

**Two Hawk-headed Sphinxes graffiti at  
Abydos**

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## **Abstract**

The present paper is a focused study of two striking hawk-headed sphinxes graffiti, surmounted by a brief hieratic inscription, located at the northern wall of the corridor that leads to the outside west gate of the temple of King Seti I at Abydos; the Upper sphinx graffiti is deeply and carefully incised; meanwhile, the Lower one is not. The presence of such graffiti suggests the existence of two hawk-headed sphinxes statues at some place within the temple of Abydos. The study discusses the purpose of the incision at the chosen spot, the date of the graffiti and the relationship between the graffiti and Seti I and his son Ramses II, it will cite other parallel examples in Ramesside temples, in order to support the summation, concluding the study with the conception and impacts of these graffiti.

## **Description: A- sphinx graffiti**

Depiction: Horizontal two hawk- headed Sphinx shapes.

Orientation: Located on vertical surface facing Est.

Technique: Engraved graffiti

Patina: Medium

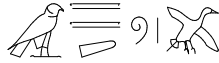
Measurements: 20 cm h, 20cm w

State of preservation: Decently preserved, but naturally obliterated in places.

The graffiti are located at the thickness of the doorway of the corridor leading to the outside west gate of the temple of Seti I at Abydos; they present two sphinx shapes, the Upper one with clear

hawk-head, and deeply incised, while the Lower graffito has a hawk-like head, and is incised less carefully. Both face the outside of the temple. The hawk heads are equipped with the double crown, the lion's body covers completely the pedestal. Both statues face the same direction.

**B- Graffito text:** A clear single line of hieratic graffito text, surmounting the Upper sphinx graffito, reads from right to left:



PAw tAwy @r

Depiction: Horizontal single row hieratic text.

Transliteration: PAw tAwy @r

Translation: Paw-tawy Horus.

Orientation: read from right to left.

Technique: Engraved hieratic.

Patina: Medium.

Measurements: 4cm h, 13 cm w

State of preservation: Decently preserved.

## Introduction

Sculptures representing local wild and domesticated animals were common in Egypt since the predynastic period; among the many objects found in the early graves are statuettes of hippopotamus, dogs, sheep and birds.<sup>1</sup> Abydos was one of the most important sites

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<sup>1</sup> J. Capart, *Primitive Art in Egypt*, London, 1905, 152, 153.

for the discovery of animal sculptures; most of which have dated back to the archaic period onward.<sup>1</sup> When possession of such object by the dead became commonplace, it might be assumed that they perform a religious purpose, mainly for protecting the tomb-owner during his mysterious journey towards the afterlife.<sup>2</sup> As well as, they are considered symbolic devices, which carried hidden messages to the audience, according to the impact and the nature of the animal.<sup>3</sup>

The sphinx figure, part human, the head, attached to an animal part representing a mighty lion's body, syncretized carefully in the same sculpture, sometimes the human features dominates the animal shape, in other cases the sphinx became completely at the animal form,<sup>4</sup> it was a significant symbol for the sun-cult from the Old Kingdom onward, it was also strictly associated with the ruler of Egypt. During the New Kingdom, it was attested clearly that this representation could be considered as his "living image" = *Ssp anx*.<sup>5</sup> As early as the predynastic period, in many examples of stone

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<sup>1</sup> F. Petrie, *Excavations at Abydos*, London, 1902, 89; F. Petrie, *Abydos*, I, London, , pl. XXVI.

<sup>2</sup> C. Andrews, Amulets in, D. Redford (ed.) *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, I, Oxford, 2001, 75, 78; R. Wilkinson, *Symbol and Magic in Egyptian Art*, London, 1994, 16; J. Černej, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, London, 1951, 14.

<sup>3</sup> P. F. Houlihan, *The Animal world of the Pharaohs*, Cairo, 1996, 1, 2; H. Te Velde, A Few Remarks upon the religious significance of Animals in Ancient Egypt, *Numen*, XXVII, Fasc. 1, 76.

<sup>4</sup> C. M. Coche-Zivie, Sphinx, *LÄ*, V, 1139.

<sup>5</sup> R. Stadelman, Sphinx in, D. Redford (ed.) *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, III, Oxford, 2001, 307; S. Hassan, *The Great Sphinx and its Secrets*, Cairo, 1953, 142; C. M. Coche-Zivie, *LA*, 1139; I. Shaw and P. Nicholson, *The British Museum Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*, Cairo, 2002, 277.

palettes, the ruler of Egypt was shown in an animal shape, the most common of these was the mighty lion, attacking and overcoming enemies, defending Egypt's borders against foreign conquistadors, and conquering their cities.<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly, this figure represented the sovereign, who consequently, was shown as a sphinx who conquered the nine bows, symbol of the royal triumph over the foreign lands,<sup>2</sup> the image was commonly used as an amulet for both individuals and royal purposes, during life and after death, the lion's figure was involved in the artistic features, as guardian for the wearers.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile the representation of the Egyptian monarch as a falcon had been in use since the early dynastic period; Kings had been associated with the falcon as a sacred figure of god Horus, who ruled the throne of Egypt as the embodiment of the hereditary son of Osiris, Abydos was the main center for this cult and a great amount of royal representations as the sacred falcon of Horus have been found there.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> S. Hassan, *The Great Sphinx*, 141, 142; K. M. Cooney, and J. Tyrrell, *Scarabs in Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, II, USA, 2005, 37; G. C. Pier, Historical Scarab Seals from the Art Institute Collection, *AJSL* 23, No. 1 (1906), 89, 90; P. F. Houlihan, *The Animal World*, 91, fig. 65.

<sup>2</sup> G. Graham, Insignias, in D. Redford (ed.) *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, II, Oxford, 2001, 165.

<sup>3</sup> E. Delange, The Complexity of Alloys: New Discoveries about certain Bronzes in the Louvre, in M. Hill (ed.) *Gifts for the Gods Images from Egyptian Temples*, USA, 2007, 44; S. Hassan, *The Great Sphinx*, 143.

<sup>4</sup> F. Petrie, *Abydos*, I, London, 1902, pl. I, II, III; R. J. Leprohon, Titulary in, D. Redford (ed.) *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, III, Oxford, 2001, 409; T. Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt*, London, 1999, 156.

From the New Kingdom onward, the lion figure became the sole and trustworthy companion of the Egyptian Kings, lions accompanied them into battle, as a symbol of the powerful fighter; in times of peace, the lion was usually shown recumbent beside the king`s throne.<sup>1</sup> It was used to decorate the temple façade and entrances with various sculptures, commonly in the form of sphinx statues, for ornamental and protective purposes, the human head usually represented the king`s presence at the temple, with other heads might belong to the gods, associated to the temple, the falcon headed sphinx is commonly found from the eighteenth dynasty onward, this sphinx represented the god Re;<sup>2</sup> and along with the main and common aspect of the god Horus.<sup>3</sup> It is a derivation of the old concept of the falcon, sacred animal of god Horus, who protected the Egyptian King, from the first dynasty;<sup>4</sup> actually the Egyptian King was considered the embodiment of the falcon god.<sup>5</sup>

A useful texts from Abydos, belonging to Ramsess II suggests that the temple of Abydos originally had two pylons, the text reflects the king`s interest and pride at building that pylon, it also describes

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<sup>1</sup> F. Petrie, *Egyptian Decorative Art*, London, 1920, 113.

<sup>2</sup> R. Wilkinson, *The Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt*, USA, 2000, 54, 55; G. E. Kadish, Pylon in; Redford (ed.) *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, III, Oxford, 2001, 87; R. Stadelman, Sphinx, 310.

<sup>3</sup> R. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, USA, 2003, 200-203, 205-209; S. Hassan, *The Great Sphinx*, 142.

<sup>4</sup> A. P. Kozloff, Sculpture in, D. Redford (ed.) *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, III, Oxford, 2001, 232.

<sup>5</sup> J. Černý, Graffiti at the wadi El Allaki, *JEA* 33 (1947), 54, pl. X.

how it was a great building; equipped with copper leaves, built in granite.<sup>1</sup> The same text also describes statues made of electrum; the context indicates that they were mostly situated in front of the temple façade.<sup>2</sup> The determinative used for statues is the human figure. Same case occurred with the dedicatory building text of Ramses II at Luxor temple, where he described the statues preceding his pylon,<sup>3</sup> but this couldn't mean they were all in human shape, because the Luxor temple façade was preceded by a marked sphinx road.

A parallel dedicatory text dates to the time of Ramses II, located at the southernmost point in Nubia desert, at the temple of Sebue,<sup>4</sup> the inscription is written on the pedestals of the sphinx statues, which flank the road leading to the temple, the repeated text mentions gloriously the great sphinx statues preceding the façade, comparing them with the temple itself as a great monument dedicated to Amun-Re, King of the Gods:



Ir.n.f m mnw n.it.f Imn-ra nsw nTrw ir.f  
(twt?) aA di anx mi Ra

<sup>1</sup> A. Mariette, Abydos, II, pl. 3; P. Spencer, The Egyptian Temple a Lexicographical Study, London, 1984, 195.

<sup>2</sup> A. Mariette, Abydos, Paris, 1880, pl. 3.

<sup>3</sup> M. Abd El-Razik, The Dedicatory and building Texts of Ramses II in Luxor Temple, *JEA* 61 (1975), 128; M. Abd El-Razik, The Dedicatory and building Texts of Ramses II in Luxor Temple, *JEA* 60 (1974), 147.

<sup>4</sup> *KRI*, II, 727; H. Gauthier, *Le Temple de Ouadi Es-Seboua*, Le Caire, 1912, I, 11, 12, 13, 17-19, PM, VII, 55:I, VI; PM, VII, 57.

Actually, the text refers to the sphinx statues, with both human and hawk heads in front of the temple façade, which carry the cartouches of the King, wearing the double crown, a smA-ṭAwy incised on the base of each one, in order to affirm his consecration as a god, and at the same time as the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, some of these statues portray human-headed lions, which others are hawk-headed sphinx.<sup>1</sup> They are considered a sacred image of the King, builder of the temple.<sup>2</sup>

### **Dating**

It seems that both Seti I and Ramses II were interested in the hawk-headed sphinxes, a lot of citation had been hit; two examples of hawk-headed sphinxes found at Abu Simbel mentioned by Belzoni could support this suggestion.<sup>3</sup> Also, two sphinx statues had been attested at Abydos, they dates back to the time of Seti I, they could be positioned at the west gate, leading to the Osirian, as two guards for the pathway, or in some place at the temple of Abydos.<sup>4</sup>

### **Concluding Remarks**

The graffiti is a visual device of the admitted and evident attachment between the Egyptian King and the god Horus, as evident embodiment of the ruler falcon, manifested in the performance of the

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<sup>1</sup> H. Gauthier, *Ouadi Es-Seboua`*, 12.

<sup>2</sup> R. Stadelman, *The Oxford Encyclopedia*, III, 307.

<sup>3</sup> G. Belzoni, *Narrative of the Operations and recent Discoveries*, London, 1920, 214.

<sup>4</sup> C. M. Coch-Zivie, *LÄ*, 1140.



double crowned hawk-headed sphinxes, a religious and political symbolic link established since the early dynastic period at Abydos.

The existence of these sphinx graffiti with hawk heads indicate to the politic and religious significance of these animals in the Egyptian regime, and supports the suggestion of being incised as a copy of the original sphinx statues positioned at some place in the temple of Abydos, they might be situated at the west gate leads to the Osirian tomb.

Being incised at the form of the hawk-headed sphinxes, reflect the rise of the osirian cult at the End of the ramisside period.

## Illustrations



The hawk-headed sphinx graffiti at Abydos temple

Photography of the Author

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