During the Classical Greek architecture period, centred round about 450 B.C., it was made up of three different orders that are most commonly seen in their temples. These three orders were the Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian.

The elements of an order are the elements of post and lintel construction. The first and obvious element is the post ot column. The next is the beam running continuously upon the heads of the columns and completing the structure of the colonnade, and called the architrave. This beam in turn, in its primitive construction, is linked with the rectangular chamber wall by cross beams, forming a vertical division above the architrave, known as the frieze. Above these elements are the overhanging eaves of the roof, known as the cornice. The three horizontal members together are known as the entablature. These elements in their relationship one with another are known as a classic order, and have become an architectural feature associated with fine architecture through all the periods of the highest culture in Europe.

The favourite order of the Greeks was the Doric, which was massive in its proportions. It is also particularly expressive of the parts of the structure. The column is plain and sturdy in proportion, the shaft standing direct on a base of three steps forming the platform of the temple, and fluted with hollow grooves meeting at sharp edges and giving emphasis to the lines of the shaft. The architrave is deep and plain, marked only by a narrow band or fillet at its meeting with the frieze. The cornice is slight, and has the form of an eaves gutter at the top, with enrichments on the underside which suggest the feet of rafters. The capitals of the columns develop the round of the shaft to the square lines of the superstructure by means of a refined elemental curve under a simple square block or abacus. We can trace the process of refinement by comparing the early Doric capital seen in the temple of Poseidon at Paestum with the mature perfection at the Parthenon, which ranks as one of the great buildings of the world.

The Greek Ionic order was more slender and graceful, more feminine in character. The column is smaller in the proportion of diameter to height, and is fluted with grooves separated by narrow, flat fillets, there is a moulded base between the column and the platform or stylobate. The capital is enriched with scrolls or volutes which form the most distinctive characteristic of the order. The architrave is lightened in effect by moulding and recessed planes, the frieze is plain, and the cornice slight and simply moulded. The Ionic capital being essentially a feature designed for a frontal view, there arose a difficulty in the design of a continuous colonnade, since the corner column exhibited an end view with the remaining side columns turned to show the front faces, or all the side columns needed to be turned with the end faces outwards. The Greek solution was to design a special capital for the comer columns of such a colonnade, in which the angle volute was bent outwards so that both the front and return faces could display their proper frontal pair of volutes. In one example at least, at Bassae, a capital was used in which the volutes of all four faces of all the columns were treated thus.

The third of the orders, the Corinthian, is the most ornate of all, and was the least used by the Greeks. It is also chiefly characterized by the capital of its column, which in other respects is similar to the Tonic. This capital is in the form of an inverted bell supporting a moulded abacus which, on plan, takes the shape of a hollow-sided square. Round the bell are arranged rows of acanthus leaves with the ends turning slightly over and downwards, and groups of volutes support the projecting corners of the abacus. The inverted bell form was a common shape for the capital of a column and was used in both Egyptian and Assyrian work of great antiquity. The entablature of the Corinthian order is similar to the Ionic in general terms, except that the cornice is further enriched by a feature of closely spaced tooth-like blocks called a dentil course. The Greek period is famous rather for the quality of its architecture than for the number and size of its buildings. One of its choicest structures is the comparatively small Choragic Monument of Lysicrates at Athens. This is a little circular tower enriched with the Corinthian order, used to support the tripod trophies which the Greeks awarded in their athletic and cultural competitions.