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A new Late-Hittite Sphinx

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A sphinx relief orthostat (Figs. 1 and 2) was seized on the Hamzabeyli border on 11 May 2007 and taken to the Edirne Museum.1 The museum circulated pictures of the object all over Turkey, with the help of the police and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, but no information was obtained about its possible origins. Our study is an attempt to provide some helpful data as to where it came from and when it was carved, based on its stylistic characteristics.

Sphinx (mythological creature)

Measurements: 77 x 84 cm

Material: Basaltic-andesite rock

In this second orthostat from Edirne Museum, on the top line there are fourteen pomegranates tied together; below there is a walking sphinx with human head, and winged lion body. The head wears a bell-shaped helmet or hat with front twisted horns. The head has no neck; the almond-shaped eyes and the eyebrows are incised. The wavy and orderly hair is well trimmed and worn long to the shoulders and curled at the ends. An ear protrudes from the two lines of tufts of hair in the front. The moustache is shown by light, perpendicular incisions and a curly beard comes down from just below the lower lip. The front of the lion-shaped body is seemingly covered by mane and fur, but there is also the suggestion of feathers. This design continues down the front part of the body. The wings are formed of six lines of feathers, some lengthy and pointed towards the rear of the body. The wings are longer than the body and cover part of the snake-headed tail.

The ribs consist of five incised lines of incision just below the wings. The four legs are depicted in a walking position. On one leg joint a triangle of three beads can be seen. According to Akurgal, these three beads represent a local style in south-east Anatolia (Akurgal 1995: şek.104-105). The rear legs are well-muscled from the hip, and from the knee onwards they show in folds. The sharp claws support the powerful creature as he walks.

The composite beast on the orthostat from the Edirne Museum has its hair and beard arranged in the typical Assyrian and Aramaic manner. The fact that it has a moustache and beard goes against Hittite tradition. The bell-shaped hat and side-lock of hair coming from the front of the ear show genuine Aramaic features (Akurgal 1995: res. 119). Similar depictions of sphinx heads began in Late Hittite cities at the time of the Aramaic king Barrakab (730 BCE) (Akurgal 1995: şek.104-105).

Our sphinx, in its current form, shows a great resemblance to the orthostats and bas-reliefs of Sakçağözü (Coba Höyük), near the village of Keferdiz-Gaziantep, showing the highest level of Assyrian and Aramaic artistic influences.

The two sphinxes registered as A/4 and A/12, positioned on the two sides of the palace entrance in Sakçağözü are almost identically styled (Ortmann 1971: 529-532). The basic difference is that these sphinxes have nine lines of feathers in their wings instead of seven. Also the line of pomegranates above the head is missing in the Sakçağözü example. On the other bas-reliefs the sphinxes are also shown with the same beard styles, manes and wings.

As well as the Sakçağözü orthostats, the sphinx registered as G/1 from Zincirli (Ortmann 1971:547 G/1 taf. 64/b) is closely related in style. With the exception of the head, its wings and body are similar. Even the number of lines of feathers on the wing is the same. But instead of the hat with horns and bell-shapes, the Sakçağözü sphinx wears a crown with flowers. The face is clean shaven.

A statue pedestal, now in the İstanbul Eski Şark Eserleri Museum and styled in the form of two bas-reliefs of sphinx-forms, from the Sakçağözü excavations gives us another comparison. With the exception of their beards, these creatures are almost identical to our sphinx. The hairstyle, the ears coming out of the lock of hair, the nose, large eyes, the shape of the wings, the details of the fur on the chest, the mane of the lion, the length of the body, the design of the ribs, the shorter hair underneath the body, reminiscent of plaits, are all undertaken in a similar style and fashion.

Another sphinx-shaped orthostat comes from Carchemish. That creature has wings and two heads, one a human and the other a lion (Ortmann, Woolley, et al., 1914: plt. B. 14, I:10). The example from Edirne differs in the line of pomegranates and its single head. The Carchemish sphinx, with its double-horned helmet, shaven and rectangular face, large nose and the two plaits coming down from behind the ears, shows the typical characteristics of Hittites and Luwi. The way the mane and the wings are detailed is different than the Edirne sphinx. In Edirne the eagle-styled wing is longer. Also, while the position of the fore legs is similar, the hind legs are different. Also the claws of the

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1Orthostat: large stone blocks at the outer wall of any monumental structure. This line of stone blocks is generally made of basalt or limestone.
Carchemish sphinx are depicted with more detail. In both bas-reliefs the creatures are walking on a plane, but the Edirne Museum orthostat has a shorter plane. In view of the general craftsmanship, the bas-relief carving of the Edirne sphinx is different. One puzzling question is that, to our knowledge, the line of pomegranates is unique and differs from all artworks coming from the Late Hittites centres. A pomegranate is encountered only once – on the hand of the Goddess Kubaba, from Carchemish-Cerablus. According to Akurgal, the bas-relief of Kupaba from Carchemish had been carved in the style of Late Hittite Period Traditional trend II (Akurgal 1995: pic. 95) On the other hand, from its stylistic differences, Carchemish is not likely to be the origin of the Edirne Museum sphinx.

It is clear that the sphinx from the Edirne Museum shows many more southern influences. Another striking parallel is the winged creature with human head seen on the bas-relief decorated terracotta fragments discovered in Emar (Feist and Finkbeiner 2002: 193, pic. 6).

From all the above, the orthostat from the Edirne museum can be taken as a Late Hittite object, with a likely date of 700-730 BCE (end of 8th century BCE), and the possible place of origin has to be somewhere near today’s Turkish/Syrian border, from a Late Hittite centre between Gaziantep and Kahramanmaraş.

References

Sengul Aydingün and Hasan Karakaya: A New Late-Hittite Sphinx