

Attempt at an explanation of the Djed column

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1 The Djed symbol

The Djed (*dd*)² column (I prefer this expression to “Djed pillar”³) is one of the Egyptian symbols that have been documented for the entire 3,000-year Pharaonic period. In its full sculptural form, it consists of a cylindrical shaft which supports four stacked cup-shaped structures with vertically striped undersides (hereafter referred to as “cups”). The shaft has a widened base, or base plate (plinth), and two to four circular bands (anuli) around its neck (Fig. 1 b).⁴ In abstracted form with variable proportions, the Djed column appears in reliefs and wall paintings, on coffins, shrines, and pottery, and as a jewelry element and amulet.⁵ The majority of the surviving Djed amulets are flattened with rounded edges. Some have a flat back pillar, and many have a variably shaped knob with an eyelet for threading a band through (Fig. 1 e).⁶ The hieroglyph  (R11, Gardiner's list) with the phonetic value *dd* served as a phonogram or abbreviation for the verb *ddj* (“to be stable”, “to have lasting existence”) and the derived nouns such as *dd.t* (“durability”, “permanence”, “stability”).⁷ It is therefore obvious that the Djed column symbolized these concepts. The long-term existence of palaces, temples, tombs, and the human body was a very important concern to the Egyptians, for which they made great efforts. Thus, it is not surprising that the Djed column is often combined with symbols of three other important concerns: eternal life (Ankh), protection (Tit [Isis knot]), and control of chaos and dominion (Was scepter).⁸

In the Old Kingdom, the Djed column was associated with the gods Ptah and Sokar, who were worshipped in Memphis as the creator god and the god of the dead, respectively.⁹ Later, it found its way into the cult of Osiris, who replaced Sokar locally from the late Old Kingdom onwards. Therefore, in the New Kingdom, the Djed column also appeared personified as an Osiris figure wearing an Atef crown, and holding a Was scepter or a crook and a flail (Fig. 1 d).¹⁰ Osiris represented permanence and victory over death like

² In older literature also transcribed as *ded*, *zad*, *tat*, *teṭ*, or *tcheṭ*. Ref 1, pp 7–18; Ref 2, chpt 155; Ref 3, p 914; Ref 4, vol 1, p 6; Ref 5 p 15.

³ By definition, a pillar has a rectangular or square cross-section.

⁴ In my opinion, rare cases of Djed columns with a three-part or five-part capital (Ref 6, p 343) should be considered non-canonical or erroneous. Scholars' drawings may not be accurate. For example, in Rundle Clark's illustration of a faience mosaic from the Djoser pyramid, the Djed columns erroneously have five cups (compare Ref 7, p 236, fig 36 to Ref 8).

⁵ For proportions and stylistic variations in Djed amulets see Ref 6, pp 342–347.

⁶ Ref 6, plts 31–33.

⁷ Ref 9, p 1094 (40516, 40523).

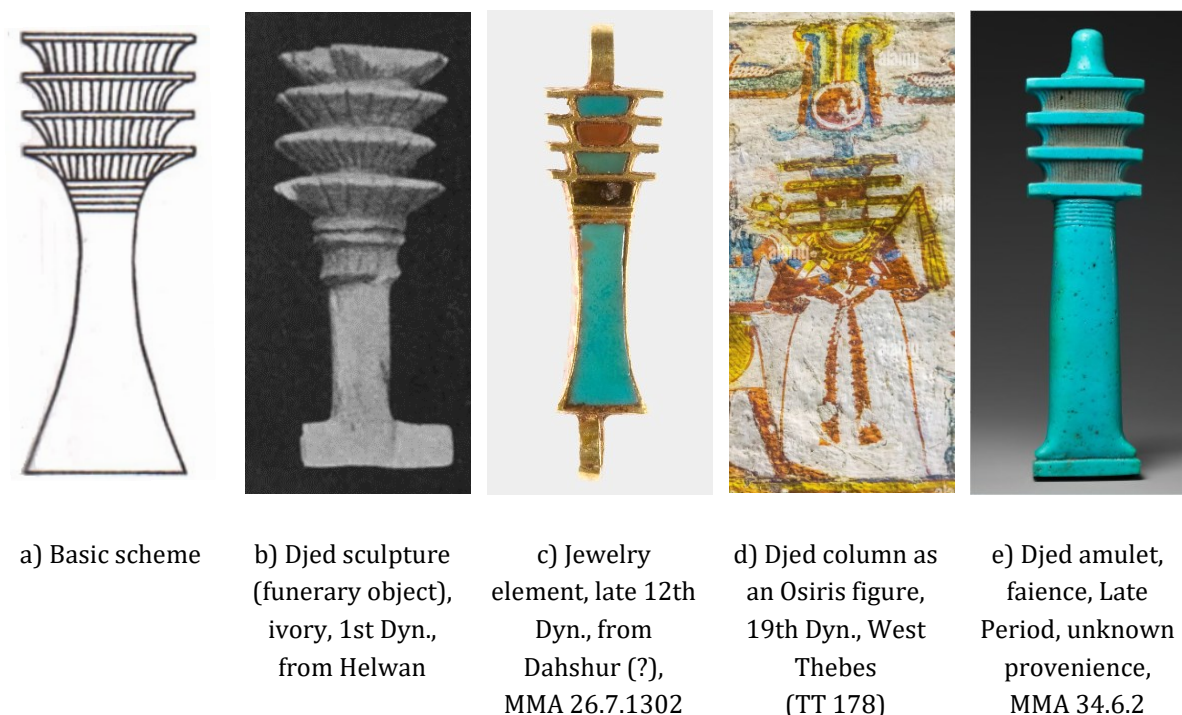
⁸ E.g., British Museum EA54412; Musée du Louvre, E 21422 and N 4333.

⁹ For Ptah, the Djed column is typically integrated into the staff of his Was scepter.

¹⁰ Ref 6, pp 345–346.

hardly any other Egyptian god.¹¹ His oldest cult site was Djedu (Busiris), the capital of the ninth Lower Egyptian nome. The festive ritual “Raising of the Djed Column” was performed in honor of the gods Sokar and Ptah (in the Memphite region) and Osiris (in Busiris and Abydos) on the 30th day of the fourth month of the Akhet season, which roughly corresponds to the end of October, when the Nile waters had receded and the next sowing season begun.¹² As shown in murals, a large, decorated Djed column had to be erected by the king with the assistance of a priest.

Fig. 1: Examples of Djed columns¹³



2 The Djed object

There are various explanations for the object represented in the Djed column. The variety of colors of the Djed column in amulets and wall paintings simply reflects different materials and artistic expression (Fig. 1 c–e).¹⁴


¹¹ Ref 10, cols 1101–1102 (with references); Ref 11, p 256 (fig).


¹² From the Middle Kingdom onwards, this ritual celebrated the god's rebirth and invoked the permanence of the king's reign. It could coincide with the king's Sed festival. Ref 10, cols 1101–1103 (with references); Ref 11, p 253; Ref 12, pp 66–67. Reliefs: temple of Seti I, Abydos (Ref 13); tomb of Kheruef, West Thebes, TT 192 (Ref 14, pp 58–61 and pls 54, 56, 57).

¹³ Photo credits can be found at the end of the article.

¹⁴ Ref 5, p 15; Ref 6, pp 341–342, 351–352.

2.1 Architectural and celestial columns

Many authors agree that the Djed column represents an architectural column which symbolizes stability and permanence perfectly. Since wood was scarce in ancient Egypt, prehistoric architectural columns were likely made from bundles of papyrus or reeds, or furled papyrus mats¹⁵. Many scholars view such archaic column as a potential model for the Djed column.¹⁶ The form was later converted into stone. The papyrus column with a calyx capital imitates a single papyrus stem with an open umbel (like the hieroglyph  [M13]), but it still has anuli like the papyrus bundle column (Fig. 2 c).¹⁷

The question remains as to the significance of the quadrupling of the calyx capital. Petrie (1892) suggested that it represents four columns in a row,¹⁸ for it is typical of ancient Egyptian art that objects positioned one atop another are to be viewed as standing one behind the other.¹⁹ Other authors adopted this idea and considered the Djed column a symbol of the four columns of heaven.²⁰ In the Pyramid Texts, these celestial columns are sometimes expressed using the papyrus stem hieroglyph ().²¹ This confirms the early connection between the papyrus plant and columns, which dates back to the Pre- and Early Dynastic periods. On early Old Kingdom artifacts and in a relief scene in the Ptolemaic temple at Dendera, it is actually Djed columns or Djed/Tit combined columns that support the firmament.²²

¹⁵ Probably similar to the furled model mats kept in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, MMA 30.8.12 (Ref 15).

¹⁶ Ref 10, col 1100; Ref 16, p 502; Ref 17, pp 94–95; Ref 18, pp 64–65; Ref 19, p 209; Ref 20, p 442; Ref 21, p 425.

¹⁷ Giza: Tomb of Khufukhaf (4th Dyn., drawing in Ref 22, plt 25); Ilahun: Ref 23, plts 6 (2–5), 16 (3–4); Luxor: Fig. 2 d, this article. In papyrus amulets (*wadj* amulets), the features of a papyrus stem and a papyrus column merge. Ref 6, plts 23–24.

¹⁸ Ref 24, p 31 (left column).

¹⁹ Ref 25, pp 343–346.

²⁰ Ref 7, p 237; Ref 26, p 104; Ref 27, pp 649–650, fig. 592; Ref 28, p 171 (note 81). The ancient Egyptians believed that the firmament, or celestial ocean, was supported by pillars or columns at the four cardinal points. These pillars were also called the “Pillars of Shu” and were sometimes depicted as the arms and legs of the sky goddess Nut. Ref 29, vol 1, pp 156–157, 466–467; vol 2, pp 51, 92, 104, 107, 241, 311.

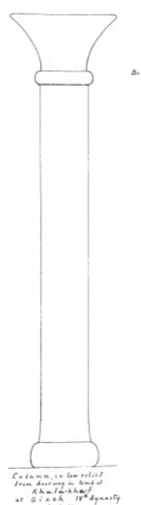
²¹ Ref 30, vol 1, PT 217 §152a; See also Ref 31, plt 65, bottom.

²² Door jamb of King Khasekhemwy, 2nd Dyn. (Ref 32, plt 2); Step pyramid of King Djoser, 3rd Dyn., Saqqara (Ref 7, p 237, fig 37; Ref 8); Temple of Dendera, Osiris chapel (Ref 31, plt 71, bottom).

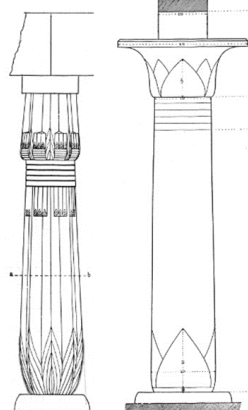
Fig. 2: Papyrus columns



a) Papyrus harvesting scene,
tomb relief, 5th Dyn.,
Saqqara



b) Papyrus
column with
calyx capital,
4th Dyn.,
Gizeh,
drawing by
Petrie



c) Papyrus bundle
column with closed-bud
capital, 12th Dyn. (left)
and papyrus column
with calyx capital,
19th Dyn., drawings by
Borchardt



d) Papyrus columns with
calyx capital, 19th Dyn.,
mortuary temple of
Ramesses II (Ramesseum),
Luxor

2.2 Spinal column fragment

In the spell in Chapter 155 of the Book of the Dead, which should be recited over a golden Djed amulet, the Djed column is referred to as the spine of Osiris:

"Here is thy backbone, thou still-heart! Here is thy spine, thou still-heart! Put it close to thee!"²³

The hieroglyph 𓆎 (F41), which resembles the upper part of the Djed column, was rarely used as a classifier for the word for "spine, back".²⁴ Therefore, many scholars interpret the Djed column as a fragment of the spinal column, or believe that the Egyptians viewed it this way in the New Kingdom.²⁵ This symbolism is explained by the myth of the murder and dismemberment of Osiris by Seth.²⁶ According to the legend, Isis found her husband's spine at a place called Djedet (Greek: Mendes) in the northeastern Nile Delta.²⁷ Hunt and Schwabe (2004), however, suggested that the Djed column represents the lumbar spine

²³ Ref 2, chpt 155.

²⁴ Ref 16, p 466.

²⁵ Ref 3, p 914; Ref 4, vol 2, pp 199–200; Ref 5, p 15; Ref 33, pp 152–155; Ref 34, p 46.

²⁶ Ref 35, sections 12–20. Summaries of the legend: Ref 11, pp 254–256; Ref 36.

²⁷ Ref 4, vol 1, p 212.

and sacrum of a bull and is a vestige of an archaic bull cult.²⁸

The idea that the Djed column represents a spinal column fragment was doubted early on.²⁹ In my view, the smooth cylindrical shaft (a stand?) and the vertically striped undersides of the four cups are strong counter-arguments. In addition, the two Djed sculptures from the First Dynasty have a wreath of truncated ends protruding from the lower edge of the anuli (Fig. 1b), which is similar to what can be seen on Middle Kingdom papyrus bundle columns (Fig. 2 c, left). The above-quoted spell from the Book of the Dead probably referred to mummies having Djed amulets close to their spine.³⁰ Alternatively, the Djed column may have been poetically equated with the spinal column, which provides stability to the body.

2.3 Grain sheaf

Some authors imagined the Djed column as a sheaf of grain tied to a post in four stacked rows.³¹ A sheaf was used to dry cut grain in the sun before taking it to the threshing site. Its connection with Osiris lies in his secondary role as the god of vegetation and grain cultivation (Osiris-Neper). In New Kingdom mural scenes depicting rural life, an umbrella-like arrangement of ears of grain together with a goblet can be seen (Fig. 3, arrows). It is believed to be a harvest offering.³² However, the interpretation of the Djed column as a sheaf of grain does not align with the timing of the “Raising of the Djed Column” ceremony at the end of the flood season.

²⁸ Ref 37, pp 114–125.

²⁹ Ref 5, p 15 (Petrie about the Djed column: “later mistaken by the Egyptians for the backbone of Osiris”); Ref 21, pp 424 (note 1), 430.

³⁰ See the alternative versions and translations of spell 155 in Ref 38; Ref 39, p 385; Ref 40, p 155. Djed amulets were placed between the mummy's bandages on its back and hung around its neck. In addition, a Djed column was painted on the bottom of an anthropomorphic coffin. Ref 7, p 165; Ref 10, cols 1102, 1103–1104; Ref 40, p 155; Ref 41, pp 78–79; Ref 42. See also the comment in Ref 21, p 424 (note 2).

³¹ Ref 12, p 66; Ref 34, p 46; Ref 42; Ref 43, p 48; Ref 44, pp 979–980; Ref 45, p 42; Ref 46, p 127.

³² Ref 47, plts 143 A, 177, top.

Fig. 3: Grain winnowing scene with a presumed harvest offering (arrows).
Tomb of Djoserkare-seneb, 18th Dyn., Sheikh Abd el-Qurna (TT38).



2.4 Fertility pole, ritual tree

Other authors have explained the Djed column as a fertility fetish in the form of a pole decorated with branches and ears of grain or a tree with cut or tied branches. Such fertility pole or ceremonial tree may have been used in the cults of Ptah, Sokar, or Osiris, who were syncretically united as Ptah-Sokar-Osiris in the New Kingdom.³³ In this context, Budge (1904) mentioned the mythological tree that enclosed the chest containing Osiris's body with its trunk.³⁴

2.5 Technical tool

Authors with a technical background attempted to explain the Djed column as a tool, for instance, a device for separating strings when twisting them into ropes³⁵ or a rope winch used in pyramid construction³⁶. Commentators from the Kemetism community who view

³³ Ref 10, col 1100; Ref 19, p 209; Ref 48, p 86; Ref 49, pp 51–52. In Egypt, trees were rare and valuable, making them predestined to acquire cultic significance (e.g., tamarisk and sycamore).

³⁴ Ref 29, vol 2, pp 124–125.

³⁵ Ref 50, pp 34–35. This author also interprets the Ankh as a tool used to produce rope and emphasizes the importance of ropes in the ancient Egyptian economy.

³⁶ Ref 51.

the Djed column as an electric capacitor or insulator are mentioned here only for the sake of completeness.³⁷

2.6 Hypothesis

As mentioned above, Djed columns were used to depict the columns of the firmament in reliefs of the Second and Third Dynasties.³⁸ In Pyramid Texts, the words for the stringers of the ladder to heaven and for the mooring post for the divine day-barque of Re are spelled with Djed hieroglyphs.³⁹ This suggests that the word *dd* originally referred to a firmly upright, cylindrical structure, such as a column or post. It follows that the derived verb *ddj* had the basic meaning of “being column-like or post-like”, which translates to “being stable” and “being permanent”, both literally and figuratively. When the Egyptians began building rectilinear houses and tombs in the early fourth millennium BCE, these structures required four posts to support the roof and provide anchorage for the wattle-and-daub walls.⁴⁰ This is the prototype of a stable and reasonably durable rectilinear hut or tomb superstructure. However, posts or columns arranged in a rectangle are not suitable for an icon or amulet. A column with four capitals elegantly solved this problem.

I would like to add one more point and highlight the fact that the number 4 was charged with mythological and magical significance in ancient Egypt. Examples include the four pairs of primordial gods in the Hermopolitan cosmogony,⁴¹ the four sons of Horus,⁴² the four paths a deceased person must take,⁴³ the four days the mouth-opening ceremony lasted,⁴⁴ the four months the shipwrecked sailor had to endure on the Snake Island,⁴⁵ and the four actions or applications in numerous rituals and healing treatments,⁴⁶ to name just a few examples.⁴⁷ Therefore, it seems that the number 4 stood for proper completion and completeness.⁴⁸ Only something that is completed properly, whether an act of creation, a religious or magical ritual, a healing treatment, or a craftsman's project, can have a lasting effect or be stable and fulfill its purpose for a very long time. From the end of the Middle

³⁷ E.g., Ref 52.

³⁸ See note 22.

³⁹ Ref 30, vol 1, PT 271 §389 b; vol 2, PT 532 §1255 a–b.

⁴⁰ Ref 53, p 124.

⁴¹ Amun and Amunet, Kek and Keket, Nun and Nunet, and Heh and Hehet.

⁴² Imsety, Hapy, Duamutef, and Qebehsenuef.

⁴³ Ref 30, vol 2, PT 553 § 1355 a.

⁴⁴ Great Mendes stela, Egyptian Museum Cairo JE 37089 (Ref 54, p 40, line 12).

⁴⁵ Papyrus Hermitage Museum 1115, lines 117–119 (Ref 55, pp 44–45).

⁴⁶ E.g., Ref 30, vol 1, PT 207 §124 c–d; vol 2, PT 508 §1116 b; PT 510 §1140 a; PT 512 §1164 b; PT 515 §1180 c; PT 536 §1293 b; PT 553 §1365 a; Ref 35, section 39; Papyrus Ebers, *passim*.

⁴⁷ Summarized in Ref 56, pp 31–33.

⁴⁸ See also Ref 57, pp 133–135.

Kingdom onwards, temples that united the cult of the king and the cult of the gods under one roof were called “House of a Million Years”. This demonstrates the time period the Egyptians had in mind when dreaming of permanence; a million years was used as a synonym for “infinitely long”. The capital is the part of the column that transfers the load of the roof or architrave to the column shaft. The four canonical capitals of the Djed column could be a sophisticated image. On the one hand, they could refer to the fact that four columns are necessary for structural stability. On the other hand, they could be a metaphorical or magical statement that uses the number 4 to express the idea that completeness is a prerequisite for permanence. Thus, a papyrus column with four capitals is “fourfold durable”, meaning it is completely and permanently durable. In this way, the Djed column showcases stability and permanence in all their nuances of meaning.


Abbreviations

ASAE: Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte; BAOA: Bibliothèque d'archéologie orientale d'Athènes; BCE: before Christian era; col/cols: column(s); chpt: chapter; Dyn.: dynasty; fig.: figure; GHE: Golden House Egyptology; J. Neurosurg.: Journal of Neurosurgery; KAG: Kulturgeschichte der Antiken Welt; MFA: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; MMA: The Metropolitan Museum of Arts, New York; p/pp: page(s); PT: Pyramid Text; Ref/Refs: reference(s); SASAE: Supplément aux Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte; TT: Theban tomb; vol/vols: volume(s).

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Photo credits

- Fig. 1: a) Scheme of a Djed column after Ref 7, p 235 (fig 35) (CC 0).
 b) Djed sculpture (funerary object), 1st Dyn., Helwan. Photo: Ref 58, p 27, plt 14 b (CC 0).
 c) Anthropomorphized Djed as Osiris with Atef crown, crook and flail, tomb of Neferrenpet, 19th Dyn., West Thebes (TT178). Photo: stock photo, Alamy Ltd.
 d) Djed amulet, faience, Late Period, unknown provenience, MMA 34.6.2. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/550987> (CC 0; accessed May 03, 2025).
- Fig. 2: a) Papyrus harvesting scene, 5th Dyn., Saqqara (courtesy of Meisterdrucke; accessed April 28, 2025).
 b) Papyrus column, 4th Dyn., Gizeh. Drawing from Ref 22, plt 25 (CC 0).
 c) Papyrus bundle column with closed-bud capital, 12th Dyn., and papyrus column with calyx capital, 19th Dyn. Drawings from Ref 59, figs 55, 66a (CC 0).
- Fig. 3: Wall painting scene of grain winnowing, 18th Dyn., Sheikh Abd el-Qurna. Photo: Ref 47, plt 143A (CC 0).