



Oedipus and the Sphinx of Thebes, Red Figure Kylix, c. 470 BC, from Vulci, attributed to the Oedipus Painter, Vatican Museums

Myth: Oedipus and the Riddle of the Sphinx

During his great journey, Oedipus came upon the town of Thebes, he found the great Sphinx there. The Sphinx sat in front of Thebes and asked a riddle of everyone who tried to enter the city. If you could answer the riddle, the Sphinx let you go, but if you could not answer the riddle, then the Sphinx ate you! Nobody ever knew the answer. This was the Sphinx's riddle:

What goes on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet in the evening?
(Answer: a person: A person as a baby in the morning of their life crawls on four feet (hands and knees).

As an adult in the noon of their life, they walk on two feet.

But when they are old, in the evening of their life, they walk with a cane, on three feet.)

When Oedipus answered the riddle correctly, the Sphinx was so upset that she fainted and Oedipus went on into Thebes. When he got there, the Thebans were very upset because somebody had killed their king, Laius. But they were happy to hear that Oedipus had figured out the riddle of the Sphinx. So, they made Oedipus their new king.