

Polygonal Columns: Unfinished Construction or Inexpensive Fashion?

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In the Pergamene architecture a 20-sided polygonal or faceted column shaft is a common feature both in finished and unfinished columns.¹ An unfinished column which was designed to be fluted was normally fluted both on the necking of the capital and the lowest part of the column before being incorporated into the building, since cutting the flutes close to the bottom of the column would be a difficult undertaking which might damage the stylobate.² From Pergamon we have also unfinished faceted columns with round shafts, and in these the facets have been finished only on the lowest part of the column and on the necking of the capital.³ The finished polygonal columns can be clearly distinguished from the unfinished ones by the surface treatment on the polished facets. It is difficult to differentiate unfinished fluted columns that are faceted but lack polishing of the facets when viewed from a distance. These combinations of finished and unfinished polygonal columns do not exist anywhere else than in Pergamon; in some cities there are finished 20-sided polygonal columns and in others unfinished ones with polygonal shape, but never both types.

20-sided polygonal columns were generally used together with Doric capitals as is confirmed by Vitruvius.⁴ In the Pergamene architecture these columns were combined with several different shapes of capitals. Pergamon is likewise the only city where we find 20-sided polygonal columns in many public and private buildings; this is probably the case in more than 20 colonnades, finished and unfinished alike.⁵ In the case of Pergamon the columns were left as polygonal probably due to lack of money, or perhaps the faceted construction had turned into a new inexpensive fashion.

It was more economical to produce polygonal columns than fluted columns, but was the presence of columns more important than their shape? This seems probable since in Pergamon the polygonal columns are almost as common as the fluted Doric columns during the 2nd century BC, and they were constructed within equally large and important building programs. The majority have the same level of finishing as fluted columns, they present the same proportions and only a few examples have a slightly fluted necking on the Doric capital. Most of the faceted columns had a polished surface on the facets and must therefore be considered as finished. Obviously, facets can be produced much more quickly than flutes and therefore they are far more economical: time was money even in antiquity. Polishing the facets was time-consuming work that would not have been done if the columns were to be altered into another shaft shape.

Fully faceted 20-sided polygonal columns with Doric capitals were used in the Aegean Islands in the 3rd century BC.⁶ In Pergamon the construction of polygonal columns starts in the 2nd century BC having possibly been inspired by earlier constructions. There is

one major difference between the Aegean Islands and Pergamon: we have no unfinished polygonal columns from the Aegean.

A locally emerged style in Pergamon explains the use of faceted columns in the Attalid kingdom. After the peace of Magnesia the kingdom was of considerable size, its economy had developed and a magnificent royal capital was to match the size of the expanding kingdom. Therefore massive construction programs took place in the city during the reign of King Eumenes II and his successors. For a short period polygonal columns were favoured in all constructions since time required to produce them is much shorter than that of fluted columns. In Pergamon, at its peak, polygonal columns were incorporated into the Pergamene architecture to supplement fluted columns. Polygonal columns turned therefore into a quicker, inexpensive fashion of construction in the 2nd century BC and spread to other towns where architecture was now directly influenced by the Pergamene model.

Notes

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² Hoepfner 1997, 32.

³ For example see the unfinished stoas and propylon in the Demeter sanctuary, Bohtz 1981.

⁴ Vit. 4.3.9.

⁵ For examples from Pergamon see Bohn 1896; Pinkwart – Stammnitz 1984; Schazmann 1923.

⁶ For example see Samos, Martini 1984, 98; Kamiros, Martini 1984, 75–76; Kos, Schazmann 1932, 74.

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