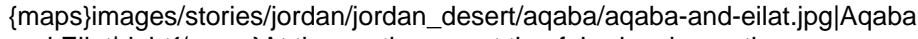


# Aqaba

Contributed by Micah Key and Stephen Langfur

At the southernmost tip of Jordan, beneath an arid mountain range by the clear waters of the Red Sea, lies a town that has long been a crossroads for the ships of the desert and the ships of the deep. It is called Aqaba now, but that is only the latest name in a long list spanning 4000 years. Three factors contributed to the flourishing of a settlement here: it straddles a junction of routes connecting the Nile, the Red Sea and the King's Highway, it is blessed with groundwater just below the surface; and the soil is relatively fertile. In contrast, the modern Israeli city of Eilat on the western shore (mere sand until 1951, when it was founded to access Asian markets) has no fresh water and the soil is salty.

In Deuteronomy 2:8, when Moses reviews the exodus from Egypt to Canaan, we find mention of a place near the site of today's Aqaba:

So we passed by our brothers the children of Esau, who dwell in Seir, [we passed] from the way of the Arava, from Elath and from Ezion Geber, and we turned and we passed via the wilderness of Moab.

Later, the Bible says King Solomon expanded his commerce by creating a port and ships at Ezion Geber:

King Solomon made a navy of ships in Ezion Geber, which is beside Elath, on the shore of the Red Sea, in the land of Edom. Hiram sent in the navy, his servants, sailors who had knowledge of the sea, with the servants of Solomon. They came to Ophir, and fetched from there gold, four hundred and twenty talents, and brought it to king Solomon. (1 Kings 9:26-28)

This must have been a mighty feat. We are a full 150 miles from Jerusalem, and most of these miles are desert. Rarely could a Judean king maintain so distant an outpost.

Around 850 BC, Jehoshaphat attempted to renew the expeditions to Ophir, which lay further south along the coast of today's Saudi Arabia, but Jehoshaphat made ships of Tarshish to

go to Ophir for gold: but they didn't go; for the ships were broken at Ezion Geber. His fleet was destroyed (1 Kings 22:48). A century later, Azzariah restored Elath to Judah (2 Kings 14:22), but not for long. In 735, Judah refused to join the northern kingdom of Israel and the Arameans of Damascus in a revolt against Assyria; the disgruntled allies attacked Judah, and before Assyria arrived to quash the rebellion, Elath fell. It went, apparently, to the Edomites, though there is variation in the textual versions of {tips} At that time Rezin king of Syria recovered Elath to Syria, and drove the Judahites from Elath; and the Arameans [or Edomites] came to Elath, and they settled there to this day. {tips} Never again would Judah hold this distant place.

There is only one ruin in the area from First Testament times, but it lies in a restricted border zone, and sand has covered most of it. Called Tell el-Khaleifeh, it is 500 meters north of the shore in an arid stretch between the two modern cities (on Jordan's side). In its first phase this was a square fortress, 13 meters per side, surrounded by a {tips}A wall consisting of two parallel walls, joined by buttresses that thus formed chambers. In time of need, these chambers could be filled to strengthen the wall. Otherwise they could be used for storage, or people could live in them. {tips} It may date back to Solomon, but the pottery is inconclusive. We do have 8th-century pottery for the site's second phase, when it seems to have been a fortified settlement about 60 meters long on each side. The archaeologists also found a seal inscribed with the common Hebrew name "Yotam" (Yo- for "Yahweh," -tam for "complete, perfect").

The ruin may have been "Ezion Geber near Elath." The ruins of Elath itself could be beneath later buildings in today's Aqaba. But why would Solomon or one of his descendants have built this fortified structure outside the fertile, well-watered area? We do not know. Perhaps the king wanted a safe place for the gold of Ophir before shipment to Jerusalem .

The excavations, headed by Nelson Glueck in the late 1930's, revealed later levels with finds belonging to Assyrian and Edomite cultures. Both would have wanted to renew the commerce with Ophir. In addition, Assyria had ambitions (briefly fulfilled) of conquering Egypt; it would have seen this point as an important base on the trans-Sinai road connecting the King's Highway to the Nile. In the final phase, 600 years after Solomon, the Phoenicians returned, as evidenced by two of their ostraca. Allied to the Persians, who then ruled the area, they no doubt had their hearts set on the south-Arabia trade, including the gold of Ophir.

Of the Nabataeans here little is known. (A graveyard has been found in Aqaba, containing the bodies of Nabataean children only.) Surely they must have had an interest in the place, given their commercial inclinations. Yet the site lay off their main spice route, which went from Happy Arabia (Yemen today) via Petra to Gaza.

When the Romans acquired the Nabataean kingdom in AD 106, the town on the site of ancient Elath became known as "Aela," probably echoing the old Elath. The Emperor Trajan then built a road superseding the

biblical King's Highway. This Via Nova Traiana connected Aela with the provincial capital of Bostra 250 miles to the north. The southernmost milestone of Trajan's highway, uncovered in Aqaba (and now in the city's Museum), includes the phrase *in finibus Syriae usque ad mare rubrum*: "from the border of Syria to the Red Sea." Trajan's road deprived the Nabataeans of their economic niche — the camel route across the Negev desert to Gaza (but this resilient people bounced back!).

Aela kept its importance in the Byzantine era. Its bishop attended the Council of Nicaea in 325, so the city must have had a significant Christian community. In 1998 a building came to light (26 meters by 16) that may have been the church. Facing east, with a central nave flanked by aisles, it was made of mud brick on stone foundations. No symbols have been found, however, although a nearby tomb from the period included pieces of a bronze cross. The pottery enabled the excavators to date its construction to around 300 AD: earlier than any other known structure deliberately built as a church. The latest coins date to 361. It was probably destroyed by the earthquake of 363.

In the 7th century, Islam began expanding beyond the Arabian Peninsula, and in 630 AD, Aela was among the first cities to surrender. It continued to function as a port and caravan stop. Around 650, a new town went up near the old settlement. This Islamic city was laid out in a format featuring a governor's residence, baths, a mosque, and city walls: the arrangement resembled other such sites in the Muslim world. Inhabited from about 650 to 1100, it appears to have been largely abandoned after attacks by Beduin, as well as an earthquake in 1068.

Chronicles suggest that when the Crusaders arrived, Aela's few remaining inhabitants escaped to the sea. The Crusaders built fortifications, calling the place "Helim": apparently, the palms and abundant water led them to believe it was *Exodus 15:27*. They came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water, and seventy palm trees: and they encamped there by the waters. *the Elim of Exodus.* Donald Whitcomb, excavator of Islamic Aela, thinks the Crusader attack finished off the Muslim town, leading to the founding of a new settlement nearby:

The evidence from excavations indicates that the condition of the town in the late eleventh century was not good and the city was in no condition to put up a fight. Thus one may suggest that the Crusader attack may have put the coup de grace on the earlier Islamic town and that the Crusaders built a small fort for their garrison - at a safe distance from the old, dilapidated city. This site is probably the present castle of Aqaba, mainly Mamluk and Ottoman in its extant form. The village or old town of Aqaba was situated around and behind this castle, stretching inland along the Wadi Shallala. This is the Aqaba mentioned by travelers of the

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In any case, the structure today dates from Mamluk and Ottoman times (Whitcomb, Annual Report, The Oriental Institute of Chicago, 1994-95 ).

Arab geographers of the Middle Ages called the castle and its surrounding settlement "Aqabat Aela," that is, "the steep pass of Aela," referring to the road that leads east and north from here through the mountains to Maan. The main trading hub in southern Jordan, with connections both to the north (Amman , etc.) and to Mesopotamia. Today it is on the Desert Highway, the fastest north-south route. Eventually the name "Aela" dropped away, leaving "Aqaba."

Much of the Mamluke and Ottoman castle is preserved, including its main gate, which is flanked by two semi-circular towers inscribed in Arabic. The entrance passageway contains an additional inscription noting the Mamluke renovations of Sultan Qansawh al-Ghawni in the 16th century, as well as rebuilding by the Ottomans half a century later. Continuing through the passageway, which has rooms opening off to either side, one enters a large central courtyard. It was here that caravans were housed and protected. Entrances to rooms off the courtyard attest to this fort's function as a caravansary during its lifetime. A section of one wall shows signs of shelling by British gunboats in World War I.

During the Ottoman period, Aqaba continued to flourish as an important caravan stop, as well as a station for pilgrims making the Hajj to Mecca. However, with the construction of the Suez Canal in the 19th century, both trade and pilgrims began to prefer the faster, safer and easier route by water. Aqaba lapsed into a time of relative somnolence, although it maintains its local importance as Jordan's only port. In the 1960s began an influx of tourists that continues to the present day. The temperature is always warm &ndash; in summer hot (110 F.), but the heat is relieved by the sea breeze. The beaches are fine, the water clear, and the coral reefs sustain a thousand species, 200 of which are unique to the Red Sea.