

Palms in Stone: Name, Origin, Date and Function in the Debate over Levantine Volute (“Proto-Aeolic”) Capitals

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1. Introduction

Schumacher’s excavations at Megiddo produced the first Levantine volute capital in 1903, and the names attached to it framed the debate long before the corpus was large enough to test them. The block had been reused as a building stone in the wall of a large Israelite building, which Schumacher identified as a sanctuary and called the Tempelburg (Shiloh 1993: 1005). Until the 1940s and 1950s such pieces were known as “Proto-Ionian capitals” and afterwards also as “Proto-Aeolic capitals” (Lipschits 2011: 203). Both names come from Greek architecture. The prefix “proto” casts the eastern pieces as ancestors of the Greek forms and so assumes that the East influenced the West (Lipschits 2011: 203). Shiloh admitted that the name arose by association with another type of capital, at a time when Palestine had yielded only a few examples (Shiloh 1979: 90–91). Betancourt avoided both labels altogether (Betancourt 1977: 156; Betancourt 1977: 156). Other proposals followed, among them “palmette”, “Israelite capital” and finally “volute” or “stone-volute” (Ruiz and Carretero 2021: 189–190).

The word “capital” carries an assumption of its own. Shiloh reconstructed most of the pieces as set into ashlar masonry on piers, where they would have carried wooden beams or lintels (Shiloh 1979: 24–26). Franklin argues the opposite: not one of the roughly 55 stone volutes from Israel and Judah served as a structural capital (Franklin 2023: 169). Even writers who keep the conventional term now concede that the blocks were used in different ways (Avisar 2025: 4). This essay argues that the debates over name, origin, date, meaning and diffusion are one connected problem. The question of function lies underneath the other five, and an answer to it would reshape them all.

The essay covers the Iron Age southern Levant, where most finds come from, together with Cyprus (Mumcuoglu and Garfinkel 2021: 464). There the motif appears to have arrived from the southern Levant in the seventh century BCE (Lightbody 2013: 196). The earliest Greek Aeolic capitals of the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE form the later horizon (Betancourt 1977: 95). The much later Punic examples from the western Mediterranean lie outside its scope (Stern and Magen 2002: 51).

2. Corpus and terminology

Counting the corpus depends on what one counts. Shiloh's foundational study collected thirty-four capitals from Iron Age II sites. All but one came from sites with monumental remains built of fine ashlar masonry (Shiloh 1979: –3). Lipschits narrows the field to twenty-seven capitals from five major cities of the Kingdom of Israel (Lipschits 2011: 222). Franklin counts more than 55 stone volutes from 16 sites in present-day Israel, Jordan and Syria (Franklin 2023: 156). She adds about 81 Cypriot pieces classified as stele crowns (Franklin 2023: 168). The corpus is also divided internally. Shiloh sorted the capitals into Types A to E by their carved motifs. He set the two Hazor capitals apart as Type D because their central triangle sits behind the volutes and not in front of them (Kleiman 2022: 191). Drinkard later extended the scheme with a Type F that is unique to Jordan (Tyson and Ninow 2019: 162).

Naming the objects has proved harder than counting them. Schumacher found the first example at Megiddo in 1903. Until the 1940s and 1950s such pieces were called “Proto-Ionian”, and since then they have also been called “Proto-Aeolic”. In both names the prefix marks the eastern capitals as forerunners of Greek forms, a case of the East influencing the West (Lipschits 2011: 203). The label therefore carried a family tree that Shiloh himself rejected. He pointed to a gap of nearly two centuries and to clear differences in style (Lipschits 2011: 203). Betancourt showed how confused the terminology had become. The Levantine and Cypriot pieces alone had been called “Proto-Aeolian”, “Proto-Aeolic”, “Proto-Ionic”, “Aeolic” and “volute capitals”. Boardman had tried to split the material by region, structure and decoration, but new finds blurred his lines. These included Hazor capitals without central triangles and sixth-century pilaster capitals from the Halikarnassos peninsula (Betancourt 1977: 4). Betancourt therefore proposed “Aeolic style”, a term that implies no theory about lines of stylistic development. He chose “style” over “order” so as not to suggest a system parallel to the Doric or Ionic. For the Near Eastern pieces he followed Ciasca and Wesenberg in using “volute capitals” (Betancourt 1977: 4).

Recent work pulls in opposite directions. Lightbody treats “proto-Aeolic” as an architectural order separate from the Ionic, Doric and Corinthian. In his account it derived from earlier east Mediterranean capitals and spread westward with merchants and colonists (Lightbody 2013: 57). This keeps both the “order” language and the family tree that Betancourt avoided. Franklin removes the word “capital” altogether. She speaks of “stone volutes”, meaning stone blocks with the motif carved on one or both faces. She argues that the belief that all such blocks were structural capitals goes back to a misreading of the Tamassos tombs (Franklin 2023: 156).

This essay uses “volute capital”, in Betancourt's sense of a conventional label for the Near Eastern pieces. The term avoids the “proto” prefix and its assumed link to Greece. The word “capital” is kept only provisionally. Whether these blocks actually crowned supports is one of the questions under debate, and Section 5 takes it up. Where function matters to the argument, Franklin's “stone volute” will be used instead.

3. Origins: Phoenician or Israelite?

The case for a Phoenician origin was built mainly on inference, and the case for an Israelite one mainly on absence. Shiloh traced the first back to the craftsmen whom Hiram of Tyre was said to have sent to Israel. On that view Phoenicia supplied both ashlar masonry and the volute capital to a kingdom whose people had been “desert nomads but a few generations previously” (Shiloh 1979: 83). Betancourt kept the Phoenician hypothesis in a careful form. He placed the origin “most likely” in the Phoenician cities north of Palestine, because Phoenician influence can be traced in other parts of Palestinian architecture of the same period. He also admitted that “archaeological proof is lacking” (Betancourt 1977: 116). Stern and Magen argued from distribution. They pointed to capitals in Punic colonies across the western Mediterranean and to hundreds more carved on gravestones in Punic cemeteries. Yet they acknowledged that some of these examples date to the third or early second century BCE (Stern and Magen 2002: 51). They added that the capitals’ flower and palmette motifs also appear on hundreds of Phoenician objects in ivory, shell, stone and metal (Stern and Magen 2002: 52). Ruiz and Carretero describe the Phoenician origin as the accepted view, even though very few examples are known from present-day Lebanon (Ruiz and Carretero 2021: 190–191).

The local hypothesis grew out of a critique of method. Shiloh argued that the Phoenician consensus mixed historical sources, which are rich in data, with archaeological evidence that offers far less support for any Phoenician architectural lead (Shiloh 1979: 83). Lipschits sharpened the point. No Iron Age volute capital has ever been found on the Phoenician coast, and most finds from the Phoenician world date to the Persian, Hellenistic and later periods. The Israelite examples are therefore earlier (Lipschits 2011: 203–204). He accepts that shrine models, the “lady at the window” motif and palmette-decorated small objects show the motif was well known. He denies that they prove volute capitals stood in Phoenician palaces or gates (Lipschits 2011: 203–204). He also reports two related positions. Shiloh saw the Israelite capitals as a local development of a widespread regional tradition, and Finkelstein saw them as the main original feature of Omride architecture (Lipschits 2011: 203–204). Avisar reports that Kletter goes further. He treats the capitals as a local southern Levantine phenomenon, citing earlier shrine models with volute capitals at their entrances (Avisar 2025: 11). Ruiz and Carretero note that, because so few Lebanese finds exist, some scholars regard the question as open and suggest the Omrides created the form (Ruiz and Carretero 2021: 190–191).

Much of the disagreement eases once the motif is separated from the stone capital. The motif is clearly older than either kingdom. Shiloh traced the palm pattern behind the capitals to the second millennium BCE in Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia (Shiloh 1979: 42). Mumcuoglu and Garfinkel set out two alternatives. One is a Mesopotamian and Syrian Tree of Life tradition, and the other is a Levantine development under Egyptian influence, with eighteenth-dynasty parallels (Mumcuoglu and Garfinkel 2021: 464). For the Bronze Age volute plant, Pfälzner records Kantor’s Egyptian derivation against Kepinski’s Middle Bronze Age Syrian origin (Pfälzner 2015: 199). He himself places the motif’s main development in Syria (Pfälzner

2015: 200). Betancourt dates the motif's move into stone architecture to the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age (Betancourt 1977: 23). What is actually disputed, then, is narrower: who first carved the motif on architectural blocks. Here Lightbody stays undecided. He places the basic form in "early Iron Age Israel or Phoenicia" and notes that little archaeology survives from the Phoenician coastal ports (Lightbody 2013: 107–108).

That caveat shows both arguments depend on the state of excavation. The Israelite thesis relies on an absence that further digging on the Lebanese coast could remove. The Phoenician thesis relies on western finds which, by its own advocates' dating, are often centuries later than the Levantine pieces (Stern and Magen 2002: 51; Lipschits 2011: 203–204). As the evidence stands, the earliest dated examples are northern Israelite, so origin cannot be settled apart from chronology.

That last sentence is my bridge into Section 4 and states the essay's argument, not a source's. The section runs to roughly 650 words. To get closer to 600, the Pfälzner and Kantor material on the Bronze Age motif could move to Section 6.

4. Chronology: from Solomon to the Omrides

Shiloh dated four Megiddo capitals to the tenth century BCE, and his dating has lasted longer than the evidence behind it. He assigned M 2, M 4–5 and M 11 to Stratum IVB–VA. He dated M 2 and M 11 by their position in the strata. He dated M 4–5 by assigning them to the southern palace complex 1567–1723. On this basis he treated all four as the earliest capitals linked to "Solomonic ashlar construction of the 10th century BCE" (Shiloh 1979: 20–21). His argument also depended on a link between the capitals and fine cut-stone buildings. He held that the capitals could not be separated from ashlar structures or placed in rough-stone ones (Shiloh 1979: 21). Betancourt was more careful. Because no Megiddo piece was found in its original position, the capitals could belong either to the city usually linked with Solomon, Stratum IVB–VA, or to the next one, Stratum IVA (Betancourt 1977: 30). He therefore dated them to the tenth to ninth centuries (Betancourt 1977: 116).

The findspots show how indirect every date is. M 4 and M 5 were reused in Stratum III. One lay beside a silo and the other was built into a wall. The excavators placed them at Gate 1567, while Ussishkin placed them at the entrance to Palace 1723 (Franklin 2011: 135–137). Most of Shiloh's Type A pieces from Megiddo came from the area of Building 338 of Stratum IVA (Kleiman 2022: 191–192). Franklin reports that all eleven Megiddo volutes were either reused in Strata II–III or buried in the Stratum IV fill laid over Stratum V. None was in use in Stratum IV, so she assigns all of them to Stratum V in the ninth century (Franklin 2023: 161–162). The date of the capitals therefore depends on the date of the stratum they are thought to come from.

That stratum's date is itself disputed. Zarzecki-Peleg notes that the consensus on Megiddo cracked partly because the Iron I and Iron IIA–B strata were poorly dated (Zarzecki-Peleg 2016: 9). Palace 1723 is contemporary with Palace 6000 in Stratum VA–IVB (Zarzecki-Peleg 2016: 102). Kleiman and colleagues treat both palaces as part of an Omride reorganization of Megiddo

(Kleiman et al. 2017: 46). Finkelstein argues from radiocarbon and pottery that the Omride city of VA–IVB was probably destroyed in the mid-ninth century, plausibly by Aram-Damascus around 840 BCE (Finkelstein 2025: 212). Franklin ties Palace 1723 to Samaria Building Period I through shared building techniques, masons’ marks and a short cubit of 0.45 metres (Franklin 2005: 320). Ussishkin disputes this anchor. Of eleven marked blocks found in place at Samaria, only one sat in a Period I wall (Ussishkin 2007: 59). Samaria cannot help much on its own. Its strata cannot be dated by pottery, so their Omride date rests on biblical and Assyrian texts (Finkelstein 2000: 114–115). Its volutes were all found reused in Persian and Roman remains (Franklin 2023: 162). Even so, Lipschits presents the twenty-seven northern capitals as an Omride feature of the ninth century (Lipschits 2011: 222).

Kleiman concludes that a ninth-century appearance is possible. The only published pieces securely dated before the eighth century, however, are the two Hazor capitals (Kleiman 2022: 190). Even these were found reused in Stratum VII and are thought to have stood first in the Stratum VIII fort (Lipschits 2011: 206). The Omride redating has also been criticized. Kletter objects that Lipschits lowers the Judahite, Ammonite and Moabite capitals to the late eighth and seventh centuries without an archaeological method (Kletter 2015: 56). Mumcuoglu and Garfinkel also list flaws in his chronology (Mumcuoglu and Garfinkel 2021: 475).

Every date discussed here assigns a reused block to the building where it is thought to have stood first. That assignment, in turn, rests on how the block is thought to have worked. Franklin points out that the Megiddo pieces weighed about two tons each and that the ashlar of Gate 1567 and Palace 1723 rose only a few courses beneath mudbrick (Franklin 2011: 135–137). If so, the Solomonic and Omride dates both depend on a structural reconstruction that Section 5 must test.

5. Function: structural capitals or stone volutes?

Most reconstructions of these blocks as capitals go back to one model, and that model is three centuries later than the Levantine pieces. The first excavators at Megiddo already relied on it. May judged it “least hypothetical” to put the Building 338 capitals on pilasters at the door jambs, following a tomb doorway at Tamassos in Cyprus (May 1935: 10–11). Shiloh endorsed the same model. He held that the paired relief capitals on the doorjambs of two Tamassos tombs were “rightly taken” as the basis for Building 338, with support from the temple model from Amathos (Shiloh 1979: 45). Pieces carved on both faces were explained within the same framework. Ussishkin set the one-sided Megiddo pieces on pilasters flanking entrances and the two-sided one on a free-standing column in a portico (Ussishkin 1989: 159–160). Shiloh likewise put the double-faced Hazor capital H 2 on a free-standing pillar between two regular capitals (Shiloh 1979: 21–22). Billig and colleagues argue that the Armon HaNatziv capitals, carved on all sides, topped free-standing square columns that may have held up the roof of a balcony, patio or courtyard (Billig et al. 2022: 23).

Earlier evidence for the reconstruction comes from a picture rather than from excavated

buildings. Kletter points to a relief from Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh, securely dated to the eighth century, that shows a Phoenician city. One public building in it has two pillars with volute capitals, though their exact type cannot be determined (Kletter 2015: 58). Kletter uses the relief to argue for early capitals in Phoenicia. He also stresses that no volute capital has ever been found in Assyria. Reliefs of this kind there probably signified the conquest of the West rather than real Assyrian buildings (Kletter 2015: 60).

Franklin's critique starts from where the model came from. At Megiddo, the architect Concanannon's reconstruction of Building 338 was "obviously heavily influenced" by Tamassos. From then on the volutes were drawn as structural capitals (Franklin 2011: 130). The other reconstruction in the same report, Woolman's, did not show the volutes at all. It had wooden columns standing on ashlar piers (Franklin 2011: 130). Franklin notes that every proposed setting rests on tombs about 300 years later than the Levantine pieces, whether roof supports, pilaster capitals or door lintels. She cites Katz's study of shrine models for the view that the volutes were not structural capitals (Franklin 2023: 168). Weight is the second strand of her argument. In mudbrick buildings, stone orthostats protected the lower courses. Before their thickness was shaved down for museum transport, such blocks had about the same proportions as the volutes (Franklin 2023: 169). Her clearest parallel is a basalt orthostat with a volute motif from the ambulatory of the 'Ain Dara temple. Its plain back was set into the mudbrick wall (Franklin 2023: 169). She concludes that before the seventh century, mudbrick and timber buildings could not carry blocks of this size and weight as capitals (Franklin 2023: 169). In place of a single function she proposes several:

- orthostats at the Khirbat al-Mudaybi gate
- a balustrade in the City of David
- fittings for a cultic building at Megiddo, where M4 and M5 together formed the base of a wooden cultic pillar
- votive capitals or stele crowns at Armon HaNatziv.

She states that none of about 55 stone volutes from Israel and Judah served as a structural capital (Franklin 2023: 169).

My judgement is that the critique succeeds against the Tamassos model but not against every architectural reading. Its strength is in the history of the scholarship. The cited passages show May and Shiloh openly taking Tamassos as their template (May 1935: 10–11; Shiloh 1979: 45). The weight argument finds unexpected support from critics of Lipschits. They note that Mesopotamian brick and adobe walls were unsuited to heavy stone capitals (Mumcuoglu and Garfinkel 2021: 475).

Three points weigh against her. First, her own study of Ramat Rahel concedes a partly architectural role. Most of the volutes there had rough backs set into a wall and a top groove for a wooden element (Franklin 2011: 138; Franklin 2011: 138). Shiloh had read the same rough sides as evidence that the blocks were set about 25 cm into the wall (Shiloh 1979: 10). Second, a 2.45 m lintel lay about 5 m from the Hazor pair. Kleiman takes this as support for

placing them at the entrance of Citadel 3090 (Kleiman 2022: 193). Third, the Nineveh relief is roughly contemporary with the Levantine finds, unlike Tamassos (Kletter 2015: 58). Even so, a picture shows what an Assyrian artist chose to depict, not how a building was put together. I found no published reply to Franklin's 2023 argument in the library. Ben-Ami, writing later, still describes volute capitals as "unequivocally associated" with gateways and royal entryways. He cites Franklin's earlier work for that association rather than engaging her case against structural use (Ben-Ami 2024: 211).

6. Meaning: palm, tree of life, divine emblem

Scholars agree more about what the volute motif meant than about anything else in this debate, but the agreement holds only at a general level. Franklin, who disputes nearly everything else, writes that the blocks' "architectural function" may be in dispute but the motif's meaning is not. She calls it "generally accepted" that the motif represents the tree of life, which Assyria showed as a date palm standing for agricultural abundance (Franklin 2011: 132). Ben-Ami likewise holds that several studies have "convincingly shown" that the volute is a schematic date palm symbolising the tree of life (Ben-Ami 2024: 212). Shiloh traced the palm motif across ivories from Nimrud, Arslan Tash and Samaria, a cult stand from Taanach, Cypriot capitals, Punic stelae and Late Bronze Age pottery. He linked it to the palm trees of Ezekiel 41:19 and 1 Kings 6:29 (Shiloh 1979: 30). He also took the Hebrew word *timora*, "palmette", to mean capitals fixed to the temple's doorjambs (Shiloh 1979: 90). Mumcuoglu and Garfinkel point out, however, that the biblical passages use the word for carvings on walls and doors, not for capitals (Mumcuoglu and Garfinkel 2021: 464).

Franklin narrows the palm reading. Date palms reproduce mainly through offshoots growing from a bud at the base of the trunk. Each young shoot is separated from the next by a triangular stub left by an old frond (Franklin 2011: 132). Only young palms that are producing offshoots keep these triangular stubs, and she argues that renderings of the volute motif show this arrangement (Franklin 2011: 132). She cites scenes of palms grown from offshoots in Ashurnasirpal II's Northwest Palace at Nimrud. There, two young offshoots unfurl outward at the base of each stylised mother palm (Franklin 2011: 133). She concludes that the volutes are those offshoots springing from a triangular stub. On this reading the motif shows the cycle of rebirth at the foot of the tree, "not the crown of the palm" (Franklin 2011: 133). My own observation is that a motif showing the base of a tree sits awkwardly on top of a column. That fits her case against structural use.

Other scholars read the motif as divine. Ben-Ami stresses its link with sacred buildings. It flanks the entrances of Iron Age shrine models and appears on cult stands from Taanach and Megiddo (Ben-Ami 2024: 212). As Ben-Ami reports, Ornan gave the stylised palm protective and beneficial qualities at Kuntillet 'Ajrud. She also suggested that the motif may stand for the God of Israel (Ben-Ami 2024: 212). Ben-Ami extends this to the Hazor pair, which he treats as divine symbols buried in a ritual of reverence (Ben-Ami 2024: 214–215). Stern and Magen

instead tie the tree of life to Astarte. They cite the “bird’s nest” ivory from Hazor, where the goddess’s head crowns a tree, and shrine models where pairs of Astarte figures take the place of the capitals (Stern and Magen 2002: 54). In Assyria itself, the palm-derived sacred tree has been associated with Ishtar (Collins 2006: 102–103) and also with Assur and the king (Avisar 2025: 2).

The motif’s deeper roots are mixed. It may come from the Mesopotamian and Syrian tree of life, or it may have developed in the Levant under Egyptian influence (Mumcuoglu and Garfinkel 2021: 464). Ornan shows that the voluted palmette belonged to a shared elite style of the second millennium and was painted on local pottery at Hazor. She adds that a lotus taken from Egyptian art often joined it (Ornan 2011: 265–266). Danthine called the dispute over whether palmettes came from the palm or the lotus the “quarrel of the date palm and the lotus” (Danthine 1937: 46). Betancourt notes that the palm theory rests almost entirely on comparisons outside architecture (Betancourt 1977: 18). Even so, he points to an Egyptian bronze stand whose single-turn volutes match the earliest Palestinian capitals (Betancourt 1977: 18).

7. Case study: the Hazor capitals

The two Hazor volutes show more clearly than any other find how one archaeological context can carry opposite stories. The pair came from Area B. They were found in secondary use in front of the citadel entrance and are thought to have stood first in the Stratum VIII fort, Citadel 3090 (Lipschits 2011: 206; Shiloh 1979: 21–22). Even that first setting is uncertain. Finkelstein allowed that the capitals “could have originated” in an earlier Stratum X building (Finkelstein 2000: 118). Yadin read their findspot as squatters reusing them to shelter an oven after the building fell into ruin (Kleiman 2022: 193). For him this was “a striking example” of the city’s decline (Ben-Ami 2024: 208).

Kleiman rejects the squatter reading. Moving blocks of 1.5 to 2 tons some 7 m would be a costly way to build a windbreak. Recent excavations have also shown that the city stayed continuous from Stratum VIII to Stratum V (Kleiman 2022: 193). His account runs as follows. The capitals stood at the citadel entrance, near where a 2.45 m lintel was found. Not long after the citadel was built, they were moved into a poorly built structure, and that structure was soon sealed under the fill of Stratum VI (Kleiman 2022: 193). He reads the move as deliberate recontextualisation, meaning the objects were put to a new use that changed their message. In his view they stopped proclaiming the power of whoever had erected them and may instead have marked that party’s defeat, an example of “counter-monumentality”. He links this to local elites who had been tied to the Damascene king switching their loyalty (Kleiman 2022: 193–195). He admits that the final sealing is “difficult to explain” (Kleiman 2022: 195).

Ben-Ami accepts that the capitals compare with the portal lions of northern Levantine gates (Ben-Ami 2024: 212). From that shared starting point he reaches the opposite conclusion. He finds no significant change in Area B between Strata VIII and VII. He argues that Yadin’s squatter reading distorted how Stratum VII was understood across the whole site (Ben-Ami

2024: 207). He dates the removal later, to the end of Stratum VII or even Stratum VI. He also argues that the new spot was “nothing coincidental”: the stones were laid directly over the buried Iron Age I sanctuary (Ben-Ami 2024: 213). That sanctuary had itself been ritually cancelled. Its standing stone was laid down and a hoard of bronzes was buried beside it (Ben-Ami 2024: 210). Ussishkin argued that buried Syro-Hittite gate lions were seen as guardians with divine powers. On that analogy, Ben-Ami treats the capitals as divine symbols laid to rest “in a reverence ritual” (Ben-Ami 2024: 214–215).

The case shows how closely dating, function and meaning depend on each other. Both scholars assume that the blocks were gate monuments. Ben-Ami points to the link between volutes and royal entryways in the literature (Ben-Ami 2024: 211). Kleiman points to the nearby lintel (Kleiman 2022: 193). With that assumption fixed, the meaning depends on timing and placement. An early removal into a shabby building suggests desecration. A later, careful placement over a sanctuary suggests reverence. Yet the same findspot first gave Yadin his evidence for urban decline (Ben-Ami 2024: 208). If Franklin’s doubts about structural use were applied here, the shared premise of a gateway would need its own defence.

8. Diffusion: Judah, Transjordan, Cyprus, Greece

The southern and western spread of the volute motif is usually explained through Assyria. The evidence for that explanation is thinner than its place in the literature suggests. Lipschits gives the fullest version. Assyrian rulers admired the Omride capitals after conquering Israel in 732–722/720 BCE and installed them in palaces at Khorsabad and Nineveh. The capitals then appeared in a few citadels and official buildings in the vassal kingdoms of Judah, Moab and Ammon, “probably” through Assyrian encouragement, approval or sponsorship (Lipschits 2011: 222). He stresses that the capitals had no precedent and no lasting place in local building. In the capital cities they barely register: one from Jerusalem, probably one from el-Kerak, and two fragments from the Amman citadel (Lipschits 2011: 218–219). Ramat Rahel, the main Judahite site, was a royal administrative building first put up in the late eighth century and probably linked to the Assyrian presence in Judah (Avisar 2025: 4). Still, no volute has been found in its original position anywhere in Judah, so dates depend on Ramat Rahel and on parallels with el-Mudeibi in Moab (Ein Mor and Ron 2016: 140). Kletter shows how much rides on this. At Khirbet el-Mudeibi one capital lay close to its original place in a gate, and wood from the gate gave radiocarbon dates of about 760±40 BC. Lipschits dismisses these dates as an “old wood effect” (Kletter 2015: 60).

Armon HaNatziv adds a story about how the capitals ended. The excavators judge that two capitals were deliberately buried together. They leave three explanations open: protection with a view to later reuse, desecration of a royal symbol next to a latrine, or reuse to seal a rock-cut niche (Billig et al. 2022: 27–28). Avisar goes further and reads the burial as counter-monumentality. On her reading it rejected the Assyrian-aligned authority of Manasseh (Avisar 2025: 14). She also reports a recent proposal that ties the abandonment of the site to Josiah’s reform (Avisar

2025: 14).

Regional styles cut across the political map. Lipschits sees clear typological differences between the Israelite capitals and those of Judah, Moab and Ammon. He takes these differences as a sign of a chronological gap (Lipschits 2011: 218). Kleiman notes that Type E is absent from northern Israel and typical of Judah, Ammon and Moab (Kleiman 2022: 192). Franklin reports that all seven Moabite pieces most closely resemble Judahite ones (Franklin 2023: 167). The two Amman pieces, by contrast, resemble northern Israelite examples (Franklin 2023: 167). Tyson and Ninow place Amman A-2 in Shiloh's Type A, which is thought to predate 722 BCE (Tyson and Ninow 2019: 164). If that date holds, it fits awkwardly with a model in which capitals spread only after Assyria conquered Israel.

Cyprus is where the motif clearly worked as a votive object. Franklin counts about 81 Cypriot volutes classed as stele crowns, dated to the seventh to fifth centuries BCE. None served as a structural capital (Franklin 2023: 168). Lightbody argues that they were probably free-standing stelae, first brought from the southern Levant in the seventh century and set up in urban sanctuaries with older traditions of tree worship (Lightbody 2013: 196). Shiloh separates simple and complex Cypriot types (Shiloh 1979: 37–38). The complex type adds an upper zone with Egyptianizing motifs such as Hathor heads and lotuses (Shiloh 1979: 38–39).

The Greek link remains disputed. Shiloh accepts that Aeolic capitals from western Anatolia are essentially identical in their elements to the Levantine ones (Shiloh 1979: 41). Yet he claims independent status for the Levantine group because it is more numerous and much earlier. He says he would rather call it the “palmette” or “Israelite” capital (Shiloh 1979: 90–91). Betancourt instead observes that the earliest Greek examples, the large Larisa capital and the Old Smyrna temple, differ little from Near Eastern forms. Only in the sixth century did the Greek tradition move away from them (Betancourt 1977: 94–95).

9. Conclusion

The volute debate is best seen as one argument rather than six, and the question of function sits underneath the others. Franklin's survey ends with a sharp claim. The motif, not the blocks' place in a building, is what unites the “stone volutes”, and “not one” of the roughly 55 from Israel and Judah served as a structural capital (Franklin 2023: 169). She notes that structural reconstructions rest on tombs at Tamassos that are about 300 years later than the Levantine examples (Franklin 2023: 168). If she is right, the name “Proto-Aeolic” has lost its footing. Shiloh had already observed that the name came from comparison with another type of capital, at a time when Palestine had produced only a few examples (Shiloh 1979: 90–91). The prefix also takes for granted a family tree in which eastern capitals gave rise to the Aeolic ones of Anatolia (Lightbody 2013: 57). Betancourt's point that the earliest Greek capitals at Larisa and Old Smyrna differ little from Near Eastern forms still shows a link in shape (Betancourt 1977: 94–95). But a motif carved on orthostats, stele crowns and votive objects is not an earlier stage of a Greek architectural order. Cyprus points the same way, since none of its roughly 81 volutes

served as a structural capital (Franklin 2023: 168).

Three questions stay open. The first is origins. No Iron Age volute capital has been found on the Phoenician coast, and the indirect evidence offered for Phoenician prototypes is not enough to show they were used in buildings there (Lipschits 2011: 203–204). Whether that absence reflects the past or simply where excavation has happened can only be settled by more digging. The second is context. Not a single example has been found in situ in Judah (Ein Mor and Ron 2016: 140). The pieces from Moab and Ammon come from insecure or later contexts and are dated by comparing their style with Judahite ones (Avisar 2025: 11). This weakness lets Kletter reject the idea of Assyrian influence in Judah outright (Avisar 2025: 11), and it lets readings of the Hazor pair diverge so far. Firmly stratified finds would test dating, function and meaning all at once. The third is the lack of a reply to Franklin. Until someone shows a stone volute that demonstrably bore a load, the word “capital” describes an assumption, not a finding.

Note on this essay

This essay was written by Claude Opus 5.5 through Agent Bayes project chat on 2026-10-14, from a library of indexed papers on Iron Age Levantine architecture, at medium reasoning with deep library search. The model was first asked to find the key debates on the topic, then to suggest a title and an outline for an essay of about 4,500 words, and then to write each section, the core sections first, the conclusion next, and the introduction last. The prompts name the topic and the task only. Every model in this comparison received the same prompts. The prose is printed as written, except that paragraphs addressed to the reader about drafting were removed. Every page number was checked against the stored page text of its source and converted to the page number printed in the publication. The positions summarized here may be contested, and the essay does not reflect the opinion of any particular author.

Agent Bayes System

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