Pliny Describes the Great Sphinx

In his encyclopedia-like *Natural History*, the first-century-A.D. Roman scholar Pliny the Elder said the following about the Great Sphinx at Giza, which was then already about twenty-six hundred years old:

In front of the pyramids is the Sphinx, which is even more noteworthy than those monuments. The local inhabitants worship it as a deity, yet say nothing about it. They believe that King Harmais [a mythical character] is buried inside it and like to think it was transported there [from somewhere else]. It is, however, carved from local rock. The face of this legendary creature is colored red—a mark of reverence. The circumference of its head, at its forehead, is 102 feet; its length, 243 feet; and it measures about 62 feet from its stomach to the top of the asp [stone snake] on its head.

thrust of the left leg, while often one hand carried a scepter, both viewed as signs of one who maintained order in both the nation and the universe.

**Human-Animal Hybrids**

Still another convention involved the depiction of humans versus animals. Although Egyptian sculptors created images of both people and animals, among their favorite and more frequent subjects were crosses between the two. On the one hand, many of Egypt’s traditional gods were regularly depicted with the heads or other features of animals. Statues of the sun god Ra, for instance, frequently had a man’s body and a falcon’s (or hawk’s) head. Similarly, Anubis, god of embalming and the dead, had a jackal’s head; Hathor, goddess of love and music, bore a cow’s head; and Sobek, deity of the Nile River, had the head of a crocodile.

On the other hand, no less popular among both sculptors and the Egyptians in general was another human-animal hybrid—the sphinx. This mythical beast usually had the body of a lion and the head of a human, most often a man. (Female sphinxes appeared mainly in Greek mythology.) In fact, the largest and most famous of Egypt’s stone sphinxes—the so-called Great Sphinx, which sits near the Pyramids at Giza—has a man’s head. More specifically, it likely originally depicted Khafre, the fourth pharaoh of the Fourth Dynasty, whose enormous pyramid looms nearby. When it was carved in the mid-third millennium B.C., the sphinx was part of Khafre’s funerary complex, which included temples, causeways, and statues, as well as the pyramid-tomb. The Great Sphinx—Egypt’s largest statue—is roughly 66 feet (20m) tall and 240 feet (73m) long.

Similarly, most of ancient Egypt’s numerous other carved sphinxes were associated with royalty or religion (or both) and were intended to blend with or enhance large-scale architectural settings. A renowned and stunning example consisted of the rows of ram-headed sphinxes that lined the sacred path leading from the Karnak temple complex to the Luxor temple,