

# Aqaba

*Donald Whitcomb*

The remains of the early Islamic city of Ayla were found in 1986, forgotten beneath flat sands near the center of modern Aqaba. The walls and semi-circular towers of the city are now known from all four sides, with over 100 meters of the walls excavated (see plan). Within the walls were residences of wealthy merchants. Artifacts indicate a great prosperity during the late Abbasid period (9th-10th centuries) and participation in an extensive trade network connecting Egypt and Syria with Iraq and China. The luxury ceramics, especially the fine lustre wares from Samarra in Iraq, were found in conjunction with Chinese celadons and porcelains. The stratigraphic evidence of the artifacts indicates a new definition for the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Fatimid periods in Jordan, the 450 years of Islamic history before the Crusades.

The dramatic discovery of the 1987 season was the Egyptian gate (Bab al-Misr), preserved 4.5 m in height. That season also demonstrated the formal, planned aspect of the city, masked by the evolved plan of the later mercantile community. In addition to the limiting plan of the towered walls with four gates, the city held two formal structures: the Central Pavilion and the Large Enclosure. The Central Pavilion, later transformed into a Fatimid residence, originally marked the meeting of the four axial streets, analogous to the tetrapylon of Classical cities. The Large Enclosure was an area bounded by heavy walls and formal entrances, defying any immediate identification. These two structures may now be seen as first indications of the original city plan, for which further clues were revealed in fall, 1988, and in spring, 1989.

**RESULTS OF THE 1988 EXCAVATIONS.** During October and November, 1988, the third season of the Aqaba Project, sponsored by the University of Chicago and the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, with additional funding from the National Geographic Society and the US Agency for International Development, was conducted on property belonging to the Royal Yacht Club of Jordan. The success of these excavations is due to the active cooperation of officials and contractors of the Royal Yacht Club, the Aqaba Region Authority, and the Department of Antiquities.<sup>1</sup> This

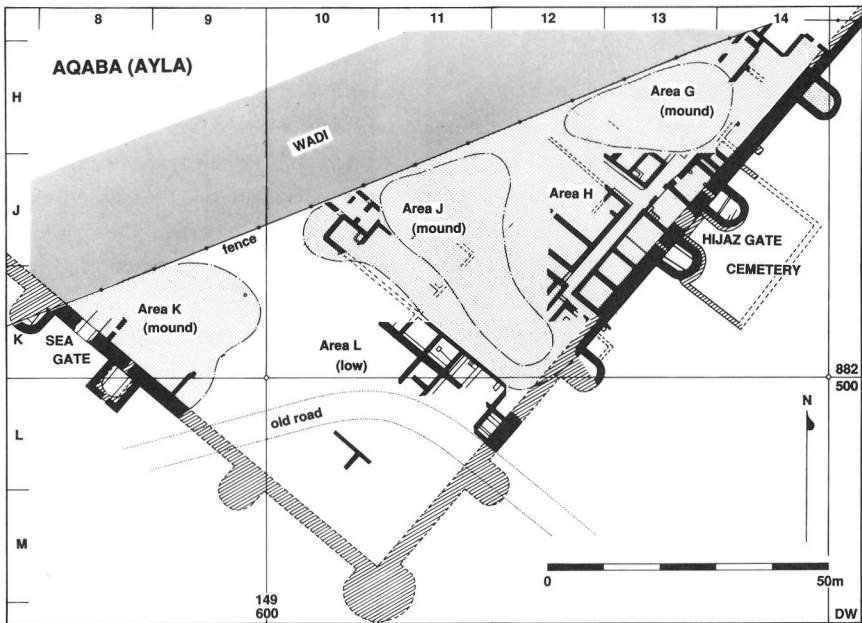
third season of excavations lasted only six weeks and was limited to clarification of remains in the southeast quadrant of the city, i.e., south of the wadi (see plan).

♦ The quarter of the Islamic city south of the wadi, on the marina property, was a vital part of the medieval city. Excavation there has yielded over 200 meters of city wall with towers and two city gates. Through the monumental Sea gate (area K) passed much of the commerce from Egypt, Iraq, and China. The most important gate was the Hijaz (or Mecca) gate; this gate (area H), facing the Holy Cities, was closed in the earliest Islamic period and the area outside the gate used as a Muslim cemetery.

Area G contained rooms adjacent to the eastern wall and a tower (tower 12) within which was a useful sequence of artifacts. Closer

to the center of the city were residences (area J) similar to, but slightly earlier than, the latest use of the Central Pavilion. Since these late buildings were cut off to the north by the wadi and to the south by sand deposits, little could be determined of their horizontal context. Therefore, the excavations continued down to obtain stratified materials in good architectural context. The Sea gate was excavated as area K and, while producing few artifacts, illustrated the history of the city in its structural changes, a pattern remarkably similar to the changes in the Egyptian gate.

♦ Perhaps the most surprising feature of the 1988 season was the discovery of the truncation of the mound over much of the eastern side. Whether by natural causes or by human action, an accumulation of 3.5 m of clean sand covered the archaeological remains. Thus, trenches in area L produced wall fragments



and a portion of the city wall associable with only the earliest period of occupation, the Umayyad. The discovery of the Hijaz gate required removal of many cubic meters of sand. This early Hijaz gate had received surprising alterations. The gate had been blocked and both the gate and flanking towers had been strengthened by an added facing of stonework. Where the street should have been there was a plastered surface and a cemetery; pottery later dumped on this cemetery consisted of only Umayyad sherds, indicating that the cemetery dates from the earliest days of the city. The cemetery near the former Hijaz gate immediately suggests the religious importance of this portion of the city and the likelihood that the mosque of 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, the suggested founder of Aqaba, is located nearby. Details of the dating and characteristics of the earliest period at Aqaba have been discussed by the author in his article, "Evidence of the Umayyad period from the Aqaba excavations," presented and published as part of the 4th conference on Bilad al-Sham.

◆ **CLEARANCE OPERATIONS IN SPRING, 1989.** The educational, touristic, and aesthetic potential of this new archaeological monument for the heritage of Jordan has led to immediate concern for its preservation and reconstruction. A beginning to this broad and complex undertaking was made in the spring, 1989, with reconstruction work on the western city wall, supervised by Dr. Hussein Qandil. The development of the marina necessitated some landscaping through removal of the sand accumulation, down to the archaeological remains; this archaeological work was under the direction of John Meloy from the University of Chicago.



*John Meloy "chasing" a bulldozer looking for archaeological layers beneath the sand; in the foreground lies debris from demolished barracks.*

◆ **T**his clearance of sand deposits revealed two mounds of archaeological strata: one was south of the Sea gate and encompassed tower 19, which has a square plan in its latest architectural phase. This mound, called mound K, produced numerous column fragments, including two drums apparently standing upright in their original positions. The second mound, called J after the 1988 area, was a finger of debris containing stone walls stretching toward the Hijaz gate. These mounds and their architectural fragments are not the only remains—all areas within the southern city walls have structural remains, now covered with only a few centimeters of sand.

**WORKING HYPOTHESES FOR THE TOWNPLAN OF AYLA.** Elements of the earliest architecture of the city of Ayla suggest a formal plan. This city has important bearing on the earliest history of the "Islamic city." This is a speculative subject for which there is very little historical evidence and for which archaeological evidence is now beginning to play a part. Excavation of Ayla will necessitate

development of hypotheses on its original form. The suggested foundation of the city of Ayla under the caliph 'Uthman ibn 'Affan suggests in turn that a very early city mosque may be recovered in these excavations. Unlike most other early mosques, which have changed over the centuries, this structure may have retained its original form and therefore gives a first indication of the earliest type of mosque in Islam. Though there has been much speculation on the earliest mosques, the mosque of Ayla would be an important new monument.

♦ **S**econdarily, mosques stood in relationship with the structure called the *Dar al-Imara*, often translated palace but more likely a general administrative complex. Models drawn from Jordan, particularly the citadel of Amman, suggest a modest throne hall, backed against the original Hijaz gate. The Large Enclosure, area F excavated in 1987, may be a garden area attached to the *Dar al-Imara*. Alternatively, if it was a large *suq* or market area, one would have the eastern half of the city carefully divided into religious, administrative, and economic functions. One additional element might be sought in this research, a structure in the mosque called the *bayt al-mal* (treasury). Persistent reports by the medieval geographers describe the preservation of the Mantle of the Prophet, presumably in the mosque treasury of Ayla. This was a ceremonial robe (*khil'a*) presented to the bishop of Ailana when he signed a treaty with the Prophet in A.D. 630. An example of a *bayt al-mal*, hopefully with an inscription or two, would be an important addition to our knowledge of early Islamic cities.

The above hypothesis may be an optimistic dream—or maybe something unexpected and more wonderful may be found—such is the excitement of archaeology. Everything discovered so far, now a proud part of the town of Aqaba, is the result of acting on previous hypotheses based on scanty and fragmentary data. What is certain is that further cooperation in this research by Jordanian and American groups is an investment in knowledge; archaeology in Aqaba must remain a balance of careful research and eagerness to find and display this monument in its modern setting.

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