

AQABA

Donald Whitcomb

The city of Aqaba has received a vast increase in information on the history of its settlement. Most recently, a team under Dr. Thomas Parker of North Carolina State University followed the initial survey work of the Oriental Institute by John Meloy and successfully uncovered the Roman and early Byzantine cities. The Oriental Institute excavations concentrated on the occupation during the early Islamic period, when it was called Ayla. The early medieval city was of some regional importance, particularly as a

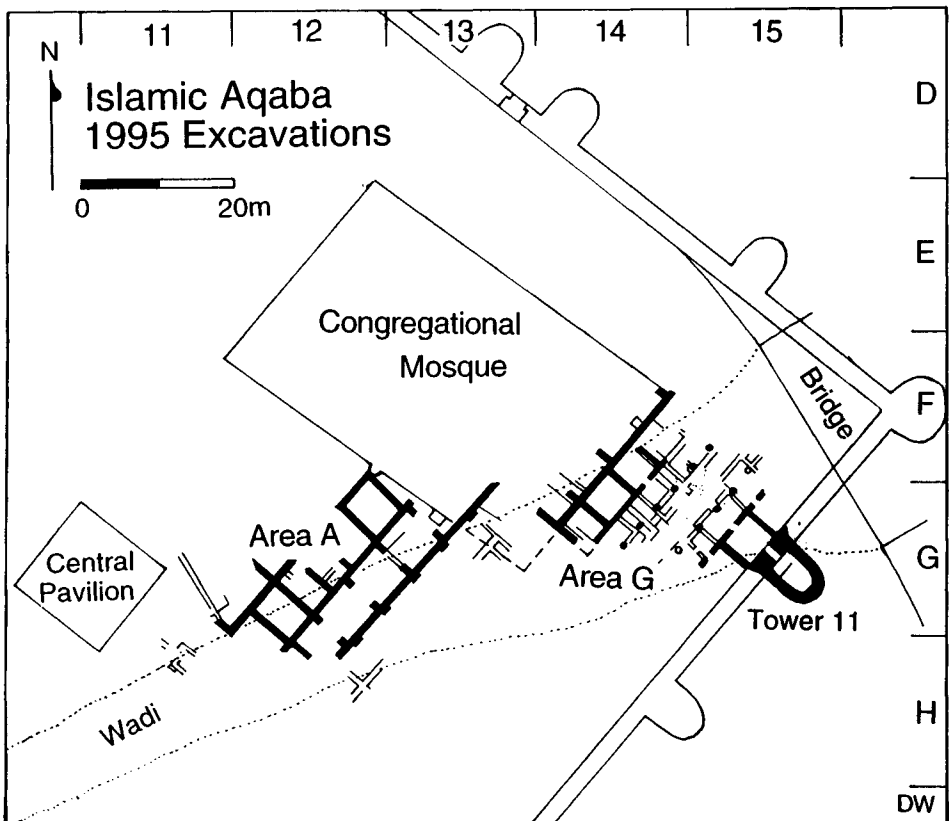


Figure 1. General plan of the areas excavated as part of the 1995 season of research at early Islamic Ayla, in Aqaba, Jordan

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southern port for Bilad al-Sham, the “port of Palestine on the China Sea” in the words of Muqaddasi, and as a major station on the Pilgrim route from Palestine, Egypt, and North Africa. Still, the city did not grow into a great metropolis and its fleeting prosperity and the fame of its notables was soon forgotten.

Archaeological research brought to light the early Islamic city, founded during the early caliphate of ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān. This town was occupied from about A.D. 650 to the arrival of the Crusaders after A.D. 1100. The site is now being developed into a tourist attraction, giving a historical depth to the modern port, Jordan’s window to the south



Figure 2. A general view of the street and buildings excavated in the wadi bed, looking southwest toward the beach. John Meloy stands in the distance (middle)

and its connection with trade of the Indian Ocean and beyond. Nothing was known of the physical remains of Ayla until the arrival of T. E. Lawrence in 1911, whose observations were not improved upon until the recent excavations. The city was engulfed in the sands until revealed by excavations from 1986 to 1995 under the sponsorship of the Oriental Institute and the Department of Antiquities of Jordan (see fig. 1). A grant from USAID, through the American Center of Oriental Research (ACOR), enabled large-scale operations in 1987, which resulted in the major discoveries

of the Egyptian Gate and northwest city wall, the Pavilion Building in the center of the city, several residential units, and the Large Enclosure. The seasons of 1988 and 1989 were devoted to investigation of the southern quadrant of the city in cooperation with the development of the Royal Yacht Club on this property. Each of these seasons of fieldwork served as salvage operations that identified the importance of the site and preserved this monument in the heart of the modern city.

The first phase, the circumference and stratification of the city, is now complete; as one might expect from the excavation of an entire city, many lacunae remain in the history of Ayla. The second phase of archaeological research is focused on functional aspects of this early Islamic city, the central institutions. A beginning was made in 1993, when the Congregational Mosque of Ayla was discovered.

The Excavations

This season of excavations lasted from the end of October until the end of December 1995 and aimed at the investigation of the earliest remains on the site by concentrating on the periphery of the Congregational Mosque (see fig. 1). The mosque was explored in 1987, 1992, and especially in 1993 and the Central Pavilion was excavated as Area A in 1986 and 1987. The general hypothesis guiding this research was that beneath and to the east of the Congregational Mosque (which was built in Phase B, 750–850) lies the first mosque, part of the original town plan of ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān (ca. 650). Further, it was hypothesized that the early mosque was associated with an administrative complex or governor’s residence, the *dar al-imara*, which could lie between the mosque and

Central Pavilion. These two structures would represent the two crucial institutions defining this early Islamic city.

Soundings in previous seasons had indicated the existence of architectural remains within the wadi, which suggested an efficient chance to reveal part of the Umayyad town plan. Further excavations expanded onto the northern bank of the wadi, which provided a stratigraphic continuity with later periods and results from previous seasons. The stratigraphic evidence resulting from this season was over 2 m of Umayyad (and Rashidun) phases beneath later Abbasid and Fatimid levels. In the bed of the wadi was over 1 m of Umayyad occupation extending into the present water table.

Area G

The first area investigated was located to the southeast of the Abbasid Congregational Mosque in the northeastern section of the city. Excavations in the wadi bed in 1993 showed the practicality of uncovering extensive areas of the earliest occupation phase on

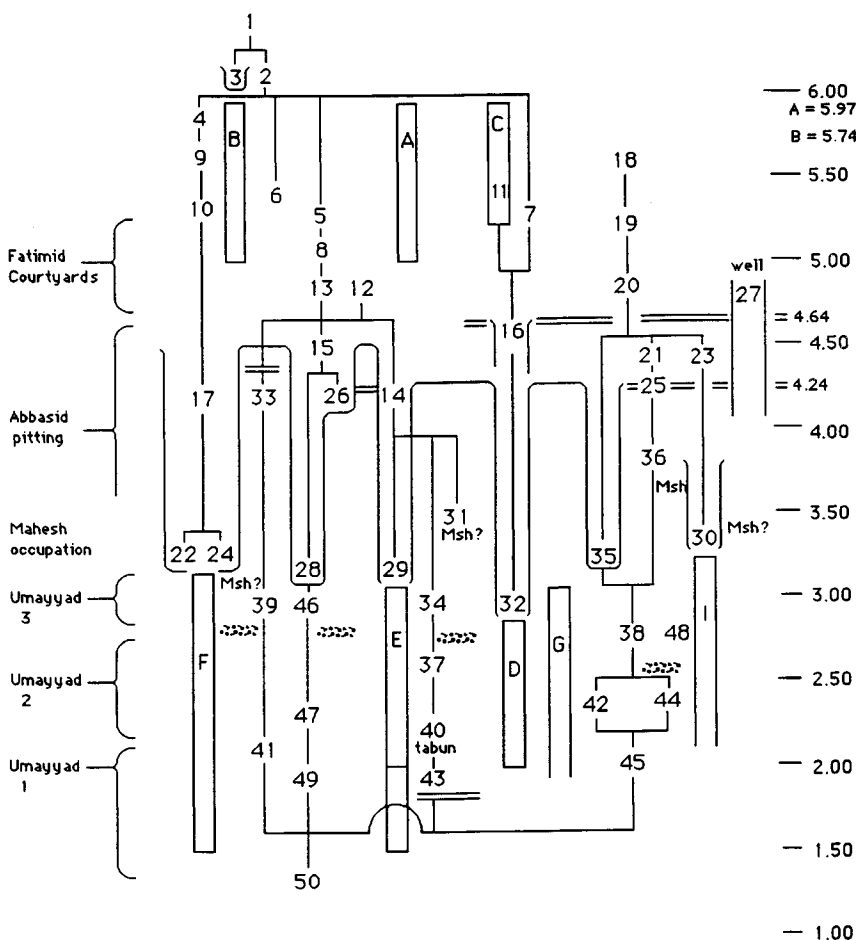


Figure 3. A matrix diagram of the loci excavated in Square G12b. The diagram illustrates the stratigraphic complexity of an area of robbed out walls, pitting, and extensive rebuilding over a four-hundred year period

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the site (Phase A, 650–750). This efficiency in reaching early occupation levels without extensive overburden is balanced by the liabilities of digging in a large drainage channel. A flash flood in 1993 effectively obliterated two weeks of work in the wadi and illustrated the temporary nature of these results, however dramatic and important.

One of the towers on the city wall was excavated (Tower 11, located next to the corner tower that is now situated under the Corniche bridge). Tower 11 belonged to the original city wall; it is filled with Mahesh debris (ca. 750–800), indicating that it went out of use at the end of the Umayyad period. This was the tenth tower to be excavated (out of some twenty-four around the circumference of the city); its excavation confirmed and provided new details and added more information on the phasing out of the tower's use. A series of rooms was built beside the city wall, probably storerooms judging from the numerous Ayla type amphorae discovered within them.

These rooms faced a street with a double colonnade, over 15 m wide; beyond the street was another series of rooms to the northwest. This formal, classical street was part of the original town plan; the plan was almost immediately changed with the addition of walls dividing the porticoes into irregular rooms (fig. 2). The architectural remains indicate three, and possibly four, phases of construction during the first century of occupation. This pattern of change suggests that the original classical plan did not prove satisfactory. It is likely that the first settlers, whether *mawali* of 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān from Madina or Egyptian converts, brought with them regional ideas and experiences of urban planning. One of the opportunities of the Ayla excavations is to observe these varied influences in the beginnings of Islamic urbanization and their development through this early Islamic period.

Area A

The excavations in 1987 revealed a rectangular building that, in its latest phase, was a residence of the Fatimid period. Evidence from the external walls indicated arched openings 3.5 m wide on the southwestern, northwestern, and southeastern sides. These architectural fragments suggest that the earliest form of this building might have been an open pavilion. Further excavations in 1988 proved that this central structure marked the crossing of the axial streets and was analogous to the tetrapylon of classical cities, manifest in early Islamic foundations such as Anjar. From the time of its discovery, an association with a central administrative complex, perhaps an early Islamic governor's residence, was hypothesized.

The second area of excavations was the middle wadi to the south of the Abbasid mosque and near the Central Pavilion. The exterior of the *qibla* wall of the mosque was revealed in 1993; in the later phases (C–D, 950–1100), there were several walls attached to the mosque wall with *tabuns* (ovens) suggesting domestic activities. Expansion of this excavation disclosed a large courtyard of the Fatimid period behind the *mihrab* of the mosque. The courtyard was filled with ceramic vessels broken in situ (possibly due to the 1068 earthquake); all ceramics were recovered and are being restored in Chicago, in an effort to obtain a large assemblage of contemporary Fatimid period vessels.

The results of this season's stratigraphy were anticipated from a deep sounding that was located outside of one of the arched entries into the Central Pavilion, which was excavated in 1987 (labeled H11a-1...16). This sequence began with late Abbasid glazed ceramics; beneath these were very distinctive ceramics called Mahesh wares (Phase B, A.D. 750–850). This assemblage was deposited upon a thick plaster floor, very similar to the bedding used for mosaics. Under this floor were Umayyad and pre-Umayyad materials down to earlier paving stones and the threshold of the gate. This trench showed the

association of ceramic sequences with architectural phases and, more importantly, gave an indication of the formal structures to be found in the original town plan.

Evidence of Abbasid occupation occurred below this yard and was found with a series of thick plaster floors. These plaster floors were badly damaged by a series of Fatimid or Abbasid pits and extensive robbing of the earlier stone walls. One can associate this destruction with the building of the Congregational Mosque in the early Abbasid period. Beneath the plaster floors was a thick accumulation of Umayyad fill above earlier floors using the same walls. Another set of wall foundations indicates even earlier structures, over 2 m deeper, all of the Umayyad period. The diagram of G12b loci (fig. 3) might clarify this complex history: (A) three phases of Umayyad occupation associated with a massive stone building; (B) fill of Umayyad debris and Mahesh materials transitional to early Abbasid floors; (C) Abbasid pitting and wall removal associated with mosque construction; and (D) Fatimid courtyard and occupation behind the mosque. Needless to say, details of this history must be confirmed, though the general outline fits the evidence recovered from previous seasons in Aqaba.

Conclusions

The Umayyad period architecture of the middle wadi (Area A) presents a sharp contrast to the street and residential elements near the city wall (Area G). As one moves closer to the center of the city, the walls become thicker and better built. A major wall with external buttresses and inner buttressed rooms suggests a large, impressive structure (fig. 4). The paving is often fine, with large flagstones and thick plaster. Several of the rooms had traces of painted plaster, unfortunately now destroyed. The buttressed wall seems to have enclosed one, or possibly two, large buildings. Description of this building is frustrated by the limited recovery under the Fatimid and Abbasid overburden and because of damage caused during those later periods.

The interpretation of the architecture to the south (and under) the Abbasid mosque is very uncertain. The first suggestion was that this building might be the *dar al-imara* of the early Islamic town. Architectural details, such as a doorway beneath the Abbasid *mihrab* and walls extending beneath the *qibla* wall, indicate that the earlier mosque (if beneath the Abbasid mosque) must have been much smaller than assumed. On the other hand, evidence has accumulated to suggest that the Umayyad mosque must be located elsewhere in the town. Thus the large and important buildings discovered this season might not be associated with the *dar al-imara*, though official or administrative functions are certainly possible. The complexities of urban architecture revealed in the Ayla excavations emphasize the general lack of archaeological evidence for the process of urbanization in early Islamic cities. The data recovered from Ayla is an important step toward the delineation of this history.



Figure 4. A general view of the large structure between the mosque and the Central Pavilion, looking north. Ghida el-Osman and Ansam Melkawi discuss the final recording of this area

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An Inscription

One of the additional projects undertaken this season involved providing assistance to the Department of Antiquities in restoring the Egyptian gateway, which entailed finishing the excavations by “opening” the gate and restoring the original arches and vaulting. Fortunately, the Aqaba inspectorate has assembled a talented and experienced restoration team for such projects. Among the rubble filling the gate was a missing piece of the Ayat al-Kursi inscription (*Qurʿan* 2: 255). Other fragments of this monumental inscription, carved in limestone, were found tumbled in the debris in front of the Egyptian Gate (fig. 5). The block found this year includes the phrase which reads “*wa ma khalfahum wa la yuhituna bishay*” (and what is behind them, and they comprehend nothing ...). This block adds important evidence for the history of the city and for Arabic paleography. The original inscription would date to the Umayyad period, soon after foundation of Ayla. However, inconsistencies in letter formation indicate recarving of some of the stones, presumably in the Abbasid period. The new stone shows a surface fracture, probably resulting from wall movement during the 748 earthquake. The first word has been recarved using a slightly different monumental script and illustrates calligraphic changes in the early Abbasid period. Clearly, detailed study of this inscription is warranted in future seasons.



Figure 5. Reconstruction of the Ayat al-Kursi inscription from the Egyptian Gate area. The inscribed stone found this year is the large stone in the lower center

Credits

The 1995 season of excavations were made possible through the support and sponsorship of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, the Oriental Institute, and the Max Van Berchem Foundation. Generous assistance was provided by Dr. Ghazi Bisheh and Mrs. Sawsan al-Fakhry of the Department of Antiquities and by Dr. Fayiz al-Khasawnah and Mr. Muzahem al-Muheisen of the Aqaba Region Authority. The staff of the excavations was a talented group of specialists and students from universities in Jordan, Palestine, France, as well as Chicago; to this team belongs the credit for the success of this season at Ayla.