# Beyond "Volute Capitals"

## Materials, Meaning, and Adaptations of a Phoenician Motif

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Front cover photo: Phoenician female drummer figurines from Achziv (eighth–seventh centuries BCE) on display at the Israel Museum. (Photo by A. E. Killebrew.)

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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

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### 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

found at Tel Hazor, formerly thought to belong to the tenth-century Solomonic architectonic program but more likely a product of the Omride initiatives of the ninth century BCE (Fig. 1). And indeed, these "Iron Age volute capitals (the so-called 'Proto-Aeolic' or 'Proto-Ionian' capitals) are among the most impressive and special finds discovered in archaeological excavations in Israel and Jordan" (Lipschits 2011: 203). Most of previous scholarship focused on issues of primacy and distribution of these capitals in the Levant, with one side of the debate emphasizing the role of Israel in the spread of this stone model of an older Near Eastern motif (e.g., Shiloh 1979; Lipschits 2011) and another side highlighting their Phoenician affiliation (already Betancourt 1977: 46–49; Mazar 1990: 474–75; Stern 1992; Stern and Magen 2002: 52–53).

FIG. 1
**Two virtually identical vegetal stone capitals found at Tel Hazor, Israel (H1 and H2); H2 is bifaced. Ninth century BCE, as reconstructed, atop square pillars, in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Length: 155 and 160 cm respectively.** (Photo by A. Oren; courtesy of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.)

The volute motif appears also in replicas of architectural contexts, such as in schematized and miniaturized models or in two-dimensional representations or architectural frames (see below). We believe that it is of importance to discuss this motif in relation to the various materials in which it was reproduced. A survey of the archaeological contexts documented for the Levantine stone capitals, as well as a comparison with portable shrines or *naiskoi*, shows that the monumental volute or Proto-Aeolic stone capitals were more often used as column bases and parts of orthostats (Katz 2016; Franklin 2011, 2023) and not as structural members (e.g., topping pilasters or columns that flank entrances). Some stone volute capitals may have topped self-standing columns in cultic areas (e.g., the small, four-sided volute capital from Gadir; Marín Ceballos and Jiménez Flores 2011: figs. 1–3). In other materials, however, primarily wood, structural volute capitals crowning columns and pilasters would have been feasible, especially in the most commonly found architecture of the period, mudbrick and wood. Since the stone versions are the ones that remain in the archaeological record, the discussions have centered almost exclusively around them, but a more holistic interpretation needs to take into account the very plausible (lost) wooden versions. Moreover, the volute motif appears more broadly in nonarchitectural contexts, decorating all sorts of objects, by itself or in combination with other vegetal and symbolic themes. As a vegetal motif it often tops the stem of a stylized plant, thus the descriptor *capital* is not entirely inaccurate, but the volutes can appear also at the bottom of the plant or in other combinations with various other vegetal motifs (see below). In the following, we will more generally refer to the *volute motif*.[1]

Outside Israel and the Transjordan, the volute motif rarely has been studied systematically. However, there has been some interest in the comparison of local examples across the Phoenician and orientalizing network (Ciasca 1961, 1962; Almagro-Gorbea 2010; Marín Ceballos and Jiménez Flores 2011; Maya Torcelly et al. 2014: 162–64). Arguably, along with the sphinx, the volute capital is one of the most successful motifs in the adaptation of Levantine art, which was largely channeled by the Phoenicians (López-Ruiz 2021: 218–25, 307–12). The volute motif has also enjoyed recent attention with the publication or revisiting of western Mediterranean exemplars from Phoenician contexts, ranging from the seventh to the sixth century BCE, for instance from the "Kothon" Baal temple at Motya (Nigro 2015: 89–90, fig. 9), from Cádiz/Gadir (Marín Ceballos and Jiménez Flores 2011: figs. 1–3), and from the Cerro del Villar in Málaga (Martín Ruiz and García Carretero 2021). This recent attention makes our contribution timely.

In the first half of this article (first two sections) we explore particular technical aspects of the representations of the volute motif, which are constant through all their iterations and materials. First, we zoom in on the articulations of the motif in ivory work and argue that the same craftsmanship would have been developed in (perhaps actually modeled on) painted and inlaid woodwork. In fact, we start by discussing the lost world of woodwork to open up a new perspective as we look at the preserved artifacts. We also discuss in detail the remarkable degree of continuity in the rendering of the motif across media, through time and space, suggesting the crucial role of Phoenician artisanship and especially woodwork in the spread of the motif. We argue that the connection between wood and other media is fundamental also for our reading of other Egyptianizing material, including protective sphinxes and male statues, and even for the reconstruction of early Phoenician architecture and its impact in the Levant. Given the comparative scarcity of monumental Iron Age remains from the Phoenician heartland, the use of wood constitutes a crucial blind spot that we need to grapple with. Our discussion in these sections also brings to the fore the interaction between artifacts executed at different scales, such as the small ivory plaques and the larger furniture they decorated, or between the volute motif that appears in small, portable objects and the versions deployed in monumental contexts.

In the second half of this article (last two sections), we trace the contexts in which the volute motif appears and situate it within the symbolic Egyptianizing repertoire adopted by Canaanites and Phoenicians, which seemingly carried a meaning of life and regeneration, especially divine protection and life-giving. It is not a coincidence that the volute, as a sort of fantastic

hybrid plant (see below), is often accompanied by apotropaic motifs, such as the rearing cobras or *uraei* and, in particular, the protective sphinx, a winged human-headed lion, also broadly adopted throughout the Mediterranean. These are all part of the Egyptianizing language of Phoenician religion, also manifest in other forms of expression, from amulets and other small portable objects to royal sarcophagi and Egyptianizing male statues (e.g., Faegersten 2003; Fletcher 2007: 41–44; Petit 2011; López-Ruiz 2015).

As we decenter the monumental (stone) types, reinforce the role of other materials (including ivory and wood), and broaden our scope from the Levant to the rest of the Mediterranean, the Phoenician version of the motif emerges as the movable, artisan model that neighboring cultures in the Mediterranean adopted, including Israel and others in the Levant. In the following, we will also open ways for the appreciation of the volute motif as part and parcel of a Phoenician symbology, calling attention to its association with other symbols and architectural elements present in sacred and funerary spaces. Hence, we shed new light on this motif as part of Phoenician religious landscapes, real and imagined.

## The Volute Motif in Its Material Expression: Wood and Ivory

### *Phoenician Woodwork: A Missing Link*

Phoenician craftspeople quarried and carved stone. However, it is important to emphasize that most of the local sandstone found along the Phoenician coast, the so-called *ramleh* or calcarenite, was of inferior quality and thus not suitable for fine or detailed carving (Dunand 1946–1948: 90–91; Dunand and Saliby 1985: 49; Lembke 2004). It seems, instead, that it was in the carving of wood that the Phoenician artisans excelled, as a rich availability of various local woods led to remarkable technical know-how and skill. Even though these materials and objects are almost entirely lost to us, we can trace them in several ways.

To begin with, it seems that the well-known connection between the Phoenician cities (particularly Byblos) and Egypt goes back to the Middle Bronze Age, when the Canaanite-Phoenician access to a variety of fragrant, high-quality woods and their resins from the Lebanese mountains—including pine, oak, and the famous cedar—together with their seafaring capacity made them close commercial partners and wood suppliers for centuries (indeed millennia) to come (Gubel 1987: 11–37; Emanuel 2019: 423–25; Sader 2019: 13; Edrey 2019: 121). The specific Phoenician shipbuilding technique to join the hull's planks, known as mortise-and-tenon (referred to as *coagmenta punicana* by the Romans), was likely transferred also to the wooden structures of monumental architecture (Scahill 2017: 223–26).[2] The Phoenicians' prowess and resulting fame with regard to shipbuilding and architectural construction is echoed also in biblical and classical literature (Shiloh 1979: 82–87; Joffe 2002: 440–42; Emmanuel 2019; Edrey 2019: 120).[3] These various allusions reflect a reputation well documented otherwise, as we know the Phoenician cities were involved in timber exploitation and transport, best attested textually and iconographically in Assyrian sources and also surmised from settlement patterns (Treumann 2009; Johnston and Kaufman 2019). It is interesting to juxtapose the friezes depicting timber transportation in Sargon II's palace at Khorsabad (ca. 710 BCE) with the actual excavated cedar columns, encircled by decorated metal bands, that were found flanking the entrances to the Sin and Shamash temples in the imperial city (Fontan 2001; Loud 1936: 89–105, figs. 99, 112).

It is in another religious context that we find perhaps the best known reference to Phoenician woodwork, namely the Hebrew Bible narratives about the construction of the Solomonic Temple. While composed at a later date and combining historical and literary traditions in the various passages, the specific role of the Tyrians/Phoenicians as masters of wood architecture and sculpture as evidenced in these texts has often been emphasized. In these narratives, King Solomon drew on the Phoenician know-how in matters of wooden architecture and ornamentation, relying on the aid of Phoenician architects and artisans as he planned and built a new house for his god (the First Temple in Jerusalem) and a new house or palace for himself. The biblical tradition captured this artistic genealogy in the name of part of Solomon's palace, the "House of the Forest of the Lebanon" (1 Kgs 7:2 NRSV). Especially significant as representative of Phoenician-style art are the mentions of

large, winged, sphinx-like creatures, or cherubim. These were reportedly placed as guardians in the First Temple's Holy of Holies and were imagined as made of olive wood, with parts covered in gold foil. In turn, wooden wall panels and temple doors were decorated with "cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers" (1 Kgs 6:35 NRSV; see further discussion below).

Various other sources also testify to the production of finely carved and beautifully decorated wooden furniture and other objects in Phoenician workshops. Not only do we have depictions of the feat of wood transportation involving Phoenicians in Assyrian reliefs, as mentioned above, but wall reliefs also depict the carrying of war booty and tribute taken from western cities into the Neo-Assyrian capitals, including elaborately carved (Phoenician) wooden furniture (Barnett, Bleibtreu, and Turner 1998: pls. 364–65; Simpson 1995). This is further strengthened by the large amounts of Phoenician and North Syrian ivory decorations that have been excavated at these royal centers, which once embellished the wooden objects (see below). To be sure, there were equally skilled wood-carving artisans in the North Syrian centers, who benefited from the availability of raw materials in the Amanus mountains. Egyptianizing iconography, however, was largely transferred by way of Phoenician intermediaries and taken up at other centers of production, including those of northern Syria (Winter 1976; Suter 2016). In our article, thus, we focus on highlighting the Phoenician workshops and artistic traditions.

We can zoom in on a distinctive example, which confirms the presence of Phoenician high-quality wooden furniture as well as the strong Egyptianizing influences in early Phoenician art. We are referring to the decorated limestone sarcophagus of King Ahiram of Byblos, found in the necropolis of the Phoenician city. Whether or not carved in the Late Bronze Age and reused in the tenth century BCE, when the Phoenician funerary inscription was added (Lehmann 2005), the imagery on the royal sarcophagus testifies to a Canaanite-Phoenician taste for Egyptian iconography and an alignment with Egyptian ideas of the afterlife (Fig. 2).[4] The choice of a decorated stone sarcophagus with apotropaic inscription as the last resting place of a deceased king is only one example of the long tradition of using sarcophagi in different styles by Phoenician royalty and élites since the Bronze Age,

FIG. 2
**Stone sarcophagus of King Ahiram of Byblos, tenth century BCE, detail probably showing three pieces of wooden furniture. Part of the ancient preserved color has been added digitally. Length of sarcophagus: 284 cm.** (Photo by O. Mustafin, public domain; digital color by F. Nilsson, MediaTryck, Lund University; color after Chéhab 1970–1971 and Porada 1973.)

a practice continued well into Persian and Hellenistic times (Martin 2017: 97–107, 136–70). At the same time, the imagery and polychrome decoration on the sarcophagus reveal religious Egyptian influence on the funerary rituals, death-and-afterlife symbolism (especially the lotus), and in the application of color (Chéhab 1970–1971; Porada 1973; and see further below). Crucial for our argument is the observation that three pieces of wooden furniture are depicted on the sarcophagus (see Fig. 2):[5] the king is seated on a sphinx throne, his feet resting on a footstool (possibly with small, volute-shaped supports), and in front of him we find a lion-legged wooden table laden with funerary offerings for the deceased.

In short, then, existing iconography and literary traditions suggest that in Byblos, Sidon, and Tyre, in the tenth and ninth centuries BCE, there were royal workshops and skilled craftspersons working in wood under strong Egyptian influence. We must envisage the manufacture of architectural and decorative wooden elements for stone and mudbrick temples and palaces, including wooden columns and wooden vegetal capitals, wooden statuary, as well as elaborately decorated wooden doors and well-carved wall panels. Sphinx thrones, footstools, and other élite furniture—alongside horse chariots—were produced in wood, too, most likely with opulent, Egyptianizing decoration.

### *Inlaid Ivory Carving: A Match for Phoenician Woodwork*

Before turning to the volute motif in particular, we need to consider the relationship between ivory and woodwork, as interrelated avenues of expression of this sort of religious iconography. The relationship is important, as it enables us to trace the volute and other symbolic motifs within Phoenician art and how they transferred to other areas of Phoenician interaction.

While woodwork is a ghost presence in the material record most everywhere, ivory luckily is an enduring material, and large amounts of Phoenician-style ivories dating to the ninth and eighth centuries BCE have been excavated in the Neo-Assyrian capitals, at a few other centers in the Near East, and throughout the Mediterranean in areas involved in Phoenician trade.[6] These objects offer crucial clues for our understanding of the skills and iconographical preferences of the early first-millennium BCE Phoenician artisans and their patrons. The ivories are often of miniature size, both due to the shape and size limitations of the raw material (narrow and curved tusks, sometimes more accessible antler or bone) and due to their high value and cost. However, we should consider these images as mirroring wooden artifacts of far larger sizes. Given the lower cost, ample availability, and virtual lack of format constraints, wood was the perfect medium to try out techniques, develop new imagery, and display decorative principles that could be adopted in other materials. The carving of wood and the carving of ivory are thus strongly related crafts. The early suggestion that Phoenician woodcarvers, well acquainted with cedar and other woods, transferred this knowledge and skill into ivory carving indeed rings true (Barnett 1957: 158). Thus, we can assume that a Phoenician Egyptianizing production of large-scale wooden objects continued during this period, since preserved carved ivories of the late eighth century BCE reveal a fully developed polychrome classical Phoenician style (Herrmann and Laidlaw 2013: 116–17).

Stylistic and technical details in ivory work confirm this relationship with the lost medium of woodcarving. Scholars have long pointed out that the Phoenician-style ivories (whether found in Neo-Assyrian Nimrud, Israelite Samaria, or Cypriote Salamis; see below) bear a strong connection to Egyptian iconography from the Twenty-First and Twenty-Second Dynasties (1069–720 BCE), which itself harks back to New Kingdom iconographies and opulence (Kitchen 1986; Fazzini 1988: pl. 3.3; Andrews 1991: 46, fig. 34; Ciafaloni 1992: 19–30). Apart from the evident Egyptianizing motifs, these ivories are characterized by the slender proportions of the human and hybrid animal figures, the attention to detail, and the opulent polychromy bestowed upon them (Faegersten 2003: 225–27 for an overview). In fact, these Phoenician-style ivories are notable for the repeated occurrence of inlay work in the cloisonné technique, where raised ivory sockets (cloisons) were filled with pieces of colorful glass or semiprecious stone, often with a rounded, convex surface, cut exactly to fit the socket's shape. In this manner, the inlays were surrounded by thin rounded ivory ridges which, in turn, were often overlaid with gold foil. Moreover, inlaid decorative elements of different colors were placed beside each other—often in an alternating

pattern (red-blue-red-blue, for example)—thus creating a very opulent effect. This will be referred to below as *color as pattern*. It has been pointed out that this ivory inlay technique resembles that of contemporary, inlaid Egyptian jewelry, where enamel, glass, precious, or semi-precious stones were set in raised metal sockets. Again, it is likely that it was a Phoenician idea to extend this polychrome cloisonné technique to wood and ivory (Barnett 1957: 156; Ciafaloni 1992: 88). One of the best preserved examples of such a jewel-like object is the famous "O.1" ivory from Nimrud, depicting a lioness attacking a youth (one of two virtually identical plaques). There is a remarkable display of chryselephantine opulence created by the application of gold foil and a highly decorative interplay of red (carnelian) and blue (lapis lazuli) pieces inlaid in the cloisonné technique (Fig. 3).

The link to wooden statuary or relief work is less often invoked but, we think, equally relevant. We must envisage that the kind of decoration we find in the tiny ivory plaques was correspondingly present in wood. Large-scale wooden statuary, furniture, and architectural elements would have been partly covered by gold, veneered with wood in different colors, inlaid with opulent, jewel-like ivory plaques, or simply painted. A layer of gesso or thin plaster could be applied to the wood before painting, a quicker way to create moldings and other details in relief. The application of paint to wooden objects was thus a cheaper and simpler way to imitate fine, royal inlay work. This is displayed well in certain preserved Egyptian wooden objects (Fig. 4).

If we consider again the scene carved on the royal Phoenician sarcophagus bearing the inscription of King Ahiram (see Fig. 2), we can imagine that the royal furniture depicted there was beautifully carved and opulently decorated. In fact, following the traces of paint still preserved on the limestone surface (red and a dark blue/

FIG. 3
**The well-known "O.1" ivory found at ancient Nimrud, one of two virtually identical plaques, eighth century BCE. Gold foil covers the man's kilt and parts of the vegetal motifs, forming gold "sockets" that frame inlaid flowers of alternate coloring (blue lapis lazuli and red carnelian) in the cloisonné technique. Height: 10 cm. The color of part of the ancient gold leaf and the (blue) lapis lazuli and (red) carnelian inlay work has been added digitally.** (Digital color by F. Nilsson, MediaTryck, Lund University; courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.)

FIG. 4
**Painted wooden statuette of the jackal-headed god Anubis. Ptolemaic period, Egypt. Height: 42 cm. Note how—still in this later period—the painted scale or breast-feather pattern of the divine figure's dress displays thin "gold" frames and alternate (red and blue) coloring.** (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of Mrs. Myron C. Taylor, 1938.)

black color), we find alternate coloring (*color as pattern*) in the lotus petals,[7] in the horizontal, twisted ornament running below the lotus frieze, and in the wing feathers of the sphinx. The same color decoration is also encountered on the lid of the sarcophagus, on the fringed aprons of the two male figures depicted there (Porada 1973: 360, figs. 4–5). This alternate coloring, then, can be considered a Phoenician Egyptianizing characteristic and an indication of Phoenician artisanship, especially woodcarving.

Right across the sea and a few centuries later, another élite burial produced a funerary context where we can appreciate the relationship between wood and ivory, as perishable materials were uniquely preserved in its chamber. In the so-called Tomb 79 at Salamis on Cyprus, the chryselephantine elite furniture, only hinted at in the Byblite sarcophagus stone-relief, could be reconstructed since the decayed wood had left imprints and inlaid ivory decoration in its place. The excavators reconstructed a wooden bed and a wooden "throne," both of

Phoenician manufacture, dating to the late eighth century BCE (Karageorghis 1974: 61–71, pls. A–E).

The wooden furniture displays Egyptianizing decorative motifs rendered in ivory (Fig. 5a and b), where thin ivory ridges, covered by gold foil, formed sockets inlaid with blue glass. This combination of cloisons with cobalt-blue glass and gold foil, alongside chemical analyses pointing toward an Egyptian origin for the mineral natron glass (Karageorghis and Rehren 2020: 269–70), corroborates the picture outlined above. In addition, Ahiram's wooden offering table (see Fig. 2) seems to find a close parallel in the extant ivory lion leg placed on a cone-shaped support retrieved in Tomb 79 at Salamis (Karageorghis 1974: pl. 55.249), which helps us bridge the centuries that separate the two élite funerary contexts. So far, the uniquely preserved Salamis furniture remains our most important ally when tracing an entire dimension of lost Phoenician woodwork.

## The Phoenician Rendering of an Egyptianizing Motif

In the second part of our article, we apply these parameters to the volute "capitals" and the volute motif more generally. Looking into the details of artifacts with this motif will be revealing of its artistic "genealogy," the relationship between different kinds of materials, and the motif's symbolic meaning in the Phoenician world and beyond.

The armrests of the wooden chair or "throne" from Salamis likely were decorated by two large, thin à jour ivory plaques, with the same decoration visible from

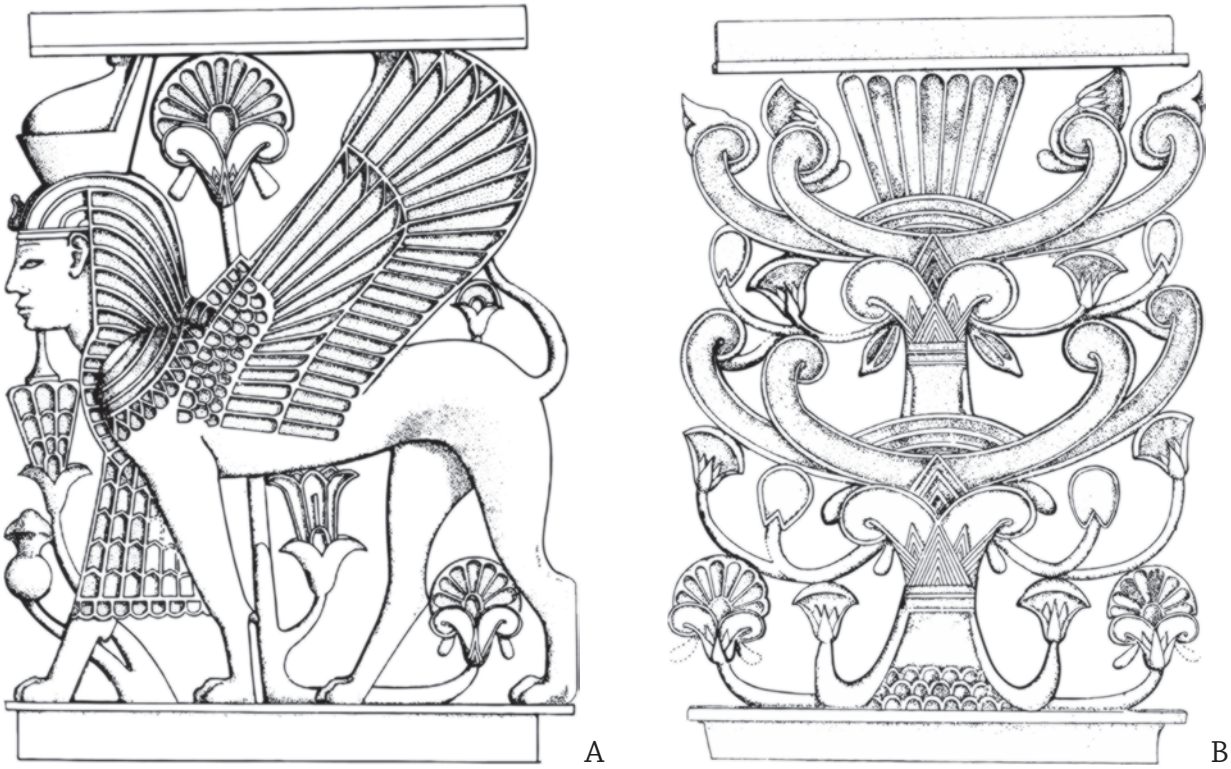


FIG. 5
**À jour ivory plaques likely decorating the armrests of the wooden "throne" from Tomb 79 at Salamis, Cyprus. Eighth century BCE. Height: 16 cm. Thin ivory ridges frame sockets with blue glass inlays.** (Karageorghis 1974: pls. 241.258, 241.143; courtesy of the director of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus.)

both sides (see Fig. 5a and b; Karageorghis 1974: pls. 241–42; see Johnson 2016: 88 for caveats on their relation to a throne). The two objects display the characteristics outlined above, where thin rounded ivory ridges frame sockets that once contained colored glass. One plaque shows a standing winged sphinx wearing an Egyptian *nemes* headcloth with uraeus and a double crown, the other depicts a very characteristic, stylized composite vegetal motif.

A closer look at this complex ornament reveals our specific subject: a vegetal entity, which consists of two volutes growing from a characteristically striped calyx (Fig. 6). The details seem to evoke a developing flower/bud/set of leaves incased inside the striped sepals of the calyx, which just opened up to allow for the lotiform flower to bloom. On top of the volutes, from the center, another cup-shaped vegetal entity is growing, producing yet another almost identical set of volutes blooming from a striped calyx (or the triangular branch stub of a date palm; see Franklin 2011: 132–33, fig. 3) (see Fig. 5b). Thus, this is a vegetal motif with a strong regenerative character, not only as it represents the flower/plant in the moment of its blooming or unfolding but because the pattern could be reproduced in perpetuum. Characteristic as well are the vegetal elements growing from the volutes:

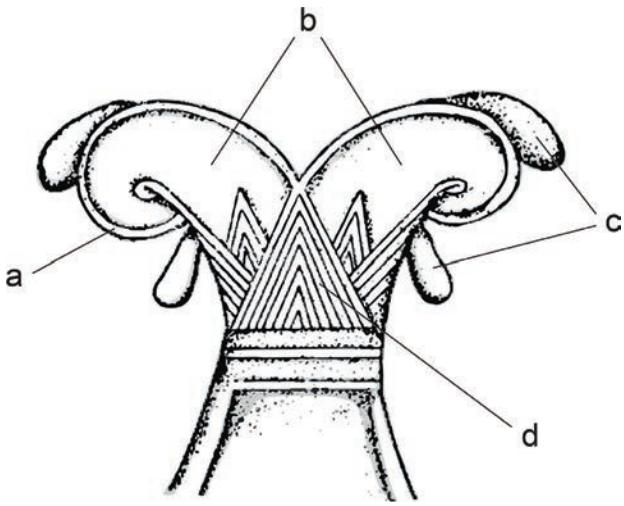


FIG. 6
Detail of one of the ivory plaques of the Salamis "throne" from Fig. 5b with the vegetal elements indicated: (a) thin rounded ridge; (b) two volutes with convex surface; (c) drop-shaped tendrils; (d) striped, triangular central sepal of calyx.

small, drop-shaped "tendrils," seemingly representing fruits or leaves (Fig. 6, labeled "c"), and larger floral elements (papyrus, lily, lotus leaf, composite lily, or volute and palmette), some of them on long, thin pliant stems (see Fig. 5b). There is a remarkable and accumulative growing power in this composite motif.

This kind of stylized, composite plant motif is recurrent in the Phoenician-style ivories. It is found in a variety of iconographic settings, whether in similar, potentially never-ending, vertical compositions or as single entities flanked by or associated with winged sphinxes, griffins, and kilt-wearing male figures who can feed on its fruits (see below) (Fig. 7). Again, we must postulate the presence of similar, large-scale objects and iconography carved in Phoenician wood. As suggested above, the skill to manufacture architectural and decorative wooden elements for stone and mudbrick temples and palaces was available already since the tenth century BCE if not earlier, and this included well-carved wall panels, wooden columns, and wooden vegetal capitals (apt to adorn both stone and wooden columns/pillars). The carvings of "palm trees and open flowers," mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, are suggestive of such stylized, vegetal imagery. Indeed, this particular motif found extraordinary appreciation outside of the Phoenician mainland.

The following characteristics and elements are common to virtually all of these expressions and appear in a variety of media and sizes (see Fig. 6 and labels there):

- Two large volutes (b) growing from a central, vegetal entity reminiscent of the central, striped, triangular sepal of the calyx (d).
- The thin rounded ridges (a) typical of inlaid or painted wood (and ivory), framing a rounded or convex surface reminiscent of inlay (b).
- Drop-shaped tendrils below and above the volutes indicating the fruits or leaves of this supernatural plant (c).
- Above the volutes, a continuation of the motif, its growing power marked by sprouting vegetal entities of various forms. When the motif is turned into a capital proper, used or depicted as an architectonic element, it is compressed by an abacus and simplified, so that only a smaller, often palmette-like vegetal entity remains on top.

FIG. 7
**Ivory plaque from Nimrud depicting two winged griffins standing inside a vegetal entity, feeding from its fruits or leaves (drop-shaped tendrils). Gold foil on the creatures' wings and inlay of lapis lazuli create the characteristic Phoenician opulent, jewel-like effect. Height: 14.5 cm. The color of part of the ancient gold leaf and (blue) lapis lazuli inlay work has been added digitally.** (Digital color by F. Nilsson, MediaTryck, Lund University; courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.)

- The polychromy, where the different parts of the complex motif have been highlighted by various colors in order to enhance its visibility and legibility. This feature imitates Phoenician chryselephantine inlay work and its characteristic, alternate coloring (*color as pattern*).

Before we move on, a further note on color and why we are insisting on this aspect is in order. The use of color allowed ancient craftspeople or patrons to unify or separate elements in their compositions and to strengthen the legibility of certain decorative motifs (Ridgway 1999: 103–4). This is especially applicable when it comes to composite vegetal motifs, such as those under discussion. It is fortunate that at least one stone volute capital retains substantial parts of its ancient color (Fig. 8). The polychromy preserved on the small stone volute capital from Megiddo (M11) displays blue volutes with red thin rounded ridges and red tendrils or fruits. On its side is a checkered pattern displaying the *color as pattern* so often found in the Phoenician Egyptianizing repertoire.

In this case, the checkered pattern (red-white-blue-white-red) corresponds to the one used abundantly in Egyptian iconography from the New Kingdom (in the Late Bronze Age) down to the Twenty-First and Twenty-Second Tanite Dynasties (eleventh–eighth centuries BCE). For example, virtually the same pattern is attested on jewelry found in the tomb of Pharaoh Sheshonq II from the early ninth century BCE (Fig. 9) (Montet 1951: 45, pl. 29.226). It is interesting to note that the same pattern and the same colors have been found in a wall painting at the eighth-century BCE sanctuary of El Carambolo near Seville, most likely dedicated to Baal and Ashtart in a cultural sphere where Phoenician and Tartessic (local orientalizing) elements merged (Escacena Carrasco 2020: fig. 3). Thus, the pattern displayed on the side of M11 from

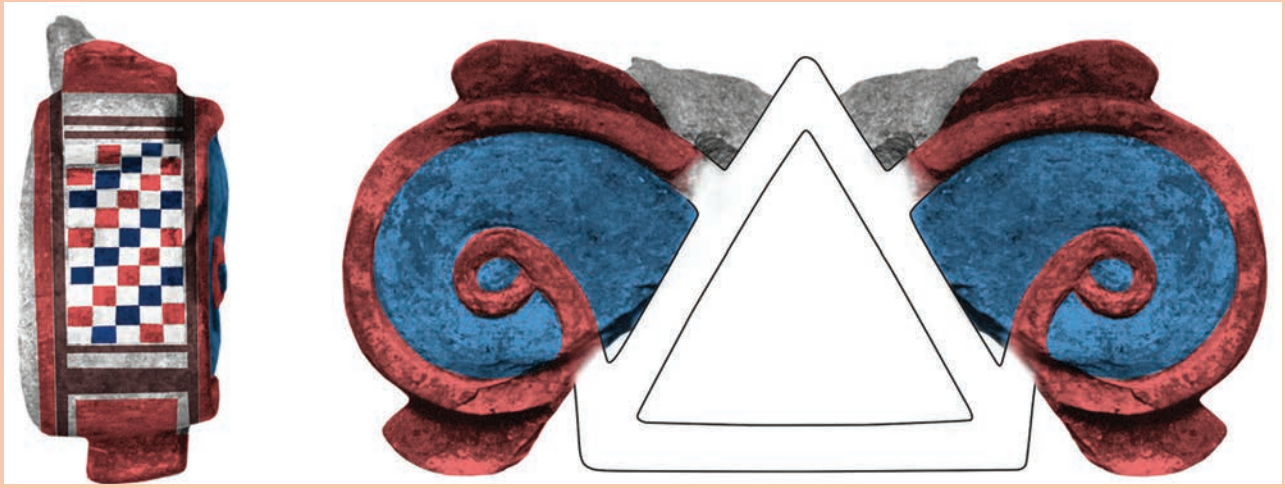

FIG. 8
**Fragmentary stone volute capital found at Megiddo, Israel (M11), side and front, with reconstructed mirror image. Estimated original length: 40 cm. Part of the ancient preserved color has been added digitally.** (Digital color by F. Nilsson, MediaTryck, Lund University; color after Loud 1948: pl. 270.1; courtesy of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures of the University of Chicago.)

FIG. 9
**One of two virtually identical bracelets found in the tomb of Pharaoh Sheshonq II at Tanis, northern Egypt (Twenty-Second Dynasty, ca. 885 BCE). Height: 4.7 cm; diameter: 7 cm. Depicted is the *udjat*-eye resting on a *neb*-basket ("all well-being"). Gold, lapis lazuli, carnelian, and faience. Egyptian National Museum, Cairo, Egypt.** (Courtesy of Sandro Vannini/ Bridgeman Images.)

Megiddo further strengthens the connection between the monumental Levantine stone volute capitals and the Phoenician, Egyptianizing artistic repertoire.

Once again, the particular shapes and color patterns used in Phoenician art are conspicuous in some of its most monumental and enduring adaptations. As scholars have proposed before, the volute motif—by itself or in its composite form, with two or more volutes placed on top of each other (see Fig. 5b)—was adapted along with other Levantine themes to the artistic repertoire displayed in the large, royal Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian centers further east (Stronach 1990; Collins 2009; Almagro-Gorbea 2010: 247, figs. 204–5; López-Ruiz 2021: 309–10). The reconstruction of the glazed tiles decorating the south wall of the South Palace at Babylon (late seventh–early sixth century BCE), leading to the throne room—a very conspicuous placement—displays rows of stylized tree trunks, featuring three superimposed volutes (Pedersén 2020) (Fig. 10).

The volutes are characteristically blue and the thin ridges yellow, thus imitating gold and lapis lazuli. Another detail ties these Mesopotamian volutes to those stemming from the Phoenician tradition. The measurement

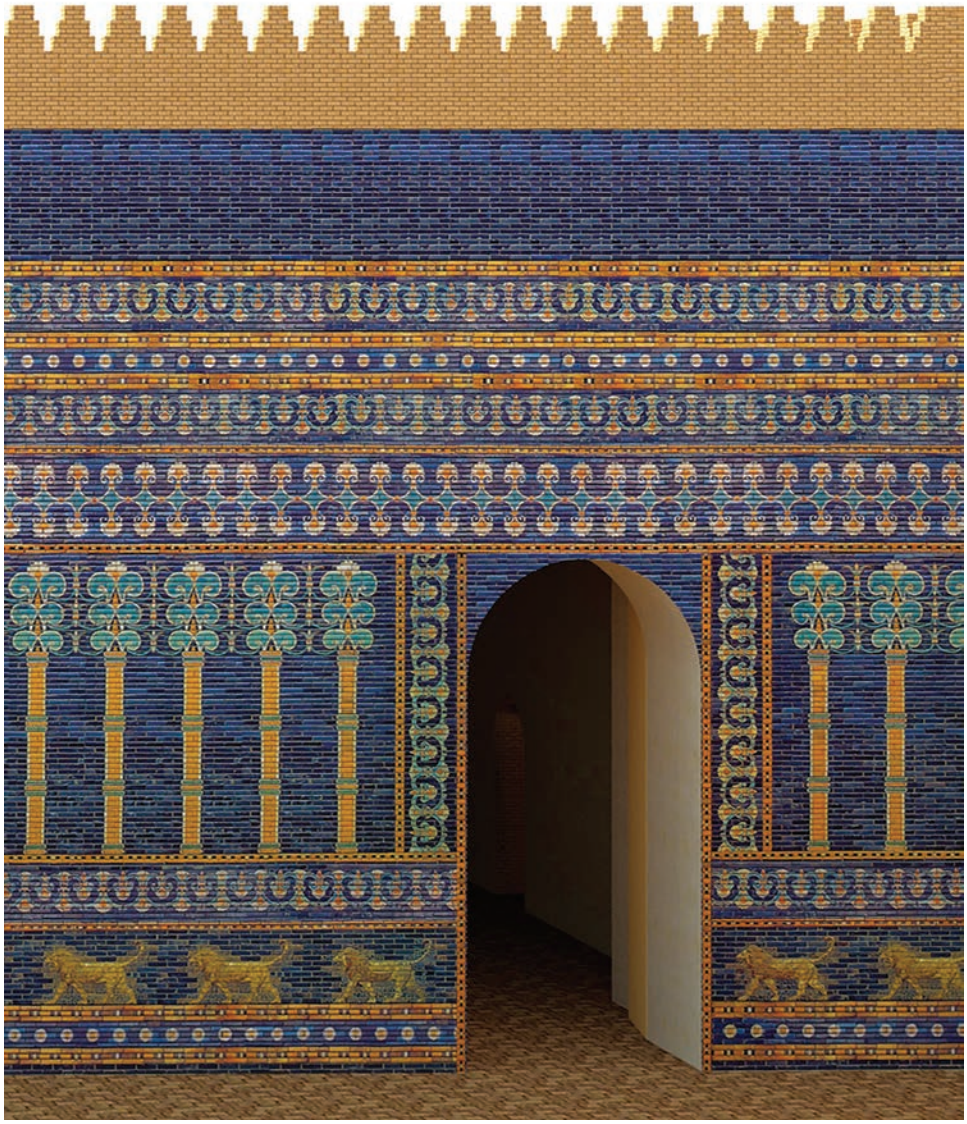

FIG. 10
**The so-called South Palace of Nebuchadnezzar II at Babylon (late seventh–early sixth century BCE). Reconstruction of the glazed brick decoration found on the south wall of the main courtyard leading to the throne room.** (Courtesy of O. Pedersén, open access; https://www.lingfil.uu.se/forskning/assyriologi/babylon/#Downloads.)

of the reconstructed Babylonian royal volutes, ca. 100 cm in length, coincides with a large group of the Israelite monumental stone capitals: eight capitals from Megiddo, three from Samaria, and seven from Ramat Rahel are very close to 100 cm in length. In a final note on the polychromy of the volute motif, we could add that also in the early fifth-century BCE decoration of the so-called Amathus sarcophagus from Cyprus, the superimposed blue volute "capitals" with yellow or plain thin rounded ridges also indicate a possible imitation of inlaid and/or painted wood and ivory, and an echo of royal lapis lazuli and gold (see below).

Returning to the different elements of the volute motif listed above (striped triangular calyx, two volutes, thin rounded ridges, drop-shaped tendrils or fruits), we can confirm that all these elements are encountered in virtually all monumental stone capitals from Israel and Judah (e.g., Figs. 1, 8, and 11a–b). The drop-shaped tendrils (see Fig. 6, "c") are always present, never left out of the composition. Since at least some of the stone capitals are bifaced, we know that they were supposed to be viewed from both front and back and, thus, from the sides as well. Looking closer at the "fruit," from a side view, we can see that it has been accommodated into the block-like capital as a flat, cushion-shaped entity (instead of what, frontally, would look like a drop-shaped fruit); there is no longer an iconographical legibility of the motif (see, e.g., Fig. 1). This indicates that the volute capital motif was not developed in stone but rather originally at home in a more flexible wooden, three-dimensional world. In addition, if

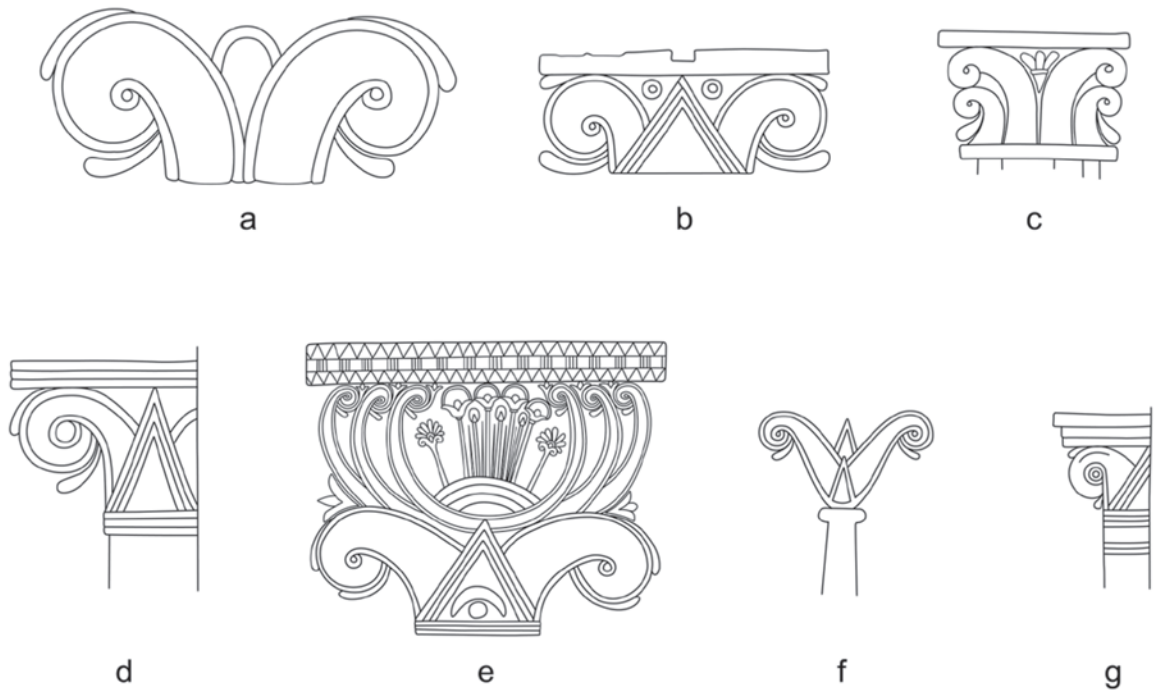


FIG. 11

**Various vegetal capitals, arranged according to geographic provenance. Despite the wide chronological and geographic span, the consistency in depicted vegetal elements and the thin rounded ridges framing convex surfaces suggest one common denominator: Phoenician (inlaid or painted) woodwork. The drawings represent: (a) Hazor stone capital, H1 (length: 155 cm); (b) Ramat Rahel stone capital, RR1 (length: 108 cm); (c) stone capital, Tomba dei capitelli, Cerveteri, Etruria (length: 51 cm); (d) flanking volute capital, Tomb 5, Tamassos, Cyprus (length: 70 cm; total height with pilaster: 175 cm); (e) limestone votive stele, Idalion, Cyprus (length: 117 cm); (f) depiction on back rest of fragmentary male funerary stone statue, Villaricos, Spain (length of vegetal motif: 18 cm); (g) flanking vegetal capital, naiskos, Sulcis, Sardinia (length: 8 cm).** (Drawings by F. Faegersten.)

indeed large volute capitals were superimposed in order to imitate the composite, stylized plant, this would be feasible in wood, not in stone.

## Distribution and Contextualized Use of the Volute Motif

As we saw above, recent scholarship has emphasized that the monumental stone volute capitals were not usually structural elements since they are too heavy for the mudbrick and wooden architecture so often found in the Levant and attested also in reproductions of architectural features in shrine models (Katz 2016; Franklin 2023). Indeed, this further bolsters the hypothesis of the wooden origin of the capitals. The same is true for the well-known volute balustrades from Ramat Rahel, just south of Jerusalem (Stern 1977; Winter 2016: fig. 7), where new exemplars, added to the repertoire more recently, confirm the impression. At the site of Armon ha-Natziv, not far from Ramat Rahel, archaeologists unearthed three well-preserved volute capitals of medium size (length: 50 cm), all bifaced and with virtually identical dimensions and decoration, topped by a tripartite abacus (AH1–3). In addition, at least nine (fragmentary) small volute capitals, of identical appearance and dimensions (length: 20–30 cm), were found together with balustrade fragments and fragmentary recessed stone frames (some with traces of red and black color; Billig, Freud, and Bocher 2022). These finds can be dated to the mid-seventh century BCE, and the nine small volute capitals, the balustrade fragments, and the recessed frames together have been reconstructed as a balustrade window. Should any of the more monumental Levantine stone volute capitals have been members of similar balustrades, they, due to their weight, could only have adorned platforms and viewing areas not too far above ground level. It is important, however, to understand the stone balustrade fragments from and around Ramat Rahel in the context of the corpus of larger monumental stone volute capitals from this and other sites. Earlier research emphasized the connection of the balustrades to Phoenician architecture (as visible, not the least, in the Woman at the Window motif that appears in ivory plaques). Moreover, balustrades and windows are features that more often belong high up in a building, we can surmise that they too were, usually—and originally—carved in wood.

Thus, we suggest that from at least the tenth century BCE large-scale wooden vegetal capitals were manufactured by Phoenician artisans and that they were painted in a manner inspired by Egyptian polychromy and firmly connected to the artisanship of inlaid ivory. The thin rounded ridges found in wood, ivory, and stone have pragmatic, technical functions such as to hold pieces of colored inlay and facilitate the attachment of gold foil in ivory pieces or to stop paint from "bleeding," in the case of large-scale wood and stone artifacts. These opulent objects would have been the artisan models which others followed, beginning in the Levant itself, where stone carving and polychrome architecture became a preferred mode of power display. The earliest monumental Iron Age stone volute capitals have been excavated at northern sites, such as Tel Hazor, Samaria, and Megiddo, sometimes displaced but generally attributed to original ninth–eighth century BCE contexts (Franklin 2023 with details of the locations and strata). It is no coincidence that these were emerging urban centers close to the Phoenician coastal cities and workshops. They were part of an Israelite culture that also adopted the Phoenician alphabet in addition to fine ware and other cultural items that signaled their belonging to an international Levantine *koiné* (overview in López-Ruiz 2021: 281–313).

As mentioned above, we can trace this stylized vegetal motif across the Mediterranean, following the pattern of Phoenician trade routes and colonization. It appears in various media and sizes, especially in funerary contexts, where this regenerative plant motif is particularly appropriate—something that in turn facilitated the understanding and adaptability of its symbology. Outside the Levant, we find examples dating from the seventh century BCE onward, whether from Phoenician settlements proper—on Sardinia, Sicily, in North Africa, and southern Iberia—or from local contexts in areas of contact with the Phoenicians, such as flanking entrances to chamber tombs in Tamassos on Cyprus (see below), inside Etruscan tumuli (see, e.g., Fig. 11c), and on funerary monuments (*cippi*) from the indigenous Tartessic or Iberian realm (Fig. 11f) (Almagro-Gorbea 2010: figs. 189–91). The characteristic elements outlined above—thin rounded ridges, drop-shaped tendrils, and so forth—are

encountered again and again (examples in Fig. 11). The consistency in the details of how the motif is formatted across time and space in all these areas points to the common denominator of Phoenician models, which were available in a variety of materials, first and foremost in movable (painted, gilded, or inlaid) wood and ivory objects (Herrmann and Laidlaw 2013: 49–50) but also in stone ornaments, whether as architectural elements or in miniature versions. We need to remember that colorful carpets and textiles also could have played a role in the dissemination of similar, highly decorative patterns, ornaments, and color schemes. So much is suggested from the Phoenicians' prominence in the industry and trade of purple dye, as attested in the literary and archaeological record (e.g., from *Iliad* 6.289–92 to Pliny, *Naturalis historia* 9.60; Sader 2019: 296–300; Johnston and Kaufman 2019: 401–3).[8]

The fact that several preserved stone volute capitals are virtually identical has resulted in their reconstruction as pairs, symmetrically arranged to flank a building or room entrance. This seems corroborated by small-scale architectural models (see below) and indeed in large-scale constructions of both funerary and sanctuary settings (below). Western Mediterranean examples include Motya outside Sicily (Nigro 2015: fig. 9) and the Iberian site of Alcudia de Elche (Almagro-Gorbea 2010: 253, 257, fig. 216). A remarkable case appeared in the remains of the Archaic sanctuary at Palaepaphos on western Cyprus. It seems that stone columns with palm capitals stood over three meters in height, most probably flanking the entrance or entrances to the sacred area, following a well-known type of temple plan in the Levant (Leibundgut Wieland and Tatton-Brown 2019: 129–34, fig. 19:a–b, pls. 33–35).[9]

Cyprus constitutes a particular point of reference when tracing Phoenician material culture. A continuous Phoenician presence and cultural influence is well attested textually and archaeologically (Petit 2019; Fourrier 2019; López-Ruiz 2021: 249–80). Geophysical conditions were similar to those of the Phoenician coast, with abundant forests and a rich availability of various local woods on the island. In contrast to the Phoenician coast, however, where the coarse-grained local sandstone made detailed carving difficult, the Mesaorea limestone from Cyprus was wet and almost cheese-like when newly quarried, quite similar to wood in workability. Thus, Cypriote local stone lent itself beautifully to intricate, detailed carving and hence experimentation in monumental stone sculpture (Faegersten 2003: 240). In this sense, it seems that some Cypriote limestone (and to a certain extent terracotta) artwork of the eighth century BCE and onward constitutes a viewing cabinet for aspects of Phoenician material culture.

Relevant to our topic is a large group of votive and/or funerary stelae from the sixth century BCE, which also displays elaborate versions of the volute motif (see Fig. 11e) (Walcher 2009: 47–51, pls. 23–33). A Phoenician connection and a relationship between wood and stone artisanship is also documented for the Cypriote Egyptianizing sculpture preserved on the island (Faegersten 2003: 225–57). This category includes, mainly, male votive figures dressed in Egyptianizing attire (Fig. 12), winged sphinxes (see below), Hathoric capitals, and stylized vegetal motives, in all of which we find the characteristics of Phoenician woodwork outlined above: thin rounded ridges framing elements with a convex surface reminiscent of inlay, and the application of opulent, alternate coloring or *color as pattern* (Fig. 13).

Zooming in on an unusually well-preserved object, we can appreciate the polychromy in the decoration of the so-called Amathus sarcophagus, dated to the early fifth century BCE (Fig. 14). We find the vertical, perpetual motif of the stylized Phoenician plant, with characteristic thin rounded ridges and convex surface imitating inlaid woodwork. The jewel-like, alternate coloring (*color as pattern*) is uniquely on display here, with red (cinnabar) and blue (azurite) vegetal elements found side by side in both the stylized plants, the scale pattern forming a background for the funerary reliefs (see above, Fig. 4), and in the friezes encircling the sarcophagus (Hendrix 2001: 50, pl. 1). The similar application of *color as pattern* on the wing feathers of the sphinxes on the lid of the sarcophagus (red cinnabar and Egyptian blue) (not depicted in Fig. 14) connects this last resting place of an élite fifth-century BCE person to the sarcophagus of Ahiram from Byblos. Several centuries separate these two polychrome stone sarcophagi, and yet we can trace a remarkable continuity. The lotus frieze, the funerary procession, the apotropaic creatures, and the alternate coloring on the sphinxes' wings—all testify to an Egyptianizing common ground, most probably based on Phoenician woodwork (Porada 1973; Hendrix 2001).

FIG. 12
**Egyptianizing limestone statue from ancient Golgoi, Cyprus, depicting a male figure wearing a double crown, broad decorated collar, and kilt with cobras. Sixth century BCE. Estimated original height: 177 cm.** (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Cesnola Collection, purchased by subscription, 1874–1876.)

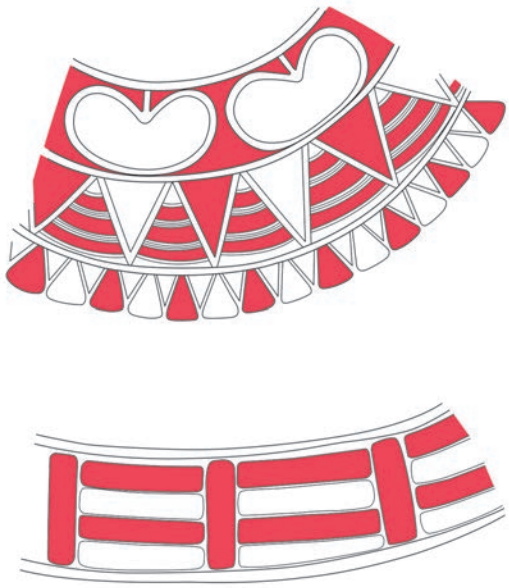

FIG. 13
**Detail of belt and broad collar of Fig. 12, from Golgoi. The preserved ancient color is indicated. Note the way color has been applied in an alternating manner (red-none-red-none). Perhaps there was indeed another color, now lost to us, but even if not, there was the obvious intention to achieve an opulent effect, using *color as pattern*.** (Drawings by F. Faegersten, digital color by F. Nilsson, MediaTryck, Lund University.)

## The Volute and the Sphinx as a Symbolic Hybrid Group

The symbolic force of the volute motif is only confirmed and expanded if we consider its appearance in tandem with other motifs connected to the supernatural realm, especially the sphinx. The unrealistic schematization of the volute (part palm, part lotiform plant) and its combination with other stylized plants emerging from it suggests that the volute motif (capital or not) represents a sort of hybrid entity, a vegetal counterpart, so to speak, of the sphinx.

We briefly point to three specific examples that are representative of this combination and also of the sorts of contexts in which we encounter the volute motif. Our three examples are well-known and often cited, but we hope to shed some new light on them: an élite chamber tomb at Tamassos on Cyprus, a terracotta naiskos from Idalion (also on Cyprus), and the description of the First Temple in Jerusalem. As we will see, in all of them other architectural features add to the Egyptianizing outlook and symbology of the volute capital. Arguably, the background of Phoenician woodwork is a common denominator in all three contexts.

A chamber tomb at Tamassos (the so-called Tomb 5) is the best preserved of a group of élite tombs dating to sometime in the Cypro-Archaic II period (seventh–early fifth centuries BCE; Buchholz, Matthäus, and Walcher 2002; Walcher 2005; Walcher 2009) (Fig. 15). The Tamassos tomb is characterized by stone architecture that imitates

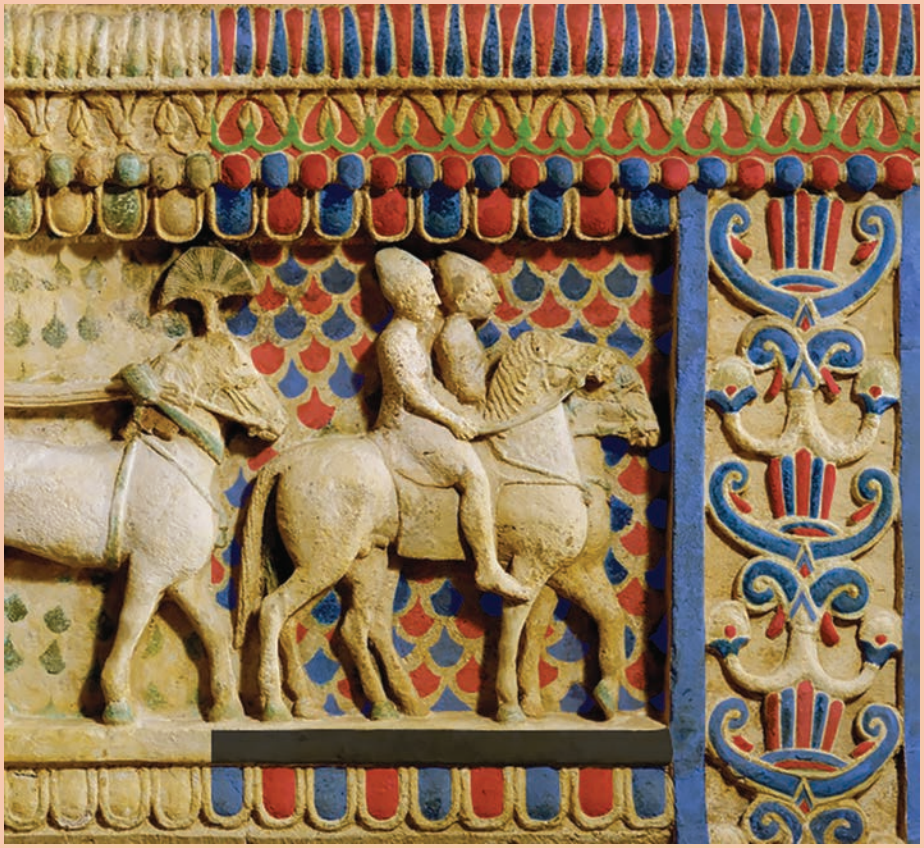

FIG. 14
**The remarkable polychromy preserved on the Amathus limestone sarcophagus from Cyprus, early fifth century BCE. The jewel-like opulence and the thin rounded ridges framing convex surfaces echo Phoenician woodwork; the *color as pattern* is almost uniquely on display. Length of sarcophagus: 229 cm; height: 110 cm. Part of the ancient preserved color has been added digitally.** (Digital color by F. Nilsson, MediaTryck, Lund University; color after Hendrix 2001; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Cesnola Collection, purchased by subscription, 1874–1876.)

FIG. 15
**Entrance of chamber tomb (Tomb 5) at Tamassos (Cyprus, seventh–early fifth centuries BCE). Flanking the entrance to the tomb are two almost identical volute capitals, rendered in relief on flat pilasters. The entrance itself is characterized by a stepped or recessed frame. Above the lintel are the ends of imitations of rectangular wooden beams. Virtually all elements in the grave imitate woodwork and timber construction.** (Photo by Rjdeadly, CC BY-SA 4.0 [https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0].)

and perpetuates elements of woodwork and timber construction. The stepped or recessed tomb entrance is an Egyptianizing feature that also recalls the "false door" and "false window" in Egyptian sacred architecture; this feature also appears in Phoenician ivories, such as those with the above-mentioned Woman at the Window motif. Inside the tomb there are, in fact, two such stepped, false windows facing each other on either side of the antechamber (Walcher 2009: pls. 8–9). In that same chamber there are two false doors as well. These recessed doors and windows replicate more common wooden versions. The entrance of the tomb is marked by flanking volute capitals on top of pilasters, which were carved in relief on the walls (see Fig. 11d). The two false windows each contain a frieze of five volute plants, related to the two relief volute capitals flanking the tomb entrance and very similar to volute votive stelae from the island (see Fig. 11e). Thus, in this funerary context the volute motif was given quite a central ornamental role. Moreover, sphinxes found in the vicinity of the tomb were almost certainly flanking its entrance, symbolically protecting the deceased. In fact, color preserved in the sphinxes also corresponds to the *color as pattern*, so characteristic of Phoenician ivory- and woodwork (Fig. 16).

We can find the same specific cluster of features in a terracotta naiskos or miniaturized shrine from Idalion, Cyprus: a stepped or recessed entrance (indicated by incisions in the clay) is flanked by a pair of columns with vegetal capitals (Fig. 17). In this case, the capitals resemble palms, which is another and perhaps more original appearance of the volute "capital," attested in the above-mentioned Palaepaphos sanctuary. To complete the symbolic set, a winged female creature, described variously as a harpy or a siren, but possibly a sphinx, is posted at the entrance of the building and looking out the door, as two other female heads also peer out of the windows on either side of the naiskos. The fact that both door and window openings are rendered as recessed, and that the palm capitals are three-dimensional, indicates that the small terracotta object echoes the idea of a wood-and-mudbrick shrine.

The description of Solomon's Temple in the First Book of Kings (1 Kgs 5–7) provides a literary representation of many of these features in a sacred context. Independent of the account's remoteness, and not taking it at face value but as a partly historical, partly literary composition of undetermined date, the fact remains that the biblical chapters point to the very same features as those outlined above, and they do so in a narrative that involved Phoenician architects and artisans of wood, metal, and masonry in the construction of a monumental building. Summarizing a recent study (Garfinkel and Mumcuoglu 2019), the temple structure described included these features: a stepped or recessed entrance with wooden doorposts of olive wood (described as four and five mezuzot), which also appear in miniature structures such as the Khirbet Qeiyafa stone model (dated to the tenth century BCE); flanking columns (the famous Jachin and Boaz made of bronze, i.e., possibly wood covered by thin bronze bands as in the above-mentioned Khorsabad cedar temple columns) with capitals of "lily-work," which are easily interpreted as some version of the volute/vegetal capital; sphinx-like guardian creatures called cherubim (cf. Gen 3:24; Ezek 21:3–4, 21:10; Ps 18:11–15), made of olive wood and overlaid with gold; and wooden panels adorning the interior with carvings featuring winged sphinxes/cherubim and stylized vegetal elements (Garfinkel and Mumcuoglu 2019; for cherubim as Egyptianizing hybrids, see Wyatt 2009; Eichler 2015).

Although there is no uniform architectural layout for Levantine or Phoenician temples, some shared features are well documented, largely inherited from Canaanite traditions, such as the use of columns or pillars in entranceways or porticoes, certain materials and masonry techniques, and the predilection for water installations of sacred connotations like wells, pools, channels, or ponds (Mierse 2004; Edrey 2019: 91–120; López-Ruiz 2021: 207–10, 293–94). It can be added that such common denominators are detailed in naiskoi or shrine-like objects in the Levant and in the Phoenician world. We see the repeated and consistent grouping of the same elements accompanying the volute motif. These naiskoi or models, in their own manner, miniaturize real or imagined religious installations. They repeatedly depict the stepped or recessed entrance to the sanctuary, flanking columns with vegetal capitals, and flanking guardian sphinxes (and lions). Moreover, the architectural frame represented in such models bears other Egyptianizing features in consistent patterns and combinations, which continue throughout the Phoenician realm and well into

FIG. 16
**Winged limestone sphinx with a double crown and broad collar, one of a virtually identical pair found—together with four lions—in connection to the sixth-century BCE élite tombs in Tamassos, Cyprus. The polychromy of the wing feathers and the double crown testify to the characteristic, Cypro-Phoenician alternate coloring or *color as pattern*. Length: 90 cm. Part of the ancient preserved color has been added digitally.** (Digital color by F. Nilsson, MediaTryck, Lund University; color after Solomidou-Ieronymidou 2001 and Walcher 2009; courtesy of the director of the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus.)

FIG. 17
**Terracotta naiskos found at Idalion, Cyprus, sixth century BCE. Note the flanking vegetal columns, stepped or recessed door entrance and windows of the "sanctuary," and a winged female creature—possibly a sphinx—which protects the inside. Height: 27 cm.** (Courtesy of the Louvre Museum.)

Punic and even later times (i.e., fifth century BCE onward) (Fig. 18). In addition to the flanking columns with volute capitals, these typically include the so-called cavetto cornice (a concave, architectural molding), the winged sun disc (more or less stylized), and the rearing cobras (uraei) with sun discs on their heads (Culican 1976).

Drawing on examples such as the Tamassos tomb, the Idalion naiskos, and the description of the First Temple of Jerusalem, we suggest that the stylized, hybrid tree or plant with fruits was directly connected to a hybrid apotropaic creature, most often depicted as a sphinx.


FIG. 18
**A Punic-period stone naiskos from Sulcis, Sardinia, fifth century BCE. Characteristics of the ancient Phoenician sanctuary are clearly outlined: two flanking volute capitals, a cavetto cornice decorated by a winged sun disc, and a frieze of rearing, apotropaic uraei (cobras) with sun discs on their heads. Height: 47 cm. Archaeological Museum "Ferruccio Barreca," Sant'Antioco, Sardinia.** (Guirguis 2017: 424, no. 260; courtesy of M. Guirguis.)

This is reinforced, moreover, by finds from Cypriote Palaepaphos, where fragments of stylized trees and sphinxes abound, together with fragments of recessed stone entrances, both miniature and monumental. Finally, there is a good indication that the stepped or recessed entrance marked the setting of important, symbolically charged Phoenician constructions—whether sanctuary, palace, or tomb—and served to contextualize this hybrid plant–hybrid guardian connection.

The combination of the sphinx and the stylized plant is indeed one of the most common themes found in the art of the first millennium BCE, in the Levant and beyond. Once the viewer is aware of it, she can find iterations of the dual motif in virtually all materials, not only three-dimensional stone and in relief work but also in ivory iconography, metalwork, glass, glyptics, and in painted ceramics and terracotta statues (Karageorghis and Des Gagniers 1974; Markoe 1985; Nys 2018). Of particular interest are instances where the sphinx and the stylized plant are not only combined in one depiction but act in tandem, physically framing a particular context, thus reinforcing their symbolic significance. We find this, for example, in the (possible) decoration of the armrests of the elaborate "throne" from Tomb 79 at Salamis (see Fig. 5a–b), in and around a monumental tomb (Figs. 15–16) or forming a formidable pair on ivory horse blinkers (Herrmann, Coffey, and Laidlaw 2004: S0755–56).

The association between the volute motif and the sphinx extends to other winged, apotropaic creatures, such as griffins (with a kind of fantastic bird-of-prey head) and ram-headed sphinxes. In many of these representations, the sphinx and its variants appear feeding on the ever-present fruit or leaf of the stylized tree (see Fig. 7). We believe this is a significant detail of the iconographic group, especially given the use of these motifs, as we have shown, in religious contexts, whether funerary or cultic. In fact, the fruit is *never* left out of the equation, whether the volute appears by itself or as part of a stylized, composite plant or of other composite motifs (see Fig. 11). Even in terracotta naiskoi of very limited size and crude manufacture, we find the tiny, drop-shaped tendril or fruit faithfully indicated (Betancourt 1971: fig. 2). As mentioned above, these volute-plant fruits were surely painted or inlaid in order to stand out.

In short, we propose that the motif of two winged sphinxes or griffins eating the fruits of a stylized vegetal

element is key to understanding the overall symbology of the volute capital. It has already been postulated that the volute motif situates the scenes or figures associated with it in the realm of the divine or on a mythical plane (e.g., Almagro-Gorbea 2010: 261). What is more, the volutes and their accompanying symbols (e.g., the sphinxes) are especially relevant at the entrances to shrines and graves where they physically mark liminal spaces, whether these represented the threshold between the realms of the living and the dead or the separation between the natural/mortal and the divine. The reading we propose here, stressing the motif's combination with other plant-forms and sphinxes as well as its hybrid quality, only confirms such mythical/divine nature. The volute motif would carry this mythological symbolism of protection in eternity onto other contexts that capitalize on such imagery, especially royal palaces or citadels or more generally prestigious portable artifacts.

The combination of these two hybrids, the sphinx and the volute motif, therefore, seems to be a Phoenician creation. Drawing on a characteristic Egyptianizing strand of Phoenician art, we should expect it to have a particular meaning and place within Phoenician religious symbolism. If this reading is correct, we cannot adequately interpret the vegetal motif and the creatures flanking it or feeding from it in isolation from each other anymore, even when they appear separately. The connotations of the volute and the sphinx overlap and reinforce each other as part of a divine symbology that inspired protection and regeneration. As we know, the sphinx was deployed as a symbol of royal and divine protection already in its Egyptian incarnations, and in the Phoenician world sphinxes carried that meaning and often accompany the royal or divine throne (López-Ruiz 2021: 218–25) (see Fig. 2). The stylized hybrid plant and its fruits, in turn, represented in perpetual regeneration, also symbolized eternity. Appropriately, they accompany and nourish (in a supernatural way) the sphinxes and griffins, who are the main guardians of divinity and kingship. In a tighter reading of the motif, we can imagine that, by eating the fruits of the stylized tree/plant, the supernatural creatures appeared gaining and renewing their eternal quality and power to protect the god/king/people, here and now or in the next life, in eternity.

With or without sphinxes, we can now better appreciate the symbolic force of the volute motif in its entirety and its ramifications (no pun intended).

## Conclusions and an Additional Thought

The volute motif was part and parcel of Phoenician religious iconography, a symbol which transcended any particular manifestation or rendition, ranging from ornamentation of small-scale portable artifacts to decorative and architectonic monumental capitals. The volute motif was also a constant in the so-called orientalizing repertoire appreciated by élites far and wide during the entire first millennium BCE, probably one of the most profusely reproduced together with the sphinx, another hybrid entity with which it often formed a group in the same scenes. In isolation or as a combo, volute and sphinx were particularly suitable and adaptable to religious contexts, given their association with protection and regeneration, including in the afterlife.

Instead of solely pointing out the spread of this iconography throughout the Phoenician realm, as previously done, or to discuss again the issue of the origins or function of the stone volute capitals that are often the center of attention (e.g., López-Ruiz 2021: 307–12; Franklin 2023; and bibliographies), we have considered carefully aspects of technology and materiality, which offer specific clues about the transmission and adaptation of this important motif. The volute capital, we have argued, provides a perfect example of how the Phoenicians, who excelled in wood- and ivory-carving, recreated an Egyptian New Kingdom opulent iconography in their own art during the earliest part of the first millennium BCE. We have identified certain details, connected to the technique of inlay, and suggested that they are indicative—also in other materials, such as stone—of Phoenician woodwork. These include the presence of thin rounded ridges around iconographic elements, the convex surface of the area found within these ridges, and the application of what we have called *color as pattern*. It was thanks to the Phoenicians' know-how, control over valuable natural resources, and the royal connotations displayed in their polychrome, high-quality output of religious art that this iconography was appreciated, adopted, and adapted by élites across the entire ancient Near East and beyond. The orientalizing trend found further west, throughout the Mediterranean, closely follows the pattern of Phoenician expansion and trade. Our discussion of the volute motif, therefore, provides a concrete, traceable example of the role of elaborately painted and inlaid Phoenician wood- and ivory-work

in that process of transmission and adaptation, whether as part of architecture, statuary, furniture, or other artistic expressions.

Also in terms of symbology, we advanced our understanding of the volute capital. Specifically, we have clinched the connection between the volute capital and the winged sphinxes or griffins that often appear flanking it and sometimes feeding from it, probably to renew or receive eternal life. We have proposed that the volute, alone or in more complex composite vegetal motifs (with palmettes, lotuses, and so forth), functioned as a hybrid entity with otherworldly connotations. As a doubly hybrid group, then, volutes and sphinxes/griffins carried strong religious connotations of protection and regeneration in the Phoenician realm, which made it appropriate for the sanctuary setting as well as for the palace, throne, and funerary context. Even when encountered independently, the volute motif carried powerful implications of regeneration and eternal protection.

The volute motif in general, and the monumental stone volute capitals from the Levant in particular, are thus viewed in a new light. With their thin rounded ridges, the convex surface of their volutes, the drop-shaped tendrils, and even the application of *color as pattern*, the monumental stone volute capitals fit right in together with the rest of the corpus of Phoenician Egyptianizing objects and motifs. Accepting the presence of large-scale, colorful, Phoenician woodwork reinforces the generally accepted idea that Phoenician artisans set the trend for the use of this Canaanite motif (already attested during the Bronze Age) in early first-millennium BCE elite art, independent of the earliest attestations in stone in Israel.

Finally, we venture an idea for further exploration. Our close look at the volute motif in all contexts, and the consideration of large wooden versions (also for sphinxes, statuary, and other artwork) helps us reconstruct Phoenician sacred spaces in the early first millennium BCE. Even as a highly stylized and fantastic vegetal composition, the volute motif draws its symbology from the allusion to living, thriving vegetation. Thus, another unexplored dimension of this symbology is how the stylized Egyptianizing vegetal symbols interacted with real-life vegetal relatives, including the palm, the papyrus, the lotus, and the lily. These plants would probably have been part of the sacred landscapes of the Levant, and some of them (papyrus and lotus) specifically live in the water. It is very tempting to imagine these plants as cultivated in sacred pools and gardens the likes of which are well attested in Phoenician sanctuaries, such as at Bostan es-Sheik (Sidon), Amrit (coastal Syria), Kition (Cyprus), and Motya (Sicily). All these sanctuaries were dedicated to deities invoked for health and regeneration in life and in the afterlife (Eshmoun, Ashtart, Baal/Melqart), which would invite sacred gardens and plants evoking these principles. However, this particular aspect of Phoenician sanctuaries awaits further exploration.[10] It is worth noting that pollen analyses from the remains of Persian-period ponds from Ramat Rahel, south of Jerusalem—a site, as we saw above, rich in volute capitals, stone vegetal balustrades, and the like in earlier periods—indicate the presence of several exotic species, including water-demanding types such as poplar, willow, and the water lily (*Nymphaea*) (Lipschits, Gadot, and Langgut 2012: 68, 71–73).

Whether architectonic or decorative, in wood, stone, or other materials, the volute motif was a permanent, mythologized counterpart of the fleeting plants that lived and died in nature, with which it shared the curated sacred landscapes of Phoenician and neighboring communities.

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## Notes

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1. The term *capital* and especially the misnomer *Proto-Aeolic* imply the association with monumental architecture and with the debate about the origins of the Greek architectural orders, as the Aegean capitals (both east Greek Ionic and Aeolic) draw on precedents from the Near East (Barletta 2001: 84–124; Jenkins 2006: 19). This is a good example of the teleological inertias that often drive the interpretation of Near Eastern and especially Phoenician art and culture.
2. This technique is attested in the Canaanite shipwreck of Uluburun as well as in the seventh-century BCE Phoenician haul of Mazarrón, southeast Iberia (Emanuel 2019: 424–25; Negueruela 2004; Sader 2019: 310; Edrey 2019: 122–23).
3. Biblical sources include 2 Sam 5:11; 1 Kgs 5–7; 1 Chr 14:1. Greek sources include Homer, *Odyssey* 15.415, who calls them *Phoínikes nausíklytoi* (Phoenicians famous for their ships); Herodotus, *Historiae* 4.42.2–4; Strabo, *Geographica* 16.2.23, and others.
4. In Maurice Chéhab's estimation, the sarcophagus of Ahiram is the only sarcophagus in the necropolis made of finer limestone, suitable for this type of carving. The other sarcophagi were of a much coarser, local stone (Chéhab 1970–1971: 113; see also Porada 1973: 357).
5. No chemical analyses of pigments have been undertaken, nor any for hue, saturation, or lightness with regard to the colors depicted. The digital reconstructions have merely focused on displaying the placement and general color (red, blue, green, gold, etc.) preserved on these ancient objects.
6. Phoenician and orientalizing ivories modeled on them have appeared throughout the Mediterranean. The corpus is not without complexities, given the dearth of hard evidence about workshop locations and the portable, hence dislocated, nature of these luxury artifacts. Scholars have proposed various classificatory criteria, stylistic or chronological, and placed more or less emphasis on a Phoenician or a broader Levantine agency: e.g., Winter 1976; Markoe 1985: 91, 116–17; Gunter 2014; Feldman 2014: 43–64; Suter 2016.
7. Maurice Chéhab noted: "Quant à la couleur noire, elle couvrait les barbes et cheveux et alternait avec le rouge soit pour les pétales des fleurs de lotus, soit pour la torsade" (Chéhab 1970–1971: 117). Since the exact appearance of the coloring of the lotus petals cannot be ascertained, it is not indicated in Fig. 2.
8. For preserved Phoenician textile finds in Iberia, see, e.g., Alfaro Giner and Tébar Megías 2007.
9. For an overview of other sanctuaries with flanking columns, including the Ashtart temple at Kition (Cyprus), see Mierse 2004.
10. In a recent article, L. Nigro proposes that the Motya pool (so-called *Kothon*) had a function related to astronomical observation, using the reflecting water (Nigro 2022). The pool at Motya was part of an enclosed precinct with installations and temples dedicated to Baal and Ashtart, life- and prosperity-giving deities the sort of which would have been aptly accompanied by representations of the motifs discussed here. Volute capitals adorned the entrance to one of the Baal temples (Nigro 2015: 89–90, fig. 9). Nigro points to the use of sacred pools in Egypt (dedicated to the deities Amun, Mut, and Thoth) and Mesopotamia, possibly hosting relevant birds (ibis in Egypt) and fish (Nigro 2022: 13–14). The issue of water plants is not contemplated.

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