 172-77, fig. 4, pls. 36/1-3). They show unmistakable Roman influence in the volutes.

In the early Islamic period antique capital forms died out, as can be seen in the *meḥrāb* (prayer niche) of the Great Mosque of Nā‘īn (*Survey of Persian Art* VIII, pl. 269A) from the 4th/10th century (Figure 59a), and new forms were developed in carved stone and especially in molded stucco. Vase capitals appear on the stucco columns that flank the *meḥrāb* of the Great Mosque in Neyrīz in the Saljuq period (Figure 59b; *Survey of Persian Art* VIII, pl. 399); this type continued basically unchanged but with evolution in details at the shrine of Bāyazīd at Beštām (q.v., 702/1302; Figure 59c; *Survey of Persian Art* VIII, pls. 392, 394) and in *meḥrābs* at the Great Mosques of Režā‘īya (676/1277; Figure 59d; Kleiss, 1969, pl. 19/2), Isfahan (ca. 710/1310; Figure 59e; *Survey of Persian Art* VIII, pl. 396), and Marand (731/1330; Figure 59f; Kleiss, 1969, pl. 17/1). On the east portal of the mausoleum of Shaikh Yūsof Sarvestānī in Sarvestān (682/1283; Kleiss, 1972, pl. 58/3) the vase capital was translated into stone (Figure 59g); on the groups of three columns that carry the central cupola the stone capitals are carved with *moqarnas* (oversailing courses of small niche segments; Figure 59h; Kleiss, 1972, pl. 58/2).

Both the vase and impost capitals appear in the Mongol building at Taḳt-e Solaymān (7-8th/13-14th century; Figure 59i), and some of the vase capitals are richly decorated. But capitals consisting of corollas of leaves, reflecting Western influence, can also be distinguished at Taḳt-e Solaymān, though it is unclear whether or not they were imported (Naumann, p. 89, fig. 69; Figure 59i).

A few examples of vase capitals are known from the Timurid and early Safavid period, for example at a caravansary north of Marand and at Airandibi (‘Oryān Tepe; Kleiss, 1972, pp. 186f., fig. 53.3).



In the later Safavid period (11th/17th century) columns or piers with capitals were the exception. *Moqarnas* capitals in wood did, however, occur in royal buildings like the ‘Ālī Qāpū (q.v.; 1053/1643-44; Würfel, p. 122), the Čehel Sotūn (q.v.; from the period of Shah ‘Abbās I, 996-1038/1588-1629), and the Hašt Behešt in Isfahan (Figure 59j, ca. 1081/1670); cut-stone versions occur as impost capitals in the Shah Mosque in Isfahan (1025/1616; Stierlin, p. 130).

In the period of Karīm Khan Zand at Shiraz (1163-93/1750-79) and during the Qajar period (1193-1342/1779-1924) columns were used more frequently as supports, and capitals thus also appeared more frequently. In the covered portions of the Waqīl mosque, built by Karīm Khan Zand in 1187/1773, basked capitals encircled by vertical sprays of acanthus leaves, reflecting Western classical influence (Figure 59l; Sāmī, p. 68).

In the 13th/19th-century Qajar kiosk near Qaṣr-e Qājār in Tehran stepped impost capitals were used (Figure 59m); at Kermān, in the early 13th/19th-century bath of Ebrāhīm Khan there is a version with *moqarnas* (Figure 59n; *A Survey of Persian Art* VIII, pl. 500). *Moqarnas* capitals of Safavid origin were also reused in the Qajar period. Qajar architects revived historicizing capital forms like the Achaemenid double protome (Figure 59o) but of course without understanding the weight-bearing function of the originals (Kleiss, 1981, p. 177, fig. 16). Capitals on octagonal piers assumed special forms; in a mosque at Čürs in Azarbaijan piers and capitals were carved as single members (Figure 59p; Kleiss, 1970, p. 124, fig. 13).

Beginning in the reign of Faṭḥ-‘Alī Shah (1212-50/1797-1834) European influence became apparent in Persian architecture. After the first European visit of Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah (1290/1873) it grew stronger and was especially noticeable in the forms of capitals (Figure 60). Today in photographs of Tehran it is possible to see the great variety of these capital forms, ranging from leaf capitals to capitals in a predominantly Corinthian style, from scroll capitals set upon basket capitals with leaf diadems and leaf-decorated impost capitals to figural capitals with human masks or animal heads combined with leaf ornament. In addition, there are undecorated capitals consisting of globular and quadratic sections combined, which were worked as single pieces. Such capitals were also molded in stucco and are still manufactured in that technique today for new buildings.

The profiles of balconies encircling some minarets, especially the Saljuq minarets of Isfahan (*Survey of Persian Art* VIII, pl. 362), which are articulated



on the exterior by *moqarnas*, recall the forms of such capitals.

See also [ARCHITECTURE](#); ART, HISTORY OF; ARCHITECTURE.

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Figure 57. a. Transverse beam resting in cleft of tree trunk. b. Front and side views of support with transverse beam carrying roof beams. c. Front and side views of capitol with transverse beam carrying roof beams. d. Double-protome capital with bulls from Persepolis. e. Floral capital from Persepolis. f. Double-protome capital with lions from Persepolis. g. Double-protome capital with bull men, Persepolis. h. Scroll capital from the tomb of Qyzqapan, an Achaemenid noble. i. Fragmentary acanthus capital from Eṣṭaqr, 3rd or 2nd century b.c. j. Palmette capital from Eṣṭaqr. k. Capital in the Hellenistic style from the Eṣṭaqr district

Figure 58. a. Sandstone capital from Bard-e Nešānda. b. Parthian capitals in stone and stucco from Qal‘a-ye Žoḥḥāk. c. Parthian capitals from Korha. d. Sasanian capital from Kermānšāh. e. Sasanian capital from Bīsotūn. f. Sasanian capital from Vondānī. g. Sasanian capital from the region of Isfahan.



h. Sasanian column in Corinthian style from Bīšāpūr. i. Sasanian column in Corinthian style from Nūrābād

Figure 59. a. Stucco engaged column, 4th/10th century, from the Great Mosque at Nā'in. b. Stucco vase capital, 7th/13th century, Great Mosque at Neyrīz. c. Vase capital, 702/1302, shrine of Bāyazīd at Beštām. d. Vase capital, 676/1277, Great Mosque at Režā'īya. e. Vase capital, 710/1310, Great Mosque at Isfahan. f. Vase capital, 731/1330, Great Mosque at Marand. g. Stone vase capital, 682/1283, Sarvestān. h. *Moqarnas* capital, 682/1283, Sarvestān. i. Capitals in various forms, 7-8th/13th-14th century, Taḳt-e Solaymān. j. Wooden *moqarnas* capital, 11th/17th century, Isfahan. k. Stone *moqarnas* capital, 1025/1616, from Shah Mosque, Isfahan. l. Basket capital, 1187/1773, Waqīl mosque, Shiraz. m. Stepped capital, 13th/19th century, Tehran. n. Stepped capital with *moqarnas*, early 13th/19th century, Kermān. o. Double-protome capital, 13th/19th century, Tehran. p. Octagonal pier and capital carved as a single piece, 13th/19th century, Čürs

Figure 60. Capitals showing European influence, 13th/19th century, Tehran.