

Topic Page: [Memphis \(Extinct city\)](#)

Definition: **Memphis** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Ancient city of Egypt, S of Cairo, part of which is now occupied by the village of Mit Ra-hina. Founded in c.3100 bc by Menes, Memphis was formerly the royal residence and capital of Egypt. Material from its ruins was used by the Arabs for building Cairo.

Summary Article: **Memphis, Pharaonic**

From *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*

Commonly, the term Memphis has come to refer to the general region of the first nome of Lower Egypt, *Ineb-Hedj* ("White-Wall"), where the Pharaonic capital of Egypt was occasionally situated and which included the vast cemetery of Saqqara. Specifically, the term Memphis is the Greek rendering of *Men-nefer*, the designation from the New Kingdom to Ptolemaic Period for one particular city within that region, the archaeological remains at modern Mit Rahina and adjacent mounds (Jeffreys 1985). Memphis was a major city from the New Kingdom until the seventh century CE, though for the last millennium of its existence it was increasingly eclipsed by Alexandria.

Men-nefer ultimately derives from the name of the Old Kingdom pyramid of Pepi I, *Men-nefer-Pepi* ("The perfection of Pepi is established"), which lies on the desert edge almost due west of Mit Rahina, but it was not used to refer to any town until the New Kingdom. In the Old Kingdom, the area was scattered with settlements, and Memphis as a permanent administrative city did not exist. Rather, it appears that royal control and administrative offices migrated with the king to new towns established near the future locations of royal tombs. Certainly, during this period, a number of towns existed in the "Memphite" area, but to suggest that any or all of them were Memphis would be anachronistic.

Little is known of Middle Kingdom Mit Rahina, though occupation is archaeologically attested. The unique inscription of Amenemhat II mentioning military action in Lebanon was apparently reused in Ramesside construction at the Ptah temple and may have been brought from any of the nearby Middle Kingdom pyramid complexes or associated towns, somewhat to the south. Whatever role the site played in the settlement landscape of the region, it was clearly abandoned during the Hyksos occupation (Jeffreys 1985).

The foundation of Memphis as the great city later described by Herodotus was the responsibility of the Thutmosid family of the 18th Dynasty, whose interest in this area, with its ancient and highly visible monumental necropolis, was probably inspired by a preoccupation with the royal ancestors (Adams forthcoming; Redford 1986). Thutmose I established a palace at Ankhtawy, an ancient name for the Saqqara necropolis, but the selection of Mit Rahina for a new city was probably the responsibility of Hatshepsut/Thutmose III, under whose reign *Men-nefer* is first attested referring specifically to the city. The earliest inscriptional material at the site (excepting the Amenemhat II block) dates to their reign (Petrie 1909-15). It is probably in this context that the first traditions of the great founder-figure, Menes/Meni, appear, aetio-logically tied to the name of the new city. The Thutmosid program for the revitalization of Egypt in the aftermath of the Hyksos humiliation was focused on the founding of Memphis as a unifying ideology to reclaim the native past (Adams forthcoming).

The new Memphis received great patronage under the 18th and 19th Dynasties. Sety I and Rameses II,

in particular, contributed enormously to the site, providing many of the architectural features of a ca. 300,000 m² temple complex dedicated to Ptah (Petrie 1909-15; Anthes 1959-65; Jeffreys 1985). Not coincidentally, this pair is shown worshipping their ancestors, the first of which is Menes/Meni, in the Abydos King-List (Redford 1986). Their hypostyle hall here was twin to the one at Karnak, illustrating the New Kingdom policy that Memphis and Thebes would be parallel ideological capitals of the country (Badawi 1948). The name of the Memphite temple complex, *Hut-ka-Ptah* ("Enclosure of the *Ka* of Ptah"), soon became synonymous with the city and with all of Egypt (> Gk. *Aigyptos*). Rameses' successor, Merenptah, a namesake of the Memphite god, constructed an additional temple to Ptah and a palace. Other Ramesside scions (Rameses III, in particular) contributed significantly to the overall complex (Kitchen 1993). Most of the New Kingdom kings also built mortuary temples here to complement those in Thebes. Though Thebes ultimately received the bodies of these deceased kings, Memphis remained the ideological and administrative heart of Egypt, as had been intended by the Thutmosids.

The Libyan dynasts of the Third Intermediate Period have left some evidence of building activity at Memphis, but the sprawl of the Ptah precinct was somewhat reduced from its Ramesside extent and the former outer reaches were given over to a cemetery and to domestic architecture, perhaps belonging to the local priesthood (Anthes 1959-65). However, the city remained an essential part of Egypt, and its capture by Piye during the Kushite invasion signaled his ultimate victory. The establishment of the Kushite capital at Memphis by Shabaka ushered in a revival of temple-building activity and statuary production intricately tied to a legitimizing policy of archaism in architecture, iconography, and language (Redford 1986). While in the south the new program of legitimization for the 25th Dynasty was strongly linked with Amun and his temple at Thebes, in the north it emphasized Ptah and his temple at Memphis. Unfortunately, the remains of the 25th Dynasty at Memphis are scant, but they include the well-known "Memphite Theology" of Shabaka, a theological treatise on Ptah as creator god pseudographically attributed to the days of the Old Kingdom, but clearly promoting this dynasty's agenda by placing Memphis at the center of creation.

During the conflict between the 25th Dynasty kings and Assyria, Memphis became the fulcrum of the military struggle. In 671 BCE, the Assyrian king Esarhaddon captured the capital after a driving offensive and seized Taharqo's family in his palace. The Assyrians deputized Necho of Sais as their governor of Memphis. Taharqo was able to retake Memphis, but this act prompted an Assyrian response in 667/6 BCE by Ashurbanipal, who seized the city once again. A victory scene at his palace at Nineveh may depict his attack on Memphis. The city was liberated by Taharqo's successor Tanutamun, forcing the 664/3 retaliation by Ashurbanipal which resulted in the sack of Thebes. Ashurbanipal became preoccupied with revolts closer to home, and while Tanutamun may have tried to recover Memphis, it was Psamtik of Sais who was able to declare his independence there, establishing the 26th Dynasty.

In the aftermath of the Assyrian invasion, Egypt rebounded with the Saite Dynasty, whose scions contributed to monumental projects around Egypt, including Wahibre's large palace at Memphis, which retained its status as capital (Petrie 1909-15). With the Persian invasion of 525, Memphis found itself under siege by the army of Cambyses. With its surrender, the Saite revival came to an abrupt halt, but the Persian rulers maintained much of the former's infrastructure, including maintaining Memphis as the seat of governance. The Inaros revolt once again put Memphis under siege, this time by the Athenian-backed revolutionaries against the Persian garrison (Thuc. 1.104, 109–110). When Artaxerxes I put down the insurrection, a period of peace ensued.

It was at this time that Herodotus conducted his autopsy of Memphis, providing the most comprehensive description of the city, its monuments, and the folktales associated with them. His report reflects the myth-building programs that provided renewal and legitimacy to the 18th and 25th Dynasties, which had evolved into a comprehensive ideological tradition. In the beginning, Menes/Meni founded the city of Memphis at the center of creation, becoming the first king of Egypt. This ideological picture was filtered through folklore and funneled into Herodotus' account of the city (Hdt. 2.4, 99–100).

With the ousting of the Persians in 332 BCE, Memphis played an important role in Alexander's accession and legitimacy strategy in Egypt. He observed the local protocol of the Memphite cults, and he made the city his official residence, linking himself, like his - predecessors, to the creator god, Ptah.

SEE ALSO:

Apis; Ashurbanipal (Assurbanipal); El-Lisht; Kushite Period, Egypt; Memphis, Ptolemaic and Roman; New Kingdom, Egypt; Persian, Persians; Piy (Piankhy); Rameses I–XI; Sais, Sa el-Hagar; Strabo of Amaseia; Tanwetamani; Taharqo, Taharqa, Taharka; Third Intermediate Period, Egypt; Thutmose I–IV; Wahibre (Apries).

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