

Donald Whitcomb

Once again, **Donald Whitcomb's** year might be divided into research on Aqaba and research on other subjects in Islamic archaeology. While there was no excavation in 1994, the study of Aqaba moved into the realm of museo-archaeology. The summer was spent working on the results of the 1993 excavations, specifically a detailed report on the Congregational mosque discovered during that season (*Annual Report for 1993/94*, pp. 10–12). This work was pursued simultaneously with preparation of a new exhibition on the Aqaba Project for the Oriental Institute Museum.

This exhibit was entitled “Ayla: Art and Industry in the Islamic Port of Aqaba”; it differed substantially from the first Aqaba exhibit in the Oriental Institute Museum in 1988. That first exhibition was a comprehensive presentation of the excavation results and was necessarily full of archaeological detail. (One should mention that the 1988 exhibit returned to Jordan where, after venues in Amman and Irbid, it became the museum of the Visitor Center in Aqaba; about fifty visitors see the exhibit daily, three quarters of whom are Jordanians.)

The second exhibition allowed a more flexible focus on evidence of local industry and the finest art/craftsmanship found in this early Islamic port. Industrial activity centered on the kilns excavated in 1993, with the reconstruction of part of the firing chamber and both complete and waster products. A selection of lamps, illustrating the varying functional/artistic emphasis in these little artifacts, was the only other

ceramic to be found in the exhibit. The smallest artifacts were glass and bronze weights, including two glass medallions of Sasanian iconography (now published in *Iranica Antiqua*). A series of coins illustrated the range of commercial connections, stretching from Axum to Morocco. One of the extremely rare gold coins minted in Sijilmasa, Morocco, was loaned to the Oriental Institute by the government of Jordan (for which we are extremely grateful). The final case contained very rare ivory panels, carved in a curious style and iconography. They were labeled Fatimid of the tenth century but, since the exhibit, similar pieces have been found at Humeima in Jordan and published as eighth century. As so often proves to be the case, the presentation of artifacts creates (and refines) problems of archaeological interpretation.

The exhibit enjoyed the talented artistry of Lamya Khalidi, who painted the scene of Aqaba. It was a great pleasure to work with Joe Searcy and Kate Luchini on the exhibit. A new Aqaba booklet was printed in October, thanks to the editorial skills of Thomas Urban. The exhibit opened in time for the November meetings of American Schools of Oriental Research in Chicago. In February there was a members' mini-course, "Great City on the China Sea: The Early Islamic port of Ayla," with lectures by Irene Bierman, Michael Bates, Fred Donner, as well as Whitcomb.

Following the exhibition opening, Whitcomb traveled to Amman, where he witnessed a very heavy snow on December 5. He participated in a conference on Byzantine-early Islamic ceramics (sponsored by the British Institute in Amman for Archaeology and History and the Institut français d'archéologie du Proche-Orient) and gave a paper on the earliest Islamic typology from Aqaba. Following this, he conducted a tour for conference members to Aqaba where it was bright and sunny. He returned to Chicago and fled to Atlanta for Christmas and the Archaeological Institute of America meeting (his paper was on "Amphorae of Aqaba"). The most recent Aqaba connected travel has been to Turin, Italy, where Whitcomb participated in the Sixth International Conference on the History and Archaeology of Jordan. This remarkable meeting illustrated the enormous amount of research in Jordan (the results of the previous meeting are published in a volume of over eight hundred pages). Whitcomb spoke on the "Name of Aqaba," the interaction of archaeology and toponymy (a synopsis is given in Whitcomb's Aqaba report).

Beyond the Aqaba Project, Whitcomb attended the "Aleppo and the Silk Road" conference in Syria, giving a paper on Qinnasrin on September 28. After this conference, he took advantage of the new spirit of cooperation by visiting Jerusalem and lecturing on Aqaba at the Albright Institute of Archaeological Research. He was able to meet for the first time many colleagues and students from Birzeit University and Hebrew University. Throughout the year, Whitcomb continued to direct the Middle East Urbanism workshop, with the assistance of Ghida el-Osman. This year he tried out some ideas on Khirbat al-Mafjar, a result of his brief visit to that site in October. At the same time, his major article on "Islam and the Sociocultural Transition of Palestine" appeared in Tom Levy's new *Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land*.

Whitcomb was drawn back to "old sins" in response to a growing interest in the Roman occupation at Quseir al-Qadim. The excavations by the Oriental Institute were a pioneering effort in the eastern desert of Egypt and presentation of archaeological evidence for Roman trade on the Red Sea. In the past decade there have been a number of new projects in this region; there is a growing consensus that Quseir al-Qadim was the ancient port of Myos Hormos. This was the most famous

Roman port on the Red Sea, from which Strabo claims 120 ships were used each year for the India trade. Whitcomb reexamined the excavation results in terms of this proposed identification, presenting new data on the town planning of this Roman port and the structure of the trade in the Erythraean Sea. He tried out this paper in the classics department at Ann Arbor and then presented these ideas at a conference on the Indian Ocean in the classical periods, held in the Maison de l'Orient at Lyon. The paper had a final venue at the American Research Center in Egypt meetings in Atlanta.

Finally, the final part of this reporting period included a sort of fieldwork when Whitcomb went to Raleigh, North Carolina, and consulted with Tom Parker on ceramics from the Roman Aila Project (RAP 94); this was a most pleasant sort of expedition and resulted in a corpus of early Islamic materials. Swinging back to the more general (and theoretical), Whitcomb gave a paper at University of California-Los Angeles, a response to Michael Morony's ideas on identity and material culture in the early Islamic world. This was part of a very successful colloquium in which there was an opportunity to evaluate the (often potential) contributions being made in the growing field of Islamic archaeology.
