

AQABA



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“Port of Palestine on the China Sea”

Donald Whitcomb

“وأيلة مدينة على طرف شعبة بحر الصين
عامرة جليلة ذات نخيل وأسماك
فرضة فلسطين وخزانة الحجاز”

*“And Wayla is a city on a branch of the China Sea.
Great in prosperity with its palms and fish,
It is the port of Palestine, the storehouse of the Hijaz.”*

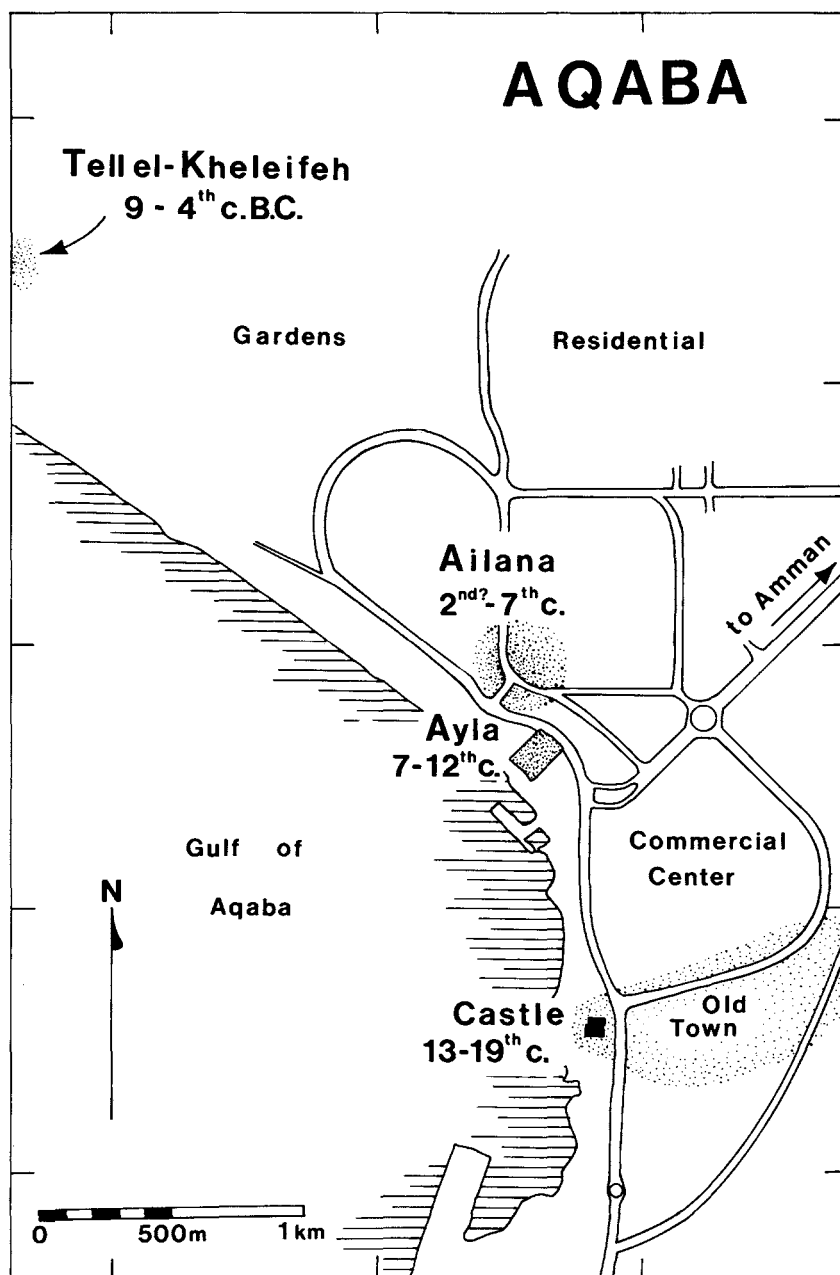
-- Muqaddasi, ca. 985 A.D.

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Map of the modern city of Aqaba, with ancient and medieval archaeological sites.

Drawing of a man with a turban, on a lustre ware sherd made in Fatimid Egypt.



One can imagine the Arab geographer Shams ad-Din Muqaddasi visiting Aqaba, known as Ayla in the 10th century, from his native city of Jerusalem. He immediately saw a problem -- his quote continues: "(The city) is usually called Ayla, but (the true) Ayla is in ruins nearby, about which it is written, 'Ask them concerning the town by the sea.' " The comfortable and prosperous town "with its palms and fish" was not the same place as the ancient Ayla mentioned in the Qur'an (or Elath/Eloth of the Bible). His solution was to make up a new name for the town, Wayla, or the "little Ayla". He was, in fact, the first archaeologist to examine the history of the area included in modern Aqaba.

Preface

Until the spring of 1987, Muqaddasi's statement could not be understood, since the archaeology of Aqaba had been largely neglected for a millennium. It is now clear that Muqaddasi stood in the medieval town and looked northwest to a vast ruin field, the Nabataean, Roman and Byzantine town (which had a variety of names; here Ailana will be used). Further to the northwest are even earlier ruins called Tell el-Kheleifeh, belonging to the first millennium B.C. These might be associated with Solomon's port,

Ezion Geber, but its biblical contemporary, Elath/Eloth, has still not been located. The long history of the port of Aqaba, connecting Palestine and Egypt with the lands along the shores of the Indian Ocean as far away as China, is now in the first stages of archaeological research.

The site of the medieval port of Ayla has been abandoned since the time of the Crusades, and its monumental buildings have been covered by wind-blown sand. Recent excavations are now returning it to view as a central part of the modern city of Aqaba. The old city wall, preserved over 4.5 meters high, its towers and one of its gates, preserved above the top of its arch, are now visible from the Corniche road. This booklet is intended to introduce readers to the medieval Islamic city, whether they are walking through the structures being unearthed, walking through the exhibit of objects discovered by the excavations, or "visiting" the ancient bustling port from their armchairs.



General view of the site of Ayla, showing a tower in the northwest town wall.

Most of the history of Ayla is only vaguely known. There is little direct evidence for the Nabataean port, though the commercial prowess and proximity of the Nabataean capital city of Petra make such a port an obvious possibility. The Ptolemies took Elath from the Nabataeans and renamed it Berenice, beginning a pattern of Egyptian attempts to dominate this region.

History of Ayla (Aqaba)

The Romans constructed the *via nova* from Aqaba to Bostra in southern Syria (111-116 A.D.), and stationed the 10th Legion Fretensis at Aqaba, which they called Ailana. Bishops of the town are known from 325 until the early 7th century. The Prophet Mohammad made a treaty with the town, represented by Yuhanna ibn Ru'ba, in 630. This early submission greatly facilitated the first Muslim attacks on Palestine under 'Amr ibn al-'As in 634.

One must turn to the Arab geographers of the 9th and 10th centuries for descriptions of the development of Ayla. The commercial prosperity of the town is reflected in the account of Ya'qubi: "The city of Ayla is a great city on the shore of the salt sea and in it gather the pilgrims of Syria, Egypt, and the Maghreb (North Africa). There are numerous merchants and common people..."

In addition to the passages from Muqaddasi mentioned above, this observant geographer noted that "...in Wayla, there is disagreement among the people of Syria, the Hijaz (western Arabia), and Egypt, like in Abbadan, but I join it to Syria because its customs and measures are Syrian. It is the port of Palestine, from which come its imported goods."

This description testifies to the prosperity of Ayla and its extensive trade connections with Egypt, Palestine and the Hijaz. An important impetus for these interconnections was the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca; both the north African/Egyptian and the Palestinian/Syrian roads passed through Aqaba, which was stocked with food supplies from Gaza.

For the end to this prosperity, one may allude to a variety of causal factors. An Egyptian Fatimid garrison was stationed at Ayla in 961, fighting revolts until the town was sacked in 1024 by local tribesmen. Ayla suffered an earthquake in 1072. Finally the Crusaders captured Ayla in 1116, after which it was retaken by Saladin (Salaheddin) in 1170. A decade later, there was a brief occupation by the Crusader Renaud de Chatillon. Throughout the latter exchanges, the town does not seem to have been fortified; it is therefore tempting to see the end of the walled site, which is presently under excavation, during the early 12th century. Correspondingly, Abu'l Fida says there was nothing left but a stronghold near the shore in the 13th century, when the settlement's name changed from Ayla to Aqaba. This would seem to be the still standing castle of the Ayyubid/Mamluke period (13th century and later), about a kilometer south of the site of Ayla, which became the focus for settlement until modern times.

Leon de Laborde's etching of Aqaba castle, with a pilgrimage caravan in 1828.

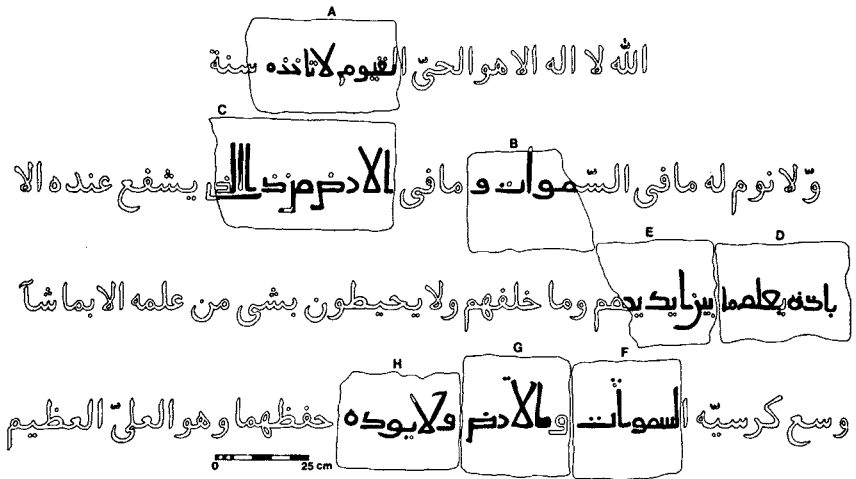


The most impressive architectural feature revealed on the medieval site of Ayla by the excavations of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, under the direction of the author, is the northwest city wall, which was cleared along a length of over 80 meters. The wall was composed of two parallel stone courses filled in with rubble, and was interrupted by semi-circular towers. Two of these towers flank the city gate. From this gate, the walls of the town stretched to the sea wall on the south and beneath the Corniche road on the north. This town probably measured 160 x 120 meters, with axial streets dividing the town into four quadrants. The gates may be described as the Bab al-Sham (the Syrian gate on the northeast), the Bab al-Hijaz (southeast), the Bab al-Bahr (the sea gate) and the Bab al-Misir (the Egyptian gate on the northwest).

The Site of Medieval Ayla



The city gate, during excavation.



Drawing of the monumental inscription above the excavated city gate, with parts of the *Ayat al-Kursi*.

The city gate, located between towers 1 and 2 (area D), revealed a complex history of rebuilding, mirroring the broad outline of the town's history. Its total excavated height is 4.5 meters; the (sweet) water table prevented the excavations from reaching the original street level. The earliest gate (Umayyad or Abbasid) was three meters wide, defined by a handsome round arch. It was surmounted by a carved stone inscription in Kufic Arabic, parts of the Qur'an verse called the *Ayat al-Kursi*, an especially appropriate verse for the protection of the city. Later, the gate was narrowed and a series of rooms (shops?) was placed on each side of the street, both inside and outside the gate. As the fortunes of the town declined in the Fatimid period, debris filled the original arch, and a secondary, pointed arch was built for a small doorway. Gradually, this entrance also filled with debris, and eventually only a basalt drain pipe for waste water ran through the blocked gate.

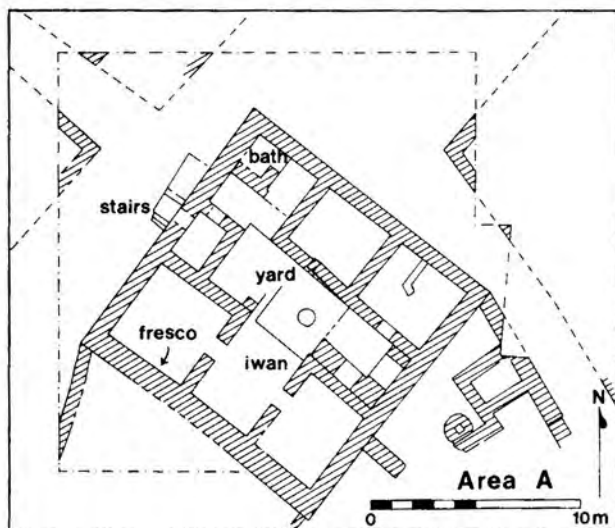
The towers, which were divided into small rooms, were entered from the town through a ground level door, as revealed by the excavation of tower 2. Between the towers, the city wall narrowed to a thinner curtain wall which accommodated buildings on the inside. An area between towers 3 and 4 (area E) was excavated to reveal the latest structures, a combination of stone and mud-brick construction. Most stones, including

several column drums, were re-used from earlier, more carefully constructed buildings. One of these columns had been set in the center of the *iwan* (or porch) of a Samarra-style *bayt*, a popular form of domestic architecture during the Abbasid period. More houses were found along the street leading from the Egyptian gate to the center of the town (area C). The earlier Abbasid houses were fine stone and brick residences. As the town deteriorated, so did the dwellings, and the originally wide thoroughfare gradually narrowed. North of the street, the latest Fatimid structures were built entirely of mud-brick, and the courtyards featured numerous *tawabeen* 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.



Some of the ovens (*tawabeen*) in area C.

The Pavilion Building is located near the crossing of the axial streets (area A). The sequence of street levels, 3.5 meters deep, indicated use from the 7th through the 11th centuries, and at least two rebuildings. The most recent configuration was a residence of the late Abbasid or Fatimid period. A number of rooms were arranged around a small courtyard, with entrance stairs on the northwest and a staircase leading to the roof or upper storey. On the south side was an *iwan* (a covered room open to the courtyard) and flanking rooms, one of which had fresco decorations painted on at least one wall. These



Plan of the Pavilion Building.

Recording the fresco and graffiti in the Pavilion Building.



consisted of floral motifs and geometric designs in red and black paint, with 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 meters wide. 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 four 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.



The monumental arch (bottom-left of photo) in the lower portion of the southwest wall of the Pavilion Building.

There is some irony in the fact that the largest structure found to date is also the most enigmatic. The residential architecture in area E continued to the axial street, here about 2.5 meters wide, which seemingly connected the Pavilion Building with the Syrian gate. East of this street was the Large Enclosure (area F), characterized by long walls of substantial construction, with distinctive grey mortar. The building measured at least 30 x 40 meters. 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 three 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 on 2.5 meters of fill. The walls continued down to a running foundation and plaster floor. All materials below the floors were Umayyad. Finally, in the southwest corner were found 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 hypothesis.



The northwest corner of the Large Enclosure.

The excavations of 1986 and 1987 concentrated on the northern portion of the site. One of the first test trenches in 1986 encountered the sea wall, casemate rooms and residential structures on the edge of the wadi (area B). It was the discovery of this fragment of the city wall which allowed the prediction of the size of the city and the location of the city gate. This western quadrant of the city is the highest part of the mounding and is safely preserved under the palms and reeds. As with the Large Enclosure, many answers to questions of the medieval city of Ayla lie waiting for future archaeological research.



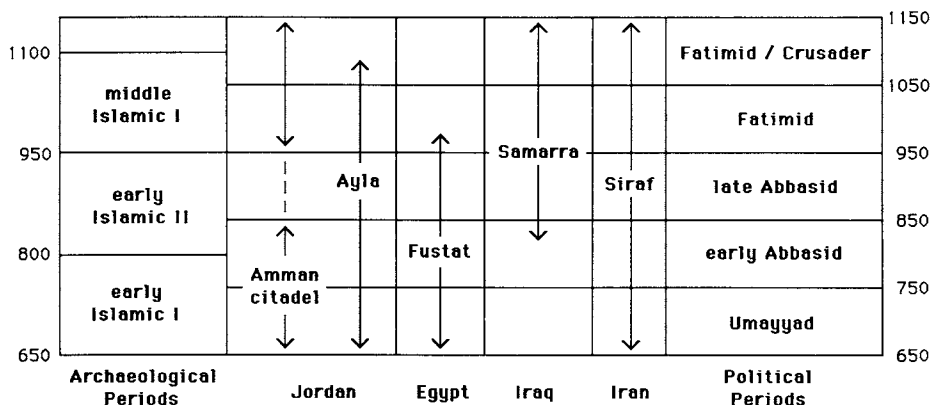
The sea wall and mud-brick casemate wall (area B).

The issue of the pre-Islamic town, called Ailana for the sake of clarity, remains problematic. Whatever the nature of the Nabataean and earlier settlements, there must have existed a large Roman camp, which accommodated the 10th Legion Fretensis in the 4th century. One may recall Muqaddasi's observation of the ruins of the large city (the Roman camp?) beside the smaller Islamic town. While Nabataean, Roman and early Byzantine sherds have been found on the site, mainly in the matrix of the walls, no distinctive levels or concentrations have been found. On the other hand, surface sherding to the northwest of the site, for a distance of about 500 meters, has produced just such ceramic material. Though no walls of a legionary camp are visible yet, surface collections suggest that ruins of the earlier town lie next to the Islamic town.

This has important implications for the foundation of the Islamic town. One of the characteristics of the *amsar* (singular, *misr*), the camp towns founded during the Muslim conquest, is that they tended to be situated

Islamic Urbanization at Aqaba

Chart of the periods and major comparative sites for Ayla.



next to older towns. Further, research into the history of Aqaba, combined with study of the earliest ceramics in deep stratigraphic probes, suggests that the foundation of this settlement probably occurred during the Caliphate of 'Uthman, about 650 A.D. The archaeological implications of this hypothesis are that in Aqaba one has pre-Umayyad (and early Umayyad) ceramics, architecture and urban planning. This is one of the first, clear archaeological examples of the transition from Byzantine to Islamic urbanism, and of the earliest stages in the development of Muslim civilization into an urban form.

The plan of the city of Ayla has both formal aspects (Byzantine style walls, towers and street plan) and the irregularity one might expect of what has been called the *ville spontanée*. This latter impression may be partially the result of structural changes during the later Abbasid and Fatimid periods. That the original plan, whether pre-Umayyad or Umayyad, may have been more elaborate is suggested in the monumental and well-carved arched gateway, the arches of the Pavilion Building and the foundations of the Large Enclosure. The *misr* or town of early Islamic Ayla is thus a response to a new set of concepts of what a town should be. The town is a combination of the experience of the late Byzantine city and the new Muslim attitudes toward urbanism. As in many innovations, one may expect continuation of many non-essential Byzantine features. What will be different is the integration of elements, as well as many institutions.

This was an early attempt at realization of an Islamic city, the fruition of which would not be identifiable until the 9th or 10th century in the great capitals of the Eastern Caliphate. The city is more than just a collection of buildings within massive walls; it is, rather, a focus of social institutions made viable through an economic system. In the absence of a strong agricultural base, the source of this prosperity was in commerce, mercantile arrangements linking, in this case, the Mediterranean with the Far East. As with other aspects of history, textual sources only hint at the structure of this trade; fortunately, as with other cultural aspects, archaeological artifacts provide evidence for a more complete understanding of this system.

Artifacts from the Excavations

Artifacts are used by archaeologists in a variety of ways. Depending on the degree of preservation, they can illuminate all aspects of peoples' lives. Generally, aims are more modest, beginning first with matters of chronology, especially during the first seasons at a new site.

Occasionally an artifact provides direct evidence of date. Fragments of a dedicatory plaque from the legionary camp of the 10th Fretensis were found near the Bab al-Misr (Egyptian gate), whence it had presumably been moved from its original location. The name of the Byzantine emperor appears to be Constantine, which would fit with the 4th century date of the founding of the camp.

Other architectural fragments also may have been moved from abandoned buildings



A fragment of the Latin
dedicatory plaque.



Limestone capital and marble fragments of a chancel screen.

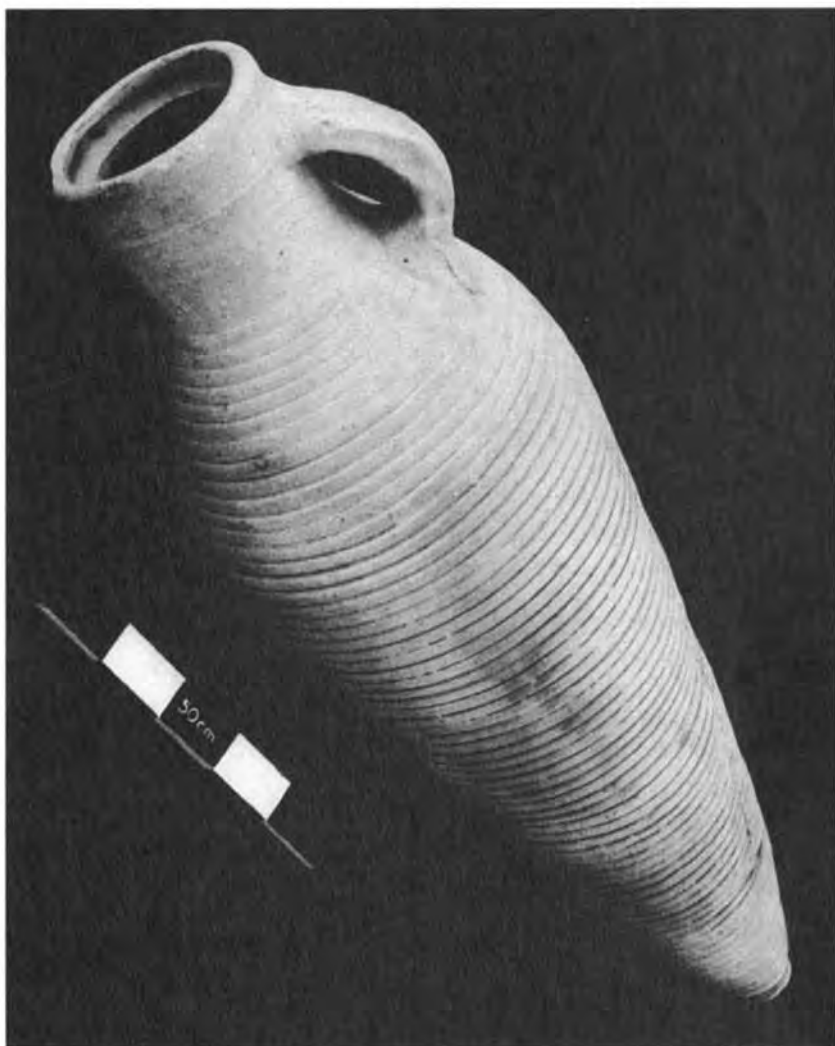
in the Byzantine town into the new Islamic one, where they might have been re-used as building material. However, the marble capital and fragments of a chancel screen do not necessarily derive from an earlier church, since there may well have been a new church built within the Islamic city.

Study of the artifacts, especially the ceramics, has allowed them to be divided into three chronological periods:

- | | | |
|---------------------|----------------------------|----------|
| 1. Early Islamic I | (Pre-Umayyad and Umayyad) | 650-800 |
| 2. Early Islamic II | (early Abbasid) | 800-950 |
| 3. Middle Islamic I | (late Abbasid and Fatimid) | 950-1100 |

Pots do not directly indicate political and religious developments, and the earliest ceramics in the stratigraphic sequence at Aqaba belong to types called late Byzantine. These ceramics may be shown to belong to the Islamic period

beginning just after the conquest and continuing through the Umayyad period (from 650 to 750 A.D.). The pottery is a transitional style, one which was very strong in this part of southern Jordan and which differs from contemporary pottery found in other parts of the Levant.



Pre-Umayyad amphora excavated at Ayla.

Pottery can occasionally reflect the religious milieu in which it was created or used. An example is a jar found in the stratigraphic section of area B, at a level which can be no earlier than the early 8th century. Drawn in ink on the base of the jar are two crosses and a Hebrew inscription. This would suggest that, in the Abbasid town, there was at least one Christian who could still quote Hebrew verse. (The metal cross found in one of the private houses near the Large Enclosure also presumably reflects the continuing presence of Christians in the predominantly Muslim port).



Jar with crosses and a Hebrew inscription drawn on the base.

In addition to providing archaeologists with basic chronological information, ceramics are an excellent indication of prosperity, economic development and cultural trends. During the main periods of occupation at Aqaba, the Abbasid and Fatimid periods (800-1100 A.D.), fine glazed ceramics reflect high artistic and technical skill, a fine sense of aesthetic appreciation, and participation in a far-flung trade network.

Especially representative of the Abbasid period is a type called Samarra ware; such ceramics were found in the excavations of this 9th century capital of the Eastern Caliphate, located north of Baghdad. Some of these ceramics, such as the blue-green storage jars, have been found widely distributed, especially around the shores of the Indian Ocean. They appear to have been made in Basra, in southern Iraq.



Sherds of a blue-green storage jar and lustre wares imported from Iraq, and typical of Samarra wares.

Other Samarra glazed ceramics include multi-colored splashed and incised wares, often closely imitated in Egypt. Perhaps the most distinctive Samarra wares are those with lustre paint, a white glaze with yellow and red paint giving off a golden metallic sheen. All these Samarra wares had very rarely been found in Jordan before now; at Aqaba, for the first time,

quantities are found in association with unglazed and other glazed ceramics more commonly in use during this period.

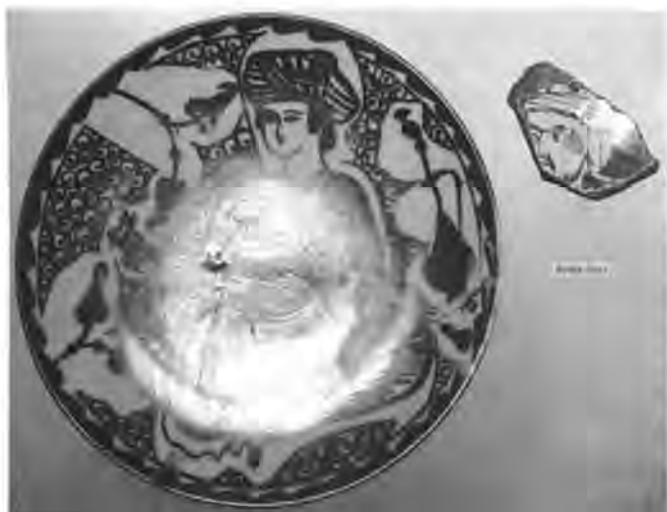
Other lustre wares are more typical of products made in Egypt under the Abbasid (and local Tulunid) dynasty. One of the most distinctive glazed wares from Egypt during this period is the so-called Fayumi ware, bold multi-colored designs on bowls in stripes or segments.

Far Eastern ceramics found at Aqaba testify to the long-distance commerce connecting the entire Indian Ocean. The Chinese celadons and porcelains have been dated to the late 5 Dynasties or early Northern Song periods, from the 10th into the 11th centuries. Forms are generally delicate cups and bowls, but large stoneware jars have also been found. The association of these Far Eastern wares with late Abbasid and Fatimid ceramics, as well as coins and glass weights from this period, corroborate this 10th-11th century dating.



Large stoneware jar
imported from the
Far East.

But even at the period of Aqaba's greatest prosperity, glazed wares formed only a small percentage of the pottery in use, 5-10% by volume or number of sherds. Naturally, more attention has been paid to the more beautiful and diagnostic glazed wares, especially in the absence of reliable archaeological contexts. Fortunately, the Aqaba excavations have fine museum quality glazed wares associated with humble earthenwares, providing a key for ceramic chronology, identification of functional differentiation and inter-regional exchange.



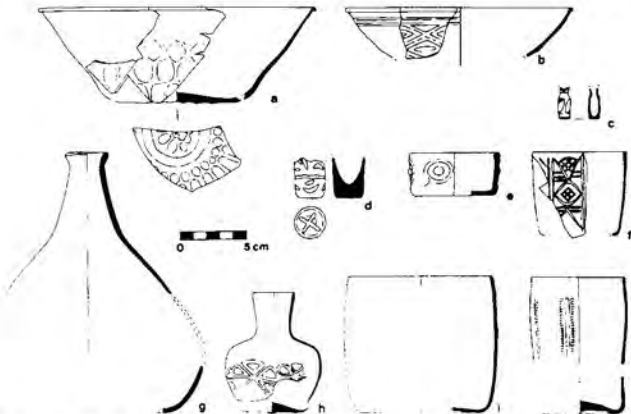
A lustre ware sherd showing a man with a turban, made in Fatimid Egypt, and a modern Egyptian imitation of same type of decorated bowl.

During the last century of occupation, the natural and political misfortunes of the town are reflected in the ceramics. On the positive side, one can see some of the power and achievement of the Fatimid state reflected in examples of lustre ware. The head of a man wearing a turban is typical of the artistic qualities of Fatimid painting, which may derive ultimately from imitation of ancient Greek painting. This and other fine glazed wares cannot offset the growing use of crude, hand-made pottery. These vessels are most often cups, bowls and basins -- their ubiquity, common material, and ability to nest in groups have given them the name "Tupperware". Some of these vessels have painted decoration, a style which would be developed during the later Ayyubid and Mamluke periods.



Common everyday ceramics used during the late Abbasid and Fatimid periods.

Glass was used for bowls and cups, small jars and vials, and lamps. Most pieces were produced in Egypt, though some Syrian or even Persian workmanship is indicated. Decoration was made by moulding or cutting; some pieces seem to imitate cut rock crystal, while rare examples may be attempts to imitate jade.



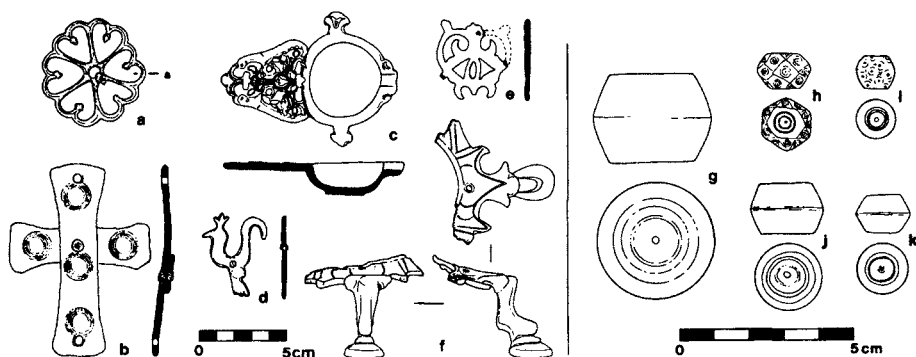
Drawings of reconstructed forms of glass ware.

Other artifact categories also reflect changing styles and technical ability, participation in an extensive trade network, and functional differentiation. Oil lamps are useful diagnostic artifacts, though much study remains to be done on these attractive objects. The range illustrated here is from Nabataean and Byzantine types, through Umayyad and Abbasid moulded "slipper" lamps, to late Abbasid and Fatimid glazed and unglazed types.



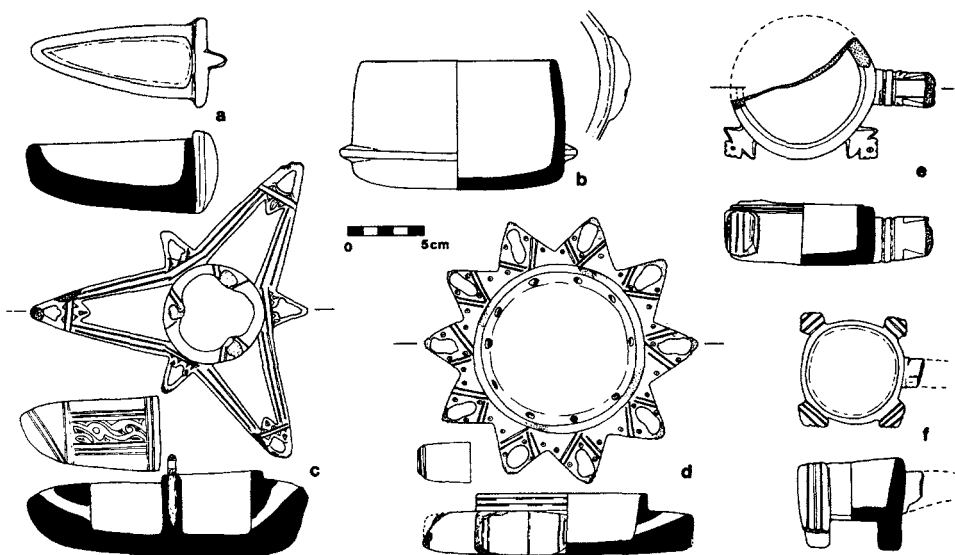
A selection of oil lamps ranging from the Byzantine to late Abbasid periods.

Metalwork, including coins, is usually poorly preserved in a seaside excavation because of the saline soil. A number of small metal objects were found, however, including jewelry, pins and rings, parts of metal and wooden vessels, and metal embellishments for furniture. As one might expect in a commercial town, numerous sets of weights and parts of scales were also found. It is hoped that some coins will eventually, after careful cleaning, reveal definite dates for the levels in which they were found.



Drawings of some fine bronze metalwork artifacts and a selection of metal weights excavated at Ayla.

Steatite (technically chlorite, commonly called soapstone) was used for only a few practical stone items -- lamps, cooking pots and incense burners. The ability of this stone to absorb and conduct heat led to the wide distribution of steatite cooking pots manufactured in Yemen from the 10th to 14th centuries.



Drawings of artifacts manufactured from steatite.



General view of the Ayla excavation site, with northwest city wall and a tower in the foreground.

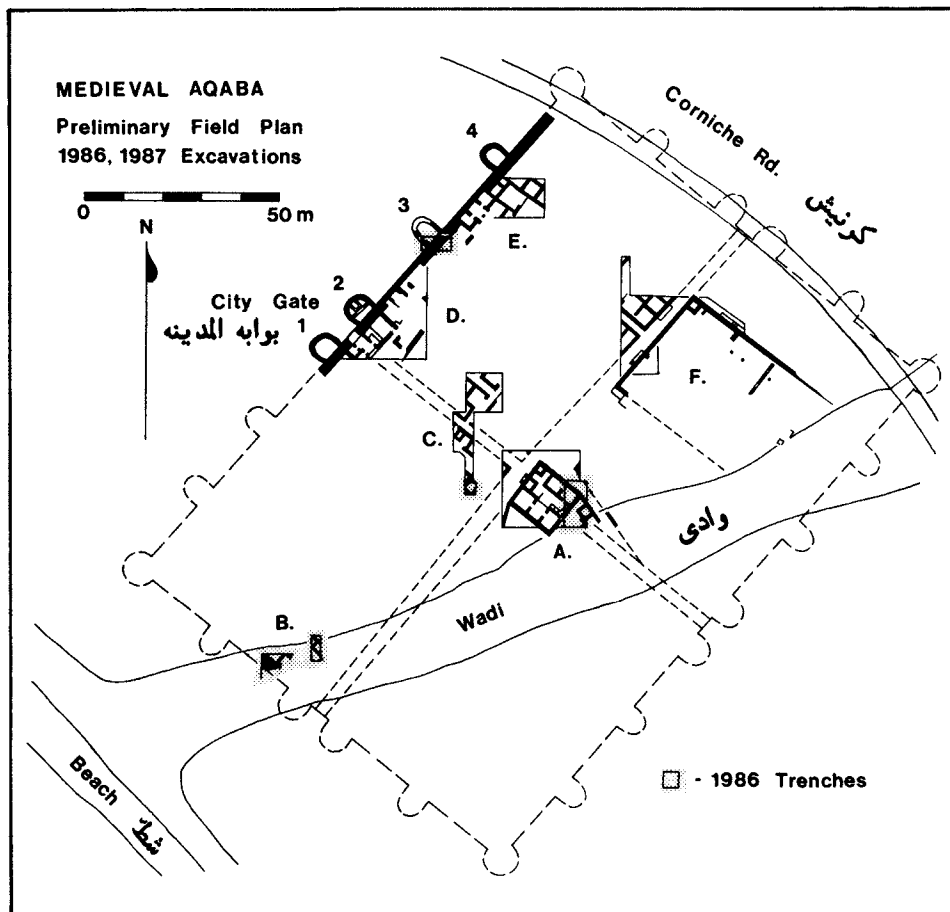
The excavation of the site of Aqaba is the result of a re-discovery, a program of research which began in libraries, where there is ample, though forgotten, testimony to these ruins. The honor of modern discovery belongs to the traveler Eduard Rüppell, who visited the area in 1822. Nelson Glueck noted the site in 1936, but excavated nearby Tell el-Kheleifeh instead. Among the many other archaeologists, the most informative is undoubtedly T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia). Lawrence visited some two and a half years before he returned with the Sherifan army which liberated the town from the Turks. His conclusion was that the evidence "all pointed to an Arab settlement of some luxury in the early Middle Ages."

Afterword

The 1986 and 1987 expeditions were made possible by the assistance of many people, especially Dr. Adnan Hadidi, Dr. Ghazi Bisheh and Mr. Suleiman Farajat of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, Mr. Nasri Atalla of the Jordanian Tourism Authority and Dr. Dureid Mahasneh of the Aqaba Region Authority. Funding came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), The National Geographic Society and the University of Chicago, which also underwrote the expenses for the exhibit. Special thanks are due to Dr. David McCreery for assistance and facilities at ACOR and to Mr. Rami Khouri for initial encouragement and professional reportage. The exhibition in Chicago benefitted especially from the talents of Mr. Ray Tindel, Mr. Jim Richerson and Ms. Cathy Valentour. Finally, and not least, we are indebted to the people of Aqaba, who take an active interest in the wonder of their past.



Examples of early and medieval Islamic ceramic lamps from Ayla.



Plan of the site of medieval Aqaba (Ayla), with excavations from the 1986 and 1987 seasons.

