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Umayyad Capital

Iberian, Umayyad

10th - 11th Century B.C.

Limestone

H: 29 x W: 16 cm

Exquisitely carved and finely polished in green limestone. In the form of a cylindrical shaft surmounted by a protruding rectangular section, creating a T-shaped profile. The lower body is decorated with two tiers of carved foliage, representing acanthus leaves, and the upper body's four corners are designed as protruding, curling articulated scrolls, volutes, with a vertical rectangular panel between.

The surface of the limestone has been polished smooth. Its style is based on classic Corinthian capitals, but simplified, without their characteristic complex openwork. This type of reduced classical style is present in Visigothic Spanish architecture, as well as in Umayyad and Mozarabic architecture and later Almohad styles. Roman columns and capitals were incorporated into Spanish architectural planning after the Muslim conquest, and column capitals made in Spain soon after were originally similar in form and decoration. This incorporation of Roman spolia and style could be seen as an attempt at establishing Caliphal legitimacy through a continuation of architectural forms, and was part of the revival and promotion of classical antiquity practised by the Umayyad caliphate and their early successors in al-Andalus.

Ornate capitals such as this would have decorated a grand mosque or wealthy private residence, and very similar ones are still extant in several parts of the Great Mosque of Córdoba, flanking the mosaic mihrab and nearby, dating to the 10th century, where Roman columns and capitals are also present. Other, slightly later, similar examples are found in the Alhambra Museum, belonging to the Almohad dynasty, a Berber dynasty who took power after the Almoravids in the 12th century and were very indebted both to Almoravid but particularly to Umayyad artistic traditions.

The dating of the current capital to 10th-11th century places the capital as belonging to the Caliphate of Córdoba, a period of great Umayyad prosperity and cultural expansion in Iberia after the dynasty had been ousted from Damascus by the Abbasids. The age is characterised by complex and ornate building projects which include the Great Mosque of Córdoba and the palace-city complex of Madinat al-Zahra, outside Córdoba. This power and influence in echoed here, in the confident lines of the volutes.

Literature:

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