



## COLUMNS

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**COLUMNS**, one of several kinds of upright, load-bearing architectural members encompassed, along with piers, in the term *sotūn* (*Wasmuths Lexikon*, p. 485). Throughout history, wherever man has sought to enclose space, supports have been a major element in buildings, from stilted huts to great monuments. In the Near East, as in other parts of the world, the development of supports began when largely unworked tree trunks were driven into the ground and used to support roofs of twigs, thatch, or turf (Figure 8.a). Already in prehistoric times it was recognized that such supports were less likely to collapse in bad weather if they were inserted into flat stones and that, if the clefts were left at the top, they would provide more stable carriers for the ceiling or roof (Figure 8.b). In this way the column base was introduced and the development of the capital foreshadowed. The stones came to be shaped, gradually assuming the form of the column or pier base, and the natural fork at the top was developed into a transverse beam through the addition of a crosspiece (see [capitals](#)), which provided a still more secure foundation for the heavier ceiling constructions necessary for multistoried buildings, which first appeared in prehistoric times.

Wooden supports with crude bases (mostly of unworked stone) and transverse beams at the top are still widespread in village structures in Persia, especially along the Caspian coast and in wooded mountain areas (mostly poplar plantations). The transverse beams can be either unworked or richly carved or painted (Figure 8.c), and the column shafts can be plastered or painted.

In the Achaemenid palaces at Persepolis and Susa columns, whether plain or



fluted, reached a height of 19 m and a diameter up to 1.60 m; they were topped by double-protome capitals, themselves an additional 8 m high. The two adjoined animal representations carried the ceiling or roof beams between them (Figure 8.d, after Pope, p. 32, fig. 22). This mode of construction was emulated in the rock-cut royal tombs at Naqš-e Rostam and Persepolis (Pope, p. 44, fig. 30) and is still recognizable in the so-called “Median rock tombs,” actually of late or post-Achaemenid date, where supports in the form of free-standing columns were carved out of the rock, for example, at Dokkân-e Dâwūd (Figure 8.e; Vanden Berghe, p. 102, fig. 31 ).

From the Parthian period in Persia the most famous monument with supports is a building at Korha (village 12 miles north of Maḥallāt), the plan of which, insofar as it has been recovered, reveals a columned structure within a palace precinct (Kleiss, 1973, p. 181, fig. 19). A series of eight free-standing columns formed a hall opening on a garden area. In the capitals the Greek idea of the cushion can be recognized, even though the volutes are worked in very un-Greek fashion strongly reminiscent of the volutes on the capitals at the post-Achaemenid rock tomb *Dā o Doktar* (Figure 8.f; von der Osten, p. 73, pl. 38).

In the Sasanian period both massive columns and piers were constructed of brick and coated with stucco (Figure 8.g: Naumann, p. 66, fig. 44). Stone columns with ornamented prismatic capitals were less numerous, but they do attest the existence in this period of spatial compositions consisting of relatively small compartments defined by columns (Figure 8.h; Kleiss, 1983, p. 319, fig. 2).

At the beginning of the Islamic period the Sasanian columned room was evolved into its most impressive form in the mosque sanctuary, as in the Tārīk-kāna at Dāmḡān (8th century; Figure 9.a; Pope, p. 79, figs. 71-73). The characteristic type of massive support found there was preserved through the whole range of early Persian architecture, including that of the Great Saljuqs and their successors, for example, at the tomb of Shaikh Yūsuf Sarvestānī in Sarvestān (ca. 682/1283; Figure 9.b; Kleiss, 1972, p. 207, fig. 83, pl. 58/2) and, in variant forms, in combination with quadratic supports, or piers, in the Saljuq parts of the congregational mosque at Isfahan (Figure 9.c; Pope, pls. 122-25).

In the Il-khanid (Mongol) period (13th-14th centuries) quadratic or rectangular supports dominated Persian architecture. Round columns were exceptional, though cut-stone versions can be seen, for example, at Taḳt-e Solaymān (Figure 9.d; Naumann, pp. 97-98; Naumann and Naumann, fig. 27).



Persian Islamic architecture reached a high point in Safavid columned halls built on a scale reminiscent of the Achaemenid palaces of Persepolis, the standing columns of which were still widely known; particularly noteworthy are the columns in the palaces of Isfahan, especially on the upper terrace of the 'Alī Qāpū and in the garden pavilions Čehel Sotūn and Hašt Behešt (Würfel, pp. 188ff., 147ff., 160ff.). In these buildings the supports, like the ceilings, are of wood, which lends a slender elegance and makes possible their extraordinary height (Figure 9.e). In vaulted Safavid buildings heavy piers were the rule, whereas columns—mostly octagonal in section—were less common and were made of natural stone, as in the winter prayer hall of the Masjed-e Šāh in Isfahan (Figure 9.f; Pope, p. 214, fig. 286).

In the Wakīl mosque (1187/1773) of Karīm Khan Zand in Shiraz spiral-fluted columns without bases were used as supports in the sanctuary. These columns are all monolithic, and their basket capitals reflect Western influence (Figure 9.g; Pope, p. 285, fig. 319; See also [capitals](#)).

In the Qajar period (1133-1344/1721-1925) columns with bases and capitals were the types of support most often used. Any of these elements could be made of stone, but stucco-coated columns and bases and stucco capitals were also used, as they could be manufactured very cheaply. In the second half of the 19th century supports and capitals in interior rooms were faced with the mirrored panels and mosaics of mirror glass (see [āina-kārī](#)) that were then so popular in Persia. From simple, unpretentious supports, with graduated impost capitals, like those in the octagonal pavilion at Došān Tappa (Figure 9.h; Pope, p. 254, fig. 340) near Tehran, now destroyed, the range of such columnar supports extended to examples with capitals bases as stylistically varied as they were numerous (Kleiss, 1981, p. 174, fig. 14). Examples include both those strongly influenced by European architecture of the late 19th century and mixed forms that betray Western influence but also hark back to traditional Persian motives like the Achaemenid double-protome capital, the structural role of which was, however, completely misunderstood (Figure 9.i).

In the 1930s such architectural forms were succeeded by modern types of support in wood, brick, or reinforced concrete.

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



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**Figure 8.** a. Tree trunk used as roof support. b. Tree trunk planted in stone base. c. Wooden capitals from the modern Caspian area. d. Column with double-protome capital from Persepolis. e. Rock-cut columns at Dokkân-e Dâwūd. f. Column from Dâ o Doḡtar showing Greek influence in the capital. g. Sasanian brick column and pier. h. Sasasian capital from Verdenī near Kermānšāh.

**Figure 9.** a. Column from Tārīk-ḡāna, Dāmḡān, ca. 132/750. b. Stone column from the shrine of Shaikh Yūsof Servestān, ca. 682/1283. c. Supports from the Great Mosque of Isfahan 12th-13th century. d. Stone columns from Taḡt-e



Solaymān, 14th century. e. Wooden column from *Čehel Sotūn*, Isfahan 1057/1647. f. Stone column from Masjed-e Šāh, Isfahan, 1025/1616. g. Spiral-fluted column from the Wakīl mosque, Shiraz, 1187/1773. h. Spiral-fluted column from a pavilion at Došān Tappa, 19th century. i. Two columns from the Tehran *bāzār* showing the eclectic style of the late 19th century.