

City of the Ram-Man by Donald Redford

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When this book arrived I was quite intrigued and excited as it is one of the few books dedicated to a Delta site in Egypt and I was interested to see what had been discovered at Mendes. The book promised to be the story of the excavation of the site of Mendes/Tel er Rub'a or ancient Neb Djedet (Lord of the Abiding Place), which had been occupied for over 4000 years. However the book wasn't quite what I expected; not exactly an excavation report but also not a layman's narrative either.

The book is divided into 13 chapters which chronicle the history of Egypt from the state formation in the pre-dynastic period through to the Medieval Period, some 4000 years later; not all was relevant to the site of Mendes although everything was linked to the city, sometimes in rather tenuous ways such as simply naming an official from Mendes who worked for the royal court.

The first two chapters concentrate on the state formation of Egypt but are written in a most bizarre manner; almost as if it were a legend, with the introduction of "chieftains" whom Redford entitles "Big Man". There is no reference to dates and it is all presented as fact. However from previous knowledge I was able to ascertain that he was, for example, talking about scenes on d-ware pottery as if they were real events. Although I thought this approach to the early history of Egypt was creative, and interesting to read I felt I was drawing on my previous knowledge of Egyptian history a great deal, in order to separate fact from interpretation, and this might not be possible for all readers.

From chapter 3 onwards the story-telling narration stops and the book starts to read more like a traditional Egyptology book. Here starts the history of Mendes with discussions about the excavations of the site and the discovery of the earliest site of the temple dedicated to the ram god, situated in the middle of the city remaining a dominant feature of Mendes until the end of the seventh century CE.

The ram worshipped at the site was an interesting deity and changed over the centuries. He is a main focus of the book, hence the title and there is a whole chapter dedicated to him. From the early dynastic period the Ram of Mendes became associated with Osiris and the cult of the ba of the sun god was thought to reside within the ram. There was a sacred ram residing within the shrine, picked from within the Mendes region. Upon death these rams were given a funeral and were buried in the Mansion of the Rams about 200 metres east of the temple. North of the temple, was a Mansion of the Ewes which looks like it was used for the burial of the ram's mothers. The Ram of Mendes was considered a creature of premonition and was used as an oracle, and some of his predictions were recorded and kept for prosperity. There is also evidence of the sexual nature of this cult, where a number of "beauties" were kept for the ram to fornicate with; it is recorded that some of these beauties were human!

From the temple's early origins it slowly developed and was extended over the centuries and the excavations show that in the Old Kingdom the temenos wall around the sacred area was 13.55 x 41 metres in size, and rather unusually there was a podium which may have been used to elevate the temple above the flood waters. This podium was maintained for thousands of years. The temenos

wall had increased to 165 metres long during the reign of Ramses II and then doubled in size when Mendes was the capital of Egypt during the Persian period.

An entire chapter is dedicated to Mendes as the capital city when it had reached its height with shrines, cemeteries, and a harbour, now dry, known as the Lake of the Crocodiles. Evidence from the harbour shows Mendes was a major trade site, particularly with the East-Greek region, primarily in oil and unguents and Mendes was known as an important city for the perfume industry. The factory has not yet been discovered although it is assumed to be near the eastern harbour. There are a lot of gaps in the archaeology at Mendes, from all periods, with the biggest absence being the settlement itself.

The history of Mendes is a rollercoaster of highs and lows, with the high point being the Persian period (399 BC) where it was the capital. For example about 20 years after the death of Pepy II, the temple was fired, and there were 35 unburied bodies in the vicinity where they had fallen during an uprising. This was repeated during the Assyrian invasion, where the people of Mendes retaliated resulted in more unburied bodies and further burning of the town. This once again occurred during the second Persian invasion, where they were targeted for their rebellions, and the town was razed to the ground, although the ram burials seem to be left alone until the Christians arrived resulting in the destruction of many of the burials and chambers. Between these events the city picked itself up again, the temple was renovated and rebuilt and life continued until the next event. The final nail in the coffin Mendes was during the Islamic invasion where Muslim feuding resulted in the whole area being destroyed. The temple was finally pulled down in the medieval period.

The history of Mendes is a long one and Redford covers this in the book in a concise way, using the archaeology of the site to show that what was happening in the rest of Egypt, was also reflected in Mendes. Sadly there were a lot of gaps and a lot of statements regarding lack of archaeological evidence. In some areas Redford and his team haven't started excavating certain areas, and in others the evidence just hasn't survived. It would be really interesting to see this book at a later date when it has been updated with new developments.

The book is peppered with illustrations and maps although they are not referenced in the text, and the relevance was not always that apparent. For example in the first chapter, an introduction to state formation there was a Greco-Roman map of the Delta, a good 2000 years or so later. There were also numerous text boxes or side bars throughout the text which covered contemporary quotes from religious texts or inscriptions which whilst interesting did not have to be read to fully understand and appreciate the main text. It was an interesting book, about a site not often written about, albeit written in a bizarre way, which could be an important addition to an Egyptologist's library.