

Aqaba

Donald Whitcomb

The port of Aqaba is Jordan's southern window on the world and has become a commercial port and tourist resort of primary importance. The castle of

Aqaba, where pilgrims to Mecca rested in Mamluk and Ottoman times, was the focus of only the most recent settlement. Before Saladin fought the Crusaders in this place, merchants of the Abbasid and Fatimid periods traded in goods from areas stretching from the Maghreb to China. And before this, a procession of Byzantine, Roman, Nabataean, and even Biblical peoples inhabited this town.

▼ For the last 50 years, in the midst of the development of the modern city, little attention has been paid to these ruins in the heart of the city and the land on which they stand ran the risk of being sold for development. In these circumstances the Oriental Institute began limited soundings in the spring of 1986, followed by major excavations in the spring of 1987. These excavations have revealed a complex architectural and artifactual documentation of great importance for the history of Aqaba, Jordan, and the entire Middle East.¹ ▼ The medieval city of Aqaba is on a slight rise above the beach near 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

¹The excavations 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, and Dr. Dureid Mahasneh of the Aqaba Region Authority. Special thanks are due to Dr. David Mc Creery for assistance and facilities at ACOR and to Mr. Rami Khoury, for initial encouragement and brilliant reportage. We are also indebted to the people of Aqaba, who took an active interest in the wonder of their past. The excavations were funded by grants from the National Geographic Society and the United States Agency for International Development as well as through contributions to the Oriental Institute. ▼ The staff included Ghazi Bisheh, Suleiman Farajat, Khairieh Amir, Hanan Azar, from the Department of Antiquities, Robin Brown, Rosa Frey, Jessica Hallett, Janet Johnson, Allison McQuitty, Carol Meyer, Yvonne Seng, Guillermo Algaze, Essam Elhadi, James Knudstadt, and Robert Smithers. Mary Lassen and Debbie Schwartz helped process materials from the excavation which had been brought to Chicago for study.

**The Oriental
Institute
1987-1988
Annual Report**

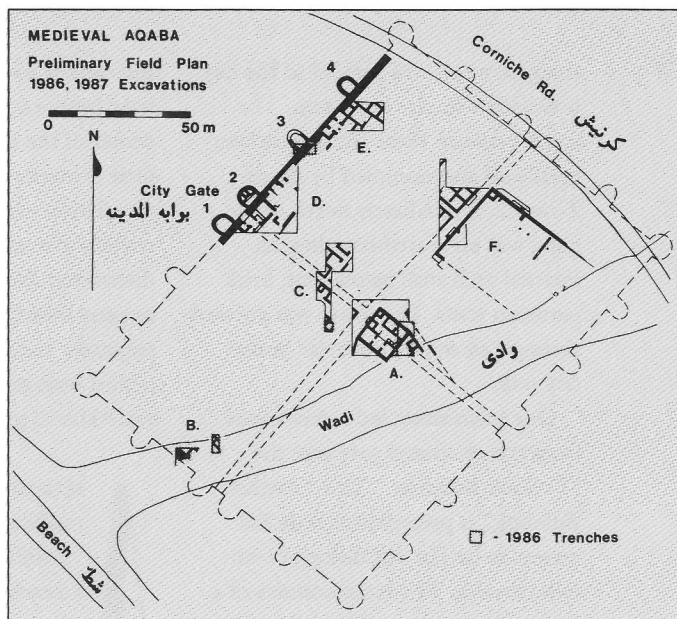


1987 city plan

the beach. Only flat sand and a palm grove could be seen on the surface before excavations, which revealed a great walled city, its walls and buildings preserved at least 4 meters in height. An historic sequence from a pre-Umayyad foundation (early 7th

century) through the Fatimid until destruction by the Crusaders (early 12th century) was identified. During this occupation, and particularly the Abbasid period, ceramics indicate participation in an extensive trade network connecting Egypt and Syria with Iraq and China.

The city of Ayla, medieval Aqaba, was rectangular in plan, 120 x 160 meters, enclosed by a stone city wall with towers, preserved 4.5 meters in height. Work during the 1987 season concentrated on this enclosure wall and several elements of the city's urban architecture. The faces of the city wall consisted of granite and sandstone blocks with, in certain portions, a good lime plaster. The matrix of the wall was mud mixed with quantities of small cobbles. Circular towers were found along the length of the wall. Between the towers, the city wall narrowed to a



thinner curtain wall to accommodate buildings.

One city gate flanked by two such towers was excavated, revealing a complex history of rebuilding. The total preserved height of the wall was at least 4.5 meters, at which depth the water table prevented reaching the wall foundations and street pavement. The gate was 3 meters 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 containing parts of the Ayat al-Kursi, a Quranic quotation used 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. 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.

One main street led across town from the excavated gate past the “Pavilion Building.” This “Pavilion Building” is preserved at least 3.5 meters in height, including at least two rebuilds. The latest consists of a series of rooms around small courts; entrance stairs are on the northwest. One of the south rooms has fresco decoration on one wall, consisting of very fragmentary floral motifs and geometric designs in red and black paint. Both the southwest and southeast exterior walls of the building were originally built with 3.5 meter wide arches, suggesting that

the earliest form of this building may have been a sort of pavilion in the center of the city. While there is too little evidence for a palace, some association with a governor’s residence is not unlikely. Artifacts discovered during the excavations suggest that the structure was originally built during the Umayyad period with reuse and rebuilding in the Abbasid period.

A second possible merchant’s residence similar to the “Pavilion Building” fronted on a nearby street with layered debris 4.5 meters deep. Late reuse, north of and intruding into the original street, included structures built almost entirely of mud-brick, rather than stone, and featuring numerous ovens in an irregular court.

The second main city street, perpendicular to the first, ran from



▼ ▼ ▼
The visit to the site of Aqaba of the United States Ambassador to Jordan, His Excellency Roscoe Suddarth.



A Chinese stoneware jar with green glaze, the make-shift lid is the base of another jar of a type produced in Iraq in the 9th century. The excavator beams next to her discovery.



the open area in front of the “Pavilion Building” to the northeast gate. East of this street were the long walls of the “large enclosure,” characterized by substantial construction with grey mortar. A well-constructed platform and stairway associated with an elaborate drain may mark an entrance to this building, whose function has not yet been determined.

The artifacts from each of these areas have revealed the remarkable character of this city. The earliest ceramics are sherds of fine Nabataean painted bowls and Roman wares, found out of context. The earliest in situ materials are Late Roman types found in association with ones known from late Byzantine and Umayyad contexts. While these latter types are known from Palestine, stylistic characteristics point to a connection with Coptic Egypt.

From the 9th century on, ceramics include glazed wares, most commonly bowls and jars with a glossy monochrome glaze, yellow, brown or green. In some examples, the decoration, as well as the vessel forms, are distinctively Samarran, characteristic of the 9th century caliphal capital north of Baghdad. Numerous pieces of the finest Abbasid ceramic art, bowls with lustre colors, have been found. While most of these come from Iraq, some may be the products

of Tulunid Egypt. These fine wares are associated with fragments of blue-green glazed storage jars, probably produced in Basra. Far Eastern ceramics were found in association with these Abbasid wares; e.g., a large celadon jar was found with the broken base of a Basra storage jar used as a lid. Dating of these celadons and porcelains precisely matches that of the Islamic ceramics.²

Ceramics of the Fatimid period illustrate a strong dichotomy on this site. On the one hand there are fine glazes, including lustre depictions. There are also increasing amounts of hand made, very crude cups, bowls

²*The Far Eastern ceramics are the subject of special studies by John Carswell and Dr. Ho Chui-mei.*

▼ ▼ ▼ and basins (the nesting range of sizes and common characteristics led to these being called “Tupperware” during the excavation). Many of these have painted decorations; some of the painted styles clearly anticipate the geometric painted wares which predominate during the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods.

Chronological and inter-regional trade implications derived from study of the ceramics are confirmed by other artifactual categories. For instance, glass sherds representing each of the periods are present, though the majority are glass bowls and cups of the Abbasid period.³ Numerous architectural elements of carved stone, usually limestone, were found. Also uncovered were parts of a chancel screen and a capital made of marble and typical of late Byzantine church elements, e.g., at Mt. Nebo. Fragments of an imperial Roman dedicatory plaque were also discovered.

The issue of the pre-Islamic town remains problematic. Whatever the nature of the Nabataean and earlier settlements, there must have existed a large Roman camp, which accommodated the Xth legion Fretensis in the 4th century. While Nabataean, Ro-

man 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 sharding 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, one may 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 *amsār*, the camp towns founded during the Muslim conquest, is that they tended to be situated 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 site probably occurred during the caliphate of ‘Uthmân, 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 this transition, of the earliest stages in the development of Muslim civilization.

The Abbasid and Fatimid periods at Aqaba represent important additions to the history of Jordan, deriving from a unique opportunity to clarify the archaeology of these two neglected periods. Aqaba was an active participant in the prosperity of Abbasid times, with connections to

³*This summary is based on an analysis of the glass prepared by Dr. Carol Meyer.*

Egypt, Iraq, and the Far East. Parallels with Egypt are mainly with Fustat; more dramatic are the connections with the Abbasid corpus from Samarra. Thus, from the fine lustre wares, the blue-green storage jars, and the celadon bowls found at Aqaba comes the first irrefutable proof of the participation of the “port of Palestine” in the extensive international commerce of the eastern Caliphate. Towards the end of occupation at this site, the architecture and ceramics signal the growing turbulence of the 11th century and anticipate aspects of the archaeologically better known Ayyubid and Mamluk periods in Jordan.



Excavation of the Egyptian gate by Guillermo Algaze; earlier arch is just visible and its jambs continue down another 2 meters.



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. In some ways, medieval Aqaba is even more important than Jerash, since it provides two opportunities: first, as a clear contribution to understanding the development of Islamic cultural history, and second, as a focus for regional interaction and inter-regional commerce in medieval times. In these and other areas of interest, the site of Aqaba may hopefully enhance historical understanding and provide models for the archaeology of the more remote past.