

FASCINATING FACTS

The Great Sphinx of Giza, Egypt is the most famous statue of its kind. It is also the largest statue to survive from ancient times. The sphinx was probably built about 2,500 B.C.

Among ancient Egyptian statues and figures, the sphinx is a creature with the body of a lion and the head of some other animal or person. This combination represented wisdom and strength.

In Greek mythology, the sphinx was a monster with the head of a woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of a giant bird. The creature waited on the roads of the city of Thebes, and when travelers came along, she demanded that they answer her riddle: What has four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three at night? If they did not answer correctly, she killed them!

Oedipus solved the riddle by answering "man," and he became king. "Man" was the answer because human babies crawl on all fours, adults walk erect and elderly people use canes. A cane counted as a third leg.

The original purpose of Egypt's Great Sphinx is not known. Unlike the pyramids, the Great Sphinx was not a burial place. It may have been built by people who thought it would protect nearby tombs from "evil spirits." Perhaps it was

just meant to be beautiful. The face of the sphinx may be the image of Harmachis, the Egyptian god of the rising sun. Others believe the face belonged to the Pharaoh Chephren or to King Khafre, whose pyramid stands behind the sphinx.

The Great Sphinx was carved out of a natural outcrop of limestone. Because the sand shifts, measurements of the height and length vary. It is roughly 200 feet long and 70 feet high. From forehead to chin, the huge face measures 30 feet. Each ear is about five feet long and the mouth is almost eight feet wide!

Many of the great Egyptian monuments of the past were neglected for centuries. Napoleon arrived in Egypt in 1798 with artists, scholars and scientists, and they found both the pyramids and the Great Sphinx half buried in sand. Projects to restore the Great Sphinx have been undertaken several times. This ancient wonder of Egypt still attracts thousands of tourists each year.

There is concern that pollution and erosion may destroy the monument. People have considered enclosing it in a temporary dome or painting it with a special coating for protection. Tour buses are kept a distance away from the sphinx, and a special station has been set up on its back to monitor its condition.
