

MEMPHIS

THE CITY OF THE WHITE WALL

MARION T. DIMICK



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THE UNIVERSITY MUSEUM

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An alabaster sphinx by the road near the colossus. It has been raised in modern times and is thought to be not in situ.

FOREWORD

For all of us who would rather do archaeological research than anything else, it is always a pleasure to discover a new convert. I am not sure just why it fascinates so many people, but I do know that those who work long enough at a dig to discover history in the earth for themselves seldom forget it. From then on archaeology, either as a vocation or an avocation, remains an exciting affair. And the confirmed addict is an enthusiast for anything from an arrowhead to a temple foundation. The Near East in particular, with its enormous ruins, its great antiquity, and its atmosphere of lost worlds dimly remembered in the legends of the Western nations, has won many of us to the study of ancient men.

Marion (Teena) Dimick accompanied her husband, John, to Egypt when he took over the general administration of the University Museum's excavation at Memphis in January 1955. When that season closed in April, she had seen all of the normal operations in a major excavation from settling the living quarters and making the original survey to the slow and dusty process of unearthing ruined foundations and stone monuments and the tedious recording of data. No dramatic discovery of gold-laden tombs or of startlingly new information about the ancient Egyptians was made in that season, but she discovered for herself the excitement of history in the earth and the reconstruction of the past. Out of this came her determination to learn for herself something of the long history of a city, one of the oldest of the world and an ancestor of all the great cities of modern times.

Much has been written about Memphis, first by Herodotus in the fifth century B.C. and most recently by many excavators in Egypt. Such accounts and reconstructions are summarized here against the background of her own personal experience in the present excavation. The University Museum is pleased to publish the account of a non-

expert with the wholly fresh approach of one who has just discovered archaeology in the field. It reflects one of the principle objectives of the Museum—to encourage the intellectually curious layman in his search for a knowledge of the past and the nature of history. We hope that other members and friends of the Museum will be encouraged to go on deeply into the subject which we think is the most interesting of all. I believe that Marion Dimick has created in this synoptic story of Memphis a colorful and readable account of a fascinating age.

FROELICH RAINEY

MEMPHIS

"The City of the White Wall"

By MARION T. DIMICK

Memphis has disappeared!

Our station wagon stopped but the angry disturbed dust rolled about us in a choking cloud. A quiet scene, palm trees, green stretches of cultivation, a tiny village. This was the site of ancient Memphis. We tried to visualize in comparison New York, the greatest city of the modern world, teeming with people of diverse nationalities and tongues. Immense buildings please the eye with the beauty of their design. Cathedral spires indicate the reverence of the citizens for their God. The activity on the rivers matches the bustle in the streets. Motion, clamor, the mingling of a hundred odors into one. This is the metropolis, vigorous, vibrant, preoccupied with life. Now wipe it out. Obliterate it. Grass grows where skyscrapers once stood, flanked by four lane thoroughfares. There is nothing left to indicate where streets or avenues were or the directions in which they ran. A narrow, dusty road meanders east to west where once was proud Fifty-seventh Street. Scattered flocks of domestic animals in search of forage climb shapeless mounds which were the Empire State Building and St. Patrick's Cathedral. A few small boats ply the rivers but the meager traffic needs no toots or blasts to avoid collision. Man goes about his rural tasks. It is still. New York has disappeared and for almost two thousand years no man has lived who remembered it. So Memphis disappeared. The greatest city of the ancient world. The seat of religion, government and culture, the home of countless millions through thousands of years, it survives only in museums, on library shelves and in the minds of men who, in modern times, have striven to wrest from the silent earth a few of the secrets of the ancient glory. Time, nature, and man have done their job too well. While the industry of the Egyptologist, the philologist and the architect has won rich rewards, only a few faint traces of the structural splendors which were Memphis remain. Where the capital of United Egypt with its vast temples and palaces

stood five thousand years ago there are today peaceful fields, scattered groves of date palms and a few small villages—man tending his crops and harvesting his dates, is the only link with the past. We see him astride his donkey, riding through the ages.

There is no history to tell us of the beginnings of Memphis, only legend. Its legendary founder, Menes, may have been one or several of the shadowy figures whose identity has never been established. Menes however has been credited with founding the First Dynasty about three thousand years before Christ and has been acknowledged through the centuries as the first ruler of Egypt. Before his time, the country was divided into Upper and Lower Egypt, each separate and distinct from the other and each largely made up of independent kingdoms. Menes united these units into one undivided Egypt. He was the first to wear the double crown of the Pharaohs, the white crown of Upper Egypt combined with the red crown of Lower Egypt which, when worn together, resemble to the modern eye a wine bottle resting in a cooler. Menes built the city of Memphis as his capital. He chose a location close to the invisible boundary which had formerly divided the country in a narrow section of the Nile valley approximately twenty-five miles southwest of present-day Cairo. He situated the city on the west bank of the Nile, taking advantage of the great river as a natural defense against enemies who existed in greater numbers to the east than to the west. It is told that Menes diverted the course of the Nile to create the site of Memphis. How much better it would have been if he had chosen to build it on higher land out of reach of the depredations of the river and its inundations. Desert sands may engulf and bury a city for centuries—but they also preserve it. Wind and silt carried by waters undirected and uncontrolled by man, deposited year after year and century after century can obliterate a city forever. If Menes had selected his site with more wisdom, the modern world would be richer. Such a measure of forethought, although it would not have prevented its destruction, would have left the ruins of Memphis accessible. But what city-planners of this century have in mind the eager interest of minds five thousand years in the future.

Memphis was known as the "City of the White Wall."

Whether this wall existed or was symbolic is not known. The ancient name was Anbu-Hat, "white wall," and it also bore the title

Men-Nefer, which the Greeks altered to Memphis. It is difficult to determine what was its exact size. The stadium or stade, the measure of length used by Diodorus in his calculations, has been reckoned at varying lengths. Sir Flinders Petrie believed that the city was approximately eight miles long and four miles wide and that a considerable part of this area consisted of villages and their gardens and fields, the "metropolitan area" as we describe it today. We can only guess what was its size in Menes' day, but it remained the largest city in Egypt for nearly two thousand years. Construction of the vast temples and palaces was carried on through successive dynasties and the whim of the reigning Pharaoh or his royal and religious advisers determined the extension of existing structures or the commencing of new ones. The fashion in gods was subject to change and new temples had to be built in which to worship and honor them. It is probable that the royal palaces were outgrown and had to be enlarged or replaced. Part of Memphis was an immense fortification and there was a large sacred lake. It must have been large, indeed, for Petrie states that the mud for bricks of which the immense walls were built was dug from this lake, as well as for the great artificial hill of the fort. The whole vast area must have been a scene of beauty and grandeur on a majestic scale. The temple of Ptah has been compared in size to the Great Temple of Amen at Karnak. Menes was said to have commenced its construction and we know that approximately two thousand years later Ramesses II built a temple within it, and a forecourt, and "statues of stone; two of thirty cubits, himself and his wife; and his four sons, each of twenty cubits." Later Pharaohs made their additions, perhaps the last being the propylaea of Ptolemy IV, who ruled from 221-203 B.C. So the growth of this great Temple of Ptah continued through thousands of years. We are indebted to Herodotus for most of what we know of it as well as for a great deal of what we know of ancient Egypt. He was probably the most traveled man of his time, and he wrote of what he saw. Some of his tales stretch credibility to the limit and his chronology was vague and unreliable. But he stated candidly that he related what he had seen, what he had thought, what he had learned by inquiry, what he had heard—and that he added something of his own observation also. From this candid Greek who lived a few hundred years B.C., and from the translation

of inscriptions found on monuments in all parts of Egypt, has come the major part of the scholar's knowledge of ancient Egypt.

Ptah was chosen by Menes to be the chief Memphite god and although other gods were worshiped and temples built to them, he remained the principal god of the pantheon. He was called the Father of the Gods, the Architect of the World, the Artificer, and although temples were built to his honor in other locales, Ptah was always associated with Memphis. His temple there must have been a wondrous thing—growing and changing with the additions of successive kings like our cathedrals of France or Europe; columned courts and shrines, halls and sculptured figures of normal and colossal size. Herodotus visited the priests and the temple and stated that it was “vast and well worthy of mention.” He mentions the eastern portico as far the most beautiful and the largest, “for all the porticos have sculptured figures and an infinite variety of architecture, but this most of all.”

The ancient Egyptians ascribed divine qualities and attributes to certain animals, built temples to them and worshiped them. At Elephantine it was the sacred ram of Khnum, Thoth was the ibis-headed god of Hermopolis, Sebek the crocodile-headed god of the Fayum, in the Delta a cat-headed goddess named Bastet. In Memphis, the sacred bull Apis was worshiped and a sanctuary built in which to reverence him. (A king of the Second Dynasty was said to have introduced the worship of the bull, Apis, at Memphis and a king of the Third Dynasty, being especially devoted to his worship, to have built a temple to him.) In Plutarch's time “Psammitichus (Dynasty XXVI) had built a hall, adjoining the temple of Ptah, in which Apis was kept. There were two compartments, from one of which to the other he passed, and in the front a magnificent peristyle court, supported by caryatides twelve cubits in height instead of the usual columns. His food was selected with the greatest care, and lest in his state of confinement he should grow too fat, he was not given the water of the Nile to drink.” (Today there is a popular superstition that the waters of the Nile induce complacency and obesity.) A writer contemporary with Plutarch wrote that a season of general mourning followed the death of the Apis bull and that his interment was accompanied with most costly ceremonies. This in-

stance was in the reign of the first Ptolemy. The body was afterward embalmed and placed in a great sarcophagus in a subterranean burial place hewn out of rock. This necropolis of the sacred bulls, the Serapeum, was uncovered and excavated by Mariette at Sakkara. Several of the enormous sarcophagi, elaborately covered with hieroglyphic inscriptions, may be seen there today. Each has its own chamber and the care and skill with which they were hewn from the rock confirm, without doubt, the reverence and honor which was paid to the sacred animals after death as well as during their lifetime.

The site of the Temple of Apis has not been found. However, portions of a building of great interest to archaeologists have been uncovered and identified as the place in which the sacred bulls were embalmed, or what is more likely, where some of the rites of embalmment took place. Nowhere else in Egypt has a similar structure been discovered. Magnificent blocks or altars of alabaster with the protective lions carved in high relief along their sides remain in situ. One is in perfect condition, its top area slightly hollowed and gradually sloping to a round drain-hole cut into the block a few centimeters below the top surface at one end. On the exterior this drain extends into a spout. Below the spout stands a large circular basin, the back of which has been leveled flat to fit flush against the altar. There is no evidence that this altar was ever used. In addition there are several small alabaster blocks, similarly carved and in various stages of preservation. They have been called libation-tables, though their exact use has not been ascertained. Inscriptions verify the fact that here some of the rites of embalming the Apis bull were performed. There is evidence also that the living Apis was housed and cared for here. The intriguing mystery of this "Apis embalming house" may come nearer to solution through future excavations though the possibility is slight. But it will always retain its unique and special interest, a challenge to the imagination of the Egyptologist.

We know from ancient writings that there was a temple to the south dedicated to Hathor, goddess of love and beauty. Her emblem was the cow and the sycamore tree was sacred to her. She was always portrayed with a headdress consisting of the horns of a cow with the solar disc between. Her temple has never been located.