

The Mythical Sphinx in the Islamic Art of Egypt

Asmaa Abdallah Rashed Soliman Kasem

Boussy Muhammad Zidan

Hebatullah Muhammad Fathi

Faculty of Tourism and Hotels - Suez Canal University

Abstract

The Islamic art is distinguished by the affluence in representing mythical creatures, they are not only countless but also variant in shapes. Utilizing these creatures in the Islamic art was an outlet for the Islamic artist from any religious restrictions, strange and unfamiliar creatures, peerless in reality, so the artist will avoid mimicking God's creation. The different phases of the Islamic art of Egypt presented us with various mythical creatures such as the harpy, griffin, phoenix, sphinx, etc. This research sheds light on sphinx specifically. It appeared in many artifacts since the Umayyad period of Egypt. The research is an attempt to study both historical and artistic backgrounds of this mythical creature in the Islamic art of Egypt.

Keywords: mythical creatures, Sphinx, Islamic art, Phoenix, Harpy.

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Introduction

The idea of utilizing mythical creatures in different artifacts can be considered a cosmopolitan idea, as it almost existed in the arts of all the famous cultures. Sphinx appeared in most of the antecedent civilizations of Islam, So in order to study the historical artistic background of this mythical creature in the Egyptian Islamic art, we have to take a look on its representation in the former arts.

Overview of the Sphinx through all epochs

This hybrid mythical creature appeared in most of the antecedent civilizations of Islam. Sphinx also existed in arts of different Islamic periods with its famous features: a human head and a body of a winged lion.

The ancient Egyptian civilization

The sphinx might be considered an Egyptian invention as scholars considered the Giza sphinx a sort of prototype of the sphinxes to come.²

Some Egyptologists assume that the word sphinx is derived from the Greek word (sphingein) which means to squeeze or to bind³, while others believe that the ancient Egyptian name (shesep-ankh) due to a verbal distortion from a period to another changed to become Sphinx. Shesep-ankh was the sphinx's name during the middle kingdom.⁴ In the new kingdom, the sphinx was called (Horemakhet) or (Hormakhes)⁵ The Egyptian sphinx is a hybrid composed of a lion's body and a human head, a royal figure wearing the nemes⁶, and usually provided with a short false beard. It was depicted in several forms, the most popular of these was the form of a recumbent animal with its forelegs stretched out and separated from each other. Some sphinxes were depicted walking on all fours, while others were depicted seated. Sphinxes were mostly masculine representing a pharaoh, but starting from the new kingdom, there were female sphinxes representing queens (pl.1).⁷

The Assyrian mythology

A hybrid creature of Assyrian mythology, which is called Lamassu, mostly resembles the Egyptian sphinx. The word Lamassu was written in Assyrian texts to indicate the good angel or the guarding angel, thereafter the same word was used to refer to hybrid creatures formed of lion or a bull's body, eagle's wings and a human head.⁸ Statues of this creature were usually placed at the entrance of temples and palaces.⁹

Lamassu statues were provided with a fifth leg so that when viewed from the front it is standing firm, and when viewed from the side it appears to be striding forward against any evil.¹⁰ Its human head has a helmet with horns while its beard is curled (pl.2).

The Greek and Roman mythology

As what we have illustrated before, the word sphinx is of Greek origin, so it is normally for this creature to be called in Greek culture sphinx; sometimes it was also called phix.¹¹ It began to appear in Greek myth in the Orientalizing period¹² of the late eighth and seventh centuries B.C, when near eastern hybrid creatures gained popularity in the Greek mythology.¹³ Sphinx of Greek mythology has a different appearance than any other cultures; it has the body of a lion, head and breast of a woman¹⁴, in addition to eagle's wings and sometimes a serpent-headed tail (pl.3).

Early Greek depictions of the sphinx show it rapping or killing young men, it appeared also on grave stelae in Greece.¹⁵ We obtained much of our vision of the Greek sphinx from a famous ancient Greek play called Oedipus the king.¹⁶ In a part of this tragedy the hero Oedipus had to encounter a sphinx in order to be allowed entering Thebes.¹⁷ The confrontation scene between Oedipus and the sphinx was depicted a lot on Greek artifacts. This creature appeared also in the roman art. Roman rulers seem to have admired this creature a lot especially Augustus. Obviously Emperor Augustus took the sphinx as one of his symbols, as it appeared several times on coins of that age (pl.4).¹⁸

The Persian mythology

This creature the sphinx, was used in the ancient Persian art; we can observe sphinxes as common motifs in the Achaemenid art.¹⁹ In general, the Achaemenid sphinx has the form of a winged, human-headed bull and cylindrical headdress (pl.5).²⁰ This type of sphinxes can be bearded or without a beard²¹, some of them also can wear an earring while others don't.²²

The sphinx apparently continued to be part of the Parthian's²³ art, as it can be seen on various artifacts dating back to that age.²⁴

Although the Sasanian artist rarely introduces the sphinx²⁵, the winged lion appeared a lot on Sasanian artifacts especially the metal ones.²⁶

The Islamic art of Egypt

Abu al-Hawl is the Arabic name given to the sphinx since the Islamic opening of Egypt, this name literally means father of dread²⁷, and in English can be understood as the terrifying one.²⁸

Some Egyptologists mentioned that the name Abu al-Hawl might be a verbal distortion of an ancient Egyptian name, which is (Br- Hawl) or (Bo-Hawl), which means house of the lion.²⁹

There will be five different artifacts exhibiting the utilization of the sphinx in the Egyptian Islamic art throughout the subject matter of this research. We will notice from the following illustration that the sphinx began to appear since the Umayyad period of Egypt.

Samples of the Sphinx on Islamic masterpieces

Sphinx on a wool and linen tapestry, Umayyad epoch (pl.6)

This artifact dates back to the Umayyad period of Egypt, 8th century A.D, 2nd century H.D. It is found in the museum of Islamic art in Cairo. It's a fracture of wool³⁰ and linen³¹ tapestry. All the decorations of this piece follow the stylization method, which reveal Coptic influences.³² Beside the stylized tree of life a sphinx lies in the upper part, while in the lower part there's a dorsal placed lion framed by a medallion. The sphinx in this piece resembles a lot the Egyptian sphinx; this can be recognized in the nemes over the head and the seated attitude. The used colors in this piece are the black, red, arylide yellow and the green in its different shades (pl.6).³³

Sphinx on a wool and linen tapestry, Tulunid epoch (pl.7)

This artifact dates back to the Tulunid³⁴ dynasty of Egypt, 9th-10th A.D, 3rd-4th H.D. It is part of the Islamic art collection in David museum in Copenhagen.³⁵ It's a tapestry made of wool and linen.³⁶ The dimensions are 56 x 43 cm. This artifact like the former one reflects clear Coptic influences. The decorated theme displays a stylized tree of life, surrounded by confronting sphinxes and two addorsed lions, each of them is framed by a medallion. This artifact displays colorfulness as it is decorated with numbers of different colors on a red background (pl.7).

Sphinxes on a sycamore wooden frieze, Fatimid epoch (pl.8)

This artifact dates back to the Fatimid period, 11th century A.D, 5th century H.D. It is found in the museum of Islamic art in Cairo. It is a frieze made of sycamore wood.³⁷ This frieze is divided into three decorative parts, in the middle one there are two confronting sphinxes separated by a tree, each of them is placed inside a medallion and surrounded by floral motifs. Features of the sphinxes and the scene of the tree separating them reflect Sasanian influences. The upper and the lower parts consist of two narrow friezes decorated with floral designs (pl.8).

Sphinx on an oblong wooden panel, Fatimid epoch (pl.9)

This artifact dates back to the Fatimid period of Egypt, 12th century A.D, 6th century H.D. It is found in the museum of Islamic art in Cairo. It is an oblong wooden panel, cut not very deep, framed with an undulated or wavy floral branch from which are projecting half palmettos. Its dimensions are 117 cm in width and 25 cm in length. In each corner there is a large leaf. The center of the panel is decorated with protruding engraved figures, in the middle a sphinx lies looking to the right.³⁸ Under this sphinx lies a hare or a gazelle looking to the left.³⁹ The bodies of the animals are decorated from the back and the front with carved floral designs. The background is decorated with foliage and branches (pl.9).⁴⁰

Sphinx on a decorated inlay of ivory, Fatimid epoch (pl.10)

This artifact dates back to the Fatimid period of Egypt. It is found in the museum of Islamic art in Cairo. It is a decorative inlay of ivory.⁴¹ The edges of this inlay seem to have been attached to another bigger piece. The main theme of decoration is a boldly carved sphinx on a stylized floral background; it looks towards its right side and follows the walking attitude. On the top of its human head, the sphinx has a three- side pointed crown. There are floral motifs on both the chest and back of the sphinx; also its raised wing takes the shape of a floral leaf (pl.10).

Symbolism of the Sphinx in the Islamic art

If we carefully study the previous five artifacts, we can notice that there wasn't any struggle scene between the sphinx and other creatures. Moreover, we have not seen any engraved texts or words that indicate any hatred from Egyptians towards this creature. On the contrary, the sphinx is displayed whether inside ornamental units or beside the tree of life. This may indicate that Egyptians utilized this mythical creature as a decorative motif or they were influenced by their Pharaonic ancestors, they used it as a guardian and that's why it was associated with the tree of life.

Other schools of Islamic art revealed different aims of utilizing this mythical creature. In the Seljuk⁴² art, it seems that the sphinx was used in funeral purposes. A couple of sphinxes was found drawn on a piece of a shroud, each of these two addorsed sphinxes is facing a tree.

Sphinxes were also found in the Doner tomb in the city of Kayseri⁴³, a couple of sphinxes were engraved above the entrance of this tomb, and between the two mythical creatures we can see the tree of life (pl.11).⁴⁴

Utilizing this mythical creature in such a way whether on tombs or shrouds might have been a belief from the Seljuks that the sphinx was among the creatures of paradise. Associating it with the tree of life enforces this assumption, they wished the deceased to be one of the paradise dwellers.

Conclusion

The Sphinx might be considered an Egyptian invention, as it appeared first in the Egyptian civilization.

Sphinx is one of the earliest mythical creatures that appeared in the Islamic art of Egypt as it appeared in it since the Umayyad epoch.

Most of the presented artifacts in this research date back to the Fatimid epoch.

The Sphinx was sometimes utilized solely while decorating the artifact. In other times, this creature was featured on the artifact beside other mythical creatures.

Sometimes the Egyptian Islamic artist utilized this creature as an ordinary decorative motive on the artifact, while other times he associated it with the tree of life in order to be a guardian.

The Seljuk artist seems to have related this creature with the concept of the afterlife as he depicted the sphinx on tombs and shrouds in order to wish the deceased a good luck in the afterlife.

Endnotes

1. عبد الناصر ياسين، الرمزية الدينية في الزخرفة الإسلامية، مكتبة زهراء الشرق، القاهرة، 2006، ص 205.
2. Christine zivie-coche, **Sphinx: History of a monument**, Cornell University press, U.S.A, 2002, p.6.
3. Hubert van der berg, **How to sound really clever: 600 words you need to know**, A& c Black, United Kingdom, 2013, p.172.
4. The word (shesep-ankh) means the living image or the living statue.
سليم حسن، أبو الهول تاريخه في ضوء الكشف الحديثة، ترجمة جمال الدين سالم، مراجعة احمد بدوي، مكتبة الأسرة، الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب، القاهرة، 1999، ص133.
5. The two words (Horemakhet) and (Hormakhes) mean God Horus in the horizon.
سليم حسن، أبو الهول تاريخه في ضوء الكشف الحديثة، ص ص 61، 60.
6. The nemes is a royal headdress characterized by folds on each side of the forehead and by pleats, two of which fall down on the shoulders and one on the back.
Pat remler, **Egyptian mythology, A to Z**, InfoBase publishing, New York, 2010, p.47.
7. Christine zivie-coche, **Sphinx**, p.4.
8. حسين مصطفى رمضان، شار وبيم أبو الهول في الفن الإسلامي، الندوة العلمية الأولى للاتحاد العام للآثاريين العرب، القاهرة، 1999، ص 408.
9. حسناء عبد السلام العو ادلى، مناظر الكائنات الخرافية على الفنون التطبيقية في إيران، أطروحة ماجستير غير منشورة، جامعة القاهرة، كلية الآثار، 2008، ص 260.
10. [Www.britishmuseum.org/colossal_statue_winged_bull](http://www.britishmuseum.org/colossal_statue_winged_bull). Available, 21/5/2014, 4:27 am.
11. حسناء عبد السلام العو ادلى، مناظر الكائنات الخرافية، ص 262.
12. The term Orientalizing period was used by scholars to refer to cultural and artistic influences that affected Greece, Italy and southern Spain due to the great interaction between these countries and the East during the late eighth and seventh centuries B.C.

- Jill Condra, **the greenwood encyclopedia of clothing through world history**, greenwood-publishing group, U.S.A, 2008, p.80.
13. Asa Simon mittman, Peter j.dendle, **the ashgate research companion to monsters and the monstrous**, Ashgate publishing, United kingdom, 2013, p.118.
 14. Daniel Loeb, **The Qabalah A.D: the Christian kabbalah**, Lulu press, U.S.A, 2012, p.200.
 15. Asa Simon mittman, Peter j.dendle, **The Ashgate Research Companion**, p.118.
 16. The Greek tragedian Sophocles wrote this play. He was born in Colonus near Athens in 496 B.C, while his death occurred in 406 B.C in Athens. He wrote 123 dramas, the best known of them is Oedipus the king.
-www.britannica.com/Sophocles. Available, 3/12/2014, 7:20 pm.
 17. Perry Westmoreland, **Ancient Greek beliefs**, lee and Vance publishing, USA, 2007, p.232.
 18. Paul zanker, **the power of images in the age of Augustus**, university of Michigan press, USA, 1990, p.271.
 19. The term Achaemenid draws its name from king Achaemenes who ruled Persia between 705 B.C and 675 B.C. The Achaemenid Empire was the first great Persian Empire, which was founded in the 6th century B.C by Cyrus the great. It lasted from 550 B.C until 330 B.C. This great empire ruled countries of three continents: Asia, Europe and Africa.
Pierre Briant, **From Cyrus to Alexander: A history of the Persian Empire**, Eisenbrauns publishing, U.S.A, 2002, p.1.
 20. Prudence Oliver harper, Joan aruz, **the royal city of Susa: ancient near eastern treasures in the Louvre**, metropolitan museum of art publication, New York, 1992, p.230.
 21. Dietrich von Bothmer, **Glories of the past: Ancient art from the Shelby white and levy collection**, metropolitan museum of art publication, New York, 1990, p.194.
 22. Prudence Oliver harper, Joan aruz, **the royal city of Susa**, p.230.
 23. The first historical record of the Parthians dates back to the great inscription of king Darius, at Behistun. They are there called the Parthva or Parthwa. The Parthians were a race of scythes who dwelled in the southern portion of the chorasman desert. Under the leadership of king Arsaces I, the Parthians founded their great empire that lasted from 247 B.C to 224 A.D. Archeologists sometimes names the Parthian empire as the Arsacid Empire.
George Rawlinson, **Parthia**, cosimo Inc., New York, 2007, pp.27, 29.
 24. Malcolm A. R. Colledge, **The Parthian period**, Brill publications, Netherlands, 1986, p.23.
 25. Eva Baer, **Sphinxes and Harpies in medieval Islamic art**, p.22.
 26. حسناء عبد السلام العوادلي، **مناظر الكائنات الخرافية**، ص 24.
 27. The great geographer ibn jubayr, born in 1145 A.D in Spain and died in 1217 A.D in Alexandria, mentioned that the commons called the big statue beside the pyramids father of dreads.
-ابن جبير، **رحلة ابن جبير**، دار بيروت للطباعة والنشر، بيروت، الطبعة الأولى، ص 29.
 28. The Egyptian historian ibn taghribirdi, born in 1410 A.D and died in 1470 A.D, stated that the Egyptians called the sphinx father of dread due to the magnificence of its shape.

ابن تغرى بردى، *النجوم الزاهرة في ملوك مصر و القاهرة*، دار الكتب العلمية، لبنان، 1992، الطبعة الأولى، الجزء الأول، ص 42.

29. حسين مصطفى رمضان، *شار وبيم أبو الهول في الفن الإسلامي*، ص 416.

30. Wool comes second in importance after linen among the used materials in the textile industry of Islamic Egypt.

سعاد ماهر، *الفنون الإسلامية*، هلا للنشر و التوزيع، الطبعة الثانية، 2002، ص 105.

31. Linen is considered the oldest utilized plant in Egyptian textile industry since ancient historic times, some pieces of Islamic textile point out the foremost degree that the Egyptians reached in cultivating the finest kinds of linen and preparing it in a proper way for the spinning operation.

سعاد ماهر، *الفنون الإسلامية*، ص 101.

32. Coptic art had a clear impact on the Egyptian Islamic art in the beginnings especially in animals' drawings. The Islamic artist followed the same traditional ways in drawing animals, actually there were two methods:

The first method is to dissent nature maintaining limits and artistically known principal features. In this method, we can see animals drawn in a side perspective abided by picturing motion especially in hunting and chasing themes. The second method is to draw animals in a sarcastic caricatural way that resembles children drawing.

- منى محمد بدر، *أثر الفن القبطي على الفن الإسلامي في التحف المنقولة، أطروحة ماجستير غير منشورة*، جامعة القاهرة، كلية الآثار، 1980، ص ص 169-171.

33. The exuberant use of color is another hallmark of decoration in the Islamic art. The epigraphic and geometric designs commonly used in the Islamic art were often enhanced by color, even the Arabic language itself has a particularly rich chromatic vocabulary, and in it, concepts can easily be associated through similarities in morphology. The Arabic root Kh-d-r, for example, gives rise to Khudra (greenness), Akhdar (green), Khudra (greens or herbs), and Al-khadra (the verdant, or the heavens). Blue, the color of the sky in the western tradition, is often conflated with green in the Islamic lands, where the spectrum is traditionally divided into yellow, red and green.

John L. Esposito, *The Oxford history of Islam*, Oxford University press, United Kingdom, 1999, p. 246.

34. The Tulunids were the first independent dynasty to rule Islamic Egypt. Their reign lasted from 868 until 905 A.D. Ahmed ibn tulun founded this kingdom when he broke away from the central authority of the Abbasid dynasty that ruled the Islamic caliphate during that time.

حسن أحمد محمود، *حضارة مصر الإسلامية في العصر الطولوني*، دار الفكر العربي، القاهرة، ص ص 37-39.

35. The David museum was founded in 1945 by a prominent Danish lawyer, Christian Ludvig David. This museum comprises three permanent collections. The collection of Islamic art is the museum's most important one.

www.davidmus.dk/en/information. Available, 29/1/2016, 3:16 am.

36. The Tulunid dynasty witnessed an expansion in interior commerce, a step that supported a lot the salability and progress of the textile industry during that period.

حسن أحمد محمود، *حضارة مصر الإسلامية*، ص 212.

37. Since the beginning of the Fatimid reign in Egypt, the authority gave great attention to forests and planting trees in order to extract the necessary wood for the fleet ships. Large parts of the produced wood were used in furniture industry and architecture.

-زكى محمد حسن، **كنوز الفاطميين**، دار الرائد العربى، بيروت، 1981، ص 197.

38. Unlike the Egyptian sphinx, the sphinx of this piece resembles the ancient Persian type that prevailed during Achaemenid and Parthian periods.

39. The figure of the gazelle is one of the most highly favored in the Islamic zoomorphic art.

-Jerrilynn Denise dodds, **Al-Andalus: The art of Islamic Spain**, metropolitan museum of art publishing, New York, 1992, p.236.

40. Foliage is an ornamental representation of leaves, stems, and flowers, especially used in architecture.

- منير البعلبكي، **المورد**، قاموس إنجليزي عربى، دار العلم للملايين، الطبعة الثالثة و الثلاثون، بيروت، 1988، ص 360.

41. The industry of ivory flourished a lot during the Fatimid period, where the utilization of ivory wasn't confined to intarsia and incrustation only but also complete inlays were made of ivory.

- زكى محمد حسن، **فنون الإسلام**، دار الرائد العربى، بيروت، 1981، ص 498

42. The Seljuks were a group of nomadic Turkish warriors from central Asia who established themselves in the Middle East during the 11th century as guardians of the declining Abbasside caliphate. After 1055 A.D, the Seljuks founded their great sultanate, an empire centered in Baghdad and included Iran and Syria. The Seljuks are regarded as the ancestors of the present day inhabitants of Turkey, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan

- A.C.S. Peacock, **The Great Seljuk Empire**, Edinburgh university press Ltd, Scotland, 2015, p.1.

43. Doner tomb also known in Turkish Doner Kumbet. The Doner Kumbet, literally the rotating tomb, was built in 1276 A.D, 674-675 H.D to be the tomb of the Seljuk princess Sah Cihan Hatun.

-www.turkeytravelprovider.com. Available, 21/9/2015, 3:14 am.

44. عبد الناصر ياسين، **الرمزية الدينية فى الزخرفة الإسلامية**، ص 206.

أبو الهول الخرافى فى الفن الإسلامى فى مصر

ملخص البحث

يتميز الفن الإسلامى بالتنوع فى تمثيل الكائنات الخرافية، حيث أن إستخدام هذه الكائنات فى الفن الإسلامى كان يعد مخرجاً للفنان المسلم من أي قيود دينية، فهى كائنات غريبة و غير مألوفة ، لا نظير لها فى الواقع و بالتالى يبتعد بها عن مضاهاة خلق الله. عرفنا من خلال المراحل المختلفة للفن الإسلامى فى مصر كائنات خرافية متنوعة مثل الخطاف، العقاب، العنقاء و أمثلة أخرى. أحد أقدم هذه الكائنات إستخداماً هو أبو الهول، إذ ظهر فى الفن الإسلامى منذ الفترة الأموية فى مصر. يهدف البحث إلى تناول هذا الكائن الخرافى بالدراسة متتبعا ظهوره فى الحضارات المختلفة وصولاً إلى الفن الإسلامى فى مصر، كما يتناول البحث عرضاً لعدد من النماذج الفنية الإسلامية التى ظهر بها أبو الهول.

الكلمات الدالة: كائنات خرافية، أبو الهول، فن إسلامى، عنقاء، خطاف.

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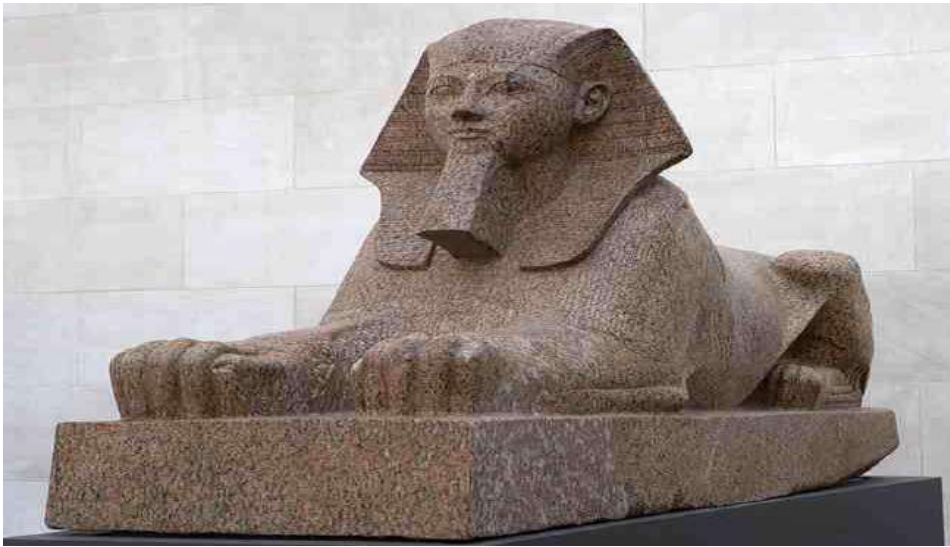


Plate 1- Sphinx of Hatshepsut
18th dynasty, New Kingdom

(<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/31.3.166>.)

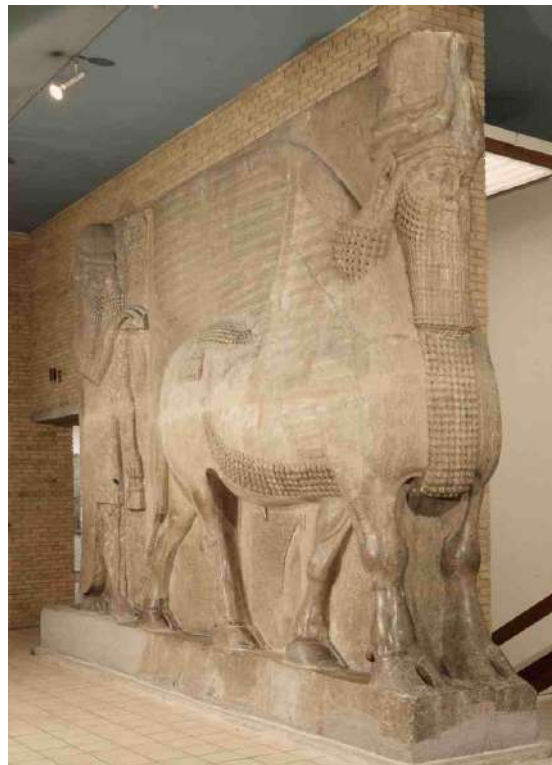


Plate 2- Assyrian Lamassu
710 B.C-705 B.C

(<http://www.britishmuseum.org/Alabaster-sculpture-of-protective-spirit-facing-left/118808.a>.)



Plate 3- Greek Sphinx

570-550 B.C

(<http://www.namuseum.gr/collections/sculpture/archaic/archaic06-en.>)



Plate 4- Roman Sphinx

19 B.C-18 B.C

(<http://www.britishmuseum.org/head-of-Augustus-sphinx-seated-right/R.9807.>)



Plate 5- Ancient Persian Sphinxes

510 B.C

(<http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/panel-sphinxes.>)



Plate 6- Sphinx on a Wool and Linen tapestry

8th century A.D- 2nd century H.D, Umayyad epoch

Museum of Islamic art in Cairo

(Captured by the researcher.)



Plate 7- Sphinx on a wool and linen tapestry

9th-10th centuries A.D, 3rd-4th centuries H.D, Tulunid epoch

(<http://www.davidmus.dk/en/collections/islamic/dynasties/tulunids-and-fatimids/art/11989>.)



Plate 8- Sphinxes on a sycamore wooden frieze

11th century A.D-5th century H.D, Fatimid epoch

Museum of Islamic art in Cairo

(Captured by the researcher.)



Plate 9- Sphinx on an oblong wooden panel

12th century A.D-6th century H.D, Fatimid epoch

Museum of Islamic art in Cairo

(Captured by the researcher.)



Plate 10- Sphinx on a decorated inlay of ivory

Fatimid epoch

(نقلا عن محمود يوسف خضر، تاريخ الفنون الإسلامية، ص 96.)



Plate 11 Sphinxes on the entrance of Doner tomb

Seljuk period

www.panoramio.com/photo/91029926