Solving the Riddle of the Sphinx on the Roof

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The sphinx is a mythical creature with woman’s head and winged lion’s body originating probably in Egypt, where it may have served as a guardian of the king. In the Greek tragedians, the sphinx is linked to Thebes and to Oedipus. The story goes as follows: after the Delphic oracle had predicted to King Laius of Thebes that any son born to him would kill his father and marry his mother, his son Oedipus was exposed on a hillside to die, but was rescued by shepherds and raised by the king and queen of Corinth. Later learning of the prophecy himself, Oedipus left Corinth to avoid his fate, encountered Laius at the crossroads between Delphi and Thebes and killed him, not realizing that this was his true father. He eventually arrives in Thebes where the sphinx is terrorizing the city, devouring anyone who cannot answer its riddle: ‘What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?’ Oedipus correctly solves the riddle, the answer being ‘man,’ and goes on to marry his biological mother, Iocasta, ignorant of her true identity. He fathers four children who each come to a sad end.

Sphinxes have been depicted in ancient art from early times; the pose is either crouching or seated. In Near Eastern art, the most famous and one of the earliest is the stone monument at Giza in Egypt, dated 2,600 bc, but other examples appear frequently in minor arts over the centuries. They enter the Greek world in the Orientalizing period, occurring in vase paintings, bronzes, ivories, jewellery and small terracotta figurines. In Archaic times, marble statues of sphinxes appear on the top of votive columns and, at Athens, on funerary monuments. Etruscan stone sphinxes are often found near tomb entrances. Presumably these sphinxes function as guardians, a rôle that may go back to Near Eastern sources.

But another group of sphinxes, in terracotta, appear as akroteria on the corners of certain temples during the second half of the 6th century ac, and they share the common features of being shown seated with body in profile and head turned to one side to face the spectator, similar to the pose on marble Attic grave stelai. These examples occur in mainland Greece, Sicily and in Etruria and Central Italy. What is the rôle of sphinxes in relation to these roofs? By examining where and when we find them, we can try to understand their presence in terms of the cultural identity of the Etruscans.

Among the earliest examples from mainland Greece is a terracotta sphinx assigned to the roof of a building identified as the treasury of Syracuse at Olympia and dated 580–570. She wears the tall head-dress known as a polos, as sphinxes often do on Protocorinthian vases. Typically for the Greek terracotta sphinxes that follow suit, as we will see, her chest is painted with a scale pattern and her wing curves upward, divided into two sets of feathers, smaller ones at the base of the wing and longer outer ones. Presumably this roof, including the sphinx akroteria, copied a roof or roofs at Syracuse itself, assuming that treasury roofs were intended to be visually recognizable as representing their home city. A number of examples of terracotta sphinxes do come from Sicily and specifically from Syracuse, for example, a wing from Syracuse reported to resemble Corinthian sphinxes and two sphinx tails. However, none are known to be as early as the one decorating the treasury at Olympia.

Corinth has produced a number of terracotta sphinxes that functioned as lateral akroteria on the second Temple of Apollo, constructed around 550–540 ac. Unfortunately they are all very fragmentary and represent successive replacements over the long life of the temple, but the high quality and large scale speak for some remarkable statues. The preserved evidence of an akroterion base attached to the back of the bottommost unit of the raking sima confirms the placement of these statues at the lower corners of the pediment. Sphinx akroteria on the Corinthian temple built by Bacchiads, returned from their long exile under the Kypselid reign, may have been intended to recall the myth of the sphinx, with the exiled Oedipus subduing the monster that had controlled his native city.

Of smaller scale, but better preserved, is another terracotta sphinx from Corinth dated to the third quarter of the 6th century; the burnished surface and bright colours are characteristic of Corinthian products of this date. Part of a decorated collar around the neck is preserved, a feature found on contemporary examples from the pan-Hellenic sanctuaries of Olympia and Delphi. From a sanctuary of Artemis Laphria at Kalydon in northwestern Greece comes one of the few examples preserving its face, as well as part of the polos; the small dot earrings are a touching tribute to her feminine nature. An important example comes from Thebes itself, the home of the story of the sphinx in mainland Greece; this head and a large, joining section with part of the painted scale pattern of the shoulder and a section of the wing with smaller inner feathers and larger outer ones, was supposedly found near the temple of Apollo Isemnios. The join between the two fragments indicates that the face was turned 90º to the right. Here too a decorated collar is partially preserved, and she wears dot earrings in addition to a polos.

All of the Greek mainland terracotta sphinx akroteria, with the possible exception of the Calydon examples, are thought on technical and aesthetic grounds to have been made by Corinthian workshops, and the roofs with which they are associated are all of Corinthian style.

In Etruria, terracotta sphinxes used in an architectural context appear equally early as in mainland Greece and, presumably, Sicily. The earliest known examples occur at Poggio Civitate (Murlo), where at least one (Fig. 1) is shown standing and is male, a rare representation in ancient art where the sphinx is generally female. The statue faces straight ahead...
and is characterized by its hairdo, with long locks curling backwards at the shoulders; its attachment to a semi-cylindrical ridge tile assures its use as a ridge akroterion. It is uncertain whether the other statues of sphinxes from the same roof were also depicted as male as they are too fragmentary. Other features of this roof find closest comparisons in Corinthian vase painting, where male sphinxes first occur in the Early Corinthian period, so this might also be the source of inspiration for the male sphinx statue. Sadly the paint is not preserved on the statues, so we cannot confirm the added details that should be present, such as a painted scale pattern covering the chest and feathers on the wings. The fragments of sphinxes were excavated near the four corners of the square courtyard building, and may have stood at the ends of the ridge at each corner. The roof can be dated on stratigraphical and stylistic bases to 580–575.

The Murlo roof is thus contemporary with that of the treasury of Syracuse at Olympia, which provides the earliest example of terracotta sphinxes used on roofs in mainland Greece, and may reflect a similar practice in Syracuse itself. Of particular interest is the fact that these two roofs may share another technical feature which is not used elsewhere during the early Archaic period, to the best of my knowledge: both use a special element designed to cover the joint between adjacent blocks of simas, a cover element that rises along the back of the sima and hooks over the top, with a pendant face covering the top front of the sima. At Murlo, the face is a feline head, on the treasury of Syracuse a Gorgoneion, both common Corinthian motifs. To my mind, the makers of these two roofs had knowledge of one another or of another roof that contained this feature, probably at Syracuse itself, which might also explain the early presence of sphinx akroteria on both roofs.

A small number of terracotta sphinxes belong to a series of terracotta roofs at Caere, datable to the period 540–510, that are closely tied by their painted details to designs found on Caeretan hydriæ. Both probably represent the products of a group of East Greek artisans resident in Etruria, to judge from decorative motifs and technical features. Despite its lacunae, one statue now in Copenhagen (Fig. 2) but probably originally from Caere, can be fully reconstructed as a seated sphinx with head turned to one side. The fragmentary head, if it belongs, wears a diadem. On the white neck is painted a decorated collar, a feature that is preserved on Greek sphinxes dated to the third quarter of the 6th century. Three long strands of beaded locks, the outermost lock curving towards the back, are not characteristic of mainland Greek sphinxes but instead recall the hair strands on the earlier Murlo sphinxes.

Fragments from the excavations in Vigna Parrocchiale at Caere may also belong to sphinx akroteria. Part of the head is preserved wearing a tall polos painted with overlapping rows of palmettes, each of a different colour, including light brown, grey, white and red, pointing towards the right side of the head. The ear was modelled in relief, and is adorned with a disc earring. A second fragment preserves hair alongside an area with a painted scale pattern forming oblique rows. The scale pattern and its location in relation to the head suggests that these fragments belong to one or more sphinxes with the head turned to one side and the chest in profile decorated with a scale pattern, as is regular on Greek sphinx akroteria. The tall polos recalls those worn by terracotta sphinx akroteria from the Syracuse treasury at Olympia and from Corinthian workshops in mainland Greece.

A different group of terracotta sphinxes appears in Central Italy as lateral akroteria on the corners of temple buildings carrying roofs of the so-called Veii-Rome-Velletri decorative system, all dated c. 530 BC. Although roofs made with the same moulds for the figured friezes of the revetment plaques have been found in Veii, Rome and Velletri, sphinx akroteria associated with these roofs are preserved only in Rome on the
second-phase temple at S. Omobono and in Velletri. The Velletri sphinx (Fig. 3) had a separately made head, provided with a long neck ending in a sort of collar, and its female nature is also recognizable from the fact that the skin is painted white, a convention in ancient art where men are instead shown with reddish skin; the head is bare, typical of sphinxes in East Greek vase painting, and the style of the head is also East Greek, two of several features suggesting that these roofs were probably made by East Greek refugee artisans fleeing the Persian expansion into Asia Minor c. 540. Similar sphinxes appear also on large painted wall plaques from Caere, that may have been painted by East Greek artisans resident there. These have features that differ from the Syracuse-Corinthian model and may represent an East Greek type: there appear to be no painted scales on the chest, and the wings have a single long row of feathers, bordered along the upper side by a solid band.

Thus we have two different groups of seated terracotta sphinx akroteria represented by the preserved examples in central Italy, both of which are depicted with head turned to one side. One group, represented at Caere, wearing a polos, earrings and collar, with chest decorated with a painted scale pattern and wings divided into multiple sets of feathers, can be singled out as conforming to the Corinthian type of the second half of the 6th century, which may have originated in Syracuse. The second group, represented by S. Omobono and Velletri, has a similar pose but instead wears no head-dress and has a single set of long feathers framed by a tapering band along the top edge; its origin is East Greek. The sphinxes of these two types are clustered in southern Etruria, Rome and Latium and are associated with a specific set of roofs made by artisans of East Greek background to judge from decorative motifs found earlier in Asia Minor.

Although the Asia Minor roofs had a tradition of figured friezes on the raking simas and revetment plaques that covered the wooden rafters, they used no akroteria, sphinxes or otherwise, whereas the roofs at Rome and Velletri, and some at Caere, had not only sphinxes at the corners but central akroteria in the form of statuary groups representing Herakles and Athena, flanked by large volutes decorated with a painted scale pattern. The roof at S. Omobono had a second statuary group preserving part of two figures, one with its arm around the shoulders of the other, identified as Leukothea with Palaimon, figures from Corinthian religious history linked in Italy to the cult of Mater Matuta, the deity to whom the S. Omobono temple was dedicated. Thus, the presence of akroteria on the roofs of the Veii-Rome-Velletri decorative system must represent a choice made by the patron who paid for construction of the temples rather than forming part of the tradition of these terracotta workers. The patron in question, at least for the S. Omobono temple, was Tarquinius Superbus, the king of Rome who was descended from Demaratus, a wealthy Corinthian exile of the Bacchiad family, and his Etruscan wife. The akroteria of Herakles and Athena, and Leukothea with Palaimon, have elsewhere been interpreted as demonstrating Tarquinii’s desire to emphasize the Corinthian part of his heritage. The sphinx akroteria may be a further effort on his part to stress his Corinthian background, by introducing a roof element specifically tied to the recently built temple at Corinth, which in turn may follow a tradition established in Syracuse, a Corinthian colony in Sicily founded by Bacchiads. By the same token, the use of akroteria on the ridge of the building bears witness to his Etruscan heritage, as this is a feature of Etruscan roofs traceable back to the 7th century in terracotta and perhaps even earlier in wood on roofs of Villanovan huts. The roofs on which these akroteria sat, though apparently commissioned from East Greek artisans resident in Etruria, grow out of a long tradition of Etruscan buildings carrying figural friezes. Where the artisans had no familiarity with Corinthian models for the sphinx akroteria, as in Rome and Velletri, they used the type familiar to them from East Greek vase painting, but at Caere a clear attempt to copy Corinthian models is evident.

This study of terracotta sphinxes demonstrates that, as with all cultures, architectural adornment is the personal choice of the donor and when the patron is of mixed cultural background himself, the choices will reflect that background. The choices of Tarquinius Superbus, however, are no different from those of other Etruscans who regularly selected decorative elements from various different sources and combined them in original and innovative ways. Study of the terracotta sphinxes therefore contributes in a unique way to our knowledge of the regional, cultural and personal identity of the Etruscans. They are one aspect of the cultural complexity of Etruscan temples of Central Italy around 530 BC, which comprised figural friezes made by East Greek artisans following Etruscan traditions, architectural forms that include a tall stone podium with Etruscan mouldings and akroteria representing figures from Greek mythology.

Notes
1 Demisch 1977.
2 Moretti Sgubini 2001, 255, no. III.C.4, pl. XIX, with additional bibliography.
4 Moustaka 1993, 104–6, Group I, pls 86–8 and 92.a.
5 Payne 1931, 89.
6 Orsi 1918, 624, fig. 216.
8 Orsi 1918, fig. 215.
10 Moustaka 1993; Ducat 1967.

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Dyggve, E. and F. Poulsen 1948, Das Laphron, der Tempelbezirk von Kalydon, Copenhagen.
Edlund-Berry, I.E.M. 1992, The seated and standing statue akroteria from Poggio Civitate (Murlo), Rome.
Moustaka, A. 1993, Grossplastik aus Ton in Olympia (Olympische Forschungen XXII), Berlin and New York.
Rhomaios, K. 1951, Κεραυνός της Καλυδώνος, Athens.
Rystedt, E. 1983, Aquarossa IV. Early Etruscan Akroteria from Aquarossa and Poggio Civitate (Murlo), Stockholm.

12 Billot 1977.
13 Murlo, Antiquarium di Poggio Civitate, inv. 68-500 111199; Fullerton 1982, 2–5, no. 1; with fuller bibliography; Lacy 1985, 111–2, no. 3.304; Edlund-Berry 1992, 223, no. B.1, fig. 97; Phillips 1993, 23–4, fig. 17.
14 Payne 1931, 89 who also notes that Protocorinthian sphinxes are shown walking while Corinthian-phase sphinxes are always depicted in a seated position.
15 Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, inv. H.I.N. 720–721: Payne 1931, 89 who also notes that Protocorinthian sphinxes are shown walking while Corinthian-phase sphinxes are always depicted in a seated position.
16 Billot 1977.
18 Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, inv. H.I.N. 720–721: Payne 1931, 89 who also notes that Protocorinthian sphinxes are shown walking while Corinthian-phase sphinxes are always depicted in a seated position.
19 Fullerton 1982, 2–5, no. 1; with fuller bibliography; Lacy 1985, 111–2, no. 3.304; Edlund-Berry 1992, 223, no. B.1, fig. 97; Phillips 1993, 23–4, fig. 17.
21 Roncalli 1965, 381–452.
22 Billot 1977.
23 Billot 1977.
25 Rystedt 1983.

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