Materiality and the observer: active and passive archaeologies

David Jeffreys
(PLATE XXIII)

The paper presents critical reflection on the key topics of context and site management, from over three decades of dedicated archaeological survey and excavation at Memphis. Whereas the monuments on the desert escarpment are among the most famous in the world, the complex and crucial settlement archaeology remains all but invisible on the popular map of Egypt — even though this was the equivalent of capital city for much of ancient Egyptian history. The specific needs of settlement archaeology are foregrounded as a priority for Egypt now and into the future. Equal urgency applies to site management, here the paper emphasizes the extremely negative local impact of enclosing walls at the site, and the lack of real protection it gives the site against thefts and damage by outsiders and insiders.

Our themes for this day of the seminar were: Context; and Site Management. I was invited to talk for ten minutes about Memphis as a case study, and what follows is a sample of some of the ideas that occurred to me and that we discussed all too briefly in session.¹

Context

The case of Memphis is an interesting one in several ways. As archaeologists we are confronted here with a settlement site that was the effective capital of Egypt for most of its pharaonic history and indeed probably well beyond (forwards and probably backwards in time), and yet it has been so neglected that few people living in the descendant town of Mit Rahina are more than barely aware of its past importance. The central religious institution, the iconic Ptah temple which gives its name Hikuptah (hw-t-k3-pth), through Greek Aigyptos and Latin Aegyptus, to the current name Egypt, is paradoxically hardly recognised as an