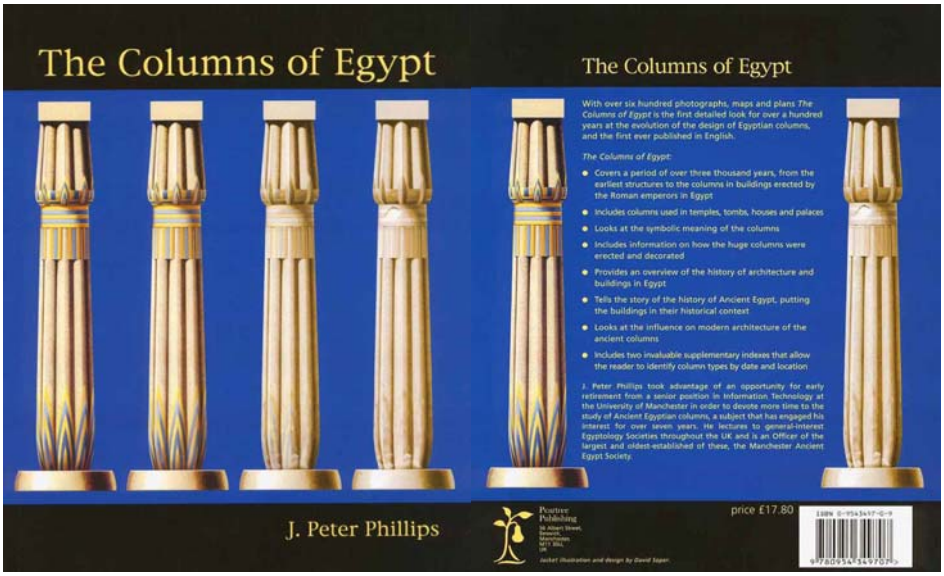
Peter Phillips, J. 2002. The columns of Egypt. – Manchester, Peartree Publishing

Book review by A.M. Hense



Among the continuous stream of books on ancient Egyptian monuments, publications in which Egyptian architecture is presented in any detail are extremely rare. For decades, 'Ancient Egyptian construction and Architecture' by Clarke & Engelbach, which saw its first publication already in 1930, was the only comprehensive overview of the elements of the Egyptian architecture and its building methods. This publication was only to be succeeded in 1991 by 'Building in Egypt' by Arnold, an up to date version of 'Construction and architecture'. For one of the most important and prominent element of the Egyptian architecture, the column, Ludwig Borchardt's 'Die ägyptische Pflanzensäule' (1897) was the only fundamental study available, besides some more recent articles covering certain aspects or types of columns.

Peter Phillips delivered with his book 'The columns of Egypt' a comprehensive overview of the development of the Egyptian column and its use and symbolism. The first chapter presents a classification of column types, in which several important issues are brought up. The distinction between papyrus, lotus and lily columns is one of them, and the presented discussion reveals a more complicated symbolism than the general accepted lotus and papyrus division. Of another type, the palm column, a different interpretation is proposed by Phillips, as he points at certain details like the collar binding and the U-shaped device carved just below the collar. The suggestion that these 'palmiform' columns in fact represent ostrich feathers bound round a wooden pole is an interesting one, and would explain why the use of this type of column was restricted, being an artificial construction expressing wealth, to houses, palace halls and temple portico's.

The next fourteen chapters present the development of the Egyptian column, enriched by a large number of instructive photographs. These chapters are leaning heavily on the dynastic chronology, which goes especially at the expense of the Middle Kingdom section. These chronology chapters would have gained much, if the information in the separate chapter on palaces and houses had been incorporated, as there was a constant mutual influence among the religious, mortuary and domestic Egyptian architecture and its elements.

On page 48 a theory by Reader formulating a possible second dynasty origin of the Gizeh Sphinx, the eastern part of the mortuary temple of Chefren and his Sphinx temple is inserted. Although this theory is to be taken more serious than the publicity seeking fantasies of Schoch & West (1991) on the same subject, the geology of the site gives no reasons to assume an earlier construction date (see especially Harrell, 1994). The use of gigantic limestone blocks in the eastern part of the mortuary temple is remarkable, but the Valley temple of Chephren was also built of unusual large blocks and shows a similar ground plan. This ground plan perfectly fits into the development of the funerary temples in the 4th and 5th Dynasty. Besides, the 2nd Dynasty architecture saw only very limited use of stone in the predominantly mud-brick structures. Probably, the use of giant building blocks was a short-lived experiment with an abundance of resources and workforce in the middle of the 4th Dynasty.

The chapter 'Palaces and houses' ends somewhat abruptly in the Saitic period, and is followed by a section on the symbolism of the Egyptian columns. Here, the use of the lily as heraldic plant instead of the lotus is further documented, as is the increasing complexity of plant symbols depicted on column bases from the New Kingdom into the Ptolemaic period. The next chapter, on materials and construction, provides a compact

overview of the route from stone quarry to the actual placing of the column and also pays attention to different types of less prominent column bases. The section on decoration is informative on the colours, materials and, again, symbols applied to the columns. The epilogue gives a few examples of modern copies and interpretations of ancient Egyptian columns. A row of plain white imitations of composite columns in Earls Court, London, is a good illustration of how even today the bright colour scheme of architecture of the ancient world is still seen as less attractive by many people.

The line drawings in the book are copied from a wide array of other publications, and as a result, vary considerably in quality. A series of line drawings especially made for this publication would have allowed the reader a better comparison of the columns, putting these drawings side by side in a separate section would have been very helpful clarifying the chronological developments.

'The columns of Egypt' is, with its comprehensive historical overview of the column development, impressive number of photographs and detailed classification, an important reference book and a good addition to classics like 'Ancient Egyptian construction and architecture'.

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