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Figural Corinthian Capitals in Syria During the Roman Period

Varijante figuralnih korintskih kapitela u Siriji u rimskom razdoblju

ABSTRACT

This study explores Corinthian capitals in Syria, categorizing them as deities (as Bacchus, Minerva, and Faunus), animals (particularly eagles), masks, and human figures showcasing a transition from Hellenistic to Roman influences. Despite dating challenges, a comprehensive assessment places these capitals in the late 2nd to early 3rd century AD, aligning with a period of architectural activity in the region.

KEYWORDS

figural capitals, Corinthian capitals, Syria, Roman period, representations

APSTRAKT

Autor istražuje korintske kapitele u Siriji, kategorizirajući ih kao božanstva (poput Bakha, Minerve i Fauna), životinje (posebno orlove), maske i ljudske figure koje pokazuju prijelaz s helenističkih na rimske utjecaje. Unatoč izazovima datiranja, sveobuhvatna procjena smješta ove kapitele u kraj 2. do početka 3. stoljeća, što se poklapa s razdobljem arhitektonske aktivnosti u regiji.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

figuralni kapiteli, korintski kapiteli, Sirija, rimsko razdoblje, prikazi

Introduction

Figural capitals are defined as the capitals of columns that feature figures. The earliest examples of these capitals can be found in Egypt. Additionally, such capitals from Persia and Paphlagonia, decorated with animal heads, became popular in other countries due to Persian expansion during the 5th to 6th centuries BC.¹ While in Hellenistic Greece, the earliest examples of this type of capital date back to the 4th and 3rd centuries BC.²

As for the capitals of classical orders, archaeological evidence found to date indicates that figures were present on various types of capitals, such as Ionic capitals.³ However, the most important and widespread type of these capitals is the Corinthian. This is because its artistic design provides suitable space for additional decoration. Additionally, the parts with plant decorations can easily be changed to figural decorations or accommodate figural elements.⁴

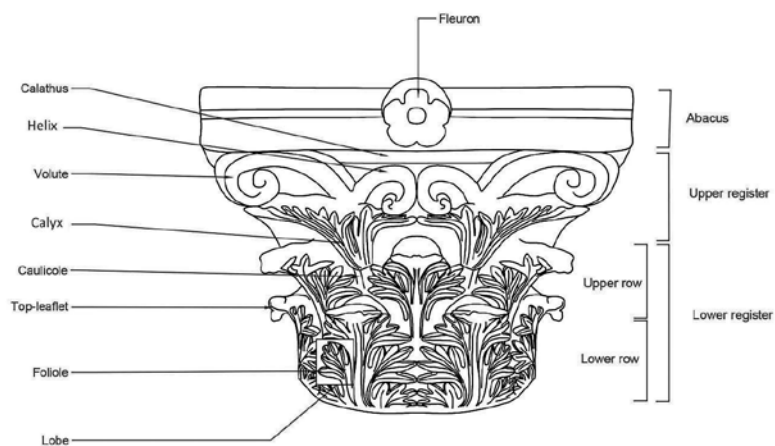
The tradition of figural decorations was common in the Hellenistic world, but it is likely that the Corinthian capitals of Messene were the first example to use figural decorations in the Peloponnese. They are canonical Corinthian capitals (fig. 1), with figural sculptures adorning the front, and date back to the last quarter of the 2nd century BC.⁵

No figural Corinthian capitals from before the Roman period have been discovered in Syria thus far. However, at the onset of the Roman period, numerous such capitals have been unearthed across various regions of Syria.⁶

This article explores Corinthian figural capitals in Syria, where there is currently no specialized research dedicated to studying this type of capital.⁷ Although some figural capitals from Syria were briefly mentioned in an article discussing additional elements on canonical Corinthian capitals in the region, that study was conducted within a different context from this article, and all the other capitals studied in this article have not been published before.⁸

This article expands the discourse on Corinthian figural capitals in Syria by providing additional scientific insights. Moreover, it examines these capitals, attempts to date them, and seeks to understand the contexts in which they were used.

Within the context of Corinthian capitals in Syria, various figures are present, falling into distinct classifications such as representations of deities, depictions of animals, masks, and human portrayals (Fig. 2).



1

Components
of canonical
Corinthian capital

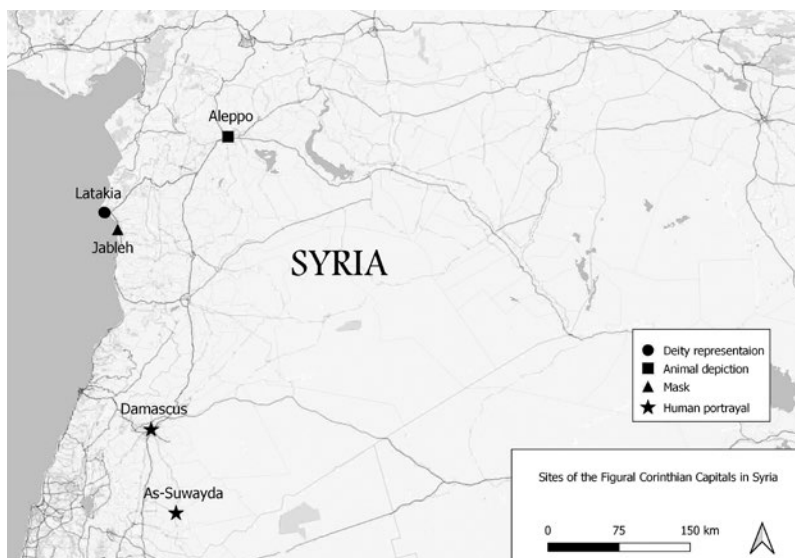
Elementi
kanonskog
korinskog
kapitela

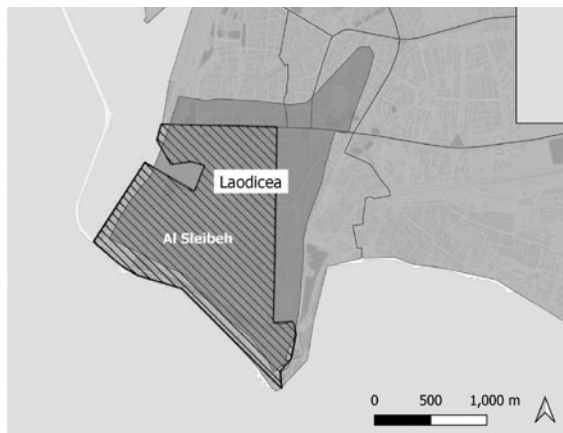
(drawing / crtež:
Ahmad Dawa)

2

Location of Figural
Corinthian capitals
in Syria

Nalazišta
figuralnih
korinskih
kapitela u Siriji
(drawing / crtež:
A. Dawa)





3
Al Sleibeh as a
Present-Day Part
of Ancient Laodicea
Al Sleibeh kao
današnji dio
antičke Latakije
(drawing / crtež:
A. Dawa)

4
Columns of
Bacchus, Laodicea
Stupovi s
prikazima Bakha,
Latakija
(photo / foto:
A. Dawa)



Deities representations

Corinthian capitals, featuring representations of various Greek and Roman deities, have been discovered in various geographical regions.⁹ Several capitals with such depictions have been unearthed in Syria, particularly on the coastal region, in the city of Latakia, formerly known as *Laodicea* during the Roman period (Fig. 3).¹⁰

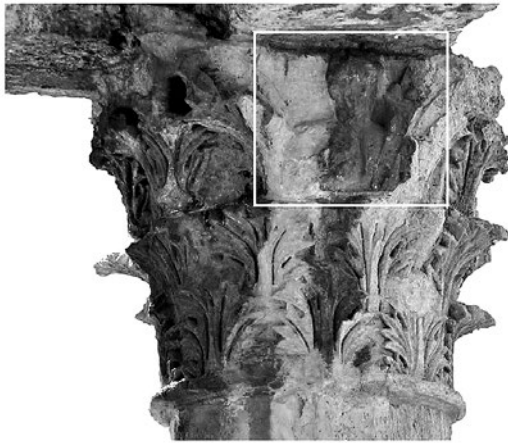
Three examples made of marble can be found in the Latakia Museum. Additionally, a fourth representation made of local limestone, can be found on four capitals situated on columns known as Columns of Bacchus, located within the borders of the old city *Laodicea* (Fig. 4).¹¹

The capitals in the Bacchus columns exhibit three faces incorporating all the essential elements of canonical Corinthian capitals, while the fourth face features a bust (Fig. 5). The precise character of this bust remains unclear due to substantial damage to its features, with only its outlines detectable. However, certain features can be recognised. The character appears to have an arm, with a cluster of grapes held in the palm of the hand. Additionally, there is an element resembling a spear behind the character on the opposite side. These two elements, the bunch of grapes and the spear, suggest that the figure in this bust is associated with the god Bacchus.¹²

A more obvious representation of the god Bacchus can be seen in one of the three capitals existed in the Latakia Museum (Fig. 6). On this capital, the figure shows a visage of a bearded young man wearing a Roman toga. This representation normally signifies the god Bacchus, and the supporting evidence lies in the inclusion of a carving of a wand called *thyrsus* behind the character—a symbol closely associated with him.¹³

The trio of capitals presently housed in the Latakia Museum were discovered alongside several granite column shafts at the same site during construction activities, in the neighbourhood of Al Sleibeh, which today comprise a large part of the old city *Laodicea* (Fig. 3). Each of these capitals comprises two parts—a lower one, which consists of the two rows of acanthus leaves, and an upper part that features the busts of the deities.

The depiction on the second capital represents a woman with a notably stern and masculine expression. This woman is wearing what appears to be a helmet on her head, and she wears a medallion around her neck that resembles Medusa (Fig. 7). These features align with the attributes typically associated with the goddess Minerva.¹⁴



5

Bacchus holding
grapes in one hand
and a spear behind
him

Bakho drži
grožđe u jednoj
ruci, a iza njega
je koplje
(photo / foto:
A. Dawa)

The figure on the last capital showcases a displeasing face, with a unique beard, and pointed ears (Fig. 8). While this description strongly suggests that the character is the Roman deity Pan or Faunus, another definitive evidence supporting this inference lies in the prominent carving behind the bust. This carving resembles a stick with a hooked end, akin to a shepherd's throwing-stick known as *lagobolon*—a symbol associated with this god.¹⁵

No similar representations of the gods have been uncovered in the eastern Mediterranean region. In Baalbek, Lebanon, a capital features a miniature figure depicting the god Bacchus, distinct from the figure discovered in Latakia, where only a small rendition

of Bacchus's head is evident.¹⁶ Similarly, in Roman Palestine, there is a capital featuring a small depiction of the head of the god Tyche, resembling the one found in Lebanon.¹⁷

Masks

In Roman architecture, masks were commonly employed, particularly in theatres and structures associated with performances.¹⁸ The Roman period witnessed the widespread construction of theatres in Syria, some of which endure to this day.¹⁹ However, despite the prevalence of theatres, Corinthian capitals adorned with a mask-like figure were very rare in Syria, with only one discovered in the Roman theatre located in the city of Jableh, Roman *Gabala*, on the Syrian coast.²⁰ The theatre's history extends back to the first half of the 3rd century AD, during the reign of the Severian dynasty.²¹

Severely damaged, this capital retains only a fragment of an acanthus leaf from the lower acanthus row, with a partially visible mask in place of the abacus motif. The mask, displaying two eyes and a smiling mouth, is a distinctive feature (Fig. 9).²² A similar mask can be found on a capital from unknown provenance in Lebanon.²³

Animal depictions

Across various regions and eras, Corinthian capitals have depicted different types of animals, including the heads of cows, bulls, rams, lions, as well as various birds such as pigeons and eagles.²⁴ In Syria, a limited number of Corinthian capitals featuring animal figures have been discovered. Among these, the representations have been restricted to eagles based on current findings. An example of such a capital made of marble is on display at the Museum of Aleppo, Roman *Beroia* (Fig. 10).

Although most parts of the eagle on our capital are damaged and challenging to discern, it is evident that the eagle is depicted in a standing position. The legs, notably resting on the inner parts of the calyxes converging at the central axis of the capital's face, are the only distinct features. The wings of the eagle are barely visible on either side, and the right wing's inner surface is adorned with grooves representing elongated feathers.

This freestanding pose of the eagle on the Corinthian capital is a less common representation.²⁵ Similar shapes have been found on different elements in various sites in Syria, such as the lintel from the Baalshamin Temple in Palmyra, dating back to the beginning of the 3rd century AD.²⁶

Several capitals featuring representations of eagles in the city of Tyre, Lebanon, depict the eagles standing with their wings positioned at their sides, similar to the capital in the Aleppo Museum.²⁷ Additionally, the shape of a standing eagle was also observed on capitals from Roman Palestine, although the wings were spread out rather than positioned on either side of the eagle's body.²⁸

Depictions of eagles frequently carried symbolic importance, especially within temples, where eagles were closely linked with the gods.²⁹ This symbolism was evident, for instance, in the Temple of Baalshamin in Palmyra.³⁰

However, establishing this connection proves challenging with the capital in Aleppo Museum. While the eagle holds symbolic significance in Syria, determining its role in the Corinthian capitals under study here presents difficulties. These capitals, crafted from marble, were imported, as Syria lacks marble quarries. The production of these forms likely occurred in workshops abroad, possibly based on pre-existing models or pattern books.³¹ Consequently, confirming whether the eagle carries symbolic weight becomes problematic. Moreover, since these capitals do not belong to specific structures like temples, explaining their symbolic placement becomes challenging and speculative. In neighbouring regions, various animals, including pigeons, lizards, and snakes in Lebanon, and lions, birds, and bulls in Roman Palestine, have been discovered.³² However, in Syria, no representations or shapes other than eagles on Corinthian capitals have been unearthed thus far.

Human portrayals

The earliest instances of capitals with human figures can be traced back to the Hellenistic period.³³ Numerous figural capitals featuring human representations have been found in Syria, particularly in the southern regions. Examples include those discovered in the temples of Baalshamin and what was believed to be Temple of Dushara in 'Si' in As-Suwayda Governorate, dating back to the beginning of the 1st century AD (Fig. 11).³⁴

The capital comprises a singular row featuring eight acanthus leaves, surmounted by volutes, and topped with an abacus. Positioned between the volutes' stalks and above the acanthus leaves is a nude male bust, with his hands resting on the upper part of the axial acanthus leaf.

Butler identified this temple according to a fragment showing feet treading grapes to extract wine, possibly depicting Dushara. However, Dentzer disputes this

6

Bacchus wearing a Roman toga with thyrsus behind him

Bakho odjeven u rimsku togu, s tirsom iza leđa

(photo / foto: A. Dawa)



7

Minerva wearing the helmet and puts on a Medusa medallion

Minerva s kacigom na glavi stavlja medaljon s Meduzinim likom

(photo / foto: A. Dawa)



8

Faunus, depicted with a displeasing face, pointed ears, and a hooked-end stick behind him

Faun s nezadovoljnim izrazom lica, šiljastim ušima i štapom zakrivljenog vrha iza leđa

(photo / foto: A. Dawa)



9

A smiling mask

Nasmijana maska

(photo / foto: A. Dawa)





10

A standing eagle
with legs resting
on inner calyxes
and wings on
either side

Orao raširenih
krila stoji na
čaškama

(photo / foto:
A. Dawa)

attribution, arguing that there is nothing to connect it definitively to the Nabataean god Dushara.³⁵

Although it is not certain whether this temple was dedicated to Dushara, it is possible that Dushara may have been honoured there. The nude beardless male bust depicted on the capital from this temple might support this hypothesis, as it might indicate Dushara, since the only type of Dushara confirmed on coins from southern Syria is beardless.³⁶

Another capital is housed in Damascus Museum (Fig. 12). This capital is composed of two rows featuring four acanthus leaves, two volutes, and an abacus. Within the space between the volute's stalks, there is a depiction of a male figure.

The acanthus leaves on this capital suggest that it belongs to a later period compared to the latter one. Moreover, the human figure depicted on this capital is dressed in a Roman toga, a departure from the naked figure seen on the preceding capital. These details may offer a more contemporary estimation for the capital's date, a topic that will be further addressed in the subsequent section on dating.

This depiction of a human figure is present in Lebanon on several capitals, including one of unknown origin featuring what the writer describes as female characteristics, dated to the early 2nd century AD.³⁷ Additionally, other capital with similar human representations dating back to the Byzantine period, all portraying female figures, have been discovered.³⁸ Similarly, in Roman Palestine, capitals adorned with female figures have been found, dating back to the Late Roman period.³⁹ It is noteworthy that in both Lebanon and Palestine, the human forms depicted are female, whereas in southern Syria, only forms displaying masculine features have been found.

Discussion

The Roman Near Eastern Sculpture in Syria could belong to Classical types, often found in the coastal region and made of marble, as seen in the capitals of the Latakia Museum and the theater capital from Jableh. Additionally, this type of sculpture can reach the interior areas of Syria, but its cost is high, indicating the presence of wealthy communities in those areas, as in the capital from Museum of Aleppo. The other type of Roman sculpture in Syria can be imitations and adaptations of Classical types of variable quality, where local stone is used, often found in inner Syria, such as the capitals of the columns of Bacchus in Latakia. The last case includes works not derived from Classical prototypes; in this case, the works are either local or show Eastern influences, such as Persian art. Such cases often appear in the steppe and desert, for example, in Palmyra.⁴⁰

In addition to all these influences, typical regional styles of Syrian art during the Roman period are exemplified. The southern region of Syria is distinguished by local Hauranite basalt, a hard volcanic stone that is challenging to work with.⁴¹ There is considerable debate over whether the inhabitants were Nabataean, as they differed from those in Arabia Petraea. Some scholars argue that these differences can be explained by the influences of Syrian Hellenistic culture and, to a large extent, ancient Syrian Aramaic traditions. Therefore, some researchers suggest that the sculptures in these areas should be termed as Hauranite

rather than Nabataean.⁴² This area is complex, with its art reflecting a multitude of interactions between various cultural and artistic traditions. The diverse mix of types, styles, and motifs raises questions about the presence of multiple workshops (occidental, oriental, and indigenous) operating in close contact with in southern Syria.⁴³

Furthermore, there was urban activity in the southern region of Syria to the Mediterranean coast during the period of Herod, and his descendants until the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Although many of the artistic influences utilized by Herod rely on Roman antecedents, others draw inspiration from various Hellenistic centers such as Alexandria, Antioch, and cities in Asia Minor. In addition, some elements of Herod's building program surpass Hellenistic and Roman models, deriving from Hasmonaean antecedents, local and eastern traditions, as well as Herod's personal tastes and preferences.⁴⁴

Nabataean art initially lacked figurative elements. However, in the 1st century AD, diverse external influences—such as Alexandrian, Hellenistic, Parthian, and provincial Greco-Oriental—prompted the emergence of various figurative representations. Figurines from the Nabataean period, primarily from the first and 2nd centuries AD, predominantly feature animals, with a smaller portion being anthropomorphic. These figurines are presumed to have held religious significance, and only a few depict deities.⁴⁵ The depiction of the gods reflects the influence of Hellenistic culture, evident in the representation of the Nabataean religion, which traditionally favoured aniconic forms in the worship of the principal deity, Dushara. This interpretation finds support in depictions of Dushara, where anthropomorphism bears Greek influence, yet the facial features have Nabataean characteristics.⁴⁶ For the later period, specifically during the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, the sculptures of Hawran maintained a notable independence compared to other Roman regions.⁴⁷ This implies a degree of independence, where, for example, the capital of the Damascus Museum exhibits acanthus leaf designs similar to those used throughout Roman-controlled regions in Syria. However, the overall form of the capital and the figure it adorns bear Hellenistic and Nabatean characteristics. Finally, it is important to note the significant importance of grapes and wine throughout Syria.⁴⁸ This is clearly reflected in the worship of Bacchus, the god of wine. We can expect a strong connection and influence between the widespread cultivation of grapes and wine and the worship of Bacchus. A dedicated temple to him can be seen in Latakia—or what remains



11
A nude male bust with his hands resting on the upper part of the axial acanthus leaf

Akt muškog poprsja s rukama položenim na gornji dio središnjeg lista akanta (source / izvor: "Si," Archaeological Archives <https://vrc.princeton.edu/archives/items/show/47586>)



12
A male bust wearing a Roman toga depicted between the volute's stalks

Muško poprsje odjeveno u rimsku togu, prikazano među stabljikama voluta (photo / foto: A. Dawa)

of it—alongside the capital bearing his image in the Latakia Museum. Additionally, Butler seems to have drawn on the depiction of grapes and wine found in the decorations of the southern temple in 'Si' to connect it with Dushara, who was also a god of wine, especially considering wines were important exports from the region.

Dating

Dating most of these capitals proves challenging due to the scarcity of information, their absence from any archaeological context, and the lack of a clear association with any specific archaeological site. However, the capital adorned with a mask in the theater of

Jableh city is an exception. This particular capital can be dated to the first half of the 3rd century AD, coinciding with the construction of the theater during the reign of the Severian dynasty. The confirmation of its connection to the theater is supported by both the mask it bears and its discovery within the confines of the theater.

The dating of other capitals relies on various factors, including the type of stone used, the elements within the capitals, and the analysis of political and military situation. By considering all these aspects, it may be feasible to determine a plausible timeframe.

In the late 2nd century AD, *Laodicea* suffered extensive damage during the conflict between Pescennius Niger and Septimius Severus.⁴⁹ However, following Severus's victory, the city garnered significant importance owing to its allegiance, prompting a renewed emphasis on its architectural advancement. This urban revitalization aligned with *Laodicea*'s promotion to the status of a metropolis and subsequently, a colony in AD 196.⁵⁰ Concurrently, there was a substantial import of marble pieces, including capitals, during this period.⁵¹ Among this assortment, our three capitals, adorned with divine representations, can also be dated to this period. This dating is also supported by the notion that the three capitals from the Latakia Museum consist of two parts, and after the Antonine period, such capitals no longer appear.⁵²

As for the capitals on the Columns of Bacchus in the city, which are crafted from local limestone, it is speculated that these capitals existed in their current location either before or during the modernization phase in the Severian period. Consequently, their dating can be traced back to the late Antonine era or the Severan era.⁵³

Despite coastal cities having convenient access to marble and granite imports,⁵⁴ numerous artifacts like columns, capitals, and bases made from various imported stones have also been discovered in many inland areas, far from the Mediterranean coast. The peak of using imported marble in public and sacred constructions in the Levant occurred during the Antonine and Severan periods. In the heart of Aleppo, the citadel provided the original context for a few grey granite columns and 'pavonazzetto'.⁵⁵ The Corinthian capital decorated with the eagle from Aleppo can also be dated to this period, specifically the late 2nd century to the early 3rd century. This determination is derived from a thorough examination of various elements on the capital signifying this timeframe, including the acanthus leaves in the first row, as well as the shape of caulicole and the closed, high calyxes.⁵⁶

Regarding the Basalt capital adorned with a human image displayed in the Damascus Museum: the region of southern Syria, once under Nabatean rule, fell under direct Roman control in AD 106, marking a significant shift in Nabatean culture as it became integrated into the Roman Empire. This transition brought about notable social and art changes for the Nabataeans.⁵⁷ One of these changes involves in art is the influence of Roman portrait sculpting. By AD 100, Roman busts depicting portraits began to feature the shoulders and tops of the upper arms, gradually expanding to include the navel and upper torso, having previously depicted only the lower neck and shoulders. Additionally, these busts could take various forms, such as cuirassed, nude, or draped, as in the case of the Damascus capital.⁵⁸ Consequently, the capital housed in the Damascus Museum can be dated to the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, reflecting this artistic evolution.

Conclusion

Exploring Corinthian capitals in Syria reveals a rich variety of representations including deities, animals, masks, and human figures, though their exact symbolic significance is challenging to ascertain due to the lack of contextual ties to specific archaeological structures. Capitals from Latakia feature diverse deity representations like Bacchus, Minerva, and Faunus, found alongside granite column shafts, suggesting their original architectural context nearby. These Syrian capitals are notable for their larger and more prominent divine depictions compared to counterparts in the eastern Mediterranean. Masks, such as a unique smiling example found in Jableh's theatre from the Severian dynasty, are rare on Syrian Corinthian capitals but indicate theatrical influences on architectural ornamentation. Animal depictions, particularly eagles, are common on these capitals, distinguishing them from others in the region. Human figures, influenced initially by the Nabateans and later by Roman styles, predominantly depict masculine forms, exemplified by artifacts like the Roman-toga-adorned bust in the Damascus Museum. Dating these capitals proves challenging, requiring consideration of factors like stone type and architectural context, placing them generally in the late 2nd to early 3rd century AD, a period of significant architectural activity in Syria.

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NOTES

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- 4 Fischer, 'Figured Capitals in Roman Palestine: Marble Imports and Local Stone. Some Aspects of "Imperial" and "Provincial" Art', 113; Jerome Jordan Pollitt, *The Ancient View of Greek Art: Criticism, History and Terminology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 37–41, 53, 65.
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- 7 Von Mercklin conducted a study on ancient figural capitals in various parts of the Roman Empire, but his focus in Syria was specifically on the Nabataean region in southern Syria, see: von Mercklin, *Antike Figuralkapitelle*, 23–27. Fischer studied figured capitals in Roman Palestine, see: Fischer, 'Figured Capitals in Roman Palestine: Marble Imports and Local Stone. Some Aspects of "Imperial" and "Provincial" Art'. Kahwagi-Janho conducted exclusive research on capitals with various figures from Lebanon, see: Kahwagi-Janho, 'Antique Figured Capitals from Lebanon'.
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SAŽETAK

Varijante figuralnih korintskih kapitela u Siriji u rimskom razdoblju

Rad se bavi korintskim kapitelima u Siriji, s posebnim naglaskom na njihove figuralne prikaze, uključujući božanstva, maske, životinje i ljudske figure. U uvodu se razmatra Vitruvijeva definicija korinskog kapitela i njegove proporcije, pri čemu se ona razlikuje od kanonskog oblika koji je nastao u 4. stoljeću pr. Kr. i stekao istaknutu ulogu tijekom razdoblja Rimskog Carstva. U nastavku se analiziraju varijacije ključnih elemenata korintskih kapitela, što omogućuje njihovu klasifikaciju prema različitim tipovima. Središte istraživanja čine figuralni prikazi na korintskim kapitelima u Siriji. Među istaknutijim prikazima božanstava ističu se Bakho, Minerva i Faun, posebno zastupljeni u nalazištima u Latakiji. Maske su rijetke, no vrijedan primjer čini prepoznatljiva nasmijana maska iz kazališta u Jablehu. Prikazi životinja, osobito orlova, također su dokumentirani, iako njihova simbolička povezanost s božanstvima ostaje nedovoljno razjašnjena. Ljudski prikazi na kapitelima u početku odražavaju helenističke utjecaje, što je vidljivo na primjerima iz mjesta Si u provinciji As-Suwayda, dok kasniji primjeri, poput onih iz Damaska, ukazuju na prevladavajući rimski utjecaj. Unatoč izazovima preciznog datiranja, autor sugerira vremenski okvir kraja 2. i početka 3. stoljeća, temeljen na čimbenicima poput vrste kamena, arhitektonskih obilježja i povijesnog konteksta. Istraživanje ovih kapitela pruža uvid u ikonografsku raznolikost korintskih kapitela u Siriji te njihovu povezanost s političkim zbivanjima u vrijeme njihova nastanka.

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