

ISLAMIC ARCHAEOLOGY

Donald Whitcomb

The discipline of Islamic archaeology may be less familiar to members of the Oriental Institute, which describes itself as devoted to the art and archaeology of the ancient Near East. Research in this period began with the first field projects in the 1930s, tangential to work at Alishar Tepe, the Amuq, Nippur, and Medinet Habu (Jeme), and the special focus of later projects as E. F. Schmidt's work at Rayy and Istakhr and Robert McC. Adams work in the Diyala, Abu Sarifa, and Jundi Shapur. These projects contributed Islamic artifacts to the museum's large holdings of Arabic papyri, bookbindings, and tombstones, originally on display in Breasted's "Persian and Islamic Hall." Building on this tradition, the Oriental Institute has supported Islamic field projects at Quseir al-Qadim, Luxor, Aqaba, and most recently Hadir Qinnasrin, with a growing number of students benefiting from these opportunities to specialize in this relatively new field.

One of the most enduring ideas of Breasted is the concept of the "Fertile Crescent." Aqaba lies at a pivotal juncture along this zone of incipient civilization. This site has made major contributions toward understanding the formative period of Islamic civilization in the seventh century. The city plan and artifacts testify to the gradual transformation from late Byzantine into early Islamic styles. This parallels the emergence of Islamic political and cultural identity in the time of the first caliphs and the Umayyad dynasty. This is the beginning of a new age and not the end of antiquity, as more often depicted here in the Oriental Institute. The emergence of Islamic civilization, which is no clearer than the emergence of the Sumerians or the Old Kingdom, demands the attentions of archaeological research. Islamic archaeology presents a prime opportunity to address historical questions from complementary textual and archaeological evidence.

Quseir al-Qadim

In early November, Alka Patel, University of Michigan, organized an Interdisciplinary Workshop entitled, "Communities and Commodities: Western India and the Indian Ocean (11th–15th Centuries)." This provided an opportunity to present the resist-dyed textiles recovered in the Quseir al-Qadim excavations. The research of Ruth Barnes on the block-printed textiles from western India, located in the Kelsey museum (1993), is paralleled by a closely similar collection in the Oriental Institute. More importantly, this excavated corpus provides the first and largest body of evidence, closely datable and with architectural (and thus social) contexts. There is some irony that the Quseir textiles are becoming the most important, or at least best known, result of these excavations.

A corpus of documents and textiles from one residence, called the Sheikh's house, may be narrowly dated to the first half of the thirteenth century. This artifactual assemblage features a wide range of ceramics, glass, coins, and evidence of foodstuffs, both used and stored in the residence and warehouse. Recent studies of the Quseir



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letters by Li Guo (in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 1999, 2001) begin the description of the family of Sheikh Abu Mufarrij, who participated in the “kinship network” that was part of a Muslim commercial hegemony. This combination of artifacts and documentation allows an extremely detailed examination of this trading community, its relationship with the Geniza and archaeology of Fustat, and its role in the larger picture of Indian Ocean history. A preliminary article on the interrelationship of architectural context, artifacts, and documentation was written by the author with Katherine Strange Burke (doctoral candidate in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations [NELC]), who will pursue the details of this subject in her dissertation.

Aqaba and Its Castle

Archaeological research has brought to light the early Islamic city of Ayla in the heart of the modern city of Aqaba. This archaeological site was occupied during a pivotal historical period (from ca. A.D. 650 to about A.D. 1100). The broader occupation pattern at Aqaba was a sequence of settlements, generally moving from northwest to the southeast. The early phases of archaeological research at Aqaba tended to focus on its foundation, on the potential significance of one of the earliest Islamic cities as a key to understanding the beginnings of this advance in urbanism. More recently, interest has shifted to the collapse of this city, or perhaps better, the causes of change to the newer settlement around the castle.

The latest events in the early Islamic port may be bracketed by the visit of the great geographer al-Muqaddasi (ca. 985), when he discerned the last phase of its early Islamic prosperity. This literary account may be contrasted with the archaeological evidence of massive destruction, the results of the earthquake of 1068, which sealed the fate of this settlement at a time when the shores of the Red Sea were dominated by the Fatimid dynasty of Egypt. This environment was one of political and economic instability, graphically demonstrated in the hoard of dinars from



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Sijilmasa, perhaps lost during the bedouin sack of the town in 1024. The events of the millennium are an opportune moment to seek new historical understandings from archaeology.

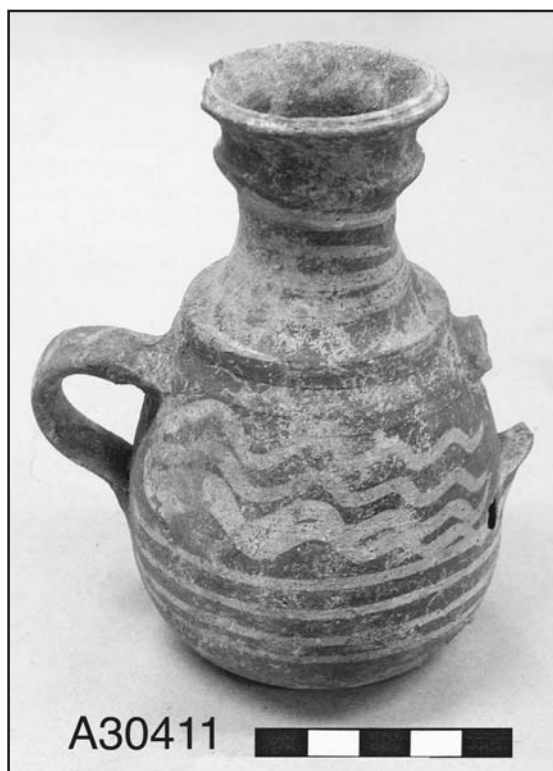
When the site of early Islamic Ayla was abandoned in the early twelfth century, settlement shifted to the castle, known now as Aqaba castle. This fortified structure is located about one kilometer southeast at the mouth of the Wadi Shalala; the structure may be Crusader or, more likely, Ayyubid in origin. The present remains are mostly Mamluk and Ottoman. The author has argued that the castle and its surrounding settlement was called Aqabat Ayla in the medieval period. This name persisted until the fourteenth century, when the ruins of Ayla were no longer extant, and the name contracted to Aqaba. The modern city of Aqaba expanded from this village around the castle only in the last few decades.

While settlement in this region had certainly declined from the early Islamic urban center of Ayla, a continuity of human occupation was guaranteed in the constants of abundant freshwater, agricultural, and marine resources, combined with the economic incentive of seasonal activity provisioning pilgrims. The study of this castle has begun with two seasons in 2000 and 2001, under the direction of Johnny De Meulemeester, Denys Pringle, and Sawsan al-Fakhri. A larger season, with the participation of several NELC students, was postponed due to the recent conflict in the Gulf. One hopes that the larger settlement history, a splendid example of the utilization of archaeological and documentary resources in a regional context, will continue to amplify the discoveries in early Islamic Ayla.

Khirbet al-Karak

This small site is well known as Beth Yerah, an important early Bronze Age settlement on the southern shore of Lake Tiberias. The Oriental Institute's involvement in this site began in 1952/1953, when Pinhas Delougaz and Richard C. Haines excavated a Byzantine church beneath an "Arab building." Last year's *Annual Report* presented the startling discovery that this building was part of an early Islamic settlement called Sinnabra. A preliminary article outlining this analysis appeared in *al-Usur al-Wusta* 14.1.

More recently, the Israeli archaeologist, Rafael Greenberg, has returned to Khirbet al-Karak for new excavations. He reports much new information about the Islamic materials, as well as additional records in the stores of the Israel Antiquity Authority. Closer to home (in the Oriental Institute storerooms), NELC student Gabrielle Novacek has begun systematically examining the Bronze Age collections from this site; she reports finding more Islamic materials in this search. One hopes that a cooperative project may be possible at this multi-period site in the near future.



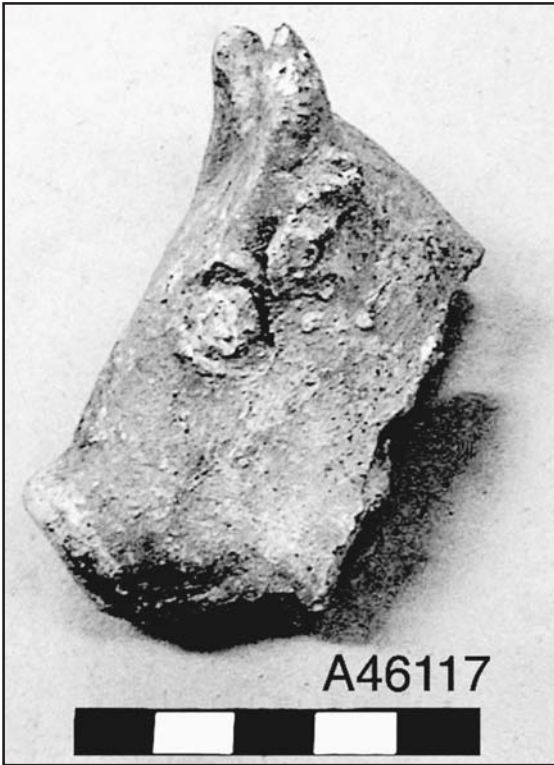
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Jundi Shapur

Last February, Robert McC. Adams and many other archaeologists who worked in Khuzestan many years ago gathered for a Landscape Archaeology workshop in the Oriental Institute. I presented a paper praising Adams's contribution to Islamic archaeology in Iraq and Iran and followed this with the display of a small collection of ceramics from Jundi Shapur. In 1963, Adams turned his attention briefly from the long history of development of settlement and agricultural infrastructure in the Mesopotamian alluvium toward the adjacent region of Khuzestan in southwestern Iran. In one campaign, he mapped and excavated soundings on a city founded by Shapur

I in the mid-third century A.D. The site was located not far from the Oriental Institute excavations at Chogha Mish. Adams recorded the formidable ruins of Jundi Shapur, extending some 3.0 km by 1.5 km and laid out in an orthogonal fashion described as a chess board some seven hundred years later.

The brief excavations conducted by Adams at Jundi Shapur were too limited to reveal Sasanian monuments and communities, especially its medical school and Christian churches. Likewise, the continuations of the medical school and astronomical observatory, and social interactions within the early Islamic city, could not be located and these social achievements were denigrated as a long cultural decline. Last year, Abbas Alizadeh and Nick Kouchoukos began a program to return to Khuzestan on behalf of the Oriental Institute to continue the study of ancient settlements and irrigation systems. Abbas has prepared a solid foundation for this renewed investigation in his efforts to



publish Kantor's work at Chogha Mish and (soon) Chogha Bonut, as well as his own archaeological research there. Like Adams before them, interest in the great Sasanian irrigation schemes lead naturally to the immense city of Jundi Shapur. In the spring season of research in Khuzestan, I hope to visit Iran and explore the possibility of resuming archaeological investigation at Jundi Shapur.

As part of these preparations, the Jundi Shapur sherds have been thoroughly studied. They proved interesting enough, colored glazes are always pleasant to handle, that they became teaching tools for a ceramics class that I taught this spring. A fine ceramic spout in the shape of a bull's head, a symbol of the potential interests of this Sasanian and early Islamic city, will be featured in *News & Notes*, Fall 2003, No. 179.

A Meeting in Berlin

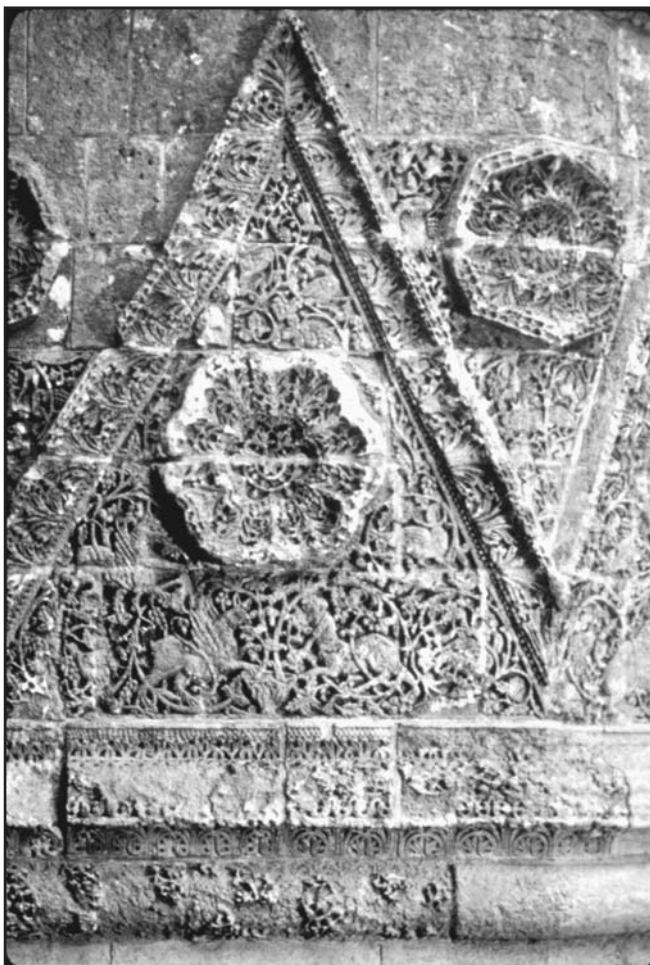
The International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East (ICAANE; at Copenhagen and Paris) provided two stimulating experiences in workshops on Islamic archaeology. These meetings resulted in the agreement by the participants that this discipline needs to

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find “a continuous platform for international meetings in our field.” This sentiment was voiced by Dr. Claus-Peter Haase, Director of the Museum for Islamic Art in Berlin, who organized a Symposium on the Archaeology of the Islamic Periods held in Berlin on November 16–18. This forum presented an amazing range of important, recent discoveries in Islamic archaeology. A more important reason for this gathering was to discuss the future of this quickly expanding field of research.

As continuing association with ICAANE seems difficult, the symposium noted that a critical level in numbers and vigor of exchange seems to warrant the foundation of a separate organization. Alastair Northedge summarized this situation, which led to informal discussion throughout the symposium. Claus drew together a preliminary “steering committee,” composed of himself, Jeremy Johns, Alan Walmsley, and myself to discuss a new organization, tentatively entitled the Association of Islamic Archaeologists. The aim is, as Claus put it, an institution which may offer a “better coherency of studies and presentations ... and interchange with the colleagues in the Near and Middle East.” This symposium had, of necessity, a restricted number of international participants and all were aware of a need for more inclusive future deliberations. This may be effectively achieved through the Internet; several proposals were entertained on accomplishing this, but with no immediate conclusion.

The initial description of this field as the Archaeology of Islamic Periods reflected some concern with misinterpretation of the idea of “Islamic Archaeology.” Following the lead of Northedge’s 1999 formulation, this term should be seen not as religious but cultural; the subject matter encompasses historic cultures under Islamic political hegemonies within which linguistic, material, and religious aspects may be present. While the focus should be on the “central Islamic lands,” this field includes regions affected by Islam, whether in the Mediterranean, Asia, or Africa. Likewise, antecedent and parallel cultural traditions must be considered. Finally, the growing field of Ottoman archaeology must be included within Islamic archaeology. There needs to be recognition that the discipline of Islamic Art History is closely interrelated but has distinctive methodologies and theoretical concerns. More importantly, there is a common focus on the relationship with history and allied philological disciplines that must be clearly formulated. In sum, the field of Islamic Archaeology must address fundamental definitions to be recognized as an independent academic discipline. Islamic Archaeology needs to be more than what archaeologists of medieval periods do in Islamic lands.



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An Advanced Seminar

At the Oriental Institute, an initiative in Islamic Archaeology was realized in May 2003 by the first of a new series of Advanced Seminars, advocated by Gil J. Stein, Director of the Oriental Institute. This seminar was an effort to explore comparative contextualizations in Islamic archaeology. Under the title of “Changing social identities in the spread of Islam: Archaeological and textual perspectives,” an unlikely combination of archaeologists assembled at the Institute.

The participants included Tim Insoll, University of Manchester, on Islamic archaeology in West Africa; Yury Karev, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, on Samarqand in Central Asia; Jodi Magness, University of North Carolina, on Khirbet Abu Suwwana near Jerusalem; Renata Holod, University of Pennsylvania, on Jerba Island in the Mediterranean; Mark Horton, University of Bristol, on Shanga in East Africa; and Tracy Hoffman, with her new doctorate

from NELC, on Ascalon on the Levantine coast. The discussant was Moain Sadeq from the Palestinian Authority, Gaza.

The goal of this seminar was a comparative analysis of different sites and regions, based on archaeological monuments or artifacts, exploring processes of adaptation or adjustment to local cultural complexes. Islam may be seen as a religion, political system, cultural complex, a trinity of inseparable aspects. The introduction of these variable



characteristics of Islam, during the contact and afterwards, resulted in changes in identity approached as a sort of “cognitive” archaeology. In each specific case, one may assess the nature of the pre-Islamic regional tradition, the resulting plurality of cultures as a “multi-cultural” society, and finally a resultant normative condition as a regional or cosmopolitan culture.

Alternative archaeologies may be defined as a search for new contexts. Thus, for Insoll, definition of this field is found in the explicit archaeology of religion, and he attempts to make the case that material culture may be seen consistently through cultic or spiritual influences of this alternative archaeology. Islamic archaeology is practiced as an historical archaeology providing vital evidence for the development of society and economy in Islamic contexts. Each project, whatever its intended goals, produces informative associations which may be applied to relevant textual sources. The intention was not the reduction to a sort of essentialism but regional comparisons exploring Islamic archaeology from different disciplinary perspectives.