COMMENT ON C. D. READER,
‘A GEOMORPHOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE GIZA NECROPOLIS,
WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SITE’

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From his study of the geomorphology of the Giza plateau, and in particular of the Sphinx and its enclosure, Reader concludes that the Sphinx was first excavated, and the Sphinx Temple first built, some time before the Fourth Dynasty. According to the orthodox Egyptological view, the Giza plateau did not achieve prominence until the reign of Khufu, second king of the Fourth Dynasty, the Sphinx and its temple being created as part of the master-plan of Khufu’s second successor, King Khafra. In recent years, many popular books have suggested that the Sphinx is much older than the conventional view allows. In contrast to some of the more sensationalist works of this genre, Reader takes a refreshingly scientific approach to the question. He shows himself ready to engage with—rather than reject out of hand—the Egyptological arguments. However, although Reader’s hypothesis is not inherently impossible, a consideration of the archaeological and Egyptological evidence suggests that it is unlikely, at least on the basis of the data currently available.

Reader correctly notes that there is evidence—albeit scanty—for activity at Giza before the Fourth Dynasty. The four pottery vessels found near the Great Pyramid in the nineteenth century, discussed by Mortensen (1985), belong to the Pre-dynastic ceramic tradition of Lower (northern) Egypt, sometimes called the Maadi cultural complex (cf., Wilkinson 1996, 5). Sites—both settlements and cemeteries—yielding material of this type have been excavated throughout the Memphite region, indicating a fairly dense occupation during the middle of the fourth millennium BC (Rizkana and Seeher 1987–90; Debono and Mortensen 1988; Habachi and Kaiser 1985). Although most of the sites are situated on the east bank of the Nile (notably Maadi itself, Heliopolis South, Wadi Digla and es-Saff) there are recent indications that the west bank too was used for settlement and/or burial in the Pre-dynastic period. Excavations within the modern settlement of Giza for the Cairo Waste-Water Project uncovered a number of pottery vessels of the ‘Maadi cultural complex’ (David Jeffreys, personal communication), confirming that Giza witnessed at least a limited degree of activity long before the Fourth Dynasty.

Be that as it may, there is a marked hiatus in the archaeological record of some six centuries between these scanty remains and the next indication of activity at Giza. Petrie’s ‘Mastaba V’, dated to the reign of King Djet in the early First Dynasty (c. 2900 BC), is the earliest evidence for
construction at Giza and the first edifice with royal associations to be built at the site (Petrie 1907). It was most probably constructed for Djet’s wife or mother (Wilkinson 1999, 73–4). Another Early Dynastic tomb, dated by seal-impressions to the reign of King Nintejer in the early Second Dynasty (c. 2700 BC), has also been excavated at Giza (Petrie 1907, 7; Wilkinson 1999, 85), while ‘Covington’s Tomb’ is dated to the Third Dynasty (c. 2600 BC). These three tombs, one from each of the first three dynasties, comprise the sum total of pre-Fourth Dynasty construction at Giza. While they do indicate a minimal level of activity—even royal activity—in the area in Early Dynastic times, they do not suggest that Giza was anything more than a peripheral site in the great Memphite necropolis prior to the reign of Khufu. (As Reader notes, inscribed stone bowls bearing the name of the Second Dynasty King Hetepsekhemwy were found in the pyramid temple of Menkaura’s pyramid complex, but such re-use of ‘heirlooms’ in kings’ mortuary complexes is a well attested practice throughout Egyptian history, and in particular during the early dynasties (Wilkinson 1999, 84).)

Of course, the intensity of construction on the Giza plateau during the Fourth Dynasty may well have obliterated remains of earlier activity. However, given also the intensity of archaeological investigation at Giza over the past hundred years, it is perhaps telling that so few indications of pre-Fourth Dynasty activity have been discovered to date. In the absence of more compelling archaeological evidence, the hypothesis that the Giza plateau was a significant site prior to the early Fourth Dynasty must remain unproven.

As for Reader’s suggestion that the prominent outlier, from which the Sphinx was later to be carved, may have been linked to sun worship in the Early Dynastic period, the Egyptological evidence is very firmly against such a theory. The study of Early Dynastic religion is in its infancy, but the available evidence indicates that sun worship did not become significant within the ruling élite until the Third Dynasty at the earliest, and was not wholeheartedly adopted into royal theology until the early Fourth Dynasty. The earliest, fleeting reference to the sun as a deity is found at the end of the Second Dynasty (c. 2700 BC), on a seal-impression of King Peribsen (Wilkinson 1999, 293). (The name of the early Second Dynasty king, Nebra, seems to refer to the sun as a heavenly body rather than as a deity.) In the reign of King Netjerikhet (builder of the Step Pyramid at Saqqara), at the beginning of the Third Dynasty, one of the most senior members of the ruling élite was a man called Hesira, whose name means ‘praised of Ra [the sun god]’. This indicates that worship of the sun god, at least as a personal deity, was beginning to gain ground within the highest echelons of Egyptian society (Wilkinson 1999, 293). The earliest building at Heliopolis—at the principal cult centre of the sun god Ra—dates to the same reign; however, it does not even seem to be dedicated to the sun god but, rather, to the group of nine deities (ennead) worshipped at Heliopolis in connection with the primary creation myth of Egyptian theology. This suggests that sun worship was still far from being established as a major tenet of state religion. Only with the accession of King Djedefra, Khufu’s successor, were the name of the sun god and the title ‘son of Ra’ incorporated into the royal titulary (Quirke 1990). Hence, Reader’s suggestion that sun worship was established at Giza in the Early Dynastic period is not supported by the available evidence, and seems highly improbable.

In conclusion, the evidence for pre-Fourth Dynasty activity at Giza is very limited indeed, and the evidence for sun worship before the Fourth Dynasty even scantier. It is not impossible that the Sphinx and its temple pre-date the reign of Khufu, and future excavations may indeed yield evidence to support such a theory. But, at present, the archaeological and historical data available to Egyptologists strongly support the orthodox view that major construction at Giza, including the Sphinx and its temple, did not begin until the reign of Khufu in the early Fourth Dynasty.
REFERENCES


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A RESPONSE TO COMMENTS ON ‘A GEOMORPHOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE GIZA NECROPOLIS, WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SITE’

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The comments of Drs Shortland and Doherty focus on the geomorphological aspects of ‘A geomorphological study . . . ’ and, while many of the key observations do not appear to be in dispute, a number of issues are raised in relation to whether the more intense degradation of the western enclosure walls is indeed the result of erosion by rainfall run-off. Shortland and Doherty suggest that other processes of weathering and erosion may be responsible for the formation of these more intense features of degradation.

During research for the paper, to establish whether erosion by rainfall run-off was the only process that could explain the observed features, the potential influence of a number of agents of weathering and erosion were considered. These included chemical weathering, the abrasive nature of windblown sand and, as Shortland and Doherty suggest, the aspect of the various exposures within the Sphinx enclosure. Aspect can greatly influence certain processes of degradation: however, it is considered that aspect has not had a dominant influence on the degradation of the Sphinx. Although the more intensely degraded east-facing, western enclosure wall is exposed to direct sunlight throughout the morning, so too is the ‘chest’ of the Sphinx. Unlike the western enclosure wall, however, the east-facing ‘chest’ of the Sphinx does not exhibit the intense and characteristic degradation of the western enclosure wall.

The sub-vertical features and smoothed, rounded strata of the western enclosure walls are considered to be typical of erosion by rainfall run-off. Similar features can be identified on a number of rock-cut tombs at Giza. Those observed to date are located mainly in the south of the central field area; for instance, the mastaba of Kai (Hassan 1941), close to what, before ancient quarrying, was probably the northern bank of the Main Wadi (Fig. 3 in ‘A geomorphological study . . . ’). The distribution and morphology of these features has yet to be fully assessed and is one of a number of objectives set for further work.

Of interest also are a number of Late Period (26th Dynasty) tombs cut into the western wall of the Sphinx enclosure (see Plan IV; Porter and Moss 1974). These tombs are in the same