

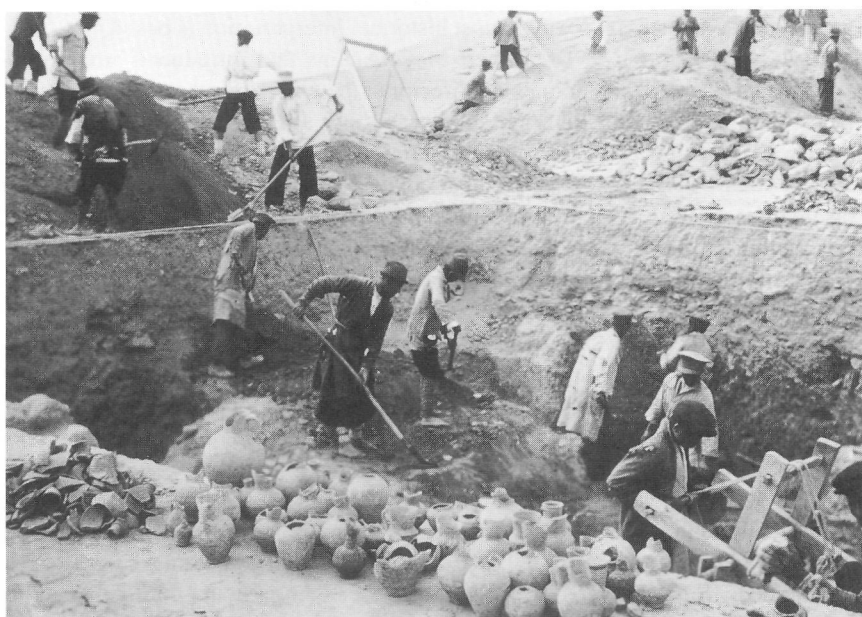
AQABA

Donald Whitcomb

The 1993 season of excavations in the early Islamic site of Ayla marked the beginning of a second phase of research on this important site. This was also the season in which we discovered not only more gold coins (Fatimid dinars) but also, and far more importantly, the Congregational Mosque of the city. This is only the latest development in the long history of involvement by the Oriental Institute with Islamic archaeology; it is fitting that on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Oriental Institute, some reminiscence on that history may be offered in the context of the Aqaba project.

Islamic Archaeology at the Oriental Institute

The Oriental Institute's first and probably most important excavation of an Islamic site was at the great city of Istakhr in southern Iran. Istakhr was an outgrowth of the Persepolis project, initiated by Dr. Ernst Herzfeld in 1931 and continued by Dr. Erich Schmidt during 1935–1938. Both Herzfeld and Schmidt had excavated Islamic cities: Herzfeld had carried out the pivotal work at Samarra in Iraq and Schmidt had recorded the Islamic levels for the Oriental Institute at Alishar Höyük in Turkey in 1927. Schmidt brought an airplane to Istakhr and careful examination of his aerial photographs revealed the underlying structure of the Sasanian and early Islamic cities; recognition of the juxtaposition of those two cities laid the conceptual framework for the Aqaba project.



A typical scene of the Istakhr excavations in southern Iran in the 1930s



Aerial photograph of the site of Istakhr taken by Erich Schmidt

Professor P. P. Delougaz excavated Khirbat al-Karak, a site better known today as Beit Yerah, one of the most important Bronze Age sites in the Levant. The first concession of the Oriental Institute during 1952–1953 focused on the Byzantine church, where Delougaz carefully recovered the extensive Abbasid occupation in the ninth century, long after the church had gone out of use. His work established a model of detailed ceramic publication, setting an admirable standard for subsequent work in Islamic archaeology. The Aqaba excavations have attempted to follow this model with extensive publication of primary data, especially the ceramic evidence upon which most historical interpretation is based.

It was the research of Dr. Robert McC. Adams that introduced modern approaches for Islamic archaeology. As director of the Oriental Institute, he supported the Nubian salvage campaigns and the excavations at Fustat, early Islamic Cairo, but the major step was his inclusion of Islamic sites and history in his famous surveys in southern Iraq. Adams has also conducted two excavations studying the Sasanian/early Islamic transition: one at the small site of Abu Sarifa in Iraq and the other at the great city of Jundishapur in southwestern Iran. A similar focal interest in the pre-Islamic development into early Islamic civilization was also instrumental in the decision to excavate at Aqaba.

The author and Professor Janet Johnson initiated the excavations at Quseir al-Qadim on the Egyptian coast of the Red Sea in order to study long-distance trade. This innovative project certainly did not conform to traditional expectations for an Egyptological excavation; it was outside the Nile valley and had neither tombs nor temples, as well as being decidedly post-Pharaonic. Quseir was a study in contradictions—a fishing village with Chinese porcelain, a sheikh's house with imported dyed Indian cloth, and hundreds of letters written on paper, giving details of the Indian Ocean trade. One unusual aspect is preservation of botanical remains, including many foods imported from the Indian Ocean area in the thirteenth century and from the Mediterranean in the fourteenth century. Work at Quseir was fol-

lowed by the medieval Luxor project, in which trenches were placed in the last remnant of the habitation mound around Luxor temple. The principal result was a complete stratigraphic sequence from the fourteenth century back through early Islamic, Coptic, and Roman to late dynastic Egyptian times. This sequence provides a basis for understanding the Egyptian component at Quseir and the foundation for further work in the Nile valley.

The excavations at Aqaba in Jordan expanded interest in the Islamic history and archaeology of the Red Sea region. Indeed, if Breasted had turned his attention to Aqaba in the 1930s, the nearby sites of the Iron Age or Nabataean/Roman periods would have been investigated. Prior to 1986, the Islamic city was entirely lost—literally hidden in the sands—and almost nothing was known about the details of its history, let alone its size, architecture, details of daily life, etc. Today the situation is significantly different; we now have a vast array of information on commerce, urban life, historical trends, and a multitude of other aspects.



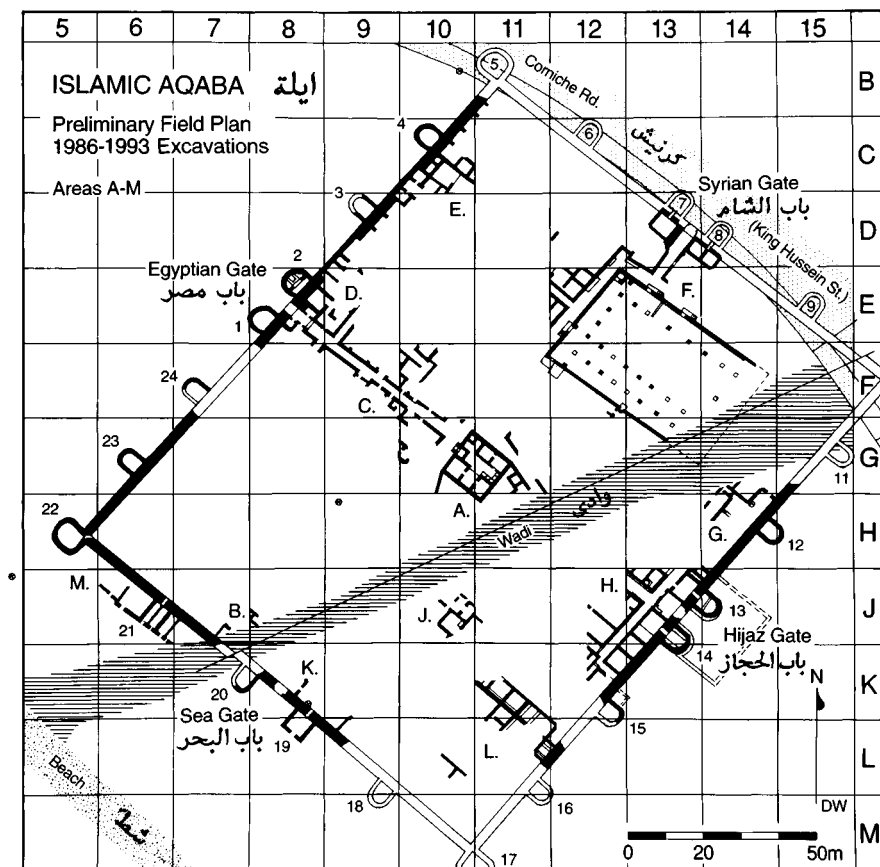
Scene from the excavations at Quseir al-Qadim in Egypt from the 1980 season

In general, the results of this research continue the traditional concerns of the Oriental Institute. The contemporary people of Aqaba (and indeed all of Jordan) have physical evidence of their past. On a local level, this has an incalculable psychological effect on the formation of identity. More broadly, there has been much talk recently of the social and political uses of archaeology in modern nations; examples of Islamic archaeology have important impact in rectifying many historical misconceptions. Finally, one may see a small incremental value of this research toward understanding of the role of Islamic culture in the formation of mankind and the modern world. And, of course, there is the pure pleasure of discovery.

One of the most enduring ideas of Breasted is the concept of the “Fertile Crescent,” and Aqaba lies at a pivotal juncture along this zone of incipient civilization. The site of Aqaba has made major contributions toward understanding the formative period of Islamic civilization in the seventh century. The city plan and artifacts testify to the gradual transformation from late Byzantine into early Islamic styles. This parallels the emergence of Islamic political and cultural identity in the time of the first caliphs and the Umayyad dynasty. This is the beginning of a new age and not the end of antiquity. The emergence of Islamic civilization is no clearer than the emergence of the Sumerians or the Egyptian Old Kingdom and, like these predecessors, demands the attentions of archaeological research. Breasted would surely have approved of such a challenge had it been formulated in the 1930s.

1993 Season at Aqaba

As mentioned above, the work in the fall of 1993 marked the first season of the second phase of research at Aqaba. The excavations returned to the northeastern quadrant that is hypothesized to contain important elements of the religious-ad-



Plan of the excavations at Aqaba from 1986 through 1993

ministrative structure of the early Islamic city. These include the Abbasid-Fatimid structures (mid-eighth to mid-eleventh centuries) identified in previous excavations (the Large Enclosure) and the earlier Rashidun and Umayyad structures (mid-seventh to mid-eighth centuries), rare and important evidence of the beginnings of Islamic culture. The one public building excavated in previous seasons was the central Pavilion Building; this has been hypothesized as a central administrative complex, perhaps an early Islamic governor's residence. It followed that the Congregational Mosque of the city should be nearby.

The Congregational Mosque

To the northeast of the Central Pavilion was an enigmatic structure called the Large Enclosure, also first identified in 1987 (see site plan). This is the largest building revealed on the site and a preliminary hypothesis suggested a rebuilding during phase B (750–850 A.D.), which encroached over the axial street (Sh. al-Sham; Syria Street). This was suggested to be an enlargement of the Congregational Mosque (built by Uthman ibn Affan about 650) after the earthquake of 748.

The excavations revealed a large building with a complex history. The overall size is twenty-eight meters by about fifty meters, most of which is a large court with multiple gravel floors and no artifactual debris. Around the edge of the court was a peristyle of columns set on plastered piers. These foundations were as much

as three and a half meters deep in the western part of the building, that is, where the street originally was situated. Foundations were not as deep in the eastern part, where the piers utilized earlier walls. The gravel floors may be dated as late as the tenth century (based on six dinars of the Fatimid al-Aziz) and as early as the beginning of the Abbasid period (ca. 750). All artifacts beneath these floors and associated both with the earliest walls and fill above the street are very early Umayyad and late Byzantine in date. The ceramics are consistent for more than three meters to the water table; the majority are identical to types recovered from the kilns (see below). They belong to phase A (650–750 A.D.) and probably mostly from the first half of that time.

The identification of the earliest walls needs more study, due to extensive fragmentation and destruction of the building's eastern portion in the wadi. The identification of the Large Enclosure is problematic; it will be useful to list its attributes:

1. The building had at least three entrances, approached by platform stairways.
2. In the northern corner was a square structure that might have served as a tower.
3. The peristyle of columns has an additional row on the southern side forming a covered area of two riwaqs.
4. There is one niche in the southern wall, with a platform in front and a semi-circular buttress attached to the exterior. This feature is very similar to known forms of mihrabs.

The above features of this building are consistent with a mosque of Syrian type in early Islamic times. The size is also within the common range for urban mosques. There is, however, a major problem with this identification; the orientation of the qibla wall is to the southwest, while the orientation of common qibla in Syria is due south. One might argue that the southwest is the direction of the Red Sea coasts and might have been sanctioned by local tradition in the original foundation of the



General view of the site from the northwest

city. Thus this mosque both conforms to the general type and yet reveals individual characteristics that could not have been predicted. This mosque presents a first step in understanding factual details of the origins of Islamic culture.

The Seventh Century Kilns

A second result of the 1993 season was the excavation of two kilns located to the northwest of the site of Ayla. These kilns were reported in 1987 and described as part of the West Aqaba Survey, in which they were hypothesized to represent industrial production of amphoras in the early seventh century. The excavation of these kilns was conducted by Dr. Khairieh Amr and Ms. Ansam Malkawi.

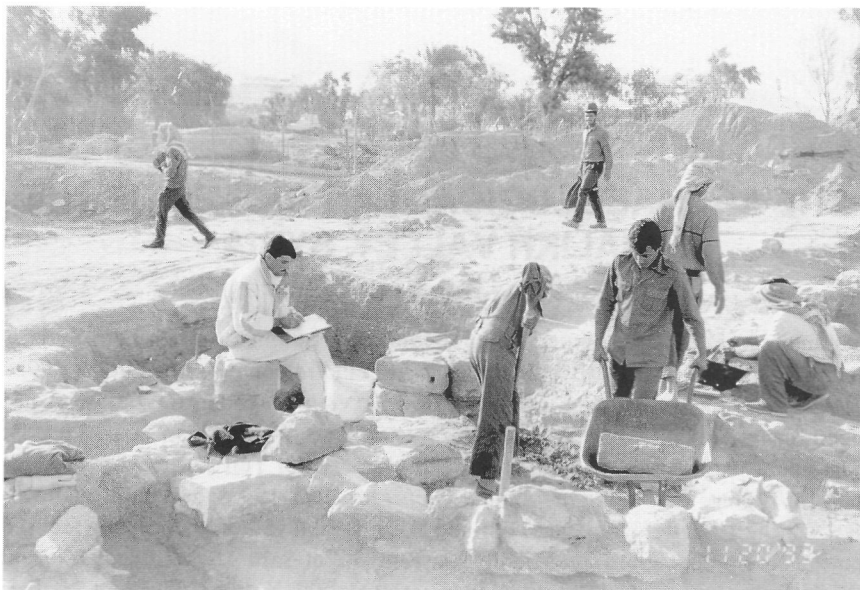
Two kilns were partially uncovered; the larger was more than three meters in diameter and more than two meters in preserved height to the firing floor. The second kiln was only slightly smaller with the firing floor completely preserved; the firing chamber was entered and the complete construction technique revealed. The ceramic products seem to have focused on amphoras, a type distinctive to the seventh century, as well as cooking pots and other common forms. The extent of this ceramic industry and evidence from early levels of the site of Ayla suggest a vital increase in occupation and commerce during the early Islamic period.

A report on the kiln excavation, "The Excavation of Two Seventh Century Pottery Kilns at Aqaba," has been written for the *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* under the joint authorship of Ansam, Khairieh, and the present writer.



The kilns excavated at Aqaba in 1993

The kilns clearly illustrate the beginnings of industrial production in the early Islamic period. The principal product was amphoras necessary for transshipment of Syrian merchandise into the Hijaz and Red Sea. In testimony to this trade, Aqaba amphoras have been found in southern Yemen and in Ethiopia (at Axum; not accidentally, the Ayla excavations have produced two late Axumite coins). The evidence of the kilns coincides with the foundation of the new port of Ayla, and both form pieces to the puzzle of the development of early Islamic culture. It is an investigation which would have enthralled Breasted, had he not left off the story in the middle, what we call the medieval. He left us a vast field, a direction to continue the beginnings embodied in the Oriental Institute.



Ra'ed El-Shara', one of the Jordanian students who participated in the 1993 season at Aqaba

With Much Appreciation

The fall season of excavations at the site of early Islamic Ayla lasted from November 1 through December 26, a total of forty-five digging days. The staff consisted of five foreign archaeologists and four Jordanian students. The expedition benefited from the representation of Ms. Sausan Fakhery and Dr. Khairieh Amr, on behalf of the Department of Antiquities. This has been possible only with the enthusiastic assistance of Dr. Safwan Tell, Director General of Antiquities. Logistical support was due to the special attentions of Drs. Pierre and Patricia Bikai of the American Center of Oriental Research, who managed the complexities of a USAID grant for archaeological research at Aqaba. Logistics in Aqaba benefited from the assistance of Ms. Sausan Fakhery and Mr. Mohammed Freihat of the Aqaba office of the Department of Antiquities; these two individuals not only helped with daily affairs but also proved to be energetic and talented excavators.
