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IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE ON THUTMOSIS III ...

THE ALABASTER MEMPHIS SPHINX: TUTHMOSIS III
OR HATSHEPSUT?
Mohammed A. Shata

The Alabaster Memphis Sphinx: Tuthmosis III or Hatshepsut?

by Mohammed A. Shata

For 25 years, I worked as an Egyptologist guiding tourists to different sites. One of these sites was Memphis, the old capital of ancient Egypt. Whenever we found a cartouche on a statue or inscription, we discussed the names. But one of the most important monuments at Memphis, the colossal alabaster sphinx, has no inscription. To me, the face of the sphinx looks like many of the statues of Hatshepsut found in the Cairo Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, so I told people I thought Hatshepsut had commissioned this figure when she assumed the role of Pharaoh. Betsy Bryan has also suggested that the statue represents Hatshepsut, while other authors have proposed Tuthmosis III or Amenhotep II.¹ How can we decide which king it is?



Fig. 1. Colossal Sphinx at Memphis.

The location of the statue provides no solution to this mystery. Petrie found the statue in 1912, very close to its present location. The statue probably sat originally just inside the enclosure wall of the Ptah Temple. Several kings are known to have built temples to Ptah, the Memphite deity, and any king could have dedicated a statue in an existing temple. Since sphinxes were usually arranged in pairs, there may have been another matching sphinx at one time. Perhaps if we could find it, it would have an inscription—either on its chest or on its base. The existing sphinx may have had an inscription on a separate base. We can see that its base has been badly damaged (Fig. 1). Perhaps someone tried to hack off an inscription.

Many kings chose to have themselves shown as a sphinx. The combination of the king's head with his royal beard, crown, and

uraeus on a lion's muscular body was a clear symbol of royal power. The Giza Sphinx may be the oldest such representation; other examples from the Old Kingdom are rare. Sphinxes were popular in the Middle Kingdom, but most of these had severe faces like the other royal statues of that period. The Memphis Sphinx looks more like the statues carved during the New Kingdom. Late Period kings also commissioned sphinxes, but some were content to merely usurp statues from earlier rulers. This borrowing is sometimes recorded in the series of cartouches found on them or in recut cartouches. Since the Memphis Sphinx has *no* inscriptions, we must use other methods to learn its identity.

Egyptologists and art historians have studied the statues of different kings and tried to determine each one's distinguishing features. They have attributed some uninscribed statues to a particular dynasty or reign by comparison of facial features or by styles of clothing, wigs, jewelry, titles or names that are known to have changed over time. Even minor elements can provide important clues. For example, Biri Fay reported that the shape of the uraeus assumed a distinctive shape in the period beginning with the Hatshepsut/Tuthmosis III reign and continuing until the reign of Amenhotep III.² During this period the body of the snake was carved with a wide double loop rather than narrow multiple loops (Fig. 2). The uraeus on the Memphis Sphinx, although hard to see from the ground, has two wide loops. This detail places the Memphis Sphinx firmly in this time frame and narrows the range of candidates to only five rulers.

However, Tuthmosis IV and Amenhotep III can be easily eliminated from further consideration. The eyes and lips on the many known statues of Amenhotep III are quite different from the alabaster sphinx of Memphis. His eyes are narrow and almond-shaped, with a pronounced upward tilt at the outside corners. His lips are fuller and have a distinct rim. His father, Tuthmosis IV, was also portrayed with narrow, almond-shaped eyes. By contrast, the eyes on the Memphis Sphinx have a "wide awake" appearance, and the lower lid is nearly horizontal, not slanted. This eye shape is especially characteristic of Hatshepsut, but is also seen on the faces of Tuthmosis III and his son, Amenhotep II.

Although the possibility cannot be ruled out, it seems unlikely that the Memphis Sphinx represents Amenhotep II. There are few extant examples of Amenhotep II as a sphinx, whereas there are many that depict either Hatshepsut or Tuthmosis III. In addition, the statues of Amenhotep II usually have fuller faces and squarer chins than that of the Memphis Sphinx.

Many writers have remarked on the difficulty of distinguish-



Fig. 2. Left: Middle Kingdom and earlier (uraeus with several narrow loops). Center: 18th Dynasty (uraeus with two wide loops). Right: Amenhotep III and later (two loops behind the hood).



Fig. 3. Left. Hatshepsut Sphinx in Cairo Museum. Center. Memphis Sphinx. Right. Tuthmosis III Sphinx at Cairo Museum. Photos by Mahmoud Khodair.

ing between uninscribed statues of Hatshepsut and Tuthmosis III. Particularly during the co-regency period, the same artists used the same artistic conventions for both rulers. Once Tuthmosis III became sole ruler, the conventions changed and his later statues look different to the trained eye.³ A comparison of the face of the Memphis Sphinx to granite sphinxes—one inscribed for Hatshepsut and one for Tuthmosis III—shows the great similarities among them (Fig. 3).

However, it is this writer's opinion that Hatshepsut commissioned the Memphis Sphinx. Most of her statues portray her in male garb with the pharaonic attributes. The sphinx must have appealed to her as a way of showing the people that she was as strong as a lion and capable of ruling Egypt. We know she had many other sphinxes in her mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri. Excavators from the Metropolitan Museum of Art found fragments of three pairs of red granite sphinxes and many pieces from sandstone sphinxes that probably formed rows along the road to the temple.⁴ These statues may have been destroyed by order of Tuthmosis III after Hatshepsut's death.

Some of the damage we see today on the sphinx may be natural erosion, since the statue was buried in the wet soil at Memphis for thousands of years. Or its inscriptions may have been recarved like many at Deir el-Bahri where Hatshepsut's cartouches were replaced by those of Tuthmosis I or II. Therefore, it may never be possible to answer the question posed in the title of this article definitively, and each visitor can choose his or her favorite candidate.

NOTES

1. Bryan 1998, Fig 2.2, Verner 2002, 3.
2. Fay 1995, 12.
3. Laboury, 1968.
4. Winlock 1942.

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