



## The Horizon at Giza



That the sun should set very close to midway between the two largest Giza Pyramids when viewed from the Sphinx Temple on the summer solstice (June 21–22) is intriguing by itself (see previous story by Glen Dash). Adding to the intrigue: the ancient Egyptians wrote the word for “horizon,” *akhet*, as the sun setting between two mountain peaks.

And we find this word in a number of contexts at Giza. First, the very name of the Great Pyramid was *Akhet Khufu*, “The Horizon of Khufu,” but written with the crested Ibis, another glyph for *akh*, and sometimes



Detail from Thutmose IV's Dream Stela (photo on the lower right) showing signs for “Horemakhet.”

used in the writing for horizon. Some Egyptologists believe Khufu declared himself one with Ra, the sun god, and so needed his own horizon in which to rise and set. His supposed sons and successors, Djedefre and Khafre, were the first pharaohs to add a “Son of Ra” name as the first of a standard set of names and epithets that every king thereafter took on.

*Akhet* was also part of the name of the Sphinx in the New Kingdom, when pharaohs, princes, warriors, and common folk worshiped the giant statue as the god Hor-em-akhet (Horus in the Horizon), a combination of the god of kingship (Horus) and the sun (in the horizon). The 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty pharaoh Amenhotep II etched the name in limestone on a temple dedicated to the Sphinx, just off its left forepaw. His son Thutmose IV inscribed

the name in the granite of his “Dream Stela,” which he erected at the base of the Sphinx’s chest to record a story that Horemakhet—the Sphinx, the sun god—chose him to be king over historically known older brothers.

Every year, when the configuration of the *akhet* hieroglyph appeared on the scale of acres, with the Khafre and

Khufu Pyramids standing in as the horizon mountains, on the summer solstice, the “wave” of the annual Nile inundation was just hitting Egypt’s traditional southern border at Aswan. Did Khafre’s pyramid planners

position his artificial mountain just so it would write, with that of Khufu, the ideogram for *akhet*, on the scale of acres? If this configuration came about by chance, could the Egyptians of his time have missed it? We are not certain. But any summer solstice that I am in Giza, I stand east of the Sphinx to watch in wonder as the sun sets between the two silhouetted mountains of the horizon. ~ Mark Lehner

Clockwise from top: The sun setting between the Khafre and Khufu Pyramids as seen from the Sphinx Temple on the summer solstice. The name Horemakhet, detail from photo just below. Amenhotep II Temple doorway, inscribed with the name Horemakhet. The Dream Stela inscribed with the story of Horemakhet selecting Thutmose IV to rule (detail in the center of the page).

