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The Polish Contribution to Egyptian Motifs in the Architecture of Synagogues

Polski wątek dotyczący zagadnienia elementów egipskich
w architekturze synagog

Summary

Egyptomania is a specific strategy related to the reception of the heritage of ancient Egypt and incorporation of Egyptian elements into various aspects of modern culture, such as art, crafts, literature, intellectual speculation, and others. This phenomenon manifested itself in architecture, too, especially in the 19th century. We can also point out various Egyptian (or rather, "quasi-Egyptian") motifs and details in the design and construction of some synagogue buildings around the world. In the 1870s, a Polish architect, Stanisław Adamczewski, proposed the idea of a monumental synagogue in Warsaw, incorporating interesting elements reminiscent of ancient Egyptian buildings. He also planned other Egyptian-styled structures in Warsaw, but none of them, like the synagogue itself, were ever constructed.

Keywords: Egyptomania; Egyptian style in architecture; Synagogues (in Poland); Adamczewski Stanisław

Streszczenie

Tak zwana egiptomania to specyficzna strategia recepcji dziedzictwa starożytnego Egiptu i inkorporowania jego elementów w kulturę współczesną: sztukę i rzemiosło artystyczne, literaturę, ponadto spekulacje intelektualne itd. Zjawisko to zaznaczyło się także w architekturze, zwłaszcza w XIX stuleciu. Różne motywy i detale egipskie (czy może raczej *quasi*-egipskie) możemy wskazać również w projektach i realizacjach niektórych budynków synagog na całym świecie. Architekt Stanisław Adamczewski zaproponował w latach 70. XIX wieku pomysł monumentalnej synagogi w Warszawie, zawierający interesujące elementy nawiązujące do budowli staroegipskich. Planował także inne egiptyzujące budowle w stolicy, jednak zarówno one, jak i projekt synagogi nie, zostały zrealizowane.

Słowa kluczowe: Egiptomania; egiptyzm w architekturze; synagogi (w Polsce); Adamczewski Stanisław

The cultural phenomenon called *Egyptomania*, (*l'égyptomanie*, *Ägyptomanie*), *Egyptian Revival*, *Nile Style* or *Pharaonism* is an extremely complex and multifaceted manifestation of the modern reception of the heritage of ancient Egypt which encompasses almost all aspects of creative activity: fine arts, architecture, design, literature, fashion, crafts, and others. In fact, it is both a completely autonomous aesthetic proposal and an intellectual phenomenon.¹ Egyptomania does not only imply simply copying Egyptian forms but also their habitual reworking in the context of new meanings and functions, resulting in both conscious and unconscious deformation, misinterpretation, and imposition of new, completely different layers of symbolism. Although the presence of Egyptian elements in European culture can be already recognized in the Renaissance, the most spectacular creations were inspired by Napoleon Bonaparte's military-scientific expedition (1798–1801) and, especially, by the 1809–1828 publication of the multi-volume, lavishly illustrated *Description de l'Égypte*, which became the symbolic catalyst for the great 19th-century wave of fascination with Egypt.²

As suggested by the title of this article, I will focus on a specific architectural aspect. At the same time, it should be emphasized that Egyptomania in architecture has already been studied, for example, in the reference book in the *Encounters with Ancient Egypt* series.³ Egyptian elements in the architecture of synagogues have also already been identified, for example, by Rachel Wischnitzer, John Gwyn Griffiths and Diana Muir Appelbaum, and Sara A. Abdoh.⁴

It should be noted that “Egyptian” architectural elements were included mainly in secular or sepulchral architecture, but we practically do not find them in religious buildings, except for Masonic tabernacles (Egyptian motifs in Masonic ideology, symbolism and architecture are a separate, very extensive issue, but, as in Jewish tradition, they are closely related to Old Testament traditions⁵) and, most importantly for this

¹ See for more references: *Ägypten-Bilder. Akten des «Symposions zur Ägypten-Rezeption»*, eds. E. Staehelin, B. Jaeger, Freiburg-Göttingen 1993 (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 150); R.A. Fazzini, M.E. McKercher, *Egyptomania*, in: *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, vol. 1, ed. D.B. Redford, Cairo 2001, pp. 458–465; J.S. Curl, *The Egyptian Revival. Ancient Egypt as the Inspiration for Design Motifs in the West*, London-New York 2005; R.H. Fritze, *Egyptomania. A History of Fascination, Obsession and Fantasy*, London 2016; *Beyond Egyptomania. Objects, Style and Agency*, ed. M.J. Versluys, Berlin-Boston 2020.

² R. Solé, *Les Savants de Bonaparte*, Paris 2001; *Views of Ancient Egypt since Napoleon Bonaparte. Imperialism, Colonialism and Modern Appropriations*, ed. D. Jeffreys, Walnut Creeks 2011.

³ *Imhotep Today. Egyptianizing Architecture*, eds. J.M. Humbert, C. Price, London 2003 (Encounters with Ancient Egypt 4).

⁴ R. Wischnitzer, *The Egyptian Revival in Synagogue Architecture*, “Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society”, 41 (1951), no. 1, pp. 61–75; J. Gwyn Griffiths, *Egypt and the Rise of the Synagogue*, “The Journal of Theological Studies”, 38 (1987), no. 1, pp. 1–15; D.M. Appelbaum, *Jewish Identity and Egyptian Revival Architecture*, “Journal of Jewish Identities”, 5 (2012), no. 2, pp. 1–25; S.A. Abdoh, *Revival of Pharaonic Architecture in Synagogues and Masonic Temples. Identity or Inspiration?*, “Disegnarecon”, 13 (2020), no. 25, pp. 161–169.

⁵ P. Montet, *L'Égypte et la Bible*, Neuchâtel 1959 (Cahiers d'Archéologie Biblique n°11); J.S. Curl, *Les thèmes décoratifs égyptisants et la franc-maçonnerie*, in: *L'Égyptomanie à l'épreuve de l'archéologie*, ed. J.M. Humbert, Brussels-Paris 1996, pp. 345–365; J.D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*, New Bedford 1997; E. Nordheim, *Die Selbstbehauptung Israels in der Welt des Alten Orients*, Freiburg-Göttingen 1997 (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 115); B. De Poli, *Freemasonry and the Orient. Esotericisms between the East and the West*, Venezia 2019.

article, synagogues. Referring to Egyptian motifs, sometimes in architectural details and sometimes in interior design, though obviously not a common practice, seems understandable here: the founding myth of Israel is strongly linked to Egypt, and especially to the memory of the Exodus and the imperative to pass on this grand narrative to the next generation (Passover-Pesah). Similarly, there may be a symbolic dimension to emphasizing the ancient roots of the Jews.⁶ The presumptions about close ties between the architectural traditions of ancient Egypt and Israel (for example, Solomon's temple in Jerusalem) or Jewish "builders" in Egypt⁷ are impossible to document scientifically, but it is undeniable that a clear, multifaceted cultural dependence of various civilizations of the Eastern Mediterranean on Egypt existed, including elements of the architectural canon or symbolic-ornamental style.⁸

The above-mentioned researchers of Egyptian influence in the architecture and decor of synagogues provide many examples of such buildings, even in modern Egypt, such as Heaven Synagogue, Meir Enayim Synagogue and Moussa Dar'I Synagogue in Cairo although all of them were built in the early 20th century. Others are found in Europe (e.g. the Peitav-Shul Synagogue in Riga, Latvia; the Copenhagen Synagogue in Denmark; the Old Synagogue in Canterbury, Kent, England) and even Australia (e.g. the Hobart Synagogue and Launceston Synagogue, Tasmania). Certainly, some other examples will remain unknown to us as a result of the destruction of old synagogue buildings, especially in Europe, unless some documentation of them is found.

Another interesting example, probably the oldest of its kind in Europe, was the synagogue, or rather the synagogue complex, in Karlsruhe, Germany — then the Grand Duchy of Baden — built between 1798 and 1806 to a design by an architect called Friedrich Weinbrenner.⁹ Only the drawings have survived, as the synagogue was destroyed by fire in 1871. It is very interesting that the synagogue's design and construction exactly coincided with the Egyptian expedition of Napoleon Bonaparte. It should be noted, however, that interest in ancient Egypt was growing in Europe as early as the last decades of the 18th century, at which time different historical styles were also occurring in architectural concepts, though they were predominantly Greek and Oriental. We do not know if Weinbrenner was particularly interested in Egypt, but during his studies in Vienna he twice watched a 1791 performance of Mozart's famous opera *The Magic Flute* (*Die Zauberflöte*) with a monumental "Egyptian" set designed by Karl Friedrich Schinkel,¹⁰ which he may have been inspired by. The most

⁶ D.M. Appelbaum, *Jewish Identity and Egyptian Revival Architecture*, p. 21.

⁷ S.A. Abdoh, *Revival of Pharaonic Architecture in Synagogues and Masonic Temples*, pp. 161-163.

⁸ D.B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*, Princeton 1992.

⁹ D.M. Appelbaum, *Jewish Identity and Egyptian Revival Architecture*, pp. 1-2.

¹⁰ J.S. Curl, *The Egyptian Revival*, pp. 106-118, 250-259.

distinctive and dominant element was the main entrance in the shape of monumental trapezoidal pylons, unmistakably associated with Egyptian temples. It is the incorporation of geometric trapezoidal forms into the buildings that is usually interpreted as Egyptian influence. Other typical details were obelisks, pyramids, columns with “Egyptian” capitals, and fine ornamental details referring to Egyptian iconography or hieroglyphic signs.

In 1859, prominent members of Warsaw’s Jewish community took the initiative to build a new synagogue. It was to be more representative, larger and better located than the existing one, located on Daniłowiczowska street. The Government Commission on Internal Affairs approved the erection, a building plot in Tłomackie Square was purchased on May 5, 1872, and a competition for the synagogue’s design was announced on July 11 of that year. The competition was preceded by press discussions on the style and decoration of the temple. In the second round, Stanisław Adamczewski’s design was selected (1830–1916).¹¹ However, regardless of the decision, the redesign of the edifice was entrusted outside the competition to another architect, Leander Marconi, and his project was accepted in 1874. Consequently, two 18th-century buildings in Tłomackie Square were demolished, and a section of the nearby former palace garden was incorporated into the plot.¹² The grand opening of the synagogue, which could accommodate up to 2,500 people, took place in September 1878. The impressive, classicist edifice was crowned by a dome evoking oriental associations, and its simple and harmonious interior was reminiscent of the Renaissance style.

With World War II came a terrifying time in the history of Warsaw’s Jewish community. In early 1940, the German occupation authorities banned the services and ordered the people to work on Saturdays, in violation of the Jewish religion. Synagogues were brutally vandalized and all the objects of worship were destroyed. Many adherents of Judaism opted for an underground religious life. In 1942, the Great Synagogue was used as a repository for the furniture looted from apartments in the Warsaw ghetto, and soon a “liquidation action” was launched. On April 19, 1943, an uprising broke out in the ghetto, and it was suppressed with a lot of bloodshed. The last act and a symbol of the total annihilation of the Warsaw Jewish community was the blowing up of the Great Synagogue. On May 16, 1943 it ceased to exist and was not rebuilt after the war. In its place today rises the so-called Blue Skyscraper.

However, in 1880 Stanisław Adamczewski published a brief “script” of his building design in a professional periodical entitled *Competition Project of the Synagogue in*

¹¹ S. Łoza, *Architekci i budowniczy w Polsce*, Warszawa 1954, p. 7; A. Czyżewski, *Odwrotna strona życiorysu Stanisława Adamczewskiego – szkic biograficzny*, in: *Architektura XIX i początku XX wieku*, ed. T. Grygiel, Wrocław 1991, pp. 71–84; G. Baumgartner, *Polski indeks biograficzny [Polnischer Biographischer Index / Polish Biographical Index]*, vol. 1, München 2004, p. 8.

¹² E. Małkowska, *Synagoga na Tłomackiem*, Warszawa 1991, pp. 29–34.

Warsaw, Made by Architect Mr. S. Adamczewski.¹³ Issue 38 was accompanied by a chart (fig. 1) with the design of the front elevation.¹⁴ The author made erudite references to Old Testament history, especially to Moses' sojourn in Egypt, and stated that he had designed the synagogue "in the monumental Egyptian style as historically justifiable".¹⁵ Although the building, covered by a large dome, did not confirm the Egyptian style as a guiding idea, its several details are noteworthy. The twelve columns on the front of the edifice (actually an overhanging portico: fig. 1, 2), signifying the twelve tribes of Israel, were "Egyptian" styled. It should be added that this number also had symbolic significance in ancient Egypt although it was rather related to the twelve hours of the day and the twelve hours of the night¹⁶ — we find columns in this number in some Egyptian temples. There is a general resemblance to Egyptian open-type capitals (due to the poor legibility of the engraving, it is not clear whether the designer had in mind the so-called lotus or palm column type, fig. 4).¹⁷ Some parallels with, for example, the Egyptianizing capital from Rome's Iseum Campense, held in the Museo Gregoriano Egizio at the Vatican, come to mind.¹⁸ All the solids that make up the building are topped with magnificent cornices called "cavettos" (fig. 2, 3).¹⁹ Adamczewski lectured on the symbolism of the various elements; in addition to the columns and cornices, he also explained, not necessarily accurately, even the smallest details: "for the Egyptians, gates and curtains to the middle of the columns with decorations in tulips and stars on the braids used at the tombs were a symbol of the antiquity of historical events" (fig. 2, 5: ornaments in the shape of lotus bunches and papyrus, symbols of the Upper and Lower Egypt).²⁰ "Traces of similar decorations are found on the sarcophagus of the pharaoh Seti, made more than 3,200 years ago, that is, 1,400 B.C.": it is probably the case with the famous, richly decorated alabaster sarcophagus of Pharaoh Seti I (1294–1279 BC.), exhibited at Sir John Soane's Museum in London.²¹

Thus, in the very center of Warsaw, a huge synagogue was planned. Even if it was not dominated by the Egyptian Revival style, it was clearly accented with Egyptian-

¹³ *Projekt konkursowy synagogi w Warszawie wykonany przez architekta p. S. Adamczewskiego*, "Inżynieria i Budownictwo", 2 (1880), vol. 2, no. 39, pp. 158–159.

¹⁴ "Inżynieria i Budownictwo" (as above) no. 38, pl. 33–34; author of the engraving B. Krzyżanowski.

¹⁵ E. Małkowska, *Synagoga na Tłomackiem*, pp. 32–33; L. Zinkow, *Imhotep i pawie pióra. Z dziejów inspiracji egipskich w architekturze polskiej*, Kraków 2009, pp. 136–138.

¹⁶ R.H. Wilkinson, *Symbol and Magic in Egyptian Art*, London 1994, p. 138.

¹⁷ D. Arnold, *The Encyclopedia of Ancient Egyptian Architecture*, London–New York 2003, pp. 52–55, 57.

¹⁸ J.S. Curl, *The Egyptian Revival*, p. 37, pl. 23.

¹⁹ D. Arnold, *The Encyclopedia of Ancient Egyptian Architecture*, pp. 46–47.

²⁰ R.H. Wilkinson, *Symbol and Magic in Egyptian Art*, p. 161, pl. 90.

²¹ J. Śliwa, "Grobowiec oświecony stał się lampą żywych". *Juliusz Słowacki i sarkofag Setiego I*, "Światowit. Rocznik poświęcony archeologii przeddziejowej i badaniom pierwotnej kultury polskiej i słowiańskiej", 1 (1999), no. 42, fasc. A, pp. 176–178; J.H. Taylor, *Sir John Soane's Greatest Treasure. The Sarcophagus of Seti I*, London 2017.

izing motifs. Did the jurors of the architectural competition — or perhaps the investors — lack aesthetic courage or were there any other arguments that influenced their decision? We will probably never know the definitive answer to this question.

Stanisław Adamczewski's architectural conceptual and design work featured some remarkably interesting Egyptianizing ideas. Furthermore, in a sense, he made them one of the central themes of his life's work, namely in the design of the "Capital of the United Slavs" and the connected vision of the ideal city, "the New Jerusalem". It is possible that this *idée fixe*, on which he began intensive work in 1863, in a way even thwarted Adamczewski's architectural career, since he devoted almost obsessively the vast majority of his active professional life to it. The surviving fragmentary comments on these ideas are kept in the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences (Instytut Sztuki PAN): Special Collections (Zbiory Specjalne), cat. no. 106.²² The complex architectural symbolism, to which Adamczewski gave a profoundly esoteric touch, is difficult to reproduce today; we cannot usually explain the essential motivations behind his particular ideas, either. The "Polish Pantheon" was devised as a monumental, multi-story structure. Although its plans are unfortunately not known to us, their existence is evidenced by accounts from the era (e.g., a typescript page under the title *Pro memoria. O ś.p. Stanisławie Adamczewskim Wyjaśnienie Planu Stolicy Zjednoczonych Słowian*.²³ According to Adamczewski's idea, the 336-meter-wide base was to stand at the Mokotów Field (Pole Mokotowskie) and the lowest floor was to be in Egyptian style. "Pomnik Historii Zjednoczonych Słowian" (Monument of United Slavs' History), was a great rotunda topped with a dome, described as follows:

on the steps in front of the rotunda on one side [there was — L.Z.] the Angel of Greece, on the other the Angel of Rome, and in the middle [a personification of — L.Z.] Poland in the ceremonial robes of her ancestors the Pharaohs [sic!], sacrificing armor and instruments of war to the Lord — next to — Pharaonic Pylons, decorated with Slavic knights [sic!].

It is worth noting that the imaginary theories of the alleged relations of Slavs-Sarmatians-Poles with ancient Egypt and the kinship of Polish rulers with Egyptian pharaohs (!) come from the priest and baroque writer Wojciech Dębołęcki or Dembołęcki (ca. 1585–1647), whose brochure *Wywód jedynowłasnego państwa świata* (Genealogy of the Most Unique Country in the World, Warsaw 1633) considered, among others, some fantastic, especially historical and linguistic, Egyptian connections of the Polish "Sarmatians".²⁴

²² A. Czyżewski, *Odwrotna strona życiorysu Stanisława Adamczewskiego — szkic biograficzny*, p. 75.

²³ File cat. no. 106; see also A. Czyżewski, *Odwrotna strona życiorysu Stanisława Adamczewskiego — szkic biograficzny*, pp. 80–82.

²⁴ *700 lat myśli polskiej. Filozofia i myśl społeczna XVII wieku*, part 1, ed. Z. Ogonowski, Warszawa 1979, pp. 143–164.

Stanisław Adamczewski remains a mysterious and intriguing figure to this day. Little is known about his biography (to date, the most comprehensive study is the one made by Czyżewski²⁵) and his actual architectural activity; he worked as a “private contractor” and, despite his inclusion in the community of Warsaw architects, was perceived as an eccentric and an introvert. This was most likely influenced by the aforementioned “mission” to create (or at least design) unrealistically monumental buildings. This mission, according to his own declaration, was supported by a “revelation” he had supposedly experienced in 1863 while in Rome²⁶ and by his theoretical arguments published in such booklets as *Nowa Jerozolima w łonie cywilizacji świata. Rzecz na prawach odwiecznej logiki* (New Jerusalem in the Bosom of World Civilization: Based on the Laws of Eternal Logic, Cracow 1897) and *Nowa Jerozolima czyli spełnienie się na ziemi bożych przyrzeczeń* (New Jerusalem, or the fulfillment of God’s Promises on Earth, Cracow 1907). In the available sources, we find no mention of Adamczewski’s particular interest in ancient Egypt or his awareness of Egyptianizing motifs in architecture and art, but it seems very likely that they were an important thread in his deep mystical and biblical studies, especially on the Old Testament.

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²⁵ A. Czyżewski, *Odwrotna strona życiorysu Stanisława Adamczewskiego — szkic biograficzny*, passim.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 72 et. seq.

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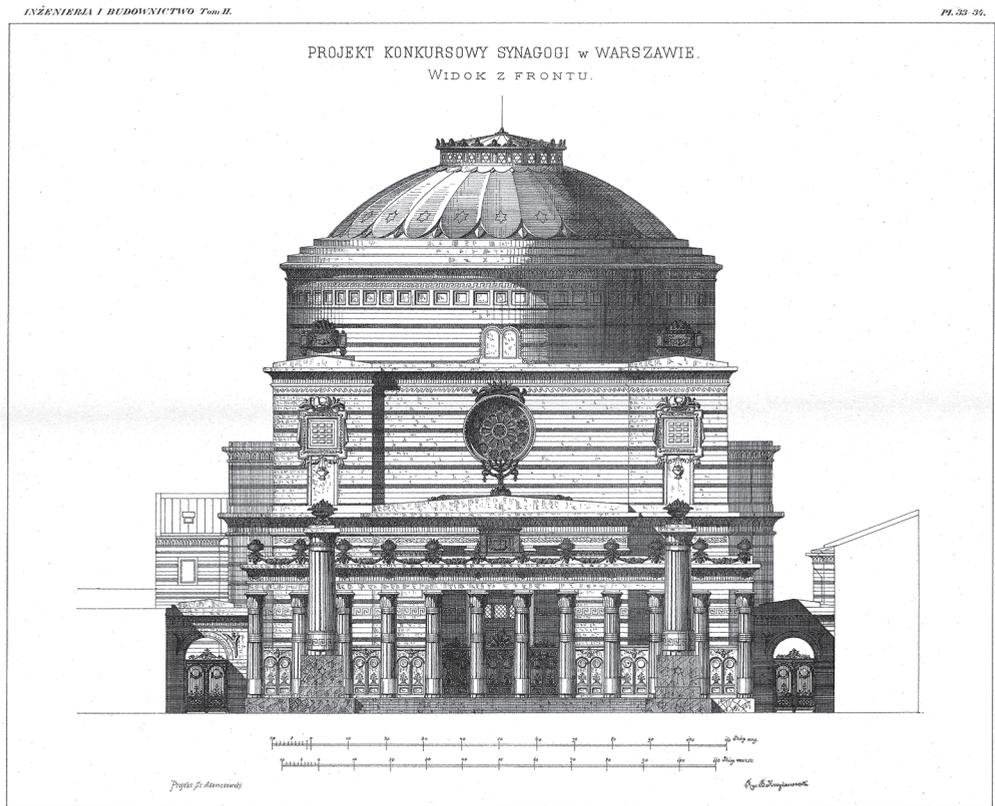


Fig. 1. Competition design of a synagogue in Warsaw, made by the architect Mr. S. Adamczewski, B. Krzyżanowski.

Source: "Inżynieria i Budownictwo" ["Engineering and Construction"], 38 (1880), pp. 33-34.

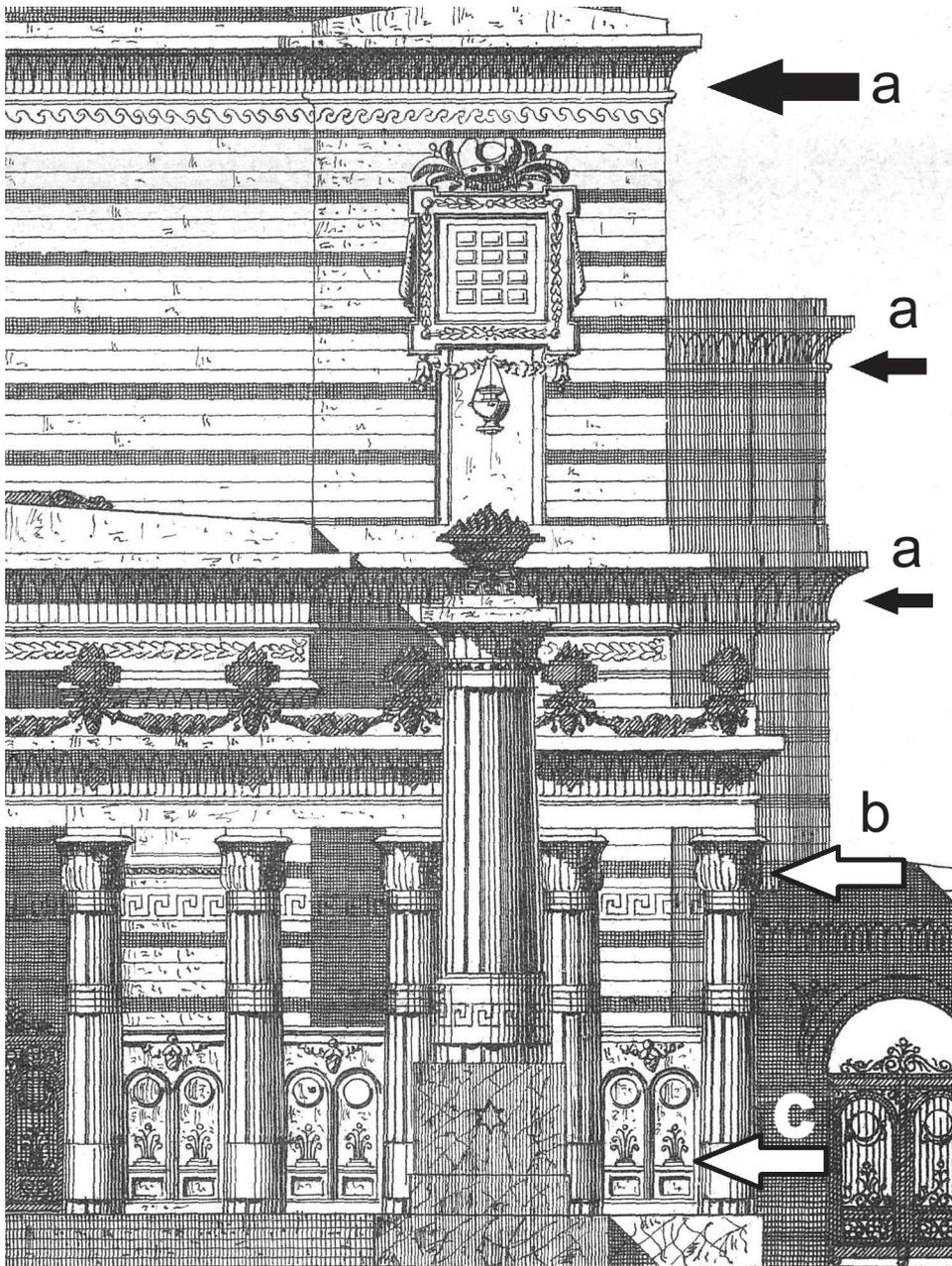


Fig. 2. Details of fig. 1: a — cavetto corniches, b — egyptianizing columns, c — flower ornaments.
Source: "Inżynieria i Budownictwo" ["Engineering and Construction"], 38 (1880), pp. 33-34.

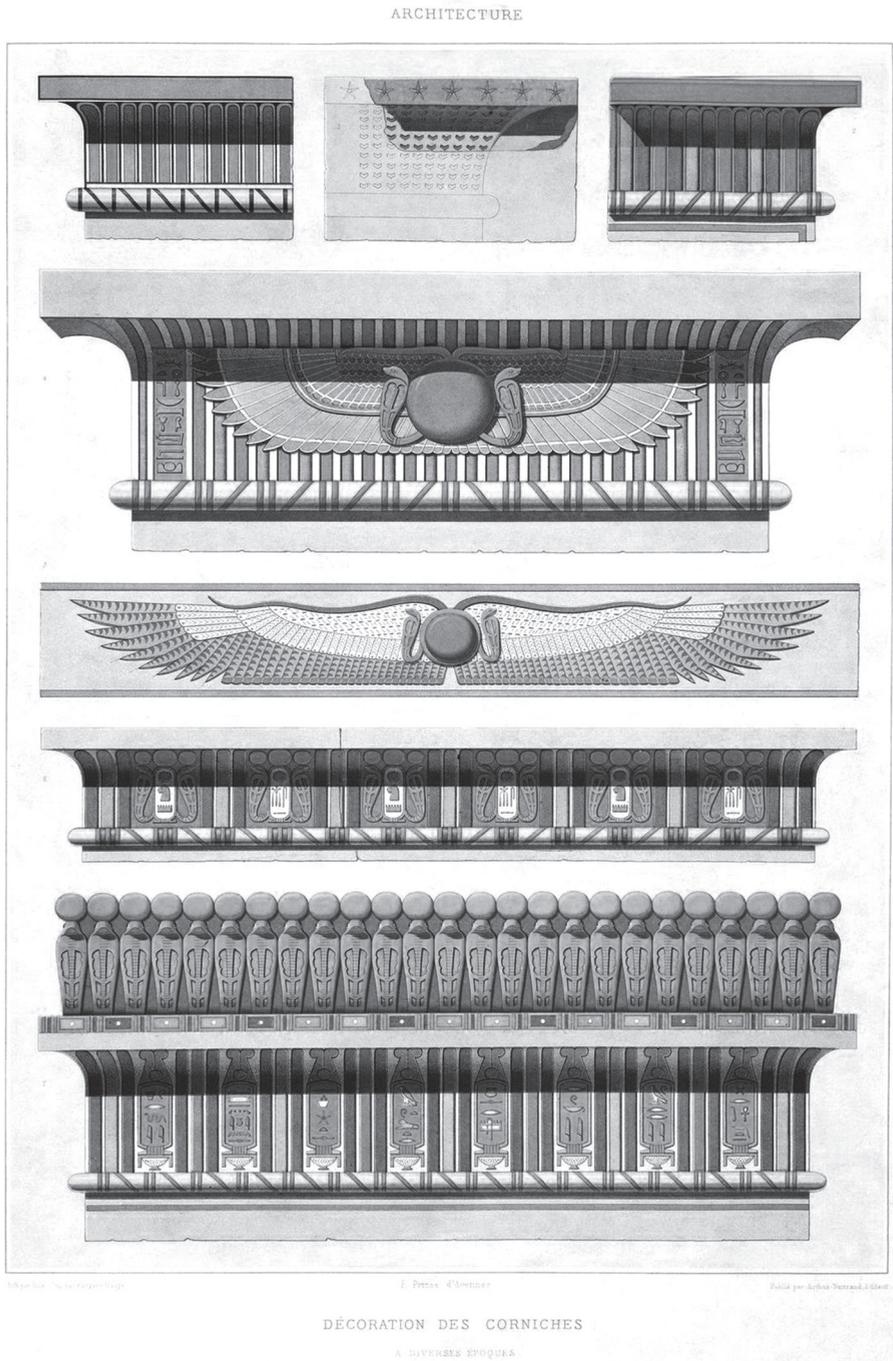


Fig. 3. "Egyptian corniches".

Source: É.P. d'Avennes, *Histoire de l'art égyptien d'après les monuments, depuis les temps les plus reculés...*, Paris 1878.

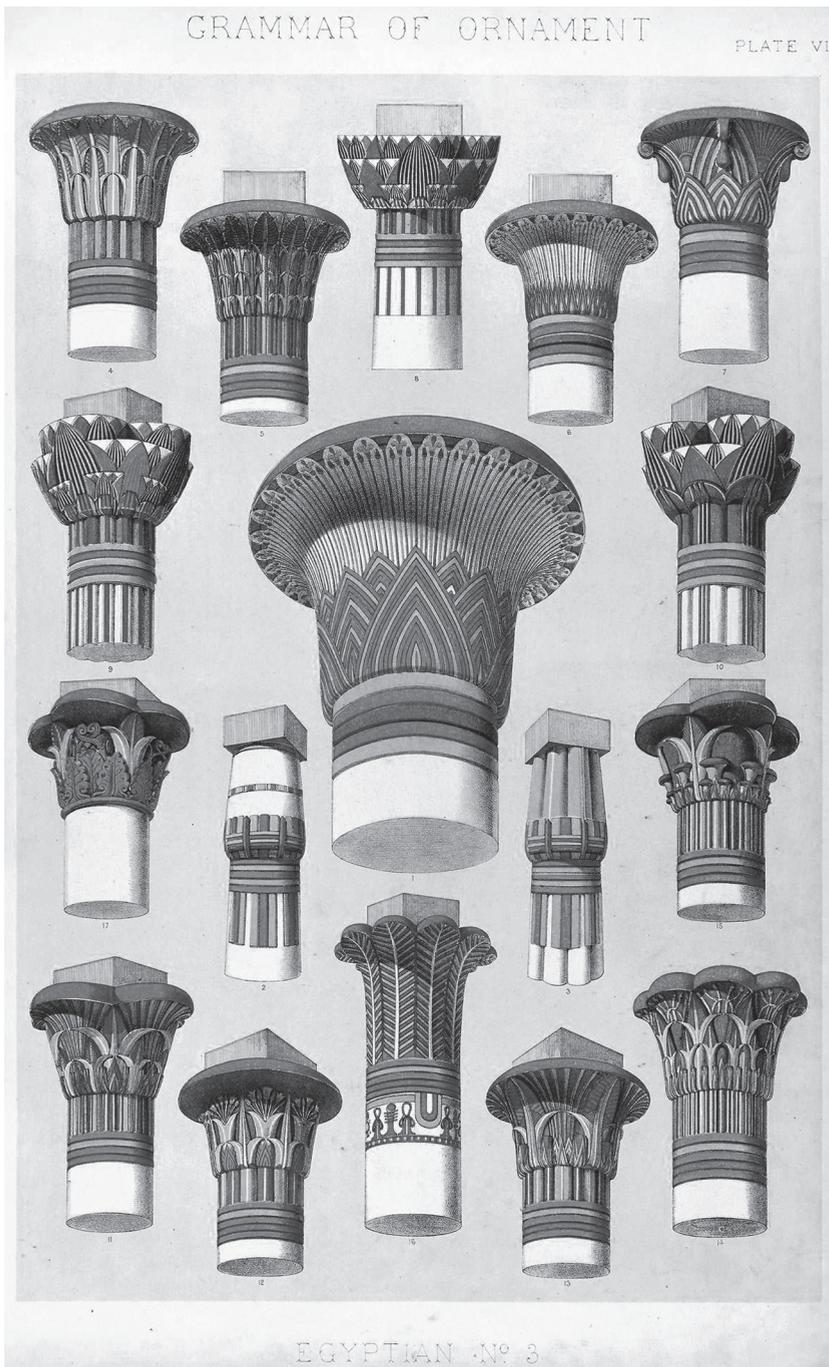


Fig. 4. "Egyptian columns".
Source: *The Grammar of Ornament* by Owen Jones... London 1856, pl. VI.



Fig. 5. Wall relief detail in Ptolemaic temple at Kom Ombo (305-30 BC). Lotuses on the left are the symbol of upper Egypt and papyrus on the right are the symbol of lower Egypt.
Photograph: L. Zinkow.