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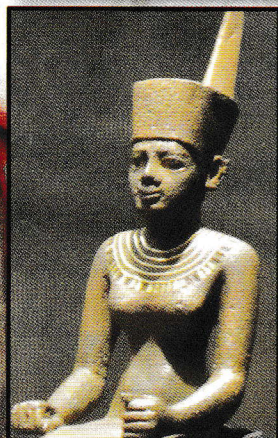
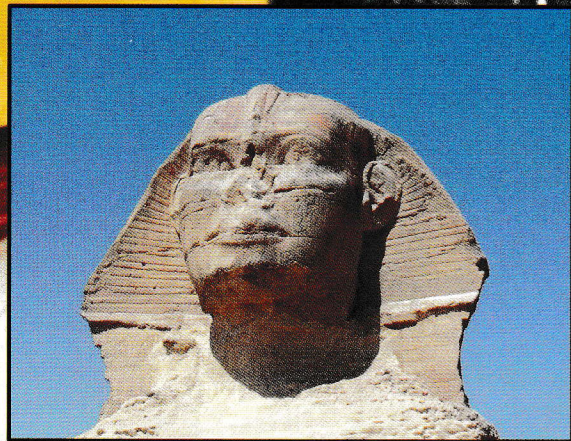
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The History, People and Culture of the Nile Valley

**Harold Jones:**  
Artist and Egyptologist

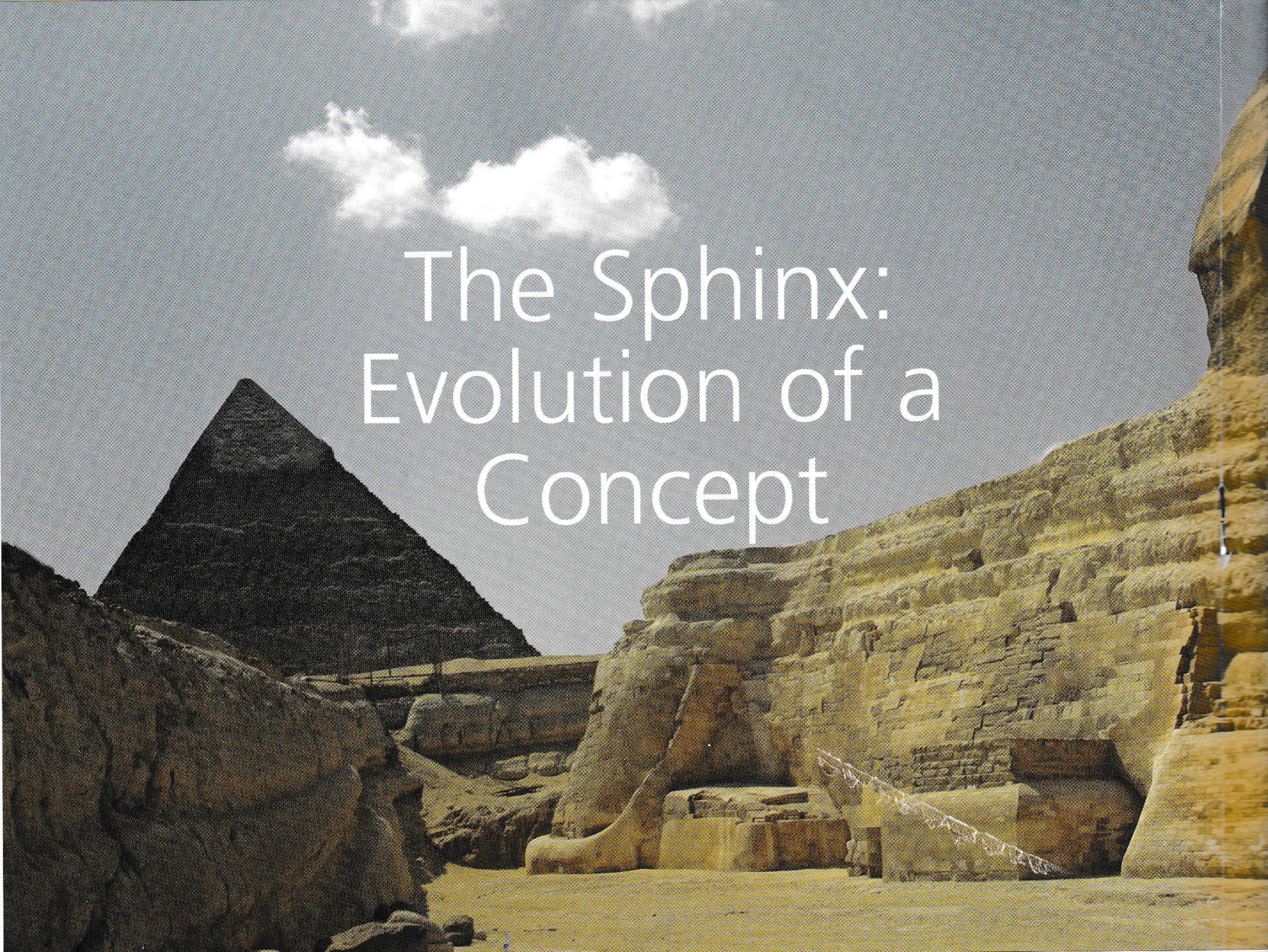
**The Sphinx:**  
Evolution of a Concept



If it looks like







# The Sphinx: Evolution of a Concept

In AE83, Peter Lacovara concluded that the Great Sphinx dated to the reign of Khafra. Geologist **Colin Reader** disagrees; he believes the origins of this unique monument are far older.

**I**t is interesting that in his recent article for *ANCIENT EGYPT* (AE83), Peter Lacovara engaged directly with the geological issues that surround the controversy of the age of the Great Sphinx at Giza. It was these geological issues that, in the late 1980s, provided my introduction to the Sphinx. However, Lacovara's article largely presents the case that was being made by Egyptologists at that stage in the late Twentieth Century, rather than examining a number of the more recent interventions, including my own contributions to the debate. After extensive studies of the geology and archaeology of the Sphinx and its position within the Giza necropolis, I have reached the conclusion that the Great Sphinx is significantly older than Khufu's pyramid.

## **Khufu Knew the Sphinx**

*Khufu Knew the Sphinx* was the title of a 1997 self-published article in which I set out my arguments for a pre-Fourth Dynasty Sphinx at Giza. Having examined the condition and structure of the limestones that are exposed in the Sphinx enclosure and compared my own notes with

detailed drawings published by K.L. Gauri, it was evident that the most heavily eroded limestones lay behind the Sphinx, at the foot of the sloping plateau. This distribution was fully consistent with the action of rainfall run-off generated from the upslope areas of the plateau, particularly the extensive area between the Sphinx and the Khafra pyramid. Although a number of other researchers sought to attribute the erosion and weathering of the Sphinx to other processes, when examined in detail, none of these other processes were able to account fully for all the features of degradation that exist within the Sphinx enclosure.

In 1997, I was largely unaware of the evidence for run-off in ancient Egypt and looking back, it is perhaps surprising that this feature had not previously been identified as a major contributing factor to the erosion of the Sphinx. It is now clear, however, that a number of tombs in the Valley of the Kings were choked by debris that was washed into them by run-off and the survival of the almost intact burial of Tutankhamun has been attributed to the entrance of the tomb having been lost beneath flood debris. Evidence for the destructive potential of run-off at Giza was identified in





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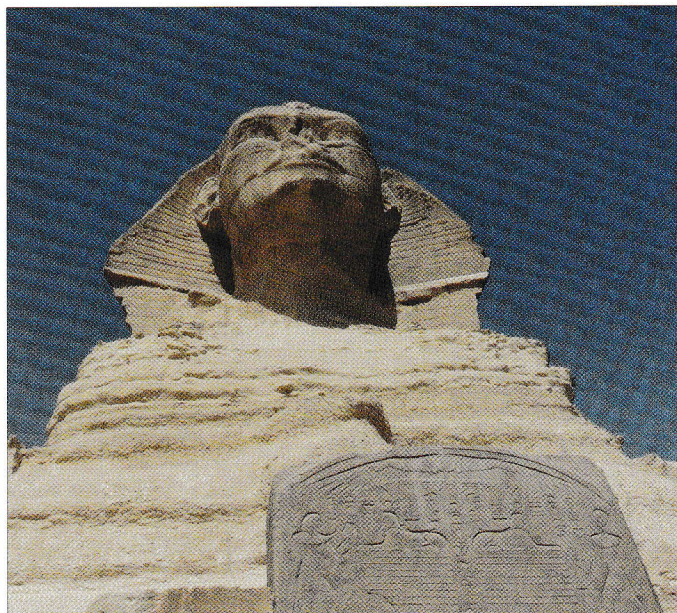
The enigmatic Great Sphinx as seen from the southeast, with the Great Pyramid of Khufu to the right and the Pyramid of Khafra to the left. The monument may predate both pyramids.

#### BELOW

The face of Great Sphinx viewed from below, with the so-called 'Dream Stela' of Thutmose IV in the foreground.

the 1930s by George Reisner, who found that a mudbrick section of Menkaura's Valley Temple had been damaged during a surface run-off event that occurred in the Sixth Dynasty. Karl Butzer has suggested that the impressive Wall of the Crow, in the south of the Giza necropolis, was built to protect the workmen's settlement from the destructive force of run-off.

Of course, erosion by run-off tells us nothing about the age of the Sphinx – as the evidence from the Valley of the Kings indicates, Egypt experienced significant run-off events throughout the Pharaonic Period and such events have continued into modern times. My conclusion that the Sphinx pre-dates the Fourth Dynasty required the consideration of another often-overlooked aspect of the geoarchaeology of the Giza Plateau: ancient quarrying. Mark Lehnér has shown that a large quarry was excavated during the reign of Khufu, only a short distance upslope of the Sphinx. The significance of this quarry for the age of the Sphinx is enormous: once quarrying was underway, run-off will have been unable to reach the Sphinx enclosure, discharging instead into the open excavation or into the loose wind-blown sand that subsequently infilled it. To have been eroded by run-off therefore, the Sphinx enclosure had to have been present at Giza *before* the earliest quarrying activity began – that is before the reign of Khufu.





*The winter season began here with a scene which will always be vividly remembered by me. I had ridden out to the excavations, when seeing a large black cloud approaching, I sent a servant to the tents, to take care of them, but as it began to rain slightly, I soon rode after him myself. Shortly after my arrival a storm of wind began: I therefore ordered the cords of the tents to be secured, but soon a violent shower of rain came in addition, which alarmed all our Arabs, and drove them into the rock-tomb, in which is our kitchen. Erbkam and Eranke were the only ones of our own party here. Suddenly the storm became a regular hurricane, such as I had never witnessed in Europe, and a hailstorm came down on us, which almost turned the day into night. I had the greatest trouble to drive our Arabs out of the grotto that they might bring our things to the rock-tombs, where it was dry, as every moment we might expect the overthrow of the tents. And it was not long before first our common tent fell down, and when I had hastened from that into my own, in order to hold it from the inside, this also broke down above me. After I had crawled out, I found that my things were tolerably well covered by the tent, so that for the present I might leave them alone, to prevent a still greater danger.*

*Our tents, protected from the worst winds, the north and west, lay in a depression of the valley, towards which the plateau of the Pyramids inclines. From that place I suddenly saw a rapid mountain torrent precipitating, like a gigantic serpent on its cer-*

*tain prey, upon our encampment, already half destroyed and beaten into the sand. The principal stream first dashed towards the great tent; another arm threatened mine, but did not however quite reach it. Everything, however, which had been floated out of our tents by the heavy rain was carried off by both streams, which united below the tents, and was borne a hundred steps farther into a deep hollow behind the Sphinx, where a great lake, which fortunately had no outlet, formed itself in a moment.*

*Now picture to yourself this scene! Our tents shattered to the ground by the storms of rain and hail, between two mountain torrents, which at once dug out a channel for themselves in the sandy ground, in several places six feet deep, and carried down with them into the muddy, foam-covered, slimy lake, our books, drawings, sketches, linen, instruments of all kinds, even our levers and iron crows, in short everything they laid hold on. In addition to this, we ourselves, with dripping clothes, without hats, securing the heavier articles, pursuing the lighter ones, wading up to the waist in the stream or lake, to fish out what the sand had not yet swallowed, and all this the work of a quarter of an hour, at whose expiration the sun forthwith shone again, and proclaimed the end of this deluge scene by a splendid and brilliant rainbow.*

*R. Lepsius*

Extract from  
Letters from Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Peninsula of Sinai.

It was some years after these ideas were first formally published that I came across a letter written in 1843 by Richard Lepsius, describing his direct experience of a brief but intense seasonal rainstorm at Giza (see above). He describes the "mountain torrent" that was generated across the unquarried areas on which the pyramids stand, which then discharged downslope across the sandier, quarried areas of the plateau. It is with a palpable sense of relief that Lepsius describes the way in which the powerful run-off was brought to an abrupt halt, forming a lake in a hollow behind the Sphinx – a lake that had "no outlet". His relief is understandable. What damage would have been wrought to the Sphinx, if this run-off had been able to cascade through the sand-filled Sphinx enclosure? Lepsius would not have been aware of the presence of quarries at Giza, yet his first-hand account provides strong confirmation of my view that following the quarrying activity of Khufu, even the most aggressive run-off was unable to reach the Sphinx enclosure.

There is a range of other geological evidence for a pre-Fourth Dynasty Sphinx that I have presented elsewhere and, in the interests of brevity, will not repeat here. When considered collectively, this evidence is compelling. What geology cannot do however is provide an absolute date for the original excavation of the Great Sphinx.

### **An Early Dynastic Context for the Sphinx**

It is my view that the Great Sphinx is a product of the Early Dynastic Period in Egypt and was originally carved in the form of a lion. On this basis, the familiar pharaonic head represents a later re-carving of the original limestone statue. It has frequently been noted that the head of the Sphinx is not in proportion with the body. More significant in my view, is the state of preservation of the head, which still retains many of the detailed features of the face and *nemes* head-dress. It has been suggested that this is due to the greater durability of the limestone strata from which the head was carved; however when assessed in detail, the published data does not support this. In terms of the composition and durability of the various limestone beds, chemical analysis allows no clear distinction to be drawn between the head and the body of the Sphinx.

When I first began to investigate the age of the Sphinx, the generally held view was that the origins of the Giza necropolis lay securely in the Fourth Dynasty and, even today, there is little discussion of the growing evidence for activity at Giza during the earliest periods of ancient Egypt. Distinctive ceramics associated with the Pre-Dynastic Maadi culture were found on the Giza plateau and in the immediate surrounding areas in the late 1800s, but these were not recognised as Maadi-cultural material until a century





later. The area surrounding the Giza plateau remains the only area west of the Nile in which traces of the Maadi culture have been found. Excavations in the 1970s in the south-east of the necropolis, encountered an area of site-clearance debris – material scraped off the Giza plateau to allow the pyramids to be built. A recent detailed review of these finds has confirmed that the material spans the period from the late Naqada to the reign of Khafra. In a 2009 paper, Peter Der Manuelian revisited excavations undertaken by George Reisner in the north west of Giza and was able to con-

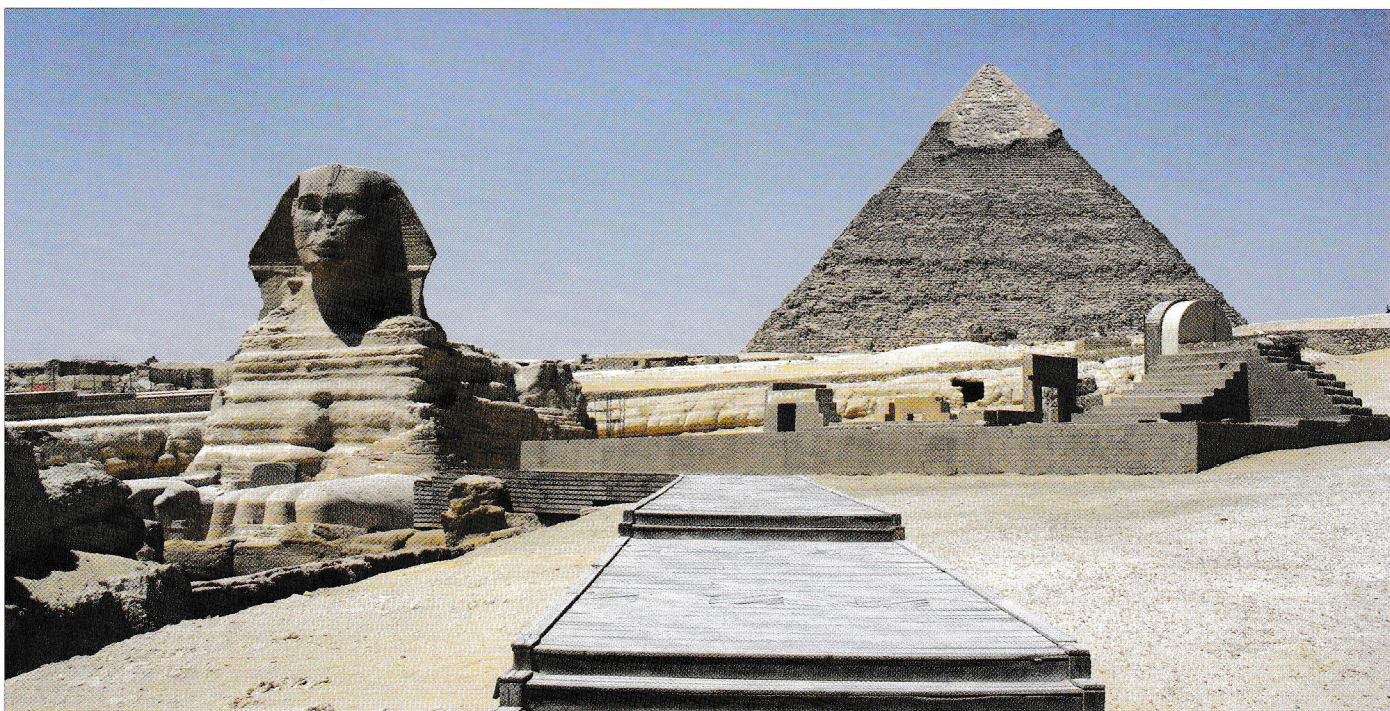
firm that at this location, there had been two periods of tomb construction, both of which pre-dated the construction of the nearby Great Pyramid. Add to this the evidence of the weathered remains of niched-facade decoration on a small number of rock-cut tombs in the Central Field area of Giza – decoration of a style used in the First and Second Dynasties (see above) – and it is evident that Giza was in use during the earliest phases of the Pharaonic era. It is my view that what was to become the Great Sphinx was an important part of that early development.

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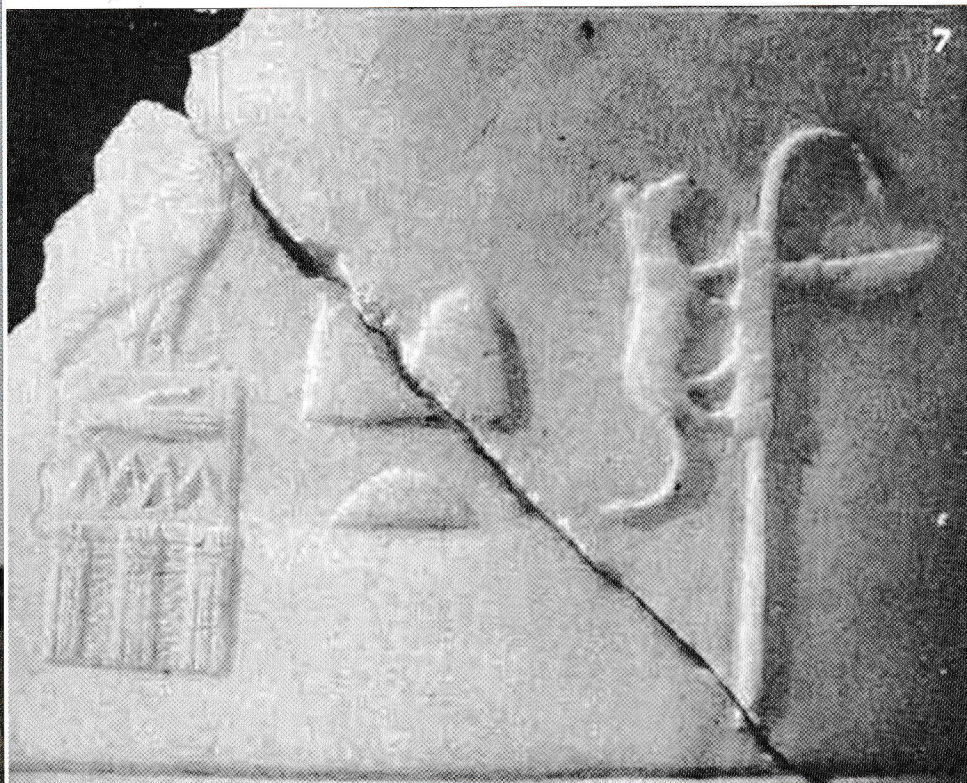
The niched façade of the rock cut tomb of Kai in Giza's Central Field. The repeated pattern of three simple niches followed by a double or compound niche was used in the First Dynasty mud-brick funerary enclosures at Abydos and the 'Forts' of Khasekhemwy at Abydos and Hierakonpolis. The Old Kingdom masonry tombs built against the façade and its weathered condition indicate it predates the use of this structure for the Old Kingdom burial of Kai.

#### BELOW

The Great Sphinx as seen from the east with the Pyramid of Khafra behind.







#### ABOVE

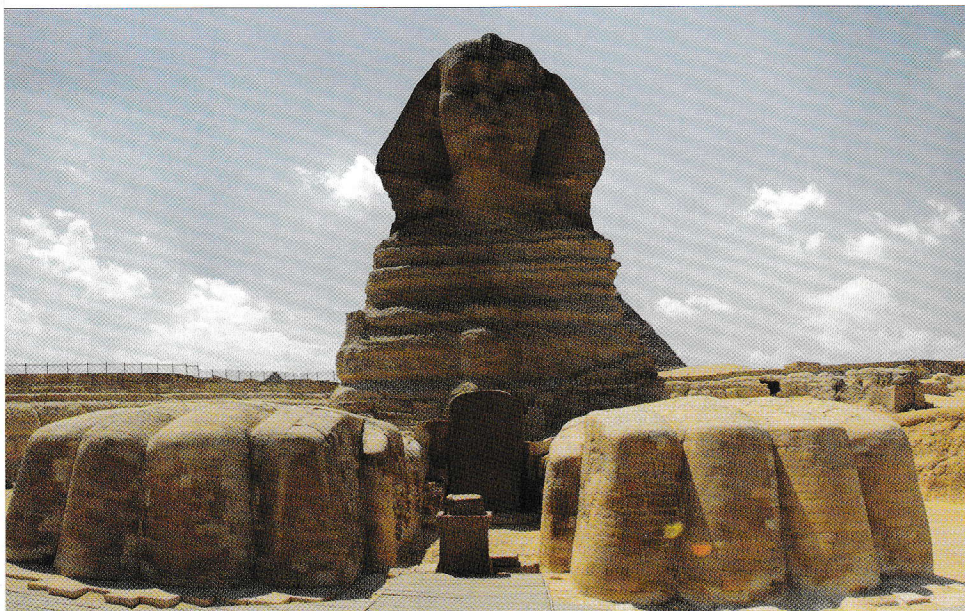
Part of an alabaster cylinder jar bearing the *serekh* of Den with the standard of Mafdet, the lioness or cheetah goddess of justice, judgement and execution and protector against snakebites and scorpion stings.

The Sphinx may have evolved from the personification of this lioness or cheetah goddess.

Image from W.M.F Petrie, *The Royal Tombs Of The First Dynasty – Part 2*, (Egypt Exploration Fund, London, 1901), Plate VII. 7.

#### BELOW

Another view of the Great Sphinx, which may have represented the royal personification of the lioness goddess Mafdet.



### From Lion to Sphinx

Recently, Mark Lehner wrote "... it is surprising that the Sphinx appears suddenly without much precedent". This general assumption that the concept of the Sphinx appeared fully-formed in the Fourth Dynasty, is often coupled with the rise to prominence of the sun god at this time, as evidenced by the adoption of the epithet 'Son of the Sun' in the royal titles of Djedfra. Recently, however, a number of Egyptologists have presented evidence for significant Early Dynastic associations between pharaoh and the cult of Ra. Furthermore, by drawing evidence from the Royal Annals and other Early Dynastic

monuments, I have been able to identify important links between one particular lion deity and the worship of Ra during the reigns of some of Egypt's earliest pharaohs.

In the theology of Ra, the objective for the king's spirit was to travel through the underworld to reach the sacred barque of the sun god. A number of Early Dynastic artefacts suggest that rather than undertake this spiritual journey alone, pharaohs of that time were accompanied by the jackal god, Wepwawet and the lioness, Mafdet. As a god of the underworld and the 'Opener of the Ways', Wepwawet played a general role in protecting the king during his journey through the underworld. In the Pyramid Texts, Mafdet is described as a 'killer of snakes' and it is my view that Mafdet accompanied pharaoh's spirit in order to fulfil a very specific role – to overcome the serpent deity Mehen, whose protective coiled body was wrapped around the solar barque.

As a representation of Mafdet, the pre-Fourth Dynasty lion statue at Giza had links with Early Dynastic sun-worship and the developing cult of Ra. Unlike their predecessors however, the powerful kings of the Fourth Dynasty – the semi-gods who could raise the mighty pyramids – no longer felt the need to call on the attendance of other deities when undertaking their spiritual journey to Ra. It is in the Fourth Dynasty, therefore, that we see the emergence of the concept of the sphinx as the royal personification of the lioness god, Mafdet.

There is supporting evidence from the archaeological record to suggest that the concept of the sphinx was the result of a process of evolution that culminated in the Fourth Dynasty. A pair of ceramic lions were found recently at North Saqqara with the cartouche of Khufu etched in the clay between the front paws (see *opposite, top*). Why was it considered appropriate for Khufu to associate himself with this lioness deity, rather than identify himself as a sphinx as many later pharaohs did? Does the fact that Khufu is not identified as a sphinx suggests that the concept of the sphinx had not fully emerged at this time? A sphinx found at Abu-Rowash (see *opposite, bottom*) and dated to the subsequent reign of Djedefra may present further evidence for the evolution of the concept of the Sphinx in the Fourth Dynasty. This lime-



stone sphinx has been modified, with possible re-cutting around the face and the addition of plaster to the head and front paws of the lion. Sections of the plaster have, however, fallen away from around the head to reveal a pair of lion's ears. Does the Abu Rowash Sphinx represent the earliest known example of modifications to a statue of Mafdet to personify the 'killer of snakes'? If so, this strengthens my view that shortly after, perhaps in the reign of Khafra, the weathered head of the long-extant lion statue at Giza was re-carved into the head of a pharaoh.

Despite there having been very little academic consideration of the origins of the sphinx, there is evidence to suggest that the sphinx was the result of an evolution in religious thought and practice that occurred in the period leading up to the mid-Fourth Dynasty. The concept of the sphinx therefore, can be seen to have evolved in parallel with the emerging royal cult of Ra. As such, the Great Sphinx may represent a lasting symbol of the efforts of the Heliopolitan priesthood to elevate their patron deity, Ra, to a position as the principal god of the ancient Egyptian state.

### Colin Reader

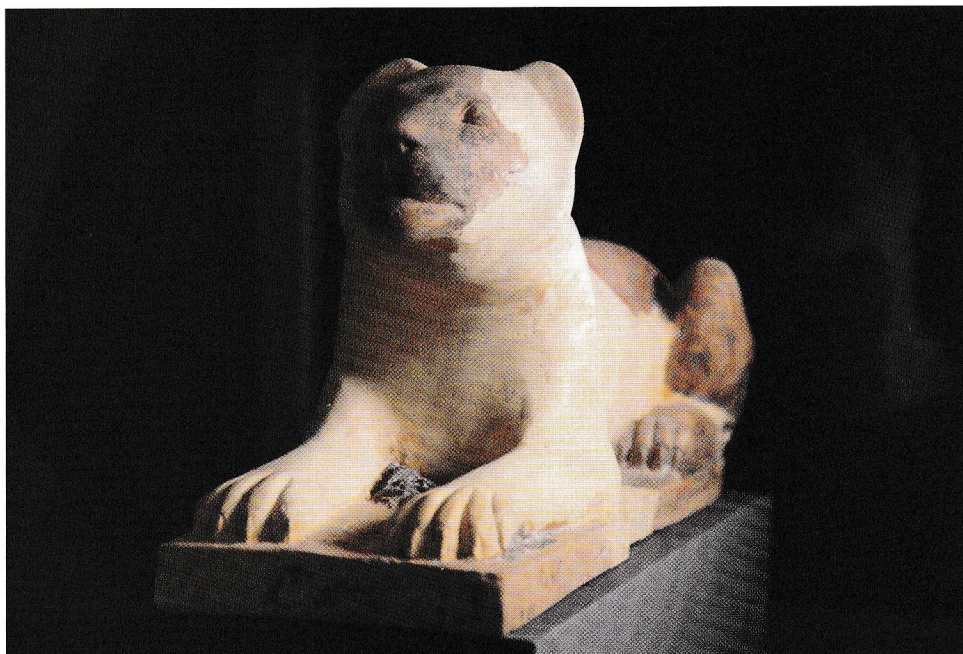
Colin is a Fellow of the Geological Society of London and a Chartered Geologist. He has twenty five years' professional experience in the application of geology, geomorphology and hydrology to construction and has been an enthusiastic student of construction in the ancient world since 1995.

See Colin's review of *Desert Road Archaeology* on pp. 49,50.

All photos by the author unless otherwise stated.

### Further Reading

- Der Manuelian, P. (2009) "On the Early History of Giza: The 'Lost' Wadi Cemetery", *JEA*, 95, pp.105-141
- Gauri, K.L. (1984) "Geologic Study of the Sphinx" *NARCE* 127, pp.24-43
- Kahl, J. (2007) *Ra is my Lord: Searching for the Rise of the Sun God at the Dawn of Egyptian History* Weisbaden: Otto Harrassowitz
- Lehner, M. (1985) "The Development of the Giza Necropolis – The Khufu Project" *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo* 41



Reader, C.D. (2001) "A Geomorphological Study of the Giza Necropolis, with Implications for the Development of the Site" *Archaeometry* 43:1

Reader, C.D. (2014) "The Netjerikhet Stela and the Early Dynastic Cult of Ra" Forthcoming *JEA* (accepted for publication, January 2014)

*For a recent general account of the conventional history of the Sphinx:*

Zivie-Coche, C. (2004) *Sphinx: History of a Monument* (English Translation) New York: Cornell University Press

*Colin has provided a full list of references for this article.*

*Please email the Editor for details.*

#### ABOVE

A ceramic lion, one of a pair found recently at North Saqqara which bear the cartouche of Khufu between the front paws. This example was recently on display in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Photo: copyright Blink

#### BELOW

A limestone sphinx found at Abu Rowash. This statuette has been modified with possible re-cutting of the original limestone and the addition of plaster. Over the crown of the head, the plaster has fallen away to reveal a pair of lion-like ears.

