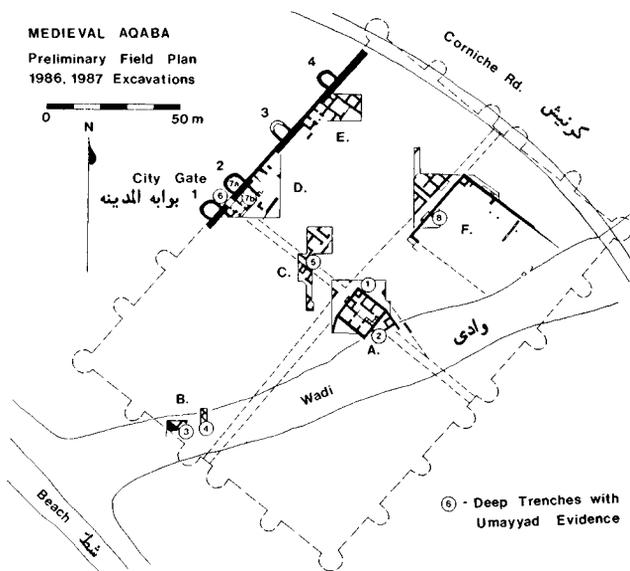


## AQABA

DONALD·WHITCOMB

The initial exploration of the site of medieval Aqaba (Ayla) in Jordan was reported in the 1985–86 *Annual Report*. While that was the first season of work at this site, the full-scale excavations this spring seem like a second “first” season. They have revealed over 80 m of the city wall, with towers and a gateway, a major public building, and the archaeologically ever present enigmatic structure. This spring’s trenches also revealed the accuracy and luck enjoyed by the 1986 season; for those small exploratory soundings (by 3 archaeologists and 15 workmen) provided an accurate feel for the architecture (construction techniques), for the stratigraphy (character of deposition), and for chronology and trade (ceramic inventory) and allowed the hypothesis of the town plan (see below). The basic historical outline has proven accurate, an occupation from the 7th to early 12th century, from the Umayyad through the Fatimid periods. Ceramics from this occupation, and particularly the Abbasid period (9th–10th centuries), indi-



cate participation in an extensive trade network connecting Egypt and Syria with Iraq and China.

Elucidation of some of the architectural features of this city has been the primary result of the more extensive 1987 excavations. The most dramatic is the city wall; over 80 m have been excavated, as well as four semi-circular towers. If one consults the plan published in the 1985–86 *Annual Report*, one sees such semi-circular towers had been hypothesized on the basis of the small corner in trench D. This small part of the city wall, combined with the fragment in trench B and the 6 m contour line, allowed a prediction of the orientation of the walls, the size of the town and the position of the gates. However, this season's excavations have shown that the north corner of the wall is not at the 6 m contour but seems to lie beneath the Corniche Road. Thus the northwest city gate was found 10 m further toward the Corniche Road than the original reconstruction had assumed. This gate, flanked by two towers, opened onto an axial street. If the perpendicular street running beside the large enclosure (area F) is also axial, the enclosed area of the city was 120 m wide.

These axial streets meet in the center of the town near a large building first uncovered in 1986. This is now called area A. A deep probe at the juncture of the streets showed the wall of the building preserved 3.5 m in height with at least two rebuilds. The sequence of street levels indicated use from the 7th through the 11th centuries. The building in the late Abbasid/Fatimid period (950–1100 A.D.) was a residential structure with a configuration of rooms around a small court, entrance stairs on the northwest, and stairs to an upper floor or the roof. The south rooms have a central *iwan* (a covered room open to the courtyard) and two side rooms, one of which had fresco decoration on at least one wall. The fresco consisted of floral motifs and geometric designs in red and black paint. More interesting, however, were the numerous graffiti scratched on the fresco in Kufic Arabic script.

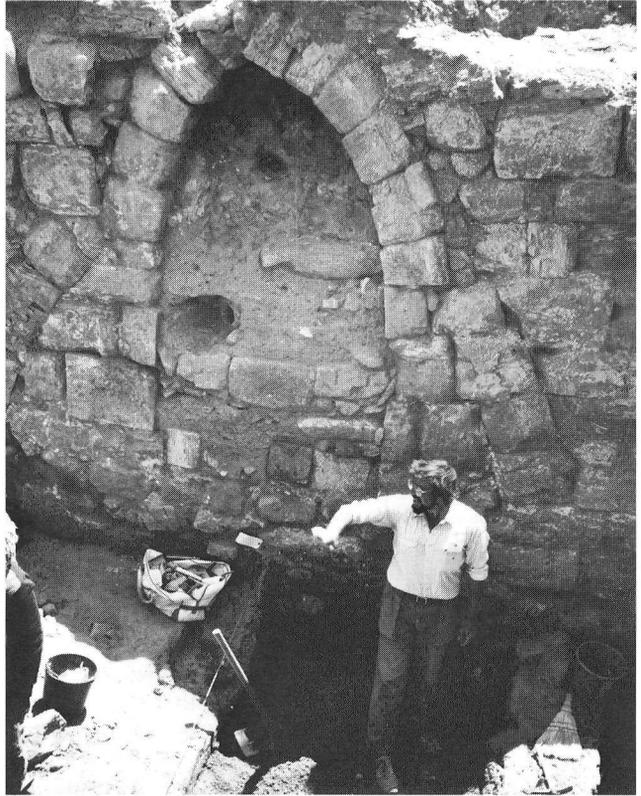
Behind the fresco, the southwest wall of the building revealed traces of an earlier monumental arch, 3.5 m wide. More surprisingly, an identical arch was found on the southeast wall, in line with the axial street from the northwest city gate. The jamb of this early arch was traced down 4 meters to a fine plaster floor; materials below this floor were all Umayyad (650–800 A.D.). These two arches suggest that, in its earliest form, this building must have been a sort of pavilion, almost a tetrapylon, in

the center of the city. Thus we have its provisional name, the Pavilion Building. While there is too little evidence for a palace, some association with a governor's residence is not unlikely.

Between the Pavilion Building and the northwest city gate was a series of large residences on either side of the street, called area C. Another probe into the street (4.5 m deep) illustrated how later buildings had slowly encroached on the originally wide thoroughfare. The northernmost part of this area showed a different sort of spatial use in the latest period of occupation. Here the structures were entirely mud-brick, and the courtyards featured numerous *tabuns* or ovens. Analysis of remains in and around the ovens suggests that, in addition to bread, a favorite recipe was fish seasoned with plenty of ginger root.

Perhaps the most fascinating structure revealed in the 1987 excavations was the northwest city gate (this was probably the *Bab al-Misr* or Egyptian gate). The complex history of this gateway could be read in the 4.5 m of preserved height; at this depth we encountered the water table (sweet water) without reaching the wall foundations and street pavement. The gate was 3 m wide with a round arch in its earliest form; this was narrowed and, as the street levels rose, a secondary pointed arch was built into the filled-in gateway. Eventually only a basalt drain pipe ran through the small doorway. Within the fill in front of the gate were blocks with a monumental Kufic inscription; this was identified as the *Ayat al-Kursi* verse from the Qur'an, intended for protection of the city. Inside the gate was a wall parallel to the city wall with a similar large arch. The space between these arches was later narrowed and occupied by shops. The extent of this rebuilding makes the original formal plan of the area difficult to determine.

Tower 2, immediately north of the gate, was excavated revealing an internal arch and, below that, brick partition walls. The tower was entered through an arched doorway in the city wall. In the course of tracing the city wall north of the gate, two more towers were found. The southern of these, tower 3, had been severely damaged by a bulldozer pit made during the construction of the Corniche. Between the towers, the city wall narrowed to a thinner curtain wall which accommodated buildings on the inside. An area between towers 3 and 4 was excavated to reveal the latest structures, a combination of stone and mud-brick construction. Most stones, including several col-



● The gateway in the city wall showing its original round arch and the secondary pointed arch.

umn drums, were reused from earlier, more carefully constructed buildings. One of these columns had been set in the center of the *iwan* of a Samarra-style *bayt*, a popular form of domestic architecture during the Abbasid period.

There is some irony in the fact that the largest structure found to date is also the most enigmatic. Area F continues the residential architecture west of the axial street, here about 2.5 m wide, which probably connected the Pavilion Building with the northeast gate (the *Bab al-Sham* or Syrian gate). East of the street was the Large Enclosure, characterized by long walls of substantial construction with distinctive grey mortar. Features along the northeast wall include a small corner room, a well-constructed platform and stairway associated with an elaborate drain, a poorly constructed perpendicular wall, and 3 columns, apparently in place but late additions. The northwest wall had a second stairway, behind which was a plastered pilaster; at this point, a deep test showed gravel floors resting



● *Aqaba: Overview of excavations with Pavilion Building in center background and the Large Enclosure closer to the road.*

on 2.5 m of fill. The walls continued down to a running foundation and plaster floor. All materials below the floors were Umayyad. Finally the southwest corner was found associated with two well-constructed platforms, possibly associated with a corner entrance. None of these architectural features or associated artifacts allows a persuasive argument for a mosque, church, palace, reservoir, or other hypotheses. The answer lies, happily, in further excavation. These hypotheses about the layout of medieval Aqaba reveal some testable rules, if not general laws, for urban planning in this period.

Analysis of the artifacts from the 1986 season also proved a reliable guide to the materials recovered this season. The larger 1987 excavations increased the corpus of complete and reconstructible ceramic vessels, including a number of large storage jars. Even more importantly, several complete Chinese vessels, including a stoneware jar standing over 1 m high, were found. Analysis of the Chinese celadons and porcelains from the 1986 season has completely confirmed the 10th to 11th century dating of their appearance at Aqaba. Also present were both Egyptian and Iraqi imports, including numerous pieces of fine Fatimid and Abbasid lustre wares. At the other extreme of this medium, there is now a large corpus of hand-made and painted vessels securely dated to the late Abbasid and Fatimid periods and anticipating the later development of geometric painted wares in the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods (13–14th centuries).

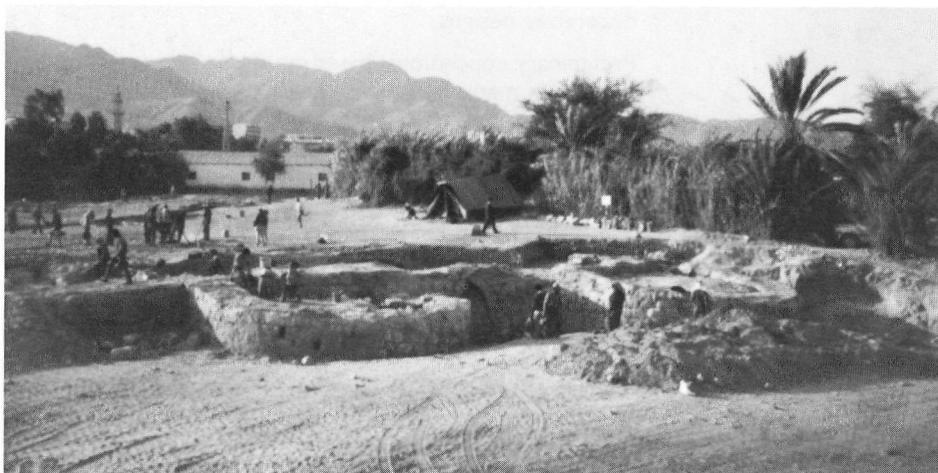
The glass from the site also offers an important, and indeed unique, corpus of Abbasid period. Several glass weights, like the coins, will add important political and chronological information for the site. In addition to vessel forms were some tesserae suggesting mosaics somewhere on the site. Metalwork, usually badly damaged by the sea salt, provided a pleasant surprise as field cleaning showed well-preserved and interesting decorative pieces. Stonework included numerous pieces of marble discussed below; basalt was used for pipes, mentioned above, and mortars and grinders in a wide range of sizes. Finally there is now a large corpus of steatite cooking pots and several lamps and incense burners with late Abbasid or Fatimid decorative designs.

Preliminary conclusions, based on the large corpus of artifacts from medieval Aqaba, testify to the unique archaeological character of this site. For the first time the sub-periods within the early Islamic may be distinguished on the basis of stratigraphic evidence. Not only is the initial Umayyad period more fully understood, but the Abbasid and Fatimid periods, which have been rather neglected in Jordan, may now be viewed in the light of correlations with imports from Iraq, Egypt, and even the Far East. Important historical evidence is found to no less a degree in the architecture. This walled city was subject to a precise, formal plan maintained through most of its history. The numerous deep soundings have produced evidence that the city was founded before the Umayyad period, probably just after the Muslim conquest, about 650 A.D.

- *Blocks fallen from the monumental Kufic inscription which originally capped the gateway.*



We know that the Byzantine town, called Ailana, made a treaty with the Prophet in 630 and continued as the seat of a Christian bishopric. Pieces of marble from churches have been found in the excavations as well as a fine Latin dedicatory plaque, apparently set up by Constantine (about 336, when the 10th legion was transferred to Ailana from Jerusalem). There is no evidence for this Roman/Nabataean and Byzantine town beneath the Islamic city. Rather we have found an extensive scatter of sherds and foundations of walls on the surface running from the northwest gate for over 500 m to the northwest. This



● *Aqaba: City wall with towers and gateway.*

area forms a mound and is undoubtedly the earlier Ailana. The explanation is apparently the same as that for Cairo, Basra, and many other Islamic cities—that they began as new foundations established beside older cities. In time most of these new Islamic cities, called *amsar*, replaced the pre-Islamic town which was left to ruins, used for building materials and eventually built over. While most of the examples of this historical phenomenon have continued as prosperous cities, Aqaba was destroyed in the early 12th century and remains mostly undisturbed. Thus the opportunity to excavate one of the earliest examples of Islamic urbanization, revealing early forms of the mosque, administration, markets, etc., is possible at the site of Aqaba.

The success of this 1987 season of excavations, which lasted from March 2 to April 29, is due to a unique combination of people and resources.<sup>1</sup> Funding of the project was provided by grants from the United States Agency



● *Aqaba: View along city wall. The towers in the foreground flank the gateway.*

for International Development (US AID) and the National Geographic Society as well as support from the Oriental Institute. The AID funding was provided as a pilot project in tourism development, sort of from the ground up. Within a few weeks of beginning excavations, the dramatic walls appeared in what had been an open field and the crowds of visitors, both local citizens and tourists, began to appear. Simple ropes were put up around the actual trenches but otherwise visitors were encouraged to look around. We provided 3 guides who showed people around and distributed simple leaflets with a plan, description, and history of the site.

An interesting by-product of this PR effort was the collapse of the rumor system. As it was initially assumed that the only reason for digging was gold, our success suggested plentiful golden finds (7 caskets were reported). The explanations of the guides, the distribution of over 7000 leaflets in Arabic, and the presence of an old glass-fronted bookcase next to the guards' tent (filled with representative pottery, glass, and metal objects) completely put to rest these rumors (which were indeed false). The site was, and remains today, completely open for the people of Aqaba and other visitors. Future work must include more permanent educational material, ideally

a small site museum. What is now becoming the pride of the town of Aqaba may become an educational and entertaining point of interest for all Jordanians and those lucky enough to visit that country.

- *Lustre sherd of man with a turban produced in Fatimid Egypt, late 10th century.*



First of all was the support and assistance of Dr. Adnan Hadidi, Director of the Department of Antiquities. He arranged for the participation of the Jordanian team from the Department: Dr. Ghazi Bisheh, Mr. Suleiman Farajat (who was our official representative), Dr. Khairieh 'Amr, and Ms. Hanan Azar. Dr. Dureid Mahasneh of the Aqaba Region Authority led the enthusiastic local cooperation enjoyed by the project. Other participants in the excavations made a talented multi-national team; they include Essam El Hadi (Sudan), Allison McQuitty (UK), Rosa Frey and Jessica Hallett (Canada), Robin Brown, Cathy Valentour, Jim Knudstad, Bob Smithers (USA). The Oriental Institute was represented by Carol Meyer, Yvonne Seng (also "representing" Australia), Guillermo Algaze (Cuban by birth), and, not in the least, Jan Johnson.