

Recent Excavations in Medieval Aqaba

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Visitors to Aqaba in Jordan usually see the old castle as the only archaeological remains of this important Red Sea port. Indeed, this castle was the center of the small town in the Ottoman and earlier Mamluk periods and is being preserved and restored by the Department of Antiquities. Earlier medieval Islamic periods have been noticed by travelers and archaeologists for over a century, but these ruins have not been visible until now.

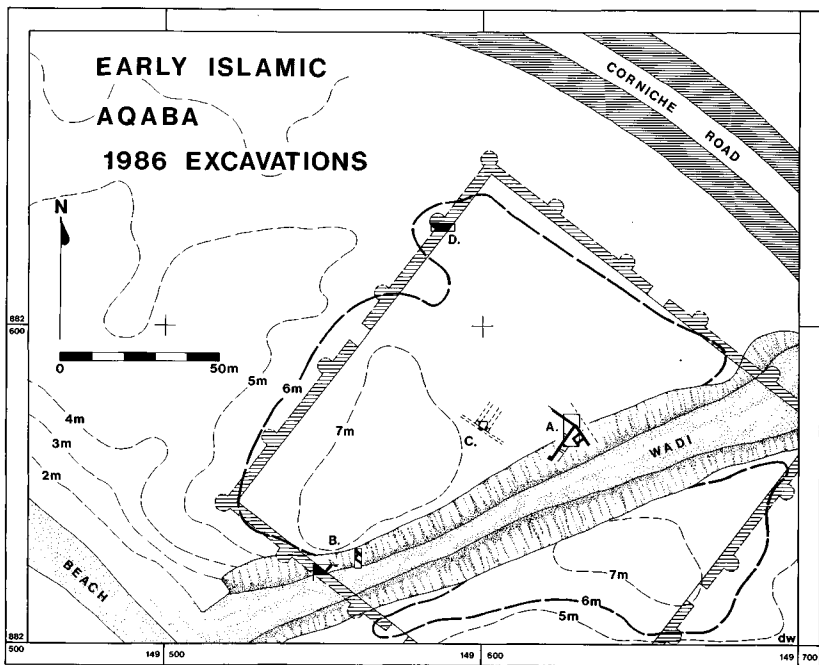
The medieval city of Aqaba is on a slight rise near the beach in the center of the modern town. The ruins are cut by a deep drainage

ditch, called the wadi, north of the Coast Guard station and extend between the Corniche road and the beach. Unlike the castle, only flat sand and a palm grove can be seen; but beneath the sand and palms lies a great walled city, its walls and buildings preserved at least 4 m in height. Excavation was necessary to begin to reveal this great city and port.

John Meloy, Joe Greene, and I (with valuable registration, etc., assistance from Eileen Caves) conducted preliminary excavations for three weeks in April and May on this site, producing important information on the great prosperity of



Laborde etching of Aqaba castle, showing the arrival of the pilgrimage (Hajj) caravan in 1828.



medieval Aqaba, or Ayla, as it was then known. Ceramic sherds from these small trenches reveal a historic sequence from the late Byzantine, Umayyad, Abbasid and Fatimid periods (from the 7th to 12th centuries) and testify to an international commerce stretching from Jordan as far as China.

The city of Ayla, medieval Aqaba, was square in plan, 120 × 120 m, of which the northern half is still preserved under the sand and palms (see figure 1). The stone walls of the city were discovered in two places, near the north corner where the beginning of a tower can be seen (area D, see figure 2) and on the edge of the wadi, where massive internal walls of mud brick are preserved over 4 m high (area B). Within the city wall at area B stone walls and floors from the Umayyad into the Fatimid periods were found. The base of a limestone column from this area suggests that a columned hall of an important building is

somewhere nearby. This area is the highest part of the mound, over 7 m above sea level, and was possibly the administrative center of the city.

Near the center of the city is a large trench, area A, and a small test, area C. Both of these excavations revealed aspects of the residential part of the city. Area A has a building made of white sandstone; the entire structure was 14 m long and probably square, indicating it was a major residence within the city. South of this building is part of another house, mostly destroyed by the wadi, with a courtyard between the buildings. A street, 3 m wide, ran beside these two houses and more houses are visible on the other side of the street. These houses were excavated only to a depth of 2 m but, judging from the remains in the side of the ditch, 2 m more remain. The small test, area C, followed mud brick and stone walls to a depth of 4 m but



Relaxing at the Aqaba Hotel (left to right: Donald Whitcomb, Laura Greene, Joe Greene, John Meloy, Eileen Caves).

still did not reach the bottom. The walls have two stages, the lower is Umayyad and the upper is Abbasid. The upper wall has pilasters, and the stone foundations strongly suggest that the inside of the building was a columned hall.

The artifacts from these houses revealed the remarkable character of this city. Many of the ceramic bowls and jars were imported from Egypt and from Iraq. The Iraqi ceramics are identical to the types found at the capital of the Abbasid caliphate, Samarra. The presence of fine lustre wares (with a golden metallic shine), deep blue, yellow and green decorative patterns shows that the finest vessels available were imported. Large decorated storage jars, made in Basra, show that products from the East were sent to Aqaba. Even more fascinating is the discovery of Chinese ceramics, fine celadons and porcelains of the Sung period. These fragments once belonged to the highest quality Chinese ceramics ever made, showing that the merchants of Aqaba were connoisseurs and very wealthy. Much of the glass was imported from Syria and Egypt. The artifacts found in these excavations offer an opportunity, not only to study the vast

commercial network of the early Islamic period, but to understand the role of Jordan in a period very poorly represented until now.

The site of medieval Aqaba is unique in Jordan and, although half of the city has been destroyed, it is almost miraculous that so much of it remains to be studied. The preserved height of its towered city walls, its streets and houses, means that complete excavation will reveal an Islamic city comparable to Jerash. We are planning a major campaign in the spring of 1987 to uncover and delineate a larger part of the important medieval port.

The limited excavations during this spring were made possible with the assistance of many people, especially Dr. Adnan Hadidi, Dr. Ghazi Bisheh, and Mr. Suleiman Farajat, from the Department of Antiquities, Mr. Nasri Atalla of the Department of Tourism, Dr. Dureid Mahasneh of the Aqaba Region Authority. I would also like to thank Sally Zimmerman, who has labeled all the sherds and small objects as she continues to provide extremely welcome home support.