

ISLAMIC ARCHAEOLOGY LABORATORY

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Over the last four decades, the OI has supported the survey and excavation of several important sites throughout the Middle East under the direction of Donald Whitcomb. These projects produced mountains of paperwork, photographs, artifacts, illustrations, and reports. This summer, Whitcomb and PhD candidate Veronica Morriss began the massive undertaking of digitizing, organizing, and cataloging the excavation archives held in the laboratory—a process Whitcomb describes as doing an archaeology of archaeology. Morriss is currently digitizing the collections of field notes from Aqaba (Jordan), Quseir al-Qadim (Egypt), Kahramanmarash (Turkey), and Hadir Qinnasrin (Syria). Oriental Institute IT manager Knut Boehmer has been instrumental in getting the project set up with a new scanner and helping dig old files out of an array of ancient, dust-covered computers. After the initial wave of documentation, Morriss will proceed to work on some of the unpublished material.

Currently, the primary focus is preparing the OI excavations at the port of Ayla (modern Aqaba) for the final publication. Several articles and preliminary reports have been released over the years¹; however, there is much more material that needs to be published, as well as a final study of the site. The port of Ayla is situated along the northeastern tip of the Red Sea in Jordan. It was a thriving settlement during the Byzantine period (when it was known as *Aila*) and continued as an important early Islamic port until the arrival of the Crusaders in 1116 CE. The town was connected to both inland and maritime trade routes and served as the primary hub for the southward shipment of agricultural products from Syria-Palestine. Travelers and explorers showed some interest in the site during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Traveler Eduard Rüppel visited the ruins of Ayla in 1822, followed by T. E. Lawrence, Alois Musil, and Nelson Glueck, among others.

Despite the curiosity of scholars, Ayla did not receive significant archaeological attention until 1985, when Whitcomb identified the buried remains of the port city based on earlier accounts and surface finds. The first season of excavation in 1986 confirmed its identity as the early Islamic port of Ayla. The University of Chicago continued excavating and documenting the site through 1995, with generous support from the local Jordanian authorities and from grants and donors.

The decade of work at Ayla produced numerous crucial discoveries that helped rewrite the history of the Red Sea. The Byzantine and Islamic towns are well-known for their diagnostic Ayla-Axum amphorae, which have been discovered at sites throughout the region and on shipwrecks throughout Africa and the Indian Ocean. These maritime transport containers attest to the flourishing regional trade of agricultural products and luxury items, such as fruits and nuts, throughout the Red Sea and beyond. Significantly, a mid-eighth-century kiln complex discovered during the excavations at Ayla indicates the continued production of these amphorae, as well as other ceramic types, following the transition to Islamic rule. Diverse artifacts found during the excavations also attest to the site's important role as a commercial hub. These finds include steatite vessels from Arabia, worked ivory from East Africa, and cream-surface storage jars, many of which have direct parallels at the site of al-Qulzum, a parallel Red Sea port near modern Suez. Additionally, Chinese ceramics from Ayla demonstrate the site's connections with the Far East during the site's later occupation. The settlement was devastated by a series of earthquakes over the centuries, the last of which in 1068 CE resulted in the partial abandonment of the city.

After all these years and the initial flurry of publications, the site continues to yield discoveries and make important contributions to the field. Whitcomb and Morriss recently published a chapter, “The Umayyad Red Sea,” in which they stress the importance of Ayla in shaping exchange, travel, and trade routes during the seventh and eighth centuries and the site’s role in laying the groundwork for future commercial systems in the region.² This November, university and continuing education program director/research associate Tasha Vorderstrasse will give a talk for the American Schools of Oriental Research conference focusing on Ayla and its interconnections through an examination of certain classes of artifacts, including the Chinese ceramics and the Ayla-Axum amphorae that were discovered during the OI’s excavations. It is our hope that through our re-excavating the old field reports in preparation for new publications, the site of Ayla will continue to yield new archaeological discoveries.

Already, shuffling through the old papers archived in the lab has revealed some exciting and surprising finds, such as old letters and boxes of photographs that provide invaluable documentation of the original site, as well as glimpses into life on the dig. As a maritime archaeologist, Morriss was particularly excited to discover a letter from Cheryl Ward and Doug Haldane describing their plans to help establish an underwater archaeology program in Alexandria. This program is still going strong and is responsible for training a new generation of Egyptian underwater archaeologists.

We would like to acknowledge all the support we have received from donors and our colleagues at the OI and other institutions over the years. None of these excavations would have been possible without your assistance.

Endnotes

¹ The Ayla material has served as the basis for several scholarly publications by Donald Whitcomb, including: “Coptic Glazed Ceramics from the Excavations at Aqaba, Jordan,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 26 (1989): 167–82; “The Misr of Ayla: Settlement at Aqaba in the Early Islamic Period,” in *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East II: Land Use and Settlement Patterns*, edited by Geoffrey R. D. King and Averil Cameron (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1994), 155–70; “The Misr of Ayla: New Evidence for the Early Islamic City,” in *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* 5, edited by A. Hadidi (Amman: Department of Antiquities, 1995), 277–88; “Ceramic Production at Aqaba in the Early Islamic Period,” in *La Céramique Byzantine et Proto Islamique En Syrie-Jordanie (IVe–VIIIe Siècles Apr. J.-C.): Actes Du Colloque Tenu à Amman Les 3, 4 et 5 Décembre 1994*, edited by E. Villeneuve and P. M. Watson (Beirut: Institut Français d’Archaeologie du Proche-Orient, 2001), 296–303. Preliminary reports include *Aqaba, “Port of Palestine on the China Sea”* (Amman: Al Kutba, 1988) and *Ayla, Art and Industry in the Islamic Port of Aqaba* (Chicago: Oriental Institute Museum Publications, 1994), as well as reports in the *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 31–37 (1987–1995) and in *The Oriental Institute Annual Report* (see <https://oi.uchicago.edu/about/annual-reports/oriental-institute-annual-reports>).

² Veronica Morriss and Donald Whitcomb, “The Umayyad Red Sea as an Islamic Mare Nostrum,” in *The Umayyad World*, edited by Andrew Marsham 267–92 (London/New York: Routledge, 2021).