

RESEARCH

AQABA PROJECT

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The city of Aqaba continues to be the focus of archaeological activity. As reported in last year's *Annual Report*, the discovery and delineation of early Islamic Ayla by the Oriental Institute has been succeeded by other archaeological expeditions. The Aqaba project has become truly "medieval," a middle period sandwiched between the Roman/Byzantine and Ayyubid/Mamluk periods. This relationship is physical as well: The Roman/Byzantine site excavated by Prof. Thomas Parker, North Carolina University, lies immediately to the northwest of Ayla; the Ayyubid/Mamluk castle being investigated by the Belgian-British team under Drs. Johnny De Meulemeester and Denys Pringle is situated to the southeast. Needless to say, both the physical and temporal distinctions are not absolute and a recognition of the "overlap" means a renewed necessity to present the results of the Oriental Institute's project.

The evidence from the Aqaba project has already made a major impact on the Red Sea region. More particularly, there has been a dramatic new interest in the historic trade of the Red Sea and Indian Ocean region. An example of this research was the MESA panel organized by John Meloy, a former student at the Institute and participant in the Aqaba excavations, for which the author was the respondent. Another manifestation of this interest is the participation of the Oriental Institute in the Geniza exhibition opened for most of this year at the Spertus Museum of Judaica in Chicago.

The Geniza signifies the vast collections of medieval documents known from the Ben Ezra synagogue in Cairo. These testify to the activities of the merchants of Fustat (medieval Cairo), who traveled to the Red Sea and ventured on to India. They mingled with communities in Arabia and the Levant and used Ayla (Aqaba) as one of their principal ports leading to these eastern lands. Beginning in Fustat/Cairo, merchants and pilgrims crossed the Sinai (known



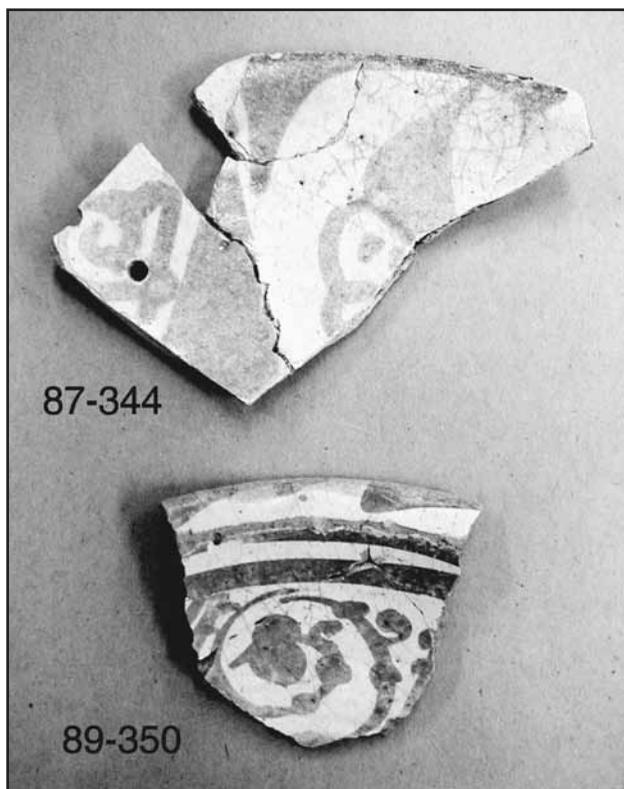
Late Byzantine (left) and Abbasid (right) lamps. Aqaba, Jordan

as the Wilderness of the Tribes of Israel) to Ayla, which Muqaddasi, writing in the later tenth century, calls the “port of Palestine on the China Sea” He and many other medieval geographers describe the port as the eastern boundary of the province of Egypt (the *kurah* of Misr). Indeed the important pilgrimage from Egypt and all of North Africa passed through Aqaba each year.

The excavations at Aqaba demonstrate the relationship between Ayla and Egypt and aspects of medieval life as it was lived by the merchants of Fustat. Artifacts and their architectural contexts may be grouped into three occupational phases.

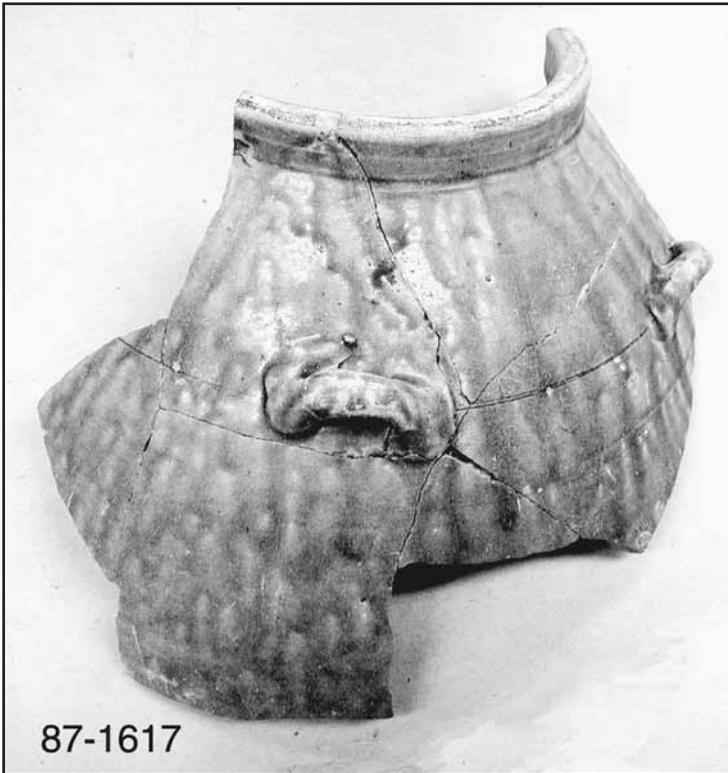
1. The earliest period (ca. AD 650–800) testifies to the gradual transformation from late Byzantine into early Islamic styles in the time of the first caliphs and the Umayyad dynasty. The earliest glazed ceramics, Coptic glazed ware, were imported from Egypt and found in good stratigraphic context. Even more interesting were the kilns of local Aqaba ceramics. These kilns produced amphoras and other vessels that have now been recognized as common to the Red Sea region and have earned the label of “Ayla-Axum wares.”
2. The next period (AD 800–950) is that of the Abbasid dynasty when artifacts illustrate new, international connections, especially with Baghdad and Basra in Iraq. Islamic artifacts, from luxurious plates to storage vessels, are characterized by imports from Iraq and Fayyumi wares from Egypt. Again, occurrence of these ceramics signals only part of an archaeological complex. Until recently, the great port of Siraf on the Iranian coast was the only archaeological referent for Indian Ocean trade; now a more detailed picture drawn from many sites is in need of the stratigraphic evidence from the Aqaba excavations.
3. The following period (AD 950–1100) was one of wars and catastrophes, when Byzantines and Seljuqs fought the Fatimids of Egypt. Artifacts show the strange contrasts: luxurious Fatimid lustre ware and beautiful Chinese vessels are mixed with simple handmade pottery (called “tupperware” by the excavators). As is often the case, archaeologists benefit from disturbed times, when prosperity and violent change make historical generalizations highly suspect.

This last period is that which overlaps with the majority of Geniza documents and shows another example of the complex relationship of textual and archaeological lines of evidence. Interpretation of the archaeological evidence produces a “historical narrative” that may be



Fatimid lustre ware. Aqaba, Jordan

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Stoneware, called "tupperware" by excavators. Aqaba, Jordan

the beginnings of this advance in urbanism. More recently, interest has shifted to the collapse of this city, or perhaps better, the causes of change to the newer settlement around the castle. Again, continuing analysis of results from this excavation provides documentation for broader processes, in this case, the transition to the Middle Ages.

set against the historical details mentioned in the Geniza letters. This relationship is reflected more directly through study of the results from the Oriental Institute's excavations at Quseir al-Qadim; the letters discovered in the Oriental Institute excavations are being published by Dr. Li Guo, formerly of the University of Chicago and now at Notre Dame University. These letters offer a unique opportunity to examine texts and artifacts from singular locations as evidence of far-reaching social and economic history.

The early phases of archaeological research at Aqaba tended to focus on its foundation, on the potential significance of one of the earliest Islamic cities as a key to understanding