

# ANTHROPOMORPHIC SUPPORTS IN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN ARCHITECTURE\*

by

Katalin CZELLÁR

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Received 15 December, 1979

Presented by Prof. DR. J. BONTA, Director, Institute of History and Theory of Architecture

Egypt was the first country in ancient Near-East to apply anthropomorphic supports. In Asia Minor this concept emerged only later and supports with human figures were rather infrequent. The anthropomorphic column achieved its full development in Europe, with the birth of the Greek *caryatid*.

Anthropomorphic supports had two quite different forms in Egypt: the column with the *Hathor capital* and the *Osiris pillar*.

The origin of these particular supports is an interesting problem of the history of architecture.

The *Hathor capital* developed by "portraying" the goddess Hathor on two of four sides of the capital block. Sometimes a small pylonlike building topped the head of the goddess, similar in form to the sistrum, a musical instrument used in the Hathor cult.

Columns with Hathor capital were used already at the time of the *Middle Empire*, but they did not extend sooner than at the time of the *New Empire*.<sup>1</sup> Their most beautiful examples stand in the Hathor chapel of the *mortuary temple of Queen Hatshepsut* (Deir el-Bahari, Fig. 1), but they are encountered in the mortuary temple of *Tuthmosis III* as well as in the *Montu and Mut temple* in *Karnak*. The "hypostyle hall" of the smaller temple at *Abu Simbel* is supported by Hathor capital columns. An important example is the *Hathor temple* at *Dendera* from later times featuring the Hathor capital not only on the columns of the porch but on those of the hypostyle hall as well, even in one of the side chapels. Some of the latest examples were found in the *Isis temple* of the *Philae island*.

The *Osiris pillar* is the ensemble of a rectangular pillar and a non-tectonic Osiris statue standing in front of the pillar. The statue represents the god always as a mummy. Osiris pillars never stand in the interior of a building but always in the court.<sup>2</sup>

\* Chapter in the Dr. Techn. Thesis by the Author.

<sup>1</sup> VANDIER, J.: *Manuel d'archéologie Egyptienne*. Tom. II. (Paris, 1954).

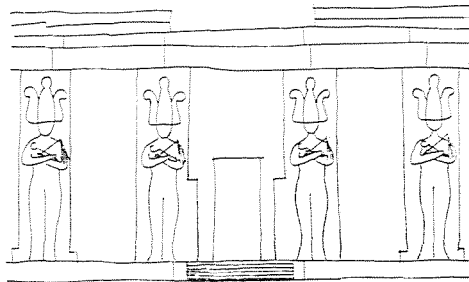
<sup>2</sup> CENIVAL, J. L.: *Egypte. Epoque pharaonique*. (Fribourg, 1964).



*Fig. 1.* Column with Hathor capital from the temple of Hatshepsut. Deir-el-Bahari. 18th dynasty



*Fig. 2.* Osiris-pillar from the temple of Hatshepsut. Deir-el-Bahari. 18th dynasty



*Fig. 3.* Osiris-pillars in a temple court. Medinet Habu, palace temple of Ramses III. 20th dynasty

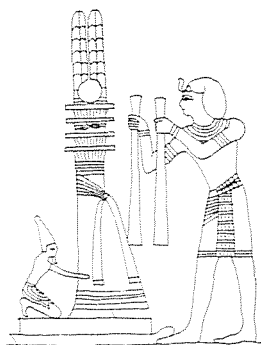


Fig. 4. Pharaoh before a djed column. New Empire

Similar to the columns with Hathor capital, the first examples of Osiris pillars (e. g. *Medamud*) go back to the time of the Middle Empire, although some archaeologists assume occurrences in the Ancient Empire but this awaits still to be proven.<sup>3</sup> They became rather frequent in the New Empire. At the beginning, Osiris pillars were standing mostly in *mortuary temples* (e.g. those of *Hatshepsut*, *Tuthmosis III*, *Amenophis II* and *III*, *Ramses III* in *Thebes*, that of *Ramses II* in *Abydos*, etc., Figs 2 and 3). Later they occurred in other temples as well (e.g. in several courts of the *Amon temple* in *Karnak*), and they were found in certain court-type halls of temples cut in rock (*Abu Simbel*, *Gerph Hussein*). No such pillars were found from times later than the New Empire.

Why Egyptian architecture applied anthropomorphic supports? What is the origin of this custom? Why just the figures of Osiris and Hathor were represented, is there a symbolic meaning, have these two deities something of common with supports? Questions related to the column with Hathor capital and the Osiris pillar will be approached first from the side of general religious history, then Egyptian myths will be involved in interpreting the role of these two deities in the origin of these peculiar supports.

Our starting point will be the cult of columns and pillars widespread in ancient times. The column and the pillar are known not to be simple structural members for the man of the ancient world, but objects of cult as well, besides of having several symbolic meanings.<sup>4</sup> That was a fact in Egypt as well as in

<sup>3</sup> VANDIER, J.: Op. cit., quotes the book by Hölscher, U.: *Das Grabdenkmal des Königs Chephren* (Leipzig, 1912): Hölscher states Osiris pillars to exist in Giza, in the court of the mortuary temple of the Pharaoh Khephren, and publishes a reconstruction. Vandier, J. does not accept this as a fact, nor does Riche in his work: *Bemerkungen zur ägyptischen Baukunst des Alten Reichs II*.

<sup>4</sup> ALLSOPP, B.: *A history of classical architecture*. (London, 1965). — BERZE NAGY, J.: *Égigérő fa. Magyar mitológiai tanulmányok*. (The Sky-high Tree. Hungarian studies of mythology) (Pécs, 1958). — CHAMPEAUX, G. DE—STERCK, D. S.: *Introduction au monde des symboles*. — (Zodiaque, 1966). — CIRCLOT, J. E.: *A dictionary of symbols*. (New York, 1962). — JAMES, E. O.: *The tree of life. An archaeological study*. (Leiden, 1966).

Asia Minor, in the Cretan-Mycenaean civilisation, some traces are found even in Greece. The two essential sources of this cult are the myth and symbolism of the *tree of life* widespread in the ancient Orient and in the Mediterranean countries, and the cult of the *menhirs*, large pillarlike stones, going back to the paleolithic age.

As early as at the paleolithic age, man is likely to have attempted to influence, by cultic rituals, the prolificity of wild animals, edible plants and fruits. At the neolithic age the extension of agriculture and animal breeding fostered the different fertility cults, first of all the cult of the *Earth Goddess*, the *Great Mother Goddess*, who ensured the yearly crop of the soil by her yearly sacred marriage. The death and revival of Nature were symbolized by the death and resurrection of her male companion. This is why the fertility cults of agricultural societies were in close connection with death and resurrection. Also certain animals and plants were objects of such cults. The development of rituals and believes gave rise to fertility symbols, which proved to be extremely long-lasting.

One of the most important and widespread fertility cults was the *tree cult*.<sup>5</sup>

Productive and often very longevous trees had been venerated since ancient times. Their periodical (yearly) "death" and revival, their seemingly endless life, their capacity to feed man with their fruit — all this was believed to be connected with superhuman beings. Trees, groves, even woods were regarded as dwellings of deities, certain trees were venerated as an embodiment of such a deity. The association of trees with goddesses and gods belongs to the religious conceptions of the majority of the ancient peoples, always related to fertility, life and death. This cult of tree developed into the myth and symbolic meaning of the "cosmic tree", the "tree of life".

In its most general sense the tree represents the cosmos, the universe. As "cosmic tree" it stands in the centre of the cosmos and connects three worlds: the netherworld, the middle world (the Earth) and the upper world (the Heaven). Thus its roots descend into the lower regions, its crown reaches up into the sky, while its trunk is the axis of the world. In many conceptions it supports the firmament. The rock or the mountain where it has grown is the centre or the navel of the Earth. Also the Sun, the Moon and the stars can be associated to the tree, emphasizing its cosmic character. Even animals can be related to it: dragons and snakes to the roots, lions, goats, unicorns to the

<sup>5</sup> BERZE NAGY, J.: Op. cit. Note 4 — CIRLOT, J. E. Op. cit. Note 4 — CSER, L.: Der mythische Lebensbaum und die Ficus Ruminalis. (Acta Antiqua Acad. Sci. Hung. Tom. X. fasc. 4.) — FRASER, J. C.: Az aranyág. (The Golden Bough) (Budapest, 1965) — GRAY, J.: Near Eastern mythology. (London, New York, . . . 1969). — JAMES, E. C.: Op. cit. Note 4 — KÁKOSY, L.—VÁRGA, E.: Egy évezred a Nílus völgyében (Thousand years in the valley of the Nile) (Budapest, 1970). — LÁSZLÓ, GY.: A népvándorlaskor művészete Magyarországon (Art of the migration period in Hungary) (Budapest, 1970).

trunk and birds to the crown, in compliance with the three worlds. But these animals transfer to the other tree-symbolism, which is not less important and wide-spread than the first, to the "tree of life".

The tree of life is the source of all life, the symbol of fertility and immortality (eternal life). It is in close connection with the fertility goddesses (with the ancient Great Mother Goddess or Earth Mother) who dwelt in the sacred tree and were identified with the tree of life. This identification is found in all of the manifestations of the fertility goddess (Mother Goddess) each being associated to one or another holy tree. The tree of life can be connected also with a god, but also this "dying" and "reviving" god is related to fertility, i.e. to the Mother Goddess, as her husband or son. The original, the ancient conception is always the identification of the holy tree with the Mother Goddess, while the association with male partners is always a later development, and never an identification. The identification with the fertility goddess is, however, so close that tree and goddess become interchangeable.

The symbolism of the tree of life may have as concomitant the water of life, spring-water welling out of the roots of the tree of life (sometimes in various directions), or out of a vessel in the hands of the fertility goddess. The related animals, mentioned in connection with the "cosmic tree": the snake and the lion, are usually the sacred animals of the earth goddesses or fertility goddesses, connecting them to the tree of life. The dragon, the snake, the lion, the griffon and many other real or mythical monsters are guards of the sacred tree or spring, whom the mythical hero striving toward the tree of life (eternal life) has to fight.

The tree of life may figure in the myths and religious conceptions either as an abstract notion, or as a real, individual tree, or a well-defined sort of tree related to a certain deity. Obviously the tree cult originated from real, individual trees, later the different kinds of trees were connected each with a deity. They got abstracted into the general concept of the tree of life, the cosmic tree. Of course, these various forms coexist, they are not mutually exclusive. The cult of certain sacred trees and groves prevailed in all ancient civilisations.

The tree of life, the cosmic tree had various representations. Sometimes certain individual sacred trees figured in fine arts, but it was generally the abstract tree of life that was represented. This could be a certain well-defined sort of tree (palm-tree, sycamore etc.), but plenty of stylized varieties are found as well. The most abstract form of representation, unlike any possible real tree, is the column. The column, as a spatial representation of an "abstract tree" is often identified with the tree of life, the cosmic tree, assuming all cultic and symbolic values of the tree, even its identity with the goddess of fertility. Thus most peoples knew, besides the tree of life or the cosmic tree, about the "cosmic pillar", in close connection with one another, sometimes even interchangeable, indistinguishable.

Another source of the cult of columns and pillars arose from the cult of the paleolithic menhirs, large pillarlike stones. These blocks constituted presumably part of the cult of the Sun with their carvings sometimes suggestive of human figures. These were the likely predecessors of the Egyptian obelisks which were also monoliths and in connection with the cult of the Sun. Besides this, they symbolize — like the menhirs — the masculine principle,<sup>6</sup> although the masculinity of the menhirs may be regarded as secondary<sup>7</sup> and their incidental carvings generally represent a woman.<sup>8</sup> Many scientists think the cult of the ancient Mother Goddess was originally connected with the cult of the Sun which was substituted only later by the man partner of the goddess.<sup>9</sup>

All things considered the cultic veneration of the menhir and of the cosmic pillar go back more or less to the same origin, the fertility cults. There may be more of the menhir descentance in the single columns considered as object of cult than in the columns and pillars of the temples, which — though venerated — had, at the same time, a supporting function. The cult of these latter columns can be derived from the function of the tree of life or cosmic tree as the supporting pillar of the firmament, i.e. as the cosmic pillar. Since the ceiling of the temple symbolized the firmament equally in Asia Minor, in Egypt and in Hellas,<sup>10</sup> it is obvious that its supporting column is the symbol of the tree of life (cosmic column). This statement is affirmed by plenty of details. Let us take only two examples. The columns were originally, in the early period of architecture, always made of wood, stone columns or pillars were made only much later. Thus, at that time, the cult of the column was devoted not only to the symbol of the tree of life but to the sacred tree itself. Besides it is interesting that the capitals can be reduced everywhere, with a few exceptions, to plants as archetypes.

After these general remarks about fertility cults and the tree of life we will proceed to a short study of the artistic and mythological monuments related to the Egyptian cult of trees and columns as well as of the religious traditions about Hathor and Osiris.

Ancient Egyptian art represented the tree of life in many forms and relations. A lot of them reflect the influence of Asia Minor, adapted, of course, to Egyptian gods and myths. The plants and trees are but slightly stylized, palms, sycamores, lotuses, the papyrus etc. are usually recognizable on the paintings and reliefs. Here, too, the tree can be substituted by the column, though they are not always interchangeable. The following passages will contain a short survey of the types and methods of the representation of the

<sup>6</sup> GIEDION, S.: *Der Beginn der Architektur*. — (Köln, 1964). — HAMANN, R.: *Geschichte der Kunst*. I. (Berlin, 1957).

<sup>7</sup> GRAVES, R.: *The Greek myths*. I—II. (Penguin Books. 1966).

<sup>8</sup> HAMANN, R.: *Op. cit.* Note 6.

<sup>9</sup> GRAVES, R.: *Op. cit.* Note 7.

<sup>10</sup> LETHABY, W. R.: *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*. (London, 1974).

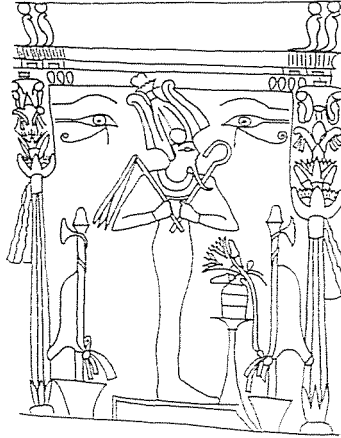


Fig. 5. Osiris under a canopy supported by a column of flowers.

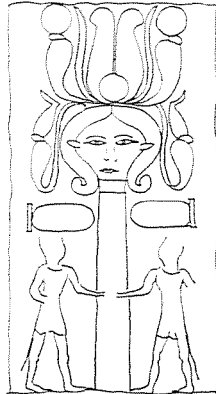


Fig. 6. Column with a Hathor capital acting as a tree of life. Abydos. 18th dynasty

tree of life in Egyptian art; this will throw light upon the beliefs related to this symbol.

1. A deity or pharaoh with a tree (or plant), with a column and a pharaoh or high priest standing in front of it (possibly offering a sacrifice). In an alternative, the column is regarded as a deity (e.g. the djed, symbol of Osiris) with a pharaoh paying his reverence to it (Fig. 4). This type shows that this plant (or column) is an attribute of the deity. The fertility god *Min* was mostly represented with a lettuce plant, and Osiris was often represented standing under a canopy supported by columns of flowers (Fig. 5), or with a bunch of flowers or a column of flowers in front of him.

2. Two animals, mostly *jackals*, flank the column or plant, thus watching the tree of life. It has a variety where two or more deities or pharaohs surround



Fig. 7. Goddess emerging from a tree trunk. New Empire

the column. Even representations are known where two pharaohs flank a column with the Hathor capital (Fig. 6). A special variety of this type is a symbol of the union of Lower and Upper Egypt, frequently encountered throughout from the earliest times to the Roman age.

3. A goddess, *Hathor*, *Isis* or *Nut*, reaches out from a sycamore or palm tree (with her upper body or only her two arms), offering food or drink to the dead she receives in the netherworld (Fig. 7). This type is a proof of the belief in the identity between the fertility goddess and the tree of life also in Egypt. It is most convincing from this point of view that the picture of the tree goddess has varieties related not only to death but also to life and life giving: when the tree gives suck to the Pharaoh, and the monarch obtains divine life through this act.

4. The tree of life in funeral ceremonies. We find a lot of them in grave-paintings, in the form of four or five lotuses or papyrus growing out of one another (cf. the god *Uneg* imagined as a plant-shaped column, the Pharaoh has become identical with after his death.<sup>11</sup>

5. Conventionalized lotus, papyrus or some other plant. The tree of life representation on applied-art objects has become a mere ornament.

6. Columns, ornamental columns, obelisks. There are plenty of representations where columns of flowers support the entablature of a building or the canopy over a god (Fig. 5). This latter goes obviously back to the function of the tree of life as a support of the firmament and became only later a more or less decorative motive. Ornamental columns in front of the pylons of Egyptian temples are descendants of guardian divinities or of trees of life. The obelisk belongs to the cultic sphere of the cosmic pillar, the same as its forebear, the menhir. Finally, the structural columns are equally related to the cosmic

<sup>11</sup> KÁKOSY, L.—VARGA, E.: Op. cit. Note 4 — Knaurs Lexikon der Aegyptischen. Kultur. (München, Zürich, 1960).



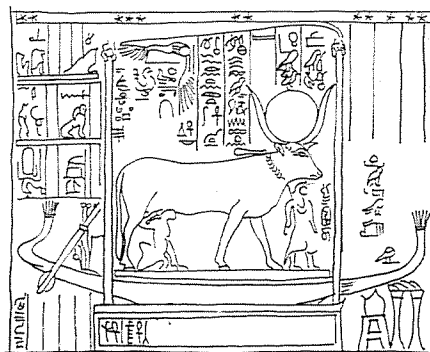


Fig. 8. Hathor cow from the temple of Hatshepsut. Deir-el-Bahari. 18th dynasty

pillar deriving from the tree of life: columns of the temple symbolizing the universe supported the ceiling of the temple, representing (and mostly painted as) a firmament full of stars.

In the Egyptian world concept and mythology the plants, trees and columns played an important role from the very beginning. According to one myth of the creation of the world, a lotus flower emerged from the primeval ocean and the Sun-god shining out of the flower created the first lot of earth. The Sun-god was related not only to the lotus but also to the sycamore: he resplended every morning between two holy sycamores standing on the eastern mountain. The Ished-tree of Heliopolis determining the fate of the Pharaohs was also a sycamore. Heliopolis played an important part also in the cult of columns; even its name (Iunu) comes from “iun” meaning “column”. Columns as fetishes were venerated all over the town. The pointed stone (menhir) named “benben” may have been the primeval form of the obelisk, well-known symbol of the sun, its name may be connected with the word “resplend”.<sup>12</sup>

Besides the Sun-god *Ra* there were other deities connected with the sacred trees, first of all Osiris and the Mother-goddesses: Isis, Hathor, Nut. In later times every nomos had its (one or several) sacred trees, above all sycamores, date-palms or acacias, planted mostly in cemeteries or near wells and lakes and the deities dwelling in them were worshipped.<sup>13</sup>

Hathor was the goddess the most closely connected with the tree cult. She was, essentially, a manifestation of the Mother-goddess or fertility goddess. She was generally represented as a woman with a characteristic headwear, with cow-horns, but she often appeared in the form of a cow with a sun-dial between her horns (Fig. 8). Hathor is the goddess of the sky, the “mistress of

<sup>12</sup> KÁKOSY, L.—VARGA, E.: Op. cit. Note 5 — GIEDION, S.: Op. cit. Note 6.

<sup>13</sup> JAMES, E. O.: Op. cit. Note 4.

the stars", so she was often identified with the goddess Nut, who supported the firmament, represented as a woman standing on all fours, as well as with Isis, wife of Osiris and mother of Horus (Hathor's name means "the palace of Horus").<sup>14</sup>

The Egyptians had various conceptions of how the firmament was supported. One version said that the sky was held by four wooden columns, imagined since the first transitional period with forked tops. In the pyramid texts four turquoise columns are mentioned as supports. But also the cow, identical with the goddess Hathor, may represent the sky, then the legs of the animal are the four supports, while in the case of Nut standing on all fours, the legs of the goddess serve as columns. All of these conceptions belong to the sphere of myths of the cosmic tree or column supporting the firmament, they are different versions of the same myth.<sup>15</sup>

But the Goddess Hathor was related not only to the cosmic pillars supporting the sky. Her cult comprised a holy tree: she is often given the epithet "mistress of the sycamore". In this quality she is the goddess of the netherworld, i.e. "the Lady of the West": she is represented as reaching out from the trunk of a sycamore or a palm tree, offering food and drink to the dead and receiving him in the netherworld (Fig. 7),<sup>16</sup> often identified with Isis and Nut. Hathor was also called the "living soul of trees". As a tree (or a cow) she gives breast — i.e., life — to the Pharaoh (Fig. 8).<sup>17</sup>

We have mentioned above that there are many representations of the tree of life on grave-paintings, in connection with the cult of the dead, in the form of four or more lotuses or papyruses growing out of one another.<sup>18</sup> In some of the pictures these columns of flowers support the entablature of buildings. Also the columns of the temples symbolizing the universe were counterparts of the cosmic pillar deriving from the tree of life, in the same way as "the four columns of the world" or the four legs of the Hathor-cow or the goddess Nut supported the sky, the columns of the temple supported its ceiling, symbol of the sky.<sup>19</sup> The columns modelled after certain plants; the palm, the papyrus, the lotus (Fig. 9) were tree of life symbols in themselves. The papyrus is the symbol of the nascent world, so its form taken by a column in the temple symbolized the world daily born.<sup>20</sup> The lotus was the symbol of the world arising from humidity, i.e. the symbol of creation. The palm is the "dwelling

<sup>14</sup> KÁKOSY, L.—VARGA, E.: Op. cit. Note 4 — Knaurs Lexikon der Aegyptischen Kultur (München, Zürich, 1960).

<sup>15</sup> BERZE NAGY, J.: Op. cit. Note 4 — GIEDION, S.: Op. cit. Note 6 — KÁKOSY, L.—VARGA, E.: Op. cit. Note 5.

<sup>16</sup> See Type 3 of the representations.

<sup>17</sup> See Type 3 of the representations.

<sup>18</sup> See Type 4 of the representations.

<sup>19</sup> See Type 6 of the representations.

<sup>20</sup> Knaurs... Op. cit. Note 14.

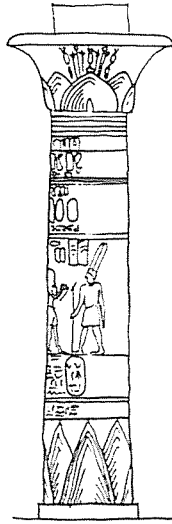


Fig. 9. Open-calyx papyrus column. Amon temple, hypostyle hall. 19th dynasty

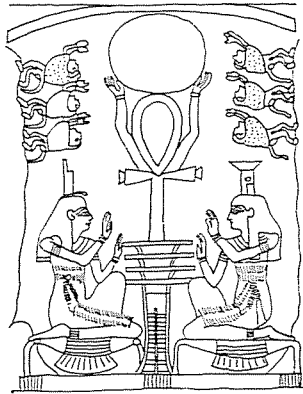


Fig. 10. Djed column as tree of life. New Empire

place” of Nut or Hathor,<sup>21</sup> and thus interchangeable with the goddess: the fertility goddesses were seen to have been generally identified with the tree of life or the column. As a conclusion, the columns with the Hathor capital are felt to mean that the goddess herself appears in the role of the tree of life i.e. column supporting the firmament.<sup>22</sup> This assumption is the more obvious, as

<sup>21</sup> See representations of the goddess reaching out of a tree, Type 3 (Fig. 7).

<sup>22</sup> The column with the Hathor capital acting as the tree of life is represented a.o. by a small stela of Abydos, where the Pharaoh (Tuthmosis III) appears in the form of two kings flanking the tree of life (see Type 2, Fig. 6).

Hathor was identical not only with the sacred sycamore or palm tree, she was not only the “living soul of trees” (which would be in itself sufficient to explain why she was represented on columns), but she was, at the same time, the celestial cow, the goddess Nut supporting the sky. This is why she was given a tectonic function, the only one among the Egyptian gods.

As for the Osiris pillars, the situation is a different one, although Osiris is also multiply connected with the cult of the tree or column. The symbol and hieroglyph of the god, the djed column (Fig. 10) was known as early as at the time of the first dynasty. Originally it may have been the trunk of a conifer, other sources say it was a papyrus bundle. Certain texts identify it with the backbone of Osiris, which was kept in his shrine at Busiris.<sup>23</sup> The djed column is obviously a tree of life in the form of a column,<sup>24</sup> as Osiris, the husband of Isis the Mother-goddess, was one of the fertility gods “dying and resurrecting”. A tree played an important role in his myth. His corpse placed in a coffin was carried along by the sea to the city of Byblos, where the coffin got overgrown by a heather tree (according to other sources, by a tamariscus). The wonderfully enlarged trunk of the tree was used as a supporting column in the king’s palace. Isis, however, found it, cut the coffin out of the tree and brought it back to Egypt. But she gave the trunk of the tree to the king of Byblos, who put it into the temple of Isis, where it was worshipped by the people.<sup>25</sup> After this, Osiris became king of the realm of the dead (he was usually represented as a mummy with an *atef* (feather-crown) in his head).

Osiris never acted as a “support” in the Egyptian world concept, as opposed to Hathor who, as mentioned above, supported the sky. Although the king of Byblos made the tree hiding, protecting Osiris’ coffin a supporting column of his palace, Osiris was hidden in the tree as a dead body, so he was not identified with it, the same as the men-partners of the Mother-goddesses never are. The supporting function is shifted to the heather as tree of life (cosmic pillar), Osiris is but “associated” to her. In the case of the Osiris pillars, this association is felt to be symbolized by the Osiris statues put before, and closely connected with, the pillars, but without having a tectonic function.

<sup>23</sup> KÁKOSY, L.—VARGA, E.: Op. cit. Note 5 — Knaurs . . . Op. cit. Note 14 — COOK, R.: The tree of life. Symbol of the centre. (London, 1974). — LUKÁCS, J.: Történelem, filozófia, vallásosság. (History, philosophy, religiousness) (Budapest, 1979).

<sup>24</sup> The tree of life character of the djed column appears on many representations. This is confirmed by Fig. 10, where the symbol ankh is above one of the djed columns.

<sup>25</sup> The Osiris myth had been written in details by Plutarch: his description is confirmed and partly completed by certain recently found texts and inscriptions. — FRASER, J. G.: Op. cit. Note 5 — KÁKOSY, L.—VARGA, E.: Op. cit. Note 5 — Knaurs . . . Op. cit. Note 14.

### Summary

In ancient Egypt two essentially different types of anthropomorphic support were used: the column with the Hathor capital and the so-called Osiris pillar.

These two deities were the only ones connected with supports. The roots go back to the cult of columns and pillars widespread in ancient times. This cult was related to the myth and symbolic world of the tree of life or cosmic tree, prevalent in the Egyptian beliefs. In closest connection with the cult of tree was the goddess Hathor — this explains the appearance of her image on the capitals. The development of the Osiris pillar may be understood from the myth of this god.

Dr. Katalin CZELLÁR, scientific research worker, H-1521 Budapest