



3036. Marble Capital with Crosses and Acanthus Leaves

Byzantium, perhaps Constantinople, 6th- 8th century

Dimensions: 17 x 26 cm

Provenance: Temple Gallery, Icons & Byzantine Art 2014, Private collection, Scotland.

Clive Bell, one of the influential writers the Bloomsbury Group, regarded the sixth century as the highest point of European art.¹ While not fashionable today Bell's views are intellectually sound and few would deny the supreme achievements of the art of the period of the Emperor Justinian, the period that saw the great flowering of Christian culture after four hundred years of gestation. Christian thought had interacted with the mysticism of the desert fathers, the esoteric mysteries of Graeco-Roman religion, the wonders of Hellenism in Egypt, and the ecstatic philosophy of the Neoplatonists. We sense the distillation of such wisdom into visual form in Hagia Sophia and other churches of Constantinople and in the early icons still preserved at Saint Catherine's Monastery in Sinai. And we sense it here in the purity and simplicity of form. The stone carver works with confidence and ease shaping the marble in proportions denoting strength, calmness, and order.

In the terminology of architectural historians the object is an impost block, the tapered block that receives the thrust of an arch and below which is the capital. The **capital** is the top part of a column and the **impost** is the bottom part of an arch. We can see this in the basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna built in 500 AD by the Ostrogoth King Theodoric the Great. (Fig. 1.)

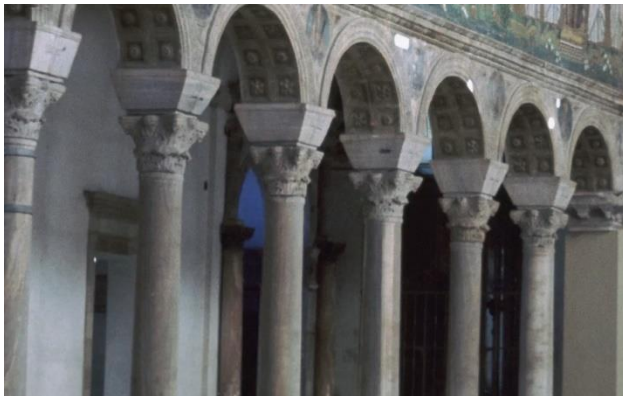


Fig. 1. Detail of colonnade and arches inside the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, showing the structural relationship of columns, capitals, impost blocks, and arches.



Fig. 2. Latrun. Libya. Byzantine Basilica Church at the small town of Latrun near Apollonia in the region of Cyrenaica. Dating from the 6th century AD the church is adorned with white Proconnesian marble columns.

¹ *Art*, University of Michigan, 1914

The marble is veined with cloudy bluish grey streaks indicating its origin in ancient Proconnesus (modern Marmara) the island near Constantinople whose quarries supplied the famous marbling on the walls of Hagia Sophia and other important sites of the ancient world. Fig. 2. Shows a capital together with its impost from a 6th century Byzantine church at Latrun, Libya whose marble is identified as Proconnessian.