

## AQABA

Donald Whitcomb

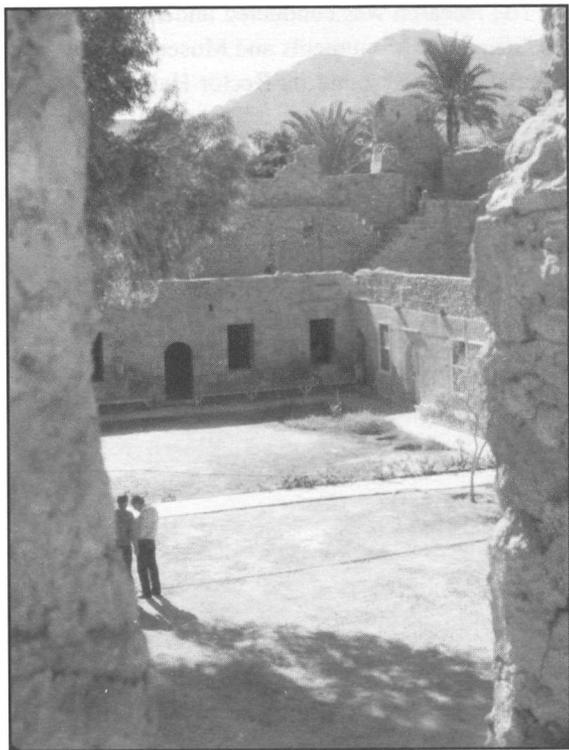
While there was not an active field program from the Oriental Institute in Aqaba, Jordan, during this year, the progress in archaeology in this town has proven relevant and fascinating. The Oriental Institute excavations revealed the early Islamic city of Ayla in the heart of the modern city of Aqaba; the town was occupied from c. AD 650 to the arrival of the Crusaders in AD 1116, a period of c. 450 years. An archaeological outline for the broader history of settlement is published by the author in the sixth volume of the *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* (Amman, 1997).

The early explorer, Alois Musil states that “northwest of the ruins of Ajla [sic] we visited a grove of luxuriant date palms in which we found other remains of old buildings, called ad-Dejr or ad-Dar” (1926). These pre-Islamic settlements have been systematically explored by Prof. Thomas Parker, North Carolina University. His discoveries include a long section of the Byzantine town wall of Aila and a building complex claimed possibly to be the oldest “purpose-built” church. A fascinating aspect of this structure is its construction, a heavy mudbrick with features recalling the Fayyum and other locations in Egypt. If a church, perhaps it should be Coptic.

Until about 1960, the village or old town of Aqaba was situated around and behind Aqaba castle, stretching inland along Wadi Shallala, about a kilometer south of the early Islamic site. While the castle has been cleared and restored over the past years, archaeological investigation began last year with a new Belgian-British project under Drs. Johnny De Meulemeester (Ministère de la Région wallonne) and Denys Pringle (Cardiff University). Their focus has been the problem of transition from early Islamic Ayla to the construction of the castle and its history

from the twelfth century and later. This project builds upon the trial excavations carried out by Sawsan al-Fakhiri and Adnan al-Rfaia of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan in Aqaba. Ms. al-Fakhiri had discovered walls of an earlier phase of the castle, associated with ninth to eleventh century ceramics; clearly the archaeological history of Aqaba has more surprises ahead.

The future of Aqaba seems destined to shift dramatically from the quiet little port into an international free-trade zone. More directly, some of the funds intended for this transition seem to be for cultural development, and specifically for enhancing the archaeology of this port. Aqaba has been designated part of the Museums without Frontiers program of the European Economic Community. The original dream of a series of archaeological parks — each revealing a successive historical period, with a new museum to display each phase — may become a reality.



*Interior view of Aqaba castle before restoration*