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Beyond "Volute Capitals"

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BEYOND “VOLUTE CAPITALS”

Materials, Meaning, and Adaptations of a Phoenician Motif

Fanni Faegersten

Carolina López-Ruiz

ABSTRACT

The stylized volute motif is attested throughout the Levant and in areas of Phoenician settlement or cultural influence. Much of the debate of this motif has focused on the volute’s appearance in Israelite monumental architecture (the so-called Proto-Aeolic capital). This article provides a fresh discussion of the motif’s depiction within Phoenician art and iconography through various media, including ivory and sculpture. The architectural versions in stone derive from a much larger repertoire in portable media and in wood, which included inlaying techniques and color patterns not easily transferable into stone. This essay stresses the symbolic meaning of the volute motif and its adaptability by other Mediterranean cultures, from Israel and Cyprus to Iberia. The volute, moreover, has the quality of an otherworldly hybrid entity, strongly associated with hybrid creatures and other stylized vegetal motifs invoking eternal regeneration, which explains the use of the motif in funerary and sacred contexts.

KEYWORDS: Phoenician iconography, volute motif, Proto-Aeolic capitals, Phoenician ivories, Israelite architecture, woodwork and color patterns, sphinxes

Introducing the Volute Motif and Its Phoenician Contexts

From the hills of Galilee to the Gadir archipelago, the volute motif—often referred to as “volute capital” and also “Proto-Aeolic capital”—is a constant within the Iron Age symbolic repertoire, whether marking the entrances of buildings and chamber tombs or framing divine or fantastic figures. This stylized vegetal motif was profusely used in Phoenician religious contexts, and it was broadly adapted in areas such as Cyprus, Israel, Etruria, and Iberia, where local groups participated in a shared visual culture of Levantine flavor, as part of the “orientalizing” trend marked by a Phoenician synthesis of Near Eastern art and themes (López-Ruiz 2021: 307–12 for an overview; Ciasca 1961, 1962; Almagro-Gorbea 2010; Franklin 2011, 2023; Lipschits 2011; Martín Ruiz and García Carretero 2021).

Due to their monumentality, the architectonic stone capitals found in Israel and the Transjordan have often eclipsed the relevance of the volute motif in other formats and media. The earliest monumental capitals were