



## THE SPHYNX OF MYCERINUS FOUND AT HAZOR

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A fragment displaying the front paws of an Egyptian sphinx flanking an engraved inscription was found during excavations at Tel Hazor in northern Israel. The fragment is made of gneiss and measures about 45x35 cm, suggesting the original length of the sphinx was around 170-180 cm. The inscription includes the name of King Mycerinus (*mn-k3w-rꜥ*) of the 4<sup>th</sup> Dynasty enclosed in a cartouche, and the royal epithets “beloved of the Souls of Heliopolis, given life eternally”. The text argues for Heliopolis as the most likely original location of the sphinx, where it was probably presented to the temple of the “souls of Heliopolis,” which is mentioned on a number of royal statues from different periods.

The sphinx fragment discovered at Hazor is an unexpected and intriguing find. The inscription and stylistic features of the fragment clearly date it to the time of the Old Kingdom and there is little doubt it was made during the reign of Mycerinus. Although a relatively large number of statues of Mycerinus survived, the Hazor fragment is as yet the only known sphinx of this king. Moreover, it is so far the only fragment of a monumental Old Kingdom royal sculpture found in the Levant.

The key question is when and under what circumstances did the sphinx arrive at Hazor. The context in which it was found is the destruction level of Canaanite Hazor which is dated to 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The probability of its arrival at Hazor during the Old Kingdom is highly unlikely considering the complete absence of objects of this scale in the Levant during this period, even in the region of the Lebanese coast which had strong commercial and cultural contacts with Egypt at that time. Moreover, considering

the minimal contacts between Egypt and southern Canaan during the Old Kingdom it is even less likely for a monumental royal statue of this type to be sent to Hazor.

We can therefore presume that the sphinx arrived at Hazor at a later period, and the most likely periods are:

- A. The Middle Bronze Age, when Hazor was one of the largest and most important cities in southern Canaan and when a dynasty of Canaanite origin (the Hyksos) ruled over northern Egypt. The Hyksos kings frequently usurped earlier royal monuments and it is possible that one of them brought the sphinx from Heliopolis to Avaris and from there sent it to Hazor.
- B. Even more likely is the Late Bronze Age when Hazor was the largest city in southern Canaan “the head of all those kingdoms” (Joshua 11: 10). This period corresponds to the New Kingdom in Egypt when all of Canaan was under Egyptian rule. Considering the importance of Hazor at that time, the sphinx may have been sent as an official gift to the king of Hazor or was dedicated to a local temple by one of the New Kingdom Pharaohs.

The renewed excavations at Hazor have been going on since 1990 by the Selz foundation Hazor excavations in memory of Yigael Yadin, led by Prof. Amnon Ben-Tor and Dr. Sharon Zuckerman of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.