



Unriddling the Sphinx

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

Among the panoply of fantastic beasts from ancient mythologies, the sphinx is one of the most recognizable. Usually depicted as a hybrid lion-human (or another animal), this creature has a fascinating cross-cultural history, evolving over time from benevolent protector to malevolent destroyer. Remarkably, the sphinx even underwent gender reassignment.

Certainly one of the most famous monuments of the world is the Great Sphinx, the 65-foot high limestone statue that sits resolutely before the pyramid of the pharaoh Khafre at Giza on the west bank of the Nile. The majority of Egyptologists reckon the statue to date ca. 2600–2500 BCE, perhaps completed during the reign of Khafre, though the dates of his rule are disputed. Also uncertain is how Egyptians referred to the statue or even how they referred to the creature we know as a sphinx. They did not call it a “sphinx,” a Greek word, perhaps from the verb *sphingein*, meaning “to squeeze or tighten.” We examine the Greek



[The Great Sphinx of Giza](#)

meaning further below, but some scholars suggest an alternate origin. Could “sphinx” be a garbling of the Egyptian *shesepankh*, or “living image,” i.e., a living image of a god? Conventional wisdom tells us the head of the Great Sphinx represents Khafre, and thus it may represent how the pharaoh was perceived in both life and death, as one with the solar deity,* represented by the lion.

The Great Sphinx was undoubtedly an imposing monument to Khafre’s successors, but sphinxes would not become a common sight in Egypt for some time. A pink slab of granite recording a strange tale was unearthed in 1818 between the paws of the Great Sphinx. Known as the “Dream Stele,” the text describes how an Egyptian prince went hunting in the desert, grew tired, and decided to nap in the shade of the Sphinx. He soon fell into a dream in which the 1000-year old statue spoke to him. It complained about its dilapidated condition and the ever-encroaching sand burying it. The statue went

(Continued on page two)



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

on to promise the young prince the throne in exchange for its maintenance. When Thutmose IV (r. 1401–1391 BCE or 1397–1388 BCE) became pharaoh, male sphinxes (*androsphinxes*) proliferated throughout Egypt. As a potent symbol of the king and the sacred power of the sun, the protective sphinx became a guardian of sacred places, such as the horizon (where the sun appeared) and Egypt’s great temples of the New Kingdom.

Egypt had a profound influence on Greece, and trade between the two nations began early, while later Greek historians extensively documented Egyptian culture. Ancient Greeks were clearly fascinated by Egypt, just as the West remains enamored with it today. It comes as no surprise that sphinxes traveled to Crete in the Bronze Age, probably from Egypt, but they were no strangers to Anatolia by this time either. Mycenaean examples are also known, but although the great Aegean Bronze Age cultures would not last, the sphinx would. By the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, sphinx images were commonplace in Greece, with one decisive change: they were now predominantly female. Those of the Bronze Age sometimes had a feminine appearance, but the female sphinx now dominated. She would also be recast as a singular, monstrous creature on a long roster of dangerous *femme fatales* in Greek mythology. Her official debut occurred in the *Theogony* (8th/7th c. BCE), in which Greek author Hesiod described her as descended from a horrific, flesh-eating creature called Echidna, sometimes known as “mother of all monsters.” In her most famous role, the Sphinx was summoned by the gods to terrorize the cursed city of Thebes. Perched on a rock outside the city

(Continued on page three)



Finial/Standard in the Form of a Sphinx (frontal view)
Egyptian, New Kingdom, 1550–1069 BCE
Bronze with traces of gilding
Gift of Mr. J. Lionberger Davis (66.297)



Fragments of Relief Amphoras with Griffins and Sphinxes (neck detail)
Greek, ca. 650 BCE
From Crete (Greece)
Pottery
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Cedric Marks and by exchange with The Greek Museum, The University of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, UK (79.82a, 73.283, 67.49)



Aryballos (bathing oil jar) with Sphinxes, Panthers, and a Swan (detail)
Greek, Corinthian, ca. 600–580 BCE
By the Duel Painter
Pottery
Museum purchase (61.32)



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

gates, she posed insoluble riddles to male citizens, strangling and devouring them if they could not answer her correctly. The strangulation of victims perhaps provides the link between the Sphinx's name and the Greek verb *sphingein* (above), and we should note that lions often seize prey by the throat to strangle it in their jaws. In any case, the Sphinx had become a monster of destruction that only a Greek hero could defeat. Oedipus would solve her riddle and cause her death, but he failed to realize the magnitude of the curse on Thebes, and his defeat of the Sphinx set into motion a terrible series of events that precipitated his own downfall.

Beyond the Sphinx's gruesome rampage in the Theban saga, the more practical function for generic sphinx images in Greece was similar to that in Egypt. Greek sphinxes guarded temples and tombs, and their images were common on grave goods, as well as coins. One even emblazoned the helmet of the goddess Athena, attested by descriptions of the mammoth ivory and gold statue of the goddess in the Parthenon. Like Athena, the Sphinx was also a possessor of wisdom, but she possessed knowledge *unknown* to men. She thus symbolized the threat of feminine power to the established male order, and her death was inevitable. ■

*Various solar deities are suggested, such as Aker, Maahes, Sekhmet, or Heremakhet.



Fragmentary Rhyton in the Form of a Sphinx
Greek, 4th century BCE
From Kolophon (Turkey)
Pottery
Weinberg Fund (82.248)



Drachma with Sphinx (obverse)
Greek, 2nd century BCE–early 1st century BCE
Mint of Chios
Silver
Museum purchase (59.64.12)