CHAPTER ONE

A PORT WITHOUT A HARBOUR: RECONSTRUCTING MEDIEVAL AL-MINA

Tasha Vorderstrasse

Introduction

The questions of how archaeology and history can be brought together in order to reconstruct a site that dates to the historic period, but is unknown in the texts, are numerous and complex. The reconstruction of the port activities at al-Mina, one of the ports of Antioch, presents a good example of the challenges involved in just such a process. It is, in many ways, an atypical site for historical archaeologists precisely because of the lack of textual information. There was very little textual information found on the site itself and the name of the site in the medieval period remains open to question. In addition, when al-Mina was excavated in 1936 and 1937 by Sir Charles Leonard Woolley, the excavators found no sign of any harbour installations and none have been discovered in subsequent investigations. Thus, in order

---

1 This article is based upon my dissertation on the site of al-Mina, Tasha Vorderstrasse, “A Port of Antioch under Byzantium, Islam, and the Crusades: Acculturation and Differentiation at al-Mina, A.D. 350–1268” (PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 2004). A revised version of my dissertation has now been published, see Tasha Vorderstrasse, Al-Mina: A Port of Antioch from Late Antiquity until the end of the Ottomans (Leiden, 2005) and this book, as well as my article written on al-Mina, Tasha Vorderstrasse, “A Port of Antioch: Late Antique al-Mina,” in Antioche de Syrie: Histoire, images et traces de la ville antique (2004), pp. 363–372, addresses some of the issues discussed here.

to reconstruct the port, scholars are dependent upon what is known about other similar ports that have been excavated and upon textual sources concerning the region that can inform us about the population. These provide a picture that can be further clarified by other textual sources, primarily from Egypt, that can provide us with detailed information about daily harbour activities. This chapter examines how one can combine the various pieces of available evidence to reconstruct al-Mina’s port activities, which were a key aspect of the city and probably the reason why it was founded.

I will begin with a general discussion about the challenges of historical archaeology and how these challenges have been met by both archaeologists and historians, providing a general overview of issues in historical archaeology, particularly from the Roman world. The evidence from Egypt, because of its excellent state of preservation of all forms of material, will receive further attention. After this overview, I will focus specifically on al-Mina and its particular issues.

Challenges of Historical Archaeology

Historical, as opposed to prehistoric, archaeology is a discipline within archaeology that presents its own special challenges due to the presence of textual information. Ideally, the two types of evidence can be combined together to enhance the conclusions from either source. While this statement may seem obvious, the presence of texts related to a particular site or problem has profound, and sometimes challenging, implications for our interpretation of the material culture. The challenge they present revolves around how scholars can integrate texts with archaeological data and used it in order to produce a more complete understanding of a particular site, region, or cultural group.

The textual information available to historical archeologists provides them with a great deal of additional information that is not always as forthcoming from the material record. Examples of this information include an indication of the language a particular population spoke, their religion(s), diet, and other cultural information. In some cases, texts can provide archaeologists with very specific information about the names of particular individuals and their families. Further, textual