AYLA-'AQABA IN THE LIGHT OF RECENT EXCAVATIONS

by
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The Earlier Periods

There is no doubt that Ayla-'Aqaba was the gateway of both sea-borne and overland trade to South Arabia, Egypt, and Syria throughout the ages. Evidence of occupation in the fourth millennium B.C. has been attested at a few sites in the vicinity of the city, but only al-Maqass has been excavated. This is a settlement situated in the alluvial fan of Wadi al-Yutum, around 4 km north of the coastline on the road to the international airport. Its architecture consists of large pebbles, coated with a mud and straw mortar. In addition to the flint tools, the remarkable objects that were collected during the excavation include "raw copper ore, copper pellets and corroded copper artefacts" (Khalil 1987: 483; 1992: 147). Consequently, al-Maqass was identified as a metal manufacturing workshop from the second half of the fourth millennium B.C.

At al-Mrashrash, west of al-Maqass, near the Gulf of 'Aqaba, Glueck reported two heaps of slag, and he dated the site to the Early Iron Age, although he found no pottery (Glueck 1934-1935: 48; Khalil 1992: 146). A Chalcolithic date was also postulated, but Rothenberg proposed a MB I dating (1962: 61; 1975: 23-41).

In his eagerness to locate an Early Iron Age site in the Gulf of 'Aqaba, Glueck without hesitation followed Frank who first identified Tell al-Khaleifeh with Ezion Geber (Frank 1934: 243-245; Glueck 1938: 4). The Bible connects this port with the mercantile activities of King Solomon (965-928 B.C.) in the Red Sea (I Kings 9:26-28 and 10:1-13). Gold and spices were brought from Ophir (Somalia) and Saba' (Yemen). The site about 3.5 km north-northwest of the Gulf of Aqaba was excavated from 1938 to 1940 by a team under the direction of Glueck (1938: 3-18; 1967: 8-38). It consists of a casemate fortress and a fortified enclosure. In period I there was an open courtyard, 45 x 45 m, protected by a casemate wall, with a central four-room house built with very thick walls and reinforced by a glacis. In period II, the enclosure was enlarged to 60 x 60 m and was accessible through a four-chamber gate. It was also surrounded by an inner wall with bastions and was protected by a glacis and an outer wall. This fortress was compared to the one excavated at 'Arad in the Negev. Various structures were built in period III inside the enclosure. Glueck attributed the three periods to the kings of Judah, from the time of Solomon to the reign of 'Uziah (769-733 B.C.). Several small constructions from period IV inside the older enclosure dated to the eighth-seventh century B.C.

Following a recent reexamination of the site, Pratico (1985; 1993) questioned the dating of the site to the Solomonic period and related the pottery to such well known sites as Buṣeirah and other Transjordanian settlements dated from the eighth to the sixth century B.C. Glueck assigned the so-called Negevite pottery to the tenth century B.C. and identified it as "crucibles", connected with smelting copper ore. Unfortunately, according to Pratico, only these handmade vessels were saved to determine the date of the four-room building.

Glueck later attributed this pottery to the "Nomadic and seminomadic dwellers of the Negev", but as Pratico pointed out "the Negevite pottery is not chronologically (or ethnically) diagnostic and must itself be dated by associated wheelmade forms" (Pratico 1985: 13). In conclusion, if the two architectural phases of Tell al-Khaleifeh — i.e. the casemate fortress and the fortified

enclosure — cannot be dated to the tenth century B.C., the identification of the site with Ezion Geber becomes doubtful. As noted above, the pottery, which shows many parallels with Buṣeirah, Umm al-Biyara, and Ṭawilan, is clear evidence that the site was settled by Edomites in the eighth-seventh century B.C. In this case, as Pratico expressed it (1985: 27): "Tell al-Khaleifeh must be allowed to tell its own story in its own language."

The fourth century B.C. occupation of this settlement should be related to the presence of the Nabataean tribes in the Gulf of Ayla-ʿAqaba, once they became established in the Petra area in 312 B.C., according to Agatharchides of Cnidus, as quoted by Diodorus of Sicily. The same author refers to the piratical activities of the Nabataeans in the Red Sea: "... after the kings of Alexandria had made the way of the sea navigable for their merchants, these Arabs not only attacked the shipwrecked, but fitting out pirate ships preyed on the voyagers..." (III, 43, 4-5).

The attacks can be understood in relation to the commercial competition between the Nabataean caravaneers and the Ptolemaic ship owners. It could at the same time be the response of the Petra traders to the occupation of Ayla by the Ptolemies who renamed it Berenike, according to Josephus (*Ant.* VIII, 163). To compete with the Alexandrian fleet, the Nabataeans probably developed the port of Leukè Komè, which appears as a major emporium in the first century B.C., at the time of the expedition of Aelius Gallus. Its activity continued in the first century A.D., as the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* reports: "... there is another harbor with a fort called Leukè Komè, 'white village', through which there is a way inland up to Petra to Malichus, king of the Nabataeans" (Casson 1989: 61). The Nabataean king mentioned here is Malichus II (A.D. 40-70). At that time, the port of Ayla-ʿAqaba was occupied by the Nabataeans, as can be deduced from two graffiti from Wadi Mukattab in the Sinai and Hegra-Mada'in Ṣaleḥ. The first one (CIS 1205) reads: "peace ʿAbdulga son of Wa'ilu who resides in Aylat". Both names are well attested in the Nabataean onomasticon and the verb ʿmr (resides) confirms that this merchant was a citizen of Ayla. The other short inscription commemorates Wa'ilu son of Qashru who is from Aylat (Starcky 1966: col. 912). Both graffiti are good testimony to a Nabataean presence in this port in the first century A.D. and it is likely that the kings of Petra took possession of Ayla after the death of Anthony and Cleopatra in 30 B.C.

Several suggestions have been advanced for the location of Leukè Komè. Some scholars identified it with the delta of Wadi Ḥamdh, but others such as Fabricius, Müller, and Schoff preferred Ḥawra', south of al-Wajh (Casson 1989: 143). This site has the advantage of its name meaning "white" in classical Arabic. It was the major harbour of Wadi al-Qura in the Islamic periods from the tenth to the 12th centuries and appears on the map of al-Idrisi (A.D. 1154). But Yaqut al-Ḥamawi (1955: s.v. Ḥawra') states, according to a man who visited it in 626 A.H.= A.D.1228, that it was abandoned; he also mentions the remains of a monument (*qaṣr*) built with "camel bones"! The name Ḥawra' probably inspired the existence of this legendary *qaṣr*. In this connection, it should be remembered that the caravan station of Ḥumeima in the plain of the Ḥisma of southern Jordan was called Ḥawra' or "Auara" in Greek and was founded, according to Uranius, by Aretas III (87-62 B.C.) (Oleson 1988: 165). It is perhaps not too hazardous to view the centre of Ḥumeima-Ḥawra' in the arid Ḥisma basin as the counterpart of the Nabataean harbour on the Red Sea. Recent explorations of the coast by Dr. Ali I. Hamed Ghabban have drawn attention to a Nabataean settlement at Akra, 45 km southeast

of al-Wajh. It is said to be connected by a track with the harbour of Karkama on the Red Sea. The author believes that this was the site of Nabataean Leukè Komè, mentioned by Strabo during the expedition of Aelius Gallus (Ghabban 1993: 252-253). However, Wellsted — based on his observations — favoured the oasis and harbour of 'Aynounah to the north, near the mouth of the Gulf of Ayla-'Aqaba. But a site further south and closer to Hegra-Mada'in Ṣaleḥ is probably more appropriate.

The aggressive reaction of the Nabataeans against the Ptolemaic vessels is echoed by the report of Strabo: "Then to the Aelanitic Gulf, and to the Nabataeans, a country with a large population and well supplied with pasturage (...) and these Nabataeans formerly lived a peaceful life, but later, by means of rafts, went plundering the vessels of people sailing to Egypt". Then the author mentions the island of Phocae, at the mouth of the Gulf. Some authors have identified this with the island of Tirān (see below). Strabo continues: "Near the island is a promontory, which extends to the Rock (Petra) of the Nabataean Arabians, as they are called and to the Palestine country, wither Minaeans and Gerrhaeans and all neighbouring people convey their loads of aromatics" (*Geog.* 16: 4,18). It is worth noting that a jar incised with two Minaean letters was excavated at Tell al-Khaleifeh, on the floor of a room (Fig. 1). This was originally a large ovoid jar "with short neck, collared rim and high ring base belonging to Level IV" (dated to the sixth century B.C.; Glueck 1967: 23, fig. 6.1).

It appears from a long inscription discovered at Baraqish (ancient Yathil) that the Minaean caravaneers were active in the sixth century B.C. (Robin 1991-1993: 58-63). In the Hellenistic period, after the conquest of Alexander the Great, they were established in most of the Mediterranean emporia, mainly in Egypt, Tyre, Sidon, and especially Gaza, which became their major

trading harbour. A Minaean dedication to Wadd and to gods of Ma'in was also found at Delos (RES 3570 = M 349; Robin 1991-1993: 62, n. 18). Other inscriptions from Yemen prove that the trade was in the hands of the Minaean tribe 'Amīr, based in the Jauf of Yemen (see Wissmann 1964: 81). It can be deduced from Strabo (*Geog.* 16: 4,18) that the Nabataeans acted as the middlemen who took over the spice trade from the Minaeans after the decline of their kingdom by the end of the second century B.C.

Ayla-'Aqaba in the Roman and Byzantine Periods

Following the conquest of Dacia in A.D. 105, Trajan prepared for his Parthian campaign. He reopened the old Nile channel to link the Mediterranean with the Red Sea and annexed the Nabataean kingdom. Of this crucial event, however, there is no formal evidence before A.D. 111, a date inscribed on the milestones (Bowersock 1983: 82-84). The building of the *Via Nova Traiana* from the borders of Syria to the Red Sea (*a finibus Syriae usque ad Mare Rubrum*) is believed to have started in A.D. 107, according to the papyrus Michigan 465 and 466:

"Julius Apollinarius to Julius Sabinus, his dearest father [...]. Things are going well for me. After Sarapis conducted me hither in safety, while others [...] all day long were cutting stones and doing other things, until today I endured none of these hardships" (Michigan 466, after Speidel 1977: 691-692).

The cutting of building stones refers to some engineering activities of the Roman legion (III Cyrenaica), but not necessarily to the construction of a road. It is true that the initials ΓΚΥΡ, an abbreviation of III Cyrenaica, are incised in the Siq of Petra, next to the betyle of Sabinus, son of Alexander master of festivals (*panegyriarches*) from the city of Der'a. But these initials
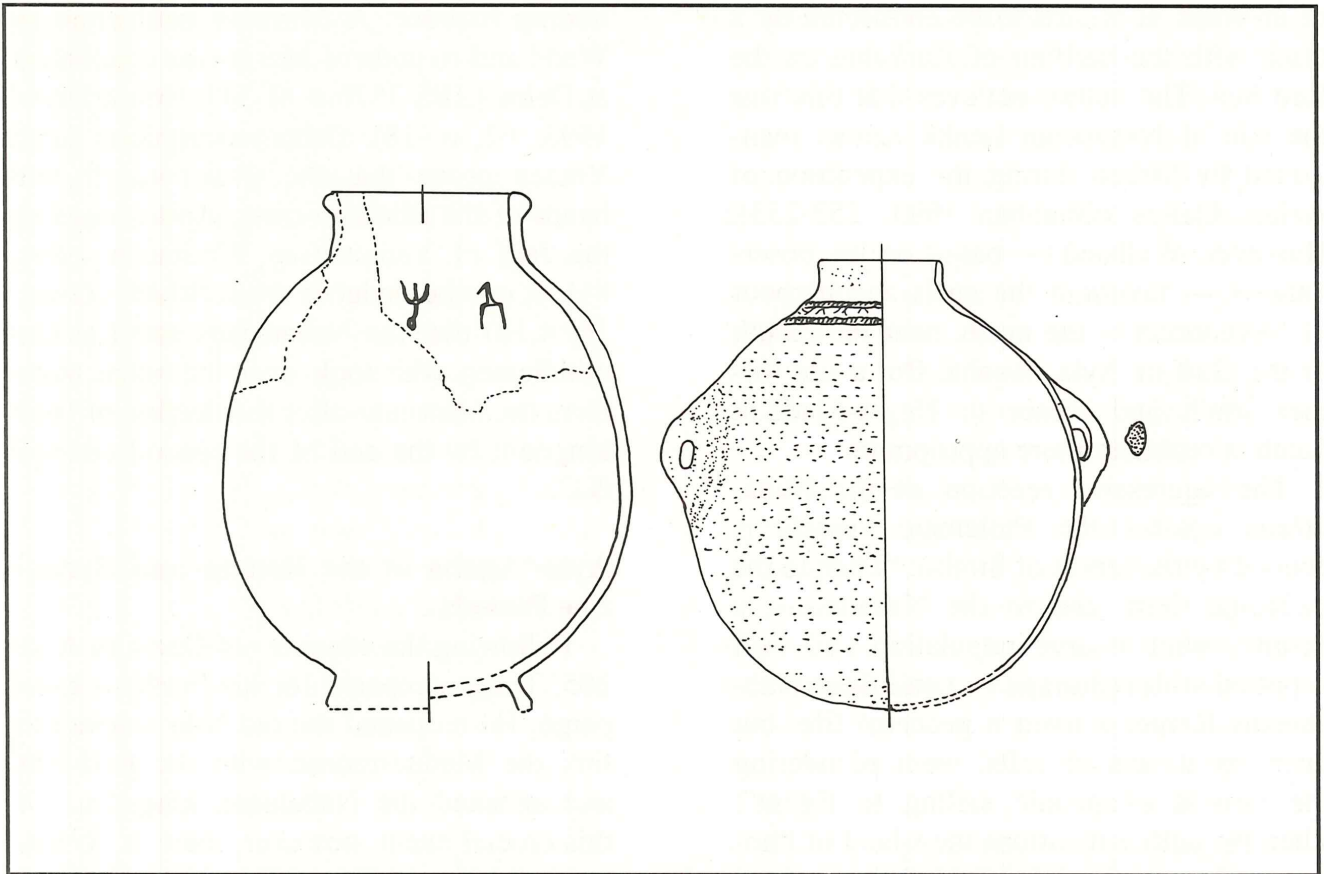
1. Tell al-Khaleifeh Level IV, jar inscribed with Minaean characters (after Glueck 1967: 22, fig. 6).

may date from the time of Hadrian, when this legion was based in Provincia Arabia (see Zayadine and Fiema 1986: 199-202). In any case, the construction of the *Via Nova* from A. D. 111 to 114 was designed as a strategic as well as an administrative and commercial project. It linked the Gulf of Ayla-'Aqaba with Bostra in the Ḥawrān, where the Roman troops concentrated before they marched on Parthia. An earlier paved road was built between Antioch and Ptolemais ('Akka) in A.D. 52-54 and was extended to Beisan-Scythopolis in A.D. 69. It probably reached Pella and Gerasa during Trajan's reign (see Taylor 1991: 235f). In addition to these goals, the task of C. Claudius Severus, the governor of Arabia, was to establish cohesion in the newly occupied province.

Curiously, there is little testimony for the long Roman presence in Ayla. The Arab chronicler al-Maqrizi (15th century) mentions a Roman arched gate (*bāb li-qayṣar ma'qūd*) at the southern entrance of the city which was reported by Laborde (1841: 126). The Legio X Fretensis was transferred to the city at the end of the third or beginning of the fourth century, probably during the reforms of Diocletian. Recent excavations by S. T. Parker (1994) in the Circular Area revealed a long wall reinforced by square towers. Its date is Byzantine. It is hoped that future investigations will bring to light the Roman fortress there (see also below).

Around the third-fourth century, Christianity appeared in Ayla; the first known bishop, Petrus, participated in the council of Nicea in 325, and bishop Beryllus attended the council of Chalcedon in 451 (Fedalto 1988: 1040-1041).

The presence of a military camp in Ayla favoured, no doubt, the cult of two soldier-saints who were martyred by the Roman emperors: SS Longinus and Theodorus. Longinus was identified with the Roman

centurion who guarded Jesus Christ on his cross. He believed in Him and was put to death. There exist two saints Theodorus: one of them was a recruit (τερον) who was a native of Amasea in Pontus and was martyred under Emperor Maximian (335-338). The second, Theodorus the general, was created, according to Meimaris (1986: 130-133), to account for the numerous legends that circulated around Theodorus the recruit. He suffered martyrdom in the time of Licinius. A church to St. Theodorus the Recruit was built in Jerusalem.) Another church was built for this saint at Gerasa by the archipriest Aeneas in 494 and a chapel in the cathedral complex of Madaba is dated 562 (Piccirillo 1993: 117).

At Ayla-'Aqaba, two capitals discovered in a ditch were displayed in the court of the police post, where Glueck noticed them in 1936 (1937-1939: 1-3 and figs. 1-2). They were brought later to the Jordan Archaeological Museum in Amman, and they have been exhibited in Europe (see Piccirillo 1986: pls. 51-52). Both capitals are decorated with relief figures: on one face is depicted an armoured soldier with a halo around his head. He is standing between a defaced eagle and a palm branch while he holds a spear in his right hand and an oval shield in his left (Fig. 2). The inscription around his head reads [Λο]γγιν[ος]. On the other face of the capital is represented an archangel, standing between an eagle and a palm tree. He holds a staff in one hand and a globe with a cross in the other (Fig. 3). The other capital represents the soldier-saint Theodorus (Θεοδορ[ος]), in the same position as the above, except that the eagle is to the left and the plant to the right (Fig. 4). The opposite face shows the standing archangel with a plant to the right and an eagle to the left (Fig. 5).

The two capitals are believed to have come from a church. In his exploration of Ayla-'Aqaba in 1936, Glueck recognised "some marble screening which probably belongs to the remains of a Byzantine church now buried under modern gardens along the seashore" (1937-1939: 1). The presence of another Christian monument in the city is now proved by a lintel that was discovered near the northeastern tower of Islamic Ayla (Fig. 6).

In October 1991, Sawsan Fakhiry, Antiquities Inspector of Aqaba, excavated a trench to probe the height of the northeastern tower and to check the occupational history of that area (Fig. 7; Fakhiry 1992). Two fragmentary walls were brought to light: wall Loc. 3 runs north-south and averages 1 m in width; another wall Loc. 4 not more than 0.30 m in width runs east-west and meets Loc. 3 at a right angle. Another fragmentary wall (Loc. 2) is of the same width. The area was occupied by ovens and hearths and dates, according to the pottery sherds, to the tenth century A.D. Along the west wall of the tower was found a lintel of fragile yellowish limestone, 131 cm long, 38 cm high and about 16 cm thick (Figs. 8 and 9). In the upper register, in the middle of the lintel, appears a Byzantine cross, framed by two zigzag lines. The lower register is framed on both sides by the same zigzag incision and decorated by a rosette in the middle within a circle and two Byzantine crosses. An abbreviated Greek inscription is distributed between the crosses and the rosette: *IC XC NI KA*. Each group of letters is underlined by incised lines, in the form of a small inverted triangle. The trace of a letter *A* that appears on the lower right angle could be the remnant of an earlier inscription.

Interpretation

Lintels decorated with the same carved design are common in Jordan and Northern Syria. At Umm ar-Raṣaṣ-Mefaʿa, an exactly similar lintel was reused as a covering slab for a grave in the complex of the St. Stephan church (Fig. 10; Piccirillo 1991: 345-346). In the church of Deir 'Ain 'Abaṭa, on

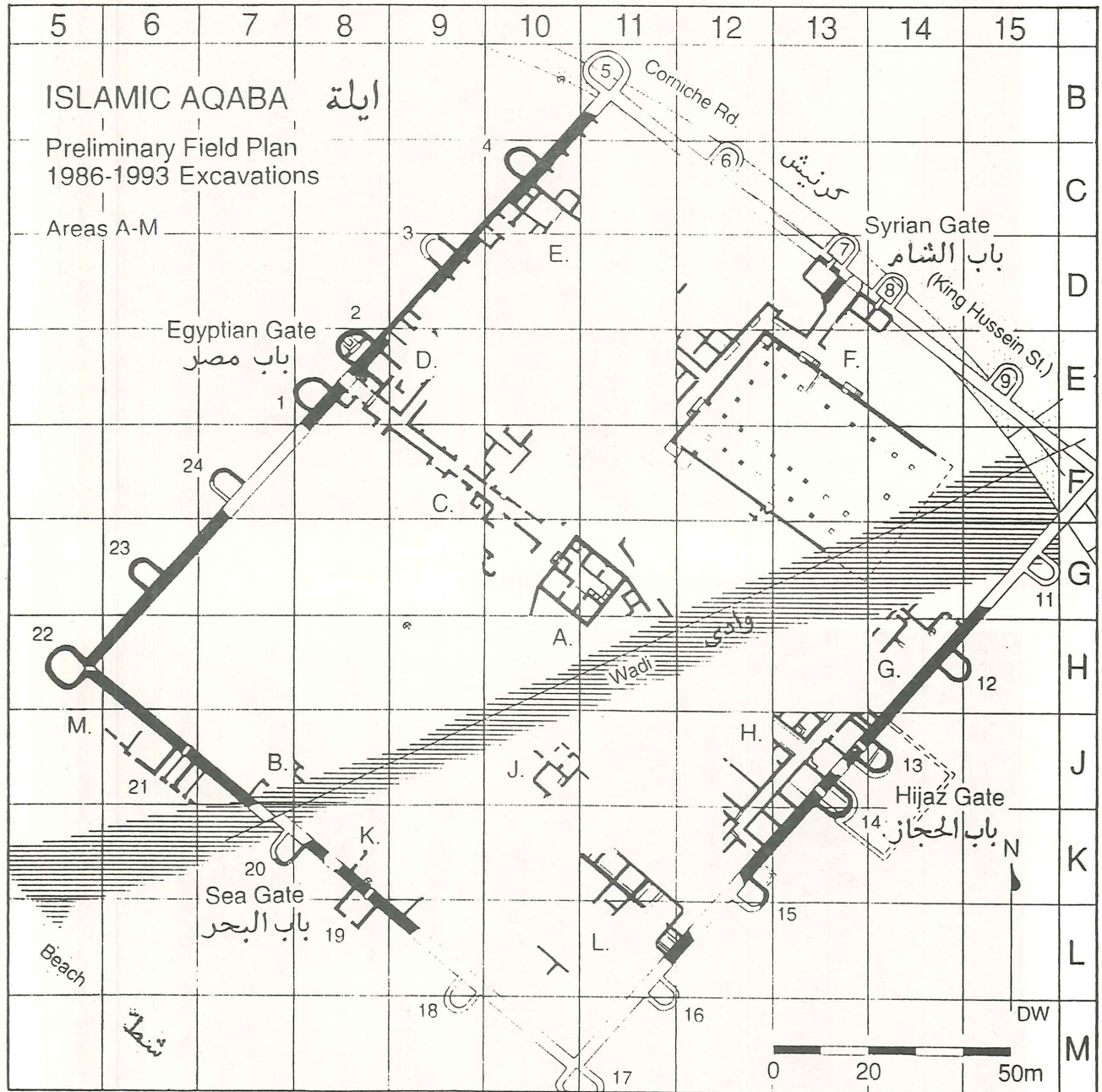2. Byzantine capital of St. Longinus found at Ayla-'Aqaba.

3. The other face of the capital in Fig. 2, representing an archangel holding a staff and a globe.

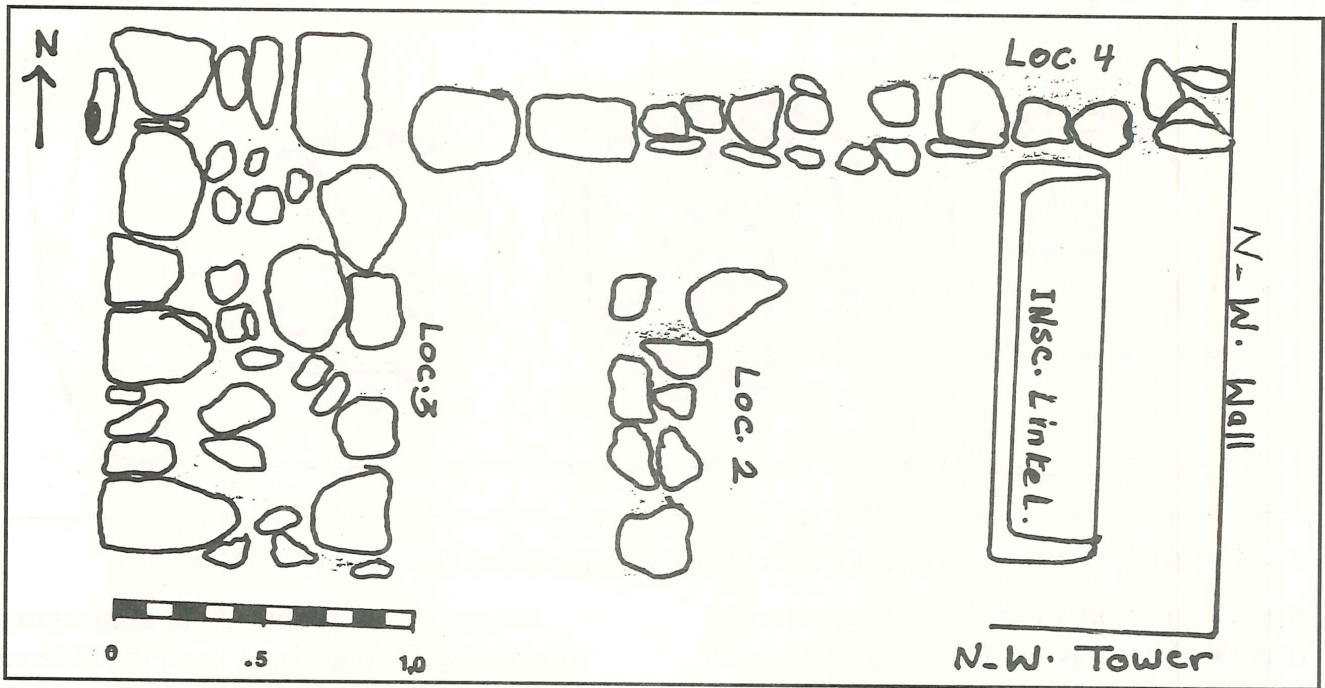4. Byzantine capital of St. Theodorus found at Ayla-'Aqaba.

5. The other face of the capital in Fig. 4, with an archangel between a palm (r.) and an eagle (l.).

6. Recent plan of the excavation at Islamic Ayla-'Aqaba (after Whitcomb 1994).
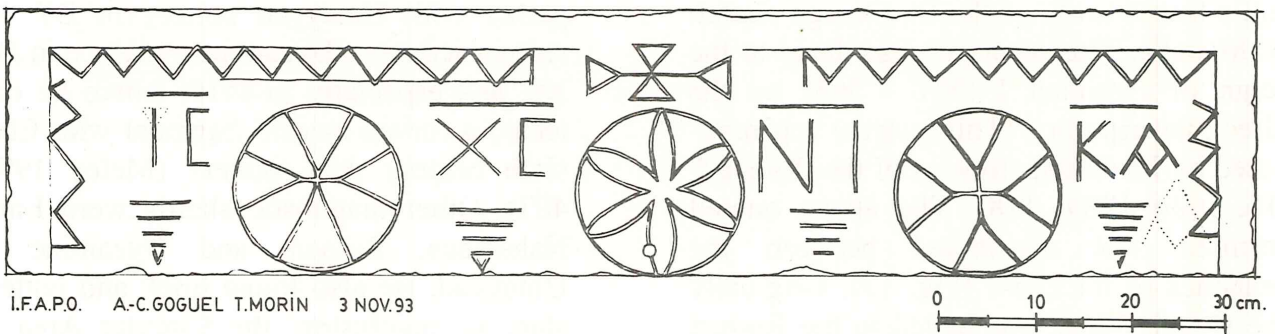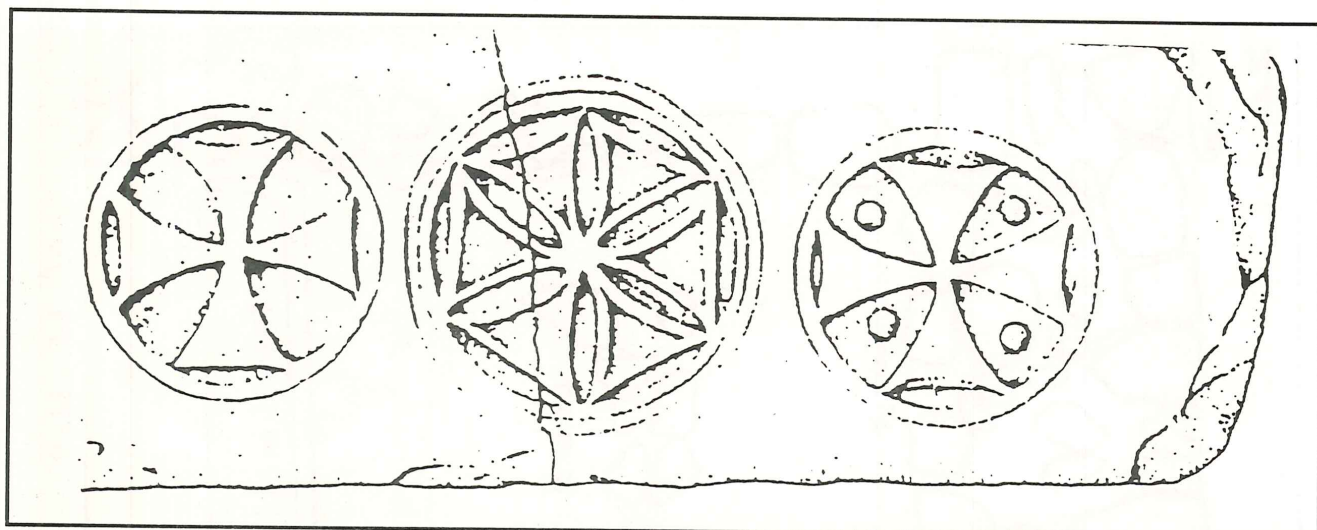
7. Plan of the excavations at the northwestern tower of Ayla-'Aqaba (after Fakhiry 1992).

8. Byzantine lintel discovered at the northwestern tower of Islamic Ayla-'Aqaba.

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9. Facsimile of the Byzantine lintel discovered at Ayla-'Aqaba (drawing by A.-C. Goguel and T. Morin, IFAPO).

10. A Byzantine lintel from Umm ar-Raṣaṣ - Kastrōn Mefaʻa (after Piccirillo 1991: 345, fig. 10).

the eastern shore of the Dead Sea, a similar decorated lintel is set above the entrance to the Cave of Lot (Politis 1993: 505). The mosaic floor in front of the cave is dated to 606, but the cave, the main focus of the veneration of Lot, was probably of earlier date, since the monastery of Lot is represented on the Madaba Mosaic Map dating from the sixth century. A similar lintel was reused as a covering stone for a grave in the monastery there (Fig. 11; Politis 1993). In North Syria, several lintels in churches dated from the fourth to the seventh centuries bear similar decoration. The best parallels are found at ed-Deir, Kharab Shams, and Kishleh; the Syrian examples, however, are more elaborate (Naccache 1992).

The same formula of the Greek inscription: "*May Jesus Christ triumph*" was first reported in a large water reservoir (30 x 20 m), situated north of the St. George church of Madaba. This reservoir was dated to the reign of Justinian I (527 - 565) by the Greek inscription: "(This cistern) was renovated by Justinian, emperor of the Romans" (Piccirillo 1989: 118). The above quoted formula was distributed between the branches of the cross (Fig. 12). Originally the slogan *NIKA* was hailed in the Roman circus to stimulate the chariot races. It appeared on Byzantine coins from the seventh to the 14th centuries (Sear 1974: 41).

As part of the Islamic Ayla excavations, directed by D. Whitcomb from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, J. L. Meloy conducted a reconnaissance project in 1990, and he recognised and plotted a wealth of archaeological sectors (Meloy 1991, Fig. 13). The sites spread in West ʻAqaba, in the Circular Area bounded by King Hussein Street on the south, al-Istiqlal street on the east and al-Hashimi street on the north and west. Sir Richard Burton visited this area in 1868 and located the ancient site of Ayla. Glueck (1937-1939: 4) reported a Nabataean site, located mid-way between ʻAqaba and Tell al-Khaleifeh. The pottery collected by Meloy ranges from the Iron Age to the Byzantine and Umayyad periods. He identified Nabataean sherds from the first century B.C/A.D. in E4 and Iron Age, and fifth-sixth century A.D. together with Umayyad pottery in D7. He recognised more Byzantine evidence in D8, K8, and especially in M10, where he collected a carved marble fragment with fifth-sixth century A.D. pottery (Meloy 1991: 407). Other diagnostic sherds were Early Nabataean, Roman, and Byzantine to Umayyad. He also found brick and pottery slag. In conclusion, the Circular Area of West Aqaba covers the Iron Age and Nabataean to Byzantine city of Ayla. The Umayyad period is also well represented.
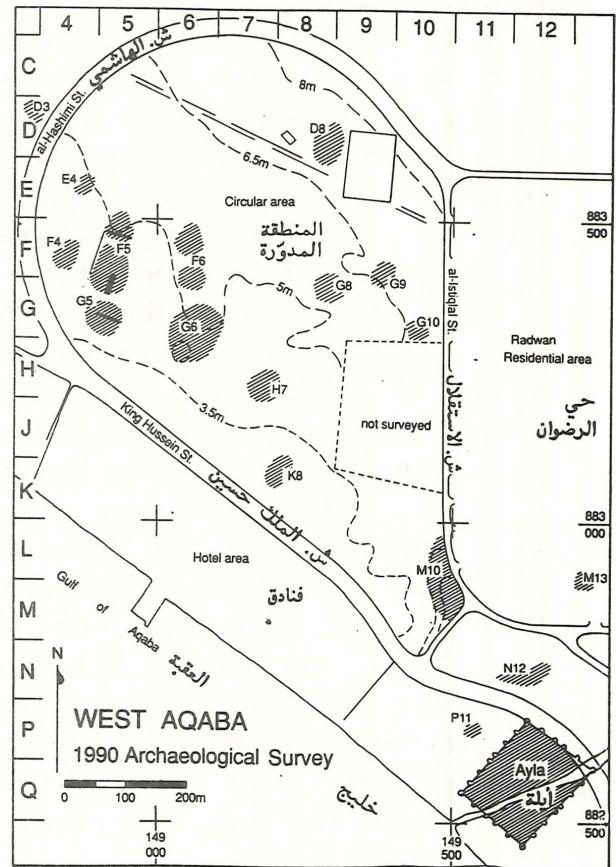
11. Lintel of the St. Lot Monastery at Deir 'Ain 'Abaṭa (photograph courtesy of K. D. Politis).

12. Greek Inscription of the Byzantine cistern at Madaba (after Piccirillo 1989: 118).

13. Plan of the Circular Area at 'Aqaba (after Meloy 1991: fig. 1).

Good evidence for the Umayyad period has been excavated as well in Islamic Ayla (Whitcomb 1989). The results of the investigations at the site, which have been condensed in a guidebook by Khouri and Whitcomb (1988), have been challenged by Knauf and Brooker in a short article (1988). In his refutation of these authors, Whitcomb (1990) demonstrated how their viewpoints "are Classical prejudices which have long since been disproven and discarded by scholars working in the periods under dis-

cussion." He convincingly showed how Islamic Ayla was founded as a *"miṣr"* or Arab military camp. That this *miṣr* adopted the plan of the Roman camps of al-Lejjun and Udhruḥ in southern Jordan does not need to be demonstrated. An eloquent site in this connection is Qasṭal al-Balqa', south of Amman. While for years the building was considered to be a Roman castellum, the research of Carlier and Morin (1984) proved that it was entirely Umayyad (see also Bacquey and Imbert 1989: 141-142). Literary sources mentioning Qastal as a residential palace of Yazid II (720-724) and his son al-Walid II (743-744) are another convincing piece of evidence.

Another important chapter in the history of Byzantine Ayla-'Aqaba in the fifth century A.D. was the adventure of Amerkesos. During the reign of Leo I (457-474), an Arab chief, Amerkesos, probably 'Amr son of Kays or Imru' al-Qays, was a Ghassanid dignitary, living in the Lakhmid Sasanian territory of Hira.[1] For some unknown reason, he decided to cross to the Roman-Byzantine side. Perhaps strife or civil war between the Lakhmids and Ghassanids led Amerkesos to change his allegiance. He belonged to the clan of Nukailos, which may be a corruption of Buqaila or Bukaila, a well known Ghassanid tribe (Shahid 1989: 62-63). According to the historiographer Malchus of Philadelphia, Amerkesos moved to that part of Arabia adjacent to Persia. Advancing from the Lower Euphrates, the Arab chief must have passed through Wadi as-Sirḥan and Dumat al-Jandal (al-Jauf) to the northern Ḥijaz and to the Red Sea coast. He occupied Iotabè, an island situated, according to Procopius, "not less than 1000 stadia (130 miles) from Ayla" (see Mayerson 1992: 2). Following Abel's comment (1938), several authors identified Iotabè with Tiran, at the mouth of the Gulf of 'Aqaba. But this analysis was seriously questioned by Aharoni who visited the island of Tiran in 1956-1957 and found no ancient remains of any kind (see Mayerson 1992: 3). He suggested the island of Jeziret Far'oun, opposite Wadi Ṭaba. It is occupied by the medieval fort of Baldwin I and Saladin (see below) and there are no remains of earlier periods evident. However, no excavation has been conducted on the site. If Tiran "must be ruled out" because of the lack of water, the difficulty of navigation through the prevailing northerly winds, and the surrounding reefs, then Jeziret Far'oun is probably the best alternative.

At any rate, the occupation of the island by Amerkesos deprived the emperor of large tax revenue. At the same time, the Arab chief occupied several villages in the Gulf of Ayla designated by Malchus of Philadelphia as "Κατα Πετραιαν" (Shahid 1989: 69), the equivalent to Arabia Petraea. He then sent Petrus the bishop of his tribe to Constantinople. Petrus accomplished his mission with skilled diplomacy and Leo I invited Amerkesos to the Byzantine capital. He travelled to Constantinople in 473 by land and was warmly received by the emperor, who invited him to his table and gave him a seat at the meeting of the senate; Amerkesos presented the emperor with a very valuable portrait of him in gold, set with precious stones, and the emperor, after giving him in return money from the public treasury and ordering all the senators to give him gifts, gave him the title of phylarch. For 25 years, Amerkesos enjoyed full autonomy in the Island of Iotabè and the Petraean territory, until he was dislodged by Romanos the duke of Palestine, in 498, during the reign of Anastasius I.

The short episode of Amerkesos may shed some light on two Byzantine inscriptions in north Petra, recently reexamined:

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1. Cf. Shahid 1989: 59-113. Sartre(1982: 115) describes Amerkesos as "le voleur devenu gendarme." The statement is unjustified in regard to the honours he received from the emperor.
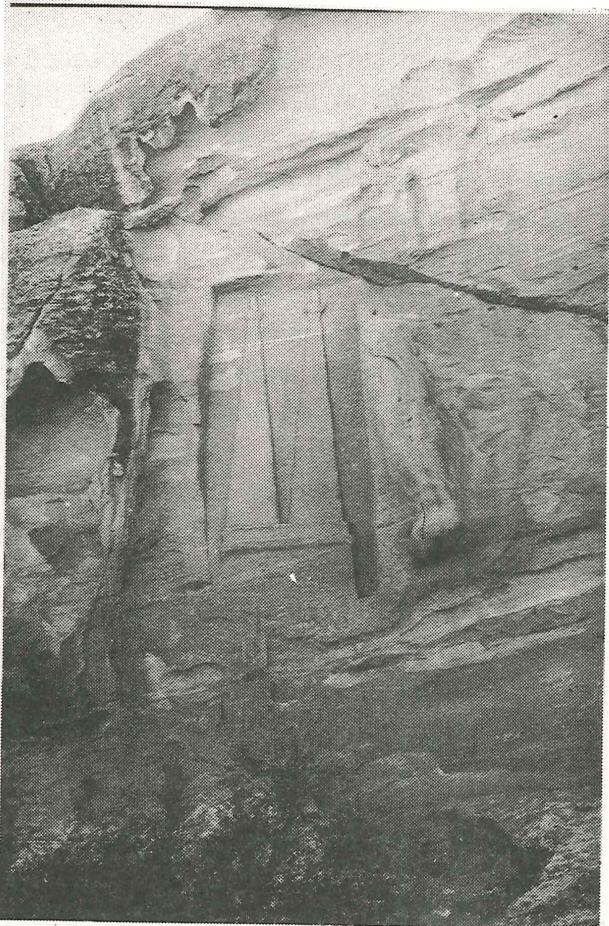
14. Two pyramids at the entrance to Siq an-Namala, north of Petra.

One of them is *painted in red*, over two obelisks at the entrance of Siq Umm al-'Alda, north-northeast of Beiḍa, by the new road to Wadi 'Arabah (Fig. 14). It is important to note that a Nabatean inscription is finely engraved in a cartouche on the pedestal of the two obelisks. This inscription is difficult to decipher because of its inaccessible position. However, a colour photograph taken by a telephoto lens suggests it is an epitaph. A shaft tomb with two chambers dug to the left of the obelisks confirms this assumption.

Apparently, the Greek inscription is not related to the obelisks and reads:

ΤΑΠΑΝΤΑΝΙΡΟΥΕΠΙΤΡΟΠΟΥ
ΣΠΟΥΔΗ
ΕΤΟΥΣΤΙ

Altogether by the zeal of Niros, the epitrope. Year 310.

Commentary

Musil (1908: 235) who first published this inscription, calculated the date according to the Seleucid era (312 B.C.) and obtained the date 2 B.C. But this era has not been attested in southern Jordan. M. Sartre reads Π instead of ΤΙ.[2] But this correction is not justified. The epitrope was a praeses or financial procurator (see Mason 1974: 49-50, 142), and I see no reason why it is "improbable" at a later period (Sartre 1993: 61-62). The use of "σπουδη" is characteristic of the Byzantine period, since it appears in most of the sixth century dedications of churches. It probably refers to hydraulic works spread all over Siq Umm al-'Alda (see Zayadine 1993: 92-94), since this caravan pass is devoid of any perennial water resource.

The reign of Theodosius ll (402-450) and especially of his wife Eudocia who left Constantinople and settled in Jerusalem was a period of economic and cultural prosperity in the East, because of the peace concluded with the Persians (Abel 1952: 335-337). In 447, Bishop Jason converted the Urn Tomb in Petra into a church, and the newly excavated basilica with beautiful mosaics probably dates to the same period (or slightly later, see Schick *et al.* 1993: 55-61). Another long inscription in Wadi Sleisel also could date to the reign of Theodosius II (Zayadine 1992: 220):

ΕΝΕΙΟΡΟΤΩΠΩ[– – –
ΜΝΗΘΗΑΒΔΟΟΒΔΑΣΑ ΒΔ
ΟΟΒΔΟΥΤΩΝΑΠΟΓΗΝΟΜΕΝΟΥΜΑ
ΓΙΤΡΟΥΟΠΛΙΤΩΤΩΝΕΝΤΩΜ.Δ
ΑΜΕΤΑΞΥΣΑΜΑΡΩΚΑΙΜΨ Ι
ΝΑΜΛΑΕΙ

1) In this holy place...
2) may Obdoobodas son of

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2. Sartre 1993: 60-61. M. Sartre, who visited the site, failed to notice that the inscription of Niros the epitrope is painted in large red characters and not engraved as he notes on p. 61.

2) Obdoobodas be remembered,

3) he who is (a soldier) of the ex-ma-

4) gister of the hoplites, (based at) M...da.

5) between Samar and MPSI.

6) Namlaè.

Commentary

L. 2. Abdoobodas, "the servant of Obodas", is a theophoric name, referring to the deified king Obodas I (96-85 B.C.). He bears the same name as his father, a common practice among the Nabataeans.

L. 3-4: *ex-magi(s)ter hoplitôn:* The *magister hoplitôn* or *magister pedidum* was the commander of the infantry in the Roman and Byzantine armies. Under Constantine the Great, only two *magistri* were nominated, one for the infantry, the other for the cavalry. They were raised to five in the time of Theodosius I (379-385), and to six under Justinian I (527-565) (see Guilland 1976: 135).

It is unlikely that a high ranking commander of the Byzantine army resided in Petra. The probably deceased *magister hoplitôn* of this inscription refers in that case to a local officer who commanded a garrison controlling the major passes of the city. According to lines 5 and 6, these are 1) *Samaros* to be identified with the pass of Jibal Sumr aṭ-Ṭayibeh, at the foot of Naqab ar-Rubaʻi, leading to the southern foot of Jabal Harun and 2) Namlaè or Siq an-Namala, north of Petra, which ascends from Wadi ʻArabah and Bir Madhkur to Beiḍa. In the last century this was the favoured access to Petra from the west (Palestine and the Negev) because it allowed visitors to enter the city through the attractive gorge of the Siq. Siq an-Namala was described by Robinson in 1858 as "... the long wild romantic pass of Nemela (*sic*)" (p. 123). In a recent article, I assumed that Abdoobodas was a militiaman who was under the command of an ex-magister peditum, and dated the inscription to the fifth century A.D. (Zayadine 1993: 90).

Sartre was surprised by the presence of this inscription in a remote area of Petra, since he felt the city was "abandoned" by then (1993: 66). But there are signs of revival under Theodosius II, as indicated above, and there is no reason to believe the region was uninhabited. The Wadi Sleisel inscription can be explained better in the political context of the fifth century. If Amerkesos seized the Island of Iotabè as indicated above and controlled several villages in Arabia Petraea, then the presence of a native Nabataean chief such as Obdoobodas to protect two major passes north of Petra and collect toll from the caravans can be easily understood. He was previously under the command of a Byzantine *magister peditum* but was now probably acting on behalf of his tribe or his city.

The End of Byzantine Rule and the Arab Conquest

From 622 to 628, the Byzantine emperor Heraclius was engaged in an exhausting but successful campaign against the Sasanians (Vasiliev 1984: 194-198). Chosroes was killed and the Byzantine emperor reached a peace agreement with his successor Kawad Sheroe. During the Persian invasion, Jerusalem and particularly the Church of the Holy Sepulchre suffered destruction and looting by the invading armies, encouraged by the Jews. But there is no clear evidence of destruction in Transjordan, except perhaps for the "Burnt Palace" in Madaba (Piccirillo 1989: 120-128). The fire that destroyed the monument might be attributable to the Persians, although there is no positive archaeological link with the invaders. On the other hand, the churches of St. Stephan at Riḥab, dated 620 and St. Peter (624), in addition to the church of St. George at Samah (624-625) show that the area was not adversely affected by the Sasanian occupation. However, the Byzantine involvement in southern Jordan lapsed at the time: Far-

wa ibn 'Amr al-Judhâmi, an Arab chief of the Ma'an region, converted to Islam, probably during the Sasanian invasion and he may have hosted the Muslim troops in that area for two nights on their way to Moab (Schick 1992: 112). But the Byzantines killed him and were able to reorganise the defense of southern Jordan and defeat the first Muslim penetration at Mu'ta, in 8 A.H./September A.D. 629, with the assistance of the local Arabs. The three leaders of the expedition, Zayd ibn al-Ḥaritha, Ja'far ibn Abi Ṭalib, the cousin of the Prophet, and 'Abdallah ibn Rawaḥa were killed in the encounter. Heraclius and his wife Martina arrived in Jerusalem on March 21st, 630, to return the relics of the Holy Cross. Probably in the fall of the same year (Kaegi 1992: 67; see also al-Ya'qubi n.d.: 67), the Prophet Mohammed led an expedition to Tabuk to avenge the defeat at Mu'ta, and to probe the Byzantine forces in the north. Al-Jarba', Udhruḥ, and Ayla, in the person of its bishop Yuḥanna ibn Ru'ba, made a treaty with him (al-Ya'qubi n.d.: 67-68; 'Abbas 1990: 211-216). The bishop arranged for the surrender of Ayla and agreed to pay a poll tax of 300 dinars, one dinar per adult. This figure is not representative of the city's inhabitants for the exact number of population was certainly reduced to pay the minimum taxes. At any rate, the treaty included protection for the commercial activities: "... This is a guarantee from God and Muḥammed the Prophet, the Apostle of God to Yuḥanna ibn Ru'ba and the people of Ayla for their ships and their caravans by land and sea ..." (Guillaume 1955: 607). At the same time, the treaty secured free passage to the Muslim troops in the territory of Ayla-'Aqaba. As early as 634, they penetrated into Wadi 'Arabah and defeated the Byzantine army at Dathin, near Gaza and at Ajnadayn. Thus the way was open for the Arab Muslims to put an end to Byzantine rule in Syria in 636-638 after the Battle of Yarmuk.

According to al-Ṭabari, 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭab passed through Ayla on his way to Syria in 638. He gave the bishop a white cotton shirt that was torn and told him to wash and patch it. The bishop did so and sewed another one like it and brought it to 'Umar. But the caliph preferred his old shirt and said: "Of the two this one absorbs sweat better" (al-Ṭabari 1963: 1.2522-23). The story might be a literary topos to demonstrate the frugality of 'Umar and official Christian courtesy towards the caliph. In any case it shows the amicable relations between the Muslims and the native Arab Christians at the beginning of the conquest. The construction of churches during this period at Riḥab and Khirbat as-Samra (A.D. 635) clearly demonstrates that the Christians were not affected by the political events and did not suffer any harm. The 11th century Arab geographer al-Bakri refers to a Christian monastery, Dayr al-Qunfudh, at Ayla that survived until the Umayyad period. He even states that al-Qunfudh was the name of Ayla. But Qunfudh was a clan of the Bali tribe and there is no evidence that it gave its name to the city (Shahid 1989: 309 and n. 371).

Ayla prospered under the Orthodox caliphs (al-Rashidun). The foundation of the port is attributed to the Umayyad caliph 'Uthman ibn 'Affan (ca. A.D. 650). The mercantile activities of this caliph are well known; he is believed to be the founder of the ports of al-Baṣra and Jidda (Whitcomb 1989: 174 and n. 28). As indicated above, Ayla was established in the Early Islamic period as a *miṣr*, "a response to a new set of concepts of what a town should be" (Whitcomb 1989: 176). By its dimensions (165 x 140 m), Ayla could be compared to the Umayyad mansions in the *badiya*, such as Qaṣr aṭ-Ṭuba in Jordan, a rectangular enclosure (140.50 m by 72.85 m), which is reinforced by semi-circular towers. Mushatta is a square palace of 140 by 140 m while the large enclosure at Qaṣr al-Ḥayr East is

about 167 m on one side. These residences were designated as medina in the Umayyad period, meaning according to Grabar (1978: 80): "a built-up unit with a limited settlement and a restricted number of specific functions." In other terms the medina was mainly a private residential quarter of the Umayyad princes. Without any doubt, there are Umayyad architectural remains at Ayla. The three metre wide arch of the northwest city gate, Bab Miṣr, was attributed to the Umayyads or Abbasids (Whitcomb 1989: 168). The Qur'anic *Ayat al-Kursi* (Throne Verse) that surmounted this gate was probably from the Abbasid period, based on paleographic grounds. Under the Fatimids, the arch was narrowed and shops were placed along the street leading to the central pavilion.

This residential building at the intersection of the axial streets is supplied with a central courtyard and a reception hall (*iwan*), flanked by two rooms, the southwestern rooms being decorated with frescoes; a small bath is lodged in the northwest corner of the building. The pavilion was probably an official residence similar to the *dar al-imara* in the northern sector of the Amman Citadel (Olávarri-Goicoechea 1985: 47ff; Almagro-Gorbea 1983: 156ff). It was dated to the Abbasid or Fatimid period (10th-11th century). However, earlier arches engaged in the southeast and southwest walls were dated by a fine plaster floor and the materials beneath it to the Umayyad period (650-800) (Whitcomb 1989: 167).

A street 2.5 m wide connects the central pavilion with a large enclosure (30 x 40 m) and with the Syrian Gate (Bab ash-Sham) (Fig. 6). This building (Area F) is surrounded by a solid wall of unshaped rubble stones. At least three entrance platforms with stairways lead into the monument, which puzzled the excavators until the 1993 season, when a peristyle courtyard was uncovered (Whitcomb 1994: 2ff). An additional row of columns was revealed along the southwestern side. It was clear that a covered hall was brought to light. More exciting was the discovery of a niche, originally coated with glass mosaics in the southwestern wall. Was this a miḥrab? Dr. Whitcomb is cautious, because the niche is not oriented due south. He quotes the examples of mihrabs at Wasit in southern Iraq and at Qal'at 'Ana on the Euphrates, famous for their mihrabs not oriented to the *qibla*. In that case the building recently uncovered at Ayla is most likely the *masjid al-jami'* or congregational mosque. The building that encroaches on the axial street was dated to the early Abbasid period (phase B, A.D. 750-850). Deep soundings revealed earlier foundations of mudbrick and stone walls, extending into the wadi bed. Thus, it has been suggested that the wadi was in fact a geological fault, the result of the 1068 earthquake (Whitcomb 1994: 2). In another trench, the sounding reached four metres, to below the table water. Foundations of red and white sandstone above the water level were found and were covered by 3.5 m of Umayyad deposit. They suggest an early Islamic building originally built by 'Uthman ibn 'Affan around 650 (Whitcomb 1994: 2ff). It is hoped that future excavation will elucidate the nature and the precise dating of the large enclosure.

Overland Tracks in the Medieval Period

It should be remembered that the port of Ayla-'Aqaba was the crossroads of several land routes. As early as the first century B.C. Strabo mentions a land track between Leukè Komè, Ayla, and Egypt traversed by camel traders "in such numbers of men and camels that they differ in no respect from an army" (*Geog.* 16, 4, 23). This track in southern Sinai is called today *Darb ash-Shi'wi,* which passes north of the Isle de Graye (Jaziret Fir'oun) by Wadi Ṭaba and Ṭweibeh, crosses by Bir ath-Themed and Qal'at al-Jindi to reach Suez, ancient Cle-

opatris. This road is recorded on the *Peutinger Table* and was followed in 1184 by Saladin on his way to besiege Karak in Moab (Clermont-Ganneau 1906). The second important route is the *Darb al-Ḥajj*, which reaches Suez via Nikhl where the Mamluks established water reservoirs (Tamari 1982). A third route, *Darb al-Ghazza* or Gaza road, starting at Ayla reached the Mediterranean port via Kantillet 'Ajrud in the Sinai and Rhinocolura - al-'Arish. The role of Ayla as a trading centre and a meeting place for the pilgrimage was well attested by the Arab geographers. Al-Muqaddisi describes the city in the tenth century A.D. as "Great in prosperity with its palms and fish; it is the port of Palestine and the storehouse of the Ḥijâz." (Le Strange 1890: 549; Khouri and Whitcomb 1989: 1).

During the Crusades, Baldwin I occupied the Gulf of Eylim (Ayla) in 1116, and built a citadel on the Isle de Graye (Jaziret Fir'oun). The objective of the Franks was to control a strategic and commercial road between Cairo and Damascus since the Fatimids of Egypt opened and developed the pass of Ayla ('Aqabat Ayla) in the ninth century (Prawer 1975: 298). When the Latin Kingdom captured Palestine and occupied the coast, the pilgrimage routes to the holy cities of Islam from Africa and Syria had to change. The attempts of Renaud de Châtillon to organise naval expeditions from Ayla and attack Medina and Mekka are well known. The Muslim world was deeply alarmed by the piratical destruction of vessels in the Red Sea, and Saladin's recapture of Ayla and the Isle de Graye in 1170 was a serious defeat to the expansion of the Latin Kingdom, before its final col-

lapse at Ḥiṭṭin in 1187 (Prawer 1975: 610).

The Mamluks initiated engineering projects to improve *Naqb al-'Aqaba* under al-Naṣṣer Muḥammad in 1319 and 1331, and in the time of Qansawh al-Ghuri in 1508 (Zayadine 1985: 160). This sultan was engaged in fighting the Portuguese penetration into the Arabian waterways, mainly in the Strait of Hormuz in the Arabian Gulf (Ghawanmeh 1984: 85). He built Khan al-'Aqaba to accommodate the pilgrims. At the same time he constructed forts at Uzlum, 'Ajrud, and Nikhl in the Sinai and fortified Jedda (Ghawanmeh 1984: 87-89). On his return from an expedition against the Portuguese fleet he was defeated by the Ottomans at Marj Dabiq in 1516. The Ottomans continued the policy of the Mamluks in fortifying the Red Sea ports and renovated the khan of 'Aqaba under the Sultan Murad III in A.D. 1587. Because of its economic and strategic importance, Ayla-'Aqaba was directly administered by Cairo in the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. When de Laborde and Linant visited the city in 1828, the governor of the citadel was appointed by the sultan of Egypt, Muhammed 'Ali (Laborde 1830: 45).

During the Arab Revolt, the forces of Faisal ibn al-Hussein occupied 'Aqaba in August 1917. The Sherif Hussein resided in the house built for him for six months in 1924-1925, before he was exiled to Cyprus. After that date, the port was ceded by Prince 'Ali ibn al-Hussein to his brother 'Abdallah, the Amir of Transjordan.

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