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Anyone who has not visited Mendes cannot appreciate the wonder of approaching from the south or west and seeing the vast, low mound arise on the horizon out of the flat Delta landscape. Before 1900 a visit often took on an eerie aspect in that, because of the proximity of the flat Daqahlieh plain, the approach was often of necessity by boat. Even today, when the fields are flooded for the rice planting, Mendes again becomes an island, and it takes little imagination to visualize the marshes of old.

Yet, for those visiting the site in July or August, another unexpected experience awaits. Arising at dawn the traveler finds him- or herself engulfed in thick fog. Heavy moisture drips like rain from indistinct tree shapes, mere silhouettes in the mist. Donkeys and humans go haltingly, unsure of the terrain, swallowed up as they perceive themselves to be in a mantle of grey darkness. All things, even those which are normally comfortingly familiar, are completely hidden from the gaze of animal or man. And the fog is everywhere; it never ends, it is infinite. Worst of all, perhaps, one cannot help but go astray, for sense of direction is stifled: the fog is “directionless.” And always there is the croaking of frogs! Only when the sun mounts high in the sky does this mantle of unknowing begin to draw back: gradually the mists retreat before the heat, and the ordered world begins to appear. Such is the daily act of creation during the summer at Mendes.

Modern times have come to Tel er-Rub'a and its environs, but the site and its satellite villages still lie off the beaten track. Reflections of an agricultural past are seen from time to time. Fishermen abound on the banks of local canals, and the *schilby*-fish, misrepresented as a dolphin, lives in garden statuary. On our first visit to Mendes our progress on the last kilometer was impeded because of a strange procession in the dust of an August afternoon: a seemingly endless flock of well-fed sheep, led by an enormous ram, was shuffling slowly westward along the road.

The city whose ruins one sees today owes its size and general configuration to the activity of a relatively late period, from approximately 540 to 350 B.C., and would have differed markedly from the New or Old Kingdom settlement. Although excavation has not yet tapped prehistoric levels of the fourth millennium B.C., it is highly likely that the shape of the first habitation differed yet again, and in many respects, from what was to follow in the 1st Dynasty. Coring has suggested that the earliest occupation was a modest

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Figures 0.2. The outer (eastern) harbor looking east at dawn on a foggy day in July.

affair, established on levees left by the meandering Mendesian branch of the Nile. The evidence of toponymy makes it tempting to identify a substantial segment of the earliest population with a West Semitic-speaking element, with demographic ties northeastward along the Levantine coast. It is one of these groups that the first chapter imagines trekking into the Nile Delta in the late fourth millennium B.C. and settling on the site that was to become Mendes. To enhance verisimilitude and depict a culture on the threshold of its historic evolution, the conceit of translating familiar place-names rather than transliterating them has been adopted in the early chapters.

While Mendes does not mirror, nor even broadly illustrate, the conventional history of Egypt, the longevity of occupation on the site, spanning as it does over four thousand years, provides a useful gauge against which any period of Egypt's long past may be measured. To the extent that the prosperity of the city appears directly linked to the strength of discharge of the Mendesian branch, one might view that gauge as a sure indicator of the ecology of northeast Africa at any given time. Unexpectedly, through archaeological investigation, certain periods in the city's history have turned Mendes into a virtual type site for interests sometimes broader than those of Egyptology. One might mention the prosperity of the site during the third millennium, which has left four meters of stratified deposition; the destruction and massacre at the close of the 6th Dynasty; the evidence of

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international trade with the eastern Mediterranean; the violence which attended the Persian occupation of 343 B.C.; and the papyrological evidence for town layout and distribution of economy during the Roman period.

What makes Mendes an important source for evidence on ancient Egyptian history and society is not the city's strategic, cultic, or political importance but the fact that over 80 percent of the original settlement has physically survived. Whereas neighboring cities of comparable size, such as Busiris and Sebennytos, are now either under a modern city (the latter) or have become farmland (the former), Mendes has remained largely intact and inviolate. Drawing from both archaeological and textual evidence, and with the advantages just adumbrated, I shall now attempt to tell Mendes' story.