

## The Sphinx of Giza.



In a depression to the south of Chephren's pyramid sits a creature with a human head and a lion's body. The name 'sphinx' which means 'strangler' was first given by the Greeks to a fabulous creature which had the head of a woman and the body of a lion and the wings of a bird. The sphinx appears to have started in Egypt in the form of a sun god. The Egyptian sphinx is usually a head of a king wearing his headdress and the body of a lion. There are, however, sphinxes with ram heads that are associated with the god Amun. The Great Sphinx is to the northeast of Chephren's Valley Temple. Where it sits was once a quarry. Chephren's workers shaped the stone into the lion and gave it their king's face over 4,500 years ago. The sphinx faces the rising sun with a temple to the front, which resembles the sun temples that were built later by the kings of the 5th Dynasty. The figure was buried for most of its life in the sand. King Thutmose IV (1425 - 1417 BC) placed a stela between the front paws of the figure. It describes when Thutmose, while still a prince, had gone hunting and fell asleep in the shade of the sphinx. During a dream, the sphinx spoke to Thutmose and told him to clear away the sand because it was choking the sphinx. The sphinx told him that if he did this, he would be rewarded with a kingship. Thutmose carried out this request and the sphinx held up his end of the deal.

The sphinx is built of soft sandstone and would have disappeared long ago had it not been buried for so long. The body is 200 feet (60m) in length and 65 feet (20m) tall. The face of the sphinx is 13 feet (4m) wide and its eyes are 6 feet (2m) high. Part of the uraeus (sacred cobra), the nose and the ritual beard are now missing. . The beard from the sphinx is displayed in the British Museum. The statue is crumbling today because of the wind, humidity and the smog from Cairo. Attempts to restore it have often caused more harm than good. No one can be certain who the figure is to personify. It is possible that it is Chephren. If that is so, it would then be the oldest known royal portrait in such large scale. Some say that it was built after the pyramid of Chephren was complete. It may have been set as a sort of scarecrow to guard his tomb. Still others say it is the face of his guardian deity, rather than Chephren himself. The image of the sphinx is a depiction of royal power. Only a pharaoh or an animal could be shown this way, with the animal representing a protective deity.

In the 1980's, a carefully planned restoration of the Sphinx was in progress. Over 6 years, more than 2,000 limestone blocks were added to the body of the sphinx and chemicals were injected. This treatment did not work. It just flaked away along with of the original rock. Later, various mortars and many workers who were not parts trained in restoration worked for six months to repair it. In 1988 the left shoulder crumbled and blocks fell off. Present attempts at restoration are under the control of the Supreme Council of Antiquities' archaeologists. They are concentrating on draining away subsoil seepage which is damaging the rock. They are also repairing the damaged shoulder with smaller blocks and staying with the original size.

The Great Pyramid of Khufu at Giza has a rival for size and grandeur very close at hand: standing next to it is the pyramid of Khufu's successor Khafre, which from many angles looks bigger than the Khufu pyramid, being built on slightly higher ground. Indeed, the ancient Egyptians called Khafre's 'The Great Pyramid' and

that of Khufu 'The Pyramid which is the Place of Sunrise and Sunset'. There were originally only a couple of metres in height between these pyramids, but our Great Pyramid of Khufu is the taller, has a shallower angle of incline than Khafre's and encloses a greater volume.

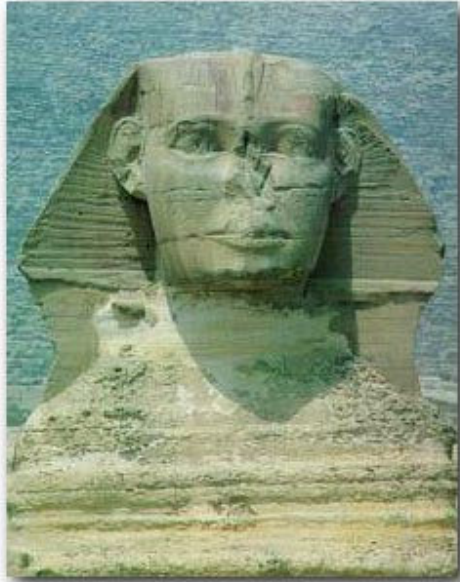
Just down the escarpment from the pyramids of Giza, the Sphinx stands alone, with no rivals either on site or elsewhere among all the sphinxes of Egypt. Truly, this is the Great Sphinx, as well as being very likely the first of the breed. It might possibly have had a companion if its sculptors had cared to repeat the exercise of carving it.

For the Great Sphinx started life as a knoll of rock (quarried in the course of pyramid building) on the slope down from the Giza Plateau towards the river valley of the Nile; and there is another knoll not far to the south, clearly visible to every visitor to Giza, which might have been fashioned into another giant monument.

The later sphinxes of Egypt were often installed as pairs to guard entrances to significant places, but the Great Sphinx of Giza is a one-off, and perhaps the other knoll was just a little too far from the necropolis to be convenient. And perhaps the original meaning of the Great Sphinx was too particular to be shared with another of its kind. An eminent Egyptologist once spent some time looking for another Great Sphinx on the other side of the river, but eventually gave up the idea.

The Sphinx is in essence a carving out of the living rock, though parts of it have been repaired (and possibly were originally constructed) with cut blocks of stone. It is immediately apparent that the rock strata out of which the Sphinx has been made from a hard grey to a soft yellowish limestone. The head is formed of good, very hard limestone of the same sort as was quarried all around locks of the pyramids. The hulk of the body, on the other hand, is made of poorly consolidated and therefore readily eroded limestone. The rock improves again at the base of the monument, with a return to harder (but brittle) reef-formed limestone that has four-and-a- allowed some carved details of the beast to remain visible after at least

half thousand years of natural and human attrition.



.The damaged face of the Sphinx, smiling inscrutable smile

In keeping with the whole Giza Plateau, these strata within the Sphinx run upwards from east to west, in other words from the breast to the hindquarters, and down from north to south. The Sphinx faces due east, with the same great precision of orientation as is seen in the disposition of the Giza pyramids.

It seems inevitable that the monument was made from the start to point directly to the equinoctial sunrise. Interestingly, the face (but not including the ears) is a little awry in relation to the head as a whole: the left eye is slightly higher than the right and the mouth off-centre, and the entire face is tilted back a little.

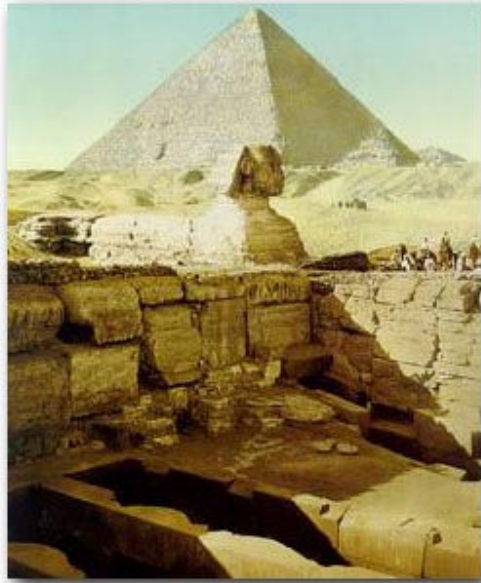


### **.The heavily eroded Sphinx**

**Despite the generally better quality of the stone of the head, the face - as is immediately apparent - is badly damaged, and not just by natural erosion. The nose is missing altogether and the eyes and the areas around them are seriously altered original state as carved, as is the upper lip. Napoleon's artillerymen have from their been blamed for using the face of the Sphinx for target practice.**

**The alteration of the face has brought an insinuation of mood to the features, changing with different lights (sometimes into a knowing smile), that needs to be borne in mind when any attempt is made to compare the face of the Sphinx with the sculpture of various Dyn. IV kings. portrayals in**

**For the head and face of the Sphinx certainly belong with the Old Kingdom of the ancient Egyptians, and with their Dyn. IV in particular. The style of the headdress (known as the 'nemes' head-cloth), with its fold over the top of the head and its triangular planes behind the ears, the presence of the royal 'uraeus' cobra on the brow, the treatment of the eyes and lips all speak of that historical period.**



**A photochrome print from around the turn of the Century, showing the fissure across the haunches that was filled with cement in the 1930s.**

**The sculptures of kings Djedefre, Khafre and Menkaure all show the same configuration that we see on the Sphinx. The Sphinx was originally bearded with the sort of formally plaited beard to be seen on many Egyptian statues. Pieces of the Sphinx's massive beard found by excavation adorn the British Museum in London and the Cairo Museum: it was supported by a stone plate to the breast, parts of which have also been found.**



**Fragment of the Sphinx**

**Beard: cast in the Cairo Museum**

**There is a hole in the top of the head, now filled in, that formerly located some further head decoration: depictions of the Sphinx from the latter days of ancient Egypt show a crown or plumes on the top of the head, but these were not necessarily the original design. The top of the head is flatter, however, than is the case part of with later Egyptian sphinxes.**

**Below the head begins the serious natural erosion of the body of the Sphinx, the leonine body of the man-lion hybrid. The neck is badly weathered, evidently by wind-blown sand during those long periods when only the head was sticking up out of the desert and the wind could catapult the sand along the surface and scour the neck and the extensions of the head-dress that are missing altogether now. The stone here is not quite of such good quality as that of the head above.**

**In the 1920s it was deemed necessary to support the head with cement approximations of the absent parts of the head-dress, and it is these extensions that chiefly account for the altered appearance of the Sphinx's head in recent times, when compared with old photographs and drawings.**



### **.The Sphinx temple in front of the Sphinx**

**Erosion below the neck does not look like scouring by wind-blown sand. In fact, so poor is the rock of the bulk of the body that it must have been deteriorating since the day it was carved out. We know that it needed repairs on more than one occasion in antiquity. It continues to erode before our very eyes, with spalls of limestone falling off the body of the Sphinx in the heat of every day.**

**The rock was of poor quality here from the start, already fissured along joint lines that went back to the formation of the limestone millions of years ago. There is a particularly large fissure across the haunches, nowadays filled with cement, that also shows up in the walls of the enclosure in which the Sphinx sits.**

**So severe is the erosion of the body of the Sphinx that, for example, what may have been in the first place an entire statue or attached column standing proud from the breast of the beast, has been reduced to a formless line of protuberances on the front of the monument between the forelegs. It is plain that extensive repairs have been made to the front paws of the Sphinx and in many other places over the body.**

**Some of these repairs go back to the New Kingdom of around 1400 BC (the time when King Tuthmosis IV set up his stela between the paws), and there is reason to believe that parts of the Sphinx must from the first have been built on to the basically carved body, out of necessity arising from the poor state of the rock from the beginning. It is even possible that the body of the Sphinx was entirely plastered over at some stage.**

**Below the neck, the Sphinx has the body of a lion, with paws, claws and tail (curled round the right haunch), sitting on the bedrock of the rocky enclosure out of which the monument has been carved. The enclosure has taller walls to the west and south of the monument, in keeping with the present lie of the land: it is generally thought**



that quarrying around the original knoll (for pyramid blocks or blocks with which to build temples associated with the necropolis complex) revealed the too-poor quality of the rock for construction purposes at this point; whereupon some visionary individual conceived the plan of turning what was left of the knoll into the Sphinx; but, of course, the Sphinx may equally well have been planned from the start for this location, good rock or bad. The walls of the Sphinx enclosure are of the same characteristics as the strata of the Sphinx body and exhibit similar states of erosion.