

The Gneiss Sphinx of Sesostris III: Counterpart and Provenance

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AMONG THE INNUMERABLE SCULPTURES left by the ancient Egyptians, the gneiss sphinx of Sesostris III in The Metropolitan Museum of Art is considered a masterpiece of Egyptian art (Figure 1).¹ There is hardly a relevant monograph on Egyptian art that does not speak of it in more or less detail.² Apart from realistic features—a characteristic of art of the Middle Kingdom, to which it dates—the head of the king and the lion's body have been combined by the artist in an admirable fashion.

STUDIES OF THE SPHINX

One of the earliest discussions of the sphinx was by Jean Capart in his *Documents pour servir à l'étude de l'art égyptien*.³ Following the theory put forward in his "Les Monuments dits Hyksos" that most Middle Kingdom royal statues were usurped from the Old Kingdom,⁴ Capart noted that the flat surfaces on the long sides of the base were reduced by several millimeters, and he concluded that the original owner's name had been obliterated. Reginald Engelbach, however, subsequently pointed out the close similarity of the New York sphinx with other inscribed statues of Sesostris III and his successor Amenemhat III; Engelbach also noted the Middle rather than Old Kingdom configuration of the royal headcloth (*nemes*).⁵

Hans Gerhard Evers reviewed and illustrated the sphinx in his exhaustive study of Middle Kingdom sculpture;⁶ Jacques Vandier associated it with statues of Sesostris III from southern Egypt;⁷ and William C. Hayes, the Metropolitan Museum's Curator of Egyptian Art from 1952 to 1963, described the mastery of the sculpture:

The magnificent sphinx of Se'n-wosret III is carved with great power and incomparable skill from a block of beautifully grained diorite gneiss from the ancient quarries of Khufwy in Nubia. The massive headdress conceals what might otherwise be an awkward transition between the human head and the lion's body. The sculptor's attention, as usual, has been chiefly focused on the grim, deeply lined face of the pharaoh, a masterpiece of realistic portraiture; but the subtle modeling and superb finish of the heavily muscled animal body is scarcely less admirable.⁸

After speaking of the royal *nemes*, the uraeus serpent, and the mane of the lion, Hayes concluded with a translation of the inscription carved on the breast: the Horus name, "Divine-of-forms," and throne name,

1. Purchased from Nahman in Cairo, 1917, provenance unknown.

2. See for instance Kurt Lange, *Sesostris, ein ägyptischer König in Mythos, Geschichte und Kunst* (Munich, 1954) pp. 30, 48, pls. 28–31; and the recent M. Seidel and D. Wildung, "Rundplastik des Mittleren Reiches," in C. Vandersleyen, *Das alte Ägypten, Propyläen Kunstgeschichte* 15 (Berlin, 1975) p. 237, pl. 163.

3. (Paris, 1927) I, p. 19, pl. 25.

4. *Annales de la Société Royale d'Archéologie de Bruxelles* 27 (1913) pp. 121–156; republished as a monograph (Brussels, 1914). This earlier work was published before the appearance of the Metropolitan Museum sphinx.

5. "The So-Called Hyksos Monuments," *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte* 28 (1928) pp. 13–28; cf. pp. 25f. In fact, Capart's theory has never been accepted, though instances of usurpation are known in all periods of Egyptian culture.

6. *Staat aus dem Stein: Denkmäler, Geschichte und Bedeutung der ägyptischen Plastik während des Mittleren Reichs* (Munich, 1929) I, pl. 78f., pp. 76ff.; II, p. 108.

7. *Manuel d'archéologie égyptienne: III. Les Grandes Epoques: La Statuaire* (Paris, 1958) p. 191, pl. 68 fig. 6.

8. *The Scepter of Egypt* I (New York: MMA, 1953) pp. 198f. See also idem, "Royal Portraits of the Twelfth Dynasty," *MMAB* 5, no. 4 (1946) pp. 119ff.



1. King Sesostrius III (1878–1843 B.C.), represented as a sphinx, Dynasty XII. Gneiss, H. 42.5 × W. 29.3 × L. 73 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Edward S. Harkness, 17.9.2



2–4. Fragmentary gneiss sphinx of Sesostrius III, from the front and sides. Gneiss, max. H. 30 cm. Karnak, Makhzan Sheikh Labib (photos: A. Bellod, Centre Franco-Egyptien d'Etudes de Karnak)

“Shining-are-the-*kus*-of-Re,” written together in the *serekh*-panel, surmounted by the crowned falcon.

A COUNTERPART OF THE SPHINX

To the west of the small temple of Ramesses III at Karnak, and opening onto the first court of the great temple of Amunra, is a large storehouse known in Arabic as Makhzan Sheikh Labib. Scores of large and small blocks are stored there, most of them coming from buildings of Amenophis I. There are several monuments of earlier periods, however, which, although fragmentary, have a certain importance. In one of my visits to this collection I noticed some frag-



5–7. The Metropolitan Museum sphinx of Sesostrius III, from the front and sides



ments of gneiss, a material rarely used in monuments; the quarry for gneiss was in the desert far to the west of Abu Simbel.⁹

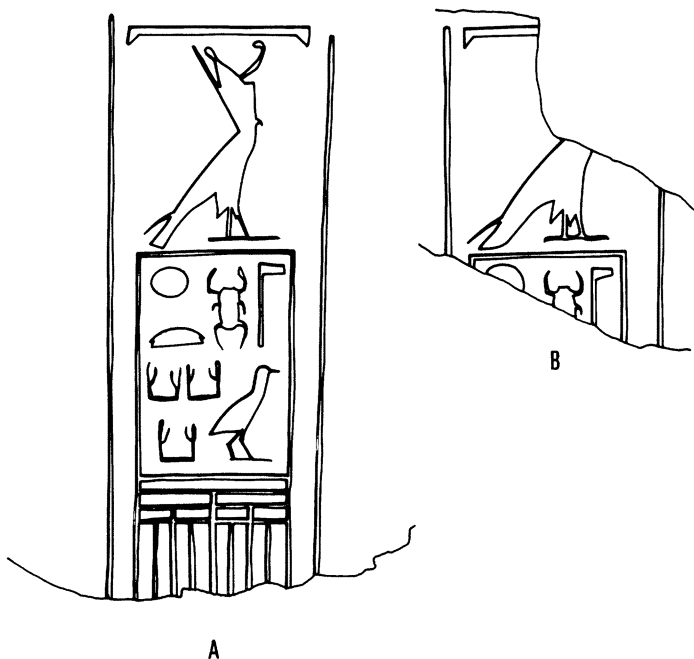
When the fragments were assembled, it was clear that they formed part of a sphinx of Sesostri III, similar in material and of nearly the same dimensions as the one in the Metropolitan Museum. The newly discovered sphinx is reproduced here from three angles (Figures 2–4), with corresponding views of the New York sphinx (Figures 5–7).¹⁰ Though the Karnak sphinx lacks the head and hindquarters, its carving is exactly the same as the other's; even the veining is similar, suggesting that both sculptures could

have been carved from the same block. Furthermore, the remaining part of the inscription on the Karnak piece corresponds to that on the Metropolitan Museum sphinx in content and dimensions. Both show the Horus name and the prenomen of the king in a

9. For this quarry see R. Engelbach, "The Quarries of the Western Nubian Desert and the Ancient Road to Tushka," *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte* 38 (1938) pp. 369ff., and A. Rowe, "Provisional Notes on the Old Kingdom Inscriptions from the Diorite Quarries," *ibid.*, pp. 391ff.

10. For information on the Metropolitan Museum sphinx I wish to thank Christine Lilyquist, Barbara Porter, and James Romano.





8. Inscriptions on the Metropolitan Museum sphinx (A) and the Karnak sphinx (B) (drawing: William Schenck)

serekh as *Ntrhpr* [*h^c-k3w*] *r^c* (Figure 8). Indeed, a comparison of the dimensions of each sphinx shows that the two were once a pair, with the Karnak sphinx slightly the larger (Figure 9).

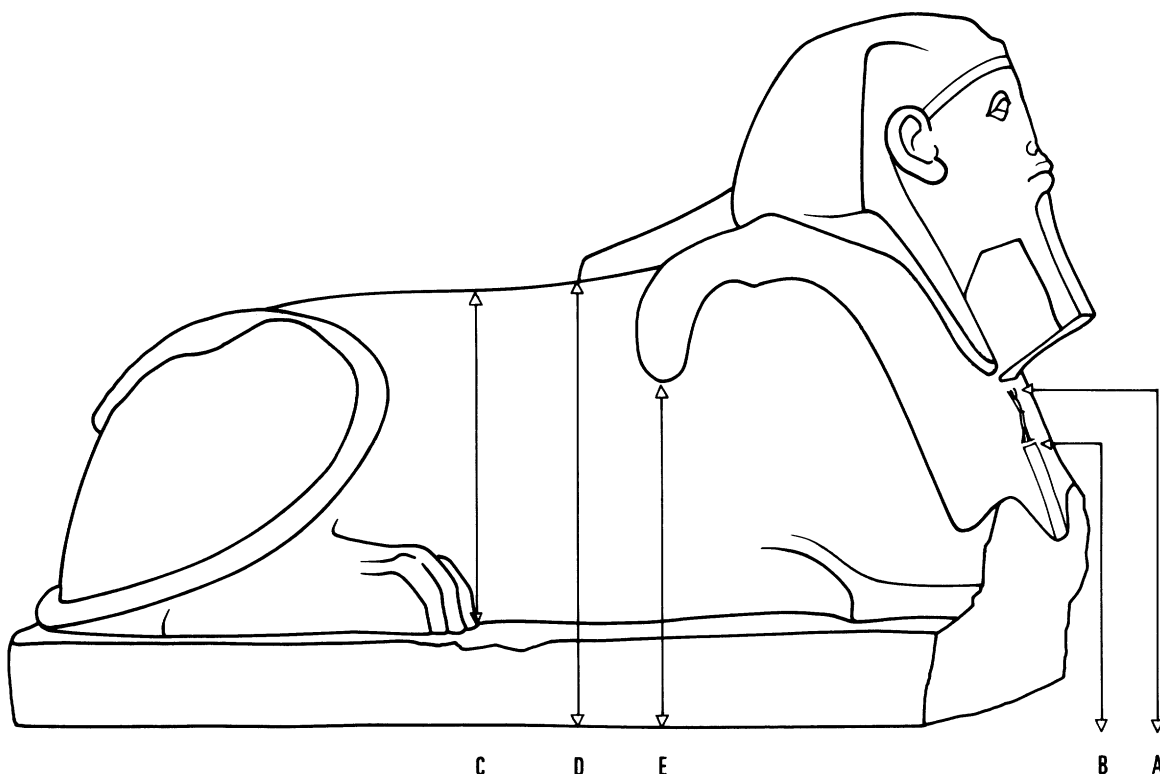
The fragment of a left front paw (Figure 10) seen on my first visit to the storehouse proved impossible to locate subsequently. It did not join the Karnak sphinx directly but may have belonged to the one in New York (see Figures 1, 5).

PROVENANCE

The objects in Makhzan Sheikh Labib are supposedly from nearby temples. It is possible, however, that some

9. Comparative dimensions of the two sphinxes (drawing: William Schenck)

	HEIGHT	NEW YORK	KARNAK
A	Falcon from base line	19.3 cm.	20.5
B	<i>Serekh</i> from base line	16.0	17.0
C	Top of back to right back paw	21.2	23.0
D	Tip of headdress to base line	28.0	30.0
E	Tip of mane to base line	20.5	21.8

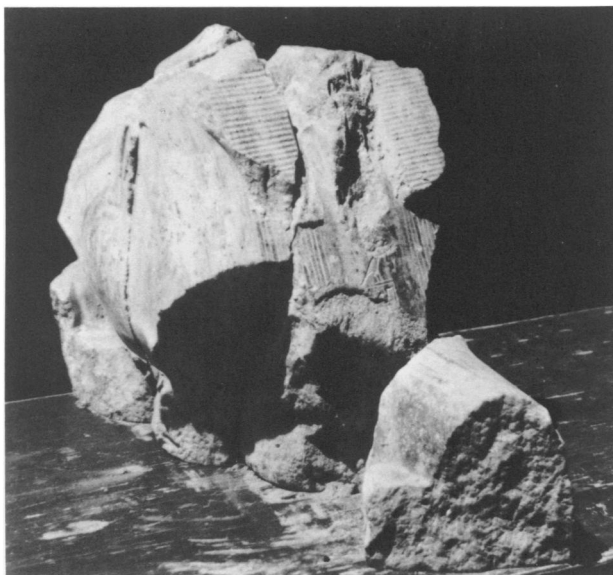


of these objects originally stood in other parts of the Theban area. For instance, nine kilometers northeast of Karnak at Medamud, extensive architectural and sculptural remains of Sesostris III were found. On most of the architectural objects the king is shown offering to or adoring Montu, the principal god at Medamud: thus, we may conclude that the stones were originally meant for this site.¹¹

Opposite Karnak on the west bank at Deir el Bahri Naville found six statues of Sesostris III and the feet of a seventh, all of which had apparently stood on the upper colonnade of the temple of Mentuhotep.¹² In the peristyle of the same temple a stela was found showing Sesostris III offering to Mentuhotep, builder of the temple.¹³ Clearly Sesostris was interested in his great ancestor, deified after his death, and the monuments mentioned were meant for this temple.

Just one and a half kilometers south of Karnak itself is Luxor Temple. An offering table of Sesostris III was found there many years ago, but with its dedication to Harsaphis, lord of Ehnasya, nothing can be conjectured regarding its original location.¹⁴ I inquired of Lanny Bell, Director of the University of Chicago Oriental Institute's Epigraphic Survey, which is recording loose blocks at the site, and was told that

10. The Karnak sphinx, with fragment of a left front paw (photo: L. Habachi)



the Survey had identified a few Middle Kingdom blocks, mostly by style; one, however, had cartouches of Amenemhat I and another cartouches of Sesostris III.¹⁵ Since so few Middle Kingdom monuments have been found at Luxor,¹⁶ and since we know that later monuments—such as an offering table from the *Akh-menu* of Tuthmosis III,¹⁷ blocks of Amenophis II with the names of seized countries,¹⁸ *talatat* of Akhenaton,¹⁹ and a statue usurped by Ramesses II²⁰—were brought to Luxor from Karnak, I suggest that the Middle Kingdom blocks recorded by the Oriental Institute also came from there.

What about Karnak as a provenance for the sphinx fragments? No architectural elements of Sesostris III have come to light there, but important statuary has been recovered. In 1900 Georges Legrain found the bodies of two inscribed red granite colossi carefully buried on the south side of the Eighth Pylon, and in 1903 he found their heads in the famous Cachette.²¹ He also found there a small, gray limestone statue, 52 centimeters high, of the same king kneeling and offering two vases, and inscribed “beloved of Amunra

11. B. Porter and R. Moss, *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs and Paintings: V. Upper Egypt: Sites* (Oxford, 1937) p. 145 and passim in the Medamud entry.

12. Porter-Moss, II. *Theban Temples*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1972) pp. 384f.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 391.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 339.

15. [For this material see Dr. Bell's note in University of Chicago, *The Oriental Institute Annual Report 1980–81* (1981) p. 17. c.l.]

16. [See Porter-Moss, II. *Theban Temples*, pp. 338 and 339, for a listing respectively of two granite architraves of Sekhemra Khutawy Sebekhotep and an offering table of “Sesostris” from the village. c.l.]

17. L. Habachi, “Clearance of the Area to the East of Luxor Temple and Discovery of Some Objects,” *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte* 51 (1951) pp. 464ff.

18. A. Fakhry, “Blocs décorés provenant du temple de Louxor (suite),” *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte* 37 (1937) pp. 39ff.

19. A. Fakhry, “Blocs décorés provenant du temple de Louxor (suite): Bas-reliefs d’Akhenaton,” *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte* 35 (1935) pp. 35ff.

20. Habachi, “Clearance . . . East of Luxor Temple,” pp. 450ff.

21. Porter-Moss, II. *Theban Temples*, p. 179; Cairo CG 42011, 42012 (G. Legrain, *Statues et statuettes de rois et de particuliers I* [Cairo, 1906] pp. 8–9 and pl. 6, where the present heights are given as 3.15 and 3.0 m. respectively, on which point see also note 23 below).

... divine ruler of Waset" (Thebes).²² Then, in 1970 the Franco-Egyptian Center at Karnak discovered the head of a colossus in front of the Fourth Pylon at pavement level among the remains of a structure of Tuthmosis IV. From its material, dimensions, and inscription it proved to come from a third colossus similar to the colossi found by Legrain, though it differed from them in one detail—a plaited beard. This beard, according to Bernadette Letellier, who studied and published the head, indicates that the king here was probably shown wrapped as the god Osiris or in a *heb-sed* cloak, rather than striding in a short pleated kilt, like the Legrain colossi.²³

In addition to these sculptures of Sesostri III we know from other remains that Karnak Temple was an important site for the Middle Kingdom kings. Porter and Moss list many royal and even private monuments coming from Karnak,²⁴ and to them can be added more recent discoveries of the Franco-Egyptian Center.²⁵ When we consider the probability that in the time of Sesostri III, the Legrain statues

at least—in view of their size and the Egyptians' love of symmetry—would have had counterparts, we may propose that Karnak itself is the most likely place of origin for the sphinxes in Makhzan Sheikh Labib and in New York.

Can we suggest how the statues of Sesostri III were arranged at Karnak? We have no sure architectural plan, and the scale of the statues varies considerably. It is possible to imagine the sphinxes, raised on bases, flanking an entryway, and to point to New Kingdom representations of statues and obelisks grouped before pylons. But our surest clue may yet come from the excavations of the Franco-Egyptian mission at Karnak.

NOTE

Following the author's death in 1984, this article was prepared for press by Christine Lilyquist, Curator of Egyptian Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

22. Porter-Moss, II. *Theban Temples*, p. 136; Cairo CG 42013 (Legrain, *Statues I*, p. 10 and pl. 7).

23. "Découverte d'une tête colossale de Sésostris III à Karnak," *Kêmi* 21 (1971) pp. 165–175; estimated original height of the colossus 3.20 m. This head is now Luxor Museum J34; see *The Luxor Museum of Ancient Egyptian Art: Catalogue* (Cairo, 1979) pp. 32–35 and cover. Letellier also points out (her n. 7) that the present heights given by Legrain for Cairo CG 42011 and 42012 (see note 21 above) must include the restorations of the missing feet but not the summits of the crowns, which are not conserved or restored.

24. Porter-Moss, II. *Theban Temples*, passim in the Karnak entry.

25. J. Lauffray, *Karnak d'Égypte: Domaine du divin* (Paris, 1979) pp. 46f.