

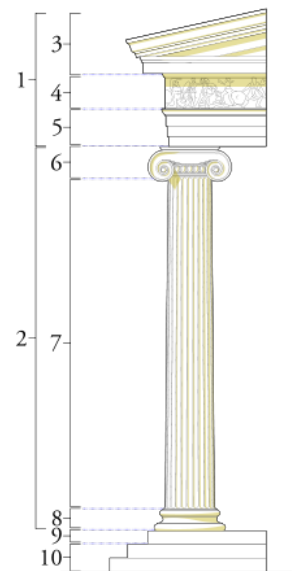
Ancient Columns

University of Saskatchewan Museum of Antiquities

Columns are probably the most recognizable aspect of ancient Greek and Roman architecture. If you try to picture in your mind an image of an ancient city, you would probably see several buildings with massive marble columns supporting their roofs. As it turns out, there is more to the story than simple round pillars in front of temples. Although their primary function is as structural support for buildings, the design of columns in ancient Greece and Rome changed several times through antiquity. The designs changed so much that we can categorize them into five distinct orders, each with its own defining characteristics.

Before we get into the details of each of the orders of ancient columns, let's learn some vocabulary that might help you later on:

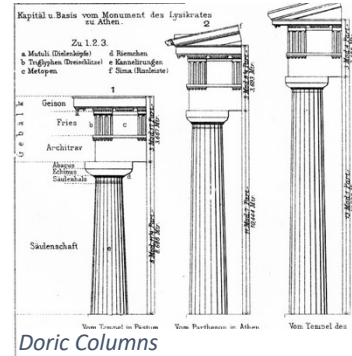
- Order: An order is a style of classical architecture defined by certain characteristics of decoration and ornamentation.
- Base: Nearly all columns stand on a round or square base, which is also sometimes called a plinth. (8 on diagram to the right)
- Shaft: The "column" part of the column, the shaft is the main vertical piece. It can be smooth, fluted, or have carvings going all the way up. (7)
- Capital: The opposite of the base, the capital is the piece that rests at the top of the column. Just like the shaft or the base, the capital may be plain or carved with elaborate decorations (6)
- Entablature: Columns that are part of a building support the entablature, or the upper portion of the building that rests on top of the capital. Some columns, like the Column of Marcus Aurelius in Rome, are freestanding and therefore do not support entablature. (1)



The parts of a Column

Now that you know the main parts of a column, we can take a look at the different orders of columns and see what makes each of them stand out from the rest. The first three orders, Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian, are the three principal architectural orders of ancient architecture. They were developed in ancient Greece but also used extensively in Rome. The final two, Tuscan and Composite, were developed in ancient Rome. They have defining features and characteristics, but were not recognized as being independent orders until the Italian Renaissance, when there was a revival of classical architecture.

1. Doric: The earliest columns built in ancient Greece were Doric columns. These can be distinguished by their simple design: the shaft is fluted (has straight vertical grooves going all the way up) and the capital has no decoration. The shaft of a Doric column will be wider at the base than it is at the top. They will sometimes not have a base, so they will sit directly on the ground or floor of a building.



2. Ionic: Ionic columns are easily recognizable due to the decorative scrolls on the capital, also known as *volute*s. Apart from the volutes, Ionic columns have little or no other decoration on the capital. The shaft of an Ionic column is sometimes fluted, sometimes smooth, and the shaft may be slightly wider where it touches the base and capital than in the middle. The column in the diagram above is Ionic.



Ionic Capital

3. Corinthian: Corinthian columns are easy to identify because the Corinthian order is the most ornate and complex of the ancient architectural orders. Corinthian columns will quite often have fluted shafts, and beautiful capitals decorated with carved acanthus leaves, flowers, and little scrolls. Often the decorations on the capital will flare outwards at the top, and the capitals will be taller than Ionic capitals, giving the illusion that Corinthian columns are taller and more slender.



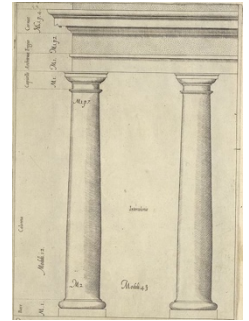
Corinthian Capitals in Rome

4. Composite: Unlike the previous three orders of columns, Composite columns were not built in ancient Greece and are instead a Roman invention. Composite columns share features of both Corinthian and Ionic columns. The defining characteristics of Corinthian and Ionic columns are the acanthus leaves and volutes on the capitals, respectively, and so Composite columns have a square capital with Ionic volutes on each corner resting among the Corinthian acanthus leaves. The shafts of Composite columns are often fluted.

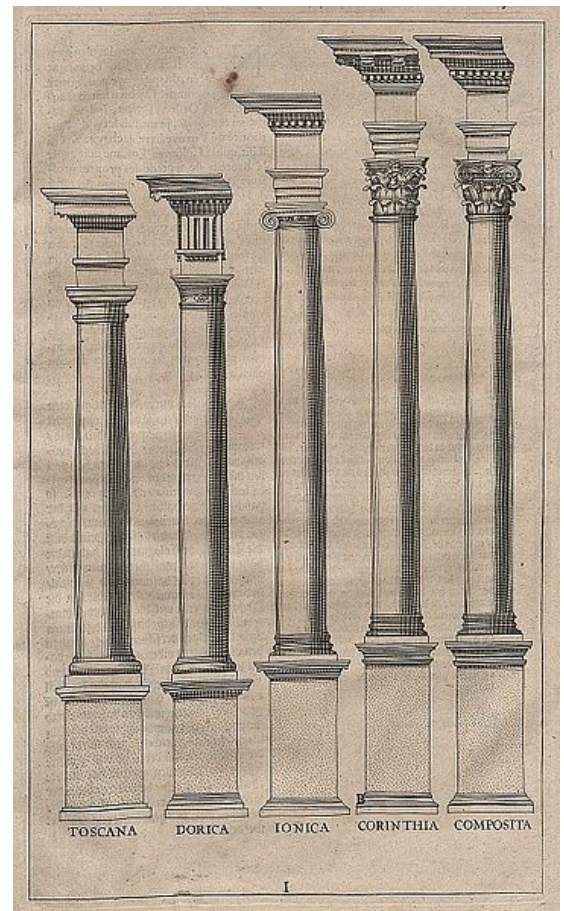


Composite Capital in Ostia Antica

5. Tuscan: The Tuscan order, like the Composite order, was developed by the Etruscans and Romans, but not the Greeks. Tuscan columns were influenced by the Doric columns of Greece, but made even simpler. The shafts are smooth with no decorations on the capital.



Columns in ancient Greece and Rome were nearly always made of marble that was imported from various places around the Mediterranean Sea. White marble was commonly used and was found in Greece, Turkey, and Italy. Different colours of marble were sometimes used as well. Coloured marble was imported from Turkey, various Greek islands, the Greek mainland, and Tunisia in northern Africa. Other types of stone that were used for decorations included granite from Egypt and porphyry from Egypt and Greece.



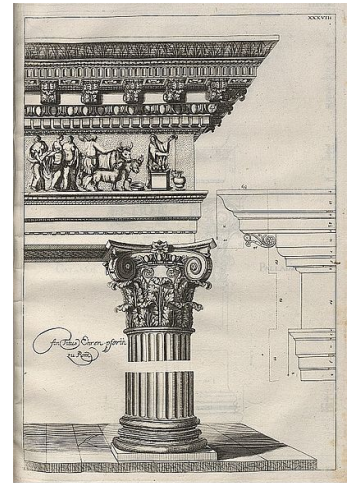
The five orders of Ancient Greek and Roman columns.



Doric Columns at Lindos, Rhodes



Corinthian Column in the Pantheon, Rome



Composite Column

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