

## AQABA

### Donald Whitcomb

The city of Aqaba has a dual role in the nation of modern Jordan; first, it is a major port for maritime commerce and may soon become a free port for this region. This commerce is one that has medieval and ancient antecedents, as exemplified by the Indian Ocean trade of medieval times, when it was the "port of Palestine on the China Sea" in the words of Muqaddasi, or as part of the Eastern spice trade in the classical periods. The second role is that of visitors. For the past 1,400 years this

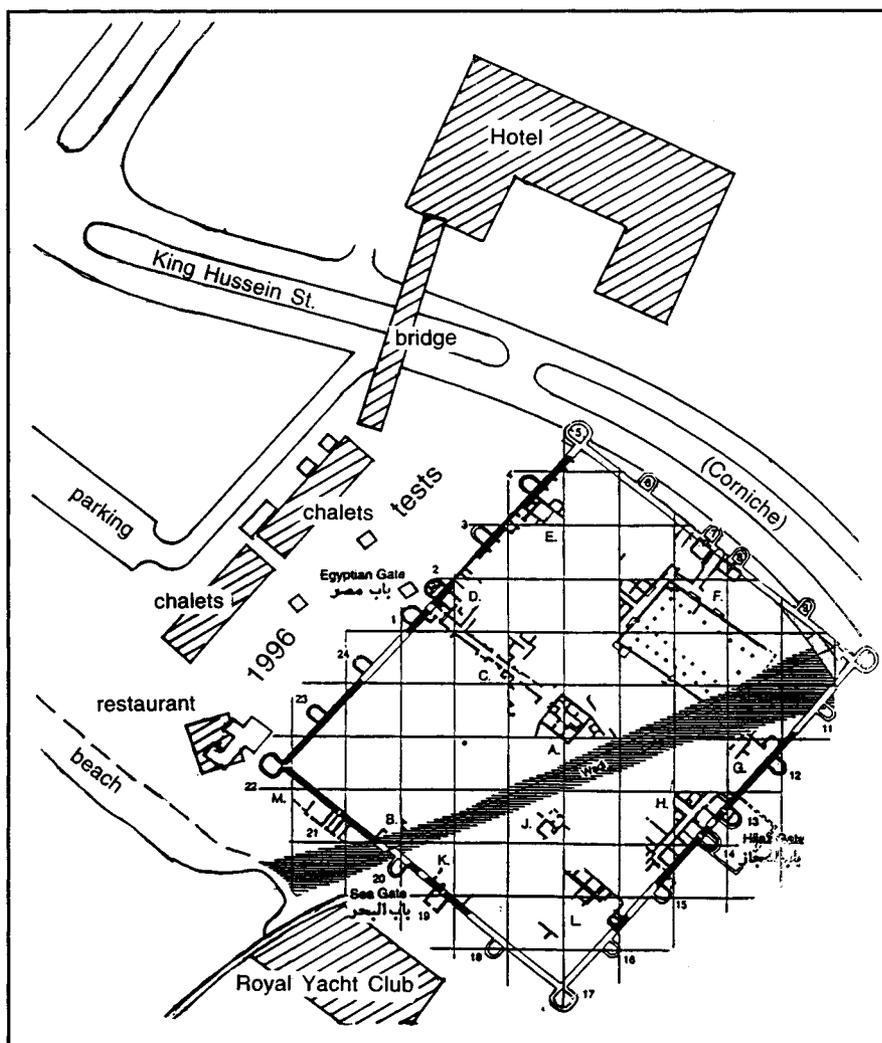


Figure 1. Plan of the site of Aqaba with hotel development project and the 1996 test excavations

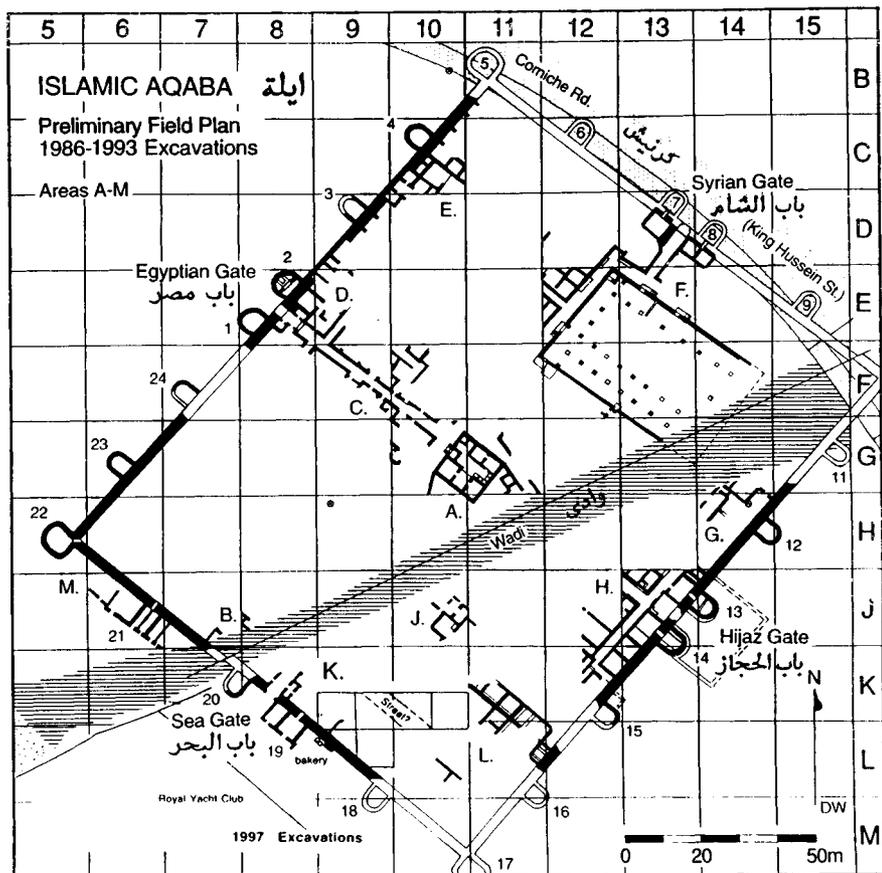


Figure 2. Plan of the site of Aqaba with the 1997 excavations near the Sea Gate

southern port of Bilad al-Sham (or greater Syria) was a major station on the Pilgrim route from Palestine, Egypt, and north Africa going to the Hijaz (Mecca and Medina). While fewer pilgrims travel by land now, another type of visitor has become more frequent, the modern tourist. The peace with Israel has meant a great increase in the number of visitors to Jordan, particularly those drawn to the unique wonders of Petra.

The Aqaba Project began more than ten years ago with funds from USAID for the purpose of tourism enhancement of the town of Aqaba. The result was a series of joint excavations of the Oriental Institute and the Department of Antiquities of Jordan that have revealed an early Islamic city, founded during the early caliphate of 'Uthman ibn 'Affan. This town was occupied from ca. AD 650 to the arrival of the Crusaders after AD 1100. The site has given an historical depth to the modern port of Aqaba and, together with the new excavations on the nearby Roman site by S. Thomas Parker of the University of North Carolina, the tourist can view the remains of over one millennium of occupation in the heart of the modern city.

The present challenge is to create an understandable monument from these subterranean ruins for tourists and Jordanians interested in their heritage. One of the problems is providing a context or transition from the modern town undergoing

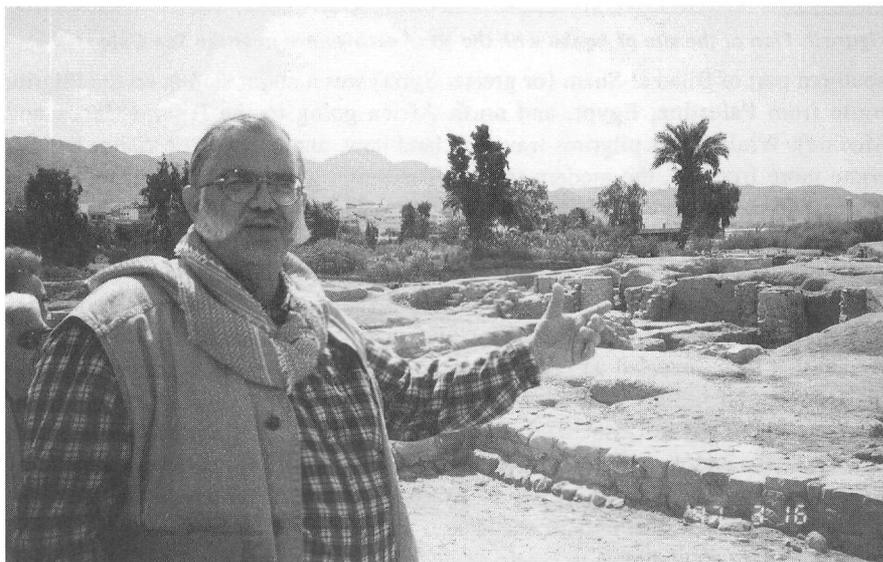
## ARCHAEOLOGY

rapid development. Unlike Jerash, Petra, and other major antiquities in Jordan, the site of Ayla has been totally covered. The remains are below present ground level and the visitor must imagine the elevations of buildings and monuments. This is possible with interpretative and educational materials used in conjunction with reconstruction and attractive display of the excavated remains. The idea of an archaeological park within an urban environment is not completely new to Jordan; witness the enormous success of Jerash, Umm Qais, and the recent Spanish/Jordanian work in Amman. The “archaeological park” presentation of the Roman/early Islamic remains in Madaba partakes of many of the same problems as Aqaba, problems which massive funding may begin to solve.

### Chalets of the Northwest

The remains of the northwest city wall, with its towers and the Egyptian Gate, were excavated in 1987 and have been reconstructed. The Egyptian Gate had a complex and interesting history, which is explained in graphics on the site. This gate was opened in 1995 and the visitor may now pass through the gate and walk along an Abbasid street, a street not traversed for a thousand years and not even imagined a few years ago. The approach to this gate and its towered walls is the most dramatic view of this early Islamic city. It is the interaction of this approach to Ayla and development of the modern city which is the subject of the present plans for the Movenpick Hotel. This large and luxurious hotel will be across the King Hussein Street (formerly the Corniche Road); it will be connected to the beach front by a massive bridge crossing the entire roadway. Other features of this hotel complex will be a series of chalets and a restaurant close to the beach.

The owner immediately recognized the need for a clear and unimpeded view of the northwest city wall and offered to set the chalets as far as possible from the ar-



*Figure 3. Explanation of the site to the 1997 Oriental Institute tour group near the Egyptian Gate. Photograph by Bernadine Basile*

chaeological remains of Ayla. The present plans allow the visitor — both foreign tourist and Jordanian national — direct access through the Egyptian Gate as a principal entrance into the monument. Though details have not been worked out, there seems a possibility to privatize some of the land in front of the city wall and the adjacent beach. Another possibility is the privatization of the entire site, a move which will assist in its preservation but will limit access to this national monument.

The proposed development of the land northwest of the city wall of Ayla will potentially affect antiquities in that area. Two test soundings made by the construction company have encountered substantial stone walls. The limited excavations outside the city wall, made in 1987 near the Egyptian Gate and in 1992 near the corner tower of Ayla, suggest that expansion of settlement might have taken place during the Abbasid period (ca. 750–970). While this expansion would reflect a population increase and expanding prosperity, it is unlikely that major artistic monuments were constructed. Rather, the remains of a typical medieval town may be found. Such remains are surprisingly rare and their documentation would be of great use for urban historians. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that unique structures will be found, or structures that could not be duplicated within the walled city. Specifically, one may expect a continuation of the small shops from the Egyptian Gate toward the northwest. Behind the shops were probably modest suburban dwellings. In a similar manner, the series of shops found above the beach in 1992 may extend toward the west as another *suq*, perhaps one catering to Abbasid tourists enjoying the beach. There will be a possibility of a more elaborate dwelling, an Abbasid “villa,” or even a small mosque serving this quarter.

Ms. Sausan al-Fakhri, Inspector of Antiquities for Aqaba and its region, placed a series of soundings into this area to be developed in 1996. Despite very limited resources and time, she made a preliminary examination revealing the quantity and characteristics of these archaeological remains. Near the Egyptian Gate was evidence that the street continues to the northwest, passing through an open area (about 50 m wide), then encountering stone and brick buildings. These were mainly Abbasid and Fatimid in date, though lower levels may have been late Umayyad/early Abbasid. One of the structures appears to have been a small mosque. A second area examined the proposed location of the restaurant near the beach, which revealed a large building complex that appears in part to have been used for storage. Given the context near the beach front *suq* discovered in 1992, one might suggest a continuation of this economic activity, perhaps with a khan or storehouse located in this area. This assessment of extra mural settlement ties into the excavations, about 100 m to the west, by the University of North Carolina (the Roman Aila project) in 1994 and 1996. At present a publication is planned that will combine the data from the northwest city wall, the Department of Antiquities soundings, and the University of North Carolina trenches into one appreciation of Ayla’s medieval suburbs.

### **Abbasid Yacht Club**

Archaeological investigations on the southeast side of the wadi began in 1988 and continued in 1989. The property belongs to the Royal Yacht Club of Jordan and these excavations enjoyed the active cooperation of officials of the Royal Yacht Club, the Aqaba Region Authority, and the Department of Antiquities. This quarter

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**Figure 4.** Don Whitcomb describing the excavations of the Egyptian Gate discovered in 1987. Photograph by Bernadine Basile

of the Islamic city revealed a vital part of the medieval city, with over 200 m of city wall with towers and two city gates. Through the monumental Sea Gate (Bab al-Bahr, area K) passed much of the commerce from Egypt, Iraq, and China. The most important gate was the Hijaz (or Mecca) Gate; this gate (area H), facing the Holy Cities, was closed in the earliest Islamic period and the area outside the gate used as a Muslim cemetery.

The Sea Gate produced few artifacts but illustrated the history of the city in its structural changes, a pattern remarkably similar to the changes in the Egyptian Gate. The mound of the archaeological site was truncated over much of the eastern side. Whether by natural causes or by human action, an accumulation of 3.5 m of clean sand covered the archaeological remains and has now been removed, which provides an opportunity to investigate the earliest period of occupation, the Umayyad, without an overburden of late occupations. Such had been the case in discovery of the Hijaz Gate in 1988 and the subsequent excavations found a very early cemetery. Since this discovery, the hypothesis that the mosque of ‘Uthman ibn ‘Affan may be located nearby has been one of the goals of the Aqaba project.

Construction of the marina and club house was deferred until these investigations had outlined the main archaeological features in this area. One of these features was the square tower (tower 19), excavated because of its formal anomaly in 1989. That season had produced ample evidence of an extensive Abbasid “urban renewal,” perhaps necessitated by the destruction caused by the 748 earthquake. In relatively low areas, where an Umayyad city plan was anticipated, this reconstruction was encountered. Unfortunately, limited funding prevented the proof (or disproof) of the Umayyad mosque hypothesis. The meaning of the alteration of the horseshoe-shaped Umayyad tower into a square tower did not become clear until the 1992 excavations. During that season, area M revealed a series of shops along the

sea wall, two of which incorporated the remains of tower 21. This area was a large *sug* or Abbasid shopping center ranged along the beach front.

In March 1997, area K was again investigated through a series of trenches directed by Sausan al-Fakhri. Five 10 × 10 m squares were excavated and revealed a double range of large rooms on either side of an apparent street (see plan). The frustrations of 1988/89 were revisited in that the lowest walls clearly belonged to the Abbasid period. In an attempt to understand this phenomenon, she placed a series of deep test pits into each square. These happily produced earlier wall phases and the long-sought Umayyad evidence. The character and function of this sector of the Umayyad city must remain ambiguous until further excavations can be conducted. Part of the project was to clear the heavy growth of acacia shrubs, reeds, and even a volunteer palm tree from in front of the Sea Gate and square tower. This was a promise of cooperation to the Royal Yacht Club that the archaeological site would become an attractive asset to the marina rather than an embarrassment. The gateway and street were cleared and leveled with several doorways revealed on either side of the street. Beside the square tower, another large shop was discovered; the exterior of the shop was cleaned but its interior left undisturbed for a more leisurely and careful excavation in the future. Finally the face of the city wall was cleaned, revealing walls and remains of at least four large ovens placed against the wall. These ovens must have belonged to a large bakery that served visitors entering the city. As we made this discovery, the yacht club was just finishing the swimming pool area with an outdoor barbecue. This included an oven for baking fresh bread for its modern visitors — directly facing its predecessor dated some 1,000 years earlier.

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