# THE FOURTH GATE AT AYLA: A REPORT ON THE 1992 EXCAVATIONS AT AQABA

by
Donald Whitcomb

## Background

One of the results of the 1987 excavations on the site of early Islamic Ayla was the identification of the location of the northeast gate of the city. This was named the Syrian Gate and posited to lie beneath the street and sidewalk of the Corniche Road (King Hussein Street). The archaeological context of this sector of the city was Area F, known primarily from the excavations of the Large Enclosure and residential units immediately to the southwest of this structure.

The proposed construction of the Ayla Orientation Center prompted further investigations in this area in Spring of 1991. Mr. Romel Greyb led archaeologists from the Department of Antiquities; this team was joined by Dr. Kenneth Russell, representing ACOR.[1] The results of this excavation prompted the 1992 excavations under discussion.[2] The archaeological evidence thus derived allows an interpretation of the history of this fourth city gate. As with the other city gates, this evidence is a mixture of anticipated patterns in architectural construction and artifactual deposition and relics of specific events in the history of this particular part of the city.

## The 1991 Excavations

This examination of the 1991 excavations is not intended as an archaeological critique. The original intent of that work was a superficial clearance, anticipating extensive modern disturbance. When architectural remains of potential significance came to light, there was a serious shortfall in archaeological expertise, funding, and time. One senses the frustration in the reports by both Greyb and Russell; this uncertainty prompted a postponement of any construction on the site.

Four contiguous 5 x 5m trenches (labeled A, B, C, D; see Fig. 1) were placed along the line of the proposed Ayla Orientation Center. This was later expanded with a 1.5 x 10m slit trench (Ext.) on the southeastern side. Russell excavated a separate 5 x 5m trench where one of the new towers was intended to be built (E). The plan of these trenches reveals the complexities introduced by modern disturbances. The recent fence marks the edge of the sidewalk and street. About 2m from the fence is a modern pipeline, apparently laid with mechanized excavator; its trench is 80cm wide and ca. 1-1.2m deep. Antecedent to the pipeline was a broad ditch, again running parallel to the street (see Fig. 3, sections a-c, f-e, k-m); this ditch contained thoroughly modern artifacts.

These disturbances committed the 1991 excavations (as well as subsequent work) to frustrating removal of modern debris. As the excavations were an average of 1.5m deep, probably 80% of the soils removed were meaningless. A by-product of this situation was that, when walls and other architectural features were discovered, there was little time to investigate and thoroughly define them. The inner face of the city wall was discovered in two places but not recognized as such; the northeast baulk of trench

1. Final plans and sections of these excavations were the work of Dr. Russell and Eng. Mohammed Shweimat. The 1992 excavation team felt honored to continue the efforts of Ken Russell, whose untimely passing occurred during this season.
2. Report on 1991 session by Greyb and Russell are on file in the Department of Antiquities and ACOR.

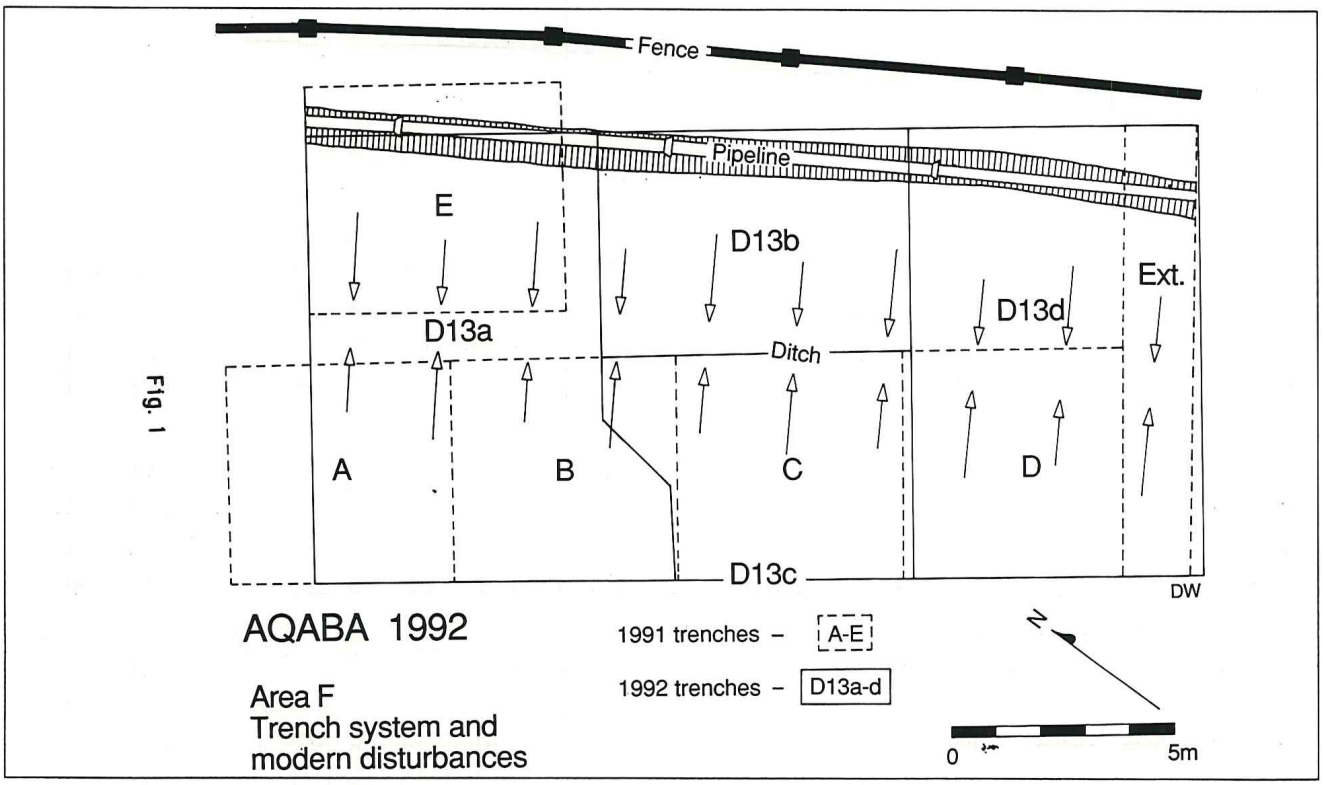



Fig. 1

Fig. 1. Area F, trench system and modern disturbances.

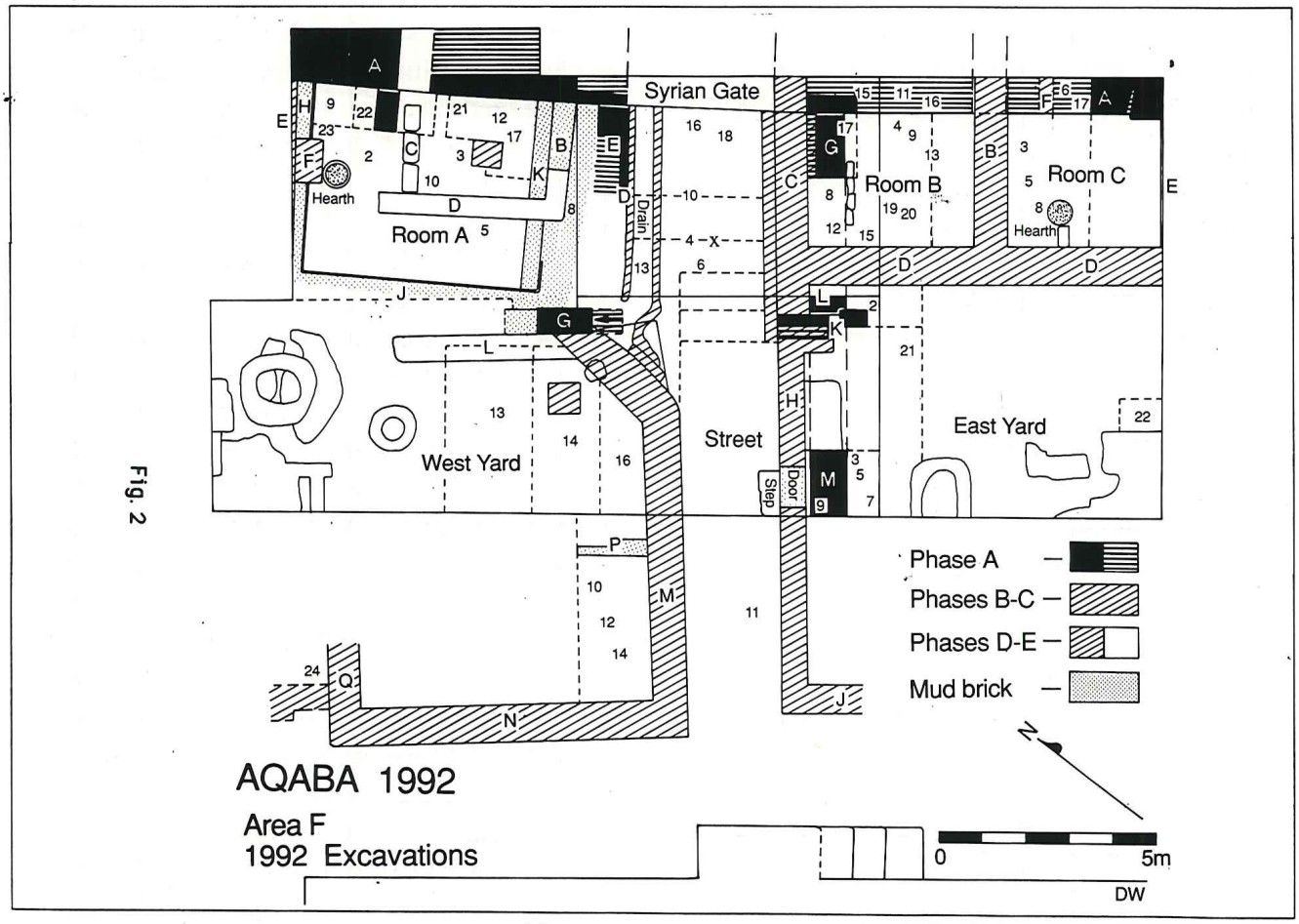



Fig. 2

Fig. 2. Area F, plan of the 1992 excavations.

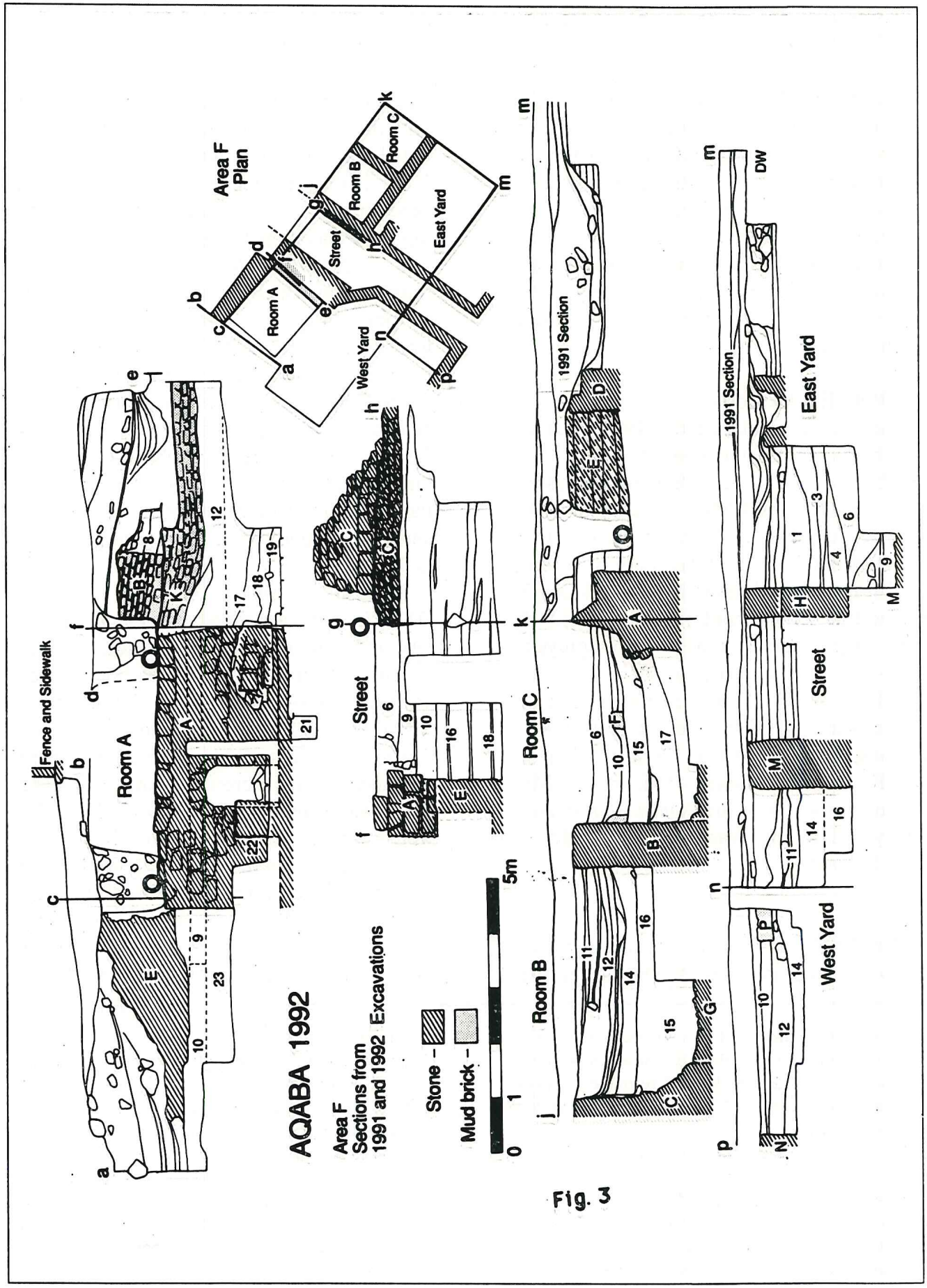



Fig. 3. Area F, sections from the 1991 and 1992 excavations.

E was entirely the rubble matrix of the city wall.[3] Wall fragments now associable with Rooms A, B, and C (Fig. 2) will be discussed below. There are a number of features in both the West Yard and East Yard which were necessarily left without further investigation. These include apparent wells, ovens, or vats described as elements of "industrial" nature. Several areas had stone pavements; while this is not without parallel, such pavements are extremely rare. These may be stone screes, the result from fallen elements.

**The 1992 Excavations**

The author continued the 1991 excavations by expanding the area into a 20 x 10m trench (Pls. I, 1; 2). This short season lasted from April 22 until May 28, a total of 32 days of excavation. The team consisted of five students from the University of Jordan and Yarmouk University; Mr. Romel Greyb returned as Department representative.[4] A work force of about 16 men was employed. 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 ACOR, and Mr. Bassam Kakish and Mr. Bassam Noueiran of the Aqaba Region Authority. Funding was provided under a USAID grant.

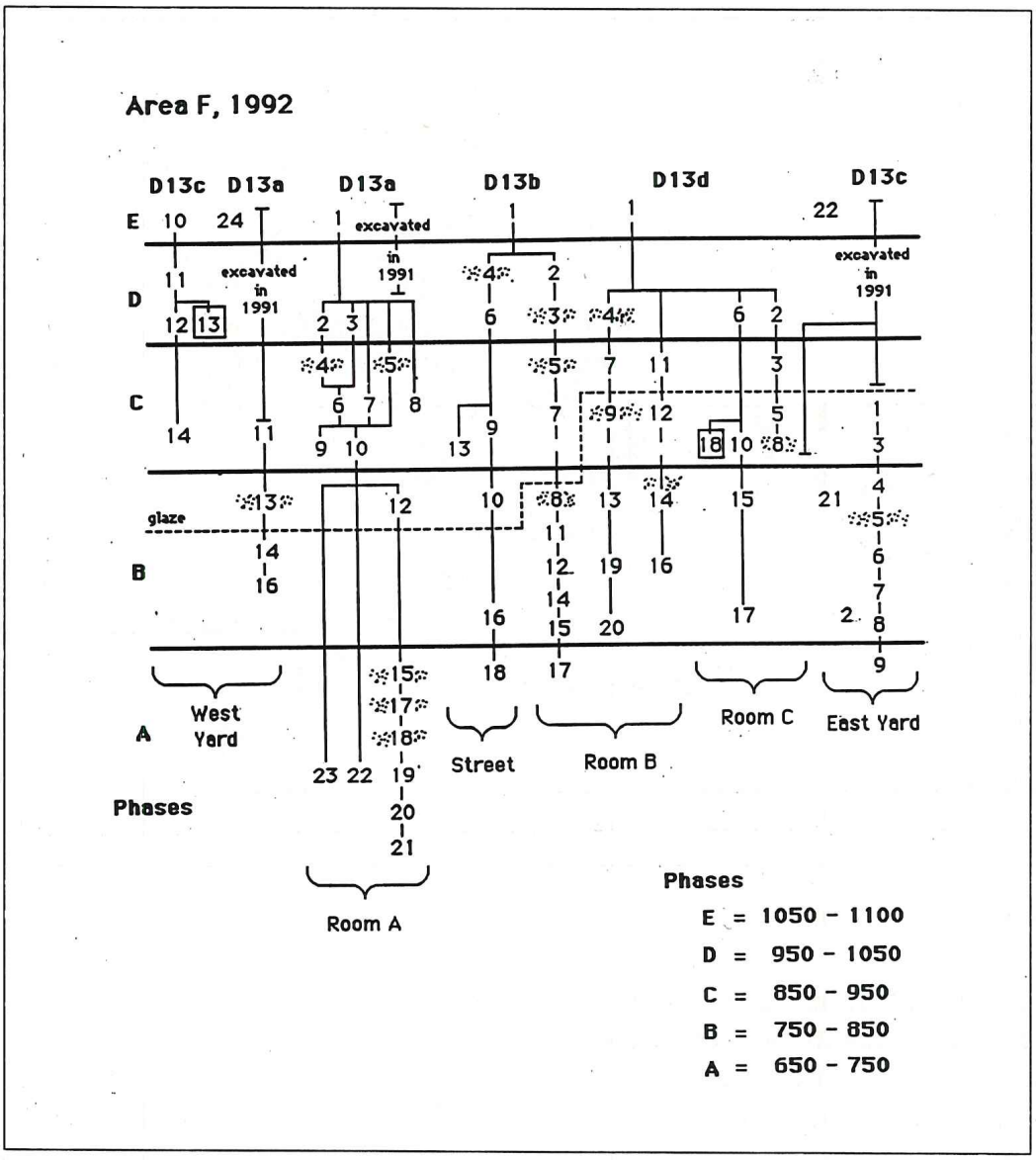
*Room A*

The 1992 excavations to the northwest of the Syrian gate expanded an earlier trench (E) into an area of 6.5 x 5m, called D13a (see Figs. 1 and 2).[5] The area held two uncovered walls, walls C and D; these were both of stone, the former consisting of only three limestone blocks. This wall C divided the area into two loci, D13a-2 and D13a-3. Refuse deposits with some ash ran beneath wall C (excavated as D13a-4). During the excavation of these loci, the edge of the inner face of the city wall (A) was found, upon which rested the intrusive water pipe (Pl. II, 1). Two other stone walls were discovered, wall E and a small pilaster, wall F. A section of mud brick wall (B) limited the room on the southeast and appeared to join wall D (investigated as D13a-8). The walls and loci of this phase may be considered as late Abbasid (or early Fatimid).[6] A diagram of the loci excavated and their chronological phases may be seen in Table 1.

Deposits southwest of wall D, locus D13a-5, contained massive amounts of pottery and animal bone. This material corresponds to locus D13a-6, the combined area after the removal of wall C. After the removal of wall D, beneath which was D13a-7, the lower loci (D13a-9, D13a-10) were bounded by a different set of walls. The city wall A remained, but walls H and J were marked by a plaster surface upon a thick reddish mud mortar. These walls were mud brick and stone (found near wall E). Wall B was probably contemporary with this phase; this was obscured by a bench or parallel wall K. The only architectural fea-

3. One must reiterate that this is not meant to be critical of techniques and abilities; these results are a natural combination of lack of resources, exceptional complexities, and limited experience at this particular site.
4. These students were Mr. Jom'a Kareem, Mr. Essam El-Hadi, Ms. Manal Al-Natour, Ms. Ansam Melkawi, and Ms. Fatima Marii. This team was joined by visiting archaeologists, Ms. Rebecca Foote and Dr. Eduard LaGro. The success of this excavation is due to the conscientious efforts of this fine team.
5. Nomenclature for the 1992 trenches is an awkward adaptation of the grid system, the Syrian Gate falling into square D13. D13a measures 10x6.5m; D13d is 10x6.5m; D13b is 7x5m plus extensions toward the Large Enclosure.
6. For criteria, see D. Whitcomb, 'A Fatimid Residence in Aqaba, Jordan,' *ADAJ* 32 (1988), pp. 207-224. One should note that purely Fatimid wares were absent from this room, presumably removed in 1991.

**Table 1:** Locus diagram, Area F, 1992.




ture within this room was a square pillar, preserved only two courses in height. The loci associated with this earlier room and its transformations are early Abbasid in date.[7] Only the trench placed along wall K, D13a-12, showed transitional Mahesh style characteristics.[8]

A series of deep probes examined the earlier phases of this room. Beneath wall K was an ash layer, D13a-15, and then a series of deposits, D13a-17, 18, 19. These were associated with poorly executed repair work to the lower face of the city wall (see Fig. 3, section c-f). The lowest locus, D13a-19, lay beside the foundation course for the city wall and on top of a stone paved floor

7. The ceramics include early "Coptic glazed" and "Hijazi" glazed wares; see D. Whitcomb, 'Coptic Glazed Ceramics from the Excavations at Aqaba, Jordan,' *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 26 (1989), pp. 167-82, and *idem.*, 'Glazed Ceramics of the Abbasid Period from the Aqaba Excavations,' *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* (London, in press).

8. D. Whitcomb, 'Mahesh Ware: Evidence of Early Abasid Occupation from Southern Jordan,' *ADAJ* 33 (1989), pp. 269-285.

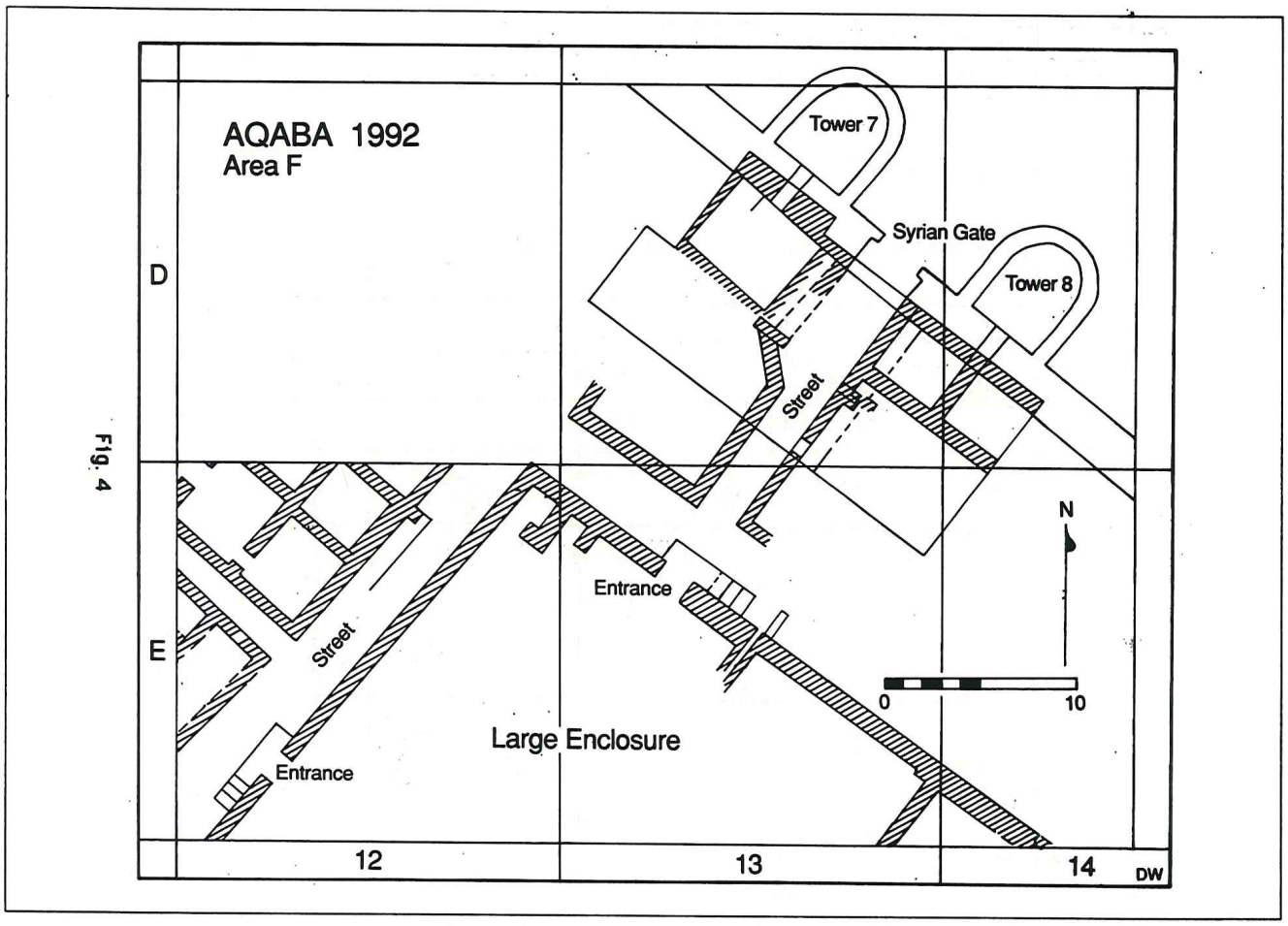



Fig. 4. Area F, Syrian Gate and the Large Enclosure.

(D13a-20). Several of these paving stones were removed and a quantity of sherds collected beneath this earliest floor (D13a-21). Within an hour this hole was filled with water. Two other probes investigated the plaster face of wall H (D13a-23) and the remainder of the city wall (D13a-22). The latter revealed the doorway (Pl. III, 1) leading from the room into the tower flanking the Syrian gate (Tower 7). A wall beside the jamb of this doorway suggests an early subdivision of this room. All of the abovementioned loci in these probes, especially that beneath the stone flooring, showed an impressive artifactual consistency; this has been defined as Rashidun or Umayyad in date.[9]

*West Yard*

This area had relatively little architectural material, as the label suggests, though it should be emphasized that the excavations uncovered only the latest levels. The northern part of the yard was excavated to an average depth of 1.25m in 1991, revealing walls L and M and features to the west (these were identified as a platform, well, and industrial installation). This trench was called area D13a, like the Room A. Wall L was only two courses of stone, not unlike wall D, and was removed; depositions around and under this wall were locus

9. D. Whitcomb, 'Evidence of the Umayyad Period from the Aqaba Excavations,' pp. 164-184 in M.A. Bakhit and R. Schick (eds), *The Fourth International Conference on the History of Bilad al-Sham During the Umayyad Period,* (Amman: University of Jordan, 1989), vol. 2.

D13a-11. Wall M continued southwest into D13c, where it joined a wall N running parallel to the wall of the Large Enclosure (see Fig. 4). Wall N makes a corner with wall Q opposite the corner of the Large Enclosure. A mud brick wall (wall P, D13c-13) ran perpendicular to wall M. A trench within the areas of walls M, N, and P produced a sequence of materials lacking from D13a. Locus D13c-10 was topsoil, followed by bricky collapse (D13c-11) lying on a rich midden deposit (D13c-12). These last two loci contained lustre wares and other ceramics of the late Abbasid period. Earlier Abbasid wares characterized D13c-14 (which seems equivalent to D13a-11, discussed above).

A probe was excavated in D13a against the northwest face of wall M; this began as D13a-13 and progressively narrowed as it deepened toward wall M (D13a-14, D13a-16). Within locus D13a-14 was a pillar similar to that in Room A, and again only two courses high. The lower level reached coincided with the base of wall M. Both locus D13a-14 and D13a-16 had distinctive assemblages of Mahesh ware (transitional Umayyad/Abbasid ceramics).

One of the reasons for investigating wall M was the anomaly of an apparently semicircular wall, which later proved to be a fairly straight diagonal wall, associated with a street drain (in D13b, see below). The diagonal section of wall M was attached to wall G in D13a. This wall G was composed of well-cut limestone blocks, tilted toward the northwest like other walls within Room A. This leaning wall section was propped up with a mud brick buttress, which may have been part of wall J in D13a.

*Syrian Street*

The 1991 excavations clearly defined the location of the Syrian street (see the southwestern section drawing, Fig. 3, m-n). Further excavation concentrated on the 5m nearest to the city wall and gate area; this was area D13b. The initial work was clearance of modern debris within the pipe trench and the parallel ditch (D13b-1). The occurrence of porcelains and Fatimid lustre wares illustrates the admixture of materials of the latest occupation with modern plastics, etc.; this made more poignant the loss of these levels through modern disturbance. The value was redeemed in the highest layer (D13b-4) which contained, amidst similar late ceramics, a hoard of 32 dinars (x). Preliminary analysis of these coins suggests Fatimid and north African (Sijilmasa?) issues datable to the first quarter of the 11th century. One might speculate that this purse was lost by a Maghrebi pilgrim, possibly during the attacks on Ayla by the Banu Jarrah in A.D. 1024.[10]

This locus began levels of silt and ash depositions in thin layers typical of street depositions. Locus D13b-6 was bounded by wall C on the southeast and the mud brick wall D on the northwest. Parallel to the street was a stone-lined drainage channel (later excavated as D13b-13); indeed this drain is similar to the drain passing through the later phases of the Egyptian Gate and proves the continuing use of the street. The drain made a dog-leg bend to reach the diagonal section of wall M of the West Yard (D13c, discussed above). Though the preservation was unclear, it would seem that the drain was intended to serve the West Yard. Like the street behind the Sea Gate, the street was narrowed during this period by a new stone facing on both walls C and D. Wall D was associated with D13b-9, before being used as a side of the drain. The ceramics from these layers indicate a late Abbasid deposition.

10. The author is indebted to Dr. Michael Bates of the American Numismatic Society for assistance in the initial identification and interpretation of this hoard.

Locus D13b-10 was marked by a gravel layer and then continuing sandy silt varves. This was the beginning of a deep probe next to the inner face of the gate (measuring 3 x 2m). The stones of the north jamb were visible and juxtaposed to a stone wall E, the predecessor to later wall D (Pl. II, 2 ). This locus produced early Abbasid materials. Beneath this were loci D13b-16 and D13b-18; the latter locus reached the water table next to the gate jamb and wall E. There was no indication of a primary street or threshold. Ceramics were clearly of the earliest Umayyad or Rashidun period.[11]

*Room B*

This room was located immediately southeast of the Syrian street, bounded by stone walls B, C, and D. None of these walls had any indication of a doorway; entrance must have been from the northeast side, which wall must lie beneath the Corniche Road. This room was bisected by two excavation squares; the sequence falling within D13d was excavated first, followed by the second half in D13b. The former was subdivided by the pipeline, which eventually was dangerously pedestaled (only loci northeast of the pipeline are shown on the section; Fig. 3, j-k).

The uppermost layers, D13b-2, 3 and D13d-4, had concentrations of ash and artifacts. The same is true for lower layers, D13b-5, 7 and D13d-7, 9, 11, 12. A single line of four stones in D13b-5 seems to limit a bin containing masses of animal bones. Artifacts, including Samarran wares, are characteristic of the middle and late Abbasid periods.

Beneath a gravel layer (most clearly recognized as D13b-8), the depositions again contained numerous potsherds with some ash (D13b-11, D13d-13, 14), resting on a floor. Beneath this packed earth surface, there were fine silt layers, D13b-12, 15 (with an intervening plaster lense, D13b-14) and D13d-16, 19, 20. This stratum may be dated by the impressive collection of Mahesh wares, i.e., transitional Umayyad through early Abbasid periods.

The walls of this room may be dated to this period, most likely subsequent to the A.D. 748 earthquake. A deeper probe in one corner (D13b-17) elucidated the earlier architectural sequence. The footing for wall C was found and, beside these stones, there was the face and matrix of an earlier phase of this wall (G). This confirms that this street gradually became more narrow in later periods, as was observed along the Egyptian street. Probes beneath the pipeline confirmed the inner face of the city wall; unfortunately the jamb of the gate was obscured in this tangle of rebuilt walls. Ceramics associated with the city wall (A) and earliest phase of wall C (wall G) belonged to the Umayyad period.

*Room C*

This room is parallel to room B and has similar dimensions. Again, doorways were not found in the three walls (B, D, E), suggesting an orientation to the northeast. The room was partially excavated in 1991, when a slit trench was placed along the southeastern side (Fig. 1, Ext.).[12] South of the pipeline, this room was excavated to the same depth as this previous work (Pl. II, 1).

The upper levels exhibited the same types of depositions as D13d-2, 6. There was a gravel line (D13d-3) and D13d-5 contained a thin mud surface associated

11. Though further investigation would have been desirable, the water table below and the water pipe above combined with baulks of over 3m of soft silt precluded further excavation; indeed, we were fortunate that a minor baulk collapse caused no serious injuries.

12. Ironically, cleaning the baulk of this trench revealed wall E, covered by only a few centimeters of soil (see Fig. 3, section k-m).

with a fireplace with hearthstone. Beneath these layers were depositions D13d-8, 10; in the latter was a small mud brick wall (wall F; D13d-18). All of the materials were, like room B, middle and late Abbasid in date.

A deep probe was placed northeast of the pipeline (D13d-15, 17) in search for the city wall. Curiously, a fragment of the city wall was preserved in the corner of the square. The excavation of this wall (A) showed a large crack and horizontal movement of the inner face along this crack. The remainder of the city wall had been thoroughly removed; stones found at the lowest portion of D13d-17 may be part of the inner matrix of this wall. Wall B also exhibited a major crack but no displacement; whether this was due to subsidence or earthquake is uncertain. This wall crossed the city wall in the precise location of the doorway into the original tower (Tower 8). These lowest levels confirm a transitional Umayyad-early Abbasid date for this room.

*East Yard*

This area lies east of the long stone wall (H) bounding the Syrian street. The southern end of the street cornered to the east (wall J), leaving an open passage before the stairway into the Large Enclosure. As in the West Yard, there are remarkably few architectural features visible from the 1991 excavations in this yard. A slit trench was excavated this season from Room B to the southwest baulk, D13d-21. This confirmed the empty character of the area and dated the surface left after 1991 within the Mahesh ware range.[13] A deep probe was placed against the south end of this trench and wall H. Upper stones, thought to have been a platform in 1991, were removed to reveal a doorway with steps leading into the street. The threshold marked the beginning of D13c-1, a thick layer of silt. This locus, with the gravel layer beneath, belonged to the middle Abbasid period.

Thick layers of ash were found against the foundation courses of wall H (D13c-4, 5). As is frequently the case, new or rebuilt walls are associated with ash and other destruction debris; the prominence of Mahesh wares strongly suggests a mid eighth century date, possibly coincident with the A.D. 748 earthquake. Silt depositions, D13c-6, 7, led down to a plaster floor (D13c-8). Beneath this floor the ceramics changed to an Umayyad corpus, D13c-9, which was associated with an earlier wall M. This wall M may have been an antecedent of wall H and may have extended to the similar deep wall (G) in Room B.

Another probe was located at the juncture of wall H, D, and K, in order to investigate the apparent anomaly of this *cul-de-sac*. Wall K proved to be most interesting; it was made of carved limestone blocks, rather like wall G in the West Yard. Wall K was rent with a large crack and its north face showed a displacement of several centimeters (Pl. III, 2). The gap between the stones was carefully filled with smaller rocks. Walls H and D (the south wall of Room B) were contemporaneous and both walls post-dated this limestone wall. At the base of the probe was wall L, the probable continuation of wall M and G; the relationship to wall K could not be seen in the confined area. This probe was excavated as a single locus, D13c-2, and contained a mixture of Mahesh and Umayyad wares.

**Summation**

As may be seen from the above descriptions, the 1992 excavations have produced detailed stratigraphic information in the

13. Another small test trench (D13d-22), located near the eastern baulk, produced only modern debris and was abandoned.

context of an important architectural sector of the city of Ayla. An historical reconstruction is possible due to the detailed studies of the ceramics from the Aqaba excavations, from 1986 to 1989.[14] It should be emphasized that other artifacts remain to be analyzed. Obviously the metals, particularly some 40 non-auric possible coins, will be of some importance. Glass and other categories will also play an important part; as an example, the introduction of steatite may be closely dated to the early 10th century.[15]

*Phase A* (A.D. 650-750 = Rashidun and Umayyad)[16]

Architectural manifestations of this period are least common 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. Further its construction details correspond to the city wall elsewhere, particularly the wide footing of the foundation. The arch of the doorway into the tower gives, for the first time, the height of the passageway (surprisingly low, ca. 1.5m). 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. The pair of limestone pillars (walls D13a-G and D13c-K) suggest that an interior arch may have provided a transition from a vestibule into the town itself. An architectural parallel for such an arch may be seen near the Egyptian Gate. Artifacts indicative of the earlier part of this period are most common in Room A, where the city wall and plastered walls are best preserved.

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

This phase is anticipated by the introduction of a new corpus of ceramics, the Mahesh wares (post- A.D. 700). 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 (Room A) remained virtually unaffected, the southeast side was totally razed and two new rooms (B, C) built upon the remains of the original walls. On this latter side, the city wall ceased to exist, at least on its inner face. Not only do Rooms B and C apparently cross the city wall but their doorways, facing to the north, indicate an architectural complex built without regard to the former limits of the city. This reinforces the implications of the Square Tower, excavated in 1989, that the early Abbasid period is a period of expansion and vigorous reorganization.

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

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

14. It is important to remember the long hours of counting and recording excavated pottery, a considerable effort begun by the teams in previous seasons and ably continued in 1992.
15. This confirms the analysis of the Aqaba steatite collections by J. Hallet, *The Early Islamic Soft-stone Industry*, (Unpublished M. Phil. thesis, Oxford, 1990).
16. The labeling of these phases with dynastic names is done for convenience and with some reluctance; cultural change and its artifactual manifestations rarely coincide with political change. See D. Whitcomb, 'Reassessing the Archaeology of Jordan of the Abbasid Period,' pp. 385-390 in *SHAJ IV*, Amman, Department of Antiquities, 1992.

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

Rooms B and C have hearths and midden debris suggesting a change in function of this building. There are parallel developments in Room A, where midden debris underlies walls C and D, also in association with a hearth. Wall L is also added, suggesting a reconfiguration of the West Yard. These changes in deposition character 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 archaeology may be said to reflect the political and social vagaries of this troubled century.

*Phase E* (A.D. 1050-1116 = 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 dramatically tilt. This may be attributable to subsidence (and poor construction techniques), but this may also be evidence of the impact of the 1068 earthquake.

**Conclusions**

The 1992 excavations in area F have 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. It is likely that 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 (see Fig. 4). 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, more importantly, it indicates the promise of the secrets of the Large Enclosure. This neutral label was given to the building in 1987, in spite of speculations that this might have been the Congregational Mosque and Dar al-Imara. Only further excavation will confirm this hypothesis.

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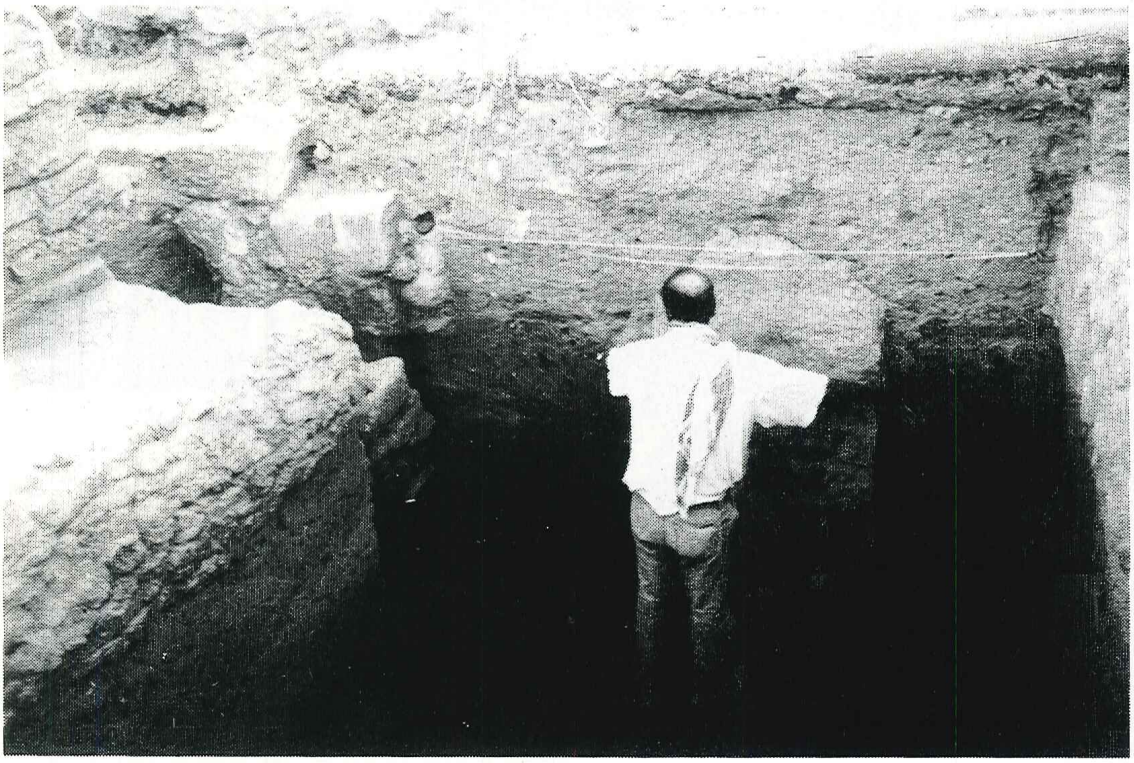
1. Area F, looking to the south.

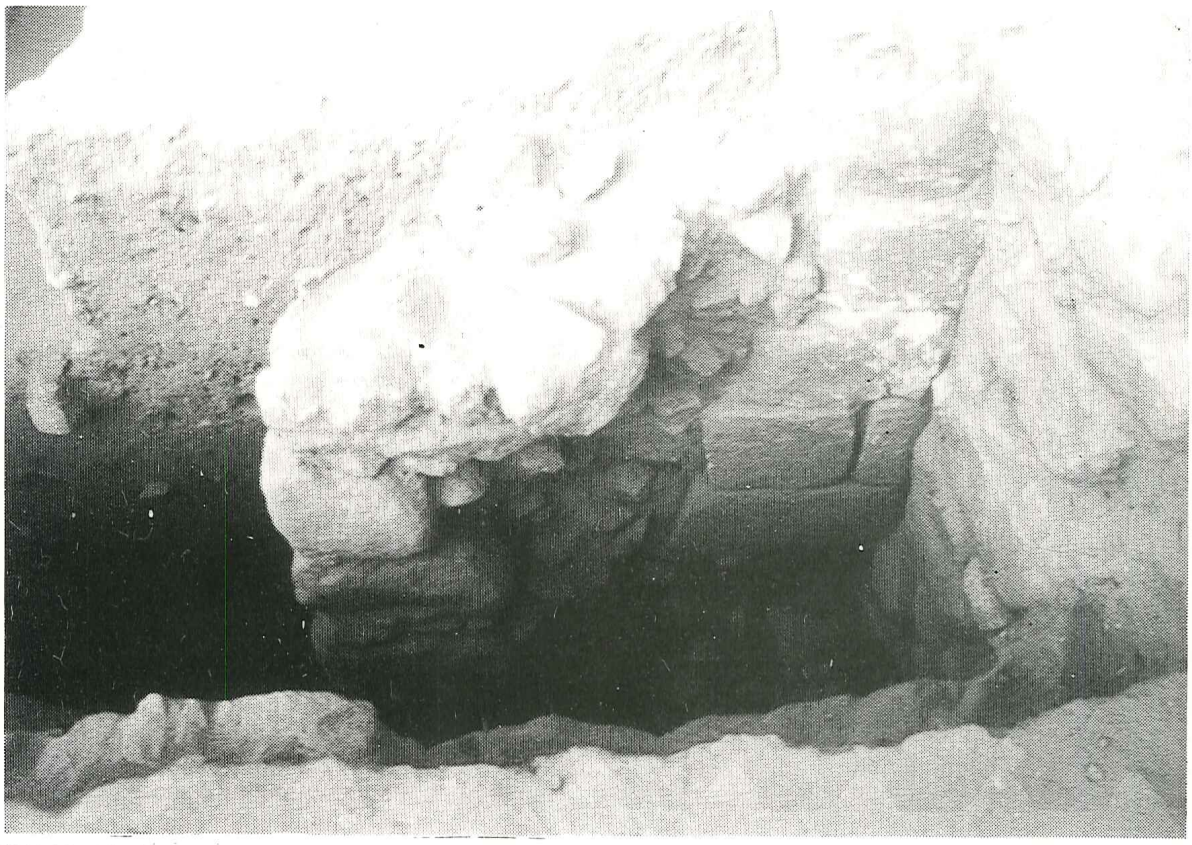
2. Area F, looking southwest. Fence and Corniche are on far left.

1. Pipeline, looking northwest. Room C in the foreground.



2. Syrian Gate, north jamb visible on left.

1. City wall with doorway into tower.



2. Wall D13c-K, displacement of northeast face.