

A STREET AND THE BEACH AT AYLA: THE FALL SEASON OF EXCAVATIONS AT 'AQABA, 1992

by
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The second season of excavations during the year 1992 took place during the month of October.¹ The Spring season had a "practical purpose", the preparation of the area of the Syrian Gate for the building of the Ayla Orientation Center.² Likewise, the Fall season was intended as "site enhancement", embellishment of the ruins as a tourist monument. Two projects were selected for these visual goals, the clearance of an entire street and the clearance of the city wall above the beach. Happily, both projects have resulted in a clearer impression of the city ruins for the visitor, while providing dramatic new information on the archaeological history of Ayla.

The Egyptian Street

The Egyptian Street takes its name from the Egyptian Gate, that is, the northwestern gate of the city. The street was one of the four axial thoroughfares connecting the gates with the Central Pavilion; it presents the longest street uninterrupted by the wadi (Fig. 1). The Egyptian Gate and the inner

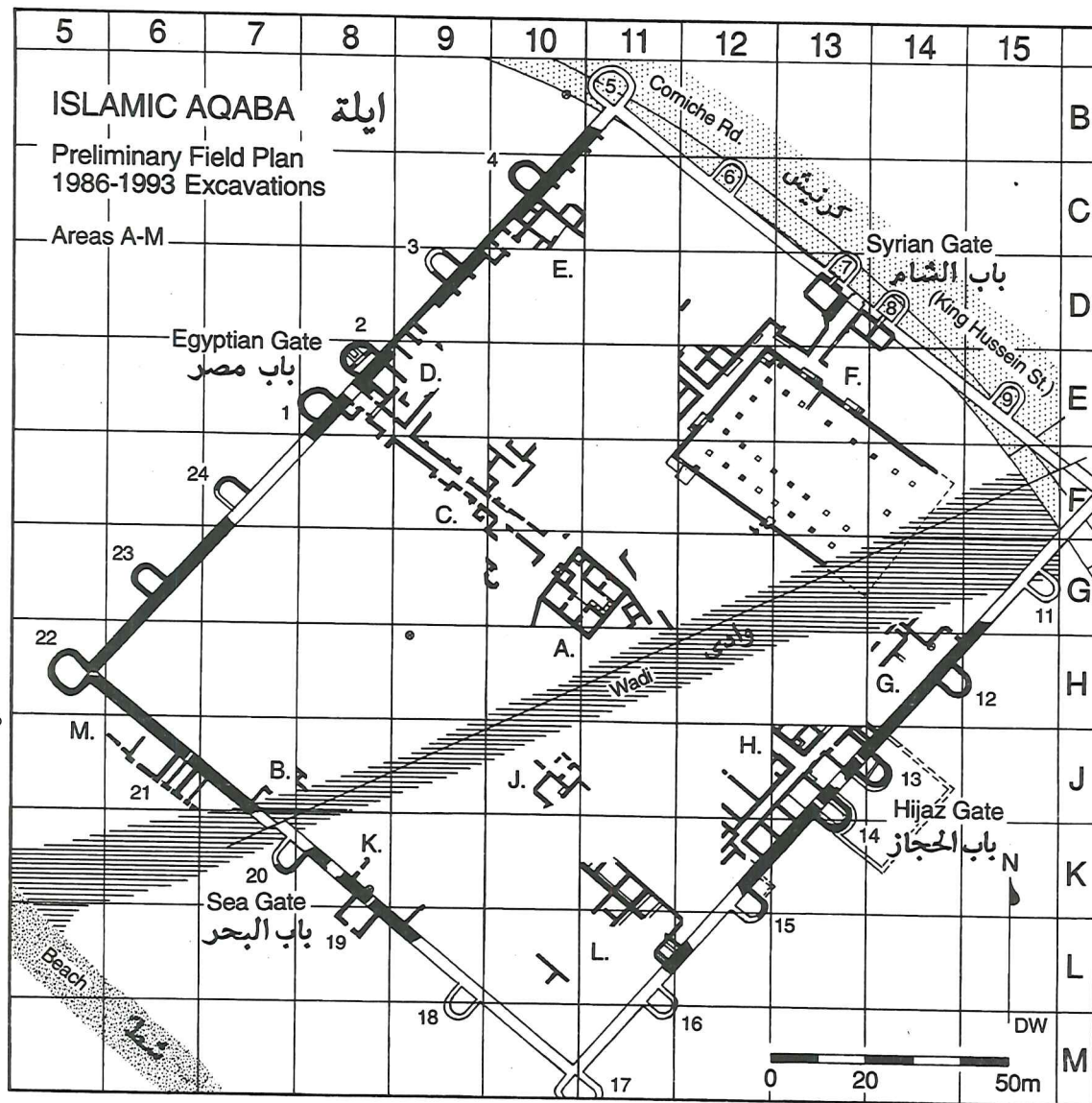
arch were architectural elements of the original townplan, probably forming a vestibule; this space was reorganized as part of the street in the eighth century with a series of small shops continuing through and to the exterior of the Egyptian Gate.³ The inner arch of the vestibule was discovered in 1987 (E8d-1) and its southeastern side excavated as part of a reconstruction of this arch in 1989 (E8d-31 ... 35; Fig. 2). This stratigraphic sequence shows, beneath a recent sand deposit (to be discussed below), refuse amidst stone fall (E8d-31, 32), generally undifferentiated from lower depositions on the latest street level (E8d-33, 34, 35; Fig. 3, section a-b).⁴ Much of this refuse and stone fall may be associated with the 1068 earthquake, making the materials discovered associable with phases D (950-1050) and E (1050-1100) in the history of the site (see Table 1).

The beginning of the Egyptian Street, within the inner arch, had radically different histories on either side (Figs. 1 and 3). On the south side was another smaller street

1. The season lasted from October 4 to 26, 1992, a total of 18 days of excavation. Staff consisted of four archaeologists and a surveyor; about 27 workers were employed. The excavation benefited from the assistance of Sausan Fakhury and Mohammad Frahat of the Department of Antiquities, 'Aqaba. The success of this season was due to the assistance of Dr. Safwan Tell, then Director-General of Antiquities. Funding was provided from a USAID grant administered through ACOR and from The Oriental Institute, University of Chicago. A special debt of appreciation goes to Drs. Pierre and Patricia Bikai of the American Center of Oriental Research. This season is denoted 1992B in the excavation records.
2. The Preliminary Report for this Spring season, 1992, has been published; see D. Whitcomb, The

Fourth gate at Ayla: A Report on the 1992 Excavations at 'Aqaba, *ADAJ* 37 (1993), 533-547.

3. Discussion of this complex area will be considered in *The Gates of Ayla* (in preparation). For preliminary descriptions, see D. Whitcomb, Excavations in 'Aqaba, First Preliminary Report, *ADAJ* 31 (1987): 259-260.
4. This excavation was conducted by Andrea Lane, under the direction of John Meloy. This reconstruction by Hussein Qandil of the Department of Antiquities exactly duplicated the arch as it was found and, being made of cement, can now carry the weight of a man and loaded wheelbarrow, as we had occasion to discover. The length of the street was accomplished by Robin Brown with the assistance of Edouard Lagro.



1. Plan of the excavations at 'Aqaba from 1986 through 1993.

leading toward the southwest. This was poorly preserved due to modern digging -- in fact we had almost two meters of wind-blown sand mixed with distinctive artifacts, port bottles and porcelain crockery from the officers' mess of the British Army camp (E9c-8). Happily, this modern disturbance was limited in area. The northern side of the street had a very fine building, which was flanked by another smaller street leading toward the northeast. The building had a large doorway, but its chief characteristic

was the use of alternating courses of black basalt and white limestone for its decorative façade (Fig. 3, section b-c). The soft limestone had a number of scratched graffiti, including several "stars of Solomon"; this indicates that building is preserved at least to shoulder height and probably belongs to the early Abbasid period (phase B; 750-850).

The excavations along the Egyptian Street cleared an average of 1.5m depth, revealing the latest buildings fronting the street. Two large residences are indicated

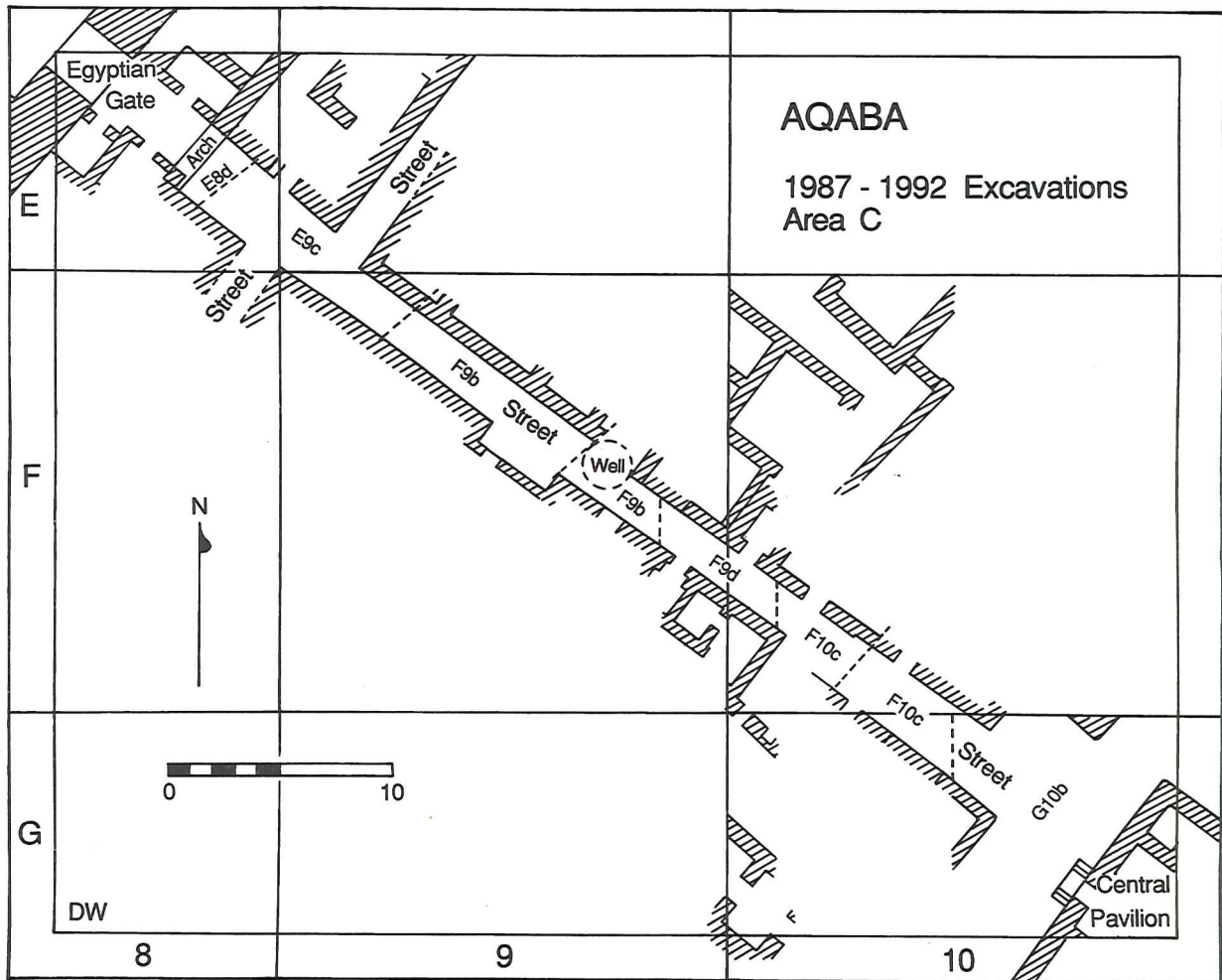
Table 1. Locus matrix from area C (the Egyptian Street).

Area C, 1992		E8d	E9c	F9b	F9d	F10c	G10b
E	1 31 32	1 2 excavated in 1987	1 8 9 10	1 2	1 2 4 8	1 3 5 6	1 2
D	34 35	33	11	9			9 excavated in 1987
C	excavated in 1989						
B	12						
A	17						
Phases	18 excavated in 1987						

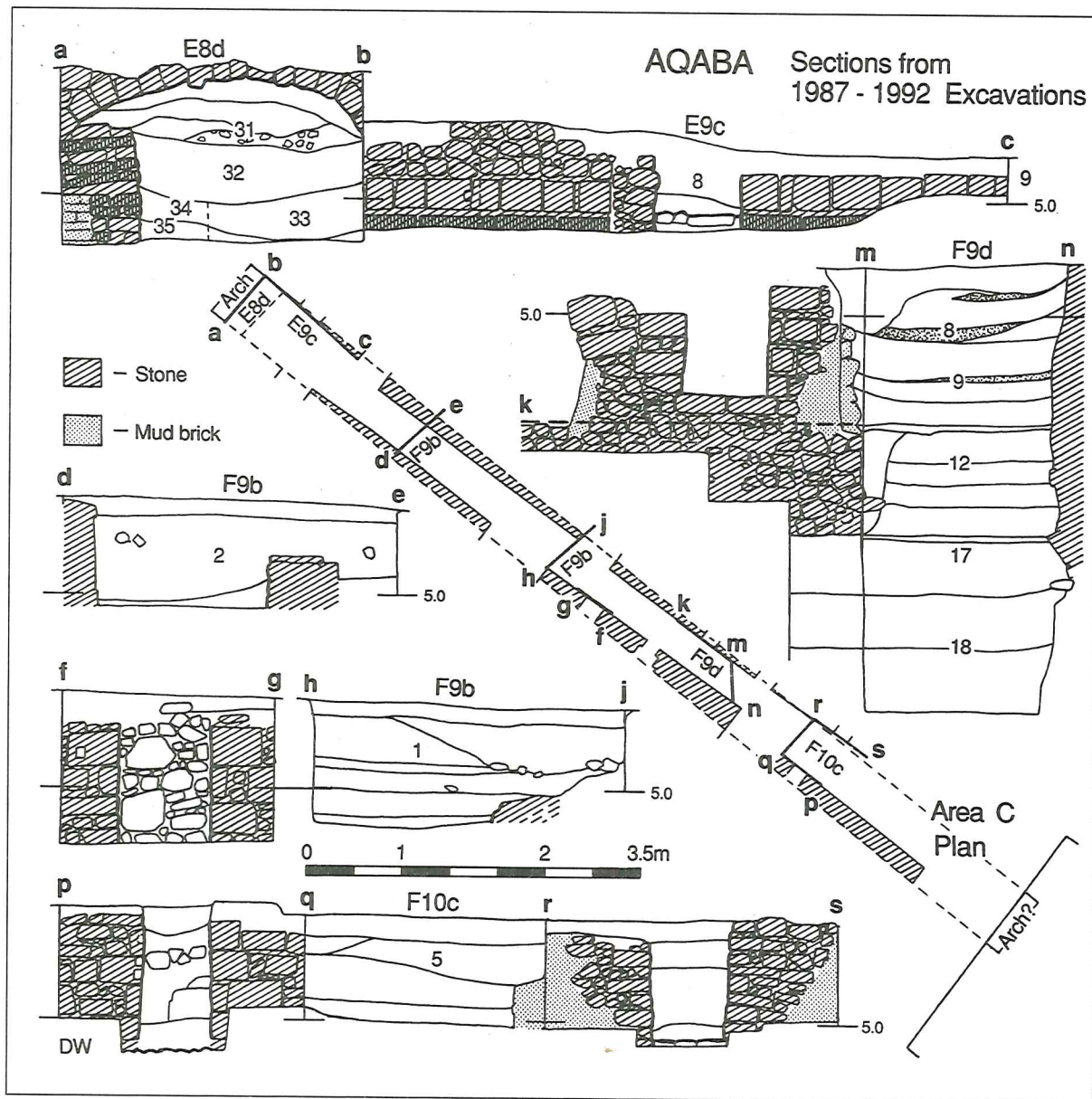
Phases	
E	1050 - 1100
D	950 - 1050
C	850 - 950
B	750 - 850
A	650 - 750

by doorways on the south side of the street and one on the north side (all in area F9b). Unfortunately a modern well obscured what might have been another side street. The general character of these structures suggests residential units of the late Abbasid or Fatimid periods. A deep probe conducted in 1987 (Fig. 3, section m-n) revealed that the original Umayyad street was much wider, the successive rebuildings of structures along the street tended to encroach on the street. Successive rebuilding also seems to have shifted the alignment of the street slightly, taking the line between the two arches as the original street line (Fig. 3).

In general, the quality of the architecture of this latest period declines as one moves



2. General plan of excavations along the Egyptian street (Area C).



3. Plan of the Egyptian street with sections.

east of the Egyptian Gate, with increasing construction in small cobbles and mud brick as one approaches the center of the city. More frequent doorways suggest either smaller houses or shops (in F10c).

There also seems to be a slight difference in quality of construction on the northeast and southwest walls facing the street; the southern wall is more often made of stone, possibly due to the corrosive effects of the prevailing northerly winds.

It is now possible to walk down the late

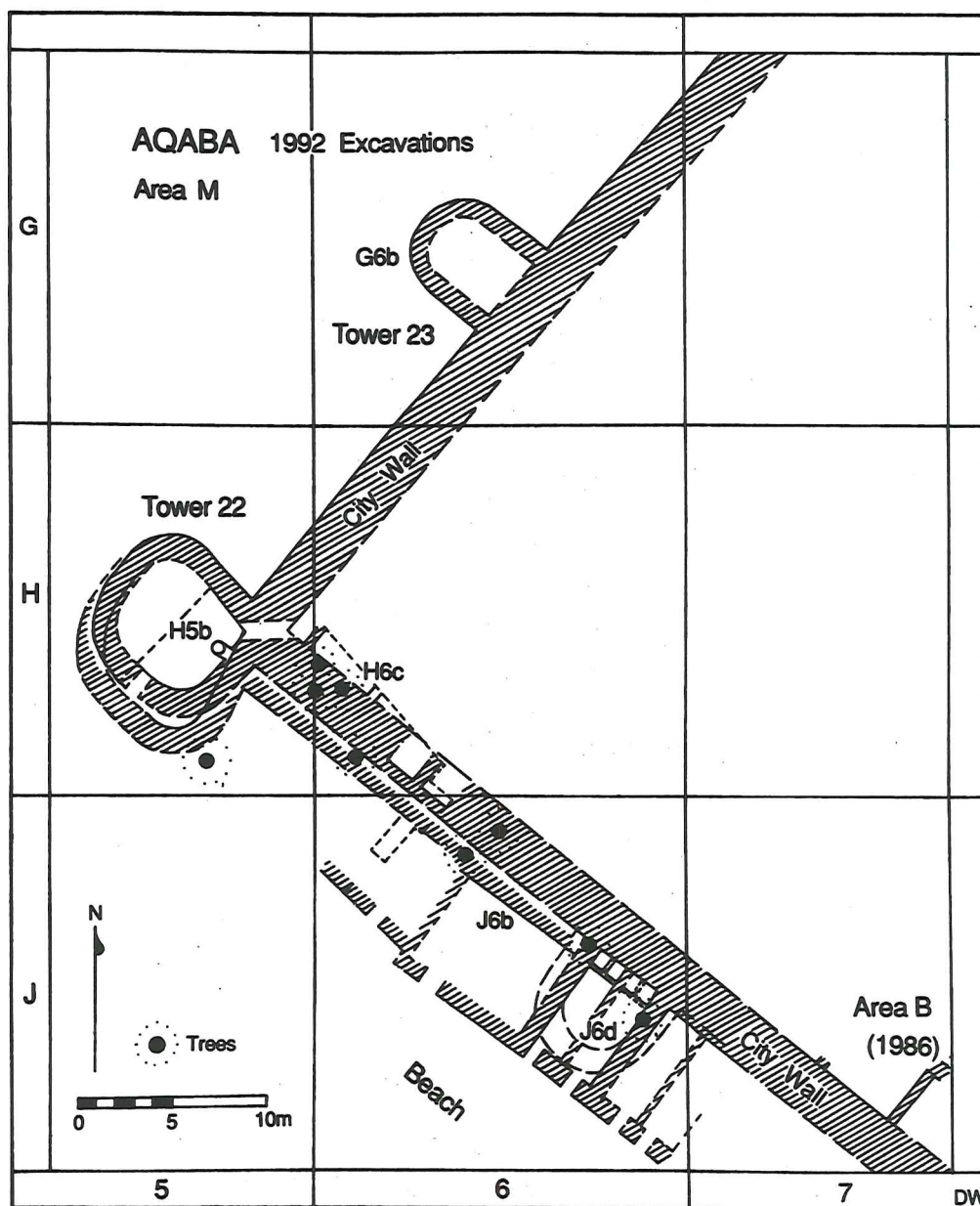
Abbasid street and to visualize something of the character of this Islamic city. Several of the side streets were partially excavated to facilitate movement of visitors. While we know much more about the Egyptian Street, we have even more questions about the earlier structure of the city, the interest of which is only whetted with this superficial demonstration of its latest manifestation. We may stroll down the street looking at the walls and doorways and are left curious about what was behind these façades.

The Sea Wall

The second goal of this season was clearance of the city wall fronting the beach. This effort was complicated by the numerous palm trees growing, as we discovered, into the wall and by a thick covering of sand and modern debris (often over 2m deep; Fig. 4). Nevertheless, the city wall

was revealed along its entire southwest face. In the course of this work an interval tower, Tower 21, was excavated to a depth of almost 5m. Perhaps more importantly, the southwest corner tower, Tower 22, was excavated.⁵

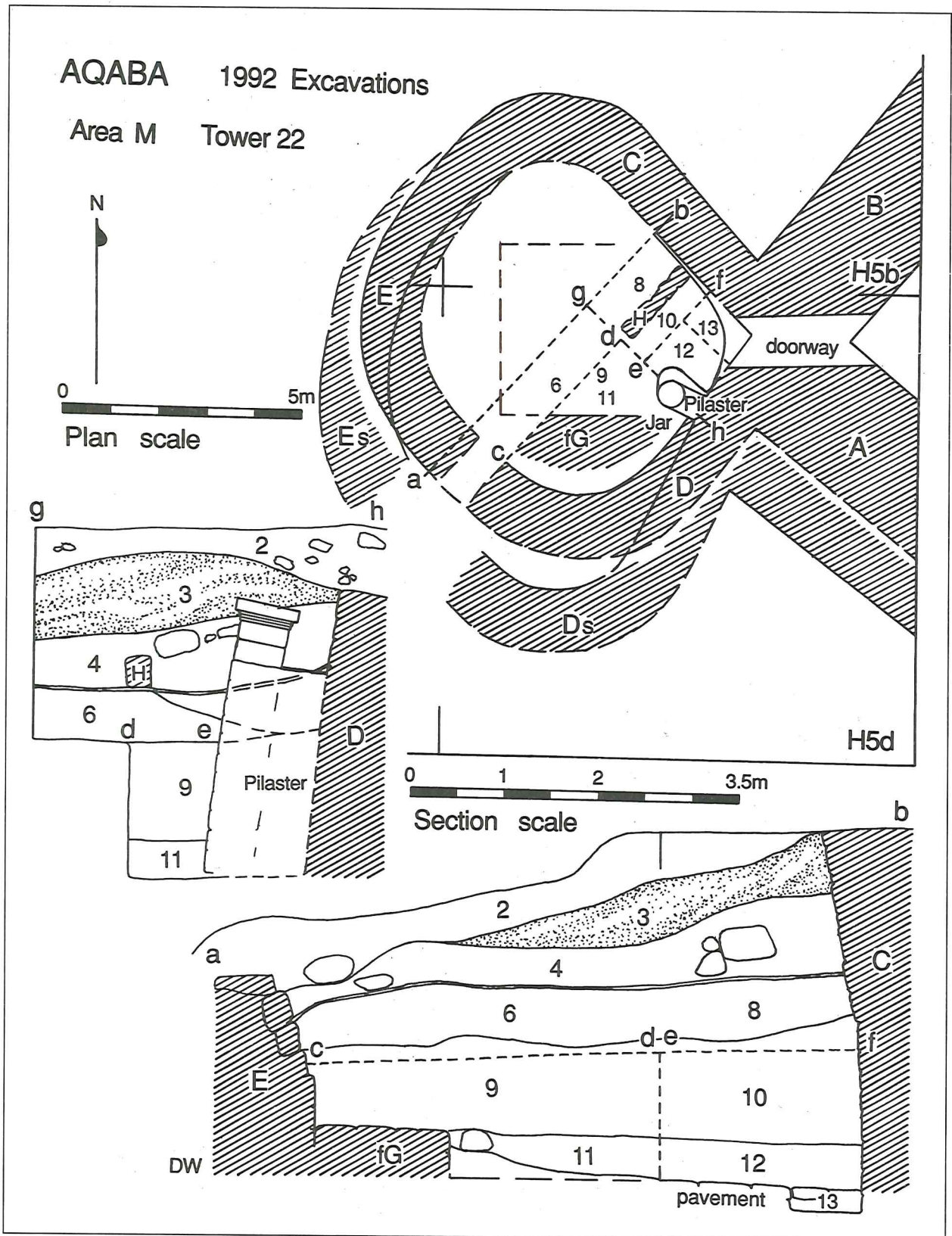
We bisected the corner tower (Tower 22) and excavated the southeast half (Fig. 5).



4. Plan of the southeast corner with the Süq and Tower 22 (Area M).

5. The location of the corner tower was known, more or less, from the efforts of John Meloy in 1989, who had cleared some surface sand and

mapped the walls of the tower. This was excavated by Tim Harrison.



5. Plan of the corner Tower (22) with sections, showing slumped off upper walls.

This gave us a good section, revealing burnt debris from the 1068 earthquake (H5d-3) and earlier Abbasid floors (H5d-4). The original foundations were found and a paved surface associated with the passage into the city (H5d-12, 13; Fig. 5, section a-b). This diagonal passage, entered through a pointed arch, was actually a crawlway less than a meter wide and only slightly more than a meter in height (confirming the size of similar passages revealed in towers 2, 7, 13, 19, and 21). The tower foundation was rectangular in plan (Fig. 5, designated fG). The external shape of this tower is now known to be early Islamic and not late Roman as some have reconstructed it. Inside the corner tower was an engaged column, part of the original building; the column was standing to its capital but leaning dangerously (the upper portion was removed and placed in 'Aqaba castle; Fig. 5, section g-h). A similar carved stone was found outside the tower. During the Abbasid phase an exterior doorway facing the beach seems to have been added, but this could not be proven.

The reason for this was that the upper portion of the walls nearest the beach had slumped outward, literally shifting off their foundation (these walls are designated Ds and Es; Fig. 5). As we moved eastward from the corner tower, we observed this slumping was a constant phenomenon along this wall (see Fig. 4), including the wall of the interval Tower 21. Some shifting and rebuilding might be expected as storms battered the sea wall over the centuries, but another explanation seems to have more force. The history of Ayla witnessed two very powerful earthquakes, that of 748 and another in 1068 (the latter with its epicenter in the Gulf of 'Aqaba). Recent conversations with Jordanian geologists re-

vealed that 'Aqaba is one of only a few locations where the proximity of groundwater and soil factors lead to the process of liquefaction during an earthquake. Like the bay area of San Francisco a few years ago, the soil becomes like gelatin, allowing slumping and possibly massive subsidence of walls and buildings of the city. One must hasten to add that there is no evidence (as yet) of moral decline accompanying this Sodom and Gomorrah scenario.

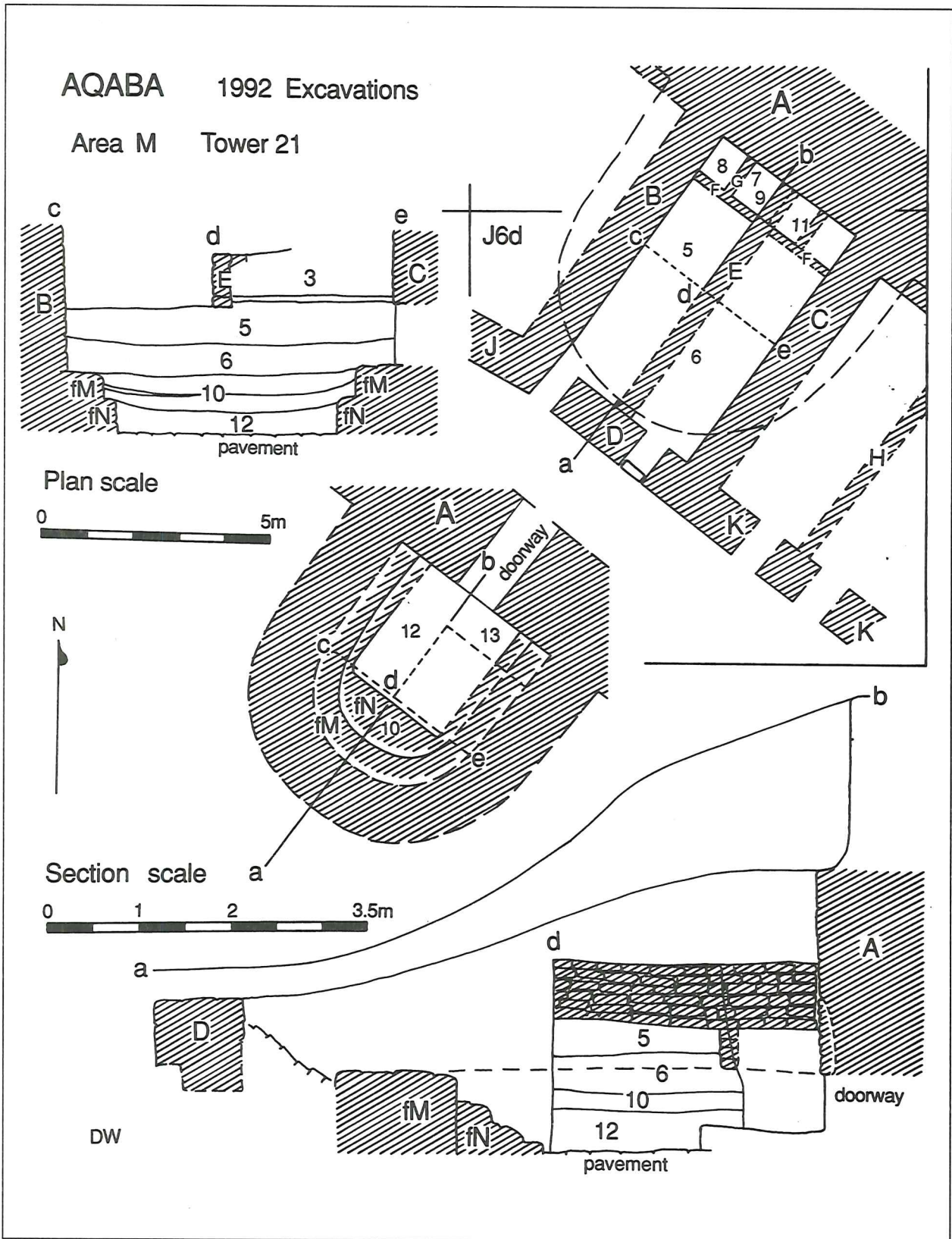
This corner tower and flanking walls and towers toward the north (Tower 23) and east now provide a dramatic view of the site from the beach and the new promenade along the beach to the west. When the trees are removed and minimal reconstruction has been accomplished, the tourist monument will be integrated with the city park and public beach.

The Abbasid Sūq

The city plan indicated that an interval tower (Tower 21) should be located on the west bank of the wadi. After clearing almost 2m of debris from the slope, the face of the wall and the substantial walls of the tower were found (Fig. 6). This excavation revealed that the original U-shaped tower (again with a rectangular foundation; Fig. 6, fN in section a-b) had been rebuilt as a square structure with two doorways on its southwest face. The building was divided by a brick partition wall, and the rear part had brick storage bins (J6d-3,4). This conversion of Tower 21 precisely parallels the history of the Square Tower (Tower 19), excavated in 1989. That tower (Tower 19) was rebuilt in the Abbasid period, actually immediately after the 748 earthquake, according to the tight, dated stratigraphy within the tower.⁶ Tower 19 was rebuilt in square plan with a series of brick bins

6. The square tower was described in the 1989-1990 *Annual Report of The Oriental Institute*, pp. 44-45, and briefly in D. Whitcomb, *Glazed ceramics of the Abbasid period from the 'Aqaba excava-*

tions, Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society 55 (1990-91): 47-48. Tower 21 and the discovery of the sūq were the results of precise excavation and observation by Jum'a Kareem.



6. Plan of tower 21 showing original U-shape and later shops with sections.

against the back and side walls and a doorway facing the beach. Large storage jars with impressed decoration were found in both these towers and in the corner tower (22) as well.⁷ The explanation was provided by the discovery of a continuous series of doorways in front of the Sea Wall (Fig. 4, in square J6), between the corner tower and Tower 21.

We can now project a continuous series of small shops built along the beach and probably flanking both sides of the Sea Gate. The stratification in towers 19, 21, and 22 clearly indicates an early Abbasid construction and continued use into the 11th century (see Table 2). During this period, the city wall no longer functioned as

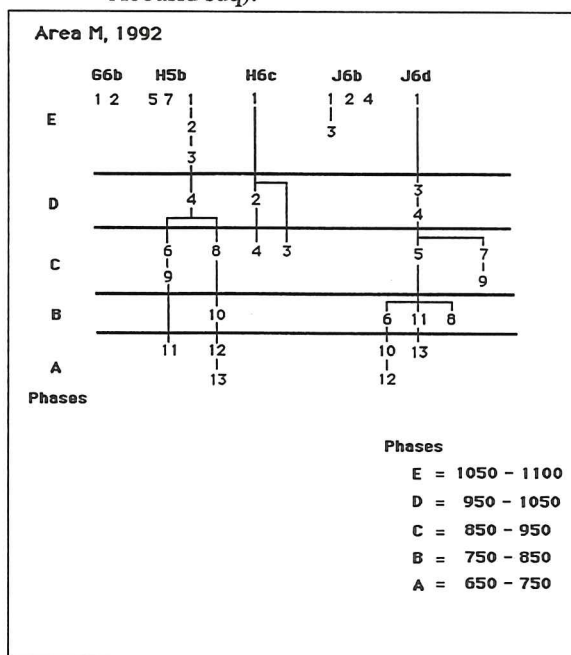
such but became the backdrop for one of the main commercial centers of the Islamic city. What was sold from these small shops is a matter of debate; perhaps a few of them were concession stands for Abbasid tourists enjoying the beach at Ayla.

Further considerations

The 1992 seasons of excavations have substantially filled in the overall plan of the early Islamic city, especially for the later phases. Gates and towers, streets and sūqs, all are important aspects of the history of Ayla. The archaeological emphasis on the periphery has stemmed from a very practical consideration, to secure the limits of the site from modern developers. These worries are happily long past. The work on the streets and reconstruction efforts stemmed from another concern, to make the site interesting to tourists and - much more importantly - to make the citizens of 'Aqaba proud of this piece of their heritage. The site of Ayla is totally open and traversed by hundreds of people daily with practically no vandalism or accidental damage. The active efforts of Ms. Fakhury and Mr. Frahat of the new office of Antiquities in 'Aqaba are largely responsible for these public relations. True "site enhancement" comes from this care and understanding, not a few more dusty stone walls.

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Table 2. Locus matrix for area M (the Sea wall and Abbasid sūq).



7. This type of storage jar is depicted in D. Whitecomb, A Fatimid Residence at 'Aqaba, Jordan, AD AJ 32 (1988), Fig. 4k; a complete example

may be seen in the Visitor Center Museum in 'Aqaba (87-1564/5).