

**AQABA***Donald Whitcomb*

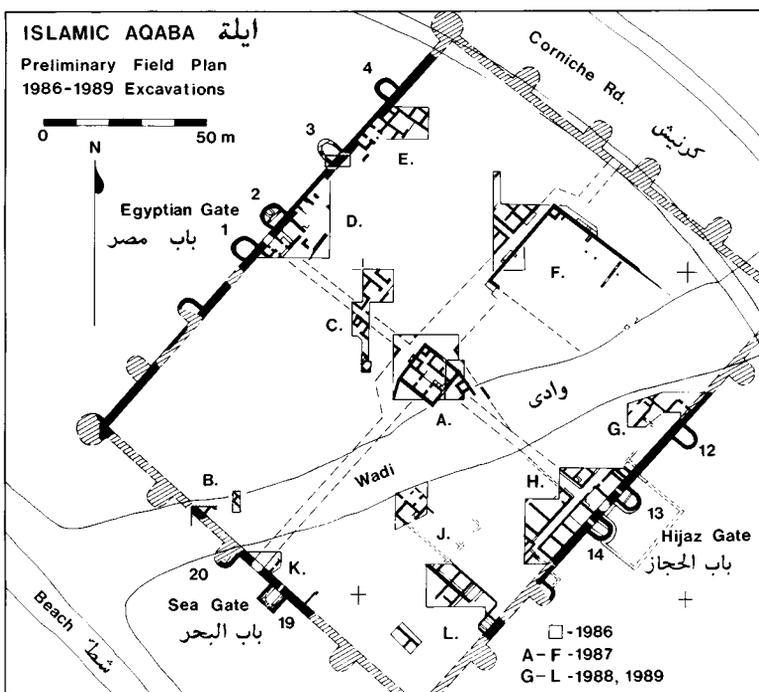
Almost 900 years ago the Crusader King Baldwin came to Aqaba and took over the city. His purpose was to blockade the port, to separate the Syrian and Egyptian parts of the Mamluk sultanate and to interdict their trade and that going to Arabia. This was one of the few times when international politics seems to have affected the history of this sleepy little port. This event has no direct evidence in The Oriental Institute excavations at Aqaba; negative evidence, the lack of 12th century artifacts and relative poverty of the 11th century levels, suggests that this event may have been the cause for movement to a new site, the building of a new town, and in effect the beginning of a new period in the history of Aqaba. ▼ The excavations at Aqaba illustrate the value of archaeology in clarifying aspects of history in relatively well-documented times. The translation of potsherds and building strata into historical evidence is not easy, even when key events are known. The method of archaeology is essentially careful recording of stratified layers and comparison of multiple examples of architectural and artifactual details, all seeking repetitive patterns. The process is very complicated and slow. The Oriental Institute excavations have completed four seasons and the evidence is reaching sufficient, if not intimidating, quantity.

The following report will illustrate several aspects of the Aqaba research program, accomplished in the year 1989-90. Three different aspects are: (1) the interaction of hypothesis and interpretation through large area excavations; (2) the stratification of the square tower as an example of historical sequence; and (3) the Geo-historical Reconnaissance of West Aqaba, extending our understanding of long term occupation in this region.

42

## The 1989 Excavations

The Annual Report for 1988-89 briefly outlined the 1988 season of excavations, which concentrated on the southeast quadrant of the city, on land belonging to the Royal Yacht Club of Jordan. The construction of a new marina on this property has been delayed as a result of and in deference to these archaeological investigations on this property. Within the 200 meters of the city walls in the southeast quadrant, there are three mounds of some 4 m. of stratified remains (see map). We returned to this area during the



Map of the excavations in Islamic Aqaba (Ayla) from 1986 to 1989.

1989 season; given the extremely limited funding, horizontal excavations were limited to relatively low areas behind the Hijaz gate (area H, between the mounds of areas G and J) and near the old road in the south corner of the city (area L, south of area J mound).



*Abbasid street  
excavated in area  
H, looking  
southwest.*

Relatively low areas, which should contain only early Islamic materials, were selected for excavation in order to test hypotheses on the structure of the early Islamic city. These working hypotheses were described in the last Annual Report, actually as an "optimistic dream." Thus, the area behind the Hijaz gate (H) was suggested to have been the location for the *Dar al-Imara*, or administrative center, for Ayla in its earliest period. A model for an early *Dar al-Imara* was taken from the citadel of Amman. The results of these excavations were somewhat different from what had been anticipated, since much more of the area in question held early Abbasid remains than had been anticipated. The plan of this Abbasid architectural complex strongly indicates that a new urban plan, perhaps necessitated by destruction caused by the 748 earthquake, obscures the earlier structures.

The Abbasid "urban renewal" is interesting in itself. A street was laid out parallel to the city wall and cross streets and alleys divided the area into structural blocks. Several of the rooms excavated had well-preserved plaster floors; within the rooms a number of fine artifacts of the Abbasid period were found. A distinguishing characteristic of this architectural phase is the use of chancel screen posts for door thresholds; this suggests church elements were available for reuse during this period (post 800 A.D.). The street leading from the blocked Hijaz Gate is of special interest. This was not axial with the gate, though it retained a curbing or bench on either side. One may suggest that the building situated where the axial street should have passed is actually a filling element where an open court once stood.

This speculation is frustrated by the limited soundings made into the earlier architectural levels. A large probe excavated the large room directly behind the locked gate; this showed special usage but no street paving. Indeed, the city wall foundations were covered with 1.5 m. of clean sand, up to the level of the blockage. Similar sand deposits filled Tower 14. Both of these areas were excavated down to the water table, which covered the lowest foundations. No pre-Islamic artifacts were found in these lowest levels. Other probes into the lowest levels of the street showed complex

buttresses and other architectural features, though nothing clearly indicating an administrative center.

The 1989 working hypotheses had indicated the earliest city mosque, presumably that built by the Caliph 'Uthman ibn 'Affan (about 650 A.D.), in area L. The model for seeking the mosque in the south or southeast corner of the city follows hypotheses on the influence of the mosque of Madina and other early mosques such as that of 'Amr in Fustat (Cairo). The mound in this area had been destroyed, making it feasible to recover this building just beneath the present surface. The walls revealed in this area were stone rubble and mud-brick, forming rectangular rooms, often with double, parallel walls, perhaps from re-building operations. While these walls might have been interpreted as cribbing foundations for a hypostyle hall (for the mosque), the irregularity and certain architectural features weigh against this interpretation. The relatively few artifacts found in undisturbed context were uniformly early Umayyad in date (ca. 650-750). A single Byzantine gold coin was found in the surface; this was minted under Heraclius, a type datable to 638-641 A.D.

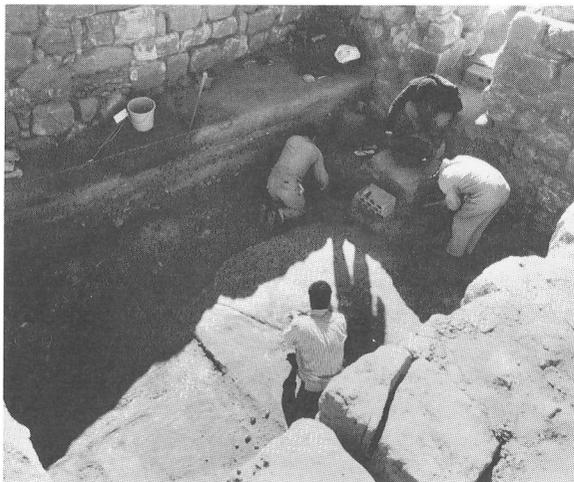
One of the ironies of this season is the importance of the early Islamic evidence uncovered outside of the walls. The sand and soil accumulations against the exterior of the city wall were cleared for a length between Tower 12 and Tower 15. More of this wall is well preserved to a depth of over 2 m. (further clearance would have needlessly endangered the wall). This work further clarified the extramural cemetery, first discovered in 1988. This year the temenos wall of the cemetery was found in conjunction with the gate blockage and thickening of the flanking towers. This very early architectural alteration and the deposition of Umayyad sherds on the cemetery suggest a date within the first 50 years of the Islamic era, that in fact Companions of the Prophet may be buried here. Unfortunately a considerable overburden of sand prevented determination of the southeast temenos wall — obviously careful investigation is a high priority before development in this area.

### **The Square Tower**

Attention was attracted to this tower south of the Sea Gate since it presented an anomaly, being square in plan with an external doorway. Surface collections, including a glass weight, a fragment of Sung celadon, and a finely carved piece of steatite, suggested special usage of this area. The excavation of the interior of this tower not only "explained" the square plan but it revealed an excellent example of architectural and ceramic sequence for determining an archaeological history in the early Islamic period.

Below the topsoil (i.e., refuse from removal of the army barracks) were large blocks of wall collapse in two stages lying on occupation layers (floors with in situ jars). The threshold of the exterior doorway was a reused chancel screen post made of marble. Artifacts confirmed late Abbasid and Fatimid depositions (ca. 950-1100) amid collapse of the room (one coin

*Cleaning the  
plaster floor in  
the square tower,  
looking south.*



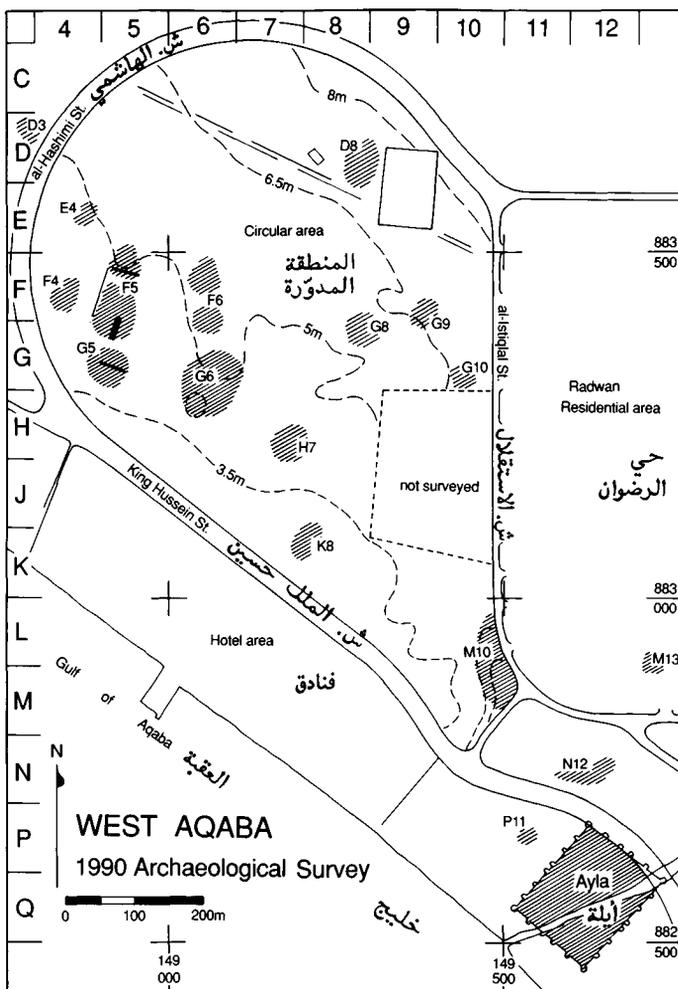
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from this level was a Fatimid dirham). Depositions beneath these occupational surfaces indicate the slow decomposition of thin mud brick partition walls around a central room. The building had a fine plaster floor and the walls likewise had a fine plaster surface and perhaps red paint. The doorway to the south was used with an earlier threshold. One coin found in the brick detritus was an Umayyad fals probably minted in al-Ramla, a type which post-dates 708 A.D. and may be early Abbasid (post 750 A.D.). Ceramics nearest to the plaster floor are of a type called Mahesh ware, transitional Umayyad — early Abbasid unglazed ceramics. Above these were glazed Abbasid wares of the classic Samarran types.

The plaster floor signals more dramatic architectural change. Beneath this floor was the curve of the original tower, identical with each of the other towers. This tower contained refuse dumped from the city wall (i.e. sloping northeast to southwest) leveled off with sea sand; this was done quickly as the plaster floor slumps in the center. This fill beneath the plaster floor contained Mahesh ware again, and in addition one interesting copper coin, a rare Ethiopian (Axumite) issue datable from the 7th to the mid-8th century A.D. The lowest occupation levels were burnt lenses with fish bones, complete vessels, and great quantities of Umayyad sherds. Beneath these layers there were irregular footings for the tower walls and the threshold of the door of the passageway leading through the city wall. The water table prevented discovery of wall footing bases and pre-fill layers.

### **The West Aqaba Survey**

From the first discovery of the site of Ayla, presently under excavation, we have been aware of additional sites within the Aqaba region. In 1987 surface collections were obtained from a site 250 m. to the northwest, referred to as Ailana (and now the more prosaic, site M10). That same year an amphora from a kiln site was presented to the excavations (from site



Map of sites discovered in the West Aqaba survey.

M13). These pieces of evidence for the settlement history of Aqaba showed the need for a systematic survey within the town and its region.

A first step toward such a survey was undertaken by John Meloy in the summer of 1990. This was a preliminary survey of the Circular Area (see map), an area lying north of the hotels along King Hussein Street (the Corniche) and west of the residential and commercial sections of Aqaba. The West Aqaba survey was confined to this Circular Area, an area as yet undeveloped, comprising about 1.6 by 0.6 kms. of sand scrub, palm groves, desert pavement, and accumulations of windblown sand. Development plans by the Aqaba Region Authority intend this area as a cultural park, with auditoriums, theaters, and a museum. Plans remain flexible and await embellishment with further archaeological monuments.

Casual descriptions of the archaeological remains near Aqaba by travelers and archaeologists alike have been vague, but nonetheless they indicate that the ruins in the north and west parts of the modern city extend beyond the chronological and geographical boundaries of the early Islamic site of Ayla. In 1878, Sir Richard Burton associated extensive remains with a Biblical site, without artifactual justification, writing:

*"... inland and to the north rise the mounds and tumuli, the sole remains of ancient Elath... During the rain-floods the site is an island: to the west flows the surface-water of the Wady el- 'Arabah, and eastward the drainage of the Wady Yitm has dug a well-defined bed... A line of larger heaps to the north shows where, according to the people, ran the city wall. Finding it thickly strewn with scoriae, old and new, I decided that this was the Siyaghah or 'smiths' quarter.' Between it and the sea the surface is scattered with glass, shards and slag."* (1879, vol. 2, 240-1)

Some 50 years later Nelson Glueck found the area "was mostly covered with sand, but the surface of the ground was strewn with Nabataean sherds of all kinds"; for him this was the site of an extremely large "Nabataean city." (1934, 10).

Sites within the Circular Area are represented by fifteen separate sherd scatters; these accumulations of sherds are diffuse and limited in quantity, due to the intensive aggradation of sand from the prevailing northerly winds coming down the Wadi 'Araba and other causes. Consequently, it is likely that the scatters should be grouped into more complex archaeological sites and that some settlement remains obscured beneath the surface.

Topographic considerations suggest that the crescent-shaped mound, M10, is the remnant of a major settlement. This mound is at least 100 meters in breadth and an elevation of at least 3 meters in its height. Artifacts found on this site include a piece of carved marble, fragments of millefiori glass, and sherds of storage jars including amphorae. Preliminary examination of the pottery collected suggests continuous occupation from the Nabataean, Roman, and Byzantine period. Although most of the site is covered by modern construction, this mound offers promising possibilities as a connection between the Classical and the Islamic settlements.

A very large settlement may be represented in sites F5, G5, F6, G6, and possibly including E4 and F4. Site G6 is the largest of the sites in horizontal extent. The surface of these mounds consists of loose sand lying on harder layers containing fine ash and mudbrick debris. Site F5 has the vestiges of a mudbrick wall about 37 m. long and further walls were found in site G5 (including an area measuring at least 9 m. by 3.5 m. of mudbrick, either a pavement or a very wide wall). Despite the deflated appearance of these mounds, pottery sherds are few. Most noticeable are the many "Nabataean" sherds of fine, orange ware, some with a gray-black core or decorated with red paint. The spatial relationships and orientation of these sites indicate

that they are the vestiges of a site up to 250 m. by 200 m. in extent. This may be Glueck's "Nabataean city"; alternatively, the size is consistent with the usual dimensions of Roman legionary camps.

Another series of mounds in G8, G9, and G10 seem likely to form part of a large settlement that remains unsurveyed in the relatively high ground of a military post. The westernmost of these mounds, G8, is the highest hillock in the survey area with slag and fine orange wares and thin but gritty orange and gritty cream wares. The northernmost site, D8, has a substantial amount of pottery slag, suggesting an industrial center of some importance. The occurrence of slag in sites E4, F6, and G8 forms a rough line recalling Burton's observation of scoriae and slag mentioned above. Thus in the pantheon of archaeological heroes who contributed to discoveries in Aqaba, we may list Sir Richard Burton, who first described the Nabataean city, and T. E. Lawrence, who first described the Islamic city. The sands which have since obscured these discoveries were swept away from the Islamic city in 1985 and now from the Nabataean city in 1990.

### Future Research

The survey just completed in the summer of 1990 was called the Geo-historical Reconnaissance. We used "reconnaissance" since a systematic and complete survey seemed unlikely in the very short time available under the brutal summer sun of Aqaba. John Meloy's results have shown this designation to be unjustly pessimistic, as we now have a more than adequate base for future research on the archaeology of West Aqaba. The second member of the survey team was Dr. Basil Gomez, a geologist charged with beginning examination of the geology and geomorphology of the Ayla site and the Aqaba region. Basil will investigate evidence for archaeoseismic damage, sea-level and water table change and the origin of the wadi. A series of bore holes has been established on the periphery of the site to begin gathering data for these questions. Basil has also given preliminary advice on geotechnical aspects of site preservation.

The geomorphological investigation will be an important aspect of the next seasons of excavation. Indeed, a number of specialized scientific fields will be included in the coming seasons. The archaeobotany, faunal studies, shells, etc., were begun in 1987 and analyses of these materials are proceeding. Nevertheless, due to the salvage nature of the project and its limited funding, the inclusion of these important lines of evidence has been less complete than might be desired. The next scheduled excavations, in Fall 1991, will address these wider anthropological concerns.

Finally, one continuing concern of this project is the interaction with tourism and education in Jordan. This last spring saw the opening of a permanent museum on the archaeology of Ayla in a completely refurbished historical building in Aqaba, the Sharif Hussein House. This display was set up by Jim Richerson, working with Hanan Kurdi of the Department of Antiquities and Amar Khamash of the Department of Tourism. Jim also completed a series of bilingual signs set up on the site, a sort of self-guided

tour explaining the archaeological remains. This sign project, in addition to a strong beginning in the preservation of the architectural remains, has been supported by the USAID in conjunction with Dr. Bert de Vries of ACOR. One further project, the creation of a Visitor Orientation Center, has received strong support (with funding) from the Department of Tourism. Jim Richerson and I have finalized plans to build it in the form of a reconstruction of the Syrian gate, complete with its flanking towers, next to King Hussein Street (the Corniche Road). Plans for the displays within this building are already well under way and will provide visitors with a ready understanding of the excitement of archaeology in Aqaba.

## **Acknowledgements**

The 1989 season of excavations lasted from November 22 until December 28, a total of 32 days of excavation. The team consisted of six archaeologists; the author, Department representative Dr. Khairieh 'Amr, John Meloy, Rebecca Foote, Kevin Rielly, and the surveyor Hugh Barnes. A work force of about 25 men was employed. This small season could not have been accomplished without the active assistance of Dr. Ghazi Bisheh and the Department of Antiquities. We are grateful for permissions and active cooperation of officials and contractors of the Royal Yacht Club, particularly Mr. Anis Mouashir and Mr. Hasan Aweidah. Support was provided by The University of Chicago, The National Geographic Society, and The American Center for Oriental Research.

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