

## The truth about sphinxes

The sphinx is a mythological creature found in Egypt, Greece and several other cultures in the ancient world. This has meant that its appearance and symbolic importance often varies but it is most commonly recognised as having the body of a lion and a human head.

A cup [[Myth & Religion 5](#)] shows a pair of sphinxes framing a scene of the Greek Goddess Athena fighting a giant. Similarly a skyphos [[Myth & Religion 40](#)] displays two sphinxes flanking the figure of Zeus, sitting with other Gods and Goddesses. Since the ancients show Sphinxes alongside the Gods, at the same size, it is likely that they saw them as mythological figures and not actual creatures.

Sphinxes, whether alone or in pairs, guarded the gateways to important places. For instance Pharaohs often had their heads carved onto the tops of sphinxes placed outside their tombs. The most famous example of this is the Egyptian Great Sphinx of Giza on the west bank of the Nile, which may represent the Pharaoh Khafra. Similarly a sphinx might guard or protect tombs and homes of common people throughout Greece, as in Egypt. These architectural sphinxes were also nice decorations!

The Sphinx is often found alone, decorating bowls and other pots [[Death 24, Greece 29](#)]. We cannot be sure if the sphinx was just decoration or if it was meant to protect the things these containers held (perhaps something sacred, like tributes to the Gods).

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