

AQABA

DONALD WHITCOMB

Excavations in 1987 at the site of early Islamic Ayla (modern Aqaba, Jordan) revealed a city plan that included four gates. The northeast, or Syrian, gate was posited to lie beneath the modern street and sidewalk of the Corniche Road. As discussed in the *Annual Report* for 1990–1991, plans are underway to construct the Ayla Orientation Center on almost the exact location of the ruins of the original Syrian gate. The center will feature a reconstruction of the gate and its two flanking towers and will introduce visitors to the history and archaeology of Aqaba.

In 1991, prior to the construction of the center, the Department of Antiquities and the American Center of Oriental Research began archaeological investigations; the fragmentary results of these excavations prompted the 1992 excavations under discussion. These excavations revealed the complexities introduced by modern disturbances. A modern fence marks the edge of the sidewalk and street; about 2 m from the fence is a modern pipeline (ca. 80 cm wide and 1.0–1.2 m deep; antecedent to the pipeline was a broad ditch, again running parallel to the street). Both features contained thoroughly modern artifacts.

The 1992 season excavated a 20 × 10 m trench from late April into May (thirty-two digging days). The team consisted of five students from the University of Jordan and Yarmouk University and Mr. Romel Greyb as Department representative. This small season could not have been accomplished without the active assistance of Dr. Safwan Tell of the Department of Antiquities, Drs. Pierre and Patricia Bikai of the American Center of Oriental Research, and Mr. Bassam Kakish and Mr. Bassam Noueiran of the Aqaba Region Authority. Funding was provided under a USAID grant.

THE GATE AND CHRONOLOGY

The 1992 excavations produced detailed stratigraphic information in the context of an important architectural sector of the city of early Islamic Ayla. The chronological framework for this occupation is from ca. 650 A.D. to the early twelfth century (ca. 1116 A.D.). A historical reconstruction is possible due to the detailed studies of the ceramics from earlier seasons. It should be emphasized that other artifacts, particularly some forty non-aureic possible coins, remain to be analyzed.

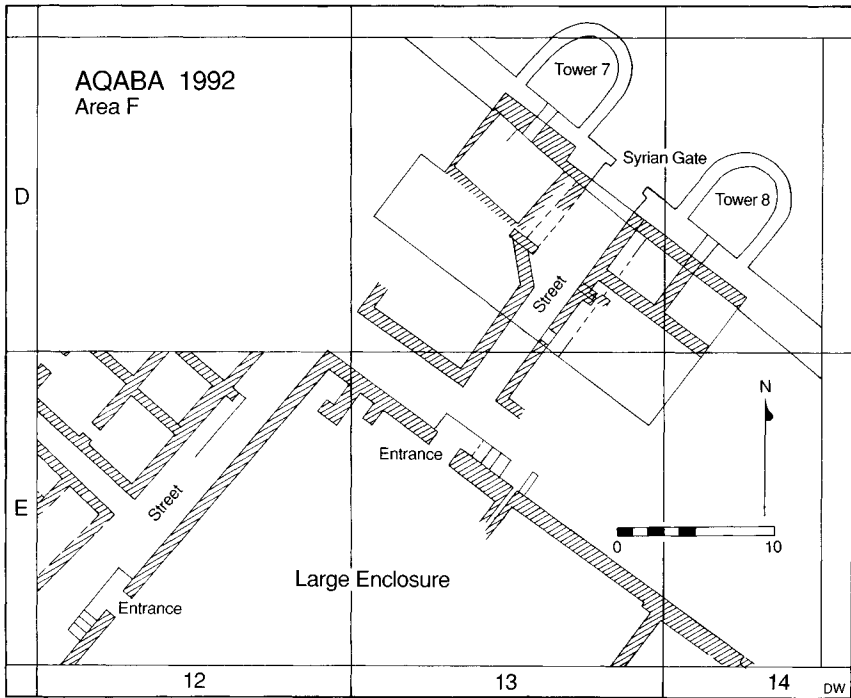


Figure 1. Plan of the Syrian gate and large enclosure (Area F)

Phase A (650–750 A.D. = Rashidun and Umayyad)

Gate architecture of this period is not well known due to the massive overburden from later periods; fortunately, numerous parallels with other gates allow an increasingly detailed reconstruction. Most dramatically, the line of the inner face of the city wall is now known. The arch of the doorway into Tower 7 gives, for the first time, the height of the passageway, which is surprisingly low, ca. 1.5 m. The jamb indicates the precise positioning of the Syrian gate. The Syrian street was limited by a stone wall to either side and behind each tower was a large room. An interior arch may have provided a transition from a vestibule into the town itself (as may be seen near the Egyptian gate).

Phase B (750–850 A.D. = Early Abbasid)

This phase is anticipated by the introduction of a new corpus of ceramics, the Mahesh wares (post-700 A.D.). There are clear architectural manifestations: new walls, floors, and occasionally complete reorganization of architectural space. The two sides of the Syrian street have radically differing histories. While the northwest side remained virtually unaffected, the

southeast side was totally razed and an architectural complex was built without regard to the former limits of the city. This reinforces the implications of the Square Tower, excavated in 1989, that expansion and vigorous reorganization occurred during the early Abbasid period.

Phase C (850–950 A.D. = Middle Abbasid)

This century of development is difficult to distinguish from the preceding phase. Architectural evidence suggests continuities from earlier patterns, but ceramic assemblages are marked by the presence of more sophisticated, imported glazed wares; ceramics thus presage attributes of the subsequent century.

Phase D (950–1050 A.D. = Late Abbasid or Fatimid)

The rooms on both sides of the gate have hearths and midden debris, which suggest a change in function of these buildings. These changes in the character of deposition suggest two possible interpretations: the area was more residential in nature, and the level of prosperity (implied in sanitation and order) had abated. Not only was the street increasingly narrow, but a portion was given over to a drain. The archaeological remains recovered from this phase may reflect the political and social vagaries of this troubled century.

Phase E (1050–1116 A.D. = Fatimid)

This last period is the most difficult to assess, due to the combined factors of the street, pipeline, ditch, and 1991 excavations. Walls attributable to this period, chiefly in and near Room A, show a tendency to tilt dramatically. This may be attributable to subsidence (and poor construction techniques), but this may also be evidence of the impact of the 1068 earthquake. The highest layer of the Syrian street contained, amidst late ceramics, a hoard of 32 dinars (see below).

THE AYLA HOARD

In the popular imagination, archaeological excavation is often thought of as a search for gold—the first excavators at Aqaba in 1985 were rumored to have found many caskets of gold. But in reality the archaeologist is searching not for buried treasure but for information on cultural and historical development of ancient cities and cultures. The excavations in Aqaba have aimed at the recovery of the early Islamic city of Ayla, a port which participated actively in the prosperous international trade extending from Egypt and the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean and Far East.

As had been predicted from earlier excavations, the inner face of the ancient city wall appeared just beneath the sidewalk of the modern street. The jamb of a gate was visible as well as a doorway, with its arch still standing,

leading into the tower flanking a gate. (Unfortunately, digging through this doorway into the tower would have meant rather dangerous tunneling under the street.) The gate led into the city of Ayla and the main street just inside the gate showed, for the most part, only the slow accumulation of silt that is typical of well-used thoroughfares. The ground level slowly rose, accompanied by occasional rebuildings of the structures on either side, about one meter for each century. Given adequate sanitation services in a city, there is nothing less interesting than excavating a street.



Figure 2. General view of the Area F excavations, looking to the south. The street and location of the Ayla Hoard in center foreground

But there is the unusual event, whether personal misfortune or urban disaster, upon which archaeology thrives. A hoard of gold coins is evidence of just such an event. Into the eleventh century street levels, less than a meter from the present surface, someone placed a cloth sack full of gold coins, 32 dinars. The initial assessment suggested regular Fatimid dinars, standard currency for anyone passing through or having business in Ayla in the eleventh century. But the story is more complex and, at present, has not been completely unraveled.

Three of the coins appear to be standard issues of the Fatimid dynasty, all minted in north Africa; the latest is a coin of the caliph al-Hakim, datable from 997 to 1010 A.D. The remainder of the hoard is remarkably homogeneous group of gold coins (over half these coins were minted from only two sets of dies). These dinars were probably minted in Sijilmasa, a southern Moroccan town on the edge of the Sahara and the first city with a mint on the caravan route that brought West African gold to the Islamic world. Virtually all the dinars bear the name of Hisham II, who ruled from 976 to 1013. Michael Bates of the American Numismatic Society suggests that this Umayyad caliph of Spain may have been recognized in Sijilmasa or his coins may have been imitated for their prestige value. The regional coins are extremely rare and, other than a poorly illustrated catalogue of 1939, there has been no systematic study of the Sijilmasa mint.

One is left with the preliminary impression that the composition of the hoard was mainly Sijilmasa dinars to which a few Fatimid coins had been added some time in the first quarter of the eleventh century A.D., possibly to bring the weight up to a standard "purse." Such purses were assembled for the convenience of merchants and travelers, as witnessed in the accounts of the *geniza* in Cairo. Bates suggests that the purse might have been lost by a pilgrim from Morocco on his way to Mecca. If so, this north African pilgrim may have been with the caravan attacked at Ayla in 1024. In that year, the town was thoroughly sacked by local bedouin, its inhabitants sold into slavery and over three thousand dinars taken. Whether the hoard of gold coins is mute witness to this catastrophe that overtook Ayla or rather represents the solitary misfortune of an individual traveler, it serves as eloquent testimony to the vast economic relationship connecting the entire medieval world, encompassing the Mediterranean, African, and Asian regions.



Figure 3. A selection of the gold coins (dinars) minted at Sijilmasa in southern Morocco

CHRONOLOGY AND CONTEXT

The 1992 excavations in area F provided the precise location of the northeast city wall, the Syrian gate, and its two flanking towers. Though the Syrian gate may have functioned as a gate only in the earliest period, the Syrian street remained an important avenue for the city. This was one of four axial streets which led directly to the Central Pavilion. This urban plan changed radically, probably in phase B (the early Abbasid). The Syrian street was blocked by an immense structure, the Large Enclosure, itself apparently surrounded by open passages. The Syrian street led directly to one of the entrances to this building, approached by stairs and a platform.

After the excavations in 1987, it was clear that the location of the Syrian gate had been seriously disturbed by modern activities. The gate and its towers remain obscured by the Corniche Road; we now know that the gate has been destroyed since the eighth century. Aside from the benefit of a record of its precise location, further evidence confirms architectural and stratigraphic patterns already learned from the other three gates excavated. The Syrian street held its treasure but it more importantly indicated the promise of the secrets of the Large Enclosure. This neutral label was given to the building in 1987, despite speculations that this might have been the Congregational Mosque and Dar al-Imara. Further excavation, planned for 1993, will confirm this hypothesis.



Figure 4. General view of the Area F excavations, looking to the southeast. The Corniche Road (King Hussein Street) is on the left