

Donald Whitcomb

Donald Whitcomb continued the excavations at Aqaba with a second 1992 season (see separate report, pp. 12–20). A detailed preliminary report on the spring season, “The Fourth Gate,” was sent to be published in the *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan*. The results of that season have not been without some irony. As readers of the last *Annual Report* will have noted, the primary result of that excavation was the location of the Syrian Gate, its street and inner face were precisely where they had been predicted. Thus the logic and accuracy of the early Islamic city planners was confirmed and an immense corpus of new information on this phase of Near Eastern urbanization is available for future research. The irony came from the attention paid to the hoard of dinars found in the street, which completely surpassed any value placed on the urban context being revealed. To be fair, the gold coins deserve their fame due to the extreme rarity and excavated context. In view of this special character, a committee of numismatic specialists from Jordan, Morocco, and the United States has been established to produce a definitive report on the Ayla hoard.

Beyond the two archaeological seasons at Ayla, Whitcomb turned to other interests. At the end of January he participated in a conference, "The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land," in San Diego. This was an innovative approach to the archaeology of the Holy Land and Whitcomb synthesized the immense amount of data on the early Islamic period (the later Islamic period was developed by Prof. Rosen-Ayalon, see below). Naturally, his lecture emphasized the urban development and cultural achievements directly following the Muslim conquest through the Abbasid period. He returned to Chicago long enough to celebrate his daughter Felicia's birthday, then left for Cairo where he participated in the "Colloque international d'archéologie islamique," sponsored by the French Institute in Cairo. His paper, "Out of Arabia: Early Islamic Aqaba in its regional context," was given on February 5. This paper was mentioned in the *Annual Report 1991-1992* in connection with the then exciting "discovery" of Ubar in southern Arabia. While this legendary site remains mysterious, the solid evidence for cultural development in Arabia is rapidly advancing, as this paper endeavors to illustrate. While in Cairo, the faculty and students of the American University in Cairo were subjected to a lecture on Aqaba and the theory of the *amsar*, as developed from this archaeological research (discussed in last year's *Annual Report*).

This visit to Egypt provided an opportunity to return to the scene of former digging, the site of Quseir al-Qadim. The modern town of Quseir remains a sleepy but extremely pleasant town as it was some fifteen years ago. The scene 8 km to the north is far different; tourism has come to our ancient site. On the opposite bank from the ruins is a new tourist village being built by Mövenpick. The bay where we used to swim (rarely) has been privatized, i.e., surrounded by a high stone wall. The wall carefully avoids the ancient remains and will have a reverse effect of making access to the antiquities difficult for the tourists. While this follows recommendations suggested to a consulting firm some years ago, it seems a pity some educational interaction with the archaeological site has not been developed, as it has been so successful at Aqaba. The site is well maintained by the Egyptian Antiquities Organization and looks undisturbed since the last day of excavation. This rekindled enthusiasm for this important and productive site found expression in early May, when Whitcomb spoke on "Quseir and the Spice Trade" to the 28th International Congress of Medieval Studies.

This year an ad-hoc study group of students and faculty was formalized into "The Middle East Urbanism Workshop," under the direction of Whitcomb with the capable assistance of Paul Cobb. The inspiration for this study is the on-going research by Professor Emeritus Paul Wheatley, who presented a lecture on the medieval geographer, al-Muqaddasi. (This paper has subsequently been printed in *Al-Usur al-Wusta*, the newsletter of the Middle East Medievalists, published here at the University of Chicago.) The highlight of the year was the visit in mid-April of Professor Myriam Rosen-Ayalon, who came with her husband, Professor David Ayalon, both of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Professor Rosen-Ayalon lectured on her important excavations at Ramlah, an early Islamic city near Jerusalem.

In the spring Whitcomb taught "Introduction to Islamic Archaeology," the core course for this rapidly growing field of archaeological research. In this connec-

tion, work also progressed on *An Encyclopedia of Islamic Archaeology*, with the first articles already having been submitted. One of the major problems facing this project is to keep the subject limited, as correspondents suggest an ever increasing range of subjects. Fortunately this complexity is matched by a wide enthusiasm for this much-needed tool for Islamic archaeologists and historians and a wider group of scholars.
