

Rewriting the History of The Great Sphinx



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**THE GREAT
SPHINX**

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Cover: The Great Sphinx of Giza, with the Old Kingdom pyramids of *Khufu* and *Khafra*.

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Contents

List of Figures and Tables.....	v
Image credits	xvii
Acknowledgments	xx

Part 1 - Setting The Scene

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Ancient Egypt	7
The Early Dynastic Period	10
The Old Kingdom	12
The Middle Kingdom.....	16
The New Kingdom	16
The Late Period and Greco-Roman Period.....	19
The Basis for our Understanding of the Early Dynastic Period and Old Kingdom.....	19
Chapter 3: The Great Sphinx.....	22
The Great Sphinx	26
The Sphinx Enclosure.....	35
Clearing the Sand.....	40
Chapter 4: The Giza Necropolis	44
The Khufu Pyramid Complex.....	44
The Khafra Pyramid Complex.....	51
The Menkaura Pyramid Complex	61
The Tomb of Khentkawes	64
Later Activity at Giza	67
Chapter 5: The Giza Landscape.....	69
The Natural Topography of the Giza Plateau.....	69
Ancient Quarrying at Giza.....	74
The Influence of Natural Topography on the Development of the Giza Necropolis	78
Chapter 6: The Conventional View.....	81
A Conundrum	83
Examining the Case for Khafra as the Builder of the Great Sphinx.....	87

The Sphinx Temple.....	91
The Face of the Great Sphinx	94
The View of Egyptology.....	95
Chapter 7: Giza before <i>Khufu</i>: Mainstream Archaeological Evidence.....	97
The <i>Ma'adi</i> Culture	98
The Southern Escarpment and Main Wadi	100
Previous Development within the <i>Giza</i> Necropolis?	101
Reisner's Evidence for Development Before the Pyramids.....	105
Part 2 – Geology Matters	
Chapter 8: The Geology of Egypt and the <i>Giza</i> Plateau	109
The Formation of Rocks and Fossils	109
Earth Movements.....	113
Geological Timescales and the Evolution of the Egyptian Landmass.....	115
The First Rivers in Egypt.....	119
The Geology of the <i>Giza</i> Plateau.....	121
Chapter 9: The Geology of the Great Sphinx.....	125
Member I Strata	126
Member II Strata	133
Member III Strata.....	140
The Degradation of the Great Sphinx	142
Rainfall in Egypt and the Surface Hydrology of the <i>Giza</i> Plateau.....	143
Part 3 – Ancient Egypt's Earliest Dynasties	
Chapter 10: Evidence for an Early Sphinx.....	149
The Effect of Quarrying on Run-Off	150
'Now Picture to Yourself this Scene!'	154
What if <i>Khufu</i> had built the Great Sphinx?	156
The Effects of Modern Rainfall	156
The Sphinx Temple.....	158
The <i>Khafra</i> Causeway	161
Early Activity at <i>Giza</i>	163
Chapter 11: Companions of the Early Sphinx	165
Time for a Re-cap.....	165
A Note About Comparisons	167

The <i>Khafra</i> Valley Temple	167
The Proto-Mortuary Temple	168
<i>Khentkawes</i>	173
The Tomb of <i>Kai</i>	178
Niched Façade Decoration at <i>Giza</i>	182
Chapter 12: Building the Great Sphinx	185
Skills and Experience – A Stone-Working Context for the Early Origins of the Great Sphinx	186
The Use of Stone in Early Dynastic Egypt	190
The Great Enclosures of <i>Saqqara</i>	197
Other Examples of the Early Use of Stone in Construction at <i>Saqqara</i>	200
The Early Use of Stone in Construction at Other Sites	201
Late Second Dynasty Royal Tombs	202
The Third Dynasty	203
The Second Dynasty: An Important Period for Stone Masonry	206
Objection!!	209
 Part 4 – The History of the Great Sphinx	
Chapter 13: The Origins of the Sphinx	215
Ancient Records: Towards an Understanding of the Concept of the Sphinx	217
Ancient Egypt's Complex Religion	221
The <i>Netjerikhet</i> Stela	223
Serpents, Jackals and Lions: Interpreting the Decoration of the <i>Netjerikhet</i> Stela	227
<i>Mehen</i> : The Board Game	230
The Concept of the Sphinx	232
Chapter 14: The Rise of the Sun-God	233
Early Pharaonic Associations with <i>Ra</i>	234
The Role of <i>Iunu</i>	238
The Power and Authority of Pharaoh	240
The Development of the Great Sphinx of <i>Giza</i>	241
From Lion to Sphinx	245
The Sphinx and the <i>Ba</i>	248
The Rise of the Sun-God	249
Chapter 15: The Great Sphinx of <i>Giza</i>	251
The Copper-Age at <i>Giza</i>	257

Appendices

Appendix A: Original Ground Levels in the Vicinity of the Great Sphinx	261
1. The Low Hill at the Eastern Edge of the <i>Giza</i> Plateau	261
2. Lehner's Original Ground Level Model.....	263
3. Summary and Conclusions	267
Appendix B: The Sequence of Construction of the Great Sphinx, the <i>Khafra</i> Valley Temple and the Sphinx Temple	268
1. Introduction	268
2. The Mainstream Sequence of Construction	268
Summary: The Mainstream Sequence of Construction	274
3. The Sequence of Construction Starting with the Great Sphinx.....	274
Stage 1- Excavation of the Sphinx Enclosure	275
Stage 2 – Excavation in the Sphinx Temple Terrace	276
Stage 3 – The Sphinx Temple: Ricke's First Building Phase	279
Stage 4 – The Construction of the <i>Khafra</i> Valley Temple.....	281
Stage 5 - The Sphinx Temple: Ricke's Second Building Phase	281
Summary: The Alternative Sequence of Construction	281
4. The Most Likely Sequence of Construction	283
Appendix C: Mapping the Member II Strata at <i>Giza</i>	284
1. Introduction	284
2. The Process Used	284
3. Strata Exposed at the <i>Khentkawes</i> Tomb and the Tomb of <i>Kai</i>	286
Bibliography	288
Index	296

List of Figures and Tables

Part 1 - Setting The Scene

Figure i: A sketch map of Egypt. All locations referred to in the text are indicated on this map.. xxii

Chapter 1: Introduction

Figure 1.1:	The Great Sphinx of Giza, with the Old Kingdom pyramids of <i>Khufu</i> (right) and <i>Khafra</i> (left).....	1
Figure 1.2:	Plan of the Giza Necropolis.	2
Figure 1.3:	A typical ancient Egyptian deity, with a human body and animal head (Temple of <i>Seti I</i> , <i>Abydos</i>).....	3
Figure 1.4:	Napoleon meets the Great Sphinx of Giza ('Bonaparte Before the Sphinx', Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1886).	4
Figure 1.5:	The highly decorated interior of the temple of <i>Dendera</i> , which was built 2500 years later than the pyramids of Giza.	4

Chapter 2: Ancient Egypt

Figure 2.1:	A summary timeline for ancient Egypt (see also Figure 2.3).....	7
Figure 2.2:	Remarkable consistency depicted in scenes of pharaoh smiting the enemy. Left is a smiting scene from the Temple of <i>Edfu</i> (c. 57 BC) and right, the same image of royal dominance used during the reign of <i>Narmer</i> , one of Egypt's earliest pharaohs (c. 3100 BC, Egyptian Museum accession number CG 14716, Cairo, photographed 2024).	8
Figure 2.3:	Detailed chronology of ancient Egypt, with a focus on the Early Dynastic Period and Old Kingdom.....	9
Figure 2.4:	Egypt's first pyramid, the Step Pyramid of the Third Dynasty pharaoh <i>Djoser</i> at <i>Saqqara</i> . 11	
Figure 2.5:	The Bent Pyramid of <i>Sneferu</i> , <i>Dashur</i>	12
Figure 2.6:	Top, the incomplete pyramid of <i>Khufu</i> 's successor, <i>Djedefra</i> at <i>Abu Rawash</i> . Bottom, the completed pyramid of <i>Khafra</i> at Giza, with large sections of Tura casing still present at the top of the pyramid.	13
Figure 2.7:	Top, the mastaba tomb of the late Fourth Dynasty pharaoh <i>Shepseskaf</i> at South <i>Saqqara</i> . Bottom, the Fifth Dynasty pyramid of <i>Neferirkara</i> , <i>Abusir</i>	14
Figure 2.8:	The ruins of the mudbrick core of the Middle Kingdom pyramid of <i>Amenemhat III</i> at <i>Dashur</i> (left), with the stone-built Old Kingdom Bent Pyramid of <i>Sneferu</i> in the background.....	15
Figure 2.9:	Top, the pylon entrance of the mortuary temple of <i>Rameses III</i> at <i>Medinet Habu</i> . Bottom, the 'Colossi of Memnon', enormous statues that once guarded the entrance to the mortuary temple of <i>Amenhotep III</i>	17
Figure 2.10:	Winter dawn at <i>Karnak</i> Temple, with the rising sun casting the long shadow of an obelisk along the centre of the Great Hypostyle Hall.....	18
Figure 2.11:	The rock-cut statues of <i>Rameses II</i> at <i>Abu Simbel</i>	18
Figure 2.12:	The Pyramid Texts. Part of the texts decorating the southern wall of the burial chamber of the pyramid of <i>Teti</i> at <i>Saqqara</i> . <i>Teti</i> was the first king of the Sixth Dynasty.	20

Chapter 3: The Great Sphinx

Figure 3.1:	The Great Sphinx of Giza, viewed from the east. The large rectangular slab at the rear of the court between the Sphinx's paws, is the Dream Stela (see also Figure 3.3).	22
Figure 3.2:	The Great Sphinx viewed from the south.	23
Figure 3.3:	Sketch plan of the Sphinx Enclosure.....	24
Figure 3.4:	Looking south across the Sphinx Enclosure. As a result of the sloping surface of the Giza Plateau, the excavation is deeper to the right (west) than it is to the left (east).	25

Figure 3.5:	An unusual view from an elevated camera gantry. The Great Sphinx sits on the level floor of the lower terrace (Figure 3.3), with a section of the excavated southern enclosure wall visible to the left. Note the near-horizontal banding of both the body of the Sphinx and the southern enclosure wall, one of the consequences of weathering and erosion of the layered limestone bedrock from which the Sphinx was excavated.....	25
Figure 3.6:	The vast scale of the Great Sphinx is only revealed when we can compare the monument with something for scale, such as the figure to the right.....	26
Figure 3.7:	The southern rear paw of the Great Sphinx, with the lion's tail draped over the Sphinx's haunches.....	27
Figure 3.8:	The toes of the north hind paw of the Great Sphinx during restoration in 1925, showing a claw carved into the bedrock (arrowed) and repeated in the overlying ancient casing stones.	28
Figure 3.9:	Ancient chisel marks on bedrock at Giza. These diagonal marks were made by quarrymen as they worked the bedrock to produce blocks of masonry for construction at the site.	30
Figure 3.10:	The Great Sphinx in the 1930s, showing areas of weathered and eroded limestones exposed across the northern body of the Sphinx. A number of important geological features are evident, including the near-horizontal bedding of the limestones and numerous near-vertical joints, including the Main Fissure (arrowed).	30
Figure 3.11:	The head and face of the Great Sphinx. Arrows indicate a number of areas of modern restoration, including extensive restoration at the level of the neck (compare with Figure 1.3).	32
Figure 3.12:	Near life-sized seated statue of <i>Khafra</i> , which was found in a pit inside his valley temple. In 2016 when this photograph was taken, this statue was regarded as one of the jewels of the collection of the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (accession number CG 14/JE).	33
Figure 3.13:	View to the east, along the ancient cutting between the upper and lower terraces, with the Great Sphinx sitting in the lower terrace to the right.	36
Figure 3.14:	Looking west along the southern wall of the Sphinx Enclosure, with the Sphinx to the right. At its eastern end, where the enclosure wall approaches the <i>Khafra</i> valley temple (to the left in this view), the Sphinx Enclosure is about 4m deep. At its western end, the Sphinx Enclosure is about 11m deep.....	36
Figure 3.15:	A view of the entire western wall of the Sphinx Enclosure, with the Great Sphinx to the left and the <i>Khafra</i> pyramid (right) and <i>Menkaura</i> pyramid (left) in the background.....	37
Figure 3.16:	The north bank of the Lesser Wadi. The modern structures protect the entrances to tombs cut into the exposed bedrock (the Sphinx Enclosure is out of shot to the left).....	37
Figure 3.17:	The remains of the Lesser Wadi in the north-west of the Sphinx Enclosure. The top of the rock-cut western wall of the Sphinx Enclosure falls away into the wadi (dashed line), where it has become buried in sand. A modern masonry wall crosses the sandy wadi infill.	38
Figure 3.18:	Rounded (or 'coved') degradation of the limestones exposed along the western (upslope) section of the southern wall of the Sphinx Enclosure. The rump of the Great Sphinx is just visible in the lower left of the photograph.	39
Figure 3.19:	A photograph from 2004 showing the Main Fissure at the point it is exposed in the southern Sphinx Enclosure wall. Recently, the Main Fissure has been infilled with masonry.....	40
Figure 3.20:	The mouth of the so-called boundary ditch, which enters the Sphinx Enclosure at the point where the southern enclosure wall and western enclosure wall meet (see Figure 3.3).	41
Figure 3.21:	The cleared Sphinx Enclosure after the completion of the work by Baraize. Note the modern wall close to the northern flanks of the Great Sphinx (arrowed).....	43

Chapter 4: The Giza Necropolis

Figure 4.1:	Looking north across the Giza Necropolis, with the Great Sphinx (lower right) and the <i>Khufu</i> pyramid, or Great Pyramid (background, left).	44
Figure 4.2:	The <i>Khufu</i> pyramid from the south-east.....	45

Figure 4.3:	Remaining highly weathered and eroded Tura casing at the foot of the <i>Khufu</i> pyramid, showing the carefully worked joints between the blocks.....	45
Figure 4.4:	A fragment of the papyrus of <i>Merer</i> (<i>Wadi al-Jarf</i> Papyrus G), on display in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, 2019. This fragment shows the name of <i>Khufu</i> in an oval cartouche (arrowed).	46
Figure 4.5:	Core masonry of the <i>Khufu</i> pyramid, showing that frequent gaps between core masonry blocks were filled with mortar and in some cases, small stones.	47
Figure 4.6:	Sketches of the arrangement of internal passages and chambers inside the main Fourth Dynasty pyramids at <i>Giza</i> (not to scale).	48
Figure 4.7:	The pyramid attributed to Queen <i>Henutsen</i>	50
Figure 4.8:	The reconstructed boat that was discovered in the 1950s in a rock-cut pit to the south of the <i>Khufu</i> pyramid. Until recently, as shown here, this ancient boat was on display in a purpose-built museum at <i>Giza</i>	52
Figure 4.9:	The <i>Khafra</i> pyramid viewed from the along the <i>Khafra</i> causeway to the east. The upper courses of Tura casing still cling to the pyramids' apex.	53
Figure 4.10:	The ancient excavations undertaken to level the court to the north and west of the <i>Khafra</i> pyramid. The <i>Khafra</i> pyramid is to the left, with the <i>Menkaura</i> pyramid in the distance. At the north-west corner of the pyramid (arrowed), the original elevated bedrock surface of the plateau was shaped into a series of terraces, to mimic the adjacent courses of masonry used to build the pyramid core.	53
Figure 4.11:	A restored section of an Old Kingdom pyramid causeway, in this case the causeway of the late Fifth Dynasty pharaoh <i>Unas</i> , at <i>Saqqara</i> . The walls and roof of the <i>Khafra</i> causeway may have had a similar arrangement.	54
Figure 4.12:	A section of the <i>Khafra</i> causeway (arrowed) viewed from a position west of the Sphinx Enclosure. For the majority of its length, the causeway pavement was formed by careful preparation of the limestone surface of the plateau, with masonry used only to provide uniform gradients both along and across the causeway.	55
Figure 4.13:	Part of the upper section of the rock-cut <i>Khafra</i> causeway. Below the causeway, a passage has been cut through the limestone (inset), which leads to the so-called <i>Osiris</i> Shaft.	56
Figure 4.14:	Plan of the <i>Khafra</i> valley temple (left) and Sphinx Temple (right).	57
Figure 4.15:	The front (eastern façade) of the <i>Khafra</i> valley temple, with the two imposing entrances. Note the huge granite blocks used as the lowest course of casing, which was placed over the limestone masonry core of the temple. It is thought that granite originally cased the entire interior and exterior of the structure. Also note the figures in the right-hand entrance, for scale.	57
Figure 4.16:	Part of the T-shaped hall inside the <i>Khafra</i> valley temple, with its granite columns and lintels, travertine-paved floor and emplacements for statues of <i>Khafra</i> (Figure 3.12).	58
Figure 4.17:	Looking generally south over the open central court of the Sphinx Temple, with the taller walls of the <i>Khafra</i> valley temple behind.	59
Figure 4.18:	Some of the fourteen limestone pillars in the central court of the Sphinx Temple.	60
Figure 4.19:	One of the short corner limestone pillars in the central court of the Sphinx Temple.	60
Figure 4.20:	The <i>Menkaura</i> pyramid.	61
Figure 4.21:	Granite casing used at the base of the <i>Menkaura</i> pyramid. Only the casing around the entrance (right) was smoothed and finished.	62
Figure 4.22:	One of the <i>Menkaura</i> triads found by Reisner in the <i>Menkaura</i> valley temple. The king is striding forward, wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt and flanked to the right by a nome-goddess, a local deity representing one of the regions (or nomes) of pharaonic Egypt. To the left, <i>Menkaura</i> is accompanied by the goddess, <i>Hathor</i> . (Egyptian Museum accession number JE 46499, Cairo, photographed 2019).	63
Figure 4.23:	The tomb of <i>Khentkawes</i> viewed from the south-east.	64
Figure 4.24:	A section of rock-cut wall at the north-east corner of the <i>Khentkawes</i> tomb.	65
Figure 4.25:	A restored section of low masonry wall adjacent to the remains of the <i>Khufu</i> mortuary temple.	66
Figure 4.26:	The gateway through the Wall of the Crow.	66

Figure 4.27:	The façade of a reconstructed late Old Kingdom tomb of <i>Senedjemib</i> (tomb G2378), built at the eastern edge of the <i>Khufu</i> western cemetery (the <i>Khufu</i> pyramid is just out of shot to the right).....	67
Figure 4.28:	The remains of the Late Period Temple of <i>Isis</i> , at the eastern face of the pyramid of <i>Henutsen</i> , the third queen's pyramid of <i>Khufu</i> (see Figure 4.7)	68

Chapter 5: The Giza Landscape

Figure 5.1:	Part of the <i>Giza</i> landscape looking across the Central Field to the <i>Khafra</i> pyramid.	69
Figure 5.2:	An approximation of the original topography of the <i>Giza</i> Plateau prior to any construction. The main cliff that forms the northern limits of the plateau is shown, together with the point of highest ground level to the west of the pyramids (in red). A number of other key landscape features discussed in this chapter, are also indicated.....	70
Figure 5.3:	The <i>Giza</i> landscape viewed from the west, with the bases of the pyramids obscured by the rising topography.	71
Figure 5.4:	The Main Wadi viewed from the west. In the distance (arrowed, left) is the tomb of <i>Khentkawes</i> , which effectively marks the southern limit of the <i>Giza</i> Necropolis. The prominent hill (arrowed, right) is <i>Gebel al-Qibli</i>	72
Figure 5.5:	Looking north across the Main Wadi to the <i>Giza</i> Necropolis. The Main Wadi is the level, sand-filled area running from left to right through the foreground. During the Early Dynastic Period and into the early Old Kingdom, sections of the Main Wadi will have been covered in scrub vegetation.	72
Figure 5.6:	Lepsius' map of <i>Giza</i> . A series of natural drainage features that may ultimately discharge into Reisner's Wadi are indicated (blue arrow), together with a linear masonry feature of unknown age (red arrow, see p101).	73
Figure 5.7:	A tentative reconstruction of the <i>Giza</i> Necropolis at some point early in the reign of <i>Khafra</i> . A number of later features, not built at that time, are identified in light grey for reference.	74
Figure 5.8:	Windblown sand has partly infilled a minor quarry at the fringes of the Main Wadi, east of the <i>Menkaura</i> pyramid (background).	76
Figure 5.9:	A quarry block in the Central Field, which after quarrying work ceased, was converted into a series of tombs.	77
Figure 5.10:	The intensely quarried area to the west of the Sphinx Enclosure (Figure 5.7, items 1 and 2), with the <i>Khafra</i> pyramid to the west and <i>Khafra</i> causeway to the south. Although largely infilled with ancient construction debris and windblown sand, the extent of these ancient quarries remains quite evident (dashed line).	77
Figure 5.11:	The <i>Giza</i> pyramids viewed from the Main Wadi.	78
Figure 5.12:	Vegetated wadis are still present at some of ancient Egypt's pyramid sites, such as South <i>Saqqara</i> . In the background are the Bent Pyramid and Red Pyramid of <i>Sneferu</i> at <i>Dashur</i> , with the stone-built mastaba of the last king of the Fourth Dynasty, <i>Shepseskaf</i> (second from left), and the Sixth Dynasty pyramid of <i>Pepi II</i> (right).	79

Chapter 6: The Conventional View

Figure 6.1:	The three <i>Giza</i> pyramids.	81
Figure 6.2:	Detail of the seated statue of <i>Khafra</i> , protected by the enveloping wings of the sky-god <i>Horus</i> (Egyptian Museum accession number CG 14/JE, Cairo, photographed 2016).	82
Figure 6.3:	The Late Period Inventory Stela, found in the Temple of <i>Isis</i> at <i>Giza</i> (Egyptian Museum accession number JE 2091, Cairo, photographed 2016).	86
Figure 6.4:	The <i>Thutmose IV</i> Dream Stela nestled between the paws of the Great Sphinx. Note that the texts from the lower half of the stela are now lost. Although these lost texts originally made reference to <i>Khafra</i> , they were damaged when first excavated, preventing the original context from being established. It is not known therefore, why the texts of the Dream Stela referred to <i>Khafra</i>	89
Figure 6.5:	A summary of the phases of Sphinx Temple construction, according to Ricke.	91
Figure 6.6:	Looking down into the north-west corner of the Sphinx Temple. The lower parts of the walls (below the dashed line) were cut from bedrock, with masonry added above.	92

Figure 6.7:	The masonry added to the south-eastern corner of the Sphinx Temple as part of its final building phase, can be clearly seen in this photograph. Unlike the masonry of the initial building phase (to the right of the dashed line) the later masonry was not dressed to a regular, uniform finish.	92
Figure 6.8:	One of the few surviving statues of <i>Khufu</i> . Carved in ivory, this statue is only 7.5cm high. (Egyptian Museum accession number JE 46143, Cairo, photographed 2024).	95

Chapter 7: *Giza before Khufu: Mainstream Archaeological Evidence*

Figure 7.1:	An unusual and deeply patinated columned structure in the Central Field, generally regarded as part of the late Fourth Dynasty tomb of <i>Ra'wer III</i>	97
Figure 7.2:	Summary of potential evidence for pre-Fourth Dynasty development at <i>Giza</i>	98
Figure 7.3:	One of only two Early Dynastic stone vessels found in the <i>Menkaura</i> valley temple. The upper left image is from Reisner's excavation report, and the image upper right, is from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (2024). The lower left image is a simplified interpretation of the decoration on the bowl. The engravings on the bowl include the serekh of the early Second Dynasty pharaoh <i>Hotepsekhemwy</i> (centre), accompanied by the serekh of his successor <i>Ra'neb</i> (to the right), together with an image of a lion deity (to the left).	102
Figure 7.4:	A summary of Fourth Dynasty land-use across the <i>Giza</i> Plateau (blue = construction, red = areas of quarrying. The areas of quarrying shown are tentative, not all areas of quarrying at <i>Giza</i> have been mapped and published).	104

Part 2 – Geology Matters

Chapter 8: *The Geology of Egypt and the Giza Plateau*

Figure 8.1:	An exposed sequence of bedded limestones in the Central Field at <i>Giza</i> , probably part of an Old Kingdom quarry face. Each sandy limestone bed (solid arrow) is separated by a softer layer of silty limestone (dashed arrow).	109
Figure 8.2:	Fossilised remains of an echinoderm, photographed in-situ at <i>Giza</i> . Modern sea-urchins belong to the echinoderm group.	110
Figure 8.3:	A worked block of coarse-grained <i>Aswan</i> granite in the <i>Khafra</i> mortuary temple at <i>Giza</i> , decorated with part of <i>Khafra</i> 's name and titles.	111
Figure 8.4:	A worked quartzite block, from the Fifth Dynasty sun-temple of <i>Niuserra</i> at <i>Abu Ghurab</i> , north of the <i>Abusir</i> pyramid field. <i>Niuserra</i> 's cartouche is clearly visible.	112
Figure 8.5:	Tightly folded beds, exposed in a river valley in the mountains of Morocco.	113
Figure 8.6:	A geological timescale.	114
Figure 8.7:	Part of an ancient granite quarry at <i>Aswan</i>	115
Figure 8.8:	A fossilised trilobite from Morocco.	116
Figure 8.9:	Part of <i>Karnak</i> temple. Most of this vast temple complex is built from blocks of Nubian Sandstone.	117
Figure 8.10:	Fossilised trees in the Western Desert, west of <i>Faiyum</i>	118
Figure 8.11:	A stretch of today's Nile – the Neonile – north of <i>Abydos</i> , where the river runs against the cliffs of the Eonile Canyon. These towering cliffs represent only the upper ten or twenty percent of the canyon walls.	120
Figure 8.12:	A geological sketch map of the <i>Giza</i> Plateau.	121
Figure 8.13:	An area of ancient quarrying adjacent to the <i>Khafra</i> pyramid. The walls of the quarry are characterised by thick beds of relatively durable sandy limestones, that were ideal for building the pyramids.	122
Figure 8.14:	Nummulite and other fossilised remains in a limestone exposure close to the south-west corner of the <i>Khufu</i> pyramid.	123
Figure 8.15:	The Great Sphinx. The <i>Mokattam</i> Limestones from which the Great Sphinx was excavated, are thinly bedded and alternate between sandstones and finer-grained siltstones.	124

Chapter 9: The Geology of the Great Sphinx

Figure 9.1:	Sketch plan of the geology of the Sphinx Enclosure.	125
Figure 9.2:	A cross-section showing the key features of the geology of the Sphinx Enclosure.	126
Figure 9.3:	The heavily degraded Member I cutting, which forms the step between the upper and lower terraces of the Sphinx Enclosure. The bottle-like feature in the foreground is understood to be part of a local groundwater monitoring system.	127
Figure 9.4:	The point at which the condition of the Member I cutting abruptly changes (the position of the arrow on Figure 9.1 is repeated here). To the west of this point (the left in this photograph), the Member I strata are heavily degraded (Figure 9.3). To the east however, the re-cut Member I strata show comparatively little evidence for weathering or erosion (Figure 9.5).	128
Figure 9.5:	The re-cut section of Member I strata north of the Sphinx Temple. This exposure shows little evidence for weathering or erosion.	128
Figure 9.6:	Undated photograph of the Great Sphinx. The heavily degraded Member I cutting between the upper and lower terraces of the Sphinx Enclosure (Figure 9.3) is indicated by the upper white arrow. Part of the less heavily degraded, near-vertical Member I cutting, north of the Sphinx Temple (Figure 9.5), is indicated by the lower white arrow. The black arrow indicates a mound of debris that was removed in 1978.	129
Figure 9.7:	Areas of chisel marks (white arrow) in the entrance to one of the Late Period tombs cut into the Member II strata along the western wall of the Sphinx Enclosure. A modern masonry wall that runs along the top of the western enclosure wall, is also indicated (black arrow).	131
Figure 9.8:	The Great Sphinx and Sphinx Enclosure following the clearance undertaken by Émile Baraize in the 1920s. Baraize built a masonry wall very close to the northern flanks of the Great Sphinx to retain the ancient accumulations of sand and other debris.	132
Figure 9.9:	The beds of the Member II strata excavated for the body of the Great Sphinx. In total there are seven beds within the Member II limestone, and except for bed 7 at the top of the sequence, each bed consists of a more durable sandstone unit (given the suffix 'ii') overlying a softer siltstone layer (suffix 'i').	134
Figure 9.10:	The beds of the Member II strata excavated along the southern wall of the Sphinx Enclosure, showing the greater degradation of the recessed, softer siltstone units (suffix 'i'). The numerous near-vertical geological joints that cut through the Member II beds are also evident, particularly those associated with the projecting upper sandstone beds (suffix 'ii') of beds 1 and 2.	134
Figure 9.11:	Detail showing the Member II beds exposed along the southern Sphinx Enclosure wall, west of the Main Fissure. These beds are crossed by numerous near-vertical joints which appear to have been exposed to significant degradation and in some cases, show evidence for widening by former groundwater movement (arrow).	135
Figure 9.12:	Vertical cross section through an area of coved degradation along the western wall of the Sphinx Enclosure. A possible reconstruction of the original cutting is also given, to indicate the extent to which the Member II beds may have receded from the original excavated face.	136
Figure 9.13:	Coved degradation of the Member II beds along the western Sphinx Enclosure wall. The projecting step at the base of the enclosure wall, represents the upper surface of the underlying Member I strata.	137
Figure 9.14:	View east along the southern enclosure wall, showing the extent to which the western coved section (in the foreground) has receded from the original cut face. The exposed limestones in the background, to the east of the Main Fissure, stand at a much steeper angle and show little evidence for features of coved degradation. The position of the Main Fissure is shown by the arrow.	137
Figure 9.15:	The southern Sphinx Enclosure wall, to the east of the Main Fissure (arrowed). Here the Member II limestones are characterised by near-horizontal banding and less deeply scoured exposed joints (contrast with Figure 9.11, which lies to the west of the Main Fissure).	138
Figure 9.16:	A composite photograph of the south-facing body of the Great Sphinx, showing a general absence of coved degradation.	139

Figure 9.17:	The wind-sculpted landscape of the White Desert in Egypt. Sand carried a few metres above ground level by the wind has selectively eroded the softer and lower-lying limestone beds. The boulder lying on the surface has fallen because the pedestal that originally supported it has been completely eroded away.....	141
Figure 9.18:	An example of pharaonic roof drainage for managing Egypt's occasional rains. In this case from the Late Period Temple of <i>Hathor</i> at <i>Dendera</i>	144
Figure 9.19:	A flow net for the Sphinx Enclosure. The topography is modelled as a series of contours in green and the resultant flow, which travels perpendicular to the contours, is identified in blue.	145

Part 3 – Ancient Egypt's Earliest Dynasties

Chapter 10: Evidence for an Early Sphinx

Figure 10.1:	The sand-filled erosion channel (arrowed), with the Great Sphinx partly clad in scaffold to the left.	149
Figure 10.2:	The implications of ancient quarrying on run-off and the Great Sphinx (sections are indicative only).	151
Figure 10.3:	Aerial photograph from the early 1930s, showing the effects of rainfall run-off on the infilled areas of quarrying between the <i>Khafra</i> causeway (dashed line) and the <i>Khufu</i> pyramid (top right). Note that none of the erosion channels in the area of infilled quarrying south of the <i>Khufu</i> pyramid, reach the Sphinx Enclosure.....	152
Figure 10.4:	Extract from Richard Lepsius' letter, recalling the events at Giza of 2 January 1843.	155
Figure 10.5:	The limestone pavement shown here, to the north of the <i>Khafra</i> causeway, is level and shows little evidence for significant degradation. This section of pavement is likely to have been cut as part of <i>Khafra</i> 's Fourth Dynasty re-development of this part of <i>Giza</i> . In contrast, the adjacent masonry at the base of the causeway, rises and falls over the undulating surface of the original eroded plateau beneath.	162

Chapter 11: Companions of the Early Sphinx

Figure 11.1:	The <i>Khafra</i> pyramid viewed from the eastern end of the causeway. In the foreground are the huge masonry blocks that make up the eastern section of the <i>Khafra</i> mortuary temple.	165
Figure 11.2:	Plan and elevation of the surviving masonry of the <i>Khafra</i> mortuary temple, with the formerly roofed inner section in the west, and open court in the centre. In the east are the remains of a cyclopean masonry element, that is not seen in other mortuary temples of this period. A series of ground levels are also given.	169
Figure 11.3:	The <i>Khafra</i> mortuary temple viewed from the north. The temple is approached from the steep causeway (to the left), which leads to the cyclopean eastern section of the temple, built on the highest point in this part of the <i>Giza</i> Plateau. The lower lying remains of the open court and inner section of the temple (to the right, with the <i>Khafra</i> pyramid behind) were built from smaller blocks of limestone masonry.	169
Figure 11.4:	Part of the cyclopean masonry that characterises the eastern section of the <i>Khafra</i> mortuary temple.	170
Figure 11.5:	Looking west at the <i>Khafra</i> mortuary temple. The main image is a digital reconstruction, which indicates that in the period before the <i>Khafra</i> pyramid was built, the cyclopean masonry of the mortuary temple would have occupied a prominent position on the western horizon at <i>Giza</i> . The inset is the same view today.....	171
Figure 11.6:	A section of wall, part of the cyclopean section of the <i>Khafra</i> mortuary temple, excavated from the bedrock of the <i>Giza</i> Plateau (arrowed). The <i>Khufu</i> pyramid is in the background.....	172
Figure 11.7:	The tomb of <i>Khentkawes</i> viewed from <i>Gebel al-Qibli</i> , showing the lower rock-cut massif and the upper masonry element.	173
Figure 11.8:	A panoramic view of the Central Field with the tomb of <i>Khentkawes</i> (arrowed, with the <i>Menkaura</i> pyramid behind) and the Great Sphinx to the right.	174

Figure 11.9:	The southern façade of the <i>Khentkawes</i> tomb. The weathered remains of niched façade decoration at the top of the rock-cut massif are circled and shown in detail in Figure 11.10. The remains of the niched façade decoration along the base of the massif are also shown (arrowed – see also Figure 11.11).	175
Figure 11.10:	The upper south-east corner of the rock-cut massif of the <i>Khentkawes</i> tomb, showing the remains of niched façade decoration (arrowed).	176
Figure 11.11:	Detail of the degraded remains of the niched southern façade of the <i>Khentkawes</i> tomb, with more deeply cut double niches (black arrows) flanking groups of three single niches (white arrows). It is not clear why some niches are apparently missing, however this could be a result of differential weathering and erosion of the exposed limestone or later cutting of the niched façade to accommodate <i>Tura</i> casing.....	176
Figure 11.12:	The southern face of the rock-cut tomb of <i>Kai</i> in the Central Field. The <i>Khentkawes</i> tomb is approximately 80m to the south-west, and the Great Sphinx (visible in the background) is some 180m to the north-east.	178
Figure 11.13:	The eastern face of the tomb of <i>Kai</i> , with relatively well-preserved niched decoration and projecting rock-cut entrance structure (arrowed).....	179
Figure 11.14:	Part of the eastern façade of the tomb of <i>Kai</i> , against which a series of subsidiary masonry tombs have been built. The relatively plain architectural style of these tombs is typical of the Old Kingdom at Giza. To the left (arrowed), is the tomb of shaft 559, which has been dated to the Fifth Dynasty.	180
Figure 11.15:	To the left of this photograph is the remains of a projecting masonry wall, part of the tomb of <i>Nisutpunuter</i> (viewed from the north). The western end of this wall was built into a niche that had been previously cut into the adjacent rock-cut façade (arrowed).	181
Figure 11.16:	Tentative reconstruction of the original escarpment in the Central Field (see also Appendix A, Figure A5).....	183

Chapter 12: Building the Great Sphinx

Figure 12.1:	Natural wind-sculpted features in the Western Desert. Top, yardangs, sculpted in limestone in Egypt's White Desert. Bottom, a 'mud-lion' sculpted by the wind from sedimentary deposits, perhaps in this case the dried-out silt of a former lake bed.	185
Figure 12.2:	Egypt 2015. Readily available natural materials have been used in construction throughout history. Here, reeds and timber have been used to build a cattle shelter on the banks of the River Nile.	187
Figure 12.3:	Towering cliffs lining the Nile Valley, north of the <i>Qena</i> Bend.	188
Figure 12.4:	The stone circle at <i>Nabta Playa</i> , photographed in its original location before it was transferred for preservation to the Nubian Museum at <i>Aswan</i>	189
Figure 12.5:	The stela of the Second Dynasty pharaoh <i>Ra'neb</i> , with the king's <i>serekh</i> surmounted by the protective royal deity, <i>Horus</i> (The Metropolitan Museum accession number 60.144, New York). This example was probably found at <i>Saqqara</i> , and may originally have been associated with <i>Ra'neb's</i> tomb, which has not yet been discovered. Similar stelae accompanied the Early Dynastic royal burials at <i>Umm al-Qa'ab</i>	191
Figure 12.6:	Key Early Dynastic features at <i>Saqqara</i> , referred to in the text.	193
Figure 12.7:	The entrance to the rock-cut tomb of the first pharaoh of the Second Dynasty, <i>Hotepsekhemwy</i> at <i>Saqqara</i> . The bulk of the late Fifth Dynasty pyramid of <i>Unas</i> sits to the west (arrowed), with elements of the <i>Unas</i> mortuary temple built over the quarried substructure of this Second Dynasty royal tomb.	194
Figure 12.8:	Part of the underground quarried galleries of the tomb of the Second Dynasty pharaoh <i>Ninetjer</i> , at <i>Saqqara</i> . Note how this section of passage is narrower at the floor than at the ceiling. Generally, the quarried tomb of <i>Ninetjer</i> appears to have been less carefully built than the earlier tomb of <i>Hotepsekhemwy</i> (see Figure 12.10).	195
Figure 12.9:	A below-ground, rock-cut chamber in the tomb of <i>Ninetjer</i> , <i>Saqqara</i>	195
Figure 12.10:	An exposed section of the <i>Hotepsekhemwy</i> tomb, showing the blocks of quarried masonry (arrowed) used to provide a roof over sections of open cutting. Note the walls of the exposed section of passage appear to be nearly vertical, suggesting that this tomb was more carefully worked than the tomb of <i>Ninetjer</i> (Figure 12.8).	196

Figure 12.11: Part of De Morgan's 1897 map of <i>Saqqara</i> , showing the <i>Gisir al-Mudir</i> (top left, outlined in red) and the 'L-shape' Enclosure (arrowed). The Step Pyramid and its enclosure is shown centrally, in the lower part of this extract.....	198
Figure 12.12: The unusual early stone-built structure, located in a remote area of North <i>Saqqara</i> , some 2km north-west of the Step Pyramid (see Figure 12.6, item C).	200
Figure 12.13: An early 1940s photograph of perhaps the only investigations that have been undertaken of the southern Dry Moat at <i>Saqqara</i> . The Dry Moat is a large trench-like excavation which is thought to surround the entire Step Pyramid enclosure and is typically 6m deep. This image shows part of an ancient 27m deep rock-cut trench that was excavated from the base of the Dry Moat in the area close to the Second Dynasty tombs of <i>Hotepsekhemwy</i> and <i>Ninetjer</i> . The number and full extent of these deep rock-cut trenches has not been established.....	201
Figure 12.14: The Third Dynasty Step Pyramid complex of <i>Djoser</i>	203
Figure 12.15: Sketch plan of the Step Pyramid Enclosure at <i>Saqqara</i> , with a number of possible early underground features shown in black.	204
Figure 12.16: A section of the southern wall around the Step Pyramid Enclosure, showing finely worked outer masonry skin, with the less carefully worked core behind.	205
Figure 12.17: The reconstructed entrance and adjacent sections of enclosure walls of the Step Pyramid complex.	206
Figure 12.18: The colonnade just inside the entrance to the Step Pyramid enclosure. Lining the central axis are a series of small chambers divided by masonry walls that end with attached stone columns, representing bundles of tied reeds, carved in limestone.	207
Figure 12.19: Reconstructed dummy buildings, within the <i>Heb-Sed</i> court of the Step Pyramid complex.....	207
Figure 12.20: A typical exposure of bedded limestones at <i>Saqqara</i> , possibly part of an ancient quarry face.....	211
Figure 12.21: Detail of the huge monolithic statue of <i>Rameses II</i> from ancient <i>Memphis</i> , currently on display at the open-air museum at <i>Mit Rahina</i> . When complete it has been estimated that this statue will have weighed in excess of 80 tonnes.	212

Part 4 – The History of the Great Sphinx

Chapter 13: The Origins of the Sphinx

Figure 13.1: The Great Sphinx of <i>Giza</i>	215
Figure 13.2: One of the surviving fragments of the Royal Annals, in this case the London Fragment, on display at the Petrie Museum. This face preserves limited but rare and hugely valuable information from the reign of the Second Dynasty pharaoh, <i>Khasekhemwy</i> . The fragment is less than 10cm high (Courtesy of Petrie Museum, UCL, accession number UC 15508, London).	218
Figure 13.3: New Kingdom representation of <i>Hauron</i> in the form of a falcon, protecting a juvenile, possibly <i>Rameses II</i> or one of his sons. (Egyptian Museum accession number JE 46735, Cairo, photographed 2024).	219
Figure 13.4: A Greco-Roman Period representation of the sphinx-like deity <i>Tutu</i> . Note the head of a snake at the end of the lion's tail (The Metropolitan Museum, accession number 30.8.71, New York).	220
Figure 13.5: Detail from one of the wooden panels recovered from the Third Dynasty tomb of <i>Hesry-Ra</i> at <i>Saqqara</i> . The lion to the left is depicted with a vertical but crooked upright feature, rising from the animal's back. This and the position of the tail, suggest this may be the obscure lion deity, <i>Mehit</i> . The lion to the right is distinguished perhaps only by the different position of the tail (Egyptian Museum accession number CG 1428, Cairo, photographed 2016).	222
Figure 13.6: Photo-montage representation of the <i>Netjerikhet</i> Stela. The decoration of the front face of the stela (middle) is divided into two registers, each of which contains the king's <i>serekh</i> followed by alternating jackals and lions (detail, left). The two flanking faces of the stela (middle left and middle right) are also divided into two registers, each	

	of which is dominated by an undulating snake, carved in high relief (detail, right). (<i>Imhotep</i> Museum, <i>Saqqara</i>).	224
Figure 13.7:	A New Kingdom snake stela. (Egyptian Museum accession number 30/10/26/9, Cairo, photographed 2016).	225
Figure 13.8:	Extract from the Royal Annals from the First Dynasty reign of <i>Den</i> , which includes a reference to the <i>senuti</i> shrine (circled), flanked by a pair of tall rectilinear standing stones, that are very similar in shape to the <i>Netjerikhet</i> Stela (Figure 13.6).	226
Figure 13.9:	The evolving iconography of <i>Mafdet</i> . Left, is a representation of the leonine deity <i>Mafdet</i> with identifying heraldic devices, from the reign of the First Dynasty pharaoh, <i>Den</i> . Right, is a representation of the ‘claws of <i>Mafdet</i> ’, from the papyrus of <i>Khonsou-Renep</i> , Twenty-First Dynasty. Although the lioness is not shown in this later example, the symbolism of the knife remains evident.	229
Figure 13.10:	An example of the board game <i>Mehen</i> , with the playing board taking the form of a coiled snake. (Egyptian Museum accession number JE 44918, Cairo, photographed 2024).	231
Figure 13.11:	Lion-shaped gaming pieces carved from ivory and used to play the board game, <i>Mehen</i> (Egyptian Museum accession number JE 44918, Cairo, photographed 2024).	231

Chapter 14: The Rise of the Sun-God

Figure 14.1:	A golden sunset at Giza.	233
Figure 14.2:	The cartouche of the last pharaoh of the Fifth Dynasty, <i>Unas</i> . The cartouche represented an encircling loop of rope, the ends of which form the straight baseline which in this case, was placed to the left of the oval.	234
Figure 14.3:	The inscription on this ivory comb from the reign of the First Dynasty pharaoh <i>Djet</i> , may be one of the earliest surviving references to the sun-god found in a pharaonic context (Egyptian Museum accession number JE 47176, Cairo, photographed 2024).	235
Figure 14.4:	This statue (left) of the priest <i>Hetepdief</i> is carved in granite and has been dated to the Second Dynasty. On the rear of his right shoulder (right) is carved the names of the first three pharaohs of the Second Dynasty: <i>Hotepsekhemwy</i> , <i>Nebra</i> and <i>Ninetjer</i> (Egyptian Museum accession number JE 34557, Cairo, photographed 2016).	236
Figure 14.5:	The rock-cut platform in the northern court of the Step Pyramid enclosure, that has been linked with early forms of sun-worship.	238
Figure 14.6:	A simulation of how the original Second Dynasty statue of a huge lion at Giza may have looked. A lion statue similar to this was the precursor to the Great Sphinx. Naturally, many of the features present on the modern photographs used for this simulation, will not have been present in the Second Dynasty.	242
Figure 14.7:	One of two restored ceramic lions found at North <i>Saqqara</i> (see Figure 12.12). The detail to the right, shows the area between the front paws of the lion, with the cartouche of <i>Khufu</i> stamped into the clay (lower arrow), facing the remains of a human figure, of which only the feet have survived (upper arrow). Note the prominent claws and compare with Figure 3.8 (Egyptian Museum accession number J 99683, Cairo, photographed 2019).	246
Figure 14.8:	The <i>Abu Rawash</i> sphinx, originally carved in limestone with areas of added plaster (for example, on the forepaws and crown of the head - A). As indicated at B, sections of the plaster have become damaged, exposing the original ears of the lion (Egyptian Museum, Cairo, photographed 2004).	247
Figure 14.9:	A <i>Ba</i> -bird with a human head, a personification of the spirit of the deceased. (The Atkinson, accession number 807, Southport, photographed 2014).	248

Chapter 15: The Great Sphinx of Giza

Figure 15.1:	The Great Sphinx of Giza.	251
Figure 15.2:	The Step Pyramid complex of <i>Djoser</i> , built from imperishable stone.	254
Figure 15.3:	The pyramid of the last pharaoh of the Fifth Dynasty, <i>Unas</i> , at <i>Saqqara</i> . The chambers beneath this much-ruined pyramid contain the earliest surviving copies of the Pyramid Texts.	255
Figure 15.4:	Ancient Egyptian copper tools (Egyptian Museum, Cairo, photographed 2024).	258

Appendices

Appendix A: Original Ground Levels in the Vicinity of the Great Sphinx

Figure A1:	Proposed reconstruction of original ground levels. The Great Sphinx and adjacent tombs and temples are shown for context only and will not originally have been present.	261
Figure A2:	An approximation of Lehner's model of original ground levels in the vicinity of the Great Sphinx and the Central Field (in blue), overlain on the reconstruction of original ground level presented earlier in this Appendix.	264
Figure A3:	The tomb of <i>Kaunesut</i> to the rear (west) of the <i>Khafra</i> valley temple. Although modified during the construction of the tomb, the undulating rockhead surface running through the tomb (arrowed) is likely to reflect original ground levels in this area. The trench in the left foreground is discussed in Section 1 of this Appendix (item 1d).	265
Figure A4:	Looking north-west across the Central Field from <i>Gebel al-Qibli</i> . Remnants of the original ground level are preserved in the upper surface of the rock-cut tombs in this area.	266
Figure A5:	Adaptation of Figure A4, showing an interpretation of the original escarpment in the Central Field, and the original ground features above and below the escarpment (see also Figure 11.6).	267

Appendix B: The Sequence of Construction of the Great Sphinx, the *Khafra* Valley Temple and the Sphinx Temple

Figure B1:	Unquarried bedrock surface at the north-west corner of the <i>Khafra</i> valley temple (the white arrows identify the upper bedrock surface), with the eastern end of the <i>Khafra</i> causeway just visible to the right (yellow arrow). Chisel marks are visible along sections of this cutting.	269
Figure B2:	The layout of the <i>Khafra</i> valley temple with the proposed section of northern boundary wall shaded grey (after Ricke, figure 2).	270
Figure B3:	Shallow cuttings in the pavement in front of the south-east corner of the Sphinx Temple. It has been suggested that these represent the foundations of the northern section of a boundary wall that surrounded the adjacent <i>Khafra</i> valley temple (Figure B2). The arrow indicates a well-defined upward step in this shallow excavation which may represent the western limit of the cutting.	271
Figure B4:	Extract from detailed survey plan of the <i>Khafra</i> valley temple and Sphinx Temple, with grey shading indicating the shallow cuttings in the pavement in front of the Sphinx Temple (Figure B3), and original ground level contours taken from Appendix A, Figure A1 (orange lines). The dashed red lines indicate the approximate alignment of Ricke's northern boundary wall (Figure B2). Note that there is no clear evidence presented on this detailed survey drawing for the continuation of the proposed northern boundary wall foundation trenches across the floor of the open Sphinx Temple court. The feature indicated by the arrow and the area shaded red, are discussed later in this Appendix.	272
Figure B5:	Stage 1 of the excavation of the Great Sphinx and Sphinx Enclosure. New Kingdom features such as the <i>Amenhotep</i> II temple are shown for context only and will not have been present at that stage.	275
Figure B6:	Stage 2 - Excavation of the Sphinx Temple terrace.	276
Figure B7:	Part of the possibly mis-aligned cutting that initially defined the western limit of the Sphinx Temple terrace (see also the dashed blue line on Figure B4). The upper part of this rock-cut internal wall (white arrow – see item 3 below) preserves this initial cutting, which was aligned a few degrees east of north. This cutting projects across to the southern wall of the Sphinx Temple (blue arrow) extending beyond, to the northern wall of the <i>Khafra</i> valley temple (Figure B4, solid blue line). The lower section of this internal wall (yellow arrow), shows a revised alignment which being closer to true north, may have been a subsequent modification. It appears that the floor of the Sphinx Temple was lowered slightly to accommodate this re-alignment.	277

Figure B8:	Stage 3 - The first phase of the Sphinx Temple. New Kingdom features such as the <i>Amenhotep</i> II temple are shown for context only and will not have been present at this stage.	279
Figure B9:	Stage 5 - The final phase of Sphinx Temple construction.	280
Figure B10:	Excavations for the Sphinx Enclosure, Sphinx Temple terrace and <i>Khafra</i> valley temple. Isometric representation of the alternative sequence of construction.	282

Appendix C: Mapping the Member II Strata at Giza

Figure C1:	Mapping the Member II strata based on published geological and topographical data. North is to the right. Not to scale.	285
Figure C2:	Geological sketch map indicating a tentative distribution of Member II strata across the <i>Giza</i> Plateau.	286
Figure C3:	Tentative comparison between the detailed geology of the Great Sphinx and the tomb of <i>Khentkawes</i>	287

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- Figure 5.2 Topography based on Arab Republic of Egypt, Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction, Topographic sheets, F17 and F18, 1:5000. Topography indicated on the source map has been modified to indicate possible original ground levels. Annotations and colour added by the author.
- Figure 5.6 Source: Richard Lepsius, 1810–1884, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lepsius-Projekt_tw_1-1-16.jpg, 'Lepsius-Projekt tw 1-1-16', <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/legalcode> Image unchanged except for the addition in red and blue.
- Figure 5.7 Topography based on Arab Republic of Egypt, Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction, Topographic sheets, F17 and F18, 1:5000, with archaeology after M. Lehner, 1985, 'The development of the Giza Necropolis: The Khufu project', *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo*, volume 41. Colour and annotations by the author.
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- Figure 7.2 Topography based on Arab Republic of Egypt, Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction, Topographic sheets, F17 and F18, 1:5000. Colour and annotations by the author.
- Figure 7.3 Upper right image from G.A. Reisner, 1931, 'Mycerinus: the temples of the third pyramid at Giza', Harvard, plate 70c.
- Figure 7.4 Topography based on Arab Republic of Egypt, Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction, Topographic sheets, F17 and F18, 1:5000. Colour added by the author.

- Figure 8.12 Topography based on Arab Republic of Egypt, Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction, Topographic sheets, F17 and F18, 1:5000, with detail taken from T. Aigner, 1983, 'A Pliocene Cliff Line Around the Giza Pyramids Plateau, Egypt.', *Palaeogeography, Palaeoclimatology, Palaeoecology*, 42, figure 1. Colour and annotations by the author.
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- Figure 9.6 Pre-1978 photograph from the author's collection of archive photographs. Published (undated) by the Egyptian State Tourist Administration. Annotations by the author.
- Figure 9.8 M.E. Lehner, 1991, 'Archaeology of an Image: The Great Sphinx of Giza', PhD dissertation, Yale, plate 2.11. Source: <https://zenodo.org/record/1203621> accessed 12 August 2023. Reproduction permitted under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>.
- Figure 9.12 Based on M.E. Lehner, 1991, 'Archaeology of an Image: The Great Sphinx of Giza', PhD dissertation, Yale, figure 5.11. Source: <https://zenodo.org/record/1203621> accessed 12 August 2023. Reproduction permitted under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>. Annotations by the author.
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- Figure 10.3 From the author's collection of archive photographs. Provenance unknown. With annotations by the author.
- Figure 10.4 From R. Lepsius, 1853, 'Letters from Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Peninsula of Sinai'. London: Henry G Bohn, p51-53.
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- Figure 13.4 From [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tutu_\(Egyptian_god\)#/media/File:Tutu_MET_DP243467.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tutu_(Egyptian_god)#/media/File:Tutu_MET_DP243467.jpg). Open access.
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- Figure B5 Base map after M.E. Lehner, 1991, 'Archaeology of an Image: The Great Sphinx of Giza', PhD dissertation, Yale, figure 4.2. Source: <https://zenodo.org/record/1203621> accessed 12 August 2023. Reproduction permitted under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>. Colour and annotations by the author.
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- Figure B9 Base map after M.E. Lehner, 1991, 'Archaeology of an Image: The Great Sphinx of Giza', PhD dissertation, Yale, figure 4.2. Source: <https://zenodo.org/record/1203621> accessed 12 August 2023. Reproduction permitted under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>. Colour and annotations by the author.
- Figure C1 Topographic data based on Arab Republic of Egypt, Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction, Topographic sheets, F17 and F18, 1:5000. Colour and annotations by the author.
- Figure C2 Topographic data based on Arab Republic of Egypt, Ministry of Housing and Reconstruction, Topographic sheets, F17 and F18, 1:5000. Colour and annotations by the author.
- Figure C3 Stratigraphic overlay based on M.E. Lehner, 1991, 'Archaeology of an Image: The Great Sphinx of Giza', PhD dissertation, Yale, figure 5.7. Source: <https://zenodo.org/record/1203621> accessed 12 August 2023. Reproduction permitted under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>.

Acknowledgments

I want to start by expressing my gratitude to everyone who has ever taken a serious interest in my work. It matters less to me that you agree with my ideas, more that you consider them worthy of your time.

When I first started to research the geology of the Great Sphinx, I was encouraged to publish my ideas by Robert Partridge. Although Bob is no longer with us, a great deal of what has followed is the result of his initial encouragement. Those early publications brought my ideas to the attention of another sadly departed friend, Ian Mathieson. Thanks to Ian, I gained direct experience of working on an archeological expedition in Egypt, experience that I will always treasure.

I also owe a great debt of thanks to Peter Allingham and Janet Shepherd at Ancient World Tours, who have been the 'Opener of the Ways' to so many incredible places in Egypt, Morocco and Jordan.

Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, I need to thank my family, who continue to give me the time and the opportunity to pursue my interests in the ancient world. Hopefully, it won't be too long until we can share the magic of ancient Egypt with our grandsons, Lucas and Thomas.

Liverpool
September 2025

Part I - Setting The Scene

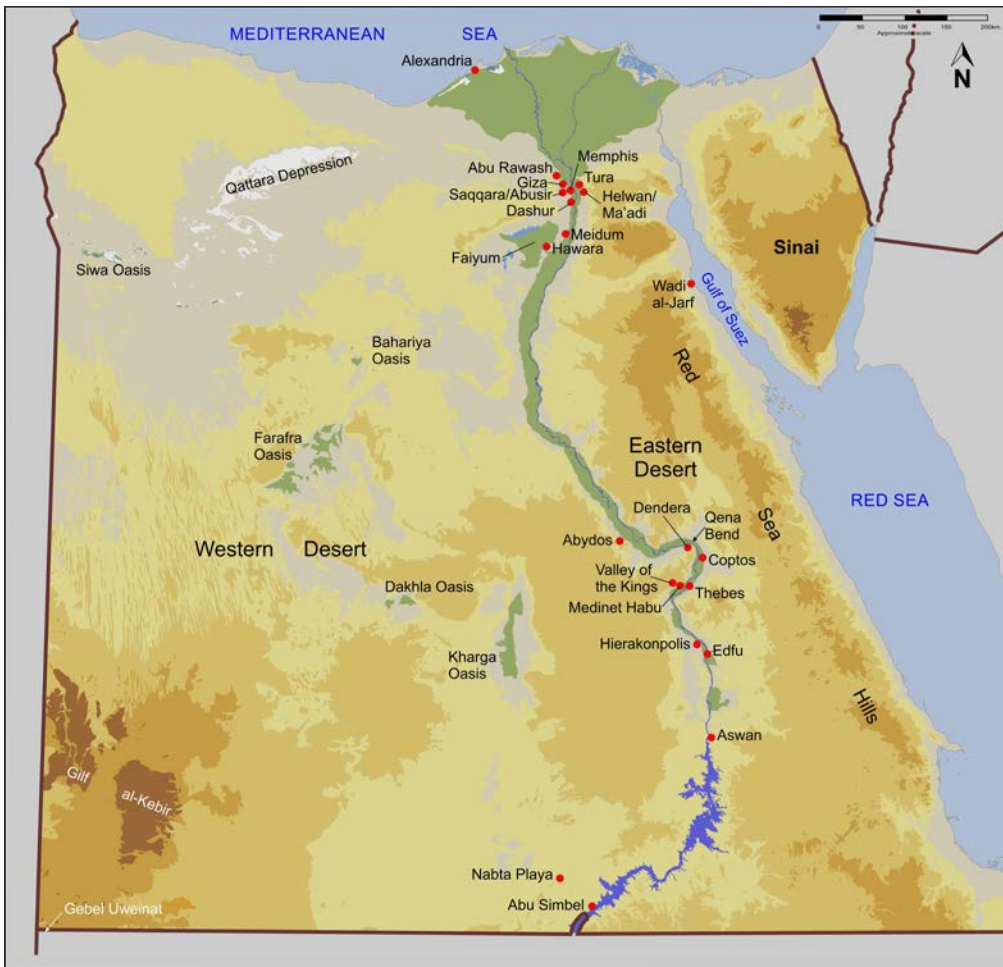


Figure i: A sketch map of Egypt. All locations referred to in the text are indicated on this map.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The people of modern Egypt call it *Abu al-Hol*, the father of terror. For the rest of the world, it's the 'Great Sphinx' or simply the 'Sphinx'. I am of course talking about the Great Sphinx of *Giza* (Figure 1.1), the enormous rock-hewn statue with the body of a lion and the head of a pharaoh, that for millennia has guarded the eastern entrance to the *Giza* Necropolis, west of modern Cairo. The generally held view within Egyptology, is that the Great Sphinx was built during ancient Egypt's Fourth Dynasty and was part of the same explosion in pharaonic construction that gave us the three pyramids of *Giza* (Figure 1.2). This suggests that the Great Sphinx was built about 2500 BC, over four and a half thousand years ago. Since the early 1990s however, a number of researchers including myself, have suggested that the Great Sphinx is older than this.^{1,2} The basis for many of the theories for an early Sphinx lie in my own technical discipline of geology, and draw principally on the features of weathering and erosion of the limestone



Figure 1.1: The Great Sphinx of *Giza*, with the Old Kingdom pyramids of *Khufu* (right) and *Khafra* (left).

¹ Schoch, 1992.

² Reader, 2001.

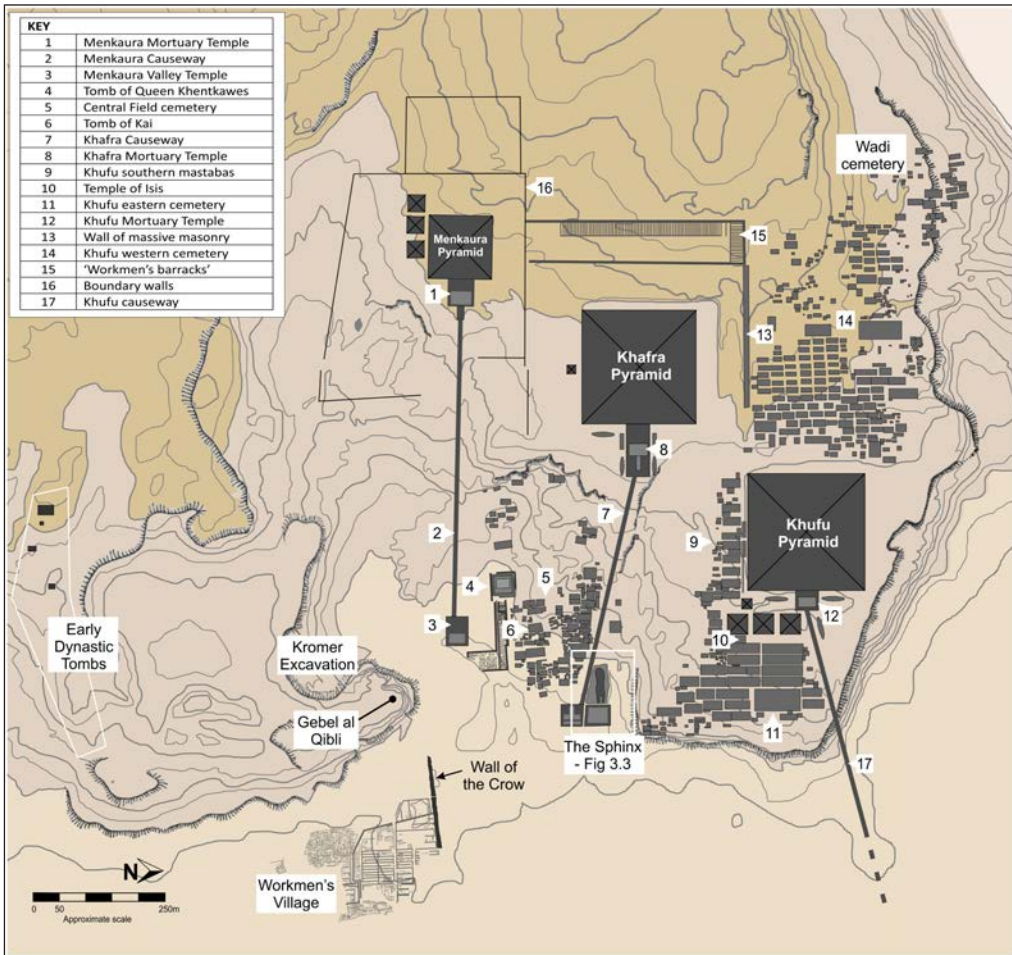


Figure 1.2: Plan of the Giza Necropolis.

bedrock from which the Great Sphinx was carved. The main purpose of this book is to attempt to reconcile this geological evidence with the established archaeology of ancient Egypt, to determine when the Great Sphinx of Giza was built and perhaps more importantly, why it was built.

Many people will question the need to re-examine the age of the Great Sphinx, perhaps believing that because the monument is so familiar, we must already have a thorough understanding of its ancient origins. It is true that the Great Sphinx seems familiar, however as we will see, even the most widely accepted aspects, such as its associations with worship of the sun,³ appear to be based on very little direct evidence. Furthermore, few people seem to have noted that the familiar form of ancient Egyptian deities, often represented with a

³ Lehner, 1997, p127.



Figure 1.3: A typical ancient Egyptian deity, with a human body and animal head (Temple of *Seti I*, *Abydos*).

human body and animal head (Figure 1.3), is reversed in the sphinx, which is one of very few concepts from ancient Egypt that combines a human head with an animal body. In this book, we will explore the potential implications of this important distinction and its possible significance for our understanding of what the Great Sphinx may have meant to the people of ancient Egypt.

Such has been mankind's fascination with the Great Sphinx, that even after the glories of the Pharaonic Era, it continued to be venerated by the Greek and Roman occupiers of Egypt, and the monument remained a source of fascination throughout medieval times. Together with their fanciful descriptions, travelers since the 1500s have left us illustrations of the Great Sphinx, illustrations that range from the whimsical to the remarkably accurate (Figure 1.4). The Great Sphinx has also been a long-standing muse of photographers and since the first images in the 1850s, must surely have become one of the most photographed ancient monuments on earth. In addition to becoming firmly embedded in the popular psyche, the Great Sphinx has also drawn

the attention of treasure hunters, archaeologists and Egyptologists. The earliest recorded 'modern' excavation of the Great Sphinx is probably that undertaken by Giovanni Battista Caviglia in 1817, who cleared the area around the chest and front paws. Since then, excavators have adopted increasingly sophisticated techniques, with the hope of unlocking the history of this incredible monument.

Despite this deep and long-standing interest, as we will explore in this book, we know relatively little about the Great Sphinx and its origins. Early 'archaeology' in Egypt was limited to the recovery of the most impressive artefacts for museums or private collections and arguably, it is only during the last century that we have looked beyond the 'treasures' of ancient Egypt in our attempts to develop a broader understanding of the Great Sphinx and the motivations of those who built it. A recurrent theme of the history of the Great Sphinx, has been the need to clear the monument of the desert sand that rapidly engulfs it (Chapter 3). In many cases therefore, the evidence encountered when working at the Great Sphinx has been filtered by millennia of excavation and re-excavation of those relentlessly accumulating sands. Although recent archaeological work has encountered material that has survived undisturbed since the



Figure 1.4: Napoleon meets the Great Sphinx of Giza ('Bonaparte Before the Sphinx', Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1886).



Figure 1.5: The highly decorated interior of the temple of *Dendera*, which was built 2500 years later than the pyramids of Giza.

age of the pyramids (p94), this has been the exception rather than the rule, with only limited areas of undisturbed material available for modern scientific study.

Our understanding of many aspects of the Pharaonic Era has benefitted greatly from the survival of hieroglyphic texts written on papyrus, shards of pottery, stone slabs and most spectacularly, the walls of tombs and temples (Figure 1.5). It is important to recognise however, that few texts have survived from the earliest parts of the Pharaonic Era, with the earliest known direct reference to the Great Sphinx not written until at least a thousand years after the monument is conventionally thought to have been built.

When the archaeological evidence for the Great Sphinx is reviewed objectively, as we will do in the following chapters, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that its widely accepted Fourth Dynasty attribution is based largely on circumstantial evidence. This was certainly the view reached by the respected Egyptologist Professor Selim Hassan, who after completing what was probably the first modern archaeological excavation of the Sphinx in 1936, wrote:

Therefore, taking all these things into consideration, it seems that we must give the credit of erecting this, the world's most wonderful statue, to *Khafra*, but always with this reservation that there is not one single contemporary inscription which connects the Sphinx with *Khafra*, so sound as it may appear, we must treat the evidence as circumstantial, until such time as a lucky turn of the spade of the excavator will reveal to the world a definite reference to the erection of the Sphinx.⁴

Although more recent excavations have not provided the definitive evidence Hassan had hoped for, the Great Sphinx is still widely considered to have been built during the reign of *Khafra*.⁵ Even within Egyptology however, there is currently no consensus, with recent research leading to the identification of other Fourth Dynasty pharaohs such as *Khufu* or *Djedefra*, as its possible builders (Chapter 3). In addition to investigating who may have built the Great Sphinx, it is important that we try to understand the role that the Great Sphinx and sphinxes in general, may have had within the complex pharaonic belief system. For this it will be necessary to look beyond the narrow focus of the monument itself, addressing not only the Giza Necropolis, but also other important sites in ancient Egypt. As suggested at the beginning of this introduction however, Egyptology is not the only scientific discipline that is able to shed light on the origins of this unique monument. The Great Sphinx is the only free-standing monument from ancient Egypt that was quarried entirely from the surrounding bedrock and as such, understanding the geology of the monument is vital. I am not the first geologist to investigate these issues, and although a number of conflicting geological interpretations have been put forward, these differing views do not diminish the important role that geology has to play in deepening our understanding of the Great Sphinx, or of pharaonic Egypt more generally.⁶

⁴ Hassan, 1953, p164.

⁵ The English rendering of ancient Egyptian names and words leaves much to personal preference. Like many names of pharaohs, the name *Khafra* includes a reference to the sun-god *Ra*. *Ra* was identified in ancient texts with just a single hieroglyphic symbol, which can be transliterated simply as 'R'. As with many ancient systems of writing, the hieroglyphic script did not use vowels and therefore, we cannot know whether the name of the sun-god was pronounced *Re* or *Ra*. Like Selim Hassan, I prefer to use *Ra*.

⁶ Reader, 2023.

Part 1 of this book provides a general overview of ancient Egyptian history and how the Great Sphinx is conventionally thought to fit within that history. There are chapters that describe both the Great Sphinx and the wider *Giza* Necropolis, together with a chapter that introduces the important role that landscape is likely to have played in the early development of the necropolis (Chapter 5). Part 2 of the book provides a general introduction to the geology of Egypt, together with a focus on the geology of both the *Giza* Plateau and the Great Sphinx. Drawing on the geological evidence, Part 3 of the book identifies a number of anomalies associated with the conventional Fourth Dynasty attribution of the Great Sphinx, opening the way for a re-examination of the history of this and a number of other monuments at *Giza*. In many respects, the first three parts of this book have been the easiest to write. Guided by the established archaeology and my assessment of the relevant geological evidence, it has been possible to reach quite definitive conclusions about how the Great Sphinx fits into the sequence of monumental development not only at *Giza*, but also more generally within the Nile Valley.

By the very nature of the material available to us for study however, the discussions presented in Part 4 of this book should be regarded as less definitive. In that final section, we examine the role that the concept of the sphinx may have played in ancient Egyptian religion, specifically in relation to the great sun-god Ra. For this, it has been necessary to engage with some of the very latest research in the field of Egyptology, in order to examine the earliest phases of the Pharaonic Era, and aspects of the more remote periods that went before. The evidence we have for these early periods is sparse, with on-going excavations in Egypt revealing new data which may well require future revision of the interpretation that I have presented. Part 4 of this book should be regarded therefore, as an interpretation of the currently available evidence, an interpretation that I hope sparks further debate and encourages other researchers to continue to investigate the history of the *Giza* Plateau, a history which dates back long before the construction of the pyramids of *Khufu*, *Khafra* and *Menkaura*.

As I have collected and sifted the relevant evidence that underpins my conclusions, it has been necessary at times to pay attention to small but often vitally important issues, often to correct inaccurate or unsubstantiated claims that have been made elsewhere. To avoid this becoming a distraction for the main chapters of the book, I have explored these detailed issues in a series of appendices, which I hope provide considerable additional weight of evidence, particularly for those readers who are more familiar with the issues being explored.

Most importantly, I hope that you enjoy this re-examination of the history of the world's most iconic monument. The fact that the history of the Great Sphinx remains such a widely debated issue among Egyptologists, geologists and the wider public, is an indication of the importance of the Great Sphinx for the history of mankind.